

A Beloved Tale

by Mischief Unmanaged

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Disclaimer: We don't own the characters.

My own Beloved, who hast lifted me
From this drear flat of earth where I was thrown,
And, in betwixt the languid ringlets, blown
A life - breath, till the forehead hopefully
Shines out again, as all the angels see,
Before thy saving kiss! My own, my own,
Who camest to me when the world was gone,
And I who looked for only God, found thee!
I find thee; I am safe, and strong, and glad.
As one who stands in dewless asphodel
Looks backward on the tedious time he had
In the upper life, - so I, with bosom - swell,
Make witness, here, between the good and bad,
That Love, as strong as Death, retrieves as well.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Sonnets from the Portuguese

The first rays of morning sunlight peeped tentatively over the horizon, bathing the sleepy houses of Spinner's End in relentless brightness. The sunshine was inescapable: it chased away all of the shadows where the shabby buildings had cowered overnight. Sitting in the most dilapidated house of all, Severus Snape waited silently. His black eyes followed the specks of dust dancing in the feeble shaft of light that had somehow managed to struggle its way through the grimy window. His back ached from having sat in the sagging wing-back chair by the front door for the past six hours, but nothing could have forced him to abandon his current post. After all, six hours was a pittance in comparison to the six years he had waited for this moment.

Six years, he thought with a sigh, his lip curling in displeasure.

It had been six long years since Voldemort's snake had sunk her deadly fangs into his neck. Six years since he'd been denied the peace of which he'd been given such a fleeting taste. Six years since he'd been dragged back through the layers of blissful oblivion. Six years since a mysterious person had felt themselves compelled to save his miserable life. Six frustrating years full of anger, bitterness, and resentment.

Severus snorted at his turn of thoughts, causing the dust motes to swirl and roil in the rays of light before him. In truth, only the first few years had been filled with such wretchedness. Suspicion and curiosity had quickly taken its place, giving a sense of purpose to his existence that he hadn't even realized was missing. Not that he was feeling particularly grateful. He would have had a difficult time describing the emotions parading through his mind as he continued to wait in the uncomfortable chair, ears alert for the slightest noise from the other side of the entrance door.

His hand twitched ever so slightly, lying in his lap atop a stack of five thick envelopes, and his long fingers instantly moved across the topmost envelope. Without looking, his thumb found the indentations where quill had pressed into paper, and he began to absentmindedly stroke the precise handwriting, back and forth, again and again. The sound of calloused skin caressing parchment was the only noise to break the silence, but still his ears strained for more.

Breaking his study of the floating dust specks, Severus glanced down at the envelopes and began to flip through them. A familiar scowl settled upon his face when he reached the bottom of the stack. This enclosure was different from the rest: not only was it wrinkled to the point of being almost unreadable, but it was also completely empty. He could clearly remember the many times he'd crumpled and then straightened the offending piece of paper, just as he could easily recall the way he'd tossed the contents...a ten-page letter...into his fireplace. It was the memory of what was contained in that long-destroyed correspondence that escaped his mind and invited his frown.

He had been so angry when he'd first read the letter, delivered on the first anniversary of the day he should have died. The sender had detailed the means they'd employed to save his life, as well as a disgusting monologue of how relieved they were to have been able to prevent his name from being added to the list of casualties. Their annoying wish to remain anonymous, along with their clueless insistence that he need never worry about thanking them, had completely pushed him over the edge. He'd flung all ten pages into the hungry fire with so much force that a shower of sparks and cinders and ashes had come raining forth, burning angry little holes into the threadbare rug before the hearth. He had spent the next year vacillating between rage for the actions of his unnamed saviour and irritation with himself for having destroyed the letter.

When a second letter had arrived the following year, Severus had not repeated his earlier mistake. Looking down, he fingered the next envelope in the stack: it was nearly as tattered as the first but at least four times as thick. He had read the pages within so many times the parchment had worn through and the lines were burned into his consciousness. There had been something familiar about the writing...the precise spacing between words, a unique loop on the letter "g," and the particular turn of a phrase...that had niggled at the corners of his memory and demanded to be identified. But the hundreds of readings had failed to reveal the author: only the frustrating certainty that he knew the writer.

The third year had yielded another letter, and with it, another year to examine every nuance of every sentence he had received. A flash of recognition had rocked him to his core late one evening, making him shake in humiliation and hatred. By the light of morning, the idea had seemed too preposterous to even contemplate, and he'd dismissed it as the result of too much whiskey and too little sleep. But the more he'd read and re-read the letter, the stronger his suspicions had become. He had been her professor for six years, after all...had she really thought he wouldn't eventually recognize her style of writing? If his guess was correct, she had taken careful steps to avoid mentioning anything that could reveal her true identity. Nevertheless, he was a highly skilled spy and adept at noticing the slightest habits, the barest hints that could give someone away.

The arrival of the fourth letter had provided him with more clues to analyse, and his certainty over the author's identity had grown. Reading her letters had soon proved insufficient...his curiosity had demanded more than mere words...and so he had searched for her. He had dismissed how desperate he'd become to locate her, but he couldn't ignore the surprise and frustration he'd encountered when his efforts to find her had been stymied. She had seemed to have disappeared from the wizarding world shortly after the downfall of Voldemort. When all of his searching had proved futile, he had been left with no choice but to track the fifth letter. Unfortunately, he had underestimated her skill, and his plan had backfired, sending him to the birthplace of the owl that had delivered the letter rather than the place where the letter had originated. He'd been left with an entire year in which to relive the frustration of having missed the small window of opportunity. Twelve months of obsessively reading each new line. Fifty-two weeks spent wondering about the infuriatingly bossy but undeniably bright witch who had saved his life. Three hundred and sixty-five days spent contemplating the woman she had become...a woman who had apparently never forgotten about him. She had somehow managed to see past the bitterness, past the insults, past the lifetime of pain and regrettable choices. And each year, she wrote to him, reminding him that something pure and innocent still existed in this world.

As the years flew by, her letters had done more than provide him with purpose. Each page had become a lifeline thrown into his tempest of internal fears and doubts. Each sentence had served as an anchor, weighing him firmly to a sanity that would have otherwise been washed away. And each word had spoken to him, cutting through his careful shrouds and defences like a beacon in the fog. Her letters had awakened a part of him that he had assumed was lost forever. If he were a fanciful man, he would have thought it appropriate that it had been her words...spoken as an incantation...that had brought his body back to life, and it had been her words again...written in achingly poignant letters...that had restored whatever small, ragged piece of his soul still existed.

Severus Snape was not a fanciful man, however. He was a realist, and he could, at times, be honest with himself. He tucked the worn envelopes into a pocket in his robes and returned his gaze to the door, waiting and listening. He knew that his obsession to find her had metamorphosed through the years. The hatred over having been forced back into a life he hardly desired was long gone, and with it, the desire to exact revenge upon his saviour for such. The overwhelming curiosity to identify her...to confirm his suspicions...had also faded. He knew who had written the letters to him... He understood it...and her...with a certainty that defied logic but was nevertheless something he'd stake his life on. Proving his suspicions right would be unnecessary and even superfluous at this point. Finding her had ceased to become an option for him...it was now a requirement. Reading her words was no longer enough, either. He had to listen to them himself, had to watch her lips form them, hear her throat give voice to them. He had to see the way her eyes would look as she spoke them.

He had never imagined he could feel this way about a person simply from reading something they'd written. He found it fascinating that the mere combination of letters and spaces on a sheet of paper could evoke such strong emotions. It astounded him to realise how easily he had overlooked the infinite power of something so simple. He had always appreciated the power of words when used in a spell, but the subtle way she arranged such ordinary fragments of vocabulary proved just as effective as the strongest of incantations. The realisation made him all the more regretful of the way he'd carelessly destroyed her first letter. He yearned for the return of those ten pages and cursed himself daily for the loss. It was yet another reason he had sat stoically for the past six...no, seven now...hours in a faded old chair by his door. Under no circumstances could he allow another mistake this year. He had spent countless days developing a new method of tracking the owl's journey, and he refused to entertain the possibility of failure.

Severus yawned and shifted his position, uncrossing and re-crossing his long legs. A sudden, terrible thought struck him, and he froze, his ankle raised in mid-air on its way to his knee. *What if she didn't send a letter this year?* he wondered. *What if she had arbitrarily picked a certain amount of years for which to write to him? Five years sounded like a nice, precise amount of time. What if there were no more letters, and he could never find...*

The soft sound of feathers moving through the air broke into his reverie. With lightning-like speed, he left the chair and completely Vanished his front door, surprising the large brown owl that hovered over the threshold, a thick envelope clutched in its beak. A quickly uttered spell immobilized the bird, and he gently plucked the animal from the air and carried it inside. He pulled the envelope from its mouth and carefully set the massive bird onto his recently vacated chair. Should the new method fail, he would need the owl, as it was the only link he'd have to the envelope's sender. His thumb traced the now-familiar handwriting, and he briefly contemplated reading the letter before departing. But he was so close now, and he had already waited so long. He tucked the newest letter into his robes where it joined its five identical siblings, warmed from the pocket's proximity to his rapidly beating heart. He pointed his wand at the statue-like owl and carefully enunciated each word of the spell he'd created solely for this

purpose.

"*Apparate Prius Scriptor*," he said. He disappeared from the room with a fast pop, leaving a gaping hole where the door to Spinner's End should be. The empty house stared out at the road with a look of surprise on its façade, perfectly mimicked by the owl that sat inside, staring into space with unblinking eyes.

Hermione Granger sat down at the kitchen table of her small flat, a freshly brewed cup of tea in her hand. Her annual deed was once again done, and now she allowed herself to contemplate her past actions.

He couldn't be dead. Not from a snake bite. Not a Potions master, who had been running with Voldemort for years, who must have known that being bitten by the megalomaniac's pet snake was a very real possibility. He couldn't just submit to a freaking snake bite and give up. Unable to rest in the aftermath of the battle, unable to focus on anything but Hogwarts' former headmaster, Hermione silently made her way from the Great Hall back outside towards the Shrieking Shack.

A sigh of relief escaped her when she saw the faint rising of his chest. "Professor, can you hear me?" she whispered as she bent down. No answer. What would he do; how would he have prepared? she wondered for a moment. Then, decision made, Hermione proceeded to find his pockets. At first, her search yielded nothing, but once she arrived at the robe pockets, her hand withdrew two phials. Uncorking one, she sniffed. Dittany. The other phial smelled of nothing, its liquid purple. Dittany was a good enough start, she figured and carefully moved his hair aside to access the bite. He remained unconscious, and his breathing remained shallow. Hermione sighed. What to do... Deciding that an educated guess was likely her best option to keep him alive, Hermione administered the purple liquid to his mouth, carefully massaging his throat to encourage swallowing, hoping desperately that the potion was antivenin. What else would a Potions master carry with him in the same pocket as dittany, if not antivenin? She remained a few more minutes, and when his breathing deepened, Hermione slowly stood up. "Good luck, Professor Snape. May your life be happier from now on," she whispered and turned to leave.

Leaning deeper into the chair, she took a sip of her tea. "Are you happier, Professor?" she asked into the empty kitchen. "Am I happy?"

It was a question she could not answer. Maybe...*maybe*...if reversing the memory charm on her parents had worked the way it should have, she would be able to answer it. Maybe...*maybe*...if she'd returned to the wizarding world after a desperately needed break, she would be able to answer it. But her parents had never regained the memory of having a daughter who was a witch, although they'd remembered everything else, down to the last detail. And Hermione had chosen to pursue a non-career as a scholar rather than re-enter the wizarding world to bask in the glory of hero worship.

"I'm not unhappy at least," she whispered to herself and emptied the last of the cup. "Not today." It was her grand holiday, the day she crafted her annual letter to him. Over the years, the day had become sacred, filled with the ritual of purchasing ink of higher quality than usual, parchment that was thicker than the ordinary one sold for correspondence, filled with hours of carefully wording the letter, ensuring she'd not give herself away, and finally, applying a glamour and Apparating to the owlery, choosing the most efficient owl, and sending it to Spinner's End. Then, the rest of the day spent in contemplation, ending with a glass of wine and a silent toast to her former professor.

Hermione smiled slightly...a bitter-sweet smile...as thoughts of Ron drifted to the surface. He had tried to convince her, tried so hard to make her return to the wizarding world, tried so hard to convince her he was the right man for her. "No point mourning a ghost, Hermione!" he'd chastised every time she'd dared mention Snape. In the end, he'd given up in defeat. "I suppose you can lead a horse to water and all that," he'd said, his shoulders slumped, and left to never return. She'd been afraid she'd miss him when he'd left, but she never really did. His friendship, as well as Harry's, yes. But not the relationship that had never led anywhere. He was better off without her, and she without him.

Hermione's thoughts returned to the last letter she had just sent, a slight shudder of uncertainty running down her spine.*Was I right to suggest we'd meet?*She shrugged. It was too late to change it now. In the two years that followed the battle that disposed of Voldemort, her highest priority had been to ensure that Snape would never find out who'd saved his life. Over time, she'd realised she'd never succeed in overcoming her obsession with her former professor. When the charms she'd cast on her letter the previous year informed her of his trying to trace her letter, she'd started to ponder suggesting a meeting. *Maybe I simply won't like him once I'm face to face with him...*She snorted. *More likely he'll have me in tears with his sarcasm in no time! Maybe he'll kill me for daring to save his life.*There was no point speculating his reaction. If he was willing to meet her, she'd know soon enough.

A loud pop outside yanked her out of her reverie. Her eyes widened when someone knocked at the door, and she rushed to see who it might be.

Severus was unaware of the change in his heartbeat as the door swung open. The woman inside was very much the way he'd imagined, except for the obvious look of surprise in her wide brown eyes. Upon seeing him, her gasp of surprise was quickly followed by her hand fluttering up to her throat as her mouth worked in an unsuccessful attempt to form words.

"Prof...Professor Snape..." she stammered at last.

"Miss Granger," he replied quietly in acknowledgement. "May I come in?"

She paled but nodded her acquiescence, stepping back to allow him entrance before closing the door and returning her gaze to him. He watched her eyes sweeping over his face, lingering just a second too long on his neck where the scars from the long-ago snakebite lay hidden beneath his collar.

He was glad for her momentary loss of words, glad for the advantage of surprise as it gave him time to study her undetected. She had grown into a lovely woman...the hard angles of youth had softened into feminine curves just begging to be touched. The unruly brown hair still seemed to have a mind of its own, but it no longer overpowered her other features. Her face was more familiar to him than his own visage, so often had he pictured it in his mind as he'd read her letters. Her head turned slightly, and he saw her eyes shift to a desk in the corner. He followed her line of sight, quickly taking in the many sheets of paper strewn across the writing surface, some crumpled into balls, others torn into tiny pieces, but all made of the same familiar parchment as contained in the envelopes cushioning his rapidly beating heart. Looking back at her, he noted her reluctance to meet his eyes. Her face had turned a bright shade of pink, and she pulled her bottom lip between her teeth as her eyes darted over his features, seemingly determined to avoid his gaze.

His brain searched for words, and he realised that he'd spent countless hours planning a way to find her, yet very little time considering what he would say to her once he'd succeeded. He took a step towards her and watched her swallow nervously. He took another step, and this time she moved as well, stepping backwards towards the door she'd just closed. Smiling slightly, he advanced again, reaching his hand into his robes for the letters as he stepped closer. She retreated quickly but there was nowhere to go. The instant her back hit the door, her hands flew to her hips, patting the pockets of her jeans where she'd undoubtedly kept her wand before hiding herself in this remote location. Her eyes widened in horror, and he belatedly realised she'd been expecting his wand, not the packet of envelopes he eventually withdrew from his robes.

She let her breath out in a rush; he was standing so close that his hair was blown back from his face. He brought the stack of letters to the same level as their faces. Her eyes scanned them briefly, then closed; at the same moment, her shoulders slumped forward and her head leaned back against the door as if in defeat.

"Did you write these letters?" he asked. He already knew the answer but somehow he wanted...needed...to hear her say it.

Her eyes remained closed, and she stood completely still for several long seconds. Finally, her throat moved and the sound of her swallow echoed in the stillness. Breathing deeply, she opened her eyes and met his gaze. There was no longer nervousness or fear: she held his stare without once flinching or glancing away.

"Yes," she stated firmly.

Her chin rose slightly, and he recognised the subtle ways her body had shifted as if in challenge. Her shoulders had squared, her hands had curled into fists, and her eyes

flashed fire at him. He had never doubted her courage, and she seemed to wear it like a shield now, ready for whatever weapon he chose to wield against her.

"I see," he said. Then, in a move that seemed to surprise her every bit as much as him, he dropped the letters to the floor and closed the small gap that had separated them. His hands cupped her face, and his lips sought hers, capturing her mouth hungrily. He devoured the soft sigh that escaped her throat, the taste of her morning tea and honey mixing intoxicatingly with her own unique, sweet flavour.

Her hands left her sides, and for a moment he thought she would shove him away. But her fingers curled around his robes near his ribs, her hands fisting in the fabric as her body moved towards him. Her lips parted and he deepened the kiss, marvelling at the passion he sensed smouldering within her. His thumb stroked along her jawbone, and their tongues met, tentatively at first, then exploring with more confidence as their bodies pressed together. A part of him knew that if he didn't stop kissing her soon, he wouldn't be able to fight the need to claim her...to possess her...completely. With reluctance, he traced his tongue along her lips before peppering her mouth with several soft, light kisses. He drew his head back and gazed into her eyes, blinking in wonder when he found them slightly unfocused.

Frowning in concentration, he searched for a way to articulate his thoughts. There was so much he needed to say to her, but he'd never been comfortable with emotions and had little experience in discussing such things.

"I lack your obvious talent with words," he began, his frown deepening as he considered how best to continue.

"I'd say you found an excellent way to make up for that," she told him with a surprisingly saucy grin.

He smirked at her statement, enjoying the way she had kept her hands on his waist and hadn't seemed to mind his palms resting on her shoulders. He moved his hands down her arms and grew serious, eager to finish his original thought. She couldn't possibly know how the words she had written had been like a gift, working their unique form of magic, spurring him into action when nothing else had inspired him. At the very least, he owed her an acknowledgement for having saved his life.

"Six years ago, you saved my life," he said.

"Yes," she agreed, and a look of disappointment crossed her face.

"I was very angry about that, although at the time, I hadn't any idea of whom to be angry with."

"Oh," she said after a moment. Her brows drew together, and she watched his face carefully.

"Then you began to send the letters."

"I wasn't sure if you even read them," she said.

"I did," he confirmed. "Numerous times, in fact. And you should know that... that your letters had the same impact as your actions six years ago."

"They saved your life?" she asked incredulously.

He nodded and watched in fascination as her eyes became misty.

"They saved mine, too," she whispered.

"I was never truly alive until the moment you brought me back to life," he said, scowling at how ridiculous the words sounded but knowing he owed them to her.

She watched him for a long time, although he had no idea what more to say or what she could possibly be thinking. At long last, she offered him a watery laugh and said, "In that case... happy birthday!"

He chuckled, grateful for the opportunity to take the conversation in a different direction. "Thank you. Where's my cake?"

She smiled slowly, tilting her head to the side as she appeared to consider him. "I have something better," she said. Taking his hand, she led him down a narrow hallway and into a sunny room dominated by a large bed.

A shy smile lit her face as she turned back to him. He drew her into his arms and placed a small, tentative kiss on her forehead. "You're quite certain about this?" he asked.

"Yes," she stated with obvious faith. "Are you?" The light of challenge was back in her eyes, and her eyebrow quirked as if daring him to refuse.

"Most definitely," he replied. His mouth lowered to hers, and he whispered, "A happy birthday, indeed." He kissed her again, and this time there was nothing tentative or small about the kiss...this time, his lips conveyed the promise of all the passion and wonder the future held for them. And for the first time in six years, there was peace.

A/N: Happy Birthday, little_beloved! Thank you for enriching the fandom the way you do!