

From Death To Life Again

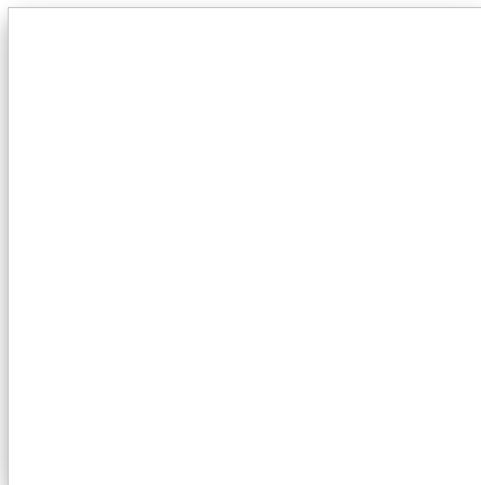
by gersknightlady

Hermione returns to a deserted Hogwarts and comes face to face with death.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 24

Hermione returns to a deserted Hogwarts and comes face to face with death.



This is my first completed SS/HG fan fiction. I do not own these characters. I am just borrowing them for this fic. I appreciate the help of Melissa and my good friend Chettina for their help with the Beta work. Enjoy and let me know what you think.

Chapter 1

Hermione approached the deserted castle. It was dark and eerie. The war was over. It had been for nearly two years since Voldemort had fallen. The castle had been so damaged and so many had died. The Ministry had closed the school – made a memorial to all those who had given their lives to make the wizard world safe again.

Harry had married Ginny and they had gone to America. Ron had fallen on that day of death. Hermione's parents, still lost to her, remained her only anchor. She knew they lived and were safe, but they were yet unreachable. Certain conditions had been placed on the enchantments that had replaced their identities. Enchantments Hermione

knew would probably never be met with Ron gone. Her heart was as empty as the castle – even the ghosts had fled. Some ghosts finally moved on to the next life when their anchors had been destroyed. Others had their anchors moved to the new Hogwarts some 50 miles down the Valley.

Hermione clutched her cloak around her and shivered against the cold.

She passed through the silent, gaping doors barely hung from their rusted hinges. She took a Muggle flashlight out of her pocket and shone it around. The doors to the great hall loomed before her, and she could see stars from the opening in the once enchanted ceiling. She turned away hearing laughter and voices in her mind. So many wonderful things had happened here. She walked down the dark hall, hearing an occasional skittering of tiny feet. Rats did not scare her; she had lived through far greater horrors. She found the stairway leading up to the Gryffindor Tower and climbed them carefully, testing each stair for stableness and strength. Her flashlight flashed along the empty walls. Only the living portraits had been removed from the castle; nearly everything else had been left as it was on that final day. The silence was heavy with sadness. Reaching her destination, she found a gaping hole where once the Fat Lady had guarded her charges. She stepped into the common room. Only scraps of furniture remained, and a large hole to the outside gawked at her from where the warm fireplace had once warmed the students.

She turned to the stairs leading to her old dorm room. She knew she might not find what she had come for. She also knew she could get into trouble for being here. Yet, she could not fathom the rest of her life without some sort of memento of her parents.

As her flashlight moved over toward her corner of the room, she sighed with some hope. The corner walls and some of the ceiling still were in place. She searched the debris and saw that there had been damage from the elements. Storms seemed to batter the old castle. It had been reported that during storms one could hear a sound like wailing. She started to search through the rubble and found her trunk.

When the battle had ended and the last of the injured carried from the castle, none of them could bear looking going back a final time. They had left the ruins with the thought of never looking back. Her personal items were now all but forgotten, until later when the emptiness had hit her. When Harry and Ginny had left last year, she found her world so empty she could no longer work and left her job. Harry had given her the use of 12 Grimmauld Place and enough money to keep her comfortable until she decided she could return to work again.

She shook the memory away and continued to search. She struggled to move the stone that had crushed her trunk. She managed to roll it off and look inside and found her books ruined from water damage. She ran her hand over the book covers: they were lumpy and warped. Some of these books had been gifts from her parents. Nevertheless, she slipped several of her favorites into the bag that hung from her neck. The size and weight of each book seemed to vanish as they disappeared inside. She thanked her lucky stars for the magical bag. She found several textbooks and added them to the bag. One was her Potions text. She touched the surface, remembering the tall, grouchy, insufferable, Potions master, and she felt her eyes burn with tears.

She shook the pain away. She still harbored a lot of guilt for having abandoned him in the Shrieking Shack as he lay dying.

She did not find what she was looking for there in the trunk. She wracked her brain... where could she have left it? She turned toward her night table. It lay on its side, contents spilled out. Her flashlight told her she still hadn't found it. She felt hot tears slide down her cheeks. It had to be here. It had to! She turned toward the broken bed, and as the flashlight passed over and under it, she caught a flash of something moving.

She went down on her hands and knees and shone the light into the hole under her bed. Her eyes blurred further with more tears as a smiling image of her mother and father waved up at her. With trembling fingers she grasped the photo album and pulled the item from its hiding place. The edges were dark and frayed, the last pages a little water damaged, but many of the photos had survived and the wizarding ones still moved. She let herself sit and cry as she clutched the book to her chest. Here was her anchor: pictures of her life with her parents and her friends.

She took a shuddering breath and struggled to her feet and slipped the album into the bag at her neck for safety and made her way out of the room. Having gotten what she came for, she was no longer interested in seeing more of the castle. She hurried from the common room and down the stairs. She had just stepped into the hall leading to the front door when a ragged sound reached her ears. A scraping sound as if something were being dragged accompanied a rattle like a deeply congested chest.

The sound became louder and she looked around in panic. Was there a night watchman here? No was supposed to be here. She squeezed herself into a small alcove as the sound grew closer. The moon cast an eerie glow through the damaged roof. A dark robed figure limped by. One foot was scraping the floor as it passed. Hermione moved further back into the alcove and scrambled over debris and fell backwards with a scream.

Suddenly she heard a voice hiss, "Who's there?" As she struggled to her feet and her light swung up, it illuminated the face of a man long dead. Hermione felt herself slip into darkness.

Chapter 2

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Hermione returns to a deserted Hogwarts and comes face to face with death.

Chapter 2

Hermione felt warm and snuggled farther into the soft covers. A scent hit her nose... *What is that delicious smell?* she thought to herself. Suddenly she remembered, and realized she was staring into the eyes of a ghost.

She sat up quickly and groaned as her head swam with dizziness and pain. "Where...?" she called out, frightened.

"You are safe," a rattling voice said kindly.

She fell back onto the pillows, groaned, and held her head. She could feel a large lump on her forehead. She struggled to open her eyes. "Who?" she asked.

"I think you know who, Miss Granger."

"Professor Snape, are you a ghost?" Hermione asked.

An odd rattling sound escaped the specter. "Hardly," he said.

"I saw you die!"

"I am half dead, but it seems my lot to stay on this god forsaken world... here."

Hermione felt him sit on the edge of the warm bed.

"I have a potion for you. It should take the swelling down so that you can open your eyes. I could not give it to you until you were awake." His voice was but a rasping whisper. "Grab my arm and pull yourself up. I will press the vial to your lips. Drink all of it, please."

Hermione reached out and felt his arm, she grabbed a hold of it and he pulled her into a sitting position, then she felt the vial against her lips. The potion was like thick syrup, and she swallowed it quickly, not lingering over the horrid taste.

"Here, drink this," he said. "It's tea."

She gratefully sipped the warm tea. Within a few minutes of being settled back against the pillows, she felt the pain fade and the swelling decrease. She then realized she could open her eyes a bit. After five more minutes, she could see well again.

She tried to hide her discomfort when she looked into Snape's face. He was pale and his hair hung in graying streaks, matted and dull. It was long, falling past his shoulders. His throat was bandaged to cover the damage inflicted by Nagini's fangs. Hermione was horrified to see the bandages blood-stained from wounds that had never closed. Hermione's eyes clouded with tears.

He turned away, getting up. He moved slowly across the room. She could see that he dragged his leg behind him.

"You cry for me!" he spat. "Do not waste your tears. I am less than the rats that scurry throughout the halls of this tomb."

Hermione struggled to sit, ignoring the residual pounding in her head. "You're a hero, Professor. I saw the memories you gave Harry. Why do you hide in this dead, empty place?"

He turned back, and Hermione realized that the damage was not only to his neck and leg, but his hand was also curled up, the fingers seemingly useless.

"You see what I am, half alive. I cannot move my hand. How can I make the potions that were my life?"

Overwhelmed by the feelings this discussion was causing, Hermione flew off the bed. Before Snape could protest, she pulled him tightly against her. He stiffened and tried to back away, but she held him tightly. Suddenly he was so overcome with emotion that a sob tore from him, and he reluctantly wrapped his arms around her and held on for dear life.

Chapter 3

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Hermione goes back to an empty Hogwarts and comes face to face with death.

Neither of them knew how long they stood, just holding on to each other. Hermione cried for both of them, for the losses they both had suffered. She was just as crippled emotionally as he was physically. Ron was gone, her parents unattainable with the special enchantments that had been placed on them to hide them from Voldemort's people, and she felt abandoned by Harry and Ginny.

Snape held on to the crying girl, feeling emotion for the first time in two years. A stranger to kindness, he found he was touched by her trust in him. The emotion was foreign to him.

They finally stepped apart, as if a signal had been given and stood, gaping at each other in silence.

Snape broke the silence. "You are no longer quite so insufferable."

Smirking, she answered back with, "I like this you better."

Snape's eyes widened and he turned away.

"There is nothing to like about me."

"You could have left me lying in that corridor amongst the rats."

"True," he said, turning to face her.

"When I saw who you were, I was curious as to what would bring you back to this graveyard. I figured you married Weasley and were already carrying one of those red-haired ankle-biters."

The 'ankle-biter' comment made Hermione want to laugh, but thinking about Ron sobered her quickly.

"Ron's dead. He died during the fall of Voldemort."

She was astonished to see a sad surprise flash across his face.

"I did not know."

She glanced down, and not seeing the pouch around her neck, she looked around frantically until she spotted the pouch on his nightstand. She went to get it and opened it, pulling out the photo album.

She offered it to him, and he flipped through the pages filled with pictures of her parents and friends.

"It's all I have."

"Your parents died too?" He asked.

"No, they were enchanted to forget who I am and who they really are. I gave them a new life and new identities to keep them safe from Voldemort."

"Can't you go retrieve them?"

He handed her back the album. She placed it back into the pouch and slung it back around her neck.

"No. There were conditions and Ron's gone. They can't be fulfilled."

"I see," he whispered.

Wanting to take the attention off her, Hermione asked, "Why stay here? St. Mungo's could help. Healers can regenerate some of your flesh and reduce the scar. Maybe even restore the use of your limbs."

"I doubt anyone wants to see the Death Eater who murdered Dumbledore, much less help him."

"You're wrong, sir. We all know what you sacrificed, how much your life you gave to the Order and what Dumbledore asked of you."

Snape looked surprised. "How?"

"Harry shared the memories you gave him. He took the Pensieve to the Ministry. The judges in the court reviewed them. Dumbledore's portrait vouched for their authenticity. You have been exonerated, Professor. You're a free man and a hero—you can go anywhere you want."

He sat heavily into the chair by the fire. "I can't return like this. I can't even help myself. I know potions that would help with this hand. But without the use of my hand, I can't make them. I can barely brew the simplest potions."

Hearing the pain and frustration in his voice, Hermione came and knelt before him, touching his hands that were folded together in his lap.

"Let me help. Let me be your hands. I can learn." She saw a flash of hope in his eyes.

"You would do that?"

"Yes, Professor. It would be my pleasure." She felt excitement at the possibility of learning from a Potions master... but it paled to the excitement of having a purpose again. She craved having a purpose again as much as he needed to be healed of his injuries.

Hermione felt him squeeze her fingers and saw his eyes moisten with tears. He was so different, so human, so broken. She reached up and slid her hand over his cheek.

"You are not alone anymore."

He swallowed the lump in his throat and nodded gratefully.

To give him time to collect himself, she excused herself to go use the bathroom. When she returned, she found him stirring a thick stew.

"That smells wonderful," she said, and her stomach rumbled as if on cue. She blushed and ran her hand over her stomach.

"Come sit at the table. Eat," he rasped.

Hermione thought as she sat how sad it was that his voice was so damaged. There was little hint of the deep, silky, sexy voice she'd grown accustomed to in class.

"Professor, will I need to procure some of the ingredients we will need?"

"Miss Granger, I am no longer your professor."

"Do you want me to call you Mr. Snape?" she asked.

The odd rattle escaped him, and Hermione glanced at him and realized he was laughing. Or at least he was trying to.

"No, call me Severus."

"Severus," she repeated after him. She smiled.

"I am no longer a student and I am of age. You should call me Hermione."

He opened his mouth to protest, but she interrupted him, saying, "Fair's fair."

Chapter 4

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Hermione returns to a deserted Hogwarts and comes face to face with death.

"Hermione," he whispered, setting the stew down before her.

She found she liked the way he said it very much.

"Did you go back to school after the war?" he asked as he sat opposite her and began to spoon stew into his mouth.

"No, I couldn't face it, not without Ron. I was allowed to sit my NEWTS."

"Potter, where is he? Why isn't he here to help you deal with all of this?" He had a bit of the old anger in his voice.

"He was here until a few months ago. I couldn't continue to hold him back. He took Ginny and went to America for a while. He couldn't stand to see the hero worship in

everyone's eyes."

"I can understand that, yet didn't he see how depressed you are and how hard this is for you?"

"I'm a very good actress when I want to be. I was stopping his future with Ginny. They got married and they deserved some happiness."

They ate in silence for a few minutes. Then Snape asked, "Your NEWTS, I supposed you passed them all?"

"Yes."

"You could have passed them your fourth year."

She looked into his eyes, "Yes, I guess I could have. I'm surprised you knew. I tried to blend in."

"Not very hard. You couldn't contain the knowledge in you. It nearly flew out of you. I've never encountered a more gifted student."

Astonished, Hermione, stated, "Nor I a teacher." She looked at him steadily, her gaze not wavering.

Unaccustomed to compliments, Snape looked away, and the emotion that overtook him caused him to cough. He stood and left the table, trying to hide the fact that blood had come up. Alarmed, Hermione went to his side. "Please tell me what to do!"

"Bottle... by the bed... table," he gasped, his fingers clutched at the bandages on his neck.

She turned, her eyes searching the bedside table. She saw the potion and grabbed it. As she passed it to him, she undid the cap.

He drank a bit then sat on the edge of the bed, holding the cloth to his face. His breathing got better. "The wound is still open all the way to the inside. It gets to me when... I forget... to take the potion. The words came out haltingly, "The potion seals it for a time, only a few hours."

"Please tell me what to do. How can I help? We can start immediately."

"Don't you have friends who will be missing you?"

"No, I had a job at the Ministry, but I left last month, after Harry left I couldn't face going there. I stay at twelve, Grimmauld Place. Harry left me some gold to live on for awhile."

"There must be someone missing you, isn't Molly keeping track of you? She is such a busy body, I would think even if Ron's gone she would be keeping tabs on you."

Hermione smiled, "Yes, she does check up on me now and then. Remus too."

"Well you must tell them something before they have every Auror out looking for you." He got up and went back to his dinner.

She followed and sat back in her chair, "I could go to Hogsmeade and send them a message. Tell them I decided to take a holiday. I could buy an owl. We could use it to send the messages and I wouldn't have to leave here very often."

"You sure you want to take this on?"

Hermione looked him in the eyes and saw for the first time since meeting him, a flash of fear, followed by anxiousness.

'He's afraid I'll leave him. Somehow this night, she had become a savior to him. Hope where there had been none.' Hermione thought to herself.

"Yes, Severus, I'm very certain." She saw him let out a breath of relief. "Now what is the first thing I can do for you?"

"Cut my hair!" He exclaimed vehemently.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 24

Hermione goes back to a deserted Hogwarts and come face to face with death.

After dinner, Snape brought her scissors, and he sat in the chair by the table. Hermione cut his hair carefully. She'd learned to cut the Harry's and Ron's hair during their time in the tent. She clipped the hair to his neck and feathered the sides so that wouldn't hang in his face. Even though he protested, she insisted on washing it afterwards. It was still graying, but now it was soft and shiny. Hermione loved the feel of it as she brushed it dry. She could tell he was enjoying the attention because he sat back and closed his eyes.

She then helped him run a bath and left him to bathe while she cleaned up the dinner dishes. She did them by hand the old-fashioned way, needing something to keep herself busy while he bathed. It took him much longer than she imagined it used to before his injuries.

Hermione thought about her next-door neighbor when she was just a child. One day he had suffered a stroke; after that, he'd had to have a lot of therapy, and his right side had been affected: leg, hand, and even his face had been affected. Hermione wondered if exercises would help Severus.

She used her wand to clean the bedsheets and transform the couch into a bed for herself. She was not about to stay in any other room. This little place he called home was surprisingly well lit and warm. A cheery fire blazed in the fireplace, and there was a comfortable chair across from the couch. The room was lined with shelves full of books. Hermione went closer to examine them. She ran her hand over a few of the spines, almost reverently. There were rare books she'd heard of, and many she didn't recognize. They were full of knowledge she didn't have, and she hoped that Snape would allow her read some of them.

He finally came out from the bathroom. He silently watched her for a minute as she examined his books. In this respect they were kindred spirits; knowledge was everything.

Hermione realized he was watching her, so she turned to look at him. His face seemed to have regained some color here in these rooms. He wore a dressing gown that

went nearly to his ankles and slippers. She smiled at him and came and brushed the hair back from his face. They stared at each other for a moment, and then Snape backed up.

"Would you please help me clean the wounds on my neck?" he asked, almost embarrassed.

"Of course."

"Do you think I will be able to help you brew a potion that will heal them?" Hermione asked as he gathered supplies and placed them on the table.

He sat in a chair, and she started to remove the old bandages.

"Yes," he said. "I have tried a number of times, but I cannot stir correctly with this hand. It's impossible to add the ingredients and stir simultaneously. Doing them at different times makes an inferior potion. It's kept me from dying of infection, but it does little to heal the wounds."

Hermione gently cleaned the wounds and re-bandaged his throat. She managed to blink away the tears stinging her eyes as she saw the full extent of the damaged tissues. In just a few short hours, Severus Snape had regained some of his humanity, and she was in place to be of service.

He stood. "Thank you, Hermione," he whispered. "You can go take a bath. I've left clean towels out for you, and one of my nightshirts is on the dresser."

"Thank you, Severus. I could use a bath after the night I've had."

She found the tub had been cleaned and refilled with steaming water. She stripped off her clothes and slipped into the hot water gratefully.

She couldn't believe all the changes in her life in the last few hours. She'd stolen into this tomb that was Hogwarts to find some tiny bit of happiness in the endless darkness that had engulfed her. Tonight she had a job of sorts, and she'd found someone who needed her desperately—the most unlikely person she would have thought of. She was amazed at how different he was now—open and able to show feelings.

Maybe all those years he'd been playing a role for Voldemort's or Harry's benefit. So much of his life had been lost because of Voldemort. So much of all of theirs lost. Tears stung Hermione's eyes as a vision of Ron being struck down by a Killing Curse from Bellatrix Lestrange's wand flashed before her eyes.

The fanatical Death Eater died only moments later when Neville Longbottom had caught her unaware with the same sword that he had just used to kill Nagini. She shook the thought away and finished her bath. She dried quickly and slipped on the nightshirt. She was only now realizing how tall Snape was as she saw the bottom pool around her feet. She used her wand to alter its size to fit her better. She cleaned and folded her clothing and stepped from the bathroom. Snape sat in the chair, staring into the fire. His eyes lit up when he saw her, and his gaze traveled over her.

Hermione felt her cheeks warm under his gaze. She suddenly remembered the huge crush she'd had on Snape back in her fifth year. It only made her blush deeper.

His smile changed to puzzlement.

She stammered, "I hope you don't mind that I changed the size. I can return it to its original size when I'm done."

"It looks nice on you," he said softly.

Suddenly she was drawn to him, and she asked, "Severus, will you hold me?"

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 24

Hermione returns to a deserted Hogwarts and becomes face to face with death.

This chapter seems to be a rather short. I will try to get a new chapter up soon. Thank you so much for all the comments I have received.

Shock registered in Snape's eyes, but he held out his arm. She climbed onto his lap drew his other arm around her, holding tightly to it. She rested her head against his shoulder.

After a few minutes of silence, Snape said, "I can understand an old man like myself enjoying this immensely, but you're a young, beautiful woman. You can have any man you want."

"You are hardly an old man. I need you, Severus. I need to be needed. When I came here tonight, it was to keep myself from falling into the black hole that had become my life. The emptiness was horrible. Seeing my parents smiling out of that album was the only thing I could think of that would possibly stop the world from spinning away from me. Now I have an anchor." She laid her head on his chest, and Severus gently stroked her hair.

"You need a father," he stated, feeling disappointed.

She pulled back and looked into his face. "No, Severus. I need a friend — a man in my life."

"You would think of me as a man for your life?" he asked incredulously. "I am the horrible Potions teacher you always hated."

"Not always," she murmured. She was growing sleepy. She hadn't felt so secure in months.

"Really!" he said with surprise.

"You have a brilliant mind and a damn sexy voice."

Severus smiled bitterly. "Not anymore."

"It doesn't matter; I can remember." Hermione reached up and slid a finger down his cheek in a soft caress. Her hand dropped back and her breathing evened out.

Astonished, Severus sat holding the sleeping girl. He must be dreaming, he thought as he held her close. She still clung to his arm. Life here had been dreadfully hard. He'd been existing on automatic: eat, dress, and try to survive. He had salvaged things that he needed from the castle. Food was stored under a stasis charm in the Potions classroom next door. He had enough supplies to last him a few years. But there had been no hope, no life. He'd felt as dead as the tomb he lived in.

Hope had fallen at his feet tonight from the most unlikely source. Miracle of miracles, she seemed to actually like him, even as damaged as he was — maybe because of the damage. She was a do-gooder. After all, house-elves had reaped the benefit of her efforts even when she was a child.

As the hours passed, Severus' back began to ache, and he was losing feeling in his legs. Managing to coax Hermione off his lap, he steered her half-asleep form toward his bed. He tucked her in and drew the drapes to give her privacy when she awoke in the morning. Then he returned to his seat in front of the fireplace. A small table next to his chair held a decanter of brandy and glass. He poured himself a small drink and sipped it slowly as he gazed into the fire. Finally, he rose, banked the fire, and crawled into the converted couch bed. Feeling hope again, he allowed himself to slip into the deepest sleep he'd had in years.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 24

Hermione returns to a deserted Hogwarts and comes face to face with death.

Thank you all so much for the wonderful reviews. I really appreciate them. This story has been through a number of betas but is now mostly corrected by Lisa; she is doing an amazing job. Thanks also to the TPP ladies who work so hard to get these chapters validated.

Hermione woke, feeling warm and comfortable. When she opened her eyes, she saw dark curtains. She wondered where she was as she scrambled to her knees. She peeked through the curtains and saw Severus stoking the fire across the room.

Oh! It wasn't a dream, she thought to herself. She really had found him. She felt her cheeks flame as she remembered falling asleep on his lap. How had he gotten her into his bed?

She slipped her legs over the edge of the bed and ran her fingers through her hair, trying to smooth it down a bit. She tugged the nightshirt into place before drawing back the curtains. Smiling, she called to him, "Good morning, Severus. Why did you give me your bed? I would have been perfectly comfortable on the sofa."

He'd stood up straight and turned toward her with a smile. "The sofa is hardly worthy of a lady. That wouldn't have been very gentlemanly of me."

"That's a new aspect of you," she said with a smile.

He turned away, feeling his ears heat up. He couldn't remember when he'd last been embarrassed.

Hermione smiled inwardly, delighted at the discoveries she was making. He looked quite handsome, even though his life had been hard here. He'd somehow relaxed—maybe because the stress he'd suffered at Voldemort's hands was gone. His face was no longer creased with anger. He looked years younger despite his injuries.

Hermione knew he was only about 42. He'd have to be if he was the same age as Harry's parents.

He turned, recovered, and asked, "Do you want some breakfast?"

"I'll go get dressed." She was a bit self-conscious about her bare feet and legs.

As if reading her mind, he teased, "Your feet are very becoming."

It was her turn to blush, and she realized she could easily care for this man. Astonishing herself, she realized she already did—and always had. No matter how hateful he had been, she'd always admired his brilliance and the sacrifices he'd made for the Order.

"Be careful," Hermione found herself saying. "You may find your silver tongue getting you into trouble."

The odd rattle came from his throat, and Hermione giggled with him.

"I would like some breakfast. What do you have?"

"Porridge and coffee," he said apologetically.

"That sounds good, Severus. I'll be right out."

She hurried to dress and joined him at the table. They ate in silence for a little while, and then Hermione asked him if, in his wanderings about the castle, he'd seen any clothing she might be able to use. "I have little money saved and need several changes of clothing if I'm going to stay here and not return home," she explained.

"I haven't really searched the Slytherin dorms. I really didn't want to go there alone. There should be little damage down there, as the lower parts of the castle are less affected. You should be able to find something down there."

"Why have you avoided it?"

"I cared for a lot of those students. I was hard on them because I wanted them to be the best they could be. I think more of my students died on the day of the final battle than in any other house. And many are in Azkaban. They followed their parents, and many were Death Eaters." He spat bitterly, "Lives were ruined by that egomaniac. Brilliant minds were wasted."

Hermione went to him and put her hand on his shoulder. "I can go there alone if you don't want to come."

"No, I'm not letting you out of my sight," Severus said vehemently.

"Are you afraid I'll run away and leave you?" she asked, smiling.

"No. Well, maybe," he confessed.

"Severus, I will not leave you except to go to Hogsmeade to send the message and get supplies. I will come back. That's a promise. I'm in this for the long run. You just try getting rid of me."

Severus saw her honesty and believed her proclamation. He nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

The uncharacteristic emotions that had run rampant in him the last 16 or so hours surprised him. Yet, he had admitted to himself that his barriers had been down for months; his abilities to resurrect them seemed gone. This openness with Hermione was a gift to him. He never remembered feeling so vulnerable, yet content, in his life. He realized she was watching his face, and he shook the contemplativeness away.

"Let me get my cloak. I think I have one you can use as well. It's warmer than the Muggle jacket you had on. It's rather cold in the castle."

They pulled on cloaks and set off to forage in the dorms. When the door to Snape's rooms closed behind them, they felt the chill of the tomb and shivered from the cold and emptiness. Hermione hadn't been able to see much the night before, another reason she'd come at night. Now the gray light filtered through, showing missing windows and roofs. Tears stung at her eyes.

Severus could feel her trembling and covered her hand with his own. "It takes some getting used to."

Snape led her down the hall, past the Potions classroom and into a corridor she'd never seen before. They went down a flight of stone stairs and came to a blank wall. Snape took out his wand and tapped the wall, and the stones slid away, revealing a doorway. Hermione slipped her arm through his for courage, and they stepped into the darkened common room.

"*Lumos*," Snape said. The tip of his wand shot light into the room and created a soft glow over the room. The common room was huge. There was some damage from falling stones from the ceiling, but for the most part, it seemed undisturbed. There were chairs by the fireplace with pillows and throws. There were game tables with chess games still in play.

Hermione released Severus's arm. "I can find the girls' dorm if you'd rather not see it."

"No, I will come. There may be a few snakes roaming the rooms. Slytherins kept them as pets. I've seen a few of them in other parts of the castle. They keep the rats down and don't seem to be in a hurry to leave here."

Hermione nodded, glancing around anxiously, and turned toward the stairs.

Hermione was struck by the riches of the bed trappings in the girls' dorm. Not only were the bed curtains the finest velvet, but they were trimmed with gold thread and designs. "It's beautiful," she said, touching one of the four-poster beds. The rich, red wood curled like a snake up into the velvet curtains. The headboards were intricately carved. Very few Slytherins were poor.

Severus said, "If you like, I could magically enlarge my quarters to make a room for you, and we could move one of these beds in for you."

She smiled. "I'd love that Severus, but let's wait a bit and see what we can do for you first."

Severus wondered privately if this meant she did not want to stay for a long period of time.

She saw the self-doubt and uncertainty in his eyes. She came and gave him a hug, holding onto him a little longer than was necessary. "I promised I would not leave you until you could go with me."

"Leave these walls?" he said. "This is my home."

"You can't stay here forever. We don't have to go to a city. We can find a small house in the country—a place we can walk in the sun. Severus, this is a tomb. Please at least think about it."

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 24

Hermione returns to a deserted Hogwarts and comes face to face with death.

Hermione turned her attention to the trunks next to the beds. She gathered underwear, robes, and cosmetics; she also found some jumpers and jeans. She found a few nightgowns and a couple pairs of shoes. They might need some size adjustments, but she was happy with her finds. She packed them all into the bag she kept at her neck, grateful again for the magic it held.

She checked the bathroom and found shampoo, soap, toothpaste, and even a fine brush and mirror set. She gathered a few undamaged books and some writing paper and quills from a desk. She could have Apparated to number twelve, Grimmauld Place to get her own things, but she was afraid someone would discover she really wasn't on holiday and would try to figure out what she was up to. The Order still used the house for business, and people came and went. She thanked the silence around her for the things she was borrowing and vowed to return them when they left here.

They walked back to his rooms in silence, Hermione taking in the devastation around her. She knew there were stone vaults in the Great Hall that held the bodies of the dead. She would never step foot in there. She was grateful that Molly had insisted on taking Ron back to their family plot by the Burrow. She didn't know if she could have stood knowing he was that close.

Finally the door closed behind them, shutting out the rest of the castle. Hermione took the bag off her neck and turned to Severus. He held out his arms as she stepped forward. She wrapped her arms around his waist and laid her head on his chest and let the hot tears come. He found himself stroking her hair as he tried to comfort her.

"You'll get used to it," he said.

"Have you ever gotten used to it?" she asked, looking up into his face. Her body trembled with emotion.

"No," he said. He let go of her so he could caress her face. She parted her lips slightly, and before he knew it, he'd leaned down and nearly kissed her. With a sigh he

backed away, drawing her with him.

He sat in his chair, and she climbed into his lap. He held her until the trembling in her body ceased, and she calmed down.

"Hermione, you are a treasure. You have no idea how you have changed my life in the last 20 hours."

"It's the same for me, Severus. I was lost, and you have given me purpose. I find you a most intriguing man."

"I find you to be quite the lady."

"I look forward to working with you." She hesitated and then said, "I hope that you are open to what could be."

Severus looked down into her eyes and asked, "Are you sure you want to go there? I'm a broken man—a puzzle with half the pieces missing."

She smiled and snuggled back up against his chest. "I'm good at putting puzzles back together."

They sat for a time in silence just enjoying the comfort of each other.

Finally, Snape sighed. "You'd better get into Hogsmeade. It's already mid-afternoon, and I would rather you be out of there before dark."

"Agreed." She reluctantly pulled away as he pushed her to her feet. She grabbed her bag and the cloak.

Snape went to the drawer in his bedside table and pulled out a bag of money. "Here, use this."

"I have some gold in the bank there. There are a few personal things I'd like to get."

"Like what?" he asked

She laughed. "OK, you got me. I'm a sugar quill addict, and Honeydukes is the only place that makes the raspberry ones."

He smirked at her. "Well, in that case, get me some caramel chocolate bars. I haven't had one in ages."

"Ah, so the Potions professor does have a vice," she teased.

"Quite," he said, taking the cloak from her and holding it up so she could slip into it. "Take the money. I have quite a bit, and I have no use for it right now. I don't trust Gringotts; I have my own stash here in the castle."

She smiled, brushing the soft hair from his forehead, and then teased, "Rich, too! How lucky can a girl get?"

He laughed, a deep rattle that might have scared someone else. It was music to Hermione's ears.

She took the bag and tucked it into a pocket.

"Severus, walk with me to the Shrieking Shack. We can use the tunnels. I can Apparate from there to Hogsmeade. I know it's only a couple blocks, but I don't want anyone to see me come out of the shack. They might ask questions. I'd love the exercise, and it will do you some good, too.

He scowled at her but agreed to go. "I guess I could use a concealment charm on us in case any visitors are sightseeing out by the gate. The old Whomping Willow died. I'm not sure if it was hurt in the war or just lost its will to live after the place was deserted. The stump is still covering the secret passage." He went and got his cloak.

Hermione slipped her arm in his. "Let's go."

They left the castle through a side entrance and made their way to the Whomping Willow. Hermione felt tears burn in her eyes when she saw the twisted, dried stump. She'd had the misfortune of being a victim of the tree, barely escaping its wrath. Still, it had been a magical creature, and she mourned its death.

Severus used his wand to open the passageway, and they slipped into the tunnel. He removed the concealment charm, and with a light from his wand, they made their way through the damp passage.

"You need to teach me that one. I wouldn't have had to scrunch under Harry's invisibility cloak all those years."

"Is that how he seemed to be in so many places and was never caught?"

Hermione smirked at him and then began to pay closer attention to her surroundings. She realized he must use the tunnel for some reason because it was clear of roots.

When she asked him, he said, "I occasionally go to Hogsmeade at night. I use a concealment charm and walk and look at the storefronts. I really haven't needed anything. The emptiness of the castle can get to you," he said as if reading her mind.

She squeezed his hand. "I'm here now, Severus."

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 24

Hermione returns to a deserted Hogwarts and comes face to face with death.

Sorry didn't realize how short this was. It had it's own natural breaking point. Thanks so much to Lisa for her amazing Beta work. I appreciate all your comments.

Severus and Hermione entered the Shrieking Shack through the tunnel door, seeing that not much had changed. It was still moving at random. The grinding, moving boards gave off the shrieking sound. Severus waved his wand, and the boards were silenced.

"It won't appear any different from the outside."

"Are you going to be OK here? I guess I really hadn't thought about what being here again might mean to you," Hermione said, worry visible in her eyes.

"I'm actually grateful for that day, despite the injuries I've had to endure. I was freed from a horrible existence as Voldemort's follower. You have no idea the horror I was forced to witness and sometimes endure at his hands. He left me for dead, too. I am grateful to Harry for ending that miserable creature's life. If I had my choice of being like this or going back to what I was, then I'd choose to stay this way, even before you came."

Hermione hugged him tightly. "I'll be back as soon as possible. I have several places I need to go, but I will come back."

"You are a woman," he said with a sigh of resignation, realizing it might be hours.

She punched his arm playfully and was delighted when he grinned at her.

"Why don't you clean up the place a bit? It will give you something to do."

"Hurry back." He passed her the list of potion ingredients; she squeezed his fingers and then Apparated away with a pop.

Severus immediately felt the silence, and he turned to look at the room. There was damaged furniture and dust inches thick with perhaps even a few bloodstains. With a wave of his wand, the stains vanished. An idea formed in his mind, and he smiled.

Hermione Apparated into Hogsmeade with a pop. She was in front of the apothecary. She stepped through the door, and a bell rang as the door shut behind her. A man appeared behind the counter in the dimly lit room.

"Welcome, may I help you?" he stated automatically.

Hermione stepped forward.

"Miss Granger!" he said, a bit astonished to see the war hero in his place of business. "It's been several years. What brings you here? We don't get many visitors now that Hogwarts is all but gone—just the locals."

She lied, "I'm studying for my healer's license, and I need some ingredients for my Potions final. I wasn't able to procure all I needed in London, and I thought about your business."

He reached out, and she handed him her list. He eyed it curiously, saying, "These are some rather advanced healing ingredients. I trust you know how to handle them. Some of them can be quite dangerous."

"Yes, as I said, I am in an advanced class."

He looked at her and then went to gather the ingredients. She looked around and gathered a few general potion ingredients from the shelves.

Finally, he set a number of vials and small canvas bags full of ingredients before her.

She paid for her things and then bade him a good day. "I may need to return. It's amazing how much easier it is to get everything here than go from shop to shop in the city."

"I look forward to your business, Miss Granger. Please tell your friends."

She smiled. "I will." With a wave she left the store and hurried down the streets to the small Gringotts branch. She withdrew some of her own gold and ran to the bookstore to get Severus a gift. She knew exactly what she wanted for him. She bought it and quickly left the store though she would have loved to linger over the many books that lined the walls and covered every surface of the store. She didn't want to call attention to herself. Unfortunately, being a war hero brought a lot of unwanted attention, and she didn't want anyone calling The Daily Prophet.

As the minutes passed and quickly became an hour, she worried that Severus would begin to fret. She bought the sugar quills and chocolates and a few other delicacies. Then she stopped into Hogsmeade Owl Emporium and purchased a small gray owl to carry her messages to the Weaselys and Remus. She went to the post office to send her first message, not wanting to wait until she got back to Hogwarts. She had promised to send Molly a message every week. The new owl had to be sent from its home base the first time for it to know where to return. She then went to the general store and bought a new toothbrush and a few other personal items. Placing all the packages into her bag and carrying the owl in its cage, she Apparated away, glad to be out of the small town.

As she focused on her surroundings back at the Shrieking Shack, her mouth fell open in surprise.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 of 24

Hermione returns to a deserted Hogwarts and comes face to face with death.

I apologize this is a very short chapter. I'm not sure why I didn't notice it before. Thank you all so much for your comments. I appreciate them. Enjoy.

The room was warm, clean, and filled with comfortable furniture. A fire blazed in the fireplace, and there were carpets on the floor. Books lined the walls.

Severus turned towards her from a chair where he'd been sitting holding a small glass of firewhisky. He rose as his eyes raked over her, and she saw a flash of relief in their depths at her return.

"How...?" she stammered, looking around.

"Transfiguration and some enchantments. I'm afraid the books are an illusion, but we can bring some real ones when we come back. I thought this might be a nice place to read to each other." He indicated the large stuffed couch by the fire. "Do you like it?"

"It's wonderful, Severus, thank you." She dropped her packages on the couch and set the owl cage on the floor. She slipped an arm around his waist and hugged him to her.

"I thought we could come here occasionally to get away from the dungeon. Maybe we could use a concealment charm on ourselves and walk down in the day. Winter is coming soon, and there won't be any gawkers for a few months."

"It sounds wonderful." She took his hand and pushed him down into the chair.

His eyes lit with amusement as she climbed into his lap.

"What?" she asked.

"Did I say anything? You don't see me complaining."

She giggled, planted a kiss on his cheek, and snuggled in.

"I could get used to this," he said amusedly. He found her need to be so close to him a bit unnerving. She was so young, and yet, he was enjoying this immensely.

"Me too," Hermione whispered.

"I still think you need a father figure," Severus countered.

She grabbed his face to plant a steamy kiss on his lips.

He stood, nearly dumping her on the floor.

"Hermione, think about what you're doing. I'm old enough to be your father. I know you have a need to be close to someone, and I'm the only one here, but look at me! I'm a broken wreck."

"But you're my broken wreck," she teased, forcing him to hold her close. "What you say is true, Severus. You are older, and I know it's hard for you because you were my teacher when I was a child. But I'm an adult now, and I have never met a man who complements me more. You and I are the same in mind. You are physically broken, and I'm a mental wreck. I need you so much, and I will never leave if that's what you wish. I know I've been here all of a day, but I feel at peace for the first time in my life."

"I'm not accustomed to anyone wanting to touch me. I've spent a lifetime building shields around myself to try to keep from getting hurt or hurting someone else. You can't imagine the hell I have lived." Severus shuddered as glimpses of his past flashed before his eyes.

She looked into his face and saw the pain of his memories in his eyes. "Severus, I know, I can't fathom what your life's been like. I only saw the fringe of that life through Harry's memories, but I can promise that if you'll stick with me, the future will have no resemblance to the past." Trying to lighten the mood she confessed, "Do you know I've had a crush on you for years?"

"Really?" He gave her a rare grin. "Though they were few and far between, that has been known to happen few times in the past, but the girls usually grew up and realized the error of their desires."

"Severus, we've had this discussion twice," she said. "I don't want to have it again. Please believe me when say I know what I'm feeling and that I want to be here and I'm so glad I found you."

"Alright," he said with a sigh. He caressed her hair. "I'm glad you found me, too."

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 of 24

Hermione returns to deserted Hogwarts and comes face to face with Death.

Hermione couldn't remember an evening she'd enjoyed more. She'd brought out some chocolate and fed him a few pieces. She had been delighted when he'd blissfully closed his eyes as the chocolate melted in his mouth.

In turn, he had teased her with a sugar quill, allowing her to savor its melt-in-your-mouth flavor.

Hermione finally brought out her gift. She unwrapped the soft, cotton cloth that covered it and laid it in his lap as he sat in the chair by the fire. She saw his eyes light up, and he reached out and caressed the soft cover. It was a hand-tooled leather-covered journal and quill set.

"Hermione, it's beautiful." His voice was rough and low with emotion.

She went down on her knees in front of him and placed her hand on his. Then she laid her cheek against his hand. "I'm glad you like it."

He gently caressed her hair and said, "It's the best gift I've ever gotten."

She did not see the glitter of tears that he blinked away.

About 10 p.m., he said, "We'd better get back to the castle and get some rest. We have a long day ahead of us tomorrow. I think we can make the healing potion for my neck, but it will take nearly all day and possibly into the night."

They reluctantly put out the fire, let the room resume shrieking, and headed back through the tunnel to the dark, foreboding castle.

Hermione let out a sigh of relief when the door was locked and warded behind them. Severus lit the fire magically, as well as a few candles and a lantern.

He looked over the potion ingredients, and his eyes shone with excitement. "As much as I would like to start tonight, we are both tired and need sleep. We will start in the morning."

Hermione nodded, hating for the evening to come to an end. She went to change into one of the gowns she'd salvaged. It was a t-shirt-like material, soft and warm, but it had an empire cut and lacy shoulder straps. Lace at the waist and v-neck made it modest, but it was becoming to her figure.

She left the bathroom and found Severus turning down the covers on the converted bed. She knew he meant to sleep there. "Your turn."

He smiled as he passed her. "The bed is ready."

She waited until he went into the bathroom and closed the door and then slipped into the converted bed and pulled the covers up to her neck.

She smiled. Though he hadn't said anything, she'd seen his eyes widen when he'd laid eyes on her new gown. Although it had only been a couple days, Hermione knew she would never leave his side for more than a few hours at a time to get supplies — not unless he asked her to. How had she lost her heart already? When had this happened? Did he care for her too? She could be setting herself up for a lot of hurt. She knew he was enjoying having her here and that he needed her right now. What would happen when he was back to normal and no longer needed the emotional crutch she was providing? Would he still want her with him?

She heard him come from the bathroom and sigh in exasperation when he spotted her in the transfigured bed. She felt him move closer, his fingers lightly caress her hair, and then the gentle pressure of his lips against her forehead. "Sleep well, Hermione. You are a treasure I do not deserve."

He turned away and slipped behind the curtains of his bed.

Hermione smiled as she let herself drift off to sleep. Perhaps he did care for her.

The next morning, they woke early, anxious to start the potion. The pair ate a quick breakfast of toast, coffee, and oatmeal. Hermione gathered the potion ingredients and waited for Severus to guide her into the potions lab. She was surprised when he touched a book on one of his shelves, and it swung aside revealing a stone stairway. It led down into an immaculate private potions lab.

"Oh, Severus!" she exclaimed. "This is wonderful! It's quite a well kept secret."

"You didn't think I would use that classroom for my private work, did you?"

"I guess if I ever thought about it, I might have imagined a small lab on the other side of the storage room," she said.

She placed the ingredients on a counter near the largest cauldron and ran around like a kid in a candy shop examining the many vials and labeled boxes. She exclaimed over a number of them, describing their properties and giving examples of what they might be used for.

Snape stood watching her delight and not finding the stream of knowledge pouring out of her annoying like he used to. Her knowledge was impressive. "You should consider a career in Potions. You seem to enjoy your amassed knowledge on the subject."

She said, "I thought about it, but I wasn't sure I wanted to apprentice myself to a Potions master."

"Why not? You have been a gifted Potions student since you were a child. Making Polyjuice Potion when you were only a young girl was an amazing feat, although the cat hair was priceless." That odd rattle of laughter came from him until he started to cough. It was a short bout and didn't require the potion.

Hermione stood red-faced. "You knew about that?"

"Madam Pomfrey had to come to me for the antidote. It had to be a specially made potion using some of the converted hair off your large cat head."

"I'm surprised you didn't come in and yell at me!"

"I did slip in and take a peek while you were asleep. I had the best laugh of my life. I hadn't laughed that hard in years. I couldn't very well scold you when I couldn't stop laughing."

Hermione giggled. "I wish I could have seen that."

"Perhaps I will show you someday."

She sobered, remembering he was very skilled with Occlumency and Legilimency. A relationship with this man could be a whole new world.

She looked him in the eye. "I look forward to that."

He ducked his head and turned away, realizing the intimacy such sharing would uncover. He could not fathom this girl's attraction to him.

"Well let's get started. You will need to chop the lizard gizzard in 0.8-inch sections. The lacewing flies need to be ground into fine powder." His voice continued throughout the morning, whispering instructions that Hermione tried to follow to the letter.

By midday, they had a fine potion brewing, so they took a short break for a lunch of dried meat and coarse bread washed down with tea. Refreshed, they returned to the lab and Hermione continued chopping, grinding, and measuring the ingredients. She added them as he instructed and stirred counter clockwise, then back a turn, then forward four... Never in her life had she brewed such a difficult, complicated potion. She found herself enjoying every minute. He was patient, and his instructions were to the letter. He also explained more about the properties of the ingredients as he went, and she soaked it all up into her photographic memory. She never forgot anything she heard.

Late that night they finally had a vial of potion and a salve for the exterior wounds. After a quick clean-up with their wands, they carried the precious pots up the stairs and into the kitchen. Hermione cut off the old bandages, cleaned the wounds, and applied the salve. Then Severus swallowed the potion.

She sat back with a sigh. "When will we know?"

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 of 24

Hermione returns to a deserted Hogwarts and come face to face with death.

"In the morning," he said, rubbing an eye in exhaustion.

"Do you feel anything?"

"Just some warmth." He stifled a yawn. "You did a good job, Hermione. I don't think I could have done a better job."

She flashed him a delighted smile. She reached across the table to cover his hand with hers.

"I had an excellent instructor throughout my Potions instruction. Now please, Severus, let's eat. Then you go to bed. You're exhausted."

After a light dinner of cheese and bread, he could no longer keep his eyes open and allowed Hermione to lead him to the bed.

She left him to undress, and when she returned from the bathroom, he'd already drawn the curtains. Hermione crawled into her bed and fell asleep listening to his rattled breathing. She woke a bit cold in the night and immediately realized she couldn't hear him. She quickly crept to his bed and drew back the green, velvet curtain to peek in on him.

He was lying on his back with only black pajama bottoms on. He had an arm thrown over his face, and in the dim light she could make out a strongly built chest lined with scars. Suddenly, she realized he was looking back at her with an amused smile on his lips.

"Oh, sorry!" she gasped, backing away.

"Hermione, come back. It's okay! Can't you sleep?"

She parted the curtains again, certain he could feel the heat radiating from her face.

"I thought you'd sleep till morning."

"I woke just a minute before you did. Why are you up?"

"I was cold, I guess, and then I realized I couldn't hear you breathing. I was concerned," she whispered.

He slid over a bit and held open the covers for her. "I can take care of the cold if you don't mind sharing."

Hermione visibly trembled. Sitting in his lap was one thing, sharing the bed was another. "Really, you don't have to do this."

"Come on," he urged her. "I'll be a gentleman. I promise. It's just for warmth."

She giggled nervously and climbed in next to him. She faced away from him, and he slid in closer enveloping her with the blankets and warmth of his body. He let his arm fall around her waist.

They both sighed, and he teased, "Be careful, Miss Granger, I could get used to this." His breath was warm against her neck.

"So could I, Professor Snape." She hugged his arm to hers, letting their fingers entwine.

They let themselves drift off to sleep.

Hermione woke to the feel of fingers caressing her hair. She lay still, enjoying the gentle touch for a few minutes and then finally sighed, as nature demanded attention.

"Good morning, Severus. Sorry, I need to use the loo," she said.

He sighed and regretfully released her. He enjoyed watching her shapely backside as she slid from the bed.

He followed, getting out of bed and building a fire to warm the room. He'd have given anything to crawl back into bed with her at his side. He didn't remember ever having woken in the morning with a woman at his side. He could not imagine "heaven" feeling any better. Later when he came from the bathroom, he found her waiting for him at the table with the scissors and bandages.

"Anxious?" he whispered.

"Aren't you?" She waved him to the chair.

"A bit." He sat down nervously, and she carefully cut the bandages off.

He could tell physically there was an improvement. He'd been free of the choking phlegm this morning.

"Oh, Severus!" She gasped when the bandages fell away unheeded to the floor. "Severus, feel."

She grabbed his hand and pressed it to his throat. His fingers slipped over healed flesh. Only thin ridges of scar tissue met his probing fingers. The wounds were closed.

Emotion bubbled up inside him, and he could not stop it. His body shuddered with relief and a ragged sigh escaped his lips. His eyes stung with tears.

Hermione wrapped her arms around his shoulders, and he buried his face against her. Sobs of relief tore from him. He hadn't realized how frightened he'd been. He'd thought himself alone with not a soul to go to for help. He'd been certain that showing his face to the world would mean Azkaban or worse. He'd been certain that the grievous wounds would eventually become infected, and he would die a horrible death.

Finally the tears stopped, and he realized his face was pressed between her breasts. His face heated up, and he pulled back.

"I was quite enjoying that." She smiled down at him; her face was wet with tears of happiness.

A deep chuckle came from his throat, and they both started. Even his vocal cords were healing.

Hermione was so excited that she leaned down and kissed his lips. Realizing what she'd done, she started to back away.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I was quite enjoying that." He repeated her words.

"You were?"

"Yes, quite."

He pulled her down into his lap, and their lips met. It was the gentlest, sweetest kiss he'd ever experienced. Overcome, he could not speak, so he held her tightly and silently thanked the Muggle God he'd heard about as a child. If anything in his life could make him believe in forgiveness, this was it.

They sat in silence a few minutes and then he put her on her feet. He was still a bit conflicted at having kissed a student—no—former student. He had to tell himself again she was of age and no longer a student. Not really experienced with what had just happened, he excused himself and went to the bathroom to examine the flesh on his neck.

Hermione smiled after him. She touched her lips and then turned to clean up the bandages and get breakfast on the table.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 of 24

Hermione returns to a deserted Hogwarts and comes face to face with death.

As he looked at his reflection in the mirror, he ran his hands over the once-puckered and seeping neck. There were red spots and lines of scar tissue, but the wounds were gone. If he applied more salve, they would eventually vanish.

The potion had been a very difficult and complicated one, and Hermione had brewed it like a professional. He couldn't have been more proud.

They spent the day preparing the first ingredients for the new potion. They wouldn't be able to start it until the new moon, which was a few days away.

Severus finally said, "Enough. Why don't we go to the Shrieking Shack and spend the evening. We can walk down under a concealment charm by way of the lake."

Hermione smiled excitedly and went to wash her hands. They gathered food and wine and packed a basket to take with them. The sun had just gone down, and the evening light shone off a new layer of snow. It was cold, but the air was still. They pulled their cloaks tightly around them, and Severus enveloped both of them with one charm so they could see each other. He took her hand, and they made their way through the snow. Even after darkness fell, they moved slowly, enjoying the freedom from the weight of the oppressive castle. They circled the edge of the lake, thankful that the stars were bright. They went down the road towards Hogsmeade and the Shrieking Shack. Once inside, Severus quickly lit the fire and warmed the room magically. Hermione lit candles with her wand. They sat on the rug in front of the fire and ate their dinner.

Later, Hermione got some pillows and propped them under Severus' head so he could lie on his back before the fire. She stretched out next to him and read from the book they had been reading to each other.

She finally set the book aside and asked, "Severus, have you ever heard of physical therapy?"

"Of course, my father was a Muggle. I watched TV as a kid."

"I know we will be using a potion that will heal the tissues of your leg and hand, but it's been nearly two years since you have been able to use them properly. I would like to see if exercising the muscles would help you regain some of your control while the potion is being made. It would be an interesting experiment," Hermione said with a slight twinkle in her eye.

Severus looked at her eagerness and decided it couldn't hurt. Thinking to himself, he grinned: They would have to have lots of close, physical contact and time with each other. He realized how much he'd come to enjoy her touch. He was like a starved man getting steak for the first time in his life. This was a win-win situation for them both.

She studied the grin on his face, and it made her feel warmed inside. She leaned over him and planted a light kiss on his lips. He slipped his hand into her hair and claimed her lips for a deeper, more profound, kiss. He released her with a sigh.

She looked at him curiously but did not ask why he always backed off. This was all new to him, and she had to give him time. She wouldn't make him feel bad by letting him know how much she wanted more from him.

She sat back. "I think the little bookstore in Hogsmeade has some Muggle books. They can order something if they don't have what we need. If I only had a computer..." Hermione trailed off.

"A computer! Those things are a menace." He sat up, and she helped him get to his feet.

"Severus, you can find out anything almost immediately on the Internet. The research possibilities are endless."

"Good books will tell you the same thing if you know where to look." The scathing look so reminiscent of Hermione's school days was on Severus' face, and she had to try hard to suppress a smile.

"You don't have to tell me that. I'm just saying that a computer has its uses. I had one at my parents' house. Did you know there are wizards who have websites? If you know the spell, you can see things the Muggles can't," she retorted.

"No," he said with a sigh, "I didn't. I'm not sure I agree with wizards using Muggle technology. Muggles are smart, and someone could stumble on to one of those sites by accident."

"Well, the Ministry is aware, and they even have an office overseeing the websites now."

Severus just shook his head and said, "Order the books from the Hogsmeade bookstore, if you must, but don't be surprised if they ask questions."

"Does it matter, Severus? It's none of their business."

"Maybe you should go disguised. Wizards are suspicious by nature—it's how we protect ourselves. They will start to murmur to each other if 'the war hero' starts to show up all the time. You don't live near here and the locals know that."

She nodded. "You're right. Maybe a gypsy would be fun this time. Would it be so terrible for them to find out you are alive?"

He got up and angrily paced the floor. "I will not be a source of pity!" He erupted with the old venom in his voice. "There's no guarantee the potion will work after all the time

that has lapsed. I could be maimed forever.”

Hermione came up behind him, put her arms around him, and laid her cheek against his back.

“Severus, there are others with permanent scars. Those scarred by magic cannot be healed. George Weasley has the missing ear, and his brother Bill has scars from Fenrir Greyback. No one looks down on them.”

His back was rigid. She thought he might pull away, so she locked her hands together and held on tightly. After a few minutes, he relaxed against her with a sigh and covered her hands with his.

“Your pride is stopping you from living the best life you could have. You’re an amazing teacher, Severus. Look at what we have already accomplished together. You don’t have to be able to brew the potion yourself. I do believe that we will have success with the potion. In the unlikely chance it doesn’t work, you can hire an assistant.”

“Are you applying for the job?” he whispered. He turned in her arms and faced her.

Her eyes widened with surprise. “Are you offering an apprenticeship or just an assistantship?”

“Apprenticeship, with all the Bonds that it entails. If I go back to society, I want you there with me.”

“Severus!” She slipped her hand behind his neck and drew his face closer. “I would be honored to be your apprentice.”

“Bound 20 years,” he reminded her.

“I’m already bonded in my heart.” She shyly glanced up at him.

Now it was his turn to be surprised. “Truly?”

“Truly,” she whispered against his lips.

Then he was kissing her hard and hungrily. All thoughts of her having been his student as a child were gone. Finally they just held each other.

“Hermione,” he groaned against her hair, “you turn me inside out.”

“That’s a good thing, Severus. You can’t imagine how much you have changed my life in such a short time.” She drew him back to the rug before the fireplace.

They sat together just enjoying each other’s company and silently staring into the fire for a good hour. Occasionally they would kiss, but mostly they just snuggled. Finally, they gathered their things and walked slowly back through the tunnels, using warming charms to heat the space around them. It was frigid.

“It’s probably snowed,” Severus observed.

“Oh, I used to love the snow. Harry and Ron...” She swallowed and forced herself to continue, “...and I had the best snowball fights.”

Severus chuckled. “I watched a few of those from the observatory tower.”

“You did?” She was surprised and pleased to know he had watched them. She snuggled up against him. “I suppose you had a sneer on your face the entire time.”

He laughed. “Of course. Potter was fuel for my role as a hated Potions master and servant of Voldemort.”

“Do you really hate him, Severus?”

Thank you all so much for all your kind comments. A special thanks to my Beta, Lisa. She is doing an amazing job.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 of 24

Hermione returns to a deserted Hogwarts and comes face to face with death.

I’m very sorry this is another short one. I wrote this all months ago and I guess they seemed like natural breaking points.

“Hate him?” he reflected. “No, Hermione, I don’t hate him. I cared deeply for his mother, Lily. She was my best friend before we came here to Hogwarts. We grew up in the same neighborhood. When we came here, Potter took her from me. Harry had the misfortune of looking like his father. Him, I hated.”

“Harry had her eyes, and every time I looked into them I felt the horror of not being able to stop what Voldemort did to her. In my grief, I often wished Harry had died instead of her. Then I would feel the horror of that wish, too. I knew what Harry was destined to do, and I had to protect him. Turning spy for Dumbledore was the hardest thing I’ve ever done and maybe the best thing.”

“It definitely was the best and most noble thing to do. I realized how loyal you were to us all when you stood in front of us when Lupin turned werewolf. You risked your life, even though we had attacked you and left you there to awaken alone.”

“I didn’t think anyone noticed. I was terrified for you.”

“Me? You mean all of us.”

“No, you, Hermione. I may not have known it then, but I saw such potential in you. You’re so intelligent. I truly believe you could be a far better Potions mistress than I will ever be.”

She hugged his arm. "You really think that, really?"

"Yes, you have been amazing with the potions we have worked on."

"I'm only following instructions. I have not been the creator."

"Do you realize you have instinctively foreseen my instructions on several occasions? You have an internal instinct for the right course of action. Several times you stirred a potion a certain way or added an ingredient before I could tell you to do so."

She pulled him to a stop and said, "I have?"

He gave her a bittersweet smile. "Yes, you most definitely have, my apprentice."

"I'm sorry. I'll listen harder to your instructions." She turned away, pulling him back into their walk.

"Hermione, that was not a reprimand. It was a testimony to your brilliance with potions. You instinctively understand what we are doing. Your mind is steps ahead of a potion you have no prior knowledge of. You do not realize what a gift that is."

They were silent as they entered the castle, and they moved through the cold, dark hallways as quickly as possible. They gave Hogwarts the reverence it deserved as a tomb but felt the seeping blackness chill them to the bone. Being away from the darkness only seemed to make it deeper and more depressing.

When they entered his rooms and barred the door behind them, the lamps and fire seemed to warm them quickly. "We could always move to the Shrieking Shack," Hermione suggested.

"This is my home," Severus stated dryly, turning away from her.

She sighed silently. *How will I ever get him to leave this place?*

They didn't speak much after that. Both seemed to slip into his or her own thoughts. Severus insisted on unpacking the dinner things and sent her to take her bath. When she returned to the room, she found he had not transformed the couch into a bed. She took her wand out to take care of it.

His voice touched her. "I thought we could share the bed again. You have no idea how cold it can be after the snow." He was looking at her like a starving child hoping for a piece of bread.

She nodded, swallowing the emotion that threatened to cloud her eyes in tears that might make him withdraw. She crawled into the bed. She would rather be here than any place she could imagine.

Severus turned away without a word, blinking away emotion. He'd felt bad for snapping at her earlier. She'd only given him support and care since she had gotten here. Did she realize what an emotional cripple he was? It was not only his body that had limited response. His emotions had been crippled his whole life. The interactions he had had with Hermione these last days were the closest to a "normal" relationship he'd ever experienced. His father had beaten him and emotionally abused him. His mother had been so abused herself that she had withheld any affection she might have had for him. He believed she was so withdrawn that she had nothing to give. He wondered why she had never defended herself with magic. What would Hermione say if she knew he had killed his own father? It had been to save his mother's life, but what would she think?

He pushed the thoughts away and completed his bath. The thought of sleeping next to her soothed his soul. When he crawled into the bed behind her, she was already asleep. He pulled her close, and she sighed with pleasure, relaxing against him. That was all he needed to send him into another night of deep sleep.

Thank you again for all the kind remarks you have made. They keep me going. I'm so glad you like my writing. Thanks again to Lisa who is doing a very good final Beta job. I couldn't do this with out her. There where others who helped me get going at the beginning, a special thanks to them as well, Gersknightlady

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 of 24

Hermione returns to a deserted Hogwarts and comes face to face with death.

The next morning Hermione got an owl from Molly. It read:

Hermione dear,

I am very concerned about you! Are you sure you are all right? You didn't convince me like you did Harry, dear. I know better than that. You were still a mess when he left. I knew you did it for his and Ginny's good, and that made me love you all the more. But we are your family and always will be. Please, let us help you. Arthur and I do so love you as our own.

Please let me know where you are, Hermione.

-Molly

Hermione sat and looked at the message until Severus took it from her hands and read it himself.

"What can I tell her?" She pleaded with him for a solution.

"Explain that you are with an old Hogwarts friend and are being well taken care of. That might hold her off for a few days."

"Not many."

"You're right. Plus, there are few worse people than Molly for not keeping a secret. If we tell her about me, it will be only days before the whole wizarding community knows I'm alive. I swear if that Rita Skeeter woman shows up, I will change her into a toad."

Hermione laughed until the tears ran. "...would...like...to...see...that," she stammered through her gasps of breath.

Severus was amused, but he stood there glaring until she snickered and finally came to her senses.

"Hey, maybe I should tell her that I have an offer to apprentice with someone, and I am considering the offer. It's true, isn't it? She knows I would be then bound to the will of my new master."

"She would never allow it without knowing who it is," he stated bluntly.

Suddenly nervous she asked, "Can she track me through the owl, Severus?"

"There are tracking spells, but they are a deep invasion of privacy and seldom used by people who respect one another. So far I have detected nothing in my wards. But she can go to Arthur. Despite looking like a bumbling idiot at times, he is quite a formidable Wizard."

She nodded. "Yes, he was a valuable Order member in the final battle. I didn't see much of it, as I was busy with my own concerns, but I know he stood against some very powerful Death Eaters."

"He did bring down Lucius," Severus commented.

"Yes, he did. I'd nearly forgotten that."

"What if I didn't reply?" she asked, trying to get back to the task at hand.

"You have to. She won't stop until she finds you if you don't. Appeal to her—tell her you need to distance yourself from Ron's family, if only to give yourself time to heal. Tell her it's too hard to sit at the kitchen table or walk the rooms of the house without thinking of him. Assure her of your love for her and the family and beg for some time."

"Maybe that would work for a while. I'll also promise to Owl her every couple days," Hermione murmured softly.

"You can only try," he said, running a finger gently over her cheek before turning away.

While Hermione penned her response and sent it back with Molly's owl, Severus fed their owl and got breakfast ready. They made plans to brew a few simple potions for nutrition and good health—potions Hermione already knew how to brew.

Hermione asked, "Some of the plants we need for ingredients must be fresh. Where are we going to get them? I really don't want to go to Hogsmeade today."

His face suddenly lit up, and he gave her a rare smile. He said, "Get your cloak; we are going for a walk."

"Where are we going?" she asked, gathering her cloak and tossing him his.

"You'll find out once you put on your cloak and walk with me." He gave her his all-so-familiar smirk.

She knew now that he wouldn't tell her, and she found herself excited as they wound their way down the corridors of Hogwarts. She realized they were headed for the kitchens, but they only walked through the dark rooms, and Severus grabbed a hold of the latch on the back door and slid it open.

A small, covered corridor with a dim light at the end greeted them.

Hermione had never seen this place. The few times she had been down to the kitchens for late night snacks, the door had never been open. She always assumed it went into deeper basement storage rooms.

They stepped from the corridor into another world. Here in this tomb was a place so alive Hermione gasped with delight and laughed up into Severus face. Then she danced away into a sea of flowers and green plants. Tiny enchanted birds fluttered here and there. Butterflies and bees went about pollinating the many plants that seemed to fill the tall towering green house. Full-grown trees stretched 60 feet above them, and there was a carpet of green grass under her feet. There was jasmine and fennel, basil and peppermint, and rosemary and sage. The air was ripe with the scent of spices, as well as ingredients for the potions they would need.

"Severus, why didn't you tell me about this place? It's wonderful!"

"I honestly hadn't thought about it since you got here. It maintains itself, and I really have so enjoyed your presence that I just let it slip my mind."

She felt warmed by his words and came and slipped her arms around his waist to give him a tight hug. "Where did all this come from?"

"Most of it was here. This is the garden of the original Hogwarts house elf cooks. If you go farther into the garden, you will realize it's huge; but it's enchanted so that from the outside it doesn't look big at all. There are all manner of fruit trees and vegetables there, but at this time of year there isn't a yield. Only the herbs we need will you find now and maybe a few tubers. The garden has a rest period, and you've come at the most barren time. There are grubs in the soil that clean and enrich the dirt during this time of year when the ground is frozen outside. In a few weeks, it will replant itself and begin a new crop of things we will be able to eat in about a month's time. I think the house elves originally prepared by stocking the basement larders with fresh things they could cook for the staff and students. I really do have enough food right now and haven't taken the time to put a store of items away. It's a lot of physical work that I just couldn't face alone. A few of the plants I brought here from the Forbidden Forest. It saves me a trip there for ordinary, but wild, plants."

"Why do you think it was left here?" she said, cupping a beautiful lavender rose. She pressed her nose to it and inhaled a soft scent almost like a tealeaf.

"Not sure...probably only the elves knew, and they wanted to leave something alive here. All of the green house plants in Professor Sprout's domain were removed."

Hermione spent an hour running here and there and laughed so much that Severus just stood back and watched, feeling overwhelmed with a desire to laugh with her. He supervised as she gathered the ingredients they would need, and then with a sigh of regret, they made their way back into the darkness away from the life that teemed there. But now the darkness didn't seem so oppressive. Hermione carried the pictures in her mind of the beautiful place, and Severus remembered the pleasure of hearing her laughter.

They spent the afternoon brewing the simple potions and talking about the healing potion they would soon start. That night, Severus taught her how to make a delicious meal out of some of the herbs and spices and a thick pink tuber he had brought back from the garden. She realized as they ate the special meal that cooking was just an extension of potion brewing. She shouldn't have been surprised that he knew how to cook and did a good job of it.

Later that evening she sat in his lap happy, but exhausted, as he read to her. She fell asleep, and he levitated her to their bed and tucked her in against himself before falling into another night of deep, restful sleep.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 of 24

Hermione returns to a deserted Hogwarts and comes face to face with death.

The next day was the day of the full moon. They went down to the lab about midday and started preparing the ingredients for the potion. Hermione listened very carefully to Snape's instructions and followed them to the letter. She chopped, ground, and even charmed some of the ingredients. It was one of the most complicated potions she had ever been involved with. They took a break for dinner and then returned to the lab as the moon came out. Severus surprised her with a rare golden cauldron. It wasn't very large, but its weight was staggering. A magical fire was built under it, and special spells were placed on the fire. It had to burn a month, and temperatures had to change as ingredients were fed into it. The result would be a one-ounce, clear, violet potion. By 2 a.m., they had a thick, green potion bubbling happily in the pot.

Severus assured Hermione that it was exactly as it should be. Too excited to sleep, they took a walk down to the lake and sat on the stone bench engraved with a dedication to Dumbledore. Magically warmed, it was luckily still functioning, and they snuggled together and watched the deep, dark lake by the moonlight. Every now and then, a mermaid would jump into the moonlight, delighting Hermione and also making her shiver.

"What's wrong, Hermione? It can't be the cold." He drew her closer to him.

"I always loved the lake and part of me still does, but I cringe when I think that Dumbledore placed me under that icy water during the Triwizard Tournament. How could he have endangered us that way? Did we agree to go? I don't really have much memory of that night. I remember being summoned to his office but nothing after that."

"I understand how you feel; I was very tense that night and during the contest. I don't really know why. The contestants accept the danger when they enter the contest, but their friends should not be subject to such danger. It seemed cruel, and I told Albus that, but he ignored me. He was always smiling with that damn twinkle in his eyes. I sometimes wondered about the power of that man. He bloody always seemed to know everything!"

"You worried about me? Back then?" she asked.

"Yes, I guess I did," he said, a little bashfully.

"Severus, did you ever think of me as more than just a student?"

He paused for a long moment and then answered. "I wasn't a nice man then, Hermione. When you live in Voldemort's world, you see, and are, subject to many human deprivations. I had thoughts, but because of Albus's trust in me, I would never have betrayed him. There were times when I thought of you as being my intellectual match. Mentally, you were the most disciplined girl I've ever known. Your intelligence threatened me when you were a child."

"Threatened?" Hermione protested.

"I knew that one day you could very well match or exceed my intelligence, and it irked and fascinated me at the same time. I can promise you that thoughts of your body did not surface until I saw you in that dress at the Yule ball. You were so beautiful."

"Oh, Severus," she said, giggling like a school girl. "I saw you watching me, and I wanted to dance with you. Victor never held a candle to you in those black robes." She leaned over and gave him a soft kiss.

"I was a dirty, old man, Hermione. How could you have looked at me with carnal thoughts?"

"I have told you before: You have a damn sexy voice. You have no idea how good it is to hear it again."

She shivered, and he pulled her close, wrapping his cloak around her. "I've never done anything to deserve this."

"Severus, you helped Harry defeat Voldemort."

"It doesn't outweigh the evil things I did as a Death Eater."

"Another life, another time," she replied, snuggling up against him.

"You dismiss it so easily," he said incredulously.

"Yes, and you must let it go too. We have a brave new world to live in. It must include those of us who are strong in our magical abilities; to hide from our people is a crime. Severus, you can be Minister or at the very least Headmaster of the New Hogwarts. Or the greatest Potions master ever. Please say you don't intend to stay here forever. There is so much we could do for the wizarding community."

"When we have done all we can, I will consider it, Hermione. For you."

Hermione raised his hand to her lips and kissed it, and then he held it against her cheek.

"Let's go home," he said. "It's time we were in bed. We have a lot to do tomorrow."

They returned to his rooms and ate a snack. Then they changed and crawled into bed. This time, Hermione cuddled up in the crook of his arm with her face against his chest.

"Severus?" she asked.

"Yes?" he returned, in almost a whisper.

"Don't you want me?"

"Very much." She could hear the pain in his voice.

"Then why?" She let her voice trail off, embarrassed that she had finally asked.

He cleared his voice, and with pain she had never heard in his voice he said, "I hoped you wouldn't ask until the potion was complete."

"Why?" she said, looking up into his face. "It doesn't matter to me if you're handicapped."

His eyes filled with more pain that she'd ever seen, and she wished she hadn't asked.

With a voice raw with emotion, he said, "I cannot. My arm and my leg are not the only thing affected." His voice was now a hoarse whisper.

As his words penetrated her mind and she realized what he meant, she turned her face and buried it against his chest. "Oh, Severus! I'm so sorry."

"It didn't bother me until you came. I had no need. I was quite dead emotionally. Now I have a reason to live. I am hopeful that I will be restored with the potion. Then I will show you how much I want you."

She raised her head and looked into his face. "I wouldn't mind some creativity."

He blinked at her, and a smile formed on his face. He suddenly felt alive, and he chuckled. "Go to sleep, Hermione. We have much to do tomorrow, and we will *both* need our wits about us." He caressed her face with his fingers. "I do want you... just take that to your dreams tonight."

Hermione smiled and kissed him softly, lingering to tease his lips. Then she snuggled down and fell asleep.

Severus lay awake long after and listened to her breathing. He was trying to stuff down the resurfacing horror he'd felt when he'd first realized his manhood was damaged. He knew enough to realize he could satisfy her in other ways, but he wanted their first time to be theirs, not just hers. Maybe that was selfish, but for now he would try to hold to that goal. He finally fell asleep in the wee hours of the morning.

Chapter 17

Chapter 17 of 24

Hermione returns to a deserted Hogwarts and comes face to face with death.

True to form, Molly was not happy with the unnamed "old" Hogwarts friend, and her next letter was very demanding.

Hermione tried again to appeal to her need to distance herself from Ron's home and family.

During the day, they worked on the potion and a few others as they waited for the results. Each night the potion was a different color, and so far it matched the desired results. Some evenings, they went to the Shrieking Shack, and Hermione and Severus worked on physical therapy from a book she'd gotten on a quick trip into Hogsmeade two days after the potion was started.

Severus would lie on the rug before the fireplace, and Hermione would manipulate the leg muscles. Eventually, he was able to raise his own leg in a series of lifts with weight added. She worked his fingers manually for several weeks before he managed some muscle twitches on his own, but he was amazed at the results they had gotten. He still had no control of his fingers, but they did move when he focused. His limp had improved a lot, which helped lessen the pain he sometimes felt in his back.

They went into the magical garden to soak up some sun and have picnics. Severus taught Hermione about each of the hundreds of plants that grew there—how to harvest and prepare them for potion ingredients. He also taught her to cook. And when the fresh vegetables started to grow, they harvested them, and their diets improved greatly. Severus was even regaining some color in his face.

Hermione was getting notes from Molly nearly every day. The woman was relentless and continued to question Hermione's whereabouts.

Severus knew it was only a matter of time before she would track them down and send someone to see to Hermione's safety. Hermione had gone to Hogsmeade several times for minor but important ingredients, and he knew that news would slip out. It wouldn't take a rocket scientist to send an Auror to Hogwarts to look for her. Molly probably thought some Death Eater still at large had her. The woman just could not see that Hermione was happier away from her former life.

Twenty-three days into the potion, a storm hit. It was not only a storm of wind and snow but also of freezing ice. The sound of it was horrendous, and they sat in the bed clutching each other for comfort. They could hear more of the battered castle falling in on itself.

Severus shouted over the noise, "This is the third storm like this since I came here."

"How did you stand it alone? I'd be going crazy," Hermione said.

"I tried to use my Occlumency to block it out. I found the castle noises to be like death over and over. In my mind, I saw people falling on the battlefield every time something would crash in. I even felt Nagini's fangs again. Both times, I woke curled in the fetal position in the tub."

Tears streamed from Hermione's eyes as she listened to his story. The hell he must have been through. What kind of man was able to take who he was today with her and become the monster Voldemort had created him to be? Somehow Dumbledore had seen through it all. Somehow he had reached into the wretched creature and reanimated his dead heart. She continued to cling to Severus as much for him as for herself, and she finally fell asleep from exhaustion.

Severus held her close, listening to her breathing. The storm had been such an ordeal that he'd somehow caught bits and pieces of her thoughts and her terror. He could not fathom her ability to love him. He knew she loved him, though she had never said those words. Somehow they had become bonded even without the ceremony to make him her Master or her husband. Would she welcome that bond when he told her? He did not share with her the terror he lived with, of someone coming to "liberate" her, taking her away from him. Who would it be? Lupin and Tonks, Molly, or Harry? As the wind finally died down, he fell asleep, but his dreams were punctuated by his terrors.

They spent two days using their wands to clear the debris from the corridors and trying to repair the worst with *Reparo*. At the end of the second day, they added the last ingredient to the potion. For the next six days, it would be mostly on its own with a little monitoring. The color now was blue.

That night Severus took Hermione to the enchanted garden, and he surprised her by cooking her dinner on a small barbeque. He had laid a beautiful table and chosen an excellent wine. Small fairies fluttered to and fro, singing a soft, gentle tune.

There were lightning bugs sending a gently glow around them. When dinner was done, he took her hand. With a flick of his wand, she wore a dress close to the one she'd worn at the Yule ball—but a bit more adult and revealing. She raised an eyebrow at him, but when he'd transformed his own robes she took the hand he offered, and they danced to music that seemed to come from the flowers around them. She did not ask how he'd done it all. She accepted the magical night and relaxed into his arms, knowing there was no place else she would rather be. They danced for an hour, and then he led her back to their rooms.

He drew her a bath, and she found it full of iridescent bubbles. When she got out of the tub, she found a shimmering, blue gown; it was the most beautiful thing she had even seen. She came out of the bathroom to find that Severus had lit at least 30 candles spaced out all over the room. There were rose petals on the bed, and she felt her heart beginning to pound in her chest. He was dressed only in black silk pajama bottoms. "Severus?" she whispered.

"You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen, Hermione, and you have given me so much. You deserve all that you desire, and I have come to realize that I do not need to be so involved physically to enjoy you just as you are."

He took her lips and kissed her until she was breathless. She buried her fingers in his hair as his lips lowered to her breast. He teased her nipple through the fabric and then used his good hand to slowly pull the strap down and reveal a taut, pink nipple. They moved back to the bed, and Hermione let the gown fall to the floor and crawled in. Severus followed as best he could with her helping him.

She tried to divest him of his pajama bottoms, but he let her know he did not feel comfortable. She laid back and let her senses go as he touched and tasted and caressed every part of her. As she felt herself reaching a peak she cried out, "Severus, join my mind, please. I want you to feel how much I love you." Instantly he was there. They were one, and she felt him as he felt her. She cried out her pleasure, and he echoed her. Severus spent another hour pleasuring her. Finally sated, she slept.

Severus felt so overwhelmed that he cried. So unused to feeling and experiencing such love, he could not contain the emotion that was erupting from him. He'd never been loved this deeply before. Dumbledore had loved him like a son, but the bond he and Hermione had forged in a little over a month had altered his entire outlook on life. He had a reason to go on. He had to face this future—a new world with new possibilities—for not only the wizarding world but also for himself as well. He'd always expected to die, and he'd never even considered life after Voldemort.

With some effort, he stuffed the feelings behind a wall in his mind. Now that was familiar. He'd always lived behind this wall. It was his security and strength. He fell asleep wondering how he could learn to accept the emotions without feeling like he was going to fly apart.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18 of 24

Hermione returns to a deserted Hogwarts and comes face to face with death.

Hermione was sitting in Severus' lap as he read to her late at night. They could barely contain their excitement. The potion would be completed tomorrow, and neither of them could sleep. Hermione wore only a silky, blue nightgown, and Severus wore his black pajama bottoms. The last month had sealed their relationship. They were as close to being one as two people could emotionally get.

Severus put down the book and was kissing her with expertise that left her weak with desire. "Tomorrow night," he whispered against her lips.

Suddenly the door blew off its hinges, and dust rained down around them.

"Hermione! Are you there?" came Harry's voice from behind the cloud of dust.

"POTTER!" Snape stood, holding her against him—partially for protectiveness and partially to cover his half nakedness. "Expelliarmus!" he shouted.

The wand flew from Harry's hand, and he crashed back against the wall. "SNAPE!" Harry cried in shock when the dust settled. "Get away from her. What's going on here? You're dead!"

"Hardly," he drawled, glaring at the once-despised, young man.

Harry ducked, grabbed his wand, and fired a spell off. Hermione stepped in front of it and deflected it, knocking Harry back on his behind.

"Harry, what are you doing here?" Hermione demanded, standing protectively in front of Severus.

"Rescuing you," he said, starting to look a bit sheepish as he realized there was more going on than met the eye. They were in a very obvious state of undress, their physical contact was gentle, and Hermione was protective of Snape. The room looked cozy and homey. It wasn't the the dungeon of torture Molly had led him to believe Hermione was in.

Hermione laughed. "Harry, I don't need rescuing." She summoned their robes.

Harry looked very embarrassed, and extremely confused, as he climbed to his feet. He bent to pick up his wand. He looked at Snape for signs of attack, but the man was now relaxed. He did a Reparo on the door, and the dust from the room reassembled into a door. Aware that Snape could easily disarm him again if he wanted to, Harry made no threatening moves.

"I told Molly many times, in many letters, that I was not in any danger and that I was doing something I really wanted to do. I could not have been more clear." She had slipped to Snape's side, and they now stood arm in arm.

"I don't understand. How can you be alive?" He addressed Snape. "I saw you die."

"Near death, as close as a man can get. Sit." He indicated the couch across from their chair. "I'll make tea."

As he moved away Harry noticed a limp and realized he was not using his hand. He glanced at Hermione and saw that she was watching Snape with a tender look in her eyes.

"You're in love with him!" he accused, bitterness creeping into his voice.

"We found each other when we had a need so great that we had almost given up on life. He needed me, and I needed him. You have no idea."

"Hermione, why did you let Ginny and I go if you were hurting so much? You should have known we would do anything for you."

"I did know, Harry," she said, reaching out and taking his hands. "But I was holding you back from having the life all newlyweds need."

"What are you doing here?" He glanced at Snape. "How did you find him?"

"Let's wait till Severus joins us."

Harry nodded and sat back. He glanced around the room and saw the big, curtained bed and fought the red heat that climbed up his neck. He glanced at Hermione and

saw her blush, and he knew they were sleeping together.

"I do love him," she said softly. "More than I could ever imagine."

"That's weird, Hermione," he whispered, noting that Snape was coming toward them, levitating a tea tray and biscuits.

"Thank you, Professor," Harry said as he took the teacup from Snape and selected a biscuit.

Snape just raised an eyebrow. "Hardly your Professor, Mr. Potter." After serving Hermione and taking a cup for himself, Snape sat in his chair, and Hermione perched on the arm.

"If you thought Hermione was in such danger, why did you come here alone?"

Harry squirmed. "I'm sorry about the door. It was so heavily warded, I thought for a moment that Molly was right."

"But you didn't when you came here?" Hermione prompted.

"No, not really. I read your letters. If you had been in trouble, it would have been encrypted with messages of some sort." He sipped his tea and bit into the biscuit. Looking down at it, he realized how hungry he was and how good it was. He attacked it and grabbed another one.

Snape chuckled.

Harry stared at him like he'd grown another head.

"I can laugh if I find something funny, Potter. Life's a lot different now that Hermione's here."

"I can see that," Harry replied unbelievably.

"I'm surprised you're not trying to tear me apart after all the things I did to the people you loved."

Harry surprised the older man when he laughed. "I've changed my mind about you, sir. Without your help, I would never have been able to defeat Voldemort. The memories you shared with me were very helpful, and I realized how much you sacrificed to keep me alive and to bring me to the point of being able to defeat that monster. I realized you were counting on me to free you from his servitude. I also realized how much Dumbledore loved you and believed in you. He forgave you. I learned after time that I could too."

Harry saw the look of shock pass across Snape's face, and he was gobsmacked when the man's eyes filled with tears.

Chapter 19

Chapter 19 of 24

Hermione returns to a deserted Hogwarts and comes face to face with death.

Hermione stood and gathered Severus close. "Harry, can you go outside for a bit. Please."

Harry nodded and slipped out the door as quickly as he could. What had happened to Snape to bring him to such an emotional state?

She placed a silencing charm on the door to give Severus privacy.

Hermione held Snape, and he buried his face in her midriff. "Severus, what's wrong," she cried.

"He forgives me. After all the hell I've put that boy through. All the things I did to take his family from him. He forgives me. I have always loved him as a son, but I could not show it. I could not endanger him that way, so I pushed him away by making him hate me. Voldemort could not see that I cared about him. It would have been all our deaths. His mother was my best friend, and I betrayed her. So much lost, so many wasted years, and so much pain, torture, and horror."

He was now sobbing against her, buffeting her body back and forth with his pain.

"Let it out, Severus. Let go of all the pain and all the hurt. I've got you; let me be your anchor." She held him until he quieted. His voice was raw, and his face was puffy. She led him to the bed and tucked him in. She gave him a dreamless sleep potion so he could get the rest he needed to restore his body and mind. "I love you," she whispered against his cheek.

"I love you too Herm... mi... one..." Then he was sound asleep. She kissed his forehead and wiped the tears away from her own face. For the first time since she had arrived, she felt Severus could truly get on with his life.

Hermione slipped out the door after about thirty minutes. "Come, let's walk. I want to show you the only place that's still alive here."

"What about Snape?"

"He's sleeping. He's exhausted. I'll tell you all about it as we walk." She took his arm, and they started through the corridors.

"I found him in such terrible condition, Harry. You have no idea the hell he was living in. He was broken and sick and barely surviving here. He had huge open wounds on his neck, after two years." She went on to explain what he was like and how quickly they had gotten close because of their devastating loneliness. "He'd been in this tomb for years alone."

"Why didn't he ask for help?"

"You know what he was like. He was proud and terribly scared. His injuries were so bad that he could not even brew the potions to help himself. The man you saw today is much improved. With my help to brew the potions, we healed his neck wounds, and we have worked hard to improve his physical abilities with Muggle physical therapy. But

only the restoring potion we are working on can bring him back to what he was.”

“When will the potion be done?” he asked.

“Tomorrow,” she said with a laugh.

He sighed and his shoulders slumped. “One day, and I messed it up? Hang Molly. I can leave now.”

“No, Harry, you coming here is a good thing. You may be the last person in the world he expected to see, but you are the only one he cares to receive forgiveness from. He needs to know that you will accept him as he is now. He’s changed so much, Harry. He can laugh, and he can love, but it’s a bit overwhelming for him. I think after the last few days, he’s on some sort of emotional overload.”

“What’s happened?”

Even in the dark hallway, Harry could see Hermione blush. “Oh, sorry, didn’t mean to pry. Only the last few days?” he asked sheepishly, but wanting to know.

“Yes, I’ve only been here five or six weeks, and we hadn’t seen each other in years. You didn’t think I’d jump into bed with him immediately, did you?” Her voice was shocked. She decided to keep the fact that they had actually been sleeping in the same bed nearly the entire time to herself.

“Sorry, Hermione, of course I didn’t. I guess I wasn’t thinking. Even five or six weeks seems a bit soon.”

“It does, but we shared so much, and it just seems so right.”

Molly said you mentioned an Apprenticeship. Are you certain you want that kind of commitment to him?”

“He already has my heart. He is teaching me so much. You can’t imagine the knowledge he has been willing to share with me.”

Harry laughed. “It’s like being in school again. You must be in heaven.”

Hermione punched him in the arm. They had reached the door to the kitchen, and she shushed him as they moved into and through the kitchen.

Then they were through the corridor and into the beginning of the house-elves’ greenhouse. The fireflies seemed to light the place with ease.

Harry stared open mouthed at the living beauty of the place. “Did Snape make this?”

“No, house-elves did. He only discovered it during his foraging trips.”

“It’s amazing, Hermione.” He took off like a kid and ran through the trees and the plants. “I wish Ginny was here.”

“Why didn’t she come? I can’t imagine her letting you come alone.”

Harry turned, grinning. “She’s pregnant, Hermione—we’re going to have a baby!”

Hermione screamed and hugged him, and they danced around like little kids.

Finally worn down from all the excitement of the evening, they returned to Snape’s rooms.

Hermione and Harry wrote a note to Molly and Ginny, and Harry explained that he would be home in the morning. He assured them that he was good and Hermione was safe, and he told them she had been with a friend. He used some phrases they had agreed upon that would mean he was safe.

Hermione teased him about his cloak and dagger spy code. They sent the owl off and then Hermione made a thick vegetable stew with dried meat added for flavor. They sat and talked for hours. She told him more about her time with Severus. Harry told her about America and that Ginny wanted to be home now that she was pregnant. They had returned the day before. They had found Molly frantic to discover what Hermione had been up to and genuinely worried about her to the point of a near nervous breakdown.

Hermione said, “I’m sorry, Harry. I really tried to be positive, and I explained over and over that I was fine.”

“Why didn’t you just Apparate there and let her see you?” he asked.

“I couldn’t take the chance that she would keep me there. Severus needed me here. The few times I went to Hogsmeade, he got very anxious for my return. He couldn’t bear the aloneness here anymore. I didn’t want to hurt him any more than he already was.”

“Alright, I understand. You did what you had to. I’m glad you found him.”

“I’m glad she did, too,” came Snape’s voice from the bed.

Chapter 20

Chapter 20 of 24

Hermione returns to a deserted Hogwarts and comes face to face with death.

Hermione got up from the table and went to Snape. She pulled back the curtains from the bed and helped him off the bed. Slipping her arm around his waist, she walked with him to the table. He sat in the chair she had vacated, and she got him a bowl of stew.

“Professor, how do you feel?” Harry asked.

“Severus, Harry, no need for titles among friends.” He took a bite of biscuit and spooned some stew into his mouth.

Harry nodded, suddenly emotional. “Severus,” he said slowly, trying the man’s first name out.

Severus grinned. "Weird, huh?"

Harry laughed. "Very."

"Did I hear you were spending the night? I guess you'll have to transform the couch back into a bed."

"Do you mind? If it's too awkward, I can go home to the Burrow."

"No, it's fine. I know it's late, but I would like to talk to you a bit more. As for tomorrow, it would be best if you leave before I take the potion. It might be an easy transition or a difficult one, and I do not know how I will react. Hermione can send her Patronus if she needs help."

"Of course, sir. If that's what you want."

"I'm sorry I fell apart earlier. All the changes this last month have been amazing, and I guess I haven't gotten control of the idea and reality of actually being able to be happy. The emotion is overwhelming at times."

"I'm a bit shell-shocked over this whole thing myself," Harry said, rubbing his forehead with his hand.

"Headache?" Severus enquired, surprised to feel such concern for the boy he had pretended to hate for years past.

"A bit."

"Hermione, would you get some of that headache reliever?"

She went to get the reliever from the bathroom.

"Harry, thank you for what you said earlier. I'm still shocked you would consider forgiving me."

Harry said, "Believe me, it was very difficult to come to that conclusion, and I had some rough nights after you 'died.' Once Voldemort was gone and the celebrations were over, I spent a lot of time reviewing the memories and realizing my gross errors all these years. I felt responsible for your death."

It was Snape's turn to feel gobsmacked. "No one was responsible for me. I made terrible, selfish, foolish choices as a young man, and I have paid very highly for my mistakes. But I also will never be able to atone for all of them." His face began to show the strain the conversation was taking on him.

"Severus," Harry said with passion, "you must let go of it all. I have. Ginny taught me how much love can heal, and I think you have found that through Hermione. Embrace that love and let go of the past. We all must forgive the transgressions of the past and live in the world we all helped forge. It's because each and everyone who fought on the side of good gave their best. You were among the hardest working—a man who no longer cared what happened to himself. Do you know how much I have grown to admire those qualities in you?" He swallowed. "And for the record... you had a right to hate my father. He was cruel and a bully. I was angry because I didn't want to admit my father could do anything so wrong, but the memories speak for themselves. I've had to accept that."

Severus saw the growth and maturity in the young man's face. This Harry Potter was an adult of wisdom and strength. Somehow, the boy had grown up to have more character than his father ever had. Yet he admitted, "Even your father grew up. Your birth curbed his rebel days. He became a father you could be proud of. Even Sirius matured with the responsibility of being your godfather."

Harry blinked away the emotion Snape's words made him feel. "Thank you, sir. I appreciate that insight."

Hermione came back then with the potion to relieve Harry's headache. She had lingered to allow them to have private time to talk, and Severus gave her a grateful nod.

Hermione said, "Severus, you're exhausted, and it is very late. You need to have your strength when you take the potion tomorrow."

Severus smiled up at her. "You're correct, my apprentice." Teasing her, he said the word like he would have sarcastically said "mother."

Hermione made a face and slapped Severus's shoulder playfully.

Harry was shocked for a moment, but when Severus laughed lovingly up into her face, he laughed, too.

Severus got to his feet, and Hermione got her wand and made the couch into a bed for Harry. She also used her wand to clean up the kitchen. Severus loaned Harry a nightshirt. And when he came back from the bathroom, he endured their laughter good naturally. He was still about 6 inches shorter than Snape, and the gown dragged on the floor.

Snape took his wand and altered the gown.

Harry grinned. "I guess I should have thought of that."

Severus grinned back, and Hermione grinned at both of them. She couldn't imagine a happier moment than having the two most important men in her life talking comfortably together. "To bed with you," Snape said.

Harry nodded, crawled into the bed, and turned his back to them as they prepared for bed. Once behind their curtains, Snape put a silencing charm around their bed.

Hermione grabbed him in a big hug as they settled against the sheets. "I can't believe he's here and the evening went as it did. I've dreaded Harry finding out about you. I knew he felt differently, but I didn't realize how much. Severus, I'm so happy tonight. One way or the other tomorrow, we have choices to make. I know you want restoration of your body. I understand that, but what we have already is wonderful, isn't it? If we had to share the way we have the last few days the rest of our lives, would you find peace in that?"

Severus settled on the pillows, and she laid her face against his chest. "If you'd asked me that several weeks ago, I would have said no, never. But now, I could be happy. As long as you are with me, Hermione, our future will be bright. I'm no longer afraid to walk out of this place."

She suddenly rose up on her elbow and turned to look into his face. He looked years younger, and there was no sign of stress. He looked like a happy man. She kissed him gently and felt his arm tighten around her. She grinned. "How private is this privacy shield?"

He chuckled at her and said, "Go to sleep, Hermione. We do have a difficult day ahead of us. From tomorrow on, whatever happens, I will never turn down an offer like that as long as I'm able."

She laughed at him. "I'm going to hold you to that promise." She settled down again, and soon they were both asleep.

Many thanks to the TTP Ladies for their hard work.

Also many thanks to Lisa, my Beta. I could not do this without her. I appreciate the wonderful reviews my readers have taken the time to write. Thank you so much. Three more chapters to go.

Chapter 21

Chapter 21 of 24

Hermione returns to a deserted Hogwarts and comes face to face with death.

When Severus woke the next morning, he could hear dishes rattling in the kitchen and smell fresh coffee brewing. Hermione still lay at his side, so he realized that Harry must be trying to make breakfast. From the smell of things, he was doing a good job. He slipped from the bed, laying Hermione's head back against the pillow. She didn't need to wake just yet.

Harry was dressed, and the couch was back to normal. There were eggs at the side of the stove, and Harry glanced at him when he said, "Where did you get those?"

"I made a discrete trip to Hogsmeade this morning. I left some money and slipped in and out of the grocers."

Severus grinned. "So, Mr. Potter has some interesting talents: breaking and entering is one of them."

"From Auror training—being able to bust through charms and spells is one of my new talents. I assure you I left far more than they were worth."

Severus eyed the fresh eggs hungrily and then realized that fresh sausage also sizzled in the pan. After years of oatmeal and coarse breads, this breakfast looked like a feast.

Harry saw the kid in a candy shop look pass over the man's face. It was astonishing what a smile did to his face. He looked like a kind, loving man now, and it transformed him.

"Where's Hermione?" Harry asked.

"Sleeping. I'll get her up in a few minutes. This is no doubt going to be a difficult day for us all. I was thinking you should stay for a few hours after I ingest the potion—just until you see if I'm going to live. I would hate for Hermione to be here alone if it doesn't go the way we hope."

"Could this be dangerous or make things worse than they are?" Harry asked anxiously.

"There is always that possibility. I really think I'll be either healed or left the same. In the unlikely chance that things don't go right, it would be best if you were here."

Harry nodded and stepped forward to shake Snape's hand in agreement. He was surprised as he was drawn into a tight hug. "I'm very proud of you, Harry."

Tears burned at Harry's eyes. Hearing this from Severus meant a lot and also reminded him of Sirius. Maybe these two men hadn't been too different after all. The choices they'd made had affected all their lives, and it was starting to finally feel good and right. He never realized how much he had wanted this man to care about him and to give him praise.

Hermione had exited the curtains just as Severus pulled Harry into a hug. She stood there and smiled through the tears that burned her eyes. They turned and saw her, and Harry reached out for her. She came, taking Severus's arm and pulling it close like she always did, and she linked arms with Harry. The three of them stood in a little circle hugging each other.

Finally they stepped apart, and Severus kind of growled through the emotion, "Let's eat."

Harry laughed and pulled out a chair for Hermione, which earned him a raised eyebrow from Snape. "Sorry, sir."

"That's alright, son," Severus said. "I can learn to share once in a looongg while."

Harry grinned, and they all sat and tackled breakfast with gusto.

Later as Harry cleaned up the dishes and Severus and Hermione dressed, they prepared to see the final results of the potion. Hermione was extremely nervous, and Severus was quiet and moody.

They finally headed downstairs, and Hermione explained to Harry what the potion was supposed to look like. They moved as one toward the cauldron, and all three peered down into it. There was a potion as pure as it could be. They could see the cauldron through it and yet could tell it was a light violet.

Hermione let out a shaky sigh, and Severus followed. Harry smiled and stood back, not wanting to interfere. Severus instructed Hermione to collect the fluid and place it in the one-ounce bottle. She used something like a turkey baster to suck it out of the pot. She filled the bottle, and it came exactly to the one-ounce line.

Together in silence they went back up to their rooms. The curtains were drawn back on the bed, and Severus lay against a pile of pillows. When he had settled in and taken several deep breaths, Hermione kissed him and held the potion out to him.

He took it with his good hand and said, "I love you, Hermione. You have been the joy of my life. I drink this to both our futures." He gestured to her like he was giving a toast and then also toward Harry. Then he swallowed it.

He lay there, feeling the potion slide down his throat. When it hit his stomach, he began to feel warm. Then a burning fire seemed to sear him inside and out. He heard himself screaming, and he felt Harry and Hermione on both his sides holding him tightly in their embrace. He heard Hermione's tearful and yet reassuring tone trying to calm and support him. He felt Harry running a cool cloth over his forehead. He also felt unbelievable pain in his extremities and his fingers—fingers that moved and twitched violently. Nerves that hadn't felt anything in years were screaming with something akin to electrical energy. He felt his body jumping off the bed, and he knew they continued to hold him down as he screamed through the pain. Somehow he escaped behind that wall of his and seemed to be floating near the ceiling, watching them shouting encouragement at him. He saw the tears fall from both Harry's and Hermione's eyes.

He saw the gentle way they tried to handle him so as not to bruise him, but it was impossible. The strength his body was displaying was phenomenal, and he knew with mental pain that they would be bruised and sore when this was done. Suddenly a pain so fierce hit, and he saw no more.

Darkness—soft, sweet, black inky darkness—engulfed him.

Chapter 22

Chapter 22 of 24

Hermione returns to a deserted Hogwarts and come face to face with Death.

Slowly, as if the world was being created through the eons, he became aware again. The bed under him was soaked, and he could hear Hermione softly calling to him.

"Severus, please wake up. Please come back to me," she was pleading hoarsely.

He tried to pry his eyes open, but he felt the darkness overtake him again.

Harry, we need some help. You have to go to New Hogwarts and get Madam Pomfrey. Please, I don't know what to do to help him."

"What do you want me to tell her?"

"Tell her whatever you want—just bring her. She has known Severus since he was a child, and she has been there for him many times when he limped home from Voldemort's meetings. She will know what to do. Just swear her to secrecy. Do you think you can get in and out without McGonagall noticing?"

"I can," he said. He grabbed his cloak and headed at a run to the door. The door closed behind him, and Hermione heard the popping sound of Apparition.

"Severus," she cried, "hang on. Just stay with me. I can't live without you."

Harry slipped into the infirmary, and he was surprised to see it was nearly the same as the one at old Hogwarts. Auror training came in handy when sneaking into warded property. He ran to the end of the big room, knowing that Madam Pomfrey would have her rooms there. He banged on the door and it opened. "Yes, what is with all the racket? Has someone fallen off a broom?" She came face-to-face with him.

"Mr. Potter, what are you doing here?" she said with a look of surprise on her face.

"I need your help. He may be dying!"

"What's wrong? Who's dying?"

"Severus Snape. You need to get your bag and come with me."

She was suddenly staring at him, and fear was etched on her face. "What are you talking about? Professor Snape's dead. He's been dead for several years. You must have hit your head or something. The war is over, Mr. Potter."

Harry grabbed her arm and yelled, "I know it's over, Poppy. I know this sounds crazy, but he didn't die. He's been hiding at the Hogwarts memorial. He's there with Hermione Granger. They have been brewing a potion to help heal the wounds he received during the last battle." He grabbed her bag and continued, "Hermione found him there about six weeks ago. Please, I'll tell you the details later. He took the potion about two hours ago, and he's not regaining consciousness. He is in extreme pain."

"What color was the potion?" she asked, finally accepting his story and breaking into action.

"Clear violet."

"Oh, my gosh." She ran to a cabinet, unlocked it, and grabbed a bottle of inky black potion. "It's the Dark Mark. It's somehow created to resist 'friendly' potions. Voldemort wanted to put his Death Eaters through more hell if they sought help from the good side at or after the final battle. I came across it several times trying to administer healing potions to those with near mortal wounds. Some of the first patients died."

"Where are they?" she asked, drawing on her cloak.

"His quarters, I think, next to the Potions classroom."

Much to Harry's surprise, she hopped onto a broom and flew out a window that opened for her. He ran to the window and saw her fly over the gate, then Apparation took her, and the broom dropped to the ground. Harry followed behind her.

Hermione was sitting on the bed now, holding him half across her lap with his back against her chest. She was crying and singing. His body was twitching as though a seizure was gripping him.

Pomfrey swept into the room and was shocked to see the long dead man hanging on the edge of a new death. She climbed into the big bed next to them, uncorked the bottle, forced his mouth open, and poured the liquid in.

Hermione looked into her face with hope. She saw Harry run into the room behind them. "Will he live?"

"I don't know, Miss Granger. Can you lay him back onto the bed? I need to make a diagnosis."

Hermione nodded and slipped out from under him. She did not leave his side, but lay down next to him, holding on to his hand.

Poppy watched with some surprise. Snape's face, though tight with his illness and pain, looked better than she'd seen in years. Something amazing had happened to this man. She now saw Hermione plant a soft kiss on his lips and tell him she loved him.

Astonished, she turned her attention back to the patient and ran her wand over him, watching the color of her whispered spell change and dance.

Having seen this before and having used the potions and the antidote, she could tell where the injured parts had been, and she could see the changes in their auras as they slowly healed. She glanced again and again at Hermione, listening to her continuous declarations of love and all the things they had planned. She could feel Harry hovering behind her.

She finally said. "He is responding." Her words made Hermione collapse with relief.

Harry came around and helped her off the bed. "Thank Merlin," he said, settling the healer on her feet and letting the cold fear he'd felt dissipate.

Severus felt the blackness start to dissipate again. He heard a new voice, a voice from his past, and he wondered where he would find himself when he opened his eyes. With some relief, his own bed-curtains came into view. Then Hermione's tear-stained face swung in front of him.

"Severus? Can you hear me?" she whispered soothingly.

He managed to smile a bit at her and heard her relief as she cried with fresh tears of joy.

Her forehead pressed against his, and she kissed him ever so gently. He managed to move his hand, burying it into her hair and deepening the kiss.

Harry was laughing with relief at Poppy's incredulous expression. "It will take some explaining."

"I look forward to the story," she said. "Now, might I have some tea? You yanked me away from my midday meal."

Harry nodded and gestured for her to come sit at the table. He drew the curtain closed on the bed to give Snape and Hermione some privacy as the man continued to recover.

Many thanks to Lisa, my Beta, and the TPP ladies. You do an awesome job.

Chapter 23

Chapter 23 of 24

Hermione returns to a deserted Hogwarts and comes face to face with death.

Hermione continued to lie next to Severus and listen to him breathe. He'd fallen back asleep, but she could see by his steady breathing that he was getting stronger, and the color had returned to his face. She let herself slip into an exhausted sleep. Neither of them saw Poppy check on them or heard Harry explain some of what he'd learned the night before.

They also were oblivious to Harry writing them a note and slipping out of their rooms with Poppy. He escorted Poppy back to New Hogwarts. The old witch gave him a hug and appeared to have tears shining in her eyes as he prepared to leave her. She said, "I never in my life thought to see that boy alive again and of all miracles happy and loved. He deserves it."

He smiled. "They both do. Hermione has been lost since Ron died."

"You're correct, Mr. Potter. This is a day of miracles."

"It certainly is," he said. "It was good to see you again, Madam. Thank you so much! Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm heading home to my pregnant wife." He gave the woman another hug. "Keep this to yourself if you can for a few days until they decide what they are going to do. I'll owl you when it's safe to talk about this to Headmistress McGonagall."

She nodded as Harry produced his broom and his Invisibility Cloak and flew out the window.

Hermione woke and found that Severus was awake and watching her sleep. "Why didn't you wake me?"

"I was enjoying the view." He raised a hand to tuck one of her curls around her ear. He then wiggled his fingers at her.

"Severus," she squealed, "it works!" She grabbed his hand and kissed his palm.

"Indeed it does," he said, closing his eyes to relax and feel the softness of her lips on his hand.

"Severus?" she asked in a whisper filled with desire. "What else works?"

He laughed and said, "Well, why don't we get out of bed and see?"

She smiled and scooted out of the bed, and he followed her. His body felt strong and more in control than he'd felt in years. He slipped his feet over the edge of bed and stood up straight. His back no longer pulled to one side from the bend in the leg. He could feel his foot. It was firm and straight on the floor. He grabbed Hermione's hands and slipped an arm around her waist, and they danced around the room. A picture of an old Muggle movie flashed through her mind. Scrooge danced after he woke the morning after the spirits had visited him. She laughed aloud, and Snape did too.

He kissed her deeply and then suddenly became aware that he wasn't very clean. He pulled away.

"Severus? What's wrong?" she asked, suddenly afraid.

He said flatly, "I stink."

She let the fear flow out of her and let out a sigh of relief. "It was a difficult transformation."

"Hey, did I see Poppy here?"

"Yes, sorry, we had to have help, and it turns out there was a curse on your Dark Mark that prevented that potion from working—a final thank you from Voldemort."

"Well, where is she? That woman has been like a mother to me. I owe her my life."

Both of them looked around and realized they were alone. Hermione then saw the note on the table. She read it out loud.

Hermione,

Poppy assures me that Severus will be fine now, and I know you'll covet your privacy when he wakes up. I'm going to accompany Poppy home and then go back to the Burrow. I've been gone far too long from Ginny. I can't tell you how much sharing this with you and Severus meant to me. Thank you for your trust. Let me know when and what you want me to tell everyone. Poppy's going to keep this to herself for a few days, and I will, too.

Love,

Harry

"Well," she said with a devilish grin, "it seems we are alone."

"I think a bath is in order. Give me a few minutes, and then come join me," he instructed.

Hermione nodded, suddenly feeling her heart pounding. He seemed fine, but what if it didn't work. How would he handle it? Hermione jotted off a note to Harry and sent it off with the owl.

It read: He seems good. Thanks you so much. I'm off to test those reflexes. Hermione.

She laughed at the thought of a blush creeping up Harry's neck when he read it.

She turned, took a deep breath, and knocked on the door.

"Come," she heard Severus say.

She opened the door and gasped. This was no longer the plain bathroom that she had used for weeks. It had been transformed by magic into a cavernous bathroom with a huge sunken tub. The walls were marbled in blue and white with gold fixtures sticking out of walls and the ceilings. Water rained down on Severus, who was already immersed in warm, steaming water. Bubbles filled the room and bounced off the walls and stained glass windows. She stood there gaping, "How did you know?"

He said, "I have shared your thoughts. It's very hard to get in there and not catch stray fantasies." He held out his hand. "Come. Join me, my heart and soul."

Hermione was a bit shy, but she quickly shed her clothes and took his hand, stepping down into the perfectly warmed water. Together they washed their hair and then each other's backs and quickly finished their bodies. Then Severus drew her close and kissed her deeply. Gently with his fingers and mouth, he set her body on fire, and she explored his body as she had never explored him before. It was soon apparent that he was "working" just fine. Hermione stroked him, and he groaned with pleasure. Then they were one.

Even as their bodies neared climax, Hermione begged, "Please join me, Severus. I want to be complete with you." Then they were one body and soul, and they clung together. He was standing, and she was wrapped around him. Their cries of completion echoed through the room. Severus carried her from the tub, and with his wand he dried them instantly. Then he took her to their bed and showed her again and again how much he loved her. They finally fell asleep wrapped in each other's arms, their legs entwined.

One more chapter and this will be a completed story. I hope you enjoy the ending. Thanks so much to Lisa, my Beta and the TPP ladies. They do such an amazing job.

Chapter 24 : Epilogue

Chapter 24 of 24

Hermione returns to a deserted Hogwarts and comes face to face with death.

Hermione sat cradling the baby in her arms. She ran her fingers through his hair.

Severus was watching her. His face was so different now. There were laugh lines around his eyes. She glanced around and saw Harry watching her as well, and Molly's eyes were twinkling as she surveyed her brood. There were Weasleys of all sizes running around the grass in the Burrow's vast backyard. Ginny stepped up close, and Hermione sighed. Her fingers ran again through the shock of red hair. She laughed and said, "I guess Harry's genes are recessive." She lifted the baby up and handed him over to his mother.

Ginny laughed. "They didn't have a chance." She held the baby close and said, "Two bets yours have raven black hair."

Hermione ran her hand over her swollen stomach, "Only five weeks to go. I can't wait to hold them."

Severus came closer, took her hand, and drew her into his arms. "I thought twins were a Weasley thing," he said with his old, dry smirk.

Everyone laughed, and Molly said, "I guess that proves you're part of the family."

Severus held his wife close and said, "I am pleased to be an honored member. There is no other family that shows our world what a wizarding family is all about more than yours, Molly."

Molly's shoulders became straighter, and she puffed up her chest, and her children laughed at her. Arthur came and slipped his arm around her. "Severus, son, I can't wait to have two new grandchildren to love. You honor me with your willingness to share your family."

Severus said, "You're under the mistaken notion that I had a choice."

Everyone stopped for a moment and then saw the wizard's eyes crinkle with laughter, and they laughed with him.

Despite the fact that he often laughed with them, it still gave them pause when that dry humor popped up. Most of the family had sat in his classes at Hogwarts. At times, they still couldn't separate the two different men—who he had been and who he was now.

Harry came with another boy in his arms and a girl. James and Lily were the twins, and the new baby was Sirius. He told Severus, "Twins are a whole new world. I don't envy you, starting at the beginning. These two were a handful that first year."

"Well, we will know who to call when we are at a loss as what to do at three in the morning," he said dryly. "To tell you the truth, I'm looking forward to all of it—even the hard parts."

Harry laughed. Setting the twins down, he gave Severus a pat on the back. "You can call anytime."

A couple of Muggles walked into view, and Hermione broke away from Severus. "Mum, Dad! I'm so glad you could make it!" She looked past them to nod to Remus, who had volunteered to go get her parents for her. He went to look for Tonks and Teddy.

"Oh, Hermione," her mum said with delight, "You've gotten so much bigger since we saw you three weeks ago."

Hermione dryly said, "Thanks, Mum." But she hugged her mother hard and then her father. Behind them, she could see Professor McGonagall and Madam Pomfrey playing games with some of the older children. Bill and his family were playing Quidditch against George's family. Luna and Neville were watching their firstborn son take steps in between them as they knelt a few feet apart in the grass.

When Ron died, Hermione had never expected to find love and get married. The spells of protection she had placed on her parents were keyed by her bonding permanently in marriage to another wizard. Now that she and Severus were married, those enchantments had been broken, and Hermione had been able to locate and bring her parents back home.

With the arrival of her parents, the party started. Later, after the baby shower gifts were unwrapped and the food eaten and many of the guests had left, Severus and Hermione walked down to the little stream that ran through the Weasley property. The moon was full and bright. Severus held Hermione against him, her back against his chest; his arms were around her, his hands caressing her swollen belly where their babies were being nurtured.

"The moon's full like it was the night we got married. The Elves Greenhouse was so beautiful," she remembered.

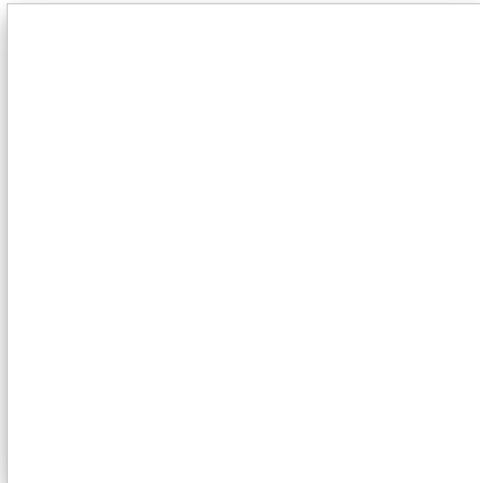
"Yes, it was," he murmured, kissing her hair.

"The restoration of Hogwarts, as a museum, is coming along well now. Dobby has done a wonderful job of overseeing the project. It's wonderful to see the kitchen alive with workers, and the dining area in the garden has become a special place for all kinds of ceremonies since we initiated it."

"That night was an initiation in itself," he said with a bit of a seductive murmur.

She giggled. "I will always remember our honeymoon in that enchanted cabin in the greenhouse forest. It was amazing, as every minute of my life with you has been, Severus."

He turned her toward him and kissed her gently. "I'm going to enjoy my roles as the museum's curator and a father. Our children will be raised in the place we learned to love again. What more can a man ask of life? You and I are now a famous Potions duo, and we can continue our research at Hogwarts Museum. I don't need anything else. We can take vacations, travel on occasion, and attend seminars. The world is open to us. People will come to us to see our museum. The place that was nothing but death is now full of life again."



I hope you have all enjoyed this story. I have received so many wonderful comments. This was my first completed SS/HG story. I hope those of you who haven't started *Raven*, my other story on TPP, will read it. No infringements of JK Rowling's rights to her characters are intended. Many, many thanks to all those who started the Beta work on this story and to Lisa who finished it. She has done a wonderful job.