

Mercy of the Elements

by shefa

For there is nothing lost that is not found.

Rain of Ice

Chapter 1 of 1

For there is nothing lost that is not found.

And though the static walls surround me

You were out there and you found me.

--Dar Williams

Are You Out There?

She nearly didn't find him, crouched as he was beneath low hanging branches, moonlight's long shadows cloaking his dark-clad form. He had always been drawn to the trees; especially in the wintertime when icicles clutched bare branches with their faux commitment and frozen bonds.

He held one now. A fallen shard of ice...sharp and heavy in his hands.

"Cold?" She settled herself alongside him on the frozen ground.

"Always," he murmured, long fingers stroking the slick crystal.

"Tell that to the ice." She glanced at the rapidly melting shard.

He huffed softly, his breath a cloud of life in the cold air between them.

"You didn't have to go."

"I did."

"Not on my account, you didn't." She turned her body towards him despite his refusal to look at her. "I was rather appreciating having you near."

He snorted and shook his head. "That would have been temporary, I assure you," he said softly.

"How can you say that?" She leaned closer to him, but drew back at his flinch. "Severus?"

He gripped the melting sliver of ice, water flowing between his fingers and soaking the edge of his sleeve.

"They never last," he murmured, eyeing the shrinking icicle in his hands. "No matter how beautiful..." He pulled himself up short. "No matter how substantial they appear,

expose them to just a bit of sunlight or the warm touch of bare skin, and..." He lifted his soaked hands and grunted in annoyance.

She reached for him then, ignoring the involuntary shudder that wracked him as her hand snaked through his hair. He hadn't been jumpy like this in her rooms earlier, but that was before she'd lowered her guard and let one affectionate word too many slip. *It was his own fault*, she thought. He was the one who'd stopped kissing her...her lips had been sufficiently occupied right up until the moment he pulled back, only to feel him slip into her mind.

It was there, all of it, plain as day for him to see. But when she opened her arms to him again, heartfelt words falling from her tongue like drops of water, he backed away as if scorched.

"I don't think they're meant to last, Severus." She ran her fingers along the line of his jaw. "They're moments in time, dramatic and beautiful, but not made to last forever."

He stiffened, but she continued to stroke his skin, fingertips dancing over his fine cheekbones and the unexpected fullness of his lips.

"As I said," he growled. "Temporary, illusory. In short, a waste of time."

"Maybe. If we were icicles, I suppose."

She felt the harsh intake of breath more than heard it, felt his lips thin and tighten under her fingers as if to thwart sentiments that might escape without his bidding.

"Who's to say that I'm not?" His words sliced the silence and shattered on the ground between them. His bleak certainty, cloaking them like a cold shroud.

"I say." Her voice was fierce, and she brought her hand to the nape of his neck. It anchored her as she shifted her body closer, her warmth seeping into him. Slow heartbeats passed as he leaned into her touch, and she felt the energy between them rise again like a flash of Floo fire. Hermione felt so fragile, poised on the cusp of a current that could pick her up and carry her swiftly along...choosing to trust in the safety of the path and its destination. But just when she thought he might cover her body with his, he turned away. "Severus?"

He laughed, a harsh, dismissive slap of sound. "I wouldn't have thought you so susceptible to illusion, Granger." His words struck their mark and, for a moment, she couldn't breathe. But then her grip tightened in his hair, and she sought his eyes in the shadows.

"Don't you dare, you insufferable man," she hissed. "Howdare you *Granger* me now, after..."

"After what, Granger?" he snapped. "After a few kisses and a moderately satisfying grope on the couch?" She narrowed her eyes, but he couldn't see in the darkness. "Consider yourself fortunate that I extracted myself...I do tend to discourage the construction of castles in the air. Or ice castles in the trees, as the case may be."

"Ah, that must be why, after hours of searching, I find you here...crouched on the edge of the Forbidden Forest under a canopy of icicles." She sniffed at his silence. "So, let me see if I've understood properly, Severus. You would have me believe that you are simply incapable of more than a casual dalliance, and anything more heated will, what...*melt* you?" she mocked.

"Always so literal," he sneered. "I am a man, Granger. I assure you that I am more than capable of sustaining a *heated* encounter." His voice flowed over her like warm molasses, but she shivered. "However, any woman foolish enough to believe me loving or *tender* will be sorely disappointed."

The edge of her laugh cut through the air, no less harsh than his had been. "You're afraid."

"Pardon?"

"What you just said. You're afraid that I'll be disappointed...that you can't give me what I want."

"I've survived two wars, Granger. I am not easily *frightened*."

"No, not by giant snakes and evil wizards, I'll grant you that," she snorted. "And yet a witch whose essays you routinely slashed to bits with red ink not ten years ago managed to send you flying..."

"I did not *fly* anywhere, Granger," he snarled, and even in the moonlight, she could see a tinge of red rise to stain his skin.

"How *literal*, Snape," she spat. "I trusted you...your sincerity, and you pushed me away and ran like a..."

"Ample evidence of your error in judgment," he interrupted. He let his eyes roam over her figure, even bundled and hidden as it was in the darkness. *I'm* a man, Granger, despite the rabid speculation of the first-years."

Her heart pounded with the hot rush of anger, the knot in her gut twisting with her rising fear.

His cold words aside, theirs had been no *casual* liaison.

It had sprung, she thought, *from the unexpected gift of shared humour and overlapping libraries; from surprising commonalities stumbled upon without intent or agenda.*

Blossoming over months of evenings shared in silent company, the casual brush of fingertips tacit experiments in the art of human chemistry. And one night, as evening yielded to the early hours of morning, the shadows of the staff room gave cover to the cautious reach of his hand for hers and to the sure grip of fingers intertwining as murmured remembrances and unspoken hopes swirled in the air between them.

Finally, tonight, when at last he'd come near, showing her with trembling hands and the heat of his mouth on hers the raw intensity of what lay beyond his barriers, the crystalline sound of his hope and longing, too long denied, swept her up, its cadences as familiar to her as her own.

No, this was no casual liaison. It had dug its roots firmly into the bedrock of Hermione's heart, wrapping itself around what must be, if the pain she was feeling now was any indication, her soul.

A shaft of moonlight struck an ice crystal, its iridescence evoking a remembered moment, long ago tucked away. St Mungo's. Walking the hallways, visiting the wounded, trying to forget the lost. A doorway. His doorway. Black hair like ink against the stark white of the bedding.

Even weeks after being immured in hospital, the faint stain of blood seeped through the gauze hiding the gash in his neck, an ever-present reminder of secrets that lurk beneath the surface. She'd hovered, guilt and regret keeping her beyond the threshold to his room, frozen with sadness and a hot flush of admiration; just watching. Thinking.

"I was wrong." Her heartbeat sped up as a notion she'd only just realised and never intended to say aloud hung in the air.

"Indeed." He seemed to curl further in on himself.

"I used to watch you from the hallway. I don't imagine you knew."

He looked up sharply. "Which hallway?"

"At St Mungo's, when you were recovering." She addressed the sharp ice crystals hanging from the branches around them. "I remember feeling...then...that I was so grateful... seeing you there, knowing the truth, I was grateful that you had survived, that you would have a chance to live." The splash of wetness on her hand came as a distant surprise, and she ignored it. "I can still remember how it felt when the Healers said that you would be all right, and that eventually, all that would be left would be the scar to remind you..." She cleared her throat.

"A lovely sentiment, Granger, but..."

"I was wrong," she continued as if he hadn't spoken. "You didn't live."

"I didn't... what?" The ice on the ground cracked as she rose to her feet and almost masked how his voice broke.

"Maybe you've been playing shadow games for so long that you've forgotten..." Wordless magic brought a sharp dagger of ice silently to her hands. "You spent a lifetime mourning for a lost love, and committed to a role that was necessary...yes, I know that it was...but still, who you were, the relationships you formed, they were all light and shadow, as impermanent as ice..."

She held her hands in front of her, the crystal wand of ice cradled like a found object...precious, dangerous. And then, she bent her head to the frozen wand, and blew...misty breath swirling around the translucent shard. With a sound like breaking glass, the icicles that hung like diamonds on the trees around them shattered, fragments hanging in the air for an endless moment until another wave of magic sent the droplets raining down on them like warm tears.

She stood in the rain of melted ice; her own tears indistinguishable from the water falling through the cold winter air. The white trails of moonlight and the astonished expression on her companion's face she ignored. In this moment, she knew only the agony of loss and the empty echo of forsaken hope.

"Hermione." His voice was rough and she shook her head as if the sound was nothing but the winter wind.

"I hope that one day you can find peace, Severus." With that, she was gone.

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An empty castle is a blessing, Hermione thought. Bereft of children, the soothing resonance of its stones...timeless and certain of their place and purpose...spoke to her as she wandered silent hallways during the long afternoons when she couldn't bear to be alone in her chambers. Most years, there was a handful of students who remained at the school over the winter hols, but this year's crop had dispersed to points distant, and even the stairways grew restless in the quiet.

She'd managed to avoid seeing more than a glimpse of Snape's dark hair since the night she left him standing in the forest. But she could feel his presence around the corners, as if she'd become magnetised to even the invisible pull of eyes, posture or tilt of head. No matter the hours spent attempting to reconcile memories of the wizard who had trembled in her arms with the one who had mocked her in the forest, she still ended each night curled up before the hearth, pretending that her eyes were red from the smoky embers.

Dozing before the dying fire, the rap at her door startled her. She'd blocked her Floo after the previous night's disembodied lecture from Ron...something about why she should join in on some holiday party or another. Even if he had made the effort to come all the way out to Hogwarts in another effort to retrieve her, he was going to get hexed for his rudeness. It occurred to her that she might even enjoy it.

She hesitated by the heavy wooden door and wrapped her fuzzy robe more tightly around her. Ron may have already seen her at her most weary and frazzled, but that was in wartime, and she felt vulnerable enough already.

The tapping began again.

She looked to the small portrait of a middle-aged witch, Belinda, who watched her door, unsurprised to see her sipping cocktails...not unusual this time of year...with a visitor.

"Hello, Miss Hermione," the visiting witch chirped. They both looked well into their cups. "Seems you have a rather persistent guest."

"Mary!" exclaimed Belinda. "Shh!"

"Well, it's true, isn't it?" the tipsy witch continued. "He's been lurking outside that door every night this week...not even knocking 'til now. Said that he would stay out there all night if that's what it took, didn't he?"

Who? Hermione cracked the door open and looked...

Damn.

"Go away."

He pressed his hand against the door before she could close it completely.

"Please, Hermione. May I come in? I just want to talk with you."

He looks, she thought, *as weary as I feel*.

"There's nothing to discuss. You made your point*crystal* clear."

"No, I don't believe I did, after all." The misery in his tone startled her. She paused, taking in his dishevelled appearance, the dark circles under his eyes emphasizing the sickly cast to his skin. Silently, she stepped back from the door, leaving a whisper of space for him to slip through.

He hovered for a moment, as if unsure whether he'd been given leave to enter the chamber properly. Hermione huffed and turned her back to him, walking back to the hearth and settling herself on the cushy chair she favoured. Wrapping her fuzzy blanket around herself, feet tucked underneath, aware that all that peeked out from the expanse of fabric and cushion must be her pale face punctuated by red-rimmed eyes and a halo of hair that burst from her as crying out for help.

The fire was hypnotic, and Hermione watched it, unwilling to look at *him* standing there, his uncertainty at once painful and irritating.

"I've been at your door every night this week...I imagine the ghosts are having a time of it, whispering about me."

"And the portraits," she interjected. "Mustn't forget the portraits."

"Ah, yes." He cleared his throat. "They will gossip."

"Indeed." She met his eyes then, daring him silently to voice what could be so compelling that it would bring the Headmaster to lurk outside his Deputy's door night after night.

"I didn't know that it would hurt... like this," he murmured.

"For whom, Severus?" He flinched as the blow found its mark.

"I thought that you..." He hesitated and she saw a shadow darken his expression. "You are resilient, and beautiful... you would...I told myself...be fine." He shook his head. "But for myself, I hadn't anticipated that it would feel like..." He stumbled.

"Like your guts had been ripped out by a rabid Hippogriff?"

He snorted. "Quite."

"How did you think it would feel, Severus? After all, you made it perfectly clear that our...relationship...was meaningless to you."

"If I thought of it at all, I imagined that it would feel precisely the same as every other time I have been alone...which has been over the majority of my adult life." This time, Hermione winced, but now he was gazing at the fire and didn't notice. "I didn't expect to feel so...lost."

There was nothing she could say to that. The hollow ache inside her twisted with recognition.

"It would appear," he continued in a soft voice, "that everything we have been taught about incantations and the power of appropriate intent while performing magic does not apply when it comes to..." He paused, swallowing thickly before at last turning to face her. "It would appear that simply pronouncing our... association... meaningless does not magically make it so."

"Ah," she whispered. "No, I don't imagine it would."

"I didn't know what finding you meant until I sent you away." He looked at her anxiously and she nodded. "For as long as I can remember, I've lived each moment preparing for the next one...bracing myself for the next circle of hell." He was pacing in front of the hearth now, and Hermione remembered again how he'd looked, buried in the white hospital bedding; how her stomach had lurched at the sharp contrast between the helpless figure in the bed and the wizard who stalked the halls of Hogwarts in her dreams.

"The war ended ten years ago, Severus."

"I am aware of that!" He turned and sat abruptly in the chair opposite Hermione. He braced his elbows on his knees as he sat and laid his head in the cradle of his hands. "Sometimes." Hair spilled over his face like a waterfall of black ice, his perpetual shield.

"And now?"

"That's just it," he said as he lifted his gaze to her. "I don't know anymore. I kept on as if nothing could ever really touch me." Hermione's eyes filled with tears and she pulled the blanket more firmly around herself. "But I was wrong." His voice was so low that at first, she thought she'd misheard him.

"You were wrong about what?"

Instead of answering, he rose from the chair and knelt alongside hers. Heart in her throat, Hermione froze as he took one of her hands in his. Now that he was so close, she could hear the hitch in his breathing and feel that the hands grasping hers were trembling.

"I didn't know you'd *found* me," he began, words tumbling over each other. "You found me...and*touched* me..." The roughness of his voice made her shiver. "I'd forgotten how that feels. If...if I ever really knew." He looked into her eyes, and she burst into tears at his unexpected openness, at his astonishment, his hope, the lingering fear. Distantly, she felt him tug on her hand and she slipped from the chair onto his lap. His arms were sure as they held her and they curled around each other, lost in their thoughts. His fingers found a loose curl, tracing its meandering pattern down her back. Slowly, her breathing calmed as she lay against his chest, and the steady thump of his heart soothed her.

"Hermione," he rasped. Her heart began to race, and she detangled herself enough to look at him again. "I'm lost without you." His eyes raked her face; she could feel the coiled tension in his body as he held her, waiting.

"You're not lost, Severus," she whispered. "I'm right here."

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