

Our Fate is What We Make It

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Chapter 1 of 7

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Hermione sat pressed up against the headboard of a canopied bed. The curtains were emerald green and black. The wood of the bed was dark cherry, and carved snakes spiraled up each bedpost. She really didn't see much of the room. Her body quaked with fear. She'd woken up on the bed with her clothes gone. She wore only a thin, white nightgown. She'd already tried the door. She'd screamed for help and pounded until her hands were raw, but of course no help had come. She pressed her hand to her forehead. She'd discovered a goose egg-sized lump there. She tried to remember what had happened. The Final Battle, dead, dying, blood, curses flinging past her, and magical energy sizzling in the air about her. Hogwarts was in ruins. She shuddered as she remembered Voldemort's red, serpentine eyes as she'd been tossed at his feet. It all came flooding back. Voldemort's laugh of triumph. Harry was dead, and she thought Ron was, too. Oh Merlin, she remembered. She'd been given to a Death Eater. Since he'd been robed and masked, she had no idea who he was. He'd only nodded in agreement, grabbing her by the arm and Disapparating away with her.

She leaned her forehead carefully against her knees and rocked back and forth. What did it matter what happened to her? Her world, maybe all the world, had come to an end. All Muggles were forfeit now. The devil was in charge. Whoever the masked Death Eater was, she only hoped he would kill her quickly. She had no doubts what he

would do to her first. Finding herself here in the room in this bed was self-explanatory. She heard a distant door and then heavy footsteps. A key rattled at the door, and she saw the sizzle in the air as a ward came down.

The tall Death Eater opened the door and stepped into the room. He stood staring at her. She pressed herself harder against the headboard, willing herself to vanish, but of course she didn't.

He turned from her, taking off his dark cloak and frock coat. He reached up and took the mask off; his back was still to her. He had dark hair tied in a string at his neck. He reached back and pulled his hair free.

Finally he turned. Hermione gasped as his hate-filled eyes raked over her with disgust.

"Why didn't you have the good sense to get yourself killed like the rest, girl?"

"Prof... fessor S... nape?" She scrambled to her feet.

"Girl, put some clothes on," he snarled.

Fear overwhelmed her anger, and she lashed out at him. "You must have put me in this thing. Where are my clothes?"

He only turned and grabbed a robe from his closet and flung it at her.

"The house-elf put you in bed. She had the Dark Lord's orders to prepare you for tonight. You were given to me as a gift. You know what for. Where is that know-it-all brain of yours now?" His voice was bitter and harsh. "Bloody hell, how did I ever get into this position?" He ran his hand through his hair. "I never wanted to live through this war." He turned toward her and pointed a finger into her face. "Your bloody Potter was supposed to kill that monster. Now what!" He went to a cabinet and grabbed a bottle and drank directly from it.

"Getting drunk won't help!" Hermione screamed at him.

"It will help me," he said. Pushing past her, he flung himself on the bed.

Hermione came to stand by the bed. "Where are we?"

"My home."

"Where?" she demanded.

"Granger, do you not understand the situation you are in? You have no rights; you have nothing. You are chattel to me. I do not have to answer any of your questions. You are for pleasure only. I should just beat you to a pulp and be done with it." He took another deep swallow from the bottle.

Hermione shrank back. "You won't, will you?" Her voice trembled.

He jumped up and grabbed her by the arm, and she knew from the pain there would be bruises. He pulled her close until his face was inches from hers. "Do not presume you know me. The man who was your teacher is no more."

Hermione was frightened half to death. Her head was pounding, and she felt the world around her go black.

Snape saw her face go white, and then she slumped. If he hadn't been holding on to her, she'd have fallen to the floor. He half dragged her to the bed. Setting his bottle down, he picked her up and placed her on the bed. As her hair fell back, he saw the lump on her forehead. "Fancy," he yelled.

A small, trembling house-elf appeared.

"Why didn't you tell me she was injured?"

"Fancy not see." The little elf began to back away.

Snape said, "I'm not going to hurt you. Go into the bathroom and bring me the potion in the red bottle."

The little elf scurried away. She was back in seconds with the bottle.

Snape took the bottle and poured a bit into Hermione's mouth. He pushed back the hair further from her forehead and watched the swelling until it was nearly gone.

"Go."

The house-elf vanished, and Snape sat on the edge of the bed looking down at Hermione. She was no child anymore. He knew she'd passed her 17th birthday, the age of maturity in the wizarding world. It did not help this situation. How could he do what was expected of him in this world and live with himself.

"Bloody Potter," he cursed again.

He had to thank Merlin that the girl had been given to him. He had no idea why the Dark Lord had done that, knowing his history with her. Perhaps he knew this would torture him as much as the girl.

Hermione had woken up and was watching him. He had half turned his face and was thinking so hard that he hadn't noticed her watching him. She saw pain, regret, and disgust pass over his face. She also saw fear. Whatever he was thinking was ripping through his emotions. Finding he had them was somehow a relief to Hermione. When he realized she was watching, a scowl appeared on his face, and he stood and moved away.

"Why didn't you tell me you were injured? That could have been dangerous," he growled.

"If you're going to beat me to death, what difference would it make?" she shot back at him.

"I could break your neck." He got in her face again, and she shrank deep into the bed. "It would be easy and nearly painless. You might find it easier than what's in store for us," he told her, retrieving his bottle.

"Us? You're the Death Eater...probably one of the elite. Why would you have to suffer anymore?"

He turned and looked at her, his eyes tortured. "You have no concept. Terror will reign, innocent lives will be lost, and torture will be the norm. He does not care for us any more than he does you." He pulled open his shirt, and Hermione gasped. His chest was riddled with scars.

She got to her feet and came close. "You were an Order member...a true spy for Dumbledore working against Voldemort?"

Snape nodded.

Hermione reached up and touched his chest ever so gently with her fingers, tracing the scars.

"For Harry, for his mum, for the Order, for the school..." She went on naming them. Her voice held wonder in it."

Snape was so shocked he stood letting her touch him.

"...for Dumbledore."

He snatched her hand away and pushed her. She fell back onto the bed with her eyes wide with fear.

"I murdered him, just as he asked me to." His voice was bitter.

"He asked?" Suddenly it was clear to her why. She had researched when she had seen the old wizard's injury. She had known it would be fatal, but she had not shared that news with Harry. She thought that Dumbledore's death would be hard enough on him, and it was. At the time, she wouldn't have burdened him further.

"...for that, I deserved death." Snape continued, "I was not supposed to live..." His head hung in shame for the taking of the life of his friend.

Hermione took a deep breath and touched his arm with her hand. He did not draw away. She dared to slip her arms around his waist and hold on tight. God knew she needed to hold on as much as she thought he needed to be held. She feared him, but she also saw his fear. That made him more human. Maybe she wasn't in the worst of situations, and she thanked God she had not been given to McCalbair, Malfoy or Goyle.

"All is not lost, sir. We can take up the fight."

Snape, trying to get over the shock of her hug, pushed her way reluctantly. "This is our fate. We do what we are told. There is no fight; the fight is lost."

"No, it will never be lost as long as I have breath," she reiterated.

"I'm tired of the fight. I have spent years fighting and suffering, for nothing." His voice was bitter. He suddenly flung the bottle away and grabbed her by both arms. His lips pressed against hers, and his tongue delved roughly into her mouth. Then he moaned and tossed her away. "It matters not, none of this. I cannot do what is required of me tonight; we are both dead."

Hermione's hand went to her mouth; his kiss had been so full of hunger.

"You're supposed to rape me tonight!" She stared at him in horror.

"Yes." He went to the fireplace and pounded his hand on the mantle.

"But you won't?" she asked, trembling.

"No. Regardless of what you think of me, Miss Granger, I am not a rapist of children."

"I am not a child anymore, Professor." Ideas flew through her head. Survival was the most important thing to her right now.

"No, I see that you are not," he said, turning to look at her with desire on his face...desire and shame.

"What are the conditions? Just that you take me? Does it have to be forced?"

"No," he let his forehead fall to the mantle's cool surface.

Bile rose in her throat, but she swallowed it down and plucked up her courage. She came close again. "If I cooperate, will you fight with me?"

He turned and stared at her. "You would let yourself be used by me?" He could not stop the hope that sprang into his eyes. Maybe there was a solution.

"Not used... given freely. I need something here to hold on to. We have both lost so much in the last few days. I can think of worse people to end up with than you. We have a history, a common fight. We can work together. Our fate is what we make it."

"But I'm the disgusting bat of the dungeons," he said with disdain.

She smirked at him. "Yes, you are, sir...to some, but not to me. You are a man I have respected."

"Your respect is misplaced, Granger. I have spent my life serving only my selfish need for survival."

"I hope not, and I don't believe you. No one selfish would have gone through what you have to help others. Please consider it. Do you really prefer death?" she asked.

He stared at her a long time. "No," he said, finally moving closer to her. The hunger was back in his eyes.

Hermione held up her hands to stop him and said, "One request: take a shower and clean up."

He glared at her and then looked down at himself. His clothes were still stained with blood and grime from the battle.

"Please?" she asked in a frightened voice.

He nodded. With a smirk on his face, he went into the bathroom and closed the door.

Hermione was seized with panic. *I just agreed to shag Professor Snape.* She took ragged, deep breaths and tried to calm herself. His kiss earlier had taken her by such surprise. The intensity had made her head swim. She almost tried to hang on when he'd pulled away. Contrary to Snape's belief, he did not repulse her; he never had. She took a deep breath. *I can do this. I can.* Did he know she was a virgin? Should she tell him?

She heard the shower in the bathroom. She herself felt clean; Fancy had probably cleaned her up with magic. She sat trembling on the edge of the bed and wondered what had happened to her wand. Trying hard to think about something else other than the man who was going to take her to his bed in a short time, she got up and wandered around the room. It was sparsely decorated. There were few personal things on the dresser. It looked like he didn't stay here often. She guessed he hadn't; he'd lived at Hogwarts most of the year. There were lots of books on shelves, tables, and nearly every surface with a flat top. She wished things were different and she could look through them and curl up in the chair that faced the fire and read.

The door opened, and she turned to find Snape in a simple black, floor-length robe. It was tied at the waist. His hair was clean and dry and laying about his shoulders. His face was guarded, and she could see he was nervous.

Taking a deep breath, she took the robe from her shoulders and laid it over the chair. She stood only in her white, gauzy gown. He stepped further into the room and stood by the bed. "Come to me, Hermione; come of your own free will." He held out his hand, and she walked over to him and placed her hand in his. She saw his face fill with wonder.

He pulled her to face him and bent, and his lips touched hers in such a gentle way. Hermione leaned into the kiss and placed her hand against his chest. She let him access her mouth, and his tongue slid softly against hers. Merlin, he was a good kisser. She let her hand slide up his shoulder and around his neck, drawing her body closer to his. He tasted of cloves and mint. His hair smelled of herbs and was soft to the touch.

"Hermione," he groaned against her mouth, and she was lost. His need for comfort from her washed over her, matching her own.

"Severus," she said and then felt his body stiffen against her. "I'm sorry, sir," she murmured.

"No, it's okay. I was just surprised." He touched her face with his fingers. "You are very beautiful."

Hermione stared at him. "No one's ever said that to me."

"You are." He bent to capture her lips. He pulled her close and set about making her legs weak with desire for him. Those words echoed through her mind. She desired him. When had that happened? Was it true desire for him or just a fierce need to connect right now, to feel gentleness from someone? No, she remembered a dream she had about him when she was younger. It had changed her thinking about him. Her thoughts were scattered as he picked her up and put her into the bed and then crawled in, covering her with his body as he continued to kiss her.

Why have I never noticed how sexy he is? she thought as his hands began to roam over the soft, cotton gown, feeling her body beneath it. He sighed as his hand covered one breast. He seemed to just weigh its size in his hand, and when his fingers felt her nipple tighten, he pinched the tip gently.

Hermione moaned against his mouth, and her body arched against his.

"My wanton witch, so you find pleasure?" His deep sexy voice washed over her.

"Yes," she gasped as his hand roamed further down her body.

"It pleases me," he said. "Take my robe off," he ordered her.

Her eyes opened wide, and she blushed at the thought of undressing him. But she fumbled at his robe belt, and it opened, and she pushed the robe down his shoulders. He pulled his arms free, and she realized he was naked beneath it. That was logical since he'd known what they would be doing.

She trembled beneath him as her desire for him ignited.

"Do not be afraid," he begged her.

"It's not fear; it's desire," she said. "I want you."

"No one has ever wanted me," he said. His hands stilled, and his voice carried a bitter sadness.

"Severus, I am here for you. Take me." Her hands urged his body on, and she slid them down his back, urging him to join with her. He took hold of the thin gown she wore and pulled it over her head. He tossed it aside.

His hands touched her, and his lips followed his hands. She lay back with her fingers tangled in his hair and her body on fire with need. She'd always thought her first time would be with Ron on their wedding night...not here, not with this man, not like this. She realized she was feeling more passion than she'd ever felt from Ron's groping hands. She pushed thoughts of Ron away and let herself surrender to Severus Snape. *It is for the good of the fight*, she told herself, but she would not have stopped him if she could. Her body would not be denied.

"Touch me," he groaned against her nipple.

She let one of her hands slide between them, and she found him hard and warm against her. She took him in her fingers, and then her hand closed around him. He groaned with pleasure, and she realized she had power over him, too. She could make Severus Snape want her. She could make him moan with pleasure.

He slid his hand between them and slipped a finger into her, finding her slick. He didn't ask whether she was ready but took himself in hand and positioned himself. He thrust deeply and felt her hymen break. He was stunned a moment and froze. "You should have told me," he hissed.

"It makes no difference now, so shut up and move!" she demanded, thrusting against him.

He sneered at her and then began to move, thrusting hard and withdrawing over and over. He was not gentle now; he was lost in the absolute need and desire to possess her. And she didn't seem to be complaining.

Her body met his, thrust for thrust, and she cried, "Deeper, Severus, harder."

He felt his climax coming, and when her muscles clamped around him in her own final throes of passion, he came, filling her with his seed. He collapsed on her. His weight was heavy and nearly knocked the breath out of her.

Hermione, suddenly realising what she had just done and who she had done it with, pushed at his chest. "Please, get off. I need to breathe."

He smirked but rolled away with a grunt. Getting up from the bed, he got his wand and a vial and collected the blood from her broken hymen.

Hermione watched him, somewhat amused. "We just had mind-blowing sex, and you want to collect potion ingredients?"

"Granger, this may give us another day of life. It will please the Dark Lord. This is a rare ingredient." He took it too the Floo and sent it away with orders for it to be delivered to the Dark Lord as proof he had done what was required of him. He then returned to the bed, flopping in next to her. He turned his back to her. "Now sleep," he ordered, not knowing what else to do. No one had ever remained in his bed after sex.

Hermione looked at his back for a while and then reached out and touched him. When he didn't protest, she moved closer, slipping an arm around his waist and pressing the length of his body to hers. She fell into an exhausted sleep.

Severus lay for a time feeling her against him, and then he drifted off to sleep.

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

Voldemort wins the War and decides to reward his faithful servant, Severus Snape.

When Hermione woke up, the bed was empty, and Snape was gone. She got up, used the loo, and then showered, scrubbing herself red in an attempt to wash away the mental horror of the battle and the stench of Voldemort's victory. Physically she was sore...probably from using muscles she'd never used before, she thought with a grimace. She was confused and scared because she didn't know what to expect from her captor. Professor Snape hadn't left a note. She had no idea when he'd be back. She had no idea where she even was. Her prison could be in the middle of a city or far out in the country with not a soul around.

She wondered, as she dried herself, what he thought of last night. He had wanted her...she was sure of that...but what about today? Was he disgusted with himself, or didn't he even care? He'd told her she was beautiful. Had he meant it, or was he trying to play her? She didn't know what to think about last night. She'd given herself to Snape, and she had enjoyed it. She'd found she craved his touch. She'd always wanted his approval. Was she translating his need to be with her as approval? She was so confused. He was her hated Potions professor, was he not? Yet last night in his arms, they had been able to forget about Voldemort's victory. They had needed each other. Was that enough for now?

She went to look for something to wear. The white gown was ruined. She found the robe he'd given her last night and put it on. It was so long. She went to the door and called to him, pounding her hands on the door.

Snape sat in his parlor. He'd heard the pounding on the door but had not moved. He yelled, "Fancy, go see what she wants. And do not tell her anything about where we are."

"Yes, sir. Fancy is going," the little house-elf said, cowering away from him.

In her room, Hermione turned at the sound of a loud crack. There stood a house-elf about half the size of Dobby. She was a pitifully small thing and looked half frightened to death.

"Miss, you wanting something? Fancy is getting you food." Her tiny voice trembled.

"Where is Professor Snape?"

"Master Snape instructing I not telling you anything. You want food or clothes?" she asked.

"You could make this fit me better. It's the professor's robe," she said, pulling the hem off the floor.

Fancy snapped her fingers, and the robe reshaped itself into a garment that fit her perfectly.

"Thank you," Hermione said as she smoothed the fabric appreciatively.

Hermione studied the trembling elf and asked, "Are you mistreated here?" she asked kindly.

"No, but Fancy wants to go home. Fancy's master was killed in the battle, and Fancy now serves Master Snape. He is frightening, but he not hurt me."

Hermione got on her knees so she could make eye contact with the little elf. "Fancy, I've known Professor Snape for many years, and he has always scared me half to death, too, but he's never physically hurt me...not even last night." She saw the house-elf's eyes widen. "Try not to be so scared. His voice is harsh, but he's not so bad. You could have had a much worse master, Fancy."

The little house-elf's eyes welled with tears. "I'm glad you are here, ma'am. Now let Fancy get food and more clothes." She vanished with a pop.

Hermione looked around her and then went to sit on the bed and wait. The hours grew long, and she barely nibbled on the food Fancy brought. Had Snape been summoned? Why was he leaving her alone? She finally got up and selected a book and curled up on the bed. She found she couldn't read, so she watched the door.

Snape turned to stare at the fire. He'd been in the parlor since the middle of the night when he'd woken to find her pressed against him. Her body was so soft, so desirable, that he'd nearly gathered her in his arms. Then what he had done hit him: He'd had sex with a former student who was barely out of childhood. He'd slipped from the bed, grabbing the discarded robe, and left the room, locking and warding it behind him.

She'd been willing, and he'd been devastated about the scope of things before him. He'd taken her; he'd tried to be gentle, but his desires had gotten away from him. He needed not just sex but to connect to a warm, living being who needed him, no matter how misguided she was to offer herself. There was no guarantee that Voldemort would allow her to live through this day. He might take her for his own entertainment. That beautiful, young woman would be destroyed mentally and then physically. He wanted to take her and run. He knew a few places he could hide her, but he doubted it would take long before Voldemort would find him. And what kind of life would that be? Running, hiding, starving. The horror of being hunted.

"Bloody Potter!" he cursed the boy again. He got up and stalked around the room. He wanted nothing more than to go in and take Hermione again and again and forget what hell might be in store for him. He wanted her to care for him. He was a fool; no one that young and beautiful would ever care for him. Was she as horrified this morning as he had been last night? He'd heard the shower run an awfully long time. Had she wanted to wash him off her skin? Would she look at him with hate in her eyes when he returned to her?

He'd seen Potter fall on the field, and he'd watched Voldemort fire the Avada Kedavra at him. It had seemed in slow motion, and he had to clamp his hand over his mouth not to shout, "NO!" He'd emptied his breakfast all over the ground. The horror of Voldemort's triumph had felt like a kick in the gut from a mule. He'd been drawn to look at Potter's face, which had blood trickling from his mouth.

Voldemort had turned away from the boy's dead body and screamed in triumph, calling his troops to him. He'd bragged for hours as the boy lay there. Then Hermione had been brought before him, and Severus had to fight for breath. He'd felt his legs weaken with fear. Then by some miracle, Voldemort had looked at him and asked, "Do you want her, my faithful servant?"

Severus had only nodded; grabbing Granger by the arm, he'd Apparated away. He could not help Potter now, but maybe he could save Granger. He'd known what was expected of him, but he also knew he was not a rapist. He had planned to give her a lust potion, which would save them both from a forced encounter. Then she had offered herself, and he'd found he wanted her more than he'd ever wanted anyone.

Life was always preferable, wasn't it? He was not sure now. He could not bear it if she turned from him. He had lived his whole adult life fighting for Voldemort's destruction, and now he was faced with compliance or renewed fighting. He was tired and dead inside. Last night, for the hour he'd been with Hermione, he'd felt alive for the first time in decades.

He heard Fancy in the kitchen gathering food and then the crack of her Apparition back to Granger. He sat heavily into his chair and placed his face in his hands.

"Merlin, what now? What will Voldemort want when I am next summoned? I will not surrender her. I will kill her myself before that happens."

His thoughts kept jumping to Voldemort, then to Granger, then to the touch and feel of her last night. Was there heaven within hell? He was sure he had experienced it last night, but then he'd lost control, too. Had he hurt her? She had not cried afterwards, but he still dreaded facing her.

He heard Fancy leave her. He sighed and stood. He walked to the door and listened. There was no sound. He went back to the kitchen. "Fancy, what is Miss Granger doing?"

"Sitting, staring at the door, and waiting, sir," she said.

He nodded and returned to the fire.

"Bring me some firewhiskey."

He drank several glasses and then sat before the fire and stared at the flames. He drifted off to sleep.

When he woke it was late, and he was starving. "Fancy."

"Yes, sir," she called from the kitchen.

"Bring some food for Miss Granger and me to my room," he commanded and then turned away.

Fancy stared after him; he seemed scared. *Maybe miss wasn't wrong. Maybe Fancy would be safe here.*

Severus unwarded and unlocked the door, stepped into the room, and locked and warded the door again before he turned to face to Hermione.

She had moved from the middle of the bed to the edge. Her feet were just touching the floor when he turned.

"You're here," she said. "Why did you leave me?" The fear and confusion on her face made him sigh with relief. There was no reprisal there.

He came a step closer. "I did not know if you would regret last night. I lost control."

She stood, came closer to him, and reached out to touch his arm. "I really don't have much experience with sex, but I think that's part of it: to lose control some and let yourself just feel."

"You are okay... with what happened then?" he asked, warmth creeping up his neck.

She smiled. "Yes, sir, you were very considerate, and if you lost control, then I did, too. You might remember I urged you on."

He smirked at her. "You did." His tight muscles started to relax. Had he wasted a day with her? He'd been so afraid to look into her eyes and see rejection. He was a coward.

She asked, "What happens now?" She returned to sit on the edge of the bed.

"I wish I knew. I could be called any moment, or it could be weeks. I never know until the last second, and I must get there as fast as possible."

"Are you sure we couldn't run and disappear to some remote country?" she begged.

"You forget your place," he said scathingly and then immediately regretted it when tears formed in her eyes. He felt the need to explain. Severus looked down at his arm. He pushed back the sleeve and showed her the Dark Mark. "There is no place to hide, Miss Granger. It would be only be a matter of time, and he would find us and kill us in a most horrific way."

Hermione got up moved closer. He didn't back away, so she put her arms around his waist and laid her cheek against his chest. She was trembling against him.

Severus was surprised at her willingness to touch him. He stood there for a long time and then raised his hand to touch the back of her head and caress her hair.

Hermione smiled against his chest.

"You know, this emotionalism you are showing me is totally unprecedented. You should hate me, rebel against me. I don't understand, Miss Granger," he said as he drew her to the bed and they sat beside each other.

Fancy brought food, and they did not speak until she was gone. They ate for a few minutes in silence. Hermione realized how hungry she was as she stuffed food into her mouth. She couldn't remember when she'd last eaten a full meal. She'd barely picked at the food earlier today.

"Sir, I don't understand it either, but I think it's because everyone I know is gone, captured, or hopefully hiding. I just can't think about it. I can't go there, or I will go crazy. You have always defended me in the past. When you stood in between us and Professor Lupin, I knew you were on our side. But I never knew until now how much you worked to help Harry win."

"He failed..." His voice was bitter. "I don't know if I can keep you safe anymore."

"I have faith in you," she told him.

He frowned at her and moved off the bed. When he turned his face toward her, it was filled with frustrated anger. "Do you still not hear me? I have no control over what happens anymore. But I will promise you if it's with in my power, I will kill you before he can hurt you."

Hermione stared at him. She wanted to cry, to scream, to tell him death was never preferable, but he had been at Voldemort's mercy many times and she had not. He knew horrors she could only imagine.

"I will make a deal with you. I can stand some torture. I can take some abuse. If you see that I am to be tortured and death is inevitable, no chance of an out, then I will ask that you take my life. But I want to fight. I want to live."

"If you die, I die, Hermione." He spoke her name softly. "I promise I will only take your life and then mine if there is no other choice."

Having lost her appetite, she took the food and set it on the table and asked, "Please, let's never talk about this again. Just hold me, Severus. So much is lost, but we can be here for each other."

He studied her face. Then he nodded and crawled on the bed and held out his arms. She came to him. She was unable to stop the flood of emotion that overwhelmed her in the face of comfort. Tears filled her eyes, and she cried, laying her face against his chest as he held her close. He knew the tears were not for him, but it broke his heart to hear her cry for her lost friends.

He understood her need for him was because she had no one else to go to...better the devil you know than the devil you don't know. She was smart enough to know what the situation was. He sighed. It didn't matter that this might be wrong in the world they had come from. This was a whole new world, and if she needed him, he would be here for her. Who was the slave and who was the master? He'd always been strong as long as he was isolated. His weakness had always been for women. His mother had kept him from killing his dad over and over. Her tears and pleading had kept him compliant far too long. Lily had been his only friend, and he'd fancied himself in love. But look what that 'love' had done to him, to her. He tried to hide the growing pain in his heart that this would end badly. He'd stayed away from women because he had known he was a fool and fell in love with only the tiniest of friendship offered from them. After Lily, he'd vowed never to let himself be hurt again. But his heart was already opening for Hermione. Damn his weaknesses. Yet he caressed her hair and whispered comforting words and became someone he didn't really know for her.

Severus wondered if she knew how much he needed her right now. When he'd seen Potter die, he'd let go of all the hope and pain. He'd thought *Now I die. My purpose is gone*. He wanted to rail against Voldemort so the monster would kill him. Then Hermione had been dropped at his feet. And he'd found purpose again. They were two different people from different generations brought together by their hate of a megalomaniac. She was right; the thing that held them together was their past relationship of teacher and student. He was glad that she had noticed he'd helped the three of them on several occasions. He leaned his head down and kissed the top of her head. He had noticed that she had matured years past Potter and Weasley. He'd secretly admired her incredible ability to think things through, and her magical power was phenomenal. She'd left behind the irritating child she had been and had been more attentive and inventive.

He should have treated her as Voldemort expected him to and not let her tear his heart out. But it was already too late; he'd allowed her under his skin last night when she'd offered herself. He'd had very few sexual relationships in his life: mostly women who fancied themselves Death Eater groupies. They had never wanted him, just an in into the organization. They had barely co-operated, making sex so horrible he'd finally left it behind as not worth the embarrassment he'd felt after every encounter.

Her willingness last night to have sex with him, her gentle touches, her urging him on... He was lost. He groaned. God help him, he was lost in her. It was now up to him to kill Voldemort. Was it even possible? Did he have the advantage in being able to get up close? He'd never tried before because Dumbledore had always said it was Harry's destiny. It had to be Harry. Well, he was dead now, and so was bloody Harry Potter. Now what?

He suddenly had a horrified thought, and he held Hermione a little closer. If they had a chance of killing Voldemort, she would have to do it. She would have to carry in the potion that would kill him. Voldemort never let any one close enough to touch him except groveling, powerless women. He seemed to get off at having them beg for mercy. She would have to be the bringer of death. Years ago he had had a plan, thwarted by Dumbledore and his bloody prophecy. Sudden tears burned his eyes. They would certainly die in the attempt. But there was no other way. The monster had to be stopped one way or another.

He let his hand run down her arm, and he felt his desire ignite. He pushed it away as he had his whole life. Let her sleep tonight. She would need her strength for what was to come. He lay half the night just feeling the marvel of her body against his. She would press herself harder against him and whimper in her sleep...no doubt having bad dreams about the final battle. He tightened his hold on her, and she calmed and slipped into a deep sleep.

Finally Severus let himself fall asleep.

When Hermione woke the next morning, she was alone again, but then she heard the toilet flush. She stretched her hand out across the sheet and felt the residual warmth of his body. He must have just left. That was progress; he hadn't left her during the night.

As she rubbed at her face, she realized she'd slept most the night, and Severus had not woken her for sex. She knew he'd probably wanted to have her again, but he had respected her need to sleep. She slipped from the bed and waited until he came out. She nodded to him, and her fingers reached out to slide over his fingertips as he went by.

Severus turned and watched her go into the bathroom and close the door. He looked down at his fingers. It had been a tiny gesture but so intimate. He heard her use the bathroom and then brush her teeth. It was odd having another person and their things in his bathroom. Fancy had supplied her with the things a woman might need to take care of herself.

Hermione came from the bathroom wearing a gown not as see-through as the first ones, but he felt himself get hard at the sight of her.

"Hermione, will you come to me willingly again?"

Hermione looked into his eyes and saw his fear and his need. She reached out her hand, and he took it.

Later, as they lay wrapped in each other's arms, Severus suddenly stiffened, pulled away from her, and got up and dressed. She called frantically after him as he locked and warded the door behind him.

Hermione stared after him. Had he been summoned? What had happened? She ran to the door, calling after him.

3

Chapter 3 of 7

Voldemort wins the War and decides to reward his faithful servant, Severus Snape.

Severus stood in his sitting room trembling. He'd had visions of Hermione writhing in the pain of Crucio until she became a vegetable like Frank and Alice Longbottom. He had pushed her from him and left the room.

Stunned, Hermione called out after him, "Severus! What's wrong? What did I do?"

She ran to the door, but it shut in her face. She beat her hands on the door and screamed his name. She finally slid to the floor. Why had he left?

Severus now stood staring into the flames. There had to be another way. How could he expose Hermione to that monster? How could he live with himself if they failed and she was punished because of him? He felt out of control and growled with rage.

"Fancy!" he yelled. He could still hear Hermione's sobs.

"Master Snape," Fancy said, appearing in the room. She was trembling. She'd heard Hermione's cries from the basement where she'd been storing food.

"Go to Miss Granger and assure her she did nothing. Tell her I just needed to think. Bring her some breakfast. Have you cared for a woman before?" he asked, trying to bottle up his out-of-control emotions.

"Yes, sir," Fancy said.

"Then you know what she needs. Get her anything else you think she might need...like clothing, personal care products, and potions."

Fancy nodded, backing away, and then she vanished with a pop.

Severus turned back to the fire. If he could not control himself with Hermione around, he would have no hope of defeating Voldemort. She might well be the death of them both. He'd lost himself in her again this morning. The touch and taste of her drove him mad with need. He'd pinned his hopes on her already. She was like food for a

starving man, and he had to regain control. He sat in his chair and used the flames as a focus as he built walls around the memories he and Hermione and made this morning. He made the walls so strong and so thick that Voldemort would not be able to see through them. He would not see that Hermione gave him pleasure beyond sexual gratification. He replaced parts of the memories at the front and altered them to make Voldemort think she had not been compliant. He used sounds and screams he had heard during his life. The memory would not hold up to deep scrutiny, but it might give them time. It made him sick to distort the memories, but for Hermione's safety he did it anyway.

Hermione looked up when Fancy entered the room.

"Miss, come get off the cold floor. You're making yourself sick. Master bids me to tell you he is not angry. He needs thinking time."

Hermione got to her feet, and Fancy took her hand. Her leathery, little hand felt almost like a child's hand to Hermione.

"He left so quickly." Hermione hiccupped and laid a hand against her chest.

"Master Snape is like that. He comes and goes. He not thinking; he seldom is explaining. Why don't you take a bath? I drawing it for you. You soaking for a while, and I bringing more clothes and things you will need. Master bid me taking good care of you."

Fancy went to the bathroom door and opened it. Leaving it open, she set about drawing the bath and even found a scented soap for bubbles. Hermione eyed the bath with real desire and stripped quickly. She was calmer now and buoyed by the words of the little house-elf.

She slipped into the hot water with a sigh. She was quite sore, and the water relaxed her muscles in a way cleansing spells or showers could not. She found Fancy waiting to wash her, and she said, "You go do what you need to, Fancy. I can take care of myself. I don't need help taking a bath."

"You and Master alike then. He no needs Fancy's help either." She turned and left.

Hermione found herself giggling at the thought of Snape's sneer at the offer of bathing help from Fancy. A deep voice from the door startled her.

"And pray what does my little captive find so amusing?"

Severus was leaning against the doorframe to the bathroom. He had his legs crossed, and his arms were crossed against his chest. He wore only his black trousers and white shirt.

Hermione, not used to having male company in the bathroom, squirmed and admitted, "I was just imagining Fancy washing your back for you."

"Not likely," he said with a smirk. He came closer to the tub. "But if you would like some help..."

Hermione handed him her rag and soap and leaned forward. If he wished to be kind, then she would let him.

Severus didn't say anything but got on his knees next to the tub and carefully soaped the rag. Then he began to make slow circles around her creamy, smooth back. He'd not really looked at it before. It was flawless and looked so soft. He leaned in and pressed his lips to the area at the base of her neck.

"I'm sorry I left. My mind often runs in different directions. I needed to think. I'm not used to having someone who cares if I'm there or not."

Hermione was sitting there with her eyes closed just feeling his gentle touch, craving so much more, when his lips touched her neck. She snaked a hand up into his hair, urging him on. She laid her head back, and his mouth covered hers. He was about to slip his arms around her when he gasped, pulled back, and tore the sleeve of his shirt up. Hermione caught sight of the Dark Mark; the snake was writhing.

"No!" he gasped, and his hand flew to his head. "Out!" he ordered her. "We are summoned."

He grabbed his wand and had her dried and clothed in seconds.

She had no time to think about...let alone react to...the fact that she now wore one of the gauzy, white, see-through gowns.

"I'm sorry," he said as he dragged her from the bathroom to the bedroom where he dressed in his Death Eater robes and then unwarded the door and hurried her through the house, giving her instructions as he went.

"Do not look him in the eyes. Prostrate yourself at his feet and kiss the hem of his robes. Do not volunteer anything. If he questions you, answer with as few words as possible and do not show any fondness for me. I am your rapist. Remember that, Hermione, and we may both live to see another day. Remember the words I might say are only to keep you alive. Do not take them to heart." He waved his wand, and Hermione felt pains about her face and body.

They were now out into a small, enclosed yard, and Severus grabbed her about the waist and they Disapparated.

Once again in the span of a couple of days, she found herself at the feet of Voldemort. She realized that Snape was on his knees beside her.

"Severus, stand. It is kind of you to come and bring your little prize with you." His words were nearly a hiss. He seemed less and less human each time. "Are you enjoying your gift, my loyal servant?"

"Yes, Dark Lord, she is a rare prize; your faith in me is humbling. Her screams are gratifying." He looked with disgust at her groveling at Voldemort's feet. He was glad she could not see the look on his face.

"Screams, Severus? You aren't torturing her, are you?" His voice was thick with irony; of course he expected him to mistreat her.

"It would not be fun if there wasn't a little torture," Severus said, his voice filled with such gloating that it made Hermione shiver and cringe away from him. She did not look up; she just stared at the hem of Voldemort's robe and noticed his feet were bare.

Her arm hurt. When she glanced at it, she found bruises that had been placed about her body by Severus' wand. He'd had to make it look like she had been very unwilling.

Voldemort ordered Hermione, "Rise, Mudblood."

Hermione tried to rise to her feet, but her fear was so great that she faltered. Severus grabbed her roughly by the arm and pulled her up.

"Mudblood, did you not hear the words of your Lord?" he hissed.

Hermione found herself standing before many Death Eaters. Her eyes raked over them. They no longer wore masks, they didn't have to keep their identity secret now. They all leered at her near nakedness.

Voldemort, true to his flamboyant ways, swept his hand out to indicate his followers. They stretched back 20 or 30 deep. "See how I am loved." His laugh was a deep, dark thing, and it made Hermione's insides shrink away.

She bit back a nasty reply. *Fear is more like it*, she wanted to say. He pulled her close, and she smelled his putrid breath. "You're the last of your kind. For now, you will suffer all the things I cannot make Potter suffer. He died much too quickly. Your Order was full of weaklings. All fell against my powers."

Tears leaked from Hermione eyes, and she tried to stifle her sobs. Harry, Ron, Molly, McGonagall... The names of the dead rolled through her mind. If she lived through the day, she would beg Severus to let her help him. She would do anything to stop this monster if only to appease the voices that cried out for revenge in her head.

"You will be a plaything until I no longer find you amusing." He threw her to the ground.

Hermione felt the skin of her knees tear as she landed. She could feel the burn of dirt and smell the rich smell of trees and grass about her.

"Crucio," Voldemort cried, waving his wand.

Severus stood in horror as his vision was realized. It took an iron will not to react.

Pain hit her, and she felt as if her body was plugged into a light socket. Her body writhed, and she screamed. Then, as suddenly as it started, it stopped.

"Severus, take this thing away from me before I kill it. Make sure she continues to suffer, or you will enjoy the same gifts I have for her." Voldemort's voice dripped venom.

Hermione laid on the ground, still twitching from the pain along her nerves. She felt Severus grab her and then Apparation clouded her view.

She couldn't see clearly and felt gentle arms holding her. Then she was being placed on the bed and Severus was shouting, "Fancy, get the emerald green bottle in the bathroom and bring the dittany."

Hermione opened her eyes and saw his face was stricken with fear and self-incrimination. "I'm okay, Severus," she gasped against the pain. "You did what you had to." She saw his face relax a bit.

Severus leaned down and pressed his forehead against hers. "Hermione," he breathed. "I vow to you I will kill that monster."

"Let me help," she whispered through her clinched teeth as a spasm hit her legs.

Fancy appeared by the bed, and Severus grabbed the green vial and pressed it to her lips. She drank the bitter liquid. Within 30 seconds, the cramps in her muscles died away, and she felt weak. She vaguely was aware that Severus was healing the bruising and the injuries to her body and knees, but she could not think.

"Sleep," he told her, and she let herself slip into darkness. Severus slumped to the floor and groaned, "That was so close. What can I do to keep her safe?" He didn't realize that Fancy was still standing there watching him.

"Fancy can help," she said.

Severus' head snapped up. "What?" he asked, not really having heard her.

"Fancy can help. Fancy has magic. Fancy can do as her master bids her." The tiny house-elf was trembling, but her eyes were big and honest.

He sat with his back against the bed. "How could you help? Your magic is for household duties."

Fancy got closer, and her eyes became hard and dangerous. "We elves were powerful before your people even came into existence, wizard. We harnessed great magic." Her voice was deeper and had strength.

Severus sat up and looked hard at her. "If that's true," he said, trying to not draw away from the crackle of her magic that suddenly filled the space between them and tingled at his skin, "why have your race not offered help before? Even in the final battle, you used only house and garden tools to flight with."

"We were enslaved by the 'good' wizards of this world. Our people are honorable. Many centuries ago, we had a foolish ruler who wagered with Merlin and lost. We became the servants of wizards. Our magic was bottled up. We only now feel our power returning. We did not know that with the fall of the 'good' wizards, our power would be released to us again."

"Then you affiliate yourself with the Dark side?" He glanced at Hermione and saw that her face was unmarred and she was sleeping peacefully from the drug. He shifted to get more comfortable. He was taken aback by Fancy's intelligent speech patterns. Gone was the pretense of a lesser creature.

"No, sir." Fancy stepped back. "We have observed the wizarding world all these centuries and realized that the future wizards did not know of the wager. They accepted what they assumed was our desire to be bonded, to belong, and to serve. Many of our kind have been treated with respect and kindness, and those of us who have not have been waiting for freedom. Dobby was powerful, was he not? He was able to defy his master and warn Harry Potter. He died for the cause of goodness. I have been charged, as many of my kind has been charged, with seeking out a good wizard who will lead us against this darkness that has taken over. We will help you, sir. This woman whom you protect, though misguided and not aware that it was not time, tried to help us all when she was a child. Her best friend freed Dobby from the Malfoy's cruelty."

Severus said, "I did not know Dobby, but I did hear of him. He was very helpful. But Potter lost, didn't he?" His voice was bitter. "Your Dobby died for nothing. We pinned our hopes on a child...a child who was not up to the task."

Fancy came and touched his arm. "Yes, he died, but he tried with all his heart and mind, and you have his best and dearest friend to protect now. You can do this, sir."

He eyed her suspiciously. "Why come to me, one of Voldemort's right-hand men? I have been given this gift because he thinks me of like mind." He got to his feet, and Fancy scrambled back. He sat on the edge of the bed, and his fingers caressed Hermione's arm.

"Fancy sees that you are not like him. You care for this woman. You brought her back, and you ease her suffering. You despise the devil. You talk about his death. We house-elves want this, too, and we will soon have the power to be of great assistance."

"I do not want to be the slave of another, Fancy. But if you have so much power, why not take over and make those who enslaved you the slaves?" He was trying to gage her true heart.

"It is time for all enslavement to end, do you not agree? Enslavement strangles the lives of people from all realms."

"Yes, Fancy. Do you have your own name?"

Fancy looked at him for a minute and then said, "Arelia, sir."

"Arelia, I am relieved to hear your tale, and I will think on your words. Would you mind going and getting me something to eat? I am going to bathe, and I will be out shortly."

Fancy smiled. "I is going, sir. Fancy will get you a good meal."

Severus said, "You do not have to pretend with me anymore, Arelia."

"It is best, sir, to keep up with pretenses. One never knows who may be lurking."

"No one lurks in my house. But do as you will. Thank you, Fancy." Fancy smiled, and Severus saw the wisdom of centuries in her eyes. He was astonished that house-elves had such a long history, and he felt real hope. It would not just be Hermione and him against the Dark Lord.

He took a long bath, soaking away his soreness and the feeling of uncleanliness. Every time he had to face that snake, he felt dirty. The evilness that exuded from the monster seemed to cover him. He scrubbed and then let his forehead fall on to his drawn up knees. Tears burned his eyes, but he forced them away. Severus Snape did not cry. But now he had so much more to lose. It was overwhelming. He realized he would have to really think this all out if he was to save Hermione. He would die trying to save her; and if he managed to save the Wizarding world, so much the better for both of them. He would wait to tell her about Fancy's army until it was necessary to mobilize it. It was best that she not know their ace in the hole in case Voldemort called them and probed her mind.

He finally got out of the tub and crawled into the bed next to her, his meal forgotten. He slipped in behind her and drew her to him. She made a soft mewing sound and moved back to press herself against him. Now when he needed all his strength, his iron will, she was robbing it from him by her acceptance and need for him. He cleared his mind and forced himself to sleep. He would need to think clearly and sleep would help. He drifted into blackness

Thank you, Lisa. I couldn't do this without you.

Thank you, writermerrin. I appreciate your help, as well.

4

Chapter 4 of 7

Voldemort wins the War and decides to reward his faithful servant, Severus Snape.

This one gets a little visually rough.

Hermione woke and groaned; every part of her was sore. She tried to move and couldn't figure out why she couldn't. Then she realized that Severus was spooned against her, and one of his heavy arms was draped over her waist. She lay still, feeling him against her and marveling that he would cuddle with her on his own.

Severus Snape was an enigma. When she was a child, he seemed hard and impenetrable; now, she saw a vulnerable man who wanted acceptance and desperately needed tenderness. How had this man kept himself so deeply buried in that persona? Had he been crying inside for acceptance? She felt tears burn her eyes.

She felt him shift away from her. He rose from the bed and peered into her face. She pretended to be asleep as she felt him touch her face gently.

"So beautiful... I will die trying to keep you safe," he whispered.

He walked away, and Hermione opened her eyes a slit to see that he was dressed in a long nightshirt. He went into the loo and closed the door. She stretched her sore muscles and grimaced as she pulled herself into a sitting position. She heard the toilet flush and the water run as he washed his hands. Then the door opened, and Severus came out. He was running his hand through his hair and over his face. He looked exhausted. He straightened when he saw she was awake.

"Miss Granger, how are you this morning?" he asked, coming to stand close to the bed.

Hermione swung her legs over the edge of the bed and said, "I think we are intimate enough for you to call me Hermione all the time." She reached out to him. "I hurt everywhere, but I need to use the loo."

Severus reached up to take a hold of her arm below her shoulder and helped her up. He guided her to the door. "I will have a potion for the pain when you come out. Do you want breakfast?"

"No, I think I'd like to go back to bed." When she finished her ablutions, she returned to the main room. Hermione climbed back into the bed, and Severus covered her with the blankets. She settled against the pillows he had propped up for her. He gave her the potion, and she drank, grimacing at the flavor.

"Would you come back to bed, Severus?" she asked, patting the bed beside her.

He looked hopeful and then guarded at the same time.

"Please," she begged.

He crawled back into the other side of the bed but stayed on top of the covers. Hermione moved into his arms and settled against his chest. She heard him sigh ever so slightly, and she smiled. She threaded her fingers through one of his hands. "I feel safe when you hold me," she said.

"It is an illusion. I cannot guarantee your safety. I will try my best."

She said, "That's all you can do, Severus, and I appreciate it." She rubbed his hand. "Your hands have always fascinated me."

"Really?" His voice was sarcastic.

She snorted. "Yes, they really have. You had such a way with cutting and preparing potion ingredients. It was like watching an artist work. I missed the demonstrations as we got into our NEWT years and you no longer showed us what to do." The pain in all her muscles was fading as the potion took effect. She turned over in his arms and with her face inches from his asked, "Could you care for me Severus? Am I more than just a slave to you?"

"Would you want me to... care?" The word came hard from his mouth, as if he had to break through barriers to even speak a word with a little emotion in it.

She leaned in and gave him a sweet kiss. He did not respond, though his eyes were softer when she pulled back. "Yes, I want you to care. You are all I have left in this world."

"That's tough on you," he said. "No one has ever wanted me to care before."

She smirked at him...a good imitation of the smirk he often wore. "I do. As crazy as that may seem in this environment, I desperately want you to care."

He answered her by wrapping his arms around her and pulling her tightly across his chest. Then he turned, pulling her across him. She ended up on her back with him partially hovering over her. His lips came down to cover hers, and he ravaged her mouth. Then his lips went to her neck, and she felt him suck there. She'd never allowed a

boy to mark her, but she wanted him to mark her now. She wanted Voldemort to see that he had claimed her. She pulled the nightshirt up and caressed his bottom, and he thrust his hips against her. She pulled on the nightshirt, and he pulled away long enough for her to draw it over his head and toss it away. She needed him to prove to her that she was worth something right now. She felt alive when he was with her, in her. He tore the gauzy white gown she wore off her, and she wondered how many more he had...or if he just keep repairing the same one.

He must have had the same idea because he did not wait for foreplay but urged her to allow him access, and he thrust into her.

She wasn't quite ready, and it hurt, but she didn't say anything because she wanted him as much as he seemed to want her. Soon the pain receded. She hung on as he pulled her up so that he was on his knees. He sat back until his bottom sat against his own legs, and she was in his lap with her legs clamped around him. "I do care a lot," he said, breathing heavily. He did all the work, raising and lowering her on his hard shaft. She threw her head back, thrusting against him, gripping his arms.

"Hermione." He groaned her name as he came. He dropped her back onto the bed, and she thought he was going to leave her unsatisfied. But he used wandless magic to clean her, and then he went down between her knees and devoured her. His tongue slipped in and out, his teeth nipped her, and his lips sucked her until she screamed her release against his mouth. He covered her body with his and kissed her deeply, and she tasted herself in his mouth.

"I can't get enough of you," he said.

"I am here for you, Severus," she promised him. And she knew in her heart she would be. He was her captor, but he was also her future. She knew she'd let him take her heart with his need, with his gentleness, and with his vow to try his best to save her.

He fell back against the pillows and drew her with him, pulling a sheet over them. He spoke in an almost inaudible whisper, "If we are to destroy him, we must do it quickly. You will have to carry the potion, Hermione. He will not expect it from you."

Hermione nodded and felt his grip on her tighten.

"I can not lose you now...not now when I have just found you," he moaned.

"Severus," she cried. "I will do whatever it takes for us to have a future and to avenge so many good wizards and witches... my friends."

"Come then." He pushed her from him and got up. With his wand he cleaned and dressed them both, and then he took her by the hand and pulled her from the room.

He took her into the living room and grabbed some books off the shelf. One was about dark potions; another was about venom. He also handed her a journal.

"Hermione, I had an idea years ago to create a poison that would kill Voldemort, but Dumbledore would have nothing to do with it. He insisted the prophecy was the only way. I have formulated some ideas in my head and made brief notes, but I could not finalize the research. Voldemort often pokes around in my brain. If he discovered this plot in my mind, I wouldn't live a minute. Desperate times call for desperate measures. We have no choice now. We will have to try. You read these and make notes, and I will fashion the device I have been considering for years."

"You won't lock me in the bedroom again?" she asked.

"No, but the house is warded as much for my safety as yours. Promise you will not try to leave while I go down to my lab."

Hermione reached out to squeeze his hand, "I promise, Severus. You are our best chance of surviving this war." She dropped her gaze to look at the book.

Survival...was that all he meant to her? He was a fool; of course it was. He was heading down the stairs to his lab when he heard her say, "I will miss you, Severus. Come up soon." He felt a warmth he had never felt before flow around him. More the fool he was, needing her. It would get both of them killed. Right now, looking back over the last years of his life, he would lose it all for the few days he'd had in her arms.

He entered his lab and found his tools. He took out a box with the small metal parts and set to work. Hours later, he heard steps coming down. He looked up to see Hermione peaking around the curve of the steps. She looked afraid, but she smiled at him. "May I work down here? It was so empty upstairs."

"Of course." He got up, cleared a tabletop, and set a tall stool in front of it for her.

She sighed and set her books and parchment on the table and sat down to work.

He went back to what he was doing but kept stealing looks at her. Her brow was tight with concentration, and she kept absentmindedly tucking a piece of hair behind her ear. It kept falling back into her face. He smiled slightly as he noted her ink-stained fingers, and he remembered his fingers used to be that way when he was young. He suddenly realized she was looking up at him with a smile, and his mouth twitched with a return smile.

He felt an itch to get up and take her right back to the bedroom, but he knew what they were doing was more important.

Hermione saw his look of hunger and felt a blush redden her cheeks. He went back to what he was doing, but she saw his hands tremble a bit. It made her happy that he wanted her so badly. It was heady thinking she had tamed the fierce Potion's master.

It got late, and Fancy came down to remind them to eat. They did snack, but they kept on working.

That night, as he took her again and again, she held on to him, feeling his mouth on her, writhing with his touch, and hearing his moans of pleasure. She dreamed of a home that they might share one day. Later, as he slept with his arms locked around her, sleep eluded her as the things she had read flowed through her mind. Voldemort was not just man; he was snake, too. The dose of whatever they made had to be delivered into his body. It had to paralyze him almost instantly, so he could not use his magic. It had to utterly destroy his body and what little soul he had left before he could make more Horcruxes. The device Severus was making was some sort of delivery system. He had not explained, and she had not asked. They both had agreed she would have to deliver the potion.

The next days were mirrors of that first day. Severus worked and tested his device, and Hermione read and made formulas at his direction. They would sit on the bed at night, eating and talking about the formula and discussing its properties. Both became aware that they might need some sort of sample from Voldemort to work with, but how to get it was another matter. Voldemort seldom let anyone with any power get close.

It had been five days since he'd last summoned them, and they knew time was running out. Hermione formulated a plan in her head, but she did not tell Severus. She knew he would not allow it; it could very well get her killed.

They were summoned the next morning, and Severus found himself nearly unhinged. They were not ready. They would have to go unprepared. He prayed they would survive the night and be able to continue their plan.

This time, they found themselves in an old mansion. It must have been something in its day, but now it was crumbling. Severus was curious as to why the Dark Lord still hung out in places with these conditions when he could have any Wizarding home he wanted. But then again, he was an animal. Perhaps he didn't care where he was; wild animals liked dark, cool hiding places. So did snakes.

Hermione fell at Voldemort's feet, and Severus steeled himself for what would come. Hermione threw herself at him. Clutching his feet, she cried with desperation, and Severus thought, *What the bloody hell is she doing?*

"Please, please give me to someone else. I cannot stand this torture any longer; he is a betrayer of everything I stood for."

Her fingers clawed at Voldemort's feet, and she felt him kick her and her ribs break. She felt a blinding pain and heard him scream at her.

"You dare touch me. Look what you've done! I'm bleeding. Severus, teach this Mudblood manners, or she dies next we meet. Now clean the wound and get her out of here."

Severus produced a handkerchief and some dittany from his pocket. He wiped the blood clean, put the healing potion on, and watched the wounds heal. His was backing away when he heard, "*Crucio*." His screams echoed off the walls as the pain from the curse ripped through him.

When he was released, he lay there, as he had many times in his life, waiting for dismissal. Hermione's breathing was shallow, and he feared for her, but he dared not make a move toward her.

"Take your pleasure of her now, Severus. I will see what you do to her next time. Make sure she pays, or we will give up this little game of revenge. Now get out of my sight, or I will kill her now," Voldemort screamed.

Severus crawled to Hermione, grabbed her hand, and Apparated them. He knew he'd splinched himself when he felt a burning pain on his hip. "Fancy!" he cried before blackness took him.

Hermione woke on the bed. She groaned with pain and tried to take a deep breath. "Severus," she moaned.

Fancy said, "Stay still, Madam. You is injured, and Sir has not woken yet."

Hermione tried to turn to see Severus but had to clamp her teeth together to keep from screaming from the pain. "What's wrong with him?"

"He splinched himself, and he's lost a lot of blood. I gave him the blood replenisher and closed the wound. We must wait to see if it's enough." Fancy came to her side of the bed and jumped up to stand near her. "Take this, madam. It will heal your wounds on the outside. I do not know what to do about your ribs. Sir will have to tell me."

"Bone regrow...it's on the far shelf in the lab. I saw it yesterday. It's labeled." Hermione gasped against the pain.

Fancy vanished and then returned a moment later. Hermione choked down the vile potion. She also took some of the potion for the *Crucio* spell and had Fancy give Severus some. She asked Fancy to get the pain potion from the bathroom, and she took some of that. "Fancy, do not use a cleaning spell on us. I have Voldemort's cells under my fingernails, and Severus has a bloody handkerchief in his... pocket. They... must be preserved." She faded into darkness.

Severus woke from a deep, dark fog and felt heavy from potions. He'd experience the morning after many times in his life and knew well the effects they had on his body.

"Hermione! Fancy!" he called.

"Fancy, is here, sir." Candles were lit, and the room glowed.

He struggled to sit. The pain was no longer in his hip, and he didn't seem worse for wear having been through *Crucio* yet again.

"How is Hermione?" he asked, turning to see her face.

"She seems okay. She had broken ribs but no lung damage. She bid me get bone re-grow, and she took that as well as the *Crucio* potion and the pain potion. I have been monitoring her breathing."

Severus looked into Hermione's pale face. "You fool," he said. He told Fancy what she had done.

"Madam said she had cells under her fingers and that I wasn't supposed to clean her. What was she talking about?"

Severus lay back. "Of course, the blood, too."

"I took the bloody cloth from your pocket, sir, and it's here on the table. I cleaned you up."

Severus struggled to his feet. "I will go get some slides. Please call me if she shows any sign of stress."

Fancy settled on the bed next to Hermione and watched her face. "Cells..." she peered at Hermione's hands. "I not see little cages..."

Severus returned with lab equipment, and he carefully scrapped under each of Hermione's fingernails of her right hand. She put the scrapping into five small bottles with a solution in them. He used his wand to siphon the blood from the handkerchief into a vial.

Hermione moaned as he finished, "Severus."

He set the vials aside and came to the other side of the bed and peered into her face. "I'm here." He caressed her face with his fingers, happy to feel no fever there.

"Oh, Merlin, I hurt," she groaned, opening one eye and peering at him.

"You're fortunate not to be dead." His voice was irritated. "I realize now why you did it, but we are lucky he still wants to be entertained by you. I have seen him kill for far less."

"I'm sorry. If you had known, you wouldn't have let me try, and we needed samples."

"Yes, we did, but you provoked him. Now he wants to see what I do to you for daring to injure him." His voice was tight, and she thought he was holding in his anger. She shivered.

"You will do what has to be done, Severus," she said, letting herself sink back into the darkness.

Severus turned away with dread in his heart. "I'm going to take a bath. Call me if she wakes again."

He found himself shaking as he stepped into the water. Before Hermione, he had always had only himself to deal with. He knew he could stand a lot of pain, and he knew his skills as a Potions Master had saved him many times, but now he had Hermione. How would they deal with this new threat and not have her end up hating him? He found himself blinking back tears, and it made him furious. "Damn, my bloody hide, I let her get to me. I will eventually have to kill her, if our plans do not work soon. Killing her will kill me, but I will tear him limb from limb if it's at all possible, first. I will not give up this life easily." He had scrubbed himself red, and the water was getting cold.

Fancy came to the door. "Madam is awake and would like to join you."

Severus nodded, and warmed the water with his wand, as Hermione, hovering an inch above the ground, came to him and was let down into his arms. He assaulted her lips, kissing her, tasting her like a drowning man.

She cried as he held her. "I'm sorry, Severus. It was the only way."

"I understand, but there are consequences, and I do not want to end this all with you hating me."

She trembled against him, and it broke his heart. "Whatever has to happen, it has to happen soon. Voldemort might call us at any time."

"What do you think the punishment should be, Hermione? What can you take and not hate me afterward? What can we do that will look bad and yet not be so horrible?" He found he was trembling at the thought of laying a heavy hand on her.

"Maybe Fancy can help with her magic. If you beat me, maybe she can keep the blows from hurting me."

Severus buried his face in her neck. "It has to be demeaning, sexual, and physiological, Hermione. He will not expect less." She collapsed against him.

She had been so afraid of him when he had taunted her about her teeth. She didn't want to fear him like that again. With a physical assault and the rest, would she be able to disengage her mind enough to not fear him afterwards?

Severus suddenly pushed her away and vaulted from the tub only to vomit into the toilet and then sag to the floor.

Hermione followed, grabbing a towel and covering him. "I'm sorry, Severus." But he had blacked out.

"Fancy!" she called, "help me get him to bed."

Fancy helped, and they tucked him in.

Hermione clutched at him and cried.

"What's wrong, madam? What has happened? Can I help?" Fancy asked in distress.

Hermione went with the little elf to the sitting room and told her what had happened and what needed to happen and asked if she had any ideas.

"I can cushion your skin with a spell so he will not physically hurt you. He will have to add the bruises like he has been doing. But the appearance of rape I cannot help you with. A mutually agreed on sexual experience with language and screams would probably work. But these pictures will be in your minds and your heads. It will not be easy to lose them afterwards."

"Could you obliviate us?" Hermione asked.

"It can be done, but you will have to request it as must he. He has always guarded his thoughts well, good or bad. It could take the memories of the relationship you have now away. You have to decide whether it is worth it or not."

Hermione looked pale and sick.

Severus appeared at the door with a hard look on his face. "It has to be done now. If he calls again and it's not, we both die."

Hermione took a deep breath. "It was my fault, Severus. We will do what we have to. Fancy says she can place a shield on my skin so I will not feel the blows."

Severus looked at Fancy. "I would be grateful for that. Place the spell on her and leave the house. Come back when either of us call."

Fancy's magic wand appeared in her hand, and she waved it over Hermione. For a moment, she appeared encased in a skintight bubble. The bubble shimmered for a minute and then sank into her skin. She did the same to Severus but put some odd bubbles like blisters on his fingers. "This will create blood for the beating. This spell will fail in 30 minutes." Fancy nodded to them and vanished.

Severus reached out his hand and touched Hermione's skin.

"I feel nothing," she said.

"Hermione, I should have kissed you before she placed the spell. He put his arms around her and held her close, and she felt nothing. Tears leaked from her eyes, wetting his shirt. "I'm sorry." His apology sounded lame.

"Stop saying that," she said fiercely. "You do what you have to do. Do whatever you think he will expect."

"You are shielded from the physical pain, but this is going to be brutally visual and demeaning, Hermione. I want you to scream and cry and beat me with your fists if you are at all able to. Make this look real: cry, beg, if you feel sick then be sick. Make your reactions honest and real. Do NOT call me Severus"

Hermione eyes were large, and fear came off her in waves. "I lo...."

"No!" he shouted, grabbing her roughly. "Don't say that, not now. If you still feel that way after, then say it. It begins now."

He grabbed her and his fist made contact with her face and the surprise of it made her scream. She cried out, "Professor Snape, please. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt him. I will tell him that I want to stay with you..." Again his fist smashed into her face.

"Mudblood, if you ever touch the Dark Lord again, so help me, I will kill you myself." He dragged her from the living room. "Harlots like you are a dime a dozen. I could find another easier to use than you."

Hermione felt fear like a blanket envelop her, and she stared into the hard, unforgiving face of the man she'd known years ago. Severus was gone, and the bitter, hateful man Harry had hated held her now by the throat. He pulled her into the bedroom and tore her gown from her. He hit her again, and she screamed and begged him to stop. He grabbed her and bent her over against the bed and took her from behind. His hands beat against her body as he, still fully clothed, used her quickly and fiercely.

Hermione lay with her face against the bedspread, feeling him pushing and pushing against her. She cried and she begged, but she couldn't feel anything except her body being pushed again and again. His hands were firm against her hips, pulling her. She was grateful she didn't have to see this, but what of Severus? What would this do to him? He struggled to make himself climax. Hermione must have realized what he needed because she clamped her muscles around him and pushed back against him. Finally he climaxed and released her. Dropping her to the floor, he kicked her and left.

Severus, horrified with what he'd had to do, could not stand to look at her, could not handle what he felt. He hated her at that moment for having forced him into that situation, and he loved her far more than he knew was right and healthy. His mind was spinning, and he had to get away. He ran to the back yard and Apparated away deep into a dark cave he had discovered years ago. He screamed and railed at Voldemort. He pounded his hands on the dirt and rocks until the spell wore off and his hands were raw, bleeding flesh.

He knew he didn't have the time for this self-indulgence. He had to get back and brew the potion they had agreed on only last night. He had completed the device. But he found he couldn't get up. His strength was gone, so he called for Fancy. It came out at a whisper because his voice was gone from screaming.

There was a pop. "Sir, Fancy is here." Her leathery, little hands touched his face gently.

"Hermione?" he asked.

"She is okay, sir. I left her in the bath. She's so afraid for you."

"For me? Please... take me home," he said.

He found himself just inside the bedroom door. Hermione was coming from the bathroom dressed in a dark robe with a towel on her head. Her face was puffy and red from crying. She came toward him with her hands out and her arms opening wide.

His heart skipped a beat to see the love in her eyes, but he felt dirty and said, "Don't touch me." his voice came out hoarse and low.

"Severus, please let me hold you."

"No, not like this," he said. "Not like this. I am soiled, damaged." He turned toward the fireplace, stripped his clothes off and burned them, and then he walked past her into the bathroom and shut the door.

Hermione stared after him, horrified. Then his words from the first night came back to her: *"I am not a rapist of children."* She had made him a rapist. Would he ever forgive her?

She crawled into the bed and waited, tears running down her face.

Thank you, Lisa, for the beta work you do for me. I depend on you so much.

5

Chapter 5 of 7

Voldemort wins the War and decides to reward his faithful servant, Severus Snape.

Severus sat in water that nearly burned his skin. He curled his knees up, put his forehead on his knees, and cried. He hadn't cried since he was a child. In his head, he knew Hermione's screams had been an act... he hoped to Merlin it had been an act. Her face had been red with tears but hopeful, and she had reached out to him.

Would he ever get past the sight of his hands beating her, leaving the red streaks of blood, and taking her so crudely? He pounded his fist against his temples. Harsh, raw sobs escaped his throat, and then he felt her arms go around him and her hands soft against his back. Her soft words of love and care washed over him.

"Severus, I love you. Please let it go. Let it all go."

He pulled her against him, and she felt the heat of the tub water swirl around her. His mouth sought hers out, kissing her with such tenderness. Their tears ran together on each other's faces. His hands sought out her body, and she closed her eyes so she could just feel the tenderness.

"Hermione, forgive me," he begged.

"Shush, there's nothing to forgive. You have to forgive yourself. You shielded me from the worst. It was an act. I never felt the blows or the... sex." She could not bring herself to use the word rape. They would have to talk about it someday...but not now.

He suddenly pushed her from him and followed her out of the tub.

"I sit here indulging myself in my own pain, and we don't have the time. We must have the device and the potion ready. It must be done now, Hermione." He got his wand and dried and clothed them, and then he got a Pepperup Potion for them both.

"Fancy," Severus called.

Fancy came. Her eyes were big with worry. "Sir, you okay?"

"Yes, Fancy," Severus said, but he really didn't think he was. "Thank you for your help. Fancy, get your army ready. We will go next time I'm summoned."

Fancy's eyes got round, and she started to clap her hands. "I will go immediately." With a pop, she was gone.

Hermione asked, "What was that about? What army?"

"Fancy is quite something more than she allows the average wizard to see." He took her arm and told her all that Fancy had told him about the house-elves.

Hermione felt tears burn her eyes...tears of hope and tears for those lost that might have been helped.

Severus came to her and gave her a tight, quick hug. "They were bound by their oaths before. It is as it has to be. There was no way to free them before."

"We must hurry. The Dark Lord might call us at any minute. If we are ready, we will live; if we are not, we will die. Will you help me?"

Hermione said, "Yes, tell me what to do."

Severus led the way to his lab and then stopped inside the door, saying, "This lab is set up much like the lab at Hogwarts. You have, in the past, organized the shelves. You know the way I arrange things. Go stand at the shelves, and I will tell you what to bring to the work bench."

He took down a cauldron that looked as if it were made out of gold and silver swirled together. The patterns in the cauldron held symbolic runes. Hermione looked at it with envy for a moment before turning. As he named off ingredients, she found them and lined them up on the worktable.

"You always had an excellent hand for potions. You will help me prepare the ingredients," he told her.

Hermione blushed at the high praise. But her eyes still held sadness. Hermione gave him a teary smile.

Pain and memories threatened to overwhelm him again.

"Severus, I'm thinking about Fancy...all that power bound. I'm just sorry for my friends, and I'm sorry for the house-elves. What must it have been like to have their magic

bound like that...only able to do their masters' bidding?" She was quiet as he told her what he needed and how each item had to be prepared.

They worked in silence, each in their own thoughts. Severus started to add the ingredients. "Since we planned this to be a quick brew, it should be done within the hour. I have created a small device to deliver the potion. You will wear it on your finger like an upside-down ring. I will throw you at him. When you grovel at his feet, you will have to press it into his foot. The poison is fast acting and should paralyze him in seconds." He stopped to look up at her. "Those seconds could be death, Hermione. He has great power. I will try to shield you from him. I hope to have Fancy and her army stationed around the Death Eaters. They can incapacitate Voldemort's army with their magic. It will have to be perfect timing or our lives will be forfeit."

Hermione gave him the mealworms she had just ground up. "Severus, if we die, we die. The house-elves will continue to fight. I will never regret the time I spent in your arms. If this is our only chance, then we must take it."

"I can think of no other way. If there was a way... Hermione." The pain was clear on his face.

"I know," she said. "Is there any chance of me having a wand?"

Severus looked up at her. "I do not have your wand; he kept it. I do have others as back-ups. A spy never takes just one wand with him. I also have a few I've taken in battle. You can try them all."

Hermione flashed him a brilliant smile that warmed the block of ice that was his heart. Each time she looked at him without condemnation he believed they could get through this. She was acting as if nothing happened, but there would be consequences...of that he was sure. He glanced at her again.

"Thank you, Severus." She stepped close to watch him as he continued to brew the potion. Each ingredient changed the color, and it finally became an inky, black liquid.

"It's done," he said.

"How will we test it?" she asked.

Severus went to the corner and produced a small cage that housed a rat. "This isn't something I normally do, but you're right. We do need to test a small amount. I caught this fellow in my pantry a few weeks ago."

Hermione tried to avoid looking at the animal's eyes. Killing anything innocent was abhorrent to her, but this would have to be done.

Severus took a pin and dipped it into the potion. He incapacitated the rat with an Impedimenta Curse and then pressed the tip of the pin to the animal's foot. Its eyes closed instantly, its body shuddered, and it fell over into a smoking heap.

Hermione had a look of horror on her face. "Oh, God, Severus."

"Yes," his voice was dry and devoid of life.

They got the slides and blood sample and did further tests. It was obvious the potion destroyed the cells. But would its reaction be as fast as they needed it to be?

He turned and pulled a box from a drawer in a small cabinet. He took a ring out and filled the inside well with the potion. You must be very careful with this. You will put it on so the well is under your finger. I will ward the ring's contents and place them under a stasis spell. You need only to press it against his foot, and it will be released through the tiny tip of a needle under it. I will also make it invisible, Hermione. No one will know it's there. Slaves are never adorned."

She nodded, staring at the little ring. It was of the same gold and silver swirls and held the rune patterns as the cauldron. She was going to kill Voldemort. She started to shake, and Severus put the ring down carefully and took her in his arms.

"You can do this, Hermione. You must do this. I will be the first one whose mind he will probe. This must be done seconds after you fall to his feet, or it will be too late. If he touches your mind, he will see our plans."

There was a pop, and they turned to find Arelia looking at them. She was clothed head to toe in a suit-of-armor. She carried a lethal blade, thin and sharp like a rapier. "We are ready, sir. It is but for Fancy to give the command."

Severus knelt to talk to her face to face, and still she was so short that he had to look down on her. He told her about the potion and the ring and asked, "Can you shield Hermione from Voldemort's wrath?"

"I can," she promised. "You as well, sir. I will appear with you, concealed from the Death Eaters' eyes."

Severus was again grateful this little creature was on their side. He wondered how long that would last. Would there be some of her people so bitter that they would want to take over one day? He was going to make certain, if possible, that it didn't happen.

"Areli, we are done down here, and we will return to the house upstairs. You must stay close. I will have to Apparate you with us, or you would not be able to follow. Will you be able to tell your people where we are?" He placed the ring back in the box and tucked the small box into the inside pocket of his robe.

"Yes, I can communicate through my mind to them." She followed them upstairs, hopping from step to step.

Hermione's mind was heavy with all the things she had learned, and she was thinking along the same lines as Severus. The power of the house-elves was phenomenal, and there could be danger later.

"Fancy," Severus asked, "are you willing to make a meal for us? Hermione is going to try out the wands I have here."

"Of course, sir. I am your housemaid. That does not change. Our people will continue to need work." Fancy went to fix them some food.

In the sitting room, Severus brought out a long box. He set it on the table and opened it. It had wands in it.

"Oh." Hermione flexed her fingers with her anxiety to touch them. She picked up one very carefully.

Severus explained, "Some of them I bought because they felt similar to my wand. Dark wizards, as I said, commanded others. They felt different. Maybe you should try the ones I purchased first."

Hermione stifled a laugh. "Do you realize you, too, are classified as a dark wizard?"

"I am different." He sounded as if he were trying to convince himself.

Hermione turned toward him and touched his face. Her fingers urged him down, and he bent his head and gave him a long, gentle kiss. "I'm sorry, I know you are different, Severus. I cannot imagine life, now, without you."

Those simple words spoken so off-handedly filled his heart.

She turned back and picked up the first wand. She waved it, and it only produced a small puff of smoke from the end. Disappointed, she placed it back on the table and tried the next one.

"It feels so good to have a wand in my hand. It's been only few weeks, and yet with what has happened it feels like years, Severus."

"I'm sorry. I know what you mean in some ways, but I would be happy with years in your company, Hermione," he admitted.

Hermione looked up at him and saw such a tender look. "Do you think it's possible to fall in love in a matter of days, Severus?"

"Of course not," he said, blushing. But he was beginning to believe it was possible.

But she could read the opposite in his face. She smiled up at him.

"Get on with the wand choosing, woman," he said sternly, but he smiled at her. Her simple ability to joke with him made him feel more normal. He let the horror of today slip into the back of his mind. He would concentrate on what they needed to do now.

Hermione picked up another wand. It was cherry wood and beautifully carved. It felt warm in her hand. She waved it, and a soft flow of sparks emitted from the end. She hugged the wand to her and turned to see Severus watching her with an unreadable look on his face.

"You okay with arming me?" she asked.

"Yes." He turned away, proving he trusted her.

She came and touched his arm. "What's wrong then?"

He put his arms around her and held her close. "We are in grave danger. I'm asking you to kill a powerful monster. I'm..."

"...afraid," she finished for him.

"Yes," he admitted. "I should have done this myself years ago, but Albus was so damn certain that it had to be Potter."

"I believed in him, too," she admitted. "I will be okay. I do know how to defend myself," she told him.

"I always thought I would die during the war. Living in the future never occurred to me. I want a Voldemort-free world far more than I ever have, if only to keep you safe. I want to see what life could be for us. It's ruined now. I'm not sure I can get past what I did today."

He could not push the thoughts back into his mind; they kept coming back and battering at his will.

"I can't take the guilt away from you," Hermione said as she pulled Severus close. "I can't convince you with words that I'm okay with what you had to do. I know I didn't see what you did, and I didn't really feel what you did, but I love you Severus, and the only thing that's scaring me to death is the thought of losing you. Get your wand, Severus. Use Legilimency on me. See my mind and my heart. See how much I have grown to love you for saving my life and for trusting me these last two weeks." She grinned into his face. "For giving me the best sex a woman could ever have. Look into my mind and see the truth, Severus. Please, Severus, for me."

Severus' eyes teared up as he stood back and used his wand *Legilimens*.

He found Hermione's mind warm and inviting. He saw himself as something different in her thoughts. She saw him as a savior and quite handsome. She felt amazingly cared for and safe with him. She felt euphoric when he made love to her.

"Severus," she said in his mind, "I want to have your babies. Please let me give you babies."

Severus pulled out of her thoughts and stared into her eyes. "What?"

Lisa, thank you for the wonderful Beta work you do for me.

Writermerrin, I do appreciate the time you spend correcting my stories for TPP.

6

Chapter 6 of 7

Voldemort wins the War and decides to reward his faithful servant, Severus Snape.

"What?" he said again. He glanced at the kitchen door where they could hear Fancy making food. He grabbed her hand and ran with her to the bedroom and locked and warded the door behind him. "Hermione, did you say you would have my baby?"

Hermione gazed up into the face of Severus Snape, a face she'd never seen before. It held unadulterated joy.

"You would like a baby? I never dreamed." His heart began to heal from the horror that had clamped around his soul. He picked her up and whirled her around. "I can't imagine more joy than having you in my life, and now you wish to carry my child. No one has ever offered that to me. Women have acted as if a child of mine would be like some alien worm they would have to carry."

Hermione let her eyes flow tears that held both fear for what they planned and joy at the thought of giving this man something he desired. If she had not already known she loved him before, she did now.

"I would be honored to give you a baby," she said.

He picked her up and carried her to the bed. Their clothing vanished, and he gently made love to her with care and unbelievable tenderness. He touched her like she was a precious stone of great worth or the frailest of flower petals. When their bodies joined and they reached the pinnacle of desire, their cries rang out, and there was a flash of energy about them. They sat back on their knees facing each other. Looks of incredible surprise and joy passed over their faces.

"Magical bonding!" they said together.

Hermione said, "You do love me, Severus!"

"Yes, I suppose I do." The revelation warmed him more, and he felt as if he might just survive the day. He gathered her close, and they lay back on the bed wrapped in each other's arms. "I only thought myself in love once before. I committed in my heart, but it was one-sided and never returned. No woman has ever loved me..."

"Until now," she finished for him, kissing him ever so gently.

He was quiet as he lay there. Finally he said, "Now, I have everything to lose. Hermione, you know what I will have to do to you before we go again."

"Yes, the injuries and the bruises." She held herself more tightly against him.

"I'm sorry," he said, burying his face in her neck.

"I know, Severus. I understand. I understood the last two times. I understood today. You didn't hear me complain, did you?"

"No, but it felt like someone kicked me in the gut when I saw them on you." A painful groan escaped him; it was hard to push the memories back. They kept jumping forward into his mind.

"As long as you do not have to physically hit me, I think we will be okay."

There was a knock at the door. Severus clothed them with his wand, unwarded the door, and called, "Come."

Fancy came into the room carrying a tray, which she levitated up onto the bedside table. "Master, I will stay in the sitting room on watch tonight."

"Thank you, Fancy. Your presence is a comfort."

The little house-elf still wore her armor. The odd little rapier was tucked into a scabbard at her side.

"Fancy, is that a sword you carry?" Severus asked curiously.

"No, sir, it's my wand." She whipped it out, and power sizzled from it. It was made of an alloy Severus could not even guess at.

Hermione and Severus climbed off the bed in a scramble and got down to look at it. "I did not know house-elves carried wands," Severus said.

The wand vanished from her hand and then reappeared.

"Elvin wands have their own magic; they respond to the wielder. I only have to think 'visible' or 'invisible.' You are probably the first wizarding people to see an elf wand since the bargain was made."

"Is it possible for a wizard to touch one?" Severus asked.

"No, sir. Elves have very powerful magic. It would short circuit your brain if you touched my wand."

Severus drew back. "Well then, remind me not to stumble around you." He smirked at the tiny creature. Severus felt his respect growing for this house-elf and her people. "Perhaps if we are successful, a new kind of alliance will form between our people...one with an equal standing. Do you think that would be possible with all your people have gone through at the hands of wizardkind?"

"Sir, house-elves are very forgiving. Most of us enjoy our work. Those of us enslaved by dark wizards will have to be freed, but they will only be grateful, as Dobby was." She turned. "Fancy will go now. Sleep. I will alert you if anything comes. Call for me the moment the mark burns."

It was more of a command, but Severus nodded. "Of course, you may be our best chance of getting out of there alive."

Fancy went through the door, and Severus warded and soundproofed the room. He looked at Hermione, who had perched herself on the edge of the bed. Her face was guarded.

"Do you think they will hold to the agreement to be equals?" She shivered at the scope of things before them if the house-elves decided on revenge.

Severus came and slipped an arm around her. "It would be very wise for wizardkind to take precautions to *not stir the beast*."

"You and I may have to take a hand in rebuilding our society once we are free," she told him.

He sighed. "Yes." His voice was dry and troubled. "I do not want to live the life I've already lived again, Hermione. I do not want to be a spy. Nor do I want to police our people. I want peace, you, and I want our babies." He pressed his forehead against hers, closed his eyes, and just held her.

Hermione stayed that way a while and then planted a soft kiss on his nose. "Let's eat and then just lay here and hold each other." They sat by the fire on a blanket and had a picnic.

"Severus, why hasn't Voldemort looked into your mind to see what you are doing with me? Will he be able see that we care for each other?"

"The war is over; for now, he's so exhilarated by his *victory* that he has been sloppy. He will hold to his word and search my mind most thoroughly. You will have to be quick because I am weak now, and it is hard for me to shield the feelings I have for you and the pain for what I did. He's a maniac, and soon the Death Eaters will find the life they imagined with him is not as good as they expected."

"What did they expect?" she asked, trying to distract him from falling into his pain.

"Endless riches. The ability to use their magic in any way they wish. They want the freedom to go out and maim, pillage, and rape at will. They are depraved."

"How do we defeat the Dementors?"

"Few people know this, but they are tormentors from the gates of Hell itself. The Dark Lord brought them here, and they do his bidding. They stayed after he was vanished the first time because they knew he was not dead. They needed to feed, so they contracted with the Ministry to feed on the life force and memories of the prisoners in Azkaban. They are still here only at Voldemort's bidding. When he gets sent to Hell permanently, they will go, too."

Hermione put her food down. "Can we go back to bed now? I want you to hold me."

Severus nodded and stood, grabbing her hand. He took her back to bed, and they undressed and crawled in, wrapping themselves around each other and talking into the night before falling asleep.

Severus woke to a deep burning in his arm, and he fought the panic that nearly overwhelmed him.

"Hermione! Wake up! I have been summoned. Fancy!"

He was up running toward the closet for his Death Eater robes. Hermione sat up with a look of terror on her face.

Severus used his wand to lower the wards and open the door. Fancy appeared at the door. "My people have been alerted. They will be able to mentally track me."

Severus waved a wand at Hermione, and she was clothed in the thin, gauzy gown.

"I'm sorry," he said.

She nodded as he came and slipped the ring on her finger. Then it vanished, but she could still feel the cold metal against her finger. It was somewhat comforting.

"Severus, I love you," she said as he waved his wand. She felt pain in her arms and legs and blood dripping from a wound above one eyebrow.

Severus faltered; but when he saw the determination in Hermione's eyes, his resolve grew strong and hard.

"I can do this," she told him. "We must go now."

"I love you, too," he said, his face filled with his pride in her. He took her arm, and he felt a now-invisible Arelia grab his other hand.

"Courage, sir. I will shield you when the time comes," Arelia reminded him.

"Only after he probes my mind...or if you see he doesn't believe me." Severus closed his eyes and stuffed all the thoughts of the last minutes behind his formidable shields and let his emotions vanish with them. He dragged them through the house and out into the garden and Apparated.

They found themselves in a cavern lit by torches; dozens of them lined the walls. Several hundred Death Eaters stood awaiting the Dark Lord's words. The room was already filled with the stench of blood.

"Master." Severus bowed and stepped back. He still gripped Hermione by the arm.

"What's this?" Voldemort reached out a claw-like finger and took a drop of blood from Hermione's forehead. His tongue flicked out like a snake and tasted it. "Have you been beating your love slave?" His voice was nasty, and Hermione cringed away. His eyes lingered on the deep purple marks on her neck, and his tongue flicked out like a snake tasting the wind.

"I had to beat her for her transgression the last time, and I took my anger out on her as you ordered. I have used her over and over. She is nothing but a vile Mudblood." Severus threw Hermione at Voldemort's feet.

"Reveal her punishment to me," Voldemort commanded. Severus felt him rip into his mind, and he fell to his knees.

Hermione fought to distract him. "Please, Lord Voldemort, please give me to someone else. He is crueler than you know," she whimpered. She crawled forward, groveling and grabbing at the hem of his robe. Her eyes were trying to see the position of his bare feet.

"It appears you're with the right master then. She is a tasty morsel, Severus. Maybe I should sample her myself." Voldemort leaned down and grabbed her up against him. She nearly recoiled at the scaly feel of his arms, but she clamped a hand on his arm and pressed down into the flesh with all her strength.

Voldemort suddenly felt threatened, so he tossed her to the ground. She saw his wand come pivoting toward her face and heard, "Ava..." Then he screamed an unholy scream, and she crawled crab-like backwards, as his curse swung out towards Severus. Hermione screamed but saw that it bounced off a bubble-like force field that enveloped him. She drew her borrowed wand and fired off a spell. Unpracticed with this wand, it flew wide.

Voldemort's eyes were wide with surprise and pain, but his wand was sending curses everywhere. Uncontrollable magic flew wild; some of Voldemort's followers dropped as his curses hit them. With his other hand, he was clawing at his throat. His eyes bulged.

"Severus, what have you done? We could have ruled this world together." He seemed genuinely shocked.

Severus reached down and drew Hermione to his side. One arm went around her waist, and the bubble surrounded her. With a flick of his wand, she was clothed in a warm, soft robe.

"I am ridding this world of a terrible disease that would destroy us all."

All around them the Death Eaters began to draw their wands. They would have sent curses toward them, but the popping of Apparition nearly deafened them. A whole army of amour-clad house-elves surrounded them, disarming them and binding them in ropes of pure energy.

Hermione and Severus stood protected in their bubble, staring with horror at Voldemort. He was still standing. His body started to steam and shrink into itself. The redness left his eyes, and there was a profound sadness of sheer betrayal there for a brief moment. Then he toppled over, and his whole body collapsed into itself like a Halloween rubber mask.

Everyone who bore the Dark Mark screamed as his or her arm burned. Severus pushed Hermione from him, fearing Voldemort had cursed the Dark Mark and that his life was now forfeit. He pushed the sleeve of his robe up and watched as a dark, inky blackness curled from his arm and rose into the darkness of the cavern above.

"Hermione, the mark is gone!"

Hermione came to him, and he grabbed her against him and kissed her deeply. "I'm finally free. Thank you, Hermione. You are my Gryffindor Lion."

"Why couldn't this have happened when our friends were all still alive?" she asked, tears now falling down her face. But she knew the answer, and her eyes apologized to Severus for saying it. He nodded and held her closer.

"Areli, can you take the prisoners to Azkaban? Will your army make sure Azkaban is secure? Will you be able to police it?"

"Yes," she said with a bow. "There are a number of us who worked for these people." The words came out in a hiss. "They would be more than happy to imprison their masters and guard them."

"Can your people discern who the *good guys* are and who the *bad guys* are? Will they let the good ones out of Azkaban?"

"We will await your command. You may be surprised, sir. There are good people in hiding."

"What?" He smirked at himself; he'd been saying that a lot lately.

Hermione sagged against him. "Who?"

"Go back to your home. I will come shortly and fill you in." She bowed and Apparated away.

Severus looked around. Their part was done, but before they left, he sent out one more spell, "Accio Hermione's wand." The wand appeared, flying from the back of the

cave, and he caught it from the air. Hermione turned and reached for it. He grinned at her flexing fingers as she grabbed it and held it to her bosom like a long-lost friend. "Let's go home." He pulled her close and Apparated them home.

Hermione was so overwhelmed that she fainted, and he picked her up and carried her into the bedroom.

When she came around, she said, "Please, Severus, I need to be clean."

He drew a bath and then, like that first time, he climbed in with her and held her. He gave her potions and watched the injuries heal. They soaked a while, and then he scrubbed her clean and helped her into soft, coral robe. When they came into the bedroom, Arelia was changing the sheets and plumping pillows as if nothing had changed.

"Arelia," Hermione broke away from Severus and went on her hands and knees, hugging the little elf to her. "Please tell me who lives. Is Harry alive?"

Arelia shook her head. "No, I'm sorry, he is gone. We have been able to create a magical painting, though. So you can speak to him if you wish. Also many of Hogwarts' portraits were secreted away before the war, and copies took their place. That's why many slept. These will be replaced in the Headmaster's office when Hogwarts is completed."

"There are 55 students who live...Neville Longbottom, Luna Lovegood, Draco Malfoy, Susan Bones, and others you do not know too well."

"Ron?" she asked.

Severus cringed. Would she go back to him, if he were alive?

"Sorry, Madam." Arelia hung her head.

"Are there any Weasleys alive?" Hermione asked, again hopeful.

"Madam Weasley lives, but she is injured. She will recover. George, Fleur, and Bill are hiding. Arthur died during the battle. Charlie and Ginny died after the battle, and Fred and Percy are also gone."

Hermione felt Severus lift her from the floor, and he put her on the bed. Arelia jumped up onto the bed and sat cross-legged on one corner.

Severus asked, "Hogwarts staff?"

"It is difficult to tell you, Master. Only Professor Flitwick and Madam Pomfrey are living."

"Minerva," Hermione groaned and buried her face in Severus' shoulder.

"Order members?" Severus demanded.

"Shacklebolt, Aberforth, Hestia, Hagrid... I'm afraid that's all of them, sir."

"Hagrid's alive? I need to see him. Severus, please."

Severus asked, "Can you bring Hagrid here? Don't tell him who's here. Let's surprise the man. Make sure he leaves his umbrella elsewhere if he has one with him. I don't want to be hexed before I can explain myself."

Hermione smiled at him and took his hand. "Get under the covers with me."

"Are you sure you don't want to entertain him in the sitting room? I could carry you out there."

"No, he needs to know who I am with. I'd rather stay here. The potions are making me weak." She snuggled next to him.

"I'm sorry about Harry and Ron. I almost held hope for a moment," he said, holding her close.

"I did, too. Thank you, Severus." She looked up at him, having heard hardness in his voice when he'd said Ron's name.

"Severus, I would not have left you, if he'd been alive. Ron and I haven't worked in a long time. You and I are magically bonded, and we are planning to have babies. I told you I loved you. Ron being alive would not have changed anything."

"I'm sorry. Everything good that has come my way has always been taken from me," he admitted, kissing her forehead. She turned her face to his and then buried it in his neck. "And we have gone through so much."

"The war is finally over, and we must leave all of it behind. We are the instigators of a new world. We make our own luck together from now on."

There was a loud pop, and Hagrid stood there, nearly filling the room. He looked around, and when he spied Severus, his face became furious.

"What is this that you summon me to your bedroom? Have you no shame, man? I am not a trained dog. What is it you want, Death Eater?" It was said from a man who had been used like a trained ox since his capture nearly two weeks earlier. "You have the nerve to embarrass some poor girl." He waved his hand at Hermione, whose back was still to him.

Hermione turned and said, "Hello, Hagrid."

The old giant's face went white, and tears filled his eyes and poured down his face.

"Hermione!" He moved to her side of the bed. She flung herself at him, and he caught her against his massive chest.

"Hagrid!" She sobbed openly for the people who were lost and the people who still lived.

Lisa, thank you for your beta work. You make the process so easy for me.

Angela, thank you pre-reading and for your comments and help.

Voldemort wins the War and decides to reward his faithful servant, Severus Snape.

A huge chair appeared behind Hagrid. He was so overcome that he was falling backward. He sat gratefully while Severus watched him anxiously, not comfortable with another man holding his woman. But as he watched them, he realized that Hagrid was like a father to her. Hagrid held her like a fragile doll in his lap, and his hand soothed her hair.

"Hermione! I can't believe it. I thought the worst for you." He glared at Severus. "What you doin' here with him?"

"Hagrid, Severus helped me kill Voldemort not more than an hour ago."

"What's this? You say the snake is dead?" He put her on the bed and watched as she crawled back into Severus's arms.

Severus nodded. "It's true. Hermione killed him."

Hagrid sat back. "But how? I saw you taken. I knew what they would do to you."

Hermione threaded her fingers through Severus's. "I was given to Severus. Voldemort thought he could trust him. He thought Severus would torture and use me."

Hagrid growled. "Filthy bastard."

Severus wondered whether he was talking about him or Voldemort. He felt he might well deserve the comment himself.

"I gave myself to Severus freely; we have become close these last two weeks. We created a potion that would kill Voldemort, and I delivered it."

Hagrid...overcome with the knowledge that Voldemort was finally dead...leaned forward and pressed his face into his hands and sobbed.

Hermione clutched Severus' hand as they watched Hagrid cry. She knew he cried for those they'd lost and in relief because Voldemort was finally dead. Finally, he wiped his eyes and sat back.

He cleared his voice and asked, "What do we do now?" He was still clearly overwhelmed.

Severus said, "We rebuild our world. We reopen Hogwarts. I hope you will help me, Hagrid. There are probably others in hiding."

"What! There are others alive?" Hagrid's eyes were round with disbelief. Emotions of happiness and sadness crossed his face as Severus repeated what Arelia had told him.

Hagrid looked at the little elf with wonder. "I always knew ye were more than ye pretended to be. I look forward to getting to know ye," he said, giving a little bow to the elf.

Severus told him whom he knew to be alive. "With Luna, Neville, Filius, and Poppy, we will teach our children differently than how we were taught. We might even get a few elves to help us teach. Shackelbolt can run the ministry. Molly will help him."

Arelia smiled. "I am looking forward to this new era. Let me take you home, Professor Hagrid."

"Home? It's nothing but a shell," he said with great sadness.

"Your house still stands and repairs are being made. We elves have a special magic for repair and restoration. Fang is there waiting. Those who have been hiding will now come from the forest and join you at Hogwarts. There is a band of elves cleaning and repairing Hogwarts with their magic as we sit here. There will be warmth and light there. Your quarters will be ready when you want to come, Headmaster Snape."

Hermione said, "Please, can we go? I want to see the others. Please, Severus?"

"You're not strong," he warned her.

"Give me a strengthening potion, Severus. It's a special occasion, and we need to be there. You need to be there, and you won't stop me." Her chin rose stubbornly.

Hagrid watched, cringing. Severus had never been one to back down. But he formed a new opinion of the man that night.

Severus laughed and nodded, running his hand over Hermione's hair. He suddenly wanted to go home as well. He climbed from the bed and took clothing from the closet.

Hagrid followed Arelia to the sitting room to wait for them, trying to fathom the gentleness and the love he'd seen in the once cynical Potion master's eyes when he looked at Hermione. Had he fallen into an alternate universe? Hagrid decided if he had, this one was better than the one he had been in.

After getting the strengthening potion, Hermione looked through the robes that Arelia had brought and picked a fine green one. She watched in silence as Severus physically ripped his Death Eater robes to ribbons and then placed them in the fireplace to burn. His mask went last, and they watched together as the face slowly melted and ran. Finally, they reached for each other's hands and went to join Hagrid and Arelia in the sitting room. They made their way to the garden and then Apparated to Hogwarts.

They stood at the gate and stared with wonder at the castle. Arelia took down the wards, and they moved through the gates. The castle was lit. Every window had candlelight flickering outward.

Hagrid saw that his house was restored and also lit. A bellow from his old hound dog split the air, and a dark shape hurled itself at him. He caught the huge dog easily against his chest.

Hermione felt tears burn her eyes and run down her face as she watched the reunion. She clutched Severus' hand tighter, and they started toward the castle with Arelia leading the way.

Hagrid set Fang down and followed them. The great door was open, and they climbed the stairs and passed into the warmth of the castle. They crossed the hall and stood at the door of the Great Hall. There were hundreds of people in the large room. Many ordinary wizarding people had been hiding. They all were standing in groups talking, hugging, laughing, and crying. All turned toward them. There was a hush and then a deafening clapping began. Hundreds of house-elves popped in and joined the clapping. Severus stood there clutching Hermione to him, wishing he could fade into the wall. He'd never wanted acknowledgement. He was just paying an old debt. He felt such shame now. What would these people do to him if they ever found out what he really was?

But then Hermione whispered, "I love you, Severus. Courage is something you've always had amazing amounts of."

Hermione heard a cry, and then she saw Molly separate herself from the crowd. One of her arms was bound to her body, and she wore the burns of a powerful curse that

had burned her left cheek, but she was still able to hobble toward Hermione and Severus. She engulfed them in a hug.

"My girl, I had no hope for you. Severus, you old scoundrel, I always knew you'd come through."

Then the others came to speak with them...some one at a time, others in groups. Severus felt old pain and resentments in his heart fade away. His whole life as a spy suddenly became worth it. He found he cared for all these people.

When Kingsley came forward, he said to the crowd, "Kingsley Shacklebolt is the finest of wizards. I think many will agree that he should be our minister. Molly Weasley should be his under secretary. He will rebuild the government with the elves and those of you who want to go with him."

He expected people to protest, but they all listened to his words and seemed to agree.

"Hermione and I will stay with those who want to help us restart the school. This school is the future of our wizarding world and essential to getting our lives back. But for tonight, we rest, we eat, and we talk. Arelia, will you ask your fellow elves to set the tables and bring on the food?"

The little elf hopped up to the nearest table and waved her silver wand. The table was set and the room flooded with house-elves all proudly carrying amazing dishes. She was smiling with glee as several magically enhanced long tables appeared in elf size.

Severus laughed and said, "Let's eat."

He and Hermione headed to the staff table. But they stopped and stood in shock as they found the wall behind the staff table was now covered with a huge magical painting unlike any that had ever graced the walls of Hogwarts. It was a painting of the Great Hall like a mirror of what was behind them. And there standing in groups were all those who had been lost in the wars against Voldemort. Harry and Ron stood closest to the front, smiling, and next to them were Dumbledore and Minerva. Behind Harry stood a man and woman Hermione knew to be James and Lily. Then she saw Remus, Tonks, Arthur, Percy, and Fred... On and on, the faces of lost friends became clear as she focused on them. She stepped away from Severus, and he watched her press her hand to Harry's outstretched hand on the canvas, and then she reached her other hand out to Ron. The trio was together again.

"Hermione," the young men said together.

Hermione pressed her face to the painting. "Harry, Ron," she said with fresh tears on her face.

Harry said, "Don't cry. It is as it should be. Hermione, look I'm with my parents. Here they are as real as you are in your world. We are all together again. It's everything I ever wanted. Sirius is here, too. I have my family. And look..." He pulled Ginny from behind him. "My girl is here, too. It's pure heaven, Hermione."

Ron said, "It is heaven, Hermione. Most of my family is here, and we can wait for the others. He glanced past her to his mum, who'd come close. "Mum, you have much to do yet."

Molly nodded and went to stand close to where Arthur was looking out at her with love and pride on his face.

Hermione eyes streamed tears. She felt Severus come up behind her and wrap his arms about her, and she clutched at his hands now.

"Professor Snape. I trust you will take good care of Hermione. I can't say it's not odd seeing you together, but I can see the bond you have with each other," Harry told him.

"I will take care of her," Severus promised. "I regret that I was not able to talk to you before this all happened. So much of what we did depended on secrecy." Yet his eyes wandered to Lily, and he saw her looking back.

"I understand, sir. I'm sorry I failed you and everyone," Harry said.

"We both could blame ourselves, Harry. You are a brave and good man. It just wasn't to be. You did as much as was possible for you to do against a powerful opponent." He glanced at Dumbledore and glared his way. He still found it hard to look at the man.

"The fault is mine," Dumbledore said. "I thought the prophecies were correct. I thought it had to be that way. I'm sorry for what I asked you to do, Severus. I am proud that you and Hermione accomplished in a few days what I couldn't do in 50 years."

"It took years and a know-it-all to work out the potion in my mind." He grinned at Hermione as she grinned back at him. "It had to be a poison that would kill a man and a snake combined...and do it quickly enough to keep us alive at the same time. Hermione helped me perfect it. It was very difficult, and I was only able to get someone that close because Hermione was given to me."

Ron said, "Given to you?"

Hermione said, "It was war, Ron. Voldemort was a cruel master. He wanted me to be tortured, so he gave me to a man he thought was his loyal servant. Severus was a gentleman, and we did what was necessary to stay alive."

Ron stepped back and nodded. Then Lavender came from somewhere in the back and stood by him. He reached out and threaded his fingers into hers. "Be happy, Hermione." He turned away and vanished into the crowd.

"Harry," she said, again overcome with emotion.

Harry smiled. "I will be here anytime you want to talk...just call me. Our worlds really are only separated by the veil. Go celebrate."

Hermione nodded at him and gripped Severus' arms more tightly. "Let's eat and celebrate." She gave him a flashing smile, and he turned her so he could kiss her. They forgot the world around them. They didn't even notice the surprised gasps of the real world and the portrait world. Nor did they hear the thunderous clapping. They were lost into their own world of each other.

After dinner, Severus urged Hermione to come with him. He took her to a corner at the back of the room and took her in his arms and said, "Bond with me, legally, tonight, Hermione. I want you for my wife."

"Severus, are you in earnest?" Her eyes glowed with the possibility.

"Absolutely. Kingsley's here, and we have everyone here in the real world and the portrait world we have ever needed to stand with us. What do you say?"

"I say YES!" she screamed happily, throwing her arms about his neck.

They cornered Kingsley, and he agreed it would be best that they were married right then.

"Arelia," Severus called.

The little elf, now dressed in a fine gown, popped in. Severus bent and whispered something in her ear, and she squealed with glee, "Yes, sir, right away." She vanished, and Hermione raised her eyebrow when Severus turned to grin at her.

He turned and went to the portrait and spoke quietly, "Harry, I'm going to marry Hermione, now. I hope that you will give us your blessing. You are her dearest friend."

Harry said, "I only want her to be happy, sir. It appears you will make her happy. Of course you have my blessing. Thank you for all you've done to keep her alive. I can see how much you care for her."

"Thank you, Harry." He nodded and then turned away. He then went to the lectern and raised his hand, and the entire company in the huge room stilled.

He held his hand out to Hermione and said, "I hope you will join Hermione and I in about half an hour to witness our bonding." There were loud gasps and more applause. Finally, Severus continued, "Kingsley has agreed to perform the ceremony. Arelia, our wonderful house-elf and champion today, has agreed to change the decor in here, so if you will all just sit quietly and let the elves do their wonderful magic, we will have a wedding."

Hermione stood against Severus in shock as the hall was changed into a garden wonderland of vines and white flowers. Drapes of white sheer material covered the stone walls. The portrait people all gathered. Harry, his parents, Ron and the Weasleys, as well as the rest of their friends all came to watch. The hall was filled with the static of magic, and everything sparkled. Everyone was dressed in fine clothing.

Hermione looked down at her dark robes and started to pull her wand out. Then Arelia appeared before her. With a wave of that wand of silver and light, Hermione found herself dressed in a long, white strapless gown. The bottom flared from her waist in layers of gauzy fabric. She glanced up at Severus, confused, and he grinned. Though not see through, it was the same fabric as her slave gown.

"I hope you don't mind, Hermione. I never saw a woman more beautiful than when you came to me that night. You were never a slave to me, only a blessing. I lost my heart that night. It took me a while to figure it out, but I loved you that night."

Touched that it had meant so much to him, she said, "It's beautiful, Severus." Arelia transformed Severus's clothing into black dress robes. Hermione glanced at the portrait to see what Harry was doing and saw that Lily was standing front and center.

"Severus, I think Lily wants to talk to you. It's time to put the past away, don't you think? I'm going to talk with Ginny for a moment."

Severus looked and saw that Lily was beckoning to him. He bent to give Hermione a gentle kiss. "I will be right back, my love."

She went to one side of the huge portrait and saw Severus head to the middle.

"Lily," he said. His heart was beating rapidly and his mouth was dry. He'd never faced her like this before so real and so alive.

"Severus, the magic that makes this communication possible is amazing. Your Hermione seems to be a lovely woman. I do hope you will be happy."

Severus felt tears burn his eyes. "Thank you. Forgive me, Lily," he blurted out.

"I already have. I'm sorry I never got to tell you. I did miss our friendship terribly, Severus." She turned now, and James came to the front. Severus noted that Harry was watching very carefully a little ways away.

"Severus, I was a prat. I am sorry." James said, offering his hand, palm against the wall that separated them.

Severus pressed palm to palm since they could not shake hands. "Yes, you were," Severus said with seriousness. "It is forgotten, James. You make her happy. All those events led to today, and I would not change my life one tiny bit right at the moment, so I guess it was fate."

"Yes, Severus, be happy. Thank you for helping our son." He pulled Lily away, and she followed him, glancing back at Severus with a happy smile. Severus stood for a moment, watching them join Sirius and Lupin, then he turned to join Hermione.

Hermione and Ginny chatted about the dress and the wedding like two schoolgirls...things best friends would talk about on a girl's wedding day, and Hermione didn't feel so lost anymore. They weren't gone, they were all there able to talk to her, alive in the next world just behind the veil. Somehow this painting made seeing through the veil possible. She found Minerva standing close, and Dumbledore was still next to her.

Severus came back and took her hand. "Minerva, Albus," he said. He thought it would be hard to look at them, but he saw that they appeared younger, stronger, and they were holding hands.

Albus said, "I'm very proud of you, my boy. I hope you and Hermione will be very happy. Age difference aside, it never made much difference to Minerva and I."

Hermione said, "You and Minerva... a couple? Why didn't you let people know?"

Albus explained, "We decided it would be best for the good of the school many years before. We took a stupid unbreakable vow, in an age before people became more accepting of couples working together. It kept us silent."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "What a waste."

Minerva giggled like a girl. "Not at all; we had a secret passage between our rooms."

Hermione glanced at Severus, who was getting red ears. She laughed at her once unflappable Potions teacher. "Don't tell me in all your years as a spy you didn't know?"

"Apparently not," he admitted.

Just then Arelia appeared. "It's is done, Master."

Severus said, "Arelia, you are no longer anyone servant. I would be happy to have you as an employee if you so wish it, but you may call me Severus."

Arelia hopped up and down like a child. "I would be happy to, Sir Severus."

Severus gulped but didn't make an issue of it. "Let's get this woman bonded to me. I do not want to wait another moment." His voice was deep, and the room became silent.

Calling Molly and Hagrid to stand with them, they took their places under the arch of white flowers, and Kingsley produced the cord that bound their wrists together. The words were said and magical rings formed from the cord, and they placed them on each other fingers. Finally Kingsley said, "I now pronounce you husband and wife."

Severus swept Hermione up into his arms and kissed her deeply, "My wife, I cannot imagine a better act I have ever done, in my life, then make you mine."

Hermione smiled into his face. "Nor I in marrying you, my husband."

Severus picked her up and swung her around. Then he said to their shocked audience, "Good night, everyone, we are off to make a baby."

"Severus!" Hermione exclaimed, laughing with happiness.

Severus laughed a deep, rich, free laugh and carried his wife away.

Fin

Thank you, Lisa, for your beta work. This was quickly written, and I appreciate your getting it beta'd so quickly.