

Missing You

by neelix

Hermione laments her loss.

One

Chapter 1 of 7

Hermione laments her loss.

A/N: This was a one shot that escaped... let me know your thoughts?

The professor pushed open the chamber door and walked purposefully into the lab, gazing around slowly as pale, slim fingers caressed the workbench. It was spotless, scrubbed to within an inch of its existence, and only thin and intricately cut marks remained on the smooth surface. They seemed like scars, and the professor smirked ruefully at the irony.

Turning to look at the shelves, the same fingers trailed over stirring rods, potions ingredients in their neatly labelled bottles and phials, lingering gently on the edge of an old and well-used – well-loved – cauldron. Inhaling deeply, familiar scents assailed nostrils. Woody and exotic spices, and flower essences, sweet and intoxicating in their strength. And something else, like carbolic soap, giving the impression of scrupulous hygiene with no frills attached.

The door in the corner of the lab enticed the professor to walk further into the bowels of the dungeon. The door was swiftly opened and with a wand-flick, a warming fire was lit in the living area. A thin layer of dust coated the once plush green velvet couch, but the professor ignored it and sat down opposite the flames that were casting a warm, orange glow around the room. It was the only source of light; the only one she needed.

Hermione stared at the flames without seeing them. It was always the same when she visited. She wasn't really here, not mentally anyway. As usual, her brain was flickering memories over and over, and her body relived the sense-memories as physical torture.

The Shrieking Shack.

The copious amount of blood on the floor. Her stomach in knots as life had become death in seconds, and eyes that had burned with black fire had turned dull and empty. Running... Now, she was running, not away but back, searching, hoping. He was gone, but his blood remained.

Then, the memories went back to before the final battle, to a moment snatched, brief and urgent. Two lost souls, one dark night. She hadn't known he also sought solace in the view from the Arithmancy Tower. She wouldn't have noticed him had she not walked straight into him as he stood by the window. Most nights, she had the view to herself, with only the reflection of the moon on the Great Lake for company.

There had been few words, but those said had been desperate and honest, cutting and passionate. It had sprung from nothing and become something, and Hermione still clung to it like ivy sucking life from a silver birch tree until there was nothing left. And now, she was withering.

Three years after the final battle, three years of searching and waiting and standing or sitting outside his dark house in Spinners End, staring at the windows in the hope of seeing a curtain twitch or a shadow pass by, Hermione had given up. She had only agreed to the teaching post in the hope that he might return one day.

The warmth of the fire was seeping into Hermione's thin frame. She slipped off her shoes and curled her feet beneath her. Resting her head on the arm of the sofa, she closed her eyes and waited again, for sleep this time.

'I miss you,' she murmured to no one.

Severus stepped out from the dark alcove silently.

'I miss you too,' he whispered.

Hermione was asleep and didn't hear him. He sat slowly in the wing chair beside the fire, waiting for her to wake.

Two

Chapter 2 of 7

Hermione laments her loss.

Hermione's heart was beating a tattoo in her chest and her breathing was rapid and anxious. Beneath her eyelids, rapid eye movement was taking place as her dream reached a crescendo. She finally escaped its hold with a sudden gasp and a strangled, 'No!' She half-sat with a jolt, eyes wide as she stared at some unseen point in front of her. Shuddering, her hand fluttered to her chest, and she held it to her breast as she calmed herself, eyes closing as she realized it was just a dream.

'Just a dream,' she admonished herself quietly.

Severus sat statue-like, not wanting to startle her further with his presence. His instinct had been to wake her from her nightmare the moment it had started, but she was talking in her sleep, and her words had enthralled him. He had listened, feeling like a voyeur, and his heart had pummelled for the luxury of doing nothing. He had filled her dream state, and the sound of his name on her breathless tongue had thrust the enforced lack of her in his life into sharp focus.

Hermione's awareness came slowly back to the room. The fire was still burning brightly, and she assumed she must have slept for only a short time. She pulled herself straighter on the couch and allowed her legs to dangle over the edge, pushing herself forward to slip her shoes onto her feet. As her gaze drifted downwards, she noticed his boots. She shook her head and laughed at herself. She believed she was indeed going mad; her desperate need for him was now creating mirages for her delight.

Severus shifted slowly in his chair, moving himself forwards and twisting his body to face her. His eyes followed her frame upwards, from her thin calves to her body. Voluminous robes gathered around her where she sat, swamping her like a child who had borrowed her father's old shirt. Her hands were wrapped around themselves, and her shoulders had tensed. Her slim throat flashed tantalisingly at him through straggly curls, and a memory of his tongue on her flesh made his mouth fall open slightly. A breath of air rushed past his teeth. Her face was thin and pale, and her dark eyes were wide and swimming glassy with tears.

She stared at him, uncomprehending. He looked just as she remembered him. She had imagined something different – that there would have been some small change that only she would notice. She could feel his breath as he leant forward slightly in the chair, and as the reality of his existence finally filtered through her confusion, a low moan escaped her and she started to shake uncontrollably. Her hands trembled, outstretched to him, and a desperate wail sprung from her mouth as she began to sob hysterically. She felt his arms encircling her as he fell to his knees before her, and as he pulled her tightly to him her hands clutched at his robes. Even the fabric felt the same, thick and rough beneath her fingertips. She couldn't breathe, and her stomach convulsed tightly as her tears wrenched themselves from her throat.

Severus closed his eyes tightly to stop his own tears. She was shaking against him, and as he held her close, he was shocked to feel her thin frame. So thin that he was scared he might break her if he squeezed too much. His hands drifted to her hair, and he stroked her bedraggled locks gently, soothing her as he kissed her temple softly. 'Shh,' he whispered, forcing back the lump that had formed in his throat. He felt her still in his arms and let out a long breath.

Severus relaxed his hold and pulled back slightly. Hermione raised her eyes to his face in panic, tightening her hold on the front of his robes.

'I'm here, Hermione,' he said softly.

Hermione looked up at him and loosened her grip to move her hands to his face. Soft fingers caressed his stubby cheeks and traced a path to his hair. With childlike wonder, her fingers slipped through his dark lengths and then back to his face again. She traced the length of his nose with one finger and then let the finger fall onto his thin lips, tracing their shape slowly. His mouth was warm, just as she remembered it. Without warning, his tongue appeared and licked her fingertip, and his mouth quirked into a soft smile.

Hermione started to giggle for the first time in three years.

Three

Chapter 3 of 7

A glimmer of hope.

Severus sat at the small kitchen table and watched Hermione as she ate every mouthful of food on her plate. They were sitting awkwardly, as she had insisted on holding his hand across the table, but he didn't care. His need for some form of bodily contact was almost as great as hers. With a contented sigh, Hermione put her fork down and licked her top lip with the tip of her tongue.

'You make lovely pasta,' she said quietly, smiling shyly at him.

Severus flashed a quick smile at her and then resumed his exploration of her face. He was relieved to see some of the colour returning to her cheeks, but the dark shadows below her eyes remained. Guilt slowly crept through him as he realised his absence had been partly to blame for her unkempt appearance, and he marvelled that she had cared enough about him to stop caring about herself.

Hermione clutched at Severus's hand and her fingers played with his gently. Slowly, she ran an index finger along his, slipping it downwards to draw small circles on his palm and then back again, as if reassuring herself that he did exist. It wasn't just her demanding imagination.

'Are you going away again?' she asked quietly. Deep down, she didn't want to know if he was, but she knew Severus wouldn't lie to her. Better to know now before she grasped too tightly to this glimmer of hope.

Severus sighed a little and squeezed her hand before letting it fall gently to the tabletop as he pulled away. He said nothing, but he stood and lifted her plate, laying it in the sink with a slight clunk. Turning, he held out his hand to Hermione, whose eyes had followed him desperately as her mind had played out a mantra, "Please say 'no'... Please say 'no'...PLEASE...don't go."

Since the night in the Astronomy Tower, Severus had been the foundation stone to Hermione's world. Her reality had shifted and had teetered on a precipice, the way it does when love is young and unsteady on its feet. Other than a few snatched glimpses of him afterwards, there had been neither further conversation nor acknowledgement of the events of that night, save for one heated glance and a short caress of fingertips in Potions class as Hermione had handed in her assignment. It had been enough for her. He had felt the same. And she had known it; she had felt it rushing through her veins. They had connected on some earth shattering level, and life was never the same again. Without a thought, Hermione took his outstretched hand, and her body thrummed to the touch of her skin on his.

He led her into the garden, where the grass was neatly trimmed and blousy, windblown yellow roses edged the path. The heat of the sun on the blooms caused their perfume to warm the air, and as they walked slowly past, Hermione inhaled deeply. Delicious.

They sat beneath an arbour trained with yet more roses of the palest pink and trailing fronds of passionflowers that hung like a curtain over the entrance. The heat was permeating through Hermione's robes to the point of being uncomfortably sticky, so she removed her outer layers, letting them fall to her feet and leaving her in naught but a thin slip covering her underwear.

Severus waved Hermione to sit in the chair that caught the most of the sun, raising his eyebrow slightly at her attire. Ruefully he realised that she had the right idea. Hogwarts robes were not intended for anything but inclement Scottish weather. He unbuttoned his jacket and removed it, laying it on the back of his own chair before pulling it beside Hermione's and sitting down next to her. He took her hand in his, and they sat, looking at the garden and listening to the bees as they buzzed about the passionflowers.

After a long time, when Hermione had relaxed in the warmth of the sun and tipped her head back to feel the rays on her face, and Severus had watched her and stroked her pale cheek with his finger gently, he spoke.

'I am leaving,' he said.

Hermione felt her heart pound in her chest as her world tipped on its axis yet again. A flicker of ire started somewhere in her stomach, yet she refused to cry angry tears.

'You returned to taunt me,' she stated, irritation in her voice.

Severus sighed again and let his eyes wander around his precious garden. His eyes lingered on the Acer. He had planted it after suffering his first Cruciatus. The spiky red leaves had spoken to him on some subconscious level, just like most of his plants. The yellow roses he had planted after Lily married James. The passionflower he had planted for Hermione. His garden was a life map, and he felt sad to leave it. The house was nothing to him, but this was his own little Eden, his escape from the war and a world that didn't understand him. And so he had brought her here, because she had understood him for one incredible night. He wanted her to see his soul.

'I returned to get you,' he responded.

Thanks to kizzy7 for her beta skills and to everyone who has reviewed. You are so generous.

Four

Chapter 4 of 7

A remembering.

A/N: Smut Alert!

Hermione felt the lump form in her throat before she had the chance to speak, and something between a sob and a laugh escaped her before she was able to stop it. Tears spilled down her face, and she took Severus's hand in hers, entwining their fingers fiercely.

Severus could feel her trembling beside him, but he didn't know if it was from joy or fear. His life had lurched from one disappointment to another, most of them not of his own making. Like a puppet, he had been manipulated, pushed and pulled physically, emotionally, morally, and ethically, always against his own grain. He had known this was a leap of faith, and he still couldn't look at Hermione. He was automatically programmed to wait for another tug on his strings. And tug she did.

'Okay,' said softly, turning herself to face him. A thin, watery smile trembled around her lips, and when their eyes met, Hermione's grin spread fully into one of pure joy. Severus felt his stomach drop away from him. He couldn't recall anyone ever smiling at him with such happiness.

'You don't know where I'm going,' he said wryly, unable to stop his lips twitching as he tried to hold back his laughter.

Hermione shifted from her seat and slid herself onto his lap, wrapped her arms around his neck and snuggled her nose against his throat. Inhaling deeply, his maleness sent a shiver directly to her vagina, and she squirmed slightly to alleviate the tension. She pressed her moist, warm lips to his skin, and a moan reverberated through Severus's chest, vibrating directly against Hermione's breasts. Her nipples started to tingle, and with a gasp she pushed herself more firmly against his shirt as she proceeded to lick his flesh, moving along his throat to his collar. Her nimble fingers unfastened his buttons until his neat patch of dark chest hair and hard, pink nipples were exposed to the elements. With a gasp of pleasure and a whimper of urgency, Hermione moved her face to his torso and let her tongue remember the taste of him as

her hips started to wriggle against his evident erection.

Severus tipped his head back and closed his eyes as his hands buried themselves in her curls. So many times he had dreamt of this and passed it off as foolish fantasy. Her tongue was running its soft pink wetness against his nipple, and his hands drifted down, caressing the smooth satin of her slip until he found the hemline. Grasping the fabric, he pulled it up her body until he encountered the barrier of her breasts. Eagerly, Hermione sat up, and their hands met as they pulled the slip over her bra and then her head, now a mass of tousled curls. They let it fall to the ground unnoticed. Severus cupped her face with his hands, and their lips collided, mouths open and gasping. Severus leaned forward to facilitate Hermione's desperate need to remove his shirt, but between them, they only succeeded to pull it half-way down his arms, effectively trapping him. With exasperation, they stared at each other, and then with a shared thought, they both made a dive for Severus's fly. Coherent thought was leaving him abruptly, but with his last thread of consciousness Severus realised that Hermione's fingers were smaller and more adept for the task in such a small space.

Pulling his hands away, he contented himself with stroking the flesh of her slim thighs and wishing he wasn't so constrained. His eyes focussed on the cotton of her white knickers, her damp crotch bared to him as she straddled him, but no matter what his intent, his shirt held him firmly fixed.

With a satisfied sigh, Hermione hooked her finger under the buttons of Severus's fly and pinged them open quickly. Her eyes met his, and smoky desire clouded her gaze as she pulled the tails of his shirt forcefully from his trousers. Severus shrugged the shirt from his arms and took full advantage of his freedom by running a hand along Hermione's inner thigh. Catching the back of her head with his other hand, he kissed her gently, exploring her mouth with his tongue as his index finger encountered knicker-elastic and soft but deliciously wet cotton. With a soft sigh, Severus pulled his head away, teasing Hermione through her knickers as he gazed at her face.

'Hermione,' he whispered softly.

Hermione shifted forward slightly, curled her hand inside his trousers and released his penis gently. Her hand caressed him tenderly, and she dropped her eyes to look at him. She had never seen him in the daylight.

The tip of his penis was poking through his foreskin, and moisture glistened there. Hermione pulled her hand up his length and let her thumb skim over the top, gently rubbing the wetness across and over his glans. Severus gasped and twitched in her hand as he watched her.

Blushing, Hermione raised her gaze to his and smiled a little. Moving her hands to waistband of his trousers, Hermione leaned forward, pushing her breasts into his face. Shuddering as Severus took the hint and sucked at her caramel nipples eagerly through the fabric of her bra, Hermione laughed lightly.

'Up,' she instructed him.

Awkwardly, and because he didn't want to stop sucking at her breasts, Severus raised his buttocks to let Hermione push his trousers lower. His cock brushed against the softness of her crotch as they shifted, and they moaned in harmony, pushing their bodies even closer. Hermione dipped her face to his, and they kissed with abandon, tongues deeply thrusting. Hermione cupped her hand around Severus's testicles and up the length of his cock, wrapping her fingers firmly around his girth before moving the soft skin up and down, up and down. Severus growled and slipped his fingers beneath her kickers, slipping two long digits through her sopping folds and sliding them wetly over the engorged nub of her clitoris.

'Oh!' Hermione gasped, unable to continue her worship of his mouth with her own as he pleased her with his hand. Tipping her head back, Hermione increased her pace as she masturbated Severus to grunting pitch. With a need Hermione had never felt before, she shifted herself forward and rubbed the head of Severus's cock between her labia. His fingers didn't cease thrumming her clit, but Hermione removed her fingers from his length as she shifted and slid his penis inside her.

'Gods!' Hermione cried out, her eyes closed as she concentrated on the feelings of intense arousal between her legs.

'Yes,' Severus growled, tipping himself back slightly. His cock went even deeper, and they both shouted out their desire as Hermione started to ride him firmly. Severus felt his balls tightening, and he increased the pressure of his fingertips on her clit as she moved back and forth. A wet, squelching sound was coming from between them, and suddenly, Hermione felt Severus go even harder as she gripped him inside of her.

'Oh God!' she shouted, her thighs trembling around him as she moved faster, the head of his cock pushing firmly against that special spot inside her.

'Oh, gods, witch. You need to come, now,' he urged her, gripping her thighs as she rode him.

Whether it was his words or the increase in tempo and friction of his fingers that sent Hermione over the edge, Severus didn't know or care. As she cried out, her muscles went into spasm around his cock, making her tighter and wetter. With a delighted cry, Severus thrust himself upwards, and his semen shot from him in thick bursts, leaving him basking in a glow of pleasure and satisfaction.

Hermione sobbed and collapsed onto his chest. Three years of grief coupled with the intensity of their lovemaking and her relief that he was here and he was real spilled out of her in torrents as she held onto his shoulders tightly.

Severus wrapped his arms possessively around her and cradled her to his body, gently stroking her tear stained cheeks and pressing soft butterfly kisses to her hair.

By the time they returned inside, the sun had dipped low behind the roof of the house, and Hermione was wearing Severus's shirt.

Five

Chapter 5 of 7

A new beginning.

Thanks to kizzy7 for being such a lovely cheerleader and a fab beta.

Severus stepped out of his Floo with a bitter taste in his mouth and a smirk on his lips. The rolls of parchment in his hand held the Ministry seal, applied firmly by the Minister himself. The meeting had been brief but necessary, the final step towards freedom for a man who had never known what freedom really felt like.

Hermione stepped from the kitchen and leaned against the chipped white gloss paint on the doorjamb. She had changed into her Muggle clothes for their journey: faded blue denim jeans and a white t-shirt under a pale blue cotton cardigan. They didn't completely hide her slight frame but they did draw less attention to her weight loss. Her hair was already starting to regain its lustre, and it hung in long, wavy lengths around her shoulders. Severus was confident she would be back to full health in the coming months, and he looked forward to seeing her new curves.

'Done?' she asked him with a quirk of an eyebrow.

'Almost,' he replied. Turning, he stripped off in front of the fireplace, and piece by piece he threw his uniform of black into the flames. He stood and watched his past life reduced to embers, sighing slightly as Hermione wrapped her arms around his waist and rested her soft cheek against his skin. With an sharp exhalation, Severus turned to her and tipped her chin with a gentle finger, dipping his head to kiss her softly. They smiled at the same time, and Hermione giggled as she felt the stirrings of Severus's cock against her leg.

'Later,' Severus chuckled, addressing his comment more to his own appendage than to the willing witch in his arms. Reluctantly letting go, Severus walked to the threadbare armchair and lifted the neatly folded clothes that had been laid out for him. Raising his eyes at Hermione, he laughed out loud and then proceeded to don the pale blue cotton shirt and faded blue denim jeans she had acquired for him. He shook his head, still chuckling. He looked down at himself and then back at Hermione, looking her up and down pointedly. He wasn't sure if he felt flattered or offended that she had staked her claim by making them wear matching outfits. Hermione stared back at him guilelessly.

'What?' she asked, her voice innocent. However, she wasn't able to hide the twinkle in her eye as she appraised his frame in his new clothes and grinned sheepishly as Severus laughed again.

'It's time.' Severus gestured to Hermione to follow him, and they walked together into the back garden. Severus didn't look at anything but Hermione as they wrapped their arms around each other. He had already said a painful goodbye to his precious plants, and it was a necessary separation. To bring them with him would be to bring reminders of a past he no longer needed or wanted.

Neither of them looked back as Severus twisted on the spot and Disapparated them both to a new life.

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The first thing Hermione noticed was the heat of the sun on her hair. Turning out of Severus's firm hold, she looked around herself in awe. There were mountains to the left that dipped down to a green valley edged with trees. Where the ground disappeared in the near distance, a blue sea dazzled like azure, tempting her to dip her toes in at the water's edge. Hermione turned around, and a green meadow spread before her and shimmered lightly with a haze that wasn't just created by the heat of the sun. Severus grinned down at her a little.

'It's Secret Kept. Between us,' he added. He started to walk towards the meadow, and Hermione fell into step beside him and slipped her hand into his. After a five-minute walk, Severus stopped abruptly and bent to Hermione's ear.

'La Nostra Casa,' he whispered, flicking his wand gently. As the house appeared before them, Hermione smiled broadly. It was perfect, as she knew it would be. White stucco walls with pale green shuttered windows were offset by window boxes of trailing pelargoniums in bright, cheery red, but she didn't have time to admire them for too long as Severus pulled her up the steps to the front door.

Inside, the house was airy and bright but devoid of any furniture or décor. It was clean, and the floors were tiled with genuine terracotta, but other than that, no time had been spent to make the place liveable. Hermione turned to Severus with the question on her lips, but he pre-empted her.

'I do gardens and Potions labs,' he explained. 'I have no skill with interiors.' He smiled at her indulgently as he watched the penny drop.

'Oh,' she gasped, looking at the rooms with renewed interest. After a moment, she turned with yet another question hovering on the tip of her tongue. Severus nodded and then sighed as he rolled his eyes.

'I should have known. Come on,' he murmured, although it was clear he was amused. Hermione followed him eagerly, her heart starting to beat a little faster. Across the wide entrance hall, Severus pushed open the door that sat neatly under the curved stairway, stepping back for Hermione to walk inside.

The lab was exquisite. A long workbench dominated the room, and along each side were bottles and cauldrons of various sizes. The myriad of ingredients stacked against the back wall was dazzling, and Severus chuckled as Hermione walked around the room. He didn't think her eyes could get any wider.

'It's incredible,' she breathed.

'I like it too,' he murmured. Hermione was suddenly reminded of his presence and turned her eyes to where he stood.

'Thank you for bringing me here,' she said earnestly.

Severus snorted and stood upright, but he said nothing. Looking at Hermione askance, he walked over to what appeared to be a blank wall beside the cauldron shelf. He murmured something that Hermione didn't catch, and the wall shimmered and vanished, leaving a doorway open and a flicker of dappled sunlight creeping onto the floor of the lab. Severus paused and ran his hand down the clean lines of the door frame, resting his forehead for a brief second. Taking a deep breath, he turned to face Hermione with a look as close to apprehension as she had ever seen him wear.

'What is it?' Hermione asked him quietly. She felt the tightrope of their new found relationship wobbling slightly, and she was scared to put a foot wrong in case they fell and couldn't climb back up again. She waited at Severus seemingly tried to find something to say. He ran his tongue over his lips slightly and closed his eyes, swallowing a little.

'I took a gamble,' he said finally. 'I built this in the hope that... well, go and look.' He gestured half-heartedly with his hand and watched with bated breath as Hermione waked slowly towards the door.

As she stepped inside the room, Hermione could feel her lower lip trembling. She bit it, resolving that today was not a day for tears and she had shed enough already in this lifetime. But the room was magnificent.

Rows of shelves lined the walls, leading to a vaulted ceiling that supported a huge chandelier. It wasn't fancy, just large enough to house enough candles to light the room at night. At the far end of the room, two large glass-panelled doors led out onto a patio, and beyond it was a garden that looked like it had just been dug over. Sunlight spilled into the room but didn't hit the shelves. The room had been constructed to protect the books it would hold and provide a comfortable space to read them in. As Hermione gazed around her, realisation hit her and her resolve crumbled as she saw Severus watching her hopefully.

'You built this for me,' she stated incredulously, and fat tears started to run down her face. Severus walked towards her slowly, searching her face for his answer but asking the question anyway.

'Do you like it?'

Hermione threw herself at him, wrapping her arms around him and pulling him close, burying her head against his shoulder and laughing with joy.

'Like it?' she almost shouted. 'I love it!' She kissed him forcefully on the lips as he started to grin, and as she pulled back, she smiled softly and stroked his cheek.

'I love you, Severus,' she said.

Six

Chapter 6 of 7

a gathering

A/N: Warning for unashamed romantic fluff. Sorry!

The sun was high in the sky, and as Maria Gonzalez paused on her walk up the side of the sloping meadow, she squinted slightly and ran her hands through her glossy black hair. Smiling to herself, she carried on up the incline, shifting the weight of the trug basket slung over her arm. It was a happy day, and as her mother always told her, the sun shines on the righteous.

As she neared the house, Maria saw Severus walk out of the front door and down the stone steps. His hair glinted like the black of a crow's wing as the sun hit it, and his skin had darkened so much he could pass as a local. He had even perfected the accent typical of the region, and Maria shook her head as she mused on his arrival all of those years ago. She hadn't noticed until he had brought the girl along that he hadn't been whole at first. She had thought the house had been a folly, but all along it had been a labour of love, built with his own bare hands and a little help from the local labourers. And when the girl arrived, Severus had changed. His demeanour had lightened, and the rumour of him actually laughing had spread through the village like wildfire, intriguing everyone so much that an impromptu party had been thrown to welcome the girl responsible for his smile. There had been wine, music and dancing, and the whole village had been swept along by the joy that had emanated from Severus and his girl.

Severus walked down the path, and Maria beamed at him.

'Congratulazioni, Severus. The sun is shining for you today,' she said warmly.

'Grazie,' Severus laughed softly, bending to kiss Maria on both of her crinkled cheeks.

'Where is she, the beautiful bride?' Maria asked, tipping her head to one side with a slight smirk.

Severus smiled widely. 'She is beautiful, Maria. In every way possible. She's upstairs, I believe, gilding the lily.'

'Eh?' said Maria, not understanding the expression.

Severus laughed and shook his head. 'Never mind. Upstairs.' He gestured with his hand, and with a slight nod, Maria walked into the house and was immediately glad of its coolness.

'Maria?' Hermione called, peering over the top of the bannister rail. 'Did you get them?'

'Yes, 'Emione, I have them.' Maria waved up at Hermione with a smile, and then she proceeded to walk up the stairs.

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Laughter was filtering through the open windows of the ground floor of the white stucco house on the hill. The sound of children squealing and playing amongst the grape vines was almost like music as Hermione walked slowly into the library. She took a deep breath as she eyed the gathered throng through the open patio doors, and Maria placed a reassuring hand on her arm gently.

'You are beautiful, Emione. Now, go marry him before I change my mind about my Silvano and decide to jiggy with Severus instead.' Maria laughed warmly, and Hermione grinned back at the older woman, knowing full well that Maria only had eyes for her own husband. The thought of Severus waiting for her steeled Hermione's resolve, and she lifted her head high, clutched her flowers tightly, and stepped barefoot into the garden. A hush descended, and even the children stopped running around and paused to watch as she walked slowly to where Severus was waiting at the newly erected arbour. After a few silent moments, a collective sigh ran through the womenfolk of the village, followed by a ripple of gentle applause.

Severus turned to watch as the guests at his wedding closed ranks behind Hermione, who was walking demurely towards him with her eyes never leaving his face. Severus smiled as she neared. She looked incredibly pretty, and he marvelled at how such a simple dress, plain, white sundress caught around the waist with a dark purple satin sash, could look so lovely on the right person. Around her neck, Hermione was wearing the amethyst pendant he had bought for her in the market only the week before, but what made his eyes widen and fill with very unmanly tears were the flowers in her hair. He shook his head in disbelief at the intricate way her hair, hanging in loose ringlets, was interwoven with passionflowers. Severus brushed away a tear and laughed, a little embarrassed.

'You knew,' he stated as Hermione reached his side with a soft smile on her face. She nodded and lifted her small bouquet, passionflowers and calla lilies tied with purple ribbon. Taking a passionflower, she reached up and threaded it through the lapel of Severus's jacket, and he covered her hand in his before leaning forward and planting a delicate kiss on her lips.

A murmur of approval went through the crowd, followed by a couple of ribald comments, until the priest, an elderly man with salt and pepper hair and a liking for robust red wine, which showed in his portly build and sometimes unsteady gait, clapped his hands to signal the start of the ceremony.

Watching from amongst the guests, Maria slipped her hand into Silvano's, rubbing her thumb over his papery skin and gnarled knuckles and resting her cheek against his arm. Smiling down at the dark head of his wife, Silvano planted a kiss on her forehead and then turned his attention back to the wedding.

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Severus and Hermione clung together, dancing on their candlelit patio to the sound of Italian opera coming from a very old record player belonging to Silvano. The guests had long since wound their way back down to the village to let them have their night together, and Severus was nuzzling Hermione's ear and trying to sing along to the words. Rather than being romantic, his singing was hopelessly off-key, and the words were all wrong. Hermione laughed until her sides ached. With a sigh, Severus gave up, but Hermione could feel his grin against her skin.

'It's been a lovely day,' she murmured, her face nestled into the front of his shirt.

'It has,' Severus replied softly, kissing the top of Hermione's hair. His lips brushed a passionflower, and he pulled away to look into Hermione's face. 'Explain the flowers,' he whispered, pausing his gentle rocking movements.

Hermione smiled. 'I knew you would want to know,' she said, blushing slightly.

Severus watched as she closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

'It was an accident,' she said softly, 'and I promise you it will never ever happen again. I saw inside your mind, Severus.'

'You used Legilimency?' Severus sounded shocked, and he loosened his hold as he stepped away, looking at Hermione incredulously. He didn't even know she had the ability, let alone the intent, to use it without his permission.

'Not on purpose.' Hermione shook her head vehemently. 'I told you..' She paused. 'It was an accident. I didn't even know what it was at the time.'

'How did it happen?' Severus asked, puzzled. His brow was furrowed. He didn't want his wife exploring his thoughts whenever she felt like it.

'It's a bit embarrassing. But you can see it, if you want.' Hermione stepped closer and took hold of Severus's hands. Realising she was opening herself up to him, he gazed deep into her eyes and whispered, 'Legilimens.'

Finding himself inside another person's mind after such a long time was a little disorienting, and Severus had to steady his breathing as he sifted through the many thoughts that were swirling around. Suddenly, they were making love---their first time in the new house, in the bedroom that Hermione had lovingly transformed into a place of tranquillity. Hermione was whispering Severus's name over and over as he slowly thrust into her, and as their passions started to build, Severus could hear his own voice saying Hermione's name. Hermione orgasmed first and opened her eyes languidly to watch Severus's face as he came. At the critical point, Severus's eyes flew open to look at Hermione. Before he knew it, he was inside his own thoughts at the point of his orgasm, and saw he Hermione's face surrounded by thousands of passionflowers.

Severus gently pulled himself from Hermione's thoughts, holding on to her as she swayed a little. Raising her eyes to him, Hermione smiled slowly.

'Am I forgiven?' she whispered.

'There is nothing to forgive. It has given me an idea, however. Something involving our house and that wonderful bed you made,' Severus whispered seductively. He bent and kissed Hermione until she was breathless, his tongue stroking her desire to the point of no return. Pulling away slightly, with her eyes still closed, Hermione sighed.

'Bed...' she murmured. Severus chuckled as he wrapped his arm around her and walked his bride inside the house.

Epilogue

Chapter 7 of 7

Visitors Arrive.

A/N: Just a quick thank-you to those who have reviewed and an extra-special hug to kizzy7. Thanks, honey, you're a star!

Also thanks to robisonrocket, Admin at TPP, for being so kind xx

Severus stretched his long legs out in front of him and opened that day's edition of the *Daily Prophet*. There was very little news, apart from the new Minister of Magic taking up his post. Severus snorted and thanked the gods he was no longer in England. Having to answer to Harry Potter might well have tipped him over the edge. He seemed to have conveniently forgotten that Harry's input had released him from the Ministry's clutches all of those years ago, but it had been years since they had breathed the same air. Hermione had maintained some contact for a while, until the children had come along and absorbed her attention, and Severus knew they still communicated occasionally via the Muggle mail system. But Severus had grown into a grumpy old man. Better to hold onto his old grudge and be comfortable than to create new ones at this time of life.

The sun shifted higher, casting its rays over Severus's newspaper. With an annoyed grunt, he squinted and raised his gaze. His eyes were drawn, as they always were, to his garden, and with a huff, he pushed his creaking bones off the sun lounger and decided to take a tour. He lifted the battered straw hat from the table beside him and rammed it onto his head, not caring that he looked ridiculous. It was stained and patchy, with small holes gnawed out of the rim, and old, flaky bits of straw fell from it each time he put it on. Hermione was always on at him to get a new one, but their first-born, Carla, had bought it for him with her first official pocket money. For Severus, it was worth its weight in gold.

Stretching his legs, Severus walked to the arbour and deadheaded a few of his roses. The passionflowers were just starting to open, and his memory was jogged as to the upcoming date. Forty years of marriage needed a gift, he mused, making a mental note to slip down to the market before the weekend. He moved on through the arbour and down the sandy path to the lemon grove.

The largest lemon tree towered over the others, and he smiled slightly as he remembered planting it with Hermione the day after they had moved into the house. It had borne two lemons that year, and Hermione had squeezed them to within an inch of their pith, insisting that they drink the first glass of lemonade together. They had planted another tree for each child thereafter. Carla's tree was graceful but robust, its glossy green leaves turning towards the sun. Ella's tree was more shy and retiring, grown as it was in the shade of Carla's, but no less important. And Dante's tree. Severus frowned slightly. It had grown the strongest and produced the most fruit over the years. It was proud and tall, planted a little further away than the other trees for some reason, but the lemons were sweeter. Severus shook his head slightly and moved on down the garden to check on his herbs.

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Hermione lifted the pot of moisturiser from the window ledge and scooped out a soft dollop with her index finger, awkwardly replacing the lid. The scent of lavender and chamomile drifted to her nostrils, making her sneeze as she rubbed the unctuous mixture into her hands. She was still rubbing as she stepped out of the kitchen door and into the bright sunlight and scanned the garden for Severus. It was time for his potion, and Hermione knew he would purposefully forget to take it if she didn't remind him. The ravages of time could be eased but not stopped, and it still amazed Hermione that Severus Snape, of all people, would develop arthritis in his knees in old age. Patting the vial in her apron pocket, Hermione gingerly picked her way down the stone-strewn path around to the back of the house. Severus was in the potting shed, his straw hat dipping up and down in front of the shelves as she walked down the path. She paused only once, watching sadly as he took his time to stand and rubbed at his knees with the flat of his palms. She still loved him with a passion, and to see him age had been a great shock to her. Not that she hadn't aged herself. In fact, she had gone grey before Severus had found his first grey hair, a fact that had caused him to smile smugly at her on more than one occasion.

He must have sensed her presence, as he turned and raised his hand in a wave. Waving back, she increased her pace until she reached the shed and then leaned against the doorway.

'Are you okay?' she asked with concern.

'Stop it,' he muttered. He couldn't be doing with her fussing.

'Sorry,' she murmured, pulling the vial from her pocket carefully. 'Here,' she said, handing it to him without catching his gaze, pretending instead to be interested in his seedlings.

'More lavender,' he grunted as he unstoppered the potion and drank it quickly. Hermione slipped her hand in his and took the vial. Severus didn't let her go so fast, however, and held onto her fingers, squeezing them gratefully. Their eyes met, and Hermione smiled warmly at him.

'It's almost lunchtime,' she said quietly. 'Walk back with me?'

Severus took a last look at his new plants and nodded, following her out of the shed and closing the door firmly behind them. He took Hermione's hand in his, and they walked slowly back towards the house in companionable silence.

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Carla walked around the side of the house and watched as her parents trudged up the path. Her hearted melted as she saw her father take her mothers' hand, and she smiled to herself. She had never known a couple as much in love as her parents. She could only hope that she and Enrico would be as happy in the years to come. She looked down at Severo, who was pulling at her hand in excitement, his dark hair swinging around his head.

'Can I, Mama?' he whispered again.

'Sure. Just go carefully. Don't knock Grandpa off his feet like the last time, ok?' She smiled at him indulgently as he turned his grin to her, letting go of her hand and running excitedly down the path.

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Severus and Hermione watched with pride as their daughter spoke gently with her son. She looked every inch the Italian Senora with her long, black hair, white linen suit and designer sunglasses. Marriage to a businessman suited her, and she certainly enjoyed his money. She never forgot her roots everus made sure of that ut his attention was taken away from his musings as he watched his tornado of a grandson plummeting towards them.

'Here he comes,' Hermione murmured, laughing as Severus muttered an 'oh, fuck' under his breath.

Severo was lithe and taller than most six year-old boys. He was also the spitting image of his grandfather at the same age, and Severus couldn't resist a grin as he came within shouting distance.

'Grandpa! Grandma!' he shouted, his face bright with joy. As he came closer, he slowed to a jog, remembering his mother's words, and then he threw himself on Hermione's legs, wrapping his arms around them and squeezing tightly.

Hermione grinned down at him and ruffled his hair. 'Hello, darling,' she said.

Severo pulled away and smiled up into Hermione's face, and she bent to give him a quick kiss. As she stood, Severo wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and made a face. Severus fought the urge to laugh out loud, but he winked when he caught Severo's eye.

'Hello, Grandpa,' Severo said politely.

'Severo.' Severus bowed his head and held out his hand. 'Walk with us and tell us all about school, young man.'

Severo smiled and took his grandfather's hand eagerly as they began to walk again. He was still chattering away as they entered the house.

The End