

The Rise of Life on Earth

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Disclaimer: Unfortunately, all things Harry Potter still do not belong to me.

Authors Notes: This is more dialogue-heavy than I am used to, so I hope it works. And the ending is deliberately ambiguous. You can choose the ending as you see fit. For those who like to know these things, I cast Rupert Penry-Jones as Tristan Finch-Fletchley in my mind. The title is from a completely unrelated Joyce Carol Oates book, but it's a phrase I've always liked. This was written for devsgma as part of the Summer 2007 round of the SS/HG Exchange. Her prompt was: Ten years after the defeat of Voldemort, Severus owns a little potions shop. I don't see him going back to Hogwarts as a professor for two reasons. I've never gotten the impression that he enjoys teaching and I can see a lot of wizards not forgiving the man that killed Dumbledore even if it becomes common knowledge he was under a blood oath to do so. The town or country is up to the writer, but I have my doubts that it would be in Diagon Alley or even Hogsmeade for those same two reasons. I could see him taking his mother's maiden name as a last name to escape some of the harassment which could also be why it wouldn't be in a mainstream setting. In any case, for some reason Hermione finds the shop. Why? Travelling and needs a headache potion? Why would she return once she found out who owned the shop? Hermione is always one who needs the answers - maybe she has some questions that only Severus can answer. Again, romance is not required, but I would like to see at least an understanding of each other reached.

We are all of us made by war, twisted and warped by war, but we seem to forget it. A war does not end with the Armistice.

--Doris Lessing

She rapped on the thick wooden door of the cottage with cold, aching fingers and waited, huddled into her coat as the winter wind whipped around her. For the second time that day, she felt her stomach lurch and heart race as her insides warred, unsure of whether the prospect of it being him or not being him was worse. There were no Snapes listed in the telephone book for Berkshire, but there had been a lone listing for Mr S. Prince--the Mr S. Prince of Upper Bucklebury on whose doorstep she was presently standing. As far as she could tell, her only options upon reaching the dead end in Manchester had been to give up and head home to London or to invest a few extra hours on a side trip to chase up the lead provided by the gossip old baggage she'd met at Spinner's End. With nothing but her sanity and a few hours to lose, she had chosen to brave the A34 and its roadworks to visit Mr Prince.

The cottage was quaint; there was no other word for it. The red brick structure stood in a field that backed onto woodland, and was topped by a thatched roof. A rapacious climbing plant of some description was staging a slow invasion of the facade, and smoke billowed from the chimney. It was one of those Muggle houses that managed to look Magical, though more in the style of the Weasleys or Dumbledore than anything she would have associated with Snape.

The door flew open with unexpected force, startling her. Standing framed and backlit in the doorway, with murder--or at least GBH--in his eyes, it was clear that S. Prince

and S. Snape were indeed one and the same.

"What the fuck are you doing here?"

Face to face with ancient history, Hermione Granger did what any reasonable person would in the circumstances, and threw up all over Severus Snape's slippers.

The ginger tea was hot and more importantly did the trick, settling both her stomach and her nerves. Balancing the mug on one knee, she sighed, her eyes taking in the homely room as they sat in awkward--and, in her case, embarrassed--silence. The half-empty plate on the coffee table suggested she'd interrupted his dinner with her knocking and subsequent vomiting. It was not how she'd intended the moment to go. In the decade she'd spent occasionally pondering such things, sick definitely had not featured at all in any reunion between herself and her wartime companion and lover. He had taken it with relatively good grace--at least for him--and shepherded her inside and onto the chesterfield while he'd changed his clothing and prepared her tea.

"Are felicitations in order?" His eyes dropped to the hand resting unconsciously on her stomach. She snatched it away, blushing violently, and shrugged.

"I suppose. I mean, well, yes. I am, you know---"

"Pregnant, I believe, is the word you are attempting--clumsily, I might add--to avoid."

"Yes, I'm pregnant," she sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. "It is... unexpected."

"Well, it explains the unfortunate manner in which you greeted me." He met and held her gaze, the lightheartedness in his previous comment falling away.

"I'm not sure about the felicitations, though." The sentence came out in a rush, and she paused, shifting uncomfortably at the arch of his eyebrow. "Do you still brew? It's just that I remember Lavender talking about the side effects if a witch decided not to---and I couldn't think of anyone else who---"

"Yes, the magic of the mother and the foetus is intertwined, and the developing magic is unpredictable and volatile. Without the appropriate potion, there is a substantial risk to the witch's magic should she take steps to terminate the pregnancy."

"Would have been nice if dormitory whisperings weren't the only source of education on biology at Hogwarts," she grumbled, rubbing her stomach absently.

"Most witches have mothers who are also witches. The governors see such things as basic biology as outside of Hogwarts' remit." He lifted his mug of tea to his mouth and drained the remainder in two easily mouthfuls. "Why come to me? Surely St Mungo's---"

"St Mungo's, according to my sources, no longer provides that service."

"And who might these sources be?"

"Justin." Snape's face remained blank. "Finch-Fletchley? Hufflepuff? He's a registrar at St Mungo's." she said. "One of your former students."

"I've had quite too many to remember them all immediately upon the mere utterance of a rather common given name," he replied with a shrug. "Is he the one who put that oversized rock on your finger?"

"No." Hermione looked down at the object in question, which glinted in the light. "That would be Tristan, his older brother."

"Who is notably absent." The statement hung in the air, full of unspoken questions.

"He's in Durham at a shooting party with some friends and family. He doesn't know, if that's what you're asking."

"Obviously." His clipped tone wasn't overly harsh, but his disapproval was manifest. "The potion will take several hours to brew. We can start now, or wait until the morning if you require rest."

"No, I'm fine," she said, shaking her head. "I wouldn't be able to sleep anyway, you know. I'd rather get this over with."

He nodded in something approximating understanding, and rose from his chair, extending his hand to her.

"Follow me, and bring your coat."

Hermione was ensconced in a Transfigured armchair, another mug of ginger tea in hand, listening to the rhythmic and hypnotic sound of Severus Snape, Potions master, slicing ingredients. She'd always enjoyed watching him work. Ten years ago--a lifetime ago, really--seeing all that power and intellect so intensely focussed had dampened her knickers and made her want more than most anything else for him to look at her that way. And he had, for a relatively brief and, by turns, wonderful and terrifying time. The years had been kind to him. He had put on a few kilos, of course, but he'd lived on his nerves for close to two decades--through two wars--and had more than earned the right to eat as many puddings as he could tolerate. The lack of stress showed on his face, though whether it was the reprieve from teaching or spying that had produced the effect, she wouldn't hazard to guess.

"So, are you going to stare at me like an imbecile all night, or are you going to tell me about this boy?" he said without looking up from his work.

"He's 32, Severus. I hardly think you could call him a boy," she sulked, stretching in the chair and rearranging the blanket he'd insisted she place on her lap.

"Still almost two decades younger than me, hence a boy," he countered. "Now stop avoiding the question."

She paused, wondering where to start. She'd never had to describe a new lover to an old one before, though considering the shortage, it was understandable.

"He's a Muggle and Justin's brother, as I said before. He's a Crown prosecutor. Average height, blond, short hair, blue eyes---"

"I'm not trying to compile a police sketch of him, woman." He looked up as he continued to chop a variety of herbs. "I meant, what's he like?"

"Like?"

"Yes, like." At her blank look, he rolled his eyes. "What does he think about you being a witch? Does he want you to have a career or are you expected to just swan about town all day doing sweet FA? That sort of thing."

"He knows I'm a witch, though I don't really do magic much these days," she replied with a shrug. "He's very supportive of whatever I want to do."

"Which is?"

"I'm a journalist."

"So you are engaged to be married to a well-to-do, attractive, supportive, reasonably intelligent man who I presume you love---"

"I do love him," she snapped, hearing the unspoken accusation in his words.

He set his knife down, and stared at her directly.

"Why the hell am I making this for you, Hermione? I never mistook you for Molly Weasley, but I recall that when we last had cause to discuss this, you never seemed averse to having children. You have a man who apparently cares for you and isn't a complete dunderhead—even if he is a Muggle. I'll make the potion for you either way, but at the very least I would sincerely like to know why you've come sneaking here to see me without telling him."

"It's complicated," she sighed, rubbing her eyes.

"It usually is." Pulling out a cauldron, he set it on the flame and began to add the ingredients. "I'd forgotten that this next stage of the brewing can be quite volatile. Go inside and upstairs, and get some sleep. I'll come get you when I'm done."

Gathering her mug and blanket, she nodded and moved towards the door. She had been dismissed.

When he returned to the warmth of the cottage as the sun began to peek over the horizon, he found her not in his bed asleep but sitting cross-legged on the carpet, poking distractedly at the smouldering logs in the fireplace. He sat down on the coffee table, setting two stoppered phials down beside him. For a long minute, the two of them stared into the flickering flames.

"Do you remember what happened in Montenegro?" she asked, voice wavering as she broke the thick silence. He didn't need to use Legilimency to see the images passing behind her eyes—the struggle, the blow, the blood, the body, the stunned emotional nothingness that had followed the wracking sobs and the frantic sex. They—whatever they were—always said that first time you took a life, you remembered everything. Montenegro had been her first.

"Yes, I remember."

It hadn't been her last by any means. The spy they called Mata Hari had more faces than days of the week. She lured men with the promise of *le petit mort* and then... They'd never talked about it—it was just the way things were—but they both knew the truth. Each time you took a life, it got a little easier. You forgot how, or who, or when. You lost count as they blended together into nameless and faceless bodies, but, like most other things, you always remembered the first.

"I'm never going to be normal," she laughed bitterly. "I can just imagine it now. 'What did Mummy do during the war? Well, Mummy spent the war tricking men into taking her to bed, and then she murdered them in cold blood, went back to her hotel, downed a substantial amount of alcohol, and fucked her old potions teacher-cum-former Death Eater-cum-double agent until she passed out.'"

"What about, 'I risked my life to spy on the enemy and saved many, many lives.' It is equally as true as your histrionics."

"I don't think that wondering whether a murderess would make a fit mother is 'histrionics'."

"Firstly, you are not a murderess. You are simply a Gryffindor with a healthy dose of Slytherin pragmatism." He shifted uncomfortably, not used to such frank and emotional discussions, and this particular one had gone unspoken for a decade. "You stepped up to do a very unpleasant job, Hermione. The rest of them want the ends and prefer to avoid thinking about the means wherever possible. Fighting in a line with wands drawn and winning makes you a hero, but we were thanked and promptly forgotten for a reason. We make them uncomfortable."

"I've never even told Tristan," she whispered. "He asked one night after we'd made love how many there'd been before him."

"A very ungentlemanly question at the best of times."

"What could I say? Well, there's been somewhere around a hundred, but don't worry, there's only two of you that are still alive.' I'm sure he'd have stuck around after that."

"There were extenuating circumstances."

"And then I found out yesterday morning that I was—well, and they were shooting pheasants, and there was blood, and I just—I had to get away." She leaned forward, putting her head in her hands, curls falling forward to hide her face. "How do they do it? How can everyone just pretend the whole war didn't even happen? It was the most important event of our lives and they act like it was some boyhood adventure and not a bloody battle."

"Because it's the only way to make sure the war doesn't take the rest of your life. They've *chosen* not make it the most important event of their lives. That is how they do it."

He paused, lightening his tone.

"Besides, do you really believe that children have the foggiest idea what their parents did before they were born? They don't, and nor do they care. Do you know whether your parents took drugs? Who your mother's first lover was? Of course not. You know them as parents, not people." He settled a heavy hand on her shoulder, squeezing it reassuringly. "If you had a child, I can promise you that they wouldn't even register that their mother was a person who had her own life before they came along. And even if they did ask, you have nothing to be ashamed of."

The ringing of her mobile shattered the intimate moment. It was obvious from Hermione's end of the conversation who the caller was. He studied his hands awkwardly while she exchanged brief words with her lover. Ending the call, she twisted the phone in her hands.

"Tristan is coming home early to play nursemaid," she said. "He thinks I have the flu. Anyway, he's leaving Durham now in a friend's car."

"And he thinks you're in London, I take it."

"Something like that." The silence hung between them for a minute. "I should go."

Nodding, he stood and offered his hands to help her to her feet. Picking her coat up from the chesterfield, he helped her into it. They stood awkwardly for a moment, both their gazes resting on the phials that sat innocently on the coffee table. He retrieved them and handed them to her solemnly.

"The indigo potion will terminate the pregnancy," he said clinically. "You will feel like absolute shit for 24 hours, but you should be fine after that. If you're not, I am in the telephone directory, as you are no doubt aware."

She nodded, twirling the phial and watching the dark viscous liquid move in its glass prison.

"And the other?" The contents of the second phial were deep red and thinner in consistency.

"If you should decide... otherwise, it is a mixture of nutrients and such that is routinely given to expectant mothers. You should take that in addition to whatever Muggle doctors prescribe."

She placed the two glass containers in her bag carefully and followed him towards the door of the cottage. Hermione, rather unexpectedly, took the lead, preempting the discomfort of their farewell.

"Thank you for everything, Severus."

"You're welcome."

Brushing a kiss across his cheek, she squeezed his hand and stepped out into the crisp air of the frosty and foggy morning.

In the kitchen of the small cottage, Severus Snape turned on the tap. The hissing of the water drowned out the sounds of starting engines and tyres on loose gravel. A squirt of detergent and the sink full, he shut the tap off, sunk his hands into the hot, soapy water, and washed the two dirty mugs as if the ancient history between him and his very own Mata Hari had stayed just that.