

# Work in Progress

*by Alison*

Severus is changing. But is it for the better?

## One shot short story

*Chapter 1 of 1*

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Work in Progress

By Alison Venugoban

It's getting worse now, and the process seems to be accelerating. Hours that I should be able to recall are blank; whole chunks of time go by without my knowing where. And I dare not look in a mirror anymore.

It seems odd, thinking back, but before I grasped what was happening to me, before the implications really hit home, I was fascinated by the process. As my future contracts to an endpoint sometime soon, my memories of the event that precipitated it all spin out, ringing true and clear as a bell.

He's stirring again in my head, and I feel irritation that I can't control him. But then again, when could I ever? He always defied me, always broke the rules, went his own way time and again with no thought to the logical consequences of his actions. And he'll be taking over again, in an hour or two, growing in youth and vigour as I weaken, and another night will be gone to me, vanished as if it never happened.

And yet...and yet it's not his fault, he didn't want this to happen, anymore than I did. He wouldn't believe it, if he knew my thoughts on that point. I could almost feel sympathy for him, if only I had the energy left. If only I had sympathy to spare for anyone's plight besides my own.

The Dark Mark disappeared yesterday. I felt the pain begin, and rolled up my sleeve, not quite believing. It was as if I were watching a movie of the event, but in reverse. The snake's head disappeared, the body vanished, then the skull, leaving the skin unmarked. But the pain was the same as the night when it was embedded into my left forearm by the Dark Lord's wand, an exquisite torture that at the time I welcomed as the pain of rebirth. Now, the Dark Mark's disappearance is just another reminder that my end is near. There will be a rebirth of sorts, but not for me.

Now the flesh of my arm is clear of the taint. I've left the sleeve rolled up, and glance at it now and then, to remind me of how my arm used to be, before I was seduced by Dark delusions. A silly fancy, really. My body is changing all the time, even my hands are not the same anymore. I hold the right one up before my eyes. The skin on the back has lost the incipient wrinkles of early middle-age, to be plumped out with youth and muscle, even the fingers seem wider, more clumsy-looking than my own long-fingered digits. I turn it palm-up and suck in my breath, surprised despite myself. The myriad little calluses and burns of a career forged over hot cauldrons are gone. The skin is soft, smooth and youthful now. I bury my face (but is it still mine?) in both hands and try not to howl, whether in fear or anger, I'm not sure myself.

The clock on the mantel strikes the hour, and I pull myself together with an effort. She'll be here soon, and I refuse to let her see me sobbing like a baby.

Every evening she comes to tell me of the progress, or lack of it, that she and Lupin are having in devising a cure. I used to be up there in the library with them, when I still had the strength to stand, desperately searching out anything we could use. She's even resorted to Muggle medicine and technology, reading up on multiple personality syndromes and anti-psychotropic drugs, searching the Internet from her flat in London, anything that might offer some hope or even just slow the march of the condition.

Her expected presence is the only reason I've dragged myself out of bed. I have some pride still, and so I bathed and dressed slowly (strange that a body which looks to be brimming over with health can be this bone-weary).

I hear a soft tapping sound and withdraw the locket from an inner pocket, flipping open the catch. Albus's tiny face appears, looking up at me with kindly concern. He leaves his main portrait in Minerva's office every day at around this time to check up on me. I appreciate the thought, although as a painted representation of the real man, he can do nothing concrete to help. But I believe he feels guilty; it was, after all, due to his teaching that Potter had the idea of constructing a Horcrux.

"How are you feeling this evening, my boy?" The voice is tinny, but loud enough in the silence of my room, where the only other sounds are the muted crackling of the fire and the quiet ticking of the clock.

I nod distractedly. I'm grateful of any company at the moment; it helps to keep me centered, stops me slipping away to blackness, the terrifying sensation of awakening hours later not knowing where I've been or what I've been doing.

"It's the loss of control that scares me." Albus is the only one I would admit this to. "I feel myself...dissolving, and I can't do a damn thing about it..."

"And - Harry?"

"He's scared as well. I can feel him now, you know, he's listening to our conversation, getting every word we say." I hesitate. I haven't asked this before, but suddenly I need to know. "Why, Albus? Why did you tell him how to construct a Horcrux?"

Albus looked down. When he spoke it was reluctant. "He came to visit Minerva in the last months before Voldemort's defeat. He said that he needed my advice about something, and asked her if she'd mind if he spoke to my portrait in private. She left us together, and I could tell as we spoke that this was more than just a social call. He said he needed to view my Pensieve, that it was vital for the war effort." The tiny picture sighed. "I told him where it was kept and how to disable the wards that guard it."

I nodded. "Lupin found out what he was going to do," I said to the picture. "He was the one who informed me, but by then it was too late. Potter had tracked down Pettigrew and killed him, and he used that death as the catalyst to turn his wand into a Horcrux."

"He got the information he needed on construction from my memories. I'm sorry, Severus. If I'd known but of course, my mind as a portrait is not so sharp as when I was alive, and hindsight is always clear. At the time I knew only that Pettigrew had murdered young Miss Weasley, and I felt that Harry had the right, after all the loss he's suffered, to avenge her death."

I rub my hand over my face, feeling the weariness assail me. Yes, all the loss he's suffered, but my thought lacks the usual hard-edged cynicism. Poor Potter the orphan. Albus always did have a soft spot for hard-luck stories. That was why he'd taken me back after I defected, after I'd realised my mistake, wasn't it?

And it seems I've spent my whole life trying to atone, even to the point of helping Albus pass over to the Other Side when he realized the poison from Riddle's broken Horcrux ring was slowly killing him.

It had taken Albus's memories in the Pensieve to redeem me in the Order's collective eyes, as well. I know I was on Potter's personal vendetta list along with Pettigrew and Voldemort, until he saw the truth of it. Until he saw why I had killed my friend, my father-figure and mentor, and how I had railed against it, refusing for so long until pity moved me, the pity of witnessing his suffering, to promise to help him when the inevitable came.

And now it seems I have a similar predicament. I smile slightly at the thought, although it's not amusing so much as fitting.

"I suppose I'll be seeing you soon," I muse to the portrait. "Wherever you are. Or perhaps I'll go to the Muggle hell for my misdeeds."

The portrait looks sad. "My boy, do you think I did only good deeds during my life? Sometimes, during the course of the Wars, I had to do things I was ashamed of, for the common good..."

I stared at him. This was the first time he'd admitted such a thing to me. "Ah well," I said, "at least when I do go to hell, you'll keep me company!"

He smiled sadly. "I have to leave you now. Minerva is meeting with Scrimgeour shortly to discuss Hogwarts's future, and would like me present."

I nod. He's going to feign sleep again, then help Minerva dissect the Minister's real meaning out of a lot of political double-talk once Scrimgeour leaves.

Albus's picture disappeared, and I click the locket shut and replace it in my pocket.

I almost didn't hear the sound, more an echo of a whisper than anything else, as I settle back in my chair. I stop moving, concentrating, until I realise that the sound is nothing external. It originates, I suddenly know, from within my head.

"...ssorry...I'm ssorry..."

"I know you are." I speak it aloud, grimly. "You should have taken over the body Lupin and I prepared for you."

"...I couldn't. He looked...I thought he was Ron..."

Yes, I think, remembering. Lupin and I had found a body left alive but brain-dead after the battle, a young wizard who would be perfect for returning Potter to life. After all, Potter had killed Voldemort for us, he deserved a second chance to live. I smile grimly. In some ways, I'm as soft as Albus ever was.

And it would have worked. It should have worked, except that neither Lupin nor I saw the resemblance of the young wizard's body to the late Ronald Weasley. Perhaps Hermione could have warned us, but at the time she was in the infirmary with every other survivor of sound body and mind, helping Poppy Pomfrey care for the many, many wounded from the end of the war.

Lupin and I laid the wand next to the young man and I spoke the incantations we had found to return a soul to a body. We had watched as the shadow of Potter rose out of the wand, to hover over the face of the young wizard on the table. Oh, if only we'd thought to shave his bright red hair first, or polyjuice him! But of course, it never occurred to us.

The shadow had recoiled, tried to re-enter the wand, which of course was now impossible with the incantation for re-embodiment still ringing in the air, and with barely a pause, it swooped around, looking for some other way. As it did so, the edge of it brushed my face, and I breathed it in. I opened my mouth to scream and more of it invaded, falling in without conscious volition, a body to inhabit before it dissolved into the ether...

"I couldn't get out," the voice within whispered now. "I tried, I really did. Once I realised that the body on the table wasn't Ron; but it was too late. I'd been trapped in here with you."

The incantation I'd invoked had been too powerful. Not only a spell to return the owner's soul to a replacement body, it would also change the physical appearance to an exact replica of the old body. I had never considered the possibility of what would happen if two souls tried to inhabit the one body. My spell had been too strong. Potter was returning in full, and as he grew in vitality, as my body changed day by day into his, I grew weaker and more frail, unable to fight, unable to stay...

Hermione and Lupin are trying, but they're fighting a hopeless battle. There is no cure. It's only a matter of time before Potter returns, my body reformed into that of a twenty-two-year-old wizard with green eyes and a shock of wayward black hair. While I can carry his shade within me, I've made no Horcrux to hold my soul. Without my body, I'll have nowhere to go.

"Where did you go last night?" I demand roughly. "I can't remember; it's a blank. What did...we...do?"

The answer came slowly, as if reluctant. "I went to the library. I wanted to help find a cure for you. Hermione seemed very glad to see...you, until I told her it was me inside." The voice paused. "She cried. She's become...very fond of you, I think..."

I feel something painful wrench at those words. I know she has. And I told her I didn't care for her. The lie broke my heart.

Hermione was an unexpected source of comfort when I discovered what my condition was. She worked herself ragged trying to find a cure, and sat with me when I became too debilitated to leave my rooms...at least as myself. As I become frailer, I find it surprisingly good to talk to another human being, someone who cares, someone who gives a damn whether I live or die. I've told her things from my past that nobody, not even Albus, knows about. And she's talked about her life, her hopes and fears and dreams. It was frightening to realise just how strong my feelings for the young witch had become.

But she and Potter only have each other now, they have enough shared history and affection to help each other heal from their grief over the deaths of Ronald and Ginny Weasley. They can build a future together. But not if Hermione still harbors feelings for me, not if she believes I love her as well and she blames Potter for my death. For her own sake, I have to push her away.

If only circumstances had been different. If only I still had sole ownership of my body, if I was not so much older than her, if only...

But such what-ifs are pointless. This is the reality, and no good comes from wishful thinking.

"She's been very...helpful," I concede to the voice within, trying for indifference and achieving only gruffness. "One could almost forget what an annoying little know-it-all she used to be at school..."

"A bit of gratitude might be nice!" The voice is snappy now, misdirected as I'd meant it to be from my real feelings by the calculated insult.

"Gratitude? I didn't ask for her help, she volunteered it."

"Same old Snape, still just as much a git as ever! It makes me wonder why we bother..."

The voice trails off, no doubt realizing what it's just said. But at least he's been led away from dangerous thoughts, from examining my emotions too deeply.

"Well you won't have to bother much longer, will you, Potter?" My reply lacks its usual sneer, even that's too much effort to go to now.

"How...how long do you think we've got?" The voice sounds uncertain now.

"You've got all the time in the world," I answer, trying to ignore the clutch of fear that has been growing more and more familiar over the past few weeks. "As for me...I don't know. It could be days, weeks, who can say? All I know is, I'm too bloody tired to keep going much longer. Even breathing is an effort now."

"I can feel us changing," Potter answers. "It's happening faster and faster. I watched the Dark Mark disappear yesterday. And I think something's happening right now, as well. Do you have a pain in your head?"

"You are a pain in my head," I snap back, but I know what he's talking about. The headache I've had since I awoke earlier in the day has been getting worse. Now it feels as if my head is about to explode. The pain seems to be centered on one side, like a migraine, throbbing and aching until it's hard to concentrate on anything else.

The tap on the door is a welcome relief. I feel the familiar bittersweet yearning as Hermione walks into the room, but the feeling fades just like her greeting and the look on her face as she sees me. With a gasp, she stops and stares at me, her eyes widening in horror, her eyes flicking from my eyes to my forehead.

Shakily, with a sick feeling of premonition, I put one hand to my painful head. The questing fingers find a rough patch of skin, a raised scar. I meet Hermione's eyes again.

"Get me a mirror," I plead. "I've got to see!"

She runs into the bedroom and returns with a small hand mirror. Kneeling beside me, she holds it in front of my face. The reflection shows emerald-green eyes in a youthful face. A lightning bolt shaped scar shows above my own hooked nose. Even as I watch I see the nose begin to shrink.

"I can't stop it, Professor!" Potter cries in my head. "Oh God, I'm sorry. It's taking over!"

Spots of light are whirling past my vision now, and I sink back into the chair, feeling my grip on life weaken. I'm being pushed...pushed out...

A hand grips mine and I turn my head with a huge effort to see Hermione still kneeling beside me. She knows, I can see it in her eyes. The feel of her grip is fading as I lose the battle, and I cling all the more tightly as the panic builds.

"Don't go," I gasp, sounding pathetic and hating myself for the weakness. "Please don't go..."

Her eyes are huge in my vision now, the only solid thing left in the world. She's crying, the tears streaking her face. I feel Potter uncoiling within me, and know I have only seconds left.

"Kismet," I whisper as the world grows black...

The End.

Author's note: If you liked this story, please have a read of my original story "Love Inhuman" at this link:

<http://www.thepetulantpoetess.com/viewstory.php?sid=11932>

Alison