

# The Redemption Charm

*by Proulxes*

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*Chapter 1 of 1*

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A/N: Thanks and hugs to beaweasley2 and Clairvoyant, who helped me to wrestle my ideas and grammar to a standstill; and to JKR, who doesn't seem to mind if I borrow her characters for a while.

New Year's Eve always feels like a sad time... a period of introspection and mourning for the year that has passed. It struck me that those emotions might run higher for some people more than others. This is a gift for nagandsev, who wrote the 250th review for my multi-chapter story *Anima Mea* and who requested "something bittersweet for the New Year"....

### **The Redemption Charm**

Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,

The flying cloud, the frosty light:

The year is dying in the night;

Ring out, wild bells, and let him die.

*In Memoriam*

Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1850)

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It was dark when he arrived at his destination. The old car's engine growled and stuttered as he drove slowly around the village square to park on the far side adjacent to the graveyard. He turned off the ignition and pushed open the door, which creaked and protested. His foot crunched on the gravel in the road as he turned the ball of his foot to get out. He levered his body stiffly out of the vehicle and stretched to his full height, wincing slightly as his back protested at the action. It had been a long drive.

It was colder here in the dip between the hills. He looked about him, absorbing the sombre atmosphere, and shivered, feeling the chill night air roughen his cheeks. But he did not cast a warming charm, preferring instead to open the rear door and pull his heavy woollen greatcoat from the back seat. He shoved his hands into the arms of the coat and quickly did up the buttons, winding a plain scarf around his neck and nuzzling deeper into the collar for warmth.

He walked around to the back of the car and used his keys to open the boot. There, lying on top of his suitcase, was a large bouquet of white lilies. He paused, sadly, looking at the way that each flower head lolled slightly against the greenery of the surrounding leaves and stalks. In the dim street light above him, he could see where the pollen had fallen from the stamens, dusting the pale flower petals and the leaves with orange imperfection. Slowly, so as not to disturb the flowers more than necessary, he drew them out of the car, gently shutting the boot with the other hand. The click of the locking mechanism sounded louder in the quiet night air than it should have, but the noise had not disturbed anything that he could tell.

He took a brief look around the square. He was a suspicious man and recent experience had reinforced his nervousness. His eyes took in the pub over the small green, the fairy lights around its windows winking and blinking in a riot of tasteless Christmas spirit. He could see the outlines of people laughing and talking animatedly inside, and the faint noise of music could be heard from within. The man's face twisted into a sour expression. To the left and right of the pub were shops in shadow. Before him, in the cobbled centre of the square, was an old war memorial. A dark granite obelisk set on a stepped plinth and encircled by a low, ornamental chain. As he focused his attention more fully on it, the obelisk appeared to shimmer and alter in shape.

He pulled his eyes away immediately. He wasn't prepared to see what the war memorial would resolve into. His grip tightened on the flowers. He wasn't here for *them*.

Turning his back on the square, he faced the church. It was dimly lit from within, and as his attention roved over the old stonework, a light flared in the bell tower, illuminating the east window of the church and throwing out beams of multicoloured light out from the building to the side. To the right of the church was an old wooden fence, with a kissing gate set into it. A well-worn path led from the kissing gate and around the church building. He straightened his back, understanding that this was where he needed to go.

He walked quietly to the gate and slid through it, holding the flowers out of the way to protect them. The graveyard was set to the rear of the small church, and he knew the way to the grave he was visiting through many years experience. His sleeve brushed the leaves of the low rhododendron bushes, which lined the pathway, glistening and bowed with the weight of the recent rain, and he felt the cold dribble of water coursing on the back of his hand and down his fingers as they gripped the lily stems. He moved the flowers in front of him, worried that the blooms might be damaged by the sharp edges of the leaves.

Always as before when he made this journey he refused to call it a pilgrimage his mind was filled with a riot of emotions. Visiting Lily's grave and, near to it, the place at which she had lost her life was a cleansing process, an opportunity to refocus and concentrate. It refuelled his motivation to keep to his purpose beyond all others, sublimating everything beneath his determination to atone for his sins. He came every year. He needed the physical proximity to her death to help him to feel anything at all.

Now as he approached the graveyard which held her body, he took a deep shaky breath and readied himself to experience those emotions: to be grounded and purged through the guilt and anger, which would swirl about him, and cleansed by the fury and remorse that immediately followed, to try to catch onto a new sense of renewal and purpose as he had before. He was desperate for it.

His senses were so focused on that familiar sensation of dread and anticipation that he was a little slow to recognise the alien sensation of a Silencing Charm on his skin as he rounded the corner of the seventh row of gravestones.

Immediately, he froze in his tracks, his heart hammering in his chest, eyes darting about the silent scene, searching for a trap... for enemies. His free hand went to the pocket of his greatcoat where it closed silently about his wand. He felt foolish as soon as he did so. Voldemort was dead and gone, his surviving supporters imprisoned. The war was over.

It had not occurred to him that another might be in this place tonight.

Someone was crying at Lily's grave a small, hunched figure, doubled up and kneeling on the grass before the low rectangular block of white stone.

His initial panic and flight instinct ruthlessly suppressed, he gave way to surly curiosity.

Whoever it was had not noticed him yet. He studied the figure intently. There was something familiar about it her, he decided, judging by the size of the body and the sheer quantity of curly, frizzy hair that bunched out from her head.

The woman was rocking on her heels as she cried. Although she was mostly in shadow, he could tell that she was wasn't wearing a coat and was wrapping her hands around her body tightly as she cried. There was nothing pleasant about witnessing such a coarsely emotional display; it reminded of things that were best left in the past, in his darker memories. She was wracked with emotion, purging herself with grief. He was too far away to be able to identify her, but nevertheless, he continued to watch, deeply uncomfortable in the face of so much raw sorrow, but unable to tear himself away. After all, he told himself defensively, he was supposed to be visiting the same grave.

She keened again, looking up to the stars, then dropping her face into her cupped hands, subsiding into quieter tears. His level of disquiet increased. This was even worse. Now he felt like he was intruding on her private grief like the grubbiest of voyeurs.

He needed to do something. Say something. Who was she?

In his indecision, he moved a foot and, in doing so, stepped within the bounds of her charm. The scraping sound made by the sole of his boot on the gravel path caused him to wince, and the woman at the grave immediately spun around at the noise, crying out in shock and surprise at seeing him looming out of the shadows.

Her spin caused her to overbalance, and she tumbled backwards, away from him, her shoulders landing with a wet splash in a puddle.

Immediately, he walked forwards, leaving his wand in his pocket and holding out his free hand towards her as she sputtered and pushed herself upright onto her hands, her legs now splayed out before her.

She pushed her hair back from her face and stared up at him, and he saw her white face clearly in the light from the bell tower for the first time.

For a moment, he was too shocked to do anything else, and she too, once she recognised him, simply stared back, her face uncharacteristically slack-jawed with surprise.

"Wwhat are you doing here?" he stuttered, cursing himself for an idiot.

"You!" Her voice was shrill and still thickened by her recent emotional outburst.

\*A\*

She struggled to her feet, her eyes red and her face puffy from crying, fine tendrils of her wild hair caught in her tears on her cheeks. She said nothing, simply staring hard at him as she caught her breath and tried to calm herself down.

He took another step towards her, and she instinctively shrank backwards. He stopped immediately and dropped his outstretched hand, conscious of what a sight he must look in her eyes. "Miss Granger," Severus began but then realised that he had no idea what he was going to say next.

She helped him regain his equilibrium by looking him up and down, dragging her gaze over his dishevelled appearance, old army-surplus greatcoat, ratty jeans and scuffed shoes. Her eyebrows lifted, and he saw revulsion and pity on her unguarded features as she started to blush.

Goddamn it, he knew how bad he looked, from his broken teeth to his sunken cheeks and dark-stubbed jaw... from his old, badly fitting clothing to his worn footwear. Despite that, to see her look at him with such patronising contempt still made him angry.

He noticed that she was not holding a wand.

She was still looking at him as if wanting him to speak, to confirm her thoughts. Her eyes rested on the bunch of flowers in his hand, hanging down by his side, as they stared at each other. He watched as the girl's eyes turned speculative, and to forestall her inevitable questions, he drew himself up and flashed her a glare that he had cultivated particularly to quell impertinent students.

"What are you doing here?" he asked briskly, standing his ground and trying to assume more of the stern teacher persona that had served him well in the past.

To his irritation, however, she did not cower or defer as he was expecting her to, but rather she cocked her head on one side. She was composed now and thinking exhibiting that annoying look of concerned thoughtfulness that he associated with the brighter element of her cursed House.

"I heard that you were released," she said quietly. "It must have been horrible in there."

Snape snorted, raising his chin defensively and scowling. "That's none of your business, Miss Granger," he said briskly, trying to hide his involuntary twitch. "I asked you a question. What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be at some sort of party by now with your fellow saviours of the free world?"

She blushed again, ducking her head and looking at her feet, then the gravestone, then the ground at his feet once more. She said nothing, and Severus had the odd thought that she was going to cry. After a few moments, it became clear that she was back in control of her emotions, and she sighed and looked up at him.

"No, I'm not," she replied. "Look, do... do you mind if we sit down, Professor?" she added and looked into the darkness to his left. Surprised, he followed her line of sight and saw a small wooden bench set around the base of one of the yew trees in the cemetery.

He hovered, torn between snapping that, no, he didn't want to sit down with one of the most annoying students he had ever had the misfortune to have taught and being intrigued by the young woman standing before him in an ill-fitting, orange sweater with "H" embroidered on it, a pair of green trousers, and stout boots.

He had not seen her since she had appeared in the witness box seven months ago at his trial. She had seemed pale and thin then, but now... Aside from looking as ridiculous as a Weasley he supposed that she must have become one by now... hadn't there been some talk of the youngest brother marrying her? It looked as if the light had gone out from within the girl. She seemed slumped and weary. And there was the matter of her recent breakdown over Lily's grave to consider.

Either way, it did not appear that she was going to leave of her own accord, and what he had to say over Lily's grave he always said alone.

He made a mocking little bow and gestured with the lilies that she should proceed him to the little bench.

Before she sat down, she drew her wand and cast a warming charm. He hadn't noticed her shivering before, but as he gingerly lowered himself onto the narrow seat beside her, he could feel her leg shaking a little against his. She gripped her knees with both hands and sat stiffly beside him.

A few more seconds of silence passed. He looked about the graveyard, noting how the light from the church tower was flickering as people appeared to be moving in front of the high windows in the belfry. He wondered what they were doing in there... some sort of party? Or a church service? He dismissed both ideas as soon as they occurred to him.

Then he mentally slapped himself of course! He had not been to a church with a bell tower since he had been a very small boy. They were ringing the bells only Hermione's Silencing Charm was still in place, so the peal could not be heard. A sudden agitation seized him. Had he missed midnight? He flicked a look at the cheap digital watch he had picked up in one of the service stations on the way to Wiltshire. 11.45 p.m. The girl was still silent beside him, although she clearly had something to say. So why wasn't she saying anything yet? He thought that all teenagers were desperate to talk about their feelings or such rubbish even his own House had been replete with hormonal brats keen to whine. Thank god for the prefects.

He began to feel impatient. Thoughts of the school threatened to bring up worse memories than his neglect of the psychological needs of his students when he had been Head of House, and he was not prepared to revisit them.

Snape exhaled through his teeth and tapped his toe on the grass beneath his feet. "Well, Miss Granger?" he asked. "We are sitting down. Why are you here?"

More silence.

A flick of her wand, and he felt the crawl of heat wrap around him again as she boosted her warming charm.

"I...I walked out on Ron tonight. I think," she said, with the tremulous air of someone announcing a great event.

Before he could stop himself, Snape made a noise somewhere between an exclamation of disgust and a snort of derision. She didn't say anything, but he felt the warmth of her charm fade. He shifted uncomfortably on the bench and coughed.

"That... does not explain why you are here tonight," he said gruffly. "Here, by..." He gestured, at a loss to say it. "Here..."

"I don't know why I'm here, really," she said. "I wasn't sure where I was when I arrived. It was only after I saw Harry's parents' graves that I knew for sure."

He stared at her, unbelieving. "You Apparated without a clear idea of your destination? That was a very stupid thing to do." He didn't even know that such a thing was possible.

She flushed brightly. "I was very upset," she said defensively, her jaw tilting up as she replied and her bright eyes catching the light from the church. "I didn't Splinch myself. This wasn't the first place that I thought of, just the one that came to me at the last second. Besides, I've had quite a bit of practice Apparating quickly."

No further explanation seemed forthcoming. The girl sniffed and looked about her. She lifted her hand to her face again and pushed her hair back in what Severus was beginning to recognise was a nervous gesture. He noticed that her hand was still shaking and concluded that she was poised at the edge of some sort of ghastly emotional precipice. A sour feeling began to lodge slightly in his stomach. He risked another quick look at his watch. 11.49 p.m. He coughed again.

\*A\*

"You... walked out...?" he prompted, wondering how long he was going to have to listen to her before she would leave him to his business.

He was about to speak again when the girl took a deep shuddering breath and let it out in a soft exhalation. "I've had a job offer for when I leave school this year. Well, actually it's just an interview, but..." she stated, as if that explained everything. The silence between them extended again.

"I fail to see...?"

She made a small exasperated noise and turned to face him. He recoiled slightly at the expression on her face. "Can't you...?" She wafted her left hand at him, and he saw the glint of a small diamond on her ring finger.

He shrugged and scowled, feeling his temper rise a further notch. "I am perfectly capable of seeing your finger, Miss Granger," he replied testily. "It is the implication of your words that is difficult to discern."

The girl muttered something under her breath and gripped her knees again.

"I take it that Mr Weasley does not wish you to accept this job," he said eventually, noting the time again. 11.52 p.m.

She let out a humourless bark of laughter. "Fifty points to Slytherin, Professor," she said sourly, then turned once more to look at him. "Ron wants to get married as soon as possible and... and start a family. He's a good man, and I owe him... all of them, really... so much... perhaps I shouldn't... But it's the most extraordinary opportunity and..." She cleared her throat. "Ron's been my boyfriend ever since the last battle... we got engaged just before I went back to school in September..."

*Just as I was sent to Azkaban, he thought bitterly. Oh yes, your life is so shitty.*

"...And we've been through such a lot together," she continued, oblivious to his reaction. "He'll be devastated. But it's not just him. If I break up with Ron, then I lose everyone I know. Everyone is related to him, either his best friend or part of his family. Molly will never understand, and Ginny is my only girlfriend and Harry..."

"So go back to your Weasley and be happy," he responded nastily. He did not want to think about *Potter* on this of all nights. "There are worse things than being disappointed in your career. Really, Miss Granger, your love life is none of my concern. And now, if you'll excuse me..."

He rose to his feet stiffly, the lilies hanging down by his side. Perhaps if he simply walked away, she would get the hint and disappear.

"Oh, you don't have the first bloody clue, do you?" she countered, throwing her hands up in exasperation. "Of course you wouldn't understand. You always kept everyone at a distance! It's not just Ron I was crying about... I won't have *anyone* anymore. She sighed and looked down at her hands, clenched together in her lap. "I'll be on my own, completely alone. I'll be a pariah... cut off from everyone I know."

"What about your parents?" He had a vague memory that she was Muggle-born.

"They're gone." Her voice was a whisper, and then she looked at him with such remorseful sorrow in her eyes that he found himself sinking back onto the seat beside her again.

"Gone?" He stared at her in confusion.

"I modified their memories and sent them away to Australia so that Voldemort could not find them. After the war, we tried to reverse the charms that I had laid, but it didn't work. Now I can't ever bring them back."

Her shoulders began to shake again and her head bowed.

*Oh.*

"I just can't spend the rest of my life... cooking and knitting jumpers..." she muttered distractedly. "I really want to go to that appointment, and I don't know what to do anymore. I feel... lost. And I can't talk to anyone about it because everyone is just getting on and they'd tell me to do the same, and I should be able to do that, I should... Oh, this is so *bloody stupid*."

She dug her hand into her pocket and pulled out a crumpled envelope and stared down at it. Severus stared at it too. The seal of the Department of Mysteries was phasing in and out on the parchment underneath her fingers. His breath caught. *What the hell was she doing with that...?*

"How are *you*, Professor?"

The incongruity of the question startled him. He lifted his head and met her eyes.

"How am I?" he asked, baffled by her sudden change of subject. He would never understand women. "How am I?" he repeated, recovering some of his customary sarcasm. "Why, Miss Granger, I have never been better, clearly." He waved his free hand at his shabby clothes and unkempt appearance. "After all, Azkaban is a veritable health farm, nowadays. Spending three months in there alongside my fellow surviving Death Eaters, each of whom I had counted as my friends at one point or another, and all of whom I had betrayed by my actions during the wars, until the Wizengamot had decided, in its wisdom, that I was probably no longer a threat to the wizarding world, was one of the most peaceful and satisfying experiences of my life so far."

He remembered the screams, the hysteria, the fear, the degradation, the fucking *misery*.

"Well, you're free now," she said in a small, hopeful voice.

"Oh, yes," he said, warming to his bitter theme, "it is even more wonderful to be 'free', Miss Granger. I suppose that I should be grateful that I am no longer gainfully employed teaching dunderheads or at the beck and call of a madman. I am 'free', indeed."

"Although, of course," he continued, before she could make some other patronisingly positive observation, "'freedom' is rather a relative concept in my case. The terms of my release included placing me under The Trace as if I were a child. Every time I do the smallest of charms, some little tosser in the Ministry knows exactly where I am and what I am doing. I have no employment prospects, little life savings, and the respectable wizarding media have branded me either a lovesick fool or a bloodthirsty traitor who tortured children..."

She had recoiled from him a little as his voice had sunk to a malevolent hiss, but as his speech ended, he saw her rally as she had done earlier.

Her chin lifted again and her eyes flashed. "'There are worse things than being disappointed in your career'," she countered pointedly, and set her jaw at him.

There was a dangerous pause, but then Snape found a sudden bubble of sardonic humour trace its way from under his ribcage to his throat.

The tension between them broke. He inclined his head towards her. "Touché, Miss Granger," he acknowledged with a small, wry grin. "Touché."

She relaxed a little, obviously pleased that she had struck home but with none of the triumphalism that he had expected from her. Instead, she looked across at him with a faintly calculating look, her face twisted into a politely sardonic expression.

"So, neither of us has particularly good prospects, then. I am stuck either becoming my future mother-in-law or cutting myself off again from all the family I have... and you... well... you..." her voice faded into silence before his expression.

Now it was his turn to pull a rueful face. It was odd how easy it felt to speak with the girl... as if their recent argument had somehow eased matters between them. He could see from the shadows that crossed her face that she was no longer an innocent. The war had changed her. She was no longer the irritatingly earnest show-off from his lessons. He wondered if he had misjudged her.

Snape shifted on his seat. When was the last time he had actually had a *conversation* with someone? He thought back over the recent weeks of sullen silence in his parents' home, before that to the horrors of his prison sentence and the officious bureaucracy of his arraignment and trial, further back beyond that to his short stay in St Mungo's while his throat was mended and they regrew his larynx.... He stopped thinking. *Too long.*

Instead, he focused his attention on the blooms on his lap and the hope of redemption and cleansing that the old charm might provide. He darted a quick, guarded look at his silent companion.

"I wasn't supposed to survive the war, Miss Granger, but I did." His tone was deliberately diffident, but as he settled back on the bench beside her, his hand tightened reflexively on the stems of the white flowers in his arms.

She nodded but said nothing.

He cleared his throat. "And now, apart from doing everything I can to disguise where I am and what I am doing to piss off the Ministry of Morons... for the first time since I was a boy... *I don't know what I'm going to do*" The last words were said very quietly, but she had renewed her Silencing Charm, and he knew that she had heard him perfectly well.

There was another silence between them, but this one was filled with a sort of awkward understanding.

Severus looked at his watch again. 11.57 p.m. He only had minutes. What if he missed it? Would the magic fail? Would he lose Lily forever?

A sort of panic seized him. "I...I need... I have something that I must do," he blurted out, his voice sounding louder than he had intended. The lilies were heavy in his hand, and he cradled them in his arms self-consciously.

She looked at him, at his carefully blank expression and his stiffly-held posture. "Oh, Professor," she breathed in sudden understanding. "I'm so sorry if I've intruded onto your remembrances."

He blinked, feeling a sudden and peculiar sense of confusion at her words. "What?"

"I'm sorry," she repeated. "You came here to pay your respects, that's why you're here, isn't it? I can see that. Of course, I'll...I'll leave you alone."

Snape scowled at her, feeling foolish and strangely vulnerable. He gestured with the bunch of lilies in his hand towards Lily's grave. "I have never missed this moment," he said quietly. "To lay the flowers as the church bells strike midnight."

It was true. He had always come, every year since he had laid the enchantment... despite Voldemort, despite Dumbledore, despite his own conflicting feelings of guilt and shame.

She held still, caught by his expression.

He ducked his head and muttered, "There's a charm... it...it reminds me... and helps me to focus... I need it so that I can feel...."

"I understand," she said, her eyes serious, and although it surprised him, he rather thought she had.

He nodded and turned away from her. He could see the gravestone outlined in the light from the church. Its engraved face was in shadow, but it did not matter he knew the words etched on the stone by heart. 'Lily.... Born 30th January 1960, Died 31st October 1981. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.' He refused to contemplate the rest of the writing on the stonework before him.

He walked quietly towards the headstone and stood before it, self-conscious under the gaze of the young woman behind him. His heart began to thump unevenly in his chest, and he prepared to welcome the purging effects of the charm.

He felt a gentle wash of magic, and suddenly the sounds of the churchyard at midnight were audible again. Hermione had cancelled her Silencing Charm. The bells of the church were tolling to a standstill. He counted six bells ringing... then five... then four... three... two... one....

Silence.

He held his breath.

And then the Tenor Bell began to ring out the hour.

As the first chime sounded, the gravestone began to shimmer. Before him, a perfect bunch of crystal lilies shivered into view and resolved from translucence into solid form. The lilies were perfect, although their perfection was almost painful to see. Severus felt the faint stirring of the bitterness and guilt that he was expecting to feel. He fingered the wand in his pocket. He had only to touch the crystal lilies with his wand and they would shatter. Laying the fresh flowers in their place would renew the spell and reset his emotions. He would have purpose and resolve again.

The Tenor tolled the second hour, then the third. For a brief moment, he rebelled. The Ministry would know what he was doing. Pathetic Snivellus, visiting the woman he could not keep, could not save, the woman whom he condemned through his eager deceit and misplaced zealotry. He pictured the report on his probation Auror's desk and felt his stomach roil and his face burn. Since leaving prison, he had taken great pains not to use magic. He was an intensely private man, and why the hell should he allow himself to be revealed...? But then he felt the tug of obligation and old, old pain, and he knew that if he were to break the charm, he would risk shattering himself.

He became aware that the girl was standing beside him. He heard her gentle intake of breath as she saw the magical lilies and felt her proximity with his sharpened senses. He found, with an odd sense of detachment, that despite his initial hostility he did not mind, now, that she was here with him. He drew his wand and rested it upon the crystal flowers, preparing to say the incantation.

He could see the Auror's supercilious expression in his mind's eye. "*So, Mr Snape... you thought you'd take a little jaunt to visit Lily Potter's grave, did you?*"

*Fuck it.* What was one more humiliation?

The bell sounded six... seven....

Hermione suddenly reached forward, across his body and in front of him, placing her hand over his. He started with the contact of her warm skin.

"Don't," she whispered. "The Ministry..."

He had rarely been touched gently in his life, and the sensation was most....

"Let me do it for you," she said. "What's the incantation?"

"Semper meminere," he muttered, "Before the twelfth chime, but..."

The bell rang again. Eleven....

"*Semper meminere*," she repeated quickly, her eyebrows furrowed as she focused on the flowers. He watched her, his emotions in a strange state of confusion and gratitude, and felt the surge of her power flow through his hand and into his wand.

The bell tolled for the twelfth time.

The crystal flowers imploded into frozen motes of dust, which then slowly expanded and showered both of them. Snape shut his eyes, feeling the weight of the charm begin to press upon him, at the same time as he registered Hermione's sharp intake of breath. The skin of his face and hand stung with the impact of the icy crystal shards. For a moment just before the emotional rush began he wondered what she must be thinking of him.

He had first set the charm in the year that she had died. He had been terrified that he would forget the rawness of his shame, and thereby lose the motivation that would keep him spying for Dumbledore against his Dark master while Lily's and Potter's son needed his protection. He had to keep the overwhelming and pervasive sensation of self-loathing and desolation that had closed about him on October 31st 1981, when his world had ended.

The charm forced him to re-live his darkest memories... It reminded him why he deserved nothing, was worth nothing, why Lily had withdrawn her friendship and love, how worthless he truly was... But then from that sensation, the charm strengthened his will, affirmed his strength and, therefore, enabled him to recover and renew his duty.

He could only hope that the charm would still work now that the Dark Lord was dead and Potter's son had fulfilled the Prophecy.

If not... then perhaps he had no purpose any more, and there was nothing more for him to do.

He tried not to dwell on the implications of that thought.

Severus tensed his body in preparation for the shame, pity, and fear to suffuse his senses.

He flexed his wand hand and realised that Hermione was still gripping it. He felt a sudden stab of concern that she would be caught up in the magical backlash and tried to pull her hand away from his and to push her away, but it was too late.

\*A\*

Her head smacked sharply into his chin, and she cried out as the lilies exploded. Instinctively, his left hand came around her waist, holding her to his body, pulling her out of the way and twisting around to protect her as the charm pulsed through them both. Like a tidal wave, the feelings surged through him through them both but rather than the negative emotions that he was expecting to experience, something extraordinary happened.

He was suffused with love. A giddy sense of happiness, trust, and companionship that filled his whole body and made his head spin and his fingers tingle.

Severus' breath caught as he felt his heart soar. This was like the first time he had flown on a broomstick, the giddy sense of power and danger, the thrill of the wind rushing through his hair, and the adrenaline rushing through his body as if nothing mattered but that strange swooping sensation in his gut.

The girl had turned around and had buried her face in his neck. He could sense her hot exhalations on the sensitive skin around the scars there. He clutched at her and was astonished to feel her hands come firmly around his back and hug him back.

He felt the tactile joy of running his fingers through soft dense fur, hearing the purr that meant his familiar was happy with him. He felt the joy of finding the solution to a logical puzzle. Gods, he loved Arithmancy... and Transfiguration... and Potions! And Coronation Street... and *chocolate*.

He realised that he was salivating and became confused. He hated chocolate! And Coronation Street was too uncomfortably close to home for him to be enjoyed. What was happening to him?

Hermione emitted a small, painful sound like a sob and clutched him closer.

His face was rubbing against her hair, feeling the warmth from the springy curls.

Before he could think any more, another wave of emotions struck him. Through his sensitised skin, he could feel Hermione moan into his neck again and the delicious sensation of her lips rubbing against his skin. Heat rose within him, and he felt a powerful surge of protectiveness towards her. She was so small and fragile in his arms. He would fight a Manticore to keep her safe. He would do anything to be what she wanted. He trembled and shook with the power of that sensation.

Slowly, he felt the charm begin to ebb away from him. He felt... emptied of all his emotions. But in the space that this absence of feeling left, he could feel her. He was giddy with relief Lily was with him, as she always was. *Always*. He felt her impish wit, her love of life, the brightness in her that burned, her intelligence, the care she felt for her friends, for her parents, for him.... He shook his head, confused *but...was that Lily?* he thought, dazed and bewildered by the baffling feelings.

Before he had always felt her fondness towards him but also her exasperation at his inadequacies, her loathing of his friends.... Now he saw himself differently: sombre, gaunt, and aloof in his classroom. He saw his sneer and the flash of casual disdain as his eyebrow arched and he looked her up and down. He was a bastard, but unaccountably, he felt her regard and respect for him, tremulously offered.

He realised with a sudden shocking insight that he was not feeling Lily's emotions at all, but those of the witch who was still holding him tightly in her arms.

The charm had run its course, and with that realisation came an immediate awareness of his current... situation.

She was still clinging to him, and he to her. His hands were buried in her hair, the bunch of lilies lying lost and forgotten somewhere on the ground behind her.

She was mumbling something against his neck, inching her face further up and closer to his mouth. He twisted his face to meet her, and he stared into her eyes.

He was trembling and his heart was racing. He found that he was breathing heavily. Sweat stung his eyes as he blinked rapidly, trying to recover his senses.

Oh, Lord. He had nearly kissed her. He could feel a deep and tingling blush begin to suffuse his cheeks and neck. *What the hell had happened to the charm?*

He should have felt terrible but resigned, purged but stronger and more resolute, guilt stricken but clear of purpose.

But he felt none of those things.

He felt... *wonderful*.

Outstanding.

Unbelievable.

He fought an absurd desire to laugh.

He became more aware of his surroundings. He could hear the church bells ringing loudly in his ears, but he realised what before had sounded sombre and funereal was now celebratory and extrovert. The bells danced about one another, changing the pattern of their call as they rang out joyfully into the night sky.

Beyond the bells, he could hear people laughing and shouting from the village square and the noise of distant fireworks bursting and exploding as the villagers celebrated New Year's Day. The wind had picked up and was whipping about them both, bringing the faint whiff of cordite from the fireworks to his nostrils a sharp accompaniment to the previous scents of pine resin and muddy grass.

In his arms, Hermione stirred, obviously coming back to herself as he had done. Severus froze awkwardly, suddenly uncertain of what to do next. He had no idea exactly how she had been affected by the charm, although he had felt her tight embrace. His head was still swimming with the memory of the extraordinary emotions that he had

felt as the charm had washed through them. Hermione stilled also, and then, after a pause, she stiffly began to disentangle herself from his embrace.

He watched her gather herself before him, running her hand through her curly mane of hair, settling her hideous jumper backwards on her shoulders and looking everywhere but in front of her.

Slowly, however, she calmed... became still... and then appeared to make a decision.

She lifted her face upwards to look at him.

His mind and body were still buzzing slightly from the aftershocks of the emotions, but he could feel an unfamiliar sensation flow through him as a huge grin stretched his mouth.

He felt absolutely and completely....

*Free.*

Her eyes met his and she smiled tentatively in return.

^^\*FINIS\*^^

### **Ring out, wild bells**

Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,

The flying cloud, the frosty light:

The year is dying in the night;

Ring out, wild bells, and let him die.

Ring out the old, ring in the new,

Ring, happy bells, across the snow:

The year is going, let him go;

Ring out the false, ring in the true.

Ring out the grief that saps the mind

For those that here we see no more;

Ring out the feud of rich and poor,

Ring in redress to all mankind.

Ring out a slowly dying cause,

And ancient forms of party strife;

Ring in the nobler modes of life,

With sweeter manners, purer laws.

Ring out the want, the care, the sin,

The faithless coldness of the times;

Ring out, ring out my mournful rhymes

But ring the fuller minstrel in.

Ring out false pride in place and blood,

The civic slander and the spite;

Ring in the love of truth and right,

Ring in the common love of good.

Ring out old shapes of foul disease;

Ring out the narrowing lust of gold;

Ring out the thousand wars of old,

Ring in the thousand years of peace.

Ring in the valiant man and free,

The larger heart, the kindlier hand;

Ring out the darkness of the land,

Ring in the Christ that is to be.

from *In Memoriam* by Alfred, Lord Tennyson