

# There, Where I Can Never Find You

*by shefa*

You disappear into a moonlit night, and I might have seen you go, if only I'd been paying attention.

Written for the Summer SSHG Exchange.

## Chapter 1

*Chapter 1 of 11*

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Banner

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**There, Where I Can Never Find You**

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The ghost of him lingers.

In the lab that houses their work. In the office where they'd shout at one another until the tendrils of an idea would finally find form. In the privacy of their chambers where she cries at night for the loss of something she fears might never have been hers, after all.

It's not as if they didn't search for him.

Like Harry said. You can't take a man, a wizard, from villain to hero and then pretend not to notice when he vanishes.

It didn't happen precisely like that, she thinks, but it's close enough.

It just took longer, that's all.

And the devil is in the details.

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The lab is dark. The fire beneath the cauldron throws shadows against the walls, but it's the potion inside that should be glowing.

"Maybe this time," she mutters as she delivers the final clockwise stir.

He brushes a strand of hair from his eyes.

"Perhaps."

Hermione risks a glance at him as she completes the final turn. His skin is grey again, and the sigh he tries to hide tells the tale of their failure more soundly than any words.

"We can try again tomorrow." The words sound hollow even to her own ears.

He says nothing, just gazes into the belly of the cauldron. The potion is nearly as black as the metal surrounding it. Black instead of the shimmering silver that would mean success at last. As black as his eyes and nearly as bleak.

"Go on home, Severus," Hermione says. "I'll clear up here and join you soon."

She can't reach him across the bench. Before she can circle around it...before she can take hold of his hand or brush his lips with hers in promise of the night's gifts...he has turned to go.

"I'll see you soon," she whispers.

But the door has already closed behind him, and he's gone.

The moment he first begins to slip away is lost to the bustle of their lab by day and the heat of his lips on her skin in the night.

He is a master of distraction, and it's only later, wrapped in the dark with the lingering scent of him pressed against her skin, that she remembers.

She fails to appreciate the irony.

Ron promises they'll find him. Despite the tension or perhaps because of it, he can't resist teasing. Severus, he says, wouldn't allow the night to take him when psychopath and snake each failed.

He'd never tolerate the indignity.

She grants him a small smile, indulgent. But the crimson of his robes burns her eyes, and she wants only to be left alone with her memories.

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She tumbles like a leaf tossed about by an indifferent wind.

At home it's the worst. Every corner holds a piece of him, and she's torn between the desire to preserve the relics she stumbles across or to banish them.

The lab is scarcely better, but at least there she can pretend to focus on their research.

"When he comes home, he'll hardly be pleased if I've abandoned our work," she explains to anyone who dares ask. She pretends not to notice when they don't meet her eyes and acts as if she hasn't heard when they refer to Severus in the past tense.

As if he were *dead*.

Ridiculous, she thinks. If he *were* dead, she would certainly have noticed; her heart crushed to dust, fear and uncertainty no longer piercing her with their ragged edges.

He's not dead, only lost.

It has occurred to her that this might be one of his most aggravating habits. It must, she decides, be an affliction of one lacking sufficient practice being found. And of course, last time it had been she who found him when no one else could.

Serves her right for leaving such important work to the Aurors.

The Floo flares green, and Hermione braces herself.

"We're sorry Mrs Snape," says the apprentice Auror who accompanies Ron today. "It's as if he disappeared into thin air."

"Thin air?" she echoes. "How novel." She holds the Auror's gaze just long enough for the man to blush.

"You're certain there isn't anyone who would wish to do him harm?"

Hermione shoots an irritable glance at Ron, but he's examining the floor.

"Apart from Death Eaters who escaped prosecution, war survivors who have conveniently forgotten he was a spy, and former students?" she asks. "No. Nobody." She glares at the Auror until he looks away.

"Hermione," Ron interjects. "It's time to talk about the research."

He's not inspecting the floor anymore. No more the uncertain boy of old, Ron's serious look warrants attention. She could evade him again, but he wants to find Severus as much as she does. Or nearly, if only so he and Harry can stop taking turns sleeping on her couch.

"Send *him* back to the Ministry and call Harry," she says, gesturing towards the nervous Auror, and Ron nods without another word.

The subject of their research is deceptively simple.

Esoteric enough to glaze the eyes of the uninitiated, but suitably profound to merit the nearly invisible security that St Mungo's has installed around their lab. She won't let herself pause to wonder that not one of them imagined danger to themselves, only to the work itself. Not even Severus, whose paranoia rivals that of Mad Eye Moody most days.

The catalyst for their work permeates the air between them. Witches and wizards huddled in whitewashed rooms not far from the lab are depending on them to succeed. Friends and rivals alike who have been silenced by a spell no one recognises and even the most skilled Healers have been unable to reverse. Stripped of memory, bereft of

history, emotion, and self, they are hollowed-out shells of who they once were.

Targeted by an assailant the Aurors have failed to identify, war survivors from both sides have fallen into a state of limbo...neither dead nor alive. The common links between them, their utter emptiness and a runic mark on each one's brow that had been lit from within just briefly the first time a Healer attempted magic to heal them.

The Aurors have been forbidden to discuss the case with anyone outside the department lest they trigger a panic. Their research grant requires no small degree of secrecy as well. But if their research has placed Severus at risk, then her priority is clear.

Memory networks, she explains to the boys. (They'll always be boys to her, no matter how red their robes or how many younger wizards in similar garb call them 'sir'.)

She and Severus, she continues...her quill flying across the parchment...are seeking ways to repair broken memory networks. Hoping to find the elusive combination of potions and charms that will uncover the links *between* them, coaxing out the dropped threads, and untangling the knotted ones. They're hoping, she explains, to find a magical way to repair fractured connections between memory and the emotions that house it.

And if she and Severus hold their own hopes for the brew, nobody else need know.

Harry looks thoughtful. He's had more experience than most with memories...especially other people's.

"Lots of security," Ron says, eying the runes that frame the door and windows.

She's thinking how foolish they've been to put so much magical power towards securing the room and not a second thought to protecting themselves...when Harry's voice breaks the silence.

"Who did you plan to use as your first test patient, Hermione?" He looks at her as if he already knows.

She doesn't really need to answer, which is fortunate. The heart in her throat is pounding too furiously for her to say a word.

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"In all the hours of Auror interviews over the last month, it never occurred to you to mention his memory hadn't been successfully restored?"

Harry is livid. She hasn't seen him this angry since the last time they argued about Dumbledore.

"Severus didn't want anybody to know," she tells him. "Anyway, it was nobody's business." She doesn't mention how many months it took him to *teller* about the lost moments and missing connections that must have made him doubt his sanity. "And it's not really accurate to say his memory wasn't successfully restored. It just didn't work the way it had... before."

Before the night he'd spilled his soul alongside his lifeblood on a dirty wooden floor.

Before he'd taken back those memories...one by one...reluctance written in the stiff line of his jaw and in the hardened furrow between his brows.

She'd encouraged him.

So naïve; so hopeful. Severus would have said hopeful *because* of her naïveté. But he'd just devoured her with hungry eyes as her fingertips traced the contours of his hands.

"You can't discard the past if you want to have a future," she'd told him, wanting only for him *to have* a future...for them to share one together.

He'd done it, looking for all the world like a man sentenced to a meal of Flobberworms and Bubotuber pus. Later, nobody would think it odd when he'd sought funding to study memory. And much later, when the first patient had arrived at St Mungo's as similar to a victim of a Dementor attack as is possible in a world without Dementors, she and Severus had been the natural choice to research a cure.

St Mungo's had been all too happy to continue to sponsor them, and nobody had given any of it a second thought. Until now.

"So are we looking for someone who wants to make sure Snape doesn't remember something he's forgotten?" Ron muses. "Or did he wander off..."

"He's not incompetent!" Hermione fumes. And he wouldn't leave her, especially not like this, she adds silently. Not slipping away like a ghost, invisible in the moonlight.

"Had you noticed anything different about..."

"I've been through this a hundred times with the other Aurors," she shouts.

But her cheeks burn, and she knows she can't hide anymore. Not from them. Harry and Ron have known her too long to ignore the telltale signs of deception.

Even...or perhaps especially...self-deception.

Ron rests his hand on hers as hot tears roll down her cheeks. She wonders absently when, over the last ten years, he has learned to wait.

"He was having nightmares," she says at last, staring at Ron's hand and marvelling at how different it is from Severus's. "He wouldn't talk about them, but it was obvious that they were getting worse. Sometimes I'd wake in the middle of the night and he'd be up."

She remembers the first time she'd woken to find him gone. For a moment, she'd panicked at the empty space beside her in bed, but a thread of light beneath the door had led her to where he'd sat in the flickering firelight. His posture that night...head bent over a book he wasn't reading...had reminded her of his stay in hospital after the war. Her presence then had been unwelcome, too, at least at first.

That night, she'd paused, chilled, at the threshold. Though he'd been only a whisper away, she hadn't felt so removed from him since the twilight time after they'd breached their shared history but before she'd worn him down and convinced him to court her...those awful months when she had despaired of him viewing her as anything more than a barely tolerable companion during the endless days of his recuperation.

"Usually he'd be fine again in the morning," she continues, trying to shake off the memory just as Severus had done the shadows stalking him in the night. "He always brushed off my concern, and I let him." Her voice drops to a whisper. "Nobody else knew. About the nightmares, or about the trouble with his memory."

"Why do you think he was so secretive?" Harry asks. "It's not as if the entire wizarding world didn't already know he'd poured them out for me to see."

Hermione shakes her head. Even seven years married, there are aspects of her husband she doesn't entirely understand. It's as if each time she thinks she has his measure, another layer unfurls, leaving her enthralled all over again...and sometimes just a tiny bit afraid of what is newly revealed.

"I don't know," she says. She can't voice the thought hanging in the air. Can't voice the awful knowledge that she has no idea whether to *fear* Severus, or to keen from the agony of his leaving.

So she does both.

The Pensieve stands where the cauldron always had, on the long wooden workbench scarred with the sorts of burns overflowing potions leave when they've gone rogue.

She refuses to do this anywhere but here.

Not in their home where she can still find him in the nubby texture of his nightshirt or the well-worn spines of his books, or at the Ministry where too many layers of history lay brittle between Severus and truth.

No, it must be the lab. It's where she and Severus began this journey, and it's fitting that here should be where they review it.

The vials sit in a row, a silvery mist shimmering in each one. Until today, she hadn't given nearly enough thought to the power contained in each of those slender silver strands. Especially not one of her own.

"The solution might be hidden inside you and you don't even realise," Harry had said. "You'd be amazed how much you can learn just by watching."

She doesn't doubt it.

She hadn't expected the idea to be quite so terrifying.

It's not until she drops into the first scene, Ron and Harry on either side of her, that she realises what she longs for most is the same as what she fears.

Seeing Severus.

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To have the illusion of him within reach without the ability to touch is pure torture. No less the fact that he has no awareness of her watching him.

He'd never be so insensate to her pain were he actually *here*.

But he's not. He is, in this particular memory, two years younger with a great deal less silver in his hair, his pallor far better than the night he disappeared. And in the moment in question, he's irritated.

They are meeting with one of the bureaucrats overseeing their research. Hermione knows how much Severus hates this administrative layer, not least because the Ministry had assigned to oversee them seems to take special pleasure in generating unnecessary paperwork. Today, frustration has escalated far beyond the aggravation of wasted time and parchment.

They have been stonewalled in their request for Graymould, their appeals for the powerful and difficult to obtain ingredient delayed and ultimately denied. Finally, a meeting is scheduled. But instead of finding their liaison from St Mungo's waiting for them, a witch with whom they have a good working relationship, they find the Ministry official Severus had taken to calling 'the simpering fool'.

"Mr Black," Severus says. His eyes flash, and Hermione wonders, watching now, as she'd wondered at the time, whether the mid-level bureaucrat has enough native intelligence or even self-preservation to be afraid of her husband.

"While your diligence in this matter is... admirable," Severus continues, "you are, sadly, not responsible for decision-making regarding the scope and experimental direction of our research. Nor do we need to gain your approval for the potions ingredients we select."

"Ah, but that's where you are mistaken," the other wizard replies. He produces a parchment stamped with scarlet seals and thrusts it into Severus's hands.

Hermione's stomach clenches at his sneer.

"I have indeed been given the authority to supervise the direction of your work and most particularly your ingredient choices. We wouldn't want any... hrm... *unfortunate* influences to slip into the protocol unnoticed, would we? Especially considering the state of the patients you hope to treat."

Severus pales.

"You would certainly know about *unfortunate* influences, wouldn't you, Black?"

The other man turns beet red but says nothing.

Hermione watches her memory-self lean forward to examine the parchment, heat flooding her cheeks. There had been no warning, she remembers. No clue that the Ministry would interfere with a research protocol contracted only peripherally through their offices.

"This is ridiculous," her memory-self is saying. "Healer Corbin at St Mungo's is our contact, and she is quite pleased with our progress as well as our selection of ingredients."

"Yes, well, Healer Corbin may be satisfied. It remains to be seen whether we are in agreement." Black shoots Severus an icy glance. "And frankly, I question St Mungo's judgment in funding such..." He pauses to look Hermione up and down. "...unsuitable researchers."

Black presses his lips together as if to keep himself from saying more, but Hermione doesn't need to be a Legilimens to see the resentment and malice in his eyes. For a moment, she can see the resemblance to his cousin Bellatrix and a wave of nausea nearly knocks her over.

Watching now with the distance the Pensieve provides, she can see what it takes out of Severus to control himself, especially with a man who has cosied up to witches and wizards who should, he'd told her, be occupying a row of cells in Azkaban.

Black gathers his papers and turns to leave, slamming the door behind him. Only Hermione notices that Severus's hand, the one still holding the parchment with the bloody seal, is shaking.

The memory fades, and Harry makes a note. Hermione wonders if they've added a suspect to their roster. But the scene changes, and she's distracted again.

It's their bedroom, the prior spring, when the nightmares were at their peak, and Severus had given her only the barest of clues as to what was roiling inside him. But that night he'd been relaxed, and they had retreated to the sanctuary of their room...their bed...early.

She wants to cry when she sees him stroking her hair, his lips brushing against her sweat-dampened skin. She wants to push her memory-self aside and crawl under the covers with him instead, curling into the echo of his scent, his touch, and the whisper of his breath against her ear, carrying promises she believes as surely as she trusts her own magic he has every intention of keeping.

They may be here to view the conversation that will begin in a moment with whispered words in the dark, to mine it for clues.

But Hermione has found a categorical truth captured in this suspended moment in time. This moment of lush silence right before they begin to speak.

Severus did not leave her of his own volition.

She is certain of it.

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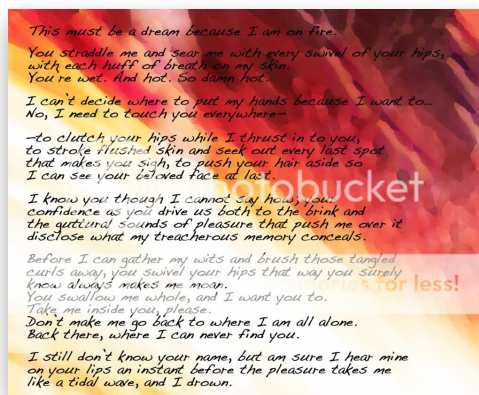
This story is complete and chapters will be posted to the queue every few days or so.

## Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 11

You disappear into a moonlit night, and I might have seen you go, if only I'd been paying attention.

Written for the Summer SSHG Exchange.



He wakes with a pounding heart and proof of his dream's potency still moist along the flat plane of his belly.

She finds him every night, these days. Like the ghost of an unforgettable lover, the smell and taste of her saturate his dreams, and the feel of her body entwined with his leaves his skin tingling long after he wakes. He has no explanation, other than to assume it must be the fate of the confirmed bachelor to conjure his perfect companion, if only for the night.

But the day beckons. No matter that he would prefer to shut his eyes in the hope she might find him again in the dark.

As if she were real.

He snorts.

Women like that, he thinks, do not choose men like him. Not outside their dreams, anyway.

He rolls out of bed, wincing at his creaky joints, and makes his way to the shower where the evidence of his need will be washed away.

If only he could rid himself of the longing so easily.

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"Snape." The line supervisor barks a greeting, and Severus nods. The man demands little in the way of conversation, which is fortunate, Severus thinks, as he's capable of providing even less.

He needs only do his work, and the boss leaves him be. Head down, focused on the task at hand...literally...though it requires no concentration. The mind-numbing repetition gives him time to think, which is not necessarily an improvement. Often, he wishes he could turn off his mind the way the boss stops the belt when they fall behind. It might be a relief to stop his spinning thoughts and drift into the sort of daze his co-workers seem to don like a jacket.

Instead, his thoughts skitter like a rock on the surface of the water, barely dipping below, still maintaining momentum. If his life had been the least bit interesting, he thinks, he might enjoy reviewing the perambulations of times past whilst working his post. But life has taken him nowhere worth mentioning save the minor deviation of living *elsewhere* for a while before returning here. To this place others call home.

He lifts his eyes just enough to peer at those others working the line with him. They're mostly men he remembers dimly as children; none of them friends then, some of them mates now...good for the occasional pint and game of darts after work but nothing more.

They'd welcomed him back with minimal fuss, as if they'd always expected it would be just a matter of time. The unforgivable crime of having gone away, absolved, since he'd been sent. The sins of the parents are not, it would seem, visited on their sons.

Besides, it's not as if he'd returned here a conquering hero...no fairy tales of valour lending him the aura of *other*. There isn't much to tell, and even less to remember, save the lingering certainty that he has in some fundamental way fucked something up.

Nothing new there.

The finishing bell rings, rousing him from wandering thoughts. Endless days lie ahead, rising in front of him like rows of bricks, cracked and sooty. Soon, he thinks, they will

surround him, completing his prison.

"Sev!" shouts Devin, a stocky man who works down the line and who makes it his business to drag Severus to the pub at every available opportunity. "You comin' along?"

"Not today, mate," he says. "Need to tend to some things back at the house."

Devin looks dubious, but Severus's tone brooks no argument.

He heads back to the rickety two-up, two-down that feels even more temporary than any of the other stripped-down places he's occupied over the years. There, he sheds work boots and coat, hesitating for a long moment in front of the whisky bottle left on the side table last night. He's not much of a drinker, but he's been turning to it more than he'd like lately, just to take the edge off. The edge of what, he doesn't even know, he realises, and wonders for a moment if a bit of edge might do him some good.

The bedroom upstairs is small, barely large enough for a narrow bed and oversized wardrobe. The bed came with the rental, but the cabinet is the one piece of furniture salvaged from his folks' house on Spinner's End after fire ripped through the place a few years back.

He traces the scorch marks marring the wood. Battle scars, he thinks. But it's his now, and the only tangible link he's got to his past. He runs his fingertips along the surface, admiring the grain and weathered stain still visible despite its injuries. It has been used well.

Severus opens the door and deposits keys, badge, and wallet...all the detritus of his workday...before allowing himself to reach for the soft white pouch lying in the back corner of the shelf.

It's a ritual he doesn't understand, which does nothing to reduce its urgency. He closes the door to the cabinet and settles himself on the bed. Only then does he allow the pouch to fall open.

Pulled from the neckline of his shirt whilst undressing his first night in this place, he'd been surprised to find it twisted between the fibres of his undershirt. He has no idea how it got to be there, no explanation for how something so clearly feminine could have come to be so close to his skin.

No matter. He'd pulled it carefully from the threads entangling it and tucked it away.

He couldn't say why he had bothered, only that he knew he must.

There are precious few things that Severus knows, and he hangs on to them firmly.

He knows his childhood home is better off burnt to the ground. He would never have lived there now in any case, not with memories of his drunken father and fading mother pouring from its walls.

He knows he's not sorry to have tried to make a go of it away from here, though he cannot explain the failure that brought him back, full circle to where he began. His memories of those years have already acquired the shape and colour of the ones from childhood...grey and flat and filled with disappointment.

Which reminds him of something else he knows.

Something fundamental.

Whatever Severus Snape touches turns to dust.

He knows that should fire ever sweep through *this* place, the one he will never call home, there would be no one to mark his absence, not a soul to genuinely mourn him. It wouldn't be much of a loss, he thinks. Nor is there anything amongst his worldly goods worth salvaging.

Only.

He can't explain it; he knows it to be completely nonsensical.

There is one item that, for no good reason, he would do anything in his power to shield from harm.

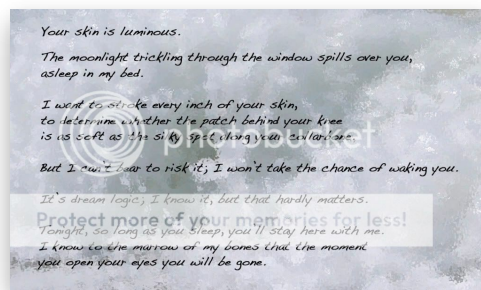
It has no earthly function. It carries no monetary value, nor is it ornamental in any objective sense.

But it is *his* in a way that nothing in this life has ever been, and he knows he would surrender anything to protect it.

It lies coiled on the white cloth, the item he pulled from his body so many nights ago, and he brings a long finger to trace its contour.

He is a fool; he knows this.

To so revere a single strand of hair, coiled on itself as it lies on the white cloth he holds in his hand.



He wakes with the illusion of her scent lingering on his skin.

If he could find a way to capture it, he would. A mote of his own imagination contained in a bottle. He would tuck it away alongside her hair.

Her hair.

He knows it's not, but thinks of it as hers just the same.

The door to the wardrobe is open, and on impulse, he reaches in to take out the cloth holding that hair. It doesn't belong here, hidden away. He should keep it close, keep it safe from harm.

There is a part of him that knows he's deluded. Obsessed with a woman who doesn't even exist.

He figures this might be marginally better than obsession with a woman who does, and who would never in a thousand years return his regard. After all, Devin's

preoccupation with the bint who works in the office got him nothing but a night down the nick and a probationary warning from the boss.

On the whole, he's decided, women...those not featured in his dreams...pose far more risk than reward. The ones of his acquaintance turn away, avoiding his gaze as if he might harm them with just a glance. He doesn't know what he does that's so off-putting, but the awareness gnaws at him, leaving him perpetually off balance.

He makes his way to the kitchen to rummage for something salvageable in the fridge. Stale toast and tea will do, and he eyes the whisky bottle he'd successfully avoided the night before.

*She's not in there*, he thinks. He'd gladly capture her scent and the memory of her voice and touch inside a bottle, like a genie in those old tales, but he knows no amount of drink will bring her to him.

Besides, he tells himself as he grabs the bottle and heads to the kitchen, he may be pathetic...he pours the half-full bottle down the sink...but he will not abide being both pathetic and drunk. Not like his father.

He's not sure why he cares. It hardly takes all his mental capacity to get through the day. He surely would be more than adequate even half pissed.

But as he watches the last of the amber liquid swirl down the drain, he feels the tightness in his chest loosen.

He might be a failure out in the big world, and he is surely destined to live the remainder of his sorry days alone.

But he'll be damned if he'll walk through even this half-life with anything less than his full consent.

And if he feels most real...and loved...in the presence of the ghostly woman who inhabits his dreams, then he'll accept it as a gift and do his damndest to keep the wisps of memory that tether him to the feeling from melting away in the harsh light of day.

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## Chapter 3

*Chapter 3 of 11*

You disappear into a moonlit night, and I might have seen you go, if only I'd been paying attention.

Written for the Summer SSHG Exchange.

The setting sun pierces the room, shafts of burgundy luminous in the dying light.

Another day gone, she thinks. One more rotation of light and dark gathering up what's left of Severus with its long fingers and spiring him away. Everything she once thought she knew has fled, chased away by the empty eyes of the Aurors who have lost hold of Severus as surely as she has.

All she knows now is that with each passing day the proof of his existence...his scent lingering on their sheets, the china cup nearly emptied of his tea, the echo of the laugh reserved just for her...fades until she can see only its outline, translucent against the day's end.

She wonders how she possibly could have spent so many hours learning how to Vanish objects and not a single one learning how to retrieve them.

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"Our last round of tracking spells has come up empty again," Harry says.

"So I assumed." She tries not to let her disappointment show. He's already gone far beyond the call of duty these last six months, not to mention Auror protocol.

"They want us to close the case, Hermione."

She wonders how they'd decided it should be Ron who breaks the news. Ron who knows the anguish of loss in a way Harry can't; Harry, who can barely remember what had once been his.

"Seems like they expended more effort searching for him when he was a fugitive than now, when he's..." Her voice catches in her throat.

"I know." Harry's jaw is tight. Hermione appreciates both his conflict and his restraint. It's clear that, despite the very public redemption of Severus Snape, the Ministry, Albert Runcorn in particular...he, himself exonerated in the post-war frenzy to claim innocence by Imperius Curse...is quite content to let Severus slip away as if he'd never been vindicated in the first place.

"I want his file," she says. For an instant she imagines the thick wad of parchment crushing the pile of fragmented memories that are all that remain of her husband.

"Already done." Ron hands her the pages with a smirk. "Runcorn thinks we're spending the day at a stakeout. There's some wizard out in Brookshire who's been peddling counterfeit Apparition licenses."

She scowls.

"We'll discuss the questionable priorities of our department head another time," Harry says, acknowledging and simultaneously sidestepping their boss's misdirection of resources.

Hermione says nothing about the wizard who would have snapped her wand and sent her to the Dementors had he succeeded in his wartime agenda.

"Let's go over what we've done," Harry continues. "Maybe you'll be able to figure out what we've missed."

Hermione focuses on the parchment. Lists of names and locations litter the page, and she's nauseous with the overwhelming awareness of where Severus *isn't*.

They've done a more thorough job than she'd given them credit for, she admits. They've followed every lead to its trailing end, scouring each possible location, interviewing associates past and present for their knowledge of his whereabouts.

"Where are you, Severus?" She runs her hand over the inked words as if her touch might find him where the Aurors...where *hefriends*...could not.

"Nowhere within our jurisdiction," says Harry as if it were a question she'd expected him to answer.

Something in the way he says it niggles, and Hermione feels her pulse accelerate.

"What are the limits of your jurisdiction?"

Harry looks at Ron. Ron shrugs.

"The whole of wizarding Britain," he says.

Hermione's heart leaps. Wizards tend to the myopic. She always forgets. Just as she still sometimes does things the Muggle way despite the fact she's spent more years with a wand than without.

"So what if he's not *in* wizarding Britain? What if he's not in the wizarding world at all?" she asks. "How would you go about finding him then?"

Had she known that finding a wizard lost in the Muggle world would require nothing more than Muggle methods, she would have set off to find him on her own long ago.

She'd never paused to think about it, but if she had, she would have assumed she'd be joining Harry and Ron in the search, and in fact had approached them as if it were self-evident that after the shock of Severus' disappearance had softened, she would help them find him. Hermione might not have chosen the Department of Magical Law Enforcement as a career, but she's sure a childhood sacrificed to fighting the most dangerous wizard to ever terrorise their world is pedigree enough.

She is apparently wrong.

Harry and Ron had mumbled and twitched, looking like little boys who had been caught out playing Quidditch all night rather than doing their homework. They had deferred to authorities whose empty words crowded the room until there'd been no air left in it to breathe.

She doesn't remember their reasons, only their cold refusal.

Implacable.

Immovable.

They will not allow her to join them in the hunt for her husband. She must wait.

Hermione has never been more painfully aware that she does not wait gracefully.

Instead, she fidgets. She frets and paces and pounds the walls in frustration. She sends reams of parchment filled with crucial information she's positive she'd neglected to mention to Ron and Harry until they finally send her an owl begging her to stop.

*Cowards.*

One dark midwinter night, after two Aurors who won't meet her eyes tell her for the tenth week in a row they have nothing new to report, she takes a pair of shears and hacks off her hair. Her hands hurt from the effort of cutting through the thick strands, but she wants to feel the heavy lengths fall as they are severed from their source.

Later she lets Ginny drag her to a salon where they take the ragged ends and give them the appearance of order in chaos, creating the illusion that her hair...like her life...is precisely the way she means it to be.

Jagged.

Cut short.

Today, with the thick file in her hand, it occurs to her that by closing his case, they might have abandoned Severus, but in the process they may well have set her free.

~\*\*~

It figures that of their group, Arthur is most excited by the prospect of a non-magical investigation. Muggle paperwork spread out on the battered wooden table, he looks as if he might leap out of his skin from excitement.

"It's remarkable what the Muggles have come up with to keep track of one another, isn't it?" he asks, rifling through the records they've pilfered from the National Archives.

Hermione doesn't ask the boys how they managed it, preferring to believe there's some shared governmental code of honour keeping them within reasonable bounds of the law. Someone's law.

"It's mad, Dad," Ron says. "They have piles of that squared paper Muggles use filled with fellytone logs, tax records, property deeds, the works. We told them we needed them for the whole of the UK."

"*Telephone* logs, Ron," Hermione mutters and rifles through one of the stacks in front of her. "That's a lot of paper."

"Yeah, that's what the chap we talked to at their Ministry records place said, too. He said we should use their 'lectronic files, but I don't know what those are, so I told him no, we'd just take the paper, thanks. He looked awfully worried about how we were going to get it all out the door, but we distracted him with a Confundus." He huffs when Hermione winces. "It was a mild one; don't worry about it, Hermione. It's for Snape, remember? He'd have done the same. Anyway, the rest of it is in those boxes over there," Ron says, pointing to the crates by the door. "We reduced it all and hauled 'em over."

He looks so pleased she can't bear to burst his bubble with a lecture on ethics.

Besides, Severus might well have advocated the judicious use of a well-placed Confundus.

"What are we looking for, then?" Ginny lifts a sheet of paper from the top of a stack and scans the list of names.

All heads turn to Hermione.

She wishes she knew.

"Well." She pauses to think. "If you were an evil git and wanted to dispose of someone without killing them..." She hesitates and looks sharply at the boys. They say they believe her, but she's certain they are humouring her. Beneath the supportive exterior, they surely still think he's either dead or hiding. So they stand at an impasse, tacitly



agreeing to pretend the scenarios she refuses to entertain don't exist.

"If you wanted to get rid of someone and be sure they stayed gone, what would you do?" she asks again.

"Without killing him?" Ron repeats to Hermione's terse nod. "I'd bind his magic and stick him somewhere nobody would think to look."

"Which is where?" Harry asks.

"That's easy," says Ginny.

Ron snorts.

"Always so dismissive, Ron," Ginny snaps. "How do you think I survived to adulthood in this house?"

Arthur snickers, but Hermione reaches for Ginny's hand.

"Tell me, Ginny. Please." Ginny seems more confident than any of the men, so she clings to her like a lifeline.

"I told you; it's simple. Hide him in plain sight."

"Where's that, then?" Harry looks amused. His wife does not.

"Did Severus have any contact with the Muggle world once he came to Hogwarts?" She's looking at Hermione.

"Not that I know of. His parents died when he was in his early twenties, and he didn't mention relationships with anybody else from his hometown." She looks at Harry. "Other than, you know."

Harry nods.

"He hardly talked about Kelton."

It had been mostly after his childhood home had burned to the ground, and he'd obsessed over the bits of paperwork the Muggle authorities had sent. Hermione had wondered at the time why he'd bothered, but it had seemed to matter to him, a way to tie up the trailing threads from childhood that always seemed to entangle him at the most inopportune times.

"He went to primary school there, but I never heard him talk about anybody else he considered a friend as a child. Certainly not by the time he'd come to Hogwarts."

Ginny looks thoughtful. She reaches for a stack of paper.

"Where's the one that has the 'S' names?" she asks.

Ron digs through a box and pulls out a pile of paper.

"Here," he says, returning it to full size and handing the stack to his sister.

"What are you looking for?" Hermione is almost afraid to ask.

"If I were an evil git...and you'll recall that I shared brain space with one for nearly an entire school year...I would put someone in the bleakest, most humiliating place I could find. And frankly, Severus's childhood sounds like it qualifies. Wouldn't you think?"

Harry nods slowly. "Apart from his friendship with my mother when they were younger, I'd say so."

She looks at Harry. Neither one says the obvious. That it would have become bleaker still after the rift between Severus and Lily grew too wide to breach.

Oh, Merlin.

"So you think someone kidnapped him and dumped him back in his hometown?" Her voice is too shrill and her chest tightens. It's worse than she'd let herself imagine even during the darkest part of the night when even the stars went out.

It gets worse when, after only a few moments, Ginny huffs, triumphant.

"Here," she says, pointing to a miniscule line of print. "Tax records for one Severus Snape."

Hermione begins to shake.

"But we've found him, then, haven't we?" Arthur asks, looking almost disappointed that the Muggle investigation has ended so soon.

Hermione nods, but can't speak. The words pile up beneath her terror until they're nothing but a tangle of pain.

Ron's eyes droop, and Hermione knows he understands what she won't put into words.

If whoever grabbed him that moonlit night was brazen enough to dump him in plain sight...with his own name as a beacon...kidnapping is the least of what they've done to him.

~\*\*~

## Chapter 4

*Chapter 4 of 11*

You disappear into a moonlit night, and I might have seen you go, if only I'd been paying attention.

Written for the Summer SSHG Exchange.

The rain falls in silver sheets, graceful arcs cascading to the pavement below.

Severus watches the street outside overflow with wind-torn umbrellas and puts his aside. A bit of wet is a small price to pay for the experience he seeks inside the storm. It's as if he's reaching for a moment salvaged from another time, preserved from beneath a distant, darkened sky.

But if he has ever been unafraid of life's capricious touch, he can no longer remember.

Today, as he admires the water pouring from the clouds, he wonders how it would feel to shed the barriers shielding him from the elements.

So he steps over the threshold and welcomes the sensation of cool water sluicing over him. He imagines plants must feel this way when the sky rains down and soaks them to their roots.

Each drop brimming with its own promise.

~\*\*~

The shift is done along with the week's work. The pub is packed with men delaying their return home with rough camaraderie and hard drink.

Severus sits at the corner table just beyond the bar, damp newsprint staining his hands. He sips his tea and watches as a rotund man who, if he is not mistaken, once held the distinction of being the meanest kid on the playground, gets soundly trounced in a game of darts.

He smirks from behind his cup and nods at the bartender.

A rush of wind heralds the entry of another restless soul, undoubtedly soaked from the storm. Severus' eyes sweep the room. Must be someone passing through; all the regulars are accounted for.

The stranger comes into view. He raises his eyebrows.

*Definitely* somebody just passing through, he thinks.

She's young, medium height, cropped brown hair only emphasizing high cheekbones and expressive brown eyes. He's not the only one tracking her path across the crowded pub, but he imagines himself the most sober. The men of his acquaintance are not shy about welcoming her with appreciative smirks and the occasional offer of companionship.

He admires the way she moves through the crowd untouched, shrugging off the rough advances without a glance. It took him years to develop that sort of poise, and he wonders if she comes by it naturally or if it's been hard earned. How odd, he thinks, to feel a rush of pride for her, this stranger.

She's looking for something, her eyes steadily scanning, peering at each group of men huddled around the room and moving on to the next. He's so distracted by the determined look on her face and the stiff set of her shoulders that it takes him a moment to realise she's stopped, frozen at the edge of the bar.

She's looking at him...*him*...as if she's seen a ghost, and he can't help but take a quick look behind him.

"May I help you?"

If anything, his voice seems to make it worse, and she starts to shiver.

Severus grabs his coat from the back of his chair...it's mostly dry by now...and leaps to his feet.

"Here," he says, wrapping the rough wool around her shoulders, resisting the urge to smooth it flat, "this'll warm you."

Her hand brushes against his as she clutches the jacket more tightly around her. Her lips are a bit blue, he thinks.

*They'll taste sweet.*

He glances around, relieved that he doesn't appear to have said that out loud. Shaking off the flood of inappropriate thoughts that have come from nowhere, he looks over his shoulder.

"Joe, another pot of tea, please," he shouts to the bartender.

The men formerly throwing darts shoot him lascivious looks now instead.

As if his traitorous imagination needed any encouragement.

*Finally bagged one, eh, Sev?*

A hard stare sends them back a few paces, and the offer of another round from across the room does the rest. The burly redheaded benefactor at the end of the bar is another stranger, and Severus wonders if he is the woman's companion. His heart sinks. Of course a woman like this wouldn't be single. Especially not one willing to take the offer of a slightly damp, woolly jacket for warmth.

"He with you?" He gestures towards the bloke doling out a pile of notes.

The man is an odd combination of wary and naïve, Severus thinks. He holds himself with the confidence of someone with authority, but seems unconcerned with the risks to himself posed by his generosity and his bank notes.

She nods. "Yes. I mean, he came with me, but he's not *with* me. Not like that." She looks flustered.

"You might want to tell him to put away that stack of cash before he's divested of it entirely." Severus raises his eyebrows with a smirk, and she looks at her companion, surrounded by twenty-five of his new best friends.

He's surprised when she snorts.

"Oh, don't worry about him. Ron's having a grand old time."

He did seem to be, Severus had to admit. Between measured glances at the woman and appreciative nods to the bartender, he's diving right into the local bitter with enthusiasm.

"Is that right?"

She blushes. "It's a long story, but really, it's all right. It'll keep him busy for a while." She puts her hand on the chair alongside his at the table.

"May I join you?"

He can only nod. And sit. He can also sit. And so he does.

Joe brings the tea, and Severus pours for her, slipping one sugar into the steaming liquid and adding a splash of milk.

She brings the cup to her lips, hands shaking. He wishes he had a better way to warm her.

Her hands, pale and slender, are wrapped around the cup. A delicate platinum ring winds around her right forefinger. He closes his eyes against the vision of his hands covering hers. For warmth, he tells himself. Just for warmth.

"How did you know how I take it?"

"How did I? What?"

"Milk, one sugar."

"I don't know," he says, flustered. "I should have asked, my mistake."

"No, you misunderstand," she says. "This is precisely how I take my tea."

"I imagine it's not an uncommon way, then, is it?"

He's off his stride, and this woman whose name he doesn't even know is looking at him as if how she takes her tea is the key to the mysteries of the cosmos.

"Pardon me! Where are my manners?" He gestures to himself. "Severus Snape. And you are?"

She's gazing into the empty teacup as if she might read her fortune there.

"Hermione. Hermione... Granger," she says, swallowing thickly.

"Hermione Granger. A pleasure to meet you." He means it, and he can see from her flushed cheeks and the way she fiddles with the teacup that she knows.

"What brings you to these parts?" Other than the absence of a proper map, he thinks.

"I've been looking for, er... something I lost," she murmurs.

"And you think you might find it *here*?" He schools himself not to laugh because she sounds absolutely serious.

"Yes, precisely here, actually." She looks at him dead on, and now he is the one to shiver.

"What is it you're looking for?"

Her eyelids flutter, like she's working to hold back tears. Whatever it is obviously means everything to her.

"Something stolen from me," she says. "Something that took me a great deal of effort to find in the first place."

He nods. "Can't imagine why anyone would stash something so important here, of all places." He looks around the room, frowning.

"I suppose this isn't the sort of spot others usually think of when they're looking for something precious."

She's looking at him like *he* might be, and his heart leaps in his chest.

"Not in my experience," he says, his voice soft.

"Perhaps their loss will be my gain."

He nods, but all he can think about is how to keep her from slipping through his fingers the way all good dreams do when he wakes.

"Is there something I can do to help?" Please, he thinks.

"There might be," she says.

There is a roar behind them as a fierce game of darts draws to a close.

"It's stopped raining I think. Perhaps a bit of air?"

She looks eager to be outside, or from the searching way she looks at him, she might want to be alone with him away from the crowd. He looks suspiciously at the teapot. Surely Joe didn't spike it with vodka again. He's no doubt too focused on profit to slip free drink into the pot, no matter how many times Severus has ushered a drunken patron out just before he's done any damage.

"Yes, please. Let's take a walk."

He ushers her out through the press of bodies, ignoring the curious glances and outright leers. It has indeed stopped raining, and the sun peeks out from behind a cloud, sending a skitter of refracted colour through the shop fronts' glass.

She lifts her face toward the sunlight and sighs.

They fall into step together, silent, taking in the clean air and clear light gifted to this place only in the fleeting moments after a rain. It's as if they've come upon an oasis set apart from the usual greyness of the town, and he's absurdly grateful that if she is to see where he lives, it should be now.

He knows she means for them to talk, but he doesn't mind the silence. She is lost in thought, and he's lost in pretending not to watch her. Just before they reach the end of the block, the intersection ahead bustling with lorries and cars speeding past, he reaches his arm forward, in a reflex he hadn't known he had, to catch her before she propels herself into the stream of traffic whipping by.

She gasps and looks sharply at him.

"All right?" he asks, perturbed that she should be distressed when he'd just kept her from being flattened.

"All right," she echoes. But she slumps on the kerb and begins to cry.

He plants himself next to her on the damp pavement.

"Miss Granger?"

She cries harder.

"Hermione?"

This time she leans into his shoulder, and he manages to wrap an arm around her. The wool of his coat smells musty, but her own scent, vanilla and lavender is stronger. He has to hold himself back from burying his nose in her hair.

They sit like this for long enough to attract the attention of passers by. A pointed glare sends the pedestrians scurrying, and he holds her until the shaking stops.

"Better?" he murmurs.

This time he's fairly certain her shiver is from neither sadness or cold.

"Thank you," she whispers.

"What is it?" he asks as if he has the right to know. It feels as if he does, and for once, he doesn't question it.

"The things you do automatically," she says. "I didn't expect..."

"I don't understand," he says. Expect what? Has he already managed to disappoint?

"We assumed they'd altered your memory, otherwise you would have come home on your own."

Now she's sounding delusional, he thinks. He should have known this was too good to be true.

"Now, look," he says. "I don't know who you think I am, but as far as I can tell, my memory is just fine." He hates to be harsh, especially when she looks as if she might melt into a pool of grief on the pavement.

But she's got more backbone than that, and she looks him in the eye.

"Is it, then?"

"Yes, it is." He's firm on that. He might not have much, but his mind is fine.

"Where did you go to school, Severus?"

"Primary school? Here, at the local Junior School."

"And secondary school?" Her eyes are hard, and he wonders how he could have thought her weak.

"My folks sent me to a boarding school out in West Yorkshire." There. Let her challenge his memory now.

"What were the names of your roommates, Severus? What colour were the walls of your room? What did they serve for dinner at the leaving feast?"

A series of images flashes by, but they look like photographs taken by somebody else. They don't include his roommates' names or the contents of his dinner plate. His throat feels tight, and he can feel the blood pounding in his head.

"What difference does that make?" he shouts. "Women bloody remember that rubbish. Men care about..."

"Food, mate," a voice interrupts. "You know how it is. We care a lot about the food." The redhead is standing behind them and he wonders how much he's overheard.

"I never cared about the food."

"Ah, right an academic man," the redhead, Ron, says. "How about the name of your favourite teacher, then."

"Maples. Mr Maples." He doesn't know where he comes up with the name, but he'll stick with it.

"Maples? What did he teach?"

He's not entirely sure Maples is male, but he's out of his depth and he knows it.

"Chemistry."

"Figures," the redhead mutters.

"Who was your lab partner?" Hermione asks.

He blinks.

He searches his memory and comes up empty. His lab partner for chemistry? Maples or no Maples, he can find neither image or name to go with a lab partner.

"It was thirty years ago," he shouts. "Pardon me for forgetting my secondary school lab partner from thirty years ago."

"What about the girl you took to the school dance? Or how about the first girl you ever kissed?" Hermione's voice is rough, as if the answers really do matter.

And it's this more than anything that burrows beneath the surface. Memory upon memory, piled like photographs in a box.

None of them with half the emotional resonance of her voice when she asks him about the first girl he ever kissed.

He takes them back to his place because it seems absurd not to.

"It's not much, but, well..." He gestures to the sparsely furnished front room and shrugs. "I wasn't expecting guests."

"Of course you weren't," she says. "Thank you for inviting us back."

He nods, awkward.

They'd been silent during the long walk back to his house. The rain had started up again, and Severus had kept his eyes on the pavement, looking up only to direct them.

"I realise this must be uncomfortable for you," Ron says.

Severus gets the sense the redhead has a good deal of experience talking to people about things they'd prefer not to discuss.

"It's rather strange to suddenly have the notion that my history is not my own."

Hermione nods. "Memory loss must be awful. I've only read about it, of course, but everything I've seen says that amnesiacs feel dislocated when they realise..." Her voice trails off and she looks unsure of herself.

"That's just it. I don't have any memory loss. Or, I should say, I haven't had the impression of missing anything. Not until now."

She looks crestfallen, and he wonders what he is supposed to have missed.

"What do you remember?" she asks.

"Remember from when? I'm forty-eight years old," he says, irritated largely because he really hasn't got much worth recollecting.

"What do you recall from the time after you lived here?" She looks around the place as if it holds some clue as to who he was or is, or might actually be.

"This isn't my childhood home," he says abruptly.

"I know," she says. "The house on Spinner's End burned down three years ago."

He wrinkles his brow. Easy enough to find in the public record.

"I lived in Manchester until recently. Worked odd jobs." He hesitates, unsure how to describe decades of drifting, attempting to gain a foothold in a slippery world.

"Odd jobs?" she echoes. "What about advanced schooling?"

He snorts. "Assuming I'd had the funds for advanced schooling, where, pray tell, do you imagine my talents lie?"

Even Ron is looking at him strangely now, as if the idea of him being without talent is ridiculous.

He's only growing more edgy. They're standing in his sitting room like three refugees, and he really wishes he hadn't poured that whisky down the drain.

"Look," he says. "I'm sure you're well-meaning, but you've got the idea that I am someone else." There. That should take care of it.

Instead, the woman's eyes sweep him up and down and he shivers.

"Would you like me to tell you about yourself, Severus?" she asks. Her voice is raspy, and Ron scoots towards the entry to the kitchen, visibly alarmed.

"I'm going to rummage for some food, all right, Snape?" he mutters. Ron doesn't wait for an answer, and then they are alone, he and Hermione.

"I can tell you what you like to eat," Hermione is saying, "or your favourite position..." She hesitates, her voice dropping almost to a whisper. "...when you sleep."

Blood whooshes in his ears. She has moved so close that he can see red-rimmed eyes under her dark lashes. Her skin is pale, but he can almost feel how smooth it must be to the touch. For an instant, he imagines he can hear her whispering his name.

His name.

"Who am I to you?" he croaks. His throat is so dry.

For all that she's moved closer to him, she is still too far away, he can't see... can't...

"Wait," he says before she can answer. "Your hair, did it used to be long? It was long, wasn't it?" He can't stop himself from reaching for her then, from bringing his hand to stroke the short curls. "You cut your hair?" he whispers.

"You remember?" Her eyes fill with tears.

"I don't. I..."

"Oh." She looks crestfallen. "But my hair?" She brings her hand to his, the one that has lingered on the wispy curls at the nape of her neck.

How can he explain to her that she resembles the woman in his dreams, the woman whose long, tangled mane hides her face from him night after endless night?

"I dream of you," he rasps. "Or a woman like you. Her hair is long. Tangled curls. Beautiful." He knows he's rambling but can't manage to care.

"You've never seen my hair short, Severus," she says. "You used to say you always could tell where I've been because I leave a trail of curls behind me."

Oh, god.

His body begins to shake.

"What is it?" She grips his hand.

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a piece of fabric.

"The night I moved in here, I found this on my clothing." He opens the pouch as he talks. "I couldn't account for it." He feels ridiculous, displaying a strand of hair as if it were a diamond, but she sees it and cries out. "But I kept it. I couldn't discard it, even though I didn't know why."

"It's mine," she whispers, and he wonders if she's right or if they are both deluded.

She's crying, and though he grasps the edges, he still can't quite wrap his mind around any of this. The hair, the dreams, the memories that seem like frayed paper images, faded and flat.

"Who am I to you, Hermione?" he asks. "What happened to me?"

Her eyes are bright, and her cheeks are red and shiny from her tears.

She's so beautiful.

She's still got his hand in hers, and she traces its lines with the fingers of her other hand. He's entranced by her concentration, and by the expectant hush in the wake of his question.

"A long time ago, you were my teacher," she says. "Then you were my friend, and then," she says as his heart races, "you were my husband. Are my husband." She raises her eyes to look at him. "And the love of my life."

The love of her life. He is the love of someone's...her...life.

The room tilts.

If he closes his eyes, he can feel it, the life she's describing. It's like in his dreams when she's there with him and he'll do anything not to have to let her go...no, not to have to leave her. Each time, it is he who goes away.

"I'm so sorry," he whispers, almost to himself. "I don't remember. It feels true, cracked as that sounds, but I can't remember."

"It's not your fault," she says. "Someone did this to you, and we're going to fix it. I promise."

He doesn't know how he manages to wrap awkward arms around her, but she doesn't seem to mind. She lays her head on his chest as if she has done it a thousand times before.

This time, he doesn't resist burying his face in her hair.

~\*\*~

## Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 11

You disappear into a moonlit night, and I might have seen you go, if only I'd been paying attention.

Written for the Summer SSHG Exchange.

### Chapter 5



She allows herself a moment to savour the rhythm of his heartbeat.

His arms encircle her, breath ragged against the shorn edges of her hair.

She knows he doesn't remember her...knows nothing *of them*...but it doesn't matter. Not now. Only the beating of his heart, alive...its steady tattoo against her ear proof of his resilience. His skin is warm beneath her, and she traces the curve of spine hidden beneath his shirt with her fingertips.

He gasps, muscles stiffening under her touch.

It is too soon.

She has spent months searching, engrossed with thoughts of him by day and dreams of him by night. Even once they'd found him...his name a flat stripe of ink amidst hundreds more lined up like soldiers on a thin sheet of paper...they had been cautious, taking a few more torturous days to be certain, and a few more still to survey from afar.

For Severus, she reminds herself, it's been hours...minutes, really, since what he believes he knows of himself has been challenged.

From lonely bachelor to much-loved husband.

Loved and very much missed.

So terribly missed.

And this, she thinks, is only the beginning of what he's lost.

A soft exhale, willing the tension and pain out, and he tightens his hold. He twists a wispy curl at the nape of her neck around his finger like he always would after her shower, a heavy towel enveloping her long hair but for the escaped tendrils.

It's as if he knows her despite the absence of his own history, or theirs together. Or perhaps it's simply that in her presence, he becomes more the Severus she has come to know over their years together. She tries to find hope in the way he seems to slip into old habits but can't help but fear the missing pieces of her husband are lost forever.

She'd fretted about what she might discover until she and Ron set out together, address and map in hand, Harry's words still ringing in her ears.

"You don't know what you're going to find when you get there," he said. "I know it's hard, Hermione, but just watch him first. From a distance."

Despite the nearly uncontrollable urge to run to him...to grab him and take him home...the moment she saw his familiar profile, collar turned up against an angry wind, she hung back.

It surprised her, the intoxication at her first sight of him, alive. Alive and uninjured, at least visibly. Moving through his day like every other man in town...half in a daze.

Ron's terse observation at the end of that first day, that he could see nothing in his demeanour to suggest a man in hiding, was bittersweet confirmation of what she'd known intuitively all along. Neither of them pointed out the irony that now it was *she* who hid...under a Disillusionment Spell...while Severus walked freely through his shell of a life without an ounce of artifice.

Mostly, she watched him for signs of magic.

This chills her most. The utter lack of magic around him. She wonders if his abductors bound it, or if it is there still, present but quiescent, with him unaware, as she herself had been before Professor McGonagall brought an explanation of her magical nature along with her Hogwarts letter.

She pauses again to curse the witch or wizard who despises Severus enough to steal away such an essential part of himself. It takes an exceptional sort of sadist, she thinks, to strip a man bare and toss him out into an uncaring world, naked to the elements.

Severus shivers as if divining her thoughts, and she lifts her head to look at him.

His eyes are hooded, his cheeks flushed, and her body responds to him as it has a thousand times before. Her breath quickens, and he lowers his mouth to hers.

At the first brush of lips, her magic rushes up to meet him; heat and need and months of desperation crash together and pour out of her...into him. They cling to each other, desperate, rocking in a storm of hope and fear and love, clothed in magic.

The taste of him fills her, she's been starving, she'll never get enough, and her magic rages on, a flood. She feels the answering wave in him rising, his magic pulsing beneath his skin, thrashing, directionless.

Blind.

He breaks away with a shuddering breath.

"What the bloody hell was that?"

He's backing away from her now, staggering.

Terrified.

In a flash, she sees what she's stopped herself from dwelling on over and over again after he was taken. The magical force it must have required to immobilise him, to bind him, to strip him of his memory and replace it with the skeleton history he thinks belongs to him.

Violence as horrific as an Unforgivable.

A violation as profound as any in wartime.

His jaw is tight, and she can see him struggling to regain his breath. She steps forward, reaching towards him. He takes another step back, his expression frozen.

Hermione inhales sharply, Severus's cautious stance knifing through her.

She hadn't anticipated this, never this.

Her magic had reached for him, and she had revelled in the feel of his rising to meet it.

Beloved.

Welcome.

But he?

He felt magic pulsing beneath her skin and is afraid.

~\*\*~

His head is throbbing, stabbing him with angry knives. Heart pounding as if he's run a mile, he can't make the slightest bit of sense of the power that rose up in him and even more so in her when they kissed.

She's standing an arm's length away, her expression stricken as if he'd hit her. As if he'd lashed out with fists to smother a spark of initiative or a saucy look rather than reflexively propelling himself away from what resembled an electrical storm rushing through her body.

Through his, too.

"What just happened?" he asks again.

She won't meet his eyes.

"You're keeping something else from me." His head begins the customary pounding presaging a migraine. "And here I thought you'd already dropped the big bombshell."

She glances at the kitchen door.

"What? You need your little lover to explain it?"

That rouses her.

"No! No, it's nothing like that."

He knows he's glaring at her and that it's mildly unfair of him. He doesn't care enough to stop.

She plants herself on his threadbare sofa and invites him to join her with a gesture.

"Make yourself comfortable," he mutters, feeling the tiniest pang of regret when she blushes.

He's irritable. His entire body feels jumpy, like there's current flowing through his veins instead of blood.

"I'm so sorry, Severus," she says, picking at a loose thread on her trousers. "I can only imagine how strange this must be."

Strange is the least of it, he thinks, and anger, burning hotter than their kiss, rushes through him.

"Oddly enough, I tend to resent being left in the dark about information that directly concerns me."

She looks at him, wide-eyed, and nods.

"I know," she murmurs.

Looking at her there, her face a mask of misery, he believes her.

"Look," he says, pressing his fingers into the corners of his eyes, "why don't you just tell me? Whatever it is. Just blurt it out and be done with it."

He wasn't expecting her to laugh.

"What's so bloody funny?" He has a vague sense she's not laughing at him, but until he's sure, he'll be making it clear he's not a man to be laughed at.

But she's shaking her head, her arms wrapped around herself as if she might fly apart otherwise.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," she says.

He is about to speak, to remind her he's hardly been the voice of resistance despite the unbelievable tale she's already spun. But before he can say a word, she goes on.

"I'll have to show you."

She stands, pulling a carved wooden stick from her sleeve, waving it through the air with a sweeping motion. It looks as if she's conducting an invisible orchestra, calling for instruments to respond to every dip and turn of that wooden stick. She could do it, too, he thinks with unexpected approval. So fierce, as if force of will alone might summon her heart's desire.

So when she points to the kitchen door, he wonders for a moment, confused, what she could possibly want from there.

He blinks. And then blinks again.

And jumps at the clatter of cabinet doors swinging open and shut. A tin of tea...his tin, his tea...glides through the air towards her followed by two battered mugs and a jug of milk. She catches them one after the other as if her mate in the kitchen had simply tossed them to her from across the room. Two rooms. Finally, she sits back down.

Now she's jabbing the stick at the mugs, steaming water flowing from it like a faucet. She glances at Severus as if to check that he's still paying attention, as if he'd be distracted by so much as a dust mote in the face of this display.

He'd like to say something. Ask something, but has no idea where to even begin.

She's busy anyway. Making tea. Making bloody tea as if it were the most natural thing in the world to do after...

She shrugs. "I'm thirsty. And it's been a long day. Don't you think a cuppa is in order?"

He just stares at her.

"Would you like milk, Severus?" she adds.

He snorts. "Seems you ought to know how I take my tea, being my wife and all."

She purses her lips. "You're not typically in favour of milk in your tea," she says, "except when you're getting a migraine. It helps." She tilts her head. "And given the way you're massaging your temples, I'm guessing your head is pounding, hm?"

It is, but he'll be damned if he'll say so.

She adds milk and hands him the chipped mug without another word.

He'd rather she not see his hand tremble. If he'd felt vulnerable before her demonstration of... of something there's no way in hell he's going to name, now he feels like an insect pinned to a display board.

"Are you planning to ask?" She looks as nervous as he feels.

"No," he mutters. "I reckon I'll be waking up soon."

She laughs again, but this time it's warm, not the brittle laughter from before.

"This would be an awfully strange dream."

"You say that like it isn't." He's put the cup down and has given up on hiding his tremor. He's got little hope the milk will relieve this headache one bit, and he presses his fingertips along his forehead. That doesn't help either.

She scoots closer and reaches for his hand. Without thinking, he takes hers instead and brings her palm to his lips. His eyes shut as a moment from an old dream floods him. His ghostly lover is curled around him, her bare skin flushed...the dreamlike bouquet of lavender and warm woman precisely the same as the scent he's breathing right now, and she, his only source of air.

He whispers into the palm of her hand.

"Either I've gone mad or..."

"You're not," she interrupts. "It's just..." She swallows hard. "What I showed you isn't a dream."

She turns her hand so she can stroke his face, and he wishes with every cell of his body that this could be real. But it's what she says next that makes his heart pound.

"Severus," she whispers, "it's magic. Real magic. And you have it, too."

She looks at him as if this should mean something.

"Magic," he echoes.



She nods and looks so hopeful he almost feels sorry for her.

"What you showed me is... magic." His tone is flat, but he doesn't care. "And you say I have the same ability you..." He waves his hand in a rough imitation of her wand.

She nods again, looking encouraged.

He can't look at her anymore, not at that hopeful, open face. Not at this woman who claims to be his wife, but couldn't possibly understand.

The sky is darkening. He walks to the window, looking out at the street, the mundane street that he sees every single day.

What a marvellous fantasy she weaves, he thinks. How astonishing it might be to actually be magical, to have the power to conjure what he needs from air and ether. And how fantastical to have a wife, a woman to love, and who...from the look on this one's face...adores him.

But he closes his eyes and searches his heart, his soul, his memory for traces of any of it. For magic. For her. He turns back again. She is standing precisely where he left her. Waiting.

"I have always been a disappointment," he says, the words falling out almost without his consent. "But have always known who I am. What I am. My failings are hardly a secret, nor is the reality that I am a middle-aged man, essentially alone in the world, working another in a line of mediocre jobs indistinguishable from one another and living..." he sweeps his arm toward the window and grimaces "...here." He holds up a hand to forestall her as she steps forward to interrupt, and she stops.

"Even so, I have always known who I am. Until today. Today, you appear out of nowhere and tell me that I am your husband. That you...and I...are magical." He shakes his head. "I can't deny that when I touch you, I feel..." He huffs, embarrassed. "I feel what any red-blooded man would feel. Call it magic if you like. But the other... what you call magic. I don't recognize it."

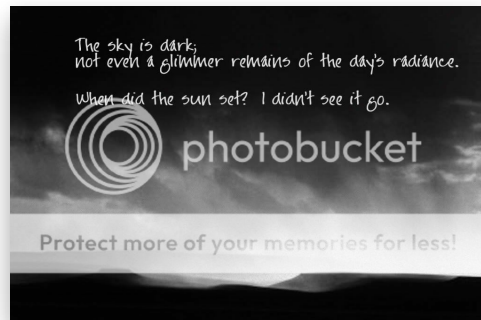
His stomach knots as he tries to explain what he is still trying to untangle for himself. What accepting her at her word would cost him.

"Hermione, you say I'm not who I thought I was. And you might think it no great loss..." It registers dimly in the back of his mind that she's crying, but he presses forward before he loses his nerve. "But if what you say is true, it means I'm nothing now." His voice breaks. "Nobody."

She's definitely crying, and he feels as helpless to comfort her as he does to wave a stick and make objects fly.

"You aren't nobody," she's saying. "I love you. No matter what, I love you. I'll show you; you'll remember."

"And what," he asks, feeling his heart...impossibly...breaking, "if I don't? If I don't remember the person you think I am? What if I can't be like that anymore? Magical? Would you have me lost in a life that isn't mine?"



It had never occurred to her that he could be further away than he already had been all these months since his disappearance. Further away even than when he'd lain dying, unsure he wanted to live. Further than when he'd wake by her side, still trapped in the grip of a nightmare.

For so long she had held on to the sickening hope that he'd been taken. That he hadn't left of his own volition. That he was still hers, and she, his.

Lost by force or lost by choice.

She never, ever would have imagined she could lose him to both.

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## Chapter 6

*Chapter 6 of 11*

You disappear into a moonlit night, and I might have seen you go, if only I'd been paying attention.

Written for the Summer SSHG Exchange.

Her body feels hollow. Rage and hope and fear lie strewn inside her like shrapnel after a battle, powerless and inert.

"Do you want me to leave?" she asks in a flat voice. She can't look at him, not now, when her need for him...liquid in her veins...has spilled out like so much blood, and all he can do is pace like a cat back and forth in front of the window.

She waits for as long as she can stand to before turning away. With each breath, she leaves pieces of herself behind; they fall away bit by bit and turn to dust. The cracks must have been there already, she thinks, for the rest of her to dissolve at the first gust of wind.

The kitchen is only a few steps away, she tells herself. Ron is in there, and he'll Apparate her away. If she can only keep herself from disintegrating first.

"Don't." His voice is raspy, and she stops short, startled.

She hears him moving towards her, his footsteps uncertain squeaks on the floorboards.

"I'm sorry, Hermione," he says, and she's sure she is going to die right there, standing on the threshold between his living room and kitchen.

She can't speak, so she just shakes her head and pushes away from the doorframe in the faint hope that she'll be able to propel herself through. Away from him and any hope she'd ever had that they would share a happily ever after.

"Please." And it is he who sounds desperate, but that can't be right, Hermione thinks. It is she whose life has been stolen. She who has been mistaken all these months, believing him the target. No, whoever took Severus and bound his magic and altered his memory has devastated Hermione as surely as if it had been her mind and magic stolen away.

"I can't..." she whispers. "I would do anything..." she won't cry again; she won't "...but I can't stand here and say a long goodbye."

And then he's behind her; his hands brushing against her shoulders. Tentative, as if he's unsure he has the right to touch her.

"Please don't leave." His breath is warm on her cheek, his voice soft in her ear. It is how he's always spoken to her when she's hurt or angry after a row. From behind, so that he doesn't have to meet her eyes, he told her once, after he'd apologised and wiped away her angry tears. It's too hard when he's ashamed for having hurt her.

She closes her eyes and leans into him. He wraps his arms around her without a word, just as he has done all those times he can no longer remember. The steady sound of his breathing rocks her until she no longer feels as if she might blow away or blow apart.

He clears his throat, and she nearly smiles at the familiar show of awkwardness.

"I may not remember the man you say I am," he says, "but the sight of you walking away..." He pauses, and it takes her a minute to realise that he's choked up. "Please don't go."

The press of his hand on one shoulder and she turns to face him.

"I haven't given you a single reason not to," he continues. "Before I knew..." He snorts. "Earlier today seems like an age ago. But, until a few hours ago, before you showed up, I was resigned to the life I have. But now you're here, and I know it makes no sense, but I can't stand to see you leave."

He shakes his head as if he thinks what he's said is fanciful, the words of an irrational man. But to her, they are nothing less than a pinprick of light in the heart of darkness.

"Then I won't," she says.

His request and her acceptance spin together like the most delicate of threads, a tenuous anchor in the storm. It hovers between them, firm for all that it's built of nothing less ethereal than hope.

And for the first time in an age, Hermione can remember what it is to feel safe.

"I believe that's my cue to go," says a voice from behind her.

She holds on to Severus more tightly, as if he might disappear again if she lets him out of her sight, and turns around, surprised to have forgotten Ron's presence so quickly.

Ron is sitting on a battered kitchen chair, an empty glass on the table in front of him.

"Right. Of course," she says, wanting him to stay. Wanting him to go.

"I had a bit of time on my hands," Ron says, standing, "so I checked the perimeter. There are no tracking or trapping spells in place. No sign at all of magical monitoring." He looks grimmer than such news would normally warrant.

"They meant him to be found."

He nods. "So it would seem. Or they are arrogant enough to believe we'd never be able to find him in the Muggle world."

They almost didn't, she thinks.

"Do you think he's in any danger?"

"Danger?" Severus interrupts. "Kindly refrain from speaking about me as if I am not present."

Hermione blushes.

"I apologise, Severus. I was saying that I've checked around your place for enchantments that might have been left by the people who kidnapped you but found none," explains Ron.

"So I *heard*." *Dunderhead*, the set of his jaw implies.

Ron looks flustered for a moment.

"I don't believe you're in further danger," the younger man continues. "But I plan to reopen the investigation when I return to the Ministry. Now that you're found. And..." He looks uncertain.

"Impaired?" Severus suggests. "Found, but not quite myself. Is that it?"

"Well, yes."

For a long moment, the two men appraise each other.

"Were you my student as well?" He looks dubious.

"I was. Yes, sir." Ron stands straighter.

"I would have been pleased."

Ron blinks, then his face breaks into a wide grin.

"I seriously doubt that, sir. But thank you." He clears his throat. "I'll be in touch." He's speaking to Severus. "And I've set some magical trip wires to alert us if anybody

uninvited comes to call."

Severus inclines his head in thanks.

"Ron?" Hermione stops him as he turns to go. "Thank you." Her eyes say more than her words. "I can't tell you how grateful..."

"Quit it, Hermione," he says, but his cheeks are red. She's not sure if he's uncomfortable having overheard her earlier exchange with Severus or ill at ease with her gratitude. Either way, it's his problem, she thinks, and throws her arms around him. He pats her back and gives her a squeeze before letting go.

"You know how to find me," he says.

"Yes." She nods. "Just tell the others that I'm okay, and that Severus..." She pauses, looking at her husband. "Tell them that Severus is safe."

Ron smiles. "That, I will." He nods once to Severus, smiles again in that way he means to be reassuring, turns on his heel, and disappears.

"Now that," Severus says, eyebrows raised. "I reckon I'd give a month's wages to be able to do *that*." He points at the spot where Ron had just been, visibly impressed.

There is nothing for it.

Like a trickle of water come to replenish the desert, she feels it brush against the brittle edges of her despair.

Joy at the light that has appeared in his eyes. It has been so long since she's seen it there. Since long before he'd gone.

She cannot help herself. Can't stanch it any more than she could stop her heart from beating.

So long as there could still be that light in his eyes, and in hers in turn, she sees herself nowhere else but here.

With him.

The house is quiet, eerily so, after the other man leaves.

Now that she's here, staying, he doesn't know what to do next. He hadn't thought beyond lunging after her and begging her not to go.

The rumble of her stomach saves him.

"Would you like to get something to eat?" he asks, wondering where he'll come up with funds for a night out.

She looks flustered. "I'm just as comfortable cooking, if that's okay with you," she says. "Do we need to shop?"

They do, as his kitchen boasts week-old bread, mostly mouldy, and the milk left from their tea.

He doesn't comment when she adds items to the sparsely populated basket at the market down the street, even though his gut clenches as he calculates the cost in his head. She never asks whether he has the quid to cover it, just hands a wad of her own bills to the cashier, as if sharing the grocery bill were perfectly natural.

Perhaps it had been, he thinks as they make their way back. Marriage means comingled lives to many, he's heard, though his parents never seemed to manage it.

The sun has set, and they walk quickly in the chill air. Most of the streetlights are burnt out, save the one abutting the old playground, illuminating it like a shimmering island in a sea of black ink.

"My primary school is just down the road," he says, pointing. "I'd come here after, and in the summers. Better than going home straightaway."

He's not sure why he's telling her this, but she seems interested enough.

"Whom would you play with?" she asks.

He furrows his brow. "I don't remember much play," he says, thinking. "It was just a place to go, I think."

They're stopped at the edge of the park. From here, it's easy to see the broken swings and rusty slides that have clearly been neglected for decades.

"Not much for maintenance, I guess," she says. "It's a shame." She's walking towards the swings, and he can see the stick peeking out from beneath her sleeve. In an instant, two swings are in working order, links repaired, seats sturdy and clean.

She sits on one and pushes off just a bit, making the swing move back and forth only slightly.

"Join me?"

He hesitates.

"I don't *swing*."

She snorts and pushes her swing higher.

"Why not?"

He watches her move through the air, and feels a swooping sensation in his chest, like a bird flapping its wings, trying to get out.

"I don't need to explain myself to you," he grumbles.

She ignores him and pumps her legs harder, sending herself further into the night sky.

He can't move, only watch her soar, his body angled towards her as if she might sweep him up as she passes by. But she only pumps once more and when she reaches the apex, without warning, leaps from the swing, tumbling through the air with a laugh that pierces the night and sends his heart galloping.

Severus has the oddest feeling for an instant that she's going to fly; that she'll buoy herself on a pocket of air and land softly at his feet. But she's moving far too fast, and her expression has morphed from jubilant to anxious. Disoriented as if she's forgotten how to find the ground.

There's no time to think, and he doesn't know what to do anyway other than to open his arms as if he could catch her. In reality, she'll send them both sprawling, he thinks, his breath a knot in his throat, but at least he might cushion her blow. He can't hear anything over the blood whooshing in his ears, and he reaches out for her with both hands, palms open, willing her to land on him rather than splintered concrete.

He's not prepared for the warmth pouring from the palms of his hands, rolling to the tips of his fingers as if it were a ball of power he could yield at will. Nor had he expected

her cry, surprised, as her descent slows, dropping her softly into his embrace.

His heart is hammering, and her breath is still coming in pants, whether from exertion, fear, or surprise, he couldn't say. Tremors roll through her body, and he wonders if she's hurt after all.

"Hermione?" He leans closer to her face, hoping to see.

Laughter.

She's laughing?

"Hermione?"

She is, it would appear, beaming. At him.

Beaming.

As if he is a particularly clever child who...

Oh.

"Did I do that?" He looks between the swing, which has not completely stopped its cyclical motion, and the woman in his arms.

"Well, I certainly didn't," she says, smug.

"Why the hell not?" His chest tightens. Now, after she's safe. Typical. Still, what is she on about? "Testing me?" Now he's shouting, but she's not cowed.

"I didn't do it on purpose, and no, I wasn't testing you," she says. "I let go sooner than I'd planned and got disoriented. I'd have hit the ground hard if you hadn't..."

"If I hadn't what? What, precisely, did I do?" He looks at the palm of one hand while the other holds firmly on to her. It still looks ordinary. Long, calloused fingers, strong, square hands meant for a full day's work.

"Wandless magic," she answers. "Instinctive." She pauses a moment. "Most witches and wizards notice it first as the magic we display as young children before we know how to control it."

"Marvellous," he mutters.

"But some adult witches and wizards have the ability to access their magic without using a wand and can learn how to direct it."

She pauses, and he lets the information sink in.

"That was an instinctive use of magic?" His voice sounds to him like it's coming from far off. He's not really standing in the abandoned playground talking with this stranger who isn't a stranger about magic. Is he?

"Your magic, Severus. Yes, I think there can be no doubt it was," she says, beaming again.

"And this makes you happy?" He's feeling around in the dark, looking for landmarks.

"Very happy," she answers. "Your wand...that's what we traditionally use to focus our magic...was found on the grass outside our lab. The Aurors... like Ron, you know, law enforcement for wizards, they think that's where they grabbed you."

He nods, chilled at the thought.

"You've not shown any spontaneous magic that I could identify since I found you, and, well, I was worried."

"I suppose I wouldn't be much of a wizard without magic, then?" The pit in his stomach is back.

"It doesn't matter to me whether you ever use magic again, Severus," she says. She's grown serious all of the sudden, and he understands that this is not something to be taken lightly. "It's only that binding a wizard's magic can sometimes have side effects, and I don't want you hurt any more than..." She stops. Her cheeks look red, but it's hard to see in the shadowy light.

"So since I did this..." He waves towards the swings. "...does that mean my magic is... what would you call it? Unbinding?"

"Unbinding will work for our purposes," she agrees. "And honestly," she adds, "I don't have the answers, here, which, when you..." She looks flustered. "Well, I'll tell you why that's ironic another time."

A gust of wind sends pebbles on the blacktop skittering, and Hermione shivers.

"It's getting cold," he says. "Let's continue this over something warm to eat, shall we?"

She nods, and they gather up their shopping bags and head back to the path to his house.

Maybe it's because the moon has risen, or perhaps some of those old streetlights have been fixed after all. But it seems to him the road ahead is just a bit brighter than the one they'd left behind.

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## Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 11

You disappear into a moonlit night, and I might have seen you go, if only I'd been paying attention.

It's closing in on four a.m., and though she wants nothing more than to stay with him here on the couch, she can hardly keep her eyes open.

She stifles a yawn, unsuccessfully.

"Time to sleep," he says from beneath drooping eyelids. He looks as exhausted as she feels. Even so, she's seen him smile more in the last few hours than in the entire year before he was taken.

They hesitate, each wedged into a corner of the couch, and Hermione wishes she had the courage to crawl into his lap and ask him to carry her to bed. She's had waves of thoughts just like that one all night, and her self-control is dwindling fast. The air between them crackles with the sort of energy generated by two people who have kept their hands to themselves for far too long against their better judgment. Well, her better judgment, at least.

She groans, reaching her arms up in a stretch, long and languid.

Severus shifts position and clears his throat.

"Where would you like to sleep?" He drops his eyes, as if he'd rather not watch her contemplate the options.

She considers scooting closer, but reconsiders. The risk of flinging herself into his lap grows exponentially larger with every inch of increased proximity.

"I'd like to sleep where I have every night for the last seven years...apart from the last six months, I mean," she says, her voice pitched low. "But I don't want to make you uncomfortable, or ruin what has been a truly lovely evening." There. Transparency at its Gryffindor finest.

He nods, slowly, as if buying time to think.

There's a part of her that is pleased he's not eager to jump into bed with a woman he's just met. But it's overshadowed by her bone-deep need for him and a fervent wish that sex magic were the legitimate branch of sorcery the publishers of wizarding erotica would like its readership to believe. It's a shortcut she could endorse wholeheartedly.

She sighs.

"Don't get me wrong," he says without preamble. "The thought of you in my bed is nothing short of..." Here he pauses, stammering, and she is charmed. "I just don't want to rush into anything, or for you to be..." He clears his throat and blushes just a bit.

"No expectations," she says. "If it's easier... I could sleep on the couch, or in another bed if you've got one."

He shakes his head. Not an option, then. She's not up to so complex a transfiguration at this hour.

"Or we could just crawl into bed and sleep, because I don't think I can keep my eyes open another minute."

He's standing close enough for her to see the stubble shadowing his cheeks and the slightly unfocused look in his eyes.

"Crawl into bed?" he echoes. "Together?"

Her heart sinks, and she eyes the couch. It is supremely unfair, Hermione thinks, that this is so difficult. They've already been through this once before, after all. He had not been an easy man to woo then, either.

"Only if it's what you want, Severus," she says.

But she's already turning away, trying to decide what to transfigure for sheets and pillows, when she feels a tug on her hand guiding her towards the staircase.

"I want" is all he says.

She follows him to the tiny room that houses a narrow bed she knows right away she will not enlarge a single, solitary inch. The loo is across the hall, and she ducks inside to transfigure a nightgown and ready herself for bed. When she returns, the lights are out, and he's already under the covers.

A powerful sensation of déjà vu comes over her as she approaches the bed, silently, in the dark. It's so like their first night together more than eight years ago. The night air then, too, was saturated with wanting tinged with fear.

She slips beneath the covers without a word, tucking herself into the curve of his body just as he turns to wrap an arm around her. His hand is fisted, lying on the mattress, and she holds it between hers, kissing one finger, then another, unfurling them like a flower to the light.

And when she presses the palm of his hand to her breastbone so he can feel her heart beating, thankful tears fall onto the mattress, unfettered.

~\*\*~

He wakes to the scent of her skin and a war raging in his body.

She has wrapped herself around him sometime in the night, the warm contours of her body moulding to his, her hands tracing unconscious circles on the bare skin of his back.

Oh, hell. When did he take off his t-shirt?

He glances down at her, more disappointed than relieved her nightgown is still on. He's not sure what this says about him, though the fact that this woman is, she says, his *wife* ought to allay the nagging feeling that he's a dirty old man for his desire to tear away the cloth separating her bare skin from his. And while his thoughts are conflicted, his body has complete clarity about what to do with this woman...preferably naked...in his bed.

Remnants of his latest dream linger, and he's grateful she's still asleep.

He shifts position, trying to put a sliver of space between them before he does something he might regret. It would probably help if he removed his hand from where it's cupping her bottom, keeping her pressed firmly against him.

Reluctantly, he releases her and turns onto his back. The shock of cool air sweeps away the last bits of his dream and gives him hope that he might yet prevail over his baser instincts.

"Sev'rus?" She rolls over and slips her arms around him again and lays her head on his chest. Half-asleep, she mumbles, "Don't go."

His heart lurches.

"Going to the loo," he whispers. "I'll be right back. I promise."

She mumbles something incomprehensible and loosens her hold.

Slipping from the bed, he feels a pang and an urgency to finish his business quickly. It's odd, he thinks. He's not afraid he'll come back to find her gone...these are not the old insecurities of a man with a string of not quite-relationships behind him. It's that he feels uneasy away from her, even for just a few moments.

It seems impossible that he should feel so tethered to her and responsible for her well-being after not even a full day's cycle of day and night. And yet, already, detachment from her is unthinkable.

Back in the doorway of his room, he lingers, watching her sleep. He fills his lungs with air and takes in the scene in front of him. The soft sunlight slipping beneath the curtain, Hermione's steady breathing beneath rumpled bedclothes.

Warmth spreads through his chest, strengthening the recognition that this is *right*. It's completely inconsistent with everything he knows about himself; it's just a feeling, and he's never been one to put much stock in those. And yet, none of that diminishes his certainty a whit.

Hermione opens her eyes. Her sleepy smile sends his heart racing, then galloping faster still when she reaches her arms towards him.

"Come back, Severus." Back to me. He can almost hear those words, layered beneath.

An invitation.

A benediction.

He's in her arms in an instant, the blanket tangled around them. Kissing her, slipping his hands beneath her nightgown so he can pull it off and finally lose himself in the silken heat of her skin.

He cups one of her breasts in a trembling hand, gasping as she moans.

It's like in the dreams. Her touch inflames him until there is nothing but her, and him, and the absolute need to obliterate every barrier standing between them. For a moment, it feels as if even skin might melt away and he would sink into her completely. All he knows is sensation and the way his body sings at her touch and the whimpers and moans his mouth and hands and body...oh, god...wring from her.

The world dissolves. There is no past, no future. Only now. Clothing and bedding lie discarded on the floor, and all that's left is the two of them, stripped bare.

And a tendril of thought that brings him enough pause to whisper, "Are you sure?"

For a suspended moment, he thinks she might change her mind, might withdraw from him and put back layer after layer they've stripped from between them. But she only traces the contours of his face with gentle fingers and eyes shining with joy.

"I'm as sure as I was the day we promised ourselves to one another, body, heart and soul." She takes a shuddering breath, and he wonders at her willingness to embrace him, even as broken as he must be in her world. "I married you, Severus. Not your magic, and not your memory. And you've already shown me you are still that man in every way that matters to me."

It's as if a weight he didn't realise he'd been carrying has been cut loose, releasing him. He is buoyant, all at once no longer bound by a history he can't remember or trapped by the complexity of a power he's just begun to taste.

Freedom, entirely new.

He leans down to kiss her again.

Slowly.

They have all the time in the world.

They wake again in the afternoon, bedclothes retrieved to ward off the chill of early spring air on damp skin.

Asleep, the lines on his face relax, and his eyelids flutter just a bit as he sinks into his dreams. She'd feared he might wake in the clutches of a nightmare as he had done every night for months.

Before.

But their sleep had been restful, if tinged with the colour of longing barely denied.

And come morning, once released, the familiar rhythms of pleasure had taken hold and carried them forward and back to a place where their knowledge of one another could never be in doubt.

"Isn't there some magic that would allow us to remain here like this indefinitely?"

She hadn't noticed him waking, lost in daydreams as she'd been.

"I wish," she says, snuggling more firmly against him. "No witch or wizard that I've ever heard about has devised a way to get around basic bodily needs."

He raises his eyebrows, and she blushes.

"We were speaking of the needs we'd like to dispense with, weren't we?"

He smirks.

She plants an open mouthed kiss on the spot just above his navel. The combination gasp and groan is enough to shoot a bolt of heat low in her belly.

"Hermione?" he gasps. "I am prepared to die a very happy man. But could we have a last meal first?"

She grins and rolls off him, fingertips leaving a trail of promise behind her.

He's watching her, following every move as she gathers discarded clothing and heads for the bathroom.

"Is the shower big enough for two?" she wonders aloud as she passes the threshold.

The speed with which he joins her is more than answer enough.

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"You and the bloke, Ron, looked surprised when I told you I'd worked odd jobs; I've no advanced schooling, you realise," he says into the silence that fell after they'd bathed and eaten.

He looks uneasy, and Hermione wants to answer all his questions...the ones he asks and the ones he doesn't know to wonder about...but she's frightened. Maybe even more than he.

"Do you want to know about the Severus I know? Severus the wizard?" she asks him.

He leans back in his chair, arms crossed.

"Depends," he says, finally.

"Of course it does."

His eyes crinkle.

"I don't know what I'd be getting myself into, see?"

She nods. Indeed, he doesn't.

"It's a lot to absorb."

"It's already been."

Yes, she nods.

"What if you just told me about yourself, your life now? If you start to wonder about your life from before, just ask."

If anything, he looks more uneasy.

"There's not much to me now," he says, looking just over her left shoulder.

She remembers what he'd said last night, what a disappointment he believes himself to be.

"Let's just go out," she says. "I fancy a walk, and it doesn't look rainy today."

He turns to peer out the window.

"Come," he says, rising. "It's not much, but I'll show you the local haunts."

It really isn't much, he thinks, but there is something to be said for taking a walk for old times' sake.

Battered school building, empty on a Saturday. The window to the principal's office covered in a layer of grime that looks left over from his time there. Down the block, the sweet shop where he'd spent too much time during his formative years peering through the window at treats he could get his hands on only by sneaking a coin from his mother's bag after his father finally dozed off late on Sunday afternoons.

Then around to the playground again. It looks even shabbier in the afternoon light. The shrubs along the perimeter are ragged, and he can't imagine children choosing to play here. There certainly aren't any around today, despite the mild weather.

He stops near the swing that had propelled Hermione through the air last night triggering...she says...his spontaneous magic.

Wait.

"There was a girl once," he mutters, more to himself than Hermione.

"A girl?" she asks, looking altogether too interested.

"At the playground. You asked me who I'd play with here. I'd forgotten. There was one girl."

She looks fit to burst, and he isn't sure he likes the sensation of knowing less about his early life than she apparently does.

"What do you remember about her?" she asks. Her face is unnaturally stiff, and Severus can see the strength of will it takes for her to not share every bit of information she knows about this girl.

"Mostly that she was irritating." The memory of a stringy looking girl with a shrill voice rushes back.

"Lily Evans was irritating?" Hermione asks looking an odd mixture of gratified and confused.

He's uneasy, but not surprised to have read her right. Even though she's got it wrong.

"Lily?" he says with a snort. "Her name wasn't Lily, though I'm sure she wished it were. Petunia. Her name was Petunia Evans, and she was a pain in the arse."

Hermione is looking at him with wide eyes, so he figures he should be sure he's being clear.

"I never knew anybody called Lily."

~\*\*~

# Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 11

You disappear into a moonlit night, and I might have seen you go, if only I'd been paying attention.

Written for the Summer SSHG Exchange.

She looks awfully flustered, he thinks, for having got a name wrong.

"Don't worry about it, Hermione," he says. "I can't believe I would have expected you to remember the name of a childhood playmate."

His words don't have the desired effect; she's gone white.

"Sit." He guides her by the elbow to a cinderblock at the edge of the playground. "What did I say that's got you spooked?" He's not sure he wants to know, if he's honest, but he can't stand seeing her so shaken.

She looks hesitant. "The answer requires me telling you something about you... from before," she says. "Do you want to know?"

From the look on her face, he's increasingly sure he'd be better off staying ignorant. He nods anyway.

She looks uneasy and won't meet his eye.

"What? What is it?"

"I don't think I should be the one to tell you," she says at last.

"Who, then?" He is exasperated and anxiety buzzes beneath his skin.

She doesn't answer, just glances around at the empty playground, then pulls her wand from her sleeve. With a flick, white mist shoots from it and rushes off.

"What was that?"

"Sending a message," she says.

"Don't you lot use telephones?" They can disappear on command, but don't have a more efficient way to communicate?

She laughs weakly. "You would think, right?" She sighs. "Magic interferes with electronics. But even if that weren't the case, wizards are very slow to change their ways. I used to fight it, but now..." She opens her hands in surrender.

This seems to make her deeply sad, and he has the urge to march in to whoever is responsible for the wizarding recalcitrance that has led this passionate woman to abandon the fight for what she believes and tell them a thing or two.

But he's distracted because without warning she's jumped to her feet. A man with a messy shock of black hair has appeared from out of nowhere at the other side of the yard. He's wearing dark glasses against the afternoon sun, but Severus has the impression that he's the sort of man who would wear them even if it were overcast.

Severus huffs.

It shouldn't matter that Hermione is hurtling across the barren space towards the stranger, but it does. He shouldn't mind that they're leaning in towards one another, heads together, whispering something he can't hear at this distance, but he can't stand it...can't stand being on the outside.

The black-haired man nods, and now he's got his hands on Hermione's shoulders.

Severus bristles.

Before he can take more than a step or two, they turn towards him. Hermione's arms are folded across her body, and she looks miserable. The man says something Severus can't make out even though they're closer now. Must have been 'stay back' or some such, because Hermione isn't moving, and the man is approaching him.

"Hello, Severus," he says.

He's wondering if he'll ever get used to random strangers knowing his name...acting as if they know him...when the man turns his head just as he takes off his sunglasses.

The man's eyes meet his, and Severus can't breathe.

Those eyes, those...

Brilliant green eyes that cut him until he bleeds...

...and remembers.

Which, he realises right before he blacks out, may as well, in his case, be one and the same.

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It's dark again when he opens his eyes, and he's sprawled across the lumpy sofa in the front room. His head is pounding, and even the hushed conversation beside him hammers into his skull.

"Most celebrated Auror in a century couldn't manage to side-along Apparate me into an actuabed?" he grumbles, eyes squeezed shut to block out even the tepid light.



"You're awake," Hermione murmurs, at his side before he can open his eyes.

"Obviously."

"And apparently himself again," says Potter, the touch of amusement in his tone as irritating as those damned sunglasses.

"For whatever that's worth," he mutters and throws an arm over his eyes.

"What do you mean, 'for whatever that's worth'?" Hermione's voice has gone shrill and he wishes she'd go back to whispering.

But he doesn't answer, just shakes his head...which he's sure is about to explode. Old memory and new...implanted, and newly formed over the last six months...collide, leaving him with vertigo and a blistering migraine.

Even his teeth hurt.

A waft of icy air envelops him, and the pain eases.

"Thank you," he murmurs. He takes a breath, long and deep.

"Would you like tea? Or maybe something cold to drink?"

She sounds nervous, and his shoulders tense in a spasm of pain. He doesn't want to hurt her; he's never wanted to hurt her.

"Water, please." He moves his arm and opens his eyes just a bit. "With ice. Thank you, Hermione."

She nods and goes to the kitchen, leaving him alone with Potter.

"She thought seeing me might be the memory trigger," he says without preamble. "It's why she was so nervous."

"Hermione has always been one to make intuitive leaps," Severus observes, levering himself upright. "She just doesn't always anticipate the consequences."

Potter nods and frowns, eyeing him closely. He looks for a moment as if he might speak, but instead sits back in his chair looking thoughtful. Severus is impressed despite himself. He'd never have expected the boy to keep his council.

He looks again at the man who so resembles his father, but for his mother's eyes. Eyes, and, he has learned over the years, spirit. It doesn't make him any more likeable; in fact, it makes it far more difficult to be around him than when he'd believed him selfish, stubborn, and arrogant.

But no, that had never been Potter...not Harry, at least. It had been him all along.

Severus Snape. Myopic in the extreme. Selfish and arrogant enough to have thrown away what he loved most for the illusion of position and power.

But Hermione is back now, and he doesn't say any of this. Just takes the glass of cold water from her hand and makes a show of drinking. He isn't thirsty, despite being parched. His stomach is churning too much, and a familiar weight sits squarely on his chest.

"Severus," she asks, her voice steadier than before, "what do you remember?"

And it's the simplicity of the question above all that cuts through the fog.

"Everything," he says, looking her in the eye for the first time since waking. "I remember everything."

"Everything?" she asks. "Even..." Her voice catches and she doesn't complete the thought.

He shakes his head as if she had. "It's the same as before, I think."

She looks crestfallen, but her disappointment wars with her obvious relief.

"Well, you've at least regained what you lost. That's better, isn't it?"

She looks brittle, he thinks, and he wonders absently if she has the capacity to withstand the storm.

"Not better. Clearer." Like the sky before a tornado. Black, with a corona of light making the edges sharp.

She shivers.

"Hermione," he says, "this...regaining my memory...it doesn't change anything."

He's still confused, she thinks. Otherwise he'd never say something so ridiculous.

"Of course it does, Severus. It changes everything. Let's go home, and we'll talk about it..." Her words come out in a rush, but he cuts her off.

"No, Hermione. This is my..." He swallows, refusing to meet her eyes. "This is my home now."

She's speechless, though only for a moment.

"Severus, we need to get you to a Healer. Who knows what they did to you apart from alter your memory?"

But he's shaking his head, his eyes closed, and a chill creeps through her.

"I know what they did," he says. "I told them to do it." And in a whisper, "I begged them to."

Light explodes behind her eyes and she struggles to catch her breath. He's suffering the after effects of the attack and the sudden recovery of his memory. It's not possible that he told them... that he begged...

"No, Severus. Stop it. Please." She might be yelling, but it's hard to tell because she can't hear anything over the whooshing in her ears.

"I won't. Not this time, Hermione."

She collapses onto the chair alongside the couch and tries to regain her breath and her balance...though she fears both may be irretrievably lost.

"So tell me, then. What did you tell them to do?" Whatever it is, they'll get through it as long as they have each other. She won't lose him again, not ever.

"They were outside the lab that night. Waiting there like they knew our routines. They said they'd been watching for you, but I would do just as well. Better, actually." His voice wavers and he takes a breath. "I couldn't believe what was happening. Right there in front of the hospital. I kept thinking somebody would come out, and they'd run. I just hoped it wouldn't be you." He swallows thickly. "I was so grateful it wasn't you."

Hermione nods and clutches his hand. The streets had been desolate when she'd finally cleared up and left the lab...as if all the other living creatures had known to make themselves scarce under the Harvest moon.

"What did they want?" she asks. As if such beasts had anything so mundane as wants.

He shakes his head, but still won't meet her gaze. "They gave me a choice. To wait for you to come out, or to go with them."

"Wait for me to come out? Why?" They'd been after Severus. What would they want with her?

Finally, he looks up. He looks haggard, the lines of his face as deeply etched as if he'd just emerged from a nightmare.

"They were planning to kill you."

Harry and Severus both lunge to grab her before she lurches forward and hits the floor.

"Kill her? Merlin, Snape! Why did they want to kill her?"

"How like an Auror to expect rationality from madmen," he mutters. "Get your tenses straight, Potter," he continues. "They still want to kill her. They apparently aren't any more fond of Muggle born witches who rise above their station than they are of Death Eaters who turn against the Dark Lord. They forgot to fill me in on their deeper motivations whilst we sipped our tea."

He's breathing hard. "They will kill her if I come back."

He looks at Hermione.

"I had to go with them." His eyes plead with her. "If I hadn't, I would have spent the rest of my life with the knowledge I'd been responsible for the death of the woman I love." Again. He didn't say it aloud, but he didn't need to.

"I told them to take me, but only if they left you alone. I don't know why they agreed. Maybe they thought it would be more painful for both of us. They even made wand oaths. Honour amongst Death Eaters." His laugh is a sharp bark. Mocking, and Hermione wants to shake him.

"But why? Severus, why not fight them? Why not tell me so we could go to the Aurors for help?"

He snorts and she wonders if he'll say something disparaging about Aurors, but he just furrows his brow, looking almost embarrassed.

"They got the drop on me. I'd already been immobilised. And then..." He squeezes his eyes shut and shakes his head.

"Then, what?" What had they done to him?

His nostrils flare. "They reminded me that I am a liability, Hermione, that's what. Never fully out from under the black cloud. Told me that so long as I stayed, so long as I tried to make a go of a normal life, they would make it their business to make sure *you* would never be safe. It's because of me. It always is." He looks mutinous, daring her to argue.

"We've had this discussion, Severus." Countless times, she thinks. Early in his recovery, and for a long time after. When he had still been prone to slipping into dark moods, silent and despairing.

But that period had passed long ago. He had, she'd thought, moved beyond seemingly bottomless guilt and fear to embrace a life together. She doesn't understand what is pushing him to despair again, especially now when he's regained his memory, and she's found him.

"Everything I touch, I destroy, Hermione. It's a talent; I don't even have to work at it, you see." He's shouting, and she has a flash of how out of control he'd been the night she and Harry rescued Sirius. Crazed. Betrayed. "I don't have much," he hisses, "but at least let me have a scrap of honour."

She's about to protest. About to tell him all the reasons he's already honourable, how she needs him and can't bear it...when Harry interrupts.

"Do what he says, Hermione." Harry's voice is sharp, and Hermione winces.

"Do what? Leave?" Surely she misunderstands him. She's not leaving her husband after spending six months searching for him.

"For now. You know where to find him. I'll stay here for a bit. I have something to discuss with Severus."

"You... what?" Just this morning her world had been heading back to normal at last, and now it was as upside down as ever. Harry would stay with Severus while she left? What is he thinking? She's not leaving him here to go back...to what? To her empty house and empty life?

"I don't want..."

"Don't argue."

Even Severus raises his eyebrows.

"I will until you tell me what is going on," she shouts.

"I need you to trust me, Hermione."

Trust him. Trust Harry. Harry who is sending her away when she's certain the only place she should be is right here. She's tired of having her instincts overridden, and furious at being expected...again...to close her mouth and comply.

"I don't understand."

"I know."

She stands there, two of the men she holds closest to her heart standing side by side.

Not exactly the way she'd envisioned them finding accord with one another.

Fine, then.

"I'll go," she says, and she's sure her heart is breaking. "But I'm coming back." She doesn't know whether to look at Severus or Harry.

"I'll send a Patronus," Harry says.

She notes he's careful not to tell her what the Patronus might instruct. Well, too bad. She doesn't need to wait for his permission.

"Go, Hermione."

She nods. But before she steps into the ether, before she returns alone to her empty house, she reaches into her bag and pulls out something long and narrow. She holds it out to Severus.

His wand. The conduit for his magic, and the only object Hermione has kept close to her continually for the last six months. He looks at it only briefly before closing his eyes and shaking his head.

She stands for a moment, her hand held out to him, hoping he might relent.

But he only folds his arms, shoulders slumped, and turns away.

~\*\*~

## Chapter 9

*Chapter 9 of 11*

You disappear into a moonlit night, and I might have seen you go, if only I'd been paying attention.

Written for the Summer SSHG Exchange.

It's been years since Severus has been alone in a room with Harry Potter, and he far prefers being the one to set the agenda.

"What do you want, Potter?"

The professor tone with its steely edge could be relied upon to snap about half of his former students to attention, but not Harry...bloody...Potter. Not any more.

The younger wizard seems tense, and Severus doesn't like it. It's one thing to agree to social contact with the boy for Hermione's sake. Even to come to a détente and enjoy the occasional pint together over a meal. But he hasn't invited Potter to join him in this new hell, and he's not about to do anything that might encourage him to stay.

It's his hell, and he might as well get on with it.

Alone, preferably.

Not with this wizard standing between him and the staircase poking his nose into issues that don't concern him, interfering when he couldn't possibly understand what Severus has to do.

How history repeats itself.

"Get out of my way, Potter. I'm going to bed."

"Not yet," he says. "Please."

There's a thread of fear just below the surface that Severus doesn't remember ever hearing from the man who had once made his life a living hell.

That would be two hells before the one he's facing now.

One almost needs a map, he thinks. He does have quite the collection.

"If you could find it in your heart to tell me what in Merlin's name you want, I might provide it if only so you would finally leave. Me. Alone."

Potter looks solemn, and Severus feels his stomach clench.

"I find it odd that your kidnappers would plant a trigger for restoring your memory. Don't you?" Potter asks.

"Your awesome powers of deduction, or rather, the lack thereof, astound me, Potter," Severus snaps. "I've not seen a shred of evidence the kidnappers planted a trigger for memory retrieval. In fact, I had the impression they intended for me to never regain..." He clears his throat. "It's a fluke, that's all."

"A fluke." Ah, there it is. The flinty Auror look Severus hates almost as much as the obnoxious Auror tone.

"Go on back to the Ministry and play your little detective games there. In fact, feel free to do so anywhere I am not. Shouldn't be difficult."

But Potter just pins him with a hard stare.

"I don't think it's a fluke, but I have to agree. Your kidnappers had no idea that there would be a way to restore your memory."

"Now that we have reached this moment of perfect accord, could you possibly leave?"

"No," he says. "Because I think you may have provided us with a break in the Faux Dementor case."

Oh. That.

The case where the victims look for all the world like they've sat with a Dementor outside the door for a decade. He feels a pang, regretful that he and Hermione have failed

to create a potion to treat the victims. Someone else will pick up the gauntlet, he thinks. Someone always does. And really, apart from their work, the victims of the Faux Dementor attacker have nothing to do with him.

"That case?" he snaps. "For Merlin's sake, Potter, they have nothing to do with me."

"I disagree. Actually, I suspect you're a victim of the same attackers, Snape. Only, you didn't respond the way they expected."

"Me?"

He's about to argue. To tell Potter to quit chattering and leave him. But he lingers on the memory of the masked figures who grabbed him outside St Mungo's, something about them eerily familiar. Of course they would be, he thinks. This is a crime of passion, not a random hit on a random wizard.

"What else do you remember from that night?"

Severus closes his eyes. "Not much," he murmurs. Only... "There were two of them in masks and robes," he continues. "I wasn't prepared. In the old days, nobody could have taken me by surprise like that."

He's embarrassed. What good is he if he can't even protect *himself*?

"They immobilised me; taunted me. Divested me of my wand and forcibly Apparated me to an abandoned field." He'd been sure they were going to kill him right there and then. "I was sure that was it."

Seventeen years as a spy. Surviving attack by the Dark Lord's familiar, only to be bested at the hands of enemies who won't even show him their faces. There's cosmic justice there somewhere, he thinks. Mostly, though, had been the imperative to do it differently this time.

"But if it meant Hermione would live..." He can't speak.

"They must have had to scramble when their spell didn't work," Potter says.

Severus is irritated. Clearly, he'd been hexed; what is Potter on about? "What didn't work?"

"You've seen the other victims, Snape. They're blank. Empty. Without access to memory or any emotion other than abject misery. That's not what happened to you."

"Which could just as easily be evidence that the kidnappers and the hex they used is unrelated to the others."

"I don't think so." He's pacing as he speaks, and the air crackles with energy. "It feels the same to me, Snape. Even down to the headache...though none of the others have had any memory restoration. But I'd nearly forgotten something we managed to keep out of the Prophet."

There is a telltale, Snape. A mark left on them that glowed when the Healers did magic on them for the first time. I saw the same mark on you when your memory came back. Right before you lost consciousness."

Severus is speechless. But as much as he'd like to refute it, Potter has a point.

"Say more," he says, and stifles a smirk at Potter's expression of surprise.

"I've been thinking," he says. "As with you, the attackers were successful in removing the victim's memory of being a wizard, even of magic. But they didn't leave you in the same broken state as the others. Why not?"

Why not, indeed?

"My memory was already damaged," he replies without thinking. "Bits of it were lost on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. You didn't get them all that night. Did you know?"

Potter looks surprised. "No. I didn't realise. I'm sorry."

Severus shrugs. "It's immaterial. And as delightful as I find helping you do your job, Potter, none of it has the slightest impact on what I have to do now."

"You don't have to stay hidden. We can put Hermione under guard now that we know she's at risk. We can protect..."

"The way Dumbledore protected your mother?"

The way *I* protected her, he thinks, bleak.

He wouldn't have been surprised if Potter had shouted. In fact, he fully expects the younger wizard to draw his wand against him.

But Severus would never have predicted that he would stand there, face growing ruddier and his eyes growing cold. Until finally, he turns on his heel and Disapparates without a sound to mark his leaving.

~\*\*~

*The trees rustle in the wind, faint starlight sending the softest of shadows tumbling to the forest floor.*

*The wizard stands in the clearing that witnessed his death nine years ago. His arms hang at his sides; his head is bowed. The trees quiver as if in whispered conversation with the man who stands, torn, beyond the reach of their branches.*

*Finally, he raises his wand, the brief incantation barely a whisper on his lips. From beneath layer upon layer of life and death and life renewed along the forest floor, a small object surfaces. As if weightless, it soars into the man's open hand.*

*And in an instant, it is as if he had never been there at all.*

~\*\*~

He's barely had time to sink into the silence when a sharp pop heralds Potter's return.

Severus pushes his fingertips into his eyes and wills his thrice-damned headache to kill him now.

The kitchen is dark, and he prefers it that way. It's better that the light dwell in memory alone. He'll get used to it.

"Here," Potter says, marching up to him and slamming his hand down on the table. "I've had enough of this, Snape. You're so keen to drown yourself in misery because you're too cowardly to face the truth. So, here..." He lifts his hand from the tabletop, uncovering the small, spherical object he'd slammed down there.

It's nearly impossible to see it in the dark. The edges of the object glimmer just a bit before melting into the night. Severus can't stop himself from reaching for it. It calls to

him.

"Figures you'd want it." Potter sounds disgusted.

"What is it?"

"Don't play dumb, Snape," Potter snaps. "You've seen it before. On Dumbledore's hand."

Dumbledore's hand? Dumbledore's...

"No." His stomach is churning.

"Yes." Those green eyes are narrowed, focussed on him. "You've been carrying around my mother's death like you own it for as long as I've known you. As if it's yours to use as your own personal armour any time you get scared."

"Now hold on there, boy..."

"No, it's time for you to listen. You want to hide in the past? At least do it right. Go ahead and Summon her...you've done everything else to keep yourself bound to a mistake you made when you were younger than I am now. You want to keep hiding? Do it. But do this first. Ask her, Snape. Call her. See what she has to say about what you're doing to your life. Would she be proud, Snape? Would she appreciate how desperately you keep yourself hidden, even if it means destroying the woman you love?"

Destroying?

But before he can say a word, Potter is gone, and the stone...bottomless and inky black...sits before him on the battered wooden table singing to him like a Siren.

\*\*

The moon rises and sets before he touches it.

It's colder than he expects, and he snatches his finger away. Ice burns so much more deeply than fire, he thinks.

How many frozen nights after her murder had he spent wishing he could call her back? Begging the Fates to take him...his worthless *cowardly* self in place of her brave one.

The image of her crumpled body haunts him even now, conjured in his mind's eye, lying unnaturally still amidst the rubble of her home, destroyed. Her life, extinguished by his arrogance, his need to be *seen*, to be recognised, to make a tangible mark.

To be chosen.

*My fault. It's my fault.*

There can be no coming back from a betrayal such as his; he'd been a fool to think it possible. A fool to venture back into the light.

The stone glints in the reflection of the street lamp filtering through the grimy kitchen window. Its enveloping darkness calls to him. Of course it does, he thinks. It must recognise a kindred spirit. His wand lies next to it; Hermione must have put it there before leaving. Two such disparate objects, he thinks. One holds his future; one, his past.

He reaches for the stone again, tipping it into the palm of his hand.

The stone that can call back souls.

It takes only an instant, he knows. Three turns of his hand and she'll be here again. A shade, yes. But still Lily, in essence.

The air around the stone shimmers, catching his eye.

Hermione would say it's the colour of souls. Silver-grey, and shining with its own luminescence.

She would know about such things, he thinks. Overflowing with brilliant energy the way she does. If he could capture her spirit under glass, it would no doubt shine more brightly than any Patronus and have more facets than the most intricate of memories.

His breath catches in his throat.

There is in all the world, he thinks, folding his fingers firmly around the stone, no fool like an old fool.

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## Chapter 10

*Chapter 10 of 11*

You disappear into a moonlit night, and I might have seen you go, if only I'd been paying attention.

Written for the Summer SSHG Exchange.

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She's in the midst of shouting at Harry when Severus marches into the room as if he'd never been gone.

Bags packed, letters of resignation and explanation piled neatly by the door, Harry's Floo call, asking to come through, had interrupted a last look around the flat which had been her home with Severus for seven mostly blissful years.

She's got her back to the door, so when Harry cuts himself short mid-argument, for a confused moment she thinks he might have taken her point after all.

But then *his* voice rushes over her, and it's all she can do to stay standing right where she is.

"Where are you going?" Severus asks as if he hadn't been the one who'd sent her off to begin with. "We've got work to do."

She turns. He's in the same clothes he'd been wearing last night. Rumpled and unshaven but with eyes more animated than they'd been in ages.

Her mouth is dry, and her heart is pounding.

He's here.

He's home.

But his warnings and his guilt, and most of all his abandonment of her...of them...suffocate her, and she can't pretend they don't.

"I thought you weren't coming back." Her voice wavers only a little.

She'd be fooling herself to think she could hide her feelings from him. Still, she's proud that she's refrained thus far from throwing herself at him, howling out both her rage and her relief.

His eyes flick from the cases stacked by the door to the closed down look of the flat. For a moment he looks uncertain, then remorseful.

"I wasn't going to," he says. "Which would have been a terrible mistake."

She nods. No argument there.

"All this was to bring back to Kelton." It's not a question.

"To you. For us. Yes."

He looks flummoxed.

"You always did have a far better internal compass than I."

He glances down as if remembering something, and moves towards her with that combination of eagerness and hesitation that never fails to warm her.

All at once it feels real. Substantial. He's really here. Home.

And then he reaches out his arm. Not to grasp her hand or gather her into his embrace. No, he's holding out his hand, palm up, fist closed tight.

"What is it?" She's confused.

He releases his fingers. Slowly, as if the item cradled in the palm of his hand is volatile. As indeed it is.

It takes her a moment to recognise it.

At first it just looks like a cracked rock etched with faint lines as if a child had got hold of it and tried to make a talisman of the hauntingly dark stone. But the familiar symbol...the Peverell coat of arms...finally burrows its way through the mass of bewildered thoughts, and she gasps.

What is Severus doing with the Resurrection Stone? And did he...

She looks up at him again, eyes wide.

"If I am not mistaken," he says, his face lit with excitement, "I believe I may have discovered the ingredient we have been missing all along."

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He explains in a rush.

The tangle of ideas and emotion is so unlike him that she hesitates at first to take it at face value. For as much as Severus has finally opened his heart to her, he's always given over bits of himself only after some inscrutable inner process of vetting and grooming...each piece ultimately worn smooth, a silken thread unsullied by knots or kinks in the fibre.

It is more often she whose thoughts and feelings twist together until she can't possibly distinguish where one ends and the other begins. She's often argued that he limits himself by working so hard to separate his ideas from the energy animating them. Surely, she suggests, well-grounded emotion enhances judgment rather than hampers it. Most of the time, at least.

He would only shrug and nod, telling her she is undoubtedly right, but that these are the only tracking methods he knows and so he does what he can.

But now he is a tangled mess. Energised and bursting with words and ideas that tumble over themselves in a way she's long been familiar with in herself. Never in him, though.

"Severus, slow down," she says, laughing despite herself.

"We have to hurry," he answers her, the look in his eyes wistful as if he'd rather take his time than rush off to the lab.

In all honesty, she'd prefer to throw him into the shower, followed closely by a nap. From the look of it, he'd not slept any more than she last night, which is to say, not at all.

"We don't. Severus, nothing has changed. The victims of the Faux Dementor attackers are still at St Mungo's, and the culprits are still at large."

"No. Hermione." He strokes her hair with one hand and his eyes crinkle despite his exhaustion. "I have. Changed, I mean. And I can't wait. I have to know. I have to make sure it doesn't fade away."

She still doesn't understand what he's trying to hold on to, what he means to do, or why he's so sure this time it will work. Despite calculation after calculation, every ingredient combination they've tried thus far has failed. Not one of them has been successful in bringing back the lost hearts of the victims sitting in the Janus Thickey Ward. None of them has even approximated the potion they believe he, too, needs to be whole again.

"Okay," she murmurs. "We'll go now."

She's forgotten that Harry is there, hanging back by the hearth, pretending not to listen. He's evidently depleted what's left of his restraint, because he's blocking the Floo, eyes fixed on Severus.

"Did you use it?"

Hermione doesn't have to ask what it is.

She's not sure she wants to know the answer.

Severus isn't looking at Harry. He's looking at her, his eyes soft.

"I had no need." Is all he says.

And somehow, that's all he needs to say.

The lab is largely as he left it. Rows of vials line the shelves; cauldrons lie empty on the workbench, ready to be put to work.

Only the sunlight streaming in through the narrow windows marks the passage of time since the last day...the last night...he spent here. No more a weak winter light; instead, the warmer sun of springtime pours in, softening the edges of the long shadows the torches throw against the walls.

Hermione's face is shadowed, too. More so than when she found him only a handful of days ago. More even than when he sent her home last night.

He knows how much he's hurt her, but it's all knotted up with a misery so old that he believed it part of himself.

No more.

They work in silence. They know the base elements of the potion by rote from the repetitive rhythm of attempt and failure.

Here first, the Blind Watcher's eye, to fortify and strengthen. Then five clockwise stirs before adding Primrose and then three drops of Hyacinth nectar just as the potion turns a sickly aubergine.

They anticipate the critical moment as if it were measured by the shifting angle of the sun in the sky. Ten stirs widdershins and the potion lightens to a pale lilac. Four more and it turns ashy grey. And then, in the blink of an eye, pinpricks of light seem to burst from within the cauldron before it fades again to grey.

Hermione looks up from her stirring and pauses.

"Thirty seconds," she whispers.

He nods and removes a white pouch from his pocket. The stone, clean and polished by the pristine cloth, sits awaiting its fate.

"Fifteen seconds," Hermione whispers, and Severus holds his breath.

He walks around the bench so that he's standing next to her and brings the stone to the edge of the cauldron, counting.

"Five, four, three, two, and..."

He drops the stone ever so gently into the belly of the cauldron. It slips beneath the surface with barely a sound.

The potion makes a soft whooshing noise.

They wait.

"Nothing," she whispers.

"Not yet," he says, eyes fixed on the surface of the potion.

"But what..."

He shakes his head and reaches for her hand.

He would have liked to watch the potion, to see it shift from its dead ashy grey as the first strands of silver light stream in long ribbons from the cauldron. But her hand is in his and she's so close he can feel her breathing. Her skin is pale, and her eyes are puffy. Cropped hair lies obediently against her head, and he wishes there were wildly exuberant spirals bursting out instead.

He can't bear to tear his eyes away from her and so he gives up trying.

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It's no less brilliant now that it's cool, but it's a good deal... mistier. Vibrantly silver, it swirls around inside the cauldron, giving no indication whatsoever as to how it might be bottled. Or administered, for that matter.

It won't respond to efforts to pour it, nor to attempts to siphon it into a flask.

Hermione leans over the mouth of the cauldron, peering inside, and for the first time, he's grateful she's cut her hair.

"Severus," she says.

"Hmm?"

"Do you think it's meant to be inhaled?"

He'll blame it on lack of sleep. Otherwise it would never have taken either of them so long to come up with it.

He peers into the cauldron.

"I'd say that's an excellent hypothesis." He's mesmerised by the swirling ribbons of silver.

"Then perhaps you should try it."

Indeed.

"We haven't calculated a dosage," he says, but he knows he's stalling. According to their Arithmetic calculations, this potion will, at the very least, do no harm.

"Severus," she whispers.

He hears her. He knows.

"All right." It will do no harm. But what will it *do*?

She barely moves away from the mouth of the cauldron as if she might be able to share the experience with him if she stays close enough.

"Hermione..." He gestures to the basin. "I believe I need to..." He eyes the maw of the cauldron.

"Right." She nods. "I'll be right here."

He can feel her beside him, even when he can't see anything but the silvery tendrils that fold in on each other and then over and around again.

Who knew how brilliant memory would look when infused with heart and soul and will?

It smells like an infusion of Gorse wrapped in the wintergreen scent of Germolene and the flowery fragrance of Hyacinth. Smells like love, he thinks. And it gives him a sense like the summer air rushing through the trees when there are no obligations waiting for you, only forests to explore and warmth filling your lungs with life.

He inhales deeply, relishing the rich scent, feeling it rush through his blood, winding around each cell in his body.

Gradually, his breathing slows.

The ribbons of mist work their way through his veins and into the magical ether that forms the links between heart, mind, and spirit. Narrow fingers find each abandoned tangle of grief and every knotty snarl of frozen memory. Carefully, they nudge here and stroke there until the knots begin to loosen, moving in time with the rhythm of the mist.

On and on they flow. Vibrant and strong, the light they shed illumines hidden corners and then leaves them, still shadowed, but with an echo of shape to the darkness.

With a delicate touch, they weave gossamer webs between ragged strands of hope and loss and memory, and build bridges where once only chasms had stood.

The potion does its work, running through his blood, flowing through his body. Repairing. Reviving.

Nourishing.

He opens his eyes.

The room seems full, even though the figures filling it are translucent. They radiate one from the other in spiral formation, each one a link in a chain twisting around itself as sinuously as the ribbons of smoke and air overflowing from the cauldron.

But they aren't emerging from the potion; they pour from his skin to take their places in a circle around him.

There, in the centre, stands his mother. Her eyes as shadowed as they ever were, but when she looks at him, they are soft, and he sighs with relief he hadn't known he'd needed. And just beyond, his father, as greasy as ever, arms crossed as if he'd been dragged to the party against his will. Severus suppresses a smile. He recognises that expression from the one in his own mirror and for once feels more compassion than resentment towards his father for his mulishness.

He hadn't ever considered how many there are...the multitude of others who have done so much more than merely brush against him over his more than forty years of life. Muggles and wizards alike, the silvery glow around each showing him more clearly than words that each of these people has meant something to him.

He presses his hand to his chest and fills his lungs with air. Despite their insubstantiality, he's sure the souls filling the room rustle as they drift closer to him. There's a cluster of children to his left, and right behind them, a teacher, Mr Maples...his name *had* been Maples...who had found Severus clever and worth an extra nod and word of encouragement. The man catches his eye, and, startled, Severus smiles at him, hoping the depth of his gratitude is evident from the expression on his face.

He closes his eyes for a moment, remembering, and when he opens them again, she's right there.

Lily, hovering at the edge of the work bench, watching him.

She looks just as she had when he'd spotted her leaving Hogwarts for the last time. Of course that day she hadn't smiled at him as she does now...not with an exuberant grin bursting with youth and innocence, but a peaceful one whose edges are tinged with absolution.

Severus blinks, and Lily's face melts, until it becomes Dumbledore's, his blue eyes warm and appreciative the way they had so often been when the old wizard had watched over Potter, and then in the space of a heartbeat, it morphs into his own. It's the face he sees every day in the glass, but for the unfamiliar expression.

He brushes away the water blurring his vision to look more closely before he notices the figure standing beside him.

He wishes someone had told him that forgiveness tastes of salt and the sea, its colour the deep auburn of Hermione's hair saturated in sunlight.

~\*\*~

"How do you feel?" she asks once she's sure his eyes are on her and not trained on a scene she is too far away to share.

He pauses, as if he can't find words. So she just steps closer and brushes her fingertips across his damp cheeks before breathing a kiss onto his lips. It's just the whisper of a touch, but like a spark bursting into flame, he deepens the kiss, cradling the back of her head and drawing her closer and closer.

There's something different in how he's touching her now, less desperate and more insistent. She can hardly think beyond the *immediacy* of him, right here, showing her something there might never be words enough to tell.

"Better, then?" she murmurs when they pause for air.

"So much more than better," he replies. There's a gleam in his eye, and she shivers in anticipation.

"What was it like?"

He shakes his head. "I can't..." His eyes are devouring her, and she can hardly breathe. "It's like discovering that everything you'd thought you lost has been right here all along."

He's looking at her as if *she* is what had been lost, when really, she thinks, it's been him from the start. Lost long before he was taken, she admits at last. Lost to his own history and the yawning maw of regret and grief he'd refused to release.

"You're found," she says, as much to herself as to him.

And all at once, in the wake of her relief, waves of fear and hurt and rage accumulated over weeks and months, and even years come barrelling in, flooding her with roiling heat and an ocean of tears.

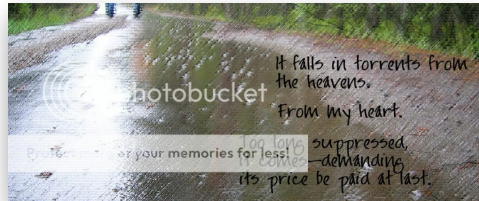


# Chapter 11

Chapter 11 of 11

You disappear into a moonlit night, and I might have seen you go, if only I'd been paying attention.

Written for the Summer SSHG Exchange.



She hates that she cries when she's angry.

To be fair, it's more a cocktail of emotions best expressed one at a time. Primary now is a searing anger that she cannot...will not...contain anymore.

It's been a good long time since she's been this furious, she realises. And come to think of it, she doesn't think she's ever directed the force of her rage squarely at Severus.

She supposes there has to be a first time for everything.

He's still trying to comfort her, his fingers combing through her hair, soft sounds meant to calm wafting across the short strands. The fact that he can't discern the difference between relief and incandescent rage makes her want to scream, and so she does.

And pounds her fists on his chest and then pushes against him, propelling him away from her.

Hard.

"You sent me *away*," she says in a voice he would never mistake for melancholy. "*Howdare* you?"

His eyebrows shoot straight up.

"You arrogant, sanctimonious *arsehole*. Who the *hell* do you think you are?"

He opens his mouth and closes it again, shocked, but she pays no attention.

"I am," she hisses, "not a child...which you manage to notice perfectly well when it suits you...and I don't take kindly to being treated like one. I am your wife. I am an adult, and I am sick and bloody tired of being trundled about like a piece of glass that'll shatter if a cold wind blows nearby." She pauses for breath. "And you know something else? I'm done walking around as if you're an even more fragile bit of glass, yourself."

He might have spoken then but she's not done. Not nearly.

"I've tiptoed around you for years. My god, Severus. You have no idea. 'Snape, the martyr.' 'Snape, the war hero.' 'Snape, the tortured soul.' Bollocks. You're a flipping coward, too afraid to live and far too fearful to let me really be your partner. A competent partner, Severus."

She picks up an empty flask, twirling it in her fingers. She takes a few steps closer, backing him into the counter. "How nice for you that you're feeling better now. You found out what you've had all along? Well done."

She slams the flask down on the countertop and turns away, her whole body shaking.

"Hermione, wait."

She pauses but doesn't turn around.

"I deserved that."

Yes, she thinks. You did.

"Don't you want to know what I found? What the potion showed me?"

He's using the seductive voice that always brings her to her knees.

Not today. Not now. She knows what he must have found, and she's done being the proxy for his tragic past.

"No need, Severus. I understand now." She takes a deep breath. "You found what you lost. You can move forward now, and I suppose, so can I."

"What do you mean, 'move forward'?" He's no longer across the room. She can feel the heat of his body, he's so close. "I'm here now. I'm back, and I love you."

"No more empty words. I'm done with promises, Severus." She turns to meet his eye. "When the chips were down, I held on. I kept looking until *found* you. But you? You sent me away. To protect me. To *protect* me? I fought *Voldemort*, you stupid man. Do you know how many kinds of insulting it is that you *sent* me *away* to *protect* me?"

"So, no. I actually don't care what the potion showed you, Severus. Your actions tell me everything I need to know."

Silence fills the room like smoke, and her chest aches with the awareness of how many times they have walked away from one another, only to be pulled back because of a love that has burned inside her for years...an everlasting light to guide them both.

It's not enough, she thinks. It never has been. Not when he can't...won't...turn to her when the nightmares come.

"I don't blame you for wanting to leave," he says. "But will you hear me out, first?" His voice is tight and for once, she won't reassure him.

She pauses.

"The potion brought me back something I'd forgotten, Hermione. Something that must have been lost on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. It's something very old, but it's more important because of what I realised it means."

He's not trying to distract her this time, she realises, nor to seduce.

At last.

"What is it?" she whispers finally, back still firmly to him.

"I knew that Lily and James were going to a Secret Kept location. But I also knew that someone untrustworthy was lurking about. I found her about a month before she was killed, Hermione. I warned her not to trust anybody. I reminded her that she'd already evaded the Dark Lord three times, and that isolating herself...isolating her family...and resting her safety on the soul of one wizard was a bad idea."

Hermione turns around, heart pounding.

"At least her husband stayed with her," she whispers.

He closes his eyes for a moment.

"He did, you're right. But they were both in danger, and they both went into hiding. She was competent, Hermione. Just as you are. I know you are. She chose to hide, and she died. I couldn't protect her there. Not hidden away from me. I would have helped to protect them both. She was strong, but she'd have been stronger...they both would have been stronger...if they hadn't isolated herself from the others. But I'd forgotten...it was one of the memories I'd given to Potter, but he didn't catch every one of them." He huffs and shakes his head. "Who would have thought the loss of so small a memory could have such a profound impact?"

"Without that memory, you couldn't trust me."

He looks flummoxed.

"No, Hermione. Without that memory I couldn't explain how I knew you would be safer if you weren't isolated. I wouldn't go back and trigger an attack on you, and if you had stayed with me, they would have known and come after us both, and we would have been sitting ducks."

"You didn't trust me enough to choose, Severus. You didn't give me the option of defending myself...defending us." She wraps her arms around her body to try to quell the shivering. "It's just like what you did in the Shrieking Shack; choosing to die, just more slowly this time." Nothing she does soothes the shaking. Her teeth are starting to chatter from the adrenaline and its aftermath. "I wish you had chosen me instead."

~\*\*~

Not chosen her? Doesn't she know that every cell of his body is filled with her? How being loved by her...and loving her...has transformed him?

"Oh, Merlin. Hermione, I chose you *instead* of me, don't you see?"

"Did it ever occur to you to ask whether I *wanted* to be without you?" Her eyes flash. "You had no right to decide that on your own...to decide I was safer or better off or whatever cracked idea you'd conjured up. You don't get to sacrifice yourself for me and call it love."

He doesn't?

"And I'm not going to hide myself so that I don't scare you and call that love, either."

That moment they shared on the playground comes back to him. The instant he realised that he would do everything in his power to obliterate whatever had been stifling this vibrant, passionate woman.

He's caught in that passion, in her fiery eyes and the energy that pulled him from the pit of despair and to the threshold of living again. It is his responsibility, he sees, to step through.

"When I looked at the stone...really looked...I understood that being afraid wasn't a good enough reason..." His breath catches. "...Not a good enough reason to hide. Not for you. Not for us. Just...I can't promise I won't be afraid," he says, realising that he's never before admitted the fear that has haunted him, driving his decisions and shadowing his mood.

"Welcome to humanity, Severus," she says, her voice just the slightest bit softer than before. "I don't know anybody who is never afraid. I just can't live like this, paralysed with fear all the time. I'd rather walk away and be done with it than live with the threat of losing you constantly hanging over me."

Terror rises to choke him and he has to pause for a breath. He didn't know. He hadn't been paying attention and neglected to see how alone he had left the woman he loves.

"I can't imagine my life without you," he tells her now, willing her to see his remorse, pouring every drop of his hope for the future into his words. "I don't ~~want~~ want a life without you, Hermione." He reaches out to her, stroking the arms she's wrapped stiffly around herself. "I want a future, a family, Hermione. Only with you."

The shock in her eyes, the hope, tells him how much of herself she'd been hiding from him. What she's been willing to sacrifice to protect him from his own fears.

"A family?" Her voice shakes.

"A real future. I hope that will include a family for us."

Her eyes are wet, and he knows what he must do. Words alone aren't enough.

"Look at me, Hermione. Please."

As she lifts her eyes to his, hesitant, he opens himself to her...no memories pouring from him this time, only the light inside of him that is there because of her.

Because she held on and didn't let go.

Because she's always been the one to find him when he's lost.

And now it's time for him to find her, too.

His lips on hers seal the promise.

Her tears...hope, relief, and flooding need wash away the last brittle barrier between them.

At last, when he's brushed her tears away and basked in the radiance of her trust and her smile, he takes a breath and tells her the last bit.

"There's one more thing the potion revealed to me, Hermione." He feels rage and a cold sort of confidence seep into his bones. "I knew those voices were familiar, and there was something about the shorter wizard I couldn't put my finger on. I just couldn't put all the pieces together until now." He takes a deep breath. "I know who's behind the attacks, Hermione. And they're not going to know what hit them."



Ron loves to tell the story of the expression on Runcorn's face when Hermione and Severus stormed through the entry to his office together, wands raised. How he'd stammered and postured; how he'd called for Black as backup, only to be told that he'd already been trussed and taken into custody; that in a final moment of desperation he'd attempted to magic his way right through Snape's anti-Disapparation jinx.

"Not bad for a Muggle, eh, Runcorn?" Snape had said.

Ron has come to appreciate Severus's sense of humour, though he tries to hide it most of the time. Otherwise it takes all the fun out of ribbing Hermione, and he can't have that.

He especially enjoys the light in Hermione's eyes when she describes taking down the two remaining wizards to evade war crimes prosecution, using the Imperius Curse as an alibi. He revels at the pride in her voice as she tells the tale of the two of them...husband and wife...together facing the wizard who had tried to destroy them as the jewel on the crown of his reign of terror, the entire Auror unit standing behind them like a silent guard.

Most of all, though, he tells Harry, he's always chuffed that Severus is sure to add,

"What was there to be afraid of? He'd already done his worst, and we'd come through stronger for it. And besides, Hermione was with me."

But it's the adoring way he looks at Hermione when he says it, and how she always beams with pleasure that gives Ron that warm fuzzy feeling not generally associated with anything Snape.

Harry agrees it's best for all of them to act as if they don't notice a thing.

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#### ~Finite Incantatum

A/N: Disclaimer: Many thanks to JKR for her permission to play in her playground.

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