

A Manner of Rescue

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Chapter 1 of 2

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The world was a terrifying black behind her blindfold, and Hermione had an over-fertile imagination to interpret footsteps, cackles, and that ghastly *scrape scrape scrape*. She struggled mindlessly against the ropes tying her to the table, but they'd been magically reinforced and were impervious even to her emotionally-charged spurts of power.

"You!" she heard Bellatrix screech, and the following scuffles gave rise to the hope that Harry and Ron— or someone, *anyone*—had come to her rescue. The ropes fell away in the ensuing silence, but before she could yank the blindfold off, she was seized from behind.

"Miss Granger."

It was a voice that had been in her teenaged dreams for a brief time before featuring prominently in her nightmares. "Miss Granger," he drawled, sending spiders racing up and down her spine and from every finger that gripped her arms. Hermione threw herself against his hold, but he merely tightened one hand and shoved his wand against her temple with the other. To her shame, she whimpered.

"Tsk, ts, Miss Granger. I'm sure you can do better than that," Snape murmured. His grip shifted lower, pressed her hips snugly against his. She stiffened in shock. "Now," he commanded. "*Scream.*"

He could feel the reverberations of sound, the following rapidity of her breathing. He could feel the softness of her hip and arse, and the ebb of his adrenaline even as hers raced. He regretted, but did not try to control, his own reaction. *Too soon...* and now, perhaps never. But it served his purpose. He counted seconds in his head.

Twenty-five, twenty-six, now! Severus spun the girl 'round, grabbed her clothes, and *yanked*. She screamed again, ending in a sob. Her took hold of her, face twisting painfully at the feel of her skin amidst the ruined fabric.

Hermione was no child; she knew what was happening. Why and how were inexplicable; whether this was better or worse was impossible to determine. She screamed, but some part of her was still trying to adjust to the change in circumstances. Bellatrix and Greyback to possible rescue to Snape. A sadistic lunatic and slaving werewolf ready for torture to a treacherous murderer about to rape her. Neither was supposed to happen!

But it was... odd. There were pauses. Oddly timed pauses when he merely held her and... counted? He wasn't stripping her nude. He wasn't even *really* hurting her.

What...?

God, she's so lovely. Severus had planned, planned so very carefully, hardened his heart against what he had to do. Told himself it didn't matter if she hated him, if she'd never again look him in the eye.

But he was long since out of practice, and her tear-stained, fearful bewilderment sliced him even as he made her scream again.

And now he had to truly begin hurting her. And there was no way to make her understand.

It doesn't matter, he repeated fiercely, weaving the first bruise-spell. *It doesn't matter!*

Just as long as she would be all right.

She hurt. God, she hurt. Everything felt bruised, as though she were a fruit fallen from a tall tree and kicked repeatedly. But Snape had turned his attention to the room and was making various small and inexplicable changes. He switched to Bellatrix's wand, and Hermione flinched to see his face twisted with hate as he cast *Cruciatus*—on what she couldn't see. Breathing heavily with exertion, he then pointed his own wand at Bellatrix's and whispered incomprehensible spells. Finally, he turned back to her, and she flinched.

A hallucination, or did a look of hurt flit across his face?

She was quiet, those following days at Shell Cottage. She mourned—yes, mourned—Dobby's loss. She healed.

She wondered.

She knew that Fleur was puzzled; her physical trauma was far less than the other witch had expected, *looked* far worse than it actually was. *She* was puzzled, trying to fit the pieces of memory together in a way that made sense.

He'd hurt her—but he hadn't. He'd torn her clothes—but left her intact. He'd cast *Cruciatus*—but not on her.

When, much later, she visited him in hospital, she had but one question:

"Why did you do it?"

He was sick, he was hurting, and he hadn't a clue what she was on about. "Do what, you bothersome bint?" he sneered. "Bollock about in a silver mask? Kill untold numbers of people?" He followed with a suggestion that *should* be anatomically impossible, but could be managed with the right spells. Innocent chit that she was, she blanched.

"Wh—why did you... that day... Malfoy Manor...?" She was even less coherent. He growled, which was hell on his throat.

"Haven't the slightest fucking idea what hallucinations you've been having, Granger. Never went, never saw, never 'did.' Bugger off."

She did.

She went back; being Hermione Granger, she couldn't stay away. She looked after him: filling gaps left by overworked medi-wizards, playing bodyguard, simply keeping him company. He sniped; she retorted. Slowly, brick by brick, they built a kind of rapport. He didn't patronise her, and she spoke to him frankly. He was horrified to learn she'd seen his memories. In return, she offered as much of her own war life as he could stomach—without speaking of Malfoy Manor.

She asked her question only once more. He was more civil, but had no other answer to give her beyond total ignorance.

ANs: I began with this many moons ago for the gs100 'rescue me' challenge, but I didn't want to post anything until I had it complete (or near complete). Part two should be forthcoming shortly, once the epilogue drabble is properly done.

If possible, please drop a little token in the box below.

A Sort of Memory

Chapter 2 of 2

Some years after the war, Severus is finally able to answer Hermione's questions as to what really happened at Malfoy Manor—and why.

The years passed; the world moved on. Severus, with twenty years of salary socked away and a nice Headmaster's Bonus, made a life away from Hogwarts with a shopfront that sold potions both magical and mundane, integrating into Wizard and Muggle society with surprising ease, but with the same intolerance of willful stupidity. Hermione had far more mess to clean up, both physically and emotionally, but she, too, found a life she could lead, working at the Ministry and learning, learning, learning. Coincidence, perhaps, that her flat was in the same town as Severus's shop. They met often... and talked.

It was one evening, very quiet and unusually solitary, when he knew. Knew the answer to Hermione's question and knew why he hadn't known before. The knowledge assembled itself slowly over the hours, and long afterwards, he lay awake in his bed, questioning, absorbing, organising. He could not... would not... rush over to Hermione's in the dead of night until he was certain of the veracity and completeness of his new... old? ...understanding. This was not something that could be brushed aside with half a tale.

Besides, the knowledge came with its own emotions, and a disturbing set of revelations.

Hermione watched him anxiously; Severus was not a man to display nerves, and he was visibly twitchy. He opened his mouth, shut it, opened it again. Finally...

"Time travel," he said, "is a tricky beast." Not what she was expecting, so she nodded dumbly.

"It has myriad effects," he continued. "Some of which are less obvious, and decidedly more bizarre."

She frowned. "You called me... on my busiest day, I remind you ...to discuss time travel?"

He gave her a look that would quell a Fifth Year. "*More bizarre*," he repeated, "but informative."

"I can answer your question now, Hermione."

It was surprisingly simple when he explained... and certainly bizarre in the way that he did so. He drew a memory from his mind, and it was the memory of a memory, a memory that a Hermione of another time had shown another Severus in another Pensieve. She watched herself show the other Severus what had happened in Malfoy Manor... in a time when he'd been unaware, and Bellatrix had indulged herself fully. Hermione cringed and backed up against the reassuring solidity of 'her' Severus.

"You trusted me," he murmured. "You showed me. I couldn't bear it."

"I went back."

'I couldn't bear it. I went back.'

The simple statements replayed over and over again in her mind in tandem with a myriad of names and faces. Time travel *was* tricky. There'd been so many instances when Severus could have gone back, could have interfered, could have saved someone at the risk of upsetting the whole apple cart.

'I couldn't bear it.'

He'd changed *her* history. He'd inflicted pain to save her from worse. He'd risked the possibility that his interference could change victory to defeat.

That flash of hurt.

He'd destroyed the bond they'd formed in that other time.

Hermione turned. She played her hand against the shuttered face. It all fitted together now. "One of these days," she informed him, "I'm going to have to get you some white armour."

A derisive subvocal and he batted her hand away.

"You loved me," she persisted. "You wanted me." He turned away, his cheeks mottling, but she didn't pursue the memory further. All these years later, and she could still feel him against her, but the woman now knew what the terrified girl hadn't. "You rescued me."

"I can only wish I could have," he muttered.

"You *did*," she insisted.

The young woman planted herself solidly before him, stared into his face with disconcertingly direct eyes. "Do you want me now?"

He didn't reply.

She stepped forward, leaving mere millimetres between them. "Do you want me?" she repeated.

A nerve twitched. "Irrelevant."

"Is it?"

"You can't want me, except from gratitude."

"My other self must have."

A raised eyebrow.

"I wouldn't have shown that memory to the boys. But I showed it to you."

"You trusted me," he explained, suddenly tired.

"I loved you," she asserted. "I was trying to explain something to *you*."

"What?"

"Why I couldn't love normally."

Severus swallowed convulsively, as though the physical act could help him digest Hermione's words. She didn't *know*; she couldn't. Hermione now was far less damaged than Hermione then.

But the woman was the same. Long before his memories had integrated themselves, he'd begun to love her for herself: stubborn, bossy, brazen, loyal, big-hearted. She'd looked past the damage 'he' had inflicted and given him a second chance.

He reflected on the differences between the two versions of this woman.

All he could do was thank the gods that his gamble had worked. And that she didn't hate him for it.

"I never hated you." Astonished, Severus stared. He must have spoken his thoughts aloud. "I didn't," she insisted. "Over the years, I was angry... terrified... *puzzled* by you,

but I never hated you."

"Hermione..." He back away; she allowed him the distance, deliberately lowered the tension by making tea.

"You *do* have an enormous nose," she said conversationally, "though your teeth are vastly improved. You're appallingly skinny, but I've never liked muscle-men anyway. And it gives me the urge to fatten you up.

"You've a brilliant mind, almost insane loyalty, and the truest of hearts.

"Why wouldn't I love you?"

Her heart was hammering against her ribs, possibly looking for an emergency exit in order to find someplace to hide.

His gobsmacked expression, however, was adorable. Yes, her mind repeated firmly. Adorable.

Hermione had felt the shift in her feelings and eventually been able to name them. Today had simply removed that final bar, resolved the incongruity that had bothered her for these years.

The water was boiling, and Severus still said nothing. She didn't dare look, focusing instead on the tea. Perhaps her heart would simply ooze out of her chest and disappear through the cracks in the floorboards.

He'd dreamed, both in this timeline and the other. Dreams were as far as he allowed himself to go; reality had never been an option, for more reasons than he cared to examine.

What it came down to was that there's no fool like an old fool, and in this, he's old enough to qualify.

She'd flattered him in the only manner he'd likely believe. '*Brilliant mind.*'

Lovely, intelligent, passionate. She had a hell of a lot better options than *him*. Some of them came to mind, and his fists curled. Could any *boy* truly appreciate her?

Not bloody likely.

Hermione proffered the mug, watched his fingers wrap around the warmed ceramic. Remembered the feel of them gripping her wrists. Remembered them clasping her hand. She bit her lip, watched the steam rise.

Severus set his cup aside, then gently removed hers. He tilted her head up and watched her minutely, finding tears hiding behind her eyes. Struggling to formulate a statement and failing, he fell back on the simplest, most difficult words. "I love you." Emboldened by her rising joy, he added, "I will cherish and adore you, Hermione, and yes, even fight with you."

And Hermione kissed him.

Epilogue

"Mother?"

Hermione looked up from her reading and smiled. Sensitive like his father, the young man had developed one of his defenses: a slightly excessive formality. "Yes, Eagan?"

"Is this yours?" He passed her an overlarge Time Turner. "I found it cleaning the attic."

She frowned at the extraordinary weight in her hands. "You know I haven't mine anymore, love." He'd grown up listening to their war stories. "It must be your father's," she realized. "He rescued me with this."

Eagan's eyes widened. "And then what happened?" This was a story they hadn't shared.

"And then your mother rescued *me*."