

Presence

by kizzy7

It is October when they find it...

one-shot

Chapter 1 of 1

It is October when they find it...

A/N I wrote this for tamatersweet on the livejournal community HPCon_Envy. She prompted me with 'Severus, Hermione, and a rare gem.' Thanks to tamatersweet for the prompt, to neelix for her encouragement, and to the mods at TPP for all their hard work!

They found it one late October night, their mittened hands clasped together tightly as they walked the windswept bluff behind his house. Severus spotted it first, and the odd shine in his eyes as he reverently stroked its shiny, dark surface sent chills shivering down Hermione's spine.

"What is it?" she asked, reaching with curious fingertips to touch.

"Don't!" he commanded as he furiously shoved the stone into his coat.

But not before Hermione caught another glimpse—shining, liquid-black, moonlight sparkling in its depths like crystals beneath a murky lake.

He didn't speak again that night, and instead of holding her hand warm in his, his fingers roamed restlessly in his pocket. Hermione knew he was turning it over and over, over and over.

She wanted to ask him again. She wanted to demand he tell her, her voice and her hair shaking with righteous anger, but their relationship with still new, still fragile, and she didn't want to shatter it with misplaced doubt.

The ubiquitous stone seeped slowly into their lives, and after their routine Friday night dinner, Severus kissed her perfunctorily and motioned at the door. His eyes were distant, and his lips cold.

Hermione allowed him to lead her to his door, his hand providing solid, insistent pressure on the small of her back. The question slipped from her before she had even formed the words in her mind.

"What... what is it, Severus? I need to know."

His eyes, so faraway during dinner, snapped alive with fury. "Miss Granger," he said caustically, "leave now."

It hurt—it hurt—because he had not called her 'Miss Granger' since she was his student.

He shut the door when she left, and she could feel him warding his house, wards powerful and vengeful.

Hermione's bottom lip quivered with tears. She had thought... she had believed herself in love.

The Hogwarts library hadn't changed. Madam Pince still presided unwaveringly over her charges, and the tomes still felt deliciously right settled in Hermione's lap. She collected every book she could find on stones, both magical and mundane. Geology had never been of any particular interest to her, but now it consumed her, much as it did Severus.

Lovely, dark, and brooding Severus, who had captured her heart with his bravery and his sarcasm. Severus, who now spent most of his time alone in the basement of his house.

A First Book in Geology told her the basics—igneous, sedimentary, metamorphic. *Magical Rocks for a Magical World* described the Snow Stone, the pure white Eastern European rock known to change the weather when wielded by a particularly powerful wizard. Black sand from Hawaii that could, when brewed correctly with bay leaves and spider legs, temporarily eradicate the need for sleep.

Interesting, yes, but it wasn't until Hermione opened a small, purple manuscript simply entitled *Rare Gems* that she found it. Wide, black, and darkly glittering, the stone glinted eerily from the pages of the book.

The Black Opal, read the miniscule text, *is one of the rarest gems in all the world. Though they can vary in size, the properties of the Opal remain consistent. When touched, one fully experiences—indeed, relives—one's happiest memories. After much study and experimentation, it is the opinion of this author that living in the past is not conducive to living in the present.*

The Opal should never be touched.

A strong mixture of fear and indignation broiled in Hermione's veins as one word echoed mockingly through her mind.

Lily.

Severus picked at his roast potatoes, swirling them around his plate with his fork. The resulting metallic ting set Hermione's teeth on edge.

"Severus! Stop that!"

He looked at her, his face an empty, hallow canvass. "I've got work to do, Hermione. Not hungry. I'll..." His voice drifted off, leaving behind an abrupt void of silence in the small dining room. With a quick nod, Severus stood and walked briskly out the door. The sound of his footsteps retreated, quieter, until she couldn't hear him anymore.

Down in his basement were his personal potions laboratory and a fireplace with a single chair facing the flames. He had strictly forbidden her from entering his sanctuary, but tonight his warning rang false in her ears.

He was sitting in the chair, his left hand tightly clasping the Opal. A glimpse of a smile played on his thin lips; he looked relaxed and... happy. That unusual emotion so clear and strong on Severus' face caused tears to sting in Hermione's eyes.

"Severus," she said softly. She brushed his hair from his forehead. His skin was so chilled, his features so motionless that Hermione might have thought him dead.

She was crying now, quietly, mourning the loss of gentle nighttime strolls on the bluff, Friday night dinners—they would take turns cooking, sometimes eating by candlelight—and the raw intensity she often glimpsed when their eyes met.

Straddling his legs with her knees, Hermione clambered awkwardly onto his lap and took his chin in her shaking hands. She lowered her face to his, pressing resolute kisses against his unresponsive mouth.

A loud crash startled her nerves and her lips. The stone had fallen from his hand, landing only tempting inches from the chair. Hermione thought *it could break it*.

But Severus, blinking rapidly, lightly trailed his fingers up her bare arms. "Hermione?" he asked, his voice thick and rich as if from a heavy slumber.

"Yes?" she responded, her voice wobbly from tears and anxiety.

"You're warm," he said slowly. "You're warm in my arms." He shifted to cradle her against his chest.

Beneath her, his heartbeat was strong and steady.
