

Passages of Time

by Bambu

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Chapter 1 of 1

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AN: This is a little vignette for Moreteadk's Weekly Challenge #27 on Quiet Ones. The challenge rules are any pairing, any rating, and must include, an animal, scars, rain, a basket, and stages.

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At eleven, she'd stood alone on the broad plinth steps at the castle's entrance, her tears camouflaged by the rain pouring down from the stormy Scottish sky. The sharp-faced blond boy had called her a *'Mudblood,'* and all his friends had laughed at her. She'd been prepared for him to mock her bushy hair or oversized front teeth or her 'know-it-all' reputation. The comment about her intrinsic worthlessness had hurt far more than those other taunts would have.

The next day had been her twelfth birthday and she hadn't had a single friend at this magical school to share it with her. She'd tried so hard to fit in, to prove that she'd belonged. No one had liked her except the boy whose toad she'd helped to find that first day on the train.

Staring out toward the Forbidden Forest and the lake, watching the Giant Squid's tentacles batting at the rain, she'd thought perhaps her mum had been right in thinking she should stay in the Muggle world.

~o0o~

At sixteen, she'd flown on the back of an invisible Thestral, racing with her friends to reach London to save a man's life. Her heart had been in her throat and adrenaline had raced through her veins. At least by that time she had found a niche within the magical world, brain to her friend's mad savior status.

In what had been a lesson she'd never forgotten, sometimes heroically rushing to the rescue wasn't the right thing to do. She'd learned, painfully, never to ignore her inner voice of caution.

They hadn't saved her friend's godfather that night when, within a twelve-hour period, she had faced down that same cruel blond boy and his father. The son, driven by prejudice and ignorance had only sought her expulsion from school. She hadn't understood then that half of his cruelty had been driven by fear. He had feared his emotional and physical reactions to her. He'd found her shockingly pretty in fourth year, and by fifth year, as her body had rounded into that of a young woman, he'd found her desirable.

The father's intentions had been far more lethal. He and his friends had sought the death of her and her companions, and she'd come from the encounter scarred for life. The shiny, narrow strip of puckered skin bisected her torso in a sideways 'v' shape, as if a mathematical equation... the right breast is larger than the left.

That summer her parents had begged her to leave the wizarding world, but she'd insisted that her friends needed her.

~o0o~

At twenty, she'd picked Pellitory nettles and juvenile Mandrake leaves in the private greenhouses on confiscated estates of pureblood wizards and witches who'd been incarcerated or had died as a result of the war. The purplish green Mandrake leaves had contrasted with the almost black-green leaves of the nettles in her collecting basket. Her position as an Unspeakable within the Department of Mysteries had allowed her restless intelligence the official weight to pursue almost any course of research.

Her goal had been to find a lasting cure to reverse the long-term effects of the more powerful Unforgiveables. Until the end of the war and so many of her friends' deaths, she'd worked in secrecy on the elixir, finding temporary solutions. Afterward, with the full backing of the Ministry she'd been given a research facility to call home. It, like the unplotable cottage she'd inhabited in the wilds of Northern England during the worst of the war, had been protected by the strongest wards known to the wizarding world. The only people who had been able to find her had been her two closest friends -- the redhead being her Secret Keeper -- and their owls.

Her confidante and research partner had been during and after the war -- in hiding as well. Their only communication had been by her friend's owl. The rest of the wizarding world had thought both he and his companion dead. That had been a misconception fostered by the fugitives.

Following the death of the aged headmaster and the flight of the pureblood blond boy and his Half-Blood Prince, she had left school to assist her friend in his quest. After the first six months, when the Horcruxes had been found and dismantled, leaving three crippled and two under the continuous effects of the Cruciatus Curse, she had been forced by her two best friends to go into hiding. They had needed her books and cleverness as resources while they pursued what they'd called 'field research.' She'd thought it had been a terrible name for battle.

Six months later, she'd received a letter, carried by the snowy owl, from her former professor. It seemed that much of the killing display he'd put on had been for show... the headmaster had already been dying... poisoned by the decaying mad wizard attempting to take over their world. She'd wondered once again whether staying in the magical world had been her best option.

However, contained within that first letter had been a plea for her help. It seemed that the blond boy was suffering from the long-term effects of the Imperius curse, and their fugitive status meant the former Potions master couldn't access the magical plants and remedies he needed.

In what she'd later referred to as the moment she'd taken leave of her senses, she'd agreed. Their weekly correspondence had begun, and she'd sought a cure rather than merely being content with treating the symptoms of the illness.

The blond boy had written to her exactly four times in four years. The first had been written in a feeble scrawl and had been, not an apology, but perhaps an explanation. *I didn't get it until after they died. Will you help? I'll know why if you won't.*

The second letter had been after her first partial-success, and his cursive had no longer been shaky. *Thank you. I had no idea how Occluded my brain has been for so many years.*

The reprieve, however, had only been temporary. His freedom from Imperial command lasted only scant hours per dose. Linked by an Unbreakable Vow, the former potions master had continued to protect his young charge.

Her weekly correspondence with the dryly acerbic wizard had increased to daily in order to chart the blond boy's physical and mental state of health.

The third letter had been after she'd compounded the penultimate elixir. His handwriting had been bold and decisive, a far cry from his first missive. *If I wasn't so overwhelmed by the disaster of my life, I might possibly be able to offer reparation for the damage my family has done to you. As it is, I don't know if I ever shall be able to. Forgiveness they say is divine... I would settle for understanding.*

~o0o~

At twenty-two, she'd been presented with an Order of Merlin, First Class, for her remarkable discovery of the Restorative Elixir and her part in the war. She'd accepted the honor, standing on the dais at the Ministry of Magic's audience hall, a grand and gaudy room packed with witches and wizards who were giddy with relief that the Dark Lord had been sent to his final ethereal grave.

She'd shared the stage with her closest friends, the Boy Who Triumphed and their redheaded friend. The other awardees -- for there had been many -- had included, in absentia, their surly former professor and her blond boy.

She'd scanned the crowd, looking for the tell-tale platinum hair.

She hadn't seen him, but he'd seen her. She'd stood proudly on the dais accepting, with a gracious tilt of her head, the golden medallion Minister Scrimgeour placed around her neck. Her hair had been tamed for the proceedings and wound in an intricate display of braiding, circling her head like a crown. The lively intelligence in her dark brown eyes sparkled, and her discomfort at being the focal point of so many leant a becoming flush to her cheeks. Her lips had curved into a soft smile at something one of her friends had said. The emerald green robes that she'd worn had clung in the right places, clearly defining the woman she'd become. She had been a witch to be proud of... an emblem of perseverance and excellence to all who'd adopted the wizarding world as their home.

The blond boy-turned-man had been speechless from fear. Afraid that the feelings he'd struggled to comprehend were one-sided, that she'd been far too scarred by him and his family to look beyond the pettiness of childhood and become friends, or more, at this late date.

He'd stood at the back of the large room and feasted his eyes upon the witch he'd come to think of as his salvation. His grey eyes had burned from his unwillingness to blink in case he'd miss something.

And he had.

She'd left the dais, disappearing into the swirling audience before he'd known she'd gone. Disappointment had been sharp and painful.

She'd wound her way toward the back of the room, knowing it was the most logical place to find them if they had come. Fervently she'd hoped that they might make themselves known. She'd thanked her well-wishers, and pushed through the crowd just in time to hear the distinctive voice of her professor-turned-colleague tell his companion it had been time to leave. In their Disillusioned state, she hadn't been able to track their departure.

It had been that moment in which she'd realized how much she had come to care for the blond boy. In one fashion or another he'd been a constant in her life since she'd been eleven, even through the attrition of a war neither had wanted to fight. They'd both borne the loss of family, friends and teachers. It had been a miracle that they'd survived.

If it hadn't been for the two friends she'd been most loyal to, she might have indeed left the magical world then, for, it had seemed, all her nebulous hopes had been lost.

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At twenty-three, she'd resigned herself to being alone. She'd continued with her research, her intention to find a cure for her dead friend's parents. It's what he would have

done had he lived through the war, and it was her way of paying tribute to the first person who'd accepted her into her new world.

Her home had remained unplotable and she had few visitors. The boys, as she'd still thought of them, had gone on a well-deserved tour. Their weekly letters had reached her from their different destinations. The texture and color of parchment varied greatly from location to location, and had usually been accompanied by a little trinket they thought she'd like. Her cozy home had been filled with those trinkets... from Bali, Jamaica, Hong Kong, Brussels, Bucharest, Mumbai, Singapore, Hawaii, and Alaska. They had taken the idea of seeing the world to heart.

It had been after she'd declined their fourth offer to join them that she'd realized why she'd refused to travel. She had been waiting for the past year for the blond boy to find her. His apparent disinterest had broken her heart... until she'd felt it shatter she had been unaware that it had no longer belonged to her.

She'd Apparated to her old school and wandered the halls in an attempt to remind herself of how cruel the blond boy had been. The new crop of students hadn't known her, and of her old teachers only the Divination teacher and flying instructor had survived the war. Neither had been considered friends. None of her mentors had been there to make her feel welcome, and so she'd stood, once again, on the stone plinth at the head of the steps leading to the castle's entrance, tears mingling with rain on her cheeks.

Perhaps, she'd thought, the Muggle world was less painful.

~o0o~

At twenty-four, a letter and a copy of the *Daily Prophet* had been delivered by the white-winged owl she'd kept bits of bacon for. It had been a gloriously sunny morning and she'd been contemplating three offers to teach, one magical and two Muggle.

Imperiously bating wings had reminded her of the delivery, and she'd picked up the newspaper first. Opening the paper to the front page, the young witch had felt her heart clench and tears well into her eyes. "*Ex-Death Eaters Pardoned. The Truth Comes Out At Last.*"

She'd stared at the headline unable to form a comprehensible thought. She'd quickly scanned the article and had been incredibly happy for the two men who'd won their freedom. Hard on the heels of vicarious happiness had been throat-tightening sadness for the loss of contact with them. She'd refused to acknowledge her broken heart.

After a time, her friends' owl had clacked her beak, drawing the bushy-haired witch's attention to the neatly written parchment. The note had been scrawled in a hand she'd only seen three times before, "*Open the door.*"

She'd almost fallen off her chair in her haste to reach the front door. She'd flung it open, regardless of the fact that she'd only been clad in her thin, cotton dressing gown.

The sunlight had shone on his long, platinum hair, and his face was familiar and yet different. He had no longer been her blond boy. Her heart had seemed to take flight like a snitch let loose from the restraining confines of its crate, and she hadn't quite known what to say.

Fortunately, it had only taken one word from him to break the awkwardness of the moment. "Hermione..."

He'd never, in all the years she'd known him, used her name, and she'd launched herself into his arms.

The Muggle teaching positions had no longer held any interest for her. They couldn't compete with the blond man who held her heart in his hands.

~o0o~

At twenty-five, she'd stood in a small gazebo on the blond man's restored family estate, dressed in ivory silk, her unbound hair cascading down her back, and faced him as they'd exchanged vows. They'd been surrounded by the three men who'd known them the best and come with them the farthest. Neither cared for the pomp and circumstance the greater wizarding world craved. Together, in the private ceremony, the blond man and the bushy-haired woman had everything they'd needed: each other and their closest friends. If the former spy had been a bit caustic to the Boy Who Triumphed and his chess-loving sidekick, then it had seemed only fitting.

After the wedding breakfast, served by two overjoyed house-elves, the guests had departed leaving the happy couple alone in the library.

Her blond man had cupped her face in his large hands and brought his lips to hers, brushing them lightly across her mouth.

"Draco," she had breathed before she'd kissed him.

At twenty-five, the wizarding world had become her home.

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Finite

August, 2005

Los Angeles