

Coming Back to You

by michmak

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Coming Back to You

Chapter 1 of 7

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A/N: Hey everyone. Just a bit of a preface -- I'm thinking this little series is going to be about 100 drabbles of 100 words each, no more, no less. Each drabble will be a progression of sorts into the rehabilitation of Snape after the events of Deathly Hallows, where certain events at the end of the book (ahem, ahem) have *never* happened. Since I am a hopeless/hopeful Snape/Hermione shipper, it should be obvious from the start where this story will go.

Hope you enjoy.

His neck was on fire, but only where the snake bite had punctured it. The rest felt strangely cold, despite the fact it was covered in his own slick blood.

The venom coursing through his veins would not have a chance to kill him he would bleed to death first. He had always known he was going to die, but had expected it would be with a little more fanfare than this.

He wondered if he was done now; if he had finally won the right to remember the woman he'd tried so hard to forget.

"Forgive me..." he thinks.

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The last thing he sees is her green eyes, in the face of his most hated enemy. It tears at him, as it always has, to wonder if things would have been different if he hadn't joined the Death Eaters in a fit of jealousy and anger. Could she have forgiven him? Would she have realized how much he loved her, and returned that love? Would her son have also been his?

The thought makes his dying heart stutter. What would a child of his and Lily's making look like? He imagines a son with Lily's eyes. Always, her eyes.

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He barely has the strength to pull his memories for Potter and is unsure if the boy will even bother to look at them. He knows that, were it was his most hated enemy dying

on the floor he would be too busy gloating. But Potter he's not like that, is he? He's her son, more than James'. He wants to tell the boy, to explain and perhaps to apologize, but there isn't enough time. Instead, he gazes into the eyes of the only woman he every really loved, and wishes there was a way to start all over again.

"Anytime now," he thinks to himself. "I'm ready I've done everything I could. I can't do anymore." He thinks of his students and imagines how happy they will be when they hear he is dead. "No happier than I will be to never have to teach them again," he mutters in his head. But he wonders if that's really true. Some of his students...not many, but a few...one...had been worth teaching.

An image of bushy hair and a waving hand races across his memory. He regrets that he won't be alive to see what she would make of herself.

Potter is long gone, but he is still alive. He wonders how that could be, considering the amount of blood he's lost and the fact that his heart is barely beating. He hasn't been able to blink for hours, and his eyes feel dry and gritty. The air is stale, redolent with the coppery scent of his own blood. He wonders if he is somehow trapped, if being stuck halfway between life and death is just another torment in the long string of torments that have made up his life. He wonders if someone will come to collect his body.

The sound of a door creaking open eventually breaks the silence, but he can't see who has entered the room -- his eyes are too full of grit.

"Oh, sir," a voice murmurs. *Granger*. "Look what he's done to you!" Hermione is kneeling in front of him. A gentle hand reaches out to push his lank hair from his face, its touch soft and fleeting.

"Whoa, look at all that blood," a second person has entered the room. "Thought you needed a heart to bleed."

"I thought you needed a brain to talk," the first person retorts hotly. "Honestly, Ron!"

'This is a punishment worse than death,' he thinks to himself as Hermione and Ron bicker above him. He's pleased they're there, of course it means Potter must have told them where his body was. And the fact that they're both still alive probably means Voldemort has finally been defeated. He wonders if Harry somehow managed to survive. Since he doesn't believe in miracles, he finds the idea highly unlikely. His father had been fond of telling him 'only the good die young'. Considering he himself was still alive and suffering, whilst Harry was probably dead, proved that old adage.

'...can't believe he's still alive!'

'...loss of blood, almost impossible...'

'...dore's orders he's a hero, and I shan't let him be sent to Azka...'

'...soup, sir. I know it hurts, but just try, please.'

The voices blend together in his head. His brain feels clouded and his entire body hurts when anyone touches it. Rationally, he knows this is a reaction to the snake venom and loss of blood, but he just wants it all to stop. Death should be the end of pain, and he has been denied even that.

He thrashes and murmurs Lily's name in his stupor.

She comes to him in his dreams, wipes his brow, holds his hand. "It's okay now," she whispers, "Voldemort is dead, and everyone knows everything you did. Harry has told them all."

"'s it really you?" he manages to slur out. "D'you forgive me?"

"We all forgive you," she replies. "Harry couldn't have defeated Voldemort without you. But do you forgive us? It hasn't been easy for you."

Her words ease his pain and a strange warmth seems to spread through his body. He grips her hand, tries to smile, murmurs her name. He wonders why her eyes are brown.

When next he wakes up, Hermione is there. Her bushy mass of hair covers her face and he can tell she is sleeping, sitting there in the chair next to his bed. He studies her sleepily, and can't even muster any anger when he realizes he must be her new pet cause like the house elves with SPEW.

He doesn't think his image will be all that easy to rehabilitate, and wonders why he should even have to try. It was supposed to end with his death, but since it's obvious he's still alive he wonders what he'll do now.

Hermione brings him tea and tells him what's going on outside his sickroom. He has other visitors Potter for one but Hermione's the only one he really enjoys. Not that Potter's visits aren't interesting, because they are especially if one enjoys awkward conversation, long conversational pauses, and tentative building of strained relationships.

It's easier with Hermione. The girl has an exceptionally sharp mind; her conversation is always stimulating and intelligent. Her tongue can be quite sharp when it needs to be, and he enjoys her rapier wit. He even finds himself laughing at some of the things she tells him.

"You're looking much better," she greets him as she walks through the door. "Poppy thinks you might be able to return to your own quarters soon."

"When?" he growls in response. His throat is still sore, but he feels himself getting stronger every day.

"Maybe by the end of the week. I brought you the paper, and in case you want to read something not actually written by a bunch of moronic gossips, I also brought you the latest addition of Potions Monthly. They're claiming you as one of their own now, since you're a hero and not evil anymore."

His robes are crisp and black, and he's glad to be back in them. His fingers trail over the material, enjoying the feel of something that's not sick-room flannel. Hermione

grins when he approaches the table she is sitting at.

"Poppy's let you out early," she states.

"Obvious," he snarks back. "May I join you?"

She nods acquiescence, and he looks at Harry and Ron as he pulls out a chair and sits.

"Harry, Ron," he mutters.

Harry half-smiles, "Sir." He's pretty sure Hermione kicks Ron from under the table, because the red-headed idiot jumps and mumbles a half-hearted "Sir."

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"I still don't trust him," Ron's voice is petulant. Snape buries himself deeper in the shadows.

"I don't understand why not," Hermione sounds cross. "He's been completely exonerated, Ron. Even Harry trusts him!"

"I don't like the way he looks at you," Ron replies. "You're not his friend. He shouldn't treat you like one."

"I am his friend," she replies firmly. "I admire him immensely and I enjoy spending time with him. He's very interesting."

"I don't want you seeing him anymore."

"Too bad," Hermione replies tartly.

Hidden deep in the shadows, Snape feels an unexpected warmth towards the girl.

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"He's completely impossible," she fumes a couple of days later. "Over-sensitive, hyper-critical....*redhead!*"

Snape arches a brow at her. "I assume you're referring to a Weasley."

"Ron!" she confirms. "He thinks he owns me! He doesn't want me talking to...doesn't want me to have certain friends."

"Meaning me," Snape responds. "I completely understand if our friendship must end. I probably am bad for your reputation." He sighs morosely and smirks inside when she faces him, eyes blazing.

"No one not even Ronald Weasley is going to dictate to me. Sod my reputation, Sir. You can't get rid of me that easily."

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He watches her and hopes no one knows. There's a certain gravitas about her; her presence soothes. While her friends spin wildly around her she remains calm and serene, like the eye of a hurricane. He finds that she is the only one he truly feels at peace with. Lately, he's been wondering what it would take to get her to brush his forehead with her gentle fingers, to hold his hand as she had when he had been so dreadfully ill. In his delirium, he had thought Lily had returned to him now he understands it was always Hermione.

~fin, part 1~

Touched by An Angel

Jimmy Rankin

I've been touched by an angel, that's one thing for sure

I felt the flutter of her wings on my skin

I fell harder than ever before

From higher than I've ever been

I'm dragging my heart around

It's lonely here on the ground

And nothing can knock my down

Like the touch of an angel

I've been touched by an angel, Swear to God that's the truth

She showed my heaven one night

Angels can fly, she's living proof

I watched her with my own two eyes

I'm dragging my heart around.

It's lonely here on the ground

And nothing can knock my down

Like the touch of something that you want to hold

Something that you want too much

Just when it starts to get close

It's too far away to touch

I'm dragging my heart around

It's lonely here on the ground
And nothing can knock me down
Like the touch of an angel
The touch of an angel
The touch of an angel

In the Gloaming

Chapter 2 of 7

They sit in companionable silence until the day turns to gloaming...

A/N: Only six drabbles this time, but they took me where I wanted to go. I hope they do the same for anyone else taking the time to read this.

Those who were expecting him to change after Voldemort's death and his release from life as a spy are sorely disappointed. His demeanour doesn't change all that much – he's still dour, enigmatic and sarcastic. The students still scurry away when he strides down the hall, a fact which he secretly finds amusing. There are still those who think he got off lightly, a fact which he secretly agrees with.

He should be dead and gone, and instead he's terrorizing his classes, making first years cry, and finding that he doesn't really know what his purpose is anymore. Has he one?

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"...rushing into things, don't you think?" She has joined him for lunch, and she gesticulates wildly with her sandwich as she makes her point. "For goodness sake, she hasn't even graduated yet! I know the war is over and everyone is giddy with it, but have they all lost their senses? Ginny and Harry are way too young to even be considering this!"

Snape smirks; but doesn't respond. His day has suddenly become much brighter. Earlier, when Minerva had told him about Potter's engagement, she'd also mentioned the next announcement would be Hermione and Ron's. Obviously, Minerva doesn't know everything.

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He finds that he enjoys sitting by the lake with a good book, enjoying the warmth of the sun. It's been a long time since he allowed himself this small pleasure, and he almost forgets the reason he had stopped doing it, until Lupin appears. For a brief moment, Snape thinks the big black dog bounding behind him is Sirius, until he remembers Black is dead and will never torment him again.

The other man smiles tentatively at Snape, and motions the animal to heel. Snape starts in surprise when he realizes the other man is holding a bright-eyed toddler.

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"Teddy loves the beast," Remus nods at the dog, who is currently having his ears pulled rather vigorously by said child. "And gods know, the dog loves him back. I can't help but think that Nymphadora sent him to us, somehow."

"It does look remarkably like her patronus," Snape agrees. He doesn't know what else to say. For some reason, Lupin had joined him and was chatting him up as if they'd never been enemies. Perhaps they hadn't.

"I loved her, and I wasted so much time..." Lupin runs a shaking hand across his face. "Will I always miss her?"

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Hermione and Potter join them by the lake sometime after lunch. Harry smiles when his godson climbs into his lap and promptly falls asleep, while Hermione admires the youngster's bright blue hair. They've brought a bottle of wine with them, and enough glasses for all. Snape notices, after a glass or three, that Hermione's hair has hidden glints of gold and nutmeg within the depths of her curls.

"How did you end up becoming Remus' agony aunt?" she asks after the two other men finally leave.

Snape shrugs, "I've no idea. I think it had something to do with Lily."

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They sit in companionable silence until the day turns to gloaming, and Snape wonders idly whatever happened to the young girl who couldn't sit still for a minute before asking a question. He'd expected a rash of them when he'd mentioned Lily – even been prepared to answer them – but she'd simply said, "You must have loved her very much."

"I did," he'd agreed. "She was my best friend at a time when I had none. I'll never forgive what I did to her."

"I'll never forget what you did *for* her," Hermione had replied. "And for the rest of us."

~fin 2~

Pas des Deux

Chapter 3 of 7

When she smiles at him, he realizes he's fallen in love with someone totally unsuitable for the second time in his life.

A/N: Another 8. Slow, but steady. I don't want to rush these, so I hope they're worth the wait.

Time seems more fluid, now that Voldemort is dead. Most days, he feels like he's living somebody else's life, watching the goings on from outside himself, wondering just how and why he survived. It's not that he doesn't enjoy living – oddly enough, he finds that he does. It's the unknown he doesn't like. Before, he could be reasonably certain what lay before him: pain, stress, guilt, and certain death at the hands of a mad man. Now, the future stretches before him empty except for what he can make of it. He only knows he wants Hermione in it somehow.

"But is that what you want?" he asks her one afternoon at lunch. Having been too busy fighting a war in her seventh year to actually attend school, she has decided to remain an extra year to make up for the courses she missed. Ron and Harry both think her absolutely barmy for doing so, but Snape is secretly pleased.

Hermione nods resolutely. "Oh yes – absolutely. I enjoy being a student, and I don't really know what I want to do with the rest of my life yet anyhow. Besides, who would you eat lunch with every day if I left?"

Of course, Minerva is delighted by the news. "I'm sure we can work something out, Hermione," she interrupts their conversation the next day. "It's unprecedented, having a student return for an eighth year. Perhaps an apprenticeship would work better for you? I'm sure you could choose whatever field interests you most."

Hermione beams. "How on earth would I ever be able to choose just one? I'm interested in them all, except—" she shudders—"history. Do you know who's teaching potions next year?"

"I am," Snape answers quietly. "I never want to be associated with the dark arts again."

Later that night, he replays the memory of her sympathetic smile and remembers the pat of her hand on his own. "*You're a brilliant potions master. If you permit it, I would love to apprentice under you.*" The thought of working closely with the girl makes him happier than it should, considering she's still his student, but he can't help himself. Everyone else had seemed relieved at the news that he would be giving up the dark arts professorship, still not trusting him in that position. Only Hermione had understood immediately that it hadn't been a difficult decision at all.

Potter and the Weasley girl are married in July, and Snape finds himself a guest at the wedding. He had debated not attending, feeling he would be completely out of place and would make the other guests uncomfortable, but he hasn't seen Hermione since she'd returned home for the summer before her apprenticeship begins. She writes him of course – he receives an owl almost every day, inquiring as to his health, relating little pieces of information she knows he'll find interesting, asking questions about what she'll need to have ready for September, but it's not the same. He misses her.

He wouldn't have recognized Hermione at all if he hadn't known she was Ginny's Maid of Honour. "*The dresses are atrocious,*" one guest whispers to another, "*they all look like candy-coloured meringues!*"

"*That's the whole point,*" is the muted response. "*It's a Muggle wedding. The dresses are supposed to be ugly.*"

Snape supposes they are, but he's never seen her with her hair in a chignon before. The grace of her neck distracts him from all the lace. When she smiles at him, he realizes he's fallen in love with someone totally unsuitable for the second time in his life.

He doesn't get to actually speak with her until much later. So many people want to talk to her, and she's surrounded by her friends. The Weasley menace spins her around on the dance floor so often, he's amazed her feet haven't dropped off. He sits in the corner watching her and wonders at his stupidity. He's twice her age and mooning after her like some love-struck teenager. He should tell her he's changed his mind about taking her on in September, but can't think of a valid reason for doing so that won't give him away.

"Pathetic," he mutters.

She's flushed and radiant when she finally seeks him out. She's managed to disengage from Weasley for the time being, and plops down in the chair beside his.

"I thought I'd never make it over here to say hello," she exclaims. "Are you having fun, Sir?"

"Oh yes, loads," he reply is sarcastic.

She laughs. "Don't be such a kill joy. It wouldn't kill you to get up and dance with the rest of us!"

"I think it might," he retorts. But when she asks him to waltz with her moments later and grabs his hands, he doesn't say no.

~fin 3~

Dance Me To The End Of Love

Leonard Cohen

Dance me to your beauty with a burning violin
Dance me through the panic 'til I'm gathered safely in
Lift me like an olive branch and be my homeward dove
Dance me to the end of love
Dance me to the end of love
Oh let me see your beauty when the witnesses are gone
Let me feel you moving like they do in Babylon
Show me slowly what I only know the limits of
Dance me to the end of love
Dance me to the end of love
Dance me to the wedding now, dance me on and on
Dance me very tenderly and dance me very long
We're both of us beneath our love, we're both of us above
Dance me to the end of love
Dance me to the end of love
Dance me to the children who are asking to be born
Dance me through the curtains that our kisses have outworn
Raise a tent of shelter now, though every thread is torn
Dance me to the end of love
Dance me to your beauty with a burning violin
Dance me through the panic till I'm gathered safely in
Touch me with your naked hand or touch me with your glove
Dance me to the end of love
Dance me to the end of love
Dance me to the end of love

Reaching for the Moon

Chapter 4 of 7

Snape realizes she's using him, to prove a point. He wonders briefly if he should let her. The material of her dress brushes against his legs as they spin. "Yes," he thinks. "Yes."

A/N at bottom of chapter. 8 more drabbles here.

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"...believe she's dancing with him! She knows..." Weasley's voice, even though he's trying to whisper, is loud. Snape catches the gist of the younger man's diatribe as he and Hermione pass the table where he's sitting. The first waltz ends and a second begins. Instead of stepping away from him, Hermione engages him in another dance. By the flash in her eyes, he knows she'd heard Ron. Snape realizes she's using him, to prove a point. He wonders briefly if he should let her. The material of her dress brushes against his legs as they spin. "Yes," he thinks. "Yes."

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When he returns to his chambers much later that night, this is what he remembers:

The amber and honey smell of her hair, and the curl that fell loose when she swung her head to glare at Ron.

Dainty fingers clasping his, the weight of her hand on his shoulder; her breath, warm and moist, against his neck.

The glide and retreat of her body against his as they moved across the floor.

Her wistful smile when he bowed and thanked her for the dances.

His wish the night would never end.

His regret when it did.

His loneliness now.

He doesn't see her again until two days before the start of school. She moves in early in order to prepare for her apprenticeship. Her hair is loose and bushy, obscuring the pale column of neck he'd so admired at Potter's wedding.

"I'm still waiting on one book," she tells him over breakfast. "It should be here sometime tomorrow."

He nods, watches intently as she butters her toast, stabs at an egg, sips her tea. He is fascinated by the way her mouth moves. She is not hesitant with him. Instead she is direct, laughing, loquacious and completely, irretrievably, bewitching.

Ron is in his office later that day, surly, sullen, and completely out-of-line. "If I could get her to listen to reason, she wouldn't even be here. You may have been working for the right side the whole time, but I still don't like you. Not only that, but all your ex-death eater friends don't like you either. What happens if one decides to get back at you by attacking Hermione? Can you keep her safe?"

Snape orders him brusquely out of his office, but later that afternoon the younger man's words echo in his head. Can he protect her?

Dumbledore is in his portrait when Snape goes to the Headmistress' office later that evening. It is his first visit since the final battle, and the familiar mixture of anger and love rises in his chest when he spies the old wizard. "Albus."

"Severus, my dear boy! I am so happy you've finally come to visit me. I cannot tell you enough..."

"Don't." Snape's reply is short. "I'm not here for that." He pauses, steepled his fingers. "I'm supposed to be dead, Albus. The fact that I'm not makes me a danger to everyone around me. Why won't it end?"

Minerva interrupts some time later, surreptitiously clearing her throat as she peeks around the door to her office. "I've brought some tea," she explains gently. "And a bottle of Ogden's. May I come in?"

Snape motions her in. "I like what you've done to the office. It suits you."

"I'm sorry that..."

"Minerva, I'm happy. People trust you. More importantly, they like you. That's important."

"They like you too," Albus interjects. "After all, they know the truth now."

"I still killed you," Snape replies. "Things haven't changed for me that much, except now I have even fewer friends than before."

The tea is good, the Ogden's is better. Snape's belly is warm but his mind is still full when he takes his leave. He can't help but worry. The Wesley boy is an obnoxious prat, but he isn't stupid. There will be students here tomorrow who are children of death-eaters. Some of their parents are dead, or in Azkaban, and he knows they'll blame him. He's not worried about what they'll do to him – just being alive makes him a target – but he is worried about what they could do to Hermione. She's their enemy too, moreso because of him.

He dreams of her that night, of her face, pale as the moon as they waltz together and her blood drains from a gaping wound in her neck. He can't stop it or save her – all he can do is hold her as she dies, watching her eyes glaze over. *"It should have been you,"* they accuse him. *"Why didn't you save me?"*

He wakes just after midnight, clammy and shaking, and barely makes it to the loo before vomiting. He knows what he needs to do. Tomorrow, he'll tell her he's changed his mind. Tomorrow, he'll send her away.

~fin4~

What can I say about Snape in this series of drabbles, other than the fact that he's terribly lonely and insecure, and doubtful of his own self-worth. I'm in a maudlin mood because of these drabbles, but it can't be helped. The real question is, how can he reconcile what he wants and what he needs with his fears and doubts?

The song below, to me, completely reflects the dichotomy and longing within this man. The bonus? It's also a waltz – perhaps one of the songs Snape and Hermione danced to at Potter's wedding.

Reaching for the Moon

Irving Berlin

The moon and you appear to be

So near and yet so far from me

And here am I on a night in June

Reaching for the moon and you,

I wonder if we'll ever meet

My song of love is incomplete

I'm just the words, looking for the tune

Reaching for the moon and you.

I'm just the words, looking for the tune

Reaching for the moon and you.

Changes

Chapter 5 of 7

He wonders how he managed to survive as a double agent all these years when lying to her almost kills him.

A/N: Sorry for the delay in getting this up -- working out exactly what I wanted in drabble format for this chapter has been difficult. I got to thinking about the start of the new school year after the war, and what would happen to the Slytherins and to Snape and this is what I came up with. There's an inordinate amount of Harry and not a whole lot of Hermione, but I think what I have of her in this chapter is effective. The next chapter will be better, I promise.

Hermione's eyes narrow when he coldly tells her he's changed his mind and won't require her assistance after all. He finds her considering gaze unnerving, and idly fingers the cuffs of his frock coat and tries to pretend the unbearable silence isn't affecting him at all.

Finally, when he can bear it no longer, he breaks eye contact and pushes violently away from the table. He stalks from the room and tries to ignore the way his heart pounds. He wonders how he managed to survive as a double agent all these years when lying to her almost kills him.

He manages to avoid her the rest of the morning, but can't escape her watchful gaze at lunch. The students will be arriving later that day, and what should have been the last peaceful meal he'd have without them instead becomes tense and nerve wracking. Hermione laughs with Filius, chats with Minerva, and acts more like a colleague than a student with special dispensation to be there. He wonders if she's already made arrangements to apprentice with someone else. When the hot ache of regret fills his chest he reminds himself it's what he wanted - even though it isn't.

The Golden Trio are reunited for the Sorting Feast. Potter, Ginny and Ron had been invited as special guests. He watches surreptitiously as Hermione hugs her friends, and doesn't miss the gloating look Ron tosses at him. She's told them what he's done, obviously. Potter's gaze is more troubled when he looks up at Snape, his green eyes muddy with...concern? Snape holds it for only a moment, before looking to his Slytherins. The first years haven't been brought in yet, but it's obvious his house has been decimated. Half the chairs are empty. It's going to be a long year.

The hissing starts when the first new student is placed in Slytherin. Peter Parkinson looks terrified as he walks stiffly over to his new housemates, but he holds his head high and does his best to ignore the mockery of the other houses. Snape stands, prepared to put an end to it immediately, but before he can get a word out the most extraordinary thing happens. Hermione, Potter and Ginny all stand, glare at the students, and walk over to sit with his house. Before he knows it, Weasley has moved as well. The hissing falters and slowly dies out.

The rest of dinner is uneventful. Hermione gamely tries to include all the Slytherins in dinner conversation, and the younger ones, at least, seem to preen under the attention of her, Potter, and Ginny. Ron, as to be expected, contributes nothing to the conversation except loud chewing noises and the occasional passing of gas. When the meal finally ends, Potter is invited to speak to the students. "I'm here today to tell you the truth about the Final Battle." He pauses, looks around. "We wouldn't have won without the heroic efforts of Severus Snape." Weasley's eyes roll. Snape is stunned.

"It was Harry's idea," Minerva tells him later over a cup of tea. "He wanted to try to set aside old house rivalries at the outset of the school year, and give new Slytherins the opportunity to be judged for who they are, not where they're placed. He thought the best way to do that was by openly acknowledging the major role you played in bringing about Voldemort's defeat."

"I don't...I killed...His parents...Lily..."

"Should have been more forgiving." Albus interrupts. "The blame isn't solely yours."

That night, Snape cries alone in his chambers for the first time since Lily died.

Classes the next few days are surreal. The students are attentive in class. Some, especially the younger ones, smile at him shyly. Many thank him when they enter his classroom. The Slytherins, as a whole, are not shunned. He waits for the other shoe to fall: this quiet gratitude and relative peacefulness between his house and the others isn't at all what he expected. Potter's speech from the first night is printed verbatim again in the Prophet and the Quibbler. He is suddenly hailed as a hero, where before he'd been simply tolerated by wizarding society. He starts walking taller.

Hermione joins him for lunch on the third day. She smiles at him when he arches an eyebrow at her, and takes his silence for acquiescence as she slides into the chair next to his own. Her skirt brushes against his leg as she settles, and he suddenly remembers the feel of it caressing his legs as they danced at Potter's wedding.

After a few moments of silence, she begins. "I know why you let me go. Ron was just being a prat. I'm probably safer with you than with anyone else. I would like you to reconsider your decision."

Unloved

Chapter 6 of 7

"Don't ever do that again!" His reply is fierce. "Of all the stupid, ill-advised..." His voice trails off when she reaches for his hand. He grips hers tightly, brings it to his lips, kisses her knuckles gently. "Never again," he vows. "Never."

Unloved

A/N: 10 new drabbles, which means I'm more than halfway to 100. Thanks to everyone who is reading this and reviewing – I might not have time to personally respond, but I can tell you I do appreciate all your comments, whether you like my story and my writing style or not. For those of you who like it, I hope I don't disappoint you. For those of you who don't, I'm sorry I did.

Her declaration leaves him reeling. *Safer with him than everyone else?* He finds it impossible to believe she's being entirely honest. Some of his skepticism must be showing on his face, because she nods adamantly and reiterates. "It's true."

"Be that as it may..." he begins.

"I won't take no for an answer," she interrupts. "I understand your fears, but they're unfounded. If I'm a target, it's because of what I've done. I could be attacked regardless, and if that happens I'd rather be with someone who can help me fight back."

"And your boyfriend?"

"Ron? He doesn't own me."

Somehow, she manages to convince him. He suddenly finds himself with an apprentice again. Despite the niggling worries he still has, her arguments have been valid. He knows he will protect her with his very life – he'd done so already, before he had any feelings for her except those of annoyance.

They seal their new understanding with a handshake. "So, that's settled then," she murmurs, "and from now on if you have concerns about this arrangement you must talk to me about them, agreed?"

He finds himself unable to do anything but when she presses her hand into his own.

She arrives at his classroom the next day. She will work as his apprentice after hours and during her free periods. Any work he assigns will be on top of her regular homework, something she's readily agreed to. He introduces her to his third year Ravenclaw / Hufflepuff class, despite the fact she needs no introduction.

"Ms. Granger is my new apprentice and will be providing teaching assistance in this class every Thursday morning. I expect you to treat her with the utmost respect. Anyone doing otherwise will answer to me. Ms. Granger, if you would please instruct today's lesson..."

The first two weeks run smoothly. Hermione easily fits in to his routine, seamlessly taking over whenever he needs her, marking essays, meting out discipline when required. It surprises him how readily her age-mates accept her tutelage, despite the fact she'd been helping out random Gryffindors since her first year. The younger students especially love her, and he marvels at the easy affection she doles out to the ones that seem most to need it.

"Easy," she murmurs to one, placing a firm hand over the child's and helping him find a rhythm to his dicing methods. "Gentleness is required."

"She'd make an excellent teacher," Minerva remarks to him one evening. They are enjoying a late-night tea in her office – it's become somewhat of a habit – while Albus watches from his portrait. "She's got even the more challenging students eating out of her hand."

"The children do seem to love her," Snape agrees.

"They're not the only ones," Albus offers. Snape doesn't respond to this, not really knowing how to. The remark seems pointed to him, but that could just be because he's worried he'll somehow give himself away and his colleagues will discover what a fool he has become.

The explosion the next day catches him by surprise. A fire salamander had been dropped into a potion simmering on his desk and, while Hermione had seen it from across the room, he hadn't. Her shouts to take cover catch him off guard, as does the feel of her small body tackling his as the cauldron explodes. She catches the majority of the boiling substance across her back and the left side of her face and is rushed to St. Mungo's for emergency healing. Potter and Weasley arrive at the hospital together. "I was right!" Weasley's accusation is viciously triumphant.

He decides to return to the school a dozen times before he's finally allowed to see her. Her face is swathed in gauze and she's lying on her stomach, her back bared as the skin begins the painful process of magically healing.

She looks relieved when she sees him. "Are you alright?" Her tone is raspy and worried.

"Don't ever do that again!" His reply is fierce. "Of all the stupid, ill-advised..." His voice trails off when she reaches for his hand. He grips hers tightly, brings it to his lips, kisses her knuckles gently. "Never again," he vows. "Never."

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"Why are you still here?" Weasley asks a while later, still upset that Snape was allowed in to see Hermione before he was.

"Ron!" Hermione protests, but the younger man ignores her.

"It's your fault she's in this situation, probably scarred for life! I told you..."

"...and I told you that it's my decisions that count in my life, Ron – not yours!" Hermione hisses angrily. "You've no right..."

"I've every right," Weasley shouts. "You're my girl, Hermione. When we're married..."

"We won't be married, ever. I don't love you that way, Ron. Not anymore; maybe not ever. We're just friends."

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Snape almost feels sorry for Weasley as he watches the younger man gape at Hermione in honest astonishment. His face pales, before turning a blotchy red. Snape is stunned himself, but manages to hide it rather well, despite the sudden pounding of his heart in his ears.

"Fine," the younger man finally manages. "I don't need you, not even as a friend. But I'm telling you now, Hermione – when you realize you've made a mistake, don't come crawling back to me. I wouldn't have you now if you were the last woman on earth. Especially not after you've had *him!*"

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Later that night Snape allows himself to remember the shock of it all. Weasley, in his ignorant and none-too-subtle way had implied that Hermione's interests lie in him. Hermione had turned an alarming shade of white at this, her fingers tightening in his own spasmodically as Ron had stormed from the room.

Angrily shaking her head she had turned a stricken look on him.

"Sir...Severus, it's not...I don't want you to get the wrong impression..." The tiny spark of hope in his chest died a sudden death as her words doused his wild imaginings. Ron's words hadn't meant a thing.

~fin6~

Another song for you that I feel evokes the image of perfect sadness and longing I can only hope this chapter conveys: **Unloved**, by the great Canadian singer-songwriter Jann Arden.

There will be no consolation prize

this time the bone is broken clean

no baptism, no reprise

and no sweet taste of victory.

All the stars have fallen from the sky

and everything else in between

Satellites have closed their eyes, the moon

has gone to sleep

unloved....unloved....unloved....unloved

Here I am inside a hotel choking on a

million words I said,

cigarettes have burned a hole and dreams are

drunk and penniless.

Here I am inside my father's arms

all jagged-bone and whiskey-dry,

Whisper to me sweetly now

and tell me I will never die

unloved....unloved....unloved....unloved

Here I am an empty hallway,

broken window, rainy night,

I am nineteen sixty-two

and I am ready for a fight.

People crying hallelujah

while the bullet leaves the gun,

people falling, falling, falling

and I don't know where they're falling from.

Are they

unloved....unloved....unloved....unloved?

Hoping that the kindness will lead us

past the blindness,

and not another living soul will ever have to feel

unloved....unloved....unloved....unloved

unloved....unloved

Choices

Chapter 7 of 7

He wonders if they can somehow reclaim the friendship they'd been building, because he finds he misses it. He doesn't want to make the same mistakes with her as he had with Lily.

Choices

A/N: Thank you for all your kind words on the previous chapters. I am trying to maintain a certain pace here, and I appreciate very much that so many of you happen to like that pace. I like to take things slowly, as I'm sure you've noticed, but I also don't want things to be glacial in their proceeding. Hopefully, I can maintain that balance. Another song that belongs to the soundtrack for this story is posted at the bottom.

She returns to his class 4 days later. He tries to pretend that things haven't changed between them, but the tentative way she smiles at him and the wistful glances she sneaks in his direction make it difficult.

Barnaby Bibbins, the student who had caused the explosion, has been punished although not expelled. Snape had been furious with this, but Minerva had determined the little dunderhead hadn't known what would happen and was extremely remorseful.

Hermione had even forgiven the little blighter, if her gentle words and easy acceptance of his apologies are any indications. She'd even hugged the child.

Potter visits on the weekend, which is a surprise. Snape invites him in and offers him tea and doesn't bother trying to pretend the entire situation is anything but awkward.

After a few moments of idle chit-chat, Potter gets to the point. "I just wanted to let you know I support Hermione in her decision. Ron's just upset that she's left him for you." Snape gapes at him, but Potter ignores his confusion. "She knows what's best for her and if she thinks you're it, that's her decision isn't it?"

"You're mistaken, Potter," Snape interrupts. "She would never choose me."

Potter wisely drops the subject, but doesn't leave in search of more pleasant companionship. Instead, he spends the afternoon. Initially, Snape is uncomfortable having him there, but as time goes by he finds he doesn't mind it all that much. After two cups of tea, he pulls out the Ogdens and offers a snifter to Potter. The two men drink in silence for a few moments.

"Why have you never asked me about your mother?" Snape suddenly asks.

"I didn't want to make you uncomfortable," Potter responds. "But if you want to talk about her, I'd love to hear it."

Snape finds the words come much easier than he'd ever imagined they would. It doesn't hurt as much to remember Lily anymore. "You must understand, she was my only friend," Snape emphasises. "I held her in great esteem. I regret...I'm so sorry..."

Potter leans forwards, eyes bright with emotion. "Sirius and my father treated you terribly, and my mother should have forgiven you. I love my parents, but I understand now they weren't perfect, not like I'd always thought they were. They made mistakes too."

Snape blinks. "It still doesn't excuse..."

"No, but that doesn't mean I can't forgive you."

Hermione joins them in the Great Hall at dinner.

"Harry, I'm so glad to see you! I was afraid..."

Harry shakes his head. "Ron is just being Ron. You could have been perhaps a bit more tactful when you broke it off with him, but..."

"I know," Hermione inserts. "Only I was in pain, and he was being so dense and horrid, and..."

"You wanted to stick up for Snape, I understand totally. Just give him a bit of time to get used to the idea. He'll come around."

"Nothing to come around to," she murmurs, glancing furtively at Snape.

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Snape is quiet throughout dinner, barely listening to the discussion flowing around him. He realizes that he and Hermione haven't shared this easy camaraderie since the hospital, where Weasley's ignorant words and her horrified reaction had so effortlessly shattered his brief illusions. He wonders if they can somehow reclaim the friendship they'd been building, because he finds he misses it. He doesn't want to make the same mistakes with her as he had with Lily. After dinner, he suggests a stroll around the lake. Harry begs off, but Hermione accepts his invitation. She blushes when he offers her his arm.

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Her hand folds easily into the crook of his elbow and he shortens his strides to match her own. The gibbous moon is barely visible in the early twilight as they stroll toward the lake. "It was a surprise to see Harry," she offers. "Normally when there's a fight he takes Ron's side."

"Perhaps Mr. Potter is growing up," Snape replies. "It seems he has more of his mother in him than previously expected."

"Sir...I just wanted you to know, I never meant to embarrass you that night. It's just...I..." She flounders for words. "I esteem you greatly, Sir."

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"It is I who should be apologizing to you," Snape replies. "You are an intelligent and beautiful young witch, and I have come to rely on our friendship. I don't want you to ever think that I require anything from you than that. I am sorry if I have given you any cause to feel uncomfortable around me, Hermione. If I've made you feel like I expect something more..."

"What if I want something more?" Her question is whispered, but it stops him in his tracks. He turns to look at her, black eyes locking with brown. "What then, Sir?"

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Later, when he thinks on this moment, he will remember the sound of small waves lapping gently against the lakeshore, working in rhythmic counterpoint to the beating of his own heart. He'll recall the way her hair clung to the hand he lifted tentatively to her face, and the feel of her cheek when she leaned into his palm, nuzzling it shyly.

All these memories will pale in comparison, however, to the memory of her arms wrapping him in a warm embrace and the way his eyes fluttered closed at the first feel of her warm lips against his own.

~fin7~

Songbird (Eva Cassidy version)

For you, there'll be no more crying,

For you, the sun will be shining,

And I feel that when I'm with you,

Its alright, I know its right

To you, Ill give the world

To you, Ill never be cold

cause I feel that when I'm with you,

Its alright, I know its right.

And the songbirds are singing,

Like they know the score,

And I love you, I love you, I love you,

Like never before.

And I wish you all the love in the world,

But most of all, I wish it from myself.

And the songbirds keep singing,

Like they know the score,

And I love you, I love you, I love you,

Like never before, like never before.