

One Night in Azkaban

by PlaidPooka

My answer to the Page 394 Challenge.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: Well, it's not OWF, but at least I'm writing again. I read the Page 394 challenge and I couldn't resist! I got this from Doomspark's LJ, though I think he may have gotten it from Notsosaitly.

The Rules can be found on my LJ: <http://www.livejournal.com/users/plaidpooka/>

This has not been past my intrepid beta, so any mistakes are my own fault. I also want to mention that I have a new homepage.

<http://www.geocities.com/plaidpooka/index.htm>

The books:

1. Stephen King, *The Stand*

"The single sound floated down the dead cellblock and then rushed back."

2. Robert A. Heinlein, *To Sail Beyond the Sunset*

"Hazel, do you yield?"

3. Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre*

"It's a very strange piece of business," I added.

4. Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*

"Need, not season, determines the performance."

5. Gregory Maguire, *Wicked*

"Yes, and aren't you just breathless with anticipation for that!"

Disclaimer: They are not mine; I just take them out to play.

One Night in Azkaban

Stopping on the edge of the clearing that housed what was once the most feared structure in the wizarding world, Severus stood...lost in thought...as he debated whether he wanted to enter the darkly deserted building at all. Even in its emptiness it was a monstrosity of a place, its unrelenting black stone stretching five stories high into the moonless night. At the moment, he could barely make it out in the dim light of the stars. If he was indeed going to venture into Azkaban this black night he would have to use the potion he had brought to enhance his eyesight.

Taking the phial out of a pocket of his robes, Severus wondered briefly if it would even work. The old texts in which he had found the potion had been of differing opinions. The Mayan text swore that the eyesight enhancer would only work in the dead of winter...which would be useless on this warm, spring night. The Celtic text had a different opinion, proclaiming that need, not season, determines the performance. The old book had warned that if the drinker's need was not great, the potion might actually dim the drinker's sight instead of aiding him.

What the blasted hell was he doing here, anyway? Hermione had not wanted him to come. Immediately after Voldemort had been defeated, Severus had been imprisoned in Azkaban for three long weeks while Dumbledore raised holy hell with the Ministry to get him released. Though that happened over a year ago, Hermione still woke up in the middle of the night to find him screaming from some nightmare. This was why she had begged him not to return, for though Azkaban castle lay cold and empty, she feared it would re-awaken the nightmares which had finally begun to leave him in peace. In the end, Severus had been forced to tell her exactly why he needed to return and she had reluctantly agreed that it was necessary. However she had not agreed with his insistence that he wished to go alone. If she discovered his absence from Hogwarts, Severus had no doubt that his protective Gryffindor wife would follow fast on his heels. Hermione had come to visit him while he had been imprisoned and it had nearly broken the gentle witch's heart. The last thing Severus wanted was for Hermione to have to re-live that experience.

That decided him. With no further hesitation, Severus uncorked the phial and downed the contents. He was both surprised and pleased when the inkiness of the moonless night lightened around him. Wary but determined, Severus made his way through the clearing and up to the front steps. The large oak door was open and creaked slightly as it swung in the spring breeze. Taking a deep, calming breath, Severus walked into the deserted corridors of Azkaban.

Shortly after Voldemort's fall, Fudge had been summarily drummed out of office for incompetence. One of the first actions of the newly appointed Minister Bones had been to build a new and more humane wizard's prison and do away with Azkaban altogether. The new prison was built and relied on human guards and magic wards to keep the peace. Azkaban had been emptied and its Dementors destroyed. This sparked a tremendous feeling of relief through every heart in the wizarding world. Well, through every heart save one. Severus could not find peace in the death of Azkaban until he searched it one last time for the truth of what he had seen while he was imprisoned there.

Once inside, Severus turned left and made his way into the first wing of cells. Every door was open; every cell abandoned. He was halfway through the corridor when a sudden gust of the spring wind blew the front door of the castle shut. The single sound floated down the dead cellblock and then rushed back. It made Severus start in surprise and reminded him that if what he suspected was true, he had reason to be cautious in this seemingly lifeless place.

If Severus had been shocked when Fudge imprisoned him after the last battle, Albus had been furious. His employer and friend had not been able to keep Severus out of Azkaban, but he had been able to make it easier on the Death Eater spy. At the close of his mockery of a trial, Severus had been surprised when Albus had come up to hug the dour Potions master before his guard led him away. The gesture made more sense when Albus had slipped an invisible talisman around his neck during the uncharacteristically public display of affection. The talisman had made it past the Azkaban guards undetected and Severus had no doubt that he owed his sanity...if not his very life...to Albus' foresight. While it did not completely save him from the attentions of the Dementors, it did seem to upset them and most of the fell beasts had left him alone. With his mental facilities sharp and intact, perhaps it was no surprise that Severus had noticed something in Azkaban which no one else seemed to realize.

During the sleepless nights of his imprisonment, Severus had spent long hours staring out the tiny, barred opening in the door of his cell. That was when he first noticed the old woman. At first he mistook her for a ghost or a wraith, so pale and thin she was. She haunted the corridors of Azkaban late at night, wandering aimlessly through the halls as she muttered to herself. By the time Severus was released, he knew that the old witch was no ghost. In fact, he knew exactly who she was.

In her youth, the old woman had been a powerful witch. Twenty years in an abysmal marriage to a Death Eater had changed that. Though she had been no Death Eater herself, when her husband had been imprisoned in Azkaban during Voldemort's first rise to power, she had been imprisoned as well. Severus had tried to visit her during those first years, but her growing madness had made it too much to bear. After she had been in Azkaban for five years, Severus had been told she was dead. He hadn't mourned; it seemed the woman he had known had been gone for a long time. During his imprisonment, he realized she still lived. Azkaban was scheduled for destruction the following day. The woman might be old and mad, but if he didn't find her and get her out of there she would be dead as well.

"How the hell has the daft old thing survived undetected all this time?" he muttered under his breath. "It's a very strange piece of business," he added. Mad she may be, but she must also be damned cunning. He'd have to keep his wits about him if he hoped to get her out of here. Drawing his wand, Severus continued his hunt.

The hours he had spent patrolling the halls of Hogwarts had trained him well for this night. After two hours of stalking the empty corridors of Azkaban he finally found the old witch searching through the bare kitchens. Her wild mane of white hair swirled as she turned toward him, shrieking in surprise. There must have been precious little to eat left here after the building was cleared; she was even thinner than he remembered. Her terrified eyes shone out of a face that was almost skeletal. With another wail, the crazed woman raised her right palm to Severus and the green light of a spell hurled toward his face.

Blocking the curse with a simple protection spell, Severus circled the crazed witch and the duel began in earnest. The skirmish was short, despite the woman's cunning, her wandless magic was no match for him. In moments he had her flat on her back with a binding spell. Without the freedom to raise her arms, even her wandless magic was rendered useless.

"Hazel, do you yield?" he said softly to her unmoving form.

"That isn't what you used to call me, you ungrateful wretch," she hissed.

Severus' eyebrows rose in surprise. He had not expected her to recognize him after all these years. Would that make this easier, or harder? "Mother, will you please yield. I mean you no harm."

"What must I do if I yield? What do you want of me?"

"At the moment, I only want you to listen to me. No hexes, no curses, no fleeing. Stay and talk with me, Mother. No harm will come to you." Severus kept his voice calm and steady. He neither pleaded nor begged knowing she would trust neither.

"If that is all you demand of me, then I will yield." she said, her voice dry and creaking.

Releasing the spell which bound her, Severus helped her to sit up and then sat on the floor beside her. He had expected her to be hungry, but he hadn't known it would be this bad. From the pockets of his robes he removed a small loaf of bread and a flask of juice and handed them to her. At first refusing the offering, Hazel Snape glared at her son distrustfully.

"I told you I mean you no harm and I meant it. I'm here to talk to you...to help you if I can...not to drug you." As he spoke, she studied his eyes intently. At last, she took the food from him. After sniffing at it in mistrust for a bit, she fell to eating like a starved hound. At that moment, they were both startled by a flurry of movement which launched itself through the doorway and into the room. The flurry stopped abruptly as it saw them. Hermione stood just inside the room, her eyes worried and her chest heaving as she tried to catch her breath. Hazel took one look at the young witch and started to try to struggle to her feet.

Stopping his mother with a hand on her arm, Severus spoke, "You yielded, Hazel. No hexing, no cursing, no fleeing." When she turned her wild eyes to regard him, Severus continued, "That woman will not harm you. Her name is Hermione, and she is my wife." Hazel looked at Hermione for a long time as the young witch caught her breath and moved to sit quietly on the floor next to Severus. Eventually, Hazel went back to her meal, though she continuously darted distrustful looks at both Hermione and Severus.

Soon the food and drink were gone and Severus let her rest a moment before he began to speak. "Mother, you can't stay here any longer. Tomorrow they will tear this building down. No one knows you are here. If you stay, you will die."

"Yes, and aren't you just breathless with anticipation for that!" Hazel muttered bitterly.

"No Mother," Severus said patiently, "I do not want that. I want you to live. I want you to be safe."

"Then why have you left me here!" she wailed as tears began to slowly trickle down her wrinkled cheeks.

Severus couldn't take it anymore. Hoping she wouldn't interpret it as an attack, he scooted closer to where she sat on the floor. Wrapping his long arms around her, he held his Mother close as he rocked her like a weeping child. "I'm sorry," he murmured, "I'm so very sorry...I didn't know, Mother. They told me you were dead...they told me you were dead long ago. Don't cry, Mother...don't cry...I'll take you out of here...I'll take you away and nothing will ever harm you again."

Raising her head, Hazel regarded him with wet, sorrowful eyes. "But where shall I live, Severus...where shall I go?"

For a moment, Severus was speechless. He had assumed that he would find his mother and take her to St. Mungo's to be cared for. Now it struck him that she would simply see that as another prison. How could he do that to her when she had been in this hateful place for so long? All he wanted to do was take her home to his chambers at Hogwarts and keep her with him. However he hadn't even thought of discussing such a thing with his wife. Raising worried eyes, he looked at Hermione.

Hermione knew exactly what to do. Placing a gentle hand on the frightened old woman's arm, Hermione spoke in kind and soft tones, "You shall come home with us. You will live with your son and his wife and we shall look after you."

For the first time in twenty years, Hazel Snape smiled.