

# Ottery St. Catchpole Park

*by ferporcel*

Hermione contemplates her life after her youngest child leaves for Hogwarts. Can an encounter of twenty years ago influence her decisions? Post-DH. SS/HG. One-shot sequel to "Forest of Dean".

## One-shot

*Chapter 1 of 1*

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**Disclaimer:** Not mine! It's all J. K. Rowling's.

**Warning:** "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows" spoilers.

**Beta reader:** Annie Talbot thank you very much!

**A/N:** Although this one-shot can be read independently, you'll enjoy it better if you read "Forest of Dean" first. \*whistles distractedly while waiting\* Okay, now, enjoy it! :0)

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It was nearly nightfall. Hermione knew she shouldn't be sitting in a swing in the neighborhood park. All the children who had earlier been playing and laughing and talking loudly with each other had gone their ways, following a parent or older sibling home. She missed her own children.

Summer holidays were a joy. Rose and Hugo had completely different temperaments; it made living with them a loud and sometimes hard experience, but even if she would never admit to them, Hermione loved even the sound of their bickering. It was proof of their presence there, with her. Home.

This year Hugo had left for Hogwarts, too. She missed him already. These couple of days of only her and Ron in the house showed how lonely it would be without him around. Hermione had dreaded this moment since Rose's departure two years ago. She knew then that it would be only a matter of time before she would be forced to admit her marriage wasn't what she'd expected.

There was nothing wrong with her life, really. She had a respectable job at the Ministry of Magic; she had two lovely and intelligent kids whom she loved most in the world, and she had a respectful husband who loved her and was a good father, but with whom she didn't feel much kinship. Although, having things in common with one's husband wasn't supposed to be crucial, right? What really mattered was the love and respect they felt for each other, wasn't it?

The next question she had to ask herself, she wasn't ready to acknowledge yet, but her heart was already sinking at the subconscious idea that she didn't love Ron enough to compensate for their differences.

A light breeze hit her face, and Hermione let it wash over her, closing her eyes and letting the swing rock slightly. The sound of creaking chains and the quiet rustling of the leaves were calming, and she let her mind forget the turmoil of disturbing thoughts she had been having lately.

"Lovely afternoon for a walk in the park."

Hermione startled with a shriek, leaping to her feet and turning to meet the owner of that deep voice. She wouldn't have believed her ears if she didn't have visual confirmation, and even so, it was impossible. Tall, pale, big and hooked nose, lank if not entirely black hair, intense and impossibly dark if heavily wrinkled at the corners eyes.... Definitely a hallucination.

"You're old," she said more to herself than to the man behind the swing. That simple acknowledgement made the hallucination theory less probable. She stood staring, frozen in shock.

"You always had a gift for stating the obvious."

*That's undoubtedly him! Him! Severus Snape! But that's not possible!*

Hermione moved a trembling hand to her gaping mouth, extending the other to grab at the swing's chain. She took a small step towards this very solid-looking ghost, stopping beside the swing. The wind changed direction, and in it, Hermione could smell the freshly dewed grass, but also the hint of clean linen on warm skin, although she didn't know how that was possible.

She slowly pulled her hand from her mouth and reached for him, expecting her touch to fall on empty air. Hermione gasped when it found strong, solid muscles over the rhythm of a beating heart.

"It's really you. I don't know how that's possible, but it's you! Oh my goodness, twenty years! We held a memorial service for you. There is a stone in the grounds of Hogwarts with your name in it! I saw you d..."

A callused finger came across her lips, silencing her. They looked at each other, Hermione seeking answers and Snape seeking all that made Hermione who she was.

"I didn't come here to discuss my death," he said at length.

Through her hand, Hermione felt his words reverberate in his ribcage. The silencing finger slid slowly from her lips, brushing lightly. She remained silent.

"The boy left for Hogwarts."

It was a statement that took Hermione by surprise, confusing her at first. *What?*

Snape seemed to notice her confusion and added, "Your Weasley. He's at Hogwarts now."

"Hugo," Hermione said, realizing who Snape was talking about. But... "You know Hugo?"

He ignored her question. "He's not here in the park with you," Snape continued.

"Prof..." Hermione started, but changed her mind. "Mr. Snape, I..."

She was interrupted this time. "Severus," he told her. "The name is Severus."

There was a glint in his eyes that made her repeat after him, "Severus." Had his eyes ever shown joy before? She didn't remember, and his eyes were something she had never forgotten.

When she didn't say anything else for a moment, his expression changed, and he now seemed concerned. "Perhaps you should sit," he suggested and covered the hand still resting on his chest with one of his, guiding her.

Mutely, she followed his lead and was seated on the swing again. She stared at their hands, watching and feeling him caress the back of hers with his thumb, warm. Hermione took a deep breath and looked up into his face.

"Why twenty years?" she asked.

He continued to move his thumb over her hand, observing her face in the red light of the setting sun. Finally, he answered, "You didn't need me before."

*And now I do? Hermione concluded from his answer. I need him? Snape?* She squeezed his hand softly. It felt good. This felt good and right. Yes, she needed him.

Hermione took his other hand, not knowing how she was so certain about the words she was about to say, but they were true. "I missed you," she whispered. *How can I have missed him when I never really knew him?*

*But I did; I missed him.*

Hermione looked up and found him smiling. It wasn't a toothy smile, but a smile nonetheless. It made her realize that even the little she knew about him seemed even less now. It also made her want to know him more than before. She smiled back at him.

"How did you know I didn't need you before?" she asked. "Don't think I'll forget what you did; all these questions are running rampant in my head, Severus," she teased, but the smile slipped from her lips. "I thought you were dead. I felt my faith waver when you fell. I asked for your safety every day after that night... I prayed that you were given a chance to live."

"You had your friends," he answered. "You had Weasley," he added, his expression now back to its normal seriousness.

"I still do," she said to the grass under her feet.

"Do you?" he asked, obviously challenging her statement.

She looked up to meet his face with what she hoped was indignation and not the pain she felt surfacing with her doubts. "What do you know about me?" she asked, irritated, letting her frustration slip into her voice.

Hermione freed her hands and stood, circling the swing and gripping the chains tightly. Glaring, she accused, "What can you possibly know of life in the last twenty years? About *my* life? You're a ghost!"

He held her gaze with calm patience. She wanted to hit him.

"You know I'm not." His eyes were burning in hers.

Hermione let go of the chains and turned her back to him, rubbing her tired face with her hands. She felt like crying in despair, in relief, in sadness, in happiness.... A warm hand rested on her back.

"Your prayers were answered," he said. "Nagini didn't kill me. I was immune to her venom and healed myself when the shock wore off." His voice was soft in the light breeze. "You saved me."

Hermione turned to look at him in question.

"In the forest, that winter," he explained. "Hermione, I would have welcomed death if that night hadn't happened. I was sure no one cared," his whisper enveloped her, "until you did."

"We cared." Hermione threw her arms around his torso, trying to reassure him.

"You did, not them. I'm back for you and you alone." He took her head between his hands, making her look at him. "You were there for me, and now I'm here for you." His lips went down on hers for a soft brush. "Take what you need from me."

Hermione closed her eyes in the rush of warmth of that whispered invitation. All she could think of was what she'd felt that night in the forest, kissing this man, comforting him. *Can I feel that again?* Her lips were already touching his. *Can I feel again?* She pressed her mouth against his, determined to try.

Severus answered her kiss, supplying her with proof of what she had thought was only made of fading memories and dreams. Even after the end of the war and of his participation in her life, Hermione had not forgotten how these lips felt, how that mouth tasted, how those arms felt as they brought her closer. And she was *feeling* again.

Their lips separated, and her eyes remained closed. Hermione was almost sure this was not happening, that she was dreaming and would soon wake up to a life of numbness. She rested her head on his chest, wanting the rise and fall of breath to rock her to eternal sleep. She slid a hand from his back and over his chest, finally meeting flesh on his neck.

Scarred flesh.

Hermione forced her eyes open to look at the fanged marks she was tracing with the tips of her fingers.

"This is real, Hermione."

That made a tear roll down her cheek. He kissed the damp path of it, ending with a tender kiss on her lips. She returned his tenderness, kissing him more firmly, needing to feel him more solidly against her.

He kissed her forehead next. "I'm fully back for you and only for you." He stepped back and watched her face. He must have liked what he saw, for he was smiling again, an oddly beautiful sight.

It was almost dark now, and his expression was losing clarity with every step he took away from her.

"An undeniable wish for a walk in the park will strike me this same day next week," Severus told her, and with that he was gone, leaving her staring at a pack of trees.

A shiver ran down her spine from the chilly breeze, bringing her back to the there and then. She had a week to understand what fate was playing at. She sighed and cleared her face of her fallen silent tears. Severus Snape *Severus Snape!* had come to remind her that, if she wanted to leave, she had options to consider, now.

Hermione began her walk back home, and even if she wouldn't admit it yet, she already knew she'd be taking a walk in the park next week.

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**A/N:** I want to thank, once again, Annie Talbot for her wonderful suggestions and beta work, but also Subversa for making sure everything was perfect in the end. Thank you!