

whispers

by bellarossi

In the darkness, we whisper secrets into each other's ears with tears in our eyes.
Written for the lovely machshefa for hpcon_envy, who asked for "SSHG, a snowdrift,
an issue to resolve, and a plant/animal."

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Thanks to my amazing beta, **Katie**, who has to put up with my random emails at very short notice. You're a star (: Also special thanks **tdulabelle72** who gave me some advice regarding this fic, which is always appreciated!

The notice arrived on Sunday morning from the electricity company informing them of repairs to the cables damaged by the last snowdrift. For a period of four days, they wrote apologetically, from seven to eight in the evening, the neighbourhood would be without electricity.

Theoretically, for Severus and Hermione, this would not have much of an effect. They had magic, after all. But they had agreed that, for the sake of keeping up appearances, they would not use magic in the house unless it was absolutely necessary, since they lived in a Muggle neighbourhood. They resolved to uphold that agreement, even sans electricity.

'I think there are candles in the kitchen cupboard,' said Severus, looking up from the notice he had been reading aloud for Hermione's benefit.

'Shouldn't they do this during the day time?' asked Hermione, eyes glued to the *Charms Quarterly* she was annotating. 'It's a bit inconvenient.'

'I suppose they must have their reasons,' Severus said.

She replied with a slightly unconvinced 'hmm' as she replaced the withering forget-me-nots with fresh cuttings.

Severus checked the cupboard. 'We have a few long ones and a handful of tea candles,' he called from the kitchen.

'Should be enough for four nights.'

'Perhaps we should buy some more, just in case.'

'Perhaps,' she repeated, without looking up.

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It had been a stillborn.

She'd had a conference about the Ethical Application of Charms in Medicine in Cairo, one in which she had spent months trying to get a place. He had warned her that it would be dangerously close, that she should be cautious. Hermione had waved her hand, kissed his nose and told him to stop being such a worrywart.

It was the last time he had seen her pregnant, one hand resting on her huge belly, her skin glowing and her smile as bright as ever.

She had gone into early labour halfway through the keynote.

It was all over by the time he had arrived at the Cairo branch of St Mungo's. She had been in a small room, asleep on the bed. The doctor had informed him kindly that her umbilical cord had been too short, that these things happen from time to time. She was still in perfect childbearing condition, she assured him, and Hermione would be on her feet within weeks.

As Hermione slept, he had held their dead child in his arms and wept.

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He was now used to the fact that she would be gone before he woke. There would be a warm dip in the bed, the faintest scent of honey and a few strands of brown curls where she had been.

He lay in bed, staring at her pillow, thinking about how they had become experts at avoiding each other in their small, three-bedroom house.

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As Severus stirred the new potion he was working on, he realised that they would have to eat dinner together simply because lighting up the whole house would be ridiculous. There would be no internet for her to escape to, no television for him to waste time watching and not enough light to make Potions or work on a Charms thesis.

It would be the first time in a long, long time.

By the time Hermione arrived back home, it was already dark. Severus had lit a long, thin candle which sat in the middle of the small, round dining table, throwing her features into darkness. Her eyeliner had smudged below her eyes, pronouncing the dark circles, and there were bare traces left of her red lipstick.

She hung her coat on the rack, washed her hands and accepted the plate he held out for her with a soft 'thanks'. They sat on opposite ends of the table, eating the margherita pizza Severus had made by hand. The silence was punctuated by the daily small talk and the jazz music their neighbour was playing on a portable stereo.

As they finished eating, the candle in the middle of the table blew out with a quiet *phut*.

'I have an idea,' she said suddenly. Severus looked up curiously. 'During the night, when we couldn't sleep, that last year...' she took a deep, steadying breath, 'the boys and I would tell each other secrets about ourselves.'

'What kinds of secrets?'

'Things that we had kept from each other, things that didn't really matter anymore because everyday seemed like our last. That was our real friendship, one without boundaries. I found out many things; serious things, like how Harry had contemplated suicide after Sirius' death, but silly things too.'

He still looked slightly confused, so she said, 'Okay, I'll start. In my first year, I was the one who set your robes on fire during that Quidditch game when Quirrell tried to jinx Harry's broom.'

He looked aghast. 'I was trying to save the dunderheaded brat! And those were my favourite robes, I'll have you know.'

'I know,' she said. To his surprise, she giggled. He felt the tension in the room lift and smiled with relief. Perhaps not all was lost.

'Your turn,' she said expectantly.

He watched the way the moonlight streaming through the window caressed the petals of the pale blue forget-me-nots as he thought. Something he had kept from her? He had always been guarded—except around her. He was sure that she knew everything there was to know. The first time he had told her he loved her, he had bared his soul to her.

Yet, even as he thought it, he knew there were small things, tiny things which she didn't know. Perhaps, in the greater scheme of things, they hadn't mattered. But he would play along.

'My Patronus changed after our marriage. I haven't needed to use it, so you haven't seen it, but when I sent a message to Kingsley one day, it was different.'

She cocked her head to the side, a familiar gesture. 'So, what is it now?'

He looked around first, checking for nosy neighbours, cast a Privacy Charm, then whispered, *Expecto Patronum*.

A sleek silver panther snaked from his wand and sauntered elegantly towards Hermione, purring.

'He's beautiful,' she murmured as the panther butted his head against her legs like a cat. Her eyes shone with tears when she looked up at him. 'Severus, you know what this means, don't you? You're free. Finally free.'

Because of you, he thought. *Because of you*.