

chai

by *bellarossi*

Written for the sshgexchange for blackeyedlily. A tale of tea with spices, the colourful streets of Kolkata, the even more colourful Bengali language, and finding something you never expected to find in the most unlikely place in the world.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: Written for blackeyedlily for the 2008 Winter SSHG Exchange.

This is set in Kolkata, which is the capital city of West Bengal, which is a state in India. Although I am Bengali myself, I have never actually lived in Kolkata, so my view is quite similar to that of both Hermione and Severus', in the sense that they are acquainted with the city and have a certain affinity with it that neither residents nor tourists would have. It's a peculiar halfway in-between feeling, and I've tried to be as honest as possible by incorporating all the places that I don't necessarily know much about but are familiar to me. There are a lot of Bengali phrases I've included, so there's a little translation list at the bottom which you can refer to. I hope it will inspire you to visit my hometown. Because despite its faults, that is what it is: home.

Big hugs and sloppy kisses to my brilliant beta **Katie** and to the lovely **WriterMerrin** who sorted out my commas for me. :) Ladies, you're absolute stars!

There's a translation at the bottom for the Bengali words, but may I suggest you read the story first--the words will fit in as you read it. :)

She wakes slowly to the gentle strains of the neighbourhood bustle: the clippers of the barbershop, *thering-ring* of the bicycles, the sound of water rushing from the well into a bucket, the distant honking of cars, a man calling '*Shobji, shobji!*' and the sounds of other households around her already starting the day with clanging pots and pans, loud conversations and strains of Indian classical music. A man with a little bell approaches the gate, singing a prayer in his lilting, melodic voice as he accepts alms from passersby.

Her radio alarm sets off a moment later, bursting with bright *bhanga* music, the beats resonating within the small room. She lets it continue, her body moving with it as she lifts the mosquito net and pushes herself out of bed.

She pushes open the window, letting the fresh, crisp winter air (and the hungry mosquitoes) waft in. There is a lingering smell of smoke from someone's bonfire last night, though perhaps the air itself is simply hazy, judging by the limited range of vision. It is marginally colder than usual: perhaps fifteen degrees. She wraps her *kantha* stitch shawl around her a little more tightly.

'Knock, knock,' she hears someone say, and she turns her head to see an Indian woman leaning against the door frame. She has light skin, large, dark eyes and thick, lustrous black hair which is braided into a long plait down her back. 'I thought I heard you pottering around,' she says with a smile. Her English is lightly accented with a Bengali drawl which hardens the end consonants and rolls the r's slightly. '*Cha*, Hermione?'

'Please. Thanks, Rina.'

Rina returns shortly with a steaming cup of *masala chai* on a tray, carefully giving it with her right hand.

Hermione accepts the cup gratefully, holding it in both her hands, letting the steam warm her face as she breathes the rich aroma of cardamom and cloves. It has become one of her favourite drinks, far superior to the boiled-dishcloth taste of Earl Grey. There is *nothing* that beats fresh milk boiled with a handful of tea and spices.

'So,' Rina begins, sitting on the edge of the bed, her hennaed hands folded in her lap, the intricate brown designs matching the border of her simple red cotton sari. 'Already six months in Kolkata and you haven't yet run screaming back to England. We must have done something right, *na*, Hermione?'

Hermione chuckles. 'I can see why the average *firring*,' she says this with a touch of irony, 'would run screaming, but I love it here. It's just so interesting. I'll never get bored here. And if you make this for me every morning for the rest of my life, I'll die happy.'

They share a look before giggling.

It is the truth, though, for several reasons. The excuse she gave for coming here in the first place was to study Eastern branches of magic. Kolkata had been her first stop simply because she'd mentioned it to Parvati, who had told Padma, who had told their cousin Rina, who had promptly thrown her door open to welcome her for as long as she liked. It is an added bonus that Rina also just happens to be a very knowledgeable witch, and an excellent cook to boot. Although she had originally intended to leave after a year and move on to the Middle East, she is reluctant to go. There is so much culture, so many fascinating places and people, and so much good food. Kolkata is by no means the nicest city in India; in fact, it's probably the dirtiest, most polluted and poorest of the lot. But there is something about it that keeps her here. She isn't yet quite sure what it is, but someday she will understand. Just not today.

The second reason was conveniently masked by the first. She needed to escape England. England, the war, the deaths, even the people. She hadn't known any other way to deal with it other than to just get up and go. Leaving Harry and Ron behind had been a difficult decision, but they had understood completely, and she loved them for it. They still exchanged letters every week; Harry was back from his holiday in the French countryside with Ginny and would be starting his Auror training in January, while Ron, who also intended to start training with Harry, was meanwhile working with George in the shop and having a great time of it. She had seen them a few times while living in Kolkata (or 'Cal' as most people affectionately called it): once each for Harry and Ginny's birthdays and once when *they* had surprised *her* by appearing on Rina's doorstep on the morning of her birthday. But Apparating across continents was incredibly exhausting, so it was limited to special occasions.

She looks at the calendar hanging above the window. It's Christmas, a day she should be spending with her friends, or even with her parents in Australia. But here she is, running away from everything.

Hiding out in India.

Her thoughts are cheerfully interrupted by the maachwalla, the fish seller, whose distinct voice can be heard yelling *Bhetki maach, paabda maach, rui maach, ilish maach, pomfret maach, chingri maach!* over and over again.

'Which reminds me,' Rina says with a grin, 'I do need to buy some fish. So, what's your plan of action today? Care *obharanda?*'

She snorts softly. 'I wish. I was thinking of going either to Victoria Memorial again or Kalighat.'

Rina's head swivels to check the clock ticking quietly above Hermione's dresser, her gold earrings catching the sunlight which streams into the room from the open window. It's already ten o' clock in the morning.

'It's a bit late for Kalighat, even for research. The best time is early in the morning, partly because that's when the magic is strongest. That's why all the tourists go at that time. Speaking of which, there will be a lot of tourists around this time of year, so you'd better be careful. Or I would leave it until January, when everyone goes back, and then you'll have it all to yourself.'

Hermione sighs. 'You're right, as always. I think I'll go to Victoria Memorial anyway, but probably later, to catch the *son et lumiere*. Our plans always seem to go down the drain with that one.'

'Yes, which is a shame. It is really very lovely.'

'Mm,' Hermione says noncommittally. 'How about Gupta Bros. for lunch? Are you up for some *chaat?*'

'I actually have to go to the Ministry today. Some *pagol* was caught selling cursed items to a bunch of *Marwari* Muggles with more money than brains. He claimed they were original Nur Jahan pieces. Judging by what I was told about the effects of the curses, I'm starting to think he was telling the truth. Some pretty nasty stuff.'

Hermione wrinkles her nose. 'That sounds like fun. Well, I've decided I'm going to Park Street, since I have a load of Christmas shopping to do, so I shall have *chaat* without you. No, I'm lying, I'll pack some and bring it home with me.'

Rina laughs, her gold bangles clinking. As her body shakes lightly, Hermione can smell the scent of coconut oil from the other woman's hair, the sandalwood of her soap, the woody scent of her henna, the lingering aroma of spices on her fingers and the sweet jasmine fragrance of her perfume. It is a wonderfully familiar smell, one that Hermione has come to look forward to every morning. 'I'd like that. Will you be home for dinner?'

Home, Hermione repeats mentally, savouring the way it rings in her head.

She smiles back. 'Yes.'

& & &

Park Street is a wonderfully chaotic study of contrasts, and strangely enough, he enjoys every minute of it. It is a mix of old and new, traditional and modern, Indian and Western. The *paanwallas* and *puchkawallas* hawk their snacks outside the most expensive restaurants in the city; the music shop blares *outhangra* before switching to the latest Britney Spears hit; women in traditional saris work just as comfortably as the girls in jeans and sweaters; the quiet (soundproofed) cake shop, Flury's, whose fruit cakes are as famous as they are expensive, sits directly in the noisiest part of town, suffering from the non-stop beeping from the cars (usually the large yellow Ambassadors that populate the streets of Cal); Raymond's, whose men's suits are second to none in both quality and price, sits next to some of the cheapest clothing shops around.

It seems almost fitting, then, that he should spot her here, in the midst of saris of every colour and fabric, like a ghost of his past come to haunt him.

As if he needs it. As if there is more to repent for, more he has to endure before he can be at peace with his demons.

Will none of it ever be *enough?*

Maybe India just hadn't been far enough. Would a Warming Charm hold in Antarctica? Or Cooling Charms in the heart of Africa?

He is a man of few words, but at this moment he is a man of no words.

No words at all to describe why Hermione Granger is in *thesame damn country, in the same damn city* and on the *same damn street*.

And it has to be her, of course. Not the Boy-Who-Lived-To-Be-A-Pain-Right-Where-It-Hurts, who would have hexed first, asked questions later. Or his faithful lapdog-cum-sidekick, who would have firmly believed he was a ghost and left it at that.

Not even Draco Malfoy, who probably would have taken it in his stride and got on with life because that was what you were supposed to do when a man whom you believed dead for six months suddenly reappeared in your life.

No. No, no, no.

It was Hermione Granger, a girl with more questions than brain cells and not enough discretion to keep it in check. Hermione Granger, whose infernal hand was forever waving itself in front of his nose. Hermione Granger, who just couldn't settle for being anything less than perfect.

Hermione Granger, who has filled out a bit and looks really rather attractive in her jeans and peacock-blue v-neck jumper. Whose hair has marginally tamed itself into a messy bun, with a few brown tendrils framing her face.

And then her head turns and her eyes move in his direction and then, oh Merlin, she's staring at him.

Suddenly there are only two people on Park Street. One supposedly dead man and one infernal know-it-all, and that's it. No one brushing past them, pushing and shoving like it's a New York subway, yelling loudly in Bengali to hear themselves above the cacophony of sound that is made up of the cars beeping, the music blasting out of every available speaker, the bustle of kitchens cooking, the rustling of saris, the pitter-patter of sandals as they walk past.

Nothing, no one.

Just two people in a world that doesn't make any sense anymore because they're the wrong two people and things like that aren't supposed to happen. The heroine marries the hero, and they have two kids, great friends and jobs, and they live happily ever after.

There isn't supposed to be a kind of sadness in her eyes. She's supposed to be running away from him, to the arms of her lover, or a friend, or anyone else that isn't him. She isn't supposed to be walking towards the snake of a man who killed her headmaster and then fittingly died by being bitten by a giant snake. She's not supposed to take that second step, or the third, or the fourth, or the fifth.

She's not supposed to be standing in front of him, her hand reaching out to touch his face, her eyes wide like she's in a trance. As ~~if~~ she's the snake, a cobra, lured by the seductive song of the snake charmer's flute.

Her fingers are barely a breath away from his face. He can smell them, like vanilla, probably from a soap, and an underlying wisp of cardamom and milk that seems entirely her own. Merlin, she smells like chai, as though he could drink her forever.

Then suddenly someone flicks a switch, and the world starts moving again, and he takes the chance and runs.

& & &

She reaches out and catches his fist. He stops, his form completely rigid and still, his back to her.

She doesn't know why. She doesn't understand at all. All she knows is that one minute ago he was dead. And now he is alive. Nothing else makes sense; her brain simply can't process anymore than that.

For a girl who has all the answers, she suddenly has nothing.

She doesn't understand why he is here. She doesn't understand why he's alive. She doesn't understand why she moved toward him when every brain cell was screaming at her to run while she was still alive. She doesn't understand why the instincts that have served her for so long have suddenly short-circuited.

She does understand one thing though. She knows why she reached out to him: to touch him. She needed to know it was real. To know that she wasn't dreaming him up, like some ghost trying to unsettle her just as she had come to terms with her own demons. To know that they were both standing on Park Street, a few steps away from Flury's, she in her jeans and sweater, holding two sets of *dahi padpi chaat* and *chai*, he in his black trousers and black shirt, amongst the colours and fabrics and borders of the saris around them.

She feels like the whole world is watching their drama unfold, but people just push past them, walking toward their next destination, unmindful of the *twiddirungs* who probably just lost their passports or got mugged or something. *Cholche cholbe*.

He turns slowly, his eyes never leaving hers. Her hand stays on his wrist. It's a weak grip, and he could probably shake it off easily.

But he doesn't.

Instead, he says one word, in that deep voice, a little harsher than usual, like raw silk instead of satin, but there is absolutely no doubt in her mind that it is his.

'Why?'

She shakes her head. No answer. For the first time in her life, she won't be ridiculed when he asks her a question, and she can't even reply. She almost laughs at how pathetic it is. Then, 'Are you a ghost?'

His lips twitch ever-so-slightly. 'No. Are you?'

She smiles, a little hesitantly. 'No.'

'Well, that clears everything up,' he says, finally extracting his wrist from her grip. She reflexively slips her hand into her pocket where both her wands are (her own wand, as well as the one given to her by an Indian guru she met during *Durga Puja*, made of a long, thick stick of cinnamon with two strands of Bengal tiger fur in the centre).

He notices it and makes a movement close to rolling his eyes. 'Don't be ridiculous. So both of us exist. And we are here on Park Street. Which brings me back to my original question. Why?'

'Shouldn't I be asking you that question?'

'Touché.'

There's a little silence, which seems impossible considering the noise levels around them, but it's there.

Then, she says, 'Have you had lunch?' and he shakes his head, so she offers him the other bag of food, charmed with a discreet stasis spell so that the *chaat* isn't soggy and the *chai* is still warm.

That is how they begin.

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Once she gets over the fact that she's sitting in a cafe in Kolkata with Severus Snape who was dead but actually isn't, she begins to discover a few interesting things. Some are incredible and difficult to believe, and some are trivial. But all of them don't quite match with the Snape of her past and the Snape sitting across from her. She isn't quite sure if they are the same person, and she can't decide whether to group them together or separate them entirely.

Firstly, that he is a genius. She knew that already, but she didn't know that he had actually developed an antivenin ('Really, you didn't think I expected it? He was evil, yes, and very sadistic, but totally unoriginal, Miss Granger,') to counteract Nagini's poison. He had been alive, all that time, and, stupidest-witch-of-her-age that she was, she took Harry's word for it and didn't even bother to check.

Secondly, he really isn't very different from before. There is no great facade of the greasy git hiding a truly wonderful, romantic and sensitive man inside. He simply is a bastard. But the caustic wit is wonderful when not used on her or in relation to anything to do with her. And after an hour or so of it, she begins to realise that it is just how he is. After another hour or so, she begins to realise that she wouldn't change it for the world.

Thirdly, he looks the same, too, except he doesn't. So she spends a lot of their time together in that cafe simply observing him. She *observes* his thin, pale, angular face; how he only seems to have one expression, but there are minute, almost imperceptible changes that shift his expression entirely from one phase to another. How the sharp cheekbones are somehow less pronounced; how his brow seems more relaxed, less lined; how his lips are not quite so thin, so severe, so harsh. She *observes* the silky (not greasy) sheen of his hair; medium-length, no longer unkempt about his shoulders but neatly kept at the nape of his neck. The way a few strands at the hairline flop into his eyes; the way he irritably flicks them away, only to have them resetttle in his eyes, and the process repeats itself. She *observes* the relaxed stance of his body, the way he unconsciously taps his feet along with the *bhangra*, and the way his face softens minutely when he takes a sip of his *chai*. She *observes* his black eyes; there is something different about them: something alive, something fierce, something electric that sparkles in a way she would never have thought possible.

Fourthly, he smells *incredible*. Like pure sandalwood oil fresh from Mysore, which Rina gave her a tiny bottle of for her birthday. It's so precious, like liquid gold, that she's scared to open it lest she spill even half a drop. So instead she breathes him in, like an intoxicating aroma, locking it away in her mind amongst the truly treasured scents, amongst *chai*, Chanel no. 5 (her mother's perfume) and freshly cut grass and parchment.

Lastly, he hates mosquitoes. They seem to flock to him, and he is forever clapping at the air as several unfortunate mosquitoes fall victim to his dexterous hands. He hasn't yet mastered Rina's smooth way of simply clenching her fist to kill mosquitoes, but even he mutters '*masha*' under his breath every time he kills one, just like Rina. The first time he did it, she laughed out loud, and he glared daggers at her.

She keeps the memory close to her heart.

& & &

She's halfway through explaining her cinnamon wand to him when he realises the sun is setting, which means three things. One, it's almost five in the evening, which means, two, they have spent close to four hours simply talking. Which means, three, they'll have to part soon. It simply won't last forever.

He doesn't want to go. Somehow this isn't quite real, and he doesn't want to break this suspended reality he's found himself in since one o'clock in the afternoon.

She notices the break, and for some reason, a shutter falls over her face and he's back to square one, where she's the ghost that just appeared in his life.

'What is it?' he asks warily.

She turns her head away, looking out the window. 'It's already five o'clock,' she says softly. 'Is there someplace else you have to be?'

What goes unspoken is, there's someone else, isn't there?

He almost laughs at how ridiculous it all is. Four hours ago he was simply a man trying to get by. Nothing more, nothing less. Now, suddenly, four hours later, he's sitting across from a woman whom he feels an inexplicably magnetic attraction towards. And he has no idea, absolutely no clue, if she reciprocates.

How? How does a simple day that starts like any other come to this? How does life manage to simply throw a spanner, or in this case a Granger, into the works and completely alter his course?

She interprets his pensive silence to be the worst. Before he can say anything, she stands up, thrusts a few rupee notes onto the table, says a curt 'thank you' and whirls out of the cafe in a remarkable impression of his trademark bat-out-of-the-dungeons routine.

He is left in a complete state of confusion before quickly clicking things together. The 'oh' moment thrusts him out of his seat and through the door, barely muttering a quick '*ektu darao, please*,' before he's out of the restaurant...

In his rush to explain, to make things right, *tokeep her with him* Merlin be damned, he calls out her name. She turns around, her eyes shining with tears, but he's a little too fast, and he pummels straight into her, managing to catch her and twist them around to break her fall before they hit the ground.

And then she's on top of him, and she's smiling despite the tears in her eyes, and he thinks she's probably the most beautiful thing he has seen, so he kisses the tears away, his lips trailing from the edge of her eye, down her cheek, teasingly close to the edge of her lips, and then finally, finally, they meet, lips locked in an embrace that just isn't quite enough, and thenand then she opens her mouth tentatively, and it's deeper, more powerful, and there's more emotion, and he can't get enough and he needs more, more, oh please...

The sound of clapping and catcalling jolts them from their euphoria, only to find that quite a crowd of people has gathered to see what kinds of censored things these strange *firrungs*, with their total lack of propriety, are doing. The men are laughing and clapping and catcalling; the girls are grinning as though it's the cutest thing they've ever seen, though they're a bit jealous, too; the aunts are standing around, muttering '*chi chi chi*' under their breaths, as well as 'how disgusting' and 'have they *no* sense of *shame*, these *firrungs*?'

But they don't care. They absolutely don't care, because they've found something special, and if this is what it takes to keep it, then damn all the disapproving Bengali mothers.

She's blushing and doesn't quite meet his eye as they walk away, but their hands are linked, and he hears her whisper, 'Merry Christmas, Severus.'

And when he replies, 'This is the best Christmas I've had in years, Hermione,' it's the absolute truth.

At the *son et lumiere* at Victoria Memorial, which is her favourite place in all of Cal, he watches the way the lights reflect off of her face and her reactions to everything, which is far more interesting than the show itself. Every once in a while she catches him, but she pretends she doesn't know what he's doing and focuses on the show. But their hands are linked between the seats, and she squeezes his tightly.

Later, she calls Rina to tell her to expect one more for dinner. 'If that's okay, of course,' she adds hastily.

'Of course, Hermione. What would you like to have? Anything in particular?'

She thinks about it for a moment, twirling her pinkie finger around his. *Chai*, please.'

FIN.

Words and meanings (in order of appearance):

shobji - Bengali for vegetables.

bhangra famous Punjabi music which is very lively and great fun to dance to.

kantha a special kind of decorative stitch often used in clothes and bedcovers.

'**cha?**' informal way of asking 'will you have tea?'

(cha is Bengali for chai, although cha means any kind of tea, while chai often refers specifically to the masala kind which is made with spices.)

na no

firring what locals call foreigners. It's not exactly rude, but it's not complimentary either.

maachwalla fish seller.

(Maach means fish. I think bhetki is snapper, rui is river carp, ilish is hilsa fish, pomfret is pomfret, and chingri maach is prawn. I'm really not sure what the English name is for pabda, but it's a very long, thin fish which is wonderful when cooked in the typical Bengali mustard preparation.)

care of bharanda sort of Bengali slang for basically being lazy/not doing anything. Which sort of characterises most of my holidays in Cal.

son et lumiere French for sound and lights, as in the show.

pagol the polite(ish) Bengali word for idiot.

chaat a popular Indian snack which comes in many different forms. (My favourite is dahi papdi chaat which has Indian crackers, yoghurt, tamarind sauce and a teensy sprinkle of chilli powder.)

Marwari they're actually people originally from Rajasthan who have settled in other areas of India and are usually very wealthy, much more so than the average wealthy Bengali, let alone the average not-so-wealthy Bengali, so Bengalis make fun of them almost as much as they make fun of sardaris (Sikhs). We're a fun bunch.

paanwallas paan seller. Paan is a kind of Indian breath freshener, basically made up of spices wrapped in a betel leaf, which you eat in one go. (It's actually pretty nice once you get over the whole leaf-eating thing.)

puchkawallas puchka seller. Puchkas are a famous Bengali snack where you dip a hollow, crispy ball of dough filled with a spicy potato mix in masala water.

cholche cholbe means 'all is fine', sort of like Bengali for 'oh well' or 'whatever'. Bengalis say this a lot.

Durga Puja a major Bengali holiday which celebrates the goddess Durga who is like the goddess of all goddesses. Everyone gets something new to wear for that day and traditionally most Bengalis, religious or not, still go to the temple for the prayers during this time.

mosha mosquito in Bengali. This is also known as the Bengali Tourettes Syndrome. They're *everywhere*.

ektu darao wait a moment (please).

chi chi chi a typical 'aunty' thing that older Indian women do to show disgust. If you've ever seen Bend It Like Beckham, you'll know what I'm talking about.

If anyone's interested, you make chai by boiling a cup of milk (if it's just for yourself, or more depending on how many you're making it for) in a pot, the kind you use to boil eggs or potatoes in, and while it's simmering, pour in a little less than one tablespoon of tea leaves (I use Darjeeling tea), a few cardamoms, cloves and aniseeds. Then let it boil while stirring and ta da! Done. :)