

A Patronus Named Tobias

by Alison

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Complete short story

Chapter 1 of 1

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A Patronus Named Tobias

By Alison Venugoban

"You clumsy little freak!"

The force of the unexpected blow sent the small, dark-haired boy reeling against the wall. He huddled there, fearful of another stinging smack as the woman advanced towards him, her face contorted in fury.

"Ma! No, I'm sorry; I was just trying to help!"

The boy yelped as the woman's fingers sank cruelly into one shoulder, dragging him into a standing position, her other arm raised to strike again.

"I'll teach you to break my best china, you ..."

"What the bloody hell's goin' on here?"

Neither Severus nor the woman had heard the front door open. The man standing framed in the doorway was tall and thin, with a hooked nose. He wore a pair of stained overalls and heavy boots.

"Tobias!" The woman was clearly taken aback by his sudden appearance. "I didn't expect you back yet..."

The man regarded her coolly. "I can see that. What d'you think you're doing to the boy?"

Tobias's wife visibly pulled herself together. "What does it look like? Discipline. He went and broke my best china plate, the one me mam gave me when we got hitched."

Tobias turned his gaze to his son. "That right, Severus?"

Severus looked at his father hopefully as the tears dried on his face. "I'm sorry, Da, I only wanted to help, really. Ma took the plate down off the mantel for dusting, and I thought I'd put it back up for her. Only it was heavier than I thought, and I ... I dropped it ... "

Tobias walked further into the room, shutting the door behind him. "There you go, Martha. The boy made a mistake; he's apologized. Let it go."

"Oh, you think because he said he's sorry it's all right, do you, Tobias? No. You didn't see what he did. I was in the doorway. He wasn't touching the bloody plate, Tobias, he was underneath it, but his hands weren't touching it! And then it wobbled and fell to the floor and smashed! But that's not the only freakish thing he does, and you bloody know it!" The woman's voice had a touch of fear evident beneath the anger, fear at what she had witnessed.

"I said that's enough!" Tobias's voice was raised in anger now as well. "That's rubbish, how could he lift the plate without touching it? Your eyes were deceiving you, woman, and I'll hear no more about it!"

"Oh, that's right, take his side as usual! You never see when he's at fault; you always make excuses for him! No wonder none of the other lads have anything to do with him; he's not right, and you're the only one can't see it!"

Severus sank to the floor in the corner, feeling tears threaten as his parents argued. Ma's words had hit a nerve. The other lads made his life a constant misery. His dad was the foreman at the works, and this combined with Severus's quiet nature, love of books and utter lack of interest in stickball or soccer all added up into making him a target. He'd always had to hide from them to avoid getting beaten up.

"What about last week, when he managed to climb up to the top of the Evans' house?" Ma was shouting now. "Could have broken his fool neck if young Lily hadn't spotted him! There's no way a lad his age could have gotten up there by himself; you can't tell me that's normal!"

Severus closed his eyes, but the tears leaked out anyway. He still didn't know how he'd gotten up there when the local thugs had chased him. He'd just wanted to find somewhere safe, away from them, and suddenly, there he was, clinging in terror to the chimney of his best friend's house to avoid falling. Mr. Evans had needed to get the ladder out to get him down.

And then Da'd been very quiet after Mr. Evans brought Severus home. Severus sometimes caught him watching him with a considering sort of expression on his face. Severus was terrified that Da might put him into care, like Billy Stubbs was when he stabbed his little brother with a penknife. Maybe Ma was right, maybe he was a freak ... odd things kept happening around him ...

"Woman, enough!" Tobias was shouting as well, and Severus opened his eyes. Tobias towered above his wife, and for the first time in Severus's memory, the woman looked fearful of her husband. A small sob escaped Severus's lips. He'd never seen Da so angry about anything before...

Tobias's head swung about at the sob. He hesitated and then moved back a step, still glaring at his wife. Then he hurried across the room to Severus.

"Come on, son, up you get. I'll not have you crying in't corner like a big girl's blouse."

The hand he extended to help Severus up grazed across his sore shoulder, and Severus flinched and gasped. Tobias's eyes narrowed, and he knelt down. Holding Severus firmly he pulled the shirt to one side at the neck, revealing the ugly purpling bruise Ma's fingers had made on Severus's pale skin. A hiss escaped between Tobias's teeth.

"How did this happen, son?"

Almost against his will, Severus's eyes shot fearfully to Ma. He huddled against the wall, wishing he was up in his room, anywhere but here, with Da watching him with such an odd, intent expression.

When his father spoke again, his voice was curiously gentle. "Has she hurt you before, lad?"

Severus couldn't answer, wouldn't meet his father's eyes. He felt ashamed. If he wasn't such a freak, maybe his mother would like him better, it was his fault, he knew it, he made her angry ...

"Look at me, boy." His father's voice still held that gentle tone. "Take your shirt off."

Severus clutched at his shirt, but his father managed to pull it over his head anyway. His eyes ran down his son's scrawny body, taking in the many small bruises and marks, the legacy of his time spent with Ma during the school holidays.

Tobias stood slowly. His face was oddly blank as he turned to face his wife. In a tightly controlled voice, he said, "Get out."

"What? I never did that; it's the local lads, not me! They're always giving him a kicking, and him sniveling like a girl! ... "

Tobias strode forwards, one hand raised. "If you're not out of my house in five minutes, I won't be responsible for what I do!"

"This is my house as much as yours, Tobias Snape! I'm the one fed and bathed the little monster ... "

The blow sent her to her knees, and she let out a sharp cry of pain. She scuttled up and away from the next descending fist and ran for the door. She paused there, one hand on the knob. "You'll be sorry for this, Tobias! I'll see you in hell for hitting me, you and that monster you whelped!"

"GET OUT!"

Tobias snatched up a lump of wood from the unlit fireplace and flung it, but the door had already closed behind her, and it hit the wall with a thump and thudded to the floor.

Severus watched wide-eyed from the corner, trying to get his head around what had just happened. He felt bewildered. Ma was gone? Just like that? It was too much to take in.

His father stood still for several seconds staring at the door, breathing heavily, his hands clenched into fists as he regained control of himself. Then he once more turned to Severus.

"Put your shirt on, boy, and come with me. I've got summat to show you. Should have told you years ago, but I weren't sure you wouldn't turn out t'be Muggle like me, n' then there'd be no need for you to know ... "

It made no sense to Severus, but he stood shakily and pulled his shirt back on, then followed his father up the stairs. At the end of the upstairs hall was a door that Severus had never seen opened. Tobias took his house keys from his pocket, sorted through them thoughtfully, and then carefully unlocked the door. He stood to one side as the door swung open, to reveal a small cluttered attic room. Dust motes danced in the bars of early afternoon sunshine flooding in through the cobwebbed skylight set in the roof. Boxes and trunks were stacked up on top of each other.

Severus glanced at his father, and then entered the room at his reassuring nod. His father made for one of the boxes, opened it, and took something out. He turned to Severus, holding a photo album in his hands, sat down on one of the boxes, and indicated that Severus should sit beside him.

He was silent for a moment, as if to organize his thoughts. "The woman you call Ma," he said finally, "is my second wife. Son, your mother died when you were just a baby, not one year old. Your mother, your real mother who birthed you, her name was Eileen, Eileen Prince. And she was ... very special."

Tobias opened the album and Severus gasped. The photographs inside were moving! He stared at them, fascinated and more than a little fearful, as the young man he

recognized as a younger version of his father stood holding hands with a black-haired young woman with eyes as dark as Severus's own. She appeared amused at something and was pulling Tobias into the centre of the picture as if he were a little embarrassed to be appearing in a moving photograph.

Tobias put a gentle finger on the young woman's face, and the photograph laughed silently as if she'd been tickled. He smiled reminiscently. "Eileen was the most wonderful girl I'd ever met," he murmured, almost to himself. "She was from a rich family, purebloods the lot of them, but she fell in love with me, a penniless Muggle, and she defied her family to marry me. I was the luckiest man alive..."

He turned the pages of the album, and Severus stared in awe at the pictures revealed. Some were regular photographs, such as he was used to, but others, particularly the older ones, were like tiny television screens, showing the people inside moving, shuffling about, waving. There was even one of a small dark-haired baby wearing a nappy and singlet, lying on it's back sucking its fist. Next to the photo was a neat penciled notation: "Severus, five months."

"Da?" Severus asked at last.

"Hmm?" His father looked down at him, and Severus saw that he had tears in his eyes. This was such a shock that he was unable to frame the question, but his father seemed to understand. "You want to know why I married Martha, after Eileen died?"

That was just one of the many questions Severus had, so he nodded.

His father sighed. "When Eileen died ... it was a bad time. You were a tiny baby, and I couldn't look after you properly, not and put food on the table and a roof over our heads.

Martha was an old girlfriend I'd had before I met your mother. She offered to baby-sit you during the day so long as I paid her. I know it was wrong of me, but she was here during the day, she began to make my meals when I got home, and ... other things. She was such a comfort that I tried to pretend she was Eileen. And after a while, she began to say that it would save money and be the right thing to do if I married her." He shrugged. "I wanted us to be a family; I wanted to be as happy as I was when I married Eileen. I was fooling myself; I see that now. Martha could never replace Eileen in my heart. I was wrong to have married her."

"How did ... Eileen ... die?"

"She was hit by a car when she was crossing the road one day. It was a miracle you weren't killed as well; you were in the pram she was pushing, but she managed to push you out of the way in time. The driver of the car was drunk. They told me at the hospital that she'd died instantly. I was a mess; I wanted to die too. And then they handed you to me, my son, with Eileen's dark eyes gazing up at me. And I knew I had to live for your sake."

Putting the album to one side, Tobias stood up abruptly and went to another box. Rummaging around in it, he pulled something out and returned to sit beside his son. Severus looked at what he held. It looked like a stick, a piece of dowelling perhaps, like Mrs. Evans hung her tea towels over in the kitchen.

"There's summat else you need to know about your mother," Tobias said solemnly. "You know all the odd stuff you can do, getting to top of people's houses, lifting things without touching them, stuff like that?" He held up one hand to forestall Severus. "I know you don't know how it happens, lad, that's what I want to tell you. Take a hold of this; it was your mother's." He grinned slightly. "Go on, take it and give it a bit of a swish."

Severus obediently grasped the stick and felt sudden warmth in his fingers. He raised it and flicked it somewhat hesitantly, then nearly dropped it in shock at sight of the stream of green and silver sparks that shot out of the end like a firework, throwing dancing spots of light on the attic wall.

"Holly wand with a phoenix feather core," his father murmured proudly. "And it looks like you're as magical as Eileen! She was a witch, son. And a damned good one, at that."

Severus gripped the wand with a hand that shook. "A witch?"

"Not one of them fairy tale hags with green skin and warts on their noses! No, witches and wizards live amongst non-magical folk. People like me are called Muggles, and I could swish that blessed wand of your mother's all day and nothing'd happen! But you just have to touch it and you make magic! Those things you've started doing, that's your magic showing itself. You've got the gift son, same as Eileen."

Severus stared at his mother's amazing wand in wonder. So many things made sense to him now. He felt a strange sensation in his chest, a fierce sort of joy beginning to grow. He wasn't a freak! There were others like him, special, magical people! "Da, why didn't you tell me this before?" He gasped.

"I should have son. But I kept thinking you were too young, you'd not understand. And there was the chance you'd be a Muggle like me, non-magical and perhaps happier not knowing about witches and wizards and the like."

Tobias snagged another box, dragged it towards him, and pulled out a heavy, old-fashioned looking book, handing it to Severus. The title on the front read: *The Standard Book of Spells (Grade 1)* by Agnetha Abernathy.

"These boxes hold all your mother's spell books from the magic school she went to," Tobias explained. "She always wanted you to go there too, when you turned eleven. I've got a bit of money set aside for you, and so long as we tighten our belts a bit, we'll manage. You may need to use Eileen's old school books and things, but I want to give you every chance of becoming a wizard, son."

Severus was staring hungrily at the pages of the book. He was going to learn all this stuff, go to a school for magic? He looked back up at his father with shining eyes, pointing out one of the spells that had caught his attention. "This is for making things lift up in the air, like I tried to do with the plate!" he said. Lifting the wand, he flicked it in careful imitation of the illustration in the book, and intoned, slowly and with great care, the phrase written beneath the picture. "*Wing ... ar ... dium Levi ... osa*"

The book rose up into the air, its pages fluttering gently as it hovered.

Tobias nodded solemnly. "I want you to study all your mother's books, Severus, not just her schoolbooks; she's got other stuff left to her by her grandma. I know you're young yet, but it's never too early to start. You're going to be one cracker of a wizard, son."

Severus stood and withdrew another book from the box. It had a dark black leather cover with spiky gilt lettering on the front: *An Introduction to the Dark Arts* by Delmar Deverell. He could feel it vibrating gently in his hands, warm and sweet, as if it was calling to him, and he caressed it with one finger as if petting a cat.

"I will study, Da." He said it almost reverently. "I'll make you proud of me. I promise."

The End.

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

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

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