Resurgam

by countrymouse

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Chapter 1

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As his last swimming vision...of intense green eyes, staring in shock and dismay...faded into blackness, his only thought had been hope that the blackness would yield to the renewed sight of those eyes...and that he might never again have to give up gazing into their depths.

Yet, when sight and sense returned, it was not forest-green eyes which greeted him, nor the soft sound of a beloved voice, but the antiseptic smells and harsh glare of sunlight through the windows of Hogwarts' Infirmary.

With consciousness fading in and out through the subsequent days, he gathered that, somehow, he had survived Nagini's attack, had been found (barely) alive, and had been borne in honour back to Hogwarts where the remorseful staff had outdone themselves in solicitous attention to the newly-revealed hero.

Poppy had spared no effort in marshalling all possible resources toward his recovery, calling in St. Mungo's highest-level Healers to consult on his treatment, and ensuring that someone sat by his bedside at all hours during the first critical weeks. Among the staff, Minerva, Flitwick, and Slughorn took turns sitting with him, each in their own way expressing their sorrow at having so grossly misjudged him for so many years. He would have preferred they kept their silence. What did it matter, now? There was only one person for whose good will he longed, and he had been denied her, again...

Through their monologues, however (for he was still too weak to reply), he learned the details of the Last Battle, as it was being called: how Potter had, apparently, seen and understood the memories that he had left him, for he had gone unresistingly to Voldemort, and to his own death. But...he had not died. How was that possible?...For she had not been here, this time, to save him?

From Narcissa and Lucius (and why were they here, at Hogwarts, he wondered?) he learned that Harry, though struck down, had lived, and of the final confrontation in the Great Hall between The Boy Who Lived and the Dark Lord. It seemed Harry had declared to the entire assembly what he had passed on to him in the memories: of his true loyalties, his plotting with Dumbledore, his doe Patronus...his love for Lily. Then Potter had spoken of possessing a greater magic than the Dark Lord's, of the Elder Wand's being his, not Voldemort's, and with a simple Disarming Spell had disarmed Death itself, sending it rebounding upon the one who had styled himself, "Wielder of Death".

Even from among the remaining students, it seemed, Poppy had impressed into service those she saw as fit to watch over his bed, and of course among them was The Boy Who Lived. Having returned his memories to him as soon as Poppy had deemed it wise, Potter was uncharacteristically silent the first few times he took the watch; but

there was now a new note of respect in his voice, and his eyes (it was, still, so hard to look into those eyes!) now carried a look of deep caring and trust. He had not seen that look in her eyes for so long, so long...

The Granger girl, of all people, was also assigned to him on some shifts, and he initially steeled his nerves for the constant verbal assault he expected to pour from her. Yet, of all his 'babysitters', as he mentally called them, she...surprisingly...seemed to best understand his moods. He could not fathom how she could sense when he wished for silence, and at those times merely sat companionably by him. Often, in his first nights there, he woke to find her brown eyes trained attentively upon him, the moonlight through the large windows transforming her normally chaotic mass of hair into an ethereal halo. As his strength returned, she seemed to know that the last thing he wished to think of was the incessant news of the War, and instead she brought to him his recently received Potions journals and read them to him in her clear, quiet voice.

It was oddly... soothing.

Eventually, he recovered sufficiently to sit up in his bed and converse with his 'keepers', as he now styled them. They were maddeningly patient with his snappish attempts to be "off-putting"; they thought they "understood" and bore with infuriating cheerfulness his venomous sarcasm and churlish silences. They assured him that "everyone" now "knew the Truth" about him; that, as soon as he was restored to health, he was to be formally honoured by the Ministry for his heroism in resisting Voldemort and would likely receive his long-deserved Order of Merlin, First Class, as well as numerous awards, memorials, and accolades in his honour. Apparently it was 'The Boy Who Lived' who was leading the public movement to see that he did receive his "due".

How very perfect.

Thus could Potter assuage his own guilt for the years of "misunderstanding", while bringing even more coals of fire down upon his head.*

So he was not taken overmuch by surprise, when next Potter came to sit by him, to find the boy in a talkative mood, eager to see his former enemy join in his own excitement.

He sat propped on his pillows, only half attending, scowling silently out the window as Potter droned on about plans and preparations for the rehabilitation of his reputation in the Wizarding world from traitor to hero. He was contemplating the irony of how all the long-desired "understanding" and plaudits he had once craved now felt, in reality, like acid poured upon an open wound, when he was brought up short by Potter's words.

"... I saw her, and I know she would have been very proud of you."

He turned his head and gave the boy his full attention.

"What do you mean, you 'saw' her?" he whispered.

Potter swallowed convulsively, glancing around the ward to see if anyone was near, then shifting his chair a bit closer to the bed, he said quietly, "I mean I saw her, Professor...actually saw her...the night I went to Voldemort."

Had the boy gone mad? "Explain!"

"I suppose I can tell you, now. Dumbledore left me a gift, something he knew would help me...help me do what I had to do. You know about the Elder Wand, right?"

He nodded jerkily, an uneasy suspicion rising in his chest.

"Well, the Wand was one of three...three Hallows."

"The Deathly Hallows... " he whispered.

"Yes." Potter answered. "And I already had one..."

"The cloak..." he gasped. Why had he not seen it before?

"Yes, and there was a third..."

His head spinning with shock, he whispered, "You had the Resurrection Stone?"

"Yes. And I used it, the night I went to Voldemort, and I saw her."

"You mean... her ghost?"

Potter paused, as if searching for the right words. "Not a ghost, exactly...more than a ghost, but less than being actually there, if you know what I mean. It's almost as though she was almost here, or I was almost there, but I couldn't really say which it was. But I saw her, and my Dad, and Remus, and Sirius." He hesitated again, then added, "They encouraged me...helped me go on, to do what I had to do...to face him."

Hating himself for humiliating himself in this way before the boy, but unable to resist the need toknow, he croaked out, "And... she spoke to you...of me?"

"Well, no, sir, not directly, but... well, I did see her and spoke to her, and somehow..." he looked beseechingly into his professor's face, all earnestness and emotion, "I just know, sir, if she could have talked to you as well, she would have told you how grateful she is, for all you have done."

If she could have talked to you as well... if she could talk to you...

"Do you still have the Stone?" he asked, trying desperately to keep the eagerness from his voice.

"No, sir. I dropped it in...! lost it. I don't know where it is, now." His face took on a more closed expression. "The Hallows...at least, the Wand and the Stone...are dangerous, sir. One has left a trail of murder, and the other of madness, behind them through all the years. I think it's better this way, that the Stone is gone." He smiled then, secure in the superiority of his motives. "And, thanks to you, I have a chance, now, to live a long life, and die a natural death, and then the power of the Wand will be broken as well. After all, that was what Dumbledore wanted, right?"

With an effort, he forced himself to reply calmly. "Yes, Potter, that was what Dumbledore wanted."

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He was discharged from Poppy's care to his former home in the dungeons a few weeks later, still weak but finally able to move about on his own without aid. The other staff were now busily employed in the rebuilding of the castle, and in preparations for reopening the school in Autumn. Work was going forward, as well, on a huge Ceremony to both memorialize the fallen and honour the living of the War, to take place just prior to the new term, in late August. At his request, Minerva had retained the role of Headmistress, but she insisted he serve, once fully able to resume his duties, as her assistant. He was given the choice of the post either of Potions or DADA instructor and, without hesitation, chose Potions.

It felt nearer to her, being in the class they had both loved.

As his strength returned, Minerva requested his help in going through his old records from his time as Headmaster, and she assigned her Griffindor protégé, the Granger

chit, to assist him both with that and with preparing his own storeroom and classroom again for his use. No longer a student, she was something between an assistant and an apprentice, helping out generally as requested while waiting to take her NEWTS and decide upon her chosen career. Slughorn had completely overhauled things to his own liking, and while he had found him an adequate instructor in his own youth, he nevertheless ruthlessly restored his own order upon the area.

In this as well, he found the presence of the Granger girl far less irritating than he had expected. Her photographic memory served her well in remembering the precise layout of his Potions storeroom, and her work in cleaning and cataloguing was competent and thorough. He often found himself surprised by how she seemed to anticipate his needs and intentions, discovering he felt more relaxed in her presence than he had been previously in anyone else's, except for Minerva...and Dumbledore.

She never asked about his past, or his role in the War, or his time as a spy. In fact, she seemed to prefer to ignore the subject altogether, as though it were inconsequential to the far more important business of getting on with life *now*. However, he found that, if he inquired carefully, he could induce her to open her confidence and share with him the experiences the trio had undergone while on the run. He was pleasantly surprised to find he enjoyed these conversations, as if they two were completing a puzzle to which many pieces had been missing. He now understood the entirety of Dumbledore's plans, and while bitterness still remained for how he had been often merely a pawn on the Headmaster's chessboard, yet he grudgingly admired the genius which had foreseen nearly all possible angles in advance.

Nearly all.

He carefully inquired about how they had learned, step by step, what they needed to do next. He expressed sympathy for the frustration she had felt at the vagueness of the guidance Dumbledore had left them. He offered succinct praise of her cleverness in sussing out the meagre clues Dumbledore had left them. He expressed modest acknowledgement of her gratefulness to him in providing them with the Sword...and then took his chance.

"I regret that I could not be more... open ... with my true motives, nor with any means of aiding you..."

She looked up at him earnestly. "Oh, but I understand, Professor! You couldn't, not while Harry still ha...still felt the way he did about you! And if you knew, then, that he was a Horcrux..."

"It would have been... unsafe, yes, for him to know of my true loyalties," he finished. "Indeed. But," he paused, "I was grateful to at least have had the help of Headmaster Black, in apprising me of your activities. Without that, I would not have known where to find you."

She blushed. "That was an accident, actually...I hadn't meant for him to hear. I'd left my bag open by accident."

"So I heard." He allowed himself to smirk companionably. "Headmaster Black was quite put out with you, for the way you desecrated his portrait by blindfolding him."

As he had anticipated, a look of shame crossed her face. "If we had only known it was safe to have let you know, Professor..." She broke off, and in an almost angry tone continued, "Surely Headmaster Dumbledore could have found some safe way to allow us to know we could trust you! It was so unfair to put you in that position!"

"Thank you, Miss Granger." He felt unexpectedly warmed by her support, and suddenly guilt washed over him for the subterfuge he was about to wield against her. "It was comforting to have Headmaster Black's counsel...he was, indeed, alone among the portraits, other than Headmaster Dumbledore's, that is...in supporting me during a very... lonely time." He paused strategically, then added, "I suppose his portrait has been returned to Grimmauld Place?"

"Oh no, as a matter of fact, I still have it in my bag. Harry didn't really want it back there, and, well, I wasn't sure what to do with it." A sudden look of inspiration colored her face. "Perhaps you would like to have it, Professor? Since he was a Slytherin Headmaster, and you being Head of Slytherin again?"

He paused, to appear to be considering it. "Perhaps you are correct, Miss Granger. It would be more appropriate if the Head of Slytherin had the portrait of the only Slytherin Headmaster. I would be honored to have it."

She promised to bring it to him after dinner, and he hid his satisfaction as he gravely thanked her.

Once she had left him with the portrait in his hands, and he had magically mounted it upon the otherwise unadorned walls of his sitting room, he removed the blindfold still upon Phineas Nigellus' face. Although the portrait was no longer bound to obey his will, now that he was no longer headmaster, still Phineas was grateful enough to be free of the blindfold and returned to a more dignified location than the inside of the Granger girl's bag, that he was disposed to be helpful. Upon close questioning, he revealed that the only time he had heard Potter and Dumbledore discussing the Elder Wand was immediately following the Last Battle. Phineas recounted how Potter had mysteriously referred to "the thing that was hidden in the Snitch"***, how he had dropped it "in the Forest"***, and Dumbledore's approval of his decision not to seek it again. Since Potter spoke of "keeping Ignotus' present"*** at the same time, he was fairly certain that the reference had been to one of the three Deathly Hallows...the Resurrection Stone.

Feeling a deeper sense of triumph than he had since the end of the War, he sat down before his fire with a glass of brandy, staring into the flames and contemplating his next move

"In the Forest"***...obviously the Forbidden Forest, since that is where he went to meet the Dark Lord. It should not be too hard to find, perhaps even a simple Accio...

He swirled the liquid in his glass, looking through its amber glow at the flames... and thinking how the color reminded him of the fiery red of her hair. Soon, very soon, I shall see you again. Beloved...

It was still some weeks before he found opportunity to go search for the Stone. August was now half gone, and preparations were proceeding apace for both the Victory Celebration (as it was being called) and the beginning of the new school year.

His greatest difficulty, oddly enough, was finding a chance to be alone. Certainly, that had never been a problem prior to his current status as "hero". So accustomed had he become, from childhood, to being shunned and alone, that he now found himself feeling almost claustrophobic from being constantly surrounded by others. Poppy, checking the state of his health; Minerva, wanting to consult with him regarding some matter concerning the school; Flitwick or one of the other teachers, inviting him to the Hog's Head of an evening; Harry Potter desiring another 'tête-à-tête' to interminably discuss either his past (which he had no wish to re-live for the boy), or to establish a camaraderie between them (in which goal the boy showed no sign of discouragement, despite repeated rebuffs). Then there was the harassment every time he showed his face outside the grounds from the likes of Rita Skeeter and her ilk, or those general hangers-on who pursue the popular to bask in their reflected glory.

All of it was a burden, rather than the pleasure he had once thought it would be, and the only thing making it bearable was the hidden hope of the escape he should procure from it, once he found the Resurrection Stone and activated it. Then...well, then he could, finally, be with the only person he really cared to be with, at all.

The only one who made no demands at all upon his time was the inscrutable Miss Granger. Consequently, he felt most comfortable spending the majority of his time hidden away in his Potions storeroom, his classroom, or his private laboratory, in her company. Their quiet conversations were a peaceful balm to the madness of life outside his quarters. That this should be so was a source of ironic amusement to him, when he considered the comparison between the young first-year, wildly waving her hand while nearly flying out of her seat with excitement, and the composed young woman who now serenely discussed everything from new Potions discoveries to the latest Ministry contretemps.

He found himself wondering, at times, why she was not more eager to spend time with the other two thirds of what he once dubbed "The Golden Trio". By watching and listening, he soon came to understand that she and the Weasley boy had had some sort of falling-out, and that furthermore said falling-out had been about him.

Apparently her red-headed would-be paramour had not accepted his "hero"-status as readily as had Mr. Potter and took issue with Hermione's choice to spend so much

time with him. No, not Hermione... Miss Granger. Arguments had ensued, the last of which had been witnessed by most of the inhabitants of the castle, as it had taken place in the Great Hall.

From what he had heard in the retelling, from an obviously proud Minerva, was that his calm, composed assistant had become a veritable spitfire in defending him...him!...against the verbal attacks of her erstwhile companion.

He had thought her merely besotted, as everyone else, by the ideal of him as "the misunderstood hero"; he was therefore taken aback to learn that her defense of him had been nothing of the kind. Rather than expound upon his virtues, she had apparently openly admitted his faults, but risen to his defense anyway. Minerva had quoted him her speech, as she remembered it:

"How easy is it, Ronald, to do what you know is right when everyone around you is encouraging you, helping you, looking up to you? How easy would it be, if the *only* people who were ever kind to you, were the ones trying to pull you down into what all the 'good' people, who shun you, keep telling you is wrong? How easy to try to climb back up once you'd fallen, knowing that probably most people would never, ever, believe in you again? How simple would it be to turn your back on the only 'family' you'd ever come close to having, to stand with what was right in spite of all that, even if the 'good' people *do* shun you, even if you're standing totally alone? How long could *you* go on, being faithful in the face of faithlessness, loyal in the face of disloyalty, determined in the face of scorn, loving in spite of rejection? How long could you go on, giving and giving, getting nothing in return? You couldn't...unless you had something higher than yourself to hold on to. Or some*one*."

Unaccustomed to such loyalty, he was not quite sure what to make of it. Part of him felt she was still romanticizing his motives...for, in the beginning, at least...he had not done what he had done to choose the "right", or to reject the "wrong", but merely and only to protect Lily. His only original motive had been to have her be his, method and cost be damned, and with or without her will. Only gradually had he come to see that what had destroyed her was not so much one person, as an idea, a philosophy...that some were more worthy, more valuable, more 'human', than others...that not all lives were equal, and equally worthy.

It had been only when the choice was put before him...would he continue to love her, though she did not love him? Would he continue to seek her protection and happiness, even though she would never be his? Would he work to prevent her death's being in vain, to defeat once and for all the evil that had destroyed her, even if all the world, and even she herself, believed him evil?...it was in answering each of these challenges that he had grown beyond simple self-interest.

Dumbledore would have called it learning to love.

Yet, where Dumbledore had seen the many, he had only...ever...seen Lily alone.

It was oddly comforting to know that at least one other person in the world understood that about him.

Finally, the afternoon before the Victory Celebration, he found his chance.

Minerva and the rest of the staff were busily overseeing the set-up for the gathering, ordering the arrangement of chairs outside on the sloping lawn before the doors of the castle, on the very spot on which the Battle itself had taken place. Molly Weasley had arrived to direct the Hogwarts house-elves in the meal preparations, and officials from the Ministry, chief among them Kingsley Shacklebolt, were closeted with the Golden Trio and the remnants of the Order of the Phoenix and the DA, finalizing the presentation of speeches and awards.

Excused due to his still-delicate health, he found himself able to slip away for "a quiet walk on the grounds, and into the Forest to collect herbs."

From careful, apparently casual and merely curious, questioning from him to both Potter and Lucius, he had ascertained exactly what path The Boy Who Lived had taken as he had left the castle to present himself to Voldemort, and the exact spot within the forest where the Dark Lord had waited with his forces. He now followed that path as nearly as he could, casting *Specialis Revelio* every few steps, along with other spells to detect the presence of strong magic.

The cool shade of the trees was a pleasant relief from the August sun, and the muted green light enclosed him in gentle silence. Slowly he paced forward, all senses alert for the slightest sign of magical signature.

Suddenly his spells quickened into both a tingle along his wand arm and a glow near the wizened roots of an ancient tree. Nothing was visible above ground but a layer of dry leaves, but he could perceive the thrum of power. He tried an *Accio Resurrection Stone!* but as he had half expected, it was not to be retrieved so simply. Kneeling by the tree, he began to sift slowly through the leaves and dirt.

In a moment he straightened, holding in his trembling palm a cracked black stone, bearing the triple signs of the triangle, the circle, and the line.

He stared at the stone in his hand, hearing only the thudding of his heartbeat in his ears.

Now. At last!

He had meant to bring the stone back to Hogwarts, their home together for seven years, to use it in the privacy of his own rooms, or even within the confines of Spinner's End, that place so near to where he had first seen her. But he found, now that he held it in his hand, that he could not wait one instant longer.

With trembling fingers, he turned the stone over...once, twice, thrice.

In that next half-second, he thought to himself half-hysterically that no one now, seeing him, would think him brave, for he trembled like a leaf kneeling on the forest floor, too afraid even to look up from the Stone, for fear that what he so desperately desired had once again eluded him.

But then he heard a gentle laugh, and a soft female voice whispered, "Severus?"

He looked up.

Lily stood before him.

She was as he last remembered seeing her, her long red hair silky and lustrous in the afternoon light. He steadied himself and looked into her eyes...those well-remembered and well-beloved eyes, bracing himself for the censure, or accusation, or disapproval he expected to find there.

And instead, he saw only acceptance and laughter in the green depths and a joy upon her face unequalled to any he had seen upon it in life.

"Severus! Oh, wonderful...you found Harry's Stone?"

He managed a slight nod, for the power of speech was beyond him at that point.

"Oh, I am so glad! I had wanted to see you, to tell you! Oh Severus, how can I ever thank you enough?"

He found his voice at last. "Thank me? Do you not wish to curse me? Lily, you don't know what I've done..."

"Oh, but I do, Severus! We all know...we've been watching over you, and over Harry!"

"'We'...Watching?'

"Oh, yes. We are aware of what is happening to those we love. I have been watching over Harry ever since I left him, and I have seen all you have done for him."

He gulped convulsively at that. If she had seen all...then she had seen the spitefulness, the pettiness, the injustice with which he had treated her son. How could she look upon him now with anything but revulsion?

He thought he would die under the weight of her smile, both from joy and from pain that she evercould smile upon him, after all he had done.

"Lily..." his voice broke with emotion, "Lily...can you ever forgive me for betraying you? For causing your death?"

She pursed her lips at that, and her face grew more solemn, but still her eyes were kind. "Severus, it was Voldemort who killed me, not you, and Peter who betrayed us."

"But none of it would have happened if I had not...had not given him the prophecy."

She grew more serious still and nodded her head. "Yes," she said thoughtfully. "Perhaps. Many of our friends who were fighting him had already lost their lives...and that without a prophecy. Perhaps, without it, he would have overlooked us. Perhaps not. Who knows? But, one thing is certain." Her eyes met his directly, and he could not look away.

"It is true you did wrong, to tell him the prophecy. But don't you see, Severus, how that wrong was made to work out for good? Had you not told Voldemort the prophecy, he would not have chosen Harry. Had I not stepped into the gap to shield Harry's life with my own, he would never have been given the blood-protection.

"And, without you...Severus, you could have, at that point, accepted my fate...and Harry's...and continued in Voldemort's service, as did many others.

"Instead, you chose from that moment to recant your allegiance to him and dedicated yourself to bringing him down. You protected my son. Without you, he would not have been able to defeat Voldemort...and for that, I cannot thank you enough, my dearest friend!" she finished, her green eyes flashing with a fierce joy.

He did not realize tears were running unchecked down his cheeks, as he stared up into the beloved eyes, which held no hint of reproach, but only acceptance and...love?

Finding his voice, he croaked, "Dearest friend?" as if he could not believe what he was hearing.

She knelt down beside him in the leaves on the forest floor, as they had once sat side by side on a riverbank, and her smile was gentle as she spread her hands in explanation.

"Oh yes, I think so. Remus and Sirius are dear to me, but none of my friends has suffered as you have, nor taken on the burdens you have done, on behalf of me and mine."

"Lily," his voice choked with tears, but for once he was utterly unashamed of his emotions, "I have missed you...so much."

She tilted her head to one side, regarding him with an almost amused air. "But Severus, I'm always right here. I'm always with you."

He stared at her, "What...what do you mean?"

"Remember I told you, we know what is happening with those we love? I can see you, I'm just right here, on the other side." Seeing his confusion, she added, "The other side of the Veil."

"But we can't be together."

She nodded again and bit her lip, deep in thought. He was suddenly reminded of seeing the same mannerism in Hermione.

"Severus, what if, when Voldemort threatened us, James and I, instead of going into hiding in England, had left the country? Say, had gone abroad...to live in France, for instance? Or even further away...to Australia, or to the States? What if we were living there now? You would not be able to talk to me daily then, either. We would be apart. But would you grieve, as you have done?"

"No," he replied. "No, because I would know there is a possibility of seeing you again."

"But you see me now, silly! And you will see me again, on this side of the Veil, when it is your time to come and join us."

"It is so long."

"Because you have made another wrong choice."

He looked quickly at her, but saw no blame, only a deep sadness.

"You have chosen to stop...to stop living, stop loving. Severus, it's wrong, it's not natural...you are alive, you shouldn't be burying yourself away as if you were dead, too."

"Lily, when you..." he closed his eyes in pain, "my life ended, too."

"Now that's just silly!"

His head snapped up in surprise, to see her shaking her head, her cheeks dimpling as if she were highly amused at him. He was quite taken aback that she wasn't taking his pain seriously enough and began to feel the old irritation he had sometimes felt with her in their youth.

"Severus," she said softly, sensing his mood, "I know how you always wanted it to be, for us. And I tried, truly I did. But you know I never could. I just couldn't love you the way you wanted me to. I saw you as a friend, as my *dearest* friend, as the brother I never had, but..." she sighed. "Even if there had never been a Voldemort, Severus, it would never have worked out that way for us. You know it wouldn't have done...we're too different. Don't you remember how we always used to argue?"

"But I loved you anyway, Lily. I still do. I shall love you always," he murmured passionately.

"For Merlin's sake, Severus! I love you, too, and I always have...why do you think I got so angry when you went over to the Death Eaters? If I hadn't loved you, would I have even cared? But ...only...not that way." She paused. "Surely you're not saying, we can only love one another, if it's only one certain kind of love?"

Again he was taken up short. He had not considered this, in all the long years he had mourned her. He had seen her only as the lover he had lost to another. That "love" itself could be separate from a specific type of relationship, that love could transcend time and space and natural limits, was a new concept to him. He pulled himself together to hear what she was saving.

"It hurts me, Severus, when I see you in pain. Especially when I know it is so needless. There is a rich, full life for you out there. I want you to have that. It would bring me such joy, to see you happy, to see you living the life you deserve to have, after all you have suffered and done for me."

She suddenly stood up. Severus stared at her uncomprehendingly, a sudden fear stabbing him.

"Don't leave me, Lily!"

"Silly," she murmured caressingly. "Didn't I just tell you I never would...I never do?" She pursed her lips again, now looking very serious. "Get up, Severus."

He rose and stood before her.

"I won't ask you to make a promise for me, because you are free now of all promises, and your life is your own again, as it should be. But I want you to know, if you *truly* want to make me happy, that you need to let me *go*, Severus. You need to live your life." She suddenly smiled beatifically at him. "You never know what may be waiting out there, for you. For all you know, the woman that you thought I could be, the perfect woman for you, may be right there, and you're just not letting yourself *see* her."

She took a step back. "Severus, I won't ask you to promise, but I want to ask you to do something."

"Anything, Lily!" he murmured fervently.

She raised her eyebrows, and he suddenly felt again as he had in his youth, when he would over-enthusiastically express his feelings for her, and she would gently repress him.

"I want you to try to live, Severus. Please. It would make me...so happy."

He drew a long, shuddering breath. "If that is truly what you want, Lily... I shall try."

She beamed at him. "And secondly, I want you to get rid of the Resurrection Stone."

"What! Lily, no! How shall I ever see you again?"

"You see? As long as you keep it, you aren't really letting go of me!" She shook her head vehemently at him. "It's dangerous, Severus. Please...please get rid of it. Don't use it again."

She held his gaze steadily, her eyes full of love and concern and pleading. Finally, he nodded his head, and she smiled.

"Then we say goodbye, for now. But remember, I'll be watching!" She paused, as if debating, then added impishly, "I know it sounds cheesy, but I have a feeling you're going to make a very lucky young woman very happy!"

She took a step back, lifting her hand in a parting wave, and looked pointedly at the Stone still grasped in his hand.

For a moment his hand convulsively tightened on the Stone; then, with a sigh, he whispered, "Goodbye, Lily," and watched her smiling form vanish as the Stone fell to the ground.

Before returning to Hogwarts, he had gathered his strength and Apparated to a rocky cliff on the seashore. He stared out over the turbulent grey water, his eyes unfocused as he held the Stone on his open palm. Suddenly, his face convulsed as if in pain and with a great cry he flung the stone from him, heaving great breaths as he watched it flash in its graceful arc down to the sea.

"That's one, Lily," he murmured. "Now...I shall attempt to do the other."

He returned to Hogwarts late, the last rays of the setting sun fading into twilight as he passed the gates.

"Professer, Sir! There ya are! I bin' that worrit about ya!" cried Hagrid, striding down the path toward him. "Headmistress McGonagall sen' me to look fer ya. We was afeared summat had happen' to ya in the Forest."

"I am quite well, as you can see, Hagrid," he replied. "Merely...lost track of the time."

"Yessir. Well, Miss Hermione, she's been worrit as well. She was almos' frantic, wantin' to go out into ther Forest and look fer ya hersel'. But I told her, I said, that if anyone's goin' into tha' Forest, it'll be one as knows it, and she's better to wait for ya in yer classroom or labertory, and she saw the sense o' that."

"Indeed.'

"Yessir, Well, I'll go on back up to Headmistress McGonagall, let her know as you're here, safe and sound,"

"Thank you, Hagrid."

He paced onward, each step seeming heavier than the one before. How could he do this thing Lily asked of him? How "live his life", how "be happy", when it could well be long years before he saw her or spoke with her again?

But Severus, I'm always right here. I'm always with you.

He gasped, for her voice had sounded so clear, so real, as if she were standing before him once again. Was the curse of the Resurrection Stone coming upon him...was he going mad?

It hurts me, Severus, when I see you in pain. Especially when I know it is so needless. There is a rich, full life for you out there. I want you to have that.

She had not made him promise...your life is your own again, she had said. But, with or without an oath, his word given to Lily was his word. So it had been since he first laid eyes on her, when all of nine years old. So it would always be. He would always love her.

Surely you're not saying, we can only love one another, if it's only one certain kind of love?

Perhaps ...perhaps she was right. The pain came, because he had thought his love was blocked...he felt this love for her, and it had no where to go. But, if she was right, and love could still be love, independent of the relationship...

He thought of his mother, and of something she used to say, when he asked her why she still chose to stay with his drunken father:

"Severus, love is the strongest force in the world, and when it is blocked, that means pain. There are two things we can do when this happens. We can kill the love so that it stops hurting. But then of course part of us dies, too. Or, we can open up another route for that love to travel...a love nothing can prevent, nothing destroy... "**

He had not understood, then. It was such drivel, as he had called it, which made him scorn his mother as weak, and love itself as a weakness for fools.

But now, at last, he thought he was beginning to understand...

Wearily, he trudged up the steps of the castle, entered the great doors, and began the ascent of the wide staircase leading to the Great Hall. The last rays of the setting sun were coming straight through the large front windows. As he neared the top, he sucked in a sharp breath and convulsively grasped the stone balustrade.

A young woman stood with her back to him, looking out the far window over the grounds. Her long hair, thick and wavy, falling to her waist, was colored a deep copper-red in the russet tints of the sunset.

Impossible!

At that moment, hearing his gasp, she turned, and the illusion was broken...it was Hermione Granger, and she was...crying?

For a moment, he had thought...

For all you know, the woman that you thought I could be, the perfect woman for you, may be right there, and you're just not letting yourselsee her...

Without warning, his normally self-composed assistant broke into a run, closing the distance between them, and flung herself upon him, wrapping her arms around him in an embrace while burying her face against the wool of his frockcoat.

"Miss Granger! What is the meaning of this?"

She pulled back away from him slightly, still with her arms around him, sobbing but laughing at the same time. "Oh, sir, I'm so sorry, I know you must think I'm silly, but I can't help it, I was so worried, you were gone so long, and you're not fully well yet, and I was so afraid something had happened to you, out there in the forest, and..."

"Miss Granger!"

"...and there are all kinds of dangers in the Forest, acromantulas and centaurs, and who knows, there may even be renegade Death Eaters hiding out there, and when you didn't come back I was just so afraid..."

"MISS GRANGER!"

"Ye...yes, sir?"

She was still trembling in his arms, and through her now-radiant smile she still had shining tears hanging to her dark lashes. It suddenly occurred to him what was the most sensible way of silencing her.

He bent his dark head to hers, and after one instant of looking questioningly into her shining eyes, he gently kissed her.

Her arms reached up to entwine themselves about his neck, and she relaxed into his arms as his embrace around her tightened.

After a measureless moment, he drew back slowly from her to look down into her face. Her face was flushed, but her eyes sparkled, and in them he saw what he had never allowed himself to see before, nor ever thought he would see again in a living woman's face.

I told you so ...

"Miss Granger. Such emotional displays are not for public exhibition. I suggest we take dinner in my chambers, whilst you compose yourself."

She didn't quite smile, but dimpled as she answered, "Of course, Professor."

He offered her his arm, and together they descended the stairway to the dungeons.

Minerva McGonagall, who had just entered the foyer on her way to the Great Hall, stepped out of the shadows as the pair vanished down the dungeon staircase.

"About time, Severus," she whispered. "And well done, Hermione."

And, with her head held high and a smile upon her lips, she swept into the Hall for dinner.

The last golden-red rays of the setting sun streamed through the windows of Hogwarts and caressed the grey stone walls with living fire.

All was well.***

*Romans 12:20 (King James Version): Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head.

**The Hiding Place, Corrie ten Boom, World Wide Publications, 1971, p. 44.

***Quoted from Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, J. K. Rowling

Author's Note: This entire story is written solely from Severus' point of view, and, for good or ill, the canon Snape still worshipped Lily...with all the idolization of both a teenage romance plus the aura we tend to build around the dead (especially loved ones). Severus himself cannot see her for the (in my opinion) fair-weather-friend, two-faced little thing she actually is...so I wrote her as "he" would see her, not as I do (and as I believe many of the HP fandom does). So I didn't have Lily apologizing to Severus for her own bad behavior because I figured, for her, it was going far enough (at that point, anyway) for her to manage to just lay aside all the "love me, love my dog" prejudices of her past and be able to show him the gratitude he deserves for all the sacrifice he's undertaken for her. They've both grown, but are still in process of growing. I just didn't want anyone to think she's some saccharine-sweet ideal of perfection...in character, Lily would probably be patting herself on the back for her magnanimous attitude toward Severus. But, in the end, she has grown enough to want him to be truly free, and to be open and honest enough to encourage him in that.

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