

Awakening

by Laralee

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Awakening

A Story of a Broken Man and His Unexpected Saving Grace.

Severus Snape, the son of a broken witch and a worthless Muggle man, sat in the darkened living room of his childhood home, lost in thought. His fathomless, hooded eyes were fixed on the last surviving embers that lay smoldering in the firebox, but his mind was elsewhere. The old recollections that haunted him regularly were, once again, making their tenacious presence known. Those memories he clung to, not because he was maudlin, but rather, because they represented a time in his life when he had least had something worth holding on to. His past and current transgressions had ostracized him from the one thing he was fighting for, forever labeling him as a traitorous fiend who would stop at nothing to ensure the rise of a madman to unmitigated reign. He had nothing left. He had no one. He was alone, and he had hit rock bottom with no hope of anyone picking up the pieces.

An unwritten warrant for his death had been issued when he savagely ripped the life from his mentor and only confidant who truly knew and understood the depths to which their games ran. Death or a lifetime of servitude under the Dark Lord were his last remaining choices unless a seventeen-year-old wizard could right several years of wrongs. Severus knew nothing of the future, but he was almost certain he would pick the former if given the choice. Death, he thought, was quick. One well-placed spell or phial of deadly elixir and it would be finished. All of the lying, all of the deceit, all of the torment he faced would be over in the blink of an eye. When compared to the latter, this option seemed a much more agreeable route to follow.

Death through servitude, although it would not be as imminent, would most certainly come, but not in the manner in which one would expect. It was very similar to a life sentence, Severus reasoned. A life sentence, in a sense, was a significantly worse punishment for someone to endure for the simple fact that a small portion of the person would wither away with each passing day. It was not nearly enough to make an outward observer aware, but only enough to make the unfortunate captive yearn for anything but the life being slowly dragged out of him.

The idea of causing further harm in a world ridden with far too much suffering made him physically ill. He had defected nearly twenty years ago over the death of the

woman he thought he loved. This love, he would eventually realize, was nothing more than a fixation with wanting a remotely normal existence. This unhealthy devotion would be used against him from both sides. A hopeless, weak scar he couldn't hide in the face of those amongst the Dark and a tool of manipulation for the light, as if such a glorious thing romanticized the grisly lines of the deeds he was forced to do. Now, it all seemed pointless.

Severus stood from his chair as the last of the fire had been snuffed out by the very ash it created, pulling a small corked phial from his wrinkled trouser pockets. He turned the rounded glass bottle between his fingers, feeling the heavy coolness that would soon be passing on to him. His escape was waiting in the blood-red liquid of the Baneberry solution he had acquired some months before he committed his latest travesty, should he fail. He had not failed in the grand scheme of things, of course, though it most certainly felt like it.

Severus turned his attention to the dust-covered mirror hanging above the mantle. The cracked, gold-framed mirror belonged to his Muggle grandmother, and though it possessed no magic whatsoever, Severus often found himself staring deeply at his own reflection as if he were under some sort of spell. His own expression troubled him as it showed him that he was nothing more than a shell of the man he thought he would have become. Hollow, tired eyes looked at ashen skin, seeing the slight lines of strain and premature aging. He was only thirty-seven, but he felt stretched well beyond his years. Next were the thin lips that held so much truth, but could not offer the slightest utterance of it. Instead, they spewed venom and vitriol, alienating him even more from those he should have held onto like a lifeline. Finally, his eyes settled on the onyx orbs staring back at him through the glass. All that he had witnessed, all he had done seemed to be churning in the depths of his dark eyes like some wildly violent tempest. The eyes, he recalled from some unknown, unimportant source, are said to be the mirror to the soul. In this precise moment, Severus was inclined to agree.

He removed the cork from the phial with his forefinger and thumb, allowing it to fall silently to the floor. His eyes never left his wounded reflection in the mirror as he lifted the glass to his mouth, savoring the harsh sting of the potion as it sloshed against his sensitive flesh of his pale lips. He threw his head back, draining the small bottle. The numbing warmth slowly spreading from his chest lulled him into a calm he had never known, but oddly welcomed. Severus returned to his seat to allow the Baneberry to do its damage, his head resting against the aged leather.

That was how she found him, sitting upright in his chair, dangling perilously over the precipice of death. She did not know what had prompted her to search him out, but something did so. She needed answers and, as far as she was concerned, he was the only one who had them. After he fled from the castle on the coattails of several wanted Death Eaters, Hermione searched through his personal belongings for the slightest hint as to where he might have escaped.

It was in his roll top desk, hidden under a mass of moldy looking sheets of parchment where she found her answer. It was in the form of a mundane Muggle photograph. She carefully pulled the photograph from the mess so as to not do further damage to the tattered, ripped corners. Bringing it to the light, she saw a severe looking woman, her scrawny arm resting on the shoulder of a young dark-haired boy. The likeness was undeniable, but Hermione was not interested in family resemblances. She looked past the two of them, to the humble home they stood before. It was dilapidated and eerily similar to the houses that stood on either side of it.

She studied it for the longest time before something off in the distance caught her attention. It was a giant, rounded chimney protruding into the horizon. She had seen that ominous structure before while on a trip with her parents one summer holiday. Her father had told her the history of the Mill, explaining that it was once the beating heart for the tiny township. When it died, everything perished alongside it. Oblivious of the dark figure standing in the doorway, her mind busily worked out her plan of finding that place once again.

"You shouldn't be in here." Hermione spun around to spot a portly looking Auror standing in the doorway. His eyes had a suspicious glint to them. She slowly slid the photograph in the back pocket of her denims to conceal her findings from his gaze.

"I'm sorry. I was just looking for..."

The Auror simply frowned. "Leave the dirty business to us, Miss. We can handle it."

"Of course, sir." Hermione nodded, feigning a sense of embarrassment and guilt. She hurried past the Ministry official toward Gryffindor tower. She would bide her time there, surrounded by those in shock from grief or fear. Hermione would be leaving as soon as the castle drifted off to sleep, in search of the answers she wasn't sure she wanted.

In the haze of all that had happened, she was sure her absence would go by unnoticed. She slipped, under the cover of night, through the front gates, the photograph belonging to Severus Snape tucked safely away in the breast pocket of her cloak. She had no idea what lay in store for her or if this inkling would even prove worthwhile, but she Disapparated with nothing but the images in the photograph acting as her guide.

She opened her eyes to the stinging chill of the night. What she saw was perfectly real and somewhat reassuring. The brick walls, shrouded in the darkness, seemed familiar, but she had to be sure. Hermione pulled the photograph from her cloak, holding it up so the pristine light of the moon illuminated the faces. She maneuvered the tattered paper this way and that, trying to match the images up with their real counterparts. When held in place perfectly, faded colors of things past blended with blacks and grays of the present and those things still yet to come, creating a striking new image...an image of past and present meshing together in the most mesmerizing fashion. She had found her way.

Hermione stowed her guide in its spot for safe keeping and started toward the door. There was no evidence of life beyond the darkened windows. The lingering scent of burning wood radiating from the cracked chimney gave the only indication that the house had been recently inhabited. The door creaked open when her fingers brushed against the weathered wood. She was sure Severus Snape was long gone by now, having only stopped by his former home as a means to thwart those following close behind. He was far too calculated to allow himself easy capture.

As she pushed the door open, the shadows of the darkened parlor dissipated slightly to reveal the starkness of the house's interior. Crispness had settled in the house, though the scent of the recent fire permeated through the space. Hermione crossed the threshold, her wand at the ready, only to spot the outline of her professor amongst the last lingering shadows. He remained unmoving when she coaxed the dead fire back to life with the wave of her hand.

Hermione approached him cautiously, fearing he had orchestrated an elaborate trap to snare those who were ignorant enough to come for him. She called out his name, and he did not stir. As she gently reached out to squeeze his hand, the red-stained phial fell from his weak grasp, clattering to the floor at her feet.

She jumped back, startled by the sudden noise. Never taking her eyes off his still form, Hermione bent down to retrieve the glass bottle. The astringent acidity wafting off the container made her eyes water and confirmed her suspicions. Throwing the bottle into the now-roaring fire, she watched as the despicable remnants turned the flames a foreboding black. It was in that precise moment, Hermione realized something was wrong.

She placed her hand on his cheek, feeling the clammy coolness of his skin. Only then did his eyes open, although fleeting. "What was in that phial, Professor?" Hermione's soft voice withdrew him from his torpor.

He sighed deeply, his head settling on her trembling hand. "My liberation, Miss Granger."

Something about his tone nearly took Hermione's breath away. She moved faster than she thought possible, rearing her wand in a wide arc above her head. *Accio Bezoar!* It was a long shot, but the first thing that came to her mind. Something about the hopelessness of his voice told her there was more to his story than they had all realized. She could not allow it to go unsaid. A sudden loud commotion erupted from a blackened room in front of where she stood, and moments later, a dusty container holding the precious thing what would hopefully save Severus Snape was hovering in the air beside her head.

He did not fight her when she pulled him from his chair and onto the floor. He did not fight her when she positioned his head on her lap, carefully brushing his errant black locks from his face. Severus, in his current state, was far too gone to fight her off, and truthfully, part of him believed her efforts were in vain. The Baneberry Solution, in accordance with its name, was designed to kill. The dose he drained was crafted with extreme precision, allowing the drinker to drift off into an endless fog from which they would never emerge. As his Muggle-born student shoved the rough Bezoar down his throat, the Baneberry was toiling away to lull his heart into a ceaseless sleep.

There, in the soft glow of the firelight, Hermione sat, looking down at the man they all pegged for a traitor. It occurred to her as she held his cold hand, that no one really

knew Severus Snape. No one knew what had driven him to such lengths, and she was not entirely sure anyone would take the time to find out considering the recent deed caused by his hand. She pushed back the tears threatening to spill from her eyes. The man lying practically lifeless in her lap did not need her pity or charity. He needed her to see him for what he was without casting judgment.

Without thinking of his response, Hermione retrieved the photograph from her pocket, trying in earnest to keep her hand from shaking as she brought it to his face. "I have something that belongs to you. Can you tell me who these people are, Severus?" The sound of his given name rolling off her tongue seemed awkward and improper, but that was all she knew to do to keep him conscious.

Severus opened his eyes once more, meeting the dark eyes of the boy staring back at him from the photograph. He was still for quite some time, making Hermione wonder if he would ever move again. "They no longer exist."

The uncomfortable prickle of tears forming in her eyes nearly robbed her of her voice, but she urged him further. "Tell me about them."

"Why do you care?" Severus's head sagged further into Hermione's lap. The look of desperation and disbelief on his face made her heart ache for him. She had never seen a stronger man in a weaker state.

Hermione pointed to the smiling boy in the picture. "I want to know why this person doesn't exist. What happened to him?"

His voice was tired, though scathing. "Don't patronize me."

The photograph fell from her hand, landing on the black fabric covering his rising and falling chest. She reached for his hands, taking them both in hers as she tried to prove her point. "I have never done such a thing and I refuse to start doing it now. Do you understand, Professor Snape? You don't have to tell me if you don't want, but you should know that I wouldn't ask unless I thought it was important. I want to know."

Something deep within him roared to life, and for the first time in his adult life, Severus felt the tiny warmth generated by the feeblest of hopes. Someone, although she was not the person he expected, had sought him out, seeking nothing but his account. The glimmer was short lived despite the fierce possessiveness with which he cleaved to such a feeling. "It wouldn't matter what I told you. It would not undo deeds that have transpired by my hand or the hands of those I have aided."

Her hand knotted in the fabric of his voluminous robes, a gesture of pleading. She was so very close to her answers. "But it would help me understand. It would help us all understand, Professor."

Black eyes truly met brown for the first time since she had found him. Hermione did not see the eyes of her calloused, overly harsh professor, but rather the eyes of a man who was nearly broken by the weight of the world on his shoulders. Severus, on the other hand, did not see the eyes of his student, but rather a young woman who was wise well beyond her seventeen years. There was something hidden in the depths of her burnished eyes, willing him to spill the secrets he was not comfortable sharing with himself. He secretly laid blame on the poison flowing through his veins, telling himself it was his way of offering penitence with the hope of vindication.

He released a ragged breath as he searched himself for the words to say to the witch cradling his head. "My character has been weighed and it is found wanting." He spoke quietly, his once rich voice only a whisper to her ears. "I am a man of a great many faults, bound together by the threads of so-called honor. The good opinion others once held me in, if one ever truly existed, is lost."

"Lost?" she asked, encouraging him to continue.

"I have sharpened my shortcomings and faults into daggers, and I have allowed each one of them to gut those around me. It is lost." He uttered those last words with a certain permanency, almost as if he had true intentions of giving up.

"Why?" she questioned and, for the slightest instant, Hermione was wholeheartedly ashamed of her ignorance.

His head began to weigh heavier as his pallid cheek rested in her palm. He spoke, looking into the flames in the firebox, "Why indeed? In the grand scheme of it all, there are things that should remain hidden from those who seek them out. You, of all people, are aware of my many transgressions; how does this latest travesty by my hand not send you straight for the door? Instead, I find you here, haunting the last moments I have before my peace."

A silence passed between them, the sound of muffled cracks and pops from the fire the only noise to break up the monotony of the quiet. They were each waiting for the other to speak, but their internal struggle to find the appropriate words was winning the battle. He was waiting for the rebuking he deserved for such a cowardly deed while secretly fumbling through his clouded mind for the explanation she deserved. She, on the other hand, was waiting for the harsh sting of his voice telling her she had no right to intrude. The questions that found their way to the tip of her tongue each died with every weathered breath he took. They seemed much too trivial given the uncertainty of the situation she found herself in. In the end, it was she who found the courage to break the wall of silence that stood between them.

"I don't want to know why you did it," she said, an air of wavering in her voice. "You don't have to tell me that. All I want to know is if you did such a thing with malice. Did you look him in the eye and betray him...all of us...with the sincere intent of doing just that?"

He turned his gaze from the embers to the glinting chocolate eyes above him. It finally happened, the moment he had waited nearly twenty years to hear. For too long had his actions been the subject under great scrutiny from others. The honest intent behind those actions had been the missing piece of the elaborate web he had spun. The thought of leaving the world without someone, even though that particular someone was not who he had expected, suddenly seemed unbearable. His flaws and faults would be discussed freely amongst those remaining once he passed through the Veil, but if just one person knew a minuscule part of the truth, perhaps it would be enough to make a difference. Not a difference in the sense that they would see him differently. No, he could not have cared less about that. It was in the hope of others learning from his mistakes and shortcomings that he found solace.

"It is true." He seemed to have found his voice for the first time that evening, almost as if the life in him was not being whittled away by some heinous potion but, rather, slowly being rekindled. "But more so the illusion others saw as a result."

She looked at him in dazed horror. "An illusion?"

"You cannot deny the viciousness of my nature; therefore, you cannot deny the viciousness of my actions, regardless of the true intentions that may be hidden amongst them. It was meant to look like betrayal, and that was precisely how it was perceived."

"I don't understand, Prof..."

"You are not meant to understand," he said, his voice cracking, "and I shall take my account to Hell or some semblance of it."

Her hand came to rest on his chest, above his beating heart. "There is nothing of Hell in you, Professor. Absolutely nothing."

A withered smile graced his features, and she wished it could have been the sneering smirk she was so accustomed too. "You know so little of me, Miss Granger."

Her hands returned to the side of his face as she turned his gaze toward her face. "I know enough."

Hermione did not press the issue any further, having been given the one answer she sought above all others. Severus Snape was a great many things, but a traitor was not one of them. While any logical person would have taken his words as nothing but a farce, she believed him. He did not have to divulge anything to her, but he did so willingly. She would not have found him in such a state had he not allowed his head to slip beneath the murky waters of the war. Only something of great consequence could have brought him to such a lowly place in his life.

Severus remained silent for some time and focused his dark eyes on the young witch that had become his unlikeliest of caretakers. He could feel the effects of the potion

coursing through his body, causing his vision to blur. Suddenly, the silence around him turned into a low roar that rose to deafening volumes. Somehow, above the roar, he heard her calling his name. It was all ending, and she could sense it, he realized. He briefly fought to remain conscious, but it quickly became obvious that was an unwinnable battle. Severus Snape closed his eyes for the final time that night, and Hermione Granger wept.

The light was not visible, but he could sense it. It was an unusual warmth, but he could not do otherwise than believe in it, given the way the warm caress of the radiance danced over him. Heaven and Hell were all frames of mind, and how cliché that his subconscious would be leaning toward the former. Then again, he thought, the fires of Hell could shine just as brightly as the lights of Heaven. Regardless of the realm from which it resided, it was a delicate but foreign awareness, he realized. He embraced this newfound awakening willingly, only to find his consciousness expanding. Severus came to with a sudden shocking jolt, the panic flashing in his eyes as he blinked through the haze.

There was no mistaking it. He was very much alive.

In that precise moment, the second wave of consciousness rushed over him, bringing to the forefront of his mind all that had transpired just hours before. His head was splitting from the inside out, but that did little to diminish the memories that came flooding back like rushing torrents. He sat up, running his hands through his hair, only to see what had been left from the night before.

The previous night would have passed for a vivid dream had his unexpected saving grace not left a token of remembrance behind. It was lying on the floor beside the pillow his head had rested on, face up so that it would not go unnoticed. It was the photograph he had kept hidden all those years. Severus picked up his photograph turning it over in his hands to reveal a note written in neat penmanship. He began, haltingly at first, then with much greater ease, to read the words she had left behind.

Your burdens are safe with me. Don't feel as if you are carrying them all on your own. In due time, people will understand just as I have, and they will be grateful for all you have done. Finish this. Finish this so that people may have a chance to recognize you for what you truly are, a great wizard but a far greater man.

...HG

Severus found himself at odds with his emotions, but he smiled modestly in spite of that fact. He stowed his childhood keepsake in the pocket of his frock coat, though it was not for the reason of remembering who he was or where he came from. No, he was well past that part of his life, and for once, grateful he could move forward from it. Instead, this slip of aged paper was his reminder of what he would be. It was his reminder, telling him he would not fail himself again, and when it was all over, he vowed to find her and give her the proper explanation and gratitude she deserved. Severus made his way to his feet, and for the first time in his life, he was ready to face whatever may lie ahead.

The two wouldn't see each other again until that following spring, but they found themselves in similar circumstance nonetheless. In the end, as he lay bleeding out on the dusty floor of the Shrieking Shack, looking into her knowing eyes, Severus Snape became a hero. Although he wasn't there to see the ripple of his actions when all was said and done, she had been right.

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