

Spellbreaker

by *TeddyRadiator*

Severus Snape has his afterlife all planned out, until he is told he must return to the land of the living. Will he be able to find a place for himself in this brave new world?

Chapter One: Coming Home, Or Not, As The Case May Be

Chapter 1 of 7

Severus Snape has his afterlife all planned out, until he is told he must return to the land of the living. Will he be able to find a place for himself in this brave new world?

For Sempraseverus

Antilittigation Charm: Nothing you recognize belongs to me. All characters are property of JK Rowling and not me. If they did belong to me, Severus Snape would be alive and well and snarking his way through Hogwarts even as we speak.

Please note that Hermione will be a very important part of this story. All will be revealed soon.

Chapter 1: Coming Home, or Not, As The Case May Be

I don't really remember the night I died. I suppose one could say I was ready, even eager for death by then. When I went to the Shrieking Shack that night fully prepared to stand with Potter and his sycophantic friends Granger and Weasley against the Dark Lord, I prayed it was for the last time. I was tired. I had done enough. I just wanted it to be over. I had fought self-pity and loathing too long; both had triumphed, and I was ready to go. I was so tired of being Severus Snape. As if I had ever been happy being me.

No matter who won, I was obsolete, a relic, surplus to requirements. I was either facing a lifetime in Azkaban or as the minion of a madman. Either proposal didn't exactly fill me with the joys of spring. No, better to be the sacrificial lamb and get it over with than suffer a long, slow painful slide into the whims of either the Dark Lord or the Ministry of Magic. Each sounded as bad as the other now.

I do remember thinking long and hard the previous night as to what I would finally say to Tom Riddle before he breathed his last, and the satisfaction I would feel when his killing curse hit me. I would hopefully be the distraction needed for Potter to finally do the bloody job the prophesy had burdened me with all those years ago, and the first thing I would do in the veil would be to find that robe-lifting Albus Dumbledore and tell him exactly what I thought of him and his gods damned greater good.

Being noble had gotten me nowhere. I was more than ready for a good dose of selfishness.

And then I'd be with Lily. The only true wish I'd ever spoken aloud had been, "If there are gods above and below, let me spend my eternity with my one true love. The only woman who ever loved me. I will happily die if that will be my reward." Surely I had earned that. Surely after last year as Hogwarts' most reviled and denigrated Headmaster, I deserved a little happiness, even if it was behind the veil.

Not many people walk into battle praying for death, but I was primed for it. My body sang with the anticipation of death. The humiliation of the last twenty years would finally

be washed away, and I would no longer have to bear the guilt, the shame and the disgrace of being Severus Snape. I almost ran to my destiny that night, thrumming with the expectation that it would all be over soon. It became my mantra that night: it will be over soon... will be over soon...

Anyone can get bitten by a ruddy snake.

So, then, I was going to be denied a hero's death at the eleventh hour. So be it. Even as my blood spilled on the dusty floor and Potter stared at me, I could feel the tugging sensation to leave, and I was so grateful I almost smiled at him even as I knew I had to fulfill one last directive. Trust Granger to have a bottle to place my memories in.

This was the last piece of the puzzle, the one I was supposed to give Potter before the final battle. Before the bloody snake decided to rearrange my throat. I managed to gargle out the words, "Look at me," just to see Lily's eyes once more before the darkness descended. And then I was dead. Huzzah and two fingers to you all.

-oOo-

I was walking down a long road, a concrete-grey sky overhead. The landscape was as barren and desolate as any moor, and from my vantage point, I could see someone in the distance walking toward me. The world was as quiet as if enveloped in the most perfectly cast *Silencio* charm ever performed.

I ran toward the approaching figure, but no matter how fast I ran or how slow I walked, the figure grew closer at the same rate. I finally got bored and just plodded along. There was nothing better to do, and the ear-muffled silence was starting to grate on my nerves.

After what seemed a small eternity the lone figure grew close enough to see properly, and I wept as I recognized the figure as Lily Evans, my boyhood love. Of course she would be here waiting for me! "You're here at last!" I cried, so joyful to see my childhood sweetheart and would-be love. I had my wish. The gods had finally smiled on Severus Snape, after all these years of kicking me in my crooked teeth, and given me my wish. I would spend eternity with the one woman who loved me. At last.

The figure finally touched me. It was my Lily. "My love," I breathed, through tears, and the sky grew darker. In the sepia toned semi-gloom Lily was colour and vibrancy and beauty, and I sank to my knees before my beautiful goddess and threw my arms around her waist. While she was alive, I remembered her smelling of mint and oranges, but I could smell nothing. In this world, there was no taste in the air, no scent on the wind, no sound to the ear. I might as well been wrapped in cotton wool.

"Get up, Sev," she said, and her voice rang so sweet and lovely into the indifferent sky I cried aloud at hearing it once again after all these years. I thought I might die all over again from the sheer joy of it.

"You waited for me," I said, more grateful for this moment than I thought possible. Lily looked down at me, unsmiling, and shook her head. Even then I was still so euphoric I didn't notice that something was terribly, terribly wrong. I plucked at her skirt nervously and attempted a smile. "Don't I even get a 'welcome home, Severus'?" A lame attempt at humour, I'll grant you, but I was too overcome to be erudite.

Sadly, Lily shook her head again, and for the first time since I saw her I felt cold, even colder than when I breathed my last on that gods forsaken shack floor. Lily sighed, and pulled me onto my feet. "You're not home, Sev. This isn't your home."

I could feel fear and panic settling in. "No, Lily, I died! I saved Harry! I don't have to put up with the shite of my life anymore!" Her eyes changed and I saw them cloud with pity. She was pitying me. Realisation swept into my heart and I felt it like a hammer blow. Oh, no. Oh no, no, dear *gods* no. Tears streamed down my face and she kept shaking her head.

I wept, "No, please!" Lily stepped back.

"Severus, I'm not here to take you anywhere. I'm here to make sure you return."

With a cry that almost tore my throat out, I sobbed and shook. "Please, Lily, please don't make me go back! I can't bear it! Let me stay with you!" My heart was breaking. It was unbearable.

Desperately I sobbed, "Nobody likes me there. I have no one to love." I knew I sounded childish but I was past caring.

I sank to my knees, tears and snot running down my face. "Please let me stay and be with you." Almost to myself, I whispered, "If I go back, I'll be the same hated man I always was. I wanted to die. I just want to stay and be loved by you. It's all I ever wanted."

"Then you wanted the wrong things," Lily said, gently. She knelt down and brushed some of the tears from my face, only for them to be quickly replaced by my streaming eyes. She looked so lovely and sad and beautiful I wanted to scream. I think I did.

"Shh, Sev, it's okay," she crooned, but when I reached for her she would not take me into her arms. Looking at me with more pity than I've ever seen in my miserable life, she said, "Sev, this," she made an arm gesture that encompassed us both, "was never an *us*. I was never yours, anymore than you were ever mine."

"I loved you," I wept. "I still love you. Only you. I'll never love anyone else." I knew I was babbling, and I knew it would do no good, or change her, or allow me to stay, but I was a desperate, drowning, pitiful excuse for a man, and I no longer cared.

"You were my friend," she said, carefully, compassionately, "and I loved you as a friend. But that was always as far as we could go. I loved James. I am with James. James and I will always be together. Your place is not with me, Sev, and you must accept that."

"No," I moaned, broken and inconsolable, and cried like a child who knows that crying will do no good. "I can't bear it. I can't bear being so hated, so ridiculed. I don't want to live that life anymore..." I have never felt so bereft, so lost. I had thought death would bring my Lily back to me. All it had brought me was another nightmare.

"You don't have to, Sev. You don't have to live that life anymore. You're free now."

I really wasn't listening. All I could think was that Lily was telling me she had never been mine, and if I was honest with myself, I had known that fact many years ago on the night she and James had lost their lives to the Dark Lord. But there was always hope that one day we'd be together, and that hope was the only thing that had sustained me in the past few months.

I might as well have hoped for the moon. I might as well have hoped that one day I'd wake up and be someone other than Severus Tobias Snape, the most hated man in Wizarding Britain. And now I had to return to that life. Thank you so much, gods, for answered prayers.

I rose, wiping my nose with the back of my sleeve, despising myself for being the sniveling coward that had earned me the nickname the Marauders had so gleefully saddled me with. I took a deep breath, and my countenance must have given Lily what she was looking for in me. She smiled for the last time.

"Sev, I will always be a part of you. Never doubt that. And I will always care for you and watch over you, as a friend would. As Harry's friends watched over him. But Sev, you don't have to be the same man you were. You have a choice now. Your Masters are both dead. You are meant for something greater than this, and you will have to return to the world of the living to accomplish it."

The air around me had been changing as she spoke, and to my dismay I could see her moving away from me. "Not yet!" I shouted, knowing it would do no good, but helpless to stop myself. "I'm not ready to leave you!" I screamed my anger and pain and sorrow to the sky. "Why? Why can't I stay? WHY DON'T YOU LOVE ME?"

The swirl of magic wrapped around me like the most sickening of Portkey journeys, and I reached for Lily, but she was gone in a haze of magic, colour and deafening sound...

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A/N: To see the beautiful art that inspired this fic, please go to:

<http://my.deviantart.com/messages/#/d32srwz>

## Chapter Two: Did I Shave My Legs For This?

*Chapter 2 of 7*

Severus finds out just what happened while he was sleeping...

**For Sempraseverus**

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**Chapter 2 Did I Shave My Legs For This?**

I regained consciousness in hell. That is, if hell looked like the Hogwarts' Infirmary on the night the Boy-Who-Lived finally managed to pull his finger out of his arse and cast the Killing Curse so that Tom Riddle would breathe his last and cease to be. I opened my eyes and tried to move. A hand stilled my movements.

"Shh," a soft voice soothed, and I felt something warm touch my forehead. "You're safe now. It'll all be over soon."

Armed and alarmed with this cryptic, familiar message, I struggled to open my eyes and sit up, but pain blossomed into my neck and I fell back with a grunt. As pain went, it wasn't the worst I'd suffered. I'd take this pain over the Dark Lord's Cruciatius Curse and his enchanted cat-o-nine tails any day. I'd suffered under them enough to know what pain really was, and I had the scars to prove it.

This new pain was burning, dry and itching, enveloped within a cold layer of air that cushioned my skin. It was accompanied by a high-pitched scream that reverberated in my head. Later I was told I was hearing the screaming of the injured, but in my feverish delirium I thought it was me. I struggled to move and get away from the cold layer of skin surrounding me and the scream that overlaid it. Small, strong hands held me in place.

"Please don't move, Prof...Severus," the shaking voice said. "Please lie still, please." The pleas were endearingly spoken with a voice trembling with fear. I understood that. I was back among the land of the living. I opened a swollen eye and found myself looking into a pair of huge, cinnamon-coloured eyes filled with concern and exhaustion. Hermione Granger. And I'd thought things were going too good to last.

"Lily," I moaned, trying to go back to that quiet place she inhabited. I despised this cold, screaming hell that I was currently floundering in. I despised the idea of Granger pawing me during my less-than-awake moments. I despised everything and everyone, especially myself.

-oOo-

My first truly lucid moment happened several days later. The afternoon sun was slanting into the Infirmary windows, and I opened my eyes to see Hermione Granger sitting on a nearby chair, a book of healing spells open on her lap. She had dozed and was leaning slightly forward. The slightest movement from me brought her wide awake, and she smiled at me as if I'd just delivered a cure for Muggle cancer.

"Severus, thank Merlin you're awake!" She jumped up and began running diagnostic charms on me. "How are you feeling?"

"Thirsty." I had meant it to sound imperious and authoritative, but it came out little more than a croak. Instantly she produced a glass of water and helped me to drink it. I was too weak to allow my pride to manifest, but later I would berate myself for letting her baby me.

"How long..." I rasped again and tried to clear my throat. Pain shot up from my neck. Granger's concern was palpable.

"Please don't try to talk any more than necessary, Severus," she fussed, plumping pillows, tucking me in, all the usual irritating things Poppy Pomfrey did to make me feel helpless. She must give her Healing Assistants lessons in it.

Granger noticed my irritation and took pity on me. "You've been asleep for almost a week." She gave me a proprietorially fond smile. "We did it, Severus! Voldemort is dead. Finally dead! And Harry did it with your help."

I listened with growing amazement as Granger filled me in on the events of the night I died. So. What happened to me made no difference in the final outcome. I might as well have been a Hufflepuff Quidditch player for all the changes I made in the final battle. I felt sick with loathing. So Potter had won, and the Dark Lo...Tom Riddle was dead.

"Who else...dead?" I croaked.

Granger made a face. "We can talk about that later, Severus..."

"Who?" I sounded like I had acute laryngitis. I felt hideous. I felt even worse as Granger rattled off the roll call of the dead. So many students. My students. Killed while I was Headmaster. All because I was the puppet held up by the manipulating hands of Dumbledore and Tom Riddle. Her voice faltered when she mentioned Fred Weasley, Nymphadora Tonks and Remus Lupin.

So, the capricious twins Fred and George Weasley, separated. How would George adjust to life without his twin? And Tonks and the werewolf were gone. I had heard through the Hogwarts' grapevine they were new parents. In self-disgust I turned away from Granger. She finally stuttered to a halt.

"Severus, are you okay? Do you need anything?"

I shook my head. Sadness and self-hatred welled up within me, and I wondered once again why I was forced to return to this life. It didn't help that Granger was talking to me as if we were old friends instead of student and teacher. Her familiarity enraged me for some reason, and I turned to her.

"It's Professor, Miss Granger. You are forgetting your place. I do not recall giving you liberties with my name." Circe, that one little speech left me exhausted, and I fell

asleep, but not before I had the satisfaction of seeing the hurt on her face.

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"What happened to me?"

It was several days later that I was able to sit up for a few hours at a time. I was still weak, frustratingly so, and irritated that Granger had taken it upon herself to be my personal Healer. Poppy Pomfrey was over the moon about it. She thought I needed around-the-clock care and, for some strange reason, Granger wanted to give it to me. Poppy had her hands full with an Infirmary overflowing with patients, visitors and concerned parents.

At my question, Granger flushed slightly and grew quiet. I smirked.

"Fancy that. If I'd only known the right questions to ask I could have shut you up years ago." She almost visibly flinched at the venom in my voice. Served her right, I thought.

Since her first year she'd been a thorn in my arse with her endless hand-waving and her textbook answers. I had famously coined her an 'insufferable little know-it-all' and nothing she'd ever done or would ever do would change my opinion of her. The truth was that she reminded me all too much of myself at her age, and seeing as how I despised myself, it only stood to reason I would despise Granger as well.

"Well?" I barked, when no answer was forthcoming. "Come now, Granger, surely you can sum up the answer without the use of one of your beloved texts, can't you?"

She shook her head. "Sev...Professor, it's a very uninteresting story. You were injured; I brought you here to get well." She said it all dismissively, but in an uncharacteristic gesture, her eyes refused to meet mine.

"What are you hiding?" I asked quietly. Too many years as a spy winking out information from reluctant sources had given me certain skills in reading body language, and I used them to terrifying efficiency in the past. I was not above using them now if no satisfactory answer was forthcoming.

"Hermione," I said, dropping my voice to its smoothest, silkiest drawl. I was confident enough to know that my voice was pleasant to some. I was not above using it as well to get what I wanted.

"Hermione," I repeated, "look at me."

Sure enough, she brought her lovely, large eyes to meet mine, and I saw her breathing increase as she looked at me with absolute trust, as willing and supplicant as a lamb to the slaughter. I smiled at her, trapped as she was in my basilisk glare.

I whispered, "*Legilimens*," and those russet eyes flew open wide as I invaded her thoughts like a vandal tearing through a breached vault, bent on careless destruction in order to find what I sought. She was too tired to put up more than a token resistance, and I gleefully batted away her defenses as easily as an adult's hands will smack a child's.

I found myself back in the Shrieking Shack seconds after I gave Potter the memories. I saw myself through Hermione's eyes as I fell back, dead. I could feel her horror and fear and desolation, but also a lurking, grim determination to do what was right.

I watched as Potter and Weasley ran off, no doubt to find a Pensieve in which to view my memories, and Granger ran after them, but only to give the appearance of leaving. She quickly turned back to my body and fell to her knees, frantically searching amongst my robes for any potions I might be carrying.

"Clever girl," I found myself murmuring, impressed in spite of myself. The other two dunderheads hadn't even thought of checking to see if I had come prepared. She found my hidden stash and added several other bottles from her own sources.

It was only at that moment that I realized what I'd done. If I was so eager to die, why had I armed myself with so many revitalization potions? Blood Replenishing, Antivenin, Infection Deterrent, Pain potions. Why was I so armed to protect myself when I was so ready to die? I grimly pressed on, having decided to examine my motives outside Granger's head.

In her memories Granger gently placed my head in her lap, her eyes almost popping with fear. She was babbling, "Don't die on me, Severus Snape! Don't you dare die! Don't you dare!" Then, more gently, "Please don't die." I saw her open and pour potion after potion into my mouth, rubbing my throat, forcing me to swallow. Her hands were shaking so badly I wondered how most of the liquid actually made it into my sagging mouth.

She applied pressure to the hideous snake bite wound on my neck to staunch the blood flow. It soon became obvious she had been studying first aid. Hphmm. The St. John's Ambulance men would have been proud. She rubbed my limbs to increase circulation. She chafed my cold hands with hers to warm them. She transfigured my robe into a thick blanket and wrapped me like a mummy, holding her small body next to mine, giving me her warmth.

Then she did something most un-St. John's Ambulance-like. She kissed me over and over on my forehead with dry, chapped lips, pleading for me to stay with her, to please, please not die. Her tears watered my forehead as she held me tenderly, begging me to stay with her.

Sometime later Fawkes arrived. Granger wept along with the phoenix as its healing tears dropped over my hideous wound, cleansing it and purifying it to heal. He stayed with us until some unheard call drew him away. Even thus, the phoenix tears had not been enough.

Still I hovered in and out of death. Granger's magic began to weaken as she cast healing spell after healing spell on me. She sent her Patronus to the castle over and over. "*Hurry to the shack... Please help me... I need help NOW... If anyone is alive, please come to the Shrieking Shack... Someone please come...*"

Even her Patronus looked weary. I saw her lose hope when no one came to her rescue, and she looked down at my failing body, a look of absolute desperation on her face.

She took a deep breath and whispered, "I hope I have enough strength left to do this. I can't let you go without trying, Severus. Please stay with me..."

With tears streaming down her face, Granger gathered the last of her fading magical strength, and I could see it swirl and gather around us. It started narrowly at the top of her range and spread out over us, like a cone of protection. When she had gathered every last ounce of her magic, she drew it into herself and shouted, "*Invenio et animo serveturus!*"

She pointed her wand at my heart, and I saw my lifeless body jerk in her arms. A bright white light flashed around us, and I watched myself take a long agonized breath. Granger almost collapsed on top of me, her magic and energy so depleted that for a moment there was no magical signature. She wept with relief, huge, braying sobs of exhaustion. "It's okay, Severus," she said, between hiccupping sobs. "You're going to be fine. I'm here. I won't leave you."

After what seemed like another eternity, Potter and Weasley and the Aurors found us and helped her to take me to the Infirmary. Hermione held them at wandpoint until they swore a Wizarding oath not to harm me or take me anywhere else but Hogwarts. Seeing Aurors only served to remind me I was just a step away from Azkaban, and Granger had brought me back to all this.

I pulled out of her mind as ruthlessly and as callously as I had invaded it, stunned at what she'd done. Granger staggered back into her chair, a thin line of blood trickling from her nose. I knew I should apologise for raping her mind so mercilessly, but I was too unnerved to do anything but turn away from her to do battle with my thoughts.

Yes, Granger had brought me back from the dead, but she'd nearly killed herself to do it. And the worst part, oh yes, there was something even worse than everything put

together. She'd done it for love. Granger was in love with me. Oh, it didn't get any better than this. Love, the most binding, powerful source of magic on earth, according to Dumbledore. And Granger had just bound my soul to hers to ground me here on earth. She had bound it with love. I was doomed.

I am ashamed to admit that I gave her unholy hell for it. My own anger stunned me, choked all utterance, and it was several seconds before I was able to speak. I more than made up for my silence when I once again found my voice. I turned on her and unleashed hell.

"You stupid, stupid little girl!" I roared, feeling a perverse pleasure in seeing her cower from my rage. "Do you even know what that spell means? Do you have the smallest inkling as to what you've done?"

"I...I wanted to save you," she stammered, cowering as if from a physical blow. "I'd been reading up on *Sanctum* spells while we were on the run, you know, in case one of us was mortally wounded..."

"In case you ever decide to hold someone's soul for ransom for the rest of their miserable life?" I was spitting in fury. "How dare you try to steal my soul, you little jumped up Muggle-born, pain-in-the-arse excuse for a witch?"

"Severus, what is the meaning of this row?" Poppy parted the curtain to my section of the ward, alarmed at the vitriol spewing from me. "The whole infirmary can hear you! Not to mention the fact that I must remind you that you are still recovering from a very dangerous wound and I can't be held responsible..."

"I'll tell you who's responsible!" I shouted, pointing at Granger. "This little fool has used the *Invio et animo serveturus* spell to bring me back from the bloody dead! Now I'm beholden to this stupid bint for the rest of my miserable excuse of a life!"

"Professor, please!" Granger was all but crying my name. She looked desperately from Poppy to me, a horrified expression in her eyes. "You were dying. I was only trying to help..."

"I wanted to die, you silly, stupid girl!" My rage was blowing sweet and hot through my belly, and I was just getting warmed up. "I was there with my beautiful Lily, and you yanked me back to this hellhole of an existence by capturing my soul? Why didn't you just make yourself into a Horcrux, you moronic bitch?"

"That is ENOUGH!" Poppy shouted. "You will calm yourself, Severus, or I will give you the strongest Calming Draught you have ever made for me! I am sure Miss Granger had her reasons for using such an extreme method of ensuring your safety..."

"Oh, and just what were your reasons, Miss Granger?" I spat out her name as if it were the most loathsome of curses. "Care to share with us this lofty justification? No?" I countered, as she remained silent, her eyes huge and filling with tears. I went for the kill, enjoying the feeling of hurting her.

"Well let me tell you something, Miss Granger," I said, my voice dropping to a lower, silken timbre, the voice that I had only just used to cajole and seduce. Now I used it to destroy.

"You will never own my soul. It belongs to my beloved Lily, and no matter how smart you think you are, or how clever or how noble, you are nothing but a slag compared to her! You're less than the dung from her shoe to me. Now get out of my sight, you pathetic, sad little piece of Muggle-born trash."

The room was too quiet. The silence was all encompassing and had its own deafening tone. Finally, in a quiet voice I had never heard her use, Poppy said, "Oh, Severus. How could you? I don't know how you can say such things to someone who has done nothing but care for you."

She shook her head. "I have never been so ashamed of you in the entire time I have ever known you, and that's saying something after this past year. Miss Granger has never left your side since she brought you here..."

"No, Madam Pomfrey, please." Granger was looking at me calmly. The skin around her lips had gone white, as if she'd been physically smacked and was still in shock from the blow. She looked into my eyes and I saw a pain that matched mine, without any of my vindictiveness. I only saw guilt and remorse and crushing sadness. She thought carefully before she spoke.

"My reasons for what I've done shouldn't be used to make anyone feel guilty or beholden to me, especially Professor Snape."

She turned to me, her eyes bleak with hurt. "I wanted to save you. I thought you would be free from Voldemort, from Professor Dumdledore, even. I never thought you would think of me like one of them. Another master to serve. I will make this right, Professor, and then I'll never bother you again. You'll never have to be reminded of this ever." She turned, and the first tears spilled. "I'm so sorry. Gods, I'm so sorry."

Granger was gone so quickly the whole outburst might have been a dream. I was beginning to wish it had been. The original euphoria of venting my spleen had faded, and I was beginning to feel queasy. My head hurt like billy-o, and Poppy was looking at me like she'd like to finish Nagini's job.

She watched me pensively, like there was a million things she'd like to say to me and only self-control prevented them from coming to me all at once, accompanied by several of her favourite hexes.

She smiled a tight, humourless smile. "Well, Severus, I can tell you are on the mend. I'll leave you to your thoughts. I had hoped that a new lease on life would bring you some joy. I can see that some things are too much to hope for."

She turned to leave, then changed her mind and looked back at me. "Well, don't just sit there." Poppy did a perfect imitation of my trademark sneer. "Snape something."

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A/N: To see the beautiful art that inspired this fic, please go to: <http://my.deviantart.com/messages/#/d32srwz>

Chapter Three: Wounded Heart

Chapter 3 of 7

All you need is time, love and tenderness...

Chapter 3 Wounded Heart

For Sempraseverus

Thank you for reading my first little fanfic and being so encouraging with your remarks. I hope you continue to enjoy my story.

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Granger was as good as her word. I never saw her during the day. I could occasionally hear her on the other side of the curtain talking to other patients. Her bossy voice was gentle for the most part, unless she was berating a student for not heeding Healer orders or forgetting to take their potions.

Mainly she offered succor, reassurance. She soothed nightmares; she joked with and brought gifts to patients. She gave advice and answered hundreds of questions. She held hands and dried tears and comforted frightened children. She avoided me like the plague, and I told myself good riddance to bad rubbish.

Weeks passed. My convalescence was painfully slow. I wasn't the best of patients on a good day, and no Healer save Poppy would attend me now. If anyone had hoped that the end of the war would foster a kinder, gentler Severus Snape, I was more than willing to disavow them of that notion. If anything, my knowledge of still being on this earth filled me with a bitterness that was growing darker with each passing day.

I awoke one morning in the wee hours from a nightmare, shivering, aching for a wee. In the dream I had lost something, and just as I located it, it would disappear like smoke. It might have been a person or an object, but in the mercurial way of dreams, it seemed to constantly change shape and purpose.

I knew for sure it wasn't Lily, as she was by my side the whole time, berating me for losing whatever it was in the first place. "You had it but you let it go, Sev," she admonished, shaking her head sadly. "Now you're going to have to work harder than ever to get it back. You'll have to do it on your own now. It'll take time to get it back. Time and tenderness, and still it might be too late."

I staggered into the loo, and after taking care of my bladder, I stumbled back to the cot, only to find a parchment lying on the bed. I picked it up and recognized Granger's handwriting. It was some sort of poem or song, and as I read it, my heart rate increased.

Wounded heart, I cannot save you from yourself, though I wanted to be brave, it never helped.

'Cause your trouble's like a flood raging through your veins. No amount of love's enough to end the pain.

Tenderness and time can heal a right gone wrong, but the anger that you feel goes on and on.

And it's not enough to know that I love you still. So I'll take my heart and go for I've had my fill.

If you listen you can hear the angel's wings; up above our heads so near they are hovering;

Waiting to reach out for love when it falls apart, when it cannot rise above a wounded heart.

Tenderness and time, Lily had said. Stupidly I felt my eyes fill with easy tears of self-pity. I dashed the tears away angrily, dredging up feelings of resentment aimed at Granger for trying to guilt me into feeling sorry for her. It was on the third read through that I realized she felt sorry for me.

I couldn't say if love would be enough to end the pain. It had been too long since love had any association with me. I read the poem again. It also told me on no uncertain terms that Granger was through being my punching bag. She was honouring my request for solitude.

I spent my remaining confinement at the infirmary trying to get my strength back, getting heavy doses of antivenin and magical physio to combat the worst of the wound's lasting effects. The scar was magical; it would always be with me. The bitterness was fading a little as well, to be replaced with a sort of grim resignation. If nothing I was a realist. I had lived; I would have to find some sort of life. That is, if I managed to stay out of Azkaban, and I still wasn't sure of that.

One day I removed my hospital gown and I grimaced as I looked in the mirror. I was a mess. My skin was ghastly pale, criss-crossed with old wounds, scars, burns. Hideous. *No one will even think about wanting you now, you sad, wretched little man!* I told myself.

I heard a flurry of sound outside the door and quickly dressed. I smirked as Granger flew into the room, her Healer robes flapping around her. "Professor Snape!" she called out, and was about to shout it again when I appeared.

"Professor...there you are!" She was sporting the biggest smile I'd ever seen, and her eyes were dancing. She looked ludicrous, I thought. Hphmmm.

"You look like a piano with all those teeth glaring at me," I growled, narrow-eyed. I sighed, not wanting to encourage her happy countenance. "What do you want, Granger? I'm disinclined to be in the mood for company."

Her smile dimmed for a moment at my harsh words, but she suddenly smiled even larger, as if she'd decided my foul mood wasn't enough to spoil her happy one. "I've just returned from the Ministry with Harry, Professor Snape. This is for you!"

Granger handed me a small box. On top of the box was a scroll, sealed by Kingsley Shacklebolt, the new Minister. I leisurely broke the seal, perversely taking my time to show Granger I would not be rushed by her puppy-like enthusiasm. I read through the first few paragraphs and sat down on the bed heavily.

I had just received confirmation that the Wizengamot had cleared me of all charges.

Potter and Granger had done it. Using select memories, Dumbledore's official portrait and a large dose of Veritaserum, they'd convinced the Ministry to find me not guilty of killing Albus, being a Death Eater, or participating in any Death Eater activities. I could return to Hogwarts as a professor if I so chose. I would not be going to Azkaban. I was free at last. I laid the scroll on the bed, and looked at the box which accompanied it.

With some effort, I opened it with shaking fingers. Order of Merlin. First class. **To Severus Tobias Snape for his selfless efforts in bringing about the downfall of the wizard Tom Riddle, otherwise known as Lord Voldemort.** Another parchment was from the Treasury. A yearly stipend for the rest of my life from a grateful government. And with it a hastily written, personal note from Shacklebolt: *It's not enough, Snape, but I hope it will suffice for now.*

I gazed out the window. No, it wasn't enough. But it would have to do. I was alive. I was free. I was declared innocent. I really could, if I chose, start over.

For a moment I was too overwhelmed not to feel a cautious happiness. My rigid self-control slipped and I looked up at Granger. Her expression was as stunned as I felt. It was then I realized I was grinning like an idiot.

"Professor. Severus," she breathed, and her face softened into an expression of wonder and delight. Self-consciously she tried to suppress it. "I'm sorry. I've just never seen you smile before." She retaliated with a glorious smile of her own, and if ever love showed on a woman's face, it was on Hermione Granger's.

I swallowed. She was happy for me. Looking back, I know she would have hugged me if I had allowed it. I didn't want that. I know I didn't want it. I told myself so, didn't I?

"Well, Miss Granger, I wouldn't recommend broadcasting the fact. I do have a limited quota, you know." I meant to sound flippant, but with my sterling social skills it came out sounding sour and petulant. I dared to peek up at Hermione through the curtain of my lanky hair. It had gone greasy again since she was no longer my attending Healer.

Hermione smiled down at me, a wistful little smile of regret. "It's okay. I'll be your Secret Keeper." With that, she placed the medal and my pardon on my bedside cabinet, wished me a good evening, and left me alone with my thoughts.

A day or so later, Potter came by to stammer out a clumsy apology and extend an awkward olive branch. I didn't make it easy for him, but for Lily's sake I forgave him his transgressions, seeing as he was so eager to forgive mine.

After a reluctant handshake we parted company. As he walked away, I could see Granger in the background, anxiously watching over us. Tentatively she approached me.

With something like admonishment in her voice, she began, "Professor? Did you..."

"As you can see I didn't hex Mr. Potter, so your friend is perfectly fine, Miss Granger," I snapped, irked at their solidarity. Trust Granger to watch over me in case, Merlin forbid, I was less than civil to Potter the Great.

She opened her mouth, closed it, then huffed in irritation. "I wasn't worried about him, you sodding moron! In case you've forgotten, you're still recovering from a life-threatening injury. I was checking to see if he'd upset YOU!"

Rolling her eyes and shaking her head, she poured me a glass of water and left, but not before I heard something I really didn't expect. She actually laughed.

"You're one in a million, Professor. Definitely in a class by yourself." With that, she turned on her heel and left, still chuckling.

-oOo-

I don't know when I noticed her insinuating herself back in my life. It was little things, like a flower on my bedside table, the appearance of a book I'd fancied reading but never got round to opening. After a few days of trying to get up the courage to ask, she offered to read it to me, her reading voice expressive and easy on the ear. I didn't hate it.

There was her quiet delight in my daily improvement. She headed off *Daily Prophet* reporters with a gentle but unrelenting 'no', and fielded visitors jealously, but with discernment. She was strong and during my rehabilitation managed to make my occasional stumble look as if I were steadying her, not the other way around. Hermione guarded my dignity, the one thing I had left that I still felt was truly mine to protect and nurture.

I don't remember when she became so important. She was the one I clung to when the nightmares returned and the damn snake lashed out at me over and over again in my dreams. In those dark hours I was the child and she the grown-up, chasing the frights away. It is very unmanly to cling to a woman's skirts. It isn't unmanly to admit you do. I was beginning to feel afraid to go to sleep without her.

"Professor, may I ask you a question?" Hermione said, one evening, right in the middle of a very good book she'd been reading to me. I sighed.

"If I answer it, will you get back to reading? You would stop at the most exciting bit."

She had the grace to blush. "It's about the spell. That night in the Shack."

I steeled myself. She would only ask it eventually. Might as well get it all out. "Go ahead, Granger. What do you want to know?"

She closed the book, marking the place with a finger. "When you found out which spell I cast, you were so very angry." She pressed on. "From what I've read about the *Invenio Etanimo Serveturus* spell, it is meant as a last-ditch effort to keep the soul from leaving the body."

"This is true, as far as it goes," I said, shifting a little to get more comfortable. The bite wound was healing and itched under the bandage. The only way to scratch it without every mediwitch in England noticing was to pretend to shift around. It usually worked.

"Please don't rub the bandage, sir. It will only take longer to heal."

I made a growling noise in my throat, embarrassed at being caught. "Get back to the bloody question, Granger."

She flushed and ducked her head. "Well, the literal translation for the spell is '*I find your soul and keep it safe*'. Why is that so bad? I mean..." She swallowed, hesitant to bring up that night again. "Why were you so angry about me keeping your soul safe?"

I gathered my thoughts. "You see, Miss Granger, you had some facts, but not the whole picture. The *Invenio* spell is very old magic. It was originally created to bind mating couples together in dark rituals."

The colour drained from her face and her breath rushed from her lungs. She brought her hand to her mouth, horrified. "Oh, no! I'm so sorry..."

Tears filled her eyes. "I didn't know all the facts. I thought it was a spell that would keep your magical soul intact until your physical body could be healed." She was so distraught I could feel my conscience ache a little. How many times had I cast a spell and thought of the consequences later?

I tried to be the instructor again. "Another reason to remember you can't find all the answers in books, Miss Granger. The actual truth is that the intent of a spell is what makes it dark. In the dark arts, the spell would be used by a wizard to bind a witch he desired to him by her soul. Until he released her, she would be incomplete. The wizard would then be the only one who could give her access to her soul and to the full range of her magic."

"I think in your case you pulled my soul back, but part of it remained in you, in your magical core. Has your Patronus changed since that night?"

She looked thoughtful, then drew her wand and cried, '*Expecto Patronum!*' A lovely silvery otter spun into view. It was playful and rather cheeky as it zipped around my bed, watching me with inquisitive, intelligent eyes.

"No, it still looks the same," Hermione replied, watching it carefully. "Although I might be imagining it, but it does look a little larger than it used to." We both watched it cavort and flirt until she dismissed it.

As it left, shimmers of soft light sifted down from it like dust motes and settled onto my head and shoulders. I felt the magic enter me and I trembled a bit. Hermione bit her lip, looking thoughtful.

I pondered this for a moment. "It could be that part of my magic has fused with yours. Not to make you feel any worse about it, but it may be the reason it's taking me so long to recover from Nagini's bite. My magical health is not up to full strength, ergo my physical health is taking longer to recover."

Seeing her stricken face, I grudgingly added, "But then again, Nagini was a bloody great magical snake. It could be taking so long to recover because I'm lucky to be alive in the first place." I was aware of the crushing irony of my statement, as was Granger, but we both decided discretion was the better part of valor and let it go.

It was only when I woke up a few nights later and caught Hermione unawares, that I realized she had set her Patronus to guard over me. As the otter ducked and swooped over my bed in invisible channels, slivers of water-like magic spun loose and nestled into me like rays of silvery moonlight.

The clever little minx had discovered it. Her Patronus had been the Spell Keeper of the missing parts of my soul.

Hermione had found a way to restore my soul. She had located the parts of it she'd captured that night in the Shrieking Shack to bring me back to the living. Hermione was returning the missing pieces of my soul to me, but unfortunately the restored magic had the side effect of being the cause of the nightmares.

Fair play, I thought. I could live with the nightmares. Each day I grew stronger as my soul solidified back into my magical footprint. Soon my magic was almost completely replenished and my physical recovery was almost miraculous from then on.

One day Hermione wasn't there when I awoke. I told myself I didn't miss her. I just was used to her being there. I waited half a day before swallowing my pride and asking Poppy about her whereabouts.

Huffing, overrun and harassed, Poppy retorted, "Severus, the girl collapsed last night. She's taken care of you day and night for weeks now, whether you wanted her to or not. She fainted dead away during dinner and I've sent her to her rooms to rest with orders to stay there until she can move again. She's almost used up her magic healing you, you ungrateful wretch."

I looked at her blankly, trying to decide whether or not to be offended. Shaking her head, Poppy smiled one of her rare almost-smiles. "Merlin knows why, but that girl cares for you, you great pillock. Every night, she's given you more and more of your soul back. She's formed a feedback within her magical core and now her soul is the one depleted. I just hope one day you'll appreciate all she's done for you."

Poppy then gave me that motherly look I knew so well. Her expression softened a little, making me recall the Madam Pomfrey of my own school days, the one we boys secretly fancied a little. She put a gentle hand on my shoulder and squeezed.

"Give a little, Severus. You know, you could be worthy of that girl one day, if you'll just grow the hell up." And with that, she left me to my thoughts, her stout heels clicking a fading cadence on the stone floor as she walked away.

Poppy was right. I needed to grow up. I may have been twenty years her senior, but Hermione was always going to be the more emotionally mature of the two of us.

It was almost two weeks before Hermione was well enough to come back to the infirmary. I was reading one of her books when her shadow fell across my legs. I counted to three, then looked up at her. I knew it was her as surely as if she'd been announced.

She smiled down at me, and something in my pent-up self recognized her soul within mine. And it was as simple as that. I was glad to see her, and our souls, which were incapable of petty things like pride and deceit, touched and knew these things to be true. I didn't have to fear ridicule or rejection. I had seen Hermione's soul. Its intentions were pure. Pure and Severus Snape hadn't gone together since childhood. I was ready for purity.

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A/N: The song *Wounded Heart* is from Bonnie Raitt's album *Silver Lining*. You can find it on YouTube, and I encourage you to listen to it.

To see the beautiful art that inspired this fic, please go to <http://my.deviantart.com/messages/#/d32srwz>

It will give you a good idea of why I wrote this story in the first place. TR

## Chapter Four: Learning For The First Time Again

*Chapter 4 of 7*

You might have a fear of falling, but that doesn't mean you won't fall anyway.

### Chapter 4 Learning For The First Time Again

#### For Sempraseverus

**Antiligtation Charm: Nothing you recognize belongs to me. All characters are property of JK Rowling and not me. If they did belong to me, Severus Snape would be alive and well and snarking his way through Hogwarts even as we speak.**

Tenderness and time. Those were the things Lily told me I would need in order to recover. As always, my old friend was correct. Time, I had in abundance. Gradually, and at first reluctantly, I'll admit, I allowed tenderness to creep into my marrow. I'd like to say I had some say in the matter.

Hermione did it, the cheeky little wotsit. One smile at a time. One gentle touch at a time. One hair washing at a time. Merlin, that girl loved to get her hands on that lank mess on my head. I let her. She made me.

And then came the tentative caresses while helping me gain my unsteady footing. Then the hugs, then the bigger hugs. The little things, like the day I struggled to stand and reached for her, rumbling, "Come here, woman."

Hermione gasped, then hugged me so tightly, I thought my stitches would pop. Her eyes were shining. "You called me a woman! Say it again," she said ecstatically, wiping tears of joy from her eyes.

I smirked. "No."

Silly little girl. Woman. I refused her whim, of course. I called her 'woman' at every opportunity after that.

And there were the full on, no-holds-barred embraces. The huge, chest-squeezing hugs that took my breath away and gave me leave to complain that she could give Nagini constriction lessons. She'd ambush me from behind, sneaking up and wrapping me in a bear hug so tight I felt almost obligated to complain. Almost.

I hid my satisfaction and told her I didn't mind her advances *per se*, only that I felt other patients might feel... left out. Not that I would have tolerated her hugging anyone else, mind. I told myself those hugs were part of my magical physio. I was good at telling myself those kinds of things.

After all, how was I supposed to tell her that her tight, tight hugs were part of the magic that held me together now? What good is being a Compleat Master Spy if you can't keep secrets even from yourself?

And then there was the first kiss. I'm a private man, or at least I was, so I won't give out the sordid details. Suffice to say, I initiated it, as the man should. That she tried to crawl all over me during and after might tell you something of my kissing prowess. That afterward I allowed her to reciprocate, until I was so dizzy and overwrought Poppy made me take a Calming Draught, might tell you something of Hermione's kissing prowess.

-oOo-

You see, rather perversely, after Lily spurned me, I became a bit of a shagging demon. Smarting from her rejection, I turned to the Dark Revels to give me scope, and I



explored all the aspects of sex available to me. I enjoyed them, but even as I took my pleasure, I knew I was experiencing a pale imitation of what I could have had with Lily. Of all people, I knew the difference between sex and love.

When Lily was killed, my physical urges temporarily died with her, and guilt and remorse drove my sex drive far underground. To the Death Eaters, I became the Dark Aesthete, the Celibate. Dumbledore's Eunuch, I believe, was Bellatrix Lestrange's favourite nickname for me.

My reputation kept me from the worst of what I saw happening around me. Now, the Revels stirred nothing more in me than self-loathing and disgust. I didn't have sex because sex was the closest thing I could equate to love, and I had killed my love. My traumatized libido stayed dormant for so long that self-denial became a way of life.

I shall not bruise your tender sensibilities with the details of our first night together as lovers. I will only say that we were quietly reading together in my chambers. Hermione looked as tender and soft as a kitten, sitting in my large chair, her socked feet tucked underneath her. I confess I was completely absorbed in my Potions journal.

I would tell you that even if I wasn't. It was only when I heard a small sound that I looked up and found her standing in front of me, her small hand reaching for mine. She looked delicate but I knew her strength. She smelled like rain and fresh herbs, and I just knew the taste of her would be equally delicious. It was suddenly the thing I wanted most in the world.

Wordlessly I rose and we walked hand in hand to my bed. My heart was pounding as she undressed for me, and I watched her as a starving man watches his first real meal. It was only after she stood before me, naked and self-conscious of her too-thin body, her many scars, that I gained enough sense to spell my clothes away, to show that I, too, had scars.

For a few moments we explored each other. Not sexually, really. Just two people learning each other, taking inventory, seeing who and what we really were. She touched my Dark Mark tenderly, and for the first time in my life, I understood the difference between pity and comfort. She stroked my skin as if it were some kind of sacrament. I had never been touched this way by anyone. I thought I was the one with the experience. I was not prepared for a sensuality of touch that nearly carved me up with tenderness.

She told me I was beautiful. I was tempted to believe her. I told her she was beautiful, and I meant it. I was lost to this meddling, wonderful little witch, and I had to admit it. Any lingering doubts of betraying Lily flew out of my life with the last vestiges of my self-control.

This sweet, lovely, intelligent, bushy-haired Gryffindor had the temerity to fall in love with me. And prove it. Time and time again. In the space of a few months, my feelings came back to life. Desire, hope, pleasure. All the things I associated with Lily were now associated with Hermione, and what's more, I knew in my heart Lily would be happy for me. She knew, after all, what was waiting for me if only I'd allow it to happen.

My silence and self-denial seemed as obsolete and redundant as the Dark Lord now. There was no reason to hold back, except for the silly stubborn pride I'd worn for so long it might as well have been a *Muffliato* charm. Hermione canceled that, and I found I didn't really miss it. At least, not with her.

When our exploring hands no longer seemed adequate, our mouths took over. And when those grew impatient, in a giddy moment I swooped her up in my arms, knowing my back would bitch about it later, and laid her on my bed. Holding out her arms to me, Hermione favoured me with the most wicked little grin I'd ever received, and I heard a noise issue from my throat that sounded like a cross between a command and an entreaty.

Finally, at last, in her arms I found my voice again. My growls, my purrs, my crooning, my pleas, my murmurs, were all for Hermione, and I felt my soul sing. Who knew Severus Snape would enjoy talking dirty during sex? And that Hermione Granger would egg him on? Certainly not Severus Snape himself.

I wanted to make this first time with Hermione so good, she'd want to repeat it with me. A lot. It was only after my first thrust that I realized this was her first time, full stop. At that first delicious plunge she made a startled sound of pleasure and pain that was so exquisite, I had to close my eyes and concentrate very hard on listing the twelve uses of dragon's blood. It was awhile before I could continue.

Well, it had been a very, very long time for me, and I was so unnerved by the twin sensations of shock and unspeakable pleasure it was nearly over before it had begun.

I remember our eyes locked as we moved together, finding our rhythm as it found us, and the noises she made gave me the feeling of being the most talented lover on earth. She issued a silent invitation, and I couldn't resist looking into her mind.

It was a strange sensation, looking up at myself through her eyes, but I can tell you I've never looked more handsome. Or happier. Or more loved. Or more humbled by the sight of this willing, loving, glorious creature stirring beneath me, loving me. Loving *me*.

I was trembling, ready to burst with happiness. I could feel our magic swirl around us as we roared to our mutual completion. Soul to soul, body to body, I was loved. Severus Snape, Greasy Git and ex-Death Eater, was loved and felt like the first man on earth to experience it.

When our passion reached its astonishing peak and left us both gasping and mewling with the power of it, Hermione smiled up at me, her face alight with a glow I'd given her. Gravity caused tears to roll into her hair and I tenderly wiped them away. She had not cried at the loss of her maidenhead. I had cried at the rediscovery of my ability to love.

I might have let it go to my head a little. I might have said, "I love you, Hermione Granger," that night. I might have said it over and over until it was a new spell only I had the ability to cast. I grabbed a quill and wrote it on her flesh as she squealed from ticklishness. I wrote it on my chalkboard in the Potions classroom. I may have flung open a window and shouted it out into the freezing night. Alright, I was a little heady from the sex. It had been a very, very, very long time. I laughed a lot. I was in love.

I now knew I was where Lily said I should be. I no longer felt like a traitor to her memory. I only felt gratitude that she'd sent me back to this warm, fierce, protective, loving little lioness, and I was damned if I'd allow anything to cause Hermione to think otherwise. My Hermione, who thought I hung the moon.

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To see the beautiful art that inspired this fic, please go to <http://my.deviantart.com/messages/#/d32srwz>.

This is drawn by the great Sempraseverus. If you are not acquainted with her work, please go and check it out. Her SS/HG artwork are things of beauty, as is her soul.

Chapter Five: Growing up and growing in

Chapter 5 of 7

In which our hero pretty much gets hit with the works....

Chapter 5 Growing up and growing in

For Sempraseverus

Antilittigation Charm: Nothing you recognize belongs to me. All characters are property of JK Rowling and not me. If they did belong to me, Severus Snape would be alive and well and snarking his way through Hogwarts even as we speak.

After being presented with my choices, I returned to teaching Potions the next term. I had not been asked to return as Headmaster, and found myself perfectly happy with that decision. Messrs. Potter and Weasley returned to Hogwarts to continue their disrupted education. I tolerated them. Hermione begged me to. Of course, she came back to complete her final year. I begged her to.

To the average Hogwarts student, I had changed very little. I was mostly the same snarky, dour, petty, unpleasantly greasy git I had been before Tom Riddle's demise. I only treated people differently because of Hermione. How could I not? I was almost helpless without her. In completing my magical soul, she had become part of me now.

That's not to say I didn't have unpleasant moments, however. Hermione told me that during Muggle wars, soldiers would sometimes develop what was commonly known as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. A load of bollocks, I sneered. You do what you have to do, you survive, you move on. If you fall apart, it's because you choose to.

The first time it happened I was simply droning on, teaching second years how to brew Pepper-up Potion. Suddenly, my heart started skidding around in my chest. I was gasping for breath, sweat pouring off me in rivers, and I thought I was going to pass out. While the students looked on in growing dismay, I staggered out of the classroom and headed for the Infirmary, terrified.

On the way, I spotted Ginevra Weasley walking toward me. She blanched when she saw her once-hated former Headmaster, holding onto the wall, flushed and clutching his chest.

Compassion overruled her memories of the past year, and she ran to close the distance. She looked horrified as she drew near. "Merlin, Professor Snape, what's wrong? Is there anything I can do?" she bleated, and her fear ramped mine up a notch.

"Hermione." It was my protective charm, my litany, my mantra. "Hermione." Miss Weasley fled back down the hall as I leaned against the wall, shuddering, praying for the first time in my life *not* to die. I heard the sound of feet running toward me, and I turned, panting like I'd run a marathon. It was Hermione, with Miss Weasley not far behind.

Hermione. Bless her. She knew exactly what was happening and stood there with me in the hall, her arms around me, gentling me, until the anxiety attack passed. She spoke to me of love, and joy, trust and completion. She spoke of the future, and inane, silly things, like potions and cross-word puzzles and books we'd enjoyed together, the mouse her ugly familiar had rustled for dinner last night.

She stroked my back soothingly. She kissed my cheeks and ran her hands through my hair. She spoke of how silky it felt now that I regularly used her shampoo, how much better her cuticles were since I'd made her the special salve for her chapped hands.

She told me how Potter made Weasley laugh so hard during lunch, pumpkin juice came out his nose. She told the most moronic joke I'd ever heard, courtesy of Mr. Longbottom. I laughed unwillingly, and the iron band around my chest started to loosen.

Hermione poured her love and respect and devotion into my starving heart, and I lapped it up gratefully. I wondered if I would ever be sated with her outpouring of affection. We stood like a tableau for almost fifteen minutes while classes changed and students and teachers alike walked by, looking but keeping their comments to themselves.

It wasn't a common occurrence, but when it happened, during a class or while I was attending a staff meeting or restocking shelves, I would hasten to whichever class she was currently attending, throw open the door and look jerkily around until I could spot her, already leaving her seat to attend me.

I suppose we became a familiar sight in the hall. The Big Bad Potions master, clinging to the diminutive Gryffindor, her soft voice loosening the vice around my throat and heart. I didn't feel guilty about taking her away from class.

My darling little swot was so far ahead of everyone she could have snored her way through the remainder of the year and still made perfect scores on her N.E.W.T.s. I justified the disruptions by telling myself I needed her more than they did.

In fact, I never felt guilt anymore, full stop. I spent so many years in guilt-enforced solitude, pretending it was my preference. Having someone to depend on seemed like the most natural thing in the world. No one chastised me for it. In fact, once Minerva, bless her, got over the shock that her favourite little lioness was sharing the Head of Slytherin House's life and bed, she became our staunchest ally. That felt good. It felt like vindication.

Since she was technically still a student, Hermione took her meals with her friends at the Gryffindor table. I had to eat at the Head Table, but I rarely took my eyes off her to make sure she ate well. I touched her in Potions class, sometimes delivering entire lectures with my hands resting on her shoulders.

Some muttered about *'getting a room'*. Others sneered I was being a mite possessive. Still others whispered about the student currying favours. I blasted that one by having other professors check her work. I wasn't about to jeopardize *that*.

The truth was I was leaning on her for strength. My grasping hands spoke of *my* need for assurance, not the other way around. I might have been a little possessive. She never denied me. She loved me. And before you, dear reader, accuse me of going soft, so what? Where had being a hardcase gotten me all those years?

I walked with her through the school halls like a mastiff escorting a kitten, her tiny hand enclosed in mine. In truth, she was escorting me. It was for my peace of mind, not hers. I would take my leave at the classroom door, kiss her forehead, and be waiting when class ended to take her to the next.

She always understood my motivations. For a man starved so long for affection, I was greedy and jealous that even her classes had the audacity to take her away from me.

At night, she would regale me with her studies, her discoveries and her accomplishments. I praised her cleverness and commiserated with her frustration with 'the boys' and their lack of focus. I told her I didn't mind if they came down to my chambers to study with her occasionally. I tried even harder to mean it. What good is being a changed man if you don't change?

Students observed us surreptitiously and rarely commented where we could hear. Hermione defended me when less than charitable phrases were flung our way. The staff left me alone. What could they say? We were both of age. We were war heroes.

I eventually had to take my resentful and sheepish Slytherins aside and remind them that harassing Hermione would mean the end of their schooling at Hogwarts. They were not happy with me. They no longer respected me, but I was not as upset with this as I thought I'd be. I chose to ignore most of my House's muttered, disparaging remarks.

I was my own man now. Well, I was Hermione's man now, and I found myself perfectly at ease with that thought.

At night, I reveled in our newly discovered sensuality. Hermione was a fearless little wanton in my bed, and I spent half of my Potions classes dreaming up new delights to try with her. "I had a thought today..." I would begin, dropping my voice to the low timbre that made her squirm so charmingly. She always responded with enthusiasm. She never said no. She inspired me.

She loved the sound of my voice, and to that end, I said things to her during the throes of passion I've never said to another living soul. She encouraged me to be vocal. I

loved the way she responded to me. I took shameless advantage of it, of course. Just because I was a changed man didn't mean I wasn't still a Slytherin.

I was emboldened by my unreserved need of her, and her unquenchable desire for me. We wrote our passions across each other's bodies with tongues of fire.

And we weren't furtive or dirty about this, thank you. No grubby fumbling in alcoves or distasteful trysts in public places. We're talking about the woman I love, if you don't mind. My intentions were honourable, even if the fantasies we shared weren't. The day I knew I was in real trouble was when she sat in my lap, put her arms around my neck and whispered huskily, "I had a thought today..."

Apparently, Miss Granger had been a *very* bad girl that day and deserved a detention. Punishment to be served across my lap. Oh, the sweet, naughty little games we played. I learned I could make my little lioness purr with a few carefully chosen words, whispered in her ear just so. I also discovered I could make her roar, if those words were accompanied by a single, tenderly administered finger. And each night I would fall asleep exhausted, thinking, Oh Merlin, I'm going to have to start getting in better shape for this...

I live to serve.

-oOo-

That Hogsmeade Weekend was cold and bright, and Hermione and I walked down the street hand in hand. I didn't care about gossip anymore. If the Wizarding world didn't approve of the Brains of the Golden Trio with the Bastard of the Dungeons, hard cheese. People's opinions would eventually change. The world had changed. I had. Yes, I could still be a bastard in the classroom, but I wasn't unreasonable.

The ring sat in a box in a small pocket of my robes, and I was going to do something that, had you told me two years ago I would be doing, I would have hexed your bollocks off and sabotaged your Floo ride to St. Mungo's to get them reattached. I was going to do the whole romantic, down-on-one-knee thing to her that evening.

Ironically, of course. Yes, I was going to ask the witch to marry me. I knew she would say yes, but I wanted to make it special. I confess a bit of smugness at the thought of her lovely eyes lighting up at the romantic gesture, her soft eyes misting with tears as I slipped the ring on her finger.

There was a light snow falling, and Hermione was skipping lightly, kicking the drifts from our feet. She loved snow; being from the South of England, she had not experienced it much, and here in Scotland it always surprised her. She was smiling at me and telling me about a new shop opening in Hogsmeade she wanted to visit. Now that the war was over, Wizarding Britain was experiencing a boom, and new shops were opening almost daily. I was being very indulgent; nowadays with Hermione I found myself doing that quite a lot.

We rounded the corner, and I had just bent down to hear her better, when the first *Expelliarmus* knocked me off my feet. My wand skittered across the icy ground. I struggled to get up, my head reeling, and saw MacNair round out his arm for the next curse. I saw the glint of masks as he and three more ex-Death Eaters surrounded Hermione and me. This was the Slytherins' revenge. Just because Tom Riddle was dead, it didn't mean that there were not remaining disciples who sought to carry on his work. As the Traitor and the Most Hated Mudblood (their words, not mine), we were prime targets now.

"*Accio wand!*" I shouted, and my wand slapped into my open palm. "*Reducto!*" My hexing power was as strong as ever, but I was slower than in previous encounters. The rigors of testicle-shriveling fear that sharpened my reflexes throughout the war years were no longer part of my life.

In other words, I missed MacNair by a mile. The long months of recovery from my injuries, an improved appetite, and loving, steady sex meant I was as indolent as a cat and sluggish with my timing. MacNair ducked the hex easily, and my Slytherin brain made me promise to start practice dueling again, if I managed to survive this.

Pulling Hermione to me, I shouted for the other students around me to get down, and to my secret pride, several of them raised their wands in our defense. I heard hexes and curses being thrown left, right, and centre, and I was afraid in their fervent desire to defend us, they would curse us or each other instead.

I needn't have worried. Ginevra Weasley blasted one of the Death Eaters so hard, he was thrown against the brick wall of the shop. He didn't get up. The other three were returning fire, albeit rather gingerly. There were quite a few of my Slytherins in the crowd, and the Death Eaters didn't fancy harming their own.

Using the agility that had made him such a formidable opponent in the war, MacNair managed to duck under another stream of hexes and curses, firing off *Crucios* to as many students as he could. I heard screaming in the air as children under my watch fell to the excruciating pain that gave the Unforgivable its name.

Hermione and Miss Weasley canceled the spells as quickly as they could, but Hermione mainly kept a shield on me while I fought my ex-compatriots. The tide turned, as one by one the Death Eaters were brought down. I may have been a bit slow, but I still could still hex like a sonofabitch.

I should have known better, but I heard a cry to my left, and took my eye from Hermione for one second. MacNair honed in, as fast and deadly as a viper. Hermione screamed my name as he rounded his wand on me for the Killing Curse, and before I could catch her, Hermione rushed in front of me.

With a demonic smile, Macnair shifted his aim and bellowed, "*Animam Kedavra!*" A bright purple light flashed from his wand and hit Hermione squarely in the chest. She fell to the ground amidst the heaviest silence I have heard since my own trip to the land of death. It was as if the world stopped, and the only sound was my own rasping breath.

"Hermione?" I whispered, lowering my face to hers. "Open your eyes, Hermione. Open your eyes now *Ennervate!*" I distinctly remember commanding her. She always indulged me, so why should I think she wouldn't now?

Others stood around us weeping. I don't remember seeing anything but Hermione. I cradled her lifeless body to my breast, sobbing and pleading, "Wake up, love. It's me. It's S-Severus. P-please wake up for me, please... please." I looked down at her face and screamed my pain at her peaceful expression. Not again, I thought. No, no, not again.

The world went black as the last hex MacNair would ever throw flew my way. It knocked me out cold before a barrage of curses from reinforcements in the form of Potter, Longbottom and Weasley hit him full on. There wasn't much left of MacNair to send to Azkaban, but they managed to get him there before he regained consciousness. He would never be allowed to leave, I was told. They were too afraid I would get to him before the Aurors did.

-oOo-

I will tell you I simply hate waking up in the Hogwarts infirmary. Merlin knows, I've done it more times than I care to admit, and Poppy Pomfrey probably knows my body better than even Hermione. *Hermione*. Realisation hit me as I regained consciousness, and my harsh sound of grief brought Poppy to my bedside.

For once, she didn't cluck over me like a mother hen. She sat down beside me and silently handed me a Pain Potion. I drank it down quickly, hoping it had something to numb and fill the empty space in my heart where Hermione had been.

"Severus, I want you to prepare yourself," Poppy said quietly, and I could see she was having trouble looking me in the eye. "I don't know how to tell you this..."

"She's dead." I was almost surprised at how flat and calm my voice sounded. You could barely hear the tears that choked me.

Poppy put a warm hand on my arm. Taking a deep breath, she said, shaking her head, "No, she's not dead, Severus."

I rose from the cot so quickly a wave of nausea and dizziness almost made me vomit. I mastered it and cried, "Where is she? I need to see her."

Poppy's eyes automatically darted to the double doors at the end of the hall. I swallowed. I had been sequestered behind those doors before, in my spying days. Only the

most critical and terminal patients were there. I started walking.

"Why isn't she in St. Mungo's?" I fumed.

Poppy was all but running after me, trying to match my longer strides. "She's just as well off here, Severus." She pulled on my arm to stop me as I reached for the door.

"There's nothing that can be done, Severus." She dropped her hand from me and looked away. Her voice shook slightly as she said, "I'm sorry."

Chapter 6: Time, Love and Tenderness

Chapter 6 of 7

As simple as breathing, I picture your face... all tangled in daydreams and shielded with grace... I feel you beside me in this place...

Spellbreaker, Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Time, Love and Tenderness

For Sempraseverus

Antilitigation Charm: Nothing you recognize belongs to me. All characters are property of JK Rowling and not me. If they did belong to me, Severus Snape would be alive and well and snarking his way through Hogwarts even as we speak.

Ah, the gods. Whom the gods will destroy, they first make mad, or some such dreck. That was the thought running a tired groove in my mind as I watched Poppy open the door to the Restricted Ward, where my heart and soul lay. I walked in, trying to swallow with a throat parched and aching.

I could hear her uneven breathing, and my gaze fell on my Hermione. She was lying on a large bed, as still as death. A white veil was draped across her entire body, so that from my vantage point, she looked as insubstantial as a dream bride.

"The veil is a protective device," Poppy whispered, as if Hermione might hear and be troubled by the words. "It encases the victim's magic. The Kedavra spell used on her is intended to rend her magical soul from her body."

I nodded. I'd seen the spell used many times in Riddle's service. It was a variation of the Unforgivable Killing Curse, and therefore untraceable, but it was just as devastating. Instead of removing life from the body, it removed the magical life force the witch or wizard's soul essence.

Funnily enough, wizards often recovered from it. It left them with little or no magical signature or footprint, but they often survived and eventually learned to live without magic.

Witches, however, had a much higher mortality rate with the Animam Kedavra curse. So much of their inner magic was part of their soul, that without magic the soul would eventually 'detach' itself from the witch's physical body and dissipate. They would simply fade away, a magic-less, soulless shell.

This was the final act of Tom Riddle's once-mighty Death Eaters. Had Hermione been further from Hogwarts, she would already be dead. Luckily, Potter, Weasley, and his sister, Ginevra, managed to get us both back to the infirmary quickly enough to staunch the beginnings of the cursework, but the damage had been done.

While I was unconscious, Poppy placed Hermione in an enchanted sleep to slow down the process. Fully conscious, the victim of the curse would grow increasingly distraught, which, in turn, caused the magical soul to disperse at a faster rate. My sleeping beauty, my Hermione, was like a fairy tale character, shrouded and eternally peaceful.

The magical veil 'held' the magic to her body, but that was all it could do. It was the equivalent of sitting on a Bludger to keep it from flying away. Once the veil was lifted, Hermione's magic, and therefore her soul, would be gone in a matter of hours, and the enchanted sleep would be no longer necessary. Hermione would lapse into a magical coma and never waken.

My love was trapped beneath a veil from which she would never rise, never recover. If I could not find the counter-curse, I was doomed to watch her shrivel and die. I promised her I promised *myself* that would not happen. I ignored Poppy's advice to rest and recover, and I set myself to task.

For almost a month, I feverishly researched the spell. I plundered the Headmaster's private library, Madam Pince's Restricted Section, and my own impressive collection. Hell, I even swallowed my pride and went cap in hand to Malfoy Manor, where Narcissa was only too happy to give me free rein of Lucius' vast collection of Dark Magic tomes.

Draco, in a rare gesture of generosity, rolled up his dainty sleeves and helped me plow through the research. I found nothing I could use. No spell, no charm, no counter-curse, no potion would reverse it. Very few could even slow it down.

The Animam Kedavra was a relatively recent creation as curses go, formulated specifically for the Death Eater arsenal of destruction. Most spells forged during Tom Riddle's rise to power were created without benefit of a counter-curse the belief being there would never be a need for one.

Ironically, it was almost the same type of spell that Hermione had used to save me in the Shrieking Shack. Instead of binding the soul to another person, the Animam Kedavra disconnected the soul from its body like a siphon and repelled it away from its owner.

If I couldn't find a way to keep her magical soul with me, the veil could never be lifted. I had already tried to recreate Hermione's Invenio et animo serveturus spell, but all that happened was my own magical signature shuddered within me, and I felt ill for days.

Every night, I would come to the infirmary and sit by Hermione's side, sickened with frustration. My anger returned, black, volatile and bitter. Potter and Weasley came to visit her, and I was sharp and heartless to them, all but blaming them, lashing out because it was the only thing that made me feel better. I hated myself for that. It would have grieved Hermione to know I was treating them so poorly.

They grimly put up with my moods until I no longer had the bile to rage against them, and eventually we formed an uneasy alliance. After we tired of the stilted Quidditch talk and the innumerable cups of tea, we began to tentatively share our stories of Hermione. We inevitably turned to the subject of the final year before Riddle's defeat.

Potter and Weasley filled in the missing blanks of their 'exile in the wilderness', as Potter called it. Their love and admiration for Hermione was evident, and I felt an absurdly proprietary pride. To listen to them, she had been part Valkyrie, part avenging angel, and part den mother while the three were on the run. She essentially kept them alive during the despairing times when it felt as if they were alone against the Wizarding world, and the Dark might triumph.

Some of their tales made me cringe. I was horrified that these three young people were sent on an impossible mission, against staggering odds, to finish Dumbledore's work. I silently cursed the old poofster for not giving them a clue as to what to look for or what to do. I also was struck by the fact that both Potter and Weasley freely admitted that Hermione had essentially figured it all out, and gotten them through it alive.

Hermione almost never spoke of that year, and when she did, it was to joke about something silly Weasley had done or to downplay the dangers. My heart cried out for my little lioness. I knew how terrified she'd been, but through it all, she'd been so damn brave it almost drove me to my knees. I would listen to Potter's narrative and picture Hermione, doggedly moving them on, protecting them, watching over them, and pulling her weight. What a woman. My brave Gryffindor girl.

In exchange, I told Potter a little about Lily. He beamed as I spoke of her faith, her loyalty, her love for her family. I found I could talk about Lily without that old familiar pain nagging at me. My heart had returned my love for Lily to its proper place. Potter returned the favour with stories of Hermione and some of the exploits even I had not known about. Most of their adventures were legend with the teachers, but some of the gentler, more important stories had remained closeted in the boys' hearts.

For several nights, the three of us sat around Hermione's bedside and talked. Sometimes, one of them would suddenly get up and walk away, to return later with reddened eyes and a sheepish apology. Sometimes it would be me. I finally asked them for a little privacy. Talking in this manner about Hermione was beginning to remind me of a wake, as if they'd already prepared themselves for the inevitable.

Guilt, fear and grief dogged my every waking moment. Poppy made me eat and sleep. This was magically enforced by Minerva. As my Headmistress, she was well within her rights to make me. I bowed to her reason. If my magic weakened, it would become too imprecise to help Hermione.

A second month went by, and Hermione started to deteriorate rapidly. She grew paler, more translucent. The more she faded, the more desperate I became to hear her voice. I was losing her. My nightmares returned, and this terrified me. Who would ease my pain who would comfort me if my Hermione wasn't there?

I am not a nice person. I am selfish, petty, stubborn, possessive and childish. I am too intelligent to ignore my own shortcomings, and too pragmatic to assume that life is fair. But I had been given a second chance. I was supposed to be here for a reason, and that reason was to find a way to save Hermione. I told myself that at the beginning of each day, and I reminded myself of this fact as I sat by Hermione's side at the end of every evening.

-oOo-

Lily was standing at the crossroads where we met on the night Hermione saved my life. "Sev, you're missing it," she said.

I nodded, too tired to argue. I ran a hand over my stubbled chin. It made a rasping sound. "I know. I can't find it." We were back at that old game in my dreams, chasing the un-findable. "I don't even know where to look."

Lily shook her head, and with amazing strength for a dead woman, punched me in the chest so hard I staggered back and whined, "OWW!" I rubbed my abused chest, irritated. "What in the bloody hell did you do that for?" I heard the whining self-pity in my voice, and despised myself for it.

Exasperated, Lily rolled her eyes and tutted. She retorted, "I'm showing you where to look, Sev! Honestly, when did you get so thick?" She grumbled, "You're starting to sound like a pantomime villain. Think, Sev! Tenderness and time, remember?"

"Wha..." I said. "Time and tenderness. Where does that come from?" I looked around, but I was alone. The landscape was bleak and empty.

I woke with a start, the dream unraveling even as I tried to remember the details of it. I had fallen asleep in the chair beside Hermione. I had a ferocious kink in my neck and needed a piss.

I stood up, stiff and stupid from my short, heavy sleep, and looked down at my love. She was an ethereal spirit enclosed in the soft white veil. I could barely see her breath stir the magical fabric, and I sighed, feeling so alone and desolate I thought for a moment I might cry.

Gently I leaned down and placed a gentle kiss on her cool lips. The veil felt soft and silky against my mouth. "Don't leave me," I whispered, and choked back a sob. "Precious girl. Hermione, come back." A tear fell from my eye and rolled off the veil like a bead of mercury. At that moment, I think I gave up hope.

I straightened up and felt my heart lurch. Merlin, I moaned to myself, not another panic attack now! I clutched the cloth of my coat over my pounding heart, the same place Lily had punched me in my dream. My heart... my heart...

Rage and pain overwhelmed me and I gasped. Suddenly a chime rang in my head. "My heart!" I shouted. Without even thinking of the whys or the wherefores, my wand was in my hand. "You took my heart, but you gave it back," I said, and immediately the fierce pounding eased, and my head cleared. "You gave it back," I bellowed triumphantly. I lifted my wand over Hermione's inert form and shouted, "*Expecto Patronum!*"

A large otter burst from my wand, knocking me off my feet. The light was blindingly brilliant and flooded the room. "Bloody hell!" I blurted, so shocked at this Patronus I almost dropped my wand. It was huge, much bigger than Hermione's. As it shook itself, huge droplets of what looked like silvery water flew from its body and settled onto my shoulders.

I shivered as I felt my magic shimmer with my Patronus' essence. Some of the droplets fell on Hermione, but the magical veil repelled it like water off a duck's back, preventing her from absorbing the spell.

I reached down and grasped the edge of the long white veil and tried to lift it, but it was like trying to lift the side of a building. It had been spelled to wrap around her like a skin. "Dammit!" I cursed under my breath. I was straining with the effort to raise the fabric, but it wouldn't budge. I shouted for Poppy to come, but no one heeded me.

I sent my new Patronus to her. "*Come here at once... I need to remove the veil...*"

Moments passed, and my impatience and anxiety melded into a frustrated wail of anger, and I stilled myself, trying to gather my thoughts. "You took my heart, but you gave it back," I whispered, speaking to my soul, desperately wanting to understand what my heart was trying to tell my head.

My soul. My soul had been part of Hermione's. What was it that Poppy had said? Her soul had fed back into mine. Her soul was part of me. And there was something else... something that was just eluding me...

I quickly ran my wand over Hermione's still body. I was no mediwizard, but you don't become a Potions master without needing to learn how to cast the odd diagnostic spell. Through the heavy veil it was hard to detect anything but... there! There it was. A faint, pinkish light. Over her womb. I staggered backward. A child.

My child was there, under the veil with Hermione. Part of my life essence was within her. If part of me was with Hermione, then the part of her soul within me was there too, hidden away safely in the unborn child we'd made. At first, I was furious that Poppy hadn't told me. I supposed she'd felt it would only make matters worse. My child. There, with Hermione. What was it? *Think, lad!*

I am a powerful wizard. I say that without conceit. Magic manifests itself in me, and I have no more say in it than I have about the colour of my eyes. It is the way I was made. Magic is part of a wizard's spiritual makeup, and you can be its acolyte or it can be yours. I had dedicated most of my life to controlling and directing my magic with skill and accuracy. That time was over now. I decided to bow to the magic and stop trying to harness it. It would harness me.

I felt a growing power swirling in the air, and I gave over my soul to the magic within me. I would not call the magic to me. I would let the magic call me to it. To Hermione and our unborn child. I closed my eyes and let the magic take hold of me. I had never attempted this and really didn't know what *'this'* was. I only knew it was happening and it was glorious.

"Do what you will with me!" I whispered to the magic in a kind of ecstasy. I cast spells I didn't recognize, words that I'd never spoken in a voice I had never used; had been waiting all my life to use at this precise moment...

Like a dam bursting, the words "*Carmine confringam animo dimittere!*" roared from my lips. The magic conjured from the casting ripped through me with the strength of a hurricane. I was lost, standing within the fury of a spell I did not know and could not identify. Something bigger than even my Patronus, larger than a hundred Patronuses, blazed from my magical core and whipped around me, encompassing the room.

It was as if a thousand shafts of light penetrated me at once. It was beautiful and terrible, pain and pleasure, agony and ecstasy. There was a bitter taste in my mouth that sickened me with its sweetness, and I thought of my soul and Hermione's soul and the soul of our little one, all fighting for her.

I could imagine Hermione smiling, praising me, proud of my ability to wield my craft with all my might. I pictured her gathering the last of her own formidable magic to bring me back from the dead, just because she loved me. My love for her bloomed like a fountain from my chest, radiating from my heart. Through this rapture, I felt that part of her beautiful soul I carried pull away from me and return to her. I was nothing more than a vessel. I was going to bring Hermione back, this soul-rendering effort resolved to that end...

Hermione moved slightly beneath the veil. I crowed in triumph, until I realized the veil was still a barrier. I had prepared her soul, and unless I could remove the magical veil that protected her, I was releasing her precious soul into nothingness, and taking our child with it. The child was the anchor, but a fragile one at that moment.

"*Antolle velumus!*" Through the roar of the magic, I heard Poppy's scream of panic as the magical veil blew upward from Hermione's prone body. It wrapped itself around me like a fisherman's netting, and for a panicky moment I lost focus as I frantically fought to free myself from the impossibly heavy fabric.

"Poppy!" I bellowed. "For Merlin's sake, get this damn thing off me!"

"Oh! Sorry, Severus!" she cried, and at the sound of another shouted spell, the veil dissolved around me.

The rushing wind increased to an ear-splitting howl, and freed from my wand and the confines of the protective veil, the pulsing, swirling light flew into Hermione's body with such force it caused her back to arch off the table. Her eyes flew open and she screamed in terror. It seemed like the world screamed at the same time, and my wand fell from my nerveless fingers.

I tried to stay conscious, I really did, but it felt like every ounce of my magic was sucked out of me from my heart through my wand arm and out the tip. It poleaxed me and I fell flat on my face onto the stone floor, breaking my nose and sending me back to the bloody infirmary one more time...

-oOo-

I remember vividly the night Hermione brought me back to life. I woke up with a terrible feeling that my nose had been repaired yet again (people think I was born this way. Alright, I had a big nose to begin with, but you don't play Quidditch and endure Gryffindor bullies with that nose and expect it to come out unscathed, do you?). I had a maddening itch in my permanently deviated septum, and my own snorting snores woke me.

I sat up and tried to get out of bed, but a sickening wave of dizziness caused me to reconsider the benefits of staying horizontal. I lay back, trying to remember how I'd gotten here. My eyes opened. Wide. I was going to be a father.

"Hermione!" I bellowed, trying once again to get up. This time I managed to get on my feet, but I was so wobbly you'd think I'd been hit by a Jelly-Legs Jinx. "Somebody help me," I moaned, frustrated and beside myself with conflicting emotions.

"Severus! Merlin's saggy Y-fronts, what are you doing out of bed, you silly man?" Poppy, sensing mother-hen-clucking material, honed in to my bedside. "Lie down this instant. I won't be held responsible..."

"Hermione!" I wailed, the only word I had energy left to utter. "Hermione?" I asked, as if it were the question.

"Severus, listen, for Circe's sweet sucking sake!" Poppy bit back. She pushed me back down onto the bed, then smiled softly.

"Severus," she said, quietly, and she took my hand. I'm fairly certain I whimpered.

"Severus, she's-she's fine. You did it, young man," Poppy said, and to my great shock, tears formed in her eyes. She shook me gently. "You did it. You brought her back. She's whole and healthy. She's resting," she admonished, as I tried to sit up again. "She's fast asleep, and when she wakes I'll let you know. And Severus," she said, and hesitated.

I squeezed the hand holding mine and patted it, my relief so vast I was laughing and weeping at once. "I know, Poppy. I'm going to be a father." I gasped, feeling the tears sliding down into the hair at my temples. "My child called out to me. It was how I knew what to do. It-it called to me, Poppy."

She was shaking her head, laughing and crying with me. We must have looked like two complete numpties, babbling and crying and laughing and sobbing. "I've never seen anything like it. I don't know what exactly happened, but you did it, Severus. I knew you were one hell of a powerful wizard, but you've outdone yourself this time. Hermione will be so proud when you tell her what you did."

I stilled. "I'd like someone to tell *me* what I did. All I know is that I was letting the magic cast the spell. Hermione's soul told me what to do. Soul magic."

Poppy pondered this for awhile. "You know, Severus, Lily Potter protected Harry with her motherly love and He-Who-Must-Not..."

"Poppy," I interrupted, a note of warning in my voice. She flushed.

"Uh, Tom Riddle, that is, couldn't kill Harry because of that love. I think it was the same thing here. Love conceived that child in Hermione's belly. Your love, the love you thought you'd lost, saved Hermione as much as your soul magic."

I contemplated Poppy's words. Love. I had originally scoffed at Albus' prattle about love and protection, but I would have to do some serious rethinking now. Then I decided to put that debate aside for another day. My Hermione and my child were back amongst the living and safe. Did I really give a niffer's fart how it happened?

Poppy and I sat in companionable silence for a few moments, each lost in our own thoughts. A new fear gripped me.

I looked at Poppy with growing trepidation. "Do I-did I... Poppy, do I have any magic left?"

Wordlessly, she handed me my wand, and I thought of Hermione and my impending fatherhood, and my new Patronus effortlessly burst from my wand and capered around us flirtatiously. We watched it in silence, enjoying its graceful movement. Poppy looked back at me and asked, "When did your Patronus change, Severus?"

I shrugged. "No idea. Last night was the first time I'd cast a Patronus since..." I thought of a freezing night in the Forest of Dean. "Since before the end of the war. It was this shape when I summoned it to bring back Hermione."

I lay back, exhausted. I still had my magic, but just bringing forth my Patronus depleted me. I pondered the change. A Patronus changes only when the magical spirit

changes profoundly. An otter. Hmm. I didn't hate it.

I confess, I felt a little sadness that the silver doe, which had been my Patronus for twenty years, was no longer part of me. It was fitting, though, that the doe should return to Lily, just as I would return to Hermione. I let Lily and my old Patronus go with a light heart, and freeing them was like allowing a dark liquid to pour from me and disappear.

Poppy sat with me, giving me her handkerchief to dry my eyes and blow my newly repaired nose. I let her fuss around me, knowing it gave her such happiness to have someone to coddle. I even indulged her by taking a Dreamless Sleep Draught, on the strict promise she would wake me when Hermione woke.

I really was becoming the most insufferably sentimental berk. *Gods, my reputation will be in complete tatters* I thought, then dismissed the thought. I'd deal with that when the time came.

-oOo-

I opened my eyes to bright Scottish sunshine, and stretched. I was stiff and sore all over and starving in the bargain. I slowly sat up, remembering the previous evening's dizziness. To my relief, my head and stomach decided to accept being vertical, at least on a trial basis.

I swung my legs out off the bed and looked around, matted-eyed and bewildered. Something caught my eye on the bedside table. It was a parchment, and I gingerly reached for it, trying not to take my delicate head unawares. I brought the parchment to reading distance and my heart leapt at the familiar handwriting:

I see trees of green, red roses too, I see them bloom, for me and you,

And I think to myself, what a wonderful world.

I see skies of blue, and clouds of white, the bright blessed day, the dark sacred night

And I think to myself, what a wonderful world.

The colors of the rainbow, so pretty in the sky are also on the faces, of people going by

I see friends shaking hands, saying how do you do, they're really saying, I love you.

I hear babies cry, I watch them grow, they'll learn much more than I'll never know

And I think to myself, what a wonderful world.

Babies cry. *I'm going to be a father*, I thought. Oh. Gods. *I'm going to be a dad* I was seized with a sudden thrill at the thought. Daddy. That would be me.

"Hello, you," said a slightly hoarse, comfortingly bossy voice. I closed my eyes.

"Hermione?" I will admit, I was afraid. Afraid that I really was still in that in-between land I'd found myself foundering in those many months before, begging to be allowed to stay.

A gentle hand stroked my hair, twining it in her fingers. "Merlin's painted toenails, Severus, when was the last time you washed your hair?"

I looked up into the face of my heart, my soul, my child's mother. She was thin and fragile-looking, but I knew better. She was the strongest, most beautiful creature in my pitiful little world. I would like to say I replied with the dignity befitting my position as Potion master and all round Slytherin Dungeon Bad Ass, but I would probably be lying.

I remember sinking to my knees and wrapping my arms around her waist and feeling her wasted arms encircle me like a protective shield. I remember babbling the words 'love' and 'soul' and 'marry' and 'child' and 'father' over and over, and hearing her laugh, and agree with everything I said. I remember kissing her belly with reverence, and placing my hands over it like a protective shield of my own.

My hands looked huge against her tiny body, and I made it my mission to nurse Hermione back to health. Hogwarts, Wizarding Britain, the World could go to hell, as long as Hermione and my child were safe.

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To see the beautiful art that inspired this fic, please go to <http://my.deviantart.com/messages/#/d32srwz>.

This is drawn by the great Sempraseverus. If you are not acquainted with her work, please go and check it out. Her SS/HG artwork are things of beauty, as is her soul.

Check out all her Spellbreaker art. She actually drew a series of art for this story, and I'm so proud of that fact, I could just cry.

And, of course, the song was the beautiful 'What A Wonderful World', by Louis Armstrong.

## Epilogue: Redemption Song

*Chapter 7 of 7*

Happily Ever After isn't for the faint-hearted.

**Redemption Song**

**For Sempraseverus**

**Antiligtation Charm: Nothing you recognize belongs to me. All characters are property of JK Rowling and not me. If they did belong to me, Severus Snape would be alive and well and snarking his way through Hogwarts even as we speak.**

We were married in a small ceremony. The bride wore flowers in her hair, and the groom wore teaching robes with a rather large hole burned in the sleeve. We were wed between first year Potions and fifth-year Transfigurations, and Minerva had to rush in to officiate before her class managed to turn each other into teapots.

Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley were our witnesses. They had just dashed in from Hagrid's class and were covered with what looked and smelled suspiciously like Thestral shit. Nobody asked.

My robes were the victim of a potions accident, and I had just enough time to kiss the bride mere moments before that year's Neville Longbottom finished melting his second cauldron of the term. I sighed. Nothing changes.

Hermione was lush and glowing in pregnancy. I couldn't keep my hands off her. Our child grew huge and healthy in her rich womb, and Hermione in labour was truly a sight to behold. She screamed, farted, grunted, cursed, and crushed my hands through her contractions, all the while bellowing, "Baby Snape, you'd better be worth all this fuss or I'll hex your father's bollocks off!" I've never heard Poppy laugh so hard; she could barely order Hermione to push.

Russell Martin Snape was born on 26 July. My first thought as I held out my hands to retrieve him from Poppy was *Merlin, I hope his looks improve.*

As my beautiful wife panted and wiped the tears and snot from her face, she was already bossing me around, demanding I verify he had the right number of fingers and toes. I was only checking one thing: his nose. It was small and perfectly shaped. Hermione's, thank Merlin.

I looked down at the bloody, slimy, shivering mess Poppy had placed in my hands. It was as ugly and dark as a monkey with a head full of black hair, and it was crying its head off. Suddenly, it stopped crying and my son opened his eyes and looked straight at me, as if he knew exactly who and what I was. My eyes filled with tears. "My son," I said, awestruck. "You're mine, little man."

He studied me for a moment. He seemed fine with that. I looked at his mother, who gave me such a look of love it almost drove me to my knees. "Mine," I said again, liking the sound of it.

Russ, as he soon became known, was the pride of Hogwarts and had the run of the place. Minerva, his unofficial Granny, thought he was the most beautiful child, and frequently told me so. I frequently agreed with her. Russ seemed to be an amalgamation of Hermione and me at our best, and witches and wizards alike often stopped us on the streets of Hogsmeade and Diagon Alley to remark on his beauty.

He had my colouring, of course, all blue-black hair and deep brown eyes. My dominant genes, I asserted proudly. Russ also inherited Hermione's porcelain skin and white teeth. Really, all I cared about was that the boy didn't inherit my nose. I truly didn't mind if his eyes were crossed, or he had twelve toes, or his teeth grew out his cheeks, as long as he wasn't saddled with my hooter.

Theresa Persephone Snape was born when Russ was four. We named her after Poppy, who had been so instrumental in the early days of our relationship. She was a proud and lovely godmother. Preesa (Russ was a little too young to get his tongue around either Theresa or Persephone) was such a beautiful child and so like Hermione in aspect and personality, I frequently declared my doubts that I had actually contributed anything to her conception, beyond her tall frame, widow's peak and expressive eyebrows.

Preesa, a clever little minx like her mother, learned early on that my bark was worse than my bite, and proceeded to wrap me around her little wand almost from birth. Because they were so alike, she frequently exasperated Hermione, to my secret delight. Preesa and I became co-conspirators against Hermione and my stunningly handsome son, who was so much like me in personality that at nine he asked for black robes and a potions kit.

It hadn't taken long for Russ' magic to start manifesting itself. I suppose I could hardly be surprised. As Ronald Weasley said at Russ' Naming ritual, "Well, we are talking about the most powerful witch and wizard in Britain. I mean, Hermione Granger and Severus Snape? That gene pool has to be a powerful human potion." Indeed.

Shortly after Preesa was born, we went to Australia to fetch Hermione's parents and restore their memories. It's amazing how Helen and John Granger adapted to having me as their son-in-law when presented with their grandchildren. Apparently, good looking grandchildren cover a multitude of sins, and once the shock and jet lag wore off, they found any excuse to meet us in Diagon Alley to 'take the children off your hands for awhile'.

We tried to look relieved and did actually enjoy a few hours' respite from the now-familiar coitus-interruptus that inevitably comes with children ('Dad, may I ask the house-elves for some cake?' *Pant, pant* 'Cake, wine, firewhisky, hemlock, whatever you want, son now shut the door!'). The real truth of the matter is that, after a day or so, we missed them so much, we had to go and fetch them. The Grangers' one complaint about us was we never really let the children visit with them long enough.

I freely admit, I had been afraid. Afraid my past would come back to haunt me, that my own wretched childhood experiences would form some malignant cell in the bloodstream of my innocent progeny. I needn't have worried. Hermione was light enough for all of us, and I found myself enjoying fatherhood. Not that I gushed about it. I had a reputation to uphold, much to my wife's indulgent amusement.

Shortly after Russ began his formal schooling at Hogwarts, Hermione took him aside and told him the entire story of our lives. He was starting to ask questions, mainly from overhearing veiled, and wildly inaccurate, information he'd been given by his mates, Scorpius Malfoy and James (grrr) Potter. I'm sorry. I actually like Boy Potter. He's got a much better sense of humour than his earnest father.

Hermione told him the whole sordid story, beginning with the rise of Tom Riddle, to the night he was born. She told of her year on the run, my days as Headmaster and spy, our coming together that fateful night in the Shrieking Shack, my changed Patronus and the part Russ himself played in bringing his mother back to me. She told me later that he listened quietly and raptly, hanging onto her every word. Once she'd finished, he rose, smoothed his robes, asked to be excused, and left her sitting alone in his room, bemused.

Russ approached me that evening, as I was in the study murdering several third-year essays. He stood and watched for a bit, then asked, "Dad, can I have a word?"

I lowered my quill and pinched the bridge of my nose. "Any respite from these essays is welcome, son. You were more adept at Potions at the age of seven than most of these dunderheads are now." I turned and studied my bright, sensitive son carefully. He was uncharacteristically solemn. "What can I do for you, Russell?"

Suddenly, he threw his arms around my neck, almost overbalancing me off my stool. "Here now," I said, returning his fierce embrace, "what's all this in aid of?"

His voice was muffled in my robes. "Mum told me you almost *died!*" he said, and I could hear tears thickening his voice. "She said you came so close, and she was so scared! Mum says you're a hero, and you never told me! If you had died, Preesa and I wouldn't have a dad!" He was very tenderhearted at that age. It dawned on me I'd been as well, that is, before life picked me up and shook me in its jaws.

I had to laugh at his logic, but I could feel my throat tighten at the thought of how close I had come to missing this life, and this fine son my seed had contributed to the Wizarding world. I had patents on several well-known potions and numerous publications in Potions journals. I was listed the previous year as one of the top three Potions masters in the world. All that meant absolute pants, when compared to the value of my family and their collective opinion of me. I was perfectly happy with that.

I tried to comfort the boy, who was obviously distraught at hearing that his old man, whom he loved, but hereto had only thought of as Dad, had jumped into the final battle with a snake and a death wish. Russ finally drew away from me, wiping his tears on his robe, and I looked at him pensively.

*I created this handsome creature.* I thought to myself, as I gave him a handkerchief and warned him his mother wouldn't be happy to find snot on his second-best robe. He laughed, and blew his nose.

He was a sunny, confident boy, comfortable in his own skin. He was everything, I realized, I might have been if my own lousy excuse for a father had been the man I was struggling to become. I knew then I would move heaven and earth not to disappoint this little man.



Gradually, he relaxed and we became at ease with each other again. Then shyly, he asked, "Can I see them?" I nodded, knowing what he wanted to see. I walked back into our library and fetched the box from the shelf. His eyes were wide and shining as he opened the box that held my Order of Merlin. Hermione's sat tucked under mine. We never looked at them anymore. When you come back from the dead and live with two inquisitive and bright children, who love you and tend to interrupt you during sex, things like medals tend to take a backseat in your priorities.

"Wow, Dad," he breathed, looking at me like he'd never really seen me before. "You and Mum are heroes."

I rolled my eyes. "It's easy to hand out medals when you've got nothing better to offer, son," I muttered, closing the box and stowing it away on the shelf. "Your mother is the real hero. If she hadn't rescued me, I'd be worm food." I knew my crude phrasing would lighten the mood, and all this talk of the past made me feel uneasy. "Please don't go around bragging to your friends, Russell. I'm not exactly everyone's favourite person, you know."

He looked up at me, then peeked at the faded edges of the Dark Mark still visible past my rolled-up sleeve. He traced its outline almost tenderly with a long tapered finger. He had my hands. Only my wife and my children ever touched me like this, with loving respect. It staggered me.

Finally, in a tone that sounded eerily like my own, Russ drawled, "Then I guess you'll have to settle for being my favourite person. Well, one of my three favourite people." He smiled at me. Gods, I wanted to be worthy of him.

I may have hugged him fiercely. I may have borrowed back my handkerchief. I don't say I did. I might have made him take a Wizarding Oath of secrecy. A rare and precious soul, my boy.

Once upon a time, I had concluded that my heart was a bitter root that would entertain no purchase. Love was weakness. I was such a twat.

I am a stubborn man, but I'm not so stubborn as to look a gift horse in the mouth. I accepted happiness. I accepted love from a good and worthy woman. I accepted the privilege of watching Russ and Preesa grow into the wizard and witch that every man hopes to father. I was the strongest wizard on earth. I was loved.

-o0o-

Hermione eventually replaced Poppy when she retired, and the year Preesa started Hogwarts, Minerva stepped down and I was asked to take up my former post as Headmaster. On that first Welcoming Feast evening, I gave my first Headmaster's speech in fifteen years. I made a vow to the entire student body that this time round, I would be worthy of the title. I was holding onto Hermione's hand the entire time.

She squeezed my hand in all the right places and stroked my palm to let me know that yes, she was proud of me, and yes, I had a very special treat waiting for me in our chambers when the evening's festivities were over. My speaking voice always did that to her. And to be fair, it was our first night alone in our chambers for almost fifteen years, give or take a few sleepover nights. Those chambers were ready to see some action.

I watched in fatherly anticipation, as Preesa was called up to the stool to be sorted. Hermione and I had a wager. I was betting on Gryffindor, Hermione on Slytherin.

"Another Snape, eh?" The Sorting hat sang out cheerfully. "I know just the place for this one with her mother in Gryffindor!"

I allowed myself a little smirk at Hermione, but she was clapping with the rest of her House, blinking back tears of pride. She smiled back at me. Ours had been a token bet at best. Neither one of us gave a skrewt's fart which House our children were sorted in.

Preesa was more purposeful than Russ, less self-assured, but nevertheless a bright, determined child, aching to prove she was more than just Russell Snape's little sister. She was so like Hermione, I couldn't help but love her, and I baited her mercilessly, just to hear my little lioness roar. I had no doubt she would do great things, and to quell any nervousness on her first night as a student, I gave her an extra hug and kiss before sending her off to Gryffindor tower with her new classmates.

It had been no surprise when Russ was sorted into Ravenclaw. Intelligent, popular, and easygoing, he was a Prefect and already making a name for himself as the Seeker most likely to beat the great Harry Potter's Quidditch records. As the boy's godfather, Harry was the first in line to cheer him on.

Russ, if I did say so myself, was the most handsome boy in Hogwarts, and the aging but still agile Mr. Filch and I spent quite a bit of time and energy fielding young witches from the heavy oak door that guarded Ravenclaw House.

Russ enjoyed the attention but preferred to play the field. He appreciated a lovely young girl as much as the next fifteen-year-old, but was content to concentrate on his schooling now. Beneath the happy, likable exterior was a very studious and organized mind.

Russ was, to my relief, not in love with his looks. Instead he tended to be a little vociferous about his potion making abilities. He saw himself as the next Potions master of Hogwarts, and some of his experiments unnerved even me. I couldn't, however, fail to see the budding genius. He was a natural, and I was proud of him, and made a point to tell him so frequently.

Already Russ was my height and from behind was frequently mistaken for me. It was both unsettling and rewarding to turn the corner and see my Doppelganger, striding purposefully ahead, dark hair flying, black robes billowing majestically in his wake. Did I ever really look that graceful, that impressive? My wife tells me I do, even now.

My son and I, Hermione often said with pride, were soul mates. Ever since Hermione told him our incredible story, I'd often catch Russ looking at Hermione with the same reverence as he would a goddess. I tended to look at her the same way.

As the last of the students made their way to their Houses that first night of term, I stood at the front of the Great Hall, listening to the sounds of Hogwarts. Students talking excitedly, ghosts flying overhead, stairs shifting, portraits whispering, Peeves irritating the hell out of Mr. Filch.

I had lived here more or less for the past forty or so years. The sounds I heard were as familiar to me as my own heartbeat, and I gave up a silent thanks to whatever gods were listening. What was I thankful for? Just being, mostly. My life, my wife, my children. For the two slender, but strong arms that snaked around me from behind, pulling me close into a hug so tight, my ribs squeaked.

"What are you doing, wife?" I rumbled. The hug got a little tighter.

"Trying to coerce you back to our chambers so I can get you naked."

I sighed. Still being manipulated, still being coerced, even after all this time. Impertinent little chit.

"Such insolence, Miss Granger! Detention, to be served immediately." I could feel her smile against my back. I had to restrain myself from rubbing my hands with glee. Oh, it was going to be fun being Headmaster.

## Epilogue

Late at night, I wake to the sound of my Hermione's quiet breathing, and I look over and see the fearless, loyal, trusting, loving little witch who captured my soul, so that I would have to return to a life I once hated. I think of her absolute belief in me, when I was the most hated man in Wizarding Britain. I think how much she loved and admired me, when I was singularly unlovable and totally unworthy of her admiration.

I think of how close I came to losing her and how desperately I need to be close to her, even if only to see her and make sure she's happy. She tells me I have made her so.

I think of our two beautiful children, both conceived in love and passion. I think of the Wizarding world and the parts we played to change it. It is still so fragile, always

teetering on the edge of its balance of light and dark.

I think of myself as that angry, bitter, unloved man, who returned from the veil wanting nothing more than death. I think how close I came to never having this love, this devotion. My wife, my Hermione, and I still love each other with the fierce passion of the first night I took her to my bed. My children, to my boundless gratitude, love and respect me. They love me.

I am loved. Thank you, Lily, for making me return to life. I am loved.

"Yes, you are, husband," says a sleepy voice. I have spoken aloud. A soft hand pats me indulgently. "Now, you have a long day ahead of you. Try to relax and get some sleep, dear heart."

A warm, enticing body nestles against my shoulder, in the crook of my arm, and we fit perfectly. It is as if we were originally formed slotted together, before the gods wished us luck, yanked us apart, and left us to wander alone, hoping we'd eventually reconnect. A warm hand gently strokes my chest, and I smile in the dark as I pull her closer. She makes a delicious little purring sound that makes me shiver.

The only true wish I've ever spoken aloud: "If there are gods above and below, let me spend my eternity with my one true love. The only woman who ever loved me."

The gods have finally given me what I wished for. I am a happy man. I am loved. And yes, I do think it bears repeating, thank you.

A spell can be cast silently, but saying it aloud makes it stronger. Especially when the soul is the caster, and the heart is the voice.

~FIN~

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I thank each and every one of you for reading my first fanfic. It has been a lifechanging experience!