

The Life Unlived

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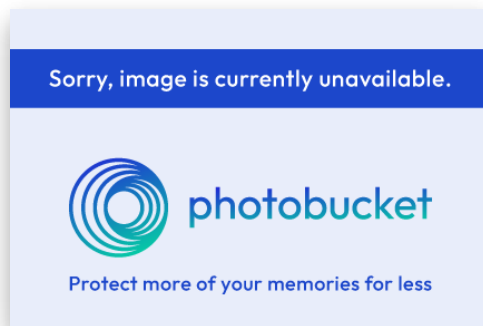
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New Beginnings

Chapter 1 of 7

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The sun hung low on the horizon, its fading light leaving the sky ablaze with colour. A faint breeze rustled through the trees, and a few leaves parted way with their branches, gently floating across the winding path that led to the oddly-shaped house on the hill. A single light in the window indicated that the occupants were home, patiently waiting for the three visitors who were currently walking up the path.

Hermione Granger Weasley focussed all her effort on reaching the house. The day had been the longest she could ever remember, and she would be well-pleased when it was over and done with. There had been no fight, no argument, not even a single word of disagreement. She had simply gone through the house in a hurried but methodical fashion, taking only those things that she could not do without. She had shrunk her book collection, as well as the children's toys, clothes, and baby pictures, and then calmly placed them into the old beaded bag that currently was held in the crook of her arm. Then she had handed him her wedding ring, gathered her children, and quietly departed, leaving her husband and the life they had shared without ever having said a single word.

He might have shattered her heart, but her dignity would remain intact.

With her head held high, she resolutely walked up the familiar path. Her son's head jostled against her shoulder, his even breathing and heavy weight indicating that he had fallen asleep. She hitched the toddler up a bit, settling him more securely on her hip as she firmly gripped her daughter's tiny hand in hers. The girl's small, slender fingers tugged her mum's, wanting her attention. Pausing in the middle of the path, Hermione looked down into her daughter's large, brown eyes.

"Yes, Rose?"

"Mummy, do you have Mr Wiggles?" the small red-haired girl asked fretfully, concerned that her favourite toy had been forgotten in their haste to leave.

"Yes, love," she murmured soothingly, mindful of her young daughter's tender feelings and ignoring the fact that the question had already been asked a dozen times since they had left home.

Home. The word had once filled her with feelings of happiness, joy, comfort ... love. Now, it brought nothing but pain; they would never be going home again.

She gave Rose what she hoped was a reassuring smile. "Don't you remember? We made him very small and then put him right here in my bag. As soon as we're inside, we'll make him big again, all right? Now, come along, Rose," she said, encouraging the child to resume walking. "Aunt Luna is expecting us, and we wouldn't want to disappoint her by being late, would we?"

"No, Mum," Rose answered dutifully, though her lower lip trembled.

Hermione felt a twinge of guilt at the sadness in her daughter's face, but then she reminded herself that the situation was not her fault. No, the blame belonged entirely on Ron's shoulders. Angry tears clouded her vision, but she viciously blinked them back; she was finished crying over Ronald Weasley.

Finally, they arrived at the well-worn gate. Pushing it open, Hermione felt her daughter's hand slip from hers. She watched as Rose ran to the front door, then turned, her expression questioning. Hermione nodded, and Rose grinned before knocking loudly. By the time Hermione had reached the front step, the door had been flung open, and Rose had catapulted herself into Luna's waiting arms.

"Hello, my loves!" Luna exclaimed, twirling a giggling Rose in a circle and then leaning in to press a kiss to a sleeping Hugo's ginger hair. "Come in," she said, ushering them into the kitchen. "I hope you didn't run into any Nargles in the garden. With the warmer weather, they've been hiding in the mistletoe until the cool of the evening."

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief at the familiarity that was Luna Lovegood. The two friends exchanged a brief hug, carefully manoeuvring around Hugo, who was still sleeping in his mother's arms.

"Luna, thank you..."

The dreamy-eyed witch waved away Hermione's gratitude. "Think nothing of it. You're my friend, and you and the children are always welcome here. Have you had any supper? I made a rather delicious stew, if you'd care for a bowl."

Rose hastily agreed, and Hermione attempted to awaken Hugo to see if he wanted a bite to eat, but the poor lad was simply too tired. "Don't you want something to eat, darling?"

Hugo blinked tiredly and shook his head. He rested his cheek on his mother's shoulder and found comfort in his thumb.

Hermione kissed his forehead and then said to Luna, "If you don't mind getting Rose started, I'll put Hugo to bed. He'll likely sleep the rest of the night."

Luna nodded and directed Hermione to the guestroom. As she walked up the stairs, Hermione heard Rose giggle as Luna began telling her a story about a garden gnome and a fairy princess.

Thank Merlin for good friends, Hermione thought as she made her way to the guestroom. She hated to intrude...especially when she was unsure of how long they would need to stay...but there had been no alternative. She simply could not abide one more moment in the house she had once called home.

She continued down the hall on silent feet, cuddling the sleeping boy in her arms. Thankfully, the door to the guestroom was already open. She slipped inside and carefully placed Hugo atop the quilt. Reaching into her beaded bag, she pulled out Hugo's well-loved blankie and tucked it close to his body, in case he should wake before she returned for the night. She kissed the tips of her fingers and then touched them to his forehead. He looked so angelic when he was sleeping. He was such a good boy. Always so happy, so loving, so stubborn, so much like his...

Releasing an unsteady breath, she gently touched a lock of his hair. "I love you," she whispered and then quietly left the room, closing the door behind her.

An hour later, Mr Wiggles had been returned to his normal size and sent to bed, along with his owner. In the guestroom, Rose lay curled next to her brother, her arms wrapped tightly about her favourite floppy-eared companion.

Downstairs in the kitchen, Luna and Hermione sat at the table with a pot of tea. Hermione sipped the hot liquid, allowing its warmth to calm and soothe her frazzled nerves. She was grateful, not only for Luna's hospitality, but that Luna understood her need to unwind a bit before she would be able to explain the events that had led to her current circumstances...to explain why she had left Ron.

Dear Merlin.

She had left her husband.

The thumb of her left hand immediately moved to her ring finger. It was bare. A strangled sob escaped her throat, and Luna was instantly at her side. Hermione wept, allowing her anger and sorrow to truly be vented for the first time since Ron had revealed his duplicity. Luna simply held her, rocking back and forth and murmuring nonsense words in an effort to calm her distraught friend.

When Hermione had cried herself out, Luna Summoned a handkerchief and handed it to Hermione. She returned to her chair but maintained a tight grasp on Hermione's hand. "You've left him."

Once again, Hermione was grateful for having enough presence of mind to come to Luna; she had known that of all her friends, it was Luna who would be least likely to judge. She dried her cheeks and wiped her swollen eyes before blowing her nose delicately. She nodded. "Yes."

"What happened?"

Hermione shrugged one shoulder. "He said he's in love with someone else. He wants a divorce."

"Merlin," Luna breathed. "Have you decided what you're going to do?"

She nodded as she delicately blew her nose. "I'll give him what he wants...the sooner, the better."

Luna tilted her head to one side, her expression uncharacteristically solemn. "You'll be in need of a place to stay for awhile, then, until things are settled. You're welcome to stay here for as long as you like."

Hermione fidgeted in her chair. "Are you certain? My parents..."

"Of course I'm certain," Luna stated matter-of-factly. "Daddy is spending the next few months in Sweden on an expedition, and so I'll be glad of the company. And you know how I adore spending time with the children."

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief and then pressed her palms to her watery eyes. She was exhausted and emotional; the day's events had taken their toll. Unable to express her gratitude in more eloquent terms, Hermione murmured a choked, "Thank you."

Since having children, early morning had become Hermione's favourite time of day. It was the only time she could enjoy a cup of tea and relish the quiet. And so it was that she found herself sitting at Luna's kitchen table, just before dawn, cup of tea in hand. It had been two weeks since she and the children had arrived at her friend's home.

Two weeks. She sighed. Two weeks ago she had been happily married with two lovely children and gainfully employed at the job of her dreams. Now, she was single and, temporarily, a stay-at-home mum. What a difference two weeks could make.

The divorce had been a simple matter. There had been no fighting over the division of assets, and both she and Ron had agreed that the children would remain in her physical custody, with Ron receiving liberal visitation rights. They had gone to the Ministry, signed the official parchments to dissolve their marriage, and that was that.

Simple, easy, fast.

And utterly crushing.

After eight years of marriage and two decades of friendship, it had been so easy for Ron to walk away. For Hermione, it felt as if a piece of her were missing. She had loved her husband, but even more devastating than that loss was the loss of her best friend. She missed him.

And to be honest, that stunk.

She didn't want to miss him. She wanted to be happy, to think that she was well rid of him. Hermione knew that at some point in time she would feel happiness again, but she wanted it to be now, not later. That wasn't realistic, however. They had spent over half their lives together, first as friends, then as a couple, and it would take time to overcome the pain and loss she felt at his betrayal.

She propped her elbows on the table and held her head in her hands. She was mentally and physically drained, and the emotional turmoil had been far greater than she had anticipated. The betrayal of their marriage, of their friendship, had left indelible scars that Hermione was not certain would ever fully heal. Ron had sworn to love only her, to be faithful to her, and although he had insisted that no physical intimacies had taken place, he had been carrying on an emotional affair for months. Regardless, the end result had been the same...the loss of her marriage.

Hermione hadn't anticipated the feelings of guilt and inadequacy that had reared their ugly heads. Intellectually, she knew what Ron had done was not her fault, but every now and again, especially late at night, she found herself wondering what it was about her that had been unable to hold her husband's interest. It was foolish, she knew, yet she couldn't help but wonder

She sighed, then sipped her tea. While it had been a difficult time for her, it had been even more so for the children. Determined not to make the situation any worse than it already was, Hermione had concentrated on easing her children's fears as much as she could. She might not have been able to do anything about their father's absence, but she was their mother and she would be damned if they would suffer unnecessarily for a single moment.

She'd had quite a bit of holiday time that she had not yet scheduled, so she had contacted her office at the Department of Mysteries and informed them she would be on holiday for a few weeks. It had been a good decision. She had been able to spend the entire time with the children, sometimes laughing and playing and other times crying and comforting.

Rose's pain was palpable. She had always been Daddy's little girl, and she asked for Ron constantly, wanting him to tuck her in, to read her a story, to tickle her and play with her. She had cried herself to sleep almost every night, desperately missing her father and worrying that he no longer wanted her. Despite Hermione's reassurances, the little girl asked if her daddy still loved her several times a day. Each time, it tore at Hermione's heart to hear her daughter in such pain. Even the baby was affected. Hugo toddled about Luna's house looking in various nooks and crannies, even under furniture, as if his father might be playing a game of hide-and-seek. His big blue eyes would fill with tears when he couldn't find him. He clung to Hermione, as though convinced that if he let her go, she too would disappear.

It was agonising to see how their father's absence was affecting them. Ron adored his children...of that Hermione had no doubt...and she knew he would be devastated to see them pining for him as they were.

Perhaps she should make a Pensieve for him.

She sighed and then finished off the last of her tea. No. While she was angry at having to be the one to sort the mess Ron had left behind, she was determined not to be the proverbial bitter ex-wife.

After all, she was partly to blame.

She had known when she'd married Ron that he wasn't the most dependable sort. He had proved that often enough over the course of their friendship. She had loved him...she still did...but it was the comfortable sort of love rather than the passionate, all-consuming love of a truly grand romance. Still, Hermione had believed that having a solid friendship as the foundation for their marriage would be enough.

Apparently she had been wrong; it certainly hadn't been enough for Ron.

The patter of little feet coming down the stairs indicated that Rose had awakened and pulled Hermione from her thoughts. She took a deep breath, readying herself for the day's events.

"Mummy, is Daddy here yet?" Rose squealed as she threw herself into her mother's lap.

Hermione lowered her face into her daughter's bushy, red hair and inhaled the sweet scent. She willed her voice to remain steady. "Soon, love," she murmured. "Daddy will be here soon."

"Daddy!"

Rose ran immediately to the door the moment she heard the knock. Thrilled to see her daughter so happy, Hermione chased after her, a giggling Hugo perched on her hip. She opened the door with smile, having mentally prepared to see her ex-husband for the first time since finalising their divorce.

What she was not prepared for was seeing her ex-husband with his new girlfriend.

Hermione's smile froze and then slipped from her face as she looked from Ron's hopeful expression to the witch on his arm's nervous one.

It was all Hermione could do not to throttle Ron where he stood.

She was about to open her mouth and issue a scathing verbal attack when she saw Rose fling herself at her father. Ron scooped the little girl up into his arms and held her tightly against his chest, his eyes tearing up as he kissed her hair. "I've missed you, Rose," he said softly.

Hermione felt her throat tighten as she watched the reunion between father and daughter. With a glance at the woman awkwardly standing off to the side, Hermione stepped out into the garden and closed the door; there was no way in hell she was inviting them inside, even if it wasn't her house.

Hugo lunged for his father, and Ron set Rose on her feet as he took Hugo in his arms. Rose wrapped her arms about her father's leg while Ron blew raspberries on Hugo's cheek before settling the boy against him with one arm.

"Ronald," Hermione said, her tone polite but cool. She took a malicious pride in Ron's slight cringe at hearing her use his full given name.

"Hermione, this is Eleanor Branstone. Eleanor, Hermione." Ron tugged at the collar of his robes with his free hand; then he reached down to twine his fingers with Eleanor's.

Hermione tore her eyes from Ron and looked at the witch standing beside him. She extended a hand; after all, it wasn't this woman's fault that Ron was a complete prat. "Pleased to meet you," she lied.

"I'm very happy to meet you, as well," the blonde-haired witch said, her tone warm despite her timid smile as she clasped Hermione's hand briefly. "Ron's told me so much about you."

"I'm sure he has," Hermione said tightly. She returned her gaze to her former husband. "Ron, if you have a moment, I'd like to discuss a few things with you about the children before you go."

Ron's eyes widened, and his Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed reflexively. "Oh. Erm ... right. 'Course." He lowered Hugo to the ground and then asked Rose if she wouldn't mind if she and her brother could show "Ellie" the garden. Rose nodded enthusiastically.

Hermione hesitated. She didn't want to have this discussion in front of the children, but she wasn't sure she trusted a stranger with them, either...especially this particular stranger. Rose smiled up at Eleanor, however, and something about the witch's easy response soothed Hermione's fears.

She encouraged Hugo towards his sister. "Hold his hand, Rose, all right? And don't go far."

As soon as the children and Eleanor were at a safe distance, Hermione turned and focussed the full force of her ire on Ron. "What the hell were you thinking, bringing her here?"

Ron seemed genuinely taken aback. "I...I wanted the children to meet her. I wanted *you* to meet her."

Hermione curled her fingers into fists, her nails digging into her palms. Unbidden, her eyes filled with outraged tears. "How could you think it even remotely possible that the children were ready to meet her? Do you have the slightest idea what they have been through these past few weeks? Do you? Rose has cried for you every night, Hugo has been utterly lost without you, and when you finally come to see them, you bring a total stranger with you. And not just any stranger, but *her*! Did you consider for a moment that your children would want to spend time with you, without the distraction of someone else? They want to be with *you*!"

"Hermione..."

She shook her head violently and slashed an angry arm through the air. "No! I have been silent until now, but no longer. You had no business bringing her here. It is selfish, and it's hurtful to the children and to me. Did you really think I wasn't hurting? Until quite recently I was your *wife*! Honestly, Ron! I gave you what you wanted...did you have to twist the knife?"

Ron appeared absolutely mortified, his face red and his eyes brimming with guilt and remorse. "I'm...I'm sorry. I didn't think ... well, you were so ... you didn't say anything when you left, and you seemed all right at the divorce proceedings." He paused and rubbed the back of his neck with his hand. "I thought you were okay ... with everything."

Hermione stared at him as if he'd grown a second head. "You know what, Ron? You are an idiot."

"Of all the unmitigated gall! How dare he bring her here! What on earth was he thinking?"

Hermione angrily paced about the circular kitchen, flailing her arms in wild gesticulations, while Luna sat impassively at the kitchen table.

"How could he have *done* such a thing? I can't believe he did that. I just can't *believe* it!"

Her voice broke as tears of anger, frustration, and pain finally spilled down her cheeks. She collapsed into a chair, hung her head, and cried. "Does he honestly care so little for my feelings? How could he be so stupid ... so selfish?"

"He's a plonker," Luna said so matter-of-factly that Hermione could not help but laugh through her tears.

"He is," Hermione agreed, wiping her damp cheeks with her fingers. She sighed and turned sorrowful eyes toward Luna. "I hate feeling this way. I hate it. It's awful, and I want it to stop."

Luna tilted her head to the side and looked at Hermione speculatively. "You need a diversion."

Hermione's brow furrowed. "What?"

"A diversion...something to get your mind off things for awhile. Maybe a project or" Luna smiled. "I have just the thing. Come with me."

She stood from the table and walked to the stairs that led to the first floor. "Are you coming?"

Hermione sniffed and then smiled tremulously. Her other friends would have allowed her to wallow alone in her misery or would have commiserated with her, but Luna...whom so many disregarded as an eccentric loon...was very observant about people. Luna knew what Hermione really needed...something to occupy her mind ... something that had nothing to do with Ron Weasley.

She rose to her feet, and Luna grinned as she led her all the way to the top of the staircase and into the attic.

"What is all this?" Hermione asked as she and Luna returned the sitting room on the first floor, followed by several floating boxes and a large trunk.

"You'll see. Let's put them down right here," Luna said, using her wand to clear a spot in the middle of the room. "You might want to sit down. There's a bit of an explanation involved."

Hermione's eyebrows rose. "All right," she said, curious as to what Luna intended.

Luna settled into the armchair opposite the sofa and said, "What do you think of Severus Snape?"

Caught unawares by the abrupt change in subject, Hermione said the first thing that came to mind: "He was a hero."

Luna's expression was more serious than Hermione could ever recall having witnessed. "I agree. So do a lot of people ... or at least they do now. The British Museum of Wizardry certainly thinks so. They're planning an exhibit on the War, and they want to have an entire section dedicated to him and his role."

Although she was confused as to how Severus Snape had anything to do with the items they had just hauled down from the attic, Hermione nodded. "I read something about that. According to the *Prophet*, the Ministry is waiting to hear from Professor Snape's beneficiaries as to what personal items they will allow to be part of the exhibit."

Luna smiled. "Yes, that's right."

Hermione waited for further comment, but there was none. Her brow furrowed as she slowly pieced together the puzzle. "You mean ... you"

"Yes. Well, actually, he left everything to my father and me. These..." Luna said, waving a hand at the trunk and boxes, "...make up the entirety of his estate."

"I'm sorry, Luna, but I don't understand. Why would Professor Snape have named your family as the beneficiary to his will?"

"Oh, that's simple," Luna replied breezily. "He and my parents were friends...very good friends."

Having met Luna's father a time or two, Hermione had doubts as to the accuracy of that statement but wisely said nothing.

"I know what you're thinking," Luna said as she stood and crossed to the room to the fireplace. She appeared to pick up an object from the mantle and then tapped its edge with her wand. A framed picture shimmered into view, and Luna handed it to Hermione. "This is the only photograph of the three of them together."

Hermione glanced down at the photo. "When was this taken?" she asked softly, intrigued by the unusual group.

"In 1980. Mum was pregnant with me, as you can see."

Hermione smiled sadly. Yes, she could see. Luna's mother was very pregnant, indeed. One hand rested on her swollen belly, and the other was held by her visibly proud husband. They appeared blissfully happy, their smiles joyous and unrestrained. Xenophilus looked younger but much the same, with one eye pointed toward his nose and his silvery blond hair puffed out about his shoulders. Hermione had never seen a photo of Eglantine Lovegood before, and she found her to be quite beautiful, with her deep blue eyes and golden hair. But it was Severus Snape and his incredibly uncharacteristic pose that quickly garnered Hermione's attention.

It was the only time she had seen her former professor without his frock coat and teaching robes. He wore slim black trousers and a crisp, white shirt, the sleeves rolled up to the elbows. Hermione's eyes widened at the sight of his Dark Mark, but no one in the group seemed to be concerned about it. He looked younger than she recalled, of course, and Hermione supposed the absence of his ever-present scowl contributed to that effect. He was standing next to Luna's mother, his right arm casually draped about her shoulders, and he was quite obviously laughing. Not smiling...Hermione had seen that a few times over the years during dinners at Hogwarts...but outright laughing. His shoulders shook, and his dark eyes glittered with amusement. The change the expression made in his appearance was startling.

He seemed ... free.

Hermione wondered how that could possibly be true; the photograph would have been taken when he was still an active Death Eater. Perhaps it had been before he had realised that he had pledged his loyalty to a madman, and he had not yet known the horrible mistake he had made. Or maybe it was because Lily Potter had not yet been killed. Regardless, it was an intriguing glimpse at the real man before his soul had been torn asunder by lost love and the manipulations of two of the world's most powerful wizards. He'd had friends, she realised, true friends who had obviously loved him and whom he had loved in return. The easy camaraderie captured in the photograph reminded her of the friendship she had, until recently, shared with Harry and Ron.

Hermione raised a hand, as if to touch the photograph's surface, but stopped herself. She tore her gaze from the photo and delicately cleared her throat. "I assume there is a very long story involved."

"Quite," Luna said cheerfully. "But that's not for me to tell."

Reluctantly, Hermione returned the photograph to Luna. The picture had unsettled her; she didn't know why.

Luna returned to the arm chair after restoring the framed picture to its place on the mantle; she didn't bother disillusioning it. She looked pointedly at the boxes and trunk. "The majority of his clothes and that sort of thing were donated to charity. This is what remains. Everything in here must be sorted and catalogued so that Daddy and I can decide what to send to the Museum, what to keep, and what, if anything, to hide or destroy. We've kept it all in the attic since it was delivered to us...Daddy hasn't been able to bear the thought of going through his friend's things until now. He thinks the exhibit would be a good way for people to learn the truth about who Severus Snape truly was."

She paused, giving Hermione time to process what was being asked of her. "He was a good man, Hermione, if not a nice one. And I think this would provide you with a much needed distraction, at least until the children return. So, what do you say? Will you help?"

Hermione yawned and rubbed her tired eyes with her palms. The sun had gone down hours before, and the clock on the wall informed her that it was well past time for bed. She knew she should probably turn in for the night and begin again in the morning, but it was all so fascinating. She couldn't bring herself to stop yet.

She glanced about the cluttered sitting room...it was organised chaos, with piles upon piles of books stacked up all around her and empty boxes tossed into a corner. She had gone through all of the boxes that belonged to the professor, leaving only the trunk and one rather small box of mementos.

It seemed as if whoever had packed up the professor's office had been respectful of his things. Everything appeared to have been sorted by category, which made Hermione's task that much easier. The first box had held his personal and teaching journals. She was terribly curious and had considered reading them, but she had been unable to bring herself to breach his privacy. So she had tagged them with her wand as having been catalogued, marked them on her parchment, and then set them aside.

The majority of the remaining boxes appeared to have been filled with books...his personal library. Hermione had been simultaneously delighted and surprised by the wide variety of titles. The potions and defence books had been expected, but they weren't all she had found. There were history, philosophy, and medical texts, both Muggle and wizarding, as well as a vast array of Muggle literature, from fairy tales to Shakespeare to Hemingway. There were biographies, novels of all sorts, and poetry. She had even found several cookbooks and a small collection of old Muggle comics.

"*The Beano*," she murmured under her breath with a small giggle, recalling her own childhood memories of the popular comic book. The professor's collection was small, only a dozen or so, and well-thumbed, as though they had been read repeatedly. Hermione smiled as she pictured Professor Snape as a small boy, hiding under his blankets with a torch and reading *Dennis the Menace*.

Suppressing another yawn, she decided she would sort through the items in the professor's trunk and then go to bed. She could catalogue the contents in the morning.

As she knelt in front of the open trunk, she felt her heart squeeze unexpectedly. She had known, of course, that there would be personal effects, but she hadn't realised that she would be affected so profoundly. After all, he had only been her professor. And a hero. And she had respected him a great deal. Perhaps that's why she felt so unsettled.

Taking a deep breath, Hermione reached inside and lifted out the heavy wool teaching robes that she remembered seeing him wear every winter she had spent at Hogwarts. The scent of potions ingredients and herbs filled her nostrils, and she was assailed by memories of Potions class, Professor Snape leaning over her shoulder, his scent permeating the air she breathed as he looked into her cauldron. Hermione closed her eyes in recollection; the robes smelt like him.

She chided herself. Of course they did. They had belonged to him. She rolled her eyes at her own silliness and gently laid the clothing aside. Reaching again into the trunk, she pulled out a piece of worn, grey cloth. She shook out the material and gasped...it was his nightshirt.

"Right," she said aloud, immediately refolding the grey fabric and tossing it back into the trunk. Going through her former professor's clothing...especially his nightclothes...was too much for her to handle right then. "Bit too creepy. I'll save the trunk for tomorrow."

She replaced the robes, as well, and then closed the lid.

As she stretched her aching back, Hermione's gaze fell on a small box. Written on the side in his familiar, spidery script was the name *Eglantine*. She shrugged and decided to go ahead and catalogue the contents. She pointed her wand and intoned, "*Wingardium Leviosa*." The box gently floated across the room, and Hermione lowered it to the floor beside her.

There were only a few things inside: a stack of letters, tied with a yellow ribbon, and a small, wooden paperweight.

Hermione assumed it was a paperweight, anyway. She removed it from the box and held the spherical object between her hands. It was quite beautiful. She estimated it to be about twenty centimetres in circumference...bigger than a Snitch but slightly smaller than a cricket ball. The smooth, richly-coloured wood gleamed in the firelight.

Turning it in her hands, she wondered if it had been a gift to Professor Snape from his friend. She smiled in delight as she considered the idea that perhaps it was a puzzle or had magical properties of some sort. She carefully examined the surface, looking for flaws or seams or anything to indicate a way inside, but she found nothing. Undaunted, she pressed her fingers against every square centimetre, in case its secret would be triggered by touch.

"Hm. Could be magical," she muttered under her breath. Her brow wrinkled in concentration as she took her wand in hand and pointed it at the wooden sphere. "*Specialis Revelio*."

A bright light burst from the orb like rays of the sun, blinding Hermione. She dropped her wand, the slender length of wood clattering to the floor.

"Luna!" she yelled as loudly as she could. "Help!"

The object began to shake and spin at an ever-increasing velocity in Hermione's hand. She unclenched her fingers from around the spherical piece of wood, hoping it that, if it fell to the floor, the magic emanating from it would cease, but the ball remained firmly in her palm. A frisson of magic shot up her arm, from her fingertips to her forehead.

"Hermione!" Luna cried as she ran into the room, wand drawn.

It was too late. Hermione felt as if she were caught in a vicelike grip, the magic squeezing tightly as the sphere gave one final pulse.

And then everything went black.

Hermione woke to the voices of a man and a woman. She thought she recognised one of them, but she couldn't remember who he was. Both voices sounded strange, as if she were hearing them through a tunnel. She tried to open her eyes, but she was too tired. She listened as best she could.

"I'm sorry, sir. We don't know when she'll wake up."

"And what, may I ask, do you know, Healer Merriweather?" the man retorted.

Hermione could hear the concern in the man's voice, even though his tone was sharp. She surmised that she was in hospital, but why?

"We've run every test we can think of, and we can't find anything wrong with her. We're hoping that she'll wake up on her own."

"And if she doesn't?"

"We'll deal with that then, should it happen."

There was a pause in the conversation, and Hermione heard what sounded like a yawn.

The Healer tutted and said, "You've been here since last night, and you haven't slept a wink. Why don't you go home for an hour or so and check on your children ... maybe rest for a bit?"

"The children are with their grandparents. They are fine."

"How about a cup of tea, then? I promise to stay right here until you return. You'll do your wife no good if you collapse from exhaustion."

He must have agreed, because Hermione heard his fading footfalls and then the sound of the door gently closing.

"There now," the Healer said. Hermione felt the sheets being tucked more firmly against her sides. "What a lucky witch you are. That wizard hasn't left your side since they brought you in last night. The poor man looks dead on his feet, so I sent him out for some tea. Don't you worry, though. I'm sure he'll back as fast as Fiendfyre."

Hermione listened as the Healer moved around the bed and began adjusting the sheet on the other side.

"Yes, you're quite a lucky witch to have a husband who obviously loves you so much. You hold on to that one."

That was odd. The man's voice had been familiar, but she hadn't thought it was Ron. And Hermione distinctly remembered divorcing Ron at his request. He didn't love her; he loved Eleanor Branstone. He had told her so himself and then had the audacity to parade the witch in front of her with no thought to her feelings whatsoever. Why, then, would he be playing the part of the dutiful, loving husband by sitting vigil at her bedside?

But the Healer had said it was her husband. Perhaps Ron was attempting to salvage some small portion of their friendship. It made sense; it wouldn't be the first time Ron had abandoned her, only to come slinking back later to beg her forgiveness. Well, she wasn't about to forgive him this time. He had divorced her...she was *done*.

Hermione fought to regain full consciousness, struggling against the fog that was clouding her brain, so that she could tell Ron where he could shove his apologies. Finally, from beneath her eyelids, she could see the lights from above her hospital bed. She slowly forced her eyes to open, blinking until she made out the smiling face of the Healer.

"Hello, dear. I'm Healer Merriweather. I see you've decided to join us. We've been quite worried about you."

Hermione wanted to tell the Healer to fetch Ron so she could tell him to get out, but she could only manage a guttural moan.

"Don't try to speak yet. You don't want to push yourself. I expect you want to see that fine wizard of yours. He's been here all night, and I finally convinced him to pop out for a bit of tea. He'll be here any moment, I promise. Why don't you rest, and I'll tell you what happened."

Hermione nodded and closed her eyes. Perhaps she would be able to speak by the time he returned and could tell him off properly.

The Healer explained that Hermione had been at a friend's house the previous evening and had collapsed, hitting her head on a table as she fell. Hermione instantly attempted to recall the events of the evening...going through the professor's things, feeling a bit odd about his more personal belongings, and then She frowned. She remembered nothing after levitating the small box to the centre of the room. Why couldn't she remember what had happened after?

She returned her attention to the Healer, who said that Luna had brought her in and contacted her husband. Apparently, his arrival had been so dramatic that it was the talk of St Mungo's.

"I've never seen anything like it. Oh, we heard the rumours after the war that such things were possible, but to actually see it Well, it was rather dashing. Had all the witches swooning and the wizards seething with jealousy." Healer Merriweather chuckled and then continued to relay the story. "He flew right up to the welcomewitch's desk, not a broom in sight. Even she became flustered! Never thought I'd see that happen, I can tell you that. And then he stalked off down the corridor, straight to this very room, those black robes of his billowing behind him like a storm cloud."

Hermione stopped listening. She didn't know whom the Healer was describing, but it certainly was not her former husband. Ron would never have dropped everything to sit at her bedside, wouldn't have known how to fly without a broom, and definitely did not have robes that billowed.

In fact, if she hadn't known better, she would have sworn the Healer was describing...

"Did she wake?"

Hermione stiffened; it sounded exactly like...

"In fact, she did! Just a moment ago," Healer Merriweather assured him.

But that was impossible. He had been dead for years.

"Hermione?"

And even if he were alive, he certainly was not and had never been her husband!

"Open your eyes, Hermione."

It was a dream, she decided. She would open her eyes and find herself on Luna's sofa, covered in parchments and surrounded by books. Slowly, she peeked out from beneath her lashes, then opened her eyes fully, until she was staring at the worried visage of the man looming over her.

Not knowing what else to do, Hermione opened her mouth ... and screamed directly into the face of a very much alive Severus Snape.

A/N: This story is complete, and I will post a new chapter every other day or so.

Huge thanks to my beta readers, DeeMichelle and Subversa, and to my Brit picker, LettyBird, for all their help. They're amazing!

The basic plot for this story was inspired by an episode of a television show. In order not to ruin the story, I'll reveal what show and which episode after the last chapter.

Known and Unknown

Chapter 2 of 7

While sorting through Severus Snape's belongings, Hermione makes an intriguing discovery that changes her life forever.

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Chapter Two

Known and Unknown

Hermione ceased screaming but rushed from the bed, ignoring the throbbing pain in her head as she panicked at the sight of the dead man who seemed intent on grabbing her. What was going on?

"Stay away from me!" she cried as she backed against the far wall, putting as much space between her and the man she knew had to be an impostor. Severus Snape was dead and had been dead for a very long time. He was not in her hospital room and certainly was not her husband.

Healer Merriweather rushed from the room, her shrill call for assistance echoing down the corridor. Hermione relaxed minutely at the knowledge that help was coming, but she kept her eyes focussed solely on the man before her, wary of the impostor's possible intentions.

"Hermione," the man said soothingly. "You must remain calm. You will cause yourself further damage. Return to the bed. Please." His eyes implored her to listen, to do as he said.

If she hadn't been certain that he was an impostor before, she was now; Severus Snape would never implore, soothe, or say please...not to her, not to anyone.

Pain lanced across her forehead as she shook her head, one arm stretched out before her as if that alone would keep him at bay, the other blindly scrabbling at the bedside table next to her, hoping to find her wand. "I don't know what you're attempting to accomplish," she said, forcing her voice to remain steady, "but I suggest you leave before the Aurors arrive to take you away."

The man arched an eyebrow. Hermione sucked in a breath at the familiar expression; this man was good, but he couldn't fool her. He had an excellent command of the professor's mannerisms, but his dark eyes were much too soft, much too kind.

She attempted to shake off the spark of curiosity that thought aroused, but the question refused to be ignored: If his goal were to harm her, why would his eyes be kind?

"What in the...?" he began, and then his brow knit in confusion. "What's wrong? Why are you acting this way?"

He edged around the bed, slowly but steadily approaching her.

"Stop! Don't...don't come any closer!" Hermione winced, her head throbbing in agony at her panicked outcry. Her mind seemed unable to process things fast enough, and until she could think properly, she would concentrate solely on self-preservation.

The man stopped, however, just at the end of the bed, not even two metres from her position against the wall. He appeared confused and ... hurt. If the situation hadn't been so dire, Hermione would have laughed. Honestly, whoever this person was, they hadn't done proper research on the late enigmatic professor. Severus Snape would never display his more tender emotions so easily, so openly.

Her traitorous mind, however, reminded her of the picture of Professor Snape with Luna's parents...the one that had so intrigued her. Clearly he had been capable of showing emotion ... when he so chose.

Pushing aside the thought, she blinked rapidly; the pain in her head was taking its toll, and she wanted nothing more than to slide to the floor in an exhausted heap. She braced herself, not wanting to appear weak before help could arrive.

The impostor was about to speak again when the door was flung open, revealing Healer Merriweather, a lavender phial clutched in one hand, and ... oh, thank Merlin. She had brought Harry.

Relieved, and convinced that Harry would be capable of handling one rather ill-planned impersonator on his own, Hermione allowed her body to succumb to the pain, sliding down the wall until her bum hit the floor. She pulled up her legs and wrapped her arms around them, resting her aching head atop her knees and willing the pain to cease.

"What the bloody hell is going on?"

Hermione frowned and then looked up at the man who had been her best friend for almost two decades. Harry looked neither shocked nor outraged nor any other emotion that would have made perfect sense in such a situation. Instead, Harry stood just inside the doorway, his green eyes filled with confusion and concern. His wand remained sheathed.

She was about to point out the obvious issue...a man impersonating a dead hero was in the room and claiming he was her husband...when Harry did something utterly unthinkable: He turned to the impostor and said, "Severus? Is she all right? What's going on?"

Scrambling to her feet, Hermione began to search for her wand in earnest. Obviously the entire world had gone mad. Harry was speaking with the impostor as if he were an old friend, the Healer was looking at her as if she had gone barmy, and that man simply stood staring at her with some sort of bizarre expectation. She didn't know what was going on, but she wasn't about to wait around to find out. Ignoring their presence in the room, she pulled herself together long enough to think of Summoning her wand. Wandless magic wasn't the easiest of achievements, but given her desperate state, she thought it was worth a try.

"*Accio wa...*"

Before she could complete the incantation, they were on her, Harry having nearly leapt over the bed. She kicked and clawed and bit as they wrestled her to the bed, her head nearly exploding in agony, but she didn't stop. Something wasn't right. Everything was dreadfully wrong, and she couldn't let them win. She couldn't let them...

Damn it. She'd forgotten about the phial in Healer Merriweather's hand. Hermione choked as the Healer managed to spill the lavender potion into her mouth, using a standard Healer's charm to force the liquid down her throat.

"Bloody bastards," she slurred as the Calming Draught quickly took effect. Her limbs ceased their movements, and she felt herself being magically restrained to the bed. She tried to fight the draught but knew it was to no avail. Tears leaked from the corners of her eyes as her brain slowly registered Harry's betrayal. Over the course of the last two weeks, both of her oldest and dearest friends had turned on her. It was too much for her to take. Her lips curled into a sneer, albeit a small, almost drunken one. "*Et tu, Harry?*"

Harry's forehead wrinkled, and he looked to the fake Snape in confusion. But the man's dark eyes rested solely on Hermione. He raised his wand, and before Hermione could fully process that Harry did not appear at all alarmed, the man softly cast the spell.

"*Legilimens.*"

Had Hermione been in full control of her faculties, he would have never been able to infiltrate her mind. As it was, however, he entered easily and had begun sifting through her memories before she had realised he was even there. His intrusion was gentle, almost tender, and had she not been furious, terrified, and drugged, Hermione would have wondered at the care he was taking to make the experience as pleasant as possible.

It was over as quickly as it had begun, and he eased out of her mind, leaving behind a gentle whisper of her name as the only indicator of his presence. Hermione tried to open her eyes...only then did she realise she had even closed them...but found that her eyelids would not cooperate. Either the Healer had given her too much of the draught, or it had been laced with a sleeping potion.

Hovering on the edge of consciousness, she heard Harry's worried voice. "Great Merlin's balls, Severus. Was that the only way to find out what's wrong with her?" When there was no answer, Harry sighed and asked, "What is it? What's happened to her?"

Hermione felt herself drift further towards the arms of Morpheus during the heavy silence that followed. Just before she finally fell asleep, she heard the choked reply:

"She doesn't remember. She doesn't know me."

Hermione shifted gingerly in the wretched hospital bed, still a bit groggy from the Calming Draught the Healer had forced down her throat. She was frightened and confused. The things they were insinuating were absurd...insane. Yet she was the one they had sedated and examined as if she had completely lost her mind.

No, it wasn't insanity; Healer Merriweather claimed it was amnesia. Five years, two months, and seventeen days...gone. And during that time, she had somehow gained a new husband, one who had once been her professor, had ridiculed and despised her...though she reluctantly granted that might have been part of his role as a spy ... perhaps. Merlin, she'd seen him *die*. It was impossible, ludicrous.

Wrapping her arms about her torso, she turned onto her side and closed her eyes, inhaling deeply. She grimaced. The one thing Hermione had always hated most about St Mungo's was the lack of smell. A Muggle hospital would reek of the chemicals used for disinfection; St Mungo's, being a magical facility, used various disinfecting charms, leaving behind an odourless environment. The lack of any odour was disconcerting ... especially since it meant the only thing she *could* smell was the lingering scent of potions ingredients and herbs.

Which meant that *he* was still there.

Not that she hadn't been aware of his continued presence. How could she not, with his stare burning a hole into the back of her head? As far as she knew, he had not left

the room for a single moment since she had awakened...not when she had screamed in his face in shock, not when she had recoiled from his attempts to soothe her, and not even after she had bitten him. Instead, he had retreated into the shadows, to a chair pushed into the far corner of the room, where he sat facing her, his black eyes intensely watchful, his face etched with pain and concern.

She couldn't bear to look at him.

There was a knock at the door, and Hermione heard someone enter the room.

"Mr Snape," Healer Merriweather whispered. "Would you mind stepping into the hall?"

He muttered an affirmation, and Hermione heard him approach her bed. She stiffened as she felt him brush the back of his fingers against her cheek. He inhaled deeply, then jaggedly released the breath before leaving the room to consult with the Healer.

Hermione was left alone, struggling to fathom why she felt like crying.

"Are you ready?"

Hermione turned away from the window to face the man she had once believed to be an impostor, the unfamiliar robes fluttering about her calves as she moved, and frowned. She wasn't sure how to answer the question. "I suppose."

"Good. Healer Merriweather has approved your discharge. We may leave whenever you wish."

"All right." Hermione sincerely hoped she didn't sound as nervous as she felt. She was leaving ... with *him*. Needing a few moments to compose herself, she turned back to the window, her fingers toying with the ring on her finger.

It had taken several hours of questions, mountains of official paperwork from the Ministry, a wand analysis, and three drops of Veritaserum before Hermione had finally accepted that the man before her truly was Severus Snape. Apparently he had gone into hiding after the war, allowing the wizarding world to believe him dead rather than face an uncertain future. Hermione was still unclear as to what had led to his return or to their marriage. Severus...*how strange to call him that*...had answered all her questions thoroughly, but Hermione had been unwilling to broach those subjects. She wasn't sure that she was ready to hear the answers.

While she had accepted that he was indeed Severus Snape, she was not yet convinced of their marriage, even though everyone had assured her that it was true. A marriage license had been provided that had clearly been signed by her, both with ink and magic. Yet it seemed too preposterous a notion to consider.

Even so, despite her reticence, she was about to return with him to his home, to the life they had purportedly built together. She had balked initially, but Healer Merriweather had admonished her quite severely, telling her that if she wished to ever remember the last five years, then she needed to return to her life, to surround herself with familiarity.

"Come," Severus said, interrupting her thoughts. "The children are anxious to see you."

The children. Hermione moved away from the window and for the first time, greeted Severus with a joyful smile.

His home, it appeared, was a white stone cottage with a grey slate roof and a red door in Hogsmeade. Colourful flowers lined the front path and filled the boxes under the windows. On one side of the cottage was a large tree with several low branches, one of which held a wooden swing. A low stone wall surrounded the property, separating the cottage from its neighbours. It was charming and utterly unlike anything Hermione had imagined.

"You were expecting something more dungeon-like?" Severus asked from behind her.

Surprised by his amused tone, she turned her head and returned his small smile. "Perhaps."

He chuckled softly, the sound sending shivers along her spine. "I am sorry to disappoint you, then." He opened the door and ushered her inside. "After you."

Once inside, Hermione paused inside the hallway and looked around. To the immediate left of the front door was the staircase to the first floor, and there were several doorways that led to rooms off the hall. The pale cream of the woodwork complemented the warm, golden yellow of the walls, and the wide plank oak flooring made the hall feel cosy and inviting.

"The children will be returning soon. Would you care for a cup of tea?" Severus asked from behind her as he hung his cloak on the coat rack.

Hermione allowed him to take her cloak, as well, and replied, "Yes, please." Tea sounded delightful ... and would be a good distraction.

"Good. Feel free to look around. I shall return momentarily." He walked off towards what Hermione assumed must be the kitchen.

Hermione stood awkwardly in the entry hall for a few moments. She had to admit she was curious. Giving in to her inquisitive nature, she peeked in the two doors on her right and discovered a water closet and a room that appeared to be Severus' study. The loo was a pale, powdery blue, while the study was a rich olive green. The woodwork and oak floors from the entry hall were present in these rooms, as well. *They must go throughout the entire house,* Hermione surmised.

Severus had gone straight, down a small corridor that must have led to the kitchen, so she turned to the door to the left of the front door and entered the dining room. Inside was an antique oak table, obviously well-used but also well maintained, its rich patina glowing in the late afternoon sunlight that filtered through the window. She smiled as she could easily see meals at the table with Rose and Hugo, chatter and laughter filling the room. She tried to imagine Severus joining in but simply couldn't picture it. Frowning, Hermione continued her exploration.

As she walked through the dining room, she passed a large opening on her right. Without entering fully, she took in the surprisingly modern kitchen. The simple beech cabinets and butcher block countertops merged nicely with the traditional elements of the cottage, while the modern lines and finishes gave it a current feel.

Severus was standing at the modern Muggle stove, his back to her as he heated the kettle. Hermione recognised her favourite teapot awaiting use beside the stove, and somehow she knew that three teabags had already been placed inside.

She worried her lower lip between her teeth as she watched him. He had not left her side for more than a few minutes at a time since she had awakened, but up until that moment, Hermione had not taken the time to really look at the man who was her husband. He was as tall as she remembered, his body still lean, although he seemed healthier, not as spindly. The genetics of being a wizard meant that even in his fifties, his hair was still as coal black as the last time she had seen him, almost two decades prior. Severus had removed his robes and frock coat and had tossed them over a chair at the small kitchen table, leaving him only his white shirt and black trousers. His shoulders were broader than she would have expected, and she watched the muscles of his back move underneath the white linen shirt as he fixed the tea. Hermione couldn't help but allow her gaze to traverse his form. She had to admit, he had a rather nice arse.

A bit discomfited by that thought, Hermione hurried across the dining room to the other door in the room. It led to a large sitting room, which was absolutely lovely. The ceiling was clad in more of the warm oak and featured exposed beams, giving the room a casual air. The walls were a golden tan, and the plush furniture was a rich olive green. Paintings of various landscapes dotted the walls, and a pair of French doors led out to the back garden. Along the main wall sat a large, stone fireplace with various photos and knickknacks littering the mantle.

From what she had seen of the house, it was warm and comfortable, inviting, even, and she recognised her own tastes in the finishes and furnishings. However, while she could easily imagine herself and the children here, she was painfully aware that she was a stranger in its midst. Nothing was at all familiar.

The photographs on the mantle mocked her, confirmation of a life of which she had no recollection. She was inundated with emotions: confusion, curiosity, fear. Part of her wanted to look, to see the evidence of the five years of her life that had passed her by, while another part of her was frightened of that very proof. She realised at that moment that she was still hoping that she would wake up soon and find herself in Luna's sitting room, surrounded by Professor Snape's belongings.

Gathering her courage, she walked to the mantle. The first several photographs were ones with which she was familiar...baby pictures of Rose and Hugo. She smiled and moved the next photo, the one Luna had shown her of her parents and Severus. Hermione wondered if it was a copy or if Luna and her father given it to him.

Her gaze travelled to the next frame; this one was new ... to her, at least. Severus was standing in the Lovegoods' garden, holding a tiny, bald infant in his arms and smiling warmly as he looked down at the angelic face.

"My goddaughter."

Hermione nearly jumped out of her skin and spun around, clutching a hand to her chest.

"My apologies. I didn't mean to startle you." Severus set the teacups on the low table that sat in front of the sofa and then seated himself. "Tea, strong, splash of milk, no sugar," he said, sliding a teacup towards her as she slowly sat down at the far end of the sofa. If he noticed her hesitance, he pretended otherwise.

That he knew how she preferred her tea was both comforting and disconcerting.

"Thank you," she murmured as she reached for the teacup.

He nodded and sipped at his own tea.

They sat in awkward silence for several minutes...or at least it felt awkward to Hermione; Severus appeared blissfully unaware of her discomfiture as he lazily crossed his legs at the ankle and continued to drink his tea. Finally, Hermione said, "Luna is your goddaughter?"

"Mm." He swallowed and set his cup on the table, angling his body slightly towards her. "Yes, she is."

"That's ... interesting."

He laughed, and she found herself mesmerised by the rich, deep sound. "It certainly is that. I have been friends with her parents since our first year at Hogwarts. Only Xenophilius and Eglantine would ask a Death Eater to be godparent to their child." He chuckled again and shook his head, as if he were still incredulous of the request, even after so many years.

His eyes flitted to the mantle, and Hermione followed his line of sight. Her brow furrowed. He appeared to be looking at a carving, but she couldn't make out what it was exactly.

"May I?" she asked, already standing to take a closer look.

He shrugged his indifference, folding his arms across his chest, his expression neutral.

Hermione picked up the small object and smiled; carved of a solid piece of oak, it was a snake, a badger, a raven, and a lion...the four Houses of Hogwarts. She glanced at Severus. "A gift from the school?"

He smirked and shook his head. "I carved that one during my fourth year at Hogwarts. There are...or were...three others in existence. Xenophilius has one...he would be the Ravenclaw. Eglantine, the Hufflepuff, had another...I believe it is in Luna's possession now. I, of course, was the Slytherin, and the Gryffindor"

He trailed off and looked at her expectantly.

As though she should know the answer. As though she had heard the story of the carving many times before.

"I...I'm sorry. I don't know."

One corner of his mouth curved upwards in a small, reassuring smile. "It's quite all right. The Gryffindor was Lily Evans. The four of us were quite close, although I must admit we were an odd bunch. As you know from your own time at Hogwarts, it isn't often that close friendships are made with those from other Houses...especially with a Slytherin included," he added self-deprecatingly.

"Yes," Hermione agreed as she looked at the carving, "but what a lovely concept...four friends, one from each House."

Severus nodded. "It was ... while it lasted."

He was quiet for a moment, and Hermione thought that he was probably recalling the events that had led to the end of his friendship with Lily; while she wasn't aware of the details, Harry had once told her that Severus and his mother had been friends but had a falling out. He'd also said that Severus had been in love with Lily ... but Hermione wisely held her tongue when it came to that subject.

Severus cleared his throat, and that small smile returned. "I will always cherish the memories of that time."

Hermione glanced away; the conversation seemed to have turned terribly intimate somehow. She quickly replaced the carving and returned to the sofa and her tea, hoping that Severus would not notice the slight tremble in her fingers as she picked up the cup.

"Hermione," Severus began, and she knew that she'd been unable to hide her discomfort. "It's only natural that you feel disoriented or uncomfortable. Please don't feel as if you must pretend that you are well."

His understanding was unexpected but appreciated. "Disoriented is an apt description," she said slowly, measuring her words carefully as she gazed into her teacup. "I feel comfortable in this house, yet nothing is familiar. It's very confusing." She lifted her eyes to his. "I can't imagine this is much easier for you."

"Indeed. I miss my wife."

Hermione sucked in a shaky breath. He looked so lonely, so bereft. It was disconcerting to see his emotions so clearly visible; she was used to seeing the mask, not the man. She didn't know what she could possibly say to ease his pain. "I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault," he replied. "I..."

Whatever he had been about to say was interrupted by the sound of the front door opening. Hermione grinned; it had to be the children. She had missed them desperately and couldn't wait to see them.

Severus released a huff of laughter and stood, offering her a hand and helping her to her feet. "Come. They are anxious to see you, as well."

Sure enough, the quick-paced pounding of little feet heralded the arrival of Rose and Hugo, and Hermione turned to the doorway to greet them.

Her enthusiastic smile faded from her lips as they ran into the room. Her arms mechanically surrounded children who seemed to know and love her ... but who were simultaneously familiar yet utterly unknown to her.

Rose had grown quite tall, and her face had slimmed, the roundness of childhood all but gone. Her hair and eyes were the same, but she was so much more mature than she had been three days ago. And Hugo ... her baby. He had also grown, his gangly arms and legs indicating that he would be tall like his father. His ginger hair had darkened and was longer than it had been, curling over his ears and the back of his neck. Hermione barely refrained from gasping as she realised that Rose would now be ten, almost eleven, and Hugo was seven.

The knowledge that she had lost five years of not only her life but of her children's lives came crashing down around her. Hermione sank to her knees and stared at the two joyful faces as they chattered away, asking if she was feeling better, telling her about their 'holiday' with their grandparents, and informing her that their grandfather had allowed them to eat ice cream for breakfast.

"Hugo!" the girl scolded, her small fists on her hips. "You weren't to tell!"

They continued to bicker amongst themselves as Hermione attempted to catch her breath. Her children, her babies

She looked up at Severus, tears swimming in her eyes.

Recognising her distress, Severus encouraged the children...whom Hermione realised were now eerily silent...to select a game to play with their grandparents before dinner. Reluctantly the two red-haired children left the room, repeatedly glancing over their shoulders, their faces filled with worry.

She heard the Weasleys with the children, offering to take them outside to play, and then Severus knelt on the floor in front of her and pulled her into his arms. She clung to him, her fingers twisting into the fabric of his shirt as she rested her forehead against his shoulder, seeking comfort where it was offered.

"It's overwhelming, I know," he soothed. One arm had loosely wrapped around her waist, while the other stroked her hair. "It will be fine, Hermione. I promise you, it will be fine."

Hermione stiffened as she realised she was currently being held by a man she hardly knew and loosened her grip on his shirt. "I'm sorry."

Severus quickly released her and shook his head as he helped her stand. "No need for apologies. I understand," Severus murmured. "Let me show you to your room. Dinner isn't for another hour or so...you may rest if you'd like."

Hermione immediately recognised his intent: he was offering her privacy and some time to regain her composure. She quickly agreed and followed him as he led her back through the house and up the stairs.

Later, she would vaguely recall him informing her of the locations of the children's rooms, as well as his own, the bathroom, and her upstairs study, but for now she could only nod, her mind unable to fully process a word he uttered.

He opened a door, and Hermione entered, taking a brief look at the room that was now her own. Everything was white, from the walls to the furniture.

"This is a guest room, but I think it will suit your purposes," Severus said impassively.

Hermione turned to see him standing awkwardly in the doorway, his cheeks lightly flushed. He cleared his throat and gestured toward the corner of the room.

"I took the liberty of bringing in our family photo albums. Healer Merriweather recommended that you spend some time looking at them...she said they might help." He ran a hand through his hair, and Hermione was intrigued by the nervous gesture; she'd never before seen the man in such a state. "I'll knock when dinner is ready." And with that he left, his back rigid and his face devoid of all expression.

Hermione blinked at his sudden change in demeanour and then closed the door before turning back to look at the room. She recognised nothing but felt immediately at ease. Once again, her mind attempted to absorb the strange, incongruousness of the familiar within the unknown; the attempt was unsuccessful. Longing for a few minutes' respite, she lay down on the bed and allowed herself to fall into the blessed abyss of sleep.

As soon as the children had been put to bed, Hermione had decided to explore the garden. Her mind was frazzled, and she sought the peaceful quiet of the outdoors at dusk. What she found was a garden that was as lovely as the cottage itself. Filled with flowers and herbs and various other plants, it was a luxuriant sanctuary. The heady scent of night blooming jasmine filled the air, and Hermione sat on a bench under the kitchen window and breathed in the lush fragrance. After several minutes, her body and mind were finally able to relax.

Dinner had been an awkward affair.

Surprisingly...at least to Hermione...the Weasleys had joined them for the evening meal. They had eaten in strained silence; no one, Hermione included, had known how to act after what had occurred earlier with the children. She had tried to offer them a reassuring smile but knew that it probably appeared as more of a grimace.

She would have to overcome this feeling of disorientation ... and soon; Hermione didn't know how much longer she could take the sad glances and careful hugs from her children. She reminded herself that even though they were older, they were still her children, and she loved them more than life itself. Rose and Hugo were the most loving, sensitive, caring creatures she had ever known...she would not allow the situation in which she found herself to negatively impact them any longer. She would simply love them and get to know them again. There was no other option.

"Go sit down, Molly. I'll take care of the washing up."

The kitchen window was open to welcome in the night air, and Severus' deep voice drifted easily out into the garden. Hermione closed her eyes and attempted to block the intriguing, anxiety-inducing sound, her thumb moving to twist her ring about her finger.

"Nonsense," came Molly's admonition. "It will go more quickly if I help. Now, budge over. I'll wash, and you may dry."

Hermione couldn't help but allow a small smile at Severus' reply: "Yes, Molly."

For several minutes, Hermione closed her eyes and enjoyed the night air as she listened to the soft clinking of dishes and the gentle swishing of water. It was relaxing. Peaceful.

"You will want to advise Ron not to visit for at least the next several days," Severus murmured, his words instantly shattering Hermione's fragile tranquillity. "For Hermione, it's only been a few weeks since their divorce. I do not know how she would react to his presence."

Ron. Her husband ... *former* husband. Her heart hurt with remembered betrayal, still so fresh to her, forgone and forgiven, by the sound of it, to everyone else.

"They won't be back from holiday until the end of the week, but I'll send them an owl tomorrow, nonetheless," Molly agreed. "Given the circumstances, it would be best for Ron and Eleanor to stay away ... for now anyway."

Them. She hated the fact that Ron's being part of a "them" hurt her. A small part of her had hoped, even gleefully prayed, that his relationship with Eleanor had not lasted beyond a few months' time. Obviously, that hadn't happened. Not that she wanted him back...she certainly did not want that...but, if she were honest, she had hoped that he would realise his error in leaving her and be alone and miserable in some pathetic excuse for a flat, with only the rats to keep him company.

Good Merlin's ghost. Perhaps she was more vengeful than she'd thought.

"Indeed," Severus replied, interrupting her thoughts. "You may tell him that I will bring the children for their visits until Hermione is ready to see him."

"Or until she remembers."

There was silence, and Hermione found herself holding her breath as she awaited Severus' reply.

"Or until she remembers," he repeated. Had Hermione not been listening so carefully, she would have missed the softly spoken words.

"Oh, dear boy," Molly suddenly said soothingly, and Hermione's brain conjured the insane image of the older woman pulling the wizard into one of her infamous hugs. "I know this is difficult, but everything will work out fine. Hermione loves you...she'll come back to you. Make no mistake about that."

"I hope so, Molly. I don't know how long I can survive without her."

The quiet desperation, the underlying longing in his voice was so heart-wrenching, so painful, that Hermione fled into the sitting room, through the house and up the stairs to the guest room, unable to listen to another word.

She was breathing heavily as she entered the bedroom, as if she had run a marathon rather than a short sprint up the stairs. Closing the door behind her, Hermione paused for a moment, resting her forehead on the door, her hands still clinging to the doorknob.

She would get through this. She would.

Turning, Hermione walked to the bed, her eyes immediately falling on the photo albums that sat on the table beside the bed. They called to her, tempting her to partake, even in such small measure, of the life they offered to share.

Slowly, she made her way across the room. She picked up the first of the three albums and then sat down on the edge of the bed, placing the heavy book in front of her. Several minutes passed as she stared at the cover, her curiosity piquing along with her reticence. Finally, she opened the album.

Within moments, she slammed the cover shut and thrust the album as far away from her as she could, unable to look beyond the first page. Her head was spinning in confusion; nothing made any sense anymore. Burying her face in a pillow, Hermione attempted to stem the flow of hot tears that streamed from beneath her eyelids as she mourned a life she could not remember living.

A/N: Thanks again to my betas, DeeMichelle and Subversa, and to my Brit picker, LettyBird. You're the best! I'd also like to thank machshefa for all her help.

Next chapter will be up in a day or two.

Coming to Terms

Chapter 3 of 7

While sorting through Severus Snape's belongings, Hermione makes an intriguing discovery that changes her life forever.

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Chapter Three

Coming to Terms

"I shall be returning to work tomorrow," Severus said as he entered the sitting room, two cups of tea in hand.

It seemed as if he were always plying her with tea. Part of Hermione wanted to scream at him that, contrary to popular belief, tea was not the solution to every problem. The other part...the part that was less emotionally overwrought...knew that offering tea was the only thing Severus knew to do, given the less than ideal situation in which they had found themselves. When in doubt, serve tea.

Putting down the book she had been reading, Hermione offered him a small smile and accepted the cup. It was a dreary, rainy day, and the children had returned to primary school that morning. Apparently, Severus and her past self, along with her ex-husband, had determined that with Hermione working, it would be a good idea for the children to attend Muggle school until they turned eleven, so that they could experience that aspect of their non-magical heritage. Now, however, it simply left her alone with too much time to think...something she had never thought she'd say...and a husband she did not remember.

Just then, Hermione became aware of the words Severus had spoken when he'd entered the sitting room. "You're going back to work?"

"Mm," he agreed as he swallowed his tea. He set the cup back in its saucer, his dark eyes meeting hers. "Harry has been covering my classes for the past week, but he must now return to his position at the Ministry."

"Classes?"

Severus explained how, upon his return from his self-imposed exile, he had been offered the Defence Against the Dark Arts position. It seemed that after the exhibit on his role in the war, people in the wizarding world had been quite keen to have such a vaunted hero teaching their children. He had accepted the position with the caveat that he could live in Hogsmeade with his new wife...ostensibly herself.

Hermione twisted the ring on her left hand with her thumb. "I see. And what about me? What will I do?" While she wasn't exactly comfortable being alone with Severus, she didn't relish the idea of staying at the cottage by herself all day, surrounded by the evidence of how her mind had betrayed her.

"I spoke with your superiors at the Ministry, and they have informed me that when you feel you are up to the challenge, you may return...as soon as next week, if you wish."

"Really?" Hermione exclaimed, her face lighting up with anticipation. "It would be lovely to get back to work...though I suppose my projects have already been completed," she added ruefully.

Severus smirked and then rose to his feet. "Since this is our last full day together, I thought you might wish to go through the photo albums with me this afternoon. Perhaps if we discuss them, something will jog your memory."

Hermione's smile faltered. "Oh. Yes, I suppose we could do that, but" She paused, desperately attempting to think of something to sway him away from that particular activity; she wasn't ready to look at the albums yet. She had tried several times, but she had been unable to look past the first page before her heart had begun to race and her throat had tightened until she had to struggle to catch her breath. The panic had been so profound that she had finally put the albums in the top of her wardrobe, so that they would remain out of sight. She didn't know why the photos affected her so negatively. Perhaps it would feel too real if she saw the tangible evidence of the memories she no longer had, or maybe she simply wasn't ready to admit that this life was truly hers.

"I was hoping to go to the castle and have tea with Minerva this afternoon," she finally blurted out. His expression became unreadable, and Hermione felt a twinge of guilt. Severus wanted to spend time with her, she knew, and while she had been cordial and polite, she was well aware that she'd also been distant and rather mercurial. Despite her guilt, she couldn't bring herself to look at the albums. Not yet, and maybe not ever.

"I see," he said slowly. "I am quite certain that Minerva will appreciate the visit." He studied her for almost a full minute, until Hermione fidgeted a bit in her seat. "You have looked at the albums, have you not?"

Hermione winced internally; she had hoped he wouldn't ask that question. Her thumb worked the ring around her finger more quickly. She wouldn't lie...exactly. "I've looked at them, yes."

That was true. She had looked at them...she just hadn't managed to look beyond the first page.

"Good. Healer Merriweather believes that the photos will help."

His eyes fell to her hands, where she continued to twist her ring, and his lips curled into a small, satisfied smile. "I see some things haven't changed."

"Hm?"

"Your ring. You twist it when you're feeling out of sorts."

Hermione looked down, and for the first time, took note of the wedding ring on her left hand. The weight had been so natural...after all, she'd only been without the one that Ron had given her for a few weeks...that she hadn't truly processed its presence. Looking at it now, she was surprised by how much it suited her.

Rather than the plain gold band with the small ruby solitaire she'd worn when married to Ron, this ring was wrought of both silver and gold strands woven together to form an open band of Celtic knots. A peek at Severus' left hand revealed the matching band.

"It's lovely," she said softly.

There was silence for several long, uncomfortable moments until Severus spoke. "I'm glad that you like it. I'll leave you now...you'll want to let Minerva know you're coming for tea."

As he strode from the room, Hermione had the uneasy feeling that she had somehow hurt his feelings.

Hermione spent the rest of the week visiting various friends, catching up on their lives, and inadvertently learning much about her relationship with Severus Snape.

By all accounts, the man simply adored her. The descriptions of their relationship indicated that their marriage was a happy one: Neville called it steady, Luna referred to it as a partnership, Ginny said it was utterly romantic, and Minerva merely sniffed, her small, stern eyes bearing down at her from over the top of her glasses, and said, "I have never seen either of you so happy, and I have known both of you since you were eleven years old. In short, you bring out the best in each other."

Minerva had also given her much to think about. "He may appear strong for your sake," she had said, "but I can only imagine how vulnerable he is feeling at this moment. He loves you as he has loved no other, and yes, that includes Lily Evans Potter. I'm quite certain the man is scared out of his wits that the one thing he fears the most is about to occur...that you will be lost to him forever."

The words were compelling, but even so, with her divorce from Ron so fresh in her mind and heart, Hermione found marriage to Severus Snape a difficult thing to contemplate.

Every inch of the dining room table was covered in various parchments and books. Seated in the centre chair was Hermione, the scratching of her quill the only sound in the room.

Working as an Unspeakable had its perks, including a fabulous library, but the workload was always challenging, something Hermione enjoyed. Her current project required a great deal of research...too much, actually, if she wanted to finish within the time parameters set by her supervisor. With no other choice, she had taken everything back to the cottage and set to work. The children were spending the week with Ron, and for once, Hermione was thankful; she could research to her heart's content with no interruptions.

"Hermione?"

Startled, she looked up only to see Severus, requisite cups of tea in hand.

"Hello," she greeted him as she accepted the tea. "You're back early."

Severus sat down in the chair opposite her and pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. "Yes. We began duelling practice today. One of the third-years during my final class decided to use a Mud-Slinging Hex. Unfortunately for Mr Harris, his aim leaves much to be desired."

"He didn't." She was careful not to reveal her amusement.

"He did. Even worse, the boy somehow managed to alter the hex to be impervious to cleaning charms. I, then, decided that I deserved to cancel my office hours and return home to shower." He noted the parchments and books but made no move to either read or inquire. It occurred to Hermione that, as her husband, he would have been used to her coming home with work and not being able to discuss it with him.

"I didn't hear you arrive," she said, gathering up the various parchments and books.

"I came through the Floo upstairs so that I wouldn't trail mud through the house."

"Ah."

Hermione worried her lower lip as they sat in awkward silence. Finally, after several agonising minutes, Severus rose to his feet.

"I'll start dinner, then," he said, his voice low, before leaving the room.

Hermione watched him leave and sighed. She hated hurting him, and yet she knew that her continued reticence was doing just that. He was so patient with her...something she would never have anticipated from the man who had once been her professor. In truth, he was very different now, more reminiscent of the man whose picture with Luna's parents had so intrigued her.

She propped her chin on the palm of one hand and stared at the doorway to the kitchen, watching Severus as he gathered his supplies. Perhaps she should attempt to get to know this man. Like it or not, this was her life, and she wasn't being fair to either one of them by holding back. She must have been in love with him to marry him, and while she wasn't sure if those same feelings would manifest now, she owed it to herself and to her family to make an effort.

Now resolute, Hermione finished collecting the parchments and books, and a wave of her wand sent them to her room. She stood from the table and walked into the kitchen. Severus had brought out a pot, a sauce pan, and various fresh ingredients. She paused in the doorway and watched him as he worked. A smile hovered on her lips; who would have ever thought Severus Snape would cook for her?

Hermione suddenly realised that Severus had been doing all the cooking since she had been released from hospital. "I'm so sorry!" she exclaimed, causing Severus to peer at her over his shoulder.

An arched brow was his only reply.

"I've let you take over the cooking duties entirely, and that's quite rude of me. I should be of more help. I'm sorry."

One side of his mouth quirked into a wry grin, and he turned, resting a hip against the edge of the worktop. "Hermione, you don't cook. You've never done more than bake the occasional batch of biscuits with the children. The task has always fallen to me."

"Really?" She was oddly pleased by that. Ron had been a nightmare in the kitchen, having not inherited his mother's penchant for cooking, which meant that, by default, Hermione had prepared the meals.

"Yes, really," Severus continued, turning to slice some mushrooms. "As I said, you don't cook."

Hermione's forehead wrinkled, and she frowned. "It's not that I can't cook, it's just that I..."

"Don't enjoy it," Severus interrupted, his expression both amused and fond. "Yes, I know."

Hermione felt her cheeks flush, though she didn't know why.

"Lucky for you," he drawled, "I enjoy it immensely...it reminds me of potions work, only the results are far more palatable." He tossed the mushrooms into the pan and then pulled out a stool. "Don't dawdle in the doorway."

A laugh escaped her at the rebuke, and Severus mock-glared at her as she sat on the stool. "Would you like some help?"

He smirked, then returned to his task. "Perhaps later. Wine?" he asked, pouring a glass when she nodded.

The next three quarters of an hour was the most pleasant Hermione had experienced in a good long while. As she watched him prepare dinner, they discussed a variety of topics, from the current debacle at the Ministry...on which Hermione was already working, unbeknownst to him...to the latest gossip at Hogwarts. She found his dry wit and acerbic humour to be quite entertaining, as well as intellectually stimulating. He certainly kept her on her toes, and she was enjoying every minute.

There was no awkwardness as he moved about the kitchen, and Hermione could easily imagine that this was a nightly ritual for them. Rather than the discomfort she anticipated, the thought warmed her. Happy with that revelation, she relaxed even more, punctuating her points by occasionally laying a hand on his forearm. Perhaps it was the wine, but soon the two were engaged in a lovely bout of flirting, something Hermione had never truly indulged in but was enjoying immensely.

Severus reached for a wooden spoon, being sure to brush her knee with his hand, and then sampled the sauce he had created. "Hm. I believe it's missing something."

"May I try?" Hermione said, reaching for the spoon.

He ignored her outstretched hand and instead leaned close, blowing a stream of cool air across the surface before raising the spoon to her lips. "Careful now," he murmured, his gaze focussed upon her mouth. "It's hot."

A familiar yet rarely felt heat settled low in her abdomen, and Hermione opened her mouth to accept his offering, her eyes wide. Her lips closed around the spoon, and the flavours exploded against her tongue. "Mmm," she hummed before swallowing as he retracted the spoon. "Yes, I see what you mean. There is something missing, but even so, it's quite delicious."

"Is it?" Severus asked, his eyes still fixed upon her lips.

Hermione heard his breath catch as her own gaze was drawn to his mouth. Slowly, as if gauging her reaction, he lifted a hand to cup her cheek, his thumb grazing against her full lower lip.

"Hermione," he breathed, and then he leaned forward and allowed his mouth to brush chastely against her own, once, twice, three times.

Hermione reeled at the feel of his lips pressed to hers. This was how she'd always thought a man's mouth should feel: warm lips, thin but strong and pliable. Not at all like Ron's rather plump, cushiony...

Oh, gods. What was she doing? Her hands came up to his shoulders and pushed lightly. "No, I can't...oh, gods." It wasn't right, and yet it was. But how could it be both? Confusion and panic gripped her as she struggled with the warring desires to both pull him closer and push him away.

Severus took a few steps back, his cheeks flushed and his eyes downcast. The lips that had just kissed her so sweetly were pinched, and she watched as he visibly withdrew from her.

Damn it. In seeking to protect herself, she'd hurt him. Again. "I'm sor..."

"No. No more apologies." He turned away from her to stir the sauce. Lowering the flame under the saucepan, he then returned to preparing the rest of their meal, his spine rigid and his face wiped clean of all emotion.

Guilt gnawed at her once more as she remembered what Minerva had said, that he was more vulnerable than he appeared. Hermione wasn't prepared for the feelings he was evoking; not only was her heart still tender from the end of her marriage to Ron, but she was confused about her place in her own life. Severus knew more about her than she did, and yet she was still herself, still Hermione. Wasn't she?

Part of her longed to be everything she had been during the five years she had lost. But what if she couldn't be that woman, the one who had been his wife? What would happen then? She knew that Severus was aware of the complexities of the situation in which they found themselves, but the reality of it was another issue; it was clear to Hermione that, in that moment, all Severus knew was the sting of rejection.

"Thyme," he said suddenly, wiping his hands on a dish cloth.

"Perhaps a little more," Hermione said, her tone slightly pleading, hoping that he would pick up on the double meaning she intended. She willed him to look at her, her hands itching with the desire to reach out to him.

"Perhaps."

Then he went into the garden to collect the herb, his face hidden behind his curtain of hair.

Hermione lay in her bed curled onto her side as she watched the rain beat against her window, her thumb twisting the ring around her finger. A sigh escaped her lips as she contemplated how to repair the rift she had inadvertently created. Severus had been quiet throughout dinner, his face expressionless, which she was coming to learn was an indication of his wounded feelings.

She'd attempted to apologise again as they'd done the washing up. Severus had paused, having been in the midst of placing a plate in the cabinet, and closed his eyes briefly. Then he had put the dish away, closed the cabinet door, and said, "Do you find the idea of being ... affectionate with me to be repulsive? Do you consider marriage to me a hardship?"

"No! That's not it at all! I just" She had trailed off, not knowing what to say.

He had nodded curtly and said, "I have rounds this evening. I'll be at Hogwarts."

And then he had left.

Hours had passed, and he still had not returned. She had stayed up for far longer than was her wont, pretending to read in front of the fireplace in the sitting room. When she'd realised he wasn't coming back any time soon, she'd given up and gone to bed, hoping to find solace in sleep.

Sleep was proving elusive, however.

Hermione felt the sting of tears, feeling horribly guilty and sad, yet confused. Her emotions were a jumble, and she was growing increasingly frustrated; regardless of the five years that had passed for everyone else, to her it had only been a mere two months. She was surprised and a bit baffled by how drawn she was to Severus. The attraction was certainly present, and she had felt his chaste kisses down to the tips of her toes. Yet she couldn't give herself over to the feelings. She couldn't be who everyone wanted her to be; she needed more time to think, to process the changes in her life, to know the woman she had become. But everything seemed to be happening far too quickly, and her need for time was causing pain to those who loved her and cared about her.

It was all too much.

Wiping away the stray tear that had leaked from the corner of her eye, Hermione sniffed and then cuddled deeper into the warm quilt. Just as she was finally drifting to sleep, she heard his footfalls on the stairs. Her heart rate increased with the knowledge that he had returned and then stilled as she heard him pause outside her door. She rolled over and watched the doorknob as she held her breath, wondering if he would enter her room. It seemed as if an eternity passed, and then she heard him continue down the hall, the door to his room quietly opening, then closing.

Hermione rolled back over and closed her eyes. She didn't know if she were relieved or disappointed.

"Don't forget to carry the one ... yes ... good job, Rose. Now, try the next one, please."

Hermione dropped her bag by the front door and peeked into the dining room. Severus and Rose were ensconced at the dining room table with Rose's homework scattered about the surface, their heads close together, bent over the Muggle paper.

Hermione felt a smile tug at her lips at the similarity to how she did her own work. Part of her longed to sit down with them, to take part in such a domestic scene; but it didn't feel right to intrude on their private time. So she stood in the doorway and observed, not yet willing to actively participate but unable to not take part in some small fashion.

"I understand it now, Severus! Thank you!" Rose exclaimed and hurled herself into his arms.

Hermione smiled at her daughter's typical exuberance, grateful that a familiar aspect of Rose's personality was still present. "I see everyone is working hard," she said, entering the room now that it appeared they were finished.

"Mum!" Rose released Severus only to rush to the door to embrace her mother. "Severus was just helping me with my arithmetic. He's ever so clever, isn't he? That's probably why he's a teacher, don't you think?"

"Hello, my love," Hermione replied fondly. "Yes, Severus is very clever and a very good teacher. I'm glad he could help you."

Rose nodded enthusiastically and proceeded to drag her towards the sitting room. Hermione looked over her shoulder only to see Severus disappear into his study. Her smile faded slightly; he was still upset with her. She sighed and allowed Rose to guide her into the other room. Hugo was lying on the floor, his Famous Witches and Wizards trading cards spread out in front of him.

"Hi, Mum," the boy said, his eyes trained on his cards as he organised them into some sort of system known only to him.

Hermione arched an eyebrow. "Is that any way to greet your mother, young man?"

Hugo scrambled to his feet, grinning sheepishly and looking every bit the spitting image of his father. "Sorry," he said and then gave her a quick hug before returning to his spot on the floor.

Rolling her eyes, Hermione all but collapsed onto the sofa. She was getting used to these older versions of her children, and thankfully no longer felt the ache that had accompanied her initial interactions with them. They were such lovely children that it was easy to ignore the pang of loss and simply love them.

Rose followed her onto the sofa and snuggled into her side as they chatted about their respective days and their plans for the evening. Rose had completed her homework and was looking forward to a promised Potions lesson from Severus. Hugo, on the other hand, had not yet completed his homework. "After dinner, Mum. All right?"

At times it was almost scary how much he was like his father.

"Where's Severus?" Hugo asked as he placed Paracelsus next to Agrippa.

"Hm? Oh, I think he's in his study. Why?" Hermione asked.

Hugo shrugged. "Just wonderin'."

"Wondering," Hermione automatically corrected. She rested her head on the back of the sofa, her fingers distractedly toying with a lock of Rose's hair.

Rose sighed. "This is supposed to be family time. It's not right that he's not here, and he's missed every day this week!"

"Family time?"

Hugo nodded. "Yeah. We're supposed to be in here together before dinner. You always say it's important."

"I see," Hermione said with a frown. She supposed that family time did sound like something she would implement. "So it's unusual for him not to be here?"

Rose and Hugo didn't say anything...they didn't have to. Instead, they looked at each other, and Hermione couldn't help but smile at the silent conversation. Finally, Hugo looked at her and said, "Is Severus mad at us?"

"No!" Hermione exclaimed, horrified that the children had come to such a conclusion. "Of course he's not. Why would you think that?"

"He's not been here for family time," Rose explained.

"But he helped Rose with her homework, and he's still gonna do Potions with her," Hugo added sadly, propping his chin in one hand, "so maybe he's just mad at me."

Hermione slid off the sofa and onto the floor, her arms outstretched. Hugo immediately scrambled into her lap, and Hermione wrapped her arms around him. "That's nonsense, Hugo, do you understand? Severus is not angry at you, not at all! You've done nothing wrong."

"But then why...?"

"He's upset with me," Hermione inserted firmly. "We had a small misunderstanding while you were at your father's. That's all. I promise you, Hugo, and you, as well, Rose, this has nothing to do with either of you. All right?"

Two sad little faces reluctantly nodded, and then Rose looked at her worriedly. Hermione quickly realised that Rose, as the eldest, might have a vague recollection of the end of her parents' marriage and was possibly concerned that her mother and step-father were having a disagreement.

"It's nothing to worry about, I promise," Hermione assured them, her gaze focused on Rose. Then she squeezed Hugo more tightly and reached out an arm to pull Rose into her embrace, as well.

"So, it's family time, eh?" she said after a few minutes.

The two gingered heads bobbed up and down in reply.

"Well then, I suppose I'll just have to remind him that he's to be here with his family, won't I?"

Hermione's lips curved into a wry grin; she would be reminding him of something. How ironic.

The door was shut, but Hermione didn't let that stop her. She rapped her knuckles against the wooden barrier and then entered, not bothering to wait for his permission. Severus was standing at the window with his back to her. At her entrance, he jerked around to face her.

"I'm sorry for interrupting," Hermione said, careful to keep her tone neutral, "but the children have informed me that you are missing family time."

Severus looked away and then gave a curt nod.

Hermione moved farther into the room, enabling her to view him in profile. "According to Rose and Hugo, this is a nightly event, one that you have missed every day this week. Apparently this is quite unlike you, even to the point where Hugo asked if you were put out with him."

For the briefest of moments, Severus appeared severely agonised by her words, but then the impassive mask he had been wearing for the past week reappeared. It made Hermione want to kick something.

"I'll cook dinner this evening," she continued when it became apparent that he was not going to speak. "The children are missing you, particularly Hugo." She stepped closer to him and reached out a hand. He immediately moved to stand behind his desk, and Hermione let her hand drop to her side. She attempted to ignore the hurt his rejection wrought, but she couldn't brush aside the heavy weight in her heart. *Now you have some idea of how he feels* she thought as her stomach churned in commiseration. "I know you're upset with me, but please, don't withdraw from the children. They obviously adore you, and they're beginning to wonder if they've done something wrong."

Severus remained silent, his gaze firmly fixed on the surface of his desk. Finally, he nodded and walked around the desk towards the door. As he passed her, Hermione reached out and took his hand in hers. He paused, his back rigid and his jaw clenched.

"Thank you."

She squeezed his hand and was about to release him when his fingers tightened on hers. He turned to her, and just like that night in the kitchen, his right hand lifted to cup her cheek. For once, Hermione didn't balk at the feelings his touch wrought in her; she wanted to be close to him like this, like it was natural ... normal. Hermione didn't know how much time passed as they stared into each other's eyes; she only knew that the moment was broken when he lowered his head and pressed his lips to her forehead before he murmured, "I'm sorry for being such a bast..."

Quickly, she silenced him by putting a finger to his lips. "No. No more apologies." She removed her finger, and he smirked, then nodded his agreement.

"No more apologies."

Hermione shut the front door and hung her cloak on the rack as she muttered under her breath. Her day had been positively wretched. Her current project was a gruelling one, and her supervisor was demanding an unreasonable timeline for its completion. Hermione usually thrived in such circumstances, but with her emotional state in upheaval, she found the work exhausting rather than stimulating.

She went up to her room and changed into more comfortable clothes, glad to be out of her work robes and her uncomfortable shoes. Tossing the offending footwear into the bottom of her wardrobe, she made a mental note to purchase a new pair at the weekend; the current pair just didn't fit quite right. In the meantime, her feet were much more comfortable in her favourite woolly socks; she felt more relaxed already.

Taking down her hair and a cool splash of water on her face both helped immensely, as well, and she ventured back downstairs to see what Severus had planned for family time. They had been taking turns throughout the week, and tonight was Severus' night to decide how they would spend the time before dinner.

She found them in the dining room, all seated around the table as they dug through a shallow, rectangular box. Hugo saw her first and greeted her with a wide grin.

"Mum, look! We're going to play Diagon Alley!"

Hermione smiled quizzically. She had never heard of the wizarding game. Severus seemed to recognize the question in her eyes and handed her the top of the game box. She read the back and grinned. It appeared to be similar to Monopoly but with wizarding properties and currency.

"That sounds like a lovely idea," Hermione replied, stifling a yawn as she took the empty seat next to Rose and across from Hugo. She smiled at Severus, who looked at her with narrowed eyes.

"You are tired."

"Is it that obvious?" Hermione replied wryly. "This project has been a nightmare."

"Perhaps you should lie down before dinner," Severus said, his brow furrowed in concern.

The children began to protest, and Hermione laughed as she held up a hand. "I'm fine. I'll go to bed right after dinner, I promise, but right now I think I'd rather play the game."

And with that, Hermione reached in the box and pulled out a tiny pewter owl, smiling as the small token hooted and nuzzled her finger. She placed the owl on the board and rubbed her hands together in anticipation, ready to play her first game of Diagon Alley.

"Erm, Mum?" Hugo said tentatively. "That's my piece. I always play the owl. Rose is the book, Severus is the cauldron, and you're the quill."

Hermione looked up, her smile quickly fading, and she was instantly confronted with the confused eyes of her son. She glanced at Rose; her head was bowed, her hands in her lap. Then she turned to Severus. His expression was blank.

Swallowing the lump that suddenly appeared in her throat, Hermione attempted a smile. "I'm so sorry, darling. Of course the owl is yours. I'll take the quill."

The game began, and the children soon forgot her slip as bits of property were bought and rents were collected. Florean Fortescue's was snatched up quickly by Rose, and Hugo crowed with triumph as he purchased the coveted Ollivanders. Severus grumbled when he was sent to Azkaban, causing the children to laugh in delight. Round and round the board they went. Flourish and Blotts was the last property to be bought, and then everyone tried their best to stay out of Knockturn Alley. A good time was had by all ...

Except for Hermione, who, despite her best effort, was unable to purge the twinge of sadness that lingered in her heart.

Hermione stood in the middle of the Leaky Cauldron and smiled. "Hello," she said.

The patrons all turned to look at her. Everyone grinned and greeted her with warm salutations.

"Hello, Hermione!"

"Watcher, Hermione!"

"Hermione, it's so good to see you!"

Pleased, she left the pub and entered Diagon Alley. The familiar street was illuminated by the bright sunshine, and Hermione quickly made her way to Flourish and Blotts, then Eeylops Owl Emporium, and on to Florean Fortescue's and Madame Malkin's, buying each location with a bag of Galleons she pulled from beneath her cloak. The owners were more than happy to give her the deeds to their properties. In fact, everywhere she went, she was happily greeted by those she encountered. Everyone she met along way seemed to know her, calling her name and waving as they passed.

Finally, she turned and walked down the dark, twisting path that was Knockturn Alley. Even there the people grinned and waved, greeting her kindly by name as she peeked in windows and explored the mysterious alley. Finding nothing that she was interested in purchasing, she waved good-bye to the smiling patrons of Knockturn Alley and spun on her heel, Disapparating with a pop.

She reappeared outside the small cottage in Hogsmeade and quickly made her way up the path to the front door. She entered, her arrival heralded by her exuberant children.

"Hello, Mum! Hello!" they said as they danced around her in circles.

Her husband entered the hallway, as well, and Hermione frowned. His eyes were shielded by a shadow, and no matter from which angle she approached, she couldn't quite make them out.

"The eyes are the window to the soul," the man intoned, and Hermione then smiled and agreed.

Suddenly, she was in the loo, her reflection smiling at her from the mirror over the sink. Hermione smiled back, and then her mirror-self tilted her head to one side and said, "Hello. Who are you?"

Hermione frowned. "I'm Hermione."

"Who are you?" the reflection asked again.

"Hermione."

"I'm sorry," her mirror-self replied, "but who are you?"

Panic began to swell within her chest, and her breath quickened, her hands trembling as they gripped the sides of the sink. "I'm you! I mean ... I'm me! I'm Hermione."

"Who are you?" the mirror mocked, its smile turning sinister. "Who are you?"

"Stop it! I'm me! Me!"

Her reflection merely looked at her, returning to its former impassivity, and asked ...

"But who are you?"

Hermione woke gasping for breath, her nightgown twisted around her legs. Throwing back the covers, she leapt from the bed, then yanked open the door and ran down the hall. The next thing she knew, she was standing in Severus' doorway, trembling from head to foot.

Severus sat up in the bed and squinted at her in the darkness. "Hermione?"

A small sob escaped at the sound of his sleep-roughened voice saying her name, reminding her of the dream from which she had just awakened.

"What's wrong?" he asked, shifting so that he was seated on the edge of the bed.

Hermione couldn't speak; the dream was still so fresh in her mind. She jumped slightly as she felt Severus' hands on her shoulders; she hadn't noticed him leaving the bed. If she hadn't been so out of sorts, she would have smiled at the sight of him in his grey nightshirt. As it was, her mind was barely able to process that he was even in the same room with her.

"Did you have a nightmare?"

She nodded, the movement short and jerky.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Her eyes widened, and she shook her head fiercely.

"I see. Would you like me to get you some water? Tea?"

"No." Somehow she managed to choke out the word; her throat was still tight with fear.

Severus sighed in exasperation, his exhaustion clearly etched upon his face. "Do need me to check under your bed?"

His impatience and parental tone caused her eyes to once again fill with tears, and her lower lip quivered.

Severus was immediately contrite, pulling her into his arms and whispering soothing nonsense into her ear. Hermione clung to him, and he held her tightly until her trembling ceased.

"Do you wish to talk about it now?"

Hermione closed her eyes and gripped him tighter. "Everyone knew me...everyone. But not me," she whispered against his neck. "I didn't know me."

"Oh, Hermione." He continued to soothe her for several minutes, holding her tightly to him as he smoothed her hair with his hand, until her body finally relaxed and her eyes began to droop. "It's quite late. Come. Let me take you back to your room."

Hermione immediately stiffened in his grasp. "No, I..." She knew what she wanted, but she wasn't at all certain he would agree. She just couldn't imagine sleeping alone. Not now. "Would it be all right if I slept here tonight? Please?"

The hand that had been stroking her hair stilled, and he was silent for several minutes. Finally, Severus led her to the bed, tucking her in before climbing in himself. Despite the tension radiating off him, Hermione snuggled into his side, her head resting on his shoulder and one arm thrown across his stomach. She felt safe and protected...she felt at ease.

"I just need a bit more time," she muttered, almost asleep, the words punctuated by a yawn. "Don't leave me. Promise."

A heartbeat later she heard him solemnly utter the words that would allow her to rest undisturbed: "I will never leave you. I swear it."

Hermione sighed in relief, her heart warmed by his oath. "Thank you."

The tension in his form seemed to melt away, and Severus shifted his arm so that he could hold her to him, his other hand drifting over his stomach, seeking out hers to link their fingers together. He buried his nose in her hair, his mouth resting against her temple, and Hermione sighed contentedly, feeling as if she were made to fit there. His thumb toyed with her wedding band for a moment, and then, just as she succumbed to sleep, she heard him whisper, "You've always been welcome."

A/N: Thanks again to my betas, DeeMichelle and Subversa, and to my Brit picker, LettyBird. You're the best! I'd also like to thank machshefa for all of her advice.

The next chapter will be up in a day or two.

Acceptance

Chapter 4 of 7

While sorting through Severus Snape's belongings, Hermione makes an intriguing discovery that changes her life forever.

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Chapter Four

Acceptance

"Give that back, James!" Albus Severus yelled at the top of his lungs, chasing after the older boy who had taken his gift for Rose and run into the kitchen, holding the cheerfully wrapped present above his head.

"James Sirius Potter," Ginny admonished firmly. She quickly handed Hermione the bowl of frosting they had been scooping into a pastry bag and turned to deal with her sons. "Give that back to your brother and behave yourself. You're a guest, not a hooligan."

The older boy handed over the gift and apologised to his mother, smacking the back of his brother's head when her back was turned. Unfortunately for him, his father noticed, his stern look promising a firm talking-to when they returned home. Then Harry took the two boys into the sitting room for a game of Exploding Snap in the hopes

that he could entertain them until the cake was ready. If not, Hermione surmised, there were plenty of Weasleys in the room to keep the boys occupied. Ginny excused herself, as well, when Lily shyly came into the room to fetch her, saying that her grandmother needed her.

Hermione smiled contentedly. The cottage was filled to the brim with family members and friends, all vying for space amongst the hundreds of colourful balloons and streamers. The sounds of laughter and children playing echoed throughout rooms, and Hermione was all but bursting with the joy of it, even as she scrambled to finish decorating the cake. The birthday girl was currently waiting quite patiently, sitting at the dining room table on her father's knee, showing off the letter from Hogwarts that had arrived by owl that morning.

Ron appeared suitably impressed and very proud of his daughter, telling anyone who would listen that he was certain his Rose would be Head Girl one day ... and a Gryffindor one, at that. Luna inserted that, given Rose's intellect, Ravenclaw might be the House for her.

Rose agreed. "Gryffindor does have a rather rambunctious reputation, Dad. Ravenclaw might be more conducive to studying."

"If you keep using words like 'conductive,' you'll be a Ravenclaw for sure!" Ron bemoaned.

Xenophilius' boisterous laughter resounded throughout the house. "Nothing wrong with Ravenclaw, Mr Weasley. Why, I myself came from that industrious house, and look what's become of me!"

Ron cast a terrified glance at his wife, but Eleanor only laughed and told Rose that it didn't matter into which House she was Sorted. Ron, of course, vehemently objected, stating that his daughter would be a Gryffindor and that was final.

Hermione overheard the conversation from the kitchen and rolled her eyes, while Severus, who was sitting on a stool watching his wife struggle with the bag of pink frosting, merely smirked.

"Why isn't this working?" Hermione huffed in exasperation.

Severus rose to his feet and moved to stand behind her, his arms coming around to encircle her waist. He placed his hands on hers and slid them down to the bottom of the bag before gently squeezing. With a few flicks of his wrist, he had quickly created a single delicate pink rose. His hands left the bag, and he rested them on her hips. "You could always use magic, you know," he suggested, his deep voice reverberating against her ear.

She shivered and leaned into him slightly. After the night she'd gone to him for comfort, something had seemed to click for both of them. Severus had been more understanding of the dichotomy of her thoughts and had patiently given her the time she had so desperately needed. Hermione, armed with the knowledge of his understanding and the freedom from his expectations...as well as her own...had been more comfortable, more contented with her "new" life. For the past few weeks, she and Severus been spending quite a bit of time together, talking and sharing, which had led to several bouts of rather shameless flirting, leaving Hermione feeling rather tightly strung.

"You don't play fair. And I wanted to make Rose's cake the Muggle way. It's more personal."

"You're a witch, Hermione," Severus said as he returned to his seat, only after dragging his hands along her sides. "Using your magic is just as personal as not."

She sighed. "I suppose you're right." With a swish and a flick, the cake was finished, with eleven perfectly shaped pink roses. "There." She clapped her hands together and smiled happily at Severus. "We're ready. Could you please call everyone into the dining room? I'll bring in the cake."

He laughed, a sound that had quickly become her favourite, and said, "I believe you're as excited as Rose."

Hermione swatted his shoulder as he edged past her. "It's not every day one's daughter turns eleven. It's a momentous occasion."

Severus paused and leaned down to kiss her cheek. "That it is."

Their gazes locked, and Hermione felt the pull of their undeniable attraction. She smiled at him, almost shyly, and then began putting the candles on the cake while Severus went to gather the guests.

Soon, everyone was crammed into the dining room, with Rose seated at the head of the table, a wide grin stretching across her face. Severus peeked into the kitchen, and Hermione gave him the go ahead.

"May I have your attention, please," Severus demanded rather than asked. "Today is the young Miss Weasley's eleventh birthday." His announcement was met with silence. He sighed exasperatedly. "Well? Sing!"

Hermione chuckled at his abrupt order, knowing how he hated to be the centre of attention; it never failed to make him cranky. The guests obviously were aware of this, as well, because they merely laughed and began to sing as Hermione carried in the cake with its eleven lit candles, placing it in front of Rose.

"Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday, Dear Rose. Happy birthday to you!"

Her daughter's face was illuminated by the tiny flickering flames as she closed her eyes and made a wish. Hermione leant against the wall and smiled as she watched Rose blow out the candles. She had expected to find the occasion difficult, a reminder of birthdays lost somewhere in the recesses of her mind. Instead, as she watched her parents help Rose cut and serve her birthday cake while Hugo and the other children excitedly observed, Hermione realised how lucky she was to be surrounded by her loved ones on such a special day.

Her gaze found Severus where he stood talking with Xenophilius, and she could think only of how wonderful her life truly was.

Severus turned his head and his eyes met hers, his lips quirking into small smile.

Yes, she was a lucky witch, indeed.

With that thought came the realisation that while she might not remember everything about her past, she really loved her present. She was happy, truly happy, with her life. She and her family were healthy, she had a job that challenged her, parents who had always supported her, true friends who loved her, two wonderful children ... and a husband who adored her.

Perhaps it was time to put the past where it belonged and live here, in the now.

Because she knew, beyond all doubt, there was no other time or place she'd rather be.

Soon enough, the guests were gone, and all that was left was the tidying up. Since Hermione had borne the brunt of the preparations, Severus shooed her upstairs for a long hot soak in the bath while he took care of the mess the party had left behind.

As she soaked, Hermione thought of the epiphany she'd had that day and knew what she wanted to do now. For the first time in a long while, her thoughts and heart were at ease. A profound peace washed over her, allowing all the strain and worry of the past months to melt away. She luxuriated in the fragrant water for almost an hour, reheating the water occasionally with a warming charm. Only when her fingers and toes had shrivelled up like prunes did she leave the bath.

She put on a warm nightgown and her favourite dressing gown, grabbed the necessary items, and then returned downstairs. As she passed through the dining room, she

saw Severus at the stove, her teapot waiting at the ready on the counter. Smiling, she continued on into the sitting room, where she curled up on the sofa to wait.

Only a few minutes had passed when Severus entered the sitting room, two cups of tea in hand. "I thought I heard you come down," he said. "You could have joined me in the..." His words stopped abruptly as he noticed the items on her lap.

Hermione looked up at him and smiled. "I think it's time to put the past to bed, don't you?" She ran a hand along the cover of the topmost album and said, "Please sit, Severus. Let's do this together, all right?"

Instead of sitting down, he shook his head, turned on his heel and went back into the kitchen, sending Hermione's heart plummeting to her toes in disappointment. Had she waited too long?

Just as she was about to work herself into an utter panic, he returned with two glasses of wine. "I believe we'll both need this before we're done," he drawled, handing her a glass of the dark red wine, then settling next to her on the sofa.

She smiled, relieved. "Thank you."

Then, with a deep breath, she opened the cover of the first photo album.

"You were a beautiful bride," Severus said as they looked through their photos of their wedding.

"The dress is lovely," Hermione replied. The simple ivory silk gown she had worn was just the sort of dress Hermione liked; it was a basic sheath, cinched just slightly at the waist, and then flowing down to cover her feet. The line of the straight-cut bodice was extended visually by the small bands of fabric that wrapped around her upper arms, leaving her shoulders bare. Her hair had been left down and apparently doused in Sneezezy, its natural bushy texture subdued into sleek, smooth waves.

"The dress was rather nice, but I was speaking of the woman wearing it." Severus sipped his wine and then turned the page. "I can't believe how much the children have grown over the past three years," he said, laughing as he watched Hugo and Rose chase each other around the garden; the reception had taken place at the cottage.

Hermione tucked her legs beneath her and leaned against his shoulder. "Children tend to do that. I swear, they seem to grow every time you close your eyes."

"That they do. It seems like only yesterday that Rose informed me that I was in dire need of a little girl and that she was certain her father would be willing to share her with me."

Hermione laughed, correcting her wine glass as it tipped dangerously. "I can only imagine how Ron felt about that."

Severus smirked. "Rose didn't ask...she merely reminded him that he had told her that it was important to share, and that since he had a little girl and I did not, it was only the proper and right thing to do."

"Well, maybe Ron is right after all...sounds rather Gryffindor of her, doesn't it?"

He took a sip of his wine and waved off her comment as she returned her attention to the photos.

She turned the page and smiled at a grinning Xenophilius. He was wearing dark grey dress robes, and his white hair stood out from his head like a giant puff of cotton. "Your best man?" Hermione asked.

Severus nodded, his own lips twitching in amusement as Xenophilius caught sight of a garden gnome and began to point excitedly. "He is my oldest and dearest friend."

Hermione knew Luna and her father very well, and while she had been witness to the close friendship between Severus and Xenophilius over the past few months, she was still intrigued by the concept; it seemed so unlikely. "And Eglantine?"

He took a sip of wine, and only because she was paying such close attention did Hermione notice the way his hand tightened around the glass. "She was the most selfless creature I've ever known, the epitome of her House: loyal, hard-working, creative."

"You miss her," Hermione said, hearing the lingering edge of wistfulness in his tone. She couldn't imagine having lost Harry or Ron; it would be akin to losing an arm or a leg. Overcome by the desire to offer him some small measure of comfort, Hermione reached out and grasped his hand; slowly, he relaxed his fingers, and she entwined them with her own.

He sighed, the little furrow between his brows deepening even further. "I do."

"From what Luna told me, you were all very good friends," Hermione said, hoping to encourage him to tell her more. After months of walking on egg shells, she suddenly found herself wanting to know as much about him as she could.

"We were."

She looked to the photo on the mantle, the one of the Lovegoods and Severus that she had first seen in Luna's sitting room. "They were there for you during a very dark time. Is that why they never joined the Order, even though they supported the Light?"

He swallowed hard and then nodded, his jaw clenching with the effort to contain his emotion at her simple question. "Perceptive," he said quietly. "They were, as Eglantine often said, my 'soft place to fall.'"

Hermione rubbed her thumb against the back of his hand. "I'm glad you had that place."

"As am I."

"What about Lily?" Hermione asked slowly; she didn't know how he would respond to such a question. Severus had never spoken of Harry's mother, but Hermione was very curious about her.

After a long sip of wine, he said, "What about her?"

"Harry never said what happened, but I know a little. You had a falling out. It was devastating to your friendship...I know that much."

"It was."

In for a penny, in for a pound Hermione thought. "Harry said ... he said you were in love with her."

"I thought I was, yes."

Hermione worried her lower lip between her teeth as she contemplated whether or not to ask her next question. Her curiosity, however, was too strong to ignore. "What happened?"

A muscle in his jaw pulsed, and his entire body stiffened before he deliberately relaxed. "I would rather not discuss the specifics. However, it was my fault, my error ... and although I made a fool of myself attempting to apologise, she never forgave me for it. Xenophilius and Eglantine attempted to repair the rift, but because of my careless actions, the family we had created was irrevocably broken."

Hermione tried to imagine not forgiving her boys for any of the stupid things they had said or done during their Hogwarts years, but she couldn't. "Is that why ..." she wondered aloud, stopping once she realised she was speaking.

He answered her, regardless. "Why I spent years pushing people away? As I said earlier, you're very perceptive."

"You know," she groused after a quarter of an hour of near monosyllabic responses to her queries, "you were much more forthcoming when I first came home."

Home.

That brought her up short. Had she used that word in regards to the cottage before? She didn't think so, yet ... yes. It fit. This was home. A warm, pleasant sensation spread through her extremities...and it wasn't from the wine.

Severus' response interrupted her reverie. "That is because the Healer recommended I be as open and forthcoming as possible. She thought it might ... jog your memory."

"Oh." Hermione was somewhat disappointed.

"Of course, all the questions you are so desperate to have answered are ones that you and I have discussed in the past. Even so, they remain ... difficult subjects for me to consider."

Was it possible to be jealous of oneself?

Hermione wondered if perhaps she'd had too much wine after all.

An hour later, she was sitting sideways on the sofa, facing Severus with her legs crossed, her attention riveted on her husband as he spoke of the friends he so clearly loved. The three glasses of wine he had imbibed had loosened his tongue and relaxed his inhibitions ... or maybe her genuine interest had been encouragement enough. With Severus, it was hard to tell.

"We were an odd lot, a bunch of misfits, really: the eccentric, the Charms savant, the Muggle-born ... and me." He shook his head, a small, almost dazed smile crossing his lips. "Even now I find it incredible that they were willing to befriend such a troubled, sullen boy. I don't know what they saw in me."

But Hermione thought she might know. "I think they each saw reflections of themselves...intelligence, loyalty, bravery."

He scoffed, "Next you will inform me of how I am the embodiment of all four Houses or some such rot. I assure you, I am a Slytherin, through and through."

She rolled her eyes. "But you do possess those other traits. It was only your cunning nature that landed you in Slytherin."

"No," he murmured, gazing blindly into the bottom of his wineglass. "It was the Darkness to which I was so drawn that led to my Sorting." Severus paused and then grinned. "Did I tell you of the time that Eglantine charmed her copy of Moste Potente Potions to paddle the arse of that mongrel Black every time he called me Snivellus? It was bloody brilliant!"

Hermione laughed...he'd definitely had too much wine.

"What's this?" Hermione said as she turned the page. Severus had become much more accommodating and had Summoned his personal album, filled with photos from before their marriage. They were currently looking at a picture that few had ever seen: Severus Snape, wearing lederhosen and scowling as he stood next to a visibly ecstatic Xenophilius, who was also clad in lederhosen and all but jumping up and down in excitement as he pointed somewhere outside the photo.

"What in the world were you doing?"

Severus gave a long-suffering sigh. "We were in Sweden, searching for Crumple-Horned Snorkack. I can't seem to convince the man they don't exist."

"I didn't think they wore lederhosen in Sweden," Hermione mused.

He grimaced and said, "They don't."

Hermione laughed while Severus glared at her in mock indignation.

Once her laughter had diminished, she looked a bit closer and noticed the silvery scars on Severus' neck, thanks to the open-necked shirt he was wearing in the photo. "This was taken after the war."

A heartbeat later, he answered. "Yes."

She looked up from the photo to stare at him, her mind whirling. "They knew," she said, astounded. "Xenophilius and Luna knew you were alive the entire time?"

He snorted. "More than that...they saved my life, then got me out of Britain. And then they kept my secret for over a decade."

They had known. She had been inundated by nightmares for years about what she had witnessed at the Shrieking Shack ... and plagued with guilt that she had left him there without even attempting to help. And all that time, Luna had known but been unable to alleviate her pain.

"I was there, you know. I saw you...when you ... when I thought you'd" She looked away, her eyes filling with tears at the memory of him lying helpless in a pool of his own blood. "I'm so sorry."

"I know, Hermione" he said, moving his arm so that she could settle against his side. "I know."

"What made you return to Britain?" Hermione asked, sipping at the cup of tea Severus had insisted she drink, saying the wine was making her "rather maudlin."

He shrugged. "It was time. I was growing tired of Italy...despite the beautiful surroundings...and I wanted to spend more time with Xenophilius and Luna. We had spent years pretending, hiding our friendship after I joined the Death Eaters, with everyone believing they had cut all ties with me. Thankfully, no one ever questioned it, and we managed to meet over dinner at their house every week until the Dark Lord returned. Then I truly did cut all ties, despite Xenophilius' objections, in order to protect them. I've never been more frightened in my life than the night I heard that Luna had been captured during the last few months of the war...if her connection to me had been discovered" He paused and cleared his throat.

"In any event, after the war exhibit at the Museum of Wizardry opened, it seemed that I would be welcome, and there was no longer a need to hide. As I said, it was time." He paused, then frowned. "That, and the idiots in charge of the exhibit had placed the section on my role in the centre of the exhibition hall ... as if I were some sort of bloody hero. Someone had to sort them out."

Hermione laid a hand on his arm and smiled gently. "You *are* a hero, Severus."

He shook his head. "No. I was a spy, and my motivations were not always as noble as some would choose to believe," he concluded with a knowing glance in her direction. "My part in the exhibit should have been located in some dark corner, in the shadows ... just as I was."

"You're not in the shadows any longer," Hermione reminded him, squeezing his arm lightly.

He looked at her and gave her a small smile. "No. Now I can stand in the light."

They had changed positions so that Severus had his back against the arm of the sofa, one leg stretched along its length, the other foot firmly planted on the floor. Hermione was situated between his legs, her back against his chest as they continued to look the photos together.

"What is she saying?" Hermione asked, laughing at a picture of Severus pushing Rose in the swing that was in the tree in the garden. A wide smile lit her face as she flew forward, then back.

"Let me see," he said, propping his chin on her shoulder as she pointed to the photo. "Ah, yes. I remember that day quite well. It was soon after you and I began seeing one another. She was squealing like a banshee and demanding that I push her higher. My ears are still ringing."

Hermione laughed and turned the page, her heart swelling at the photo of Severus on the very sofa on which they were now sitting, with Rose and Hugo cuddled up on either side of him, their ginger-haired heads resting on his chest and his arms about their shoulders. A copy of *The Beano* was precariously held in Severus' lax fingers, and all three of them were asleep.

"They adore you," she said, tracing her fingers along the photo's edge.

He smiled crookedly. "The feeling is mutual."

"How did we ... renew our acquaintance?" she asked, realising that she had no idea how they had come to find each other.

"Such formality," Severus teased. "Through Luna, of course. I was at her house to collect the belongings I had entrusted to her care, and you happened to be there for tea. By that time, you had known that I was alive and back in Britain, but we hadn't crossed paths until then. You were inquisitive, as always, and before I knew I knew it, we had agreed to meet for dinner the following evening to continue our discussion. The rest, as they say, is history."

"Oh."

He smirked and arched a brow. "You were expecting something more scandalous?"

"Well, it is rather ... ordinary," she admitted. "I suppose I was expecting something a bit more unusual or exciting...like a research project, perhaps."

He laughed. "How cliché."

With a mock scowl, Hermione stuck out her tongue, and then she grinned.

They had finished going through the photo albums and now were simply enjoying each other's company. Hermione was still reclining against him, her back against his chest and her head tucked beneath his chin. One of his arms was resting on her stomach while the other was slung across the back of the sofa.

"I've missed this," Severus murmured into her ear.

She smiled. "Me, too."

"You don't remember this."

"No," Hermione said, with a sly grin. "But I can imagine."

He placed his mouth against her ear, and Hermione shivered as he replied in a low, smooth voice, "And have you imagined this often?"

"Sometimes," she said slowly, grateful that he couldn't see her the way her cheeks had flushed at her admission.

Severus did not respond, but the fingers of the hand that was resting on her stomach began to move in small, deliberate circles.

He was trying to kill her.

After several minutes of the exquisite torture, he began to speak in a torrent of softly spoken words, as if he could not keep his thoughts from escaping his lips. "I always believed that I would live out my days in solitude, and I had accepted it as my lot in life. After I joined the Death Eaters, my life was not conducive to romantic entanglements. There was never a safe time to bring someone into my life, and even if there had been, I felt undeserving. Even so, I desperately wanted what Xenophilus and Eglantine had ... that sort of soul-deep connection. I even admitted as much to them one evening in a drunken bout of self-pity."

He paused, and his fingers stilled their movements. Hermione held her breath, wondering if he would continue or if he had suddenly realised that he was revealing more than he had intended. Then his fingers began to move again, and he continued.

"I never believed for a moment that I would experience that sort of love, that sort of connection with another individual. And then you came along, and it was more than I ever could have imagined." His voice broke, and Hermione felt a warm drop of liquid splash against the back of her neck. "When you lost your memory..."

Hermione's vision blurred as her eyes filled with tears, and she turned in his arms until she was facing him, lying atop his chest. "I'm here now, Severus. I may not remember everything, but I'm here now." She reached up to wipe away the evidence of the single tear that had trailed down his cheek.

He caught her hand before she could move it away, his eyes closing as he reverently pressed a kiss into her palm. When his eyes opened, Hermione gasped as he revealed the full measure of his love and desire for her.

"I have missed your touch," he rasped as he held her palm against his cheek, his burning gaze igniting a fire deep within her soul. "No one ever touched me ... until you."

The tears that had been clinging to her lashes spilled down her cheeks. "So let me touch you," she whispered, the fingers of her free hand trembling as she toyed with a button on his shirt. "I want to ... I want..."

Her words were drowned out by the sound of his tortured groan as he hauled her up his body until they were face to face. "No. Don't do this out of pity or..."

She silenced him, not with her fingers but with her lips. She dominated the kiss, demanding with her mouth and tongue that he grant her entry. When he hesitated, she nipped his lower lip with her teeth, delving inside when his mouth parted in surprise. And then she was lost in the taste and feel of him, in the slide of his tongue against hers as he finally responded and battled for control. Fire burned deep within her, and she willingly offered herself to the flames.

Severus tore his mouth from hers, his breath coming in short pants as he stared at her. "Hermione, are you certain?"

She nodded vehemently, her own breathing ragged as her fingers began to free the buttons of his shirt until her hands were able to slip inside. "I want to be your wife. I want to be your friend, your lover ... and I want you to be mine. My husband. I want you. I want this life. Please," she all but begged. Her entire being, body and soul, screamed for him to accept her words as truth.

His kiss was his reply.

A/N: Thanks again to my betas, DeeMichelle and Subversa, and to my Brit picker, LettyBird. You're the best! I'd also like to thank machshefa for all of her invaluable advice. This story would not be what it is if not for these wonderful ladies!

The next chapter will be up in a day or two ... and it's a big one. Did that build any suspense? ;)

Life to the Fullest

Chapter 5 of 7

While sorting through Severus Snape's belongings, Hermione makes an intriguing discovery that changes her life forever.

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Chapter Five

Life to the Fullest

Exactly six months after Rose's birthday, Hermione and Severus renewed their wedding vows. Hermione never did recover the memories of those five years, but it made no difference. Their lives together were filled with ups and downs, joys and sorrows, but she never regretted a single moment. She had set her course...and her heart...towards the here and now and allowed the future to take care of itself.

"Slytherin? Why in the world would the Hat Sort Hugo, my sweet baby boy, into Slytherin? There has to be some mistake."

Hermione was genuinely concerned that there might be something wrong with the Sorting Hat. Hugo was a kind, outgoing child who, as he'd grown older, had become more and more like his father. Ron was practically the poster child for Gryffindor House...brave, daring, fun-loving, impetuous. Hugo was much the same. That he had been Sorted into Slytherin had to be a mistake. There was no other explanation.

Severus sat up in bed and moved to where she was propped up against headboard, one long arm wrapping around shoulders. He reached for her hand to stop the nervous twisting of her ring. Hermione rested her head on his chest and snuggled into his warmth.

"Are you disappointed?" he asked neutrally.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "No. I'm just surprised. Of the two of them, I might have expected it from Rose...she can be terribly sneaky when she wants to be. But Hugo? I just can't imagine what the Hat was thinking."

Severus snorted. "If you noticed when Rose was being sneaky, she's a Gryffindor, not a Slytherin, proving that her Sorting was valid." He ignored the light slap to his chest and continued, "As for Hugo, you see the child through a mother's eyes, Hermione. You never noticed his rather ambitious and cunning nature, as his gregariousness provided the perfect camouflage. However, I can tell you with utmost certainty that he has inherited his mother's intelligence..."

"Thank you very much."

"...his father's strategic mind, and a mischievous streak that could only have come from his uncles. The boy has avoided trouble thus far solely because he knows how to not get caught. It's time to face the facts, Hermione...Hugo is a true Slytherin."

Hermione sighed, her fingers drawing small circles against the small patch of exposed skin where the buttons at the top of his nightshirt ended. "It must be your influence," she said, shifting until she was reclining half on top of him.

Severus' eyes gleamed with something akin to pride. "Indubitably," he said, and then he rolled her onto her back, covering her body with his own. "Now, how would you like to be influenced by the former Head of Slytherin?"

"What in the hell do you think you're doing?"

Severus paused, his back to her, and then resumed clearing out his desk. "I assume Minerva told you."

Hermione closed the door to his office and stood in the centre of the room, her arms crossed. "Yes, although I would have rather heard it from you."

He gingerly placed the framed family photo at the top of the trunk and closed it. "I was going to tell you this evening."

"And then what, Severus? Were you going to clean out your study, too? Were you going to run from me?"

He hung his head, bracing himself against the desk. "Perhaps we should speak of this when I return home this evening."

"No!" She marched forward and reached out to turn him to face her. "You aren't coming home this evening, are you?" She studied his face and was outraged by what she found. "You're planning to leave? Without me? Without the children?"

He said nothing. He didn't have to...his agonised expression spoke volumes.

Hermione willed her voice to remain steady. "Of all the ridiculous, stupid, idiotic plans you could have concocted ... and over what? A baseless accusation by the child of a former Death Eater out for revenge?"

Severus wrenched out of her grasp, the mask of indifference he had shed so long ago now firmly in place. "There will be an investigation. Every mistake, every error, every sin I have ever committed will be on display. I will not stand here and continue to teach and pretend that all is well. I will not allow you and the children to suffer the consequences of my actions."

"Stop it." She reached out and grabbed the front of his robes. "I won't let you do this. We are a family, and as such, we'll face this together. They have no evidence, and you have already said you would submit to Veritaserum. You never turned your wand on that child...the truth will come out in the end. I don't understand why you're so concerned..."

"They will crucify me!" Severus shouted, and then his voice lowered to a whisper. "They will use the opportunity to sate their curiosity about the past, to dig and delve into every nook and cranny of my mind, of my memories. They will sensationalise every word I utter, every gesture I make, and print it in the *Prophet* for all to see. And they will rake you and the children across the coals, as well. I will not allow it...not if it is within my power to stop it."

Hermione placed her hand beneath his chin and guided his gaze to hers. "Severus, you're not thinking very clearly. The wizarding world regards you as a hero. And as for your position as professor, the Board of Governors has said they have the utmost confidence in you."

Her words gave him pause. He searched her face, as if looking for some sign to indicate the falsity of her statement.

"And how, exactly, would you know that?"

She arched an eyebrow as she reached inside her bag and then handed him the letter that Minerva had sent her to deliver. "Minerva kindly alerted me to your rather premature resignation and allowed me to arrive via the Floo in her office. She gave me this when I arrived and asked that I deliver it to you directly. If you had bothered to give her a few more minutes of your time, you would know that the Board of Governors has already released a statement to the press declaring their unwavering faith that these accusations will be found to be completely false. They also stated that the hearing will be closed to the press and that you will be allowed a representative to ensure that only those questions relevant to this accusation will be asked."

When she had finished speaking, he had already opened the letter and was quickly scanning the contents. "I don't know what to say. I never expected..."

"Obviously not," Hermione interrupted tersely, her eyes glistening with moisture. "You were about to abandon your family, and I choose to believe that you would not have considered such a thing under normal circumstances."

"Of course I wouldn't!"

"After all," Hermione continued, as if he hadn't spoken, "I seem to recall a certain promise that you made a few years ago that you would never leave me. I have always believed you to be a man of your word."

He pulled her to him, clutching her as if his very life depended on having her in his arms. "I only wanted to protect you and the children," Severus said brokenly, burying his face in her hair.

"We neither need nor want your protection, Severus...we need *you*. I'm not some silly little girl who needs to be coddled. I want to walk through life beside you...whatever comes our way. We will get through this, and through anything else life tosses at us, *together*. It's the only way."

She felt his answering nod, and then she threw her arms about his neck and began to weep; her fear at the mere thought that he had been so close to running was overwhelming.

He held her tightly until her tears were spent, and then he murmured, "Do you think Minerva would allow me to rescind my resignation?"

Hermione sighed in relief. "I'm sure she will."

"Severus, try to remain still. I don't want to prick you with this pin. There. It's perfect," Hermione said, admiring her handiwork. The deep red rose was so dark that it all but disappeared against the black of his formal dress robes. At least the greenery offset it somewhat. She smiled, remembering the day she'd read of the birth of Draco Malfoy's son in the *Prophet* and how she'd pitied the poor boy for his parents' unfortunate choice for a name. And now

"Why does it have to be Scorpius Malfoy?" Severus grumbled for the millionth time.

"Enough," Hermione said firmly. She gently held his face between her hands and drew his gaze to hers. "Scorpius may not be the wizard you would have chosen for her, but he is the one that Rose has chosen. I admit that I had my own doubts initially, but she loves him, and you know perfectly well that Scorpius worships the ground she walks on."

She released him, then tugged on his sleeves and smoothed her hands along the front of his robes. "Now, today is our daughter's wedding, and you are about to walk her down that aisle and give her away. Don't ruin this for them by glowering and sulking. You will behave. Understood?"

Severus released a heavy sigh, his sullen expression melting into melancholy. He rested his forehead against hers and said, "I don't want to give her away."

Hermione pulled back in surprise. "You don't? But I thought you agreed that both you and Ron would walk her down the aisle. Rose has her heart set on it! You can't disappoint her..."

"That's not what I meant," he interrupted, his dark eyes troubled. "I'm not ready to give her up ... not yet."

"Oh, Severus," Hermione murmured in understanding, one hand drifting to the nape of his neck. "She loves you so much, and no matter how old she is, Rose will always be your little girl."

Severus was waiting in the entry hall as she opened the door. Hermione set down her bag at her feet and then released the clasp on her cloak.

"Well?" he demanded impatiently, "Are you going to keep me in suspense all evening, or will you deign to inform me as to the success of your presentation?"

She ignored him and removed her cloak. Only after hanging it on the rack did she respond.

"It went well."

"It went well," he repeated, his tone exasperated, and Hermione knew she could only hold out for a few more moments before he turned to drastic measures in order to obtain the information he wanted...like tickling.

She decided to press her luck.

"Yes."

He gave her his best glower...at one point in her life she would have been terrified...and crossed his arms over his chest.

Hermione rolled her eyes and then attempted to walk past him into the kitchen. He reached out an arm to block her path, halting her progress, and gave her a warning glance.

"Hermione"

She huffed. "Oh, all right." She sighed and looked up at him, attempting to keep her expression neutral. But she couldn't help the twitch of her lips that threatened to bloom into a full-sized grin.

"You did it," he said.

A wide smile emerged. "I did," she affirmed and then threw herself into his arms.

"I knew you would," he said, tightening his arms around her in small squeeze before taking her by the hand and guiding her into the kitchen. "This calls for a celebration...champagne?"

Hermione came to an abrupt stop as she entered the kitchen. The small kitchen table had been set with their finest linens, crystal, and china. Her favourite meal had already been served, and a bottle of champagne was chilling in the centre of the table.

"Severus," she breathed, "this is beautiful. Thank you." She turned to face him and pressed her mouth to his.

They were enjoying their afters when Hermione asked, amused, "What would you have done if I hadn't convinced them to award me the research grant?"

He raised an eyebrow, and his mouth curled into a small, crooked smile. "I would have said it was a commiserative gesture."

Hermione laughed. Severus had quite the romantic streak, one that he occasionally indulged, much to her enjoyment.

"When will the research begin?" he asked, pouring her another glass of champagne.

"In a month or so. I have to finish putting together a team, and then there is some preliminary work that must be done before we can begin the patient trials."

"Good."

Hermione waited for him to continue, but he was silent, his gaze focussed on the table cloth as his long fingers ran along the stem of his glass. She tilted her head to the side. His response had been rather unusual; typically, he would have asked more questions and discussed various hypotheses. "Are you all right?"

"Of course," he said, his expression blank.

Now she knew something was wrong. "Don't hide from me. I neither like nor appreciate it. What's wrong?"

He ran a finger around the rim of his champagne glass, his eyes blindly focussed on the centre of the table. "I understand your motivations for this project. However, I cannot help but wonder at times What are you hoping to accomplish?"

"I'm not sure what you mean," Hermione replied, confused. "We've discussed this many times. Do you want me to give up the project?"

"Of course not," he said firmly. "The subject of memory loss is a profound one for both of us. St Mungo's made a wise decision in selecting you and your team for this year's research grant." He paused, and she watched as he struggled to articulate his concerns. "Your project has resurrected many old questions, that is all. I merely wonder if"

"Yes?"

"I wonder if perhaps you view this as some sort of catharsis regarding your own memory loss. Perhaps you even harbour some regrets about staying ... after."

Of all the things he might have said, that was the one she would have least suspected. After all these years, to know that he still had doubts about her love for him was heartbreaking. "Why would you ever think such a thing?"

He shrugged, and Hermione rose from her seat and squeezed herself between him and the table until she was sitting on his lap.

"Listen to me right now, Severus Snape. I love you. I have never regretted a single moment of our life together. I'm where I want to be...here, right now, with you."

He relaxed and rested his head in the crook of her neck, his hands sliding up her back until he tangled one in her hair. Then he reverently dragged his mouth along the column of her neck to her ear and murmured, "Thank you."

"Hugo, she's beautiful!" Hermione crooned, her eyes drinking in the tiny creature she held in her arms. Deep blue eyes blinked at her owlishly, and the perfect little rosebud mouth opened in a wide yawn. Hermione grinned and gently drew her fingers down one velvety cheek, utterly entranced by the newest addition to her family.

"Congratulations," Severus said, clapping his hand against Hugo's shoulder and then bending to kiss the cheek of his very tired daughter-in-law, who was resting on the sofa. Then he moved to stand behind Hermione, peering over her shoulder at the little girl who had made them grandparents. "Yes, she's definitely a Weasley," he said, taking in the fuzzy bit of red hair on the top of the newborn's head.

Ron laughed, startling the baby. "That's rather obvious, mate."

"Where is Eleanor?" Hermione asked, gently bouncing the infant to calm her; she hadn't spoken to the woman she now considered a friend in a few weeks, having been busy on a project for the Department of Mysteries.

Hugo chuckled. "She's in the room next door. Passed out when Dad called her 'Grandma.'"

"She did not. Tell the truth, Hugo," Rose scolded, though her eyes belied her tone; she was too happy to be truly irritated with her brother. "Tessa has some sort of stomach bug, and Eleanor and Dad were up with her all night. The Healer said it was all right for them to visit the baby, as long as they used a Sanitation Charm, but Eleanor was falling asleep in her chair, so Dad sent her home to get some sleep."

"Is Tessa all right?" Hermione asked, concerned about her children's youngest half-sibling. Tessa would turn eleven in a few months. There were three others, as well:

John was fifteen, Roger, seventeen, and Henry, age twenty.

"Yeah, Eleanor said she should be back to normal in a few days," Ron replied. "I certainly hope she's right, 'cause I'm dead tired."

"And how is it that you're still wide awake, Dad?" Hugo asked mischievously; he obviously already knew the answer to his query.

Ron sent a scathing glance towards his son and then folded his arms across his chest before mumbling, "I had one of those Muggle fizzy drinks with that coffee-nated stuff."

"You mean caffeine?" Rose asked, alarmed. "Dad, you know Eleanor doesn't like you drinking caffeinated beverages...the last time you had one, you didn't sleep for three whole days!"

"Only because I drank more than one!" Ron said, defensively.

"How many did you have?" Severus asked, amused by the story.

Ron muttered a number under his breath, then glanced up to find everyone looking at him. "Seven, all right? It was hot, and I was thirsty!"

Hermione laughed lightly along with the others, so as not to scare the infant, but little Dahlia Hermione Weasley began to fuss, regardless. "I think someone wants her mummy."

"I'll just take her to the other room to feed her," Lydia said.

Hugo immediately was at Lydia's side, helping her to stand. He lifted little Dahlia from Hermione's arms and then hovered over his wife as she slowly made her way to their bedroom.

Hermione sighed and leaned the back of her head against her husband's shoulder as he wrapped his arms around her. "She's perfect, isn't she?"

Severus hummed his agreement. "It will be interesting to have a baby in the family."

Resting her hands on his arms, Hermione craned her head so that she could look at her husband. "Do you ever regret that we never had one of our own?"

They hadn't ever actively tried to have a child together, but they had never done anything to prevent it, either. It just hadn't happened for them. Hermione wouldn't have minded having a child with Severus, but it would have been icing on an already decorated cake...her life felt full and complete.

Hermione watched as Severus looked around at their expanding family, his gaze falling on Rose and the small bump that had just become visible; they would be grandparents again in a few short months. Finally, he looked at her, his eyes glistening suspiciously as he said, "No. I have no regrets. I have more than I could have ever wished for."

Hermione gripped Severus' arm tightly with her gnarled hand as they stood on the crowded platform with their family. The youngest of their great-grandchildren, Severus Ronald, was leaving for his first year at Hogwarts, and Severus had wished to see him off. He didn't often leave the cottage, usually venturing only as far as the back garden, as his health had been rather precarious in recent months, but he'd been determined to see the last of this generation off to Hogwarts. And so their grandson, Peter, the middle child of Rose and Scorpius, had arrived early that morning to accompany them as they Apparated to platform nine and three-quarters.

After many kisses, hugs, and tears, young Severus Weasley finally boarded the train. He waved enthusiastically from an open window and the train began to move, beginning the young boy's long-awaited journey to Hogwarts.

There was then another flurry of kisses and hugs, as the grandchildren all had busy lives of their own...things to do and people to see. Soon, only Hermione and Severus remained on the platform, along with Peter, who had patiently waited to escort them home.

As they walked toward the Apparition point, Hermione shook her head. "It seems like only yesterday that Severus was born. Where in the world has the time gone?"

Severus gave a hoarse chuckle and squeezed her hand. "I believe it was you who told me many years ago that children have a way of growing when you aren't looking."

"They certainly do."

Hermione both loved and hated days such as this one. She loved the time spent with family and seeing the fruits of her labour, so to speak; but it was bittersweet in that it reminded her just how quickly time was marching on.

Her ruminations were interrupted when Severus came to an abrupt halt. She looked up at him and frowned. "Are you all right? You look a bit pale."

"I'm fine. Just a bit out of breath. Give me a mo..."

Then she watched, horrified, as Severus lurched forwards, struggling valiantly to remain upright.

"Peter!" Hermione called out, desperate to maintain her grip on Severus' arm as he collapsed at her feet.

"I'm sorry, Mrs Snape."

The young Healer gave Hermione a sympathetic smile and then walked away, on to his next patient.

She stood in the middle of the corridor, his words echoing inside her head.

"His mind appears to be as sharp as ever, but his body is worn out. All of his vital organs are shutting down, and his magic is depleting. I'd say he has a few hours at the least, a few days at most."

A few hours? Hermione couldn't comprehend even the thought of a world without Severus in it. She didn't want to even consider such a possibility, and yet in as little as a few hours, that world would be her reality.

She stood frozen, unable to move save for the thumb twisting her wedding band around her finger.

Her husband.

Severus.

She needed to see him, to be with him, to spend every single second with him. She would stay with him ... to the very end.

Hermione swallowed the sobs that were clawing at her throat, desperately attempting to escape. Straightening her spine, she turned to face the throng of family and friends

that had gathered upon hearing of Severus' collapse at the station. Most of her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren were present, as were Harry and Ginny, Ron and Eleanor, Luna and her husband, Johannes, and dozens of assorted Weasleys.

"The Healer says that he won't be coming home this time," she said bluntly. "I'm going to remain here with him until" She paused, unable to actually speak the words, and steadied herself before turning to her children. "Rose, Hugo, Luna. I'd like you to stay, at least for a little while. Severus will want to see you."

She looked about the crowded corridor and smiled tremulously. "Thank you for being here. It means so much to me that you came. The Healer says he could linger for days, so if you'd like to return to your homes, please, don't feel as if you need to stay on my account."

"We'll stay, Hermione," Harry said, running his hand through his shock of white hair and then putting an arm around Ginny's shoulders.

"Us, too." Ron's face was splotchy, and his eyes were moist. Severus had played an integral part in his children's lives, and in a way, Hermione realised suddenly, the two wizards had a very strange but very real bond.

She felt a hand on her arm...Luna. She wanted to wrap her arms around her friend so that they could grieve together...but she knew they would do that later.

Hermione closed her eyes and took a moment to gather her thoughts, but they were scattered. Death, she knew, was part of life, but it didn't make it any easier to bear. They'd lost Arthur five years ago, Molly following him within a year. Xenophilius had passed beyond the veil the previous summer, which Severus had taken particularly hard. "I'm the last of us now," he'd whispered to her brokenly, as he'd held the carving of the four Houses in his hands.

And now

Rose and Hugo each took a hand and led Hermione into the room, Luna coming along behind. Although Hermione wanted nothing more than to weep and rage, she knew she had to hold herself together; she could fall apart ... after.

Hermione watched, neither seeing nor hearing the scene playing before her as Severus said good-bye to the children he considered his own and the goddaughter he so adored. Her mind was caught up in memories of their life together, of the joys and sorrows they'd shared. How was she to continue on without him?

"Hermione."

His voice dragged her from her thoughts, and she realised they were alone.

"Come," he said, his voice weaker than she'd ever heard it.

She went to him and sat in the chair beside his bed, taking his hand between both of hers. "How are you feeling? Are you in pain?"

"No. I feel ... tired. And embarrassed."

"Embarrassed?"

"I collapsed at the bloody station," he grumbled, his pale cheeks turning a light pink. "It will be all over the *Daily Prophet* tomorrow."

Hermione couldn't help but smile fondly, even as she held back her tears. She patted his hand and said, "Well, you always did love a dramatic exit."

He gave a short huff of laughter, breathed more than voiced. He squeezed her hand and said, "I have something to tell you, Hermione. This will be my last chance...my time is coming to an end."

The tears that she had been so valiantly restraining spilled over and streamed down her wrinkled cheeks.

He gripped her hand more tightly. "It would have been easy for me to have never returned to Britain, to have spent the remainder of my life in self-imposed exile. And then you came and turned my life inside out ... and allowed me to truly live. There is no one else with whom I would have rather lived this life. Thank you for sharing it with me. I love you."

Hermione wiped away her tears with one hand, and smiled at him tremulously. "Loving you has been the best part of my life. I wish I had those missing five years again ... not because I still feel that something is missing...because I don't, not at all...but because it would have been five more years of memories with you. I love you, so very much."

No other words were spoken between them. They merely held hands as they gazed into each other's eyes; words were not needed.

An hour passed, then two, until finally, Severus' eyes slipped shut and his breathing slowed. Hermione laid her head on his forearm, her eyes open, staring at the white sheet of his hospital bed. She breathed deliberately, timing her inhalations with his, the familiar smell of potions ingredients and herbs filling her nostrils. Her hands clung tightly to his, even as his grip turned lax. He took one last breath, and then he was still, and she knew ... he was gone.

Closing her eyes, Hermione began to weep. He was gone. What would she ever do without him?

"Hermione?"

Luna's voice cut through the fog inside her mind. Her eyes felt heavy, as if she'd fallen asleep. She realised suddenly that Severus' hand was no longer in hers. Had they already taken him away?

"Hermione!"

She opened her eyes and was immediately confused. She had been sitting, but now it appeared she was lying down because she was looking at the ceiling. She shifted, and something fell from her hand to the floor. Disoriented and bewildered, Hermione was about to ask Luna who had put her to bed when the witch entered her field of view.

"Thank Merlin, you're awake! A Healer should be here soon. You were out for quite a while, so I contacted St Mungo's. What happened? Was it a Blibbering Humdinger?"

Hermione closed her eyes and then opened them, but everything remained the same. She looked around Luna's sitting room, finding herself surrounded by Severus' books and parchments and journals. Her entire body shook as she raised her hands before her eyes. Her wedding ring was missing, and her skin was smooth and unblemished.

"Oh, no. No." She sat up and continued to look at her hands, then clenched them into fists as she wrapped her arms about herself, doubling over as if in pain. Her gaze dropped to the floor, landing on a small, wooden sphere. "No! This isn't possible. This isn't happening."

"Are you all right?" Luna asked, kneeling next to the sofa, her grey eyes wide with alarm.

Hermione shook her head slowly as she looked into the youthful face of her friend...a face she hadn't seen in decades. "No. No!"

In her anguish, she dissolved into a torrent of tears.

*A/N: Don't kill me! Just hang on with me a bit longer, and it will all be explained, I promise. Many of you saw this coming, and really, there were enough clues that it shouldn't have been completely unexpected. Right? *winces**

The television episode may be clear to some of you at this point. No, it's not Dallas. :) Any guesses? I'll post the answer after the next chapter.

Also, I forgot to include in my notes for the previous chapter that the line "they don't wear lederhosen in Sweden" was a nod to my husband...it's from one of his favorite movies, Trading Places.

Because of the evil cliffie, I'll post the next chapter tomorrow night.

Back to the Beginning

Chapter 6 of 7

While sorting through Severus Snape's belongings, Hermione makes an intriguing discovery that changes her life forever.

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Chapter Six

Back to the Beginning

A/N: I usually don't put author's notes before the chapter, but in this case, I decided it was a good idea. Please, read this chapter very carefully as everything is explained just not all at once. Thank you, and enjoy!

Hermione's head felt as if it were about to split open as she was finally able to fully comprehend where she was. She sobbed in the wake of the pain that washed over her. Her hands gripped the sides of her head, and her eyes screwed tightly shut.

"Hermione!"

She could hear Luna's worried cry, but she was lost to her grief and despair. She couldn't answer. All she could think of was that her life, as she had known it, was over. No, not over ... it didn't exist. It never had.

Another sob was torn from her throat, and she rocked back and forth in a vain attempt at self-comfort. As if through a tunnel, she heard Luna's frantic voice, and then she felt hands easing her back onto the sofa.

"A Healer is on the way, Hermione. Please, be all right."

Hermione had no idea how much time had passed before the Healer arrived. She paid no attention as he cast several diagnostic spells, nor did her weeping cease when he informed Luna that she appeared to be physically fine, merely emotionally overwrought.

The Healer offered to help Luna put Hermione to bed, saying that she would hopefully feel better in the morning and if not, that Luna was to contact him immediately. Hermione vaguely felt the hands that tugged at her arms, helping her to stand. Arms were wrapped about her waist, and she was led her from the room to the guestroom down the hall. She barely noticed as Luna Transfigured her robes into pyjamas and then helped her into the bed. A cool, glass phial was pressed to her lips; she vaguely registered the taste of the Calming Draught on her tongue. She swallowed and then curled onto her side as Luna tucked her in.

"When you're ready to talk about what happened, I'll be ready to listen," Luna murmured.

The door shut with a soft click, and Hermione was alone.

The Calming Draught quickly took effect, and she fell into a fitful sleep, where her dreams taunted her with the life she had never truly lived.

The early morning sunlight filtered through the sheer curtains, and Hermione gradually shifted into consciousness. She blinked slowly as her sluggish mind attempted to orient itself. Her eyes were gritty and swollen. Why...?

Severus.

Fresh tears filled her eyes. She would have to Floo the children today; they would want to help with the funeral arrangements. There were so many people to contact, so many decisions to make. Her thumb moved to her finger

Her wedding band was missing.

In an instant, the events of the previous evening flooded her mind.

Hermione rushed from the bed and all but ran to the loo, unmindful of the ease of movement she hadn't felt in decades. She stood in front of the sink and stared at her reflection in the mirror that hung above it. Staring back at her was her thirty-two-year-old self.

It was true. Dear Merlin. She was back where it had all begun, back at the beginning. How had this happened?

And what had she experienced, then? A dream? A fantasy? A vision of the future?

Her heart skipped a beat. If it had been the future she'd seen, then that meant Severus was alive and well, and within the next year, he would return to Britain ... and to her.

Joy, abundant and unrestrained, filled her from head to toe, and her body shook with relief. As quickly as it had come, however, the feeling fled. What if it hadn't been the

future but something else? She recalled the image of the sphere spinning in her hand and the sensation of magic coursing from her fingertips to her forehead.

Future or fantasy? Which was it?

There was only one way to find out ... and she couldn't stand to spend another minute without knowing.

Quietly, so as not to wake Luna, she slipped from the bathroom and walked down the hall to the sitting room.

She lingered in the doorway a moment before finally entering the room. The mess from the previous night had been cleared away; Luna must have tidied up before retiring. As she scanned the room, her eyes fell upon the small box labelled with the name "Eglantine."

Anticipation and dread warred inside Hermione's chest, and she could feel her heart pound against her ribcage as she approached, drawn as a moth to a flame. She knelt on the floor beside the box and pulled out the stack of letters. After a moment's hesitation, she reached inside and removed the wooden sphere, as well.

It remained dormant in her palm.

She released the breath she'd been holding in a whoosh of air. Whether she felt relief or disappointment, she wasn't certain. Perhaps she felt a bit of both.

After replacing the sphere in the box, Hermione turned her attention to the letters. Carefully, she untied the yellow scrap of ribbon that bound the parchments. Her fingers traced the edge of the topmost letter; she was nervous and not a little frightened of what she might find inside. Were they simply letters to a friend ... or would they explain what had happened to her?

"The answer has to be here," she whispered aloud. And then she gathered her courage, opened the first letter, and began to read.

"Damn it. There's nothing here."

Hermione sighed and ran a weary hand across her face. She blew a stray lock of hair from out of her eyes, then retied the bit of yellow ribbon around the stack of letters. It was strange; all the letters had been from Severus to Eglantine. Why would he have had in his possession letters that he himself had sent?

She had no answer to that question and was about to return the stack of letters to the box when she noticed that there was another letter, this one inside what appeared to be a plain brown envelope. Pulling the envelope from the box, Hermione studied the outside; it was devoid of writing. Turning it over, she noticed that the seal had been broken.

As she removed the pieces of parchment from the envelope, something told her that this was what she had been searching for, and soon, she was engrossed in the decades-old letter that had been sent from one friend to another.

Dear Severus,

I've enclosed a very special gift for you. As I write this, I am in the midst of creating a very unique charm...one specifically meant for you. I don't really know why I feel the need to write the letter that will accompany the gift before it's even completed, but as you well know, I think it's always best to follow one's instincts.

Since we were young children, you have been our dearest friend, and we have been proud...honoured, even...to be able to provide you with safe haven whenever needed. You know that Xenophilus and I think of you as more than a friend ... you are our brother in all ways but blood. And it is because of this that I offer you this most unusual of gifts.

You see, my dear Severus, I know the secrets of your heart. Not only due to the bond of friendship we share, but because you are quite chatty when you're sodding drunk.

You may not recall the events of last year, so I will remind you. It was our weekly dinner, and you were feeling rather melancholy, as it was the anniversary of the day Lily turned her back on you ... on the three of us. And don't you dare defend her, Severus Snape. I am well aware that you have chosen to shoulder the blame, but ... well, that's not really relevant I suppose. In any event, you were feeling rather blue and had drunk more than usual. And that, my friend, is when I learned of your deepest wish, your most secret desire.

You looked at Xeno and me with such sadness, such longing. I asked you whatever was the matter, and you told us...in quite a lengthy dissertation...how much you wished you could have the sort of relationship we have, how you longed to stand in the sun and live life to the fullest.

I know how impatient you are, and I'm well aware that you're currently gritting your teeth and muttering at me to "get on with it," so I will.

You live a half-life, Severus. Perhaps not even that. You've hidden yourself behind so many walls, so many layers, that it's nearly impossible for anyone outside our small circle to reach you. You lash out so they won't get too close ... because if they remain at a distance, they won't be able to hurt you. And yet, even with that, your greatest wish is to live freely and to share yourself with another.

Times being what they are, I know that even if there were a witch who caught your attention, you are in no position to court her...not only because of the guilt you still feel over Lily's death, but because we both know that You-Know-Who will return one day. And we also know that Albus Dumbledore will call upon you again, and you will play the role of spy once more.

What your mind knows is in direct conflict with what your heart desires.

And that, my dearest friend, is where I come in. Although you may be unable to accept my gift for what it is, I had to try.

I present to you The Life Unlived. Use it well.

Eglantine

Hermione stifled a sob as she glanced at the final piece of parchment: instructions for use of the Charmed sphere. Through the veil of tears that hovered on her lashes, she read the words, "incantation to activate the charm," and "nothing but a dream, a possibility."

The letter slipped from her fingers and landed in her lap as she buckled under the realisation that the lifetime she had shared with Severus had occurred entirely within her mind. It hadn't been a vision of the future, merely a vision of what could have been.

Unable to bear the thought, Hermione threw the letter back into the box and fled the room, not bothering to read how the charm had been designed to work.

After all, what did it matter? Knowing would change nothing.

Hermione sat at the window in Luna's guest bedroom with her knees drawn up to her chin and her arms wrapped around her legs. A swath of heavy black material was draped about her body, and one pale hand clutched the edges of the fabric to her chest as she stared with unseeing eyes at the garden below.

Luna had checked on her several times over the past two days, usually with a tray of food. Hermione had picked at the meals, but she really hadn't felt much like eating. Instead, she had been too caught up in her thoughts as she attempted to reconcile the events of the past few days.

When she had awakened in Luna's sitting room, she had been an elderly widow grieving the loss of her husband ... only to find that she wasn't a widow at all, because the man for whom she grieved had never actually been her husband.

But he was dead, all the same.

He was dead, and he had never been hers and never would be. The life they had shared had been nothing but smoke and mirrors, and nothing...*nothing*...could have hurt more.

Because no matter how real it had felt, it hadn't happened.

It hadn't been real.

More than a dream but less than reality, it left Hermione caught between two lives, two worlds, each as sharp and clear as the other.

The ebony fabric was redolent of potions ingredients and herbs, and the smell filled her nostrils as she inhaled deeply. She closed her eyes and basked in the familiar scent, her eyes stinging with unshed tears...tears she had no right to shed, because he'd never been hers to lose.

She sniffed and pressed her palms to her eyes, his scent more heady as the material drew closer to her nose. She rose to her feet and pulled the length of wool from her shoulders. Carefully, reverently, she folded the fabric neatly, pressed it to her face, and then gently laid it on the bed. She would return his robes to the trunk and then attempt to go on with her life.

She had the children to consider...children who were still reeling from their parents' divorce, children who needed her despite her desire to wallow in her grief ... children who would be returning to her arms that afternoon.

She had no other choice but to go forward.

Because if she'd learned anything from her "other life," it was that time was far too precious to waste.

Luna hummed off-key as she prepared lunch, but Hermione barely acknowledged the discordant sound. The children were returning from their visit with their father, and she was nervous. The last time she'd seen Rose and Hugo, they had been grandparents; now, they were young children again.

She sighed and reminded herself that they were *still* young children. They had not yet grown into adults, had never had children and families of their own. What she remembered had not been real, and she would do well to not forget that.

"Are you feeling better?" Luna asked, her back to Hermione as she sliced a loaf of bread into thick, crusty pieces.

"Mm," Hermione hummed noncommittally as she sipped her tea.

"I was thinking," Luna continued, "that perhaps you encountered a Wrackspurt...you know, because they make your brain feel fuzzy, and they're invisible, so you can't see them coming." She put the slices of bread on a serving platter. "But that isn't very likely, is it? There hasn't been a Wrackspurt sighting in years."

Hermione couldn't help but smile at the wistfulness in Luna's voice. "I suppose it would be rather difficult for there to be a sighting of an invisible creature."

Luna glanced over her shoulder and nodded knowingly. "Well, that explains everything, doesn't it?"

A knock on the kitchen door echoed throughout the small kitchen, and Hermione was immediately on her feet, anxious to see her children and her friend. Even though she had prepared herself, the sight of them standing in the garden as she flung open the door was still mind-boggling; they were all so young.

Dropping to her knees, Hermione opened her arms and welcomed her children into her embrace. "Hello, my loves! Did you have a lovely visit with Daddy?"

"Yes, Mummy!" Rose exclaimed happily and immediately launched into a very detailed account of everything she and her brother had done over the last three days. Hermione listened attentively until Luna finally was able to silence the little girl with the promise of lunch.

While Rose had chattered on about their visit with their father, Hugo had cuddled against Hermione and promptly fallen asleep. Hermione looked to Ron in concern. "Is he ill?"

"No, but he didn't sleep very well."

Hermione smiled. "Well, you always did have a hard time putting him to bed," she teased.

Ron's brow furrowed in confused surprise at her warm tone. "Oh...erm, yeah. I suppose so. He always did go to sleep better for you."

"I'm sure he'll be fine once he has a nap," Hermione replied as she rose to her feet, her arms securely fastening around Hugo's tiny body. It seemed like forever since she had cradled him in such a way. Then again, she supposed it had been almost a century. Shaking off the thought, she said, "Why don't you stay for lunch, Ron? I'm sure Luna's made enough for everyone, and it would be lovely to catch up."

Ron glanced at Luna, his eyebrows all but disappearing into his hairline. Then he turned his wary gaze back to Hermione. "I'm...well, I'm not sure that's a good idea."

Of course, Hermione thought sadly. *I've had entire lifetime to come to terms with things, but for Ron, it's only been a few weeks...far too soon to renew our friendship.*

"Maybe you're right," she said, her smile not quite reaching her eyes. "Perhaps another time."

She walked him to the door, while Hugo snored softly against her neck. After an awkward good-bye, she carried Hugo to the guestroom and gently laid him on the bed. It had been a very long time since she'd seen him so small. She brushed a lock of hair from his forehead and wondered if he would look the same when he grew older as he had in her other time.

Setting the thought aside, she leaned down and kissed his forehead, then turned and left the room.

After another week at home with the children, Hermione returned to her job at the Ministry. Molly quickly agreed to watch Rose and Hugo, as per their previous arrangement, and the children seemed happy to return to their normal routine.

With that settled, Hermione began looking for a house of their own, somewhere they could call home. Thankfully, Luna was more than happy to allow them to continue to stay with her until Hermione could find something suitable. In the meantime, she relished the opportunity to go back to work, hoping that it would be easier to deal with her dual realities if she kept her mind occupied.

"Let's play this one tonight, shall we?" Hermione asked the children as she placed the box on the kitchen table. She had picked up the game on her way home from the Ministry and was excited to play it with the children. She'd been lucky to find one, according to the shopkeeper. He'd told her the game had just been released within the past few months and only in limited quantities. In fact, she'd taken the last one he'd had in stock.

"Aren't we going to wait for Aunt Luna?" Rose asked.

"Didn't I tell you? She sent a message telling us to start without her."

Rose pouted, her lower lip protruding pitifully.

"Tuck that lip back in, please," Hermione admonished gently. "Aunt Luna had something very important to do, and she'll be back soon. All right?"

Rose didn't reply but set about examining the contents of the box. "What's this game, Mummy?"

Hermione paused, momentarily surprised by Rose's question, until she remembered that, technically speaking, she hadn't yet played the game herself...not really. "It's called Diagon Alley. We haven't played it before...it will be fun! Why don't you pick out a token, hm?"

Rose quickly selected the broom, and Hermione's breath caught in her throat. Hadn't Rose always been the book? Biting her lip to keep herself from frowning, Hermione reached inside the box. Her fingers lingered over the miniature pewter cauldron before she sighed and grabbed the quill, placing it on the square labelled "Leaky Cauldron."

She looked up to see Hugo staring at her with his big blue eyes, his thumb in his mouth. "Would you like to be the owl, love?"

He nodded, and Hermione smiled, putting his token on the board next to hers. Rose followed suit, and they began to play.

The game quickly turned into mayhem. Rose was confused and bored beyond measure, while Hermione spent the majority of her time wrestling the extra tokens away from Hugo so that he would stop attempting to eat them.

They were too young for the game, Hermione realised. Tears sprung to her eyes, and she blinked them back, not wanting to frighten the children with her emotional display. She packed up the game and sighed. "Perhaps we'll try this again another time."

"Why don't you try this one?" a voice suggested from across the room.

She turned to see Luna standing in the doorway; the children's favourite game was in her hand.

"Honeydukes!" Rose cried enthusiastically as she bounced in her chair.

Hermione smiled gratefully at Luna, and soon they were all racing along the board, hoping to land on "Sugar Quill Lane" while avoiding the "Black Liquorice Forest."

As much fun as they were having, Hermione's mind returned again and again to the other game ... and the small pewter cauldron she now held in her left hand.

Hermione trudged up the hill, her legs straining from the effort; she was exhausted, both mentally and physically. She had thrown herself into her work, and between her current project and the children, she was stretched a bit thin. She was more than ready to return to Luna's, spend some time with the children, and then collapse into bed ... even though she knew sleep would be elusive. But before she could go back to the house, there was one errand she had to complete.

Finally, she reached the top of the hill and the small, gated cemetery. There was a loud creak as she pushed open the wrought iron gate, and then she slipped inside. As she walked among the nondescript headstones, her eyes sought one name. She found what she was looking for under a large oak tree.

Eglantine Lovegood

Beloved Wife, Mother, and Friend

"Hello. I'm Hermione Sn..." She paused, then inhaled deeply. "Hermione Granger. I'm a friend of Luna's," she said quietly as she stood by the grave. "I just wanted to thank you for being a good friend to..." She swallowed and reached inside her bag before bending over to place a clutch of daisies at the base of the headstone. "He missed you very much."

Her eyes travelled to the headstone beside Eglantine's. The Aurors had found his wand but no body...Harry believed the Death Eater's might have stolen it...but regardless, a headstone had been erected in memory of the man that many now considered a hero. As far as Hermione knew, no one had thought anything of its location, adjacent to Luna's mother's grave.

The sight of his name etched into the stone sent a fresh wave of pain washing over her.

Severus Snape

Friend, Teacher, Hero

He fought till the last gasp

Hermione knelt beside the marker, and even though she knew his body was not there, she began to speak. "Hello, Severus. I hope it's all right if I call you by your given name." Her fingers traced over the etched letters of his name, and then she pulled out another nosegay of flowers from her bag. "I brought these for you...forget-me-nots. They seemed appropriate." She smiled a little as she imagined his pained reaction to her words; she could picture him rolling his eyes and muttering under his breath about what a silly witch she was.

She laid the flowers next to the stone and then sat upon the cool, dry earth. She began to talk to him, telling him of the children and of the events that had happened since she had "returned," of how difficult and confusing everything was. "It's even worse than when I lost my memory...but of course, that never happened. Do you see how befuddled I am?" she said with a sad laugh.

The smile slipped from her lips, and she toyed with the edge of her robes. "I miss you. I know it wasn't real, and I know that you've been gone for a very long time, but" She shrugged. "I can't sleep without you anymore...even though you always stole the blankets. I've taken to sleeping in your old nightshirt...the one that I found in the trunk you left to Luna and her father. I know I shouldn't, but it helps, even though it's not the same."

The breeze picked up, and several leaves blew across her lap. She caught one in her hand and studied it as she continued. "I'm very confused much of the time. Trying to keep track of two lives is very difficult. I'm adjusting, though. Really, I am. Seeing the children helps keep things in perspective. It's ... it's hard to accept that they won't ever know you."

A tear slipped down her cheek, and she quickly swiped it away. "I'm sure you'd be quite put out with me to know that I accidentally activated Eglantine's gift. I don't understand how it worked exactly, and to be honest, I don't really care to know. At first, I thought it would be better to get on with my life as best I could. But if I'm honest with myself, I ... I'm afraid, I think. Afraid that examining the experience too closely will somehow diminish it or make it even less real than it already is. So, I'm doing my best to move forward and trying to keep my mind firmly in the here and now. I like to think you'd agree with me."

She rose to her feet and brushed the leaves from the front of her robes. "I am grateful for the life we shared. Whether it was real or not, I choose to believe that I knew the true Severus Snape. I choose to believe that what we had together was something special, something that cannot ever be replicated. I choose to love you ... I always will. And I will never forget."

With one last brush of her fingers against his name, she turned and left the cemetery.

Hermione hadn't immediately noticed when the memories began to fade.

She had been busy with work, the children, looking for a house ... busy with life. With her mind so caught up in the present, it had only been when she had purposely attempted to recall a specific memory that she noticed the foggy haze which seemed to be gradually swallowing her other life.

Hermione had panicked and done the first thing that had come to mind: she'd contacted Harry.

Now, she sat Luna's kitchen table and waited impatiently for Harry's reply. Slowly, inexorably, the life she had lived with Severus was being systematically erased. Bit by bit, memory by memory, it was disappearing into nothing more than vague impressions. She wasn't certain if her plan would work, but she had no choice; she had to try.

Hermione felt as if she were suffocating under the weight of her fear. The memories were all she had left of Severus. She had to do something to stop their deterioration...she had promised that she wouldn't forget him.

Only an hour had passed when the package from Harry arrived by owl. Hermione quickly opened the kitchen window to allow the bird inside. Her fingers trembled as she struggled to untie the knot that secured the package to the owl's leg, until finally it loosened. Setting the delivery aside, she gave the owl a bit of toast, thanked it, and sent it on its way.

Scooping the rather heavy package into her arms, she raced up the staircase to the guestroom, grateful that the children were visiting her parents for the weekend.

Within minutes, she had knelt down on the floor, placing the shallow stone basin in front of her. Closing her eyes, she brought to mind the clearest memory of her life with Severus that she could muster...the night in the kitchen of their little cottage when he had first kissed her. She placed her wand at her temple, and soon, a silvery strand began to emerge. Ever so slowly, she moved the wand away, until suddenly, the strand snapped and disintegrated into a cloud of sparkling silver dust.

Her frustrated cry rent the air as her wand dropped from her lax fingers and clattered to the floor. The Pensieve had been her only hope ... and it had failed. Her greatest fear had been realised: the memories were of events that had never occurred in reality, and therefore they could not be kept. She fought the urge to pick up her wand and try again and again, until it finally worked, but she knew that her attempts would be unsuccessful and would result only in the premature loss of her memories.

She dropped her head into her hands. How much more could she take? Why did it seem as if everything was being forcefully taken from her? First Ron, then five years, then Severus ... and now an entire lifetime. All gone. Wiping her eyes, she rose to her feet and then curled up on the bed, her arms wrapped around her torso, as if she could contain her pain.

It was horrible enough that she was losing her last tie to Severus, but Hermione hadn't realised how much the memories of her other life had been grounding her in her real one. It had allowed her to hope that, no matter how dismal things might currently seem, she would one day be happy and healthy and whole again. It had provided a touchstone of sorts, the knowledge that she could build a new life for herself and her children.

With each heartbeat, part of the enchanted vision further faded, slowly chipping away the hope on which she so depended.

She had lain there for quite some time when she was filled with a sudden determination. She sat up in bed and scrubbed her wet cheeks with the sleeve of her robes. Maybe she couldn't stop the memories from disappearing into the hazy fog that was slowly replacing her life with Severus, but she couldn't allow herself to drown in self-pity. That would accomplish nothing. She could, however, learn as much as possible about Eglantine's Charmed sphere ... and if she were lucky, perhaps she could find a way to keep her remaining memories.

After a brief visit to the sitting room, Hermione knocked on Luna's bedroom door. It was very late now, but she couldn't wait until morning. Now that she had made a decision, she was going to act on it as quickly as possible.

The door creaked open, and bleary, grey eyes met hers. "Hermione?"

"I'm sorry for waking you, but ... I'd really like to tell you what happened now, if that's all right."

If Luna was surprised by Hermione's sudden willingness to talk after weeks of silence, she didn't show it. "Of course," Luna said, swinging open the door to allow Hermione inside.

Luna flopped on top of her bed, sliding her legs beneath the quilt, and then encouraged Hermione to do the same. "I've been quite anxious to hear your story," she said wistfully, and Hermione could see the genuine interest and concern in the other witch's eyes.

As she walked to the bed, an object on Luna's dressing table caught her eye. She glanced at Luna and, gesturing toward the object, asked, "May I?"

"I don't mind," Luna said with a small shrug of her shoulders. She watched as Hermione slowly made her way to the dressing table.

With shaking hands, Hermione picked up the carving that appeared to depict the four Houses. She ran her index finger along the coiled snake, its head resting on the lion's paw. The badger was tucked against the lion's side, and its tail wound around the snake's. Behind, with its wings outstretched, stood the raven. The carving was familiar, yet she didn't believe she had seen it before

Except she had. Her mind stretched to find the memory. "A gift from Hogwarts?" she murmured, more to herself than to Luna. A vague recollection of a long-forgotten conversation was all that came, but it was enough. "No. He made it. He carved it and gave one to each of his friends. Four friends, four Houses." She clasped the carving to her chest, her heart aching with the thought that his hands had fashioned the object that she clutched, and turned to face a shocked Luna. "Severus...Professor Snape made this."

"How do you know that?" Luna asked curiously.

Hermione released a shaky breath. "He told me. He was your godfather."

"I never told you that." Luna tilted her head to one side, staring at Hermione with inquisitive eyes. "I think we should talk now."

"Yes," Hermione agreed, moving to sit on the edge of the bed, the carving still clutched in her hands. Her mind was whirling at the possibilities; some of what she'd seen had to have been real...the carving was proof of that, as was her knowledge that Severus had been Luna's godfather. How could she have dreamt things that she had

never known?

She took a deep breath and then said, "I guess I should start from the beginning."

And then she began to share all that she could remember.

"... and then I woke up in the sitting room. That's all I can remember clearly now...the memories are fading, little by little, all the time. Some things still seem as if they actually happened, but the rest is beginning to feel as if it were only a dream...but Luna, it was more than that. It was all so real. I lived an entire life with him."

Luna passed Hermione yet another tissue from the box she'd Summoned, and Hermione wiped away the dampness from her cheeks. It had been good to tell Luna, as if the enchanted vision had more meaning, more substance in the telling ... even though with every minute that passed another memory turned surreal.

"And you say my mother had something to do with this?"

Hermione nodded and reached into her pocket. She pulled out the letter from Eglantine and handed it to Luna. "Read this."

"What is it?" Luna asked softly, her fingers drifting over her mother's handwriting.

"A partial explanation," Hermione replied, and then she settled in to wait while Luna read the letter.

"Amazing," Luna said once she had finished reading.

Hermione tucked her knees to her chin and wrapped her arms around her legs. "It really is. I can't imagine a more thoughtful, loving gift to a friend."

"Oh, no. Not that," Luna explained. "Well, that's amazing, too, but I mean, it's amazing that she was able to create such a complicated charm. Daddy always says she was incredibly talented at charms work, but I had no idea she could develop something of this nature. It's quite an accomplishment."

Smiling at Luna's obvious pride in her mother's abilities, Hermione agreed. "It really is."

"Now, let's see," Luna continued, studying the second parchment with Eglantine's instructions for the Charmed sphere. "It looks as though all Severus had to do was activate the charm by holding the sphere and saying the incantation. He would have felt as though he'd lived an entire lifetime over the course of approximately ten minutes, which is astounding, really. All that time compressed into ten little minutes. That definitely corresponds with what happened to you, Hermione. As for the witch, she would have felt as though she simply had a rather pleasant dream. Oh, and he obviously never used it, because Mum says the sphere can only be used once." Then she paused, her head cocking to one side. "Hm, this is odd."

"What is it?"

"Mum left a blank space where the witch's name should be."

Hermione frowned. "That is strange. I wonder why that would be?"

"I don't know," Luna replied. "You know, it's very odd that the spell put you in the role Severus was to have taken. It must have been because you accidentally activated it."

Luna thought for a moment, then nodded. "Yes, I think when you cast the revealing spell you interfered with the how the charm was designed to work...muddled up the sequencing, perhaps. That could also be why your memories are deteriorating...or I suppose it could be because the charm was never intended for you."

Hermione considered the idea for a moment. "That certainly seems plausible. Of course, the only way to know for certain is to study the charm itself ... but we don't have enough information to even begin to research its characteristics."

"Yes, we do," Luna insisted, and she hopped from the bed. "Come on. I'll show you."

Hermione followed Luna down the hall and up the stairs to a small room that she'd never noticed before. "What's this?"

"My mother's study," Luna replied. "Daddy left everything the way it was the day she died. He never comes up here, but I do sometimes...when I want to feel close to her."

They entered the small, circular room, and Hermione was immediately enraptured by the inviting space. "What a fabulous room to work in," she murmured as she took in the built-in bookshelves and large work table.

Luna was already across the room, perusing a section of the shelves, occasionally tilting out a book to read the cover before replacing it and moving onto the next. "Yes, Mum did all her work from here, so she wanted to have everything at her fingertips. Ah, here it is!"

"What is it?" Hermione said, moving to where Luna was standing.

With a bright smile, Luna handed her a large, aqua-coloured book. "My mother's research journal. Mum was meticulous about keeping a step-by-step account of her research projects. I'm sure her notes on The Life Unlived are in here, as well. We should be able to find answers to all our questions."

Hermione accepted the journal, gripping it as if it were a lifeline. "I'd like to go through her notes, if you don't mind. I need to understand what happened to me, and I need to know if there is a way to stop the deterioration of my memories."

"Of course," Luna replied earnestly. "In fact, if it's all right with you, I'd like to help."

Hermione smiled and readily agreed. Despite the late hour, they gathered a few quills, some ink, and several feet of parchment, placing everything on the large table in the centre of the room.

As they settled in to begin, Hermione paused and asked, "Why do you think he never used it? Why would he have let it sit in a box for all those years?"

Luna looked at her, her eyes both kind and wise. "Oh, Hermione. I think you already know the answer to that."

Surprisingly, the answer was clear. A feeling of intense sadness overwhelmed Hermione as she swallowed the lump in her throat and murmured, "He didn't think he deserved it."

Hermione pressed her palms to her tired eyes and yawned widely. It had taken several days to even begin to comprehend the complex magic that had made up the charm. Now, she was close to discovering ... something. She wasn't sure what it was yet, but her instincts told her that she was on the verge of finding a key component to the charm.

She leaned back in the chair and stretched. She'd been sitting in the same position for hours, and her back was aching. Luna had gone to bed hours ago, but Hermione

had continued working, chasing after the elusive bit of knowledge that was niggling at her brain.

Glancing at the clock, Hermione groaned. She knew she ought to go to bed; she had to be at the Ministry for work in the morning. When she'd first realised that examining...not to mention comprehending...Eglantine's notes would take longer than she had anticipated, she had considered taking another brief holiday. In the end, she had decided against it; she had just returned from an extended holiday, and she didn't think taking another would be looked upon very favourably by her supervisors.

Luna and Hermione, then, had taken to studying Eglantine's notes after the children had fallen asleep. The work was laborious as neither of the witches had much knowledge of charms theory and development beyond what they'd learned at Hogwarts. The majority of Eglantine's notes were so complex that they had no hope of ever fully understanding it. It was fascinating, however, which made the work seem to go more quickly.

With her memories disappearing at an ever-increasing rate, Hermione felt a sense of urgency and often stayed up late into the night, poring over Eglantine's notes well after Luna had gone to bed. She had already accepted that they would not find a way to stop the deterioration of her memories of the Charmed vision...Eglantine's notes had stated that she'd designed the charm so that once it was activated, it would run its course with no interference. All or nothing, so it seemed. Hermione had been distraught at that discovery, but she continued to work at a vigorous pace, compelled to continue with the work. Whether it was merely a desire to understand or something more, she didn't know.

She yawned again and then looked over her notes of what they had gleaned from Eglantine's journal. First of all, the charm was technically unfinished. On the final page of the notes regarding The Life Unlived, Eglantine had written that the charm was just shy of completion...she had keyed the sphere to Severus and been waiting for him to show even the smallest amount of interest in a witch so that she could also key the charm to said witch. She had written of her frustration that he had isolated himself to such an extent that there were few witches who would have even had the opportunity to catch his eye. Her final notes had stated that the sphere was ready to be sent, as was its accompanying letter, as soon as the "witch situation" was resolved.

Luna believed that this explained how Hermione had been able to activate the charm with the revealing spell...the charm had accepted *her* as the solution to the "witch situation" and keyed itself to her. By using the revealing spell, however, the charm's focus and sequencing had been interfered with, giving Hermione the vision, rather than a mere pleasant dream.

Hermione sighed. What an utter mess.

They had also learned that the charm was, in part, a conglomeration of sorts, incorporating bits of various other charms into its foundation. Luna had made a list of those they'd found evidence for thus far. Hermione glanced at the words written in Luna's now familiar, looping script: Pensieve, Stunning Spell, Legilimency, portrait-magic, Shield Charm, Body-Bind Curse, Fidelius.

Hermione picked up her quill and began making notes on the possible uses for each bit of magic in the margin of Luna's list. The Body-Bind Curse and Stunning Spell would have been what caused her to lose consciousness and remain motionless until the magic had done its work. The Shield Charm and Fidelius, Hermione surmised, might have offered protection while she had been unconscious.

Her quill tapped at the other three words: Pensieve, Legilimency, portrait-magic.

According to her notes, the vast majority of Eglantine's charm consisted of magic similar to that which comprised these three spells. Hermione's brow furrowed as she considered the possibilities. The use of components from the three spells could explain how she had known about Severus being Luna's godfather and the carving of the four Houses. The charm had been keyed to Severus, so his memories, emotions, and personality would have been intact, despite his death, perhaps using magic similar to that used to animate portraits.

She shook her head. Something wasn't right. If Severus was to have been the one to actually live The Life Unlived, it wouldn't have been necessary to, for lack of a better word, "copy" him, as he would have been the active participant. It was for the unknown witch that the portrait magic had been necessary, as she was to have been merely an observer. So how had the charm known so much about him?

Hermione rubbed at her temples. It was all so bloody confusing.

Returning to her original train of thought, she remembered that in the vision, Severus had always smelled of potions ingredients and herbs. She clearly recalled that. Yet she had a vague recollection that he had not worked with potions...in fact ... yes. He had been the DADA professor, not Potions. The magic used to create Pensieves, as well as Legilimency might explain why he would have consistently smelled of potions ingredients even though he had not worked with them. She had associated that particular scent with Severus, so the charm had included that characteristic in the enchanted vision.

She supposed that Legilimency might also explain why the charm had incorporated a renewed friendship with Ron; subconsciously, perhaps, she must have always believed that at some point in time they would be able to salvage that part of their relationship.

It made sense. Eglantine's charm created the vision by accessing Hermione's mind and memories, as well as Severus', and then used their own suppositions, whether conscious or otherwise, to fill in any unknown areas.

"As well as Severus'...." Hermione mused as her brow furrowed. No, that couldn't be right. Severus was dead, therefore it must have been the magic associated with wizarding portraits that explained how the enchantment incorporated things that only he would have known. But again, she wondered how the charm could have collected that information if it had never been activated. And, she reminded herself once more, the aspect of the charm that was based on portrait-magic had not been intended for Severus anyway, but for the witch.

She frowned. The portrait-magic was the key to what was bothering her about the scenario. She rose to her feet and walked to the window, looking out at the dark night sky. There was something important she was not grasping, but she just could not place it.

With a sigh, she shoved her hands in her pockets, and the fingers of her left hand collided with a small object. She smiled sadly as she removed the small pewter cauldron from the Diagon Alley game. She had taken to carrying it around in her pocket, as it reminded her of Severus for some reason

The hazy fog parted briefly for a moment, as if a ray of the sun had cut through the misty veil surrounding her memories of the enchanted vision.

Her eyes widened, and she closed her fingers around the cauldron. If she were right

Quickly and quietly, she made her way to the sitting room and then found the Diagon Alley game. A whispered *Lumos* provided enough light for her to confirm her suspicions.

Her breathing turned ragged, and she felt as if someone had released a hundred fairies inside her stomach. Clutching the game against her, she all but ran out of the room and down the hall. No longer caring if she awakened the entire house, she pounded on Luna's door.

"Luna! Luna, wake up!"

There was only the briefest of pauses before the door opened, and Hermione thrust the box into Luna's hands. "In the vision, Severus taught me and the children how to play this game, but it only became available a few months ago."

Luna appeared to have been wide awake, her eyes alert and searching. "Really?"

"Yes. Do you see? The charm knew things about him that it shouldn't have known. It had to have current access to his mind, to his memories, his personality, his hopes, his dreams. It wouldn't have worked otherwise."

Hermione released a shuddering breath in a vain attempt to calm her racing heart. "He's alive, isn't he?"

A/N: The quote on Severus' headstone is taken from Shakespeare's King Henry VI Part One, Act I, Scene ii.

Don't give Luna too hard a time for not telling Hermione. As we'll find out, she couldn't have told Hermione, even she'd wanted to.

Also, before you ask why Hermione didn't ask Luna if Severus was alive, read her thoughts after Eglantine's letter. She thought it was all a fantasy within her mind, so it never occurred to her that his being alive was even a possibility.

Thank you so much for the great response to the last chapter! You all rock! Some of you guessed the TV episode. It was "The Inner Light" from Star Trek: The Next Generation, my favorite episode ever! I deviated quite a bit, as you can tell, but it was the inspiration for this story.

My thanks, as always, to my beta readers, DeeMichelle and Subversa, and to my Brit picker, LettyBird. They're the best!

The next chapter will post on Friday. :)

Life Anew

Chapter 7 of 7

While sorting through Severus Snape's belongings, Hermione makes an intriguing discovery that changes her life forever.

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Chapter Seven

Life Anew

Hermione raised one gloved hand and used the back of her forearm to wipe the bead of perspiration from her brow. It was an unusually sunny day, and the sky was a brilliant blue with not a cloud in sight. She had decided it was a perfect time to help Luna with the rather neglected garden; she also thought it would be a perfect way to keep the children...and her mind...occupied.

"Not those, Rose," Hermione said as her daughter was about to pluck a seedling from the ground. "Those will grow into flowers. We only want to pull the ones that look like these. You see?"

Rose leaned in to take a closer look at the small green plant. "Why, Mummy? Won't they grow into pretty flowers, too?"

"No, these are weeds, sweetheart. They'll choke the flowers and not allow them to grow. That's why we want to pull them out, so our flowers can be pretty and healthy."

"Oh," Rose replied, her eyes wide with understanding as she began to pull the weeds.

Hermione smiled, then looked over her shoulder at Hugo and laughed. She had placed the toddler in the magical equivalent of a playpen...a type of shield charm used by wizarding parents that she had learned from Molly. He could only go as far as the charm would allow. Hermione had brought out plenty of toys for him to play with, but Hugo was too busy entertaining himself. She watched as he ran as fast as his short little legs would carry him, threw himself against the magical barrier, and then bounced off, falling on his bum. He chortled happily and then did it again. And again. And again.

Chuckling, Hermione shook her head and returned to the weeding. She knew she could complete the task much more quickly if she used magic, but there was something about her hands in the earth that she found soothing...and perhaps, she hoped, the physical work would be distracting.

She sighed. Even if that were the case, it wouldn't have made a difference; her thoughts would inevitably turn to Severus, whether she wanted them to or not.

"I've brought more flowers!" Luna declared as she entered the garden. In her hands were dozens of seedlings. Luna closed the gate behind her with her foot. "Oh, I do hope you've been watchful for Billywigs. They're quite abundant this time of year, and we don't want anyone levitating away."

Rose giggled. "We're weeding!"

"Oh yes, I can see," Luna replied, crouching down next to the little girl and wiping off a bit of dirt from the child's nose. "And what a lovely job you're doing." Then she plopped down on the ground beside Rose and set to work.

After the weeds had been cleared away, the planting began in earnest. Hugo had tired himself out and was napping on the quilt Hermione had laid out for him. Rose was having a grand time working in the garden, but eventually she also succumbed to the need for sleep, curling up on the quilt beside her brother.

When they had finished planting half the seedlings, Luna brought out some bread and cheese, and the two witches chatted as they sat outside with their small repast and enjoyed the warm sunshine.

"You seem to be doing much better...well, better than you were," Luna said; her eyes closed as she raised her face to the sky.

"Mm," Hermione hummed in agreement as she plucked a blade of grass and twirled it between her fingers. "It's different now."

"How so?"

Hermione shrugged. "He's alive. Whether or not he chooses to have anything to do with me, he got his second chance at life. I can be satisfied with that."

"But not happy," Luna said knowingly.

Hermione smiled sadly. "I can be happy *for* him ... and that will have to be enough."

Luna opened her eyes and reached over to place a hand over Hermione's. "It's only been a week. I'm sure he'll respond to my owl soon."

"You and I both know that the likelihood of him wanting to have anything to do with me is slim to none."

"But perhaps..."

Hermione shook her head and interrupted. "No. I may not recall everything with vivid clarity, but my instincts tell me that he'll be angry, uncomfortable ... perhaps even bitter about the sphere being activated. He won't want to see me."

Luna sighed, conceding that Hermione was probably correct in her assumption. "I've asked him to return to Britain. Daddy is trying to convince him. It would be nice to see him more often, and we wouldn't have to keep his connection to my family a secret any longer. I don't like that he has to hide...he's done enough hiding for one lifetime." Luna's brow furrowed in consternation. "I don't know what he'll decide."

"He adores you, you know. He'll come back, if only because you and your father have asked him to."

"Do you think?"

"I've never been more certain about anything. He'll be back."

Luna grinned. "That will be lovely. I miss him terribly."

Hermione swallowed and then gave Luna a wobbly smile. "So do I."

The blonde-haired witch stared at Hermione, her grey eyes seeming to seek out some untold secret. "You really do love him, don't you?"

Hermione stared at the blade of grass she held in her hand. "The memories may be fading, but the emotions are not. I still love him. I always will."

Luna opened her mouth to reply, but her response was interrupted by the arrival of a large, brown barn owl as it swooped into the garden, a piece of rolled parchment attached to its leg. Hermione's tummy swooped along with the bird as it approached; it had to be from Severus.

The owl landed beside Luna and hooted softly as she untied the string securing the parchment.

"I'll get a treat for him," Hermione said, her hands shaking as she pushed herself off the ground and then ran into the house. She quickly grabbed an owl treat, and then stopped, bracing her arms against the counter. A few deep breaths helped to calm her nerves, and then she straightened and returned to the garden.

"Here you are," she said to the owl, offering him the treat. Taking the bit of meat in its beak, the owl spread his wings and flew off in the direction from which it had come.

Hermione turned to Luna, who had already opened the letter and begun to read. Hermione shifted from foot to foot as she waited. "Well? What does it say?"

"Hm? Oh. He says that Daddy is returning in a few weeks. Isn't that lovely?" Luna's eyes continued to scan the parchment. "He had some rather good luck finding the potions ingredients he was looking for, and he thinks he'll have a nice batch of Wolfsbane to sell to the ... well, to the ministry of the country he's been living in." Luna looked up at her apologetically.

Hermione knew that Luna wished she could reveal where Severus was living...for her own inscrutable reasons, the witch believed that if Severus saw her, things would fall into place...but his location was under a Fidelius Charm, and Severus himself was the Secret-Keeper. If he didn't want to see her, she would have no recourse.

"That's nice," Hermione said. She worried her lower lip between her teeth, then blurted, "Did he mention me?" She flushed and closed her eyes, mortified by her lack of control.

Luna continued reading and then nodded.

"May I see it?"

"Oh, Hermione," Luna said, shaking her head. "I don't think you want to..."

"No, I really do. I think I need to. Please?"

Luna was visibly uncomfortable with the idea, but after a moment's pause, she handed Hermione the piece of parchment, her eyes sad.

Hermione felt the blood drain from her face. She had known it hadn't been likely, but she had hoped that maybe he would agree to see her at least once. Maybe. Hermione slowly reached out and grasped the parchment, though by Luna's reaction, she already knew his answer.

As per your inquiries regarding Ms Granger, yes, I was affected by the charm. Yes, I do have memories of the event. Unfortunately, they do not appear to be diminishing in clarity, unlike those of Ms Granger. And no, I have no interest in either seeing or speaking with the insufferable know-it-all who took it upon herself to violate my privacy in such an obtrusive manner. If I never see her again, it will be entirely too soon.

Hermione flinched as if she had been dealt a physical blow; there was no sign of the man who had known and loved her, only the sardonic professor who had felt nothing more for her than impatience and disdain. She ran the tips of her fingers along the parchment, the familiar scrawl becoming unfocussed as she struggled to hold back tears...she was sick of crying. She took a deliberate breath, then slowly exhaled.

He remembered everything...how they had loved and laughed and *lived* ... and he had made his decision. She would have to live with the ramifications. There was nothing else she could do.

Silently, she handed the parchment to Luna, and then she returned to the flowerbed and seedlings.

In the summer, new life would bloom.

Hermione couldn't have said when the last of her memories of the life she had shared with Severus finally faded. She had simply awakened one morning to the sensation that it had all been a dream...and if she hadn't still loved him so much, she might have allowed herself to believe that it had been.

Hermione quickly ducked inside the Three Broomsticks, pushing back the hood of her cloak as soon as she was inside. She was a quarter of an hour early, but that was all right; now she could warm up for a few minutes before Minerva arrived.

After ordering a warm Butterbeer from Rosmerta, Hermione settled in at a table near the window. Droplets of rain distorted her view, but she passed the time watching the passers-by. She sipped at her drink, allowing the sweet warmth to melt away the chill. Minerva had told her about a little cottage in Hogsmeade that was for sale...actually, as it turned out, it was *her* little cottage in Hogsmeade. For years, Minerva had spent her summer holidays there rather than staying at the castle, citing a need for privacy. However, once she had been made Headmistress, she had rented out the cottage, as she had needed to stay at the castle year-round. The previous tenants, however, had recently had another child and had moved to a larger home. Minerva had decided to sell the property rather than rent it out again. When she had heard through the grapevine that Hermione was looking to buy a house, she had immediately sent an owl, saying that her cottage might be the perfect home for Hermione and the children.

Hermione certainly hoped so; she had been looking for weeks, but nothing she had seen had been right. She felt terribly guilty for having stayed so long at the Lovegoods', even if Luna continued to insist that she was happy to have them. Hermione knew, however, that it was time to begin the process of rebuilding her life, and a new home was an excellent beginning ... if she could only find one.

The door to the Three Broomsticks opened, and Minerva entered, closing a large umbrella. Hermione waved, and Minerva immediately made her way through the crowd. "I see you've had a chance to dry out," the older witch said in her usual clipped tones, though her eyes were warm. "How lovely to see you, dear. Are you ready to look at the cottage, or would you like to finish your drink first?"

Hermione smiled and rose to her feet. "I'm ready. I'm quite excited to see the house."

"Well, then, let's not dally. Come along." Minerva turned on her heel and returned to the door, Hermione following behind. As they opened the door, Minerva prepared to open her large umbrella when the rain suddenly stopped, and the sun peeked out from behind the clouds. "Ah, very good. That's a bit of luck. Let's be on our way."

The two witches chatted amiably as they walked along the streets of Hogsmeade. Hermione liked the idea of living in the magical community, and there were several Muggle villages that were close enough that the children could attend primary school if she so chose. She was honest enough with herself, as well, to admit that she also rather liked the idea of being close to Hogwarts once the children left. While she wouldn't interfere with their lives at school, she would feel better knowing that she could reach them easily should the need arise.

Finally, they stopped in front of a worn, stone cottage. "This is the cottage," Minerva said tersely but not unkindly. "It needs a bit of work, but it's nothing a little magic can't fix."

Hermione nodded and turned to examine the exterior of the cottage. The slate roof appeared to be in excellent condition, but she would check for evidence of leaks once they were inside. It was in desperate need of a coat of paint, but that was certainly doable. The stone wall that surrounded the perimeter of the property had fallen in a few places, but again, that would not be difficult to fix. Next, she noted the attributes she liked: lots of windows meant natural light; the garden would be lovely for the children to play in; and there was even a large tree which sat along the side of the property...it had the perfect branch from which to hang a swing.

Smiling, Hermione turned to Minerva and said, "It's lovely. May we go inside?"

"Of course."

Hermione was delighted that the cottage was larger than it appeared from outside, and there was plenty of room to expand if necessary. There were three bedrooms and two baths upstairs, and one of the rooms had a fireplace large enough that it could be connected to the Floo network. Downstairs, there was a small powder room, a study, a dining room, a large kitchen, and a sitting room. The kitchen needed to be remodelled, but the rest of the cottage was almost perfect. A few coats of paint would work wonders on both the walls and woodwork, as would re-varnishing the oak floors.

Hermione stepped into the sitting room. It was a lovely space, with yet another large fireplace. She frowned. "Where is the door to the back garden?" she asked.

"There isn't one, I'm afraid," Minerva replied. "It would be simple enough to put a door right off the kitchen, however."

"No," Hermione said, shaking her head as she stared at the back wall of the sitting room. "I think ..." She tilted her head to one side as she studied the wall. "I think French doors leading to the garden would look lovely right there." She nodded; she could see it quite clearly in her mind. "Yes, I think that would work wonderfully."

Minerva waited patiently while Hermione took her time looking throughout the house a second time. She could imagine raising the children in the cottage, birthday celebrations and family gatherings held in the dining room, the smell of biscuits in the kitchen, Severus at the stove as he made a pot of tea ...

Hermione's train of thought came to a crashing halt, and she deliberately pushed aside the brief twinge of melancholy that she now associated with Severus; this was her future she was considering, and he had chosen to have no part in it.

Forcing herself to focus on the task at hand, she paused in the middle of the entry hall and imagined how it would look with a bit of paint and effort. The cottage was warm and inviting; it felt right ... as if it were meant to be her home. She relished the feelings of comfort and familiarity; it felt like a sign that she and the children would be happy living there. Her decision made, she returned to the sitting room where Minerva was waiting.

"What do you think, Hermione?"

She grinned widely and said, "It's perfect."

Luna, Hermione, and the children stood in the front garden of the Lovegoods' home, awaiting Xenophilius' arrival. He had sent an owl the previous day informing them that he would be arriving by Portkey precisely at noon...it was now a quarter past. Luna and Hermione sat in two of the garden chairs while Rose and Hugo chased each other.

Finally, they heard a soft thump, followed several more thumps, and after a few minutes, they saw a bush of familiar white hair come into view.

Xenophilius walked up the well-worn path, looking rather tanned for someone who had supposedly been on an expedition in Sweden. Of course, Hermione knew he hadn't been there at all...at least not on this occasion. Still, she found it rather humorous when he arrived looking as if he'd spent a fair amount of time on a sun-kissed beach. He came bearing numerous packages ... and wearing lederhosen.

"They don't wear lederhosen in Sweden," Hermione murmured to herself as she watched him hasten his steps toward the house. She shivered, overwhelmed by a strong feeling of déjà vu.

"Hello, hello! This is quite a welcome home, I must say!" Xenophilius exclaimed as he finally passed through the gate and entered the garden. Luna ran to her father and hugged his neck before taking a few of his cumbersome packages.

"You should have shrunk some of these, Daddy," Luna admonished lightly as she took his arm.

"Nonsense! Oh, my! How the two of you have grown," Xenophilius cried, fussing over Rose and Hugo as if they were his own grandchildren. "I do believe I have some gifts for both of you. I say we go inside and see what they are...unless you'd rather wait for Christmas."

The children were quick to dissuade that notion, Rose insisting that she was more than happy to have her gifts now.

"Be polite, Rose," Hermione reminded the small girl. Then she turned, and tears sprung to her eyes as she was overcome with unexpected gratitude for the eccentric wizard who stood before her. He had been Severus' friend through thick and thin, good times and bad, with never a second thought. He had protected him and cared for him when no one else had given a damn. Unable to stop herself, she stepped forward and hugged him tightly. "Thank you."

Xenophilius gave her a quick squeeze and a few fatherly pats. "You're quite welcome, my dear, although I'm not exactly sure what it is I am to have done."

Hermione didn't reply. She merely smiled and followed him into the house.

Rose squealed in unrestrained glee as soon as she saw the swing. She dropped her small bag, dragging Mr Wiggles as she ran across the grass to the large tree. Rose clambered on and kicked off, her delighted laughter echoing throughout the garden.

Hermione grinned and tightened her grip on Hugo as he squirmed in her arms.

"Down. Me 'wing, too, pwease," the toddler said, kicking his feet as he struggled to get down.

"Here, I'll take him to play," Luna said, setting down the box she was carrying. "Why don't you go see if everything made it inside?"

"Thanks," Hermione said as she passed her wiggling son to Luna. Soon, the two were laughing as Luna tickled Hugo on their way to the swing.

Standing in the middle of the path, Hermione smiled as she took in the changes to the outside of the cottage. The fresh coat of white paint gleamed in the sunlight. Flowerboxes had been installed under the windows; though for now they stood empty, they would be overflowing with flowers the following spring. The door had been painted several different colours before she had finally settled on a bright, cheery red, and she was pleased with the way it enhanced the appearance of the cottage's exterior.

She picked up the box that Luna had left behind and headed up the path to the house; then she opened the door and stepped inside. The entry hall looked vastly different than when she had seen it last. All of the woodwork had been refurbished and painted a pale cream that complemented the warm yellow of the walls. It was cheerful and cosy... just as Hermione had hoped. It felt comfortable, inviting ... familiar. But more importantly, it felt like home.

She walked through the dining room, pleased with the oak farm table she had chosen for the room, and peeked inside the kitchen. Everything was new, from the Muggle stove to the butcher block counters and beech cabinets. It was exactly as Hermione had wished.

Happy with the changes to the cottage thus far, she moved into the sitting room. The only alterations to the room had been the golden tan paint for the walls and the installation of the new French doors that led to the back garden. The new olive green sofa and chairs were to be delivered the following day, but Hermione knew they would be perfect in the room.

Smiling, she walked to the fireplace, and then set the box on the floor to open it. One by one, she pulled out the framed photographs and placed them on the mantle, each in its own place of honour. When the box was empty, she stepped back and studied the arrangement. She frowned and rearranged the photos, but it made no difference. No matter how she shifted things around, there were odd spaces here and there, as if some items that belonged on the mantle were missing.

Severus.

She closed her eyes and attempted to tamp down the swell of emotion. Then she inhaled deeply, straightened her spine, and turned on her heel, determination in her every step as she went to fetch the children to show them their new home.

One day, she would fill in the spaces on the mantle with new photos ... and she hoped that the holes in her life would then be filled, as well.

"Thank you for coming, Hermione," Luna said. "I'll wait over here while you take a look about."

Hermione thought she must have been crazy to have agreed to this, but Luna's anxious face had caused her to disregard her misgivings. Luna and her father had worked tirelessly for weeks, wanting to honour their friend as they felt he deserved. The exhibit was almost complete and was set to open in a few weeks' time. Luna had asked Hermione to come to the exhibition hall to give her opinion as to what they had chosen to display. Hermione had balked, saying that her opinion was not the one that mattered.

"But you love him," Luna had said breezily, mindless of Hermione's wince at the casually spoken words, "so you wouldn't allow anything to be made public that might hurt him."

"I don't remember specifics, Luna," Hermione had warned, not at all happy with her friend's request.

Luna had merely waved away her words as if they were a bothersome fly. "You'll know."

And so, after much begging and pleading on Luna's part...and Hermione's admission to herself that she was terribly curious...she had finally agreed.

With a deep breath, she stepped into the cavernous, circular space, her hands trembling as she took in the exhibition hall. If Luna hadn't implored her to come, she might not have ever visited the exhibit. The war was not something she often thought of; it had been a dark, painful time, and while she had never forgotten, she had worked very hard not dwell on that horrible period of her life. When it had been over, she had grieved for those they had lost and then thrown herself headfirst into life, determined that their sacrifices would not be in vain. As far as Hermione was concerned, they were the true heroes.

Standing there now, surrounded by the memories, her emotions, which already seemed to be hovering at the surface as of late, overflowed once more. Hermione had feared that the exhibition might have romanticised the war or been melodramatic in its delivery, but the coal black walls and stark displays generated an atmosphere of respect, reverence, and solemnity. All along the perimeter of the room, written in golden script, were the names of those who had fought and died for the Light, for the preservation of their world. The scope of loss, so visibly yet elegantly displayed, was overwhelming.

Hermione slowly began to move about the room, lingering at some sections longer than others: the history of the Order of the Phoenix; Dumbledore's Army; a display that asked her to "Remember what happened to a boy who was good, and kind, and brave ... remember Cedric Diggory." She shuddered as she passed the area designated for

Voldemort and his Death Eaters. Memories, good and bad, flooded her mind, and Hermione was caught by surprise at the vast array of emotions the exhibit was evoking. Pride, grief, anger, relief...all surged through her blood.

She snorted as she passed a display titled "The Golden Trio." She'd always hated that ridiculous name for the friendship between herself and her boys. Even so, she couldn't help but smile as she saw the various photos of the three of them during their years at Hogwarts and wondered where some of them had been found. A small placard in the corner read, "Photographs by Colin Creevey, on loan from his brother, Dennis Creevey."

"Oh, Colin," Hermione murmured as she thought of the excitable young boy who had proven to be a true Gryffindor in every sense...and had died fighting just outside the doors of Hogwarts.

As she entered the centre of the room, there were three final displays. One focussed on Harry, one on Albus Dumbledore, and one on Severus Snape. There she saw excerpts from Severus' personal journals depicting his thoughts regarding both Voldemort and the Headmaster...though nothing that hadn't already been revealed by other sources. Also included were his sixth-year potions book and a set of his teaching robes draped over a tailor's form; Hermione had to force herself to refrain from burying her face in the fabric. A lone tear finally broke free as her gaze fell upon his hickory wand and posthumously granted Order of Merlin, First Class.

Wiping away the dampness from her cheek, Hermione forced herself to look at the rest of the display. Luna and her father had selected several photographs for the exhibit. Some were quite personal...including the one of Severus with Xenophilius and Eglantine. She wondered what he would think of it, but then she imagined that Xenophilius would have asked for his approval before including anything of a personal nature.

Something was niggling at her, but Hermione reminded herself that it wasn't her business...she did not speak for Severus Snape. The honour of acting in his stead belonged to Luna and her father, not her.

"They did a very good job, don't you think?" Luna asked a bit nervously.

"They did," Hermione replied, turning to glance at her friend before returning to her gaze to the photos of Severus. "It will be a huge success."

Luna breathed a sigh of relief and then tilted her head to one side. "Something's bothering you, though." Hermione shook her head, but before she could speak, Luna said, "You can tell me, you know. I won't be upset."

Hermione rubbed at her eyes with the palms of her hands and then sighed before admitting, "I don't think he would appreciate his part of the exhibit being here in the centre of the room."

"Where would you suggest, then?" Luna asked curiously.

Hermione glanced off to the side, to a part of the room that was cast in the shadows by the bright lights illuminating the centre displays.

Luna followed the direction of Hermione's gaze, her eyes widening at the implication. "Oh. Yes, you're quite right. I'll make the arrangements with the curator. Thank you."

War Hero Returns From the Dead!

Minister for Magic Kingsley Shacklebolt announced this morning that Severus Snape, the spy for the Light who was believed to have perished during Battle of Hogwarts, is in actuality alive. Minister Shacklebolt indicated that Mr Snape has been living in self-imposed exile as he recovered from wounds received during the battle and has now expressed a desire to return to Britain. It is not known where Mr Snape has been for the past fourteen years, nor why he chose to keep his survival a secret. Minister Shacklebolt denied knowledge of the date of Mr Snape's expected return. The *Prophet* will bring you more on this story as it develops.

The exhibition hall was packed with people. It was the night before the official opening, and the museum had invited the surviving members of the Order of the Phoenix and Dumbledore's Army, as well as those who had fought for the Light at the Battle of Hogwarts, for an exclusive preview of the war exhibit. It was a reunion that had been a long time coming.

Hermione stood off to the side, watching as people mingled about, taking in the various displays. Everyone seemed pleased with the museum's efforts, and she now knew for certain that the exhibit would be a success; if this select group of people found it acceptable, then the public would flock to view it.

She smiled as Ginny and Harry arrived and waved them over. They made their way across the room, greeting her with a warm embrace. The three friends chatted about the exhibit...Harry wasn't happy about being in the centre of the room, and it was all Hermione could do not to laugh, thinking that he wouldn't appreciate her comparing him to Severus. The topic soon switched to the children, and Ginny and Hermione were making arrangements to take the cousins on an outing when Ron and Eleanor entered the room. Hermione smiled sadly and moved so that her back was to the new couple; she didn't want anyone to feel uncomfortable.

"He is an absolute arse," Ginny fumed, staring at her brother with narrowed eyes.

Hermione laughed. "He's never been one to hide his feelings, Gin. He loves her, and he wants his friends to love her, too."

"But to parade her about all the time, as if he hadn't thrown you over..." Ginny paused as she realised what she had just said. "That was stupid of me. I'm sorry."

Hermione shook her head. "Nonsense. I'm fine. Truly, I am. If he can find what he needs with Eleanor, then I'm happy for him."

Ginny and Harry both gaped at her for several moments before Harry seemed to snap out of his daze. "You're a saint, Hermione. If I'd done what he did, Ginny would have strung me up by my ba..."

Ginny elbowed him in the ribs and then gave him a saccharine smile. "And don't you forget it, Mr Potter."

Harry rubbed his aching side. "Yes, dear."

Hermione couldn't help but laugh at Ginny's smug expression. "I'm no saint, believe me. I wanted to strangle him when he first told me." She shrugged one shoulder. "But life goes on, and so must I."

Harry was about to say something when his eyes widened and his jaw dropped in shock. "Merlin's beard. I can't believe it."

"What is it?" Hermione asked as she turned to see whose arrival had so surprised Harry, only to see the one man she'd never thought to see again. "Severus," she whispered.

Luna had told her that he would be returning to Britain, and she'd read about it in the *Prophet*, of course, but Hermione hadn't thought she'd ever see him. Yet there he was, standing stiffly in the entry to the exhibition hall, his dark eyes scanning the room.

Time seemed to grind to a halt as Hermione drank in the sight of him...the ebony black hair, the hawkish nose, the thin lips set into a perpetual sneer. Gods, how she'd missed him. She fought the urge to close the distance between them, throw herself into his arms, and bury her face against his neck...somehow she didn't think he would appreciate such a gesture. Hysterical laughter bubbled in her throat. The man she loved was alive and well and only a room's width away, and all she could do was stand and stare. The rest of the room could have gone up in smoke, as far as Hermione was concerned. Greedily, she let her eyes continue to rake over him, memorising every

detail, painfully aware that she might never have such an opportunity again.

She might have expected his gaze to pass over her as quickly as possible...after all, he was angry with her for activating the charm...but instead, his eyes met hers and lingered, his gaze seeming to penetrate her very soul, seeking, searching ... and she willingly laid herself bare before him. Whatever he was looking for, it was there for the finding. She would withhold nothing ... not from him. *See the truth, Severus* she thought. *It's right here...* I'm *right here*. It was only when her lungs began to burn that she realised she had stopped breathing, and she sucked in a desperate breath. Before she could take another, the moment was gone.

He looked away, his withdrawal an abrupt reminder of what she had lost, even if it had only been in an enchanted dream.

The room had gone eerily silent, but Hermione was deafened by the sound of her heartbeat pounding in her ears. She inhaled another shaky breath, then slowly exhaled.

Standing next to her, Harry began to clap his hands, then Ginny joined him. And then Minerva, then Molly and Arthur, then Dean and Seamus and the other Gryffindors, until finally the entire room swelled with thunderous applause, welcoming the final hero home.

Hermione wished her parents good night and then helped them through the Floo so that they could return home. Then she wearily walked up the stairs to check on the children. Both of them were sleeping soundly, an evening with their grandparents having worn them out. Hermione smiled; her parents had looked rather exhausted themselves.

She walked to her bedroom and removed the high-heeled shoes from her aching feet. The soft rug felt lovely on her poor, abused toes. She performed her nightly ablutions and then dressed for bed. Her body was exhausted; her mind, however, was still wide awake. With a sigh, she threw on her dressing gown and headed downstairs, hoping a glass of wine might help her to sleep.

She had left the museum almost immediately after Severus' arrival. It was cowardly, she knew, but she couldn't have borne spending hours in his presence with nary a word or glance from him. If she'd thought that not seeing him had been painful, then seeing him again, knowing that he would never love her, would never know her...and did not want to...was nothing less than torturous.

"Doesn't matter," she muttered to herself as she opened the bottle of wine. Her heart would eventually heal, and perhaps, one day, she'd love again. It was unimaginable at that moment, but she had to believe that there was someone somewhere with whom she could live and love and...

Her thoughts were interrupted by a knock at the door. Hermione sighed; it was probably Luna, come to check on her after Severus' unexpected appearance at the exhibit. She set the bottle of wine on the countertop and went to answer the door. At the last second, she remembered it was quite late, and that it might not be Luna at the door after all. She pulled her wand from the pocket of her dressing gown, gripped the doorknob, and said, "Who is it?"

A knot formed in her stomach, tightening as the silence stretched between her and the unexpected visitor at her door. It twisted into an excruciating ache as a voice made its way through the barrier between them. Wanted and feared, hoped for and yet terrifying...it was a voice she'd thought she would never hear again.

"Severus Snape."

They sat uncomfortably on the sofa in the sitting room, each as far away from the other as they could possibly get while sharing the same piece of furniture. They had been in the same position for at least five full minutes, neither uttering a single word.

Hermione glanced at him from the corner of her eye. His posture was so unusual...at least it seemed so to her. He was perched on the very edge of the sofa, his back stiff and rigid, his eyes firmly focussed on her fireplace. His clenched fists rested on his thighs. It was incongruous with the vague mental image that his presence had brought to mind, of him lounging on the sofa with his legs crossed at the ankles as he flashed a lopsided smile. The misty memory of him being so relaxed with her, imagined though it was, tugged at her heart.

Unable to bear the silence any longer, she cleared her throat. "Would you care for some wine? I just opened a bottle."

"No," Severus answered shortly, then added an equally terse, "thank you."

Hermione fidgeted with her dressing gown for a moment, lamenting the fact that she had already dressed for bed. She would have been inordinately more at ease if she had still been wearing her robes.

She waited a few more minutes, until her initial, dazed reaction began to fade, replaced with irritation that he had come to her house at such a late hour, only to sit and stare at her fireplace. "Did you stop by for a particular reason, Severus, or did you just want to test the comfort of my furniture?"

He turned his head to look at her, his expression inscrutable. Then he arched an elegant eyebrow, and Hermione felt a familiar heat settle low in her stomach. Before she could dwell on her rather extreme reaction, he stood with a flourish, his robes swirling about his legs as he strode to the fireplace. Hesitating only a moment, he reached inside a pocket, his whispered incantation too low for her to hear. His hand emerged from his pocket, cradling the item as if it were a precious gem.

Hermione forced herself to remain on the sofa, resisting the urge to leap forward and examine whatever it was that Severus was holding. He stood before the mantle for a long moment, until finally, he placed the item amongst her framed photographs and stepped away, allowing Hermione a clear view.

She immediately recognised the piece of wood, not only from when she had last seen its twin in Luna's room but, as a veil lifted from her memory, from her own hazy remembrances of the charmed vision. It was the work of his own hands...the carving he'd made so long ago of the four Houses.

Hermione stared, her mouth dry, speechless. The carving fit perfectly in a space that had not welcomed any other object, as if it had always been meant for that spot. As if it were home.

Her heart raced as she considered what his actions might mean, but she refused to jump to conclusions where Severus Snape was concerned. "What do you want?" she asked, breathless despite her determination to keep her tone neutral. "Why are you here?"

He met her eyes reluctantly. "I am uncertain. I had no intention of seeking you out once I returned to Britain." He stopped short, and Hermione had the oddest sense that he expected her to explain his presence in her sitting room.

"Yet here you are."

"Yes." He walked to the French doors and peered out into the darkness. "You've created an almost perfect replica of the cottage from the vision."

"I didn't realise" Her brow furrowed as she considered his statement. "It was unintentional. My memories are all very hazy now."

He nodded but kept his back to her; all she could see of his face was what was reflected in the panes of glass. A muscle in his jaw twitched, and he clasped his hands behind his back. "I see."

Hermione sighed and rubbed her face with her palm before saying, "I'm sorry I activated the charm. It was..."

"Unintentional," Severus interrupted impatiently. "Yes, I am aware of that, Ms Granger. According to my goddaughter, she gave you the ignominious task of cataloguing my

belongings...Merlin knows why...and you found the sphere in the box of things her mother left to me upon her death."

"Oh!" Hermione exclaimed, pushing aside the twinge of hurt she felt at his curt tone. "So that's why you received the sphere before its charm work was finished. I had wondered about that."

His hands clenched into fists and then released. "I was not aware it was unfinished. Luna did not explain precisely how the sphere was activated, nor has she shared how it worked."

Hermione was shocked. "Why wouldn't she tell you?"

She saw his eyes close, then reopen before he all but growled, "She said if I wanted to know that I should ask you."

She smothered a laugh at his aggravated expression and then wondered if she were completely losing all sense of reality; her emotions were all over the place. "Ah. Well, when I found the sphere, I didn't know what it was. I thought perhaps it was a puzzle or something. I examined it tactily..." She stopped abruptly at the impatient pursing of his lips; somehow it was as familiar to her as the expressions of her own children. "It activated when I cast a revealing spell."

Severus turned to face her. "I read the letter from Eglantine, Ms Granger. It was my understanding I was to have been an active participant, rather than a mere spectator."

Hermione nodded. "Yes. Luna and I have studied her mother's notes on the charm, and we believe that the revealing spell altered the charm's focus, and thus the sequencing was affected. Since I activated the charm, rather than you, as was intended, I was the active participant. We believe the alterations are what also led to my memories fading, while yours" She paused for a moment, then asked, "How much do you remember?"

"Everything."

"And you experienced it as a dream?"

"Not precisely."

Hermione rolled her eyes, exasperated by his terse replies. "Honestly, Severus, it's like pulling teeth to get any information out of you!"

His mouth twitched. "I was a spy."

The sudden display of humour caught Hermione by surprise, and she stared at him for a moment before she burst into a short bout of laughter. His expression softened slightly, she saw, but by the time she had composed herself again, he had slipped that damnable mask firmly in place.

Or perhaps not so firmly.

"I would compare it to a Muggle cinematic experience," he said, glancing at her as if to punctuate the reference.

"As if you were watching a movie?"

"Yes."

"Oh." She worried her lower lip for a moment, wondering briefly if she should ask her next question, and then forged onward. "Did you develop any ... emotional attachments?"

"It wasn't real!" he said forcefully, glowering at her. "It was a fantasy...a very realistic dream. But it was not based in reality. The man you knew..."

This time it was Hermione who interrupted. "The man I love."

He winced, but then his expression hardened, as did his voice. "That man was not me. This," he said, gesturing to himself with one hand, "*this* is who I truly am: the bitter, angry, *greasy git* whom everyone so loves to hate. I do not relate well to people...I prefer my solitude. I'm not a hero, I'm not a father-figure, and I'm certainly not a loving husband!"

She was shaking her head as he ranted, the unexpected revelation of the reasons for his reticence leaving her speechless ... but only briefly.

"No, that's not true. That bitter, angry man you just described ... that's the mask. The charm revealed your true self...that's how it was designed."

"Designed?" Severus frowned, then cleared his face of all expression. "What do you mean?"

"I can show you Eglantine's notes sometime, if you're interested, but the magic the charm used as its base is consistent with several other spells, including Legilimency, as well as the magic used to make Pensieves and wizarding portraits. Don't you see? The charm used our own memories and personalities, our own subconscious dreams and desires, and integrated them into the vision. That's how it was *designed*, Severus. Eglantine wanted to give you the life that she believed you were capable of having but would never allow yourself to live...and she was right."

"That was my business, not hers and certainly not yours!" Severus spat angrily, stalking towards her, stopping once he was within arm's reach. "You had no right to meddle in my affairs. You and your recklessness have cost me my peace of mind...I never intended to activate the charm, and now my dreams are filled with a life that was never real and that I can never have!" His hands fisted at his sides, and he was all but shaking, his posture so stiff that she worried that he might pitch forward nose-first into the floor.

Hermione studied him for a moment, then her jaw dropped momentarily before she shut it with a snap. "You're frightened."

"I beg your pardon!"

"No, no. You are," Hermione insisted, her mouth curving into a smile as she became more certain of her assessment. "I know because ... well, because I think I experienced something similar in the vision. It's ... it's a vague impression but ... yes. Yes. You're frightened, because you're not certain that you can be that man, and since that's who I fell in love with" She trailed off, her eyes widening with realisation. "Oh, dear Merlin. You love me."

"Ms Granger..."

She waved him off. "Not now, Severus. I'm having an epiphany." Her mind reeled at the possibilities, giddy with newfound hope. "You tried to push me away in the letter you sent to Luna, but you were curious about me, weren't you? That's why you came back!"

"I hardly think that..."

"And then tonight, you saw me at the exhibit, and that clinched it, didn't it? You saw me, and you couldn't resist the temptation to speak to me, to see if I still feel the same way that I did in the vision. I'm right, aren't I? You love me, and you're frightened that my feelings for you aren't real."

"Stop saying that," he ground out from between clenched teeth. "I am no longer capable of that sort of emotion."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Oh, please. You loved your friends. You love Xenophilius and Luna."

"That's entirely different, and I have no fears regarding your feelings or lack thereof." His mouth twisted into an ugly sneer.

On familiar ground at last, years of enchanted experience melded with the forceful determination of the woman standing in a no-longer-imagined cottage with the man she was sure she loved. "Why did you come, then? Luna would have eventually answered all your questions...you had no real reason to come here. So why did you? Why are you here?"

Severus dropped his chin to his chest, and Hermione watched in dismay as he seemed to crumple before her eyes. "Luna was sending me owls daily," he began, "and she made sure to mention you and the children multiple times per letter. She told me how you requested that the museum relocate my portion of the exhibit, because you knew I'd be more comfortable outside of the spotlight."

He raked a hand through his hair, and Hermione's breath caught at the vaguely familiar gesture. He continued, "Xenophilius thought he'd have a go, as well, informing me that if he could have another lifetime with Eglantine, he would snatch it up in a heartbeat. He said I was a fool and ... a coward for choosing not to at least speak to you."

Hermione cringed; she could only imagine how well that conversation had gone over with Severus. She was about to compliment him for choosing wise friends when the mask came slamming down once more.

"This was a mistake. I apologise, Ms Granger, for arriving at such a late hour. Rest assured, I will not bother you again. Good night." Without even pausing long enough to glance at her, he strode from the room.

"Oh, no you don't, Severus Snape," Hermione muttered as she ran after him.

She caught up with him in the entry hall, rushing to block his exit despite the knowledge that he could Disapparate if he were truly determined to leave. She grabbed a fistful of his robes, stood up on her toes, and shoved her face in his. "We are not finished talking yet."

"Yes, we are. Now if you'll excuse me..."

"I will not!" Hermione cried, stomping her foot like a petulant child. She took a deep breath in an effort to calm her rising panic. A flash of memory penetrated her growing despair, and she clung to it with everything within her. "You can't leave. You can't. You ... you promised, damn you. You promised me that you wouldn't leave."

Severus flinched, and his face twisted as if he were in pain. "No, Ms Granger. I didn't."

She gasped, her sob stuck in her throat. He was right, Hermione realised. *He* hadn't promised her anything. He'd never promised her anything at all.

Slowly, she released his robes and looked up at him, the tears in her eyes shining in the dim light of the entry hall. "Severus, please," she pleaded softly, not caring that she had resorted to begging. "I know this sounds crazy...it's insane...but I miss you," she whispered. "I can ... I can understand if you can't stand the thought of loving" She paused, forcing down the lump in her throat, and beseeched him, her hands opening in supplication. "Can't we just give this a chance? Maybe ... maybe we could just talk sometimes or go to dinner ... be friends. Maybe it will turn into more or maybe it won't, but I'm willing to take whatever..." She stopped herself from voicing the thought. "Severus, we'll never know what could grow between us if we don't try. Couldn't we try?"

They stood together in the dark entry hall, the silence thrumming with fear and possibility. He hadn't rejected her offer immediately, Hermione thought. Perhaps he would consider...

"I'm not a very nice man," he said, breaking into her reverie.

She smiled. She knew *this* man. Stepping neatly into the small crack in his icy veneer, she brushed a strand of hair away from his eyes.

"No, no you're not. But you're a good man. A bastard, to be certain, but a good man nonetheless." She took heart in his small but brief smile and reached out to grasp his hand in hers. "Please, Severus. I won't make any promises...not yet. You say I don't know you, so help me. Let me know the real you."

He looked down at their joined hands, his expression inscrutable, as always. Hermione held her breath, the gossamer thread of hope gaining substance as she watched his chest rise and fall and felt his thumb trace mindless circles on the soft skin of her wrist.

Finally, from behind the long curve of his lashes, the swing of his hair around his face betraying his nervousness, he spoke at last.

"I don't suppose you'd care for a cup of tea ...?"

Hermione was certain her answering smile was as blinding as the sun.

Five years later

"Hermione?"

"In the kitchen!"

Hermione slathered the bit of cold toast with strawberry jam and then set the knife on the counter. She was about to take that first blissful bite when she felt his arms surround her. Leaning back against his chest, she sighed happily. "I wasn't expecting you home so early," she said. Although Minerva had allowed the Potions professor to live in Hogsmeade with his wife and family, she still insisted that he perform his share of rounds. Since that evening had been the Welcoming Feast and Sorting, he had been required to stay even longer than usual.

Severus laughed, his breath hot against her neck, causing her to shiver in delight. "It's almost midnight, Hermione. I'm rather late."

"Is it really?" She frowned; it seemed her internal clock was completely off these days. "I was hungry."

"So I see. Let's take your midnight snack to the sitting room, shall we?"

Hermione agreed and allowed him to guide her to the other room. She rolled her eyes as he chivalrously helped her seat herself on the sofa before sitting down beside her. "How did the Sorting go?" she asked. "Gryffindor?"

"No," Severus replied with a smirk.

Hermione lightly smacked his arm; she knew he was imagining Ron's reaction to that bit of news. "Well? Which House?"

"Ravenclaw."

She grinned. "That's my girl."

Wrapping an arm about her shoulders, Severus drew her closer to his side. "She was quite excited. I'm sure you'll be receiving an owl in the morning. How did it go at the station? I see you're still alive after your little adventure."

Hermione groaned. "I don't know what they were thinking, allowing Ron to drive an automobile. I swear, Severus, he had to have Confunded the examiner. He was awful!"

Severus stiffened. "You are not to ride in a car where Ron Weasley is the driver again ... ever."

"Don't be ridiculous, Severus," Hermione grumbled as she struggled to find a comfortable position. "I may have lost my feet ... and my waist," she sniffed as he sniggered under his breath, "but my intellect is still intact. I'll never, ever get into a car with Ron again." She shuddered. "I insisted on Apparating Hugo to his house, as well. I wasn't about to let Ron drive him home."

Severus relaxed, laughing at his wife's outburst. He rested a hand on her swollen tummy, laughing again as a hearty kick met his palm. "Active little bugger."

"Don't get him all riled up. I'd like to sleep tonight, if you don't mind," she grouched even as she moved his hand to where the baby was now kicking.

"Yes, dear," he replied dutifully, only the crinkling at the corners of his eyes betrayed his amusement. "Was Eleanor at the station?"

"No, which is odd, don't you think? She loves Rose."

"Perhaps she thought it would be too difficult, with all the children about," Severus murmured, his fingers stroking her distended belly.

Hermione leant further into him and sighed. "Yes, that could be."

She felt badly for Ron and Eleanor; the previous year, the Healers had informed them that Eleanor was unable to have children. Ron loved her unconditionally, but Eleanor had been devastated. While she had since accepted the situation, Hermione knew that some days were more difficult than others for the witch who, thanks to the children, had become her friend.

She picked up a slice of jam-laden bread and was about to take a bite when she remembered Luna's letter. "I forgot to tell you! An owl brought a letter from Luna today. She met someone while she was on holiday in Sweden...his name is Rolf. We've been invited to dinner on Saturday to meet him. And I am to inform you to, and I quote, 'be nice.' She really likes him."

Severus sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Will I never be forgiven for that little skirmish with Martin?"

"Michael," Hermione corrected primly, "and that 'little skirmish' was a full-blown hex."

He waved a dismissive hand. "He was a pillock."

Her lips twitched in amusement; Michael *had* been a bit of a prat. She smiled at his tense jaw and narrowed eyes. *So stubborn*, she mused. "Perhaps he was. In any event, Luna would like your promise to be civil to Rolf. This is quite serious, Severus...she likes him, and she's worried that you will run him off with your glowering and hexing."

Severus snorted a laugh and then smiled crookedly, causing her heart to skip a beat. "All right. I will play nice. I promise."

"Thank you," she replied, satisfied, and burrowed into his side as she popped the last bit of toast and jam into her mouth.

She felt her body relax as Severus began to tell of his day, of Rose's Sorting, and the Welcoming Feast, one hand toying with a strand of her hair, the other resting where their baby lay. As she listened, Hermione snuggled closer, her eyes falling on the small, wooden sphere which sat in the very middle of the mantle above the fireplace, her most treasured reminder that a life un-lived was no life at all.

She sighed in contentment, so very grateful that they had both chosen to live.

A/N: And that's the end of our tale! Thank you so much for the wonderful response this story has received. I was blown away by your lovely comments and reviews. Thank you!!

I do have two more SS/HG stories in the works, both of which will be novel length (if not longer). Those of you who read Heart and Soul know that I don't do well with WIPs (I take forever to update), and so I will not be posting the new stories until they are complete. I have no idea how long that will take, as some real life issues have emerged, but I promise that I will finish them and begin posting as soon as they're done.

The Life Un-lived was written for the SS/HG Exchange on LiveJournal. The recipient was Atlantel, and her prompt for this story is as follows:

Hermione tries a mysterious object at Luna's, her dearest friend, (what is, it's your choice) and suddenly, she gets a vision. Her children are still her children, but older, nearly ready for Hogwarts, but her life isn't the same one. Ron is out of the picture and she's married to a dark-haired husband. Could it be Snape? Hermione cannot believe it. He died so many years ago... research (and love) are in order!

My never-ending gratitude to my beta readers, DeeMichelle and Subversa, and to my Brit picker, LettyBird. Aren't they the best? The artwork of the carving was a birthday gift from DeeMichelle, and I love it!! Thank you, my friend! I also owe a huge thanks to machshefa, not only for all her advice in regards to Hermione's amnesia, but for the huge help she was on this particular chapter. Thank you! I'd also like to thank my dear friend GinnyW for being such a great sounding board and listening to me whine throughout the writing of this story. Love you all!