

A Ghost of a Chance

by gersknightlady

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him.
Is this death?

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 57

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This story will eventually become very adult: minors, please do not read.

Severus Snape slowly became aware of two women crying nearby. He found they were standing over his place of death. It was death, wasn't it? He wondered. He'd only had brief bouts of awareness, but he'd always been in the same place. He could see that it was the old witch McGonagall...and was that Hermione Granger? What was she doing here? They both shed some tears and then they went away, and his thoughts faded into nothingness again.

Again he became aware. How long had it been since his death...a minute, a year, or 100 years? He realized he had no awareness of time. There was a woman standing over the same spot, but the darkness of the bloodstain had faded. She wasn't tall, but she was comely. Her long, dark hair fell in cascades around her shoulders, and she had the bearing of a professional woman. Who was she, and why had she disturbed his sleep? Was the rest of his existence going to be spent trapped in the Shrieking Shack, only aware when someone gave him a thought or visited? No matter when he was aware whether someone was there or not, he seemed confined to this old place.

"Is this hell?" he mused.

She seemed to be shedding tears, sniffing and wiping them off with the sleeve of her robe. They were professor's robes. He filed that away as interesting and watched as she moved slightly to the side. A small gasp escaped her lips, and she walked over the uneven boards of the floor and bent down. He appreciated the rear view, watching as she dug into a crack in the floor and then held up a wand.

"That's my wand," he thought. He could feel his nonexistent fingers itch to hold it. He watched as she held it up and then cleaned the wood with the hem of her robes.

"Sir," she said aloud into the dusty, deserted, room, "I promise I will take good care of it. Thank you for the things you taught me. Thank you for showing me the joy of Potions."

Severus was puzzled. *Who was this beautiful woman? She was obviously a former student, but why would she come here, and what would she want his wand for?* She straightened as if to leave, and he tried to speak, tried to stop her from taking his wand. It somehow seemed important for him to keep it here with him. But he could not speak. He must be a ghost, but the Hogwarts ghosts were visible. Why wasn't he? Why could no one ever see him?

He was astonished that when she left the house, he did too. He was drawn out into the clear, warm night with her, and he felt as if a string was attached, like someone might drag a balloon. *Am I some how locked to my wand?* That idea made him think as they moved along. When she reached the gate, Filch let her in. So it hadn't been that many years since he had "died." Filch really hadn't changed much; maybe his back was stooped a bit more, but that was it. *For a Squib, he is holding up well,* Severus reflected.

The door to the castle swung aside, and there stood McGonagall. The woman looked positively ancient. Her wrinkles had wrinkles, and she used a cane to walk. "Hermione!" she cried out with joy, opening her arms to embrace the young woman.

"Hermione Granger? This was Granger? Looking more carefully at the woman, he could see now in the light that, yes, it was Granger. She must now be at least 35. More than 15 years had passed since he'd last seen her. He watched as they linked arms, and Hermione went with the old woman up to her office.

He seemed drawn along and found this period of awareness to be very stimulating. Would he fade into oblivion again? Would he find himself back in the Shrieking Shack, or would he now stay with Hermione or wherever she placed his wand?

A house-elf brought tea as the two women caught up on gossip. Ron Weasley had become coach of a Quidditch team Severus had never heard of. He'd never married and seemed happy to play the field. More than Potter, that boy had always raised his hackles. He had been disgusted when he'd found Weasley and Hermione Granger in a clinch in some dark corner their sixth year. He pushed those thoughts away and listened in. Potter was in Ireland on a case for the Aurors. His wife Ginny was at home with their two children. The second of the Potter children would be coming to Hogwarts this year. Merlin, not another Potter! He suddenly wished for his Shrieking Shack.

Severus turned his attention back to the two women. McGonagall was saying, "I've had your school things put in the classroom, but we've had to make other arrangements for quarters. I'm sorry, but no one has been able to break through his wards. After all these years, they have stayed strong; usually after a wizard dies, his wards will fail, but not these. You can try, too, if you like; but I'm afraid you will have little luck. The entrance is through the storage room on the back wall."

Hermione said with regret, "I was really hoping to use them." She sat straighter and leaned forward with interest. "You mean, all his things are still there?"

McGonagall nodded. "Yes, as far as we know, no one has gotten in."

Hermione got a determined look in her eye. "It will give me something to do in my spare time."

He found himself confused. Were they talking about him? Was that why he was awake and here? It seemed that people remembering him gave him life. He shuddered to think that only when a person seemed to be thinking of him did he come alive. It was like an old Muggle movie he'd seen when he was a child. Sherry Templer, wasn't it? No... Shirley Temple, something about a bird and happiness. When the child thought of her grandparents, they woke and were aware and alive again. But he had nobody. He didn't seem even to be anything but thought.

McGonagall seemed to be tiring. "This will be my last year, Hermione. I will pass my post on. Flitwick has agreed to take over. There was a time when I hoped Severus Snape would be here to take his place as my replacement. But alas..." She sighed. "Go on, Professor Granger. Go see your classroom. I'll see you at dinner."

Hermione hugged the old witch and left the office and headed down to the dungeon.

Severus found himself bristling. "Was this chit going to teach Potions in his classroom?" He found he was drawn along. He had to admit this was better than the Shrieking Shack. It was good to see the castle again. This had been his home for many years. He had never been able to enjoy it before; there had always been the threat of Voldemort calling him. There was never a time when he wasn't on edge with fear. He might have even enjoyed teaching had he not been a spy and had so much riding on his being successful at his job as a spy. The teaching had sometimes been a distraction, but his life had always been on the line.

Granger had arrived at the door to the Potion classroom and pushed it open slowly. She took a deep breath and held it. Then she let it out as she stepped into the room and the door shut behind her. "Sir, I hoped you would be proud of me someday, but you will never see what I have accomplished. I tried so hard to show you how much I wanted to learn from you, but it only made you hate me all the more." She went over to the desk she and Harry had shared and ran her hand over it.

Snape suddenly realized she had been talking to him. It astonished him that she would even think of him, but then again she was coming back into his world, his place that he'd lived in for so long. She was taking a position he had held when she was here; he thought it only natural that she would think of him. He felt a twinge of regret. Had he been unfair; had he not handled his brightest student of all time correctly? He'd used his curtness as a weapon to challenge her to be better and do better. But she had not seen that; instead she had felt ridiculed and berated.

"You were hard, sir, but you did make me learn more than any other teacher I'd ever known. You did not know it, but I love Potions." Then she giggled to herself and said, "Granger, he's not here; you're standing here talking to the walls." She went up to the desk and ran her hand over the wood, and then after a short hesitation, she sat down at the desk. "Silly, I know someone else has been teaching here for years, but you seem so close, Severus. I hope you don't mind me using your first name; we are colleagues of a sort now." She laughed again. "It's an old habit my I talking to myself. Since Crookshanks passed, I forget he's not there to talk to. I guess this makes me eccentric, but I hate being alone with my thoughts. I think I will pretend I'm talking to you, sir. How would you like that?"

Snape stepped closer. "I'd like it just fine," he said, actually hearing a whisper come from his mouth.

Hermione shrieked, stood up, and took a step back. "No one has reported that you'd taken up residence here, but I could have sworn I heard you." Then she laughed again, a bit hysterically. "Ghosts have never frightened me, but invisible ones, well, that's a new experience. It's probably an overactive imagination." She walked away, and Severus followed.

Had she really heard him? He found that a bit exciting. Could he learn to communicate with her? Was she so receptive because she had been talking and thinking of him so much? He needed to let someone know he was here. Somehow he felt the need to no longer be free of it all. Death was very lonely, trapped as he was between worlds. He found he no longer wanted to be forgotten. Things could be worse; after all, she was a beautiful woman.

She went to the door of the storage room and opened it. "Ugh, it's full of dust and cobwebs. You would roll over in your grave if you had one, sir." Her voice held a bit of sadness when she said the last few words. She seemed to get angry with herself as she scrubbed tears from her eyes.

Severus moved closer and was amazed to see real tears from him. Was she just emotionally overloaded from something else in her life, or did she truly care what had happened to him?

She walked to the back of the storeroom and reached out with her wand. A charm she cast showed his wards still glowing strong.

Severus was puzzled by that, too. What McGonagall had said was true: A dead wizard's wards always weakened after a matter of months, and it had been years. He had never had any power that was more extraordinary than any other wizard of his age. That was curious. He filed it away to think on it later. He was too interested to see what Hermione would do next.

Severus watched as she reached out to touch the wall. "Now, what would Severus Snape use for a password? What was the only thing we know of in his life that meant something to him?" she puzzled as she watched the shimmer of the ward. "It would have to have something to do with Lily. But McGonagall knows that, doesn't she? Maybe she didn't know. After all, it was from Snape's own mind that the memories came. But then we did have to share them with the Winzengamot. That was the only way to get his name cleared of the espionage charges," she murmured to herself.

What? I'm cleared. Bloody Hell, I'm cleared and stuck in an afterlife of hell, he thought sadly.

"I would take good care of your things, sir. All those books going to waste," she said, regret tinted her voice. "I know you had wonderful books." Hermione laughed. "I can't help but talk to you here in these rooms. I wish you had come back here to haunt the place. There is so much I could still learn from you."

Snape watched her puzzle as she stood in silence, and then she blushed.

What the hell was the bloody chit thinking?

She whispered, "Lily." The wards fluctuated, but nothing happened.

"Well I am a romantic, I guess. My true love Lily... My one true love Lily..." Neither produced any change. "Lily, my love," she tried.

Suddenly, he wanted to see his things, too, so he whispered at the same time, "Lily, my love," and the wards shimmered and went down.

Hermione turned around and looked behind her. "Now I swear I heard you, sir. If you are here, why can't you show yourself? I doubt my saying the words would have made a difference. You would have set them to voice recognition only."

She reached out her hand, and for a moment Severus could feel warmth close to him. She pulled her hand back as if stung. "Coldness, there is something here." She glared at the space before her. "If this is really you," she said in anger, "you're just as much an ass in death as you were in life. What purpose does it serve to hide?" She turned away, dismissing him, and pushed the door open.

Snape was astonished at her sudden anger and frustrated that he could not tell her he had no control over his invisibility. It seemed suddenly important to him that she know he was there. He rushed toward her and actually touched her warmth, and she shuddered and jumped away.

"Please don't do that again. I don't understand this game. If you are a ghost, show yourself." When only emptiness continued to be around her, she dismissed him with a wave of her hand and a harrumph and stepped into his rooms.

Unable to do anything but follow, he was pulled into the rooms himself.

Hermione found herself in a small sitting room with a fireplace. It was surprisingly ordered and cozy, and there was a nice high-back chair facing the fireplace and a table with a book. She moved closer to look at the pages. *Furtherfield's Potions*, the book pages were labeled. Hermione gasped; this book had been out of print for 40 years and was hard to find. She reached out and touched the page almost reverently.

Snape noted, looking around, that dust covered everything, but he could see nothing had changed. The book he had been reading was still lying open on the table by his chair. And there was a empty glass of whiskey stained with gold of the fluid that had long since evaporated.

He watched as Hermione touched the book. *At least she will value and take care of these things,* he thought to himself.

She drew her wand and sent out a number of *Scourgify* spells to vanish the dust as she walked through the rooms. She looked briefly at the little kitchen and vanished numerous dishes with dried food on them. He assumed she would have her own things. He had never been one to cook much or wash up after meals.

Hermione moved into the bedroom, and before even really looking, she cleaned the place with her wand. The bed curtains needed some repair, having fallen apart on one side. She reached out with a trembling hand and touched his nightshirt, which laid across the bed.

He had thrown it there the last time he'd been called to Voldemort's side. Snape gaped at her as she gathered it up and held it against her and sniffed the fabric, like one would a lost lover's shirt.

Hermione breathed in. "There's still a faint scent of nutmeg and brown sugar. I always liked the cologne you wore," she whispered. She ducked away. What if he could hear her? Then she thought that it didn't really matter one way or another if he was in the room. He was still dead, and she didn't care that he knew she cared about him. Maybe in some way it would make his afterlife better.

She went to the fireplace, grabbed a hand full of Floo powder, and then stuck her head into the flames. "Minerva?" she called.

Severus could hear the headmistress reply, "What, you got into his rooms?"

Hermione laughed. "Yes, I swear he's here over my shoulder. It's like he just stepped out."

"Well I'll be," the old witch exclaimed. "You are resourceful."

"Maybe it's just that I have studied his memories more than most. He was very fond of Harry's mom."

"I see," the old woman replied. "There is no one to give his things to, so you may do what you want with them. I'm sure there are many books and papers there that will interest you. Do be careful, my dear. There's bound to be some dark magic items there as well."

"I was wondering about his things. Thank you, I will take good care of them. Can you have the house-elves bring my things down here? I will be staying. The place just needed a good dusting," Hermione explained.

Minerva said, "I'll have them bring fresh linens and towels. Let me know if you want anything else or need anything removed. If I wasn't so old, I'd come down there for a look myself. But those drafty old dungeon rooms play havoc with my arthritis. I'm not feeling well. I'm going to have dinner in my rooms tonight. I'll see you in the morning. Goodnight, my dear."

"Good night, Headmistress," Hermione said. She turned to look around, quite happy with the afternoon's events. This was exactly where she had wanted to be, and she couldn't believe her fortune. All his things were still in place. She said aloud, "It's too late for us, Severus, but I can still take care of your things. Perhaps there will be information enough for a book here in your things. People should know the man you really were."

Too late? Where was this girl's head? Did she have some notion that they could have had a relationship? He shook his head sadly. Maybe she was a little off. The war had been terrible. She didn't seem off, except when talking to him, but she seemed to have some romantic notion about him.

She went to check out the bathroom, and Severus discovered to his relief that he was not drawn inside with her, but he was pressed against the door. This spell gave him

about a 15 ft radius from his wand. He waited patiently by the door and then heard crying. *What's wrong now?* he thought. Being tied to Hermione Granger was going to be very trying, and if he had to admit it to himself, interesting. It was better than sitting in the Shrieking Shack or being in oblivion.

She finally came from the bathroom with a newly scrubbed face and red-rimmed eyes. She looked around the room with an expectant look. "I wish you were here, sir. I have little to look forward to, and I would love to have picked your brain. The discussions we could have had." Then she said, looking toward the fireplace, "The dinners before the fire... the long nights..."

A knock at the door interrupted her. When she called, "Come," house-elves poured in the door, bringing her things and quickly changing the bed linens. They seemed to have their own brand of magic because everything shone much brighter when they poured back out of the room. Snape had been watching them scurry about, grinding his nonexistent teeth. House-elves were necessary, but he could not abide the silly creatures.

Hermione went down to the main hall for dinner, and Severus was pulled along. He had expected her to take his wand and place it on the table or something, but instead she had fashioned a special pocket in her robes and placed the wand there. He had to admit he'd rather be along for the ride than wondering what was happening as he sat in his rooms.

The hall was a madhouse of students, some looking little older than babies. *Had they always looked this young?* he wondered. He seemed to be floating somewhat behind Granger, and he was surprised to see Sybil staring up at him with her big, bulbous looking eyes.

"Madam Granger, I sense him near. Oh, he's here. Don't you see him?" She hurried away, taking a seat far from Hermione.

Hagrid, who was much greyer and seemed to have grown a bit smaller, asked, "What was she on about? The daft old woman."

Hermione smiled at him. "Who knows; the woman has always given me the willies."

She glanced at the old Divination teacher and found she was still being stared at. Hermione turned away and ignored her. She confided in Hagrid, one of her dearest and oldest friends, "I found Snape's wand in the Shrieking Shack. She probably just senses that there is something of his here. I know now that she gave the prophesy of Harry and Voldemort, so I know she has some real sense of divination. I just really find her creepy. That prophesy cost people their lives," she said, thinking of Sirius Black.

"Well, she certainly is on about something." Hagrid sniffed and stabbed a huge piece of meat from his plate. "Best stay clear of her."

Snape was feeling just the opposite. What if the woman could see him? He also had found her creepy and had tried to avoid her when he was alive. She'd cornered him at a dance years ago when he'd just started working at Hogwarts and was kissing him before he could stop her. Since then, he'd given her the widest berth possible. Hmmm, if she could see him, she might be able hear to him. He called out to her, "Sybil." The daft woman screeched, got up, and ran from the room.

Hermione glanced her way and then shook her head. "I think the woman's gone bonkers." But her eyes slid sideways, looking at the empty space around her. She had felt something earlier. *But how could Snape be here? Why wouldn't he be like any of the castle ghosts? They were there for all to see and hear. Was there some sort of signature of Snape in the wand she carried?* She decided not to tell anyone else, and she figured Hagrid wouldn't have a reason to talk about it. Likely he'd already forgotten. She remembered how good he'd been at keeping secrets when they were kids and groaned inwardly. Oh, well, the damage was done now. She snickered to her herself; dare she try a memory-altering charm on him? No... she would just let it play out. She tackled her dinner and brought Hagrid up-to-date on what Ron and Harry were up to.

Severus groaned. Would he have to listen to the same stories about Weasley and Potter over and over? He was definitely in hell.

Hermione returned to Snape's dungeon room and took the time to unpack her trunk and bags. She put away her things. She shrunk most of his personal clothing, placed it in one of her bags, and stashed it in a closet.

She really didn't have a lot, Snape observed. Her items, though very well kept and clean, were somewhat threadbare, like many of his things had been. She kept his cloak in the closet, and the night shirt was still lying across the bed.

She eyed his books with longing but had already begun to yawn. So, to his great surprise, she took his night shirt into the bathroom and came back wearing it.

She said to the air as she crawled into bed, "If you are there, Severus, you may think me mad. But I had more than just a schoolgirl's crush on you. I had planned to speak up after the war, but you were gone." She settled herself against the pillows and closed her eyes.

Severus moved closer to look down at her. She was a beautiful witch with her hair fanned out about the pillows. So, she had fancied herself in love with him; he was gobsmacked. This young, beautiful woman thought herself lost to the world of love. As he watched, she wrapped her arms around herself and pulled his night shirt up to her nose and breathed in its scent. A tear squeezed out of her closed eyes.

Severus felt himself fall into that oblivion that he was so used to.

Thank you, Lisa, my beta. I appreciate your work very much. Thank you for going on this new adventure with me.

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I added the manip on 3/24/2010. I want to thank Becky for the beautiful frame she added to my manip.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

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Snape became aware as Hermione woke. *Well, that's odd*, he thought, *not only am I tied to the wand, but I am only awake when she is.*

Hermione woke lying in a fetal position on the bed, wrapped in Severus' nightshirt. She groaned and dragged herself out of bed. She stood looking at herself in the bathroom and said, "Girl, you went overboard yesterday. Being here really got you to thinking about old times. It's time to get back to the real world and get to work."

Severus stood outside the door listening to her with a smirk on his face. Maybe she had let her thoughts take weird paths yesterday. He'd be lucky to be awake if she got to work. She'd very likely forget about him, and he'd fade away again.

He wanted her to know he was there. But if she continued to avoid Sybil, would it be possible to let her know? She had heard him a couple of times but dismissed it as an overactive imagination.

When she came from the bathroom after a shower, she was dressed. He expected her to put the nightshirt away somewhere, but she folded it carefully and placed it under her pillow.

She left the rooms and warded them, and he was close enough to hear her say, "Severus, I wish you were here."

Severus' feelings were overwhelming: He was desperate that she continue to talk and think of him and then suddenly terrified that she would let him slip away, and he would be forever trapped in nothingness. He was beginning to realize he was not like the other ghosts in the castle. Even they could not hear or see him. What could this be? He was nearly certain it was death, but what kind of death? Was he stuck here because he had a purpose to fulfill? Didn't those left behind in old Muggle movies get to move on when they accomplished their task? What could his task be? Was he supposed to get Hermione Granger to let go of him and get on with her life? Or was he supposed to find her someone to love?

The idea immediately made him feel nauseated.

Right now, she was his, and he didn't want to share her. This woman, who was once the most annoying child, now was his lifeline, and he wanted...no, needed...her to stay with him. He looked around and noted that he'd been drawn to the main hall, and the staff and the students were assembled for breakfast. He guessed it was mid-semester after the Christmas holidays as the children had their coats and gloves and looked prepared for a weekend trip to Hogsmeade.

Breakfast was quickly eaten, and then the children all left for the walk to Hogsmeade. To Severus' delight Hermione was a chaperon, and he was drawn along with her. He literally felt as if he were encased in a bubble floating along. The snow was deep, and the kids talked excitedly. Some of the students stopped to say hello to Hermione and ask her questions about her involvement in the war. They seemed very excited that she would be teaching when classes started on Monday.

Dismissing the children, Severus took the time to look around. It was amazing how beautiful the landscape was. He'd always ignored his surroundings before. He had been so intent on his business, constantly reflecting inward, practicing in Occlumency and going over details in his mind to protect himself. He'd had to make sure there was no way he was going to trip up and reveal himself to Voldemort. It had been an exhausting life. Today he didn't have to worry about any of that. He could just look at the beauty around him. He thought briefly that it was odd his senses were exactly as they had been before. He could see everything, hear everything, and to his surprise, he realized he could smell different things. Maybe the longer he was awake the more he would be able to do. The idea made him happy, and he turned his attention to watch Hermione as she pulled him along with her.

The children, who were quite a distance ahead, were launching a few snowballs at one another. Hermione sighed, remembering walks along the road with Ron and Harry.

Severus saw her shoulders slump a bit and heard her sigh.

No doubt she's remembering her dimwitted friends, he thought scathingly.

Then she said, "Severus, I wish you could see what a beautiful, clean day this is. I would have loved to share the day with you, walking arm-in-arm to Hogsmeade."

Snape felt his invisible eyebrow shoot up. She was thinking about him again, and he called to her, "Hermione."

Hermione heard her name as if on the wind, and she stopped to listen, letting the children move further and further way. "Severus?" she whispered into the wind.

"Hermione, I am here." he shouted, wishing he could move forward. Then to his happiness, he did seem to float closer till he was near her ear.

"Hermione, I am here," he repeated.

Hermione's eyes widened again as she heard her name whispered over the breeze. Just then a nasty gust of cold air seemed to wrap itself around her. She shuddered and laughed nervously.

"I'm going nuts. Coming back here may not have been the brightest of ideas." She hurried to catch up with the children.

Severus snarled with anger. *Will the chit, not listen to me!*he complained to himself. *She's too logical, too literal. How will I get her to really hear me?* He felt himself slip into darkness. Somehow she had found the power to push him from her thoughts.

When Severus became aware again, he was in a bookstore. Hermione was standing before the potions books. Her hands were practically caressing the spines of some of the very expensive books.

"I will have to look through your books, Severus, before I indulge in any of these." She let out a soft sigh. "I cannot get you out of my mind," she whispered. Her fingers went to the hidden place in her sleeve where she kept his wand. "I always wished we could have come to this store together. You could have told me what books to buy and the ones that were a waste of money. I wish you could have seen that we had so much in common. None of the students my age engaged my mind the way you did. I often wished I'd been born at least ten years earlier. You might have given me respect enough to have apprenticed me."

Her face seemed to fall, and Severus noted she had tears in her eyes.

Not even thinking, he reached out his invisible hand and touched her, "Hermione."

Hermione felt the touch of coldness, and she heard his voice again near her ear. She jumped back eyes wide. She didn't say anything but left the store quickly, and Severus bobbed around, like that proverbial balloon on a string.

"Damn it, woman," he called to her, "stop and just listen."

Hermione stopped as she realized she was looking around wildly, standing in the middle of the road with students all around her. She waved her hands erratically.

"Sorry, there was a bee. I hate bees." She giggled and blushed.

The kids shook their heads. Some of the older ones still looked at her funny. After all it was the dead of winter and there were no bees.

"Must have been a joke from Zonko's," she said lamely.

The children nodded, seeming satisfied, and headed for the aforementioned store. Hermione prayed they did have a bee trick. She glanced around her.

"Severus, if that's really you, keep your mouth shut until we get home. I can't look like I'm crazy, even though I may be a little to think you're here."

Severus said, "Alright, Miss Granger."

He settled back and let himself relax. It was odd how a nonexistent bubble could be so comfortable. He wanted for nothing. He wasn't hungry or thirsty, and he didn't need a bathroom.

*What in bloody hell is this?*he thought.

Hermione had a meal at the local pub and a glass of fire whiskey, Severus noted with amusement. In the late afternoon she met the students in front of Zonko's Joke Shop. After having to root out a few stragglers from the store, she herded the group back to Hogwarts.

They stood outside the door to the castle, stomping their feet and shaking off the loose snow and ice that had accumulated on them during the long walk home. Then the students filed through the doors and headed for dinner.

Hermione stood for a moment, looking out over the grounds. She wondered if Hagrid was home. No, he was probably at dinner, too. As an instructor, he came to most of the meals provided in the castle, now.

She looked around her but didn't speak because she was almost afraid to find that Severus wouldn't answer.

He watched the emotion cascade across her face and saw her sigh and head for dinner. What had she been thinking? Was it possible to use Legilimency to contact her? Or would that only scare her? She was starting to think he was really there, he could feel a difference. He was getting stronger. But he'd seen fear. What did she fear...that he was real or that he was not real? The latter intrigued him. Hermione was somehow linked to him in a way he could not understand, and he found the problem gave him the ability to think longer.

He became aware that he had been drawn to the staff table, and he was behind Hermione as he had been this morning. She was talking to Hagrid, who sat on her left, in whispers. He heard his name.

"I swear, Hagrid, I heard his voice. It's been more than once. I heard it in the classroom, in his quarters, and even in Hogsmeade. It's like he's following me around."

Hagrid looked down at the young woman. "Ye sure you're not just a imagining this, Hermione. You always had such adventures here as a student. Maybe you're missin' Harry and Ron too much and bein' around his things is bringing him back."

Hermione saw him squinting at her. He thought she was nuts.

She waved her hand and said, "I'm sure that's all it is." She laughed. "Well, I'd best get back to my room. I've got a lot of planning to do for Monday's classes. I'm very happy to be working here, Hagrid."

He smiled at her. "It's right nice to be havin you here. Now you come for a visit some afternoon, and we will have tea and talk about old times."

Hermione stood and gave the half-giant a hug, smiling when she realized standing she didn't even come to his elbow as he sat. She said goodbye to a few others as she made her way to the teachers' entrance and into the narrow hall.

Severus was pulled behind.

She didn't speak until she got back into her classroom and warded the door. She took a deep breath and said, "Now, Severus, if you're here, we've got to get this settled."

"I'm here," he said. He saw her eyes widen. "I'm right inside the door."

Hermione turned toward the door and looked. "I see nothing. Do you know what you are?"

Severus sighed. "No, maybe energy, ghost, spirit."

Hermione felt the coldness again and strained to hear his words. This couldn't be her imagination. He was speaking to her. She heard his voice...the same deep, sexy voice he'd always had. His voice was slow and articulate. She reached out her hand and felt the coldness deepened as she got closer to the voice.

"It's been years since you *died*," she said. "Why now, why me?"

"You found my wand." He saw her reach up to touch her sleeve where his wand was encased. She slipped it from her sleeve and moved forward, holding it out before her. The moment it touched the bubble that encased him, he felt himself dumped unceremoniously at her feet.

"What was that?" she said, jumping back.

Severus was so astonished to feel the hard floor against his backside that he didn't realize she still couldn't see him until he saw her looking wildly around. He climbed to his feet.

"You still can't see me?" He reached out and touched her arm, and she screamed, backing away.

She held her hands up and shuddered. "No, and don't do that again." She was rubbing her arm. "It's nearly frozen."

Severus asked, "Can you hear me better now?"

She nodded. "It's as if you were here in the room instead of a long distance away."

He explained, "I was incased in a bubble of some sort. You punctured it with my wand. I damn near busted my tailbone landing."

"Do me a favor, sir. Please see if you can sit at the chair in front of my desk."

"You mean my desk," he said acidly.

"No, it's mine now, and you'd be wise to respect that. Your wand obviously is connected somehow. I could just snap it," she said, holding the wand up and placing her fingers along it.

"Ha," he laughed. "I've been watching you for days. You're not going to break my wand. That would destroy your pretty little fantasies about me now, wouldn't it?"

Hermione felt the blush rise up her neck and color her cheeks, and she pressed her cool hand against her face.

"You've been watching me?" she accused.

"Don't get your knickers in a twist. I didn't have a choice because I'm tethered to my wand. I was thankfully excluded from your bathroom time. I get stuck outside next to the door."

"Well, thank God for that. I'll make sure I don't change clothes outside the bathroom."

"Shame," came a whisper.

Hermione turned, and a smile played about her lips. "What did you say?" Hermione asked.

"Nothing," he said. He found he could now walk, and he sat in the chair. It felt as if he'd been able to actually take the weight off straining, underused muscles. "I'm sitting. You can come sit at your desk."

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief. "I don't understand this. If you're a ghost, why can't I see you?"

"I've no idea," he replied in a nasty tone. "I didn't even realize I was in this state until you came back." He told her of seeing her and McGonagall crying over him and then not remembering more than a snatch of thought here or there for years. He'd always been in the Shrieking Shack until she had found his wand."

"That's very odd. I've never heard of a curse attached to the owner's wand." She started to sit in her chair and then panicked.

Severus sighed. "I am sitting where you told me to, Miss Granger. But it might have been fun to have a comely witch sit in my lap," he said teasingly.

Again she blushed. *He'd said I am comely.* Embarrassed she said scathingly, "As if anyone would want to sit in your lap."

For a moment, Severus was stunned with her comeback, and then he laughed. "Touché."

"Besides, I don't want to freeze my back side." She sat at her desk and stared at the seemingly empty chair before her. "You never used to make off-handed remarks," she observed.

"You were a child. You knew me only as your teacher and a spy for Voldemort," he told her.

"That's true." Then she shook her head and placed her face in her hands. "I must be going mad. If someone were to come here and find me talking to myself, they'd think I was crazy."

She got up and moved away and started to place books on each table, ignoring him.

He got up and followed her. "Miss Granger, please, you must believe I'm here. You need to help me figure out why I'm here. This is torture."

Hermione jumped at his closeness and turned toward his voice. "Are you in pain or hungry?"

"No," he said with a sigh. "None of that. I can't even see myself. I'm just veiled or cloaked or something."

Hermione felt panicked at the enormity of what had just been placed on her shoulders. If Snape really was here and trapped between worlds, she knew she had to help him.

She said, "Alright, sir. I will do some research and see what I can find out."

Thank you Lisa, I appreciate your beta work. I could not do this without you.

Becky, I appreciate you help and support.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

This story becomes very adult in upcoming chapters. Minors, please do not read.

Hermione woke the next morning and stretched. Her hand encountered a stinging coldness, and she screamed. She heard a grunt next to her.

"Severus, are you in this bed?" She moved away, jumping from the bed.

"Sorry, it seems I am." He hauled himself off the bed. "I have no memory of anything once you fell asleep." Then he said, "Would you mind putting on your robe? It's not that I mind the view, but I assume you'd find your state of undress alarming."

Hermione had been embarrassed about his dressing gown and had put one of her own nightgowns on. It had no sleeves and stopped above her knee. It was soft cotton but not thick. She snatched her matching robe off the bed and slipped into it aware that her nipples had hardened at the thought of him looking at her.

Severus grinned. The glimpses of her hardened nipples had been an amazing sight. A snicker escaped his lips, and Hermione glared in his direction.

"Keep your eyes to yourself, Severus. I won't have you gaping at me like a school boy!"

"Well, I really have little choice." He stepped closer and whispered in her ear. "You are beautiful, Hermione."

Hermione felt shivers go up her spine, and it wasn't just the coldness he brought with him; it was his soft, sexy voice. She moved away, shivering, and dismissed his compliment for the moment. But it warmed her that someone thought she was beautiful. She'd received few compliments because most men could not deal with her bookishness.

She cleared her throat and changed the subject abruptly. "We really have to figure out how to make you somewhat visible so I can at least tell where you are. Can you pick anything up?" she asked, trying to distract him from the blush that rose in her cheeks.

Severus smiled and turned away. He went to the bookshelf, reached out to take a book, and found there was something blocking his fingers from touching anything, like a force field.

"No, I can't pick anything up. If I'm not a ghost, which seems unlikely since I can't pass my hand through things, what am I? There's an invisible wall surrounding things. I'm in some sort of stasis, I think. I don't get hungry, and I don't need water or food. It has to be a stasis spell."

"Stasis... Severus, how is that possible? I've never heard of a spell like that. We use stasis to preserve food, stop things from aging..." Her voice trailed off. "Do you think you've stopped aging?"

"There's no way to tell since I can't see myself." The idea that he and Hermione's ages would be closer now was a comfort.

She sighed. "Let me get dressed, and we can talk more." She turned away and went to the bathroom.

Severus found that since she had laid his wand on a table, he did not find himself pressed against the bathroom wall. He moved around the 15 or so feet he was allowed and looked longingly at his things.

There was a quill that McGonagall had given him one Christmas. There was a small world globe that Albus had presented him one year. There was a small, wooden horse Lily had given him; well, he had swiped it from her. They had been about eight years old then. She'd had a wonderful set of barn animals, and he'd had few toys in his life. He offered to carry them once and *accidentally* dropped them near a small grate on the street they lived on. He'd picked the horse up and slipped it into his pocket as he'd gathered up the other animals. He had told her it must have fallen through the grate into the sewer system.

He had few mementoes of his life, and he wished now he could put the little horse away. He didn't want to explain it to Hermione, and he found its attachment to his former life something that might disturb her. In the short time he'd been close to her, he'd found that he wanted to leave his past in the past. He felt tightness in his nonexistent head, and he reached out to grab at the little horse and saw it move. "What the hell?" he said softly, glancing at the bathroom door and then back at the little horse. He closed his eyes and imagined the little horse sliding off the edge of the dresser and onto the floor. His head began to ache, and he heard a clatter. His eyes flew open, and he saw the little horse lying on the floor. He pressed his hands against the sides of his head. Blinding pain lanced through his temples, and he saw the little horse slide under the dresser and vanish from sight. He felt like his head would explode. He fell to his knees, and then everything went dark.

Hermione came from the bathroom dressed but rubbing her damp hair with a towel. "Severus, where are you?" she called.

Silence met her, and she called again, "Damn it, don't play games with me!"

She looked around in panic, but then she saw the wand on the bedside table. She moved forward with her hands out, seeking the coldness that surrounded him.

"I am not amused by this game," she told him, and then her foot encountered coldness. She realized he was lying on the floor when she ran her hand over the edge of the coldness.

"Severus!"

Forgetting the freezing effect for a moment, she plunged her hand into the coldness and felt a form, a hip to be exact. It took only a fraction of a second for the pain to register, and she snatched her hand back. Her fingers were blue from the cold, and bits of blackened skin were forming around her fingernails as she ran to the bathroom to run tap water on them. She could see the frostbite. She pulled the tiny potions bag out of the bathroom cabinet and found a potion that would treat the frostbite. She swallowed it and called to him again, "Severus, can you hear me?" She stopped several feet away from the area she had discovered him. She sat on the floor. What could have happened? How could she help him? "Severus!" she called, her voice elevating.

A low groan sounded close to her, and her fingers itched to touch him.

"My head," he groaned.

"Severus, what happened?" she repeated, relieved that he was conscious.

"I tried to move something, and it moved, but it gave me a blinding headache. I blacked out."

"Are you okay?" She felt the coldness move up beside her, and she realized he was sitting up close to her. She was cradling her healing fingers against her.

"What happened to you?" he asked, leaning closer.

Hermione felt the stinging cold and scooted away. "No, don't touch me. I nearly froze my fingers off touching you earlier."

Severus stared at her. "You touched me? I have a body?"

Hermione realized that she had encountered his body. "Yes, you do, Severus, you have a body!" She got to her feet and wrapped her arms about herself. Her face crumbled because she couldn't touch him, and she cried.

"Did you take something for the damage?" he asked with concern.

She nodded.

"Hermione," he said softly next to her, "please go lie down for a bit. Let the potion do its work." He was grateful he was invisible because tears swam in his own eyes. He ached to hold her, too. How had he formed such feelings and dependency on this woman in such a short time?

She nodded and went to the bed and climbed in.

He stood at the end of the bed, wishing he could crawl in with her and hold her against him.

"Severus?" she called to him. "How is your head?"

"It's better." He came close and knelt on the floor in front her. "You?"

She scrubbed at her tears. "I'm sorry. Severus, I feel things for you. In my head over the years as I studied Potions and became a master, I wanted your blessing and wanted you to be proud of me. You were part of a fantasy in my head: we working side by side, we being recognized as a Potions duo known around the world. It was all silly, schoolgirl stuff. You became real to me, and now I find you're still among us, and I can't even see you. I can't look into your eyes or see that terrible smirk you're so known for. You hurt, and I can't help you."

"Hermione, you've only just discovered me. You are a brilliant woman. Coming back here is emotionally charged for you, and it's exhausting you. Now you have to deal with me, the invisible man." He actually laughed and saw Hermione's look of shock.

"Please sleep. It's Sunday, and you start your classes tomorrow. I'm not going anywhere. I've been floating around for years. We have time to work out whatever this is. As long as I don't try to move anything again, I'll be fine. I have someone who knows I'm here. That means a great deal to me, Hermione."

She yawned; the potion was making her sleepy. She smiled in his direction. "I will take a nap, and when I wake we can sit and talk."

He said, "I would like that." He walked around the bed and slid on to it, keeping as far from her as he could. He felt his vision begin to fade as she slipped into sleep.

Severus became aware and could see by the light coming in the small window that it was late afternoon. He sat up on the edge of the bed. He twisted around in time to see Hermione still lying down but running her hands through her hair, trying to smooth the wild mass down. Why had he ever thought her bushy hair unattractive? It was a beautiful, coppery auburn, and the mass of curls had light and life to them.

"Severus, are you on the bed again?" she whispered.

"I'm sitting on the edge," he said. "How's your hand?"

"It's as good as new." She turned toward him. "Would you lie down and face me; we can talk."

If Hermione could have seen the astonished, touched look on his face, she would have smiled.

Severus crawled back into the bed and lay as far from her as he could; he did not want to injure her again. He was pleased when she reached out and felt the edge of his shield and moved a bit closer. She lay on her side with her arm under a pillow pulled tightly into the cleft of her shoulder to prop her head up. Her eyes searched the emptiness before her.

"Severus, I thought you had died when Harry, Ron, and I left the Shrieking Shack. What happened? Do you remember anything?"

Severus let his mind wander back to that day. "I felt the blinding pain of Nagini's fangs and the warmth of my blood flowing down my neck. I remember Voldemort's laugh and then his fading footsteps. Then the three of you came into view, and it took nearly all my strength to pull the memories out and give them to Harry. Then you went away, and I found I could still move a bit. I managed to pull the vials of anti-venom from my pocket with my wand. I took the anti-venom, then some blood replenisher, and a potion for pain mixed with a healing potion."

As he spoke, his eyes drank in each tiny detail of her face. Her soft skin was still glowing with youth. She had a slightly upturned nose, and thick lashes that lay against her cheek when she blinked. His eyes seemed to be locked on her soft, pink lips. He wondered what it might be like to kiss those lips.

Hermione's eyes widened, and her hand flew up to her lips. "Hey, what was that?"

Severus ducked away in embarrassment and then settled back when he remembered she couldn't see him or feel him moving on the bed. Had he somehow touched her? Had his thoughts pushed at her lips as he thought of kissing her?

"What? What was what?" he asked innocently.

Hermione shook her head and closed her eyes. *He would think she was a silly girl for fantasizing about him if she told him she'd just felt kissed* Nothing, sorry, go on."

Severus felt the tightness in his head; yes he must have exhibited some of that power again. It wasn't so bad this time. She'd felt him touch her and hadn't complained about cold. *Now that was interesting.* He filed it away to think on it later.

He continued, "I felt a bit stronger, and then I tried to move. I lost control of my wand. It fell, and the last thing I remember was feeling it hit my other arm. There was a blinding flash, and then I woke when you and McGonagall were crying over me."

She propped herself up on her elbow. "I wonder what that blinding flash was. Have you ever heard of any spell from a wand backfiring on the wielder when dropped?"

Severus shook his head and then remembered she couldn't see him and said, "No."

"What about it hitting your arm? Maybe it rolled across the Dark Mark, and that created some sort of curse."

"It's possible a curse was placed on us Death Eaters by Voldemort. Maybe he cursed my wand and I didn't even notice. I was, after all, dying," he theorized.

He saw Hermione's hand reach out to touch him, and then she drew it back and a frown appeared on her forehead, marring her beautiful face. She turned over and rolled up to a sitting position with her feet off the bed, and slid to her feet. Without a word she vanished into the bathroom.

He stood and paced the room until she came out. "Hermione, please go have some dinner with the staff. Leave my wand here, and I will be fine."

She nodded, needing time to think. "I won't be too long." She gave him a brave smile, but he could see fear. Was she afraid he wouldn't be here when she got back, or was she afraid he would be?

Hermione left the rooms and warded them. She didn't want anyone to enter without her presence. She felt bad leaving him there. He could not even read a book. What would he do by himself? As she made her way through the dungeon classroom, she thought of the touch on her lips. It had been warm. It had felt like real lips. Maybe she was going nuts. She resolved to go see Madam Pomfrey when dinner was done. She wanted the witch to do a brain spell on her to see if everything was working okay. She had to know if Severus was real or only in her mind. Coming back to Hogwarts had been so wonderful, and yet so much harder than she had expected. Discovering Severus trapped all these years and somehow linked to her was fantastic and scary at the same time. If he were really here, she would devote the rest of her life trying to free him from his prison. She couldn't stop the panic she felt for him. How could he stand this? He was trapped like a fly in a bottle. Right now he was grateful for her company. What would he feel like in a few months tethered to his wand and unable to even pursue his love of Potion making?

She chose the seat by Hagrid and realized that would probably be her seat from now on.

"Hermione," the half-giant greeted her. "Whatcha been doin' all day? You missed breakfast."

"I'm sorry. I had a headache and needed to rest," she explained, feeling a bit bad for fudging the truth.

"Just jitters, bein' your first teachin' day's tomorrow," he said stabbing his fork into a huge piece of meat. He stuffed it in his equally huge mouth and chewed twice, swallowed and repeated the process. The food on his plate would have fed her for a whole week. "Hey, you still hear the old bat whisperin' down there?"

Hermione shook her head. "No," she lied. After all, he wasn't whispering anymore.

"Good, old ghost of the past I imagine," he grinned, stuffing another huge bite into his mouth. He picked a goblet, over two liters in size, and gulped half of it down.

She smiled fondly at him and set about eating her dinner. She realized she was starving, and by the end of the meal, she did feel better. Talking with Hagrid about Ron and Harry brought back some wonderful memories and made her feel closer to them.

After dinner, she went quickly to the infirmary. She walked in; the room hadn't changed at all. "Madam Pomfrey, are you here?" she called into the huge room. Thankfully, it wasn't occupied by any students.

A door opened at the other end, and the small woman came from her quarters. Her face lit with pleasure. "Madam Granger, it's good to see you."

"Hermione, please, we are colleagues now," she told the Healer. She looked almost the same. A few deeper laugh lines fanned out by her eyes, and there were more grey hairs now than her original golden blonde.

"Well, then call me Poppy. All the staff does."

Hermione nodded, suddenly nervous about coming here. *Will the woman think me mad?* What could she say without alarming the Healer? She came to the conclusion there was nothing to do but tell her the truth.

Poppy watched her face and saw the fear in the young woman's eyes. "What can I do for you, Hermione?"

Hermione wrung her hands together and walked away from the woman, studying the beds in the room. "I have your word that you'll be discreet, don't I Poppy?"

"Of course." She frowned.

"I mean no disrespect. I just needed to be reassured." She took a deep breath. "I'd like you do a brain spell on me."

The older woman was alarmed. "Why?" She gestured and said, "Come, sit down here on the chair."

"I want you to scan for a tumor." She was embarrassed. "I'm hearing someone who's supposed to be dead. I seem to have picked up a ghost of sorts. I know this sounds crazy. He's invisible, trapped in a stasis spell of some sort. I really think he's there, but I want to rule out brain illusions."

"Can you tell me who you think is trapped?" the Healer asked as she drew her wand from her sleeve and prepared to begin her work.

Hermione sat straight in the chair; her body was taut and slightly trembling. She realized she was more afraid of finding out Severus was in her mind than having him really there. Part of her knew he really was there. After all, she'd nearly frozen her fingers today; but she still needed to know for sure. She knew he was there... but maybe she needed to share that information with someone who could not tell anyone else...someone she might be able to work with so that it wouldn't be all on her shoulders.

She realized the woman was still waiting for an answer. "Severus Snape," she whispered.

Lisa, my beta, thank you so much for your hard work.

Becky, thank you for your support.

Chapter 4

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

This story becomes very adult in upcoming chapter. Minors, please do not read.

"What?" She paled and took a step back. "He's been gone for 15 years. Why wouldn't he have let someone else know he was here?" The woman's voice was high with a touch of hysteria and excitement.

"Please, Poppy, do the spell, and then I will explain if there's nothing in my head creating these scenarios," she begged.

The woman raised an eyebrow at her. Hermione could see she was suddenly thinking there might be something to worry about, but she said no more and raised her wand to begin the spell. She chanted the words softly, and the colors of a spell flowed from the tip of her wand and created a halo above Hermione's head. Then it widened and slowly went down the sides of Hermione's head like a scan in a Muggle MRI might. There were no changes in color.

The woman's eyes widened with the implications, and she pulled up a chair near Hermione's.

Hermione looked at her with frightened eyes.

"What? Did you find something?" she asked in alarm.

Poppy seemed to shake herself out of her thoughts and grabbed Hermione's hand.

"No, I'm sorry, dear. You're just fine, but that means Severus Snape could really be there. How's it possible?"

The older woman paled more. Hermione grabbed her arm as she swayed and almost toppled off the chair.

"Poppy, are you okay? What can I do?" Hermione asked.

Poppy leaned forward and took a deep breath. "That boy was like my son. He's been here since he was a child, and I held him when he cried and patched him up when Voldemort tortured him. The things he was put through...you have no conception. Now you're saying he's been imprisoned for years, alone. Why wouldn't he come and find me?"

Hermione saw the hurt look on her face. "Well, somehow, we are bonded. Don't ask me why. I found his wand in the Shrieking Shack a few days ago in a crack in the floor. It was nearly impossible to see. I was just in the right place at the right time." She saw Poppy look at her strangely. "I went to pay my respects, and he has no grave," she explained. "Professor Snape may not have liked me when I was a child, but he was the best teacher I had. And I am stepping into his shoes."

Poppy nodded and smiled at her even though she saw something else in the young woman's eyes.

"He seems tied to the wand," Hermione explained. "He was trapped there and was only able to come here because I brought the wand. He told me that he's been mostly unconscious over the last 15 years. He wasn't even aware of how much time had gone by." Then she explained the *mechanics* of the stasis bubble he was trapped in.

"So you're telling me he is free of the hover charm but still trapped in the stasis/invisible spells." Feeling better now, Poppy got up and paced around the room. "I've never heard of this. It has to be dark magic."

Hermione nodded. "At first his voice was so soft I thought it was my imagination, and it nearly scared me half to death." She didn't share the fact that she'd had such a crush on the man that this whole thing had nearly embarrassed her to death as well.

Poppy smiled. "I imagine he did. Is he his old nasty self?"

Hermione shook her head. "He tried to be at first, but he no longer has to hide behind his spy persona, and he's really not so bad. It's hard having him so close and not being able to see him. He can see me, and..." She trailed off, not willing to explain about sharing her rooms with an invisible man.

"If he's being crude, tell me, and I will go give him a piece of my mind," Poppy said, standing taller and puffing her chest out with determination.

"No, really, he's being quite a gentleman. It's me; I have to remember to keep covered up even in my own bed." She was beginning to feel the need to get back and check on him.

The Healer smiled at her. "Ah." She offered, "I could keep him here if you want." Poppy smiled to herself as she saw panic pass over Hermione's face.

"No, no... He's fine where he is, and I feel responsible for him. Even now I've been gone too long. I need to get back." Hermione gave the older witch a hug. "I hope Severus won't be furious with me for telling you. I just needed to talk to someone about him, and even though I mentioned a bit to Hagrid, that first day... but, you know how he is."

"Which 'he'?" she asked, laughing.

Hermione laughed with her. "Both of them. I'm afraid I let Hagrid think it was my imagination that first day. I didn't want him to worry about me or to blab it all over the castle."

Poppy laughed, and Hermione saw a new side of the woman. She'd always been kind but very stern with them when they had landed in her infirmary. True it had always been because they had been doing stuff they shouldn't have. This was a genuinely kind woman, and the laugh lines meant she was a happy woman. She loved her job and loved being of service to people.

Hermione gave Poppy another hug and said, "I'll let you know if he's willing to have you come and visit. It's possible I might be the only one to hear him, tied together as we are." Hermione headed for the door, feeling so anxious her skin was crawling. "Gad, it's getting late, and I still have to finish setting up my room for tomorrow and have a conversation with a possibly very angry *specter*."

Poppy watched the young woman leave and then sat back in the chair with a plop. "Oh, my boy." Tears ran down her face.

Hermione opened her door and peered into the room. "Severus?" She jumped half a foot when he started yelling.

"Where have you been? It's been hours!" He stood in her way so she could not pass his shield without feeling the biting cold.

Hermione immediately bristled. "I'm not your slave, Severus! Now get the hell out of my way!" She blinked away the tears that were burning her eyes.

Severus backed away. His anger suddenly deflated, but he didn't apologize. He was silent and watched as she ran and hid in the bathroom for nearly 10 minutes. "Women!" he muttered and went to sit on the couch. He'd felt okay for about 30 minutes, but he'd started to get anxious after an hour had gone by. Then it felt like ants were biting his skin. And it got worse the longer she was gone. By the time she'd walked back in the door, he'd felt as if he could jump right out of his skin. Had it been an effect of his fear of being alone again, or was the spell working to make him miserable?

Hermione came from the bathroom, grabbed his wand, and stuffed it inside her sleeve; she didn't say a word but left her rooms and went to the classroom. She started to make her preparations for the next day's lessons.

Drawn along, Severus watched in silence as she placed the cauldrons on the stands and carefully measured out ingredients for a simple potion. She placed a little bottle by each cauldron, went to the board, and began to write the instructions.

She was efficient and exact. Only dunderheads would not be able to follow her directions. He assumed she wanted them to have success right off so they would find Potions fun. The word *fun* had seldom been in his vocabulary. Yet he could see the wisdom of it. Hermione, after all, was not an ugly old Potion's master, turned spy. She could teach and enjoy her students, as he had never been able to.

He maintained his silence and waited for her to speak. He knew he should be the one to break the ice and apologize, but he could not make himself speak.

He was surprised when she finished, went back into her room, and got ready for bed. She slipped into the bed and blew out the candle, leaving him standing in the room in silence.

He hastened to slip into the bed. He did not want to wake up on the floor the next morning. But Hermione did not fall asleep very quickly. She tossed and turned for over an hour until he felt so bad he whispered, "Goodnight, Hermione."

"Goodnight, Severus," she choked out. He could see her shoulders shake for a time with silent sobs. Then she finally cried herself to sleep, and his world faded from him.

Hermione was up early the next morning to get ready. She ignored Severus; she was too nervous to talk to him.

He watched her buzz around the room and was surprised when she tucked his wand into her sleeve as she headed out the door to get to the Great Hall for breakfast. Being mid-year, there was no sorting ceremony, so breakfast was pretty normal.

Severus followed along. If he stopped to test the length of his invisible leash, Hermione would go about 15 to 16 feet, and then he was tugged along like a rope being pulled.

Once Hermione stopped to watch two students walk from a hallway toward the hall. One had his hair done in a Mohawk with purple fringe. The other had her hair dyed pitch black, and she had many rings in her nose.

Hermione whispered, "Things sure have changed."

"That's for sure," he agreed close to her.

"Severus, not a word from you today in my class, please. I don't want to appear to be a loon, so don't talk to me unless we are in private," she warned.

"As you wish," he whispered. He would not make her to cry today, but he knew a whole day of silence would be trying for him...especially if she did something in the classroom he did not like. He wasn't sure if he would approve of her teaching or not. That was yet to be seen.

Severus spent the day watching Hermione teach her first classes, and he was surprised that she was very strict and proper but also let the students know that there were times when they could also enjoy their time there and ask as many questions as they wished. He watched that with a smirk. She obviously hated the fact that he'd always silenced her inquisitiveness.

As lunch came and the last of the children went out the door, Hermione shut and warded the door with her wand. She sat at her desk and sighed, putting her face in her hands.

Severus said, "You did well. What's wrong?"

"I did?" she said, looking around.

"I'm standing in front of you," he told her, and her eyes swung to look at the space. "Yes, you did well. Very well."

He saw her blush, and a coy smile appeared at the corners of her mouth. He breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm sorry about last night." He explained how he had felt after she'd left him alone.

"Severus, why didn't you tell me?" she said, sadness filling her eyes again.

"Hermione, having to depend on someone is all very new to me. I have always been indentured, but I had to think on my own feet to survive. Now I can't even leave a room without you."

"Severus, I can't read your mind. Hell, I can't even read your body language. All we have are words. I will try harder not to flare up if you will, and I will not leave you for long unless it's necessary." She stood. "Now, I have to get some lunch. Do you want to come with me?"

"Please, I'm not ready for anymore alone time."

She smiled at him and patted the sleeve of her robe. "My guardian angel," she said, with a giggle.

"Hardly," he replied acidly.

Hermione only giggled more at him as she unlocked her door.

He found himself enjoying her laughter as they moved out of the dungeon.

The rest of the day went about the same, and finally Hermione locked and warded her door. She knew she still had to bring up her talk with Poppy, and she dreaded the silence that might follow. Last night had been horrible.

"Severus?"

"Here?" His voice came from the corner behind her desk. "I didn't want anyone to bump into me."

"You mean you stood back there all afternoon? I'm sorry. I should have thought to place a chair there for you. Please sit at my desk whenever I'm not there."

"Thank you. You did well, Hermione. It was different from my teaching methods but not any less effective. Perhaps you will coax more out of your students with your kindness than I ever did with fear."

"High praise coming from the old bat of the dungeons." Hermione smirked in his direction and then changed her position when she felt his coolness come closer to her right side.

"Old bat, indeed," he said.

"Back off," she warned with a snicker. His closeness was giving her the shivers. "I need to grade some papers."

"Hermione, may I look over your shoulder? I'm going stir crazy with inactivity," he begged.

"Alright, I'd appreciate your opinions. But remember, mine is the last word," she informed him.

They spent several hours grading the papers and testing the potions. Finally, Hermione went to dinner. This time Hagrid was missing from the table, so Severus sat in his chair and watched Hermione eat. She and Minerva had a conversation about her first day, and he saw Hermione look down the table at Madam Pomfrey and shake her head slightly.

Severus watched the old woman's face. She had aged but was still holding up well. He had fond memories of her from his childhood. That woman knew more about him than anyone here. The things she could tell about him made him light headed. But she had always kept his secrets. As she watched, he became a bit suspicious. She was not only looking at Hermione but searching the space around her.

He eyed Hermione and saw her glance nervously at him. He came as close as he could and whispered harshly, "You told, Poppy?"

"Shhhsh," Hermione warned him,

McGonagall said, "Oh, was I being too loud?"

Hermione blushed. "No, Minerva. Sorry, there was a fly."

"A fly, here in Hogwarts? Unlikely, this time of the year."

"Sorry, maybe it was an errant hair that tickled my forehead." Hermione felt foolish under the old witch's gaze.

"Yes, well..." she said, pushing back from the table. "I'm going to turn in for the night. See you all at breakfast." She said the last words for the entire table to hear.

When Minerva was gone, Hermione also excused herself and quickly left. She knew there would be a discussion tonight. She didn't speak until they were back in their rooms and the doors were locked and warded.

"Alright, spit it out. What did you do, Madam Granger?" he asked in a tight, low voice.

"Whatever are you going on about, Severus?" she asked as she set about lighting the fire with her wand and drawing a warm blanket off the end of the bed so she could sit and relax. She was starting to feel quite tired from her first day.

"I saw you and Poppy trading looks. You told her didn't you?" he accused.

Hermione felt his coldness settle near her feet on the couch, and she drew her legs closer to herself.

"Yes, Severus. I had to talk to someone," she finally admitted. Then she grimaced, waiting for him to blow up.

Lisa, thank you for your beta work. I really appreciate it.

Becky, thank you for your support.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

This story eventually becomes very adult. Minors, please do not read.

"Hermione! You should have consulted me," he threw back at her angrily.

Hermione felt his coldness leave the couch. She pulled the blanket to her chin to shield herself.

Severus paced across the room and then turned to see her cowering under her blanket. "Damn it, woman, if you are going to cry every time I yell at you..."

"I'm not crying," she yelled back, cutting off his next words. "I needed to know that you weren't a figment of my imagination or a brain tumor."

"What?" He looked surprised. "I thought you realized I was real. Your frozen fingers should have told you that," he said in exasperation. He waved his arms wildly, although he realized she couldn't see them. It felt good to be animated.

Now the tears came, and she felt foolish. "I haven't cried this much in years. I never thought I'd be faced again with actual disapproval from you, Severus. I don't know how to deal with it. You make me feel like that foolish girl in your class every time you raise your voice. I was traumatized when you made me cry in class." She turned to face the fire. "Fantasies are so much kinder," she whispered under her breath.

He tried to rein in his anger. What would it hurt to have Poppy's help? She had always been trustworthy, and she was as near to a mother as he had. As a child, when others had beaten him up or tormented him, he had always run to her. The first time she'd stumbled across him in a dark hallway, he'd been crying because James and Sirius had put a curse on him and turned his hair pink.

She'd taken her apron off and covered his hair with it and had taken him to the infirmary and actually held him in her lap as she'd spelled his hair back to normal. She had known his mother had died shortly before he'd been sent to Hogwarts, and she had taken his mother's place in watching out for him. At 11, he'd been small and scrawny. Since that day, he'd trusted her with his life, and she'd repeatedly saved him from bleeding to death after being tortured by Voldemort.

He sighed. "You were right to trust her. She will keep your confidence. I trust there was no physical reason that you are hearing me?" He was slightly afraid that he was a figment of her imagination. "After all, this entire situation is full of unbelievable scenarios."

Hermione sniffled and wiped her eyes dry on the hem of the blanket. "Severus, please come sit by me. It's so hard when I don't know where to look." She felt the coolness return, and she looked toward her feet at the space a little above her own eye level. "There is no physical reason."

She was surprised to hear him sigh. "Were you afraid there was?" she asked, smiling at him.

"Well," he laughed bitterly, "my life has been one bad story after another. Being the figment of a beautiful woman's brain tumor wouldn't be the worst place to be."

Hermione reached out and caressed the coolness of the barrier between them. Severus was touched, and he put his hand out as well.

Hermione drew her hand back when the cold intensified. "Thank you," she said.

"For what?" he asked, placing his invisible hands in his invisible lap.

"For reaching out to me and for understanding."

"You're welcome, Hermione." He was looking at her cheek and wishing he could touch her when her hand flew to her face.

"You touched me! I distinctly felt a finger run down my face. It was just like the kiss." She was sitting up and looking into the coldness before her. "How did you do that?"

Severus backed away, not wanting to hurt her. "I was thinking about touching you."

"Severus! That's amazing."

"For you," he said. "I feel nothing."

She sat back dejected. "I'm sorry, Severus, but do you realize what this means? You are getting through the barrier again, even if it's just with your mind. Does your head hurt?"

"No, not much." He got into her excitement. "This time hurt less than the last." What if he could learn to move things and touch people? Maybe he could wear out this barrier from the inside. He still had some magical power.

She looked suddenly shy. "You kissed me..."

"Yes, well, at least I wanted to," he admitted, feeling a blush creep up his invisible neck.

"It was nice, Severus," she said softly.

He sighed and said, "You're an enigma, Hermione. You are a beautiful young woman, and yet you fantasize about me...not only before I died but after I was dead to you. Can't you find a live man?" The minute the words were out of his mouth and he saw her eyes widen in pain, he wished he could have bitten his tongue off.

She threw the blanket off and ran to the bathroom.

"DAMN IT! Women!" he screamed angrily at himself. "Hermione, I didn't mean it like I said it!" he shouted. But he only got silence. He went to the door and listened and heard muffled crying.

He felt his fury release, and a book flew off the nearby table. He bent over as pain lanced through his head. He immediately used techniques from his spy days to calm himself, and with his hands clenched against his thighs, the pain left.

The door to the bathroom opened and Hermione stepped from the room. She picked up his wand and a pillow and took them through the door out into her classroom. He

had no choice but to follow her. She locked his wand in her desk drawer and checked the locks and wards on her doors. "I need space tonight," she said, not really caring if he heard. Then she left him there in the dark room.

He sat in 'his' chair at 'his' desk and fumed. It was hours before he felt his sight start to fade, and he knew Hermione had finally fallen asleep.

The rest of his week was nearly the same. Worse, she left him in the classroom when she went for meals. There was a time or two when he became very uncomfortable as the bond between them stretched too far. Yet, she always came back before the pain would start.

On Friday night, she was sitting in the chair by the fire with her feet drawn up. Severus was sitting in the bathtub, whistling, when the door opened and she said, "Severus, please get out of the bathroom. I don't feel well."

He moved past her. "Hermione, please call Poppy if you really feel sick."

She slammed the door in his face. Moments later he heard vomiting. That made him nervous. What if she was really ill? How would he get her help? He had not tried to talk to anyone this week. He wasn't even sure if anyone else could hear him. Hermione had been so angry with him that she had kept him isolated all week. Even Poppy, who knew he was here, obviously hadn't tried to reach him. After a time, the door opened, and Hermione stumbled to the bed.

He came close and saw her face ablaze with heat. "Hermione, did you take any potions?"

"Flu, 21 cases, several children... young ones... my first class. KaCe Higginbothom and Lynn Jamerson... Oh, God, Severus, I'm gonna die." She proceeded to vomit over the side of the bed.

Severus ran to the Floo, but try as he might, he could not pick up the powder and call for help. *Accio* wand," he called, but it did nothing but sit there. He could see, from experience, that her temperature was dangerously high. He went to the bathroom to get a fever reducer, and the bottle fell and splintered on the stone floor. Pain was lancing through his head. He crawled back to the bed and managed to slide in behind her. Though he stayed a distance away, he wrapped his coldness around her like a shroud. He could feel the darkness coming, and he knew he was powerless to move away. He prayed that somehow he would help her fever and not injure her in the process.

Slowly Severus became aware; he felt a warmness he had not felt in a long time against him. He opened his eyes to see Hermione's nose inches from his. She was sighing and snuggling closer. The Barrier was gone. He could feel her. Her eyes suddenly snapped open, and she stared into his... nose.

"I know it's big," he said quietly, "but it's rude to stare."

Her eyes shifted up a bit. "Sorry, Severus. I can feel you, but you're still invisible."

Disappointment ran through him, but her fingers exploring his face made him forget his problems. "I can feel your touch," he said incredulously.

Hermione grinned and snuggled up to his chest. "What happened? How did the barrier get broken?" She laid her body against his. "You feel so good. I was so hot and sick. I thought I was going to erupt like a volcano." She coughed dryly against his chest.

"Your fever got very high, and I could not summon help; the pain in my head was blinding. I was barely able to slip into the bed and try to wrap the coldness I had around you."

She frowned. "...a very odd curse," she said, slipping off to sleep again, and Severus did, too.

Hermione woke and slipped out of the bed. She heard Severus call, "Are you OK?"

"Loo," she said. She locked herself in the bathroom, quickly used the facilities, and then washed her face and brushed her teeth well. She tried to comb her hair, but she couldn't make it lay down. She came back out, found her wand, and cleaned the floor and bed. "Severus, are you still in bed?"

He said, "Yes, do you want me to get up?"

"No, I need to rest some more." She heard the sound of a hand patting the blankets.

"Hermione, cast a cleansing spell over me, as well; I really have no clue as to what condition I'm in."

She grinned weakly and did what he asked. Then she placed her wand next to his and crawled in. Strong, invisible arms reached out and pulled her close.

"You feel so good," she said, and he spooned himself behind her.

She grabbed his hand and brought it to her lips, kissing the back. "If I didn't feel so weak, I'd be jumping all over, excited about what's happened here. Severus, we are getting closer to figuring this out...well, undoing it, because I have no idea why it's changed. You might be out of stasis. We'll have to see. Are you hungry or thirsty?"

"Not right now. I'm enjoying the feel of you next to me. I'm sorry about what I said the other day. It came out all wrong. I wanted to know why you would choose a dead man's memory instead of a living man to marry and have babies with." He could feel she was already on the edge of falling asleep again.

"...because there never has been another man for me, Severus. I always felt I was born too late for you. We are intellectual equals, and you're a sex...y man."

He smiled as they fell asleep again.

Severus woke cheek to cheek with Hermione and heard her sigh with pleasure. Her fingers reached up to slide over his face and then caressed his hair.

He smiled against her cheek.

"It's so much better being able to touch you," she said in a whisper, trying not to disturb the peace that seemed to have enveloped them.

"I agree with you there." He pressed a kiss against her temple. "Are you feeling better? It's nearly 8:00 in the evening on Saturday. You need to eat something. You should make tea."

She begged, "Just hold me a bit longer, Severus. It's been years since anyone has held me."

"I could say the same," he said. "No one wanted to hold this Death Eater. I played the greasy bat of Hogwarts' dungeon well. Not even the women associated with the Death Eaters wanted me. Plus, not many of them trusted me because I was in Dumbledore's pocket."

"Severus, I know you're trapped with me..."

"Shhhush," he said, "I would be here with you even if I weren't. I was so scared earlier when you got sick. Hermione, I couldn't help."

"You did help. You broke my fever, and it burned off the cold. This is the oddest spell I've ever seen."

Severus nodded. "It seems to respond to your needs. I've been thinking a lot this week. Somehow when you came with Minerva all those years after my death you stepped into the spell and got attached. Maybe a tear fell on my wand. I really don't know, but it locked us together, but only when you thought of me. I know how intense working toward a master's in Potions can be. When you came back and actually found the wand, making contact with it strengthened the bond we had. You were open to hearing and seeing me because your mind was so tuned into thinking about me that you really could hear me."

"I needed you so much. I have my profession now, and my work is exciting, but you inspired me and made me who I am. I had this huge desire to share that with you, Severus. Last night, your bond to me responded to my fever and saved me. Now it's eaten away at the barrier, but you're still invisible. Will the invisibility be the final layer of the curse?"

Severus said, "You realize this bond has changed me. I would not have even considered being here with you, in this bed, in such a short time from returning to 'life.' The spell itself seems to have changed me. I'm no longer angry all the time. I no longer want to hide from the world and myself. Since the Dark Mark is no longer active, it's possible that the spell could be losing its power on me."

Hermione threaded her fingers through his and drew them up so she could kiss them. "I'm glad you don't want to hide from life. You are reborn, Severus. You can be and do anything you want. I rather think the changes in the spell are triggered by emotional attachment. Love is the last thing Voldemort would think would come for you, Severus, or that you would respond to someone unselfishly."

He urged her to turn toward him, and she rolled over and faced him. "You may be right," he said. "Emotional attachment was something Voldemort never had and never understood. It was the only thing powerful enough to beat and destroy him."

He kissed her tentatively. Then when she didn't protest from pain or coldness, he devoured her mouth, plunging his tongue into her warmth and feeling her respond with equal fervor. She arched her body against his, and his hands explored the plains of her neck, shoulders, and breasts.

Hermione moaned and clutched at him. The reality of his mouth and hands far outweighed the fantasy. She wanted all of him. She reached out to try to help him out of his clothes, but they wouldn't budge.

The kisses stopped, and he sighed; his forehead was pressed against hers. "I guess it's not going to be easy," he groaned.

She smiled and ran her fingers through his hair. "I think it's time to go see Poppy."

Lisa, thank you for your beta work. I can not do this without you.

Becky, thank you for all your support and help.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

This story eventually becomes very adult. Minors, please do not read it.

I do not own these characters. I am just borrowing them.

Please consider leaving a review. I have received very few. I need to know what you like and don't like.

They lay holding each other for a while and then finally got up. Hermione took a shower, and Severus waited patiently for her to come out.

He sat in a chair with his hands folded in his lap and waited as he had waited all week long for her to overcome her anger and talk to him again. He was able to escape into his ordered mind and work on some spells and potions he had been developing before the war. If he had not had something for distraction, this would have been even more maddening. Sitting in his quarters or the classroom for the last week had been infuriating, but he'd eventually calmed down and stayed silent and let Hermione work out her pain. When she'd gotten sick, he'd been afraid. It had been obvious to him that the control of the power he had come without pain when he really was not thinking about it. He just desired it. It had little to do with mental force. He would have to learn to relax to use it.

Hermione came from the bathroom clean and pink from her warm shower. She had her hair smoothed into long waves, and her robes were a deep green.

"Severus," she called to him.

"I'm in the chair. I'm now moving toward you," he informed her.

She extended her hand, and he took it and drew her close.

"You look beautiful, Hermione."

She raised her face to his, and he kissed her. She buried her hand in his hair, urging him into a long kiss.

He finally drew back. "If you were still 20 years younger, this might seem bizarre."

Hermione said, with a laugh, "It wasn't so bizarre. I was determined to approach you after my N.E.W.T.s. After all, I was over 17 and of age. It was my dream to apprentice under you." She pulled on his arm. "Come on, I think I need some food. We can go down to the kitchens to get some soup and then go see if Poppy is in."

She took their wands from the table and tucked them into her sleeves and then reached out so he could take her hand. They walked in silence through the classroom and down the dungeon halls. Hermione smiled at some of the students as they passed, and Severus jumped out of the way. They finally reached the kitchens and got the house-elves to serve them some soup. Hermione took the big bowl and an extra spoon to the private dining room near the kitchens.

When Severus tried to eat some of the soup, it came right back up. He sighed and said, "I guess I still have the shield internally. Well, at least I cannot starve, and I do have the pleasure of your touch and kisses." He reached out and took her hand, lacing his fingers through hers.

"Severus, if you could go anywhere without me, would you still want me?" she asked with a bit of uncertainty in her voice. Not convinced he really would stay with her.

He looked at the fear on her face, and she suddenly seemed like the young girl he had known so long ago.

"Yes, I'm sure I would. You believe in me. Maybe your feelings have something to do with the barrier that keeps me in this half-life, breaking down. I am almost certain it does. If Voldemort hated me enough to do this, he must have known about my duplicity. Let us say he planned to curse me to this non-existence. Maybe he thought I would only come into consciousness when someone hated me. I did have snatches of consciousness over the years, but I have no clue who was thinking about me or why. Whether it was good or bad thoughts, I only knew I was trapped in that nothingness. If I were awake more than a few minutes, I would start to panic because I was alone in the Shrieking Shack. A few times, it got really bad. It was terrifying, not knowing why I couldn't leave that room. It was a dismal prison with only the blood stain for company, Hermione."

He squeezed her fingers and brought them up to his lips for a kiss. "You saved me from that nothingness. I'm here now because you care for me."

"But I don't want you here because you think you owe me some devotion, like a guardian angel," she protested.

He smirked at her. "No, I don't see wings on you. I just see a good and beautiful woman. I would not have had the courage to go after you if I had known you cared for me back then; seventeen is still a child to me. But a man who has had nearly no love or affection his whole life would be a fool not to respond to the care that you have for me, and you're clearly an adult now."

Hermione noted with a silent smirk that they both avoided the "L" word. It was too soon.

She sighed. "I guess we may never know if you would have cared for me without this spell."

Severus noted she'd finished her soup, and he drew her to her feet and put his arms around her. "Does it truly matter? A devious wizard who wanted nothing more than to torture me orchestrated this situation. Instead, I am getting care and affection. As I said earlier, he never understood the power of LOVE." The word came from his mouth as a foreign word. He'd formed the letters almost with slow deliberateness. "That which defeated him can now defeat his spell."

She was still a bit frustrated. They would never know if Severus would have cared for her if he had not gone through this trial in his life. Did their bond emotionally tie them together? He was so different than he had been years ago.

He watched the emotions cross her face, and he realized she couldn't see his pleasure at being with her.

"Hermione," he said, kissing her forehead, "I do not make it a habit of being physical with a woman I do not have feelings for. Please believe me when I say that I care deeply for you. If you could see my face when you come into the room, you'd know I care."

"Now that's something I wish I could see: a Severus Snape who cares for me. It downright boggles the mind." She laughed and hugged him, jumping back when the door opened and Minerva came in carrying a cup of coffee and a pastry.

"Oh, Hermione," she said, looking curiously at her, "what are you doing?"

"I was just doing some warm-up exercises." She flapped her arms about her, raising and lowering them as a demonstration. "I was sick last night, and I came for soup and thought I'd stretch a bit."

Minerva looked at her as if she didn't believe her. Then she nodded and went to set her cup and saucer on the table.

She eyed Hermione's empty bowl and two spoons. "I thought I heard voices."

"Oh, yes, Sir Nicholas was just on his way through before you opened the door."

"Well, that explains the voices." She chose to ignore the extra spoon. "I'm sorry to hear you were so sick. How come I wasn't informed?"

"I wasn't able to call for help. When I woke this morning, my fever had broken," she said. She felt Severus tug at her shirt from behind, urging her to get out of there. "I was going up to see Poppy and ask for something to get rid of my residual headache. Have a good night, Minerva."

Minerva nodded. "I hope you feel better for work Monday. Let me know if you need a substitute."

Hermione nodded. "I will, thank you." She strode out of the room and got down the hall before Severus spoke.

"We will have to tell her soon," he said with a sigh. "The woman always tried to accept Albus' belief in me. Though it was hard for her after Albus' death. I just wanted to talk to Poppy first."

"She was heartbroken over your death. She felt really guilty for not seeing through Albus' plan, and she was so furious with him that she had his portrait covered for nearly a year after he exonerated you in court."

He laughed. It was a curious, low rumble. "It's nice to hear that Albus wasn't everyone's saint. Maybe I should have spoken to her, but I wouldn't want to give the old woman a heart attack. It's best to break the news to her a little more carefully."

"Yes, we do need to tell her soon." They went quietly the rest of the way to the infirmary. It was late Saturday, and most of the students were back in their dormitories.

Hermione knocked on the door to the infirmary and entered. She and Severus made their way to Poppy's door and knocked again.

"Come," the woman called from inside.

Hermione opened the door and stepped into a small sitting room. It was warm and cozy. All the chairs and the couch were draped with knitted throws in multiple colors. There was a rag rug in front of them. Shelves of medical books lined the walls. Poppy was sitting in one of the chairs with a throw over her legs and a big book in her hands.

"Ah, so you've finally come to see me again, have you?" She looked around Hermione.

Hermione realized the Healer was angry with her for not having come sooner. "I'm sorry, Madam Pomfrey. I got really annoyed with Severus and didn't speak to him most of the week."

The older woman waved her to the couch still not sure if Severus was there. She leaned forward and looked at Hermione's face. "Have you been ill?"

Hermione sank gratefully into the couch. "Yes. I got that flu last night. It was very bad."

Hermione reached over and took Severus' hand.

Poppy's eyes got wide. "Why didn't you call me, and why haven't you said hello, Sev?"

Severus took a deep breath and said, "Hello, Poppy."

The healer's hand flew to her mouth, and her eyes clouded with tears. "Oh, you really are there."

Severus said, "Thank Merlin, you can hear me."

Poppy threw the blanket off and came forward, and Hermione felt Severus let go of her hand and rise to meet the witch.

Poppy threw her arms around the invisible barrier that she met and held him tightly.

Severus held her close and leaned down to rest his chin on her head for a long moment. "I'm sorry I didn't come at once. We have been trying to adjust to the situation." He sighed. "I keep sticking my foot in my mouth."

Poppy pulled back and laughed. "I just bet you do." She was not even trying to hide the tears that now ran down her face. She still had a hold of one of Severus' hands. "Come out into the infirmary. I can run a scan and see what it tells me."

Hermione got to her feet and stepped closer to where Severus was. He reached out and took her hand. They went sideways out the door. Once inside the infirmary, Poppy let Severus go and set up some instruments in the middle of the floor. She made some adjustments to the instruments, which looked a bit like Muggle survey equipment on tripods. There were three of them, and they were positioned in a triangle with a chair in the middle. Once she finished fiddling with the instruments, Poppy motioned for Severus to sit in the chair and asked Hermione to stand back and watch.

Poppy began to sing a spell. Her voice was capable of many notes, and her resonance went from high to low. Colors began to swirl through the holes in the instruments, weaving a blanket around the whole triangle. It gradually moved inward until Severus' form could be plainly seen under the cover of colors.

Hermione stood quietly with her hands clasped nervously in front of her. She watched the lights move around Severus but mostly she drank in his outline. He really was there. She saw his form was three-dimensional and real. He was sitting with one leg crossed over the other. His hands were in his lap. Even made out of rainbows, he was beautiful to her. She longed to see him again. But the colors faded as Poppy stopped chanting, and there was nothing left of Severus.

"Did you find anything?" Severus' anxious voice came from the emptiness.

"The spell is very powerful. It is like a living invisibility cloak. It seems to be only a few millimeters thick now. It is as if you are suspended in a stasis field. It is somehow keeping your body functioning on nothing. It's like a time warp where you are. Your body is not aging. There are several more layers of the barrier. You say you've worn away two already?"

"Yes, the bubble he floated in and a stinging cold exterior barrier where I could not touch him. His coldness took away the fever from my body last night when I was very ill, and today it was gone."

"That is unusual to say the least," the old healer said. "I will have to go to St. Mungo's and do some research. I have never heard of this. It would have been placed on you by a very strong wizard."

"We suspect that my Dark Mark is somehow involved." Severus explained what he remembered.

Poppy pursed her lips and then said, "I guess it's possible, but I really have nothing to go on. Other than your imprisonment, I'd say your life's not so bad. You managed to heal from the bites that Nagini gave you. You don't have to eat or eliminate. You most likely haven't aged. Now you can talk and interact, even touch."

Hermione waited for him to react.

"No, it's not so bad. I have a beautiful woman I can share my life with, which is something I never had. I am, however, unconscious when she's asleep, which makes me crazy. I would prefer to be awake and on watch. It's my nature to be on watch."

"This thing seems to be slowly losing its power as it is. Maybe you should just wait to see how it goes. Something is weakening the layers. There seems to be one right under your skin, thin like a second skin. I detect one around your internal organs, and the last is around your heart," she said quietly.

"My heart?" Severus asked. "That's kind of odd, isn't it?"

"Yes, very," she said suddenly, making herself busy putting away the instruments and taking the chair back to its original position by one of the beds.

She stopped suddenly, and Hermione realized it was because Severus had a hold of her.

"You have an unspoken opinion here, Poppy. What is it?"

"It has a purpose, and I think it will be obvious to you when you finally break free. I cannot say whether Voldemort or someone else placed it on you. It is a prison, that's obvious, but it's a rather benevolent one. If its purpose were evil, wouldn't you have been alone in torture all these years? Alternatively, having been aware of your isolation, you suffered little and have been asleep most of the time, alone, and only now aware when you have had Hermione for company or were thought of by her. Your consciousness in the Shrieking Shack was only minutes. Think what it would have been like if you lived every minute of every day and night all these years, alone," Poppy theorized.

"So you think this was done on purpose? That it wasn't an accident?" Severus asked, going to Hermione and taking her hand and pulling her close because he needed her comfort.

"It's possible." Poppy stopped and looked toward Severus and Hermione. "I can give you a spell to shroud yourself with. It will make you appear as the ghosts do here at Hogwarts. It probably would be best to do it only in your quarters, Hermione. You don't want to scare the children with the big, bad, legendary spy." She laughed. "It will take some of your energy to keep it going. So I would suggest using it only a few hours at time. I also think we need to tell Minerva about you. She cared a great deal for you also, Severus, and she still speaks of you on occasion. She wanted to have you replace her."

Severus said, "Yes, I heard her tell Hermione that. I am not sure I want the job. You know how much I enjoyed teaching the hoodlums," he told Poppy, sarcastically.

The healer laughed. "Well, you were under a lot of pressure back then. I think if you tried it now, it might be quite satisfying. Hermione, come over here. Severus, stand about six feet in front of her. This shroud might feel a bit warm, but you will be visible for a time. Now I will teach it to you, Hermione, but I will also teach you how to turn it off. I'd really rather you not come face to face with anyone in the halls, least of all Filch; the poor man is ancient and might have a heart attack."

"...and that would be bad, why?" Severus asked.

Hermione jabbed him in the ribs playfully. "The poor man. It must be hard for him to be here, knowing our world of magic can never be his."

"That man supported Umbridge, and I have no doubt he was in Malfoy's back pocket. I was clearly surprised to see him still here," Severus complained.

"I think he repented after the war, Severus. You, of all people, should understand the need for forgiveness," Poppy said, her tone like a mother giving a lecture. "Enough for now. Let's get this spell done; I'd like to go to bed before midnight."

Severus said, "Of course. How rude of us."

Poppy came and reached for him and pulled him close when he took her hand. "I'm very happy to have you back, Severus. You have no idea how many times I wished I could have found you in time to help you."

Severus held her close. "There was nothing you could have done. I took all the potions, but I did not know to fight against this unseen barrier." He pushed her away. "Now, old woman," he said, the affection plain to hear in his voice, "teach Hermione the spell so we can let you rest."

Lisa, I appreciate you so much. Without your beta work, I could not do this.

Becky thanks for your help and support.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

These characters are not in any way mine. I am borrowing them to tell this story. Please leave reviews if you like the story.

I added a story title manip to chapter one. Check it out and let me know what you think. Becky added a wonderful frame to it.

Poppy had Hermione practice the motions for the spell first: twirl left three times and then a quick stab. She had to have the twirl of the circle just the right width and height.

After six or seven tries, Poppy said, "Now speak the spell very carefully:*Reproba Tergum*. Say it on the third circle and finish as the stab is completed. Let's try in this direction first. A ghostlike shroud will appear, but there will be no form underneath."

"Why wouldn't others know about this spell? Harry might have gotten caught many times when he was a kid if someone had aimed it at him," Hermione said.

Poppy looked quite pleased with herself and then said, "Because I invented it. Dumbledore told me about Harry's invisibility cloak shortly after returning it to him. He wanted me to be able to locate Harry in case he was injured while wearing it."

Hermione looked at her with interest. "I would be very interested in the theory behind the spell."

Poppy smiled. "Perhaps we can discuss it once we set Severus free."

Severus' voice came dryly from the area left to them. "If you two are finished gabbing, I would like to see a bit of myself."

Poppy laughed. "Sorry, Severus, you poor dear."

"Poor dear, my ass. Just make me visible, old woman," he said grumpily.

"You seem impatient, Severus," Poppy teased.

"Invisibility has its drawbacks."

"Well come on then. Hermione, give the spell a try and see if you can get the shroud to appear."

Within four tries, Hermione had the shroud appearing. It seemed to hang like an old sheet ghost before them, color running like a rainbow around it, seeking a form that was not there.

Poppy said, "Good, good. Now, try undoing it. Use the same motions, but say *Reproba Tergum Laxo*."

Hermione tried the reverse spell, and the shroud vanished.

"Good!" Poppy exclaimed, clapping her hands. "Now, I think you're ready. Severus, stand right here." She reached out and encountered his arm and pushed him into position. "Okay, Hermione, give it a try."

"This won't hurt if it doesn't work, will it? I don't want to be permanently wrapped in that thing."

"It's not shrink-wrap, Severus. It will dissipate after a bit if it doesn't find a form it can grab on to," Poppy said, stepping away.

Hermione took a deep breath and quickly fired off the spell. The shroud appeared and then seemed to fold into all the nooks and crannies that were Severus Snape. They took on the color and form that was his body, clothes, and flesh. There he stood, translucent but actually visible like the ghosts of the castle. Hermione ran to him and felt and saw arms go around her. She gazed up into his face. She had never seen such a tender look in Severus Snape's eyes before. It was a look she had only imagined him having for her.

"Hermione," he said as he bent to kiss her tenderly.

Hermione felt her eyes tear up. "Severus," she said softly as she moved back just to look at him. He was a bit thinner. His hair and his face were just as she'd remembered him that last day in the Shrieking Shack. He was a bit disheveled, and his clothing a bit worse for wear from the final battle. She stepped back and reached up to caress his cheek and saw him turn to kiss her palm. It was wonderful.

They heard a sniff behind them and turned to see Poppy brushing tears from her face. "It's good to see you, Sev," she said.

Severus regarded her with affection and held out his hand to her. She came and was enveloped in a group hug.

After a few moments she broke away and said, sniffing, "Now get out of here. I need my sleep."

Severus smiled down at her. "Yes, Poppy, thank you."

"Thank you," Hermione echoed, giving the woman a hug.

Then she turned to Severus and said, "Sorry, but I have to make you invisible for the trip back to our rooms."

He nodded as she released the spell, and he faded from view.

Poppy warned her. "Do not keep the spell active for more than an hour. Eat well and drink plenty of fluids to keep your body in balance if you plan to use the spell a lot. You need to keep up your energy level. Eat every two hours. The spell will burn up your reserves fast."

Hermione nodded, and Severus looked worried. "We will use it sparingly, Poppy."

Hermione had that determined-to-use-it-a-lot look on her face, and they stared at each other for an unwavering minute before she smiled. "Come on, let's let Poppy get to bed."

Poppy ushered them out the infirmary door and called after them, "Tell Minerva tomorrow."

"Yes, Poppy," they said in unison.

The halls were deserted this time of night, and Hermione and Severus walked slowly arm in arm back to their rooms.

"This is progress," Hermione said as they locked and warded their door.

She moved away from Severus and pointed her wand at him. "*Reproba Tergum*."

Severus was smiling at her when he appeared, and he held his hands out to look down at his own ghostly appearance.

"Well, it's a bit scary but better than nothing."

Hermione came to him and hugged him around the waist. "It's really good to see you." She raised her face for a kiss. "You look as handsome as I remembered."

He smirked at her. "So, not so handsome."

"Yes, you are Severus; you're a very good looking man. So your nose is a bit crooked; I like it."

"It's a gift from my drunken father. It's the only thing he gave me that lasted," he said bitterly.

She laid her cheek against his chest. "I'm sorry."

"Come on, Hermione, you need a quick snack. You've hardly eaten anything, and Poppy warned you not to use too much energy with this spell."

Hermione got out some cheese and bread from the kitchen, and Severus watched as she ate the small meal. When she was finished, he said, "It's late, and you need to rest. You're still pale from the flu. You need to get to bed."

She groaned. "Please, I want to look at you a little longer."

"I'll tell you what, you get ready for bed, and we can lie facing each other for a bit. When the candle burns down, you will cancel the spell. In the dark, it makes no difference if I'm visible or not."

She nodded and pulled away. Going into the bathroom, she quickly got ready for the night.

When she came from the bathroom, Severus had lit one candle by the bed.

She crawled into the bed, wearing the cotton nightgown, not caring if he saw a little leg or her bare arms and chest.

Severus said, "You are beautiful, Hermione."

She smiled, "Thank you, Severus. Now we must figure out a way to liberate you from these clothes." She ran her fingers over the buttons of his frock coat.

"You brazen hussy," he teased her, leaning forward to give her a long, deep kiss.

She laughed. "You have no clue how much you turn me on."

"Turn you on? Well, I guess I can decipher that, but it's a crude way of saying it."

"The generation gap," she snickered, yawning. It had been a long day, and she still wasn't strong from her night of illness.

"Please," he said, "let the spell go, and go to sleep. We have many nights to be together."

Hermione nodded and touched his face, trying to memorize him for her dreams. Then, moving away, she brandished her wand and let him fade;*Reproba Tergum Laxo*." The candle went out, and she slid into the bed and into his arms, feeling the warmth of his body against hers as she went to sleep.

Monday morning during Hermione's third hour, she had a prep period with no students. She and Severus went up to Minerva's office.

The old witch let Hermione in and asked her, "Would you like a cup of tea?"

Hermione nodded.

Severus glanced at Dumbledore's portrait and found it empty. He was glad. He did not feel ready to face the old man, yet.

"Come sit. I will summon a house-elf with some crumpets." She called, "Tinky."

There were two chairs there, so Severus took the one closest to the wall as quietly as he could. Hermione sat next to him.

A little house-elf popped in. "Yes, Headmistress?" he asked with a deep bow.

"Tinky, can you bring us some tea and crumpets? Some of those little lemon ones, I think."

When the house-elf had gone, come, and gone again, Minerva looked into Hermione's eyes. "You have something to tell me?"

Hermione nodded, "I went back to the Shrieking Shack when I first arrived in Hogsmead." She pulled Severus' wand from her sleeve. "I found Professor Snape's wand in a

crack in the floor."

Minerva's eyes got wide and then sad. "I always hoped he'd escaped. Not really died. There was no body. He wouldn't have left his wand behind."

"No, he didn't leave it behind. Minerva, brace yourself," Hermione warned. "He was still there, trapped. I didn't know it then, and I brought the wand to Hogwarts with me."

"What do you mean trapped?" The old woman sat up a bit straighter. "What... what are you telling me?"

"It might be better if I show you." Hermione stood and drew her own wand out and brandished it *Reproba Tergum*, "she said, pointing at the chair.

Severus took his ghostly form. "Hello, Minerva," he said, softly.

The old witch paled even more than her usual pallor. "Merlin! You've become a ghost. But why didn't you come here immediately?"

Severus said, "I'm not a ghost, Minerva. I'm trapped inside a spell. My wand held me prisoner in the Shrieking Shack. Somehow this spell I'm under keeps me within sixteen feet of my wand."

"I... I can't believe this," she sputtered, placing a wrinkled hand against her cheek.

Hermione went to her and squatted next her chair, taking the old woman's hand in hers. "I'm sorry, I didn't know how else to tell you. Poppy insisted you know."

"Poppy knows?" she said, staring at Severus. The old witch was shocked more by the smile in his eyes and face than anything else.

"I took him to see her last night. She gave me this spell to use to see Severus. He was invisible till then."

"You're under an invisibility spell? Why don't you look any different than you did fifteen years ago?"

"It seems to be a stasis spell, as well. I haven't aged." Severus reached out a hand.

"Lucky for you," she said with her old, dry humor. Minerva glanced at Hermione, and she nodded at her. Minerva reached out her shaky hand, and Severus took hers. She shifted her fingers over his, feeling his hand and his solidness, and her eyes got wider. "Tell me," she said, not wasting words.

Once the story was told, Hermione and Severus headed back to her classroom. Minerva made them promise to come to dinner on Saturday.

The old woman had been so moved that she had retired to her rooms for a nap after they left.

The week was long for Hermione, and she found the work challenging. Severus was in the classroom a great deal, but he always remained silent. Sometimes that was difficult, but he managed it.

At lunch, Hermione would lock the door and make him appear. She would crawl into his lap at her desk, and they would just talk as she ate her lunch. She never got tired of the crinkle around his eyes and the amused look on his face when she sat in his lap.

She sometimes took a short nap to rally her strength for the evening, resting her head on his invisible shoulder. He, of course, slipped into sleep, as well, but he never dropped her. He hounded her to eat every two hours, and she reluctantly did, fearing she would gain weight.

Friday, the last period of the day, Severus was sitting at the desk, watching as the students were finishing up their potions. He'd been distracted this afternoon, thinking of the weekend they would spend together. Suddenly, a blue spark caught his eye, and he found himself rushing toward Hermione who was standing beside the cauldron of a seventh-year. He grabbed her, pushing her behind him, and shoved the student away as the cauldron exploded.

Repoba tergum: False skin

Repoba tergum laxo: False skin undone

Lisa, thank you so much for your many hours of beta work. It is very much appreciated.

Becky thank you for your support.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

This story become very adult in later chapter. Minors, please do not read this story.

Reviews are appreciated

The force of the explosion caught him mid-chest, and he screamed with agony as the molten potion splashed over him. He fell to the floor, trying to brush the liquid off, and his hands came away with pieces of his garments and skin.

Hermione heard his screams and struggled to her feet.

"Severus!" she screamed.

She turned to her stunned students and said, "Jacobs, go get Madam Pomfrey. Run; do not stop until she comes. Tell her to bring potions for burns."

"But who's burned? Who's screaming?"

The children were all looking around wildly.

Hermione ordered, "Out all of you, NOW!"

They turned and fled their angry teacher.

Hermione brandished her wand and said, "*Reproba Tergum*."

Severus lay there. His eyes were wild with pain, and his chest was an angry wound of clothing and burned skin.

"Oh, God, Severus." She was on her knees next to him.

"Pain." The word was squeezed out of his mouth through clinched teeth.

Hermione ran to her storeroom and grabbed a pain potion. She was just emptying it into Severus' mouth when Poppy ran into the room followed by Minerva who was moving faster than Hermione thought possible.

"What happened?" the old witch questioned. She stood trembling as she watched the mediwitch work.

Poppy gaped at the horrible wounds that greeted her eyes, and she bent immediately to make a quick diagnosis and send a cooling charm over Severus. He had his eyes clinched closed, and his lips were clamped together to stop the screaming.

The pain medication was finally kicking in, and Severus felt himself start to slip into unconsciousness. He squeezed Hermione's hand to let her know he realized she was there. Then, thankfully, the darkness took him.

Poppy used his unconsciousness to place him on a stretcher and levitate him before her to the infirmary.

Minerva stayed behind to speak to the children who lined the halls.

"Is that a ghost?" one student asked.

Then others chimed in: "Can ghosts be hurt?" "What's going on?" "Hey, that looked like Severus Snape. I read about him in *Hogwarts: A History*."

Hermione stayed at his side, staring at the white apparition that was Severus. His skin, even without color, looked like an angry, horrible wound.

"What happened?" Poppy asked as she transferred him to a bed and set up a sterile field around him.

"I don't know. I thought he was at my desk. Suddenly, the cauldron I was near sparked. I was about to dive out of the way when I felt shoved. It blew up right next to him."

"What is the potion?" she asked as she used tweezers to extract the pieces of cloth from his flesh. "I'm going to keep him under until the healing can start. These burns are third degree at best. Help me get the rest of his shirt off."

"It was menthol, green tea, and honey. We were making your cough syrup."

Carefully they worked to cut away the shirt and gently remove the pieces that had melted into his skin. Hermione worked, refusing to cry, knowing the tears would burn him even more should they fall on him. She caressed his right cheek, as the other one had an angry burn across it.

Poppy nodded. "He shouldn't get infection from that. The honey was so thick it stuck."

Hermione's voice shook, "Why didn't the spell he was incased in stop this?"

"The shield must have failed. That would mean another layer is gone. It's a very odd spell," Poppy said as she used her wand to clean the rest of the wound. Then she troweled a thick healing paste over his chest, his left cheek, and up and over the bridge of his nose. She finally sighed and stepped away. "I have done all I can. He's strong, and he will heal. The worst should be over by the morning."

Hermione sat down next to the bed.

Poppy said, "You need to let go of the spell. You're exhausted. He will sleep, and I will place a ward over him to let me know if he needs me. You need food and sleep yourself."

"I won't go," she said stubbornly, gripping Severus' hand.

"Alright, but you need to sleep, and it's best if he sleeps, too. Take the bed next to him. I'll have Darby bring up some food, and you will eat and then sleep. Now let go of the spell on Severus."

Hermione leaned in and kissed his cheek. Then she pulled her wand and said, "*Reproba Tergum Laxo.*"

Severus faded from view. Hermione used her wand to move the bed up against his bed, and then she crawled in and held on to his hand.

Poppy smiled sadly at her. She was such a young woman, and she had it bad for Severus Snape, held in a twilight world.

Darby appeared with a stew, and Hermione sat on the edge of the bed. It was awkward because she would not let go of Severus' hand. The food was eaten, and Hermione finally slipped into an exhausted sleep.

Minerva came in quietly and watched the young woman sleeping. Poppy used the spell on Severus so she could see him for a few minutes as she checked him over.

"Will he be alright?" Minerva asked.

"I think so, unless the spell he's under interferes. So far I've not seen evidence of that. His lungs were protected from the steam. The burns are on the skin and top layer of flesh."

Minerva said, "It boggles the mind that he's here. He spent years trapped in that rundown place. I doubt anyone's gone there since he 'died.'"

"You know, Minerva, the layers of this spell seem to be responding to situations involving Hermione. I find that odd. He's put his existence on the line for her a few times, and layers are breaking down. Granted this time he got hurt by it, but the other two times he was just trying to help, or Hermione badly wanted him to be here. It's tied to them..."

"...because of their feelings," Minerva finished for her. "Voldemort wouldn't have done that."

"No but who?"

Minerva got a nasty gleam in her eye. "I will look into it," she said tersely, turning quickly and heading for the door. "Please let me know when he's awake."

Poppy's eyebrows rose, but she didn't say anything. She knew when Minerva had a bezoar up her butt. She laughed. "I'd hate to be the object of her wrath."

She pulled up a chair and resigned herself to a long night.

Minerva stormed into her office. "Albus, you get front and center, NOW. I'm not requesting, I'm demanding!"

The old wizard moved into his portrait and sat in the invisible chair. "Minerva, what's wrong?" he asked.

"You know damn well what's wrong. You did this didn't you?" She pointed a finger at him.

"Minerva, what are you going on about? What have I done?"

"You trapped Severus in this God-awful situation. That boy is down in the infirmary fighting for his life."

"Severus? Severus Snape? He's been dead many years," he said with that damnable twinkle in his eye.

"Dead, my eye. YOU did this! You trapped that poor man in that bubble for 15 years. Fifteen years! I want to know why. After the hell that man went through, he deserves happiness. Why would you do this to him?"

"I did it for his happiness," Albus said with his age-old smile.

Minerva sputtered, "How...can...this be for him. He's in agony down there."

"It was not my intention that he be injured during this growing period in his life."

"Then what was your intention?" Minerva asked, crossing her arms and staring daggers at him.

"I knew Hermione fancied him years ago. I saw that she admired him and wanted his approval. She is the only woman I have even known that could challenge the man and rival him in knowledge. They compliment each other. She was, however, too young. Severus never would have taken to her at her age. This places them on a more equal standing, her being Muggleborn and all."

"But you were dead. How did you manage this?" Minerva asked.

"I placed a spell on Severus' wand before I forced him to take my life. If I owe him anything, it's a life of happiness...don't you think, Minerva? I knew that if anyone went to the place Severus 'died,' it would be Hermione. I used some old magic to bind her to him. One of her tears was attracted to his wand. I did not know how long it would take, but I knew one day she would come back here to take her place on our staff. We are home to her. When she returned, she would go back to the place of his death. I gambled that she would see the wand. One way or another, Severus wouldn't have been harmed. The spell had a life of 20 years, and then he would have been released to continue on a life of his choosing."

"This layered thing, it's monstrous. He was horribly burned tonight."

Albus sat up closer to the front of the frame. "Will he be alright?"

"Yes, Poppy's worth her weight in gold. You need to release him."

"No, I cannot. There are conditions on each layer. He has to give of himself willingly. He must realize that he can love and that someone else can love him. There can be no early release."

"He could have DIED getting through this last layer. He's an invisible man, Albus. If Poppy weren't a proficient healer, she would not have known a spell to make him visible for a few hours at a time. She would have been working in the dark."

Albus looked quite pleased with himself. "I did steer her to that years ago, didn't I?"

"I'm going to tell them." Minerva glared at him.

"No, you can't. They have to break through these layers on their own. If they are to truly find each other, love must be the guiding factor."

"Albus, you've done some damn fool things in your life, but this one beats all. I have a staff member with a 'ghost' living in her quarters. Now the students know he's there."

"It will all work its way out, you will see. Two people who have never had real happiness will find it. Give it some time."

Hermione became aware as early morning light filtered through the many stained glass windows in the infirmary. She sat up and looked down at Severus who was visible at the moment. The heavy salve was gone, and he had smooth-looking skin on his chest. He was nearly healed. There was only a bit of scarring. She called to him, "Severus?"

Severus heard her voice from far away and struggled to open his eyes. He recognized the effects of drugs to keep him asleep. He finally pried his eyes open and found himself looking into Hermione's eyes.

She ran her fingers down his uninjured cheek. "How are you, Severus? Are you in pain?" She looked earnestly into his eyes. "I'll get Poppy."

"I'm here," the old witch said, pulling herself out of her chair. "I was just going to check on him."

She came over and ran a scan over Severus. "The healing is going very well. It's unlikely you will have much scarring," she told Severus, "but you need to lay very still for the remainder of the day. Your new skin is thin, and it will tear if you move too much."

Severus smiled up at Hermione and then closed his eyes and let himself sleep.

Hermione stared down in his peaceful face and realized how much he'd come to mean to her. She could not imagine a future without him in it. Would he eventually feel the same way? Would they be able to free him of this spell and let him live his life? Layers had already peeled away. What had Poppy said? By her accounting, there were two layers left. But what else would it cost Severus to be free of them? This one could have killed him. She stroked his face and kissed his forehead. She heard Poppy say, "*Reproba Tergum Laxo*," and she watched him fade away.

Severus slept most the day. Toward evening, he was able to sit up. They tried food, but he still couldn't eat. It was just by some miracle that the pain potions had worked. But then again potions were not like Muggle pills. Potions soaked into all tissues by osmosis. Though it was easiest to ingest a potion, the simple fact of getting it into Severus' mouth had allowed him to have benefits of the pain potion.

Hermione stayed by his side most of the day. It was Saturday, and she didn't have to teach, but this was not how she had imagined this weekend with Severus.

Toward evening Poppy checked him over. "You can go back to your rooms. I think it's wise not to wear any clothing on your chest for a day or two. Restrict your activities as much as possible. You may bathe if you so desire but with cool water only. Put on soft, cotton clothing if you need warmth. Try not to use a warming spell or get too close to the fire for a few days. Your skin is going to be very sensitive."

Hermione sighed with relief. She was looking forward to her bed. Severus swung his legs over the side of the bed, and Hermione took his arm as he slid to the floor. He was a bit unsteady. His head still fighting off the drugs Poppy had given him for the pain and sleep, but he didn't complain. Magical medications were far better than Muggle medications. He would have been in torture for months in a Muggle hospital with the burns he had experienced less than 21 hours earlier.

"Thank you, Poppy," he said, kissing the old woman's cheek. "This place could not survive without you."

"Oh, go on with you," she said, her cheeks pinkening up. "Once I'm gone, another mediwitch will do as well or better."

Hermione hugged the healer to herself for a long moment. "I will take good care of him. I will call you if there are any problems. Thank you."

"No thanks necessary, Hermione." She said to Severus, "You're like my own. We take care of our own, don't we?"

Severus nodded. "Yes we do." He cupped the woman's face with his hand and let his fingers trail gently over her chin. "Now make me invisible, ladies, so I won't scare the children with my half nakedness."

Hermione laughed and said, "*Reproba Tergum Laxo*."

Holding on to Hermione's arm, he turned and guided Hermione out of the infirmary.

Their progress was slow, and they walked carefully. The halls were empty. "This damn castle is rather drafty, isn't it?" he said, shivering.

Hermione hugged his arm closer. "I wish we could have used the Floo, but Poppy wasn't sure you'd do well with the harsh entrance."

"It's good to be free of that place. I've spent way too many hours in that place or under her care. That woman has patched me up so many times, Hermione, you can't imagine."

Hermione moved a bit faster with him, wanting to get him into a warmer environment. She'd asked Darby earlier in the evening to start a fire in the room so that it would be warm when they got there.

Finally they reached their rooms. Once the door was locked and warded, Severus sank gratefully into the bed.

"Hermione, do you mind sleeping behind me? I'm not sure I can take even the touch of your silk nightgown tonight."

She smiled. "Of course, Severus. Anything you need."

Severus smirked. "I'm not sure how I appear to you, half naked. I'm sorry if it's not a pleasant sight."

She slipped in behind him and pressed herself up against his back. "You can't imagine how good it is to see you without that shirt and cloak on." She pushed his hair aside and pressed some little kisses against the back of his neck. She slipped her arm over his arm and threaded her fingers through his.

Severus smiled and asked, "So, you like what you see?" His voice was husky with desire.

"Very much," she said.

He brought her hand up to kiss her fingers. "As much as I would like to respond to that challenge, we'd best wait till tomorrow night. Poppy's orders." His deep sigh conveyed his own sadness at having to wait to explore their feelings further.

"Sleep, Severus. Sleep," she soothed him. "We have lots of time."

If there at been an observer, they would have seen a beautiful, young woman spooning a pale, handsome ghost...beautiful and tragic in its own way.

As Hermione fell asleep, the spell faded. It now appeared as if she were alone.

Lisa, your doing an awesome job. I could not do this without you.

Becky thanks for your support and help.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

This story becomes very adult in future chapters. This chapter begins the more mature aspect of this story. Minors, please do not read.

I have really appreciated your reviews. Thank you for them. New reviews are always desired.

Hermione woke alone, and she panicked.

"Severus!"

She felt across the bed and it was empty. She climbed out of the bed and was about grab her wand to fire off the spell to reveal Severus when the bathroom door opened and a towel walked out.

She was stunned, and then the idea of it all made her laugh. He obviously had the towel wrapped around his waist.

He smirked. "Laugh all you want. But this is an improvement, Hermione. It means I can wear clothes. You will know where I am. With gloves and some makeup, I can at least appear half human."

Hermione came to him and reached out, and he took her hands.

"That's wonderful, Severus. It will make things easier."

"If I want to disappear, all I have to do is walk out of the clothes," he said seriously.

Hermione stared at him and then realized he was teasing.

"Not unless you want to find yourself butt naked in one of the halls," she warned.

She moved closer. It was a bit odd talking to a towel, but her wand was on the bedside table.

"How's the chest," she asked, bending forward, encountering skin and placing a kiss on his clavicle. She smiled when she heard him suck in a breath.

He smelled of soap, and his skin was warm and soft. She gently placed her palms against his chest. His skin felt firm, and there was even a light sprinkling of curly hair. His arm went around her, and he drew her close, taking her lips in a deep kiss. Hermione pressed herself against him.

He pushed her back to look down into her face.

"Are you sure you want to go here this soon? We hardly know each other, and you can't even see me. I'm a man, Hermione, one who's been living in a bubble for years. You're a beautiful woman, and I want you. I do not know love; I've never really been in love. I only had infatuations as a youth."

Hermione drew back. "Severus, let me cast the spell. I need to see you."

He nodded and then stepped back when he remembered she couldn't see him. "Of course."

Hermione retrieved her wand and cast the spell, "*Reproba Tergum*."

When Severus came into view, his hair was still damp, but he looked so good to her. His chest was healed, and the burn on his face gone. She smiled at him.

"I'm going to use the loo, and I will be back in a few minutes. Please wait for me in bed. Get under the covers so you don't freeze."

She raced past him and closed the door behind her. She used the loo and then her wand to cleanse herself, instead of taking the time for a shower. She brushed her teeth and then headed back to the room.

Severus was still only a ghostly apparition sat in the bed. He looked a bit concerned as she crawled into bed, but he reached out and drew her to him.

"Severus, what's wrong? Are you scared?" she asked, placing a kiss against his chest.

"Not scared, no, concerned, yes. I still have two layers of the spell on me. What if ..." He hesitated, not wanting to actually voice the concern.

"...it doesn't work," she finished for him. "If that happens, then we'll improvise. We may not be able to bring you to fulfillment here, but there are other ways to pleasure me...as I'm sure you are aware."

Severus smirked. "I think I can figure it out," he said, relieved that it wouldn't matter to her.

She said, "I can give you lots of pleasure as well." She began to move over his chest, placing kisses along his body. "I can touch every inch of your body and reconnect you with the land of the living." Her hands slowly moved over his arms, chest, stomach, and lower. "You have been denied physical pleasure for a long time. I find immense pleasure in just lying against you and feeling your kisses and touch. I know it's the same for you."

He pulled her on top of him. "Easy for you to say," he said dryly and saw worry crease her forehead. "I'm teasing. You're right. It is very pleasurable."

His voice was low and sensual, and she closed her eyes as he ran his hands over her silk gown and body. They kissed a while, their tongues dueling and lips bruising with their desire for each other. Severus finally slipped his hands under her gown, and she sat up, straddling him, as he pulled it over her head and tossed it away.

She grinned down at him and then leaned down, framing his face with her hair.

He placed his hands on her hips and slid one up her side until he cupped one of her breasts. The pleasure was so exquisite that he closed his eyes.

"You're so beautiful, Hermione."

Hermione ran her hands over his body, trailing kisses everywhere and making sure he felt as much as she did. She kept her eyes closed as he did, letting touch and taste guide her as she mapped out his body with her hands.

To Severus' dismay, they discovered it didn't work. The internal part didn't work...only his outside flesh was sensitive...and the spell still encased him. Yet, he enjoyed Hermione's hands on his skin and body; she made sure she touched him everywhere.

He found extraordinary pleasure in Hermione's body. It was satisfying to tease her with his fingers and his tongue until she cried out with pleasure, shuddering to completion several times before wrapping herself around him and falling asleep in his arms. He saw himself fade away, and he smiled as he slipped into sleep beside her, thinking he'd never, in his life, been more content in such a difficult situation.

They woke later in the afternoon, and Hermione had a simple meal of meat, fruit, and bread.

Severus and Hermione looked through her bags and selected clothing for him to wear. Hermione cleaned all of his things and returned them to normal size. When he was dressed, he looked like a dress form standing in the room.

His robes, from before the war, were a bit loose, but not unattractively so. Yet Hermione used her wand to make them shrink to fit him perfectly. They played around with make-up, but it was just creepy.

Finally they decided to go with the spell if he was out and about. The children would have to be told. She figured Minerva had told them something already. Hogwarts students never batted an eye at ghosts, so they would just have to get used to the man encased in a spell. With real clothing and the ghostly appearance, it was odd.

"Maybe a hooded robe," Hermione suggested. She altered Severus' outer robes to include a hood, and that did help. The gloves made him look scary, too, but they decided that was best until the children were told at breakfast the next morning that he would now be able to walk among them, with Hermione. Neither she nor Severus wanted to see him left in hiding anymore.

Severus tried to pick up his wand, but it got very hot, and he wasn't able to hold it. So Hermione would have to keep it.

The progress they had made so far, even if they didn't know why, made them feel like Severus would eventually be free.

Monday morning arrived, and Severus and Hermione prepared to go to breakfast. Minerva had agreed to talk to the students, and she knew that Severus was pretty nervous about coming with her. They headed out early, hoping not to meet any students. But a few moved against the walls when they went by and stared after Severus and Hermione. The whole school knew there was an invisible man, who felt pain, living with Madam Granger.

Those who saw them followed them to the Great Hall.

Hermione held onto Severus' arm and laced her fingers through his gloved hands. She'd removed the palms of his gloves so he could feel his palm against hers.

As they approached the table, Hagrid moved down one seat, giving Severus a place to sit. He and Snape had never gotten along, and he was silent other than nodding greeting and saying, "Professor Snape."

Severus said, "Hagrid." His hooded head dipped.

Minerva came a bit earlier than usual, and Poppy did, too. They took seats next to Hermione. Word must have gotten around because students started filling the hall quite quickly, and soon they all sat watching the robed figure at the head table with expectant faces.

Finally Minerva got up and took her place before the pedestal. "Good morning, students. You will have noticed we have a special guest. You are all aware that there was an unusual occurrence in Madam Granger's classroom last week. Because of the cauldron explosion, our guest was injured. Through Madam Pomfrey's excellent skills and care, he has recovered. I know you are all listening to rumors about our guest, so I will tell you exactly what's happening here."

"It's true: Professor Severus Snape has returned to Hogwarts. Madam Granger discovered that an odd spell had been placed on our Professor Snape years ago, and it's only now breaking down. Because Madam Granger found him, it seems they are now bound together. Professor Snape cannot move more than 15 ft away from Madam Granger." She thought it best to not share the information about the wand's involvement. It was possible that Snape still had enemies. "Professor Snape is solid, only invisible. A certain spell gives him a ghostlike outline. I would ask all of you to give the professor your utmost respect. His appearance is a bit odd because he's able to wear clothing and still has an invisible and/or a ghostly appearance. Professor Snape, will you please remove your hood?"

Severus stood, reached up, and removed the hood. There was a gasp as for the moment he did not have the spell on. Hermione stood and cast the spell without speaking too loud; she did not want the students to learn the spell. There was a collective gasp as Severus came into ghostly view.

Minerva continued: "For now, you will see Professor Snape in Madam Granger's company for obvious reasons. If I were you, I'd avail myself of the professor's knowledge of Potions should you have questions and Madam Granger is too busy. However, I would caution you about personal questions that pertain to the war. That is a taboo subject for the time being. As you will recall, Professor Snape was a spy for the Order and as such is a war hero who sacrificed much to spy for Albus Dumbledore, former headmaster of this school. He deserves our utmost respect. Now enjoy your breakfast."

No one saw the nasty glare a few Slytherin students gave Severus...or the balled fist Scorpius Malfoy shook.

After that morning, Severus was free to walk among the students. He found that they didn't seem to mind him much, and it felt good to go about the day's business with Hermione. Little had changed in the running of the school. That in itself was a comfort to him. He had no doubt that the Muggle world had taken leaps and bounds since he'd been sealed up and nearly forgotten.

One afternoon after class he looked up to see Albus Potter waiting till the last student left the room. The boy took a deep breath and came forward, "Sir, may I speak to you?" he asked bouncing back and forth on the balls of his feet nervously.

Severus glanced at Hermione, and she was watching him, her eyes begging him to be nice.

"Of course, why don't you come sit with us by the desk," he said.

Hermione stood and came to hug the boy. "It's good to see you, Albus."

"You too, Aunt Hermione," Albus said.

"Aunt?" Severus asked.

"Well, Harry is like a brother to me. The kids in the Weasley family all call me Aunt."

Severus nodded as the boy took a chair.

He sat on the edge and leaned toward Severus. "Sir, do you know I was named after you?"

Severus nodded. "Poor you." He smirked as the boy squirmed.

"I'm very proud to have your name, Sir. My father told me all about you...about how he'd misjudged you most of his life, well all his life, until it was too late to ask you to forgive him. You know, sir, I'd never seen my father cry. He cried as he told me how you *died*."

"Did he now?" Severus said, suddenly moved. "I cannot fathom that, Mr. Potter."

"My father has great admiration for you. I would like your permission to Owl him and tell him you are here at Hogwarts. I'm sure he will come when he can."

Severus squirmed a little. His problems with Harry had happened only weeks ago in his mind...not years. He had thought about all this during the days he'd sat invisible in the classroom. Hermione had proven to him that life could be exciting and that the past was, just that, the past. He'd already vowed to seek Potter out one day after Hermione had told him that Albus was, in fact, Albus Severus Potter.

He looked now at the boy. "Of course you may tell him. Tell him I look forward to having a conversation. Tell him I think he has a fine son."

Albus gave him a wide smile. The boy looked very much like Harry had as a child, but he had a shock of red hair and a sprinkling of freckles. Severus willed himself not to shudder as he suddenly realized that the boy was a blend of Harry and, in a way, Ron Weasley. Yet he could see as well that Albus was a good boy and a concerned human being. He'd already noted that he was quite intelligent and enjoyed Potions very much. He'd even seen that the boy, if taught correctly, could be quite gifted in Potions.

Albus stood. "Thank you, sir. I hope that we will have a chance to talk about Potions one day soon. I have some ideas I would like to discuss with you."

Severus stood and reached out and shook the boy's hand. Albus nodded to Hermione. He still had a huge grin on his face as he turned and practically ran out of the classroom.

Hermione had come to hug him close to her. "Thank you, Severus. That meant a lot to him."

Severus kissed her forehead, "It meant a lot to me, too," he said, staring toward the door the boy had exited from.

After that the classroom became a much more interesting place to be, and Hermione begged him to assist her. He had smiled down at her, knowing she was very capable. But the idea of having something to do gave him such pleasure that he could not say no. So he would wander her half of the classroom, helping students by making suggestions as they worked. He could always tell when Hermione was watching him, and he would look up to see her smiling at him. He started winking at her, something he never, ever had done in his life.

There were a few days that week when Hermione couldn't maintain the spell for long. Severus became invisible. It took a few hours, but soon students were talking to him without the spell as if he were normal.

One night, as Hermione and Severus locked and warded their rooms, Severus stripped off his robe and inner heavy garments. Hermione sagged into the couch. "I'm so tired," she said, as she drew her feet up and tucked them under her.

Severus came and had her move down so he could sit under her head and shoulders.

Hermione snuggled up into his lap and fell asleep. He sat holding her as she drifted, stroking her hair, until he felt himself sleep, too.

Neither was aware that down in the Slytherin common room a plan of revenge was being plotted by one bitter boy who had been told all his life that Severus had robbed his father of his shining moment and his grandfather of his honor. His family, once prominent and rich, had fallen on very hard times. The mansion was in disrepair, and even Scorpius' clothing was second hand. He endured the torture and hate dealt out to him by fellow Sytherins. He'd always hated the name Severus Snape, and now he would take revenge on his father and grandfather's destroyer. If he couldn't reach the man himself, he would use Granger, the Mudblood, as revenge. Didn't this school need to rid itself of her, she who had bested his father on a number of occasions. He, Scorpius, would show the wizarding world what a Malfoy could accomplish.

Lisa, your beta work is very much appreciated. I know I work you really hard. Thank you so much.

Becky, thank you for all your support and all the tiny things you find before I send the chapters to Lisa.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

This story becomes very adult in future chapters. Minors, please do not read this story.

Readers, thank you for all you kind reviews and comments.

Severus woke that next Saturday morning to find Hermione wrapped in his arms and their legs entwined; her head was on his chest.

He looked around a room that had changed little in one and a half decades. Only Hermione's things made the difference between the darkness he'd lived in then and the life that now filled these walls. He caressed the fan of soft, beautiful hair that he could feel laying over his arm and half his chest. It never ceased to amaze him to find the little witch in his arms when he awoke. She fit so naturally and perfectly against him. In truth, they were bound together. But he found he would not have it any other way. He almost feared the end of the spell. If she were free, would she still want him, too? He knew he wanted her more than ever. His life before waking to find her crying over him had been one horror after another. He was free to care about someone and to work and create...not destroy. He'd never expected to live a life free of Voldemort and his Dark Mark. He held up his arm, and of course, it wasn't there. He really hadn't thought of the Mark. Was it gone now?

The thought that he was awake suddenly made him realize Hermione must be awake, too. He then heard her sigh. She stretched against him, and one of her legs slid up his. Her hand traveled slowly across his chest.

"Good morning," he said, grinning at her wandering hand. She had no qualms about touching him anywhere at any given time, and he was excited that she wanted him that much. It was frustrating that he couldn't respond to her the way he wanted to. But she hadn't voiced any complaints yet.

He pulled her on top of him. It was his favorite place to have her so that he could watch her face and see her reactions. She usually kept her eyes closed because it was a bit disconcerting to make love to an invisible man and to see herself floating above the bed. She sometimes would cast the spell so they could look into each other's eyes as they made love, but most times she could not maintain the spell while they were in private. She needed to use it when they were in the classroom.

He put his hands on both sides of her face and raised her hair so her could see her face. The pulled her down to so he could kiss her. "You're quiet this morning, Hermione. Are you okay?"

"I'm really tired," she said. She laid her head on his chest and wrapped her arms around him.

"The spell is too much for you. Perhaps we should ask other staff members to help. I do not want you sick because of me."

She placed a kiss against his right nipple. "I want to be here for you, Severus. Never in my life have I been so happy about having someone in my life. It's a dream come true."

He said sarcastically, "Dreams don't often have invisible men in them." He let his hands pet her hair and caress her back and felt her grin against his chest.

"No, this is better than my imagination by a thousand times. Severus, would you mind if I went back to sleep?"

"No, but when you wake we will go see Poppy. Maybe she can give you a vitamin potion to help you with your strength. A Pepperup Potion is only temporary and would only hype you up to make you fall flat later."

She only said, "I'm sorry you can't read or something while I'm asleep. I hate that is traps you in sleep with me." She ran a finger over his cheek in a soft caress."

"I'm content to be asleep in your arms Hermione... sleep"

So she did, and he did as well.

Later that afternoon, they sat in the tub. Severus held Hermione in front of him with her back against his chest and his legs wrapped around her. The warm water soothed them both, and Hermione soaped a rag and washed herself as Severus washed her back. She asked, "Are you really going to make me see Poppy? The sleep did me a world of good. I feel much better."

Applying a kiss to her neck, he said, "Yes. It won't hurt, and I'm sure she's been wondering how we are doing."

Hermione signed. "I live for weekends, Severus. I have you all to myself, and I really don't want to share you."

"We need to take a walk tomorrow. It will do you some good to get out of these stuffy rooms and go outside," he told her.

"Oh, Severus, I should have asked you if you wanted to go out. I forget how many years you've seen little else than four walls around you. Actually, I thought we'd go out tomorrow and watch Quidditch practice."

"Quidditch," he snarled, "Potter's game." The bitter thought was out of his mouth before he could stop it.

Hermione turned a disappointed look his way and rose and stepped from the tub. She grabbed a big towel and wrapped it around herself, slamming the door as she left the bathroom.

Severus raised his arms in exasperation. "Hermione! I'm sorry..." He got out of the tub and got his own towel and went after her." He found her sitting on the bed with tears running down her face.

"Hermione, tell me what's wrong." He sat next to her and pulled her close.

"PMS," she cried.

"Pm... oh." He felt his face and body heat up.

She turned to him, and her tears turned to giggles. "Did you just blush, Severus?"

He said, "I guess I did."

She slipped her arms around his neck, and her tears ran down his neck and chest. "I'm a bit frustrated and emotional, and I get darn horny during this time. I want you, Severus, all of you. How can you stand to give and not receive all that you should as a man? My heart breaks for you," she said, "and I'm afraid that you won't need me when you're free."

He pushed her back and took her face in his hands. "I am afraid you won't want me. I'm afraid you will be happy to be free of me, as well. You're tired, and your body is out of sorts from the pressure of maintaining the spell. Please, Hermione, let's walk up and see Poppy. I know she can help."

"I have Muggle medication for this time," she said, going to her purse and getting a small bottle.

"Muggle pills? Have you even tried a potion? I assure you, I have been told it works much better."

"I'm 35 years old, and I have these useless cycles. I go through this pain and irritation for what?"

"You might still want to have a baby," he said.

Hermione looked at him. She'd gotten the hang of picking the spot his eyes were in when he was invisible. "You offering?"

Severus felt his heart skip a beat, and his body heated up. The idea of children had never really occurred to him before. He said carefully, "If I were to have children, they could ask for no mother better than you, Hermione." He bent to kiss her.

She giggled again and said, "What a nice safe answer." She got up and dragged him to his feet. "Come on, let's get dressed, and we will go see Poppy. It's been silly for me to hang on to the Muggle remedy all these years."

They dressed, and Severus insisted on wearing the hooded robes so she would not have to use her energy for the spell.

They walked arm in arm through the halls, greeting students and staff members as they passed.

Hermione said, "Could we go out and see Hagrid? He invited us to tea. I haven't had much time to spend with him since we got back. I really love him."

Severus groaned inside but knew Hermione needed an emotional boost, and Hagrid would provide her with that. For all his primitiveness, he'd always known how to relate to the children and adults around him. He had been a huge support to Hermione, Ron, and Harry.

Poppy made Hermione hop up on one of the beds and lay back while she ran some tests.

"You need some vitamins. I have a potion that will give you some extra strength and help you use the spell without as much drain on your body. Hermione, you have a little bit of endometriosis. That's causing the pain, and I do have a treatment for that. It will give your body much better health, and the hormones won't be so crazy next month."

Hermione looked in Severus' direction and asked softly, "Would this effect me having children in the future?"

Poppy glanced sideways at Severus and saw his head go up. She wondered what he thought of that turn of events. "It would if it remains untreated, but I don't think you'd have problems conceiving after treatment is completed."

Hermione laughed it off. "We'll it's not like I'm planning to go out and have a baby. I just wondered."

"Well," Poppy said, "You're still young enough to enjoy children. You've got at least a good ten years of strong, healthy childbearing if you so desire."

Hermione sighed and lay back while Poppy finished her scans and got the appropriate potions.

Severus wandered to one of the big windows close by and stared out at the grounds. There was a weak winter sun out, and the skies were clear. He found the thought of a walk in the fresh air to be quite compelling. It was too late today, but they had all day tomorrow.

Hermione watched him standing and looking out the window. She felt guilty for not having thought about his needs as much as she had her own. Simply going out should have occurred to her before today. And what was he thinking about her sudden questions about a baby? She'd never really thought much about children. After the war, when she and Ron had gone their separate ways and she'd realized her fondness for a then dead Potions Master, she had given up thinking about babies. Suddenly, the idea had hit her with Severus alive. They just needed to free him of this curse and then talk about a future.

His hood turned toward her, and she smiled at him and held out her hand. He came and took it, leaning down he kissing her forehead. "I'm glad you're going to be okay, Hermione."

She said, "I'm sorry, Severus. I've wasted another day. We should be getting out more. I've been selfish trying to keep you to myself."

He pressed his cheek against her forehead, "My needing to be visible is wearing you out. You have every right to call the shots right now, Hermione."

Poppy came back then. "Here, take this potion now. Then take a whole vial every day for the next week. It should give you more energy. I also added the potion to treat your condition. I know you feel tired, Hermione, but some mild exercise will actually increase your energy. Walking outdoors is the best thing you can do. I understand it's late afternoon, but the Quidditch game is still in progress. There may be time for you to go out and watch. Even if you get out there and it's over, the time will have been well spent. I'm also advising walking everyday. Weather permitting, go outside; if not, the castle is filled with plenty of hallways. You might have some fun in the Room of Requirement...bone up on your fencing or dueling. It's important to maintain your skills even in times of peace."

Hermione, now sitting on the edge of the bed, took the vials and slipped them into the pocket of her robe. Severus took her hand and helped her hop off the bed.

"Thank you, Poppy," he said, giving the old witch a hug.

"Come see me. We can have tea next Saturday. By then, you should be feeling more yourself."

Hermione hugged her, too. "Thank you, we will."

She took Severus' hand, and they went down the halls to the Great Staircase and out through the front door. The air was crisp and cold, but their robes gave them enough warmth.

Hermione took in a deep breath. "This is wonderful. I've been inside too long. I love this place, and I love teaching, Severus. It's one of the best decisions I've made, coming back here." She squeezed his hand. "Especially finding you. Sometimes miracles happen."

Severus squeezed her hand. "This was orchestrated by someone, Hermione, for good or evil, we have yet to determine. This spell is rare and very specific. Whatever it is we've done that breaks the layers down was set into the spell." They had come upon the Quidditch Pitch and found the game still going. They climbed into the Gryffindor stands, which were the least populated, and settled in the back row. Hermione was happy to see it was Ravenclaw vs. Hufflepuff. At least they wouldn't have to root for their own houses against each other.

They watched in silence for a bit as the players zoomed back and forth before them on the enormous field.

Hermione clutched Severus' hand against her. "I really wasn't a huge Quidditch fan when I was in school. I went to cheer Harry and Ron on because that's what good friends did. I would have rather been in the library most days."

Severus, trying to enjoy the game, agreed. "Me, either. I avoided the games at all cost when I was in school. Heaven forbid I get between Potter's gang and their game. But that was the past. Albus Potter seems to be a good young man."

He looked out across the pitch, and his eyes searched the stands on the other side. He'd felt a prickle in his old spy nerve...a nerve that ran across the back of his neck. Someone was watching them rather openly and trying to probe them using Legilimency. Severus' eye caught the small, blond boy that was Draco's son staring his way.

He felt his invisible eyebrow climb; something was up. He'd seen the boy several times in class, of course, but the boy had avoided contact with himself and Hermione as much as possible. Severus vowed to keep a closer eye on him. He could imagine a child of Draco's might have heard a lot of bad things about him. He might have saved

Draco, but he had no doubt that Lucius had only seen it as a failure on Draco's part and blamed Severus for acting too quickly and robbing Draco of his glory. He knew Lucius would have felt betrayed by his role as an Order spy, once the truth had come out. After all, Lucius had been his friend. He'd spent holidays at their home, and he was Draco's godfather.

He looked down at Hermione, who was cheering for one of the members of the Hufflepuff team, and vowed that he'd keep her safe no matter what.

Lisa, my beta, thank you for the great for your are doing on these chapters.

Becky thank you for your support.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

This story becomes very adult in future chapters. Minors, please do not read.

Readers, thank you for your reviews. They are very much appreciated.

On Sunday, they went to visit Hagrid. They found him sitting at his table with a piece of wood and a huge knife in his hands. He was whittling a replica of Fang, his old dog that had passed some years before.

He put his work aside and set about making tea. He kept sneaking peeks at Snape...who looked rather Dementor-like in his hood and gloves...out of the corner of his eye.

Severus wanted to make Hagrid feel more comfortable for Hermione's sake, so he started a conversation with him.

"Hagrid, do you go into the forest like you used to?"

"On occasion. My rheumatism seems to act up there more. It's so cold and damp, you see. But there are herbs and plants I use for my cooking that ye can't find anywhere else."

Severus said, "The next time you go into the forest on a Saturday, ask Hermione and me to join you. There are some plants I'd like to gather for our storeroom, and there are a few that Hermione has never seen in the wild."

"Severus, that's a wonderful idea," Hermione said. "I don't have many good memories of that forest; but with you and Hagrid along, I'm sure we can accomplish a lot in one day."

Hagrid seemed quite touched that Snape would ask if they could accompany him.

"We can go by and say hi to Grawp," Hagrid said as he picked up his whittling again.

"Grawp's still out there in the forest?" Hermione asked, going to the door and looking toward the thick, dark trees.

"He found himself a right huge cave, he did. He mines it for gold. It keeps him in supplies, and it keeps him busy. He's able to carry on a right good conversation now, and he's very content there."

Hermione turned to look back at Hagrid. "I'm happy for him and you. I know having family close by means a lot to you. I would like to say hi."

They talked about old times much to Severus annoyance, but he sat back and let them do the talking. Hagrid served Hermione tea in a cup so big that she had to hold it with two hands. The biscuits were so hard that she only pretended to eat them, slipping them into her pocket instead.

As they walked away, Severus could see the visit had had a good effect on her. She seemed happier. Maybe the potions Poppy had given her combined with the visit to Hagrid's had been just what she had needed. And to tell the truth, Severus had enjoyed being out of the castle and having a conversation with another adult...even if it was

Hagrid.

At dinner that night Severus found himself able to converse more openly with the staff. Poppy offered to control the spell that made him visible so that Hermione could rest her powers. Filius and he had quite a discussion about the stasis spell and some of its properties. Filius was certain it was spell work layered with charms.

There was a nagging suspicion forming in the back of Severus' mind when he thought about the spell and about the points in time when he had lost layers. He had not discussed it with Hermione. If this all had to do with emotion and relationships, he did not want her to blame herself if he remained in this state for years.

She had been busy talking with Minerva about her classes while Severus talked with Filius. When he realized she hadn't heard much of the conversation, he was relieved. Voldemort hadn't put the spell on him; someone closer to home had done it.

He looked down the table on both sides and studied the faces of those who had been at Hogwarts when he was "alive": Poppy, Minerva, Hagrid, Filius, and Sybil. Who would have done this to him? What had they hoped to accomplish by making that bubble his prison? It had been a ghost of a chance that Hermione had found his wand, hadn't it?

Who would have bonded him and Hermione together on purpose 15 years ago? She had been a child then. He happened to catch Minerva looking at him, and he saw her duck away when she noticed him returning her gaze. *She knows something!*

When Minerva got up and hurried away, Severus knew he could not go after her without alerting Hermione. It was unlikely she would get close enough for him to have a private conversation. *Damn that old woman!* he thought. It was not rocket science to figure out who had done this to him. He knew Minerva enough to know she might not agree with what had happened, but she would not betray the source. *That old bastard. He controlled my life for years, and he's still doing it. If he wasn't already dead, I'd kill him,* he thought, his face marred with a sneer.

Severus felt Hermione's hand slip into his. "Severus, are you okay?" She had seen anger flashing across his pale face.

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and buried his anger. He nodded. "Yes, I'm okay, but it's been a long day, and I am a bit on overload. Can we go back to our rooms?"

She stood and grabbed his hand. They said goodnight to those close to them and then went toward the door. As they passed Poppy, Severus said, "Let it go, Poppy. Hermione and I are turning in."

Poppy glanced up at him and noted the stiffness in his jaw. She was about to ask what was wrong when Severus gave her a clear warning look. So she simply said, "Good night, Hermione, Severus. Sleep well."

Hermione watched as Severus' face vanished, and then she squeezed his hand, palm to palm, and they left the Great Hall.

They walked in silence down the stairs and halls to the dungeon. When the wards were set, Severus peeled his cloths off until he wasn't there anymore. Hermione saw the blankets on the bed fold back and then a body shape appeared under the covers.

"Severus, what's happened? What's wrong?" She shrugged out of her clothes and crawled in beside him. "Severus, something happened. Tell me what it is."

"Please, Hermione, I'm just going through my own sort of PMS. I'm tired of being trapped here."

Severus felt Hermione's body jerk like she'd been hit. He felt her turn over and move away from him.

"Damn it!" he swore. "I did not say I was tired of you. I'm tired of being manipulated by someone. I can and would be here, with you, on my own, Hermione." He turned and took her in his arms and held her close. "I want to be with you. But I want to be with you on my own terms, not because I can't move more than 15 feet from you."

She lay against him, hearing his words, knowing in her head that what he said made sense. But all she felt was, *He wants to be free of me.* She forced herself to relax against him, but she laid awake a long time, and he knew because he was awake, too. That was a given, but they didn't talk. Finally, in the wee hours of the morning, Hermione fell asleep, and Severus did too.

Monday arrived, and Hermione groaned as she woke. She'd only been asleep a few hours, and there was so much to do. She crawled out of bed and went to the

bathroom, dragging a half-asleep Severus with her. He sat on the floor next to the bathroom door with his knees drawn up and his head in his hands. He couldn't bear another week of silence that might well loom before them. He would have to try to talk to her more tonight. He could kick himself. He was so bad with words. He always let his mouth open before thinking about what he was saying...or more how it sounded to Hermione. She was still out of sorts, and she would have taken anything he said badly. Hopefully, in a day or two, she'd be over this cycle, and they would have a better chance to understand each other without the emotional overload.

So with all this before them, they ended up in the classroom with Hermione teaching and Severus sitting at the desk, hooded. Today's lesson included a recipe for a perfume. It was going to be given to an Old Witches Home in Hogsmead. Hermione had a firm belief that if one was going to brew something, it needed to be used by someone if at all possible. Each group of students was making a different scent.

As classes started after lunch that afternoon, Severus was only half watching. He believed that the dunderheads shouldn't be able to mess up a perfume recipe, and there wasn't anything dangerous that could cause an explosion. He was poking a pen at the parchment before him, just fiddling away the time, when that old nerve on the back of his neck tickled him. His head came up, and he saw Hermione about ten feet away, turning to lean over Scorpius' cauldron. His eyes caught Scorpius tucking a vial into his pocket. He was on his feet and leaping the entire distance in a bound.

"Hermione!" he screamed as he pushed her away and with his other hand backhanded Scorpius, knocking the boy out. His nose caught a whiff of a dangerous chemical, and his lungs burned. He grabbed at his chest as his entire internal system came back to life with searing pain.

His vision faded as he heard Hermione scream, "Oh God, Severus, not again! Potter go get Poppy. Run!"

He saw her anxious face hovering over his. "Silica," he stammered out. "Pop...py." He coughed and blood issued.

Hermione went to her storage room and got the antidote, but she knew it would not heal the damage done. She realized when she came back with the antidote and saw more blood that another layer of the spell was gone, and that meant he was in more danger than ever. His lungs and organs were subject to the full damage of the inhalant.

"Ferryman, run up to Professor Flitwick and have him come immediately. Then alert Headmistress McGonagall...and get Filch," she cried as she poured the potion into Severus' mouth, knowing it would stop the poison's progress but not the damage and its effect. "Why didn't you just call out a warning, Severus? I can't live without you. Hang on, please," she pleaded, her tears splashing onto this face.

Severus felt as if an elephant was sitting on his chest, and he struggled to get air. He felt her hands on his face, and her tears were salty against his lips. He heard children crying and others shouting angry words at Scorpius who was now awake and struggling against Albus and James, who were holding him down.

"It was for the Mudblood! It was for the Mudblood," he repeated. "He deserves the pain, but I thought he couldn't be hurt. That's for my dad, you bastard, and my grandfather. I hope you die!"

As Severus' vision faded, he heard someone's fist meet up with Scorpius' face, and the boy was silent.

Severus felt Hermione's cheek against his. "I love you, Severus. Stay for me, stay with me..."

Then blackness took him.

Poppy burst into the room, and Hermione choked out what had happened. Filch was right behind her, and he grabbed Scorpius by the arm. He took the boy's wand from him and dragged him from the room. For an old man, Filch's grip was like iron.

Poppy brandished her wand, *Aerineus*. Severus' chest raised and lowered as swollen lung tissue shrank enough to temporarily allow some oxygen into his lungs. She began a diagnostic right there, and colors and chanting filled the room. All the students had pressed themselves against the walls and were watching in silence. Some had their fists stuffed in their mouths to stifle their cries. Many had grown to like, or at least respect, the invisible man.

Minerva and Filius arrived together and took charge of the students.

"I need to get him to St. Mungo's. This is more than I can handle here. Darby!" she called.

Darby the house-elf appeared.

"Take us to St. Mungo's," she ordered the elf. He reached out and took Severus and Poppy's hands. At the last moment, Poppy latched onto Hermione, and she felt herself drawn with them.

At St. Mungo's Hermione staggered and hands steadied her. Severus was already being placed on a gurney and rushed away. She realized they were now more than the 15 ft apart. She ran after them, following Poppy, who was shouting her diagnosis and trying to explain why Severus Snape was suddenly alive but looked like a ghost and why it was important that Hermione come with them. She hadn't realized the limit spell was gone with the inner-layer spell.

St. Mungo's used some machines in dire cases, and this was one. Severus was placed in an oxygen chamber with a spell to send oxygen by osmosis through his flesh to give his body the oxygen he needed to live. Hermione watched the frightening treatment, held up by Poppy, who stood with her against the wall of the treatment room.

More potions were administered, and finally the Healer looked around with a sigh. "I think he'll make it. We will have to see if there are any problems once he wakes. He was without full oxygen for some time. Madam Granger, you may have saved his life by having the knowledge and access to the potion that stopped the damage. In a few more moments, his lungs would have been useless. The healer reached out and touched Hermione's arm. "Are you okay? Did you get any odd effects from the potion fumes?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, nothing."

Poppy introduced them, "Healer Barnamais Hookeneye, this is Hermione Granger. Hermione, Barnamais and I went to Hogwarts together and later Healer University in Paris.

Hermione shook the man's hand. "It's good to meet you, sir. Thank you for saving Severus for me. I do not think I can live without him. This spell picks the darnedest times to change."

The Healer shook his head. "It's a very odd spell, if I understand it. There is an encasement of spell work around his heart. From what Madam Pomfrey has told me, he's advanced through a number of layers of this spell. Since he is still invisible, I would assume once this last layer is dissolved, he will become visible."

The Healer motioned toward a chair by the chamber. "Madam Granger, please sit and try to relax. We have done all we can for Mr. Snape, and he must fight to live. Perhaps he will hear you if you talk to him. He will be moved to a bed of his own when we see he's cognizant and getting adequate oxygen."

Poppy pushed Hermione across the room to the chair by the chamber. "Try to rest."

Hermione nodded, not sure she could speak. Her eyes were glued on Severus' face, and she moved the chair so she could reach his face and caress his cheek.

"Severus," she said softly, brushing his hair back from his forehead, "I'm here. I won't leave you even if I could. Please, get better, please," she begged, laying her cheek against his.

The Healer stood with Poppy and watched the young woman. "I knew Severus before the war. He often supplied us with rare, difficult potions. He really doesn't look like he's aged; in fact, he looks younger. How's this possible?"

Poppy motioned for him to follow her into the hall. They stood watching their patient through the observation window. "The spell had a stasis charm. He has not aged since the day he was placed in that bubble, which is the day we thought he died. Hermione found him in the bubble," Poppy explained.

"For him to still be alive is huge!" the Healer exclaimed. "How do you keep him visible?"

Poppy shared the spell with him. She had known this man for years and believed him to be trustworthy.

"I will have Madam Granger let the spell go, and I will take over. I have several key nurses here I trust with my life, and they can help maintain the spell. This will give Madam Granger a rest." He watched Hermione as she kissed and caressed Snape's face. "Do you know who put this spell on him?"

"I have my theories about the spell. I think I know who did it, and he did have Severus' and Madam Granger's best interests in mind. It was a plan for matchmaking with very disastrous results. I think the spell caster assumed the layers would fall away with emotional stages of commitment. But disaster has always followed these two, and the learning process has been more difficult than the caster could have imagined."

The Healer looked interested. "You think this was a matchmaking plot?"

She nodded, still watching Severus and Hermione. "Yes, Hermione and Severus are intellectual equals; she was but a child at the end of the war. You can see how devoted she is now to him; each layer has fallen as he has given unselfishly of himself, thinking only of her best interest. He is being taught to love, rather cruelly, I'd say, but maybe that's all Severus has ever understood. Does the end justify the means?" she asked, glancing at the Barnamais. "If I am right about the original caster, I think his intentions were good. He loved this man like a son, as I do."

The Healer looked at her with dawning clarification, nodded and whispered, "We all know, now, who pulled Severus' strings. I will not tell a soul."

She said, "Good, it is best they figure it out for themselves. I'm going to go back to Hogwarts and take one of your traveling Healers with me. He or she can stay there when I come back to spell Hermione. She will need some rest."

Barnamais nodded. "I will go take over the spell. I will let you know when he awakens. Then we can talk Madame Granger into taking a rest. It was good to see you again, Poppy." He walked back into the room with Hermione and Severus.

Lisa, thank you so much for the beta work you do for me.

Becky, thank you for your help and support.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

This story becomes very adult in future chapters. Minors, please do not read.

Thank you, readers, for your kind comments. I really enjoy your reviews.

When Severus became aware many hours later, he felt and smelled Hermione's hair against his cheek. He opened his eyes and realized he was in a chamber not unlike an iron lung used in the early 20th century for polio patients. His pain level was much lower than before; it felt like a large dog...instead of an elephant...was sitting on his chest. He could see his own ghostlike nose, so he was visible; someone was maintaining the spell. He realized that Hermione was asleep, and he was awake. So, another layer of the spell had fallen away during his rescue. He'd been too slow to get out of the way and stupid enough to breathe in. He'd been so scared for Hermione that he'd not given his own safety a thought.

He also realized that the chamber he was encased in was spell driven. He could feel the magic working in his body. He relaxed against the padding that ran under his body. Would he be okay? Had he compromised his lungs so badly that this would be his life from now on?

"Hermione," he whispered. His throat hurt, and his voice barely came out.

Hermione's head shot up, and she stared into his face with wide eyes. "Severus, thank God you're awake."

Her fingers caressed his cheek, and he closed his eyes and just let the feel of her touch soothe his fear. He turned his face so he could kiss her fingers.

She moved and planted kisses ever so gently on his eyelids and then his mouth. He felt tears drip onto his face, and then her fingers gently wiped them off. "Sorry!" she cried.

He smiled at her. "I understand."

"I've been so scared, Severus. Why didn't you just yell? I can move when told to... Why do you keep doing this?" She touched his face. "Can you perform Legilimency on me so you don't have to talk?"

"*Legilimens*," he whispered. Severus let his thoughts flow into hers. This was easier than trying to speak. *I was afraid you'd ask 'why,' Little Miss-Know-It-All.* "He smirked at her. *"I just reacted; there was no time to yell. I suddenly found myself between you and harm. I'm sorry. What is my prognosis?"*

"*The Healer thinks you will be fine. I managed to stop the damage. It will heal, but it will take time.*"

Severus felt his body begin to tremble with the emotion of knowing he would be okay. Tears burned at the corners of his eyes and ran down the sides of his face and into his ears. Hermione cooed and soothed him with her fingers and lips as she kissed the tears away. *"There, there, you're going to be okay. Guess what? Another layer of the spell is gone. Obviously, your organs are your own now, but I am no longer tethered to you."*

Severus said, *"Remember, I do not want to be without you. Freedom to walk to another room or go outside while you teach is all the space I need. I would not know what to do without you, Hermione."*

Hermione leaned down to kiss him.

A Healer came at that moment to examine Severus. "Mr. Snape, it's good to see you're awake."

"Barnamais, you're still here." Severus swallowed against the pain.

Hermione stepped back to give the Healer room to peer into Severus' face. He performed a diagnostic spell on Severus, administered a potion that would heal and soothe Severus' throat, and then he stepped away. Hermione moved back in to touch Severus' face.

"Well, you're making progress. We can free you from this oxygen chamber in another 24 hours and try just regular oxygen through your nose. The ducts and passages of your lungs and nasal cavities show there are now openings through to the lungs. They were quite compromised earlier." He came closer to make eye contact. "You have been conversing? How is your memory? Are you experiencing any delayed thought processes?"

Severus shook his head and whispered, "No."

"Excellent, excellent!" the man repeated. "That's a good sign that there was no brain damage. It's a good thing Madam Pomfrey thinks fast on her feet...and Madam Granger." He reached out to give Hermione's arm a comforting squeeze. "Please, you must get some food and some rest. Madam Pomfrey will come back and stay with Severus if you wish it. She knows you will not want him alone for even a moment."

"I'm okay. I don't need to go." She had a determined look on her face.

"Please, Hermione, go and eat. It will do me no good if you faint from hunger. Take a shower, and get some sleep. Poppy will take good care of me," he whispered.

Hermione looked from the Healer to Severus. With a sigh, she nodded; she felt quite grimy. "All right, I will eat and shower, and then I'm coming back. I can sleep here if need be."

Both men noted her determination and nodded.

The Healer said, as he left, "I will Summon Madam Pomfrey. We have arranged for a nurse to take her place while she is here. And some of my staff will maintain your visibility spell so that we can keep an eye on you."

The Healer left, and Hermione bent to shower Severus' face with kisses.

He smirked at her. "I could get used to this...lying around all day and being showered in kisses. It's not a bad way to spend my time."

Hermione said sternly, "I expect you out of this bed as soon as possible. I want some pay back."

"You just bring those lips here, and I will show you what can be done from this bed."

Hermione gave him a beautiful smile and pressed her lips against his. His tongue dueled with hers a bit until he was breathless, which didn't take too long thanks to his compromised lungs.

Severus groaned. "Just my luck. I think 'it' works now, and I'm encased in this thing."

Hermione pressed her forehead against his and looked into his eyes and giggled. "Just my luck too," she said with a sigh. "Maybe I'd better back off a bit here. I wouldn't want you to get too uncomfortable in there." She laughed. "I guess that's another good reason to get out of here."

Madam Pomfrey came through the door at that moment, and Hermione blushed a bit.

The Healer saw the blush and smiled. If Severus felt good enough for a round of teasing, then he was better than she expected. She came and stroked his cheek with her fingers and placed a motherly kiss on his forehead.

He smiled. "More kisses. I definitely could get used to this."

Poppy smiled. "I'm glad you are doing better. You're a lucky man, Severus."

"Perhaps," he said drily. "But I'm also foolish. I could have held my breath."

Poppy said, "I guess you had other thoughts at the time." She smiled at Hermione and reached out to slip an arm around her waist and draw her close for a hug. "Now go, my dear. Please get some rest. I will keep a trained eye on our favorite guy here."

Hermione looked at them both and nodded, loath to leave him. She was scared something might happen.

"He looks very good, Hermione, and I doubt there will be any setbacks," Poppy assured her. "Please take care of yourself. You will need your strength when he comes home."

Hermione nodded and kissed Severus again and squeezed Poppy's hand. "I won't be gone long," she promised. She left the room and stood for a moment in the hall just breathing a sigh of relief and letting tears fall down her cheeks again. She had been so scared. She could not lose him now that she was finally getting him back. As she walked through the halls to the Floo, she wondered what had happened to Scorpius. The boy was dangerous. "Will the evils and consequences of the Voldemort's reign ever go away?" she whispered to herself.

She called through the Floo to Minerva's office and got permission to step through. She stepped through, and the emotion of the last hours cascaded over her. She found herself in the old witch's arms crying out her pain, fears, and relief that Severus would be okay.

Minerva held the young witch until her sobs subsided and then pushed her into a chair. She brought her a tiny glass of amber liquid and bid her to drink. The whiskey burned like fire down Hermione's throat, but it helped to settle her nerves and clear her head a bit.

"Scorpius?" she asked.

"Expelled," Minerva said. "He's under house arrest, for now, till there's a hearing. Draco came here; he's different now. He seemed very sorry and apologetic for what happened. He did ask for the house arrest instead of Azkaban. I wasn't sure, but Scorpius is a boy."

Hermione nodded, exhausted. "At least he's not here anymore. Do you think he had help?"

"No, he doesn't have many supporters. I feel sorry for him in a way. His grandfather is still filled with hate for Severus. They were best friends. Scorpius feels betrayed because Severus was his grandfather's 'friend,' yet really spied for the other side. You'd think Lucius would be grateful for Draco's life. There's no doubt he has more influence over the boy than Draco. Draco and his wife work outside of the home to help them all survive, and Scorpius has been raised by Lucius."

Hermione sat her little glass in the edge of Minerva's desk and struggled to her feet. "You'd think... I need to shower and eat."

Minerva nodded and hobbled over to give Hermione a hug. "Poppy assured me that Severus would be alright. Now go get some rest. I will have a house-elf bring you some food. Please sleep at least two hours; I will send an elf to wake you."

"I told them I would come back." Hermione was realizing she was dead on her feet.

"I will send them a message, letting them know I talked you into a nap," Minerva promised.

Hermione nodded and left her office and headed to the dungeon. She found Albus Potter sitting on a hall bench near the doors to the dungeon. "Albus?"

He got to his feet as soon as he saw her and came closer. "Aunt Hermione, will Professor Snape be all right?" His eyes were big and round with concern.

Hermione reached out to squeeze the young man's shoulder, glad that someone else cared for Severus. "I've been assured he will be fine. Thank you for holding on to Scorpius."

The boy relaxed. "It was nothing," he said. "I could kill him myself." His anger was hard and scornful.

Hermione took him by the shoulders and peered into his face. They were nearly the same height. "Albus, Severus understands the hate and pain in Scorpius, and he has such a kind heart now. I understand your anger, but more hate will only breed a new generation of strife. It has to end with you, now. By all means keep your guard up around him, but let your anger go, please. Let it go, and be the better man. Albus Dumbledore was the kindest of men...and very forgiving. You are named for two great men; you need to make them both proud."

Albus nodded. "I'm glad he will be okay."

Hermione smiled warmly at him and gave him a hug. "I will tell him you asked about him. He's very proud to have you named after him, Albus. I hope that in time you will get to know each other better."

"I would like that," the boy said, backing away. "Good night, Aunt Hermione."

"Goodnight, Albus, tell your dad hello for me. Hey," she called, stopping the boy's retreat, "did you Owl a message to your dad about Professor Snape?"

"Yes, I sent an Owl to him right after I asked him that day. I know he will try to come when he gets back," he called over his shoulder, vanishing up the nearby staircase.

Hermione went down to her and Severus' room and warded the door behind her. She found a house-elf already there. The little elf had some steaming stew and some fresh-buttered rolls for her.

"Madam, I ran a hot bath per the Headmistress' orders. She bids me to come wake you in two hours after you fall asleep. Is that being your orders as well ma'am? The headmistress asks you to consider a longer sleeping time." The little elf's huge eyes peered at her, waiting.

Hermione sighed. "Three then, and not a minute longer," she warned the little elf.

He bobbed his head and bowed, backing away. "As you wish, Madam." He grinned in relief and then vanished with a pop.

Hermione ate about half the food, but she was so tired she pushed the rest of it away. She let her clothes fall where they may as she stripped while heading to the bathroom. She slipped with a sigh into the hot water and lay for a moment to let her body relax. She nearly fell asleep, so she washed and used her wand to dry herself before slipping into the thick, warm blankets on the bed. She was asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow.

Severus slept as soon as Hermione left. His face was suddenly lined with exhaustion, and Poppy realized he'd been putting on a show for Hermione's sake.

She ran her own diagnostic. Once she was satisfied it was just fatigue, she settled into a chair and took a book out of her pocket. It was rare that she could sit and read for pleasure. With 673 students, there was always something to do.

Severus woke about 90 minutes later and saw Poppy had moved her chair next to the chamber.

"How are you, really, Severus?" she asked, her stern look forbidding him to lie to her.

"I'm okay. My throat still hurts a little. There's still a lot of pain when I breathe, but I can breathe," he said encouragingly.

Poppy said, "I can ask for more pain meds, if you like."

"Please," he whispered.

Poppy went to the door and summoned a nurse. The pain potion plus another healing potion was brought, and Severus fell back to sleep.

"Stubborn arse." Poppy shook her head and reseated herself, taking up her book again.

He woke about 45 minutes later, and Poppy came to stand over him. "How is it?"

He nodded. "Better." His voice was louder and stronger. "Poppy, you know who did this bubble spell to me, don't you?"

"I have my suspicions," she said, conjuring up a brush and setting about brushing his hair for him.

Severus closed his eyes and enjoyed her attention for a moment, before swearing, "That bloody arse. I could kill him for this. Years of my life wasted. I thought I was dead for Merlin's sake."

Poppy said, "I'd like to take a piece of him, too, but I don't think he realized you would be physically hurt like this."

"But what about my right to finally call the shots in my life? I deserved that after the hell I went through." He was so angry that tears ran down his face. The pain in his chest worsened from his anxiety, and he gasped for breath.

She peered into his face and sternly told him, "Calm down, now! This won't do you or Hermione any good." She waited until he was breathing better. "You know Albus is a romantic at heart. He only sought to place you in a position to get to know an older Hermione. If he hadn't done that, would you have gotten to know her like this? Severus, would you change what's happened in the last weeks for the freedom you could have had years ago...freedom without her?"

Severus closed his eyes and swallowed his anger. He was silent for a long time. His mind ran pictures of her hair in the sunlight, her smiles when she looked at him, the touch of her fingers on his skin, and the love in her eyes.

"No," he finally whispered.

She finished combing his hair and lifted his head to smooth it out under his head.

She placed another motherly kiss on his forehead. "You be grateful for that, then. I'd bet my life that this might have been an easier spell to break down if you would just speak of your feelings and let them surface before you find yourself in a position to be heroic."

"You really think that's all it's been, levels of emotion? That damn fool knows I do not talk about feelings."

"Yes, I think it's all about feelings. He wanted you to have someone to love, Severus. He felt he owed you so much, and he knows you'd be truly happy having someone to love."

"But why would he think Hermione could love me back?" he asked.

"Intellectual equals, her sense of fairness to all creatures... If there were ever a woman alive to do so, Hermione would have been the one to see your good qualities. He had a sixth sense; he may have realized her fantasies about you. You would never have cared about a teen Hermione. Who knows, maybe he heard a prophecy. He was close to Sybil, and she has made some crucial predictions."

Severus nodded; it was a lot to think about. *Would I trade a minute of what I'm building with Hermione for a freedom without her? Would I let go of a minute of this pain if it changed the fact that she would not be with me?* "I would not change it," he said aloud.

She smoothed his hair back with a smile. "I thought not."

Thank you, Lisa, for the amazing Beta work you have been doing.

Becky, thank you for your comments, help, and encouragement.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

This story becomes very adult in future chapters. Minors, please do not read this story.

Thank you, all, for your many reviews. They are very much appreciated.

Hermione woke when the little elf popped into the room with a loud crack. She thanked him, and then he was gone after collecting the lunch dishes and leaving her a small basket of food to take with her.

Hermione climbed out from the warm covers and pulled a robe on. She found a note with the lunch basket.

Hermione,

*Severus is doing well. He's been asleep most of
the time you have been gone. Please take your time.*

Poppy

She took a little longer dressing, making sure her hair was smoothed down and her makeup was perfect. She wanted to look good for Severus. She returned to the hospital through her own Floo, not wanting to bother Minerva as it was getting late.

She entered Severus' room and found Poppy spooning broth into his mouth. She was laughing, as it wasn't easy, and she had spilled some of it down his neck.

"Old woman," he was saying grumpily, "you can grow bones, but you can't feed a sick adult."

"Don't you 'old' woman me. I've got more years coming than are behind me, you mark my words, ungrateful wretch."

Severus chuckled at her, and Poppy giggled like a schoolgirl.

Hermione smiled and moved into the room, greatly relieved to hear the banter. "Hey, what's going on here?"

Severus turned the little ol' innocent me look on her. "Poppy's trying to drown me in broth," he complained with laughing eyes.

Hermione came and placed a kiss on his forehead. "Maybe a straw would be a better idea." She set the picnic basket and knapsack she'd brought with her down by the chamber.

"You look beautiful, Hermione. I missed you," he said, his eyes glued to her.

She smiled and reached out for the broth. She conjured up a straw and held it for him to sip through."

"Well," Poppy said with feigned indignation, "I see I'm no match for Muggle inventions. I'm going to go home and go to bed." She smiled warmly at them. "You do look better, Hermione. I'm glad you slept an extra hour. Severus slept most the time you were gone anyway." She gave the young woman a hug. "Now you see that he gets those pain meds without fail for the next 24 hours at least. Do not take no for an answer."

Hermione frowned at Severus. He gave her a sheepish look, so she didn't comment. "I'll make sure," she said with determination.

Poppy said, "Call me if there is anything I can do. I will come again tomorrow and spell you for awhile."

She gave Severus a kiss on the cheek and then swept from the room.

"She really loves you, Severus. You're like her son, as if you were her blood."

"Hummm," he agreed.

"Finish this broth," she ordered. They were silent as Severus finished up.

Hermione set the bowl aside on the little bedside table and took a napkin and wiped his mouth. Then she bent down to give him a hungry kiss. Severus kissed her back with relish.

He sighed as she moved back. "I can't wait to get out of here." His desire was plain.

Hermione blushed. "I can't wait either. But even when you get out of here, sex won't be high on your list for a few days. You're going to be as weak as a newborn kitten." She blushed again. She pressed her cheek against his, wanting to feel his skin against hers.

"I know this may be easy for me to say since you're the one going through all this hell, but I'm grateful to whomever sent you on this course. Otherwise, I would not have you here to love."

"I agree," he said quietly, really feeling that in his heart. His heart soared at her mention of love, but he couldn't make himself say the words back.

She moved back to look into his eyes. "One more layer, and you will be here in the flesh. You're so handsome already in your ghostly appearance. I can't imagine the flesh-and-blood Severus before my eyes." Her lips stole another kiss from him.

"I look forward to being seen," he said, kissing her back. "This is damn frustrating...not even being able to touch you on my own."

"You heard the Healer. You should be out of this thing tomorrow and into a normal bed. I think I can squeeze into it with you. I'm not going to leave again," she promised stubbornly.

"I might be here for days...maybe as long as a week, Hermione. You will take breaks and shower," he stressed. "Be reasonable: As a Potion's master, I have a strong sense of smell."

Hermione swung at his nose as if she would slug him but barely grazed it. "Are you saying I stunk before I left?"

"No, not at all. But you could... You might if you don't take breaks." He frowned at her.

"Alright, alright, I know you just want me to rest. I understand that, Severus. But if I can sleep here next to you, won't you let me stay? I'm sure they won't mind if I use your shower."

"We will see," he said. He was mostly concerned about keeping up appearances for her sake. If the pain got bad like it had before, it would wear him out to have her fussing over him.

Hermione settled into the chair Poppy had vacated. She took a book from her bag and read to him until he fell asleep.

Hermione sat back in her chair and let herself doze, but she continued to listen to Severus' breathing pattern. She went back in her mind to what Poppy had said, and she realized Severus had been keeping up appearances for her earlier. She had to make him understand that she didn't mind if he showed his pain. It was not weakness in her eyes. His body would heal in time; she realized he had pain and discomfort.

Suddenly Severus woke with a fit of coughing, and she watched with horror as blood seeped from the corners of his mouth. "Severus," she cried. His eyes were wide with fear.

The wards went off, and the room was suddenly full of Healers and nurses. One pushed Hermione back against the wall.

Hermione stood in the back watching; her eyes were wide with fear, and her fist was stuffed in her mouth.

They worked with their wands and potions for nearly 20 minutes before stepping back from him. Healer Hookeneye came to her.

"It's alright; he will be okay. The coughing was so rough a few blood vessels broke. Blood got into his lungs, and he was unable to breathe very well. We have repaired the damage, and the potions will ensure it doesn't happen again."

Hermione sagged against him, and he was kind enough to pat her on the back, giving her some emotional support. She then pushed away, going to stand over Severus and look down into his face.

He smiled weakly up at her, but he did not try to speak.

She didn't speak either but pressed her lips to his cheek. She ran her fingers through his hair, massaging his scalp with her fingers. He closed his eyes with a smile on his face and fell back into a deeper sleep.

Hermione stood at his side nearly thirty minutes and then sat back in her chair and drew out a different book to read from her knapsack. The night passed with occasional visits from Healers. Hermione and Severus talked for a few minutes between his pain potions, but mostly he slept. Hermione dozed in the chair, which she had transfigured into a lounge. She had a soft blanket with her and a pillow.

She woke to find him awake and ready for the breakfast being delivered. She changed the lounge back into a chair and put her blankets away. "I'll feed him," she told the nurse. The woman nodded and left her to it.

She asked as she put some eggs on a fork. "Severus, how are you this morning."

He smiled. "Much better. I hardly feel any pain right now." He took the bite she offered and chewed it very carefully before swallowing. "That's good. I'm starving."

"That's a good sign," she said, giving him another bite. They didn't talk much until the eggs and a little creamy tea was gone.

Hermione read to him most of the morning. She took a shower in his bathroom before lunch, and Poppy came to sit with him while she went for a walk to stretch her legs and to the cafeteria for some lunch.

St. Mungo's was not like Muggle hospitals. There were nurses' stations and patient rooms, but there were also plants everywhere, which made the halls look like gardens. Many of the plants had healing properties, and staff members harvested the ingredients for the potions that were made onsite. There were also many varieties of flowers just for the simple beauty and restfulness they brought to people. She passed a man clipping leaves from a tall, tree-like plant, and he looked familiar to her. "Neville?" she asked in astonishment.

Neville Longbottom turned to her. "Hermione, it's good to see you." He reached out to hug her briefly. He smelled of fresh herbs and spices.

He was tall, straight and had a bit of grey at his temples. His face was lined with laugh lines, and his eyes were bright with happiness.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"I work here. I maintain the gardens and gather the potion ingredients," he explained, clipping a few more leaves from the tree.

"How wonderful for you. I know how much Herbology meant to you back in school."

He nodded. "I've been here for 5 years. I like my job very much." He glanced down the hall in the direction she had come from. "Why are you here? Is someone ill?"

She took his arm and led him to a bench surrounded with flowers. "I know I can trust you with this information. Sorry, this might be a shock, Severus Snape was injured, and I am staying with him here."

Neville's face paled. "Proff..f..essor Snape is here, alive!"

Hermione laughed. She briefly told him how she had found him and what had happened since.

He said dumfounded, "That's astonishing."

She confessed, "I have grown to love him, Neville. He's a very different man freed from his obligations to Voldemort and Dumbledore."

He was speechless for a time. "You love him?" he finally stammered.

"Yes, I love him as a woman loves a man," she said, covering one of his hands with her own.

"That's hard to imagine," he confessed.

She laughed. "It is, isn't it? Because of the stasis, we really aren't that far apart in age anymore. Maybe seven years. We love the same things. We can talk about anything. It's really quite refreshing."

Neville confessed, "I never thought you'd marry for that reason." He looked down at her hand entwined with his.

Hermione knew he'd had a crush on her when they were young. "Did you marry?"

He smiled at her. "Yes, you'll remember Luna Lovegood."

"Luna! She's such a lovely girl, and very earthy." She smiled.

"Yes, we have our own herbal store and own green houses," he said with no small amount of pride. He added, "... and twin nine-year-old boys.

Hermione gushed, "I'm so happy for you, Neville. Please say hello to Luna for me. We really should try to get the DA members together. A reunion of sorts. I was off continent so long getting my Potion's credentials. I love being back at Hogwarts."

"We did have some good times, didn't we?" he said, letting her hands go.

Hermione stood. "Yes, we did. I'd best be getting on to the cafeteria. Poppy's sitting with Severus. Please go say hi."

Neville's eyes got big, and he gulped.

Hermione laughed. "I promise, he's different. I'm sure he would love to say hello. In any case, I will be back in his room in 30 minutes. Come then if you need moral support."

Hermione left Neville and went to the cafeteria and got herself a sandwich and a drink, which she carried back to Severus' room.

There was a room full of healers when she got back. She tossed her food down by the little sink and called, "What's wrong? What's happening?"

Poppy disengaged herself from the crowd. "Hermione, it's okay. They are preparing to move Severus to the bed." She pulled Hermione close to keep her out of the way.

Hermione noticed then that there was a bed in their room. They were helping Severus into a hospital gown. Then with gentle hands they picked him up and moved him to the bed. Hermione caught his smiling face through all the arms, and she relaxed against Poppy's body.

When they moved away, he was lying against the pillows; the bed was elevated so that he was half sitting.

Healer Hookeneye came to her. "He's doing very well. The potions have healed a good 75% of the damage already. I think he needs to spend a few more days here, and then he can go back under Poppy's care." He squeezed Hermione's and Poppy's arms and then left. A few others checked to make sure Severus had everything he needed, and Hermione saw two nurses exchange the visible spell.

"Thank you, so much," she said as they passed by on their way out of the room, pushing the chamber between them carefully. Hermione went to him, and he held his arms out to her. She laid her upper half across his chest carefully, trying to keep her footing on the floor. They both sighed.

Poppy called to them, "I'm going back to Hogwarts. Call me if you need me."

They said simultaneously, "Thanks, Poppy."

The medi-witch smiled and left.

Hermione's face was buried in his neck, and she pressed kisses there.

Severus breathed in her scent and caressed her hair with one of his hands. "It's good to hold you again."

"I'm so glad you're free of that thing." She stood, pulled her wand, and transfigured the bed into a full-size bed. Then she crawled up beside him as he looked on in amusement.

"You know, Severus, since I'm no longer on a 15 ft. tether, why don't you keep your wand. I know you may not be able to handle it for long. But I can fashion a sleeve that will hold it to your gown." She fashioned the sleeve and placed his wand with him.

He seemed to relax a bit. It had been like having an arm missing not having the wand close. "Thank you," he said, kissing her.

She lay within his arms; her face was against his left shoulder. "Are you in pain?" she asked.

"No, I have been taking my meds like a good little boy." His voice was full of sarcasm.

Hermione placed a kiss on his chin. Her hand roamed over his chest, giving him a light massage. "I can't wait to get you home. These people have been wonderful, but..." She let her voice trail off.

He kissed the top of her head. "I know what you mean." His voice was deep and husky.

She giggled. "Typical man, thinking with his..." A throat being cleared stopped her, and she looked up to see a very pale, yet blushing, Neville standing over them.

Lisa, you are doing amazing beta work on my stories. Thank you so much.

Becky, thank you for your support and enthusiasum.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

This story becomes very adult in future chapters. Minors, please do not read this story.

Readers, thank you so much for your reviews. They are very much appreciated.

Hermione blushed, and Severus glared at the visitor.

Neville stammered and pointed toward the door. "I can come back later..." He started to back out of the room.

Hermione pulled away from Severus and got out of bed. "Severus, look who's come to visit." Her eyes begged him to be nice.

Severus closed his eyes and opened them. "Mr. Longbottom, it's good to see you again."

"You too, sir," Neville said halfheartedly.

Severus laughed. "I doubt it. I was not a favorite teacher of yours...nor anyone else, I'm afraid."

"Well, sir, you had other, more pressing concerns in those days," he said.

Severus cocked an eyebrow at him, surprised the man was so generous.

Hermione said, "I saw Neville in one of the hallways here and told him how I found you."

"Indeed," Severus said. "Did she also tell you she and I have been bound together by a spell?"

Neville nodded. "Yes, sir. I'm glad to see you're still alive."

"Are you really, Mr. Longbottom?" Severus asked.

Neville took a deep breath and said, "Yes, sir. Your true work for the Order was a relief to discover, and we owe you a great debt of gratitude."

"Thank you, Mr. Longbottom. Come sit for a little while and tell me what you've been doing since your NEWTs."

He held out his hand, and Neville shook it, relieved it was solid. Neville sat in the chair and told Severus about his studies, his work, his wife, and his children.

"Congratulations," Severus said with genuine feeling. He studied the man's face. Neville looked older than Hermione did; yet they were the same age. "I would be interested in talking to you about your work and your experiments sometime. Once I am free of this spell, I will need to work. I used to supply St. Mungo's with potions on occasion. I will need a supply of herbs and other ingredients. Perhaps you will be able to assist me."

Neville stood, held out his hand again, and they shook hands. "I would be happy to help you, sir."

Severus smiled at him. "I look forward to our discussions, Mr. Longbottom."

"Neville, sir," he said, stepping away from the bed and placing a hand on Hermione's shoulder for a short squeeze as he turned to go.

"Severus then, Neville," Severus said.

"Goodnight, Severus." He nodded at Hermione, and a smile broke out on his face. "It really is good to have you back, sir." He headed away, anxious to tell his wife about his encounter.

Severus patted the bed, and Hermione rejoined him, giggling. "Poor Neville. He must have heard me teasing you."

"No doubt. He's matured so much. He looks older than you, Hermione," Severus observed. "I've heard kids will do that to you," he murmured.

She laughed at first but then sobered and whispered, "Yes," softly.

Severus heard the wistful note in her voice and filed that away for another time. Tired from the happenings of the day, he fell asleep.

Hermione listened to his steady breathing then let herself sleep.

They woke when dinner was brought in, and Hermione was served dinner as well. Severus was able to feed himself and slowly went through a dinner of solid food.

Minerva came in as they were finishing dinner. Hermione climbed back into the bed and sat up against the back, and Minerva took the chair. "Severus, you're looking good. What have the healers said?"

Severus filled her in.

"Good, you should be home before you know it!" she exclaimed, rubbing her gnarled hands together.

"Home," he said dryly. "I wasn't aware that Hogwarts was my home."

"Well they say home is where the heart is," she said happily.

"My heart is encased in an impenetrable shell at the moment," he said with annoyance.

Hermione's eyes teared up, but Severus didn't see it.

"Hogwarts is your home, Severus. It will be until you want to leave. I know this appointment is not what you may want nor richly deserve, but all my positions are filled right now. But Filch is old, and he needs help. Poppy needs potions of a more difficult nature, and Hermione is very busy with her classes. If you stay on and help out, we would be most grateful. If a position opens, it is yours. You are... more than capable of taking most our classes."

"Except music," he said distastefully.

Hermione sat up and said suddenly, "I need to go get some of my class work to grade, Minerva. Can you sit with Severus till I come back?" She was gone before either of them could say anything.

Severus glared after her. "What happened? Women can be so fickle."

"If you weren't such a lout, you'd know Hermione loves you. You have to be more careful about what you say."

"What did I say this time?" he asked, truly baffled.

"You should have said, 'Yes, Minerva, home is where Hermione is.'"

"Bloody Hell," was all he said. "She knows I care for her."

"Does she? Have you told her? I know you enjoy having her take care of you. I know you enjoy her touch. If you love her, you need to tell her."

Severus grimaced. "I don't know if I can *love*, Minerva. I desire her, yes. I enjoy her company, but love..."

"Well, I don't believe you will truly be free until you can figure that one out."

"I know who did this to me. That bloody, old wizard is still controlling my life. If this hurts Hermione, I will shred his portrait to ribbons that will not heal themselves."

"You're the only one hurting Hermione right now, Severus," Minerva said sternly.

With a bit of difficulty, Severus turned his back on her and sulked.

Minerva smiled ruefully at his back, drew a book from her pocket, and settled in to read.

Hermione moved quickly down the hall, trying to distance herself from Severus and the whole mess. Damn that man. What else did she have to give him for him to see how much she loved him? Was it really so impossible for him to see that he could love her back? Granted, he'd been horribly injured twice now. Was that making him resent her? Did he feel nothing but entrapment? She was certain he cared for her. She'd seen it in his eyes. Yet he was unable to allow her to have the satisfaction of hearing it come from his mouth. Was he truly not capable of the words? Worse of all, was it only lust? Was getting in her knickers all that was important to him?

Suddenly, she realized who had orchestrated this whole thing. She nearly slapped herself on the forehead. Albus Dumbledore. That bastard, playing with Severus' life like that!

A coin sitting in the middle of the hall caught her eye, and she absently bent and scooped it up. She knew instantly she was in trouble. The tug of a Portkey caught her, and the hospital vanished around her."

"Severus!" she screamed aloud and in her mind.

Severus bolted out of a light sleep. "Hermione! She's gone!" He was struggling to get out of bed. He felt hands pressing against his chest.

Minerva cried out, "Severus, what are you going on about? It must have been a dream."

"No, someone has taken her! A Portkey, I think." He could feel her shocked thoughts filtering into his mind.

Minerva went to the door and called for help.

Barnamais was sitting at the station outside Severus' room. He came and tried to restrain Severus. "Sir, you're not strong enough. Please lay back down, or we will have to restrain you."

"You will not keep me from finding her. It has to be the Malfoys. They hate me, and they are the only ones who know I'm here. Please, Hermione cannot fall into their hands. Lucius can be truly vindictive."

Minerva said, "I'm going to send for Potter. I don't care what he's doing. He would want to be here for you and Hermione."

Severus sat back. He wouldn't let them restrain him, but he would leave here as soon as he was able. As much as he loathed the idea of Harry Potter coming to the rescue, he would not waste valuable time with his resentment. "Please, Minerva, call him, and call Poppy, too. I need her here."

Within an hour, not only was Poppy there, but Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, Neville, Luna, and Ginny stood there ready to storm Malfoy Manor to see if Hermione was there.

There was yelling, arguing, and frustration. Severus insisted he go along, and the rest were dealing with the fact that not only was he alive but he was involved with Hermione. Finally, Minerva put two fingers in her mouth and whistled so loudly that everyone clapped their hands over their ears and turned to stare at her.

"Now, children, shut the bloody hell up! It appears to me that you're all men and women. Mr. Potter, you're an Auror, so you're the leader now. Organize this thing, and everyone else listen to him. Mr. Potter, there's nothing in this world that will stop Severus from going. So, you need to include him and help him when possible. He's weak, but I know he would rather die than not be a part of this rescue."

"But he's not strong enough; if I take him and he dies, Hermione will kill me," Harry complained.

"If you don't, he will go anyway. Severus knows his way around that house. He knows where she's likely to be kept."

"This is probably a trap for him anyway."

"I'm lying here, Potter. You can speak to me directly," Severus said scathingly.

Harry turned and looked him in the eye. "I'm sorry, sir. This is all just a shock. I knew you were here, but this threat to Hermione has spoiled the chance to sit with you and talk. You have my utmost respect."

Severus nodded. "I suppose you have forgiven me, since you've named a son after me." He tried to smile, but it came out a grimace.

Harry smiled back at him. "Do you think you can make this trip and be more of service to the rescue than a hindrance?"

"Yes, there are potions I can take for any residual pain. I feel at least 90% healed. Harry," he said, looking the younger man in the eye, "I have done far more in worse condition. I am strong enough."

Harry smiled reached over and squeezed his shoulder. "Alright, sir. You tell us how we are to begin this rescue and keep you from becoming a victim as well."

While Barnamais and Poppy worked over him with spells and potions, he laid out their plan and got up and dressed. A tight brace was placed around his chest to help support his lungs. Spells of protection were placed over and through the garment.

Minerva worked with charms on the others as they girded themselves and prepared to go to battle. There was little talk between the friends, who hadn't seen each other in years, and Ron spoke to no one. He glared a lot at Severus.

Severus just glared back. Finally he had a moment with Ron close and no one else. "Weasley, you have no right to judge who Hermione cares for. You made your choice and walked away years ago. Respect her enough to let her make her own choices. She will be safe with me, and she will be happy. She hasn't been happy in years."

Ron stared at him a moment then nodded.

"Good, Mr. Weasley, Ron. You will use your skills as a Quidditch player and create a diversion from your broom. Some of those crazy bombs and distractions from your brother's shop should do the trick."

"It sounds like fun, sir," he said. "I'll go get what I need now. Tell me where you want me to meet you."

Severus gave Ron the area and time he expected him to be there. He watched the younger man leave and for the first time was impressed by Ron Weasley. He watched the others as they readied themselves, and he realized that they were not much younger than he was. They had years more experience than when he had known them before. Harry had a strength and power about him now. He was a well-trained wizard.

Severus felt ready, and he said, "Let's go."

Healer Barnamais said, "Severus, Godspeed. I do expect you to come back here for a checkup and treatment when you have found and rescued Madam Granger."

"I will thank you. Be alert for us; we may have injuries," Severus instructed.

The group reached out to the Portkey and was gone.

When Hermione woke up, she saw she was in the same room in Malfoy Manner that she had been held in all those years ago. How long had she been out? It might have been minutes or hours; she had no way to tell. She ran to the door and pounded on it. "Draco, help me? I know you don't want to do this."

There was a nasty voice from the other side of the door. "Draco's not here. Scorpius and he went to the Wizengamot, Mudblood. No one is here but my friends, my house-elves, and me. No one will help you. You and Severus will not be allowed happiness...not when Narcissa is dead. She was my life, and she could not bear the disgrace of this family; she wasted away. Her death ended my life, and now you will pay. I will kill Severus when he comes to save you. He betrayed my family."

Hermione pulled away from the door as if she was burned. "Oh God, Severus help me." She whispered to the empty room. He couldn't come. He wasn't able, was he? But then she knew he would come. He would come even if it cost him his life.

She went to sit on the cot in the room. She pulled her knees up to her chin and rested her forehead on her knees. She started to tremble, and she felt hot tears on her face. Lucius was a monster, and Hermione knew he wanted to get back at Severus for his betrayal. Lucius would never take responsibility for himself and his fall from the wizarding world.

The door lock clanged and then opened. Lucius stood staring down at her, and it was obvious he was drunk. His eyes were red, and his hair hung limp and dirty. She was surprised to see him so unkempt. He'd always been such an immaculate man.

Hermione tried to remember some moves she'd learned in the self-defense class she had taken one summer at a Muggle school. She wondered where her wand was. She felt naked without it.

Lucius loomed over her, and she felt steel fingers on her arms. He dragged her to her feet and pressed his wet lips against hers.

Hermione pulled away and screamed, "Severus!"

Lisa, thank you so much for the awesome beta work you are doing for me. I could not do without your help.

Becky, thank you for all you do.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

In future chapters this story becomes very adult. Minors, please do not read.

Please leave reviews. I have appreciated every one I have gotten.

Severus had just Apparated to the trees that surrounded Malfoy Manor when he heard Hermione's mental scream. It took all his discipline not to run blindly inside.

Harry had been taught the spell and was keeping him visible for now. Since Severus could not use his pocketed wand, Harry was shielding him. Harry, Ginny, Luna, and Neville furiously shot spells at the wards on the gate. The wards were strong, and fire-like sparks flew everywhere. The wards glowed red hot but held.

Severus shouted, "Harry, let the spell on me go and then try *Antonitum*. You must know the spell; it was in my Potion's book.

Harry fired off the spell, and the wards fluctuated. It was then that Ron appeared above the house. He flew at the edge of the wards and threw fireworks and bombs of color, blinding light, and darkness. People, presumably servants, were running here and there confused by the noise and light.

Ron dodged the spells that were being fired at him. Ginny and Luna deflected some of them, as well. It was their job to keep Ron in the air and safe.

Harry shot off another spell he'd learned from Snape's book. Though not related to potions, Snape had scribbled a number of spells inside the back cover. "*Aculeatus fluminious*," he cried, running forward and firing off protection spells before him.

Severus followed the younger wizard and felt the pain in his lungs from his exertion.

Then Ron lobbed something at the wards that hit them with a deafening crack, causing them to burst into sight like a bubble over the entire mansion. They watched as it ate the top of the bubble and worked its way down the sides and met up with the flames of Harry's spell. Then it was gone, and so were the wards. Ron flew into the garden surrounding the house and fired off stunning spells and body binding spells. The others ran from the trees into the gardens, and servants or perhaps friends fell in their wake. Severus saw Neville go down, but he got to his feet and kept running. Luna, small and pale as she was, seemed almost camouflaged in the pale flowers in the garden; she ran with little interference. Ginny was hit in the shoulder with a stun spell and fell. She cried out and then called, "I'm okay, go! Go! Harry saw her get to her feet, and he ran to catch up with Severus who was ahead now. Not stopping, not caring that he did not have any protection, Severus ran and dodged spells. As he went, he tore the clothing from his body until he was invisible.

"I will not be noticed," he called to Harry. He'd already told Harry this plan and the route through the house.

Harry picked up Severus' wand.

Several of Lucius' friends ambushed Harry as he came into the house. As he fought them, he saw a door open and shut at the other end of the room. He stunned the two men and followed through the door; the kitchen Severus had described was before him. A house-elf stood with her hands up, not trying to fight. He stunned her anyway and ran past her. He could hear his compatriots' fighting and their cries of pain. He prayed that everyone would be safe.

The dungeon stairs were steep and dark, but he flew down them. Invisible, Severus had the obvious advantage of surprise, but since he was naked and unarmed, he was vulnerable. Harry knew for Hermione's sake he had to keep Severus alive. But he encountered more armed wizards and had to backtrack up the steps. He hid behind a curve in the stairwell and darted out to fire spells.

Hermione shoved Lucius as his hands groped her body, and she heard the fabric of her robe tear.

She brought her knee up and managed to strike soft, warm flesh, and he cried out and let her go momentarily. She pushed past him and ran for the door, but he grabbed her ankle, and she fell. She landed on the stone floor face first and hard enough that the breath was knocked out of her. Blood ran from her nose, and she had several broken teeth.

She clawed her way across the floor, kicking at Lucius and trying to dislodge his hand.

"No you don't, you filthy Mudblood," Lucius spat out.

He crawled up her body and held her pinned to the floor. He was stronger than he looked, and he turned her over and tried kissing her again. She fought him, biting whatever came close, and tasted his blood on her tongue. He struck her face with the flat of his hand, and Hermione saw stars. He twisted her breast, and she screamed with pain. He was attempting to force her legs open, and she knew he was fumbling to open his own robes.

"Severus!" she cried again aloud and in her mind.

She was so intent on fighting Lucius that she did not see the door open. Suddenly, Lucius was lifted off her and flung against the back wall of the cell. No sooner did Lucius hit the floor than he was plucked into the air and flung by the invisible force to the other side of the room. Lucius' wand fell from his hand, and Hermione lunged for it. "*Pertrificus totalus*," she screamed. She saw Lucius' body stiffen; yet it was held up. His neck was twisting in an obscene manner.

"Severus! No, please don't kill him. Please! No more killing. He's a broken, deranged man!" Hermione went to the place where Lucius hung and grabbed Severus' arm.

"Please, let him go! I need you to hold me. Please, Severus," she cried, tugging against him.

Lucius was flung to the floor, and Hermione felt Severus' arms go around her. She sagged to the floor, and he followed her. He felt the cold floor against his naked backside but pulled Hermione into his lap.

"I'm here, I'm here," he said, trying to soothe her.

"Severus, you came!" She was nearly hysterical and clutching his arms so tightly he knew he would be bruised, but it didn't matter. Every inch of him hurt already.

"Hermione, are you alright? He didn't..."

"No." She trembled. "He didn't have time." She realized that Severus must be naked, and she found herself giggling a bit hysterically.

Severus, astounded and scared, wondered, *Has she lost her mind?*

"I finally got you naked, and here we are in a dungeon. I knew you'd come, Severus." She sought and captured his lips for a kiss.

She exclaimed, "I love you, Severus."

Severus said, holding her tight afraid of losing her again, "I love you, too."

As soon as the words were uttered, a blinding light burst from his chest. Severus appeared layer by layer from the inside out: his heart, then lungs, then skeleton, muscle, and flesh. Each layer built itself before their eyes.

He stared at his arms, which were clasped around Hermione's body. She was looking wide-eyed into his face as he appeared.

"You're the most handsome man I've ever seen," she gushed, tears flowed from her eyes.

It was at that moment that Harry burst through the door. He came to a dead stop and stared at the naked Severus on the floor holding Hermione in his lap. He saw the blood and the torn clothing and the joyous smile on Hermione's face.

"Harry," she asked, "What are you doing here?"

At that moment, the rest of the rescuers piled in the room, pushing Harry further in. They all stood stunned. Ginny was holding her shoulder. Neville had a goose egg-sized bump on his forehead. Luna's hair was ragged, and a cut on her face bled freely.

Ron looked worn but whole. "Bloody hell, a naked Snape!"

Hermione's mouth was open with astonishment, and then she started to giggle. She started to pull away from Severus, thinking she should get her weight off him. He had to be in pain.

"Madam Granger," he said in the driest, most sarcastic voice he could muster, "do not move an inch. Potter, give me my wand," he commanded. "Now, please stop gaping at me and give us some time alone. Oh, and by all means, take Mr. Malfoy with you."

Everyone was trying hard not to laugh at his obvious discomfort as he clung to Hermione, using her as a cover.

Harry handed Severus' wand over with a snicker and got a scathing look in return.

"Fifty points from Gryffindor, Mr. Potter!" he said, but his eyes crinkled in a smile.

"Yes, sir." Harry smiled back. "Ron, help me with Malfoy. They stripped his upper robes off and dropped them by Severus. He nodded gratefully, holding Hermione closer.

Ron and Harry grabbed Malfoy under the arms and dragged him from the room. The others followed. Ginny reached out to squeeze Hermione's shoulder. She winked at Hermione as she shut the door behind them.

Hermione felt Severus sag beneath her, and she pulled away and stood, scooping up the robe as she went. She held it out, and he slipped it over his head as he struggled

to get to his feet. His hands smoothed the sides, and he felt something in a pocket and pulled it out.

Hermione gasped with happiness. "My wand." She took it from his hand and held it close.

Severus raised his wand and spoke softly, and Hermione felt her nose and her teeth repair. He staggered, and Hermione said, "Severus, please sit a minute." She pushed him to the cot and went on her knees before him. "Do you need to go back to St. Mungo's now?" she asked.

"No, just let me look at you." He smoothed her hair with his hand and touched her bruised face. He bent forward and kissed her deeply and then drew her up beside him and wrapped his arms around her. "I thought I might lose you. I'm sorry Hermione. I should have gotten here sooner."

"I'm okay," she said, trembling against his side. "He didn't have time to hurt me, and I gave him a mean groin kick."

Severus smirked at her. "Remind me never to get on your bad side. Perhaps you didn't need me at all."

"Oh, I needed you. I was about to lose the fight when you got here." Hot tears burned her damaged skin.

They sat holding onto each other, each thinking what could have happened.

"How did you get the old DA group together? I can't believe Ron came, and he's not trying to tear you apart for being involved with me. He may have no use for me, but I know this has to be hard for all of them."

"Yes, but we were united in a common cause. We all love you, Hermione. I think your friends want you to be happy, and they were willing to accept the idea. Once they see you are truly happy, they will all accept me."

Hermione touched his face and kissed him again, "I suppose you really do love me, Severus. You're visible."

He smiled tenderly at her. "I suppose I do." He laughed, hugging her tightly and rocking her against him. "I was so scared, Hermione."

"I was, too," she whispered against him. "We really need to get out of here."

He nodded. "I just need to muster up my dignity. Appearing naked before Potter and the others was really quite horrible."

Hermione stood and drew him to his feet. "You were only partially naked. I covered the important parts, which by the way, looked quite impressive," she teased and saw him blush.

"Yes, you did," he grinned, embarrassed and in pain, feeling the strain of the day in his body. He literally ached everywhere. He groaned as he took a few steps. "If I didn't hurt so much, I'd pick you up and swing you around. I'm so happy right now." He groaned again.

Hermione laughed. "I'll take your word for it." She used her wand to quickly repair her robes and clean them. Then she slipped herself under his arm and let him lean on her as they made their way painfully to the door.

Outside the door Harry stood waiting patiently, wand at the ready. He slipped under Severus' arm on the other side and slowly they made their way up the long, winding dungeon stairs. When they came into the kitchen, Ginny held Severus' clothes. The room was vacated, and Hermione helped him dress. She tightened the chest brace and saw that it helped him.

The DA group was met in the entry by a group of Aurors who had taken custody of Lucius. He sat scowling, his eyes shooting daggers at Hermione and especially Severus.

"She was good, Severus," he taunted. "Mudbloods sure have fire in them."

Severus lunged at him, and his fist made contact with Lucius' nose before he was pulled away.

Lucius screamed, "This isn't over. I have another line of attack. You won't know when it's coming, but it will come. Mark my word, traitor."

Harry held Severus. "Let it go; he's just trying to get one last dig. Let's get you back to St. Mungo's, sir. We need to get Hermione checked out."

Severus had been struggling, but he stopped. "You're right, Harry. Thank you." He looked around and found Hermione being held up by Ginny and Luna.

He pulled away from Harry and held his arms out to Hermione. She came into his arms, and they kissed, in front of their whole company and God.

Ron had a scowl on his face, and Harry and Ginny stood in each other's arms grinning.

Neville and Luna watched with dopy smiles on their faces.

The company of rescuers, Severus, and Hermione Apparated back to St. Mungo's.



Antonitum: lightning bolt

Aculeatus fluminous: fire lightning

Lisa, thank you for the awesome beta job you are doing for me. You Rock!!!

Becky, thank you for your help and feedback.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

This story becomes very adult in future chapters. Minors, please to do read this story.

I made a manip for the last chapter. Please check it out and let me know what you think.

Thank you so much for your reviews. I really enjoy reading them.

They all landed on their feet in front of St. Mungo's. Once inside the door, nurses and healers who had been put on alert by Barnamais Hookineye surrounded them.

Poppy and Minerva were still there and came forward. Severus sagged against Poppy, and two nurses commandeered him and took him back to his room. Poppy and Hermione followed.

The others were taken to exam rooms to be checked over and healed of their bruises and cuts. Ginny's collarbone was broken from the stun she had received, but it would heal quickly.

Severus was striped, cleaned, dressed in a hospital robe, and placed in his bed.

Hermione refused to leave him, so she was checked over as another bed was brought into the room and she was tucked in.

Severus would be okay, but he needed additional days in the hospital. Hermione was bruised and traumatized. Finally, when everyone cleared out of their room, she snuck out of her bed.

"Are you in pain, Severus? Can I sleep with you?" she asked.

He reached out for her. "I was waiting for you." He used his wand to combine their beds, and she crawled into the big bed and his arms.

They both sighed as she settled against him. She was trembling as he held her. "Let it go, Hermione, cry. I'm here, and I can take it. I'm sorry I didn't get there sooner. I'd like to tear Malfoy apart with my bare hands."

"I was so scared for you. You're not healed, and I worried you'd die trying to get there. Thank you for asking Harry and the others for help, Severus." She let hot tears spill from her eyes, and she cried, trembling against him for some time. It felt good to let her fear go and release some of her anger and shame.

Severus held her and stroked her hair and thanked God that she was safe.

"It's Harry's job, and he would have never forgiven me if I hadn't let him help. The others just sort of showed up. I think Poppy or Minerva alerted them."

"I was so afraid Lucius would take from me something that I'd been saving just for you," she said against his neck.

"You're a tiger; you fought him off and gave us the time we needed," he said, trying to comfort her.

"I was so close to losing," she cried, clinging to him.

"Tell me how to help you, Hermione. I don't have any clue how to deal with your pain."

"Just hold me; all I need is your arms around me," she cried.

He held her tightly. "I think we need to try to talk to Draco. I need to find out what he really thinks about today. I need to know if he's sympathetic or stands with his father, and we need to know what will happen to Scorpius. We need to be aware. That boy is young enough to be turned if someone takes an interest in him. Lucius has done a good job of poisoning him so far. But it may not be too late to make him see that hatred only brings man's downfall."

She stopped crying and scrubbed at her face with her fist. "Do you think he would allow help? It's a good idea, Severus, but I have my doubts. That boy is dangerous."

"Don't worry, I will have you protected, and we will search out Draco. Minerva thinks he's changed. We must try to end this before it escalates. Voldemort was also an angry young man."

Hermione trembled more violently in his arms. I can't go through an adulthood like my childhood. Severus, promise me we will disappear into some backwoods life. I can't spend my life battling evil."

"I can't promise you that. Freedom from evil is worth fighting for. Do you really think you could stay on the sidelines hiding, Hermione? You're a warrior. Would you honestly sit back and hide when good people are in danger?"

"No," she muttered in shame.

"That's my girl," Severus said, hugging her to him a little more firmly. "Now sleep. No one can bother us here. Malfoy's in Azkaban by now."

"I don't want to live my life afraid," she said.

"I will make things right, Hermione. Let me heal first, and then we will see what we can do." He gave a shaky laugh. "I can always sneak up on Scorpius and Oblivate him."

She laughed nervously. "That's a good idea, Severus. He can be Lockhart's roommate."

Their laughter helped cut the tension, and she relaxed. She snuggled in and eventually fell asleep.

Severus lay there thinking for a time. He vowed he would do just that, if the boy would not listen to reason. There were ways to alter his brain and not take all that he was like Lockhart. Severus only hoped that he could connect with the part of Draco that used to respect and care for him. Severus slept.

Severus was sitting up in his bed the next morning and Hermione was taking a shower when there was a knock at his door and Harry slipped his head inside. "May I come in?" he asked.

Severus nodded. "Of course, Mr. Potter."

Harry came in and looked around.

"She's in the shower. Did you come to see Hermione?" he asked.

Harry held out his hand to Severus, and Severus cocked an eyebrow but shook it.

"I'm happy to see you alive, sir. I didn't really get a chance to talk to you yesterday. It was a very fast and furious day."

Severus indicated the chair by the bed, and Harry sat, crossing his legs. He leaned back and seemed at ease. The boy had grown into a confident man.

"I understand. Thank you for coming."

"I will always be available to help you and Hermione, sir," he said. His eyes conveyed his sincerity. "I was able to talk to Madam Pomfrey last night, and she told me about why you're still here and what you've gone through. Do you know who was behind this?"

"Dumbledore, I'm almost certain. He's an arrogant bastard and still pulling my strings."

Harry tensed and sat up a bit straighter.

Severus laughed. "I do, however, have to thank him for Hermione. I would not have gotten to know her otherwise. I really do love her, Harry. Can I call you Harry? We should be on a first-name basis."

"Yes, of course, Severus." Harry sat back. "I've done my share of loving and hating Dumbledore over the years. I suppose he had to do what was necessary. I guess the secrecy is what pisses me off. Maybe if he had explained it all to us."

Severus shook his head. "The connection in your head to Voldemort made the secrecy necessary, Harry. In that, his hands were tied. I guess, in retrospect, I can understand why he kept things from me as well. But I still will go see him when I am better and give him a piece of my mind," he said with a growl.

Harry smirked. "He's just going to look down at you with that damn twinkle in his eyes. The end justified the means with him. He will see that you have love in your life, and he won't care how you got there."

Severus nodded. "You're right, of course. Are you okay with Hermione and me?"

Harry nodded. "It's a shock, and I can't say it isn't. But with the age difference dealt with, I'd say she has her own mind, and she has been knocking around the world with only a career in mind and no happiness. If you make her happy, Severus, then I can see no problem here."

"And Weasley," Severus asked, "will I have to keep an eye on my back?"

"No, Ron's gone back to his life. I think it bothered him to see Hermione so happy with you. He left so he would not interfere. He gave up his right to her years ago, and he knows there is no going back. I'm sure he wants to see her happy as well." Harry did not give credence to the nagging doubts in his mind. He'd seen the look of hatred on Ron's face.

"Good," Severus said, relaxing against his pillows.

"Sir, what will you do about Scorpius? Minerva told me what happened," he explained.

"I'll try to reach him and try to work with Draco to help the boy see right and wrong. If all else fails, Hermione and I talked about memory alterations and Obliviation. I will not have her in fear of her life," he said adamantly, his fist holding a wad of the covers on his bed. "I will do whatever it takes."

Harry nodded with a rueful smile. "Call for me, and I will help you if it comes to something drastic. Hermione deserves happiness and peace of mind."

The door to the bathroom opened, and Hermione came out dressed in a robe and rubbing her hair with a towel. "Harry!" she said, dropping the towel and coming to a now standing Harry to give him a hug."

"I was hoping you'd come by to say hello today. When do you have to go back to work?"

She used her wand to dry her hair and went to sit on the bed, winding her fingers into Severus hand.

Harry watched them smile at each other and was pleased to see the same gentle look in Severus' eyes as was in Hermione's. This man had changed so much. Had he changed, or was this the man his mother had called her best friend as a child?

Harry had forgiven Severus years ago. He'd come to terms with the memories Severus had given him. He'd realized the sacrifices the man had made for him. He'd agonized over his treatment of the man for several years after Severus' "death."

Severus pulled Hermione against him and said, "Harry, your son Albus is a fine, young man. He seems a chip off the old block."

Harry gulped with emotion and said, "Thank you, sir. That's high praise coming from my nemesis."

Severus grinned at him. "We have all been given second chances at life. I'm just getting started a bit later. A blessing in disguise," he said. "I would be much older now without the stasis charm."

"Maybe Dumbledore has bestowed a number of blessings on you," he said, smiling at Hermione.

"Oh, so you figured that out, too," Hermione said.

Severus nodded. "I was going to talk to you about it when we got home."

To Harry he said, "I agree." He brought Hermione's fingers up so he could kiss them. "I will take very good care of her, Harry," he promised.

Harry nodded. "I hope it does not entail any more physical risks like you have taken already. I'm sorry if it was a breach of confidence, but Poppy did tell me what had happened to you both. I'm now over the shock of you two being together."

"I'm glad," Severus said quietly. "You are being a gentleman about it all."

"I learned years ago to trust Hermione's judgment of people." He stood. "Well, I have been given leave to stay here a few more days, so I'm going to go spend some time with my wife and visit Albus. My assignment will last only a few more weeks, and then I will come back to this area for work." He looked at Hermione who had been very quiet. "Are you okay?" he asked concerned.

"I will be," she said. "I know Severus will take care of me. He's risked his life a number of times for me already. Now that he's free of the spell we can get on with our lives..."

"...together," Severus finished for her.

"I certainly hope so." She blushed.

Harry went to her side of the bed and hugged her. "They sure have relaxed their rules around here. I didn't know they made double hospital beds."

Severus and Hermione laughed. "They don't." Severus waved his wand.

"I see." Harry laughed and then came and shook Severus' hand. "I hope that we will get a chance to talk sometime soon."

"Count on it, Harry. It is good to see you. I hope that we can be friends," Severus said sincerely.

Harry said, "I hope so, sir." He nodded to Hermione and then turned away and left the room.

Hermione buried her face in Severus' shoulder. She cried, and he held her, stymied as to the reason, but he decided to just wait to see what was wrong. She would tell him when she was ready.

Hermione fell asleep and left Severus to wonder what was up. He finally decided it was the whole day, both good and bad, so he just held her and let her sleep. Finally he fell asleep as well.

Two days later they were released. They'd had visitors every few hours. Most of the group of old DA members had come back to see them, and Severus had enjoyed the conversations with his former student's very much. Was it because they were all adults on a more equal standing? Hermione continued to be elusive and quiet, letting him do most of the talking.

As they walked into their rooms at Hogwarts, Severus watched Hermione walk around and touch her things. "It's good to be home," she said quietly.

"Yes it is." He came and placed his arms around her, drawing her close for a long kiss.

Hermione let him kiss her but drew away, smiled wanly at him, and went into the bathroom and closed the door.

Severus felt his heart skip a beat, *Something is very wrong with her. Lucius' attack has changed her.* The last few days she'd slept close, sometimes crying, sometimes just hanging on, but there had been no teasing or sexual advances even when he warded the door for privacy.

Hermione finally came from the bathroom. "I'm going to go to my classroom and see what kind of work the students have been doing." She didn't wait to see if he would object but tucked her wand in her sleeve and left.

He went and sat on the edge of the bed. They were no longer tied together. He could go where he wanted, but he didn't want to be anywhere but where Hermione was.

Lisa, you are doing an awesome job. I really appreciate all your hard work.

Becky, thank you for your enthusiastic opinions and help.

Chapter 17

Chapter 17 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

This story becomes very adult in later chapters. Minors, please do not read this story.

Please leave reviews. I enjoy them so much, and it helps me to know what you think of the work.

Severus was sitting in a chair by the fire when Hermione finally came back. It had been several long hours, and he'd nearly been jumping out of his skin wondering if he should go check on her. But he needed to let her have her freedom.

"How was work?" he asked. He noted with a sadness he could not explain that she did not come to kiss him.

"There was a lot," she said. "Are we going to dinner in the Great Hall?" she asked, placing a stack of papers she'd brought with her on the table.

"I thought you might want to stay in tonight. Spend some time alone?" he said.

"I think we should go see everyone. They know we're back, Severus," she said, not looking at him. "I don't want to stay long. I have a lot of papers to correct tonight."

"Must it be done tonight?" he asked in a low, deep voice. He stood and went to hold her, and she felt stiff in his arms. "Hermione, please tell me what's wrong."

"I'm not ready," was all she said as she pulled away from him. "I can't get the images of his hands out of my mind."

"I can take them out if you want," he offered, trying to help. Then he cringed when Hermione looked at him with horror.

"Promise you won't mess with my mind, no matter what happens, Severus." She moved away to grab a warmer cloak for the trip through the drafty dungeon to the dining hall.

He stepped back as if slapped and said angrily, "I would never do that without your permission. You have to know that, Hermione."

Tears filled her eyes and she said, "I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry, tell me what's wrong, and tell me how to help you," he said in exasperation.

"I can't talk about it...not yet, Severus," she said. "I'm going. Are you coming with me?"

He grabbed his cloak and pulled it on and ran after her.

Dinner was odd. Hermione chattered with everyone like it was a normal day, and Severus sat quietly and watched her. He caught Poppy's eye and frowned at her. She, too, was watching the too cheerful Hermione with consternation.

After dinner, they milled around until everyone had left. Severus heard Hermione sigh, and her shoulders slumped. She said, "I guess we need to go back. I do have that work."

Severus followed her and was beginning to get the picture. She was afraid to be alone with him here. At the hospital, she had stayed glued to his side. She'd felt safe there, knowing he would not ask her to make love to him while there.

He felt his heart constrict with pain as he realized she was afraid of him. He felt rage and wished he could pound Lucius to a pulp. His beautiful, open, loving Hermione was changed. She was afraid to give of herself, afraid of being touched intimately.

When they got back to their rooms, she went directly to the table and spread her work out. "Why don't you go to bed, Severus," she suggested to him. "I will only work a little while, and then I will join you."

He knelt down next to her and placed a hand on her knee, feeling her tense. "I will not ask of you something you are not ready to give, Hermione."

He saw the stricken look on her face. She hadn't even put the thoughts into words in her own mind. She turned to him and wrapped her arms around his neck and cried against the top of his head.

"I'm sorry," she stammered between sob and gulps of air. "I didn't think at first that he'd harmed me. Here, alone with you, I realized I can't give you what you deserve, what we've been waiting for, Severus. Damn Lucius, will we never get him out from between us? I only see a dark tunnel in front of me."

"Give it some time, Hermione. You need to go talk to Poppy. Maybe she will know someone who can help you, if she can't. Please think about it. Now come to bed. I promise I will only hold you, like we did at the hospital. I can't stand to see you in pain."

He felt wet tears run down his own cheeks.

She sagged against him, and he stood, picked her up, and carried her to bed. With his wand he changed their clothes, and he pulled the warm covers over them. She turned away from him but let him hold her close, spooned against her back, and they slept.

The next day, Hermione started teaching again. Since Severus was no longer tied to her, he stayed in their room at her request. By the end of the day, he was nearly stir crazy.

She came in late, and they went to dinner. The night pretty much repeated itself. By the end of the week, Severus was very disheartened. She could no longer bear to have him touch her in the bed, and when he woke she was sleeping on the edge as far away as she could. She wouldn't talk to him and rarely spoke to him when they were in private.

Friday night, she volunteered for hall duty, and Severus sat alone. He decided to go talk to Poppy since Hermione wouldn't go herself.

He walked into the empty infirmary and knocked on the door to her rooms.

"Come in," he heard her voice call. When she saw him, she stood and came to give him a hug.

"How are you holding up?" she asked, indicating the chair across from her by the fire.

He rubbed his face with his hand and sat with a sigh. "She's pulling further and further away. She barely lets me touch her. I can't help her, and she won't admit anymore that there's a problem."

Poppy shook her head sadly. "Severus, it's going to get worse. They are letting Scorpius come back to school Monday. He's like a mirror image of Lucius."

Severus had stood and gone to stand by the fire. His fists were clenched at his side. "I wish in a way I was still invisible. I could follow the bastard around and make sure he wasn't plotting anything. I've been so worried about Hermione that I haven't had time to hunt Draco down and feel him out about the situation. I can't seem to make myself leave Hermione right now. I've gotten so used to being with her that even being in our rooms while she is in the classroom is driving me to distraction."

"Severus," Poppy said, coming to stand near him and taking one of his hands in hers, "you need to give Hermione time and space. I will talk to her. We will have to make her take some steps toward healing. Ask Albus Potter to keep an eye on her in class. There are a few others I know that we can trust to keep a look out on her. You need to make a life for yourself. Let her see that you can work also. You might ask her if she wants you to take separate quarters for now."

"No, I can't leave her," he nearly shouted, agonized at the possibility.

"You may have to," she said sternly.

"I love her; I need to be there for her. Do I force her to accept my touch? I'm afraid to touch her for fear she will send me away, and I'm afraid not to touch her for fear she will think I don't want her. She won't talk to me. I'm scared. Really terrified I'm losing her... just when I thought things were going to be wonderful." Hot tears stung his eyes, and he turned away from Poppy, ashamed of his emotion.

She gathered him in her arms, and he found himself crying on her shoulder.

"I have tried to stay away from love. It always hurts, Poppy. When I fell in love with Hermione, I thought that I could finally be happy. What happens if she leaves me? I can't live life like I had been. It tears my soul apart. It's a horrible pain."

"Listen to me, Severus. For now, do not even consider this possibility. Hermione loves you. This isn't about you. It's about the fears she has from her attack. Sometimes it's not even rape that causes the pain. Just the fear of being out of control and the physical danger can be as traumatizing, for her, as the near rape itself. You have to let go of your own anger about this and just be there to support her. If she cries, hold her. She may want to pull away mentally, but physically she needs to know you will love her no matter what she says or does. Encourage her to talk. Never tell her that her feelings aren't valid. There is no right or wrong here. She's feeling out of control, and I bet she knows it. But she's spinning out of control and doesn't know how to pull herself out of it. Maybe I can get her to use a potion that will even her feelings and help her regain control."

"Please, Poppy, try. I can't stand to see her like this. She was such a beautiful, vital woman before this." He pulled away, passing a sleeve of his robe over his face.

"You need something of your own, Severus. Why don't you help Filch, like Minerva suggested. In that position, you could keep a closer eye on Scorpius. Some substitution would be good as well. Hermione may be freaking out over leaving you to just sit. Maybe if you start to work, it will help both of you."

"What if we guess wrong? What if she thinks I'm leaving her behind and going on about my life?" Severus asked in near panic.

"Severus, I know you don't like to talk about your feelings. I know she's not talking to you. But she has to hear you if you tell her point blank. It has to sink into her brain. Don't let a day go by without telling her you love her and that you are here for her. And stick with it; don't let your hurt feelings draw you away," she encouraged him. "Cry if you need to cry with her. Let her see that her pain hurts you; you don't always have to be strong. Maybe the love she has for you will help pull her out of this. Most of all, give her time. Time doesn't always heal all wounds, but it helps distance them."

Severus thanked her and walked up to Minerva's apartment and spoke to her about the work. She seemed happy that he was going to help Filch out and be available for some special lessons and substitutions. "Severus, I always meant to have you take my place. Filius really does not want to do the job. He was going to take it as senior teacher here. But he's has intimidated to me that you could take the job now that you're here. What do you think?"

"Ask me in a few months. Things will hopefully be better for Hermione and me, and we will have a better idea if she can stay here with Scorpius back." He thanked her for her time and set off back to his room.

The room was quiet and dark when he got back, and he found Hermione sitting on the front end of the couch with her knees drawn up and staring into the flames. Her fist was in her mouth, trying to stifle sobs. He slipped in behind her and put his arms around her, and she did not draw away.

"Where were you? Why did you leave?" she asked. "I felt so lost."

He told her where he had been. He tried to keep any emotion from his voice.

"I'm sorry. I feel like I'm going to fly apart, Severus. I'm not sure I can handle this job."

"Let me help you, Hermione. Let me work with you like before. You know I want to be here for you." He got to his feet and drew her to hers, and fear flashed in her eyes. He saw her glance at the bed.

"Come let's go see Poppy. She can help. Please, Hermione. I hate to see you in this pain."

She nodded, holding onto his hand tightly. They got cloaks and set about walking the same path Severus had gone on earlier. He felt a tiny bit of encouragement that she was holding tightly to him.

Poppy came to her door this time and smiled warmly at them. She invited them in, made some tea, and checked Hermione over.

"Your blood pressure is up a bit, and your heart rate is a little high. That's to be expected since you're so tense right now. Hermione, I'm going to suggest a potion. It's very mild. Try it for a few days. It will help calm your nerves. We can easily make it stronger if you need it to be." She handed her a bottle and a dropper. "Just two drops in your morning tea. It should help. Please let me know if I can do anything else. I'm here to listen at any time, and I know Minerva would be, too. We've lived a lot of years and have experience dealing with people."

Hermione nodded. "I know. I should have come right away. I'm just so out of control. I want something, and I don't know what it is."

"It's your peace of mind, dear. I'm afraid that can't be given: You have to learn to let others help. With us all working together, we might be able to restore it. Severus, can you go to my storeroom and get the lavender soap. It might be something else that will help."

Severus nodded and went to get the soap. Knowing it was a ploy to get him out of the way, he took his time looking over Poppy's shelves, making a few notes on what she was low on.

Poppy took Hermione's hands and drew her into a motherly hug, and Hermione allowed herself to cry again. "All I do is cry," she sobbed. "I don't want Severus to think it's his fault, so I try to hold it in."

The old witch rolled her eyes, knowing Hermione couldn't see them. "Hermione, you are both so afraid to tell each other what you're feeling. You're both scared out of your minds about offending the other. Severus loves you, and he admits it. You can't imagine how huge a step that is for him. He's scared senseless that you will push him away."

"He may not want me now. I'm damaged goods. Maybe someone else would be better."

Poppy gasped. She pushed Hermione back a bit so she could look into her eyes. "Listen to me, he *loves* you. Severus has only loved one other person in his life, and you knew that. Now he loves you. He will never take that chance again if you hurt him. He's very willing to let you go through what you need to however long it takes, Hermione. Please do not push him away, please."

Hermione nodded. "Do you really think that's what he wants?"

"I know that's what he wants. He would rather be back in that bubble oblivious to life than lose you."

"I am disappointing him daily. I can't let him touch me, intimately. I just keep feeling Lucius' hands hurting me and touching me in places he had no right to touch."

"Give it some time. Let Severus love you. He can be a most patient man."

Hermione suddenly giggled; it almost felt hysterical. She clamped her hand over her mouth. "I never thought of him as patient."

"No one would, seeing his gruff exterior. But he was an excellent spy, and patience is one of a spy's main tools. He worked in the background, waiting sometimes years for things to be set in motion. He can be very patient, Hermione."

The door opened, and Hermione stepped away from Poppy and turned to Severus with a wan smile. "You ready to go?"

"Yes. Poppy, I noticed you're low on a few things. Perhaps I can do those potions for you this next week."

Poppy nodded. "Thank you, Severus. Now you two go get some sleep. Sleep as long as you can tomorrow. You're still healing and need the rest. Take an afternoon walk, and get some sun if possible."

Severus hugged the medi-witch and said, "Thank you."

Hermione echoed him.

Severus held out his hand, and Hermione laced her fingers through his. They slowly made their way back to their rooms.

"Thank you, Severus." she said in almost a whisper.

He raised their fingers so he could press a kiss against her knuckles. "I'm here, Hermione. I'm not going anywhere. I cannot imagine my life without you."

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Don't be sorry; just let us help you get better. I do not want anything from you that you cannot give. Please don't fear me for that reason."

They entered the classroom and went through to their rooms.

"I will try not to," she replied.

She took her cloak off and went to the bathroom. But this time, he did not hear the door lock behind her. She came out a little later dressed for bed. The gown was kind of a flannel thing, but it was cut nicely. He saw that she was nervous. He'd changed while she was in the bathroom and now wore a nightshirt that went to mid-shin.

"Please, just let me hold you. That's all I want or need right now." He beckoned to her by patting the bed.

She took a deep breath and climbed past him and slipped under the covers. He crawled in behind her and reached out for her. "Can I pull you close?" he asked before touching her.

She nodded and felt his arms go around her. She closed her eyes and tried hard not to tremble against him.

He laid very still, his hand caressing her hair ever so gently. Finally he realized she was sleeping, and he let himself sleep too.

Shrill screams woke him in the middle of the night, and Hermione was thrashing about the bed. He was trying to catch her hands in the dark as she hit at him. "No, no, don't touch me. Please, Lucius, don't do this, please!"

"Hermione, wake up." Severus shook her a bit, turning her toward him, and her eyes popped open. She pulled away and bounded off the other side of the bed. He heard her grab for her wand.

Severus grabbed his wand, "*Expelliarmus, Lumos*," he shouted. He heard her wand fly away. "Hermione, it's Severus. Lucius isn't here."

"Oh, God," she cried, realizing she'd almost hexed him. "I can't do this, Severus. You have to go. I might have killed you," she cried.

"I can't go. I won't go," he stated adamantly.

"Go, damn it. Get out of here. I can't stand seeing your face, please go." She collapsed on the bed.

Stung by her words and not wanting her to hurt herself, he got his cloak and left the room.

Don't kill me for this one cliffhanger. I promise it gets resolved in the next chapter...so breathe. LOL

Lisa, thank you so much for the awesome beta job you are doing. I appreciate your help so very much.

Becky, thank you for pre-reading each chapter and for your opinions.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

Finally we have arrived at the first adult chapter. Minors, please do not read this story.

Please leave reviews. They are a breath of fresh air to a writer. I appreciate the feed back so much.

He sent his Patronus off to Poppy, sagged against the wall by the door, and slid to the floor. He wouldn't leave her. He didn't care what she said.

Suddenly, the door flew open, and she was there screaming, "Severus, please don't leave me! Oh God, I can't lose him," she cried, not seeing him there on the floor.

She took a step and tripped over one of his legs. He reached out and caught her, drawing her into his lap.

"I'm here. I'm here. I will never leave you."

She clutched at him, and her mouth found his. Her kiss was frantic, wet with tears, and hungry for him. He kissed her back with equal desire.

That's how Poppy found them, snogging on the floor. She watched in relief for a moment and then discretely cleared her throat.

Hermione gasped, "Oh, Poppy." She pulled away and got to her feet.

"I'm sorry," Poppy said as a slight blush rose on her face. "I got Severus' Patronus and thought there was an emergency."

Hermione grinned at him and reached down to help draw him to his feet. "There was, but it's fixed."

Poppy said, "Good, I'm going back to bed." She winked at Severus, tuned, and left.

Hermione pressed her warm, embarrassed face against his chest. "I'm so glad you didn't leave. Please come back to bed with me."

He took her face in his hands and said, "I told you I wouldn't leave. Get this through your head, Hermione. I love you. I am not going anywhere."

She wrapped her arm around his waist, and side-by-side they went back into the room. Severus shut and warded the door. Next they looked for and found Hermione's wand. They made tea, and Hermione drank a cup, using the drops that Poppy had given her.

Finally, they climbed back into the bed. Hermione faced Severus, and they just looked into each other eyes for a bit. Hermione leaned forward finally and kissed him. It was a warm, gentle kiss. She let her forehead rest against his after a time.

After a bit, Severus tentatively reached out to kiss her eyelids and then her nose. They spent time just exploring each other's faces. Hermione didn't put her hands on him, so he refrained from touching her.

She finally sighed. "That was nice."

He grinned at her. "Yes, it was very nice." He rolled over on his back. "Come rest your cheek against my shoulder. We can talk or just lay here together until we fall asleep."

Hermione smiled and snuggled into him. "I do love you, Severus. Please be patient with me," she begged.

"You have as long as you need." He was encouraged by the events of the evening.

She snuggled against his chest, and after a time she went to sleep. Severus laid there for a while just enjoying her closeness. He had been so scared earlier. Was this a step forward? Would there be more steps backward? He had to prepare himself for that possibility.

Hermione turned, sliding a hand over his stomach and hugging him to her.

He fought hard for a minute, trying not to become aroused by her unconscious touch. He willed himself to go to sleep.

They slept till nearly 1 p.m. Severus woke first and took a quick shower. He came from the bathroom drying his hair with a towel and found Hermione sitting up against the headboard. She smiled at him and held out her hand, so he climbed back in and pulled her close.

"Poppy told us to take a walk. I'd rather just sit here with you all day. Maybe we can read a book. I have some Muggle novels," she said, her fingers sliding down one of his arms.

"We'll walk tomorrow," he said. "Do you want to take a shower? I can make some food for us to eat while we read."

Hermione nodded. She did need to use the loo, and a shower sounded nice.

When she came from the bathroom, Severus had set a tray on the bed with eggs, sausages, and biscuits; he also had a small pot of tea.

Hermione climbed back into the bed and attacked the food. Severus did, too. It did him good to see her eat. She'd barely been picking at her food lately. He finally got off the bed and got her brush. "May I?" he asked, holding it up.

Hermione nodded, and Severus set about brushing her beautiful, long, curly hair dry. Hermione sat with her head back a bit and her eyes closed.

"That feels wonderful. I used to sit, and my mom would brush my hair. I miss her and Dad. It's been a few years since they died. My mom died and then my dad. I just don't think he had the desire to live after she was gone."

"I'm sorry," he said. "My dad died in a mining accident when I was 14. He was a right bastard, and I didn't miss him. My mom got sick a few years later; she died two months before I sat my NEWTs."

Hermione turned to him. "I'm sorry, Severus." After vanishing the dishes to the kitchen, she took the brush from his hand. "Your turn."

Severus smirked. "Are you sure? It can be a tangled mess."

"I'm sure," she said.

He sat cross-legged on the bed, and she knelt behind him and began to brush his hair. Severus let his head fall back, and he closed his eyes. First Poppy and now Hermione. It was a luxury he'd not had for decades. He'd always just let it hang with minimal effort. "That feels wonderful, Hermione."

She dropped the brush and crawled around to face him. He came up on his knees as she pressed her palm against his face and leaned in to kiss him.

"Severus, would you make love to me? Slowly, gently, I need to be with you. I need to forget his hands on my body. Please!" she begged.

He slipped his arms around her and drew her close. "I want to be with you more than you can imagine. Don't do this for me; make sure this is what you really want."

"It's what I want." She sounded certain.

"I would love to be with you, Hermione, but if at any time you feel afraid or want to stop, just tell me. Promise me you will tell me. It would destroy me to add more pain, my love."

"I will, Severus." She placed a hand on his robe and leaned in to kiss him.

He ran his tongue along her lips, and she opened them and let him explore her mouth. She tasted of mint. He then slowly moved across her cheek and kissed a trail down her neck. He felt her hand rubbing his chest and over his shoulder.

Her touch became firmer and carefully they undressed. Severus slowly caressed her breast. He knew she had been badly bruised, so he was very gentle. She closed her eyes as his fingers gently caressed her breast with a feather light touch. Soon she was pressing herself into his hand, and he let his fingers, then his palm cup her breast. He pulled her down, and they faced each other as their hands caressed shoulders, necks, arms, chests, and stomachs. Their lips followed their hands. Hermione arched her back, thrusting her breast deeper into his mouth. He sucked the nipple into a hard nub and ran his tongue over the tip of her breast, eliciting a groan and sigh from her. He used one foot to caress her leg gently, and his hand ran down her hip and leg.

"Are you okay?" he would ask every now and then. She would just smile, encouraging him by touching his body and kissing him.

He'd had little sexual experience, but he knew it would be best not to hover over her. So they remained facing each other on their sides. Severus slipped a hand down her stomach and caressed her soft mound. He felt her hand on his thigh, and he knew she had felt his hardness lying against her thigh and stomach. He groaned when her fingers slid over his large shaft.

"Severus," she breathed, "you're magnificent."

He felt himself expand even more. He gently slipped a finger into her, and she arched against his finger. She was wet and ready. He rubbed the little nub, and she pulled back and forth, rubbing against his finger. Her breathing was getting faster, and she took a hold of him and guided him toward her. She shifted so one leg was over the top of his hip, spreading herself open for him. With slow, careful movements, he pressed against her opening and slid inside.

They both sighed and stared into each other's eyes. He pushed harder and broke through the barrier she had been saving for him. Her eyes teared up, but she smiled and kissed him deeply.

Gently, he began to move, pulling half-way out and then thrusting forward. Her fingers clutched at his buttocks and pulled him closer with each thrust. She finally cried out, "Harder, Severus."

He was only too happy to oblige her; he moved faster, and he felt her pressing into his thrusts. He used his fingers to give her pleasure, bringing her to fulfillment as he felt himself getting close to going over the edge. They cried out each other's names as they climaxed and then collapsed against each other, crying and laughing and holding on to each other.

They lay with their arms and legs entwined as they kissed for a while, and then they slipped into a light sleep, nuzzling each other with kisses every now and then.

They had a dinner later that evening by candlelight. Then they curled up in bed and read a book. Spooned against each other, they fell into the deepest, best sleep they'd had in ages.

They spent much of the rest of the weekend alone. They went for a walk on Sunday and stopped in for tea with Hagrid. They were surprised and pleased to see Harry there with Ginny. Hermione cried as Ginny hugged her, and then she hugged Harry. They sat and talked about their childhood adventures and how Hagrid had helped them. Severus knew as he watched their faces that they avoided the part he'd played. They also avoided the elephant in the room, Ron. He had not come to talk to her after her rescue, and he'd chosen to go back to his life without acknowledging her relationship with Severus.

Severus realized that she was hurting from Ron's rejection as much as from Lucius' attack. He was surprised he hadn't realized it before. He knew it was not because she had any latent sexual feelings for Ron. He had been one of her best friends, and she wanted him to support and approve of her. She wanted him to be happy for her, like Harry was. Severus realized that Ron was still a child. He'd never married, never committed himself to anything but Quidditch. He found it hard not to sneer. He made sure she didn't realize how angry he was with the git. He smiled, amused that he could call the idiot the same thing Ron had called him when he was younger.

Somehow he would see that Ron knew how he felt and how hurt Hermione was. He realized, too, that he would have to follow through quickly and find Draco and talk to him. That evening after dinner they went back to their rooms, and Hermione was pulling away again. He knew it was because Scorpius would be back here at school, and she would have to teach him.

"Hermione," he said as he climbed into bed next to her, "please let me be in the classroom tomorrow during the period Scorpius is in there. It can become part of the duties I have. You know I am enjoying the job much more than I did when I was the teacher."

"Thank you, Severus. I honestly don't understand how they can ask me to continue to teach him after what he did to you. It was intended for me."

"Hermione, I will teach that class, only that class. I do not want your job, but I can and will handle him if you wish it."

She snuggled against him, letting some of the tension leach out of her body. "My first reaction is to refuse your help and to do it myself, but I do not think I can face him alone. I will teach the class, Severus. As long as you are there with me, I will be okay. I will watch your back, and you can watch mine. Albus will be here as well. Severus, please just yell if something is going to happen. I will not ask why." She laughed a false laugh as she gave him a tender kiss.

Severus held her close, and they slept. Hermione woke screaming again that night. Her body was drenched in sweat, and she held Severus tightly, trembling for an hour before he got some dreamless sleep and had her take a dose. He lay for hours listening to her breathe and trying to figure out how best to help her deal with the next day and beyond.

Hermione barely talked the next morning. She was tense and anxious. Severus planned to give Minerva a piece of his mind when he caught her alone.

While she was preparing her class for her first-years, Severus slipped away and headed down to the Slytherin dorms. He disillusioned himself and stepped back into an alcove. He waited nearly 15 minutes before Scorpius came out of the common room. He was with a group of boys, but they distanced themselves, and Severus realized he was being shunned. That gave him some hope that peer pressure would help change the boy.

Severus reached out and grabbed him by the collar and dragged him into the disillusionment spell. He also muffled the area so no one would hear or see them. He loomed over the boy and then got into Scorpius' face, his nose was barely an inch from the boy's. "Scorpius, as you can see, I'm back to normal, and I will be watching you."

Scorpius' pale face was now white as a sheet. He did not try to say anything but stared into Severus' face with huge eyes.

"You put a toe out of line, and I will come down on you so hard that you will not know what hit you. You are to march into that classroom this afternoon and apologize to Madam Granger."

"I'm sorry, sir," the boy stammered. "I did not mean to hurt you."

Severus shook him until his teeth rattled. "Do you think I care a whit about myself? Your intentions and words were plain in the classroom. You will not under any circumstances hurt her again." He let the boy go and smoothed his shirt and robes down. "Scorpius, I respect your father, and your grandfather was my friend. I regret what happened all those years ago. Voldemort was a horrible creature; if he'd been allowed to live, we would all be suffering greatly. He thought I was his loyal servant, and he routinely tortured me. Serving him was not some glamorous job. You have freedoms you would never have under his rule. Do not go down the same path as your grandfather. His hate destroyed his life. You can be a much better man."

Scorpius glared at him but only nodded. "May I go now?" His voice was hard, and it dripped with venom.

"Go," Severus said.

The boy slipped out of the spell and ran.

Severus sighed, watching after him. Was there no hope for the boy? The hate in him was deep. He headed back to the classroom. At least he had gotten his point across.

Hermione looked up at him when he slipped into the room, "Where have you been?" she asked, suspiciously.

"I wanted to spy on Scorpius," he admitted.

She came closer and looked into his eyes. "...and?"

"He's being shunned by his classmates," Severus said as he moved into the room and let his eyes slide over the room and its readiness.

She raised an eyebrow at him.

"Sorry, force of habit," he said as he went toward the desk.

"Any suggestions on how to proceed with him?" she asked, sitting at her desk and checking over some papers to appear busy.

Severus came and placed his hands on her shoulders. "There's a lot of anger in him. Yet he's going to become very lonely here. Maybe kindness will win him over. Encourage him when he does something right. Most children want to be praised."

Hermione nodded as she slipped a hand over one of his. "What are you going to do this morning?"

"I'm going to see Minerva and find out exactly what my duties are. I will have to go talk to Filch, too. I wonder how he will take having help. He's a proud man."

He felt the tension in her shoulders. "Hermione, he's a boy, and he knows we will be watching him. It will be obvious when I'm in the room, too. Try to relax. You love this

job. Now come on, we need to go to breakfast and let them see that we are okay." He kissed the top of her head, and she bent her head back to receive a deeper, upside down kiss. Severus pulled her to her feet, and they headed for the Great Hall.

The Hall was filled with students and staff when they arrived. When they were noticed, a titter went through the hall, and suddenly every mouth was silent and every eye was on them.

Minerva smiled widely at them, and Poppy hugged them.

Severus smiled at the students, and Hermione waved as they took their seats at the head table.

The students broke out into thunderous clapping.

Severus looked and found Scorpius, who was sitting off by himself at the end of the long Slytherin table. He was glaring their way. He ducked and averted his eyes when he caught Severus looking at him. But the hate was there.

Minerva stood, and they became silent. "Students, I'm sure that Madam Granger and Professor Snape appreciate your welcome. I ask that you be very attentive in your classroom with Madam Granger. Professor Snape is going to be helping her out in a class or two and also working with Mr. Filch in security until a permanent position opens up."

"I hope that you will welcome Professor Snape to the staff and avail yourself of his vast knowledge. I believe he will also serve as a substitute and guest speaker at times in your classrooms. Now have a wonderful breakfast, and let's get this week's classes started."

She received a round of applause. Then the food appeared, and everyone tucked in with relish.

Hermione picked at her food. Severus leaned in close and said, "Hermione, I can take your classes if you're not ready."

She gave him a determined look, took a deep breath, and said, "I'm ready, but thank you, Severus."

Lisa, thank you for the amazing beta work you have been doing for me. I could not do this without you. I know you often fix many sentence problems. I am so happy to have your help.

Becky, thank you for reading through the chapters and for your suggestions.

Chapter 19

Chapter 19 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

This story is an adult story. Minors, please do not read this story.

In this chapter Hermione must deal with going back to work and having Scorpius in her classroom. Severus begins his duties as a security guard.

Please leave reviews. They are a fic writer's only thanks.

Severus walked her back to the classroom and gave her a kiss on the cheek since there were already students waiting by the door. He heard a few sighs from the young girls.

Hermione grinned at his alarm. "Have a good morning, Severus. I'll see you at lunch."

She watched him go down the hall and then turned to her students.

"Come in and take your seats. We'll get started shortly."

She waved her wand and the door opened and the students followed her in. She relaxed as she looked at the young faces of the 11-year-olds. This class was fun, and she felt no threat here.

She started explaining her lesson, and her first day back started.

Severus strolled down the hallways to get a feel for the school again. He'd had very little freedom when he'd been bound to Hermione and his wand. He enjoyed the freedom, but he missed being close enough to catch a whiff of her cologne or her shampoo.

He wanted to talk to Minerva, but he did not want to see Albus Dumbledore's portrait just yet; so he headed to Filch's office.

The old man was sitting at his desk cuddling the ancient Mrs. Norris. The cat had nearly no hair on her head. She stopped purring and turned her red eyes on Snape.

"Snape," the old man said nastily, "are you surprised to find yourself in the land of the living?"

Severus took the chair in front of the desk even though it hadn't been offered. He relaxed against the back and crossed his legs. Filch had always been on the Ministry's side of the politics around here. Why Dumbledore hadn't fired the man, he never knew.

"Yes, I am a bit surprised," he said slowly.

"I am well able to do my own job. I don't need help," the old man told him bluntly.

Severus sat up a bit straighter. "I know that, Argus." He let his voice sound bitter. "Minerva's, getting on in years and feels the strain. I guess she figures you might be having the same troubles. Anyway, this is just a place to shove me until I get a better offer here...no disrespect to your office; you do an amazing job." *Best to butter up the old guy*, Severus thought. "Hermione's here, and for now I'm here, too, with her."

"Madam Granger is a welcome addition to this school," Argus admitted. "She's the best lookin' woman to come along in a while, no disrespect intended," he added.

"None taken," Severus said. "Now, my main concern is keeping tabs on Scorpius Malfoy. I will not allow Hermione to live in fear. Nor do I want to be watching my back 24/7. It astounds me that he was allowed to return."

"Lucius may be in Azkaban, but Draco works at the Ministry. He has made friends there."

"Is that the reason? I was not aware of his employment," Severus said.

"People respect him." Argus got up and placed Mrs. Norris on the floor. She waved her nearly bare tail, meowed loudly, and then stalked over to her basket in the corner and crawled in.

Severus fought to not let his nose wrinkle at the smell. "I can make a potion to restore her hair and give her a few more years of better health," Severus offered.

Argus' face lit up. "I would be beholden to you, Severus." He went and got a folder stuffed with papers and offered it to Severus. "This is the information I have on the Malfoys since you vanished. You're welcome to take it and read it at your leisure. I got it all up here," he said, pointing to his brain.

Severus laughed. "I just bet you do, Argus. No one is sharper than you when it comes to security here. Just tell me what you want me to do. I will be with Hermione in her classroom during 5th hour each day. Scorpius is in that class, and I will not leave her alone, so to speak, with him."

Argus gave Severus a schedule he'd planned out, and they talked for a few more minutes. Then Severus got to his feet. "I will get that potion for Mrs. Norris to you by tomorrow," he promised. He shook the old man's hand and left.

Severus waited for the door to shut before he groaned to himself. *That cat stinks to high heaven. He must be giving her something; she's little more than a rotting husk. Being nice to everyone is wearing my nerves down, but I will not cause Hermione anymore stress*, he vowed as he headed for hall duty. Argus had given him the worst of duties, but he would not complain. Work was not something he had much time to think about right now. He was so focused on Hermione and helping her deal with mentally healing that the rest would be on autopilot. He would be well versed in the school security wards and hall duty by the end of the day, though he suspected little had changed. Minerva would continue to follow Albus' edicts. All the teachers had schedules to follow.

He allowed himself, for a moment, to think of Hermione's silky skin and the feel of her breast in his mouth. It was pure heaven. He shook the thoughts away; he did not want to get physically excited here the hallways of Hogwarts. Who knew when she would be ready to make love again? Being together had been a way to distance herself from the attack and give her something else to remember besides hands that hurt. He could have made love to her all weekend, but she only needed to cuddle, and so that's what they had done.

He cleared his mind of personal thoughts and refamiliarized himself with the castle. There were tiny changes here and there. Some of the castle had been rebuilt after the war. He could see the changes in the color of the walls. There were plaques on the walls giving homage to students and staff members who had given their lives. He hadn't had a chance to grieve for any of them. He'd been spared the visions of the final battle, having 'checked out' at the beginning. The deaths recorded there were little more than names...names he knew, to be sure, but names that no longer meant anything. He should feel more than he did for the boys and girls who had sat in his classes year after year. Had the stasis spell so frozen his heart so that he didn't care? Or did his heart realize that the deaths had happened years ago and the bodies were now nothing but dust?

He only felt really alive when he had his hand on Hermione, when he was looking at her, sharing stories, or simply holding her. Making love to her was like warm sunshine on the first spring day: a beautiful, alive feeling. He felt at a loss as to what to do now. He was no longer bound to her, but he wanted only to be with her. He would have to make choices. But what did he have to offer her? He was a fill-in handy man and a lowly security guard. This was a pity job. It rankled him, but he knew it was necessary right now. He had a lot to catch up on. He had to hone his magic and get in touch with himself again.

There was so much to think about that he nearly missed seeing Malfoy ahead of him in the hall going to his next class. As he watched he saw Albus and James shadowing Scorpius. He smiled. It was good to know Albus and perhaps James would also be around, now and then, to watch. As fourth- and fifth-year students and sons of Harry Potter, he would imagine both boys had a number of skills the other students hadn't been taught. He would have to ask Hermione for confirmation.

He veered off into another corridor and left the boys to their vigil.

When they met in the Great Hall for lunch, Severus was happy to see Hermione looked more relaxed. She dragged him to her classroom 15 minutes before the class was to start and locked and warded her door. She had him sit at her desk and, much to his amusement, crawled into his lap and bathed his face with kisses. Her bottom was pressing against him and making him want her.

"Hermione, if you persist, you're going to make me very uncomfortable," he told her with his silky voice.

She giggled. "A preview of tonight," she whispered against his lips.

Severus knew she was trying hard to forget that Scorpius would be sitting in her room in a few minutes. So he kissed her deeply, using his tongue to explore her teeth. When he touched her breast, she sighed and pulled back.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I need to have something to focus on if it gets too hard."

He pulled her close, and she buried her face on his hair. "I will be right here with you. Albus will be here. You will not come to harm."

She tried to relax against him; but as the minutes ticked by, it was getting harder. "Intellectually, I know that. But I'm afraid...and not only for me, but for you, Severus."

"I will take the class, Hermione. All you have to do is say the word."

She hopped off of his lap and straightened her robes. "I will not run from this boy. I have faced others more lethal than he is." Her face was full of determination.

He stood and kissed her forehead. "That's my girl. Go open the door and let the hooligans in."

Hermione took a deep breath and went to un-ward the door. Her class filed in, and Malfoy was the last to enter. He was looking at his feet, and he stopped at the door and looked up as Hermione waited patiently. She knew everyone was stealing looks at them. Severus stood at the head of the class.

"Madam Granger," the boy finally choked out, "I am sorry."

Hermione felt her legs trembling under her robe, and she sucked her breath in silently. "Thank you, Mr. Malfoy. Please take your seat."

The boy didn't smile, and she saw the flash of hatred still in his eyes as he went past her and sat at the back desk by himself.

She walked a bit unsteadily up to the front of the classroom, and Severus passed her to take a position in the back near Scorpius. His fingers slid over hers, and she felt encouraged.

"Now take your books out and turn to page 75. Today we will be brewing Befuddlement Drought."

With that, the lesson started. Hermione pushed her fears into the back of her mind and taught her class.

When the last student, which was Albus, filed out of the room, he gave her a thumbs up, and she smiled back at him.

She locked and warded the door, and Severus came and held her close. He could feel her body trembling a bit.

"You did wonderfully, my dear. No one would have guessed you were nervous," he encouraged her.

She laughed. "I'd like a stiff drink."

Severus, who had used alcohol much of his life to dull the pain of his existence, hoped to keep her from going down that avenue. "I can think of a few more pleasant distractions that will relax you." He waggled his fingers at her. "I have these magic fingers that can stimulate the body and make you forget about the world around you. How about a massage later on? I promise it can be one you will never forget."

She laughed at his gestures. "That sounds wonderful, Severus. I'll look forward to it. Now, I best get that door open for 6th hour, and you'd best get on to your other duties."

He pressed a kiss to her neck and gave her a scowl. "Other duties..." He headed for the door. "Oh, I promised Argus a restore potion for his cat. That thing has got to be 50 years old."

She laughed. "Forty-six to be exact. But she's like his partner, and I really think he lives because she keeps living."

"Well he needs a Dorian Grey Portrait then; neither of them are getting any prettier," he joked as he left the room. He was happy to hear Hermione's laughter behind him as the students sidled past him and entered the room.

Severus was heading down a north wing hall when he caught sight of Minerva. He ran to catch up with her.

"Minerva," he said angrily, "what possessed you to put Scorpius back in Hermione's room? Do you know what it's doing to her?"

Minerva glared at him. "It wasn't my idea. The minister himself told me I had to do it."

"I don't like the idea of that. Are we still on a different side from the Ministry?" he asked. He really hadn't had the time or inclination to figure out what was going on in the world since he'd gotten back.

"There has been a shift in their politics that doesn't always match with the Order." She made her way slowly down the corridor, and Severus tried to match steps with her. "Order members are keeping a very sharp eye on the minister."

"Who is it? Is it someone I know?" he asked, slipping his hand against her elbow to give her some support.

She turned a bit and looked him in the face with a look of distaste. "Percy Weasley."

"Percy. He's a prat. How did he get the job?" he asked in disgust.

"He worked his way up the ladder. He seemed to have turned back to his family's side at the end of the war. Yet sometimes I think he has his own agenda, and heaven knows what that is," she said as they reached the gargoyle that led to her office. "Do you want to come up?"

"No," Severus said adamantly. "I have no desire to look the old Bastard in the eye just yet. The memory of all the pain is still too fresh."

Minerva nodded. "I don't blame you. I gave him a piece of my mind when I figured it out. Hermione hasn't mentioned she knows," she observed, stepping up onto the first step with Severus' help.

"She knows, but we haven't had the time to discuss it yet." He felt bad that they hadn't discussed it. He was a bit surprised that she had figured it out and really hadn't said much. "She's had other concerns. Have a good afternoon, Minerva. I'd best get back to my rounds." He gave her a slight bow and grabbed the lapel of his cloak; swirling around, he headed at a fast clip down the hall with his robes billowing behind him.

Minerva watched him with a smile. "Chocolate cheesecake," she said, and the stairs began to revolve.

At the end of class that day, Hermione and Severus walked hand in hand to the dining hall. After dinner, they went to the classroom, and Severus carefully mixed the potion for Mrs. Norris. Hermione kidded him about buttering up Filch; but secretly, she was very proud of him.

Finally the day was done, and they were behind closed doors. They took a hot bath together, and then Severus dried them with his wand. He carried Hermione to the bed and asked her to lay face down. He got some lavender oil and kneeled on the big bed beside her and gently started to rub her shoulders and back. He ran his hands down her arms and he even oiled her fingers. He rubbed her shoulders until the knots were worked out. She lay under his hands groaning with pleasure as he worked on her tense muscles. He went over her back carefully, feeling each muscle and making sure it was soft and relaxed. Then he moved to her lower back and then her legs...

"Hey, you skipped a part there," she complained in sexy voice filled with desire.

He grinned and chuckled. "I wasn't sure you wanted to go there tonight." He slid his hands over her buttocks in warm, soothing circles.

"You promised," she said with a faint pout.

"I did," he said, leaning in to kiss the small of her back.

He kneaded her buttocks a bit and then ran his hands back up over her shoulders and down the length of her body all the way to her feet. He stood at the end of the bed and oiled her feet, and then as he moved up her body, he crawled into the bed and straddled her feet. Then he worked his way up her body with his mouth, kissing her as he went.

She giggled a bit as he tickled her with his hair, as he bent over her, and she groaned with pleasure as he continued kissing her. Finally, he urged her to flip over. She held out her hands and begged some oil. He was straddling her hips now, and she ran her hands over his chest and around to his back. He bent forward and then back with each stroke of his hands.

His hands reverently slid over her breasts, and he was fascinated watching the tips firm and become hard under his fingers. He bent and captured her mouth, sliding down a bit so his bottom nearly touched her knees. She ran her hands over his face and buried them in his hair, urging him down to her breasts. He sucked one into his mouth, slowly teasing it until she arched against him. Then he moved to the other one as his hands roamed lower, slipping into her warm depths. They shifted, and she spread herself to allow him to slide between her legs. He kissed his way down over the flat of her stomach, and placing her knees over his shoulders, he plunged into her warm, wet center. His tongue drove her into a frenzy, and she bucked against his face, her fingers still buried in his hair, urging him deeper. He took her nub and sucked hard, and she screamed out her pleasure as her body jerked against him. He released her legs and pulled her into his arms

"Don't you want more, Severus?" she asked.

She could feel him hard against her belly.

"Only if you want more, my love. I am content."

She reached down with her oiled hand, and soon he found release against her palm. They cleaned up with their wands and then slipped under the warm covers and let themselves sleep.

Lisa, thank you for getting this to me so quickly. You're a gem. I can't do this without you.

Becky, thanks for your feedback.

Chapter 20

Chapter 20 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

The week pretty much went the way Monday had. Hermione taught alone except for fifth hour, and Severus worked the back of the room and kept a watchful eye on

Scorpius.

The boy glared at them much of his time in the classroom, but he was rather gifted in Potions and couldn't help but do exceptional work.

On Friday, Hermione passed out the progress reports for the week. When she came to Scorpius, she came close to him. "Scorpius, your work has been exemplary this week. It wouldn't surprise me if you decide to be a Potions master one day. You might find yourself with my job in the future."

He seemed confused to be getting praised by the Mudblood whom he'd tried to kill. He nodded, searching her face for some hint of hatred, but only saw pride there. He ducked his head in acceptance, but he couldn't bring himself to thank her. "*What is she playing at?*" he thought as he left the classroom that afternoon. No one ever praised him, not even his mom and dad. They were too busy working and trying to keep the Malfoy estate in the condition needed to make it in upper class wizarding society.

He pondered her compliments and was further surprised when Albus wandered by and clapped him on the back and said, "Good going, Scorpius. My Aunt Hermione doesn't hand out idle praise."

Deep in thought, Scorpius headed toward his common room.

Hermione breathed a huge sigh of relief when the last student left the classroom. It had been a long week for two people who weren't quite yet recovered from all the events of the last few weeks. There was a school holiday on Monday, so they had a three-day weekend.

Severus had asked Minerva if they could have the weekend away from Hogwarts. With a bit of mystery, he had Hermione pack some things for a warm climate. Then he took her waist, pulling her close, and Apparated them away.

They landed in the tiny garden of a quaint beach house.

Hermione took a deep breath of salt air. It was warm, and there were birds flying over head. The air was fresh and tangy. Severus took her hand and opened the door into the little house. They entered the back end of a cozy den that had a fireplace. There were thick overstuffed chairs, a couch, and even a Muggle television.

"Severus, where are we?" Hermione asked with curiosity and obvious pleasure.

"This is Poppy's hidden get-away. She comes here when she has days off and summer vacations. I asked her if we could come for the weekend, and she thought it was a wonderful idea," he explained, taking their bags into another room.

Hermione followed him into a large bedroom with a huge four-poster bed curtained in blue topaz and gold. The spread matched. There were thick carpets on the floor and another fireplace. The door leading to the bathroom revealed a large, sunken tub surrounded by blue marble the same color as the bedroom beyond.

"It's wonderful." Hermione ran to kiss Severus and give him a big hug. "This is a marvelous idea: sun, sea, and thee. I couldn't ask for more."

He blushed with her praise, still not used to it.

"There is a small kitchen on the other side of the den, and I've had it stocked with fresh food," he told her.

"I wish I had brought my swim suit," she said wistfully, going to the window and looking out over the vast ocean.

Severus smirked at her. "Are you a Muggle or a magician?"

Hermione blushed. "I guess I could transfigure something." She pressed her hand against her warm cheek in embarrassment.

He laughed and picked her up and swung her around. "I guess you could, but I do have a gift for you." He dug into his bag and produced a small garment box.

Hermione opened it with a pleased squeal. There, lying in white tissue paper, was a bathing suit.

"Oh, Severus," she said as pulled it out of the box. Then her face showed her surprise and a bit of concern. "It's a bikini..."

"Don't you like it?" he asked, disappointed.

It was blue and gold like the bedroom. She suspected he'd transfigured them all to match. She figured maybe these were his favorite colors...something she'd never asked him.

"Yes, I kind of favor those colors. Poppy likes green and silver. I think it's because she supports me as a Slytherin. I changed them for us. That's not really important to me anymore." His voice was level, and Hermione could hear his disappointment.

"Severus, it's a beautiful bikini. I just have never had the courage to wear one before." She pressed her hand against her stomach. "I'm not crazy about my body."

He took her in his arms. "You have a beautiful, perfect body," he said as his hands caressed her.

She said, "But others will see me."

"Hermione, this is a very private, warded beach. No one will see you but me."

She grinned. "Well in that case, I am going to go put it on." She bounced off toward the bathroom.

He watched her go, relieved.

She called back over her shoulder. "You do have matching trunks, right? I'm looking forward to that."

He said, "Yes, I have a bathing costume. I haven't worn one since I was a boy. Do you really need me to match? I can wear some jeans and a T-shirt."

Hermione stuck her head out the door. "If you want to see me in this, then I suggest you get that 'bathing costume' on right now, Severus."

He groaned and went to unpack his suitcase.

Hermione undressed and slipped into the bikini. She looked at herself in the mirror sideways and forward. Geeze, Severus, she giggled to herself. *I might as well be naked.* The top barely covered her nipples, and the bottom was almost a g-string. She brandished her wand, expanding the tiny pieces of material until they covered her a bit more.

She came from the bathroom to find Severus standing in the bedroom with only spandex type trunks. "Whoo hoo," she whistled at him.

"Ha, ha," he said. "I think I underestimated my size."

She moved toward him slowly, seductively and saw him take her in with great appreciation.

"Hey, this suit wasn't quite this big was it?" His hands went around her waist and pulled her against him.

She laughed. "No, it was barely bigger than a postage stamp. Severus, what were you thinking?"

"I was thinking about pulling it off you, and that it wouldn't take a lot of time," he admitted with a dreamy grin.

"Well, this suit of yours leaves very little to the imagination," she said, running her hand over his thick shaft.

He jumped back. "Hey, unless you're going to follow through, don't. " He laughed good-naturedly. He actually reached up and ruffled her hair, and then he grabbed her hand. "Come on, it's time for some fun in the sun."

"That sounds like a Muggle slogan," she said, laughing with him. This was wonderful. They were so far away from the life that was Hogwarts. Being a witch or wizard left one in a sort of time warp. They lived without power and technical wonders. It made one feel like they were in the 18th century or something with candles and ink quills. True they could do many of the things Muggles used their machines for with their wands, but sometimes it was confusing jumping from one world to the other. But here with the sea and the sun and Severus out of his robes, she felt just human...human and on a vacation."

They had gone through the house and out onto a veranda around at the side. He pulled her on, running down the stairs and across the sand to the water's edge. Hermione screamed and danced as the cold water hit her feet.

Severus threw his head back and laughed. He'd laughed more since Hermione found him than in his entire life, and it felt wonderful being so free. He grabbed her and flung her around and held her close. "I love you. Marry me, Hermione, marry me."

Hermione stared at his happy face and his mouth. Had she just heard him... "SEVERUS!" she screamed, "Did you just ask me to marry you?"

He looked stunned. "Yes, I guess I did. You will, won't you?" he asked in earnest.

"YES!" she screamed, jumping into his arms and wrapping her legs around his waist.

They kissed each other and ended up on the sand making love. It was quick and passionate. Severus carried Hermione back to the cabin and sat her on the edge of the large bathtub. They rinsed off with the showerhead, and then Severus filled the tub with warm water and bubble bath. They slid into the tub with sighs of pleasure, and he held her close.

"Hermione, would you go into the little town nearby with me tomorrow? We can go to a justice of the peace. We are both born to Muggle parents, so we can get a Muggle license."

She smiled and turned to face him, sitting straddled across his lap. "Is this what you really want, Severus? I think you were even shocked the words came out of your mouth. We were both carried away out there."

He took her hands in his face and said, "More than you can ever imagine, Hermione. I want you to be my wife. I have never even fathomed the depth of love I have in my heart for you. Love always hurt me in the past. With you, the blowups are minor and will never endanger our true deep love."

"No, they won't," she said. "You're so different now, Severus, so loving, so giving, so damn sexy." She grinned. "But what happened to that nasty, gruff, horrible old Potions master? Will he suddenly come back one day?"

Severus looked confused. "Do you want him to?"

She kissed him softly and then backed off to look into his face. "I did like him," she admitted to him. "He had a great dry sense of humor and a really sexy frown."

"I will remember that, and I won't hold my tongue as much."

"Just be yourself, Severus. I love you. Seriously, I loved you for years...even when I thought you were dead."

His eyes widened with horror. "Do you think that was a part of the spell? Making you love me so that you would eventually come back to Hogwarts. Did it make you want to take my place? Be the Potions master to keep yourself close to what had been mine?"

"No, Severus, no. I loved Potions, and I loved you long before you died. I wanted you before the war. If the spell drew me back, then thank God for it. It did not make me love you. You made me love you. I will go with you tomorrow."

He sat forward, pressing himself against her body. She loved the feel of his bare chest against her breasts. They didn't talk anymore but slowly touched and caressed each other. With the buoyancy of the water, he lifted her easily by the waist and shifted her on to his thick shaft. They didn't care that their movements caused waves that drenched the bathroom. They thrust against each other, finding a rhythm that satisfied both their needs. Their fading climax brought them back to reality, and they held each other tightly.

They cleaned up the mess, dried each other off with thick, warm towels, and went to bed.

The next morning, they got up and had a nice breakfast. Hermione bathed and dressed in a white, gauzy summer dress she had brought with her. Severus put on black Jeans and a button up white shirt with a back vest. They tied his hair back with a black ribbon. Hermione left her hair down in thick, full curls.

He took her hand, and they Apparated to a small garden alcove that was disillusioned to Muggles. They stepped out of the garden and walked down the street. They first stopped at a jewelry store and bought two simple gold matching bands.

Severus said as they left the store. "I will make them special later, Hermione. We can talk about what we want."

Down the street at a corner florist, Severus bought Hermione a bunch of roses wrapped with ribbon

She smiled at him and squeezed his hand, and they continued down the boardwalk. It was a quaint, old-fashioned town. Children ran here and there as dogs barked. Cars passed in no hurry. Life was simple here. People could be seen walking along the beach a few blocks away from the boardwalk. They stopped before an old courthouse, and Severus said, "Are you sure? Is this okay? We can have a Wizarding ceremony with friends later."

She reached to caress his face. "I would like that, yes, but this is wonderful. I cannot think of anything I want more than to be your wife."

They spent nearly thirty minutes filling out papers, and then they found themselves standing under an arch with beautiful silk flowers entwined in it. The Justice of the Peace reminded Hermione of Dumbledore. He had white hair; it wasn't long, but he had half-moon glasses perched on his nose. His eyes were green, but there was a similar twinkle there, and he was round like a Santa Claus. There was a woman who served as their witness and played a small organ. Another young man took photos for them.

They stood facing each other and spoke the words of love, promising to be faithful and to love each other in sickness and health, till death would they part.

Hermione slipped the ring on his finger. "With this ring, I thee wed," she said softly, staring into his dark eyes. A tear ran down her face.

Severus took the ring and placed it on her finger. "With this ring, I thee wed," he said, his voice thick with emotion.

The justice said, "With the powers vested in me and by the Providence of England, I now pronounce you husband and wife."

Severus took Hermione's face in his hands, and she clutched at his arm still holding her roses in one hand. He bent and kissed her gently on her lips; he then deepened the kiss until she was breathless.

"I love you, Mrs. Snape," he said.

"And I love you, Mr. Snape," she repeated, grinning.

They turned and thanked the court employees. They arranged to have the photos delivered the next morning to the mailbox on the street by the cottage, and then they ran out into the sun. They walked to a small café and ate a light lunch; afterwards they ran down to the beach, dancing along the waters edge. Hermione's hair flew around her face. She reached out to free Severus hair. They removed their shoes, and Severus hung them by the straps and strings over his shoulder. They headed down the beach and finally slipped into the wards on Poppy's property. Hermione watched Severus' face as she slipped the straps of her dress over her shoulders. She dropped the dress into the sand, and she carefully placed her wand among the folds of material. She stood before him and unhooked her bra and let it fall. Then she stepped from her knickers. She danced away when he reached out for her, skipping into the sea. The waves slid over her feet and splashed against her thighs. Severus dropped the shoes and pulled the vest and shirt off. In a quick motion, he stepped out of his pants, sent their stuff to the cabin with his wand, and ran after her. He finally caught her and pulled her, laughing, into his arms. "You're so beautiful, a beautiful goddess," he said as he captured her lips.

"And you are magnificent, Severus. I had no idea who you were and what you could become when I was a child with a crush. I am so happy. We went through hell for a few weeks, but look where we are today." She ran her hands over his chest. "Carry me into the house, Severus. I want to make love to my husband in our beautiful bed."

Severus bowed. "My lady." He swooped her into his arms and carried her into the little cottage. He laid her on the bed. He used his wand to create a dark blue sky filled with stars above the bed. Candles appeared and lit the room in soft, dancing light. Hermione had one knee up and she reached out for him. "I want you to cover me. I want to feel your weight this time, Severus," she requested.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"Yes, come to me, my husband," she urged.

He crawled into the bed, one knee between hers and one on the left. He leaned in to kiss her and felt her hand slip over his ribs and draw him down to her. They sighed as their bodies pressed against each other.

Hermione ran her hands over his back and smiled into his face as she squeezed his buttocks.

He grinned back. "That feels wonderful." He bent to kiss her neck, and she sighed with pleasure. He covered her face and upper body with kisses, and she stroked his hair and ran a foot over the backs of his legs. She could feel him hard against her stomach, and she reached between him and caressed the thick shaft with her fingers until he moaned with pleasure. He raised himself above her, and she helped guide him in. He thrust quickly, burying himself deep in her.

"My Severus." She breathed his name, and he hardened even more. The touch of her skin against him, the taste of her mouth drove him to heights of pleasure he'd never known. The desire in her eyes for him and him alone made him love her far more than he could have ever imagined.

Hermione felt him fill her, and she stared into his deep, dark, fathomless eyes. She loved this man far more than humanly possible, she thought. Their souls were one. He began to move inside her, and she grabbed his buttocks, drawing him deeper. "Faster," she breathed.

He moved faster, throwing his head back as he moved over her. Past images were gone; she would forever remember his bliss at being one with her. His weight was gentle, loving, and kind. Together they reached new heights of feeling within them, and when he filled her with his seed, she climaxed. He collapsed on her and held her close.

"Am I too heavy?" he asked.

Her legs were still clamped around his body, and her feet were resting on the back of his knees.

"No, Severus. I love the feel of you where you are. Thank you so much for this trip and for my lovely wedding. I am so filled there are few words."

"I feel the same," he said, kissing her gently again and again. He loved the feel of her lip between his lips. Finally, he rolled to his back, drawing her onto his chest. As she slept, he lay a long time, listening to the breathing of his wife.

Chapter 21

Chapter 21 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

On Sunday they rose early and wandered down the beach. A few blocks up, a church bell rang, and Hermione looked up at Severus.

"Do you want to go to the service?" he asked.

"You'd go?" she asked in surprise.

"I had a Muggle father; I'm not a stranger to church. He wasn't so bad when I was a small child. I was six when I showed my first abilities toward magic, and he changed. He started to look at me like I was a nasty bug on the wall." He sighed. "Anyway, church was fun when I was a kid."

Hermione said, "I would like to go."

He took her hand, and they moved toward the church and slipped in the back. It was a simple service. People from every walk of life were there...women dressed in fancy summer dresses and hats and others who'd come from the beach in bathing suit cover-ups and flip-flops.

Hermione was astonished that Severus could sing some of the old hymns from memory. She held his hand as they sang and said a small prayer for their lives and their marriage. The message was a simple one of love and forgiveness.

The sun was warm when they came out, and they strolled to a small beach café and had some lunch. The rest of the day, they lay on the beach by Poppy's cottage and got suntans and read a book to each other.

They fixed dinner and carried it to the veranda. The sun set as they ate at a small table, looking into each other's eyes over a small candle that danced in a glass holder. Later they curled up in the living room and watched an old black and white film on the telly. It was a wonderful slow and easy day.

As they crawled into bed that night, Severus saw Hermione's brow crease.

He drew her close. "What worries you, my wife."

"No worries, really. I love being here. There is no danger and no one to answer to. It's been a wonderful weekend. I hate for it to end, but we should get back by midday so I can set up for Tuesday's lessons."

He sighed. "We do have jobs, don't we?" His voice was grumpy.

Hermione looked at him with delight. "There he is! There's the man I fell for."

"I'll show you what that grumpy old potion's master can do to you," he said as he covered her mouth with his and pressed a hand to her breast.

Hermione and Severus stood looking up at the castle. They'd Apparated back to Hogsmeade to buy a few things and then walked slowly to the gates of Hogwarts.

"It's good to be home," they said in unison and then laughed. Severus took her hand. "Come on, Madam Snape. Let's go tell Poppy and Minerva the news."

"Do you think they will be happy for us or angry that we didn't ask them to be there?" she asked, suddenly worried.

"It was a civil ceremony, and we plan to have a real wizarding bonding, don't we? They will be happy for us. It was long overdue," he added.

"Yes it was," she said.

They entered the castle and nearly bumped into Albus. "Professor Snape and Madam Granger, you're back," he said with enthusiasm. "Did you have a good trip?"

"Yes, we did, Albus. Did you have a good weekend?" Hermione asked, giving the boy a hug. She often thought that Albus was more like her than either Ginny or Harry. He was a very studious boy.

"It was long," he said. "I enjoy my classes. We did all enjoy the trip to Hogsmead on Saturday. They opened a Muggle picture show house."

"Really," Hermione said astonished. "Oh, Severus, we can go to the movies sometime."

"If you wish," he said. "Come on, I've got a threshold to carry you over."

"What!" Albus hissed, looking to see if anyone else heard. "Did you get married?"

Severus bent so he was eye level with the boy. "Yes," he whispered. "Keep it to yourself for now. I know we can trust you, Albus Severus."

Albus looked proud and pleased that he'd said his whole name. "Yes, sir, you can. Congratulations."

"Thank you." They waggled their fingers in front of him to show him their rings.

Hermione snickered. "That's scary. How did you know I was going to do that, Severus?"

He shrugged, a bit dismayed. "You're rubbing off on me." He laughed a bit. "I think I'm becoming a child again. We had so much fun this weekend, it's hard to rein in that spirit," he admitted.

"We don't have to. There is no more Hermione and Severus pre us; we can be and do anything we want now."

Severus pulled her close, while the wide-eyed Albus looked on, and kissed her.

They pulled apart and waved to Albus as other students came into view.

Albus turned. "*Boy, have I got a secret,*" he thought. "*Wait till my dad hears about this!*"

Severus snickered. "I wonder how long he will be able to hold on to that secret."

"Will you be angry if he doesn't?" Hermione asked as she headed down the hall to the dungeon stairs."

"No, of course not. I'm sure Minerva will tell everyone tomorrow at breakfast. You will, after all, be Madam Snape after today." He wondered, suddenly, if Hermione would rather keep her own name. She was, after all, a modern woman.

She raised her hand, flashed her ring, and eyed it. "That's true. Madam Snape. I like it." She beamed up at him.

He relaxed a bit. Why had he been afraid she wouldn't want his name? They had been calling each other Mr. and Mrs. Snape all weekend.

She saw him sigh. "You were afraid I didn't want your name. You're a dear man. I guess I am rather headstrong, but I have wanted to be your wife for a very long time."

They had finally reached the door to the classroom, and they stepped inside and warded and locked the door. Severus went ahead with their bags. He opened the door to their rooms and left it open. He dropped the bags and came back for her.

She slipped her arms around his neck, and he picked her up. "Mrs. Snape, welcome to our home," he said as he swooped into their rooms. He kissed her thoroughly before he set her on her feet. "Do you want to eat in tonight? Or should we eat in the Great Hall after we talk to Minerva and Poppy?"

"Let's decide after we talk to them," she said. "I'll be right out...the loo," she said.

She went and used the facilities and tidied up. When she came out, Severus had changed from his jeans and shirt to his school robes.

She loved the cut of his robes. They fit so perfectly on his body. She came and ran her hands over his chest as he looked on in amusement.

"Severus, your robes turn me on so much. You have no idea how many times I fantasized about taking them off you and having my way with you on your desk."

"You're telling me this now, woman! We will never get out of here if you don't step back." He smirked at her.

She laughed at him. "You're so sensual; it doesn't take much to turn you on." She rose up on her tiptoes, and he lowered his head. She kissed the tip of his large, crooked nose.

He took her hand with a grin. "Come on. I do not want Poppy to find out any other way. She has been the only mother I've had for years."

Hermione smiled. "I really like her. I want to thank her for the use of her beautiful home."

Poppy was just cleaning up after a small repair she'd had to make on a student's arm. She smiled widely at them when they came in. "The sun and the beach seem to have done you both a world of good. You look better than you ever have," she said, tweaking Severus' cheek.

Hermione looked amused at the flash of feigned annoyance in his smirk, but his eyes danced with happiness.

"Hermione, we have something to show Poppy, don't we?" he said teasingly.

"What?" Poppy asked.

They both lifted their hands and waggled their ring fingers at her.

She stood there stunned with her mouth open, and tears flooded her eyes. "You got married?" she gasped...not unhappily, but with a left out sort of sadness.

"Yes, Poppy," Severus said, taking her into his arms. "It was a spur-of-the-moment thing, and it was a Muggle ceremony. We want to have a wizarding ceremony for a true magical bonding, and we will invite all our friends." He lifted her tear-stained face to look into her eyes. "You will have a special place; after all, the mother of the groom is very special to the ceremony."

"Mother?" she said, smiling through her tears.

"Of course, Poppy. You've been my mother for many years now, ever since you covered my pink hair with your apron. We can't do this wedding without your help."

"You remember that?" she asked, thinking about the skinny little boy with pink hair that had captured her heart with his tears that day.

"Of course I do. I remember every moment your soft hands touched me, soothed my tears or pain away, pushed my torn flesh together, or held me as I screamed in pain after Voldemort tortured me. I remember everything."

Hermione stood next to him with tears running down her cheeks. She had tortured herself over one small attack that had hardly injured her, and Severus had gone time and time again to face torture to help save Harry and by extension her and Ron. She was proud of him and a little ashamed at the same time.

Severus must have heard her sniffing because he reached out and grabbed her and drew her against him and Poppy. "Sappy, women. I am melting with all this emotion and tears, melting, I say, meltinnnnngggg," he droned.

Hermione started to giggle, and Poppy actually pushed him away and guffawed. "Go on with you," she said, wiping the tears from her face. "That was for witches, not wizards." She turned to Hermione and said, "I took him to the cabin a few times when he was young, and we watched *The Wizard of Oz*. He drove me nuts for months with that saying."

Hermione looked up at her husband. There were so many things she didn't know about him. Poppy knew wonderful tidbits from his life. She would have to grill Poppy sometime.

Severus glared at her. "I know that look." He turned to Poppy. "You are not allowed to tell Hermione all my secrets."

"Me? Tell secrets?" She laughed and whispered to Hermione, knowing he could hear, "You just come and visit sometime. I have some funny stories to tell you."

"Come on, Hermione. Let's leave this OLD woman to her work," he said, touching her arm to steer her away. He reached out to kiss Poppy's forehead. "See you at breakfast, Mom."

Poppy's face glowed with happiness. "Congratulations," she called after them.

They left the old mediwitch already planning what kind of wizarding wedding would be fitting for Professor and Mrs. Snape.

Minerva invited them into her rooms and asked them to sit on the couch by the fire. She summoned a house-elf who brought tea and crumpets.

When they each had a plate and a cup, she asked, "What can I do for you two tonight?"

Severus set his tea and their plates on the table next to the couch and took Hermione's hand. "Minerva, Hermione and I were married in a Muggle ceremony this weekend."

The old woman's eyes teared up. "Congratulations. I must say I'm shocked, but I'm pleased for you both."

Hermione smiled at the old witch. "I was as surprised as Severus was when the question flew out of his mouth."

Minerva laughed, sipping her tea. "I bet you were."

"I am possessed by love," Severus said in his defense.

Minerva said, as she fiddled with the clasp on her robe, "I am quite pleased. I never thought I'd see the day when you would be smitten, Severus."

Severus brought Hermione's hand up to his lips and kissed her knuckles. "Neither did I."

"I'd say with your two very strong personalities, it could get stormy, but you were made for each other. I think the instigator of this scenario knew that." She clapped her hand over her mouth.

Hermione laughed at her. "I figured it out. I think we have something to say to Albus one of these days. I may give him a tongue lashing along with Severus for putting him through the hell he's been through... before I kiss him for sending me the love of my life."

Minerva laughed and was pleased when Severus joined them. They set about drinking their tea and eating their crumpets and told Minerva about their lovely marriage. They promised to bring the pictures along with them some day soon.

Severus went into their rooms while Hermione got her classroom ready for the next day. He came back and helped her finish. Then he said, "Mrs. Snape, are you ready for our first night at home?"

Hermione nodded. "I am; it's been a long day. It seems like a dream that we woke up married in a different part of the country this morning. She followed Severus through the door. Hermione gasped. Every surface was covered in roses and candles. The room smelled strong and fragrant. "It's beautiful, Severus." She saw that the old bed curtains had been transformed into the blue and gold ones of the cottage.

"Magic is a wonderful thing, isn't it?" She kissed him. "It's like having our home-away-from-home at home." Then she laughed and said, "Say that five times fast."

He smiled. "Come on, let's have some food and then go to bed."

He had had a house-elf come and bring a nice meal of baked chicken, vegetables, and wine. It was a wonderful meal. As they talked about the last few days, Severus summoned the photos from their bags, and they looked through them. They were surprised to find that the young man had followed them a ways down the beach and had taken some wonderful pictures.

"They are amazing pictures, Severus. I will get an album and put them in. It's too bad they are Muggle photos. I love magical photos because they're like short videos.

"We will have plenty of pictures from our bonding ceremony." He stood and held out his hand. "Let's go to bed. It's late, and you have to teach early in the morning."

She nodded, suddenly dreading the fifth hour. A frown creased her forehead.

"Say the word, Hermione, and he will be gone. I can make him vanish."

"No, Severus!" Hermione looked horrified and afraid for a moment.

He looked hurt. "I will not kill him, Hermione. Do you have such little faith in me?" He got up and went to stand by the fireplace and stared into the fire.

Hermione sat there feeling the most horrible dread.

"I am not a killer," he finally said. His voice was low and gruff. "I never really was. I was forced by powers that ruled me to kill on rare occasions, but it was never my choice and only as defense or a last resort in order to maintain my cover for the Order." He turned away, and Hermione felt worse.

"I'm sorry," she said, coming up behind him and putting her hands on his back. She slid her hands around to his chest under his arms and held him close. "You just took me by surprise, that's all, really," she reassured him. "What would you do, Severus?"

"I was thinking more of a memory change, a new relocated life. Much like you did to your parents in the war." His voice was bitter.

Hermione felt tears burn her eyes. "Yes, I did do that, didn't I. Severus, I will allow you to do that if we can not reach him."

"How will we know?" he asked angrily. "Will it be when I am bloody and lying in a hospital again or, heaven forbid, when you end up injured or dead?" The fear he felt for her showed in his tone of voice.

"Love came to you when you were young. Love helped you. Poppy really saved you," she told him. "We can give that boy forgiveness and kindness."

"I still joined the Death Eaters and Voldemort. You have no idea how hurt Poppy was. She didn't speak to me for a very long time. Then one night when I was torn and bleeding, she took me into her arms and healed me with her amazing skills."

"Severus, I'm sorry. I hurt you, and I should know you better. I know how much it hurt you to take Dumbledore's life. I'm tired, and I wasn't thinking. Please can you give us a few weeks to try to reach him? Go talk to Draco about him. We've put that off too long. Can we forget Draco and Scorpius tonight? I just want to go to bed and have you hold me."

Severus turned and held out his arms, and Hermione threw herself in them.

"I'm sorry, too," he said. "We have not been together long. There is so much we need to learn about and share with each other." He picked her up and carried her to the bed. He undressed her, and they made slow, gentle love. Hermione fell asleep, but Severus stayed awake wondering if she would ever really know him. Would he ever be able to tell her the things he'd rather keep buried under a dark rock? Was it necessary for her to know the kind of man he had been? Would she understand him better if she knew, or would it make their relationship strained?

He had been shocked when she thought he might kill the boy. Her mistrust for those few seconds had made his insides twist. He knew he loved her, and he wouldn't leave her, but her mistrust did hurt. Yet he had received forgiveness from her, just by the fact that she loved him and wanted to be with him. Hermione loved him to the depths of her soul. He knew that, and maybe he was overreacting. Time would strengthen their marriage and their relationship, and he vowed Hermione would learn to trust him by his actions. He would prove to her that her faith in him was grounded. Settling things in his mind, Severus looked down at his sleeping wife and finally let himself sleep

Lisa, thank you so much for your beta work. This is such a great collaboration.

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Chapter 22

Chapter 22 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

Finally, in this chapter, Severus goes to talk to Draco.

When Hermione arose the next morning, she was alone. She had known that Severus had early hall duty, but waking alone in their bed was shocking. He had not woken her to say goodbye. Was he still upset with her? She turned toward his pillow and found a red rose lying across it, which made her smile. He had left his love after all, but she still couldn't stop the sinking feeling that she had somehow damaged their relationship with her careless words.

She bathed and dressed and headed to the Great Hall for breakfast. Severus was already sitting in his chair. He rose, took her hand, placed a chaste kiss on her cheek, and then held her chair out for her.

"Severus, I missed waking with you. It seemed like the life had gone out of our rooms. Thank you for the beautiful rose."

"I did mention I had early hall duty." His voice was very like his old self, formal and non-familiar, and it brought tears to Hermione's eyes.

Hermione said, "Yes, you did." She turned away to add food to her plate...food that she found she couldn't eat.

Severus could hear the strain in her voice and he thought, *Now what did I do? She told me it was okay to be my grumpy old self, and now she's hurt by it.*

He reached over and took her hand. "Hermione, neither of us are hungry. Let me walk you back to the classroom." He stood, and Hermione nodded. He took her hand, and they walked out of the Great Hall, not noticing the concerned looks on everyone's faces.

In the corridor, Severus slipped his arm around her and drew her close. He kissed her deeply and said, "I missed waking with you, too. But it was so early and we'd had such a long weekend I wanted you to get as much rest as you could. If you wish, I will never leave our rooms again without a goodbye."

Hermione clung to him and said, "I'm sorry, Severus."

"What for, my love?" he asked. Apparently, marriage was going to be a bit harder than he had thought.

"For last night." She sniffed, and he fished a handkerchief out of a pocket in his robe and handed it to her.

"You already apologized," he replied. But he knew it wasn't all right yet. He didn't know how to fix it right now.

"You're still hurt," she cried.

"Yes, Hermione, I am still hurt." He figured honesty was the best policy. Another half-truth or a falsehood would only damage them further. "But I will get over it, and you must know that nothing you say will ever make me not love you with all my heart." They reached the classroom, and he locked the door behind them.

He turned and took her by the arms and tilted her chin up to look into his face. "If you have some reservations about me, if you have some tiny part of me that you do not trust, I will earn that trust back."

His face was hard, and yet Hermione could see the fear in his eyes. He was scared!

"Severus, I do trust you. I do. I don't know where that came from. Look at what you have done for me. You've endured so much pain...I didn't realize how much. You have the right to hurt and be frightened that Scorpius might hurt you again. I guess women don't realize that men can fear further torture. It made my attack from Lucius seem trivial."

He took her by the arms and peered down into her face. "Nothing about what happened to you was trivial, Hermione. You have a right to feel fear, rage, and pain. We can get through this together."

"I feel guilty that I didn't see that you have a right to mistrust that boy. I will not ask any more of you than you can take. If you feel something more is needed to ensure your safety and mine, then do it," she tried to explain.

Her words made Severus feel a bit better. She would let him choose. He also knew he would allow Hermione time to help the child. He would try not to give in to tactics practiced before the war. This was a new era and a new life. If it was to be different, then he would have to try to make it different by his actions. He would try forgiveness for now. He would try to encourage and work with the boy, but he would not for a second relax around him."

"This is our new life together. I will try for a time. But if I see one more thing out of line from that boy, I will not risk either of us again."

Hermione nodded and held on to the front of his robe. "Agreed." She tugged him till he bent, and they kissed again. She buried one hand in his hair while the other one went down his back and squeezed a buttock.

"Woman," he said when the kiss broke off. "If you do not cease, I will be forced to cancel your first class and take you back to bed."

She sighed. "We are newlyweds. That's what they do: shag themselves senseless."

He grinned. "They do, do they? Well, sadly, we have jobs, and the hordes will be banging down your door at any minute." He kissed her again and slipped his hand down her back to squeeze her buttock. "Now we are even," he said as she groaned against him.

She giggled, and it made his heart feel even lighter. They would get through this. It would be all right again.

"Be gone with you then," she laughed. "I'll see you at lunch."

Severus kissed her again and then unlocked and opened the door. "Tonight," he promised her.

He left the room and went out of the building to the gates at Hogwarts and Apparated to the Ministry. He'd asked Minerva if he could go to see Draco. He had made an appointment with Draco early that morning. He supposed he should have mentioned it to Hermione before he left. But the moment of frivolity between them had felt so good he hated to destroy it. It would only make her worry."

He walked through the huge main entrance. It hadn't changed much. He found people stopped to stare at him. The public had gotten wind of his return. This was his first appearance in wizarding society other than the hospital.

He saw a few former students heading his way. He turned to glare at them, and they turned away. He smiled to himself: He still had it.

He found the department Draco worked in and was shown into his office.

Severus was surprised by Draco's appearance. He was tall and broad shouldered now, but his eyes looked haunted and his face was gaunt.

"Draco." He came forward and extended his hand.

Draco stood with a weary smile on his face. "Uncle Severus," he said. His handshake was firm, and he held on until Severus drew him into a hug and felt the man hold on a bit more than was necessary. Time didn't change much. The "boy" still needed support, and he hadn't had much from his father in years."

Severus pushed him back gently. "Are you alright?"

Draco ran his hand through his short hair and shook his head. "I'm at a loss as to how to deal with Scorpius." He stepped back. "Please have a seat. I am sorry for the pain

he caused you. Merlin, Uncle, you don't look any older than the last time I saw you. I have more grey hair than you do."

Severus was pleased to see that Draco still cared about him. That was going to go a long way with this situation. "With a son and a father like yours, I've no wonder you're going grey." He leaned in toward Draco. "I'm sorry about your mother's death and that your father felt so betrayed. It was the only thing that would save all wizarding kind from a terrible reign of terror."

Draco nodded. "I know. I don't think it was your betrayal that twisted my father; it was mother's death. Father really wasn't a hardcore Death Eater. He only wanted power, and he became disillusioned by the horrible things he was asked to do. My father loved my mother more than anything in existence. When she died, he lost his mind. He needed someone to blame, and your name just fit in that slot."

"Life was difficult for us after the war," Draco continued. "We lost a great deal, and it made him more bitter. I had to work, and Pansy does, too. We didn't realize how he was poisoning our son. Scorpius had nothing to compare the knowledge to, and so he took his beloved grandfather's word as truth." He got up and paced the room. "I have tried to explain to him, and Pansy has tried. But we fear it is too late. He will not listen to us."

Severus stood and went to stand eye to eye with him. "Draco, I will not sugarcoat this for you. I mean no disrespect to all you have gone through, but I cannot allow Scorpius to hurt Hermione or me again. It's a miracle students haven't been hurt as well."

"I heard you were with Granger. How did that happen?" Draco asked, suddenly afraid to hear what Severus might wish to do about his son.

"She found me. I will tell you about it. Let me finish talking about Scorpius first." He looked into Draco's face. "I proposed to Hermione that we alter Scorpius's mind and relocate him in a different life."

"What? Surely there is another way." Draco, who was already pale, turned ghost white.

"He is my only child, my only son, Uncle," he pleaded. He sat at his desk and covered his face with his hands. "He was once a gentle and kind boy."

Severus was surprised the man didn't threaten him but seem to take his word as law.

"You would allow me to do that without a fight?" Severus said a bit forcefully.

"Scorpius will end up like father, dying in Azkaban. I do not want to see this happen, and Pansy and I have talked about just this sort of thing. Uncle, is there no other way?"

"Draco, with your permission, Hermione and I wish to try to reach him. I want to try kindness at first, with encouragement. If he responds, I will not alter his thoughts. But I will be keeping a close eye on him. I want to show him what life was like when I was a Death Eater. Let me share with him some of the horrors of the times your father and I shared. If he does have a kind heart under the anger that now seems to rule his life, maybe we can find him and turn him back."

Draco sat up and shot Severus a hopeful look. "You would do that and the Mu.... Granger will agree. I'm sorry, Uncle," he said, having received an angry glare that had stopped his words. "Old habits and bad habits are hard to break."

Severus nodded. "I do understand. I should inform you that Hermione Granger is my wife, Madam Snape."

"What!" Draco exclaimed, gobsmacked. He actually grinned at him. "You work fast, Uncle."

Severus stood. "Circumstances brought us together, and it seems right."

Draco stood and held out his hand over the desk. "Congratulations, Uncle."

Severus shook his hand and squeezed it as well, and then the men sat down again. "Thank you, Draco. I will do my best for Scorpius." He went on to tell Draco how Hermione had found him and what had happened since. Finally he stood. "Hermione and I will be having a wizarding bonding for our friends. I would be honored if you would attend."

"I would like that, Uncle. Please give Hermione my regards."

"I will let you know when we have decided a time." Severus turned to open the door and then turned back. "Draco, I am proud of you for taking the higher road here. Send me a binding contract for permission to take your son under my tutelage. Have Pansy sign it, as well. I want there to be no question upon what has been agreed upon today." He then swept from the room.

Draco watched after him with a bit of hope in his eyes.

Severus returned to Hogwarts and made a couple rounds before meeting Hermione for lunch. He sent Darby to ask her to come to their rooms for lunch and had the house elf bring them food there.

Hermione came in with her eyes glittering with desire. "Severus, couldn't you wait for tonight?" She came forward with a seductive air.

Severus groaned. He'd been so happy about Draco's cooperation that he'd forgotten about their teasing this morning and how Hermione might interpret the invitation. He had no desire to make her angry again.

She saw the look in his eye and stopped. "I thought we were okay this morning."

"Come, Hermione, eat some lunch. I probably should have told you I was going to go see Draco this morning, but I enjoyed our...."

"You what! You left here with out telling me?" she accused.

"I'm sorry. As I was saying," he said a voice that was a little louder and deeper, "I was so enjoying our banter this morning that I didn't want to make you concerned."

"Well," she said, "you're in one piece. I don't see any blood, and I'm not your keeper. I would appreciate it if you'd tell me where you're going if you're leaving here, but I won't demand you do. I know you value your freedom as much as I do." She picked up one of the sandwiches and took a bite.

Severus sighed. He sat down and told her about his conversation with Draco.

Hermione reached out squeezed his hand. "I'm happy with your progress. Severus, I know you're doing this for me. I know it could put us in danger, but I feel this is right. We are teachers because we care about children and want them to learn and grow to be good, respectable, productive witches and wizards. It seems like giving up on Scorpius is the wrong thing to do."

Severus took her hand pulled her around the small table and sat her in his lap. "You're right; that's what teachers are supposed to do. I wasn't a proper teacher. I didn't care about the students when I was here. For me, teaching was a job necessary to be Dumbledore's stooge. I hated teaching."

"You seem to enjoy it now." She ran a finger under the edge of his hair and tucked it behind his ear, and then she kissed a path over his cheek.

"It's because I see how much you enjoy it. The student becomes the teacher... Hermione, we must be in class in 20 minutes." His breathing was becoming uneven as her

hands were moving over his body and undoing his belt.

"There's enough time," she whispered, releasing him. When she found he was already hard and extended, she pulled her robes up and vanished her knickers. He helped slide her down and over him. Their bodies rocked back and forth on the chair, and it creaked with their combined weight. Their cries rang out at the same time, and she slumped against him with her arms wrapped around his neck. "Oh, Merlin, Severus, you are amazing."

"I'm not as amazing as you are...or beautiful. You're making all my teenage fantasies come true, one by one," he murmured against her forehead.

"Well," she said, grinning at him, "you will just have to tell me about those. But turn about is fair play. If I make one of yours come true, you have to make one of mine come true."

Severus stood her on her feet, cleaned them up with his wand, and replaced her knickers. He put on his robe and kissed her flushed forehead. He said, "Come on, let's go be nice to the hooligans."

The class was waiting at the door, and Hermione waved them all in. "Sorry, Professor Snape and I had some business to conclude." Hermione caught Albus's blush. That boy was too smart for his own good.

"Today Jake will work with Albert, Rosie with Allison, and Albus with Scorpius..."

"What? I'm not working with him," Scorpius complained. "He's a Potter, and my family hates Potters."

"Then you will receive a zero for the day," Hermione said to him. "You can do this. You're brilliant, and you can learn to work with others. It's a quality that will aide you in the world of business."

Scorpius' grades were excellent, and Hermione knew the thought of getting a zero might convince him to work with Albus.

He didn't speak but nodded and went to the station where Albus was standing. Albus looked at her in concern, but she nodded to him.

She continued to name students and partners. When everyone was divided up, she put the recipe up on the board, and she and Severus walked around the room, carefully monitoring the students.

That was the beginning of the rehabilitation effort for Scorpius Malfoy.

Lisa, thank you so much for your fine beta work.

Becky and Angela, thank you for pre-reading and for your comments.

Chapter 23

Chapter 23 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

After class, Scorpius ran out the door first. He'd been quiet but had done the project with his usual excellence. Albus, however, remained behind.

Severus smiled at the boy and beckoned him to the front of the room. Hermione sat at her desk, and Severus was half sitting on the edge of the desk with his legs crossed.

"Albus, I see you have questions?"

Albus came closer. "I was wondering if you were going to make Scorpius my permanent partner?"

Hermione got up and placed her hand on his shoulder. "Professor Snape and I have decided that we need to try to help Scorpius, yet keep a close eye on him. I hoped you would be willing to help. He needs friends. If he had friends, he might grow to see that other people have value and that his grandfather's teachings were wrong. His father wants for us to help him."

Severus asked, "Are you willing to help us, Albus?"

Albus nodded. "Of course I will help. He's brilliant with Potions. I could learn a thing or two from him."

Severus stood and gave the boy a squeeze on the shoulder. "Thank you, Albus. Just keep your guard up."

"Thank you, Professor and Madam Snape, for asking me to help." He turned and left.

Severus said, "Maybe we should inform Harry about what we are asking of Albus."

Hermione said, "Yes, I guess it would be best that he and Ginny know. We probably should have done that before asking. I really don't know why I didn't think about that earlier."

"Do you want me to write to Harry?" Severus asked, pulling a chair up close to her desk.

"Why don't we both write and then sign the letter," she said.

"We can do it after the last class. I'd better get going; you'll have students filtering in any time. He bent and gave her a gentle kiss, and she ran her fingers down his cheek as he stood and smiled down at her. Then he headed out of the room as the next group of children entered.

Hermione watched him go. She often felt guilty teaching Potions alone when Severus, a Master of Potions, was out doing hall and security duty. He didn't complain...being back to life and free was something to be thankful for...but how long would it be before his duties started to make him unhappy? Maybe she would ask Minerva if Severus could set up a private lab of his own for experimentation and to sell potions to St. Mungo's and other organizations to help raise funds for the school. It would make him feel more useful. She hoped that perhaps the DADA job would open up. No one seemed to stay in it long, and the current teacher had been there for five years. Then again, if

Filius really didn't want to be Headmaster after Minerva's retirement, Severus might be offered the position.

Severus left the classroom, glancing back as the sixth-years entered the classroom. He wistfully wished that he had his classroom back. He needed more of an anchor than some made-up duties. But Hermione deserved the position. She had worked hard for it.

He headed down a long corridor and then out a side door to check the wards on all the outer gates and walls. It was sunny, and the air was still. An owl came and lit on a tree close to him, and he saw that it carried a message. He went to retrieve it. It was from Draco, as he had suspected. He gave the owl a treat, and it took off as he unrolled the sheet of parchment.

It was the legal document giving him permission to work with Scorpius, using his memories and a Pensieve. Severus read over the letter and was pleased that Draco seemed to have remembered every detail and a few more. The man surely knew his job. He was surprised to even find a clause, signed separately by Pansy and Draco, which gave him permission to alter Scorpius's memories should he attempt or succeed in endangering the lives of anyone else.

Severus found a personal note from Draco underneath the document. It read:

Uncle,

Pansy and I discussed this at length. We will agree to whatever you decide. We ask that you do all in your power to change Scorpius, including mind alterations, before sending him to a different life. We thank you for helping us with our son. You have no idea the hope you give us where there was none before. Please keep us informed weekly.

Draco and Pansy Malfoy

It was dated, signed, and magically notarized.

Severus slipped the parchments into an inner pocket on his robe. He was pleased to still be regarded by Draco in such high standing, given their past. The "boy" had always had people telling him what to do. Lucius had never really allowed him to think on his own. He marveled that Draco was such a success. Yet, now that Severus was there, Draco seemed content to have someone else make his decisions regarding his difficult son.

Severus resolved to do the best he could for Scorpius. He also hoped one day to visit Lucius and try to explain. He knew Lucius might have already gone over the wall, so to speak. But he would have to try. They had been good friends for many years.

He walked back through the halls, listening to some of the children who were free from classes now. Some students were heading for the library and some to the Quidditch field for practice. He found the familiar banter comforting, and he realized he did enjoy working here. He just hoped he would find more to do than security. For now that would fulfill his purpose of needing to keep an eye on Scorpius until he could discover if it was possible to help turn the boy to a better future. He found he might actually enjoy the project more than he'd thought. The idea of saving the child from a fate like his would be reward enough.

He suddenly caught sight of Scorpius, who had turned into the corridor ahead of him. The boy saw him and did an about face.

"Mr. Malfoy," he called rather loudly, "may I have a word."

Scorpius froze and turned to find that half of the students in the corridor had frozen with him and were looking to see what would happen.

Severus came up touched him on the shoulder. "Mr. Malfoy, you have a gift for Potions. I was wondering if you would like to have some special tutoring. I would like to speak with you about special lessons in the Potions classroom, if you would be so inclined." His hand tightened on Scorpius's shoulder, letting him know that he dare not refuse.

"Of course, sir," Scorpius said.

Severus felt the boy's muscles harden like rocks under his hand. They went down the hall to the dungeon stairs and into the classroom. Hermione stood up warily when Severus came into the room with Scorpius.

Severus took the parchment out of his robes and waved it at her. "I have received the papers from Draco."

"Oh," she mouthed, trying to prepare herself for the boy's outburst.

"Scorpius, please have a seat. I know you are concerned and curious about why I have asked you to come here. You are aware that I might have made a formal request that charges be brought against you for nearly killing me and trying to kill Madam Granger."

The boy gulped and nodded; his eyes were as big as saucers. He knew he was alone with two people who might want revenge. Severus Snape was well known for detentions that rivaled prison sentences.

"Madam Granger and I have decided to take a different approach. We do not want you punished. You have an excellent mind and can be the ruler of your own future. Your grandfather was once my friend. There were many possible outcomes that could have occurred from the choices we made as young men. You can go down a road of hate and destruction, or you can make a pleasant, prosperous life for yourself.

Scorpius glared at him. "Are you going to use mind control? I have heard of your ability to change people's thoughts."

"Only as a last resort," Severus said dryly.

"What are you playing at? My father would never stand for this." He started to get up, and Severus pushed him firmly back down in his chair. He pulled the parchment out of his pocket and handed it to the boy.

Scorpius grabbed the parchment and ripped it to pieces. Then he laughed as he threw it on the floor. The pieces started to glow, and then they moved back together, and the tears sealed themselves. He stared in horror at the repaired document.

Severus grabbed him by the collar. "Pick it up and read it," he demanded, shaking the boy.

Scorpius stared at it, and Severus took his wand out and forced the boy to pick it up.

"You can't do this," he screamed. "My dad will kill you!"

"You're wrong, Scorpius. If you will look at this contract, you'll see that it gives me the right to do what I see fit with you, except kill you."

"You lie," he screamed. "My mom will come for me."

"She signed it as well." He glanced at Hermione and saw her staring at him with wide eyes.

He sighed. She was still skittish, and his loudness was making her nervous. He calmed himself, then pulled his chair up near Scorpius, and faced the boy.

"Scorpius, your parents love you. They are scared for you. They do not want to see you living in a cell next to your grandfather for the rest of your life or his. Just because

you're younger won't guarantee you'd live longer. People die there every day from diseases and brutality. Your parents asked me to show you what it was like for your grandfather and I when Voldemort was alive and terrorizing good people. There is no romance to the dark powers of wizardry. There is no peace or beauty; it's ugly, horrific, and brutal."

"I won't do this," Scorpius said stubbornly, tears shining in his eyes.

"Scorpius, you will do this. You have two, well maybe four, choices. You can just chose to turn 360 degrees and start a new life; you can learn what I have to teach you and change; you can find yourself living a life totally removed from this one...new life, new history, and no connections to your past; or I can simply Obliviate your entire mind, and you can share a room with the famous Gilderoy Lockhart.

Scorpius looked terrified. "You wouldn't do that."

Severus raised himself to his full height and then bent down and got into Scorpius's face. He gave him the best imitation Hermione had seen of the old Severus. "I can and I will. I will not allow you to hurt my wife or me again. You not only endangered us, you endangered your fellow students."

"They hate me. Why should I care about them," he hissed.

"I know some of those boys; they would embrace you, if you allowed it. They admire your gift in Potions. You could help them; those who struggle in that class would benefit from your knowledge."

"They are Mudbloods and half-breeds; they are on their own," he spat at Severus.

Severus put him in a body bind.

Scorpius eyes got even bigger.

Hermione came closer. "Please Scorpius. I was kidnapped and nearly raped by your grandfather. Is this the man you defend and admire? Do you truly enjoy what it is you do, or do you wish you had other choices? You're so gifted. You can use your gifts for good...maybe be a healer or the maker of miracle potions for our people. You can restore honor and glory to your family name and be proud again. You can help your mother and father financially, so they don't have to work so hard. I have never seen a student more gifted and one who has more possibilities."

"Why would you even care? I tried to kill you; I nearly killed your ghost-man. You must want something from me," he accused her.

"I want to see you happy. I want to see you have friends. I want you to use your gifts to benefit people and not tear them down. Azkaban would be a real waste of talent for you. You ask why I care. You're a young man. It's my business to help steer children into careers that will carry them through their lives with pride and honor. Yes, you tried to kill me, and you nearly killed Professor Snape, but we can rise above that if you will try."

Scorpius just stared at her.

Severus took a deep breath. His inclination was to strangle the child and Obliviate him at the same time, but he held himself in check and said, "Your grandfather was my friend...a friend I desperately needed as a child. We went down a path that cost a dear friend of mine's life. I saw the error of my ways, but your grandfather was a bit older and already on a path that he would not stray from. I did use his friendship and my position as a Death Eater to spy, but it was for the good of our people. Let me show you what it was really like back then. I do not want you to despise your grandfather. I really loved him; I only want you to see that choices have terrible consequences. Will you try the Pensieve and the memories? Your father's a good man; I want to do this for him, as well. It's this or a memory wipe. You have very few choices. I suggest you let us try. You can be a fine young man and a credit to your name and yourself, Scorpius."

Scorpius stared at them for a few minutes. The silence stretched as he weighed his options. He was very curious to see the memories. What would it hurt? He could do whatever he wanted afterwards. The chance to live in the glory days of his grandfather out weighed his thoughts of escape. "I will try the Pensieve."

Severus smiled at him and reached out to squeeze the boy's shoulders, not with real affection, but relief. No matter what Hermione had agreed on, when it came down to it she would not support him changing the boy, not in her heart. She always tried to find the good in people, and defense of herself and friends always came as a last resort for her.

Hermione came and touched Scorpius's shoulder. "I'm proud of you for making this choice. Now run along and go have dinner."

The boy shot them a confused look and ran from the room.

Severus reached out to take Hermione in his arms, and she sagged against him.

"Thank God, Severus. I thought he would not even consider cooperation for a while there."

"Neither did I."

He held her as much to comfort himself as her. They were embarking on a dangerous path. He owed his long-ago friend the salvation of his grandson. It didn't matter whether the Lucius of today would support that or not. Severus knew it would make him feel better about his betrayal.

Severus kissed Hermione and then just stood, holding her close.

"You are my brave, little warrior. You have every right to want to see that boy Obliviated, yet you chose to try to save him. This is one of the reasons I love you so much. You see past the horrors of a person's past and accept them as they change and go forward. Where would I be without you?"

"Still in your bubble, I suppose. Severus, let's write that letter to Harry." She took paper from her desk, and they sat side by side and composed a letter to Harry and Ginny. Severus summoned an owl, and they sent the message off.

She slipped her arms around his neck and urged him lower so she could kiss him. "I'm glad that's done." She sighed. I suppose we need to go to dinner tonight in the Great Hall. I think Minerva will want to announce our marriage for the benefit of the students. We have been living in sin." She laughed.

Severus grinned down at her. "I suppose she will. Come on then, we'd better get moving. We don't want them all to think we are still fighting."

"It wasn't a fight more than a misunderstanding," she said as they left the classroom.

Severus locked and warded the door.

"Whatever it was, I do not want to repeat it anytime soon. My heart grieves when we are apart in our harmony."

Hermione laced her fingers with his. "I feel the same way, Severus. I will try to be more worthy of your love," she promised.

He said, softly for only her ears to hear, "You are always worthy of my love. I am the one who is rather rough around the edges."

"Well, we will just have to smooth those edges off each night, won't we?" she said in a seductive whisper, for they were coming to the hall and children were moving around them to go in the huge door.

"Tonight? I can get behind that." He smiled. They went to the staff table, and Severus pulled out Hermione's chair and sat next to her. They put their heads together to talk.

Minerva and Poppy exchanged sighs of relief. Things were okay again. Minerva stood and went to the podium, and the students saw her and became quiet.

"Good evening. I trust you have all had a good day back from your holiday. I would like to make an announcement. You are all aware that Professor Snape, now free of his spell, has come to live here. This weekend Madam Granger and he were married."

Albus gave a yell, as did Hagrid, and the rest of the students followed. There was a huge uproar, and then Minerva held up her hands, and they calmed down. "I would ask you to congratulate them, should the moment arise, and welcome Professor Snape as a permanent member of the staff at Hogwarts. He will be helping Mr. Filch for now and will be working with Madam Snape fifth hour. There will be other duties as they arise. Now enjoy your meal and then get to your common rooms and do your homework. We all want to be rested and ready for tomorrow's Quidditch Game, Slytherin vs. Gryffindor."

Hermione and Severus looked at each other and laughed. Finally, the rival game had arrived.

Lisa, thank you for your excellent beta work.

Becky and Angela, thank you for pre-reading and comments.

Chapter 24

Chapter 24 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

Finally we have come to the first very adult chapter. I hope you enjoy it.

After dinner, they wandered out onto the grounds. It was cold, but with their robes, it was comfortable. Severus did his ward checking, and then they walked down to the lake and sat on a bench to look at the water and watch the reflection of the moon move across the lake. Occasionally, the merpeople would jump out of the water. Hermione and Severus sat holding each other and enjoying the peace.

"When will you begin to show Scorpius the memories?" she asked.

Severus squirmed a bit. Having the boy view his memories would not be a very comfortable thing. He would have to choose those that would horrify the child and yet not damage him.

"I should begin tomorrow, but I have not yet decided what to show him. I am uncomfortable about revisiting those days as well, Hermione. The past is best left in the past."

"Do you want me to go with you?" she asked in earnest, curious herself.

"No, please don't ask that of me. I do not want you to see what I truly was." He pulled her closer, and she could feel him trembling against her. "Much of it was horribly humiliating. Voldemort would make us grovel at his feet, and then he would torture us for his own pleasure. You might lose all respect for me."

"Severus, that would never happen. I respect you more for the torture you went through. I only want to be there to give you support as you relive these memories and allow you to see me and know that's not your life now. I want you to know that what awaits you outside the Pensieve is bright and wonderful." She pressed her cheek against his chest and held him tightly.

"I will think about it. Will you give me the choice without becoming angry if I can not bear you to see that time in my life?" he asked in a fearful voice.

"I will not be angry, Severus. There are parts of my life I don't want you to see either, but I would share them with you if it would make us closer or make you love me more. I know this will be difficult for Scorpius, too, and having a woman there might not work for him," she admitted. "Come on let's go to bed."

Severus asked Minerva if he could magically enhance a corner of the Potion's classroom into an office so that he could work with Scorpius.

She looked a bit like Hermione had at the possibility of one of her teachers Obliviating a student. "Are you sure this is your only choice, Severus? He's a boy."

"Yes, he's a very dangerous boy. I will be careful with what I choose to show him. None of it will glorify Voldemort's powers in any way. I want to show him what loyalty to his grandfather means. In the meantime, Hermione and I will try the path of kindness and encouragement with him. We'll help him to have successes with his schoolwork. Maybe we can try something new this year...a contest for those who excel in Potion's. We have a few gifted children. This could very well give Scorpius school notoriety if he wins. He's a very lonely boy, much like I was as a child. Lonely and angry. If we can guide his energy into paths for good, he may change, Minerva."

"Severus, I am concerned but pleased that you would undertake the job of trying to rehabilitate Scorpius." It was more to his credit and showed her how much Severus Snape had changed. He'd always been rather selfish and out to watch his own hide before the war. Maybe Albus had done him a huge service after all.

Minerva said, "Take Albus' Pensieve. It will serve you well."

Severus stood and said, "Thank you, Minerva. I am concerned about the path Hermione and I have decided to take with Scorpius, but I do feel this is his only chance to make a choice for the better. But know that if he makes a move toward Hermione or myself again, I will take appropriate action."

Minerva nodded and watched him use his wand to adjust the weight of the Pensieve so he could carry it down to his office.

"Tread carefully, Severus. We do not want to create a new Voldemort."

"Believe me, Minerva, that boy will live a perfectly comfortable Muggle life before that happens."

She nodded. "Watch your back."

Severus said, "I will. Thank you for not sending me packing for having such a wild plan."

"Something has to be done. If anyone can do it, it's Hermione and you."

Severus gave her a slight bow and then swished away with his robes billowing behind him.

By the time fifth hour arrived, he had his office "built," furnished, and ready to go.

Hermione stood with him to admire the room. It had a fine oak desk and a comfortable desk chair. There was a high-back chair for whomever he might be working with. There was a fireplace to warm the room when it was cold and shelves, with glass windows, filled with books from their living quarters. There was even an enchanted window that appeared to look out over the lake. It made the room light and comfortable.

Hermione sat in the chair and swung her one of her legs over the arm. "Hmm, I could think of a few things to do here," she teased him.

He grinned at her. "Only a few?" he questioned. "I can help you with those fantasies."

They heard the class entering the outer room. Hermione sighed and got up. As she passed Severus, she raised her fingers and ran them along under his chin. "Later," she promised. "We will christen your new office."

Severus' eyes grew bigger and his eyebrow arched. "I'll look forward to that." He had to stand there a bit to get himself under control. It didn't take much to turn him on.

The class went pretty well. Scorpius worked with Albus, and Severus saw they shared a word here or there during their brewing time. There were no deadly glares from the boy today. When class was over, he hung around until everyone else had left.

Severus asked, "Can I help you, Mr. Malfoy?"

"Sir, I was wondering when we were going to start our lessons," he said, avoiding really looking at Severus.

Severus was pleased that he seemed to be at least interested enough to ask. "Tomorrow after school if that's okay with you," he answered.

Scorpius nodded. His eyes were wide with fear and excitement. "Thank you, sir. Madam." He nodded at Hermione and then hurried out of the room.

Hermione raised her eyebrow at Severus. "Dare we hope that was progress already?"

Severus said, "I will know when I can feel what kind of attitude he has toward the memories. Does he want to see them for ideas to enhance his magic to do more harm, or will he respond to people who actually give him respect and encouragement? We must not allow his benevolence to knock us off guard."

Hermione nodded as the next class of students started to filter in through the door.

Severus sighed. "I best be getting about my rounds."

Hermione watched him go and swore his shoulders slumped a bit. He already hated his other duties here, and she couldn't blame him. He was a teacher, not a security guard. She vowed to make him very happy tonight.

After dinner, Severus had to make a couple more rounds, so Hermione went back to their rooms and prepared herself for the evening. She bathed and scented her body, smoothing soft creams over it. She dried her hair into thick, long waves. She applied some make-up, and then she dressed. She left Severus a note with instructions. She then made her way to the new office, making very sure the classroom was locked and warded. It would not do to have a student come looking for them. She blushed just thinking about it. She settled herself into the high-backed chair with a good book to await her husband.

Severus, weary from rounds, entered the classroom, locked and warded it, and headed for their rooms. He found it empty. "Hermione," he called as he pulled off his outer cloak and unbuttoned his shirt at the neck. It was then he saw the note propped up on the table. He reached out and took the note and curiously opened it.

Severus, please take a bath, dress in your usual teachers' robes, and meet me in your office. Bring your old, grumpy self.

Severus stared at the last words and then grinned like a schoolboy. This night had possibilities after all.

He bathed carefully but quickly and dried his hair with his wand. It was a bit fluffy, but it shone with highlights and was getting quite long. He found he liked it. He shaved carefully and used a potion to soften his skin. He wondered what Hermione had in mind as he left their quarters and headed for his new office.

He opened the door and found her hidden behind a rather large book.

"Miss Granger, I did not give you permission to touch my books. I will just have to lengthen your detention for this evening," he said in his old, hard voice.

Hermione lowered the book a bit and batted her wide eyes at him. "Why, Professor Snape, what horrible detention do you have in store for me?" She stood and walked away from him and placed the book on a low shelf.

Severus stared. His mouth dropped open, and he felt himself get hard. Hermione had a ridiculously short school uniform on. As she bent, he was aware that she didn't have knickers on. She turned toward him, and her blouse was low and revealing. Her round breast tops were quite visible. She had altered the style so there wasn't much of a top in the first place; a tie hung around her neck, and small cape was draped over her shoulders.

"You are underdressed, Miss Granger," he said dryly. His voice was thick with sexual tension.

She came forward and took him by his cloak and pulled him close. "You're overdressed, Professor Snape." She pulled him down and kissed him, her tongue delving into his mouth.

He slipped his hand down her back and squeezed her naked buttock. She twisted away from him as she danced away. "That is unseemly behavior, Professor Snape. I just may have to punish you myself."

He looked on, intrigued. "What exactly did you have in mind, Miss Granger?" His eyes crinkled with his desire to laugh at her and take her where she stood.

He groaned, becoming very uncomfortable in his tight garments.

"Come stand before me, and I will show you what I can do for you. Grumpy old professors need a lesson or two in the giving of detention."

He came and stood before her. She unbuckled his trousers while he pulled off his vest and shirt. She released him, and he sighed with pleasure as her cool hands stroked his hot shaft. He found himself thrusting against her hand.

"You're an impatient professor, aren't you?" She walked to the chair and bent herself over it, placing her hands on the arms, her face toward the back of the chair. Her

uniform skirt nearly vanished, leaving her bare and positioned. He could see her thatch of red hair glistening with the moisture of her arousal.

He came behind her and took himself in his hand and guided himself to her. She pushed back, impaling herself onto his shaft. They both groaned with pleasure. Severus placed his hands on her hips, drawing her closer and then pushing her away to draw himself partially out. They set about perfecting a rhythm to bring them to the heights of pleasure."

"Harder, Professor Snape," she cried. "Harder, Severus."

"Ah, Miss Granger, I will have to punish you for your impertinence." He was gasping as he neared his climax.

Hermione slammed herself back against him, pushing him deeper than he'd ever been and setting her orgasm off. She felt him fill her with his seed. He fell forward, planting his hands next to hers, covering her with his body, still inside her. He kissed her neck.

Hermione could feel his heart beating against her back. They both just stood there, trying to get their breaths. Finally Severus slipped his arms around her and they stood. He reached for his wand and cleaned them up. Then he slowly fondled her breast gently. "You're so beautiful."

"Now, Professor, it is time for your punishment."

She went to the chair and turned it toward him. She sat on the chair and placed one leg over each arm, spreading herself out for him. "Get down on your knees. You will pleasure me until I scream," she said sternly, though her eyes were full of mirth and desire.

He used his wand to create a thick kneepad and then went to his knees and slid his hand along her legs and up her thighs. He then bent to kiss a trail up the inside of her right thigh. He slipped his arms under her knees and around to pull her closer, and his tongue slipped inside of her as he pressed into her, and she pushed herself against his face and cried out with pleasure. His nose became a tool as it stimulated her nub, and he strove to reach deeper into her. She buried her hands in his hair, pulling his face closer. She felt herself ready to cum, and she screamed as he sucked her nub, bringing her over the edge. He came up and kissed her, and she tasted her musk on his face and tongue. He lowered his mouth to suck on her breasts. She felt him hard between her legs, so she moved closer to the edge of the chair and guided him inside her once again, clamping her legs around his body. They found this a bit awkward, so he drew her to the floor and took her hard and fast on the floor right between the chair and the desk. They were laughing when they climaxed, and Severus collapsed on her, summoning a blanket from their rooms to cover their cold backsides.

"Wife, you are a minx. I have to tell you, I never had a fantasy about one of my students, but I can't think of a more classic fantasy to re-enact with my beautiful wife. I thought I might have a heart attack when you bent over to put that book away."

She giggled. "I was shaking with desire for you just thinking about it today."

He held her close a moment. Then he climbed to his feet and pulled her to her feet, and they walked to their rooms. Sitting in a warm bath, Severus wrapped his legs around her. He loved holding her close, his hands sliding over her breasts with thick body soap.

Later, dressed in nightclothes, they sat cross-legged on the bed while they ate cheese and meat on bread and drank wine.

They talked about the next day and a little of what Severus had decided to do during Scorpius's first lesson.

Hermione was concerned but decided to not press him about being there. She had to allow him the freedom to choose. She would decide when she saw the end result whether she should stress going with them on their next journey into the Pensieve.

They lay together giggling about their *detention* as they fell asleep.

Lisa, thank you so much for the beta work you do for me. Your the best.

Angela and Becky, thank you for your feedback.

Chapter 25

Chapter 25 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

Scorpius entered the office about an hour after school the next afternoon. Severus looked up and said, "There you are, Mr. Malfoy. Come in, come in. Please have a seat, and we will talk about your lessons." Severus stood and came around his desk and sat on the edge.

Scorpius sat down in the big chair. It made him look smaller. He fidgeted with his hands and picked at his nails nervously.

Severus towered over him from that position. "You should be proud of the work you did in class today, Scorpius. Madam Pomfrey was quite pleased with the Pepperup Potion you brewed. She said it was the most potent batch she's ever seen a student brew."

Scorpius looked pleased for a brief second, but then he masked it with a scowl. "I just followed the instructions; any student could have done it."

"They could have made the potion, yes, but not the quality of yours. I was watching, and you used a different stir pattern. Why did you do that?" Severus asked, genuinely interested.

"The ingredients have to be integrated a slightly different way," Scorpius explained.

"I did a lot of changing potion instructions in my day. You could write your own book."

"You don't have to pretend to like me or encourage me, Professor." His voice had a hard edge to it. "I want to get through these lessons and be done with this."

Severus stared down at the little brat. "I don't like you, Scorpius. There's no reason I can think of to like you. I suffered much at your hands. I'd just as well Obliviate you than stand here and talk to you," Severus said, glaring down at the boy. "My wife wants me to do this. You put one foot out of line, and I will break your wand and sentence you to a nonmagical life. You will be a squib. Is that what you want?" He was now down in the boy's face.

Scorpius drew back until his head touched the back of the chair and there was nowhere else to go. He could see the hardness in the man, and he felt his body start to tremble with fear. He could not imagine anything more horrible than a life without magic.

Severus stood, went to a cabinet behind the desk, and pulled out the Pensieve. He sat it on a lower table close to Scorpius. Never taking his eyes off the boy, he brought his wand to his forehead, and a long strand of silver appeared and attached itself to his wand. Severus waved it over the Pensieve and shook it off. It landed and spread out in the Pensieve like silver water.

"We will be seeing events from the past. We will visit a number of memories, and you will see what it was like to be alive in that time under the mastership of Voldemort. Your grandfather will be with me in nearly all, if not all, the memories."

Scorpius was watching, fascinated. The silver reflection in his eyes made him look alien, and he got closer and stared down into the bowl.

"You cannot make me hate my grandfather, no matter what you show me."

"Scorpius, I do not want to make you hate him. I only want you to see that he perhaps glorified things, and they were not so pretty. Life was hard then, and there were few rewards at our Master's hands. We were like white rats to him. He used us to experiment on and torture for his own amusement. He used us to lie, steal, and on occasion murder good people."

"When I say go, you will plunge your face into the memory. Try not to get disoriented when you are dragged into it. You will see the events of the day, but no one there can hear or see you. I will be there as well, Scorpius."

The boy nodded, not taking his eyes off the memory.

Severus stood on one side and he on the other. "This was one of Lucius and my first meetings with Voldemort. Now go!" he commanded and plunged his face in. He felt Scorpius join him.

They fell through a tunnel of light and color and found themselves in the Forbidden Forest. Two boys, one about 15 and one about 17, were making their way through the dense, dark trees. They were as different as night and day. One was obviously rich and wore clothing fit for one of high stature. He had long, blond almost white, silky hair, and the nails of his hands were manicured. He had a superior air about himself. The other was lanky and awkward, and he wore cast-off clothing that was too big for him. His hair hung in greasy long strands as black as a raven's wing. They were hopping from fallen tree limbs to stumps, trying to make it through the forest without touching the ground. They laughed as they went. The boys played the game to take their minds off their destination. They were going to see the dark wizard Tom Riddle. He promised great power. For the blond boy, whose name was Lucius, it gave him vision of being richer and having enormous power. For the poor boy, it was simply a place to belong and to be accepted by peers.

Severus glanced at Scorpius who stood next to him. The boy's face was unreadable as he watched the teenage version of his grandfather. Severus realized how much Scorpius looked like Lucius at that age.

The young Severus took a misstep and fell onto the forest floor. Lucius laughed and landed next to him, holding out his hand. Severus extended his hand, and Lucius pulled him to his feet and said, "See, old buddy, if you would go out for Quidditch, you would learn balance, and you wouldn't have two left feet."

"Quidditch is a sport for the rich with fancy brooms or idiots who can't spell their own names to have some glory in their lives. Potions will get you power and richness if you're gifted enough," he said, dusting his backside off.

"Well, that's your opinion. I like Quidditch, and it's better than sitting in a stuffy old library all the time. But you're right; your knowledge of Potions is what will help you get into Voldemort's good graces. You have little else to offer him," he said rather bluntly.

Severus saw Scorpius grin at his grandfather's stinging comment. Severus found his chest constricting with emotion. He'd had no idea how hard this was going to be. He'd just as soon never revisit his life back then. He wished he could reach out and change the course for Severus and Lucius by telling them that the path they were heading on tonight would bring them terrible suffering. But it was only a memory and therefore set in stone. For his friend Lucius, there was no redemption; for himself, there was the joy Hermione brought to him each day.

The boys had come to a clearing in the forest. There was a fire burning there, and other young men wandered in and out of the light. They stepped from the forest and came into the light only to find about eight wands pointed in their direction.

"Who goes there?" a gruff voice asked.

"Malfoy and Snape," Lucius said. "We are here by invitation. We are here for glory." This was the pass phrase he'd been told to say.

The wands were lowered, and a deep voice called out from the shadows. "Come closer to the light so I might look at you."

The two boys walked closer to the fire. There was the smell of molding forest leaves and fungus; the smoke from the fire irritated their eyes.

"I see why I can use your strengths blond one, but what does the other have to offer? He is but a cast-off."

Lucius bowed low. "Dark Lord, this boy is very gifted in Potions. He will no doubt be a Master one day. You will have need of a great Potions maker as you rise to power."

A tall man stepped into the light. He had an aura of great power about him. His eyes were so dark they were nearly black. He had a thick head of hair and wore it short. His clothing spoke of wealth though Scorpius knew he had been poor like Snape. He must be availing himself of someone's money.

He drew an ash grey wand. With it, he forced the boys to their knees.

"He could have just asked," Scorpius whispered.

"Yes, he could have, but that was never his way," Severus explained.

"You wish to pledge yourself to me and allow me to direct your lives. I promise you there will be riches enough for all of us...riches and powers you cannot fathom. What say ye?" he asked.

Severus felt his body tremble with the emotion of seeing this again. As a teen, he'd realized as he'd kneeled there with his nose nearly to the ground that if he refused he would die. This Dark Lord was raising an army of wizards to take over the wizarding world. Yet he had had no loyalties to the world and ideas Dumbledore supported; he had never been given a fair shot. The "good" boys could torture him and get slaps on the wrist. If he retaliated, he got detentions for weeks. He heard Lucius say, "I will pledge myself to you, my Lord."

"What say you, Potion-master-in-the-making?" Tom Riddle asked.

"I pledge myself to you, Dark Lord. My talent will be yours."

"Raise up on your knees and extend your left arms," he demanded.

The boys rose up and held out their arms. Riddle pressed the tip of his wand into Lucius's arm, and Lucius clenched his teeth against the pain. Blackness bubbled up under his skin, and he fought his fear and the desire to cry out. The death mask and snake tattoo formed quickly, and Riddle pulled the wand away and turned toward Severus, who was now white as a sheet. The wand went against his arm, and he clenched his teeth lest he cry out as the tattoo formed on his arm.

Scorpius stood white, too, and Severus couldn't still his wildly beating heart. It was like watching an old picture show of Romeo and Juliet where you knew what the ending was, and you wanted to shout, "*No, don't do that!*" or "*No, don't take the poison!*" But it still happened every time.

Riddle smiled, but it wasn't a pleasant smile. "Learn what it means to be my enemy before you learn what it means to be my friend." He brandished his wand *Crucio!*"

Severus and Lucius were hit by the curse, and they screamed with pain and writhed on the ground.

Severus watched with his hands clenched and his nails biting into the flesh of his palms. He felt the warm blood drip down his fingers.

Scorpius swayed, and Severus grabbed him. Lucius was up on his knees, vomiting onto the dirt, and Severus followed. When Tom Riddle released them, they fell onto their faces.

Severus grabbed Scorpius and pulled him from the Pensive.

Scorpius was white as a sheet, and Severus dropped him into the chair and collapsed onto his own chair.

"If I did not care what path you are on, boy, I would not relive this nightmare of a life I had for anything," he said.

Scorpius asked, "Are we done?" He was green as could be.

"Yes, but I expect to see you at dinner. If you are ill, go see Madam Pomfrey. I will come to check on you if you do not show up."

The boy nodded and ran.

Hermione must have been waiting outside the door because she entered the room immediately and came to him. He buried his face between her breasts and cried. She stood for a long time caressing his hair and whispering words of love and encouragement to him.

"I'm sorry, Severus. I should never have asked you to do this. We can find another way."

"No," he said. "This is the only way to reach him. He showed real emotion and fear." Finally he stood and arm-in-arm they went into their rooms, and Severus washed his face. He took a potion to settle his stomach and nerves, and Hermione put dittany on the wounds on his hands. They made their way to the Great Hall.

"Let me go with you the next time. I will be more of an anchor and a comfort to you," she said as they went down the hall.

"Hermione, I don't want you to see that part of my life. I don't want you to see the horror it was. I could not bear it if you turned from me."

"Severus, I love you. That will not happen." She held his arm tightly.

"You cannot guarantee that. You do not know how bad it was. I was forced to kill innocents."

She pushed him into an alcove. "I know that, Severus. Do you think any of our hands are clean? All of us killed in that final battle. It was kill or be killed."

"That's defense; it's not cold blooded murder," he tried to explain.

"You survived. For you, it was self-preservation," she told him.

"Some would think it braver to die than to hurt others," he said, ashamed.

"You had to stay alive to help Harry. There was no other choice, Severus."

"I will think on it, Hermione. Please don't ask me for an answer tonight," he begged.

"All right." She drew him down for a kiss. "I will support you without question whatever you decide. You have my word."

He held her a moment and then pulled her out into the hall and they continued to the Great Hall. They went to their seats, and Severus looked over at the Slytherin table.

Scorpius sat in his usual place a little ways away from the last student. He was toying with the food on his plate, and he did not look up during the whole meal.

Hermione ate, but Severus pushed the food around on his plate as well. The images from his mind had brought back things he'd rather not feel. Images that had faded in his thoughts with time were so new, now, so real. Could he stand to resurrect more of them?

He felt Hermione take his hand. "Let's go home."

Scorpius watched them go. He still felt shaky inside at what he'd seen. He'd barely made it to the bathroom before losing his lunch. His grandfather, who was so regal, had been tortured and degraded for the glory of what? Maybe Professor Snape was trying to help him. But Scorpius wanted to see more. He would not allow Snape to know how much this had affected him.

For this story I have only a 3 year difference in age between Lucius and Severus.

Lisa, thank you so much for getting this to me so quickly. You are the best.

Angela and Becky, thank you for your comments and input.

Chapter 26

Chapter 26 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

Warning: This session with Scorpius is even more brutal than the last one.

As Severus prepared to head out for his rounds the next morning, there was a knock on his office door.

"Come in," he called. The door opened, and he heard foot steps but didn't see anyone. "Filius?" Severus guessed before the small man appeared from behind the tall chair.

"Do you have a minute?" Filius asked, climbing into the chair and looking up at Severus.

"Yes, of course. How have you been? We haven't had much of a chance to talk since I became visible."

Filius fidgeted, and then he took a deep breath.

Severus waited patiently.

"You do know that Minerva asked me to take her place when she retired?" he asked.

"Yes," Severus said slowly. "I know you will do a good job."

"I really don't want the job," he blurted out. "I would have taken it, and I would have done well, but I really would rather not," he said, looking down at his hands.

"You deserve the appointment, Filius. You've been here many years, and you weren't a Death Eater. I'd say you are more qualified than I was."

"Severus, I love teaching. I do not enjoy bureaucrats, nor do I like paper work. I enjoy teaching Charms and working with the choir. I really have no desire to become Headmaster. Minerva would have never asked me had she known you'd come back. I know you'd be excellent in the position, as you've done it before under very difficult circumstances. I'm sorry we were not all more supportive. We all had blinders on under the circumstances. Dumbledore would not have trusted you so if he had not been certain."

Severus waved his hand to dismiss the apology. "It's the past, Filius. I was successful because I was a good actor and a good spy. It was my job to look guilty. Dumbledore asked too much of me."

Filius nodded. "I agree with you there." He squirmed a bit. He'd always been a gentle man, and he tried to stay out of any and all conflict. He just wanted to teach and enjoy his life.

"Well to the point, I would like to know if you would take the position if I relinquished my promise to Minerva. I feel you would be the best man for the job. I will do the job if you do not take it. But I truly wish you would. I want the school to be the best it can be, and we do not want to leave it open to a Ministry appointment, do we?"

Severus gave him a thin smile. "No, Filius, we definitely do not want to do that. If it is your wish and you truly want out of this job, I will take it for the good of Hogwarts."

Filius actually bounced up and down on his chair for a moment. "Jolly good, I'm spared. Thank you, Severus." He climbed down off the chair, and Severus got up and came around the desk and shook the small man's hand.

"You're small in stature but a great man, Filius. I will be happy to have you as an ally and friend as we both take care of Hogwarts for the future of wizards and witches in England. I expect you to come to me if you see I'm not doing the job properly."

"Of course, of course," he said, rubbing his hands together with glee. "I'd better get to my class." He waddled out of the room as quickly as his short legs would carry him.

Severus found he had tears in his eyes. He was saved from a mundane life of security and substitution. He would be content to run this school and have Hermione by his side. This would be their home. It had been his home nearly three quarters of his life.

He stood, straightened his robes, and walked from his office. Hermione was just letting her second hour class in the door. She smiled at him with a curious look on her face. He smiled and nodded to her as he passed through the classroom.

"I will tell you at lunch," he said, placing a kiss against her temple as he went down the hall.

Hermione watched him go and noted that he seemed to be standing straighter and his step was lighter. She turned to her class. "Take your seats; we will begin immediately. Turn to page 76 in your book. Today we'll be studying headache potions."

Severus walked through the halls of Hogwarts and breathed in the scent of old stone and the metal of its armor. This school had nurtured him when he had no one to support him. Through Poppy, this school had become a home. He could not imagine a finer history to uphold. He sighed. Becoming Headmaster after this year was completed meant facing Dumbledore. He had to confront him, didn't he? With the love that was his through Hermione, he no longer found he was angry at Dumbledore for what he had done. How could you be angry about having found the love of your life? Granted, his methods had a lot to be desired. But Severus could not imagine life without his beautiful wife.

He would go into that office and tell that bastard off for not having given him a choice. But in the end, he would thank him for the love that was now a part of his life. He found he looked forward to visiting with his old friend again. There was a lot they needed to say to each other.

Severus stepped out the front door, and a warm sun hit his face and warmed his body. Life was getting better and better. Now all he had to do was get through his "lessons" with Scorpius. He hoped that he could help the boy for the sake of his godson Draco and in memory of the friendship he'd had with Lucius.

He decided to go see Minerva after rounds and make sure this was what she wanted, as well. He was not disappointed.

Hermione was waiting for him when he returned to the classroom. He came and took her in his arms and held her and told her what Filius had wanted and about his conversation with Minerva. Hermione congratulated him and held him close, knowing this would help him tremendously. She knew he'd been at loose ends about his future.

"Will you truly be happy not teaching and not working with potions?" she asked.

"I will have a private potion's lab at my disposal. Albus showed it to me once. The quarters there are quite something, as well. We will live in style." His happiness was contagious, and Hermione felt a weight lift off her shoulders.

"I'm so happy for you, Severus." She kissed him and buried her face in his neck.

"You're relieved, too, I imagine." He laughed. "The old man won't be dawdling around with nothing important to do. No one wants to be married to a security man."

"Severus!" She playfully smacked him. "I don't care if you're cleaning toilets as long as you're with me, you love me, and you're happy. But you deserve to have this job,

and you will be amazing at it. You need something to stretch your mind and occupy your time. This job is so much more. It's a huge honor." She snickered. "Maybe when you're old and retired, I will take your place."

He grinned down at her. "I don't plan to retire for a very long time, my love. You will just have to be happy with the position you have."

She grinned. "I can handle that; you just work as long as you're able. I am after all Muggleborn. You have the advantage."

Severus pulled her close and held her tightly. He would not think of a time when one of them was gone and the other left alone.

"Come on," he finally said, "we'd better get to lunch. We have fifth hour to look forward to and my session with Scorpius."

With those sobering thoughts, they slowly went to lunch.

Severus stood when Scorpius came into the room. "Mister Malfoy, how was your day?"

"OK," the boy said, looking toward the Pensieve with a bit of trepidation.

Severus followed his gaze, feeling about the same. "We can talk about the last memory instead of viewing a new one if you wish," he told the boy.

"No, I want to see more." His face was defiant and hard.

"Very well." He went toward the Pensieve and Scorpius followed.

Severus drew a deep breath and pulled a silver memory from his forehead and dropped it into the Pensieve. "Go," he commanded as he plunged his face into the Pensieve.

Severus found that Scorpius was a step ahead of him. There was an old house up ahead, surrounded by dark, tall trees. There was a low glow of candlelight in a window, seen only because the night was pitch black. Severus stepped to Scorpius' side.

"Come on," he said.

He went ahead and heard the boy's steps on the gravely stone of the long, dirt road that went up to the house.

As they entered, Scorpius saw that it was an old house, one that may have been abandoned in the past. The halls were covered in peeling wallpaper. There were piles of leaves against the hall walls. Dust covered everything.

Harsh voices could be heard ahead; hushed remarks were being bandied back and forth.

They entered a bedroom where a woman lay on the bed. Her hands were tied to it by scarves. Severus, a few years older than the boy they had seen earlier, was staring at her with huge eyes. She had been beaten and possibly brutalized. He had his arms clutched around him, and he was yelling, "Lucius, please just leave her. You can't do this."

It was then they saw Lucius, standing in a corner with his hands over his face. "I have no choice, Severus. If we don't do this, Tom will kill us."

"What have we gotten ourselves into? I did not sign on to be a murderer. I wanted to make potions. Tom has helped me finish my studies and get my master's degree earlier than most. I never thought he'd ask me to kill with my knowledge."

"Really?" Lucius sneered. "What did you think he would want with it? He needs poisons to best his enemies. That vial you have will end her suffering. It will end her pain. All you have to do is pour it into her mouth. Severus, give it to me and just walk away. I will make sure she's dead."

"Please, Lucius, we can leave the country and start over in America. We can get away from all of this. This will lead to war. Don't you realize this?"

"Realize it? You're an idiot, Severus. I'm counting on it! Now give me the potion. I will do it."

"Why must she die, Lucius?" Severus' hand shook as he held on to the vial with a death grip.

"She knows what Tom's planning, and she will alert the wizarding world," Lucius told him. "It's not time yet. We aren't ready. Now give me that vial, Severus." Lucius grabbed his hand and tried to pry the vial out of it. "You will get us killed. I am looking forward to the things Tom can teach us. We will have power that you can't imagine. I have heard a rumor that he knows how to fly. Think of it, Severus!"

Severus looked at the pleading eyes of the bound woman, and he jerked away from Lucius grip. The vial went flying and shattered against a wall. The vile, black fluid from inside ran down the wall.

"Severus, now look what you've done. He's coming, and she must die. There is no other choice." Lucius wrung his hands together and went to the bed. He stood, looking at her with panic in his eyes. Suddenly, he lunged at her and put his hands about her throat and squeezed."

Severus came forward. "No, Lucius, no!" Severus tried to pull him away.

Lucius turned and backhanded Severus so hard he landed on his butt on the floor.

Scorpius turned to look at Severus and found the man was deathly white and had his eyes closed. He looked back and watched as

Lucius then strangled the woman with his bare hands. Scorpius heard his grandfather's younger self laugh. "That was an amazing feeling. You could feel the life drain from her. That was power. I held her life in my hands, and she surrendered to my strength."

Severus struggled to his feet. He was horrified. "Lucius, I've seen you kill before but never with your bare hands." He felt his stomach turn. "You're a monster. I'm trapped in this hell with you."

Lucius laughed and put an arm around Severus. "You're such a dramatist. We are headed for glory, my friend. Glory, power, and wealth. That will keep you warm at night.

Suddenly Tom was there. The man was beautiful. His bright eyes would have made women swoon, but there was a twisted glint in them that made Scorpius back away and stop against Severus. Severus placed his hands on the boy's shoulders for support, as much for himself as the boy.

He looked at the woman's body like she was a gross bug and then said, "I told you to try the poison. Did you strangle her?" His voice was low and dangerous. The young men looked scared.

"Severus, did you not use the poison as I requested?" Tom asked, coming close.

Severus avoided looking at his eyes. "Yes, sir, there was an accident." He could not help glancing at the wall stained with the poison.

Tom glanced there, as well, as he assessed the situation and looked at the marks on the woman's throat. "If you are to work with me, you must follow my instructions to the

letter. Do you hear me?" He came very close to Severus, and the young man cowered before him.

"Yes, My Lord. It will not happen again." Severus went to his knees and touched Tom's shoes with his forehead.

Tom looked at Lucius. "You were in charge, and it was your duty to see that it was done right. He is young, and it will take time to train him." His look was so wilting that Lucius went down on his knees.

Tom pulled his wand before the two young men realized and shouted, "*Crucio!*"

He watched with pleasure as the two young men screamed and writhed before him. This time, the torture went on longer, and they were unconscious before he stopped.

Scorpius had turned toward Severus to block the view, and Severus held him against his body with his face buried in his chest.

"Can we go?" he asked with a sob.

"No, not yet."

Severus watched as Tom left them there, unconscious. Finally, there was a groan.

Scorpius turned back to see Severus struggle to his feet and go to arouse Lucius. Lucius was crying when he woke. He sobbed, holding on to Severus.

"I wish we could run. But if we go, he will hunt us down, and we will be just as dead as that woman. You and I have to stick together. You have to back me up when we have a job."

Severus nodded. "I won't let you down again."

Now Severus took hold of Scorpius and pulled him out.

The boy sobbed against him. Severus went down on his knees and pushed the boy back so he could look in his eyes. "There may have been financial success for your grandfather. He became hard after that night. But was it worth the pain we went through nearly every time? Voldemort was even more warped when he returned, and he was furious with all of us for not looking for him...for not helping him when his body was destroyed and only a shred of his spirit roamed looking for substance to stay alive. Scorpius, there was no honor and glory. There was only death, pain, and horror masked by richness."

Scorpius pulled away. "I don't care what you say. My grandfather loves me, and he taught me that I can have anything I want if I'm strong enough to fight for it."

"Yes, by all means, fight for what you want. But use good and not evil to get there. Evil begets more evil, and it will destroy your soul like it has done to Lucius."

Scorpius glared at him. "I will not betray my grandfather. He has loved me and my Father with all that he was. He did all of it for us and my grandmother." He ran from the room.

Severus slumped into his chair and sat with his hands in his face. He did not hear or see Hermione come in until he felt her hands on his hair. He pulled her down into his lap and took his wand from the desk to and locked the door. He let himself cry again. The tears seemed to wash the pain from his heart, and Hermione's presence soothed his soul.

"Severus, how did he react?" she asked once he'd calmed enough to talk.

"He cried. He hid his face from what I showed him, and he held on to me. Lucius killed a woman with his own hands. I hoped he would see the futility of dark magic and evil deeds. This is why I chose those memories. But his voice was still filled with anger and hate when he ran out of here." He slumped against her, holding her tightly. "What if we can not change his course? I do not know if I could follow through with my threats to Obliviate him. Seeing these things again shows me more and more that I chose the right course when I came to Dumbledore and begged him for help."

Hermione kissed his face and said, "Scorpius was crying when he ran out. He may have angry words, but his armor is cracking. I think eventually he will come and apologize for what he did and mean it."

Severus buried his face in her hair. He said, "I used to use my long hair to hide behind. It was a measure of distance between myself and others. It allowed me to observe others unnoticed. Now your hair is my refuge, Hermione. The scent and thickness are my refuge, as is your body and heart. I could not do this with out you, my love."

They sat there for a long time, and Hermione just loved him.

Thank you, Lisa, for the wonderful Beta work you do for me. I appreciate your extra effort in getting this chapter to me before your vacation.

Angela and Becky, thank you so much for your comments.

Chapter 27

Chapter 27 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

My friend Becky wrote a small drabble for the beginning of a tryst between SS/HG. I will seperate it and italicize it.

Severus had fallen asleep in her arms the night before. He'd told her the gist of the memories; she knew that was easier for him than her seeing the things he had participated in firsthand. In her heart, Hermione knew Severus was being wise, so she had not argued. First: because she had promised she would take him at his word. Second: because she did not want her image of Severus tarnished. His part in these incidents had been minor. He was not doing this to show Scorpius his sins.

He had agonized, to her, whether this had been the proper thing to do. Was this really helping, or was it making things worse? He had not been able to tell. Sure the boy had cried, but was there anger toward her and Severus in the boys mind? This could make him more dangerous.

Hermione lay holding Severus and stroking his hair, trying to plan another liaison for her and her husband, something that would take his mind off the next lesson.

He had the next night free. She'd managed to get Filius to take Severus' rounds; she'd tried to explain in confidence what they had been trying to do for the boy. And she stressed that Severus needed a distraction between lessons.

Filius had looked confused.

Hermione had laughed at him when he'd blushed, finally realizing what she was talking about. Hermione blushed herself, thinking about that first night in Severus office and what she might plan this time.

Filius had said a hasty goodbye and fled.

That evening after dinner Hermione had said she had some errands to run and a few people to check with, so she said her goodbyes and left the room.

Severus was doing some security work at his desk when he finally noticed it was getting very late and Hermione hadn't come back. He went in search of her.

He'd been looking for her for hours; he'd tried the infirmary, the astronomy tower, the Great Hall, and even the kitchen. The house elves had looked frightened when he'd first appeared at the door, but they had quickly calmed when he'd asked after his wife.

He was on his way back to the dungeons when he noticed a small flicker of light peeping out from under the Library door.

"Blasted students, out after hours," he grouched as he pushed the door open on silent hinges and stepped into the darkened room.

The faint glow of a candle could be seen in one of the alcoves in the restricted section...a study section with chairs, tables, and several comfortable couches.

As he trod silently toward the glow, he could see several candles actually floating in the air; the scene that met his eyes astonished him.

There in the middle of the room sat his wife, her hair gracefully about her shoulders. She was reclining on the largest couch, sipping a glass of wine, and was as naked as the day she was born.

Severus cleared his throat. When she looked up at him, the desire in her eyes made him smile.

"Ah, here you are," he whispered as he walked towards her.

"Wine?" she questioned as she pointed to the second glass and the bottle that sat on the low table. Severus glanced at the table and then back at her.

"Bit overdressed, aren't we?" she whispered as she pulled her wand from between the couch cushion and silently vanished his clothes. "There, now, that's much better!" she said. The light in her eyes sparkled as she set her wine glass down on the table and held her arms out to him.

Severus flicked his wand back behind them to lock, ward, and set an impenetrable seal on this section of the library. He placed his wand on the nearby table and poured himself some wine. She drew her feet up, and he sat admiring the view. He ran a hand over her feet and up to her knees. "You really are a scamp. I've been looking for you for hours."

"I've been waiting for an hour for you to find me," she whispered. He placed his wine on the table and slipped into her arms, his body covering hers. Their legs entwined.

As he kissed her neck and shoulders, he said, "You are determined to make me blush every time I come in here from now on, aren't you? I already have a hard time concentrating in my office."

Hermione giggled at him, a soft sound like amazing musical notes playing a love song. "I want you to think of me all the time," she said as she buried one hand in his hair and guided him to her breast.

"I always think about you, my love." He bent and took her nipple in his mouth, sucking and teasing her with his tongue until she moaned with pleasure.

He hummed against her nipple, and she groaned louder.

"Oh, Severus, that's an amazing feeling."

He set about teasing both her nipples in turn and hummed a song as he did it. She squirmed beneath him, thrusting her hips against him. He ran his hand down her stomach and caressed her thatch of soft, silky hair then slipped a finger into her warm wet depths. She cried out with pleasure as he teased her, slipping his finger in and out of her and rubbing her nub with gentle, rounded strokes.

"Please, Severus, I want you to fill me." She placed her legs around his hips and urged him up. He slid over her, and his hard, thick, shaft found its mark, and he pushed very slowly into her hot, wet channel.

"Oh, Merlin, Hermione, you are so beautiful." He started to thrust, deliberately slow, just enjoying her heat around him. He could feel her fingernails raking light tracks against his back. He bent to kiss her, thrusting his tongue slowly into her mouth. Their tongues dueled as he increased the strength of his thrusts.

She spread herself wider so he could press into her more deeply. Their breathing was ragged, and she felt her climax building. Her nails scrapped furrows into his back, and she clutched his buttocks, driving him deeper.

Severus felt himself spiraling out of control, and then she was there, within his mind. Legilimency had connected them unconsciously; this happened only when both desires and minds were so close, so tuned to each other. He saw and felt what she felt. He felt her welcome and pleasure.

Hermione felt Severus become part of her, and she surged forward to wrap herself in his mind as well as his body, and they cried out their pleasure. Hermione saw his love and felt wrapped in it like a warm blanket. It was scented like roses, and the blooms erupted around them in his mind.

Severus watched the blooms in his mind with amazement. His body spilled its seed inside of her, and he found himself suddenly wishing a seed would take root and create a baby. He felt Hermione's astonishment at the thought and surged to agree.

They let their minds drift separately, and they just held each other, kissing gently as their hearts beat against each other's chests.

"A baby, Severus. Did I read you right?" she asked in a whisper against his ear.

"Yes," he said, and no one was more astonished than he. He felt tears on his face. The joy of the thought of children overwhelmed him.

Hermione felt his tears; she was so moved that her tears joined his. "We might get married, magically, first," she suggested with a snuffle.

He moved off of her but drew her into his lap and covered them with his outer cloak.

"I have been meaning to talk to you about that. We have been so busy with work and Scorpius. I was thinking a ceremony here, out on the grounds."

Hermione pressed her face against his shoulder; she had one hand wrapped around his back and one at his neck. "That's a wonderful idea," she kissed his chin.

"Do you wish to be Bonded soon, Hermione?" he asked curiously.

"What about Easter break?" she asked. "It's about two months away. That should give us time to make our plans and arrangements. That will also be about the time my contraceptive potion wears off." She grinned up into his face and caressed his cheek with her fingers.

Severus clutched her more tightly. "You might be surprised to know I took care of Draco when he was a baby."

"Really?" She pulled back to look into his face with astonishment.

"There was a bit of peace those few years after Voldemort vanished. Even Death Eaters raised families. Marriages took place, and babies were born. Most of them went about their lives. Draco often climbed into my lap to hear a story."

"Yes, I suppose they did. Many of them except you," she said sadly.

"Yes, well, I had my sins to atone for. I knew he would return as well as Dumbledore did."

"You sacrificed a lot to secure our future. You know Dumbledore knew that. He loved you like a son, I'm sure of it. The bubble stasis charm was his gift to you."

Severus kissed her softly. "I know. I have forgiven him. He gave me you. I could not want for any other future."

Hermione smiled warmly at him. "I'm glad. Will you talk to him?"

"Eventually. I still plan to give him a piece of my mind for taking my choices away. In principle, it was a horrible thing to do. But considering the results, it was a wonderful thing for him to do."

They drank some wine and talked a while. Then they dressed and headed back to their rooms. Finally, they crawled into bed and fell asleep pressed against each other.

Much to their enjoyment, the next morning was Saturday, and they slept late, having breakfast in their own rooms.

They dressed and took a walk to Hogsmeade with some of the students tagging along.

Albus and Scorpius were hanging on the edge of the group. When they neared the apothecary's shop, Severus asked, "Albus, Scorpius, would you like to join Madam Snape and me in selecting ingredients for our storage room? You might learn a thing or two."

Albus said, "Sure that would be great, sir, Aunt Hermione."

Scorpius watched them a bit dubiously. Albus said, "Hey come on, Scorp, when will you get another chance to shop with two Potions masters?"

Scorpius gave them a thin smile and nodded. "Okay, but my name is Scorpius." He was actually relieved to be cajoled and not be just shrugged off. Albus could have said, "Suit yourself."

Severus smiled at Hermione over the boys' heads. "Come on, Saturday school commences." He took hold of Hermione's arm and guided her through the door of the shop.

The shop was crowded with stock. They were assaulted by aromas wafting through the air: rosemary, jasmine, cinnamon, sage, garlic, and many, many other things. There were jars of things one didn't really want to look at too closely...things with twisted faces and claws. Severus, Hermione, and the boys made their way down each aisle and selected dried ingredients. Severus asked them questions like a pop quiz and was pleased that they knew what most of the items were without checking the nametags. What Scorpius didn't know, Albus did and vice versa. Hermione watched, quite pleased, and Scorpius began to get into the whole thing and smiled as he tried to answer questions before Albus did. They were all laughing when they came from the store.

Severus looked around and spotted Draco. He'd sent his godson an owl earlier to let Pansy and him know they would be shopping today.

Scorpius looked up and saw his parents. "Hey, why are they here?" His voice was suddenly suspicious.

Severus said, "I probably should have mentioned it earlier. I asked your parents to lunch. I didn't really plan to take you boys shopping when we left Hogsmeade. But since you're here, why don't you join us?"

Scorpius nodded, still wary, but he went forward and was enveloped by his mom and then his dad.

Scorpius held on a bit longer than necessary, and Pansy gave Hermione a grateful look.

"Come on, let's go to Rosemerta's. The boys can have some butterbeer. I hear she has a new steak recipe that's out of this world."

Draco reached out to shake Severus' hand. "Uncle, it's good to see you. Hermione." He nodded to her.

"Draco, Pansy, you have a fine son there. Misguided for a time but quite brilliant."

Pansy and Draco looked surprised and pleased to hear her compliment their son.

Severus pulled his godson into his arms for a tight hug and then pushed him back to see astonishment on Draco's face. He glanced around to see that the boys had gone ahead.

"He's coming along well. There has been a lot of change this week."

Draco said with emotion, "Thank you, Uncle. I do not know how we would have handled an Obliviation. More than likely, Pansy and I would have volunteered to be Obliviated along with him."

"I understand," Severus said, though he was horrified that two magical people would give up their magic. But he was their son, and they loved him.

Hermione nodded with understanding. "Come on, let's catch up with the boys."

Draco said with a smile in his voice, "What does Harry Potter think of my son and his son becoming friends?"

"Probably the same thing you think. He's wary, but he is more than willing to give the boy a chance," Hermione informed him.

"I guess this is a new world," Draco said. They had reached the tavern, and Draco held the door open for his wife and Hermione. Severus took the door and held it open as Draco entered. The room was dark as always. There was a fire burning in the fireplace. The room was half full of students.

Albus waved from a table in the back. "Over here! This is the only table big enough for all of us."

They all took seats and ordered drinks and food.

Hermione said, "I haven't had a chance to make an announcement in class yet, boys. There is going to be a schoolwide Potions contest. I thought maybe you two might want to form a team. There are a few others who might qualify for the contest as well."

The boys sat up to listen. Albus said, "That sounds like fun. What do you think, Scorpius? Do you think you and I could win this?"

"Maybe we should compete against each other," Scorpius said. He had a very competitive look.

"That would be interesting, Scorpius, but this contest is for teams," Severus told him.

"You just made this contest so that Albus and I would work together," he accused.

Severus nodded. "You're right; we did. I am so impressed with you both, and I feel you can become an amazing duo in the world of Potions. But you need a reason and a purpose to go forward with ideas of your own."

Scorpius seemed taken aback that Severus would admit that he'd made the contest for them to work together. But he also saw the honesty and truth in the man's eyes. He was impressed by their abilities, and he was curious to see what they might do together.

"I am game, if Albus is," he said, looking to Albus for his reaction.

Albus's eyes were lit up. "That would be swell," he said, literally jumping up and down in his seat.

Everyone laughed at him.

Scorpius watched Severus and Hermione with veiled eyes. Today had been fun and interesting. He'd been good because his parents had been there, but he wasn't ready to give up the memory sessions. He had his reasons. He loved his grandfather.

Thank you, Lisa, for your beta work. it keeps me writing. Your willingness to keep working with me, story after story, humbles me.

Becky, thank you for the wonderful drabble you worked on for this chapter.

Angela, thank you for your input.

Chapter 28

Chapter 28 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

The next day, buoyed a bit by the dinner the night before and the enthusiasm of the boys, Severus went about his duties as if in a fog. He watched Scorpius as carefully as he usually did. But the rest of the time, he thought about what he could show Scorpius next...what might finally change his mind once and for all about his grandfather. Severus felt nervous and depressed about the whole situation. Granted, the memories showed some hard times. However, no one knew the depth of his and Lucius' friendship. More times than not, they'd saved each other in situations that Voldemort had put them in. Sure, they fought and had come to blows a few times, but he cared about Lucius. Lucius was gone now; he did not think he could ever forgive him for what he'd done to Hermione. If the only way he could help him was to save Scorpius, then so be it. He would relive every memory he had that was appropriate for the boy to see. Showing him the murder had been very harsh but necessary. There were other things they had done that he would never show or tell anyone about. After Voldemort *died* the first time, Lucius had changed; he had married Narcissa and seemed quite devoted to her. Then Draco had been born. Those had been good years. The Dark Lord's army had been dispersed. They became a family like any other, and Severus had become an uncle. Only that had helped him survive the loss of Lily. Having baby Draco to entertain him had been his salvation. He'd never had to deal with a baby before. Draco had given him life in his tiny, curious way.

Yet Lucius had never embraced the wizarding world in general. He had acquired a lot of Dark Magic by then and finally felt he had the means to rise to power himself. He'd been recruiting loyal followers when the Dark Lord reappeared. They'd all been horribly shocked from their comfortable lives. Severus was already deep in his role as spy, but he'd never felt that much danger with Lucius, his friend, in charge. Voldemort's return was like being hit by a train. When the Dark Mark had once again activated, they were all subject to his whims. They had to face the terror of the constant tortures he used to keep his subordinates in line.

He needed to show Scorpius what Voldemort had been like after his return. The Dark Lord's visage would have scared anyone to death. Everyone had seen his picture, but being in his presence had been a different horror.

Severus regretted he had been so incapacitated that he had not seen the final fall of Voldemort. After all, he felt, who had deserved more than he to see that creature fall and die? Maybe Hermione would share that memory with him one day.

Well, back to Scorpius, he thought. Maybe that time in Lucius' own house... Yes, maybe he should see his grandfather's fit of rage.

What had Scorpius said the last time? *He has loved me and my father with all that he was.* Severus remembered a time when things had gone wrong with Voldemort and Lucius had been in a terrible fit of rage. *Yes, this is where we will go tonight.* Relieved to have his subject picked out, he settled back to wait for the boy.

Scorpius, walked slowly like a man going to his own execution. He didn't want to see any more of his grandfather's shame. He didn't want to know that the man who had loved him and cared for him most of his life, since his parents had gone to work, was a monster. However, the stubbornness of his heart would not let Professor Snape win for now. He'd almost started to like him yesterday, but last night he'd thought about his grandfather and let the bitterness overwhelm him. The anger had returned. He would make that man suffer by reliving his horrible memories. He could see how painful it was for Professor Snape, and he had vowed he would make him hurt over and over for bringing pain to his grandfather. Wasn't it Snape who'd made his grandfather murder that woman? If he'd had the potion and had given it to her himself, his grandfather wouldn't have been forced to kill her with his hands. He tried to ignore the fact that Lucius had enjoyed it. He shoved that part to the back of his thoughts. The evil gleam in Lucius' eyes had scared him more than anything else. What horrible thing would Professor Snape want him to see tonight? He was already having terrible nightmares. He had woken screaming last night. He had visions of himself with his hands around the woman's throat. It had been terrible, and he hadn't been able to sleep again.

He already knew he didn't want to have anything else to do with dark magic or dark potions. That was not who he was inside. He was deeply disturbed by what had happened to Snape while he'd been invisible. He'd had no idea what the potion would do to Madam Granger when he'd found it in one of his grandfather's books. He'd thought it would only knock her out, maybe make her sick. He thanked Merlin he had not seen much of what had happened because Albus had punched him so hard he'd blacked out while Madam Pomfrey had worked on the professor. He knew he was lucky to not be expelled. Only his father's job had saved him. He'd felt horrible standing before his father, trying to tell him why he'd done what he'd done, and seeing the disappointment on his father's face had hurt him deeply. He knew his father and grandfather were different. His father had told him that he'd been hard and arrogant as a child and then the war had changed him. It made him see that all people, Muggle-borns, half-bloods, and full-bloods all had fought for the side of good. Those people had saved him even though they had hated him.

Part of Scorpius was realizing that his father might be right. Maybe goodness was the better way. His teachers seemed to care. Why else would they do what they were doing if not to help him? They certainly had a right to hate him.

With these thoughts in his head, he stepped into the Potions classroom and headed for the professor's office.

Madam Granger was at her desk grading papers, and she looked up and smiled at him. "Mr. Malfoy, go on in. He's waiting for you."

Scorpius nodded at her and gave her a weak smile. He was glad that she did not hold a grudge; he was learning so much in her classroom. He found Potions to be the most stimulating class he had. He knew Snape was in there only during his fifth hour to watch him, but together they had taught him more than he'd learned from any other teacher. He turned toward the door and went in.

Professor Snape sat up a bit straighter as he entered. "Good evening, Mr. Malfoy."

"Sir," he said, giving the man a little bit of respect. Was his vow to his grandfather and himself worth this horror? Was this man really so bad? Would Scorpius have wanted to live in a world where Voldemort was Lord? He didn't think so now. It definitely wasn't like his grandfather had painted it. Sure he'd had a fancy house and fine clothes and food, but he'd pimped himself out for it, hadn't he? Had the torture been worth that?

Severus stood and went toward the Pensieve, eager to get this one over. He would later bury himself in the arms of his wife and try to forget the hell of his past. He only prayed this memory would do the trick. He had no desire to keep looking into the past. Hermione had only nodded when he'd told her he still did not want her to see the deeds of his past. She told him later she understood, and maybe he was right. He thought she did not want to see his shame as he now considered it. He was no longer that man in her eyes.

He used his wand to draw the silver thread of a memory out and then dropped it into the Pensieve. Scorpius stood back looking at the Pensieve as if it was crawling with flesh-eating ants.

"Do you wish to continue these lessons?" he asked again.

Scorpius nodded though his eyes said no.

Severus sighed. "Very well, come join me then. Scorpius, there is no shame in changing your path. Hermione and I are very proud of the work you have done so far. I know your father is too."

"How do you know what my father feels?" he asked sarcastically.

"I am his godfather, and I do communicate with him. He has wanted to stay in contact considering our lessons. I have been unable to share much with him, however, because you leave after each lesson. Do you not wish to stay and talk about what you have seen?"

Scorpius shook his head. "No." He stepped closer, letting Severus know that tonight he didn't plan to talk either.

Severus nodded. "Come then. I thought you might like to see Voldemort after he changed. Go!" he commanded, and they plunged their face into the silver memory.

Scorpius was shocked to find himself in his own living room. Yet it was different. There was a richness to it that no longer existed in his life today. The carpets were new, thick, and fluffy. There were statues and fine mirrors. The fireplace, which was seldom lit in his house, was blazing with fire. His grandmother was sitting in a chair, her blonde hair brushed to shine. He barely remembered dull, graying hair. Lucius, looking young, fit and handsome, stood near the fire. He was brandishing his walking stick, swinging it here and there. Scorpius knew his wand was inside the head of the snake.

Narcissa said, "Put that thing down before you hurt someone. I warned you not to drink so much. You know he could come any moment."

"I care not whether he comes or not. We have the things I got into this for. It's my hope that Harry Potter does do him in," Lucius slurred, reaching for a goblet on the fireplace mantel. "I have toiled and sweated and experienced pain for what reason...to be looked down on, to be tortured while Severus here is in his back pocket."

Scorpius turned to see a brooding Snape sitting back in a chair holding his own goblet of red liquid. "If you dislike me so much, Lucius, then why ask me to come here?" Snape got to his feet and set the glass down. "I am tired, and we have waited for four hours. I do not think he is coming tonight."

Lucius said, "You can't go. He is likely waiting for someone to give up, and then he will torture me to the brink of death. I can't afford to go through that now; I haven't recovered from the last time." He pounded the mantle with his fist. "We live like rats in a cage. He pulls our strings and we dance like puppets."

Narcissa stood up nervously. "Severus, do something. If The Dark Lord comes now, we are all in for it. Can't you sober him up?"

Severus stood and went to a cabinet to get a potion when suddenly Voldemort was in the room.

"Ah, you're still all here, patiently waiting." His voice dripped like honey laced with venom.

The younger Severus tightened the rein on his emotions, pushing them behind the walls in his mind. Had he been observing them invisibly?

"Of course we are here, My Lord, as commended." Lucius said, raising a glass to the Dark Lord. Narcissa's eyes got huge.

"I would hope you'd be here because this is where you wish to be," Voldemort said with a hiss.

"It is my living room," Lucius said. "I am usually here." He swallowed another big gulp of wine, not noticing that Voldemort's eyes had begun to glow deep red.

Severus stood frozen in place, trying to warn Lucius with his eyes, but his friend was too far gone.

The observer Severus stood with a dread-filled heart; but as before, there was nothing to do but watch the past play out again. Scorpius had been standing away from him. When Voldemort had appeared, he'd backed up again and stood in front of Severus. Severus put his hands on the boy's shoulders to give him support and courage. He felt the boy's body shaking with fear.

Voldemort eyed Lucius with amusement laced with anger. "I have come to see your son, Lucius. I have a plan for him; he might be of use to us, being at Hogwarts."

Lucius sobered a bit. He might place himself in danger, but his son was another matter. "My Lord, he is a boy. What use could he be?"

The younger Severus had moved to hold Narcissa back with a warning by taking her arm and tightening his grip on it. Her eyes were as round as saucers. They had hoped that keeping Draco out of Voldemort's sight would make him forget about of the boy."

"Bring him," Voldemort commended, turning to Severus.

Severus bowed, avoiding his master's eyes. He backed away, his eyes warning Narcissa to keep quiet.

Severus left the room and went up some stairs, down a long hallway of doors. They followed because it was Snape's memory, and it pulled them along. Scorpius knew this hall well. They went to the door of his father's old room, now his own room at home. Severus knocked then went in. Draco was sitting on his bed, knees drawn up. Fear was all over his face, and he paled when he saw Severus' face.

"Come, the Dark Lord wishes to see you." Severus grabbed Draco by the arm and pulled him from the bed. "We must hurry. He is not in a good mood, and your father is drunk and spouting off his mouth. Kneel when you get in front of him, and do not look him in the eye. Do you understand, Draco?"

Draco nodded, gulping convulsively in fear.

"Agree to whatever he says. Do not contradict him or you will pay the price," Severus hissed as they neared the entrance to the living room.

They entered the room, and Severus and Scorpius stood to the side again.

Scorpius glanced up at Severus. He could see the dread on the man's face, and he found he no longer wished him ill. The comfort of his professor's hands on his shoulders had conveyed the man's care and concern for him. Nevertheless, this must play out. He had chosen to force Snape to bring him on another journey. He felt tightness in his chest. What would happen here? He turned back to the horrible snake-like Voldemort. The pictures he'd seen could not have conveyed the terror of looking upon the man in the flesh. The red eyes were horrible, and Scorpius could not fathom the horror of having them trained on him.

Snape pushed Draco forward, "Here he is, My Lord."

Draco went to his knees and kissed the Dark Lord's bare feet. Voldemort looked pleased.

"Lucius, you have trained the boy well. See, he shows me proper respect." Always flamboyant, Voldemort waved his wand around. "Rise." He placed it under Draco's chin and made him look at him. "Fear is a healthy response to meeting one's god," Voldemort said. "I will ask a great deal of you, Draco. You will help me infiltrate Hogwarts."

Draco knew better than to protest. "Yes, my Lord," he said, quaking inside.

"Severus, come hold the boy's arm. He will take the mark."

Snape came, took Draco's arm, and pulled up his sleeve.

Draco, in his fear and stupidity, exclaimed, "No, my Lord. I can do it without the mark. "

Voldemort whirled on Lucius. "*Crucio*," he cried out. "Maybe you have not taught your son well enough."

Lucius hit the carpeted floor writhing in pain. Snape was holding Draco's arm so tightly that he would leave bruises, and he was staring into Narcissa's eyes, willing her to stay quiet.

Her body was so taut that it looked made of stone.

Lucius screamed and thrashed for what seemed an eternity.

Severus had a hold of Scorpius; he'd slipped his arms around the boy's shoulders to hold him close. He was trying to lend comfort for him as well as himself. He felt tears dripping onto his arms.

Voldemort let Lucius go, and he slumped onto the floor whimpering. He struggled to turn and see that Voldemort had turned to Draco and was pressing his wand into Draco's arm. The Dark Mark bubbled to the surface, and Severus had a hand clamped over Draco's mouth to keep him from screaming.

Voldemort laughed. "This is the next generation of Malfoys. You will serve me well...your sons, their sons without end. Come to Borgin and Burkes on Friday night, and I will tell you my plan."

"Lucius, teach your son to accept what he must, or he will die," Voldemort told him as he vanished.

Severus dropped Draco's arm, devastated that this had been forced on the boy. He'd turned to take hold of a crying Narcissa.

Lucius, still in his drunken state and furious at himself and now Draco, climbed to his feet and attacked Draco, who had reached down to help him up. He pummeled the boy with his fists, bloodying his lips and nose, punching him in the gut before Severus realized what was happening and hit Lucius with a body bind.

Narcissa was screaming and had grabbed Draco to her. "Lucius, if you ever touch him again, I will kill you. Do you understand?" She ordered, "Severus, get him out of here before I change my mind and do it now."

Severus grabbed Lucius, but Lucius screamed back, "If he ever makes the Dark Lord turn on me again, I will kill him myself."

Severus dragged Scorpius from the memory, and they stood in his office. The boy's knees gave out, and he nearly fell. Severus held him up and pushed him into the high-backed chair. Scorpius looked like a small, lost boy. His face was red from crying, and he was shaking.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, Professor Snape. No more, please, I cannot see anymore. My grandfather is a monster. How could he treat me as he has and have done that to his own son?"

Severus knelt down and held the boy to his chest. "Lucius can be a wonderful man, but he loses himself from time to time, and that was the result. I show you this only to let you know that participation in the Dark Lord's service or in the clutches of Dark Magic can only destroy you and those around you." He pushed the boy back and got him a handkerchief. "After Voldemort was killed, Lucius was able to relax, and he was devoted to Draco and Narcissa. The evilness that was in us all when the Dark Mark vanished left as well."

"If it left," the boy hiccupped through his emotion as he dapped at his face, "why would he kidnap Madam Granger?"

"Was he drinking heavily again?" Severus asked, sitting on the edge of his desk and looking down at the boy.

"Yes. Ever since my grandmother died, he did little else. I had to watch what I said to him myself, but he never laid a hand on me."

"Drink always brought the worst out in him, Scorpius. After the war, after my betrayal, he blamed me for his loss of status and wealth. The Wizengamot stripped him of many of his holdings and land. This left him only the mansion in disrepair and a stipend to live on. That was only because he did not participate in much of the final battle. His concern over the safety of his wife and child had kept him from the fight. Also, somehow he'd alerted several members of the Order and helped avert some deaths. It helped him avoid a prison term. Yet he was placed on probation and was pretty much a prisoner in the house."

Scorpius nodded, mopping at his red nose. "He was so bitter the last years. He was not the same man I knew as a small child. He was getting more and more bitter. I think when he heard you were back, it put him over the edge."

Severus nodded. "Scorpius, I know what I have shown you was horrible. I meant to scare you and show you reasons not to follow your grandfather's path. Your father has always honored Lucius by taking care of him, but he is his own man...a man you can be proud of."

Scorpius nodded and stood. "Thank you, sir. I will not disappoint you. I will never again hurt another person, intentionally."

"Scorpius, we do need to talk more at length. Please come to me if you have any questions. I would be happy to tutor you in more advanced potion making if you desire. You are more gifted than any of Madam Granger's other students with the exception of Albus. You'd do well to partner with him."

"I know that you placed him there to watch me. I do not blame you for that. But he may wish another partner," Scorpius said.

"I think you'll find Albus is very much a boy of his own mind. I think he admires your work, and that's a great place to build a friendship."

Scorpius nodded. "May I go to dinner, sir? I'm starving."

Severus smiled down at him and squeezed his shoulder. "I think that's a good idea. I find I'm very hungry myself, tonight."

They headed through the door.

Lisa, thank you for your beta work.

Becky and Angela, thank you for reading the chapters and giving me your opinions.

Chapter 29

Chapter 29 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

Hermione stood when Scorpius dashed past her. His face was red from crying, but there was a smile on his face and lightness to his features she hadn't seen before. The frown that had always been there was gone.

Hermione looked up at Severus hopefully as he came from his office. He had a smile on his face, and he took her in his arms and held her close.

"I think we finally got through to him," he murmured, and he then told her a bit of the memory he had shown Scorpius.

Hermione held him close, thankful that the memory viewing might be at an end. She had seen the stress it had put on Severus. She could see a streak of silver in his hair. She wondered if he had noticed it.

"I'm happy for you, Severus. I know this has been hard on you."

Taking her hand, he said, "Let's go eat."

They left the classroom and headed for dinner. The halls were alive with students walking in the same direction, and they caught sight of Albus and Scorpius ahead talking animatedly.

Hermione squeezed his hand. "It looks like we have created some friends."

Severus nodded, thinking about what Harry might say. Harry hadn't been thrilled about his son being partnered with a Malfoy, but he had told them he trusted their judgment and knew the wizarding world would only work with all branches of wizards working together. There were still houses at Hogwarts, but the students intermingled more now and often sat at different tables. The separation was mostly for the Quidditch games.

Hermione watched Severus wolf down great amounts of food and was relieved that he had his appetite back. He hadn't been eating much since the lessons with Scorpius had started. She noticed Scorpius was actually sitting with Albus at the Gryffindor table. Their heads were together as they scribbled away on a piece of parchment and stuffed food into their mouths.

"I think you'd best announce the contest tomorrow before Albus and Scorpius tell. The other students may call foul if they realize they have a head start," Hermione told Severus.

He nodded between bites of food. "I'm sure you're right, my dear. Sorry, I am just famished tonight."

"Is food all you want?" she asked with a devilish glint in her eye as she trailed a finger over his hand.

He stopped eating and stared into her eyes. Seeing desire there, he suddenly was more than ready to be done with his meal.

"I have an insatiable appetite when it come to you, my dear," he whispered, wishing he could nuzzle her neck and give her a kiss.

"I have reserved the prefects' bathroom for us tonight," she informed him. One of her hands under the table was sliding up his leg, getting closer and closer.

"Hermione," he hissed. "Please, if you don't cease, we may have to wait until the room clears."

She laughed aloud and everyone at the staff table looked their way.

Severus blushed furiously.

Minerva gave them a stern look that said, "Behave."

Poppy was watching with a fond smile. She was happy to see the change in Severus tonight. She hadn't had much time to talk to him, but she had known of his plan to help Scorpius.

Mortified, Severus took Hermione by the hand and as they stood, murmuring, "Good night, everyone. Hermione and I have work to do."

He saw that no one believed them as they made their way out of the room and had no doubt the students would also be talking about them. He realized as they stepped into the hall, and he planted a steamy kiss on Hermione, that it didn't matter in the least. He didn't care what people thought. They were, after all, newlyweds.

"What time did you reserve it for?" he asked impatiently.

She grinned at him. "I think we could go now. Everyone else is eating." She took his hand, and they hurried through the hall and up a few flights of stairs.

They entered the room and gazed at the bathtub. It was more like an indoor swimming pool. Severus locked and warded the door. It was, by far, one of the nicest bathrooms in the castle. Its many faucets, rich gold fixtures, and stained glass windows made it sheer heaven.

They didn't really talk but stripped and slipped into the warm water. Hermione swam a few laps just to warm herself up. Severus watched her appreciatively. A glimpse of a breast here or buttock there made the view especially pleasurable.

He dove under the water and caught her. She laughed as he captured her against his chest. She let him tease her lips with his before she slipped away again.

She was so like a girl at these times. She loved teasing him and loved to see the smile play across his face. He was so unlike the man she'd know as a child, yet he had barely aged from that time. She was thankful that she'd caught up physically and mentally with him.

"Hermione, come here," he called, cricking a finger at her.

She laughed, swimming to the other side of the bath. "Catch me if you can." She dodged him as he lunged across the bath. She let him chase her for a while as she bounced, swam, and dove away from him.

When the frown on his face began to grow, she swept up under the water, vanishing, and came up before him. She flung herself in his arms and bathed his face with kisses.

"You little minx." He kissed her until she was gasping for breath, and she let herself sag against him with pleasure.

"Severus, I love you so much. I wake each morning, and when I realize I'm not dreaming and you're really there beside me, I just thank God. I can't imagine life without you." She smoothed back his wet hair from his face. She could feel he was hard against her stomach. She slipped her hand down to caress him.

"Hermione," he groaned, "I can't imagine my life without you either." His fingers were caressing her breasts.

She urged him to the side of the pool and slapped her hand on the edge. "Sit up here, please."

He looked at her curiously and did as she bid him.

Hermione got her wand from the side of the pool where her clothes lay. She warmed the spot where he was sitting and placed a warming charm around him.

His eyes were enormous as she stood before him in the water and ran her hands up his legs and knees. She took the thick shaft in her hands and teased him until he was rock hard. She then bent and ran her tongue over the head.

"Oh Merlin, Hermione, that feels amazing." He caressed her hair as she took him deeper into her mouth and began to bob back and forth. He buried his hands in her hair and gently guided her back and forth.

Hermione heard his breath get short, and then he pushed her back and slipped into the water. Lifting her, he guided her to place her legs around his waist.

He let her down over his thick shaft, and she threw her head back as he wrapped his hands around her legs and gripped her thighs. She placed her hands on his shoulders to help raise and lower herself onto the thick shaft, and they began the age old dance of bringing each other to fulfillment. Their cries echoed through the cavernous room. Hermione slumped down against him, burying her face in his neck as he cradled her in his arms.

"You are amazing, my beautiful wife," he said, kissing her again. Then, resting back on one of the sitting areas, he just held her and let the warm water sooth them both.

Later they made love again, conjuring a thick pad to lie on at the waters edge. They dressed each other and then walked slowly back to their rooms.

The next day, Hermione and Severus laid out the plans for the contest to all their fifth-year students. They told them they would have to work in pairs. They needed to write up their theory for a potion, explain what it was supposed to do, and create and execute the potion. Reports were due in four weeks. Potions would be brewed in class the week after.

Hermione concluded, "You will make appointments for practice on your potions after school. There will be a schedule set up depending on how many students are participating. Sixth and seventh years will also join in on this project. Theories will be due by the end of the week. You will need to make a list of the equipment and the ingredients you will need for your potion. Professor Snape will be in his office after dinner for one hour every night so you can ask questions. He has vast knowledge of potion making and will be able to explain the properties of the ingredients. I would ask that you make very sure your ingredients do not have any volatile properties. I think we've had enough explosions for one year."

The students laughed uneasily. No one wanted to see either of his or her teacher's hurt, including Scorpius. Her words had made him duck down a bit and get red. He knew he had to talk to her. He had not yet apologized, and he was dreading the task he knew was necessary.

Class was out a few minutes later, and he waited till every one left and then came forward. "Madam Snape, may I speak to you?"

Hermione looked up from her desk. Severus, who had been putting a cauldron on a shelf, looked toward the boy as well.

Hermione stood and waved the boy forward. "Of course, Scorpius, come forward. You may sit if you like." She waved at the chair in front of her desk.

Scorpius came but stood before her. "Madam Snape, I want to apologize for my actions. I was wrong. My grandfather was wrong. I thought he was right. I thought he loved me, but I was mistaken."

Hermione said, "Your grandfather does love you, Scorpius. He's just messed up, now. He cannot get over the past. It has poisoned his soul."

Scorpius nodded. "I will never try to harm you again. You have my word."

Hermione came and held out her arms, and the boy threw his arms around her and cried.

Severus watched from the side; his own tears blurred his view.

Hermione looked over Scorpius' head and smiled through her own tears as she stroked the boy's hair. "You go on to your next class, Scorpius. If you want to talk more, please come back. My door will be open to you anytime."

Scorpius backed away, taking a swipe at his face with his sleeve. He smiled and then turned and nodded to Severus before hurrying from the room.

Severus came to Hermione, who was trying to dab at her own tears.

"You okay?" he asked as he took her into his arms to give her a tight hug.

"Yes, I think it's alright now," she said, accepting a kiss before pushing him away. "I don't want to have students catching us snogging in the classroom."

Severus nodded, his eyes twinkling with some extracurricular thoughts as he glanced toward her (his old) desk.

She blushed a bit, guessing his thoughts. "You keep that thought in your head, dear. Now go off and do your rounds. I can hear the students coming."

He gave her a smirk and a peck on the forehead and headed off.

Severus stopped into the infirmary to see what Poppy was up to and found her making a list of potions that needed restocking.

"Severus, it's about time you stopped by," she said a bit annoyed. "I know you're a newlywed, but you have time on your rounds for a visit now and then."

"Sorry, mom," he said, giving the older woman a kiss on the cheek.

She looked up at him. "Are you really going to continue to call me mom?" she asked.

"Do you mind? There's no one alive that deserves that title, in my life, more than you."

She giggled nervously. "I'd like that, Severus."

He gave her a hug. "I see you have a new list for me. Is there anything complicated?" he asked with hope in his voice.

"Skele-Gro, some liver purifier... I wouldn't mind having some Acromantula antidote. I know Hagrid still goes in to visit Aragog's children, but they seem less and less accommodating. I can't talk him out of going."

"I would need a sample of the poison," he told her.

She smiled and got a small vial from the shelf. "I thought you might." I asked Hagrid to get some the last time he was there. It's only a few weeks old and should be well preserved. I put a stasis charm on it."

Severus held the little bottle up and eyed the inky black contents; he resisted the shudder that wanted to run through his body. He didn't like spiders much either, but he'd never told anyone that. Being a spy, and therefore an actor, he was able to control his body's reactions to likes and dislikes.

"Did you know Minerva offered me her position when she retires at the end of the year?" he asked her, changing the subject.

"Yes, she mentioned it. She's happy that Filius stepped down and let you take the job. She knew she was asking a lot of him. This new job will help you feel better about yourself."

Severus stared at her a moment. She'd seen his weakness in not being able to adjust to having less of a job than Hermione. "You know me well," he admitted. "I think Hermione is relieved as well. I should be happy for her accomplishments, and I am very proud of her, but it's hard to walk out of 'my' room everyday and leave her to teach what should be my classes."

Poppy reached out to squeeze his hand. "Maybe one of the other classes will open up after a time and you can teach before Minerva leaves. Why don't you contact St. Mungo's and see if they need your expertise. You could use my lab if you like any time."

Severus bowed to her wisdom. "Alright, I will. I do need something to keep me busy when Hermione's grading papers or working with students. I will have a little more to do now with the contest." He told her about the contest and his tutoring after school.

"That's a wonderful idea, Severus. We do have some very smart children, and who knows what they might come up with. Please let me know if I can be of help."

Severus nodded. "I'd best get on with my rounds. It was nice to see you, Poppy. Thanks for the talk."

"Severus, I'm here most of the time. Come by anytime. This weekend is my weekend off. Why don't you and Hermione come for dinner on Saturday at the cottage. You can spend the night and relax a bit. I have friends I can visit to give you some private time. We need to talk about the wedding."

Severus smiled. "I'd like that, but I'll have to check with Hermione. With the contest commencing, we may need to be close by. Oh, Hermione thought the Easter week would be a good time for the wedding, here at Hogwarts. The weather should be good, and we can do it out in the garden. That should give you at least a start to come up with decoration ideas."

Poppy rubbed her hands together with relish, and her eyes glowed. "It will at that." She then asked seriously, "Are you sure Hermione's okay with me helping. I don't want to overstep my bounds and be a meddling mother-in-law."

Severus gave her a rare all-out laugh. "She welcomes your help. I don't think you will ever fit the bill of a meddling mother-in-law."

Poppy looked at him with amazement. "Severus, it's wonderful to hear you laugh...even to see you smile so much. Marriage agrees with you. Now go on with you and get to work, son." She handed him her list.

He grinned, took the list, and stuffed it in his robe pocket. He liked the sound of 'son' coming from her mouth. "I'm off."

Poppy watched as he walked away with a light step. He'd slunk around...slithering in and out of rooms, barely looking at anyone...ever since she could remember. Severus Snape in love was a joy to behold. She turned back to her work.

Please leave a review. It's a writer's only thanks.

Lisa, thank you so much for the beta work you do for me.

Angela and Becky, I appreciate your feedback and comments.

Chapter 30

Chapter 30 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

Severus made his rounds and met up with Hermione for dinner in the main hall. They talked to Poppy and Minerva. They asked about having their bonding at Hogwarts. Both women were happy they wanted to marry there in a Bonding Ceremony.

As they walked back to their rooms that night, Severus noticed Hermione was extremely quiet.

Severus asked, "Why the thoughtful silence? Don't you like what we talked about tonight?"

She smiled up at him. "Yes, only..." She let her voice trail off.

"Only what?" he asked.

"I want to have Ginny help, and that would mean Molly helping, too. I know she's getting on in years, but she's still a bundle of energy. I always thought of her as my mother, too. I spent a lot of time at their house when I was young."

He stopped her and turned her toward him, bending low so he could peer in her face. "Then ask her, Hermione. It doesn't matter to me that she's 'the git's' mother. If you're close, ask her."

Hermione giggled. It always made her laugh when he called Ron a git, and Severus knew it. She had to agree with him this time, though. Ron was a git. It still hurt that he'd come to help after she'd been kidnapped but had left before actually saying hello.

"Are you sure you wouldn't mind?" she asked again.

He slipped an arm around her shoulders, and they continued down the hall. "No, not at all. You might find this hard to believe, but Molly supported me a lot when I was coming and going from 12 Grimmauld Place. We got to be friends in a quiet sort of nonconversational way. She always made sure there was a plate of dinner ready for me when I'd come dragging in. It was very much appreciated."

Hermione nodded. "Severus?"

"Yes." He knew what was coming.

"When are we going to talk to Dumbledore?"

He sighed. "I don't know, soon. I'm just not ready."

She didn't answer but tightened her hold on his waist.

They managed to get to the cottage early in the evening on Saturday. The Portkey travel wasn't too bad, and Hermione was happy to see the little house again. It was a bit different with Poppy in charge of her home, but it was relaxing and quite pleasant.

They had a wonderful dinner of roast and vegetables followed by a plum pudding that was to die for. The wine was delicious. They settled with their goblets in the living room.

"That was wonderful, Poppy," Hermione said as she sat down and rubbed a hand over her stomach. "I ate way too much." She tucked her feet up under her and leaned into Severus.

Poppy sat and picked up some knitting by her chair. "I'm glad you enjoyed it. I love to cook, but I don't often get a chance to entertain."

Severus sat and smiled; he felt so content. When he was a teen, he'd had fantasies of sitting here with his wife and visiting with Poppy. He was amazed the dream had actually come true.

Poppy asked, as she started to knit, "Hermione, what have you imagined for your wedding?" The needles in her hands were flying.

Hermione said, "I honestly hadn't thought about it much. Maybe we could have it on the open land between the castle and the lake. I guess there should be a trellis with flowers and vines. We could have some sort of magical creature, like fairies, fluttering in and out."

"Sounds rather...Muggle," Severus droned.

Hermione laced her fingers with his. "I suppose it is. I was raised as a Muggle for my first 11 years. Little girls have their own fantasies." She was a bit disheartened.

Severus gathered her closer. "I did not mean to sound as if it wasn't nice. I'd marry you sitting on a unicorn if that's what you wanted. Your plan sounds fine with me. You're the love of my life. If you want to be flamboyant, please go all out."

Hermione giggled. "Then I want a circus with acrobats flying over us or...hey...a Quidditch game, going on over head. We'll get George to fling some fireworks over our heads as he rides by on a broom."

Severus groaned and then caught the teasing look in her eye.

Hermione smirked at him. "Be careful what you say; you might have to live through it."

Poppy was laughing at the frightened look on Severus' face.

"I'm going to keep my mouth shut from here on out. But please...not Quidditch." He shuddered as he told the women, who laughing good-naturedly.

"But I want you to let me know what you'd like, too, Severus." Her voice was a little whiny. "It is your magical bonding too," she said adamantly.

Severus nearly let his eyes roll up in his head but stopped himself. Planning a wedding often got emotional...he knew that from just listening to people over the years.

"Hermione." He dragged her into his lap. "Please, I'm a simple man. All I want to do is bond with the most beautiful woman on the planet." He kissed her soundly as Poppy watched with amusement.

Poppy said, "Why don't you go take a walk on the beach and talk about it. It's a warm night, and you should take advantage of it. You can have my room. The guest room will be fine for me. If I'm asleep when you get back, I'll see you for breakfast at 9:00."

Severus asked, "Are you sure? We came here to visit."

"Quite sure," she said. "I wanted you two, mostly, to get away from the castle and have a little time with each other. You're exhausted from working with Scorpius. The night air will do you good."

Severus nodded. "I guess I am a bit." He pulled Hermione to her feet and stood, lacing his fingers in hers.

Poppy picked up her remote control. "I'm going to watch a movie. I love Muggle TV."

Hermione laughed. She and Severus bent simultaneously and each kissed one of the old woman's cheeks. "Good night, Poppy," they said as they wandered out of the room.

Hermione was wearing a sundress, and she kicked her shoes off on the porch. She grabbed Severus' hand, and they ran to the water's edge and played a bit, dodging the waves and each other.

"You make me feel like a boy again," he said as he captured her and kissed her soundly.

"I know what you mean. This may as well be a Hogwarts seventh-year. Severus, what would you have done if I'd come to your office and sat on your lap that year?"

"I like to think I'd have dumped you on the floor and taken every point Gryffindor had."

He clutched her to him, remembering that last year when she had gone off with Potter and Weasley. There had been an unexplained emptiness.

"Truth is, I would have held on to you for dear life. I was so certain I was going to die. I knew the end was very close, and I really didn't expect to live through the final battle. I had few expectations for future life. I'd had no female comfort for many years, and I think I would have welcomed it no matter how wrong it might have been."

He felt tears on his face as he admitted his shortcomings and the sadness that had been his life.

Hermione clutched him to her and held him as he cried. As strong and fearless as he was, she knew he had hurts that ran deep inside, and she was proud to be the one he told his secrets to.

When she thought he was done with his grief, she whispered, "The thought of sitting in your lap, as you were then, makes me so hot, Severus. You can't imagine how much I wanted you. When we were out there in that tent away from everyone, even civilization, I spent a lot of nights with the *Muffliato* charm around me, pleasuring myself with your face in my mind and your hands on my body. I wanted to hear you cry my name. I wanted to feel you thrust yourself into me, and I wanted to bury my hands in your greasy hair." She groaned, pressing herself against him.

Severus groaned, too, as he went with her, picturing her fantasies. He tried to speak, but his need for her was too great.

"I want you, now, my wife," he finally managed.

She grabbed his hand, and they ran up the beach to a rocky area. Severus pulled his wand out and warded the area. They fell to the sand and stripped their clothes off as their hands explored each other and their mouths bruised each other with deep kisses.

Their bodies melded and became one. They cried each other's names into the starry night as they climaxed. Severus lay there holding her against his body; he used his wand to transfigure a blanket from his shirt. They watched the night sky and talked about their bonding.

Hermione woke first the next morning and stretched, admiring the sunshine that came from the window and fell across the bed in a warm, bright streak. She ran her hands through Severus' hair. His cheek was against her breast, and he was curled into her side. One of his thick, hairy arms was around her waist. She ran the other hand over his arms, feeling his strong muscles and the soft, warm hair that tickled her skin when he moved.

He turned his face slightly and latched onto her breast, teasing the tip with his tongue.

"Good morning, husband," Hermione whispered with amusement.

"Goomrrrring," he said against her breast.

"Breakfast is ready!" A call came from outside their door.

Severus groaned and pulled away. "Come on, get your robe on. We will make up for that interruption tonight when we get home." He grinned as he sat on the edge of the bed and pulled pajama bottoms on.

Hermione smiled as she was pushing her mass of bushy hair back over her shoulder. She swung her legs over her side of the bed and pulled a robe from the floor and slipped it on. She stood and pulled her hair from under the collar and then tied the belt at her waist.

"Maybe we should put more clothes on."

Severus stood. "It's Poppy, and she's used to having me half dressed at breakfast." He grabbed her hand. "Come on."

Hermione couldn't imagine the secret life Severus had had with Poppy Pomfrey, but she was grateful to the woman for giving him affection and taking care of him when he had needed someone so badly.

They found Poppy had fixed a huge pile of blueberry pancakes. There was bacon, sausage, and streusel, as well as soft-boiled eggs in little cups.

Hermione, who was still trying to smooth down her errant hair, exclaimed, "There's enough to feed an army, Poppy. It looks wonderful."

"Thank you," she said with a blush. "Now you tuck in. I can make more."

Severus held Hermione's chair. As she sat, he pushed it forward for her. He did the same with Poppy, who was pleased that he was still comfortable enough with her around to come to breakfast half dressed. She could tell where nearly all of the scars on his chest had come from; it was a roadmap to his life.

The scars at his neck still bothered her. He didn't seem to mind her gaze. He took his seat and attacked the pile of pancakes with a fork. Stabbing four of them, he placed them on his plate.

Hermione watched him as he slathered them with fresh butter and poured dark purple syrup over them. His face was bright with anticipation. She glanced at Poppy and

saw the woman was looking at him with such motherly affection that it made her eyes tear, and she thought of her own mother. She quickly blinked away the tears that filled her eyes. She would not spoil his enjoyment or her chance to watch him interact with his 'mother.'

"This is wonderful, Poppy," he said as he stuffed more blueberry pancakes into his mouth. "There were times when I dreamed of these pancakes after I fled Hogwarts."

"You always knew where home was," Poppy said.

He stopped eating and reached out and covered her hand with his. "Yes, I did. Those few times we had a chance to visit here kept me going."

"You came here? After you killed Dumbledore?" Hermione asked.

Severus stopped mid bite and looked at her. The subject was still hard for him to hear, out loud. He heard Poppy take in a slow, deep breath. But he only saw relief in Hermione's eyes.

"I was hoping you had someone to comfort you. It took me some time to realize he'd asked you to do it. It was the only thing that made sense," she said, reaching out to squeeze his hand. "I'm glad you were here for him, Poppy."

Poppy smiled, letting her breath out. This woman really did love him with all her heart. It did not matter to her that Severus had been forced to kill his friend and mentor. She got up and gave Hermione a tight hug.

"You just proved to me that you are the very best wife for my son." She went back to take her seat, filling her own plate with food. "Now tell me all about the plans you decided on, and I will let you know how I can help."

They spent the morning discussing the plans, and Poppy made lists.

When they all returned to Hogwarts that afternoon, Hermione and Severus found a very anxious Albus and Scorpius camped out by the door to their classroom. They had a parchment with their theory on it. Their faces were so hopeful when they saw the couple coming toward the door that Hermione hadn't the heart to tell them to go away.

Severus gave her a kiss on the cheek and said, "I'll take our bags to our rooms, and I'll join you in a few minutes." He gave her a 'be careful' look.

She nodded and then placed a hand on each boy's back and pushed them into the room. Severus went to the supply closet and on through to their rooms. He didn't think he had anything to worry about, especially with Albus there. They weren't actually brewing anything. He would continue to watch Scorpius, but he had seen such a change in the boy in the last week. His face was no longer guarded, and he laughed and joked. Some of the other kids were starting to talk to him. Severus was so encouraged that he thought Scorpius would never again be the mean-spirited boy Lucius had created.

He found Hermione and the boys sitting at her desk. They were pointing to the paper they had written and were explaining the gist of their potion. Hermione looked up at Severus. "It's an amazing plan, Severus. They did a ton of work this weekend."

Severus pulled up a stool from one of the student desks and sat next to Albus. "Let's see what you have here. He picked up the parchment and looked at the title; his eyebrow arched high. "A scar vanishing potion, that's what you want to create? Many Potion Masters have worked toward that goal for centuries. It's a huge chunk to bite off. Are you sure you want to try this?" His hand went up to touch the scars on his neck, unconsciously.

Scorpius said, "Yes, sir. I already have some ideas. There are existing potions that will resurface a person's face, like a Muggle face-lift, but they have proven ineffective with deep scars. It only improves the surface of them slightly. Many of our people are scared from the war. If we could help them remove the scars on the outside, maybe we can help them on the inside, as well."

Severus looked at the boys with pride. But he found he could not speak; he was too touched. He knew he would love to have the scars on his neck gone. They made it hard to forget every time the tissue pulled at him or they itched.

Hermione took their attention away from him, so he could collect himself. "It's a huge undertaking, but you will learn a lot about potions, and that is the ultimate goal with this assignment. It will help you learn whether you wish to continue a career with potions after school is over. This is good work." She stood. "Why don't you go off to dinner. We can talk more about this tomorrow after class."

Severus had recovered his voice. "Come to my office tomorrow after school, and we will go over your theory and see what it is you would like to try first."

The boys stood and said, "Thank you, sir, madam." They turned and ran. They jostled each other as they passed through the room, laughing with excitement.

Hermione turned to Severus. "Are you okay?"

Severus nodded. "Imagine if two boys accomplish what many have set out to do, myself included."

"Do you think it's possible, Severus?" she asked, slipping her arms around his waist.

"I'm beginning to think anything is possible," he said, looking down at her contentedly. "Anything's possible with love."

Lisa, you did such a super job on the last chapter. Thank you so much. Betas are worth their weight in gold.

Beck and Angela, thank you for reading and commenting on the story.

Chapter 31

Chapter 31 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

The week passed, and more students applied for the contest and turned in their theories. One set of students planned to create a potion that would target certain areas of

the body to take pain away during surgery. Others wanted to make a youth serum, and others wanted to relieve the symptoms of Parkinson's disease, which afflicted magical folk and Muggles alike. Other students were working to alleviate the effects of dementia.

Hermione and Severus were amazed with the variety of things their students had come up with. They knew some teams would never accomplish their goals because they were not knowledgeable enough about the subject and didn't have the physical technique needed to follow through with advanced Potion making. Yet there were several older teams they knew would give Albus and Scorpius a run for their money.

That weekend, they decided to visit the Weasleys. Hermione had sent an owl to Ginny with a note asking if they could come for a visit when Ron was not home. Ginny had replied that this weekend would be good, and she was excited about their visit. She and Harry lived in their own house down the lane from The Burrow.

They arrived at the Weasleys' gate about noon on Saturday. There were scads of young children running here and there across the fields near the house. Hermione knew that Molly had 17 grandkids, most of them below Hogwarts age. Surprisingly, Percy was the father of five of them. He'd turned into a rather wonderful father. He was now in office just below the minister. One day, he would take his place in the highest office of their government.

Hermione and Severus barely got close to the house when kids and dogs rushed them, jumping here and there. Hermione saw a few cats peeking from bushes around the house.

"Merlin, it's a regular zoo," Severus said dryly.

Hermione laughed at him. "That's what happens when you have a brood like the Weasleys." She bent to place kisses on top of heads, calling each child by name.

Ginny burst from the house and enveloped her in a big hug. "Hermione, it's so good to see you. Sir, you haven't changed," she said, nodding at Severus.

"Oh, he's changed. He just hasn't aged," Hermione informed her as she took her husband's hand.

Severus said, "Please, call me, Severus. We have no need for titles, and thanks to my stasis bubble, our ages aren't that different."

He noted that Ginny's middle had expanded a bit. She looked more like her mother now. She had her flaming red hair tied back, and she wore an apron that made her look matronly.

Ginny tucked a stray hair behind her ear. "Actually, Severus, you look younger," she said with a blush.

"Well, being a sleeping beauty has its advantages," he said with a drawl.

Ginny looked confused, and Hermione said, "That's a Muggle fairytale."

"Oh, well then, come in. Mum is waiting for you inside. Dad has been ill the last weeks, and she is making him stay in bed. Harry will be here as soon as he gets home from work."

She waved the kids away and gestured for them to go ahead of her.

Hermione took a deep breath and stepped into the house. Little had changed, and the house was still a hodgepodge of this and that. There was a jumble of mismatched furniture and odd magical gizmos. The only difference she could see was the enormous amount of toys that littered the floor.

Molly was sitting near the fireplace with her knitting needles working all by themselves in her lap. She was napping; her face was lined with age. It took Hermione by surprise. It hadn't been that long since she had seen her.

Severus frowned but didn't comment. After all it had been many years since he'd seen her.

Ginny smiled fondly at her. "The kids wear her out, but she wants them here as much as possible." She bent over and placed her hand on Molly's shoulder. "Mum, Hermione and Severus are here."

Molly woke and got to her feet. To Hermione, she seemed smaller than she used to be. Her back was a little stooped from years of hard work.

Molly greeted Hermione and gave her a hug. Then she turned to Severus and said, "You can't imagine how good it is to see you, Severus."

He held out his arms, and she went into them, hugging him to her. Her head rested against his chest for a few moments.

"It's good to see you too, Molly. You were always kind to this spy, and I am grateful."

Molly backed away but held his eyes. "Dumbledore had faith in you. It was all I needed to know. You can't forget, I saw a great deal of your suffering, too. No man would have gone through that unless he was devoted."

"How did you know which master I went through the hell for?" he asked.

"There was a time or two when you came back injured and delirious. I kept your secrets and never told a soul," she said. "Now, come, we will have some tea, and I've made scones. They're waiting under a warming charm."

Hermione knew Severus was touched. He had been dreading visiting the Weasleys. But now that they were at The Burrow, he relaxed and settled into a chair at the kitchen table and attacked the raspberry scones with relish.

Hermione was amazed at the changes in her husband each time she saw him interact with old friends. He'd kept so much of himself hidden all those years. It made her heart ache to know he'd been so closed off. He was just a wonderful, caring man.

Severus turned to look at her and saw the love in her eyes. He reached out and took her hand.

"It was a good idea to come here," he whispered as he placed a kiss on her forehead.

"Thank me later, Severus," she said with a grin. "You may change your mind after the bonding plans are talked about over and over."

The door opened and in came Harry. He carried a two- or three-year-old boy in his arms. The child sported a furry head of flaming hair and had a sprinkling of freckles across his face. Harry spied Severus and smiled. He set the boy down and told him to find his grandmother.

Harry held out his hand and said, "It's good to see you, sir."

Severus eyed the younger man. He'd grown a bit taller, broader, and more mature. His hair was shorter. He looked happy. Severus took his hand and got a firm handshake.

"It's good to see you too, Mr. Potter," Severus said, and he realized he meant it.

Hadn't that been what his life had been about...to get Harry through the end and help him destroy Voldemort? Seeing him here...older, happy, a father to happy children...brought it all home. It had been worth it.

"Really, sir?" Harry asked, letting Severus' hand go.

He was studying the man's face as well. He looked healthier, happier, and younger than Harry remembered. He glanced at Hermione and saw her watching them with pride. He could see the love she had for Snape. It had taken him some time to come to terms with the idea. But now he realized his friend was happier than he'd ever seen her. She literally glowed.

"Really," Severus said, handing Harry off so that he could hug Hermione.

He watched the two friends hold on to each other a minute longer than necessary. He knew Hermione missed her friends.

Harry joined them at the table to have tea and scones. When the women started to talk bonding plans, Harry stood.

"Severus, would you like to take a walk?"

Severus stood and said, "Anything to get out of going through the bonding plans again."

He kissed the top of Hermione's head as she continued to chatter in excitement with her friends.

Harry gestured to the side door in the kitchen, and they ducked through the doorway and went out into the garden.

Harry and Severus walked down the road and walked through the fields as they talked.

"Sir, you do not know how relieved I was to hear that you survived and are back at Hogwarts."

He fidgeted, and Severus waited for him to speak. He stopped and faced Severus, looking into the taller man's eyes.

"I owe you an apology. Words cannot express how horrible I felt when I realized what you really were and how Dumbledore used you, as he did me. You have permission to look into my thoughts." His gaze never wavered.

Severus stared at Harry in astonishment. "You have become an honorable man, Harry. I may?" He reached for his wand.

"Of course, Severus," Harry said, tensing for the invasion.

Severus smiled and stowed his wand back in his robes.

"It's not necessary to invade your mind. I can take your word for it," Severus said, though he was curious.

"Please, sir. It would relieve my mind to have it once and for all done with. If my thoughts in those few years after the war will bring you some comfort and it all to a conclusion, then you have no idea how I want this. You shared private thoughts with me; it's my turn."

Severus placed a hand on Harry's shoulder and extended his wand. "*Legilimens*," he said softly.

He found himself cradled in Hermione's arms, but he was Harry. "Harry, Snape would have understood eventually. He played his role so well; he would have never held it against you that you thought him a traitor."

"You don't know that, Hermione. I hated that man my whole life, and he stood up for me and saved us on countless occasions. He took so much pain and grief on his shoulders, paving the way for me to receive all the glory if I was successful."

"If he were here, you'd make sure he was right there with you," she said, trying to calm him.

"Yes, I would have, but he will never know. He will never know how grateful I am that his loyalty and love of my mother helped save our world. My dad was horrible to him, and he still gave his life for me." The boy was sobbing.

She held him until he cried himself to sleep. Severus heard her say, "I always knew he was good. Why couldn't you have believed it?"

He was then in front of the wizarding council, sharing Snape's memories, getting him pardoned. He saw and felt the boy's determination to clear his name.

There were memories of him crying himself to sleep in Ginny's arms...intimate memories, but Harry still shared them with him. Finally at the birth of their first child, Harry began to heal and talk of Snape to his son, telling him what a hero he had been.

Severus stepped back, breaking the contact and looking at Harry with surprise. Somewhere along the line, after his death, Harry had come to love him, just as he had loved Sirius.

Severus pulled him into an embrace. "We all have our regrets about the war, Harry. I find myself reliving it because for me it was only months ago...not years. Let's make a pact to let the past go. We can be friends now, yes?" he asked.

Harry looked relieved and said, "Yes, Severus. I would like that. You're very different now."

"Hermione loves me, and it has made all the difference to my life," he admitted as they walked back toward the house.

"I think she had a crush on you seventh year," Harry told him. "She was always going on about you, defending you."

Severus laughed, startling the younger man. "Yes, she has shared her fantasies with me."

Harry blanched and turned red; he chose not to comment.

"I will take care of her with my life, Harry," Severus promised. "I would also ask you a favor..."

"Anything, sir," Harry promised.

"Please, get that git of a friend of yours to come talk to her. She was hurt by his attitude after the kidnapping," Severus snarled.

Harry nodded. "I gave him a piece of my mind, but he couldn't deal with the attack or you at the time. He has a lot of regrets where she is concerned. He lets his love of Quidditch drown out his pain."

"He needs to accept that Hermione loves him as a friend...always has, always will. They need to let go of the past and be friends again, as it was always meant to be between the three of you," Severus lamented.

Harry looked at him with admiration. "I will try, sir."

"Please do."

They had reached the door of the house. It was getting to be late afternoon. Some of the children had been sent home. There was a roar of voices in the living room when

they entered the kitchen.

Hermione was waiting anxiously. She relaxed when she saw their smiles. *One down*, she thought. *Now, if I can just get that git to talk to us...*

Severus held out his arms, and she came to him. Her fingers touched his face with a soft caress. He kissed her tenderly.

"No worries, my love. Your Mr. Potter is quite the man now."

Hermione turned to search Harry's face and found he seemed quite relieved and happy himself. She reached out and drew him to her side.

"Now I have two of my three favorite guys together."

"I'll work on Ron," Harry promised her.

Later, after sitting to watch the children play games, Severus went up to visit with Arthur.

He entered the semi-darkened room and found the man propped up on pillows in his bed. His face was pale, and his snow-white hair was now only a ring around the back of his head. He looked small and shrunken against the pillows. *What has happened to these two vital people? He and Molly were pureblood wizards. They shouldn't be aging that quickly.*

"Severus, come in, come in," Arthur said, holding out his hand.

Severus took his hand and found it dry and cool. *Something isn't right.*

"Arthur, forgive the bluntness, but have you seen a healer?"

Arthur shrugged. "I saw the medi-witch down the block. She's not sure what's wrong. Please, Severus, take the chair and pull it closer. My goodness, son, I was perplexed when I heard you were alive. Tell me about it." The man took a glass of water and drank it down.

Severus refilled the glass from a pitcher by the bed, pulled the chair closer, and spent some time telling Arthur about his resurrection.

"That's amazing," Arthur said, as he poured another glass of water and drank it down. "I'm always thirsty. I drink gallons every day, but I seldom have to get up."

"You drink that much and are still dehydrated?"

Severus had that itch at the back of his neck. He found he was becoming more alarmed. That was not physically possible unless there was a potion at work, perhaps held by a spell.

"When did this start?"

Arthur looked away as if in thought. "Well the thirst started after the war. Molly and I seem to be the only ones affected. The kids all seem fine. It's gotten worse the last two years. In the last weeks I've had to stay in bed a lot; my body doesn't have much strength to hold itself up anymore."

"Merlin, man, you have to see a healer. Can't you see that?" Severus said alarmed. "You're pureblood wizards. You should not appear to be an 80-year-old Muggle."

"Eighty? If that's true, why wouldn't the kids say something?" He seemed alarmed finally.

"Sometimes when people see you every day, they don't notice. You are just Mum and Dad to them."

Severus said, "I will be back."

It is dark magic; I'm sure of it. The moment he'd stepped into the room, the hair on the back of his neck had stood up. *What is wrong with this family? Couldn't they see the man was dying? Molly isn't far behind.*

He came into the living room where Hermione, Ginny, and Harry were talking. Ginny and Harry both had babies in their laps.

Hermione saw the look of alarm on Severus' face and fear in his eyes.

"What's wrong, Severus?"

Ginny looked to the stairs. "What's happened to Dad?"

She started to run past Severus, but he grabbed her arm.

"He's the same, Ginny."

Molly had come from the kitchen when she'd heard the alarm in Ginny's voice.

"Is Arthur, okay?"

Severus held his hand up.

"You see him every day," Severus said. "You know he's ill, so you cannot see the changes I see. He's aged 30 years in 15. Harry, can't you see that he's been cursed? That is your job isn't it?"

Harry was taken aback. He nearly lashed out at Severus, but then he saw his concern.

"I didn't see it," Harry admitted.

"Harry, go to Hogwarts and bring Poppy here. Then go to St. Mungo's and see if you can get a healer to come...Miriam Strout, if she's still there. Ginny, please get your mum up to bed, and make sure she continues to drink as much fluid as she can."

The houseful of children was silent and stunned. The older ones took charge of the little ones as Harry dove into the Floo.

Severus wondered if there was time left to save Arthur and Molly. Hermione slipped her arms around him and gave him her love and strength.

Chapter 32

Chapter 32 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

Before Severus could even press a kiss against Hermione's forehead, Harry was coming through with Poppy. She looked alarmed and confused.

Severus pulled away from Hermione and ushered Poppy up the stairs, trying to explain his thoughts about what he was seeing in Arthur's condition.

Harry stood on the side, his face stricken with pain.

Hermione went to him. "Go to St. Mungo's, Harry, and get Miriam Strout. We will talk when you come back."

Harry nodded and exchanged a frightened look with Ginny. He grabbed at the Floo powder and was gone.

Ginny was standing with one of the babies clutched in her arms. "I don't understand what's happening."

Hermione said, "Severus suspects your parents are under some sort of dark magic curse...a slow, degenerating one. Ginny, you need to contact your brothers and sisters-in-law and have them come and pick up their kids. I have a feeling we will all end up at St. Mungo's before the hour is out."

Ginny turned away, still in shock, but she wrote a note, magically duplicated it, and sent them through the Floo to her family.

Soon the Floo was a flurry of activity as George's wife came through to pick up their three little ones. George came minutes later to hover there.

Percy arrived with his wife and gathered their brood. Bill and Fleur arrived via Portkey from France. Fleur took their two babies home because they knew it would make it less confusing. The other wives and children followed.

Hermione's back was to the Floo when there was another arrival. She turned to find herself face-to-face with Ron. He stared at her open mouthed and was about to speak when Harry returned with Healer Strout. He was shoved into the back of the crowd, and Hermione followed Harry and Healer Strout up the stairs. She could not face talking to him in this emotionally charged situation.

Hermione watched from the door as Severus explained the things he had observed. Poppy was helping a bewildered-looking Molly into the bed next to Arthur. She was telling Miriam Strout what her initial diagnostic spells had found and watched as the healer performed a more advanced spell, tweaking it as Poppy recounted her results. The healer gave her instructions, and she took a container of water Severus brought from the bathroom. He formed a sheet of water over Molly with it as the healer formed one over Arthur. The sheet of water shimmered as it hung in the air, then floated down and was pushed into their bodies for them to absorb.

"This is a temporary fix," Healer Strout explained. "We will need you both to come to St. Mungo's so we can study the affects of the curse."

Molly complained, "I can't go to a hospital. Who will take care of all the children?"

Harry said, "Ginny will do it, if necessary. Molly, you must have them take care of you. I'm sorry I didn't see it. I should have caught this."

Severus stepped to his side. "I misspoke earlier, Harry. You would not have seen it. It was a tickle in my old spy radar, for want of a better explanation...my sixth sense. The curse is slow acting; to someone who sees the victims everyday, it might just appear as normal aging. You might not have heard him complain about unusual dehydration. Because they're Purebloods, they should not have aged this much in 15 years. Those of you used to Muggle aging wouldn't notice. Since I haven't seen them every day, the fact that they look 40 years older in 15 years hit me hard."

Harry, grateful for Severus' explanation, left the room to find Ginny and reassure her. He nearly bumped into Ron coming up the stairs.

"You're here, huh," Harry said.

"Of course I am. They are my parents. What's happening?"

"They are ill from a dark curse. Ron, stay out of their way, and do not talk to Hermione. You were a right git to not stay to talk to her after her kidnapping"

"She's with him now. I can't fathom that, and I couldn't talk to her," he said defensively.

"You made your choices years ago, and Hermione deserves to be happy. Severus has changed; he really loves her. She wants her friend back; we both do. Stop running away and support your family." Harry stepped past him and walked away.

"Severus, is it?" Ron said bitterly to Harry's back.

"Grow up, Ron, or go back to where you came from," Harry shot back.

Ron glared after him and crept toward the door to his parents' room.

He saw Hermione standing at the edge of the threshold, and then Severus Snape stepped into view and took her in his arms. They looked into each other's eyes, and Ron was stunned by the depth of the love that was exchanged between them by just a look.

He cleared his throat. Severus glanced up at him, and his eyes hardened.

Ron held his hands out in a nonthreatening way and said, "Professor Snape, Hermione. So... sorry to intrude. I need to know about my parents."

Severus stepped in front of Hermione. "Madam Pomfrey and Healer Strout are making a diagnosis, Mr. Weasley. It is best not to disturb them; they will be down to give their results to the family."

Ron nodded and turned away.

"Mr. Weasley, I'm not sure if you are aware or not that Hermione is my wife. I expect you to treat her as such."

Ron tuned back, and his face paled, "Wife? No...sir. I didn't realize that."

Hermione stepped around and laced her fingers with Severus'.

"Yes." She raised her ring hand and waggled her fingers at him.

"Con...gratulations," he stammered and then turned and left.

Hermione stared after him. Her heart ached that he was such an ass. She felt Severus squeeze her hand.

"Thank you for not strangling him," she said, smiling.

"I don't hate him, Hermione. He really helped a lot when we needed it. I do hate that he hurt you. If he can talk to you like the friend you wish him to be, then he is welcome in our life...like Harry. If he hurts you again, I will not be so forgiving."

Hermione nodded. "Let's go wait with the rest of them." She pulled on his hand, and he glanced back into the room, watching the colors of the diagnostic spells for a moment. Then he allowed her to lead him away.

As they came down the stairs, the murmur of voices stopped and everyone turned to them expectantly. Severus repeated what he'd told Ron and they all stood waiting, quietly.

Poppy called downstairs, "Severus, Healer Strout needs your help in Apparating Arthur to St. Mungo's. She will explain what we have decided."

Severus nodded and placed a quick kiss on Hermione lips. "Follow me," he said as he ran up the stairs.

Poppy turned to the Weasleys and took a deep breath. "Healer Strout and I feel that your parents are under a dark curse. It may have been placed on them at anytime before or during the final battle. It is a dehydrating curse that ages the body about two and a half times the normal rate for full wizards. If Severus hadn't seen this, we have little doubt this might have taken their lives by the end of the year. For now, by keeping them well hydrated by magical means, we can stall the effects of the curse, but we will need to find out what the curse is and reverse it. It will continue to degrade their condition if it's not stopped."

"Healer Strout and Severus have taken your parents to St. Mungo's. We will put them in a room together. You may come and see them...but just a few of you at a time. Give her a couple hours to settle them in. One of you needs to go and help fill out the paperwork."

Bill volunteered and left immediately.

Harry and Ginny went to check on their own children and to find a babysitter. Everyone else seemed to be in his or her own little world.

Hermione prepared to leave the house to Apparate to St. Mungo's. The fact that Severus was so far from her made her nervous. Was it an after effect of the spell that kept them together so long, or just her need to be with him? She did not know.

Ron grabbed her arm as she was heading out to Apparate. "How can you be with him!" he hissed in her ear. "He killed Dumbledore. He must have you and Harry under a spell. I cannot stand the idea of him touching you."

"Ron, get your hands off me." She nearly slapped him.

Ron released her and stepped back. "How could you marry him?"

"He asked me!" She saw him step back as if he'd been slapped. "He's here with me, and he loves me. Are those reasons enough? Mostly it's because I love him with all my heart."

"I love you, Hermione. I always have," Ron said.

"Yes, Ron, you love me. But we are friends, and that's all it ever was. We were like brother and sister all our lives until puberty. It was confusing, and we may have at one time wanted more, but it didn't work. Other women turned your head too easily. Be my friend again, Ron. Find a way to let the past go. Be happy for Severus and me. I would like you at our bonding."

"I thought he said you were married?" he asked confused.

"It was a Muggle marriage. We're planning the bonding soon," she informed him.

He came close. "Then you can get out of it. I will take care of you. He's just the greasy old git, Hermione."

This time she did slap him. "He is my husband, Ron, and I love him more than my life. If you can not respect that, then stay away from me." She walked out the door and was gone with a loud crack.

Ron stood there with his hand pressed to his face and his mouth open.

Harry, who'd caught the end of the conversation, came up to him. "If Severus finds out you touched her, he might be tempted to send you to the brain injury ward at St. Mungo's. Get your head on straight. You lost Hermione many years ago. It's time you let that go and give her the respect she deserves...and the same goes for her decisions regarding Severus. He is a good man. He always was, Ron. I told you that years ago."

Ron just glared at him. "I will never accept him as her husband."

Harry turned away. "Then we have both lost our best friend."

"Harry! You're going to choose his side?" Ron said with astonishment.

Harry turned back. "There is no choice for me, Ron, and you're making the choice for all of us. Let go of your hate and be here for Hermione and me, or we all lose."

Hermione landed close to the door of St. Mungo's and used her wand to gain entrance; no one on the street would really notice the hospital unless they were magical.

She went to the receptionist desk and asked about the location of the Weasleys and Severus Snape, and she was directed to the fourth floor...the magical curses ward.

She found Severus outside one of the ward rooms. He came and took her in his arms and held her close, and she was surprised to find he was trembling.

"Severus, tell me what happening."

"The dark magic signatures are Voldemort's. It literally makes my skin crawl. The area where the tattoo on my arm was itches. It must be residual dark magic. Will I ever get him out of my life?"

Hermione held him close. "It's a good thing you can recognize it, Severus. You may well have saved their lives. I knew they seemed to be getting older. But I knew the war affected them because of losing Fred, George's disfigurement, and Bill's horrible scars." She gave a hollow laugh. "And they watch a lot of children. It takes a lot of energy."

"No one would have picked this up, Hermione. Even the healers are having a hard time with a plan of treatment. Hydration is imperative. They may have to be immersed. Their bodies now seem to need fluids constantly, and the curse is progressing rapidly...like once detected, it accelerates."

"You are a genius at potions, Severus. You can help the healers. Scorpius is also a genius at potions; ask him to help. Bring him in on this. He has an uncanny ability to see potions completed just by looking at the ingredients."

Severus pressed his forehead against hers wearily. "You're right. I can help, and it would be good for the boy. We will include Albus, too."

Severus took hold of her arms, and she winced. "What's wrong?" he asked. He pulled her sleeve up and saw the bruises. His eyes flashed dangerously. "Where did those come from, Hermione?"

For the first time, she was scared of him. "Please, Severus. It's nothing. I've dealt with it."

"Hermione, who did this?" he demanded.

"Ron grabbed me," she said. "I slapped him. He won't do it again," she promised.

"You're damn right he won't do it again. I told him not to touch you." He turned to go back to the Weasley house.

Hermione grabbed at him. "Please, Severus, he's just scared for his parents and wasn't thinking."

"Hermione, I will not allow him to hurt you," he reiterated.

"Please, for me, let it go. Once this is over, we never have to see him again," she said.

Severus saw her fear, and that in itself made him furious...that she would try to protect the git. Severus had never liked Ron, but now he felt a healthy hate for him.

He took a deep breath and pulled her close. "I will do what you say for now, but if he touches you again, I will not hesitate to pound him into the ground."

"Fair enough," she said with a sigh. "I will help you." She grinned at him.

Severus pulled her closer but stared over her head with a tight, dangerous expression on his face.

The Weasleys started to arrive at the hospital once their children had caretakers. Soon the waiting room was full of Weasleys and by association Potters.

Severus stared at Ron with such dislike that Ron finally got up and went down the hall to wait.

Finally Healer Strout came from the room and headed for the waiting room. Ron followed her.

The group stopped talking to give her their attention.

Healer Strout said, "Your parents are doing well. Treatment has helped them immensely. We have had to submerge them in water for now, and their bodies are drawing water through the skin at an alarming rate. It's a very odd curse. It's a good thing you alerted us when you did, Severus. Our very best potion master will work overtime to help solve this problem. Severus, we would value your help at this time. You are more familiar with some of more dangerous curses and potions."

"I would be happy to help. My wife, who is the current Potions master at Hogwarts, will work with me. I have several gifted students. One is a natural. He seems to know and see what potions do before they are created and what is needed."

The healer looked at him like he was a little mad, but she smiled. "Whatever you think best. We would welcome any help we can get. I will have tissue and blood samples for you as soon as possible."

Severus said, "Thank you. We will work at Hogwarts. I have my private lab there and can work around the clock if necessary. I would appreciate you sending me any promising potions by owl, and then we can collaborate."

Healer Strout nodded. "I will do that if you reciprocate."

"Agreed," Severus said. Although it went against his policies to share promising potions, this was a different situation. Competition might get them all working as quickly as possible to save these two people.

Harry pulled away from Ginny and left the room. Hermione tugged on Severus' arm to get his attention. "Can you talk to him? He's really torn up that he didn't detect this."

Severus sighed; this day had started out to be a nice one. He nodded, squeezing her hand.

"Please, stay clear of Ron," he added.

Hermione nodded, not wanting to her once-upon-a-time friend to get injured by Severus' anger. She was dismayed to see how quickly it resurfaced. When this was over, they would need to talk. She turned and saw Ginny was across the room with George. She glanced around to see Ron watching her, and she turned away, ignoring the stare that was burned into her mind. Damn him, he'd always been so stubborn. His jealousy and stubbornness had always been in their way. Damn puberty, anyway, she thought. It had taken their friendship and twisted it. She and Harry had never had that awkwardness about them. They truly had been like brother and sister.

She went to Ginny who clutched at her and cried on her shoulder.

Severus went down the hall until he found a small waiting room. Harry stood looking out the window at the Muggle street below, watching people go by oblivious to the hospital next to them.

Harry glanced up at him. "Sir," he said as he turned away.

"Harry, do not beat yourself up over this. For all I know, you were prevented from seeing the actual decline of your in-laws. It really is only obvious to me that they are ill because I have not seen them in years."

"Auror training is supposed to make me sensitive to Dark Magic," Harry said, dully.

"True," Severus agreed, "but the one true master of Dark Magic is dead. Dark Magic for you is different than myself. I lived a great deal of my life with it in my face...under my skin, if you will. I was in stasis most of the time it faded from your world. Perhaps my sensitivity to it has not faded as yet. Auror work isn't the same anymore. They are petty criminals without the master behind it all."

"That may be true, Severus." He sighed, letting go of some of the guilt. "Do you truly think I would not have seen this?"

"I truly believe that. My sensitivity to Voldemort's kind of magic is fine-tuned. You can't imagine the training I underwent with Dumbledore to perfect it."

"Dumbledore taught you?" He looked at the old potion's master with new regard.

"Yes, you cannot fathom the knowledge he had, Harry."

"Why did he keep me so isolated from the wizarding world? Why did he only teach me a few things when he could have armed me with such knowledge?" Harry's voice was bitter. "My childhood was hell."

"Yes, it was. He considered it 'character building'...at least that's what he said when I ranted at him. I asked the same questions. He felt you did not need vast amounts of knowledge. He felt it would get in the way of the pureness and love you had in your heart. That was what defeated Voldemort: the love in your heart."

Harry nodded. "I do not find the passion for my work as I did when I was younger. It mostly amounts to being away from home more than I care to be. I'm missing too much time with Ginny and the children. Albus sometimes seems a stranger to me."

"He's a fine young man, Harry," Severus informed him.

Harry laughed ruefully. "With a best friend who's a Malfoy."

"Yes, but Scorpius has changed, and he will be a huge asset to this community. Albus could do a lot worse than hang on to his coattails for the ride. Your son is quite gifted, as well, and Scorpius can teach him a lot."

"I will trust you and Hermione with his well being," Harry informed him. "I trust you with my son's life. Do not disappoint me, Severus." His eyes held strength and the fearlessness Severus had always seen in his eyes.

"I accept that trust." He added, "I must get back to the room. Healer Strout promised some samples for me to take back to Hogwarts. Are you okay, now?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. Thank you." Harry followed him out of the room.

Severus turned so quickly that Harry nearly bumped into him. "Harry, keep Ron away from Hermione. I will not be responsible for my actions if he hurts her again."

Harry nodded. "I will do my best; he's a stubborn arse."

Severus smirked grimly. "Better than a dead arse," he muttered.

Lisa, well another year is nearly done. Each and every chapter you complete gets us closer to finishing this story. I really appreciate your steadfastness to keep doing all my Beta work. Your a gem. Thank you so much.

Becky and Angela, thank you for pre-reading and for your comments.

Chapter 33

Chapter 33 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

Severus collected his samples and his wife. After a brief visit with Molly and Arthur, they returned to Hogwarts to start their work.

Minerva listened anxiously as they told her of the Weasleys' plight, and she gave them permission to work nearly non-stop. She assigned Albus and Scorpius to them during their entire school day.

All Severus' patrolling was cancelled, much to Filch's dismay. He was realizing he was no longer capable of keeping up with his duties. He asked Minerva to assign several of the older students to help him.

Hermione and Severus awaited the boys in the classroom. She was rubbing her arm subconsciously where Ron had given her a bruise.

Severus took her arm and pulled the sleeve up. With a few incantations and a wave of his wand, the bruise started to fade, and the pain stopped. He said apologetically, "I'm sorry. I should have vanished the bruises earlier."

"It's okay, Severus. I should have done it myself. I've just been worried about Arthur and Molly. They are like my parents now. I cannot think of losing them." She slipped her arms around his waist and pressed her face to his chest.

"We will help them, Hermione. As soon as we talk to the boys, I would appreciate it if you would go to the library and research the restricted section for this sort of curse. Anything even remotely related may give us the spark we need to head us in the right direction."

She started to protest, but he held his hand up. "Please, Hermione. I know you have the Potion skills to be of great use in the lab. Right now I need a researcher, and no one in this entire school is as thorough and as fast as you are. I will keep you up to date, and if anything occurs to you, send me word. When the research is done, I would welcome you working with me. I will also share what I am doing with you. After all, I'm 15 years rusty on new discoveries."

She said, "Alright, Severus. I agree with you about the need for research. I do love it."

"That's my girl." He held her close, trying to stop his own fear from overwhelming him. Being touched by Voldemort's evil again was disturbing. The only reason Molly and Arthur were still alive was because the monster was dead. His curse had lost some of its potency, but it still continued to ravage their bodies.

The door opened, and Hermione and Severus moved apart. Scorpius came first, and Albus followed. Their faces were alight with curiosity.

Severus said, "Gentlemen, come into my office. We have some serious work ahead of us."

Albus asked, "Are we going to start the project?"

Severus said, "No, Albus. Something has happened, and we need to postpone the contest for a time."

He asked the boys to sit, and Hermione came to stand with him behind his desk.

"Albus, your father asked me to tell you what has happened. Your grandparents are gravely ill because of a dark curse left over from the war."

The boy jumped to his feet, saying, "I must go to them." He turned to dash from the room.

"Albus, please stop," Hermione called. She came around and took him by the shoulders. "They are in St. Mungo's and are being well cared for. Severus and I need you to stay here. He will begin work in a few minutes to try to solve the problem."

Albus turned to look hopefully at Severus. "Can you help, sir?" the boy asked with fear in his eyes.

Severus came around the desk, "Yes, I think we can." He squeezed the young man's shoulder and then glanced over at Scorpius, who was looking confused. "Scorpius, I asked you to come because I want you and Albus to help me. Madam Snape will go to the library and do research for us. We will begin the process of developing a potion that will cure the malady or at least slow it down. We will work simultaneously with staff at St. Mungo's. Will you help me, boys?" he asked the astonished young men.

Albus nodded, his eyes still wide with fear for his grandparents.

Scorpius exclaimed, "Yes!" with excitement and then looked back at Albus apologetically.

Albus gave him a wan smile. "I understand."

"Well, let's go to my lab and get started. I will fill you in on the symptoms. Then we can do some brain-storming."

Hermione gave Albus a tight hug, and the boy held on to her for a moment. "It will be okay," she said, running her hand over the back of his head. "We will all make sure it's okay." She released him and stepped back. "You and Scorpius are gifted Potions students. You will be able to assist Professor Snape, and we will save them," she said with confidence that she did not feel in her heart. "Now off with you. I must get to the library."

The boys watched with embarrassed smiles as Severus leaned and kissed her gently and then said quietly, "Keep me informed."

She nodded and left the office.

Severus said, "Come with me. The lab is attached to the Headmistress office. It was Albus Dumbledore's lab when he was Headmaster." They followed him from the classroom. Their eyes were enormous. They had heard about this lab and had talked about it before, thinking they would never get a chance to see it.

"You two will be preparing ingredients. It's grunt work, and I want you to share anything that occurs to either of you, no matter how unlikely. You boys have a gift for Potions, and I need that to work in our favor. We are in a contest of sorts with the staff at St. Mungo's. This will be good practice for you when working toward the contest goals. We will bounce ideas off each other, and Madam Snape will be sending us information as quickly as she can find it. We will be testing these theories and sending the information to St. Mungo's if anything looks promising. They in turn will share their research. If we all work together, we will come up with an answer." Severus thought to himself, *I hope it's in time.*

They entered Headmistress McGonagall's office, and she greeted them enthusiastically. "It's good to see you, Albus and Scorpius. I am going to give you a password that will allow you to come into the office and lab at any time of the night. I will insist you spend at least 6 hours a night sleeping. I will not have you becoming sick. Perhaps you can work out a schedule with them, Severus, so that you are covered. I want you and Hermione to sleep as well."

Severus protested, "I am well able to stay up days at a time."

"That may have been true years ago, but you have been sleeping a long time Severus. You may find it's not as easy as it used to be. Never the less, I will expect you to know your own limits. I have spoken to several teachers, and they will take Hermione's classes. They will also send her several seventh-years to help her gather books and do research. Filius and some of the other teachers will assist her. The Weasleys are very much respected in our community. Everyone wants to help."

"Thank you, Minerva." He turned to Scorpius and Albus. "Boys, let's get into the lab and get started." He waved his wand at the far wall, a door opened, and the boys craned their necks to get a glimpse.

The room they entered must have been three stories high. It had shelves upon shelves of the most fascinating potion jars full of ingredients. It was like a three-story library with sliding ladders reaching to the shelves. There were cauldrons of all shapes, sizes, and metals already over burners. The room was huge. Scorpius looked closely at the instruments on the tables. They were clean, well organized, and in excellent condition. His fingers itched to touch them. This was a Potion master's dream lab, and a boy's fantasy world. There were instruments for testing everything imaginable.

"Wow!" the boys said simultaneously.

Severus couldn't help but grin at them. It had nearly been his own reaction upon seeing it many years ago. "I know you're excited, but we really need to get to work."

The boys sobered and nodded.

"Scorpius, take this station and dice the ingredients that I have laid out for you. I know you know to make sure the entire surface is clean before working on another ingredient, but I want to stress that. We need to be careful with what we have. Some of the ingredients are very volatile. Albus, you take station two and grind the ingredients I laid out for you. Scorpius, when you have completed that task, take the 3rd station and sliver those items. Albus, you'll take the fourth and pulverize those items. If you have any questions...no matter how insignificant you might think they are...do not hesitate to ask me. This is not the time to make an educated guess, ask," he commanded. "We have no time for mistakes."

The boys donned aprons and got to work. Severus watched for a moment always amazed at how gifted they were with their hands. Then he turned and began to light the fire under the cauldrons he would use. He selected more ingredients and then added them, carefully studying the colors and scents they produced. Eventually, he began to add some of the things the boys had prepared and watched the potion as it brewed.

There was a thought nagging at his mind, and he tried to dismiss it. They needed help from someone who had known Voldemort better than he did, but Severus could come up with only one name. He kept rejecting the idea, and yet his thoughts dragged him back to that one person...the one person who had shared his home with Voldemort, one who'd lived with him far more than any other Death Eater: Lucius Malfoy. Severus never wanted to see his 'old friend' again. He could pretty much be assured that Lucius would not want to talk to him. Their friendship had disintegrated over the years. It had gotten so bad that he'd had to watch his back around the man. Granted, Lucius had been shamed and beaten down by Voldemort in those last years. There was so much anger in the man, as he'd demonstrated when he'd taken Hermione. As the day wore on and the potions proved to be useless, Severus knew he would have to go see if Lucius would tell him where Voldemort might have kept his books and records.

Severus finally sighed. He turned the fire off and told the boys, "I must go see Hermione. Please clean up and get some food and sleep. We will start again in the morning. If you have any ideas in the meantime, write them down, and we can discuss them when I get back."

"Yes, sir," they chorused and set to cleaning up.

Severus left the lab and went directly to the library. He found Hermione nearly buried under a pile of books.

She glanced up when he came close and did a double take, "Severus? Did you find anything?" The hope in her eyes died when he shook his head. He stood looking down at her with a steady, uneasy look.

She stood took his hand and pulled him into an alcove with a deeply set window. It had a window seat below, and she pulled him down till they were knee to knee. "Tell me," she demanded.

Severus sighed. She knew him so well now that she could almost read his mind. "I must go to Azkaban to see Lucius."

"What!" she cried out as her face paled.

He turned his hand to hold hers tightly. "I don't want to lay eyes on him either. but he may know something. He may have heard something we can use."

Hermione could see the pain in his eyes, so she swallowed her fears and said, "Go, Severus. Do what you must. Be careful and come let me know when you're back."

"Go sleep, Hermione. I promise I will come to our rooms when I get back. There is no danger. Lucius is under magical dampening fields and can't harm me."

Hermione slipped into his lap. "I know. I just hate when you leave without me."

"I feel the same," he said, pulling her against him. He kissed her deeply, running his tongue against hers, tasting her, feeling a part of her. It calmed his ravaged nerves.

"Hermione, go sleep, and I will be back."

He pushed her to the seat and strode out quickly without looking back.

Chapter 34

Chapter 34 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

Severus Apparated to Azkaban. The wind from the sea whipped his robes around him. Icy coldness gripped at his heart as it tore at his hair and flesh. The salt spray of the sea seemed to permeate everything. He could taste it on his lips seconds after arriving. The huge prison loomed over him, dark and oppressive.

Thank Merlin there are no Dementors anymore, he thought as he stepped up to the gate.

There was a huge, severe-looking guard at the gate, and he eyed Severus suspiciously. But after checking his wand, he motioned Severus down a dark, grim hallway. The prison was freezing, and it stank of decaying bodies, vomit, and urine. Severus was lead to a huge metal door with only a small grate to see through. The guard used his wand to open the door and then ushered Severus into an even colder, gray hallway and up two flights of stairs where another huge door lead them to a corridor that held solid metal cell doors with only slots to slip plates of food through.

The guard asked, "Are you ready for this? This one is best left to rot. Don't try nothing, or you will share the cell next to him for the rest of your life, Death Eater." He sneered at Severus and used his wand to open the door.

Severus entered the dimly lit cell and saw a figure sleeping on a cot with his back to the door. There was a wooden table and chair and an ever-lit candle. A bucket with a vanishing spell was placed in the corner for Lucius' use. The spell that cleansed it kept the worst of the stink of excrement away, which he was grateful for. His heart was pounding as the door slammed shut behind him.

He called out, "Lucius."

The figure moved and a raspy voice spoke. "I hear a ghost. Go away ghost. You were best dead. This is hell." Lucius pulled the filthy, ragged blanket over his head.

"You know I am not dead," Severus informed him with a sneer. He tried not to let his disgust show. The stench of unwashed male was horrible.

Lucius slowly unfolded his body and turned toward Severus. The hate in his eyes made Severus take a step backward.

"Have you come to join me, Severus, you miserable traitor?"

He sat on the edge of the bed. His once-shiny, long, blond hair was dingy, dirty and mostly gray. He was so pale that his face was nearly translucent. His lips were cracked and had sores on them from malnutrition.

Severus was aghast at the conditions Lucius was forced to live in. Granted his crimes were many, but this was beyond cruel. There weren't even books for him to read. Severus could feel the magical dampening field like a shroud around him. So many Death Eaters had a propensity toward wandless magic that special wards blocked any use of magic within the cells.

"I saved your son from being a murderer. Did you really want that sort of life for Draco?" he asked as he pulled the chair out from the table and sat facing Lucius. "I have been told that you didn't participate in the final battle and that you only seemed concerned with finding Draco and being with Narcissa."

Lucius glared at him and chose not to comment.

"Lucius, I need your help. Agree to help me, and I may be able to lighten your sentence or at least make you more comfortable here...get you better food, books, writing materials."

"Why would you help me after what I did to that Mudblood of yours?" he asked.

Severus reached out and grabbed him by the throat, nearly lifting him off the bed. "You will show respect for my wife."

"Wife!" Lucius blanched. "You married Granger?" He then peered closer at Severus. "Where have you been? You don't look any older than you did the day you died. Are you a ghost?"

"The old buzzard encased me in a sleeper bubble for 15 years."

Lucius' eyes got wide, and then he laughed until he choked, spittle coming from his mouth in strings of bloody fluid. Lucius pulled back, spitting into Severus' face, his eyes

glittering with malice. The broken wizard raised his hand to grab at him.

Severus pulled back, and his hand went out to fend off an attack. He caught Lucius in the face and knocked him back against the wall.

"Kill me," Lucius begged him. "Death is better than this hell."

Severus brushed the nasty fluid away with his sleeve.

"No one wants to see me. Draco is a sniveling worm, and Scorpius is not allowed to come here." He eyed Severus. "What do you want?" he asked, unable to crush his curiosity.

"I need your help, Lucius," Severus told him.

"I will not help those who placed me here...those who killed my Narcissa. You were my friend, Severus. At least I thought you were. Why didn't you warn me? Why didn't you help me out of that life? You went to Dumbledore and never once suggested I do the same. I was tortured far more than you will ever know. I was his pawn, his play toy. He did things to me you cannot imagine."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Severus leaned forward again.

"He was a monster. But he held a lot of power, and I wanted that power. At first I was willing to take what he gave for the chance to best him one day. I was looking for that opening. But it was not worth my son's life. Draco was my only child, the only chance for my family to continue. What would you have had me say? We all had our assigned places. Did you imagine having him in my house was pleasant?" His voice was bitter.

"Draco is a man you can be proud of. Despite his corrupt upbringing, he is a man of honor who is trying to rise above the name of Malfoy...a name you destroyed, Lucius. Scorpius loves you. He's a brilliant young man. He can become an amazing Potions master. You should be proud of him. Why did you try to poison his mind? He nearly cost me my life."

Lucius glared at him. "That was the idea."

"You put him up to that! Why let hatred rule your life now? We are free of Voldemort; you can enjoy your son and grandchild. This sentence will only take a few years of your life. You could give the ministry evidence against others who have evaded capture. Help me help Molly and Arthur. It might go toward a lighter sentence."

"They are traitors to all purebloods. They cavort with Muggles and half-breeds."

Severus was losing his patience. He reached out and grabbed Lucius by the collar of his thin robe.

"Those attitudes are best lost. Do you not hear me? Do you not understand? This is a new world for our people: purebloods, half-bloods, and Muggleborns. We can live together in peace. We all can help each other."

Lucius sneered at him and pulled away. "Tell me about the Weasleys."

Severus explained the medical facts to him and what he and his grandson were trying to do to help. "I know you have dark magic books. You may even know where the Voldemort's books are. Help me help them. Help me help your grandson be a hero and make the name Malfoy something to be proud of again. Be the friend you were when we were boys, before the madness took our lives from us."

Lucius had an evil smile on his face. "They get their reward finally."

Severus grabbed him and begged, "Please see reason, for their health, and your son and grandson." Then he did something he hadn't planned: He pulled Lucius to him and held him in a tight hug. "Be my friend again; let go of the hate."

Lucius stiffened against him, but he soon relaxed into the hug. It had been a long time since he'd had a human touch him with anything other than pain. He held on for dear life as the tears rolled down his cheeks and he cried for Narcissa, his one true love. He cried for the son who no longer looked at him with respect and for the grandson he'd tried to poison with his anger.

Severus stood a bit stunned, but he held his friend tightly, trying not to gag at the assault of body orders and other things he did not want to think about. He remembered how he'd held the boy recently. Since his escape from the balloon, love had changed everything. *Could love now thaw this man's heart? Could it bring my friend back to me?* He even ventured to think that if Voldemort had been loved by anyone in his life, maybe he would have never been the monster he had become. Anger and evil had a life of its own. It seemed to expand, and things in its path were destroyed. Thank God Albus Dumbledore had taken him under his wing and had saved him from the same path as the man he now held close.

Finally, Lucius pulled away and looked at him with almost a shy smile. He backed away and sat on the edge of the filthy cot.

"Someone might as well live," he said with a sigh. "There is a room in the far left tower of the mansion. The top room is only the entrance to an invisible library and hold out. You must touch the stones on the top of the fireplace in the same manner as you enter Diagon Alley but with the opposite combination and two extra taps on the top center stone. I do not know if what you are looking for is there, but that is where he kept his things."

Severus stepped close again and clasped his friend's boney shoulder. "I will make sure you receive some things to make this more livable."

"I do not matter, Severus. Death is preferable. Separation from Narcissa is a living death." He turned away, crawling into the bed, and turned his back toward Severus.

"I will not forget you, Lucius. Your son and grandson will be proud of you." He turned away, pretending not to see the man's shoulders shaking as he cried.

Severus pounded on the door and was let out. He followed the guard out of the prison. Standing once again in the salt air, he looked back at the horrible prison and wondered how many others were living in these horrible conditions. Granted some of them deserved their fate; perhaps Lucius did, too. But he would keep his promise and lessen this place's horror a bit. It might be an orange or a new blanket...maybe even a book or two to help his old friend escape for a few hours.

He Apparated to Hogwarts. He ran to the castle and down to Hermione and his rooms. She was fast asleep when he burst into their bedroom.

"Hermione," he called excitedly.

"What... what?" Hermione sat up in the bed and tried to focus on Severus, who was taking clothes from her closet. He now tossed them to her and grabbed a bag and began shoving more things into it.

"Severus, what the hell are you doing?" She came from the bed.

"You must come to Malfoy Manor with me. I know where Voldemort's library is, and I daresay you will need to stay there for at least a few days if not weeks. You will need help, as well. I will send for Harry immediately. I do not want you to venture into the place alone, nor stay alone. I'm sure Draco will be more than hospitable. But I want Harry there to protect you. I know he'll want to help. I will take you," he said as he watched her struggle into her pants. He grabbed the sweater and helped her into it. "I'm sorry to be so abrupt, but we haven't the time to lose."

Hermione nodded and grabbed a few things from the bathroom. Before she knew it, they were running across the grounds of Hogwarts to the gates and were gone.

The gate to Malfoy Manor was closed tight. Severus rang the bell and a house-elf appeared to help them. He took their message to Draco, who soon came and opened the gate and ushered them in.

Draco was more than happy to let them in to the mansion and immediately showed them the corridor to the left uppermost tower. Within minutes, Harry joined them. The two men, once enemies, eyed each other warily for a few moments. Then Draco said, "Harry, welcome to Malfoy Manor."

Harry said, "Thank you, Draco. You have a fine young son. He and my son, Albus, have gotten to be quite good friends. Shall we take a lesson from them?"

Draco nodded. "I would like that. Come, the tower room is just ahead." They were ushered into a huge, round tower room, and Severus immediately made his way to the fireplace. He'd been thinking about the opening to Diagon Alley and reached out with his wand to tap the bricks in the faux arch above the mantel backwards, adding the two taps at the top.

The fireplace folded back upon itself and opened into a doorway. The room beyond was dark, and Harry went before them with his wand ready. He was sending detection spells to protect them from any dark curses that might be there to booby trap the room. He erected a shield, as balls of fire came toward them.

Severus raised a shield as well.

Hermione and Draco said, "*Lumos*." The room lit up, and the four people gasped. The room, which was magically enhanced and could not be seen from the outside, was huge. It was filled with treasure and rare, old books...some unknown to present wizard scholars. The light from the tops of their wands glinted off gold and jewels.

Severus said, "Well, Draco, you're not poor anymore." He grinned at the younger man's wide eyes. "Be careful, and don't touch anything. Let Harry check it all over before you give in to any temptation to open or examine anything."

Harry said, "There is so much here. Do you want me to alert the Auror's office and get some help?"

Severus looked at Draco. "I will accept whatever you say, Draco. Right now, it's all yours. If you get help in here, you will be expected to share it and maybe give some of it back. Spoils of war."

"Get help. I'm sure there is so much here that I can share with others who were taken advantage of during the war. They will be able to benefit from it, too."

Severus placed a hand on his shoulder. "I think you just got a new job, that of distribution. It's in your house and therefore your property. I do ask one thing: Send your father some good food, vitamins and healing potions, blankets, and safe novels. He needs help. Even if you must bribe the guards, make sure he gets some help. He lives in the worst of conditions."

Draco nodded. "I will see to it immediately."

"You might go see him," Severus suggested.

Draco blanched and turned away, leaving the three of them alone.

Severus said, "Harry, we must have help. You cannot scan this whole warehouse alone, and Hermione needs help as well. I must be back in the lab soon; the boys will be awake and ready to work."

Harry nodded. "Alright, I will send for the best." He stepped out of the room and sent off his Patronus to alert his office of his need of help.

Severus went over to Hermione and pulled her close, sighing as her body pressed against his. "I'm sorry I had to leave so abruptly. I was looking forward to your promise."

Hermione grinned at him. "I knew work would come first. When this is done, we will go away for a weekend. Maybe we can go back to the beach house."

Severus pressed a kiss to her lips then one to her cheek and just held her for a few moments until Harry returned to the room. He said to Harry, "I'm leaving her in your care; see that she is safe." He turned to Hermione. "Hermione, please listen to the Aurors. You are much more needed as a reviewer than a spell breaker. Promise me that you will not touch anything until it is cleared. I will not be able to concentrate on my work if I think you might be in danger here."

Hermione wanted to protest, but the fear in his eyes was real, and so she promised. He kissed her again, and then Severus quickly left the room.

Hermione touched her fingers to her lips and then turned to find Harry watching her.

"The love you have for each other is really something, Hermione. It still amazes me to see you with him, to see him as he was all those years ago physically yet so radically changed in soul and spirit."

"It is amazing, Harry. You know how much I've loved him, how I hung on to his memory. I do not know if that was part of the spell that kept him trapped in the bubble, but no matter what, I love him with every fiber of my being. I've never been more happy."

Harry came and gave her a hug. "I'm glad you're happy. At least two of us turned out okay. I can't imagine life without Ginny. I just wish Ron would give up the past enmity and go forward with his life and find someone to love...someone who will turn his life upside down and really make it right."

She nodded, hugging him back. "I wish for that, too, Harry. It kills me that he's not here with us. We were always like the Three Musketeers when we were kids. But we are not kids anymore, and reality is not our dreams." She stepped away from him. "Now, let's start on this shelf. You check the books, and I will start looking into them."

Harry nodded and set to work. Several hours later, there were others working with them and a growing pile of books on Hermione's table. She reached for a new book as she stretched a kink out of her back.

A small, female house-elf dressed in a tiny maid's outfit popped into being in front of her. "Master Draco is asking if you want to eat, Madam. He will be having us prepare a meal for the entire company in thirty minutes in the downstairs dining hall."

Hermione sighed. She would rather eat here, but it would be a good idea to freshen up and have a walk to stretch her legs. "What is your name?" she asked the little creature.

The little elf blinked her huge eyes at Hermione. "Dolly, Madam."

"Dolly, I see you are a free elf. Do you like working here?" she asked, curious to find a liberated elf at Malfoy Manor.

"Yes, madam, this is my home. I was born here, as was my father and father's father. We are all free now that Master Draco is in charge. Will you come down for dinner?" she asked with a squirm.

"Yes, Dolly. Tell your Master we will be down soon. Thank you."

The little house-elf bowed and was gone with a crack. Hermione was surprised about the house-elf's status. She had seen that Draco had changed, but she hadn't realized how much. Even with his struggles to financially maintain his home, he'd freed his slaves. She would have to commend him for his charity.

A little later, the group found themselves in a huge dining room. The meal was simple but delicious, and Hermione found herself enjoying the conversation of intelligent adults. She missed Severus and knew he would have enjoyed this as well.

She only hoped he was doing well with the boys and they were coming up with something that would stall the end of the curse until her team found what they needed from Voldemort's library. She'd already seen some amazing things and some things that turned her stomach. He really had been a monster.

Lisa, thank you for your amazing Beta work. I would be lost without you.

Becky and Angela, thank you for pre-reading this story and for your comments.

Chapter 35

Chapter 35 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

Hermione pounded her pillow for the tenth time. She could not sleep without Severus. This whole ordeal was going to be difficult to get through. She had finally slipped into a light sleep when she felt the bed move behind her, and familiar arms slipped around her waist.

"Severus?" She turned around to face him.

"It better be me, or someone else is dead," he drawled.

She grinned and moved in for a slow, long kiss. "Merlin, I missed you."

"Me too." He laid his cheek against her chest, snuggling into her.

Hermione soon realized he'd fallen asleep, and she let herself drift off in the safety and comfort of his arms.

A hand making lazy circles across her belly woke her to the dim light of sunrise. Lips touched her cheek softly.

The hand slid up to gently caress a breast. "Mister Snape, what do you have in mind?" she whispered.

He grinned against her cheek. "I thought a good shagging would be nice. You up for it? Sorry, I don't have a lot of time. The boys will be in the lab in 30 minutes."

She caressed his hair and said, "I'm always up for a shagging." Her laughter rolled over him like beautiful wind chimes.

He rose half above her and then attacked, giving her a thorough kissing. She clung to him, letting her hands roam his body, which she now realized was naked. She hadn't had the nerve to sleep alone in someone else's house without her gown on, and she now wished it was gone.

But it didn't take long for Severus to remove it. Their bodies pressed against each other, and their hands stroked arms, legs, stomachs, and other, more sensitive spots.

Hermione arched against his fingers. She threw her leg over his hip, and he slipped in, pressing himself into her. Their bodies moved slowly and deliberately, slipping deeper and deeper into their need to go over the top. The climax was a hard one, and Hermione muffled her screams of pleasure against his lips. His cry echoed around in her head. They clung to each other as their breathing slowed and their heartbeats settled down.

Hermione found tears sliding down her cheeks, and Severus held her while she cried. He did not have to ask her why. He knew being in the Malfoy house brought back bad memories, and she missed being with him all day. He felt her loss as much as she did his. He knew she worried they wouldn't be able to help Molly and Arthur in time.

"Thank you, for coming here last night, Severus," she finally whispered.

"You're welcome, but it was as much for me as it was for you. I couldn't sleep without you, my love." He pressed a kiss onto her forehead. He started to move away, and she clung to him.

"Five more minutes, Severus," she begged.

He sighed and settled down to hold her close. After the five minutes passed, they got up, took a quick shower, and dressed. She kissed him goodbye, and then he reached into his pocket and took hold of the Portkey and was gone.

Hermione blinked back tears and took a deep breath. She headed down for breakfast and then up to Voldemort's library to work.

When Severus entered the lab, Albus and Scorpius were already there. They looked tired, and he eyed them suspiciously. "Did you sleep?" he asked pointedly.

The boys nodded. He could see it wasn't all the truth, but he didn't admonish them. They'd probably been in the lab for hours already. He could see that Scorpius had already crossed off a few of the potions he had wanted to test the night before. He rolled up his sleeves and joined them.

Late in the afternoon, Scorpius screamed, "This one works!"

Severus rushed to his side and watched as he demonstrated the potion on small mice they had infected with Molly and Arthur's blood. The water the mice had to constantly sit in to stay alive stopped being drawn into their bodies at the alarming rate that it had been before the potion. Scorpius had to turn the flow of the in-feed way down. This mouse looked healthier than it had. Its thin body retained a more normal fluid level and did not overflow, as some had previously.

Severus grabbed the boy and hugged him. He clapped Albus on the back. Great job, boys. "I must get this to St. Mungo's immediately." He took a generous supply of the potion from Scorpius' cauldron and placed it in a bottle, which he slipped into his cloak pocket. Then he reached into his other pocket and took hold of the Portkey for St. Mungo's.

Upon arrival, he shouted for Miriam Strout as he came into the hospital foyer. The staff had been alerted to the fact that he would come suddenly, and they quickly took him to the room where Molly and Arthur were being treated. Healer Strout grabbed the potion, did a few tests, and within minutes administered a dose to her patients.

Severus stood back and watched.

His friends had aged years since Severus had last seen them. They looked at him with hopeful, but terrified, eyes. Harry and Ginny were there in the room and stood holding on to each other as they saw the potion change Molly and Arthur. The hollow, dried look about their faces slowly vanished, and their wrinkles started to disappear. The tubs they were suspended in started to overflow, and the healers reached up to turn the taps off.

"Severus, was that a cure?" Molly asked.

Severus shook his head. "No, I'm sorry, but it will give us time."

Ginny put her arms around her mother, and they cried huge sobs that wracked their bodies. Tears of hope and relief.

"Harry, you left Hermione alone at Malfoy Manor?" He tried hard not to let his voice sound angry.

"I had another Auror come to keep an eye on her. She will be okay. Ginny sent a Patronus that they were getting worse. I had to come."

Severus cringed at the raw emotion still coming from the women. He felt Harry's hand grab his shoulder, and he turned to see Harry giving him support in the only way he could. "Thank you, Severus."

Severus replied, "Thank Scorpius Malfoy. It was his and Albus' potion. They have been working nearly non-stop for two days."

"Scorpius." He seemed to balk, but then he took a deep breath. "It's hard to get over the prejudices of the past." He looked Severus straight in the eye.

"Yes," Severus said slowly, "but it can be done. Don't you think, Harry?"

"Yes," he said evenly. They both knew they weren't talking only about Scorpius anymore.

"We all did what we had to, what was planned for us by Albus Dumbledore. My role was as difficult as yours," Severus explained.

"More difficult I think," Harry said. "I have a hard time forgiving him for what he asked of us without explaining. I think if we'd had a choice, we would have done the same thing. Don't you think so, sir?"

Severus nodded. "Yes, we would have," he said with conviction. "I must return and let the boys know how it's going. Please let me know immediately if it begins to fail."

"I'll have Ginny send word," he promised the older man. "I'll go back to help Hermione," he assured Severus.

"Thank you, Harry. I do not feel comfortable without you there, but I understand why you had to leave." He turned and left the room.

Harry went to give Ginny a kiss and told her he had to return to Malfoy Manor.

Hermione was looking through the desk and shuffling through papers. She carefully examined every item that was in the drawers. She was about to close a drawer when she caught sight of a piece of paper nearly hanging behind the rear of the drawer. She got on her hands and knees and carefully pulled the drawer open as she heard Harry coming back into the room.

"Hey, what did you find? Let me check, please," he said bring his wand out and casting some spells around the desk.

"It's just a piece of parchment, maybe a book page," she explained, annoyed with the constant checking. It wasted so much time. "What happened at the hospital?" she asked, sitting back on her haunches.

"Good news. It looked dire when I got there, but Severus came with a potion the boys made. It helped, Hermione. It really helped." He finished his survey of the desk, lowered his wand, and then stepped back for her to move in.

"I'm so glad." Then she asked, "Did you see Severus?" She was curious about how that had gone.

"Yes, we talked," Harry said, watching her draw the drawer out and fetch the paper.

She stood, and he cleared a place for the page on the desktop. It was immediately clear that this was only a part of a page. The bottom was torn off.

Hermione began to decipher the ancient runes. "It's a spell," she said. "It speaks of darkness, ancient death." Her voice became excited, "receding waters, husk ... Oh, Harry it's not complete; part of it is gone. This could be it, but it's not all here."

She immediately dove at the desk and pulled out every drawer. The rest of the page was not there. She slumped back, her eyes filling with tears.

"Please, Harry, send for Severus. He knows more about Dark Magic. Maybe he will have heard of this. Maybe he saw something when he was with Voldemort."

Harry nodded and sent off his Patronus.

Severus was sitting down to a long-deserved meal with Albus and Scorpius when the Patronus arrived. He recognized it immediately, and his heart stopped.

"Hermione found something, and she asks that you come." Harry's voice sounded excited.

Severus sat catching his breath; she was okay. He felt Albus tug at his shoulder. "Are you okay, Sir? Professor?"

He gulped air and nodded. "I'm okay. For a moment, I thought something was wrong with Hermione," he admitted to the startled boys. "I can't imagine life without her." He didn't see the pain that winced across Scorpius' face. The boy still had some guilt left in his heart for what he'd tried to do to them.

Severus stood. "Please, eat your lunch, and then take some time to relax. Go out and play a round of Quidditch. You deserve it. So far word from St. Mungo's is positive. You can afford an hour or two off." He reached in his pocket as he stepped away from them, touched the Portkey, and he was gone.

The boys grinned and gulped down the rest of their lunch. A game of Quidditch was just what they needed.

Severus barreled through the gates as soon as one of the house-elves opened it for him. He raced through the house and up to the tower.

Hermione was studying the parchment page before her with a magnifying glass. Harry was staring at it over her shoulder.

Severus stepped to her side while admonishing them both. "You nearly gave me a heart attack. Is everyone okay?"

"Sorry," they chorused. Harry was turning the page this way and that while she examined it, and Hermione didn't need to give him directions. Harry and Hermione did not even look up at him. He frowned. They had been so close, and they could still finish each other's sentences. He found that nagged at him. He shook the silly thought away. He sometimes let his old, possessive self give sway to his thoughts.

He bent to look at the parchment and read the words aloud.

Duco Vita Coactum

Drawer of a life force, wrought from alchemy,

Bringer of death, stern and dour

Revenge upon thine enemies

Wilt thou take with thy power

Past the time of the caster's death,

this curse ravage to their last breath.

Time given for lessons hard learned

Reversal can be achieved in turn.

Duro Vita Coa...

"It's not complete," Severus said resignedly.

Hermione nodded. "But I think it may only be the last line. It's missing for a reason. That bastard must have memorized it. We can continue to look, but I thought maybe you might be able to work with it. I know you have the creativity to write your own spells."

He nodded, thinking back to when Harry had used one of his own spells against Draco and nearly killed him. "Yes, I will take it back to Hogwarts, and you two keep looking."

Hermione got up and wrapped her arms around him. "If anyone knew that monster, it was you and Lucius. You may have to go see him again."

Severus shuddered against her but nodded. "I will do what I must." He told them that the potion continued to keep the status quo with Arthur and Molly. This was giving them precious time they had not had before.

Harry had stepped back when Hermione had mentioned Severus' abilities to create his own spells. The use of Snape's potion book had been a dark time in his life, culminating with the death of Dumbledore. For months he'd had nightmares of watching the blood watching the blood seep from Draco's body and mix with the water on the floor of the bathroom.

Severus saw his white face, and he had no trouble figuring out where Harry's thoughts had wandered. "Harry, it's the past. Let it go."

Harry nodded, grateful for this new Severus. He actually was coming to admire and like the man. He saw the all-encompassing love Hermione had for Snape, and he trusted her judgment more than his own.

"Thank, you, Sir." Harry let the thoughts go back into the dark parts of his mind he didn't visit anymore. He knew he still owed Draco an apology.

Severus studied the younger man's face and saw all sorts of emotions passing across his face. "Maybe when all this is over we can really have a talk, Harry. We can put all the ghosts to rest."

Harry smiled. "I'd like that, Severus."

Hermione looked with love from her husband to her best friend. It warmed her inside to know that they might actually become friends. She frowned, thinking about Ron momentarily. He was such a git.

She hugged Severus close and offered her mouth. He kissed her and then stepped away. "I need to get back to the lab. I gave the boys a few hours off to play Quidditch. It will be good for them to get in some exercise and sun."

Harry nodded. "Please tell Albus and Scorpius how proud I am of them, and give Albus my love." He laughed when Severus frowned.

Hermione laughed and playfully punched his stomach. "You can do it."

Severus only glared at them and strode away, wondering if he'd able to give Albus Harry's 'love,' to say those silly words to a teenaged boy for his father*.will see when I face the boy*, he thought.

Severus returned to his office. He checked the lab and found the boys were still out playing. He stood at the window and watched them practicing. They were both really quite good, but that wasn't a surprise. He knew they would be on a team soon.

He turned to the desk and sat, drew the parchment out of his robe, and began to read through the ancient runes. He made notes and studied the ebb and flow of the verse the spell was written in. If there was a tune, how would they ever find it? He knew a lot of spells with a sort of singing rhythm. He'd invented some of them himself.

He got a couple of the mice they had for experimenting on and sat them in a small cage on the desk before him. He directed his words at one of them and began to chant the spell. At first nothing happened; then, suddenly, the mouse began to squeak and run. His body twisted in agony, and then he turned into a puff of dust and was gone.

Severus sat horrified. The missing parts of the spell were the parts that allowed the victim to linger. He took a shuddering breath and put the other mouse back in a cage. He would have to study it more carefully before he tried that again on another living creature.

He decided it was time to revisit Lucius. If that didn't help, he would have to revisit his memories with Voldemort. Could he see those again, could he stop the evil that was his past from damaging who he was now? Taking Hermione with him could help anchor him in this new life, but he did not want her to see what he'd been.

He stood and left a note for the boys. He went to his and Hermione's rooms and got a few books, some food, clothing, other supplies, and a blanket and headed for the gates of Hogwarts. He'd not confirmed with Draco about whether he'd gotten anything to Lucius or not.

A little while later, standing against the noise and spray of the sea, he took a deep breath and stepped up to the guarded gate.

Lisa, thank you for your Beta work. You keep hanging in there no matter what I ask. I really appreciate the consistency you bring to my work. I can always count on you.

A special thank you to Ms. Tree. She helped me with the verse above. I very much appreciate the help.

Thank you, Angelea and Becky for your thoughts and comments.

Chapter 36

Chapter 36 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

It took Severus a good 30 minutes to gain access to the prison. He reasoned it probably would have taken longer if the guard had not been an Order member. So many of them took other jobs, as their Order of the Phoenix duties were at a minimum now.

Severus remembered the guard and was wary when he first stepped up to the gate.

"Well as I live and breathe, if it's not Professor Snape. I heard you was back amongst the living." The older man swung the gate open, and Severus stepped into the search area.

"I need to see Lucius Malfoy. He may have information that will help Molly and Arthur Weasley," he told the guard. Grimmley Hinckernill, if he remembered correctly.

"That's one sorry mess of a man. Can't say as if I'm sorry to see him here."

He ran his wand over Severus as Severus stood with his arms out, feet planted apart.

"I suppose you think I should be in the next cell," Severus stated matter-of-factly.

"No, sir. Harry Potter stood up for you after the war, and most of us believed him. I know what you did. You may have not realized, this but there were those of us sent to trail you."

He cringed when Severus turned a nasty stare his way.

The man hurried to explain, "We was sent to back you up, if necessary, but only if we were sure death was coming down on you. I saw some of the things you went through. No, sir," he said as he turned to examine the things Severus had brought with him. "I'm very happy you're not here in this cesspool. Why you bringing these things? His son tried to get stuff through here, but I wasn't having nothing to do with it. I don't take bribes." He spat on the ground. "That man deserves less than what he has. It was for kidnapping your wife that he ended up in here, wasn't it?"

He looked at Severus with a hint of confused suspicion in his eyes.

"Yes, but the Weasleys are paramount in my mind for now. If I can bribe the man with a few comforts, then I might be able to get the information I need to help them."

He did not tell the man that Lucius was still his friend of sorts and that loving Hermione had taught him the value of a man's wife and the devastation Lucius might feel at the loss of Narcissa.

"Grimmley, is it?" he asked.

The older man looked pleased that he'd remembered. "Yes, sir." He stood a little prouder.

"I have little time to waste, and I need answers now. Please, allow me to take these things to Malfoy for the sake of the Weasleys."

The old man nodded but took some time checking each item over. Finally, he took Severus' wand and placed it in the lock box, and then he used his wand to open the great door.

The stench hit Severus' nose, but he didn't comment as he followed the old man down the hall to the stairs that lead upstairs to Lucius' cell.

Lucius lay in the same balled-up place he'd seen him the last time. The stench of his unwashed body hit him. He turned to Grimmley and said, "I will wash him, if you will allow us use of the showers."

The old man looked concerned, but he owed Severus like so many others. He nodded.

"Lucius, it's Severus. I have permission to help you shower."

Lucius turned to look at him. "You came back." He struggled to sit up.

Severus helped him and then actually picked the weak man up and followed Grimmley down the hall to a shower room that had bars. Once Severus was locked in with Lucius, Grimmley promised to return in 30 minutes.

Severus stripped off his own clothing to the waist and carefully undressed Lucius. The man was far worse off than he'd imagined. His skin was bitten by mites and lice, and it also hung from dehydration and starvation.

Severus found the delicing soap and carefully washed his old friend. Thirty minutes later, with a worn but cleaner robe on and his hair clean, he looked a lot better. Severus was furious at the treatment he was getting. He was a murderer and kidnapper, but Severus knew himself to be not much below that. These people in Azkaban didn't deserve treatment that wasn't even meeting basic needs. They should have clean cells, clothing, enough food to be reasonably healthy, and blankets for warmth. He'd heard some Muggle prisoners had tele and game courts. That was going way too far. But basic needs were important. He decided then and there this would be a cause of his once the Weasleys were cared for. He knew this decision might not be easy for Hermione, but he was sure she would support him and try to understand. If she had worked for house-elf rights, why not prisoners rights? He wasn't at all sure if he was right or not. She would certainly let him know if he was asking too much. He smirked at the thought.

When Grimmley came back and led them back to the cell, Severus was pleased to see that it had been cleaned and sanitized.

"Thank you," he said as he helped Lucius to the chair by the table.

Grimmley nodded, a slight smile on his face as he backed out, locked, and warded the door. "Just yell when you want out. I will be on duty several more hours. Best you be out by then. Oh, I placed a spell on this cell; the other guards will not see the improvements."

"Thank you," Severus said with a tiny bow of his head.

He turned back to Lucius, who was eyeing the bundle that now sat on the bed. Severus went and got it and sat it on the table before him. He untied the bundle and let the blanket roll open. He moved the items off it and placed the warm blanket around Lucius' thin shoulders.

"Thank you," the man said, in a thin voice, as he watched Severus sort through the other things.

There were several novels...books Lucius had liked as a boy. The broken wizard put his hand out to caress the covers, and his eyes teared up.

Severus handed him a potion bottle. "A drop every day will help you with your strength. It's a concentrated vitamin supplement. I compressed quite an amount of it in there; it should last months."

He took another bottle and opened it. "Drink it," he said. "It will heal your lungs."

He watched as Lucius drank the potion down with a grimace.

"Lucius, you deserve to be locked up for this crime, but not in this state. You only have seven months left of this sentence. You can go back home, enjoy your son and grandson, but only you can decide to live. If you do not help yourself while in here, no one else can."

Lucius nodded. His eyes turned to the tied bag with hopes of food.

Severus opened the bag and handed him a bar, like a Muggle protein bar. "This bag is also enchanted by the house-elves. They made this for me on Dumbledore's orders. This bag will never empty. I carried it with me when I was traveling."

The tears now spilled down the man's cheeks.

"Now, you have to get up, drink the water they give you, and eat this food. This is the only way you will survive this hell hole."

"The books are also enchanted. You hold one in your hand and tap the top three times, and it will change to whatever novel you are thinking of reading."

"How did you manage to get this all past the dampening field?" Lucius asked with a gleam of mirth in his eyes.

"Old magic, house-elf magic. This place won't affect it. Now this will all turn to dust if you are in any way tempted to harness the magic for your own use. There are safeguards. Use the items as I've explained, and you will find your life a bit more bearable, but that's all."

Lucius nodded. "What do you want, Severus? I know you are not doing this out of the goodness of your heart." His voice was stilted with sarcasm and suspicion.

"No." Severus sat on the edge of the cot. "I do want you to be more comfortable, but I do have a reason for this visit. I told you about the Weasleys the last time. We have made some progress. They are more stable for now. Scorpius and Albus Potter have created a potion that has stalled the inevitable. Hermione also found part of a spell in Voldemort's office."

"Part," Lucius sneered with a nasty laugh that ended up in a cough.

"Yes," Severus intoned, disheartened by the look of mirth in Lucius eyes.

"Sorry," the emaciated man said, "old habits."

"Yes, they are hard to break."

A bit of sparkle appeared in the imprisoned wizard's eyes. "Despite what I've done, you still are willing to help, or at least bribe me, Severus. I can respect that. Tell me about the spell."

It took the good part of an hour to tell Lucius about the spell, and they discussed the meanings of the words. Lucius told Severus he was not aware of the spell, but he would think on it and send word through Grimmley if he remembered anything. He did share some of his knowledge of spells, and it gave Severus several things to try when he got back.

Finally he called out to Grimmley, and the wards let the man know he was ready to go.

When Severus stood again on the other side of the locked cell, he glanced in to see Lucius turn away and reach for one of the books. There was a faint smile on the man's face...not an evil look of one who was getting more than he deserved, but a touched look as his fingers caressed the gifts given to him by an old friend.

Severus turned away and followed Grimmley from the prison. At the gate he said, "Please send me word if Lucius should ask to see me. It's of utmost importance."

The old guard nodded. "I hope this works for the Weasleys' sake. They served our people well. They are what wizarding families should be."

Severus nodded. "Thank you Mr. Hinckernill." He Disapparated.

Hinckernill finally began to feel that his days as a spy for Dumbledore and the Order had been worth it after all.

Back at Hogwarts, Severus continued to study the spell and try different things. Hermione stayed at the Malfoys' for five more days but did not find anything. So she returned to the Hogwarts library to look for more references to similar spells.

Severus came to the library one night and found Hermione asleep with her head against a book she had been reading. He picked her up and carried her to the library Floo and into their quarters. He knew she was exhausted, and he wasn't much better off. The Weasleys were starting to lose ground again. It was slow and still gave them weeks, but time was running out. Subsequent variations of the potion no longer worked. Albus and Scorpius were frustrated, tempers were getting the best of all of them. Severus had sent the boys to bed, and he administered a sleeping draught to them himself to make sure they got at least eight hours of uninterrupted sleep. He planned to do the same himself. He placed Hermione in their bed and used his wand to change her clothes into a gown. After a quick shower, he slipped into the bed and downed the potion; drawing her close, he fell into a deep sleep.

A soft finger trailing over his lips woke him, and he kissed the teasing finger and opened his eyes to see Hermione peering down at him. Her hair was a tussled mass of curls, but he had never seen her look more beautiful. He reached out to kiss her and found her breath sweet from mint toothpaste. She'd slipped out to shower before waking him.

He gathered her close and kissed her; it had been nearly a week since they'd slept together. His need for her wouldn't be denied, and she surged forth with her need as well. They caressed and touched each other with urgency and desire. He thrust into her, looked into her eyes, and whispered, "I love you."

Hermione caressed his face as she wrapped her legs around him, trying to match his rhythm. "I love you, too, Severus. I can hardly stand sleeping without you." The rest of the conversation came to a halt as their climax neared, and they let themselves slip into abandon as their cries rang out with pleasure.

Hermione pressed her ear to his chest, listening as his wildly beating heart began to calm, and ran her hands over his stomach.

"This has to be over soon. It just has to, Severus. How much more can we all take? Harry said Ginny is just beside herself. She cries herself to sleep every time they have

managed to be together."

Severus gathered her closer and caressed her hair with his large hand, trying to impress the memory of every part of her body that touched him: the touch of her thigh along his leg, and the softness of her breast against his chest. He felt her fingertips as they trailed over his stomach and her fuzzy hair as it tickled his nose. These things comforted him when they could not be together.

"I am trying as hard as I can. We have nowhere else to look. You and your helpers have nearly exhausted this library. Others are double-checking the Voldemort Library and the Malfoy library. I don't know what else to do."

Hermione raised herself up along his body and kissed his face, gently touching his eyes, nose, cheeks, and lips. He left his eyes closed as he relished her touch. It was always a thrill to have her touch him. He knew he would never grow tired of her.

"Each touch is as the first..."

His voice trailed off as she covered his mouth with hers. They made love again and then spent more time than they knew they should just being together. Finally they crawled from the bed and showered. When they came from the bathroom, an owl was sitting on the table with a note in its mouth; it was black with Floo ash.

Severus glanced at Hermione and saw her eyes widen with fear.

"If it was bad, they would have sent a Patronus," he tried to assure her as he undid the note. "It's from Azkaban. Lucius has remembered something. I will go at once," he said, grabbing his cloak and a small bag he had been preparing to take the next time he went.

"You're taking him gifts?" she asked, a bit surprised.

"Hermione, call it a bribe. We can talk about it when this is all over." He wished now he'd told her about the other things he'd taken, but they'd had no time.

He kissed her fiercely. "I love you. I will come to you when I get back."

She watched him disappear into the Floo and knew he would come out in Hogsmead and Apparate from there. She stood there, not sure if she liked the fact that he was making Lucius' life easier.

She went and crawled back onto the bed and held the blankets to her nose, smelling his scent. She sent a prayer heavenward for the Weasleys and the hope that Severus would find the answers they needed.

Severus went through the process of security more quickly this time. Grimmley Hinckernill trusted him and did not check the bag he carried.

If this had been any other situation, Severus would have scolded the man for his lax security...never trust anyone had always been his motto as a spy...but as he followed the old man to Lucius' cell, he realized this man would not have done it for anyone else.

Lucius was sitting up at the table, and he looked a lot better than he had the last time. He had put on a few pounds, and his color was better. A bit of sparkle had returned to his eyes. He'd been able to shower on a more regular basis since he was able to walk to the showers himself.

Lucius said, "Come, Severus, sit. I have had a memory. It may be of help. I have no idea."

Severus said, "Grimmley, we will need your wand help."

Severus sat on the bed, and Lucius pulled his chair to face him. "You will have to view it for yourself."

Severus looked surprised as he reached out to his friend and touched his face. Without his wand, direct contact would be needed.

"Grimmley, stand behind me and command Legilimens," Severus instructed.

The old guard looked a bit perplexed but did as he was asked.

Severus found himself at a revel. Death Eaters were dancing around in the firelight, and Voldemort was watching the merriment through his snake-like eyes. Bellatrix was kneeling before him. She fawned over him and tried to seduce him and take his mind off whatever it was he was taking her to task about. She seemed afraid and was begging for mercy.

"Dark Lord, we were outnumbered. There were Order members there."

"This party was set for your success. They should have been no match for my best," he said, leaning and pressing one long nail into the flesh of her cheek and drawing blood, which he licked from his fingertip. "My followers deserve to let loose, but you were in charge. Perhaps you will be the entertainment for tonight."

There was horror on her face as she tried to draw away. It was then that Severus realized Voldemort was holding her there with an unseen spell.

Severus shuddered at the realness of being in Voldemort's presence again. He felt dirty, and he nearly stepped back out of the firelight when he felt Lucius' hand on his back.

"We must go closer. You need to listen to what he is telling Bellatrix."

Severus had to remind himself that Voldemort could not see or hear him, but he found his feet felt like lead as he forced himself closer to the monstrous despot.

Voldemort stood, knocking Bella down to the ground as he kicked her. The merriment stopped and fear permeated the place. No one liked it when Voldemort was angry. Severus wondered where he had been that night. This was not in his memory. Had he been off on another mission for one or the other of his two bosses, or had he still been at Hogwarts? By the looks of what was coming, he was happy to have missed this party.

Voldemort strutted around, scattering his followers as they tried to shrink further back from the fire in the hope of not becoming a casualty of this revel.

"This woman failed to destroy the Weasleys as she was commanded. They and the others at the now destroyed Burrow all walked away unscathed," he hissed as his snake like eyes narrowed.

Bella shrunk further onto the ground, prostrating herself before him.

"Please, Dark Lord, let me try again. I will not fail."

"Oh, you will try again but not before you get a taste of what I plan for the Weasleys. They will not know what has befallen them, but they will feel my wrath until their death. Water is life and life will be denied to them. You will demonstrate to us what their lives will be like," he bent toward her and hissed, "at a much accelerated rate."

His wand flashed out, and he began to chant a spell, in song.

Severus recognized the words; it was the spell Hermione had found. He moved closer and tried to clear his mind of whatever else was going on around him as Voldemort chanted out the spell. Bellatrix started to squirm uncomfortably, and then she raised herself to her knees and moved her hands into her vision. Her skin was starting dry.

Her flesh sunk in. She raised her hands to her face as it dried, and she cried out in horror as she felt her face age.

"Water! Please, I'm thirsty."

"No water for you. Water would prolong your life for years, my dear, but eventually you'd have to swim in it to keep yourself alive," he teased. His eyes were alight with devilish pleasure at her now obvious pain.

She began to scream with pain, and her flesh began to recede more, causing cracking and bleeding.

Then Voldemort began to chant again. The spell was backwards, and the last line was spoken first. The missing line was now cemented into Severus memory. He backed away, dragging Lucius with him, anxious to be away from the filth that was Voldemort. He did not want to see how Bella would beg for forgiveness; he'd seen enough of the woman to last a lifetime. Thankfully, she was as dead as Voldemort.

He pulled himself from the memory and found himself breathing in the foul air of the prison, but it smelled sweet compared to being in Voldemort's company. He felt his stomach heave, and he fought the bile in his throat down. He grabbed Lucius and hugged him and said, "Thank you. I must go now, but I will come and we can talk." Leaving the bag behind, he urged Grimmley out the door, down the hallway, and out into the fresh sea air.

Severus turned and said, "Thank you, sir. You did a great service for the Order. If you ever need anything, please contact me."

He stepped away and Disappeared.

Lisa, thank you for being my beta. I could not do this without you.

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Chapter 37

Chapter 37 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

Suddenly his mind and head reeled, and he felt dizziness overwhelm him. His vision began to fade. He stumbled as he landed in the back room of the Three Broomsticks in Hogsmeade. He grabbed the Floo powder and dove through, landing in his own rooms at Hogwarts. He fell to his knees, vomiting on the floor. He heard Hermione cry out his name, and then her hands were on him, cooling his hot skin and ministering to his needs. She cleaned up his mess and got him into the bed. Poppy came and gave him a calming draught, and they waited for him to calm down enough to tell them what happened.

He lay on the bed, thinking he should be able to overcome the shock of being that close to Voldemort again. The memories he'd shared with Scorpius had been like watching a movie; he had already known what was coming. But seeing the monstrous way Voldemort had chastised his favorite had been a shock to his system. He was reminded of his own *death*. He felt like he was in a dark tunnel looking out. He knew he had the information they needed, but his mind seemed somehow turned in on itself.

Poppy finally told Hermione, "As best I can tell, he used Legilimency on Lucius Malfoy. I sent a Patronus to the prison, and a Grimmley Hinkernill sent back a message saying he had assisted but he never done it before. He says that Lucius also seems affected, but the prison doctor says he will sleep it off. I guess we just have to wait for Severus to work his way through the shock of whatever the memory did to him. I have helped him all I can. Just hold him and talk to him. Call me when you see any changes."

The old healer gave her a hug and ran her hand over Severus' hair. She turned and left the room with tears burning her eyes. "Will he never be truly free?" she muttered under her breath.

Hermione crawled into the bed and wrapped herself around him. Having second thoughts, she used her wand and vanished their clothes and then wrapped herself around him, skin to skin. She wanted him to feel his anchor to this world, to feel the love she had for him. She reached out with her thoughts, catching glimpses of what he had seen, and she called to him, flooding him with her love. She knew when he started to cry that she had touched him.

He wrapped his arms around her and cried, letting go of more of the pain, shame, and guilt of his former life. Hermione's love proved to him once again that most people forgave him and he had a life to live and people who depended on him. He needed to get this new information to St. Mungo's. The filth of Voldemort that he had been dipped in flowed away.

"Severus, Molly and Arthur are okay for now. You can sleep for a few hours. Let go and sleep."

Emotionally exhausted, he let Hermione soothe him. Wrapped in her love, he let sleep take him into a silent restful blackness.

When Severus woke, Hermione's hair was spread over his chest, and she was also sleeping. He caressed her hair with his hand until he heard her stir.

She raised her head and looked into his face. "You okay?" Worry lined her forehead.

He nodded. "Yes, I wouldn't have been if you hadn't been here for me. Love truly is the answer to all problems. Love is so tangible. I would like to lie here and tell you all about it, but I have the spell, and we need to go save Molly and Arthur."

"You have it!" Hermione screamed with joy. She bounced from the bed, pulling on her clothes.

He laughed at her excitement. "Yes, Lucius witnessed the spell being used. He heard but really didn't think much about it until he re-visited his memories. He has little else to do in Azkaban."

He climbed from the bed and used his wand to cleanse himself, and then he dressed in his Hogwarts robes.

"Hermione, go get Albus and Scorpius. They deserve to be there. And send your Patronus to the Burrow and Poppy, and I will alert the hospital."

She saluted him with a grin. "Aye, aye, Sir." She turned and ran out.

He stared after her; she had just looked more like the girl he'd know years ago. The pressure that had recently made her look tight and drawn had faded quickly.

Within ten minutes she was back with the wide-eyed, jubilant boys. Her face was red and flushed from her excitement and the exertion.

Severus held up his hands to stop the boys' questions; he was still pale from his ordeal. "I will answer all your questions later. We must go." He grabbed a handful of Floo powder and was gone.

Hermione followed, then Scorpius, and then Albus. They found themselves in the lobby of St. Mungo's, and they ran after Severus, his robes billowing about him as he strode quickly down the hallway.

Hermione had to catch her breath at the sight of him. He had all the power and might of her old Potions teacher. Her heart swelled with pride. She had to sprint to catch up with him, and she felt the boys close at her heels.

Inside the room, the Weasley family and a group of healers had gathered. Ginny stood by her mother's tank, holding on to Harry's hand. George and Percy stood close to their father's tank. Charlie and Bill were there. She saw that Ron stood behind Charlie in the back of the room trying to blend into the wall. Hermione briefly caught his eye and then went to stand next to Severus.

Poppy and Minerva slipped into the room. Poppy's eyes searched Severus' face, and she seemed to sigh with relief.

Severus nodded at her, his eyes promising they would talk soon. He slipped his hand into Hermione's, drawing her close. "Healers, I have the verse, which is the spell. It is sung magic. I must slip into a memory to repeat it. Please, everyone stay quiet until I come out of the memory. I will take Hermione with me; she will be my anchor."

He felt Hermione's hand tremble; she had not realized he would have to go back. Could he take it?

"You will be my anchor," he said again to comfort her.

She thought, *Who will be mine?* But she nodded at him and felt a bit of comfort as two healers took places beside them in case they needed help.

Severus reached out to her mind first, and she felt his horror at having to take her to this place. But when they got there, he was concentrating on the words so intently that the scene faded out, and she only got impressions of the surroundings. She was grateful; the sounds of Bella's screams were enough to make her shake. Then Severus began to sing...

Reversal can be achieved in turn.

Time for lessons have been learned.

This curse give health to their breath

Even unto the caster's death.

Wilt thou give with thy power

Relief to thine enemies?

Bringer of Life, kindly dower,

Giver of life force, wrought from alchemy.

Yield up the water of life,

Lightness of living, gone from strife.

... and the sound of his voice and the healing power of his words washed over her like a fresh mountain waterfall. The water of life seemed to flow through them as well as the Weasleys. When it was over, they knew it had worked. Molly and Arthur looked like they had years ago, healthy and robust. They had relief on their faces that made the whole ordeal well worth it.

The healers stood quietly until Severus moved away from the tanks. He and the family filed out of the room and allowed the healers to extract Molly and Arthur from their webbing and get them dressed. They were placed in warm, comfortable beds. Then the family returned. There was of lots hugging, more crying, and many bouts of laughter as the family shed their fear and let the relief wash over them.

Severus found himself suddenly standing next to Ron. They looked at each other, and finally Ron took a deep breath and said, "Thank you, Professor Snape. I have misjudged you. I hope you and Hermione will be very happy together. Forgive me for my horrendous acts of stupidity."

Severus regarded him with an icy stare until Ron squirmed. Then he said, "You're welcome, Mr. Weasley. For reasons I do not fathom, my wife and Mr. Potter love you. Try to be worthy of that. If you can let go of the past, you will be welcome in our home."

Hermione and Harry were standing behind the two, and they exchanged surprised looks. Maybe Ron was not lost to them.

Hermione reached out to gather Severus close, and she smiled uncertainly at Ron.

Ron blushed and said in a strangled voice, "Sorry, Mione." He sidestepped them and went to give his mother a hug.

Harry had been watching and he said, "There may be hope for him after all. Severus, we owe you so much."

"No debts anymore, Harry. We do for each other what we must out of care and lo-ove." The last word came out with difficulty, and Hermione snickered. Severus smirked at her, and his eyes promised that she would pay for her snicker later. But the promise was something that made her blush.

Harry turned a bit red at the looks they were giving each other. He excused himself to go talk to Scorpius and Albus. He had to laugh when he found Molly had grabbed Albus and Scorpius and was hugging them from each side of her bed so tightly against her breasts that they were turning beet red. After that, the room erupted in so much laughter that tears were shed, yet again.

Arthur was nearly choking with glee as his eyes took in the happiness.

Severus hissed to Hermione, "Let's get out of here before she wants to hug me."

Hermione laughed and dragged him from the room, and they ran to the Floo and escaped.

Hermione started then stared around her. They had not ended up in their rooms at Hogwarts but at Poppy's beach house.

"Severus, won't everyone be looking for us?" she asked, not at all unhappy to find herself there.

He turned and gathered her up against him. "No, Poppy will know where we went. I asked her one day last week when she came by the lab if we could hide out here for a few days when this whole ordeal was over. She was happy to give me permission. Now shush."

He leaned in to capture her mouth and silence her. The kiss left her breathless, and she pressed herself against him.

Severus picked her up and carried her into the bathroom; they undressed and slipped into a tub of hot water and let the jets of the Jacuzzi soothe bodies that had been pushed beyond their abilities and strength for weeks.

Hermione lay against Severus. "We abandoned the boys there," she whispered, the thought just fleeting across her mind.

"I'm sure they will be able to go back through to Minerva's office. Harry will take care of them," he said as his hands started to slip over her soapy body.

"What will they think of us running away?" she murmured, losing herself in the pleasure of his touch.

"They will think we are making up for lost time. We are newlyweds, are we not? Now shush, wife."

Hermione giggled and turned to face him, kissing him deeply. "Sorry," she murmured against his lips.

He continued to slide his hands over her breasts and down her stomach in slow, curving motions. She arched her body against his hands, loving his gentle touch. He slipped two fingers into her and moved them gently in and out. She threw her head back against his neck and closed her eyes as he brought her to a climax.

Severus loved watching her cum; she was so beautiful, and he loved that he made her so happy and content. Each time she responded to him, he felt life was renewed. Having someone who loved him and who he loved amazed him. He turned her around, and she wrapped her fingers around his thick shaft and guided him to her opening. He slipped into her as he devoured her mouth. The buoyancy of the water helped him raise and lower her. They did not care that their movements splashed water all over the bathroom. Hermione clamped her legs around his waist and threw her head back so that he could lean in and take the tip of her breast into his mouth. He teased her and nipped at her tender flesh until she moaned with pleasure. He watched her face as she moved up and down...her eyes closed, her face intent on his and her own pleasure. He felt himself coming to his own climax as she shuddered into her own, and he felt her muscles squeeze him at exactly that moment, sending him into one of the most amazing spasms of pleasure that he cried out and pulled her into a deep long kiss.

"I love you," he gasped when their lips parted.

"I love you," she said, her hands cupping his face as she bent to kiss him again. She slumped to his chest and listened to his rapidly beating heart.

Later lying against each other in the warm bed, they snuggled closer as they slept. They slept through the night and late into the next morning. Hermione woke to Severus' hand sliding over her hip.

She smiled to herself and placed her hand over his, "Mmmm, that feels good."

He kissed the back of her neck. "I'd make love to you if I wasn't ravenous. How about breakfast and then a swim in the ocean?"

"Brunch is more like it." She nodded, throwing back her covers and sliding away from him.

He watched her pad a way from him toward the bathroom; he loved watching her naked bum. He grinned lecherously and climbed out of bed. The cabin was warm, but he slipped into a thin robe and got Hermione's out of the closet. When she came from the bathroom, he helped her into it. As he finished tying the robe, he pulled her close for a deep kiss; she tasted of fresh mint toothpaste. Then he slipped into the bathroom and called back to her, "I'll be out in a minute to help you."

She went into the kitchen and found the fridge brimming with fresh food and a note from Poppy.

Hermione, Severus: I slipped in this morning to stock up provisions. The Weasleys were sent home last night. I think we will all sleep a lot this week. The boys went right to bed when Mr. Potter brought them back to Hogwarts. I doubt I'll see them till noon or later. I gave them the day off. Have a wonderful time, you two. Minerva will get you subs for the next week. Come see me when you get back.

Love, Poppy

Hermione smiled and handed the note to Severus when he came in. He read it silently and smiled. "She really is the best, isn't she?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes, you have been very lucky to have her there for you all these years." She handed him a knife and nodded toward the onion she'd set out.

"Oh, thank you. You just want to see me cry," he said dryly, but with a smile.

She laughed, loving his sarcastic tone. Her Severus was so different from the man he'd once been. But she loved his old sarcasm. She pulled a cutting board out for him and one for herself and started to cut up fresh bell peppers.

Together they made thick, juicy omelets filled with fresh vegetables. Severus brewed a pot of coffee with a spell. He made the best coffee, rich and dark.

They sat in the breakfast nook and ate, glancing at the beach and the ocean, watching the seagulls running here and there.

Hermione sighed. "I love this place. I feel so at peace here, so relaxed." She reached out and threaded her fingers with his. "Thank you for thinking to bring me here."

He leaned over the table to kiss her. "You're welcome, but I assure you it's my selfishness. I wanted to have you alone; we have a lot of love making to make up for. I have been missing those fantasies of yours." He laughed.

She blushed. "What did you have in mind?"

"Give me the afternoon, and I will think of something." He pulled away from her. "Come on, the sand and the beach are waiting."

Hermione stood. "What about the dishes?"

Severus promised, "You go put that little bikini on, and this place will be clean and in order before you come out."

She nodded and ran off to throw on the bikini. It took only a minute, but Severus was as good as his word. The kitchen looked spotless.

They went out of the little cottage hand in hand. The sun was warm and bright, which was a wonderful difference from the rain back home.

They were like two children racing down the beach hand in hand, dancing in and out of the waves, catching each other for kisses and then dancing away. Hermione's hair got fuzzier and fuzzier from the sea air. Severus' hair flew about his face and shoulders free and wild.

Hermione wished she had a camera to take pictures of him. He was so happy and free. *God, how I love this man*, she thought as she caught him again in her arms and kissed him. He always tasted of fine wine and honey.

Suddenly, she realized she wanted to have a baby. But just as suddenly, she was afraid he might not want a child, being who he was and what had happened in his life.

Severus felt her warm against him, and then she stiffened. He pulled back to look into her face and saw some fear there. "Hermione, are you okay?"

She nodded, took his hand, and they walked slowly up the beach. "I'm sorry, my mind wandered."

He could feel her hand trembling. He pulled her to face him, put his finger under her chin, and raised her face to look into his eyes. "Tell me what made you afraid. Did I do something wrong? Was I too rough in play?"

"No, Severus, nothing like that." She reached up to caress his face, assuring him he wasn't at fault. She blushed. "It's a woman thing."

"Hermione, please tell me," he urged her.

"I'm sorry, I can't right now. I need to think about it." She pulled away and walked down the beach alone.

Stunned, Severus watched her go thinking, *What the hell! Did I say something, do something that reminded her of Lucius' attack? Did she remember something she hadn't remembered before?* He found his heart beating fast, and he pressed his hand to his chest and ran after her. He would not let this, whatever it was, come between them.

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Chapter 38

Chapter 38 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

Severus ran down the beach; but when he got there, Hermione was gone. The end of the beach was empty up to the rocks that made it private. He stood with his mouth open and felt tears sting his eyes. Had she left? Then he heard a sob, and he moved closer to the rocks, searching in the crevasses. There was a small, hidden cave, and Hermione was sitting against the back of the cave with her knees drawn up to her chest and her forehead pressed against her knees.

"Hermione," he cried out in alarm as he crawled in and pulled her into his arms. "Please tell me what's wrong. You're scaring me half to death."

She clung to him. "I'm sorry, Severus. I'm sorry. Something hit me, and it so overwhelmed me with need. I was afraid you'd reject the idea, and it scared me so much."

He made her look at him as he held her in his lap. "Please tell me what it is. I cannot fathom anything you might say to me that would make me reject you."

"Anything?" she asked, her eyes pleading for him to understand her.

"Anything," he repeated adamantly, pulling her closer and placing kisses against her cheek.

"I want to have a baby," she choked out, gasping for breath, looking him in the eyes.

He blinked. "What?"

"Wrong answer!" she said angrily, pulling away from him.

Severus reached and grabbed her, toppling her back into his lap. "You want to have a baby! Hermione, you want to have my baby?"

She stopped trying to pull away and turned to look at him. He had a goofy, soft look on his face, and his eyes brimmed with tears.

"Of course it would be your baby. Who else's would it be?"

"I know you mentioned babies months ago, but I've lived my whole adult life thinking I'd never have a child...that no one would ever want my child. Having you in my life is so much more than I ever expected. The idea of a child overwhelms me with excitement and happiness."

Hermione was crying now, too. When she kissed his face, their tears mingled. She started to laugh, and he laughed with her. They climbed out of the cave and walked down the beach hand in hand. The sun went down and filled the evening sky with reds, gold, and oranges. They sat in the sand with a fire burning in front of them for warmth and watched the sunset. They ate and talked about the baby they would have.

They woke cuddled inside a sleeping bag that Severus had conjured. The fire near them was smoldering, and the sun was just coming up. They lay spooned together inside the bag, huddled against the cold morning, and watched the sun light the sky with brilliant pinks, yellows, reds, oranges, and blues. It was spectacular and seemed to rekindle their energy and life.

Finally they unzipped the bag, and Severus crawled out. He helped Hermione out and wrapped it around her. They walked back to the cottage and took a warm shower and then crawled into their bed. They slept for several hours before getting up to have a breakfast. Hermione found all sorts of wonderful Muggle breakfast things. She made a huge breakfast of waffles, sausage, eggs, and biscuits with loads of melted butter and honey.

She brewed Severus his favorite tea, Darjeeling.

After breakfast, Hermione asked, "Severus, can we walk into town today and do a little shopping?"

He groaned and then smirked at her. "I live for shopping."

She giggled. "I'll make a deal with you. You go to the bookstore, and I will look for the things I need in the dress and lingerie shops close by. Then we can have lunch."

He'd slipped up behind her. "Why didn't you say lingerie? I might enjoy that if you'll model for me." He placed kisses down her neck and shoulder.

"Sorry." She twisted away from him with a laugh. "It's going to be a surprise."

He leered at her backside and grinned. "There are a few Muggle chemistry books I have been planning to buy." He followed after her. "Maybe I should get a baby book, too. I know so little about them."

Hermione turned and allowed him to catch up. She touched his face with her fingers, letting them slide gently over his cheek. Then, as she turned away to get dressed, she called back, "You and me both. We can read it together." She stepped into underwear and a pair of jeans, and Severus hooked her bra for her. He let his fingers slide around to cup her breasts and knead them gently."

She slapped at his hands playfully. "Stop that. I really want to get the shopping over this morning. Get dressed, Mr. Snape."

"Yes, madam." He dressed similarly in black jeans and a white button-down shirt.

Hermione said, "I detected some hair on your face. Are you going to take a potion or shave?"

"Neither, I'm on vacation. We have eight more days, and I'm going to grow a beard," he informed her.

"Really?" She turned to study his face as he slipped into some shoes.

"Yes, ma'am." He stood up and, catching her hand, pulled her out of the room. They headed down the front stairs and started to walk up the beach toward the town. The sand was so soft that they ended up taking their shoes off and treading through the sand barefoot. It was starting to warm up and felt wonderful between their toes.

"A beard would look marvelous," she finally said as they walked hand-in-hand.

"Do you think so?" he asked, bringing her fingers up so he could kiss them.

"Very sexy," she murmured. She rubbed the stubble on his cheek.

"Well, I will make sure to put a softener on what I have so I don't injure you tonight," he promised.

They had reached the boardwalk. Severus and Hermione stepped up onto it and started to look at the shop windows as they headed for the boutique. Hermione went into the boutique, and Severus headed down the street a few doors to the bookstore. But something caught his eye, and he stepped into a shop. He felt odd and conspicuous as he made a purchase, but he knew it would please Hermione. He slipped into the edge of an alcove of a door down the street and shrunk and pocketed the item, and then he proceeded to the bookstore.

Hermione stepped into the boutique and wandered through the aisles and racks of clothing. Everything was geared more to teens, but she finally found a few things she thought Severus might like; she made the purchase and then went next door to the lingerie shop. She was surprised and pleased to find some sexy items. She had planned to alter something if it wasn't what she really wanted, but she was pleased that they had items for all tastes."

"Planning a special night, are we?" the saleslady said with a smile as she wrapped the delicate pieces of lingerie in tissue paper and placed them in a box.

Hermione blushed a bit. "Hopefully, making a baby." She grinned.

"Well, you may not know this, being a tourist, but my things have a reputation for just that purpose," she informed Hermione as she slipped the box into a twine-handled bag.

Severus appeared at the door with a heavy bag in his arms. "Hermione, are you done?"

Hermione nodded. "I was just coming out."

The woman raised her eyebrows as her eyes raked over Severus. "He's a beauty; good luck."

Hermione raised her chin proudly. "He is that. Thank you." She took hold of the handles on the bag and joined Severus at the door. His eyes had been darting around at some of the scantily clad mannequins.

He flashed the woman a smile and then took Hermione's arm, and they headed down the boardwalk toward a café.

"Did I hear her correctly?" he asked,

"Yes, she thinks you're a beauty. You are devastatingly handsome without the old scowl, and your face looks years younger now."

"Well if it does, it's all because of you, my love. That shops seems rather risqué for this little beachfront town."

Hermione laughed. "I told her the same thing, but she says it's quite popular. They certainly have wonderful things, and you will appreciate them very much tonight," she promised in a deep, sexy voice.

"I'm looking quite forward to it." He looked up as the waitress came to take their order.

"I would like the roast beef sandwich, a side of dills, potato salad, and iced tea." He gave his order and then looked at Hermione.

"I want the turkey club, little mayo and mustard, no pickles, and iced tea," She said. "Oh, can we have a basket of bread and cheese sauce?"

Severus raised an eyebrow at her when the waitress left. "Bread and cheese sauce. That's not so good for the waistline."

Hermione glared at him. "Are you saying I'm getting fat?"

"Hardly. I wouldn't mind a little more meat on your bones, but I know you try to be careful."

"I plan to work it off tonight, so I'm indulging," she said with a secret smile.

Severus felt himself harden a bit, but he ignored it. He would have to try to relax until they got home. He was so looking forward to whatever Hermione had in mind, he almost wished for a Time-Turner that would make the day go faster.

He reached into his bag from the bookstore and brought out the baby book he'd bought.

"Oh, Severus, you found one," she squealed. She gripped his arm with excitement, and he watched her face as she opened the book. *Yes, motherhood will look wonderful*

on her. She was so pleased; he would keep it to himself that he was scared shitless. Was he really father material? He couldn't deny the idea of a baby thrilled him, but his son or daughter would have to live with what he'd been. Was that at all fair to a child?

Hermione must have picked up on his mood, "Severus, it's okay to be scared. I'm scared. Raising a child is scary and wonderful. You will make a great father."

"Are you reading my mind?" he asked, knowing she hadn't been.

She smiled. "No, I think your face reflects my fear, as well," she admitted nervously.

They moved closer together and looked into the book and started to pour over the pages as they waited for their food.

When they'd finished with the meal, Severus and Hermione walked hand-in-hand to the pier. They looked down at the water and down the pier, watching women pushing babies around, and they even witnessed a tantrum or two.

"Do we know what we are getting into?" Severus observed dryly as he watch one child fall to the ground, kicking and screaming for a balloon.

Hermione laughed at him and pulled him away. "Our child would never behave that way. It depends on how they are raised. If they tried that, they would know quickly enough that behavior like that was not acceptable."

"You wouldn't put a child in a body bind would you?" Severus asked in horror.

Hermione snickered and replied, "No, but I'm not opposed to a spanking now and then. I remember getting spanked maybe three times in my entire childhood. When my parents said something, I darn well knew to do it. The few times I didn't were memorable enough...not really from the physical punishment but more the embarrassment of it all. I also knew my parents loved me dearly by their daily actions." She frowned a bit. "I think at first they were scared to death of my powers. I remember hearing them talk of fear, but later I realized it was not fear of me but of people finding out what I could do and taking me away."

"But our world did, in effect, take you away to Hogwarts." He took her hand, and they stepped back onto the beach and headed for home.

"Yes, but by then they knew I'd have to be trained. The fact that there was a world for me to be accepted in and fit into relieved their fears greatly. I kept a lot of the facts about Voldemort from them." Hermione noted that he cringed when he heard the monster's name. "I'm sorry, you know I really need to let him be the past and forget about it all. It's been years, and we have the most amazing life ahead of us, Severus."

"It seems like only months to me, but you're right. Let's make a concerted effort to not speak of him again." He was quiet until she tugged on his arm and looked up inquisitively into his face. He sighed. "Not much gets past your notice."

"I've learned to read you well. What else is bothering you?" she asked, squeezing his fingers reassuringly.

"Please don't react too quickly. Hear me out," he pleaded.

"It's Lucius, isn't it? You want to help him," she said bluntly.

"Yes, you are a mind reader." He smiled down at her. "He did give me the spell to save the Weasleys. Azkaban is a hellhole. That place is not even fit for rats. No one deserves that kind of treatment. Well, there are some, maybe even Lucius, but he's changing. I can see it. Kindness and love saved me. Can I not try the same thing on an old friend? He was there for me at times in my life when I had nothing and no place to go. Granted he brought me into... You-Know-Who's circle, but I think we were both trying to belong in a world that just wouldn't accept us. You never met or even knew of his father. He was tyrannical. He was rich and beautiful like Lucius, but he was a horrible, cruel, dark man. He died shortly after we took the Mark. He insisted that Lucius learn about dark power and be a social climber. We are all products of the way we were raised. Truthfully, we could have chosen differently, but the odds were against us, and we had no Dumbledore at first to help us see there was a different life. Lucius felt betrayed by me at the end of the war. He asked me the first time I visited him why I didn't tell him about being a spy, why I didn't offer him the same out." He stopped and turned her toward him, looking her in the eye. "I was a coward. I was afraid he'd kill me. He never once suggested to me that he might not be happy with what he was doing."

"Are you sure he's not playing you now?" she asked still fearful of the man.

"I don't think so. I have been in his mind; he was never a good Occlumens. I think he's genuinely shocked to have been betrayed by me. After Narcissa died, he couldn't be angry with her, so he turned his anger on me, and it flared out of control when he heard I was alive. He truly regrets what he did to you. Old habits die hard for those of us tainted with the dark arts."

Hermione took his hand, and they went on down the beach. They were getting close to their private beach. She could feel the wards.

"I don't trust him, but I trust you, Severus. If you need to help him, do so. But make very sure that he is telling you the entire truth...for my sake and for the sake of the children we may have."

He slipped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her against him as they walked. "Thank you. I promise I will be careful. I know what I have to lose should anything befall you. You are my very life," he said.

She nodded. "And don't you forget that."

She shook away the thoughts of the past and Lucius and quickly changed the subject. "I'm going to need a few hours to get ready for tonight. I expect you to stay in the office and read those chemistry books."

"Really?" he asked. "What do you expect me to wear to this little party of yours?"

"Your black silk pajama bottoms will be enough," she informed him.

"Really?" He smiled down at her. His eyes were alight with the possibilities and that hungry look she loved to see in them.

"Really," she said as she began to pull him down the beach as they passed through the wards and could now see the beach house. "Come on, Severus. The sooner I'm ready, the sooner we can play."

"Impatient are we?" he asked, wondering how in the world he was going to concentrate for several hours on a chemistry book.

"I'm always impatient for you, my love," she said, giving him an impish look.

They reached the house, and Severus went and took a quick shower while Hermione headed to make some secret preparations in the kitchen. He pulled on the aforementioned silk pajama bottoms and then slipped his robe on, tying it about his waist. He dried his hair with his wand and applied a softener to the day-old stubble on his chin. He retrieved the package from his jeans pocket and expanded it. Then an idea occurred to him. He slipped into Poppy's office took a handful of Floo powder from the bowl next to the fire place and stepped through into his own sitting room. He went to his own potions cabinet and selected a couple of potions. Then he opened a small drawer in his desk and reached way in the back. He drew out a small, velvet box out and slipped it into his pocket. He grabbed a bag and gathered a few of their off-duty outfits and took them as well. Then he returned through the Floo.

Severus listened at the door and heard Hermione singing. He smiled; she hadn't even realized he was gone. Minerva would have received word that someone had come

and gone from their quarters, but she would have waved it off, knowing he'd probably just come to fetch a forgotten item.

He turned and found the bag of books by the door. There was a note on the top that read, "Enjoy your reading when you return. I hope that Conceive Now Potion is one of the things you went to get."

Severus stared at the words and sighed. Nothing got by that wife of his. He was pleased that she didn't seem to mind that he'd left. He laughed to himself and got the little vials out of his pocket. He opened one and swallowed it. Then he put the other back into the pocket of his pajama bottoms. He opened the velvet box and stared at the item inside. Would she like it? Would she mind that it had been his mother's? He snapped the box shut and gathered the books and set them on the desk. He sat in the large, upholstered desk chair and opened the first book. He glanced at the door, wondering what delights were in store for him tonight. Then he forced himself to begin reading the chemistry book in front of him. Soon, he was lost in the formulas.

Lisa, thank you for your beta work. You have no idea how happy it makes me to have you working on my stories.

Angela, thank you for your support and comments.

Chapter 39

Chapter 39 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

Severus was pulled from his formulas when the door opened a tiny bit and a black-laced arm slipped in.

He turned as she held her hand out; only her fingertips were bare. He stood, slipped his hand into his pocket, pulled the Conceive Now Potion out, and went to her. He took her hand, bent and kissed her bare fingertips, and then placed the vial into her hand. The hand was withdrawn. He stood back and waited. A minute later the black-laced hand reappeared. This time, one finger curled, beckoning him to come, and then it was gone.

He used his wand to send a cleansing spell over himself for good measure. Tasting the minty-fresh breath he now had, he smiled, anxious to see what his wife had cooked up for him tonight. He opened the door and stepped into another world.

The entire cabin had been magically changed. He now stood in an old, western saloon. There was a bar and a player piano. Hermione stood with one foot on the foot rail in front of the bar. She was stunning. She had her hair up and wore an ornate headdress of red and black feathers. Obsidian chandelier earrings hung from her ears. Her body was encased in a scanty black- and red-lace bustier with a matching bottom that met at her waist. She wore black lace stockings and six-inch heels. Her eyes went wide when she saw him, but she stayed in character. As she held her arms out...palms toward him...and shook them, swishing her body to the music, he saw a plumed tail of feathers fanned out behind her. *How had she gotten all the details so exact?* he wondered. This was the scene from the movie he'd seen with his dad as a teen. Hermione had become the dance hall girl of his boyhood dreams.

As she sashayed up next to him, he felt a change in his outfit. He looked down to find himself now wearing a black leather vest over his bare chest and boots on his feet. The next moment, he felt a cowboy hat settle on his head. He stepped forward as she beckoned him to the bar and heard the spurs on his boots clink. She slid her finger seductively over his chest and said, "Mister, would you like to buy me a drink?"

He grinned and took a deep breath; role-playing was not something he'd ever done for fun.

"Why of course, pretty lady. Why don't you join me at the bar for a drink."

Her feathered tail swooshed as they walked the few steps to the bar. She stepped behind the bar and poured two drinks. She set the bottle down close by while he took in the details. The wall behind the bar was mirrored, and he tried not to laugh at his reflection. The cowboy hat was black leather and had one black feather in it. He thought he looked silly. The shelves before the mirror held bottles of all sorts of liquor, and glasses were stacked here and there.

She plunked a drink down, and it splashed a bit on the bar. She then added one for herself. She returned to his side and picked up his drink and handed it to him. She slipped one finger into it and then slowly licked the fluid from her finger. With her eyes never leaving his face, she picked up her drink and said, "To dreams coming true tonight, mister."

Severus leaned over and kissed her and then threw his head back and downed the drink in one gulp. "To dreams." He plunked his glass down. "Another drink, woman," he said. "You sure are a beautiful, little thing."

"Why thank you, mister," Hermione said as she sipped her drink and then reached out to pour him another from the bottle. "I could show you a real good time tonight."

"I just bet you could," he said. "I think that's an excellent idea."

She ran her fingers over his chin; he now had a healthy growth of beard thanks to the potion he'd taken earlier. A soft beard was better for lovemaking than stubble.

"I love a man with a beard. This feels wonderful. Come sit here and let me entertain you."

She motioned him to a chair by a round, wooden table. She set the whiskey bottle on the table, and he took the seat. She went to stand by the piano; she touched it, and it began to play a new song. Severus was dumbfounded when she began to sing the old, western song. She danced as she sang. Her body swayed to the music, her fingers and arms slid seductively over her bustier and breasts, and she curled her fingers and hands toward him. She eventually stepped forward and placed one high-heeled foot on his knee, and he slid his hands over her black-laced leg. She wagged a finger at him and moved away. Hopping up onto the bar, she strutted back and forth with the music. Sitting on the end of the bar as the music finished, she crossed her legs. With her eyes looking directly into his, she beckoned him and said, "I'm a bit lonely over here, mister."

Severus stood up uncomfortably; he was well past being turned on. He stepped up to her. She laughed and grabbed the rim of his hat, lifted the hat off, and swung it away, and it flew. Severus did not see where it landed. He reached out and took her by the waist and pulled her closer.

She uncrossed her legs and parted them to let him step between them, and then she clamped them around him. "Now that's better, isn't it?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said, trying to put a bit of a Texan accent on his words. He saw the amusement flash in her eyes. Her fingers strayed to his beard again. She stroked his

face and then leaned in to rub her cheek against it.

"Hummm," she cooed. "You smell wonderful, mister."

He leaned in to draw a breath by her neck. "So do you, my dear. As we seem to be alone here, does that mean I can have you anywhere I wish?"

"Anywhere," she said, leaning in to nibble on his ear.

He brought his hands up, and one hand palmed her breast gently, feeling the nipple harden under the thin lace.

"May I release your hair?" he asked, sliding a hand up between her breast and around her neck.

"You may do anything you like, mister. I just want to show you a good time," she said, leaning in to give him a deep kiss. His hand worked at the fastenings holding her hair, and he finally detached the feather headdress. With a pull of an old-fashioned hairpin, her hair tumbled about her shoulders. He buried his face in her long, thick tresses and breathed in her scent. Pressing a kiss to her neck, his hands returned to her breasts. Her fingers had slipped the vest off his shoulders, and he let her draw it off his arms. He pressed her back. His hand slipped up her thighs, and he pushed her back down the bar and then placed her heeled shoes at the end of the bar. To his delight, the crotch of her outfit was open. He slipped his fingers in to caress her. Then he bent to kiss a path down one of her laced thighs and slipped his tongue into her. She moaned with pleasure and arched up, begging him to go deeper. She tasted of honey, and he took hold of her hips and held them as he pleased her. She was gasping with her climax in no time. He pulled her into a sitting position and kissed her, letting her taste herself on his tongue and lips.

"Where to next?" he asked, breathing deeply. His voice was deep, sexy, and filled with need.

She reached up one hand and produced her wand. The saloon vanished with a wave, and a cozy room with the rustic look of a wooden cabin appeared. There was a fireplace with a roaring fire and a thick bearskin rug before it.

He picked her up and carried her to the rug and let her down onto her feet. With a bit of difficulty and some giggling on Hermione's part, he removed the feather tail. He went to his knees on the rug and sucked first one and then the other nipple as his hand roamed over her body. She finally stood back a bit and placed one foot on the top of the bear's head. Severus undid her garters and slowly ran his hands over her leg and kissed a path from her ankle to her knee. Then he began to roll the stocking down, kissing her leg as he did so. Once that leg was bare, she changed feet, and he repeated the process. He finally pulled her down to join him on the rug and, with a quick flick of his fingers, vanished the rest of their clothing and hovered over her body.

Hermione whispered, "Let's make a baby, Severus. I love you so much, and I want to have your baby."

He smiled at his beautiful wife and said, "And I love you, Hermione. I want you to have my baby."

He let himself down into her arms and felt the pleasure of their naked bodies pressed together. "Fantasies are fun, but the reality of my wife in my arms is all I really need. Thank you for tonight." He kissed her and moved over her. She opened herself for him and then took his hard shaft in her hand, caressing it for a moment before helping to guide him in.

Severus thrust himself into her and held her eyes as he began to move. He could feel her feet on the backs of his legs. Her hands had slipped under his arms and down his back to grip his buttocks, and she pulled as he thrust. "Deeper, Severus. We want to plant the seeds deep." He pressed further into her. Their bodies created a rhythm that became faster and faster; their breathing became more rapid, and their climax was deep and earth shattering. Their cries of pleasure rang out as they climaxed and fell over the edge. Images of their lovemaking filled their minds and clouded their vision...a result of the potion working.

Severus collapsed on Hermione. As he started to move away, she held him tightly. "Stay for a minute; you're not heavy. I love the feel of our bodies together."

Severus used one hand to hold himself up a bit and took the opportunity to kiss Hermione over and over. Finally, he slipped off to her side. He used wandless magic to clean them. Hermione summoned a fur cover, and they snuggled in and watched the fire dance.

Severus reached out and grabbed his discarded pajama bottoms and fished the velvet box out of the pocket.

Hermione asked, "Is that for me?" She snuggled closer to his chest.

"Yes, my wanton wife, it is. I hope you do not mind that it was my mother's. She gave it to me to pass on, though I could see in her eyes she never thought I'd find someone to love ..."

"... after Lily married," she finished for him.

"Yes," he said.

Hermione reached for the little box with trembling fingers. "I don't mind. It makes it all the more special."

Tension and uncertainly drained out of him.

She used one hand to hold it and lifted the top with the other. A beautiful diamond pendant was inside. The diamond was resting in the bottom curve of a yellow gold S. The gold was filigreed in delicate lace pattern. She touched it with trembling fingers. She sat before him and asked him to fasten it around her neck. When Severus finished working the clasp, she lay back down and drew him down to kiss him with soft gentle kisses. "It's beautiful. Thank you. It's very special, Severus."

"It's one of the few things my father gave her when they were first married and in love. There are happy memories attached to it," he explained.

Hermione stroked his hair as he placed small kisses on her face; then he sighed and pressed his forehead to hers, chuckling a bit. "I would love to make love to you again but you have darn well worn me out, Hermione."

Hermione giggled. "It was fun wasn't it?"

"Extremely. Who knew Little-Miss-Know-It-All had all this inside of her back then. I'm glad I did not know you had such a sexy side. It might have made me crazy to have you in my classes." He settled down next to her, his arms wrapped around her, their legs entwined. Hermione rested her head against the cleft of his arm and shoulder.

Hermione stroked the side of his neck, "I was seriously enamored with you. You really never noticed?"

"As a teacher, I was trained not to notice. There were a number of Slytherin girls over the years who wanted more than a teacher/student relationship. Did I ever even consider anything with them? Absolutely not. I did have some barriers I would not cross. I caught you watching a few times, my minx. After I had one dream of you..." He broke off uncomfortably.

"You had a dream? Severus, you never mentioned it." Her eyes were alight with curiosity.

"It's funny, I haven't thought of it in several years ... well, I guess many years." His forehead creased. "You know, I think that thought was behind a memory lock. I can't tell you about it because I removed it, and it's in a memory vial in a secret place in my lab. I only know it's there. I don't even know what it is myself."

She grinned. "Wow, it must have been a doozy. We'll have to watch it together."

He paled. "Hermione, you were a child. If I had inappropriate thoughts of you before you were of age, it's probably best left unseen."

"Severus, you show me yours, and I'll show you mine. I had a number of favorite fantasies of you when I was around 16."

"That's a child, nonetheless." He found himself curious but also afraid of what his thoughts may have been back then. He'd had so much darkness in himself then and so much need and desire. If he had withdrawn the memory, he must have had a reason. Why remember it now? What sort of memory blocks had he put on himself back then? It felt so odd to have just accessed knowledge of himself he hadn't had before.

"But we are no longer children. We are married, and it's okay, since we both had thoughts of each other back then. It makes me pleased that my thoughts weren't one-sided." She felt him tremble a bit. "Severus?"

"I was not a nice man back then," he said in a near whisper.

"If you had been vile like the other Death Eaters, you would not have hesitated to take those Slytherin girls to your bed. You had morals, Severus Snape, or you would not have been the spy you were. I would bet your thoughts of me are special and beautiful and you could not stand the idea of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named seeing them in your mind and thinking to use me as a weapon against you."

"You really think so?" he asked, daring to hope she was right.

"Yes, my husband. Now sleep. Let's dwell on that baby we conceived tonight." She let her hand roam over her stomach and then snuggled down under the warm cover.

Severus settled down and let his body relax.

It was only moments before Hermione fell asleep, and he lay for a while trying to think hard on the memory, wishing to recall at least a feeling or a stray picture in his head. But there was nothing but the knowledge that there had been a memory and where it was now. He finally let himself slip into a restless sleep.

When Severus woke the next morning, he found himself alone on the floor in the thick, fur rug bed Hermione had made the night before. The rest of the cabin's decorations had been returned to normal. He heard the soft sound of the toilet flushing, and he relaxed back into the fur.

Hermione padded out of the bedroom door and headed for him. She smiled when she saw he was awake.

He reached out for her, and she crawled back under the fur cover and snuggled up to him.

He bent over to kiss her and said, "Good morning, wife."

Hermione reached up to caress the beard on his face and said, "It really is becoming. Maybe you should keep it for awhile."

He rubbed at it. "It itches, but I guess I could get used to it. You didn't find it annoying or irritating last night?"

"No." She smiled. "It's very soft. Severus," she asked in a whisper, "do you think I'm really pregnant?"

"It's very unusual for that potion to not work," he told her as he placed a hand, his face alight with wonder, on her stomach.

"How fresh was the potion?"

He turned to her and grinned. "I brewed it just before we discovered Molly and Arthur were sick," he admitted.

"You DID? Why?" she asked curiously.

"It occurred to me that neither one of us was getting any younger. Now is a perfect time. We are married," he explained.

She caressed his cheek and urged him to kiss her again. "How come you didn't mention it?"

He blushed. "Cold feet, sorry. You hadn't mentioned it, and I thought maybe you'd changed your mind about babies, my babies."

Tears burned her eyes. For all their closeness and the things they shared, he still had been uncertain that she might not love him enough to want to bear him a child.

She pulled him down into a fierce embrace. "Severus, I love you so much. Having your babies means more to me than I can tell you. I do not want, nor will I ever want, another man's children."

Severus pulled back. "Hermione," he said lovingly, "no one is guaranteed the next day or hour of their life. I plan to be around for a very long time; but should something happen, I do not want you to be alone."

She opened her mouth to protest, and he placed his fingers against her lips to silence her.

"You have such an ability to love. You've spent enough of your life alone. I do not want you to be alone for the rest of your life if I am not by your side."

She said, "I was alone because you were not among the living at the time. I'm a one-man woman. I always have been. I tried to give other teenage relationships a chance because I thought you were unattainable. When I got out of school, I realized I no longer had people around me who cared whether I was alone. It was a relief to just love your memory and not try to fill that place in my heart."

"It might have been Dumbledore's spell that did that to you," he said with a deep bitterness in his voice. "Damn meddling old man."

Hermione said, "I love him for what he did. He obviously knew I loved you. He allowed me the time I needed to build my career, which also meant a great deal to me. I never wanted to just be a man's wife. I wanted to be a Potion mistress and your wife. Well lookie now," she said, trying to lighten the mood, "I have both and," pressing her hand to her stomach, "possibly the icing on the cake...your baby."

Severus grinned at her and covered her hand with his. "One day when I was furious with Dumbledore, Poppy asked me if I would change any of the time I slept in that bubble if it meant not having you in my life."

"What did you say," she asked.

"I told her I wouldn't change a moment of it. We are right for each other."

Hermione suddenly had a thought. "Severus, do you think he knew about the lost memory, the one that's hidden at Hogwarts. What if you told him? What if he's the one who helped you place the memory charm on your mind? It's a difficult spell and hard for one person to do. You must have had help."

Severus snuggled next to her and drew her close. "Now that's a thought," he said.

Lisa, thank you for your beta work.

Chapter 40

Chapter 40 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

Lying there, it suddenly occurred to Severus that he'd forgotten his other surprise for Hermione. He reached for his wand and said, "Accio gift."

A huge, white, fluffy teddy bear flew from Poppy's office.

Hermione, who had sat up curiously, caught the soft bear and hugged it to her chest.

"Severus, it's beautiful."

"I hope you like it. I got it for our child," he said, seeing the tears sparkling in her eyes. He caught one with his thumb as it cascaded down her cheek.

"Thank you. I love it, and the baby will, too." They shared another kiss and then lay back. Hermione continued to hug the bear to her side.

They got up after a while and took a Jacuzzi bath, dressed, and went out to walk along the beach and soak up some sun. They watched the seagulls and spent quiet time together. They ventured out onto the Muggle beach and discovered a photographer taking pictures of sunbathers, trying to make a bit of money.

Hermione asked, "Severus, can we pose for a photo? This is a momentous vacation."

He nodded. "Of course. Poppy has a Muggle post box; he can send the pictures there."

They were both dressed in jeans and white shirts. They lay upon the beach with the sea at their backs, and the photographer snapped their picture a few times and took their information, promising to send the pictures the next day.



Hermione saw Severus pull some cash from his jeans pocket and pay the man. They headed back to their own private beach. "You keep Muggle money on you?"

"When in Rome," he said with a laugh.

Hermione smiled. "You're never caught off guard, are you?"

"Not often," he admitted as they passed through the wards into their private beach.

Hermione grinned and stripped her top and jeans, let them drop, and ran naked down the beach, leaving Severus with his mouth open. Her wand flashed in her hand. He suddenly felt a draft and found his clothing gone.

He laughed and chased after her, muttering, "Maybe I can..."

They spent the rest of the week making love and eating quiet meals together...never in the kitchen but on the floor by the fire or on the beach watching the sun set and sometimes rise. They were tanned by the end of the week and feeling more rested and healthier than they had in many years. Severus had filled out a bit and looked wonderful. His hair, no longer lank and straight, had a healthy glow and was a bit bushy and curly from the salt air.

As they lay together in the huge bed on their last morning of vacation, Severus was thrusting into her, and Hermione was moaning with pleasure as they climaxed. They held each other tightly as their heartbeats quieted.

"I hate for this time together to end," she said, sliding her hand over his hair. His cheek was pressed between her breasts.

"I, too, wish it didn't have to end, but we do need to get back. Your classroom is probably a disaster. Subs never take care of things, and life must go on. Besides, Poppy will be able to tell by now if you are going to have a baby."

"Really?" she said. "It's only been a week."

"It's magic, Hermione. You should know this."

She smiled. "Sorry, I do. I'm so happy to believe I am pregnant, I don't want to be told otherwise."

"It's very unlikely...I'd say almost impossible...that the potion failed."

She continued to caress his hair. "I hope you're right. Our life has been lucky, or preordained, as it's meant to be. So I suppose I shouldn't fear this. If it didn't happen, it will in a few weeks. We can try again until we get it right."

Severus raised his face to look at her. "Now, I can get into that."

She laughed and then pushed him gently away. "I suppose we'd better get packed up."

"Are you bringing the outfit you bought for that special night home with you?" He crawled out of the bed after her.

She nodded. "Uh huh, I'm certainly not leaving it here for Poppy to find," she said, blushing.

"Good." He laughed, capturing her for a kiss. "I wouldn't mind seeing it again. It will work well for entertainment back home without the feathers."

"You didn't like the feathers?" she asked.

"I loved the feathers." He grinned devilishly at her. "I want to keep that memory of the saloon intact. They might not fit in at home as well as they did here."

She smiled, caressing his hand with her cheek. "You and I really need to get married the wizarding way."

Severus nodded. "I know, it is important, but it's not at all necessary for me. We could not be any more married than we are now."

"I agree with you. But if I am pregnant, we need the marriage to seal his or her rights to our properties and heritage in the wizarding world."

"Yes, you're right." He started to dress. "Do you want a big ceremony? Our marriage will be publicized far and wide whether I wish it or not. You are part of the magical three."

"And you are a war hero, Severus, newly returned to the land of the living," she told him as she slipped into a robe. "I know we talked about having the wedding at Hogwarts, but I would be happy with a quiet ceremony in Molly's garden if you do not mind."

"I think that would be wonderful. I think they would be happy to do it," he said, running a brush through his tangled hair.

Hermione came and took the brush and had him sit on the little vanity stool. She brushed his hair till it tamed a bit. "I think Molly would be insulted if we got married anywhere else. But it's a big garden, and she will want to have a say about the guest list."

He took the brush from her and returned the favor. He loved the way her hair glinted in the morning light. He smirked. "Of course, it really doesn't matter to me, ten guests or five hundred, as long as the deed is done, the food is good, and we can have another special wedding night."

Hermione pushed playfully at his hand. "Is sex all you think about?"

"Bloody, hell right. It was denied me all my life. I'm making up for lost time lost," he teased, nibbling at her neck.

"As long as it's always me, as long as I live." She was quiet and then said, "Same applies to you, too, Severus. If something happens to me..."

He grabbed her against his chest and said, "It won't."

She held onto him tightly. "My wish for you is the same as yours is for me. Agree and we will never speak of it again."

"Agree," he whispered against her hair.

She smiled, pushing away from him. "Good," she said as she went about packing.

Thirty minutes later they had the house in order and locked up. They stood arm in arm on the porch for a last minute, looking at the beach. Then Severus took Hermione's arm and they Apparated away. They could have gone through the Floo, but Hermione had wanted to stop at Hogsmead for some supplies and a book. Having sent their luggage and the huge bear through the Floo to their rooms, they walked slowly arm in arm to the different stores to buy a few things and then headed to the castle. Hermione never failed to catch her breath at the majesty of it. "I love this place, Severus. I'm content to live and teach here."

"It used to be an anvil about my neck, more like a prison. Now I think I might enjoy living here for a very long time...as long as you are at my side."

"We will make a new era at Hogwarts when you take over as headmaster," she said, squeezing his arm.

"We will have to move into the headmaster's quarters." His voice was reluctant and dry.

"You will miss your apartment, won't you? You actually like it best in the dungeon," she teased.

"I remember you being pretty excited to get past my wards that first day," he said.

"I was, but mostly because I knew all your stuff was there. I thought if I can't have the man, then I can preserve his things. Imagine my surprise when I found out you had been watching me the entire time there in that bubble. It still makes my face hot to think you saw how pathetic I was there with your night shirt."

Severus let out a rare laugh. "You were adorable. But I was a bit surprised. I thought no one in the whole bloody world had ever cared for me before my death...except perhaps Albus, and you know how that ended."

Severus used his wand to open the gates and reset the wards. They headed up the hill toward the castle. The day was warm, and they enjoyed the sun as they watched a few students flying about on their brooms or kicking balls to each other.

A couple boys broke away from a small crowd and headed toward them.

"Professors Snape," they called, running to the couple.

Hermione reached out to hug Scorpius and Albus. "It's good to see you boys. What's the news from your grandparents, Albus?" she asked the boy, trying to smooth his wild red hair down. He looked a lot like Harry had except for the red hair. It made her nostalgic.

"They are doing well. I got an owl from my dad this morning. Grandma is cooking everything she can think off. It's driving them all nuts. They had all gotten a bit plump and were able to lose weight while she was sick. Now Dad says she's trying to fatten them all up again."

Hermione laughed at the image of Molly cooking, flour half covering her face. "Well, Severus and I will have to go visit. There's nothing better in the whole world than her freshly baked scones."

Severus placed a hand on Scorpius' shoulder. "I hope you boys have been getting a lot of sun and exercise."

Scorpius said, "Yes, sir. Headmistress McGonagall forbid us to go back into the lab. She said we needed to get out and have some fun and get back to our studies."

Albus groaned. "It was nice being excused from classes, but now we have a lot to make up."

"Well, please come to me if you need help. I can tutor you until you catch up," Severus offered, grateful to have something to occupy his time. He had been wondering what he might do with all his time before the end of term.

Albus and Scorpius smiled enthusiastically. "We will, sir, thank you."

Hermione said, "Now run back to your game. It's such a wonderful day."

With waves the boys were gone and Hermione said, "Thank you, Severus. The boys will really need your help. In a few weeks, you will be able to start your DADA classes."

They had finally reached the door to the castle. Severus held the door open and then closed it behind them.

Hermione grabbed his arm. "Let's go see Poppy. I don't want to wait anymore." She turned away from him as she dragged him down the hall.

He was glad she didn't see him go pale. In his mind, he knew there must be a baby there, but having it confirmed by a medi-witch made it real and changed their lives forever. Would they ever have the time for their fantasies, or would that be a thing of the past? In light of their new role as parents, he supposed that leaving the fantasies behind might be okay. The image of bouncing a child of his own on his knee made him feel warm and fuzzy. He balked at the feelings; feeling warm and fuzzy was foreign to him.

He was now being dragged upstairs. He turned his attention to Hermione as they climbed the stairs to the infirmary. The main room was empty, but Severus felt a light ward ripple when they came in, and Poppy came from her rooms. He saw her face light up with pleasure as she took in their suntanned, healthy appearances.

"Well, look at you. The sand and sun seems to have agreed with you. I'm so happy you're back." She hugged Hermione and then grabbed Severus and placed a kiss on his cheek. "Was everything okay at the cottage?"

"It was perfect, Poppy. Thank you for the supplies. That was very kind of you." Hermione hugged the older woman again.

"Come in. I just made a pot of tea." She waved toward her door.

Hermione said, "Poppy ..." She hesitated, still a bit leery about finding out.

Severus finished for her, "We need you to run a pregnancy spell over Hermione."

"What?" Her face lit up with a huge smile. "You think you're pregnant?"

"She took a Conceive Now Potion about a week ago. You should be able to tell now."

Poppy looked into their faces and saw they were both scared. They were scared but excited...typical reactions for new parents-to-be. "Come, Hermione, lie on this bed, and I will get my wand." She vanished back into her rooms and returned with her wand. "I usually have it with me, but as I said, I'd just sat down to have some tea."

Severus helped Hermione up onto the diagnostic bed and fluffed the pillows so she was propped up a bit.

Poppy helped her open the front of her shirt and fold her pants down under her stomach area. She smoothed a green paste over her stomach and then started to run her wand over Hermione, chanting a spell as she did.

Severus stood near the head of the bed and held on to one of Hermione's hands.

The air above her stomach was filled with alternating colors of pink or blue, and they danced over Hermione as the spell continued. Finally the blue settled over her, the paste evaporated, and the color disappeared.

"It's a boy," Poppy exclaimed. Tears were filling her eyes, so she could not see that tears were dripping down Hermione's face, and Severus was blinking tears back.

"It's a boy! Hermione shouted. "I'm pregnant! Severus, we did it!" She'd already readjusted her clothes, and as she swung her legs over the bed, she launched herself at Severus.

He caught her up against him and his mouth sought hers. His heart was pounding at the thought of a son, but he realized he would have been just as happy with a daughter. He whispered, not trusting his voice, "You have made me so happy, Hermione."

He turned and held out his hand to Poppy, and she came close for a group hug. "It looks like you're going to be a grandmother, Poppy."

Her voice was trembling, "I honestly thought this would never happen, Severus. First there was the war, and then you were ~~dead~~."

"Well," he said, "I guess we all have something to thank the old man for now, don't we."

The two women laughed.

Hermione said, "Yes, I think I will take him a painted, blue booty and attach it to his portrait. I've read that there is a spell to make it actually become a part of the painting."

Severus smiled nastily. "Do you mean I could send that old man a smelly old sock or a pot of spoiled Limburger cheese?"

Hermione punched him. "You wouldn't dare," she said with a laugh.

"He needs to pay for locking me into that bubble for all those years." He caught the pinched look Hermione gave him. "I'm not saying it has not been the best thing he ever did for me, but he took away my freedom of choice just when our contract had been fulfilled."

Hermione turned away, disappointed that he hadn't let it go yet.

He pulled her back to face him. "I'm sorry. Old habits of revenge are hard to break." He smoothed her hair. "I just wanted to play a joke on him. But I suppose that's a little harsh since he would have to keep it permanently."

Poppy was watching them with concern. "The less stress you have, the better this pregnancy will be," she warned, catching Severus' eye.

He nodded. "Let's go have some of that tea, and do you have some of those chocolate biscuits I'm so fond of? We have reason to celebrate. We are having a baby!" he said loudly. The tension was dispelled as they all laughed and made their way to Poppy's apartment.

In bed later that night, Severus was spooned behind Hermione and caressing her stomach. "I can't tell you how happy I am," he said. "Never in my wildest dreams did I

think I would have such a wonderful wife, let alone be a father." He kissed the back of her neck and shoulder.

Hermione covered his hand with hers. "And I never thought I'd be married to the man of my dreams and having his baby."

Severus murmured, "I guess I do have a lot to thank the old man for. I'm sorry about earlier. Maybe I will think of something nice to add to his portrait after all."

Hermione turned over to face him. "Can you let it go?"

"Absolutely, nothing is more important than you and our baby." He kissed her deeply and sighed as he turned onto his back and felt her snuggle into the cleft of his shoulder.

As he listened to her slip into sleep, he felt his heart lighten, and he did let it go. For all Dumbledore's manipulations, one of them had been the best thing that had ever happened to him. He loved and was loved in return. He was going to be a father. For the last several months he'd felt like his life was really a life... not just an existence. He let himself drift off to sleep.

Lisa, thank you for your beta work. It has been exemplary.

Angela and Becky, thank you for pre-reading and your comments.

Chapter 41

Chapter 41 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

They woke the next day to return to work and their lives at Hogwarts. That night, Hermione came to him as he sat in his chair by the fire. She took the book he was reading from his hands and set it on the table next to him and climbed into his lap.

"Severus, the memory," she implored him. "Can we watch it, please?"

He put her off of him and went to stand by the fireplace. "Hermione, I'm not sure I can do that. You have no idea what kind of man I was. If I lusted after you, it was probably not a pretty thing. Dreams are often distorted things at the very least." He rested his forehead on the mantel. "Don't ask me, Hermione, please. Maybe it's best left forgotten."

Hermione came and placed her arms around him, pulling him into an embrace. "Severus, if it was such a horrible thing, you wouldn't have saved it and you and Dumbledore wouldn't have placed a trigger on it so that you could remember someday. My love, you are worried about nothing. I promise you, it will be a good thing. I believe that with all my heart."

Severus looked into her eyes and could see she was in earnest. One way or another, she would eventually see the memory. He was curious, and her argument made sense. Why had he kept it? He nodded and went to his lab, and she followed.

He stood looking at his desk for a time and then bent down and touched a hidden latch. A tiny drawer, magically hidden, popped out. Inside was one vial of silver memory. He picked it up and stared at it. His hand shook, and Hermione covered his fingers with her hands.

"It will be okay," she assured him. "Come on, Severus. Let's go watch it." She pulled him from the lab and through the classroom to his office. As she held the memory in her hands, he took the Pensieve from its place and put it on the corner of his desk.

He took the vial from her hands, removed the stopper, and poured it into the obsidian bowl. He reached out and took her hand and squeezed it. "Remember, it was a long time ago. I have changed because you love me, Hermione." They plunged their faces into the bowl.

Music, light, and noise disoriented them for a moment, and then the picture swirled into place and focused. From their point of view, they were deep in a black shadow of a Hogwarts corridor near where stairs led up to the Gryffindor Tower. On the stairs, they heard Hermione cry, "Ron, you spoil everything!" Then she crumpled on to the stairs in tears, pulling her shoe off her sore foot.

Severus of the dream stepped forward from the dark shadow and held out his hand, "Miss Granger, dance with me?"

She looked up surprised and wide-eyed, and then a shy smile touched her face, vanquishing her tears. She slipped her shoe back on and reached out and placed her hand in his. He drew her to her feet, pulling her down the few stairs, and then tucked her arm into his and led her into the ballroom. It was empty save for an orchestra, and a waltz began. Severus swung her into his arms, and they moved fluidly around the room. The observer Hermione felt his emotional delight as the dream Hermione smiled up at him and held his eyes as they moved. Their bodies slid against each other every now and then. She could feel the warmth and heat of her hand in his. His hand at her waist held her lightly. "You are beautiful tonight, Miss Granger."

"Hermione," she whispered.

"Her... mione," he choked back.

She gave him a dazzling smile.

Severus seemed stunned by her obvious enjoyment at being there with him. His heart surged forth with warmth, and he held her just a bit closer. She was so tiny in his arms; the top of her head came only to the middle of his chest.

"You do not need those dunderheads; they are still children. You, on the other hand, have so much intelligence and drive. You will go far." He seemed to force the next words and seemed astonished that the thoughts had even formed in his mind. "Were I a little younger, or you a little older, and this was a different world, the things I would teach you."

She seemed touched, and her hand tightened in his. "You only have to ask it of me, sir. I would do anything for you."

Severus brought them to a halt and cupped her face with his hands. He bent and pressed his lips to her forehead in a soft, gentle kiss. "Off to bed with you." Releasing her,

he took his wand and flicked it at her, and her eyes glazed over.

"You will not remember this; it would only endanger you. Thank you for the tiny respite from the horror my life is," he whispered as he sent her off to bed.

The scene changed, and they found themselves standing in Dumbledore's office. Dumbledore was walking back and forth, and Severus was sitting in a chair before the desk with his face in his hands.

"Severus, I'm not sure why this disturbs you so much. It was a dream. It wasn't something you did. We can't all control dreams. You had a long, late night, and being called to Voldemort's side in the middle of the night left you with nearly no sleep for several days. You felt sorry for the girl; she was left crying on the stairs."

"It was bloody Granger. She's a child. What was I thinking? She's Potter's little sidekick... If Voldemort looks into my thoughts and sees this, he can use her against Potter. I will not have her put in this position. Have I not done enough damage to the boy already? He depends on her. He needs his wits about him if he is to accomplish all you have set before him."

"Your concern for Harry is admirable, Severus. But you despise the boy. Why don't you admit it? You admire the girl's intelligence and perhaps saw how lovely she looked last night."

"Don't be ridiculous! She's a bloody Gryffindor know-it-all."

Dumbledore asked, "Then why are you so rattled by this? You did nothing wrong, Severus. It was an innocent thing."

"She's a child, Albus, a child. I have done many terrible things in the service of Voldemort, but finding a child attractive is not one of them."

Dumbledore turned to stand before him. "There is not a teacher in this world who has not admired a student's beauty at one time or another. It does not mean they would act on it. Your intentions were just to make her smile, and you did. Did your body betray you?"

Severus looked shocked. "No!" He stood and his fists were clenched. "What do you take me for?"

Dumbledore smiled, and his eyes twinkled. "I take you for the honorable and decent man that you are, a man only I get to see." He turned and picked his wand up from the desk. "However, if this concerns you so much, I will remove the memory, and you can store it. I can place a block on it so you will not remember ever having the memory removed unless you one day find yourself in the position to reveal it to Miss Granger."

"Unlikely," Severus spat.

"One never knows, Severus; stranger things have happened in this lifetime." The old man raised his wand, and Severus' face went blank.

Astonishingly, there was more, this time from Albus' point of view. "Severus, as I remove this, I will also place a spell on you. You might grow to hate me for it, but I happen to know that Miss Granger has a healthy crush on you. Minerva has told me she confided concerns about her feelings for you. I will weave a spell about you both, and if and when the times comes that your life will be forfeit, this spell might save your life and give you a future you so deserve, my son."

The memory faded, and Hermione and Severus pulled their faces from the Pensieve. Hermione watched in silence as Severus gathered the memory and returned it to his mind. He took her hand, and they then went into their quarters.

"It was beautiful, Severus," she whispered.

Severus nodded, overcome with relief and unable to speak for fear he'd cry. He picked her up and carried her to their bed and gently made love to her. They fell asleep, holding each other tightly.

Severus returned to working with Filch for now and tutoring the boys in the afternoon, helping them catch up on the studies they had missed. He found he enjoyed teaching the other subjects as much as Potions. He would start teaching the DADA class in a month. For now, he substituted on occasion. Having a competent sub allowed the other teachers to feel free to ask for more time off for things they'd always struggled to do on the weekends. Severus found the work interesting, and he also found he enjoyed the students far more than he ever would have expected.

As the next two weeks passed, he began to think more and more of Lucius. He knew he would have to ask Hermione if she was okay with him going to visit Lucius...not only visit but also try to help him return home. He understood more of his friend's desperation, and yet the idea of making his wife angry with him right now made him uncomfortable. She was starting to have the general queasiness of a woman expecting, and he didn't want to put any more stress on her. She had seemed to accept the idea when they'd last spoken of helping him; but when faced with the reality, would she feel okay within her heart, and would she tell him if she wasn't?

One evening he sat in his chair before the fire, sipping a small glass of wine. He was staring into the fire and had been for probably an hour. He felt Hermione slip her hand over his shoulder and around his neck, and then she slipped into his lap. He smiled and set his glass down on the table by the chair and held her close.

"Severus, what's wrong? You've been moody and brooding for days." She ran her fingers through his hair.

He smiled a little at her. "I'm sorry, I have been contemplating visiting Lucius again," he told her frankly. "I have been worried about upsetting you."

Hermione smiled a little sadly. "Severus, I agreed you should help him. We talked about this. You shouldn't be afraid to talk to me about it."

He ran two fingers over her cheek. "I was not really afraid. I am just concerned for your state of health right now. I don't want to put any stress on you."

Hermione hugged him, and her eyes teared up a bit. *He's such a dear man. He would never admit fear.* "Severus, I'm pretty tough, and I don't mind you visiting him. If you think he needs a few things to make his life comfortable..."

"Hermione..." He put her on her feet and went to stand by the fire, his voice bitter. "I wouldn't leave a dog in that place. The conditions are nowhere even close to adequate for civilized people. They don't even supply basic needs. He had a bucket to relieve himself in and a threadbare blanket in a freezing cell. He was riddled with lice. He hadn't been bathed in weeks...maybe months...because he was too weak to get up and do it. The food is nearly non-existent. He might eventually starve to death. I'm not sure anyone deserves that."

Hermione wasn't so sure. There had been Death Eaters who deserved a lot less. They had committed atrocities during the war. But she had to agree that a prisoner deserved at least the bare essentials to live and not be frozen, beaten, or starved to death. Being locked up was punishment enough. Prisoners rarely saw each other. That had to be torture. She came and slipped her arms around him.

"Then you must work to help them, if that's how you feel. I will be your biggest supporter. They should at least be given food enough to sustain their bodies, blankets, books, and writing materials."

He leaned in and buried his face in her hair. "I do love you. Thank you for understanding."

"When will you go?" she asked, pushing him back into the chair as she climbed on his lap.

He smirked at her, and the corners of his mouth came up a bit. "Tomorrow. I need to assess the situation there and then prepare some information to bring to the Ministry."

"Kingsley will listen to you. As an Order member, he will be on your side, Severus."

"I certainly hope so. But you know this will not be easy, Hermione. There are many people who will see this as betrayal from me, again. They will accuse me of helping my fellow Death Eaters, assuming there are any left alive after this many years. There are victims and victims' families that will not care if those people starve to death or are beaten to death. They would do the same to me."

"Oh, God, Severus. I cannot bear you being in danger again." She hugged him closer, trembling against him.

He pushed her back a little. "This is what I feared. You're getting upset, and I cannot allow that to happen. You and our baby mean more to me than everything else in this world."

She took a deep breath and the trembling stopped. "I will be okay. I trust you to do what's right. We are, after all, at Hogwarts, and we are pretty safe here. And we can stay here all year if need be. You've proven many times that you can survive the un-survivable."

He had to stop himself from trembling. He was taking a step away from his happy, sheltered life and going back into a world where not many people would welcome his ideas. He only wished for basic needs; he did not want to carpet the cells or give them feather beds. He just wanted them to be treated better than an unwanted animal. He hoped people would understand that and support him, yet he knew that might not happen. He only hoped that Hermione wouldn't have to deal with the flack their own people would give him.

The next day Severus worked with Filch in the morning and then Apparated to Azkaban in the afternoon.

The salt spray whipped around him. He carried a small pack with him. He stepped up to the guard's gate and was glad to see that it was Grimmley Hinckernill. "I would like to see Lucius Malfoy, Mr. Hinckernill," he said.

"I thought you'd be back." The old man came from the guard gate and waved him in to the search area. Severus stood as he was told as the man checked him over with his wand and then patted him down. He locked Severus' wand away and then checked the contents of the bag Severus was carrying. "What's in these here bottles?" he asked, holding up a couple potion vials.

"They are vitamins and blood replenisher for strength. The food here is not really conducive for good health. Tell me, sir, how do you live with yourself in this place? These people live in conditions worse than farm animals."

Gimmley stared at him, and his eyes became angry. "I do my job; it feeds me own wife and puts a roof over our heads. I have no power here. I only do what I'm told to, sir."

Severus, holding his hand up to stop the man's tirade, replied, "I do not wish to offend you, sir. But I will have you know that I will bring your bosses to light with the ministry. They need to know that this is unacceptable...even for criminals. At very least, they need to provide adequate food, basic warmth, and cleanliness. We do their victims no service if they do not live long enough to serve out their sentences."

The old man gulped and nodded. "It might lessen me nightmares if you were successful, Mr. Snape. You get the Order in on this, and I will be right at your side."

"That is an excellent idea. Do you think the Order would stand behind me?" Severus asked, wondering why he hadn't thought of that. Maybe it was because a certain little witch in his lap was always distracting him with her touch.

"You're a respected man, sir. They would at least hear you out, I reckon." Grimley turned to unlock the large gate behind him, and Severus followed him up the hall to the stairs. The place hadn't changed much in the last weeks. It still reeked and was probably even dirtier. There was no excuse for the filth with the use of magic. Granted the whole place was under a dampening field. Were the guards and caretakers just so lazy that they would not do their jobs? Severus smirked nastily. The Ministry might not like him very much when he was through, if they did not listen to him. This could not go on. He stopped to glance into the small port window of another cell and blanched. The man was clearly dead. No one had taken his body away. The small offerings of food he'd been given the last week still sat close to the trap door at the bottom when Severus checked.

"Grimley, this one's dead." His eyes flashed angrily, and Grimley cringed and said, "I only came back after a week with a sickness. I have not had time to check on everyone yet. I will inform the warden."

"Inform him that I wish to speak with him as soon as possible," Severus told the man.

Grimley unlocked Lucius' cell and ushered him in. His face was full of fear. He could feel the anger radiating off Severus.

The door clanged behind Severus, and he wondered if he would be allowed out. This place was clearly run by sadists.

Dismissing the guard for now, Severus turned to find Lucius sitting in his chair. His friend had fallen asleep reading one of the fairy tale books that Severus had left behind during his last trip. He studied his friend's face. He looked a bit better than he did the last time. His hair was still gray, but it was brushed in long, straight locks as he'd always worn it. He looked cleaner than he had the last time Severus had visited. The potions and vitamins he'd left were obviously working, since Lucius had a bit more color in his pale cheeks, and he'd gained some weight. He touched the wizard's shoulder. "Lucius," he called.

Lucius opened his eyes. "Severus, I was just dreaming about you." He sat up a bit straighter, and the mere hint of a smile formed on his now-lined face. "Remember that meadow where we chased that heriboar?"

Severus sat on the edge of the cot, which was fixed to the wall. The blanket he'd brought was carefully folded at the end. He grinned, "You ended up covered in mud."

"But we got him, didn't we? And we cooked him, and he was the best meal I'd eaten in days in that godforsaken forest."

"Yes, it was a good meal." He turned to open his bag. He unrolled a package and produced a dozen or so pieces of dried meat. "This is not boar, but nonetheless I think you will like it." He handed the thick piece of meat to Lucius, whose eyes had gotten big with hunger.

The man grabbed the piece and tore into it. Another one followed before Severus stopped him. "You will be in pain if you do not go slow. Make them last a week." He showed Lucius the potions and some other chewable dried beans and seeds he'd brought. He last produced a journal and a Muggle modified crayon. With magic, he'd thinned it and hardened it. It would not be considered strong enough for a weapon, but it would last a long time and allow Lucius to record his thoughts.

Lucius took the volume and held it close to his chest. "Thank you. It will give me something to talk to."

Severus nodded. "That was the idea."

Lucius sneered, "I have become as a little girl, Dear Diary." His voice was bitter. He put the journal down on the table, but Severus noted his fingers rest on the cover gently.

"You must do whatever it takes to remain sane here, Lucius. I have spoken to Hermione, and she has agreed to let me work to make things easier here for all the inmates."

Lucius eyes got bigger. "She would do that, after what I did to her? Even you, Severus, why haven't you poisoned me with your vitamins? In the past, you would have killed me where I stood for touching your wife in the manner that I did."

Severus stood and paced the cell. "You're right," he said. "I have changed. Hermione's love, goodness, and gentleness have changed me. The fact that I'm no longer

indentured to Dumbledore or Voldemort has changed me. I doubt my sins are any less than yours, Lucius, and yet I walk free, a hero in some people's eyes."

Lucius nodded. "You did your duty to the wizarding community while I chose power. After Voldemort died, I wanted to take over. I thought I could run the organization. Riches and power clouded my thoughts. I contemplated it very seriously. Narcissa, afraid for Draco and our lives, begged and begged me not to. I ignored her. I had gathered some followers..." His voice trailed off, and Severus could see tremendous pain on the man's face. "Severus, she was not sick. She killed herself. Because of me..."

Lucius dissolved into great, wracking sobs. Severus reached out and grasped his shoulder and let him know he was there for him. He had always known that no matter what Lucius had become, his love for Narcissa was his existence. He was horrified for his old friend. No wonder the man had spiraled down into the wretched drunk he'd become."

"I'm sorry, Severus," he finally sobbed. "I could not stand to see your happiness with Hermione. I could not stand to feel so betrayed, so lost without Narcissa. My friend and wife betrayed me. Something broke inside me when I realized you were still alive. I wanted revenge, and you were the only one left to mete it out on. I am quite glad you stopped me from harming your wife."

Severus reached out with his mind...a probe for feelings, not reading actual thoughts. Without a wand, this was all he could manage. He didn't even ask for permission; he probed Lucius' mind for the emotion of lies or truth, and he found only truth there. He sat back and then stood.

"I am sorry for your terrible loss. I am sorry for leaving you to Voldemort, but you never gave me any indication until the last battle that you did not want what he wanted."

"It was a role I played as well as your role of spy. Survival was paramount to me, survival for my wife and child." He looked down into his hands. "I killed her. My ambition killed her as sure as if I'd strangled her with my bare hands."

"Lucius, looking back only destroys the future. Let it go and forgive yourself. Draco is a fine, hardworking man, and Scorpius is a genius with potions. You have a lot to be proud of. Narcissa made her own choices."

"I could not look Draco in the face after I told him his mother had been sick and that she'd concealed her illness. I lied to my only son and then tried, out of bitterness, to shape Scorpius into the kind of man I thought I should be...one of power and hate. I'm forever in your debt for saving him and proving to him that he can be a good wizard."

Severus rose from the cot. "I must get back to Hermione. She is going to have a baby, and she frets over me when I am gone."

Lucius stood and held out his hand. "Thank you, Severus. I'm happy for you. Please ask Draco to come see me. I have some apologies to make, and I need to tell him the truth."

Severus shook Lucius' hand, grasping it warmly for a moment, and then turned to the door calling out into the wards.

It took Brimley a while to come, and Severus was beginning get nervous when the man appeared.

He turned to nod to Lucius and found the man watching him with a curious look. "Afraid I was going leave you here?"

He nodded, and with an apologetic smile, he slipped through the door.

Grimmley said, "Sorry, I sent Farthington to the Warden's office to ask if he had time to see you. I wanted an answer before I came here to fetch you."

"And?" Severus asked.

"He agreed but asked you to come back tomorrow. He's in a meeting."

They had traveled down the hall, and Severus was relieved to see the cell with the dead man was open, empty, and clean.

Severus nodded. It would give him time to research the man. When he was once more outside and in possession of his wand, he bid Grimley goodbye and Apparated to the Ministry's back entrance. He made his way into the great hall for the first time in years. Little had changed. He used the Floo to send Hermione a note about where he was and proceeded to the archives. When he had spent several hours gathering information on Azkaban's warden, he went to see if Arthur was back at work. He found him in a small office on the fourth floor.

"Severus!" Arthur called out excitedly, getting to his feet. His hand reached out to shake Severus' hand.

"Arthur, I was taking a chance you might be here. I know you hadn't worked in quite sometime." He took the chair in front of the desk. It was a tiny office. Their chairs were pressed against opposite walls.

"I'm on half days. I still tire easily, but I'm getting so much better. My office isn't much, but they promised to move me up soon. I guess my replacement has been doing a good job." He seemed embarrassed.

"Take it slow. Your body needs time to recover its energy. At least you still have a job."

Arthur nodded, grateful for his words. "How can I help?"

Severus told him about the conditions in Azkaban and what he hoped to do.

"Are you sure you want to bite into this rotten apple, Severus? Even some of the Order will have trouble with it. Many lost friends and family to the Death Eaters."

"Actually, I did some research today. There are only a few Death Eaters alive in that place. Lucius is in there because of what he did to Hermione. There are only two others alive because they have family willing to bribe a few guards to get food and clothing into the prison. The rest died of starvation and beatings. The other prisoners are violators of some crime or another." He told him what he has seen during his visits.

Arthur sat up a bit straighter, and his eyes flashed with anger. "I had no idea it was so bad there. Frankly, I don't think of that place much. I never had anyone I knew well go there. I guess I, like so many others, I assumed that it wasn't so bad since the Dementors were no longer there to torture prisoners."

"It's bad." Severus sat back in his chair.

Arthur groused, "What the bloody hell is Sartoff doing up there? He gets paid a fortune for that job. I will look into the funds that the prison gets and find out if he has the money for any better care of the prisoners. Frankly, Severus, it's quite possible that it has just slipped through the cracks here. No one wants to think about Azkaban."

"Well someone needs to think about it. Sentences for small crimes that should take people a few years to serve are costing them their lives, and no one knows or cares."

He sat forward. "Do you think the Order would be willing to take up this cause? I know for a fact that Muggle prisons even have Tele and game courts. They allow prisoners to get an education." He sat back and watched emotion play across his old acquaintance's face.

Arthur finally said, "All we can do is ask. I doubt anyone would go for Wizarding game courts."

Severus smirked. "I'm not suggesting that. Muggle prison privileges are ridiculous. What I am suggesting is clean cells, clothing, and enough warm food to keep a man reasonably healthy. Perhaps prisoners could have a book or two, to occupy the mind. Nothing more...after all, prison is meant to be a punishment."

"I agree with you," Arthur said, and then he asked, "What's happening with you now?"

"Minerva asked me to take her place next year when she retires. I told her I would, but the final decision will be up to the board," he told the man.

"That's excellent. You may not know this, but Molly and I are on the board. You'll definitely have my vote."

Severus nodded. "Thank you, Arthur. Hermione and I are very excited about the possibilities. I may be speaking out of turn here, and she might get angry with me, but I'd like you to know that she is pregnant."

"Severus!" Arthur cried. He jumped from his chair and came to give a surprised Severus a hug.

Severus stood, bracing himself, not sure what that might feel like. Hermione and Poppy were the only people who routinely touched him. He'd been making an effort to be a little more comfortable with the boys. Minerva had touched him over the years, but it had always been very brief. Arthur grabbed him in a tight hard hug that was brief, and he got a hearty clap on the back. A man's hug. Severus smiled down at him when he stepped back.

"I'm happy for you and Hermione, Severus. That's one amazing woman to capture your heart. You deserve happiness. You gave life back to Molly and me. I wish there was some way to repay you."

"No payment is necessary, Arthur. It is what people do for each other in this new brave world we are trying to build." He stepped back to sit in his chair as Arthur took his again. "I do have a request, not as payment but as a favor to ask, for Hermione's sake."

Arthur sat forward. "Of course, anything we can do."

"Hermione wants to have our bonding ceremony in your garden. Do you think Molly would help her?"

Arthur's face lit with rapture, and he rubbed his hands together. "Oh boy, would she. She will be over the moon when she hears about this. She's been wracking her brains to figure out something she can do for the two of you and those boys. Imagine a Malfoy helping us."

Severus smiled. "Yes, imagine that. It is a brave new world. You have no idea how much that boy has changed and how much this project meant to him. He was on a serious road to destruction, and this gave him a belief in himself he didn't have. Arthur, I was saved by care and love. I want to do that for other people at the school and at Azkaban. People should not be thrown away because they made bad choices. They should be given choices, as I once was by Albus. They need choices that give them lives worth living. We have to make the choice of good magic as seductive as dark magic. We need to give those teetering on the edge of darkness a choice for good. Maybe that should be the theme we present to the Order. If we show those prisoners mercy, they might show mercy back." He stood. "I will step off my platform for now and go back to my very anxious wife."

Arthur stood, and they stepped the few feet to the door.

Severus shook the older wizard's hand and said, "Thank you for your time. Please let me know when and where the Order will convene, and Hermione and I will be there."

"I will, Severus. Thank you so much for giving me back my life and my Molly. That was the worst of it, watching her suffer."

Severus nodded. "I understand that now. Good wives are hard to find. I think we have two of the best." He gave Arthur's back a parting pat and turned away.

Arthur smiled, watching the Potions master walk away. "Will wonders never cease, Severus Snape is going to be a father." He turned, eager to share his news with Molly. His little office didn't seem so dingy now.

Lisa, thank you for your beta work.

WriterMerrin, thank you for pointing out some flaws that needed fixing in the story line.

Chapter 42

Chapter 42 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

As Severus passed back through the Atrium, he realized it was pretty crowded. He also realized that he was the reason. He'd seen very few people since his return. People were pointing and starting to come forward. When he saw Rita Skeeter heading his way, he quickened his pace and stepped into a Floo back to Hogsmeade. He had decided to go to Hogsmeade first and get Hermione a surprise from Honeydukes; then he headed up the road to Hogwarts and found his wife smiling at him from the other side of the gate.

"Hermione, are you okay? It's a long walk down here." He used his wand to lower the wards and open the gate and then reset them before drawing her into the crook of his arm."

"I'm fine, and the exercise is good for me. I was anxious to hear about what happened."

He handed her a little bag of chocolate truffles. "For you, my wife."

She opened and peered into the bag. "You've been reading my mind, again," she cried out as she plunged her hand into the bag.

He watched her with a smile as she devoured the first chocolate and then started on the second. He took her arm and told her about his visit to Azkaban as they walked slowly back to the main door of the castle.

"That's progress, but what about Sartoff? What kind of man is he?"

"My research at the Ministry told me he's meticulous in his own life. He seems to have a good head on his shoulders. He's somewhat germaphobic, though. Maybe he never actually visits his prison. He may be leaving the everyday work to his lackeys. They may be the ones to hold responsible."

"Maybe physically, but he is responsible. Maybe we need a new warden," she said, feeling warm and secure against him.

He said, "I hope you don't mind. I went to see Arthur; he's back at work. I mentioned the bonding ceremony."

She grinned. "You did? What did he say?"

"Judging by his reaction, if Molly is half as excited, we will not be able to contain her." He grinned back at her.

Hermione stopped him and threw her arms around him and gave him a kiss. "I'm so glad you asked. I've been thinking about it all day. I want it to be soon, Severus. With the baby coming, it's a little behind schedule already."

"You think," he said with a smirk. Drawing her to his side again, they continued up the grassy slope toward the castle. "We can visit them next weekend and make the arrangements. You should get a hold of Harry and Ginny and tell them about the bonding and the baby as soon as possible. As it is, they may know already. I didn't exactly ask Arthur to keep it a secret."

Hermione gave him the cat-that-ate-the-canary look. "I spoke to them through the Floo after lunch today. I didn't want to tell them about the bonding until I had a chance to talk to you again. I'm glad you asked Arthur. Ginny is beside herself with glee, and Harry is trying to put the idea of a baby and you and me really doing it together out of his head." She giggled.

Severus stopped. "He had to know."

She burst into uncontrollable giggles. "Of course he knew. He just didn't want to think about it. What man wants to think of his sister doing it?"

"Sister?" Severus cocked an eyebrow at her.

"Of course. He's like my brother...always has been. And he was so far behind us all in the relationship department. Ginny had to go after him before he got the courage to tell her he cared about her, too. He's always been a little prudish."

Severus laughed. "Hermione, he can't be to prudish with all those kids." He was watching some flyers over the Quidditch field. "Hey, I think that's Albus and Scorpius. Let's go watch them."

They climbed into one of the stands and watched as the boys raced each other for the snitch. Then they practiced hitting the Quaffle through the hoops.

"Albus really does have talent...like his father." Severus couldn't help but see Harry flying through the air with Draco fast on his heels all those years ago. Looking back over at Hermione, who was whistling and screaming, made him marvel at his life. She was a grown woman well into her childbearing years. How odd the passage of time had been in his life. He glanced back at the Harry look-a-like and felt nothing but pride and happiness. A tinge of regret hit him at what might have been between him and Harry had he been supportive, but he had to remind himself that time was gone and there was no time for regret. Things were much better now, and he had been given the time to make up for a lot of the wrong done. When the practice was over, they went to dinner in the Great Hall. Severus and Hermione sat close to Minerva and Poppy, telling them about the location for the bonding and letting Minerva know about the baby.

"What! A baby, already? Don't you two breathe a word to the students until the bonding ceremony is over. We must set a good example," she warned, but her cheeks had color in them, and she looked ecstatic.

"Yes, Minerva," Hermione said, laughing at her.

Severus gave her a stinging smirk. "We are married, and they know that." But he couldn't stop the edges of his lips from curling up in a tight smile.

Minerva laughed. "Yes, but the purebloods don't recognize that as a marriage. It's shocking how separate their lives are from the physical world we live in. Most of them have had little or no contact with Muggles. It's like an alien world to them."

Hermione nodded. "I'm afraid most of them take their Muggle studies as fiction. Maybe we should have field trips."

Those listening to them at the table suddenly turned with a gasp.

Hermione stared back. "What did I say?"

Minerva said, "Field trips are impossible. Underage wizards do too much uncontrolled magic to trust them in an open environment like that. No, I'm afraid we are doing as much as we can to teach them about Muggles."

"What about TV and movies? Those would give them a better idea."

"You know we have a separation of technology, Hermione," Severus reminded her.

"I know, but maybe it's time for a change," she told her listeners. "How can our students learn about Muggles from picture books? They need to touch and feel the objects and see how they work. They need to watch movies and experience the Muggle world. I'm not saying take first years out on the town, but 5th to 7th years might be able to control themselves in an outing. We are all part of the same world."

"Well, hmmm," Minerva said, giving Severus a look that told him to control his wife.

He smirked at her.

"I will take the idea into consideration, Madam Snape." The old witch got to her feet. "I will see you all tomorrow."

Poppy stood. "I'll walk with you. Good night, Severus, Hermione." She smiled warmly at them and winked at Severus.

Hermione said, "I might as well be talking to a brick wall. When you are Headmaster, we will discuss it again." She got to her feet, and they left the dining room and headed toward their rooms.

Severus smiled. "She has lived many, many years, Hermione, and seen many things. Our people are safer the further we stay away from Muggle society. Do you want our people exploited or hunted again?"

Hermione shook her head and blinked away her tears. "No, I don't want that. I wouldn't want to put our people through any more strife now that they are rebuilding their lives."

He hugged her close. "I know you want both your worlds to be one, Hermione, but the world is not yet ready. Let us take on only one cause at a time."

Hermione said. "The prison is your cause; but you're right, I have other things to be concerned about now: my job, the bonding, and our baby." She grinned up at him. "You have no idea how happy I am about our baby, Severus."

He smiled down at her as they reached her classroom door. "I think I do. I'm very happy, too. I'm not sure I want to take up a cause like Azkaban right now. But this cause may save lives and stop horrible suffering. It's not something that can be put off."

"You're right," she said as he closed the door behind them. "You need to start this as quickly as possible. Try hard not to step on too many toes. Try to let the guy in charge be the one who thinks it's his idea to implement changes. If you find someone is well funded and taking money for his or her own purposes, then have the person tried. But if it's lack of funds, then petition the Ministry for them."

"Sound advice, my wife," he said as he undid the buttons of his cape and frock coat. He hung the garments in the closet. Hermione slipped out of her robes and handed them to him. After hanging those up, as well, he turned to her. She stepped up to unbutton the buttons of his shirt and leaned in to kiss his chest and run her fingers lightly over the hair on his chest. She smiled up at him when his nipples hardened. "You like my touch, husband?"

"I love all your touches." He moaned as she ran the tip of her tongue over his nipple. "Your touch is like a touch of heaven... every one of them." He buried his fingers in her hair, and he closed his eyes.

She smiled and then said, "Come to bed, Severus. I'll show you a slice of heaven tonight."

Before Severus knew it, he was back standing before the gates of Azkaban. Grimmley was not there. Another man checked him over and led him to the warden's office. The minute Severus stepped through the door, he knew there was a serious problem. The floor was covered in plush carpeting, and there were walls of windows overlooking the sea. The sea, without any view of the prison itself, was quite beautiful. The office furnishings were of finely carved, rich ebony wood.

A large, well-fed man stood as he entered and held out his hand. "Professor Snape, what can I do for you? Welcome, would you like a drink?" He waved his hand toward a cabinet filled with fine wines and liquors from around the world.

Severus gave him a withering look. "No, thank you. I have some matters of grave importance to discuss with you."

The man had sweat along his hairline, and he waved his hand to the leather chair that sat before his desk, then he took his chair. He reached for his own drink, and Severus caught a whiff of very fine whiskey. "Of course, what is it you want?"

"Sir, I had occasion to visit Lucius Malfoy a few times this last couple of months. He had information I needed. His physical condition was deplorable, and his cell conditions were even worse. It was not fit for rats...let alone a man. Sir, have you been downstairs recently? Do you visit the men and women incarcerated here?"

"I have employees who do that sort of work. I trust them to take care of the prisoners."

Severus sat forward and gave him another withering look, and the man cringed. "Sir, I looked into a cell yesterday, and there was an obviously dead man inside! Are these people not checked on? They should be given medical care and bathing privileges."

The man's eyes were no longer friendly. "They are prisoners. They are here because their crimes against the wizarding world are horrific and barbaric in most cases." He stood and went to look out over the sea. "You have no idea how difficult it is to be in charge of the dregs of our society."

"You seem to have made yourself comfortable," Severus accused nastily.

"This job pays well, and I must survive this situation," he said, taking another drink from his glass.

Severus stood. "If you need help getting funds to take better care of your prisoners, I will petition the ministry. But sir, if you are using the monies for your own purposes or your men are skimming from the basic needs of those men and women in your care, Merlin help you. The condition of the prison below us is not fit for rats. I suggest you make yourself inspect that which you are guarding; otherwise you may well find yourself in the cell next to Lucius." He turned and left the office.

Sarkof gulped and glared after him. "Tarkov!"

"Yes, sir," called a burly man as he stepped into the room.

"That man is a danger to all of us. See that he does not leave. I will not have him take away what I have here." He turned and fished a perfumed handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his nose.

"But that's Snape. He's a bloody dangerous Death Eater." The man obviously was afraid.

"There are no Death Eaters. There are only half-starved men. Now go before he leaves here. Make it look like an accident."

Tarkov nodded, and his eyes bulged with the thought of coming up against a known hero and one-time Death Eater. He backed out of the office and turned, drawing his wand as he went after Severus.

Severus was a trained spy whether his life called for his talents right now or not. He'd wanted to be prepared to fight his way out if necessary. Knowing most of the prison was under a magical dampening field, he'd visited George Weasley at his shop earlier that day. He'd explained what he needed and discovered the man was quite a genius. He'd given him a number of distraction bombs and one-time spells that would work under any circumstance. Severus had also bought a second wand, which he'd turned over to the guard. His own wand was taped against his arm, and he drew it now as he stepped to the stairs from the posh upper floor. He brandished it behind him, *Incarcerous*, and discovered it worked up here. The guard who was rounding the corner was bound with magical ropes, and he fell onto the floor. He then said, "*Petrificus Totalus*." He then pocketed his wand, knowing he would not have to worry about his back, and took several items from his inner coat. The items magically inflated to full size in the light. One was a staff of hard wood. He knew this one would be very handy for his escape and held onto it tightly.

Severus headed down the stairs as an alarm went off. He brandished the staff, and the guard coming around the corner was dispatched with a strong hit to the side of his head. As Severus rounded the floor where Lucius was kept, he ran to the door, pushed open the food slot, and tossed a number of items into the room. They would expand into containers of food and water, and it was more than enough to keep the man alive and safe while he brought help. He then slapped what looked like a simple ball of rubber onto the door. It immediately expanded like a spider's web, encasing the door and wall around Lucius' cell, making an impenetrable wall. This would protect him. The warden knew he'd come to see Lucius, and he would not have Lucius bear the brunt of the man's anger. He also knew taking Lucius with him would earn him a cell in Azkaban. In the next hall, he lobbed one of George's darkness bombs. He slipped on an odd pair of glasses that penetrated the darkness and ran, holding the staff before him.

He'd reached the main hall and gate. He barely escaped a solid hit from a curse sent his way. He felt it glance off his left shoulder, and his shoulder went numb. He lobbed another item that looked like a grenade at the men who stood there smiling, confident that they had him. The stunned look on their faces as a force field of energy hit them and knocked them out was priceless. He brandished his wand, holding his other arm against his body, and blasted the door away. He heard shouts behind him and ducked to the side...but not before a curse sliced a long gash across his cheek. He was into the salty, damp air, and the cut stung like fire. Firing several spells behind him, he Apparated away.

Hermione cried out with alarm when Severus appeared and stumbled against the gate. She had been waiting for him. When she saw the blood, she sent her Patronus to Hagrid to come help; it would go on to Poppy after.

Severus slumped to his knees. Exhaustion from the excitement combined with the growing numbness of the spell prevented him from standing any longer. Hermione opened the gates and was down on the ground kneeling before him. "Severus, what's wrong? What hit you?" She tore some cloth from her robe and pressed it to the cut on his face.

"Stunned... numb... arm..." he stammered. He could feel the ground shaking and wondered what it was, but then he heard Hagrid's loud voice, calling as he came bounding up. The fact that the giant could cause an earthquake would have made him laugh under different circumstances. But he felt his sight fading, and he pitched

forward.

Hermione shouted, "Hagrid, we must get him to the castle!"

Hagrid stooped and gathered the unconscious wizard into his arms and ran toward the castle. Hermione followed. Her heart was beating fast, and she tried hard to stuff the fear down. She knew the cut wasn't dangerous. But the spell, whatever it was, was taking his strength...and that scared her.

Poppy was coming from the front door as they neared.

"Hagrid, put him on the ground. We cannot wait to get him to the infirmary," she instructed.

Hagrid laid the unconscious wizard on the ground and stood back.

Poppy was already chanting a spell when Hermione, puffing tiredly, caught up with Hagrid. Minerva came from the castle, and students were now streaming from the door, making a circle around them. She saw the pale, confused faces of Albus and Scorpius in the crowd.

Minerva grabbed onto Hermione, lending her support as they watched.

Lisa, thank you for your beta work. You are invaluable to me.

Chapter 43

Chapter 43 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

Poppy studied the color of the spell and waved her wand. Severus gasped, but his eyes opened and the pain on his face relaxed.

"Merlin, that hurt." He drew in a deep breath and let it out very slowly. But panic laced his eyes as he realized he could not raise his left arm. "Poppy?" he whispered, dread clutching at his heart.

She shook her head. "I don't know. It was a stun spell with a variation I haven't seen. Maybe it was dark magic. I've blocked it in your arm from your shoulder down. I do not think it will spread. This will give me some time to work out the cure." She turned, not able to witness the pain that was in his eyes. To Severus Snape, losing an arm would be devastating to his abilities to make potions.

Severus looked at Hermione, who was clutching his right hand tightly. He saw tears slip from her eyes and slide down her face. She couldn't say anything, so she leaned forward and touched her lips to his forehead.

Poppy took a deep breath, steeled herself, and turned back to him. "You should be grateful it only hit your shoulder. If it had hit your back or chest, your heart would have stopped before you arrived here."

Hermione's hand clutched his harder, and he tried not to grunt against the pain. He needed it to help him focus on the full impact of Poppy's words.

His thoughts flew back to the night he'd stopped that curse from killing Albus Dumbledore. The old wizard had lost the use of his hand. He had never complained about it...only the pain on occasion. Severus wasn't so sure he could live with this disability. Maybe this was his punishment. He had always been waiting for the retribution.

Hermione whispered, "Severus, let Scorpius and Albus be your hands for now. Rest assured we will find an answer to this curse and restore you."

Her mouth made the promise, but he could see the fear in her eyes. Yet the idea that the boys could be of assistance did encourage him, if only a tiny bit. He fought against the wave of anger and frustration as he tried to force his fingers to move and they did not. Fear and anger overwhelmed him. He turned his face away from everyone and said, "Leave me."

Poppy's voice was shaking with uncharacteristic uncertainty. "Rest, and let me run some tests while you sleep."

Severus felt the anger explode. "LEAVE ME!" He let go of Hermione's hand and pushed her away.

"Severus!" she cried out in shock.

"Please, Hermione," he begged in a strangled voice.

Hermione bent again and kissed his cheek. She caressed his hair and then said, "All right, but I will be back in a few hours, and you won't send me away again, husband." She stressed the last words.

He didn't reply and closed his eyes to block them out.

Minerva and Hagrid exchanged looks of grief and fear, and then they turned away, leaving the infirmary, clearly distressed. They had seen Severus in many moods over the years, and they were concerned this was an old one.

Poppy drew Hermione to the side and whispered, "Hermione, why don't you go lie down on my bed for a while. Try to nap. I will call you if I find anything out. That way you'll be out of his sight but close."

Hermione nodded numbly and looked back at Severus. "I love you, Severus." She turned and went to the door of Poppy's rooms and vanished inside.

Poppy looked at Severus who still had his eyes shut. She went and placed a hand on his shoulder and said, "My boy." She let her own tears fall. Through her touch, she could feel his body ridged with encased emotion. "I will be at my desk doing some research. Call me if you need me."

He didn't open his eyes or answer her, and she ran a hand over his hair. He turned his face away, so she headed to her office.

Severus felt cold inside, and he knew he was being childish and selfish. He knew Hermione's heart was breaking, and maybe Poppy's too, but he could not make himself

call either of them back even though he desperately needed them. A familiar wall rose in his mind...a wall he hadn't tried to use in years, a wall he hadn't known was still there. Somehow it just rose again now that he needed to shield himself from the personal pain of dark magic. He hadn't sensed or needed the wall since before his *rebirth*. Against his own wishes this old survival mechanism built itself hard and strong, and he felt his emotions cool and deaden. He gasped at the familiarity of it; this had been his home for so many years. It was a dead place, but it was comfortable. The part of him who loved, laughed and enjoyed his life was now looking out from a small, dark cell in the back of his brain. He willed himself to sleep.

Hermione, who'd fallen into Poppy's bed after crying herself to sleep, woke with a start and felt the coldness that enveloped the bond she'd already formed with Severus in her heart. What was happening, and why was he drawing so far away? She got up and went out into the infirmary. It was now late and dark. She could see the light was on in Poppy's office, but she made her way to Severus' bedside. He was lying on his side on the far edge of the bed, and she crawled in behind him. She slipped a hand over his waist and snuggled up to him.

As she sighed from the close comfort of his body against hers, he stiffened and said in the harshest of Snape voices from her old school days, "Hermione, I do not need you hovering. Please go back to our rooms. I will come when Madam Pomfrey releases me."

Hermione was shocked and hurt. A strangled cry escaped her lips, and she pulled away and fled the infirmary.

The Severus Snape inside the little cell in the back of his mind slipped to the floor and cried, but the Severus Snape in the bed gave a "harrumph," closed his eyes, and went back to sleep.

Hermione flew down the halls of the school, not seeing anyone that she passed because her eyes were streaming tears. She pulled her wand half way down the hall from the Potions room, and the door flew open. She flung herself through the door and warded it behind her before she crumpled to the floor crying. What was happening to Severus? It was more than the injury. She could feel he was different, like he'd been before the war: hard, impersonal, and buried within himself. She did not need a marriage bond to know that. The sound of his voice had chilled her like Professor Snape had done all those years ago when she was a student in her first year. Severus was not that man anymore. Poppy had said she'd stopped the curse in his shoulder and arm, but something else must have affected his brain. She could not believe that this was only the injury. The Severus she knew and loved would be hurt and concerned, but he would have gotten back up and been there for her. The cold bastard that had sent her away tonight could not love her, could he? Where was Severus? Maybe Poppy would know. She dragged herself from the floor of the classroom and went to their rooms and used the Floo to alert Poppy.

Poppy studied the note from Hermione carefully and then went out into the infirmary with a heavy heart. She'd been up all night trying to find something that would help tell them what this might be. If the curse wasn't to blame for his mannerisms, how would they reach him, if he was locked up inside his own mind? She was well aware of Severus' power to control his mind. She'd seen him through some pretty horrible times, and she'd seen him withdraw into his mind on a number of occasions. Yes, this was similar. She hadn't thought he would ever need to go to the part of his mind that had kept him sane and separate from the pain and torture that Voldemort had often inflicted on him. If this was something similar, it might take a lot of time and patience to coax him back out.

He sat up as she approached.

"Severus, how do you feel?" she asked, coming around to study his face.

"Crippled," he stated flatly.

"Why are you being so hard on yourself? You're a better man than this. You hurt your wife terribly with your indifference last night."

He stood and grabbed for his cloak. "I do not need a lecture from you, old woman." He sidestepped her and moved to go out the door.

She gripped his arm with a powerful strength. "Severus, if you want to withdraw and bury yourself in self-pity, then I cannot stop you." She placed herself under his gaze. "But hear me: Your wife is pregnant, and she needs as little stress as possible. You WILL NOT push her. You do want her to have this baby, don't you?"

"Yes," he said, cringing from her formidable stare.

"Then if you cannot say anything to her that's nice or comforting, keep your mouth shut! There has never been a woman who loves a man more. You know deep in your heart. Find a way to free yourself from this wall you've thrown up. It's an old habit for self-preservation you created so many years ago. But you do not have the luxury of hiding behind it for months like you used to. Hermione needs you and needs to feel safe and healthy right now."

Severus only glared at her. Then he grabbed her and pushed her to the side and left the infirmary.

Severus came in the door as Hermione was fixing breakfast and was setting the food on the table. Having been warned by Poppy, she watched him out of the corner of her eye. He carefully hung his cloak up with some difficulty and then gave her only a mere glance. He did not greet her, nor try to kiss her as he sat down at the table. His left arm he placed across his lap with his right hand.

"Severus, are you okay?" she asked. Fear laced her voice.

"I am coping," he replied. He did not protest when she buttered his toast and placed it on his plate.

"Are you?" Her voice was soft and shaky.

"Hermione, please give me some time to assimilate the ramifications of this curse."

She reached out for his hand. He jerked it away and held it up palm flat out to warn her off.

He saw tears fill her eyes. "It is not my intention to hurt you. I am what I am. For now, it is different than what I was yesterday. Time is what I require to get my life organized."

Hermione could only stare at him. His language and mannerisms were cold and stilted. "How do I fit in as your wife?"

He looked away. "For now, cohabitation is all I can deal with. I understand that you are hurt and confused. Perhaps you need to talk to Madam Pomfrey. She knows why I have changed."

"She does?" Hermione asked.

He did not speak again but accepted her help with his plate afterwards. Finally he stood and asked her to help him get his robe back on. "I need to talk to Minerva and find out what happened at Azkaban yesterday. I may need to go to the Ministry offices to speak to Kinsley. Please do not wait up for me. This may take all day and into the evening."

"Severus." She spoke his name not as a question but with pain.

He turned and repeated, "Talk to Madam Pomfrey." He brushed past her and left.

Hermione stared after him and then grabbed her own robes and headed for the infirmary.

Severus entered Minerva's office and found her having morning tea. She watched him carefully as he took a seat.

"Have you talked to Madam Pomfrey?" he asked.

"Yes, I have. Is there no way for you to consciously breach the wall and set yourself free?"

"No, it has time constraints."

"But this was an injury you understood. It was something that sent you back to the people who love you. Why did it activate?"

"I do not know. But this is not the time to discuss it. I need to know what was done at Azkaban yesterday."

Minerva nodded. Poppy had told her not to push him.

"Kingsley sent a group of Aurors to check out your story and found very little to establish the truth of it, at first." She watched Severus' eyes flare with anger.

"At first?" he said tightly.

"Yes, it was glamourous. The entire prison had some pretty powerful spells on it, making the cells and conditions look ideal. Harry Potter led the group. They broke down the spells and charms and were able to ascertain the true conditions of the place."

"Potter." Severus spoke the name with harshness. "It's another way for him to be the hero of this story."

Minerva gave him an exasperated look and picked up the morning paper. She shoved it at him. "The warden is now out of a job and being held in one of the Ministry's dungeons."

The headlines were bold and huge across the paper: SEVERUS SNAPE UNCOVERS FRAUD AT AZKABAN. There was a picture of him wielding his staff as he fought off the guards. Magical security cameras were relatively new.

It took him aback, and inside the tiny cell of his heart, Severus Snape heard the tiniest crack in the wall behind him.

"Severus, that young man has learned to care for you; he would never steal your accomplishment," she admonished him. She stood and came closer, and he stood and backed up. "Severus, you will need to go to the Ministry and give a formal statement. They may need to examine your memories."

He nodded. "I expected as much. I will go now. I do not know when I will come back."

"It matters not to me, Severus. But your wife needs you. Even the man you are now can offer comfort to a wife who is carrying your child. You do not have to feel anything at this point. A man can have needs and have no emotional connection to a woman. But a woman like Hermione needs that physical comfort. If you want to be the man you were when you are with her, as her husband, let her touch you. Let her tear the wall down. Too many of your years were wasted hiding behind that wall; don't let it take the months of your baby's development away from you."

He studied her face for a moment and nodded. Minerva had always had a claming affect on him. She was a respected teacher and colleague. They'd had many heated fights over the years and many talks as well. She had always been frank with him, and he had appreciated her sharp tongue on many occasions. She'd had an ability to get through the wall where Poppy hadn't been able to. The love Poppy had for him was too hard to take when he was like this.

He left the castle, and the fresh air seemed to revive him a bit. A ball came his way from a group of students, and he could not reach out to catch it. He cursed his useless arm as he moved across the grounds, bitterness washing over him. Minerva's words repeated in his head over and over. Could he gird himself up and let Hermione touch him? Each time she reached for him, he cringed. Touch had always hurt him, putting him in this state, and it almost burned his skin to receive touch when the wall was new and strong. He dismissed the thoughts of her as the gate clanged shut behind him.

The long day at the Ministry wore him out. It was a physical and mental exhaustion to have people view his memories of the things he had seen there. Late in the afternoon they released him, and he went to Azkaban to release the lock on Lucius' cell. He was shocked to find Harry in the guardhouse at the front gate.

"Potter." He nodded at the man. He found the man irritated him today just by his presence.

"Severus?"

"Yes, who else," he said scathingly. "What are you doing here? The investigation is completed, is it not?"

Harry saw hardness in the man that he hadn't seen in a long time, and he wondered what was up. He'd have to try to contact Hermione after Severus left. "Yes, but it will take time to interview and choose a new staff."

"Grimmley is a good man. I do not believe he was involved with this mess," Severus said.

Harry nodded. "I will pass on your recommendation. Because he's an Order member, his story has carried more weight."

Severus nodded. "I need to see Lucius and release the lock on his door."

Harry nodded. "Of course, sir."

"Do you need my wand, Potter? I do not have all evening. I'm told my wife needs me to be there for her."

"Told?" Harry frowned at him. Something was up. "No, sir, you can keep your wand. If it wasn't for you, those people would still be suffering terribly. Mind you, I think some of them deserve death; but while they are alive, they need adequate food, conditions fit to live in, and a reasonable amount of warmth. We wouldn't want to let them escape their punishment too early through death."

"Agreed." Severus turned toward the gate that opened for him, and he went through, leaving Harry to stand there confused.

Hermione stood before Poppy's fireplace in her apartment and stared into the fire as she took in the ramifications of what Poppy had told her. The bonding would have to be put on hold. She would not marry Severus the way he was. She wanted her bonding to be a happy occasion...something to smile about and maybe even laugh about as the years go by. She was determined to stick by him no matter what he said. She hoped she could keep her promise to herself. An angry Severus easily struck fear in her and made her cry. She would have to steel herself behind a wall, of her own making, to take what he dished out.

She stood as Poppy came back from seeing a patient. "I'm going to go to my rooms and wait for Severus."

Poppy gave her a warm hug. "Call me if he gets to be too much to handle, and I will put him in his place. If not me, Minerva can." She felt Hermione tremble against her. "Try to remember this is temporary. It might break down tomorrow, or it might take six months. Be gentle, reach out, and whatever you do, don't push him away if he makes an effort to be there for you. Each time he reaches out, another crack will hit that wall he's build up around his heart."

She took a deep breath and said, "I'm ready to take him on, Poppy. I can be patient and loving. I can and will break through the wall."

Poppy nodded appreciatively as she watched Hermione go. Severus had definitely picked the right woman to fall in love with.

Lisa, thank you so much for getting this chapter done so quickly. I very much appreciate it.

Chapter 44

Chapter 44 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

Hermione had been lying in bed for at least an hour before Severus came to their rooms. She hadn't been able to fall asleep. Her mind was buzzing with all the possibilities.

She sat up when he came in and watched him struggle with his cloak.

"Severus, will you let me help?" she asked, knowing he was aware that she was awake.

"Yes," he said. "I need to bathe. The stench of that place is not as bad as it was, but it will take time for the Aurors to really clean it up.

She crawled from the bed and slowly unbuttoned his shirt, trying to draw comfort from his need of her help and the warmth of his flesh as her fingers undid each button. She drew the shirt from his shoulders, and only the fact that he felt dirty made her not attempt to press her lips against him. She meant to break that wall down with her love as quickly as he would allow it.

He tried to undo his own belt and couldn't. He stood stiff before her as she released the spring lock that held it in place.

"Can you manage while I go fill the tub?"

He nodded. The scent of her so close had called to his inner self. He kicked his shoes off and toed off his socks. He let his pants fall to the floor and then stepped out of them. He seemed to be watching himself from another place. It was like standing on a balcony looking down at his life. He stood in his boxers and finally made himself move toward the bathroom. After all, this woman had seen him naked; he could handle her seeing him in underwear.

Hermione was bent over the tub, testing the heat of the water with her hand. He ogled her bottom *She is a beautiful woman*, he thought. But his inner self cringed at the lust in his thoughts, and he said, "Can I have privacy?"

Hermione stood, nodding. "Of course, Severus. Please call me if you want your back washed."

She slipped past him. Her hair fragrance reached his nose, and he drew in a silent breath. It was so familiar and yet not. He knew in his head what their life had been. He could see it and hear it, but it felt like it belonged to another man. After she shut the door, he struggled to get his boxers off and then stepped carefully into the tub and sank into the hot water with a sigh.

She had left the soap and flannel handy. With some difficulty, he managed to wash everything he could reach. His back did feel grungy, and he sat back for a moment, thinking. Should he skip it or call her in? Finally he called, "Hermione."

She must have been waiting right outside because the door opened almost immediately, and he glanced at the hope in her eyes. He turned away and said, "I cannot do my back."

Hermione was aware that he had not said please. His words were just a statement of fact. She came, took the flannel from him, and said, "Lean forward a bit."

He did as she asked and sat still and stiff as she slowly scrubbed his back. When she went to rinse it off, she slid her fingers down his skin, following the trails of water.

He stiffened a bit but did not tell her to stop, so she rubbed against his tight muscles.

"Please tell me what happened today."

He told her about the Ministry and seeing Harry at the prison. There was no passion in his voice. It was just recitation of the facts. She washed his hair for him, and then she got a big towel. She held it up in front of her. When he stepped from the tub, she wrapped it around his waist, her cheek briefly pressing against his chest. As she turned away, she did not see him close his eyes or the look of desire fleetingly flash across his face like a starving man getting a fine steak.

When he came from the bathroom dressed in his nightshirt, he looked over at her and murmured, "Please go to bed, Hermione. I want to do some reading."

Trying to take some courage from what he had allowed her to do, she nodded and crawled into their bed. She did not sleep but watched him take a book from the shelf and take his chair before the fire. She lay still and let her breathing regulate. When he thought she was asleep, he put the book away and came and crawled into the bed.

When he'd fallen asleep, she slipped over against him, and he instinctively turned toward her and drew her close with his arm. Hermione sighed and fell asleep.

The next day, Severus seemed to withdraw even more, and Hermione threw herself into her work. She announced that the potions contest would begin, and there was a flurry of sign-ups. In the following days, the students' theories had come in. Severus barely talked to her on a personal level but worked with her reading through the papers submitted for evaluation. They managed to have some engaging talks about the potions and what ingredients would be needed to be purchased. Severus agreed to

procure the things the students would need. Hermione watched him pack a bag one afternoon a few days later.

"When will you be back?" she asked. She helped him close and latch the bag.

"A few days, I think. I want to look into a few libraries for more information on curses like the one I have received. I will be able to also gather the ingredients that are a bit more rare in those towns." He turned away to grab his traveling cloak and struggled to put it on. Hermione grabbed one side and pulled it over his shoulder.

"Severus, please let me go with you. I can hardly fathom being alone at night."

"It will only be a few days," he said, not even looking at her. He went to pick up the bag.

"You're not coming back, are you?"

There was such raw pain in her voice that he turned and saw tears running down her cheeks.

"Hermione, I will be back. I need this time to think, but it does not mean I want to leave my life here or you." He came closer, but he did not reach out to her. "You are my wife. You are having my child. I promise you I will not abandon my responsibilities."

"Responsibilities... is that all we are to you?" She had paled and grabbed onto the bedpost for support.

He dropped the bag and took her arm rather harshly. "Please, Hermione, give me the time I need to work through this. I know what our life was. I can see each moment of it. But it's like looking at a movie of someone else's life. I will try to be that man for you, again. But right now, I'm just not. Let me go now, and I will return as soon as I can. I promise."

Hermione nodded and threw her arms around him, and he stood stiffly against her. Then he briefly hugged her against him before turning to grab the bag and dive through the Floo, not looking back.

Hermione stared at the green flames until they were gone. She refused to cry again. He'd promised, and one thing she knew about Severus Snape then or now was he was honorable. He would come back.

She turned to get ready for her first class of the day.

The next four days were the longest she'd spent in years. She worked late into the evening with students as they used the labs to practice and test their theories. Some of the teams were waiting for Professor Snape to bring their ingredients, and they hung around making her life at least bearable by their constant chatter and questions.

On the fourth night, Hermione was shrugging off her robe and tossing it over the living room chair when the Floo activated and Severus stepped out. He saw her standing there, and he nodded to her and held out his good arm. She flew into his one-sided embrace and held him close. His body was still tense, yet his arm pulled her close.

"It appears I have missed you," he said against her hair.

"I've missed you, too." She stepped back to peer into his face. He still looked guarded, but his greeting encouraged her. "Did you find the things the students needed?"

He nodded. "Yes, some of them were difficult to locate. I even had to gather a few of them from rather remote places. But the fresh air was good for me."

Hermione helped him removed his cloak and vest. "Do you want to take a bath?"

"Yes, please."

Hermione nodded and went to fill the tub. As before, he wanted his privacy, but he called her again to wash his hair and back. As he relaxed in the warm water, he told her about some of the things he had seen and some of the libraries he'd been given access to. He'd even found a few potions and spells to try.

When he was dried and dressed, she called the kitchen and had some soup and bread sent up for him to eat. She was ladling him a bowl full and looked up to see him watching her.

"Are you okay, Hermione?" He could clearly see that she was exhausted; there were deep, dark circles under her eyes.

"Yes, I'm tired. The students have been harassing me for help, and my classes have been quite exciting now that the contest is in full bloom. I will look forward to you helping me."

He took the bowl from her, set it down, and broke a piece of bread off the loaf. "I'm sorry if I was gone too long."

"I knew you'd come back, Severus. I can't say I slept well or didn't worry about you, but you promised. I've always known you keep your promises."

"Yes, I do. Please sit with me and eat. You look half starved."

She rubbed her sore shoulder and nodded. She got herself a bowl of soup and sat opposite him and ate.

She found she was starving and dug into the food.

"You should take better care of yourself," he said with little emotion.

She froze and felt tears burn at her eyes. "You shouldn't have left me."

He stood, took her hand, and pulled her close. "No, I shouldn't have. I'm sorry. I'm sorry this whole thing is hurting you."

She didn't reply but just held him close until she felt him moving away. They sat again in silence and ate their food.

Later they crawled into bed, and Severus lay flat on his back with his body stiff and unyielding. Hermione turned away from him, scooting till her backside touched his hip. When he didn't protest or move away she sighed. "Good night, Severus."

"Goodnight, Hermione." He closed his eyes, willing himself to sleep. But he lay for a long time enjoying the touch of her against him. Another crack appeared in the wall.

The next week was a flurry of activity in the lab, and it was so crowded that Severus let Albus and Scorpius go up to the private lab in the Headmistress' office. He also asked them to help him with some of the potions that he'd found.

So far there had been little relief from the numbness; he had sensation in the tip of his little finger only.

He was quite impressed with Scorpius' and Albus' potion theory, and he secretly hope they would be successful. But he was careful not to suggest or help them in anyway.

He also made sure there was a third student with them in lab when they worked so there would be no speculation if they won the contest. He wanted them to succeed on a selfish level. He wanted to be rid of the scars that itched and marred the surface of his neck and the deep scars across his chest. He knew it was selfish, so he told himself it was for Hermione. She would not have to look at them anymore, but he knew he just wanted them gone. They were a huge reminder of the "death" he had suffered. He told himself that he might be able to break free of the wall and resume his life if the scars were gone. He struggled daily to recapture what he had, and he yearned for the

closeness he saw in his mind that they had shared. But he could not force himself to accept more than a hug or a simple touch here or there. Especially on his bare skin, it was nearly unbearable...like a burning pain. He cursed himself every time he saw tears in the eyes of his beautiful wife, and he endured the pain to allow her some small comfort each night as she pressed a part of herself up to him. With their clothing on, it was at the very least an irritant. Part of him cried inside for the intimacy they'd had. His desire for her body was becoming a deep ache inside, and he wondered if she would willingly let him touch her even though his heart was not with hers. So he did not try to reach out for fear she would read too much into the gestures.

Finally the day for the contest judging commenced. Severus and Hermione had contacted a number of Potions masters from the European continent.

The main hall was cleared after breakfast, and tables with cauldrons and ingredients were set out about the room. The 10 teams began their brewing at 10:30 a.m. They would be given four hours to complete the potions, and then the judging would commence.

Each team had to have at least four affected people to willingly take the potion so the judges would be able to gauge the results.

Albus and Scorpius had asked Severus if he would try their potion, but he thought it was inappropriate because he was their teacher. He secretly did not want to chance a breakdown of his emotional barriers in public if the potion was a success and it somehow broke the wall down as well. He promised he would take their potion in private should it prove successful. It was obvious it already worked on small scars. They had tried it out on a number of classmates. But Severus' scars were so deep and so severe that they still did not know if the potion would work for him.

Hermione and Severus paced the hall, staring intermittently at the door as the judges worked with the students and their subjects. Minerva came every now and then, looking just as anxious. Poppy came as well. She had great hopes that even if the potions proved to be helpful, rather than curing a malady, they could be improved upon by professionals. Finally, they all moved outside.

There were tables out on the large expanse of lawn in front of the main entrance. It was nearly a festival-like atmosphere as people laughed and talked anxiously. They ate snacks, knowing there would be a full meal when the judging was completed in the afternoon.

Hermione sat between Poppy and Minerva and watched Severus, who was striding out across the grass like a prowling lion.

Poppy asked, "Hermione, how are you and Severus doing?"

Hermione sighed. "He is about the same, very remote, but he is trying. He allows me to help him bathe, and he will endure a hug now and then. He talks of the baby on occasion, mostly the education we will be able to give him." She laughed tightly, running her hand through her hair. "I often wondered how it would be to live with Severus as he was before the war. I guess I know now. It isn't so bad."

"And intimacy..." Poppy ventured, a bit embarrassed to ask.

Minerva exchanged a sad look with her over Hermione's head, and the younger woman dipped her head and sighed. "There's been none. It honestly seems to pain him to be touched."

Poppy nodded. "Severus knew only pain back when he needed the walls to protect himself from those around him who would hurt or punish him. The pain isn't really there. It's only in his mind. He expects it. All I can say is, if he gets to the point where he wants a physical relationship and you can handle no emotional connection, please let him. It will break his wall down faster than anything else. He is your husband, and that makes it okay, if you're okay with it."

Hermione nodded. She was a bit embarrassed by the turn of the conversation, but she was comforted that it would be okay to be there for him, if only physically. She had qualms about him using her body that way, but having gotten Poppy's advice that this would help him, she let go of her reservations. Inside she had known even if he'd asked and she'd had reservation she would have come to him. She was starved for intimacy with him.

Minerva said, "Hermione, I have never seen a love so deep as you two have. He will be himself again."

Poppy added, "I have seen him fight through those walls a number of times. In the end, they will fall. This time he will be aware, and he can deconstruct them so that it will not happen again."

The door to the castle opened, and silence rang out over the expanse of lawn. Every eye turned their way. The judges came out to the table that had been set out for them, and the five finalist teams took their places.

Hermione was saddened to see that some of the teams she had hoped would be successful were not among those teams.

Severus was suddenly behind Hermione, and he placed his hand on her shoulder for support. Hermione glanced up and saw an anxiousness that was reflected in her eyes.

Minerva stood and went to have a word with the judges. Then she took the podium. "Welcome guests, students, and staff. It is my honor to have you all take part in this Hogwarts' first potions contest. Only three of the remaining five teams will be given honors, and yet all of our teams will be encouraged to continue their work on their ideas. The creation of potions that will benefit our people is an ongoing process that should never stop. I commend all those who have worked hard to be here today. Now, I will allow the judges to make their decisions public. Please give them a warm welcome."

There was a thunderous applause and some whistles and shouts. Hermione smiled and felt Severus' hand tighten gently on her shoulders. She reached up and covered his hand, and he did not stiffen or pull away. He turned and threaded his fingers into hers.

A tall man stood and came forward. He took the podium, and Minerva stood to the side with her hands tightly clasped before her.

"I am Potions Master Glin Hookenbothem. I teach at the University of Ireland, in Castelbar. We are a secret school much like this one. I have had the privilege to see some amazing potions today...not only those that were successful but the ideas put forth in the others that were not. Some have valid theories and only need more work. Perhaps those students will one day come to my university or to one of the schools represented by my colleagues. First I introduce to you Farling North from the Netherlands." A small round man stood and waved then sat back down. "Next is Jema Starling, from the University of France." A tall, thin severe woman stood and gave a slight bow and then she sat down. Potions Master Hookenbothem waved for the five teams of finalists to come forward. "I am pleased to announce that each winning team will be given a full scholarship to one of the three schools represented here."

Huge applause erupted from the school. Hermione heard familiar whistle and turned to see Harry and Ginny standing off to one side. He waved briefly, catching her eye. "I see Mr. Potter has come to bask in the glory of his son's accomplishments," Severus said dryly over her shoulder.

Hermione turned her head and glared at him. "He's as proud of his son as you will one day be of yours, I hope." His continued criticism of Harry now that he was behind the wall irritated her. She hoped he'd keep his comments to himself once she had the time to talk to Harry. It was good to see him here. It was then she caught sight of Draco and Pansy in the crowd of parents at the back.

Severus leaned down. "Forgive me, I will endeavor to keep my opinions to myself."

Hermione squeezed his hand, "Thank you, Severus. You really do love him."

Severus smirked, "That's hardly likely."

Hermione laughed. The sound of her laughter washed over him and placed another crack in the wall he had built around himself.

Lisa, thank you for your beta work on this chapter. I appreciate the time you give up, from your busy life, to help me.

Chapter 45

Chapter 45 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

Potion Master Hookenbothem stopped their conversation when he said, "I first must thank two of these teams for participating. Doors and Hawthorn, while your potion was partially successful and has relieved the symptoms of your subjects' pain temporarily, it did not cure the malady. Please continue your work, and perhaps we will see you successful next year."

The young man and girl took a bow and moved off to the side. Their faces filled with disappointment, but they seemed to be encouraged at the same time.

"Farthing and Perry, you are to be commended for your hair regrowth potion. Achieving an inch of hair is more than most bald people can hope for. The fact that it falls out after a few hours is distressing, but it's quite a feat for students of your age. I hope you will continue your work. I would welcome your re-entrance into this contest next year." The two young men took a bow and headed to the side.

Hermione and Severus had eyes only for Scorpius and Albus, who stood with the other two remaining teams. One way or another, they would receive scholarships...and for that reason alone, they were excited for their two excellent students.

Severus secretly hoped they had been completely successful. His scar itched, and he twitched a bit because he didn't have a free hand to scratch at it.

Hookenbothem turned to the three remaining teams. "It has been my privilege to see such fantastic work done by school students. I have hope that this next generation of potion masters will revolutionize our medical abilities as they grow, mature, and learn. Their abilities at this young age are astounding.

"I will now announce the winner. The winners will, in addition to the before mentioned scholarships, take this trophy home." He took a tiny object from his pocket and set it upon the table. He waved his wand over it, and it expanded until it was at least three feet tall. It had a gold base in the shape of a cauldron. Out of the middle came a ruby glass vial; magic steam curled and undulated about it. The audience gave a collective, "Ohhhh."

He continued, "There really is no second and third place since all of you will receive the same prize. I will tell you what each group has accomplished, and then I will announce the winners.

"Hornner and Walls have created a sleeping drought that will enable the drinker to calculate his or her own hours of sleep and then wake up at the proper time. The magic that they infused with the potion is quite astounding.

"Annis and Doorman have been working to relieve the devastating effects of Parkinson's disease. This affects Wizardingkind as well as Muggles. The potion they created stops the tremors and returns muscle control to the patient. It is their hope to market this in pill form to Muggles in the future. For now, many of our people will benefit from this amazing potion.

"Last, but not necessarily least, are our most notably named students: Malfoy and Potter. I find their ability to reach past their own heritage and form this amazing alliance quite astounding. Yet the creation of this amazing potion has nothing to do with their famous parents but with their own abilities and accomplishments. They have created a potion that erases even the deepest of physical scars. Many of our people carry horrendous magical scars from the war that could not be healed or erased. They face these scars each time they bathe or even look in the mirror. It is possible that once the surface scars are gone, they will heal and move on with their lives.

"I want to reiterate that first place does not mean that any of the other potions are not just as amazing and beneficial. The judges and I determined which one would relieve the most debilitating symptoms of people's current conditions. I award the first place title to Annis and Doorman."

Applause and shouts of congratulations erupted. Hermione felt tears sting her eyes. The boys had not won the title. Severus' hand tightened almost painfully on her shoulder, but she now saw Scorpius and Albus clapping the winners on the backs. Laughing as excitedly as any of the others, they congratulated their fellow students and admired the huge trophy they struggled to lift together. Severus whispered in her ear, "Perhaps we should take a lesson from them and go congratulate them all."

Hermione wiped the tears from her eyes and nodded. She took his arm, and they moved through the crowd. They saw that more of the Weasleys were here, and it was then that Severus realized he was looking at Bill. The horrendous scars that had marred the young man's face since Greyback's attack years earlier were gone. Then he heard Hermione gasp, "Severus, George ..."

Severus turned to see George Weasley coming toward them with both of his ears healthy and whole.

Hope flooded Severus, and a large crack appeared in the wall encasing his halves. Hermione's touch no longer irritated him. He drew in the scent of her hair, and desire flared through him. He pushed it away as he heard Hermione crying tears of joy as she hugged the tall, red-haired man to her. Lost in congratulations and excitement, Severus let the crowd pull him this way and that. He found himself congratulating his students. He saw the emotions of many excited people, and it did not send him running. He watched as if from behind a glass, but it no longer hurt to have people grab his hand, and he did not rebuke their touch.

There were conversations with the Weasleys and the Potters that lasted for hours, and Severus stood close to Hermione, finding a comfort in her nearness.

As he crawled into bed that night, he felt Hermione slip in next to him, and he felt more open and relaxed than he had in weeks. He stretched out his arm, and she curled up against him, and he wrapped his arm about her. She sighed as she rested her cheek against his chest. Tomorrow he would take the potion, and the scars would be gone. Would the wall, too? He let himself bask in her warmth, and then he slipped into sleep.

Severus woke to the warmth of a body against him, and he opened his eyes to find Hermione laying half across his chest with her hair tickling his nose. He breathed in her scent and reveled in the feel of her arms holding him close. His mind told him to move away, but his heart wouldn't allow him. He lay still, afraid to wake her, just enjoying the warmth of her against him. Inside, another crack appeared in the wall. Finally, he pulled away and slipped out without waking her.

He stood beside the bed and watched her sleep. What had ever made such a beautiful woman love him? Why had she devoted herself to him even when he was dead? He'd always felt unworthy of love. This woman was such an enigma. The fact that she carried his child made her amazing.

She sighed, stretched, and opened her eyes. She realized he'd been watching her with a gentle, confused look on his face. But he'd turned instantly and headed for the loo.

She could still feel a ghost of the warmth that he'd left in the bed.

She smiled. He'd allowed her to sleep against him even when he'd been awake. There was hope that this would soon be over. She crawled from the bed and sat on the edge. When Severus came from the bathroom, he nodded to her. "Good morning, Hermione. Did you sleep well?"

She smiled at his formality. "I did. How about you?"

He went past her. "It was good." He used his wand to dress quickly. "I am going to the lab. Scorpius and Albus are meeting me there this morning so I can take the potion. Do you want to come?" He came close and gave her a ghost of a kiss on her forehead.

She nodded and reached up and touched his cheek. He let her for a few seconds before stepping back. "I will wait for you."

Hermione slipped off the bed and ran to get ready. She felt a flutter in her stomach. She was so nervous and excited for him.

They entered the lab and found the boys already in the brewing process. The potion had to be fresh to do its best work. Severus paced nervously as the final stages were completed, and the brew changed to the fiery orange color, indicating it was complete.

Scorpius labeled a vial full of the potion and studied it.

Hermione grabbed Severus' arm, and they moved closer to the boys as they used their wands to check the potion.

Scorpius then smiled and held the vial out toward Severus. "It's ready, sir. Albus and I didn't care about the title 'winner of the contest.' We did this for you. It may benefit more people, but it was created to say thank you for what you did for me."

"... and for me," Albus said. "This wouldn't be possible if you hadn't forced us to work together at first."

Severus was touched, and he felt the wall crack more. He could only nod. He tipped the vial up toward his mouth and swallowed the potion. Surprisingly, it tasted of mint and honey. Considering its properties, he found himself planning to ask them how they had engineered a pleasant taste. But before he could form a word, warmth crept up his throat and turned into searing pain. He gasped and fell to his knees, pulling at the tight collar of his robes.

He heard Hermione, as if from afar, calling to him. He'd known there would be pain. They had cautioned him about it. But he had not expected this. He supposed it was the deepness and severity of the wound, coupled with the dark magic that had been instilled in Nagini. He gasped as the searing pain seemed to brand him, and then it faded and was gone. He sucked in a deep breath of air and reached up and touched his throat. The skin that greeted his fingers was smooth and healed. He struggled to get back to his feet and found Hermione, Scorpius, and Albus helping him up. He saw the joy on their faces, and it blinded him. He couldn't look at it. He said tightly, "Thank you, gentlemen, Hermione. I must go. I am going to go see Lucius." He turned on his heel and left them standing there gaping at him.

Hermione grabbed them up and hugged them. "He's happy, boys. He just can't show it right now. Thank you so much. He will come back to us, soon. I know he will."

Severus left the castle and nearly ran to the gates of Hogwarts. He slipped into the edge of the forest and fell to his knees, gasping with emotion and nearly sobbing with relief. The scars were gone. The last tie to Voldemort was broken. He lay against the grass, gasping against the strong emotion that threatened to overwhelm him. Finally he got to his feet and Apparated to Azkaban, pushing all the emotion that threatened his sanity inside.

Grimmley was at the guardhouse and surged forward. "Professor Snape, thank you so much for what you've done here. I can't begin to tell you..."

Severus felt uncomfortable with the man's sincere praise. He could not deal with more emotion right now. He pressed a hand to his chest. "Please, just let me in. I did what I had to do," he growled.

Grimly looked at him curiously. "Are you okay, Professor Snape?"

"I'm fine. I don't have all day, man." His voice was terse.

"Yes, sir," Grimmley said. "I know my place. I did not mean to speak out of turn, sir."

Severus felt annoyed with himself but pushed it away. What good were all these foolish emotions? They only gave you pain. "I will not be long," he said, stepping past Grimmley and walking down the hall with his wand still in his hand. He opened the gates and stepped into the hall, closing them behind him with a wave of his hand. He encountered several Aurors still on duty who nodded to him, and one of them stepped up to Lucius' door and opened it for him.

He turned as the door clanged behind him and then turned to find Lucius sitting in a decent chair at his table. A plate of plain but recognizable food was in front of him, and a book sat nearby. He'd been reading. The room was scoured clean, and there was decent bedding on the bed. A porcelain toilet sat where the bucket had been. It was still an enchanted device, but at least it was more civilized. Lucius wore a rather nice cloak.

Lucius stood and reached up to run a hand over his shoulder. "Draco was here yesterday. He brought this for me."

"It's nice, Lucius. I'd ask how you were faring, but you seem to be doing well." There was a hard edge to his voice.

Lucius studied Severus' face. "What's happened to you? You're different from the man who came bearing gifts these last weeks."

Severus flashed him an angry look. Then, indicating his arm, he said, "This happened as I was trying to get out of here a couple weeks ago. I got hit with a nasty curse."

Lucius stood and came close. "Useless, is it?"

"Yes," Severus said. He stepped past Lucius and took the chair.

"Make yourself at home," Lucius said with a smirk, and then he sat on the bed. "I can guess you've come to pump me for more information. I'm not a library, Severus. I'm a caged rat. The cage is more comfortable, but it's still a cage."

"You nearly raped my wife. Be glad it's a cage and not a coffin," Severus warned.

Lucius cringed and studied his friend a bit more. "You retreated behind that wall, haven't you? I'll bet your little wife is devastated."

His own defenses flared, and he gave Severus a nasty sneer.

Severus lurched at him and took him by the neck. "I have given you far more friendship than you deserve, Lucius. Do not push me. The man I was had forgiveness in his heart. I, however, could easily kill you for what you did." The love that surfaced in defense of Hermione put another crack in Severus' wall.

He let go of Lucius, and the man slumped back onto the bed. "I'm sorry, Severus." He held his hand against his bruised neck, rubbing the sore skin. "I am so used to us reflecting our darkness off each other." He waved his hand, indicating his cell. "I am grateful for the changes. I am most grateful for my son's visit. You are right, he is a man to be proud of."

"Your grandson, as well," Severus reminded him. "Help me again, Lucius. Try to find out what spell was used on me. If you can help me, I will work my very hardest to get

you paroled to home arrest."

"You would do that despite my crimes against you," Lucius replied.

"Now that Azkaban is under control, I can focus more on what comes next."

"You're kidding yourself," he said, pulling the robe closely around him. "You will not be able to deal with anything until you have the use of your arm. You always were a perfectionist. I always thought I knew who you were. Yet you were a master at deception."

"Do you hate me for it?" Severus asked.

Lucius looked at him a moment then shook his head. "Not anymore."

"I have always valued the friendship we had before this whole thing with the Voldemort came about," Severus admitted.

"You were right to hide your true allegiance and do what you did," Lucius admitted. "I would have betrayed you. I have always followed. I would have feared his wrath too much." He looked away from Severus' penetrating gaze. "I cannot imagine the hell we would all be in if Voldemort had taken over." He stood now and went to pick up the book on the table. "Severus, I will ask around. We are going to have some outdoor time in a new yard in the back. I will be able to converse with other wizards. And a few of the guards are now prisoners."

Severus stood and went toward the door. "Will you let me know if you find out anything?"

Lucius stood and came toward him. "Severus, thank you for what you did for this place, for all of us."

Severus nodded, unable to deal with the gratefulness he saw in his friend's once-steely eyes. He turned and knocked and was let out. He did not look back.

Severus was tired when he got home, and Hermione was still correcting papers. He waved a hand to stop her from rising from her desk. "I'm going to take a quick shower and a nap. Please wake me, and we will go to the Great Hall for dinner."

Hermione nodded. "Of course, Severus." She watched him walk slowly to their door and enter their rooms. She wanted to hold him and she needed his arms around her, but she did as he requested and turned back to her work.

When Hermione was done, she came into their rooms and found that Severus had lain on the couch and had fallen asleep. She took a rare opportunity to caress his hair a bit, and then she sat on the floor. His arm lay against the edge, and she laid her cheek against it and fell sleep.

Severus woke a bit later, and he felt her warmth against him. The man trapped in the cage wanted her love so bad. It flared through him and made him reach out. He hungered to touch her, and he ran his hand lightly over her hair. Closing his eyes, he felt the silkiness against his palm. Then two fingers touched her cheek.

Hermione woke to the touch of his fingers and raised her face to find Severus studying her face. She leaned toward him, and his lips captured hers. His kiss was deep but different. She realized he was hungry for sex. She could feel his need through that bond that had already developed between them. He was her husband...a husband she was trying to reach. She did not mind indulging his need because she needed him just as much. She thought that he might allow more of his inner self to come forth once they'd made love.

She took his hand and pulled him toward the bed. "Severus, please make love to me. I need you." She wanted to allow him to accept her on her needs and not have to admit to his.

"I am not the man you knew," he said. But he did not pull away.

She smiled. "But you are Severus Snape. I loved Severus Snape long before he became my husband. You are the man I fell in love with. The man you became after we worked to release you from that bubble is also Severus Snape. It's different facets of the same man and different aspects of his life experience. I love every part of you. You are my husband, and I need you."

"But you're pregnant. Won't this harm the baby?" he asked with sincere concern.

Hermione smiled warmly at him. "No, Severus."

The idea a peeling her clothing off one garment at a time was too intimate for him, so they agreed to undress themselves. They quickly took their clothing off, and then Severus pulled her close, kissing her deeply. His mouth devoured hers in his need. She felt such joy at being able to give him physical comfort, and the burning ache she'd had for his touch intensified.

Lying back on the bed, he drew her on top of him so that he could see her.

Hermione leaned down so she could kiss the smooth flesh of his neck, and he groaned with pleasure as she ran her tongue over his healed neck. He slid his hands up the side of her face, pushing her long hair back so he could see her face. He was amazed by the love she had there for him and by the desire she had in her eyes.

She sat back against his drawn up legs. Her hands ran over his chest and down to take his hard shaft in her small fingers and gently stroke him.

Hermione watched him close his eyes, and she felt him arch against her hand. His hand slid up her stomach, and he cupped her breasts, his fingers kneading her firm warm flesh, his thumb teasing her nipple into a hard nub. Then his hand went to her waist and urged her to lift up and impale herself on his hard shaft.

Hermione sighed and heard Severus moan with pleasure as she sheathed him. She began to move. Throwing her head back and closing her eyes, she moved, setting about a rhythm that would bring them both to a climax. Hermione was pleased that he could support her with one hand, and she slid her fingers against herself, rubbing inside her outer lips until she cried out with pleasure and felt him empty his seed inside her.

She collapsed onto his chest and then rolled to his side. As they lay together afterwards, he held her lightly against him with his good arm. "If I'd had the love of a good woman when I was younger, I doubt I would have made the same choices. I would not have had to hide for so long behind the walls that I learned to build in my mind. I don't really know how to break it down all the way. I feel closer now to you. I feel closer to the life we had but not all the way back."

"That's okay, Severus. I'm here waiting for all of you to come back. Thank you for letting me in. I needed you so much. I've been so afraid that the walls you built would not allow me to be your wife anymore."

He raised her chin so he could look into her eyes. "You are my wife and always will be...of that I'm certain." A bit apprehensive that she would get angry he added, "This may not be the best way to tell you this, but there's a possessiveness inside of me that makes you mine, and no one better dare take you."

Hermione nodded. The fierceness in his eyes was a bit daunting. "I understand what you are saying. No witch better try to take my wizard either. She would have a formidable fight on her hands."

Severus found the determination in her eyes mirrored his, and he relaxed, comfortable in the realization that she understood him. Another crack appeared in his wall.

Dinner in the Great Hall was forgotten as they pulled the covers up and fell asleep.

Lisa, thank you so much for sending this so quickly. You have always been there for me, story after story, and would be lost without your beta work.

Thank you, Merrin. Chapter after chapter you continue to help me through these final corrections.

Chapter 46

Chapter 46 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

The next day Severus went to talk to Minerva about using the private potions lab again. She, of course, told him it was his any time.

He looked over the information he'd gathered at the Ministry and then checked the stores of ingredients. Each time he climbed the ladder to look for something, he saw many wondrous things. Albus probably had collected more ingredients in one place than any other in the world. There had been more to the man than even Severus had known.

He met Hermione in the Great Hall for lunch. He didn't take her hand, but she didn't mind. Yesterday's lovemaking and his words afterwards had given her enough comfort for the time being. She was confident that he would not leave her now. She could see more of the Severus she'd married in his eyes, and she really had loved the whole man. His snarkiness was something she loved about him.

Hermione followed him to where Albus and Scorpius were sitting. They hadn't let separate houses strain their friendship. They alternated between their house tables, and their actions had encouraged other students from different houses to form friendships. The tables were no longer strictly one house, and Hermione knew that Minerva was happy about it. Things needed to change after the war. She was proud of Albus and Scorpius for leading the way.

Severus stopped behind the boys and told them, "I will need your help this afternoon." He saw the curiosity on their faces, but he only said, "Please, come to the Headmistress' lab after your last class today." His voice was emotionless.

Albus and Scorpius nodded and said, "Yes, sir." They'd hoped Severus would be back to normal again. It was a little disappointing that he wasn't. They watched him proceed to the staff table with Hermione.

"Severus, how are you?" Poppy asked. She reached for her goblet and took a sip of the cold water.

"I am well," he said, as he reached for some pumpkin juice.

"Any progress?" Her eyes traveled over to Hermione's, and she saw pink travel up the woman's face. *Ahhh*, she thought, *that is progress*.

"Some," Severus said simply. "Are you going to let me eat, old woman, or are you going to give me the third degree?" He smirked.

Poppy grinned. "That's the Severus I know and love...nasty humor abounds. You're doing good, Hermione," she said, looking past Severus. "He's already got some cracks in the wall."

"You daft woman, keep your tongue. We are among the staff," he hissed.

"Don't you get nasty with me, Severus. You know I can get my revenge the next time you come in for care."

Hermione stifled a giggle at Poppy's tone. Obviously, this was old banter between them.

Severus glared her into silence.

They ate the rest of their meal in silence. Severus noted that other staff members were watching him curiously, as if confused by the re-emergence of his former self. He finally had enough and got up and walked out, leaving Hermione and Poppy to giggle some more.

As Hermione walked her back to the infirmary, Poppy murmured, "You have the right attitude, Hermione. Take as much as he will give, and give as much as you always have. No man could not respond to the love you have. I've seen Severus through many instances of this wall. I can see the cracks in this one already. It used to be months, sometimes years, before anyone could get through to him. Mostly it was Albus who managed to crack the wall away. Severus has been hurt so much in his life. With you, he has learned to trust and to give freely of himself. I think this wall was an automatic response. Never think he wanted to pull back from you. You are his life and breath. The regression the wall produces in him seriously handicaps his ability to interact with people. It's a survival mechanism. Once he's back, he can choose to go into his own mind and dismantle the wall for good." They parted at the door to the infirmary, and Hermione walked slowly back to their rooms.

Severus was sitting in the chair by the fire. "Where have you been?" he demanded.

Hermione chose to ignore him. She went to the loo and then grabbed her papers for her next class.

Severus was standing in her way. "I asked where you were."

Hermione flashed him a look. "I choose not to answer. Severus, you cannot treat me like a child. I am a woman and a professional. I deserve your respect."

He turned away. "Suit yourself. I don't really care where you were."

"That's childish," Hermione said as she went from their rooms into the classroom.

Severus glared after her, grabbed his cloak, and went through the Floo to Minerva's office. From there, he went into the lab.

The two boys came when they were told, and Severus told them a little about the new potions he had discovered and what he expected them to do to help him. They were a bit wary of Severus; but out of respect, they didn't push him.

Severus sent them to their dormitories around 9:30 to do their homework. He stayed in the lab until nearly 3 a.m. to make some notes and read some of the material he'd collected. When he finally returned to their rooms, Hermione was in bed asleep. He stood looking down at her for a while. He saw the tear stains on her face and felt

another crack appear in the wall. He undressed and crawled into the bed and pulled his wife close.

When Severus woke, he found Hermione gone. Then he realized the shower was going. A few minutes later, he heard the door open. Hermione entered the room dressed and ready to leave for breakfast.

She nodded to him, not sure what to say. She'd woken against him, but he hadn't been holding her. Feeling awkward, she'd gotten up and went to prepare for her day. She asked, "Are you coming to breakfast with me?"

"Yes." He got up and used his wand to clean and dress himself, so as not to keep her waiting.

They left their rooms, and Severus held the door to the classroom open for Hermione as she stepped into the corridor. As they made their way down the hallway, he told her, "I would like to talk to you tonight about the bonding. Will you make sure you are in our rooms by 8:30?"

Hermione felt her heart skip a beat. She was suddenly afraid he did not want the bonding. She felt his hand at her elbow as they climbed the stairs to the main floor. Then his hand left her arm at the top of the stairs. Afraid her voice would not work, she whispered, "I'll be there."

At breakfast, they sat in silence. Severus was busy with his own thoughts, and Hermione was creating all sorts of terrible scenarios, fearing that Severus was going to tell her he didn't want the bond. She became so upset that her stomach began to churn. She got up and left quickly. Poppy, who had been watching the two with concern, followed after Hermione.

Severus started to get up but sat back when she glared at him. He shrugged, seemingly indifferent.

Poppy found Hermione heaving in a cubical in the women's restroom. She got a cool, wet towel and bathed Hermione's face. "Come sit on the lounge chair and rest. Is this the pregnancy or something else?" She could see the woman's hands shaking.

"Oh, God." Hermione tried to smile. "Probably both," she said as tears filled her eyes.

Poppy gathered her against her and held her. "What's happened? What did he say?"

Hermione held the medi-witch tightly, wishing for her mother, but she was feeling close to Poppy, and was grateful for her support.

"He got angry because I wouldn't tell him why I was so late after lunch. I didn't want to tell him we'd been talking about him." She told Poppy what he had said.

"Why didn't you just answer him?" Poppy said softly, trying to soothe her.

Hermione said, "I won't be treated like that. He has to respect me and know that I wouldn't be off doing something wrong. His indifference hurt me worse."

"Hermione, I thought you understood about the wall. He's not himself."

"But we made love the night before. He wanted me. Why is he this hard, demanding man, again?"

Poppy smiled sadly at the younger woman. "Honey, he's a man. He desires you, of course, but he's not emotionally connected to you. The part of him that adores you is locked behind that wall. It will take time. You really are making progress." She sat down on the lounge by Hermione's feet. "Do you remember Severus when you were a child? He was hard and nasty. When Harry came here, he was reminded of the way James and Sirius treated him all those years earlier. Then Voldemort reappeared, and Albus pressed Severus into service again. He retreated behind that wall and stayed there nearly the entire time you were here. It was dreadful. Those were hard, dark days for him. Only in the summers at the cabin would he finally find the peace and freedom to just be himself.

"Hermione, the Severus you released from the bubble was Severus without the wall, so relaxed and free. It was a miracle to see him happy with you. It will happen again, but you have to be patient and open with him."

"But tonight, if he doesn't want me or the baby..." Hermione dissolved into tears again.

Poppy sighed. "You're creating scenarios in your head that may not even have occurred to him. Just be there to talk to him, and don't become emotional if possible. He just can't understand a lot of emotion right now. It will only make him draw further away."

There was a knock at the door, "Hermione, are you okay," Severus called.

Poppy looked Hermione in the eye. "Talk to him now. Make him tell you what he wants." She patted Hermione's hand and then stood.

As Poppy opened the door, Hermione gathered her strength and sat up straighter.

Poppy stepped out of the room and closed the door behind her. "I thought we agreed you would not stress her out."

Severus tried to sidestep her. "Damn it, Severus." She grabbed his arm. "Do you want her to lose this baby?"

Severus said tightly, "I already answered that question."

"She's terrified as to what you want to talk to her about tonight."

Severus sighed. "I only want to talk to her about not waiting for the bond."

Poppy sighed and grabbed his arm. "I'm going to ask Minerva to find Hermione a sub for first hour. Get in there and talk to her, now!"

"It's the women's lavatory!" he protested.

Poppy gave him a disgusted look, waved her wand at the door, and an "Out of Order" sign appeared on the door. "Now go," she commanded.

"Yes, Mum," he said sarcastically, glaring at her.

Poppy glared back. "Make it right."

He stepped into the room and shut the door without looking back.

Hermione was sitting up on a lounge. Her arms were around her legs, her head was resting on her knees, and she was rocking back and forth.

Severus cleared the glare from his face and seemed taken aback by her pain. *Why can't she just go with things? Why did she have to read into everything I say as a rejection or a bad thing?* He was stumped. *All I asked was to talk to her* She did not look up at him, but he could tell by the way her body drew into itself that she knew he was there.

He sat down on the end of the lounge and softly called her name.

She sniffled but did not try to talk. He took a handkerchief from a pocket inside his robes and nudged her hand with it. She looked up at him with a tear-stained face and

then took the offered cloth and wiped her face and nose.

Severus stared around him at the very feminine restroom decorations and grimaced.

"I am sorry if I was vague this morning. I only felt the subject would garner some time, and I felt it best accomplished in our rooms once the day was done." He spoke slowly and tried hard not to be harsh in anyway.

Hermione sniffed and raised her head to look at him. She didn't trust herself to speak.

"I have already told you that you are mine and that no one had better try to take you from me. Why would you think I would want to send you away? Why would you think I do not want this baby?"

"I am not a possession, Severus," she whispered.

He nodded. "I know that. This is very hard. I do not have the words to explain the attachment I have with you because my emotions are nearly disabled right now. It does not mean that I do not want you with me. You are my wife."

"Wives are easily gotten rid of in the Muggle world." She wiped at her tears.

Severus grabbed her hand and held it gently but firmly. "I do not want to *get rid of* you. I can see you are confused, hurt, and scared by what is happening to me. I wanted to help relieve your fears. I want us to go through with the bonding."

Hermione's eyes filled with more tears, and they ran down her face. Severus felt like screaming. He thought he'd stated this all very simply. How could she be hurt more?

But then a tiny smile played at the corner of her lips. "You want to bond with me, now, like you are?"

He brought her hand to his lips to kiss her fingers. Suddenly, he had a sobbing witch on his lap, and he held her lightly, his body stiff with the sudden emotional bath. Then he forced his muscles to relax, and he held her close. The wall cracked even more.

She let sobs of relief wrack her body for a time, and then she just rested against him. Her craving to have him physically close was relieved.

"I'm sorry, Severus. The hormones and the strangeness of all this has me turning summersaults inside. One moment I'm fine, and the next I'm literally screaming with my need to have the Severus I know here with me. Having a baby is a scary thing, and I need your support."

Severus pushed the hair away from her face, and some of the damp strands stuck to her skin.

"I realize this more now than I did this morning. I do not know the words to explain what I *feel* right now, but I know that we need the bond to help put your fears to rest. It's not only for you, Hermione. I need the anchor of knowing I have you to come home to."

She looked up into his face and saw fear deep in his eyes; of course he was scared. The wall was a mask for his fears. It always had been. It kept him from pain, hurt, and the agony of loneliness and rejection. She reached up to caress his cheek. "I'm sorry, Severus. I will try harder not to misread your intentions. You're right: A true magical bonding would help."

He nodded and gently extracted himself from under her. As he did, he drew her to her feet. "Finish your classes today. I will go work in the lab. Tonight we will go see Arthur and Molly. If it's possible, I would like to have the ceremony Saturday."

"Saturday! What about the dresses, flowers, and food? It takes a lot of work and planning."

"Are we not wizards and witches? It can be handled easily. Now pick your closest friends. I do not want the whole wizarding world invited. Please, let's make it small." His eyes beseeched her to give him this assurance.

"Alright, Severus. I promise it will be small."

He nodded. "Why don't you wash your face and repair your make-up. I will go down to your class and relieve the sub."

Hermione smiled. "Thank you, Severus."

He bent and placed a kiss on her cheek. Then he let his cheek rest against her a moment before turning and heading out of the women's restroom. He took a deep breath when he closed the door behind him. He flicked his wand at the door, and the sign vanished. Feeling a bit more settled, he headed downstairs. His mind was already planning the day's experiments.

Hermione washed her face and took her make-up from a tiny box in her pocket. After expanding it, she repaired her damaged face. Staring into her own eyes, she saw relief and excitement about the upcoming bond. She started to mentally tick off the people she would like to invite and then she realized that there were a lot. Her colleagues and friends made a pretty big group...well, goodness, even the Weasleys alone made a pretty good size group. She felt her stomach twist again. What had Severus meant by small? Fifty might be small to her, and ten might be small to him. Hermione mentally kicked herself. She would not worry about this until after talking to Severus. She examined her face in the mirror and decided it was time to go back to work.

The day passed, and Hermione found that Severus had managed to arrive for dinner in the Great Hall on time. He gave her a chaste kiss on the cheek as he took a seat beside her. Any display of physical attention made her feel good. Those who'd witnessed this morning's emotional tension relaxed and went back to eating.

Severus asked, "How was your day?"

"Good," she said. "How was yours?"

Minerva, who was sitting close, glanced at Poppy and rolled her eyes. "At least they are talking," she whispered with a snort.

Severus pretended not to hear her, but turned to address her, "Minerva, Hermione and I are going to talk to Arthur and Molly tonight. We will take the Floo in our quarters. I do not know when we will return. There is much to discuss."

"Discuss?" Minerva asked as Poppy leaned in to hear.

Hermione looked at Severus, and he nodded for her to tell them.

"Severus wants to go forward with the bonding on Saturday."

"Saturday!" Poppy and Minerva said in unison.

"That's only a few days away!" Poppy exclaimed.

"Arthur assured us Molly would be happy to have it in her garden. We just need to see if they are available. It's going to be small." Hermione glanced at Severus. "I was thinking thirty to fifty people."

"Thirty to Fifty!" He gulped, but seeing the fear return to Hermione's eyes he said, "That's fine. But please draw the line close to there."

Hermione relaxed and nodded. "I will do my best." She laughed. "The Weasleys make up a good fifteen or more by themselves. Then there are staff members and a few friends."

"I would like to invite Draco, Pansy, and of course Scorpius," Severus announced.

Hermione reached out to cover his hand. "I think that would be nice. Do you have other friends I need to add to the list?"

Severus shook his head. "No, I think that's all the ones I know who are free to come." He left that unspoken name between them.

An idea formed in the back of Hermione's mind, and she started to make plans of her own.

Lisa, thank you so much for getting this chapter to me so quickly. I could not do this without you.

My hope is that we will get this story completely posted by the end of the year.

Chapter 47

Chapter 47 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

After dinner that evening Severus and Hermione Flooed to the Weasley's house. Hermione had sent a note earlier letting them know about Severus' state of mind and when they were coming.

Molly wrapped Hermione in a big bear hug the second she stepped from the Floo. She was laughing with happiness.

Severus stood back ready to hex the woman if she tried to touch him. Arthur stepped forward with his hand out, and Severus shook it.

"Severus, it's good to see you. Come to the parlor. I have some excellent elfin wine I thought you might like to sample. Let the women talk a minute."

Severus was all too happy to leave the hugging to the women. He saw that Hermione was clinging to the woman with a look of sadness on her face. No doubt she was missing her own mother again. He turned away and followed Arthur.

Arthur didn't speak until he had poured their drinks and they had seated themselves in chairs before the roaring fire.

Severus examined the wine. It was an icy blue color and smelled of a rare berry.

"Minerva wrote to me about what's happened. I never really understood the differences in your personality until now. I wasn't aware of the walls you built in your mind," Arthur said, taking a sip of the cool blue fluid.

"I didn't really think of them much; it was just a part of who I was before Hermione. In or out of the wall, I could not act much differently...more precisely, I didn't have a reason to act differently." The wine was sweet, but he found he liked it very much. "This is excellent, Arthur." He set his glass down to reposition his useless arm with his good hand and then picked it up again.

"Does the injury hurt?" Arthur asked, thinking it was better not to ignore Severus' obvious infirmity.

"No, it's numb. That is the only redeeming aspect of not having the use of it...at least there is no pain."

Arthur nodded, taking another sip of his wine then asked. "Why not wait until you are yourself again for the Bonding? It should be a joyous occasion," Arthur observed.

"With Hermione being pregnant, I need to assure her that I want her and the baby. She's vulnerable right now and doubts everything about us. She is my wife, and I want the wizarding world and her to know that. A Muggle wedding is one thing, but Muggle marriages are easily put aside."

Arthur observed Severus' face with a smile. Didn't this man know how much he loved his wife even now? What a complex man this Severus Snape was. Arthur was not envious of the pain this man had gone through to get to this place in his life, but he was envious of the fiery feelings Severus had for Hermione. Arthur's relationship with Molly was deep and abiding and forever, but they were happy and comfortable...fiery passion seldom touched them anymore.

"You're doing the right thing, then, of course. She does need to know that you are committed."

Severus heard the sound of the women talking excitedly, and their voices got closer. He placed his glass on the table and stood as his wife entered the room. He moved to the couch, and Hermione came to sit near him. He reached over and covered her hand with his. The warmth of her touch always calmed him.

Hermione smiled up at him. Pleased that he was showing some kind of affection in front their friends, she threaded her finger through his.

Molly sat in the chair Severus had vacated. "Well, Severus, you certainly didn't give us girls much time to plan this, but I think we can make it nice. I'm quite good with transfiguration. All I really need from you tonight is a list of guests, and I will get invitations sent out by owl tomorrow."

Hermione laughed. "That would kill Errol. Let's work on the list, and I will use the owlery to send them tomorrow."

Molly laughed. "You're right; it would be too much for him. The poor dear does the best he can. He's getting on in years now." Her eyes teared up over the owl.

Severus couldn't fathom getting emotional over an owl. He had known Molly many years and had never really understood her emotionalism.

Molly conjured up some paper, a quill, and some ink.

She added all the family's names first at Hermione's urging.

So, the list looked like this:

Arthur and Molly

Ginny, Harry, James, Lily, and Albus

Bill and Fleur

Charlie and Angela

Percy and guest

George and guest

Ron and guest (which Severus sneered over but didn't say anything)

Minerva

Poppy

Filius

Irma Pince

Pomona Sprout

Neville and Luna

Draco, Pansy and Scorpius

Hagrid

Minister Kingsley: to officiate

Hermione sat back and then said to Molly, "You know, I thought there would be more. But there really isn't. That's the bare bones besides classmates who have gone on to their own lives, and I haven't seen most of them in years. I'm happy with this."

Severus sighed in relief. "Well, if you think of anyone else, we can just add them," he said, personally hoping she would not think of anyone else.

They talked a bit about the food and the ceremony requirements, and then he and Hermione took the Floo back to Hogwarts.

Hermione drew his cape off and then took hers and hung them up.

Hermione sighed. "I need a bath. Floos always leave me feeling gritty. Do you want to join me?"

He stared at her. He knew that he'd bathed with her before. He had all his memories of her. But they seemed to be like a mirror life, something that had happened to someone else.

"Please, Severus, I need my back washed, and you do such a good job." She pleaded, hoping that if she gave him a reason, he would accede to her wishes.

He swallowed, feeling physical desire for her and nodded.

Hermione smiled. "I'll call you when the bath is ready."

Severus nodded. Intellectually, he knew she would be more than willing to accept his advances. She was his wife. But he felt that it wasn't fair that he could not feel for her what he knew he had in the past. It made him nervous, and it felt wrong. But his desire outweighed the nagging thoughts in his head, and he went into the bathroom when she called.

He undressed and slid in behind her. She settled in between his legs and leaned back with a sigh against his chest. He left his arms up along the side of the tub. She lay against him for some time and finally pulled his injured arm around her.

"Why would you wish to hold on to this useless appendage?" he asked curiously.

"I know you feel uncomfortable holding me. But since you can't feel it, you really don't have to know you're holding me."

Severus rolled his eyes and snorted. "I have eyes," he said dryly.

"Close your eyes then," she said sleepily.

"If you are tired, perhaps a quick bath and bed would be wiser," he debated.

"Severus, just shut up and relax," she said with a pout.

He opened his mouth to protest her attitude but then remembered Poppy's warning to be nice. So he shut it and let his other arm snake around her. She sighed and relaxed further into the warm water.

"Severus?" she asked.

"Yes," he said after a moment, having slipped into thought.

"Do you find it distressing that you don't have family to invite to the Bonding?"

"No, I have never had many acquaintances. I suppose the Malfoys were the closest, beside Poppy, to family or friends."

"Would you have asked Lucius if he was free?" she asked, picking up the soap and starting to wash herself.

"Not the man who attacked you, no. But as he is now, I think he might be the man I knew years ago before we became involved with Voldemort. He was ambitious and ruthless in business, but he wasn't the pain-filled, heartless monster he became as a Death Eater and especially after Narcissa's death." No longer able to resist her, he leaned forward and pressed his lips to her shoulder. His working hand slipped over the front of her body and cupped a breast. "Why do you ask?" His voice was low and sensuous with desire.

"No reason," she said, forgetting about Lucius as she let herself feel her husband slide his hand over her, bringing her pleasure, before she turned and sheathed herself over him. The buoyancy of the water aided in holding her up. She placed her hands on his shoulders, threw her head back, and rode him to completion.

The next morning, Severus was up early. The boys had a free hour in the morning, and he needed their help with processing some ingredients for the potion he was working on.

Once he was gone, Hermione called Minerva through the Floo and, knowing Severus would not leave the lab for hours, explained what she needed.

Minerva tried to talk her out of her plans, worrying that she was making a mistake, but she finally gave in and helped Hermione with the arrangements.

It was midmorning by the time Hermione Apparated to Azkaban. She pulled her robes tightly around her to stave off the biting wind and salt air.

Grimmley Hinckernill was waiting for her, and another guard stood ready to take his place. After storing Hermione's wand and clearing her to enter, he escorted her to Lucius' cell and stood inside the door, per Headmistress McGonagall's orders.

Hermione felt her heart beat speed up when Lucius looked up from his writing to see who had come in. She saw his eyes widen in surprise, and he sat his quill down and stood. Surprising her, he bowed low.

"Madam Snape, what do I owe the pleasure of your visit? Is Severus alright?" Curiosity and concern played across his features.

Hermione didn't answer but studied his face. He was different. She had always been pretty good at reading people. She held out a small box of confections she had purchased in Hogsmead before coming here.

Lucius reached for them, and Hermione involuntarily cringed and pulled back.

Lucius said softly, "Perhaps you could sit them on the table." He drew back and sat on the end of the bed as far from the table as he could get and placed his hands in his lap.

Hermione took a deep breath and stepped over to the table and placed the box down. Grimmley moved beside her to pull the chair out and set it about six feet away in front of Lucius.

"Thank you, Mr. Hinckernill," she said, pulling her robes about her as she sat down.

Lucius was watching her, but he waited patiently for her to get to the purpose of her visit.

"Mr. Malfoy," she began, trying to figure out just what to say. Had this been a bad idea? Just seeing him again made her skin crawl. Yet she had come for Severus, and her love for her husband spurred her on. "Severus still considers you one of his best friends...more to the point, his only friend."

Lucius nodded, finding the information interesting. He'd felt closer to Severus more than anyone in the past. The mere fact that Severus had been kind to him had given him hope that they would recapture that friendship in the future. "I share the sentiment," he said, carefully smoothing out his new robe over his knees. He was finding it more difficult to look this woman in the face.

"We are getting bonded on Saturday. I know that Severus would be very pleased to have you there," she informed him.

"I am hardly in a position to attend a Bonding," he said, bitterness creeping into his voice. Then shame washed over him, and it made him look up at her. "I am sorry for what I did. I was mad with jealousy for Severus' happiness and my loss. It's hardly an excuse...after all, I was supposed to be a civilized man."

"Were you? Can a Death Eater who did not seek redemption be civilized?" Her words were harsh, and she expected a rise out of him. But he just sat there.

"Power is corrupting. I chose the wrong side, and I stuck with it. For that reason, and that one alone, I am where I belong. What I did to you has no excuse, nor should it garner forgiveness in any way." He lowered his eyes again.

"Nice words, but how can I believe you?" she asked.

"You cannot. Your husband feels I have changed. I gave him access to my thoughts. It is impossible to hide from his knowledge and abilities in Occlumency. It depends on whether you trust his word."

"I do," she said. "That is why I have come here. I can arrange for you to be released to house arrest and for one excursion to the Bonding. You will be under magical wards, wandless, and under guard at the Bonding. Will you attend as Severus' first?"

Lucius stood, holding his hands before him in a nonthreatening way. "Severus is a lucky man to have a wife such as you. You have his best interests at heart. Your kindness astounds me. I will gladly accept your offer."

"Know this, Lucius. If you step one toe out of line, you will be back here as fast as your guard can Apparate." She stood and turned toward the door.

"Madame Snape, I will not jeopardize this opportunity. Thank you." he said, bowing low to her again.

Hermione nodded, not seeing the bow. She did not turn back but went through the door that Grimmley held open for her. When the door clanged shut, she faltered, and the man placed a comforting hand under her elbow. "Are you alright, Madam Snape?" he asked kindly and conjured a cool glass of water for her.

She sipped at the water and found that it revived her somewhat. "I hope I am doing the right thing," she said.

"I think you are, ma'am. He would have been out in only a few weeks anyway, and your husband seems to care for him. Though I myself wonder about that. I guess they know their own history." He walked with her down the stairs and through the long corridor to the front gate.

"They knew each other as boys before taking the mark. Severus had few friends, and Lucius offered him friendship and belonging," she explained to him.

"Malfoy has changed a great deal since Professor Snape has been coming here. Have there been any changes in the professor's condition?" he asked with genuine concern.

"No, none yet. He still is hopeful." She took a deep breath of the fresh, salt air when they had cleared the gate. She was happy to be free of the oppression of the wards that shrouded the place. "Thank you, Mr. Grimmley," she said as she took her wand from his hand and tucked it back in her sleeve. "Sir, the Bonding is Saturday at 4:00 in the afternoon at the Weasley's house. You are welcome to attend."

Grimmley ducked his head in surprise. "Thank you, ma'am. I do have the day off. I would like that. I will attend Lucius myself, also. An extra eye will not do any harm."

"I would appreciate that. I would very much like to enjoy the day without thinking about Mr. Malfoy." She stepped away and Disapparated to the Ministry and then home to Hogwarts. She enjoyed the walk in the sun back to the castle and even stopped to wish Hagrid a good day.

Lisa, thank you for your beta work.

Chapter 48

Chapter 48 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

Hermione entered their rooms and found that Severus was still not back from his rounds. There was a note from him telling her he would be waiting for her at the staff table in the Great Hall for dinner. He didn't appear to know she'd been gone, and that was how she wanted it. She cleaned her clothing and took a quick shower to wash the scent of the prison and the sea from her body and her hair. She hoped he would appreciate her surprise. She was nervous about this decision. Seeing Malfoy had not been the trial she had thought it might. He had changed. He wasn't the deranged man who had attacked her. He was clean and sober, and there was a kindness about his eyes. She wondered if Severus realized that his faith in people could change them. Scorpius was different and now so was Lucius. She wondered if Severus had a gift he didn't know about. Helping people would be the last thing he would expect to be good at...but look at the evidence.

She picked her robe up and slipped it on. She would ask Poppy to go see Molly and ask if she needed any help. Hermione thought about her visit to the Ministry. After her visit to Azkaban, she'd gone to the Ministry to sign his release papers. Having been the person who'd brought the charges against him, she had the right to modify that complaint and have him released earlier to home arrest.

The minister had stared at her for some time when she had requested that Lucius be allowed to attend the Bonding. Kingsley had questioned her for nearly five minutes as to why she would even consider possibly bringing those memories up.

Hermione had finally convinced him she'd put it all behind her. Wasn't that what forgiveness was about? It gave second chances, and everyone needed a second chance. She did, however, reserve the right to carry her wand up her sleeve. She had no reservations about protecting herself, and she would Obliviate Malfoy into the psych ward at St. Mungo's if he so much as laid a finger on her with a malicious intent. She grinned to herself and headed for the Great Hall.

Severus had worked all afternoon using the potion ingredients Scorpius and Albus had carefully prepared for him. He had watched the boys work with envy as they sliced, diced, and ground the ingredients to perfection.

He'd been trying hard to ignore the pain his injury was causing him...not physically, but mentally. He felt inadequate. He couldn't hold his wife close with both arms. Having sex was awkward, and Hermione had to help him dress. It was getting harder and harder to bottle up his emotions. He prayed this potion would work. He'd found it in a very old book in the Ministry. It had some rare ingredients. Luckily, when he was Voldemort's Potion's master, he'd collected a number of rare items and placed them on a secret shelf in his rooms. Plus, Albus' stores had proved invaluable. He'd nearly forgotten about his stash until this afternoon. He'd returned to their rooms and found them still stored under a stasis spell he'd invented. The life of the spell had astounded him. It suddenly occurred to him that he'd shared the spell with Albus. What if the old man had used a variation of that spell to encase him? He took a deep breath and tried to steady himself. Had he been a party to his own incarceration in that bubble? He'd felt his fury rise, and he'd had to clamp it down. Wasn't he already in a precarious state? No, he would not compound the wall by creating a new one on top of it. He used his wand to preserve the potion he was working on and went to have dinner.

Hermione was waiting for him at the table, and he bent to kiss her forehead as he took his seat. "How was your day?" he asked.

"It was productive," she said and was glad when he did not press her. "What about yours. Did you get the potion started?"

"Yes." He took a goblet of pumpkin juice and sipped it. "It will be done tomorrow. Would you come back to the lab with me after dinner and help me stir the last ingredients into it? I know the boys would come if I asked, but they need to do their homework."

Hermione was delighted that he'd asked her. "Of course I will." She turned as Poppy took the seat beside her and said, "Poppy, I told Molly you would come tomorrow and help her with the arrangements. Severus and I are both here, and we do know a bit about healing. We can keep watch. If anything comes up, I will send my Patronus. I've already asked Minerva."

Poppy grinned and rubbed her hands together. "A day off and a Bonding to plan for. That's a rare treat. Thank you, Hermione."

Hermione nodded. "I have to go to Diagon Alley the next day and get my gown. Severus, do you want to go with me? Is there anything you want to look for?"

Severus nodded. "Yes, I do have a few things to get. We can go as soon as your last class is done. It's an early day, and that will work well for all of us.

Poppy was grinning as ideas shifted through her mind. She knew Hermione and Severus didn't want anything elaborate, and she knew she would have to head off a few of Molly's ideas. Their bonding should be small, elegant, and simple. Severus, being as he was, would not want anything else. She was glad he felt this was the thing to do. She knew it would help Hermione stabilize her emotional difficulties. There was no going back from the way they planned to bond: It was forever.

She watched them for the rest of the dinner. They did not speak a great deal, but they touched more. She could see that Severus was breaking through the walls he'd placed around himself. Between the potion and the bonding, she was sure he would return to the Severus who had fallen out of the bubble: a more relaxed man who enjoyed his life and wasn't afraid for people to see that...like the boy she known when he was a teenager at the cabin during the summers. He laughed, played on the beach, watched TV, and danced to rock music. That was the Severus she knew. The man he'd become after the Dark Mark had hurt her heart so much. The evil took away his joy. Watching the pain he experienced because of his choices had been difficult. She honestly had never hoped to see that young man again; but with Hermione, he could be a new man who was free of his past and his pain. She realized that Severus and Hermione had risen from the table and he was telling her something.

"... going to the lab to finish the potion. Do you want me to come to the infirmary when I ingest it, Poppy?"

"Yes, please. I would like to be in attendance. We have no idea what this might do to you." She had been quite worried about him trying such an ancient potion, but she had not been able to talk him out of it.

Severus nodded. "Alright, we will be in your office in about two hours. It should be complete by then. If it's the right color, I will want to try it tonight." He bent and placed a kiss on her right temple and took Hermione's hand.

Hermione grinned at Poppy and mouthed behind Severus' shoulder, *He's on his way back.*

Poppy gave her a thumbs-up as Severus guided her out of the room.

Minerva, who'd been quiet throughout dinner, asked Poppy, "He's getting better, isn't he? It shouldn't be too long now."

Poppy smiled and said, "Yes, he's better. I don't think he even realizes how close he is to breaking out of that shell. Minerva, I want to see him enjoy this pregnancy." She said quietly, "It won't be long before Hermione starts to show."

"It's a good thing we wear robes. Why, I remember when I was pregnant with my first son..."

Poppy's eyes grew large.

Severus continued to hold Hermione's hand as they walked toward the lab next to Minerva's office. They stood in silence after the code was given to the phoenix, and they rode the steps upward.

"Are you afraid, Severus?" Hermione asked as they crossed Minerva's office to the lab's entrance.

"I'm not sure afraid is the word. I'm excited, concerned, and maybe afraid for you if something happens to me. I'm sad that I may not get to know our child."

Hermione tightened her hold on his hand. "You don't have to do this. I don't want to lose you." Her fingers tightened almost painfully on his.

"I need to be whole, Hermione. If I am to be a husband and father, I need to be a whole man."

Hermione smiled sadly at him. "Severus, physical infirmities don't make you less of a man in my eyes. I love you no matter what difficulties your body experiences."

"Please understand: I need to be myself again. My profession is an important part of my life. Perhaps it's selfish of me to take this risk, but I really believe it will be all right."

Hermione took a deep breath. "It will be all right," she parroted him, praying under her breath, *God, please let it be all right. We have been through so much together. We still have a lot more life to live and love to give.*

They entered the lab, and Severus released the cauldron from its stasis field. He proceeded to tell her exactly what it needed and to watch as she expertly prepared the final potion ingredient. Then he measured the amount and told her how to stir the potion.

Hermione forced herself to listen carefully and do exactly as he told her though she felt conflicted inside. When it was done, they stood looking at the color, willing it to turn the indigo it was supposed to be. Then it flared, sending up a scent that neither of them had smelled before: peaches, wine, apple, and mango all wrapped together in a fine mist. Then the color turned the dark blue they had been hoping for.

Hermione felt herself begin to tremble, and Severus slipped his arm around her. "Are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm scared for you. Do you know how much I love you?" She laid her head against his chest when he pulled her close.

He felt inadequate; she needed comfort, but he didn't know what to say. "I'm sorry, I am being selfish but I need this, Hermione. I need to be whole to regain what I was. You are my wife, and I need you to accept this." He could not tell her he loved her, so he bent his head and kissed her deeply, hungrily.

Hermione understood and clung to him a few minutes before she let him go. He carefully filled a number of vials of the potion before vanishing the rest of it.

They took a couple of the vials and left the lab, walking toward the staircase. Hermione wrapped her arm wrapped through his, and their fingers entwined.

Poppy was waiting for them. Her eyes were wide, and a smile tugged at her face.

Severus eyed her. "What's got your knickers in a twist?"

To lighten the mood, she told them "under strictest confidence" what Minerva had shared with her. She'd been pregnant her senior year at Hogwarts...just managing with a glamour to hide the pregnancy from the mediwitch. She'd had her first son only three weeks after the Leaving Dinner.

Hermione laughed and felt much better, and Severus stared at Poppy with disapproval. "You shouldn't go spreading stories of such a personal nature," he admonished her. But his voice was not harsh, and Poppy just grinned at him.

"Oh, go on with you. You're happy to know the woman's not perfect," she teased him.

"Right you are. Wait until I get a hold of her...after telling Hermione and me to be careful about letting the students know about the baby."

"You'll do no such thing. You promised not to tell anyone." She held her hand out.

Severus reached into his pocket and pulled out one of the near-black vials and a small book with darkly stained pages. "You will have to perform the spell as well."

Poppy peered at it and then held it up to light of her wand. It was easy to see the deep blue of the potion with the light piercing it. "It certainly is a singular color." She opened the vial, poured a bit out into a reflective dish and ran her wand over it, chanting a spell as she did. She watched the colors around the dish.

Hermione and Severus stood watching with interest. Both knew the procedure and could also read the colors.

Then Poppy took some time to study the spell. Poppy finally put her wand down. "It looks sound. I do not detect anything that will harm you. I know you both could easily have done this spell, but I'm glad you have allowed me to take part."

"Poppy, even a man has need of his mother's support," Severus said gently.

Hermione and Poppy turned to stare at him. He'd sounded so much like himself...well, the "himself" from the bubble.

"Stop lollygagging, old woman, and let me take the potion," he snapped.

Hermione giggled, and Poppy punched his arm. "Go lay on the bed, there. Its best you're not standing, so I don't have to heal a broken head if you faint."

"Faint, I have never...." He stopped when Poppy raised an eyebrow.

"Not a word, Poppy," he sternly told her.

The look on Poppy's face was barely controlled mirth, so Hermione couldn't help but wonder what they were alluding to.

"For now," she said, her eyes promising Hermione she would tell her sometime.

He took another vial from his pocket and held it up, staring at it for a minute. Hermione touched his face and caught his eye.

"I love you, Severus," she said. "It will be all right."

"You are my wife, Hermione. I want no other," he said.

Hermione kissed him, knowing that was the only way he could say I love you for now. She then moved back, but she held on to the hand that had no feeling as Poppy uncorked the vial and Severus drank it down.

Poppy's voice took on a new tonal quality. The spell rang out, and light poured from the tip of her wand and struck Severus' arm. His fingers held tight by Hermione began to twitch.

He seemed to be looking inward; his eyes became unfocused, and Poppy cast a spell to monitor his vitals. Hermione looked anxiously at Poppy, but the woman was studying her spell and didn't seem concerned. Hermione willed herself to relax, but then the hand she was holding flexed, and his nerves danced uncontrollably. A tremble seemed to travel up his arm, and then his body convulsed.

"Severus!" Hermione cried out. She used her hand to press him onto the bed while still holding his other hand. It jerked hard, but she would not let go.

Poppy had left and returned a moment later with a potion for Severus. His body jerked a few more minutes and then became quiet.

Hermione, tears running down her face, looked up at Poppy.

"I sedated him; nerve regeneration is painful and quite active." She came to slip her arm around Hermione's shoulders. "He seems fine. I think he will sleep most of the night."

"Nerve regeneration... Is it working, Poppy?" Hermione searched her face for truth and saw the woman nod.

"He's fine, and, yes, I think it's working." She waved her wand and made the bed larger so that Hermione could crawl in and sleep next to him. "Now, get some rest, Hermione. Please. I promise he's all right, and I will be right here to monitor him.

Exhausted emotionally, Hermione scrubbed her face with the back of her hand and left her robe on the chair before climbing into bed and lying against Severus with her head in the crook of his good arm. She stared into his face until she fell asleep.

Poppy sighed. She let a spell flow around Hermione that checked her health and found she and the baby were okay. She pulled up a chair and sat watching her children with concern and some relief. The potion Severus had brewed seemed to be working. She hoped that by tomorrow he would be recovered enough for her to go to the Weasleys. There were only a couple days left before the Bonding. The convulsions had alarmed her, but her potion had worked to arrest them. She sat back, watched, and hoped the long night would pass without further incident. She used her wand to tuck a light blanket around them before she opened the book she had brought to her chair.

"Hermione." Hermione heard her name as if from far away, a soft and nearly silent whisper.

Hermione opened her eyes and saw Severus had raised his left arm and was flexing his fingers. She sat up quickly. "Oh, Severus, it works." She fell into his arms and felt him close them both around her for the first time in many weeks.

Poppy had stood and was watching them. There was a rare sight: Severus still behind the wall with a smile on his face. She felt her eyes tear up, and she turned away to go have a good cry of relief and left the lovers to their moment.

"Severus, I'm so happy for you, for us," Hermione said before he'd captured her lips for a hungry kiss.

Severus relished the feel of his arms closing around his wife and her lips against his and then his eyes. He left her wet happy tears on his face and did not mind them. He was happy to be whole again. He could feel some stiffness in his fingers, but he felt with exercise they would be good again, and the nerves would continue to regenerate a few more days.

Her kisses had become more urgent, and he hadn't been paying attention to his body. He broke the kiss and pushed back a bit. "Hermione, should we not wait to get back to our rooms for this?"

She looked into his face, wondering if he was opposed to the idea of making love. She blushed and looked around, expecting Poppy to be standing there watching them. "I'm sorry." She started to back away, not wanting him to disapprove of her.

He saw her fear and look of confusion and apology. He reached to touch her face, realizing he cared a lot for this woman, even in the state he was in. She had become his anchor. "Hermione, I am very open to continuing this, but not in this location. Now if we can just get Poppy in here to release me..."

Hermione grinned, and tears leaked from her eyes again. "God, I'm a soppy, wet thing," she complained out loud to herself.

He slipped an arm around her waist. "Yes, but you are my soppy, wet thing."

"Severus Snape, I think that's the nicest thing you've said to me since you slipped behind that wall." She followed him as he hopped off the other side of the bed, and together they went in search of Poppy.

Lisa, thank you for all your beta work.

Chapter 49

Chapter 49 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

Severus and Hermione found Poppy scrubbing at her eyes, standing just inside the door of her rooms.

"Old woman, what's wrong with you?" Severus asked. But his voice was gentle.

Hermione glared at him nonetheless and hugged Poppy as the healer dried her eyes.

"I'm so glad it worked," she stammered.

"Of course it did. With the 'Wonder Boys' and Hermione working on it, how could I fail to win?"

Hermione and Poppy looked at Severus incredulously. "The Wonder Boys?" they said in unison, laughing.

"Those boys have established their brilliance, and they need to establish their own collective identity. Scorpius needs this to help build his reputation. Albus needs it for the same reason...and to get out from under his father's shadow."

Hermione sobered. "You're right, of course. I think Harry would approve. He never wanted the glory, Severus."

"No, I suppose he didn't. He was Lily's son in more ways than Potter's." He turned to Hermione and basked for a moment in the pride that filled her eyes. "I'm starving. Would you mind if we take up our plans later and go to breakfast first?"

Hermione blushed, feeling so euphoric at the moment she didn't care what they did as long as they did it together. She just wanted to look at Severus and see him nearly all the way back. "I don't mind. I didn't eat much last night, and I am starving, too."

Severus nodded. "Come on, then, ladies, let's go to breakfast. It's time the boys got a little school-wide recognition."

Hermione and Poppy eyed one another. Didn't Severus realize he was nearly free of the wall? There was so much more gentleness and good nature in his mannerisms this morning. The potion had not only restored his arm and hand, but it had taken the anger and fear away.

Hermione was suddenly hopeful that she would be bonding with not only the Severus she'd known as a child but also the one she'd fallen in love with. They were, in fact, one and the same. She only wished Severus realized it. The angry, standoffish, unfeeling man she'd lived with all these weeks was fading away. That Severus would never have wanted to place himself in a position to get recognition right next to the boys.

Encouraged, the women followed Severus to the Great Hall. They took their seats and watched as a few more students filed into the room and sat at their tables.

Minerva got up and made her usual speeches, telling the students that a Hogsmeade weekend was coming up and reiterating the rules. The students were excited about the coming day of shopping and relaxation. She turned to the staff table and asked, "Does anyone else have anything they want to add?"

Severus stood, looking over the eager faces of the students, and caught Scorpius and Albus' attention. Then he raised his left arm to wave at them.

There was a collective gasp from the staff and student body, and then a thunderous clapping began.

Severus looked down at Hermione, perplexed, and she stood and took his hand. "They all love you, Severus. You have earned their respect. They admire and love you for the things you and the boys have done." She saw tears well up in his eyes.

Severus blinked against the sudden stinging in his eyes and felt wetness on his face. Horrified, he wanted to turn away and hide; but with the encouragement of Hermione and the rest of the staff, he stood as the waves and waves of clapping sounded around him. He waved to the boys to come up. They looked at each other and ran up to the stage. Hermione moved back, squeezing his hand before she released him.

Severus put his hands on the boy's shoulders and said, "I give you the Wonder Boys." His deep voice pierced the cacophony; and after a moment of silence, the students got louder. Everyone knew that Malfoy and Potter had been working with Professor Snape to create a potion to heal his arm. He felt the boys start to sweat under his palms, and he allowed a smile to play about his lips.

The applause continued. Severus was overwhelmed, and he could not imagine the boys being any less happy. He glanced at their faces and saw the utter pride they couldn't help but exude.

Severus finally raised his hands and everyone sat quietly waiting. "Thank you for your unexpected applause. This was a difficult time for Madam Snape and myself. Without the help of Mr. Malfoy and Mr. Potter here, I would not have the use of my arm again. You should be very proud of them and their accomplishments at such a young age. Now eat, have a productive end of week, and enjoy your day at Hogsmeade on Saturday. Madam Snape and I will be gone this weekend." He turned on his nastiest glare and said, "I do expect that you will all behave because detentions will be harsh for anyone who disobeys."

Minerva looked on in amusement as the students gasped. Then they seemed to half laugh, not knowing if he was joking or not.

There was another round of applause, but it was short lived because the food appeared and the children tucked in.

Severus gave each of the boys a hug and turned to gather Hermione to his side as they returned to the staff table. The table was abuzz with demands for the story of Severus' return to health and to his old self, as they now thought of him as reborn from the bubble.

After telling the story and eating breakfast, Severus took Hermione's hand and prepared to leave the Great Hall. As they walked by Poppy, Severus squeezed her shoulder while leaning to kiss her temple. "Have a good day off, Mum. I have the watch."

Minerva and Poppy exchanged misty-eyed glances and heard Hagrid blow noisily into his handkerchief down the table. They started to giggle.

As Severus and Hermione walked back toward their rooms to take showers and get ready for class, Severus said, "I hope you don't mind the boys getting most of the credit. Hermione, you were well capable of helping me, and I hope you don't mind that I let the boys do nearly all of it."

"Mind?" She laughed. "Of course not. I've got enough to do teaching class, and the boys need to continue to cultivate their brilliance with potions." They were now in the hallway by themselves, and soon they reached the stairs to the dungeon. They didn't speak again until they had gotten into their room, and it was warded behind them.

Severus drew her against him and kissed her hungrily. "Mrs. Snape, I feel like a heavy load has been released from my shoulders."

"Is the wall gone?" she asked, kissing him with equal fervor.

He stopped and stood back; he seemed to look inside himself. His eyes closed, and he stood there a long moment. Finally his eyes opened. "Not in the respect it used to be...not like a breaking of glass where I felt it shatter and pain would overwhelm me and then relief came. It faded away this time. 'Faded' isn't really the right word. I absorbed it, Hermione. It won't happen again. I don't need it. I will never pull away from you that way again. But I can't promise not to have cantankerous moods on occasion."

Hermione took his hand and led him to their couch. He sat, and she curled up at his side. "I don't care about the cranky side of you. I kind of like it. A good roaring argument is good for us occasionally. I won't promise not to cry, though. I just want the man I married to be with our baby and me. And there is make-up sex. It's quite fun."

"Yes, there is that," he said with a sexy smirk, turning toward her. His once-useless hand slid over the small bulge in her stomach, and he felt the life there. His magic seemed to sing to the life inside, and Hermione made an odd sort of purring sound. She felt it, too. "What is that?" she whispered.

"Our baby is going to be powerful," he said.

Hermione sighed; she'd harbored a fear that their baby could be a squib because of her Muggleborn heritage. "Severus, would you be unhappy if I asked you not make

love to me till after the bonding? It would be a new beginning for us."

He looked down into her face, and she saw gentleness there. "Of course not. I was thinking the same thing." He stood and pulled her to her feet. "Now, I'm going to shower, and you go prepare to teach your classes. I will hang around the infirmary today while Poppy goes to help Molly."

Severus sat at Poppy's desk. It was after lunch, and he'd been alone all day. He stood for the 15th time, discarding his book, and walked to one of the infirmary windows and looked out over the vast grounds of the castle. In the distance, he could see Hagrid walking with his students to the edge of the forest. No doubt he had some unusual animal to show them.

He watched a few first years flying a few feet off the ground to get practice. Off in the distance, he could see the greenhouses, and he was sure Madam Sprout was busy showing her students how to care for some strange and exotic plant.

There had been times in his mid 20s when he'd hated the sight of this place and the students who sat in his classes. He'd always had desperate fear clutching his heart. He'd been afraid of the situation he'd found himself in and of the things his decisions had led to. When Harry Potter had come to Hogwarts and Voldemort had returned, he'd felt that fear tenfold. It never had affected him getting the job done. Fear had made him more careful and sharpened his instincts. Now, here with Hermione, a peace he'd never known before was settling down around his heart and soul. He felt excited about his life and about the baby. There was a terror there, but it was a different kind of terror...one like being on the top of a rollercoaster and knowing you'd scream your head off going down but enjoy every exciting moment of it.

He was distracted by a timid knock at the door. "Come," he called, turning toward the door.

A small blonde head peered around the door, and a young girl stepped into the room. Spying him, he saw her go pale, and she started to back out.

He came forward. "What is it you need?" he asked. His eyes assessed that she wasn't externally bleeding or limping. "Please come in." He gave her a smile. "I promise not to bite."

Her eyes were wide with fear, and she was twisting her robe in one fist. "Where's Madam Pomfrey? I need to speak to her."

Severus said, "She took the day off, and I am here to help you with anything you might need. Please come sit in the chair at my desk. We can talk." Alarm bells were going off in his head. He tried not to groan out loud, and he hoped against hope he was wrong.

"But... but I need to talk to a woman... Professor Snape." She choked and tears filled her eyes.

He stood and came to stand over the girl. Then he squatted down and took her hand. "Please, I'm a professional, Miss..." he said kindly.

"Sarah Juniper," she supplied a bit shakily.

"Miss Juniper, please tell me what it is you need." His voice was nearly purring with softness.

She stood staring at her feet for several minutes and finally whispered, "I'm bleeding. I'm sorry... I'm scared. I need my mummy!" She crumbled against him, and her arms held tight to him.

Severus' fears were realized. He held her lightly and patted her back, praying that no one would come in. He felt a blush creep up his neck.

"Why isn't your Head Girl helping you with this problem?" He had a tight edge to his voice, and the tears spilled down the girl's cheeks.

"Hasn't anyone ever told you this might happen at your age?" He stopped and took a deep breath and calmed his face and voice. If he sent for Hermione, she would laugh hysterically at him, and he would never live this down. What if Hermione gave him a daughter? He might have to deal with all this one day.

"No," she cried.

"Miss Jun... Sarah, come hop up on this bed and let me make sure if what I suspect is right. Then we will talk." He let her go as he stood and guided her to a bed. She hopped up onto it, and Severus used a simple spell to study her body rhythms and confirm his diagnosis.

He looked to the ceiling and thought, *I'm going to kill Poppy, this girl's Head of House, and the Head Girl.* He took a deep breath, "There's nothing to be frightened about. This is a natural thing that happens to girls your age. Your body is changing, and you're becoming a woman. Each month your body has a cycle..." He could feel the sweat running down his neck, and his robes felt heavy and hot. "... it's very normal, and it shows you're growing up. Mind you..." he gave her a stern look "...this does not mean you're a grown-up. You still have years of school and lots of maturing before you will be a woman. You will not engage in any snogging and/or shagging for a number of years to come."

Sarah looked at him astonished and frightened. Then he gave her a tender smile, and she giggled. "Yes, sir."

He spent another 20 minutes explaining the cycle, and he gave her a potion for the cramps and the supplies she would need. Finally he asked, "Is there anything else you need to know?"

"No, sir. Thank you." She smiled up at him with relief on her face. She headed for the door and then turned back and said, "You're not such a meany after all, sir." She blushed and ran out.

Severus felt his legs go weak, and he went to Poppy's desk and sat heavily, putting his hands in his face. Mortified, he thought, *Well, I guess I handled that, but I'm still going to rake some people over the coals.*

Suddenly, he heard a giggle. He felt a soft hand on his shoulder, and then Hermione appeared out of thin air. "You're going to be a great daddy, Severus."

"Hermione." He stared at her aghast. "How long have you been watching?"

"I came when she latched on to you." She snickered.

"Why didn't you help me?" He glared at her, wondering how he'd missed the door opening and closing. He'd been scared out of his wits.

She laughed again and climbed onto his lap. "You were doing just fine. One of my students told me why Sarah wasn't in class. I came to bail you out, but you were wonderful, Severus."

Severus held her close and buried his warm face in her cool neck. "I was mortified."

"But she didn't know that. You did an amazing job." She kissed his forehead and ran her fingers through his hair.

"I did?" he asked, feeling a little less embarrassed.

"Yes, you did. I'm proud of you. Poppy will be, too." She soothed his face with her fingers.

"I'm going to strangle Poppy and the rest of the women in charge of these girls. They need to know the facts of life. It may be the parents' responsibility, but if that fails, they need to at least be aware of what's happening so they aren't scared out of their minds."

"Well, Severus, when you become Headmaster, that can be one of your new rules," she said, leaning her forehead against his and placing a kiss on the tip of his nose. She sighed. "I'd better get back. Filius is not that comfortable in a Potion's classroom. It's impossible for him to see into the cauldrons."

Severus held her close a moment. "Thanks for taking the time to assist me, even if all you did was stand there and let me twist in the wind." He smirked.

Hermione got to her feet and laughed. "You really were doing okay on your own, and I didn't want to interrupt." She stretched her neck, and he kissed her again. "Merlin, I love you, Severus. I can't wait to be your bondsmate, Husband."

He walked her to the door. "And I'm looking forward to being your bondsmate, Wife."

"It will feel different, won't it?" she asked as he opened the door.

"Yes, we will be more in tune with each other. There will be a bonding on a magical level. I really can only spout facts since I've never experienced it."

"Good thing, too. You're mine!" she teased him, poking a finger into his stomach.

"Get out of here, and rescue Filius. I'll meet you in the Great Hall for dinner." He gave her a pat on the butt as she went through the door.

She turned to flash him a brilliant smile, and then she was gone.

Severus smiled and closed the door. *God, I love that woman. Thank you for putting her in my life*He sat down at the desk and devised some ways to get back at Sarah's Head of House and the Head Girl.

Lisa, thank you so much for the Beta work that you do for me. It makes this process so much easier for me.

Chapter 50

Chapter 50 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

When Severus got to the dinner table, Poppy was back. But then he noticed she, Minerva and Hermione were in a three-headed clutch, giggling like children. He stopped behind them and placed his hands on Minerva's and Poppy's shoulders and said in a dry voice, "What are you silly women gossiping about?"

They ducked guiltily away. Poppy took her seat and started to eat. Severus took the seat next to Hermione. "I never thought you'd betray me so, Hermione." He turned away to grab some food, ignoring her and trying not to let her see the mirth in his eyes.

He heard her gasp, and she clutched at his hand. "Severus," she whispered, "I'm sorry. I couldn't resist. You know they love you as much as I do."

Stoically he said, "It doesn't feel so good to be twisting in the wind, does it? He turned to grin at her.

She socked him in the arm. "You scared me."

He feigned a pout and said, "I'm sowwy."

Hermione stared at him. "What have you been drinking?"

"I'm drunk on life, Hermione, life. I'm about to bond with the wife of my dreams, and we are having a baby. Life can't get better than that, can it?" He pressed against her a moment and then turned back to grab a roll and butter it.

"No, it can't," she agreed, hugging his arm. "I will be so happy when Saturday night gets here. It's going be hard to not jump your bones for the next two days."

"Jump my bones... Hermione, where do you get these expressions?" he asked.

She laughed. "Muggle Tele, of course."

Minerva leaned into Hermione's space. "Will you two lower your voices?"

Severus glanced at her. "The students can't hear us, and the rest of the teachers are too busy eating, old woman. Poppy's on one side, and you're on the other."

"Severus, you may be giddy on love, but I do demand respect," Minerva said, glaring at him.

"I love you, too, Mommy Min," he said.

Poppy and Hermione choked, sputtering food everywhere as they saw the soft look that Minerva gave Severus.

Minerva's eyes filled with tears, but she looked past him and said, "Poppy, you'd better take him up to the infirmary and check him over. I think that potion is messing up his head."

Severus said dryly, "Don't be daft, old woman. The wall is gone. I'm bonding with Hermione, she's having my baby, and...." he glared at the women, "I explained the facts of life to a girl. I'm allowed to be punchy and giddy."

The three women laughed at him until they were gasping for breath. The entire school stopped and stared.

Severus finally turned a withering glare on them all, and they all turned back to their meals, including the teachers.

The next morning, Hermione went to teach, and Severus went up to the lab to put away everything and clean it up. He found Albus and Scorpius sitting on the floor near the

Phoenix statue. They jumped up when he came into sight.

"To what do I owe this pleasure, boys?" he asked as he gave the password and the phoenix rolled out of the way. They followed him up the stairs and across Minerva's office.

"We just wanted to see how you really were," Albus said.

"Yeah," Scorpius agreed.

Severus waited until they were in the lab and then turned and shrugged off his robe and bared his arm. He turned it this way and that, flexing his fingers.

"Awesome," the boys said together.

"Thank you, Albus, Scorpius. Your expertise made all the difference ... Wonderboys," Severus said with a smirk.

They giggled like two schoolgirls. "But, the Wonderboys ..." Scorpius sputtered.

Severus rolled his eyes. "You're a wonder and a godsend to me." He turned to take the cauldron off the stand, grinning. He used his wand to clean it and carried it to the shelves to store it with all the others. "Are you going help or just stand there and gab?"

The boys grinned and jumped to help him. They replaced all the ingredients back in the storage room, and they made an inventory of the potion ingredients so that supplies could be re-ordered.

"Did you get your invitations to the bonding?" Severus asked as he washed his hands.

"Yes," Albus said. "We got them today. There's a Portkey. Do you know where it goes?"

"The Weasley's garden, I believe. It probably won't be a long ceremony, but I wanted you both there. You've become more than students...you're friends, I hope."

The boys glowed. "Yes, sir."

Severus raised an eyebrow. They seemed to be so tuned to each other that they often answered at the same time with the same words, like the Weasley twins. He filed that away to think on later. "I know you still have years at Hogwarts; but if I can help you in any way after you leave, I would be happy to do so. Now, get on to your next class." He watched them nod, and they scurried away. They had grown since he'd met them. Each was a good four inches taller and broader in the shoulders. He extinguished the candles with a wave of his wand. Then he locked and warded the lab door.

Minerva, who was sitting at her desk, looked up at him. "I'm so glad you're back, Severus, for Hermione's sake. I rather like the acid-tongued Severus Snape. I always understood him. There was no color or change...just black and white. It was stabilizing."

Severus sat in the chair in front of her desk. He glanced up to see Albus smiling down at him, "Hello, son," the old man said.

"Albus," Severus said, trying to squash the heaviness he felt when he saw Albus' portrait and heard his voice.

"You wouldn't feel bad if you saw the world I live in now," the old man said, reading Severus' face. "It's really quite wonderful, Severus. It's such freedom. Portraits are only our windows to your world. We are free to pursue so many things and see so many wonders. Let go of that last vestige of guilt."

"I will try, sir." He gave Albus a look that dismissed him, and he saw the old man smile and leave his portrait.

"I feel sorry for you having to put up with the old man all the time," he said, annoyed that he still felt guilty no matter how kind Albus was to him.

"I don't," she said. "Albus and I have been friends longer than you have been alive. I will miss him a great deal."

"Well if it were possible, I'd let you take him with you," he said scathingly.

"You know you wouldn't. You value his advice as much as I do."

"Yes," Severus admitted, "and it's a nasty habit." He grinned. "Anyway since you will be living here, feel free to come in and see him anytime."

"You're looking years younger every month, Severus. Hermione's good for you."

"I agree with that," he said. "It's also having Voldemort gone."

"Well, that's a given. Did you sit to visit, or did you have a purpose?" she asked. "I have lots of work to do."

"I want to become your Deputy Headmaster, Minerva. You need the help, and I need the title. It will help my transition into the job at the end of the term. I'm a bit vain, and I do not want to bond with my wife only being a sub and a security man."

Minerva leaned forward to look at him. "I've been waiting for you to ask. It's hard to admit the job is too much for me. But I'm so far behind."

Severus smiled. "I'd be happy to help, Minerva; and frankly, I would value your insight on the job and the changing times."

"Well if you can handle a girl's first period, you can handle anything," she said with a devilish grin.

Severus glared and stood. "When you wish to talk about the job, I will be back."

Minerva laughed and waved him off. "Have fun shopping tomorrow. I'll see you at the bonding on Sunday."

"Shopping is a necessary evil. The Bonding can't get here too soon for me." He bowed his head slightly and left.

Minerva smiled warmly after him and glanced up to see Albus slip back into his chair. "I never thought I'd live to see the day that Severus Snape was truly free and happy. It's a wondrous thing, Albus."

He nodded and said, "It is, indeed."

After Hermione's last class, they decided to Apparate directly to Diagon Alley and have lunch there. After a quick sandwich at the Leaky Cauldron, they went to Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlour for a scoop of chocolate truffle ice cream. Hermione then headed to Madam Malkin's Robes For All Occasions. Severus followed, having decided to buy new dress robes for the ceremony.

Madam Malkin showed Hermione many gowns. While Severus was across the store looking at samples of the men's line, she chose one and had the witch box it.

Severus chose a fine suit as well as robes, urged by Madam Malkin that some odd robes would be a good match. Severus eyed the robes with distain, but he took the

woman at her word. Madam Malkin placed them in boxes. Severus shrunk and pocketed the boxes. He went to join Hermione. Hand in hand they walked down the street to Flourish & Blotts.

"Hermione, do you mind looking around while I run to Gringotts? I need to check my account and withdraw some money to pay Molly back.

"Of course not! I could spend an entire day in there." She raised her face. He gave her a kiss and then headed down the street. He turned to wave but she'd already disappeared inside.

It took some time to check his finances. To his relief, his vault was still intact. Albus had put a hold of 22 years on his account, so all his savings were still there. The old man had thought of everything.

The trip into the bowels of Gringotts was arduous. Severus hated the cart rides. He always felt unsettled. When the door of his vault opened, he was astounded at the piles of gold silver and jewels. "What is this?" he demanded. "I didn't have anywhere near this amount when I 'died.'"

"It was an inheritance," the goblin explained.

"From who? I had no living relatives." He tried to rein in his anger at what he knew was coming.

"You received Albus Dumbledore's entire fortune, other than that which was gifted to The Golden Three, Hogwarts, and Minerva McGonagall. It was his desire that you want for nothing for having followed through with his wishes," the goblin stated.

"You knew what he asked of me?" he asked, stupefied.

"Yes, he left documents should they be needed. He was not sure Mr. Potter would step up, knowing his relationship with you. Thankfully, the boy did understand. I have been under a vow of silence. Since Mr. Potter had your memories, it was not necessary to divulge them. I will die with the secret."

Deflated, Severus felt his eyes burn with tears. "That old bastard." But he was touched beyond measure. He wished Hermione was with him; he needed her strength right now. He sorted through the original piles of his things and pulled out a small, black velvet box. He filled a bag with gold coins, and then he instructed the goblin to lock the vault. He was deep in thought on the way back to the surface of the bank.

Once on the surface, he breathed a sigh of relief. His mind was already working on ways to use some of the fortune to help others. He would also buy Hermione a house...someplace they could call home in the summer or on holidays. They couldn't impose on Poppy all the time. He did wonder if there might be another house on the same beach.

He entered Flourish & Blotts and began to walk down the aisles, looking for Hermione. He found her in the potions section with her nose buried in a book. He watched her. Her face was screwed up in deep concentration, and she reached up to tuck her hair behind her ear.

"Hermione," he called.

She looked up at him, and her face lit with a smile. "I was trying to read this but I kept missing you." She shoved the book onto the shelf and came to him, slipping into his arms. "What's wrong?" She could feel him trembling.

"Are you done? Can we go?" he asked.

"Yes, I have what I need," she said as Severus tucked her into his side.

They walked out of the shop and wandered down the street to a small garden that was deserted. Hermione asked again, "What's wrong?"

Severus took a deep breath and said, "I went to check on the status of my vault. It was still in my name. Albus made them lock it down for a period of 22 years in the event I came back to claim it. He knew I would."

He hesitated, and then said, "Hermione, he left me a fortune in gold, silver, and jewels."

"What!" She paled. "Oh Severus, don't feel strange or bad about it. You know he loved you. I'm so happy for you."

"You mean for us. There is a great deal we can do with this money, and I will expect you to help me distribute a good deal of it."

Hermione was so pleased that he wanted to give a lot of it away. "I would be happy to."

"Now, I hope you got the robes of your dreams. If you didn't, I want you to go back to Madam Malkin's and get them," he said firmly.

Hermione smiled. "I got what I wanted, Severus. I think you will like it."

He smirked. "I will enjoy taking it off you more than I will like it on you, Hermione."

Hermione laughed. "You know, I think I will like that more, too. I can't wait to be your bonded wife."

They decided to go to the Owlery, and they picked out a large grey owl to deliver their messages. On their way past Eeylops Owl Emporium, Severus pointed out a white snowy owl in the window. Hermione commented, "That looks just like Hedwig."

"Let's buy it for Harry," Severus said.

"Really! You'd do that for him?"

"Of course, Hermione. He's your friend, and he freed me from that monster."

"Only because you kept us all alive until it was time," she told him, reaching up to kiss him on the cheek.

"He still did the deed. He's not a killer, and it was forced on him. He had enough Gryffindor courage to stand up to a man more than three times his age and probably more powerful, and he still defeated him. Voldemort never realized it was his fault that Harry had the blood magic to defeat him. No matter what Voldemort did, Harry was destined to win. I didn't understand that till the end." He laughed ruefully. "It might have made my job easier."

"Severus." Hermione pulled him close.

"I wouldn't have changed my life in any way. We all did what we had to do for freedom."

Hermione said, "We can have the owl delivered. You can write a note."

Severus paid for the owl and had it sent by Apparation delivery.

"Let's go home." She wrapped her arm around his waist, and Severus Apparated them to the gates of Hogwarts.

They found a note waiting from Poppy and Molly telling them they'd had a small problem, but things had been worked out. A new set of Portkeys was set for them to

Apparate to the wedding site.

They lay together in their bed that night and held each other, talking quietly about what the changes might be. Then they decided it didn't matter. They trusted the women to make the ceremony beautiful. They fell asleep holding each other tightly.

Lisa, once again, thank you so much for the beta work you have done on this story. You are very much appreciated.

Chapter 51

Chapter 51 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

The morning of their bonding finally arrived. Hermione took some time to soak in the bath, trying to calm her nerves, while Severus took a quick shower, gathered his clothing and a few other things to take with him.

When Hermione came from her shower, she was dressed in regular robes. She had a bag she'd packed the night before that held all the things she needed for the ceremony and some clothing changes. Severus had mentioned they might stay the night at Poppy's cabin.

They went to breakfast and found that Poppy was absent and a medi-nurse from St. Mungo's had come to take her place for the day. Hermione found she could hardly eat even though Minerva and Severus tried to get her to eat something. Her stomach was upset, and she had to return to her quarters to get the nausea medication for the morning sickness. Severus hovered over her nervously, hoping she would be okay. Finally her stomach settled, and they decided it was time to use their Portkeys to go to the Weasleys'. Severus wondered why they weren't Flooing or Apparating to the house, but he shrugged it off. He figured the Portkeys would probably take them to different rooms in the house so they wouldn't see each other until the ceremony.

Before taking ahold of their Portkeys, Severus pulled Hermione in his arms and held her tightly. "I love you so much. I am so happy that you are going through this bonding ceremony with me. Our Muggle wedding means no less to me; but in our world with this ceremony, we will magically be bonded in a way no one can tear us apart."

Hermione held on to him, breathing in the scent that was magically Severus. "I love you too, and I look forward to the extra connection. I wouldn't want it any other way."

He backed up and took a small box from his robe pocket. "Hermione, I would be honored if you would wear these earrings. They were my mother's. She had only a few things from her wealthy family, and she passed them on to me for my bondmate."

Hermione said, "Oh, Severus, I would be happy to." She reached for the box, hoping the earrings would not clash with her gown. Taking the lid off, she gasped. Inside was a set of gold, teardrop pearl and diamond earrings. "Severus!" she gushed. "They are beautiful and will go perfect with my gown." She replaced the lid and slipped it in her bag. Then she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him deeply. "Thank you. I've never had such beautiful things in my life."

Severus caressed her hair. "I'm glad you like them. I had little else to give you. There are the things from Albus, but these are the only heirlooms I have. They are a more appropriate bonding gift. You and I will go look at Albus' gifts soon and see what else you might like."

"I don't need jewels. I just need you. These are perfect." She hugged him tightly. "I love you so much. Come on, Molly will be having a fit if I wait much longer. Ginny is going to come help me get dressed."

Severus said, "You go first. I will follow." He bent to kiss her briefly and said, "I'll see you in a few hours."

Hermione pressed her hand to his face in a gentle caress and reached out to take the Portkey. She felt that tug at her navel and found herself standing in Poppy's bedroom.

"What?" she gasped, suddenly frightened. But then she saw Ginny and Poppy and relaxed. Poppy looked amazing. Her short blonde hair was free of the medi-witch hat and carefully styled. She had a bright red dress that seemed to shine bits of purple like it had magical lights beneath the fabric.

Poppy said, "Surprise! Molly had a infestation of garden gnomes from hell, and we decided my place would be the best alternative. The bonding will be on the beach. The magical wards are set so we won't be affected by the wind or salt air. I hope you don't mind."

Hermione came forward and hugged her, whispering in her ear, "It's perfect. You look beautiful." She saw the older woman blush as she turned away. She turned to Ginny and gave her a hug. "I hope your mum's not too disappointed. Where is she?"

Ginny laughed. "She was only disappointed momentarily. She's busy outside making sure the house-elves Minerva sent put on the finishing touches. You should see them. They are so excited to be helping the Professors Snape." Ginny wasn't sure about how Hermione felt about house-elf labor these days.

"I'm glad they are happy. I guess that's all that matters. When I was young, I could not imagine how one could ever be happy serving. But they are, and when I learned that, I dropped it all." She took her bag from her pocket and expanded it on the bed.

Ginny and Poppy came over to help her lay out her things.

Ginny blushed when Hermione laid out a white lace, strapless teddy and white lace stockings and garters. "Oh, Hermione you are going to have fun tonight."

"That's the idea," she said with a laugh

A long lace waist slip went over that. Then the gown came out.

Poppy gasped, touching the delicate white silk fabric. "It's beautiful. Severus will adore it."

Hermione smiled at the woman. "I hope so." She took the box that Severus had given her and showed them the earrings. "This will go perfectly, don't you think? Severus gave them to me. They were his mother's."

Poppy went to her dresser and pulled a box out. "I wanted to give you something, and now I know what will be perfect with the dress." She opened the box, and inside were two golden Greek key arm cuffs. "I got them in Greece when I did my medical training there. I want you to keep them."

"They are beautiful, Poppy, but I can't keep them," Hermione said. "This is too much, but I will borrow them."

Poppy said, "You'll do no such thing. They are yours, Hermione. I would be proud to have you keep them. You're my son's wife, and I have no daughters to pass these things on to. Please take them."

Hermione could see the sincerity in her eyes. She gave the woman a hug. "Thank you, I hope you will be a mother to me, too. I don't think one gets too old for a mother's support."

"I already am, dear," she said, patting Hermione on the cheek. "Now come on, Ginny. Let's get my girl's hair done."

As Hermione sat down at a mirrored vanity, she wondered what Severus thought of her wedding gift. She felt a few butterflies in her chest. What if he didn't like it? What if it made him angry?

Ginny, unaware of her thoughts, smiled and said, "I wanted to put it up like it was at the Yule Ball. It would fit the dress better, but Severus gave me some instructions."

Hermione turned to look up at her. "He did?"

"Yep. He loves your hair, Hermione. He wants it to be free and wild." She drew a comb and her wand and proceeded to fluff and expand. "You should see Mum, Hermione. She let me do her hair up, and I even darkened it a bit. You won't recognize her. I think she fancies it."

Hermione gasped when she saw her hair. She said, "It looks like It did 20 years ago. I look forward to seeing Molly. She's looked the same since I first met her. She gives so much of herself. She deserves to be pampered occasionally." Hermione turned her attention to her hair, staring at the wild mass. She rather liked it, and she was touched that Severus didn't mind the crazy mass.

"You look striking," Ginny said.

There was a knock at the door. When Poppy answered, a tiny female house-elf came in with a small, silver tray. It had a note on it.

Hermione opened the note, recognizing Severus handwriting,

Hermione, thank you. This is an

astounding bonding gift.

I love you,

Severus

Molly came in at that moment. "You caused a stir with your bonding guest, but I got them all settled." She laughed. "They promised not to murder him."

Hermione's eyes got big. "I should have warned everyone. I'm sorry. Is everyone really okay?"

"They are fine, my dear. They can see he's different. The evil is gone, and his eyes are like windows to his soul. It humbles him. They will nevertheless watch him like a hawk." She looked at Hermione. "Your hair is lovely. Ginny, you did a great job."

"Thank you, Molly. Ginny did a great job on you, too; you look fantastic." Hermione gushed, reaching up to touch Molly's hair. She saw a blush creep up Molly's face, and the woman fussed at the curl that fell from her forehead.

Molly hugged her and then turned to Poppy. "Poppy, can you come outside for a few minutes and make the last check with me?"

Poppy asked Hermione, "Do you mind? I'll be back in a few minutes."

Hermione said, "Of course not. It will give Ginny and I a few minutes to gossip about Harry." The bride giggled, looking far younger than her years.

Poppy smiled.

When the door closed behind the women, Ginny said, "Harry cried last night when he got the owl. He was so touched by Severus' gift. He's missed Hedwig so much."

Hermione smiled. "I'm so glad he liked her. It was Severus' idea. We went by Eeylops, and there she was."

"Severus? Why would he want to buy Harry an owl?"

"He cares about Harry. He just wasn't allowed to show it before. There was a war, Ginny, and he was undercover. Besides Harry is his best friend's child. He's let go of the past."

Ginny said, "Well, that was a nice thing for him to do. Harry kind of thought you might have put him up to it."

"No, it didn't occur to me before Severus said, 'Let's buy it for Harry.'"

Poppy returned and helped Ginny hold the dress over Hermione's head. It fell over her in a cloud of soft, white silk. Poppy fastened the armbands on, and Ginny magicked the earrings on. Hermione stood, looking like a goddess. Poppy waved her wand, and her feet were clad in gold sandals with straps that wound around her legs.

"Oh," Hermione exclaimed, "I'd forgotten shoes. These are wonderful. It looks like I'm all set. I wonder how Severus is doing. It probably took him five minutes to get ready." She laughed.

In the meantime:

Severus watched Hermione Portkey away, and then he shouldered his bag and grabbed his. "Bloody hell," he exclaimed, as Lucius appeared in front of him. He ducked away, drawing his wand. Then realized he was in the study at Poppy's house. Then he noticed Grimmley and Harry flanking Lucius. "What the bloody hell is going on?" he growled in confusion.

Lucius drawled, "Severus, I thought we were friends. Calm down, I'm an invited guest. He smoothed his hand down a fine robe he was wearing. "It's nice to be out of prison garb permanently."

"Can someone tell me what the bloody hell is going on?" Severus demanded, looking at Harry.

Harry stepped forward and said, "Hermione invited him. She thought you'd like to have him here. I promise he's little more than a squib right now. He has no wand. He is warding magically with a dampening field. He's wearing the Muggle equivalent of tracking devices in the nature of spells. If you don't want him here, Grimmley and several others who are on watch will take him to his manor."

Severus realized that everyone else seemed more relaxed than he did, so he made himself relax and reached out a hand to Lucius. "It is good to see you, my friend. My wife has surprised me." He pulled Lucius into a hug. "I'm sorry for the welcome. I was surprised to find you here."

Lucius stepped back. "No apology necessary. I understand. I was wondering if you'd hex my head off before I could explain." He laughed.

Severus laughed then and turned to Harry, "Harry, it's good to see you. You out of all Hermione's friends, I think, belong here today with her."

Harry came to take Severus' hand, and Severus pulled him into a hug. "Your son is an amazing child. Forgive me for not seeing that his father was also an amazing child."

Harry hugged him back. "You have already apologized, and you are making it up by helping Albus. He admires you so much. His letters are full of your exploits."

Severus backed off, laughing. "I bet that rankles your hide."

"No, on the contrary, I'm very happy he is close to his name-sake. Thank you for the owl, Severus. I have named her Hedwig, as well. It was a very thoughtful gift."

"You're welcome, Harry." He gave Harry a clap on the back and turned to Grimmley. "It's a surprise to see you here. Are you in here in an official capacity?"

"No, your wife invited me, and I thought I might guard this ruffian," he waved at Lucius, "and enjoy the bonding."

"Well, it's good to see you again, sir. I am sorry I was so harsh the last time. I was dealing with some issues." He turned away and set his bag on the desk and expanded it. "Well, gentlemen, do you wish to help me dress like the ladies are doing for Hermione? Or will you clear out and let me get ready?"

"I'd like to stay," Lucius said.

"Gentlemen," he said to Harry and Grimmley, "would you mind waiting outside the room? I think I will be fine with Lucius. I would appreciate you coming back in and helping me on with my robe, Harry." That was an honor bestowed on close friends and family.

"I'd be honored, Severus." Harry grinned, motioning Grimmley to follow him.

Lucius watched them go. "Well, old chap, you and Potter seem to have made up."

Severus turned to take out his shaving equipment and conjured a bowl of water to shave with. "Yes, I can't stay angry my whole life, Lucius, and he is Hermione's best friend. He has a very gifted son...as gifted as your grandson, Scorpius. I hope you are proud of that boy. He helped me with the potion that restored my arm and hand."

"I am. I haven't had a chance to see him yet, but I will tell him just that when I do. You are marrying an extraordinary woman." Lucius laughed. "She threatened to hex me into St. Mungo's psych ward if I so much as put a toe out of line."

"I bet she did," Severus said with obvious pride for his wife.

"Let me shave you, Severus. You know I'm good at this. I taught you all you know."

Severus nodded, wondering at the wisdom of allowing him to handle the razor, but he saw a different man when he looked into his friend's eyes, so he surrendered the razor.

Lucius took the straight razor from Severus as he motioned him to sit on a chair. He used the soap and water to make lather and proceeded to shave Severus.

Severus was serious when he said, "You'd better heed her warning, Lucius. She can be very fast with her wand."

"I just got out of Azkaban. I'll not jeopardize my chance to sleep in my own house tonight. I promise you that." He finished and Severus conjured a hot cloth for Lucius to wipe his face clean.

"I didn't think you would, my friend," he said as he stood. He stripped his frock coat off.

Lucius took it and hung it up on the back of the door. He stood there as Severus stripped to his boxers and took out a dark suit from the box on the bed. He stepped into the trousers. He sat on a chair and Lucius brushed his hair. He allowed it because it was part of the ritual of the ceremony. He found himself relaxing quite happy with his friend there. "I always thought you'd be here with me if I ever got bonded. Last week I never thought that possible."

"You were always sensitive about your looks, Severus; but you are very fetching to the ladies. Haven't you ever noticed how they fawn over you?"

"Death Eaters! Sorry, not my type. You know Hermione fell in love with me while I was invisible."

"I'm sure it was that sexy voice. Bella told me how she would swoon over it."

"Please, let's not think of her today...or ever," Severus spat, annoyed.

"Sorry. Anyway, I am happy to be here to help," Lucius said as he helped Severus shrug into his white shirt. Then he helped him into the dark jacket.

"Go get Potter. It's time."

Lucius went and opened the door and called to Harry, "Severus is ready, sir."

Harry, with an astonished look at the "sir," stepped into the room. The two of them held the robe up, and Severus ducked down. They settled the robe, and it fell around him in soft, draping folds. It looked like a Roman toga."

Harry and Lucius traded eyebrow-raising looks. "It's certainly different," Harry said carefully. He didn't want to annoy Severus.

Severus said, "It's ghastly, but Madam Malkin told me it would make Hermione happy and fit the dress she is wearing. I certainly feel silly in it." He stared at his reflection in the long mirror on the door.

"It kind of suits you, sir," Harry said. "You're looking all emperor-like." Then he laughed.

Severus gave him a withering glare, but his lips curved up in a smile.

Harry tied the bright blue sash around his waist and draped it over his shoulder to hang down his back. A strip of gold keywork laced the hem and neck of the white robe. "I don't think I've ever seen anyone chose this style, but you look good, sir."

"Thank you, Harry. It's unusual, but I would do anything for Hermione."

"I'm glad, sir. That makes me feel very good about your life together." He turned and then looked back. "I will go see if Hermione is ready. You could go out onto the beach and wait for her."

Severus nodded. "I will take Lucius and Grimmley with me."

Harry nodded. "Alright, Severus." His eyes told Severus to watch his back, but he did not voice his reservations out loud. Severus didn't blame him for being suspicious of Lucius, but he truly believed the man was different. He was surprised to see how Harry was handling this whole thing...no fits or accusations. He thought *Albus, you would be happy to see us all getting on. Life is as it should be. No war, no sides. We're just men who want this world of ours to be better. I am sorry you are not here to see it.*

Severus opened the door and crossed the parlor of Poppy's house and went out onto the veranda. Lucius and Grimmley followed. He could see, down the beach, that most of the guests were there milling around, visiting.

They all looked up at him as he came out. He went from person to person and thanked them for coming.

Arthur and Molly stood near the front, and he was enveloped in a hug from Molly. This time he welcomed it and found it comforting. "Thank you, Molly, for all your work. Hermione and I really appreciate it."

"I'm sorry we had to change the venue," she apologized, looking a bit worried.

Arthur took his hand and said, "Hope the changes are okay."

Severus said, "It's fine, really. I'm sorry you're having such a problem. Talk to Hagrid; he's good with repellents and magical creatures." He secretly felt this was a perfect place. He loved this home-away-from home. It was the only place he'd felt loved and cared for as a child and a teenager.

Arthur nodded with a smile, "Thank you, I'll do that."

Severus took his place and then looked toward the house, waiting for Hermione.

Lisa, thank you so much for your Beta work. You Rock!!!!

Please leave reviews.

Chapter 52

Chapter 52 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

There was a knock on Poppy's bedroom door. Hermione called, "Come in."

Harry stuck his head around the door. "Alright if I come in?"

"Harry, of course. I was hoping to see you before the ceremony," Hermione told him.

Harry stepped into the room. "You're beautiful, Hermione. Severus will be beside himself." He gave Hermione a gentle hug and a kiss on the cheek before stepping back. "I'm very happy for you. He's crazy in love with you."

Hermione laughed. "He is, isn't he? Imagine that! Little Miss Know-It-All got to him. I'm crazy in love with him, too."

"Imagine that!" Harry laughed and took Ginny's hand. "Is everyone ready?"

Poppy patted Hermione's arm and then scooted out ahead of them to get to her seat.

Harry said, "I'd better get back to watching Lucius and standing next to Severus."

Ginny squeezed his hand and let go. Then she and Hermione followed him to the door of the cottage. She handed Hermione one large, white rose. Hermione gave her friend a hug and stepped from the house on to the veranda. There was an aisle of thin, shimmery gossamer fabric in pale blue and white held up by magic, which led to a flat arch of the same shimmery fabric. There were no awnings...just the rich, blue sky. The wards held back the wind and sand from the beach. Seats were situated on each side of the path that led to the front. There were two stained glass windows suspended on each side of the arch, giving it a church-like appearance. Soft, unearthly music played, seemingly to coming from the air around them. It was beautiful and simple. Perfect.

She walked down the aisle toward Severus, who stood up front. He wore robes of white, and his sash was an aqua blue. The style was similar to hers, but he had short sleeves that hung down his arms. She noted he'd worn a dark suit underneath, and she smiled. He looked like a Greek god.

The audience of friends stood and waited as she passed by. She could see the people who had been the most important in her life, the Weasleys and Harry, Hagrid, Filius, and Minerva. Poppy was up front dressed in her glorious, red robe. Nearly everyone dressed brightly: it was a Wizarding ceremony, and wizards loved color.

Severus watched as Hermione came from the house. She looked like a Greek goddess. Her gown was white, held up by only one shoulder strap that was a flowing sash down her back and fanned out to a train. It was fitted under her breasts and bordered with a gold key design. It flowed like water down her body. Her hair was a wild, wonderful mass. He closed his eyes a brief second, thinking about pushing his fingers into it. She was so changed from the girl in his "forbidden" memory. She was much more beautiful now...a woman and his wife. Though the dress barely showed her budding abdomen, he could see the swell of their child, and he felt nearly overwhelmed with happiness.

She'd reached him, and he took her hand, leaning in and whispering, "You are beautiful, Hermione."

"And you are magnificent, Severus," she whispered back, stifling a giggle when he rolled his eyes. She smiled as she saw him blush. What an enigma he was: hard as nails and soft as down.

Minister Shackbolt had stepped up before the arch. "I have the pleasure of bonding this wizard and witch. They come before you in a covenant of lifelong devotion and love for each other. Everyone here knows the services these two performed for our people. They know the story of how Severus Snape was returned to us. We are all here to support and give our blessing to these two, who richly deserve a life of happiness and support from each other."

Kingsley produced a gold and silver entwined cord. Severus faced Hermione, and they clasped each other's left arms with their fingers near the elbow. Their arms were

pressed flesh to flesh. Kingsley took the cord and wrapped it around their wrists and up their arms. He used the tip of his wand to magically prick the tips of their fingers, gather the tiny drops of blood, and spread them on the cord. As he chanted a spell, it began to glow, and the gold and silver fused together. It then floated into the air. Kingsley fashioned two silver and gold braided rings from the cord. Hermione and Severus plucked the rings from the air and placed them on each other's ring finger. A document and a silver-tipped quill pen with a gold feather plume appeared in front of them. Another drop of blood was collected into the quill, and they signed the document. The document began to glow, and then it burst into silver and gold sparks that surrounded them like a gentle breeze and faded into them.

Kingsley said, "I present to you the wedded and bonded wizard, Potions Master Severus Tobias Snape and his lawfully wedded and bonded witch, Professor Hermione Jean Granger-Snape."

Severus pulled Hermione close for a deep kiss, and her fingers clutched his arm and shoulder. A kiss was not usually part of the Wizarding ceremony, but it was one that Severus heartily approved of in the Muggle world. Everyone was standing and clapping. Hagrid was crying loudly and blowing his nose into a handkerchief the size of a small quilt. Minerva turned to give him a look. Severus and Hermione laughed out loud. The joining had given them an extraordinary sense of each other.



Poppy, crying happily, came forward, and Hermione and Severus hugged her and kissed her wet cheeks. Minerva was next for a hug; after that, a line of friends joined in congratulations.

Later, Hermione saw Molly wave her wand. The chairs moved to the sides and the arch vanished to be replaced by tables of food and an amazing cake with floating tiers iced with silver and aqua frosting. Tiny replicas of them appeared on the top. The wedding kiss from moments before was duplicated in perfect 3D perfection.

A polished dance floor appeared under their feet, and glasses of champagne popped into their hands.

Arthur stepped forward. "I wish to make a toast to the bonded wizard and witch. May all your days together be as the first one. May the children born of this union find acceptance and love as well as the power of our people. May you grace us with your presence for many decades to come." They raised their glasses and drank.

Harry stepped forward, "I'd like to add, may the love you have today grow as each day passes. I've seen no greater love than what you, my friends, have created between you...except, of course, mine for Ginny," he added and everyone laughed. "I'm so happy for you both." He raised his glass and said, "Let's drink, eat, and dance."

Once they had sipped again from the glasses, they magically vanished, and soft music filled with the sound of harps and other stringed instruments came from the air. Severus took Hermione's hand and swung her into his arms.

"I missed you all morning," he said. "If I could I'd whisk you away this instant, I would." He saw the protest in her eyes and said, "Don't worry. I will be happy to dance and stand at your side for pictures and cake cutting. You will have your bonding album."

Having noticed the photographer earlier, she'd been delighted. Hermione caressed his neck where her fingers rested as they danced. "Thank you. I missed you, too. How do you really like my surprise?"

Severus glanced over to see where Lucius stood still flanked by Harry and Grimmley. Draco, with Pansy, was talking to his father, and Scorpius was smiling because Lucius was holding onto his shoulder lightly but warmly.

"Look at them; it's wonderful. You have given them back their family. They need Lucius' guidance, and I believe he's now capable of being a good example. Nevertheless, I will be watching him."

Hermione smiled. "I'm glad you are happy about it. I wasn't sure if what I did was right, but he was changed. I could see it in his eyes."

"I would be angry with you for going there, but Grimmley assured me you had a great deal of protection woven around you. He left nothing undone, and I am very happy to see my friend. If I was given this second chance, can we do less for anyone willing to change?"

Hermione reached up, and he leaned in for a kiss. "No, we can't." She buried her face against his shoulder, and they just stood and swayed. "I'm so happy, Severus. We have our lives and our baby to look forward to."

He held her close. Severus then felt a tap on his shoulder and turned to find Ron Weasley standing there.

"Sir, may I dance with Hermione for a few minutes? I promise to return her shortly." He had an earnest look on his face. Severus looked at Hermione.

"Second chances," she said.

Severus nodded and placed her hand in Ron's, giving him a solid look. "A few minutes only, Mr. Weasley."

"Yes, sir." He guided Hermione a few feet away and placed his hand on her waist. He didn't hold her close but they danced slowly. "Hermione, I wanted to tell you that I'm very happy for you. I'm glad you have someone in your life...someone who will care for, love, and protect you. I once believed the man had no heart. But I can see now he adores you. He's changed a great deal."

Hermione glanced at Severus and saw him watching them carefully. She thought he might have his hand on his concealed wand. She smiled her love at him and saw him relax.

"Thank you, Ronald. I hope that you will find the same happiness. You and I went through a lot together, and I want us to always be friends. You mind your place, and Severus will welcome you into our lives on occasion."

"I will, Hermione. I promise." He bent to kiss her hand, and then without another word he led her back and placed her hand in Severus'. "Thank you sir, I wish many years of happiness to you both." He dipped his head in a slight bow and melted back into the crowd.

Hermione looked up at Severus. "Thank you for letting me dance with him."

"Hermione, you do not need my permission. I want you to dance with anyone you wish. I know that when we leave here tonight, you will be going with me. That's all I need to know."

Hermione smiled warmly at him and pressed herself against him, her eyes promising him things to come. "Partners."

"Partners," he agreed. "Now, I know Harry wants a dance, and I'm sure Lucius would like one, also, if you are so inclined. I really do have to dance with Poppy, Minerva, and Molly."

Hermione nodded, "Of course. Just keep me in your sights, and I will keep you in mine."

"Agreed." He placed a kiss on her temple and guided her to Harry. "Harry, here is my wife. Take care of her while I do my duty to the lovely ladies here."

Harry was pleased. "Thank you, Severus. I have yet to let her out of my sight. I am so happy for you both."

Severus reached up to touch the man's face briefly. "Your mother would be proud of you, Harry. She was a good friend. I am pleased we have been given this second chance to know each other." He then turned, leaving a stunned Harry to dance.

Harry was overcome for a minute, and Hermione just smiled into his tear-filled eyes as they danced. Finally she said, "He cares a great deal for you. I think he always did."

"You aren't jealous of his memory of her?" Harry asked.

"No," Hermione said. "She was his friend...the only one he had. I had you and Ron. I understand friendship. I understand the mess your emotions can become when you're an adolescent." She glanced through the crowd and picked out Ron, dancing with Ginny. "He understands it all now, and he loves me more than he ever imagined loving her. She will always be his best friend. I am his wife and now bondmate."

Harry nodded. "We did have fun when we were kids, despite all the terror and pain, didn't we, Hermione?"

"Yes, Harry, the very best of times." The music came to an end, and Harry kissed her cheek. "Who's next?" he asked.

"Lucius...let's get it over with." But she smiled at him when he opened his mouth to protest. "By all means stay close, Harry. But I really think he will behave himself."

Harry nodded and led her to Lucius.

"Lucius, as Severus' first, I owe you a dance," she said warily.

Lucius, looking as beautiful as he had years previously, bowed deeply and said, "It would be my pleasure, Madam Snape."

He took her hand, and they moved onto the dance floor. Hermione giggled as she saw nearly every one of her friends reach for his or her wand. "You'd best behave, or you might find yourself zapped into a zillion unattached atoms."

"A zillion what?" he said as his eyes darted around the crowd.

"Particles," she translated.

"Ah," he said. "I have no intention of misbehaving. I told Severus that I wish to sleep in my own bed tonight. For me, that would be heaven."

"Then, I wish you heaven tonight. What will you do now?" she asked as he swung her to and fro.

"I do not know. For now, I just want to rebuild my relationship with my son and grandson. I want to take some of the burden off Draco and his wife so they can work without having to take care of the house."

"You'd get your hands dirty, Lucius?" she asked in a teasing voice.

"It's time to find out how the real world lives. That odd blonde woman, Luna, was telling me something crazy about having a healer's heart. Fool notion," he said quite seriously.

"You should heed her words, Lucius. She gifted with insight. Nevertheless, I wish you well, then. I wish you love, as well. Time can heal the pain, and we all deserve love that sets us on our butts with astonishment. Leave yourself open. You will always have your love for Narcissa in your heart. Don't let her memory keep you from a future."

Lucius stared into her eyes and saw her honest hope for him and was touched. The music finished, and he found that Arthur was there to take her hand. "Madam, Severus is indeed a lucky man. I wish you all the best. Arthur, she is yours." He bowed and stepped back as he placed her hand in Arthur's.

Hermione let herself sag against Arthur a moment. He asked, "Did that ruffian say anything unsavory?"

"No, he didn't; he was a perfect gentleman. I think I'm just suddenly exhausted; maybe I need some food. Can we dance later?"

"Of course, Hermione. Let's go get you something to drink and eat. I'd rather sit and talk than dance, to be honest." He laughed.

Hermione nodded and linked her arm in his. As they passed Severus and Poppy, he asked, "You okay?"

She smiled at him. "Yes, I just need a bite to eat. I'm in good hands, Severus. Please, keep dancing."

Severus nodded as they headed for the food. "Poppy, did she look okay?" he asked in concern.

"She's fine. I expect she didn't eat much today in her excitement. She'll be okay with a rest and a bit of food."

Severus returned his attention to his 'mum'. He leaned in to whisper in her ear, "I'm glad the bonding took place here. It's perfect. You and Molly outdid yourselves."

Poppy laughed and said, "Thank you, Severus. I personally thought she'd want wild crazy Wizarding decorations, but she was happy to tone it down and make it simple. She got over her disappointment about her garden quickly and was so helpful." She squeezed his shoulders, kissing his cheek. She snickered. "Your gown is quite becoming."

Severus blushed. "Snicker all you want, old woman," he said fondly. "I only did this to match Hermione. I'm trying really hard to ignore it all."

Poppy laughed. "I'm sure every woman here will have dreams about you tonight. You're really quite dashing."

Severus glared at her. "They dare not. Mum, thank you for all you've done for me. I doubt I would have known how to accept Hermione's love if you had not shown me love and kindness for so many years of my life."

Poppy hugged him as the music ended. "Go dance with Minerva and Molly and then reclaim your wife."

Severus hugged her tightly and gave her a soft kiss on the forehead.

Poppy nodded unable to say anything as he walked away.

Food was eaten, dances were given, and laughter and stories were told. Finally, Severus and Hermione stood together before the cake and sliced it. Taking small pieces, they carefully feed each other a bite while the wizarding photographer took pictures.

Finally, Severus held his hands up to silence everyone. "Thank you, my friends. On behalf of my wife and I, we want to tell you how much we have enjoyed the evening and that we are leaving." He laughed. "Party all night and have a wonderful time. Thank you, again, Molly and Poppy, for planning a very successful bonding. I think Hermione will agree with me that the decorations were perfect."

Hermione nodded. "It was absolutely perfect." She placed her hand in Severus' and there was a loud pop of Apparation, and they vanished. There was an amazing fireworks display of color above their heads. The bonding guests clapped and laughed as they watched the fireworks."

Hermione and Severus stood on the veranda of the house and watched the fireworks. Severus ducked into the house for their bags and then came and wrapped his arms around Hermione. He took hold of the Portkey he had been given, and they were whisked away to their bonding night destination.

Well, we are getting to the last five chapters. It's been a labor of love for a good two years. This next chapter begged me to write it. It's a departure from the main story as we follow Lucius home and see how the first night home goes for him.

Lisa, thank you so much for all your beta work. It's such a pleasure to have someone I can continue to depend on.

The manip is made of many photos. No infringement of copyrights intended.

Chapter 53

Chapter 53 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

This chapter is quite different; we follow Lucius home. This chapter takes place in Malfoy Manor.

Meanwhile, while Hermione and Severus were whisked away to their honeymoon, Grimmley Hinckernill and Harry Potter took Lucius home. Having been at the wedding, Draco, Pansy, and Scorpius Apparated back with them.

They arrived at the gate and a house-elf let them in. Lucius looked around and saw the grounds where overgrown and the mansion looked neglected. There were no servants, and the "friends" who'd been at the manor mooching off him before his incarceration were gone, too.

Draco seemed embarrassed, and he was wondering when his father would lay into him because of the condition of the place. They still had a couple of house-elves. But they were small and hadn't been able to keep up with it all. Lucius only said, as he took in a deep breath, "It's good to be home."

Draco and Pansy looked at each other with hope. They were still waiting for the "keepers" to leave and the rants and raves they were used to.

Harry set about placing wards on the property that would allow Draco, Scorpius, and Pansy to come and go as they pleased but would prevent Lucius from leaving the grounds without an Auror escort.

Grimmley stood with Lucius in the entryway of the mansion while Harry did his work.

Lucius watched for a while and then asked, "Is it necessary to do all this? I won't leave the property until my sentence is finished. I should be glad to be here, shouldn't I?"

"Absolutely," Grimmley said. "Mr. Malfoy, I have seen a change in you. Do not let being in a familiar environment reverse the change. Do this for your son and grandson. We all lived through rough times. Isn't peace and family more important than power?"

"Yes, of course," Lucius agreed. He had noted by looking through the door to the Great Room that some of the furniture was gone. It had probably been sold to keep the household functioning. "I would be appreciative if you two would finish and leave me to my family. I have much to say to them."

Harry could see a difference in Lucius' face, but he was still quite skeptical. He passed by Draco and whispered, "Watch your back."

Draco stared at him and nodded almost imperceptibly.

Turning, he said, "Grimmley, I'm done. Let's leave this family to become reacquainted." He placed a hand on Scorpius' shoulder. "You have leave from school till Sunday afternoon. Headmistress McGonagall will open the Floo at 2:00 p.m. You can step through from the Great Room to her office."

Scorpius nodded and said, "Thank you, sir."

Harry turned to the family and said, "Draco, Pansy, Lucius, please let me know if you have any concerns or needs. The Ministry will know how to contact me. You know the office, Draco. It was good to see you again. Lucius, you have one very special grandson here. I hope you will teach him the right way from now on. If Severus Snape hadn't cared what happened to him, he might be in Azkaban right now or dead."

Lucius nodded, looking grim.

Scorpius hung his head. Would he ever get away from his past?

"Don't feel bad, Scorpius," Harry encouraged, grasping the young man's shoulder and squeezing it warmly. "Be proud of the man you are becoming. I am proud you are my son's friend," Harry said, smiling at the boy. "Well, gentlemen, I'll leave you all to get reacquainted. Come on, Grimmley, we have other things to do."

Draco went to the door with them. "Thank you, Mr. Potter," he said.

"Harry, Draco. We were classmates, were we not? The past is done and forgiven. I say we try to become acquainted. After all our sons are friends now."

Draco smiled and stuck his hand out, and the once enemies shook hands.

Harry and Grimmley went to the gate and were let out.

After the wards reset behind them, Harry turned to Grimmley and said, "I'd like to be a fly on the wall. Hear what they have to say to each other. I really have hopes that Malfoy has changed for the better, for his son's sake and his grandson's. But he can be a very good actor if he wants to be."

"You're right, sir. But you know, I've been there with him, and there has been such a change in attitude since Professor Snape came to befriend him despite what Malfoy did to his wife. I think the man has changed," he said with conviction.

"As Severus has," Harry told him. "I never even thought of him and Hermione together, but look how happy they are. As a child, I would have been angry about him being happy after what I thought he was doing. Now I am glad that he's found peace in his life. His ability to look past what Malfoy did and see why he did it astounds me. I don't honestly know what I would do if I lost my wife."

"You didn't have the man's horrible values to start with. It was different for him."

"That's true," Harry said. "Well, Grimmley, I'd best be getting back to my wife. Please let me know if there is anything I can do for you. If you want out of Azkaban, I can find a better situation for you."

Grimmley said, "Thank you, sir. Those people need someone to keep an eye on them."

"And you do a wonderful job." Harry shook hands with the man and stepped away and Apparated.

Grimmley turned to Malfoy Mansion and silently hoped all was going to go well for them. Then he was gone as well.

Inside the mansion the family stood staring at each other. Then Lucius smiled and said, "Is it possible for us to have a small meal and then sit and talk?"

Draco nodded and said, "Of course, Father."

"It is good to hear you call me father again. I do hope I can earn your trust." Lucius took his cloak off and instead of calling a house-elf went to the hall closet and hung it up himself.

Pansy and Draco exchanged incredulous looks.

"Scorpius, why don't you and I go to the kitchen and gather the meal. I'm sure the house-elves have enough to do around here," Lucius told the boy.

Scorpius glanced at his father, and Draco nodded for him to go.

Scorpius walked to his grandfather's side. Lucius smiled at him, placing an arm around his shoulder. "You are becoming such a fine young man. I am glad I will be here to see you mature."

Draco, still watching, heard his father say, "You're just like your father. He is a son to be proud of..." And then they vanished around the corner.

Draco grinned at his wife who was standing there with her eyes wide and her mouth partially open. "Do you think he is in earnest?" Pansy asked.

"I certainly hope so. I have never seen my father like this, Pansy. There is a difference in him. I have been able to read him since I was a child, and he always scared me. There was a dangerous air about him, a sharp edge, which made it impossible to get close to him. Maybe freedom from the Dark Mark is life changing. Look what Severus has done."

Pansy came and slipped her arms around him. "Come on, let's go get settled in the Great Room before he comes back. Let's build up the fire a bit so it will be warm for a change."

Draco nodded and they went arm in arm into the vast room.

Lucius walked with Scorpius down the long hall to the kitchen. He glanced into rooms as they went. Many of them were now bereft of furniture. "It's been tough here, hasn't it?"

Scorpius said, "Mother and father had a hard time trying to make ends meet after Grandmother passed..." He hesitated, waiting for his grandfather to yell at him not to speak of her. When he didn't, he continued. "You didn't notice things were gone, and money was in short supply. You just kept on borrowing and spending it on your friends."

Lucius stopped and turned to face the boy. "I was in a terrible place. I could not see past my pain and the alcohol. Friends were the only thing that kept me going... and my hate for the people I felt were at fault." He said, "Let's get the food. I need to say this all to your father, too."

The little house-elf they found in the kitchen let out a scream of fear when she saw Lucius.

"Posey, isn't it?" he asked.

She nodded, backing away and trembling.

"Posey, there's no need to fear me. Scorpius and I have come for some cheese, bread and juice."

"Juice?" Scorpius asked.

Lucius nodded. "It's best I don't start drinking again, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes, Grandfather," Scorpius agreed readily.

The little house-elf was eyeing him, her eyes wide with disbelief. "I will get it, sir."

"No, no. I'm sure you have enough to do. Scorpius and I will gather the things if you will just direct us." He started to look around and said, "I don't think I've ever been here before."

Scorpius exclaimed, "Really," He laughed and said, "Grandfather, you've lived in this house for 40 years or more, haven't you?"

Lucius chuckled. "Yes, strange, isn't it? You and I will have to go exploring tomorrow and see what else I don't know about my own house."

"I'd like that. The house has some marvelous secret rooms and passages."

"I do know about many of those," Lucius said as they gathered the cheese, bottle of juice, glasses, a knife, and some bread. They put them all in a basket and carried them back down the long hall to the Great Room.

Draco came forward and said, "Let me help you, Father."

"No, son, you sit and let me wait on you. You've been carrying the load far too long." Lucius sat the basket on a table and set about cutting the bread and cheese while Scorpius, Draco, and Pansy stared. They had never seen Lucius lift a finger to do anything.

After he'd handed them all plates of food, they sat close to the fire and ate in silence, each marveling at the homey feel of it all.

"Draco," Lucius began, "I see you had to sell some things."

Draco paled. "Yes, Father."

"I think we should sell more things, perhaps the mansion. We could move someplace smaller and easier to manage. Posey looks like she's about to drop, and she obviously doesn't and can't keep up with this place."

"All our Malfoy history is here. I'm sorry. I've tried to keep it up," Draco fretted.

"Draco, maybe it's time to make new Malfoy history. We need a new start, don't you think?"

Draco reached out to take hold of his wife's hand. "Pansy and I have talked about it a number of times. But we wanted to wait until you came home, Father. I think this would be something to look into. It could easily pay off the debts and give us a reasonably sized home to live in. What do you think, Scorp?"

Scorpius said quietly, "I love this house. But I think a new start for everyone is a good thing."

Lucius smiled for the first time. "Draco, you know I loved your mother, and I will always keep her in my heart. But I need to be away from the constant reminders. It hurts, and I don't want to go back to where I was after she died." He went to stand by the fire and ran his hand over the tall mantel. "This is the only thing I want to take. This she polished and loved because her father carved it. I have hundreds of memories of her caressing it." He turned back to look at Draco. "You are so like her in many ways. She was much gentler than I was. She would have never lived a life like we did if she hadn't loved me. She loved you to distraction. You were the best of both of us. Forgive me for trying to turn you. I know you went through agony trying to please me. But it was never your nature to be in the darkness."

Draco nodded. "No it wasn't, Father. What of the painting? Would you like to talk to her?"

Lucius reached over and touched his son's cheek. "Do you think you might call me dad?" He ignored Draco's comment. "Let's make it a new life completely. No more formal stuff. Let's be a family. You're a son I can be and am proud of." He then turned to take Pansy's hand. "You, my dear, are beautiful, and you have given my son an amazing wife and me a fine grandson. Forgive me for basically ignoring you for so long. You are a good mother." Draco was looking at him with hope and also like he was an alien.

Lucius laughed and then sobered and explained. "Thank Severus Snape for my new attitude. I was dying in Azkaban. I'd be gone if he hadn't come to see me and worked to make my conditions bearable. I did a horrible thing to his wife, and he's forgiven me. He and I were very close when we were kids, and what happened in between was both our faults. I want to live again, and that means letting go of all the old hate and prejudice."

Pansy said, "Sir, I would love to have us all be a family."

"Dad," Lucius said, giving her permission to call him that.

Draco seemed to stand taller. He'd gotten used to standing with a slump, looking down at his feet, and not meeting people's eyes because of the family shame.

Lucius noticed that he smiled now. It lit his face up. "You were such a happy child. I would enjoy seeing a happy adult son. I'm exhausted, though, tonight. Tomorrow we will make solid plans for this family's future."

Draco came closer to Lucius. They looked at each other for a moment and then gave each other an awkward hug. Lucius gave his grandson a hug and said, "Come on, Scorp. Let's go upstairs. I'm worn out."

Pansy gave Lucius and her son a hug. Then she and Draco watched Lucius and Scorpius go toward the hall and the staircase to the upper floor.

Draco tried again, calling to him, "Please, Dad. It's time."

Lucius nodded.

Draco turned and gathered his wife close. "I have dreamed of this kind of life for us all my life. I spent most of my childhood in fear of that man. He was always so cruel. I just can't fathom this, Pansy. I'm thrilled and scared it will go away at the same time."

Pansy reached up to push the blond hair away from his forehead. "Let the fear go, Draco. Believe that he is in earnest. I see such a change, and I would never have believed it myself."

Draco bent to give his wife a kiss and said, "Let's go to bed."

Scorpius and Lucius came to Scorpius' bedroom door. The room was lit with many candles, and a fire blazed in the fireplace. Posey had gotten the rooms ready.

"Good night, Gramps," Scorpius said with a grin.

"That's grandfather to you. I don't think I can stand that less formal greeting," he said with a laugh. "I'm not a hundred."

"Yes, Grandfather." Scorpius grinned. "Sleep well. I am looking forward to our explorations tomorrow," he said. Giving Lucius a hug, he turned to go to his room.

"I will show you some more secrets of this place. Sleep well, Scorpius." He watched until Scorpius' door was closed behind him, and then he went on down the long hall to the room he'd been using for a long time. But he looked toward the last door. He took a deep breath for courage and then went to the last door. He took hold of the doorknob and turned it. Taking a deep breath, he opened the door and stepped in.

The room was lit and warm, and he discovered that nothing was missing. Draco had left his rooms the same. Caesar, his one surviving old dog, came slowly. It licked his hand. Lucius went to one knee and hugged the large animal to him. He finally stood and sent the dog to wait, beside his chair, for him. He walked slowly to the large fireplace and raised his eyes to look at the painting of his wife. He hadn't been in this room since her death. He'd known she'd be there, and he hadn't been able to face her.

"Narcissa." Tears blurred his vision as she smiled down at him.

"You have come, my love." She studied him, and then her own eyes filled with tears. "You have finally found yourself again. You are the young man I married."

"Yes, with the Dark Mark gone, it was easier to accept help and change." He fell to his knees. "I'm sorry, Narcissa. I'm sorry. I failed you."

"You never failed me, Lucius. You failed yourself. And the Dark Mark poisoned you. My weakness was never your fault. But look at you, my love. You are a man to be proud of."

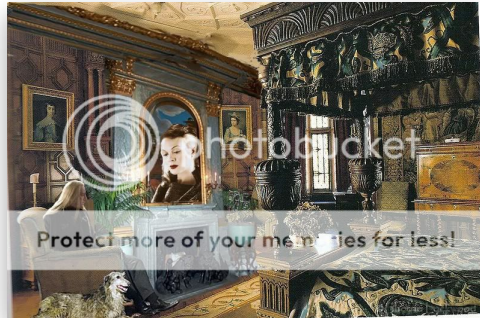
"Draco and I spoke of leaving here and starting over," he told her.

"It is a good plan. Just take me with you," she begged.

How could he ever have thought to leave her behind. She had been and still was his life. Lucius, buoyed by her uplifting words, said, "I will. I was so afraid to face you. Now I have so much to tell you. I'm sorry it took so long."

"Time here doesn't matter. Now sit and tell me all about what has happened. You look thin, Lucius."

Her voiced faded as his voice, strengthened by her look of love, became stronger and surer. He sat in the chair beside his dog. His hand stroked its warm head. Sleep forgotten under the adoring gaze of his wife and best friend, he began to bring her up to date on his life.



Lisa, thank you so much for being such a great beta.

Chapter 54

Chapter 54 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

Hermione's mouth dropped open when she realized where they were, and she saw Severus was just as astonished. They were in the high branches of the most magnificent tree either of them had ever seen. "Where are we?" she whispered in a hushed voice.

Severus said with wonder of a boy in his voice, "I asked Darby to arrange for us to spend our Bonding night in a wondrous place. Minerva assured me he knew a place that was safe and pleasant.

They stood on the flat branch of an enormous, ancient tree that stood several hundred feet tall. The branch was at least ten feet wide, and smaller branches had woven themselves into living railings. Behind them were cabin-sized rooms. Woven branches formed doors, windows, the walls and roof. Fairy lights danced and hundreds of fireflies flitted around the branches of the tree, and colors like Muggle Christmas lights blinked here and there as the creatures moved around. On other branches were more rooms with warm lights coming from their windows. Music, soft and unearthly, sang from the leaves themselves. Severus slipped his arms around Hermione's waist and pulled her against his body. "Shall we explore a bit?"

"Yes, please. This is amazing. Where do you think we are?" she asked, not knowing where to look first. Amazing birds and animals moved about the tree, gathering food and playing, scampering here and there. There were squirrels in brilliant blues and greens, birds the color of fire, and animals she didn't even have names for.

"We're in some elf-enchanted land, I think. I have never heard of such a tree." He took her hand, and they walked along the branches and climbed stairs to the other rooms on the vast tree. There was an amazing bedroom, with a canopied bed of woven vines, leaves, and flowers. A room for bathing had water coming from the trunk of the great tree, a pool of smooth carved wood. The toilet and sink were also wood. Everything was living and enchanted into shapes for their use. Severus speculated that once they were gone these things would change back into limbs of the tree until the next visitors came. Another room held furniture for relaxing, and they found a library of amazing books. There was a kitchen with a private dining room that looked out over a meadow they could barely glimpse below. Another had a hammock as its only feature.

As the last of the evening light faded, the twinkling lights all over the tree became even brighter and more beautiful. The music got louder, and a branch swung into view with a flat space for dancing. A tray of snacks and glasses of wine appeared on a railing. Severus, who was starving, helped himself to a few of the little cakes and found they were quiches.

He fed Hermione one, and she fed him a few of the purple grapes that appeared. He drew her close and pulled her onto the dance floor, and they danced slowly to the enchanted music, kissing as they moved. Severus' hand was touching her bare back, and his fingers moved up into her hair. She giggled at a thought and then said, "Severus, please take off the suit. I want to see you in the Bonding gown alone."

"Hermione, really, I'm sure it's not a pretty sight," he told her.

"Please," she begged, her large, brown eyes full of love.

He nodded and produced his wand, and with a wave, the shirt, jacket, and pants vanished, and he stood only in the gold sandals and white robe and sash. She reached up and smoothed his hair.

"You look amazing, Severus...like a Greek god."

"And you are my Queen. Come, my wife, it's time for bed. I cannot wait any longer."

"You just want out of this outfit," she laughed.

"Yes, I do," he teased, "but I also want you out of your gown as well, my dear."

"Well, in that case ..."

Severus bent and picked her up, swinging her into his arms. Hermione's arms went around his neck, and he carried her up the wooden stairs to the bedroom. He set her on her feet and then pulled the strap on her shoulder off, and her dress fell to her feet. He next tugged the long white slip down over her hips, and she stepped out of it. She stood in the white teddy and garter, stockings, and sandals. Next he went to his knees and carefully untied one long, golden strap and freed one leg, then the other, slipping the sandals from her feet. Then he ran his hands over her laced legs and her thighs, kissing her laced stomach and thighs until her legs trembled with desire for him. Slowly, he unhooked the garters and then rolled the stockings down each of her legs. Hermione stood looking down at him with her hand caressing his raven black hair. He stood, and Hermione tugged at his shoulder buttons, pulling his sleeves apart and untying the sash. They joined her gown on the floor. Severus stood in his golden sandals and white boxers, and Hermione bent to untie his sandals, caressing his muscled legs. He pulled her to her feet, and he claimed her mouth, his tongue gently tasting her and sliding over hers. He stood only in white satin boxers and she in her strapless lace teddy. His hands slid down her sides to her hips and then up over her breasts. He could feel the hard nubs of her nipples through the thin fabric. He began peeling it down her body, and his lips trailed along her body, taking one nipple into his mouth and sucking gently then nipping at the tip until she moaned with pleasure. Her hands were busy pushing his boxers down over his hips; then she heard them settle to the floor. It took Severus about two more seconds to free her from the teddy, and they stepped away from the garments toward the bed. The cover was now folded back, and white satin sheets greeted them. They really didn't think how things worked. The tree seemed to know their needs.

Hermione slipped into the bed, pulled Severus with her, and said, "Please, Severus, I want you now. We have our whole life for play."

He looked at her desire and nodded. She opened herself to him, and with a little guidance he thrust into her, burying himself deep. They both gasped with pleasure. Something had changed, and they were much more in tune with each other. They didn't even have to initiate Legillimens; they were already connected mind, body, and soul. This was better than plain Muggle sex. It was Wizarding bonded sex, and it was amazing. Hermione could feel what he felt, each and every nerve that she stimulated with her body against his, he felt and she saw that he felt every touch of her pleasure from his skin as he did. He began to move, and she wrapped her legs around his body. Her fingers gripped his buttocks, pulling him tightly into her with each of his thrusts. Their feelings magnified tenfold, and they could not contain the cries of pleasure that rang through the leaves and branches of the huge tree, and it shuddered with them. Their bodies arched against each other, straining for deeper contact. They threw their heads back as they climaxed. The pleasure was so intense they both lost consciousness for a moment; in the back of their minds, they were floating in darkness together. It was so warm and so nurturing they felt wrapped in the hand of God.

Hermione and Severus were laying entwined when they returned to their senses. Words were not necessary as they still could hear each other's thoughts and feelings. Yet they whispered to each other at the same time, "I love you." They drifted off into a blissful sleep, and the quilted top of leaves and flowers covered them.

Hermione woke laying half over Severus' chest. She could feel one of his hands idly curling a strand of her hair over his finger and letting it slide off and then gently repeating the action over and over. Warm sunlight filtered through the open windows of the bedroom. Birds were singing, and a gentle breeze rustled through the leaves, making sounds like faint wind chimes.

She raised her face and found that his eyes were still closed. She kissed his lips and felt him respond in a sleepy, soft, lazy way. But the corners of his mouth slipped into a smile as she pulled back, and his eyes opened slowly. "Good morning, Hermione."

"Good morning, Severus." She laid her cheek back against his chest. "This is heaven."

He smiled and caressed her hair. "It is."

"How long do we get to stay?" she asked.

"I asked Minerva for a week," he said.

"Hmmm," she sighed. "That sounds wonderful." She laughed lightly and said, "We have had many days off this year. It's not really a good precedent for my first year."

"She understands, and she's happy for us. She and Poppy will probably be making plans for the baby while we are gone. It's going to be a new experience for Hogwarts. I don't think a married couple has ever taught there in their child's early years."

Hermione ran a finger around his nipple and watched it tighten into a hard bud. She moved to take it into her mouth and then hummed against it as she teased it with her tongue. She felt him take in a swift, deep breath, and he let out a soft moan of pleasure.

"Hermione, why don't we go take care of our morning ablutions and then bathe in that huge tub? We can pick this up in there."

She nodded, slipping away and drawing him with her. In the bathroom they took turns relieving themselves, and Hermione found the tub already brimming with warm water.

"This tree or invisible house-elves think of everything." They slipped into the tub and washed each other with soft cloths and soap. Hermione loved having his legs locked around her as she scrubbed them. She loved the feel of his muscles and the dark hair that covered them. His feet and toes were long and well formed. She ran her hands over his legs as his hands came up behind her and soaped her stomach in slow, lazy circles and then slipped over her breasts. She could feel his hard shaft against her back, and she pressed gently against it and heard him groan. His hand slipped lower, covering her thatch of soft, curly hair, and she pressed against his hand. He slipped a finger in, running it over her soft folds. He pressed his lips against her neck and nipped her. She pushed against his legs, raising herself in the water, and he slipped into her from behind. Their movements were slow and gentle, and it didn't matter that it took them some time to build to a climax. They just closed their eyes and let their needs take over. Severus used his fingers to help her climax. One final thrust, and they fell over the pinnacle. Hermione collapsed back against his chest, and Severus wrapped his arms and legs around her.

Later, as they sat cross-legged on the bed and ate a breakfast of scones and tea, Hermione told Severus about a tree house her dad had built for her.

"There was a large tree in the backyard when I was a child. My dad built this tree house up inside the tree. It had the trunk of the tree right through one end and a trap door through the bottom. It was a big fig tree, and my dad fastened bicycle training wheel stirrups up the side of the tree so I could climb up the tree and into the little house. It had windows that hung down when they were open. The top over the part without the tree was camouflaged with leaves painted on canvas. I spent many hours up there reading."

Severus smiled and said, "There's a surprise." He feed her a cube of cheese. "It sounds like fun. I would have given anything to have a refuge like that."

She reached over and squeezed his hand. "I'm sorry your childhood was so terrible. I'm truly glad you found Lily to help you through it."

"She and I did find a space under a weeping willow for a time when we were young. It became our fort. Its branches hung over us like a canopy. It was a place I would run and hide in when my dad was in a fit of temper. But it was also a place of fun. We went one day and found a drunken homeless man had moved in, and he was a mean one. We never went back."

"My tree cracked in half and fell to the ground in a wind storm a few years ago. I sometimes go by the house just to remember my parents. The people that live there must have loved the little house because it was rebuilt in a corner of the back yard, and the stump of the tree is still alive and has small branches. I'm glad it's not gone for good."

"I'm glad your memories are good ones." He leaned forward and gave her a gentle kiss.

"It was a lifetime ago. I was always between worlds there. I think as I got older my parents became concerned and a bit afraid of the things I could do. We grew apart. My life with you, now, is the happiest I've ever been."

"You know it's the same for me, Hermione. Sometimes I wonder when the brick is going to fall from the sky and snuff me out. I never felt I deserved to be happy."

"Severus, you earned this happiness. Just accept it, and don't tempt fate to take it away. I'd crawl back into that bubble with you if I could guarantee us happiness."

"No one can do that." He put the tray aside and gathered her into his arms. "But we will certainly take every bit of happiness together we can find." His hand covered the swell of her stomach. "I am still terrified about the baby and also very excited."

"Me, too, Severus. Me, too. I was harboring a terror about letting house-elves take care of the baby, but I no longer feel that way. Our child will be in excellent hands when we are working. Look at the wonder of this magical place. They can certainly care for one tiny baby if they can harness the power of this realm."

"There is only a few months left of this school year. Then I will work with Minerva during the summer. She wants to tell me things she says I wasn't told about the school when I was headmaster for those brief months so many years ago...secrets only a true headmaster is allowed to know." Severus lay back against the pillows.

"...and maybe a headmaster's beloved wife," she teased him.

"Hardly! I think there are vows that go with the job. But then again, we are no longer at war, and I believe many of the castle secrets were secrets that would help us defeat Voldemort."

"Well, I guess you will find out." She sat next to him and asked, "What do you think we should give Scorpius and Albus to do next? We don't want to keep them idle."

"I have thought about it while I've been doing rounds. I think they should take on one of the hard cases at St. Mungo's. They have a unique way of building a potion from nothing. They can hear a description of the symptoms and understand what needs to be done and then work their way back to create that potion."

"They are brilliant. I hope that Lucius will really encourage Scorpius and not divert him from this path."

"I really think he will try to be encouraging. Maybe now that he's back home, he can appreciate more what he has. I truly would like to see Lucius become the wizard he was meant to be before Voldemort poisoned him. He was such a brilliant young man with amazing powers of empathy and gifted insight."

"I'd like to see that man, too. It's going to be hard for our society to accept him after his Death Eater activities."

"They accepted me back." He got off the bed and stood by the railing to look out over the vast tree.

Hermione slipped out of the bed and said, "Yes, they did. But you were a proven a spy for the Order, and he was not."

"I'm not sure if my association with him will help him or harm me," Severus ventured aloud.

"I guess you will find out. I want you to help him. I see now that what he did to me was blind pain. He was grieving for a bondmate. Knowing now the power of this connection, maybe we can understand having that torn away."

"Yes." He gathered her close. "Why don't we ask this tree to take us to the top so we can see where we really are?"

"Oh, gosh, I'm doing okay with having the tree around us like a shelter, but you know I hate tall, open places." She trembled at the thought.

"Oh come on, Hermione, give it a try. I won't let you go." He laughed, not really understanding her terror of open heights. A small, caged platform tethered by vines was swinging into view, and a door opened for them. Hermione gripped Severus' hand tightly but gave him a shaky smile and stepped into the cage with him. It rose very slowly up through the branches that parted to give it space. Hermione forgot her fear as she saw the world spread before them. The meadow they'd glimpsed below was only a small part of it. There were blue and purple mountains and a waterfall that looked at big as Niagara Falls flowing over cliffs. In a jungle some distance away, amazing birds flew lazily above them. "Severus, do you think it's real...not just an illusion?"

His voice was low with emotion at the beauty. "Does it matter? Magically enhanced rooms are just as real. I'm sure if we left the tree and walked to the falls it would feel and be as real to us."

"Of course," she said as she snuggled closer. "I would rather go back to our room and enjoy some more physical exertion there." She laughed.

"As would I, my wife. Back we go then." The little cage began to slip down toward their rooms.

Hermione's tree house mentioned above was a real tree house in my back yard. It stood in that fig tree 45 years before coming crashing down a couple years ago while I was away on vacation. My nephew rebuilt what he could salvage for my nieces and nephews to play it. It was reborn.

Thank you, Lisa, for your amazing beta work. You really are a trooper.

Becky, thanks for reading and finding small things to fix before Lisa gets the chapters. Angela, thank you for pre-reading as well and for your support.

Chapter 55

Chapter 55 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

Hermione and Severus decided to explore more of the tree the next morning. Hermione continued wearing only the white gossamer gowns she found there, and Severus wore soft pants and a tunic top. Their own garments lay forgotten in their bags. They only needed to think of something, and the tree provided it. Food came in simple snacks or complicated cooked meals. The kitchen was well stocked, but they only had to think of what they wanted and it was prepared by hands made of vines and placed before them. In the light of the day, they could see a vast meadow below, and tiny animals wandered freely about the grass and flowers. No doubt some of them were huge up close, but it was hard to tell what they were from so high up.

There were other trees in the distance. At night, lights could be seen from the windows of more homes. Hermione and Severus wondered if there were free house-elves here or if it was a vacation spot. The one thing Hermione had accomplished many years ago was to have each elf receive time off: two weeks a year. At first they had seemed concerned and at a loss, but then they had gladly packed and left each time.

Has all this come about because of my wife? Severus said, "Let's see if we can visit the meadow." He looked toward the trunk of the tree and asked, "Can we have transport to the meadow?"

There was a rustle from the leaves above, and then a small platform with railings appeared. Vines lowered it to them, and the railing before them drew back and gave them an opening. Severus turned to Hermione and reached for her hand, saying, "Your chariot, my goddess."

Hermione giggled and took his hand. They stepped onto the platform, and it slowly lowered through the limbs below. The majestic valley was huge and green. The platform came to rest near the massive roots of the tree. Severus hopped out and took Hermione's hand as she stepped away. The platform rose back into the tree.

They turned, staring at exotic flowers of all shapes and sizes. They came in colors Hermione knew she'd never seen before. As they moved deeper into the meadow, a large beast walked by. It glanced their way and continued on. It had a body like a bear and a long, slim neck with the head of a giraffe. Its pelt was orange and brown like a tiger. It munched only on grass. They wandered about, seeing more animals. Some looked like dinosaurs but were covered in rich plumes of soft feathers in every imaginable color.

"Severus, this is amazing. I wish I had a camera," she lamented.

"It's an enchanted place, Hermione. I doubt a camera would work...Wizard or Muggle."

She sighed. "You're probably right; no one will believe us." She released her hold on his hand and ran out into the middle of the meadow. Her hair was flying, and she looked like an enchanted fairy herself. As the breeze caught her gown, it blew back, framing the swell of their child and bringing tears to his eyes. His heart felt tight with the joy he was so unaccustomed to feeling. Yet lately, its powerful feeling attacked him from all sides.

Severus had a crazy urge to run and dance with her, but he only stood and watched her. Freedom and spontaneity were difficult for him. She dragged him into the field, and he let go and danced with her. Finally they fell into the soft grass and made love. Later they lay just looking at the tall tree before them. They were barely able to see their rooms so far above. They slept for a while...Severus on his back and Hermione curled against his side.

As the afternoon grew into evening, they went back up into the high branches of the tree, ate, and then decided to watch the sunset from their hammock. It was glorious. The sky lit in yellows, oranges, and fiery reds against the blue of the sky and the white of the clouds. They almost felt the warmth of fire touching them out on their branch, lying in the hammock in each other's arms.

Severus was rubbing soft circles around Hermione's stomach when the tiniest flutter occurred in the child nestled in her body.

Hermione asked, "Did you feel that?"

"Yes, I did." His voice was tight with emotion. Tears burned his eyes. "That was the most amazing thing I've ever felt," he said.

"I thought our bonding night was the most amazing thing," she teased, watching his face. "But I know what you mean. Do you know how rare it was for us both to feel the baby's first movement?"

"Pretty rare, I'd imagine." They lay with their hands pressed against her stomach, but no more movements came.

When the darkness came and they had eaten again, they sat in the library and looked at the books. Making love was forgotten for a time as they combed through books only mentioned in Wizarding history...books filled with amazing stories and accounts of the founders of their community as well as Hogwarts.

Hermione asked, "Do you think the house-elves have secreted these away over the centuries, or are they here for the asking?"

"We will have to find out when we get home. I never thought to ask a house-elf to bring me a rare copy of something I've searched for. I've only asked for things I knew were there and I'd misplaced."

"Why do you think they revealed this to us, Severus?" she asked, carefully turning the pages of what was probably a first edition of *Hogwarts: A History*. It included history that started well before any of the books she'd seen.

"They respect you, and there are many who knew you loved and cared for Dobby before and after his death. They love you. Maybe they like me, too, now because you love me. Maybe they are excited about the baby and look forward to such a young child amongst them at Hogwarts," he theorized, mostly just saying his thoughts out loud.

She came and sat in his lap, and he put aside the book he was holding and held her close.

"House-elves are such a mystery. They have enormous magical powers and yet they serve us without question...even the bad masters. Dobby had such a huge heart that he found the strength to rebel against the Malfoys in an effort to help Harry. I have nothing but love for their race."

"I can imagine they feel the same. I know of no one who has ever seen this place. There have been no rumors of a house-elf realm. You and I have been accorded a great privilege."

"Do you think we will be able to tell people about it?" she asked.

"We will see when we return to Hogwarts in a few days."

"I hate to go back, and yet I'm looking forward to being home with you and our work."

"I know the feeling. Having you here to ravish whenever I want is heaven," he said, sliding his hand over her breast and feeling the warmth of her skin beneath the thin, white fabric of the gown she wore. She nipped him in the neck and ran her tongue along the inside of his ear, and he shuddered with pleasure against her.

She pulled away and took his hand, pulling him to his feet and leading him to their bed. She drew him down and made him lie on his back. She proceeded to kiss and caress him, encouraging him to only touch her lightly and let her take the lead. She ignited every inch of his body, causing him to clutch at the bed covers as she straddled him and took him into herself. She finally gripped his hands with hers, threading her fingers as she moved slowly, building up their pleasure.

Severus thrust deeply, feeling his climax building and building till he could hardly contain it, and then she leaned down, kissing him deeply.

Hermione cried out with her climax. It pushed him over the edge, and their cries of pleasure echoed out over the valley. She collapsed on his chest, and he gathered her in his arms.

"I love you, Mrs. Snape," he told her, his voice deep with emotion.

"I love you, Mr. Snape." She snuggled into his chest and fell asleep.

Severus lay there holding her and thanking God...knowing there really was a God. He knew this life was something he had never expected to have; yet with the grace of some higher power, he had been spared thanks to the machinations of an old man. "I am thankful," he whispered to the air as he fell asleep.

By the end of the week, they were well rested and very content with their relationship. They stood naked against the railing that last morning and watched the sun come up. It bathed them with warmth and made them glow.

Their kisses were slow and lazy and full of contentment. They didn't speak but finally dressed in their Hogwarts robes. They stood at the rail again, holding their bags and trying to commit each detail of their amazing tree house to their minds. Then Hermione nodded to Severus. He took hold of the Portkey, and they were whisked away.

Slowly the house started to unravel and fade back into the tree.

They stood at the gates of Hogwarts, looking at the castle. "It's home, isn't it, Severus?"

"Yes, it's definitely home. I look forward to the challenges of the next year...personal and professional." He unwarded the gate, and they slipped through. After the wards were set, they shouldered their bags and walked hand-in-hand toward the castle.

They heard a great voice calling to them and saw Hagrid sitting by his door, waving. "Welcome back, ye two." He went back to what he was doing.

Hermione waved at him, smiling. *Yes, this is home.*

Students were out about the lawns, and Scorpius and Albus flashed by on their brooms, calling out to them, "You're back, woo hoo!" They swooped around them and then headed off toward the Quidditch pitch.

"Boys," Hermione said, laughing.

Severus grinned at her, and they hurried toward their rooms. Hermione flung herself on their bed and lay there while Severus looked on in amusement.

She clambered up before he could join her and kind of danced around, saying, "Home sweet home. The tree was amazing, but this is wonderful, too."

"You're how old?" he asked, smirking.

She smirked back at him. "It is good to be home."

"Yes, it is," he agreed, breathing in the scent of their lives. "I love you for your exuberance," he admitted. "I often wish to be so free."

She came to him and hugged him, whispering, "You just have to let yourself go."

"It's been bred out of me," he said.

"Well, with our child, maybe you will learn to play again." Hermione grabbed his hand and said, "Let's go see Poppy and see if we can tell her about the tree."

He nodded, bringing her hand to his lips. "Let's go, Madame Granger-Snape." He smiled and they went out the doors of their rooms and the classroom and up through the stairs and halls. Many students greeted them and congratulated them on their bonding.

They burst through the Infirmary door, calling, "Poppy?"

Poppy came from her door drying her hands on a towel. "You're back! I'm so glad."

They reached her and gave her a big hug each. Severus planted a kiss on her cheek.

"Stand back and let me look at you." She surveyed them both up and down. "My, you both look wonderful. Sev, is that a tan?"

"Is it?" He glanced at his hands. "I suppose it might be...though we had quite a canopy of shade around us most of the time."

"Where did you go?" she asked.

Hermione clasped her hands together and said, "A tree house. It was the most amazing place."

"Ah, the tree house. Yes, it is most amazing," she agreed.

"You know about the tree house?" Severus asked, eyeing her. "You never mentioned it."

"Come in and sit down, and I'll make tea. I'll tell you a little about it." She led them back into her rooms, and after she'd made the tea, they got comfortable.

"Some of the teachers here know about it. Only those who know will be able to hear what you have to say about it. It's really a deeply kept secret."

Severus said with disgust, "How come I'm just finding out? I was here for years before the bubble. I could have used a place like that to rehabilitate a time or two."

"Sorry, Sev. The house-elves didn't know if they could trust you then. They are very sensitive creatures. With the Death Eater tattoo, there was a sense of evil about you. Now that it's gone, you are part of the inner circle here."

He took a deep breath and waved his hand. "It doesn't matter. It was wonderful, and we had an amazing time."

Hermione, who had been concerned by his reaction, relaxed against his side. "It was the most amazing place I've ever seen."

"It's the house-elves' original home," Poppy explained. "Very few humans have seen it. Only those who show a kindness and a concern for them are taken there."

"Well, it was an amazing week. We had such a good, relaxing time. Lots of sleep... lots of play." Severus blushed.

Hermione grinned at him, taking his hand.

Poppy laughed. "Well, it obviously did you both a world of good. Severus, I think you do actually have a little color in your skin. You both look wonderful."

Hermione said with a sigh, "I guess it's time to get back to the real world and figure out what's next for us besides the baby coming. It's been months of ups and downs. Some normalcy would be nice."

Severus said, "Here, here! I will be working closer with Minerva until the end of the year and gradually taking on some of her duties and learning the ropes. I'll be becoming a little more familiar with the duties of Headmaster. I'd say this time around things have to be better."

"Well, we can only hope," Poppy said, picking up her knitting.

"You have your doubts, Poppy?" Hermione asked, amused.

"Well, interesting things seem to have occurred to you two all your lives," she said guardedly.

"Interesting, that's a way of putting it," Severus said with a smirk. "There are always surprises in teaching and running a school...and I'm sure in raising children. But I think we are up to it, aren't we, Hermione?"

"Children? I'm not having a brood," she said, touching her stomach.

"Well, having been an only child, I would hope you're up for at least one more." He hugged her close.

Hermione stared at him. "Who are you, and where have they taken my Severus?"

He laughed at her, and Poppy stared at him misty-eyed.

"But really, Severus, I quite agree with you, being an only child does have its drawbacks." She became a bit misty-eyed herself. "I was hoping you might like at least two children."

"You're the one who has to carry them, Hermione. Just know that if you wish to have another baby, I will support you all the way. There should be no angst in your thoughts about approaching me with the idea after our baby is at least a year old."

"You'd better wait until he's two to give me that offer. You may not like having a child. You never much liked teaching children, and you'll have to live with ours 24/7...at least for the first 11 years."

Severus sobered and told her, "Hermione, Albus and Scorpius have taught me that older children can be quite interesting and quite fun to be around. They can be well worth sticking your neck out for. I'm sure little ones can't be too much more difficult."

Hermione reached over to kiss him on the cheek. "Poppy, you're my witness." She settled closer into his arms, and he placed his hand on her stomach. "Poppy, we felt the baby move the first time, together."

Poppy got wide-eyed. "You're certain?" she asked. She got up and came closer.

"Why, does that mean something? I know it's rare, but it's just a coincidence, isn't it?" Severus asked.

"An old wizarding myth says it's a blessing. A special protection is supposed to be with you when the child is born...a sort of a natural Fidelius ward deters people from finding you when they have evil intent. May I?" she asked, holding her wand out.

Hermione said, "Of course." She was already planning to research this new situation.

Poppy said a spell as she waved her hand, and a gold and silver filigree web appeared in the air and covered all three of them. "It's like having a Felix Felicis potion at all times. Things may just work out for you two after all. Lots of luck and fortune are to come your way. Fortune doesn't always mean money; it can also mean love and happiness."

Severus sat there speechless. "Maybe I do need to go thank Albus again for the damn bubble. The blessings keep piling up."

Hermione said, "Maybe we should both go talk to him and tell him a bit about what has been happening to us lately. I miss seeing him, and Minerva would be thrilled."

Severus smirked, "She loves the old goat, doesn't she? Poppy, did they have a thing?"

Poppy said, "Best ask her. She might be willing to tell you."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "They were married, weren't they? They were married and never told anyone."

Poppy paled a bit. "Ask her, Sev. I have confidences to keep."

Severus stood. "We will do that in the next few days. I'd better get Hermione back to her classroom. I know she's anxious, aren't you, my dear?"

Hermione nodded with a smile.

"She has a lot to do so she can take over her classes tomorrow."

Hermione agreed and let him draw her to her feet. "I probably have mounds of parchments on my desk to check over."

Poppy hugged them both and then stood at her door and watched them walk arm in arm back through the infirmary and out the outer door.

Only two more chapters after this one. Please take the time to leave reviews. They are a writer's only reward.

Lisa, thank you once again for the beta work you do for me. I couldn't do this without you.

Chapter 56

Chapter 56 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

Severus and Hermione settled into the next few months of waiting for the baby. Hermione was so pleased to be back in her classroom full time. The children seemed to be happy and learning a great deal. Scorpius and Albus were so far advanced, from the students in their class, they were given permission to work in the back corner of the room on special projects that Hermione and Severus okayed.

Hermione's body began to swell at an alarming rate. By the last month, she was so uncomfortable that she asked Severus to teach her classes. Being around the cauldron fumes was not that good for her, and she found standing on her feet all day quite difficult.

Severus closed the door behind him as he entered the room after his first full day of teaching the class alone. Hermione was lying on the couch asleep. The book on her

huge belly was going up and down with her steady breathing. He smiled and took off his cloak and waistcoat and hung them up. He rolled up his sleeves and then kicked off his boots. He came close and took the book off, silently laying it on the side table. He knelt down next to her and caressed her hair and bent to place a kiss on her lips. He heard her sigh and felt her fingers snake into his hair, pulling him in closer for a deeper kiss. He drew back, and she was smiling at him. "How was your first day back in the classroom?"

"I enjoyed it," he said with a bit of wonder in his voice.

"Of course you did. You were born to be a teacher. All the other stuff was just growing pains."

He laughed, and a touch of bitterness worked its way in. "I could have done without the pain part of the growing."

"We all could have, Severus. But you wouldn't be the man I love without what you went through."

She tried to get up but couldn't, and he grinned and held out his hand. She grasped his hand and felt his other hand on her back, and he pulled her to her feet.

She rubbed her swollen belly. "I'm as big as a beach ball."

Severus rubbed her stomach and said, "I love beach balls...especially this one."

He walked with Hermione to the door of the loo. "Call me if you can't get back up." He placed a kiss on her cheek as she ran her fingers over his. She turned to head into the loo.

"Do you want to eat dinner here or in the Great Hall tonight?" Severus called in to her.

"Nothing sounds good. I've been having this craving..."

Severus said, guessing, "Sugar quills, Rosmerta's famous chicken pie, pudding, or some Muggle thing like a Twinkie?" He'd been all over for weird things since about the fifth month of the pregnancy.

So far he'd barely had to step into Muggle London except for a specialty store that had some unusual American fast food treats.

Hermione flushed the toilet and washed her hands. She came to the door, and Severus saw her grimace. "Did you have a pain?" He took her arm and slipped an arm around her waist. His voice was full of worry.

Hermione laughed. "No, Severus. I just don't think you will go for this one."

"Hermione, haven't I already gotten you everything you've craved?" He went to put his cloak back on, but Hermione picked up her wand and changed his clothes to Muggle clothing.

He looked down at the jeans and shirt. "Ah, so it's Muggle food. What is it this time, my love?"

"I want a Big Mac, fries, and a chocolate milk shake...and don't forget the hot apple pie."

"A what? Hermione, you want a fish?"

"A fish? I said a Big Mac not a mackerel." She laughed. She went to the couch and pressing one hand to her back and one to her stomach, she lowered herself awkwardly into a sitting position.

"Well, in that case, I need more details."

"The food I want is from one of those fast food American-style restaurants."

Severus grimaced and groaned, "Please tell me you're not serious. I can't go into London this late in the afternoon. It will be dark in no time."

"Please, Severus. I can't get it out of my mind. I need some comfort food. I can just taste the bun and the burger, slathered with secret sauce and the dill pickles. Or the fries, greasy and crispy with salt, the milkshake thick and chocolaty, and the apple pie, hot and sweet... please." She turned her big brown eyes on him, batted them at him, and then flashed him a grin full of love that she knew would get her anything."

"That's not fair. Those Muggle fast food places are full of shrieking, ill-mannered children. And they stink of grease and body odor."

"I know, Severus. I'm sorry, but I really don't think I can sleep without getting this craving satisfied tonight."

Severus sighed. He couldn't tell her the whole idea of venturing into Muggle London, alone, terrified him. The last time, he'd Apparated close to a shop and was in and out with the Twinkies in two minutes flat. Still some street woman had clutched at his hand and begged for coins.

The idea of going into one of those commercialized restaurants full of families made his stomach flip.

"Location?" he asked, turning away so she couldn't see the annoyance on his face.

"Leicester Square, Swiss Court, London." She said, "Look in the drawer by the bed. My wallet is in there. You'd best take £10.

"Ten? You can't be serious! Will it really cost that much?" He went to get the money.

"Well, you might find there's something you want." She lowered herself back onto the pillow and pulled her feet back on the couch.

Severus tucked the money into his jeans pocket and bent to give her a kiss on her lips. "I will be back as soon as possible. If anything comes up, send for Poppy immediately. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, sir," she teased him. "Thank you, Severus. Your son will be very proud of you when I relate this story."

"I doubt it." He turned and went to the Floo and took a hand full of powder. "Diagon Alley," he stated and stepped into the fireplace. He was gone in a cloud of green smoke.

Hermione smiled and let herself relax as she picked up her book.

Severus walked through the arch from Diagon Alley into The Leaky Cauldron. He passed through, not paying any attention to the odd looks he was getting from those who were surprised to see Severus Snape in Muggle attire.

Severus stood for a moment on the street then headed on Charing Cross Road to Oxford Road. He stood in the dimming evening light looking with disgust at the yellow arches. People from all walks of life seemed to be streaming to the restaurant. Shrieking, laughing kids were skipping, running, and hopping along with their parents. He was used to children 11 years and up. Exposure to babies and children younger made him stare with hidden fear. He stepped into the restaurant and eyed the tables of families. One mother was mopping the face of a crying child. The child seemed to be leaking fluid from every orifice on its face. Severus couldn't tell whether it was a boy or girl. With drool, tears and bogies, it was a complete soggy mess. For the second time that night, his stomach rolled. Another child was stuffing some small round

unidentifiable thing into his mouth, which was also covered in white sauce. He averted his eyes and took his place in the queue. He looked up to study the menu, picking out the items Hermione had wanted. Yes, he would have enough to buy something. He would order a number 5: an Angus Bacon & Cheese burger with fries and a drink. He thought he might try a McFlurry. Ice cream and cookies sounded good. He felt something slam into his legs and looked down to see a tiny boy looking up at him with huge black eyes. One very sticky hand was pressed against the leg of his pants. He was about to grab the boy and push him away when the child smiled at him.

"Sowwy," the boy said. "Jimmy's after me. He wants my Shrek." He held up a fat green plastic thing that looked sort of like a troll.

Severus saw a hand reaching out for the toy. He grabbed the other boy's arm, firmly but not exerting any pain. "Jimmy? It's not polite to take others' toys."

A harried looking woman hurried up and said, "I'm sorry, sir. Nicholas, tell the nice man you're sorry and come sit down." She grabbed Jimmy and pulled him to her side as Severus released him.

Nicholas looked up into Severus' eyes and said, "I'm sowwy I bumped you."

Severus suddenly wondered if his son would someday look like this. The boy was beautiful. He had large black eyes and curly hair. He reached out and touched the boy's head, feeling the silky black hair. "No harm done, Nicholas. Be gone with you; go back to your table." He smiled down at the boy.

Severus looked at Jimmy with a stern frown. The boy tucked into his mother's side. "Sorry sir." He turned and ran back to his table.

Severus looked at the sticky spot on his pants leg and then back at the boy who was now pretending to walk the fat, green monster around his table. He was laughing and talking a blue steak. Other parents were smiling or hugging their children. One mother clapped when her child sucked successfully from his straw. Severus realized that the parents may look harried from a day of child chasing, but most of their faces were lit with love and happiness as they gazed into the faces of their children. Severus suddenly found the idea of having a boy like Nicholas appealing.

A voice interrupted his thoughts: "Sir, can I have your order?"

Severus turned to the young woman and started to name off his list of choices.

When Severus stepped back through the Floo into their rooms, he found that Hermione had fallen asleep again.

He sat the bag of food and drinks on the dining table. He came and kissed her awake for the second time that night.

She let him help her up from the couch, and they moved slowly into the kitchen.

"Oh Severus, you did it." She grabbed some fries and stuffed them into her mouth, chewing with relish.

He eyed the fry and then took one and fed it slowly into his mouth. He chewed it carefully as if he was eating a worm, and then his eyebrows rose. Hermione laughed and said, "You like it!"

"It is quite good," he admitted as he folded the paper wrapper half down her burger and then handed it to her. He watched as she took an enormous bite and pink sauce slipped out and dripped onto the table. He smiled as she moaned with pleasure.

"Oh, Severus, this is wonderful. I can't remember eating at McDonald's more than a handful of times when I was a kid, but I loved it so much. She took a hard suck of shake from her straw. "Oh, that's good. I'm in seventh heaven."

He unwrapped his own burger and took a big bite. Hermione watched in amusement as his eyes shut. "That is good," he admitted. Having lived most of his life at Hogwarts, he found the food well made but familiar. It was nice to have something that tasted different.

"Was it as horrible as you expected, Severus? I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked you to go."

He eyed the sticky spot on his leg and then smiled at Hermione. "Actually, it was educational."

"How so?" she asked, stuffing several more fries in her mouth.

"Small children may be a handful and a lot of work, but they are valuable and can bring great pleasure and fulfillment."

Hermione stared at him. "You learned that from a trip to McDonald's?"

"Indeed," he said, stuffing a few fries into his mouth.

"Remind me to send you more often." She laughed, but her eyes glowed with happiness that somehow during this trip he'd seemed to have left his fear behind at having to deal with a baby or young child.

After dinner, they crawled into bed. Hermione tried to arrange the pillows to help make her comfortable, which seemed almost impossible this late in her pregnancy. She finally lay back with a sigh. Severus joined her. As they lay in bed, Severus pressed his ear to Hermione's naked belly and listened to the faint movements of his son. He felt the baby kick against his fingers, which rubbed her ever so slowly. She slowly caressed his hair.

"I can't wait until I can hold our baby, Severus."

"Neither can I. I never imagined being a father before you came into my life. Some of it still scares me, but I'm looking forward to the challenge."

"I'm scared, too, Severus. We will have a baby that's totally dependent on us for everything. I like our time. I like laying in peace in our bed and making love when we want. But I'm also looking forward to the challenge and joys of child rearing."

"We will have to find time for us...even if we have to use a Time-Turner," she joked.

"I hardly think Minerva will give us a Time-Turner in order to have sex," he drawled as he began to kiss her belly, sliding his hand over the round mound and then up to cup her breast. "They are larger. It's a beautiful thing to know the change will nourish our perfect boy."

He moved to take a nipple into his mouth and slide his tongue over it and made her moan with pleasure. Her fingers threaded into his hair, and she stroked his hair as he continued to ignite her passion and his own need for her.

His hands and fingers caressed her and massaged her. His fingers slipped into her and moved gently as she pressed down against them.

"Severus, move behind me," she coaxed. He stretched out behind her and rolled her to her side, facing away from him. Kissing her neck gently and placing one hand around her to continue pleasuring her, he helped her part her legs and slowly he moved to enter her. It was a bit awkward, but he managed it, and he started to move in and out as she pressed herself back against him. He put his arm around her to support and hold her close, and his finger slipped into her from the front, pressing his fingers against her nub and stimulating her until she was tensing with an orgasm. Her muscles clamped around him, and he came with a groan and held her close.

"I never tire of you, my wife. Each time is as good as the first."

Hermione rolled to her back, and he pushed up onto his elbow to look down into her face.

"You're so beautiful. There's such an amazing glow about you. Having our baby really makes you fulfilled doesn't it?" he observed.

Hermione slid her fingers over his cheek and said, "Being in love with you, being your wife, and having your baby agrees with me. I never thought I'd be this happy, Severus. I came back to Hogwarts to live with a ghost, a mere memory of you. By a ghost of a chance, I found you alive and eventually in the flesh." She drew his face down into a kiss that made Severus believe anything was possible.

Lisa, thank you for your beta work. We are nearly there. One more to go. It has made this whole process so much easier for me.

Readers: Please leave reviews. It is the only thanks we writers get.

Chapter 57: Epilogue

Chapter 57 of 57

After the war, Severus finds himself only aware when someone comes to mourn him. Is this death?

Well, we have come to the long-awaited end of *A Ghost of a Chance*. I hope you enjoyed the story. It was a long labor of love to get it all posted. I started posting at the beginning of 2010. I believe most the story was written by then or at least two thirds of it. I have really enjoyed working on it.

This is the last chapter. Please leave a review even if you haven't before, and leave one even if you have. I have so appreciated all the reviews left by faithful readers, who have made themselves known, and the occasional ones left by someone touched by a particular scene.

Now onto the final chapter...

Hermione bore down: The pains were coming quite regularly and very quickly, and she barely had time to catch her breath in between them. She could see Severus' concerned face swimming in and out of her view as the tears ran from her eyes. She felt him dab them from her face with his fingers. He was pressing kisses to the back of her head. She knew she was practically breaking his fingers; she was clutching his hand so tightly. She could see Poppy's face over the swell of her stomach, between her knees.

She felt Severus, who was sitting behind her as he pressed against the upper part of her stomach, as Poppy instructed them to push. Hermione let out a scream as she felt the baby's head crown and then the relief as the baby slipped from her body. She was sobbing, and she thought she heard Severus sobbing as well.

Poppy stood, and she had a bundle in her arms. She moved to Hermione's side and laid the baby down on her stomach. "She's beautiful," Poppy said. "She's perfect in every way—right down to her 10 tiny toes."

"Severus, look at her. She's beautiful," she sobbed.

He reached over her and let one of the baby's soft, golden curls slide over his finger. Then he threaded his fingers into his wife's and said, "Thank you, Hermione. I thought the birth of our two sons could not be topped, but she's perfect. She looks like you, and you're the greatest love of my life."

"What will you call her?" Poppy asked as she covered Hermione and the baby with a warming charm.

Hermione grinned at her as she held the baby close to her. "Her name is Poppy Minerva Jean Snape."

"Oh." Poppy's face crumbled.

Severus moved out from behind Hermione, settling her back against a thick pile of stark white pillows. He put his arms around his mom. "Poppy, you have been so important to my life. I doubt I would have survived to get to that damnable bubble if it hadn't been for you." He held her till she stopped crying and pushed him away to go back to bustling around Hermione.

Hermione grinned at Severus as he came to place a kiss on her lips and caress the soft skin of his new daughter's cheek. "Severus, call the boys in and Minerva; well, let them all in. I know Harry and Ginny will be out there with their brood."

Severus grinned. "It's quite a brood, isn't it? Your extended family is as much mine now as yours." He kissed her forehead and then headed for the door of the infirmary. When he opened it, he was sure there were hundreds of people. Nearly every existing Weasley stood there. He thought wryly that the red hair would blind him. Then he could see scads of students, staff, house-elves and maybe the minister himself. He felt a tug at his heart that all these people cared for Hermione and him now.

"Harris Scorpius Severus and Edward Albus Wolfgang, front and center." A tall seven-year-old stepped up front. He was nearly the spitting image of his father. He had ebony, shoulder-length hair and deep, intelligent eyes, but there the likeness ended because Harry was a Quidditch player. Sometimes he was allowed to practice with the teams. Severus placed a hand on his shoulder; he was a credit to his namesake, Harry Potter, who stood there among the adults waiting with expectant faces. "Edward Brian Wolfgang, where are you?" A smaller five-year-old came out from behind Ginny Potter. Severus knelt next to the boy, who had short curly golden-reddish hair. His eyes were like looking into Hermione's. "Boys, Mum is doing great. Do you want to come meet your sister..." He glanced at Minerva, who stood leaning on a silver, cat-headed cane. "... Poppy Minerva Jean Snape?" The crowd broke out clapping.

Minerva smiled, and a tear slipped down her wrinkled cheek. Harry placed an arm around her, ready to help her into the room. "Unhand me, you whelp," she teased. "I'm not dead yet. I can make it on my own steam."

Harry, now in his mid-40s, grinned at the woman who was probably pushing 100. "I just bet you can, you stubborn, old woman."

Minerva was an honorary great-grandmother in the Potter family now. She loved it when he teased her. "Congratulations, Severus," she said as Severus stood.

"Thank you, Harry. Give us five minutes, and then you all come and see our new daughter. She's beautiful."

Harry nodded. Even after all these years, the love and joy in Severus Snape's eyes stunned him. Harry turned away and started to organize the crowd.

Severus went slowly, waiting for Minerva to hobble along with them. She took a chair that Poppy had placed for her on the left side of the bed. The boys climbed onto stools that Poppy had conjured by the bed. Hermione smiled at them and folded back the pink blanket so they could look at their new sister.

Edward said, "She's very small, Mum. She's not gonna be able to play with me at all."

Hermione reached out to squeeze his hand. "No, not just yet; but she'll be walking in a year."

"A whole year!" the boy whined.

Severus saw his older son grin. "I waited for you to get bigger, sport. I guess you'll wait for Poppet."

"Poppet?" Severus asked, looking at Poppy.

Poppy grinned. "Sounds good to me. I was called Poppet in grade school."

Hermione grinned. "Poppet." She caressed the head of her tiny baby.

The door opened at the other end of the room, and people crowded in, anxious to look at the baby. Harry, who was guiding them, was cautioning his children, "Just look, no touching." Severus moved with the boys to the head of the bed, and Harry and Ginny came first. They kissed Hermione and gazed at the tiny baby. They had four children of their own. Albus and James had twin sisters, Lily and Molly.

Severus looked over the crowd of faces and saw two he hadn't seen for a few years. He broke away from his family and enveloped the two tall men—one blond and one redhead. "Scorpius, Albus, it's great to see you. I can't imagine one tiny baby would pull you away from that lab of yours."

"We had to come, Uncle," they said almost in unison. They went to the bed with Severus' hands still at their backs. Each pressed a kiss to Hermione's forehead and gazed at the baby. Hermione stared into the faces of two men. They were so grown up. She looked into her husband's eyes and saw his pride. They couldn't be more his sons than the two boys she had birthed.

One by one people came, and the room filled with everyone gazing at the baby. Molly and Arthur were still going strong. Their 30 plus children and grandchildren filed quickly by. Many of them were Hogwarts students. Then came a tall red-haired man with a blonde wife. Severus gave him a stern look and then grinned, sticking out his hand. "Ron, I'm glad you could make it. Susan, it's good to see you again."

Hermione found herself misty eyed. The two men in her life who'd had problems with each other had managed to become friends. It had happened when Ron had really fallen in love and had married Susan Bones. They had a little girl now. Things were finally, completely, right.

Faces of students and many others, like Luna and Neville, who was now the Herbology professor at Hogwarts. Draco came through with Pansy as well. There were so many, but Harry herded them through and then sent everyone to the Great Hall for a special dessert prepared by the house-elves for the occasion of Headmaster Snape and Madam Snape's new baby.

Finally, Harry helped up Minerva, who still lived in the castle, and they walked out of the infirmary, leaving the Snapes and Poppy alone.

One more face stood expectant at the door, and Hermione saw Severus' face light up.

Lucius gave her a gentleman's bow and asked, "May I take a peek at the new baby?"

Hermione held out her hand to him, and he smiled and stepped close. He placed a chaste kiss on the back of her hand. He'd proved over and over since his release from Azkaban that he was different and that he could be trusted. They had developed a close friendship.

"She's beautiful, Severus, Hermione." He raised his hand and then looked at Severus. Severus nodded, and a soft white glow appeared from Lucius' hand, bathing the baby in a special blessing.

Lucius had become a Healer at St. Mungo's three years ago. One day Draco had been in a terrible accident. Using the strength he once used for evil, Lucius had turned it around and had saved his son, healing his wounds. It had changed his life. He was now known now for his strength and power for good.

Poppy stood watching the light bathe her granddaughter and felt more content than ever. So many things had happened in the last eight and a half years. So many hard times had turned the Wizarding world into a place of growth, prosperity and peace. She knew it was mostly because of the ability her son had learned: the ability to forgive and forget. Severus Snape was and had everything she had ever desired for him.

Lucius turned and said, "Thank you for letting me see her. She's a strong baby and will have strong powers. I'm going to let you get some sleep, Hermione. I will come back to visit in a week."

Severus hugged Lucius to him. "Thank you, brother. Look at us. We have families we can be proud of—families who work for the good of our world. Did you ever think..."

"No, never, Severus, but the peace in my heart is complete. I'm going home to talk to my wife." He gave Poppy's arm a squeeze before leaving the room.

Poppy said, "I'm going to go get some tea. Hermione, try to sleep. You can place the baby in this crib." She waved her wand, and the chair Minerva had been sitting in turned into a little bed attached to Hermione's bed. "Call me if you need me, but you're old hands at this."

Severus leaned down and kissed Hermione's forehead, then moved to her lips. She lazily sighed and said, "Severus, could our life get more perfect?" She was still caressing the baby's curls. "Help me get her to latch on."

Severus picked the baby up and held her close for a moment. He placed a kiss on her cheek. "She's so beautiful. It's going to be hard to get used to all the pink."

Hermione laughed as she bared her breast, and he held the baby up against her nipple. The baby latched on and they watched her suck greedily. "She's like her father," Hermione said and then grinned devilishly at him.

Severus threw his head back and laughed; the sound startled the baby but she went on sucking with relish. "You just wait till we find some time alone, in a few weeks. I will give that baby a run for her money. I'm a breast man through and through."

Hermione smiled at him as she wound her fingers in his and sighed with exhaustion.

"Hermione, would you mind if, once you fall asleep, I take her up and show her to Albus? I won't be gone more than 20 minutes. I'll have Poppy come in and sit with you."

She took hold of his hand. "Of course not. I wouldn't have it any other way. Albus will be tickled pink." She felt her eyes slide closed, and then she opened them to find Severus smiling at her with such love. This man was so different, and yet the differences had come over years of learning and growing in their love and their lives.

The baby had pulled away and was sleeping. Severus went and moved the baby to her little bed and sat with Hermione as she slipped into sleep. He could not fathom how he deserved the life he had now, but he was blessed and grateful for it. Severus Snape had many, many good friends. He played with the children, and he headed the school with strength and love. People loved him.

He stood and summoned Poppy, who picked the baby up and placed her in his arms. She watched as he left the room. She turned to Hermione and smiled at the sleeping woman. Then she took a chair next to the bed and let herself doze off.

Severus placed a warming charm on his new daughter and walked to the gargoyle who once guarded his office. It no longer kept the way locked. It stood opened and grinned at him as he passed with the baby. Severus rode the stairs upward and then walked through the open door of his office. There was a soft clapping, and he saw that the people in each portrait were trying to get a look at the new baby. It had become a ritual of his to bring each new baby up and show Albus. He held the baby up and turned slowly, letting them look. Then he stood before Albus, whose eyes were bright with mirth. "Severus, she's beautiful. How's Hermione?"

"She's sleeping. She did so well—no problems. Poppy's watching her. Albus, this is Poppy Minerva Jean Snape. Poppet, this is my dearest friend, Albus," he said sincerely.

"Hello, Poppet," Albus said, beaming down at the baby's face.

Severus looked up at Albus. "Thank you for the bubble, Albus. Thank you for my life."

Albus could only nod as tears streamed down his face. "You're welcome, son."

Severus nodded and then turned to head back to the infirmary. He glanced back and said, "Thanks, Dad." He did not see the smile that broke out on Albus face nor hear the standing ovation Albus got from his peers.

Severus returned to the infirmary and bid Poppy good night. He placed the baby in her little bed. He used his wand to enlarge the hospital bed and crawled in, gently pulling Hermione close.

Hermione woke for a moment and snuggled against him. "I'm glad you're here now. I can really sleep."

"Do you know how much I love you, Mrs. Snape?" he asked.

Hermione smiled sleepily and said, "As much as I love you, Mr. Snape."

"God truly has blessed us."

"Yes, he has. Now sleep, my love. There will be only a ghost of a chance that we will get any sleep in the next six months." With that Poppet started wailing, and Hermione and Severus laughed as they reached for her.

Lisa, what a ride this took us on. I have been so blessed with your continued beta work on all of my stories. I don't know what I would have done without your steadfast help. Thank you *SO* much.

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