

Swallows and Stars

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Hermione and Severus find themselves lost and struggling after the war, but in very different ways. Can the memories of a dead man bring Hermione clarity? Can the voice of a girl lead Severus to a decision? Or together can they hope for something more?

An Unwanted Choice

Chapter 1 of 2

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A/N: This story is written in full, so no worries about it being dropped. I will be uploading new chapters multiple times per week, so please check back often. This is rated MA for later chapters; consider yourself warned. It follows canon until the end of DH (epilogue ignored). Normal disclaimers apply. Now, without further ado, here we go. I hope you enjoy!

Swallows and Stars

Chapter 1: An Unwanted Choice

Severus Snape hadn't expected to end up here.

He remembered the searing pain as Nagini's venom pulsed through his veins like Fiendfyre, his body sagging against the walls of the Shrieking Shack, feeling the end coming over him. The last thing he saw was the eyes of his love, Lily's eyes, in the face of her boy. That was when the darkness took him.

When he opened his eyes again, he was in blinding whiteness. As his pupils adjusted, he realized he was standing in a classroom not unlike his own at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry...except it was white, bright white, with three towering windows on one side.

Severus appeared in the middle of the room, naked. As he looked down over his thin body, he was shocked to realize that his scars were missing. He looked hopefully at his left forearm: the dark mark that had haunted him for so long was gone.

Not wishing to wander about without any clothes, he found a set of black robes on the teacher's desk and put them on. Feeling more comfortable, he allowed himself to study the room. Behind the desk, recessed into a corner, was a dark mahogany door; another door stood at the other end of the room at the top of a set of spiralled white marble stairs. While the classroom appeared set up for potions, with cauldrons on each of the desks, there seemed to be no tools, no books. There were shelves behind the desk, but no bottles of ingredients. Other than the furniture and the cauldrons, the room was bare.

He was peering out the intricately patterned windows, which overlooked a lawn some three stories below, when he heard her voice behind him.

"Hello, Sev."

It had been over twenty years since he had heard that sweet voice. Turning around, he saw Lily standing by the desks, her green eyes smiling at him, looking young, carefree and happy. She wore a simple white dress, with short sleeves and a high neck. She was as beautiful as he remembered.

Lily. Oh, Lily.

He stood in shock, taking her in greedily as she smiled and walked over to his side. Severus swallowed, his saliva congealing in his throat and making him unable to form words. Lily seemed immune to Severus's open-eyed stare; the fact that his heart was simultaneously swelling and breaking in his chest at the sight of her. She peered out the window, her long marigold-coloured locks falling forward from her shoulder, and Severus noticed her dress had tiny flowers embroidered into the fabric.

Was this a dream? Was she here to lead him on?

"Lovely view," she said as if they saw each other every day, and she was commenting on the weather.

"Lily?" Severus finally choked out. He yearned to reach for her, to brush her pale arm that was glowing in the bright light of the room, but he stilled his hand. She was not his to touch. She was never his.

Severus scowled, his eyes fixated on the curving iron bars that made the image of a snake between the clear panes of glass. "Is this...?"

"The afterlife?" she said, finishing his question. "No, I'm afraid not. You've come to Limbo." She pointed out the window, and Severus followed the direction of her finger, noticing that the lawn receded into a fog after only a few hundred yards.

Limbo? But, surely I should have passed over... Does that mean... Am I not dead? How can that be?

"Regrets, Severus," said Lily, as if answering his final question. She turned to face him with a soft smile. "I think, after all you did, you deserve a choice."

But that makes no sense.

"I deserve a choice? After all I did?" he bit out, his voice harsh and incredulous as it echoed in the mostly vacant room. Memories of his life, decades of spying, of watching people die flitted through his mind like a giant cloud of ravens, and he quickly pushed them away before he could become overwhelmed by it all. He was left with only the memory of Lily's death, which fluttered down a let out a hoarse call that rattled his heart as much as his head.

"Lily, it's all my fault," he choked as his fingers seized window sill, his knuckles white.

"No, Sev," said Lily calmly but firmly.

Severus rocked forward, barely hearing her refusal, his hair hiding his face in shadow. "I did so many terrible things, said so many terrible things..."

"And I was a terrible friend," said Lily.

"No, Lily," said Severus quickly, and raised his head to look at her, pain evident in the creased lines of his face. "No, never think that. You were my best friend. Always my best friend."

"You know that's not true," said Lily with a sad look in her eyes. "You were a wonderful friend, but I wasn't. Friends...best friends...don't give up on each other over a silly word said in a terrifying situation; they don't care what house they are in, or who their other friends are. But before I realized that it was too late. I thought you were gone. I'm sorry I never sought you out. I should have known you could never be truly one of them."

"But I was, Lily," said Severus, a wave of regret washing over him as he remembered all of things he had done as a Death Eater. All the deaths and tortures he had witnessed and done nothing about. In the end he felt his soul was tarnished with a darkness he could never scrub clean, no matter how many years he was a double-agent for Dumbledore. He may have been acting for the light, but his actions were dark all the same.

"Sev, you would not be here if your soul was broken or dark," said Lily, as if reading his mind again. "Please give yourself a chance. You deserve a better life."

"I deserve nothing! Death should have taken me!" His voice rose sharply in a yell as anger surged within him like a terrifying wave, but Lily didn't flinch.

"That's up to you," she said, still smiling peacefully.

Snapes's mind roared, unwilling to believe her words. *No. No, it's not possible.*

But then, here was the woman he loved, had loved since he was a boy, telling him it was possible, though it made no sense to him at all.

He looked at his hazy reflection in the window and saw a grim reaper: raven hair, ebony robes and cold dark eyes in a skeletal face. Though he had tried desperately to stop it, his life had only ever served one purpose: to send those he meant to protect to their graves.

Lily... Albus... Harry...

Another storm of regret smashed into him, swirling like a typhoon in his chest. He turned his head to the side so he wouldn't have to see Lily's smiling green eyes. If she only knew...

"I deserve nothing," he whispered.

"Listen to me, Sev," said Lily firmly, tilting his face towards her with her fingers. "You paid for your mistakes. Please give yourself a chance. You can have a real life. You can have something better." Then she stepped forward, reached up on her tiptoes, and kissed him on the cheek.

"You were forgiven long ago, my friend," she said, smiling, and then melted into a white mist.

"You have a choice," her voice echoed in the room, but she did not return.

Severus stood for some time as the feeling of her lips faded from his cheek.

His mind eventually rattled into a single thought: *I have a choice to live or to die.*

It still seemed impossible, but there it was.

He looked at the two doors at opposite ends of the classroom. The one set back in the corner must lead to the afterlife; it was darker, more mysterious, somehow. He looked closer, and noticed the frame was etched with runes. The one up the stairs, then, must lead back to the living world.

But to what, to whom?

He didn't see that he had anything in his life worth returning to. Was he meant to go back and continue to help Lily's boy? Was that why she met him here?

Even assuming the boy and his friends were successful in defeating Voldemort without his further help, what hope did he have? After all that had happened, he would end

up in Azkaban, tormented and alone.

He looked at the dark door again. *I should pass on.* Perhaps there would be something better for him, less painful, beyond the veil. Perhaps there he could finally make it up to Lily for all the terrible things he had done.

But she had said to give himself a chance, that he was forgiven. He wasn't sure he believed it.

He looked up at the door back to life, and banged his fist on the window ledge. How was he to choose? Why had she left him again?

It seemed, for perhaps the first time ever, he had no idea what to do.

Sometime later...he had no idea how long, though he had not moved from the place where Lily had left him by the windows...he noticed movement outside. A short procession was making its way across the lawn towards an imposing black marble tombstone that appeared on the green. He recognized most of the line: colleagues, Harry Potter and his friends, a few other students and members of the Order.

He wondered who the funeral was meant for as Hagrid approached the tomb with a limp body in his arms. Long black hair spilled over the half-giant's brown coat, and as Hagrid set the corpse gently on top of the stone, Severus's breath caught in his throat.

It was *his* funeral.

His body was wrapped in black funeral robes, his arms folded neatly over his chest with his ebony wand. His face no longer wore the scowl ever-present during his life; if at all possible, he looked peaceful.

As the small group stood in front of the tomb, Harry took up a place at the front.

"Severus Snape was a mysterious man, sometimes cold. But in his heart was love," said the boy, sounding tired but confident. "In the end, Severus Snape showed courage and loyalty that we can only hope to have. For this, for saving me, I thank him. To Severus Snape, the bravest man I ever met," he finished and raised his wand. The rest of the group raised their wands in unity, and his corpse faded from sight.

Snape grimaced as he noticed several of those in the crowd were crying. He wondered if the scene below him was real, or if it was all in his mind. He wasn't entirely sure how things worked in this place. *Surely, this must be some farce of my mind. No one could be sad at my passing.*

Slowly the group filed away. A few stayed behind at the tomb and said a few words of thanks. Even Neville Longbottom, whom he had always seemed to terrify, said a quiet thank you.

The Granger girl stayed the longest. In her face was a mixture of sadness and confusion.

"Professor Snape," she said quietly when she approached the grave. "I know you can't hear this, but I wanted to say thank you. As a teacher, you taught me a lot. But I know you were looking out for us all too. I always had a feeling you were on our side." She put her hand on the tombstone and bowed her head, her bushy hair blocking her face. "You saved us in the end. I hope you are happy and at peace now. Goodbye, Professor Snape. Thank you."

Snape grimaced at the gross outpouring of sentiment. People were thanking him? Saying good things about him? He didn't see how it could be true, didn't understand what it could possibly mean in this place.

What was the point of the vision? What was his brain trying to tell him? Was he being mocked by his own subconscious?

In the end he couldn't figure it out, and still couldn't decide between the doors.

Perhaps he would simply stay in this place forever.

No Turning Back

Chapter 2 of 2

Hermione and Severus find themselves lost and struggling after the war, but in very different ways. Can the memories of a dead man bring Hermione clarity? Can the voice of a girl lead Severus to a decision? Or together can they hope for something more?

Hermione stood in front of a two-story stucco home, staring up the cement front path. The first thought that struck her was that it looked nothing like her family's home in London. It was bland, for one: a grey boxy house with narrow windows and a large garage on the left. The garden was well groomed and bordered by a concrete and iron fence, but it did not look well used or well loved. There was no tangle of plants against the fence, no weeds sticking out of the path, no rose bush that she and her mother had planted when she was seven. The home looked sterile; there were no children here, no steps to jump off the front porch into the puddles in the rain, no pink paper stars hanging in a large front bay window.

She knew that her parents' home in Australia would look different, but she was not prepared for how much. As she stood staring at the black front door, Hermione suddenly wondered if her parents were happier living this way without her.

No, she thought, shaking her head to rid herself of her negative thoughts. *They love you. They will be glad to have you back in their life, no matter what their house looks like.*

Gripping her wand, she took a careful step forward, followed by several more, and before long, was standing in front of the black front door, pressing the bell. She heard it ring inside, a bright, cheery tone, and then the muffled call of her mother's voice; she almost cried at the sound, it had been so long since she'd heard it, but pushed her feelings down. There would be time to cry later when her parents were in her arms, having become her parents once again.

A moment later, the door was open, and she was staring into her mother's sweet brown-sugar eyes, which matched her own.

"Hello, can I help you?" she asked lightly, and Hermione felt her heart break just a little as she realized there was no recognition on the woman's face at all.

Fighting back tears, Hermione gave herself a determined mental push and squeaked, "Hello, Mum," wishing nothing more than to hug the woman in front of her.

"I'm sorry, but I think you have the wrong person," said her mother, looking confused.

"No, I'm sorry, but I've come to fix it," said Hermione, raising her wand and casting the spell she knew would reverse her memory charms.

"What are you doing?" said her mother, her face unchanged, though looking slightly more worried. "Who are you?"

Hermione blinked, startled, wondering why her spell hadn't worked. It should have. She'd done the research. But then why was her mother staring at her as if she was considering calling the police?

Hermione cast the spell again, waving her wand more forcefully, willing her magic to work, and yet her mother stood before her, beginning to look truly frightened now.

"I think you need to leave," she said warily. Hermione could not move, her feet cemented in place on her parents' doorstep.

"I don't understand," she said, unable to accept what was happening in front of her. "Mum, it's me! It's Hermione, your daughter!" She reached out to try and hug her mother, but the woman jumped backwards, clearly afraid.

"I don't know what you're talking about," said her mother, her voice shaking. "I don't have any children. Please leave." She made to shut the door, but Hermione bolted forward, pushing past her into the square front hall. Her mother screamed, and then her father was stomping down the stairs that emptied into the foyer, asking what was going on.

"Dad!" said Hermione, casting the spell again as he turned towards her. "It's me, Hermione!"

"Well, Hermione, you need to leave this house right now. I don't know who you are, but you are scaring my wife and me," said the sandy-haired man who had tucked her into bed every night as a child, read her the same stories over and over at her behest. Except instead of his normal loving gaze, his chocolate eyes were filled with a mixture of fear and anger as he spat the words at her.

"Get out, or I'll call the police!" he shouted. Something triggered in Hermione's mind at his words, and she bolted out the door, not looking back.

Her feet pounded blindly against the pavement until her leg muscles and her lungs screamed at her to stop. She slowed to a walk, still gripping her wand in her hand, letting the tears fall freely from her eyes.

She kept moving, her feet tapping against the ground, not caring what direction she was travelling. She knew if she stopped, she would be overwhelmed by it all, get sucked into the grief like a strong riptide that could carry her out to sea.

Seeing her parents again, bringing them back to a world in which they could exist together without fear, was the only thing that got her through the past year. The torture, the searching, the frustration, the fear and the hurt he could have handled it all except for this moment.

She would grieve, eventually, but not here. Not in this place that was so foreign to her that she wondered how she could have thought to send her parents here in the first place.

Because you love them, her mind reminded her. Enough to protect them. Enough to let them not love you back.

It nearly sent her over the edge, but she forced her feet to keep moving, choked back the scream that was building in her chest with every step.

As she reached the end of a dark street and turned into an alley, she knew she had to get back to England quickly. She needed to be back somewhere she could cry, somewhere she could piece together her now infinitely more broken life. Maybe there she could find a way to restore her parents' memories, but even as she thought it, she knew it was hopeless. There was no other spell; she'd read all the books last year before performing the initial memory charms. She'd simply done too good a job, and for the first time in her life, she wished she was not so talented at magic.

Without pausing her feet at the end of the dark alley, she spun to the left and Apparated, feeling more alone than she ever had in her life.