

The Unforgiven

by livvy6

Fourth Place Winner in the Potter Place's Variety Challenge 2009. Life after Voldemort isn't as everyone thought it would be.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 18

Fourth Place Winner in the Potter Place's Variety Challenge 2009. Life after Voldemort isn't as everyone thought it would be.

Chapter 1

"Hide them all, then," he croaked. "Keep her...them...safe. Please."

"And what will you give me in return, Severus?"

"After all this time?"

"Always..."

Hermione walked into the common room in Gryffindor tower. Harry was sitting in a plush chair, still wearing the same filthy robes he had worn during the battle. There was a plate of sandwiches in front of him, and he was staring off into the distance. His left leg was bent at the knee, and his foot was resting on the small table in front of him. His right hand, his wand hand, was resting upwards, propped up at the elbow. He was rubbing his thumb and fingers unconsciously. His green eyes were off into the distance, far, far away from where he sat.

Hermione walked towards him tentatively. "Harry?" she whispered.

He looked up to her and said blandly, "I'm going to take a shower now and sleep. I am exhausted."

Hermione nodded. "That's good, Harry. Do you want me to get Ron up here? You seem upset," she said uneasily as he stood and walked away from her.

He turned his head around and said, "No. Fred's gone. Ron needs to be with his family."

Hermione reached out to him and hugged him tightly. "Harry, you are their family, too. Why don't you go and be with Ron?" she suggested.

"No!" he snapped as he pushed her away from him. "If it weren't...oh fuck! I can't live on what should have been. I can't handle all of this now." He grew increasingly angry and rubbed his forehead. "I have learned so much about my past, I can't handle it all! First, my parents, Voldemort, Snape..."

His head snapped up, his emerald eyes grew huge in horror. "Hermione! Snape, he's still in the shack...we have to get him," he said urgently. He grabbed his Invisibility Cloak and climbed out of the portrait hole.

"Harry, wait!" said Hermione as she dashed after him. She half-walked, half-jogged alongside him. "You're not thinking clearly. Let's get someone else to get his body. I don't think you are in the frame of mind right now to handle this."

He stopped walking and reached out his hand to her. "Then help me, Hermione. You were the one who liked him best out of the three of us."

Hermione shrugged. "That's not saying a lot. You and Ron loathed him. I merely thought he was a lonely, bitter man to be pitied," she said hollowly.

The two walked together, hand in hand. Harry started to smile. "Snape would have hated your pitying him," he said abruptly. Then he tugged her hand to follow her as they walked down the moving staircase.

They went out through a back passage of the castle towards the tunnel that led towards the shack. Harry threw his cloak over his head. Hermione looked alone with Harry's Invisibility Cloak covering him. As soon as they were in the tunnel that led towards the shack, Harry took off his cloak.

Hermione whispered as they neared the entrance, "I'm afraid, Harry. I don't want to see his dead body. I feel so horrible. He deserved more than this." She felt tears well up inside her, and Harry squeezed her hand.

"Hermione, I feel it too. All this time, all these years, he loved my mum. I never thought the ruddy git could love!" he said in a strangled voice. "I hate that I have those memories. He would throttle me if he knew I had so many of his private thoughts."

He faced Hermione with a worried expression. "D'you think he meant to give me all of them? Did I need to see so much?" Harry looked as if the weight of the universe rested on his young shoulders.

Hermione placed her hand on Harry's arm. "Harry. I haven't seen the memories. I only know what you were yelling at Voldemort. Snape loved your mother, and that is why he came over to our side and remained."

Hermione looked down the passageway and pondered the words she had spoken. "I wonder though, Harry. Was he *really* on our side? Or was he there just for your mother? Did he truly think people like me are Mudbloods?"

"No," Harry said firmly as he grasped her hand. He bore his eyes into hers and continued. "I know this, Hermione. Severus Snape did not believe in all that pure-blood rubbish. He was on our side. He knew it was right to leave Voldemort. In fact, one of the memories showed that Snape hadn't liked that word even spoken in his presence!"

They reached the room where the murder had taken place. Hermione braced herself and held Harry's hand tightly as they walked inside. She could see in her mind the dead eyes, the open mouth, and the grip of his hand loosen from Harry's robes.

Look at me.

She could swear the words lingered in the air like an echo that went on and on, never ceasing. They continued slowly inside the room and saw the pool of blood, but there was no trace of the dark wizard. Harry stood frozen in his tracks. He was speechless. Hermione was flummoxed.

"Maybe someone else took him into the castle, Harry," Hermione whispered as she tried to get Harry to show some sign that he was processing the situation.

Harry looked visibly upset. His face was splotchy in red and white, and his breathing became shallow and irregular. His eyes darted around the room as they began to glisten with tears. "Or some fucking Death Eater decided to take his body. FUCK!" he swore.

Hermione leaned down and dipped two fingers into the blood pool and examined it. She shook her head, glanced up at Harry, and then back to the blood on her fingers. "I don't see how he could have survived, Harry. There is so much blood loss..."

Hermione stood up and stepped back away from Harry. He was livid. He marched off back into the tunnel and inside the castle, his robes whirling behind him, so ironically like the professor, and she followed him, watching and waiting to see where he would go and what he was planning to do. He stormed his way through the throngs of people who wanted to congratulate him and went up to Professor McGonagall.

"Where is Severus Snape?" he demanded as he walked up and down the tables of the dead searching each lifeless face as he strode furiously up and down the aisles. Everyone in the Great Hall, even the wounded, silenced as the Boy-Who-Killed-Voldemort raged.

McGonagall's face was white as she tentatively approached the volatile wizard. "I don't know, Potter," she said in a soft voice.

"Where are the Death Eaters' bodies?" he bellowed as he continued to look, becoming increasingly upset as he searched and found no sign of the wizard. Hermione swallowed and tried to remain calm. She had seen Harry angry before, but not like this.

"They are in one of the empty classrooms, waiting to be burned," McGonagall answered sharply. She grabbed his upper arm when he tried to run off.

"Harry," she said in her stern teaching voice. "I assisted Hagrid in the separation of the dead. I have seen each and every Death Eater's face. He isn't there. Where did he die?"

Hermione's eyes darted between them. *She doesn't know*, she thought. *No one knew Snape had died.*

"In the Shrieking Shack," he spat angrily. "Hermione and I went to make sure his body was brought back here to lay with the dead who were in the Order. *What happened to him?*"

McGonagall took him by both shoulders and forced him to focus. "Potter!" she barked. "What did you see?" Her eyes were like burning steel. Her hair had come free from its usual trademark bun, and now it hung in a makeshift twist to keep it out of her face. She looked younger somehow, and the pressure of now being Headmistress pro tem was bringing out the lioness in her.

Harry looked into her eyes and whispered softly, "There was blood...his blood. I need him here, Professor. I can't have him out there. He has to be buried properly." Harry looked strained to the point of breaking. McGonagall seemed to understand this and treated him cautiously.

"And he shall, Potter," she said as she kept her grip on the young wizard. "You must get control of yourself. We will find him."

"Professor McGonagall is right, Harry," Hermione whispered as she put her hand in his. "It will be all right."

"No, it won't, Hermione!" he yelled. He forced the two witches to release him. "I want every Auror to be looking for him. Finding his body should become priority number one!" He looked around and focused on the Malfoy family. He stalked over to them in a blinding rage. Hermione stayed close, her wand at the ready. Harry took his wand and forced it underneath Lucius Malfoy's chin. Narcissa and Draco shrank away from Harry's ire. He was no mere boy wizard; he was a man...a man who had killed the greatest Dark wizard in fifty years. His look commanded respect. Although mother and son would be reluctant to give him his due, they were no fools. Lucius, however, a wizard who had stood up to far more dangers than a wand of a raving boy, refused to cower. He remained where he sat. He kept his back straight and his face upraised in defiance.

"Where is Severus Snape?" Harry roared.

"I have no idea, boy," Lucius replied arrogantly in a clipped tone. Hermione watched the green eyes of Harry's stare into the cool, gray eyes in front of him.

"CRU..."

"*Expelliarmus!*" screamed Hermione, and Harry's wand flew into her hand.

"No Unforgivables, Harry!" she snapped at him. "No more!"

"I've got to find him, Hermione," he said desperately. "I have to find him now before someone does something to him."

Madam Pomfrey dashed over to Harry's side and said, "That is enough, Mr. Potter! Now lie down." She forced a phial of liquid into his throat, and he immediately became sedate and relaxed.

"Draught of Peace," she explained to Hermione as she tucked Harry into one of the makeshift cots in the Great Hall for the wounded. "Now," she said after Harry was tucked away. "What's all this hullabaloo about?" she demanded.

"We can't find Professor Snape's body," Hermione whispered to her. "Harry is very upset. We need to keep him calm until all of this can be sorted."

Madam Pomfrey looked horrified. "Oh, dear," she choked out. "Is Severus *really* dead? Is there any chance he could be alive?" Hermione saw tears beginning to swell in her eyes

Hermione opened her mouth to answer and closed it. She had never even entertained such a possibility.

A/N: Some quotes in this chapter are from DH. I used the following prompt:

5. Coping in the Aftermath

a. Many people were affected by Voldemort - his followers, his victims, etc. After the war is over, how are they dealing? After all, for people like Harry, Ginny, the trio, and especially the Malfoys, he was a huge part of their lives. How are they dealing with his demise and are there any repercussions?

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 18

Life after Voldemort isn't as everyone thought it would be.

Chapter 2

The months flew by, and before Hermione knew it, it was Christmas. So much had happened during the last seven months since the end of the war that it was a relief to have a season of happiness, even if it was a bit forced. No one really wanted to celebrate, not with Fred, Tonks, and Remus gone, but life had to go on for everyone's sanity. Hermione sat in the sitting room of the Burrow, watching Harry and Ginny, freshly married, enjoy their first Christmas together.

"Why you two would want to be here makes no sense," Ron said to them as he tucked into his third piece of pumpkin pie. "If it were me, I would be with my wife still on our honeymoon."

Hermione's face felt warm. Ron had been dropping hints ever since Harry and Ginny's wedding during the first week of December. She was trying to accept Ron's advancement of their relationship, but the dream in her head of living happily ever after wasn't sterling in reality. It was embarrassing to go to dinner in public since he ate like a pig. Then, there were his moods. He was so very self-deprecating. Hermione spent most of her time reassuring him he was fine the way he was and that he should not try and size himself up to Harry so much.

On the other hand, Ron made her laugh, and he did love her. Their sex life was also getting better. At first, it had been just a nightmare of painful, humiliating experimentations that had left Hermione sore and in tears. But after a month, she'd stopped bleeding during intercourse, and they'd eventually found her g-spot, which made it so much more interesting and pleasurable; they were shagging like jackrabbits, and Ron excelled at giving a good pounding. Of course, it would have been better if he had not done that when she had been a virgin.

Every time she thought about it, she cringed. She had screamed her head off and bawled like a baby, but Ron had insisted in carrying on and getting it over and done with. She had curled up into a protective ball afterwards and cried herself to sleep as he had snored next to her. The following day, she had been in terrible pain and was bleeding so badly, she couldn't go to work. Ron, of course, wanted another go, but Hermione had been terrified to let him touch her. After two weeks, she'd slathered a warming lubrication on herself while Ron had washed up in the bathroom before the main event. It had been still agonizing, but at least, she hadn't screamed like he was killing her.

Ron knew only one mode of sex: hard, fast, and good. What he lacked in the art of drawing out the act to make it last longer, he made up in spades with his stamina. The wizard could shag the whole daylong. Hermione wondered at times if he didn't just walk around all the time with a stiffie. She couldn't wear skirts anymore. Ron would have those up around her waist and her underwear pushed to the side in a heartbeat. Then, before she knew it, she would be full of hot, throbbing Ron, fucking the shit out of her against a wall somewhere. He knew exactly how to trigger her orgasm, and she would be screaming out her release in less than a minute. Once she was screaming, he would finally bring himself to orgasm. The whole interlude would last around five minutes. Sex had so far been a blur of grabbing, thrusting, sweating and messy jumbled bits of combined pleasure and embarrassing words Ron liked to shout out as he hammered inside her. After four months, she had discovered that she had finally grown to handle Ron's rough treatment of her and that she was very easy to satisfy physically. However *physically* sating the sex was, she had never once felt *emotionally* fulfilled.

As time passed, Hermione had begun to think of the pros and cons of their relationship. Ron wasn't interested in learning as she was, and he never had been. Ancient Runes still fascinated her, as did Wizarding History and Charms. Then there was Potions.

Hermione groaned inwardly as she sipped on her wine. No one mentioned Professor Snape, potions, dark arts, dark magic, billowing robes, bats, or even words like "git" or "greasy"...anything that could make Harry think about Professor Snape. He had been thoroughly devastated when the dark wizard's body had not been recovered. Harry had poured hours, weeks, and months into the search, but he and the Ministry had always come up empty. All that had been recovered was a broken ebony wand that had been the Potions master's outside of Dufftown, just a few kilometers south of Hogwarts. Harry had taken the Elder Wand he had placed in Dumbledore's Tomb, and he had used it one last time to repair Snape's wand and had hidden the Potions master's wand in a secret location along with the owner's memories.

The month prior to that discovery had been the worst, in Hermione's estimation. She had thought things could not possibly become more upsetting for Harry as she, Ron,

and Ginny had wandered with him, searching for clues, and then had sat in the gallery as each Death Eater who had been captured alive stood trial. Harry had frequently whispered or passed notes to the prosecution for information concerning the missing professor, but each time, they all had left disappointed.

The discovery of the broken wand, made in July, had prompted the Wizengamot to formally declare Severus Tobias Snape legally dead. When Harry had been notified about the formal proceedings by Arthur Weasley, he had made his way to the Ministry of Magic on the day of the judgment in his best robes to petition the Wizengamot to hold off their pronouncement.

"Hermione, please! Neither Ron nor anyone of us has been able to get through to Harry. You must make him see reason. Going down there will only make things worse!" Molly pleaded while Hermione tried to rest from another rough night of sex with Ronald. She felt bruised and battered. The last thing she needed to do was run down to the Ministry of Magic and try to hold Harry back when he was on a mission.

"Molly, I am not going to stop him," she whispered. "I don't feel well, and I can't reason with him when he's like this. Harry just refuses to listen. He wants to believe what he wants to believe. But I will go down there and try to make his petition sound less insane and logical."

"Thank you, Hermione," Molly whispered.

Hermione went to the bathroom and found healing paste. She went back to her room and lay down, setting the alarm for her to wake up in time for Harry's public outburst.

When she walked into the Atrium and had her wand taken for the duration of her stay, she fixed her eyes in front of her and tried to locate Harry. She checked her watch and decided that she couldn't waste any more time. She went down into the Department of Mysteries and waited outside the door of the Wizengamot.

"May I help you?" asked a tall, thin witch with an important look about her face.

"I am here to find Harry Potter. I believe this afternoon's agenda of the Wizengamot includes the formal declaration of Professor Severus Snape's death?"

She looked onto the clipboard in front of her. "Ah, yes. Mr. Potter is inside. A right bit of trouble he has been. Are you here to restrain him? He was acting most unstable," she said with concern on her face.

Hermione bit her lips. "Madam, I, nor anyone who is close with Mr. Potter has ever been successful in influencing him where Professor Snape is concerned. I am here merely to make sure he isn't thrown out of the court for contempt."

The witch harrumphed and then opened the door for Hermione to walk through. She was already too late. Kingsley Shacklebolt and Griselda Marchbanks were both arguing with Harry.

"Mr. Potter," snapped Madam Marchbanks. "You must realize that a great deal of blood was left on the floor of the shack. No one could have survived with that much blood loss. The Healers from St. Mungo's have attested to that fact!"

Harry was standing and shaking his head. "No," he shouted. "Not if he had dittany and Blood-Replenishing Potion. He is a Potion master for Merlin's sake!"

Hermione came to his side and placed a hand on his shoulder. He broke his concentration and whirled around her angrily, as if he didn't know who she was. Then his face broke into a beaming smile and gave her a bear hug.

"I didn't want to hope, Hermione," he whispered desperately. "But now you're here, I know they'll listen."

Hermione wanted to burst into tears. The look on Harry's face was fanatical. He clearly wasn't himself.

"Harry," said Kingsley in a fatherly voice, "I realize that in the light of all the information that was hoisted upon your shoulders in a day's span has still yet to settle within you these last three months. I urge you to let the Wizarding world go on with the healing. It was a horrible tragedy to lose Severus Snape, especially since he had never received the gratitude that had been his due."

Kingsley's eyes grew bright as he cleared his throat, and his voice took on a new cadence. "With an official declaration of Severus Snape's death, we can now acknowledge his service properly. The ceremonies and awards, albeit posthumously, nevertheless, can allow those to publicly express their grief and respects. I think, Harry, that would be good for you."

They all looked at Harry with pity as he stood, fidgeting with his glasses, running his fingers through his hair, and rubbing the scar that had faded to a faint line.

"T-The wand," he began as he shuffled through his pile of parchments, "it was f-found so far from Hogwarts. You haven't even given a thought to the possibility that he's out there, not wanting this world, thinking he's hated and alone."

Harry broke down sobbing. Hermione helped him to sit down. She looked up at the Wizengamot fearfully. She felt the building of her own tears as a few members began to discreetly take out handkerchiefs. She wanted them to tell her what to do. She looked back at Harry and tried to comfort him.

"You don't understand, Hermione!" he said as he sobbed. "He HAS to be alive. I never got to say I was sorry! What if he's out there, starving and sick, feeling scared and alone?"

"Harry," Hermione reasoned. "Professor Snape isn't the young, hurt boy you saw in that Pensieve. He is a grown wizard, and if he is capable to think about breaking his wand and starting over, he MUST be able to care for himself!"

"Mr. Potter," called out Madam Marchbanks to Harry calmly. "Although it gives me no pleasure to see such an upstanding and noble young man as yourself suffer so, and be a party to more suffering, we must deny your petition and formally declare that Professor Severus Tobias Snape, Potions master, is deceased."

Hermione held the devastated Harry in her arms as the vote passed with the crack of the gavel. She jumped in reaction to the sound, like the veteran she was. Sharp noises and sudden movements would always haunt her.

Harry was leaning into her lap, his head held up by his hands. "What am I going to do, Hermione? How could I lose? Why didn't we stay and help him? I know he hates me more now than ever. I can't give up. I can't!"

Hermione placed a firm grip on his shoulders and forced his head up to look at her. "Harry," Hermione said as she searched out his eyes, "you must move on. You must! You have so many people who love you. Accepting Professor Snape's death isn't such a horrible thought, is it? I mean if he's gone, then he is with your mum again. And I am positive she has welcomed him with open arms because she saw all he did to help you. I'm sure he's looking down at you from heaven and saying to your mum and dad, "What is wrong with that dunderhead? The blighter wasn't happy when I was alive, and now he's sniveling that I'm dead!"

"You know he's probably blaming your dad for that character defect!" she said as she laughed.

Harry was laughing now as well through the tears. "If he really is dead, you know he's having fun dueling with Sirius again," he said as he wiped his eyes. "I'm sure the first thing Sirius said was, 'Snivellus... excellent!'"

Hermione burst out laughing. "That's right, Harry. Let's concentrate on positive things and give up those we can't puzzle out. We may never know the truth, but one day we'll know, even if it's after our own deaths. But you and I are alive and so are Ron and Ginny."

"Ginny," he whispered in confusion as he wiped his eyes. "Where is she?"

"She's at the Burrow. Harry, she's been just a wreck. Please find comfort with her. Talk to her, let her arms soothe you and her words ease your mind."

"Okay," he said weakly.

Hermione held him as they left the Ministry, and he Side-Along Apparated with her; she didn't trust him to Apparate by himself. When they returned to the Burrow, Ginny was waiting on the porch, and Harry collapsed in her arms, sobbing and talking all at once. Hermione let them be alone and met Molly as she stood in the kitchen. Hermione sat at one of the kitchen tables, and Molly held her head to her chest. Hermione's arms encircled her waist as she cried.

"Molly, it was awful! Harry was just so unstable. I thought he was going to lose his mind. I was so scared they were going to declare him unfit," she said hysterically.

"Well, it's over now," said Molly. "What's done is done, and now we can grieve. It will be hard for a while, but Harry is strong, and Ginny loves him so...as we all do, but there is nothing like the love a good witch to soothe the grief of a wizard."

"That's right, Hermione," Arthur said as he got down the firewhiskey. "Harry will be all right. Now, have a drink. It'll calm your nerves. You've had a terrible shock."

"Arthur!" Molly said shocked. "When did you get home?"

"Just now," he said sadly. "But I did speak with Kingsley. He told me about the hearing. Very tragic, that."

They sat in silence as they drank their firewhiskey in silence. Later that night, after Hermione told Ron she wasn't in the mood, she went to her old bed, which was the room next to Ginny's. She was lulled to sleep listening to the muted whispers, gasps, and the gentle, rhythmic movements of the bed next door to hers.

Harry's mourning for the man he had hated for so long had grown to mammoth proportions, bordering on the obsessive. He had begun to revere the wizard, taking up whatever causes he could to exonerate his name and give him posthumously the recognition he'd never received in life. Harry had again argued in front of the Wizengamot for Snape's portrait to be painted and hung with the other former Headmasters and Headmistresses of Hogwarts. The memory of the last debacle had still been fresh on the Wizengamot's mind, and although they'd expressed their feelings against it, considering Snape had abandoned his post, they'd conceded defeat once Harry had declared them all hypocrites, and never should Severus Snape's name be marred in his presence again. When questioned about the silvery memories of the Potions master encased in a thick crystal phial, along with the ebony wand he had repaired in a secret hiding place, Harry had refused to divulge his hiding place. He had declared the memories his property, given to him by Professor Snape, and as for the wand, he had declared it was safer not to be in the open where it might be misused.

Harry's increasing fragile mental state had not been lost on any of the Weasleys or Hermione...neither the flaw in Harry's logic. He had wanted the death of Severus Snape to be acknowledged in court through the work of a portrait, but he still held onto the hope that the elusive and mysterious dark wizard who had protected him his whole life was still out there...somewhere. However, he continued to maintain he was only holding the Wizengamot responsible for their decisions.

"They wanted him to be dead, well, Severus Snape shall get every thing due him!" he had said viciously when first approached by Hermione and Ron.

Ginny had been the one to take Harry and get his head on straight again. Once they had resumed their relationship after that terrible day at the Ministry, Ginny had sensed she was losing the man she had loved to an obsession over Professor Snape. Her tender loving ways had awakened Harry when she'd taken him to her bed. Molly and Arthur had turned a blind eye that Harry was sleeping with their daughter when it had seemed he was getting better as the days had passed. Even now, months later, Hermione still couldn't bear to tell them to use a Silencing Spell. First, she was embarrassed to say to Ginny she could hear them making love, but secondly, the fact was that it was all so tender and erotic soothed and fulfilled a deep need inside of her that she was too ashamed to analyze why. Harry cried a lot a first, his emotions were too tangled up, but he and Ginny would talk, and although Hermione couldn't understand the words, the humming sound of love carried through the wall that separated them and touched her heart.

After the talking would be the lovemaking, and Harry was, by how Ginny sounded, a tender and giving lover. There were no screams of a frenzied coupling, as it was between Ronald and her. They seemed to make love how they talked to each other, biting and sniping every other sentence. For Harry and Ginny, they were by no means dispassionate; it was just they were gentle in their ardor. Ginny's voice would gasp and whisper Harry's name in a way that made Hermione know she was in ecstasy. Harry, likewise, was as enthusiastic. His sounds were as guttural as Ron's, just softer and gentler. Hermione was in awe every night they made love. It was sad that she didn't have that with Ron, but still she enjoyed living vicariously through Ginny and Harry's lovemaking and genuinely felt happy for them.

By October, Harry had seemed awakened from his haze of grief and depression, and Ginny's comfort and love had given him a certain amount of peace of mind. They all knew he would never be the Harry he had been before the war, but he had his moments of light-heartedness that gave all of them hope. He and Ginny had married at the beginning of December, and Harry was finally smiling and happy again, but all it took was for some damn idiot to mention Severus Snape, and Harry would be at a loss. The grief and the pain would begin to overwhelm him, and he would look frightened and lost until Ginny would touch his arm, and then he would smile and take a deep breath to steady himself.

Hermione continued to sit on the couch, listening to Celestina Warbeck sing on the wireless, wondering why Harry could not free Professor Snape from his mind. For a while, the Weasleys had thought it was just a matter of time until Harry pulled himself out of his pain. But now, seven months after the final battle, Harry's mood had plateaued. Life went on with Harry not quite as mentally stable as they had hoped. Ginny believed Harry couldn't bring himself to forgive...not Professor Snape, of course, but *himself*. Whenever Harry thought of Snape, he would grow melancholy and despondent. The story of holding the dying wizard in his arms, looking eye to eye as his memories of his true love, Harry's mum, spilled out into the bottle Hermione had conjured had been told a hundred times over.

There had been a time Hermione went through the same feeling of guilt and sadness over the loss of such a brave man, but life had to go on. For the others, it was a slow process...but a sure one. For Harry Potter, the inability to forgive himself ate away at his mind and soul. No one knew when or if it would ever end.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 18

Life after Voldemort isn't as everyone thought it would be.

Chapter 3

Hermione sat watching the family who had adopted her and hoped would marry their youngest son do their very best to have a happy Christmas. Everyone had his or her own personal pain, and Hermione was no different. Her trip to Australia in August had been a terrible shock. Her parents had not handled the news well that their daughter had used her magic on them. They had informed her that they could not trust her. She was too different. Hermione, though, had known the real truth: they were afraid of her, afraid of her magic and how she had used it without their knowledge or permission. Although she had done it for their safety, it hadn't mattered.

Harold and Jane Granger had decided to stay in Australia and gave the rights and property titles in England over to their only child with the provision that she never contact them again. Hermione had sat in shock as they had informed her the house, the dental practice and their secret bank account in Switzerland was all hers. Hermione was rich, more than rich; she was an heiress, and she could do and have whatever she desired. The ironic part of it all had been that all Hermione had ever wanted was a family who would love her. That want had grown to include what Hermione heard on the other side of the wall in Ginny's room and also a child, which came to mind whenever she watched Harry play with his godson, Teddy, Remus and Tonks' son, or Fleur when she would feed baby Victorie.

Hermione had kept all of this information to herself and had also hired a barrister and an accountant to handle and oversee the liquidation of her parents' house and practice. When all had been said and done, Hermione Jane Granger was worth more than five million pounds. When she had been informed of her worth, she wondered if she should just say her final good-bye to the Muggle world, take the money and pour it all into Gringotts. She was still so unsure.

Unsure about Ron.

Unsure about Harry's sanity.

Unsure about the direction of her life.

It was time for her to discover a life on her own. She had spent more time worrying over Harry's moods and Ron's not-so-subtle prodding towards marriage than on her own dreams of a career and for her future. She was now a *financially* independent young witch as well as a formidable one who could do whatever she pleased.

However, what pleased her was just having peace of mind.

Hermione announced the day after Christmas that she was leaving and going back into the Muggle world for a while to sort herself out. She had no other choice but to make her plans known to the entire Weasley clan. Late on Christmas Night, as everyone had sat around eating Christmas pudding, Ron had pulled out a box, got on one knee in front of Hermione and proposed.

Her eyes grew larger and larger as the horror unfolded. He was speaking, but all she could see was the gold ring with a ruby setting in front of her.

"She must be so ecstatic!" said Molly. "She's speechless!"

Ginny's forehead puckered as Hermione turned to her best friend. Her mouth was gaping open in shock and disbelief. She couldn't believe Ron would do this. Not in front of everyone, not like this. Then she realized everyone was looking at her for something.

An answer.

"O-Of course!" she blurted out.

Everyone clapped and cheered for the newly engaged couple. After a toast by Arthur, the wizards gathered in one area, and the witches went into the kitchen. Ginny pulled Hermione to the side for a chat.

"What are you doing?" she hissed.

Hermione's eyes darted around the room. "I couldn't do that to Ron. Not in front of everyone! I'll turn him down easy, when we are alone. He has such a fragile ego," she whispered anxiously as she looked down at the new ring on her left finger.

"I hope for your sake you know what you're doing," the redhead warned her darkly as she joined the other witches.

That night, Ron took Hermione into his bedroom and said, "Now we can spend the night without sneaking around. We're engaged now. They'll let us sleep together."

"Ron, we need to talk," she said as Ron began to strip off her clothes.

"NO talking, Hermione," he said firmly as he attacked her breasts. "I love you. I've loved you since I was thirteen. You are so perfect."

Hermione loved how Ron praised and admired her body. He told her constantly she was the smartest witch in the world, and he felt so lucky that he had a girlfriend so intelligent and hot to boot. Sure, he didn't understand or enjoy the things she did, but he said just watching her talk with someone about smart stuff made him hard with the thought she let him be the one to fuck her. Many evenings after numerous parties and celebrations for the end of the war had ended had been spent with Ron shagging her mindless in her evening gown and robes up against a wall in some isolated area of the building.

Within minutes, Ron was deep inside her as he pounded into her on his bed. Hermione thought to give it a final try, if she could have with Ron what Ginny had with Harry. She tried to get him to slow down and savor what he declared to love, but he just got confused and talked over her. Ron had Silencing Spells down to an art form, so Hermione again felt the familiar drilling inside her, but she couldn't orgasm. She kept thinking about Harry and Ginny, imagining their bodies intertwined in abandon. Ron tried to use all the tricks in his arsenal to trigger Hermione into an orgasm, but it just wasn't happening.

"Just finish, Ron, I'm okay. Don't worry," she reassured him.

"Hermione," he whispered. "Please, stroke my balls."

Lovemaking with Ron was all about getting what one needed. 'Ask and ye shall receive' was their motto. Hermione knew all about how to get hers, Ron had told her from the start just to blurt it out, and he would do it. Mystery had never been a part of the discovery of sex. Sometimes, Hermione felt they never made love, they more like...relieved each other. The feeling of connection of oneness just didn't exist for them.

Ron swore and cursed as he fucked her...hard. Hermione was in pain by now. She never thought "go ahead" translated into "fuck the shit out of me."

"Ron," she cried out. "Stop, you're hurting me!"

There must have been something about saying his name like that, for he was grunting out his release, and then it was mercifully over.

Hermione felt like a huge bruise. "You bastard, Ron!" she hissed. "You hurt me. I feel like you tore me in two!"

"Sorry, Hermione," he said, "you just don't know how awesome you feel. I just lost control. You've got the sweetest little pussy ever created."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Well, get your arse into the bathroom and put some healing paste on my 'sweet little pussy' before I go into Charlie's room and get that strap-on I found in there and see how you like being fucked within an inch of your life!" she snarled.

Ron jumped up and put on his boxers before leaving for the bathroom. The tears began to flow, and she wished she were in her bed, listening to Harry as he made love to Ginny. It wasn't that she wanted Harry; it was just that what he did was what she needed. Ron was never going to give that to her, and even if Harry were single, she just didn't feel that way for him.

Early the next morning, she dressed and waited for Ron to dress as well. She gave him his ring back and said she was sorry.

"I can't marry you, Ron. I mean, the sex is satisfying...most of the time, and you are a sweet man, it's just that there is something missing between us. I don't feel the connection of being 'one' with you," she explained.

Ron hugged her and said, "We haven't been together a year yet, Hermione. It will happen in time, I'm positive. I make you feel good, don't I? I don't ever deny you, do I?"

Hermione drew in a sharp breath. "No, Ron. You are wonderful. You have never denied me orgasms. It isn't about something being wrong with me, or you, per say. It's that the two of us together just don't fit. I couldn't say no in front of your family. I couldn't hurt you like that. I-I care too much to humiliate you like that. So, I wanted to do this privately," she explained.

Ron stood there, shocked and pale. Hermione went downstairs and made her announcement. It hadn't been easy, she had discovered. There were lots of questions and hurt feelings, but when Hermione finally left the Burrow, she felt free.

As she walked down the road that led from the Burrow to the Apparition point, Harry ran after her.

"Hermione," he said. "You have to level with me. You have to tell me. You know everything about me. Now I want to know about you. You and Ron were content. What happened?"

"I don't think I can tell you, Harry. It's private," she whispered.

Harry snorted. "What, sex?" he said as he laughed. "Come on, everyone in that house is having sex! What's wrong?" he said as he placed his hands on her shoulders and began to rub them.

Hermione burst into tears. It was wrong, it didn't make sense, but she just kissed him. She kissed him the way she always imagined he kissed Ginny, and she felt nothing but a sense of warmth and kindness.

"I'm sorry, Harry. You know that Ginny's bed is next to my room. I've been listening to you both make love, and it was fascinating. Making love with Ron is so animalistic and rough...I want tenderness. I-I want what I hear when you make love to Ginny. I will never find that with Ron, and I deserve more."

Harry put his arm around her and walked with her down the snowy road to the end where no one in the house could see.

He turned to face her and said, "Hermione, you are my best friend. In ways, you and I will have a bond that I could never have with Ginny. I think you understand that."

Hermione nodded as she wiped the tears from her eyes.

"Hermione, I love Ginny. She is my heart, my sanity. Without her love, I would be forever lost. You are right, Hermione. You deserve to find a man that will make you feel those feelings that have awakened inside you. I know you don't love me romantically any more than I love you, but let me do this for you. I don't want you to go off into the world never knowing what it is supposed to be like," he whispered.

Harry slowly gathered Hermione into his arms and held her securely. "Let go, Hermione," he whispered against her lips. He pulled her to him firmly and gently at the same time as he kissed her. It was full of gratitude and love that was purer than any she had ever experienced. He let her wrap her arms around his neck and explore his mouth. When she finally let go, he did as well, giving her tender kisses on her cheeks and neck.

They drew apart, and Hermione knew her eyes were shining. "I've never been kissed liked that. Even though I didn't feel the passion, it was still wonderful!" she gushed.

"That's my thank you, Hermione, for sticking by me when I was so lost. When in the future, you lose your way; remember that kiss you want. Although I couldn't provide passion, hopefully, I gave you a blueprint. I pray you will find a wizard or Muggle that will make you feel how I make Ginny feel. She told me it's like we are the only people that exist, and if she couldn't...well, she just feels I fulfill her in every way a woman can be. Does that make sense?" he asked, looking a bit sheepish.

"Yes," Hermione replied whole-heartedly. "I know exactly what it means. Harry, I love you, and thank you...for everything."

They embraced as the friends they had always been and always would be. Then, Hermione waved good-bye as she Disapparated with a pop.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 18

Hermione settles in Grasmere and makes a little friend.

Chapter 4

When Hermione had been planning her "escape," she had thought of one place she had known she would find the peace and quiet she needed: Grasmere. She had always wanted a little cottage or house in the Lake District, and Grasmere was in the heart of it. Her Muggle upbringing came with a healthy appreciation for British literature and poetry, which included a hearty portion of Wordsworth and Coleridge. That area had been the vision that prompted some of the most beautiful poetry written, and Hermione wanted to be a part of that beauty and serenity.

Being a woman of means meant Hermione could afford the best, and she planned on having it. There was a charming place called "Garden Cottage" that resided on the very edge of the city on a private drive. Hermione's estate agent showed her the most magnificent pictures of the property, and Hermione could see in her mind how gorgeous the land would look in the spring and summertime. As she stood on the outside deck of the property she was considering buying, she closed her eyes and droned out the sound of the estate agent and inhaled the wintry air. It would be magnificent in spring and summer. The fells around the property belonged to the owner as well, so she would be able to walk amongst nature's loveliness and lose herself in the splendor of it all. It hadn't been a difficult decision to make. The village was beautiful and quaint, the area was quite historic, and the nature, well, was simply, as Wordsworth would call it, "sublime."

When she drove into Grasmere to sign the documents, she was impressed with the provincial, yet touristy, style of the city. She made a mental list of the things she would need for a long, quiet winter. The first thing was to get groceries and then a stop off at Sarah Nelson's Gingerbread Bakery. It was reported to be the best in all of England.

Garden Cottage was quiet and calm with all the peace and solitude Hermione could have ever hoped for. She had many small projects written down to get the house just right, but she mostly spent her days reading and writing. She was considering writing a book on Ancient Runes. She fixed the annex above the main floor to serve as her Potions lab. She wanted to have all the necessities that she would need, such as burn-healing pastes, Blood-Replenishing Potions, Boil-Cure Potions, Bruise Removal Pastes, Calming Draughts, Draught of Peace, Dreamless Sleep Potions, Invigoration Draughts, Pepper-up Potions, and Strengthening Solutions. She already had a plentiful store of ingredients to make her own potions plus ingredients that were healers by themselves. Essences of Dittany, Rue, and Murtlap were among them. In between reading and writing, Hermione worked on her potions while Crookshanks slumbered nearby.

She thought a lot about the past, about Harry, Ron, Hogwarts, all those who had died. Each time she brewed, she could hear Professor Snape's cold voice in her head, telling the class how they should be cutting their ingredients. She realized he would always be a part of her, just as when she had to perform certain charms, she would hear the squeaky voice of Professor Flitwick, saying, "Now, swish and flick!"

By the time the winter was ebbing, Hermione was ready to emerge from her self-imposed isolation. She had taken to walking along one of her many "fells" around her property for exercise and meditation. It felt good to have the wind on her face. One lazy Saturday, late in the afternoon, she came upon a group of boys playing in the slush around a small river. She stayed back a ways, crouching down in the reeds that grew tall by the riverbed and listened to them chat with one other. They were little boys, she determined. They couldn't have been older than nine. One was tall and had sandy-blond hair that made her think of Remus Lupin with a twinge in her heart. The second boy had dark curly hair and was the loudest of the group. He had a wide, happy smile that he flashed often as he laughed, which was quite a bit. The last boy was quiet and had black hair as well, but she couldn't make out his face. He was crouched low, playing with a stick in the slushy, muddy snow.

Hermione watched the three friends with bittersweet memories of her own childhood skittered across her mind whilst they laughed and pushed the other. Suddenly, they started talking seriously.

"I told you, he's just an old git that is mean and hateful! He hollered at me and David because we were playing too close to his property!" said the sandy-blond-haired boy.

"I don't care," said the boy Hermione couldn't see. "I've been inside his house!"

The other boy with the black curly hair slapped his forehead. "Eugene, you're a damn liar! Just because we dared you to go and knock on the old man's door doesn't mean you have to lie about it," he said to the boy named Eugene.

The boy stood up, and Hermione could see his straight black hair and pale skin. "I told yer, it's true!" he insisted with his fists clenched to his side. "I went into the house, and he wears an old-fashioned frock coat and trousers, and a scarf around his neck. All in black, too. He's got black hair, straight like mine, and he said he's waiting for a lady to arrive. He's got a wife, I reckon, so he can't be so bad. He said she's really pretty, too. Yer dared me, and I dast!"

"You're making it up!" jeered the boy again.

"I did, I tell you!" Eugene yelled. "Aw, go 'way then!" He waved his hand dismissively at them and went back to his work in the mud and slush.

Hermione watched the two boys scamper off, and when the boy was finally alone, Hermione walked towards him.

"Hello," she said sweetly.

The black-haired boy jumped up and looked at her. He glanced around nervously, and Hermione softly said, "Don't be afraid."

"I'm not afraid!" the boy said as he stuck out his chest and glared at her with his bright eyes.

"I'm Hermione," she said as she walked closer to him.

"What are you doing out here?" he demanded.

"I live on this land. Garden Cottage is my home," she calmly replied.

The boy's eyes grew large. "Wow! You really own that place? I didn't think anyone could ever afford to buy anything around here. You must be rich!" he exclaimed as he looked her up and down.

Hermione regarded him. He was tall and slight with black hair and dark blue eyes. His clothes fitted him well enough, but they looked careworn. His pale face was clear and unblemished, and he looked as if he could stand to have a few good, hot meals. If he were given a chance to eat well and be cared for, he could grow to be very handsome one day. A fleeting thought of Sirius Black crossed her mind, but she dismissed it.

"What's your name?" she asked him.

"Eugene. Eugene Wainwright," he said as he kicked some of the snow around him.

"Were those other lads your friends?" she asked.

"Yeah, I reckon," he said. "We go to primary school together in Grasmere at the church, and we're all in the fourth year. There's not a lot of us, so we kinda have to be friends."

"I couldn't help but hear you all talking," Hermione said cautiously as she bundled her scarf closer to her. She noticed the boy wore no gloves and his jacket was not a proper coat for wintry weather.

"I have cocoa and biscuits in my house, Eugene. I also have a cat, Crookshanks. Do you want to see my house?" she asked.

"Sure," he shrugged as he walked close to her.

"What were you boys arguing about?" she asked curiously.

Eugene shrugged again. "There's this old bloke who lives down outside of the village, off of Red Bank Road. He's supposed to be really scary. We kids never noticed before, but he has to have been there quite a while. The house is really old and creepy. The girls won't walk past his house, they're such babies, and the other boys just keep trying to make him mad by throwing rocks at his old house and deekabout for a dare."

"And you took the dare?" she asked.

Eugene became very expressive as he talked. "Yeah, I durst. I just went right up to his door, knocked on it, and there he was. Tall, all in black, with a really pale face, like he hadn't been in the sun for ages. He's got a black scarf and wears weird clothes. He was really mean, but I told him I didn't want to make him angry, I wanted to meet him."

Hermione was intrigued. "What did he do?" she asked as they walked up the steps to the back of her cottage.

"He slammed the door in my face. But I went back four times, and then he finally let me inside."

"What's his name?" she asked, now intrigued by the mystery man in black.

"Dunno," he shrugged carelessly. "Wouldn't give me one. Said it was his business. Said he didn't like children much, especially *know-it-alls*..."

Hermione stumbled. In her mind, she heard a voice echo in the back of her head from when she had been just a third-year. *"Do you take pride in being an insufferable know-it-all?"*

She straightened herself up and led Eugene into her house through the mudroom.

"So, what do you call him?" she asked curiously as she took her coat and Eugene's and hung them to dry.

Eugene looked thoughtful for a bit as he paused to unlace his boots. "I did tell him since he wouldn't give me a name to call him, I'd call him Mr. Black, you know, since he wears all black."

Hermione turned to hide a smile that was spreading on her face. She fought the urge to laugh and turned it into a cough.

"Come in, Eugene," she said as she padded towards the kitchen. Eugene sat in one of the booth chairs opposite her kitchen preparation area. Hermione went to put water in the kettle as she asked, "How did he like that idea?" she asked innocently.

Eugene barked a laugh. Hermione's ears perked up instantly. *He even laughs like Sirius!*

"His face went nearly purple! He's got a vein that pulsates from the side of head," he said with a huge grin on his face.

Hermione set down a plate of biscuits in front of him, and he took two, one for each hand and then a third, for his mouth. He was hungry. It bothered Hermione a great deal that a boy in such a well-to-do area of England would be so hungry.

She folded her arms across her chest as she watched him work his way through the biscuits. Without asking or offering, Hermione began to take out the chicken broccoli casserole from her refrigerator and heated a heaping portion in the microwave. She poured a large glass of milk and set it in front of him. Eugene paused in his inhaling of her biscuits to eye her strangely.

"Where's the cocoa?" he asked after he swallowed a mouthful.

Hermione smiled brightly at him. "It's heating up, as is the casserole. I reckon you are rather hungry, and I make far too much food. Crookshanks won't eat the broccoli, and I think it's sinful to waste good food. So you'd be doing me a big favor," she said as she rested her elbows on the counter opposite him.

"You're a nice lady," he said awkwardly as he brought the glass of milk to his lips.

"Thank you," Hermione replied graciously. She sat across from him and said, "How is it that you so readily came into my house? You don't know me. I could have been a bad person."

Eugene shook his head, his lanky black hair moved slightly. "Naw, you're just a mott. You're not all that big anyway. I reckon I could take you on iffin' I had to, but you're nice. I know about people. Since my aunt and uncle don't like me around anyways, I've met all sorts of people. That's why I wasn't flaiten to knock on his door."

Hermione frowned. "You should be afraid," she chided. "Not everyone is kind and nice."

Eugene looked at her with his large blue eyes. "I know that, lady. You don't need to tell me. The people who are my family treat me far worse than any stranger I've ever met."

His candor and tone rendered Hermione speechless. He was obviously psychologically older than his eight or nine years, and she didn't think it was such a good thing. She brought him a heaping plateful of food, and his face lit up.

"Thanks!" he said excitedly.

Hermione watched the skinny, lanky boy eat as if he had never had a decent meal in his life. Hermione looked at his hair. It was ill kept and choppy. "Eugene, may I touch your hair?"

He swallowed another mouthful and said defensively, "What for?"

"I was wondering about the last time you had a proper haircut?"

The young boy made a grumbling noise in his throat. "You ask too many questions. That's what I like about him. Doesn't yatter about nonsense. He works hard and has too much to do before she comes to see him," he replied.

Hermione heard the kettle whistle, and she fixed his promised cocoa. She set the cup in front of him and said softly, "I apologize if I have offended you."

Eugene shrugged as he ate another biscuit. "He has hair like mine. It just doesn't look like the others," he said sadly.

"What's his hair like?" she asked.

Eugene looked at Hermione as if she were speaking another language. "I just told you," he said impatiently. "His hair is longish, like mine. It's black. He has too much on his mind to care for it properly. He tells me I remind him a bit of himself when I was his age. He said his parents never gave him enough food. He never had nuthin' good."

"Where are your parents, Eugene?" Hermione whispered as she took the spoon to get him another helping of casserole.

"Don't got parents," he said as she placed another helping of casserole in front of him. He tucked right in and ate in heaping mouthfuls.

"Eugene!" Hermione scolded. "Take smaller bites! I don't want you to get sick."

Eugene looked at her and stopped eating. "Can I touch your hair, if I let you touch mine?" he asked as he gazed at her face intently.

"Sure!" Hermione said as she hopped up on the stool next to his. He touched her curls and said, "You're real nice. Not like my aunt. She never hugs me or lets me touch her. She's really dishy, too, for an old woman. You're not so very old, are you?" he asked.

Hermione smiled as he continued to examine her curls. "No, I'm only nineteen," she confided.

"I just turned nine!" he said excitedly. "You and I are ten years apart in age." His face grew sad. "He's really old sometimes, but there are times I think he might be young, somehow. Especially when he talks about *her*."

"Who is this woman, Eugene?" she asked worriedly.

"Dunno," he said simply as he closed his eyes. "He says she comes to him in the mirror, and they talk for hours. 'She's coming back,' he says. He said she had to hide from a wicked man for a long time, but now they will be together again."

Hermione was rooted in her chair in shock.

"Well, aren't you going to touch my hair?" he asked.

"Of course," Hermione whispered absentmindedly as she slipped off the stool. She examined his black hair and saw he needed a decent cut badly. She ruffled his hair and said, "I have a friend who could never keep his hair tidy when we were kids. No matter what he did to it, it always was untamable."

She stood there looking at Eugene and thought of Harry and Professor Snape. She was taken off guard when two thin arms wrapped themselves around her waist.

"You don't mind hugging, do you, Hermione?" he asked.

Hermione wrapped her arms around his slight frame and rested her head on top of his. "No, Eugene. I think hugging is as important as food. Not enough hugs can make a person sad and sickly."

Eugene held onto her tighter as he spoke. "I think he needs hugs just like I do. He's sick sometimes I think. He waits for that lady to be with him. He thinks every day she'll come to him, but she never does. Sometimes he cries. That's when he yells at me to leave."

"Oh, dear," murmured Hermione.

Eugene released her and went back to eating. "I bet he'd get all better if you hugged him a bit. But he doesn't like being touched. I came close to him once to look at a tattoo he had on his arm. He yelled and screamed at me to never touch him. He said he only liked for that lady in the mirror to touch him. So, I don't think he'd want a hug from you," he mused.

Hermione deviated the subject from the elusive and secretive man and asked questions about Eugene's home. "Tell me more about your aunt, Eugene," she asked light-heartedly.

"I dunno," he muttered. He looked thoughtful, and Hermione watched his beautiful blue eyes glaze over. "She's really pretty with curly blonde hair and blue eyes. She looks nice and smells nice all the time and has lots of kisses for my uncle and their kids, but she looks at me like I were a bug or something."

Eugene looked so sad. *He clearly loves his aunt* Hermione thought sadly. "What is she like with her kids that is so different from you?" she asked.

"She always tells them she loves them. She holds them to her and kisses their heads and cheeks."

"Do you think your aunt and uncle love you?" she asked, thinking of Harry so desperately, she wished he were here this second.

"Naw," he said flippantly. He grew a bit nervous, and Hermione could tell he wanted to ask her something but was afraid.

"What is it, Eugene?" she asked.

"Nothing," he said as he shook his black hair. "I need to go. I have to go see Mr. Black. I don't say it to his face. He'd go razzie. He told me if I ever called him that, he would skewer me and then said he doubted anyone would miss me."

Hermione's eyes grew large. "That's totally barbaric!" she yelled indignantly. "Do you think he would hurt you?" she asked concerned.

"Naw," Eugene said confidently. "He needs me. I go run errands for him, and he gives me money. He tells me I'm special, but I shouldn't let it go to my head. He said soon a time would come where I would leave Grasmere and go to a real, posh school somewhere in Scotland. I tried to ask him more about it, but he said when I got a little older, near eleven, he'd tell me all about it. He also said I wasn't to tell people about him when I went there. He says he just wants peace."

Just like me, Hermione thought sadly.

"Your friend and I have a great deal in common," she whispered. "I came to Grasmere to get away from all the hustle and bustle of the city. It was too much."

"I want to go live in London," he said excitedly. "Can I come back sometime, and will you tell me about London?" he asked with bright eyes.

"You are more than welcome any time, Eugene," Hermione said warmly. "And please call me, Hermione."

Eugene got off his stool and said, "You are real nice, Hermione. I like you. Can we be friends?"

"Sure," Hermione said warmly as she walked him back to the mudroom.

Eugene sat on the bench to lace his boots and put on his jacket. Hermione wrapped her scarf around his neck and gave him a pair of old leather gloves. "Put your hood up, Eugene. I would hate for you to get sick."

Eugene wrapped his arms around Hermione and squeezed her tight. "I wish you could meet Mr. Black. I bet you're nicer than that old lady any day. I know he would love to get nice food and hugs. He's always so sad and gloomy."

Hermione thought about it and said quickly, "Please don't tell Mr. Black my name. You can make up a name for me, but don't tell him about me."

"Why?" he asked confused.

"Oh, I'm not ready yet to meet people, but I'm sure one day I would love to meet your Mr. Black," she answered lamely.

Eugene shrugged. "Can I come back tomorrow?" he asked.

"I plan on going to church in the morning," she told him. "Do you want to go to church?"

"Why?" he asked. "God never did nuthin' for me," he said defensively.

Hermione furrowed her brow. "That's not true, Eugene. God let us find each other. You have an adult now who cares about you and who will give hot food and warm clothes when you need them. I would say our meeting was... *providential*," she replied as she smiled.

"Okay. But I'm not wearing anything posh," he snapped. "I'll wear my jeans and jumper. If they don't like it, then they can lump it," he said stoutly. "I don't think God cares a thing about my clothes."

"That's true," said Hermione as wrapped her arms around herself. "He cares more about your heart and mind than your clothes or hair. Rich, poor, whatever...it makes no difference. God loves us just the way we are, faults and all."

Eugene looked at her as if she were talking nonsense. "I'll come by. Shouldn't I call you Mrs. Something? Aren't you married?" he asked suspiciously.

"Nope," Hermione answered. "I am Miss Granger. You may call me that in public. But here, you may call me Hermione."

"Okay, Hermione. See you!" he said as he walked out the door.

She watched him as he bounded out of sight and then went back to clean up her kitchen.

Cumbrian slang

Dast I dared to do it

Deekabout look around

Durst past tense of dast

Mott good-looking girl/young woman

Flaiten afraid

Yatter to talk excessively

Razzie - berserk

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 18

Life after Voldemort isn't as everyone thought it would be.

Chapter 5

Eugene came in the morning for breakfast, and Hermione was smartly dressed for church. True to his word, Eugene came dressed as he had yesterday: a simple jumper and jeans.

"How did your aunt and uncle react when you told them you were going to church?" she asked him as she served him eggs and toast.

He shrugged his shoulders as he sat down at the kitchen table. Hermione gave him a glass of orange juice. "They were glad I was out of their hair. They like to have a lie-in on Sundays. Me cousin Stanley watches all us kids. Stanley is a real berk; he thinks he's so great because he's four years older. He likes to boss me around, so it's good to get out of the house. Then there is the noises and thumping coming from my uncle and aunt's room. It's rather annoying, actually," he said absent-mindedly.

Hermione hadn't had sex in a while now, and although she did not have anyone with whom she wanted to have sex, the remembering gave her a twinge between her legs. She was glad Eugene was completely oblivious to what was happening in his uncle and aunt's room.

They ate in silence until Eugene was finished eating. "So, where are we going?" asked Eugene as he handed Hermione his empty breakfast plate.

"We are going to a Catholic church that is not more than three kilometers from here. Perhaps in the spring and summer we could walk it," she suggested.

"What's it called?" he asked.

"Our Lady of the Wayside," Hermione said dreamily. "I have never been a Catholic, but I figure it can't be all that much different from The Church of England, I reckon," she figured.

"Well, best foot forward, Eugene!" she urged. "I'm going to give your hair a good trim-up before we go."

After the grumbling and grouching had ended, Eugene looked at his reflection in the mirror.

"Cor! Not too shabby, Hermione," he said happily.

"It does make a bit of difference," Hermione said aloud as she smiled. "Now, if you have need of clothes to be washed or patched, you will come to me. Now, let's get our coats on, and I'll get my bible."

Eugene sat with Hermione throughout the service, looking at her pensively now and again. He copied her movements, and Hermione knew he was watching and studying her as she worshiped. The lull of the music, the comforts of the repetition of various prayers made Hermione feel somewhat normal again. She took out a rosary that she had bought last week and began to count the times she said "Hail, Mary" and "Our Father."

After the service, Eugene asked Hermione while they ate lunch. "What was that stuff you was sayin' whilst you were fiddling about with those beads?" he asked.

Hermione contemplated how she should explain. She didn't want to go into all that dogma.

"Well," she began, "I was praying a couple of different prayers, but the one that I think you need to learn is the Lord's Prayer."

"Why?" he asked suspiciously before swallowing a large mouthful of mashed potatoes.

Hermione explained it to him. "Because it is a humble prayer, and it was the prayer Jesus taught his disciples when they asked him how they should pray. It's very simple." She began to say the words, and she could see the spark of comfort in his eyes.

"Our Father, who art in Heaven,

Hallowed be Thy Name..."

After dinner, Hermione took the bible and showed the passage of the Lord's Prayer to him. She told him she wanted him to memorize and remember it always.

"Eugene," she said as she placed her arm around his back, "forgiveness is a tough business. It is not enough to forgive others. We must also forgive *ourselves*. God forgives us through Grace. Grace is God's gift to us. But there are many people who refuse to accept that God has forgiven them, so they hang on to anger against those who have hurt them. They won't accept God's gift of Grace and instead let the pain and sadness remain in their lives. So, it is important to forgive others and yourself because God has already forgiven you anyway. But if it seems too hard to forgive, God will give you the ability to do it if you ask Him. That's what the bible teaches."

Eugene's face was downcast. "Mr. Black, he has a lot of anger. I don't think he has forgiven anyone," he confessed sadly.

Hermione felt so sad for Mr. Black. Not pity, like she had before, but a real sadness that he was living and had lived so many years holding on to pain and regret.

"God gives us all free will, Eugene," Hermione explained sadly. "Mr. Black must come to his own place where he can forgive and move on with his life."

"So, what? It's like forgive and forget?" he retorted hotly.

"Oh, no," said Hermione in earnest. "It's impossible to forget. But you still can forgive. You forgive so you may release yourself from the pain. God one day will settle all scores. One day, all will be made right again. I don't know when, but one day it will happen. Those who keep their faith in God will receive their reward and live with Him forever in Heaven."

"I like that," said Eugene. "One day, even if I don't get satisfaction, my aunt and uncle will pay for how mean they were to me."

Hermione hugged him and said, "Why don't you take a nap? I have the room down the hall you can use. I shall nap in my bed on the other end."

"Okay, Hermione," he said as he padded off to his new room. Hermione's heart was full to the brim with love for him; it nearly made her weep for his tragic life. She had to rescue him from those wicked people. She just had to find a way.

The next couple months went by with Eugene coming faithfully every day he could after school and on Sunday mornings for Mass. Hermione made rich meals to feed him. He was a weed, growing so fast, but wilting from lack of care and nourishment. She had half a mind to go tell Eugene's aunt and uncle they were complete bastards!

She learned from Eugene more about the elusive Mr. Black. When Eugene came to Garden Cottage after school, he told her stories about the other boys as well. They continued to tease Eugene about being at the old man's house.

"I have to be there, Hermione!" he exclaimed desperately. "He is cleaning the house and working hard in his basement making things. He knows she will come back to him, and when she does, he wants to be ready. He needs my help to clean and do his shopping. He still won't leave the house."

"And he still wears that mangy scarf around his neck. I think he was wounded. His voice was really raspy when I first met him, but it's better now. He takes lots of homemade medicine, and he gets tired easy. D'you think I could take him some food? He never eats much, and he's real thin."

"Sure," Hermione said as she packed up some spring salad with cold chicken, fruit and vegetables. "I will also have you take him some of my lemonade. I hope he doesn't prefer it on the tart side, but from what you told me, he probably needs some sweetening," she said with a wink.

Eugene laughed. "I want you both to meet. I think you would be so good for him. He is a really smart bloke, and you're real smart, too. I think he needs someone to love him. He still is waiting for that old lady, but she doesn't come. He cries when he thinks I'm not looking, and then, when he thinks I'm not there, he talks to her in the mirror! He has a small picture of her he keeps by his bed. I saw it once. I had to sneak 'cause he won't let me look at it. But I snatched a look, and she was really pretty with dark red hair and nice green eyes. He caught me and thrashed me with a switch," he said gravely.

Hermione's eyes went wide. "Aren't you afraid of him? He seems a bit unhinged."

"Naw," he replied. "He's going to tell me the reason I am so special soon. I'm almost ready. Then I'll be free of my stupid aunt and uncle and their bratty kids. They don't want me around anyway."

"Why is that, Eugene?" she asked as she sat next to him on the couch.

Eugene looked uncomfortable and said, "Do you promise never to tell anyone what I tell you? I mean, only Mr. Black knows, and no one else."

"Okay," Hermione said nervously.

Eugene lowered his voice and said, "I make things happen. I don't mean it, but I got really mad once and made a mirror explode. I didn't even chuck nuthin' at it. Then, once me older cousin, Stanley, really made me mad, and the next thing I knew, he was dangling from the ceiling by one leg. I didn't mean it, it just happened. Then, me aunt cut my hair, and it grew back the next day. They think I'm weird and won't tell me about my parents."

"Whose side were your parents on?" she asked him.

Eugene frowned. "My mum was my uncle's sister. He doesn't like to talk about her much. He said she got herself killed. They said they didn't know who my dad was. She was an unmarried woman. They said they met my dad once, but he was strange and not very nice."

Hermione was intrigued. *Could he be a wizard, like Harry, living with Muggle relatives who treat him like dirt?*

The more Hermione thought about it, the more it made sense. Eugene was a studious boy who was smart, didn't really fit in with his peers and being mistreated by his guardians. *If this man is really Professor Snape, it would make sense why he trusts Eugene* At least Hermione hoped it was Snape. It made sense. Harry had confided in her some of the details of the memories he'd received from Snape. The wizard had desperately loved Harry's mother, Lily. But Lily was dead! How could he be waiting for her to return? And what was this mirror nonsense? Perhaps he *was* mad. Sooner or later, she would have to meet Eugene's friend. He remembered "a special school in Scotland," so he must remember he had been a teacher at Hogwarts, and he had mentioned he hated children. If it were the professor, he would have to know her.

That evening as Hermione got dressed for bed, she looked into her bedroom mirror. She looked hard at her face. How would she feel if it wasn't Professor Snape? Would she be sad? Disappointed? Relieved?

No, relieved would not be an emotion she would feel. As far as she knew, Harry was still drifting in and out of his depression and guilt, still unable to forgive himself for the professor's death. She decided to owl Ginny to ask how Harry had been these last five months. If it was real, and this 'Mr. Black' truly was Professor Snape, Harry could start to forgive himself.

Hermione couldn't believe it was May. The time had melted away. Each day was something new with Eugene, and he had brought so much fun into her life. He was a very special boy. She pulled herself out of her woolgathering and wrote to Ginny. Then she went to bed and memories of old school days came rushing back to her.

She remembered going out with Harry and Ron when they'd been just little firsties, out to help Harry defend himself in a wizard's duel with Draco Malfoy. Of course, the berk had never showed up, and they, along with Neville had returned to Gryffindor tower after a near run in with Filch and a real run in with Fluffy, Hagrid's three-headed dog. She remembered her parting words.

"I hope you are pleased with yourselves. We could've all been killed...or worse, expelled!"

She smiled as she thought about Hagrid, his love of Norberta, all those years they thought Norberta was a male...Norbert, the dragon! Then there were his Blast-ended Skwerts. Hagrid and Buckbeak...no, Witherwings...she wondered how they were. Probably well, now that the war was over, and Grawp had already begun acting with better manners.

As she fell asleep, she thought of Sirius and how much Eugene looked like him. She thought how much he reminded her of Harry with his cruel aunt and uncle and of Snape with his long black hair and thin body begging for nourishment. If she were able, she would take him and raise him as her own son. He had to be a wizard. She wondered when the secretive 'Mr. Black' would give him that talk. She giggled. How hilarious. Mr. Black, indeed!

Hermione heard a knock on her door, and she was jerked out of the book she was reading. She glanced at the clock as she made her way to the front door. *This is usually Eugene's time to drop in*, she thought.

She opened the door and found Eugene doubled up on the ground.

"Oh my God! Eugene!" she cried out as she gathered him into her arms.

"What's happened to you?" she asked desperately.

"I got twatted in the face," he mumbled in pain.

Hermione sighed. She really did have a time figuring out his dialect and slang. "I would say it was more than that, young man!" she snapped.

Hermione took him into his bedroom and laid him down. She went into the bathroom and got her bruise removal paste and wand. The boy would have to know sooner or later.

She also returned with a small wet towel and wiped some of the blood from his face. Poor boy had a bloody nose. She told him to keep his head tilted with the cloth over it whilst she felt his torso. She lifted his shirt and saw the bruises. Someone had definitely kicked the crap out of him, poor thing! She was mad now. Someone had hurt her little friend, and she was almost positive who the little bastards were, too.

She felt gingerly around his ribcage and thin chest. He had either a broken or cracked rib. Well, she'd figure this out. She took her wand and performed a diagnostic test. Sure enough, he had a broken rib. She healed it, and Eugene began to breathe easier. She performed a quick nonverbal "Tergeo," and his face was all clean. She took the cloth from him and healed his bloody nose. She felt along the bridge for any serious damage.

"Well, thank goodness it's not broken!" she said happily as she flashed a smile at him. She began to rub the bruise removal paste on him, and within minutes he felt perfect.

He was in shock as to how easy and quickly she healed him. He looked at his stomach and felt his ribs. He then felt around his face. "Are my bruises gone?" he whispered.

"Yes," said Hermione happily.

His head flopped back on the bed.

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked as she sat on the edge of the bed next to him.

He was crying.

"Now they're really gonna hurt me! They all think I'm a radgee, just a weirdo kid that's not like them. They hate me," he said as he choked on his tears.

Hermione got some tissues and dried his eyes. "Eugene, what do you think about you?" she asked.

"I dunno," he muttered.

"Come now, Eugene," she prodded. "Tell me, what do YOU think about yourself?"

"I think aas crazy," he whispered. "I keep doing things that are strange and scary. I pushed a kid after he called me a bastard, and he flew back real far. I also keep making glass explode wherever I go. Then today, I made Tommy's chair disappear, and he fell on his arse. That's why they thrashed me today after school. They said they didn't want me around anymore."

Hermione placed her hand on his cheek. "Eugene, you aren't a radgee or a weirdo, nor are you crazy. You're a wizard," she whispered.

"A w-what?" he said with large eyes looking at her strangely.

"You're a wizard. And I am a witch," she replied. She took her wand and said, "Watch."

She made a swish and flick with her wand and said, "*Wingardium Leviosa!*" The tube of bruise paste went up in the air and rested down upon her bedroom dresser.

"Wicked!" he blurted out. "That's a magic wand! Can I have one?" he said, sounding very excited.

Hermione looked at Eugene and thought about it. Then she said, "One day...the August after next, when you are eleven, you'll receive a letter from a very special school in Scotland called Hogwarts. You will be there for seven years, learning all about magic and all sorts of interesting things about the magical world. When the day your letter comes, I'll take you into Wizarding London, and you will see Mr. Ollivander. He will get you a special wand made to fit you! It will be your very own special wand. Now let's see what you can do with mine."

She taught him how to swish and flick first. Then when he had it down pat, she taught him the spell.

"Say, Wingardium Leviosa!"

He repeated, and she helped him how to place the emphasis on the correct syllable. Then she had him work the spell. He focused hard on the small feather Hermione got from her closet, and he got it to lift, but then it dropped down.

"Why didn't it stay up?" he asked.

"Well, you must keep on concentrating," she explained. "Just because you got it in the air doesn't mean you can take away your attention. But let's not do that now. How do you feel? Are you hungry?"

Eugene wrapped his arms around Hermione's neck. "I love you, Hermione. I bet my real mum was just like you."

Hermione gave him a squeeze and said, "I bet she was ever better! She was probably the prettiest, most wonderful mum ever." She gave him a kiss on the head. She went up and fixed him a bowl of soup and gave him another glass of milk.

"Nothing too heavy," she said. "You've just been healed, after all."

As she watched him eat, she said, "Now, you realize that you can't tell anyone about me being a witch or you being a wizard, right?" she said.

"I know," he said casually.

"How do you know that?" she asked, a little irritated. She placed her hands on her hips and glared at him.

Eugene smiled. "Because Mr. Black does it all the time. He told me last week I was a wizard, and he showed me a bunch of cool stuff...and he didn't even use a wand. He didn't even say the words! Things just obey him when he stares at them. It's amazing! He must be the most powerful wizard in the world!"

Hermione exhaled. *This Mr. Black is sounding more and more like Professor Snape every time Eugene mentions him!*

"I gotta go now, Hermione. He doesn't like it when I'm late. We're cleaning really hard now. He gets so mad, it's hilarious, because he's total crap with cleaning."

Hermione smiled smugly. "Yes, you need a wand for most cleaning spells," she said in her best know-it-all voice.

She picked up his empty dishes, and Eugene hovered around the corner. "Hermione, I really want you to meet Mr. Black. He's so lonely and sad. He keeps talking about her and *to* her. But I know she's not coming back. She should have been here by now!" he said urgently.

Hermione knelt down and gently stroked his shoulders. "Eugene," she said as she looked up into his brilliant blue eyes. "You're right. I think she won't be coming back. Actually, I think she may be dead. Mr. Black is sick, I think. I think he has only part of his memory working. Please do not tell him I said these things. Just keep helping him. Ask him about the school, Hogwarts, that you'll be going to. Ask him about his life there when he was growing up. Ask him all sorts of things about school and his past, and then maybe, he'll remember she's gone. But DO NOT ever tell him she's dead. I think he would completely lose his mind if that were to happen," she whispered.

Eugene flew into her arms and hugged her tight. "I wish I could bring Mr. Black here. I know if you made him some good food and some milk, he'd be all better. Then if you hugged him, he'd forget all about that old lady and fall in love with you. You're dishy, and you always smell good," he said.

Hermione blushed. "Is that what you want, Eugene? You want for me and Mr. Black to fall in love?" she asked.

His eyes shone brightly. "Yeah! Then you both wouldn't be alone. You could clean his old clothes that are really worn and patched up and maybe heal his sore neck. He needs good food, too. He really loved the food I took him from you. At first, he was suspicious and took a long time sniffing it before he would taste it. But he'd be happy. I just know it! Then you could get married and maybe... Would you keep me?" he asked.

Hermione's eyes flooded with tears. She hugged Eugene tightly and whispered, "I don't need Mr. Black to give you a home. If you want to stay with me, and be my son, I will try my hardest to make it happen."

Eugene pulled away. "But Mr. Black...he really needs you, too! He's way too old to be adopted. But you could marry him, and he'd be my dad! It would be really cool, too, because we both have black hair. We'd live far away from Grasmere and be a proper family. I'm sure if he only got himself all cleaned up, you might like him enough. He's kinda dirty, but he does work a lot. I'm sure you don't have to do all the kissin' my uncle and aunt do. *Blech!*" he said with a grimace.

Hermione smiled. Eugene was going in for a treat when puberty hit him. It shouldn't be too far off, a couple years at least. Then he would forget all about her and Mr. Black and find his own love, trying to win her affections. As Hermione cleaned up, she wondered what Mr. Black was telling Eugene about girls. Was he being a real father figure and telling him about the facts of life? She wondered...

Cumbrian Slang

Twatted smacked, hit

Radgee A person not capable, a waste of space, or mad and crazy

Aas I am

Dishy pretty

Thanks to JKR for the quote of Hermione's taken from SS.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 18

Life after Voldemort isn't as everyone thought it would be.

Chapter 6

One day in June, Hermione received an owl from Ginny. She was nervous and excited all at once. She opened it and scanned it quickly.

Her mouth dropped open. Not only was Ginny upset she was gone, she was angry as well.

"I don't know how you can live with yourself, humiliating Ron that way. He was devastated for months. He only now is starting to come around, but he is still not the same. Neither is Harry. I can't do the work of two witches! Harry was so depressed when you left; it was like losing you in battle. He wouldn't speak of you in the present tense. He cries all the time, going from you, to Snape, then to Dumbledore, Fred, and each one that died that day. It is just wearing me down to a frazzle.

Ron is so devastated that he won't do anything except work. When he comes home, Mum says he eats and goes to bed. I saw Parvati the other day, and she saw him in Diagon Alley completely pissed. She said she didn't know how he could still walk; he was so drunk. Seamus brought him home to our place one night because he was too scared to take him back to the Burrow he was so pissed!

I know that it was hard for you. I know that you and I both were suffering...but at least we had each other to commiserate with. I have no one. Hermione, when are you coming home? We need you! I need you!

Ginny

Hermione sighed. *Oh dear*, she thought. She sat on her couch and thought about what Ginny had to say. True, she could understand the insane nature of Ginny's life. She had two broken down young men who had already lived enough for a lifetime. They were already old inside. However, they needed to pull themselves together. Ginny needed to understand she couldn't do everything for them.

She was focusing so hard she never heard the doorbell. Then she heard loud thumping on her front door. She jumped up and raced to look through the peephole. It was a very beautiful woman, blonde curly hair, perfect make-up and clothes. Hermione only had one guess as to whom she could be.

She opened the door after smoothing down her tank top and shorts.

"Hello," she said, smiling. "May help you?"

"Yes," the woman said haughtily. She reminded Hermione of Narcissa Malfoy. "I am Eugene's Aunt, Margaret Wainright. I wish to speak with Miss Hermione Granger, please."

Hermione smiled at the woman's obvious attempt at rudeness. "I am Miss Granger. Won't you come in?" she asked.

"Oh!" she said in mock surprise. "I thought you were the help. I suppose Eugene was just doing what he does best, making up large lying stories. To hear him speak, you were a gorgeous young woman with long brown curly hair that smelled like lemon verbena and dressed like an aristocrat. Now, that couldn't possibly be true, could it?"

"I wear what I like," replied Hermione evenly. "Today is unbearably warm, so I am dressed for comfort, not for company. Would you care to sit down, Mrs. Wainright?"

"No," she said sharply. "I came to tell you that Eugene shan't be coming round anymore. It was enough when he was working for that wretched man! He was the rudest and most ill tempered man I have ever met. Eugene's uncle shall deal with him, but I felt assured I could at least deal with you.

"Eugene has never respected our house or our rules. He is a careless and thoughtless child we were forced to take in because my sister-in-law and her lover were so damn careless, they ended up killing themselves in some freak accident."

Sounds like what Harry's aunt and uncle told him, Hermione thought.

Mrs. Wainwright tossed some of her golden hair off her shoulders. "I don't appreciate you trying to interfere with our nephew," she said in a clipped voice. Then her voice changed into a more sneer. "Eugene tells us that you and this 'Mr. Black' will be his new parents. He says you love him and would be happy to have him as your son. Now that's all he talks about."

Hermione thought of what Eugene's aunt had said earlier. "You said you met this 'Mr. Black'?" she asked.

"Yes, I just said that!" she snapped.

"What does he look like?" Hermione asked, trying hard to focus on point and not thinking about getting her wand and hexing the wretched woman.

Mrs. Wainright sighed. "He is ugly as sin. His hair is black and greasy, his face so pale that it has a sickly hue to it. He has the dullest, emptiest eyes. He's like a zombie or the living dead. At first, when I spoke to him, he wouldn't open the door fully so I only saw a half of his person. He's thin and wears all black, including a very smelly, nasty scarf around his neck. When I tried to reason with him about Eugene, he nearly went rabid! He flung the door wide open...I thought he was going to bite or strike me. His teeth are yellow, and he has the most abominable personality I've ever met. He threatened my husband and I with the authorities. So, when's the big day?" she said sarcastically with a smirk.

Hermione felt that remark crack across her face her tone was so nasty. "Mrs. Wainright, I do not know this 'Mr. Black' or whatever his real name is. However, I do agree with his assessment. You and your husband are cruel and horrid people to treat your nephew with such disregard! I have half a mind myself to report you to the authorities and have you arrested for child abuse!" Hermione yelled.

Eugene's aunt turned about four shades of red before she stalked out of the house with her head held high.

"Miserable, stupid, wretched woman!" Hermione yelled out after she slammed her front door. Well, one thing was for certain: she and "Mr. Black" cared a great deal for Eugene.

A week went by with no word from Eugene. Hermione was worried. What if those people hurt him? Where could he be? Family vacation? She spent a lot of time pacing and walking around the fells on and around her property. She saw many of the younger children that went to Grasmere Primary, but Eugene wasn't among them.

She decided it was finally time. After all, she'd be twenty in September. She was a grown woman, not a child anymore. She could face Professor Snape again, if he was who she thought he was. She was growing nervous. Her palms were sweating as she approached a group of boys that had among them the two boys she had first seen Eugene with.

"Um, hi," she said in a small voice. The children stopped their playing and stared at her. She drew a breath and used her most important voice she always used whenever she was giving an answer in class.

"I was wondering about the strange man who lives on the south edge of the village. I've heard odd things about him and wanted to know where he lives."

"You want to GO there?" asked one boy with his mouth gaping open.

"Why do you want to see him?" asked another. "He's just a mean radgee."

Hermione squared her shoulders. "I grew up in boarding schools from the age of eleven," she said bossily. "I have handled my share of nasty, mean, old men. I had a teacher who was the worst...ever! I think I can handle a mean old *radgee*."

They looked at her in respect and awe. "He lives down Red Bank Road," piped up one of the smaller boys.

"Yeah," said the tall, curly-haired boy. "We'll take you!"

She marched off with the little gang of boys. She felt like Wendy with the little lost boys. But that would have to make Professor Snape more like Captain Hook rather than Peter Pan. But if he had truly gone round the twist, she might encounter a man who may have wished he had never grown up.

They were a motley group that was for sure. She took them into Sarah's for some gingerbread, and the women working in there laughed at the group of rowdies as Hermione worked her way to corral them.

"Ah, ah!" she said with a shrill to her voice. "There shall be none for naughty boys," she announced. "No pushing, shoving, biting...Joshua, stop that...or stealing. Each shall have their portion."

"Now, say thank you to the nice ladies," she directed them.

"Thank you," they all said in unison.

The ladies laughed as they marched out single file.

"So, what d'you want with that old radgee?" asked Anthony.

"Well, Anthony, I don't think it's proper to call one of your elders an 'old man,'" she said reprovingly, "much less a radgee."

She walked on with them as they munched on their gingerbread, talking about people and manners. Soon, she found two of her hands were being held by the youngest of the group, Joshua and Jason, the redheaded twins. A lump caught in her throat as she looked down at them. She could vividly see young Fred and George in them. They were sweet and full of bounding energy, quick-witted, and a bit mischievous. But of course, they were only six. They had a long way to go before they could take on the mad skills of the Terrible Twosome.

"You never know a person, really, unless you know the kind of life they have lived. I once knew a man who was lonely as a boy. He was really smart, but he didn't fit in. The clothes his parents gave him never fit him, and the other children laughed at him. He was thin and hungry because his parents never fed him enough, and he was always dirty because his parents wouldn't give him baths. His parents fought a lot, and he was alone most of the time to get away from his violent home.

"One day, he saw a lovely, little redheaded girl. He thought she was very nice and wanted to be her friend. He finally got the courage to talk with her, and they became best friends. She was his best friend even into their teen years. He loved her and wanted very much to marry her when they grew up."

"Girls? Yuk!" said one of the younger boys.

"He sounds like a sissy to me! Why would he want to be friends with a girl?" asked another.

"Hey!" said Steven, the oldest and the ringleader of the lot, "Shut yer moy! One day, you'll think twice about girls, and if you laugh at me, I will personally follow you on your first dates and tell them all about the stupid stuff you said about girls when you were just a little wanker!"

They all quieted down and waited for Hermione to continue. "Well, during his growing up years, there was this group of boys who went around teasing and beating up this boy, and each time, his friend would be there to comfort him. One day, when he was sixteen, the mean boys set upon the boy. One of them had liked the redheaded girl for a long time and wanted her for himself and away from the boy. He had been jealous of their relationship and had been hitting and beating on him every day, thinking that would make the redheaded girl love him. During the fight, the mean boys really embarrassed him, and he was so angry and upset that when his girlfriend came to stand up and fight for him, he snapped at her and called her a very rude and cruel name. She was so hurt and sad; she refused to forgive the boy. She married that mean boy who had wanted her, and the boy, when he became a grown man, was so devastated he lost her, became very angry and mean. He never let anyone close to him again. He became a bitter man and died that way. But he never stopped loving the redheaded girl who had become a beautiful redheaded woman."

"Why didn't she forgive him?" asked David.

"Maybe he never said he was sorry, you pillock!" snapped Steven.

Hermione looked at the older boy. He looked upset and distressed by the story. She wondered if there was a Lily in his life.

"Oh, he apologized. He was even going to sleep on her front porch if she wouldn't talk to him and forgive him. But she rejected his apology because by this time, the boy had been hanging out with a group of really bad boys who were just as mean as the other group of mean boys who were beating up the boy. These boys, though, didn't like the redheaded girl, and over a period of years, she begged him to stop hanging out with those mean boys who hated her. She was afraid of them. When he apologized, she gave him one final chance, and he refused to choose between them. He wanted to be friends with those bad boys and have her. But he couldn't have both, and she finally had enough. They never spoke again."

"Well, that was dumb!" said Tommy. "Why should he have to choose between his mates and some dumb girl?"

"Because the boys were mean, and maybe they wanted to hurt the girl!" said Anthony.

"Yeah!" said Steven. "If he loved her and wanted to marry her, he should have left those berks behind!"

Hermione smiled gently. "It's really easy to see things the right way when you can look back. This poor man spent the rest of his life mourning the loss of his one true love. He loved her until the day he died," she said.

"What happened to the girl after she married that mean boy? Was he mean to her?" asked little Joshua.

"No," said Hermione. "He grew up and realized it wasn't polite being mean. He changed and became a nice man. He loved the redheaded girl very much, and they had a baby boy. Then one day, a very bad man killed the redheaded girl and her husband, and their little boy became an orphan, raised by his mum's family."

"What did the man do when he found out she died?" asked Joseph, Joshua's twin.

"He was broken-hearted," whispered Hermione sadly. "He had known the man who had killed her, and he felt he should have protected her better. He knew the wicked man was out to find her and her family and kill them...even the little baby because he was so wicked. He tried to save her, tried to keep not only her but also her husband and baby boy safe; he loved her so much, but the wicked man eventually found them, and when she died, he was never the same again."

"The wicked man didn't kill her son, though. What happened to her son?" asked Steven.

"He's my best friend," said Hermione with a bright smile, though she felt a pang in her heart. "He and I have been best friends since we were eleven. He married the sister of another good friend of ours. He used to be happy. It's just now he's sad all the time...sad about the man's death, the one who loved his mum. You see, all my friend's life, he thought the bitter man was a terrible and selfish person. My friend didn't know until the man had died that he had loved his mum his whole life and risked his life to save hers and his. He reckons now he was the bravest man he had ever known."

"The girl's son knew her old friend?" asked Steven.

"Yes. He was a teacher of ours. It was hard for the man to see his only love's son there with her eyes and that mean boy's face who used to torment him staring back at him in class while he taught. So, it was all very sad. No one understood this miserable, bitter man or why he was so angry and mean all the time. But actually it's rather simple. People who are hurting tend to hurt other people and hate to see other people happy when they feel so wretched. They are to be, maybe not pitied, but rather given more compassion. Do you all know what compassion means?"

"I do," said Steven importantly.

"Tell the others, then," she said.

"It means to show tolerance and mercy. To try and understand why they act the way they do."

"Did that make sense to you all?" Hermione asked.

"So, it means to see life how the other bloke sees it, right?" asked Tommy.

"That's right," said Hermione. "That's why you shouldn't tease and call the old gentleman names. There may be a story there that is painful and sad. There is always a reason," she said simply.

"That's his house," said Steven pointing into the distance. "No one walks by it unless they have to. It's really creepy."

"Well, I have to go. I need to speak to him," said Hermione bravely as she continued to walk down the road.

The boys tagged along as she walked up the rickety stairs. It was a dilapidated old house, for sure. She knocked on the door, and the boys behind her hid off to the side of the house in the overgrown bushes, whispering amongst themselves.

"She's really gonna do it! He's going to kill her!"

She rapped on the door again, more forcefully this time. The door opened slowly and there stood Mr. Black or, as Hermione knew him, Professor Severus Snape.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 18

Life after Voldemort isn't as everyone thought it would be.

Chapter 7

"Miss Granger," Professor Snape ground out as his eyes shot daggers into her. He looked past her and smiled nastily. "Still collecting strays I see. How nice that the years and a war have not changed you. As Hagrid had collected every dangerous beast under the sun, you seem to gravitate towards every worthless male within your reach. Now why have you darkened my doorstep?"

His eyes darted around suspiciously towards the boys hiding in the overgrown shrubbery. Hermione was still in shock upon seeing him. She had always known, of course, but still it had seemed so far-fetched. A dream, really, but now it *was* true, and there he was, alive and himself. Harry would be so happy. Perhaps finally he would be able to forgive himself.

"Oh, Professor," she gushed. "I'm so happy you are alive!" Her eyes filled up with tears.

He glowered at her. "You spill one tear, and I will have you thrown off my property!" he raged.

Hermione blinked her tears away fast. "Please, sir, I'm worried about Eugene. He hasn't been around for about a week. I had an unfortunate encounter with his aunt..."

"Charming woman," he said snidely as he crossed his arms. "Reminded me somewhat of Black's mother at headquarters."

Hermione took notice of his state of dress. He wore the same black frock coat and trousers as he had underneath his robes at Hogwarts; however, they were filthy and threadbare. He had patches on his elbows and knees. She looked closer at his neck. There was indeed an old rag covering Nagini's bite. He was entirely grimy and careworn. He was so thin, it shocked her he had the energy to be so nasty.

Hermione collected her thoughts and continued. "I haven't seen Eugene. He always comes to my house so I can feed him and take care of anything he needs. He's special, you realize," she whispered softly.

"Ah, yes," he replied impassively. "I am aware of the lad's *talents*. Why this is a concern of yours, I cannot fathom."

Hermione was gobsmacked. "He loves me! He told me he wants me to be his mother. He wouldn't just stop coming round without a reason, unless he was ill or hurt. He came to me when he had been beaten up...he knows how deeply I care for him."

"Beaten up?" he snapped with a glimmer of fury in his eyes. He took a step outside of his door. Hermione immediately recoiled from him and was aghast. He stunk to high heaven. It was as if he hadn't had a bath since the final battle. The emaciated look of him was even worse in the sunlight. But even with that, he still had the power to strike the fear of God Almighty into the boys who stood quaking nearby his porch.

He spoke loud and deep. "I don't care to dissemble the situation. You all know your guilt, and you should be horsewhipped within an inch of your worthless lives. If I ever hear of Eugene being mistreated again, and trust me...nothing gets by me...I have my ways," he said in a deadly whisper, "you will regret you were ever born into this miserable world. Now. GO!"

The boys tore out of there, scrambling down towards the main road back to the village.

Professor Snape watched the boys dash out of sight. Then he turned towards his former pupil. "Miss Granger, still the insufferable know-it-all, I see. How disappointing it took you this long to find me."

"Well, I had known it was you Eugene was working for, for quite some time, Professor," she explained.

"Do not call me that," he snapped.

"I knew it had to be you, *sir*," she said with emphasis. "But I didn't want to interfere with Eugene's life. He was welcome to come to my house, and I was more than happy to feed him and make sure he was washed properly. I also have been taking him to church with me to feed his religious education. He spoke of you often, and I never let on I knew it was you. I respect your wish to be alone. The only reason I'm here is because I was threatened by that horrid aunt of his, and I told her after she insulted you that I was in full agreement with what you said. They should be brought to the authorities for child abuse. He's been poorly neglected. Up till now, I have done my best to give him lots of love and care. I am frightened. I don't know where he is. Have you seen him?"

Professor Snape stared at her with boredom in his eyes. "As always, Miss Granger, your mouth has an uncanny ability to prattle on with useless nonsense. The boy is here. He's been here for a while. That gormless uncle of his came to get him, and I nearly hexed him. I told him he was fortunate the law wasn't at his door and that I would be caring for the lad until the time comes for him to go to his new school. The dunderhead seemed *relieved*," he recounted with emphasis.

"May I see him?" Hermione pleaded.

Professor Snape stared at her until a twitch near his mouth betrayed a hint of softness. "He's been asking for you," he whispered uncomfortably. "He's under a delusion that a *mere* child could be a mother to him."

Hermione's anger rose up quickly. "I am nearly twenty, Severus Snape! I am old enough and capable enough to be a mother."

He smiled nastily and raised an eyebrow. "Well, congratulations, Miss Granger. You seem to have acquired a son," he said factiously. "You do realize he wants for you and I to be his parents? How does that make you feel? You're a grown woman. I'm sure you're no shrinking violet. How does the idea of me being your husband strike you? Are you the passionate type that requires a lot of grunting and thrusting, or do you appreciate a slow and gentle lover who will tell you how incredibly desirable you are with each delicate stroke?"

"Don't be disgusting," she said as she felt her cheeks getting warm.

He smiled wickedly. "Well, that poses a difficulty. Sex is disgusting in general or just sex with me?" he asked, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

Hermione set her mouth firmly and remained calm. "You are coarse and your descriptions of sex are repugnant. If you don't mind, I would rather see to Eugene and not continue this discussion," she said bossily.

"After you, Miss Granger," he said sarcastically as he gracefully extended an arm to lead the way.

Hermione walked into the house and was appalled by the lack of care and blatant disregard for cleanliness. It was a filthy, smelly house covered in dust and cobwebs. The house itself was very old, but it appeared structurally sound. The foyer led into a large sitting room where a fireplace dominated the layout of the room. Straight ahead, to the right, was a long staircase that wound up to a second floor. Hermione was just getting her bearings when Eugene barreled down the stairs and flung himself into Hermione's arms.

"Hermione! Oh, Hermione, I knew you'd come!" he said breathlessly. "He had his doubts, but I knew you'd find me."

He turned to Snape. "See, sir? This is Hermione. Isn't she beautiful?"

Snape raised an eyebrow and stalked off into the next room. Eugene took Hermione by the hand, and they followed Snape into the kitchen where it was much cleaner.

Hermione went to help the professor with tea, and she whispered, "Have you told him your real name yet?"

He grimaced. "I had to," he said tersely. "He told me he was calling me 'Mr. Black' when he spoke of me to you." He glared at her, daring her to laugh, but she didn't. She didn't dare.

They all sat down properly and had tea and biscuits. Professor Snape ate nothing, just drank his tea. "So now what are we going to do?" asked Eugene happily, looking at each of them. "What do you think of her? Mr. Snape, sir, isn't Hermione beautiful? She's real young, but wicked smart."

He turned to Hermione. "What d'you think of Mr. Snape? His clothes are shabby, and the house is a bit dirty, but I can fix that. Maybe you can help him with his clothes? He's really smart like you, and you are a witch, and he's a wizard, so you'd be perfect together. We could be a family. Then maybe I'd have a brother or sister. So, what do you think? DO you want to get married?"

Hermione choked on her tea at the mentioning of "brother or sister."

Snape looked at her with barely concealed rage. "Eugene," he said calmly. "There are many wizards and witches in the world. I am sure that Miss Granger would not willingly choose me as a husband. Besides, I have my own taste in witches. Miss Granger does not fit the bill."

Hermione's ears perked up. "Eugene," she said as she kept her eyes on Professor Snape, "go to your room. I need to speak with the professor."

After Eugene had left, she leaned towards him and hissed, "What is this nonsense? Why are you claiming Lily is coming back to you? She's dead. DEAD! She's been dead for almost twenty years!"

Hermione watched as the professor, who had been so sharp-witted and cutting with his tongue, dissolve into a confused and uncertain little boy before her eyes.

"That's not true," he whispered in a scared, shaky voice. "T-The Dark Lord p-promised me, and then D-Dumbledore k-kept her safe. He protected her. That's why I came back to H-Hogwarts. It was the bargain I struck with the Headmaster. She's in hiding. She just has to realize all I did to save her son, and she'll come back to me. S-She'll forgive me this time. I helped her son kill the Dark Lord. She'll come back, and when she does, I shall be prepared to give her everything she ever wanted. She always loved the Lake District. She loved to recite Wordsworth.

"O pleasant transit, Grasmere! to resign

Such happy fields, abodes so calm as thine;

Not like an outcast with himself at strife;

The slave of business, time, or care for life,

But moved by choice; or, if constrained in part,

Yet still with Nature's freedom at the heart;--

To cull contentment upon wildest shores,

And luxuries extract from bleakest moors;

With prompt embrace all beauty to enfold,

And having rights in all that we behold.

"I knew it would have to be Grasmere. At first, I feared, but she has been scrying on my work. She comes to me and talks to me in the mirror in my room. She's coming back as soon as she can. I just have to get things arranged and clean."

He began to smooth his clothes and brush off his filthy frock coat, as if that all what was needed to make him presentable. Hermione thought she had found Professor Snape. Instead, she had discovered a schizophrenic. The professor who had met her on his porch and insulted her had been the real Professor Snape. This...this...*child* was living in some alternate universe. His face was smoother, happier, and even perhaps a bit younger. Could it be he thought he was back in his teen years or early twenties? Whatever it was, it was terrible to behold. Hermione's face was numb with shock, but still felt the tears that were streaming from her eyes steadily dripping onto her hands, which were shaking in fear.

Hermione swallowed and regained her composure. She hastily dried her eyes and began to think *He needs his memory back, that's all. He's been through a terrible shock, near death experience and all that.*

Hermione's face continued to pale as she watched the professor she once knew, stumble alongside the road to madness. She would have to intervene. She would need Harry, forgiven or not.

Hermione found herself on the horns of a dilemma. She came each day to see Eugene, who ignorantly worked feverishly to clean the house along with the professor, who remained resolute in his belief that Lily was still alive. Hermione learned quickly not to speak her name if she wanted to avoid screaming rages and death threats. As long as she worked and kept to herself and Eugene, the professor was calm and sedate. Hermione still did not know if Harry was strong enough for this situation. One thing she was convinced of was that the professor desperately needed his memories back.

She worked hard, dusting surfaces, scrubbing floors, polishing the wood furniture to a shine. The professor worked himself to a frazzle, all the while refusing to eat when Hermione required an afternoon break for lunch.

One day, Hermione threw her rag down and bellowed, "I've had enough of this! Severus Snape, get into that kitchen and eat, or I will hex you!"

He looked up at her from where he was cleaning out the grate of the fireplace. His eyes were burning with a rage that was building underneath the surface.

"Do not presume to order *me* around, Miss Granger," he whispered. He then slowly turned and continued his snail's pace of cleaning the grate. Hermione decided to appeal to his greed.

"If you eat, sir, you will be able to have more energy to clean more efficiently," she said sweetly.

This time he didn't even look at her. "You just don't want to help. You're just jealous. You don't want Lily here. I don't need you. You don't belong here anyway. When Lily comes, she will be Eugene's mother. The three of us will be a family. Go away."

Hermione noticed his sentences were short and his breathing shallow. He was going to kill himself with this hallucination. She was going to have to take drastic measures, and damn the consequences. She drew her wand and said calmly, "*Petrificus Totalus.*"

He fell over frozen onto the floor. Eugene dashed down the stairs from where he had been cleaning the banisters. "What did you do?" he yelled. "Why are you hurting him?"

He began to cry, and Hermione knelt onto the floor and said, "Eugene, I haven't hurt him. I'm sorry, but you need to go home to your aunt and uncle, just for a while. The professor is sick. I had to paralyze him, so I could get him back to my house. There I can feed him and get him clean. Do you understand?"

Eugene gulped back his sobs, and Hermione wiped his tears with the corner of her apron.

"He'll need to eat and take a bath." She looked over at his pathetically thin frame and sighed at the condition of his robes. "He needs clean clothes as well," she muttered as she bit her lower lip.

She turned to look back at Eugene and said, "I will have to send for help to get the professor thinking straight again. Do you understand?"

Eugene's face grew hard. "You don't want me anymore. You just want to get rid of me!"

Hermione shook her head furiously. "No! Never, Eugene, would I do such a thing. I would have you come with me this instant, but these are very serious grown-up things I must do. You don't want to see the professor when he realizes what I have done to him. It's for your own safety. I will come round for you or have someone send for you. Don't worry." She hugged him and watched him leave. She took Professor Snape by the hand and Apparated into her house.

With a deep breath, she removed the spell, and he was furious. "How dare you!" he spat. "I demand you take me back to my house this instant!"

"No!" Hermione shouted as she pushed him further inside the cottage. You will remove those filthy rags you call clothes and get into a bath. You need a good scrubbing, and if you refuse to do it, I shall!"

She looked at him with her hands on her hips, boring her eyes into his. She saw he was trying to decide what to do, but they both knew he had run himself physically into the ground. He was weak as a newborn kneazle and couldn't perform magic against her in that condition. He was at her mercy.

"Fine," he acquiesced. "Please give me my privacy, at least."

"Of course," she replied.

She led him down the hall to the bathroom. She gave him all the necessities he would need. As she turned to leave, she said, "Just so you know, I shall be right outside the door. Any funny business, and I'll not hesitate to enter, so you'd best make short work of your bath."

His eyes were throwing daggers at her as she left the room. She heard the water running and the telltale splashing that he was cleaning himself. She came in, and he began to bluster.

"Miss Granger! I am not fit to be seen. Get. Out!"

Hermione sat on the lid of the loo and said, "Well, you've got at least one thing right. You are not fit to be seen. You are downright filthy! I am going to wash your hair, Professor. You are disgustingly dirty. Look at that water! It's revolting. You'll take a shower after the water is drained.

She stopped speaking as she stared at his throat. The filthy rag he had wrapped around his throat still remained.

"What is that thing still doing on you?" she demanded.

"I have to keep the wound covered, you little twit!" he snapped.

"Not encased in that mangy thing," she contradicted. "Take it off, now!"

She pointed her wand at him, and he took it off. She left her wand carefully out of reach and got onto her knees to examine the puncture wound closely.

"Well, Professor, you started out well, I can tell by the smell of old dittany that you have thoroughly cleaned it. However, you have insisted on keeping that putrid material with old dittany and blood on it, and now, you've got an infection. She proceeded to scrub his hair clean. She turned on the water and pulled the drain.

"I'm pulling the curtain, and you will rinse the shampoo out of your hair and clean the rest of your body in the shower. I want you squeaky clean, Professor!" she warned. She pulled the curtain and waited until she heard the water turn off and heard a mumbled, "I've finished."

She left the room so he could dry off. "I transfigured a bathrobe to fit you. It's right there, hanging on the hook on the door. Put that on, and let me see you."

He came out shortly and looked at her with pure loathing. She felt his hair, scalp, the backs of his ears, neck and examined his hands. She took him upstairs with her to her Potions lab and looked for the potion she needed for his infection.

She touched his neck more thoroughly. "Does this hurt?" she asked as she applied pressure to various areas of his neck. At one point he winced. Hermione took out a bottle of Murtlap Essence and dabbed it all over the area. "How is that?" she asked again.

"Fine," he ground out.

She took out a bottle of Wound Cleaning Potion and continued to heal him. She glanced at him every so often as his eyes darted around him. After she had finished, she said, "All right, I am done. Keep that wound uncovered. In a couple of days, the infection will be gone, and you'll be fine."

She looked up and watched him look curiously at her lab. He looked at her neatly written labels and all the ingredients in her stores.

"You make your own potions?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied as she leaned against her lab table.

He looked at her with a wary eye. "You are able to receive proper ventilation up here in this rat trap?" he asked sharply.

She matched his stare. "My skill in the art of potion making is sufficient to ascertain whether or not I possess the proper ventilation needed," she retorted confidently.

"And what exactly gives you the delusion that you possess the subtle art of potion making?" he said as he continued to examine her stores.

"Well, I had better, or you were a piss-poor teacher, sir," she said smartly.

He glared at her and walked towards the door. "Cheek! You were always a cheeky girl when it suited you. I order you to return my clothes to me, and then I demand you Apparate me back to my house," he said imperiously.

"Not just yet, Professor, now come with me," she said as she took him by the hand. He tried to wrench his hand from hers, but she was far stronger. She led him downstairs to the kitchen sink.

"*Accio spare toothbrush and toothpaste!*" she trilled.

The items came soaring into the room, and she handed them to the professor. "Now, brush your teeth."

She knew he wanted to strangle her, but was in no condition to confront her. After he was finished, she led him into her sitting room that was next to the kitchen. She could observe him from there while she prepared his dinner. She dried his hair with a towel and lowered his head onto a plush pillow. He sighed as he sank into her plush couch, and she lengthened it to accommodate his height. She covered him with a soft blanket and tucked him in like a child. He was so lost and helpless; Hermione couldn't help the tears from welling up. She had never seen him in so vulnerable.

He slept while she cooked. She roasted a chicken, made baked potatoes and green beans. She also made an apple pie while the meal cooked, and she went to tend to him as the chicken finished cooking.

"Severus," she whispered as she stroked his arm. "I need you to wake up."

Weary eyes met hers, and she smiled. She conjured a chair and took one of his thin hands with a nail trimmer and emery board.

"What are you doing?" he rasped.

She had her head bend over his hand to carefully examine each finger. "Your nails were overgrown and caked with layers of dirt. Soaking in the bath helped a great deal to release the muck, but your nails are still in bad shape and need trimming." After she finished trimming, she took out a lotion for his dried out skin. She massaged and rubbed the lotion into his hands and arms, one at a time. The professor kept his eyes closed and stopped protesting. Hermione smiled. *He must be enjoying this now.*

When she was finished with his hands, she uncovered his feet.

"What the bloody hell are you doing?" he roared as he pulled his feet back protectively.

Hermione looked up at him with poorly restrained frustration. "Your feet, Professor, are in a frightful state as well. You have got to learn to be more consistent with cleanliness."

"You are an impudent bitch!" he seethed.

"Look!" she shouted as she whipped out her wand. "I had just about enough of your whining. If you want to get out of this house alive, I suggest you cooperatel. *highly doubt anyone would miss you,*" she added, thinking of how he had threatened Eugene.

She began to tend to his feet. They weren't so bad. Just needed a trimming and lotion for dried out skin. He was just so thin and pathetic looking. Then she realized he wasn't yelling at her.

She looked up sharply, and his black eyes were large and glassy. "Lily would miss me," he whispered softly. Hermione didn't know if he was even speaking to her or not. She didn't know if he was aware of her presence.

She made short work of his feet and tucked them back under the blanket, cozy and warm. She went to the kitchen and washed her hands, sighing deeply as she went about her tasks. She felt mentally exhausted. She had to not think too much about all of it. So, she decided on getting him physically sorted first, and then she could work on getting Harry to give up the memories he had kept for the professor.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 18

Life after Voldemort isn't as everyone thought it would be.

Chapter 8

Once dinner was finished cooking, Hermione helped Severus to sit up and gave him his plate. He tore into the food and in no time was finished. He lay back down and slept.

The hours passed, and he woke again that evening. She gave him a thick slice of apple pie, and he ate that just as fast as his dinner. Hermione gave him a large glass of milk and ordered it to go down. She had retrieved a Strengthening Solution while he had slept earlier and made him drink that as well. Severus slept while Hermione ate her dinner and composed a carefully written letter to Ginny, telling her about the professor and that she needed Harry to let her have the memories. After she had sent Archimedes, her owl, to fly away with the letter, all she could do now was wait.

She slept a little while the professor slept through the night. In the morning, she woke to find him gone. She panicked. Then she heard a voice and sobbing from one of her bedrooms. There she found Professor Snape talking to an old, long, oval mirror she had brought down from the attic when she had first moved in. The mirror was very old and beautiful; however, she had not wanted it in her room, so she had placed it in the guest room. Now, there was Potions master, Professor Severus Snape, spy for the Order of the Phoenix, Occlumens against the most evil Dark wizard that had ever lived, and one of the most ruthless wizards alive, sobbing and begging on the floor in front of an antique mirror.

"Why don't you come, Lily?" he whispered as his voice hitched from his sobbing. "I worked so hard. I took care of your son, and now he's all grown-up with a wife of his own. I love you, Lily! You told me you loved me! I'm sorry I disappointed you. I knew taking the Mark was wrong, but he's dead now. Can't you forgive and stop punishing me? I didn't want to leave our house, that evil witch hexed me. Please, come back to me, Lily!" His hands pressed against the mirror as if he wanted to crawl inside it.

Hermione's blood turned cold. He was mad. She walked in carefully, and his tear-stained face turned to her. "She just wants to stay silent. She won't let me see her. She won't even come to me in the mirror. Why did you take me from my house? You have ruined everything! Why can't she forgive me?" he raged.

He burst into a new wave of tears, and Hermione's heart went out to him. She went to his side on the floor, and he wrapped his arms around her waist tightly as he sobbed in her lap. She delicately wrapped her arms around him as she looked at their reflection in the mirror.

After he stopped crying, Hermione directed him from the bedroom back to the kitchen. He began to regain some lucidity, and she sat with him at her kitchen table with a strong cup of tea and listened as he spoke.

"I remember so much, but there are blank spots in my mind," he whispered deeply. "Miss Granger, I must return to my house. Perhaps she will not enter into this house, or maybe she thinks I have left her and am with you?" He grew frantic and rose to leave, not registering that he was only dressed in a robe.

"Please, sir, you must stay here. You must! You are not well," Hermione insisted as she tried to contain him without actually touching him.

He rounded on her, grabbed her arms in an iron grip, and hissed, "What I am or am not is none of your business! You wretched little ~~swo~~*how dare you* presume to dictate to me how I should live my life?"

Hermione ripped herself from his grip. "It became my business the minute Eugene became a part of my life. For whatever reason, he wants ~~us~~. You have to snap out of this delusion. Lily is dead! She died in 1981..."

"SHE DID NOT DIE!" he screamed as he threw his cup of tea across the room, crashing the pottery into the opposite wall.

"I want my clothes back and for you to Apparate me back to my home, right this instant!" he shrieked as he crashed his fist onto her table.

"I will not!" retorted Hermione, although feeling increasingly nervous about his violent temper. "You are ill, Professor. Don't you remember your life before teaching at Hogwarts? What do you remember?"

It was her last chance to get him to talk about Lily. She hardly dared to breathe as his black eyes glassed over, and he slumped down in his chair.

"I remember her kiss on my cheek. She was my best friend. We made potions together in class. She loved me. I know she loved me. Then she wouldn't talk to me. I don't know what I did!" he slammed his fists on the table in frustration. "I-I can't understand. She was my friend, my only friend. She was everything to me. The Dark Lord said he would spare her. He swore to me. For insurance, the Headmaster took them, Lily, Potter, and that boy and hid them. I know that Potter couldn't have kept her for long. She'll forgive me now. I know she will," he whispered.

"Do you remember the first time you met her?" she asked.

His eyes focused on her, and they snapped. "Damn you infernal chit! Did I not just say my memory has blank spots in it?" he bellowed.

Hermione steadied herself. He was going to be difficult to contain soon. "I'll go and get your clothes, Professor," she said quietly as she stood up slowly. She had washed his clothes while he'd slept and patched the holes in them. The cloth he'd worn around his neck was repulsive, as it had copious amounts of dried dittany on it mixed with old blood, so that had gone straight into the rubbish bin. She came back with the bundle of clothes and his boots and said, "Let me see your wound, Professor. I want to make sure medicine is working against your infection."

"Don't you dare touch me, you wench!" he yelled. "I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself. I have no infection, and my wound is none of your business. Actually, nothing pertaining to my body is any of your business. I shall care for Eugene. You may see to his eating and clothing needs. I shall care for his education. Besides, he is a wizard. What could *you* possibly know about wizards?"

"A great deal since I spent nearly a year living with two on the run from Voldemort!" she shouted.

"Don't say his name!" he hollered.

"Oh, shut up!" she snapped at him. "Your stupid Mark doesn't hurt anymore, even I know that. I've been to the trials!" She pointed at his arm as she continued to bellow at him. "I've watched Harry interrogate several of your past associates. I know that *thing* doesn't hurt."

He snatched his clothes from her and stalked to the bathroom. Hermione was ready to pull her hair out. The man was simply a crazy tyrant. She had to get Harry here to restore to him his memories before they ended up killing each other.

Every so often, while Hermione waited for Ginny to reply, she went to the professor's house to help with the cleaning. When she had first retrieved Eugene from his aunt and uncle, he'd been so happy to see her; he hadn't let her go the entire time she'd spoken with them. She had told them that Eugene was special and that the things they had witnessed were not just their imaginations. She'd given a fine display of nonverbal magic, and they had gone into hysterics. They'd told her to get out of their house and to take the boy with her.

So, Eugene in due course became the ward of Hermione Granger. She was happy to see him out of that terrible home, but she couldn't escape the fact he was jumping from one frying pan into the next. The professor was still as insane as ever, whispering to Eugene when he thought Hermione couldn't hear him that Lily was going to be his mother, Hermione would only be around until she returned, and they would be a proper family. Eugene argued continuously that he didn't like Lily; he wanted Hermione to be his mum. That would enrage the professor to no end, and the screaming and threats would start. That would be when Hermione would take Eugene home.

"But, Hermione," Eugene whined as she held his hand tightly, walking away from the professor's latest tantrum, "he needs us! He'll die if we don't help him."

"Eugene," Hermione said firmly as she continued to quickly march them to the Apparition point, "I want you to understand something." She stopped and placed her arms on his shoulders. "I realize the professor is ill. And we will continue to help in whichever way we can. However, that doesn't mean he is allowed to scream, threaten, and carry on because he is frustrated. We'll try returning tomorrow and see if his mood has improved."

"But you won't give up on him, Hermione, will you?" he asked with his wide-blue eyes open with pain.

She ran her fingers through his black hair. "No, Eugene. As long as he keeps letting us in, I won't give up on him."

Eugene hugged her fiercely, and she laid her cheek on his head and sighed. She hoped she wouldn't live to regret this.

The professor would grow disgustingly filthy every so often, and Hermione would have to force him back to her house and order him to bathe and eat while she tried to make one garment out of the tatters his old one had become. Finally, one day she gave up the fight.

"Professor," she said in frustration as she worked on yet another hole in his trousers, "I think this has given up the ghost."

She looked up and saw him staring at her. "Why do you insist on taking care of me as if I were some homeless mongrel?"

Hermione continued to look at the offending garment without missing a beat. "Since I found out you insist living like one," she retorted calmly. She looked up and said, "Professor, I assure you that I do not enjoy having to ambush you in your own house, Apparate you to my home, wrestle, argue, and half-way hex you into making you look like a decent human being. If it were not for Eugene, I daresay, I wouldn't take the time to care." Inside, Hermione winced at her lie. She knew she would care. Harry would never forgive her if he knew she'd given up on the professor.

"Now, I will be going to Diagon Alley for new clothes," she informed him. "You shall write down your sizes so I can purchase you a new suit of clothes and robes."

"What store?" he bit out. "I am particular to the material against my skin."

"I'm sure!" she said mockingly. "So what do you want me to ask for? 60% cotton and 40% old mud or was that 40% silk and 60% caked on dust mixed with sweat?"

"I am perfectly capable of caring for myself. I don't require your charity," he growled.

Hermione remained focused on sewing the patchwork trousers in front of her. "If you were, Professor, I wouldn't have to drag your arse here every three weeks to get you to clean it," she answered sourly. "If you want to be a part of Eugene's life, you have to admit your status as a role model and keep yourself tidy."

He ignored her then, as was his wont when he didn't want to debate a point any further or concede defeat. "Just give me my clothes, and I shall be on my way," he demanded.

Hermione smirked at him. "I have just destroyed them, Professor, save these trousers. They were not fit for wearing." She threw his fixed trousers and clean shirt at him to put on. You will remain here in my house whilst I go to Diagon Alley and purchase new sets of robes and clothes. If you insist on being stubborn, I shall 'guesstimate' the sizes. I'll just need to alter whatever is too large."

He huffed as he scratched out his measurements on a piece of parchment at her writing desk. He strode over as majestically as one could in a terrycloth bathrobe and shoved it under her nose.

Hermione looked at it without touching it and then frowned. "Sir, I need to know what size you require for underwear," she asked.

"You have no business knowing such private information," he ground out, his cheeks flushed red with embarrassment.

"Come now," she said with a sigh. "Give over, Professor." She gestured for him to return to the desk and complete the parchment. He wrote furiously as he spoke.

"I have never met such a bossy, obstinate witch in all my life!" he spat. He thrust the parchment her way. "Meddlesome bint!"

"Twilfitt and Tattings, if you please," he said angrily.

"Well!" she huffed. "Aren't we picky and choosy today," she said, feigning being insulted.

She got her cloak and said, "I shall return as soon as possible." Then, she Disapparated away with a small pop.

Upon her entrance into Diagon Alley, she went straight away to Twilfitt and Tattings and purchased all he required. She also bought him a new traveling cloak and extra robes to wear whilst brewing.

Upon her return, a raging Professor Snape approached her. "How dare you!" he bellowed as he stood in her bathrobe. "You kept me here like a prisoner!" Hermione handed over his new clothes, and he took them roughly from her. He had sense enough to realize he was in no position to protest, so he accepted the new garments.

Hermione smiled. "I see you tried to break my wards?" she asked. "You've only depleted your energy even more, you foolish wizard," she tutted as he slammed the bedroom door in her face.

Hermione wondered from time to time as she watched the dilapidated old house turn into a cozy home if the professor was not entirely insane. As she watched him work, he was able to focus, give direction, and also he brewed (via the aid of Hermione's stores), which meant that he was still quite lucid for extended periods of time. It was only when it came to Lily that his instability came to a head.

In an attempt to test her hypothesis, Hermione insisted that she be present for all of Eugene's lessons, and it furthered her belief that the wizard was not totally mad. He was an effective teacher, much more patient than with his other pupils from her school days. When she had asked him about it, he had snapped, "Well, if I only had one student to teach, instead of twenty dunderheads at a time, I wouldn't be worried so much about my bollocks being blown off me, now would I?"

Hermione kept one eye on the professor and the other on Eugene. It was an exhausting summer. Sometimes, at night, Hermione wondered if she ever would hear from Ginny. She thought a lot about just either writing again or going back and getting Harry herself.

The inside of the house was complete. With a little magic and a lot of hard work, the old house fairly shone. Hermione stood in front of the long fireplace in the main room of the downstairs in her shorts and a shirt she had tied up above her waist, a handkerchief wrapped around her hair to keep the dirt out and blacking smudges on her hands, arms and face. Her face was flushed and her breathing irregular from having just completed blacking the iron. The professor came out of the room underneath the stairs and stopped cold.

Hermione turned to the footsteps behind her. "What?" she said as she panted, wiping sweat off her brow, only succeeding in smearing more blacking around her face.

"You look ridiculous," he snapped as he continued to stare at her. "You realize there is a young boy in this house, don't you? Your clothing is indecent. You look..." He stopped short and stalked off into the kitchen.

Hermione got back down on her knees and shook her head as she gathered all the trash from her labors. "Eugene!" Hermione called. "It's time to go home for dinner."

Eugene came out from one of the upstairs bedroom. "Aw, Hermione, do we have to go? I like my room. I think we should all stay here."

"Eugene," she corrected gently. "Our food is at Garden Cottage," she reminded him. "There isn't a proper bit of food in this house."

"There would be if I went to the store!" the young boy offered eagerly. "Then you could stay the night! All of us could stay here. Hermione could sleep with the professor in his room so he won't be lonely!"

"EUGENE!" shouted Professor Snape from the kitchen.

"We'll think about staying over, Eugene. But not tonight and certainly not with me sharing a bed with the professor," she said firmly.

Eugene sulked down the stairs.

"Professor," she called. "You *are* welcome to have supper with us. You know you are always welcome."

"I shall stay here, thank you very much!" he answered snidely from inside the kitchen.

Eugene broke from Hermione and ran to Severus. Hermione could hear the boy pleading. Hermione placed all the used and dirty newspaper into the rubbish bin in the hall. She could hear and see clearly Eugene's efforts to make the professor change his mind.

Severus was sitting in his usual chair, against the wall, sipping tea or something, trying to ignore Eugene's pleadings.

Eugene stood across from him on the other side of the table. "Why don't you come? Hermione is nice. She's so much better than some old lady whose not even real!"

Hermione held in her breath and waited for the explosion. There was nothing. The silence frightened her. When she re-opened her eyes, she couldn't see Eugene. She dashed into the kitchen and saw Eugene kneeling on the other side of Professor Snape. His face was white and confused. Hermione silently directed the boy to leave the room. The professor's head was resting on the table. His hands were in his hair, and Hermione knew there were tears rolling down his face. She knelt down at his side and placed her hand delicately on his back.

"WHY DO YOU INSIST ON TOUCHING ME?" he roared as he pushed her from him. He stood up quickly and stared at her with a strange look she had never seen on his face before.

Hermione had been knocked to the floor, and she slowly got to her feet, on her knees, too scared to move, looking at the professor warily. Eugene strode over to the professor and hit him in the stomach. "Don't you hurt her!" he screamed. "Hermione's only been nice to you. She's taken care of us, and you keep on being mean! Why can't you be nice? She just wants to make sure you're okay and take care of you!"

Eugene stood breathing heavily as Hermione watched something click in Snape's head. He ran one of his long hands through the boy's lanky black hair and then wrapped his arms around him, whispering, "I'm sorry, Eugene. I shouldn't have done that to Miss Granger."

Eugene wriggled out of his arms. "She's 'Hermione'! Why can't you call her Hermione? Why can't you love her? She's here. I don't want your old Lily anyway!" He ran out and dashed up the stairs to the room he had claimed as his own.

Professor Snape looked glumly at the table. Hermione was still on the floor, afraid to move.

"It seems I owe you an apology, Miss Granger," he said stiffly as he offered her his hand.

"It's fine," she whispered, brushing it off as she stood up. "I know you have an aversion to being touched. I should keep that in mind more often." She went to walk out of the kitchen without looking at him, and he grabbed her by the wrist. Hermione froze at the warm contact of his hand on her body. He had never touched her of his own accord.

"You have been kind. I am not accustomed to altruistic kindness. I would like to accept your offer of dinner. That is, if I am still welcome." He turned his face to look at hers.

Hermione stared at him in disbelief.

"You have blacking smudges on your face," he said quietly.

"Oh," Hermione said dumbly as she slid her hand down her blouse. "I think I will need a shower before we eat. I'd best ready the house and myself."

His fingers released her slowly as she slowly began to move. As her hand slipped from his fingertips, he whispered, "I don't think you have ever looked lovelier, Hermione."

"Thank you... Severus," she whispered as she left.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 18

Life after Voldemort isn't as everyone thought it would be.

Chapter 9

Something changed after that day. There was a shift, although Hermione couldn't place her finger on it. The professor started joining Hermione and Eugene for dinner every night, and the three of them would play games together or Eugene would listen to Hermione as she told stories about Hogwarts. Hermione liked it best when Severus would tell Eugene his own stories about what a sneaky little girl she had been. It seemed nothing had escaped the professor's notice, much to Hermione's horror, Eugene's delight, and the professor's pleasure. She pretended to be insulted, but her eyes always gave her away. The truth was that she enjoyed seeing her sad, embittered teacher from her youth laughing and smiling without Lily marring the warmth of their laughter and fun.

The last days of summer came with the return of Archimedes. Hermione was excited when she saw him flying back from Godric's Hollow. However, her excitement was short-lived. She shakily opened the letter and sank down hard onto one of her chairs in the kitchen, unable to utter a sound, except for an occasional gasp here and there.

... you can only imagine the heartache Ron has endured. He has been a complete wreck since you walked out on him and us! Harry has been just as difficult; he did not take the news of Professor Snape's survival well at all. He wants desperately to give you the phial of memories; however, he refuses to allow anyone else do it for him. So that means he must face Professor Snape. I have put my foot down, Hermione. I won't go through another episode with him being committed into St. Mungo's again. You just don't know how terrible it's been! His anxiety and fear over all this nonsense has made him so ill, he has been in and out of St. Mungo's for the past three months. Because of this, we had to give up on rebuilding the old house in Godric's Hollow and move back in with my parents.

But you wouldn't know about that, would you? It seems all you are about is yourself and your new pet project: Professor Snape! So forgive me if I don't sound as excited as you'd have hoped. I will not allow Harry to do this. If you and Snape want those memories so damn bad, you'll have to come here to the Burrow and get them yourselves! I've enough on my hands as it is...

The letter went on in the same vein until Ginny's curt goodbye. So, it was final. Harry would not be coming to Grasmere. Even if he had wanted to, Hermione doubted Ginny would let him. Then there was the problem of Harry's refusal to let anyone besides the professor take the phial of memories from him. That meant the professor would have to go to the Weasleys', and he was just not stable enough to go face all of them. Hermione sighed. They all would have to continue on as they had been until more progress was made.

Hermione was not without hope. As long as Professor Snape talked and worked with Eugene at Garden Cottage, the saner he became. He still had his moments, especially if he were allowed to linger inside his bedroom at the old house. Slowly, his mind was becoming calmer, sharper, and Hermione believed happier at Garden Cottage. But ultimately, Hermione knew that only retrieving the professor's memories from Harry would make him completely well again...at least she hoped. She had no idea about long-term memory survival. Did memories deteriorate on their own over time? She only knew they needed to be preserved in a special way. She didn't want to think about what the fallout would be if the professor were never able to get his memories restored to him.

The fall arrived, and Eugene started his fifth and final year at Grasmere Primary. He would be eleven in March. Soon, much too soon, he would be getting his Hogwarts letter and leave them in only one year. He spent his day hours at school, so now Hermione and the professor had a great deal of time alone together. They began to take daily walks along the fells, and Hermione would listen as he spoke about his life.

It was always the same with them. The professor kept his body close to him; his hands clasped behind his back, deliberately keeping a wide berth between them. It was clear to Hermione that he either truly feared physical contact, or perhaps he didn't know how to handle closeness.

Physical proximity was not the only issue that seemed hard for him to manage. Talking about emotions, especially honest and vulnerable emotions, were almost foreign to him. Hermione recalled all too well from her school days what he had considered to be the accepted forms of communication: sarcasm, rage, browbeating, and just plain old verbal abuse. As long as she steered clear of such touching matters and spoke of intellectual pursuits and ideas, he conversed normally, civilly, and politely. Hermione had wondered during those first walks together when nothing was said between them if he must have been like that when not around his students and amongst his colleagues, just more easy and comfortable.

It didn't matter anyway. He probably would only ever see her as Hermione Granger, the annoying Gryffindor student. Not enough time had passed. Although they both had had major life-altering changes take place within a short period of time, she still looked as fresh and young as when she had been his student merely three years before when she had been in his Defense class.

One afternoon, she had been pleasantly surprised when he initiated a conversation with her out of the blue. She was shocked. Perhaps her silence had made its impression on the dour wizard

"Miss Granger," he said softly. "I never thought I would live to see the day when you could manage to keep that trap of yours shut," he said with only a hint of a bite in his voice.

Hermione lowered her head to hide a smirk from him. "You would be surprised, I think, at many things I am able to do now," she replied smoothly.

He turned his face to her. "Such as?"

She turned to him and smiled. "Well, I don't feel a need to prove myself anymore. After the war, I had felt just so tired, all I wanted peace and solitude to think about what it was I wanted to make out of my life."

He snorted. "Silly girl!" he snapped. "How on earth have you been able to manage? You don't seem all that different to me. You still are collecting strays. First with Potter and Weasley at Hogwarts..."

"...and you, Professor?" she interrupted. "Are you a stray in need of feeding and caring?"

"Cheek!" he bit out angrily. He stopped walking and faced her with the wrathful face she had grown to recognize since she had been a small child.

"I am not a dog, unlike your friend, *Black*, whom you all took to so well under your wing! If anyone had deserved the least bit of caring, it would have been that son-of-a-bitch," he snarled.

Hermione watched as he slowly turned his eyes from her to the side. She watched, her head cocked, and evaluated him. He was so tightly wound, so rigid, and unyielding. She wondered if he would never forgive her for seeing him at his worst.

"Who had deserved the best, Severus?" she whispered lowly.

His face snapped back towards her, and his eyes narrowed angrily. "Don't," he whispered in warning.

"What, Professor?"

"Don't you pity me," he snarled. "I have taken a great deal from you, you bossy witch! But I refuse to be pitied like some forlorn outcast in the cold!"

"But, Professor," Hermione said boldly, "isn't that what you have always been? Sirius and Professor Lupin had told us the stories. Harry, Ron, and I have heard both sides of it. Sirius would always take the stance of you being mean, vicious, and cruel, but Professor Lupin, well, he had told us a very different side of you."

"Like what?" he asked quietly.

"Oh, that you never really got a fair shake from James and Sirius. Professor Lupin had always spoken of his regret that he hadn't work harder to rein Sirius and James in. He had known you never had a real chance. They had a fixation on you that had bordered on the obsessive."

Snape grunted and continued to walk. Hermione quietly maintained the divide between them.

The time finally came when Severus began to really talk. He had asked her if she would care to join him for another walk, and she had agreed as usual.

They had started out normally, with the divide between them, like a glass wall. It had given Hermione hope, for glass walls could be broken easily, but until then, she could observe him and consider his body language.

"I thought of what you had said," he started abruptly as Hermione knelt to pick some wild flowers she had found.

"What was that?" she asked as she knelt in the midst of the tiny flowers.

He stood a distance away from her. "You are acting like a silly girl," he said but not with enough venom to make his comment believable. "I detest flowers, and here you are fawning over them like they will live forever."

"They are beautiful, Severus," Hermione said as she stood with the flowers she had gathered. "Nothing lasts forever. The war taught me that. So, I take my enjoyment in the here and now."

"I'm sure that's exactly what comes to mind when they begin to wilt. They are useless. Here I thought you were practical," he muttered.

He began to walk away, and Hermione shrugged and started to walk back to the cottage.

"Where are you going?" he barked suddenly.

Hermione whirled around on him and spat, "How dare you speak to me in that tone! I am not your student, and you are not one of my betters. You are a guest in my home, and in my home I happen to enjoy living things. If it offends you, by all means, return to that dilapidated pile of kindling you call a house and remain there. I will not apologize for being myself, nor will I stand on my land and allow you to insult me!"

His face contorted in frustration as he crossed his arms in front of his chest. "I'm not good at these things... I wanted to speak with you after so many times walking out together, and the moment I start, you run off picking flowers!" he said petulantly.

He strode away, and Hermione knew he was returning back to the house on Red Bank Road, the house where he would find Lily once again and descend into madness. Hermione couldn't bear to see it happen to him again, not when he had come so far.

"Professor, stop!" she pleaded as she dropped the flowers and took a couple of steps towards him, ever mindful of keeping her distance. "I'm sorry. I didn't know today was going to be so important to you. Of course, I care to talk with you. All you have to do is tell me and be open and honest..."

He laughed. He laughed like a madman and then composed himself and focused his black eyes onto hers. "I will never be an open and honest man, Hermione. I am an old, vindictive, spiteful wizard that has spent the past twenty years of his life comfortably numb in the area of positive emotions and have clung to every slight against me since birth. I have had to fake happiness when I wanted to cry and feign exuberance when I wanted to retch. I doubt I am capable of producing an *honest* and *open* dialogue with anyone."

"That is sad," replied Hermione quietly. "However, I disagree with you. I think that a person capable of great anger and rage proves that he or she can produce the opposite of said feelings, such as, joy, passion, and happiness. I think it will just take time for you to feel comfortable with the idea."

He began to walk again with her, keeping the wall up between them. Hermione supposed he had to think and weigh her words. After a while, he spoke again.

"My parents were complicated people," he said. "My mum never hid the fact she was a witch. She was proud, perhaps too proud, and that caused me to run away whenever my father was home and they would begin to fight. I never knew anything of domesticity, happy families, things such as those."

"Hogwarts was your haven," Hermione mused.

"My haven and my hell," he muttered as the wind blew through his lanky hair.

"I hated my first months at Hogwarts," Hermione offered. "I had no friends. I was smart and worked hard, always had the correct answer, was basically an 'insufferable know-it-all,'" she said while smiling.

They walked on in silence for a long time before coming to a glorious sight of the valley and hills that surrounded them. "I never thought I would ever see this place," the professor said suddenly. "I don't belong here."

"Why ever not?" asked Hermione indignantly as she turned to face him.

He quoted, "*Ah, dearest Grasmere!... Its little lakes and mountains were beloved by them all. Romantic yet manageable, it sprang from a kindlier planet.*"

"Mmm, Forster," Hermione replied.

He stood looking uncomfortable inside his black robes. "It's all so beautiful here. I just don't go along with beautiful things or people," he mumbled as he took in the scenery around him. "I've tried, but with only disappointment to show for it."

Hermione decided to take a chance and shatter that glass wall between them. She slowly sidled up to his side and allowed her side to press against his.

"You can belong wherever you wish, Severus," she whispered as she looked ahead. "I bet no one ever told you that." She turned her face to look at him and found their eyes and lips just inches from each other. He had been looking at her as she had gazed on ahead, talking about his possibilities.

He was looking at her strangely. "No. No one has ever," he whispered as they continued to face each other.

Hermione tried to press her luck. "What of Lily? Didn't she ever tell you that you were good enough to be ~~what~~ what you wanted? To be *where* you wanted? Didn't anyone?"

Hermione could feel the relaxation in his body as the tension left him. His hands released from their closed grasp behind his back. He turned his head straight, closed his eyes, and said softly, "All I wanted was to be with her and where she was. That was all I ever wanted out of life," he admitted.

He turned his head to face her. "My life has been one long day of mourning. I was to have been released from this pain and be where she has been all these years. Now I find myself here, in this strange land, where I should find her, but everywhere I look, she is not there."

Hermione watched his eyes moisten, and she desperately wanted to comfort him. She stood in the silence with him and cautiously spoke tenderly. "Remember, here is manageable, and in it, the creation was kind. You will not be left destitute here," she reminded him as she paraphrased from Forster's quote.

Hermione felt his fingers skim along hers, and the warm contact from him made her heart race and her breath hitch.

There was a long pause before he turned his head back to look at her closely. "Lily isn't coming back for me, is she?" he whispered sadly.

Hermione tightened her hand around his around his, and he urged her soft frame closer to his rigid one. She looked upwards into his eyes more closely. "No, Severus," she whispered. "But you have to face the truth, not just take my word for it. Do you remember that you gave Harry many of your memories in the Shack?"

"No," he said strangely as he pulled his head straight up again. "Lily was there. I saw her eyes. I thought she was coming to take me home with her, but...but she left me," he said sadly.

"That wasn't Lily, Severus," Hermione whispered. "That was Harry."

His expression turned desperate. "But if I still keep believing that she's alive, then I never have to face the loss," he said urgently.

"You would be choosing a reality that is false, and it would rob you of anything good that could come your way," she whispered.

He lowered his head and massaged his temple with one hand. Hermione went to remove her hand from his, and he caught her wrist with his long, white fingers.

"I wish for my memories to be returned to me. Can you arrange that?" he asked softly.

Hermione sighed. Finally, the moment had arrived she was hoping for. "I have already started the process. I'm awaiting for Harry and Ginny to reply," she replied softly.

He loosed her wrist from his hand and clasped them behind his back. He turned his head straight, looking forward once again. "My head is hurting. I wish to be alone," he stated as he refrained from looking at her.

Hermione turned and silently walked back to Garden Cottage and yet couldn't help but glance back every once in a while to see if he was all right.

Hermione felt she had gone through hell trying to get Eugene to become officially her son. The obstacle was plain and simple. Hermione was simply not old enough. British Law states that only a person over the age of twenty-one can adopt or even foster a child. Hermione wouldn't be twenty-one until the next September.

However, Professor Snape could adopt the boy or at least foster him for the next year. It would be considered a medium level care, but he would be theirs. As they lived out the days of Eugene's final year as a Muggle, Hermione tried to figure a way to finally get Harry to communicate with her. She was still not sure if taking the professor to the Burrow would be good for his mental health. Until then, they all had to make the best of things. Hermione and the professor agreed the boy desperately needed a wizarding education. Since he had not been raised to live in the wizarding world, Hermione and Severus worked hard at his magical studies.

Hermione was most relieved when the professor focused on teaching. It kept his mind clear and from wandering into the dark areas that would suck him into a black hole. There were bad days when Hermione would find him begging Lily to come out of the mirror in the spare room and return to him, and then there were dreadful days that Hermione and Eugene both feared, for his temper and anger could be easily triggered. However, the delusional episodes were become less frequent. Hermione helped Severus with his lawn and the care of the outside of the house. Painting needed to be finished before it became cold again. That fall kept them all quite busy. The three of them fell easily into a pattern of life between houses. However, Garden Cottage was becoming more of a home for them all. Severus never said, but Hermione suspected he felt more in control of his mind and less anxious around the cottage.

Each night, Eugene would be kissed and hugged before bed by Hermione while Severus was content to shake the lad's hand, and afterwards, they would sit out on the deck together and watch the night sky. Sometimes Severus would talk, sometimes he wouldn't, just like he would stay overnight and sometimes he wouldn't, but he seemed content with the odd life they had made together. Hermione still felt at times like Wendy with her lost boys. She prayed Harry would come soon. She believed with all her heart that if the professor had those memories back, the delusions would finally leave him completely.

The quote was from E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 of 18

Life after Voldemort isn't as everyone thought it would be.

Chapter 10

It was an early morning in late November when the doorbell rang at Garden Cottage. It pulled Hermione out of a deep sleep. She threw on her robe, rushed to the door, and opened it. To her shock and joy there was Harry! She threw her arms around him, laughing and crying at once.

"Oh, Harry!" she cried out. "Thank you for coming. I can't believe you're here!"

He was thin and looked weary. Yet, he still had that grin that would always remind Hermione of better days. At least he had not lost that.

"Well, I left an irate wife at home, but I reckon she'll get over it," he said with his eyes shining brightly. As soon as they had appeared on his face, the smile and the light in his green eyes faded as he looked beyond her.

Hermione turned to see Eugene and Severus walking into the living room, but Harry kept his composure. Hermione could tell he was having a difficult time breathing, and his hands were trembling.

"Are you all right, Harry?" she whispered as she grasped his hand. She knew he still struggled with guilt over leaving Severus in that Shack, and he was probably still having a hard time accepting the wizard was alive.

"What's going on here, Hermione?" Harry asked, concerned.

"Harry Potter, this is Eugene Wainright. He is the 'official' foster child of Professor Snape, but Eugene likes to claim both of us. Eugene, this is my best friend from school, Harry Potter."

"I'm going to change my last name to Snape when the professor adopts me. Then we will all be a family when Hermione and he get married," Eugene said proudly.

"Eugene!" hissed Professor Snape. "Enough. Now go and dress yourself," he said as he nudged the boy towards his bedroom.

Hermione felt like a child in her flannel pajamas. How she wished to be more disciplined like the professor, who always rose earlier and had never been caught in his pajamas. "Excuse me, Harry," she said hurriedly. "I'll get dressed quickly."

She left her door open and hid beside her bureau as she dressed. She didn't want to miss a word between the two wizards.

"I'm sorry it took so long for me to come," she heard Harry say. "It took a while for me to wrap my mind around all of this."

"Ah, yes, I can understand. Lack of a body to bury can lead anyone to believe a person is truly dead," Severus replied smoothly.

Oh, dear, thought Hermione. *He IS going to be a bastard about this!* She rushed getting her clothes on before the professor could really cock things up.

"I worked hard to find you, Professor," said Harry defensively with a hint of hurt in his voice. "You have no idea how much time and convincing I had to do to even gather a search party. People just couldn't be arsed, but *I* cared."

"And caring means so much, doesn't it, Mr. Potter? Leaving me on the floor of that filthy shack to exsanguinate...the caring just radiates," he intoned with his voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Still a bitter, old bastard, eh?" Harry spat. "It's always about you. Why I ever thought you would care that I tried so hard to make sure you got your dues...your recognition...I *really* must have been mad!"

"Oh, do shut up, Potter!" he snapped. "No one asked for your efforts. I have lived for two decades without 'dues' as you call it. What I did had nothing to do with you or anyone."

"My mum?" Harry whispered.

Hermione arrived just in time. Harry was pale staring at the professor unblinkingly.

"Harry," she said quietly, bringing him out of his trance. "Why don't you go to sit down, and let me deal with the professor, all right?" She touched his arm lightly, and his green eyes met hers.

Harry stalked off into the living room, and Hermione smacked the professor on the arm. "What's the matter with you?" she hissed angrily. "Can't you see he's not himself? He is still very traumatized and weak. Can't you muster just a modicum of compassion?"

Severus' eyes bored into hers. "Why should I show compassion to a person who has been a thorn in my side for his entire life?" he said menacingly.

Hermione's eyes narrowed into slits. "Because you have been a burr in my backside for nearly nine years, and I still have managed to save your sorry, ungrateful arse from yourself!" she whispered. "Now stop acting like a *git*, and show a little gratitude, you pillock! He's brought you your memories back."

"I do not want them," he declared childishly as his voice grew louder with each word.

"Why?" Hermione demanded. She heard the familiar shuffling of Eugene's feet. "Eugene, go back to your room until I tell you to come out. The professor and I are having a disagreement," she said darkly as she kept her eyes trained on Snape.

"I asked you a question," she reminded him.

The professor sat down lazily in a chair. "I do not want them, Miss Granger. You suffer from a malaise that is all too common in women like yourself. You collect people as if they are pets to bolster your need to feel important. You fuss over me as much as that mangy cat of yours," he said maliciously.

Hermione eyes flew wide open and, for a moment, thought she was going to cry. "Fine!" she shouted. "I'll take those memories and pour them down the fucking drain."

She leaned over him and seethed, "Just remember how I found you, *Professor*, mad as a hatter and near starvation. Your clothes were in tatters, and you would have expired like a mindless idiot waiting for a woman to come out of a mirror that had only been a figment of your deranged imagination. So there! If you want to go back to that house and sit and talk to yourself into madness in front of that bit of glass, *go right ahead*"

She strode over to the front door and wrenched it open. Eugene came running out of his room, hurling himself at the professor. Hermione massaged her temples. This was turning into a nightmare.

"NO!" Eugene screamed. He flung his arms around the wizard's waist and cried. He just burst into sobs. "You can't go back there! You can't! I won't let you. We need you. You promised to stay with me and teach me about my magic. You promised you'd never leave me!"

"Eugene," Professor Snape said softly. "You are welcome to return with me. You and I will get along just fine without Miss Granger." He shot Hermione an evil glare as he spoke.

The boy looked up at him and said, "We need her, sir! Hermione makes everything better. You're happy when she's around. Whenever we go back to that house, you just want to talk to that stupid lady!"

Oh, fuck! Hermione thought as she saw Harry stand up from his chair.

"What lady?" he asked suspiciously.

Eugene blurted it out before either Snape or Hermione could stop him.

"Lily. He thinks she's in the mirror in his room and wants to come back to him. He thinks she's alive, but I know she's ~~dead~~!" he yelled.

He turned to Snape and continued to howl. "I hate her! I don't want your old Lily. Even if she were here, she'd never be a better mum than Hermione. Hermione knows us and loves us!"

That's it. I am officially in hell Hermione thought as she rubbed her forehead. "Eugene, I need for you to return to your room and not come out until I call for you," she said firmly.

After Eugene had reluctantly left, Harry spoke up again. "What's this about my mum?" he demanded.

Hermione stepped forward. "Harry, Professor Snape has had a difficult time with his memory. That's why I wanted for him to have his memories restored," she explained. "He gets confused. Sometimes he thinks Lily is still alive and is hiding. He's been waiting for her all this time, since the end of the war."

"I demand you stop this absurd discussion immediately. I am as sane as he is," the professor said pointing to Harry.

Harry burst out laughing. "Well, then you're done for, old boy!" he exclaimed. "I've been in and out of St. Mungo's for months now. I'm officially a nutter, lost the plot, not what you would call 'all-there.'"

"Perfect," spat Professor Snape. "Congratulations, Miss Granger. However did you accomplish it? You managed to leave my memories with this idiot? They are probably rubbish by now. Pensieve memories will ruin if not kept in a controlled climate."

"Stop being so bloody-minded," she spat as she tried to let Harry explain.

"I kept them preserved, just in case someone found you," Harry explained. "Do you want to view them first before replacing them into your head? I brought a small Pensieve."

Harry took out from his rucksack a Pensieve and then carefully another pulled out a velvet package within. He unwrapped it, and there was the crystal phial of Snape's memories.

"I would like some privacy, *if* you don't mind," Snape ground out as he took the items from Harry's hands angrily.

Hermione moved out of his way so he could go to the bedroom he used when he slept over. Hermione watched as he closed the door softly.

"Eugene," she called. "Would you please get some cereal for you and Mr. Potter?"

Eugene came out of his room slowly. "That lady was your mum?" he asked Harry.

Harry looked at the boy sadly. "Yes," he whispered as he looked around for a place to sit.

Eugene hung his head and muttered, "I'm sorry I said I hated her. I just don't like how the professor acts when he thinks about her."

Harry took off his glasses and massaged his eyes. "It's fine, mate," he said in a strained voice.

Hermione started to go towards the professor's door.

"Where are you going?" demanded Harry as he poured a bowl of flakes for himself.

Hermione laid her hand on Harry's chest. "You haven't an idea how bad off he was," she whispered lowly. "He was just a mess when I found him. It was frightening to see how his mind had deteriorated. He's had fewer episodes of being delusional, and Lord knows, getting back his memories can only help him, but sometimes the cure can be painful. Not harmful, but hurtful just the same."

Hermione smiled at Eugene, who was now showing Harry his latest battle scar from the last scuffle with his friends. She turned and stood nervously by the door, listening carefully for any sounds of anguish. She leaned against the frame and rubbed her forehead and temples. This was going to be a day the professor would never forget.

She heard a slump and wrenched open the professor's bedroom door. The professor was on his knees with his face in his hands. Hermione swiftly closed the door behind her softly and knelt on the floor with him. She lightly skimmed her hand on his taunt back and was taken by surprise by what happened next.

The professor turned and pulled her to himself. He crushed her flush against him, and as she considered how delicious it felt to have her breasts pressed against a man's chest after so long, she could feel his tears on her neck.

"She's dead," he said in a broken voice. "Why couldn't I remember?"

Hermione felt his thin frame quiver against her soft curves. During all this time together, she had never seen him so vulnerable.

"I could see her, laughing, talking to me like we used to when we were children. She died. She died, and she never knew," he blurted out painfully.

"I think she knows, Professor," Hermione whispered as she slowly accepted him into her embrace. "I think somehow, she knows you helped her son, and I think that she has forgiven you."

He started to laugh softly. He broke from Hermione and said, "It was never about her forgiveness. I finally realized that a couple of weeks ago. I cannot forgive myself for hurting her and being complicit in her death."

He stood up and began to deposit his memories, one by one into his head. The weight of knowing wore his face down. He looked forlorn and heavy-laden. Each gossamer strand was another line on his already dour visage. When he was through, he took his cloak and said he needed to walk.

"Do you want me to join you?" she asked timidly.

"No, Miss Granger. I wish to be alone," he said stiffly as he left.

Hermione walked out of the room and watched the professor leave. Eugene was confused.

"Hermione? Where is the professor going?" he asked worriedly.

Hermione brushed back his black hair and looked into his big blue eyes that were so troubled. "The professor needs some time, Eugene. He has just had to accept after all this time, all the work, and all the weary days were for a woman who is truly gone and won't be coming back. He has to grieve."

"He really loved her?" the boy asked.

"Yes, he did...he does still," said Harry from the corner. "I can't understand it, Hermione," Harry said as he walked towards her. "He loved my mum so much, but he can hate me so readily. Why? *Why?* What did I ever do to him?"

"You were born, Harry," whispered Hermione as she watched the professor walk slowly alone. "And you weren't his son. In his mind, it was a cruel twist of fate that you should have those eyes that had always beckoned him in the face of the man who was his enemy. It was something that was a slap in the face each time he saw you. You were the undeniable proof that he had truly lost her."

"He just wants to be miserable!" Harry spat.

Hermione sighed as she walked to the couch and sat down resignedly. "Harry, it's been a long morning, and I'm tired. I came to Grasmere because I needed time. I wanted to get out of the insanity of taking care of you and Ron. I couldn't do it anymore! I have my own pain. My own parents rejected me. They are afraid of me...of what I can do magically, what I have done, and it frightened them. I am an heiress!" She felt her chest constrict, and she wanted to burst into a sobbing heap. "I have all the money I could ever want, but what I want is a family of my own!" she raged.

She burst into tears and ran into the bathroom. Eugene was hot on her heels. "Hermione?" he whispered. "Don't you want us anymore?"

"What?" she asked through her sniffles.

Eugene looked at her with his head cocked to the side. "I'm talking about you, me, and the professor. We're a family."

Hermione barked a laugh. "We aren't a family. You have the professor and me, and we each have you, but that is all. We are like two families, just like the two houses that we shuffle you from back and forth," she said bitterly as she blew her nose into a tissue.

She walked into her bedroom and lay down. She was so tired, so weary. A while later, Eugene came in and snuggled next to her.

"Harry said good-bye," he whispered.

Hermione nodded as she kept her eyes closed.

"Don't you love me anymore, Hermione?" he asked.

"Of course, I love you. What is there not to love?" she said through her tears. She wrapped him in her arms and kissed his head. She rested her chin on the top of his and said, "I wish you could be mine. I would take you traveling, and we would see beautiful things. When you're at Hogwarts, I'd send you embarrassing letters and cards, so all the other boys would tease you, but deep down you would love it because it would be special. You would know I love you even when I'm not there to tell you."

"I wish you were my mum," whispered Eugene. "I don't remember her, but I would like to think she was special. You are special, Hermione. Why don't you and the professor get married?"

Hermione sighed as she continued to stroke the boy's hair. "The professor doesn't love me, Eugene. He loves Harry's mum. I think he will always love her, and a part of him will always be waiting for her to come back. Sometimes I wonder if he should have just gone ahead and died in that Shack. Then he would see her again, and they would be together. He doesn't even like me. I am far too bossy for the likes of him," she whispered.

"Do you love the professor, Hermione?" Eugene asked.

"It doesn't matter, Eugene," she whispered as she sighed. "He loves Lily, so nothing else matters."

Together they fell into a deep sleep. When Hermione woke up, she saw the professor standing at the doorway. "You really love him, don't you?" he asked her softly.

"Yes, I do," she whispered. She was still holding the slumbering boy in her arms.

Hermione watched him nervously as continued to stand in the doorway. He leaned against the frame and crossed his arms. Hermione felt as if she were being studied. She saw she was not the only one being studied. The professor was looking at them: she and Eugene. Hermione shifted her gaze to the sleeping child and instinctively brushed the black hair from his face.

"If only my own mother had been so kind," he murmured softly. He sighed and looked down.

"Your mother wasn't a loving woman?" she whispered.

His expression changed to something wistful. "I would like to think she had been once. However, my father beat that out of her. She didn't have anything to give. Just caring for him, his needs, cleaning his house, cooking his meals, washing his clothes, and all without magic, too, was all she could handle while always hurting from the last beating. I remember her with having black eyes. It seemed my father enjoyed giving black eyes."

"Professor, that is the most dreadful thing I have ever heard. Surely, I mean, you were his son. Didn't he want you? Didn't he have time for you?" she whispered.

Severus laughed softly and looked up to the ceiling for a moment, closing his eyes as if in prayer before looking at her. "No. I wasn't supposed to exist. It seems I have never belonged anywhere, actually. I never seemed to quite fit in. But here," he said, his eyes moving around him, "it seems I have found a fit."

Hermione opened up her mouth to speak, but she realized she didn't know what to say. He held up a hand. "Please, Miss Granger...Hermione," he said quietly. "Let me savor this moment. Let me pretend that the small black-haired boy who reminds me so much of myself in your arms is my very own son, and you are his mother, the wife I never knew I wanted."

Hermione held her breath. She turned and looked at Eugene, his sooty eyelashes fluttered on his pink cheeks. He was asleep and beautiful. Hermione realized she felt the same. She wished he had come from her own body. It was a silly, ridiculous thought. She was so young herself, but she pushed it aside. She cherished this boy, and perhaps that was because he was so like the two men she cared for very much: Professor Snape and Harry. It made him even more precious in her eyes. She continued to hold Eugene in her arms and kissed his brow. She laid her head back and closed her eyes. She knew the professor was watching, and it did not feel strange at all. On the contrary, it felt quite right...

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 of 18

Life after Voldemort isn't as everyone thought it would be.

It was another month before Severus spoke to Hermione about the day Harry came to give him back his memories. She had watched from a distance, his need for solace in his own private way. He would never be an easy man to know, she thought one evening as she looked out the window that looked over the fells where Severus walked. However, she found that she really didn't mind.

There had been a few small changes. He called her "Hermione" now, without effort, and in return, she called him "Severus." The house Severus had been living in when Hermione first found him now stood abandoned, along with the source of his madness...the oval mirror that had haunted him with Lily's face. Then there was the day he started to ask her to walk with him again.

The walks varied. Sometimes he wanted silence, other times he would converse with ease. Severus was trying to learn what he could about the history and poetry of the famous writers that had lived in this region, and they had many wonderful conversations about Wordsworth and Coleridge.

"I like Wordsworth's concept of an experience so profound that it begs time before setting quill to parchment," he mused. "I find myself many times unable to find the words to express how I feel at a pivotal moment and then it is only later that I can puzzle it out."

Hermione smiled. "Wordsworth said that Poetry is for the common man, and it should be a product of one's overflowing of feelings that are too powerful to comprehend. However, when the time comes for the recollection of the event, it should come to life through tranquility."

Severus' mouth twisted into a small smile. Then he spoke, "I like that word *tranquility*. It reminds me of quiet waters that still are in motion but are in no hurry."

Hermione nodded, and they continued to walk side-by-side.

I think it is incredible how many famous authors were inspired by this area of England," Hermione mused one day as they walked up Loughrigg Terrace.

"Sometimes I feel if I were careful enough, I would be able to see Peter Rabbit or Benjamin Bunny," she said as she laughed.

"Hermione, you forget yourself. If you recall, I am the one who experiences hallucinations," he said dryly.

Hermione chuckled. "Ah, Severus, but you forgot the auditory hallucinations! I don't believe for a second I would be able to ~~hear~~ Peter Rabbit or Benjamin Bunny!"

He raised an eyebrow as he glanced over at her. "It is a moot point, Miss Granger. We would have to be near Ambleside, on Hill Top Farm to be near Beatrix Potter land," he replied coolly.

His return to calling her 'Miss Granger' was not lost on her. "But, still, Professor...think about Shelley, Tennyson, Carlyle, and Hawthorne..."

He interrupted her. "*Thank you*, Miss Granger, for enlightening me. However would I have survived, living in this paradise, without you to point it out to me?"

Hermione fell silent. He was obviously in a mood and didn't seem interested in talking anymore. They carried on for a while before he spoke to her.

"I thought a great deal about what you told me, Hermione," he said quietly.

"What was that?"

"Who was loved the least, who got the scraps of affection while others reveled in favor. I could never bring myself to eat at Black's table," he continued slowly. "I never let it show, never let it be known that I was so desperately lonely. Some think I am what I project, and perhaps they are right to an extent, but I loved in the only way I knew how to love, and it was cast aside. It had been worthless. I-I...please Hermione. Please let me be. I need to be alone."

Hermione watched his face as she pulled the hair away from her own. His face was so pale and distorted. She couldn't begin to figure what, might be running through his head. The wintry wind was picking up, and she was deeply concerned for his state of mind.

"Normally, Severus, I would just comply without a word. However, it is so cold, and the wind is starting to blow terribly. Are you sure you shall be safe?" she asked as she stepped a little closer to him.

"Quite," he answered. And with that, he pressed on alone.

Hermione made her way back to Garden Cottage and fretted as she looked out the picture window that showed the fells of her land. After indulging in enough worry, she decided to work on supper. She had a roast that had been simmering all day, and it was nearly done. She had just finished frosting a chocolate cake when Eugene breezed in from school. He was stomping his snowy boots in the mudroom, and when he came in, he went straight to Hermione where she was icing the cake.

"Oh, Hermione, that looks absolutely delicious! Can I have a piece before supper? I'm starved!"

Hermione smiled at him. "There are oatmeal cookies in the jar. Just don't eat too many! I don't want all this good food go to waste," she warned him. She watched him as he made his way to the cookie jar. *My, he is starting to sprout up! When did that happen?* She looked at his trouser legs. He was going to need new clothes, he had to have grown two inches since September, and it was now only the beginning of December.

"Hermione," he asked as he munched on his cookie. "Are we going to have a proper Christmas, with a tree and all that?"

"Of course," she answered as she looked at her finished cake. "I shall have to speak with Severus about any traditions or special things he would like so we all can enjoy the season."

"Where is the professor?" Eugene asked as he went to place his book bag in his room.

"He's walking. He needed to think," Hermione answered vaguely.

"He does that a lot lately," he said with a frown. "What's he got to think about all the time?"

Hermione set the frosting bowl into the kitchen sink and gathered her composure. She smiled to herself. Sometimes, he reminded her of Ron *Just because you have the emotional range of a teaspoon...* "Well," she said as she faced him, wiping her hands on her apron. "It's like this: the professor has had a lot of changes to accept in a short period of time. It's all been quite a shock to his system. He needs to sort himself out."

Eugene shrugged and went to his room.

Hermione walked out of the mudroom door to let Severus know dinner was ready. She threw on her heavy shawl and called for him. He looked so forlorn, trudging in the snow. She wondered why at times he didn't catch his death of cold.

She stood inside the mudroom, and as he walked in, she helped him to thaw himself. She took his cloak, shook the snow from it, and as she reached up to hang it on

the high rack, she felt two cold arms wrap themselves around her waist, right underneath her breasts. They were strong masculine arms that triggered a need, something Hermione had not experienced in a long time...if ever. At least not in the way these arms were holding her, firmly, possessively, with a yearning for more. She closed her eyes and threw back her head as she felt cold lips touch her warm neck. Her hands clenched the material of his cloak as he continued his exploration of her neck. The smell of winter was on him. She wanted his hands to touch her everywhere and never stop. It had been so long since she'd had a man touch her. She turned around in his arms, and he looked down at her with half-lidded eyes.

"Hermione," Severus whispered as he lightly brushed her lips with his own.

"I love you."

Hermione thought she had imagined something. His kiss was so light she felt she was flying. It was the kiss she had wanted for so long. It wasn't perfect, but it held promise. He was gentle, and she didn't feel a sense of urgency. This wizard would take his time to savor her, to taste her, and lure her desires from inside her. It sounded as if he said he loved her, but he couldn't...he would never love her. Not that way... or could he?

Dinner that night was...different. Eugene went on and on about his day at school, and he even reported that Steven, the ringleader the boys' little gang at Grasmere Primary, had gotten a girlfriend.

"Can you believe it? He turns eleven, and then all of a sudden he can't be arsed with being with just us blokes no more. He's off with *Cindy!*"

Hermione felt her face grow a bit warm. "Is that her name?"

"Yeah. She wears skirts, and he stares at her all the time. All she has to do is call out his name, and he comes runnin' like a divvy! We caught them kissing, and he had his hand up her shirt behind the church! Boy, did we take the mickey out of him!"

"I don't think that was very nice, Eugene," said Severus reprovingly. "Steven is starting to grow up. He's becoming a young man. He's one year older, but in his case, it could mean a world's difference. You will understand the allure of girls when you get a bit older."

Hermione felt Severus' gaze upon her for a moment as he spoke.

"We...ll," Eugene drawled out. "There's a bit more to it. I mean all us older boys are talkin' about girls. At least they are!" He looked defensive when he said the last part.

Hermione looked over at Severus, who was growing paler by the second. "You sound a bit insecure, Eugene," mused Hermione. "You know, it isn't as if a ten-year-old boy hasn't ever noticed girls before."

Eugene swallowed the greens he had been chewing for a while and said, "The lads talk a lot. They know stuff. The bigger boys, like Steven and David, all the girls like 'em, an' they are always talking about kissin'... and... things..."

Eugene's face was now turning red. Hermione caught the subtle quietness that had descended suddenly at the table. She looked over at Severus, who wore a look of sheer terror on his face.

"Eugene," asked Hermione delicately. "You are going to Hogwarts next year. You'll be eleven in three months time. You're growing up real fast as well. I wonder if any girls have caught your interest...just a little? Or perhaps you have some questions now that some of your friends have girlfriends?"

Eugene squirmed in his seat, and Hermione glanced at Severus again as she took a sip of wine. They caught each other's eye, and Hermione smiled timidly. Severus, though, looked as inscrutable as ever.

"Well," Eugene said. "There's a girl in my class. She's kinda quiet, you know? She doesn't giggle and talk about stupid stuff like the other girls. Steven's girlfriend is like that! She's so silly and wears make-up. She keeps talking about how *matute* she is and how happy she'll be to leave Primary and go off to a boarding school. Steven likes how she flirts and giggles around him. He gets all red and tongue-tied.

"But this girl, her name is Allison. She's got blonde hair that has curls all around her face. It's short, and she's really thin like me, but shorter. She sometimes will smile a little at me when I walk by, and her cheeks get pink. Kind of like yours are, Hermione. Why do girls blush so easy and then lower their faces? Did I make her feel bad, or does she think I'm stupid?"

Hermione was quick to quash any and all ideas he might have about not being good enough for any girl. "No, Eugene. You aren't doing anything wrong. Girls get unsure and shy around boys they think are cute, and they blush and drop their eyes. Even grown women do this sometimes," she confessed softly. "It's just nervousness."

Severus was now hanging onto her every word, and Eugene began to laugh. "Professor! You look like Steven when he looks at Cindy!"

"That will be enough of that cheek!" snapped Severus.

Eugene went back to his plate with his head bowed, chastened. Hermione ignored Severus' obvious discomfort at Eugene's ability to detect his new found interest in her.

"Eugene, Allison sounds lovely. What else is different about her?" Hermione prodded.

The young boy's large blue eyes glazed over, and he said, "She likes to read. She's serious, not silly. But she likes my jokes. Everyone thinks they're corny, but she laughs, and her smile is so nice. It makes me feel...uh." He cleared his throat and started again in a more practical tone. "She's like a pixie, so small and stuff. The only thing is she's really quiet, and it's really hard to talk to her. She doesn't hang around like the other girls do, and she doesn't *look* like the other girls, or at least not like *Sarah*," he said sadly as he blushed.

There is certainly more to the story than he's letting on, thought Hermione.

They ate in silence for a few minutes while Hermione waited in irritation for Severus to say *something* as the male role model in the boy's life. *And who the hell is Sarah?*

Eugene suddenly burst out, saying, "Is it true that girls *want* boys to put their penises inside them?"

Severus began to choke, and Hermione had to whack him on the back. She wanted to whack him upside the head and tell him to get a grip as well.

"Is that what the boys talk about?" Hermione asked innocently.

Eugene kept glancing over at Severus while he spoke. "Well, they think girls really like it when boys do that stuff. Steven even had a magazine that showed all kinds of things. You could see everything. The woman looked happy about it, and she was really grown-up. I see the other girls, and they don't look like that, but maybe when they are older they will, and they'll want to do those things.

"Perhaps," Hermione replied. "How does all this new information about women and girls make you feel?"

"I don't know," he mumbled, and then he shot a furtive look towards Severus.

He pushed his food around, and Hermione leaned slightly across the table and said, "Eugene, you're hearing a lot of things, and I just want you to know that what you may

be feeling...even confusion...when you see those pictures are normal."

Finally, Severus spoke up. "Now, Eugene, you have told us your honest interest in girls, and that is good and right that you should share those things with us. I would like to have a man-to-man talk with you, now that you are growing up. I wanted to do it alone, but I think Hermione may have some insights you need to know since she was a girl herself.

"First," he said after he wiped his mouth. "I never, and I repeat *never* want to hear of you being rude, disrespectful, or cruel to any girl. Secondly, if I hear that you have struck or hexed a female at Hogwarts, and believe me, I shall hear of it, I will come down to that school and thrash you right in front of the entire assembly. Wizards do not hit or hex witches unless they are dueling or in battle. It's plain and simple."

"What if she hits me first?" he asked, affronted.

"Then you walk away after apologizing for the behavior that caused her to strike you!" he said, looking exasperated. "Most witches do not go around hitting or hexing wizard unless there is a damn good reason. You will also need to curb your vocabulary around witches. Wizards can be crude and say questionable things amongst themselves, but never say them in front of girls. I want you to live by this rule: every female you meet, I want you to think about Hermione. Would you treat Hermione that way? Would you say cruel and hateful words to Hermione? Would you ever hit Hermione or deliberately hurt her feelings?"

"NO!" said Eugene, visibly upset.

"Then I promise you, life will be kinder to you for it. It won't be easy. You may fancy a girl who doesn't return your feelings. If you need to talk about it, just come to us, and we will... help you sort it out," Severus concluded uncomfortably.

Now encouraged, Eugene began to talk more. "There is this girl, Sarah, and she keeps trying to kiss me with her tongue. All the other boys tell me I should do it. She got...uh... *stuff*...and she's pretty. But if I kiss her, it'll hurt Allison. I like Allison more; I just don't want to kiss her like that. She's so small, and she doesn't have... uh." He stopped talking, his face beet red.

"A chest, right?" asked Hermione.

Eugene nodded, looking very embarrassed as he stared at his plate.

"Now, uh." Severus' face went beet red as well at this point. "I think we need to discuss the things that happen between men and women...and it should only be for adults! After seeing that magazine, I'm sure you know about the rudimentary facts concerning sexual intercourse?"

Hermione looked at him as if he were some kind of Muggle Sex Ed teacher. By the book, and all that.

Eugene was turning nearly purple by now and mumbled, "Yes."

"Well, you should not even consider having sex until you find the one witch with whom you wish to spend your life," Severus stated firmly. "Well, ah, Hermione, would you like to say anything about this area?"

Hermione was curious at Severus' awkwardness. She was also certain Eugene was lying about what he claimed to understand about sexual intercourse. Perhaps Severus' discomfort stemmed from the fact it was what was on his mind at the moment. She knew sex was on her mind. After that interlude in the mudroom, images of those lips on her nipples, and his hands between her legs were making her hot and bothered.

"Eugene. Severus is right. Sex should not be something you do in the heat of the moment UNTIL you have found a woman that you wish to have a long-lasting relationship with. It will be difficult, your hormones will be growing, and the need will be urgent. Just remember that is all normal. Wanting to have sex is not wrong. The key word is to always be *gentle*. Even with your attitude, you are to be *gentleman*. Always be respectful." Hermione didn't even want to think about how to explain what he should do if a girl didn't want him to be a gentleman! Hopefully, by that time, he would have figured it out or, for Merlin's sake, gone to Severus to talk.

Severus cleared his voice. "Here are the rules: First, NEVER, EVER have sex with a girl who is drunk. It doesn't matter the circumstances, DO NOT DO IT. Some people don't know what they are doing when they are drunk. Sometimes, bad wizards put drugs in witches' drinks to make them feel like they want sex. DO NOT DO IT. Secondly, always practice protection. I'll teach you about that another time. Thirdly, if you are in the middle of things and she says 'stop,' you stop! When a girl says 'no,' respect her 'no.'

"If I ever hear that you had sex with a girl when she said 'no,' I will come to Hogwarts and personally take you to Azkaban Prison myself! It is a horrible crime to force a woman to have sex. It's called rape. You should only have sex with a woman you love and respect, and who loves and respects you in return. Actually, you shouldn't consider having sex with a woman until you *know* she wants to make a life with you," interjected Severus as he lowered his head from view. "Then you won't ever be hurt."

Both Eugene and Hermione looked at Severus in silence. Hermione was sure they were both shocked at Severus' last comment but for different reasons.

Cumbrian Dialect

Divvy = Idiot

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 of 18

Life after Voldemort isn't as everyone thought it would be.

Chapter 12

Nothing more was said on the subject of love or sex until after dinner. Hermione was cleaning up the kitchen, and Severus was helping her.

"Hermione," he whispered as Eugene worked on his homework in the next room, "what am I supposed to tell him about the act of sex?"

Hermione chuckled a little and raised her hands in surrender. "If you don't know, I think we may have more of a problem than we originally thought."

Severus looked terrified. "Oh, Merlin," he muttered as if in pain. He rubbed his temples and tried to speak.

"Hermione," he whispered. "I need to tell you something." He looked sick, horrified, scared. But Hermione knew what he was trying to say.

"First, I need to know... you realize what I said to you...?" He stopped talking and stood still as stone as his white-knuckled fists rested on the counter top.

"I think I do, Severus," she replied as she dried a plate carefully, not wanting to look at his face. "I think I never did understand what love between a man and a woman should be like until you came into my life. What I would like to know is why do you love *me*?" She rested one dish on top of the other all the while she had spoken to him. The last dish was now at the top, and she had nothing but her towel to occupy herself with.

Severus placed the dried dishes away and remained silent for a few minutes. Hermione knew him enough by now that he was considering her question.

After the last cup was put back into the cupboard, he turned to face her. "You have cared for me, even when I fought you at every turn. Hermione, since becoming a man, I have never opened up like this to anyone, much less a woman holding my feelings in the palm of her hand. I first came to a grudging respect for you when you first came to my house and barged your way in. I saw how concerned you were for Eugene and because I knew you were living somewhere in Grasmere; the boy talked about you incessantly. I'd been waiting for your arrival and had been intrigued at how long you had stayed away."

Hermione sat at the now clean dining table and folded the dishtowels. She was so nervous; she thought her heart would leap out her throat. "It was your business, Severus. Eugene told me about you as well, but he never told me your name. It was just the logical conclusion of our combined information," she said nervously.

Severus placed a large hand on top of hers to still their trembling and fidgeting. Hermione had seen his hands do many things over the years. She had seen him wield a wand in anger, dice and chop potion ingredients with ease. She had even experienced how incredible those hands could make her feel with a touch. She had held his hands when they were so pale and frighteningly thin. She'd seen every blue vein through his translucent skin. Yet, this was new. His hand was warm, strong, capable, and reassuring. It was a comforting sight to see how his hand covered hers so easily.

He sat in the chair next to her and continued. "I thought you just wanted to take Eugene from me, but then I saw how you cared for *me*. Sewing my clothes when they were past repair," he added as he chuckled. "I would watch you try and make the material work with your needle. It was soothing and funny at the same time. You intrigue me, Hermione. All the women I knew were just decorative. I-I don't mean ALL the women...just the ones I seemed to gravitate towards or who were attracted to me. Even then, the attraction was just for novelty's sake or a joke. Who can make the ugly Potions master of the Dark Lord cave in to their twisted games?"

He was getting flustered now, rubbing his forehead as he tried to explain.

"Hermione, what it has come down to is this," he said as he caressed her hand, keeping his eyes fixed on her skin as he spoke, so his face could not be seen. "The woman I loved, Lily, and the women who had caught my momentary interest in times past, were very complex and needy. They needed so much from me and required it at such a cost. In the end, I always ended up the fool, giving more than I should have, only to see the shoe drop, and I would become the laughing-stock once more. By the time I was teaching at Hogwarts after Lily had died...I had closed myself off to physical affection. I only allowed Poppy to tend my wounds, and she remains to this day the *only* woman who has ever touched me beyond a colleague's handshake...yet it was professional, not a lover's touch."

He placed his hand delicately on Hermione's exposed collarbone and explored the area there slowly. "I wanted to be loved as much as I had loved, just someone who would give as much as I am willing to give. I never found it before. Lily had been the closest. She had stayed with me through a lot, caring, and trying to build me up. It had never been enough, and I couldn't understand why. Now I know."

"What do you know, Severus?" Hermione urged when he faltered, feeling so silly this emotional and delicate conversation was taking place in the middle of her kitchen, and became very aware of his touch on the skin above her left breast.

Severus removed his hand and stood up to rest a hand on the counter top and shifted his weight to the side. "I can't forgive myself. I think if I had just stayed away from Mulciber and Avery, or if I had not played a part of her death, I could have moved on. But for years, it pressed on me and weighed me down so much...I was a prisoner in my own head. When the memories left me, I still should have been able to retain a basic *continuity* of what really happened to Lily. I think the freedom of the pain made me quite mad. I relied on the presence of mental anguish for so long that it became what I counted upon to keep me stable.

"But even before I hated my parents for the weak people they had been. I had wished my father dead, and he died. I had wished my mother dead, and she died. I understand, logically, that I had nothing to do with their deaths, but the first thing I learned about Dark magic was that *you've got to mean it*"

He turned his eyes to hers, and they were dead and empty. No fire that had been there before, just ... nothingness.

"How many times had I heard him say that!" he whispered to himself, sounding exhausted. "*You've got to mean it, Severus.*"

Severus looked up at Hermione with such anguish etched upon his face. It pained her to see him like this.

"Where do I go from here, knowing all that I know about myself?" he asked in a small voice.

Hermione swallowed and nodded as she closed her eyes. "I have been so terrified," she confessed as she rose from the table to stand by him. "I didn't know how else to reach you than to get Harry here with your memories. But it has continued to be so hard. Harry is still dealing with his own trials. He hasn't forgiven himself for never seeing the real you, for leaving you there in that Shack. You and Harry are very much alike. Harry wanted to kill you desperately after Dumbledore's death. He had sworn he would kill you if it were the last thing he did. Then when we thought you were dead, he finally learned the real truth about you. An hour hadn't even past."

"Foolish boy," he muttered.

"Foolish man!" she snapped as she threw the dishtowels on the counter top. "Don't you dare criticize Harry for what you have been doing for two decades! You don't know what it was like for him...you at least knew where Lily's body laid. Harry only had the worst and the most obscene things to imagine. There was no body, only the blood that was still on his robes and on that filthy floor!" The sadness and the anxiety of those days washed over her; those horrific days of Harry's cries and bouts of searching, always searching and never finding anything to give him absolution. The tears welled up and stung her eyes, and she turned from him as they came pouring down. Severus wrapped his long arms around her, forcing her to face him, and she shuddered as she finally broke down.

"You obstinate man! Harry was just a shell of himself. There was no laughter, no relief. Only tears of frustration, and the months of searching, always one more place, another lead that led us nowhere! The end of each day was spent in awful, terrible silence as we stared at Harry, who was falling apart more and more each day." She cried openly now, and Eugene came out of his room.

"Hermione?" he called out. "What's wrong?"

Hermione had turned from the both of them as she wiped her eyes. "I-I am okay, Eugene," she said shakily, trying to make her voice as light as possible. "Please go back to your studies. Severus and I are having a talk."

She figured he must have left when she felt the strong, solid arms of Severus enveloping her.

"Why can't you forgive yourself?" she whispered.

"I killed the woman I had loved," he said. "That is a terrible, terrible thing to know about yourself...to know what you are capable of doing. And yes, I know I didn't do it on purpose, and I didn't wield the actual wand, but I had wanted James Potter dead for so long. I wanted him dead and his son dead as well, just so I could have Lily to myself. So I created this reality that the Dark Lord would keep his word, or sometimes, in an act of desperation when reality came too close, I would hold on to

Dumbledore's promise to keep them all safe from him. But the fact remains that I had gone so far down that I could wish the death of a baby and another human being without conscience. I was lost. I was lost before *anyone* died. I was guilty of murder before the Killing Curse had been cast *because* I wanted it in my soul. I wanted them dead...dead! I couldn't forgive anyone, *anything*. I could not forgive Black, Lupin, Potter or his son for simply existing because I could not forgive *myself* for being what I am."

"How can you say such things?" she whispered as she turned around in his arms.

He dropped his hold on her and backed away. "I am this kind of man, Hermione. I don't think you can change from being that kind of person *You have to mean it, Hermione*. Ask Potter, he knows."

"I killed," she whispered as she looked into his eyes. "But I did so much worse. I betrayed my parents in the worst way a person can betray another human being. What I did was infinitely worse than just taking a life. I left them alive, yet I took their souls. Their memories, all the years of their love and living... and I justified it by saying that it would be for their own good. I twisted it around to make it by saying it had to be done in order to spare their lives. But when I returned to Australia, it was a nightmare. They were afraid of me. In their eyes, I was nothing more than a monster that could bend and twist them to my will at whim. They want nothing to do with me...to this day. I have no family because I chose to do the very thing that made them fear me the most when they first learned I was a witch. They never understood...never! They tried, of course, but it was too hard, and I couldn't tell them what was happening in our world.

"So you see? Look at all of us. You, me, Harry, even Eugene. His family can't even forgive him...as if he ever had a choice...as if any of us ever had choices! We are the 'unforgiven,' but we could decide to let ourselves free," she said hopefully.

Severus looked at her painfully. "We can never change the past," he whispered.

"I know," Hermione admitted. "But we can determine what our futures will be, to some extent. We all must choose to live and believe we deserve to be happy."

Hermione shifted closer to him as he leaned against the counter with both hands. She placed her hand on his back, between his shoulder blades. His body quivered at the contact, and he turned his head towards hers.

"And now?" she whispered.

He looked at her as if he were considering something. "I think it could be possible," he whispered. "I feel free and open to so many choices and possibilities, all of which contain... you."

He swiftly took her head in his hands, and he kissed her firmly. He broke the kiss and confessed, "I haven't kissed a woman since I was sixteen. And she had been fifteen. So, I guess I could say I have never kissed a woman before I kissed you."

"You're fine," Hermione whispered as she wrapped her arms around his shoulders. She laughed. "I feel so alive. You have no idea how you make me feel when you touch me."

Severus dropped his hands from her face, and his body stiffened. "I-I haven't ever been with a woman," he confessed. "I have kissed once before as I had said, and there was an unfortunate incident when I had been trapped at a faculty party, and a very drunk Sybil Trelawney cupped my...uh...what-not. It had not been appealing. But I do want...I just...God knows I have wanted, but I never could get a witch *I desired* to say yes."

Hermione was shocked. He was a virgin. She looked at him in awe as she smoothed her hands up his frock coat. "Well, I guess you have something to think over, considering I have said yes," she whispered as she stood on her tiptoes to pull him against her and her lips.

He was hesitant and timid, but then he began to kiss her in earnest. Hermione broke the kiss, and he continued to suck and kiss along her neck and collarbone.

"I have wanted this for so long," she moaned as she closed her eyes and surrendered herself to his hands and mouth.

Severus finally tore his lips from hers, but kept his solid frame hard against her frame. She could feel his erection throbbing against her stomach. He swallowed and nodded. Suddenly, he stiffened. "What about Eugene?" he whispered.

"When he goes to bed," whispered Hermione, "come to my room. It's the farthest from his."

He kissed her again, savoring her taste. "I need you, Hermione. I'm tired of being alone," he breathed as his eyes drank in her face and hair.

"Me, too," she said quietly.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 of 18

Life after Voldemort isn't as everyone thought it would be.

Chapter 13

Severus and Hermione spent the next two hours trying to keep their hands off one another, but every so often, they would reach out, and each time, the mounting desire became too difficult to control.

"I need you, Hermione," he whispered huskily against her throat. She already had her hands slowly making their way down the front of his trousers when he moaned and gave himself over to her.

Severus pulled her flush against him. "Will you put your hand on me...*underneath*?" he asked nervously as he unbuttoned a couple of buttons on her shirt, just enough to get a fabulous view of her cleavage and the tops of her breasts.

Hermione grasped his hand and led him back into the mudroom. She didn't want Eugene catching them. She pushed him against a wall and dragged her fingers along his erection, massaging it through his clothes. His hands cupped her backside and lifted her from the floor. He breathed deeply into her cleavage, and he pushed himself harder into her hand. "I need this. I need you. Please," he whispered as he kissed the tops of her breasts.

"We'll be able to do more later when you join me in my bedroom," she whispered in his ear as she teased his calf with one sock-clad foot.

He placed her back onto the floor, nodding his head, and returned to kissing her mouth eagerly. His face was red, and he looked afraid.

"What's wrong?" she asked as she pulled from him.

"Nothing," he murmured as he continued to explore her body with his hands and eyes. Hermione slowly unbuttoned the row of tiny buttons on his trousers, and he started to tap his head back against the wall as he strained to keep his eyes closed. He had just started to gather the courage to dip his hand into her bra when he realized she was so close to skin-on-skin contact with the most sensitive and intimate part of his body. His breathing became a series of light gasping and choking sounds.

Hermione reached up on tiptoe and kissed along his Adam's apple gently as she slowly pulled his trousers apart and skimmed her hands along his underwear. His hands were on her upper arms, and they began to clench her painfully as she watched him try to maintain control.

"*Let go, Severus,*" she whispered. "You need release. Don't be afraid, I'm here."

He opened his eyes and looked down at her full of lust and desire. Hermione didn't even know if he could hear her.

She slid her hand into his underwear and found that swollen, rigid part of him that needed to be inside of her. He gasped as his breath hitched. He jumped and stumbled against the bench when her hand touched the velvet smooth tip of his sex, and his body slid down to the bench, boneless, taking Hermione with him. Straddling him, kissing his face delicately, each touch was deliberate and slow. He started to explore her soft flesh again with his hands. His nimble fingers swiftly opened her blouse and ran his tongue up her cleavage passionately.

She gently glided her hand up and down his hard shaft. Soon, all that could be heard was their gasping breath, intermingled, feeding off the other, silently begging for more pleasure.

Severus slid her bra off her one shoulder and exposed her milky breast. He teased her nipple with one finger as he eyed it appreciatively before taking it into his mouth. Hermione grabbed the back of his head, fisting his black hair, breathing her approval in quiet, gasps. She tightened her grip on his shaft, and he panted as he released her breast, "I-I can't stop!" he mumbled frantically into her ear.

"Don't stop," Hermione replied into his ear as she egged him on with a flick of her pink tongue. "Give in to it, Severus."

He shuddered and gasped again much more loudly, and Hermione clamped her hand against his mouth to mute the sound that threatened to roar from his mouth, and then he was out of breath and trembling, having spent himself. He looked into his Hermione's face and then let his eyes roam around each exposed part of her body. He swallowed, and Hermione watched his Adam's apple bob up and down. She didn't know why, she just loved it and needed to kiss it. As her lips made contact with his neck, she felt a hand reach into her hair, massaging it.

"Teach me," she heard him gasp, and Hermione looked up into his face. "Teach me to please you," he whispered again as his black eyes opened wide and innocent.

Hermione unbuttoned her pants and rose up on her knees. She took his hand and guided it inside her knickers. She placed his fingers on various places of her womanhood, murmuring into his ear what would happen if he chose to manipulate them a certain way. She pushed his two middle fingers into her channel, and he smiled as his eyes closed.

He leaned his head against the wall behind him. "That is the softest thing I have ever touched," he whispered. "Let me give you an orgasm, Hermione. I need to know I can do this to you."

Hermione positioned his hand securely and breathed what to do. She began to move and rock against him. Soon, she could feel his eyes burning into her, watching her face as it flushed and glistened. She placed her palms against the wall between his head.

"You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen," he whispered in awe.

"Touch my breast," she moaned softly.

He massaged one milky globe, pinching its pink tip as their eyes locked, frozen into place.

"Ahhh...oh my god!" she gasped quietly as her chest heaved. She could feel the perspiration on her forehead and her palms. She wanted to scream so badly; it was killing her.

Hermione peered into his face in a haze and saw the respect and shock in Severus' face at what was occurring on his lap. Soon, Hermione was whimpering and bucking wildly against him as she neared her peak. She grabbed his face and kissed him hungrily as she melted in his hand. She emptied her screams and groans in his eager mouth as she rode out her climax. She panted against his lips and tried to keep herself steady. She slumped against his shoulder and rested there against him as she caught her breath.

"That was wonderful," she crooned to him.

Severus was speechless as he held onto her with one hand. Hermione realized his fingers were still inside her. She shifted, and he was careful not to hurt her as she lifted off of him. Severus continued to sit there staring at his hand that just been inside her and looked up at Hermione in time to see her blush.

"Why are you blushing?" he asked. He looked at her in sheer amazement.

"Because you're sitting there examining the hand that was inside my... knickers," she mumbled as she put her clothes back together.

"It felt incredible," he whispered as he continued to regard his hand. "You were so soft, moist, and hot. Then when you shuddered, I felt more moisture."

Hermione smiled as she patted down her hair. Severus just sat uncovered, still, and looking at her as if she were an angel. Hermione went over and began to help him back into his trousers and button them up. He looked at her with wide eyes that were shining and open.

"You're the most astounding woman I've ever known," he whispered as her face came close to his.

Hermione focused on his tiny black buttons and tried to think of what to say. "I'm not so special, Severus," she replied shyly. "I just did what women do." She felt his other hand lift her chin level with his eyes.

"Women don't do that to me. Women don't want me. The only ones who did, and they have been precious few, have been either insane, drunk, or used me for sport."

He stopped speaking and lowered his head and folded his hands in his lap. Hermione went to sit next to him, and she was suddenly whisked up and placed firmly on his lap. He rested his head on her shoulder and whispered low and sad as he enveloped her, "Oh, Hermione, I have been so lonely my whole life. I wanted so much to reach out and not have a woman freeze up in fear or disgust. You just don't know how much you have done for me. I feel like a little boy just realizing what mysterious creatures witches are."

Hermione rested her cheek on the top of his head and sighed. His arms wrapped around her tighter.

"Do you still want to make love?" he whispered.

"Yes," Hermione replied. "Do you still feel like it?"

He moved his head and looked at her. "I can't wait," he said as he nuzzled her cheek with his nose. "I hope I won't disappoint."

"You can't," Hermione said urgently. "Your feelings are real, and you love me. No matter what happens, it will be satisfying."

They remained together for a while, holding each other, and relishing in the quiet of the moment until they had to face their responsibilities and make sure Eugene had finished his homework and was put to bed.

Later, after all was still and quiet in the house, Hermione heard her bedroom door open softly.

"It's me," a deep voice answered her.

Hermione sat up in bed to watch Severus as he shrugged off his robe. His chest was magnificent. Thin and chiseled with barely any chest hair, he stood in his naked glory, watching Hermione take him in with her eyes.

She looked down lower at his narrow hips and sinewy legs. His erection stood out proudly as he continued to rest his black eyes on her. His arms were toned and strong. He had a body of a trim athlete. Hermione bit her lip and turned down the covers.

"Come in," she invited him.

He slid in quickly under the sheets and immediately reached out for her body, holding her close to him.

"Severus," she breathed as he moved to lie on top of her. He was solid, as she knew he would be. His hair tickled her eyes, and his nose kept bumping her cheek.

He's kissing me.

That was all Hermione could think as he fumbled his way around her clothes. He never stopped kissing her. She was sweating by the time her nightgown was pulled over her head and discarded onto the floor. She gently raked her nails across his back and sides.

Hermione.

It was the strangest sound she had ever heard. It was the most beautiful sound. It took her a few minutes after he had whispered it a couple more times to realize what it was.

Hermione.

Hermione.

It was the sound of Severus in ecstasy. It was lovelier than she had imagined. She sighed as he slid his hands over her entire body, caressing each dip and curve. His hands shook and trembled as he breathed into her ear to open her thighs wider.

Please.

She could never refuse him anything with such a plea as that. He cradled the back of her neck and kissed down her cleavage. He delicately brushed her mound of curls and carefully pushed a finger inside her. Hermione gasped.

"This is it, right?" he breathed.

"Uh-huh," she moaned.

He kissed her deeply, pushing his finger in and out of her. She reached down and moved his thumb on top of her nubbin. As he swirled and familiarized himself again with this new discovery, Hermione groaned.

Severus.

She saw the outline of his head snap up as she moaned his name. She felt him struggle to place his manhood to her waiting flesh. He was breathing hard now. Hermione held herself still so he could find his way. The tip of his cock touched her wetness, and he shuddered and quaked. He gripped her tightly as he bit back a roar and sank his mouth onto Hermione's neck, spilling his seed against her inner thigh.

"I-I am sorry, Miss Granger," he said in a detached voice as he made to leave her bed.

"No!" she whispered in protest as she held him to her. "It's okay. It's normal. Let me hold you."

It was amazing as he lowered his quivering body onto hers. He was perspiring and weak as a kitten. He rested his head on one of her breasts as he stroked the outside of the other pink-colored tip.

"You are so lovely," he whispered as he focused on her crinkled nipple. "Why me...I haven't done anything to deserve you. I'm sorry I ruined it."

Hermione lovingly stroked his hair. "Severus, you just need time. You've already surpassed all of my experience. Instinctively, you are a good lover. In time, you will be a fabulous one."

"Am I? You wouldn't lie to me and then complain when I'm not around, would you?"

Hermione giggled and her breasts moved. He looked up into her face, and she hoped the glorious thoughts floating in her head were shining through to her face, reaching out and reassuring him.

"Your eyes are sparkling," he whispered.

Hermione smiled. "You have touched my heart," she whispered as she caressed his face, her thumbs stroking the sides of his nose and her fingers running across his cheeks and into his hair.

"What did you mean by 'instinctively'?" he asked suspiciously.

"Well," Hermione considered as she raised one arm behind her head. "Some wizards...even those who haven't been virgins in years...still would jump on a witch and ride her like she was a broom at the Quidditch World Cup."

"So, Krum was your first?"

"No, you prat!" she snapped as she smacked him.

He laughed and held her close.

"I wasn't even sixteen!" she protested.

"Forgive me, Hermione. The analogy was far too much to pass upon," he admitted.

"Well, at least, I'm happy you've improved your mind and stopped deriding yourself," she said seductively.

"Miss Granger, were you like this when you were my student?" he asked pointedly. "Was Rita Skeeter truly onto something?"

"NO!" she hissed as she smacked him again.

"Ow!" he said. "I never knew physical violence was a part of foreplay. Do you normally beat wizards who sleep with you?"

She snickered. "Only if they've been very naughty," she murmured.

Severus looked at her appreciatively. "Enough talk about the old days. I'm ready for another approach." He climbed back up and held her to him, kissing her deeply.

She flipped them over, and she rose to straddle him. She shook out her hair, running her hands through it. It was long now. Long, full, rich brown hair that spilled down her back. Severus glided his hands up her belly to her full, luscious globes. He closed his eyes as Hermione swiveled and rocked him gently. He was growing desperately hard as she teased him, and his breathing became shallow.

"How do you want it?" she asked seductively.

He swallowed and opened his mouth to speak, but he couldn't.

"Do you want it hard and deep?" she whispered huskily. "Do you want to be as deep inside me as you possibly can?"

Yes.

There was the voice. The sound Hermione was learning that meant he was beyond rational thought.

She could make him scream. She wanted to...*badly*.

She made to lower herself onto the swollen flesh that demanded relief as Severus moaned and tried to breathe normally. He quickly turned them over, and he slowly pressed his cock inside her.

"Not like that. Not for my first time. I have wanted to feel a woman underneath me for so long."

A growl from his throat escaped, and he fell forward against her neck to swallow his shouts. He thrust into her aching flesh that needed to be filled and taken.

Hermione could feel the tension in him. He was holding back for her. She closed her eyes as she nuzzled his freshly washed hair with her nose. She had been afraid to counter his movements. She didn't want him to lose control again so soon. Now, she couldn't arrest her own body's response. It needed to move with his, as if they had been created to join solely for the fulfillment of the other. Severus ground into her depths as she lifted upwards to feel the delicious friction that slowly penetrated her mind, opening the secret depths of pleasure and decadent yearning that had lain dormant all this time.

She cried out as she began to climax, and he covered her mouth with his own as he continued to thrust inside her deeply, taking control of her movements as he grasped the underside of her sweaty thighs as an anchor for his ardor. He pushed her knees to her chest as he rigidly jerked within her, signaling his release.

Stay with me, the voice said.

He kissed her then, hard and frantic, and she kissed him just as eagerly. He tore his lips away from hers to plead with her once more.

Don't leave me! he cried out.

He moaned, and his whole body stiffened as he emptied into her. They collapsed together, his body covering hers. Hermione felt hazy and sated. The ability to think left her. The man on top of her as a virgin had taken her places Ron had never taken her, even after their virginity had been distant memories. Hermione smiled and stroked her lover's hair, and he hummed appreciatively.

They snuggled together, huddled in each other's warmth.

"Tell me how it was before," he asked. "What was it like your first time."

Hermione tapped her lips with a finger thoughtfully. "Making love," she explained, "should be about mutual giving and taking. I have had only one lover, and his definition wasn't that. The first month was terrible. I bled every time. The first time was terrible. He finished fast and held me, apologizing for it hurting so much. He promised it would get better. However, I realized he really got off on my pain. I think he thought it was a sign of his virility, penis size, or perhaps that I was extra virginal because I was 'so tight,' or some rot like that. It was just miserable, but he told the truth, it did get better. I started to have orgasms, and to his credit, he made sure I had them. But I realized he was never going to change. Hard and fast, done in five minutes. It was physically satisfying, but emotionally, it was empty, and I felt used. I promised myself I wouldn't do that again if I took another lover."

Severus frowned. "I will never understand the way some wizards treat their witches. Never tell me who he is, Hermione. I would kill him knowing he made you suffer," he whispered angrily.

Hermione stroked his chest and arm, trying to soothe and calm him. "Tell me about the girl you kissed," she asked softly. "It couldn't have been Lily, you said the girl was fifteen when you were sixteen."

As soon as she finished speaking, she knew she had made a gross error. His face turned to stone, and his body stiffened in rage. He fixed his eyes straight ahead and said, "Remember when I told you that the women who have ever wanted me were either insane, drunk, or used me for a dare?"

"Yes," Hermione whispered.

"The insane one was Bellatrix Lestrange. I told her I wouldn't fuck her with James Potter's dick...this was before the Dark Lord killed him. Then Sybil Trelawney was the drunk one. Of course, she was just disgusted and made a huge display of her revulsion of me the next day when she was sober. I think that was more humiliating than her touching my bollocks. However, by far, the most damaging was after Lily had ended our friendship.

"There was this girl, a Hufflepuff. She was the school vixen. She was beautiful and had a body that would make a young wizard hard as granite just by brushing past her in the hallway. Every wizard at Hogwarts secretly wanted her. Her name was Isobel. She would walk by me for days with a wink or a smile. It was embarrassing and also stimulating at the same time. I imagined being with her and that perhaps she liked me, wanted to be with me as much I wanted to be with her.

"After a month of her flirting, I was primed anytime I saw her. Then one evening she came to me, took my hand, and pulled me into a dark hallway. She kissed me, and I responded eagerly. Then there was laughing. The lights came on and there was Potter and Black, just pointing and laughing with a whole bunch of Gryffindors. I thought, 'Let them laugh. Isobel wants me. Then I'll show them when I am walking around with her on my arm!'"

He was starting to breathe heavily, and Hermione grew worried. She saw tears in the corner of his eye. "I turned to her, and she was laughing with them! She walked over to the others and said to me as some dunderhead seventh-year Hufflepuff draped his arm around her, 'You're so easy to toy with, Snivellus. Next time, don't be so eager...it's just pathetic.'"

Hermione gasped as he looked at her with pained eyes.

"Those bastards!" she hissed. "And her! That piece of baggage...she was so cruel. That must have crushed you."

"I was humiliated. I not only had experienced my first kiss, but I went from feeling like I was soaring to the heights only to find myself hurtling towards the earth. I felt I would just die inside; it had all been so calculating and heartless. I decided that all witches were cunning, manipulative beings whose only true desire was to make wizards look weak and stupid."

"Had Lily been there that day?" Hermione asked quietly.

"No," he whispered soberly. "She heard about it, though, and tried to talk to me. She approached me, and I winced. I was so hurt and distrusting, I thought she was there to plunge the final dagger in my back. She tried to reach me and say she was so sorry Potter and Black did what they had done to me. Nevertheless, I remember sneering at her and saying coolly, 'It's quite all right. After all, it's not like they used Dark magic. So, why should I feel slighted?'"

Severus sighed as he continued. "She opened her mouth to speak, and I pitied her. I knew I had been right. She thought the pain they caused could never be placed alongside what the Slytherins were doing. I think she knew then that she had done me...us...a disservice. She had judged me, so I judged her. She never looked at me again. I just stood there looking bored and smug, so above it all, looking at her as if she were an insect with no meaning to me."

"Did it make it better, treating her that way?" she asked him softly.

His fingers played with the frays of her blanket, all the while concentrating on his task and not looking at her. "Of course not. It made it all worse. Revenge, they say, is best served cold. However, I believe revenge is best served swiftly and consumed in great haste, for it spoils so quickly."

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 of 18

Life after Voldemort isn't as everyone thought it would be.

Chapter 14

Hermione woke up with a stretch that she normally would not indulge. But this particular morning was absolutely delicious. Her body felt warm and relaxed. She yawned and thought of Severus, and how he had made love to her. She felt honored to have been the woman to take his virginity. She relished in the details of his discovery, the looks on his face as he experienced being inside a woman for the first time. Hermione's face felt warm. She wondered if she were blushing. She turned over to reach out for Severus, and he was gone.

Her hand felt along where he had lain, and it was cold. She was a little panicked, but told herself he had returned to his bed. How confusing to Eugene would it be to find them naked in bed together! She got up and threw on her robe. She had an urge to know where Severus was. She went into his bedroom, and it was empty. She went over to the bed and saw how neatly it was made. She had her own unique style of making beds that was different from Severus', and this bed had not been touched.

Maybe he's in the kitchen or the sitting room, she told herself. She went to check on Eugene, who was just beginning to stir but not quite awake.

She went slowly into the sitting room and saw it was empty. The kitchen, likewise, was untouched. Hermione sat at the table and nervously chewed her nails. There was no coffee, no breakfast in progress; nothing was out of order. Slowly, she made way to the mudroom, where just the night before they had sated each other's lust until they could go to bed and truly make love. She looked up at the coat rack and saw her coat, cloak, and Eugene's school coat, but there was a gaping space where she had placed Severus' cloak last night.

He was gone.

Hermione felt she had lost all feeling in her face and hands. Her chest felt as if it was being crushed, and she couldn't breathe. She felt an animal was in her stomach, gnawing at it, and her feet felt like lead.

She stood there for a long time in total shock. *Why did he leave me?* she thought again and again. He had told her the most beautiful things. He had asked her to stay and never leave him. He had told her his saddest story of how he had been tricked into believing the school beauty was interested in him. He had told her he was lonely and tired of being alone.

A stone sank into the pit of her stomach, and tears began to fall from her eyes. She stumbled to the nearest chair at her dining table and cried. He had left her. Just when she thought she had found what she had wished for so long. She thought she had finally found a love like Harry and Ginny, a lover who would take his time and slowly enjoy her. Now it had all been a delusion.

Still, she was confused. She got up and quickly went to her bedroom to hastily wash up and put on a pair of jeans and a jumper. She pulled back her hair into a shape that was between a bun and a ponytail. She went out to the kitchen and started Eugene's breakfast. He came out tired and yawning. Hermione silently made breakfast and served him.

"Where's Severus?" he asked innocently.

Hermione felt the tears sliding down her face. She turned from him and said as cheerfully as she could, "I don't know. Perhaps he had some things he needed to do, or perhaps he decided on an early morning walk." *Of course!* she thought happily. *How could I've been so stupid? He must be out walking. After all, that's what he does to help him clear his head. And he did make love for the first time last night. There's bound to be a lot of emotions churning inside him!*

She turned back, smiling like her normal self and ate a decent amount of her breakfast. She got him off to school and then waited at the picture window for the black-clad figure to come walking back into the house. The hours ticked by, and Hermione's hopes were dashed. She sat on the couch and cried. She could still smell his scent on her. Where was he?

She bolted upright, and her brown eyes narrowed. He had better not be there. Not there, not after everything they had been through. Not after Harry had come and all the silent walks and the time she had spent talking and listening.

"SON-OF-A-BITCH!" she screamed as she stomped off to the mudroom. She ripped her coat from the wall, Apparated to the safe zone near his house, and stalked over to the front door. She eased herself inside and heard his voice, deep and pleading. Then he stopped speaking, and she halted her steps. She heard the distinct sound of a quill scratching on paper. She carefully proceeded towards the master bedroom where Snape had occupied and kept that trice-damned mirror.

"I am, Lily. I am. Please don't be angry with me. I just wanted to be loved. Yes, I know that I promised I would never touch another woman, but you wouldn't come! Then your son came with the memories, and I just don't understand! Yes, Lily. I'm writing. Just don't hate me anymore. I am sorry. I won't go back if that's what it takes. I promise."

Hermione listened in horror as she heard the sounds of Severus' crying. "It's just she loved me and wasn't afraid to touch me. I'm lonely, and you aren't keeping your promises! You promised you would come out of there if I did what you asked. I did it, and you still wouldn't return to me. Always more and more with you!" He burst out into fresh tears, and Hermione wondered when she should make her presence known.

"I'm writing, I'm writing!" he shouted desperately. "Lily, I am sorry. It's just that Hermione loves me, and she's so sweet, and I-I wanted her so much. I know it won't last. Don't say hurtful things, Lily. I know that no one will ever love me like you did. If you would just come out! DAMN IT, LILY! STOP TORMENTING ME!"

Hermione had heard enough. She walked into the room and saw Severus standing in front of that fucking mirror. His face turned into horror as he watched her slowly advance upon him. He dashed to a wooden table and began to shuffle the papers there.

"Severus, stop it!" she yelled.

She watched his eyes dart from her to the mirror in utter fear. Hermione was flummoxed. She had never seen Severus like this before...ever. She went over to the desk and looked at a large pile of parchments, broken quills, half-empty inkwells and various smudges around the desk. She picked them up and saw what he had been writing.

There were numerous letters of pleading forgiveness, love, and acceptance. Each page had numerous scratching and crossed out sentences. Water spots showed Hermione that at various times Severus had been crying as he wrote. The worst one of all was an entire page that only had the words "Forgive me" written over and over, filling each empty space of the parchment on both sides.

She sat weakly onto the desk chair and looked at his attempts at bargaining. Perhaps if he wrote "Forgive me" enough times, she would relent? Or had the delusions told him to write lines? Either way, it was the most pitiful sight she had ever seen, and her heart ached for him. She looked at the offending mirror, and her rage boiled over. What would she not give to have the real Lily Evans in front of her? She looked at Severus, who was holding himself fiercely as if he would shatter into pieces if he let go. She saw the wild look in his eye, the desperation, guilt, shame, and condemnation that would just not go away.

Hermione was livid. She was angry about it all. At that moment she hated him, herself, Harry, Eugene, his parents, her parents, Lily, Dumbledore, Voldemort...everything that would not let them go. She took the inkwells and one by one smashed them into the mirror, destroying the glass and marring the wood. Severus fell to the floor moaning in despair. His hands were gripping his hair, and he was rocking back and forth on his knees. Hermione picked up all the parchments, jerked Severus to his feet and Apparated back to Garden Cottage.

Hermione had the parchments held against her chest as she guided him into the house. She slipped off her shoes and went to the dining room table where she deposited all the parchments. She then slowly took off her coat and looked back at Severus, who was sitting in the mudroom, on the bench where they had found so much pleasure the night before. He still had on his boots and cloak, looking dejected and miserable sitting there, staring onto his hands. She walked past him and hung up her coat and then went back into the dining area.

"Severus, come in and close the door. You are making a draft," she whispered.

He slowly stood and hung his cloak. He walked inside and closed the door behind him.

"Why did you have to destroy the mirror?" he whispered.

Hermione was angry, angrier than she ever remembered being before. "I destroyed the mirror when I saw that," she snapped as she pointed to the parchment with the writing of "Forgive me" written all over it.

His face grew tired, and he picked up the parchment. "She told me to write it, and if I did it well enough, she would consider coming back out of hiding," he said sadly. "It was all so real...I really believed she was there, talking to me, setting more and more conditions on me."

He stopped talking as he let the parchment fall from his fingers, and Hermione asked, "Now do you realize it was all your own mind trying to make it all right again?"

He nodded dumbly. "I needed for it to be over," he said as he stared at the mess in front of him. "I just wanted the nightmare to end."

"Why did you leave?" she asked while trying to control her rage.

He hid his hands in his hair, blocking her view of him. "I was compelled. I needed to end it once and for all, but when I got there, she was so angry, so hurt...I couldn't believe she knew what I had done!" he said in confusion.

"Well, of course 'she' knew, Severus!" she snapped impatiently. "'She' is in your head! She's not even real...just a figment of your guilt and need to punish yourself!"

He gathered the parchments to his chest, crushing some in the process.

"Why does my guilt affect you so?" he bit back angrily. "It's mine, not yours to handle. Or do you want to take her place and dictate to me how to feel, when to feel it, and what to do when you fucking well feel like it?"

Hermione shook her head. "No!" she shouted. "I never wanted to run your life. I just didn't want you destroying Eugene's in the process of ruining your own!"

She looked at him pointedly and continued. "Our lives have become so entangled because we first loved Eugene. Out of that love came a friendship I thought was important to you as it was to me. Perhaps I was wrong!"

She jumped up and started cleaning the dishes from breakfast. "People just don't let their friends drown in fear and madness. For Eugene's sake, for my sake...because I love you...I won't let you fade away into insanity if I can help it." She stopped talking as she felt the pain in her chest return. She looked down at the floor as she felt the tears well up again.

"Hermione?" Severus called. "Hermione, what's wrong?" He jumped up, and the parchments fluttered to the floor as he dashed to hold her up by her shoulders.

"My chest hurts," she gasped through her sobs. "When I saw you were gone, really gone, I felt a pain here," she pressed her hand to her chest. "I could feel something

was so very wrong. Seeing you like that in front of that mirror, crying and trying to reason with your own mind...I couldn't take it any more. I do love you, Severus. And when you are in pain, I am too."

"Why would you want to love a broken-down man like me?" he whispered sadly.

Hermione cried. She just released her pain completely. Severus gathered her up and carried her to the couch where he laid her down and stroked her hair from her face. Then he walked slowly over to where all the parchments had fallen, picked them up, and strode over to the fireplace where he threw them in and watched them burn.

Hermione watched him as the fire consumed the parchments. He stood for a long time, watching the flames lick and dance around the burning parchment, and he stroked his arms with his hands. Hermione didn't know what to do. Her heaving sobs had subsided, and now, she was just trying to catch her breath.

Severus began to speak as faced the fireplace, occasionally peeking towards Hermione's direction. "My hurting never seemed to bother her the way it does you. She never shed one tear for me in that mirror for the hundreds I shed for her. I don't want that, Hermione. I know I can choose what I want, but can I choose how to feel? I'm afraid. Even now with that mirror shattered and broken, how will I know she will finally stop tormenting me?"

Hermione sniffed as she wiped her eyes. "Why does *her* forgiveness have to mean so much?" she asked brokenly.

"What?" he said as he turned to face her. His eyes were burning, and his face was fixed in a grim line.

"Maybe, it's not the forgiveness so much, just the unfairness of it all. We are always having to constantly excuse ourselves for being who we are, for the impossible choices we've had to face, and the decisions we make. Sure, we made terrible choices at times, but who hasn't? Then all the while the people we love hold us to these incredible standards we can never reach, then curse and abandon us when we needed acceptance the most. But it really doesn't matter, does it? Because we aren't good enough, and what we are will never be acceptable," she lamented.

"Who finds you unacceptable?" he sneered.

Hermione looked at him. She felt sad and hurt he didn't remember what she had confided with him. "I told you, Severus, my parents! I can understand their fear of me now. I realize it was too much for them, but even when I was younger, they were drifting away from me, little by little. I wanted so badly for them to be proud of what I was and of who I was becoming. Look at Eugene...he never had a chance, just like Harry. It wasn't their choice to be wizards, it wasn't Harry's fault he couldn't get the Wizengamot or the Ministry to help find you, or even care!" She sighed heavily. "What are we going to do?" she asked as she wiped the tears from her eyes.

Severus looked at her for a long time. Finally, he straightened himself up and said firmly, "We'll live, Hermione. We will live unashamed free lives. To hell with the ingrates who would sneer at us for being different or not living up to their standards."

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 of 18

Life after Voldemort isn't as everyone thought it would be.

Chapter 15

Severus and Hermione spent the remainder of the day mostly in silence. Hermione went about her day, cooking, cleaning, and reading. She stayed clear of Severus as he went about his chores. She watched him through the mudroom window as he gathered the firewood from the pile on the side of the house. He seemed completely absorbed in his work, methodically picking up one log at a time. She dashed back into the kitchen as he brought in firewood and went about the task of keeping the flame burning strong. She picked up her wand and set the potatoes to peeling themselves. She sighed silently, wondering if they were ever going to talk about where their relationship was going to progress now.

Hermione realized the day had slipped from them, and Eugene would be home soon. She quickly started finishing dinner and focused on her work. Unexpectedly, the strong, lean arms of Severus envelope her from behind, and his warm body pressed against her back.

"Did I hurt you last night?" he whispered. "Was I careful enough?"

Hermione's heart skipped a beat at the sound of his warm voice against her ear. She turned around and wrapped her hands around his neck loosely. "It was perfect," she whispered. "For a beginner, you are a wonderful student."

Splotches of red appeared on his cheeks. "Even with the first failed attempt?" he said self-deprecatingly.

Hermione smiled and pecked him on the lips. "For decades you have wanted to experience that. I think it was quite normal, and I wasn't offended or thought less of you as a man. Besides, your second attempt was the most satisfying sex I have ever had."

"It was that wonderful?" he asked.

"I've had powerful, earth shattering orgasms before that were more intense. But if I had to, I would trade all of that for the tenderness and passion you showed me last night. You wanted me, and more than that, you wanted to satisfy me. I felt connected to you in more ways than physically. You are going to be an amazing lover once you get familiar with the act," she said ardently.

She took a deep breath and said nervously, "Severus, I-I love you."

Severus took her hands into his own, examining them as if they were made of porcelain. "With all my faults and mental instabilities?" he whispered lowly as he kept his head bowed.

Hermione's eyes traveled over his ebony hair and took a deep breath. "I'll take you just the way you are, Severus. As long as you love me, and respect our love, I will stay by your side forever," she declared softly.

Severus raised his head. "So, you stay with me?" he asked with a light in his eyes. "Be my wife?"

Hermione was taken aback. After all that had occurred between them today, she was amazed that he would even consider such a thing. "Is that truly what you want, Severus?" she asked nervously in return.

Severus took her into his arms passionately and kissed her lips hungrily. He pulled back, and with the restrained face she had known from her school days, said, "I meant what I said before, Hermione. Even when Lily had been alive, she never considered my feelings or desires. You stayed by me when I was so unlovable and determined to remain in my madness. I told you I could see possibilities for my future. I also said that each one of them contained you being in my life. With you, it is possible to start over again."

Hermione was shocked. Her hands moved from around his neck to resting the palms of her hands on his frock coat. He continued to search her out, to savor and enjoy her mouth. She detected urgency and hunger in him that he only wanted her to sate. She slowly wrapped her arms around his waist as he wound his fingers into her hair. He suddenly broke the kiss and looked searchingly into her face. Hermione smiled slightly and whispered cheekily, "Eugene said he was right. All you needed was lots of hugs and good food."

"Was there anything *you* needed?" he asked shrewdly.

Hermione's eyes grew moist as she placed her forehead on his woolen-clad chest. "A family. A family of my very own that would understand and love me," she whispered.

Severus lifted her head and kissed her lips tenderly. "If you accept me, you can have it all, Hermione," he replied softly. "We are going to have a child of our own someday as well as have Eugene for our son. We will have everything we have ever wanted."

"Am I truly what you want, Severus?" she breathed as his lips moved closer to hers.

"I've never been a likeable person, Hermione. I think I've proved that to you. Still, you see the good in me that I always wanted to show others, but after Lily, I decided only foolish people wore their hearts on their sleeves, showed positive emotions, and trusted others. It has always been in me to doubt ... I couldn't risk it. With you, it is impossible to fight," he replied.

"Come, Hermione," he said deeply. "Let me love you. Be my wife."

Hermione smiled and let out a small giggle. "Yes, Severus, I will," she replied as her eyes began to fill to overflowing.

Severus took her face and kissed her tenderly on her lips. Then he traveled lower to her neck and nuzzled her ear with his nose. "I want you."

"Now?" she asked incredulously.

"Oh, yes, Hermione," he moaned as he crushed her lips against his. "I have so much to make up for." He started to swiftly undress her and kissed each spot of uncovered skin.

"Eugene," she protested as she looked wildly around her. "He'll be here soon!"

"Then you would do best to comply," he said to her darkly.

Hermione sighed as he suckled on one breast. "Here," Severus insisted. "Here on the table."

He stripped their essentials quickly and leaned over her, stroking her waist and hips.

Hermione felt her face flush as she remembered listening to Harry and Ginny make love with all the envy and sadness that went with it. She thought of the kiss Harry gave her when she left. "You make me feel the way I always wanted to feel with a man," she confessed to Severus. "You bring so much passion out of me, and you are in no rush. You treat my body with such adoration. I feel so pretty and sexy in your arms."

Severus furrowed his eyebrows. "Hermione, you are those things. You don't need me for that."

Hermione laid an arm over her eyes. "You just don't understand, Severus," she said as she laughed. "Just take the compliment that you are the only man able to touch me so deeply."

"I'll try, Hermione," he whispered as he plunged into her moist flesh.

Hermione squeaked as she jerked her arm from her face. Her eyes grew heavy and decided that she would let him take over her and revel in the pleasure.

"Oh, fuck," he ground out as he slammed a hand flat onto the table's surface. Hermione ran her fingers through his black hair, pulling it back as he leaned over her, slowly thrusting between her legs.

She gasped loudly. "Oh, Severus," she begged as her hands fisted his hair. "Faster, please!"

"No," he grunted as he took his time. "I'm rather pleased where I am at the moment, and I do not wish to rush anything."

She swore as she arched her back, releasing her hold on his hair and flinging her hands behind her head.

"You're getting quite moist," he whispered deeply.

"Yes! That happens...mmm...when it's good," she panted as she spread her legs further and lifted her bum with each thrust. "Severus, please...I'm coming!"

She was sweating and breathing heavily. She was aware of burning black eyes fixed on her writhing body.

"*Ahh*," he moaned. He lifted her by her arse and teased her with his languid movements until Hermione firmly grasped his tight arse, forcing all of him into her. He was trembling and still trying to adjust to the sensation of being in a woman's body. Hermione knew he wasn't going to last long. She rocked him inside her, and he groaned loudly.

He kissed her as he tried various angles to stroke inside her just right. She finally whimpered, and he finally gave over, thrusting into her furiously, making her cry out loud and long as he panted her name against her throat as he ejaculated deeply into her.

He softened inside her as he lay upon her on the table. "I never thought I would experience this. I always thought that part of me died with her and never would I ever know this joy. I feel alive," he gasped. "You've made me alive again."

"Have I?" Hermione said as she draped an arm and a leg over him. "I think you just finally loosed yourself and let go of the pain."

"Perhaps," he muttered.

Later that night, after Eugene was in bed, and the house was still, Severus silently slipped into Hermione's bedroom and slid under the sheets. "Make me come, Hermione," he whispered as if he were in pain.

"What's the matter?" she whispered sleepily.

"I can't stop thinking about you," he whispered. "I need you."

Hermione giggled as she straddled him. He inhaled sharply at her naked form above him. She unfastened the buttons on his trousers rapidly, her hands shaking with anticipation as Severus watched her efforts. Hermione could feel his eyes on her hands and could hear the ragged breathing from him, becoming rapid and gasping. She tenderly tugged his trousers and underwear down and really examined his engorged flesh for the first time. It was dusky and red. Hermione glanced at Severus' face, and his eyes were closed, and his nostrils were flared as he concentrated on his breathing. His fists clenched into the fabric of her sheets, white and taut.

Hermione wrapped her hand around its thickness, and he emitted a low groan from her touch. She tenderly glided her hand and fingers along the velvet soft skin, familiarizing herself with its contours and ridges.

Severus was panting heavily now and she made low shushing sounds to relax him.

"Look, Severus. Open your eyes," she pleaded.

He weakly opened them, and Hermione knew he was watching her skim along his erection with the tip of her pink tongue.

"My God," he whispered in awe. "Hermione, you are amazing."

Hermione heard Eugene come into the kitchen the next morning and gasp. She thought it probably had something to do with how she and Severus were sitting at the kitchen table with their hands intertwined, smiling.

Hermione turned to Eugene and smiled happily. Severus kept his hand firmly interlocked with hers as he kept an impassive look on his face.

Eugene sauntered over to them, grinning like a Cheshire cat. "So?" he pressed. "Anything to share?"

Hermione placed her arms on Eugene's shoulders and said, "Severus has asked me to marry him, and I have accepted."

"So," he said happily as he put on his backpack, "when's the big day?" he asked.

Hermione looked at Severus. "Uh, we haven't decided, but I'm sure before next fall," she said as she smiled.

"Wicked!" he said. "Then can I be officially adopted? I can have my name changed before I go to Hogwarts!"

"We would want nothing else," Severus replied confidently. "However, you must not speak of this to your school mates. Of the marriage, yes, but of Hogwarts and magic...NO. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," Eugene said as he beamed. He gave Hermione a big hug and whispered, "I knew you'd be good for him. That was all he really needed, someone to give him lots of hugs and good food!"

He ran out the door, and Hermione stood in the mudroom, watching her black-haired boy leave for school.

Life became completely different. Severus could not return to the house on Red Bank Road. He told Hermione he didn't want to talk about it, but Hermione felt he was afraid that if he returned, the delusions would begin again.

Hermione was thrilled being one household again. Severus sent Eugene and Hermione to fetch the remainder of his belongings. It was a delicate situation, but Hermione happily went ahead with Eugene and went to the old house, eager to leave it behind them.

Winter had been taking its toll on the property. It was freezing inside, and Hermione hurriedly directed Eugene to take all of his belongings from his upstairs bedroom.

Hermione stole into Severus' old bedroom. She slowly turned the knob and walked in. She looked at the broken mirror where Severus had spent so much of his time in constant vigil before she arrived and destroyed the mirror. Eugene came in, agape at the broken ink bottles and smashed glass everywhere on the floor.

"What happened?" he asked as he looked around the room.

Hermione looked down at the wrecked mirror. "I had to destroy the mirror, Eugene," she whispered. "I was so angry at what Severus had become because of her."

Eugene looked confused. "Why did she hurt him so much?" he asked. "What made her so mean?"

Hermione sighed loudly and massaged her forehead. "She wouldn't forgive him for a choice he made a long time ago. He even admitted he was wrong and tried to make up for what he did, but I don't know if she knew or not what he had done for her before she died," Hermione replied tiredly.

"What's so special about *her*?" he spat angrily.

Hermione's eyes wandered around the room. "He loved her," she replied hollowly.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 of 18

Life after Voldemort isn't as everyone thought it would be.

Chapter 16

"I wish Harry could do that," Hermione said sadly as she washed her hands one night just before dinner.

Severus glared at her and snarled, "Potter did his job. He is the beloved hero of our world. So, what has he to be miserable about?"

Hermione and Severus were discussing Harry's difficulties after the war. Hermione was very concerned about him, especially since he had left so abruptly after seeing

Severus for the first time. She was also angry. Angry at Severus for how he had treated him when he had come all that way to restore his memories to him and angry at herself that she hadn't gone after him and tried to smooth things over.

Hermione looked at him sadly. "Don't you realize how guilty he feels?"

"He should feel guilty, the ungrateful tosser!" Severus snapped. "For years he wanted to think the worst of me, just like his arrogant father..."

"...Severus, don't you hear yourself?" Hermione bellowed as she faced him. She didn't care. She was going to get through his thick head once and for all.

"Harry never got a fair shake from you. Sins of the father were visited upon the son! The first day in class you just *had* to be a nasty bastard to him, mocking him, saying things that were untrue, pushing a standard onto him that he never could live up to!" she reminded him.

"So, fine. Harry didn't like you. He didn't care about you one whit. He was just as prejudiced against you as you were against him! But you know what, Severus? He was the child, and *you* were the adult. At least admit that you were too emotionally crippled to see that Harry wasn't James."

They stared at each other in silence. Hermione wondered what he was thinking. She wondered if he would walk out. Had she stepped over the line?

He pulled himself to his full height and said coolly, "I think you are sufficient in preparing the table yourself, Miss Granger." He turned on his heel and left her in the kitchen alone.

Dinner had been subdued. Eugene looked miserable. He kept looking back and forth from Severus and Hermione. Hermione wished she could do something to fix what she had done, but she couldn't. She sat in silence as Severus ate with an unreadable expression on his face. Not one word was passed between them.

She went to bed early, feeling low and alone. She sat in bed, hugging her legs to her chest, looking out her window, wishing she could even summon the tears to cry, but she couldn't. She felt so numb. She absent-mindedly played with her plait she had made out of nerves. She stroked the edges of her hair, wrapping one curl around her finger over and over. She couldn't stand being in bed for another minute, so she took one of her hardwood chairs and sat in front of the window, leaning her elbows on her knees, watching the gloomy rain and sleet come down.

She heard a soft knocking on the door.

"Come in, Eugene," she said softly, still looking out the window.

The door opened, and a deep voice said, "It is I, Hermione."

Hermione turned sharply towards the door. Her chest felt it would explode from the tension. He was still dressed and stepped into her room slowly, closing the door quietly behind him.

He was silent for a minute as he slowly made his way towards her. "Hermione, I apologize for tonight. I resented your tone and felt I needed to leave. I don't appreciate being addressed in the manner you did," he said stiffly.

"You don't seem to have a problem chiding me when it suits you," she retorted. Then she turned back to look out the window, crossing her arms angrily.

"I know that I will have to adjust how I respond to you," Hermione heard him say from behind her. "It's not easy when you have lived a certain way for so long."

"And all I ask is to be treated with dignity and respect," Hermione said curtly. "I treat you the same way. When you love someone, you refuse to allow them to live a lie that they are always right. I won't do it, Severus. You are grossly blind where it comes to Harry, and he is no better. I have told him that as well!"

She felt his hands on her shoulders. "Please don't shut me out, Hermione. I know I have faults, I am all too aware of all of them. I just hated you knowing and looking at me with such disdain as you counted them out to me one by one," he whispered against her head.

She turned and placed her hands lightly over his. "I'm sorry, Severus," she whispered. "I should have been more temperate with my words."

"It just goes to show you how truly breakable I am," he choked out. "I've never allowed anyone to ever know me as you do. I am terrified you shall crush me."

Hermione stood up and wrapped her arms around him. "Never, Severus. I would never hurt you like you have been. You have suffered enough for two lifetimes. I just want us to love and respect each other."

Severus took her face into his hands. "I was so afraid you would never let me return to your bed," he whispered softly.

"*Our* bed, Severus," she reminded him as she began to kiss him around his sensuous mouth.

He slowly gathered up the bottom of her nightgown from her as he kissed her languidly. They teased each other with their lips and tongues as they took each other's clothes off. Hermione fell backward onto the bed, and he stripped off her knickers before straddling her to remove his own clothes. Hermione watched with tingles shooting up and down her stomach, waiting for him to complete her. Soon, he was looming over her, and in her, thrusting deftly, taking his fill of her.

Hermione.

The voice called to her. He was desperate for her acceptance. "I love you, Severus," she whispered.

Severus continued to make love to her, kissing, suckling and biting her flesh. Hermione's breath hitched.

She screamed her release into his hand that he had clamped over her mouth, and he shouted into hers as his seed filled her. Hermione lay gasping on her pillow as Severus continued to hover over her. He watched Hermione as her breathing slowed to normal.

"Do you even know how incredible you make me feel?" he gasped as he kissed her throat.

Hermione smiled lightly as he continued. "I'll do anything for you, Hermione. I'll go and release Potter from his guilt and forgive him. Obviously, he needs some sort of absolution from me, although I can't see why."

"It's about him, anyway, Severus. It's not about you, it's about how Harry feels about himself." She opened her eyes and stroked his chest. "You could tell him numerous times that he is released and forgiven, but it is himself he can't forgive," she whispered.

Severus nestled next to her on the bed. "Are we unforgiven because of ourselves or the ones we hurt?"

"I think it could be both, but I believe it is due to ourselves. We all need to release ourselves from the chains that hold us down to the past and the hurt from days gone by. But, Severus," she whispered, "sleep. You need to rest."

The unlikely couple held onto each other and easily fell into a peaceful slumber, knowing they had found the love and acceptance with each other, after they had waited so long.

"How the hell did that happen?" Severus bellowed as he jumped up from the chair.

"Well," Hermione said calmly as she sat down in her chair across from his. "Do you recall the first time you put your penis inside me? Well, it looks like your sperm were ready to do exactly what they had been created to do."

Severus had stood there, pale, and speechless. Finally, he remembered the newspaper in his hand, folded it up neatly, and tossed it onto the coffee table. He clasped his hands behind his thin frame and said, "You know this for certain?" he asked stiffly.

"Yes," she had said as she had smiled up at him. "It was simple mathematics, after all. We've only been together for two months, so when you look at the calendar and figure it all out, I can say with a great deal of accuracy that it was the first night we made love that I had conceived."

He looked out the picture window, as he usually did when he needed to ponder something. Hermione watched a smile creep over his face, and she felt her cheeks growing hot.

"Severus," she said shyly, looking down at her lap, focusing on her knitting. She knew what he was thinking.

"Look at me, Hermione," he demanded softly.

She looked up hesitantly and saw the proud, self-satisfied smile on his face.

"You are insufferable!" she said, irritated, but happily just the same.

"Well, well," Severus said aloud. "It seems my sexual initiation was...*fruitful*." He was really looking smug now, his chest was puffed out, and his head was raised cockily while his eyes glittered at her.

He slowly made his way towards her, and Hermione started to feel like his prey. "You weren't on any birth-control, Hermione. Why was that?"

"I WAS on birth-control," she snapped.

"You were?" he said surprised. "Did you forget a dose?"

Hermione glowered at him for that.

"So, all the time you were with Weasley..."

"...I never told you I was with Ronald Weasley!" she barked.

His eyes continued to glitter. "Please, Hermione, that boy had it bad for you since you were third-years, everybody knew that. Those who were thick enough to not notice certainly knew by your sixth-year, after he started up with Miss Lavender Brown. That was quite disturbing," he muttered.

"What was disturbing?" she asked.

"I don't know how many times I caught them doing... their attempt at the act of intercourse, but I do recall vividly a disturbing scenario. Miss Brown was a rather attractive young witch, but watching her being pawed over by that fumbling idiot was almost enough for me to intervene solely so I could tell him that even /knew he was doing it wrong!"

"What was he doing that was so wrong?" Hermione asked.

"He was pummeling the poor girl. She was actually crying. I thought he was assaulting her, and he nearly got hexed...but the witch started complaining and whining for him to go slower, touch her more delicately, etc. It was revolting."

"When you told me about your lover before me, I figured it had to be Weasley. Only he would be daft enough to treat a woman like a slab of meat."

Hermione winced, and he apologized. "So, this method of birth-control was what you have always used?" he asked.

"Always," she answered coolly.

A feral smirk spread across his face. "Well, that doesn't surprise me. Weasley was always on the slow side. Why his sperm should be any different shouldn't be a surprise."

Hermione stood up and placed her knitting aside. "I think I've had quite enough of this discussion. Ronald Weasley is off limits," she declared.

She tried to walk past him, and he barred her way. She tried to dodge him, and he blocked her as well. He began to advance, and she stepped backwards away from him until he had her in a corner.

"Tut, tut, Miss Granger, it seems you are in a spot of bother, doesn't it?" he said silkily. "What ~~shall~~ *the Daily Prophet* say? I can see the headline now, 'War Heroine up the Duff.'"

"Severus," she warned him. "Do not toy with me. You are acting like a kitten with a ball of yarn, and I don't appreciate it."

He smiled and leaned into her. "Tell me you don't want me to continue to tease you," he whispered into her ear. "Tell me to leave you alone."

Hermione felt her cheeks grow hot, and he kissed the apples of them as she smiled. He kissed her more arduously until they were sliding to the ground, unbuttoning each other's clothes. When he had finally pushed inside her snugly, he looked at the body of his witch underneath him and whispered, "You've made me happy."

He thrust into her shallowly once, and her back arched in reaction to his slow movement. He continued to pause between each thrust, taking the time to build the tension.

"You like this, don't you?" he whispered against her neck.

"Yes," she moaned.

He languidly sucked on each nipple as he continued to tease and play with her senses.

Hermione.

The voice was back. Hermione loved it when he spoke her name in that tone. It shot straight between her legs and made her melt around him.

Severus.

Hermione had no idea what her voice did for him, but he began to moan and speed up his thrusts.

I love you!

Never leave me!

Never!

She was feeling the soaring pleasure that signaled her pending orgasm. She gasped as he growled out his own release, grasping her thighs and panting his love for her against her neck. She screamed and screamed as she clung onto every word he whispered to her. She tightened up and squeezed him inside her as she milked all the satisfaction she could from him, and then they collapsed onto the floor, heaving breathlessly.

They looked at each other intensely as Severus drank in her face. "I love you, Hermione, and I love our family."

The tears ran down her cheeks as she smiled at the look of joy in his black eyes.

Severus looked nervously around him and whispered, "I'm afraid if I asked you when you were in complete control of your senses, you would say no. After all that has transpired with our last disagreement, I wasn't so sure you would remain with me."

Hermione's fingers traced the angles of his face. "Marry me, Severus," she asked him simply. "Please, marry me. I will never leave you."

He buried his face into her shoulder, and she felt the tears on her skin. He was trembling and looked so vulnerable that Hermione felt like weeping for him. How sad that he would react so to her declaration of love. They lay together, naked and not ashamed at their vulnerable state. After a while, Severus kissed her feverishly and said, "I will marry you, Hermione. Will you marry me?" He withdrew to look intently into her face calmly.

"Yes, Severus. Always, yes," she said passionately.

He rose and picked her up to place her on the dining table. He leaned her back down, and he stood looking at her exposed body. He held her legs apart and gazed upon her parted flesh that was his for the taking with a sigh. His face was unreadable, except for his eyes, which were smoldering as he continued to stroke her body. His hands smoothed where the baby was and drank in the sight of the woman he loved.

"It's almost too much," he whispered as he gasped. "It is so erotic to see you like this. You have my child inside you. I know how to make your entire body succumb to my touch."

Hermione sighed in satisfaction, happily being under the control of the man above her. He placed his hands gently on her shoulders and made a path downward with his fingertips, taking his time to massage and knead her breasts before skimming along her waist and the apex of her sex. He gently brushed over the hair lightly in a gentle exploration of the hidden wonders there. Hermione sighed as she shifted her legs apart further. He grazed her inner thighs and whispered, "I love feeling your thighs surround me."

He bent over her and plundered her mouth. His hands deftly traveled upwards to touch her hardened nipples. She gasped in pleasure as he pinched and rolled them with his strong, white hands.

"Put me inside you," he growled as he made his way down to suck on one pink tip.

Hermione stifled a squeal of delight as he sucked and swiped it with his tongue. She reached down and felt his hardened cock twitch as her fingertips brushed it. A growl escaped Severus' throat, and a thrill of anticipation ran through her. She was quivering with anticipation for that first thrust. She ached for him to ravage her in a way she had never felt before, not even with Ron. It had never been a choice with him; yet, with Severus, she could have a choice on what she wanted and needed.

He was still laving and nibbling her breasts when she had finished placing him at her entrance. He slowly eased in and watched Hermione's face change from impatience to fulfillment.

"Amazing," he whispered. "You really want me to do this to you, don't you?" he asked her. If any other man had said that, Hermione would have thought he was taunting her, but Severus was truly astonished that she wanted him...and only him.

"Yes," she panted as her eyelids fluttered.

He plunged into her, and she cried out passionately for him.

He paused to look at her in wonderment. He began to pound and force himself inside her, faster and faster. It was only a minute; he couldn't handle all the sensations and power of taking a woman so wildly.

"Hermione, I can't...I can't!" he shouted just before he wailed out a cry so primal and deep, it frightened her.

She watched him as he withdrew from her, panting and glistening from his exertions. His cock was moist with her juices. She went to hop off the table, but his hands clamped down forcefully on her thighs. "You need more," he gasped. "I want to watch you make yourself come."

Hermione was nervous. His face was right there between her thighs. She reached down, slid her fingers between her lips, and began to tease her clit. She glided her fingers and worked feverishly to reach her completion. Soon, she was climbing the heights and shrieking as Severus tugged and twisted her swollen nipples as she reached the edge and spilled over. Her hands stilled as her chest heaved as she closed her eyes to rest...just for a minute.

She heard the running of water and felt more adored and worshiped than at any other time in her life. As she laid out, sprawled on her dining table, open for her lover, she felt completely like a woman. She knew this wizard had been created for that purpose.

He stood up and hovered over her. "My darling rose," he whispered. "How sweetly you open for me." His hands stroked her hair and face, and she felt her eyes grow heavy with sleep. The last thing she remembered was his lips on hers, soft, supple, and yielding.

Chapter 17

Chapter 17 of 18

Life after Voldemort isn't as everyone thought it would be.

Severus and Hermione were preparing dinner, waiting for Eugene to come home from school. Severus was strangely quiet as he chopped and diced his ingredients. Hermione waited patiently for him to speak to her. It had been a very emotional moment they had shared, something that bound a person to another if it was done just right. She waited for him to sort out his emotions. For her, it was simple. She loved him. She was having his child, and she adored him. She would cherish him and never take him for granted. However, she couldn't let her feelings crowd his mind. So, she had gently continued with her work, waiting for his decision.

He paused as he poured the wine into the saucepan. "I don't want to wait, Hermione. Let's marry now. I love you so much, and my child is growing inside you...let's do it!" he said enthusiastically.

Hermione continued to work slowly on the salad. "Are you quite sure, Severus?" she whispered as she struggled not to look into his eyes. "I want this decision to be from your heart, not that you owe me or Eugene anything," she replied emotionally.

"I love you," he said with a hint of hurt in his tone. "I have broken the need to do things out of coercion. When Dumbledore and the Dark Lord perished, I promised myself there would be no more rulers or despots to own my soul. I never thought my own mind would betray me. Nevertheless, I am my own man. I chose you as my lover, and I am so happy you are pregnant with my child. I want to be with you for always. So, why should we wait?"

He looked at her intensely. Hermione could feel his eyes on her. She shifted her eyes upwards. "As soon as we can make a plan, I will marry you, Severus," she whispered.

Severus caught her in an embrace and kissed her cheek quickly. Hermione smiled as she felt his arms encircle her. It would be an ideal moment for more, but there still was dinner to finish and a boy coming home from school to enjoy the news.

They married that next week in the old church in Grasmere. It was a private and quiet ceremony with Eugene as Severus' best man and an elderly woman who was always working at the church as her matron of honor. They prepared immediately to face the world they both had left, for feeling so unworthy and unhappy in it.

It had been a difficult journey from where Hermione had started from to this point now. She walked along the road that led to the Burrow. The last time, she had been alone. Now, she came with a family.

Eugene was eager to meet more wizards like himself; nothing was going to ruin this moment. Severus and Hermione were both anxious about being accepted. Severus would have been happy to stay far away indefinitely. However, he knew he needed to do this for the young Mr. Potter.

Hermione was even more upset. She didn't know how she was going to face Ron. She had not spoken with him for two years, and now, she was coming to his home with a husband and soon to be adopted son. Then there was the matter of the baby that was growing quickly inside of her.

As they continued walking up towards the Burrow, Severus asked nervously, "You did remember to warn them of our arrival, didn't you?"

"Um, I just said we would be arriving today, but I didn't include any information," she replied as she winced, waiting for him to blow.

"No information at all!" he hissed. "Holy Mother of Merlin! I do not need this drama."

Hermione swallowed and said, "Please, Severus. We must. We can't hide forever."

"Of course we can!" he growled. He inhaled deeply and straightened his frock coat. "Fine," he said sharply, watching Eugene going farther ahead. "If I must be ogled at like freak of nature, so be it. However, I am not going to take any cheek from that little shit."

"Which 'shit' are you referring to?" she asked with a small grin.

"Weasley, of course!" he snapped angrily.

"Look, Severus, we aren't here for him. It just so happens that Harry still lives here with Ginny," she explained nervously.

He looked at her strangely. "A wizard that would willingly live under the same roof as his mother-in-law must be truly mad," he stated.

Hermione sighed and whispered, "Harry isn't well, Severus. He hasn't been well for a long time. Your disappearance nearly destroyed him."

Severus rolled his eyes. "I *still* don't understand why. It wasn't as if we had a connection or even tolerated each other!" he sneered.

Hermione stopped them and led the both of them away from Eugene. "Severus, he had those memories. You had loved his mother. You knew her more than anyone did, he believes. Therein lies your connection. In addition, he thought you had given your life for him...and you had! He understood all the years you watched out for him and what an ungrateful child he was to you, never showing you respect or any thanks."

Hermione rubbed her temples and said, "He took you and built you up as this angel watching over him, that you cared deeply about him and then at the same time, lowered himself to that level of an undeserving boy who had rejected your sacrifices. His distortions...you can understand...is how you had suffered. You need to help him right his mind and conceptions of you and himself. I also think you should apologize for being a bastard to him when he came to Grasmere just to help you!" she said disapprovingly.

Severus looked uncomfortable. He was sullen at first and then blurted out, "The fact is that I don't know what to say without hurting him more. I didn't care about him, I hated his existence, and I only helped him because Dumbledore forced me. If I had any affection at all, it would have been because of Lily. He was just so much like his father!" he spat.

Hermione closed her eyes. "I-I don't know what to say, Severus. You can't tell him he meant nothing to you. I think it would kill him. I think you should just graciously accept his apologies and assuage his guilt. He needs forgiveness, Severus. That is what it comes down to. Tell him you are grateful he worked hard to fight for you. Because he did, Severus," she reminded him. "Harry fought the Wizengamot fiercely to keep looking for you. Then when they shut him down, he worked and fought on your behalf to petition your portrait to be included with all the other past Headmasters and Headmistresses of Hogwarts. Just be grateful...please! Someone cared to fight for you. Recognize it, and set him free!"

Severus took her into his arms and held her tightly. "I will, Hermione. I'll do my part. I think I can find some gratitude for him. At least someone worried if my body was rotting away somewhere without a care or if I had been held prisoner. He did care that much," he whispered.

Hermione broke from him and nodded. "That's a good start."

They clasped hands and called for Eugene to come back. Hermione held her hand out for Eugene's. Together, as a family, they went to free the last of them who needed forgiveness and relief.

Ginny came out of the house and greeted them nervously. "Hermione, Severus...I-I can't tell you how happy I am you are here."

Then she fixed her eyes on Eugene and said, "You must be the little boy I've heard so much about."

"Hullo, ma'am," he whispered nervously.

Ginny placed a hand on his shoulder and leaned down to whisper to him. "I've got fresh biscuits cooling on my table. Why don't you do get some before the herd comes in and eats them all?"

Eugene smiled at the young redhead and turned to Hermione and Severus.

"Well, on with you!" Severus said urgently. "It's not everyday one gets full access to fresh biscuits!"

Eugene grinned and ran off towards the house.

Hermione looked at Ginny anxiously. "Will he be all right?"

"Oh, yes," Ginny said airily. "We've been expecting you to arrive. Come on, Hermione, looks like you have been quite busy of late," she joked as she looked at the small bulge under Hermione's robes.

Hermione and Severus sat on the porch's long bench as Ginny pulled up a chair.

She folded her hands in her lap and said softly, "Harry hasn't been well. He came back a bit upset from his trip to Grasmere. It's been difficult. He had to stop Auror Training..."

"He what?" Severus snapped.

"He had to stop Auror Training," Ginny repeated, completely unfazed by Severus' temper.

Severus got up swiftly and made his way inside. Ginny smiled weakly. "Well, I'm glad that's done with. If anyone can get Harry out of his funk, I'm sure Professor Snape can," she said, sounding more enthusiastic. "At least, he won't brook any arguments."

"Ginny," Hermione said, not knowing where to start. "Severus and I...well, we're married. We're taking in Eugene as our own, and now we have this one coming as well," she said as she patted her little bulge.

"Ron has been seeing a number of girls since you left," Ginny replied reservedly. "Mum's been after him constantly to settle down. He's just been so tied up with Auror Training; he's not been able to have time for a long-term relationship. It's going to hurt him to see you with Professor Snape."

Hermione grasped her friend's hand. "Ginny, I swear, this was not a plot against Ron. I didn't know that Severus was even alive when I left here. My leaving Ron had nothing to do with Severus. We just weren't compatible."

"I know," Ginny sighed. "But still, it will be hard. I reckon he'll live though," she said with a grin. "Hermione, I am so happy for you and the professor," she said as she hugged her friend tightly.

As the women made their peace with each other, Snape was on his way to have a chat with Mr. Potter. He walked in the house and was greeted by Molly and Arthur.

"Merlin's Beard!" exclaimed Arthur as he slowly rose up from his chair. "So, it's true. Severus Snape is among the living!"

Molly smiled as she grabbed him and hugged him fiercely. "I expect you to stay round for supper, and I'll not have a word otherwise about it!" she said bossily.

Severus stared at Eugene who was eating chocolate biscuits and gulping down milk happily while Molly tutted over his clothes and appearance. He walked in closer and heard Molly's lamenting.

"I know Hermione must have worked wonders with the both of you!" she declared. "However, if this boy is anything like you, Severus, he probably needs round the clock feeding! I'm sure Hermione does very well, but it never hurts to have an extra hand once in a while."

As she busied herself with her pots and pans, Severus leaned towards Arthur. "Who is all here?" he asked.

"Well, Ron...but he won't be home until late, and George, as well. He still can't bring himself to stay overnight in the flat over the store. Then Ginny and Harry."

"Is Mr. Potter here?" he asked delicately.

"Yes," answered Arthur, looking confused. "Up the stairs, first door on the left."

"Thank you, Arthur," he said quietly and walked up the steps cautiously.

He knocked on the door, and a low voice answered, "Come in."

Severus opened the door and saw Harry sprawled supine on the bed. He looked ragged and sickly. The room wasn't doing better either.

"Well, I don't know how your bride can bear to live in this rubbish tip," he said as he canvassed the room.

"She doesn't," replied Harry nastily. "I bet that makes you happy now. Harry Potter and his young bride are already living in separate rooms."

Severus winced at the bite in his tone. He decided to stop the animosity and just talk with the young wizard.

"Potter," he said as he came into the room closer to him. "I know why you are doing this, and it is understandable. So many things have been taken from you and so little control has been in your possession."

He came to a chair and sat across from Harry.

"I came not to gloat over your marital strife, but to talk with you. I know that you have had a difficult time with accepting your mother's relationship with me, and then all the years I watched out for you, I was a cruel bastard at the same time. It's a wonder you didn't go mad whilst in school," he said softly.

"So what do you want?" snapped Harry. "I've given you everything I have. I came to you to help you, and you threw it back in my face!"

Snape swallowed and said, "Potter, I hated that you had to be the rescuer for me. I hated being vulnerable in front of Hermione and Eugene, so I lashed out at you. I am

sorry. I truly am. If I could repeat that moment, I would. I would have enveloped you into our new family and would have been grateful for restoring to me what was mine. I know you have been tight-lipped about it, and only a select few know. I came to thank you for your discretion and your kindness."

He reached out his hand, and Harry shook it, reluctantly.

Snape took a deep breath and carried on. "I also want to tell you that I am grateful that you cared enough to search for me. Hermione told me everything...how hard you worked and suffered. I just want you to know that you did well, Potter. It wasn't your fault you couldn't find me. I wanted it that way. That's why I broke my wand. Harry, I want you to forgive yourself, for I hold nothing against you about that day."

Harry looked up at him with tears in his emerald eyes. "I never should have let you go," he whispered. "I left you there bleeding and alone. It wasn't right!"

"Potter," Severus said sternly. The younger wizard looked up at him with wide green eyes. Severus crossed his arms and looked down at the floor. It was just too much to see those eyes.

"You don't need to carry it anymore. I don't condemn you, so you needn't punish yourself anymore," he said softly as he continued to look away from him.

Harry covered his face and cried. Snape was at a loss. What was he to do with a crying man? He waited until Harry had calmed somewhat and said, "Well, let's hope this is now over, and you can put this in the past," Snape said stiffly. "Now, get back to your training! Putting your life on hold because you feel unworthy or unforgiven? That's insane, not to mention self-indulgent on a level that is far beneath anything I have ever seen in you! You can't wait for others to forgive you...forgive yourself! Now, live your life." He stood and made his way towards the door.

Harry asked, "How is Hermione?"

Severus stopped and turned around slowly. "She is well. We married and are having a child," he said, feeling embarrassed.

Harry wasn't shocked by the news. "And the boy... Eugene, right? Is he still around?"

"Yes," Snape replied. "Hermione and I will adopt him as soon as possible. He'll be going to Hogwarts in September."

Snape navigated his way out to the doorway and said sharply, "Get this room in order so your wife can rejoin you. I expect you to be back working at the Ministry and giving more attention to your wife than yourself!"

He marched out and went downstairs only to face a waiting Ronald Weasley.

Shite! he thought exasperatedly. He steadied himself for a fight. He saw Hermione out of the corner of his eye, her face red and eyes puffy. She was sniffing as if she had been crying hard. Ginny was there next to her, her face white as a sheet.

Severus was furious. That little bastard had made his wife cry *My pregnant wife!* She looked upset, and that wasn't good for her in her condition.

"Mrs. Potter," he said smoothly. "I believe your husband requires your assistance."

Ginny reluctantly left Hermione side. When she had gone to the top of the stairs, Severus turned his attention to his wife. He walked cautiously towards her.

"Hermione?" he whispered. "Are you feeling all right?" He sat next to her, ignoring Weasley, concerned with her physical state. He rubbed her stomach and kissed her temple. She drew a shaky breath and leaned into him.

"Is this how your parents raised you, Weasley? To berate and terrorize women in delicate conditions?"

"How could you, Hermione?" Ron whispered as he looked at Hermione, ignoring Snape. "After all the years we've had? The things we shared? Did it mean nothing to you to cast me aside without warning?"

"She did no such thing, you idiot!" Severus snapped at him. "She left you after breaking your engagement. Please, try to attempt at keeping a sense of continuity concerning facts."

Ron walked closer towards her. "I will never forgive you for this," he spat viciously.

"Then that will be your hardship, Ronald, not mine," she whispered quietly.

Severus looked at Weasley as the younger wizard glared sullenly at him. Severus placed an arm around his wife and said, "Let's collect the boy and be on our way. There is nothing left for us here."

Hermione nodded slowly and let Severus support her. They went into the kitchen to make their apologies to Molly and get Eugene.

Ginny and Harry came cautiously down the stairs, looking warily at the scene before them. Harry spoke up and said, "Professor, I have something left that belongs to you."

Severus turned and saw Harry hold out a long ebony wand. "My wand," he breathed. "However did you repair it?"

Harry sighed and replied, "It wasn't an easy feat, but I knew I had to do it. I took the Elder Wand from Dumbledore's Tomb one last time and repaired it. I had done the same for my own. I'm rather partial to it. I figured you might be partial to yours as well."

Severus forced himself to look into the bright green eyes before him and allowed the relief, pain, and regret wash over him. He didn't try to fight it anymore. "Thank you," he whispered as he took his wand into his hand. He closed his eyes and felt the magic within him sing. He felt better than he had in a very long time.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18 of 18

Life after Voldemort isn't as everyone thought it would be.

Chapter 18 - Epilogue

Eugene received his Hogwarts letter just as Severus and Hermione had promised. He also had become their son in the eyes of the magical world. Eugene reckoned he had no real use for the Muggle world. It had not given him any favors, except his new parents. He took the name of Eugene Severus Snape, and after Severus and Hermione had taken him to King's Cross, Hermione was ready to have the baby any day now.

"Mum," he said as Hermione brushed his hair with her fingers and slid her hands to brush out imaginary wrinkles from his crisp, new robes. "Why can't I just wait until the baby comes? I don't want to miss out," he whined.

"Eugene," Severus replied. "Either way, you would not be allowed to be a part of the process. Only husbands or adult friends of the family are allowed."

Hermione smiled at her son and kissed him on the cheek. "You'll be brilliant. And I swear I will have the headmistress collect you as soon as the baby arrives."

Eugene placed his hand on his mum's belly and whispered, "Hey, you. Don't forget you have a big brother! I'll take care of you. If you're a boy, I'll teach you wicked hexes Dad probably won't let you know about, but I'll know them because Uncle Harry's already taught me a couple! If you're a girl, I'll take care of you. Any bloke that's mean to you, just tell me, and I'll jinx him for you."

He threw his arms around his dad, and Severus squeezed him tightly. "Owl us as soon as you can. I want to know which house you're sorted."

They waved him off as the train left. Hermione turned her face into Severus' robes as she began to cry.

"I have to give him up, and we just got him," she said through her muffled cries.

Severus wrapped his arms around her and whispered, "We actually had him longer; it just hurts that he just now got to take on the family name."

Hermione nodded as she wiped her nose with her husband's proffered handkerchief.

Sunday came, and the Snapes were walking home from morning mass at the old Catholic church Hermione had been attending since she had first come to Grasmere.

Neither of them was in a good mood. First, Severus had nearly suffered a fit when Eugene owled them, letting them know he was in Gryffindor, and Hagrid was now his head of house. He had gone on for an hour-long diatribe about how Hogwarts was scraping the bottom of the barrel to have Hagrid as head of Eugene's house. He very nearly left to retrieve the boy and take him out of Hogwarts, for fear of his life, but Hermione said that it had only been a temporary position for the semester and that McGonagall was going to be on the lookout for a more proper head of house.

Secondly, Hermione was in a foul mood because it was still bloody intemperate and was not happy Severus was forcing her to walk about all the effing time! Then, there was the fact of his grousing and disrespect for Hermione's religious beliefs.

"If you think that bag of wank they sell you every week about God and Jesus is true, I believe *you* need to be taken to St. Mungo's to see if you are delusional," he spat.

Hermione had largely ignored his skepticism and his ranting because there was obviously something that was urging him to go with her each week. She rose up on Sunday and went to Mass, never once asking Severus to join her. Nevertheless, he came, and they never spoke about what he felt about religion or if he even believed in God.

But the ranting had started to wear on Hermione's nerves. When Eugene had still been with them, eager to get out of his Sunday clothes (as Hermione started ordering him to wear more decent attire for the sake of respect), he'd always dashed ahead and never heard Severus ravings.

Today, Hermione decided she'd had enough.

She stopped walking and said, "What the bloody hell is wrong with you? Why even go with me if you hate it so much. I have never asked you or forced you to join Eugene, or me, yet you stubbornly insist on going! Why?"

Severus looked around and saw they were alone. He Apparated them to Garden Cottage and led her inside. Hermione slipped off her shoes and sank into one of the dining chairs. She was nauseous, exhausted, and more than ready for this baby to be born.

Severus brought her some lemonade and took his handkerchief to dab up the sweat that had collected on Hermione's forehead and neckline. As he focused on his task, he said, "I hate that you have something that is so apart from me. I want to be a part of what you care about."

Hermione frowned. "If that were true, Severus Snape, you would then respect my feelings and stop acting so meanly about religion. I happen to find it rather comforting in having faith in a God that cares about me. It's important to me!"

Severus sat next to her, slumping down into the chair. "After everything we've been through, I still feel an emptiness, a vast hole inside me that refuses to be filled. I hate that it exists. And most of all, I resent some idea that a God can take that away," he whispered.

"What *can* take it away?" Hermione asked as she reached for his hand.

"I don't know," he whispered softly, his head bent low, hiding his face from hers.

Hermione got up. "Severus, take my hand."

"What?" he said as he looked at her.

Hermione held out her hand. "Just have faith, Severus," she said as she smiled.

She led him outside where she Apparated them to Godric's Hollow. Severus was incensed. "How dare you take such a chance on Apparating that far in your condition!" he roared.

"Severus," she replied as she led him by the arm into the nearby cemetery, "I didn't know if you knew where we were going."

She led him slowly towards James and Lily's grave site. Severus saw it ahead and shook his head. "No. I will not see this. I am resolute, Hermione," he warned her.

"What are you afraid of, Severus?" she asked him. "What frightens you so?"

"The finality of it all. I hate death. I used to wrap myself in it like a warm blanket. Now it is repulsive and... sad," he said lowly.

"There in lies the promise, Severus. Come and see," she implored him.

She led him to the grave, and Severus looked down at the tombstone that bore the names of James and Lily.

Hermione wrapped her arm tightly around Severus'. "I was here with Harry when we were on the run. He had never once seen his parents' graves. He was confused by the inscription."

Severus peered closer and read aloud, "The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death."

He snorted.

Hermione looked at him. He looked away into the distance, refusing to meet her eyes. "So fucking trite," he spat.

Hermione drew from her pocket a small bible. She turned the pages to a passage, and Severus turned his eyes sharply to her.

"Here," Hermione said. "Read."

Severus took it and read the verse Hermione pointed to. "Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live.

"Though he were dead..." he mused.

"... yet shall she live," Hermione finished.

Severus looked at Hermione and saw her bright brown eyes awash in tears.

"Death, where is thy sting?" she whispered softly.

"I don't know if I can believe this... won't it be as if I were going back into my delusion?" he asked coolly.

"No," Hermione replied. "It's hope. The hope that one day you will see her after this life has ended. There is still a chance for wrongs to be made right. Just that hope lives is life-giving!"

She looked at him pensively for any reaction.

"Hope," he repeated as his eyes drifted towards hers. "Hope is good."

"Hope is everything for people like us," she whispered. "We've lost again and again. We know we have nothing more to lose than we haven't lost already. We've been alone and frightened. Unloved, unwanted, unheard... we've lived through it. So, what can be wrong with a little hope?"

Severus wrapped his arms around his wife. "I love you," he said as he bent to kiss her chastely on the lips.

"Let's go home," she said.

"I'll Apparate, *if* you don't mind," he sneered.

Two days later, Hope Anastasia Snape was born. Hermione couldn't believe how fair she was.

"I was positive she would have come out with black hair and black eyes!" she declared.

Severus was smiling broadly in the privacy of their room. He took his daughter and held her to him.

"Little lovely," he murmured. "She will look just like her mother." He gently stroked the soft skin of her face and drank in the sight of her curly honey-brown hair and blue eyes.

"Those eyes will change," she whispered. "Look how dark they are. They'll be brown."

Eugene took his turn to hold his sister. "Why 'Hope'?" he asked his parents.

Hermione laid a tired hand on Severus' arm as she looked lovingly at him. "It was your father's idea," she whispered. "Hope, meaning, obviously, *hope*, and Anastasia was the name of a saint. It means, 'to rise again.'"

Hope started to cry, and Hermione sat up to feed her. Eugene excused himself to get a drink from the cafeteria.

"It's impossible not to believe in second chances when I look at her," Severus whispered as he watched his wife feed their daughter.

"It's good not having to worry about what others might say or think, isn't it?" Hermione asked.

"Mmm," he replied. "I never thought I would escape from the hell inside my head or rid myself of the need to be accepted and forgiven. Now I have been. Three times over." He looked into Hermione's face and kissed her lips tenderly, delicately savoring her bottom lip for a moment as he released her.

"Three times?" she whispered.

"First came Eugene, then you, and now our daughter. I've been more than forgiven. I've been blessed."

~The End~