

# Sound of the Rain

*by Alison*

With less than a month to go before publication of the last book, will this be how it ends up for Severus and Hermione?

## Complete short story

*Chapter 1 of 1*

With less than a month to go before publication of the last book, will this be how it ends up for Severus and Hermione?

The characters and the situations within this fan fiction story are not my property. They are the property of J.K. Rowling, Warner Brothers, and others, and are used without permission; challenge to copyright is not intended and should not be construed. No profit is being made from the use of these characters and situations; these written-down imaginings are only presented in an internet forum for the interest of and consumption by like-minded individuals who enjoy them and recognize them as unauthorized fan fiction only, and are not in any way meant to be confused with the originals nor presented as authorized materials of these owners.

Sound of the Rain

Alison Venugoban

i.

Severus loved the sound of the rain.

He and Lily had been walking by the lake that warm Sunday afternoon at the start of sixth year when they were caught out by an unexpected shower. They ran for shelter with Severus's cloak held above their heads to protect them from the storm. Severus cast *Sectumsempra*, causing a long tear to appear in the thick canvas wall covering the Quidditch stands, and they'd both ducked inside, damp and giggling.

And it was there, on the pillowing white sands of centuries, under the overarching oak rafters hung with cobwebs and with the rain pattering playfully, insistently, on the seats above their heads, they'd lost their virginity together.

He'd held her afterwards in his arms, listening to the rain and her soft breathing as she'd slept cuddled against him, and felt at peace with the world and his place in it, for perhaps the first time in his life.

ii.

He hated the sound of the rain.

They'd fought again, that chilly evening at the end of sixth year, angry hurtful words flung at each other while the rain lashed the windows and the wind howled and moaned outside.

It was over. Severus knew it and Lily knew it, but that didn't make the hurt easier to bear, and it didn't keep them from saying horrible, painful things which neither meant.

And when she'd stormed out of the empty classroom, slamming the door behind her, he'd sunk onto the nearest desk, covered his face with shaking hands and listened to

the rain's thunder, fighting against the tears that threatened.

iii.

It was Albus who found him.

Severus was sitting by the ruins of the house at Godric's Hollow, just sitting, staring at the destruction. Albus watched him for a moment, then walked through the damp, misty quiet to his side.

Although Severus made no sign that he had seen the older wizard, he whispered, "It's my fault, isn't it? He went after her because of the information I gave him. I killed her..."

Albus lowered himself to sit beside him.

Only then did Severus turn his head to look at the Headmaster. The look on his face in the wandlight was beyond tears, a shocked disbelief evident in their dark depths. "I loved her, you know. Even though she married Potter ... I still loved her. I never wanted this to happen. I would never have hurt her ..."

"This is not over, Severus," Albus said quietly. "You and I both know, Voldemort is too powerful a wizard to have been killed. He'll be back, someday, whether it be ten years, twenty, or more. But he will be back. And there is a way for you to atone for what you did."

Severus turned away from him. "There's no redemption, Headmaster." He said it tonelessly, hopelessly. "Lily's dead, and there's nothing I can do to bring her back."

"No magic can do that," Albus agreed. "But think for a moment, Severus. Lily's son is still alive. And when Voldemort returns, killing that child will be his priority. You can be redeemed so long as you vow to help the child."

Severus went still for a moment, then turned his face back to fix his gaze on Albus. "A vow?"

Albus nodded. "The Unbreakable Vow. Will you agree to protect Lily's son with your life, to teach him the skills needed to survive, and to help him in every way you can to ultimately destroy Voldemort? When Voldemort returns, will you agree to spy on him and his Death Eaters for the Order of the Phoenix?" He paused, searching the young wizard's face. "Be careful what you answer, Severus. If you are still loyal to Voldemort and his Death Eaters, if you aid Voldemort to harm the child, this Unbreakable Vow will mean your death."

Severus took a deep breath. Slowly he nodded. "Yes, Headmaster. I'll make the Unbreakable Vow with you ... for Lily's sake."

iv.

It was raining again. Not that it was loud, an almost subliminal patter against the closed DADA classroom windows, but the smell of wet teenagers was musty and enveloping as he stalked into the room, and he wrinkled his nose in distaste. Had none of these children ever heard of soap?

He smirked as he passed the "Golden Trio". They must have been caught outside when the rain began. Weasley looked like a drowned red rat, and Potter's drenched hair for once lay flat and plastered to his skull, his glasses misted up. But Granger was unfazed. She was calmly drying her mass of hair with a charm before class started, fluffing it up with one hand as her wand emitted a soft stream of cinnamon-scented warm air.

As he reached his desk at the front of the room, he turned, and for a second his eyes met hers. She appeared to be the only dry teenager in the whole class.

"Miss Granger, if you would kindly stop preening yourself, we'll begin," he said reprovingly.

The girl blinked, but had the sense to look abashed and put her wand down. "Sorry, sir."

"Well, if nobody else wishes to visit the salon, we can start," he said, hearing Draco Malfoy's predicable snigger.

But as he flicked his wand to write the instructions for the lesson, just for a moment he reflected that the Granger girl was really quite talented. Nobody else in his sixth-year class had yet perfected that warming charm. What a pity she hadn't been Sorted into Slytherin ...

v.

He sat at the safe-house window, gazing out into the night. At some point it had begun to rain, mournful heavy droplets that sounded full of bleak sorrow.

Draco had already gone to bed, exhausted with the night's work and their desperate escape from Hogwarts, but Severus couldn't sleep. Not with Albus's ravaged face imprinted on his mind, not with the old man's final words to him: "Severus ... please ..."

He wouldn't cry. It had never helped in any way. He wouldn't. But, oh, Merlin, it was hard not to. Albus dead, the only one who had believed in him despite everybody else's doubts, begging Severus to stand by his promise to euthanize him once the progressive pain of the Dark Lord's hex became too much.

The rain dripped tears from the heavens as Severus stared out into the night, dry-eyed.

vi.

Well, that was one less Horcrux for Potter and Co. to deal with.

Severus had managed to track down Hufflepuff's cup. Now it lay, a melted ruin, still smoking slightly from the hex he'd used to destroy it in its glass case at Borgin & Burkes. There was a single small lamp burning dimly in the corner, casting just enough light to be able to read the scorched card which sat next to the cup's remains: "Medieval silver goblet, 1100 A.D. (?) Provenance unknown. Display only NOT FOR SALE." He imagined there'd be some consternation when Borgin discovered the destruction of his prized antique showpiece in the morning.

"*Finite Incantatum!*" he muttered, and felt the prickling tingle of the Horcrux protection spell he'd devised ebb away. His hair, which had lifted up and been whipping about his head due to the Dark Art spell settled once more about his shoulders in its usual lank style.

He went to Disapparate but instead of the usual compression, felt a snapping pain and fell to the floor.

"What the hell ...?"

Eyes narrowed, he picked himself up and tried again. And once again, the pain and another bruise as his gluteus maximus made contact with the floor.

"*Accio wand!*"

Severus gasped and grappled uselessly after his wand as it flew to the outstretched hand of the figure which had appeared from the shadows, a figure which still had its wand pointed at him.

"Hello Professor Snape. You can stand up if you wish, but no sudden moves, please, or I'll cast Petrificus on you. And I'd rather not do that, as I have some questions for you."

Severus stood slowly, gathering the threads of his dignity about himself once more. "Miss Granger. I presume the Anti-Disapparition charm is your doing?"

With her wand still trained warily on him, Hermione leaned against one of the display cases and gave a tight nod. "That's right. Now tell me. Why did you destroy that Horcrux?"

Snape glared at her, but she gazed right back at him, unfazed. "Horcrux?"

Hermione made a disgusted sound in the back of her throat. "Oh, come off it, Professor. I heard the incantation you used to protect yourself before you destroyed it, and I saw it light up like a Christmas tree when you hit it with that curse! That was not some random piece you blew up. That was one of the Horcruxes Harry and I have been looking for!"

Snape moved away from her slowly and seated himself on one of the lower displays. Folding his arms, he said, "Since you brought up the subject, where IS the redoubtable Saint Potter and his trusty sidekick? I was under the impression that none of you could function properly without the other two in the set."

There was a sudden intensity to the silence that followed, only the space of two heartbeats, but enough for him to become aware of the soft drumming of rain on the roof and the far-off grumble of thunder. Then, in a flat voice, totally devoid of emotion, Hermione answered, "Ron is dead. Killed when ... when we destroyed Slytherin's locket ..."

Her wand drooped for a second as she gazed at the floor. Now, thought Severus, now would be the perfect time to tackle her and retrieve his wand. He didn't move.

"I'm sorry," he heard himself say.

At that, Hermione lifted her head, her eyes fierce. "No, you're not, you hypocrite," she spat. "You hated us at school. And you haven't answered my question. Why did you destroy the Horcrux?"

Severus sighed and decided to try the truth. "So Potter won't have to," he answered. "You've seen how dangerous they are. If the Dark Lord is to be destroyed, Potter needs to have all his wits, not to mention limbs, intact. He managed to destroy the diary back in his second year," and Severus raised one hand to tick off points, "Albus took care of Marvolo's ring. Slytherin's locket you three have accounted for. Now the cup has been destroyed."

"That only leaves Ravenclaw's wand, and the snake, Nagini," Hermione breathed. "And then Voldemort can be killed, really killed ..."

Severus nodded. "Just so. But made more problematic by the fact that I have no idea as to where Ravenclaw's wand might be. And Nagini hardly ever leaves her master's side."

Hermione was watching him closely, as if considering something. Finally it seemed she had come to a conclusion; she nodded and said, "Harry and I heard of two goblets that could be the Horcrux. One's in the British Museum: Harry's checking that one out while I came here. How could you be sure the cup you destroyed was the right one?"

Severus shrugged. "I couldn't. But it fitted the description I have. And seeing how it reacted when I hit it with the curse showed I was correct in my assumption. A simple metal cup would have merely melted quietly. This one fought back, hence my need for a substantial Dark Arts shielding spell."

Hermione frowned, biting her lip as she thought. "That incantation you used to shield yourself: would it work against the wand and the snake?"

Severus nodded. "Against any Horcrux. Can you remember it accurately?"

"I believe so. At any rate, Harry has Dumbledore's Pensieve. I can review it when I get back ..."

She hesitated, then calmly walked up to him, handing his wand back.

Severus stared at her in surprise. "You ... aren't you going to call the Aurors? I'm a wanted wizard."

Hermione shook her head. "No. You've convinced me you're on our side. Nobody loyal to Voldemort would go about destroying his Horcruxes. You're free to go, Professor Snape."

Severus slowly pocketed his wand. As he stood up, he said haltingly, "I am truly sorry for your loss. Ronald Weasley ... had the makings of a good wizard ..."

Hermione gave a slight smile. "Ron had his faults, like anybody. But I loved him," she said softly.

Then, as Severus turned to go, she said, "Professor? Good luck."

And she Disapparated.

vii.

Severus dodged behind the trunk of a huge oak as yet another werewolf prowled past.

Merlin, the Forbidden Forest was alive with the things! And he wasn't about to take a chance as to which side they were on. Fenrir's pack, loyal to the Dark Lord, or Lupin's mixed bag of werewolves and Animagi.

The former would of course let him be, seeing as he was still ostensibly on the side of their master, but the latter would tear him to pieces on sight. He preferred not to take the risk. At any rate, werewolves per se still had the power to turn his knees to water, the phobia a legacy of Lupin's attempt on his life as a teenager.

Another magical blast lit up the sky somewhere beyond Hogsmeade, turning the rags of cloud racing past the full moon to livid green for an instant. The fighting was fierce in these magical pockets of resistance country-wide since the Battle for London.

It was only with the assistance of Muggle technology that the Dark Lord had not prevailed in the capital. But out here in the country, it was magic against magic with no help from the severely culture-shocked Muggles, who had battened down into siege positions and were still grimly holding London with their not-inconsiderable firepower.

Bewildered refugees were what the werewolves in this forest hunted tonight. Now and then an eerie ululation would echo through the Forest, and Severus would know another human was being chased down by monsters. He shivered and pressed on towards Hogwarts, cursing the fact that the ancient Anti-Apparation wards still held, even though the castle it protected was now gutted and burned.

Severus hoped his old quarters down in the dungeons had survived intact. There were poison antidotes kept there which he hoped to pass on to the Order via Moody and Shacklebolt, the two Aurors who knew his true allegiance. Since the Dark Lord had begun poisoning the water supplies, such antidotes were desperately needed, and the Ministry was going to use his samples to prepare the massive quantities they expected to need in the weeks and months ahead.

Staying in the shadows as much as possible, he eventually reached the old castle. In the uncertain light, it looked reassuringly normal, although dark; there had always been some lights on somewhere when Hogwarts was operating as a school.

But inside was another matter. Lumos showed fire damage everywhere, furnishings smashed, and even the moving staircases had been reduced to ashes. His chest tightened in anger: this place had been his home for so many years, as a student and then a teacher, and to see it so reduced was more painful than he'd realized.

The solid stone stairway down was intact, however, and the dungeons themselves appeared undisturbed. Severus quickly found his notes and sample phials, all

deliberately mis-labeled as Veritasum, in his private store cupboard: he was a firm believer in the old adage that to hide a book, one should use a bookshelf. He transfigured the notes to blank sheets of paper, gathered the bottles together, and put everything away in an inside pocket of his robe.

As he was turning to go, his eyes fell on an innocuous-looking small phial, standing among the others and labeled Orange Essence. The phial was only as long as his smallest finger, and there was a single sip of liquid inside. It was tightly stoppered, the cork reinforced with wax. Another deliberate mis-labeling on his part - the precious Felix Felicis that the phial really contained might make the difference between life and death in the final battle that Severus knew must come soon. He wanted to survive this war, despite the precarious position he was in. He'd take all the help he could get. He took the small crystal bottle from the shelf and stowed it away with the others.

As he left the dungeon staircase, a cold droplet of rain fell on his head, and he glanced up at the ceiling of the Great Hall, realizing with a shock that the thickening clouds above were not a reflection, but the actual night sky. The roof had fallen in. Something massive and heavy had apparently smashed it. More than one something, Severus suspected. Voldemort's giants had a fondness and talent for demolition ...

Another blasted werewolf, sniffing about by the lake! Severus ducked back into the shadow of the entrance. Impossible that the creature was hunting Severus by smell; he'd deliberately used a spell this evening that neutralized his natural body scent. This had to be just bad luck.

Severus backtracked into the building. Striding along well-known corridors, he headed for the library. It had large windows that let out directly onto the grounds; he could get out that way.

But as he entered the former library, he realized he wasn't alone. A figure stood with its back to him in the middle of the room, surrounded by the ashes and scattered, scorched and burnt portions of books. Soft sobs sounded from the figure, and Severus felt a sinking sensation. Not again!

He thought about slipping past unnoticed and just continuing on his way, but the thought of what the werewolf outside would do to this traumatized young lady was not to be countenanced. And he was under no illusions that it would find her: their hearing was almost as good as their sense of smell. Her sobs would alert it to her presence here. The wonder of it was that she'd gotten as far as the library without being detected ... damnation! The bloody thing was tracking her! It was not simply bad luck that had led it here!

He cast a non-verbal Muffliato, then Accio, and Hermione's wand flew into his hand as she whirled about, her eyes wide in shock.

He lifted one eyebrow and raised his finger to his lips for quiet. Even with Muffliato, he didn't feel safe speaking much above a whisper. "Miss Granger. We do seem to be running into each other rather a lot lately." He walked forward and handed back her wand. "I didn't want you to hex me by mistake," he added by way of explanation. "This is rather a dangerous place to be at the moment."

She accepted the wand and Severus sized her up. Her eyes were puffy and red-rimmed in the light from his wand; she was paler than usual and shaking.

"What on earth are you doing here by yourself?"

"I might ask you the same thing." Her voice was low, but angry. "Sneaking up on me like that; what did you think you were doing?"

"In case you haven't noticed Miss Granger, there is a werewolf in the grounds of Hogwarts. Unless I'm much mistaken, it's tracking you."

She paled further and glanced fearfully at the door. "What? A werewolf? But I ... I was wearing an invisibility cloak ... "

Severus made an impatient sound. "I expected better of you, Miss Granger. These creatures track by scent, as you should have known after your third year in DADA class. But I'd rather we continue this discussion somewhere safer. Tell me, are you currently menstruating or pregnant?"

The abrupt change of subject appeared to throw her, and she flushed angrily. "Pregnant! No, of course not! How is that any of your business ... ?"

"Keep your voice down, for Merlin's sake! I've cast Muffliato, but werewolves have exceptional hearing! I need to neutralize your body odour with a charm. But for it to be successful, I need to know approximately where in your hormonal cycle you are so that the spell can be modified. And if you were carrying a child, the charm would need to be further modified. So, as you're not pregnant, are you menstruating?"

Hermione shook her head, rubbing her forehead wearily with one hand and leaving a black smudge of soot behind. "No. It's been ... oh, fourteen days since I finished. I have another two weeks to go."

"Mid-cycle then, or near enough. Good. Stand still while I cast the charm."

He cast non-verbally and watched as a stream of aquamarine light crackled from his wand to wrap about her. He caught a faint whiff of her natural scent, like a freshly-broken cinnamon quill, before the spell took hold and neutralized it.

He whirled about as a frenzied howling sound came from down the corridor the werewolf had tracked her scent into the building!

"You mentioned something about an invisibility cloak," he said, trying to control the sudden tremor of his limbs and the stutter of fear that wanted to take over his voice. "I'd suggest we employ it now."

Even as he spoke, Hermione reached down and picked up the shimmering silver cloak pooling at her feet. She swirled it up and over both their heads before they ran urgently for the fallen-in back wall of the library.

They could see more werewolves appearing out of the Forest, coming to join the hunt, drawn by the howling of the one in the library. More eyes gleamed redly from the shadows. Not daring even to whisper, Severus grabbed Hermione's elbow and pointed urgently at the Quidditch stand.

The pair of them ran for shelter with the invisibility cloak held above their heads, Severus hunching his head and shoulders to keep his height from betraying their position to the questing monsters. As they neared the still-intact stand, he risked letting the tip of his wand appear so that he could cast Sectumsempra, causing a long tear to appear in the thick canvas wall, and they ducked inside, tremors of fear coursing through them.

The monstrous pack passed close by, loping towards the library exit with tongues lolling, their fetid breath steaming in the chill night air. The single were that had been tracking Hermione appeared at the toppled-down wall that had served them as an escape route. It was casting about, back and forth, growling in frustration as it tried to discover where the scent trail had disappeared to.

Severus pulled the canvas quietly to behind him and again cast Muffliato before sealing the tear shut seamlessly. "We should be safe here," he murmured. "They've lost our scent. We can rest up and wait for morning." He sat down on the sand. "I think we can risk some light; the canvas wall is thick enough that it won't show outside. *Lumos!*"

Hermione sat down with her back against one of the timbers; she was white-faced and shivering and pulled the invisibility cloak up around her shoulders for warmth, giving the eerie impression of a disembodied head. She stared at him owlishly for a moment.

"If you hadn't come when you did ... " she stuttered, then covered her face with her hands as long, frightened sobs shook her.

Severus felt an impotent exasperation with the young woman. What had she been thinking, going alone into werewolf-infested territory? Attempting to distract her, he said, "What were you doing in the library?"

Hermione sniffed a few times and then lifted her head, pulling herself together with a deep breath. "I was looking for a particular spell I remember reading once," she whispered. "It was for Harry. He knows the final battle must come soon, and he's scared. He sent Ginny and the baby off to London, but hasn't heard from them since, and

he's terrified something's happened to them. Plus we still haven't managed to destroy the snake. It must be staying close to Voldemort."

"I haven't seen Nagini for some time," Severus commented. "The Dark Lord is keeping the location of his pet a secret. Have you found Ravenclaw's wand yet?"

"Yes," Hermione answered quietly. "Some mad old wizard had it in his collection of antique wands. We modified his memory after we destroyed it and left a replica so he wouldn't know anything had happened. But it was hellishly difficult to destroy. I cast that protective spell you used on the cup. It was still nasty the wand seemed to know it was under attack and shot hexes at us. Harry tried Reducto on it, and the floor beneath him vanished when it returned fire with the same spell. I was just able to levitate him above the hole in time."

Snape nodded. "Wands are semi-sentient. It's logical to think that it would copy the spells you threw at it. So how did you manage to eventually destroy it?"

"We both hit it with the Killing Curse. It was horrible it let out this high-pitched scream. Then it just sort of ... shriveled, until it was a pile of dust. We'd have had no chance if I hadn't memorized that protective spell of yours. It deflected every hex away from us." She was silent for a moment, thinking, and then asked, "Would that spell be of any use protecting Harry once he's fighting Voldemort? He'll need all the protection he can get then."

Snape shook his head. "No. It's Horcrux-specific. You'll only be able to use it to protect you from Nagini, and then only against the Horcrux retaliatory magic. Don't let her attack you physically, or bite you. She's large enough to be quite capable of inflicting damage even without magic."

Hermione shuddered. "I remember what happened when she bit Arthur Weasley." She was silent for a moment, then added, "But the problem is, we can't find her. And while she lives, we can't kill Voldemort, not really! All that effort, and for what? Just so the world's most evil wizard will someday come back again?" She leaned her head wearily against the timber. Speaking to the ceiling of cobweb-hung seats far above, she said, "I remembered reading in the Restricted Section once, something about a spell to lure another witch's familiar to you, despite where they were. So I decided to come here and try to find it. B...but ... the library's burned ... all those books ... I was all right until I found '*Hogwarts: a History*' lying on the floor ... It was just the spine, everything else gone ..."

With alarm, Severus saw that her eyes had filled up with tears again.

"It was the first book I ever read about Hogwarts. It's irreplaceable!" And she put her head in her hands and began to sob.

Severus sighed. He really didn't have the patience for this sort of emotional wallowing. "Well then," he said sharply, "that sounds like something worthwhile for you to do after the war's over, doesn't it? You said you have access to a Pensieve, you can re-write the bloody book from memory, adding or deleting anything you wish. '*Hogwarts: the New Improved History*.' You'll make a fortune once the school re-opens. Or," he added waspishly, as she looked up at him, the tears drying on her cheeks at the idea, "you can keep sniffing about things that can't be changed and do nothing."

He stood up and unclasped his woolen traveling cloak. Spreading it on the ground, he transfigured it into a blanket. He looked back at Hermione; she was watching him with an odd expression.

"You're a true bastard, aren't you?" she said quietly.

Severus shrugged; he'd been called far worse. At least she was no longer crying. "Do you want to hand me your traveling cloak? I'll transfigure it for you. I'm not going to risk lighting a fire; the weres would smell it."

Hermione cast aside the invisibility cloak and unclasped her woolen cloak underneath. "I'm perfectly capable of transfiguring it myself, thank you," she told him icily. As if to emphasize the fact, her resultant blanket more nearly resembled a quilt.

Severus grunted non-committally as he lay down under his blanket and closed his eyes. It had been a bloody long, trying evening.

Unfortunately, sleep evaded him. The werewolves presumably were now backtracking Hermione's scent trail; a brief howl fest faded into the distance as they headed off along the road to Hogsmeade, and finally he could hear again the patter of rain on their ceiling of seats. However he didn't suggest they go back to the more comfortable quarters of the dungeons. For who knew how many of the creatures were still prowling quietly about, hoping for their reappearance?

But he was wound tighter than a piano string. It was not just the fact that he'd nearly been caught by weres, not merely the irritation of having to deal with Hermione's emotional outburst, but also the memories associated with this place. He'd last been under here with Lily, back when he was a teenager, and the sound of the rain above, the feel of the sand he was lying on, the dusty smell and odd creaks of the timber buttressing, all combined to leave him unsettled with a strange nostalgic, empty feeling in the pit of his stomach. What, after all, was the point of this continual struggle? People he loved were murdered, horrific things done by both sides in the name of war, and nothing he did seemed to make a damn bit of difference in the larger scheme of things. It just kept going, years and miserable bloody years of it ...

He knew that Hermione was still awake too; she gave little startled gasps at every pop of timber or flap of canvas. Finally he heard her stand and then he jumped as he felt the soft *flump* of her blanket landing on top of his own. He began to protest, but Hermione crawled in beside him.

"Shut up. I'm freezing to death, I'm scared witless, and I want to stop bloody thinking!"

As she said this, her fingers were undoing the buttons on his robe, and one hand was creeping downwards, exploring, rubbing, and he felt his body respond as his mind was very efficiently distracted from its brooding thoughts. As her hand closed on him, he decided to agree with her just this once. Thinking was definitely overrated ...

viii.

A grey, watery daylight filtered in through the canvas walls. Rain plopped in lazy heavy droplets outside.

Severus stirred and became aware of a soft, warm presence cuddled up next to him on the sandy floor. For a moment, he was a teenager again, convinced that this was Lily lying asleep beside him, but then as memory reasserted itself, he realized who he was really with, and opened his eyes.

He should be horrified, he thought, as he buried his nose deeper into the sleeper's exuberant mass of hair, smiling at the cinnamon scent that had reasserted itself now the spell had worn off. He should at least feel more ashamed of himself than he did; the age difference alone was bad enough. She was what, nineteen? He counted back the years since he'd left Hogwarts. No, she must be twenty now. That didn't change the fact that he was forty.

He should wake her, get dressed and get out of this dangerous area, in that order. But instead he lay there, breathing in her scent as the day outside gradually lightened, luxuriating in the warmth and feel of her beside him. For the moment, just for this perfect, crystal moment, he allowed himself to feel at peace with the world.

She stirred slightly against him, prelude to waking. Severus felt his penis stir as well, hopefully, and he frowned. What was he thinking? Last night had been a one-off, comfort sex; Hermione would want nothing more to do with him after this ...

"You look worried," a sleepy voice slurred in his ear.

"Just ... just thinking about ... whether all the weres have gone ... " he lied.

"Oh." Hermione propped herself up on one elbow and looked down into his face, which he tried to keep expressionless. But it was difficult; with her pink cheeks and sparkling eyes, with her warm nakedness pressed against him, all he could think about was how much he wanted to make love to her again, how he wanted to feel her writhe in pleasure beneath him and hear her panting murmurs of delight once more ...

"I thought we decided last night that too much thinking wasn't good for us," she told him.

He grimaced, trying to ignore the growing clamour for attention from his nether regions. "This from the woman who got eleven 'Outstandings' in her OWLs!"

"Ten," she corrected absently. "Anyway, I enjoyed it," she added. "So now I'd like to stop thinking again ... "

Before he could answer, she astounded him by leaning forward and kissing him, little playful nips and tender exploration. When she finally left his lips, she transferred her attention to his neck ... then lower, her head disappearing under their makeshift blankets ... further down, and ... oh Merlin! Still lower ....

He groaned, and surrendered his will to her utterly

ix.

He watched appreciatively as Hermione picked up her discarded robe.

"Don't put that on yet," he commented lazily. "I'm enjoying the view."

He was rewarded with a quick grin.

"It's too cold not to," she answered as she slipped it on, shivering. "And if you'd shift yourself, I could transfigure my blanket back into a cloak."

Severus took the hint, stood and began to dress as well. As he bent over to retrieve his blanket prior to transfiguring it, he felt the crystal bottles in his robe pocket chink together, and a thought struck him. Quickly spelling both blankets back to cloaks, he picked them up and handed Hermione's to her absently, then reached into his pocket and withdrew the smallest bottle.

"Hermione, I want you to have this," he said, watching her face intently and holding up the bottle.

She took it, peering at the label before gazing at him quizzically. "What do I want with Orange Essence?"

"Don't be obtuse it's been mis-labeled to hide it. That's a three-hour dose of Felix Felicis."

Hermione gasped and looked at the little bottle with new respect, holding it up to the light to gaze at the contents.

"Severus," she said excitedly, "could we make a detour back to your dungeons for more of this? This could make the difference between our side winning or losing ... "

He held up one hand to forestall her. "That's the last dose in existence," he told her. "The Dark Lord ordered me to make stocks of Felicis for himself and selected members of his Death Eaters. I made placebos instead; the only effect they have is of inducing mild euphoria. I also destroyed all of the rarer ingredients needed whenever I could find them, so that I could tell him truthfully it was impossible to make any more."

She gazed at him. "But ... then why ... oh! This was for your use, wasn't it?" she said with sudden understanding. "Severus, I can't take this; I know how dangerous it is for you, pretending loyalty to Voldemort. Take it back; you need it more than me ..."

He reached for her extended hand, but instead of taking back the proffered phial, closed her fingers, gently but firmly, over it.

"Keep it until you're sure we're in the final battle," he said, meeting her eyes. "The Felicis will keep you ..." He hesitated, he'd almost said alive. But the thought of any harm befalling her was now unendurable, a twisting knot of anxiety in his gut. "It will keep you safe. Use it wisely, but ... use it. Promise me?"

She gazed into his eyes, and he got the impression that she was trying to read his mind without the use of Legilimency. And for once, he didn't care that his emotions showed clearly on his face.

Slowly, she nodded. "I promise," she whispered, slipping the phial into a pocket of her robe.

x.

The tide of war had turned.

The Order of the Phoenix, the Ministry of Magic, and Muggles were now working together to fight the common enemy, having formed the powerful Muggle and Magical Alliance (MaMA) which was having devastating effect of the previously all-conquering Death Eaters of Voldemort.

Traditional magic hexes were limited in that they required the caster to be able to see their victim; Muggle technology, particularly lasers, did not have that restriction. They could, with pinpoint accuracy, hit any target even if line-of-sight was out of the question. Orbiting satellites, previously used by Muggles as a worldwide mobile telephone network, were turned into missile bases, hurling hex-loaded, laser-guided missiles into the enemy.

Muggle researchers found that the giants had an immune system weakness when it came to the influenza virus; it was one of the reasons that their numbers had been declining for centuries as the human population grew and encroached on their previous territories. Therefore a virus was manufactured that would cause mild symptoms of fever and muscle aches in humans, but spell death to the giants. Aurors on broomsticks flew the dangerous missions over giant encampments, dodging magical hexes from airborne Death Eaters while spraying aerosol death on Voldemort's huge allies.

Specially-trained sniffer dogs with automatic Patronus generators affixed to their collars searched out the lairs of Dementors and held them with a permanently-circling Patronus until wizards or witches could be summoned to deal with them. Thousands of Dementors were subsequently confined within specially constructed cages of Patronus light; there, unable to get to their prey, they were left to starve to death.

The armies of Inferi were vanquished by the use of an ultraviolet light spell contained in a Muggle handgun. The flash of actinic radiation gave living humans a mild case of sunburn, but reduced Inferi to smoking remains in an instant. Teams of Muggles, again armed with sniffer dogs, tracked down and destroyed thousands of Inferi with these weapons and bombed the lakes and waterways where they lurked.

The remnants of Voldemort's once-proud Death Eaters were forced into guerilla warfare, hiding, striking, and then running to hide again. And wherever they ran, information provided by Severus Snape inevitably led MaMA to the hiding place, harrying the Death Eaters and keeping them on the defensive, not giving Voldemort the time needed to stop and plan.

Voldemort's egomania would not allow him to conceive that any of his Death Eaters might be employing Occlumency successfully against him and leaking information to the enemy; the only other explanation had to be that Seers were scrying Death Eater movements in advance. Therefore known Seers began to be targeted by the shrinking numbers of Death Eaters. This had only limited effect, as true Seers had seen the future for some time and gone into hiding. That left only misguided hopefuls or out-and-out fraudsters on the receiving end of Voldemort's purge.

The Death Eaters were beginning to lose the war. The demographics of Earth had been changed forever; the once-uneasy, wary alliance of Muggles and Magicals, forged of necessity, was now a smoothly operating unit, greater than the sum of its individual parts. Death Eaters were deserting Voldemort in droves, more terrified of MaMA than of their megalomaniacal leader.

There was even optimistic talk now of what MaMA could achieve once the war was won: many were speaking of colonizing Mars and beyond: Muggle technology could reach the Red Planet and once there, an automatic Floo connection or Portkey would be set up. From Mars, humanity could leap-frog throughout the solar system and beyond ...

Meanwhile, the fight to capture or kill Voldemort and his last remaining Horcrux continued apace. For as long as the snake, Nagini, remained alive, the most evil wizard the

world had ever known could never really be destroyed.

xi.

Severus only managed to see Hermione a few times in the six months since they had hidden together under the Quidditch stands. The Dark Lord was now so very paranoid that it was dangerous for any of his Death Eaters to be gone long from his personal supervision. So the visits were brief, infrequent ... and passionate.

Severus still couldn't understand how the young witch had managed to get through his emotional defenses so easily; but what left him totally bemused was why she wanted to in the first place.

During their last time together, she had whimpered, "I love you, Severus!" He had been too preoccupied then to examine the statement closely, but she repeated it as they lay drowsily together afterward, listening to the soft sound of the rain pattering against the bedroom window of her Unplottable home.

Severus had turned onto his side to look at her seriously. "Why?" he finally asked, genuinely puzzled. "I'm flattered, immensely flattered. But why?"

Hermione thought about it. "I began to feel for you that night you found me in the Hogwarts Library. Remember how distraught I was?"

Severus snorted softly. "I remember you called me a bastard, or words to that effect." He ran one finger playfully along her naked shoulder as he spoke, down to her neck, where she now wore only the tiny bottle of Felix Felicis on a leather thong. He touched it fleetingly; it was warm to the touch from being nestled against her skin. He leaned forward and kissed her, stroking her hair. "Am I still a bastard?"

"You've grown on me," Hermione admitted with a little smile. "Anybody else would have tried to comfort me and sympathized about what a loss the destruction was. I think I would have dissolved into jelly if you'd done that. Instead, you told me that it was up to me. I could use my memory and passion for the place, rebuild and rewrite Hogwarts. A History, or I could keep crying and do nothing. And do you know, that was the best possible thing you could have said? You didn't give me empty sympathy; you gave me two options and let me choose which to take. It struck me then that's what you've always done, for as long as I've known you. You help put things into perspective for me, give me the options, and let me decide." She smiled. "Like those times in class when you'd look into my cauldron and say, 'Are you sure you want to put that particular ingredient into the mix, Miss Granger? Why not comfrey root instead?' And I'd be forced to think about the consequences of my actions: would the cauldron blow up, or would the potion be unaffected or even improved?"

"You're not saying I have my throwaway remarks about books and cauldrons to thank for being here, are you?" Severus questioned with a slight smile.

"No, but certainly that started me thinking. I'll admit I was bloody terrified that night under the Quidditch stand. Werewolves howling around outside and only a couple of spells to hide us! Admittedly, it was comfort sex I was after that night. But ... when I was with you I felt ... I don't know, I felt safe. Protected."

Severus pulled her closer into the circle of his arms. "I'm, what, a ... knight in shining armor to you?"

"No, you're a survivor, and you made damn sure I survived as well. I know how scared you must have been of the werewolves, you knew they'd be all through the Forest; yet you still went to get those potions and notes you needed, and saved my life while you were about it. That's incredibly courageous, Severus. You inspire me to strive to be the best I can possibly be. And I love you for it."

"You were there as well," he reminded her. "You went to help your friend. If I'm courageous, as you say, then you are too, just as much."

She was silent after that, one hand resting on his chest. He didn't need Legilimency to know what she was thinking: what were his feelings towards her? But she didn't ask, and for that Severus was thankful.

For the truth was that he was afraid. Always, whenever he had allowed himself to love anybody, they ended up dead. He couldn't afford to love. But his heart wasn't listening to the wise advice of his head, and his feelings for the young witch beside him terrified him.

He played and replayed their conversation over in his head many times in the days that followed, whenever he felt helpless or feared the situation he was in was spiraling out of control, and always the fact that Hermione respected him, even loved him for what he was trying to do, gave him the strength to continue.

But what if they did both survive the war, what then? Could he stand aside and let her go once they were both free to make a choice? Truthfully, he had to admit that he would do whatever it took to stay with her, presuming she still wanted him.

At last, he decided that he'd tell her he loved her the next time he saw her. And it would be up to her to decide if she wanted to continue with him or not.

For the first time in many years, he began to hope that he may actually have some sort of future to look forward to after the war, that it needn't be an end in itself. He began to dream of the future again, but now his dreams included the young bushy-haired witch who used to annoy him so thoroughly when she was a student.

xii.

The last few Death Eaters huddled around their master as the house in which they sheltered was, quite literally, torn down around them.

The ceiling and walls groaned and shook as the giant Grawp, vaccinated against influenza, used his formidable strength to repeatedly hit the bricks, attempting to smash his way in. And his tough hide was virtually immune to hexes. Even allowing for the fact that the building had been hastily reinforced magically, it was still taking a hell of a beating. It would not be long before the foundations themselves gave way under the barrage.

Outside, Order of the Phoenix members and Aurors surrounded the building, waiting with wands drawn and ready. And nobody could Disapparate from the house, as a tight Anti-Disapparition Charm had been thrown over the building.

This had caused Severus an immense feeling of relief when he saw the first of the Death Eaters attempt to escape; every Anti-Disapparition Charm had the individual caster's "signature" on it: some sparked magically when an attempt was made to Disapparate from it, others would cause automatic Splinching. Severus knew the signature of this one; it was a definite, buttock-bruising bounce-back. He turned away from the Dark Lord to hide his smile. Hermione had cast that particular charm, he would bet on it.

The barrage ended abruptly, and a voice, magically amplified, sounded. "Voldemort! You and your Death Eaters are completely surrounded. Give yourselves up now and live! You will throw out all of your wands and any other weapons you may have and come out one by one with your hands behind your heads, or we will demolish the house with all of you inside. You have five minutes to decide!"

The voice, even amplified with Sonorous, was instantly recognizable as that of Harry Potter.

"My Lord!" squealed Pettigrew, as the bellowing voice faded. He'd been growing steadily paler and was now quivering visibly. "M...maybe we should surrender peacefully ... You are immortal. After all, nothing the Order does can possibly harm you; you will be able to escape and take your revenge later ..."

The Dark Lord stared at Pettigrew coldly. "So you would have me give up, Wormtail? No doubt you hope to transform back into the rat you are and hide in the rubble while the rest of us hand ourselves docily to the Aurors." He gazed around at the other Death Eaters. "Who else wishes to take this step?"

Bellatrix smiled. "I say we fight on, my Lord! I for one am not ready to let those dogs put me back into Azkaban!"

A chorus of rather uncertain agreement dutifully rang out. "And I," ... "Yes, fight on," ...

Voldemort turned to Severus. "And what say you, Severus? Your counsel is always well-reasoned. I would hear your views."

"My Lord, when I realised we were ambushed here, I sent word to Fenrir Greyback and his pack that we had need of reinforcement. I am confident that he will be here soon. If we can only hold out against the Order until the werewolves arrive, we will have no need to surrender."

Wormtail shook his head. "I heard that Greyback had been challenged and overthrown as Alpha by Remus Lupin! If that's true, there'll be no reinforcements coming! Remus has always been on the side of the Order, and if he's now Alpha, the werewolf packs will do as he says!"

"If it were true," Severus conceded smoothly, knowing it to be a fact but keeping his face bland. "Then indeed we would have few options available to us. But I believe it to be mere rumour and innuendo. Are you telling me, Wormtail, that you think your dear old friend Lupin would have the balls to finish off Greyback?" The scorn he put into his voice was withering. "Lupin always was a weakling, uncomfortable with his lycanthropy, and fit only to be lowest-ranked member of the wolf pack. Rather like yourself, Wormtail."

Pettigrew reddened. "Shut your mouth, Snivellus!"

"However, we should examine this further," Severus continued, as if he had not heard. "Where exactly did you get your 'information'?"

"It was being reported in the *Prophet* that Greyback had been killed. Get around that, Severus!"

"Until you produce a copy of this issue, I'll decline to believe your story, thank you," Severus sneered.

"My Lord!" Pettigrew shrieked, turning to Voldemort beseechingly. "The werewolf packs aren't coming, we're surrounded by Aurors, and we will die here if we don't give in! We must surrender! Please, my Lord ..."

Whatever else he may have been about to say was cut off, however, by a vivid green flash of light. Pettigrew fell backwards, his eyes wide as the life left them. Voldemort lowered his wand and sneered at the body. "I have no use for cowards," he snarled. Aiming his wand at the body again, he flung it through one of the open windows towards the hidden Aurors. Pointing the wand at his throat and casting *Sonorous*, his voice rang out to the watchers. "You have my answer, Potter! Do your worst, and die like your hero Dumbledore!"

The giant barrage began again.

xiii.

Severus dodged between two of the fallen blocks of masonry just as the hex hit the spot he'd been standing, sending stones and dirt fountaining up into the air. Cursing, he stumbled over something, and looking down, saw that it was the body of Peter Pettigrew.

Ignoring Wormtail's accusing dead stare, he knelt down, panting heavily, and risked a glance over the masonry blocks. He could clearly see Potter, who was using bits of demolished house as cover while he duelled the Dark Lord. Voldemort had stopped taunting him now and was grimly throwing his darkest magic against the young man. But Potter had improved more than Severus would ever have given him credit for; the Dark Lord's casts continually missed or were effectively blocked as Potter ducked, dived, parried and counter-hexed. Even as he watched, Severus saw a shower of sparks as a vicious strike almost broke through Voldemort's defenses. The Dark wizard bore the marks of several of Harry's hexes that had made glancing contact, whereas the younger wizard appeared unharmed. The Dark Lord's snake-like face was now a mixture of fury, confusion, and yes, fear.

The fighting had spread out over a wide area; in the distance Severus could see the giant Grawp fighting in hand-to-hand combat against another giant. Grawp appeared to be winning; although his opponent was bigger, he was also obviously weakened and sick with 'flu infection. There was an explosion as a hex hit, throwing up a curtain of dust and obscuring Severus's view of the fighting behemoths.

All around were shouts, sounds of hexes, smoke and screams. He heard a nasty shriek of triumph and whipped his head around in time to see an Auror go down under Bellatrix's curse. And Severus felt his heart clench just a short distance away, he suddenly saw Hermione, her wand ready as she advanced on Bellatrix determinedly.

He threw another quick glance at the Dark Lord. He was still too preoccupied dueling Potter to notice what his Death Eaters were doing, so Severus carefully took aim and threw the killing curse at Bella, smiling coldly when the green light hit her midsection and threw her body backwards. Hermione crouched warily behind a cinder block and looked towards him; their eyes locked, and she smiled, ever so slightly, in acknowledgement.

It was then that Severus heard it: a loud and angry hiss sounded. Bella's body moved with a sudden horrible semblance of life as a large, sinuous something slithered out from underneath her. Severus stared hard at the thing and realized what it was as it looped away from Bella's body. Nagini, under a Disillusionment Charm! So that's where she'd been these many months, hidden in plain sight with her Master all along!

The dust from the building collapse had coated her smooth, glassy scales so that he could see her outline vaguely even through the charm. Hermione was also gazing at the spot, apparently puzzled by what looked like a flowing river of dust. Perhaps she'd never heard of the Disillusionment Charm before, Severus thought.

He couldn't let the snake escape. It would be all too easy for it, disguised in that way, to slip under some rubble and hide out with the last fragment of Voldemort's soul. The dust cloud that indicated the snake's head was already disappearing into a fissure leading to the basement. Severus knew he couldn't take the time needed to invoke the Horcrux Protection, the snake would be to hell and gone in a moment. Instead, he raised his wand and cast a swift *Sectumsempra*!

The effect was immediate; Nagini hissed like an exploding steam kettle, and her coils flew high into the air as bright red blood blossomed in a long line along her side. It was not enough to kill the snake, but certainly it marked her position in plain sight. Then Severus was slammed to the ground as he was hit with his own spell in retaliation.

"Severus!" It was Hermione's voice. He struggled to a sitting position, ripping away his shirt to reveal a long bleeding cut across his chest, but one that mercifully was not deep.

"I'm all right!" he yelled to Hermione. "The snake, get the snake!"

He began to chant the counter-curse, his wand-tip tracing the shallow wound, the skin knitting cleanly behind it. From the corner of his eye, he saw Hermione grimly begin the Horcrux protection invocation; her hair lifted in the windless air as the charm took hold and she advanced warily on the furious snake, its position highlighted by the long, bloody wound.

Severus had just finished the counter-curse when he heard a wild ululation and saw a tattered pack of ragged men and women with amber eyes join the fray, fighting on the side of the Order and Ministry Aurors with Remus Lupin at their head. Severus smiled grimly. So, Lupin had received his Patronus message that the final battle was about to start. This way the werewolves loyal to him would take some of the credit for the win against the Death Eaters and hopefully be less marginalized afterwards because of it.

Hermione had managed to stun Nagini. The snake's blood-stained outline lay on the ground in limp coils. Severus saw the young witch glance across at him worriedly, and he managed to nod reassuringly to her, getting to his feet as a sign that he would survive. He saw her expression smooth out in relief as she again turned her attention to finishing off the snake Horcrux. He watched for a second longer as she managed to lift the Disillusionment Charm smart little witch, having never seen it before! and Nagini reappeared, dusty, blood-stained and unresponsive.

Satisfied that the snake was all but dead, Severus peered out from behind cover. The Dark Lord was on his knees now, no longer throwing hexes at Potter. Instead he was focusing all his remaining energy on maintaining a shielding charm in front of him to counter the killing curses Potter was flinging at him. It was unbelievable - how had the younger wizard become so adept in just a few short years?

However, Severus was aware that Potter's luck could change at any time. All it took would be for one of the remaining Death Eater to cast an Unforgivable at Potter while



his attention was on the Dark Lord. Severus preferred that it end now, with Voldemort's shield concentrated in front of him, leaving him unprotected at the back.

Coming out from behind cover, he threw Sectumsemptra at his former Master. "THAT'S FOR LILY!"

Voldemort howled in pain and his entire body jerked as his robe was slit open and a deep but eerily bloodless cut sliced across the corpse-white skin of his back.

Severus saw Potter glance at him, wide-eyed and incredulous at the assistance, but Severus had no time to feel vindicated. Casting again, he yelled, "THAT'S FOR ALBUS!"

The Dark Lord folded at the knees. An igloo-shaped dome of protective magic appeared about him, shielding him as both Potter and Severus advanced on him, their combined hexes sparking and smoking as together they hit and weakened the shield, which diminished steadily in size as Voldemort's energy was sapped. Severus could see hex-marks appear on the Dark Lord's body as some of the curses got through the weakening protection. As the two wizards got nearer, they saw cracks had appeared in the shield.

Potter raised his wand for the final killing curse, confident that Avada Kedavra would have the strength needed to break through, but as he cast, the cracked shield surrounding the Dark Lord suddenly turned glassy as a mirror.

Severus realized what that meant an instant before it happened, and his warning shout was too late: Potter's curse broke through the shield and Voldemort flew backwards through the air, his red slitted eyes wide in disbelief as he died. But the residue of Avada Kedavra rebounded off the disintegrating shield, striking Potter, who gave a gasp of surprise and collapsed.

Severus was by Potter's side in three long strides. Kneeling down, he felt for and Merlin, found! a pulse. Slow and steady. He checked the young man's breathing. Again, it was there. Severus checked the lump forming on the young man's head. The skull beneath was undamaged. No doubt he would have the mother of all headaches when he came to, but he was not only alive, but appeared to have merely been knocked unconscious. The only other damage was that there was now another lightning-shaped mark on Potter's forehead, red and bleeding slightly, superimposed on top of the older scar.

Severus sat back on his heels, feeling stunned. Harry Potter was now officially the only person ever to have survived the killing curse, not once, but twice. The only thing he could attribute it to was that the main force of the curse must have been used up on the Dark Lord, leaving Potter to be hit with a smaller, non-lethal dose. That, and an amazing amount of luck ...

He felt a sudden chill. Potter had been lucky, incredibly so, luckier than anybody had any right to expect. With shaking hands, Severus moved aside the collar of Potter's robe and felt his mouth go dry. There, hanging from a leather cord about his neck was a familiar tiny bottle. But the golden potion it had once contained had been drained. There was the answer to Potter's amazing luck. Hermione had given him the Felix Felicis.

Severus could see it in his mind's eye: Hermione, knowing the final battle was about to be fought, insisting that Potter drink the luck potion. He could almost hear her words ringing in his ears: "*Harry, you take this; you need it more than I do. You must kill Voldemort!*"

He was on his feet in one swift panicky movement, turning to where he had seen her last. And there she was lying in the dust, her face pale as death, enfolded in the snake's coils! And the Horcrux protective spell could do nothing against a non-magical assault.

Severus was running, shouting and casting hexes at the snake as he ran, anything he could think of to make Nagini loosen her death grip on Hermione. As he approached, the snake raised its triangular head and looked straight at him, and Severus saw that its eyes had become blood-red. It opened its mouth and hissed at him, "*Ssss ... ever ... ussss!*"

Then he realized what had happened: the Dark Lord's spirit, his body destroyed by the killing curse, had taken over Nagini's still-living body. The coils tightened visibly again, squeezing the life out of the young witch.

Severus raised his wand and slashed down at the snake's ugly head. "*Sectumsemptra!*"

The body twitched spastically as the head fell onto the dust, completely severed and spurting blood. The evil red light faded from its eyes as the snake, and Voldemort, finally died.

But Severus was no longer watching. He was pulling the snake's now-slack coils off Hermione, crying out her name, begging for some response. But her eyes remained closed, her face deathly pale. A thin trickle of blood had appeared at the corner of her mouth, staining her cheek. He dragged her from under the dead weight of the animal.

"*Rennervate!*" he cried desperately, his wand pointing at her chest; there was a flash of red light, but nothing else happened. "*RENNERVATE!* Oh please, Hermione! *Rennervate ... RENNERVATE!*"

But there was no response. With a shaky hand he felt for a pulse, tried to feel a breath, but there was nothing. Nothing. At last, he sank down onto the dusty ground and pulled her body into his lap. Holding her tightly, the tears that he had not cried for Lily, or for Albus, at last flowed. Great shuddering sobs tore from him as he rocked her, unable to let her go.

"Accio wand!" Severus lifted a tear-stained face as his wand flew out of his hand to the outstretched hand of an Auror. The man had a leer on his face. "Severus Snape, I'm arresting you on the charge of murdering Albus Dumbledore and for Death Eater activities in support of the Dark Lord Voldemort ..."

Severus merely bent his head over Hermione's bushy hair again, ignoring the man. An angry shout sounded, and the hoarse voice of Remus Lupin said, "You fool, Dawlish! He's on our side, man!"

Dawlish turned to face the newcomer. "You talk of sides, Werewolf!" It was said scornfully. "Why should I listen to you?"

Remus made an ugly growling sound. "Summon Shackbolt if you don't believe me. He'll tell you the truth. Severus has been under cover, giving us information on the movements of the Death Eaters for years ..."

To Severus their argument meant no more than the buzzing of angry bees, but at least they were ignoring him for now. Locked in his private misery, he suddenly saw salvation. For lying by Hermione's side where she'd dropped it was her wand. Reverently he picked it up, staring into her face in gratitude.

A gentle, sifting rain began to fall, quiet and soothing, surrounding the world in a grey hush. It was appropriate; every significant event in his life had been played out to the sound of the rain. Severus pressed a last gentle kiss to Hermione's cold forehead. "I love you, little witch," he whispered.

Then he pointed her wand at his chest, the tip just above his broken heart.

"*Avada Kedavra!*"

There was a flash of green light ...

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>

