

ADVENTURES
IN FANFICTION

All the Stories are True



BY
DELPHIPSMITH



A RED HEN PUBLICATION



Red Hen Edition
Copyright © 2020 by the Author

All the
Stories
are
True



by
Delphismith

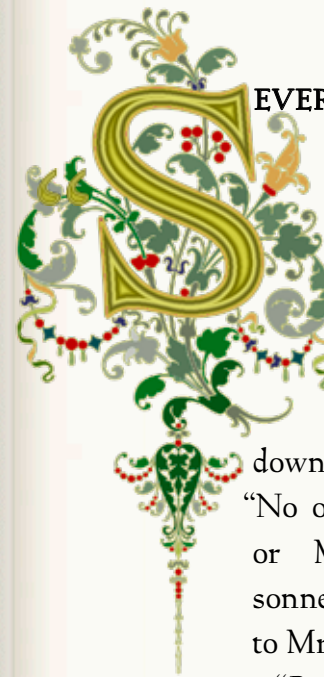


PART I:

Into the Woods

*It's dangerous to stray from the path.
But it's far more dangerous not to.*

— Jenifer Donelly, STEPSISTER



“EVERUS SNAPE?” Hermione said to the young medi-witch at the desk.


The witch consulted a clipboard. “Are you immediate family?”

“No, but — ”

She set the clipboard down with an air of dismissal. “No one but immediate family or Ministry-authorized personnel are allowed as visitors to Mr Snape’s room.”

“Professor Snape,” Hermione corrected her instinctively. “And I am — ”

“Thank you, Miss Spissus,” said a firm Scot-



tish voice, and Hermione turned to see Professor McGonagall exiting a room down the hall, closing the door gently behind her. “We appreciate your dedication to protecting your patients’ privacy, but Miss Granger has been authorized — indeed she has been invited — by the Ministry.”

“Invited?” The medi-witch’s officiousness collapsed and she gave Minerva an anxious look. “You think, then, that she might help?”

“Perhaps. We do not want to get our hopes up.”

“What is all this?” Hermione said, looking from one to the other. “I received your owl, Professor, but it wasn’t at all clear.”

Minerva beckoned to her. “I did not want to put too much in writing, Miss Granger. Professor Snape has been through so much already, and that Skeeter woman is always snooping.” She opened the door and ushered Hermione in. “Now that you’re here, I can explain more fully.”


On the bed lay a pale-faced dark-haired man, his neck lightly swathed in bandages. His eyes were closed, dark lashes like ink-strokes against skin as white as milk, his long dark hair a tumble of midnight on the pillow. Hesitantly, Hermione

approached, her feelings a tangle of anger, confusion, grief, and something else that she was reluctant to name.

When the full story of Severus Snape’s double-agent work had come out, she had struggled to reconcile his heroic (yes, that was the right word) actions with his cold, almost brutal behaviour towards them as students. Ron, of all people, had been the one who had pointed out that any other attitude would surely have brought suspicion, and perhaps worse, down on them. “Look how Voldemort treated Draco, just to get at his dad. And he knew about Snape and Harry’s mum. So, if Snape had been nice to him, who knows what Voldemort might have done?”

“Also he did save my life more than once,” Harry had added. And of course Minerva had come to his defense, recognizing in hindsight all that he had covertly done to minimize the depredations of the Carrows and keep the students safe during that last terrible year.

Now, standing by his bedside and seeing in the weary lines of his face, in the bandages still spotted with blood even after six months of arduous



effort by the best healers at St Mungo's, hard evidence of what he had suffered in their joint cause, Hermione felt the last of her resentment slip away. This man might have treated her with cold disdain, but she could see now that the biting contempt he had directed at others had had its source in the self-hatred he felt at what he was forced to do. Tears pricked her eyes as she took one of his limp hands in both her own. "Is he...dying?"

Minerva shook her head. "Not at all. His heartbeat is strong and his wounds are healing, albeit slowly, as you can see. His body is nearly recovered, though years of strain have taken their toll. But he remains in a deep coma."

"Why?"

"No one is sure, but as best we can tell, its cause is mental, not physical. He is apparently... doing it to himself."

Hermione frowned. "What do you mean?"

Minerva went to the window and gazed out at the cold November rain. "Once they were certain that the coma had no physical origin, St Mungo's called in the most powerful Legilimens and Occlumens they could find, to try to see into his mind.


Their conclusion is that, at the very end, his mind spontaneously locked itself up in self-defense."

Hermione shuddered, remembering how very nearly it *had* been the very end. There had been blood everywhere, pooling beneath him in a black flood, its coppery smell sickeningly thick and rich. He could so easily have died, had Hogwarts not answered its Headmaster's need and sent house elves to put him in stasis and bring him here. The school had known, when no one else had guessed, how much of himself Severus Snape had given to protect its students and staff.

She shook off the memories. "Yes, it makes sense. He spent so many years as an Occlumens, having to hide his true mission, his feelings, his every thought. It's no wonder instinct would have taken over when..."

"Precisely. And being a remarkably talented Occlumens, the barriers his mind has created are not easily breached. Indeed, from what they saw in the topmost levels of his mind, the Occlumens are not even certain that they can be."

"What exactly did they see?" Hermione asked, never taking her eyes from the pale face on the pillow.



“A room,” Minerva said, beginning to pace. “A small round room, as if it were at the top of a tower. They were unable to penetrate any farther, but because of that very fact, they believe that this room and what it contains might be the key to unlocking his mind.”

“What does it contain?”

“Nothing, except a spinning wheel.”

Hermione looked up in surprise. “A spinning wheel? What could that mean?”

“We believe it is a reference to Spinner’s End, the house where Severus grew up as a child and where he lived after his parents died.”

“That seems reasonable.” The phenomenon of coded messages from the subconscious was known to both Muggle physicians and Wizarding healers.

“On that assumption, a team from St Mungo’s has made several visits there, going through every room, every drawer and cupboard, every nook and cranny, searching for anything that might give them a clue.” Minerva moved to the other side of the bed, looking down on Severus with an expression of affectionate frustration. “So far, they have turned up nothing.”

Hermione laid Severus’ hand gently down on the coverlet. His chest rose and fell slowly, evenly, as if he were merely sleeping. Outside, the rain had turned to sleet, beating a tiny percussive rhythm on the glass of the window. “Minerva, what is it you think I can do? I never had a single lesson on Occlumency or Legilimency.”

“Tobias Snape never accepted his son’s magical talents, or his wife’s for that matter. Spinner’s End was a Muggle home, and Severus spent most of his early life living as a Muggle. I am hoping you as a Muggle-born might see something they missed.”

Hermione did not miss the shift in pronoun. “You are hoping?” she said with a sharp look. “Not ‘we?’”

Minerva flushed, and Hermione was amused to see that she looked slightly embarrassed. “Yes, well, the OccluLegi Masters and St Mungo’s administration were... not in favor of bringing in a non-expert.” She thinned her lips. “But rank hath its privileges, as they say — with no living family, Hogwarts has authority over all medical decisions involving Severus, and since I am Headmistress of Hogwarts, I made the decision to call on you.”

“I see,” Hermione said, feeling both flattered

and curious. The chance to see Severus Snape's home intrigued her — what might she find out about him? “I can't promise anything, obviously, but I'll do my best.”




The house at Spinner's End was small and rather dilapidated, but the garden, Hermione noted, was neat and tidy. Although by this late in the autumn most of the plants had died back, the stakes with their neat labels were still in place, written in the spiky hand she knew so well from innumerable Potions essays: dittany, aconite, and boneset here, feverfew, wild garlic, and stinging nettle there. A hawthorn tree stood in one corner, a few peach-gold leaves still clinging determinedly to one branch.

Minerva had arranged with the Ministry that the wards would let her pass and that she was to have as much time as she needed, so once inside she moved slowly from room to room. She tried not to look for anything in particular, simply let her mind drift and take things in at its own whim. If the key were here it would not be something

obvious, that much she was certain — Severus Snape had been anything but obvious!

The sitting room was spotlessly neat, although the carpet was threadbare and the cheap furnishings had seen better days. She wondered why he had never replaced them, then considered how she would feel about, say, her father's decrepit armchair where she had sat on his lap so many times to listen to stories. Curiously, there were no photographs, either Muggle or magical. To her delight, however, every wall held a bookcase of some size or other, their shelves crammed to overflowing. Most were about potions, but there were also volumes on charms, transfiguration, and other magical topics. Nothing on occlumency or legilimency, she noted, although almost certainly the St Mungo's team would have spotted them had they been there. She had to force herself to put back the fifteenth-century illuminated manuscript on *Kneazles, Krups, & Rats: Pets for the Discerning Wytch & Wyzyrd* and move on.

Apart from an exceedingly well-stocked closet of potions ingredients the kitchen was nearly bare, only a few cups, plates and saucers in the cabinet,



and so clean that a stray crumb would probably have died of embarrassment. Hermione opened the door to the space under the sink, wondering if perhaps she'd find a house elf nest like Kreacher's, but there was nothing but a bucket filled with odd-smelling rags and a dustpan and brush.


She hesitated at the door of the bedroom. It seemed strangely intimate to enter Severus Snape's bedroom, even without him in it, and as she stood there with her hand on the latch, her mind obligingly resurrected memories that made her face get rather warm. His voice, so silky and smooth even at its most cutting. His eyes, so dark and penetrating. His hands, as he diced and chopped and stirred. And his mind, so agile, so flexible, so powerful. How many times had she imagined that voice whispering her name, those eyes alight with passion, those hands moving over her skin, that mind focused on her and her alone? Sweet Circe, she'd tried so hard to suppress such thoughts, especially after Dumbledore's death, hating that she could feel *that way* about someone so cold, so cowardly, so utterly untrustworthy, not to mention quite possibly evil. And then her mouth

opened in a silent "Oh!" as she realized the full import of the fact that *everything had changed*. She no longer needed to feel ashamed of her feelings, or deny them, or even suppress them — for Circe's sake, the man was a war hero, there were probably witches across the entire country fantasizing about him right now, and more than a few wizards, too.

Slightly breathless at this epiphany, she shook her head. Time enough to process all that when she'd done her work here. With a new determination, she opened the door and went in.

Like the kitchen, the bedroom was almost entirely bare: a narrow bed, a pair of worn slippers, a small closet with several sets of robes as well as Muggle clothing (including, to her bemusement, a Psychedelic Furs concert t-shirt), and a bedside table on which were a small lamp...and two books.

Only two, when the sitting room held hundreds. Curious, she sat down on the bed and picked them up. The top one was a fairly new copy of TALES OF BEEDLE THE BARD. It appeared to be mostly unread, its pages crisp, apart from "The tale of the Deathly Hallows" which was extensively annotated and dog-eared. Hermione



made a face. Surely that carried no meaning other than the completely bloody obvious. She turned her attention to the other, which was far older and more worn, and saw that it was a book of Muggle fairy tales — one she knew well, in fact. Her parents had given her a newer edition of this same collection for her tenth birthday. Examining it, she saw that the spine was cracked, the cover worn and battered, every page soft and limp from long years of frequent handling. This was a book that had been much loved, read and re-read again and again. She opened the cover and saw, written on the flyleaf, “Dearest Sev — We tell ourselves stories in order to live, but no story lives unless someone wants to listen. All my love — Mother.”

Scanning the table of contents, she noticed that this edition included, at the end, a version of “The sword in the stone” — not a fairy tale, strictly speaking, though it shared many elements. She riffled through the book, the titles conjuring brief memories of each of the stories as they flashed past. One in particular caught her eye and she frowned, then with a triumphant “Aha!” she snapped the book shut and slipped it into her bag.



“My dear, are you sure you want to do this?” Minerva said, a concerned frown creasing her brow. Even her tartan hat seemed worried.


Hermione looked down at the sleeping face of Severus Snape. “After all he’s done for us? Of course I do.” She looked up to give the Headmistress a warm smile. “Don’t worry, Minerva.”

“I know.” Minerva said. “But I am still not convinced you’re right.”

“We’ve been over this,” Hermione said patiently. How strange it felt to have their roles reversed, she reassuring the redoubtable Professor McGonagall! “That little book of Muggle fairy tales, Professor Snape obviously loved it. And I showed you the story, there’s a direct connection.”

Minerva shook her head. “Spinning straw into gold? What could that possibly have to do with anything?”

Hermione busied herself straightening the coverlet so she would not have to meet the sharp eyes of the Headmistress. “I’m not sure either. And that’s why I need to get into his mind myself. See



what they saw, look for any tiny detail they might have missed. Besides, I'll have the most expert guidance possible. Xander Jugson and Emily Vane are, as you said, the best OccluLegists in the world."

As if Summoned by their names, the door opened to admit a witch and wizard in grey robes. On the breast of each was a gold circle with a sapphire eye that alternately opened wide and closed tight, indicating they held the rank of Master in Occlumency and Legilimency. Xander Jugson was a small, slight man of thirty or so, Emily Vane a large handsome woman perhaps ten years older. Both looked extremely competent as well as rather cross.

"I want to go on record as objecting to this," Emily Vane said without preamble.

Jugson nodded reluctantly. "I have to agree with Emily: I now think this is not only foolish but downright dangerous."

"Dangerous?" Minerva and Hermione both spoke at once.

The two Masters exchanged a glance, then Vane said, "Last night we brought in a colleague. Strongbark. A trainee, a good one. We thought it was a good chance for him to get some experi-

ence." Her face was stony. "On his own initiative, he attempted to create a hole in the stone wall of the little room, to see what lay beyond it."

"What happened?"

"He died," she said bluntly.

Jugson turned a severe look on Hermione. "So you have to promise you'll do nothing without our permission, and I do mean *nothing*."

"Of course," she agreed primly.

Vane gave her a narrow look, as if sensing something beneath the obedient words, but said nothing, simply moved to one side of the bed and motioned to Hermione to stand at the foot. Jugson positioned himself on the other side of the bed and extended his hands. Emily Vane took one, Hermione the other, and then Hermione and Emily joined hands so they formed a closed circle around the sleeping figure in the bed.

"Close your eyes."

Hermione obeyed. Dizziness swept through her and she felt the hands of the two OccluLegists tighten on hers, and then she lost all sense of the outside world as she entered the mind of Severus Snape.

The three of them were in a small round room,

hands joined and standing around a large old-fashioned spinning wheel, in exactly the same configuration they had been moments ago in St Mungo's around Snape's bed. Beside the wheel was a small heap of clean straw.

"It's moving!" Master Jugson's voice was high with surprise. "It wasn't doing that before!"

Indeed, the wheel was spinning, so rapidly the spokes were a blur. Its speed made a whirring sound like the wings of a hummingbird, and the treadles moved up and down as if powered by invisible feet. Hermione stared at it, fascinated. It was beautiful, fashioned of some dark wood, polished until it shone. The spindle was of silver.

It had a wickedly sharp point.

"We should go," Master Vane said firmly. "We don't know what this means."

"No, wait!" Hermione wondered fleetingly if Minerva would forgive her for lying, for of course there was no connection with spinning straw into gold. She had known it from the first.

She will prick her finger on the spindle of a spinning wheel and die.

But she hadn't died, only slept.

Hermione took a deep breath and then, with a quick jerk, freed her hands from the two Masters, stepped confidently forward, and put her finger firmly on the gleaming point of the spindle.

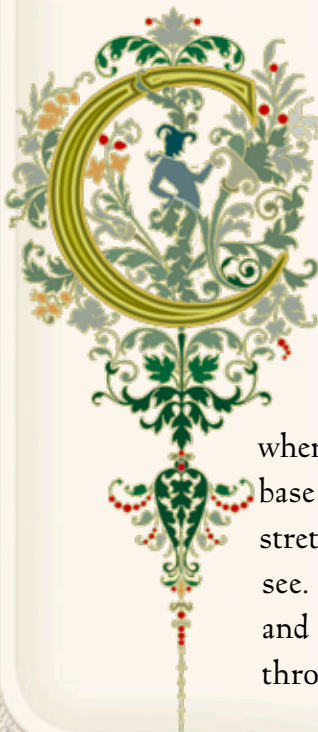
Everything went black.



PART 2:
**A Trail of
Breadcrumb**s

*Midway upon the journey of our life
I found myself within a forest dark,
For the straightforward pathway
had been lost.*

— Dante Alighieri, *INFERNO*



COLD WAS THE **FIRST** thing she noticed when she woke — the cold, and the waning grey light of a late winter afternoon. Snowflakes drifted lazily down through leafless black branches. From where she lay curled at the base of a huge oak, the forest stretched as far as she could see. Here and there rocks and dead branches poked up through the light blanket of


snow, and faintly she thought she heard the howl of a wolf. Hermione sat up and shivered, pulling her light jacket closer around her. Her bum was wet where the snow had melted beneath her. Trust Snape's mind to be full of ice and snow, she thought wryly. Was it possible to freeze to death inside someone's head?

"I really don't want to find out," she muttered.

She stood up and brushed the snow off her shoulders, patted her pocket to verify she still had her wand, tucked her hands into her armpits to warm her chilled fingers, and looked around. Trees, trees, and more trees, the more distant trunks merging into a shadowy mass. Off to one side it appeared to be somewhat more open, so she headed that way. The snow gave way to a cold misty rain as she walked, and taking out her wand she cast a quick *Impervio* to keep off the damp.

Nothing happened.

She frowned and tried again, with the same result. After two more failures she was forced to acknowledge that magic evidently didn't work inside Severus Snape's head. Or at least other people's magic didn't. Which she supposed made



sense. After all, would she want someone else doing spells in her head? Sighing, she put her wand away and carried on walking in the rain. Her hair reacted as it usually did in such situations — that is, it first became frizzier than ever, then went limp and stuck to her cheeks in wet tendrils.

After fifteen minutes or so of stumbling over hidden gullies and rocks she reached a small clearing. The rain had melted the snow and the clearing was a muddy, weedy expanse in the centre of which squatted a dilapidated cottage, slate roof sagging, windows broken. Round dark-brown stones formed the chimney, which had partially collapsed. A low post-and-rail fence surrounded the cottage; the posts had once been painted in bright red-and-white spiral stripes but the red had faded and run, streaking the white with rust-colored stains. A path of rough light-brown paving stones led from an opening in the fence up to the half-open front door. Bordering the path were rows of peculiar petal-less flowers, round and flat on rigid white stalks.

Though all signs suggested the cottage had been deserted for a long time, Hermione approached

warily. After all, one never knew. She picked her way through the mud, but the moment she set foot on the first stone in the path she jerked back in surprise: her foot had sunk right through it. She squatted down to examine the stone. Despite its appearance, it was friable and crumbled at her touch into light brown pellets, the color of a Ginger Nut. Frowning, she picked up a few small bits and smelled them, then carefully touched her tongue to them. *It was* Ginger Nut!!

Comprehension dawned, and Hermione looked around with fresh eyes. The dark grey roof was not slate, but thin smooth chocolate biscuits. The broken windows were sugar glass, the round dark chimney stones Maltesers. The painted fenceposts...peppermint sticks! And the strange flowers were lollies, dissolving slowly in the cold rain. She rose and wiped her hands on her jeans, a half-smile on her face. Every child's dream: a house made of snacks and sweets!


Avoiding the path of soggy biscuits, Hermione went to the door — which she could see now was formed of graham crackers studded with Smarties — and pushed it open enough to squeeze



through into the large main room of the cottage.

The pink-and-yellow checkered floor was formed of squares of Battenberg cake and pleasantly spongy, though spotted with mold here and there. A sofa of bourbon creams on Matchmaker legs stood against the right-hand wall, with fruit pastille pillows at either end (Hermione gave one a tentative poke and made a face at the unpleasant stickiness). Beside it was a matching chair, a miniature pork pie serving as a pouffe. Between the sofa and chair stood a small three-legged table formed of a Hobnob resting on three chocolate finger biscuits, with a rock-candy vase holding icing sugar flowers, now gone soft and deformed. Against the opposite wall was a tall Welsh dresser made of dark chocolate slabs, which held rows of plates of some black substance (with a sniff, she identified them as Pontefract cakes) and shallow bowls in pastel hues (halved Flying Saucers, she guessed). A door beside the dresser led, presumably, out to the back garden.

To her left were two doors. Through one, half-open, she could see a bed with a frame of elaborately woven red-and-black liquorice laces, its



marshmallow pillow and candy-floss mattress gone clotted and lumpy. The other, she guessed, led to the kitchen. She shook her head with a smile as she pushed it open. Thank Circe for the damage done by age and damp, otherwise she'd be tempted to sit down and nibble for an hour or two.

The smile dropped from her face as if *Vanished* when she saw the two small cages in the corner of the kitchen. Just the size to hold a child.

Slowly she knelt and reached out a hand to touch the rusted iron bars with hands gone cold with horror. Dirty straw covered the floor of the cages, and each held a small bowl of scummy water. These were not edible treats, not part of a child's dream but a thing of nightmare. The story of Hansel and Gretel left this part out, she thought. It focused on the children's cleverness; it didn't talk about the mind-numbing terror they must have felt, the hopelessness, the desperate desire to escape. Trapped with a vile monster, no one to help them, slowly starving but knowing that eating would only bring their death sooner. . .

She gave a convulsive shudder and closed her eyes, hands clenching on the iron bars. Memories flooded

her: of Greyback and Scabior mere inches away on the other side of her protective charms, aching to run but knowing she couldn't; of Bellatrix LeStrange laughing as she wielded a silver knife; of —

Abruptly she thrust herself away from the cages and got to her feet, wrapping her arms around herself. For a long moment she couldn't look away from the cages, and then her eyes were caught by marks on the wall behind one of them. She bent over and saw the tiny childish letters scratched into the surface:

Severus Snape was here.

Her eyes stung with unexpected tears. Trapped. Caged. No doubt he had felt just that way, for more years than any of them had known. And he was still trapped, only this time he'd done it to himself.

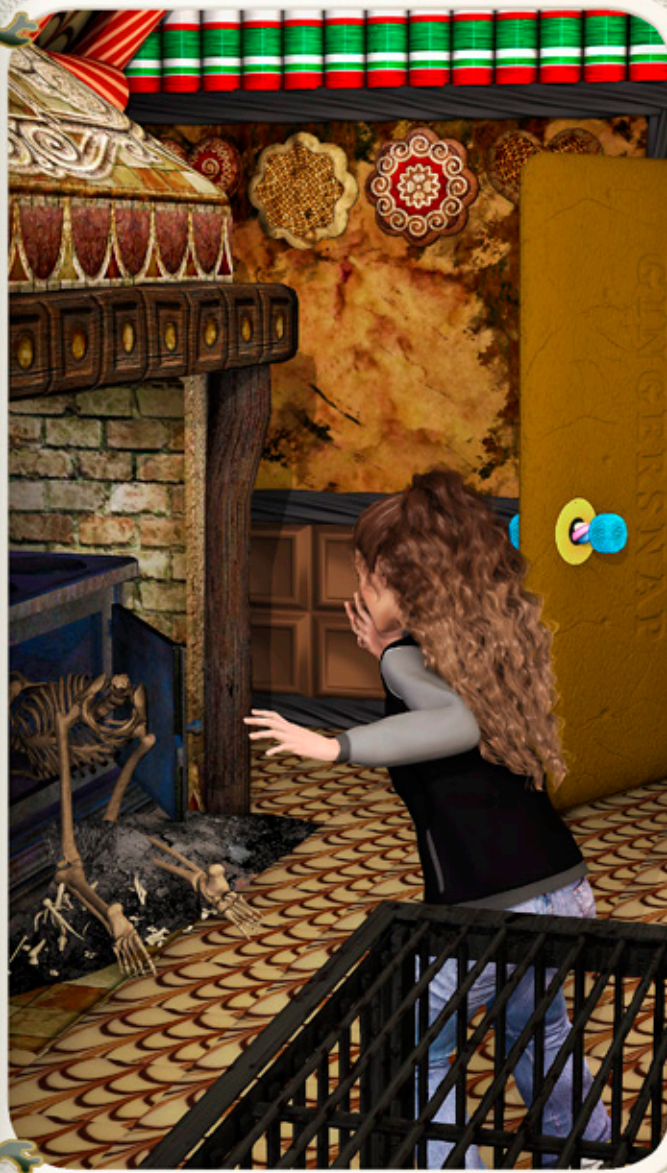
She spun around, suddenly wanting nothing more than to get out of this hovel that was rotting to sweet pieces around her, then froze with a gasp. Behind her was a squat iron cookstove, its weight and bulk somehow reminding her of Dolores Umbridge. Heaped around it were ashes long cold, and mixed in with the ashes Hermione could see bones. Small ones. The size, perhaps,

of a child's forearm or fingers. And lying half-in and half-out of it, its head buried in the depths of the oven, was a skeleton.

The skeleton was obviously of an adult. It was on its knees in front of the oven, slumped slightly sideways, prevented from falling by the oven's heavy iron door. Slowly, as if unable to help herself, Hermione crouched to look inside the dark hole of the oven. The skull was there, blackened, strangely shaped, its slanted eye sockets giving it the look of a snake. As she stared at it in shock, something in the long-dead cinders shifted and the skull tilted as if turning to look at her.

Choking back a scream Hermione scrambled out of the kitchen, slamming the door behind her, and leaned against it, panting. For a moment she simply stood there in the sitting room, waiting for her racing heart to slow. If Severus Snape's mind was already this terrifying, what lay ahead?

It didn't matter. The image of a small dark-haired boy in a cage merged in her mind with that of Severus, eyes haunted, trapped into watching Charity Burbage die, trapped into murdering Dumbledore, trapped as Headmaster of a school



that hated him, trapped into that last confrontation that ended with Nagini tearing at his throat.

Determination overtook trepidation: she *would* fix this, no matter what. In two quick steps she crossed the sitting room to the door on the opposite side and opened it, already knowing what she would see. Three steps formed of shortbread, soggy in the rain, led down to the back garden, and in the dark mud she could clearly see a trail of small white bread crumbs leading away from the cottage into the forest.

The wind gusted up and she shivered. There was a long cloak hanging on a peg beside the door that seemed to have escaped the depredations of rain and mildew, and she took it and flung it around her shoulders, glad of its warmth. It was of heavy red wool, with a hood trimmed in white fur and fastened with innumerable tiny buttons of jet.

Hurriedly she ran down the steps. The rain had turned back to snow, and the bread crumbs would soon be covered. There was no time to lose.

As she followed the trail to the edge of the clearing and slipped into the woods, a pair of yellow eyes watched her.

PART 3:


Red as Blood

*They'll speak of girls who met their fate
In shadows in the wood;
They'll say the woodsman came too late.
They never understood*

— Seanan Maguire, "THE TRUE STORY HERE"



BY THE TIME THE BREAD crumbs ran out, she'd found a new trail to follow: pieces of Severus Snape's life. Here, impaled on a twig, was a photograph of a skinny dark-haired boy inscribed "Severus, age eight." There, in a neat triangle on a stump, three buttons from his teaching robes. Tacked to a tree, she saw a Potions assignment she



had turned in, with comments in his hand (“An essay on *Felix Felicis* does not require a full biography of its inventor. Five points off for too much information”). A green-and-silver Slytherin House pin, clasped to a dangling tendril of ivy, nearly took out her eye when she walked into it. The snow thickened, and she pulled the hood of her cloak over her head, grateful for the fur lining.

The pathless forest went on, endlessly it seemed, in every direction. The light too was unchanging: grey, sourceless, no darker or lighter than when she had started out. More than once she stopped short, eyes wide, sure she had heard something moving behind her — the cracking of a twig, a stealthy footstep. Was something following her? It was hard to tell with the creaking of trees in the bitter wind and the muffling fall of snow. She shivered, thinking of the snake-eyed skull in the cottage far behind her, and trudged on.

It felt as though hours had passed when something caught her eye off to the left: a humped mound of white, with spatters of dark red. She bent down a branch to mark her place so she could find her way back, then floundered through

the snow towards it, cursing once again the fact that she was unable to Transfigure her trainers into proper boots.

It was Strongbark. Or what was left of him — something had made a very determined effort to tear him limb from limb. Something that left huge pawprints, like a very large dog. Or a wolf.

Hermione glanced down uneasily at the red cloak and hood she was wearing and swallowed hard. Not only was she a very visible target, she was a very *symbolic* target.

“None of that now,” she whispered to herself. Slowly, keeping her fear under firm control, she made her way back to the broken branch and looked around for the next marker.



At last, after what seemed like days (and more than one flashback to camping across the U.K. one step ahead of Voldemort, which made her mutter curses under her breath — at least then she’d had a functioning wand), she stepped out of the trees. Before her lay a small meadow, now a stretch of featureless white. On the far side of


it stood a neat little house, its roof frosted with snow. Smoke rose from the chimney, only a little darker than the grey sky.

Hermione chewed her lip thoughtfully. The trail had brought her here and ended, so this was clearly where she was meant to go. And someone apparently was waiting for her. She ran through the various fairy tales in her mind, realising with some annoyance that pretty much all of them involved cottages in the woods. She'd just have to go knock at the door and find out for herself.

There didn't seem to be any particular path across the meadow (or if there was it was obscured by snow), so she simply made for the front door as directly as possible. As she neared the house she saw through the large window a woman, looking out across the snowy expanse. Hermione raised a tentative hand and waved, but the woman did not respond.

Ancient rose-bushes flanked the door, their tangled canes leafless and thick with thorns. A splash of brilliant red drew her eye, and she saw that one of them bore a single rose, its petals rimmed with frost. Amazingly, a sweet scent





still clung to it despite the season. Hermione instinctively reached out to pluck it, then drew her hand back. Picking roses unsolicited never led to good things, all the stories agreed on that. Turning regretfully away (it really was the most beautiful rose she'd ever seen) she knocked gently, then more firmly. When no one responded, she pressed the latch and went in. "Hello? I'm sorry, I don't mean to intrude, but..."

The woman she had seen through the window was seated in an armchair, still looking out, her dark eyes fixed on the far distance. Her black hair was drawn back in a thick braid, touched here and there with silver, and she held a crumpled heap of fabric — a piece of embroidery — in her lap. She made no sign of hearing Hermione, or seeing her.

Slowly Hermione drew closer and saw that there were tears on the woman's cheeks, though her face was calm and still. "Are you alright?"

The woman made no reply, but looked down at the fabric in her lap. Hermione followed her gaze expecting to see a sampler or stylised picture, as usual with embroidery. To her surprise it was a collage of images — the detail was incredible,

almost as though they were painted rather than stitched — and like wizarding photographs, the images moved. She saw a dark-haired man with something of the look of Severus but with blue eyes, smiling and laughing...a young woman holding a child on her lap, pointing at the pictures in the book she was reading to him...an emerald-and-silver snake, not venomous but proud, sleek, and powerful...a red-haired girl waving with a shy smile, then vanishing in a blaze of green light...an ink-black serpent coiling from the mouth of a skull — the Dark Mark!...her own face, with Ron and Harry behind her...a silver-haired man falling from a tower, peacefully and silently as a feather...

...and then, at the last, unfinished but clear, Severus, asleep, awakening.

A wave of hope rushed through her, a feeling of a puzzle piece slotting into place. She wanted to ask the woman question after question but instinct stronger than the need for information held her tongue. Stories couldn't be rushed.

The woman touched the image of the black-haired blue-eyed man with loving fingers. "He

was my Prince Charming when we met, you know," she said softly. "So strong. So full of life. He was always laughing. It was only later, when the mill closed, that he changed."

"Changed?"

Her hand stole to her cheek, as if recalling an old bruise. "It was no fault of his own that he couldn't find work, but he took it hard. We'd agreed never to ask for money from my family after the things they said about him. But we didn't have a choice." She looked at Hermione, her dark eyes filled with grief. "And then, when he found out I'd kept things from him, that was the end for us."

"I'm sorry," Hermione said gently. Part of her recognized the woman's pain and wanted to comfort her, while another part was cataloging every word and trying to fit it into place.

The woman shook her head. "There, but only there, the fault is mine. What he did was wrong, but so was I. I tried to tell a story that wasn't true, about a Muggle father and a Muggle mother and their Muggle babe." The woman looked at Hermione, her dark eyes filled with grief. "Your life is a story, child. Always tell it true."

Hermione pointed at the mother and child. "You?" A single tear fell on the two small figures engrossed in their book. "Yes. I asked for a child, and the Fates gave me one, and I failed him, and I lost him. A child with hair as black as ebony, skin as white as snow."

"And lips as red as blood," Hermione finished slowly.

"Oh yes, there was blood on his lips that night. There was blood everywhere." Her voice took on a rhythmic chanting cadence. "The night my child died, the night was black as ebony, the serpent's fangs were white as snow, and the red, red blood was everywhere."

She looked down. Blood was welling up through the fabric, staining the white cloth crimson.

Hermione caught her breath. "You're Eileen Prince. Severus's mother."

The woman set the embroidery aside and rose. "Come, I want to show you something."



Hermione followed Eileen out the back door of the house. The surrounding woods were much

closer here, and just beyond the first few trees Hermione glimpsed something that sparkled even in the dim light. As they drew closer, she saw that it was a box, perhaps three feet by seven, of fine crystal. Along the edges were carved ornate designs of vines and flowers, their incised facets reflecting chips of light that seemed to float in the air around it.

Inside lay Severus Snape.

His eyes were closed, his face peaceful and still, just as he had looked in the bed at St Mungo's but there were no bandages on his neck and he was in his usual black robes. Hermione knelt down to put a hand on the glass near his face. Did he know she was here? Could he tell?

"What's wrong with him?" Snow White had bitten into a poisoned apple. She couldn't imagine Snape accepting anything from a strange witch, let alone eating it. Not a man whose life had depended on constant vigilance.

Eileen trailed a gentle hand over the top of the glass case, her eyes on her sleeping son. "Envy, anger, hatred, vengeance, guilt — these are all poisons to the heart and soul. And he has partaken



of them all, bitter as they are. Especially the last.”

Hermione stood up and paced around the glass box, trying to remember how the fairy tale went. She'd always disliked the story of Snow White — the girl had been so stupid, for Circe's sake — so it wasn't one she knew well. Did she need to break the glass? She frowned. No, that wasn't it. Oh yes: the prince had put the coffin on a cart and the jolting of the cart had dislodged the piece of poisoned apple stuck in her throat. Unfortunately, the thing looked like it weighed about five hundred pounds, there wasn't a prince handy, and *Levicorpus* wasn't currently an option. Then again, Severus hadn't actually eaten anything, so maybe that wasn't the solution anyway.

...not a prince handy...

But there was.

She turned to Eileen. “You said, ‘Especially guilt’. Why?”

“It is the oldest, rooted far deeper than any of the others,” Eileen answered. “He was only a boy, it was not his responsibility to protect me. Still, he felt he should have. He named himself a coward, simply for being a child. That was the

first poison, and the worst.”

In her mind's eye, Hermione saw a little boy trying to stand up to the violence of a grown man, guilt gnawing at him every time he failed, though he could never have been expected to succeed. No wonder he had grown into a bitter and angry man, vulnerable to the temptations of power and strength offered by the Dark Arts. And the Dark Lord.

“I never had the chance to tell him...”

“Tell him now,” she said simply.

Eileen moved to the head of the coffin. She laid her hands flat on the sides of the glass case, fingers spread wide as if yearning to run them through her boy's hair once more, and bent her head. A tear fell on the crystal lid. “Oh my son, I am so very proud of you,” she whispered.

Inside the crystal coffin, the sleeping form of Severus Snape shimmered, faded, and vanished.



Hermione looked towards the edge of the meadow where a pale track began between two huge oaks. It was visible for a few yards as it wound its way into the forest, then disappeared

around the far side of a huge grey boulder. “What do you suppose comes next?” she mused, half to herself and half to Eileen.

Eileen looked at her intently. “You can still turn back. In fact, you should. All the stories are true, you know, and you can’t close the book when you get frightened. And the guardian knows you’re here.”

Stone walls, trackless forests, blizzards, glass coffins, and now a guardian. If it wasn’t that Snape’s life depended on it, the overkill would be comical. Well, the man had always been thorough. “Isn’t the purpose of a guardian to protect, not to harm?”

“Sometimes to protect one thing, you have to harm another,” Eileen said sadly. “There is danger for you here, make no mistake.”

“I read once,” Hermione said slowly, “that the real gift of fairy tales is not to teach children monsters exist. Children already know monsters exist. Fairy tales teach children monsters can be defeated.” She looked at Eileen. “Severus learned that lesson. He was afraid, but he never gave in to fear. He knew that even the most terrible monster could be defeated.”

“But at what price?”

“Severus thought the price was worth paying, then. As do I, now.”

Eileen held something towards her. “Take this.” In her hand was the red rose Hermione had seen on the bush by the door. “Keep it safe.”

“Thank you.” The rose was fully open now, its sweet scent stronger and richer than ever. Hermione tucked it into a buttonhole of her cloak and set off towards the forest once again.



Now that there was a path to follow, Hermione made better time. Or at least it felt like she was making better time — since it grew neither darker nor lighter as she walked, she couldn’t be sure. The hard-packed dirt was smooth and firm underfoot and the path always chose the easiest route around obstacles or through them, so most of her mind was free to ponder Eileen’s words. Harry hadn’t gone into detail about the memories Snape had given him, but he’d said enough to make it clear that he’d grown up poor and had a difficult, even violent, home life. She wondered—

Hermione stopped dead, her heart thudding in her chest. A huge black wolf sat bolt upright in the middle of the path, red tongue lolling from its mouth, brushy tail curled around its front paws.

“Well, well, what have we here?” the wolf said, yellow eyes gleaming. “A little girl in a red cloak wandering the woods alone. I would have expected better from the brightest witch of her age.”

Hermione watched it intently, muscles tensed to run. She doubted it would do any good, but the survival instinct was hard to argue with.

“Nothing to say? No pithy comment?” It raised a mocking eyebrow. “Ten points from Gryffindor for utter failure to think.”

The familiar words coming out of its mouth startled her into a laugh. “So, are you going to attack me and eat me?”

It eyed her judiciously. “Perhaps later.”

“In all the stories, wolves are vicious beasts.”

It gave her a toothy grin. “Oh, I am.”

She shook her head, beginning to relax. “Severus Snape was never what he seemed to any of us. I don’t think you are either.”

“Do you care to bet your life on it?”



She looked it straight in the eye. “Yes, I do.”
“Hmph.”

The two of them stared at each other in silence for a moment.

“It was you who killed Strongbark, though, wasn’t it?” she said finally.

She wouldn’t have thought wolves could shrug, but this one managed it. “I merely did what I was created to do.”

Hermione took a step towards it. “You’re the guardian Eileen mentioned.”

The wolf licked its lips but made no answer.
“Why did you kill him?”

“He tried to force his way in.” It lifted a hind leg and scratched an ear. “The mind is not a book, to be opened at will and examined at leisure. Thoughts are not etched on the inside of skulls, to be perused by any invader. The mind is a complex and many-layered thing...or at least, most minds are.”

“I’m here, and you’re not trying to kill me,” she pointed out.

“You came in the right way.” It got to its feet and padded up to her — its shoulder was nearly level with her waist — then lifted its head to sniff the

rose. “*Rosa gallica officinalis*. A good choice. It may come in handy.” It turned and began to walk away, then looked back at her over its shoulder. “Well? Are you coming, or are you just going to stand there like a dunderhead?”

Suppressing a grin, she followed it.



The dark forest flowed past like an endless dream of all the winter woods that had ever been: black branches, white snow, a cloak red as blood. And a wolf padding silently beside.

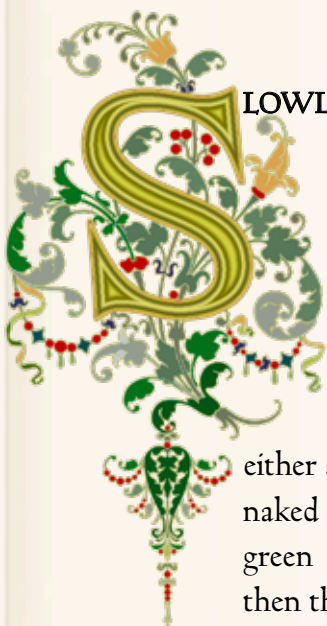


PART 4:

A Walled Garden and its Center

In the end, we'll all become stories.

— Margaret Atwood



SLOWLY, THE LIGHT BEGAN to change. The featureless grey of the sky began to break apart, allowing fragments of blue sky to peep through. The air grew warmer, too, and the trees and shrubs to either side began to clothe their naked branches, first in the pale green of new leaves in spring, then the darker green of mature leaves basking in the summer sun. Without surprise, Hermione found that her red cloak was no longer heavy wool but a light weave of soft cotton.

She inhaled deeply, enjoying the rich smell of growing things — and still, over it or beneath it, the scent of the red rose in her buttonhole.

The wolf, its paws noiseless on the soft earth, gave her a slanted look. “Risky,” it said. “Smells are powerful things.”


“You’re saying they can bewitch the mind and ensnare the senses?” she said lightly.

It snorted. “Check.”

Ahead of them the path narrowed, passing between thick clumps of twiggy shrubs covered in oval green leaves and clusters of four-petalled white flowers. Although attractive, they had an unpleasant smell. Pushing back a long branch that sprawled out to overhang the path, Hermione was startled to see that there were faces on the leaves.

Although there was no wind at all, the leaves began to rustle busily as they approached and she realised the faces were speaking, their taunting voices tiny but clear. “Snivellus!” “Snivelly!” “Hee hee hee!” “Let’s see your underpants, Snivellus!”

She seized a branch to look more closely. “That looks like Harry’s dad,” she said in astonishment. “And...isn’t that Sirius Black?” She grabbed



another branch, and another. Sure enough, every leaf bore the grinning, chattering likeness of either James Potter or Sirius Black.

The wolf laconically lifted a leg and peed on the left-hand shrub. "I have no idea."

Twigs thrashed in agitation while tiny voices spluttered indignantly and squeaked impotent threats. The wolf ignored them and went to pee on the other bush.

Hermione couldn't help it — she laughed as she had not laughed in ages. "Twenty points to Slytherin," she managed to gasp out, "for creative response to taunting!"

"Hmph. I would have given thirty."



The pieces of blue sky grew and merged. Streaks of sunlight reached the forest floor, which sprouted crops of wood anemones and violets. Gradually the trees began to thin until without noticing when it had happened, Hermione found herself walking beside the wolf along a broad track surrounded by grassy meadowland. Wildflowers starred the green with yellow and

pink, purple and blue: columbine and cornflower, ragged robin and dog roses, tall sturdy lupines and delicate enchanter's nightshade.

Hermione was no gardener, but she was fairly certain all of these shouldn't be flowering at the same time. Still, she liked the thought of flowers blooming in Severus Snape's head. It occurred to her to wonder whether they had always been there, or had been brought into being in response to something.

To her, perhaps?

Surely that had to be a good sign?

Shading her eyes and looking ahead, she saw that the road appeared to be blocked by a large mass, grey and indistinct, that extended a ways to either side. Distances, like time, were deceiving here, but she guessed it to be a half-mile or so away.

When they reached it some time later, it turned out to be a wall of thorns. Fifteen feet high, dense, tangled, and utterly impenetrable, it stretched across the road and to either side in a gentle curve away from them.

"I suppose there's no point trying to walk around it," Hermione said, putting her hands on her hips. She had no doubt that the hedge formed a circle. But

was it protecting what was inside, or imprisoning it?

The wolf yawned and flopped down onto the grass. "I expect you're right," it said, then put its head on its paws and promptly went to sleep.

Hermione went as close as she dared to the thorns. The shortest was fully ten centimeters long, the longest nearly a meter. She peered into the knotted mass, trying to see how thick it was. Maybe two or three meters? Perhaps, with care and patience, she could break a pathway through it twig by twig. It would not be a rapid process, but as she hadn't yet become hungry or thirsty despite all the walking she'd done, she suspected that time didn't much matter.

There were bones in the thorns. Human bones.

She jerked back, feeling slightly nauseated, then wiped damp hands on her jeans, took a deep breath, and stepped forward again to look more closely. It was difficult to distinguish white bones from white thorns, but there seemed to be at least two skeletons, perhaps more. Dagger-like spines thrust through the rib cages and pierced the eye sockets and brambles twined tight about the arms and legs, holding them fast prisoner. No



flesh remained, but one set of bones was clothed in ragged shreds of green and silver. Long strands of white-blond hair still clung to the grinning skull, and a thick bramble had grown through its mouth in a grotesque parody of the Dark Mark. Another wore tattered red and gold; on its head were matted clumps of long red hair.

Hermione couldn't look away. The bones held her transfixed, hypnotized. She took one dragging step closer, then another, her eyes fixed on the black holes of the eye sockets...

A sharp bark startled her out of her daze and she jerked her head back just as a finger-thick vine covered with barbs like tiny needles reached for her face. It missed her eye but only just, leaving a long scratch along her cheekbone. Looking down, she saw that a long twisted thorn had corkscrewed its way into the hem of her cloak, and another was reaching for the rose in her buttonhole.

Frantically she tore at the grasping briars, finally managing to break free and back off to a safe distance. She dropped to the ground, panting, waiting for her racing heart to slow. Had those two been *alive* when the thorns and brambles

caught them? She closed her eyes and shuddered at the thought, imagining thorns slowly driving their way into struggling bodies, blood dripping through the vines to stain the earth below...

The wolf nudged her with its nose. "Are you alright?"

"I think so." She pushed back her hair and sighed. "Thanks for the warning."


It looked away. "Don't mention it."

"Well, clearly breaking a path through isn't an option. How are you at leaping?"

Luckily, it turned out to be quite good indeed, even with Hermione on its back.



Hermione and her companion stood at the edge of a huge sweep of green lawn, a circle bordered on all sides by the curving hedge of thorns. The grass was as even as if every blade had been measured and trimmed individually, and a cloudless summer sky arched over it like a blue bowl. In the center rose a tall manor house of cream-colored stone, with tall narrow windows across the front and a round tower at each corner. Wide,



shallow stone steps led from the grassy sweep of lawn up to the main entrance, a pair of heavy wooden doors ironbound and elaborately carved. Lush green shrubs, trimmed into exotic shapes — a cockatrice, a hippogriff, a manticore — fronted the manor house all along either side, right up to the base of the stairs.

Directly in front but about twenty feet out from the first step was a massive stone on which rested an anvil. Thrust through the anvil and deep into the stone beneath it was a sword crafted of goblin silver, its ornate hilt set with rubies that winked like burning coals in the sunlight. On the part of the blade visible above the anvil were incised the letters G O D R

Hermione reached up to touch it reverently. “The Sword of Gryffindor.”

The wolf looked away with a sniff. “Showy.”

“It must mean something that it’s here,” she said, ignoring her friend’s pique. She walked around the base of the stone, looking for an inscription. “No words. Makes sense, I suppose. I can’t imagine Severus Snape wanting to be king of anything.” She turned and began to mount the

broad stone steps.

Halfway up she realised the wolf was no longer at her side and turning round she saw it standing at the foot of the stairs. “Are you coming?”

“No,” it said. “My place is here, not in there.”

She hesitated. She’d become so used to its companionship it felt strange to continue without it. “You won’t...leave, will you? While I’m inside?”

“Worried you might need to make a rapid getaway?” it smirked.

“Ha ha. Just...don’t go?”

“The sun is pleasantly warm here. I shall nap.” It nosed about for just the right spot, finally settling on a patch of grass that looked exactly like all the others, and lay down with a contented sigh.

Reassured, Hermione continued up the stairs.

The doors were not locked and swung open at the touch of her hand. Inside was a single large room with a high, arched ceiling. Carved winged creatures mounted on the walls held round braziers, their flames pale in the sunlight coming through the tall windows. Four long tables stretched the length of the room, and seated at the tables — or rather, sleeping at the tables — were the faded and

semi-transparent figures of...well, everyone.

Hermione walked slowly up and down the tables, looking at the familiar faces. At school each House had its own table, but here all were intermingled: Slytherins and Hufflepuffs, Gryffindors and Ravenclaws. Here were Molly and Arthur Weasley and their children across from Pansy Parkinson and Millicent Bulstrode... Oliver Wood and Lee Jordan flanking Crabbe and Goyle...Ernie MacMillan and Angelina Johnson side-by-side with Draco Malfoy and Daphne Greengrass...Luna, her sleeping face dreamier than ever ... Minerva McGonagall, her dark-green tartan now a dusty olive...Seamus and Neville... Justin...Blaise Zabini...and there, together, herself and Ron and Harry. Gently she reached out to touch Harry's face, but her fingers passed right through.

At the back of the hall an arched opening gave onto a narrow stairway, twisting its way upwards, and at the top of the stairway was a door, plain and unadorned. Hermione pushed it open and, with a sense of inevitability, saw the tall, black-clad form of Severus Snape.



He stood at the window looking out, hands clasped behind his back, like a crow gazing down from its nest. His robes swirled about him, moved by the warm summer breeze coming through the window. At the sound of her footstep he turned, and a flicker of heat kindled in her as his dark eyes fixed on hers with a questioning look.

“Do I know you?”

Pleasure at hearing his voice again — silky, rich, smoky— prevented his words from registering at first, then she stared at him, speechless. Of all the things she’d expected, this had not even been on the list. “Don’t you?”

He frowned, lifting a hand to rub his temples. “I have been here a long time. I had thought I was alone, apart from...” He made a motion in the general direction of the hall downstairs, where the sleepers lay.

Hermione was at a loss. If he didn’t know who she was, what hope did she have of convincing him to listen to her. A gust of summer air caressed her cheek, bringing the fragrance of roses.

Smells are powerful things...

Her hand went up to brush the petals of the

flower in her buttonhole, and a tingle of hope crept through her. “I brought you this.” She held out the rose, and a shaft of sun from the window fell across it. In the golden light its red was deeper, almost scarlet. The rich, sweet scent stole through the room.

Severus reached out slowly, as if in a dream. “I know this flower...” He bent his head, closed his eyes, and inhaled deeply. For a long moment he stood motionless, then opened his eyes and there was knowledge and memory in them. “Hermione?”

“Severus,” she said with a smile and held out her hand. Instinctively he took it, his fingers warm and strong and alive. “I’ve come to take you home.”



PART 5:

The Ones Worth Suffering For

*My heart is lost;
the beasts have eaten it.*


— Charles Beaudelaire, *LES FLEURS DU MAL*



AS THEY REACHED THE bottom of the stairway and stepped out into the great hall, Hermione was surprised to see that the tables were still occupied by their sleeping simulacra. Severus had regained his memory; shouldn't they be... not awake, since they weren't really there, but... gone?

Severus paused beside the sleeping copy of herself and brushed his fingers through her hair, a gesture Hermione





did not fail to notice and which made something strange happen in her chest. "I had forgotten. I have not left the tower room in..." He shook his head. "I don't know how long." He looked down the rows of tables.

"It doesn't matter. They aren't real," she said, then winced at the transparent idiocy of the statement. Anyone could tell that. She waited, expecting one of his usual biting comments, but none came.

"No," he agreed somberly. "They are wishes, born out of my desire to keep you — them — safe."

She gestured towards the sleeping simulacrum of Ron Weasley. "Even Roonil Wazlib?"

He gave a faint smile. "Even he."

"And you did." She took his hand, her heart full of love and respect for this man who, even in his dreams, had tried so hard to protect them all. "So many people are alive now because of you, Severus."

"I can only assume, however, that some are not." She bit her lip, her eyes sliding away from his questioning gaze. "I see." He took her arm in a grip that was gentle but unyielding and turned her to look at the sleeping figures. "Who?"

"I don't know them all," she said, fighting back

sudden tears. He shouldn't be blaming himself for this, but he would. Oh, she knew he would. "I can't—"

"Tell me the ones you can." His voice was deep, inexorable.

Reluctantly she pointed to a pretty girl with long wavy hair. "Lavender Brown." A small, skinny boy holding a camera in the crook of his arm. "Colin Creevey." One of two identical boys, tall and rangy and mischievous-looking even in their sleep. "Fred Weasley." She sighed, then pointed to a witch and wizard, close beside one another, their hands clasped. "Remus and Tonks."

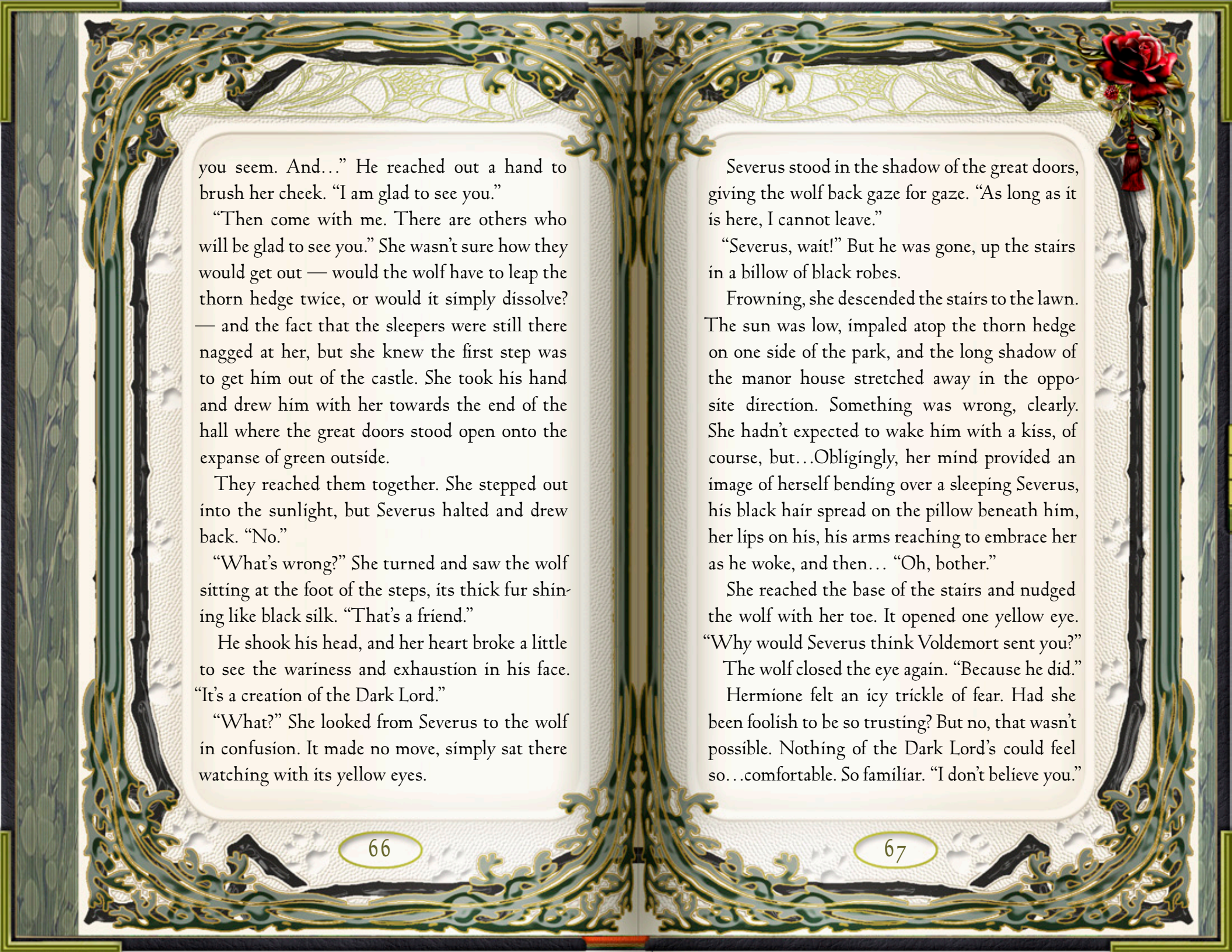
She heard him draw in a sharp breath. "Both of them?"

She nodded, then turned to look at him. "Severus, I'm so sorry. But we did win."

"Did we?" he said bleakly. "I have no way of knowing. For all I know, you are some phantasm of the Dark Lord sent to torment me."

"No!" The cry came from her heart. "You can't believe that!"

"No, I don't." He smiled briefly. "It may be foolish of me, but I choose to believe you are what



you seem. And..." He reached out a hand to brush her cheek. "I am glad to see you."

"Then come with me. There are others who will be glad to see you." She wasn't sure how they would get out — would the wolf have to leap the thorn hedge twice, or would it simply dissolve? — and the fact that the sleepers were still there nagged at her, but she knew the first step was to get him out of the castle. She took his hand and drew him with her towards the end of the hall where the great doors stood open onto the expanse of green outside.

They reached them together. She stepped out into the sunlight, but Severus halted and drew back. "No."

"What's wrong?" She turned and saw the wolf sitting at the foot of the steps, its thick fur shining like black silk. "That's a friend."

He shook his head, and her heart broke a little to see the wariness and exhaustion in his face. "It's a creation of the Dark Lord."

"What?" She looked from Severus to the wolf in confusion. It made no move, simply sat there watching with its yellow eyes.

Severus stood in the shadow of the great doors, giving the wolf back gaze for gaze. "As long as it is here, I cannot leave."

"Severus, wait!" But he was gone, up the stairs in a billow of black robes.

Frowning, she descended the stairs to the lawn. The sun was low, impaled atop the thorn hedge on one side of the park, and the long shadow of the manor house stretched away in the opposite direction. Something was wrong, clearly. She hadn't expected to wake him with a kiss, of course, but...Obligingly, her mind provided an image of herself bending over a sleeping Severus, his black hair spread on the pillow beneath him, her lips on his, his arms reaching to embrace her as he woke, and then... "Oh, bother."

She reached the base of the stairs and nudged the wolf with her toe. It opened one yellow eye. "Why would Severus think Voldemort sent you?"

The wolf closed the eye again. "Because he did."

Hermione felt an icy trickle of fear. Had she been foolish to be so trusting? But no, that wasn't possible. Nothing of the Dark Lord's could feel so...comfortable. So familiar. "I don't believe you."

“Your belief or disbelief is irrelevant.” It flicked one ear unconcernedly. “Voldemort is the proximate cause of my existence. Though not the ultimate one.”

Hermione huffed in frustration. “What does that mean?”

“He ordered Nagini’s attack, which brought me into being.”


She stared at it, the last piece falling into place. “You’re the barrier,” she breathed, eyes widening. “It isn’t the little stone room, or the forest, or the wall of thorns. It’s you.”

Behind and above her she heard the soft sound of the carved doors swinging open. She looked up to see Severus standing in the arched opening. His expression was neutral, giving away nothing, but his voice was low and almost caressing when he spoke. “It would be an honor, Miss Granger, if you would join me for dinner,” he said. “Before you go.”



They ate on a small terrace off the great hall, with the rose in a crystal vase in the center of the table. Although under normal circumstances the violation of Gamp’s Law of Elemental Transfigura-





tion would have driven her to spasms of curiosity, Hermione gave no thought to the source of the food and wine (which were delicious). Nor did she feel the need to investigate the soft, sweet music that seemed to emanate from the fragrant summer night itself. These were trivialities whose explanation did not matter. All her attention was on the man who sat opposite her, and on how to release him from his self-imposed prison. But each time she tried to turn the conversation in that direction he adroitly deflected it, and at last she simply relaxed into the pleasure of the evening, of witty conversation, of dark smoldering eyes and a husky low voice that thrilled along every nerve.

As he poured the last of the wine into their glasses the music changed to a waltz. He rose and extended a hand. "Shall we dance?"

In the mellow candlelight the lines of strain and weariness were erased from her companion's face, and he looked younger and happier than she had ever seen him. His hands, one on her waist and the other holding her own, were warm and strong, and they moved together as if they had but one body between them.

He held her gaze as they glided across the floor. "You're...older."

"And wiser, I hope."

He spun her gracefully round. "What a terrifying thought."

She gave a slightly breathless laugh. "I suppose you'd think I was peculiar if I asked you to say, 'obviously'."

His lips quirked. "Obviously," he drawled, lingering over each syllable, and it was both a reply and a gift. She shivered deliciously and he drew her closer, and she felt him smile as he pressed his lips to her hair.

At last the music faded away and with one last slow turn the dance came to an end. Severus was apparently as reluctant as she for the night to end; rather than releasing her, his arms tightened. She could feel his heartbeat, slow and steady, against her breasts. At last, however, she could no longer hold back the question that had been haunting her since his invitation hours earlier.

"Why did you say, 'before you go'?" she whispered into his shoulder.

He shifted so that there was space between them,

then cupped her cheek with one hand, his eyes dark and deep as the Black Lake. "The plain fact is that you cannot stay," he said gently. "And I cannot go."

"But you can!" she said, tears pricking her eyes. "That's what I've been trying to tell you! You created all this — the forest, the thorns, the wolf. It's all you."

His thumb reached out to brush her lips, gentle as a butterfly's wing. "If I did, I have no memory of it. Nor of how to unmake it."

"But you can't just stay here, trapped, not when you've already lost so much! It isn't fair!"

He raised one eyebrow. "It may have escaped your notice, but life isn't fair."

She shook her head in angry denial, her hair whipping about her face. "What you have here, this isn't life, Severus. It's a story."

"Life is a story. And not all stories have happy endings."

"Well damn it, this one will!" Without letting herself stop to think, she put her arms around his neck and pulled his head down to meet her lips. She felt his surprise, but only for a moment, then his arms were around her and he was returning

her kiss with a passion that took her breath away. Time stopped as she lost herself in the sensation of his body against hers, his hands twined in her hair, his mouth trailing fire across her skin. She tilted her head back, wanting more, wanting all of him.

"Bloody Gryffindors," he growled against her neck, his voice rough with desire.

She broke away then, knowing that if she didn't go at that moment, she never would. At the foot of the stairs she turned to look up at him. The light was behind him and all she could see was a silhouette, a shadow, as if the man himself were already gone. "This one will," she whispered. "I promise you."

Behind him, the next-to-last petal dropped from the rose as silently as a tear.



PART 6:

“Whoso Palleth Out This Sword”

*I will love the light for it shows me the way,
yet I will endure the darkness
because it shows me the stars.*

— Og Mandino



HE HAD BEEN SO DISTRACTED the night before that she hadn't noticed the absence of the wolf, but when she woke the next morning she went in search of it. She found it getting a drink from a low marble basin set with sapphires and surrounded by heart's ease and Queen Anne's lace. She dropped to her knees beside it.

“You're supposed to be protecting him,” she said, bypassing the courtesy of a greeting, “but



you're just another trap. He can't, or won't, come out as long as you're here."

The wolf raised its head, water dripping from its muzzle. "I am a guardian. I can only fulfill the purpose my creator set for me."

"But you have. It's done. The war is over. Voldemort's gone. So can't you just...leave? Go back into the forest? Just for a little while, maybe that would be enough."

"The forest would not be far enough. Nowhere is far enough. In here, everywhere is near. As long as he is here, so am I; as long as I am here, so is he."

"Oh, don't talk in riddles! Don't you understand?" she cried desperately. "I don't want him trapped here forever, no matter how beautiful it is. No matter how safe."

"Why?"

"Because I love him!" She had not admitted it, even to herself, but now the words came without thought and she knew they were true.

"You love him?"

"Yes!" She pounded a fist on the grass in frustration.

It regarded her closely. "And yet you want to

take him away. Out of this place. To somewhere else, where it is not safe."

She sighed. "Yes. He may not be safe, but he'll be free. Free of Voldemort. Free of Dumbledore. Even free of you," she added softly, lifting a hand to stroke its fur.

"Technically, that makes you a threat," the wolf said idly. "And what if, in this other place where you wish to take him, he also wants to be free of you?"


"Even that," she whispered, swallowing over the lump in her throat. "He deserves a second chance, to shape a life of his own choosing. To write his own story."

The wolf rose gracefully to its feet and stepped towards her, close enough she could feel its warm breath on her cheek. "Come to the sword in the stone this afternoon," it said.

"Why?"

"Never mind why. Only make sure he is there too, in the doorway, where he can see you." It nuzzled her once, gently, then turned and trotted away.





Severus stopped just inside the doors. Outside, a late summer day blazed in all its glory of blue and gold and green. “What is it you want me to see?”

Hermione shook her head. “Severus, please, don’t ask. Just...wait here.”

The sun was hot on her shoulders as she descended the broad stairs and crossed the few feet of grass to stand by the stone which held the Sword of Gryffindor. Tiny pieces of mica embedded in the rock glittered in the sun, the edges of the blade blazed like white fire, the rubies in the hilt were like drops of blood. Although there were no flowers nearby, she could smell roses. She shook back her hair and looked up at the man she loved, waiting in the shadows.

A twig snapped, and she turned to look.

The wolf stepped out of the bushes, head held low, ears laid flat back against its skull, yellow eyes blazing. Its lips were drawn back in a snarl over gleaming white teeth and a low rippling growl rose and fell in its throat as it stared fixedly at her, jaws slavering, eyes filled with rage. She stared at it in confusion. What had happened to her friend? And then, with a surge of terror, she

remembered its words that morning: *Technically, that makes you a threat.* Its front paws moved in a tearing motion, leaving dark-brown wounds in the lush green grass of the garden. With a sudden thrust of its hind legs, it lunged towards her.

Everything seemed to be moving very slowly and something was wrong with her hearing. She could see Severus, his mouth open as he shouted at her to run, run, for Merlin’s sake, run! but she could hear nothing the beating of her own heart.

Then she heard the voice of the wolf, calm and clear in her mind, utterly at odds with the ravening beast racing towards her. *Do you trust me?*

The burning eyes, the open jaws, the sharp white teeth filled her vision. *Always.*

Don’t move.

She drew herself up and stood there, waiting for whatever would come. If this was the price, so be it. With a baying howl of fury, the wolf closed the last few yards and sprang.

“No!” Severus leaped down the stairs to the stone and grasped the Sword of Gryffindor in both hands. In a single motion he drew it from the stone and anvil, the metal blade singing a



high sweet note as it came free, and swung it straight across the throat of the wolf.

Hermione cried out in anguish at the sight of the great black body stretched lifeless at her feet, but there was no blood whatsoever and she realised she could see through it to the grass beneath. She heard its voice one last time: *He is yours now. Protect him.* It faded, became insubstantial, a shadow twisting in the air like smoke, and was gone.

Then Severus's arms were around her and he was holding her so tightly she could barely breathe, murmuring broken words of love in her ear. She wrapped her arms around him to hold him close, and then...

"Look," she said, pointing at the stone that bore the now-empty anvil, her heart lifting in joy. Letters had appeared, incised in sharp, crisp strokes:

WHOSO PULLETH OUT THIS SWORD OF THIS STONE AND ANVIL HATH RIGHTWISE FULFILLED HIS CHARGE WITH HONOUR AND COURAGE, AND MAY GO FORTH FREELY FROM THIS PLACE, RELEASED OF ALL CONSTRAINTS.

The letters seemed to glow from within, brighter and brighter. And then everything went black.

EPILOGUE:
**Happily
Ever After**

*“Of course it is happening inside your head...
but why on earth should that mean that
it is not real?”*

— Albus Dumbledore



SHE OPENED HER EYES TO white: white walls, white ceiling, white snow falling outside the window. Ah. St Mungo's, of course. She turned her head and saw black: Severus, in a chair beside her bed.

“Welcome back,” she whispered, a warmth curling around her heart at the sight of him here, in the real world, awake and smiling at her.

He rose from his chair and slid carefully onto

the bed beside her, gathering her into the curve of his arm. “When I saw it attacking you, all I could think was that I couldn't bear to lose you.”

She snuggled close, rubbing her cheek on the rough wool of his robe. “What happens next?”

“Next?” He twisted a piece of her hair around his finger, and she felt the rumble of laughter in his chest. “Why, next we live happily ever after.”

Finite

Notes:

The title of Part 5 is taken from a quote by Bob Marley.

Rosa gallica officinalis is one of the oldest known roses; it is also called the apothecary's rose.

Eileen's inscription in the book of fairy tales is a combining of quotes from Joan Didion and J. K. Rowling.

Hermione's observation about fairy tales and monsters is adapted from an essay by G. K. Chesterton entitled "THE RED ANGEL."

Colophon



Layout was done in Adobe InDesign.

The Red Hen logo and other elements are adapted from the incomparable Marwan Aridi, modified in Macromedia FreeHand. Cover was created in Adobe Photoshop. Marbled paper photo was found on the web. Additional Graphics were provided from Dover Publications and Getty Images. Border rose is from Moonbeam1212.

Illustrations were built in the DAZ Studio.

Fonts used in this publication are: the Truesdell family, by Monotype for body text. Titling has been set in Folkard, by Fontcraft. Notre Dame Dfr, Flight of the Dragon's Medieval Dingbats, Dresser Rules, and FM Bolyar Rough Ornaments have also been used in the project

Special mention should probably also be extended to Jack Davis and Linea Dayton for their efforts in producing The Photoshop 7 One-Click WOW Book. Nearly 2 decades later this is still my frst "go-to" resource.

Graphics design by J. Odell
(J0del@aol.com)