

Cinderella Man

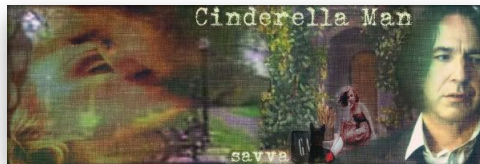
by Savva

Some wizards don't get a second chance. Severus Snape isn't blowing his.

Awakening

Chapter 1 of 7

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Cinderella Man

Yeah, I'm not even really supposed to be here right now,

So fuck it,

*I might as well make the most of it. **

Awakening

The moment Lily's green eyes, *Harry's green eyes*, Severus corrected himself, disappeared into nothingness, he relaxed. Here it was: Death, black and calm infinity. There was no pain, no worries, no duties, no sacrifices—nothing but blackness. Severus embraced the peacefulness readily and duly. He had been waiting for it for quite some time.

He was convinced that time was supposed to end in the afterlife, and thus he wasn't sure exactly how long he had been swimming in its all-encompassing blackness. Yet, the moment he felt the first, definite, and outright troubling signs of his returning senses, he knew that he hadn't been drifting there, in that long-awaited sea of calmness, nearly long enough. At least, it wasn't as long as he had anticipated. *No peace for me*, he thought. *Darn, why am I not surprised?*

First, he felt a hot, almost burning, touch of hurried fingers on his temples. Then those same fingers ran across his face, and a warm, slightly damp palm was pressed firmly into his forehead. A moment later, his whole face was covered with cascades of hair, with someone's impatient breath tickling his neck. Somebody was feeling for his pulse, he detected with apprehension. Though he had to admit that a heavy mane of hair on his face felt rather nice. It smelled of a peculiar fusion of rain, smoke and

cooking oil. Still, Severus found the scent agreeable and even somehow soothing. It was... *homey*. The word popped up in Severus' mind by itself and shocked him - *Homey? What the heck!*

"I think I've got him," a loud, boisterous, and painfully familiar voice finally announced triumphantly. Unable to concentrate just yet, Severus couldn't place the voice immediately. Plus, he had no chance to even try because just a breath later... *Hmm, a breath, whose breath? Is it I who is breathing?* Severus wasn't sure at all when he heard, "Give me that. He needs it!" and a soft, suffocating mass, which Severus, even in his suspended state between life and death, unmistakably identified as a woman's bosom, had replaced the curls on his face, knocking that bloody unknown breath right out of his lungs.

At that moment, he understood quite clearly that he had undoubtedly arrived at his destination. He was in his special, very personal, and apparently perverted hell where all sorts of evil creatures were beginning to taunt him. Surely, elaborated tortures were to follow.

Those dark thoughts didn't last long in Severus' head though, because a millisecond later the bosom's mildly suffocating, yet wonderfully comforting, warmth and heaviness were gone from his face. In its place, an ice-cold cloth was rudely slammed onto his forehead. Unexpectedly zapped with pricking coldness, Severus was forced to open his eyes, only to meet the bright and overly friendly brown eyes of Molly Weasley.

Hell! Definitely hell! thought Severus. However, when a second later he noticed the sight of that same comforting bosom heaving enthusiastically right in front of his eyes, and a soft mass of reddish-chestnut curls held by a touchingly ridiculous scarf, his thoughts suddenly changed to, *Maybe not.*

Molly gently patted his cheek and said, "Welcome back, darling." Then, she turned her face to someone Severus couldn't see and cooed, "Hermione, honey, take over please, Arthur is waiting for me."

At this, Severus uttered a muffled moan of protest and tried to sit up. An excruciating pain rushed through him in an overwhelming tide, and everything went black and silent once again.

* **Eminem/Cinderella Man**

Surprises

Chapter 2 of 7

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Yeah, feels good, guess I'm lucky

Some of us don't get a second chance

But I ain't blowing this one. *

Surprises

The gentle warmth of a delicate palm on Severus' forehead brought him back to consciousness once again. For a while, he cautiously kept his eyes closed, carefully listening to the sounds around him. Alas, his fine spy skills proved to be futile this time. It was suspiciously quiet, and the only sound he could detect was someone's light breathing. Severus waited for a few more minutes, and then, falling victim to his own curiosity, he slowly opened his eyes.

He instantly recognised the clinical décor of the hospital wing and the person near him. Hermione Granger was precariously perched on the edge of his bed. Her petite body was tilted towards him, and her hand was still warming his forehead. The girl's caramel-coloured irises were locked on him, and her wild mahogany curls were almost touching his chest.

Of course, still here, he thought with annoyance, *and already very much in my personal space. How awfully Gryffindor.*

The wizard's thoughts were interrupted by the girl's warm breath. It reached his skin right when he was in the middle of his mental rant. He inhaled deeply, and a light jasmine scent filled his nostrils. Severus' body chose to react to this fact with an unexpected heat wave, catching him by surprise. Drowning helplessly in its suffocating depth, he tried to convince himself that this bone-melting heat was instigated by a fever, or at least, by righteous ire at the girl's boldness and not...absolutely, positively not...by her close proximity. Whatever was the cause, either way, he needed to quickly stop it.

"Miss Granger," Severus tried to scold. Alas, he only succeeded in uttering a hoarse hiss, which was immediately halted by a little finger pressed firmly and demandingly to his lips.

"Shh, shh, Professor; please don't talk. You are not allowed. Madam Pomfrey scarcely managed stop the bleeding from your wound after your last try," she informed him in a hurried whisper.

In the process of whispering, the girl moved even closer to him, this time pressing her hand into his chest. Moreover, her curls were now definitely tickling his bare skin, and her lips were dangerously close to his ear, causing the heat inside him to become almost unbearable.

Shite, thought the wizard, who desperately sought an escape. At last, being already dangerously close to combustion, Severus managed to produce a proper glare. The girl finally heeded the warning and removed herself from him.

"I am helping to tend the injured," continued Hermione from his bed's far corner, as if answering his untold question. "Many of us are helping here. A lot of students were wounded." Her eyes suddenly became watery and honey-coloured. Hermione swivelled her face away from Severus, and a second later he heard a stifled snuffle.

"I need to let Madam Pomfrey know that you are awake." Still avoiding his eyes, she hastily jumped from the bed and walked to the door. There, she paused for a moment, faced him again and smiled. Her eyes still glistened with unshed tears.

"So, I guess, you will be seeing me quite often, Professor." She arched her eyebrow. "It might be a good thing that you are not allowed to talk. Your silent glare is not that intimidating." With that, she disappeared behind the door, leaving Severus seething with fury at the witch's cheek.

In the next few weeks, Severus did see Miss Granger a couple of times per day, not more. Her hair always was first to enter the room, followed by her bright smile and customary "Good morning, Professor." To Severus' immense displeasure, his body never failed to react to the witch's presence in unreasonable, uncontrollable, and surprising ways. In the beginning, he fiercely fought this phenomenon. But after a while, Severus surrendered. He decided that maybe, just maybe, his reactions weren't that unwelcome. After all, he did grow quite partial to a faint scent of jasmine filling the air, to her quiet steps and continuous babbling. So, he just lay there with a protective frown and watched her, letting his body react however it may.

Soon enough, most of the injured were either healed or transferred to St. Mungo's. Thus, Poppy didn't require as much help as before, and the helpers one by one began to drift away from Hogwarts. On one of those days, Miss Granger came to say good-bye as well. As soon as she stepped into the infirmary with that special, determined look on her face and briskly walked to his bed, Severus knew that there would be a monologue and he, still unable to either move or talk, would be forced to listen. Knowing now that glaring at her was a waste of time since the insolent witch had developed immunity to his glares, scowls and frowns, he simply faced her, waiting for her to begin.

"I am leaving today, Professor," she began, focusing her serious eyes on his. "But before I go, I want to tell you 'thank you'. Thank you for everything you've done for us. Thank you for saving us all. I am..." At this, she faltered and broke their eye contact. After a deep, calming breath and a snuffle (she was sniffing quite often, but Severus had become accustomed to this peculiar habit of hers), she continued, "We all are forever in your debt. Please, forgive me for doubting you."

Severus uttered an exasperated huff and impatiently waved for her to stop this nonsense. He, however, did give her a curt nod of acknowledgment and did allow his thin lips to curl just the slightest bit into a faint smile.

Miss Granger beamed at him, awakening embarrassing butterflies in Severus' stomach. "Good-bye, Professor. See you in September," she singsonged and left the room in a striking swirl of mahogany curls. Severus silently looked after her, trying to calm the bloody butterflies flocking in his stomach and nursing a novel idea that caramel-coloured eyes and mahogany hair were actually an agreeable colour combination.

He suddenly decided that he liked those subtle colours. Yes. He nodded to himself. In fact, he liked them even more than green and red...they were warm, and they were real. This discovery certainly surprised Severus, although he had an inkling that this wasn't the last surprise that the future held in store for him.

It took nearly two months for Severus to recover from the horrendous injury he had suffered. Poppy tried, though unsuccessfully, to transfer him to St. Mungo's. Unlike Severus, she was convinced that he needed special care. Eventually, she grew tired of Severus' continuous, aggressive refusals and gave up on him. Besides, he was obviously getting better, and that was the key factor in her giving up the struggle.

As for Severus, he felt comfortable enough at Hogwarts and had no desire to be transferred anywhere. He was busy rediscovering himself. His unexpected second lease on life changed him, and it was Severus' foremost task to find out just how radically.

Every day brought new discoveries and surprises for the wizard. The first and the most notable one was his realisation that he was no longer anyone's servant. Oh, how wonderfully soothing this epiphany was! For once, Severus Snape belonged to himself, and it suited his tired, tattered soul perfectly.

Of course, there were scores of other, smaller revelations. For instance, the moment he was well enough to return to his quarters, he learned that he actually strongly disliked his gloomy, damp dungeons and decisively loathed the feel of his teaching robes scratching his skin. *So unlike Miss Granger's soft touches.* The unsolicited thought instantly popped into his mind. He disregarded it instantaneously as entirely inappropriate.

Later on, Severus was extremely disturbed and disconcerted to discover that he liked the smell and taste of freshly baked bread. This particular revelation was so worrisomely unlike him, so domestic, that Severus felt inadequate. "What next?" he muttered. "Collecting pictures of cute kittens and puppies?" He decided he probably had to thank Molly Weasley for that one. She was, after all, the one who had brought him back.

Over the summer, Severus, to Poppy's disapproval, helped to restore Hogwarts and made the decision that he didn't wish to return as Headmaster of Hogwarts. Even though Kingsley, along with Minerva, tried hard to convince him to reconsider, he steadfastly declined, and therefore Minerva became the new Headmistress.

Sure enough, there was an array of things he still despised. He still was Severus Snape, after all. Coffee remained unpalatable. Just as before, he wasn't a fan of the Ministry. Very predictably, when in late August he was invited to the award ceremony at which he was to receive his First Class Order of Merlin, he unexpectedly fell seriously ill and was unable to attend.

Harry Potter himself delivered the Order to the wounded hero the day after the ceremony. Had Severus known that it would turn out that way, he would have probably gone to the event. Instead, he was punished by having to listen to Potter's awkward apologies, all the while thinking that Miss Granger managed to say the same thing in only a dozen words. Potter, on the other hand, spent a full hour mumbling half coherent excuses and explanations. There was one useful thing, however, during that torture...Severus acknowledged that he still didn't like Harry Potter. He still couldn't stand him for more than a few minutes. Nothing had changed in that particular area.

As usual, summer ended way too soon, and students returned to Hogwarts. Severus didn't find teaching an enjoyable task. Scaring, belittling and intimidating students weren't as satisfying as before. The little nitwits just annoyed the hell out of him with their imbecility. The only pleasant part was to see Miss Granger return for her NEWTs. Severus quickly made it a habit to discreetly gaze at Miss Granger's warm honey-coloured eyes and coral lips from the teacher's desk and to watch...in embarrassing awe...her untamed, mahogany curls flutter in Hogwarts' drafts.

Although he didn't allow himself any improprieties, by the middle of the year, Severus had developed an obsession with the witch. At night, he dreamed about her breath warming his skin and her soft, delicate fingers caressing his face. He sensed her jasmine scent whenever she was in the same room with him. Damn his over-sensitive nose! He couldn't help but admire her wit. Somehow, she ceased to be an annoying, attention-seeking know-it-all. Unexpectedly, she had become a ray of light in his life. Sure enough, Severus wasn't going to act upon these newly acquired feelings. He did what he knew best. He fastidiously hid them deep inside his soul and blamed Molly Weasley for everything.

The rest of the year went by quickly. Severus spent it in a constant wrestling match with himself. And really, it was one thing to secretly charm his teaching robes to be as soft as cashmere or to ask an elf to bring him a few freshly baked rolls. It was, however, an altogether different story to have inappropriate thoughts about a student. Severus Snape wasn't going to put up with them. He fought them relentlessly.

And yet, when after the final assembly, the witch in question came to bid her farewells and then left, an acute feeling of loss gripped his poor heart and didn't let go. By the next morning, a decision was reached...Severus Snape was leaving Hogwarts for good. He had a new life to live and a witch to find.



* *Eminem/Cinderella Man*

Long Goodbyes, Short Hellos

Chapter 3 of 7

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Nah, man

Shit, I feel like I can do anything now

Long Goodbyes, Short Hellos

1

By the next morning, a decision was reached - Severus Snape was leaving Hogwarts for good. He had a new life to live and the witch to find.

Alas, it turned out that reaching this fateful and utterly life-changing decision was much easier than accomplishing it. Severus' next steps proved to be quite challenging, and even poignant, at some point. A talk with Minerva, for example, was annoyingly emotional, on the Headmistress' part of course. A search for a replacement, on the other hand, was sheer torture and required bottomless patience. Luckily, Severus possessed just the right amount of it.

The wizard embraced the situation with readiness, deriving his enthusiasm from nightly dreams about his future and a certain witch. With his habitual thoroughness, Severus spent the whole summer flipping through the candidates and rejecting them one by one. By the end of August, he was already losing hope. Fate, however, decided to offer Severus a little present once again, and just a week before school started, he finally found a suitable replacement for himself.

It wasn't the end of Severus' prolonged parting with Hogwarts, though. Sure enough, with his replacement being excellent in Potions but rather amateur in teaching, Minerva implored Severus to stay at least for a few months and train the novice. Severus had a strong desire to decline, yet he couldn't. Hogwarts had been his home for far too long, and he couldn't just leave it without a second glance, or without making sure that the new Potions master was truly ready. Thus, he just clenched his teeth and stayed, putting his life on hold once again.

Of course, it took a bloody school year to properly prepare his replacement for the Potions master's position. It was a long and lonely year that poor Severus spent in vivid night dreams and constant perusal of *The Daily Prophet* in search of crumbs of information about Miss Granger. He was fastidiously watching the witch's every move. Thank Merlin for the press and its obsession with everything about the Golden Trio.

From the *Prophet*, Severus knew that Miss Granger had chosen to join the Healer's program at St. Mungo's. Her decision to become a Healer didn't surprise him. Moreover, he wholeheartedly approved the witch's choice...she obviously had a talent in that particular area. He had experienced it himself during that memorable brief period of time in Hogwarts infirmary, which started it all. The girl could make him feel better with the lightest touch. He was in denial back then, but now he knew that even her fingertips possessed a healing power. Although Severus did note that he could hardly be objective as he dreamed about those fingertips almost every night. "Entirely biased is more like it," hummed the wizard, hiding behind a newspaper and fruitlessly trying to conceal his grin from Minerva's sharp eyes.

As the year progressed, the *Prophet* published a few troubling articles about Miss Granger's involvement with Ronald Weasley. Ignoring his heart's painful tightening, Severus dismissed these warning signs as the media's weak attempts to quench the crowd's thirst for romance. The wizard just couldn't believe that nonsense. *Hermione Granger and Ronald Weasley*, huffed Severus to himself, *what an asinine notion*. Plus, he was certain that Miss Granger wasn't at all eager to tie any knots.

However, when articles began to reinforce their claims with photographs, worry and jealousy saturated his soul. His heavy heart lay in his chest, making it difficult to draw a breath as he looked at those damned pictures and kept muttering "bloody idiot" in his powerless rage. To be honest, even he didn't know to whom exactly he referred...to himself or to Weasley.

The last straw came on one of early spring's mornings when the *Prophet* ran a huge photograph of Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley holding hands in public. Unable to

contain himself, Severus crumpled the thin paper and left breakfast in a furious billow of black robes. He didn't touch the *Prophet* after that, and for the rest of the year, time changed its pace to a slow crawl.

Eventually, however, this tortuously long school year did come to an end just like everything else. The Potions master was perfectly ready to replace him, and the wizard refused to stay in the school any longer. The very day after all the students had left, Severus Snape collected a few things that mattered to him, carefully packed his books and finally, finally bid his long-awaited farewell to Hogwarts.

"Good luck, Severus. Have a good life," said Minerva, whose eyes glistened peculiarly, "because you deserve it." And that was it; the end of one epoch and the start of another, in which, the wizard sincerely hoped, fate would be kinder to him than before.

2

Severus decided not to return to Spinner's End. He just couldn't make himself live there again. Instead, he stayed at the Leaky Cauldron while he looked for a new house. He had managed to save money during his teaching years by being frugal. Plus, his First Class Order of Merlin came with a round sum as well. It took quite a bit of running around, but by the end of June, Severus Snape became an owner of a house near a park. Actually, it was the last before the park's entrance, which suited him perfectly. Although the house was on the smallish side, it had everything he needed and was full of light and airy. Plus, there was a nice French bakery near by where fresh rolls and baguettes were available at six in the morning.

A few more weeks were spent in unpacking, buying furniture, and setting up a library and a potion lab. After days of hard work, everything in the house found its place. Every book was put on a shelf in a strict and proper order, every cauldron was meticulously cleaned, and every ingredient carefully stored. Finally, his bachelor's nest looked presentable, and at last, Severus felt that he was ready to go to St. Mungo's. It was time to find Miss Granger.

And he almost did go. Only Severus happened to glance in a mirror right before leaving the house, and he didn't like what he saw there at all. He did see himself every day during his morning toilette, of course. Yet he didn't realise just how hideous he looked until he saw his reflection in a full-sized mirror in a foyer. His trousers and overcoat were dated at best; his shoes had seen better days a decade ago; and his hair clearly needed attention. No witch would look twice at him...he was certain...especially such a young and attractive one. He desperately needed new clothes, shoes and, maybe, even a haircut.

It took Severus three days to work up the nerve to go shopping in Muggle London. He had money, but what he lacked was an understanding *of how to and where*. And he had no one to ask for help. There, at that moment, for the first time in many years, he regretted his unwillingness to have friends. In the late afternoon of the third day, annoyed and disappointed in himself, he finally went out there. Already standing in front of numerous, irritatingly bright London stores, the wizard still was unsure of his actions. Finally, a neon sign *Gap* caught Severus' attention. He thought that the name was somewhat symbolic since he was, in some way, closing a gap between himself and the modern world after all. Muttering, "What the heck," he bravely walked into the store.

All the confidence which he had managed to muster during those three days evaporated the moment he stepped inside, though. Blinded by lights and deafened by loud music, he instantly forgot why he was there. Luckily, a doll of a girl with bright pink hair came to his rescue.

"How may I help you, sir? What you are looking for?" she asked politely in a high-pitched voice. Severus, who was already half-blind and half-deaf, only managed to hiss, "Something soft."

The doll-like girl arched her perfectly drawn eyebrow disapprovingly, pursed her candy pink lips and said, "Please, follow me, sir." Twenty minutes later, Severus was back on the street with a huge white bag in his hand and with no idea what was inside. It had been a fiasco.

"Fuck," he cursed as he decided to take a walk. He needed to calm down. While he was walking down the street, manoeuvring between hurrying Muggles, a light rain began to drizzle, darkening his mood even further. Dark doubts began to poison his mind, and millions of *what ifs* suddenly pierced his heart. Engrossed in those heavy thoughts, he didn't notice that someone was calling him.

"Professor Snape!" his brain registered.

Who on Earth would call me Professor Snape here? he thought. Perplexed, he turned around. There, right in front of him, was Pansy Parkinson, breathing heavily from running. She looked remarkably different, barely recognisable. Only because Severus had known her since she was eleven did he manage to recognise her. In bewilderment, Severus took in Pansy's purple hair, huge black boots, black nails and three earrings in one ear.

"What are you doing here, Professor?" asked the witch when she finally caught her breath.

"I can ask you the same question, Miss Parkinson. What are you doing here in Muggle London? What happened to your hair and nails? Did you join some kind of sect? Why did you violate your ear, Miss Parkinson? Was it misbehaving?" scolded Severus.

"Nah, Professor, relax, I am Goth this week." Pansy rolled her eyes at her former teacher's scowl. "I am working in that boutique. You probably know: it's a final stage of our rehabilitation program. We all have to work at least six months in Muggle institutions," explained Pansy. Severus recalled reading about the Ministry's special program for Death Eaters' children and nodded in acknowledgement.

"So, how are you, Professor? I heard you left Hogwarts. Finally, sir, you need to start living, you know, just like everybody..." Pansy abruptly stopped her tirade and focused her eyes on the bag in Severus' hands. "What is this in your hand, sir? Did you go shopping? Why the hell did you choose an American store, Professor?"

"American?" repeated Severus distractedly, suddenly feeling inadequate under Pansy's penetrating gaze. "I didn't know it was. I just needed a few new trousers and shirts."

"Oh, I see," Pansy tucked her purple lock behind her ear and thought for a minute. "You know what, wait here, Professor, I'll be right back." Severus surprised himself by nodding affirmatively. A few minutes later the witch was back. "Alright, that's done." And she boldly intertwined her arm with Severus' and led him down the street. "Now, sir, I'll teach you how to shop properly."

It seemed to Severus that they spent countless hours in different *boutiques* as Pansy called them. By the end of this torture, however, Severus had everything he needed...trousers, shirts, overcoat, and few pairs of shoes. Pansy did try to force him to buy other colours than black and white. But, despite all her efforts, the wizard didn't budge. Trousers and overcoat ought to be black, and shirts ought to be crisp white. Nothing had changed there...Severus Snape still didn't consider other colours practical or appropriate.

During their shopping spree, Pansy told Severus everything about other Slytherins who were on the program. He now knew that Blaise Zabini worked in an Italian restaurant. He started as a busboy there and was now a second chef. Theodore Nott was employed by a London library as a vintage book specialist, and Draco Malfoy found a job in Harrods' men's clothing department. These bits of news filled Severus' heart with contentment. It was gratifying to know that his students were all right, that they had managed to adapt as true Slytherins despite the horrible war into which their parents had dragged them.

When Severus and Pansy stood on the sidewalk hours later, she gave him a knowing smile. "Congratulations, Professor. Now that you have a proper wardrobe, you can pursue your target, a desired witch I suppose."

"Don't talk nonsense, Miss Parkinson!" rebuked Severus, feeling embarrassed that he was about to blush.

"Yeah, yeah, sir, whatever. By the way, you will need trainers for those joggers and sweatshirts you bought in Gap. I can help you with that as well, if you wish. All you need to do is swing by my boutique sometime. Oh, and Professor, never ever use a drying charm on trousers, or on any article of clothing for that matter, or they will shrink just like your old trousers." Pansy turned on her heel and began to walk down the street. After a minute, the wind brought to Severus her parting words, "See you, Professor. And remember, no drying charms on trousers."

The wizard uttered a huff but then smirked and muttered, "Cheeky witch." Afterward, at home, Severus decided that he definitely should see Draco, Blaise and Theo. *Maybe*, he thought, *Miss Parkinson can organize that* However, it was not his first priority now. He was finally and truly ready to pay a visit to St. Mungo's.

3

Next morning, Severus walked out of the house in his new outfit, with his hair tied back with a leather string, which Miss Parkinson had found for him yesterday, and for once he was feeling good about himself. He strode to the park entrance for a quick stroll. Walking through an old wrought iron gate, he noticed a cardboard box with "FREE" written on it in large letters. Curiosity got the better of him, and he peered inside. Twelve pairs of hopeful puppy eyes peered back at him.

Severus crinkled his nose in disapproval, muttered "Mongrels," and continued his walk.

He Apparated to St. Mungo's from a secluded area of the park. His plan was simple...he was going to offer his potions making skills to the hospital. He was certain that he would be able to obtain a consulting position there. He was the best-known potions maker in the country, after all. Plus, this morning Severus believed in himself: he felt that he would get the job, find and woo his witch, and that she would be his, having completely forgotten Ron Weasley.

The meeting with St. Mungo's General Healer went just as the wizard expected. Healer Tibald was extremely enthusiastic about this rare opportunity to have Severus Snape as a consultant in their Potions department. He immediately offered him an agreeable salary and a premium for every project he directed. Severus, on the other hand, was pleasantly surprised by St. Mungo's laboratory. Since the conversation thoroughly satisfied both parties, they shook hands, and Severus agreed to start next Monday.

The wizard was leaving Healer Tibald's office in an excellent mood. His heart was filled with triumph. The first part of his plan had gone extremely smoothly...he had found a proper job near his *desired witch*, as Miss Parkinson had referred to her yesterday. Airborne by his early success, Severus didn't pay attention to where he was going and collided with someone unnaturally blond and dressed in the most ridiculously magenta-coloured suit. "Skeeter," he growled with abhorrence as soon as he recognised her.

"Severus Snape," replied the infamous reporter, puckering her fuchsia lips in a coquettish smile. "I wonder, what is our famous hero doing here?"

Severus stifled a disgusted shudder. "Nothing you have to trouble your magenta-coloured brain with, Skeeter. I am sure you can dig something juicier from the manure in which you are wallowing. Now, move out of the way, because I cannot stand the stench!"

Rita puffed angrily but stepped back, giving Severus an opportunity to leave the Healer's office. The wizard had gone a few steps, when he heard Skeeter's falsetto, "Healer Tibald, please confirm that Hermione Granger is taking a three month sabbatical due to her impending nuptials with Ronald Weasley."

Dumbstruck, Severus stopped in his tracks. A dreadful realization stabbed his heart with its ice-cold knife, twisting slowly with each following word. In a haze, he heard the Healer's reply, "I am not sure how you found out about that, but I don't see any harm in confirming it. I am sure an official announcement is already on its way. Yes, Miss Skeeter, it is true. Miss Granger decided to take a three-month break. She is going to return to her studies as Mrs Weasley right after the honeymoon."

The heartbroken wizard didn't wait even a second after the word 'honeymoon' reached him. He needed to leave this place before he destroyed it in his fury, so he Apparated right from the office. A few moments later, he appeared in the park. He stood there under the pouring rain for the longest time, shouting profanities into a grey sky and crushing his fists against an unforgiving granite post. Thank Merlin there was no one around. He was so unbelievably furious with himself, with his imbecilic presumption that this time around he could hope for happiness. How could he believe that? Oh, what an utter idiot! Damn Molly Weasley for bringing him back!

Eventually he ran out of cusses as his voice became hoarse and his knuckles turned into a bloody mess. It was time to go home. Severus slowly walked toward the old gates when he noticed that the box with the puppies was still there. In the rain, the soggy cardboard "FREE" sign had become unreadable. Severus peeked inside, expecting to find the box empty but was surprised to find a pair of little eyes staring at him. A tiny, completely black and extremely unhappy-looking puppy was sitting there. Yet it didn't whine. It just sat there and silently stared at the wizard. There was something strange about its gaze, something that Severus couldn't decipher. Intrigued, he bent over the box and observed the creature carefully. Then he understood...the puppy's eyes were different colours...one blue and one brown.

How bizarre, thought the wizard and lightly petted its wet head. "Not your lucky day, mutt? Welcome to the club," muttered Severus. Then he straightened up and turned to leave. There, he paused, and after a short contemplation, said, "Come on, Black, if you want to live with me, you have to get out of the box by yourself." After this, Severus just kept walking until he reached his door. He entered the house without a backward glance, though he did leave the door slightly ajar. A short while later, he heard a tapping of tiny wet paws over his wooden floor and drew a heavy sigh. At least, he wasn't alone anymore.

* *Eminem/Cinderella Man*



Mornings

Chapter 4 of 7

Some wizards don't get a second chance. Severus Snape isn't blowing his.

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Cinderella Man

Who can catch lightning in a bottle? Set fire to water?

...

*Cinderella man, Cinderella man, Cinderella man, Cinderella man. **

Mornings

A short while later, he heard a tapping of tiny, wet paws over his wooden floor and drew a heavy sigh.

With a grunt, Severus sat down on a kitchen chair and waited. When a furry figure finally appeared on a threshold, the wizard lifted the pup up and muttering, "Let me just make sure," peeked under his belly. After a quick check, he returned him to the floor, lightly smoothed his wet, black fur and said, "All right, Black it is." And added with a bitter chuckle, "Two is better than one. What do you think, mutt?" Not expecting an answer, he muttered, "hungry?" and poured a little bit of milk into a bowl. Warming the milk just a notch, he placed it in front of the dog. Black slurped the milk with enthusiasm, filling the kitchen with hurried lapping sounds.

Severus drew another sigh and muttered a drying charm over the pup's black fur, chuckling tiredly in the process, "You are not going to shrink, are you, Black?" Then, he healed his knuckles and with the words, "All right, you take your time, mutt. I am off to bed," he left the kitchen, fed up with this hapless day.

Sure enough, time didn't cease its relentless running, and the clock over the fireplace kept ticking, entirely ignoring Severus' tragedy. It was downright irrelevant for the universe how utterly broken his heart was. The sun still rose the next morning, just as always, and the wizard was forced to continue his life.

The new day presented Severus with the *Prophet's* front-page article from Skeeter and a modest official announcement of an engagement on the third page. Of course, that pathetic piece of paper didn't make it to the garbage bin. It was destroyed, turned into ashes, seemingly by Severus' fury itself. The same unfortunate fate befell many of the following issues of the *Prophet* as well. The wizard didn't even try to contain himself. Day after day he violently destroyed newspaper after newspaper, at least giving his emotions some outlet.

Severus was at a loss. Doubts and regrets continuously jostled in his mind. He couldn't comprehend how to proceed now. Somehow he was so foolishly, inanely sure that his happily-ever-after would wait for him. Damn! How could he be so unforgivably dim? Molly Weasley must have passed her nonsensical optimism to him. How could he lose so many precious months just dreaming about the witch and doing nothing about it? And now, it was probably too late.

There were days when he was certain that he had missed his only chance forever. And then there were days when he woke up with a feeling that he could still turn everything around. The wizard just couldn't decide on his further actions, if any, and kept torturing himself with doubts and questions. Should he seek out Miss Granger and talk? If yes, what exactly should he say? "Miss Granger, please, do not marry that oaf," didn't sound terribly constructive. "I love you, Miss Granger; please, marry me instead," sounded even more asinine. How could he possibly make her reconsider? And what right did he have to even try? There was, of course, one more reason for Severus' hesitation. That reason had been ingrained deep inside his heart decades ago, that even his second lease on life couldn't obliterate...Severus feared rejection. He simply wasn't sure that he would be able to survive another one.

Eventually, after spending countless hours in a fierce argument with himself, Severus decided not to interfere with Miss Granger's plans. He was too late, and he would have to live with his failure now. Still, Severus chose to keep his job at St. Mungo's. His heart simply refused to give up hope entirely. *Maybe, just maybe, thought the wizard, the witch will realise that she made a mistake.* What if, a week into marriage, she suddenly started to understand that the Hippogriff, also known as Ronald Weasley, wasn't the right wizard for her at all? In that case, he would be right there, waiting for her. And if not, then he could at least settle for a friendship. With this reasoning in mind, Severus began his consulting career at St. Mungo's, working there on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, and conducting his own research at home on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Meanwhile, Severus' newly acquired pet was happily growing. The wizard was genuinely and pleasantly surprised just how clever that little mutt turned out to be. It took only two lengthy talks over a puddle on the floor and a few intense exchanges over teeth marks on books and black fur in cauldrons for Black to learn his boundaries once and for all.

Within a month, the wizard and the pup fell into a routine. Every day they began with a stroll across the park to the French bakery, invariably returning with a fresh baguette for breakfast. Quite unexpectedly, those joggers and sweatshirts, which Severus had unwillingly purchased in The Gap, came in mighty handy for their walks. How the heck he had managed to buy them in navy blue, he still wasn't sure, but at least, they were soft and comfortable. And because there actually weren't too many Muggles in the park at six in the morning to notice Severus' atypical blue clothes, he decided to put up with them.

Moreover, after carefully perusing random park runners' attire, the wizard decided that he probably should obtain those comfortable looking shoes that they all wore as well. So Severus found a moment to visit Miss Parkinson in her boutique and ask her for help with *the trainers* she had mentioned during their last encounter. The witch was quick to respond, and on that same day, the Potions master became the happy owner of a pair of dark blue Adidas. Now, he and Black blended effortlessly into the park's morning crowd.

Weeks went by, and summer was already well in its second half as the wizard settled into his new life nicely. To an inattentive observer, it could even seem that Severus had moved on and forgotten about his heartbreak. The only indication that the fire in his heart was still very much alive and burning was the deplorable fate of the *Daily Prophets*, which still were destroyed quite regularly. Even Black learned that newspapers were bad and needed to be destroyed...a task which he performed with great gusto, although the young pup did get carried away once or twice, ripping morning papers apart before his wizard had a chance to see them. Severus did hate the Prophet, and yet, he was always on a watch for pictures of the happy couple, even though that made his heart bleed. "A masochistic idiot," he called himself afterwards, vanishing another newspaper into oblivion.

To dull the pain, Severus threw himself into his new work and kept himself extremely busy. Soon he was leading a vast number of vital researches in St. Mungo's.

Alas, as the day of that damned wedding drew closer, it was getting harder and harder for Severus to keep his thoughts from Miss Granger. When there were only two weeks left, the wizard was no longer in control of his emotions. Dark, dreadful moods became frequent visitors in the house, and that's where a bottle of firewhisky came into play. Frankly, reality was much easier to deal with after a glass of the fiery liquid.

On Friday, the day before the wedding, the level of his misery became simply unbearable. Severus came home from St. Mungo's with a firm intention to get drunk. He knew for certain that one glass of firewhisky wouldn't be enough. He was on a mission to become absolutely, totally and utterly pissed and to fall unconscious and remain unconscious through Saturday and right until Sunday. Otherwise, the wizard couldn't be sure that he wouldn't Apparate to the wedding's venue at the last moment, shouting, "I object!"

The last thing he wanted was to create a spectacle. Hence, Severus decided to be on the safe side and drank himself into a stupor, crawled to his bed, and passed out. However, even though the first part of his plan went well, the second part of it didn't quite work as he hoped. Apparently, Severus' plan to remain unconscious through Saturday didn't bode well with Black's needs. The pup still woke the wizard up at six in the morning. It took him more attempts than usual, of course. Yet, after about twenty cold, wet nose-pokes, along with his persistent barking and a light teeth grazing over the wizard's bare feet, a groaning and cursing Severus was up and ready to go. Well, almost ready to go. The poor wizard was forced to take an emergency hangover potion and a cold, invigorating shower in order to be able to walk. Eventually, twenty minutes later, happy Black and noticeably unhappy Severus left the house for their habitual morning stroll through the park to the French bakery.

They walked down their usual path in silence. Black was busy sniffing every granite post in the vicinity while Severus tried to keep his foul mood at bay. "Fuck," he cursed. It was going to be a long and torturous day, and the wizard wasn't looking forward to it at all. When they reached their destination, Severus tied Black near the bakery's entrance. "Sit and wait," said the wizard and walked inside.

There, he braced himself for an unavoidable chat with the baker's wife Anouk, who was always annoyingly talkative and, for some mysterious reason, particularly sympathetic to Severus. Moreover, she was determined to find Severus a *mademoiselle* as she put it. She constantly showered him with offers: a date with one of her

many nieces, or a lovely lady from a house across the street, or her friend's daughter. To be honest, only their excellent baguettes were keeping Severus from a sharp retort to her. She reminded him of Molly Weasley, French style.

Severus braced himself, curled his lips into a shadow of a polite smile and walked to the counter, inwardly scolding himself for coming there. He didn't feel well. The baguette was not even a wise choice this morning. It was all Black's fault. To his surprise, Anouk was strangely quiet today. Instead of her standard boisterous, "Bonjour, monsieur," she silently handed him his bread, and smiling conspiratorially, whispered, "Look over there, monsieur. I caught a perfect demoiselle en détresse for you." She accompanied her utterly absurd words with a ridiculous giggle and an enthusiastic nod. "There, look there, by the window," she whispered.

Bewildered by Anouk's mysterious behaviour, Severus turned around and froze. By the window, with her back to him sat a young woman. Her mahogany curls were wet, messy and... so painfully familiar. Severus' heartbeat halted for a few seconds and then restarted, pounding faster and faster with each step he made. When there were only a mere few steps between them, Severus stopped. He couldn't believe his eyes. There was no mistake now. It was she...Hermione, his desired witch, his Miss Granger.

Severus took in her appearance. She looked awfully pale; dark shadows lay under her eyes. Her glazed glance was fixed on the window, though Severus doubted that she actually noticed anything around her. *Demoiselle en détresse indeed* he thought and hurriedly made those last few steps. There, standing so close to her that their clothes were almost touching, and hungrily inhaling her light jasmine scent, Severus regarded the witch carefully. She looked tired, as if she had not slept. It had probably rained during the night because the witch's summer dress was soaked, and she was shivering. She was holding a cup of hot coffee with both hands, as if trying to warm her fingers. And Severus couldn't tear his eyes from those delicate fingers. He had yearned for their soft touches for so bloody long.

Before he could stop himself, he rasped, "Hermione, " his throat suddenly scratchy and constricted. A second later, he got a hold of his emotions and corrected himself with, "Miss Granger."

She faced him, and Severus heard her breath hitch. For a few minutes she silently stared at him, evidently not being able to grasp the sight in front of her. It was understandable, of course. First of all, she didn't expect to meet him here. Secondly, she did not expect to see her former Professor in joggers and a sweatshirt, in *blue* joggers and a sweatshirt. Feeling that the silence between them was stretching into infinity, Severus repeated softly, "Miss Granger, are you all right?"

This time she managed to nod and then asked hoarsely, "Professor, why are you here?"

"I live across the park, Miss Granger. The question is, why are *you* here at six in the morning on your wedding day?" His words came out a bit too forcefully, but he needed to know, to understand. There was no ring on the girl's finger, for Merlin's sake! His heart was ready to jump out of his chest. Thousands of contradictory thoughts crowded in his mind.

"There will be no wedding, Professor. It was called off," Hermione's fingers began to tremble, causing the cup in her hands to tip threateningly.

Not waiting for her to burn herself with coffee, the wizard moved even closer, took the cup from her icy fingers and placed it on the table. Keeping her little hand in his, he said, "This coffee is clearly not helping, Miss Granger..."

The witch interrupted him. "Hermione, please, call me Hermione," she asked softly.

"Very well, *Hermione*, what you need is a good cup of tea. Come, Miss Granger... hmm, Hermione. I will brew a nice cup of Earl Grey for you. I have a fresh baguette and a jar of cherry jam. Come."

"Are you sure that I am not intruding, Professor?"

"Severus, call me Severus." He allowed himself to smile. "And yes, I am sure, Hermione." Severus took off his sweatshirt, gently draped it over Hermione's shoulders and led her from the bakery, all the while thinking about how, ironically, this time it was *Black* who was responsible for his incredible luck.

*Cinderella Man/Eminem



Advances and Retreats

Chapter 5 of 7

Some wizards don't get a second chance. Severus Snape isn't blowing his.

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Cinderella Man

Smash an hourglass, grab the sand, take his hand and cup 'em

Spit a rhyme to freeze a clock, take the hands of time and cuff 'em

Cinderella man, Cinderella man, Cinderella man, Cinderella man*

Advances and Retreats

Severus took off his sweatshirt, gently draped it over Hermione's shoulders, and led her from the bakery.

Black noticed them the moment they stepped outside, and of course, instantly began his ritual happy jumping...a habit of which Severus didn't approve. On the contrary, he found it quite annoying and tolerated it only because the pup was still young.

"Calm down, Black. Sit," muttered Severus quietly, trying to mollify his overly enthusiastic pet.

Naturally Hermione, even in her more-than-a-little distressed condition, reacted to Black just as most women did. Actually, the pup was a true magnet for ladies. It didn't surprise Severus all that much, however. He did name him Black after all, and evidently, certain legacies were awoken and transferred. Thus, Severus was ready for Hermione's delighted, "Oh." She walked closer and bent down in order to pet Black's furry head. "Hello, there," she said softly, and then, turning to Severus, asked, "Is he yours?"

The wizard didn't answer right away as he was thoroughly captivated by the sight of Hermione's delicate fingers gently caressing the pup's black fur. Severus felt a pang of absolutely uncalled for envy piercing his heart. *Oh, please, don't be ridiculous*, he scolded himself. Though it still seemed utterly unfair that Black was receiving the affection for which he had been yearning for so long.

"What's his name?"

Hermione's question interrupted Severus' ponderings. The huskiness of her voice reminded him about the witch's soaked dress and her icy fingers, forcing him to spur into action. The wizard shrugged his shoulders at the absurdity of his train of thoughts, tore his eyes from the witch's hands, and finally replied, "Yes, I must confess that this scandalously behaving creature is mine. His name is Black," as he hurriedly untied Black's leash.

"Black?!"

Smirking at Hermione's perplexed face, he commented, "Unexpected, I know. But, as you can see, it's a fitting name for him." And with that, Severus picked up Black from the ground. Keeping the pup under his arm, he took a gentle hold of Hermione's elbow and guided her towards the park. "You are cold. We need to get going before you catch pneumonia," he murmured. Hermione nodded, though she still eyed him with a quizzical expression.

The fact that they made it to the park in silence alarmed Severus. He couldn't help but wonder just where his smiling and chatty Miss Granger had gone? A few heavy sighs that Hermione drew while they were walking also indicated that she indeed had returned to her previous melancholy state. Worry and anger began to grow in Severus' heart as he discreetly watched the witch's face. *What, for Merlin's sake, had happened? Just what had that oaf done?* Those questions were spinning on the tip of his tongue, and yet he chose to wait. First things first...he needed to make the girl comfortable. There would be time for questions later.

Once they reached the park's secluded area, Severus gave her a short warning, "Hold onto me, Hermione," and Apparated all three of them home. Purely by accident of course, the arm that had been holding Hermione's elbow shifted during their short journey and somehow ended up wound tightly around Hermione's waist. Oh, how he savoured those few seconds of heaven. It had been so bloody long since he last held a woman in his arms, and even longer since he had held the woman he loved. He would have enjoyed those seconds even more if the dog under his other arm had stopped squirming. The moment they landed, the extremely discontented Black jumped out of Severus' hands, and as soon as his paws touched the floor, the dog fled under the sofa with a displeased grumble. The pup obviously wasn't too pleased with Side-Along Apparition.

After Black deserted him, the wizard became only too aware that his arm was still wrapped around Hermione's waist, and her slight body was still tightly pressed against his. The girl in his arms stayed suspiciously quiet. He was so much taller than she that he only could see her wild curls. *Maybe she is dizzy*, deduced Severus. His extremely loud heartbeat was pulsing wildly in his temples, making it difficult to hear anything. Finally, Severus managed to detect her shallow breathing, which was warming his shirt somewhere around his chest pocket. *Well, at least she is definitely not shivering anymore*, thought the wizard, while he was futilely trying to calm his pounding heart.

"Hh-hmm." He cleared his throat and awkwardly stepped back, reluctantly removing his arm from the witch's waist. "I think a warm shower is in order, Hermione." Now, when he finally could see her face, he observed the lightly blushing witch. At his words, she began to shake her head vigorously.

"I am quite alright, Severus, really. There is no need for a hassle," she replied quietly, demurely wrapping her arms around her body, as if she felt too exposed. Actually, the wizard was exceedingly aware that her wet dress clung to her every alluring curve. However, he decided that it was impolite to ogle and focused on Hermione's face instead.

"I'll just use a drying charm," continued the witch, "I honestly don't know why I didn't use it earlier. I am such an idiot sometimes." With that said, she summoned her wand and was ready to cast a charm.

"No!" exclaimed Severus before he could stop himself, "Don't use the drying charm!"

Startled, Hermione gave him an anxious look. "Why?"

Utterly frustrated with himself, Severus inwardly cursed Pansy Parkinson, nervously pinched the bridge of his nose and attempted to explain, "As I have recently found out, the drying charm causes clothes to shrink." He paused, feeling that he succeeded only in making a complete fool of himself. Then, he took a breath and bravely continued, "It is a nice dress, and it would be a shame if you ruined it with a charm."

"Oh." Hermione blushed even darker rose colour. "I didn't know that. Though I don't use it that often. Still, Severus, I am fine, truly. I am already almost dry anyway."

"Nonsense." Not listening to Hermione's weak protests, the wizard conjured a fresh towel and a robe. "Here. The bathroom is down the hallway," he said in his most authoritative tone. "Go, you'll feel better. Meanwhile, I will make tea." That seemed to work, because the witch drew yet another sigh and took the towel and the robe from Severus' hands.

"Thank you," she said and disappeared in the corridor.

Twenty minutes later, when Hermione emerged from the bathroom, Severus had already served tea on a table in the living room. He regarded her the moment she appeared at the end of the hallway. His robe was entirely too big for her, and she was literally swallowed by the velvety green fabric. Still, she unquestionably looked better than before the shower. Warm water had erased the signs of fatigue, giving her skin that special after-bath glow. Her wet mahogany curls cascaded down her shoulders. The sight made the wizard's fingers itch with an intense ardour to touch them. No, he wanted much more than to simply touch them...he wanted to be tangled in them, feel their silky heaviness, inhale their jasmine scent.

"Um, where can I put my dress?" she asked bashfully.

Severus took the garment from her, and a second later it was floating in front of the window. "Yes, I think it'll do."

He then guided Hermione to the table where a pot of freshly brewed tea was waiting for them. Hermione sat down on the sofa, while Severus settled in the armchair on the other side of the table. Black surfaced a few milliseconds later, and boldly placed himself on Hermione's feet, earning himself a giggle from Hermione and an exasperated humph of 'Casanova' from Severus.

They started their tea in silence again. Severus just couldn't decide when would be the right time to begin asking questions. And so, he patiently waited.

Finally, after a second cup of Earl Grey and a third piece of baguette with jam, Hermione, to Severus' immense relief, began to talk. Her quietness worried him. The Miss Granger he knew couldn't stop talking even for a minute, and frankly, he missed her continuous babbling. Thus, he was genuinely glad when she focused her eyes on him and asked, "Isn't it bizarre that we met like this, in the bakery? I had been walking around London all night. I could have ended up anywhere. And yet, I walked into that bakery, *your* bakery."

"Peculiar, indeed," he remarked. "However," he continued, "the question that concerns me right now is *why* had you been walking all night? What happened, Hermione?"

Hermione bit her lip and lowered her caramel eyes, concentrating on her teacup once again. Her fingers began to tremble, causing the porcelain in her hands to tinkle melodically. Watching her wrestling with her emotions, Severus had a sudden urge to sit near her, to take her small hands into his and comfort her somehow. Though he certainly wasn't an expert in comforting witches. *Maybe*, a wild thought bolted through his mind, *I just need to confess my love to her*.

After a short contemplation, however, the notion about confessing was dismissed as completely untimely, unsubtle, and unwise. The wizard suppressed his impulses, and instead of declaring his feelings, he simply repeated, "Hermione, please, tell me what happened?"

His 'please' probably did the trick, and the witch told him everything. She told him how from the very beginning she always had felt that something had been missing between Ron and her. How, at first, she had thought that maybe it would get better with time, but it hadn't. How, later, her little doubts and concerns had slowly grown into huge ones. How she had felt rushed by Ron and pressured by their friends and family into saying 'yes'. And how she eventually had begun to suffocate with all that tension around her.

Severus absorbed Hermione's words eagerly. He found the facts to be very comforting. He was afraid that Ronald Weasley had done something stupid and broken the witch's heart. He would have to simply kill the nitwit if that was the case. Luckily, it was she who broke the engagement.

Remarkably, it had been Molly Weasley who had noticed Hermione's growing uneasiness with the wedding. The older witch simply had cornered Hermione, and once they had talked, she had given Hermione her blessing. As Molly herself had put it, "It will be better to call off the wedding now than to live through divorce later. My heart breaks for Ron. He is my baby, and I know he truly loves you. But, Hermione, you are like a daughter to me as well. I don't want you to marry him because it's expected of you. It's not a solid reason. I want happiness for all my children. Enough sacrifices have been made already. Go and talk to him, dear."

After listening to that particular detail, Severus had to admit that he felt grateful to Molly for what she had done, even though it pained him to do so.

"Yesterday I talked to Ron," the witch continued her story. "He wasn't as understanding as Molly. He just couldn't comprehend why I had said 'yes' in the first place. Why did I wait for so long? He called me a traitor and a coward. I think that he is right. I *am* a coward and a traitor. I misled him by letting him believe that I love him. I should have been strong and honest and said 'No'."

The witch's voice broke, and Severus could no longer restrain himself. The last couple of weeks of misery, and the previous night's excessive drinking, took a toll on the wizard's self control. He rose urgently from his place and in a few hurried strides covered the distance between the armchair and the sofa.

Once he reached her, he took her hands into his and spoke, "Hermione, listen to me. You made a mistake, yes. But we all make mistakes sometimes; that's what makes us human. The important thing is that you managed to remedy it before it became too late. Take it from a wizard who knows a few things about '*mistakes*' and '*too late*'. It was a very brave thing to do, and you are not a coward and certainly not a traitor. Ronald Weasley was never very bright. However, when he does find a witch who loves him, he'll thank you, you'll see. You just gave him a chance to find his true happiness."

Hermione sniffled and lifted her face to look at him. "Thank you," she whispered and smiled. "Thank you for everything."

Sitting so close to her that their knees were touching and still keeping her hands in his, Severus gazed into her eyes, almost amber from tears, for a long moment. He felt her warm breath on his face and smelled the scent of his sandalwood soap on her skin. Emotions flooded him, causing his mind to lose its grip on reality just for a second. The fact that Hermione didn't avert her eyes and didn't remove her hands from his only drove him even deeper into sheer madness. And when she parted her lips slightly and let out a shaky breath, Severus came utterly undone.

The last logical thought fled from his mind, and he captured her succulent lips in a kiss. Tentative at first, he felt how she froze just for a moment. However, before he could retreat, her hands wrapped themselves around his neck. A heartbeat later she responded to his demands and opened her mouth for him. The kiss quickly became deep and passionate. Euphoric, Severus began to place open mouth kisses on Hermione's neck, while his fingers found the belt of her robe and untied it.

Sure enough, that unsanctioned bliss was extremely short lived. As soon as Severus' hands parted her robe, the witch stiffened. "I have to go," she whispered suddenly, her eyes wide, and her palms now frantically pressed into his chest.

Severus instantly realised his mistake. "I am sorry, Hermione, I shouldn't have," he muttered and promptly removed himself from the witch and the sofa.

Hermione sprung up hurriedly and repeated her agitated, "I have to go."

"Hermione, please, let me explain," pleaded the wizard and tried to catch her arm.

Alas, he wasn't quick enough. The witch disappeared with a pop, just as she was, wearing his robe and leaving behind her dress, which was still floating in front of the window.

Severus muttered, "Shit," and sagged into his armchair.

* **Eminem/Cinderella Man**

Group Therapy

Chapter 6 of 7

Some wizards don't get a second chance. Severus Snape isn't blowing his. Severus/Hermione

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Cinderella Man

There's a storm comin' that the weatherman couldn't predict*

Group Therapy

Severus muttered, "Shit," and sagged into his armchair once more.

For a while, he just sat there, trying to understand what had just transpired between Hermione and him. Her sweet taste still lingered on his lips. His body still savoured the feel of her petite, pliant form under his. It felt so utterly perfect, so darn right. He was given a glimpse of happiness, a preview of how it could be. If only it hadn't ended so quickly. If only he hadn't pushed it too far....

"Argghh," growled the wizard in frustration, "What an imprudent fool!"

Severus was so peeved with himself...he honestly couldn't comprehend how the hell he had managed to be so idiotically inconsiderate. Fate had granted him a perfect chance, and he had just ruined it. How could he have let that happen? Did he unreservedly lose his mind? He knew that Hermione was upset and confused. He knew that she needed someone who could provide a friendly ear, sympathy, and comfort. And yet, he chose to behave as a cad of the worst type. Instead of providing all of the above, he shamelessly forced himself on her...practically attacked her. No wonder that the girl ran off on him.

Regrets tortured him mercilessly, and still he couldn't help but think about those minutes when the girl was actually responding to his kiss. He couldn't have been totally wrong in imagining that. There was undeniably a moment during their encounter when Hermione had pressed herself into him; when she had succumbed to his demands. He was certain that he had heard a little mewl of delight from her. And then everything had ended so abruptly. Why?

Baffled and disappointed, Severus spent the rest of Saturday in restless pacing and endlessly castigating himself. By evening, he finally ran out of curses and insulting epithets for himself and sat down to think. He needed a new plan. He sat and thought silently for a while. Then, tired of silence, he initiated an intense and lengthy, though one-sided, conversation with Black and eventually, by night, a few new paths were identified.

Knowing Hermione, Severus presumed that with the wedding being called off, the witch would choose to return to her studies at St. Mungo's sooner rather than later. He would find her there and explain himself...that was the first plan. Of course, he could try and send her an owl this evening. However, there were a few 'buts' in this second option. First, Severus genuinely wished for an instant tête-à-tête with Hermione on Monday. Moreover, he wasn't at all an expert in writing love letters. Sending a candid note about returning the witch's dress seemed way too dry. Plus, there was always a disturbing possibility that his letter would fall flat. *What if the witch won't reply?* thought the wizard. Thus, in the light of those 'ifs', he decided upon the St. Mungo's plan.

Once the decision was reached, he only needed to somehow survive through the weekend and hope that Hermione would be in the hospital on Monday. Frankly, it wasn't easy... to survive. The kiss he had shared with the girl renewed all the longing in Severus' heart. He was so painfully in love that his chest physically ached. His dreams became so vivid, his desire for her so unbearable, that he couldn't sleep through the night. What sheer agony it was to wait and have no idea of the outcome. The suspense was killing him.

Next morning, the *Sunday Prophet* brought an official announcement about the most anticipated wedding of the year being cancelled and a nasty article from Skeeter. Never would Severus have imagined that he would destroy this particular newspaper, but the article was so full of nauseating insinuations that he simply couldn't help himself. Sure enough, Hermione was painted as the guilty party and poor, abandoned Ronald Weasley as the victim. Thank Merlin that the boy refused to make any comments. Molly probably forbade him to do so, Severus assumed. Still, it didn't stop that revolting bug Skeeter from making innuendoes and assumptions, marring Hermione's name.

And so, the *Prophet* was once again destroyed, and the ire helped Severus to make it through Sunday. He didn't sleep a wink that night. Nerves got the better of him. The wizard really should have been amused by how hopelessly in love he was, if only it wasn't so heart-wrenchingly painful. Alas, when on Monday hopeful Severus arrived at St. Mungo's, he was once again reminded that even "the best laid plans of mice and men go often awry," **, because he didn't find Hermione there. In vain, the wizard perused the hospital's halls. The witch was nowhere to be seen.

After an unproductive day, Severus returned home and immediately sat down to write a letter to the witch. He wasn't going to lose any more time...he ought to get in touch with her, the sooner the better. After countless tries, at last a short note was produced. It read as follows:

Dear Hermione,

I know quite well that nothing can explain or excuse my outrageously inept behaviour last Saturday. Still, I hope that you will kindly give me a chance to explain myself. Please, allow me to meet you. Any place and time will do.

Sincerely yours,

Severus.

PS. If nothing else, I would like to return your dress. It is perfectly dry now.

The wizard wasn't pleased with it, yet it was the best he could manage. With a frown, Severus reread the short missive and sent it. Twenty minutes later, his owl returned without an answer. Disappointed, Severus decided to take Black to the park, just to pass the time. Predictably, fate wasn't in the mood for smiling, and when they returned there was still no answer.

There was still no answer the next morning. Therefore, Tuesday met the wizard with only the *Prophet* and not a pip from the witch.

Now, frantic and full of depressing apprehension that he was going to lose his witch forever, Severus went to the Ministry of Magic. Though he hated the Ministry, it was the best-known rumour mill in Wizarding London. Unfortunately, after spending three hours in the Ministry, the only crumbs of information that Severus was able to dig up were meagre. First, nobody had seen Miss Granger since the announcement; and secondly, no one had a clue just where she might be. He did manage to find out that the witch hadn't been answering any inquiries. That news took the edge off Severus' dread just a little. It was a bit easier knowing that his was not the only unanswered letter.

So, despite spending half a day at the Ministry, Severus returned home empty-handed. The disgruntled wizard proceeded with even more pacing and cussing. Once again scolding himself for his stupidity, he opened the bottle of the Firewhisky and poured the amber liquid into a glass. Sipping his drink, he desperately tried to think of something else he could do. The sense of urgency that had gripped his heart in the morning only grew more pronounced. He had to find his witch, and he had to find her now!

Even Black seemingly felt the doom that was looming over his owner and tried to help by licking his toes and tearing the hated newspaper apart. When these two acts didn't work, and his wizard was still slumped in the armchair, the pup decided to try a different tactic. He sprinted to a corridor and a minute later returned with one of Severus' trainers in his mouth. He placed a shoe in front of the wizard and barked impatiently...a walk in the park never harmed anybody. Sipping his Firewhisky, Severus melancholically observed Black's efforts. However, when his eyes slid over his blue Adidas, a stray thought suddenly crossed his mind. The wizard instantly sprang up, muttered, "Parkinson," and whirled away from his living room, to Black's gargantuan disappointment.

Twenty minutes later Pansy Parkinson and Severus sat on a bench right across from her boutique. The wizard had just finished describing his situation to her, sans details of course, and now waited for her verdict. He was grateful for the girl's lack of comment, as he already felt extremely awkward asking the young witch for help in matters of the heart. Severus couldn't say exactly what kind of assistance he expected from his former student. He just truly was at his wit's end and was probably grasping at straws.

Now, waiting for Miss Parkinson to react, he began to doubt himself once again. While the witch sat silently, as if she were carefully contemplating something, the wizard grew more uncomfortable by a minute. He wasn't used to opening his heart to anybody, let alone his former student. Once Severus was almost ready to bid a hasty good-bye and return home with another fiasco in his pocket, Pansy finally looked at him and said, "You have to go to Potter."

This suggestion took Severus by surprise, and he repeated in bewilderment, "Potter? What on earth do I need Potter for, Miss Parkinson? Please, explain yourself."

Pansy gave her former teacher a slightly annoyed glance and abruptly stood up.

"All right, Professor, you and I are having lunch." And without explaining anything, Pansy took him by his elbow quite forcefully. It was rather late for lunch, but Severus didn't have a chance to refuse because the next moment the witch caught a cab and steered him into it. After a ten-minute ride, they arrived at a nice-looking Italian restaurant with a sign "Closed. Reopen at five," on the door. When Severus hesitated by the door, Pansy simply nudged him. "Come on, sir, braver."

Upon entering, the wizard paused at the threshold. The cosy room, with about twelve tables, was almost empty, and the few occupants that were there immediately focused their attention on Severus, making him uneasy. A young pianist who was quietly rehearsing a mellow jazzy composition in the room's corner stopped and now was gawking at the tall, dark, and brooding wizard with an opened-mouth fascination. Two waitresses stopped folding napkins and stared at him as well. The poor wizard just stood on the threshold, shifting his feet and feeling exposed to their scrutiny until Pansy rescued him. The witch confidently got hold of Severus' arm and led him to the table in the far end of the room, casually throwing to the pianist as they walked past him, "Do your thing, honey; Professor is very much taken."

That cryptic phrase perplexed Severus, though he didn't have time to ask what the witch meant. A surprise awaited Severus at the table. There sat three of his former students...Draco, impeccably dressed in a Muggle suit; Theo, also dressed in a Muggle white shirt and a tie, with an opened book lying in front of him; and Blaise, who hovered over them both in a white chef's uniform. Evidently, Pansy had brought him to a restaurant where Blaise worked.

"Professor!" The boys noticed him and hurried to greet him. For a moment, the wizard almost forgot about his problems. Ignoring a peculiar prickling in his eyes, Severus shook their hands, asked questions, and listened to their answers, all the while fighting with his ridiculously sentimental reaction. He wasn't going to tear up; he wasn't some soppy old spinster, for Merlin's sake. Thankfully, Pansy cut short their lively news exchange.

"Oh, this is touching, really!" said the impatient witch. "We, however, have a problem to solve. Boys, pay attention! You see, our Professor here is in love with the one and only Hermione Granger."

For a second, there was a complete silence, and then all three Slytherins began to laugh. "Good one, Pans," Draco managed between fits of laughter.

Flustered by Pansy's sudden straightforwardness and humiliated by the young wizards' reactions, Severus barked, "Miss Parkinson, I don't remember giving you permission to make a laughing-stock out of me and my situation!"

With that, he stood up and was about to leave when the laughter ceased as abruptly as it started, and Theo concluded, "I don't think it's a joke, Draco." And three pairs of eyes with an identical puzzled expression concentrated on their former professor.

"Oh, finally...took you long enough," muttered Pansy with exasperation. Then, as she faced Severus, who was still standing, she added, "Sit down, sir. I am sorry that I didn't prepare these three idiots properly." And the witch unceremoniously pulled Severus by his sleeve as he grouchy sat down again.

The three young wizards stared at him quietly. It was Blaise who broke the silence first. "So," he said, clearing his throat, "what is the problem?"

Pansy quickly informed them about Severus' situation, and after a pause, Draco voiced his conclusion. "I think, Professor, you need to go to Potter. He definitely should know where she is."

"Precisely," agreed Theo.

"Yup," added Blaise.

Pansy turned to Severus as triumph shone in her eyes. "Told you, sir. Potter it is."

Severus didn't even have a chance to reply because he suddenly found himself in the middle of a whirlwind of activity. First, he was coerced to write a short meeting request to Potter, which Blaise then sent right from the restaurant. Apparently, he kept an owl hidden somewhere at the back. Fifteen minutes later, he returned with a bright smile and Potter's answer, stating that Harry would see Severus in thirty minutes at 12 Grimmauld Place.

Armed with Potter's agreement to meet, Pansy and Draco immediately forced their former teacher to stand up in order to give him a careful look over. Though Severus truthfully didn't understand the purpose of him being so carefully scrutinised, he decided to obey Miss Parkinson's commands, assuming that she knew what she was doing.

"Hmm, something is missing," Pansy remarked thoughtfully, eyeing the wizard.

"The professor needs a tie because as it is, his appearance is way too casual," decided Draco. "Now, mine is too fashion forward for this particular ensemble," continued Draco, "Theo, give me your tie."

Without a word of protest, Theo untied his conservative grey pinstriped tie and gave it to Draco. After fixing Severus' collar, the young wizard took a few steps back and sighed with satisfaction. "Yes, excellent...what do you say, Pans?"

Pansy, though, still wasn't fully satisfied with Severus' attire. "Nope, something is still missing. Oh, I know! Draco, give the professor your belt. His is just horrendous." Not waiting for Draco to comply, she impatiently carried on with removing it by herself.

"Hey, easy, it's Armani, by the way," grunted Draco, fruitlessly trying to remove her hands from him.

"I know it is. That's the point," smiled the busy witch with Draco's belt already in her quick fingers.

Only when Pansy-on-a-mission tried to undo Severus' belt, did the wizard finally come around and protest, "I can do it perfectly well myself, Miss Parkinson. Moreover, I don't comprehend what all these herculean efforts are for. Why should my look matter for Harry bloody Potter?"

"Ah, Professor, you never know, the witch might be there," explained Blaise. "So it always pays to look your best."

Severus sighed and exchanged his belt for Draco's. "Well?" he asked, obviously annoyed.

All four Slytherins observed him carefully and nodded. "Not perfect, but it will do," Pansy summed up. Then they guided Severus to the back alley behind the restaurant. From there the still-irritated, yet hopeful, wizard Apparated to Grimmauld Place.

A bit later, Severus knocked on Harry Potter's door. The dishevelled, green-eyed wizard opened the door instantly. He invited Severus inside, and they settled in the living room.

"What is it, Professor? What has happened?" asked Harry, clearly concerned.

"Nothing has happened, Potter," answered Severus, keeping his face blank. He categorically wasn't ready to discuss his private life again today, especially with Potter. "I wonder if you by any chance know where Miss Granger is?"

"No, I don't," replied the young wizard with suspicious alacrity and stood up. "Why?" he asked after a minute, not quite making eye contact with Severus.

Severus narrowed his eyes, watching the boy carefully. It was clear that Potter knew where Hermione was. A sudden wave of tiredness engulfed the wizard. He felt that he was just wasting his time for naught. The boy wasn't going to say anything, and Severus, on the other hand, wasn't going to use Legilimency on him. The war was over and so were its methods. It was senseless to hope that Harry-sodding-Potter would help him. With these thoughts in mind, Severus chose to cut their conversation short. "I have in my possession something that belongs to Miss Granger, Potter. I simply would like to be polite and return it in a timely manner. I would really appreciate that if, by any chance, you see Miss Granger, you let her know that I am looking for her. Goodbye." With these words, Severus gave Harry a curt nod and, without further ado, Apparated home.

Once at home...disappointed, tired, and unsatisfied with himself and everybody around him...Severus took Black to the park for a second time. They walked slowly alongside their usual path. The wizard was contemplating his next move. Maybe Minerva, a new idea flashed in his head. *Oh yes, Minerva beyond doubt should know at least something.*

The wizard rushed toward home, hopeful all over again. He urgently needed to write a letter to Minerva. However, the moment he and Black turned around the corner and saw the house, they both knew straight away that there would be no more letters. There, on his doorstep sat his witch, his Miss Granger, his Hermione.

It looks as if Miss Parkinson was right again. It was Potter, after all, thought Severus, briskly walking toward the witch. "Hermione," he called. She turned to him and smiled.

*Eminem/Cinderella Man

** Robert Burns/To a Mouse



Ever After

Chapter 7 of 7

Some wizards don't get a second chance. Severus Snape ain't blowing his. Severus Snape/Hermione Granger Romance. AU.OOC.DH partly ignored. EWE.

I do not own Harry Potter or any of its characters; J. K. Rowling does. In addition, I do not make any profit from this fanfiction. Huge thank you to my beta Valady and AmyLouise.

Ever After

Yeah, I'm not even really supposed to be here right now,

So fuck it,

I might as well make the most of it. *

"Hermione," he called. She turned to him and smiled...

Severus watched the witch intently as he hurriedly walked toward her. She was once again wearing a dress, and a light afternoon wind gently played with its periwinkle silky material. She looked at him, her face still lit by a warm, open smile. As the wizard and the dog got closer to her, she stood up and made a step in their direction. A slight movement of her lips caught Severus' attention. The next moment, a soft breeze brought her breathy "Severus" to him. Hearing his name, the wizard sped up as his heart began to thump a wild tempo in his chest. In a matter of seconds, he was near her.

Remembering only too well the horrible consequences of his mistake from a few days ago, Severus came to a full stop, determined to keep about two feet of free space between Hermione and him. His body, though, begged to differ and fought vigorously against his precaution as every fibre of his being desperately longed for her. His lips burned with a desire to taste her skin. His nostrils flared, and he hungrily inhaled the air in the hope of sensing that jasmine scent he loved so much. Feeling that his body was about to rebel, Severus clenched his fists painfully and felt how the plastic handle of Black's leash begin to crumble under the sheer strength of his frantic fingers.

For an infinite while, they stood in silence, interrupted only by Black's occasional sniffs and puffs. The wizard felt lost in the velvety, chocolate depth of Hermione's eyes. He still couldn't believe that she was there, on his doorstep. Eventually, Severus shifted his feet awkwardly and cleared his desert-dry throat. "Hermione," he managed to rasp. The next moment, however, he was forced to stop and swallow, as his vocal cords weren't cooperating with him at all. Severus drew in a fresh portion of oxygen into his lungs and started again. "Hermione," he said solemnly, noting that the witch watched him closely, seemingly holding her breath. "My behaviour on Saturday was nothing less than atrocious. Please, forgive my imbecilic callousness. You had been distressed enough without me forcing myself on you, and I have nothing to say in my defence. There is truly no excuse, except..." Hermione suddenly gasped for air, forcing Severus to falter and lose his focus as his eyes dropped to her slightly parted lips. He fell mute, unable neither to drag his gaze from Hermione's mauve-coloured lips nor to utter the words that stuck to the tip of his tongue.

"Except what?" she asked, and to the wizard's surprise, her voice sounded just as husky as his own did. "Except what, Severus?" she repeated and made another step toward him, cutting the space he had so carefully kept between them by half.

Still staring at her mouth, Severus muttered, "We shall go inside."

Hermione shook her head and made a final step, stopping just a mere inch before him. He could smell the light scent of jasmine now, and her impudent curls tickled his face. To be honest, he didn't have any desire to talk at the moment. He yearned to crush her body flush against his so damn much, and yet, he couldn't risk scaring her for the second time. "Severus?" whispered Hermione, peering into his eyes searchingly. Her hand flew up, and her fingers traced a deep line that marred the wizard's forehead. Severus groaned, his eyelids fluttered and, unable to deny himself, he tilted his head toward her, seeking more of her light caress.

"Hermione," he sighed and covered her delicate hand with his. Slowly, he drew her palm down his face to his mouth and pressed it to his lips, whispering against it, "This confession is so long overdue. Bugger! This is not how it was supposed to happen," he chuckled uneasily. Somehow, it was agonisingly difficult to say those three words. "I gather there is no way around it now." He paused again, sighed heavily through his nose, focused his black eyes on the witch and at last stated, sounding a bit professorial, "I developed an infatuation with you, Hermione."

Hermione's eyes widened, and she repeated his words under her breath a few times. After a minute, she asked, "How long?"

"Since the infirmary." Hermione drew a shuddered breath and stepped back from him, shaking her head as if in disbelief. Deprived of the warmth of her hand, Severus was left feeling cold and bereft.

"Why, why didn't you say something? I dreamed about you, Severus. I thought," she stammered, "I thought you weren't interested. I almost married Ron, for Merlin's sake! Oh, God, what were you thinking?" she shouted at him.

Severus' heart tightened painfully in his chest. She was right. What on Earth was he thinking? He had utterly blown his only chance. Feeling the dread creeping into his heart and swallowing his very soul, he muttered, "I was unforgivably stupid, Hermione. I recognise that, and I can understand entirely if you don't want to have anything to do with me. Please, accept my sincere apologies." He didn't have a chance to add anything else, because in the next instant, the witch rolled onto her toes, cupped his face between her palms and kissed him.

Caught by surprise, Severus dropped the ruined handle of Black's leash, letting his arms hang uselessly by his sides. A second later however, with a guttural rumble coming low from his chest, he deepened the kiss, wound his hands around Hermione's waist and effortlessly lifted her from the ground. Pressing the witch tightly to him and not breaking contact with her lips, he briskly walked through the magically opened door and disappeared inside the house. Poor, forgotten Black trotted after his owner, dragging his leash with him.

Once inside, Severus gradually and rather reluctantly ended the kiss. Still keeping Hermione in his arms, with his nose buried in her hair, he hesitated, not quite knowing how to proceed. Well, he knew what he craved! His body boldly demonstrated as much, and Severus was certain that Hermione could feel it quite well. However, he was ready to dash his needs and wants at the slightest indication of protest from her. For a while, he just stood there, in the corridor, hugging the witch and feeling that a giant rift in his self-control widened with every second.

"Hermione," he whispered eventually and drew back just a fraction of an inch. Even that minuscule gap between them roused a furious, antagonistic reaction from the erection in his groin, and the sight of her flushed face and red lips didn't help at all.

Inwardly groaning, Severus repeated, "Hermione?" and tried, though half-heartedly, to untangle himself.

That move earned him a heated hiss from the woman in his arms. "Don't you dare bungle this now, Severus Snape!" The feisty witch clasped her fingers around his neck, looped her legs over his hips and pressed her smouldering centre right to the most defiant part of his anatomy. Lightly grazing his neck with her mouth and teeth, she whispered, "All this time, unconsciously, I sought this, wanted this. I waited for this, Severus, for this feeling. Poor Ron," she sighed, "he never stood a chance, did he? And how could he, really?"

She focused her eyes on him and said, "Kiss me, Severus. I won't run this time, I promise."

What was the wizard to do? Who was he to argue when the witch who had occupied his thoughts for so bloody long asked *that* of him? He surprised himself by the vigour with which he attacked her mouth. He pressed her against the wall in his tiny, pathetic foyer and ravished her lips as thoroughly as only the Potions master could do.

Soon, the need for the optimal horizontal position became apparent, and Severus, breathless and euphoric, took her to his bed. Unwrapping his long-awaited gift, his Miss Granger, he savoured the warm softness of her smooth skin and her perfectly rounded breasts as he worshipped them with fervent touches. He licked, nibbled, and grazed his teeth over her tender flesh, marvelling in the little noises of pleasure his witch emitted under his ministrations.

When he gently inserted one probing finger between her damp curls, he found her deliciously wet and ready for him. The fact that she desired him just as much as he desired her nearly undid Severus. There was nothing more alluring than her eager willingness. "Fuck," muttered the wizard and began to hastily remove his clothing. The stupid tie and belt that his Slytherins made him wear hindered the process, and he was forced to swear a few more times before he managed to undress. Finally naked, he once again dragged his burning gaze over the gloriously nude witch.

She was watching him with an expression of such high expectation on her face that Severus found it somewhat disconcerting. *Merlin*, bolted through his head. *What if I fall short of the mark?* He was hardly an expert in intimacy, his experience in that particular field being rather scarce. A sudden wave of nervousness got a hold of him, and he hesitated for a few long moments. However, when Hermione wantonly opened her legs for him, shaping a perfect 'm' and whispered, "Please, Severus, please," biting her

lips impatiently and beckoning him, he forgot all his doubts and insecurities. His mind and body were focused on only one task animalistic urge to claim.

He muttered "Fuck" again, which for once was exceptionally fitting for the situation, positioned himself between her parted thighs and drove himself up to the hilt into her scorching heat.

~*~*~*~

All in all, it would be safe to say that Severus' concerns proved to be unfounded. He did manage to satisfy his witch more than once before he found his own completion, buried deep inside her velvety sheath. That fact brought a feeling of smugness that engulfed him in its comforting sense of contentment, and the wizard spooned the sleeping witch, buried his enormous nose into her curls and drifted off with a slightly goofy smile playing on his lips.

Next morning, Black, who by that time had managed to free himself from the leash, woke him up at six just as usual; Hermione was still there in Severus' bed, confirming by her presence that everything that had transpired between them the night before was indeed real. With a slight smile, he noted that, against all mathematical laws, his slumbering Miss Granger managed to occupy the major part of his bed, *and surprisingly*, he didn't object in the slightest. Moreover, she was still there when the wizard and the dog came back from their morning stroll in the park, solidifying the beginning of a new era in his life.

By the time the witch awoke, a fresh baguette and a newly brewed pot of Earl Grey waited for her, along with the freshly showered and extremely contented Severus Snape.

Epilogue

Hermione moved in with him three months later. It took Severus a year to work up the nerve to ask the witch to marry him. When at last, after a long talk with Black during their usual morning promenade, the wizard did propose, Hermione simply said, "Of course". These two little words made Severus Snape the happiest wizard in London and maybe in all bloody Britain as well.

Not daring to waste precious time and test fate, Severus took Hermione to the Ministry the very next day, where a slightly grumpy Ministry clerk declared their union official. Hermione Granger became Hermione Snape. To celebrate, they went to a little Italian restaurant, which had been opened that year by none other than Blaise Zabini. His Slytherin crew was present at the celebration, as well as Harry Potter. After all, Harry was Hermione's best friend, so Severus had to learn to tolerate him. To be honest, the wizard himself thought that it was a remarkably small price to pay. He was even willing to endure the Weasley clan, though still only on special, and preferably rare, occasions.

What surprised Severus the most was that Hermione and Pansy Parkinson managed to find many similarities and eventually became close friends. Severus did question Miss Parkinson's influence at times, though. For instance, he never understood the necessity of a second piercing in Hermione's left ear. He wisely chose not to voice his opinion on the matter, however, as he always did remember Pansy's role in his current state of absolute marital bliss.

Well, *almost* absolute. Because lately, Severus had come to think that Black could use company, someone to play with perhaps. The wizard just needed to find the right moment to subtly suggest to his wife that it was time to start thinking about Snape junior.

The end

*** *Eminem/Cinderella Man***

