

The Spirit That Remembers

by Elise_Wanderer

The war is over, and Severus Snape is dead---or is he? Hermione Granger, with the help of Harry Potter, begins to work on redeeming his memory. In the process, she uncovers the power of memory itself. Canon-compliant—despite JKR's best efforts. Complete in 19 chapters plus Prologue and Epilogue (What Epilogue?).

Prologue:

Chapter 1 of 21

The war is over, and Severus Snape is dead---or is he? Hermione Granger, with the help of Harry Potter, begins to work on redeeming his memory. In the process, she uncovers the power of memory itself. Canon-compliant—despite JKR's best efforts. Complete in 19 chapters plus Prologue and Epilogue (What Epilogue?).

Disclaimer: The world is JKR's, the characters are hers, the rules laid down are hers. The poetry is Brontë's. The playing with these lovely toys, and the lack of any profit thereof, is mine alone.

Author's Note: I wrote this story in part for my friend Suzi. She is a huge Harry Potter fan, but she has never really understood why Severus and Hermione comprise, in my eyes, a One True Pairing. I wanted to write a tale that would lead her gently in their direction and convince her by the end. This is a sequel to canon that is as canon-compliant as I can make it, even down to that infamous Epilogue. I have not altered what Jo wrote. I have simply... looked at it from a different perspective. I hope this helps Suzi see the light. She certainly had some great insights into grammar and word usage that helped in the early stages of its writing.

My deepest thanks to sshg316 and dacian_goddess, who made this so much better with their thoughtful encouragement and insightful comments and their wonderful spirits. Thanks also to minuet99, who found more evidence of the fact that I type with three fingers (and who made me my first icons, welcoming me so sweetly to LiveJournal).

Anything still weak or unclear or just plain wrong in this is entirely because I was too pigheaded to take a gentle, smart, caring suggestion from one or the other of them, and because I happen to favor slightly nontraditional punctuation---as you will see.

This is what JKR meant us to know actually happened.

Or at least, it could be....

PROLOGUE

“Fifteen Wild Decembers”

Cold in the earth—and fifteen wild Decembers

From those brown hills have melted into spring:

Faithful, indeed, is the spirit that remembers

After such years of change and suffering!

- Emily Brontë, from "Remembrance"

Fifteen years. He couldn't believe it had been that long. In some ways, it seemed as though it were just yesterday, just a few days before that he had stood, shivering, alone, and wondering if he was about to make the biggest mistake of his life. Yet in other ways, those memories belonged to another man entirely. So many people he loved had died or changed or just moved on with their lives. As had he.

As had she?

No, he shuddered, *I won't even think that*. He pulled his dress cloak tighter around his shoulders. The soft cashmere against his fingers brought a slight smile to his face; the days of shabby clothes and struggling to get by were long gone. That, at least, was a comfort.

He squinted up at the sky, attempting to gauge whether he had enough time to try one more street before the rain began. The Perfect Present had to be here somewhere, the gift that would bring it all back into focus. If he could just find exactly the right thing, maybe it would be enough to show her that there was still something worth having with him. Maybe an object could save them. He knew that was probably a futile thought, but he had been trying to find comfort in anything these days.

But wasn't fifteen years of marriage worth fighting for? They had two amazing children and a lot of history to show for it. Even if those vague suspicions that tickled the edges of his mind were right, didn't she at least owe him the effort to get things back on track?

He refused to focus on the fear that danced before him. If he did, if he faced it squarely, he might never be able to stop weeping. This could after all simply be another one of those intellectual obsessions that sometimes seemed to consume her. This time felt subtly different, but how would he really be able to tell?

The truth--the bald, bitter truth, that he refused to make possible by articulating it--might be that she was in love with another man. He could compete with an idea or an all-consuming pet project. He could compete, or he could wait it out. Eventually, she would have found out all she could or finished the work she saw needing to be done. Eventually, she would decide she was through, and then she would return to him again. How many times had it happened before, after all?

But what if this desperate, panicked, new fear turned out to be true? If his rival this time was a flesh-and-blood man and not just an abstract concept, how could he fight back? If he had lost her heart to another human being, what could he possibly offer to make her choose to stay with him? Fifteen years of marriage suddenly seemed so inadequate. And he could not bear to confront the frenzied, out of control, mind-numbing terror that the idea suggested to him.

So, rather than contemplate the possibility of losing his wife, Ron Weasley was frantically looking for the perfect anniversary gift. If he found something amazing, everything might be all right again.

~~~~~

Hermione was contemplating mileposts herself. The war that had defined her adolescence had ended two decades ago. She had so many injuries to show for her role in that incredible struggle. The visible, literal scars were nothing compared to the contusions she kept secret. Most of the pain had been dulled with age, but, just recently, the old, dull ache had become palpable again. At times, it left her breathless and tormented. Something was wrong, and she just could not put her finger on it.

Most of those years had been wonderful. And marriage, while sometimes difficult and infuriating and downright annoying, was also an amazing state of grace when shared with someone you loved, respected, and could even, on occasion, laugh yourself silly with.

Why, then, did she feel left out? Why did he seem so guarded of late? Hadn't they made it past the need for secrets? She shivered. This was going to be a challenging anniversary.

## CHAPTER ONE

*Chapter 2 of 21*

The war is over, and Severus Snape is dead—or is he? Hermione Granger, with the help of Harry Potter, begins to work on redeeming his memory. Canon-compliant—despite JKR's best efforts.

*A/N: All hail JKR, who created these amazing characters and this incredible world and who lets us play in it for free. And thanks to Ms. Brontë, whose poetry has proved an incredible guide on this journey.*

My deepest thanks to the incomparable sshg316 and the amazing literary observer, dacian\_goddess, who have made this so much better than they found it. Anything still ragged and broken is my own damn fault.

### CHAPTER ONE

"Sever'd At Last?"

*Cold in the earth—and the deep snow piled above thee,*

Far, far removed, cold in the dreary grave!

Have I forgot, my only Love, to love thee,

Sever'd at last by Time's all-severing wave?

*- Emily Brontë, from "Remembrance"*

The war was over, and Severus Snape was dead. Hermione had tried to leave him in his grave. And she had failed.

The thing was, she had been unable to shake the certainty that he wasn't gone, and she didn't think it was just wishful thinking. Despite what they had seen happen in the Shrieking Shack, there was no body when they returned later. Its absence had fueled in her a desperate hope.

Hermione Granger on a mission was a force mighty to behold. Ron Weasley never really stood a chance. The first few months after the end of the war were the worst, though he did try to divert her attention.

"Hermione, give it up," he pleaded, putting down what had started out as a celebratory glass of wine at the end of an intimate dinner. "Maybe he was vaporized. Maybe his buddies came and—Okay, all right!" he squeaked suddenly as she fixed him with a fierce look of warning. "Okay! The guys who thought they were his buddies! Maybe they came and zapped him out of existence, or took him away and buried him, or, I don't know, ate him or something!"

"Now there's a revolting thought!" she answered sarcastically. "No, Ron. Dead bodies do not just get up and walk away."

"But—" he started.

"No," she answered firmly. "He did not become an Inferius."

"We watched him die, Hermione," he said, trying to sound reasonable.

"We thought we did," she replied. "We were a little busy with other things at the time. And we didn't have the luxury of verifying anything before we left him there."

"He was bleeding. A lot. And even without that, there was the snake's venom. He, uh, she bit him. The poison alone---"

"But don't you see, Ron?" she interrupted eagerly. "That's the strongest argument of all! Professor Snape was a Potions master! If anybody could have counteracted the poison, don't you think it would have been him? And don't you think that, of anybody, he'd have been the one prepared for the possibility of being bitten?"

Ron shook his head, exasperated. "Maybe, I don't know, but there's still all that blood. There wasn't a body, but there was a huge pool of blood. It hadn't even all dried by the time we got back. Even the most amazing Potions master of all time needs a certain amount of blood in him to stay alive. Most of Snape's was on the floor."

Hermione smiled smugly. "Yes, and if anyone would know ways to replenish blood, guess who that would be? And who would have been ready to replenish blood in the first place? I know, Ron," and her voice grew gentler at his look of annoyance, "you'd rather have the greasy git dead and gone, good riddance, but remember what Harry said. I never heard him talk that way about Professor Snape before. He sounded almost, I don't know, ashamed of himself. And wouldn't it be incredible if one more hero had survived?"

She stopped abruptly, thinking suddenly of all those fallen who had been close to her. Remus and Tonks, who had finally found happiness together, now lying cold in adjoining graves, their newborn son an orphan who would never know his parents. Mad-Eye Moody, whose gruff courage had protected Harry to the last. Eager, brave Colin Creevey, who never should have been there at all. Amazing, complicated, wonderful Albus Dumbledore, who had sacrificed himself to maintain Snape's cover and protect that odious little prat, Draco Malfoy.

Fred. Dear, wonderful, fearless Fred. Tears welled in her eyes, and she suddenly grabbed Ron in a fierce hug. He was momentarily startled, then returned the embrace, burying his head in her hair. There might come a time when they could get through a normal conversation without crying suddenly, but it was not going to be anytime soon.

"I'm sorry, Ron," she said apologetically. "This is going to take more time than I thought."

He pulled back, looking embarrassed. "No worries," he said, his voice gruff. "We'll get through this."

~~~~~

It did get easier, of course, but so gradually that neither of them seemed to notice. A lot of things happened that way during that strange, troubled, transition time.

One of those things seemed at first to be a blessing. The spontaneous kiss that Ron and Hermione had shared during the battle broke the ice between them and appeared to lay the groundwork for a deeper relationship. Both were glad to have one particular someone to cling to when words were not enough. They found comfort in their embraces. They had been through so much together, so much that almost no one else could even begin to understand, and Harry, who might have been able to share in that tight circle, was distracted most of the time. Clearly, Harry's commitment to Ginny was now complete, and he focused his full attention on her now that he had the freedom to do so.

So it seemed only natural that Ron and Hermione would connect, as well. In some ways, though, there were already complications. First, they had responsibilities to their families. Hermione had to retrieve and restore hers, and that turned out to need more time than she would have guessed. Meanwhile, the Weasleys had a few demands of their own to make of their youngest son. Separated and distracted, Hermione and Ron soon drifted into a more casual relationship. For her part, Hermione found it comfortable. Having Ron somewhere in her life was reassuring, and she didn't feel the need for his constant presence.

Ron, on the other hand, felt a void, but he had never been especially adept at understanding his own feelings. He exercised his frustrations in the ways he always had, by smacking the hell out of Bludgers and by complaining about the girl's current fixation, sometimes at the same time.

"She's not a girl anymore, really," he admitted sullenly to Harry one day, scraping himself off the ground before taking a break from a particularly energetic pickup game. "You'd think she'd be past these obsessions of hers."

Harry took a swig of pumpkin juice and kept his opinions to himself. Considerable time with his new fiancée had taught him the value of the occasional conversational silence.

"She's bloody mental about him," Ron went on, his voice rising to a simpering falsetto. "'Oh, Professor Snape, he was such a hero!'" he said, quoting her inaccurately. "'His whole life was such a noble tragedy!'" He snorted in derision. "To hear her talk, he's suddenly some big romantic thingummy. Bloody greasy bat."

Harry put down his cup carefully. "Well, he was a hero, after all," he said quietly.

"Oi, mate," Ron wailed. "Not you, too!" He took a swipe at his friend's arm. "Give it up! He's dead!"

"Yeah," Harry agreed softly, but his eyes were distant.

Ron picked up his broomstick. "And you will be, too, before I'm done with you!"

Harry shook himself and then grinned at the challenge. "You're on, mate," he said with a laugh, and they returned to their game in earnest.

~~~~~

Harry had decided that his new mission, now that he had defeated Voldemort, was to redeem the reputation of Severus Snape, the one casualty of the war he could save, if only in memory. Hermione had come on board enthusiastically, but Ron couldn't reconcile himself to the image of Snape blasting George's ear off in the heat of battle. Harry and Hermione spent many evenings at Grimmauld Place trying to convince Ron what Snape's memory of that night proved.

"I told you," Harry urged on one such evening, "that was an accident. And he wanted to make sure we knew. That's why he included that particular memory in what he left me."

"The git was playing both sides," Ron said smugly. "He made it look like he missed. He never liked any of us, and he'd have taken the chance to zap any one of us if he could. George is just lucky Snape's aim wasn't better."

"Ron, we misjudged him almost from the beginning," Hermione pointed out, glaring in Harry's direction.

"Yeah, mate," Harry said, taking the rather pointed hint. "I was the worst. I always thought he was out to get me, so I saw everything he did in the wrong light. Even when I found out the truth, each time I believed it was just a fluke. I never gave him a break. And he still saved my arse, time after time. Bloody amazing."

"And he was a bastard, too, have you forgotten that?" Ron challenged. "He was not a nice man!"

"True enough," Harry responded with a lopsided grin. "But he was a good one. And damned courageous." His face grew thoughtful. "And I called him a coward. To his face. I was the real git. I was so bloody stupid."

Hermione put a hand on his arm. "He was just as prejudiced about you, Harry," she said evenly.

"But he protected me anyway," Harry replied, looking up at her. "I knew that Professor Dumbledore trusted him, and I should've known there were good reasons why, but I just couldn't see past what I thought was the truth. He wouldn't have been in the Shrieking Shack if he hadn't been doing what he could to help me. He would've been safe."

"Harry, you don't know that," she said sharply, starting to be alarmed at the despair in his voice.

"I'm not sure what I do know," he answered bitterly. "But I think it's my job to find out. And make sure the truth really does get told this time."

Ron scowled at him. "My sister is marrying a ruddy fool," he muttered and left the room.

Hermione smiled at Harry. "He'll come 'round. It just takes him longer. Remember how he came back before."

Harry returned her smile faintly. "Maybe. It doesn't matter, though. I've got to do this."

"I know you do," she replied. "And I'll help you. I promise." It was a promise she ended up keeping more completely than she could have imagined.

## Of All the Wedding Guests

*Chapter 3 of 21*

A wedding, a controversial toast, a proposal, and a promise. Canon-compliant—despite JKR's best efforts.

*A/N: Once more, thanks to the incomparable JKR for amazing characters and an incredible world to play with. No money being made here, but it's a glorious place to visit. Thanks also to Ms. Brontë for poetic inspiration.*

*Deepest, humblest thanks to sshg316 and dacian\_goddess, who continue to make me a better writer through their caring comments and watchful eyes. Anything out of order is because I didn't listen to 'em, and shame on me!*

### CHAPTER TWO

#### "Of All the Wedding Guests"

*The trees did wave their plummy crests,*

*The glad birds carolled clear;*

*And I, of all the wedding guests,*

*Was only sullen there.*

*There was not one but wished to shun*

*My aspect void of cheer;*

*The very grey rocks, looking on,*

*Asked, "What do you do here?"*

*- Emily Brontë, from "High Waving Heather"*

The marriage of Ginevra Weasley and Harry Potter was a simple but glorious affair. The event itself had been planned to the last detail by a mother determined to have her only daughter's marriage be as perfect as possible and was funded by the groom's rather deep pockets.

The occasion was also an important sign for all involved that Voldemort really was dead and gone, his followers captured or silenced, and the war at an end. The toasts went on throughout the day, celebrating both the bride and groom's happiness and the spirits of so many good people who could be present in memory only.

At length, Harry stood up. After raising his glass to his new wife, her welcoming family, and his two best friends (the best man and the maid of honor), he stood still, looking solemnly at his attentive audience.

"There are too many who couldn't be here today," Harry said, his voice as strong as his heart could make it. "Too many made this day possible, but paid an unforgivable price. First, to my mum and dad, who showed me the strongest magic there is."

"To Lily and James," Minerva murmured, in response with the rest.

Harry lowered his glass from his lips and blinked brightly for a moment, thinking of the love that had made his whole life possible but had kept him from knowing the two most important people in his whole history. He swallowed past the lump in his throat and continued. "Next, to Sirius and Remus, who gave everything to teach me, protect me, and give me strength, even after they were gone." As he drank, he thought about the shining images who had walked beside him as he went to face Tom Riddle one last time.

Then he stood as tall as he could and looked out into the company that included so many people he had come to think of as his family. He raised his glass again and said, "And finally, to the two greatest wizards of our time, one of unmatched heart and the other of unswerving courage: I give you Albus Dumbledore... and Severus Snape."

There was an audible gasp from the crowd, and then silence as they considered his words. Harry met their shocked eyes steadily. And then, one by one, they acknowledged his words, raised their glasses in return, and emptied them. For another moment, the only sound was a distant rustle of trees, and then the voices resumed, swelling to fill the air. As Harry sat down, Ginny took his hand and pressed it to her lips. Harry held Hermione's eyes for a moment before turning to embrace his new wife. He was smiling.

~~~~~

Minerva McGonagall had enjoyed quite a lot to drink. Between the toasts and the little (and, apparently, bottomless) flask she kept in a pocket of her robes, she had put herself in quite a celebratory wedding mood. Hermione found herself giggling indulgently as her former professor grew increasingly nostalgic about her favorite Gryffindors and slightly weepy at the thought that they were now adults and no longer under her care.

As the two women sat watching the bride and groom swaying slowly on the dance floor by the lantern light, Minerva's mood began to turn melancholy.

"That was a very fitting toast of Mr. Potter's," she confided, using a bony finger to chase down the last crumbs from Hermione's cake plate. "And high time, too. We were all so wrong about him." Her voice sounded suspiciously close to tears.

Hermione reached out to place a comforting hand on her shoulder. "It was hard to know what was true about Professor Snape," she murmured quietly.

Minerva sniffed and took another drink, this time directly from her flask; she had apparently given up the pretense of moderation for the evening. "We couldn't have won without him, but we all--even I--were so sure he'd gone over. I thought he had betrayed us." She drew a shuddering breath. "I thought Albus was just an old fool for trusting him."

"We all did," Hermione assured her. "We couldn't have known the truth. It would have put him in even more danger. But I'm quite glad we found out in the end."

Minerva shook her head. "It's all so unutt---unutt---ununutterably---." She shook her head. "It's just so sad. His whole life, really."

Hermione sat back in her chair and gazed at the night sky contemplatively. "What do you know about him, Professor? I mean, what were you really sure about?"

Minerva tried to push a stray strand of greying hair back into place. "I remember his mother, of course. Can't say I liked her much. Got his flying skills from her, I think."

She laughed suddenly. "Though not that trick of doing it without a broom!"

Hermione grinned. "Until I found out about her, I'd always thought he came from an old, established wizarding family."

"Oh, he did," Minerva asserted. "The Princes are, well, they go back a long way."

"But not the Snapes," Hermione said. She'd researched the family tree. She'd found no other Snapes anywhere in the magical genealogies.

"No," Minerva agreed, hiccoughing slightly. "He was the very first. He was an original. Scrawny little thing. And I always had my suspicions...." Her voice trailed off.

Hermione turned to ask what Minerva had suspected, but the older woman had laid her head carefully down on the table and was already fast asleep. Hermione took the flask from the witch's fingers and patted her gently on the arm. "Sleep well, Minerva," she whispered, smiling down on her.

~~~~~

The first time Ron proposed was at Harry's wedding reception. Hermione hadn't believed he was serious, or even sober, for that matter, and he had turned it into a joke simply to save face.

The second time he asked, he brought a ring.

"Ron, it's lovely," she had said gently. "And you are a sweet, wonderful man."

"But the answer is 'no,'" he finished for her, closing the box with a snap.

She reached across the table and placed her hand on his. "It's too soon, we're too young, we both have a lot we still need to do on our own," she replied, her voice sensible.

"Harry and Ginny didn't think it was too soon," he said.

"That's Harry and Ginny for you," she answered. "That's not us."

"Is there an 'us'?" he asked, trying not to sound hopeful. "I'm just asking," he added as she smiled at him.

But she didn't answer.

~~~~~

Each time Ron proposed, Hermione struggled with what had come to feel like his betrayal on the subject of Snape. She refused to consider any other reason for her feelings, even as she and Harry found out more about Snape's unhappy history.

She resisted examining whatever other feelings she might have been developing for a dead man. Yet she found him to be a compelling figure, and Minerva continued to be a fertile source of information. She shared Snape's student records with Hermione, albeit reluctantly.

"These records are confidential," she told Hermione primly. "I'm afraid I can't let you copy them or remove them from this office. But," she added, glancing at Dumbledore's portrait, "I suppose it would not hurt for you to read them here, considering the use you might make of them." She settled in behind her desk and opened a book.

"Thank you, Headmistress," Hermione said solemnly. She, too, looked at Dumbledore's portrait. He twinkled at her. She found the twinkle strangely disconcerting. She settled into the chair by the fire to examine the record of Severus Snape, Hogwarts student.

And immediately looked up, startled. Dumbledore was still twinkling. "I thought---," she began.

Minerva looked up. "Thought what, dear?" she asked.

"The Sorting Hat wanted to put him in Gryffindor?" Hermione asked, perplexed.

Minerva frowned. "Is that what it says there?"

"Yes," Hermione replied, still staring at Dumbledore.

"Is it?" he asked blandly.

She looked back down at the file. "Well," she answered slowly, "it says, 'Gryffindor affinity, but sorted to Slytherin.'" Her eyes rose again to meet Dumbledore's. "Affinity. He wanted to be where Lily was."

Minerva was still frowning. "That isn't the way it works," she said, sounding disapproving. "You don't choose your House, your House chooses you."

"Just like wands," replied Hermione.

Minerva nodded. "Exactly."

"But Harry told me the Hat tried to put him in Slytherin and he refused," Hermione said.

"I'm certain he was mistaken," Minerva said firmly.

"Perhaps," Hermione responded uncertainly. "But Professor Snape turned out to be braver than any Gryffindor I've ever read about. Would it have been a huge mistake to put him there? It certainly would have changed a lot of things!"

"It certainly would have!" Minerva answered, trying and failing to imagine the scrawny boy who had been Severus Snape starting his Hogwarts career as a member of her beloved House.

She glanced over and realized that Dumbledore had transferred his attention from Hermione to her. She wasn't sure she appreciated the scrutiny. "Is this what you meant, Albus?" Minerva asked irritably. "We sort too soon? Well, no one is all of one type. It's more a question of overall compatibility. It's the whole collection of traits, not just one predominant characteristic."

"Of course, Minerva," Albus answered placidly. "And the House system encourages certain tendencies. I've wondered about some cases, that's all."

Hermione chewed her lip thoughtfully and returned her attention to the file. This was already a complicated research project, she thought. She wondered if she could really understand the man. He was an intriguing enigma.

And she was fascinated.

That Melancholy Boy

Chapter 4 of 21

A crystal vial held the key to what came before and why it happened. Hermione is determined to uncover the truth through the memories given to Harry. Canon-compliant—despite JKR's best efforts.

A/N: As always, JKR created these people and this world. I am only suggesting what else she might have (should have?) done with them. Thanks to Ms. Brontë for poetic inspiration.

And deepest thanks to the incomparable sshg316 for her keen eye and powerful instincts. Shug, you make me a better writer every time you look over my shoulder. Anything still squirrelly is my own pigheadedness.

CHAPTER THREE

"That Melancholy Boy"

Never has his grim Fate

Smiled since he was born -

Frowning on the infant,

Shadowing childhood's joy;

Guardian angel knows not

That melancholy boy.

- Emily Brontë, from "The Two Children"

"Tell me again, Harry," she ordered briskly. "Tell me the memories he gave you. I'm going to catalogue them." Her quill was poised over a fresh piece of parchment.

They were tucked in front of a cozy fire in Hermione's new flat, testing out the tea set her parents had given her as a housewarming gift. He smiled indulgently as she began to write. The sight made him happy. He took a deep breath and began. "The first memory he gave me--the very first one--was the first time he met my mother. They were just kids... and he told her she was a witch."

"She didn't know?" Hermione confirmed as she wrote.

"No," Harry replied, shaking his head. "They were both nine or ten. I didn't find out until I was eleven." He cocked his head at her. "How old were you when you knew?"

Hermione bit her lip. "I felt as though something was strange for a long time," she answered slowly. "But I didn't find out for sure until I got my Hogwarts letter. I was really

relieved. I thought I might have been a little bit crazy."

He grinned at her. "Me, too. It's probably the typical Muggle-born story. She was lucky to have someone who could explain it all to her."

"What was he like then?" Hermione asked, her curiosity sparked.

"Stringy," Harry replied, remembering the skinny little dark-haired boy from Snape's first few memories. "I mean, it was obvious it was him, but he looked..." His voice trailed off.

She frowned at him. "What?"

Harry swallowed a sudden lump in his throat. "He looked like he'd been abused... and neglected." His eyes widened at the realization. "That would explain a lot," he continued softly.

She nodded in agreement, wondering if that was what Minerva had suspected as well. She shifted in her seat. She didn't like feeling pity for the man. Somehow, he deserved more. "What was the second memory?"

"A year or so later," Harry went on. "He told her she didn't have to be afraid of ending up in Azkaban for being a witch. He started to say she was 'too' something, but he never finished the sentence. I don't know what he was going to say."

"'Too good,' perhaps?" she supplied.

Harry shrugged. "I don't know. I've looked at that memory so many times now, but I still can't tell how he intended to finish that sentence." He stared thoughtfully into the fire.

Hermione had already heard every scrap of information Harry had ever uncovered about Lily and James. He loved analyzing what he still thought of as their great love story, and tonight she really did not want to get sidetracked. She let out an impatient breath.

Harry met her eyes with an apologetic shrug. "Next," he continued, "was their meeting on the train platform for their first trip to Hogwarts. Aunt Petunia was there. She was furious that she wasn't being included." He winced at the memory. "Having me around later must have reminded her how left out she felt."

"That's the third memory," Hermione observed, writing quickly. "Then?"

"Then they were on board, and that's when she met my father for the first time." Harry smiled. "They were so young! All of them were there." He grimaced. "Even Pettigrew." He stopped again, glaring at the memory.

"And then they were in the Great Hall for the sorting," Hermione prompted.

Harry nodded, visibly struggling to focus on the matter at hand. "Snape expected to go into Slytherin, but he obviously thought my mom would be joining him. And he met Lucius Malfoy." His lip curled in distaste. "Just like me. Greeted at Hogwarts by a Malfoy. What a way to start things off."

"They continue to be a delightful family," said Hermione dryly.

"Next was a few years later," Harry continued. "She called my dad a toerag." He grimaced at Hermione. "I think Snape included that one just to show me that she didn't always think the world of Mr. James Potter."

Hermione nodded. "And then there's the one you had seen before," she observed. She stopped writing for a moment and looked carefully at her friend. "I do wish you hadn't glossed over that one, Harry. There might have been something new to see this time around."

Harry shifted uncomfortably. "In that context, I can see why he thought it was the worst thing he could remember. The first time I saw it, I was so sure it showed his true colors. But I see now how ashamed he was of calling her that awful name. It probably ended their friendship. That's what made it his worst memory. He must have relived that day a thousand times over."

"And this time, you saw the result of it," Hermione reminded him. "I wonder if that was the last time he ever got to talk to Lily."

"I can't believe he would choose to become a Death Eater just because of that, though," Harry said stubbornly.

Hermione sighed deeply. "Oh, Harry. Who knows what he was thinking? Remember how sure you were of everything when you were exactly that same age?" She looked at him speculatively. "You know, the two of you actually had a lot in common. Having Ginny in your life was probably one of the best things that could have ever happened to you, even if you felt as though you had to shut her out until you had done what you needed to do."

Harry met her gaze with a rueful grin. "Don't forget, though, that I also had you and Ron." His face grew serious. "I don't think Snape had anybody. That must've been awful."

Hermione nodded. "Maybe that's what drove him to join the Death Eaters," she said solemnly. "He felt as though he didn't have anyplace else to go." She looked down at her parchment, wondering if she would ever truly understand the man. "That's the first eight memories," she concluded. "Interesting."

He frowned at her. "What do you mean?"

"Well," she began slowly, trying out a theory as it came to her, "I'm not sure why he chose these particular ones to give to you, but it seems to me..."

"Yes?"

"These must have been painful memories to share, especially for someone as private as Professor Snape."

"He knew I had already seen the one where he called my mother that name," Harry asserted, unable to actually repeat the hated epithet.

"Yes," she agreed, "and they were obviously important memories for him, even if they weren't happy ones. I wonder if he made sure he gave them to you because he didn't want them to be lost forever, or maybe he had another reason, too."

"What other reason?" He looked puzzled.

"He must have taken the time before that day to organize these memories, and he must have hoped you would be the one to see them, even if he couldn't be sure you would."

"I think that's clear from some of the later memories," Harry replied, still looking confused.

"Those memories were especially important to him," she ventured tentatively. "He loved your mother, Harry. Memories were just about all he had left of her. I think he wanted to be sure some of them were safe with you. Kind of like passing on family heirlooms."

Harry didn't answer. He stared into the fire, mulling over her words. Since he had first seen Snape's carefully arranged memories, he had revisited the ones that contained his parents more than once. They were almost the only sustained record he had of the people who had given him life, better than the few wizarding photographs he had

managed to find, and much better than the few stories he had coaxed out of those who had known Lily and James during their brief lives. Had Snape really intended to give him these memories in order to preserve them? Had it been Snape's final tribute to the green-eyed girl he had loved for the rest of his life?

Even if Lily's son had called him a coward? Harry felt his cheeks redden in shame, remembering the words he had flung in Snape's face when he had thought him to be a traitor and a murderer. He could not believe how wrong he had been about everything to do with Severus Snape.

Hermione was looking at her notes. "So he became a Death Eater. And then he went to Dumbledore."

Harry shook himself from his reverie. "The next memory was him telling the Headmaster about reporting the prophecy to Voldemort. He was terrified."

"Of what?" she asked, curious.

"He was afraid that Dumbledore would be furious with him. But he was even more afraid of what was going to happen," Harry recounted, recalling Snape's expression of horror and self-loathing as he realized that his actions had put the woman he loved in mortal danger. Harry felt a knot in his own stomach at the memory and the rush of his fury at what Snape had done. But seeing the scene replaying now in his own mind, he had to acknowledge Snape's bravery in facing Dumbledore and the genuine desperation in his promise to do anything--anything--if Dumbledore could save her.

And, of course, the very next memory was Snape's agonized report of his utter failure. Lily was dead. Snape might as well have joined her. There was nothing left for him after that. He did the only thing he could do: he pledged his life to protect her son. Lily had died to save Harry, and the only thing Snape had been able to think to do was to continue the job... for her sake.

"He made Dumbledore promise never to tell," Harry whispered. "He didn't want anyone ever to know."

"Until now," Hermione said, equally softly. "He needed you to know, Harry. He needed you to know."

Hopes Which Obscure

Chapter 5 of 21

Hermione continues to catalog Snape's memories, with Harry's help. Canon-compliant—despite JKR's best efforts

A/N: All hail the incomparable JK Rowling who made this world and lets us play in it (except for Ms. Brontë's poetry, of course). And heartfelt personal thanks to sshg316 for taking time away from her own masterpieces to beta my humble work in such exquisite, caring detail. Anything remaining that you have a problem with is directly attributable to my own thickheadedness.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Hopes Which Obscure"

Sweet Love of youth, forgive, if I forget thee,

While the world's tide is bearing me along;

Other desires and other hopes beset me,

Hopes which obscure, but cannot do thee wrong!

- Emily Brontë, from "Remembrance"

Hermione looked down at the parchment on which she had been writing. "That's exactly half of the memories Professor Snape gave you," she observed. She raised her head to gaze at her friend. "Now, I believe, we come to the first one that includes you."

Harry wrinkled his nose, recalling his own initial impressions of the formidable and forbidding Potions master. "Why are we doing this, Hermione?" he asked, although he knew the answer as well as she did.

Her lips quirked. "Clues, Harry. It will give us a place to start."

Harry ran a hand through his hair. "You really think he's still alive, don't you?"

She leaned back in her chair and contemplated the quill in her hand. "If nothing else, it will give us information to redeem his memory," she stated, trying to sound practical.

"But you think it will help us--you--find him," he persisted.

She shrugged lightly. "Then we could save the man, too," she replied.

His eyes narrowed. "You... you're--" he began.

She cut him off. "Memory number eleven," she prompted, her voice brisk. She was not ready to examine her feelings. She needed more facts.

He exhaled. "Okay," he conceded after a moment. "Okay. The eleventh memory was really two fragments: his first glimpse of me--he was not very impressed--and a caution from Professor Dumbledore to keep an eye on Quirrell."

"That stuttering little fool," Hermione breathed contemptuously.

"He was a *dangerous* little fool," Harry reminded her. He continued, "Memory twelve, our fourth year. Snape told Dumbledore that the Dark Marks were becoming more pronounced and that Karkaroff had been spotted. And then there was Snape's curious reaction to Dumbledore's opinion about his courage."

Hermione stopped writing and chewed her lip in thought. "That's a recurring thing, isn't it?" she asked. "You called him a coward, and he took it as the biggest insult he'd

ever heard."

"And rightly so," Harry acknowledged bitterly.

"But Professor Dumbledore tells him he's brave, and he looks...how did you describe it? Destroyed?" she continued.

"I'm not sure he really believed him," Harry replied. "He wanted to be brave--he turned out to be braver than any man I've ever known--but I think he didn't really believe he could be. Bloody hell."

"Yeah," she agreed. "Bloody hell." She took a deep breath. Snape was turning out to be a bigger puzzle than she would have guessed. "So, what was after that?"

Harry rubbed his hand across his face. "The next one," he began and then plunged ahead, "the next one was the one that really knocked me for a loop. Still does. They had planned the whole thing. He asked Snape to kill him. He ordered him to do it, in fact. He was reminding him of that up there on the tower that last night."

He stopped, replaying once more the scene from his own memory that he had watched unfold, frozen in place under his cloak and unable to stop it from happening. Realizing that it had been staged gave an entirely new meaning to what he had witnessed. He shook his head, angry and confused.

"And then," he continued slowly, "Snape was trying to save Dumbledore's life, and Dumbledore was explaining why he couldn't. Snape never wanted to kill him. Dumbledore made him do it."

"He was going to die anyway, Harry," Hermione said gently. "So I think he decided he could make his death mean something, use it to help. And Professor Snape was the only one he trusted to be able to carry out his plan."

Harry buried his face in his hands. "Why did Professor Dumbledore have to die?" he asked plaintively. "Why couldn't Snape have saved him?"

Hermione touched his arm lightly. "Some magic is just too strong. And everybody dies in the end, Harry. You know that." She sat back and looked at her notes. "And I think this memory was particularly important for him to share because he needed you--they both needed you--to understand that why we do things matters. I mean, that's what saved you in the end."

Harry looked up at her, frowning. "What do you mean?"

"You were able to walk into Voldemort's camp because you believed that your death was the only way to destroy him, as well. You chose to die, the same way that Professor Dumbledore chose to give up his life. You believed there was a really good reason to make that sacrifice."

Harry simply looked at her.

"And that, I think, might be why you got another chance, Harry," she continued quietly. "Because the reason we do things matters. That's what saved you."

Harry's eyes were glittering. "But it didn't save anyone else."

Hermione shook her head. "I know. I don't understand it exactly. And I'm not sure Professor Dumbledore did, either. But he had to convince you to try. That's what all the memories were for, really. To convince you to fulfill your destiny."

Harry ignored the tear that had started down his cheek. "So many people died and didn't get the chance to return. Why was I the only one?"

She moved across to put her arms around him. "I don't know, Harry," she said softly into his ear. "But I'm glad it was you."

He shuddered and hugged her back for a moment. Then he sat up in his chair, and Hermione moved back to hers, taking up her quill again. "How many is that?" he asked in a shaky voice.

She counted. "Thirteen."

"Okay," he replied. "The next one was the argument that Hagrid told us about, but he hadn't heard the whole thing. Snape could've given me just this one if he'd known I'd heard some of it already. He might have known I'd believe it all by itself."

Hermione looked at him steadily. "It was important that you know what had to be done, Harry, and that you were willing to accept it. He had to give you a context for his memories. And I don't think he knew that Hagrid had told you anything."

Harry sighed. "I guess not. By the time I got to this one, I think I was really ready to believe it all. Then he showed me what must've been the last time he and Dumbledore talked, the last time before..." He couldn't bring himself to put words to the event that he had thought of for almost a whole year as "The Murder." Even now, remembering the sight of Dumbledore being catapulted from the roof was almost more than he could bear.

But he also realized something new this time. "When Snape saw me again," he said slowly, "when he saw me that last time, he knew what I was going to have to do. At the time, I wondered why he didn't just kill me and be done with it. When I caught up to him, he knew I was going to have to die to take out Voldemort. He knew that he'd spent half his life keeping me alive, and that I was going to have to die anyway."

He sat for a moment, shaking his head, unable to find the words to express what Snape might have been feeling then. Finally, he spoke: "And his Patronus..."

"It was your mother's, wasn't it?" Hermione asked, though it was not really a question. She wondered if she would have recognized that graceful, solemn, silvery figure if she had glimpsed it herself that night in the forest. It seemed so out of character for the man she had thought she'd known, yet all the new information she'd been gathering showed her how little she knew the real Severus Snape.

"She was his happiest thought," Harry whispered. "She was the most wonderful thing he could think of."

"He loved her, Harry," Hermione said simply. "He protected you because he loved her."

Harry looked up, his eyes haunted. "But she died because of him. He betrayed her!"

"No, Harry," Hermione replied. "He relayed the prophecy he had heard. It was Voldemort who decided the prophecy referred to you and your family. And it was Wormtail who betrayed her. Wormtail betrayed you all. Professor Snape thought it was all his fault. And he was wrong."

The fire crackled, and Harry stared into the dancing flames. He tried to imagine the weight of the guilt Snape had felt. He still struggled to reconcile the forbidding figure he had thought he'd known with the facts he and Hermione had been piecing together.

After a few minutes, Hermione stirred. "And Dumbledore knew that," she said, her voice taking on an edge. "At some point, he had to have realized what really happened. But he needed Professor Snape to keep feeling guilty! He used that guilt to get him to spy for the Order." She opened her mouth again, but no sound came out.

Harry looked at her, frowning. "Hermione, that's not fair," he protested, but she glared at him.

"You're absolutely right!" she said sharply. "That manipulative old man!" She shook her head in astonishment as realization took hold of her.

"There was a war on, Hermione," Harry protested. "He needed a spy for our side. He was just doing what he had to in order to beat Voldemort."

Hermione stared at him, her eyes bright with tears. "He used him, Harry. Just like... just like he used you!"

Harry sat up abruptly. "Wait a minute, Hermione!" he protested. "He loved me. He was protecting me!"

She glared back at him. "He was keeping you alive until it was time for you to face Voldemort," she said, enunciating her words carefully. She knew how close Harry had felt to Dumbledore, but she was suddenly furious at the old man. "He may have loved you, but he was still planning to send you to be slaughtered!"

Harry shook his head vigorously. "But I survived, Hermione. I talked to him. And then I came back!"

Hermione looked at him steadily. "Did he know for sure that's what would happen?" she asked. "It's something called collateral damage, Harry. It's that whole 'for the greater good' thing from his days with Grindewald. He still believed that. He still believed there were acceptable sacrifices."

Harry regarded her solemnly for a very long minute, the firelight glinting off his glasses. Finally he said quietly, "Sometimes I do think there are, Hermione. I was willing to die. It would have been worth it."

She stared back at him, simultaneously astonished and not at all surprised. She wondered if she would have had the courage herself to do what he had done. To do what Dumbledore had done. To make the sacrifices of Severus Snape.

Till Life Be Done

Chapter 6 of 21

The last of the memories and the continued quest for the truth. What does Minerva know that could be useful? Canon-compliant—despite JKR's best efforts.

A/N: Still not mine, but I'm happy to keep playing with Ms. Rowling's delightful toys for fun, not profit. The poetry is by Emily Brontë, who inspired some important plot points. And my deepest, humblest thanks to sshg316, who continues to be an astonishing beta: supportive, enthusiastic, and gently demanding, in a way that keeps making me a better writer. Her words convinced me to rework this chapter in particular, clarifying some things that were perfectly evident in my mind but confusing outside that dark place. She encouraged me to add details that I think really enrich the story. If it's still not as brilliant as it might be, it's not because she didn't try!

CHAPTER FIVE

"Till Life Be Done"

A thoughtful Spirit taught me soon

That we must long till life be done;

That every phase of earthly joy

Will always fade and always cloy.

- Emily Brontë, from "How Beautiful the Earth Is Still"

The willing sacrifices three men had made to defeat Voldemort were not the only surprises Hermione discovered in reviewing Snape's memories that evening. One was simply a curious fact.

"So it was Dumbledore's idea to move up the date we took you away from the Dursleys for the last time?" she asked, looking contemplatively at the picture that she had just decided this morning to hang above her new fireplace. She realized suddenly that she had not placed a single magical painting anywhere in her flat. *I've had enough of eyes watching me to last me a lifetime*, she thought.

Harry nodded. "Snape consulted his portrait."

"But wait a minute," Hermione said, puzzled, returning her attention suddenly to her friend. "Professor Snape didn't come back to Hogwarts until weeks afterward. How could he have spoken to the portrait? It was in the Headmaster's office, and it wouldn't have appeared there in time for him to see it!"

It was Harry's turn to look puzzled. "No, I think you're right, now that you mention it," he replied. "But the memory was there. And if he was talking to the portrait, it had to be after Professor Dumbledore..." He still had trouble talking about the Headmaster's death.

Hermione nodded. "Curious. I suppose he might have found a way back in before he returned officially." She frowned as she made a note on her parchment. "But it's odd!"

Harry didn't appear to be interested in solving this minor mystery. He went on, "Then he Confunded Mundungus and accidentally wounded George, trying to protect him while we were escaping." He sighed in frustration. "I wish Ron would believe me. It's very clear that he didn't mean to hit George. The memory shows that."

She shook her head. Ron could be maddeningly stubborn and unfailingly loyal. To be fair, she reminded herself, he hadn't actually viewed the memory. She made her notes without commenting, then looked back up, waiting for Harry to continue.

He was staring at the fire again, his eyes soft and suspiciously moist.

"Harry?" she asked hesitantly.

He looked up at her. "He was reading the last page of the letter from my mum," he said softly. "He was weeping. I've never seen grief like that."

She chose her words carefully. "I wonder if that letter might've been one of the few things he ever had of hers," she began. "It must've meant a lot to him to find it." She started to write but then frowned down at her notes. "But wait a minute. Where was he?"

"In Grimmauld Place," Harry replied. "In the bedroom where I found the first page and the piece of the photograph. I recognized the wallpaper." He looked up at her. "Why?"

Hermione blinked. "Harry, are you sure that memory came *after* our fight with the Death Eaters? After George was wounded?"

Harry nodded, confused.

"And after Moody died?" she asked, her voice stronger.

"Yes. So?"

Hermione sat up straight in her chair, dislodging her notes and ignoring the cascade of parchment that suddenly littered the hearthrug. "Harry, how did he get in? Moody had set the wards there specifically to keep Professor Snape out! Are you sure that memory was in the right place in time?"

He thought carefully. At last, he answered, "Yes, I'm sure. I don't know, Hermione. It doesn't make sense."

Hermione was kneeling to gather her notes, scrutinizing the sequence carefully. "Very curious," she murmured. "Very strange." She remained kneeling on the carpet, muttering to herself. The timeline she was drawing up was no simpler than the man himself. She shook her head in frustration.

Harry shrugged and concluded his account of Snape's memories, of Dumbledore's instructions to Snape to send them the sword.

But the inclusion of this final memory also struck Hermione as odd. "Why did he bother reminding you that he was the one who sent it?" she wondered aloud. "Once you'd seen his Patronus, you'd have known who sent the sword to you. He must have known you'd put two and two together."

Harry shrugged. "I guess he just wanted to be sure," he said.

"Probably," Hermione agreed, but she wasn't convinced. The memories Snape had given to Harry that night in the Shrieking Shack seemed to have been chosen very carefully. She began to believe that, if she could worry out the reasoning Snape had used to select them, she would understand the man a little better.

He was, she admitted, a fascinating puzzle.

~~~~~

The next day, she sought out answers from a different source.

"Headmistress," she began over afternoon tea in McGonagall's office, "what did he leave behind?"

Minerva sat staring pensively into her teacup, swirling the contents around in the delicate porcelain. "Not much, my dear," she answered at last. She looked up, obviously embarrassed. "I confess I was rather curious to rifle through his desk drawers and get a glimpse into his wardrobe after he died, but it was hardly as interesting as I would have expected." She blinked suddenly and looked down. "Most of it, anyway."

Hermione sat straighter in her chair. "What do you mean?" she inquired, trying to sound nonchalant.

"Well," Minerva answered cautiously, "he obviously left in a hurry, so I wasn't surprised to find his papers. No diary, of course," she said gently, smiling at Hermione's eager look. "But he was working on some interesting projects. Especially considering how he died."

Hermione stared at her. "An antivenin, perhaps?" she asked carefully.

Minerva cocked her head at her former pupil. "I rather think so," she replied. "Potions isn't my speciality, of course, and I'm not sure his work had been completed."

Hermione looked up at the wall, suddenly realizing something. "Headmistress, where is his portrait?"

"Dear, I've told you, please call me Minerva. We're friends by now, I hope." She reached for a biscuit, avoiding Hermione's eyes.

Hermione turned to the headmistress, her voice sharp. "I know what you thought of him for a very long time, but you had no right to take his picture down! Even that old fart is still up there!"

"Watch it, young woman!" Phineas Nigellus remarked sharply, startled out of a half-doze.

"Oh, how do you know I'm even talking about you, old man!" she retorted and turned back to Minerva. "Where did you put it?" she demanded.

The older woman raised her head at last and looked at Hermione. She suddenly looked very old. Hermione was struck by the careworn lines around McGonagall's eyes, framing a look of pain. "I didn't touch it," Minerva admitted softly. "It never appeared."

Hermione simply stared at her, her brain whirling. Her eyes slid slowly to Dumbledore's portrait. The old man was looking back at her. He lowered his chin very slightly in order to gaze directly in her eyes over the top of his half-moon glasses. He said nothing.

"Do you know?" she murmured in his direction.

He remained silent.

Hermione turned back to Minerva. "Was there anything else?" she asked.

Minerva furrowed her brow. "His chess set," she replied at last with a sigh.

"What about it?" Hermione tried to recall if she had ever seen Snape play chess. He seemed the type, but she couldn't remember watching him actually sit down for a game.

"Nothing," Minerva answered. "It wasn't there."

Hermione frowned. "His wizard chess set was missing?"

Minerva nodded. "And so was his other one."

"What other one?" Hermione asked.

"I think he brought it with him the first time he came to Hogwarts. Nothing special. But it's the only possession I remember ever seeing from his childhood." Minerva looked across the room to a small, spindly table that now held an enchanted crystal cat batting at a tiny ruby ball. "He kept it there," she said. "And then it was gone."

"When did it disappear?" Hermione asked.

Minerva shrugged. "I'm not sure." She looked at Hermione apologetically. "I didn't exactly take inventory right after the final battle. And I suppose anyone could have taken it anytime that whole week. I doubt I'd have noticed if anything except my bed was gone right about then." She smiled ruefully. "I would have noticed if they'd taken my bed."

Hermione's lips quirked, remembering how welcome her own bed had felt that first night.

Minerva continued, "I really have no idea what happened to it. It wasn't worth anything. It wasn't even magical. It was just a plain wooden set, painted red and black. A Muggle set. I don't even know why he kept it. He wasn't a sentimental man, you know."

"No, I don't know," Hermione replied thoughtfully. "If he kept a cheap toy in a place of honor, maybe he did have at least a small streak of sentimentality in him."

Minerva looked at her, somewhat startled. "Perhaps you're right. I suppose I really didn't know him, when it comes right down to it. He was a spy, after all. And a very private man, even without that." She contemplated her teacup. "I really am ashamed of myself," she added softly. "I should have tried to know him better."

Hermione looked back up into Dumbledore's watchful gaze. "We all should have, Minerva. We all should have."

~~~~~

The more she found out about Severus Snape, the more intrigued and sympathetic Hermione became. She felt pity, yes, but her respect for the man also grew exponentially as she learned what he had done and what he had managed to overcome.

She was also becoming increasingly frustrated. On the one hand, she could not shake the feeling that somehow, improbably, impossibly, he had survived, that he had been prepared for most of ways Tom Riddle would have tried to finally kill him. On the other hand, there seemed to be no trace of him anywhere. There were no mysterious new sources of imaginative potions, no curious sales of magical ingredients to unknown buyers, no anonymous articles in the wizarding press, no whispers or rumors or random sightings or odd stories suggesting he was anywhere doing anything, surviving by any means at all.

Harry had finally been able to convince the Ministry to award Snape a posthumous Order of Merlin, First Class. The ceremony that spring was rather perfunctory, but it at least served to satisfy their sense of justice having been done, even if it had taken almost two years.

At her request--though she couldn't say why she'd made it--Hermione took possession of the medal itself. *I'll keep it safe*, she thought. *Just in case*. It somehow comforted her to take it out occasionally and run her fingers across the name embossed on its surface. The pebbled engraving seemed to give her tangible evidence that he had, in fact, existed.

After the ceremony, Hermione made a point of hunting down Rita Skeeter and preventing her from publishing the requisite sensational Snape biography by using the unsubtle threat that she would squash Skeeter like the bug she really was if she even thought about it. The enigmatic memory of the real man began to fade in the minds of most of those who had actually known him, and life went on.

The only place he still haunted regularly was Hermione dreams, and that was hardly conclusive proof of anything. She was clinging to a phantom, a wisp of smoke, an elusive, silvery thread of memory. Yet she could not seem to let him go. She tried, but he managed to hold onto her imagination.

On the second anniversary of his death, she found herself standing just above central Hogsmeade, outside the Shrieking Shack. The afternoon breeze carried the distant scent of burning wood from a nearby chimney, though the weather was hardly cool enough to justify a fire. She pulled her lightweight summer cloak closer around her shoulders, shivering. She wasn't cold. The gooseflesh on her arms was caused not by temperature but by memories.

She stared up at the boarded windows and marveled at Dumbledore's ingenuity. *Snape wasn't the only one with a wildly overdeveloped sense of the theatrical*, she thought. This whole, ramshackle building was part of a lie. Albus had set this up less than thirty years ago, yet she had talked with villagers who swore the Shack had been here for hundreds of years. Its weathered wood looked weary and derelict. It had become an abandoned, forgotten hulk, inaccessible to the world. It had outlived its purpose.

It made her want to cry. She knew she was not weeping for a building. She turned and walked back down the hill, the summer wind scattering the grass behind her.

Win Thee to Forget

Chapter 7 of 21

Love the one you're with.... Canon-compliant—despite JKR's best efforts.

A/N: The wonderful JK Rowling continues to own all rights to the Potterverse, and we continue to be deeply grateful that she allows us to play here for fun (but not for profit: we are here for the love of it only). The poetry is by Emily Brontë, who has proved to be an inspiration all her own.

The beta work is by the utterly amazing sshg316, who blows me away every day with her generous spirit and remarkable ability to put her finger on just what might make everything so much better, but who leaves it entirely up to me to take her advice (which is always a brilliant idea) or ignore it (the result being anything here that still might not be as good as it could be).

Oh, and for those of you whose OTP is the same as mine, please don't kill me for this chapter! To stay as canon-compliant as possible, as I am trying for here, this just had to happen. Note, however, that there is a great deal of the story still to come, and everybody is allowed to make mistakes....

CHAPTER SIX

"Win Thee to Forget"

How Spring can bring thee glory yet

And Summer win thee to forget

December's sullen time!

Why dost thou hold the treasure fast

Of youth's delight, when youth is past

And thou art near thy prime?

- Emily Brontë, from "How Beautiful the Earth Is Still"

Ron kept proposing at random intervals, and Hermione kept dancing away from the question. Eventually, her dances began to take her far from him for long stretches at a time. She told herself she was exploring her options, getting used to being on her own, and adjusting to the grownup world, a world that was different from the one of her youth not only because of its demands and responsibilities but also because it was a world at peace for the first time in so many years.

She tried to ignore the fact that the other world, the world of Muggles to which she still had ties, never seemed to be at peace for long. She tried to ignore the questions and the longings and the general sense of discontent that lay just under the surface of her life. She kept busy, she dated other people, she built a resume, and she waited.

"Ron, I can't," she answered gently when he had gotten up the courage to ask The Question one more time on one of his now-rare visits to her London flat.

"Can't what?" and this time his voice was fierce. "Give him up?"

She sat back, confused. "What? Who?"

"Your precious wizard. Snape," he bit out the hated name.

"What are you talking about?" she breathed, her cheeks coloring.

"He's dead, Hermione. He's not coming back."

"I--I'm not--" she stammered, not sure how to respond, even to herself.

"Yes, you are!" he cried. "You're waiting for a sign or some bit of evidence or a miracle or, I don't know, a different ending. And there isn't going to be one, Hermione! You can't keep putting everything on hold! You can't keep putting *me* on hold!"

"Ron," she said gently, "I'm not putting you on hold. I've told you no so many times--"

"But you've never really meant it," he replied bitterly. "I'm your fallback position. I'm your 'just in case.' You say no, but you only mean it for now."

"Ron, that isn't fair," she said, her eyes shining with tears. "I've told you so many times to move on. It isn't fair to you--"

"And it isn't fair to you, either!" he interrupted. "You need to get on with your life!"

She sat back and looked at him, and she realized that she hadn't actually done that in a long, long time. The boy she had loved had grown into a man. He knew her better than almost anyone ever had. He had seen her at her absolute worst, and he still wanted to be with her. Her breath caught in her throat: how did she really feel about him?

She clasped her hands in front of her face. "You're right," she said at last. "I do feel as though I've been waiting. I don't know for what, and maybe you're right about that, too. But I keep thinking I'll know when I find it."

"You won't, love," he answered, and his voice was gentle. He took a deep breath. "Look, tell me to go away, and I will. I swear. I'll get on with it all if you will. I won't keep annoying you."

"Oh, Ron," she sighed, her heart catching in her throat.

He caught one of her hands and held it. "But I promise you if you can bring yourself to say yes, it'd be great fun. Not all the time, sure," and she laughed at that. "But I do love you, you know."

She bit her lip, torn between a giggle and a sob. "I know you do. I just... I don't know how I feel. I love you, of course, but..." she trailed off.

"But you know me too well," he finished the sentence for her. "You know what a berk I can be."

She looked at him, the corners of her mouth twitching in amusement. "That's one of the things in your favor, you know."

He cocked one eyebrow at her. "You never could resist a project," he said challengingly.

"You know me too well, too," she answered, matching his tone.

"And that's why we could make it work," he countered eagerly. "Come on. Give it a go."

And he offered a gentle kiss, filled with as much promise as he could give her. And so Hermione Granger finally consented to become his wife.

~~~~~

She was not a virgin. She had both experience and a rather vivid imagination, and she had brought that education with her when they had retired to her bed that first night. Which made the morning after a bit uncomfortable.

"Umm, 'Mione--" her newly-minted fiancé began delicately over breakfast.

"Sweetheart," she interrupted gently, brushing a few toast crumbs from his cheek and hoping to deflect his thoughts from the skill and vigor she had shown in bed the night before. "Please call me any endearment you fancy, but my given name is Hermione. It's long, I know, but it's mine. Don't shorten it. I hate that." She softened her words with an impish smile. "Mrs. Weasley' is nice," but then added hastily, "if that doesn't make you think of your mum, that is!"

He looked confused, but he was also clearly distracted, at least for the moment. "It's supposed to be 'Ms. Granger-Weasley,' if I recall the exact terms," he replied, his face crinkling at the memory of her insistence.

She laughed and snuggled into his shoulder. "Oh, Ickle Ronnikins, that's for professional purposes. Right here, I'll just be plain Mrs. W."

He grinned and then remembered suddenly what he had started to ask. But how to phrase it? "Umm, Mrs. W, not that I'm really complaining or anything, but well, you weren't... that is to say... you hadn't... I mean, last night was..." There just didn't seem to be a graceful way of putting it.

"Last night was delicious," she said firmly, hoping he would just take it at that.

He couldn't.

"Yes," he agreed. "Yes, it was. But you..."

She sighed and sat up, facing him.

"Ron. Dear. Just ask the question." This had to be settled. She just wished it didn't need to be.

He swallowed. "Well, Hermione," and he pronounced her full name carefully. "It just seems to me that, ah, well, that you were incredibly... well informed."

She lifted her chin slightly, trying for a tiny bit of superiority. "I'm Little Miss Know-It-All. You know my reputation. I don't like being ignorant."

"Yes, but... well, how much can you learn just in theory? You do seem to be... familiar... with more than the library could possibly supply...."

She cocked her head mischievously. "Ah, my love, you'd be surprised," she purred. "The library isn't quite the dry, dead place you always imagined. Why do you think I spend so much time there?"

He was unconvinced. "I got good at Quidditch, and better at chess, by doing it, not just thinking about it. Doing it a lot."

Hermione sighed, and her face grew serious. "Ron. When you asked me for my hand, were you a virgin?"

Ron blushed deeply. Why was that question so easy for her to ask, when he couldn't frame the words himself?

"Umm," he replied eloquently.

"I certainly hope not," she continued briskly. "I hope that you came into this with some practical experience, if only so you'd know what goes where. And why. Which you obviously do."

He looked a little sheepish. "Well, of course..."

"I'd also hope you'd have satisfied at least a little curiosity. And have learned enough to know something about what works best for you." She leaned in and traced one delicate finger along his lower lip. "I'm willing to do original research, of course," she said, as seductively as she could manage, "but it's nice not to have to start completely from scratch."

Ron gulped. "Kay," he managed to say. "But..."

She waited, but he couldn't finish the sentence. "Ronald. You don't have to give me footnotes or citations. I'm glad you've had experience. I'd be rather sorry for you if you hadn't. And I happen to like reaping the benefits of what you've learnt."

He was clearly processing her words. And coming to some interesting conclusions. She needed to head off this line of thought before it got specific.

"But who," she kissed him lightly on one cheek, "or even how many 'who's," she kissed him on the other, "isn't important." She kissed his right eye. "The fact is," she kissed the other, "that's what was," she kissed his nose, "and this is now," she kissed his chin, "and now is all that matters." She kissed his mouth, very gently at first, but then with sudden fierceness, and his arms went around her, instinctively returning and deepening the kiss, and in less than a breath, he had forgotten what he had wanted to ask her, forgotten what he'd even wanted to know, forgotten to think entirely for a bit. She was with him now, and she had promised to stay. He lost himself in her and put his questions away.

He rarely took them out again. It was simply easier to accept that she was here now and not to speculate on how she had become so proficient, so expert, so... inventive in bed. She actually taught him a thing or two. And, once in awhile, he was still able to surprise her, as well. For a long time, it was sufficient.

~~~~~

Author's Note: Never fear, this is indeed a Severus/Hermione story! But we do need to explore where canon went, if only to bow in JKR's general direction. And then head off in the RIGHT one. Immediately. See Chapter Seven.

How Existence Could be Cherish'd

Chapter 8 of 21

Where do you begin to look for a dead man? Canon-compliant—despite JKR's best efforts.

A/N: As always, all hail JKR and her creation and ownership of all things Harry Potter. Thank you, Oh Great One, for letting us come and play in your sandbox just for fun. And thanks also to the marvelous Ms. Brontë, whose poetry continues to inspire.

Deepest, most heartfelt thanks to my fearless beta, the incomparable sshg316, who keeps nudging me toward more descriptions, more specificity, and more accuracy (she saved me from a big boo-boo in this chapter!), who is always patient and warmly encouraging, and who has already made me a better writer because of her eagle eye and sweet words. You were so worth waiting for, my dear!

Thanks also to my dear friend Suzi who taught me what she had already drilled into the heads of her college students: "discrete" means one thing and "discreet" means quite another, and a person would do well to know the difference.

And if there's still anything clunky or unclear and not specific enough, well, that's entirely my fault. I can't say they didn't try!

CHAPTER SEVEN

"How Existence Could Be Cherish'd"

But when the days of golden dreams had perish'd,

And even Despair was powerless to destroy;

Then did I learn how existence could be cherish'd,

Strengthen'd and fed without the aid of joy.

- Emily Brontë, from "Remembrance"

In the end, she couldn't go through with it.

Ron had been a fun and funny boy, and he had matured into a dependable, good-natured friend. He was even a bit of a fun shag. But there always seemed to be something missing. Hermione refused to consider what that might be. Yet she finally had to acknowledge the elephant in the room.

As it turned out, Ron had spent the last few weeks staring at the same elephant, hoping it would go away before Hermione noticed it. In the end, he took the news with more grace than she would have expected. She wondered at her own mixture of grief and relief.

"Do me one favor," he said, stroking the ring she had returned to him.

She waited. Finally, she urged gently, "I can't read your mind, Ron."

He sighed. He thrust the ring into a pocket and looked at her, catching one of her hands in his. "Hermione," he murmured, "look for him. You'll never be at peace until you know for sure."

She felt her eyes suddenly well with tears. "Oh, Ron," she said very softly, "I do wish it were a matter of choice. I'd have chosen you. You know I would have."

He nodded, suddenly unable to speak. He pulled her into an embrace, and she stroked his hair, breathed in his scent, and puzzled for the thousandth time over the riddle of love. And perhaps he was right; if she settled the question of Severus Snape, once and for all, maybe that would make all the difference. Maybe she could come back then and make this dear man happy.

But as she broke the embrace and pulled back to look up into his eyes, Hermione realized that, no matter what else might happen, she could not keep him waiting any longer. She smiled into his gentle gaze, and she let him go.

~~~~~

Where do you begin looking for a dead man? If he had in fact survived, where might Snape have gone? What life might he have carved out for himself? In all the great worlds, wizarding or Muggle, where would he have chosen to go?

Knowing as much as she did about him now, Hermione tried to imagine how he might have felt at the end of everything. With both Dumbledore and Voldemort dead and the threat to Harry gone, he would have been released at last from the monumental demands that had ruled his entire adult life.

First, however, he would have been gravely injured, and he would have had to deal with that. Hermione had studied the notes Minerva had found in Snape's desk. She did indeed believe they were the research for a very particular kind of antivenin, and she did indeed believe the research had been completed. The fact that the notes had been in Snape's study, not his private lab, suggested as much. These looked to Hermione like filed conclusions, not a work in progress.

Had the results been on his person when he went to see Voldemort for the last time? Hermione remembered Harry's account: "There will come a time when Voldemort will seem to fear for the life of his snake." At the end, Snape should have expected that Voldemort would want to cut his losses. He may not have known exactly why, but he was not a fool. He would have guessed that his own life was in even greater peril than ever. He would have been prepared. Hermione was certain of that now.

And if he had been ready to counteract Nagini's venom, he would also have been ready to deal with the accompanying blood loss and the injury the snake's fangs would cause. She shivered, recalling the huge pool of drying blood that had greeted them when they returned to the Shrieking Shack after the battle. The absence of the body that had once held all that blood had seemed to be a moot point at the time. Now she found herself wondering how much of it had even belonged to Snape.

"Wouldn't put it past him to have turned it all into a stage set," she muttered to herself. "We didn't test it. We just assumed all that blood was his."

Dumbledore's portrait was no help. Although Hermione knew that a portrait couldn't acquire knowledge its owner wouldn't have possessed at the time of death, she was still quite certain that the twinkling old man in the picture frame knew much more than he would ever willingly tell.

She also suspected that he had an idea how her own opinion of him had shifted subtly. "It's not that I hate him," she had tried to explain to Harry. "I understand he had to make some pretty cold-blooded choices. He was up against pure evil, after all." She shifted in her chair. "But I just can't see him anymore as a kindly old grandfather, either. He was complicated. I'm still sorting it through."

Harry had simply nodded, neither agreeing nor arguing, and she let it go. The Light had won, after all. The Golden Trio had survived. And if a lot of others had not, well, most of them had chosen to fight, and they hadn't died in vain, when all was said and done. She sighed. Some mornings she felt much older than her years.

Minerva had allowed Hermione to conduct her own search of Snape's former quarters at Hogwarts, his study, and his private lab. She had not found anything useful. Her search was not helped by the new inhabitants, many of them successors to those lost to the war. Life had somehow managed to go on, and that appeared to have included a lot of tidying up and discarding of bits of what might once have been useful evidence.

No such inclinations had affected the house at Spinner's End, as she discovered. Hermione had surprisingly little trouble gaining permission to enter the dwelling. Apparently there were no stray Snapes left anywhere in the world to care, and the property was not worth the attentions of even the hungriest estate agent, magical or otherwise.

As she walked down the street toward the house, she tried not to be oppressed by the neglected shambles around her. Spinner's End was a sad and silent place. Many of the houses were boarded up, and those that still appeared to be occupied were badly in need of attention. By the time she arrived at Snape's doorstep, she was ready to cry. *How could anything thrive here?* she wondered. This seemed to her to be the saddest place in the world. *Rather like the man,* she thought.

The wards left in place to guard the door proved the greatest challenge, but Hermione had already practiced on the ones she had encountered at Hogwarts and had grilled Minerva sufficiently to anticipate what she might find at his home. One ward tickled and tingled differently from the others, but she dismantled it with equal ease to become the first visitor to Snape's childhood home in more than three years.

Even though it had remained untouched after Snape's departure, the house had yielded very little of interest. Hermione was touched more by how dull and mundane the place turned out to be. "There's really nothing here," she sighed.

And then she realized what that might mean.

She walked back through the abandoned little kitchen at the back of the house into the threadbare sitting room. She opened the hidden door in the bookcase, climbed the staircase, and looked carefully through the bedroom and tiny bathroom above. Again.

And again, found nothing. Which might be significant in itself, she thought. She re-warded the house, restoring even the curiously ticklish ward. She walked outside and stood in the street, looking back at Snape's childhood home.

She did not notice the eyes watching her from the half-shuttered window of the empty house across the street.

Her arrival had, just as he had planned, triggered the alarm that had brought him here. He was a little taken aback to realize the visitor's identity. Hermione Granger. He peered out at her, noticing how much more grownup she looked since he had seen her last. He wondered what she had found inside. He frowned. He was going to have to call in a favor or two if he were to find out. But perhaps her involvement would prove educational in the long run. He drew back into the empty room to consider his options, his long, pale face gleaming in the semi-darkness.

Oblivious to the man's scrutiny, Hermione ducked discreetly into an alley and Apparated to Harry's office to bounce her latest theory off him. He looked up from his desk,

welcoming the distraction from the morning's demands and waving away Sophie's sputtered attempts to protect his privacy.

"Harry," she said without preamble, "it isn't there."

Harry looked at her patiently, a slight smile on his lips. Hermione could be very obtuse sometimes, but he took that as a compliment to their friendship.

"The chess set," she explained impatiently. "Maybe the letter wouldn't be there, maybe he'd have kept that with him. But the chess set isn't anywhere. I think that's significant."

Harry continued to look at her, cocking his head expectantly.

She flounced into a chair. "Okay," she said, trying to sound reasonable but succeeding instead in sounding annoyed that he hadn't yet grasped what seemed like the obvious significance of what she was thinking. "Your mother's letter, first. I haven't found it anywhere."

Harry's face grew serious. "I wish you had. I'd have loved to have the whole thing."

"Yes, well, that's as may be," she replied. "And it was just a piece of paper, not worth much to anyone else. It might have gotten tossed if he had left it anywhere at Hogwarts. No one would have noticed."

Harry nodded. "And, as you say, he might have kept it with him. It would've been easy enough to tuck away in a pocket."

She smiled, happy that he was following her so far. "But the chess set. That's another matter." She told him what Minerva had said. "I found his wizard chess set," she continued. "It was there in his sitting room." She stopped for a moment, remembering the almost panicked glee with which the tiny figures had greeted her. They had obviously been abandoned for quite some time and missed having company to play for.

Harry looked unhappy. "I hate to point this out, Hermione," he said, "but the other set could be anywhere. It could've been left at Malfoy Manor. It could've even been destroyed in the battle. It doesn't prove anything."

She grinned at him. "Ah, but perhaps it does," she replied, sounding triumphant. "Because I think it ended up at his house."

"And why do you think that?" Harry asked with a sigh, knowing she wanted him to.

"The dust," she said. "Something just about the right size, something square, had been sitting on the table in his bedroom upstairs. Nothing else looked out of place. Nothing else had been touched. Don't you, see Harry! The house has been closed up all this time, so it's hard to tell how long it might have been like that. But I think he took it with him after Hogwarts. I think it was the one thing he had left. And I think he still has it."

Harry let out a long breath. "Hermione..." he began.

"What, Harry?" she asked, and her voice sounded challenging.

Harry looked at her for a moment, and then he ran a hand through his hair. "We've been questioning Death Eaters," he began, and Hermione was suddenly still. "Kingsley wants this settled almost as much as you do. And," he leaned toward her, "there's nothing. Not a word, not a sign, no wandtrace, nothing at all. He's gone, Hermione. He's really, truly gone."

She stared at him. And her heart refused to listen.

~~~~~

Leaving Harry's office, Hermione decided to walk. She hoped the air would clear her mind, suggest some new line of investigation, or help her put paid to the whole search. She moved out of the nondescript door that served as the Ministry's gateway into the Muggle world, stepping into a swirl of bodies oblivious to her.

Except for a lone figure posted carefully just the other side of a lamppost across the way. He pulled his fedora lower over his face and started after Hermione. He was very good at this. She had no idea she was being followed.

Over the Mountains

Chapter 9 of 21

Hermione asks Harry to help her restore what was lost. Canon-compliant—despite JKR's best efforts.

A/N: Again, this is JKR's world and belongs to her, not me, and Emily Brontë's poetry has inspired this story. Once again, as well, the incomparable sshg 316 has worked her magic here, improving everything she touches (including me).

CHAPTER EIGHT

"Over the Mountains"

Now, when alone, do my thoughts no longer hover

Over the mountains, on that northern shore,

Resting their wings where heath and fern-leaves cover

Thy noble heart for ever, ever more?

- Emily Brontë, from "Remembrance"

Harry Potter, with the full weight and power of the Ministry of Magic at his disposal and the ability to question powerful prisoners and explore the subtlest of rumors, had been of absolutely no help. There simply was no sign of Severus Snape anywhere in the wizarding world. As far as any magically endowed entity could tell, he had indeed

died in the Shrieking Shack at the Battle of Hogwarts, and his body had simply vanished into thin air.

And Hermione no longer believed that could be true.

All because of a simple wooden chess set—or, more accurately, because of the lack of a simple wooden chess set.

"I know you think I've lost my mind," she told Harry. "And you might be right."

She was seated at the Potters' kitchen table, watching Ginny attempt to entice James to eat something, anything, but preferably a vegetable. It was already clear that their firstborn was a pigheaded handful.

Ginny smiled across at her, abandoning the hopeless vegetable battle. "I've no idea what Harry thinks, Hermione," she said cheerfully, "but I think there may be only one person who can figure this out, and that's you."

Harry shook his head and sighed. There was no arguing with either of them, he knew. He looked across at Ron, and the two shared a moment of silent martyrdom.

Their exchange was not lost on Hermione. "This is as much your fault as anyone's, Ronald Weasley," she said acerbically.

His face immediately morphed into a look of wounded innocence. "My fault?" he cried, rather more dramatically than necessary. "I didn't say a word!"

She rolled her eyes at him. "You were the one who told me to look for him," she reminded him.

"But did I ever say don't take no for an answer? Did I say dedicate your whole life to an impossible job?" he replied.

She put a fist on one hip. "So I'm supposed to give up, just like that? What about the chess set?"

"You're putting way too much stock in that silly thing," Harry snorted. "It's not as though you can trace a dead man through a couple of pieces of wood."

Hermione wheeled toward him. "Pieces of wood," she exclaimed. "What did happen to his wand, by the way?"

Harry sputtered. "I... I have no idea. You tell me."

She glared at him. "It's gone, Harry. No one can find it. And no one can find any trace of it, either."

Harry frowned. "Isn't that more proof?" he asked, appealing as much to the Weasleys as to Hermione. "His wand is lost. There's no evidence it's been used even once since the day he died. We'd be able to tell."

Ron nodded. "That's what Romy said, too."

"Romy?" Hermione asked, all at once alert to a new piece of news.

Ron blushed to the roots of his hair and was suddenly mute.

Ginny giggled, but her brother glared at her, willing her to keep silent as well.

"Hermione," Harry said, dragging her attention back to the original topic of conversation, "we'd know if he used it. Not where or for what, but there'd be some evidence that it had been used. And there isn't any, hasn't been any. I know, I checked for wandtrace more than once. It's been how long now without even the slightest indication."

"Maybe he's using a new wand," Hermione challenged.

"Maybe. But what happened to the old one?" Harry asked. "It hasn't been broken. We'd know that, too."

"All that proves," Hermione said carefully, "is that he knows how it works. He knows how you could find him. He knows how wizards think."

"And what makes you so sure that proves anything at all?" Harry asked, sounding suddenly very tired.

Hermione smiled sweetly across the table at him. "Because I'm a Mudblood, Harry," she replied, watching the flinches the word triggered in her friends. "I know his other world better than he does. I can find him, if anybody can."

"If he's anywhere to be found," Harry muttered softly.

~~~~~

Hermione had been right, after all, and she made sure they knew it. The absence of wandtrace wasn't a help, but the chess set, the simple wooden chess set that didn't do anything but sit there quietly on a table, had finally provided the single key.

Because a really good chess opponent has a price above rubies, apparently, to those who are fanatical about the game. And the Muggle Internet offered the best way to share that kind of treasure. Hermione finally found the slightest kind of sign that she had been right in a chess chat room. She didn't get absolute confirmation, of course; the anonymity of the World Wide Web was part of its appeal. And Snape himself would never have stooped to going online, she thought, even if he were hiding behind a carefully thought-out username.

Yet as she read the cryptic descriptions of the complex maneuvers and unique gambits of one particular player, she became convinced that she was catching glimpses of the man who had eluded them all for so long. One of the more vociferous online voices, writing under the moniker P2Q, was especially effusive about the dark master who had, Hermione gathered, come onto the scene at just about the right time. His occasional partners gushed about his coolness under pressure and vague air of intellectual superiority.

That sounded like the Snape she knew.

Eventually she began to get the vaguest geographical hints about this master's base of operations. Not that almost any of the online players had ever laid eyes on him, of course. Or put a name to him. Or could pick him out of a lineup.

But one or two of the tiniest of clues began to give her hope, and she started to plan her search.

Then a sudden realization gave her urgency. She charged into Harry's office one morning, pushing past Sophie, Harry's new assistant. She was lugging an enormous backpack and the full force of her determination. Sophie trailed behind her, looking apologetically at her boss. "I'm sorry, sir, I tried to stop her, but—" she exclaimed.

"I think I know where to look for him," Hermione announced as she threw the backpack onto the floor. "And I think I know why he stopped using magic. And I need something from you."

Harry stood up. He nodded reassuringly to Sophie and then pointed at the backpack, urging Hermione to pick it up again. "Let's go to lunch," was all he said in response.

"Lunch?" she asked, confused, but he was already halfway through the door. She fumbled to grab her pack and follow him. "Harry, it's early--slow down!"

In the deserted café, they waited in silence while the waitress brought two cappuccinos then disappeared back into the kitchen to brace herself before the eventual arrival of the lunch crowd. Harry had not said a word since leaving his office, and Hermione was watching his face carefully, trying to guess why.

He looked back at her, his green eyes glittering behind his glasses. "You're ready to look for him," he said at last. "You think you know where he is."

"Yes, Harry, I do," she replied quietly. "And I need your help."

He nodded. "Money?" he asked. "Or help from the department?"

She shook her head. "Neither," she replied. She took a deep breath. "I need the memories."

He frowned. "Snape's memories? I've told you all about them. But I wouldn't feel right letting you see them."

She shook her head again. "I don't want to see them," she replied. "I want to give them back."

His mouth flew open in astonishment. "What do you mean, give them back?" he asked at last, his voice strangled.

"Harry, when you take a memory out of your mind, you're actually removing it, aren't you?" She was speaking in a rush now. "You can't remember it until you see it in a Pensieve or put it back in your head. And what are we without what we remember?"

Harry stared at her. "You said you think you know why he's not using magic," he answered slowly. "Do you think he's forgotten how?"

"No!" she cried. "I think it's a conscious choice, because he doesn't know what he can't remember. And I think he needs to. I think he's lost without those memories, and he's not using magic because he's afraid of what he can't remember!"

Harry ran a hand over his face. He thought of his own experiences with a Pensieve, the time or two he had experimented with taking out his own memories and looking at them in detail. The extraction process left behind a sort of fuzzy patch. Removing a memory had always given him a slight headache, a dull throbbing behind one ear, and the sense that he'd forgotten to do something vaguely important.

He looked at Hermione. "I've only tried it twice," he said, "and I put the memories back after I had looked at them, so they weren't out of my head for very long. I don't know what it would be like to have pulled them out and never returned them. I can't even imagine how that would feel."

Her mouth was set in a grim line. "And think about it, Harry. Think about the things he can't remember now."

"Well," he answered slowly, "he doesn't have the worst one anymore. The one he never wanted me to see."

"The one that drove your mother away forever," Hermione said softly.

Harry nodded, and then his face grew pale. "And he doesn't remember...." He gasped.

Hermione's face reflected the same horror. "I know," she breathed. "He remembers that he killed Dumbledore... but he doesn't remember why."

~~~~~

Hermione let out a deep breath and stared at the tabletop. "He might have other memories of it, of course," she said softly. "But what if he doesn't? What if he knows he was the one who killed him but has no memory of Dumbledore's order to do it? Can you imagine how that would feel?"

Harry looked a little shell-shocked. "He must have other ways to know it," he began slowly. "They must have discussed it more than once. They must have." He seemed to be trying to convince himself.

She looked up at the strain in his voice. "It's possible, Harry," she said soothingly. She wasn't so sure herself. Since realizing what Snape's memory loss might mean, she had tried to decide how much he could still have known from other memories. "In fact," she said, with more conviction than she felt, "he had to have taken time before that day to decide what memories to give you, to put them in order so you would understand. He might remember something, maybe even a lot of that."

He locked eyes with her. "He must," he whispered fiercely. "But you're right: he has to take them back. He has to remember everything."

"Yes," she replied. "That's exactly what I thought. I want to give him back what he's lost."

Harry reached for her hand. "I'm coming with you," he declared.

"No, Harry." She squeezed his hand. "I've thought about it. I'm sure he thinks you still hate him, and if he sees you coming, he may run. He just might give me the benefit of the doubt. Or at least be curious long enough for me to talk to him."

"You've got a family, Harry," she continued firmly as he started to protest. "This may take a while, you know. I've only got a general idea of where to look. I think I need to do it without magic, so I don't spook him before I get near." She grinned suddenly. "And I was always better at camping than you were!"

He smiled in spite of himself, and then his face grew serious again. "Hermione," he started, "there's something else...."

She gazed out the café window. "I thought there might be," she sighed. "It's nowhere near lunchtime. Harry, what's going on?"

He ran a hand through his hair. "I'm not sure, exactly," he said hesitantly. "It's just a feeling I've had recently. I don't think you're the only one looking for him. And I don't know what someone else might want from him."

Hermione looked at him sharply.

"I haven't really heard anything," he replied quickly. "But it's why I didn't want to talk about it at the Ministry." He tightened his grip on her hand. "You will be careful, please?" he asked urgently. "I don't know why, but something feels off about all this."

She clasped his hands in hers. "I feel it, too, Harry," she admitted. "But this is something I have to do. I can't leave him like this. I feel as though I already abandoned him once. I can't do it again. I just can't."

Where My Own Nature Would Be Leading

As Hermione continues her search, someone is watching.... Canon-compliant—despite JKR's best efforts.

A/N: The world continues to be Ms. Rowling's, the poetry continues to be Ms. Brontë's, the expert beta work continues to be sshg316's, and whatever mistakes remain continue to be mine. Shug, I love you, and I'm blatantly ignoring one (probably very wise) suggestion in this chapter, so that one in particular is my fault!

CHAPTER NINE

"Where My Own Nature Would Be Leading"

I'll walk where my own nature would be leading:

It vexes me to choose another guide.

- Emily Brontë, from "Often Rebuked, Yet Always Back Returning"

Hermione watched the boat landing disappear from Black's Harbor, a place she'd had to consult a very detailed atlas to even locate. The coast had a lot of nerve calling the vessels that touched in from time to time an actual "service." She wondered how the few hardy souls who made their homes on the handful of islands tossed out at the edge of the international boundary line could manage to eke out a marginal existence here.

The boat that had brought her from the mainland--whose name seemed to be *The Grace*--chugged up to the sketch of a dock on one of those islands. The crew threw out a few heavy ropes to hold it briefly in place.

She descended onto the severely weathered timbers at the water's edge with just the barest modicum of poise. Truth be told, she more or less fell out of the boat onto marginally dry land. *The Grace's* crew--both of them--had already begun the energetic transfer of miscellaneous crates and barrels to the dock. Their speed suggested an only mildly disguised panic that the winds might shift at any moment and substantially alter their plans for the rest of the day. They were obviously determined to beat the weather.

Hermione looked around. To even call this a port was to be deeply generous. She counted perhaps four buildings of any size, and she wasn't actually certain that the grey hulk off to her left qualified. She glanced at the closest hut and was just able to make out a figure almost exactly the same shade of grey as his backdrop. He was eying her with an equal measure of curiosity and diffidence.

She hoisted her backpack onto her shoulders, took a deep breath, and stepped toward the figure. The boat's crew had already begun to unhook the untidy mess of ropes that bound their vessel to the dock and fired up the sputtering engine, pushing on to the next port of call.

She stopped a few feet from the man watching her, who had not moved at all as she approached. She cleared her throat. "Are you Riley?" she asked. She had not been able to determine whether that was a first or last name, but it was the only one she had.

The man continued to gaze at her, then slowly tipped his head to one side. She supposed that could be taken for acknowledgment. "I understand you play chess, Mr. Riley," she said.

Riley continued to stare at her. At last, apparently deciding she was not a real threat and had already been stranded by *The Grace* and her crew, he gestured to a low stool next to him.

Perched on that stool was a small, cheap, wooden chess set, battered but still sporting a bit of red and black paint.

Hermione shivered. He was here. She was sure of it.

~~~~~

On the mainland, as the last light of the dismal day faded into twilight in Black's Harbor, *The Grace* chugged back into port, vested of her deliveries for the day. The odd collection of human beings carrying on various duties or lounging about pointlessly paid her little attention.

Save one tall figure with a long, pale, twisted face. He watched the boat pull in, emptied of the only passenger she had carried that day. He considered how he would be able to continue to follow her without resorting to magic, but he had a feeling his search was nearing its end.

He leaned back against the side of the shed, letting the shadow of its overhang disguise him further. He could wait. He had nothing but time. If Snape was still to be found, Hermione Granger would do the work for him.

~~~~~

Snape had not been in the cottage when she finally located it. He had seen her approaching from a long way off. The lonely sweep of moors had provided the kind of visibility he found necessary to maintain his isolation. He should have just hidden from her, waited for her to leave, and then found a new place of exile. For some reason, though, he continued towards her. Perhaps it was because it was her, of all the people it could have been.

When he was close enough to see her face clearly, he stopped. For a moment, neither spoke.

"I'm sorry," she said at last. She spread her hands, almost in supplication.

It was not what he had expected her to say. "For finding me?" he asked at last.

She shook her head fractionally. "For leaving you."

He raised an eyebrow. "I was dead." His voice was dry. "And I still am."

"Not to me," she answered, drawing in a shaky breath. "Never to me."

He looked at her steadily, refusing to try to understand her words, but uncharacteristically, she did not say more, simply studying his face.

Finally, he took a deep breath and lowered his head. "Go away, Miss Granger," he said quietly, with none of the venom he had intended. "You have, once again, satisfied that insatiable curiosity. Now, go away."

She wouldn't, of course. He knew she wouldn't.

"You know better," she answered. The wind rose to a howling pitch and then blew past them. For a moment, neither spoke.

At last, he simply shrugged. "Come inside, then," he said wearily, making the invitation sound as indifferent as possible. Without looking to see if she was following, he

strode past her and opened the door to the place that had become his home.

She noted that there were no wards on the door, no sign of magic anywhere. There was not even a simple key in the lock. She closed the door behind her, put down her backpack, and looked around curiously. It was shelter, barely more than protection from the elements.

He knelt at the stove, setting kindling with a practiced skill that made it seem as though he had always laid a fire with his hands, never using the shortcut of a wand. He struck a match along a sharp metal edge and set it to the twigs he had arranged, and the fire began to crackle into life. Then he rose in one fluid motion and turned to face her, clasping his hands behind his back, still and vigilant.

She finally broke the silence. "You aren't surprised to see me." It was not a question.

His expression did not change. "You. Someone. I'm only surprised it took so long."

"You covered your tracks very well," she acknowledged. "And there was a lot to do. I..." She wanted to tell him about all the funerals, all the near deaths, all the injuries that had needed immediate attention. She wanted him to know that she had started the search for him even as the last corpse was being laid out in the Great Hall, that he had never been a second-level priority for her, just a particularly difficult puzzle to crack.

"I didn't ever give up," she said at last and let the rest go unsaid. There would be time later. Or it wouldn't matter at all. "You were, as you say, dead."

"Indeed," he drawled. "But apparently not dead enough."

"We went back to look for you. We had to."

His eyes narrowed suddenly. "He showed them to you, didn't he?"

She blinked. "Who?"

"Harry bloody Potter," he snarled.

She opened her mouth, shut it again, and then said slowly, "You're talking about the memories you gave him."

Snappe cocked his head at her but said nothing.

She continued, "They changed everything for Harry, you know."

"Yes," he replied harshly. "I believe I showed him that Albus always expected him to die. I thought about sharing that little revelation with him several times."

Her mouth quirked. "Actually, no. Dumbledore didn't demand Harry's death, just his willingness to make the sacrifice. You showed him what he needed to know at that particular moment in the fight. Your timing was perfect."

He looked at her steadily, his face impassive.

"And apparently," she went on, "you showed him a lot more than that. More than you needed to. More, maybe, than you know."

He hissed. "It was a private matter, Miss Granger. You may believe yourself entitled to shove your nose in it, but you were not invited."

"I didn't need to be invited," she replied somewhat archly. "I was already there." She took a deep breath. "But he didn't share your memories. He told us, just Ron and me, about them, but he never let us see them for ourselves." Her mouth quirked slightly. "So, once again, we learnt everything important through 'the Harry filter.'"

He frowned at her. He was not going to ask. What, after all, did he care?

She watched him struggling to keep silent and smiled. "Since you so evidently want to know," and she waved a dismissive hand at him even as he was opening his mouth in denial, "that's what I've come to call it. So much of what we knew about you before the end, and about Dumbledore, for that matter, came from what Harry told us. And he so rarely got it right. We saw you through the filter of his perceptions, and it took him forever to start to see you clearly. He did in the end, though. After he'd looked at things through your eyes. Literally."

He sneered at her. "If you never saw them yourself, how do you know he finally got it right?"

She tilted her chin at him. "Because I've had time for some independent verification, that's why," she answered. "I've finally had time to do my own research. Not that I ever took what he told me at face value. Do you know how often I defended you? How many times I gave you the benefit of the doubt when Harry would not?"

"Always the Gryffindor," he replied disdainfully.

"Harry was a Gryffindor, too," she answered easily. "But he always assumed the worst when it came to you. Then again, you gave as good as you got."

"I assumed nothing," he replied silkily.

"Really," she shot back. "And you knew what about Harry Potter that first day in class?"

"I knew that he was a pompous brat who had used his celebrity to gain favors to which he was not entitled," he snarled. "I knew that he was famous simply because he hadn't died. What an accomplishment."

"Oh, come on now," she said with gentle amusement. "Avada Kedavra is usually pretty damned effective. And that isn't even the point. You didn't know anything about Harry as a person. You didn't know how he had been living before he came to Hogwarts. You didn't know what he was like or what he was capable of." She paused, and her voice dropped. "You just hated him because he wasn't your son."

His head whipped up, and he drew in a sharp hiss of breath as his eyes bored into hers. "Never forget, Miss Granger," he said, his voice a razor-sharp whisper, "I have proved myself capable of murder."

She shuddered despite herself, but she kept her voice steady. "I have never thought otherwise," she murmured. "But I believe I know in exactly what circumstances you would commit it. And when you would not. And why."

He stared hard at her, obviously evaluating her words.

Eventually, he said scornfully, "Such a shame that I will not have the chance to hear all your complicated and pitiful theories. So nice of you to drop in. So sad that you must now be on your way."

"There isn't another boat off the island before next Tuesday," she stated firmly. "You're stuck with me until then, I'm afraid."

"Nonsense, Miss Granger," he replied. "You have your license, I presume. Return to the boat dock and then Apparate back. It will take no time at all."

"No," she answered calmly. "Not if you're really serious about keeping in exile."

He raised a sardonic eyebrow.

"I'll stay until the boat comes back," she continued. "That will make it harder to trace my movements. Muggle transportation seems to confuse many people in the wizarding world. It was part of the reason you were so hard to find in the first place. I at least knew a few of the options you had available."

He let out a very deep breath and lowered his head. "I had forgotten the force that is Hermione Granger," he muttered darkly, missing the delighted smile that his remark elicited.

"Besides," she went on briskly, "this will take some time."

His glare sharpened into suspicion. "Oh, I see," he said silkily.

"See what?"

"I have become another one of your projects. Lucky me."

~~~~~

~~~~~

A/N: "The Harry Filter" is the brainchild of JOdell of Red Hen Publications fame. If you've never read her long, insightful, and very funny (sometimes scathingly so!) essays on all aspects of the Pottverse or seen her gorgeous illustrated layouts for certain choice writings, you simply must check out www.redhen-publications.com/Articles.html and see for yourself.

All Who Watch

Chapter 11 of 21

Three books, another disappearance, and an exotic wall decoration. Canon-compliant—despite JKR's best efforts.

A/N: JKR created the world and the characters, Emily Brontë wrote the poetry, and sshg316 made sure I didn't make too big a fool of myself playing with these toys. She even did a bit of Brit-picking in this one that saved me some grief, though I have ignored one suggestion because it amused me to keep one bit of silliness. Don't blame her for it, she did try!

CHAPTER TEN

"All Who Watch"

Heavy and dark the night is closing;
Heavy and dark may its biding be;
Better for all from grief reposing,
And better for all who watch like me.

- Emily Brontë, from "The Two Children"

Hermione covered a sudden desire to weep with a gesture toward the tiny library of books stacked neatly across the window seat of Snape's cottage. "I did that once as an intellectual exercise, but I'd hate to have to do it for real."

"Do what?" he asked, irritated again by his curiosity about her meaning.

"Decide on the ten books I couldn't live without." She indicated the library. "More than a few here would've been on my list, too. I see you have been able to acquire rather more than ten, but it's still nowhere near enough, is it? But without magic, I suppose you were kind of limited."

She rose and went to her pack. "I brought you a few more. I thought you might appreciate some fresh material."

She started to reach inside, but he swiftly closed the gap between them, grasped her wrist, and bent her arm painfully behind her back. "Don't you dare," he whispered, his lips grazing her ear.

She gasped. "You're hurting me."

He eased his grip but did not release her. "This place has never known magic. That is part of its appeal."

"I wasn't... I wasn't going to use my wand," she stammered, trying to sound reassuring. "I didn't Reduce the books. That's why I could only bring a few."

He stared down at her, suddenly aware of her closeness, feeling her pulse beating steadily against his hand and inhaling her scent. He released her abruptly, pushing her away from him, and she staggered slightly as she regained her footing. She continued to look at him for a moment, and he noticed that her cheeks had reddened slightly. Then she shook her head and reached into her pack, removing three volumes. She placed them carefully on the window seat and backed away. He resisted the impulse to examine them and turned instead to stoke the fire.

"How the hell did you find me, by the way?" he asked roughly. "I covered my tracks rather better than you did when you went on the run at the end of things."

"Yes, you did," she replied quietly. "The thing is, I've spent a large part of these last years studying you. I think I know you fairly well by now."

He raised his head sharply and fixed her with a fierce, angry look. "You don't know me at all, Miss Granger," he hissed. "And you are an even bigger fool than I thought if

you believe you do."

She met his gaze steadily. "You may be right," she said finally, "but I've come to bring you something. And you've been in hiding long enough."

"Oh, no, Miss Granger," he said, sneering. "Not nearly long enough." He turned on his heel and walked out the door.

Hermione sighed. She returned to her backpack. Most of it contained food, as she had no intention of either depleting his stores or of sharing whatever he might be living on. Months on the run from Voldemort had taught her a lot about being self-sufficient. This time, however, she would have to do it without her beaded bag and the help of magic. She hoped she remembered enough of her distant days as a Girl Guide to make a decent go of it. She pulled out an air mattress and began to inflate it.

~~~~~

Hermione rose from the window seat where she had been reading and stretched a weary arm. The boat ride to the island had taken several hours, and it had required another two wandering the moor to find this desolate place. Snape had stalked out of the hut at least two hours since. Now it was growing dark. Had he decided already to find a new place of exile? Would he simply stay away until she gave up and went back without him?

She glanced at his tiny library. It was just a few books, but somehow she couldn't see him leaving them behind. His meager provisions, perhaps. His would-be rescuer, certainly. But not his books. He would be back. She had to believe that. She decided to make dinner.

~~~~~

Night had begun to fall in earnest, and Snape had still not returned. Hermione stood uncertainly outside the door, her eyes adjusting to what little light the sliver of a moon and expanse of stars threw over the barren landscape. She stared up at the night sky and more stars than she had ever seen in her life and found the display both exhilarating and frightening. The wash of the Milky Way bathed a swath of glittering dust across the black velvet background. Hermione felt very small before all that heavenly indifference.

She sighed. She had not expected to be greeted with open arms. To be honest, she had anticipated that he would do his best to drive her off, maybe with physical force and certainly with words. She was surprised to have met so little resistance, and alarms began to go off in her head as she added up some of the relevant facts of his present existence. She found the resignation in his eyes troubling, and he really seemed to have abandoned magic entirely. Perhaps he was afraid that he could be traced that way, but surely an unregistered wand and some discreet charms would have relieved his exile at least a bit without too much risk.

She was also disturbed by the paltry library he had gathered here. As far as she had been able to tell, he had moved around for awhile after disappearing, but her diligent investigation had suggested that he had been settled here for some time. And as voracious a reader as Snape was, he should have found ways to collect more books.

Most unnerving of all was the fact that he seemed to have given up making potions entirely. The cottage held no evidence of even the most rudimentary efforts to mix ingredients of any kind, magical or even Muggle. He barely had a pot to his name, and she could find only two spoons in a drawer in the table. The single, ebony-handled knife beside them was large and quite sharp, but it would not have been suited to the task of preparing magical ingredients. Apparently, he had not concocted any preparations to ease his lonely existence or sought any activities to challenge his once ferocious intellectual curiosity, other than the occasional game of chess that had allowed her to find him.

She chewed her lower lip vigorously and attacked the problem. He seemed, yes, even more withdrawn and morose than she remembered, but he did not look to be wasting away. And he had not appeared overly desperate to get her out of his home. Add to that the fact that it was now pitch black, yet he was nowhere to be found. *There's more to this than I'm seeing*, she thought. She pulled another log from the lean-to next to the window, scrutinized the tiny outhouse that was the only other structure visible, and went back inside to feed the fire.

She was suddenly struck with a horrifying thought. What if, in his rage at her presumptuous arrival, he had injured himself? What if he had fallen somewhere beyond the range of her hearing and was now slowly bleeding to death? What if she had finally found him, only to ensure that, this time, he would really die?

She gathered her cloak back around her and twisted her scarf firmly about her head. Scrabbling in her pack, she found a small flashlight. She would not give him away by using her wand if she didn't have to, so she would be forced to search for him using primitive methods. She swung back out into the darkness and began to search for Severus Snape all over again.

~~~~~

The island was bigger than it looked on maps, and it was not completely uninhabited. She assumed that he would not head for the dock from which she had come. She pulled out her tiny compass and decided to try the opposite direction first. After more than an hour, she had met some of the island's other residents, but the sleepy flock, bedded down for the night, resented her intrusion and was singularly unhelpful in aiding her search.

In the end, she very nearly missed it entirely, but her eyes had acclimated to the darkness so well that the tiniest sliver of candlelight escaping through a chink in the rock gave away his hiding place. She approached the cave cautiously, deciding she would simply assure herself that he was unhurt. She moved forward as stealthily as she was able. She had found the gap in the rock and caught the briefest glimpse of a much larger collection of books and a primitive workbench when she suddenly found her arms pinned behind her and a hand at her throat.

"I just had to make sure you hadn't broken your neck," she managed to gasp.

He hissed into her ear, sending gooseflesh down her arms. "I may have to break yours, Miss Granger," he breathed. "Let me rest in peace."

She resisted the impulse to struggle against his hold. "We'll talk about it when you're ready," she answered quietly. She waited for him to release her. After a moment, he did, and she immediately walked away from him into the dark, refusing to look back. She waited until she had come quite a distance to stop and check her compass to be sure she was headed back in the direction of the cottage.

~~~~~

It was the first thing she saw when she awoke the next morning. Lying on her air mattress, stretching sleepily on the floor, she found herself staring up at a slender piece of wood, mounted over the doorway. It was his wand. It had become decor.

She was dressed, making a cup of tea, and slicing a loaf of bread with the huge kitchen knife when he finally returned. "It was Riley, wasn't it?" he said without preamble as he slammed back into the cottage. "The damn chess games."

She looked up from her preparations. "Yes."

"Betrayed by a Muggle," he murmured. "A Muggle in the middle of nowhere."

"He didn't betray you," she scolded him, setting the knife down. "He didn't have any idea who you were or that you didn't want to be found. He likes you, you know?" She grinned. "That's why I almost didn't think it was you at first."

Snape glared at her, but she refused to be cowed. "He enjoys your games," she continued serenely. "He wishes you'd get down to the dock more often. He's lonely, too."

"I am not lonely," he growled. "The solitude here is refreshing."

"Right," she replied. "There's so much to keep you occupied. Would you care for some tea?"

He glared at her.

"I'm afraid I couldn't find a second mug," she continued. "I hope you have something in your 'summer house.'"

He continued to glare. He had, in fact, always thought of the cave that way, but he was not about to admit it. Ever. He sat down heavily in the cottage's only chair. "You're really staying," he grumbled, "until the boat comes. You are a preposterous woman."

She smiled again. "And here I thought you'd still see me as your student," she said lightly, handing him the cup.

"It's been a very long time since you were in my classroom, Miss Granger," he replied stiffly.

"It's been a very long time since you've actually had a classroom," she answered. "From what I hear, the Potions curriculum has never been the same since you left."

He snorted and took a sip of tea. He grimaced at the flavor. She ignored his response.

"Now," she continued briskly, "I've brought my own food, which you're welcome to share." She set a plate with a generous slice of brown bread and honey in front of him. "I do not intend to be a burden."

He snorted again, louder, but said nothing.

"I've located the cistern," she told him, "and your wood supply appears to be adequate for now. Mr. Riley sent word that he has a few things for you waiting at the boat dock."

Snape raised one elegant eyebrow. "You didn't bring them with you?" he asked disdainfully. "I wasn't expecting anything too cumbersome this time. You could have saved me the trip."

Hermione looked at him serenely. "He wouldn't let me carry them. He said you owe him a game. You'll have to pay him yourself if you want your delivery." She smiled sweetly across the room at him and took a bite of bread. Snape scowled back at her.

No Coward Soul

Chapter 12 of 21

Adjustments and gifts. Canon-compliant—despite JKR's best efforts.

A/N: As always, this world and its inhabitants are the creation of JK Rowling, and I am just playing with them for fun. The poetry is by Emily Brontë, who might be horrified that I have been so inspired by it (but maybe not, big romantic that she was).

And my deepest thanks as always go to the incomparable sshg316. Shug has been swamped with her own work (not to mention her own life!), yet remains gracious, giving, and immensely helpful. This all could not exist without her.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"No Coward Soul"

No coward soul is mine

No trembler in the world's storm-troubled sphere....

There is not room for Death.

- Emily Brontë, from the last lines she wrote

Hermione ended up accompanying him back to the dock. He hadn't invited her, but she had insisted, in a voice that would brook no opposition, that it would save him a second trip.

"There are several crates waiting for you with Mr. Riley," she said simply. "It'll take all day if you try to shift them yourself."

He scowled at her, but his only reply was a brusque, "It's just 'Riley.'"

He refused to utter another word the whole trip down to the dock. He set a brisk pace, and Hermione was quickly panting from the exertion of keeping up with his long strides. She was, however, not about to complain. Working hard to keep her breathing regulated, she was happy not to have to make conversation as well.

Riley looked more surprised to see her again than to see Snape. In fact, he beamed at the tall, scowling man at her side, though he, too, remained mute. He indicated the cargo that was waiting for Snape, who began to heft one of the barrels onto his shoulder at once.

"Wait," Hermione gasped, holding up a hand. "Riley," she acknowledged, "I believe that the gentleman owes you a match. You told me that was the price of keeping his provisions overnight."

Riley smiled again, seating himself immediately next to the chess board. With a growl, Snape put down the barrel and sat on it. He moved a pawn and then focused intently on the board, pointedly ignoring Hermione.

She breathed a sigh of relief and turned her attention to the sea, walking away from them toward the pebbled shore. An indifferent tangle of waves lapped against the shore, mixing strands of seaweed among scattered rocks. She bent her attention to the water's edge, enjoying the chance to simply meander along the shoreline at her own pace.

The grey of the Atlantic stretched out on three sides from her eventual vantage point, blending haphazardly into the sky. She breathed in the tangy air and watched a bird dipping into the waves a long way off. The wind whirled her already tangled hair around her face, and she shut her eyes, surrendering to its ministrations.

The sharp tingle of the wind suggested changeability in the weather. Hermione smiled to herself. The weather was trying to warn her. This would not be an easy visit. She

had found the man at last, but could she do what she had come for? She hugged her cloak around her and opened her eyes again, gazing out at the shifting sea.

By the time she returned to the dock, Snape had finished the game and was already on his way back to the cottage. He was a distant figure in black, a barrel on one shoulder and a crate tucked under one arm. Riley indicated the remaining crate with a nod of his head and turned back to the chessboard, carefully setting it up for a new game.

Hermione picked up the crate, which was heavier than it looked, and sighed with resignation. She looked at Riley, who had not spared her another glance.

"He's been here awhile now, hasn't he?" she asked.

Riley straightened from his task and simply stared at her. She held his gaze, trying for a serenity she did not feel. He blinked at her.

"The boat comes on Tuesday," he said at last in that oddly flat accent she had been hearing for a few weeks now. "Early," he added and then went into the hut.

She nodded to the air and turned toward the cottage, shifting her burden as she began to walk.

~~~~~

"So, what name have you been using?" she asked into the stony silence of the long afternoon.

He continued breaking up the crate he had just finished unpacking, stacking the pieces by the stove. He was trying the Silent Treatment. She was refusing to be annoyed by it.

"Because I didn't ask for you by name," she continued calmly. "Riley doesn't seem to call you anything. And one of the lobstermen in Black's Harbor actually thinks your name is Chessminster."

He snorted and continued stacking wood.

"At least, that's what it sounded like he said," she went on. "Hard to tell with that accent. He thought mine was odd, too. I'm not sure you've talked enough for anyone in this part of the world to guess where you might be from."

He glared at her, and she could see him struggling with the urge to respond. She was secretly delighted: his curiosity would be his undoing.

She kept at it. "I hadn't realized how good you are at chess. Minerva didn't tell me. Maybe she didn't know. Or maybe you've just had a lot of time to practice in the last few years. But you're something of a legend in certain circles." Her lips quirked. "Geek circles, to be sure, but it's still impressive." She looked at him speculatively. "I know Ron was impressed, and that's saying quite a lot."

He cleared his throat loudly.

"I mean, he's become something of a master himself," she told him. "Wizard chess, of course. He'll probably make the tournament in Bruges this year."

It was all too much for Snape, though he managed to keep his response to a disdainful mutter. "The competition must be particularly execrable these days."

"Oh, quite probably," Hermione responded cheerfully, as though he had been participating in the conversation all along. "I've never been any good at the game myself, wizard or Muggle versions. I'm afraid my mind will never be devious enough."

He looked at her, his eyes narrowing.

"Of course, Ron is one of the least devious people I know," she continued, "and yet he's very good at it. I've no idea why."

Snape's voice was low but still quite distinct: "The term 'idiot savant' springs to mind."

"Be careful what you say about my ex-fiancé," she replied brightly. "I'm still quite fond of the man."

Snape's eyes flickered toward the ring finger of her left hand.

Hermione saw the glance and laughed. "No, we didn't go through with it. It was a near thing, though." Her face became serious, and she blushed suddenly. "He was convinced I was falling in love with someone else."

Snape inclined his head slightly. "Or you simply recovered your wits," he replied snidely.

She laughed again. "Possibly. Harry and Ginny already have a son, by the way."

Snape looked at her disdainfully. "How wonderful. The Potters are breeding."

"Their wedding last year was really lovely," she told him. "And Harry's final toast was to you and Dumbledore."

Snape looked startled, as much at the sharpness with which she said the former headmaster's name as at her pronouncement, but he quickly schooled his features once more.

"He called you the two greatest wizards of our time," she continued. "He caught a bit of guff for that. It was before--" She stopped and went to her pack. "I nearly forgot!" she exclaimed, rummaging through its contents. "Ah!" She pulled out a thin silver case and held it out to him. "There was a ceremony," she explained, "but I doubt you'd have enjoyed it much."

He simply stared at the object in her hands.

"Go on," she urged. "That's not the original packaging. There's practically no magic there at all."

"Practically?" he asked sardonically.

"Well, it moves a bit, but it isn't traceable. I had Harry make sure."

Snape looked up at her. "I can't begin to tell you how relieved that makes me," he said with a sneer, and his voice was nearly back to Classroom Terror level.

Hermione struggled not to grin. "Take it," she urged. "You can throw it in the sea if you want to, but I'm not returning it."

Snape reached out and grasped the case with two fingers, looking for all the world as though he were picking up a dead animal. He placed it on the table. For a moment, Hermione thought he might simply leave it there, but he finally shrugged indifferently and opened it.

Resting inside on a bed of cotton wool was the Order of Merlin, First Class, its ribbon curled beneath it. It caught the weak gleam of the sun through the cottage window and magnified the light. The tiny orb at its center whirled slowly. Even without bending to examine it closer, Snape could see the letters of his own name curving gently around its base.



"Harry wouldn't give up," Hermione told him quietly. "He kept at them until they acknowledged you. He insisted that everyone needed to know what you'd done."

With a snap, he closed the case. "What I'd done," he repeated with a snarl. "What does anyone know about what I've really done?"

Hermione looked at him solemnly. "I do," she replied. "That's why I've come."

~~~~~

She had decided not to talk about returning the memories until she had a clearer idea of his state of mind. As the week wore on, she discovered that he was surly, uncommunicative, sarcastic, and incredibly quick-witted, with a tongue that could slice to the bone in a single stroke.

In other words, he seemed not to have changed at all.

But she also began to notice a few signs that disturbed her deeply. His dress since her second day had been a variation of the pristine, constricting black ensemble she remembered from her schooldays, though without the billowing teaching robes. But the clothing he had been wearing the day she had arrived had been mismatched and decidedly threadbare. She could not remember a time before that when she would have described him as careless in his dress.

She took advantage of his absence at another game with Riley to examine the "summer house," as she thought of it. Although the cave did prove to hold many more books than the cottage had, and it did appear that he still conducted an experiment or two there, it nevertheless had an air of deprivation and isolation that Hermione was not convinced was completely a conscious choice. The workbench looked unused, and Snape seemed to spend most of the daylight hours stalking the desolate moors.

Hermione admitted that might simply be to avoid her company.

Yet she sensed that he actually enjoyed their conversational duels when he decided to talk to her. And though he grumbled loudly when she insisted that he visit Riley again a few days later to play another game, he did deign to go in the end. He returned in a talkative frame of mind, too.... *Talkative for Snape, that is*, she reminded herself.

"You continue to have quite peculiar tastes, Granger," he said as he stalked through the door.

She looked up from her reading. "Oh?" she asked mildly.

"Three books," he announced, gesturing at the volumes she had brought with her. "And those are the three you select."

She looked at them. Although he had finally decided to examine her first gift--albeit when he thought she wasn't watching him--he still had not integrated them into his meager library. They sat, separate and otherwise untouched, on the floor. She half wondered if he had considered using them as a doorstep. The thought appalled her.

"Well," she began, "I couldn't carry as many as I would have liked, and I didn't know what you might already have. I was fairly sure you wouldn't have Heinlein or *Random Harvest*. I had a hard time even finding a copy of that one. And this Potions book was only published a few months ago. I tried to be eclectic."

He smirked. "That's what you call it. Eccentric might be more accurate. I observe that you have not changed at all."

She looked up sharply at him. "And what, exactly, do you base that on?" she asked.

"Still a swotty little Clever Dick," he replied smoothly. "Nosy, too. While I am gracious enough to tolerate your presence here until such time as you can go the hell home, my hospitality does not extend to the privacy of my study."

She raised an eyebrow. "Your study?" she asked. "That unfortunate little hole you escape to each night? Is that what you call it?"

He sniffed. "What I call it is immaterial. You are even less welcome there than you are here."

"Fair enough," she agreed serenely. "There's hardly anything of interest there, anyway."

She picked up her book and made an elaborate show of returning to her reading.

Snape scowled and made tea.

The Image of Light

Chapter 13 of 21

Sondheim wrote, "No one is alone," but memory can be a tricky thing. Canon-compliant—despite JKR's best efforts.

A/N: As always, this is JK Rowling's sandbox, and we are all just happy little kids playing in it. The poetry belongs to Ms. Brontë.

And my deepest, deepest thanks to the always magnificent sshg316, who continues to make me a better writer, both in her gentle suggestions and in her endless encouragement. Anything still questionable is not her fault. She tried!

CHAPTER TWELVE

"The Image of Light"

I, the image of light and gladness,

Saw and pitied that mournful boy;

And I swore to take his gloomy sadness,

And give to him my beamy joy.

- Emily Brontë, from *"The Two Children"*

Hermione looked up from her book. Dusk was coming on fast, and she gave up trying to read, sliding a bookmark between the pages. Snape was sitting at the table, staring absently at its worn surface. He started as she shut the book with a snap. The eyes that met hers were blacker than she had ever seen them.

"Shall I light the candle?" she asked, proceeding to do so without waiting for his answer. The thin flame danced for a moment from match tip to wick and then stilled. She gazed at it. "Why do you keep your chess set with Riley?" she asked.

"He likes to play against himself, sometimes," he replied after a pause. "And replaying the games in my head instead of on a board is a... useful exercise."

"You remember all the moves?" she asked, astonished.

"Certainly," he replied smoothly. "That's how the game is played. I sometimes find the pieces themselves to be a distraction."

She shook her head. "I'm afraid that's a skill I'll never master," she admitted.

"What?" he asked, slightly mocking. "There is actually something the wonderful Miss Granger can't do?"

She looked across at him. "Oh, there are many things, believe me. Life since Hogwarts has been quite an education."

He met her gaze with a thoughtful look, and she smiled ruefully. "I probably should thank you," she admitted.

He frowned. "Thank me?"

"Yes," she replied. "You might have been the one constant in all that time."

He snorted. "Surely your life was not so bereft as that."

"What do you mean?" she asked lightly. "You were a surprisingly intriguing puzzle. Though a lot of people thought I was out of my mind."

"Should that statement be made in the past tense?" he asked with a sneer.

She grinned. "Maybe not. After all, I'm here on this little spit of land way off on the other side of the world, talking to a dead man."

"All of that to deliver a pointless token from people who didn't want to remember him to a corpse that has moved beyond caring," Snape snarled.

The smile faded from her face. "Surely not," she replied quietly. "The token isn't quite so pointless as all that; there are at least a few of us who wanted to--needed to--remember you, and you're hardly a corpse."

He fixed her with a haunted look. "You've accomplished your mission, Miss Granger," he said wearily. "You've made your delivery. You've proved your theory."

She nodded, suddenly frightened by the desolation in his voice.

"All that remains is how you end this little escapade," he breathed. "Will you force me to find a new retreat? Or can you forget that you found me and leave me in peace?"

She took a deep breath. "There's another reason I've come," she said slowly.

"I can barely contain my curiosity," he growled, but he did not seem curious at all.

"What do you remember?" she asked carefully.

He stared at her suspiciously. "About what?" he inquired at last.

"Dumbledore, for one thing," she replied.

He leaned back in his chair, steepling his hands in front of him. "Now, that is one thing that has changed," he said, very nearly purring. "And I cannot imagine why."

Hermione frowned. "What do you mean?"

"There was a time, Miss Granger, when, if I am not very much mistaken, you held the man in the highest esteem. At the very least, you respected him. Deeply." His voice was rich and silky. "And that has changed. I wonder why."

She looked down. "I told you I've been conducting my own research."

His lips twitched. "I gathered your research was about me," he replied.

"It was. But I found out quite a lot of things," she said evenly. "And some of them horrified me."

He scowled. "I am not a nice man, Miss Granger. The service of the Dark Lord took full advantage of that fact."

She shook her head. "That's not what I mean. I expected evil from a Death Eater, but you were the only person who was ever able to walk away from Voldemort. That took tremendous courage."

Snape shifted in his seat. "It was hardly a heroic gesture," he said darkly. "Joining him was unforgivable. I merely sought to rectify the situation, if such a thing were possible."

"So you went to Dumbledore," she replied.

He looked at the table and did not answer.

"You don't remember," she said then.

"I remember quite enough," he hissed.

"Perhaps you have convinced yourself of that," she answered, keeping her voice quiet, "but we are what we remember, aren't we? And you are missing some of your past. More than one of those memories was of Dumbledore. They were the ones that changed my opinion of him."

His eyes locked with hers.

She continued, speaking gently. "You selected twenty memories to give to Harry. I know you remember that. But the memories themselves--they are gone from your mind. You don't have them to help you understand your own life, your own actions. And I believe that at least one of them is essential for you to take back."

His black eyes continued to bore into hers. His breathing had become shallow. She longed to reach out her hand, but she feared that he would flinch away from her touch.

She kept still, looking into the bottomless depths of Snape's eyes.

"Harry described it as a kind of fuzzy patch in your mind," she continued after a moment, watching him twitch slightly at the mention of the name. "Something's been removed. You just can't quite figure out what... and I think you need to know."

His voice was barely audible, emerging from his throat almost despite himself. "There is nothing I need to know. There is no point in knowing."

Tears glistened suddenly in her eyes. "I do recognize that you are deeply depressed now, and you were not the last time I saw you. You welcomed your death then, but something made you fight anyway. I think I understand you enough to know what's happened."

He rose thunderously from his chair in one swift movement. "Spare me your pop psychology, little girl," he snarled. "You don't know anything at all!" He swept past her and stalked out of the cottage, banging the door shut behind him as firmly as he could. The effect was diminished when the latch did not catch. The door swung back open slowly, framing his retreating figure.

She frowned at his furious departure. This could take awhile. She wondered if the boat would really show up on schedule. She might need more time.

~~~~~

*The Grace* was sitting in the dock at Black's Harbor at that moment, bobbing on the slackening tide after another hard day's work. The man with the thin, pale face had been contemplating her since the day she had delivered her lone passenger to one of the distant islands she visited erratically.

He had decided that following Hermione on that particular boat would be too conspicuous. Even with a disguise, news of a stranger of any kind arriving on the regular boat would raise alarms in her.

*And in Snape*, he reminded himself, if Snape were indeed alive and out there on one of those tiny tufts of land *Especially in Snape*. The man had been a spy, as it turned out. A traitor. He would still, after all this time, be alert to danger.

He would have to find another way to follow her.

By the end of the second day the thin-faced man had targeted a vessel that would suit his purposes: a ragtag little blue boat that had the unlikely name of *Winsome*. Its owner did not even have to be Confunded. Gold was simpler. The charts he had confiscated suggested at least seven likely islands. On the morning of the first day that promised fair enough weather, *Winsome* set out from port carrying the man with the thin, pale face out onto the open sea, looking for revenge.

~~~~~

Damn and blast the girl! Snape thought as he stalked furiously across the dark ground. To presume that she knew anything at all, to shove her nosy little face into his life again, to act once more as though reading a few things in a book somewhere actually meant you knew something! The war was long over, Voldemort was gone, Potter was safe—he had earned the right, dammit, to peace and solitude. Why couldn't she just let it rest? He kicked a tuft of moss and would have been satisfied as it went sailing away from him had his boot not connected with an unyielding rock underneath. He cursed more profoundly.

Depressed?! What did that *mean*, anyway? And what difference did it make, even if it were accurate? Of course he was depressed, but hadn't he always been? Wasn't that a central fact of his life? Didn't he have every right to be depressed? And what could possibly make her say that it had gotten worse out here? Here he had no idiot children to deepen his annoyance, no cloying colleagues trying to start a conversation, no competing masters demanding his allegiance or expecting him to fulfill ridiculous obligations, not one human being trying his patience or testing his intellect or—he sputtered—psychoanalyzing his motives, thinking they understood him. The presumption of her!

Certainly there were gaps in his memory. He knew perfectly well that he had given a select collection to Potter that night in the Shack. As soon as he had let the memories go, he had needed to attend to much more pressing matters. Staying alive and getting away from anyone who might want a spot of revenge had been major priorities. What did it matter that he had emptied a part of his mind? He hadn't given up anything of significance. He remembered selecting the memories and arranging them to provide a coherent narrative. He had needed to ensure that Potter would understand what he had to do.

Which was... what? Defeat Voldemort, certainly. Fulfill that damned prophecy. Finish the whole insane war single-handedly. Become a hero, once and for all.

From what Snape had gathered when he was finally able to pay attention to bigger events again, Potter had succeeded magnificently. Of course he had. Snape had heard enough to know that the Light had won and that they had bought the story that Snape himself had died in the process. Good on him. He was well rid of them all.

What did it matter if there were things he didn't remember? He had given them up willingly, taken them from his mind by his own hand. There could be nothing that would be helped if they were returned. He was sure of that.

Wasn't he?

~~~~~

The first island *Winsome* tried was tiny, barely big enough to hold the tavern and the family who ran it. The pale-faced man had a drink with the scrawny barmaid, but she hadn't known enough about most of the other inhabitants of the area to be useful. She hadn't appeared to be interested in knowing, either.

The second island seemed to be home to nothing but goats, though his pilot assured him that he had glimpsed people there once or twice. They circled the jagged coast, seeing no signs of human inhabitants anywhere.

Headed for the third possibility, *Winsome's* owner pulled around abruptly.

"Where do you think you're going?" his passenger snarled menacingly.

The boatman simply pointed to the horizon. Apparently, the distant haze of clouds suggested that a stray traveler in a very tiny boat should call it a day, and quickly. *Winsome* returned to port for the night, and no amount of gold could persuade her owner back out that day.

~~~~~

Hermione weighed whether or not to light a fire; it had been a mild day, and the night had not yet begun to bite. Even the wind was quiet.

She took out the crystal flask that Harry had given her and placed it in the center of the table. She stared at the swirling, silvery blue contents. Amazing that a vital piece of history could be stoppered in such a small container. She sighed. She couldn't force him to take them back, after all, and it would require magic to do it. He would have to use magic.

She stared up at the wand mounted over the door. He hadn't nailed it in place, at least, though perhaps he thought the Ministry might have been able to detect such a violation. It was simply resting on two bent nails. It appeared as though it had been there awhile; one of the nails looked rusted into place.

In deference to him, she had stowed her own wand in her pack. If he did not want magic used here, she would honor that desire, but, she thought with a grim smile, she would not resort to turning her wand into a household decoration. She would take it back up when she was finished here. Her eyes drifted, unfocused, as she thought

about leaving the island again. Leaving him.

She shook her head to clear her thoughts and stuffed the flask filled with memories back in her pack, deep down between several pairs of socks. She considered what she would make for supper.

Each night, Snape had left her to the cottage after dark. Presumably, he had gone to sleep in his cave. It did house a crude camp cot, she had taken note of it when she had looked inside. The cot might be more comfortable than the pallet here in the cottage looked. She was once again grateful for having brought her air mattress. She did not know how he might react were he to return and find her in his bed.

She grinned wickedly at the thought, then took the knife from the drawer and set about slicing up vegetables.

Both the Worlds

Chapter 14 of 21

Memories and realizations. Canon-compliant—despite JKR's best efforts.

A/N: Once again, JK Rowling is the creator and owner of these characters and this lovely world that the rest of us play in just for the fun of it, and Emily Brontë is the author of the poetry. Once again, as well, I owe incredible debts of gratitude to the incomparable sshg316, the best beta in the Potterverse. She rocks my world. Anything still wonky is my not listening to her.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"Both the Worlds"

The earth that wakes one human heart to feeling

Can centre both the worlds of Heaven and Hell.

- Emily Brontë, from "Often Rebuked, Yet Always Back Returning"

The day had barely begun as Riley watched *Winsome* heading in toward his dock. This was not the regular delivery boat, and this island was not a destination for a casual visit. Maybe the boatmen were lost. That seemed the most plausible explanation.

He remained where he stood as the grizzled fisherman at the rudder reached the dock and stood to tie his tiny boat to a pier. His bright yellow slicker gleamed incongruously in the brilliant early morning sunlight.

The other man still sitting in the boat was the oddity. He must be the reason for this interruption of solitude. Riley looked at him carefully.

Winsome's passenger wore a dark fedora pulled low over his face, shading his eyes; they glittered from the shadows. His long coat was sufficient protection from the wind but looked out of place. It had been made a long way away from here. The man's face was almost luminous, a long, drawn out stretch of pallid skin over sharp bone. His hands were thin but powerful.

The man rose from the little boat and grabbed hold of the side of dock. He hauled himself up onto it with a single pull of one arm and stood, looking slowly around him.

Riley remained motionless, watching the man survey his surroundings. Then he shivered suddenly. This man was dangerous. This man traveled with death.

Nor could his arrival be a coincidence. This man was here because of who had come before. Riley could not remember how long ago the troubled, dark chess master had come. It must have been a good number of seasons by now. The chess master suited Riley. It was good to have him here.

And Riley had known as soon as he had seen her that the woman had come to find the dark man. His instincts told him she came to help. He did not know if she could, but he would watch. So far, it had gone well—or at least it had not gone badly.

But this man, this new arrival, brought grief and danger and death. And Riley, who was not a man who was easily frightened, shivered in the bright morning sun.

~~~~~

Hermione was up early. She had made a decision in the middle of the night, and now she felt a strange urgency to carry it out at once. She had dressed hurriedly, pulling on a pair of dark jeans, a long-sleeved cotton shirt, warm socks, and her sturdy shoes. She had scrubbed her face quickly in a basin and then rushed from the cottage, banging the door carelessly behind her, moving quickly before she could change her mind.

As she drew near to Snape's cave, she slowed, suddenly hesitant. She stopped, staring ahead. The place was well hidden, but she had already found it twice, once in the dead of night and once while Snape was distracted at chess. Yet he had ordered her to stay away, and he had been deeply furious with her when he had left the cottage the night before. She summoned her courage and moved forward again.

"The dock is on the other side of the island," said a silky voice, almost whispering in her ear, instantly halting her movement.

She whirled, staring up into his face all at once. She struggled to master the rush of adrenaline caused by his sudden appearance and the warmth of his breath on her ear.

He looked back down at her, only inches from her face, his expression inscrutable, his figure immobile.

The intense early morning light illuminated the delicate lines around his eyes, the cruel slant of his mouth, the sharp arch of his nose, and the fine down on his cheeks. This close, she could suddenly see the barest difference between the inky black pupils and the coal black irises of his eyes.

Her breath was suddenly ragged. Her lips parted slightly as she tried to steady her breathing. Her hand shaking slightly, she reached into her pocket, her eyes still locked on his, unable to look away. She removed the flask of memories and held it against her breast. She could feel her heart beating wildly beneath her hand.

In the barest whisper, the only sound she could get out, she said, "You are a good man, and you deserve to have your life back."

She held out the flask of swirling, silvery blue memories, unable to look away from him and unable to say more.

His expression was still unreadable, but, this close, she saw an almost imperceptible tremor pass across his face. His hand moved slowly, agonizingly slowly, and caught hers at last, wrapping his fingers around hers and caressing the flask with incredible gentleness. His touch was warm.

Still staring down at her, he said, in a whispered breath that might have been all he could manage, "Mr. Weasley was right, I think," and took the flask from her hand.

She gasped and blinked.

And suddenly he was gone, moving away from her swiftly, striding down to the sea.

~~~~~

The stranger with the pale face had found Riley amazingly easy to read. A single plunge into his mind had told him where to find his prey. It had also confirmed that Severus Snape was, indeed, very much alive, that Hermione Granger had found him, and that the two were both on this remote little piece of land, far away from help of any kind. The two people he hated most in the whole world were right here within reach. Alone.

He looked down at his handiwork, and he smiled. It was not a pleasant sight.

~~~~~

Hermione sank to the ground where she was standing and hugged her knees to her chin. She was trembling.

Ron had accused her of falling in love with Severus Snape, but that had been with the idea of the man. All the details she had uncovered about his life had made her, at first, merely sympathetic to his plight and understanding of his mistakes. They had also illuminated his courage, his sense of honor, his unfailing dedication to doing what was right, to paying for his terrible mistakes, to righting the wrongs he had committed. On paper, he was an attractive man, and it became easy to forget what she had thought of him before she had learned his history.

Faced once again with the man himself, those memories had come rushing back. In classes, he had seemed a petty tyrant, unfair and demanding, but he had also taught her more than she realized until she had left his classroom. The constant pressure of his insistence on detail and perfection had bred in her a kind of watchful vigilance in all her studies.

Outside of classes, he had seemed cruel and haughty. Yet almost everything she had witnessed then had been tempered by Harry's extreme reactions to the man. She had tried to keep her own counsel, to draw her own conclusions, but Harry was her friend, and Snape had seemed to be their enemy.

Then she had learned to look at him from an entirely new perspective, and all her assumptions had been shaken to their core.

Faced once again with the man himself, she saw now the doubts and self-recriminations that must have always been there. She saw the price he had paid for mistakes he obviously felt could never be redeemed. She saw the way he was haunted by the gaps in his memory, the things he no longer understood about himself.

She saw incredible intelligence and a deep vein of humor, and she saw, clearly, the decency of the man.

And Ron was absolutely right.

~~~~~

The man with the long, pale face wondered if he could risk a bit of magic to make himself less immediately visible. There were few trees to disguise his movement across the landscape. If he headed for the cottage, and they were looking, they would see him coming from quite a long way off. If he waited here for Snape to appear at the dock, he would need to be out in the open with room to maneuver.

But if they were able to detect the shimmer of magic, especially in a place where apparently none had ever intruded before, they might sense him coming. He did not know that the one who might have noticed his magic coming was thinking about other things at the moment, and the one who might have seen him coming without magic was not looking in his direction at all.

He decided to risk magic. He needed the element of surprise. He cast a Disillusionment Charm and contemplated his next move.

~~~~~

Snape reached the water's edge and turned north, slowing his pace as the lapping waves soothed his roiling emotions. He still clutched the flask in one hand, thrust into a pocket, the smooth crystal surface warming to his touch.

He had recognized her intelligence almost from the start. Though he had ridiculed her incessantly waving hand in class, he had been secretly delighted that one student at least cared enough about learning to want to know the answers. He had eventually cured her of her obsessive need to display her knowledge, but he had nevertheless looked forward to reading her essays and grading her work in class. She had validated him as a teacher. Few others had.

She had solved his logic puzzle in the first year, apparently quite easily. None of his colleagues had been able to figure it out. He had tried it on them all before putting it into place to protect Flammel's stone. He suspected that her Muggle heritage might have helped her work through the logic involved. He did not consider that heritage to be a deficiency. Why would he? He knew first-hand the value and power of drawing on the wisdom of two different worlds.

He had continued to notice her throughout her years at Hogwarts, though only as a student and principally as the best friend of the boy he hated but had pledged to protect with his life. More than once, he had been reminded of the danger of underestimating Hermione Granger. The first time, she had set him on fire. He had learned from that experience.

By the time she had left Hogwarts, he had glimpsed the woman that she would become. He had approved. Yet he didn't think about her, hadn't obsessed over her, hadn't even known what had happened to her after the defeat of Voldemort. He'd had other things to focus on, and Hermione Granger was definitely not one of them.

But he had not been surprised when he realized who had finally found him. The tenacity when solving a puzzle, the unwillingness to accept things at face value, the courage to trek out to one of the most desolate places on earth, the sense of being right and needing to prove it--these were all traits that had distinguished the Miss Granger he had once known.

He was gratified to discover that she had turned out as he expected. Better, perhaps. She had a fire and a brightness to her that lit up a room. She seemed to know a great deal about him now, but she did not need to flaunt her knowledge anymore. She had obviously learned how to rein in her temper, as well. He hadn't succeeded in baiting her the way he once would have.

And there was more. He shivered. She seemed to understand him, not just the facts about him but also the facts *of* him. It couldn't be possible, but when she looked at him, she seemed able to touch his soul. It wasn't Legilimency. It was a human connection. He had never experienced that before. It frightened him.

It fascinated him, too.

He stared out across the water, fingering the flask in his pocket. What did it contain? What had been missing from his mind all this time? Was she right, and should he put it back?

If he restored his memory, how might that change his world?

He sighed deeply. Perhaps a game of chess would clear his mind. He began walking toward the dock.

# My Life Must Forfeit Pay

Chapter 15 of 21

Eating death has its consequences.... (Warning: This is the chapter where the real violence begins.) Canon-compliant—  
despite JKR's best efforts.

*A/N: It is as it ever was: JKR is the creator and owner of this world, and we are merely happy players in her sandbox. Emily Brontë remains the author of the poetry that inspired this little foray into the Potterverse.*

And sshg316 remains the Beta to End All Betas, making me realize how often I take liberties with minor punctuation and how frequently I use a certain word that the Brits do not. Thanks, my dear, for saving my ass once again!

Warning: This chapter is one that earned this story its rating (Brazen). If you are put off by violence and its aftermath, please do not read on. There is more than one death here.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"My Life Must Forfeit Pay"

What I love shall come like visitant of air,

Safe in secret power from lurking human snare;

Who loves me, no word of mine shall e'er betray,

Though for faith unstained my life must forfeit pay.

- Emily Brontë, from "The Visionary"

Hermione rose at last and stretched her arms over her head. She had accomplished her task. She had found him and given him his medal and his memories. She would meet the boat on Tuesday and get on with her life. He would restore what he had given up, or he would not. She would leave him in peace.

She stared up into the morning sky and wept.

~~~~~

Snape walked on, trying to think. The boat might be back this afternoon, if the crew felt like coming ahead of schedule. Riley had told her it would be there on Tuesday, though, and he could simply forget to enlighten her himself. He could maneuver events to keep her here another week.

Or two.

Or forever.

He wanted her to go away immediately. He wanted her to stay for the rest of her life. He was in awe of her. Awe. Yes, that was the word. He wondered at her. He feared her. He was amazed by her.

Surely she was simply being kind. Surely Ron Weasley had been wrong. She might have loved the story of Severus Snape, but she could not love the man himself, the ugly, cruel, bitter man. She could not love the man who had fled from everything and who spent his days now wandering and lost and waiting.

Yet what had he seen in her eyes? It was something he had never even glimpsed before. Yet it was familiar. It felt like home.

~~~~~

Hermione wiped her sleeve across her face. This would never do. She needed a cup of tea and a bite of breakfast. She would decide what to do after that. She raised her chin in a show of bravado she did not feel and started back toward the cottage.

~~~~~

As Snape rounded the promontory, he could see the distant dock come into view. A tiny blue boat bobbed next to it in the waves. He frowned. It was much too small to be *The Grace*. It appeared to be empty. He scanned the shore and saw no one. Curious. He continued toward the dock cautiously. The hair on the back of his neck tingled. Something was very wrong.

He was still several yards away from the hut when he glimpsed the fisherman. The yellow slicker was floating beneath the dock, now visible, now hidden by another swell. As Snape took a few more careful steps toward him, he saw that the body was missing its head.

Snape turned away, his stomach heaving. He faced Riley's hut, which stood quiet and still. He stared at it, every sense heightened, every sound amplified. The wooden stool next to the door lay splintered in the grass. The chess board had been blasted into several segments, and the pieces littered the ground. Still scanning the area for movement--any movement--Snape stepped closer.

And he suddenly realized what he was looking at. Snape had seen horrors before. He had seen blood and destruction. He had even caused some himself. He had never become accustomed to it. He hoped he never would.

It was worse when the corpse, the mangled, twisted, sad little corpse, belonged to someone you knew. He did not have to look at the face--though he forced himself to turn the body over--to know that his chess partner had met a horrifying end.

"Riley," he breathed, his voice catching in his throat. The man had been a good companion in this self-imposed exile of his. Snape thought with despair that his own presence here must have been the reason for this brutality. He slumped beside his friend and mourned for him. Even if he had his wand and was willing to use it again, Riley was long past the help of magic. He stared bleakly out at the sea.

And he realized suddenly that the butcher must still be here. Whoever had done this had enjoyed the job far too much. He recognized the signs of that particular kind of sadism. In fact, the signs looked distressingly familiar.

If, indeed, he himself had been the cause of it, then there was likely only one place the murderer would be headed. He leapt to his feet, panicked. Hermione. Whoever had wreaked this havoc was now on his way to her.

~~~~~

She crested the ridge and stared down at the lonely cottage before her. This was where he had chosen to retreat from the world. It was a Spartan, self-contained little existence, just like the man who lived here.

She cocked her head curiously. From this angle, with the light glinting off the window, it looked as though someone was home. She shrugged off the impression. It must be a trick of the light. Snape had gone off in the other direction. She would have seen him if he had arrived back here ahead of her.

At least, she hoped so. She realized that she did not want to see him right at this moment. Her face was still streaked with dried tears. She had not bothered to brush her hair this morning. She had, in fact, been in such a rush to leave, to take him the flask containing his memories and discharge her last duty, that she was not sure she had even latched the door properly.

The door stood firmly shut now.

Her hands felt suddenly clammy. This was ridiculous, but she thought, somehow, impossibly, that she could just detect the slightest shimmer in the air.

It felt like the ripple of magic.

Had Snape somehow arrived here ahead of her after all? Was he using his wand for the first time on the island? Was he even now putting back the silvered memories he had torn from his mind? Was he remembering Lily and James and George and Dumbledore? Was he rediscovering the horrible tasks the Headmaster had demanded of him?

She wanted to run down the hill and stop him. This was all her fault. That she could be so arrogant as to think she knew what he needed and how to help him....

She took a deep breath and braced herself for what she would find inside. She walked resolutely to the door of the cottage and grasped the latch firmly, swinging the door open.

The cottage was empty.

She closed the door carefully behind her. She still felt that curious ripple. Her hands still felt clammy. She stared into the shadowed room, holding her breath.

And he shimmered into view in front of her. She gasped as the long, pale, twisted face of Antonin Dolohov emerged from the fading Disillusionment Charm and smiled nastily at her.

"You," she breathed, her voice trembling.

He inclined his head slightly, still smiling. "I am flattered," he said quietly. His voice chilled her to the bone. "I was not sure I had... made an impression on you."

She tried to steady her breathing, but flashes of that face had haunted her regularly for years. She took in his long coat, the wand held casually in one hand, the fedora that shadowed his glittering eyes. His dress was different: the Death Eater himself was not.

"Thank you," he said mockingly. "I had given the traitor up for dead. You led me right to him. And now I get to have you both."

Her breath caught in her chest. She raised her chin slightly. "You can thank him yourself," she said, her voice a touch louder than she wished but otherwise steady. "He'll be here in just a minute."

Dolohov chuckled. "Will he?" he asked. "How very nice. I've got a present for him."

He reached into his pocket and held out his left hand to her. Perched on his palm was a carved wooden chess piece, the black paint flaking off it.

She gasped again. "Bastard!" she croaked. "What have you done!"

Dolohov laughed, the evil sound echoing in the tiny room. "I can't tell you how lovely it is to meet you again, little Mudblood," he replied. "It's been worth the wait." He took a single step toward her. "Let's see how that little fantasy I developed in Azkaban plays out in reality, shall we?"

She bent double, grasping her arms around her, and a moan came from her lips.

Dolohov leaned back, enjoying the sight of pure terror. He preferred his victims this way. As a child, he had tormented rabbits for fun. He had moved on. Rabbits could not moan in fear the way a human being could. He liked the sound.

Hermione continued to whimper, leaning into the table now for support. "No," she sobbed, raising one hand in supplication. "Please..."

Dolohov eyed her contemptuously. In his imagination, she had put up a bit of a fight, but perhaps he had wounded her even more severely than he thought the last time they had met. He obviously inspired blind panic in her. He growled, "Oh, get up, girl. Show some courage."

Hermione continued to writhe on the table, her pleas now almost incoherent. She tossed her head to one side, her eyes rolled back in her head, and Dolohov took a step toward her again, revulsion in his features now.

"You useless excuse," he snarled savagely, "you sent me back there! I should have finished you off in the Department of Mysteries!" He reached down to grab the hand that was waving in his face--

--and found himself staring into the cool fury of Hermione Granger holding the large, very sharp kitchen knife in her other hand. She slashed at his face with deadly accuracy, cutting deep into his cheek.

With a scream, he fell back, and Hermione instantly grasped his wand hand, twisting it until she heard the distinctive crack of snapping bone.

Dolohov roared in pain and slapped her full in the face with his good arm. Hermione was thrown back against the closed door, nearly dropping the knife and grinding her teeth from the force of the blow. Breathing hard, Dolohov lunged across the table at her, trying again to loosen her grip on the knife. She darted out of his reach, slashing at his arm as she moved.

She whirled once more, assessing his position and adjusting her stance to face him. He had transferred his wand from his now useless hand to the hand unaccustomed to casting, but he was still not as clumsy as she could wish. He aimed the wand, sending a shot of purple flame at her. She ducked and bobbed, having anticipated it, and it

glanced off the wall millimeters from her ear. He aimed again, and another burst of flame shot across the room, striking the arm holding the knife. She released the weapon with a sharp wail.

Her lungs felt ready to burst. The table was again between them, and she grasped the edge, slamming it up and into his snarling face. He howled and staggered back as, still holding the edge of the table, Hermione slammed it into him again, sending his wand flying.

With a lurch, he suddenly pushed the table back against her, pinning her to the floor. Her fingers scrabbled to find purchase on the knife, just out of easy reach, but she managed only to slice her thumb on its razor-sharp edge.

He stomped hard on her ankle, eliciting an agonized yowl from her as the muscle and bone compressed under his boot heel. He reached past her, pressing the table down onto her chest, trying to grasp the knife handle, but rage took hold of her and gave her a strength she had not known herself capable of, and she found the handle first, raised the knife, and plunged it into his chest with desperate fury.

As his blood shot out of the wound, washing over her and blinding her, and the world began to go black, her last thought was of Severus. She wondered if he was already dead. She wondered if he would forgive her.

## Strange Power

*Chapter 16 of 21*

Aftermath. Canon-compliant—despite JKR's best efforts.

*A/N: Once again, if you recognize it, Ms. Rowling created it (unless it's 19th century poetry, in which case Emily Brontë wrote it). I just play with the toys for the fun of it.*

*Once again, my amazing beta, sshg316, has saved me from public embarrassment and kept me going. Shug, I owe you big time!*

*Warning: This chapter contains the aftermath of the violence. There are bodies to be buried. Look away if you are squeamish.*

### CHAPTER FIFTEEN

#### "Strange Power"

*Burn, then, little lamp; glimmer straight and clear*

*Hush! A rustling wing stirs, methinks, the air:*

*He for whom I wait, thus ever comes to me;*

*Strange Power! I trust thy might; trust thou my constancy.*

*- Emily Brontë, from "The Visionary"*

He did not need a broomstick to be able to fly. He did, however, need a wand. His was at the cottage. So Snape began to run.

Very shortly, his breath was coming in gasps, but he kept hurtling forward. Her face was all he could see before him. Hermione, brutally attacked. Hermione, savaged beyond recognition. Hermione, staring up at him, her eyes accusing him, her life leaking out onto the floor of the cottage in the middle of nowhere.

Someone he loved was going to die, and once again it was going to be his fault.

A muscle in his side suddenly spasmed. He slapped an arm across it, willing it to go away, and ran on. He had to get there. He was not going to make it soon enough.

By the time he had the cottage finally in sight, his lungs were scraped raw, he was soaked through with perspiration, and his legs were shrieking at him to stop, please, stop. Breathing was agony. There was a mottled mist before his eyes, threatening to overwhelm him.

Only the thought of her overpowered the physical agony and urged him on. He reached the door by sheer force of will and flung it open to reveal the scene he had been dreading to find all the way here—blood, disorder, chaos... and her body, lying still and broken and bloody beneath the upended, cracked table.

Across from her sat a figure propped up against the wall, grimacing up at him. His pale cheek was sliced open, and his eyes were staring out at Snape. The long ebony handle of the kitchen knife protruded from his chest and blood dripped from the terrible wound.

Snape registered only that this body was very, very dead and offered no further threat. He turned his attention away from the corpse without a second glance.

He knelt beside Hermione, his eyes boring into her, desperately seeking a sign of life. He managed a single, guttural sob and grabbed the edge of the table, flinging it aside and revealing the woman beneath it. She did not stir, but as Snape watched, the tiniest movement of her breast whispered that he was not too late. Not yet.

Her face was covered with blood, and one arm lay at an unnatural angle across her chest. Her left foot looked crushed. He began to wipe her face gently with his bare hand, trying to find the source of all the blood, but there seemed to be no breaks in the skin or in fact anywhere on her skull. He removed his coat and wadded it beneath her head for a pillow and then proceeded to examine her carefully and thoroughly for other injuries.

The right arm was out of its socket, and he gritted his teeth while he positioned it to pop it back into place. As he forced it back, she moaned in pain, and he murmured reassuringly, stroking her cheek, seeing the first signs of bruising already beginning to darken her chin.

The deep cut in her left thumb was still bleeding a little, and he put it gently in his mouth, applying pressure to encourage coagulation. He realized he was weeping, but he focused on his task.

His fingers explored carefully down her arm but found no other wounds there. He undid the buttons of her shirt, revealing soft flesh but no apparent injuries on her torso. He lifted her gently a few inches off the floor to stroke down her back and found it also untouched. He sighed in relief, embracing her carefully before laying her back down and tugging her shirt closed again. Head wounds and injury to major organs were the most immediate threats. She seemed to have escaped the worst.



He continued down the obviously injured leg, his fingers carefully caressing her thigh, her knee, her calf. He arrived at her ankle and took it gingerly in his palm. A thick woolen sock still covered it, though the shoe had fallen off in the fight, and he thought, as he felt its wet warmth, that the sock had at least offered some kind of protection.

With the utmost care, he began to peel the sock down. Hermione moaned again, louder, and he thought his heart might burst to be hurting her further.

Once off, the sock revealed a sorry sight. A jagged shaft of bone protruded through the skin, surrounded by congealed blood. Her foot flopped uselessly at the ankle and felt to Snape's touch like a bag filled with small, rough rocks rather than an appendage with the connected bones that should have lain beneath the skin.

He rose from beside her, his own muscles already stiffening painfully, and hobbled outside to the cistern, returning with a damp cloth, a bowl of cool water, and a crude bar of homemade soap. He lifted the blanket from her mattress and draped it gently over her still form. He considered transferring her to the bed but decided not to risk moving her yet.

He ripped a strip from the hem of his shirt and began to wash the wounded foot very gently but thoroughly. When it was clean, he wrapped it firmly, trying not to aggravate the injury. His fingers worked to straighten the protruding bone and return the foot to its natural alignment. He found a spoon on the floor to use as a makeshift splint. It would do for now. It would have to.

He placed the foot gently back on the floor, cushioning it with the discarded sock, and examined her right leg, which appeared to be intact. He went to work cleaning the drying blood from her face. As he dabbed gently at her cheek with the cloth, he stared down into her bruised and battered face, memorizing every curve and surface. He brushed the hair back from her brow, feeling it for the warmth of fever or the clamminess of shock. So far, neither were present. He hesitated, then leaned in to plant a feathery kiss on her forehead.

Dittany. He needed dittany from his meager stores in the cave, and essence of Murtlap, Skele-Gro, Blood-Replenishing Potion, Bruise Removal Paste, Dreamless Sleep Potion. Some he had and some would require time to brew and ingredients he would never be able to procure in time. And magic. They required him to use magic.

He leaned back on his heels and looked up at the wand mounted over the door. It sat there, untouched by the terrible battle that had raged below it. A single shaft of wood, crafted for his hand, designed to concentrate and focus his magic. His gift. His curse.

He rose from the floor and stared up at his wand. Making up his mind suddenly, he grasped it and swung it down in front of his chest. He opened the door to the cottage and looked toward the ridge that rose behind it. Taking a deep breath, Severus Snape spoke the first words of magic he had uttered in more than four years. "*Accio* dittany," he commanded firmly into the wind.

For a brief moment, nothing happened. Then a small vial suddenly shot through the air into his outstretched hand. He turned back to the room to continue ministering to his patient.

~~~~~

A good while later, Snape had done as much as his considerable knowledge and limited resources made possible. He would now be forced to wait, an activity he disliked intensely even in the best of circumstances. He sat back on the floor with a groan, leaning wearily against the wall next to the unconscious woman.

He gazed across at the dead man--and for the first time recognized the contorted face staring back at him with dull, dead eyes.

"Dolohov!" he breathed in horrified wonder. How had the man come here? How had he found him? Who else might be coming in his wake?

He shivered. He would have to move the corpse, he realized. It would not do to have that gruesome sight be the first thing Hermione saw when she awoke.

Aside from his own unpleasant and unattractive visage, he thought sourly.

With a loud sigh of pain, he pulled himself up and walked over to stand staring down at the body. Grasping a rough blanket from his own bed, he threw it over the grimacing face. He leaned in and tried to lift Dolohov from the floor, but the effort was beyond him. At last, he grasped him by the ankles and began to drag him from the room, refusing to dignify the body with any magical assistance. Outside, he was able to haul him as far as the lean-to and fling him awkwardly onto the piled firewood. He adjusted the blanket to cover the body as best he could. He stalked back inside and settled in to wait.

~~~~~

He must have fallen asleep, for he felt a small hand touch his feebly and startle him out of his confused dreams. His eyes snapped open, and he turned his head to find Hermione looking up at him, her eyes vague and bleary. He leaned in to cup her cheek with one trembling hand.

"How do you feel?" he managed to rasp.

She searched his face. She tried to moisten her lips with her tongue, and he came to her aid at once, pressing them delicately with a damp cloth.

"Severus," she said feebly.

"Shhh," he replied, fear evident in his eyes. "I'm here. I'm here."

She looked at him a moment longer, then her eyes drifted shut again. He continued to stroke her cheek, as much to assure himself that she was merely asleep as to offer comfort.

"It's fine, dearest," he said, though the words were almost inaudible. "It will all be fine." He willed his words to be true.

~~~~~

Snape leaned his head against the cottage wall wearily. She would recover. He would do everything in his power to heal her wounds. He would make it so.

And then she would get on the next boat and go back to England, back to that London flat she had mentioned the other day, back to the life she had clearly carved out for herself, back to her place in the wizarding world. She would leave him in peace. She would tell no one where she had found him. He might have to move again, depending on what Dolohov had discovered and who he had shared his findings with, but it would not be because of Hermione.

She would not even tell anyone that he was still alive if he asked her not to. She would not feel compelled to tell the world that she had been right. It would be enough that she knew. He himself had been the one to cure her of her need to show off her knowledge. He smiled bitterly at the irony of that.

Nevertheless, his refuge had been shattered. He stared at the dust motes dancing in the shaft of sunlight in front of him. In less than a week, this hurricane of a woman had swept into his sheltered retreat and upended everything. Because of her, he had even used magic for the first time in forever--used it several times, in fact, in every way he could think of that might ease her pain or speed her recovery. He could give it up a second time, of course, but that was not the point. He had dared to use magic again, and it had not killed him or hurt someone he cared for or caused destruction of any kind.

He thrust his hand into his pocket--and found himself holding the crystal flask. He took it out and eyed it warily. She had said he needed to take these memories back, but he was unconvinced. What could they possibly show him that he did not already know about himself? Twenty slivers of his past could never counter the overwhelming tide of memories he still recalled clearly. There was evidence enough for a hundred trials, whether or not the Wizengamot chose to conduct them. He was not a nice man. He had done unforgivable things. People had died because of Severus Snape.

As recently as today, he thought mercilessly.

He continued to stare ahead, unseeing, his thoughts tumbling madly through his head.

Yearning After Thine

Chapter 17 of 21

The authorities weigh in and several pipers must be paid. Canon-compliant—despite JKR's best efforts.

A/N: JKR created these characters and this world and graciously allows us to play here as long as we do so without profit. Emily Brontë wrote the poetry that inspired this tale. And sshg316 is the Beta To End All Betas for her watchful eye and gentle encouragement. Shug, I couldn't do it without you!

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"Yearning After Thine"

Then did I check the tears of useless passion--

Wean'd my young soul from yearning after thine;

Sternly denied its burning wish to hasten

Down to that tomb already more than mine.

- Emily Brontë, from "Remembrance"

Three murders, especially three gruesome and bloody deaths, were at least three more than usual anywhere along the coast serviced by *The Grace* that whole year. The authorities who came to investigate the scene tried to affect a casual air, as though this were the sort of event with which they dealt on a regular basis, but their attempt at professional detachment was marred when the youngest member of the party, disembarking from the police boat and catching a glimpse of the first victim, promptly lost his lunch.

The lead investigator, a taciturn little man named Peacock, was a cooler customer, disbelieving Snape's account of the events of the day on principle. Snape had managed to drag Dolohov's unlovely corpse down to the dock and suggested that everything had happened right there. Peacock was skeptical.

Interviews among the residents of Black's Harbor turned up several witnesses to Snape's history there and his friendship with Riley Macmillan. Two others had noticed the pale-faced man chartering *Winsome*, and neither of them had taken a liking to the stranger. *Winsome's* owner, the dead and headless fisherman, had even confided his misgivings to one of his friends before his final departure.

Peacock consulted his notes when he returned to continue his interrogation of Snape.

"See here, Mr. Chessminster," he began, "both of the crew of *The Grace* tell me they brought a young lady here last week on the regular delivery. She said she'd be coming back with them this week. Where was she through all this?"

Snape nodded. "My sister," he lied smoothly, though his stomach clenched. She had intended to leave, of course, as soon as she could. He should not find that surprising. "She's visiting me from Sheffield. She twisted her ankle day before yesterday, unfortunately," he added suavely, "so she'll be staying on the island until she's well enough to walk to the dock. She knows nothing about what happened down here."

Peacock eyed him speculatively. "If she doesn't turn up soon, I'll be back," he cautioned. "Can't have any more... unpleasantness."

Snape acknowledged the veiled warning. "I understand," he answered solemnly. "She'll be on the boat in a week or so, I expect." She'd want to be gone from here as soon as possible.

In the end, Peacock didn't have enough evidence to press charges of any kind. He took away the bodies and the abandoned boat and left the chess master to his solitude and his self-doubts.

~~~~~

The sun was unbearably bright. And it was flickering. Hermione turned her head toward the light and worked very hard to open her eyes. Ah, it was a stove, not the sun, with a crackling fire roaring behind the grate. She lay for a very long time simply looking at it.

Eventually, she flexed one hand speculatively. It appeared to function. She was puzzled. There ought to be more pain. She could not quite remember why, but she had a vague feeling that every joint should be screaming in agony. Yet all she felt was a mild headache, a stiff heaviness in one foot, and a raging thirst. She turned her head slowly, trying to identify her surroundings. Perhaps she was dead. This did not feel quite like death as she expected it, but then who could tell?

Just out of reach to her left was a small stack of books. She was glad that she would have books to read. Death could not be so awful if there were books.

She seemed to be floating, but with considerable effort, she remembered the air mattress she had bought in a camping supply store in London. This must be that mattress. Which probably meant that she was *not* dead.

She continued to look around the small, unfamiliar room. The door was shut. Above it, two bent nails, one slightly rusty, protruded from the wall. She frowned. That meant something. Something used to hang there, and now it was gone.

*Snape.* The name suddenly surfaced in her conscious mind. *Severus.* His wand had been there. His wand was missing. She felt an uneasy stirring in the pit of her stomach. He could not live without his wand. He would not be safe. He was a wizard, and he required his wand, even if it was only hanging on the wall for decoration.

And with that, everything else came rushing back--watching him dying on the floor of the Shrieking Shack, researching his sad and secretive life, deciding he must still be

alive, figuring out how to find him, seeing him for the first time on the moor, rediscovering the man, sensing the constriction of her heart as she looked in his eyes...

*Dolohov.*

The long, pale, leering face blasted everything else from her mind. She had brought him here. She had put Severus in danger. It was all her fault. He would never forgive her. He must hate her for destroying his solitude, revealing his secrets, and leading his enemies to him. She needed to get out of here, to leave Severus in peace. He had asked her to go. She would honor his wishes.

With a groan, she rolled to her side and started to sit up. Her head swam with the effort. She struggled to rise anyway but found that her left foot throbbed and felt tender. She was not certain it would bear her weight. She sat on the edge of the mattress, panting with the effort.

"It is entirely up to you, of course, but I do not recommend trying to walk just yet," said a dry voice behind her.

She whirled to face him and immediately regretted it as her stomach lurched with the movement. Snape stood framed in the doorway, his face an expressionless mask.

"I... uh," she stammered.

He arched an eyebrow. "So eloquently put," he replied sarcastically. "Now if you have concluded your feeble attempt at further injuring yourself, I suggest you lie down again. I have no more Skele-Gro, nor the ingredients to replenish my stock, and it does require some time to take full effect." His voice a silky purr, he added, "If you recall anything you learnt in class."

She stared hard at him, registering the cold distance in his voice. Yes, he did indeed blame her and would wish her gone as soon as possible. She bit back the impulse to sob and simply lay back on the mattress without comment, trying not to let him see how deeply his words hurt her.

He paused in the doorway a moment longer, then strode toward her. He thrust the mug he was carrying at her. She took it without meeting his eyes.

"Drink this," he growled roughly. "You're dehydrated."

She nodded and emptied the cup. With a wave of his wand, he refilled it. Her eyes flickered toward his wand as she drank again. He cleared his throat, almost daring her to speak, but she said nothing. She handed the mug back to him and rolled away from him, huddled under her blanket. Snape stood over her for a moment, then turned on his heel and left the cottage, the door banging shut behind him.

~~~~~

Gradually, she began to regain her strength. Snape issued a few blunt instructions about food and drink and almost reluctantly helped her to and from the outhouse, but he refused to engage in conversation. As she began to recover, she found herself glad of his silence. Within a few days, she had started to put weight on the damaged foot and taken several halting steps, leaning heavily on the straight-backed chair for support. She was able to make it to the window seat unassisted now and could begin each day staring silently out at the morning sunlight.

When he returned from his final interview with Peacock, he told her gruffly that the boat would be back in four days. "If you're sufficiently recovered to leave by then," he said, sounding indifferent. "Otherwise, it will be another ten days."

Hermione nodded. "I believe I could be ready," she replied, working to keep her voice even. "I'll try walking a bit this afternoon."

Snape shrugged.

"I don't think I'm--" She took a deep breath and began again, "I don't think I could Apparate yet."

"No," he agreed, his voice cold. "And certainly not from here."

She glared at him. "Surely you don't mean because magic would sully the sanctity of this godforsaken hole," she snapped. "That can't be a problem anymore."

He arched one eyebrow. "And who are you to decide that?" His words dripped with derision.

"I'd say it's already been decided," she replied sharply.

"Certainly not by me," he retorted.

Hermione looked at him, the color rising in her cheeks. "You really are a bastard, you know that?" she asked.

"I have never pretended otherwise," he responded silkily. "I have never romanticized my choices or my life. I at least have accepted full responsibility for everything I have done."

"How do you know?" she asked tartly. "You haven't looked at the memories you gave to Harry, have you? You don't know what they might show you--you can't remember them unless you take them back!"

Snape sneered at her. "I gave him nothing I was not glad to be rid of. If Potter chose to see that as anything more than the discharge of an extremely unpleasant long-term obligation, that is his misfortune. And it is, as I said before, a private matter. You cannot begin to know what I retained, little girl, and so you cannot begin to know me at all."

"How dare you!" she shot back, her voice suddenly, alarmingly quiet. "I have not been a 'little girl' for far longer than I had a right to be. This war we both fought in wouldn't let me. And I may not have been a celebrated spy or a Death Eater turned hero, but I think I proved myself rather effectively. And I..." she struggled with the words, "I killed a man the other day. I am a murderer now." The last words came out almost in a whisper, and Snape stared across the room into the sudden silence.

Hermione was not looking at him but was instead gazing down at the place where Dolohov had fallen, replaying the whole scene again in her mind. She drew in a shuddering breath, but she refused to look away. She was responsible for a man's death. She would face the consequences, even if it took the rest of her life.

Snape continued to stare at her, watching the recriminations and doubts and repudiations wash over her. He was moved by her stubborn courage. She would not pretend that nothing had happened. She would face what she had done, even if it destroyed her in the end.

He was struck by a desperate longing to take her in his arms and reassure her, tell her it was not her fault, that she had been magnificent, that she had defended herself wonderfully, that he was impressed and proud and humbled and moved. He wanted to tell her that he loved her.

And he said nothing. He simply watched her. And then he turned and walked out of the cottage, leaving her staring at the wall alone.

Memory's Rapturous Pain

Chapter 18 of 21

This is the story she will tell the world. Canon-compliant—despite JKR's best efforts.

A/N: All hail the creator of the Potterverse, JK Rowling, who lets us come and play for fun and no profit. The poetry is by Emily Brontë.

My deepest, humblest thanks to my amazing beta, sshg316, who keeps me on track and makes this all so much better than she found it. Shug, I owe you so much!

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"Memory's Rapturous Pain"

And, even yet, I dare not let it languish,

Dare not indulge in memory's rapturous pain;

Once drinking deep of that divinest anguish,

How could I seek the empty world again?

- Emily Brontë, from "Remembrance"

"I will not be here when you return." They stood apart at the dock, watching for a sign of *The Grace's* approach.

"Return? What do you mean?" she asked.

"You will not be able to give it up, Miss Granger" he replied, matter-of-factly. "You will convince yourself once again that your project is not complete. You will come to believe that my desires are not important."

"Your desires?" she answered indignantly. "I assure you, *Mister Snape*, that your desires are uppermost in my mind. You want to be left in peace, and so you shall be."

"Or you will lie," he continued smoothly. "You will tell them you did not find me, and those who know you will not believe you would give up the search without a final answer. Potter will check my wandtrace one more time, and this time he will see that my wand has been used. Then he will come, or he will tell Shackbolt, or the Death Eater sympathizer who so obviously still works at the Ministry will send someone else with a grudge to settle. At least give me the courtesy of a reasonable head start."

She glared at him. "I was planning to take a page from your book."

"My book?" he asked, frowning.

"Your little spy manual," she retorted. "I will tell them the truth. Just not all of it."

"Indeed?"

"I will tell them that I did in fact find you, but that Dolohov followed me. I will tell them that he killed Riley Macmillan." She gazed placidly at him.

"And?" he prompted impatiently.

"And I will let them draw their own conclusions. They don't know what name you have been using recently. And Riley had your chess set, after all." She smiled rather smugly before going on. "Harry told me that wandtrace is not especially precise. It will indicate approximately when and where a wand was used, but it cannot pinpoint *exactly* when or by whom or the spells it was used to cast, without the actual wand itself. Put it back up on the wall, and no one will ever be able to prove anything."

He stared at her in frank admiration. "But what of Dolohov?" he asked at last.

"I fought him," she replied defiantly. "And I killed him." She suddenly stopped and looked away, toward the tiny dot of the approaching delivery boat, as memories of the attack came flooding back into her mind again. She had murdered a man. She had thrust a knife into his chest, felt the resistance of tissue and bone, pressed it firmly in and forced out his life with her own hand. She was a killer. She shuddered. She did not deserve to be here. She did not deserve to be anywhere. She ought to have died herself.

Snape was still staring at her, and he saw that she was now shivering. He moved to her despite himself, hesitating as he reached her, mutely offering his cloak. She stared at his hands, almost as though she did not recognize the object he was holding, then shook her head.

"No. Thank you," she said softly. "I'm not cold. I'm just... I've never..." All at once, her legs refused to support her. She suddenly sat down on the dock. When she spoke again, her voice was a fierce whisper, "I keep stabbing him in my mind. I shouldn't--"

He knelt down in front of her, taking her hands tightly in his. "Stop it!" he ordered harshly. "He was trying to kill you!"

Her eyes found his, and they were swimming with tears. "There should have been some other way!" she said intensely. "I could have just wounded him! I could have Petrified him or tied him up or--"

He shook his head, insistent. "You did what was required of you. There is no point to this. Stop."

One tear escaped and rushed down her cheek. "I can't," she admitted.

"Yes," he replied. "You can."

She stared down at her hands clasped in his. "How?" she asked simply. "How do *you* stop seeing it all the time?"

"Seeing what?" he asked, frowning.

She breathed, "Dumbledore's face."

Snape froze. He looked down and, as if suddenly realizing he was holding her hands, released them and stood. His breath came out in a hiss.

Hermione scrambled up, grasping his arm. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" she cried. "This is all my fault! I shouldn't have come here! You were safe, you didn't need to remember, you didn't need me!"

His face was contorted as he looked down at her. "Didn't need you?" he roared.

Her voice was coming out in ragged sobs now, but she didn't care. "I thought I could help, I was so stupid, I came here to find you, and all I could think was how incredible you are and how much I wanted to help you and then I saw how much more wonderful you really are and how much I love you now and I've mucked it all up and all you want is for me to go away and all I want is to give it all back to you--"

Suddenly she was in his arms as he clutched her almost desperately, saying, "Shh, shh, Hermione, be quiet, it's all right, dearest, it's all right, I don't want you to go away, I thought you wanted to leave--"

Their lips found each other and silenced speech, and their mouths joined, tongues intertwining, breath becoming one, fingers wrapped in hair, tears mingling, each grasping at the soul that gave completion and meaning and purpose.

~~~~~

The crew of *The Grace* (both of them) had been plying these waves all their lives. They both remembered the first time the chess master had ridden in their boat. They had listened patiently to Riley's enthusiastic accounts of his chess games with the stranger, though they had understood little about the moves that so delighted their friend at the dock. They had seen the woman arrive and had their own somewhat lascivious discussions about why she was there. They had heard the official account of the recent murders, and they had shared their own doubts about how much of it was true.

As the boat chugged slowly up to the dock that morning, they watched the chess master and the woman who had arrived just recently as they embraced passionately on the dock. They stared in frank and hungry curiosity as the two kissed and caressed, locked in the ecstatic and oblivious exploration of one another.

Finally, Dakin turned to his companion. "I thought he told them she was his sister," he said. Declan simply shrugged and turned *The Grace* back out toward the open sea.

~~~~~

It was quite awhile before either recovered the power of rational speech.

The cottage was filled with sunlight, warming the two figures sprawled across its floor and the trail of clothing strewn around them. Hermione's head was resting on Snape's bare chest, listening to his heart quiet under her ear.

"You missed the boat, you know," he murmured.

"Did I?"

"Umm-hmm."

"It'll be back Tuesday."

"Oh." He sat up suddenly. "Yes. It will be back Tuesday. Time enough."

She yawned. "And the Tuesday after that, and the Tuesday after that."

He stared out the window at the open sky. "And then one Tuesday--"

She put a finger on his lips. "Come back here." She wrapped her arms around his neck, nipping lightly at his ear. Enveloping his mouth with her own, she opened her lips and sucked gently on his tongue.

He decided to let Tuesday sort itself out later. He gave himself up to the woman now insistently working her way down his chest. She seemed in no hurry to run away, at least not yet, not now. He stopped thinking and surrendered himself to her touch.

~~~~~

"I think I owe you a life debt."

"Do you."

"You saved my life."

"No," he corrected her seriously. "You saved your own life. I just put some pieces back together. In fact," and he cocked one eyebrow at her, "you may have saved *my* life. If you hadn't stopped Dolohov, I would have been next."

"Oh, don't be ridiculous," she huffed. "You could have taken him." She smiled slyly. "I softened him up for you."

He looked indignant. "You did no such thing, young woman."

"Oh, so now I'm a young woman. Step up from a little girl, I suppose."

"Oh, I am very much afraid that I shall never be able to see you as a 'little girl' again."

"Good thing, too. What are you--Severus!" She squealed as he pressed his advantage.

"Life debt indeed...."

Distracted, she began to chew her lip, and he touched it gently with his thumb, stopping her.

She looked at him. "You don't have to," she whispered.

He froze. "I don't have to what?" His voice was careful.

"Do any of it," she replied. "You don't have to go back to using magic, or leave this place, or do anything. You can put your wand back up on that wall and throw your medal in the sea. You've earned the right to do whatever you want to, including nothing at all."

He stared down at her, his expression uncertain now. "Have I?"

"Yes," she answered, willing herself not to cry and thrusting out her chin. "But do it for the right reasons, Severus. Do it because you understand why you came here, why you stopped using magic entirely. Make it a conscious choice. Do it because you've chosen to do it."

He continued to gaze down at her, and she watched him turning her words over in his mind.

Finally she said, "You need to take back the memories. You don't have to keep them all. But you need to understand. Please, Severus. Look at them. Then you can fling them into the wind."

~~~~~

"How much difference does it make?" Hermione asked one morning over breakfast.

"What do you mean?" Snape was standing in the doorway, frowning out at the sky, his back to her.

"Magic," she replied. "You told me when I arrived that this place had never known magic. And," she continued pointedly, "you weren't using your wand. How much difference does all this make?"

He sighed, and his shoulders sagged. At first, she thought he was not going to answer her, but finally he said, "It doesn't matter. It was only a question of time, I suppose. It doesn't matter." His voice was flat, defeated.

She rose and went to him, wrapping her arms around his waist from behind in a tight embrace. "Severus," she admonished, "of course it matters. You had chosen to give up magic. My coming here changed that. I want to know what else I've changed."

He turned, taking her into his arms and brushing her hair from her face. "Everything," he answered simply. "You've changed everything." He tilted his head to look down at her, a faint smirk on his face now. "You have quite ruined me, in fact. Everything was perfect before you came. I should have simply stayed away from the cottage until you gave it up and went home."

She returned his gaze, unsmiling. "It wouldn't have worked. I'd have waited as long as it took. I knew you were here. I'd have waited you out."

He nodded, and the smile left his face. "I realized that as soon as I saw you. That might have been the first moment, you know."

Her forehead crinkled. "The first moment?"

"The first moment I started to love you," he replied.

She looked at him for a moment. "I've been falling in love with you for a very long time," she said at last. "But surely you hadn't even given me a second thought until I barged into your peaceful hiding place and arrogantly demanded that you take all those priceless gifts I'd lugged along with me. You can't have fallen in love with me that fast. Especially as I was such a proper little shit most of that time. Or unconscious."

Snape stroked her hair and answered dryly, "I'm a quick study."

Hermione smiled in spite of herself. "So I observe."

"With very strange tastes," he added.

"I noticed that, too," she replied. "To quote one of the greatest wizards of my time, 'Lucky me.'"

He pressed her against the door, pinning her arms above her lightly at both wrists. "I believe I said that with a great deal more spirit," he purred. He looked down into her glowing face, and his own expression suddenly turned solemn. "Lucky me," he whispered and bent his head to kiss her.

Remembrance

Chapter 19 of 21

What are we but what we remember? Canon-compliant—despite JKR's best efforts.

A/N: This world, these characters, the magic that they do—they all belong to the genius who created them, JK Rowling. I am simply playing with them for the fun of it.

Personally, I have to thank sshg316, my amazing beta, for her continued support, sharp eye, and spot-on comments. Thanks particularly for helping me be sure that a key point in this chapter actually made sense. You are a wonder, my dear, and your sense of humor is priceless!

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"Remembrance"

The cave was buried within the hard rock that made up the southeastern end of the island. It had been carved out by the retreating sea, and in storms sometimes the sandy floor could still grow damp with seawater trying to carry away the rest of the unyielding granite. Snape had discovered it shortly after his arrival. He had decided at once that it would make an effective retreat from the abandoned shepherd's cottage that had become his primary home.

He truly did think of it sometimes as his summer house. Its sheltering walls kept the interior cool. He could not quite see the shoreline from inside, but the steady ebb and flow of the waves signaled the close proximity of the beach. He had fashioned a tight-fitting door that kept out all but the worst of the weather, but he usually left it open whenever he was in residence.

Hermione surveyed the simple surroundings curiously. She had stepped inside briefly when he had been distracted with one of his chess games down at the dock, but she had not dared to take the time to examine it closely then.

Books and parchment scrolls were packed in plastic bins, protected against the damp but clearly visible. In one corner, nestled on a ledge, stood a camp cot, with a rough blanket folded neatly across it. The worktable that took up most of the interior held a few beakers, some tools, a small gas stove, and the mate to the coffee mug back at the cottage. In the center of the table stood a small crystal flask, its silvery blue contents swirling innocently.

The whole place had an uncluttered, snug feeling to it, but Hermione was again struck by its stark simplicity. Even with the plethora of books, it did not look like a place to stimulate thought or accomplishment.

Snape watched her.

He studied her face, so familiar and yet brand new now. She really had grown up. There was little left of the anxious schoolgirl, even the one of her final year. He supposed that she might not be considered a classic beauty, but he had never seen anything more astonishingly lovely in his life. She stood gazing around her and though she must

certainly have been impatient for him to begin, her face was calm, serene even. Feeling his eyes on her, she turned and smiled at him, and his heart contracted in his chest.

That smile--that smile was just for him. He did not deserve such a luminous look, but by heaven he would take it, for as long as it was offered, but he realized all too well that could not be long at all. She could not stay here. That would be an incredible waste, a sacrifice he would not allow her to make.

Her face stilled. "Severus?" she asked, puzzled at the expression that had come over his sharp features.

He shook his head and spoke briskly. "We must do this now if we are to support your story. It will require me to use my wand. If I do this, there will be wandtrace activity well after the time at which I am supposed to have died."

"I will say I used your wand afterwards," she answered levelly.

He nodded. "I am confident now that you will have an explanation ready for whatever anomaly may arise. You will go back, and all will be as it must. The formidable Miss Granger can will the world to be as she sees it." His voice was coldly sarcastic.

She looked at him, uncertain. "Severus, I can't stay here forever."

"I know," he replied, his tone softening. "Though I did consider bribing the boat."

She was fairly sure he was joking. It was hard to tell in this light. She sighed. There was something more important to concentrate on first, before considering their future. Their future--was such a concept even possible? She shook her head briefly, focusing on the task at hand.

"Do you want me to do it? Use my wand instead?" she asked.

"Yes. But it doesn't work that way. I have to do it myself."

"I rather thought so." She frowned as the thought occurred to her, "Is it possible to put memories into someone else's head?"

"The Dark Lord did want me to try," he replied, "but I never found a way. Thank Merlin." He sighed and sat at the table.

Hermione sat opposite him, watching him carefully, allowing him to determine the pace of things.

He did not pick up the flask but merely continued to study it. At last, he spoke, "Hermione, I know you believe I surrendered something vital to... Mister Potter. But memories don't work that way. They are so rarely discrete entities. They leave echoes, especially when they are of important events."

He took a deep breath. "For instance, I must have given up the memory of going to Albus to beg him to save Lily. I recall being summoned before the Dark Lord and realizing what he believed the prophecy meant, but I do not recall my meeting with Dumbledore. Yet I know it took place. I know it because I thought about it again and again afterwards." He looked directly into her eyes, and his face grew cold and still. "I thought about it just after I killed the old man."

Hermione realized she was holding her breath. She reached across the table and stroked his hand reassuringly. "You did what was necessary," she murmured.

"Perhaps," Snape replied stiffly. "I certainly recall taking the Unbreakable Vow, and I know what the consequences would have been had I not honored it. Draco himself told me what he had been charged to accomplish. He actually thanked me for killing Albus for him." He looked sick and disgusted.

"The Vow?" Hermione asked.

"I promised his mother I would finish the job if he could not. I bound myself to him through that promise," Snape answered bleakly. "I would have died if Albus had not, and then Voldemort would have killed Draco. If I had not committed murder in his stead."

"But Dumbledore--" Hermione cried, and then she stopped. She gazed at Snape for a long moment. "Severus," she began at last, "take them back. Look at them all carefully. I believe there is something crucial in them that didn't leave... an echo, as you call it. I know you would rather walk away from it all," she continued in a rush as he turned his head from her. "But trust me. Please."

He turned back to her and took her hand in his. "Hermione," he said carefully, "that part of my life is over. I can never atone for what I did. Reliving it serves no purpose."

"Trust me," she repeated softly.

He let out a sigh and lowered his head. "You won't let things be, will you?"

She stroked his hand. "You truly *have* forgotten 'the force that is Hermione Granger,' haven't you?" she asked, smiling gently.

He raised his eyes to meet hers. "I doubt I shall ever be able to forget it again," he replied.

~~~~~

She watched him closely as he returned each memory. She could scarcely believe that she had once thought this face to be ugly and cruel. Now, she saw the hooked nose as strong and aristocratic, the angle of the chin as fiercely independent, the creased brow as a sign of incredible intelligence and wit, the curtain of hair the defense for a surprisingly sensitive man against an unfair and unfeeling world.

And how could she ever have judged those eyes to be empty of all feeling, when they now revealed every vulnerability of the man behind them, this man who owned her heart and caressed her soul?

She watched him meet Lily again, become her friend, and lose her forever. She watched him throw himself on Dumbledore's mercy, his world shattered by his own foolhardy actions. She watched him meet Lily's son for the first time and struggle with his preconceptions about the boy he was charged to protect. She watched him deny his own unshakable courage. She watched him save Dumbledore's life but recognize that it could be only for a time. She watched him receive Dumbledore's final orders, realizing that Harry would have to die, despite all his protections, and that Albus was demanding his own murder at Snape's hand to carry out the grand plan for the salvation of the Light.

As the final vision of the silver doe returned to his mind, Severus sat back in his chair with a great exhalation. "He ordered me to do it," he murmured wonderingly. "It was a mercy killing. It was what he wanted."

"I know," she replied. "That old bastard! How could he demand that of you?"

Severus met her eyes. "It was brilliant, actually. It secured my place with Voldemort, simply by taking advantage of the inevitable."

"The fact that he was willing to die for the cause didn't make it right for him to maneuver other people into sacrificing their own lives!" Hermione said indignantly. "He manipulated Harry! And he didn't give you a choice! How were you supposed to live with that!"

Snape stared solemnly at the empty crystal flask. "I *wasn't* supposed to," he said quietly. "I was supposed to be dead by the end of the battle."

"I saw the formula you created for the antivenin," Hermione said, her voice calmer. "I gathered you were ready for all possibilities."

Snape smiled grimly. "I was simply glad of the Dark Lord's penchant for theatrics. It gave me... options."

Hermione threw him a speculative look. "The only thing in all this that was a real surprise for you was finding out what Dumbledore had ordered you to do, that murdering him was his idea."

Snape nodded. "I must confess I had not guessed that. And there were indeed no echoes to suggest it." He leaned his head back and let out a breath. "It does explain a great many things."

"But does it make it easier to live with?" Hermione asked hesitantly.

He contemplated her question. Finally, he replied, "I do not know how easy it *should* be to live with." He looked across at her, suddenly realizing that she was not asking merely for his peace of mind. "Hermione, forgive me," he said. "I meant that death in any form shouldn't be taken lightly. But when there is good that comes from it..."

He continued to simply look at her. At last, he answered, "Yes. I believe it does help to know why I did that one particular thing. It was truly the memory I had lost completely."

"I'm glad," she said. She chewed her lip thoughtfully. "But I don't understand why you wouldn't have remembered that, why there weren't any traces of it anywhere else in your memories."

"Ah, but you see, I was a spy," he said placidly.

"Of course you were. What does that have to do with anything?" she asked impatiently.

"The Dark Lord had to believe my reasons as well as my actions," he explained. "He had to think that I had killed Albus to carry out my Vow and to support his cause. He could not know that it was part of Dumbledore's plan, or I would have been exposed, and the plan would have been ruined."

"Yes, I quite see that. But you are an expert Occlumens. You could have hidden that from him."

"I would not have liked to bet my life on my skill. Voldemort had his own strengths." Snape shivered. "Now I know that it was the first memory I removed, that night, just before I went to see the Dark Lord. I never put it back. I saved it to give to Potter, but I never put it back in my mind. It would have been too dangerous."

Hermione stared at him. "But... then you have spent almost five years thinking you were a murderer," she whispered.

Snape looked at her bleakly. "As I said, I was supposed to be dead myself. It should not have been an issue."

Hermione flew around the table and grasped his face with both hands. "Severus, the war is over. I cannot begin to tell you how grateful I am for that. You deserve to live, and I don't mean just survive. You can stay here, of course; I meant what I said, that you have earned the right to do whatever you wish. But I think you should come back. Come back with me."

She leaned in and kissed him gently. His arms went around her, one hand in her hair, and he deepened the kiss, drinking in the scent and the taste of her and shutting out the world.

## All My Life's Bliss

*Chapter 20 of 21*

Returning home. Canon-compliant--despite JKR's best efforts.

*A/N: Everything you recognize and love is the creation of the fabulous JK Rowling (except the poetry, which is the work of Emily Brontë). I'm just here for fun.*

*All hail the most beta-to-end-all-betas, sshg316, who has the sharpest eye, the quickest wit, and the kindest heart I could ever wish for. I adore you, Shug!*

### CHAPTER NINETEEN

#### "All My Life's Bliss"

*No later light has lighten'd up my heaven,*

*No second morn has ever shone for me;*

*All my life's bliss from thy dear life was given....*

*- Emily Brontë, from "Remembrance"*

"Come back with me."

The words hung in the air.

"Come back," she had said.

"With me," she had said.

And in the end, he had.

She had thought it would be easy. She was wrong, of course. He had known it would be impossible. He was wrong, too.

The first task was simply to get off the island.

"We can use magic now," she pointed out.



"Can we?" he asked, giving her The Look.

"Why?" she responded, returning it with interest. "Have you forgotten how?"

"Really, Miss Granger," he drawled, "do apply those wits to something useful. Or are you particularly anxious to Oblivate a dozen or so Muggles?"

"Ah," she said, "I see your point. Well, then, we shall simply wait for the boat. What would you like to do until Tuesday?"

As it turned out, he had a few ideas.

"You could have been a little less obvious," she grumbled as she clambered on board *The Grace* the following Tuesday.

"Whatever do you mean, Dearest One?" he asked serenely.

"We nearly didn't make it, Oh Love of My Life," she replied through gritted teeth. "We would have had to wait another week. You did that on purpose."

He looked at her with wounded innocence. "I beg to differ, Object of All My Adoration, but that last bit was hardly my idea." He rubbed his thigh significantly.

Hermione turned to the crew of *The Grace* (both of them). "My brother," she said in a voice dripping with sweetness. "He's such a cut-up."

The ride back to Black's Harbor was a very slow affair.

Once they were free to use more efficient methods of transportation, the journey home became simpler. Until they reached England, that is.

"I assure you I am *not* dead," Snape repeated, showing uncharacteristic patience with the Ministry of International Transfer and Travel bureaucrat seated behind the desk.

"That's as may be, sir," she asserted primly, "but you're still on my no-Floo list."

"This man is a decorated war hero," Hermione asserted, stepping up to the desk. "Show her your Order of Merlin."

Snape did not look at her. "Can't," he replied tersely. "I threw it in the sea."

Hermione gaped at him.

He shrugged. "You said I could."

As Hermione was still listed among the living, the immovable bureaucrat finally allowed her to pass on her own. She burst into Harry's office, pushing past Sophie once more, who sputtered and tried in vain to stop her.

"Harry!" Hermione proclaimed. "I've found him! I was right! And I've brought him back!"

"Sir, she keeps doing that!" Sophie cried indignantly.

"It's fine, Sophie," Harry said. "She's always been that way." He glared affectionately at Hermione before folding her into a warm embrace.

"So, where is he now?" he asked.

She sighed dramatically. "Come with me," she answered. "I need a favor."

"Of course you do," he grinned. "Lead on."

Ultimately, Snape was forced to see that being a friend of The Famous Harry Potter could prove useful. He was damned if he was going to admit it, however. The final leg of the journey was marked by Harry's fevered attempts to apologize for all his past misinterpretations, Snape's pointed attempts to ignore him, and Hermione's conflicted attempts to suppress both hysterical laughter and a desire to throw something at them both.

At last, divested of their remorseful escort, the bedraggled travelers arrived on the doorstep of Hermione's flat in London. She stood on the mat, suddenly hesitant. She racked her brain, trying to recall the state of the place when she had left it and how it might look to his shrewdly appraising eyes. She turned to her companion--and saw her own panicked feelings mirrored on his face.

Instantly reassured, Hermione reached up to caress his cheek. "Severus," she said softly, "welcome home."

~~~~~

"No!" he insisted firmly. "They are merely inviting me to be polite, though why either of them should suddenly feel the need for a display of manners on my account is very much beyond me."

"Severus," she said patiently, "we are both going, and we will have a good time, and we will toast the bride *and* the groom, and you will dance, if only with me."

He sighed heavily, but it was a sigh of defeat.

As it turned out, the invitation had been issued at Ron's insistence. He grinned at Hermione from the dais as he saw them arrive, and his delight was even more evident as he claimed her for a dance later that afternoon.

"Told you," he said, looking smug.

She batted her eyelashes at him. "Whatever are you talking about, Ronald?" she asked and immediately began to interrogate him about his honeymoon plans.

Snape waited until she would be properly appreciative of rescue before claiming her for the last dances. Ron bowed stiffly to him and then looked in shock as Snape offered him his hand.

"Congratulations, Mr. Weasley," he said solemnly. "And I believe I owe you thanks as well."

"Umm," Ron sputtered, staring at the proffered hand and finally shaking it hastily. "Thanks for what?"

"For moving on," replied Snape, and he swept Hermione back onto the crowded dance floor.

She grinned up at him. "Bastard," she said affectionately.

"Always," he agreed. They continued to dance for a moment. Then he said, "I believe you told me that it was at a wedding that you received your first proposal of marriage."

Hermione nodded, smiling. "Dear Ron. He was very sweet. And very drunk, if I recall correctly."

Snape looked at her. "I am not drunk," he said.

"I didn't think you were," she said.

"So you will not be able to use that excuse," he said.

"What excuse?" she said.

"That your *final* proposal of marriage was from a drunken man at a wedding," he said.

"What?" she said.

"Hermione, will you marry me?" he said.

She gaped at him, then schooled her features into a bland smile. "Oh, I think I will," she said, and they danced away into the night and into their future.

~~~~~

"I don't know, Hermione," Ron sighed. "She just seems so far away. I mean, she's been like this before. Just after Hugo was born, she got all wrapped up in some project she was working on, and I barely saw her. I felt like a single parent."

Hermione smiled in sympathy and urged another biscuit on her friend. This was Ron. Food usually helped.

He took the biscuit but simply held it in his hand. "This time just feels different." He gazed into the fire. "I'm frightened."

She pulled her feet up under her and shivered herself. Usually this fire made her feel particularly warm. It was this hearth that had convinced her to make this her home. Severus' home. Their home together. It had been the fireplace that symbolized and framed her whole married life. Yet today she could find no more comfort from it than her friend could.

"These are strange times, Ron," she said at last.

He looked at her in surprise. "Please don't tell me there are problems here, too," he said with concern. "You and the greasy git seem so happy every time I look at you it almost makes me want to vomit!"

She glared affectionately at him. "So eloquently put," she drawled.

He grinned. "See, you do that better than he does these days!"

She shrugged. "What can I say? The man has a way with the language."

His face stilled. "Seriously, Hermione, what's wrong? Surely you don't think that he would--"

She shook her head. "I don't know what to think, Ron. He's been so odd lately."

"How can you tell?" he asked derisively.

She threw a pillow at him. "He's actually one of the most charming men I know," she replied haughtily. "Present company very much included."

"Who are we talking about?" he inquired in mock confusion.

"Well, really," she replied, "you don't expect him to show it around you, do you? He does have his reputation to protect."

"Yes," Ron agreed playfully. "Though I never did understand that these days. Has he gone back into the spy business?"

Hermione grew quiet. "I wonder," she murmured. She wrapped her arms around her shoulders, hugging herself tightly. "Oh, Ron," she sighed at last, "we're a fine pair, aren't we? Come on," she said briskly, rising from her chair, "you have errands to run. You have an anniversary present to buy, old son. No time for this moping around!"

She shoosed him up and out the door, parting with a fierce hug. "I love you, you know," she said.

"I love you, too," he replied and went off in search of the gift that might save his marriage.

~~~~~

That night, Hermione sat regarding her husband of nearly fourteen years across the dinner table as he read the owl post.

"You're staring at me," he said at last, not looking up. "Have you finally realized just how old and ugly I've grown?"

"You're not any good at it anymore, you know," she replied at last.

He froze.

"The spying," she clarified. "You've gotten rusty."

He relaxed almost imperceptibly, but Hermione noticed. "See?" she continued. "Mad-Eye would have your guts for garters these days."

He laid down the parchment he had been reading and met her eyes. "Would he indeed?" he asked quietly.

Her expression grew serious. "Severus, what's wrong?" she pleaded.

"If I am such an open book, you tell me," he replied.

"Dearest," she said gently, working to keep her voice even, "please tell me. Whatever it is."

He stared at her for several minutes. At last he spoke. "It is ironic that you should mention Moody," he said. "'Constant vigilance' indeed."

"Severus, you're frightening me," she whispered.

"Do you remember the conversation we had on the dock, all those years ago, the one where you promised to leave me there in peace?"

"Yes," she breathed. Her hands were shaking.

"You had it all figured out then, didn't you?" he asked coolly. "You knew just how things would go if you returned and told them that Dolohov had followed you and murdered me. You were extraordinarily clever."

She shook her head. "Not clever enough," she admitted, but her voice was barely audible. "I was never any good at espionage. Someone would have seen through my story. You would have been in danger all over again."

He nodded. "Yes. Espionage," he hissed. "It is always such a convoluted business."

She studied his face, terrified. "Severus, please, what is it? What's going on?"

"How did Dolohov find me?" he asked at last.

Hermione flinched as though he had struck her, but she refused to look away. "He followed me. He'd been following me for quite some time," she answered miserably.

He gazed at her. "And how did he find *you*?" he asked.

"I wasn't in hiding." She shrugged. "I was an easy mark. Severus, I'm so sorry!"

"Sorry? Sorry for what?" He actually sounded puzzled.

"For leading him to you!" she cried. "He'd never have found you on his own, and I brought him right to your door."

"Indeed," he agreed. "But why did he follow you at all? How did he know you were on the trail of a dead man?"

She gaped at him, thinking hard. "Wait," she said at last. "On the island..." She frowned, trying to remember his reactions to her silly little plan to keep his secret. Suddenly she gasped.

"Yes," he nodded.

"You said... you said there was a Death Eater still working at the Ministry! And Harry told me before I came that he thought someone else was interested in my investigation of you!"

He nodded again.

"Are you still in danger?" she cried, rising from her chair, relief and new anxiety washing over her at the same time.

Snape stood and moved swiftly to take her in his arms. "Shh, no, I don't believe so," he said reassuringly. "I'm sorry, Hermione, I should have told you, but I did not wish to reopen old wounds. It's been quite awhile since you've had a nightmare about all that."

"You've figured out who it is!" she said, as the blood rushed back into her face.

"I have."

Hermione sighed. "Who? Do I know this person?"

Snape shook his head. "Not well, at least. Potter had an assistant when he first became a Sub-Auror. A girl named Sophie Avery-Smyth."

"Avery?" Hermione asked, pulling her head back to give him a quizzical look. "Wasn't there a Death Eater by that name? Was she related?"

Snape shook his head. "The security investigation when she was hired said she was not. Investigators can be bribed, of course, and records altered." He drew her back to rest against his chest. "It is immaterial. She has done little damage. She was not an actual Death Eater herself, merely sympathetic to their cause--and to their money."

"How did you find out, after all these years?" Hermione asked, her voice muffled by his shirt.

He stroked her hair. "An accident, actually. I had been mildly curious all along, but there was little to connect her to anyone, with Dolohov dead and most of the surviving Death Eaters accounted for. I stumbled across... evidence recently. I have been pursuing it."

Hermione sighed and hugged him tighter. "I knew there was something," she breathed. "I was so afraid everything was starting all over again."

He tipped her chin up with one finger. "It is all ancient history, love. No one even remembers those days. You would do well not to think of the darkness anymore."

She smiled up at him. "But I can't forget it. I won't. Every memory, even the awful ones, lets me treasure all the good that came from this. And it protects against any of it ever happening again."

He gazed down at her face. "Then remember everything," he said after a moment, and he kissed the woman in his arms.

~~~~~

*A/N: Just one more bit to go, as I take on that dreaded Epilogue... and show how I think it ought to fit in with all of this!*

## Faithful, Indeed

*Chapter 21 of 21*

Epilogue? What Epilogue? Canon-compliant--despite JKR's best efforts. This is what the final chapter did not reveal in print.

*A/N: Well, here we are at the end of my romp within the world created by JK Rowling. Whatever you recognize, she owns it (except of course for Ms. Brontë's poetry). I make no money from this. My only profit has been the fun of trying to stay within canon.*

*My incredible beta, sshg316, has worked to keep me on track (she saved me from another big boo-boo in this chapter when I didn't go back and correct something from an earlier draft). Shug, it's been a wonderful ride, and I thank you for every comma, every question, every funny comment, every bit of hand-holding and encouragement. I*

*couldn't have done it without you!*

*Thanks also the admins at TPP—you've been thorough and supportive throughout, and I really appreciate all your help, as well as having a great place to post my little excursion into the Potterverse!*

## **EPILOGUE? WHAT EPILOGUE?**

### **“Faithful, Indeed”**

*Cold in the earth—and fifteen wild Decembers*

*From those brown hills have melted into spring:*

*Faithful, indeed, is the spirit that remembers*

*After such years of change and suffering!*

*- Emily Brontë, from “Remembrance”*

Autumn seemed to arrive suddenly that year. The group of adults was huddled together on the platform, stamping their feet against the cold. They watched silently as the Hogwarts Express bore their children away to another year of magical education.

“They’ll both be back for Christmas break sooner than you know,” Ginny said softly, patting her husband’s arm. “And Albus will be fine, whatever House he’s sorted into.”

“Yes, he will,” echoed Hermione from the other side. She turned to the redhead on her left. “Rose will keep her eye on him, won’t she, Ron?”

Ron grinned at her. “She’s as smart as her mother and bossier than her godmother.”

“Glad to hear I’ve been a healthy influence,” Hermione grinned back.

“Harry, can I give you a lift?” Ron asked, dangling his car keys in what he hoped was a tempting manner.

Harry shuddered. “Um, thanks, Ron, but we’ve got errands to run. We’ll see you Saturday.”

“Sorry Romy couldn’t make it today,” Ginny said sympathetically. “I think it might’ve helped her to be here.”

“Yeah,” Ron replied, a bit uncomfortably. “Well, you know how she is about goodbyes.”

“Lily!” Ginny called, suddenly distracted. “Get back from the edge!” She hurried after her daughter, and with a wave and a laugh, Harry followed her.

Hermione turned to Ron. “Everything okay?” she asked lightly.

Ron shrugged. “You know how it is. You’ve been married almost as long as I have. Every day can’t be a honeymoon.”

She squeezed his arm. “Could be worse,” she teased him. “I could’ve actually said yes one of those times.”

He laughed. “I was a bit of prat, wasn’t I?” he admitted.

She slipped her arm around his shoulder. “You? Are you kidding?” She giggled. “And half the world thinks we actually did marry each other.”

“Stop it,” he gasped, pretending to be shocked. “Who’d think a thing like that?”

“Didn’t you see the way Draco looked at us today? That speculative little pursing of the lips?”

“You always did pay way too much attention to those Slytherins.”

She punched his arm affectionately. “You are a git.”

He chortled. “Well, you married one, so you would know!”

Collecting Hugo from the news vendor’s stall, the two old friends headed for Ron’s car.

As they approached the squat little vehicle, an owl suddenly swooped down and landed rather ungracefully on its hood.

“Minx?” Ron asked a little uncertainly, recognizing his wife’s familiar.

The bird thrust her leg at him haughtily, and he untied the parchment fastened there. Hermione fished in her pocket for a treat, patting the owl awkwardly with her other hand while Ron unrolled the note.

She watched him carefully as he read it. A shy smile spread slowly over his face, and he exhaled a soft whistle. He looked up at her, meeting her eyes.

“Everything okay?” she asked again.

“Let’s just say…” he began, and then he shrugged. “Let’s just say, there’s hope.”

She grinned encouragingly. “Do you want me to take Hugo home for you?” she asked.

Ron glanced down at the note. “Umm, would you?” he answered quietly.

She gave him a brief, tight hug. “Go to her, Ron. Talk. You’ll find the words.” She released him and pushed him toward the car. “But for Merlin’s sake, remember to drive carefully!” she admonished. She turned briskly to Hugo. “Now, come with Auntie Hermy, Hugo, your dad has an appointment to keep.”

Hugo took her hand and pulled her back toward the stalls with hardly a glance at his father. “They’ve got a new ‘Muggleman’!” he proclaimed loudly, and Hermione rolled her eyes at Ron as the boy dragged her away.

Comic book now in hand, Hugo continued to steer Hermione through the station, out into the swirl of Muggles blissfully going about their magic-free business. She saw him before he spotted her, a dark figure, dressed mostly in black, leaning against the bricks.

She studied her husband as she approached him. She very much approved of what she saw, especially these days. He was tall and lean but solidly so, with just the faintest brush of silver beginning to suggest itself in his neatly trimmed jet black hair. He no longer looked haunted or angry with the world or as though he were suffering from perpetual indigestion. Marriage obviously agreed with the man.

As he turned his head and spied her, a rare but genuine smile lit up his angular face, softening its lines and turning her weak in the knees. She took a few more steps and was in his arms, ignoring the curious stares and Hugo's impatient tug on her sleeve. She kissed him, and he kissed her back.

He broke the kiss to smile down at her. "You are a preposterous woman," he said.

She looked up into his dark eyes. "Never forget that," she replied. She released one hand and reached down for Hugo's hand. "Come along, my dear," she told him breezily. "We have to take this man home."

Hermione leaned her head against her husband's arm. He stroked a wisp of hair away from her cheek, caressing her gently. Arms linked and godson in tow, they headed out into the London crowd. Dark times were past, at least for now. All was well.

~~~~~fin~~~~~

A/N: We all just assumed JKR married Ron and Hermione off to each other. But she never actually says it, if you read that Epilogue. So, Severus/Hermione fans, just as JKR left us enough wiggle room to resurrect him, she also gave us enough dock space to keep this 'ship afloat. This is my version of their story as I think it should have happened. The first and last lines of the Epilogue, the characters, and the world they inhabit are all JKR's. Everything else is wishful thinking.

That's my story, and I'm sticking to it!