

The Man

by nantanny

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but not like I did.

One-shot

Chapter 1 of 1

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He was a hero, in the end, though no one believed it until after the battle was over. Too much was shrouded in secrecy in those days; knowledge was spread only amongst a small circle of people...those opposing and those defending. The rest of us wandered blindly with only the *Prophet*, whispers, and gossip for direction.

I met him in a tavern. He was hunched over the bar, perched on a stool, nursing a two-Knut whiskey. He was tense, and every few minutes, he would stare into the dark corners of the room, as if waiting for a hex or curse to fly in his direction. After discovering no impending threat, his gaze would drop to his drink, as if he suddenly remembered why he was sitting at the bar, drinking, reeking of loneliness and regret.

For two months of Fridays, I watched him watch for hexes and drink his thoughts away. I had a routine. Every Friday, my friend Shannon would drag me out for drinks. 'It's no good moping about your flat,' she'd say. 'Just because you're alone doesn't mean you're destined for a horde of cats and spinsterhood.'

She was right, of course.

And so we would go into Hogsmeade, and she would flirt with handsome men while I nursed a glass of warm wine. Sometimes, I would read a book, but, most of the time, I would watch Severus Snape. I continued this pattern of observation until one night in early October when Shannon didn't show up.

I sat at our usual table, staring at the door while I waited for my flighty friend. After twenty minutes of awkward shifting and impatient foot-tapping, I was ready to bolt for the door. Without the buffer of Shannon's charm, the tables full of cozy couples and groups of loud-mouthed Quidditch fanatics were too much. I gathered my things and cast a warming charm to prepare for the autumn chill outside. The charm turned out to be rather pointless because before I could take more than two steps, I met Severus' stare. He tilted his head in the direction of the bar, beckoning me to him.

I must admit I was nervous. I cannot say he was a handsome man, and I doubt even the most ardent of his admirers would call him that. But he was compelling. Alluring, in a dark sort of way. Impossible to ignore, but just surly enough to make a person hesitate to approach him. But I went anyway.

I took the stool next to him and ordered a drink. I waited for him to say something, but he seemed to be struggling to find the words. I thought for a moment he might fancy me, but just as I was beginning to flush with pleasure, he said:

"She said to tell you not to wait for her. She left with some daft bloke."

Slightly disappointed that his words didn't contain even a hint of regard for me, I nodded and accepted my wine from the bartender.

We sat in silence for the rest of the night until he paid his bill and left.

And so my routine changed. Shannon had finally found a wizard she wanted to keep, so I would often show up at the tavern to meet with an absent companion. On these nights, I joined Severus at the bar.

We each said little more than a passing comment on the latest from the Ministry or the occasional story from his classroom.

I'm not sure when my Friday nights at the tavern changed from planning to meet Shannon to going to see Severus.

A week after the New Year, I noticed something different about Severus. He was nearly smiling and quite intoxicated by the time I arrived at the tavern. Once he saw me enter, he pulled out the stool next to him and gestured for me to join him. I did. He asked me about work and if I'd had a good day. He made sure my glass was full throughout the night and stared at my chest when he thought I wasn't looking.

Before I knew it, we were leaving the tavern, weaving out the door, kissing, groping and Apparating to my house. It wasn't a night to brag about. It was awkward as first times usually are. Between the two of us, our experience in the art of sex was sorely lacking.

After, we lay next to each other in the dark, staring at the peeling paint on the ceiling. He confessed that Sunday was his birthday. He didn't tell me outright, but I could fill in the blanks...he didn't want to pass another year of his life as a virgin, especially when the rowdy students he taught released their budding hormones in every unoccupied space in the school.

I didn't know what to say so I kissed him and we did it again. He was gone when I woke in the morning.

We eventually abandoned the tavern and spent our Fridays in the small house I had inherited from my parents. He spoke more freely and with less bite without the presence of others. I think I fell in love with him, listening to him rant out his frustrations over tea and biscuits.

After six months of intimacy, he told me the truth. He loved someone else, and he would never love anyone else. My first thought was to prove him wrong. But his solemn manner and flat tone of voice snuffed out what little spark of hope I had. I left the room and cried in the loo. I heard the floorboards creaking outside the door, and I prayed to Merlin he would knock and tell me something different. But the creaking stopped, and eventually I heard the front door close.

For some time, I didn't go back to the tavern and he didn't come to my house. I let Shannon fix me up on a few dates, but they never worked out. They were too loud while I craved my quiet companion. They were aggressive when I wanted solid strength. They weren't him. So I went back to the tavern and sat next to him while he finished his whiskey. He tried to hide his surprise when I took his hand, but I could feel his stare on the back of my head. I led him out of the tavern, Apparated home, and took him to bed.

He stayed that night. The next morning he asked me why, but I couldn't answer him. I only knew that I loved him and that in some way he needed me. He needed someone to talk to, arms to hold him, a place to find some peace.

And so Friday nights were mine. I liked to think that when I opened my door to him, he left her behind. It wasn't perfect, but I was content. I think he was too.

To be sure, there were hard times. Between Harry Potter, Albus Dumbledore, and Voldemort, our time together became increasingly fraught with tension and the awareness that he might not come back one day.

One morning, just before dawn, he showed up on my doorstep. It was a Tuesday and he was bleeding badly. I patched him together with charms and potions that he had left for me in my bathroom cabinet. He cried that night and told me everything. With stories of vows and orders running through my head, I struggled to understand what he told me. I could only comfort him with my body, expressing my love the only way he would accept it. The next morning I took an oath not to betray him. He was shocked that I suggested it, especially after the delivery owl brought the *Prophet*. Dumbledore was dead.

I rarely saw him that year. Once before Christmas and a weekend in March. The last time he came, I could tell he was ready for it all to end. In the dusky haze of dawn, I watched him dress. He sat on the edge of the bed to put on his socks when he turned to me.

"Sabine, if I..." He broke off and resumed dressing. I lightly touched his naked back and felt him sigh.

"Will anyone remember me?" he whispered.

I knelt behind him and wrapped my arms around him. I pressed my nose into the crease of his neck, kissing him lightly, admiring the flush of arousal spreading over his skin. "I will."

He spun around and pulled the bed sheets away from my body. Until that moment, I had never seen his face so completely open. His eyes were depthless, warm, and caressing as they searched my face. His mouth was soft, and the lines that creased his forehead relaxed into faint furrows. I thought back to the first night at the tavern when I thought him so far away, so lost in memories. I never imagined I could compare to her, but in that moment, with all of his focus completely on me, the woman who had loved him for nearly fourteen years, I felt cherished.

It didn't last because, just as he reached for me, his mark burned black and he closed up like a dying blossom. He dressed quickly, grimacing, only managing to kiss me briefly before running for the door. He forgot his robes. I jumped up and ran for the window, opened it and shouted for him to be careful. He stopped just outside my wards and seemed to be at a loss for words. He slowly raised his right hand and dropped it in a graceful arc before Apparating away.

It was the last time I saw him.

I attended his funeral and sat near the back, while the crowded masses gathered around to hear his eulogy. He'd been pardoned and awarded an Order of Merlin. It was beautiful.

They remembered the hero, Dumbledore's Potions master and spy, the lover of Lily Potter, but I mourned the man. The quiet, pensive man who liked black tea, Muggle mystery novels, and too much raspberry jam on his toast. The man who snored like a foghorn, wore his boots until they fell apart, and who was more comfortable with a cauldron than most people.

I still have the robes he left on the hook by my door. I wear them on nights when the loneliness begins to suffocate me. The soft, well-worn fabric still smells of cedar and wood-smoke. I can't forget him and I won't try. I only hope he will remember me in return. He told me that he would never love another. Long ago, I decided I could live with that. She could have his love; it wasn't meant for me. But I would keep his passion. I would keep the flawed, imperfect man.

End