

Memoire Persistante

by seinde

Sometimes things other than ghosts can haunt the living. An unsuspecting Hermione picks up a strange ring and discovers that, unlike most people, Severus Snape left behind more than just a mere object.

Le Premiere

Chapter 1 of 5

Sometimes things other than ghosts can haunt the living. An unsuspecting Hermione picks up a strange ring and discovers that, unlike most people, Severus Snape left behind more than just a mere object.

LA PREMIERE

"Ron!"

Hermione's voice was full of annoyance. She pursed her lips as she watched him wave his wand at all corners of the house. There were fiendish mops, utensils, and rags crashing into each other as they jumped around, fervently cleaning everything in their path. In truth, they were creating more of a disturbance than actually cleaning. Hermione let out an unexpected "oof" as she ducked, narrowly avoiding a flying dishrag.

"Stop it, Ronald!" she shouted.

With a flick of his wand, Ron set down the cleaning supplies, feeling slightly afraid of her angry eyes.

"This is completely unnecessary, Ron. I can still use my wand, you know," she continued, standing up from the couch. Ron immediately ran over to assist his wife. "I'm pregnant; I'm not ill and dying," she said, exasperated.

"Just, you know, take it easy. Maybe a few days off from work?" The red-haired man gingerly guided her to sit back down on the couch. He then dashed off to the kitchen and retrieved a glass of water. Presenting it to her, he smiled deliriously in the way that only first-time fathers could. After she took a sip and moved to set down the glass, Ron intercepted it, eager to set it down for her.

Hermione gave him an incredulous look in response. Notoriously lazy Ron Weasley had suddenly changed into a horrifically fussy version of his mother and appeared to be having the time of his life doing housework. He grinned absurdly at her.

"Um," she stammered, desperate to be rid of him, "I think I would like some chocolate frogs. Would you run out and buy some? And do get two boxes; I know you'll want to eat one on the way home."

His eyes went wide. "How do you always know?"

Rolling her eyes, Hermione said blandly, "I just do."

"All right, you wait here. Don't move! I'll be back in just a few!" He ran to the door and left in a flash.

When she was sure he had gone, Hermione made her way upstairs to their bedroom. She sat down at her dark wood vanity and opened her jewelry chest. A thousand little matchbox drawers sprang upward. Taking off her rings, she carefully tucked them into a little compartment at the bottom. Her fingers had swelled slightly and the golden bands were becoming uncomfortably constricting. They made a strange clinking noise as she pushed the box closed.

Bothered by the unexpected sound, the witch pulled the box out again. To her shock, there had already been a ring in the box—a tiny ribbon of silver bent in odd waves. A single drop of blue gem stone sat at the sharp corner of its twist. Hermione pulled out the little ring with the intention of placing it in another box. As she held the silver loop, its little gem seemed to shift, its crystal color swirling organically. Hunching over, she squinted at the piece closely but saw nothing.

Hermione played with the small silver ring languidly, unaware of her fingers turning it over and over. It took her back to that terrible night at Hogwarts. She had picked up the crooked little ring in the Shrieking Shack next to her dying professor. Her keen eyes had seen the glint of its singular gem as it fell from Snape's hand when he tried to staunch his fatal wound. Covering her forehead with her hand, Hermione tried to not think of the blood. There had been so much metallic red fluid seeping into everything. Thank goodness her morning sickness was over.

She glanced at the thin ribbon of silver again. It was completely ordinary, she was sure. Kingsley Shacklebolt had checked it himself.

No excuses could be made for why she kept it all these years. It had a bizarre austere type of beauty, but it was nonetheless a relic from a man she did not like. The ring was either too small or too large for each of her fingers, so she had never worn it. Toying with the band, she slipped it on to her right ring finger absently. It slid on without resistance, as if it had been intended for her, and Hermione made a noise of curious amusement.

The ring seemed to change again, its color shifting to become frosty encased light. She held her breath as the light engulfed her, pulling her into its own realm. A chilly paralysis over took her senses.

Hermione could not recall why or how long she had sat staring at the tiny stone. Time was at once still and rushing to her.

It was the sound of jingling keys and turning lock gears which startled her out of the trance much later. Without a second thought, Hermione threw the ring into a random tiny drawer and slammed the chest shut, thinking only a few minutes had passed. She made her way down the stairs and felt compelled to run straight towards Ron as if she had not seen him in ages. Flinging her arms around him, she pulled him into a crushing embrace.

"Blimey, Hermione, I didn't know you liked chocolate frogs this much," he muttered, encircling her with his free arm.

Hermione buried herself into his robes, still clinging to his broad shoulders. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, Ron! I love you so much. Please don't ever leave me!"

"Not even to go to the bathroom?" Ron said jokingly.

"This isn't funny!" cried a distraught Hermione. She could not explain her sudden need of him. All she could feel was intense yearning for him as if he would disappear at any moment. Her fears were stained with regret and endless apology which made her feel she was infinitely fortunate to have him with her. It was like he was the sun and she the mere mortal earth.

"All right, all right," her husband yielded. "They really weren't exaggerating about those mood swings."

That night, when Hermione went to bed, she had a deep and vivid dream. She awoke clinging to Ron, gasping with inexplicable tears in her eyes and aching loneliness in her heart. It did not surprise her that the dream had been about *him*; he had been on her mind ever since she'd put on the ring that afternoon.

"Lily," a dark and lanky boy pleads.

The girl he is speaking to looks confident, standing upright with a straight back. She does not look at his hunched form, but instead glances past him. With a look of determination, she shakes her head. "I told you already, I'm not interested. I only spoke to you that night because Mary asked me to."

"Please."

Ignoring his plea, she begins to walk away. "This is a new low, even for your lot. I'm going to talk to McGonagall if you have your Death Eater friends corner me again," she says harshly.

The boy's face falls into an expression of pure despair. "Lily ... I just want to ..."

She spins around and stares him in the eye.

"Get this into your head, Severus, I don't want anything to do with you, so stay away. Don't speak to me again," she forces out before hurrying away.

The dark-haired boy draws a shaky breath and stares after her in desperate longing. His sharp features are filled with the shadows of internal turmoil.

La Deuxieme

Chapter 2 of 5

Another, more disturbing, piece of the puzzle emerges.

LA DEUXIEME

Having no repeat experiences of her strange dream, many weeks passed before Hermione thought of the ring again. In the interim, she had managed to convince Ron to ease up on his over-mothering and was back to working regular hours in the Ministry's Legislation Office. On the weekends, they'd even begun to purchase furniture for the nursery. All in all, she was rather happy with life.

The dream of a young distraught Snape lingered in the back of her mind, but it was overshadowed by more pressing matters regarding her first unborn. Right as she hit six months, Hermione began to notice that the house was beginning to exude the distinct scent of chicken soup. She sniffed all around trying to uncover its source only to learn, upon questioning Ron, that it was none other than herself. Small, but nerve-grating issues like this occupied her these days.

After a difficult meeting one day, she decided to go shopping at Diagon Alley. To her disappointment, the shops were full of fascinating and novel items, but none of them seemed to warrant her parting from her gold. The new book release list was an especially tremendous letdown. Not a hour had gone by before Hermione found herself at the end of the cobblestone street empty-handed.

However, just when she was about to head home, a sparkle from the junk shop at the alley's end caught her attention. She narrowed her eyes and took long strides to the dingy window. Her heart fluttered when she was close enough to see the shining object sitting behind cloudy glass. It was an angular silver ring identical to the one she had stashed away in her jewelry chest.

Reflecting the light of warm, afternoon sun, its tiny jewel was almost lavender.

An obsessive impulse gripped Hermione's heart, and she felt a burning need to obtain the ring. Without hesitation, Hermione pushed open the heavy wooden door to the shop. A string of abalone shells jingled when she entered, and an ugly witch with a large boil on her forehead emerged from behind the counter. She gave Hermione a greedy smile, revealing yellow, uneven teeth.

"Um, excuse me," Hermione said tentatively.

The junk store owner gripped the glass counter in anticipation. Rows and rows of strange objects around the walls seemed to lean in toward them.

"Is the ring in the window for sale?"

The ugly witch nodded slowly and summoned the ring with her bony fingers. Using a dirty cloth, she rubbed the silver and set it down in front of Hermione with a clatter. "Five galleons. Goblin made!" The ring clearly was not.

"I'll take it," Hermione replied, all too eagerly. It being overpriced and not Goblin made were the least of her concerns. She stared at the ring hungrily and itched to put it on. Handing over the gold with zeal, she reached for the loop, entranced by its similarity to the one she knew.

"Madam, can I interest you in other jewelry?" the shop keeper rasped, disrupting her customer's train of thought.

Hermione shook her head quickly. Before she turned to leave the dark and unkempt store with her purchase, the young witch suddenly asked, "How did this ring come into your possession?"

"An elderly witch, sad looking, bless her, pawned it many many years ago. Does Madam have the other the pieces?"

Eyes narrowing, Hermione gave a quizzical look. "The pieces?"

"'Tis a puzzle ring, broken into four, by the looks of it." The ugly witch scratched her balding temple.

Hermione put her elbows on the counter to bring herself down to the height of the shopkeeper. Where were the other pieces? She clutched the ring in her palm tightly and inquired, "Do these puzzle rings have any properties?"

"Only if you enchant it. It's just a ring."

With this new information, Hermione rushed home, impatient to put the two pieces together.

Once she arrived home, she ran up the stairs as fast as her feet could carry her and pried the jewelry chest open, frantically pulling open every box. Finally, she dug the ring out of a corner container and held it up to her new purchase; her arms shook with anxious prospect. Pressing the two together, she saw that they were not identical but enantiomers. The mirroring pair fitted against each other with a gaping space in between, just big enough for two more rings.

Just as she had done with the first ring, Hermione slid the second ring onto her right ring finger. This ring fit exactly the same as its reflection had. There were no doubts that they were sisters. Slowly and thoughtfully, she turned the ring around her finger with her thumb, admiring the way its stone was tinged with glistening silver light. A hot sensation shot up her arm from the ring and Hermione wrenched it off, unsettled.

"I made dinner, Hermione!" Ron called proudly from below.

Hermione rolled her eyes and groaned. The last time Ron cooked, she had to secretly feed most of the dreadful plate to Crookshanks. Carefully placing the pair of rings into the topmost box, she closed the chest, effectively shutting away any further thoughts on the subject.

That night, Hermione had another dream. The sound of hazy newspaper rustles and loud breaking porcelain jerked her into consciousness, drenched in sweat and feeling ill. The contents of the dream were elusive, and she remembered nothing once she was fully awake, save for the nausea and rush of blood from her pounding heart.

Hermione suspected that the dream had been about *him* again. No matter how hard she tried, her mind refused to settle back into sleep, and she found herself compulsively organizing dishes in the kitchen by dim candle light.

All the clinking of delicate china woke Ron, and he stumbled downstairs upon finding the bed empty.

"Hermione, what are you doing awake? It's the middle of the night," he murmured, still half-asleep.

The kitchen was a mess with dishes and glasses sitting everywhere; some were even floating in midair. Hermione was pacing back and forth, tapping her wand against her leg in agitation. "They won't fit," she hissed. "They won't fit!"

"Merlin, Hermione. Come back to bed; we'll put them back in the morning together," Ron said bleary-eyed and bewildered by the state of the kitchen. His wife was looking extremely angry and rather possessed. Rubbing his forehead, he thought about what could be the matter.

"You don't understand!" Hermione yelled, eyes wild and furious.

Ron stopped dead in his tracks. "What's wrong?"

"Get out!" she roared before hurling a plate in his direction. Instinct taking over, Ron jumped behind the staircase.

The plate shattered against the banister in a rain of reflective white shards.

A young wizard with long greasy hair sits at the Leaky Cauldron. Seemingly without intention, he rubs one of his forearms periodically as he sips coffee. The man is engrossed in reading a copy of the Daily Prophet, looking purposely disinterested and occasionally sneering at a headline.

When he reaches the last page, however, his expression suddenly changes to one of unbounded rage. His bulging eyes are glued to a small announcement at the bottom of the page.

In small text is the line "Congratulations to James Potter and Lily Evans, wed on June 23."

The wizard throws the paper forcefully down on the counter. He grits his teeth as clenched fingers reach around the coffee mug. Unable to contain his fury, he screams and smashes the mug against the pub's wall.

La Troisieme

Chapter 3 of 5

Deeper and deeper the rabbit hole goes.

LA TROISIEME

Ron and Hermione had a quarrel the following day.

Concerned with Hermione's erratic behavior, he scheduled an appointment with the psychiatric ward of St. Mungo's without consulting her. Upon notice of said appointment, she was instantly resentful and upset. Perhaps at the idea of him going behind her back, perhaps at his premature suspicion that she was going mad. Angry, hurtful words were exchanged in their heated argument, the least of which was Ron's insinuation that she was being a thoughtless and negligent mother. It left them both feeling decidedly sour.

Never once in their five years of marriage had Hermione felt such a rift between the two of them. Finally, in the interest of preserving their relationship, she gave in and went to St. Mungo's. Delighted at a compromise in his favor, Ron held her hand lovingly the entire time there. But his joy was short-lived. No matter how many examinations they performed, the Healers could not find anything wrong. One Healer even looked inside her ears in case an angry Glumbumble had crawled in there. In the end, they pronounced her perfectly fine both physically and mentally, albeit slightly stressed from the ordeal. They sent her home with a recommendation of rest and an overpriced bottle of Calming Draught.

At Ron's fervent insistence, Hermione took a few days off from work to lounge around the house. He spouted all week about excessive stress from work and fussed even more than usual. Hermione relished the daytime when he was away at work; she took these hours to study up on magical objects. Stacks of heavy volumes from the Ministry's library covered their dining table.

Despite remembering only bits of her outburst, she was sure that it had something to do with the puzzle ring pieces and the dreams she had after putting them on. Ron claimed that she had acted as if possessed. Thinking back to the first piece, Hermione thought that she'd been unusually attached to Ron that night.

In her literature search, she'd only found a few relevant items, but none of them seemed to fit her situation. There were ghosts who were trapped in possessions they died carrying--seemed feasible, but how could one ghost be trapped in two rings? There were Himitsu enchantments, originating from Japanese wizards, designed to reveal an experience to only one individual--Hermione thought it ridiculous for Snape to ever feel the need to reveal his teenage angst to her. And then there were Horcruxes--she shuddered at the thought.

Could they be Horcruxes?

Snape would never make a Horcrux--would he?

The first piece certainly was not. She hadn't bothered to have anyone check the second piece for dark magic, but was confident that it was no different from the first; it felt the same: plain, devoid of the dark vortex-like thumping heartbeat Voldemort's Horcruxes had possessed. But maybe Snape's soul would be different, the back of her mind nagged. There was only one way to find out, and she was not about to put the rings back on.

Hermione racked her mind for information regarding Horcruxes and remembered that their creation required ripping one's soul. Remembering the lanky rejected boy from her dream, Hermione felt determined that such a sad and emotional person could not ever grow to commit such horrible, blood-curdling magic and still remain sane. If only she could recall what her second dream had been; one case was simply not enough to go on. Unable to analyze things any further, Hermione put the matter aside.

Today was the last day of her week-long leave, and she stood before her wardrobe picking out robes for the next day. To her annoyance, all of her robes were either missing buttons around the stomach and refused to be repaired (she suspected they'd burst off) or were far too small. Her belly seemed to have swelled exponentially in her days at home. It simply wouldn't do. No one in the office was going to take her seriously if she went to work looking a mess.

Grabbing her purse, she headed to Madam Malkin's to purchase some larger summer robes.

Diagon Alley was fairly quiet during the weekday morning with only a few patrons ambling down its tortuous length. Hermione expected no wait in seeing the seamstress, but was shocked to see the store packed with witches. "Just my luck," she sighed along with a little curse.

When she entered, a slim, pretty girl seated her by the left wall next to a tall, blonde witch who was looking the other way. "Madam Malkin will be just a moment," the girl said sweetly.

"Just a moment, my arse," Hermione muttered under her breath.

The comment caused the tall witch beside her to turn and look at her with a frown. Hermione very nearly jumped from recognition. It was Narcissa Malfoy, looking every bit imposing and judgmental as her reputation led on. The older woman regarded Hermione with her heavy-lidded eyes, and the sight seemed to deepen the lines in her aristocratic face. She looked down with a deliberate air that told she knew Hermione's identity as well.

The two witches sat next to each other in silence, both stiff with discomfort.

Hermione fidgeted with her collar every few seconds as if it were too hot in the room. Unlike her, Narcissa was absolutely still, only a twitch of her lips betrayed her disgust at having to sit next to such a dismal person. Hermione thought that the only reason she was not dramatically stalking out of the shop was that she'd already invested too much time waiting.

Venturing a darting glance to her right, Hermione peered at the older witch. A most peculiar pendant hung from her neck. Between the many intricate pleats of Narcissa's navy robes, only half of a silver circle was visible, but there was no mistaking the strange blue stone set onto curving corners.

It was another piece of the ring.

"Mrs. Malfoy, is it?" Hermione suddenly said, entranced by the pendant.

The stern woman jerked her head downward and swept her eyes to Hermione slowly without speaking.

"That silver ring you are wearing is most peculiar."

Narcissa looked down her nose at the brown, mousy witch and spoke with a high, pinched voice. "I am not wearing any silver rings, Ms ...Weasley."

"Around your neck, Mrs. Malfoy. Wherever did you procure it?" It took all of Hermione's self control to not grab the silver band and yank it from her slender neck.

The blonde witch clasped the silver pendant around her neck. Next to her slender fingers, it was clearly much too large to be worn. "A gift, from a friend. He did not need it anymore," she said brusquely, not wanting to continue the conversation.

"A friend?" Hermione echoed. She stared at the ring with undisguised greed; she must have the piece.

"Yes--"

"Recently?"

"No, a fair number of years ago," Narcissa drawled, both hands tightening their hold on her clutch.

"It must have been a special occasion."

"He was--" She stopped, catching herself. "I merely liked it and asked for it."

"Most fascinating," the younger witch muttered as a scheme brewed in her head.

Narcissa looked at her with piercing blue eyes. "And why should it be fascinating?"

Hermione pretended to be knocked off guard by the biting tone. She knotted her fingers in purposeful nervousness. "It's just that," the shorter witch stammered, "that is to say..."

"Yes?"

"I've seen that ring before," Hermione whispered seriously, "and I'm afraid it's a Muggle ring. My Muggle mother had one just like it."

Narcissa's face colored with an expression of horror, possibly at both the outspoken admission of Hermione and the ring's heritage. The tall witch jerked the chain from her neck in one fluid motion as if it were poison. Hermione felt her pulse quicken as she anticipated Narcissa to cast it to the floor. To her dismay, Narcissa paused while holding the chain at arms length, seemingly conflicted. She glared at Hermione, angry that her memory of a dead friend had been tarnished.

Finally, she threw the ring to ground and stormed out of the store, looking terribly insulted. Hermione quickly bent down and searched for the bit of silver. It had fallen beneath the chairs and her rotund stomach was in the way of her reaching it. Refusing to be discouraged, she got on her knees and fished the chain out from the corner.

It was hers! Hermione couldn't help but smirk devilishly. When the pregnant witch lifted her head up, the slim girl who had seated her was standing beside the chair. She was staring at Hermione strangely.

"Where is Madam Malfoy?"

"I do believe that snob thought herself too important to wait any longer," Hermione said spitefully.

The girl was quite shocked and stuttered for a minute before finally saying, "Please follow me then, she'll see you now." Hermione dumbly followed her back to see Madam Malkin. She barely registered the fitting session with her mind constantly on the ring she had just acquired.

Upon leaving the shop with her new clothes, Hermione immediately Apparated home. She headed up the stairs, oblivious to the stack of mail and a hooting owl at the kitchen window. When she reached her vanity, she threw her new clothes unceremoniously on the floor and opened the jewelry chest. Heart racing, she reached into the top box and took out the twin silver rings.

Fishing the third from her robe pocket, she wedged it between the first two. Hermione smiled deliriously; it was a perfect fit. Only a thin sliver of empty space sat between the ribbons, to be filled by the fourth and last piece.

She carefully extricated the newest piece from the other two and moved to place it on her finger. Feeling extremely cautious due to the violent incident the last one caused, she stopped. She knew it was an unwise decision, but it felt so right, so satisfying. Against her better judgement, Hermione pushed it on without another thought.

When Ron came home that afternoon, he found her sobbing uncontrollably over her vanity. She had her face buried in her palms and was rocking in despair. When Ron pulled her hands down, her face was blotchy and her breaths shallow. In a panic, he thought that something was wrong with the baby, but Hermione shook her head upon questioning. No amount of reassuring words could make her stop crying. Over and over, she muttered incoherently to herself in between choking sobs.

There was no dream this time; she did not have to sleep to see this vision. It played in her mind again and again as she wept.

"Let me see her!" a young wizard cries as a broad-shouldered Auror holds him back.

His face is desperate and pleading.

An old wizard with a long and flowing beard appears behind the pair and nods to the Auror.

"Let him go, Kingsley."

The Auror hesitates for a moment before lowering his arms. The dark-haired wizard throws him to one side and runs into the little house. He stumbles against various investigators crowded in the small hallway around a body but manages to push his way to the stairs. On the second floor, against the last door, he draws in a sharp breath and freezes. His entire body trembles as he struggles to stay upright.

A willowy woman in blue uniform steps aside as he inches forward. When he reaches the woman lying on the floor, his legs collapse, and he falls to his hands and knees.

Hot tears rush down his cheeks as he reaches for her hands; they are cold as the October air. Drawing her into his arms, he embraces her still form. Ignoring the uniformed witch, who tries without much success to pry him off the body, he buries his anguished face to avoid the blank green eyes of his beloved.

"I'm sorry... I'm sorry..." he murmurs over and over into her dark red hair.

La Quatrieme

Chapter 4 of 5

At long last, answers are seen, but they are only guesses at best.

LA QUATRIEME

The last episode had both Ron and Hermione severely worried. Ron was so afraid for her and the baby that he had his mother come to stay with them. He assured his wife that it was so they could have help around the house, but Hermione knew that Molly Weasley was there to do nothing aside from keeping a close eye on her at all times.

Truthfully, she was rather glad to have a reason to stay away from the rings. She had tucked the puzzle pieces away into their box and refused to look at them. All her research and tests showed that they did not exude dark magic, but they did not need to for Hermione to be frightened.

The feeling of Snape's anguish was fresh in her heart, and the blank face of a dead Lily Potter was constantly on her mind. She hoped and prayed that she would never have to suffer that sort of trauma with Ron. Life must have been a terrible ordeal for Snape, she reasoned. It must have been extraordinarily difficult to float between the lines, following both the man who murdered his one love and the boy who stared at him hatefully with her eyes.

Hermione felt a new appreciation for her professor despite her fears and all the grief he'd given her. He used to ridicule her to no end in the library when she was running back and forth, searching texts. "Ever curious, Miss Granger," he would say. "Do you have some incurable fascination with walking in circles fervently?" Then there was that time he had glowered at her from across the Great Hall, causing her to accidentally drop her spoon into her soup. It seemed rather comical now.

Deeply unsettled by this sudden connection to Severus Snape, Hermione tried to push him out of her mind to no avail; everything she saw had a nasty effect of reminding her of him. Slowly, she found herself in a strange isolation. There was only one person she could tell, someone who deserved to know...Harry. But what would she say? No, she couldn't.

Molly's presence helped ease her trouble a great deal, but some days, she longed for more. As the month wore on, Hermione slowly found herself itching to see the sinister ring pieces once more. Telling herself that she had better things to do, like setting up the nursery and rounding pointed corners in the house, she pushed the desire back. Yet every time she walked past the vanity, her eyes would linger on the jewelry chest just a little longer than the previous time.

Before long, she was consumed with trying to find the last piece again.

Just one last piece, then it would be over.

She ran through the origins of the rings once more. Snape was holding the first. The second was sold to the junk shop by an old woman. And Narcissa Malfoy had said, in not so many words, that Snape had given the third to her. Hermione was sure that the old woman who sold the second had been his mother. He had given each piece away separately, and he had not finished when he died.

Instinctively, she knew where she could look for the final recipient. It was so numbingly clear that she mentally kicked herself for not thinking of it sooner. She would go find his will.

The clerk at the records office was happy to help her when she flashed him a winning smile and said her name slowly. "Hermione Granger, you know, friend of Harry Potter." He gave a little yelp and immediately drew up a yellowing stack of parchment from the archives.

Hermione flipped through the papers excitedly. House, Gringotts, other assets, she rushed past them to the small individual objects section. Halfway through the page, she saw it. It was beautifully simple and clear. In his small spidery writing were the words: "To Minerva McGonagall, I leave one silver ring. May she remember always that it was I who won our bet." A small picture of the crooked loop was beside the text. She had found it!

A second image of the same ring was below the first accompanied by the text: "To Harry Potter, I leave a second silver ring. May he have the wisdom to feel its truth." A small red stamp bearing "unrecovered" was beside this one.

Hermione frowned. Another piece?

Then it suddenly made perfect sense to her. She had picked up the piece that was meant for Harry, and the ministry was never able to find it. Filing this bit away, she knew where her next stop was. After writing an overly eager correspondence to Hogwarts, she left work early.

That evening, after Molly had gone to bed, she enlisted Ron's reluctant help to connect the Floo to Hogwarts.

"Ron," she said unkindly, "you need to hold that charm for more than a second."

"Can't we do this tomorrow?" her husband moaned.

"Of course not!" she insisted.

Ron gave a snort and dropped his charm again. "What's so important about seeing McGonagall anyway?"

"You wouldn't understand," Hermione shot back. There was nothing keeping her from this last piece.

The wizard recast the charm and held it this time. "You know, you're past seven months now. I think Floo travel might be dangerous. Mum once told me about a witch who was seven months and went through the Floo." He leaned forward to add to the seriousness of his tone. "The baby came out *grey*."

"Don't be ridiculous, it's perfectly safe," she shot back tartly. "Plus, I will not be kept in this house and fed all day. I'm not a swine for you to raise."

Ron turned bright red.

Hermione was in a much better mood the next morning when she visited Hogwarts. Molly had insisted on joining her, but Hermione purposely set a cake in the oven on fire so her mother-in-law would stay behind. She burst from the headmistress's fireplace with grace atypical of a woman her size.

"Professor McGonagall! It is delightful to see you!"

The elderly witch smiled kindly and beckoned her with arms prepared for a light embrace. "Miss Grang...Mrs. Weasley is it now. Do come over here where I can get a good look at you." She admired Hermione at arm's length with an expression that made Hermione fear the old witch was going to pinch her cheeks.

"You look radiant, dear. Do come and sit, you must be tired of being on your feet. Are you expecting your first?" McGonagall invited her to the seat opposite her desk. She

looked very much the same as she always had.

"Oh yes, we're going to name her Rose," Hermione replied proudly.

"What a pleasant name...Rose."

The two witches exchanged pleasantries and small talk over tea until they were both well acquainted. During their entire conversation, she could not help glancing down with hungry eyes at the silvery ring on McGonagall's middle finger periodically. The last! The fourth and final!

"Professor, about the artifact that I mentioned..."

"Oh yes, how can I be of assistance?" McGonagall nodded eagerly.

"Well, the artifact...it's your ring, headmistress. Can I...see it?"

McGonagall seemed taken aback at the request. "My ring? I do not see how...it is quite plain."

Hermione watched with building anticipation as the old witch took off the crooked ribbon and held it out to her. Snatching it up shamelessly, Hermione slipped it onto her own finger. Unlike the others, however, the tiny stone did not shine. It fit just as the others did, perfectly aligned to her hand. Confused, she twisted it around. There were no outbursts, no emotions, no unusual sensations at all.

This last ring was devoid of magic.

"Professor Snape gave this to you, did he not?" Hermione asked quickly while setting the ring down on the desk in disappointment.

McGonagall looked alarmed. "Yes, how did you...what is the meaning of this, Mrs. Weasley?"

Swallowing, the younger witch shook her head and said in a strained voice. "It doesn't make any sense. The piece fits."

"The piece?"

Hermione took out her three pieces and placed them onto the desk next to McGonagall's. Her fingers shook slightly as she lined them in a row. "Professor Snape gave away the four pieces of his puzzle ring, and this is one of them," she explained. Picking up the thin wiry pieces, she hooked them onto one another. It took some clever twisting before the rings fit together harmoniously. With a snap, the four pieces clicked into place and formed a perfectly circular knotted ring.

The younger witch held her breath and shrunk her hands below the desk. She was not sure what she'd been expecting. Nothing happened.

McGonagall gasped and pressed her face toward the table top. She picked up the beautiful silver knot and examined it closely. Momentarily, she glanced behind her to a portrait on the wall, searching for something, but looked back at Hermione when she saw that the gold frame was vacant.

"How did you come to possess these?"

For a single moment, she considered lying and manipulating the last piece from McGonagall, but she felt no compulsion toward this piece now that she'd seen it. Biting her lips, Hermione couldn't help it as her pitiful tale rushed out, all the dreams and episodes. McGonagall seemed to be slightly disturbed by her story; she sat back in her seat with an indescribable expression. The headmistress held the ring delicately when Hermione finished and extended her hand forward. The four stones seemed to recognize one another, gleaming with the same silvery threads.

"He was always so stoic, Professor Snape was," McGonagall said as she traced the knot's path, "especially at funerals, never shed a tear or broke composure. I wonder if he..."

Hermione's mind was racing. Her eyes darted from the ring to the black runic bowl behind McGonagall's desk. It was so simple!

"Memories," she blurted out, "they've got memories!"

The headmistress looked at Hermione in surprise.

"That's why he was always so stoic! Because he never remembered what he was supposed to feel! They're in the rings! He threw his own memories away and placed them into these!" Hermione spoke excitedly.

"Oh my, Severus..." McGonagall breathed.

Hermione gripped the edge of the desk and said eagerly, "Professor, could I...could I view them in your Pensieve?"

Considering the request, McGonagall looked as though she had something to say. However, to the contrary, she wordlessly brought the black bowl forward onto her desk and pointed her wand at the tiny gemstones. Long silvery threads began to slip out of them.

"Be careful, Mrs. Weasley. If what happened to you is indeed true, these may be quite unpleasant."

The young witch nodded. Taking a deep breath, Hermione bent down and placed her face into the ghostly fluid.

When her feet found solid ground, she was standing in a Hogwarts hallway behind a red-headed girl and a very young Severus Snape. It was her dream exactly! The second memory was a new experience, her rage-inducing dream which she could never recall. She cringed when the mug crashed against the wall. And the third, she felt a pang of sympathy for him as he knelt muttering into the long red hair of Lily Potter. Hermione walked through the scenes with the familiarity of reading a book a second time.

When she reached the fourth, she found herself in a field of daisies, washed out and yellow from summer sun. She thought she could hear voices but could only see a fog of flowers all around. This last memory was empty compared to the others, only a shadowy echo. Hermione felt no overwhelming emotions here, only a vague happiness.

The Pensieve abruptly pushed Hermione out and she found herself sitting in McGonagall's office once more. The headmistress lent Hermione a steady hand and gave a curious look.

"They are exactly like my dreams!" she remarked, "but the last one, from your ring, Professor. It's gone, like someone has taken it."

"Gone?" McGonagall considered this carefully before lifting the memories into a vial she conjured.

Hermione furrowed her brow. "Aren't you going to look as well?"

The old witch seemed to waver for a second. "It would seem that these are not for me to see," she replied simply. "I think that it would be most appropriate if you took this. That last one...it's best to leave it be. If I know Severus, we shall never see." McGonagall looked at the ring wistfully and traced its angles one last time then pressed it into Hermione's clammy palm.

Hermione looked at the silver circle, completed at last. It felt as though she had exorcised a demon; the metal felt heavy and foreign to hold.

For a second, she thought about severing the ring and returning each piece to their rightful owners but abandoned the idea quickly. The ring had such a strong look of finality that Hermione could scarcely remember that it was once four distinct pieces. It was clearly meant for someone as one single entity, not to be scattered about.

Harry could have the memories, but she would keep the ring. The four gem stones were now all clear and empty. They reminded her that her current life was a gift...a gift born from the sacrifices and self-destruction of her professor, and that memories were precious, too precious to lock away. She felt strong when she put the whole ring on, as if she had just gained enough determination to conquer all.

"But Professor McGonagall, I don't understand...how can mere memories be so powerful?"

McGonagall flicked her eyes to the vacant portrait again before saying, "Sometimes, Miss Granger, I'm afraid memories are far more real and carry more of us than we'd like to admit."

Hermione seemed unsatisfied.

"But what happened, I still don't ..."

"I suspect these memories were forced out and retained some type of the magic he used to remove them."

"But after all these years, why me? Why now?"

McGonagall dabbed at the corner of her eyes. She gave a kind smile that showed the wrinkles of her face. "You reminded me sometimes of him. Perhaps they felt they had finally found home again."

The younger witch thought this over carefully. The idea would occupy her long after she left. "One more thing, Professor. What was the bet that you lost to Professor Snape?"

McGonagall gave a wry smile and replied, "He bet me that he would become headmaster."

Hermione said her thanks and left after a long goodbye. Stepping through the fire, she turned the ring over and over in her hand and wondered what had happened in the daisy field.

She would never find out.

Clarke

Chapter 5 of 5

The truth.

CLARKE

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Against a pristine morning—deep, sinking smoke washed out against pale ascending sky—an old battered clock struck seven. The air was crisp and dry as it often is at the end of autumn when branches of great enduring oaks turned bronze, and twisting yew trees began to swell with red lantern arils. The clock rang its reminder once again, hollow and dispassionate.

The room housing the clock was a scattered mess, looking very much as thorough burglars had gone through and spilled its contents everywhere. Books laid about in tatters across the floor, accompanying similarly broken glassware and overturned furniture. There had never been much in the spartan room to begin with, but what little was there had all been smashed by the owner in a fit of grief-driven rage. A young wizard in torn black robes sat against the far corner in the midst of rubble. He was messy and unshaven with tracks of dried tears crusted under blue-grey sunken eye sockets.

He had not slept in days, not since—

Defeated and heartbroken, he sat staring at dawn, unable to move. Morning light streamed through the window onto his slumped form. The dawn held nothing for him; it was not even real, only an enchanted portrait made to hide the darkness of the dungeons. Another lie piled upon yet more lies.

The clock chimed one final time, and the wizard glanced at it through his long greasy black hair. It would not do to be late to her funeral, to dishonor her memory. But his misery was too much, her presence still too real to him. He could feel her cold stiff body and blank accusing eyes as he pleaded—prayed for her to not leave him to face the world alone.

With a struggling hand, he reached into his pocket and dug out a ring. He could barely summon the strength to keep it upright between long fingers. It was a simple puzzle of silver knots with four tiny brilliantly clear gem stones, one on each metallic band. He had meant it as a gift for her many years ago, purchased with painstakingly saved petty allowance, but she had never permitted him that one gesture.

And now it was too late.

Determined to pull himself together and attend her burial, the young man twisted the ring between his fingers and carefully pulled it apart into four separate pieces. His hands couldn't help but tremble slightly. Touching his wand to his temple, he pulled out a single strand of silvery memory and set it into the first ring piece's gem stone. The stone glowed protesting blue in response. Already, he felt lighter.

Repeating this process for each of the pieces, he locked away his anguish and resentment so she could be unsullied to him, remaining eternally beautiful in every way. He would get rid of them in due time, once he found deserving owners. Unbeknownst to him, his tumult of emotion was deposited along with each memory. With only faint imprints of the thoughts, he felt composed, stoic. However, when he saw the last strand of wispy recollection slip into the final piece, his brow immediately furrowed in felt deep regret. Before the tail end of the memory became fully immersed in clear crystal lattice, the wizard hastily tugged it back and returned it to his temple.

This last one was simply too precious. He would permit himself this one indulgence.

His eyes felt hot as he let it return.

A great field is covered in summer blooms of knee-height daisies, as far as the eye can see. The sound of gentle wind and nectar-collecting insects is interrupted by the mellifluous laughter of a young girl. She is running through the field, closely followed by a black-haired boy. He grabs her shoulder, and they both plummet down into the daisies.

Beneath the scorching sun, they lay in the field, breathless and exhausted. There are grass stains on her white dress, but neither of them notice or care. The boy's arm becomes pinned under the girl's slim weight as she rolls toward him. He can sense the feeling in his hand gradually turning to pins and needles yet makes no attempts to move. Turning away from harsh midday light, he studies her profile, her long hair, her smile. There is a covetous hint in his gaze, as if the sight of her were water and he dying of thirst.

He memorizes every detail, from the way the sun flows over her pale skin to the number of freckles on her cheek. Taken with the way summer dances in her brilliant green eyes, he smiles. She is infinitely beautiful to him, not ephemeral but eternal. A single word from her perfect lips and he would die again and again for her.

The girl finally rolls away to lay of her stomach, much to his disappointment.

"Are you looking forward to fourth year, Severus?" she asks casually.

He nods and fidgets with crushed flower stalks under his arm, eyes never leaving her delicate features.

"I think it'll be the best one yet."

The girl shakes leaves and grit from her red hair as she beams at him.

He sits up and pulls his too-short trousers toward his feet. With hardly a wave, he is suddenly holding an arm full of daisies, a bunch as thick as a tree trunk. The boy hands the bundle over to his friend. It is more an armful of stalks and stunted leaves than flowers, but she looks delighted anyway. Holding the heavy bouquet, she squeezes the stalks with her pale slim arms, and the white flower petals all begin to dance, blinking and spinning. They both laugh in the manner with which young people laugh at secret inside jokes. She places a small kiss on his cheek.

The dark-haired boy lets out a content sigh as he shifts and lies back down. Still holding her armful of flowers, the girl lies down opposite him so her feet are by his head.

"Lily, do you think we will be friends forever?"

Her voice rings across the swaying flowers, floating on wind.

"Always, I promise."

Endnotes: A million thanks to my beta, Kim (ks51689), the people on this fabulous site, and to you, beloveds, for reading to the end.