

Discovery

by Melenka

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Hermione sat at her desk, bent over a particularly difficult section. She'd been at it so long she felt like her bum had melded to the hard chair. Ginny had suggested some padding, but being comfortable seemed to slow her down, so Hermione had tossed aside the horrendously colorful cushion Molly had sent over. Pain was part of the process.

The first knock was so light she attributed it to some woodland creature, a bird perhaps. When it continued, louder and more insistent, she ~~swore~~ *told them to leave me alone*. For almost a week, her friends had complied. Blissful silence had ensued, allowing more and better work than she'd managed in the months prior. The battered wooden chair scraped across the stone floor, giving voice to the scream she suppressed at the interruption. She stomped into the hall, ready to eject Harry or Ron or whoever else had caused the distraction. Friendships could mend. The work was all. She flung open the door.

"What do I have to do to get you lot to " The rest of the sentence died unuttered. Her vision filled with a black that absorbed light, words, thought. Only feeling survived, multiplied. Fear, suspicion, confusion. She blinked to clear her vision. Nothing changed. Unrelieved black.

"Do close your mouth, Miss Granger."

Her teeth snapped together, the sound echoing in her head. At least something filled the sudden emptiness. She looked up. The black of his eyes allowed no more words than his clothing had. The voice held her captive, more now than before. She'd heard it so often in dreams, broken, weak, filled with anger and regret. The vigor of it sought to erase memory, but the lush tones that tormented her for years in her youth could not undo the scars that had followed.

"Are you going to invite me in?"

She stepped aside and motioned for him to enter. Despite the passing of years, he still made her feel a fool *Because I let him*. The relief of forming a coherent thought brought her back to herself not the girl in the classroom, but a woman grown. He swept past her and looked around her small cottage.

"To what do I owe the pleasure?" She'd hoped to sound more sure, but at least her vocal chords had recovered.

"Is it?" He turned to face her. "A pleasure, that is."

"I suppose that depends on the reason for your visit." She didn't ask how he knew where she lived. He had always been good at ferreting out secrets, and her friends were notoriously bad at keeping them, now that the terror of war was so far behind them. Their caution was little more than an element in a series of stories and nightmares, rarely admitted and never in public.

"Fungus." He might have sworn for the effect it had on her.

She shook her head, trying to assign meaning to the word. "Beg pardon?"

"Mushrooms, to be exact. There is an astounding variety in the woods nearby, some of them quite rare."

"Neville was on about that when I moved in. I'd forgotten. Herbology was not a consideration when I chose such a remote place." Her mouth was opening, words spilling out without thought. Too late, she remembered the need for caution around him.

"What was?"

To her surprise, she answered him honestly. "Hiding. It was all too much, the stories in the papers, the ceremonies and balls, constantly being asked to relive the worst time of my life."

"I'd have thought you'd like the attention."

"For all of a month, perhaps." She shrugged. "I could never get any reading done. As soon as I picked up a book or tried to work out a problem, there would be some message by owl requesting I go here or speak there, or a stranger at my door wanting me to sign some foolish relic they swore came from the last battle. As if evil will never rise again. No one reads history, even in the wizarding world. It's a travesty. After a year of that, I withdrew. They found me, of course. I've been getting better at evading them. It took some study, I must admit, and I'm sure there is a way to obscure the place entirely, but I've not yet managed it. I will."

He laughed. "You've changed so little. How very refreshing that you cannot seem to keep quiet and still strive to be a know it all."

She bristled. "Did you come all this way to insult me, professor?"

"It was a compliment, Miss Granger. Do try to have some sense of humor or you will get old before your time."

"Voice of experience?"

He flinched so slightly she almost missed it. "I have a great deal of experience in a number of areas, which is why I will attribute your lack of a gracious greeting to your having failed to eat for at least the past two days. It will bolster the pretense that you do not despise me."

"You have me confused with someone else," she said softly. "I never did hate you."

"No? I gave you more than enough reasons. It's a wonder you let me into your home at all."

"There is a great difference between dislike and hatred. For me, to hate means to wish dead. Even when I thought you a terrible man, I did not want you to die."

"Your childish desire for justice overrode good sense. I most certainly deserved to die." He moved closer. "But you could not leave it alone, could you?"

She stepped back. "I'm certain I don't know what you mean."

"Come now, Hermione. You may lie to your friends, to the world if it pleases you. I will have honesty. It is the least you owe me."

"Owe you?" She drew herself up and looked him in the eye. "For what, Severus?" His given name slipped from her tongue. It felt right. She was no longer a child, no matter how he made her feel.

"For not letting me go. Tell me, what possessed you to send the healer?" He took a step toward her. "And not Pomona, at that." Another step. "No one who could connect you to the message, no one who would know. Very clever." He loomed over her.

She stood her ground. "What makes you think it was me? You had allies aplenty at that fight, on both sides."

"Ah, but they did not know what had happened. You did."

"As did Harry," she countered. "Surely you haven't sought to browbeat him into confessing to the great sin of saving your life."

"Potter did not care." He spoke each word with cutting precision.

"Why would you assume I did?" she returned with equal sharpness.

"Because you cried." The accusation hung in the air.

"I did no such thing!"

"One tear, two perhaps. The others may have missed it, but I did not. I remember seeing the shadow of a phoenix on the wall, and wondering if perhaps you'd had the wrong patronus all along."

"So you credit me, or blame me it seems, for sending a rescue, based on the delusions you had whilst poisoned and dying. A shaky premise, even for you." She crossed the room, crossed her arms, turned to face him. "Even if I had done, how could that make me beholden to you? By all accounts, a life debt should work the other way."

"Presuming the person wished to be saved in the first place."

"As I recall, you were hardly in a state to grant permission. I was more surprised than anyone that you pulled through. But it was not by my hand, so you can take out your anger over living to become a war hero on whoever actually saved you. I'll not become your whipping girl a second time."

"You misunderstand. I ask only that you admit to your part. Surely a Gryffindor can find the courage to speak the truth."

She stared into his eyes, unwilling to give in. "My school days are behind me, so find another card to play or fold your hand. A call for honesty requires reciprocity. You can hardly ask me to speak openly of that horrid night when you came here on false pretenses."

He stiffened. "I most certainly did not."

"Mushrooms, Severus?" She arched one eyebrow. "Really."

"A basket rests on the bench outside your door. Next to it is a bottle of wine. Wrapped in a small packet you will find some very fine cheese I purchased from a red-headed witch in the village below. She waxed rhapsodic about its age and properties. If she spoke true, the bread might be good enough to do it justice. The rest of the basket is filled with mushrooms. I would not advise eating the purple ones." He gave her a smug smile.

She put her hands on her hips and fixed him with a glare. "I don't cook."

"I do." He glanced down the hall. "If you have a kitchen, I will make you a meal to repay your hospitality." He drew out the last word.

"Fine. Afterward, you can take your leave."

"Providing you tell me the truth of that night, I will leave you in peace."

"That's what they all said," she muttered. She retrieved the food, shoved the bottle of wine into his hands, and stalked into the kitchen. She plunked the basket down, trying desperately to ignore the smell of fresh bread, the earthy scent of mushrooms. The cheese, blessedly, was wrapped so well she had not a whiff of it.

She turned to face him. "I have work to do, so let me know when it's ready."

"It will go faster with your help," he said. "You can rinse the strawberries while I cook the mushrooms. The rest takes scant effort."

"Strawberries?" She licked her lips. "You hadn't mentioned them."

His smile told her the omission had been intentional. "They go so well with the wine."

She set about washing the fruit, then carefully unwrapped the cheese and set it on a board. Her stomach growled, loud enough that he must have heard it. For once, he didn't needle her. Or perhaps he was too engrossed in the sizzling mushrooms to have noticed. She lifted the knife to nick a bit of cheese before she passed out from hunger.

He chose that moment to speak. "We will need glasses."

She set down the knife and pulled out wine glasses. Naturally, they needed rinsing, too. By the time she'd washed out all the dust, he'd set the table. He pulled out her chair and waited until she'd been seated before taking his own. At least she'd thought to wash the napkins. He took his time pouring the wine, swirling it around, sniffing it. She thought seriously about kicking him for making her wait to eat but decided it would be bad form to assault a guest, however unwelcome. Finally, he took a sip and filled her glass. It was perhaps the finest wine she'd ever tasted.

"Eat, Hermione." For once, his tone was soft.

She obeyed. Despite her best intentions, it was impossible to maintain any dignity. The cheese was her undoing. Rich and smooth but with a sharp edge, it elicited a groan, then another. The mushrooms brought her close to rapture. She was ravenous, but the subtle flavor, heightened by a sprinkling of herbs, made it too good to rush. Small sounds of pleasure punctuated each bite. She gave up caring about making a spectacle of herself. He could hardly think less of her, after all.

When the first rush of hunger had been sated, she became aware of his hands. Long fingers, small scars, defined tendons born of the refined touch required to brew potions. She blinked as she realized she'd been staring. Her gaze lifted to meet his. Features carefully neutral, he said nothing as they finished the meal.

As she stood to clear the table, the room shifted. Holding onto the back of the chair for balance seemed a very good idea. The wine bottle stood empty, as did her glass. Severus shook his head.

"Still doing things the Muggle way," he chided. He drew out his wand and flicked it. The dishes piled into the sink. There was nothing left of the food.

"It's comforting." She'd no idea why she felt the need to explain herself to him.

He merely nodded, rose, and took her arm. She let him lead her back to her study. Anyone else would have made the room into a parlor, but she rarely had guests. There was, at least, a sofa, small, a bit on the ugly side, but reasonably comfortable. She slept on it when she'd worked so late that climbing the stairs seemed too much effort. He released her, and she sat with an embarrassing flump.

"The wine went to my head, I'm afraid." She was inordinately proud of herself for not slurring.

"So I see. Perhaps we should finish our conversation another time." He turned away.

"Don't go," she whispered, so softly it was barely more than a thought.

He regarded her over his shoulder. "I'll not have you say I got you drunk and forced you to answer my questions."

"I wouldn't think so," she said. "You're better than that."

"No, I am considerably worse than that, but I am quite careful."

"Sit down, please." Not moving had helped her regain some composure. "This won't take long, but you might as well be comfortable."

He complied. She waited for him to say something. He regarded her in silence.

"When I was a girl, I thought you the most beastly man I'd ever encountered."

He nodded as if he'd expected as much.

"You did your best to seem that way. Maybe you were that way. It wouldn't surprise me, knowing what I do now. How did you manage, all those years? The pressure must have been dreadful."

"Survival is a very good motivator," he drawled.

"The reason I didn't hate you " The right words eluded her. "The reason " She wanted to blame the wine for the knot in her stomach.

"The reason does not matter."

"It does! I didn't hate you because, despite your penchant for making my life miserable, you loved teaching." She forestalled his interruption. "Maybe not Potions, though you were quite good at it, obviously. But even before you took over Defense, your desperation to give us something that would be useful was so apparent, and you couldn't have done that if you didn't really want us to know. Not just learn, but know, so when it came down to life or death, we weren't helpless. You may not have liked me, but you cared."

He raised an eyebrow. "Do you think so?"

"I know it. You get as good as you give, Severus. Admit that our well-being was important to you, and I'll give you what you came here for."

"I did what I was assigned to do. It would hardly have served me to fail. I am not who you think I am, Hermione. Seeming is not the same as being."

"Then why do you presume to know who I am?"

"Because for years I watched you grow into the person you eventually became."

"And you think that you had no hand in that." She shook her head. "Sometimes, you can be terribly dense."

"You would know this how?"

"Because, you idiot, I spent as much time observing you as you spent dissecting my every flaw. In case you missed it, I was a fairly bright student. I learned from you that it was not only possible to do something good for people you dislike, it was quite often the only right thing to do."

"You give me too much credit."

"And you give me none at all." She rose from the couch, steadier now that the food had settled in to take care of the wine. She walked over to her desk and picked up her wand. The page she had been laboring over lifted into the air and turned, drifting softly back to the surface. She flicked her wand at it. Music filled the air, the deep strains of the cello joined by a mournful oboe. A chant spoke of the march toward death, carrying the burden of those already lost. Behind it all beat drums of war. The voices trailed off as horns added a strident note, the tempo building with military precision, then erupting into chaos. Violins rode the edge of screaming, then faded, heralding a moment of silence. The drums slowed to a heartbeat, steady, sure. The horns sent out a tentative call, exploring the possibility of hope. A single flute dared more, beckoning the other instruments toward joy.

Without warning, the music stopped. As always, the sudden quiet took Hermione back to the moment where everyone had paused, unknowing. She fought to suppress the fear, the loss, the cost of secrets kept. She turned to face Severus.

"Beautiful," he murmured. "What was it?"

"Your requiem. Not a proper one, but that wouldn't do, would it? I heard the music in my head, war raging around me. It would not stop. And now, it will not be finished. Cannot be, because you lived."

"And whose fault is that?"

She closed her eyes. "Mine."

He rose. She listened to the sound of his footsteps, careful, slow. He would leave, as promised, and she would force herself to try to finish an impossible task. At least he would be satisfied, and she could keep busy.

"Foolish girl." His breath brushed her ear. "Of course I cared." He lifted a tendril of hair from her face, then tenderly kissed her on the lips. "How could I not?"

Notes filled her head clear, intense, profound, the time kept by her quickened heartbeat. She could barely breathe for fear of losing the moment. He opened the door, the heat of the meadow pouring into the room, filling it with more sensation than she should be able to bear. Birdsong, buzzing, wind through the grass all melded with the music. The taste of summer lingered despite the closing of the door and his muffled retreat.

She drank it in, opened her eyes and smiled. "I knew it."

For Lady Karelia, who has given me so much.