

Raven

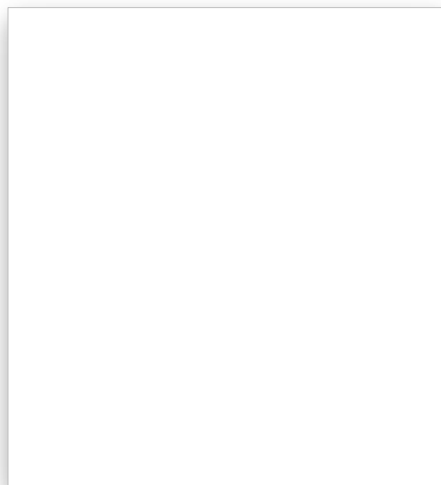
by gersknightlady

Having fled the Wizarding World Hermione comes face to face with her past.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 63

Having fled the Wizarding World Hermione comes face to face with her past.



Hermione walked the dirty, back street in London. It had been nearly four months since the war had ended, and she had turned her back on the wizarding community. She couldn't face that world anymore because nearly all the people she loved were gone. The people who had made that world so enjoyable and enticing were gone. Harry had fallen moments after Voldermort's destruction. Though he lived, he was much like Neville's parents, lying in a bed unable to communicate or even feed himself. Ron was dead; he'd been killed by enemy spells. Her parents had been murdered in their house, victims of revenge at the hands of Voldermort's few surviving followers. That had been the last straw. Hermione had walked out of the house and with a flick of her wand had set it on fire. Everything she'd known was gone. She looked and dressed like a chimney sweep. Few people even gave her a glance. She'd stuffed her wand in a rocky crevasse in a field down the road from her home and had not looked back.

She lived in a shack and did odd jobs to keep food on her table. Not much at that, since her clothes hung on her. She was turning into an alley when she noticed a man draped in filthy black robes stumble away from a trashcan. She stayed back in a doorway to avoid contact. She seldom talked to anyone these days.

An alley cat came up to the man and rubbed itself against his legs.

The man screamed out, "Get out of here you mangy cat!"

He stumbled on seriously weakened legs and fell with a crash to the ground. He lay in a heap.

Hermione immediately found herself alert. *'That voice... it was impossible. No one else could have a voice like that. It was a voice from her past - but a voice of the dead.'*

The man groaned in pain as he struggled to sit.

Hermione was drawn out of her hiding place. She inched her way closer trying to get a look at his face.

The man's filthy hair hung to his shoulders and covered his face in greasy strands.

She found herself standing over him. "Do you need help?" she surprised herself by saying.

"I need no one," he growled. "Leave me."

The words were harsh, but the voice was music to her ears.

"Professor Snape? Is that you?" she whispered.

"What are you bleedin' on about, girl? People call me Raven."

Hermione reached down, pulled at his arm, and with difficulty, got him to his feet. In the dim light, his hair fell back, and she saw Snape's face looking down at her.

"It is you!"

"Don't know no Snape. Now if you'll unhand me, I will be on my way."

The odor about him nearly staggered her, and she cringed but held on tight. Despite his protest, he was resting most of his weight on her. She knew he would have fallen again had he tried to move away.

The young witch had the arm that would have had the Dark Mark. She ignored his protest and pushed up his torn, dirty sleeve.

There it was. This was Professor Snape. But he had died, hadn't he? She'd seen him bleeding. She'd never gone back to the Shrieking Shack.

"Let me help. Come with me. I can get you food," she offered.

"Don't need food, need a bottle!" he said, pulling away and promptly falling to the ground again.

"I have one at home. I'll share it with you."

He turned his face up to her and sneered. "Why would you want to do that? Are you planning to kill me? Perhaps you're a cannibal."

She snorted at him, "If I was, I sure wouldn't try eating a filthy, rubbery, old buzzard like you."

"Ha," he snorted. "Why then?"

"You are Severus Snape. Don't you know that?"

"I'm Raven. That's what they call me," he repeated.

"Don't you know who you are?"

"Raven," he insisted.

"Come on then, Raven," she said, pulling him back to his feet. "You need help. I promise I have that bottle."

"Crikey, I'm shattered." He groaned, leaning even harder on her.

With great difficulty and nearly more energy than she had, she nearly dragged him down the alley and through the next two before she came to the door of her shack. They both practically fell in the door. She dragged herself to the side, or he would have landed on top of her. She fell in a heap next to him and felt herself blacking out.

Thanks so much to Becky for the photo tag.

Chapter 2

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Having fled the wizarding world, Hermione comes face to face with her past.

Hermione became aware of an odor so powerful it burned her nose and throat. She forced her eyes open and found her nose inches away from Snape's hooked nose.

"Ughh," she cried, turning away and retching.

She crawled up into the only chair in the room. She hugged herself and tried to breathe air in to calm her stomach.

"I should have left him in that alley," she said aloud to herself.

Yet somehow this foul, evil man brought a hope to her that she hadn't had in months. He was familiar and powerful. He was a Potions master as well, so he could help Harry. But what had happened to him? Did he really not know who he was? If that was true, maybe the tiny bit of an idea forming in her mind would be for naught.

He was coming to. He growled and dragged himself to his feet. When he saw her, he stared for a minute, his face puzzled as if searching for a memory. Then he spat, "The bottle."

She got to her feet, went past him, and pulled open the door to a wood-splintered cabinet. She grasped a half-filled bottle she'd found in a trash can several blocks from home.

She moved toward him, and he leaned over and snatched it from her hand. He pulled the cork off and downed half of it in a single gulp. Then he grabbed at a filthy rag he had wound around his neck. He pulled the rag loose, and Hermione gasped. There were raw puncture wounds on his neck. He poured the whiskey on the wound and screamed from the pain.

"Are those the wounds that Nagini inflicted on you? They still aren't healed?"

"Nagamy? What's that?" he groaned as he rewrapped the wounds. "Whiskey kills the pain for awhile."

"I can get you some help. If you will stay here, I will come back with something that will help those wounds."

He eyed her suspiciously. "Who would help you... some rich woman on the street?" He laughed roughly, startling her.

She'd never heard Snape laugh, and it was a horrible, nasty laugh. "I have a friend who will help," she lied. "Will you stay?"

"Why would you want to help me? I'm just filth. I git told that nearly everyday."

"You don't remember me, but I remember you, Raven. I know who you are. I can help you regain your memory."

"I'm this Snape fellow?" he asked, struggling to his feet. He moved only a few feet and then slumped down on the edge of her cot. "Does he have money?"

"I don't know. We weren't exactly friends."

"Then why help me? What's in it for you."

"I have a friend who needs help. You have specific skills that could help him."

"Ah, you want to use ole Raven. That I understand."

"Not use. I help you, and you help me."

"Every one uses Raven, mostly for kicking practice," he said, rubbing his ribs.

"Are you hurt?" she asked, moving closer.

He reached out and grabbed her, pulling her close. "I know what you could do for me," he said, sneering nastily; one hand was groping her breast.

She kneed him in the groin, and he gagged, releasing her. "Don't you ever touch me again!" she screamed into his face.

"You didn't have to do that!" His yell was furious.

"Then don't touch me!"

He held up his hand and lurched to his feet. "I'm out of here, you witch." He grabbed the door and pulled it open.

"I can get you more whiskey, and you won't have to beg for it."

"You're crazy, woman." He turned back nevertheless.

She could see the hunger in his eyes. He was an alcoholic. The drink was all he craved right now. She had no doubt Snape had been fond of drink, but she'd never thought of him as alcoholic. It hurt her to see him like this.

"Will you stay if I go get some more?"

"Get it!" he demanded, sitting back on the cot.

Hermione slid past him out of arm's reach, and he laughed nastily as she closed the door behind her. She had no clue how or where to get the bottle. Foraging seldom yielded bottles of whiskey.

Then it hit her: her wand. She could transform a bottle of water, and he wouldn't know the difference. She stood still for a moment. Did she want to return to that world? Did she want to drag this horrible man with her? Maybe he was better off not remembering who he was. But he had been formidable. He had been powerful, and she could not leave him this ruined, despicable man. Whatever Snape had been as a Death Eater and then as a spy for Dumbledore, he had not been this disgusting. And maybe he would be able to help Harry. He knew Voldemort's powers better than anyone. He might know what the curse was and how to break it. All the best Healers had known was that it was a dark curse different from the one suffered by the Longbottoms even though the results were similar.

Returning to the fringe of the world of magic might help all three of them. If she could just stand to be near him. With her wand, she could make him do anything. She turned and took off down the alley. It would take time to reach the field she had hidden her wand in. She only hoped it was still there.

She was not there to see Raven slip from the door and head away. "Trollop. I'm not waiting for her," he said.

Chapter 3

Having fled the Wizarding world, Hermione comes face to face with her past.

Hermione tried to go as quickly as possible, but she hadn't been eating right. She didn't have the energy to run, and it seemed much further away than she remembered. She'd been closed up inside herself for so long that she was barely making herself work enough to eat ... and sometimes not even that. She wandered the alleys looking in rubbish heaps for things to sell at the local pawn shop. There were so many people like her in this part of London that there was seldom a good find. As she headed toward her wand and what might be a different kind of life, she began to feel excited for the first time in months. The darkness that had seemed to clutch at every thought slipped away a bit, and she noticed the air was warmer and fresher. The sun was out, and it felt good.

Coldness and darkness had been her hiding place for so long. She had been destroyed when Ron was found dead on the battlefield and Harry was unable to communicate. It was like her two arms had been cut off, and she had nowhere to go. Then a few weeks later she had come home to find both her parents dead, lying like broken rag dolls in the middle of the living room with a Death Eaters mask on top of them. She felt nothing but the need to run as fast as she could possibly go. Magic had destroyed her life, and she had wanted nothing to do with it.

Could magic now rebuild what she had lost? It could never return all she'd lost, but maybe she could salvage the very best of what there was: Harry Potter. Didn't he deserve a life of peace, love, and freedom? He'd given their world a whole new start, and he was not able to enjoy his success. Not that he wanted the glory; he just wanted a family to love him. And Hermione knew Ginny was as devastated as she was. Ginny sat by his bed, everyday, and told him about what was happening in her life. But how long would that last? One day, Ginny would realize how useless it was, and she would move on. If she could discover a way to help Snape, he might, in turn, help Harry. She knew it was a long shot. The man had appeared to hate Harry. But the memories Snape had shared with Harry had been reviewed days after the war ended, and he had been proven a faithful Order of the Phoenix member who had sacrificed his life to help Harry ultimately defeat Voldemort.

Inside that horrible wreck of a wizard was an honorable man. Somehow she had to bring him back. He also had a right to some peace in his life. She couldn't imagine anyone ever loving that one.

Hermione continued to retrace the steps she had taken months ago and soon spotted the rocky crag. She prayed the wand was still there. She stood staring down at the little indentation in the rock and then reached a shaking hand into the crevasse. Her hand felt the smooth rod before she even touched it. It was like a welcome home feeling, and she grasped the wand and drew it out. Why had she thought she could leave it behind? She felt some of her energy return. She moved her hand back and forth, swinging the wand here and there.

She tried a simple cleansing spell and found herself standing in clean clothing ... rags nonetheless, but still clean. She nearly preened. How could she have let herself go so far down? She turned and fled back to the city and Raven.

Hermione threw open the door to her shack and stood staring at the empty room. The long-drained bottle lay on the floor. She set it up and with a flick of her wand filled it. If he came back, the bottle would be there as promised. She rummaged in a box and found a crust of bread; with a wave of her wand, it became a loaf of fresh bread. She chewed on it hungrily. Transfiguration had always been a talent of hers.

She put on her dirty cloak to help her blend in with the rest of the homeless and headed back out into the now cold evening.

Hermione retraced her steps back to the alley where she had found Snape, but he wasn't there. Very quietly and with as much stealth as she could muster, she slipped in and out of alleys all over the area. It must have been midnight before she trudged wearily back to her shack alone.

There, sitting against her door, was Raven. He had blood running down the side of his face from a head wound. He groaned when she slipped an arm under his and dragged him to his feet enough to get him inside the door.

Once the door was closed, Hermione used her wand to levitate him to the bed. Before touching him again, she used the same cleansing spell she had used on herself. She grinned, realizing she had wanted to do that to him for years. Cleaned up he didn't look too much different from the man she had known. He actually looked better with his hair longer. She could understand why people called him Raven, with his black hair, robes, and piercing black eyes. She examined the wound and found it to be superficial. She used a cloth and some of the whiskey to clean the wound up. He still hadn't regained consciousness, and she wondered if he had a concussion.

She sat back in her only chair and watched Raven sleep. Even with her wand, she couldn't do anything for him. Superficial cleansing might help the pain of the wound. She needed help, and she needed potions. Then an idea occurred to her. He had a house at Spinner's End. It had only been a few months. Maybe no one had done anything with it. She had never heard of living relatives. She could take Snape by Side-Along Apparition, and they could stay there. She couldn't imagine a Potions master's home without a supply of potions. And maybe the familiar sights would help his memory return. She knew it might be a bit of a taxing journey. She decided to take what little money she had for rent and go get them some kind nourishing food.

She put a Full Body Bind on Raven, as she had decided to call him for now. She did not want to come back and find him gone. She knew it was late but a few taverns in the area sold a kind of gruel that would help strengthen them. She purchased the food and returned to the shack to find Raven staring wide-eyed at the door when she walked through.

"Witch, what have you done to me?" he roared, struggling against the invisible ropes.

"You got that right!" She laughed at him, and it made him pause.

"You're a witch?"

"Yes, and you're a wizard. You just don't remember."

"Me, a wizard!" He laughed, and it was an ugly, grating sound.

She raised her wand. "Did you have a stick with you when you woke ... something like this?" She held her polished wand up for him to see.

His eyes widened. "I did."

"What did you do with it?" she asked anxiously.

"I tried to sell it, but I was laughed at." He struggled again against his binds.

"I will let you go if you promise to not leave and not to try to touch me."

He nodded.

She flourished her wand and released the Petrificus Totalus.

He groaned as he was released, and his hand absently rubbed at his shoulder. "I use it to hold up the flap on my box when I need air."

"Box?" she asked, going to the table and placing the bowl of gruel on it. She found another bowl and dumped half the stew-like substance into it, dropped a spoon into it,

and held it out to him.

"My home is a box." He grabbed the bowl like a starving man and shoveled a couple of spoonfuls into his mouth. She supposed he had been starving.

"The wand ... " she prompted.

"It's under the rags in the corner of the box."

"Aren't you afraid someone will take it?"

"Nah, no one messes with ole Raven. They know I jus' as soon cut out their heart than look at them."

He had an evil glint in his eye, and it made her shiver.

He grinned, taking pleasure in her discomfort.

"You have no idea what I could do to you with this little stick," she said.

He drew back a little; he was ready to believe her since he'd awoken unable to move.

She was glad to see he was a bit afraid of her. She had no intention of letting him mess with her again. She planned to stay ahead of him at least one step.

"We have to go retrieve your wand and anything else you may have had with you."

"I only have two small, empty bottles," he said between bites of the food. Some dribbled down his chin, and she looked away.

"Potion bottles?" she observed. "Hmmm, maybe that would explain why you're alive. You could have taken an antidote and Blood-Replenishing Potion. I can tell you for certain when I see them. We need to go," she said.

"Now tonight? Them's that clubbed me could still be out there." He rubbed his sore head.

"What did you do?" she demanded.

"I only wanted the bottle. They didn't have to hurt me. I would have gone away." His eyes suddenly blurred with tears.

Chapter 4

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Having fled the wizarding world, Hermione comes face to face with her past.

Hermione was astonished the man had feelings. "Why'd you come back here? I thought you hated me."

"Yo'se the only one who has shown Raven any kindness, and I thought maybe you might have found the bottle. My neck is a hurting something fierce."

"I will give you enough to stop the pain for the moment, but we have to go retrieve the wand. Then I'll let you have more."

She poured a bit from the bottle into a small tin cup and handed it to him. He snatched it and downed half of it. Then, as before, he poured the rest right on the wound.

Unsteadily, he led her through several alleys before they came upon a ruined warehouse. A cardboard box city, complete with occupants, was inside. Candles lit the darkness, casting eerie light on the ruined humans who lived there. They eyed her suspiciously and called out nasty remarks about Raven bringing a whore home for the night. The place made her skin crawl, and she urged him into the darkness until he stopped before a box in the back corner.

She whispered a concealment charm and then lit the tip of her wand so she could peer down into the box. It contained mostly filthy rags and stained blankets. He had a bent tin cup and an empty bottle or two. There was a tiny wooden block with a half burned candle stuck to it and a couple of ruined books. One of them was *The Hobbit* and the other was about Merlin. She glanced at him.

Raven shrugged. "Escapes," was all he said. He crawled into the box, fished around in the corner, and came out with the wand.

Hermione snatched it from him. She sighed when she ran her hand over it. It was still whole and in perfect condition. She'd seldom touched anyone's wand, but this one seemed to warm in her hand, and she was surprised to find it obeyed her whispered command to light.

"Well, looky there, it's magic, too." He reached out for it, and she sent a stinging charm out the tip. He drew back his hand as if it had been burned.

"Hey, that's mine," he protested.

"When you understand what it is and how to use it, I'll give it back, I promise. You play around with it, and you could kill yourself."

He harrumphed, but he didn't say anything.

"Get whatever you want from that filthy mess. You won't be coming back here."

"Suppose I don't want to go."

"Look, Raven, I know you don't know me, but I used to respect you a great deal. You need help to return to the wizard you were. I need your help when you get there. Trust me, and I will take care of you."

Raven looked around the dark building and surveyed the filthy occupants. He dug down into the corner of the box and brought out the two little potion bottles and slipped them into a pocket. Then he started to gather up a dirty blanket.

"Leave it. I can get clean ones."

He nodded and gathered the two worn books. Then he looked at her as if she might make him leave those, too.

"Books are great friends," she said.

He nodded stonily, hugging them to him. As they moved away from his box, he growled to the group at large, "So long, scallywags."

"Hey, Raven," a voice called from the darkness, "are you leavin any food behind?"

Hermione grabbed his arm and whispered, "Yes." She sent a transfiguration spell backwards toward his box, and it was filled with bread.

He looked at her wide eyed and said, "Yes, it all yours. Share."

They didn't talk until they had returned to her shack. Then he verbally pounced, "What are you livin like this fur if you can do stuff like that? This all a disguise?" he waved his hand around the bleak room.

"No. The world that spit you out with no memory took the people I loved away. I couldn't stay there, and I vowed to never go back. I didn't care what happened."

"You're pinnen a lot of hope on my rememberin," he said.

"Yes," she said, suddenly weary to the bone. "Why do you talk like that? You're an extremely educated man."

He smiled. "It's easier to blend in. I guess it's become a habit."

She realized that when his smile wasn't evil, it kind of made his face handsome.

He raised an eyebrow at her, and she shook her head with fatigue. "Look, Raven, I've got to get some sleep. I can bind you again, or you can promise not to leave."

"Where would I go? This is better than a cardboard box."

She turned and used her wand to transform the chair into another cot. Then she got a blanket from a box in the corner. With a wave of her wand, it became a down-filled cover. She did the same to his blanket.

It felt good to perform the magic. Inside she felt another surge of energy envelope her.

"Can I have more whiskey?" he asked.

As she crawled into her bed, she pointed to the bottle. "It's yours; you held to the bargain. I can help you heal those wounds, and you should consider leaving off the drink. I know the man you used to be probably drank, but I don't think he was so dependant."

"It's dulls the pain. You have idea what these wounds feel like."

"I'm sorry. I really can't do anything tonight. But if we go tomorrow, depending on what we find, I may be able to help then. There are wizarding doctors that could help. But then people would know who you are, and you'd never have a moment of peace."

"Why would people know me and care what I do?"

"You're a war hero, Raven," she said. She set a light ward around her bed, something that might alert her if he got to close, but nothing he could see.

"Hero? That's a darn fool notion," he stated, slipping back into the bad English.

"Nevertheless, that's who you are. We both have enemies. Until we restore your memories and abilities, it is safer to hide from people."

"Tell me ..."

"I'm exhausted; go to sleep. We will talk more about this tomorrow." She turned her back to him and pulled the blanket over her head.

Stunned, he sat there cradling the bottle in his hand. This morning he'd woken in a box on dirty blankets. Tonight he was sitting on a cot in a "house" and had a bottle in his hands. He wasn't alone; he was amazed that she could turn her back on him just by his word. This Snape fellow must have been someone she could trust. But he'd already proven to her once today he couldn't be trusted, and she still went to sleep. He could run out the door and lose himself so deep in the city she might never find him. Yet something made him stay where he was seated.

He looked down at his hand with the bottle and glanced again at his clothes. He was still in his rags, but somehow she'd cleaned him. It must have been with the magic stick. What had she called it? Oh, yes, a wand. And he'd had one, too. Life on the streets with no memory had been hell. She was giving him an option. She moaned softly and turned toward him. In the dim light of the moon that was coming through the window, he studied her face and realized she was a young woman. Now that she was clean, he could see her soft, creamy skin and reddish, curly hair. Thick lashes lay against her cheeks, and as he watched a tear squeezed out her eye and slid down her cheek.

He stood and moved forward about to offer some comfort when she whispered, "Harry." It somehow felt like he'd been slapped, and he backed away, grabbed up the bottle and downed its entire contents, splashing only a tiny bit on the rags at his neck.

The alcohol dulled his mind, and he sprawled across the cot and fell asleep.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 63

Hermione flees the wizarding world only to come face to face with her past.

When Hermione opened her eyes, she was facing Raven's cot. He was sprawled out with one leg and one arm hanging off. The empty bottle had rolled from his hand and was halfway to her cot. She groaned and got to her feet. She used her wand to clean herself because there was no shower in the shack. She'd allowed herself to become jaded and had not cared whether she'd showered in weeks. Occasionally, she'd go to a local shelter and clean up, but it wasn't often.

She used her wand to clean the shack and transform the rest of the cabinetry to look nicer. She wouldn't be here after today, but she could at least leave it nice for the incoming tenant. She went out the back door and used the outhouse. When she came back, Raven was just sitting up. He was groaning and clutching at his head.

"You got something for this pain?" he complained.

"Nope, not a thing. I told you: You need to give up the drink."

"Doesn't usually bother me much," he said, groaning.

"That was a bit stronger than your usual watered-down stuff. Enchanted whiskey is always of the finest vintage."

"You created that with that 'wand.'" He looked at her with new interest. "You got to teach me that one."

"That one you can know when you get your memory back. Now, please see to your morning ablutions, and I will pack what little I have here in a bag. We can be on our way."

"Where are we going?" he asked, getting to his feet and heading toward the back door.

"To your house."

He stopped and turned toward her. "I've got a house?"

"I understand it's not much — a hovel left to you by your parents."

"They're dead then. I always wondered if I had a family."

"Sorry, Raven. I think they are all dead."

He turned back to the door and went out. She noted the sagging in his shoulders. Again, she was surprised the man had feelings. He was human after all. What kind of man had Snape been besides that which he had allowed people to see? She had been so grossed out by him, filthy and drunk as he was, that she didn't think how hard it must have been for him waking in the city not knowing who he was. The poisons from the snakebite must have fogged his memory. Maybe he had tried to Apparate away from the Shrieking Shack and had only made it half way. Even with the Blood-Replenishing Potion and the antidote, he would have still been in terrible condition. It was a wonder he hadn't splinched himself. Maybe the result had been his impaired mind. She hoped he had books on mind-repairing drugs at his house so she could help him. When he returned, she realized helping him would be enough even if nothing could be done for Harry. His work and unselfishness had been hidden, so he'd taken abuse from people and never complained.

"What's your name, girl?"

"Hermione."

"Hermione, that's an odd one." He stood looking at her and then asked, "How old are you? You're nothing but a girl."

"I turned 18 a few weeks ago — though 17 is of age in our community."

"And me, how old am I?" he asked, looking intently into her eyes.

"I don't really know, Raven. My friend Harry's parents went to school with you. You were in the same year. They would have been 41 or 42 if they had lived."

Harry, this was the same name she'd mentioned last night in her sleep.

"This Harry, is he a boyfriend?" He felt the old dread that his mind somehow associated with that name.

She saw the guarded look in his eye and wondered what he was thinking. "No, he's my best friend. You always seemed to hate him. Yet you were a spy for our side in order to help him. None of us understood what you had to live through to do that until after you were gone."

Best friend; that somehow made him feel relieved. "What was I to you? How do you know me besides this spy fellow?"

She laughed. "You were my greasy git of a Potions master."

He raised an eyebrow. "Not very nice, are ye?"

"You were never nice to me either, Raven. Our relationship hasn't been a good one. I've known you nearly 8 years now. You were my Potions professor."

"Me, a teacher? Was I any good?"

"Cruel, hard as nails, and absolutely brilliant," she said, respect evident in her voice.

"Potions? What is that?"

"You taught us how to make medications for pain and healing and potions that would make others do your bidding. Potion making is a very difficult skill, and only a master can teach it to others."

He pushed the hair back from his face. "I can't imagine teaching kids. Kids make my life hell here."

"According to you, we did the same thing at school. I don't think you liked teaching, but the man who hired you is the one you spied for."

"Where is he?"

"He's dead," she said. "We don't have time to talk. I think we should get on our journey."

"Is it far? I'm not sure I can make it too far. I may need another bottle."

"It's far enough, but I can use magic to get us there. It might not be very comfortable; but if you close your eyes and hold on tight to my arm, we will be there in no time. Just remember to breathe once we get there."

He looked fearful; but when she'd collected the fabric bag she'd put the few things she owned in, he took her arm and she Apparated them out of there.

She materialized in front of his house. It was a tall, two-story brick surrounded with a thick yard of trees and vines, so they weren't seen from the street.

Raven staggered away from her and put his head down toward his knees. "What the hell was that?"

"Breathe," she said. "Apparition can take some getting used to, and I haven't been able to do it for very long."

The house was warded, and it took her an hour to realize that she couldn't break through them. "Raven, you put protections on your house. Things I can't break through. Maybe if you simply try to open the door, the house will recognize you and let us in."

He looked at her skeptically but went toward the door. It was a rounded-top door like one would find in a cottage. He reached out and took hold of the doorknob and turned it. It opened. He laughed. "I guess it knows me."

She nodded, relieved. "I guess it does. Let's get inside."

They entered through the dark door into a tiny sitting room. The furniture was old and worn, yet she smiled at the room because the walls were covered with bookshelves overflowing with books of all kinds. Books sat on the coffee tables and end tables and were piled into corners.

Raven, having followed her, exclaimed, "Crikey! That's a mass of books."

"It sure is. Maybe there will be something that can help both you and Harry in them."

"You like books?" he asked.

"Yes, Raven, I like them very much — as much as you do. Though I never found a book I wanted to keep since I left this world."

"It's kind of a shabby house, by some standards; but when one's lived in a box, it's like a castle."

"It's not bad," she said. They seared through the room and found several hidden doors. She found a small kitchen at the back. Another door opened to a staircase that went upstairs where they discovered two small bedrooms and a bathroom.

One bedroom had a four poster with drapes much like those at Hogwarts, and there were deep green drapes with gold hanging cords. The Slytherin symbol of the snake hung down at the end.

"The snake, I've seen this before in dreams."

"You were the head of one of the houses at Hogwarts, the school you taught at. That's the symbol of your house."

"I had a memory?" He seemed pleased.

"Why don't you come in and look around. Maybe something else will seem familiar," she encouraged.

Raven moved into the room.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 63

Hermione flees the Wizarding world and comes face to face with her past.

He picked up a small wooden dog from a dresser top and held it in his hands. "Seems familiar, can't think though."

"It's probably a toy from your childhood ... though I can't imagine Snape keeping toys."

Hermione looked around in interest. She used her wand to light several lamps around the room, and a warm glow filled the room. She then used her wand to clean away months of dust and stuffy air."

Raven didn't say anything. He just watched with a surprised look on his face and maybe some envy.

He found a framed photo of himself as a younger man with a stern-looking man and woman.

Hermione watched as he ran his fingers over the faces, and the creases on his forehead deepened.

"Not a very happy bunch, were we?"

"No, Raven. Your father was a Muggle, and your mom was a witch. I don't think he knew until after they were married, and he quite hated her for it."

"Muggle?"

"Non-magic people, ordinary humans. My parents were Muggles, just so you know. A lot of magic folks have nothing against Muggles. There were some who hated them, and that's one of the reasons we had the war. The man you were aligned with on the evil side wanted to purge our world of all half-breed and non-magically parented people. He was a monster."

"Then how did he allow me to be his follower?"

"You were brilliant with mind control and kept that fact from him, I guess. You were in the inner circle. That's what made you such a valuable spy for Dumbeldore. He was your only friend and the only person to believe you had changed. He trusted you."

"This Dumbeldore is dead."

"Yes."

"How?"

She looked him in the eye. "You killed him."

"What?" He seemed to shrink inward like he'd been sucker punched in the gut.

She saw his eyes fill with tears, and he backed away and fled the room.

Feeling guilty because she'd hurt him, she ran after him. She caught up with him in the sitting room heading for the front door.

She grabbed at his arm, and he shocked her by turning and pulling her into a strong shuddering hug. As she stood there in his arms and felt his chin resting against the top of her head, she felt him shaking from head to foot. He didn't cry, but she could feel his pain. His deep sadness and fear overwhelmed her.

After a few minutes, she realized how comforting his arms were. She hadn't been held or soothed since her parents' death. She'd rarely allowed herself to cry over them. Suddenly the dam on her own emotions broke, and she clung to him. She didn't know how long she cried, but when she returned to coherent thought, she felt him softly stroking her hair and whispering softly to her.

She stiffened and tried to draw away. He held her tightly a moment longer and then let her go. "I guess we both needed a bit of comfort."

She nodded and turned her face away from him. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to freak out on you. The whole running away thing and losing my parents suddenly got to me."

"I'm the murderer of a best friend."

"More like a father," she corrected him.

"A father," he whispered. "In my box, I was only a drunk and maybe an old Hippie biker guy. Now I'm the murderer of a friend ... maybe my only one."

"I'm sorry, Raven. I was being cruel. You did kill him, and I hated you for it. But a few days after the war, we discovered Professor Dumbledore asked you to kill him. Voldemort ordered a school boy to kill Dumbledore, and Dumbledore would not allow that to happen. He was dying from a curse, and it was getting to a stage that was very painful. To save you from a vow you had made to protect the boy and to allow you to continue your work, he felt he had to die. In choosing the time of death, it gave him some peace knowing he would not suffer the end of the curse. You released him from his pain, and you showed the deepest love you probably have known in your life by doing that."

He took her by the arm, and they went to the couch. He pushed her down and went to a table that held some glasses and a decanter of what he thought might be whiskey. He poured a couple small glasses, handed her one, and then took a gulp. The liquid burned like fire down his throat. "Ye, gads!" he cried. "What the hell was that?"

She smiled through her tears and said, "Firewhiskey. A good brand at that." She sipped her drink, and it helped to clear her head.

"Wizarding whiskey?" he asked, taking another small sip.

"Yep. Wizards know their drink. You could drink this all day and it wouldn't get you drunk unless you want it to."

He looked down at the glass. "How would it know?"

"It's sort of a finely brewed potion with charms added. It works with the centers of a person's brain. If they are just out for social drinking and have no need to escape their lives, it will just be a drink. If someone is so depressed that they need to forget for a while, they will get mighty drunk."

"Well, that seems like a plan." He grabbed the bottle and headed up the stairs.

She sighed and sat for a bit trying to collect her wits. She couldn't stop thinking about how comfortable she'd been when he'd held her. He wasn't that same man she'd known. Was she doing right by him, trying to return his memories? Maybe he had been better off not remembering what he'd done to Dumbledore. She mentally kicked herself for causing him pain.

Would remembering all of it be in his best interest? Perhaps not; but he was Harry's only hope, and she could not let the idea go that Snape could save him. She busied herself by using her wand to clean the place from floor to ceiling.

She found a good supply of staples in the kitchen and made some food. She took some bread and soup up to Snape's room and found him dead drunk on the bed. She placed the tray down on the bedside dresser and covered him up. Asleep, the lines of pain and worry no longer creased his face, and he looked younger. His long hair was splayed on the pillow, and she reached out to smooth it down. It was surprisingly soft.

She'd never felt close to this man, but today she felt they'd shared their pain together and somehow that had brought them closer.

Although she would have loved to have sat and looked at some of the books, Hermione spent the rest of the evening cleaning the house. The bottom bedroom had probably been his parents'. It looked like no one had gone in there in 25 years. She used Scourgify on it and backed out. So far she'd found a downstairs bathroom with tub and a small one upstairs with a shower. She tried the water, and it worked; but it was in terrible condition. She used magic to make it usable.

She decided to sleep in the room across from Raven's. It had a bed with thick, red drapes. Once it was clean, she found it was quite nice. The closet held a number of robes; it had probably been an extra closet for his parents as she found both male and female robes. She cleaned and altered a few to fit her, dressed in a night robe, and slipped into bed. It was like heaven. She had not been in a full featherbed and down comforter in months. What seemed like heaven last night was far eclipsed this night. She fell into the deepest sleep she'd had in years.

Hermione woke to the sound of birds outside and a healthy warm ray of sun touching her face. She lay under the covers listening and heard the door across the hall open. She heard Raven groan as he went toward the bathroom. She giggled quietly. *Serves you right*, she thought.

She heard the shower kick on and thought, *At least I don't have to make him bathe*. She was glad she'd left a bunch of clean towels there for him to use.

She got up and brushed her hair and decided to go downstairs to use the bathroom. As she came out the door, she nearly collided with Raven. She put her hand out to steady herself and came in contact with warm, bare flesh.

She looked up into his eyes and saw them widen with surprise. She glanced down at her hand and realized her hand was pressed to his bare chest. And what a chest it was: a thick sprinkle of dark hair and finely chiseled muscles. There were scars, but they did not distract from the strength of it. How'd he kept his body in shape as lazy and drunk as he was? He was wrapped only in a towel. She glanced back up at him and saw him grin. It was not an evil, nasty grin but one of amusement.

"Sorry," she stammered.

"My pleasure, Hermione," he whispered into her hair, his voice thick and sexy as he slid past.

She felt the heat rise in her face, and she fled. She heard him laugh behind her as his door shut.

She ran down the stairs and into the bathroom. She closed and warded the door behind her as she gulped for air. She was shocked at her reaction to him. Gads, he looked good. She'd had no idea. He'd always been enveloped in layers and layers of robes. He looked younger than she expected and damn sexy. With his long, black hair free

and hanging down his back and over his shoulders, he looked almost like a Native American from a Hollywood movie.

She shook her head. No, she could not allow herself to think of him like that. Was she insane? If she did return him to what he was before the war, he would as likely spit on her than do anything else.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 63

Hermione flees the Wizarding world and comes face to face with her past.

Thank you to all who have written reviews. I hope you enjoy this next chapter. A special Thank You to Lisa my Beta who has been doing a great job, also the ladies of TPP for all their help.

Hermione was in the kitchen when Raven came down the stairs. He stood in the doorway for a minute before she screwed up the courage to look up at him. Then she gasped, turning red at her reaction.

He was clean-shaven, and his hair was tied back. He was wearing black pants and a white, button-down shirt with the top buttons open. A tantalizing bit of dark hair was visible through the gap in the shirt. Only the clean, white bandage at his neck marred his visage.

He grinned at her and then let her off the hook by saying good-naturedly, "It feels good to be really clean. I assume the clothes are mine. I found them in the closet."

"You look nice, Raven."

She turned away, fighting the heat in her face. This might be difficult if he was going to look so darn sexy every minute.

"Come get some breakfast."

She waved him toward the small table in the corner nook, and he smiled and took a seat. She placed a bowl of oatmeal with some dried fruit on the top in front of him. There was a small dish of bread next to it.

"Sorry, there isn't milk to add to it."

"It looks good. Your robe looks nice. Did you find that here?" he asked. She looked amazing: clean, her hair tamed down. Her face was beautiful without makeup. She was young, but he could see a maturity about her. This was a woman...not a child.

"I found the robe in the closet upstairs. I hope you don't mind. I have no idea whose it was. I altered its size a bit."

"It makes no difference to me. Take what you want. I don't quite feel like it's mine either," he said and began spooning the cereal into his mouth.

She got her bowl and sat opposite him.

"The pantry is full of staples. You kept the place well supplied. We have enough to last for weeks before we might need to go out."

"Did you find any of the potions you expected? This wound is really starting to sting, and I hate to pour whiskey on it since I just bathed."

"No, I'm sorry. I know they have to be somewhere. My thought is there maybe a hidden entrance to a basement."

"Can't you use that wand of yours to detect it?" he asked, biting into his bread.

"I can, but I wanted you close in case it resists. You were able to open the door with no problem. Maybe you can do that with the basement door."

After they had finished their food, they went into the sitting room and carefully examined the walls and bookshelves. Hermione was excited as her eyes and fingers registered all the books she touched. She pulled each one out to see if there was a lever behind it. She could have pulled up a chair and read for hours, but they had other priorities. She did have to take some time to douse Raven's wounds with whiskey because the pain was getting to him. He never complained as she worked on him.

"You seem different, not the...." She paused.

"... animal I was," he filled in for her.

She nodded, too embarrassed to speak.

"I felt like an animal. Here it's easier to let that persona slide away. It helped me survive. I may not know who I am, but I know I can be a gentleman if I so choose," he said. "It was frightening to wake up in that slum with no idea who I was and have to survive. Drink dulled the pain of the wound as well as the loneliness."

She glanced at him. "I know about loneliness."

"I'm sure you do. Do you think it possible for us to be friends?" he asked, anxiously listening for her answer.

She was quiet for a while and then replied, "It's possible."

They returned to looking for the hidden entrance.

He smiled down at her as he pulled a picture away from the wall by the fireplace. "Hey, look, there's a knob back here."

Hermione got up from where she'd been poking at the bricks around the fireplace.

"Reach out and touch it with just the tip of your finger. Then pull it slowly. If that doesn't work, try turning it."

He did as instructed and the whole fireplace slid away, revealing a narrow staircase going down into the darkness.

"Ahh," he said, "we found it."

Hermione squealed with joy, and before she realized it, she'd hugged him. They both stiffened a bit in surprise, but then they relaxed a bit. She felt his hand touch her hair, and she felt such pleasure at the gentle touch. She tried to tell herself she was just starved for attention, but she knew it was more than that. She had grown in the last day to actually like the man he now seemed to be. And he needed her as well.

He sighed and stepped away. "Sorry."

"Don't apologize. You know, Raven, when you're not drinking, you can be quite a nice fellow."

He looked pleased. "I feel more clear headed than I have in weeks. Maybe your Wizarding whiskey knows I really don't need so much after all. You come along, drag me out of the sewer, and suddenly I see a different life for myself. What happens if I don't get my memory back?"

"Well, for my friend Harry, nothing I guess." She felt her self tremble with the thought.

He touched her arm in support. "You really love him, don't you?"

"He's been one of my best friends since I was 11. We went through a lot together. He and Ron ..."

"This Ron, where is he?" he asked, rubbing her arm.

"Ron was killed in the War." She turned away to pick up her wand. "To answer your question, you will have to create a new life for yourself. You have a house, and the Ministry owes you some hero rewards. You'd have money to stay here and live a nice life."

"Hero rewards?" He said the words distastefully.

"It's kind of like veterans' pay for injured war veterans."

"Oh. Can I be taught to use magic again if I don't remember?"

"I don't see why not. Come on, let's go look at the basement. Hopefully, there is a fully stocked potions lab down there. Maybe tonight we can try a few easy spells with your wand and see how it goes for you."

"You'd trust me with it." He seemed surprised.

"For some very simple spells."

He grinned, and it took her back again to how human and how different "Raven" was from Severus Snape. What would happen to their "friendship" when Snape became himself again?

"Come on, let's get down there. Maybe we can have those wounds healed by tonight."

"That fast? How's that possible?" he asked in astonishment.

"Potions are magical, too. They can heal very fast. Few take more than a few days to completely heal...even very serious wounds or injuries."

They started down the circular stairway, using her wand to light the way. It went down at least for 30 feet before opening up into a large room. Hermione squealed.

Raven actually laughed. "And I was thinking of you as a mature, young woman."

She ignored him. "Look."

She pointed to the walls, which were covered with little jars of all kinds of what he assumed were potion ingredients. There were several different sized cauldrons in the center of the room and a table with books and tools near it. Hermione used her wand to light the lanterns around the room. She searched the books on the table and selected one.

"There are some potions in here that are supposed to cure snake bite wounds...not just take the poison away. You must have been aware that Voldemort could turn Nagini on you at any time. I wonder why you didn't have a potion with you at the time."

"You said I took two. Maybe I dropped the other one or lost it during the heat of battle. Just conjecture."

"It must have been something like that. You were never taken by surprise. It's the only way you were able to survive all those years."

"How did I get to the city, and why would it have affected my mind?" he asked curiously.

"Nagini was a very powerful snake. She had a piece of Voldemort's soul embedded in her. He may have enchanted her poison. That's just a guess, of course. She was huge...bigger than a giant python."

She started looking around the room.

"Good, this is arranged very similar to your classroom potions room. I should be able to locate the ingredients we need."

"Will this help my memory?"

"I doubt it. We will have to look for a memory restore related to snake venoms. It could be really a lot of research. Memory restores are one of the more difficult potions. You probably knew more than anyone else."

"Great," he said with a sneer.

She smiled. "You just sounded like your old self."

He turned and started to look at some of the jars. "What's that?" he asked, grimacing.

Hermione stopped to look. "Lizard eyes." She snickered. "It's actually one of the things I need."

"I won't have to drink it, will I?" His face had grown white.

"You've become too much of an ordinary human," she said with a laugh. "I'm afraid it has to go inside as well as out."

"Ugh!" He blanched.

"Come on. When the pain's gone, you'll be happy."

"I guess." He didn't sound too convinced.

"Don't think about any of the ingredients then, Raven. Just help me prepare them."

Amazingly, when Hermione told him how to chop and grind the things they needed, he seemed to be able to do them with expertise. He found himself comfortable, and for the first time, the room actually felt like it was familiar.

Hermione watched him closely, amazed that his body seemed to know instinctively how to prepare the things they needed with only simple instructions.

He actually smiled while he was working. How handsome he looked with the smile.

Finally, the cauldron was lit, and the ingredients were added. They stood back watching the bubbles pop on the surface.

"That was pleasant. I don't think anything I've done since I arrived in London was that pleasant. It was downright horrible; you have no idea. I woke up bleeding and in horrible pain. I had no idea where I was or who I was. I thought I'd been mugged or something. My neck was screaming in pain, and I had no idea what had happened. I crawled under some trash and fell asleep. When I woke, my head was clearer, and the pain was worse. I saw a bum drinking a bottle and took it from him. The pain was better when I was drunk, and I had enough sense to know the alcohol would help me from getting an infection. Since then, I've gone from scoring one bottle after another. I barely ate-most of it was from trashcans around restaurants."

Hermione said, "I was only a little better off. I searched the trash for things to sell. I found the shack a few weeks after I got here. I was able to find cleaning jobs here and there. One day I worked in a sweatshop for a few hours because someone was sick and the manager liked me, so I worked there most days. It kept me in the shack and food on the table. It wasn't much of a step up from where you were."

"I'm sorry about your parents. Do you know who did it?"

"Yes, I suspect it was Lucius Malfoy. He was a Death Eater and a friend of yours I guess. You seemed to spend time at his home." Tears leaked from her eyes, and she turned away.

"If I was so detestable and so much of a monster, why help me now? Is it only to help your friend?"

She turned back. "Initially, yes, but I have come to see a different side of you in the last couple days. Dumbledore believed in you and loved you. He also loved Harry and me. I think he would be happy to see us working together."

Raven stepped closer and cupped her face with his hands. His thumbs wiped the tears away, and he leaned in and pressed a soft kiss to her lips.

"Thank you," he said, releasing her and stepping back.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 63

Hermione flees the Wizarding world and comes face to face with her past.

Hermione stood there, her heart beating against her chest like a drum. Her eyes were wide with surprise.

The only thing she could think was, please, kiss me again. But she didn't say it out loud. She turned away and busied herself with checking the potion, and she heard Raven chuckle. It was music to her ears. Who was this man? Where had he been hiding all those years? The horrible Potions teacher had vanished. True, she'd always admired Snape's vast knowledge and even his teaching abilities (though he had been hard as nails). But this man, Raven, was someone who totally blew her away. She was rapidly developing feelings for him.

That wasn't something she'd ever considered. She had to be more careful. If they succeeded and managed to bring back his memory, he would realize he hated her, and she couldn't lose anyone else again in her life. If Raven vanished and became Snape, he might have no memory of who he'd been the last months. This was something she would have to be prepared for.

"Is it ready?" Raven broke the silence that had stretched between them.

"Almost. I will ladle it out in a couple of minutes. When I do, you have to swallow it in one gulp. I will dab the wound at the same time."

He grimaced. "Ugh."

"It will be easier, and you won't taste it as much if you down it quickly anyway... and don't let it come back up."

"That bad?" He groaned.

"You're being a baby," she teased.

"You drink it then." He pouted.

She laughed at him and ladled the potion into a cup. "I know it looks like it's boiling, but it's magical and it's not hot." She took a cloth and dunked it into the remaining potion. "Come sit here and take the bandage off."

He removed the bandage and took the cup from her. He stared down into the cup with disdain.

"Come on, drink it," she urged him.

He took a deep breath and downed it. She slapped the wet potion against his neck, dabbing it into the entire wound.

After the potion was down, he clapped his hand over his mouth and gagged a few times. Hermione nearly fell on the floor laughing at him.

His glare sobered her. Snape's glare could curl one's toes.

But the moment she sobered up, he started laughing, and she ended up socking him in the arm.

He then pinned her arms to her sides and captured her lips in a deep kiss. She ignored her inner voice and pulled her arms free and slipped them around his neck. The kisses grew more urgent. Suddenly Raven drew away, and his hand went to his throat.

"The pain is gone!" he cried with excitement.

Hermione backed away, grateful for the interruption.

"Let me see."

She ran her fingers over the skin of his neck.

"It's healing! Feel!"

She placed his fingers against the once red, raw, puckered area. Although it was still red, it was much smoother, and it no longer had open wounds. There would probably be some scarring, but it wasn't bad.

"Crikey! He ran for the stairs, and she ran after him. She followed him upstairs where he stood in front of the bathroom mirror, looking at the mostly healed skin.

His eyes swam with tears, yet he had a glorious smile on his face. He was trying desperately to blink the tears away. She slipped her arms around him from behind and laid her cheek on his back.

"It's okay to cry, Raven. I'm happy, too, so very happy for you."

"It's like a miracle. I've been to some churches and prayed for it to be healed. Do you think this is his way of answering?"

His talk of God surprised her, and she pulled away. "You went to a church?"

"You're shocked? It's not something a wizard would do, huh?"

"I was raised as a Muggle for the first 11 years of my life. I've been to churches many time with my parents," she said thoughtfully. "It's not usual for a wizard to go to church. Magic and religion seem to be different worlds. I see the value in both. I'm not sure what you remember of human history. There have been times in the past where religious zealots have chased down and killed our kind. I tend to think our magical abilities are just another extension of the power of God. If Muggles would allow us to help them, who's to say our abilities with the potions and magical healing aren't just another form of science much of the 'world' does not accept or understand. If, you want to believe in God or Christ, that's your business. I don't think it's a conflict as long as we don't get into the dark arts. Those definitely are wrong."

"Dark arts." He pulled back his sleeve and looked at the Dark Mark, now a harmless tattoo. "This was bad, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it's harmless now, but it was once used by Voldemort to summon you when he wanted to ask you to do something for him or ply you for information."

"I wish I could remove it. Is there any way?" he asked.

"I really don't know. Ordinary tattoos will come off with laser treatments, but I don't know about that one. No one knows about the magic that put it there. Come on, let's go downstairs."

They left the bathroom and went down to the sitting room. Hermione went to one of the bookshelves and took a large, leather-bound book from the shelf.

"This is one of the early history books of our people. Maybe you can spend some time reading it. It might help you to get an overview of what kind of life we had before. This one goes up to the first destruction of Voldemort. I will have to fill you in on the last 18 or so years."

He took the book and sat by the window. When it grew dark Hermione lit the lanterns around the room. She had to coax him to stop for a bit for dinner, but he was very engrossed in the book and hardly ate.

She let him be and searched through Potions books for something that might help her bring his memory back.

They went to bed pretty late. Raven was quiet and didn't really want to talk. She knew he'd had a lot to take in. Maybe it would be best to get a book for him. She was sure someone had written about the end of the recent war and maybe even his part. Maybe they could read it together, and she could help by filling in her reality. Writers never got everything right. It made her nervous to think about going to Diagon Alley. What if someone recognized her? She was sure she was on someone's "missing" list. Molly was probably frantic about where she'd vanished to. It was cruel of her to not have let anyone know what had happened to her. She knew she should find a way to let them all know she was okay. Before she'd found Snape, she hadn't thought much about the Wizarding world. She'd been going about her existence in some sort of denial. Now here in this house with the potions and the books, her history was coming back, and her reality was the Wizarding world. Maybe she could use the fireplace to Floo a message to the Order. But for now, she would keep Snape a secret.

She climbed into her bed and thought about the day. She fell asleep thinking about his kisses.

After breakfast the next morning Raven asked, "Can I try the wand now? I didn't think of it last night after I started reading."

"Of course."

Hermione went up to her room and got his wand. She handed it to him and saw it glow for a moment when he held it in his hand.

"What was that?" he asked. "It's never done that before."

"Maybe it knows you finally intend to do some magic. Your mind must be more receptive. Wands are funny things. They aren't alive, but they seem to recognize their owners in a very special way. It's part of the enchantments they have been infused with."

"Let's start with this sheet of paper."

She laid a piece of paper on the table and then extended her wand. "Swish and flick. Say, *Wingardium Leviosa*."

She demonstrated, and the paper floated gently into the air about three feet. She then let it back down onto the table.

Raven tried, "*Wingardium Leviosa*," he said, aiming the wand. It lifted about two inches and then settled back down.

"It's not just the spell; it's also your mind. You must think of where you want it to go, give it a direction, and then guide it there. Try it again."

He restated the spell, and the paper lifted about ten inches before settling down.

"Better, Raven. That's good. Most of the students in my classroom couldn't move their feathers a fraction of a meter when they tried the first time."

He was concentrating so hard the next time that sweat popped out on his forehead, and the paper hardly moved.

"What's wrong? Why can't I do it?" he complained.

"You're trying too hard. Try to relax and let the energy flow from your mind through your arm. Then just move the wand, and the paper will go where you wave the wand."

Raven tried to relax, and Hermione rubbed his shoulders and prompted him. "Relax, raise the wand, slowly picture your energy going down the wand, and then say the spell.

He did as instructed and felt energy flow through him and out his wand. The paper flew into the air and circled where he guided it.

"I did it!" he said like a child riding a broom for the first time.

Hermione laughed. "You did it brilliantly."

"It felt amazing. I could feel the power flow through me. It almost felt like I could have done it without the wand. Is that possible?" he asked curiously.

"I saw you perform wandless magic. It takes a very talented, powerful wizard, and you were such a wizard.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 63

Hermione flees the wizarding world and comes face to face with her past.

Raven turned away in embarrassment. Unaccustomed to any sort of praise, he felt awkward.

Hermione watched him perform a few more simple spells, and then she went to get a book from the shelf.

"Here," she said, handing him the book, "read this. It's actually a textbook for first through fourth years. It will help you learn more spells, and then we can go from there."

Hermione settled herself in a chair and turned to Raven expectantly.

"Raven, can we talk a little bit about what we are going to do?"

"Sure," he said and came to sit opposite her. He set his book on the table.

She watched his face for a minute and then said, "I've made all the decisions so far, and it's not really fair to you. You've followed my lead."

"I didn't have much choice. You had the wand," he stated frankly.

Hermione grimaced. "I'm sorry. You were so unpredictable at first. I was afraid you'd vanish and I'd lose the chance to help Harry ... but now?"

"Now? What's different?" he asked, sitting forward.

"You need my help as much as I need yours. If we are going to work together, it's only fair we make decisions together."

He smiled and took her hands in his. "Thank you. But for now, you're going to have to keep filling in the blanks and telling me what we should do to find a cure for my memory."

His fingers were holding hers tightly, and his thumbs were caressing the backs of her hands.

Hermione had a hard time concentrating when he touched her.

"Raven, you need to decide if you want to be reintroduced to the Wizarding world as you are. The advantage would be that healers could help us."

"I wouldn't know anything about being a wizard. I wouldn't be able to function there," he stated. "We need to figure out something else. I'm exhausted now. Magic must take energy from you."

"I feel stronger when I use my magic," she told him. "It's probably just requiring a lot of concentration, and your body is tense. Why don't you go to bed. It's late, and we've worked hard."

He nodded and stood. "We can talk more tomorrow."

Hermione stood and was surprised when he pressed his lips to her forehead. With a smile, he went out of the room and up the stairs.

She stood there a while and then touched the spot where his lips had been.

"God help me, I could fall for that man."

When Hermione got up the next morning, she was surprised to smell coffee already perking and a heavenly smell of something cooking downstairs. She hurried through her shower and got dressed. Raven was in the kitchen, making an omelet with reconstituted eggs, canned potatoes, and other items he'd found here and there in the kitchen cupboards.

"That smells wonderful. I didn't know you could cook!"

He smiled a bit shyly. "I didn't really know either. It just came to me when I was looking at some of the ingredients. Must be that Snape fellows who knows how."

Hermione laughed. "Snape fellow! That's you, Raven."

"I know, but it's easier to refer to him as a different person since I don't remember anything." He motioned to her and said, "Sit. It's my turn to serve you this morning."

She sat at the table, and he brought her coffee first. Then he served her plate and sat across from her with his own. After they'd eaten a bit, she spoke.

"I've been thinking. Snape was a very smart man, very prepared. He had to be, or he would have never out-foxed Voldemort with his duplicity as a spy for our side. He must have known the different side effects he could have suffered from Nagini's bite. If he was prepared for memory loss, it serves to reason that he might have left a journal or some notes someplace that would help him later. He might not have realized he wouldn't make it home in that state. There are all kinds of magic charms that he might have tripped had he arrived here alone ... charms that would have revealed things to him/you clues to the whereabouts of a potion that could restore you, or maybe leads to someone who could help you brew such potion."

"You think that's in this house someplace?" Raven asked, chewing some eggs.

"We have nothing but time on our hands. I suggest we start going from room to room and look into everything. It may be like the front door. If you touch something, it could be activated. Touch charms are rare. I wondered about that when we arrived. It might mean that he assumed if he had no memory, the touch of his own body would activate different things in this house and lead you to clues as to your identity."

Raven dropped his fork and walked away into the living room.

Alarmed, Hermione followed. He was standing in the living room looking out into the street from behind the curtains.

"Raven, what's wrong?" she asked.

He sighed. "This Snape fellow, you said he didn't like you and that he was mean and the kids hated him. What kind of man was he? I don't want to be that man again. Sure, he's powerful and all, but I kind of like Raven. His life is simple, and he has a friend now." He turned to look at her.

She was touched by the fear in his eyes. "I will be here for you no matter what. Severus Snape was an honorable man. It's possible you can remember your life and also what it was like after you woke up. Why don't you write about who Raven is and what he thinks and knows of himself. We can charm it to be like a movie that Snape can watch if he wants to know who you were. That's only a backup in case he doesn't remember who you are or rather what he's been doing since he lost his memory. More than likely, the past will return, and you will still be who you've been since I found you."

"Do you really think that's possible?"

She shrugged. "I certainly hope so, Raven. I also like who you are now."

She felt herself blush and turned away. When she felt his hand on her shoulder, she turned back and was enveloped in his long arms. He held her close, and she found her face pressed against his warm chest. She wrapped her arms around his waist and snuggled close as his breath rustled her hair where his cheek rested against the top of her head.

"You have no idea, Hermione, how scared and frightened I was in the city. I never want to be that alone again."

"You and Snape aren't that much different, Raven. His tough hide and anger where just a cover-up to survive the harshness of the dangerous life he had to live. He was hard like you were when I met you in that alley and when you tried to hurt me in the shack. It was defenses to keep the world away. He was hiding who he was to prevent emotion from getting him in trouble and to keep anyone who might care about him safe. Voldemort is gone. Snape is free to be whoever he wants...just as you are. I'd be surprised if he's that much different than you are. His self-sacrifice proves he was a noble man."

Raven said, "I'm glad you found me, Hermione."

She squeezed him hard and then stepped back. "I'm glad I found you too, Raven. You may think I saved you, but you saved me. You sent me back to the life I belong to."

She looked up into his eyes and saw emotion, gentleness, and hunger. She understood that hunger to be one with another and not feel alone anymore.

"Raven," she started slowly, "I have the same feelings I think you do. It scares me, too. I'm afraid to care about you too deeply because if Snape comes back and doesn't remember our time together here, I will lose everything again. I can't do that right now. I have barely found myself again. Please let me help you rediscover the wizard you were and the power you had. Once that's done, if you still want me here, I won't leave you."

"Will you tell Snape about me and show him who I was if he doesn't remember?"

"I will; I promise. If he doesn't remember, then I will make sure he knows."

"I still don't know why I can't stay the way I am," he said.

"You have to be Severus Snape again to take your rightful place in our society. Plus, you have powerful enemies, and I want you to have the ability to fight them on their level. If someone saw you right now, you'd never make it out of this house alive."

"I see your point. I'm not happy about some of your decisions, but I will support your position for now," he admitted.

She smiled. "Shall we begin our search? You will have to do the looking, and I will follow behind with my wand as a sort of shield or detection device

Raven nodded, and they decided to start in the living room.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 of 63

Hermione flees the wizarding world and comes face to face with her past.

They searched the living room again even though they hadn't come across anything when they'd searched for the basement door. She let him go to the places she had searched and watched the charms that she had spelled to keep watch for repel spells. By noon, they hadn't come up with anything. They did find a small bag of gold Galleons. Raven's eyes had gone wide when he pulled them from the back of a drawer.

"Wow. Is this real?" he asked, his eyes bugging out.

Hermione laughed. "It's wizarding money. We use gold coins as tender."

"Wow, I'm rich."

"You may be. Snape was always very conservative in dress. I doubt he spent much of his hard-earned money over the years. We'll have to go to Gringotts and find out once you're ready to appear in public."

She watched his face, and he withdrew into himself.

"We'll go when we have decided I can't be helped. And I'll want to relearn my magic first."

"We have as much time as you need. I will probably have to make a reappearance sometime soon just to get into my account and buy the food we will need. With the lab below, I was thinking we could make some potions and sell them to the local apothecary. There might be some recipes downstairs for more complicated potions. You were one of the best. It stands to reason you might have rare ingredients, and I am well-versed in brewing methods. I enjoyed Potions more than any of my other classes."

"It was probably because you had such a nice teacher," he said scathingly, but with a hint of a smile.

"Because you were brilliant. You may not have been very nice, but you were intelligent and you taught me things I did not already know. That was pretty rare for my Hogwarts teachers. Your class and Professor McGonagall's were my favorites. They challenged me."

"Are you some kind of genius?" he asked

"I wouldn't say that. I just like to read, and I always remember everything I read. Potions making wasn't only book knowledge. You told me that in no uncertain terms when I'd quote my books at you. Potions are feelings as well. Two people can use the same ingredients to create a potion, but the person who feels the potion as he is making it learns the subtle way to cut ingredients and stir the mixture. He will get a much better result than those who just throw things together." She sucked in a breath, a thought dawning on her. "I never realized... you felt your potions. Maybe that was the only time you allowed feelings out. Only then no one would have known."

He sighed. "I'm not sure I want to be Snape again. I don't even want to be Raven ... the Raven out in the streets. Since I woke in that alley, this is the first time I can say that the person I am today is the best I can remember. I feel at peace."

"You know, we have really done as much as we can today," she said. "I'm tired, and I know a secluded forest we can take a picnic to. It will do us both good to get some fresh air. Will you go with me?"

"Sure, it might be good to get out of this dark house."

They packed up a basket, and Hermione changed into some jeans and a jumper. She'd even found a pair of trainers under the bed.

Raven found a pair of black jeans and put on a dark blue turtleneck. With his clean, shiny hair free around his shoulders, he was quite impressive.

Hermione felt her heart flip flop, and she admonished herself for being a silly schoolgirl. "Are you ready?" she asked.

"That magic travel again," he said and grimaced.

"Yep, come on take my arm." She held it out, and he wrapped his arm around hers. She closed her eyes and concentrated on Disapparating, trying to ignore his warm fingers on her arm.

"Ugh," was the first thing she heard when she opened her eyes. Raven was doubled over.

"Breathe deeply and the nausea will pass," she instructed.

He gasped for breath a few times and then straightened with a pained look on his face. "Is it always like that?"

"No, it shouldn't be for you either. You've done it many times alone. I guess it's just your fear that's making you sick."

They turned to look up at the deep, thick trees that surrounded them. "We're in the mountains near a cabin my parents used to rent in the summers. This is a fairly secluded spot; never-the-less I will ward it so that anyone passing will look away...not that anyone up here should be able to recognize you. It's a Muggle area.

They found a small clearing about 30 feet into the forest, and Hermione spread out the blanket and set the picnic items out for them. She kept busy trying to ignore the sudden feelings of melancholy that struck her. Maybe this hadn't been such a good idea. She hadn't expected the familiar site to bring back so many memories of her parents.

Raven was looking with interest at the huge trees and seemed to be enjoying the fresh air and the warm, light breeze. He heard a snuffle behind him and turned to see Hermione scrubbing her eyes with the back of her sleeve.

"Hermione, what's wrong?" He came closer.

"I'm sorry," she suddenly sobbed. "I spent so much time here with my parents. I should have known better than to come here."

He reached down and pulled her to her feet and drew her into a warm embrace.

She clung to him and cried, nearly screaming with the loss of parents she had never allowed herself to grieve for.

He stood feet planted apart and let her buffet him with her pain. He soothed her with his voice and rubbed her back with large, comforting hands. He continued holding her close even though she beat at his chest with her hands. Grief tore at her. Finally, she sobbed quietly and then became still clinging to him.

He stroked her hair softly, feeling his own tears dry on his cheeks. Her pain had touched him more than he'd thought possible.

"We are a pair, aren't we? We're both damaged by that war," he whispered against her hair.

She nodded, sniffing and trying to just breathe and calm down.

"Thank you, Raven," she finally said.

"You have helped ole Raven. I guess I owe you." He shifted uncomfortably, not used to expressing emotion in words.

"Not owe, Raven. We are friends now, aren't we? We support each other. That's what friends do."

"I'm sorry about your parents, Hermione. I should have been there to help."

"What happened to them had nothing to do with you. You were already out of the game."

She drew him down to the blanket, and they sat facing each other holding hands.

"I never let myself grieve before today. It was all stuffed down inside of me. In the city, I keep it closed up in my mind. I'd left it all behind when I ran. At the house, I kept it at bay because we were focusing on you. Here there are so many memories. That tree over there has my initials carved into it, if you look closely enough. There's probably a nail or two here and there that my dad put in to hang our picnic stuff on when we would hike away from camp. We used to fish in the stream about a half mile down. I fell into it when I was 6. See that branch over there? My dad would tie a rope swing to it, and I would fly like the wind touching the leaves, hanging from a top branch, with my toes. Mom and Dad would make a fire at night, and we'd sing silly songs and roast marshmallows over the fire."

As she talked, more tears started to leak from her eyes and slide down her face. Raven sat on the blanket and drew her into his lap and held her as she cried quietly and finally fell asleep from emotional exhaustion. He gently stroked her hair and gazed into her tear-stained face, wishing he could help take away her pain. He could not fathom ever having been associated with the people who would have done those things to her parents and to countless others. What sort of monster had he been? He had read a bit in a book he'd found in his room. He hadn't mentioned it to Hermione. It was a diary of sorts ... mostly just notes on what Snape had done each time for Voldemort and Dumbledore. He'd found it while looking through the drawers. A hidden door had popped open. He'd read a few pages and had been ashamed of who he'd been. He knew sooner or later he would have to tell Hermione about it. But for now, he just wanted to know who he had been. He didn't think it was what they had been looking for. It didn't seem to address anything about spells or potions; it was only a daily accounting of things he'd done. Some of them had been quite terrible, and he felt like burning the diary. He couldn't imagine now being that person, and yet he felt the relief in the man's words when Dumbledore had accepted him back into the side of light. He didn't care about the power he might have. A simple life seemed to be a more peaceful one. Here in this peaceful forest with the birds singing and Hermione asleep in his arms, he couldn't imagine a better place to be.

He wished the old wizard were still alive so they could talk about what had happened. Sometimes the journal was scarce on facts and didn't speak of the emotional motivation behind the things he'd done.

Who was he? Right now, he seemed to be three different people: Snape, Raven of the city, and now this Raven...a man this beautiful, young woman could look at with desire. He had seen the desire and need in her eyes after they'd kissed. With her, he felt like he might actually have some worth. For the first time since he'd woken in that stinking alley, he felt a purpose in his life. Would she be able to get past his history if he revealed the book full of the horrors? He wanted to help her and her friend, Potter. He didn't care about the power he might have. A simple life seemed to be a more peaceful one. Here in this calm, serene forest with the birds singing and Hermione asleep, in his arms he couldn't imagine a better place to be.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 of 63

Hermione flees the wizarding world and come face to face with her past.

Hermione had awoken about an hour later and scooted away from Raven, embarrassed. Neither saw the look of regret on the other's face at their separation. They spent the afternoon eating lunch and walking in the forest. They went down to the stream Hermione had mentioned and sat on the bank dangling their feet in the icy water. They laughed and talked about the nature around them and a few funny things that had happened to them in the city. Hermione couldn't get enough of his face when he smiled or laughed. It wasn't that frozen, evil smile that Snape had directed at her and her friends when they were kids. She was beginning to see Raven as a totally different wizard...not the Snape she had known in school. Finally, as the light started to dim in the forest, they gathered their things. Hermione spent a few minutes teaching Raven the Lumos spell. He was quick to learn as usual, and they returned to Spinner's End just as the moon climbed high in the sky.

This time Raven felt only a little dizziness. "That was better," he stated, drawing in a deep breath as he released her arm.

"Good." She peered into his face. "Maybe you're beginning to trust me a little more."

He smiled at her, took the picnic basket from her hand, and went to the kitchen to unload it.

She watched him put all the things away. "Thank you again, Raven, for being there for me today. I felt like I was going to fly apart. Your tight hold on me kept me sane."

He nodded. "I was happy to help."

"You aren't the man I knew, that's for sure. Snape probably would have laughed at me." She frowned. "No, that's unfair to say in light of what I know of him now. He... you spent years protecting us from our foolish escapades. You never asked for credit or even acknowledgement. Our lives might have been different if we had realized we could have trusted you then."

She saw his face blanch, and he turned away. "Raven, what's wrong?"

Suddenly knowing it was time, he said, "I was not a nice guy. I was a murderer and more. I did things you have no clue about. If I helped you, it was probably for selfish reasons."

"Do you remember something?" she asked, coming and touching his arm to try to pull him around so she could look into his eyes.

He jerked his arm away. "No. You can't even trust me now. I have kept something from you. I didn't want to see the disgust in your eyes." He moved across the room to stand before the cold fireplace.

Hermione waved her wand and a fire flared to life, warming the cold room. She said, suddenly afraid, "Tell me."

He walked toward the stairs and motioned for her to follow him to his room. He pulled the drawer open and a little drawer popped out. He took the small journal from it and held it out to her.

She watched his hand tremble. She took the book and asked, "What is this? Is it what we've been looking for? Why would you keep this from me?" She had a bit of anger in her voice, and she saw that he cringed and drew away.

"No, I don't think it's what you described. But he... I was a despicable person...a murderer and maybe a rapist. I think I even enjoyed torturing people." His voice shook with pain.

She took a deep breath; her anger wouldn't help them. She had known that Snape had chosen to do a lot of dreadful things while in Voldemort's service when he was young...things he might have later regretted and/or didn't want to do to start with. His cover had to be maintained. "What is this?" she repeated.

He sighed. "It's a journal of all the horrible things I've done. There are no real feelings; it's nothing but a list mostly. Why would he keep such a thing?"

Hermione looked at the book and then made a decision. She placed the book in his hands and said, "Let me know if you find something you think I should know."

He stared at her. "Don't you want to read it?" Surprise made his voice a bit high.

"Yes, but I won't. Dumbledore was an amazing judge of character, and he believed in you. If he can forgive what you did in the past, I can too. You saved Harry, and you saved the Wizarding World. The past is done, over with, and another life...especially now that you can't remember it. Everyone deserves a second chance, Raven: you most of all."

She slipped her arms around his waist and pressed her face against his chest. He was so surprised he dropped the book and held her close. This woman had such a capacity for forgiveness, it floored him. After a long time of just hanging on to each other, he drew her to the bed. They spooned together under a thick blanket and fell into an exhausted sleep.

When Hermione woke the next morning, she was surprised to find herself tucked into Raven's bed. She could hear the shower going down the hall. She slipped from the bed and headed toward her room. Part of her wished she had woken up beside him, and part of her was mortified that he would smell her morning breath and see her messy hair. But she smiled when she thought about having slept so safe and warm in his arms.

When she heard him leave the bathroom, and his bedroom door close, she slipped out into the hall and dashed into the bathroom. She showered, put on fresh clothing, and fixed her hair. She found him cooking breakfast. She went to him, reached up, and placed a quick kiss on his lips. She saw the pleased look on his face when he drew back.

"Thank you, Raven. I don't think I've slept that well in months, maybe years."

"Me either," he admitted. "I'm sorry I left you alone this morning. I felt dirty from yesterday's romp in the forest."

She laughed. "I felt the same way; think nothing of it." She sat down, and he served her breakfast.

They made plans to search the bathrooms, and Hermione broached the subject of his parents' room. "It's possible he put it in there. It really doesn't look like the place has been stepped into in thirty years. It would be a good hiding place. I don't think you liked your parents much."

He ate in silence, so she followed his example and left him to his thoughts.

When breakfast was over, she cleaned up the dishes. When she went in search of Raven, she found him standing in the open doorway of his parents' room.

She touched his arm, and he looked down at her. "It's kinda creepy in there."

"Yeah, like a tomb," she agreed. "I wish I could do this for you."

"Me too." He sighed and stepped into the room. They started with the dresser and found nothing but old clothing. They moved on to the closet, and Raven found a shoebox in the back. It was an ordinary Muggle shoebox filled with small, handmade, wooden soldiers.

"Do you think they were mine when I was a kid?" he asked.

"Perhaps," she said, taking one of the finely carved figures into her hand.

"Whoever put this here must have cared to save them." His voice was heavy with emotion.

"Maybe your parents cared, but they just were introverted and unwilling to share their feelings."

He took the soldier from her and placed it back in the box, shoving it back in the closet. "There were one or two notes in the book. My dad died after I started to write the book. It says, 'The old bastard died today. Good riddance, Dad.' I doubt he was the one."

She touched his arm. "Did it say anything about your mom?"

"Only once. 'Mom's gone; I cried for the first time in my adult life.' Nothing else. Just those two references to sum up my life with my parents." He shut the door to the closet and turned toward a vanity with a rounded mirror.

"You must have loved your mom or you wouldn't have cried. She probably saved your toys. They must have been your favorites."

He only grunted and reached for the first drawer. It held jewelry of different sorts. He held up a necklace of large, shiny crystal beads. He reached out to touch one of the sparkling beads. Suddenly a light shot out from the bead and began to expand and shimmer like a Pensieve.

Hermione grabbed onto his arm and found herself drawn into a memory.

"What is this?" Raven shouted with fear.

"It's a memory, a message. Just go with it. Don't be afraid. We are invisible, and no one will hear us."

They found themselves standing in the living room. A tall woman, thin with long black hair, stood near the fireplace. She was placing the soldiers in a box when a gruff-looking man came into the room. "What the hell, you doin', woman? That boy don't care about nothing; throw them in the fire."

"He only said he didn't want them because you made him so miserable for still having them. He's still a young man."

"Man being the word," replied the harsh man, growling. "He don't need no toys, and I will not have a son of mine keeping sentimental things. There's no time in this here life to be sentimental. He needs to be hard as nails." He took the box, flung it at the fireplace, and stalked from the room.

With a quickness that defied the eye, his mother waved her hand and pulled the soldiers from the fire before they could even be singed. Glancing at the door, she quickly put them into the box and went to hide it. "I want my son to know he did know how to play," she whispered.

Suddenly, they were back in the bedroom, and Raven still held the beads in his hand. "Wow," Raven said, astonished. "That was like being in a movie!"

Hermione said, "I wonder if the other beads have messages on them. I don't think this is what we are looking for, but your mother obviously wanted you to have some of her memories regarding yourself and your childhood. Maybe she knew the direction you were heading in and wanted you to know she loved you."

Confusion and hope flashed across his face. "I thought I was like I was because they both hated me."

"How did you activate that memory?" Hermione asked, curiously looking at the necklace. She did not attempt to touch it.

"I just touched the bead with my finger," he said.

"Maybe you should try another one."

Raven looked at the beads. "You'll go with me?"

"If you want me to. They are personal memories, and you have no idea how revealing they might be," she warned him.

"I don't want to go alone," he stated emphatically.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 of 63

Hermione flees the wizarding world and comes face to face with her past.

Raven reached out his finger and touched another bead. This one was closer to the clasp. Immediately they were engulfed by another flash of light, and they found themselves standing in a garden. A woman whom they both recognized as Snape's mother was sitting on a garden swing and holding a small baby in her arms. He sported a tuft of raven black hair. The baby was crying loudly. She was singing a song and gently caressing the baby's face. She would lean and press her lips against his forehead, kissing him or just breathing in his scent. But the baby continued to cry.

"You're mama's good boy; you must be mama's good boy. Your father doesn't like much noise. Please, Severus, please be quiet. It's cold out here, and we can't go in until you're quiet."

Raven felt Hermione hold his arm more tightly, and he watched his mother glance with fear at the back door.

"Please, Sev, please. I know your tummy hurts, but I don't have any potions to help. Your father only gave me so much money, and it barely covers the bills and food. He took my wand. I have nothing." She started to cry, and tears ran down her face. "Tomorrow when he's at work I'll take you to Diagon Alley. If I don't eat for a couple days, I can buy a potion. If we hurry, we can get there and back before he comes home." She continued to talk to the baby like he was an adult." She turned the baby onto her shoulder and patted and rubbed the baby's back gently.

A loud, gruff shout came from the house. "Woman, I'm hungry. If you can't shut that brat up, I'm gonna make it shut up. Now get your butt in here and make my dinner."

Snape's mother gulped and took a vial from her pocket. She laid the baby on her lap, opened the vial, and put two drops into the baby's mouth. Moments later, the baby was quiet and sleeping. "Forgive me," she whispered. She grabbed him to her, and her tears splashed on his back. She went through the door of the house, and Hermione and Raven followed. Almost before the baby was placed in a small bed, his father appeared from the next room and knocked her against the wall.

"You didn't wash the clothes again, and my dinner isn't ready. You insisted on having that half-breed freak. He will never amount to anything... never." He pushed her again and slammed out the door. "I'm going to the pub. Have my dinner ready when I get back."

His mother stood for a moment and then shakily went and picked the baby up. She held the child carefully and rocked the drugged baby. Tears still fell down her cheeks.

"He's wrong," she said, glaring at the door. "You're my prince, and you're going to be a great wizard. If I have anything to do about it, you will take your place among my people."

Abruptly the memory ended, and Hermione and Raven stood in the dusty, old room. He dropped the necklace onto the dresser, and it landed with a clatter. He turned and ran from the room. Moments later Hermione heard the door to his room slam, and she stood there for a moment longer, shocked by what she'd seen. How must Raven feel? Unlike her, he had not stayed with her but had sought solitude. She decided to wait a while and see if he would come out on his own. She respected him too much to barge in even though she thought he'd feel better if she was there to hold him.

Raven stood inside his door and then let himself slump against the door. The cold wood felt good against his back. He let himself slide to the floor and drew his knees up against his chin. He rested his forehead against his knees. The face of his father seemed to batter at his feelings. The man had been horrible, hateful, and abusive. Was that why he'd turned out to be the monster he had been in his early years? In contrast, his mother had seemed loving and tender; yet she'd been unwilling to use her magic to spare him from abuse. She'd even drugged him with something to keep him quiet even though she'd known he was hurting from illness. She may have loved him, but her weakness was a horror. No wonder he'd joined Voldemort. Ugliness was all he'd been familiar with. He realized he was embarrassed about what Hermione had seen. He was disheartened with his parents and horrified that he'd been treated so cruelly. Most of all, he was devastated that still he had no memories of his parents. The memories were so real and so alive; yet they didn't touch him. It was still like looking at a movie. Would he ever remember? He realized he didn't care for himself. But Hermione was helping him so much. He wanted to help her friend and pay her back for all the things she was doing for him. Even if he did not regain his memory, he could prove who he was. And with her help, he could regain his magical skills. He didn't care to be the man he had been. But he would try for her.

He sat there for hours until he became chilled, and then he struggled to his feet and opened the door. When he stepped out, he found Hermione sitting on a chair by his door, asleep. For the first time, tears burned his eyes. She cared for him, and that meant more than anything in his life.

He scooped her up and carried her into her room. When he placed her on the bed and turned to leave, she grasped his hand and said, "Stay."

He slipped behind her, and she snuggled back against him. He laid there for a long time holding her and breathing in the scent of her hair. He could imagine that he'd never known anything as peaceful as this in his former life. He was disturbed that he'd manhandled her the first day. That Raven had been a horribly messed up man. The streets had made him no better than an animal. All animals cared about was getting food, or in his case drink, into their bodies and a place to lay their head. It was funny how he

didn't think much about the drink anymore. He had things to learn, an interesting woman to talk to, and a comfortable house to live in. He did not need to drown his pain with mind-clouding drink. He finally let himself drift off to sleep.

He woke in the early afternoon and realized that Hermione was sitting in front of her vanity brushing her hair. He watched her through half-closed eyes, not wanting her to know he was awake. He watched the brush slide through her hair. It was soft; and though it was bushy, it looked beautiful. Sun shone off the red highlights like new copper pennies. She finally set the brush down and turned.

Raven closed his eyes and waited to see if she would leave. Then he felt a wondrous thing: she pressed her lips against his forehead and brushed the hair from his face with soft, gentle fingers.

"Why do you tug at my heart so?" she whispered before heading out of the room.

He heard her gather some clothing and slip into the bathroom to take a shower. He laid there until she vacated the bathroom and headed down stairs. He took a shower and dressed, thinking of nothing but her whispered words.

Her admission made him feel wonderful. She was growing feelings for him. Kissing was one thing. Men and women did that sort of thing for comfort and need, but feeling was different. Feeling for each other was a whole new idea, and he found himself liking the thought very much. This place with Snape's memories was like a foreign world to him. The only thing in his life that felt right and real was Hermione. He wondered if she thought about what would happen if he regained his life as Snape and forgot this one. Her focus seemed to be her friend Harry. How did he fit into that world?

Once he was dressed, he went down the stairs. It was probably at least 4:00. The memories had taxed his strength and emotions, and he was starving. He peeked into the kitchen and saw that Hermione was cooking a stew. The smell made him practically drool. He stepped into view, and she looked up at him and smiled a wonderful, sweet smile.

"You okay, Raven?"

"Yes, thank you."

"For what?" She laughed. "I feel asleep on the watch."

"You cared enough to be watchful of my needs. I find it very unexpected ... but welcome."

She nodded then said, "I'm surprised I didn't wake up when you picked me up. You didn't have to stay with me."

"Actually, you asked me to. You must have been asleep. Truthfully, I didn't mind. I sleep better with you near."

She blushed and turned away. "I feel the same way, Raven." She glanced back at him to see his eyes had widened and his smile. "Come and eat some stew. We need to talk a bit about this morning."

The smile left his face, but he sat and took the bowl of stew she had ladled up for him. "I really don't want to talk about it."

"I know, and I'm sorry. But I need to know why you were so upset. Did you remember something?"

He heard the hope in her voice. "No," he stated. "That baby was me, and she drugged me. She was supposed to be this powerful witch. Why did she let him treat her like that?"

"He took her wand, Raven. Some of us can't do magic without our wands. You must know there are women who once under an abuser's control will not fight him no matter what he does. You saw that in the city didn't you?"

He nodded and put down his spoon and pushed the half empty bowl away. "She couldn't have loved me."

"She did ... you could see it in the way she touched you and hear it in her voice as she sung to you. She thought she was protecting you with the drug."

Hermione stood and came around the table and slipped her arms around his neck. He laid his face against her chest, and she gently stroked his hair.

"She gave up food for days to pay for the potion, assuming she was able to follow through with her plans. Raven, she was scared and did what she could. You heard what she said, 'You're my prince.' Later, when you were a teenager, you used to call yourself 'the Half-Blood Prince.' I think that must mean you were honoring her. You must have learned as you grew what she sacrificed for you."

"Hermione, I don't think I can watch any more of those memories right now." He looked down her.

"It's OK. We don't have to watch them right now. When you're ready, let me know." She pressed her lips against the top of his head. "We have more pressing things on our plate. We need to continue to look for messages Snape may have left you. I need to teach you a lot more magic. I don't think the necklace will have what we are looking for. My bet is Snape never knew it was there. I doubt he ever stepped foot in that room after his parents died ... not even to hide the messages to you."

I think we need to continue to search the house. Maybe we should look at every page of every book. Snape loved books just as you do. He may have hidden his message ... or at least a possible clue ... to you in a book."

Raven nodded.

An hour later, they sat in the living room. After they each chose a bookcase, they started looking page by page. Hermione found the task very difficult. She would have loved to just sit and read. But she forced herself to skim them and look for written notes or underlined items or something that might be a clue.

Several books later, Raven was the first to speak, "This book's about Voldemort. Snape marked some words: 'The mark holds power.'"

Hermione put her book down and came to sit next to him on the couch. She looked at the words. "The mark holds power," she repeated. "I wonder if this was marked before or after he took his vows with Voldemort. Let's look some more."

They turned more pages and found a word here or there underlined, so Hermione grabbed a piece of parchment and a quill and started copying the words into a list. When they came to the end of the book, Hermione reread the words out loud as sentences.

The mark holds power.

Ink

Magical

Has

The

Power to

Hold
The
Wearer
bondage
If
Master
Betrayed
His
Power
Will
steal
Your
Mind

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 of 63

Hermione flees the wizarding world and comes face to face with her past.

They both sat there stunned. It was a message directly related to what had happened. Voldemort had somehow known about Snape's duplicity and had stolen his memory. It was not the poisons or the blood loss. It had been magic performed by a man who was no longer alive. Possibly a forgotten spell ...

As Raven turned to put the book aside, Hermione glimpsed a handwritten note on the back. It was so tiny that it was almost invisible, yet the light had caught it just right. She grabbed the book from him and held it near the lamp. They both peered at the tiny words, "Look to the HM."

"HM?" Raven questioned. "What you think that is?"

"Headmaster probably Dumbledore," Hermione said, feeling tears stinging in her eyes.

"The one I killed? He slumped back onto the couch. Is this all for naught?"

She sat heavily next to him. "Snape must have known all this even after he killed Dumbledore. He wouldn't have left a message unless there were further clues."

Raven with his simpler speech asked innocently, "Why would it say, 'Look to'? Why didn't it say, 'Talk to Dumbledore'?"

"LOOK!" Hermione shouted with excitement. "His portrait at Hogwarts! We can ask him ourselves."

"Ask a portrait? What are you talking about?" he asked loudly, infected by her excitement.

"I really hadn't thought about portraits not being on the walls here. There are only landscapes."

"Yeah, so?"

"Raven, in the Wizarding world, most pictures in books move. For some weird reason the pictures you've come in contact with here have been all Muggle photos, or they were frozen by a spell. It was probably some old rule set down by your father and executed by your mother before he took her wand." She went over to the bookshelf, selected a picture history book, and brought it to him. She flipped it open, and taking her wand out, she waved it over the book. "*Liquescitio!*"

The pictures started to move, and Raven jumped back a bit.

Hermione giggled at the horrified look on his face.

He threw her a disgusted look. "Don't laugh... No book has live telly in it."

She only giggled louder. He finally smiled at her as he ran his hand through his hair. "Well I'll be buggered. I still don't get it."

"At Hogwarts," she explained patiently, "there is a portrait of Dumbledore. When a headmaster dies, his knowledge is somehow transferred to that portrait. A person can go there and talk to the portrait as if the person were still alive. If Dumbledore knew about the magic that the mark holds, we might be able to get information directly from him."

"Look to the HM," Raven whispered, repeating the idea in his head. "Why wouldn't I have fixed the books after my parents died?"

"Portrait people have been used to spy on enemies. If there is a portrait at Hogwarts and one of the same person in this house, that person can move between portraits. They hear and can repeat what they hear. We use portraits to send messages to each other and call for help. It's a Wizarding communication tool."

He grimaced. "That's kind of creepy...little people in pictures moving here and there."

Hermione smiled, then shrugged. "You get used to it. Pretty soon it's the norm. As a child, I thought it was fantastic."

He smiled at her. "You didn't have any trouble adapting to the Wizarding world, did you?"

"No, my letter from Hogwarts was actually a relief. I knew I could do magical things. When you're a child, untrained magic can erupt from you during intense emotional incidences. Weird things happened a few times when I was a child, and my parents had started to look at me with fear. They were as relieved as I was to have a reason for the odd happenings. They weren't exactly pleased to find I was a witch because it was hard on their religious beliefs. That still kind of freaked them out. But to know that I wasn't alone, that this occurred in nonmagical families on occasion, helped them to accept me as much as they were able to.

"I think they were also relieved when I went away to school. They had lived in fear that someone would find out I could make weird things happen and come take me away. My parents did relax and learn to accept me as I was. It was getting better all the time..." Her voice trailed off as her eyes suddenly filled with tears.

Raven took the book from her hands and put it aside. He drew her close to his side, and she laid her head against his arm.

"We are a pair aren't we, Raven? Maybe between the two of us, there's a whole person."

He laughed sadly. "You got that right." They sat for a while, and the sun went down outside. Finally Raven went to get them some dinner. He elected to bring a plate of cold cuts, crackers, cheese, and wine to the couch. Hermione sat bundled in a blanket, and a fire roared in the fireplace. They ate in silence.

When they were finished, Raven asked, "What now? How are we going to get to this portrait?"

Hermione, who'd been deep in thought said, "We are going to need help. I think it's time we made contact with someone. The current head of Hogwarts is Minerva McGonagall. She is a trusted Order member and was a colleague of yours for years. She was probably even one of your teachers. I'm sure she was a friend."

"Are you sure?" he asked, his eyes flashing the uncertainty he was feeling. He fidgeted uncomfortably. He stood and went to stand before the fire.

Hermione was struck by how handsome he was as the fire danced off his ebony hair. She tossed the blanket aside, wanting to touch him. She stood and went to him, and he opened his arms. "Raven," she murmured as he bent to kiss her.

"Hermione," he whispered against her lips. He captured her lips and kissed her until she was breathless. His hands caressed her back gently, and he ran them up into her hair.

When he moved his lips to her neck and shoulders, she said huskily, "Let's go to bed."

He drew back a bit surprised. "Hermione, sleeping in the same bed has been wonderful, but I'm not sure I would be able to keep my hands off of you tonight. We should probably sleep in our own beds."

She smiled up at him and took his hand in hers. "I want you, Raven. I don't want to ever sleep alone again."

Unable to speak, he took her hand and led her up the stairs. Hermione waved her wand behind them, and the fire and lamps went out.

As they entered his room, he pulled his wand out and lit the candles around the room. He turned, and she came into his arms.

"Are you sure?" he asked again, astonished that this beautiful young woman would want him.

"More than I've ever been about anything in my life."

There was no need for words. They kissed, and their hands met at their sides and then slid up each other's arms. Raven's hands slid over her back, and his lips caressed her bare shoulders as he pulled the robe away and let it drop on the floor. Hermione was busy unbuttoning the front of his shirt. She closed her eyes as he brushed his fingers gently over her breast. He was careful to be as gentle as he could, trying to replace her only other memory of his touching her body. His lips teased her nipples, and she threw her head back and groaned with pleasure.

He helped her pull his shirt off, and they sighed as he pulled her against him flesh to flesh. His kisses became more urgent, and his hands slid lower over her back. Hermione worked at his pants and finally loosened the belt. Quickly they shed the rest of their clothes, and he picked her up and placed her on the bed. He followed her in, covering her body with his.

Urgently, they lost themselves in the sensation of hands, legs, and tongues, caressing, and intertwining.

Hermione realized he was trying to be careful with her because he was afraid to hurt her. She urged him on. "I won't break, Raven. Please, I want you now!"

He needed no further encouragement and plunged into her warm depths. They abandoned all thought and let their need for each other take over. They reached the pinnacle about the same time, and their cries of pleasure rang out through the empty house. Raven collapsed onto her and rolled over, drawing her to his chest as their pounding hearts quieted. They kissed gently a few times and then settled against each other. Hermione ran her fingers through the dark hair on his chest, and he caressed her side, down her ribs, and over her hip, and back up.

She pressed a kiss against one of his breasts. "That was amazing, Raven."

"You're amazing," he said, emotion deepening his voice into a slow, seductive sound.

She smiled against his nipple and then teased it with her tongue, making him draw in a deep breath.

"If you continue that course of action, I will be forced to respond."

Sliding her hand lower, she said, "I think you already have."

They let themselves go more slowly this time. Tasting, caressing, and touching. Giving themselves body and soul to each other. Finally exhausted, they slept.

Hermione woke with her body nestled at his side and her face against his chest. She felt his arm tighten on her.

"Good morning." His voice was low and soft.

She turned and pulled herself up on his chest so she could smile down into his face. She kissed him and brushed the hair back from his face. "Good morning."

"Thank you," he said, caressing her face with his fingers.

"For what?" she asked.

"For making me human again, for making me a man. For taking me away from hell and giving me heaven on earth."

She smiled, eyes clouded with tears, but she blinked them back. "Raven, you've done the same for me. I was living in the same city...well not living, existing. When I saw you and realized who you were, you gave me purpose again. I think we are good together." She started to kiss a trail down his chest.

Thank you all so much for your kind comments. This story has been a joy to write. An extra special thanks for Lisa, my Beta. She is doing a wonderful job.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 of 63

Hermione flees the wizarding world and comes face to face with her past.

Much later that morning, after they'd showered and dressed, they decided to use the Floo to contact Headmistress McGonagall.

Hermione found a pot of Floo powder and sent a message to the Headmistress's office.

Raven watched with interest as the paper flew into the green fire and vanished.

"That's a right nice trick there," he said.

Hermione laughed at his funny language. It still slipped out on a regular basis. She grabbed his hand and brought it to her lips.

His eyebrow rose. "What was that for?"

"For laughter. You make me so happy. You have no idea how long it's been since I had something to laugh at."

"From what you tell me, I can't imagine I've done much laughing in years."

"No, I can't imagine you would have," she said with sadness touching her eyes.

Suddenly the flames erupted and a paper floated out. Hermione released his hand and grabbed it out of the air. She unfolded it and read:

Miss Granger,

We thought you kidnapped...or, worse, dead! Please come at once. I am curious about the mysterious friend you are bringing. I will await your arrival.

HMM

Hermione gasped when she read that they'd feared that she'd been kidnapped.

"Oh, my gosh! It never occurred to me they would think me in danger all this time. I'm going to have to answer for it now. Everyone will be pretty pissed off at me."

"I doubt anyone will stay mad long. They will just be happy to have you back." He hugged her to him, then asked, "Are we gonna use Side-Along Apparition?"

"No," she said. "We're going to use the Floo Network."

He drew back. "In flames... no! I don't think I can do that."

Hermione couldn't help but laugh again. "You're such a baby!"

"Who's a baby?" he asked, getting a mischievous glint in his eye. "I bet I can make you scream."

He grabbed her and proceeded to tickle her until she screamed with laughter.

"OK,OK!" she screamed. "If you remembered McGonagall, you would know it's best not to keep her waiting."

He sobered up and helped her to her feet. "An old schoolmarm, uptight biddy, huh?"

"The uptightest ... but extremely loving to those who look past that tough exterior. Come on. Now I will go first. Please repeat after me exactly what I say. Toss the powder down at your feet and speak clearly."

Looking freaked out, Raven watched Hermione step into the fireplace, toss the Floo powder, and say, "Hogwarts, Headmistress's office."

Afraid to be separated, he followed immediately. It was an odd sensation. Warmth and disorientation hit him, and then he stood in an old fireplace in an odd room full of books and instruments. Hermione was in the clutches of an elderly witch who was crying and hugging the young woman to her breast. He saw her glance past Hermione, and when she caught sight of him, her mouth fell open and she gasped in surprise.

Hermione felt the old witch's legs buckle, and she held the woman up until she recovered her wits.

"Severus! Oh, Merlin! Is that you?" She came forward, and Raven found himself enveloped in her arms. She was soft and warm and tall for a woman, and she smelled of lilac and rose. There was something familiar about her. It was the first familiar sensation he'd felt since he'd seen the bed in his room. He hugged her back, breathing in the scent. She felt like a mother somehow.

When she drew back, she looked at him curiously, "What's wrong? You haven't let me hug you like that since you were a young boy."

Hermione came and took his hand. "Headmistress McGonagall, this is Raven."

"What are you on about?" she asked. She backed away, somehow afraid her eyes were deceiving her and this wasn't her old friend. "Who?" Extreme disappointment flashed over her face.

Hermione realized she might start to mourn Severus again. "Raven is the name he knows himself by. He is Severus, but he can no longer remember his former life."

The old woman paled.

Hermione released Raven's hand and guided her to her chair behind her desk.

"Raven," she said, waving to a brandy decanter on a table close by, "get her a drink. She's a bit in shock."

Raven quickly uncorked the decanter and poured the old woman a drink. He set it down in front of her and noted with amusement when she grabbed it up and downed the whole shot. It didn't even faze her. This woman was no stranger to drink. For the first time in days, Raven wanted a drink himself.

She seemed to right herself, an old hand at having to take in bad news and assimilate it quickly. She waved to them to sit in the chairs before her desk, and Hermione reached out and Raven took her hand as they sat down.

"Headmi..."

Watching their hands with interest, the headmistress said, "Minerva. No reason for titles anymore. We are all adults and friends I hope. Hermione?" she questioned, asking for permission to call her by her first name.

"Minerva." Hermione nodded slowly, trying out her name with a smile on her face. "I found 'Severus,' about a week ago in London."

"You've been in London this whole time?" Minerva said, admonishing Hermione. "Molly's been beside herself with grief. Ginny, too." She saw Raven's eyes flash with anger at her tone. She mentally filed the interesting body language away.

Hermione's eyes clouded with tears. "I'm sorry. I ran when I discovered my parents. I wanted to flee everything I knew. I've been living in a shack in the city."

Minerva decided not to comment and let the young woman talk.

"I've been barely surviving on odd jobs. Just existing. I was going through the motions to stay alive but not much else. Then I found Raven about a week ago. He was worse off than I was. He was living in a cardboard box in a warehouse full of derelicts."

Minerva cringed at the mental picture. The man before her was now well-dressed and clean-shaven. He looked better than she'd seen him in years. She watched as he caressed Hermione's hand with his thumb, and the girl did not think it unusual. They had certainly grown close in a week. "Continue," she urged Hermione.

"He was drunk and in pain from the wound that Nagini inflicted on him."

Hermione continued to fill her in on what had happened those first few days. She left out their growing relationship but noted the woman's curiosity about their handholding.

"You say you don't remember anything?" Minerva asked Raven.

"No, ma'am." He shook his head. "There's only one thing at Spinner's End that is even remotely familiar to me: the snake on the bed drapes."

"How about this office?" she asked, waving her hand. "You were the Headmaster for a time."

"I was?" He shot Hermione a curious look.

"Sorry, I forgot. I wasn't at school during that time."

He gave her a forgiving look and turned to the Headmistress. "I do find your perfume familiar."

"You do!" both women exclaimed at the same time.

"You should!" The older woman snorted. "You made it for me years ago for Christmas and have been supplying me with a bottle since. I'm nearly out," she said wistfully.

"Anything else?" Hermione asked.

Raven stood up and started to wander around the office. He found it curious that all of the frames in the office appeared to be empty. He looked at the Headmistress with curiosity.

"I wasn't sure who Hermione was bringing, and I felt it best not to have 100 eyes and ears on us. I wouldn't want the wrong people to hear about you before you're ready. Plus they might spread news quite without intent to harm. Their lives are pretty boring these days."

"Lives?" he questioned, looking again at the empty frames in horror. "It's hard to think of pictures with lives."

Hermione interrupted, "Minerva, we came to talk to Professor Dumbledore. Can you ask him to come back?"

"I might have known." She seemed hurt.

"I knew you were the only living person we could trust with Raven's existence," Hermione explained to her.

That seemed to mollify the old woman. She turned to the large, empty frame behind her and called out, "Albus, you old goat. Come on in. You were right; she did come to see you."

The two visitors walked closer to the portrait.

Raven held his breath as an ancient wizard walked back into the frame.

The old man's face lit with glee when he spied his two visitors. "I wondered when you'd come back, Severus. I've been waiting. Hermione Granger! It's good to see you again, child." Although they couldn't see a chair, he seemed to take a seat; only his head filled the portrait.

Hermione once again felt tears burning in her eyes at seeing his sparkling eyes and kind, weathered face.

Minerva quickly brought him up to speed on their earlier conversation.

The old wizard's face took on a great deal of apprehension. "So is it as bad as you feared?"

Though Raven's eyes were large and uncertain, he was having difficulty talking to the portrait. His heart was beating very fast. How could this man talk to his murderer so calmly? "Apparently," Raven said dryly.

Hermione glanced at him. That had been such a Snapeish sound.

"Can you help us?" she asked.

The old Headmaster looked her way. "I'm surprised to find you in the equation. Yet, it's delightful to see you again, all grown up."

Hermione blushed. "I'm a bit surprised, too. Can I ask, sir, if I hadn't found Raven how would he have been lead back to his home? How would he have known to even look at the books?"

"Owl, Miss Granger. Severus and I worked out a spell that would send an owl to him wherever he was six months after the war, if he had not already found his way home. Owls have the magical ability to find anyone anywhere. He knew that if Voldemort discovered his true allegiance, he might well find himself without his memory. He honestly did not expect to survive." The old man's eyes glittered with emotion.

His voice almost a whisper, Raven asked, "You do not blame me for your death?"

Hermione reached out to grab Raven's hand again in support. She saw Albus' eyes widen.

"Of course not, son. It was I who asked the terrible task of you. We both had to make horrendous choices and sometimes carry out terrible deeds to get through that war. I know what I asked of you broke your heart." A twinkle returned to his eye. "I see you have a lot of support now."

Raven nodded, unable to speak. He'd been dreading coming face to face with the man he had killed. Yet all he saw was love in this man's eyes. The dread that had been weighing on him lifted and seemed to flee. His heart felt lighter than it had since waking from the poison-induced near death.

He drew Hermione close. She slipped her arms around his waist. Forgetting the eyes of the two older people, he bent to place a kiss on her head and smooth her hair down, relaxing with the feel of her. They did not see the surprised look the old couple exchanged.

Raven seemed to come to his senses first and looked up to find himself being scrutinized.

Albus said, "I'm glad for you both. You will need each other on your journey."

"Journey?" the younger couple said together.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 of 63

Hermione flees the wizarding world and comes face to face with her past.

The old Headmaster sighed. "I'm afraid so. You came to me several years ago, 'Raven,' and related your fears about the power of the Dark Mark. You'd overheard a conversation between Voldemort and Bellatrix."

"It confirmed your fear that Voldemort had placed a spell on the Mark that would send you away from everything you knew and dump you into Muggle society without your magical abilities. It was something you feared more than serving him. Apparently your fears have come to fruition."

Raven tried to assimilate the information and waited for the old man to continue.

"You were summoned to a cave years ago. It was Voldemort's lair. Because you were pulled there by Portkey, you had no idea where you were. You never got a look at the stars or sun. You only managed to gather a moss sample from the cave's floor before you were sent back here."

"It seemed to come from a strain only found in the Carpathian Mountains in Romania. Those mountains are huge and probably riddled with thousands of caves."

"Sir, why is that important?" Hermione asked, feeling her heart pounding and dreading his answer.

"That's where Voldemort kept his records. If there is anything to help Raven recover his memories or free him of the Dark Mark and its magic, it would be there."

"Are you saying we have to find and go into Voldemort's lair to find the answers? Are you sure you don't know of any spell that would help?" She knew the question was redundant, but she had to ask anyway.

Dumbledore's eyes held an age-old sadness. "I am sorry, Severus, Hermione. I cannot be of much more help. I do have a small box that you entrusted to me. Go to the farthest east corner of the room. There is an astronomy book on the top shelf. Pull it out and press the innermost circle in the tile.

Raven looked toward the east corner and asked, "What's in it?"

"I'm afraid I don't know. You entrusted it to me, and I respected your wish that the contents remain secret, even from myself."

As Minerva and Albus watched, Hermione and Raven followed his instructions and found a simple wooden box. Like the house, it sprung open on Raven's touch. Inside they found several vials filled with silvery Pensieve memories, a written journal, and what Hermione presumed was the moss sample.

"Wow," Raven said, peering into a silvery vial. "Is this liquid silver?"

Hermione chuckled. "No, it's a memory like the beads of the necklace in your mother's room. It's probably your memories of Voldemort's lair."

"I'm gonna see a memory from my own mind?" He sounded horrified.

Dumbledore said, "You can use my Pensieve, if you'd like."

"Your Pensieve? It's mine now," Minerva said dryly.

Albus chuckled and said, "So it is, my dear. So it is."

Hermione was surprised to see a blush creep up McGonagall's neck. She filed that away as quite interesting. Had they had a more personal relationship?

"Maybe you'd be happier if Minerva went with you two. An experienced set of eyes might be of value."

Raven looked more hopeful. "Would you go with us?"

The old woman looked touched. "Of course, Severus... Raven."

"Hermione, why don't you take Raven on a tour of Hogwarts. Maybe something else will come back to him," Minerva suggested.

"I'd rather no one see him. Someone might recognize him. He's not ready."

"I can put a glamour charm him." She waved her arm and Raven's features changed. His hair was now short, brown, and wavy. The bump on his nose was gone. The few differences made such a change that Hermione was sure no one would recognize him.

She led him to a mirror. He gasped when he saw his reflection. He reached up to touch his face. "Don't feel no difference."

"You wouldn't. It's not really your face that's changed, it's just the external view...like a mask laid over your face," Minerva explained.

"Not bad," he said, sliding his fingers across his chin.

Hermione took his fingers in her hand. "Raven, I like you just the way you are." Her other hand slid over his cheek, feeling his familiar features under the glamour.

He bent over their fingers and kissed her hand.

Behind them Minerva and Albus exchanged wide-eyed looks and silly smiles.

Albus piped up, "You two are certainly close now. You say it's only been a week since you found him, Hermione."

Hermione broke the gaze she and Raven were giving each other and had the good grace to blush. "Yes, only a week. It's transformed both our lives," she said, staring back into Raven's eyes.

She glanced around Raven at Dumbledore. "Professor, if Raven remembers his life as Severus, will he remember the time we have spent together?"

Dumbledore looked serious. "I'm not sure, Hermione. It's possible for him to remember both periods in his life. Usually when one remembers a past life because of amnesia, the current life takes a back seat. But eventually some of it comes back. If you have strong enough feelings for each other, there is a good chance it will resurface. Are you sure you want to recall who you were, Raven? Severus lived a life filled with ugliness, fear, and pain."

"Hermione wants me to help her friend, Harry. I do not remember him, but this is very important to her. I would do anything for her. Since he is injured by a spell from Voldemort, it's possible we might find information leading us to an answer for him as well."

Minerva came forward, taking Raven's and Hermione's hands in her weathered fingers. "I would be so grateful to both of you if you could help that boy. He deserves more than just laying in that bed. The whole Wizarding world owes him so much."

Hermione assured her, "We will do our best for Harry. In the meantime, Raven is writing a journal of his life now, and perhaps you will help us learn how to store some of his best memories of us if the time comes for the spell to be broken."

"Of course," Minerva said. "Go and tour Hogwarts. Albus and I will talk about what we can do to help you prepare for your journey to the Carpathian Mountains. We can watch the memories later."

Hermione added a glamour to herself as well. She then nodded to the two older people, took Raven's hand, and led him out of the office.

Minerva turned to Albus. "Well, can you beat all... the boy's in love. Do you see how gentle he is...how open and loving. Is that how Severus could have been in a different life?"

Albus sniffled. Always emotional, he had found the changed Severus quite touching. "I think so, Minerva. What difference there is in him! He's also so different from what Hermione said she found. I always thought love was all that boy needed. I guess I was right."

"That and to be unfettered by his past," Minerva observed.

"Yes, you're right. Now, how can we help them on this difficult journey?"

Minerva sat down at her desk and made a list as she and Albus discussed what they might send.

Hermione and Raven went first to the Great Hall. He was awed by its size and the sky that seemed to take up the entire ceiling. It was class time, so the big room was empty. They walked up to the staff table, and Hermione showed him where he used to sit during meals.

Raven ran his hands over the carved wooden chair and tried to imagine the room filled with students. He shook his head sadly. "Nothing," he said.

Hermione took his hand and led him through the teacher's entrance and down to the Potions classroom. This hour of the day was the teacher's free period, and as luck would have it, he was not present. They stood in the room and looked at the desks.

Raven said, "The smell is familiar. It gives me a feeling of belonging."

Hermione smiled, hugging his arm to her. "That's the second scent you've remembered."

"Minerva, she must have been a friend, like you said. Why else would I make a personal perfume for her?"

"What did it make you feel when you smelled it?" Hermione asked curiously.

"Like..."

"Say it, Raven," she prompted.

"Like a mother. She felt like a mother should."

"You should tell her; she would be very happy. She has dedicated her life to this school, and its teachers and students. They are and have been her family." She giggled. "I think she and Albus were sweet on each other. Did you see the looks they exchanged?"

"They were kind of like the ones we were giving each other." He smiled down at her.

Hermione laughed. "I think they were able to tell we're more than friends. They were exchanging looks."

Raven bent to kiss her. "What do you think they might have thought about that?"

"Honestly, I think they would be very happy for us, for you. Your happiness means a lot to them. They raised you from childhood and may have been more parental than your own parents were."

"I think you might be right," he said.

They spent more time looking at the room and the desk, but nothing else seemed to spark Raven's memory.

At the Owlery, Hermione wrote Molly a letter while Raven looked out at the lake. She sent it off, and then they walked down to the lake. The giant squid was swimming close to the surface.

When a mermaid jumped into the sky and splashed back into the water, Raven jumped back. "What the..."

Hermione led him to the bench and he sat white faced. "You've got to warn me! This magic world is beyond fantasy."

Hermione laughed. "There's so much to share with you, Raven. Some things you've just got to experience for yourself."

About that time the front door erupted with students, and the yard filled with kids talking and laughing and goofing around.

Hermione watched Raven's face to see how he would react to students. She saw him frown and could imagine Snape's old face under the glamour with his customary frown. But then a smile of wonder broke out. "I wish I could remember school. It must have been nice to be free of worry."

Hermione agreed with him that school should have been free of worry. But for now, there was no need to burden him with the fact that school had not been a fun experience for him. If he regained his memories, he would know then.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 of 63

Hermione flees the wizarding world and comes face to face with her past.

Later in Headmistress McGonagall's office, Raven and Hermione listened as she told them all the things that they should take with them on their trip. As it was late in the afternoon, Minerva suggested they stay the night in guest quarters. That way, they could observe Snape's memories tomorrow.

Hermione was given a room next to Raven's in a wing not occupied by students at that time. It was used for guest quarters during special ceremonies...often housing dignitaries or parents. The rooms were huge and had the customary four-poster beds in house colors.

Raven agreed to stay in the Gryffindor corner. There was a common room much like the Gryffindor common room. Raven and Hermione cuddled up on the sofa in front of the fire. She sat with her back to his chest.

"It's wonderful to be here in the castle. I loved it here as a child. Classes, friends..." Her voice trailed off as sharp memories of Harry and Ron hit her.

As if reading her mind, Raven asked, "This Ron, you never talk about him. What happened between you?"

Hermione took a shuddering breath. "We were friends for years. The three of us grew up together. Like the three Musketeers, my mum would often call us. Puberty hit, and it got awkward between Ron and I. I developed a crush on him. But he was a git and couldn't see it. He had a girlfriend for a time. It was a very painful time in our lives. We put poor Harry in the middle of it. Then the war came; by then Ron and I had worked our way back to each other before the final battle. I guess I thought our future held marriage and children. When he died, part of me died."

Raven had wound his fingers into hers, and she stared at their joined fingers. She felt him stiffen a bit behind her. She turned toward him, slipped her arms around his neck, and held him close.

"Raven, since I met you, since we have become close, this is the first time I've felt I can let that all go. I have a life again and someone I care for very deeply." She heard him sigh, and he relaxed against her. "Please don't ever feel jealous of Ron. He's the past. You're my present..."

"And future?" he asked.

She drew back and smiled at him. "Well, I didn't want to presume."

Raven caressed her cheek with his fingers. "I don't want to ever be without you, Hermione."

"Ever?" she said, her voice getting a bit husky with desire.

"Never, ever." He kissed her deeply, and she buried her hands in his hair.

"Raven, please stay in my room with me tonight. I don't want to be alone here. There are so many memories."

He stood and drew her to her feet. "Let's make some new ones."

Arm in arm they went into her room and shut the door.

Breakfast in the Great Hall in the morning was an experience. They were seated at the head table. Raven again wore the glamour. Hermione wore one too, still not wanting to be recognised. As she looked out over the school she realized how much she loved it. And as she sat looking at all the faces before her, she realized something else: She wanted to teach. She wanted to teach here at Hogwarts. But if Raven remembered who he was, would he want to come back here and continue teaching? McGonagall had let it slip during the breakfast that the teacher who was teaching Potions was temporary and would be gone when this year was over. They would also need a Charms teacher. Granted, they were only a third into the year. Maybe it would give them the time they needed to figure out what their lives were going to be. She knew it was silly to hope things would work out. They still had a long, dangerous search before them, and neither knew what would happen if the search was successful. But maybe she could at least tell Minerva her thoughts before they left.

Again they stood in Minerva's office with Dumbledore in attendance. One of the memory vials had been poured into the Pensieve, which sat on a low table in the center of

the room. The three travelers stood around the bowl. Minerva took one of each of their hands, and they leaned forward and plunged their faces into the silver memory.

They found themselves in a dark forest. There was a fire burning in the center of a circle of Death Eaters. A man knelt before Voldemort. "You are young, and I will forgive you this once. If you ever hesitate to follow my orders again, you will not be so fortunate. Do you understand?"

The man kneeling at his feet kissed the Dark Lord's shoes. "Yes, my Lord, I will not fail you again."

"Crucio!" Voldemort cried out. His wand waved, and the body of the Death Eater contorted in agony at his feet. He writhed so much that his mask fell away.

Hermione, Minerva, and Raven watched in horror as a young Severus Snape was revealed.

The scene faded and they found themselves in a dark, old house. Severus, only a few years older, was hiding behind a door. Voldemort could be seen pacing the room, and a rather beautiful Bellatrix Lestrange stood close by, watching him with a look of adoration on her face.

"You're certain of the origin of this book?" He held a heavy, leather-bound book.

"Yes, it belonged to Salazar Slytherin himself. There is a spell to change the Mark your followers already bear. There will be no doubt of their loyalty; and if their betrayal causes you injury, their minds will be stolen from them and locked forever from their recall, unless you so desire to restore them." She fawned over him. Her hands moved seductively over his legs as she prostrated herself before him. This Voldemort still looked human, more like the young Tom Riddle.

Voldemort swooped down and grabbed Bellatrix by the neck and dragged her to her feet. Her nose was one inch from his. "If you ever breathe a word to anyone about this magic, I will cut your brain from your skull while you live. There will be no going back for you. Do you understand?"

Bellatrix turned a pale shade of gray and fell back at his feet. "I will never breathe a word. It is already forgotten."

"See that it is." He hissed, kicked her away from him, turned toward the door, and strode from the room.

Severus barely had a chance to jump behind the door.

Again the scene faded, and the three observers found themselves in a dark cavern. An unmasked Severus Snape stood before Voldemort; he was in his late 30s and looked much like Raven did today. Voldemort, snakelike and repulsive, was staring at the Potions master. "Are you certain no one saw you leave tonight?"

"Quite certain, my Lord."

Voldemort turned, and his hand swept the width of the cavern. "This is my home, Severus. You have proven your loyalty, my favorite of servants. I wanted you to see what can be yours if you deliver the Potter brat to me."

"Look, Severus. Look at the vast dark magic I have accumulated. Look at the treasures I would willingly share with my MOST faithful servant if you bring the boy to me."

The cavern was laden with piles of gold, jewels, and works of art. Books filled rough, wooden shelves; there was a vast library. Severus looked on with eyes hungry for the knowledge they held.

"You will bring me the boy and watch while I cut the heart from his chest. You and I will feast on it together."

He grabbed Severus' arm and, with the wave of his wand, opened a deep wound on Severus' hand. Producing a parchment, he pressed a bloody hand print into the paper and added a print of his own. If you fail me in this assignment I will take all that you know and care about. It will be but one thought in my mind, and it will be gone. Do not fail me." Voldemort pushed Severus back, and then he fell to his knees. "Activate your Portkey and return to Hogwarts. I will soon call you back, and you will bring the boy to the place of my choosing."

The observers saw Severus pull at some vegetation in the crevices of the wet, humid cavern floor. He slipped it into his pocket.

"Yes, my Lord." Severus bowed and backed away. Again the scene faded, and they found themselves in Snape's rooms at Hogwarts seconds after his return from the cave.

Severus had fallen to his knees. "Lily, I will protect him. I have promised. My life is forfeit, and my memory forfeit if I can save your son for you." The words were spoken to the empty room.

The memory faded, and the three observers stood again in the Headmistress' office.

Raven was pale and slipped into a chair. Hermione went to her knees beside him.

"It was not only the Mark but a blood oath," Minerva said with horror. "Albus, it was a blood oath." She said looking toward the portrait. Then filled him in on what they had seen.

"It's worse than we feared," Albus admitted, "but it's not insurmountable. If the spells or charms he used are recorded in that cavern of knowledge, you will be able to break them. There is nothing we can do here. If you wish to do this, wish to help Harry, the sooner you start the better." He told the young couple. "Tomorrow, Minerva, you will ask Dobby to collect the things that he can here at the castle. You will go with Hermione and Raven to Hogsmeade and buy the rest."

"Hermione, do you still own that magic bag?" Dumbledore asked.

"Yes," she said, pulling it from inside her robe. "It was the only thing I kept with me after I left my home."

"I'm pleased you kept it. It will be invaluable on this trip. I believe we can find one for Raven, too, so you won't have to carry everything." He looked down at Raven who was still in the chair. "Are you okay, Son?"

Raven nodded. "Was I that harsh? My face was so hard, so impenetrable. There was evil radiating off me. How could I have given my allegiance to such a man? What kind of person was I?"

"You were a very misguided one," Albus said kindly. "You had been given little care over your entire life, and his followers offered you friendship and belonging. I often blamed myself for not making your life at this school easier."

Hermione sighed. She had hoped to keep the nature of Severus' life at Hogwarts from him.

He looked at her. "You did not tell me I had a hard time here."

Hermione shook her head. "Raven, I only saw a few glimpses of your life here. You shared a few memories of your sacrifices for Harry with him the day you 'died,' vanished as it were. Harry's father hated you, and his friends often ganged up on you. Lily, Harry's mother, was your childhood friend, and she fell in love with James Potter. I think you joined Voldemort to get away from your feelings of betrayal and maybe to initially get power to hurt James with, but you betrayed them all by relaying part of a message you heard. What you heard ultimately led to James and Lily's deaths. You spent the rest of your life trying to protect her son; in doing so, you put yourself at great risk all of your adult life as a double agent. The power of your mind is phenomenal. You were able to keep that secret from Voldemort even though he had the power to read your thoughts."

Raven had turned away from her. She grabbed him by the front of his robe and pulled him close. "You made up for that error of youth by saving many, many countless Order members. You showed Harry how to defeat that monster, and you saved our world."

"She's right, my boy," the old headmaster said. "You did all that and so much more that you have shared with me these many years. Countless times you managed to thwart Voldemort's plans one way or another. Lives were saved and sometimes lost. You'd grieve for them...sometimes at the bottom of a bottle...and I knew your heart broke. That maniac tortured you many times. Poppy would stitch you up with magic. Yet you still pulled yourself up and went back time after time. The Wizarding world has no clue of the debt they owe you."

Minerva looked on with tears streaming down her face. She'd had her reservations about the feelings between Snape and Hermione, considering the age difference; but as she watched the young woman soothe and heal the older man with her love, she let those doubts go. She was grateful to Hermione for the heart full of love she had and for the fact that she was able to love her "son." For many years she had been hurt by the cloak of evilness that Snape had wrapped about himself in order to survive Voldemort. She had watched others who felt betrayed by his duplicity even when Albus had vouched for Severus. Even she had doubted the old man's belief in Snape a time or two. It had driven a wedge between her and Albus. She had thought she'd let go of the old hurt and pain after the war, but today she realized she would have to have a heart-to-heart talk with her old headmaster.

Raven held on to Hermione and cried again. Inside he was a huge emotional wreck. If this Snape had been so strong, why was he so weak? Why did everything he learned about his past devastate him so? He looked up at Albus. "Why am I so unable to control or accept what I was?"

Chapter 17

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Hermione flees the wizarding world and comes face to face with her past.

Albus looked at the young man cradled in the even younger woman's arms and said, "Severus Snape was made strong by his experiences. It hardened him into that amazingly talented spy. Voldemort took it all away from you. He left you little more than a child in a man's body. All the hardness, maturity, and pain that was Severus is gone. You don't have to hide your feelings like he did. Raven, what you are now is a wonderful, kind, feeling man. There's nothing wrong with that. If you and Hermione are successful, we can only hope that you will be able to integrate the two men you have been into a whole, kind, gentle man who has strength and leadership abilities."

"Leadership? What for?" he asked curiously.

Minerva stepped forward. "I always hoped you would one day fill my shoes here at Hogwarts."

"What? Be a headmaster?" He laughed. "You've got to be kidding."

"You already filled the position in the past for a short time. You did a good job considering the circumstances."

Raven got to his feet and pulled Hermione with him. "Hermione mentioned that. I can't fathom it." He laughed nervously.

Albus said, "Well, nothing can be done about it all unless you recover who you were. It's ironic that in doing so you could possibly help Harry...the same boy your other life was lived to save."

"Ironic," Raven said dryly.

Hermione, Minerva, and Albus laughed at his tone, which was so like his old self.

Minerva gave Raven a magic backpack that was much like Hermione's bag. He watched gobsmacked as they packed item after item into the bag: a tent, tools, food, clothing for all kinds of weather, books, and potion's ingredients. They also spent a few hours teaching Raven to do spells that would return the items to their normal size and then reduce them back. Poppy came in the evening after dinner and taught Hermione and Raven to do some minor healing spells and Hermione to do some more serious spells. It was a lot to take in.

That evening as they sat before the fire in their common room, they looked carefully through the diary Snape had left Raven. There were other details about the caverns, such as the scent of sulfur and the sound of water dripping in the background. There were extensive notes taken on the sample of moss he had collected that day. And there were maps of the Carpathian Mountains and the areas in which the moss was common. It looked like Snape had spent several summer vacations hunting many of the areas of the mountains and eliminating a number of them. Hermione was grateful for the research included in the diary, and they made a plan based on the remaining areas that he hadn't had time to search.

"Of course, we will have no clue if Voldemort was able to conceal himself from Snape during those searches. He may not have known it was Snape, but he would have made his Lair as invisible as was possible with his extensive knowledge of magic. She was certain that Snape had also known some very serious concealment charms and was pleased he had included some of them at the end of the diary. There were a number of charms and spells that they might find useful in the search.

Raven began to kiss the back of her neck, and soon the book fell to the floor unheaded. He drew her into his lap and kissed her breathless and then slid his hand over her breasts, feeling the nipples harden beneath the robe's fabric. "Enough books for tonight," he whispered against her lips.

She moved to straddle his lap and pushed the robes away from his shoulder and kissed her way down his neck and across his shoulders. He lay back against the pillows and closed his eyes, and she made her way down his body. His fingers slid through her hair as she set his nerves on fire.

They woke in the early morning hours, still wrapped up in each other's arms, on the couch in the common room. They had pulled a knitted blanket over them. Hermione, who was spooned against him, stretched; she loved feeling the length of his naked body against hers.

Raven ran his hand down her side and over her leg. She nearly purred with happiness. "I can't remember ever feeling so content," she whispered to him.

"Neither can I." He chuckled. "Not that I remember anything."

She turned to face him. "If Harry didn't need your help, I would not change who you are for the whole world. I will only hope that when you are Severus Snape again, you

will also remember the bond we have formed."

"I also hope I remember. I will certainly make efforts to leave him as much of my memories as possible. Knowing how I feel when I am with you, I do not believe he will ever be happy unless he is with you."

"It's weird to speak of Severus as a totally different person...like he has his own body elsewhere." She caressed his face and placed tiny kisses along his jaw and the corner of his mouth. "You have his face and his scent, like his classroom, which I have always loved. The scent is like the spices of the potions he has brewed all his life. If for some reason he does not remember our time together, I swear I will make him. Raven, I swear to you." She slipped her arms around him and buried her face in his neck, and they both held on tightly until they had to dress for breakfast.

That morning after breakfast, Hermione found herself alone with Minerva in her sitting room while Albus had a private talk with Raven.

"Minerva, do you think I could teach here once all the stuff with Raven and me is settled?"

Minerva gasped and reached out to take the young witch's hands. "Oh, I would love that. If you come here, there is more chance of you and Severus working something out."

"You really love him like a son, don't you?" Hermione observed.

Minerva looked surprised. "I didn't think it showed."

"To me, yes." She added, "Minerva, Raven said when you hugged him, he felt as if a mother was hugging him." Hermione saw the old witch's eyes fill with tears.

"I nearly fainted when I saw him alive. He has been like a son to me. Mine are lost to me. They're off in their own worlds. They seldom communicate. Severus and I were student and mentor when he was young. We always kept our relationship a secret since I was a Gryffindor and he was a Slytherin. But we spent many evenings together. He needed someone so bad, Hermione. Yet I always felt I failed him, and I felt betrayed when he became a Death Eater. As the years went by, we were able to become friends of sorts, but I always mistrusted him. You have no idea how horrified I am to have not believed in him when he came back. Severus tried to make it up to me, with little things like the perfume, but I never quite forgave him for joining Voldemort. Yet I treasured it. I hope since I used it all the time he knew I still cared for him."

Hermione squeezed the old woman's hands. "I'm sure he did. He continued to make it for you, didn't he?" She sat back in her chair. "You have no idea how much I love him right now. I am so scared to lose him. He feels the same way, but our lives have never been ours. They were lived to serve and protect Harry. Even though he doesn't remember Harry, he still feels a sense of duty to him. It seems ingrained in him."

"I'm glad he feels that way. He may be Harry's only hope. I think the spell on Harry may be something similar. The link Voldemort and Harry shared through Harry's mark somehow had a similar effect...like Raven's Dark Mark."

"I think so, too," Hermione agreed.

Minerva said, "I'm glad you love Severus, Hermione. I never thought I'd see such happiness in his face. Whatever happens, I will be on your side if you need help to win him back later."

Later having said their good byes to Minerva and Albus, they returned to the little house on Spinner's End. They collected more things from the lab and took a few books from the library. That night, as they lay in Raven's bed, they didn't talk or make love. They just held each other and thought about the long, difficult trip they would begin in the morning.

They packed their personal stuff in the morning. After warding the house, Hermione took a small box from her pocket and opened it. Inside was a small, metal paperweight. It had been charmed by Minerva to deliver them in a certain area of the Carpathian Mountains.

"Reach out your hand and touch it at the same time I do, and try not to be too afraid. There will be a yanking sensation at your belly button; when the motion stops, we will be in the mountains."

He looked pale but nodded and reached out his hand over the box.

"On three: one, two, three," she counted slowly, and then they were whisked away.

They found themselves in a dense forest on the high cliff of a rocky mountain. Below a river ran through a deep gorge. It was cold, and the first thing they did was slip into warm coats. They already wore thick, turtleneck jumpers and heavy jeans. They had boots of fine leather lined with sheep's wool. They pulled their hoods up around their heads and turned to survey the area around them.

After setting up camp in a secluded area, they stepped into the tent to put their personal things. Hermione laughed at Raven's shock when he saw the interior of the tiny tent and discovered the magically enhanced rooms. It was similar to the one the Weasley family had used all those years ago at the Quidditch World Cup. The tent had a huge family room and even a magical bathroom. There were several bedrooms, but they chose one and decided they would sleep together.

Raven said, "Minerva probably thought we shouldn't be sleeping together."

Hermione laughed. "You're probably right. You know she is very happy for us."

"Is she? I'm glad," he said.

Hermione waved her wand and the extra bed was replaced by a worktable. She unpacked some of the books, and they spent several hours looking through the cave sites in the same mountain range. They tried to figure out if some of the caves Snape had mapped were known caves.

They decided to start their search at Ursilor Cave in the Apuseni Mountains where they were. Granted this was an established cave with tours, but they had agreed to take the tour and use their wands to detect any magically enhanced areas. Though unlikely, it would have been like Voldemort to flaunt his lair right under Muggle noses.

The tour was fun, and Hermione and Raven were amazed at the wonderful rock formations. The cave housed some of the largest stalactites in Romania. It was like having a vacation day. Raven, having no memory of any of his former life's adventures, was like a kid in a candy factory pointing here and there and dragging Hermione to this and that formation. She didn't remember the last time she'd had such a fun day. After the tour, they sat at the entrance of the cave and had a small picnic lunch. Later that day they returned to the tent and studied the maps and the diary.

After a dinner of cheese, bread, stewed meat, and some wine, they slipped into their warm bed. Raven initiated the lovemaking, and Hermione welcomed it. They gently explored each other with gentle kisses and light touches. Hermione lay clutching the bed covers as he ignited the passion in her body. She thought, *How will I ever live without him if he does not want me once we are successful?* A tear leaked out the side of her eye, and Raven froze when his lips tasted the tear.

"Am I hurting you?" he asked, alarmed.

She groaned. "No, don't stop, please."

"You're crying," he accused.

"Raven, I'll tell you about it later. Please continue!"

"But..."

"Raven!" she cried out in exasperation.

He grinned. "Your wish is my command, my lady."

Later, as he held her close, she whispered her fears to him, and she could tell by the way he clutched her that he felt the same way.

Chapter 18

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Hermione flees the wizarding world and comes face to face with her past.

The next day they got up very early, had breakfast, and were met by Dobby in the forest. He brought them a couple of horses and one mule laden with supplies. They packed the tent and rode for several miles until Raven spotted the opening to a cave, partially hidden by a bush. "Hermione," he said, making her stop her horse.

She turned in the saddle to look at him. "Yes?"

"That cave, up there. It's triangular...well, from here it looks triangular. Isn't that something mentioned in Snape's diary?" he asked.

Hermione pulled out the diary and smiled. "Yes, it does say 'a partially hidden triangular cave'. Good eye." Hermione dismounted and bent to stretch her back and legs.

Raven slid off his horse, surprised that his legs felt weak and his behind sore. The cushioning charm hadn't helped that much. He copied Hermione and stretched a bit as she walked up to him. "Do you want to go and check it out? There might be something in there."

"I think we should," he said, glad to have his legs feeling normal again. The cave looked undisturbed. The book didn't say if Severus had explored it. It was as if it was something he'd mapped but hadn't had time to look into. They set the tent up near a small stream. Then they tethered the horses in an area big enough for them to graze well and headed in. They had only gone in a short way when the cave opened into a huge cavern with a steep drop in the cavern floor. This required some rope to climb down twenty feet to the only visible way forward. They used their wands to illuminate the interior. Hermione conjured a line of blue light etched into the wall of the cave about shoulder height, leaving a trail they could follow back. They climbed through tunnels and scrambled through passageways leading to amazing rooms of crystal formations, quartz, calcite, and probably gold. The crystal and quartz of the rock in the walls magnified their simple light like mirror reflections off every surface. Hermione wished they had a camera to take pictures. As the day wore on, they could not detect any magical signatures or wards. Hermione suggested they spend the night there. They had much more to explore, and they were both exhausted.

"But how can we stay here?" Raven asked. "The tents are back in the forest, and we don't have anything with us for tonight."

Hermione gave him a mischievous smile and pulled the bag from under her thick coat. From it, she produced a tiny lamp, a sleeping bag, a small cook stove, and food. They found a small alcove in the cave with a soft, sandy bottom and decided to set up camp there. With a wave of her wand, the items expanded, and they set about making a nice camp. Hermione warded the entrance, and after a quick meal of venison and water, they fell asleep in each other's arms.

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Hermione found herself alone in a huge cave; it was so dark the light from the tip of her wand barely pierced the darkness before her. "Raven?" she called out in confusion. "Where are you? She moved forward and heard a soft sliding sound close by. Panic gripped her. She knew that sound, Nagini! But Nagini was dead, wasn't she? She started to swing her wand here and there, and she heard a hiss in the darkness.

"Raven? Help me!" she screamed into the blackness. Something brushed her leg, and she screamed and ran, firing off shots of energy around her feet in hopes of injuring the snake.

"Hermione!" She heard Raven's voice in the distance.

"Here! I'm here!" she cried, running toward the voice. No matter how long she ran, his voice never got closer, and she started to realize she wasn't getting any further from the hissing.

Then a blinding pain struck her leg and she screamed. A thickness bound itself around her, and she struggled.

"Hermione! Hermione! It's me, Raven. Wake up! You're dreaming..."

His voice finally got through to her, and she realized the thickness around her was his arms trying to stop her frantic flailing.

She fell back against him, crying with relief. It had been a nightmare. She sobbed in his arms. After what seemed like hours, her heart stopped pounding, and she managed through her sobs and gasps for breath to tell him about the dream.

After that, she insisted they leave the lamp on, and she clung to him, needing the reassurance the contact of his body gave her.

"I didn't realize this would bring up so many bad memories and my fears," she whispered to him. "I know Voldemort is dead, but he was a powerful wizard, and he would have left all sorts of protections near his Lair...living monsters possibly, living guards likely, enchantments and wards most certainly. Some powerful Death Eaters escaped after the war. No one knows where they're hiding. It's possible we will encounter some of them on our journey."

Hermione knew a lot of defensive spells, and McGonagall and Dumbledore had taught her a few new ones. She decided it was a good idea to start teaching some of the

spells to Raven and to start working on his magical knowledge. They spent periods of their day "in school" of sorts as Hermione taught Raven how to defend himself. Hermione estimated that they could be in these mountains for months until they found what they were looking for. Thankfully, it had been prearranged that McGonagall would send Dobby with fresh supplies whenever they needed them. They really didn't have to worry about anything other than connecting with old spells or Death Eaters.

They spent the other half of their days exploring the amazing cave, returning to their tent each night. The longer they stayed in the cave, the more pensive Raven became. One night, Hermione noticed during dinner that Raven was unusually quiet. Hermione kept looking up at him, but he would glance away.

"Raven, what's wrong," she finally asked.

"Nothing!" he stated a bit tersely.

"C'mon, you've hardly eaten, and you're not talking to me," she urged.

He sighed and shook his head. "I brought the beaded necklace with me."

"Oh," she said. "Do you want to watch another memory?"

He got up and walked from the table and went to the bedroom.

Hermione followed him and watched him take the beads from his backpack. He pulled out a folded piece of soft, black velvet cloth. As he unwrapped the necklace, he was very careful not to let his fingers touch any of the beads. "I really don't want to see them, but I need to know who I was, don't I?"

She came and placed her hand on his arm. "Yes, you do need to know if you want to remember your past."

He let the beads drop to the bed, reached for her, and held her close. She could feel his body trembling and hugged him, stroking his back as she said, "Shh, it's okay. We don't have to do it if you're not ready."

"I hate my weaknesses. I don't even have the knowledge or skill to keep you safe," he said against her hair. "I am a weak person, Hermione. How can you care for me? I should be taking care of you."

"You do take care of me. If you hadn't been there when I had that nightmare, I may have run off into the caves and gotten lost. I was so terrified. You were there to hold me and bring me back to my senses. Kindness, gentleness, and concern are not weaknesses, Raven. Most men, and especially Snape, hide behind a wall of hate and anger. You being able to show what you feel is a blessing."

"A blessing, to who? Me...Snape...we are the same. Inside, I am trying to reconnect with a monster. You said it yourself: He was a hateful man. If I reconnect with who I used to be, I could lose you, lose everything. I want everything. I want to remember, and I want to help your friend Harry, and I want to have you as well."

She held him tightly, "I do too, Raven. I want all those things for us too."

"I'm sorry, Hermione. I know we've already talked about this. But I can feel a panic each time we take a step closer to my memory returning."

"And we will keep talking about it. Only you can know if it's what you want." Inside Hermione was a tangle of emotion. She knew she loved this man just the way he was, but she also knew she had to help Harry. She felt she owed him that.

Raven put her from him with a sigh. "Life is not always what we want. It's what must be. As Snape, I have a responsibility to that young man. If I went through hell for so many years to save his life, then I cannot go back on a life long pledge to protect him now, can I? It doesn't matter that I don't personally remember it. It is what I lived my life doing, and, in that life, it seems the only thing that brought me honor. I will not let him down or go back on my word now."

He turned to the beads. "I'm going to grab at the one next to the last one we watched." He held out his hand to her. "Will you go with me?"

"Of course." As she took his hand, he reached out and touched the bead.

They found themselves in a darkened barn. The only light was coming through cracks in the boards.

Severus as a young child, sat among the hay bales with his mother near him. She had a wand, and she was demonstrating spells for him. The small, thin boy with the long, black hair watched intently. In his small hand, he held a small wand and practiced with her. Hermione recognized some of the spells. A few she was showing him were some more complicated ones.

There was a rabbit sitting before him on the hay. "Severus, hold the wand straighter," his mother commanded and demonstrated the wand movement with slow precision. "Raise it like this: swish and twist."

Severus did as she said and then spoke the incantation clearly with the movement, "Veraverto." Suddenly there was a candleholder sitting where the rabbit had been.

His mother grabbed him in a big hug and exclaimed, "My little Wizard! I knew you were going to be a Prince among men. Barely five and doing spells a child of eleven can barely master!"

Raven and Hermione watched the child's face light with happiness at his mother's praise. Seconds later, the wonderful scene was shattered.

The door flew open, and in came Tobias Snape, Severus' father. "Witch!" he growled. "Haven't I forbidden you to teach that boy magic? It's bad enough I have to have a freak for a wife, and now you want my son to be a freak, too! I thought I had that wand hidden. You've been in my things," he snarled as he strode up to them. He swung his arm and smacked her hard enough to knocked her back, and her wand flew out of her hand. Then with his back-swing motion, he whacked Severus sideways before he could get away, which shattered Severus' nose.

The boy screamed in pain.

His mother screamed in fury and launched herself at Tobias Snape. Landing against him, she beat him around the face with her hands. "How dare you touch my son! You're nothing more than a drunk and a bully. I may be a witch, but you are a worthless human, Muggle."

He tossed her off. "You dare attack me, woman. I warned you." He hit her several times, blackening her eyes and splitting her lip.

Severus' mother scrambled to retrieve her wand, but she was too late. Tobias snatched it from the floor where it had fallen and snapped it in half.

Eileen fell back with an anguished cry and screamed, "Noooo!"

Tobias pushed a huge finger into her face. "If I ever see another hint of magic from you, I will kill the boy, and you will watch. You hear me, witch?" He turned and left, slamming the door behind him.

Eileen crawled to her son and pulled him into her lap. She pressed the hem of her robes to the boy's nose to staunch the bleeding. "There, there," she cooed at him. "One day you will make your mommy proud and kill that bastard, won't you, Sevy?"

Severus eyes were wide with fear and pain, but then his lips curled up in an ugly smile, and he nodded.

The scene faded, and Hermione and Raven stood back in their tent. As before, Raven dropped the beads and stood shaking. His eyes filled with tears.

Hermione took him in her arms and held him tightly as he cried. "I killed him, like she asked. Many years later."

"What?" Hermione asked, gobsmacked at his confession. "Do you remember something?"

"No, it's a notation in his journal. Like it meant nothing: 'I killed my father today.' I was a monster. She raised me to be a monster. What mother tells a five-year-old to kill his father? She couldn't have loved me. Why did she leave me these memories? They have all been terrible ones." He turned and walked out the tent flap into the moonlit night.

Hermione grabbed a blanket off the bed and followed him. It was a cold night, and he'd left his jacket behind. She found him standing about twenty feet from the tent, staring into the darkened forest that surrounded them. She tossed half the blanket around his shoulders and pulled it around herself as well.

"Raven, your life may have been full of horrible things, but when she held you and praised you, I saw the love you both shared. You saw the happiness in your face, didn't you? She left the beads so you would know that even though she made some horrible choices in marrying your father and staying with him, she *loved you!* You were her hope for the future of your family. You were her pride and joy...the only thing in her life that gave her pleasure."

"If he were here, I'd strangle him with my bare hands."

There was such bitterness in his voice that Hermione shivered against him.

He turned to her. "I'm sorry I frightened you."

"No, you sounded like Snape."

"And you were afraid of him." He leaned down and kissed her. "You are the only good thing in my life. I promise never to hurt you."

Hermione pressed herself against him. She knew he might not be able to keep that promise, but it was good to hear. She let her thoughts go and surrendered herself to the headiness she felt from his kiss as his tongue teased her mouth and made her weak in the knees. Needing reassurance that he was not the monster he used to be, he picked her up and carried her into the warmth of the tent. With a slow and deliberate gentleness, he kissed her face and his fingers caressed her. He gently shed her layers of clothing, leaving on her chemise.

Hermione buried her hands into his hair and urged his head down. She gasped as he sucked her nipple into his mouth; the soft fabric of her chemise only increased the friction against the tip, making it harden. She moaned and fumbled to open the buttons of his heavy flannel shirt. She finally slipped her hand across his bare chest and moaned again with the pleasure of feeling his skin under her hands. She felt rewarded as he groaned with his pleasure from her touch. After that, a flurry of clothing hit the ground as they nearly tore the clothes off each other, their need almost tangible in the tent.

Later with their clothing in piles around the bed, they lay sated, sleeping in each other's arms.

I hope you enjoyed this chapter. I received help from beawasley. She helped me make the chapter more visually interesting. Thank you so much to Lisa for her Beta work. She's amazing. Thank you to the readers for their comments. I love reading them.

Chapter 19

Chapter 19 of 63

Hermione flees the wizarding world and comes face to face with her past.

Several weeks had passed, and they continued to explore unremarkable cave complexes. They had traveled higher into the mountains. There was a rare beauty to the mountains. The area had once had many volcanoes, and it was riddled with caves. Vegetation and flora were everywhere. The meadows were filled with brilliant colors, and streams of icy water were fed by the snow in the higher mountains.

They saw Lynx, wolves, and bears. Simple repel spells kept the animals from bothering them and gave them wonderful views of the wildlife. One day they sat for several hours at a stream and watched beavers build a dam. There were little villages here and there, but for the most part they avoided people. One night, they came upon a caravan of Gypsies. Back in 1964, Gypsies had been forbidden to roam, and they had formed communities here and there. Yet there were still a few who traveled the mountains in caravans, staying ahead of the local authorities.

They were invited to sit around the campfire. Dinner was a gamy stew and coarse bread, but it was wonderful after their diet of dried beef stews. Hermione would be the first to admit she wasn't a cook. There was fresh fruit and baked tarts. They sat and listened to the music, heard stories, and watched some magical performances. Gypsies had their own form of magic, and many of them were seers. Hermione could feel the magic around them.

She had moved a few feet away from Raven as he talked with a man who was separating some herbs he had gathered in the woods. He was the medical man for the people in the small caravan.

She felt a hand grab at her arm, and she turned to find herself looking into an ancient face. The woman's eyes were white like boiled eggs without the yolk. She held herself up by a cane hewn from a branch of a tree. She wore many beaded necklaces, and a scarf was wrapped around her hair. She was dressed in the traditional layers of heavy skirts and had a vest of patchwork fabrics. She warned, "The place you search for is evil, and you must beware. Love can be lost there, lives changed, futures unknown, good, bad, it is what you make it."

The woman turned and hobbled away.

Hermione stared after her with her heart in her throat. Up till now, the idea of really losing Raven had only been one possible future. It was one they talked about but something she would not allow herself to believe was going to happen.

If Severus Snape looked at her with horror after he was returned to himself, how would she convince the man she had known that as Raven he had loved her? She had promised Raven she would do it, but there was no way to guarantee that any such reunion would be possible. Severus Snape had been a hard, horrible man on the outside. She did not know if a life hardened by his choices would allow him to reach out and love her again even if he remembered pieces of their life. She was terribly afraid Raven would be lost forever. Now this woman had said, 'Love can be lost.'

Hermione turned to watch Raven talking animatedly to the old Gypsy. He seemed to be learning about the herbs the man had collected. His face was alight, and his search for knowledge was satisfied for the moment. Hermione felt tears sting her eyes. She wiped them away and smiled at Raven when he turned to look her way.

Later, when nearly all the people had retired for the night, they sat with a few of the older couples at the fire and asked them if they had seen or sensed any unusual magical energy from any caves or areas that they might have passed in the last few weeks. The cave they sought in this area was not as well documented. They weren't even sure it was a cave. Severus had written that he'd sensed something in the area. He'd searched the place as best he could in the time he'd had one summer, but he hadn't been able to pinpoint a location from the odd magical signature that permeated the area. Hermione had hoped the Gypsies would have some clues for them.

The oldest man said, "You should go home and live your life. That sort of evil should not be stirred up."

Hermione tried to explain that the magic was residual and that the wizard from whom the evil originated had been destroyed. Yet they seemed reluctant to speak of the places that they may have felt or seen.

Finally one old man said he'd felt a strong magic that had made his skin crawl in a gorge about ten miles due west. He tried to describe the area and told them that if there was a cave hidden there, it was not visible from 50 or so feet back. The area had made him fear for his life, and he had run.

Hermione and Raven thanked the Gypsies for their hospitality and help and returned to the tent that they'd hidden in the woods nearly five miles from the Gypsy camp.

They talked into the night about the possibility that this might be Voldemort's lair, and they brushed up on their spell work. Hermione quizzed Raven about the spells he might use for different situations.

They made love slowly that night, feeling very blessed that they had each other. Finally they held each other as they fell asleep.

In the morning, they packed their bags with food, water, and weapons (always a good practice in a fight). If a wand was lost in close hand-to-hand combat, a weapon was the next best thing. Slim knives and some decoy bomb products from Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes. Raven had laughed when they had sent Minerva to the shop to buy gag gifts, but Hermione knew he would be grateful for them if they were needed.

They rode the horses close to the gorge and then tethered them in a secluded corps of spruce trees. They warded them and blanketed them with a concealment charm.

Hermione could feel the deep, possibly dark, magic that seemed to seep into their pores. She and Raven concealed themselves and crept carefully into the gorge.

The tall, limestone cliffs that rose above looked almost polished in the sunlight. Hermione saw bits of moss clinging to the sides of trees nearby. She pointed them out silently to Raven, and he nodded in comprehension. The moss was the same as the one in the sample Snape had left for them. They crept along one of the walls of the gorge. It took them two hours of climbing and searching the thick underbrush before they got to the back wall. They started their journey along the wall. Raven had his wand at the ready, and Hermione cast spells to detect wards and concealments.

About two kilometers along the wall, they detected an unseen barrier. There was a ward ahead. Hermione looked at Raven with mixed emotions: happiness that they might have found their goal and fear that they could be injured or killed by what lay ahead of them. Hermione cast a reveal on the wall. Slowly the wall began to shimmer, and a rough, low opening in the wall appeared. Before they could go forward, a spell like a beam of light shot out and burned the surface of a tree near Raven. He ducked behind the tree and fired off a returning volley. Hermione had ducked behind another tree and shot off a spell. They fired off spell after spell. Raven went toward a closer tree, and Hermione watched in horror as a spell shot toward him. He managed to raise his wand and knock the spell back but not before he received a shock like an electrical shock. He went down but fortunately rolled behind a large rock. Hermione shot off another spell. It hit a man in the shoulder. The spell caster fell out of the mouth of the cave. A Death Eater mask rolled away as the person hit the ground.

"Death Eaters!" Hermione called to Raven. "Be careful. These men are well trained."

Raven nodded, rubbing at his shoulder to force feeling to return. He moved closer and found himself under fire from someone else in the mouth of the cave.

They fired more spells as they worked their way closer tree by tree. Finally close enough, Hermione pulled a stun bomb from the pocket of her jeans and with a deft aim tossed it into the cavern door. A blue light erupted from the mouth of the cave. A muffled scream was audible, and then silence ensued.

Hermione placed a spell-reflecting shield around them, and they moved swiftly to the door. Raven lobbed a flare into the cave door, and it lit a room about 25 meters by 40 meters. Several Death Eaters lay unconscious on the floor. Not having expected the stun bomb had caught them by surprise. Hermione said, aloud, "Incarcerous." Ropes appeared and bound the men and one woman. Raven quickly found their wands and collected them. He searched their robes and found several knives, and one Death Eater had an extra wand tucked into a boot.

Hermione surveyed the room. There didn't appear to be any other exits. There was a stockpile of supplies. But upon closer look, the Death Eaters appeared very thin and malnourished. Their supplies were nearly gone. The place was dirty and stank from their long use.

"A Death Eater hideout," she said with disgust. "This scum killed friends and maybe my parents." She pointed her wand at one of the men who was coming around and struggling against his bonds.

"You!" he spat, catching sight of Hermione, "The great war hero. Your parents begged for death," he taunted her. Then noticing Raven, he said, "Look, it's the traitor. We thought you were dead."

"Reports of my death are greatly exaggerated," Raven replied in a Snape-like voice. "Tell us where Voldemort's lair is."

"I wouldn't even if I could. I was not a trusted member of his followers like you," he growled. "You had his trust, and you chose to stand by half-bloods and Mudbloods."

Raven felt an uncharacteristic rage envelope him. He knew what "Mudblood" referred to. He swung his foot and caught the man in the ribs. The Death Eater cried out in pain and curled away from Raven's foot.

Hermione had watched frozen. She felt such rage. She felt her magic welling up inside her, and she wanted to Crucio the murdering Death Eater. This was the group who had murdered her parents. She raised her wand and cried out, "Crucio."

Raven simultaneously raised his and blocked the spell. It hit the wall behind them with a deafening boom. "No, Hermione! If you do this, you will never forgive yourself. You cannot become one of them. Our magic is for defense only. I will not let you kill those who have killed your parents. I do not even remember murdering my father, but knowing I did it makes me feel tainted by evil, and I do not want you to feel regret afterwards."

She was staring at him with anger. "It's not the same thing. They deserve to die! I didn't ask for your interference. This scum killed the only family I had. They deserve a horrible death. They probably killed friends, dear friends. People I loved." She was crying now.

"They deserve the very worst. We will send them to Azkaban. From what I've read, it's a living death...far worse than you killing them now."

She turned a stricken face his way. Her disappointment in him was evident, but she would not cross him now. She turned and ran out of the cave, leaving him there alone with the five Death Eaters. Realizing the danger he was in as a novice in spellwork with five heavily trained, evil wizards, he called out, "Dobby, I need help."

There was a loud crack, and Dobby stood there with several other house-elves. Albus had agreed to send house-elves to help if they needed it. House-elves had their own powerful magic. Raven, having been adamant that no one know he was alive, had accepted the elves' help because he knew they would be duty bound to silence.

Dobby placed the Death Eaters in a kind of stasis spell after he'd taken in the scene. It would prevent them from using non verbal or wandless magic."

The little elves took charge of the Death Eaters hovering them in the air and wrapping them in magical chains.

"Sir?" Dobby asked. "Miss Hermione, she okay?"

"Yes," Raven said, looking into the elf's wide, liquid orbs. "Please tell Minerva and Albus that I am taking care of her. I would prefer my part in this be obliterated from their minds. Tell the headmaster this was not the cave we sought. We will journey on. Thank you for your help."

A wide smile appeared on the little elf's face. "You're most welcome, sir. Dobby is here to serve." He bowed, and with a loud crack the elves and prisoners Disapparated.

Raven turned and ran from the cave out into the trees. He looked for Hermione and didn't see her anywhere. The evil feeling that had tried to repel them earlier that morning was no longer there. The spells broken by the capture and binding of the spellcasters. Raven saw that the grass at the edge of the clearing before the cave was crushed a bit, and he followed a trail of broken twigs and crushed plant life deep into a forest of spruce and heavy foliage. The forest gave way to beech trees, and he found a stream bubbling along through the forest. A footprint in the mud showed him that she'd jumped the tiny stream. He followed, realizing she was still running from the murderers of her parents or maybe her desire to murder them as well. Was she running away from him? Would she forgive him for stopping her? The idea made him gulp with fear. He would not know until he caught up with her.

He followed what trail he could see. Then when the forest got darker and denser, he used a tracing spell and followed the trail. Nearly three hours later, exhausted and at his wits' end, he stumbled on her, curled in a ball at the foot of a huge tree. He picked her up, and she buried her face in his neck. "Raven, I'm sorry," she whispered.

"There is nothing to forgive," he told her. "You gave me such a fright."

Taking his bearings, he realized they weren't too far from the tent. Hermione having run from the cave but fortunately toward the tent had brought them most of the way back. It took him another 30 minutes of stumbling through the darkened forest before he was able to detect the wards on their tent. He slipped into the warded area and then carried her into the tent. She had stopped sobbing, but she still clung to him with such strength as he tried to place her on the bed. In the end, he kicked off his shoes, slipped into the bed, and just held her long after she'd fallen into an emotionally spent sleep.

When he woke the next morning, Hermione was still curled up against him, but he could tell she wasn't asleep. He reached out to caress her arm, and she moved back against him even closer. "You okay?" he asked quietly.

She nodded. "I've killed Death Eaters before, but I've never hated like I did this time. I wanted to set them on fire and laugh as they burned. My reaction scared me so much. I had to get away. Once I started to run, I couldn't stop. It felt as if I ran that the hate and the pain washed away."

"I thought you were disappointed in me, disappointed that I was weak, that I stopped you from what it was you wanted to do," he said.

She turned her body toward him and caressed his face. "I will never be disappointed in you, Raven. Your goodness made me feel ashamed."

"Goodness?" He laughed sadly. "I'm the one who kicked him first. I couldn't stand him hurting you anymore than he already had. I wanted to tear his face off for even daring to call you that."

Hermione gave him a wan smile. "Good thing we both had some sort of restraint. What happened? I should never have left you."

"I called Dobby and he brought other Hogwarts house-elves. They bound the Death Eaters and took them to Minerva." He looked past her. "I was afraid they would escape me. I do not know enough to fight their kind of training even though you had immobilized them."

She nodded. "You have always been a wise man, Raven. Forgive me for deserting you. I promise I will not run again. I will be more prepared. I was horrified to come face-to-face with my parents' murderers and more horrified to come face-to-face with my own demons of revenge. I did not think myself capable of that."

"Having read a lot of information of Snape, I guess I am capable of anything, Hermione." He drew her close, and she let him kiss her and caress her, taking the tenseness out of her body. They lay kissing gently for some time and just enjoying each other before finally getting up to pack their stuff and ride to their next destination.

This chapter came about because I misnumbered previous chapters and had to write an extra one. I am not sure if I like it, and/but hope you find it somewhat entertaining. Thank you to Lisa for her Beta work. I couldn't do this without her.

Chapter 20

Chapter 20 of 63

Hermione flees the wizarding world and comes face to face with her past.

The next day they reluctantly packed after deciding the cave had been a useless search. They rode toward the next place. The trip high in the mountains took five days. When they got off their horses, they were slapped in the face by a sharp, icy wind. They quickly put a warming charm around themselves and erected a small shed for the horses and added a warming charm for them. Dobby had delivered hay bales shrunk into small cubes, so they expanded them and fed the animals. Hermione added a charm to replenish it if they didn't come back that day or the next.

Raven pulled out his wand and said, "*Erecto*." The tent opened and set itself up.

Hermione commented, "You're getting good at that. Let's change into our warm clothing."

Once changed, they decided to go into the cave right away.

They found the mouth of the cave buried beneath five feet of snow. There was barely a hint of the landmarks Severus had written about in his journal. When they entered the cave, Hermione felt the hair on her arms stand up. She saw Raven's eyes widen, and he shivered. He held his wand high to give them light, and Hermione held hers tightly and ran through defensive spells in her mind. There was definitely something here.

They cautiously moved forward. This cave had spikes of sharp ice sticking from the walls and ceiling. They had to side step some of them because they were that low.

A shriek of rage split the air around them, and they heard a shuffling sound ahead them. Hermione felt her breath leave her. Tangible fear was emanating from Raven.

"Back out! Back out!" she cried. She pulled back as a creature the size of a bear, covered in white fur, came galloping at them. Its face was long, and two sharp tusks protruded like boar tusks at the sides of its mouth. They stumbled and fell back, and Hermione's shoulder was pierced by one of the sharp ice shards. Raven grabbed her up, and they rolled head first out of the cave entrance. Hermione managed to fire off, "*Duro!*"

Instantly, the creature froze with its long paw with lethal claws still reaching for them. The beast had several rows of shark-like teeth. Six legs...all sporting wicked claws...held up the massive body... Its eyes glowed with a deep redness...even in stone.

They watched in horror as it started to warm and shake off the spell.

"Raven, get us into the tent!" Hermione screamed. She could feel the blood seeping from the wound in her shoulder, and the pain was like fire. "*Avis Oppugno!*"

Small birds with razor-sharp beaks came from her wand and flew into the creature's face. Its claws drew back, and it swatted at the birds, becoming distracted for a few precious seconds.

Raven dragged Hermione into the tent. "*Cave Inimicum!*" she shouted before fainting.

Raven glanced down at her in alarm and then at the lunging beast. It seemed to hit an invisible wall and bounce back. It whined, got to its feet, and tried again. Pawing at the shield, it seemed confused. Raven could see it through the door of the tent. It tried several more times and sniffed at the edge of the shield as Raven held Hermione against him. Finally the thing stopped trying to test the shield and turned and vanished back into the cavern.

Raven turned his attention to Hermione: Blood was covering her right shoulder. She was still out. He used his wand, as Poppy had taught him, and removed Hermione's jacket and shirt. He got potions from the bag he carried. He gave her a vial of blood replenisher and used another potion to sterilize and seal the wound. Then he wrapped her shoulder and laid her down on the bed. He would wait the required hour for the blood replenisher to do its job. If she had not regained consciousness by then, he would send for help.

He took his own jacket and shirt off and pulled her close, wrapping himself around her for warmth. The minutes seemed like hours before she finally groaned with pain and called to him, "Raven?"

"I'm here," he said, smoothing her hair down. "Take this pain potion. It will help."

"What happened?" she asked after swallowing the potion.

"You fell against one of the ice spikes."

Suddenly remembering, she asked excitedly, "That thing, what happened to it?"

"You put some sort of freeze spell on it and then made an impenetrable field around the tent. But the freeze spell wore off in less than a minute, and it came after us. It could not get through the shield around the tent. It finally gave up."

She trembled and laid her head on his shoulder. He held her close. "I need more practice. When I saw the blood, I just froze. I didn't react. You could have been killed, and I stood there like a statue and let it happen."

He got up and moved away. His shoulders were stiff. "This not having the part of Snape that makes me brave is a hindrance."

"You fought the Death Eaters just fine, Raven. You are brave. What happened that was different?"

"The blood, your blood," he admitted. "I was terrified; you have no idea. I wondered what would happen to me if you died. Nothing would matter to me at all. You are my life, Hermione. You are an anchor to a life I had. Without you, I'm a bum in a cardboard box. I can't go back there. I can't."

"Raven," she called to him and held out her arms, grimacing a bit with the mild pain the potion hadn't eased.

He came to her but knelt by the bed and laid his head on her knees. She stroked his hair for a long time.

The next morning they were both starving, and Hermione was much better. Only a little soreness remained. After breakfast, they moved the tent further away from the cavern's entrance and put a concealment charm on it as well as the wards.

"There," Hermione said as she set the last ward. "We are quite safe here, and the rock facing will give us some protection against the wind. "I'm afraid we are going to have to go back in there. That animal's guarding something."

"Agreed," Raven stated. "But before we do, I need some instructions and practice with the shield charm, the stone charm, and any others you think might help. That charm didn't keep him down long, but it gave us time to escape."

"The fact that it didn't keep him down means he's enchanted. He's got a reversal spell woven into his makeup. It didn't affect my shield...only those directed at its physical body."

She spent the morning teaching Raven the shield charm and several other defensive spells. He was so quick to learn. She only had to show him once or twice, and he had the spells down. They spent an afternoon running out in the snow firing spells at each other. Magic seemed to be in Raven's blood. It was more instinctive than learned. His body knew these spells well. Hermione realized that his mind just had to be reminded.

They ate well that day, trying to fortify themselves. They decided to wait till the next morning to enter the cave again. They would try a concealment charm to start with and see if they could get past the cave's guardian. They tried not to hope this was the real deal. Had they found Voldemort's lair, or was it just some other wizard's private lair? They had little doubt that there could be some serious obstacles ahead of them. They also knew this might be a false lead. Voldemort would never have considered defeat, so this could be just a tactic to throw people off. But it didn't matter: They had no clock to race against; all they would find were the ghosts of Voldemort's past. There would be formidable protections, but the wizard was dead, and enchantments from dead wizards eventually disintegrated and could be broken through with powerful enough spells. Dumbledore and McGonagall had given Hermione spells that caused destruction and death that could help. The young witch didn't really want to use them unless she had to. Having come close to killing the Death Eaters, she did not want to go there again.

That night they held each other, each thinking his or her own thoughts, and finally feel asleep.

The next morning, they packed some survival equipment and food. They made their way under the Disillusionment charm to the mouth of the cave. Hermione also put a silencing charm on them. There was some sort of natural light, like lichen, that grew on the walls of the cave. It allowed them to see without using their wands or torches. The cave seemed to expand about fifty feet in. They still had not seen any sign of the creature.

Fortunately, the inner cave didn't have icy spikes to navigate. They heard a rumbling ahead and discovered the beast slumbering in a small alcove. With stealth they slipped past the animal, and Hermione placed an impenetrable shield behind them. After that they let go of the Disillusionment and used their wands to brighten the area so they could see better. They could feel the magical wards pressing against them. This place was definitely hiding some secret. Abruptly, the cave floor vanished. Hermione, who was a step ahead of Raven, screamed as she felt herself falling. Raven's hand shot out and clamped onto her arm. He fell to his stomach and was half dangling over the edge. By some miracle, his feet found a crack in the cave floor, and it anchored him. His arm wrenched with the weight of her, but he hung on until she was able to climb back onto the edge of the cliff. She fell to the cave floor next to him, gasping for breath as she helped pull him back away from the crevasse.

A roar split the air, and they were on their feet and running into another branch of the tunnel. The beast was coming after them. Hermione placed a shield charm at the mouth of the cave, but they didn't know if the shield would hold for long under the onslaught of the magically enhanced animal. They were no longer in their own tent but under the rules of the cave itself. The tunnel opened into another cave, and they stopped short as a rope bridge spanning a 100-foot gulf appeared to be their only way forward.

Hermione, already weak from the injury and having just exerted a lot of energy climbing back from the abyss, was already panting with effort. Raven didn't have the ability to hover them past the bridge to the other side. And Hermione, who had always been afraid of flying, had not packed a broom. She cursed her fear of heights.

Raven said, "You go head. If you get into trouble, save yourself. Don't worry about me.

I'll enhance the bridge with a strength charm, and you run."

"Raven, no! You have to come with me. I won't leave you!"

He grabbed her arm and pushed her, "Hermione, trust me and go." He yelled at her with some of his old strength and authority.

She turned and ran. She grabbed the rope rail to help steady herself and moved along as fast as she could. She felt the rope burning her hand but kept going. She then felt Raven running behind her, the bridge erratically bouncing as they went and making it harder not to lose her footing.

Halfway across the enormous gulf, the animal must have reached the bridge because it started to shake even harder, and Raven sounded a bit frantic as he urged her to move faster. Just as she reached the other side, the bridge gave way, and she screamed as she leaped for the other end. She hit the edge and managed to use the rungs of the bridge to stop herself from falling into abyss. "Raven! Raven!" she sobbed.

Then a hand grabbed her, and Raven hauled her up and onto the level ground.

She flung her arms around him, sobbing and nearly strangling him. "I thought you were gone! How?" she demanded.

He held her, trying to calm her, and managed to say, "I don't know. I was falling, and then I was here."

She pulled back to look at his face. "What?" she asked for clarification.

He shrugged. "I was falling, and then I was there. It was instantaneous...like when we Apparate."

"Your body must remember how! Self-preservation," she said with relief. She suddenly felt weak legged and sat in the dirt. "Merlin, that was close." Her body had started to shake.

Raven plunked down next to her. "You have no idea. I thought I was a goner."

She grabbed his hands. "We still haven't taught you the right stuff. We have no clue what's up ahead, and I'm not as good as I thought with all the tactical planning. Maybe we need to ask Dumbledore for help."

Raven felt his heart shrink, "No! This is our responsibility...well mine at least. I won't ask anyone else to put themselves into danger."

She touched his face, seeing his fear. "I understand you don't want to meet any other wizards, but there are good people out there more than willing to help. Neville Longbottom, Luna Lovegood...they are brilliant and would be happy to help."

"No." He pulled away from her, got up, and stepped away. He could not imagine having to deal with someone else...especially someone who knew Hermione. He didn't feel he could share her right now, and he also knew that was foolish. They weren't really qualified for this job. She might be brilliant, but she was handicapped by his inability to do the all magic he obviously knew. He couldn't depend on his ingrained magic to save him every time.

He felt her hand on his waist, and then she drew him close, laying her head on his back. "All right, Raven. I understand. We'll go a little further."

The next hour they traveled unmolested through the only tunnel that lead forward. They would have to find another way out of the cave because they could not return the way they had come. They had heard the beast's roars for some time. They had finally faded when they got far enough away.

They turned a corner in the tunnel and came face-to-face with a dead end. Hermione pounded her hands against the wall and cried in frustration. "There has to be something here. That guardian is here for a reason. This place has enchantments."

Raven watched big tears fall down her checks. He pulled her to her feet and held her tightly. "It's probably just a decoy cave ...something to waste the searchers' time. Maybe it had alarms when Voldemort was alive." A shadow passed across them, and they looked to see the beast blocking the escape route.

In seconds, Raven shoved Hermione behind him and raised his wand. The beast was inches from his face when it suddenly stopped, sniffed, and then reached out and licked his face.

Both Hermione and Raven were stunned as the great beast began to jump around him like a large, happy puppy.

"I'll be damned," Raven said.

Chapter 21

Hermione flees the wizarding world and comes face to face with her past.

Feeling stunned, Raven reached a hand out and patted the creature's head. It licked his hand and then turned toward the wall. It seemed to look into the wall, as if patiently waiting for something. Then it whined and looked back at Raven.

Hermione, finally finding her voice, said, "Maybe if you touch the wall, like all the stuff in the house, we will discover this cave's secret."

Raven nodded and turned to the wall. He reached out his hand and pressed it to the wall. The wall shimmered and dissolved, leaving a doorway to a room.

What a room it was! The two travelers stepped into the room, and torches lit automatically. Their mouths dropped open. It was filled with potion ingredients, cauldrons, as well as many, many books and piles of gold, jewels, and other spoils of war. There were trunks, food storage containers, and many other things a person might need to survive if in hiding.

Raven asked, "What is this? It's similar, but it's not the cave we saw in the Pensieve."

"I think it's Snape's hideout...a place he could come if he was able to escape after the war. It's a hideout for a Death Eater hunted by the Order."

"You mean all this belongs to me!" Raven choked and waved his hands around. He went to pick up a ruby the size of a golf ball, and his eyes were as wide as saucers.

Hermione laughed at him. "I told you Snape might have money. He was obviously storing treasure for a long haul of solitude. With this, he could go to any remote village and purchase supplies."

The 'dog' went to a corner and found a huge pillow. He walked around and around and then settled to sleep."

"Well he's certainly at home. I never thought of Snape as an animal lover." She smiled thoughtfully.

Raven gulped. "What do you think it eats?"

"I think it hunts and fends for itself. Maybe it has a magically replenished supply of food. There's no telling how long it's been since Snape was here." Hermione started to look over the many shelves. "Raven, look at this," she called excitedly from across the room.

Raven came close to see what she was looking at. "Are those more memories?"

"It looks like it. Do you think he sent us on this part of the journey and left more clues here?"

"I say let's look at it and find out...anything to get this trip over. I'd like to go home."

"Your not enjoying this trip at all, are you?" Hermione asked with tears filling her eyes.

"Hermione," he sighed and said softly, "I love being with you, but this trip is filled with possible dangers, and I fear for you. That thing might have killed us. I thought it was going to. The next beast will not turn out so friendly. I should have blasted it before it got that close."

She nodded. "We were both slow in reacting. I couldn't get the thoughts to form or my hand to really move. I felt paralyzed, but I don't think it was from fear after all. I've been very near Voldemort in the past, and it hasn't stopped me. There might have been some sort of spell at work...one that recognized its caster and protected the animal."

"Are these kinds of spells known?" he asked curiously.

"Not that I know of, but you were a very gifted spellcrafter. It came from the bad days at school and was more for protection and then later for your work as Voldemort's spy."

She looked at the sleeping animal. "Who knows. I know it's far fetched, but maybe Snape played games with him and tried to slip past his defenses."

He reached out, took a bottle from the shelf, and held it up, looking at the swirling silver inside. "I seem to have been very keen on memory sharing. This one says last will and testament." He put it back on the shelf as if it had burned his hand. "Let's skip that one; after all I'm not dead, and he's not yet, sort of. He took another one. It was labeled watch immediately. "It looks like this one is the obvious choice."

"Good thing for us they are labeled," she replied, turning to look for a Pensieve.

They spent some time rummaging through the cave, looking into trunks and on shelves.

Raven finally called out to Hermione, "This thing doesn't look much like the one in Minerva's office, but it's got a bowl."

Hermione came and peered at the object. It was more oblong than round, and it was made of black marble with white feathery veins. It was bowl-like and had no pedestal. "I think you're right. Maybe it's a portable Pensieve."

Raven picked up the Pensieve and carried it to what must be Snape's desk and placed it in the middle. Standing on opposite sides of the desk, they poured the silvery memory into the Pensieve and slipped into it together.

They found themselves standing upon a sheer, stone cliff, and they heard Snape's voice whispering. "Below is a cave system. It's enchanted. I haven't had a chance to search the cave. Time is running out. I do not know if I will be able to return to search this one. In the unlikely possibility that I survive this war and then find my way back to this cave with no memory, I am leaving this to help you speed up your search for our memories. The other caves had to be eliminated before searching this one. With the knowledge of the actual terrain, you can Apparate here and save yourself a lot of traveling time. Of course that must mean you've had help, as you probably won't have the skill to Apparate on your own. Whoever is with you, possibly Minerva, maybe Lupin, I bid you be very careful as you go into this cave. I have felt the power that surrounds it. I came upon it only moments before being summoned away by the Dark Lord and have only returned to add this memory. The war is at hand, and I fear for Potter and his friends. I am one wizard between legions of Death Eaters who have no conscience and Order members who would kill me without a chance to defend myself. Be on guard for guardians that won't lick your face. I bid you find a home for my faithful companion, Grendel, if you cannot care for him. He was a gift from Hagrid many years ago. At the time I assumed he hoped Grendel would eat me." There was an uncharacteristic laugh. "Now I understand, Grendel is invaluable. Perhaps he will look after him for you, if I can not care for him myself. There is a black, leather-bound book on my desk, here in the cave. It will give you some very helpful spells and thoughts that will render some of the foes you may face in Voldemort's Lair inactive. Take care: Both our lives are at stake."

They found themselves back in the cave. Hermione was blinking away tears from the mention of Lupin. She still missed him. She also was touched by the tone of Snape's voice and the concern he'd had for Harry and 'his friends.' The laugh had been very unexpected and sounded oddly like Raven. Had Snape had qualities of Raven in his character that he'd just kept hidden? Grendel was obviously an enigma in his life. He obviously had great affection for the creature. It was a terrible shame he'd had to keep himself hidden from the world for so many years.

Raven took her arms and pulled her to him. "He didn't sound so bad, did he? Maybe he had a heart, too."

"I'm sure he did, Raven. You are who he might have been without all the horrid baggage of his choices or the masks he wore to complete the tasks he was forced to do."

"What do we do now?" Raven asked.

She gave him a hug back and turned to look around the desk. "We need to find that book of spells."

They looked through the many books and papers and found the book among stacks of parchment, quills, and ink. They searched the cave a bit more and found another hidden door.

There was a fine bed draped in rich burgundy. This cave held all the comforts of home. Hermione and Raven decided to send the horses home and bring their stuff into the cave for safekeeping. They discovered that Grendel understood them when they asked him for directions back to the mouth of the cave and he took them back across a stone bridge about 50 feet from the now-broken rope bridge. The stone of the bridge had been colored to look like the surrounding area, so it was difficult to see until they were on top of it.

They called Dobby and asked him to bring a broom. The little elf appeared a few minutes later with the broom and greetings from Albus and Minerva. Hermione gave him an account of their progress and discoveries. They introduced him to Grendel, who seemed to know instinctively that this could be a friend. The little House-Elf shook and hid behind Hermione. His saucer-size eyes were huge with fear. Finally they coaxed him out, and he made friends with Grendel. It was a sight to behold the huge animal bowing to the tiny elf so he could pat his massive head.

Later their cave companion showed them the most wonderful natural bathroom with a waterfall shower. They used a warming spell on the water and took a long, warm shower together, gently washing each other with handmade soap and sharing some gentle kisses. Raven used a soft piece of muslin to dry Hermione and himself, and then he carried her to their bed. Inside the curtained bed, they felt almost at home. Only the rumble of Grendel's snoring reminded them they were still in the cave.

They spent the next week reading the spells and doing some practicing. Grendel didn't seem to mind being the target of spells that froze or incapacitated the victim. He'd jump up and bounce once released like it was a big game, and Hermione rewarded him with treats they had found in the cave supplies.

At night there was more desperation to their lovemaking. Both feared the coming exploration because of the possibility of reaching their goal and losing what they had with each other. Their fingers grasped at each other almost as if they wanted to become the other. Their bodies pressed together. Their kisses were deep, and lips swelled with the pressure of their angst; their joining was fast and hard. Their cries echoed through the caverns, causing Grendel to howl, but he did not intrude on them.

The last night, Hermione lay panting against Raven, their bodies entwined. She held him so tightly she felt him trying to expand his rib cage to breathe, and she loosened her hold slightly. "Raven, I love you," she whispered to him.

He turned her to face him. Side by side, they lay and looked into each other's eyes in the dim light of a single candle at the bedside. He reached up and pushed his finger along her face, moving the hair back behind one ear. "I love you, Hermione. Thank you for finding me, for trying to help me find my life again, and especially for loving me. I doubt Severus has ever felt love before."

"Other than his mother, you're probably right. Her love was flawed, but she did love him," she reminded him softly. "But you're right. I'm not sure he ever knew that. I love you, Raven, more than I thought I could ever love any man. I know that if that is Voldemort's Lair we could die trying to find out its secrets. If we succeed, you could be lost to me."

"I would like to grab you and run as far and as fast away from here as we can. We could live in another country and make a life for ourselves." He sighed and then said, "No, it's a pipe dream. We must try to save Harry. You have told me I sacrificed my life and happiness for decades for that boy. Now I can't even remember his face."

Hermione ran her fingers over his face and placed soft kisses on his lips and nose. "I'd like to run with you, too, my love. But I also pledged myself to Harry when we were kids. I have to go through with this, too. I promised you I will try my darndest to make Snape remember our lives together. This may all be angst for nothing. You could remember your life as Snape and our life. I can only hope that the man Snape was will allow the man you are to continue to love me. The workings of the mind can be so confusing, Raven. We just have to work with what we are given." She teased his lips with her teeth. "For tonight, you are mine, and I want to make love to you, Raven."

He nodded, eyes clouding with emotion, and he lay there and caressed her body with his hands as she kissed and nipped and explored every part of his body. Their joining this time was soft, gentle, and very sweet.

Sated, she finally slipped into a deep sleep in his arms.

Raven held Hermione close as she slept and let tears roll down his cheeks. He felt foolish and weak, but he could not stop the onslaught of pain in his heart. He knew beyond a shadow of doubt he'd never before been loved this way. He could feel it in his bones, in the fiber of his muscles, in a heart that once was dead and now lived again. The simple act of going forward might lose him everything he had, but he would do it. He would put on one of those masks that Snape had been so famous for, and he would go into that cave and find his destiny no matter what the cost for the man named Raven.

The next morning they were quiet as they dressed and prepared themselves for battle. They didn't talk much to each other, preferring to stay focused and deep in their own thoughts. They would pass, their fingers reaching for the other, and they only smiled and let their fingers slide together.

Then with fear and a bit of trepidation from Raven, Hermione helped him collect a few of the memories they had made together. Some memories came from Raven and some from her, and they bottled them for Severus. They stood looking at each other, gently telling each other what the lost memories were. For Raven it was awaking with no memories and their first kiss, and for Hermione, it was finding him and making love that first night. They couldn't bear to give up any more of their memories. They hoped one day they would be able to put them back where they belonged.

About midmorning, after a good breakfast, they stood outside the cave. Grendel stood with them and whined as they patted his head and tried to assure him they would come back for him. He licked Raven's hand and then walked back into the mouth of the cave.

"Can we send a message to Minerva about him? Let's make sure she will send Dobby to fetch him if we do not come back?" Raven asked.

"Yes, of course." Hermione took a paper from her pocket and with her wand wrote a note and wrapped it around a small stone from her pocket. She set it down on the snow. It was a miniature Portkey, and it vanished ten seconds after activation.

She took Raven's hand and pulled him close. Visualizing the cliff, they Apparated away to their destiny.

Chapter 22

Hermione flees the wizarding world and comes face to face with her past.

They found themselves on the cliff they had seen in the memory. The weather was a bit cool this time of year, but they were able to shed some of the layers they'd had on in the high mountains. A bit of spring touched this place. Some green showed among the melting snow.

Hermione could feel the magic that emanated from the place. Raven just felt itchy...like static electricity was pricking at the Dark Mark on his arm. An ordinary human would have felt freaked out by the repel spell and tried to vacate the area as soon as possible. They both had their wands out as they crept toward the edge of the cliff.

Hermione lay on her stomach at the edge, trying to fend off the horror she felt leaning over the cliff. She knew she would have to use a broom to reach the entrance of the cave. Her heart was pounding as she looked over the edge.

"Raven," she whispered, "hold my legs, and don't let me go."

He held them firmly. "I've got you," he reassured her. He also wasn't too crazy about getting on a broom.

"Couldn't we just Apparate in?" Raven asked.

"No, there are wards, and we need to get out a ways to reconnoiter and to see what sort of entrance we're talking about and what we might need to fire at the entrance to get close enough to enter. This is one time I wish I had been a Quidditch player. You're going to have to hang on as tightly as possible. I may have to dodge some nasty spells."

Raven took a deep breath and helped her to her feet. "Hermione, can we say a prayer? I know it's not standard wizard practice, but I did find some comfort in the churches I visited before you found me."

Surprised, Hermione nodded. "I think that's a good idea." She reached out her hands, and he took them and bowed his head.

Raven said, "God protect us. Lives depend on us to be successful. Amen." He didn't speak again but nodded he was done.

Hermione reached up and gave him a light kiss, and they held each other for a moment before she took the tiny broom out of her bag and expanded it. She made it longer and proportionally heavier than normal so they could both ride it. They mounted, and she added a stabilization spell to help hold them on. With one hand holding on and another with wands at the ready, they took a few laps around the top of the cliff to get the feel of the broom. Raven found it exciting and was exhilarated. But he could feel Hermione trembling against him.

"You can do it. You're the strongest woman I know," he encouraged her. He felt her take a deep breath and center herself, and the broom evened out. They flew a wide loop out in front of the cliff and hovered at least a half a mile from the face of the cliff. Hermione gripped the broom, white knuckled, and tried to ignore the fact that they were a good 1,000 feet or more above the ground. She could feel the edge of the wards.

The cave opened into the face of the cliff about half a mile from the top and appeared to be only a shallow indentation. Hermione brandished her wand and shouted, "*Specialis Revelio!*"

The broom wavered, and she held on for dear life as the front of the cave wavered and a huge, spider-webbed door came into view. What must have been one of Aragog's distant relatives moved along the huge web. The spider's legs spanned a good 25 feet wide and 30 feet long. Its eight furry legs had razor sharp blades of armor on them.

"Good thing Ron's not here. He'd faint dead away and fall off," she said almost to herself with a sad laugh.

"Keep an eye out for that tail. It's like a scorpion, and there's no telling what form of poison it will have," she warned Raven.

"*Antonitum*," Raven cried. A huge bolt of lightning flew from his wand and bounced harmlessly off the ward, electrifying the air around them. It crackled against their skin, and their hair stood on end.

Hermione swooped further away from the ward. She cried out with fear as the broom took an alarming dip. She righted them again.

Raven tried again: "*Illicitus Portus*." A bolt of energy emerged from his wand and shimmered along the edge of the ward. He and Hermione fired subsequent shots at the ward. At the same time, they dodged fireballs that seemed to come like a volley from the spider's stinger. One came so close that the sleeve of Raven's shirt caught fire, and he batted at it to put it out. They trailed a stream of smoke. But their constant barrage ripped big holes in the shield. Hermione flew through one into the inner area.

"*Aculeatus Fluminious!*" she fired off. The broom dipped alarmingly, and she grabbed it again with both hands, trying so hard not to lose her wand that she barely held onto it by a finger. The bolt of energy hit the monstrous creature's midsection, and it reared and flung a web as thick as an arm at them. They dodged the web and several more. Hermione held on for dear life, and Raven fired the same spell over and over. The spider fired several rounds of energy. They dodged them and the heat of one ball as it singed the tail of the broom. The change in balance made the broom fly erratically, and they both clung to it.

Hermione screamed.

Raven shouted at her, "You can do it, hang on!" He screamed, "*Ignitus Teregum!*"

The creature's outer shell seemed to shimmer. Then, as if from inside, fire broke through like rays of the sun, and the creature let out a deafening shriek and fell away from its web. Its legs waved, looking for a hold, but it found none. It fell hundreds of feet and crashed upon the jagged rocks below.

"Wow, Snape knew his stuff, didn't he?" Raven commented over her shoulder. Raven said, "*Persisto Penetro*," and they sailed into the cave through the opening in the web.

Hermione landed with a crash, and they rolled away from the broom.

Raven scrambled to her side. "Are you okay?" He turned her face to his.

She was covered in sweat and was white and pasty. Her eyes were round with fear. "Oh god, Raven, I hate flying." She gagged with the fear. Her stomach was rolling.

He mirrored her fear but held her close to help calm her fears and stop her trembling. He didn't want to admit that half the trembling was his. He'd never seen anything to beat that spider. It was a thing of nightmares.

No sooner had they gotten up from the sandy cave floor and turned from each other to face the darkness than a cry of anger rent the air, and they looked up into the red eyes of a Hungarian Horntail dragon. Its huge neck was reared back, and its massive fangs were dripping with saliva. The talons on its front feet were at least eight inches long, and Hermione knew the poison in them might very well be deadly.

Hermione pushed Raven to the side, and he dodged the fire the dragon breathed at them. "*Aquamenti*," she cried. A stream of water pushed the surprised dragon back, and it lashed out with huge taloned feet. It hit Raven in the chest, ripping open his shirt and leaving a deep scratch that blood welled up from.

Raven screamed when the fiery pain exploded across his chest. He fell sideways barely missed by the barbed tail. He grabbed at the bezoar that Hermione had made him keep in his pocket and stuffed it into his mouth. He choked as he tried to swallow it and still keep his wand up and firing spells at the dragon.

Raven stumbled back and nearly fell into the web. His sleeve got stuck, and he had to abandon his outer cloak. Somehow he managed to retain his grip on his wand and fired off "*Conjunctivitis!*" The dragon's eyes swelled, and puss ran from the animal's eyes, sealing them shut.

Hermione added, "*Vinculum!*" Huge chains appeared and bound the blinded dragon's front right leg. Hermione cried out the same spell again, and its left leg was bound. She could see Raven struggling, grabbing at his neck, and she knew the poison could very well incapacitate him before the bezoar made it to his stomach. The tail was thrashing around and tearing at the web. If a spike hit Raven, he could be killed or knocked from the cave into the gorge.

She fired off her spell again and again, chaining his other legs to the cave floor. Another one drove the stakes deeper.

Raven, having finally gotten the bezoar down, felt better and fired off the same spell Hermione had. It anchored the tail of the dragon to the cave floor. The animal was bellowing in rage, and he was still able to send flames at least four feet out before him.

Hermione tried the water curse again: "*Aguamenti!*" Then she fired off another spell, and a rope of energy lassooed the dragon's muzzle. When the glow of the spell wore off, his muzzle was encased in an iron band.

Suddenly the Horntail broke a leg free, and she could see the floor cracking under the strain of his struggle.

Hermione feared for them both. "*Sectumsempra,*" she shouted, moving her wand in a slashing motion. Huge, jagged cuts appeared at the base of its throat. Its roars were cut off, and a gurgling, strangling sound erupted from it. Blood, as black as night, poured from the grievous wounds. The Horntail collapsed.

"*Petrificus Totalus,*" she cried, faint with exhaustion.

Raven looked in horror at its bleeding wounds. He bent down and lost the contents of his stomach.

Hermione raised her wand and whispered, "*Avada Kedavra.*" The bolt hit the tortured animal in the chest, and it died. Hermione fell to the floor of the cavern, sobbing.

"Hermione, Hermione!" he called. "Are you okay? You didn't get hurt?"

She clung to him, horrified at having to kill something so magnificent.

"You had no choice," he said, rubbing her back. "Come and sit down."

He pulled her a ways from the dead dragon and had her sit in the sand against the cave wall. He took water and some Pepperup Potion from her bag. He watched as she drank both items and was relieved when she calmed down.

"You were awesome."

She managed a weak smile. "You weren't so bad yourself." She could feel some of her strength returning.

"We have to keep moving. There will be more."

He stared at her and then headed past the dead dragon. His face was set and emotionless.

She followed at a run, not willing to let him get too far ahead.

In the darkness, hands reached out and pulled her back as her foot encountered only emptiness.

Her scream was muffled as Raven clamped a hand over her mouth and hissed in her ear, "It's me."

He pulled her further back and to the side until they found the solid wall of the cave.

"*Lumos,*" he whispered, and a small light showed them a deep pit. Only a ledge about 16 inches wide could be seen near the cave wall where they stood.

She stopped and picked up a rock and tossed it out into the dark pit. It fell about 20 feet and ignited, seeming to turn red and glow the further it fell. At about 30 feet, it burst into flames like an asteroid, which grew brighter and developed a tail of flames as the rock burned up, eventually falling apart into tiny, burning pieces.

Raven picked another rock up and flung it up into the air over the pit, and the same thing happened.

"We can't use the broom," he stated flatly.

Using the wand, they examined the ledge. It seemed to be strong and seemed worn by many feet having passed over it. They saw markings on the walls. Ancient Indian symbols. This must have been an Indian habitat long before Voldemort discovered it. There was a groove cut into the wall about five feet above the ledge. By slipping their fingers into the slot, they would be able to hold on as they moved over the ledge.

Hermione stood looking at the ledge with horror. The broom ride had just enforced her hatred of heights tenfold. She stood and stared into the darkness.

"I can't do this, Raven," she cried, tears streaking her cheeks.

He took her face in his hands. "Yes, you can. I know you can. You can do anything. You go first, and I will be right beside you. This is really quite wide. Come on, it will be easy."

They tied their lit wands to their palms, so they could keep them close but still use their fingers to grip the ledge, and started out into the inky darkness. The cave was colder, and they wished they had stopped to replace some of their winter clothing. The darkness was oppressive, and they prayed that no one was ahead to see their beacon of light.

Their stomachs were pressed against the cave wall, giving them some sort of comfort. They traveled a good 15 feet before Hermione realized the ledge was getting narrower. "Raven, the ledge is running out. My heels are hanging off." She clung so hard to the groove in the rock that she felt the rock rubbing her fingers raw.

"Keep moving. Don't stop. This is easy compared to the dragon."

"Easy for you to say," she accused. Suddenly the ridge under her foot caved away, and she screamed through her clenched teeth.

Raven grabbed her and held on tightly as he struggled to move back a few feet so she could put both her feet on the ledge again. She was trembling against him. "We can't go back. You have to test the ledge, Hermione. I can't climb around you. It would endanger both of us. My beautiful wench, I know you can do it."

She couldn't speak but only nodded, giving him a frightened smile, and moved forward still holding his hand. As her foot hit the edge of the broken ledge, she let it slide out over the open space and was happy to feel stone about nine inches further on. Carefully, they moved until she straddled the gap. Then carefully, inch by inch, she tested the strength of the ledge with her weight. Finally, Raven stepped across, and they moved on carefully, testing each step. Their hands cramped against the coldness of the

stone.

Raven watched Hermione with his heart pounding in his chest. He could only pray she could continue. Her strength and stamina were fading even with the Pepperup Potion. He had never seen her so fearful. That made his panic even more forceful.

Then evidence of a rope bridge appeared ahead of them. They stepped off the ledge onto the solid cave floor and went to look at the bridge. It was some sort of extendable bridge that was probably Voldemort's way across the gulf. They moved away from the bridge and the ledge.

Their limbs were trembling with fatigue when they finally saw sandy ground ahead, and they dropped to the sand to rest. Raven dug into his bag and brought out several more Pepperup Potion bottles, and they took the potion and felt much better.

They sat in silence a good 15 minutes, getting their strength back. Hermione pushed a bottle of water into Raven's hands and drank one down herself. Then she portioned out some Pemmican: dried meat mixed with berries. It was an old Indian food, but it was still used by travelers in the Wizarding world. It provided the protein for strength and sugar for energy. Feeling much better, they slipped into jackets and went forward.

The darkness and silence were nearly deafening. They stayed close, not wanting to lose each other. A sound of rustling stopped them dead, and they stood back to back, trying to peer into the darkness all around them. Suddenly, the cave erupted with shrieking, and they felt soft, winged bodies battering against them.

"Bats!" Hermione screamed as they grabbed at her hair, their claws ripping at their skin.

"*Evanesco!*" Raven yelled. The bats seemed to vanish, but when he looked around so had Hermione.

"Hermione!" he called. "Hermione!" But there was only silence. Horrified, he stared into the darkness. Had he made her vanish with the bats? If that was true, how could he reverse the spell?

He was about to send a message to Minerva when he heard a muffled cry up ahead. "Hermione," he whispered. He moved forward in the darkness.

Hermione had a cold, clammy hand gripping her like iron and another clamped over her mouth. The air around her was putrid and thick. There was a hissing in her ears. "Silence or you die."

"Who are you?" she whispered. She cringed as she felt a long nail slide down the side of her neck.

"A line of defense for the Dark Lord! I love my visitors; they become my captives." He sneered and emitted a nasty, evil laugh. He lit a lamp, and Hermione stifled a scream. Piles of human bones lay around...some had rotting flesh on them.

She struggled to look around at her captor. "The Dark Lord is dead. You hold a post that no longer matters. You can be free; you can leave here. Please, there's been enough hatred. The war was over months ago," she pleaded to the uncaring silver eyes.

"Why did you come here?" the thing asked. It jerked her head to the side and pulled her hair away from her throat. It ran a wet tongue along her neck. She cringed and tried to draw back to no avail; it kept her in a viselike grip. Its long fingers were as strong as steel. Hermione knew then that it was a vampire.

"The Dark Lord enslaved a couple of my friends in spells that have changed their lives. I want only to free them of their bonds. You can have anything here that he has left. You can have it all. All we want are the spells to undo the damage."

She found it hard to concentrate. She felt a desire for the vampire's touch and wondered how it would feel if he bit her. She desired this with part of her mind. Another part of her feared for Raven, and she tried hard to concentrate on retrieving her wand. She sensed its energy signature about 12 feet away. Where was Raven? He had no clue how to fight the vampire, or did he? Vampires carried their own magic. They were powerful foes. With her inner strength fueled by her love for Raven, Hermione braced herself. When she felt his fangs touch her neck, she pushed with superhuman strength laced with horror and caught him by surprise. His sharp nails tore streaks in her arms. At the same time, she yelled, "*Accio wand*," and then she stumbled a few feet away.

The moment the wand was in her hand, she whirled and shouted, "*Impervius*," blocking the spells he fired at her.

She heard Raven's voice call out, "*Antonitum!*" The bolt of lightning hit the vampire square in the chest and knocked it back. Hermione scrambled further away as the energy crackled and burned at her arms.

The vampire, barely slowed by the energy bolt, came forward.

"*Lumos Maxima!*" Hermione cried, and the cave lit up like the sun had suddenly appeared. The vampire drew back and shrieked from the brightness of the light. Its head was bald, its eyes red, its face pasty white, and its fangs protruded past its blood-red lips. It was much like the vampire in the old Nosferatu movie Hermione had seen as a kid. It was a real monster...not like the handsome vampires in modern movies who wooed the girls.

He fell back away from the light, covering his eyes and face with a filthy sleeve of his raggedy clothes.

"No one has to die here. Believe me, Voldemort is gone. You do not have to stay here anymore!" Raven tried to reason with it.

"You lie." He sneered and came forward. "First, I will feast on your blood and then your man's."

Raven had seen what it was, and he cried out, "*Ligneus Asser!*" A wooden stake appeared in his hands. He lunged past Hermione and plunged the stake with both hands into the chest of the vampire and stumbled back. Yet the monster came forward. Raven kicked out with his foot, driving the stake deeper, and the ancient monster crumbled into dust.

"Hermione! Are you okay?" he called anxiously. She had collapsed on the ground.

"My arms burn. It cut me," she gasped.

He could see the damage. The skin on her arms was flayed. He tore open his bag and took out a pain reliever and dittany.

He held the flesh together, ignoring the blood that fell onto his clothes.

Hermione lay back with her eyes firmly closed against the pain. "*Epithelializasis Finallis*," he called out and watched some of the flesh seal together. The burns from the fire bolt healed, but the long, ragged tears from the vampire's talons stayed raw and bleeding.

Raven drew out more potions and finally put a salve on her arms and wrapped them when the bleeding stopped.

Tears squeezed out from her tightly shut eyes.

"We need to go back. You can't go on like this," he told her.

"No, I'll be fine. We've come so far already. The vampire may have been his last line of defense. Give me a bezoar. It should help."

"It's not much of a defense, seeing as you and I have gotten past them all." He laughed, trying to make her smile.

"It's been months since his death. His wards and powers are weakening. The vampire hardly had enough strength to maintain its alluring and lust enchantments. That thing was probably starving. There were no new recruits to keep it fed. Its powers were weak; it was probably living off the bats."

The pain potion was taking effect, and she got to her feet with his help. They started forward. The cavern narrowed further and further until there was only a tunnel wide enough for them to walk single file. Raven took Point, and Hermione followed. She tried to maintain a shield around them to ward off the oppression that had set in. She finally conjured her Patronus, and they followed the playful otter as it slid into the holes in the wards.

As they drew further and further into the tunnel, Raven gasped, pressing his hand to his arm. His Dark Mark was burning. His eyes were wide, his face pale, and his voice quivered as if he was terrified. "Why would it burn?" They stopped and leaned against the walls of the tunnel...Hermione for support and Raven so he could pull back the sleeve of the shirt he wore. The mark was brighter, and the snake was moving.

Hermione fought back a feeling of lightheadedness from blood loss and her injuries and the queasy feeling in her gut as she tried to reassure him.

"Voldemort is dead. He's dead Raven," she said. "I saw him fall. It has to be the dark magic in the place. We are getting closer to the source of the spell he left here to guard the entrance. But he never expected to die, and so it's only strong enough to repel now. This wall must be similar to Snape's. Somehow we have to get through."

Raven went to the wall and reached out to touch it. He drew his hand back quickly.

"It's warm. There shouldn't be heat here. Do you have any idea what we can try to enter? It's not going to accept my touch."

With one arm folded across her chest, Hermione used her wand to try to pierce the rock. She tried spell after spell, but nothing worked. Raven got closer to the rock and said, "*Lumos*." He searched the face of the rock.

"Hey, look at this." There was a light etching.

Hermione squeezed in next to him. She examined the scratching and then took her wand and said, "*Scripton*." The etching turned dark. It was the Dark Mark.

"Raven, try to press your arm against the wall. Try to line up your tattoo with the etching. I think they are the same size."

He drew his sleeve up to expose the Dark Mark and then raised his arm. The moment the mark touched the etching, the wall started to shimmer. It undulated but did not vanish like the door to Snape's Lair had.

Raven pressed his hand into the rock, and it slipped in. The rock felt thick, like heavy sand...granulated but penetrable.

"Hey, I think we can pass through it. Come on." He headed into the wall, holding onto Hermione's hand.

Hermione tried to follow, but it felt like solid rock to her.

"Raven!" she screamed.

Raven heard her as if from a long ways away and backed out of the wall. He stood thinking for a minute. "Maybe if I put my arm around you...kind of like a shield...my magical signature will encompass you."

She took a deep breath and slipped next to Raven, and he drew her close to his side. They started through. Hermione clung to his waist, fighting panic as the thick wall surrounded her. She could breathe, but the granules of sand seemed to pull at her and grip her organs. She started to turn, and she pulled away from Raven. Suddenly, she was surrounded with hardening rock and couldn't move. As if from a distance, she heard him calling. As she started to panic, she felt him envelop her and draw her back to his side, and they passed through to the other side.

They found themselves in a large, dimly lit cavern.

"Oh my god, oh my god," she cried, gasping for breath. "Raven!" She clung to him, not caring that the pressure on her arm made it hurt fiercely. "I thought I was going to be stuck for good." Her body shook, and her teeth chattered.

"It's okay. I'm here," he whispered quietly as he kissed her temple gently and rubbed her back. "Apparently, you needed to stay in contact with the mark bearer in order to get through." He gave her a quick squeeze as he looked around. He turned and called out, "*Lumos Maxima*!"

A bright light shot out from the wand, and the cavern from Snape's memories spanned out before them.

A figure took form in front of them. It was visible only as a dark, rippling, faceless figure, shimmering and indistinct. A swirling, black-blue light emanated as the form became distinct and solidified.

Hermione gasped as the slender figure in black robes glared down at her, his red eyes glowed in a snake-like face, and his slit-shaped nostrils flared in indignation. "It's...it's...him. It's Voldemort," she gasped, shock numbing her mind beyond all reason, even her pain.

The figure sneered at them. "Severus, you traitor, you dare face me?" Hermione's world spun and she fainted in Raven's arms.

The above cliff ledge and the wall of rock they passed through was suggested and/or lent to me by beaweasley2. She has been very valuable in helping me come up with some ideas to help Raven and Hermione get through this cave with very picturesque imagery. I appreciate her letting me bounce ideas off her and for coming up with some interesting sentences I could use. Many, many thanks.

Also thanks so much to my beta, Lisa. You have no idea how I depend on you.

Thanks to Becky as third eye in the beta process.

Specialis Revelio: reveal hidden secrets (HP canon)

Illicitus Portus: illegal port (breaking into an opening)

Antonitum: lightning bolt

Aculeatus Fluminious: fire lightning

Ignitus Teregum: set fire to outer covering

Persisto Penetro: persistent entrance

Exoclatus: blind

Petrificus Totalus Vinculum: body bind with chains

Ligneus Asser: wooden stake

Scriptom: mark

Epithelializatisis Finalis: skin repair

Chapter 23

Chapter 23 of 63

Hermione flees the wizarding world and comes face to face with her past.

Raven let Hermione slip from his fingers, nearly dropping her onto the cave floor. He fired off a bolt of energy at Voldemort. It passed right through him as if he were a specter.

"Severus," it continued like a recording not even aware of the spell that had passed through it, "you always were resourceful. No other wizard could trip this spell. If you are here, then by some amazing miracle, you have beaten my best and me. I can only assume Potter has done me in. I trusted you as I've never trusted anyone, and I didn't trust anyone. I knew you'd betray me."

Raven, realizing it was some sort of memory, bent to pat Hermione on the face.

"Hermione, come on, wake up. It's only a faded memory."

Hermione opened her eyes and sat up, and he helped her to her feet. They stood arm in arm and watched the memory play out.

"Betrayed by the little, forgotten, poor boy who was tormented by his peers. Murdered by a child. So much power in the Dark Arts...that's what has been my end, simple love. Love is something that I never had. Love is a weak emotion. There is so much power in the Dark Arts. You understood the power of knowledge. Your love of Lily was your undoing. Her sacrifice for Harry is what banished me that night. And you, Severus, who could love a murderer of their own father? My only consolation is that you are in the same forgotten place that I am. Do not assume that it will be easy to find what you're looking for because you passed through the wall, but it is here. At one time in your life, you truly thought I was your master. Love has made you weak and pathetic. Your associates are weak. You cannot remember who you are, and they do not have your skills. You would do well to leave here and not come back... Beware."

The image wavered and began to fade. Then Voldemort was gone.

"He's wrong, Raven. You are loved, and in that respect so is Severus Snape," she said. "There will be deadly traps in this place. We have the advantage, and we can watch each other's back."

They stood their ground for some time and lit the huge room with their wands. Seeing torches along the wall, they lit those magically. This was the room Severus had seen when he was younger. This was Voldemort's lair. Here in this room, if they were careful and cunning enough, they would find the hidden parchment with Voldemort's and Snape's handprints. Once the blood oath was destroyed, they could then look for the spells to recover Severus' memories and possibly Harry's as well. Hermione hoped it was all the same magic and that they might even restore Neville's parents to him.

Hermione finally agreed that they could cautiously move a little, but they stayed together and didn't touch anything. She used her wand to try to detect wards placed on objects. This place had so much in it. There was more wealth than any person alive had seen: treasures, statues of antiquity, paintings, and artifacts. There were books long forgotten and some Hermione had only read about...Dark Arts books that even she might admit needed to be destroyed. The jewel-encrusted chests probably contained gold and jewels. As they looked around, they realized that Severus' treasure was tiny compared to this one.

Hermione said, "When we are done with this place, we can turn it over to the Aurors. They will finish breaking any curses and can catalog this for museums, libraries, or wherever else it needs to go. Personally, I'd like to see some of the families damaged by Voldemort or his minions compensated monetarily."

"Always wanting to help," Raven said softly, placing a kiss at her temple. "It's one of the reasons I love you."

"Do you think we should call for help?" He said it in a way that let Hermione know it was the last thing he wanted. "I could not bear it if you suffered anymore injuries."

She tried to joke with him. "Yeah, why am I doing most of the bleeding around here?" But she immediately regretted it when she saw the grimace on his face. "I'm sorry, Raven. I was trying to be humorous. That image of Voldemort scared the hell out of me. Besides, you obviously duck faster than I do. These injuries could have just as easily happened to you. The pain is fading and the bezoar is finally taking effect. I'm much better now."

They moved a bit further into the room. Raven kept an eye on the floor, and Hermione watched the room for spells. They could still feel the dark magic emanating from this place.

Hermione saw something coming toward her out of the corner of her eye and sent up a shield. It was some sort of insect the size of a clenched hand. The thing had a deadly stinger on it. Its wings were gold-colored, and it had a red body. It buzzed around tearing holes in the shield, and she kept putting more up to push it back.

Raven yelled, "*Incendio*," and it caught the thing and burned it up. The ashes fell to the ground.

They took another step and the floor began to melt like quicksand, and Raven sunk waist deep. Hermione sent a special levitation spell combined with a shield to protect Raven from the elements around him. They'd found the spell in Snape's journal. She clambered up on a box close by. Snakes of all shapes and colors poured from a hole in the wall. Hermione froze some snakes. Raven incinerated some. They trapped others and vanished more of them. They kept coming. In the end, Hermione managed a seal spell on the hole, and Raven burned the rest of them up. They both sat atop the box panting, coughing from the smoke. Unwilling to move until they recovered some strength, Hermione pulled out a kind of baked protein bar that Dobby had brought, some water, and another Pepperup Potion.

They stayed back to back so they could watch the room around them. About an hour after entering the room, it suddenly went dark, and the torches went out. There was a skittering sound, and Hermione felt a dread she hadn't before. "*Lumos Maxima*," she cried out. They were surrounded by huge beetles with red and black shells, black beady eyes, and three-inch-long pinchers. Before they could react, one climbed the box and took a slice from Raven's leg. He jumped up and shook the thing away, and more swarmed up the box, several taking slices from his hand and face. He screamed in pain.

Hermione pulled the broom out, and they jumped on and flew up higher into the top of the cave. The entire cave floor was filled with beetles. Hermione used a spell that

crushed them. Raven knocked them off of anything higher than floor level, and Hermione continued to crush them.

They cleared the floor with a vanishing spell, relit the torches, and finally settled back to the floor of the cave.

"They were creepy but not exactly lethal or hard to get rid of." She had no sooner said that when Raven paled and fell over.

"Raven!" she cried out. A clear fluid erupted from the wounds on his leg, arm, and face, and it poured over him like water. But when Hermione reached out, she realized it was hard like Lucite or glass. Seconds later, when Raven was totally encased, she touched him and felt hardness and coldness. He'd been encased in a crystalline substance, smooth as ice. She tried several reversals and then sat down and cried.

Raven felt cold but still alive. He tried to talk, tried to tell Hermione that he wasn't dead, but he was unable to move. He realized with horror that this could very well be a living death. He could hear Hermione crying. He wanted to wrap his arms around her. He wanted to stop her pain, but he was forced to listen and was unable to even let her know he was there. He struggled against his bonds and nothing changed. He tried wandless magic, but nothing happened.

She finally lay over him, looking down into his face through the crystal casing. Without Raven, she was trapped in here. She would not be able to get through the wall without his touch. She called out, "Dobby, I need help." This time he did not come. She couldn't get out, and no one could get in. She tried a Portkey, but it just sat there in her hand.

He appeared to be asleep, but she knew with Voldemort's horrible sense of humor that in all likeliness Raven was still alive, still hearing her cry.

"Raven! If you can hear me, I will get you out."

"I hear you, Hermione," he thought.

"Raven!" She looked for something to crack the glass casing, and she found a heavy candelabra. She hit the casing as hard as she could, over and over, until the shock of the impact made her feel like the bones of her arm might shatter. Tears were streaming down her face. She threw herself on him. "Oh God, please help me."

Simultaneously they said, "I will love you forever."

Raven could feel his heart pounding against his ribs. He felt as if his heart would break in two. He felt tears blurring his eyes, and they seeped out the sides of his eyes and ran down his cheeks.

At the same moment, Hermione's tears slipped down over the sides of the casing. The two tears ran opposite each other, and the casing cracked. Hermione's eyes flew open, and she stared at the crack. When she saw Raven's eyelids flutter, her tears turned to tears of joy. As they splashed onto the casing, it continued to crack and then shattered. The sound was like twinkling crystal. Suddenly, Hermione felt pain as the tiny pieces embedded in her face and arms.

"Raven, don't move," she screamed.

"Why?" he asked.

"The glass will cut you to ribbons. Hold as still as you can."

With care, she inched her arm up, and her wand slid into her hand. She used it to levitate herself into the air and cautioned him to keep his eyes closed. As she hovered, the tiny shards fell from her like the twinkling of wind chimes. She used a wind spell to blow the shards away. It didn't stop the glass from cutting them, but it kept a lot of it from embedding itself into their flesh.

Unable to grab him and hold him, she carefully levitated him to a standing position and used the wind to take more of the glass away. She lowered herself to stand before him and withdrew her bag from around her neck. She then took out tweezers and carefully removed the glass imbedded in Raven's face. Using her own breath, she blew shards from his eyelids and hair. Having been above him, she had little on her hair, but her hands were cut, and the blood seeped down her wrists.

In turn, Raven carefully removed the shards he could see from Hermione. Then he used a little of the dittany they had brought with them. The cuts sealed shut, and the bleeding stopped.

After some time, they decided they could finally hug, and Raven gathered her gently into his arms. Their kisses were gentle, and more tears of relief mingled on their faces.

"I was so scared, Raven."

"You were here; you were next to me. You didn't leave me. It kept me sane."

She laughed a bit hysterically. "I'm glad you're free; but ironically, I couldn't have gone anywhere without you. I'm stuck in here. And if I could have gotten help, you would have gone with me regardless."

She kissed him deeply, hungry for his body and confirmation she wasn't dreaming. She felt him laugh with relief as he kissed her back.

"I don't know about you, but I need the loo and some food and water."

She smiled and caressed his face. "OK, but if we deem this place finally safe, you're gonna know how much I want you."

"I'll look forward to that," he said. As he stood up and turned away, a grimace flashed across his face. He knew very well that "he" might not leave this place. Snape might be the one to walk out with Hermione. He felt jealous of himself.

They moved toward one end of the room and discovered a loo of sorts...a side room with a chamber pot. It seemed to have its own vanishing spell. Once finished there, Hermione produced some more food and water, and they ate sitting by the wall.

"What do you suppose broke that spell?" Hermione asked.

"Voldemort mentioned it himself: love. He could never understand it. He never, in a million years, thought I would come here with someone I loved. Your tears broke the spell."

"It was sort of like Sleeping Beauty," she mused.

"Well, I could argue about the beauty part," he said with a snort.

Hermione smiled. "I love you so much."

He kissed her again, letting his cheek remain against hers and feeling her soft skin against his. "I love you."

From somewhere in the room, they heard a sliding stone. Instantly, they were on their feet, wands at the ready. Hermione, having looked around the room before, started forward to see what had changed. A door to a hidden chamber had opened across the room.

Slowly and cautiously, they went toward the open door. At the last moment, they reached their hands out and clasped them together. If something hit them, they wanted to be together. A wall of green light formed at the door, and they threw a few curses at it. Nothing happened. It hit them with quite a powerful wind, but it seemed to lose its power against their joint stand. Shelves appeared before them, and they saw a book and a rolled parchment. Many vials of potions and a few huge jewels that Hermione was certain where enchanted stones lay on the shelves.

Hermione grabbed the parchment and unrolled it. She could feel Raven shaking next to her. There, on the parchment, were two bloody handprints.

Chapter 24

Chapter 24 of 63

Hermione flees the wizarding world and comes face to face with her past.

Hermione threw her arms around Raven and jumped up and down, screaming with joy. "We found it! We found it!"

Raven was laughing at her. Then suddenly he stood back and stared at the parchment.

Hermione sobered and choked back tears. Finding this piece of parchment had been one of their goals, but now that they had it, they remembered it could undo their whole lives together.

Hermione dropped the parchment and threw her arms around his neck. She buried her face into his neck and felt his hand rub her back. She felt the warmth of his breath against the back of her neck, and she wanted him like she had never wanted anyone in her life.

"Raven, make love to me, now! Please!"

He did not answer her but swooped down and picked her up. He waved his wand, changing a lounge into a bed.

"Well done," Hermione whispered, impressed.

They quickly shed their clothes. Raven's hand touched her more roughly than before; Hermione was just as firm with her touch, and their kisses were quick, deep, and hungry. Raven's fingers slipped inside her, and she rode them with urgency. Just before climax, he thrust himself deeply into her and pounded against her. She wrapped her legs around him, holding on to his shoulders, loving the feel of his long hair, which made a wall around their faces so they only saw each other. They were in a world of their own. They looked deep into each other's eyes as their climax hit them, and they cried out their pleasure. Suddenly, they seemed to feel each other, become each other. Their cries of pleasure echoed back and forth in the room a number of times. Raven collapsed onto her, and she held him tightly, her legs still wrapped around him.

"What was that?" he gasped.

"Legitimacy, I think," she answered, her breathing starting to slow.

"Did I read your mind?" he asked incredulously.

She smiled. "It was wonderful, wasn't it?"

"Amazing." Then he asked, "Are you sure you don't care that I invaded your mind?"

"No, Raven," she said. "I am yours in my heart. Why not my mind?"

"Aren't I heavy?" he asked with a smile.

She caressed his lip with hers. "Not really. You feel wonderful."

They stayed wrapped together for a long while, gently kissing. Then Hermione released him, and he slid to her side.

Later, after they had slept, they went to stand over the newly found parchment. Raven finally reached down to touch it. He nearly dropped it. "It's warm like it's alive!"

Hermione said, "It didn't feel warm to me. It must be the magic that connects you to it."

"How do we destroy it? Do you think we can burn it?"

Hermione reached into the hidden compartment and took hold of the book. It was heavy, and the cover was intricately detailed and carved. It had a snake on it. "Salazar Slytherin was one of the most evil wizards in our world. I don't think he started out that way. He just wanted to learn, but the dark magic captured him. Its power corrupted him. It made him think he was superior to everyone. It spoke to the evil in Tom Riddle, and he thought he would continue Salazar's work...creating a master race with pure-bloods being the ultimate wizarding rulers. It doesn't make sense on so many levels, the least of which is because he was half-blood himself."

She took the book to a table and they sat and looked through it. The blood oath parchment spell was near the beginning. Burning would destroy it. But it had to be done by Raven and with his wand. He had to cut himself, let a drop of fresh blood drip on the parchment, and then ignite it with his wand.

They placed the parchment inside a cauldron. With a small, jeweled knife they'd found, they cut Raven's hand and squeezed out a drop of blood. It fell with a plop onto the parchment, and then Raven reached out with his wand and said, "*Incendio*." The flame flared bright blue, then purple, and then vanished. Only a fine dusting of ash remained in the cauldron. It was gone.

They stood there silently looking at the ashes for a while. Then Raven took Hermione's hand and pulled her into his arms. "Well, we have taken a big step forward."

She was trembling, and he held her close until she calmed down. "It's all been quite an adventure, Raven, but I guess I didn't realize that it has always been a one-way road. We have to complete this no matter what the cost to ourselves...not necessarily for Harry, but for you, too. You need to be all of who you are."

He nodded in agreement. "Well, what do we do now?"

"We need to study the spell and potion book. The spell must be there, or he would not have hidden it with the parchment."

They took their seats again and started to go through the book. Near midnight they found it. "It's here," Hermione said excitedly. Then, "Oh god, Raven, it takes six weeks to brew the potion."

"Six weeks!" He peered at the page himself. Part of him was glad they would have more time together, and part of him was freaked that he would be in limbo in this place full of dark magic and the unknown. And there was the beaded necklace that seemed to be on the edge of his thoughts. Were all the memories tainted with horror at the end? Would he find out something nice about his life? Hermione was convinced his mother loved him. She seemed to have had feelings, but had that been love? Her love was tainted with her hatred of his father. He wondered why his mother had ever married such a horrible man. Why hadn't she found a wizard to love?

"Well, that will give us more time together. We will be able to explore this place."

"Yes, more time," Hermione said. "We'll explore, but we'll do it very carefully."

A little while later, after reading more about the potion and its theory, Hermione spoke again. "Raven, there's a warning here. Once the potion is started, anyone affected by its curse will begin to lose himself. He will become more and more like a child. The actual brewing is in itself a curse; the fumes slowly steal the mind of the affected one. Only the fully cooked potion will bring the cursed one back to himself."

"Do you think this is another of his nasty traps?" Raven asked, peering around the room suspiciously.

"It's more like another one of Voldemort's dirty jokes. It's probably his last-ditch effort at destroying you. But he never counted on me being here. Me, loving you, and me brewing the potion. I learned from the master. I can do it. You must decide if we will do this. This will be your last chance, Raven. Once we start the brewing process, there will be no going back."

"We will continue. I must remember my life." He knew that Hermione would never accept anything less of him. He had to do this, or eventually, they would lose each other one way or another. Her desire to help Harry was overwhelming. He knew she desperately wanted to save Harry and have him as well. It wasn't a choice she could make, and he wouldn't force the choice on her.

Hermione looked at him with pride and fear for them both. "I am so proud of you, Raven." She looked around, shielding him from the tears that had filled her eyes. "We must be careful here no matter what we touch. The very nature of his collection garners caution. Touching evil can rub off on you, so-to-speak. Plus, some of these books might actually have teeth that bite."

Raven looked horrified, and Hermione just laughed at him.

They did spend a couple of hours very carefully looking into the food and water situation. They found a kitchen with a great supply of staples and some delicacies preserved in food jars. There was a collection of rare wines. Voldemort had had expensive tastes. There was an enchanted alcove that had a sliding stone door. It was like a freezer inside, holding fresh meat of all kinds.

"Beef," Raven said with a sigh. "I haven't had a good steak since I found one half eaten in the trash behind that eatery in London."

"Oh, Raven," Hermione said with tears stinging her eyes. "I know how that was. Yet London seems a lifetime away instead of just a few months. It almost seems like a nightmare and not something we really lived through." She took out a large steak and set it aside for them to cook later. There was a stove they could heat with a cooking spell. There was also a dinning table with a large candelabrum in the center.

Hermione laughed. "I guess he liked all the comforts of home."

Another alcove was a full bathroom with a running waterfall, similar to Snape's. There was a large, tub-sized indent in the rocks. The water was heated like a hot tub. It was probably a natural hot water spring. Hermione looked longingly at it. The next room was a bedroom. The bed was covered in black and had blue topaz and silver Greek key designs on the spread.

"I'm surprised he didn't sleep in a snake's den," Raven said. "From what you've told me, he seemed more animal than human."

"He was an animal. He was cruel, blood thirsty, and power hungry, and he didn't care who or what got in his way. It's a huge testament to Severus Snape for going through all that he did for Harry and for the wizarding world in general. He may have believed that it was his fault and he had amends to make, but the hell he suffered at Voldemort's hands would have made any man turn away from that course. Yet he stayed to the bitter end. He knew he would end up without his memories and alone."

Raven said, "You finding me was a miracle, no coincidence. I believe God sent you to me. We may not be all he wants us to be, but he did care enough to send you to find me."

"At the cost of my parents?" She sounded bitter.

"No, but he used that situation to send us both where we could find hope and happiness," he said, holding her close.

She buried her face into the crook of his neck. "Maybe you're right, Raven. Maybe he does care about us."

They spent the evening talking about what they would do. They decided that leaving with the book might not be a good idea. They had no clue if the cavern would magically seal if they passed through the wall again. There were protections here for them because of their love. It had been unfathomable to Voldemort that Severus would come with someone who had loved him more than life itself. Their love had undone the enchantments surrounding the book and parchment. They felt they would continue to be protected. They decided to brew the potion and live in the cave. There were enough provisions to take care of them the entire six weeks and beyond. Cave life was not ideal, but they determined that they would be okay without the sun for a few weeks. They had spent a great deal of time in the sun in the last months. Plus, this cave had many wonders to be discovered. If there were hidden passages leading to further reaches of the cavern, they would find them and do some exploring.

They cooked and ate the steak with some potatoes and bread. They opened a bottle of fine wine and toasted to their future even though they both had secret thoughts that it might be short. That night, they curled up in the huge bed, and though they both pretended to fall asleep, they stared off into the darkness for hours.

The next morning after a breakfast of porridge and eggs found in a stasis box, they went to study the book of potions and spells. They spent the day trying their best to understand it all, and they began the arduous task of collecting all the ingredients from the huge stores of potion supplies that Voldemort had amassed.

Hermione had a hard time staying on task because she was so excited about the rare ingredients Voldemort had stored. "Phoenix tears!" she cried out in excitement. She slipped the vial into the pocket of her jeans for safekeeping. They could heal any injury. But there were still dangers. When she came upon books that felt wrong, she placed wards around them. They would leave those for the Aurors to deal with. By the end of the day, they had their lab set up and their ingredients assembled.

Exhausted, they took a long, hot bath and relaxed as the water and steam soothed their bodies. They sat cradled in each other's arms for some time, just loving the feel of their bodies pressed together. Raven held her in his lap with her back against his chest. He ran his hands over her body, rubbing in a soft soap they had found. His hand slid over her legs and thighs and circled her stomach. "I can't get enough of you, Hermione. I don't think I've ever been cared for by anyone as much as I have by you. I may not remember, but I know that your touch is the first time I've felt that touch of love, as a man, in my whole life. Severus was a wretched, lonely man." His hands slipped up to encircle her breasts.

"Raven," she groaned, feeling him harden against her back.

He kissed the back of her neck and then drew his teeth against her neck.

"Ohhh," she cried, quivering against him. "That's very sensitive."

He laughed and then did it again as he teased her nipples to tight hard nubs. She leaned back far enough for him to give her a kiss, and then she twisted around, straddling him. She flexed her back, lying back over his legs, and he took her breast into his mouth and sucked on it.

"Raven!"

"Yes," he smiled against her breast. "You can wait. I'm enjoying myself."

She rose suddenly, pushed up on his shoulders, and then let herself slide down on his hard shaft.

"Impatient, are you, my wanton wench?"

"You got that right." She nodded, closing her eyes and moving up and down on the hardened shaft.

They moved in tandem, determined to reach their climax together. But this time, it built up slow, smooth, and steady.

They muffled their cries of pleasure with a deep, long kiss.

Later, lying in the big bed, they whispered their love to each other.

Chapter 25

Chapter 25 of 63

Hermione flees the wizarding world and comes face to face with her past.

The next days were filled with preparations. They lit the cauldrons and prepared and started the ingredients for the first stage. There would be no fewer than five cauldrons brewing simultaneously. One would brew 18 days. Another took 76 hours and two minutes. Others took varying stages of time. This was by far the most complicated potion Hermione had ever heard of...let alone tried to brew. She relied on Raven's seemingly instinctual knowledge of how to cut and grind some of the more difficult things. Small cauldrons were also needed to brew ingredients for one of the five main cauldrons. Voldemort must have brewed it before just for practice. Everything they needed was there.

If Severus had truly been his servant, Hermione felt that Voldemort would have eventually allowed him to use the vast knowledge in the pages of the book they now had. Some of the potions did terrible things. Others healed wounds with amazing speed, according to the text.

One night, as they watched the cauldrons, Hermione was browsing through the book. "Raven, look! This may be the spell that will help restore Harry!"

He came to sit near her, and they studied the spell. "It does say it awakes the catatonic patient. If this is the one, there has been an impenetrable mind ward put around Harry's brain. He's been awake all the time and not able to speak."

"It sounds much like when I was incased in that glass coffin." Raven shuddered with the memory. "Poor kid."

"He's hardly a kid anymore. We are the same age."

"Don't remind me. Severus is going to have a conniption fit when he realizes he's been having sex with his former student."

"We'll let's hope you're there, too, and then he will understand." She turned away, not wanting to think about it or see the pain in Raven's eyes. "We won't know until Severus is back and can read this. It's a strange spell that requires singing and chanting. I have never heard some of these words. There is a very fine line in pronunciation of spells. If it's not done just right, all can be lost, and the patient could be further damaged."

"Why do you call him Severus, not Professor Snape?" Raven asked.

"I'm trying to think of the man in more personal terms. I use your first name all the time, so I should use his. He may not know your name at first, but he is you, and I will have to learn to love him." She laughed a bit from nervousness. "He will probably leave me inside the wall on the way out, and that will take care of that."

"Oh, Hermione, you don't..." Raven said with horror.

Hermione rushed to him and took him in her arms. "I'm sorry. I was just making a joke. Harry and Ron used to tell me my humor was scary. Even Severus Snape would not abandon me there. He will have to know how much I helped you/him. Just the two of us will be here."

"Your jokes sometimes make my heart stop. The worst part is that if I am not there when he wakes, you will be subject to his abuse and sharp tongue. I promised to never hurt you. You know I can't keep that promise, don't you?"

She soothed his cheek with her fingers. "I know, Raven. I knew then, but I loved hearing it."

"We have five and a half weeks here. Let's not talk about Severus Snape too much. What will be will be, Raven. Let's just love each other as much as we can. Let's make it the best weeks of our lives."

"I can do that," he said with a grin.

Each day they made a list of what the potions needed and when. Hermione had brought a small alarm clock with her that was capable of multiple alarms. So it helped them monitor the potions more easily.

They also found time to explore the cave and its contents. They made a rudimentary list...a sort of inventory. They didn't open some of the chests because of the dark magic oozing off them. Hermione continued to ward things they wanted to stay safe from. One day they found a chest of very rich, very old robes. Hermione cleansed the robes with a cleaning spell, and they planned a special dinner.

Two weeks into their stay, Hermione cooked another steak. There were potatoes and canned carrots in a sweet sauce. She found a special bottle of wine and then hurried to dress in the gown she'd found. It was from the 16th century: It had a tight bodice, low front, and long sleeves with tight wrists that pointed over her hands. It was made from gold, shimmering fabric, and pearls were sewn across the front in a diamond pattern. The full skirt billowed around her. She had brushed her hair up and wrapped a gold chain through it. Pearls hung on her ears. She had sent Raven to dress by the tub and had dressed in the bedroom. She wanted this to be like a date night...something different and fun.

Raven buttoned up the tunic and looked down with a grimace at the pantaloons and tights. Why had Voldemort had this chest of costumes? The fabric was rich and expensive, but he could not believe Voldemort enjoyed dressing up. He would do this for Hermione; she had a princess fantasy in her head, and he would do anything to make her happy. Oddly enough, he found the clothing comfortable and looked forward to the evening as any young man might on his first date. He was looking forward to seeing Hermione dressed up. He finished by brushing his long hair until it shone.

He stepped into the dining area and found it alight with many candles. The table was set, and the food was under warming spells. Then he heard the rustle of her skirts, and he turned to find a vision of such beauty. She stood with her hands at her sides, holding up the hem of her skirt slightly. Her hair was piled high, and the gold chain shined like diamonds in the flickering candlelight. She had left two thick, long curls of hair hanging over her shoulder.

Raven stepped forward and held out his hand, and she slid her hand into his. He bent and kissed her hand. "My Lady, you are beautiful," he said with a deep bow.

She giggled shyly at him. "It beats old jeans."

"That it does...a million times over."

"Raven, you look amazing." His tunic was a deep emerald green. The pantaloons were black, and the hose were also emerald green. He wore lace up shoes. His hair over his shoulders made him so sexy she had to contain herself. She would have loved to help him back out of his clothes, but she did want to have a nice dinner with him.

He turned and led her to her chair. She sat down, and then he pushed her close to the table. He sat at her right. She hadn't wanted him at the other end of the long table since she wanted to be able to touch him as they ate, to look into his eyes, and to perhaps feed him bites of her food. He opened the wine and poured it for them and then took his seat at her side.

They ate their meal and tried to talk about the trip and all the beautiful things they had seen. They didn't mention Severus, Voldemort, or Harry. They reminisced about the nights they had sat holding each other looking at the stars; the night with the gypsies remained one of their favorite memories. They enjoyed the music and the dancing.

"Hermione, close your eyes." Raven had a surprise for Hermione. He'd found a turntable hidden in one of the chests, and he'd hidden it. It had some old dance music from big band era. Crap as far as he was concerned but it was dance music. Not something he liked much. Why couldn't there have been some Carpenters, Stevie Wonder, or even the Detroit Spinners? Love songs or music you could dance too. *Never Knew Love Like This Before* by Stephanie Mills would have been perfect. Spoils of war he figured, a bit disappointed. Voldemort probably hadn't even known what half the chests had contained.

"Hermione, dance with me."

She opened her eyes to find he'd created a twinkling light spell of some sort; with the music, it made the room look enchanted. They danced close and slow. It was wondrous...like being on a ballroom floor. They shared gentle kisses, and Raven caressed her fingers as they danced and occasionally kissed her fingers.

Raven could think of nothing else but her body. He tried to concentrate on her conversation, but all he could think of was sex. He felt younger than he had in years, and he wanted what any young man might want after a night spent dancing. Part of him frowned at his thoughts. He loved Hermione. He loved her mind and her soul, and yet his only thoughts were for her body.

As the night grew late and the twinkling lights faded away, they went to their bed and made soft gentle love; lying naked in each other's arms was so natural to them now. They spoke of the life they wanted...of a house and babies...a life they knew might never be. As Hermione finally fell asleep, Raven grinned like a teenager.

The days passed, and the potion continued to bubble away. They were down to three cauldrons now, since the contents of two had been added into the remaining cauldrons. One was blood red, one emerald green, and the other was a deep midnight blue. All was as it should be. Their days together were vanishing as the potions grew toward completion. Half their time was gone. One night Raven asked Hermione to watch another memory from the necklace. He had decided to skip a few and try to find one in which he was a little older. He wanted to see what he had been like during the year or so before his entry into Hogwarts.

Hermione prayed that it would be a happy memory for him.

They found themselves standing in a wooded area. Eileen was with him. He had his wand out, and she was teaching him how to do spells that fifth-year students could barely master. Hermione was impressed. She held only a twig in her hand, but her knowledge was formidable. After some time, they sat on a blanket and had some cheese and bread.

"Mother?" Severus asked.

"Yes, my prince," she said with pride in her voice.

"When I was five and dad came into the barn, did you mean what you asked of me?"

His mother stood. "Oh, Severus, forgive my request. I was hurt and angry, and the pain of the loss of my wand was devastating. I should have spoken of this to you years ago. But I wasn't sure you remembered. I should have known better. You were always smarter than average children your age." She came back and knelt before him, taking his hands. "I once loved him, truly I did. When we first met, he was wonderful, amazing. We'd dance and go to movies and were like normal humans dating. We married in a wonderful garden wedding. That night in our wedding bed I told him what I was. I thought our love would take care of the shock. But he changed, and he never trusted me again. He became afraid; he was bitter and angry that I would lie to him about something so important. He was a man anchored to mundane Muggle life. He couldn't see the wonders of the powers of magic. He was terrified of it." She sat back, looking past him. "He started to drink, and the drink destroyed anything human left in him. I have stayed because I vowed to love, honor, and obey him. Sometimes promises must be kept even if one partner is no longer really there with you. It's my fault the love on his end was destroyed. He doesn't hate you. He fears you. Fear has warped his mind. Do not hate him. I bear the responsibility of our lives as they are." She got up and walked a few yards away into the trees.

Severus stood. He was tall and so thin that his bones were sharp and angled. Years of near starvation had made his long hair dull. "Mother?" he asked again, following her.

She turned, took him in her arms, and held him close. "My baby. Soon you will leave here. Life in Hogwarts will not be easy either. We are poor. Your clothing will show that. Children can be cruel. There's nothing I can do. But there you will excel, and you will have plenty of food. You will have books that we can only dream about. Your only weapon is your mind. It can be your sword. Your mind is sharp. You can be the best at everything you touch. You are a Prince, after all. You will make me proud, my son."

The boy's face glowed under her praise, as she ran her hand over his hair, petting him.

"I do not wish to leave you here with him."

"I will be alright, Severus. You must go. I want you away from here, and I want you to be the great wizard I know you can be. Go for both of us."

He nodded, looking into her eyes. "I will make you proud."

She kissed his forehead, and the memory faded. Raven had tears in his eyes. "She did love me. You must make Severus watch these memories. He needs to remember and see from her point of view."

Hermione held him close. "I will, Raven. I promise."

"She did love meeee!" He suddenly grabbed her by the hands and twirled her around like a child. He picked her up and twirled her around again. Her body was pressed against him, and as she slid down his body, she planted a steamy kiss on his lips.

Suddenly she found herself on her feet, and Raven was wiping a hand over his lips. "What are you doing? That's gross!"

Hermione stared at him, and then many little things that had been happening over the last few days fell into place. He'd insisted on bathing alone, and she'd awoken and found him pressed against the opposite side of the bed as far from her as possible. He has lost himself already. The adult Raven was gone, and he hadn't said anything. It made her queasy to think of what he might think of her: her touches, her teasing, and her kisses.

"I'm sorry, Raven. I forgot how young you are. I guess you're not ready for kisses."

"Nope, that's grown-up stuff," he said, fidgeting with his fingers and looking away from her.

She patted his arm. "Come on, let's play a game. I'm sure I saw something around here that looked like a ball."

She turned from him and bit her lip to keep from crying. He'd gone, and she hadn't even said goodbye.

That night she lay in her bed alone. She'd made Raven another bed and curtained it off. She put a silencing charm around hers and cried. She curled up in the huge bed, feeling more alone than she had in many months.

When she'd read what the effects of the potions would be on Raven, she hadn't expected him to regress to childhood so quickly. How would she deal with him like this? And how far would he regress?

Chapter 26

Chapter 26 of 63

Hermione flees the wizarding world and comes face to face with her past.

Hermione stood before Raven and watched as he swallowed the potion that had taken them nearly six weeks to brew, and then she started the incantation.

Raven looked into her eyes the entire time. Then he seemed to blink and whispered, "Hermione, so it is done. I love you." Tears ran freely down his face.

Somehow the potion had reversed his mind already. In the seconds it had taken him to swallow it, he was back loving her with his eyes. She wished she could touch him and kiss him one last time, but she could not enter the circle. She mouthed back, "I love you, too." Tears fell down her face, obstructing her vision.

She had memorized the incantation because she had known she would be crying and that she would not be able to read it from the paper. In a few minutes, their lives might be changed forever. Suddenly, a light pierced the room, and the area around Raven began to glow. Light surrounded his body like fire, and he screamed with pain.

Raven felt as if the sun was shining right through him. Darkness streamed from him, and he let out an unholy scream, feeling as if his body was being ripped apart. There seemed to be a fire in his arm. He lifted it to look, and a fiery light broke out of the skin around the Dark Mark. The beams of light rose to the ceiling of the cavern.

It was so bright, Hermione had to cover her eyes. When she peeked through a slit in her hands, she saw the light flare and then vanish. Raven fell to his knees. After he remained silent and close-eyed for a few moments, she ran to him and threw her arms around him. "Raven, Raven! Are you all right?" She covered his face with kisses, and then she kissed his mouth gently.

Suddenly, she felt his body stiffen, and she opened her eyes and looked into his eyes. He backed off a few inches and looked at her in confusion.

"Granger? What the bloody hell are you doing?" He pushed her back. "What's happening?"

He seemed to take in his surroundings and then looked back at her. "How did you end up helping me?"

Hermione felt her heart go cold; what she had feared for weeks became reality. She asked, "Professor Snape?"

"Of course," he answered in a nasty tone.

She felt her vision fade, and then blackness overtook her.

Snape saw her turn white as a sheet and slip toward the floor. He caught her and struggled to his feet, looking around. In the back he found a bed, and he tossed her onto it. He turned to survey his surroundings. He found his wand where he'd always kept it in his sleeve, and he held it up defensively.

He could sense the emptiness of the caverns; no other living person was near. He turned back to look at the unconscious girl. She had matured, and there was a toughness about her. He reached up to touch his lips; she'd been kissing him quite intimately. How had that happened? The touch had not been that unpleasant. Suddenly, he grabbed at his sleeve and pulled it up to see the Dark Mark. He gasped and had to sit on the edge of the bed. It was gone, leaving his arm an unblemished white. He was free; he no longer had the Dark Mark. That meant Voldemort was gone. Though it appeared his fears had been realized and he'd lost his memories, somehow he had been restored. He looked back at Miss Granger. He couldn't fathom how she had come to be the person who had helped restore him. He thought the girl and her friends hated him. What had happened? Only questions remained.

Snape cringed at the thought of having to endure an explanation from her. The story could be quite long, and he would be subject to her emotions and quite possibly her pain.

He checked her with his wand and found her in shock; but she would recover. He thought he'd better look around and see what was available to him. There might be potions around he would need to help her wake up.

He looked around the bed and saw a book on the table nearby. It had a cover with his name on it. It was odd because the handwriting was his, but he could not remember having seen this journal before.

He opened it to the first page and read, "Severus, I am Raven. I am who you have become."

Snape closed the book. He wasn't sure he would be able to deal with what had happened. His eyes shifted to Hermione. Her eyes were now open, and tears were running down her cheeks. She turned away from him.

"Miss Granger, are you all right?" he asked. He wasn't really sure he cared or really wanted to know, but he knew how to be sociable when the need rose. And it was obvious that she must have been a great help to him. He was honestly surprised not to see Potter or Weasley there with them. What had happened to them?

"Miss Granger, are you OK?" he asked again, not having gotten any response. "Granger, answer me!" he demanded, using his teacher's voice.

"No," she whispered.

"You are in shock. Are you in any physical pain?"

She couldn't speak; she could only shake her head. Her whole life was suddenly empty and frightening. Everything she'd had with Raven in the last months was gone. She only hoped that in time the memories she had made with Raven would resurface.

Severus looked around the massive cave room and noted all the treasures. He saw the books, and he felt a huge desire to start reading them. He'd loved books as a child and throughout his adult life. Books were one thing he and his mother shared that his father had no part in, being illiterate.

Strange, he thought, he hadn't thought of his mother in years. Why were thoughts of her so fresh? He could see her clearly in his mind.

He came back close to the bed, and Miss Granger was sitting on the edge of it. "Better?" he asked.

She nodded.

"You have obviously been of help in returning my memories. How long has it been since the war?" he asked curiously.

"Six... six and half months," she said flatly.

"SIX MONTHS! Bloody hell, girl!" he yelled. "Where have I been?" He came close to peer in her face and was suddenly enveloped by her arms.

"Raven, I know you're in there. Please remember I love you. Please remember!" Hermione cried. Her face pressed against his waist.

"Miss Granger! UN-HAND ME!" he growled, struggling to disengage her arms from around him. But he found the strong hug somehow reassuring nevertheless. Part of him was familiar with her touch. He loathed feeling her release him, but she heeded his voice and let go. She got up and ran to the far end of the cavern and huddled in a ball against the wall.

He stood looking at her, feeling he should go to her. But he was Severus Snape, and Severus Snape did not coddle emotional females.

He finally went and stood her up, shaking her to get her attention. "Miss Granger, you must not succumb to this emotionalism. I need answers, and you are the only one who can give them. How did you get in here? How do we get out?" He hadn't seen any doors.

Hermione stood for a while just watching him. He was pacing the cave like a trapped lion, growling and strutting here and there. He was as arrogant and harsh as he'd been when he'd taught her at Hogwarts. Her heart ached for Raven. His gentle, kind, loving, soul was trapped inside the man demanding answers from her.

She dried her tears with the back of her hand. "We came through the wall, but I can only get through if you are holding me inside the circle of your arm."

Snape nodded, taking her at her word. "Let's get out of here. I take it you got to my cave before coming here."

"Yes, sir," she said.

"Let's go there then. This is no place for you to be."

"I've been here with Raven for six and a half weeks. The potion that brought back your memories took a great deal of work. The spell took a lot of practice."

He looked around again. "You've been here for more than six weeks?" He saw the journal again at the bedside and then realized there was only one bed.

Hermione had returned Raven's bed to its original form...a lounge chair.

"You and... Raven... have been sleeping together?" His eyebrows had risen in surprise.

"Yes," she said, suddenly embarrassed.

"You and I... ?" he asked, not finishing the sentence.

She took a deep breath and stood straighter. "Yes."

"You're a child! A student! What kind of man was he? Why would you want to?"

"We became friends, very good friends at a time when we both needed someone desperately. We grew to respect and love each other very much."

"Love." He said the word as if it were a nasty thing. "Love only kills you. Now we need to leave here."

Hermione went to the bedside table and took the journal. "Raven spent a lot of time writing in this book so you would know what you've been doing all this time. I doubt you will like a lot of what you read, but everything in it happened...everything." She held it up to him and stood waiting for him to take it.

He stood looking at it as if it were a vile bug. Then he reached out and took the book.

She stepped closer and reached up to touch his cheek. Surprised, he drew back, but she came forward and caressed his cheek with her fingers. "Severus Snape, you have the ability to love and be loved. The part of you that was Raven learned that with me. I am no longer your student. Do not dismiss me as a child. I am a woman...a woman you made me. I love you with all my heart."

"Love me!" he spat. "You love a ghost, someone I was, someone who's dead."

"Do not dismiss me like that," she demanded. "Raven is part of you. I am here for you...not just because you were Raven but because you are a man who has garnered great respect in our world. You gave so much to protect Ron, Harry, and me."

"Where are the ungrateful brats? Why haven't they come here to help you?" His voice was condescending.

"When the war was over, Ron was dead. Harry is lying in a hospital, catatonic, the victim of a spell Voldemort placed on him moments before Harry's curse killed him. You can help me with the spells in this book Raven and I found. You are the Potions master and a great wizard. I do not understand the instructions in the book that holds the key to the spells that might help Harry."

"Now, the truth is told," he said, stepping back from her. "You kissed up to this Raven so you could convince me to help Potter. Always Potter. He has been a thorn in my side for my entire adult life. The agonies I have gone through for that boy. You have no idea. What did I get from him but hatred and disrespect?"

Hermione slapped him. "I gave up the love of my life for you. Yes, I did it so you could save Harry, and that's a payment of sorts, but mostly I did it because it was the right thing to do. Raven doesn't know Harry. He never met him, but he gave our life up to help Harry because that was what you had devoted your life to. He respected you enough to give you back your life. The least you can do is read his journal and honor who he was by saving Harry."

Snape stood looking down at her. "Are you done?" he asked with a sneer. This girl certainly was a spitfire.

"For now."

"Then let's go. I can't stay here right now. I need my own things. I need to reconnect with my life." He did not tell her that this place scared him.

"Collect what you want to take with you, and bring the Potion book you mentioned."

Hermione quickly collected her things and joined him again. She took one wistful look back at the bed they had shared.

"Miss Granger, I am not a patient man. Let's go!" he demanded.

Hermione showed him the wall they had passed through, and he found that his hand passed into the wall easily. He reached out his hand to her.

"You won't let go?" she asked fearfully. "Raven didn't know the first time, and I got trapped for a few moments. I thought I was going to die surrounded by that rock." She drew back. "Don't let go of me!"

Severus saw the naked fear in her eyes, and he felt the need to reassure her.

"I will not let go, Hermione."

Hermione could see the truth in his eyes. For a moment she felt as if she was looking into Raven's eyes, and he reached out and drew her against him into the circle of his arm.

Well it finally happened, Severus is back. What do you think?

Many thanks go out for Lisa, my beta.

Chapter 27

Chapter 27 of 63

Hermione flees the wizarding world and comes face to face with her past.

Hermione felt a panic she had never known before as she felt the grains of sand pass through her body, but the continued grip of Severus's arm around her kept her from freaking out. Finally, they stood in the outer cavern. Severus let go of her, turned, and strode away. She had to run to keep up with him. He had the tip of his wand lit.

"Severus! Watch the floor; it vanishes. Let me help you get out," she called after him.

He stopped so abruptly that she ran into his back. He turned and gripped her arm so hard that she knew she would have bruises.

"You impertinent girl; you will address me as Sir or Potions Master Snape. I have not given you permission to use my first name." He turned and moved further into the darkness, quickly outdistancing her again.

"Sir," she gulped, "please let me show you how to get out. The cave floor has dangers, and I know the way."

She saw his light stop ahead, and he waited for her to catch up.

He didn't say anything but motioned her in front of him.

Hermione went ahead and showed him the tiny ledge. They slipped over the ledge as quickly as possible and came upon the trussedup, dead dragon.

He looked surprised. "You did this?"

"Raven blinded him, and I chained him."

"Well, the man had bollocks after all."

"Crude, but yes, he had courage. I think it had more to do with making sure I survived than anything else," she said wistfully, wishing he were there with her.

They got to the mouth of the cave, and he eyed the huge web. "Where's the spider?"

"It's dead and at the bottom of the gorge. It was more than a spider."

"Do you have a broom, Granger?"

"Yes, sir," she said, fishing out the broom from her bag and expanding it.

He took it from her, mounted it, and motioned for her to get on. She did and then clasped him around the waist. She laid her cheek against his back and closed her eyes. Breathing in the scent that was Raven gave her courage. She felt him stiffen against her, but he did not rebuke her.

They flew out over the gorge. Then, in an act Hermione had never seen, they Apparated broom and all and landed before the entrance to Snape's cavern.

Snape entered the cavern and shouted, "Grendel!" The animal tackled Snape, knocking him down and licking him all over the face.

Hermione stood gobsmacked as Snape actually laughed and wrestled with Grendel.

"How are you my old friend?" he said, getting to his feet. He tousled the fur on the top of Grendel's head. "Granger, shut your mouth. You're gaping." He strode off into the cave.

Grendel came to Hermione, bounced around her, and licked her hand. They followed his master into the cave.

Inside Snape's lair, she watched as he kicked off his boots and walked around.

"You've been messing with my things. I did not leave them in this order."

"I'm sorry, sir. Raven and I stayed here for a few weeks. We had to spend some time studying the spells you left us in your journal."

"I assumed you found the journal in Minerva's office. It is still her office, isn't it? She survived the war, didn't she?"

Hermione heard a bit of hesitant fear there. Before the war, she would not have been able to recognize all the nuances in Snape's voice, but she knew Raven so well that she could read so much more now. Snape was not as black and white as he had seemed all those years...or was it because of Raven that there were changes in him?

"Minerva is fine. She was very happy to see you were alive and a bit devastated that it wasn't really you. She loves you, you know?"

Snape just shot a glare at her and then walked away. He went to his desk and sat behind it. "Miss Granger, do not presume to know me. The man you spent time with all these months is no longer here."

Hermione couldn't stop the tears that swam into her eyes and fell down her cheeks.

"Tears!" He sneered. "No one cries for me."

"That's right!" she cried. "No one cries for you, but I cry for Raven. He was a wonderful human being."

She went to the bed, crawled in, and turned her back to the cave.

"Granger, that is my bed!" he growled.

"You are welcome to share it," she sniffled over her shoulder.

"Not bloody likely," he said.

"Suit yourself. I didn't sleep well last night, and I'm exhausted."

"Bloody brat," he said under his breath. How could he in any lifetime sleep with that insufferable know-it-all? He went and found a bottle and got very drunk.

Severus woke with a pounding headache. He suddenly realized that he was in his own bed, and there was a body pressed against his. Her arm was around his waist, and her cheek was against his back. He could feel her warmth through his clothing. He was about to move away when she stretched against him and her lips pressed against his neck. The softness of her kiss surprised him so much that he froze.

"Raven," she murmured in her sleep.

Severus saw red and dragged himself away, waking her at the same time.

"He's gone; you forget your place."

Hermione saw anger and something else she could not put a name to flash across his face. Was it disappointment?

"I'm sorry, sir. I didn't realize you had joined me."

Snape ran his fingers through his hair. "No... I was drunk. It is not my habit to come to a woman's bed uninvited."

"This is our bed. Well, your bed."

Snape said, "Look, Miss Granger. I know this is a very strange situation for you; it is for me, too. There is much to talk about and much to consider."

"You would consider continuing our relationship?" she asked hopefully.

"Hardly," he said. "But I do need to know what I have been doing and where I was all this time. You will supply me with the information I want. Then you can go back to your own life, and I will be free to get on with mine." He left her sitting there.

Hermione felt as if her heart would jump from her breast. She turned her back to the cave again and pulled the covers over her face. She used the pillow to muffle her cries.

Snape sat at his desk, oddly feeling a tightness and an overall nervousness as he listened to her muffled tears. He was not without sympathy. Who was this Raven who had captured her heart so completely? Was that part of him still alive inside himself? He growled and grabbed another bottle. He could not block out her cries, and it tore at his heart. If Raven was going to be nothing but pain to him, then he didn't need him. After a time, he no longer heard the crying, nor was he aware when the tears stopped.

Hermione came from the bed and stood over him. He was asleep. His head had fallen forward onto the desk, and a nearly empty bottle was on the table. Was Snape in so much pain that he had to drown himself in drink? This was where she had found Raven, anesthetized with drink. If her tears were causing him pain, then she had to stop. She vowed she would not let him see her cry again. She gently caressed his long hair and then went to bathe and dress.

Severus woke with his head still pounding. He had a terrible neck ache from having slept in the chair. He could hear Grendel's snores from his corner of the cave. He heard dishes rattling and smelled a wonderful aroma. He realized he was starving. He struggled to his feet and used a cleansing spell on himself. For now, the black jeans and plaid shirt he had been wearing when he woke would have to do. He rubbed at his stiff neck and went to see what Miss Granger was up to.

She was dishing out bowls of stew and had placed glasses of water from the spring on the table.

She looked up at him when he came near. "Dinner is ready. I'm sorry, I'm not much of a cook."

"I'm sure it will be fine." He spooned the stew into his mouth. "Passable," he said.

She smiled. That was high praise from Snape. She sat across from him and ate.

"I apologize for my drunkenness; it's an old habit."

She didn't say anything.

"I realize you must have sacrificed a lot to get me back to Voldemort's lair. Your life has been on hold. I do not want you to think me ungrateful. You will be well paid."

"I did not do it for money, sir. You insult me. Do not assume anything until you have heard my story."

He looked steadily into her eyes, seeing the flash of anger. "Again, I apologize. I am not accustomed to being in anyone's debt. I've always had my own to pay."

"Sir, there is no debt. I helped you because I needed something to help me continue living at the time. When I found you, it was a saving grace for me as well as for you. I have told you we became friends."

"I cannot fathom that, Miss Granger."

"Sir, surely two people who have had the sort of relationship we have had could at least be on first name basis. Please call me Hermione."

Her request was reasonable. He ducked his head in agreement. "Hermione. I will try to control my tongue, but you know me. Words are not easy for me."

"I know, Severus. I will try not to take offense. I apologize for my weakness earlier. I tried to prepare myself for this eventuality, but it is harder to live through than I imagined."

Severus rubbed at his neck. "I cannot understand your willingness to be involved with me. There are so many years between our ages. I have never in my life been nice to you and your friends. You do understand it was mostly an act to keep Voldemort from suspicion, don't you?"

She nodded, noting again that he was rubbing his neck. "Please, sir, may I massage the knot out of your neck? I have gotten some practice over the last months."

He normally wouldn't have let her touch him, but the pain was unbearable, and his head was still pounding.

He nodded. She went to his own shelves of potions and brought back a pain reliever and a salve for his neck. He downed the potion in one swallow and then pulled his hair forward and to the side out of her way. She pulled the collar of his shirt down. Applying some salve to her fingers, she gently but firmly rubbed it into the tissues of his neck, working at the knot Raven often got from sitting at his desk too long reading or writing.

He closed his eyes and let his head drop forward. He could not remember anyone's touch being as therapeutic as hers was. Again, he felt the familiarity of her touch. He wished he could remember what they'd had. The woman was beautiful. He couldn't deny that in his own mind. If he could remember, maybe he would find a relationship with her not so bizarre. He was having a hard time separating the fuzzy-haired child of 11 from the woman whose fingers felt like magic against his skin. He felt her fingers slip down beneath his shirt. It startled him, and he stood, nearly knocking her off balance.

"Thank you, that will do. I'm going to feed Grendel," he said, hurrying away.

Hermione rubbed her hands together and smiled after him.

Chapter 28

Chapter 28 of 63

Hermione flees the wizarding world and comes face to face with her past.

Severus spent the evening looking at the book of spells. His eyes were alight with the enjoyment of new knowledge. Hermione had a book in her hands as well, but she was not really reading it. Instead, she kept stealing glances at him over the edge of the book.

"Granger," he admonished, "stop gaping at me."

"I'm sorry, sir."

He sighed, putting the book aside. "Tell me how you found me."

She put her book down and moved her chair a little closer to his desk. "My parents were murdered by Death Eaters after the war."

His eyes widened, and he leaned toward her. "My condolences."

She nodded. "I found them, and the pain was more than I could bear. I ran from the house and into the city, hiding my wand and abandoning my life." She told him about

finding him and how he had been.

He didn't comment but listened carefully.

Hermione left out how he'd tried to manhandle her. She didn't see much point. She'd forgiven him long ago and felt as if it had happened to someone else.

She told him about having taken Raven to Spinner's End. "Severus, I could fill you in on all that happened there, but you have Raven's own words and feelings. It might be best if you read his journal. I would be happy to clarify anything you might have questions about."

He had taken the book from his jacket pocket earlier and had laid it on the desk. He bent forward and touched the cover. "I find I dread reading it."

"Why, Severus?" she asked in a soft voice.

It seemed to caress him, and he felt soothed by it. "Your Raven seems to have been a very gentle man. That is a quality I do not have...nor have I ever had. I doubt I will understand it, and it seems as if it might be an invasion of your privacy if he speaks of intimate details from your time together."

"I understand, but you need to know how it was for us. I want you to know how it could be if you would just give us a chance. I am going to go to bed; it's late. There is plenty of room, and I will try very hard not to touch you if you wish to sleep in the bed with me. You are welcome to put a magical barrier between us if it makes you more comfortable."

He nodded and watched her get up and move away into the darkness at the other end of the cave. He saw a small candle light by the bed. When he saw her pull the robe she had been wearing over her head, he averted his eyes. He picked up the journal and opened the cover.

Severus,

I am writing this journal because Hermione wishes it. I understand her reasons. If we are successful and you regain your life and I am lost, you need to know what happened. I have been with Hermione only a few weeks, and already she and I sleep together. It seemed so natural and so easy for me. I have very strong feelings for her. Do not underestimate her feelings for us. You would be a fortunate man to receive her love. She has told me much about you. My deepest fear is that you will not allow yourself the comfort she can give you. I am part of you, so you are capable of loving her with all your heart. Do not be stubborn, man. I know she was once a child and a student of yours. But she is a woman now.

To our history...

Severus read the first pages. Raven had repeated the first meeting and also had told him of his despicable handling of Hermione in his drunken state. He begged Severus to stay away from alcohol. *"It will only cloud your mind. I am much better off without it, and Hermione deserves better than how we can be drunk,"* he said, reading the quote aloud.

He read a few passages that made his ears redden with their descriptions of the young woman who now slept in his bed. His body ached for a woman who really was not his.

He skipped many pages and read that Raven had left a few of his memories on the shelves with the vial labeled "Last Will and Testament."

"Severus, if you walk away from Hermione, I can guarantee that you will never be happy. She is our completeness. Look for me inside yourself. With all that she has made me, you can find that happiness, too.

Severus read through the weeks of Hermione's entries, grimacing as she described his regression into childhood. He even laughed a bit at how uncomfortable she was while having to bathe and dress him as a mother would a child. It seemed as if it had all happened to someone other than himself. But he found in the deepest reaches of his hidden thoughts that he envied Raven.

Severus tossed the book on the desk. He didn't want to feel what Raven wanted him to. He could not face this yet...maybe never. Feelings and love hurt so badly. He'd spent a lot of years burying his feelings. He felt as if chaos would ensue if he allowed himself to feel.

He stood for a time looking down at Hermione. She was sleeping in a satin gown that seemed to slide over her skin with such softness, and he wanted to reach out and

touch her. Her hair fanned over the pillow, making her look like a sleeping princess. Her lashes were thick on her rosy cheeks, and her lips were full and inviting. He shook himself and scowled at her.

Severus pushed the feelings down behind his usual barriers and was relieved as the feelings died down. He also felt disappointment, and he didn't think it came from himself. The part that was Raven had no voice, and he realized that Raven had been his feelings. He would have to rid himself of the woman as soon as possible. Love had always hurt him.

He stared at a bottle craving the mindlessness it would put him in. Then he remembered Raven's words; with a sigh he transformed a table behind his desk into a small bed and crawled in, pulling his cloak over him.

Hermione woke a few hours later and noted with disappointment that Severus had chosen to sleep elsewhere. But she couldn't expect miracles, and at least he had been civil.

She saw that Raven's journal lay closed on the desk. Had he read it? If so, he knew how she felt and how Raven had felt about her, and he had still chosen to sleep elsewhere. She blinked away the sudden tears that sprung to her eyes. *No crying.*

She prepared breakfast and gave Grendel a treat when he came to nuzzle at her hand. He looked over at Severus and seemed to be confused. He'd grown to like Raven very much and accept that they slept together, and this new arrangement puzzled him. Hermione wondered how much he really did understand.

"Go get your master. It's time for breakfast," she told the animal.

She watched as he went over and nuzzled Severus' face, and finally the wizard woke up.

"What, old friend?" he asked.

"Breakfast is ready," Hermione called.

Severus scowled at her. "You're not my maid. I can get my own food."

Hermione turned away. "Suit yourself." So, he was going to be the tough guy today. He'd let his guard down somewhat last night, and now he was regretting it. She'd known he would find it hard to understand all the things she and Raven had experienced. She had fully expected Severus to hide behind the carefully placed barriers he was used to living behind.

Severus watched her turn away, and he felt the loss of her smile. Then he forced the twinge of feeling away. She would poison his life if he let her in. They all did.

Hermione was eating breakfast when he came from the bathroom and got his own bowl of porridge from the stove and took some dried fruit to go with it.

He went to sit at his desk. She saw him put the journal away in a drawer.

She finished her meal and then came to stand before him until he acknowledged her.

"Did you read the journal?"

"Not much," he said, annoyed and wishing she'd go away.

Hermione was terribly disappointed but decided to change the subject. "Will we go back to Hogwarts to see Minerva and Albus?"

"Albus?" He blanched. "He's dead."

"Yes. Severus, I'm sorry. When you talk to his portrait, you forget he's not really alive."

He nodded. "I'm not sure he would want to see me," he said scathingly.

"Your wrong, sir. He was delighted to see Raven, and when Raven asked him if he hated him for killing him, Albus forgave him."

"Why would Raven take responsibility for my actions?" he asked gruffly. "You say Albus forgave him?"

Hermione saw hope in his eyes. "Of course he did. He asked you to do it, and you gave him what he wanted even if he shouldn't have asked. I'm not sure I forgive him for putting you in that position."

Severus nearly smiled. "It was war." Then he asked, "Are you certain I have been exonerated for my war crimes? I do not wish to go back to be arrested and placed into Azkaban."

"Yes, you have. I believe Minerva plans to hand you the Headmaster's office in a couple years. If you come back."

"Go back to teaching?" he said sarcastically. "I always loved it so much."

"You were the best teacher there. You taught me so much. If you hadn't, I would never have been able to complete the potion that gave you back your life."

He looked at her with a touch of surprise in his eyes. Pride filled his heart, and then a longing forced itself to the surface and hit him with pain. He could not feel for this woman... he could not... She was not his to feel for.

He stood. "I need to go. You can get yourself back to Hogwarts."

"What!"

Hermione stood shocked as he grabbed his cloak and said to Grendel, "Guard duty, my friend."

Then he was gone...Apparating to who knows where. He'd taken nothing with him. He'd left the memories and journal behind.

Hermione stared at the spot where he had stood. What had happened? The conversation hadn't been emotional, had it? She'd seen something in his eyes seconds before he'd left.

"Raven! It was Raven, and he had scared the hell out of Severus with his emotions!"

She ran around the cave collecting her things, and she took the journal and the memories with her. She hugged Grendel, leaving wet tears on his neck.

"Dobby?" she called, collapsing to her knees with emotional exhaustion and fear mixed with hope.

"Miss...Miss..." She could hear him calling to her.

"Take me to Minerva." She felt herself slip into darkness.

Chapter 29

Hermione flees the wizarding world and comes face to face with her past.

Hermione woke to find herself in a bed. "Where am I?" she asked, struggling to sit up.

Minerva came to hover above her. "Just lie back. You've been in shock. What happened, Hermione? Is Severus okay?" Fear was in the old witch's eyes.

Hermione nodded and said bitterly, "Yes, he's back to his old, nasty self. Minerva, what am I going to do without Raven? Raven is trapped inside him, and he will do everything he can do to keep him buried. I can hardly stand the idea of Raven buried alive inside that man. I saw Raven looking out from his eyes for only a second, but I know it was him. The feelings scared Severus so badly he ran. He left me in his lair and ran. Where would he go? I need to find him."

"Hermione, you have to give him time," Minerva said sternly. "He just got his mind back. It's a lot to take in. Does he know your and Raven's story?"

Hermione nodded through her tears. "Some of it. He asked, and I told him. He read some of Raven's diary, and then he went to sleep...but not in our bed."

Minerva couldn't hide the worry in her face. "He must be so confused. He can see that 'Raven' had everything he's always wanted. He has no experience with love. Love has always hurt him. Did he tell you he'd killed his father?"

"We knew that from his journals," she said, sitting up against the pillows, her interest piqued.

"He went home the Christmas before he took his NEWTs. His mother had begged him. He loved her, yet he'd always mistrusted her love because she had subjected him to his father's cruelty all his life. I urged him to go. I really thought his father might be proud that he was at the top of his class. I had no clue the man was mad. Severus arrived and found his parents in a heated row. His father had already beaten his mother half to death. When Severus intervened, he got stabbed in his left shoulder. He managed to overpower his father and drove the knife into his father's heart. It was self-defense and no one thought differently, but Severus was tortured over the event. His mother wasn't even grateful. She refused to speak to him again. Love has always hurt Severus."

"Oh my gawd," Hermione cried. "How will I ever get through to him? I promised Raven I wouldn't leave him."

Minerva placed her hand on the young witch's shoulder. "I know you loved Raven very much, Hermione. But if you are to find him again, you will have to learn to love Severus and become his friend first. Treat him as an acquaintance and hopefully as a colleague. Find a way to be useful to him. Let go of Raven for now. If you can be a friend and support Severus as Severus Snape, he may respond."

"What of Harry? I have the book of spells. He didn't even take that with him."

"I can ask Poppy to look at it. If Severus knows he's the only one who can perform the spell, he will come back eventually. He has a sense of honor that he may at times despise, but he will pay his debts, and he knows he owes you. You will see him again." She looked sternly into Hermione's eyes. "It may be your only chance to reconnect. Do not blow it by being overly emotional or demanding."

Hermione nodded.

Minerva continued, "I know he will come to see me eventually, and I want to convince him to work here. I also want to have you come and teach Charms. I plan to get him to sign a legally binding contract to teach here and then eventually become Headmaster. If he signs it, he will honor it. I do not plan to tell him you will also be here. And I would advise you to keep that detail to yourself. Once you are colleagues, it will be up to you to slowly win him over."

Hermione dried her tears with the back of her hand. "I will do my best."

"See that you do. I want to see the same happiness in Severus' eyes that I saw in Raven's. Raven was an adult child. Severus is a man. They can be integrated into one man if we are cunning and careful enough. We both love that man, and he, more than most people, deserves to be happy." She hugged Hermione. "So do you, my dear. Now get some rest. This will be your quarters. You might as well settle in."

Hermione watched her gather her robes around her and sweep from the room. She settled back against her pillows. "God, it's in your hands now," she whispered.

Severus Apparated to Spinner's End and swept into the house. He growled at the changes he saw and banished all the traces of Hermione that he found there.

"Damn that woman. She had no right to bring him here. This is my house...mine." Yet he knew Raven was part of him. He could feel changes in himself that he had no idea how to contain or react to. He'd felt such an overwhelming need for Hermione that it had scared him witless, and he'd had to run. He would not take a woman who wanted him only for a shadow of himself. Yet as he looked around the empty house, he felt more alone than he'd ever felt.

What a fool he was. She could never love him for who he was, could she? And as he sat in his favorite chair with a forgotten book in his hands and a drink by his side, he suddenly remembered he'd left everything behind...even the book of spells. He would have to find Hermione. He knew she would not have left anything behind in his lair. He felt exhausted with the knowledge that he would have to deal with her again, yet somehow it relieved the ache in his chest. This would give him an excuse to interact with her again. No matter what he did, he could not quell the longing to set eyes on her again. He did owe her. And Severus Snape always paid his debts.

That night when he laid his head on his pillow, he smelled her there in the sheets and on the pillow. Her scent was in the room all around him. As he slipped into an exhausted sleep, he felt somehow comforted.

Minerva sat in her office late that night and nursed a brandy. She was so worried about Severus. She finally summoned an owl and wrote him a note, welcoming him back to the land of the living. She told him that Hermione had arrived at Hogwarts in a state of shock and was being taken care of. She somehow knew her 'son' would be concerned. She told him to come see her when he was able. She sent the owl out into the night, knowing it would find Severus no matter where he was.

Severus stayed in his house for three days. He'd gotten Minerva's owl the first night, and he had sent her a reply, telling her he would come talk to her in a few days. He had asked her indulgence and thanked her for taking care of Hermione.

On the second night, he tried to get drunk, but he found his heart was not in it. He kept remembering Raven's warning about the drink taking their life away, and he found that Firewhiskey did not make him drunk...much to his disgust. On the third day, he decided to go pay Minerva a visit. He figured Hermione would still be there. Even though it made his stomach queasy to think of seeing her again, he knew they had to get on about the business of seeing if the spell book would help Harry Potter.

Severus Apparated to the gates of Hogwarts and was pleased when they admitted him with his old password. He walked across the grounds, drinking in the sight of the old castle and its battlements. He had not realized how much he had missed it. It was home after all. He also realized there had been repairs. He could see the new stone mixed with the old.

He opened the big door and entered the school. It was quiet and still. Before he could get to the Headmaster's office, the bell rang and hundreds of students came out of doors and surrounded him as they headed to their next classes. He saw a few stop and stare at him, then duck away when they met his eyes. And he heard his name like an echo through the corridors.

"Professor Snape?... Snape!... Snape!... Is that Snape?"

All he had to do was glare at them, and they ran. He was grinning to himself when he entered Minerva's office. He still had his touch.

The old witch was waiting near the door for him, and he found himself hugged quite heartily. He endured it for a couple seconds and then pushed her back, making sure she was steady on her feet.

"Unhand me, you old bat," he said, but not unkindly.

Minerva laughed. "It really is you...you old buzzard." She smiled affectionately at him.

"Yes, it's me, the nasty old spy." He slumped into a chair by her desk.

Minerva passed him and squeezed his shoulder as she went by. "I see no spy. That's done and gone, Severus." She took her chair. "You've had quite an adventure."

"Apparently," he said flatly. "It's a shame I can't remember it." He looked her in the eye. "What did you think of him?"

Minerva smiled, surprised he'd asked. "He was a very genuine young man. He was very innocent and scared. You have no idea how Miss Granger's finding you saved you."

"Humm." He fidgeted uncomfortably. "It was so inappropriate. She's still so young. Raven may have been her equal emotionally, but I on the other hand... Is she okay?" he asked quietly.

Minerva was delighted that he had asked. "She's grieving. I sent her off to Molly's." She did not say it was only for a few days. "It was not inappropriate. She's no longer your student, Severus. Under the circumstances, it was a blessing for you both. Give her a chance."

"Minerva, I am not Raven, nor is he me. What they had is gone. She would not look twice at me if I were not in the same body. Nevertheless, I will need to see her. She has the spell book. She believes one of the spells will help Potter. Perhaps it will help Longbottom's parents, as well."

Minerva saw more in his face than she'd ever seen. He wanted to see Hermione. Did he even realize he'd changed?

"I can have her back here in minutes if you'd like."

"No, let her stay there for a few days." He waved his hand, dismissing the subject. "I understand you are hoping I would come back to teach?"

"Actually our Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher is ill and won't be able to finish the year. You could start immediately."

Severus sat up straighter. "DADA? You would finally trust me with that post?"

"If that is what you truly wish," she said.

"Who is teaching Potions?"

"Phinnius Philbin."

"Phinnius Philbin! He couldn't brew a love potion to save his life. Why is he in that position?"

Minerva said, "We lost many wizards during the war. The castle was damaged and many died. They nearly shut the school down. He's about the best I could come up with."

"Let him teach the Dark Arts class. I want my lab and my quarters back," he stated.

Minerva arched an eyebrow at him. "Is that truly what you want?"

"Yes, the book Hermione has belonged to Salazar himself. There are amazing potions there: forgotten potions, potions that will heal people in amazingly short times, potions that will repair damaged tissues that we couldn't heal before. There are also incredibly dark potions...potions that would be better off lost. I will make sure they can no longer get into evil hands."

"Yes, I see you have it all thought out," Minerva replied. "Well, Severus, if that is what you want, you shall have it, under the condition that you become Headmaster when I retire in two years."

"I had heard that rumor, old woman. Are you sure this is what you want?"

"Very sure. I can think of no one else I would trust with this school and its students. You might find you actually enjoy the job."

"I have had the job. It wasn't all that bad."

She nodded. "Yes, Albus tells me you did a good job."

At the mention of Albus, Snape glanced at the portrait on the wall. He'd been careful to avert his eyes so far. The death of his mentor and friend still haunted him. But his eyes only met a twinkling smile.

"Severus, it is good to see you, my old friend. I was trying to give you and Minerva privacy to conduct your business."

"You were probably eyeing me up and down and taking stock of your murderer."

"Severus!" Minerva said in horror.

"No, Minerva, he's right. I was taking stock, but he's wrong about the reasons. You did not murder me. You had my permission and my persuasion, if I remember."

Severus glared at him. "Yes, persuasion." It was said harshly and sarcastically. "You cared for Draco's soul. What about mine? Maybe we should have left well enough alone. Raven was without consciousness about all my sins. Maybe he did deserve a life better than mine. He had it all: love and a woman who would never break his heart. In time, he would have learned his craft again."

Albus lowered his chin and looked at Severus over his glasses. "You do not need to hide behind Raven, Severus. He was only half of who you are. Although he was a gentle soul, he could not have lived that way forever. He was but a young man, really. You are all of him as well as all that you have been, Severus. You can find that part of him. Hermione loved him not just because of who he was but because she has always admired you."

Severus said, "Shut it, old man." He turned away. "Minerva, give me the contract. I will sign it under one condition. When you leave here, you will take that portrait with you. I will not look at it again."

Minerva glanced at Albus in concern, but he nodded, the twinkle in his eyes never wavering.

Minerva produced the contract with her wand, and Severus signed it. He tossed the pen onto the contract and, with billowing robes, turned and left the office.

Minerva looked back at Albus. "How can you be so happy? He's miserable and tortured."

"Yes, my dear, but he's also going to stay here, and Hermione will be here. I have no doubt that in time she will win his heart. When she does, he will come back to see me. In time, he will see the necessity of what I asked of him, and he will forgive me and himself."

Chapter 30

Chapter 30 of 63

Hermione flees the wizarding world and comes face to face with her past.

Hermione had barely arrived at the Weasleys' before she was enveloped in a big bear hug from Molly, and then Ginny came. Tears flowed between them all. They had no idea why Hermione was heartbroken, but they all shared her pain. Each of them was living with the scars of war branding them anew every morning. Molly mourned for her lost and maimed children, Ginny for Harry laying in St. Mungo's, and now Hermione for Raven/Severus.

Hermione sat at their table a little while later and told them a bit about meeting Raven and how he had been. She didn't tell them she had loved him, slept with him, and bathed with him or explain how they had lived nearly in each other's minds, but they could tell her heart was broken at his loss.

She and Ginny talked into the night, and she gave Ginny more details about her life with Raven.

"Oh my gosh, Hermione, I envy you." The girl's eyes clouded up. "I miss Harry so much. I go there and sit with him and talk to him, but it kills me to see him like that. I wonder if it would be best to stop."

Hermione wished she could tell Ginny about the book of spells she had in the bag around her neck, but she would not get the young witch's hope up. She needed to talk to Severus about it first. They needed to try the spell and see if it worked before saying anything to anyone.

"Ginny, when Raven was trapped in the glass coffin, he could hear me. He was alive and able to think. If Voldemort wanted to hurt Harry, he would do the same thing to him. Harry could very well be aware of everything that's going on around him. You can't stop."

"Do you really think he can hear me?"

"There's a good chance. Look, Ginny, I know you deserve a life better than sitting beside Harry's bed forever, but wait just a while longer."

"Why, what's going on?" There was hope in her eyes.

"Well, Professor Snape is back now. He is brilliant with spells and potions. He also knew Voldemort about as well as anyone alive today. I'm going to ask him to help Harry. He owes me, and he knows it."

Ginny threw herself at Hermione, hugging her hard. "Oh, Hermione, something's got to work. It just has to. I'm so glad you're here." She finally stepped back. "I've been going nuts by myself. Mom tries, but she's so devastated by losing Fred."

"I'm here for now. Let me tell you a secret. I'm going to teach at Hogwarts. Minerva is certain she can get Severus to sign a contract to teach there again. If I go back, I will have a chance to prove that I can love him too. I have to get him to take me back."

Ginny grimaced. "Are you certain you want this? It's Snape we are talking about. Raven is one thing, but Snape... Ugh, Hermione."

Hermione gave her a nasty look. "Ginny, you have no idea how delicious that man's body is. Those robes hide a fantastic body. He's a brilliant man. He can teach me so much, and if I can get him to let parts of Raven out, he will be a wonderful, happy man."

Ginny paled at the thought of coveting Snape's body, but she gave Hermione a nervous smile, and Hermione laughed at her. They finally crawled into their beds and went to sleep.

Severus Snape wandered around his quarters at Hogwarts. At least it felt more like home. He found it pretty much the way he had left it. Apparently Minerva had kept all his things and had them placed the way they had been.

He still felt restless. He found sleeping in his bed alone as usual odd. Being a solitary man had never bothered him, but now the silence drove him mad. He found himself out walking in the corridors his first night back.

No matter how much he tried to discipline his mind to not think about Hermione, he could not close his eyes without seeing her liquid brown eyes peering into his. She had never touched him, other than his neck, but he could feel her hands on his body. The barriers he had nourished all his adult life, had hidden behind, refused to work for long. He cursed Raven's indulgences. He refused to ask Minerva to bring the woman back early, so he spent those three nights pacing the halls and the grounds because he could not sleep.

Hermione found her heart was beating hard when she stepped through Hogwarts' door. Minerva had sent her an owl to tell her Severus was at the castle. How would she keep herself from running into his arms when she saw him? Her arms physically ached to hold him against her.

She went to her room and put her things away and then pulled the book from her bag. She carried it against her as she went to the dungeon and to the Potions room.

It was early evening on a Friday, and most of the students had retired to their common rooms for game night. She walked through the corridors, feeling at home. She loved this old castle, and she was so glad she'd been given the opportunity to work here. Minerva had asked the current Charms teacher to take her under her wing and allow her to team teach the remaining months of this school year.

Hermione stood for a good ten minutes before the door to the Potions room before she reached for the doorknob and turned it. The room was lit by only a few fires under

cauldrons and a candle by the desk.

"Professor Snape," she called, "are you here?"

She heard a noise by the storage room door and turned to see him standing, leaning against the door jam. He took her breath away.

"Miss Granger," he said, trying to deal with his rapidly beating heart. Merlin, she was beautiful. "You've brought the book, I see."

She took a deep breath, determined not to embarrass him or herself. "Yes, sir."

He walked toward her and took the book. His fingers slid over hers for a brief moment, and she looked into his eyes and saw him drinking in the sight of her as much as she was him.

Then he turned away and went to his desk. "Come back tomorrow," he said sharply. I will talk to you then."

Gads, he's a stubborn man. Hermione nodded. "Yes, sir." She was disappointed, but she was also buoyed by the desire she'd seen. If he felt something for her, then a big part of the job was done. She would have to convince him that she could love him not for Raven but for him. "What time?"

"Come for tea. We may have a lot to talk about," he murmured not even looking at her.

"Thank you, sir," she replied and left the room. Hermione practically skipped down the hall. *A lot to talk about.* What did that mean? Then her spirits plummeted. He'd hardly looked at her; he must have been just talking about the spells and potions. But that didn't matter. At least she would be in the same room with him. She would prove that they worked well together.

The next day Hermione again stood on the threshold of the Potions room. She had brought her notebook and some tarts from the kitchen. She was nervous, but she steeled herself and knocked on the door.

"Come," she heard Severus call.

She opened the door and found him inside, standing beside the desk. He looked amazing. It had been ages since she'd seen him in full teaching robes, and she realized he'd always cut quite a figure.

"Come to my sitting room. It would be inappropriate to serve tea in the office." He motioned toward the door to the storage room. Once inside the door, he waved his wand and a door Hermione had never seen appeared and opened. She went ahead of him through the door.

The sitting room was not too large but very cozy. There was a couch and a chair facing a fireplace that blazed and warmed the room. It was September and getting much cooler. There was a small table with tea and a plate of cookies. Hermione added her tarts to the plate.

Severus gave her a tight smile. "Those look good," he said, trying to make conversation. He was so conflicted inside. He was drinking in the sight of her and desiring her touch. Yet part of him cringed away from the whole idea, so instead he growled, "Let's get on with it."

She poured the tea and sat. "You've had time with the book. Do you think this spell and potion might help?"

He ignored the tea and picked up the book and opened it. "Yes, I think it's worth a try. You obviously have exceptional potion skills. I have looked over the potion that you and Raven brewed. It's very difficult. This potion is also difficult, but it's not as difficult as the spell. It is a form of ancient language and song. It will take great deal of work, and I will not be able to concentrate all my attention on the potion at the same time. I would like you to do the preparations in my private lab. I will come and do the actual brewing"

Hermione was gobsmacked. Not wanting to read too much into it, she said simply, "Thank you, Professor Snape. I appreciate your confidence in me. I would love to help in any way I can."

He placed the book aside. "It would be remiss of me not to acknowledge your part in my being back in my own life."

Did he realize how different he was now? Before Severus became Raven, he would have never complimented her...even if someone had been pulling his fingernails out. The odd part was he didn't seem to notice the difference.

"I see you brought some paper and a quill with you. You always were the studious student."

"I'm no longer your student, sir. I have taken a co-teacher position here. We will be colleagues."

Severus found the idea of Hermione under foot all the time very exciting, and then he realized he had been maneuvered into this without his knowledge. "That old witch," he said angrily. Suddenly he got up and said, "You can find your way out." He turned from Hermione and left the room, heading out into the storage room and presumably to Minerva's office.

Hermione was shocked and a bit scared. He was such an enigma now. He was calm one moment and raging the next. She wondered how he could stand it. Would it be at all possible for Severus Snape to integrate that which was Raven into himself, or would he always be this unpredictable spilt personality? She knew it had been a few days, but it didn't stop her from feeling panicky.

Maybe she should have waited to tell him until after he'd helped her with the spell to reawaken Harry.

Severus stormed into Minerva's office uninvited. "You old witch. You set me up. You planned this all along."

Minerva looked up at him over her glasses. "Whatever are you going on about, Severus?"

"You knew if I signed a contract to stay here, I would honor it! Yet you have brought *her* here. She does not want me; she only wants the man I was without my memories. I will not be a pawn. I have my pride."

"Severus, will your pride keep you from being happier than you have ever been in your life? That girl loves a part of you. Give her a chance to love all of you. You're a good, decent man. You've always hidden inside yourself."

Severus slumped into a chair. He'd always been a little more open with Minerva than with any other woman in his life. He ran his hand through his hair. It was still longer than he'd ever remembered having it before. But so far he couldn't bear to cut it.

"I am incapable of letting someone love me. You know that, Min."

Minerva smiled, setting her glasses on the desk. He hadn't called her that in years. "Maybe that was true before Raven, but he is now part of you, and those emotions he had are very close to the surface. You can't tell me that Hermione doesn't call to you and that you don't desire more."

"That's just it: They are Raven's emotions."

"No, Severus, they are your emotions. Raven is only the name you went by because you could not remember your own name. I know you can't remember what you were like then, but I saw you, and I talked to you. It was you before Voldemort took possession of your life. It was the young man who loved Lily with all his heart. If you look inside yourself, you will see it was all you."

Severus was horrified. "I killed that young man. He no longer exists. He was a murderer and a betrayer. You want me to become him again? Even if I admitted I had feelings for Hermione Granger, I would not subject her to the man I was then."

Minerva came and grabbed his arms. "Severus, you're being ridiculous. She does not see you as a Death Eater or a murderer; she sees a good man. She sees a brilliant man. She loves the man you were, and she can love the man you are, if you will let her."

Severus pushed her away. "Love kills, Minerva. It always has. Raven loved her with all his heart, and she let him go. She didn't try to keep him. It's always been Harry for her."

Minerva lost her temper. "Harry is her friend...nothing more nothing less. She sacrificed Raven for you! You, Severus, because that was what was right. You deserved your life. Of course she hopes that the part of you that is Raven will love her still, but she knows he's part of you, and she is willing to love you. If you do not give her a chance, you will be far more miserable than you have ever been in your life...even at the height of the torture you suffered from Voldemort will not compare. I promise you that. She glanced over at Albus, who was doing a good job of being a still portrait. "I have had experience with loss."

Severus couldn't help but glance at the old man and saw a sadness in his eyes that he'd never seen before. It was mirrored in Minerva's eyes. He got up and stalked out of the office.

"I hope that boy will listen to his heart, Albus. I failed to years ago, and it cost us so much."

"Yes, it did." he agreed.

Severus found himself standing in the observation tower watching Hermione walk slowly across the grass toward the lake. Her long hair was flowing freely around her shoulders despite the cold in the air. Red highlights glinted off it in the winter sun. There was a light, powdery snow on the ground, and she wore a heavy wool cloak pulled tightly around her.

She suddenly turned to look up at him. She raised her hand to wave at him.

He jumped back into the shadows. How had she known he was there?

She turned her face away, lowering her head. Then she walked away, not looking back.

Severus cursed himself for causing her pain. Emotion. It was so foreign to him, and right now all he felt from it was pain. Pain and confusion tore at him. Was Min right? If he gave into the emotion, would he find peace?

A big THANK YOU you goes out to Lisa, my Beta. You are doing a great job. Thank you also to Beth and Becky for your kind comments and help. Hugs for beaweasley2 for dissecting the story and helping me so much.

Chapter 31

Chapter 31 of 63

Hermione flees the wizardng world and comes face to face with her past.

The next morning at breakfast an owl delivered a message to Hermione. It was a note from Severus, who was conspicuously absent.

Ms. Granger,

Please come to my classroom at 1:00.

Professor Snape

Hermione could not help but feel the day had just taken a turn for the better. At least she would be able to see him and hear his voice. She might even catch his scent. She realized she'd always loved the scent of Professor Snape, which had been ingrained in Raven as well. It was the scent of sandalwood and jasper, common potion ingredients.

She made sure she was impeccably dressed in school staff robes and that her hair was tamed by the time she knocked on Snape's classroom door at exactly 1:00.

He told her to come in. He was working at his desk. He ignored her for a bit while she stood there, trying hard not to get angry with him. Did he think she had all day? Actually she did, but she wouldn't let him know that.

Severus, however, was trying hard to get his emotional barriers in place. He had not expected an overwhelming desire to sweep her into his arms to hit him the moment

she entered the room.

"Ms. Granger, I'm sorry to keep you waiting," he finally said, getting to his feet. He went past her. "Please come into my sitting room." He turned and looked her in the eye. "I promise not to run out on you this time."

Hermione gave him a pleasant smile, not aware that it made Severus' heart beat wildly.

"I do understand why you left, sir. I shouldn't have dropped that information on you so soon. I know all this is difficult for you."

"...and for you," he said, closing the door behind them as they moved into the sitting room.

"Yes, well, I do look forward to working with you. You have always inspired me to do better, learn more, and stretch myself."

He was surprised at her admission and found himself pleased. "I have never had a student who challenged me more to give her information she did not already know."

Hermione laughed, and the laugh was like music to his ears. He, Severus Snape, had made her laugh.

"Well, we're on equal standing then. I think we can make a good team in our search for answers for Harry."

"Yes, for Harry," he said, finding himself disappointed.

"Sir, I would very much like it if we could be amiable colleagues and in time perhaps friends."

"Why would you wish to be my friend, as if I didn't know." He turned away to gather his things, angry with himself for making her frown at him.

"Sir, not everything I do is aimed at recovering Raven. He is gone."

Severus begged to differ with her, but he would not let her know that Raven was pressuring him every minute to take her. His emotions would not settle down. Yet unlike those first few days when he felt a separateness in himself, this felt like his feelings and his desires. Yet he knew he would never speak to her of them as 'Raven' unless he remembered all of their time together.

"Well, I will take your word for it right now. We have much to do and plans to make. I would appreciate it if you would set up the timetable for the potion and give me the information so I can set a timetable for myself on learning the spell."

Severus took his wand and turned the small coffee table into a working table with chairs, and they pulled up on opposite sides. Severus handed Hermione the book. "I would caution you to not look any further into the book at this time. I know how exciting the information in it is, but there are dangers there. I promise you that when we are done with this spell and potion, I will go through the book with you."

Hermione was warmed by the information. That could take years. If two people who loved each other spent that much time with each other, they could find their way back.

"I will hold you to that promise, sir." She settled down to pore over the potion. She carefully made a list of the ingredients they would need and the kinds of cauldrons they would use to brew the potion. It was another complicated one, and it would take three weeks and two days to brew. It would almost be Christmas by then. What a Christmas gift to give Ginny and the Weasleys.

She finally set her pen down and looked over at Severus. He was looking at her with such tenderness. When he realized she'd caught him, he looked away. He stood and asked. "Have you accomplished your given task, Madam Granger?"

"Yes, sir. It will take 23 days." Hermione was pleased when he didn't say, 'Are you sure?'

"I will endeavor to finish my study of the spell a few days prior to that. I believe you already realize it's best to keep this to ourselves. I imagine Ginny Weasley has had enough pain for a lifetime. We do not need to cause her more if this fails."

Hermione was pleased that he'd considered Ginny in his thoughts. "I agree."

Snape said, "Well, we have accomplished much today, and it's nearly dinnertime. I'm sure we will both be expected at the staff table. Would you mind if I walk with you there?"

"Of course not, sir." He held the door open for her, and she felt him touch the tip of her elbow.

His touch was almost electric, and she groaned with her need for him. She glanced at him in embarrassment and saw that he was staring at his own fingers. So, he had felt it, too.

"Severus." She felt herself breathe his name almost silently, but he had heard her. He turned and swept her into his arms and planted the hottest kiss on her. She swooned, and he had to hold her against him or she would have fallen.

"Hermione," he breathed against her lips. His deep kiss was followed by several more.

Then, before she realized what she was saying, it happened: "Raven..."

Severus Snape pushed her away and stared at her. "I am going to Hogsmeade to get very drunk. I can only hope to forget this so we can get on with the work we need to do."

He left her standing there in the classroom as he swept out, robes billowing around him like a dark, angry bat. Hermione sank to her knees and cried.

The next morning, Hermione woke with blurry eyes. She was still furious with herself. She'd ended up crying on Minerva's shoulder. The old witch had held her until her tears had dried and then had taken her back to her rooms and tucked her in like her mother would have.

Hermione wondered where Severus was. Had he really gone and gotten drunk? She did not want to be the reason he drank. It broke her heart to know she had hurt him again.

He was not at breakfast, and the regular teacher stepped in and took his first class. She heard later that he had come to teach his second class and was the tyrant Hogwarts was familiar with.

Severus had not gone to Hogsmeade; he had stood outside the door of Minerva's office and listened to Hermione cry her heart out. He'd walked out into the forest that night, needing to be alone. While there, he had Apparated to his lair and had slept in his bed there, with Grendel laying against him for comfort. He'd been so comfortable that he'd overslept and had been late. He was not a man to miss classes, and he'd been angry with himself.

He found he did not blame Hermione, when she had said the name... Raven. He'd felt himself rejoice in it. He'd wanted to be Raven for her because she loved the man so much. He wanted to remember who they had been together, and yet the memories eluded him. They were so close, and yet he could not grasp them. It was maddening. He could have everything he'd ever wanted with Hermione if he could only tap that closed-off place in his mind. He and Raven would be one Severus Snape as soon as he remembered. He could not even find the hardness and aloofness that he'd lived his life with. It wasn't there anymore. Raven had changed him so much that he hardly recognized himself. How would he ever come to terms everything? Integration was imperative, but he had no idea how to go about doing it. For now, he would pretend it had never happened. They had to help Harry. When Harry was okay to live his life, Severus would be free of his debt once and for all.

He wrote Hermione a note:

Madam Granger,

Come to my lab Tuesday night at 8:00. We will begin to gather the ingredients we need.

SS

Hermione held the note to her chest. He was going to be okay. She had been so worried. But he was back, and he was willing to go forward. She said a silent *thank you* to Raven's God.

Thank you, Lisa, my Beta. I could not do this without you. I also appreciate all the help I have received from beaweasley2. Her help and teaching have been invaluable. Becky and Beth, new Alpha readers, have also given me help. Thanks ladies.

Chapter 32

Chapter 32 of 63

Having fled the Wizarding World Hermione comes face to face with her past.

Severus found himself nervously tapping a pen on his desk as the time neared for Hermione to arrive.

At exactly 8:00, he heard her knock.

"Come," he called.

She came into the room, and he swore it brightened. She was smiling, but her eyes were as big as saucers, and he could see the fear and uncertainty lurking in her eyes.

He came forward, wanting nothing more than to ease the pain in her eyes. "I apologize. This is difficult for both of us, and I overreacted. Madam Granger, do you think it is possible for us to finish our work and pay that final debt to Mr. Potter?"

Hermione nodded in relief. "Yes, of course it is." She was happy he was willing to try to understand. She came forward and raised her hand to touch him.

He held his hand up to stop her. "Well," he said, stepping back and turning toward the doors of his storage room, "let's get to work. I would very much like to get this debt out of the way and get on with life."

Hermione noted that he didn't say 'my life' this time. He wasn't ready to commit to 'our life' yet, but she felt much better as she entered his storage room. Maybe there was a chance for them after his debt was paid. She would have to come to terms with the fact that Raven was gone. She would never hold him in her arms again; but he was Severus Snape, and all the things they shared and loved about each other were there. As long as he allowed them to work together, there was a chance to get to know him for who he was now. There was hope for them. She had to hang onto that.

Severus felt as if a weight had risen from his heart: She would stay and work with him. "Madam, if you will read your list, I will gather the items together." He took a basket from the shelf and filled it with the jars, boxes, and dried items she read from the list.

"Horned-tail dragon's venom," Hermione read.

Hermione saw Severus stop and look closely at the bottle on the shelf. "Damn, it's empty. That shyster of a Potion's master doesn't do his job properly. Some of these ingredients are nearly gone, and others are old. What was Minerva thinking giving this job to Philbin?"

"Could we still collect some from the dragon you and I killed?" Hermione asked.

Severus turned to her and raised an eyebrow at "you and I," but he did not comment. "Yes, it is possible. But we would have to go there. It would mean possibly missing classes again, if we didn't get back on time. I haven't started out on the right foot here. I went to my lair the other night and slept there. I'm afraid my internal clock didn't wake me in time."

"Oh, you didn't go drink? Hermione asked, feeling her heart beat with relief. Then she ducked her head. "Sorry, sir, I didn't mean to pry."

"No, it's okay." He sighed. "I went to talk to Grendel. He's a good listener and..." he hesitated and then admitted, "...a good bed companion."

Hermione nodded with a smile. "I had the pleasure of his company when you were in the early stages of youth. It was a difficult time."

Severus stared, thinking, *She has decided not to speak Raven's name anymore.* He didn't know how he felt about her saying that they had done this or that. Technically, it was true "they" had done it all together, but since he had no memory of it, the events were foreign to him. He had to admit it was better to think of himself doing those things with Hermione than hear Raven's name over and over. Severus said, "Go on with your list."

Hermione nodded. "Sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry about. If we can complete assembling the items we need, we might be able to take a trip to Voldemort's lair tomorrow after classes. I will ask Minerva to allow us a night off from our hall duties. I do not want to wait until the weekend to get the potion started. I would like to have this whole thing completed before the Yule break," he informed her.

"I agree," Hermione replied. They worked for several more hours.

Once the ingredients were gathered, Severus showed her his private lab. It was wonderful! It was full of cauldrons of every size and metal type. There were chopping blocks of marble, polished wood, and porcelain. Surfaces of cork and glass. All kinds of knives and grinding equipment. It was a potion maker's dream. Hermione ran here and there, touching the surfaces and examining the tools. "Oh, Severus, it's wonderful."

Severus smiled openly at her. She was a vision of beauty when she was excited. What a wondrous creature. It made him sad that he could not remember holding her and making love to her. He shook the thoughts away and helped her select the first cauldron.

"After we return from the lair, I will not be able to help you much during the potion preparations. I will come when the schedule decrees and do the brewing. I have a great deal of research to do concerning the language in the spell and its proper pronunciation. There is so much to learn about the song that must be sung as I say the words. I know some song spells, but this is the most perplexing spell. You will be on your own here. I have set the wards to admit you. You can use anything here you need. If you find something that you are not absolutely sure of, I want you to come find me. I always knew you were an accomplished Potions student, but the potion you brewed for me to return to myself was utterly brilliant and a very difficult potion. You have my admiration. You should pursue your potions interest, perhaps take an apprenticeship."

Hermione noticed that he sometimes used her last name and sometimes her first. Perhaps that was part of the mood changes. For more formal conversation, he was more like Snape, and for less formal he was more like Raven. It was fascinating.

"Yes, sir. I will consider it. The art of potion making is a wonderful craft, and I enjoy the research as much as the actual brewing."

"Good girl. We'll discuss this with Min when we have completed this task."

"Min?" she asked, confused.

"I'm sorry; Minerva. I have known her nearly my whole life, Hermione. She is more a friend than a colleague."

Hermione nodded, pleased that he would tell her. "I knew that you were close when she mentioned a perfume you used to make for her each Christmas. She's nearly out of it."

"Is she? I will have to remedy that." He looked around. "It is time to call it a night. Get a good night's sleep, and we will make our trip tomorrow afternoon. I can make a Portkey that will take us the entire way."

Hermione washed her hands and went through the door into the sitting room. He saw her to the Potions classroom door. "Goodnight, Hermione." His voice was soft and gentle.

She looked into his eyes and saw the gentleness of Raven looking through Severus' eyes. They were becoming one. "Goodnight, Severus."

Severus watched her walk away. He took a deep breath. The woman was getting to him, and it scared him and excited him.

After classes the next day, they packed some supplies and took the Portkey Severus had made to the mouth of the cave. Hermione felt herself shaking with the emotion of being in a place that had been so horrifying and also had such strong memories of Raven.

Auror Fortesque came from the shadows and nodded to Severus and Hermione, having received word they would arrive. The cave was now full of Aurors who knew how to deal with the dark curses inhabiting many of the items in Voldemort's lair.

Hermione hung back, but Severus strode forward to examine the remains of the dragon. "You did a formidable job on this creature. You were fortunate to get away alive."

"The spells you left us really helped. We couldn't have done it without you," she informed him.

He knelt next to one of the creature's claws and used a sharp knife to pry it from the foot of the dragon. Behind it was a sac of venom, still fluid. He used a glass tube to draw out the poison, and he placed it into the vial that he'd brought with him.

"We are finished," he said to the Auror as he stood.

"There is a group of potions masters coming tomorrow to gather as many ingredients as they can. It's been under a stasis spell, so that the flesh doesn't decay anymore," Fortesque informed him.

Severus nodded. "I wish I had time to help. There is so much there, liver, scales, heart... but I don't have the time." He looked wistfully at the huge carcass.

The Auror nodded. "It will be done correctly, sir. The group coming has an excellent reputation for procuring the finest of ingredients. This group is from St. Mungo's."

"Well, I'm sure it will be alright then. They have an excellent reputation. Thank you, Auror Fortesque." He turned to Hermione, took a hold of her arm, and activated the Portkey. When they arrived at their destination, she found herself in Snape's lair.

"Why are we here?" she asked as more memories cascaded through her head.

He saw the emotional impact on her. "Forgive me, I should have warned you. I need some of the other ingredients stored here." He strode to his shelves for the supplies. "The older ingredients we have at school are not good enough. I want the very best for this potion."

"Thank you," she said.

"For what?" he asked as he placed more vials into his pockets.

"For caring that Harry gets the best." She came forward, took his hand in her fingers, and kissed his palm.

Severus felt overwhelmed by her touch. Some of his anxiety about not being able to touch her leached away. He squeezed her fingers before turning away.

Hermione smiled and then turned as a roar of excitement filled the room. Grendel was jumping around her and Severus. She reached out and hugged his huge neck. "Hey, boy, how have you been?"

Severus turned to watch her fawn over his pet. He was touched that she loved the great, scary-looking beast.

He came and rubbed the beast's head. "Sorry, Grendel, this is a quick visit. No time for games this trip."

The beast whined but licked his fingers.

Hermione said with a laugh, "I was right! You do play games with him!"

Severus smiled and ruffled his head again. "It keeps us both in practice for battle. He's rather intelligent and quite fast."

"I would like to hear more about him, Severus," she said.

"Ask me again when we have finished this. I have some stories you might like to hear." He turned to gather a few books and other personal things.

"Severus?"

"Yes."

"What do you plan to do with all this? You don't have to answer if you don't want to."

Severus thought, nosey wench, but he didn't say it. *Where had that come from? It was a strange word to characterize Hermione with.* "I don't mind. I planned to use it if I had to survive the war and found myself on my own, a fugitive from both the Order and the Dark side. Now I will probably use it to help repair the damage that I was forced to cause as a Death Eater. There are homes we burned. Property damaged. I can't replace lives lost, but perhaps it will help relieve someone's burdens."

Before he knew it, Hermione was hugging him tightly. He thought about pushing her off, but the comfort it gave made him relax in her embrace.

Hermione said, "I'm so proud of you, Severus. I wish I had known 'you' more as I was growing up. I wish you had been allowed to be yourself. So much time has been lost in our lives. We might have been good friends." She realized then that she was holding onto him so she stepped back. "I'm sorry, old habits."

"Don't be. I appreciate the thought." He was amazed at her generosity. A part of him rejoiced that she wished they could have been friends. An idea occurred to him. "Why don't we have some dinner and keep Grendel company for a few hours? We really haven't been gone long, and we did request the night off. I am a good cook."

"I'd like that." Hermione smiled up into his face. "You'll have to give me lessons."

They spent some time in the kitchen cutting up dried vegetables and herbs. The meat came in cans. Grendel was so excited, he begged and begged for tidbits.

Severus laughed at him. "I see you have corrupted my friend. He was never a beggar before."

"I'm sorry," Hermione apologized, but Severus could tell she didn't mean it.

He saw her glancing at the bed occasionally, and there was a sadness in her eyes. He knew she was thinking about Raven. It irritated him at first, but then he realized how grateful he should have been for their relationship. He might not have been given his life back otherwise. The sheer weight of their honesty and responsibility allowed them to sacrifice their love and give him back his life, even though they had loved each other so deeply. He wanted to remember that love and remember their time here in the cave.

He reached over the table and touched her fingers. He surprised himself when he said, "I wish I could remember our life here in the cave."

She was so surprised, she shared some of her thoughts. "Severus, I always knew it was you with me. I have always respected you. As a child, I always wondered what you might be like without the Dark Mark enslaving you. I used the name Raven because that is what you knew yourself by. Maybe I should have insisted you return to your given name once we became friends, but you were so different, and it was easy to think of you as a man I could have. Severus Snape seemed so untouchable, not because I didn't want to have a relationship with you, but because of the barriers you kept so tightly around yourself."

Surprised by her words, he only nodded, feeling her fingers wrap themselves around his. They were so warm and so soft. She stood, pulling him to his feet, and moved around the table toward him. He was shocked when he felt her body press against his, and he backed away. "I'm sorry, I cannot lose myself right now, the spell..." He tried to explain, cursing his own shortcomings. Having been in love as a youth, he knew how consuming a woman could be to him.

Hermione took a deep breath and stepped back. Knowing what it was like for her and Raven helped her to understand what he was saying. "No, Professor Snape, I do understand." She knew he would understand that she was trying to help him re-establish the space between them.

"Madam Granger, I believe it is time we head back to Hogwarts." He turned away, hiding his disappointment in himself from her as he gathered his things.

He took her hand again, they bid Grendel goodbye, and they Portkeyed back to Hogwarts.

Later that night Severus stood in his bathroom and looked at his face in the mirror. He felt conflicted about what had happened earlier. Part of him had wanted to make love to Hermione, and part of him had wanted just to ravish her body. It didn't take much thought to know who wanted what. Had he no real feelings for her? Was all the love Raven's? Had he wanted only the sex? When her body had pressed against his, it had taken all his strength to pull away. Few women in his life had ever offered themselves to him. In fact, there were so few that he could count them on one hand. And he had never felt as close to them as he did Hermione Granger. He knew her deep in his soul, yet he did not understand why. He could not remember.

He stared into the mirror into his own eyes, and they were not the unemotional, sheltered eyes he was used to. They were tortured eyes. He had always avoided looking into his own eyes, but he had not seen pain like that in his eyes since Lily had turned away from him that last time. There was a gentleness and a softness there as well. He knew they were Raven's feelings, but they were beginning to feel like his own. The integration, of his two halves, was no longer him or I; it was we.

Chapter 33

Chapter 33 of 63

Having fled the Wizarding World Hermione comes face to face with her past.

The next day, the work began. Hermione had made a schedule for herself that allowed her to team teach three classes a day and work on the potion afterwards. Minerva was also interested in the completion of the potion and hoped that Harry could be helped. She could see the first weeks that Severus was exhausted, and she finally told him that she wanted Philbin to continue to teach his afternoon classes and that she would bring in some of the Order's best wizards to guest teach DADA until the Yule vacation.

Severus finally conceded to the schedule. When he was not working on the potion, he was reading, searching books that might give him information on the spell. He even took trips to other Wizarding communities. He was frustrated because he wasn't having much luck with some of the musical notes in the spell. He had the beginning of the song down pat...he could feel the power...but the power leached away in the middle as he continued to try to find the notes he would need to make the song work.

One night he sat among stacks of books in the restricted section of Hogwarts with his head pounding and his heart heavy.

"Severus," he heard Hermione call to him.

He raised his head and found her standing close by, worry written on her face. She placed a hand on his shoulder. "You must get some rest. Minerva is worried about you. I'm worried about you."

"Mind your own business, Madam. We both have our jobs to do." His voice was harsh and bitter.

Hermione felt tears burn her eyes.

Severus saw the tears swimming in her eyes and sighed, his anger undone.

"You can be as nasty as you want, but you need sleep. The answer could be right in front of your large nose, and you wouldn't see it," she said in just as nasty a tone.

It made him grin wearily.

She went to her knees and placed her hands on his knee. "Please, Severus. I have some time, and I can help. You know I love to research. Right now I'm only monitoring the potion for you; you don't need to add any ingredients until Monday."

He didn't say anything, and she sighed, stood, and started to walk away. He reached out and took her hand and pulled her back. Not even thinking, he slipped his arms around her and laid his face against her waist.

Surprised, Hermione brought a hand up and ran it over his hair. "Please, Severus, let me help."

"All right," he said, exhausted. "I'm so tired, and my head is pounding."

Hermione was still astonished that he needed to hold on to her and hated to let him go. She sighed. "Please go sleep. I will continue to read through these books. Just tell me what you're looking for."

He realized he was holding on to her and pushed away, giving her a sheepish look. "I need to know the origin of these notes. Do you see the pattern that works its way through the spell at this junction?" He pointed to notes here and there.

"Yes," she said, "I see it." He stood and she took his seat. "Sleep well, Severus. I will come and let you know if I find anything."

"Thank you. What would I do without you?" he said as he walked away.

"You will never find out, Severus," she whispered, more for her benefit than his.

Hermione sat for nearly six hours looking through books until early in the morning hours. Tomorrow was Saturday, and they would have the weekend to work together. She was bone tired, and suddenly words swam before her eyes that spoke to her past. 'Gypsy wizards'. They had a music as old as the beginning of music. Thinking about the group they had met, she remembered they had played some very intricate music the night she and Raven had spent with them.

She was so excited by the idea she ran down to the Potions classroom and let herself into Severus' rooms. She paused for a moment to smile. Yes, he had set the wards to allow her entrance even to his private rooms. That spoke volumes to her. He trusted her with his privacy, and that meant more to Severus Snape than anything in the universe.

She peeked into the bedroom and saw the curtains were drawn. She hated to wake him, but he should have gotten five or more hours of sleep by now. If they had to go find the Gypsies, it could take most of the weekend.

Hermione peeked past the curtain and softly called, "Severus." He didn't move. He was lying on top the covers with only black pajama bottoms on. He looked so much like Raven, yet she knew it was Severus; she saw the difference in his face. There was a bit of a frown on his forehead. She wondered if his head still hurt. She ran her fingers over his forehead, and the lines on his face relaxed. She was suddenly enveloped in his arms, and he pulled her over him into the bed. He planted a steamy kiss on her. She wished she could just to curl up at his side. It had been hard for her to sleep without him.

She felt him stiffen at her side. "Hermione?"

She laughed. "You thought you were dreaming?"

"Yes," he admitted uncomfortably. He started to move away.

"Severus, please, don't get up. Can I lay with you here for a few minutes? I have something to talk to you about. I found something."

He was surprised but pleased and lay back against the pillows, drawing her closer. She sighed as she laid her cheek against his chest.

"What did you find?" He was finding it hard to concentrate with her breath rustling the hair on his chest.

"Gypsies, Wizarding Gypsies. They have a very old form of music. You and I ran into a group of them on our travels. It's in the diary, which you haven't read," she teased.

Severus replied, "I'm sorry. I really should read it." She was stroking his stomach with her fingers, absentmindedly. He felt himself harden with desire for her.

"We could try to find them, show them the spell, and see if they can help us." She turned her head and kissed his chest.

He closed his eyes and just lay still; the feeling was so amazing and so familiar. He could lose himself in her. He felt his body respond, even more, with a powerful need for her.

"You know, Severus, maybe you can't feel the music because there is no music in your heart," she said, placing more kisses across his chest. "Maybe if you yield to your desires, you will find a freedom you have never known. Music is freedom, music is emotion, music is love. You say we have to wait until Harry is saved to even talk about our relationship, but I think that you're thinking about me anyway. I see it in your eyes when we're having meals in the Great Hall, when we talk, and when you check on me and the potion."

She was now laying over him, kissing his face and his eyelids. He had slipped a hand up her back to hold her close. Her body felt so good. It had been so long. When her mouth covered his, he growled and rolled her over onto the bed and kissed her back. His hands ran over her body, and with a quickness neither could imagine, her clothes were shed and she was naked against him.

"You are so beautiful," he said. His deep voice rumbled over her. His hands touched her back, buttocks, and legs.

Hermione could feel him hard against her thigh, and she wanted him inside her. "Severus, please give in to your desire. I need you so badly."

With a little effort, they got his pajama bottoms off, and he let his hands roam her body. He was urgent with his need. His hands touched her, and his mouth took her. He was more physical than Raven had been. Raven had been innocent and trusting, and she realized he'd often let her lead their love making. Severus, on the other hand, commanded their moves and took her with power and strength she'd never sensed in Raven. She realized as they climaxed, crying out, that it was his magical strength. Severus was a wizard, and she a witch, and their magical signatures combined and melded. They gasped for breath, and he held her tightly in the circle of his arms. "Hermione."

"Severus." She smiled and then kissed his mouth. "That was wonderful. I have never felt such power before."

"Never?" he asked, pleased that this was different than her times with Raven.

"No, Severus. It was never like this for us before, when your memory was gone." She had decided not to speak Raven's name again to him; she had been trying these last few days to accomplish that. "I believe one day you will remember what we had. This was wonderful and I have missed you so much."

"It was very satisfying, Hermione," he said. "Now you sleep while I prepare some things for our journey. If I know you, you've been at those books since I left you."

She nodded. "I guess I am a bit tired." She settled down against him.

Severus lay next to her until she was asleep and then slipped from the bed. He took a quick shower, feeling better than he had since he'd woken from this memory loss. He was amazed at her desire for him. She may have fallen in love with Raven, but she desired him now. He felt a happiness and contentedness that he had never felt before, but he also felt a bit like a rogue. He'd given into his physical needs. *If she realized that's all it was, would she hate me for it? She probably thought I made love to her.* He didn't think that was what had happened. He had just been unable to resist her. Her advances had ignited his body and his needs would not be denied.

He dressed for the trip and gathered food and clothing for himself. Then he went to Hermione's room and took clothing for her. Her magic bag lay on the table next to the bed, and he grabbed that as well. She hadn't been wearing it tonight. *Had she known she was going to make love to me? Had she left "Raven" behind on purpose?* The thought warmed him inside for the first time. *Maybe she really did want me.* He knew she would never forget Raven, but he felt she had given herself to him tonight.

He went to Minerva's office. Even though it was early morning, she was already at her desk. She asked him to sit and gave him some tea. Severus sipped the liquid. He had never really liked tea but it was growing on him, now that he no longer drank on a regular basis.

Minerva studied his face. "What happened, Severus? You seem quite smug this morning. It almost seems as if you are about to burst out with a... a genuine smile."

Severus laughed. "You know me so well, Min. I allowed Hermione into my bed, as it were."

"Really?" She frowned as she pursed her lips. "Two of my professors are fraternizing. I'm not sure I can stand for that," she said with faux indignation.

Severus smirked at her as he chided her, "You old bat, you are about to jump up and down in joy over this development. You and that eavesdropping old goat up there will have a party when I leave here."

Minerva huffed, "Severus, have some respect... I have to warn you, Hermione is a wonderful girl. She may have made mistakes from time to time, but for her, you and Raven are the same man. She simply saw Raven as a nicer side that you never show the students. She never meant to hurt you or use you. Merlin, Severus, the lengths that girl went through to help you!"

"I know, damn it, I know," he said, gritting his teeth. "Damn, Voldemort, even dead he's still manipulating peoplemanipulating me, but she did help me and... I am aware I owe her, Min." He looked at his hands. "I feel sorry she got mixed up in this whole mess."

Minerva looked at him sternly over her spectacles. "Severus, what did tonight mean to you?"

"She came to my bed. What should it mean to me? I couldn't resist her advances. My heart is not made of iron. I felt horrible for her, for me, for this whole mess. I'm not in the habit of using my students for sexual gratificationeven ex-students!"

The old witch sat back hard into her chair. "Oh, Merlin help you both. That girl loves you. If she knows your heart wasn't in accord with hers tonight, she's going to be shattered."

"Damn, Voldemort," Severus growled, suddenly realizing what he'd done. He respected Hermione, and tonight he'd ignored all respect for her. He'd used her.

"Just try not to react if such a thing happens again...unless you want to be with Hermione Granger, not just a beautiful, young woman. You are her life, Severus. Be worthy of her."

"I will try, Min." Then he said, "I did come here for a purpose other than my personal life."

She smiled. "I thought you might have."

"Hermione and I need to leave for the weekend. She and I met some Gypsies during our search for Voldemort's lair. I have been unable to decipher the music in the spell with the accuracy that it needs. Hermione feels the Gypsies have great knowledge concerning ancient music. We will look for them and see if they can help."

"You and Hermione found them?" Min asked.

"It seems Hermione has decided that we should both ignore Raven's name for now. He is best not spoken of as a different person. She knows it was me, without a memory, and so do I. It makes it easier this way."

"Easier, yes, but do not forget him, Severus. He was a wonderful man, and he lives in you. I see him more and more now, and you should thank him for the happiness you have."

"I will not forget. I never forget that Hermione was with him, first." His voice was bitter.

"If she had not been with him, then she would not love you now. Perhaps you are right: He was you, and you are him, all in the man named Severus."

"It's all very complicated, Min. I can't remember in my mind, but my body sings when she touches me."

"Perhaps once you remember what happened during those months, you will know it was always you...just a different facet of you."

"I hope that happens. I really do. I want to remember." He got to his feet. "If something delays us, I will send you a message."

Minerva got her feet and came to him. She reached out and placed a soft kiss on his cheek. "Be careful and enjoy your time with Hermione away from here. Perhaps you came back to work too soon. You needed this time to finish your business and get used to the changes you are experiencing."

He smiled at her. "Min, you have always been like a mother to me. I will let you know if we need time, but you may be correct. It has been taxing." He turned and left.

Minerva brushed a tear from her eye. "Did you hear that, you old goat. He said I was like a mother." She looked up into Albus' twinkling eyes.

"Yes, I heard, Minerva. I'm so proud of him. But he's walking a fine tightrope between his desires and his heart. They are at war inside him. Slowly, he's finally becoming the man he was always meant to be."

Hermione woke alone. *He'd left her. What had happened? Yes, he had mentioned he was going to make the arrangements for their journey.* But she had a lump in the pit of her stomach. He had said there was a strong desire, and it had been very satisfying. *Did what happened between them mean nothing to him? Only sex...sexual gratification...and nothing more?* She felt a bit nauseated when she sat up. *Had Severus Snape used her body? Had it not meant anything to him? Raven wouldn't have done that to her...well at first he would have, but that was before.*

She sighed. She had begged him to let her stay in his bed. She had initiated the touching. He was a man. She couldn't deny she had enjoyed it. It had been wonderful to be with him again. If nothing else, he had satisfied her somewhat... well, more than somewhat.

She suddenly felt better. If nothing else, maybe she'd gotten under his skin. Now, when he looked at her, maybe he'd remember. Maybe at night when he was alone, he'd think about her...fantasize about her. Men did that; it was how things were in books. Now, he knew what it was like to be with her. His imagination and analytical mind might work in her favor. She had confidence that the rest would fall into place.

Thank you, Lisa, my Beta. I could not do this without you. I also appreciate all the help I have received from beaweasley2. Her help and teaching have been invaluable. Becky and Beth, new Alpha readers, have also given me help. Thanks ladies.

Chapter 34

Chapter 34 of 63

Having fled the Wizarding World, Hermione comes face to face with her past.

Severus and Hermione Apparated into the forest close to where Hermione had last seen the Gypsies. Of course they weren't there; it had been months. But with a spell, they could discern their direction.

Hermione shivered; it was late November now and quite cold. Severus pulled their heavy cloaks from his pocket and expanded them. Hermione paled when Severus produced a broom from his pocket, as well.

"No, Severus. Please, I can't. You go, and I will stay here." She drew away, her palms getting sweaty and her heart pounding irregularly in her chest. When they had left Voldemort's lair that first time, she had not complained because Severus had been so intimidating. She had feared he might leave her if she had protested.

"Hermione, you have to go. There's no other way." He tried to reason with her, the furrowing of his brow showing his confusion at her reaction. "They could be hundreds of miles away."

"Severus, I hate flying," she tried to explain, her voice coming out as a shaky squeak. "The last time we flew, before you got your memory back, I was in charge of the broom. We nearly got killed. I don't know if I can get back on a broom."

He came nearer and took her by the arms to peer into her face. His stern, dark eyes bore into her frightened ones, and his gaze softened. This situation seemed to call to his memory and felt like déjà vu. "I will be the driver this time. You can bury your face against my back. I promise it won't be so scary. I will not let anything happen to you. You have my word. Can't you trust me?"

Hermione stared into his eyes and then nodded, knowing she had no choice. She climbed on behind him and held on for dear life. They rose up into the air, and Severus smiled at the death grip she had on his waist. Although it did make maneuvering difficult and restricted his breathing, it felt good to have her holding him so closely. He could see the pale, green line of the spell running below him, giving him a trail to follow. He flew at a steady pace, level to the tree line, for nearly 150 kilometers. When he finally spotted the caravan below, he landed a short distance away.

The moment their feet touched the ground, Hermione gave a shuddering sigh and let go of him as she stood unsteadily on her feet. "I'm sorry, Severus. I hate heights."

"You did fine," he encouraged her, grasping her arm to help steady her. "Come, let's go speak to our friends."

As Hermione and Severus made their way closer to the caravan, Hermione called out, "Nicholi, it's me, Hermione, and the man you knew as Raven." She whispered to Severus out of the side of her mouth, "I'm sorry."

He shook his head. "No, it's necessary."

The people of the caravan were all standing by their fire, looking toward them as they came closer. They had seen the broom with the riders as it came close and knew these riders were magical people.

Nicholi came walking over to them and held out his hand. "Raven, Hermione, it is good to see you again."

Severus shook the stranger's hand. This man was obviously the leader. He could feel Nicholi's power. He reached out with his thoughts and found walls in place.

The man cocked an eyebrow at him and smiled, though he seemed confused.

Nicholi looked him in the eye and said, "You are not the same man." He could tell Severus was a very powerful wizard, and he was all too aware that Severus had tried to probe his thoughts. Raven had never had control of his mental abilities.

Magi, the blind, old woman who had grabbed Hermione's hand those months ago, said, "Your love was lost, was it not? That which was Raven is now this man. Yet as I said, love is what you make it, and he has been reborn. The soul of Raven becomes one with him."

Hermione felt a sense of deep relief and hope, hearing the wise woman's words, taking them as encouragement. "Yes, you are correct, old mother. This is Severus. This is who Raven was before he lost his memory."

There was a collective, "Ahhhh," from the crowd. Their respect for Magi was evident on their faces as they looked at Severus with great interest. They respected her so much that no one would question her words, and they now accepted Severus into their group just as Raven had been."

Severus stared back at them, trying hard not to glare because he needed their good will. But he did not enjoy being scrutinized.

Hermione and Severus were invited to sit by the fire. They watched as several wizards transformed two logs into intricately carved chairs, and another transfigured several clay cups to glass that seemed alive with lights. A roast came from a spit on the fire. Some of the women poured piping hot coffee in their cups. Instruments were summoned from different caravan wagons and settled into the hands of waiting musicians.

Hermione laughed joyfully at the fun of it all.

Severus watched her face glow with happiness, and it filled him with peace he had not felt in days. He wished he could make her happy like that. He felt a prickling sensation, and turned to see the old woman, Magi, with her face turned toward him. She nodded at him with a smile, her blind, white eyes seemed to read his very soul, and he squirmed under her gaze.

Severus' eyes widened as he heard her voice in his head, "Love awaits you, Severus Snape. You only have to accept it."

"Get out of my mind, old woman." He pushed her back mentally.

She cackled as if she was enjoying the music, but her eyes never left him.

Hermione, having totally missed the exchange, pulled out the little bag from around her neck and produced the book from it.

Severus stared at the fire, his thoughts on the old woman's words. As he watched the flames, they seemed to dance and weave intricate patterns like a living piece of artwork, calming his mind as he sat there.

Hermione noticed the many magical abilities the Gypsies had hidden the last time they were there.

"Nicholi, we've come to ask your help." Severus said, looking across the fire at the man.

Nicholi looked up, his eyes alert with cautious curiosity. "What would my people have to offer wizards such as yourselves? Come, sit by me, and we will have some food and talk."

When their drinks were refilled and they'd made headway into their plates of food, Severus explained. "Your people have a magical ability that's laced with artistry. We have a spell that has ancient musical patterns that I don't understand. I'd appreciate it if you could look at it and see if you might recognize it. Hermione tells me you have some experience with music, specifically that with tonal qualities and tempos. I have deciphered the words, but I need to know how to sing them. This is a very difficult spell, accompanied by a potion that Hermione and I are brewing."

Nicholi relaxed and slapped his knees and smiled broadly. "Let's finish eating, and then we will look at this music of yours. It is true our people do have an ancient history with music, but a great deal of it is learned by fathers teaching their sons. Very little is written down."

Severus nodded. "Well, I would appreciate you looking at the music. I can sing what I know so far, and maybe it will give you some idea of what we're looking at. There is a young wizard who fought a brave battle but ended up cursed. This may save him and others. It would mean a lot to the people of our world."

"You speak of Harry Potter? We know of him," Nicholi admitted.

Severus nodded. "Of course you do."

"It would be my pleasure," Nicholi said, smiling broadly.

They sat and ate, and Hermione told the group some of what had happened to them since they had last visited. They all listened with great interest. It was not often new people came into their camp with unheard stories. The children whooped with excitement when Hermione told of the dragon and cringed when she described the incident with the vampire. They marveled at all the adventures, and the children begged them to bring Grendel to visit sometime. To Hermione's amazement, Severus promised they would.

Later they sat around the fire with only a few of the older men and Magi. Severus had picked up one of the instruments and plucked a few notes.

Hermione was astonished to hear him play a melody. It was like a love song, soft and romantic.

"Is that the tune?" she asked, astonished.

Severus actually blushed. "Sorry, it's something I learned as a child. I really don't know more than a few simple chords."

Hermione smiled wistfully at him. "It's beautiful."

Severus cleared his throat. "Well, it's easy to play music if you know the chords. But the actual feeling behind music is a totally different matter."

"You were doing just fine," she said, reaching out to squeeze his arm, her eyes sparkling with admiration.

His eyes actually twinkled a bit, but he didn't seem to know how to react to her comment.

Nicholi watched the two visitors. There was feeling between these two, as well. He'd known they loved each other the last time they had met, but he felt and saw a very different man in Severus Snape. It pleased him that this man also had feelings for Hermione Granger. He finally said, "Severus, Hermione, let's have a look at this music of yours."

Hermione opened the book to the spell and passed it to Nicholi.

Nicholi took it, studying the page by the dancing firelight and with the help of Severus wand. He was very quiet and very serious as he looked at the words and music written there. He didn't speak for a long time as he studied the book, then he asked Magi to take a look. Severus and Hermione waited patiently. They talked quietly together until finally Nicholi said, "I think we can help."

Hermione and Severus both let out a sigh of relief as they looked over at Nicholi and then at each other.

With care and expertise, Nicholi explained the tonal qualities, demonstrating each note carefully for Severus, and Severus tried to sing the notes. His voice had a deep, natural resonance and rich, silky tone; he was a natural baritone. Hermione sat transfixed, enraptured by the sound of his powerful voice.

But he struggled occasionally with the complexity of the song, listening to Nicholi's instructions, suggestions, and corrections. As the night wore on, Severus became frustrated. He could only get so far, and then he would stop because the magic that was building up fell flat. It was like a visible color, like rainbows turning and twisting on themselves, colors that he couldn't quite paint, like a song with all the colors of the wind, or trying to sing with all the voices of the mountains.*

Ah, she thought, *Severus is mostly in charge right now. He suppresses his feelings, controls them, and doesn't like to rely on them... He isn't allowing his feelings to flow. He doesn't need his feelings right now; at least he doesn't think he does. As Raven, he wasn't afraid of his feelings. Raven was everything Severus hadn't been since he was a young man. When Lily died, he had shoved his feelings into a box behind his shield of Occlumency, and he lived behind that shield every day. Severus had become this hard emotionless man she had known as a child.*

She got his attention. "Severus, you need to reach out with your feelings for this music. Music is basically feelings in sound; to really understand the music, you have to feel it. Without passion and a desire behind it, you won't be able to get it right. You are literally singing Harry back to life, back from a darkness he is trapped in." She went to him and took his hand and placed it against her chest. "Feel my heart beat, and look in my eyes; see and feel the love I have for you. Life is just waiting for us to happen, Severus. I care deeply about you. You just have to let the feelings flow through you. It's all inside you."

Severus looked deep into her eyes. His thoughts caressed her and found he was welcome there. That touched him more than words could. He saw himself through her eyes, and he saw that she loved him as much as she had ever loved the man named Raven. He realized to Hermione, Raven and he really were the same man. Before it had all been words, and now it was fact to his mind and now his heart. He felt a lightness in his heart he had never known before.

This time when he turned that to the fire and faced Nicholi, they sang the song with fierceness and a lightness of heart. The music lived in his heart as well as his mind, and he suddenly understood that the song was a love song. In order to make it work, he would have to love Harry. He'd have to forgive the past and let himself love. The tendrils of light before him continued to intertwine and wind in an increasingly intricate pattern. When they reached the end of the song, it burst like a celebratory fireworks display.

Hermione was hugging him and laughing and crying at the same time. "You did it! You did it!" Then she was kissing him, and everything around them ceased to exist.

Nicholi watched for a few moments with his eyes lit with joy. Then he backed away with a bow and left the two lovers to their night fire.

With an Apparition Hermione didn't even feel, they ended up in the lair and in Severus' bed. Severus removed Hermione's clothes slowly. He shed his with a flick of his wand. They made love with their minds joined the entire time, being one with the other, a total abandonment and, if it was possible, even lighter hearts than ever before. When Hermione slept curled against him in his arms, he let his mind wander to the song and to the things he had realized as he had sang earlier. He had real feelings for Hermione. It wasn't just Raven's feelings taking over. They were his. But the feelings were so foreign to him that they hurt and clawed at his heart, and fear encased him.

Hermione snuggled closer. He found he could not staunch the flow of exquisite pain that now bubbled up inside. The pain tore at him, and yet he felt love as he never had before. He tried to fight the surge of emotions, but the love burned through him, battling against the many rooms of darkness and suspicion within him. He did not realize when Hermione had woken. She just held him and soothed him, somehow realizing what was happening to him. Finally, he fell into an exhausted sleep.

He cried out as he slept, and Hermione continued to hold him, stroking his hair for a time. She realized that Grendel was hovering close by, and she reached her hand out over the edge of the bed to tousle the fur on his head. "He's okay, boy. I have him. You can sleep now." The animal licked her fingers and lay next to the bed and slept. Hermione soon slipped into a deep sleep as well.

Thank you, all, so much for the many wonderful reviews I have received. This story is now complete, so it won't be abandoned. It could take several more months to post all the chapters.

I want to thank Lisa, my Beta; she's amazing. Many thanks also go out to beaweasley2 and Becky for all their hours of help and their helpful suggestions.

("Borrowed from "The Colors of the Wind." Disney's *Pocahontas*.)

Chapter 35

Chapter 35 of 63

Having fled the Wizarding World, Hermione comes face to face with her past.

They returned to Hogwarts early the next morning and resumed their duties. Hermione went to check the potion, and Severus went to his classes. He knew he could practice the song and spell at night. His research had ended, so he immersed himself in his work and realized he loved teaching Potions.

In the next few weeks, he made changes in his classroom. He no longer kept the room in darkness unless the potions his student's were brewing called for it, and he gave more points than he took. The students seemed to respond to his newfound pleasure. They seemed to actually enjoy the work and turned in high-quality essays.

Hermione continued to monitor the potion every day, although it needed fewer and fewer ingredients.

A few evenings a week, they would meet in a corner of the library and talk or wrap themselves in heavy cloaks and walked down to the lake. They tried not to show any physical closeness when students or staff members were around. Christmas was looming closer, and decorations had started to pop up here and there. Severus had always quoted his favorite Muggle holiday book when faced with holiday merriment: Bah Humbug. But this year he found himself looking at the decorations with enjoyment. He had to stop himself from singing carols a time or two when he passed the choir practicing for the holiday program.

Hermione and he had agreed they wouldn't sleep together at Hogwarts again until the potion was done and the results were known. At that time, they would decide what their future would be. They did slip away to Spinner's End once or twice.

On evenings when Hermione was busy with her own classwork or checking the potion, Severus would sit by his fire and think about his life.

He felt lighter and less burdened than he had in years. He knew it was because he had Hermione in his life. His only frustration was Raven. He wished he could remember his life as Raven; he knew Raven and Hermione had loved each other. And he knew she cared deeply for him now. Was he ready for real, true, heart-stopping love? Or, more logically, was he truly capable of it? He didn't believe he was worthy of her love. He feared she would look within him and see the monster he had been, and it would repel her. He had felt love the night they had visited the Gypsy camp. But Severus Snape didn't love; he'd now convinced himself that it had been Raven in charge.

Severus Snape, retired spy extraordinaire, was scared of his past catching up with a future he'd never dreamed of. Once Harry was saved, would she really still need him? Would she realize he was just an old grumpy Potions master living in a drafty old castle? She was young; she might want children. The idea of children had never occurred to him, at least not in many years. His thoughts were interrupted as Hermione swept into the room and plopped herself on his couch.

"Two more days," she announced.

"I'm aware of that," he said, putting the book he'd been holding on the table next to his chair.

"I know. I'm just making conversation. Would you rather I leave?" Her exhaustion was making her grumpy, and she'd hoped for a bit of snuggling with him, but he didn't seem to be in the mood.

He sighed, got up from his chair and sat next to her, slipping an arm around her shoulders and drawing her close. "No, I do not want you to leave."

"I'm sorry, Severus. I should have knocked. Just because your wards allow me in doesn't mean I should assume I can come anytime."

"Hermione, you may come anytime. Just do not always expect me to be in a great mood. I am the grumpy Potions master after all."

She giggled a bit and slipped an arm around his waist. "But you are my grumpy old Potions master." She placed a kiss on his chin.

He sighed and kissed her forehead. "I do not deserve this contentedness."

Hermione turned to look into his face. "Severus, you more than most deserve happiness."

"I think a lot of Voldemort's victims might disagree with you."

"As you have reminded me, it was war. We all did things we aren't proud of. The end justified the means. Why are you having a pity party?"

"You did know me well before I regained my memory, but now you may not realize I spend a lot of my time regretting my past. If you want to be a part of my life, you're going to have to get used to it."

Hermione turned a beautiful smile his way and slid into his lap, "Well, we will just have to make your future so good you have no time to dwell in the past." Her kiss made him forget even the present.

They'd spent a bit of time kissing and then talked about the end of the war. Hermione told Severus about last moments of the war and Neville killing Nagini. She had told the story to Raven, but since Severus didn't know, she explained again.

"I guess I owe that young man a debt of gratitude for killing my near murderer. That snake was a monster," he said, shuddering.

The next night Hermione was working late in her classroom and Severus had walked out to the gate of the castle. He stood for a moment and looked back at the magnificent castle, his home. He let himself out the gates and Disapparated.

Severus stepped up to the doors of the magical St. Mungo's. His wand signature allowed him to enter the hospital. He made his way to a desk and asked for a room number. He then went down the hall and up several floors to the Spell Damaged ward. He scanned the names on the doors as he went down the hall and finally came to his destination.

He slipped into the room. Because this was not a Muggle hospital, there were no machines humming and clicking away. There was a soft glow of a ward over each patient.

The wards would alert the Healers and nurses on the floor if anything would go wrong with the patients.

He stood in Harry's room and looked down at the "boy." He looked more like a man now. He was relieved that he didn't have to look into Lily's eyes. He reached out with his thoughts and found a dark, impenetrable barrier. Having learned what he wanted to know, he left the room as silently as he had entered.

He followed the hallway down to the Longbottoms' room. The pair lay sleeping in their beds. He reached out with his thoughts and found Frank's mind impenetrable, black, and silent. Alice's mind seemed only partially impaired. He knew that she had some motion and ability to do simple things like eat and sit up. Her mind was only partially eclipsed by the spell. Bellatrix, probably having learned this spell from Voldemort, had only partially impaired the woman. Yes, he was certain that it was the same spell. Neville had played an important role in the war, killing the snake that had nearly killed him. He ran his fingers over the faint scars on his neck. Another young boy had been robbed of his parents because of that monster. Severus felt a sense of kinship with them...for their loss and sacrifices, which had led to the life he had now. He hoped he could restore them, but they had been under the curse for many years. Would they be mentally challenged? Would Neville want them restored? He heard a noise behind him and turned to behold the man that Neville Longbottom had grown into.

"Professor... Snape?"

Severus turned and extended his hand. "Mr. Longbottom."

Neville suddenly looked a bit like the scared young man he'd intimidated in class. But he extended his hand and shook Snape's. "I heard you had returned to Hogwarts, sir."

"Yes, it's a long story. Suffice it to say, Miss Granger found me and brought me back. I understand I have you to thank for Nagini's demise."

Neville swallowed and ducked his head. "Yes... It was a lucky swing."

"I doubt that. You were an accomplished DA member." He smiled.

Neville stared at him as if he'd grown two heads, and Snape laughed.

Neville stared and choked.

"I'm sorry, Neville, for making your Potions class so miserable. I was quite a miserable excuse for a teacher back then. I really have not lost my mind; I've regained it. Much has happened to me in the last six months."

Neville nodded, not sure if he could believe him. "Why are you here, sir?"

"Neville, I have a question to ask you, and I need you to really consider it. There may be long-lasting ramifications. I also need you to keep it to yourself for now."

Neville swallowed and nodded. *What could Snape want of him?*

"Hermione Granger and I have discovered a spell and potion that might return Harry to his life."

Neville nodded and a confused smile broke out on his face. "That would be great, sir. But why are you here?" He waved his hands to indicate his parents' room.

"It may be possible to wake your parents, as well, with the same spell," Severus informed him.

"What?" Neville paled and might have fallen had Snape not grabbed his arm and pushed him down into the chair between his parents' beds.

"I'm sorry to spring this on you, but since your parents have been like this so many years, there may be more risks. I need you to tell me if you want me to try."

"What risks?"

"I can only guess. There may be some brain damage, physical handicaps, or memory loss. Voldemort had a very specific spell book in his possession. He likely shared it with Bellatrix, who was his most loyal servant. I now have that book. Hermione Granger and I have been preparing a potion and studying the spell. We are confident that we can revive those affected. Would you rather they stay this way, or should we try to free them and then work with what we get?" He stopped a moment to let the young man think. "Neville, be sure this is what you want. I have no guarantees for you. I cannot say this won't be an experiment. It will be. It's a spell that hasn't been used in centuries. It may seem cruel to you that we try your parents first. Harry Potter does not deserve a life free from the curse any more than they do."

Neville looked at his parents and then said, feeling hope for them the first time in his life, "Do it. I trust you to do your best, Professor Snape. I understand about Harry. After all, he saved our world with your help."

Severus was grateful for his understanding and a bit surprised to get some credit. It made him feel warm inside. The feeling was odd, and he frowned. Then covering, when he saw Neville grimace, he said, "Severus. You're an adult now, Neville. Call me Severus."

Neville turned pink but stammered out, "Sev... er... us."

Severus smiled and squeezed his shoulder as he passed by. "I will let you know when we are ready. Please *do not* tell any one at this time."

"Luna..." he protested.

"Okay, you can tell Miss Lovegood. I can understand that, but no one else Neville," he instructed firmly.

"I want to be able to conduct the spells in private. I'm sure you would not want the likes of Rita Skeeter hovering anywhere near."

"Oh no, sir. That woman gives me the creeps," Neville agreed.

"As she does all of us," he said with a laugh. "I will contact you tomorrow, and we can make the arrangements with the hospital. The potion will be ready tomorrow."

Neville stared at the door after Snape left and then turned with tears in his eyes. Would it be possible to get his parents back? He'd just been telling Luna the other day that he would have loved to have his parents at their wedding, which was only a month away.

He put his head on his knees and cried.

Thank you, all, so much for the many wonderful reviews.

I want to thank Lisa, my Beta; she's wonderful. Many thanks also go out to beaweasley2 and Becky for all their hours of help and their helpful suggestions.

Chapter 36

Chapter 36 of 63

Having fled the Wizarding World, Hermione comes face to face with her past.

The next day Hermione and Severus took the morning off and went to St. Mungo's together. They were quickly ushered into the director's office. It was a huge room with an impressive cherry wood desk and large leather chairs. The plants scattered artfully around the room seemed to make the office alive and comfortable. No expense was spared, and it made Hermione wonder about the man. Budgets were tight everywhere.

Severus visibly bristled at the sight of the tall, stocky, balding man. "Healer Davenport," he said tightly.

"Alishus, Severus. We are all professionals here," the man said, seeming to genuinely be pleased. "Come sit down. What brings you to my hospital?"

Severus explained about the spell and the potion. But he told Davenport he would not share it at this time.

"Why should I allow you to do this unknown procedure on one of my patients? It's an unheard of spell. I have no idea what the potion is made of because you refuse to share the ingredients with me."

Severus stood and glared at the Healer. "This may bring patients out of their damaged states and give them back their lives and return them to their loved ones. What's more important to you, Alishus, your need to know or your patients' welfare?" He could not tell him the spell came from Salazar Slytherin's book because the Healer would have assumed it was Dark magic. But Severus had detected nothing of the sort in this potion.

"You haven't changed at all, have you, Severus? You still think everything is a competition. I am concerned for the welfare of my patients. I do not want to strap a family with a relative who will be worse off. So many things could go wrong: paralysis, mental retardation. Do you think it will benefit family members to have to diaper and tube feed their relatives? With the way things are now, the patients are calm and in no further pain."

"You made everything a competition, Davenport, not I. Were you so unsure of yourself that you needed to best me at everything? You seem pretty successful now," Severus said with a sneer.

"Severus, my job at Hogwarts was many years in the past. Now, I am only concerned about the wellbeing of my patients. You need to give me some idea of what your spell entails, or I cannot let you proceed. It is a reasonable request," he said adamantly.

Hermione watched with increasing fear that they might come to blows. She could tell that Davenport was just as stubborn as Severus, and that scared her.

Severus stood and turned to go, striding away and leaving Hermione behind. Hermione stopped him at the door and whispered harshly to him, "Severus, please, this is for Neville and Harry. You must let go of whatever your past is with this man. Please do this for me and for Neville. You can do this: You are the master. You can prove to yourself and this man what you're capable of. It's not unreasonable for him to ask what you're planning to do to his patients."

Severus looked into her face and realized she was near panic that he would walk away from healing Harry and Neville's parents. She was on the verge of tears, and he hated hurting her.

"All right," he said, squeezing her hand. After they had taken their seats again, Severus explained the spell and even demonstrated a bit of it.

Davenport seemed to come alive with excitement. He was well-versed in spells and could read the nuances in the lights. "Come, I may be the director, but I must have a consensus of Healers to allow this. Give me a moment to call everyone to the boardroom."

The boardroom was different from what Hermione expected. There was no table surrounded by high-backed chairs. The room was circular, and it had a wall of windows looking into a huge greenhouse of potion ingredients. An open door allowed plants to spill into the room, making it an extended garden. Seating consisted of cushy couches and chairs positioned in a circle. There were even several Pensieves among the plants in alcoves. To Hermione's great surprise, an actual pine tree was growing from the floor and was now seasonally decorated in Christmas décor.

"Impressive," Severus admitted.

Although Hermione could see how tense he was by the way he was standing, she didn't say anything.

"Thank you, Severus. That's high praise from you," Alishus said. "We gather here several times a week to discuss our cases and to sometimes share the memories of those working on the most difficult or perplexing cases. It helps us to see what it is they see and why they have made certain diagnoses. It makes my staff more like a family."

"Yes, I guess it does." He knew there was an inherent trust in people who shared their thoughts. They were all people who were of one thought and goal. He looked at Hermione and smiled.

Healers of all shapes, sizes and races started to wander into the room. Besides Wizards and Witches there were Goblins and Fairies. Yet the lime green of their Healers' robes made them a solidified group.

"Come meet Miriam Strout, Severus. She's in charge of the Permanent Spell Damage department. She will have to give her consent."

The woman was friendly, and they had a quick but lively conversation with her. Finally Davenport said, "You will have to share the potion ingredients with her. Did you bring a sample?"

Hermione nodded, patting her robes. She pulled out the vial and handed it to the short, motherly woman.

Healer Strout took it with a sparkle in her eye. "Master Snape, your expertise precedes you. I will be happy to look at this, but I am certain that it will do what you say it does."

"My assistant Hermione Granger helped me prepare the ingredients, and I did the brewing. She was an incredible asset while I was studying the spell. I checked on her as the need arose."

"Well, Madam Granger, if Master Snape has your confidence, I'm sure the potion has been well prepared."

Hermione was distracted by a familiar figure and called out, "Firenze!"

"Miss Granger, it is good to see you again." Firenze bowed in respect. Even he wore a scarf of green tied around his waist where his humanoid and equine halves blended.

"What are you doing here?" she asked curiously.

"Firenze was a Healer in his herd," Davenport explained for him. "We are very proud to have him on our staff."

Firenze explained, "I still can't go back to the herd, and this gives me purpose."

"I'm glad; it's good to see you again, Healer Firenze."

The group was called together, and Healer Davenport explained why Potions master Snape and Hermione Granger had come. Everyone in the room listened wide-eyed as Snape explained in detail the properties of the potion and the spell. Arguments broke out as to who should be able to watch. Severus and Hermione were firm that they needed privacy to properly administer the potion and spell to Frank and Alice Longbottom. Severus agreed to allow Healer Strout to administer one dose of the potion to Alice, and Davenport would give the other to Frank. The spellbook had intimated that more than one person could be returned to himself or herself if they had a full dose of potion and had the spell performed near them.

Finally, Severus asked them to keep this conversation confidential. He didn't want the press alerted before the famous Aurors and Harry Potter were healed.

Once Severus had thanked the Healers for their time, he and Hermione left the hospital and Apparated back to Hogwarts.

As soon as they arrived at the Apparition point, Severus began walking briskly toward Hogwarts. Hermione ran after him and grabbed his hand, which, she discovered, was trembling. "Severus, what's wrong?" she asked, standing before him stopping him in his tracks.

He frowned and tried to walk around her.

"Damn it, Severus, don't shut me out. If we are going to do this, we need to do it together."

He ran his hand through his hair and looked down at her. "I didn't expect to have to have an audience...least of all Alishus Davenport."

"But you agreed," she protested, squeezing his hand.

"Yes, but you saw how Alishus is. He wouldn't have allowed us to help Harry and the Longbottoms unless he is allowed to be there. It's his hospital."

"Why do you think it was so important to him?"

"It's always been about control with him. He and I were first-year teachers together here. He taught Herbology before Professor Sprout came. He always made it a miserable experience to gather potion ingredients from his greenhouse. He still wants me to know that he's in charge."

"Are you sure? He seemed genuinely excited about the procedure. If you had a chance to see something like this for the first time, wouldn't you try your best to be included? You can be the better man here, Severus. Just ignore him. When we are in that room with Frank and Alice Longbottom, it will be just the two of us in our hearts. They will administer the potion, and you will sing them alive. I will be there supporting you every second. You won't even know anyone else is there."

He took her in his arms and held her tightly. "What would I do without you? You are my anchor. How am I supposed to feel love for people I do not even know? I am uncertain that this will work, Hermione."

"Severus? I've never known you to be insecure about your abilities. It was..." She stopped.

"... Raven who was scared," he finished for her.

"Yes, sorry." She pressed her face against his chest.

"Well, I guess we are getting closer. I am becoming someone I don't recognize."

"Is it bad?" she asked, trembling against him.

"No, not all of it. I have him to thank for you." He placed a soft kiss on her forehead.

"No, Severus. You have yourself to thank for me. He was and is you. I know that; you just have to accept it. Maybe then all the pieces will fall together for you."

The next evening they stood in the Longbottoms' hospital room. Someone had placed a tiny Christmas tree with blinking fairy lights on the small table between the beds. Neville sat rather nervously in a chair off to the side. Hermione took her place behind him and held tightly onto his shoulders in support. Frank Longbottom lay on a bed in the center of the room, and Alice sat in a wheelchair at his side. She was folding and unfolding a shiny candy wrapper.

Healer Davenport stood poised at the head of the bed ready to administer the potion to Frank. Healer Strout was running her hands over Alice's hair, trying to soothe her. Severus stood at the foot of the bed centering himself and working to block out any distractions so he could sing the words of the spell.

Hermione waited in silence and said a prayer for him as she awaited his signal for the Healers. She tried to send him her good thoughts and saw his face relax a bit. When he opened his eyes, he looked at the Healers and nodded ever so slightly.

Neville sat up a little straighter on his chair and watched the procedure with interest. His body was taut with excitement and fear.

Davenport positioned Frank's head so that his mouth opened a bit, poured the potion down his throat and rubbed his neck to ensure the potion was swallowed without choking the patient. He then stepped back. Strout held a small glass to Alice's lips. Alice grasped it and drank it quickly and then the song began. The timber and pitch of Severus' voice filled the room. The spell of lights wove around Frank Longbottom and formed a cocoon. A second group of lights encircled Alice. She watched, enraptured, and tried to pick the lights from the air.

Severus' voice soared and then faltered. He felt the fear well up inside him and saw the colors start to gray and Frank's body start to convulse. Severus took a step back afraid he'd injured the man further. *How could I care for this man who means nothing to me? Who am I to think that I could bring someone back from so long a sleep?*

Alice was still working at the strands of elusive wisps of grey with her fingers.

Neville was holding himself in his chair, his fingers white with strain as he gripped the seat at his sides. He didn't want to interrupt the spell, yet he had an overwhelming desire to comfort his father.

Hermione let go of Neville's shoulders and went to Severus and took his hands. "Sing, my love, sing. You can do this. Let my love fill you. Love is all you need, Severus. Sing."

He felt her mind touch his, and he felt her love soar like a giant bird with wings of gold through his heart. It filled him up, and his voice picked up its strength and pitch. The lights of the spell flared brightly, and the weave tightened. Frank Longbottom's seizures stopped, and his body relaxed. The lights started to travel up his body and finally surrounded only his head. The timber and resonance of the song came to its final notes, and the spell lights burst in a cascade like the celebratory fireworks they had seen during spell practice. But this time, darkness fled the man's brain and dissipated into the air around him.

Alice Longbottom was already looking around in curious wonder. "What's happening?" she asked.

Neville, who had been sitting stiffly, petrified with fear, finally catapulted out of his chair and came to stand over his mother's chair. "Mom. It's Neville, do you understand me?"

"Neville, my son? It is you." She hugged him and tears streamed down her face.

Hermione saw Frank's eyes flutter. "Neville, your dad!"

Neville kissed his mom and left her side as Miriam Strout went to her knees beside her and began to whisper things to her, trying to explain what was happening, but Alice halted her with a few words. Hermione wondered what she had said.

"Dad? Dad?" Neville called. "Can you hear me? Please try to open your eyes."

Severus stood stiffly, trying to process the feelings inside him. Hermione withdrew her mind and put her arms around him and held him close.

Neville called again, "Dad, open your eyes."

Frank Longbottom's eyes opened. He looked around, and his eyes focused on Neville's face. "Who?" he whispered.

"I'm Neville, Dad. You've been asleep a long time." He brushed at the tears on his own joy-filled face.

"Neville, no, he's a baby. Alice... my wife... where is she?" Frank asked, trying to sit up.

"She's here next to you," Neville said, trying to stop the flow of tears that streamed down his face.

Miriam pushed Alice's chair closer to the bed, and Alice reached for both Neville's and Frank's hands. "I'm here, Frank." She spoke clearly and with strength.

Frank was blinking, trying to focus and understand what had happened. "Bella... trix." he stammered. "She cur... sed..." His words were slow and broken.

"Yes, Dad. You've been asleep nearly 19 years."

"Nineteen years Neville, you're a man now... my son." Tears leaked from the man's eyes and slipped down his face, drenching the pillow.

Neville leaned over the bed, hugged his father to him and placed a kiss on his father's forehead. "Dad..."

Hermione noted that Frank tried to raise his left arm to grab on to Neville. But when he tried to lift his arm, it spasmed, and he finally let it drop to the bed.

Neville hadn't noticed.

Hermione went to the door, opened it, and motioned to Luna who was waiting outside. She noticed that Severus was leaning against the wall for support. The spell had exhausted him. She rushed to his side to lend her shoulder for support.

The beautiful waif of a girl went right to Neville, who drew her close. "Dad, Mom, this is Luna. We are getting married soon."

"Luna... beautiful... need to sleep." Frank drifted off.

Neville looked around in alarm.

Alishas Davenport called, "Miriam."

The Healer left Alice's side and came closer. Neville moved back. She waved her wand over the unconscious wizard and ran a scan. "He's sleeping," she diagnosed after a moment. Everyone in the room breathed a sigh of relief. "Mr. Longbottom, your father has some paralysis on his left side. It's nothing too serious. I think that with potions and muscular manipulation, we can help that in time."

Neville nodded, unable to speak as he continued to stare into his father's face. A tug on his hand brought him down on his knees into his mother's arms.

"Neville, I've watched you for years, but I was trapped in that half existence and unable to speak. Your Luna is a beautiful girl. I'm so happy for you."

Davenport turned to Severus and came closer. "Severus, you and I haven't seen eye to eye for many years, but I have to tell you that was the most impressive spell work I have ever seen in my life. I would be proud to have you work with us on a few other cases of curse-injured patients."

Severus eyed him, amazed at how sincere the man was. That shocked him and also warmed him. "Once we have brought back Harry Potter, I will consider it. Now if you think we are done here and you can take over, Hermione and I need to leave. I need rest."

"Of course, I understand. I don't know where you got that spell, but I would love to see it and see the source."

Severus thought, *I bet you would*. But he said, "Alishas, if you keep the press away until after Harry is awakened, I will share the spell and maybe its source. Do we have a deal?"

"Of course! The Longbottoms will stay in seclusion. They need time to assimilate what has happened and to gather strength."

Severus arched a suspicious eyebrow. "Why the change of heart? Aren't you jealous of my accomplishment?"

"Severus, I should have explained yesterday. Your sacrifices saved my family. I owe you. Forgive me for the ridiculous, old games," Davenport explained. "There was a Death Eater raid on my family home. My in-laws were killed, but my wife and kids survived. She swore to me that she saw you miscast spells at them on purpose. I didn't believe her until the truth came out after the final battle. I owe you so much."

Severus was touched by the man's gratitude, but his exhaustion was getting more severe with the effort to remain on his feet. He only nodded gratefully at Alishas and Hermione guided him out of the room and the hospital. Severus pulled a Portkey from his pocket.

When they landed, they weren't at Hogwarts but the lair. Hermione watched as Severus slipped to the floor and cuddled a waiting Grendel. She realized the animal had been his only friend for years. As she watched the scene, more tears spilled from her eyes, and she realized that Grendel was somehow able to give Severus some of his strength. She could see the strength returning to his face as the lines of exhaustion vanished.

He reached up to draw her down to sit with Grendel and him. "This emotional overload is rather painful and wonderful at the same time," he told her softly. Severus wound his fingers into hers and held her hand tightly. His other hand was buried in Grendel's thick fur. "If you had not been there tonight, Frank might have died. I nearly lost the spell."

"But you didn't; you finished it. You saved them both from living death."

"We saved them, Hermione. I do not know what I ever did without you."

"You have Grendel," she said, soothing the animal's fur. The great beast began to purr. Hermione laughed. "He has empathic abilities, doesn't he?"

"Yes, you know I need to talk to Hagrid about him. He gave me the great beast. Maybe he knew I would need his abilities over the years. There have been times when I nearly fell into the cave here, bleeding and near death, and somehow when this big guy sat near me or licked my wounds, I healed."

"That's one of those stories you were going to tell me." She smiled. "I knew he was a comfort, but I had no idea about the rest," she said, looking at the beast with new respect and love.

He was running his hand over Grendel's fur. "I can't really live without him or you, Hermione."

Chapter 37

Chapter 37 of 63

Having fled the Wizarding World Hermione comes face to face with her past.

Hermione laughed when she woke the next morning and found Grendel lying between them on the large bed. Severus had needed his help to regain as much strength as possible so he would be able to perform the spell again that night. It was Saturday, so they decided to stay at the cave for the morning. They ate breakfast and then played ball with Grendel. For all his scary rows of teeth, he was gentle with the pigskin ball. He was a big baby at heart and romped and chased after the ball like a small pup. Hermione laughed at his antics. It made her feel good to laugh and relax for a bit. Just seeing Severus play made her heart light, and she was amazed that the child Raven had become had always been a facet of Severus Snape that he'd kept secret.

Severus wasn't much different from Raven after all. But what was it that was keeping Severus from remembering his life as Raven?

Around three o'clock, they returned to Hogwarts to shower and dress for the evening. Severus practiced the spell a bit and tried to concentrate on the feelings that had allowed him to continue the night before. He did not want to falter tonight. His inability to produce the spell in a continuous manner may have cost Frank Longbottom months of physical therapy and potions to restore his left side. He knew that no one blamed him, but he did not like imperfection. Neville had sent an owl to Severus, thanking him for all he had done. He let Severus know that he was delighted to actually have his parents healthy and talking. He had assured Severus that he did not hold him responsible for his father's infirmities and that the healers were very certain that his father would be fully recovered in a few months. Severus was grateful for the letter, but he hoped to do better tonight.

Hermione had sent an owl to Ginny and asked that she bring her family to St. Mungo's. Severus had wanted to do the spell without them there, but he'd understood. Potter would want Ginny there when he woke up. However, Severus had asked that Ginny wait outside until called.

When they arrived at the hospital, the Weasleys were already there. They seemed happy to see Severus but did not try to touch him...except Arthur, who came to shake his hand.

"Severus, it's good to have you back. Thank you for agreeing to help Harry. The boy deserves a life," Arthur said.

Ginny had gone to Hermione and stood in her arms, trembling with excitement and fear.

Severus nodded to Arthur. "There is no guarantee this will work. There are things I need to ~~feel~~ to make this a success, and I do not know if I have it in me."

"If this fails, Severus, then you will try again when you have worked through the feelings. You have always done your best for the Order and Harry. You will do all that you can for him," Arthur encouraged the reluctant wizard.

Hermione gently detached Ginny and pushed her into her mother's arms. "Please, wait out here as quietly as possible. I will call you if we are successful." She had not mentioned Severus' success with the Longbottoms. She knew that Severus still had some issues with Harry.

Severus turned away from the Weasleys' hopeful faces. He could not quell the fear in his heart that he was not up to this task tonight. He was afraid that the ease of Frank and Alice's return would not happen this time. Bellatrix had been an inferior witch when compared with Voldemort's phenomenal powers. The darkness around Harry's mind seemed thick, inky, and impenetrable.

Alishus was in the room with Harry when they entered. He nodded to them but did not speak. Then he stepped back and out of the room, leaving only Miriam Strout in attendance.

That astonished Severus; the man was giving him more privacy this time. Everyone knew about his relationship with Harry. It had come out in the hearing that had

occurred after his disappearance and assumed death. To clear his name, all of his past and Harry's past had been revealed from the memories Harry had left in the Pensieve in Dumbledore's office, and he presumed Dumbledore's portrait had concurred that the memories were not false.

Hermione went to stand at the side of Harry's bed near his head, and Severus took his place at the foot. Miriam took the other side. Severus stood and stared into the young man's face for a long time. He was trying to feel what he needed to feel. There was so much bad blood between them. There was, in contrast, so much feeling between Lily and him. His feelings of love were compounded by his betrayal that had cost her life. He looked at Hermione for encouragement and found that golden smile that always made his heart soar. He took a deep breath and nodded to Healer Strout. She administered the potion.

Severus started to sing. His voice was deep, almost husky, and the resonance wavered. He took a deep breath and started again. He sang with rich tones, and the colors started to form. They wrapped themselves around Harry. The boy's eyes opened, and Severus was staring into Lily's eyes. It shocked him so much that he lost his train of thought, and the colors and lights crumbled and faded. Harry's body jerked and then seized up. His eyes closed, and then he lay still. Hermione looked at Severus in horror and then anxiously watched Healer Strout make a diagnosis.

"He's okay," she finally said. "His body shows some shock, and he had a mild seizure, but he's slipped back into the full curse and is the same as he was before. What happened, Severus?" Her voice was curious but kind.

Severus had stood frozen in horror, and then he broke away and ran out into the hall. Pushing past the Weasleys, he vanished down the hall. Hermione, having run to the door, stood for a moment staring after him, and then all the voices of the family accosted her.

"What happened?"

"Why did he leave?"

"Will Harry stay this way?"

"Hermione?"

Hermione pushed past them. "I need to find him. Please let me go. I will find out what happened. I promise I will make sure he tries again. Please keep this to yourselves," she begged them and ran down the hall to the stairs and out of the building. But there was only silence there; Severus was gone. She stood on the empty street, tears streaking down her face. *He'd left her behind. Where had he gone? What had happened?*

She had been excited when Harry's eyes had opened, and then the music had stopped. Somehow Severus had shut down and been distracted. She went over what had happened again in her mind. *He stopped singing when Harry opened his eyes.* Suddenly, she thought of all the times over the years that she'd heard people telling Harry that he had his mother's eyes. She groaned. *Oh Merlin, will he ever get her out of his heart, and will he ever forgive himself for what happened all those years ago?*

She Apparated to Hogwarts, feeling it was best to start there. She gathered a few things from her room that she felt might help him and started her search.

His quarters were empty, so she went to Spinner's End and found it dark and empty. She had never tried to Apparate the distance to his lair, so she went to Minerva and asked for her help. Minerva sent for Dobby, and he took her to the lair. But Grendel was there alone, and Hermione really began to fear for him. *Where else would he go? What state of mind was he in?*

Then she had it: Lily. He would have gone to Lily in Godric's Hollow. She'd been there before and knew she could get there alone. She sent Dobby back to tell Minerva where she was going, and then she Apparated. Hermione found herself on a dark street about a block from the cemetery. It was a dark, foreboding night, and she used the tip of her wand to send a soft warm light before her.

She was not crazy about traipsing through a dark cemetery alone at night and only prayed that Severus would be there and not send her away. She made her way through the woods to the kissing gate. It was slightly open, and it gave her courage that Severus had come before her. Her feet took her in the familiar direction of the grave, past the now dark church. The grave stones stood out, throwing sharp shadows everywhere. As she neared Harry's parents' grave, she saw a dark form lying before it. The white marble was silhouetting his form in the dark surroundings.

"Severus?" she called softly.

The form moved, and now she could see him.

"Hermione, please leave me." His voice was ragged with emotion and tears.

She continued on, determined to comfort him. She took him in her arms, and he slumped down, drawing her to the ground with him. He cried heart-wrenchingly painful cries that were ripped from his soul and tore at her heart so that she cried with him.

"I will never leave you, Severus. Do you hear me? *I will never leave you*, so never send me away because I will not go!"

Severus finally believed her. She would never leave him. He clung to her, aware that he was probably bruising her arms and body with the strength of his hold, but he could not stop the waves of painful cries that kept erupting from his mouth.

"Cry, Severus. Let go of the pain and forgive yourself for the mistakes of your past."

"My mistakes cost the lives of my best friend and the man she loved dearly. It is not some simple mistake, Hermione. She is gone, and she can never forgive me. Please get me out of here. Take me to Grendel, please. I cannot stand this pain," he cried.

She helped him stand, and they Apparated. But when Severus opened his eyes, he found himself outside Spinner's End. "What are we doing here?" he demanded. "I need Grendel! Please, Hermione, take me to Grendel."

"Severus, you need to face your pain, not have it taken away. Grendel will only mask this pain again. This pain must be dealt with," she said as she helped him through the door and into the house. They went straight up to the bedroom, and Hermione helped him change into a long nightshirt and crawl under the bedcovers. She was going to let him sleep alone. But he would not let go of her hand, so she crawled into the bed beside him. He spooned himself against her, and they both slept from emotional exhaustion.

Severus woke first and found Hermione's face inches from his; she must have turned toward him during the night. He felt heavy and hungover from all the emotional exertion. His face felt crusted with spent tears, and he could see the streaks of dried tears on her face as well. This woman was a miracle in his life, and her love had saved him over and over again. Her willingness to love him despite his past and his own self-destructive nature made him feel warm.

She was stirring now, and her eyes opened. When she saw him watching her, she smiled that glorious smile that warmed him more than the sun and brought life to his heart.

He leaned forward and kissed her deeply. She pressed herself against him, and he held her close. "Thank you for finding me," he said softly.

"You're welcome," she said, kissing him back.

"Will Harry be alright?" He couldn't remember much of what had happened after Harry's eyes had opened.

"Yes, he's the same as before the spell. The potion doesn't seem to have much effect without the spell. You can try again."

Severus stiffened and pulled away, getting out of the bed. "I'm not capable of doing the spell for him. It will have to be someone else."

Hermione crawled out after him and made him look at her. "It can't be anyone but you, Severus. You know the spell and what it entails. You have to be the one to bring him back. You can do this, Severus. I have faith in you and your abilities," she told him.

"No, I can't do it. I am too fragmented, and I have no anchor for my own life. How can I hope to find the anchor to bring Harry back?" he said.

Hermione went to retrieve the magic bag she had placed on the bedside table. She opened it and pulled out several items. She was hurt that he didn't see her as an anchor in his life, but she did not point that out to him. She knew that would help no one.

"Severus, it's time you faced your past. You need to see the memories Raven and I left you, and you need to see the memories your mother left you. I also have the diary here. This is the only way you will be able to move forward in your life with me. You need to let go of the past," she beseeched him.

Severus stared at the items in her hand with revulsion, but in his heart he knew it was time. He nodded, reaching out to take the diary from her hand.

Thank you for the many wonderful comments and reviews. I appreciate them so much.

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Chapter 39

Having fled the Wizarding World, Hermione comes face to face with her past.

Hermione Apparated them back up the stairs and into the bed, and Severus slept. Hours later he woke to find Hermione lying next to him on his bed, and he reached for her. He wanted her so much. He needed her to ground him to the reality they had now. He knew he had at least one more memory bead to watch, but he didn't have to do it this minute.

"Hermione?" he asked, drawing her close and kissing her lips gently.

"Yes, Severus." She let her fingers slid along his face...the face of a man she loved more than she ever thought she could.

"I love you, Hermione. I love you more than I have ever loved anyone in my life. Do you understand what I'm saying? I no longer want the past to cripple me. My mother sacrificed her need to be with me to set me free. I am free of my parents and their baggage. Please, can you accept me for myself? If I never remember Raven's life with you, can you love me, Severus Snape?"

Hermione screamed with joy and threw her arms around his neck and pressed herself against him. "Yes, Severus, yes! I can and do!" She had realized that the man Raven had been was here in Severus. Severus was just as wonderful, just as interesting, as well as being a brilliant wizard, and they complimented each other so well.

Everything ceased to exist around them, and they no longer saw the old house with dingy, dusty, old drapes and peeling paint. They did not smell the stale sheets or hear the traffic outside. They only saw each other. Their minds were joined; and they were one with each other and saw each others thoughts. The love that was there was so deep and engrained, it was like one entity, a new being. They kissed, caressed, and joined their bodies together in a soft, gentle dance that melded them together. Severus pinned Hermione against the bed as his body pressed against hers. Their fingers were entwined, and they gazed deeply into each other's eyes. He thrusting, she pressing upwards. Their needs spiraled higher and higher, their cries of passion, laced with love, gave their hearts wings, and they flew. Later, they slumped against each other, their bodies' slick with sweat, kissing gently until they finally just clung to each other.

They stayed in bed through the afternoon, holding each other and talking about their jobs and future. Severus reiterated his hope to apprentice Hermione in Potions, and she was very excited about the possibilities. Together, she was certain they could help many people with the safe spells in the spell book now in their possession. Severus talked about how they could lock the darker spells into the book so the pages would be blank, and that way no one could see them unless they learned how to unlock them. They also decided that this book should be locked away in the Department of Mysteries once they copied the spells they thought safe. In the late afternoon, Severus went down and brought up a plate of cold cuts and cheese and some wizarding wine, and they sat cross-legged in the middle of the bed and ate.

Later that afternoon they finally took up the string of beads and touched the last bead together.

Severus and Hermione found themselves in the garden of the little house on Spinner's End, but the garden was a bit more wild and the old swing was broken and in disrepair. The roof looked more worn than Severus had ever seen it, in need of repair as well as the rest of the house. They looked at each other, wondering when this memory had taken place, as Severus' mother came to the door. She stood looking at the devastated garden. Her face wasn't much older, but she had gained more lines on her face from her empty life. Her hair, once mousey brown, was now long and grey. Her pain had aged her. This was months after Severus had left after his father had died. He stepped closer to her and reached out, wanting to touch her, but of course he couldn't. There was a sound at the gate behind them, and he looked around. There stood Lily Evans with a small baby in her arms.

Hermione gasped and covered her mouth with her hand as she glanced into Severus' face and saw his eyes widen and his face turned stony and grey.

"Mrs. Snape, may I speak with you?" she asked.

"You're that girl my Sev used to hang out with. What do you want?" Severus mother pulled her shawl around her tightly and turned back toward the house.

"Please, ma'am, it's about Severus. He needs your help." Lily came closer, reaching out with one hand to grab Eileen Snape's arm if necessary.

"That's not Sev's baby, is it?" She looked almost hopeful.

"No, I'm married to James Potter, and this is his son." She allowed Eileen to look into the baby's face. Lily caressed the child's face softly, lovingly with her fingers.

Eileen turned away saddened. The baby was plainly not Severus'. "You married the man who tortured my Sev. You have cheek coming here. I haven't seen my son for nearly a year, and I no longer have anything to do with him. I cannot help you. Go away!"

Lily grabbed her this time. "Please, I can't talk to him any longer. Our paths went in very different directions. He changed during the last year at school, running with a bad crowd. He was angry all the time, and I believe he took the Dark Mark! Please, Mrs. Snape, you must talk to him," she begged.

Eileen looked at her with horror on her face. "The Dark Mark! No, Sev is much smarter than that. And if you truly were his friend, why wouldn't he listen to you? I told you I have no contact with him," she repeated, her eyes tearing up. "If this is true, Severus is truly lost, and I am to blame."

Lily then told her what had happened. "I was in Gryffindor at Hogwarts. You know our two houses have an age-old rivalry. My then boyfriend and Sev hated each other. Something happened; when he came back from Christmas break, he was sullen, angry, in pain. I fear for him. He was my friend. What happened to him? He won't talk to me anymore, and he's become more and more involved with the Slytherin pure-bloods. I will always love him," she cried, tears now running down her face.

"Love him!" Eileen spat the words at her. "If you have no idea what happened during Christmas break, then you are no friend of his."

Lily shook her head sadly. "I did let him down, and I pushed him away. Please tell me what happened," she begged.

Eileen sat on the worn bench by the back door. "Severus killed his father, here in the house, a few feet from where we stand."

"What! Nooo... How? Why?" Lily face crumpled. "Poor Severus."

Eileen told her what had happened.

"Oh, Severus," she said. "No wonder he would not talk to me. He probably believes I'd never be able to look at him again if I knew what happened."

"Why are you here now, if your falling out happened so long ago?" Eileen wanted to know.

"I know people who fight against the Death Eaters." She could not tell her it had been James. "There was a battle a few weeks ago, and I know someone who saw him there. His mask was blasted away, and he looked right at this person. He might have gotten killed. I don't want to see that happen. He is and always will be my best friend."

"You cannot help him. You are his enemy now, and you love a man who hates him. What kind of friend does that make you?" Eileen accused her.

Hermione moved closer to Severus and took hold of his hand. He had not taken his eyes off Lily since she had walked into the scene. She was somewhat comforted that he did not push her away but clung to her hand tightly, pulling her against his side.

Lily had tears on her face now, and she came and sat upon the worn bench next to Eileen. The baby started to cry. "There, there, Harry," she soothed the baby. "Mummy loves you, Harry." She kissed his face until he was quiet again, and then she continued to speak. "You're right. It makes me a traitor. Severus and I said hateful things to each other. He loved me and wanted me as his girlfriend. He's like a brother to me. I do not feel that kind of love for him, but he is and always has been my very best friend. I always dreamed that Severus would be my son's godfather, but he's beyond my reach now. I didn't know where else to go. If he has taken the Mark, it will have been my fault as well. I will never blame him for anything he does afterwards. Evil is very seductive, and the power is very controlling."

"Well, you have come to the wrong place." Tears now streamed down Eileen's face. "This place has poisoned him, and I did nothing to stop it. I sent my only son away so that he might have a real life. If what you say is true, then it is too late. We have both lost him forever."

The two women embraced each other and cried.

The scene faded, and Severus dropped the beads and backed away. "Lily still cared. She still loved me. She was still my friend even though I called her a Mudblood, and even though she knew I had taken the Dark Mark. She tried to get me help, and I never knew."

He sat heavily on the couch, covered his face with his hands and cried. "Hermione, she wanted me to be Harry's godfather. In her heart she forgave me." He felt Hermione's arms around him.

"Yes, my love, she forgave you. Severus, she forgave you. Let it all go. Forgive her for leaving you behind and for marrying James Potter. Forgive your mom for pushing you away. She left this record of her most important memories so you would know the two women you loved the most never stopped loving you. She wanted you to understand the terrible things that happened in your life shaped you and made you what you were and that they still loved you no matter what."

Severus gasped for breath between his sobs. This was worse than yesterday; it felt like his heart might burst, and his mouth was heavy and thick. Pain shot through his head like electrical shocks as images started to flash through his brain: Hermione and the shack, Hermione and his house, Hermione in the pond, swimming as they made love, Hermione in his Lair... Hermione naked against him in Voldemort's bed... Hermione telling him she loved him as she bathed the child he had become and last as he took the potion... Images of the beads long forgotten... Hermione's image blazed like fire through his brain. He was Raven, and Raven was him. He remembered all of it, and he clung to her, buffeted by the images of their life and their love. All of it real, all of it was him. He felt himself slip into darkness.

Hermione felt him sag against her. "Severus, what's wrong?" She pushed him back and realized he was unconscious. She called Dobby and asked him to take them to the lair and Grendel.

With help from the house elf, Hermione got Severus into the bed at the Lair, and Grendel knew to crawl into the bed and lay against him. Hermione crawled into the bed behind Severus and held him close. Her tears and prayers poured out for him. What had happened? Had he just realized how much more he loved Lily? What would that mean to him? She lay awake for hours, listening to him breath and feeling silent tears fall from her eyes. She finally fell asleep.

Chapter 38

Chapter 39 of 63

Having fled the Wizarding World, Hermione comes face to face with her past.

I accidentally posted chapter 39 as 38. I apologize to those who read 39 first. We needed to get through the diary chapter first before the last memory bead.

Hermione smiled up at him. "Let's take a shower and have some breakfast first."

Severus nodded and said, "You go first."

Hermione smiled at him. "You could join me. It wouldn't be the first time."

"It would be for me. I'm not ready right now to further our relationship. Please, understand I want to be free of all this, Hermione. If we are to have a life, I want it to be both of our lives. I want to remember falling in love with you the first time."

"First time?" she asked. Her heart skipped a beat as she caught his meaning.

He reached out to cup her face in his hands. "You know I love you. It's ingrained in my heart. I've fought it long enough. It bubbles out of me each time you come into the room. But they are still not my feelings; I wish they were, but they belong to the man named Raven. I want to know his feelings and have us be one complete person who is no longer fragmented. You're right: It is time for me to read the diary in its entirety and view the memories." He paled, let go, and stepped back. "You have no idea how much I dread looking into my mother's mind and seeing our life through her eyes."

Hermione listened to his words, but she knew differently. *Severus, you do love me. You just aren't ready to admit you can love. I see it in your eyes and feel it in your touch. You are so different from the first time we had sex. I can wait until you realize it yourself.* She said aloud, "I know, Severus. Some of the memories were hard for Raven, even though he did not remember her. But I'm going to be with you each and every moment. You do not need to be afraid of expressing whatever feelings these memories invoke in you. I can handle it. Raven and I did not see all the memories your mother left. I detected a couple more magical beads amongst the strand. So there will be new things for me to see there, as well. You go shower, Severus. I'll go down to the other bathroom and bathe there." She gave him another soft kiss.

Severus watched her leave before going to the closet to find some clothes. He had an overwhelming desire to flee. Severus Snape, spy for Dumbledore and Voldemort, was afraid of feelings from his past...feelings so foreign to him that he'd rather cut off his hand than face them. He stood in the shower a long time, letting the hot water scald his skin before he finally dried off and dressed. He found Hermione working on a breakfast of pancakes, bacon, and coffee. He sat and ate with her in silence. Both of them were deep in their own thoughts.

After the breakfast items were put away, Severus wandered into the living room and stood holding the diary. When Hermione joined him, he sat on the couch with her and opened the diary and began to read it aloud. It took several hours to finish, and then he got up and walked to the old fireplace and stood there for a bit.

"His words are powerful. Yet, I do not remember them. They are from a man I cannot see, a man who exists only as feelings I do not understand. Hermione, it's still not real. Nothing I do seems to bring back that time with you!" He pounded his fist against the stone of the fireplace.

She came to him and held him close. Although he held his body stiffly at first, he finally relaxed against her.

"Severus, you have never had to face your feelings. For years Grendel has taken your pain away. He was a godsend for you at a time when you needed him desperately. But now it's time to face your feelings. We will do all we can to bring back your memories. You know our story now, and you must watch the memories that we took out for you. Maybe they will trigger the desired memories in your own head. Do you have a Pensieve here? I don't remember seeing one when we were here before."

Severus nodded and went across the room to the bookshelf, where he drew a book out and a cabinet opened. Severus picked up the heavy Pensieve and placed it on a small table so they could stand on either side.

Hermione chose the first memory of Raven waking in the alley alone. She poured it into the Pensieve, and the soft silver memory floated over the surface until it was almost a mirror reflecting them back. "Do you want me to go with you?" she asked.

Severus nodded, not taking his eyes off the silver memory.

He took her hand, and they plunged their faces into the memory. Hermione gasped at the sights and sounds of the city she had lived in all those months ago. The stench in the alley was horrible, and she supposed she had become numb to it before.

Snape lay on the ground before them. He groaned and pulled himself into a sitting position. "Where am I?" he asked the silence of the filthy alley. He struggled to his feet, grimacing as his neck pained him. As he reached around, his fingers found the ragged injury. "What the hell," he wondered aloud. His fingers came away with blood on them. He looked around and then down at himself. He pulled open his cloak and tore the hem of his shirt off and wrapped his neck. He fumbled in his pockets and found his wand and two small, empty bottles. "A stick and bottles? What are they for?" But he didn't toss any of them; he replaced them in his robes.

A noise distracted him, and he turned to find a group of young men bearing down on him.

Hermione glanced at Severus and saw his lips set in a straight, unemotional line. His hand was clenched at his side.

They watched as the men surrounded the memory Severus. "What have we here? Look, this guy's just an old drunk. Those are pretty nice threads for an old drunk. Give those here, old man. You have no need of finery in this ally." Severus tried to rise, but they knocked him down again and pulled off his robes, his inner jacket, and his fine shoes. They checked the pockets and found the stick and the empty bottles and tossed them onto the ground. Severus tried to fight, but he was only knocked down again and again.

Hermione had her fist stuck in her mouth, trying not to let Severus hear her cry. She had never seen this memory; she'd only helped Raven remove it.

The last man kicked Severus in the ribs and said, "Thanks, old man." They left him hurt far worse than before and with little clothing to protect him from the cold night.

He lay in a heap for some time and then struggled to his feet. He picked up the bottles and the polished stick, holding onto his side as he made his way through the alley. He came upon a woman digging through trash.

She wore layers of old clothing, all mismatched and dirty. Her hair was long, ragged, and grey, and her face was lined from years of hard living. She looked at him, glanced at his hand holding the polished stick, and gave him a toothless smile. "Hello, deary, what happened to you? Come let Mary see you in the light." There was an old alley lamp hanging out of the building nearby. "I've never seen you around. What's your name, man? It looks like the hoodlums got to you and stole your clothes, didn't they?"

Severus nodded, leaning on to the building for support. His mind was so confused that, when she'd asked him who he was, he had no answer. "I don't know my name," he admitted.

"Deary, you're hurt. Come back to the place I sleep. There's an empty box in the back; its owner vacated last week, if you know what I mean." She continued to jabber on and on. "You say you don't know your name. You got hit on the head." She thought for a long moment and then said, "Raven, I'll call you Raven. With that black hair and beak you have, it fits. Come, you need sleep. Maybe Stumpie's shoes will fit you. He had one arm, you see. That's why we called him Stumpie."

Severus followed the old woman down the alley.

The scene faded, and Severus turned away. "Merlin," he said, "I see it, but it's not me. It's like watching a movie. I was in such trouble and had no way to help myself. That woman saved me. We must find her when all this is over. I can help her now."

Hermione was touched by his words and took him in her arms and held him close. "Do you hear yourself, Severus? You have changed so much. You have sympathy for a mere bag lady. You are already becoming one with Raven."

"Or perhaps the man you knew as Severus Snape was always an actor. I did have a heart, Hermione. I just didn't allow anyone to see it," he said in his own defense.

She said, "You're right, and I have realized that recently. You would not have sacrificed your life for Harry...a child you claim to have hated...if you had not cared. Why didn't you want him to know how much you cared? Why was it such a secret? Don't you realize how good a friend you could have been? Perhaps you could have been the father he needed so desperately."

"It was as it had to be." He pushed her away. "Let's see the next one."

They watched as Hermione found Raven and took him back to her shack. They had read the details already. Severus had now seen her point of view and Raven's, and yet it made no difference. He could not remember. The memories of the first time they made love made him angry with jealousy, and he pulled out after a few minutes of watching it. "Put it back in your head. I do not want to see it. If I am to have that memory, I want it to be from my own head. It's like watching a twin, someone else besides me doing these things with you. What's the last memory?" he asked gruffly.

"It's our first kiss. Raven gave it up because that was when he felt he loved me for the first time. I think it meant as much to him as our first time together. What if we put your memories back in your head? They would be your memories again, Severus, it could trigger everything."

Severus realized the idea terrified him. It would be like letting someone else's memories be installed inside his mind. Intellectually he knew it was ridiculous, but he could not shake the idea.

Hermione was hurt that he did not want the memory back, but she tried hard to look at it from his point of view. *Maybe there is something in his mother's memories that would help trigger his own. The woman had to have had a reason for leaving them. Maybe there is an explanation in the memories yet unseen.*

They agreed to try a few of the ones that Hermione had already seen. They watched the one of Severus as a baby; it brought him to the same angry tears that Raven had, and the one in the barn made him furious, though he remembered that one first hand. His indignation wasn't as bad as Raven's had been because he also remembered the day in the forest when she had apologized for asking him to kill his father. His anger was gone when he left that one. The idea that she had actually loved him seemed to mollify him a bit. Knowing that she had felt this was important for him to remember, he watched it again with fresh eyes. The parting at King's Cross left him in tears. He clung to Hermione. That parting had been one of the hardest things he'd ever done in his life.

Then came a new one in which they watched him kill his father. He was devastated, and the memory had left tears streaming down his face. Severus looked like a young man near NEWT age. Hermione watched in horror, and Severus stood stony and white, his face nearly drained of blood. It was obviously self-defense; they had been fighting, but this time, Tobias had attacked Severus with a knife. Severus had pulled out the knife his father had embedded in his shoulder and turned to his dad just as Tobias had lunged forward, and the knife plunged into his father's heart. The Bobbies came and ruled the incident as self-defense and carted his father's body away.

Severus was sitting on the floor staring at the bloodstain when Eileen had come at him, screaming, hitting him with her fists, and telling him to go and never come back.

She was yelling horrible, nasty, hard words because he had killed his father. But the memory didn't end there.

After he had run from the house, Eileen fell to the floor screaming in pain and rage, "Tobias, you're a bastard! Severus is a wonderful young man, and you did nothing but cripple him emotionally and beat him into the ground. He has such wonderful power and intelligence. You cannot possibly imagine the things your son is destined for, and I am just as much to blame. I should have cursed you to hell years ago when you hit me and Severus saw us fight. I tried to make excuses for your hatred of your own son. I nearly begged the boy to kill you, and I damaged him further. We are both to blame." She was speaking to the bloodstain as if it still was a flesh and blood, hearing body. The air was now thick with the smell of spilt blood. "He's better than both of us together. Without us, he can live a better life and make something of himself. Maybe he'll even find a wife, find love. I will never talk to him again; it is for his own good. He must distance himself from me and this Muggle life I allowed myself to get trapped in. He must make his own life. I am damaged beyond hope, and he needs to be free. I love him so much I must let him go..." She collapsed into the puddle of blood, and the memory faded.

Severus slipped to the floor and cried as Hermione held him tightly against her. Her tears mingled with his.

I want to thank all the people who have helped me read and correct this chapter. I could not do it with out you, Beaweasley2, Becky and Lisa, my beta. Thank you all so much.

Chapter 40

Chapter 40 of 63

Having fled the Wizarding World, Hermione comes face to face with her past.

Finally, the chapter everyone's been waiting for. I hope you enjoy it. Thank you, all, for your many, kind comments and thoughts about Raven.

Hermione woke and stretched. When she opened her eyes, she found Severus lying next to her, watching her with a smile on his face.

"Severus, are you okay?" She reached up to caress his face and was pleased when he turned his face into her hand and kissed her palm.

"Hermione, my Hermione. I thought I loved you yesterday, but now... now I understand. I really understand all of it," Severus told her.

"What do you understand, Severus?" She looked at him in puzzlement.

"I understand what happened to me after I lost my memory; I understand how your finding me saved me and how we grew to love each other."

"SEVERUS," she screamed, throwing her arms around him. "YOU REMEMBER!"

"Yes, my dearest love, I remember," he said softly, standing and drawing her to her feet right in the middle of the bed.

They grabbed each other and hugged, and soon they were jumping up and down like little kids. Grendel was making a barking sound and bouncing there in the middle of them, nearly knocking them off. They screamed and hugged and rolled with the big guy.

Finally, they sat and just looked into each other's eyes. "I'm truly, truly free, Hermione. You cannot fathom how light I feel. I have never felt so free, so loved, and I've never looked so forward to my future in my entire life. My mother's final gift gave me my life back. It's allowed me to leave all of my past behind. And it allows me to love Harry, truly love him. His mother was my best friend, and she always will be my childhood friend. But you are my love...the one and only true love of my life."

Hermione leaned forward, and they kissed deeply and then sat and held each other.

After a while, Severus said, "It's time to put those memories back in my head. I want to remember our first kiss firsthand. I remember the first time we made love. It was exquisite.

"We will do that first thing when we get back to our house."

"Our house?" He grinned at her.

"Well, if I'm the love of your life, I expect it will be our home one of these days."

"Perhaps we should sell it. It's time to let go," he said. A certain dread touched his heart.

"No, Severus, it's time to bring light and life to that old house. Let me remodel; you won't recognize it," she promised.

He frowned and gave her a faux stern look. "So it starts, there goes my money."

Hermione frowned. "I'm sorry, I just wanted to help."

He grabbed her up and kissed her. "I am just teasing you. I think remodeling would be an excellent idea. I can hardly look at the place as it is. I hadn't gone in my parents' room, before I found the beads, for many years. You can help me give their stuff to someone else who might appreciate it."

She smiled up into his face. "I'm going to enjoy my life with you, Severus."

He took her face into his hands. "No, it's we who will enjoy our lives. You always had the capacity to love me no matter whom I was." He gave her another soft kiss, "Now I think it's time we go wake that young friend of yours. I have a lot of explaining to do. If he will accept me, I want to try to be his friend."

Hermione tried to focus on his face, but her eyes were swimming with tears. "I will make him understand!" She grabbed his hand. "Let's go."

Grendel, who had been sleeping at the side of the bed, hopped up as they climbed out of the bed.

Severus said, "Perhaps we'd better shower and put some clean clothes on."

Later when they had showered and prepared for their return to Hogwarts, Hermione stood next to Grendel with her hand on his head. "I wish we didn't have to leave Grendel alone so much. It must be so hard for him."

"He's an empath, Hermione; he can't be around people all the time. It takes time for him to regain his strength. I've been here a lot lately." He placed his hand on Grendel's head.

"We will be back soon; I promised a band of Gypsies I would bring you for a visit," he told the animal.

Grendel licked Severus' hand and then Hermione's. He turned, climbed back onto the bed, flopped over, and was soon snoring.

Hermione laughed and then reached out to take Severus' hand. "Let's go home."

Severus nodded and grabbed a hold of a Portkey, and they were whisked away.

Spinner's End hadn't changed, but Severus no longer felt the oppression it had always had on his heart and his mood.

With great care, they returned the memories to his mind and to Hermione's. He held her close as the memories integrated themselves into his mind. Experiencing the alley memory for the first time was hard, but it no longer held the sting of the desperation it once had. "When you let me kiss you that first time," he explained, "I felt so normal; all those months of hell seemed to fade away. You were so beautiful, Hermione. I could not believe my fortune."

She laughed. "You were so handsome; I could barely keep my thoughts in order. I wanted you from that moment on. I had never realized how handsome you were, under those many layers of garments."

He grinned at her. "Handsome is not a word anyone else has ever used for me."

"Nevertheless it's true." She pressed a hand against his chest. "Deliciously handsome."

"Well, for now I will accept your word for it." He grinned at her double meaning. "We must be about the business of bringing Mr. Potter back from his sleep."

They sent messages to Minerva, the Weasleys, and Davenport at St. Mungo's telling the time of their arrival at the hospital that night. Then they returned to Hogwarts late that afternoon to change and collect a vial of the potion for Harry. At the appointed time, they Apparated to St. Mungo's and entered the hospital. Christmas decorations overflowed in the halls of the hospital, adding to the feelings of renewal they had in their hearts. When they turned the corner to Harry's room, they found chaos because the Weasleys were milling around the hall. Even Hagrid and Minerva were there. The half-giant filled the hall as he moved to intercept them. Hermione and Severus both found themselves buried in the huge man's stomach with the breath nearly squeezed out of them.

Severus bellowed, "Unhand me you great oaf!"

Every one froze, and Hagrid released them so fast that Hermione and Severus grabbed on to each other for support.

"Sorry about that there, Snape. I was just so excited 'bout Harry," Hagrid apologized.

Severus stepped toward him, and everyone gasped when he held his hand out to Hagrid. "Understandable." Then he whispered to the giant of a man, "Thank you for Grendel. He has been an invaluable tool and a great friend." He stepped back and saw great tears of happiness fall out of Hagrid's enormous eyes.

The old half-giant brought out a huge handkerchief, the size of a baby's receiving blanket, and blew his nose so loudly everyone clapped their hands over their ears and laughed.

Ginny managed to sidle past Hagrid and threw herself in Hermione's arms. Her face was red from tears of happiness and fear.

Hermione said encouragingly to her, "It *will* work this time, Ginny. I promise you. Severus is ready."

The rest of the group gathered in front of Hagrid, and their faces were alight with optimism.

Minerva held out her arms to Severus. "You remembered, didn't you?"

Severus nodded and stepped forward into her waiting arms. He rested his cheek against her shoulder for a moment.

Minerva held him close and ran her hand over his hair. "How did you know?" he whispered into her shoulder.

"Your face is so alight with happiness. It's about to burst from you...Hermione as well. I'm so happy for you and so proud of you for letting go," Minerva whispered.

"Letting go?" he asked, stepping back a bit.

"For you, letting go of the past was the only way to step into the future," she said softly so only he could hear.

He looked around at the now silent group, who were gaping at him with open mouths.

"Well," he said, pulling his robes straight as he saw Davenport open Harry's door, "let's get this show on the road." He reached out to Hermione and drew her close. He addressed the crowd, "I would like it if you would all join us; everyone who loves Harry should be in there. He must be sung alive with love, and I think we all agree, we can do that together. I would ask you to be as quiet as possible during the song, and not smother the boy when he does awake, but you all have supported him, and I think it's important that you be there. Don't you agree, Hermione?" he asked, looking down into her face.

She nodded, unable to speak. Tears swam in her eyes, and she had such pride in her chest she felt like she might burst.

Severus waved his hand. "Arthur and Molly, you go first. Stand on the other side of Harry's bed, and Ginny...I may call you Ginny, can't I?"

Ginny nodded.

"You stand in front of them and hold his left hand. Hermione will be at my side, and Healer Strout will administer the potion."

Hermione took the vial of potion out of her pocket and handed it over.

"Alishus," Severus said, "I would be proud to have you stand at my side. We have much to talk about later."

"Severus, you honor me." He took a spot near Severus who now stood at the foot of the bed, looking into Harry's sleeping face. Asleep, he still looked so young, and Severus felt a love for this young man that he'd never allowed himself to feel. Harry's sacrifices had freed Severus from a life of bondage, and he was the son of his best friend. He could dismiss James Potter now; after all, he was the past. He had pushed Lily away himself. Now all his hate and animosity had vanished. They had all made terrible sacrifices for the war effort and for wizarding freedom, and James Potter had given his life trying to protect his wife and son. That deserved respect.

The rest of the group filed into the room quietly. George, Bill and Fleur, Percy, and Hagrid tried to hang back inconspicuously. Severus realized that the loss of Ron and Fred still weighed heavily on these people. Why had there seemed to be such a crowd before? The group wasn't that big. Minerva slipped in last and was about to shut the door when she opened it and looked toward Severus with a question on her face.

There stood Neville and Luna, and behind them came Frank and Alice Longbottom. Frank had a cane, but looked very well, and Alice needed no aid. She looked the picture of health, and Neville's face looked so happy. Severus felt it was almost like looking in a mirror. He knew what the young man felt like. "Please, come join us."

The door was shut, and the room was crammed full of life and love. Severus could feel it like a blanket of warmth. Yes, Harry would waken this night; he could sense it. Hermione's body was pressed against his side, her fingers entwined with his. He nodded to Miriam, and she gave the potion to Harry.

Then Severus closed his eyes and began to sing.

His voice resonated throughout the room; his deep baritone sounds vibrated through each person, making them feel like they were part of the music. His voice filled the room with light, and the lights moved and surrounded Harry's body. As the sounds and words were sung, the lights brightened and the colors were more brilliant than any colors anyone had ever seen. The web of light tightened around Harry's body like a soft, pulsing cocoon. It slowly ran up his body, and then it encased his head, trapping a darkness that was leaking out of his eyes, ears, nose, and mouth. It was inky and black; it turned like a tornado, the colors closing in on the blackness, funneling it away from Harry's head. It flowed away, leaving the freshness of a spring breeze in the room. Harry's eyes opened and then Severus' did, too, and they looked into each other's eyes.

Severus smiled and said, "Welcome back, Mr. Potter."

Harry exclaimed, "Sir, you really are alive!"

Everyone laughed. Ginny bent to give Harry a kiss, and he pulled her into the bed with him, and then it was a free for all. There was hugging, kissing, and tears enough to flood the room...certainly no one went away dry eyed that night.

Severus and Hermione slipped back against the wall and watched the sheer joy of it all. They stood facing each other, and Severus bent his head to kiss her deeply, drawing her body up so close he nearly pulled her off her feet.

They heard Harry exclaim as he caught sight of the couple, "When did *that* happen?"

I want to thank all the people who have helped me read and correct this chapter. I could not do it without you, Beawesley2, Becky and especially, Lisa, my beta. Thank you all so much.

Chapter 41

Chapter 41 of 63

Having fled the Wizarding World, Hermione comes face to face with her past.

Later, after every one went home, Ginny went to sleep on the bed next to Harry. Ginny had hardly slept at all since Severus' first attempt at waking Harry. She'd barely been able to keep her eyes open after the crowd had left, so Hermione had told her to sleep.

Harry had wanted to go home, but Healer Strout had talked him into staying another day. He wasn't strong enough yet, and she wanted to create a plan of physical therapy strength training the next morning. He would need this plan before he could really do much on his own. He'd agreed as long as Ginny was able to stay with him.

Harry was propped up on the bed with a bunch of pillows, and his hand was entwined with the sleeping Ginny's at his side.

Harry admitted to them, "Everything was so confusing with all the others here. I could barely understand any of it. Hagrid came once a month and cried until I was sopping wet." He shuddered.

Hermione laughed at Harry's description, and Severus grimaced.

"But I do know about most of it...what happened at the end of the war, what happened to all of us, and what happened to Ron..." Harry's voice trailed off for a moment.

Hermione stood next to the bed and held Harry as he cried, and she cried with him as they mourned a good friend who had been with them since childhood.

Severus watched them comfort each other. He had to push away the jealousy that he felt; part of him wondered if Hermione loved Harry more than him. He knew intellectually it was a different love, but the crippled emotional man he had been for years did not want to share. He considered that maybe these feelings were Raven's. Raven had never met Harry and may have felt threatened by the love Hermione had for Harry. After all, she had chosen to allow Raven to be sacrificed for the good of Harry. Severus was intelligent enough to know that Hermione had understood that he and Raven were the same man, yet Raven wouldn't have realized that. Severus squirmed as he watched the scene in front of him. He was not comfortable with the affection between the two people before him, and he became angry.

Hermione finally backed away from Harry and gave Severus a concerned look.

Severus felt his face heat up. Had she caught some of his thoughts? Had he been broadcasting his jealousy through their link? He knew she could get angry with him over his jealousy. The idea of fighting with her made his stomach turn.

When Hermione came to him and snuggled against him, he relaxed, knowing she understood. Hermione knew he had his memories back, but he still did not have total control of his emotions. Harry had continued to talk as Severus had thought about his feelings

Harry continued, "I was conscious the entire time, but I was unable to move. Thank God, Ginny told me lots of things and read me stories from *The Prophet*, *The Quibbler*, and of course Quidditch magazines. I would have gone insane without her being here every day."

Hermione reached out to cover Harry's other hand with hers. "Harry, forgive me for not being here. I want to tell you what happened to me." She took a deep breath and plunged ahead. "We had so much to occupy our minds in the pursuit of ridding the world of Voldemort that I never had time to just relax before the final battle. Afterwards, you were placed here, and Ron was dead. I went home to live with my parents and got a job in a Muggle video store. I just needed time to distance myself and ground myself again." Tears filled her eyes as she brought the memories up. "Harry, my parents were killed."

"Oh, Merlin, Hermione, I'm so sorry." He squeezed her hand tightly, his eyes tearing up again. "I wish I had been here for you. I know Ginny left some things out. She knew if I heard about the horrible things that happened to some of our friends, it would hinder my recovery, and she may have been right. It was hard enough as it was, but to have known all the pain everyone was in might have driven me nuts. Please go on," he said gently.

She nodded, sat back against Severus and continued. "I found them in our house. They were hanging in the air by some unseen spell, like horrible marionettes on strings. They had death masks on. You have no idea how gruesome it was. There was blood everywhere, and the smell was horrendous. I fell to my knees and vomited right there on the carpet. My mind shattered, and I could not deal with it, so I ran. I left the house with the clothes on my back. I hid my wand in that rocky lot down the road and fled to the city."

Severus slipped his arm around her shoulder to comfort her, lending his support while she told her story, and Hermione snuggled deeper into his embrace.

Hermione wiped a tear from her eye. "Harry, I couldn't face my life without all of you. You and Ron had been my family in the wizarding world, and my parents, of course, were my family in the Muggle world. Suddenly everyone was gone. Even my home was foreign to me. So I stayed in the city, and I lived on the check I'd just cashed from work that morning. I had the money in my pocket; I'd been planning to deposit some of it in Gringott's. I got a job scrubbing floors in a restaurant. I found other cleaning jobs, and I was able to rent a shack. I was barely surviving emotionally and mentally. A few months later, while picking through trash for things to sell, I stumbled across Severus." She reached over to take his hand and brought it to her lips and kissed it.

Severus saw Harry grimace a bit, but he only smiled; the young man would have to get used to their public displays of affection. Severus was getting used to it himself, but it always made his heart sing to have Hermione receive his touch so openly and give back to him in the same manner. He jumped into the conversation. "Hermione saved

me from death at the bottom of a bottle. I still had the horrible wound from Nagini's fangs. I had managed to fight the infection with whiskey and the grace of God, I think. I was also in constant danger of being beaten to death by young, Muggle hoodlums. They had taken nearly all the clothing I had on me when I woke in one of those alleys. The streets of London are a hard place to live."

"Sir, Ginny told me some of your story, but I'd like to hear it from you. Forgive me, but it's a little hard to fathom you two... together," he said.

Hermione giggled. "Harry!"

"I didn't mean..." Harry turned red.

Severus laughed, and Harry stared. "You are very different now, Sir. I'm having trouble understanding it all."

"Hermione has changed my life. Mr. Potter, if you like, you can call me Severus."

Harry nodded and then said, "Call me Harry."

"I'd like that," Severus said. "Harry, you obviously remember the memories I shared with you, otherwise you'd be screaming at me to get out of here."

"I remember you took Dumbledore's life because he asked you too, but you should have told me," Harry said, a bit annoyed. "I know you care about my mother, even loved her," he said in a strangled voice. "You were on our side the whole time. You sacrificed so much for me, and all I gave you back was hate. I'm sorry, Sir."

"Harry," Severus said kindly, "there's no need to apologize, I played my part well, that's the reactions you were supposed to have. It was part of my cover as a spy. Voldemort had to believe I hated you and wanted you dead...just like he did. Things played out as they should have. It was all for the best and for the good of the War effort," Severus told the young man.

"The bloody war," Harry said angrily. "Dumbledore played us all for fools! Were we nothing but puppets on a string?" Harry asked bitterly.

"It would seem so, Harry," Severus replied a bit sadly. "But it all worked out. Perhaps Dumbledore knew ahead of time what had to be done. Maybe if he had told us what we would accomplish if we voluntarily chose those paths, we might have done the same thing." He shrugged. "But don't you think we would have had even more burdens along the way? The man in charge of anything always has the burden to carry."

Harry nodded, and his anger at Dumbledore deflated a bit. "I suppose you're right." That gave him a lot to think about. The idea of Dumbledore carrying all the burdens of the pain he'd put Harry and Severus through, the two people he was closest to, saddened him. In the cave, when he'd drank that poison, Harry had felt more respect and love for the man than he'd ever felt before. Maybe he had to rethink his anger towards Dumbledore.

Not having heard Harry's thoughts, Severus told him, "Anyway, you can go to Minerva's office and tell the bloody old goat off yourself."

Harry nodded, remembering the portrait the last time he had seen it. Dumbledore had been sleeping. More than likely, he'd been faking so that he didn't have to reveal anything more.

Harry told Hermione and Severus about the conversation he'd had with Dumbledore in King's Cross Station in whatever limbo that was.

Severus snorted. "I imagine the old goat and Min are having a fine old party right about now."

Harry realized that Severus was speaking about Minerva McGonagall when he had heard Severus refer to the name Min. The idea that Severus and McGonagall had such a close relationship and that he'd call her by an affectionate nickname warmed him more to the man. Harry thought, *Minerva McGonagall has always been there for me. She was tough on me, but she cared a great deal for me. She had confidence in me from the beginning of my schooling at Hogwarts, and she gave me my first broom. I have always loved her for that. If she has such faith in this man, then I should, too.*

Hermione laughed, coming to Dumbledore's defense. "Albus really is an old dear, and leaders have to be tough. He was like a general in the war. Generals make life and death decisions, but it doesn't mean they don't care and maybe even love their 'soldiers.'" She made the quotes with her fingers in the air. "Severus, you should have some respect."

"Albus knows I'm jesting with him, and he loves it," Severus explained.

Hermione laughed, pushing Severus away playfully. "Speaking of caring, I think Minerva and Albus were soft on each other when they were younger."

Harry groaned and covered his face with his hands. "I don't need that picture in my head."

Hermione and Severus laughed, and Severus said, "Neither do I."

Sobering up, Harry asked, "Severus, what happened after Hermione found you?"

They stayed another hour telling him their story, and Harry was trying hard not to fall asleep by the time they got to the end.

Hermione finally said, "Harry, we have to go. You need sleep."

"I've been sleeping for months. I hate to close my eyes again. I'm afraid I won't wake up. I'm really afraid this night has been a dream," he told them.

Hermione could see the fear that lay behind his eyes. She got up and bent over him to kiss his forehead and lay her cheek against his hair. "You won't revert back to that state, I promise. Severus and I did the very best with the potion and the spell. Just look how well Neville's parents are doing, and it's only been a few days since they woke. Healer Strout's a very good healer, and she will monitor you every minute. Please, Harry, trust us and just go to sleep." She tucked him in.

Harry let his head fall to the pillow. "Good night, Hermione... Sever..." He was asleep.

Hermione smiled down at him and pushed the hair out of his face. She gently pulled his glasses off and placed them on the table next to the bed.

She turned back to Severus with a smile and reached out for his hand. They silently left the two sleeping lovebirds behind.

Healer Strout was at a nearby monitoring station. She had looked up when they came from the room. "Healer Strout," Severus called to her as they came close, "Harry is asleep, although he was a bit afraid. He was concerned he wouldn't wake up. It's possible he may have nightmares. Can you please keep a close eye on him?"

Healer Stout assured them, "The darkness that had been holding Mr. Potter in that state is now gone. I will keep a very close eye on him. Healer Davenport is very interested in this case, and he has agreed to come and take over in a few hours, so I can get some sleep tonight."

Severus nodded. "Please tell Alishus I will come to speak with him in a few weeks, after the holidays. Perhaps you would also like to see the original spell and potion recipe."

"Master Snape, I certainly would," she said with great enthusiasm and gratitude at his willingness to share his findings.

"Remember, call me Severus," he said, extending his hand.

"Severus, you know we will not be able to keep this secret much longer. This ward is closed, but there were a number of people here tonight. The more people there are, the easier it is to leak the news of Mr. Potter's return to consciousness quite by accident," Healer Strout explained.

"I understand. Do your best. Harry only needs a few days; the rest is history." He smiled at the woman.

Hermione said, "Miriam, thank you so much."

The two women hugged. Severus took Hermione's hand, and they walked slowly arm-in-arm to the Floo and called Minerva to ask if they could Floo to her office. It was late and getting rather cold outside to walk up from the gate.

She sent back her okay, and then they stepped into the Floo and out into her office.

There was an eruption of clapping as they arrived. Every portrait in the room was stuffed full of the inhabitants of the castle's many portraits. Severus glared at Minerva and a very smug Albus. "There's little chance of keeping this mob silent for an hour let alone a few days. Honestly, Minerva," he admonished, using her full name to let her

know how irritated he was.

"They are all sworn to silence," Albus said. "Severus, it's good to see you, son."

"I'm no son of yours, you old goat..." Severus snarled roughly.

Hermione squeezed his hand tightly, tugging at his arm, nervously.

He finished, "...it is good to see you, too."

He came closer to the portrait, peering up into the old man's face. "You did what you had to do, Albus, just as I did. It's done now, and I've let go of our past and have started planning a new future." He pulled Hermione close. "I hope you will give us your blessing."

Albus was dabbing at his eyes with his sleeve. "I'd be very happy to, Severus."

"You're just an old woman, Albus," Severus accused, laughing at Dumbledore.

Minerva came closer and slipped an arm through Severus' free arm. "How's Potter? It has been hours since I left."

"He's good, Min." Severus told her about their conversation. "He'll probably be out of there in another day. It's too bad you had to leave so early."

"Hagrid was so overcome that I barely got him home before he was asleep from emotional exhaustion," Minerva explained.

"I'd have liked to have seen that, Min. You dragging that old oaf home." The image of Min with Hagrid was so funny that he laughed.

"Actually, I levitated him," she said smugly. "If he'd fallen, I would have been crushed!"

Hermione stifled a yawn. "Severus, forgive me, but I can't stand up anymore. I know I didn't do much today, but the last few weeks have been long and exhausting."

Severus nodded agreeing with her. "I'm getting fatigued too." He marveled that he had not gotten exhausted immediately, like the last time, but it was starting to catch up. "Albus, Min, goodnight to you both." He guided the sleepy Hermione out of the room.

Minerva called after them, "Good night, you two. Take tomorrow off. You deserve it! I'll get someone to cover your classes, or I'll let the kids study."

Severus waved back at her. He suddenly felt that he might not make it to his quarters either, let alone Hermione's. Tonight he was going to break their rule. He did not want to sleep without her, and bone-weary exhaustion was setting in. He'd been running on adrenaline, and the excitement had fueled him up till now.

He and Hermione stumbled into his quarters, and with a wave of his wand, the rooms were warded. He transformed their clothing into nightclothes with a second wave of his wand, and they crawled into his bed. They were asleep in each other's arms as soon as their heads hit the pillow.

Chapter 42

Chapter 42 of 63

Having fled the Wizarding World, Hermione comes face to face with her past.

When Hermione woke up the next morning, she was spooned against Severus and feeling wonderful. Her mind was flooded with all the amazing things that had happened in the last 48 hours. When she felt fingers caress her hair, she realized Severus was awake.

His lips pressed against her ear, and he whispered, "Good morning, my beautiful wench."

Hermione turned toward him, giggling. "You really do remember it all."

"Yes, I remember all of it...every horrible, scary, awful, wonderful, amazing, loving moment of it. Hermione, I have something to ask you."

"What?" she asked as her heart started to beat rapidly.

"Will you go to the Yule ball with me?" he asked very seriously as he pressed some kisses along her neck.

Hermione felt let down for a moment, and then she mentally shook herself. She had thought he was going to ask her to marry him. How silly was that? They both knew their future was together; it had already been agreed upon. "I'd love to, Severus," she said, letting herself get excited about the whole idea of a date in public. "We need to go shopping!" She pulled away and bounced out of the bed.

"Right now?" he asked, laughing at her.

"Well, after a shower and breakfast. Hey, didn't we say we weren't going to sleep together, here at the castle?" She glanced around her at the walls. "The castle has eyes."

He laughed at her and patted the bed. "Get back here, you salty wench. There are no eyes in these rooms. I've made certain of that."

She flew back onto the bed, landing nearly on top of him, and he snatched her against him. "To heck, with our pact. I don't want to sleep another night without you, Severus." She kissed him deeply.

"I was hoping you'd agree with me on that," he murmured against her lips.

They stood on the streets of London later that morning after having gone shopping at a bargain warehouse store. A little mind-altering charm on the store clerk had allowed them to shrink and pocket all the things they had purchased. Hermione and Severus pulled their Muggle attire closer around them. "These coats are never as warm as my robes," he said grumpily. The wind was harsh and blowing leaves around their feet. "Come on, it's this way." He urged her on as they ducked down a filthy alley under an ignore spell.

Severus headed with determination toward the old warehouse he had lived in. It was an abandoned area. No one seemed to bother them, and he'd often been curious about that.

Hermione asked, walking faster as she tried to keep up with him, "Do you think this wise, Severus? I'm all for helping those people, but to use magic in such an open way..." She had to occasionally run to catch up.

"It's Christmas, Hermione, and besides these people are very closed mouth, as well as close knit. I doubt they will run out talking about today. They will want to keep what they have for themselves. Even if they do talk, it will be chalked up as a Christmas Good Samaritan miracle...or maybe Santa Claus will get the credit."

Hermione smirked as an image of Severus in a Santa suit made her nearly burst out laughing.

Severus frowned at her. "Hermione, you're broadcasting. That's an utterly ridiculous idea you have there." He smirked at her.

She giggled as she hurried after him. She was behind Severus' plan; she just didn't want the Ministry on their necks.

They arrived in front of the warehouse, and Severus entered calling, "Mary, it's Raven. Are you here?"

Hermione felt warmed that he was so casually using the name Raven.

Most of the inhabitants of the warehouse were out, foraging in the daytime. They hung out behind restaurants, street cafés, and markets, hoping for scraps of food and that good-hearted people would give them handouts. Hermione had to place an Olfaception charm about her face. The stench of the warehouse was horrible because there was no water available for any kind of bathing. Boxes were arranged in rows; some were cardboard and others were made of plastic or wood panels tied together with rags, string, or wire.

Minutes after their arrival, Severus had found only three people *onguard duty*. He used his wand to send them out of the building with a Confundus Charm with orders to come back in an hour. He and Hermione worked quickly to change the warehouse into a bum's palace, using a *Scorgify* many times to clean the place. Each cardboard box or wooden shack was transformed into a small, insulated box about seven by eight feet; there were a few larger ones with small rooms for family members. Severus remembered all the warehouse residents and inscribed their names on the side of the new *homes*. A wooden chest was added for all the inhabitants' personal trinkets hidden about their old rags and dirty blankets. Severus knew that some of the dirty blankets were probably remnants of their old lives; so he and Hermione freshened, mended, and placed the clothing and blankets they found into the wooden chests. Flashlights that the residents could shake for power were also included in each of the chests, as well as personal hygiene items. Hermione pulled out new, warm feather beds from her pockets, and out of the many pockets of Severus' Muggle jacket came warm sweaters, jeans, and heavy shirts. Item after item was pulled from his pockets and expanded. Candles that lasted hours and warmed the room would make winter easier for these people. Warm, heavy jackets and other clothing as well as a stockpile of canned food and dried food was stacked into the corners of the little rooms. Boots and clothes were charmed to fit the first person who slipped them on. They made sure there was color and beauty by adding painted scenery inside the boxes, windows to beautiful places.

Severus set aside a library of books in a corner of the warehouse because he knew that books had been a lifesaver to him. He also added an outhouse of sorts with a disappearing waste disposal system. There were toys for the children that lived with their families here in this warehouse and Christmas decorations to liven up the place. There was room for a number of other boxes, which Severus added, giving the inhabitant's the choice to add more friends to their community.

He and Hermione then disillusioned themselves and watched as the inhabitants struggled back through the big doors as the afternoon's weather got too harsh.

There were explanations of disbelief and then rapture as the motley group discovered the wonders of their *newhomes*.

Mary came late from the cold and watched the merriment with a twinkle in her eye. She looked around the room and stopped when she was looking directly at Severus and Hermione. She nodded at Hermione and came closer to Severus whispering, "I got the sight, but alas no magical skill. I knew ye were a lost wizard soul when I saw yer wand, but it wouldn't have helped to tell ye... I couldn't help you. My father were a wizard, and though I'm a Squib, I can still sense things and see things others can't. I see ye found yer way home, Raven." She nodded at Hermione.

Severus said, as he pulled Hermione close, "Yes, Mary, this is my lady love, Hermione."

"How'd you do," Mary said. She looked closer as Hermione wrapped her arm about Severus' waist. "I saw you looking in trash a few times, too, didn't I?"

Hermione smiled as she said, "Yes, I will tell you about it sometime. Raven and I are both back where we belong."

Severus reached into his pocket as he said, "Thank you, Mary, for saving my life that day." He handed her a magical card. "If you ever need anything, press the gold button on this card, and I will come and take care of it."

Mary took the card and held it as if it was a fine piece of sculptured glass; her faded eyes welled with tears. "Me mom died when I was born. When I was 10, me dad died,

and I was left alone. I had no place to go, and I found this group of lost souls. They took me in. It's been me home for years now. Whoever owns this place leaves us alone."

"I'm glad Mary; I will be able to do more in the future. This is just a beginning. I hope to purchase the building and make the rooms more livable," he promised.

"They was livable before. They looks to be heaven now. Thank ye, Raven." Tears ran down her worn face.

"You're welcome." He nodded, not bothering to tell her his real name. It was on the card, and she would figure it out. He then took Hermione's arm and they Apparated out of there, leaving Mary to stand and watch the happiness of her *family*.

Mary stared at the place they had been, then she glanced at the card and saw a black embossed Raven next to the gold circle. Then the name 'Severus Snape, Professor at Hogwarts.' Her brow furrowed as if working out a difficult problem, *Bloody hell, I rescued a real war hero.* She cackled to herself, and then she went to investigate her own warm, little room.

Hermione spent the afternoon trying on dresses and gowns of silk, satin, brocade, and other fine blends in a fancy dress shop for formal parties and weddings. She tried gowns with sleeves, half sleeves, and no sleeves; she tried gowns that had high necklines to low necklines. Some dresses were all white with no decoration, and others had fine pearls and crystal beads. She tried hard not to look at the wedding dresses, but Severus saw her glance their way more than once. He saw her fingers sliding over the fabric of one particular dress several times. He smiled to himself as she went into a dressing room for the umpteenth time, and then he slipped away. He made several quick purchases and returned just as she was coming out of the dressing room with a box.

"Which one did you decide on?" he asked, slipping several miniaturized boxes into his pocket out of her sight.

She looked up at him. "It's a surprise." She grabbed the front of his jacket and pulled him down so she could kiss him. "Now, we can go Christmas shopping?"

"What!" He grimaced. "I thought we came for a dress, and that took hours!" he complained.

Hermione laughed at the grimace on his face. "I need to go to Diagon Alley and get a few new robes ordered, and I need a new quill. I have to buy gifts for the Weasleys, Harry, Hagrid, McGonagall and the rest of the staff, and Dobby." Her brow furrowed as she thought. "Oh, and I want to get the Gypsies something...and Grendel of course."

He groaned. "Of course, but does it all have to be tonight?"

Hermione only laughed, ignoring him. "The ball is less than a week away, and then there's Christmas. I have final exams and grades to record. There won't be another day, Severus. We've had so much to deal with; there has been no time for me to even think of Christmas." She asked him earnestly, "Don't you buy gifts?"

"No," he admitted, "not usually, but I always gave Albus a pair of newly transformed, thick socks, and I make the perfume for Min. That's was the extent of my gift giving. Oh, I also make sure when Hagrid goes hunting he gets a prize boar each winter. I had to thank him for Grendel, but I didn't want him to know it was me. It wasn't good for my nasty image." He smirked.

Hermione hugged him. "You're the one who sent the boars! He always bragged that he had the touch. He used the meat all winter. You were a softy all along!" she exclaimed, drawing him down for a kiss. "I knew he couldn't be so lucky every year, but I assumed it was Albus. I'm sorry, Severus."

"No need to apologize; you had no way to know. The past is gone. I'm very happy with the future in front of me." He groaned as he said, "Let's go shopping." With a sigh, he took her arm, and they Apparated to Diagon Alley.

Hours later they collapsed onto Severus' couch, many boxes and bags spread at their feet. Hermione groaned, kicking off her shoes, but then exclaimed, "That was so much fun! I probably have an empty vault at Gringotts, but it was worth it. I got the perfect gifts for everyone."

Severus leaned in to kiss her. "I got the perfect gifts for you too, my love," he teased. He had managed to slip away once in Diagon Alley when she was busy.

"You bought me a gift?" She tackled him. "Let me see!" she said, trying to dig her hands into his pockets.

"No wonder, I picked the name *Wench* for you." He laughed, pinning her against him. "You will have to wait for Christmas like everyone else. Do not even try to find your presents...they are well hidden." He got to his feet and pulled her with him. "Let's go wash the dust of Diagon Alley off." His face revealed he had more than a bath in mind.

Later, sitting in a deep, hot bath, they made love. Afterwards Severus dried them off with his wand, wrapped Hermione in a warm towel, and carried her to their bed where they snuggled together, talking about the day. As Hermione fell asleep thinking about the warehouse of inhabitants snuggled under their warm feather beds, Severus slipped from the bed and sent a few messages off by Floo. With a smug, satisfied smile, he climbed back to bed and pulled her close.

Chapter 43

Chapter 43 of 63

Having fled the Wizarding World, Hermione comes face to face with her past.

I want to give a special thanks to beaweasley2. Up to this chapter, she has been a huge help in giving me encouragement and help. She helped me learn a lot about writing the chapters and embellishing the scenes so you will know what I am seeing as I visualize the story. She is working very hard on her own fics and hasn't had time to help me further. I just want her to know how much I have appreciated her help.

I also want to thank Becky for her feedback and enthusiasm.

A very special thanks to Lisa, my beta, whom I cannot do without.

Now for some fun! I hope you enjoy this chapter.

The next couple of days were final assignment and grade days for the end of the first half of the year, so they were kept very busy. Students were all abuzz about going

home and what they would do for their holidays with their families, and they were all excited about the upcoming dance. Severus and Hermione didn't see a great deal of each other those two days. They worked late into the night in their own classrooms, but at night they held each other close in their bed.

So far, they really hadn't spent much time in public in each other's company. But the third morning after Harry's awakening, they came to breakfast together and sat quite close talking. Although the staff had realized something was up, this new development caught the students by surprise. They gawked when the Potions master and Madam Granger sat with their heads so close and then gasped as he took her hand and kissed her fingers before leaving the breakfast table. Hermione suddenly realized the room was quiet and looked up to see hundreds of pairs of eyes watching her and the retreating back of Severus Snape.

She turned bright red and stood, gathered her dignity, and quickly strode from the room.

The room erupted with voices all talking excitedly, staff included. Now everyone knew why the grumpy old Potions master was no longer so grumpy.

Hermione received an owl with a letter from Ginny a few days after Harry had woken up, telling her he was home now, at the Burrow. He was walking with only a cane for assistance and not really using that a lot. She said he tired quickly, but he was doing very well.

Hermione was so pleased that when she sent her reply back, she promised that she and Severus would visit them during the holidays.

Hermione was now finished with her classes, and her grade reports were done. She was now getting very excited about the Yule Ball. She was planning to tie her hair up and leave her shoulders and neck bare of adornment.

The next morning was the day of the Yule Ball. Severus told her he needed to do some last-minute work and disappeared out the door quite early. As the day wore on, she soaked in a long bath and took care of all the things she had been lax on: eyebrow plucking, shaving well, creams for her legs and body. She longed to have Ginny to just talk with about the coming dance. She almost felt like she was back in school, and this was truly her very first date. It was with Severus, but she felt like she was a kid going through all the motions again.

It was early evening, and she had not seen Severus all day. She was beginning to worry about him when there was a knock at the door. "Come," she called, slipping on a red satin robe and tying it at her waist.

Ginny walked in the door carrying a large box and a bag with her.

"Ginny! What are you doing here? I was just wishing you were here!" She ran to give her friend a hug. "Let me take the bag. What have you got in here? It's heavy," she said, swinging it up and down.

"Severus asked me to come and help you dress for the dance. He said he knew you'd want to have some womanly support this evening. He also invited Harry and me to join you. So I brought my stuff," she explained, placing the big box on the bed.

Hermione jumped up and down with Ginny, like a schoolgirl. "Oh, Ginny! He thinks of everything. Come on, you can help me paint my nails." They sat on the side of the huge bed, and Ginny did Hermione's fingernails and toenails. "I was so afraid I'd mess them up." She waved her fingers under Ginny's nose. "I wonder if he's been reading my mind," she said. "But I can usually tell when he does."

Ginny looked at her in horror. "He reads your mind? Hermione, I know you love him, but that's going pretty far." The young woman shuddered.

Hermione laughed. "You make it sound bad, but it's really quite wonderful. We have no secrets, and sometimes it's easier..." She lowered her voice, just because it was personal stuff and whispered, "...when making love, not to have to talk too much."

Ginny's face turned red. "Okay, but that was too much information," Ginny complained, playfully covering her ears. "I see how much he loves you, Hermione, but I still have a hard time seeing him as anything but the nasty Potions teacher."

Hermione hopped off the bed and walked to the other side where her dress was laid out. "I wish you could see him as I do. All he needed was someone to love him, and that's exactly what I needed. We can talk about so many things, Ginny, and he's intelligent enough to know what I'm talking about every time." Tears formed in her eyes. "My whole life, most of my conversations have been so far over most everyone's head that I've bored them silly."

Ginny smiled at her. She came and gave her a hug. "I know." She laughed, a bit embarrassed to admit that to her friend. "I'm so happy you have found your soul mate, but it's kind of odd because he was your teacher."

Hermione shrugged as she slid her hand over the fine fabric of her dress. "I'm not a child anymore. I am of age, and we fell in love far from the world of this school. The man I fell in love with wasn't even a teacher then."

"Do you really love Severus Snape, or do you love the man he was as Raven?" Ginny asked her friend pointedly and then sighed. "I just wish he wasn't as old as he is."

"Ginny, he's only 41. That's not that old, and I really love Severus Snape. I find him so engaging. Raven is there, too, changing him little by little. He's no longer angry all the time. He can be incredibly tender and loving. He's also very sexy," she said with a giggle, "and besides, wizards live longer lives. I'm Muggle-born, so hopefully our lifespans will even out."

Ginny nodded, opening her dress box on the bed next to Hermione's dress. "You've got a point there, girlfriend."

"He's really a wonderful man, Ginny," she said, trying to convince her friend, "and I'm blessed to have him in my life."

Ginny admitted to her, "I can tell you, he was pretty magnificent singing Harry back to life. My heart nearly stopped."

Hermione smiled and said, "You can see a bit of why I love him."

Ginny asked, "Hey, the trip up from the gate left me dusty and sweaty. Can I take a quick shower?" she asked, looking for the bathroom door. "I barely got wet this morning before there was pounding on the bathroom door. It was a mad house this morning. Everyone is still here trying to *help* Harry." She laughed as she rolled her eyes. "Mum loves it, so I haven't had the heart to tell them to go home."

Hermione smiled, but thought to herself, *Enjoy it, my friend. Things can change so quickly,* but she only said out loud, "Sure, there are towels in the bathroom."

There was another knock at the door, and Hermione gave Ginny a questioning look, but Ginny just shrugged at her and went to take her shower.

Hermione opened the door and found a walking bouquet of red roses. "Oh, my, those are beautiful," she gushed, reaching out to take the flowers.

"Master Snape is asking me to bring these to you, Madam." Dobby's voice came from behind the flowers. "There being a small one in the middle for your wrist. Also Master Snape bid me say, 'I will come for you at eight o'clock.'"

Hermione took the huge bouquet of roses from him and inhaled their fragrance deeply. "Oh, they are so beautiful. Dobby, how is he going to get ready?" she asked the wide-eyed elf. "I haven't seen him all day."

"Master Snape is bringing his clothes to the prefect's bathroom. He gives Miss Weasley and you privacy for getting ready, he says." The little elf blinked his huge eyes as

he smiled up at her.

"Dobby, please tell Severus thank you and that I will be ready." She smiled down at the little elf.

"Yes, Madam, and I'm supposing to tell Miss Weasley to meet Mr. Potter upstairs in the ballroom."

"I'll let her know, Dobby, and thank you, again." She nodded her head at him, and he gave her a huge smile. His huge eyes sparkled with pleasure, and then he was gone with a crack.

Hermione carried the flowers to the kitchen table and got a vase of water for them. She removed the little wrist corsage and was arranging the flowers in the vase when Ginny came from the bathroom wrapped in a towel.

"Oh, Hermione, those are beautiful!" She came close, cupped one of the roses, and held it in her hands to breathe in the fragrance. "Wizards don't often give flowers. It's a wonderful Muggle custom."

Hermione nodded. "Yes it is. Come on, I'll do your hair, and then we can get dressed. It's getting late, and Harry wants you to meet him in the ballroom."

Ginny nodded. "He's still not too strong, but he's doing amazingly well. I'll be happy if I can get one slow dance out of him."

The women quickly finished Ginny's hair. After she put on her slip, Hermione slipped Ginny's dress over her head. It was an emerald green, tight, sleeveless bodice with a flared skirt. It looked smashing with her red hair.

Hermione surveyed her. "You look fantastic," she assured her friend.

Ginny smiled and took Hermione's dress from the bed and helped her into it. "This is a beautiful dress. Where did you find it?"

Hermione told her about their shopping day.

"Well, it's really beautiful; Severus should be very pleased with it." It was a shimmering, raven black silk. It had one shoulder strap on the right side and a sash that came from the same shoulder and flowed down the back; this left her left shoulder bare. The bodice was tight on Hermione's body, and then the dress flared mid thigh into a semi full skirt. It complemented her well and fit her like a glove.

With her hair up, leaving her neck and shoulders bare, she looked sophisticated and even more mature.

"Wow, Hermione. You look perfect. Severus is going to flip."

"I'm so excited about tonight, Ginny. We have tried very hard to keep our relationship a secret, because of the students, but also because Severus and Raven weren't integrated. You have no idea how difficult the transition was for him because he has lived such a tortured life. I plan to make him happy for the rest of his life because he deserves it so much."

Ginny hugged her. "I know he does, and you're lucky to have each other." She tuned to gather up a small, beaded emerald purse that she had brought with her. She used her wand to shrink the rest of her things. She stored the little box and bag into her clutch bag. "Now, I'd better get up to Harry, and you'll want to be alone with Severus for a few minutes, I'm sure, before you come up." She turned to go and then saw the wrist corsage. "Hermione, let me help you with this. It's so dainty and beautiful." She fastened it onto Hermione's wrist. "See you upstairs." She gave her a kiss on the cheek.

Hermione watched as the door closed and then looked down at the beautiful roses on her wrist, turning them this way and that way to appreciate all their beauty. Moments later, there was a knock on the door, and Severus called out, "Are you ready, my love?"

Hermione called, "Yes, come in."

Severus opened the door and stepped inside the room. He closed the door behind him and then turned and stared at her appreciatively. "You're more beautiful than I could imagine, and I imagined a lot." He smiled a seductive smile that made her blush.

"Severus, you looked so handsome!" she gushed. He had black dress robes on. His hair, still long, was brushed to shine and fell in soft cascades about his shoulders. She moved toward him with her hands outstretched. He met her halfway and took her hands and placed a careful kiss on her lips. It was a long, gentle kiss.

"I wish we were at a different location. I would have hired a horse-drawn carriage to take us to our destination," he told her.

Hermione smiled up into his face. "I'm happy with the arm of a handsome wizard. You look really amazing, Severus. Thank you so much for the beautiful flowers." She was delighted when he blushed in turn.

He offered his arm, and she slipped hers into his, and they walked out of their rooms and through the classroom without really seeing it. The dungeons weren't really there either, because there was no darkness for them anymore.

As they entered the ballroom, the entire crowd of students stopped talking and watched them. Severus winked at Hermione and swung her around in his arms; bending her back, he planted a steamy kiss on her lips. They were both surprised when the room erupted in hand clapping and cheering.

Severus and Hermione bowed deeply to the crowd, and Minerva clapped her hands, calling everyone's attention. "Happy Yule Ball to you all! Enjoy the evening. You know the rules. No wandering out into the halls. First and second years need to be in bed by ten o'clock, third through fifth by eleven o'clock, and the rest by midnight. Now enjoy and have a wonderful time." She waved her wand, and many candles lit around the room. A soft snow fell from the ceiling, and it vanished as it touched them or the floor. The music began, and everyone turned to the dance floor or to the food tables.

Hermione spotted Harry and Ginny across the room, and she dragged Severus with her so she could greet Harry.

"Harry!" She gave him a big hug, rubbing his back with her hands. "It's so good to see you. You're looking great."

Harry held her a bit longer than Severus found he was uncomfortable with, but he chided himself that it must be Raven's residue feelings. For all of Raven's good qualities, he did have a flaw; he was a bit insecure about Harry, but somehow that made him more human for Severus. *I find the sight of Hermione hugging Harry comforting*, he told himself, wondering with a grim smile if that was really true.

When they stepped apart, Severus reached for Harry's hand. "Harry, it's good to see you up and around." Severus was surprised when Harry pulled him into a quick hug.

"Thank you, sir," he said, as he released him.

Hermione saw tears swim in Severus' eyes.

He nodded, swallowed, and then said, "Later tonight I'd like you to see something. A memory my mother left for me. I think you should see it."

Harry cocked his head to the side. "What is it?" His curiosity was piqued.

"It's something good, something I hope you will find a comfort now, considering our circumstances," Severus informed him.

Harry sighed, a bit exasperated, but he could see from Hermione's smile she thought it was a good thing, so it probably was. "Alright, Severus, now you two go dance. Ginny and I are going to watch a bit. I'd rather do one of the slower dances later on. I still can't stand too long."

Severus squeezed the young man's shoulder, took Hermione's hand, and said, "I'll see you two later." As he walked into the middle of the dance floor with Hermione, he glanced up onto the platform and saw Minerva watching him. It was then he noticed that Albus' portrait was on an easel near her.

He smirked. "The old goat couldn't be left out, could he?"

Hermione laughed and said, "Forget about them all. Let's just pretend we are here alone."

"Yes, my love." He drew her close, and they kissed deeply and danced, unaware that the entire room of students and adults slowly moved to the side to watch the two of them.

Chapter 44

Chapter 44 of 63

Having fled the Wizarding World, Hermione comes face to face with her past.

There were a lot of groans at midnight, but the older students gradually drifted out the big doors and off to their rooms.

Harry and Ginny were dancing a little ways away. He was barely moving his feet, but the couple had eyes only for each other. Tears came to Hermione's eyes, and she looked back into Severus' eyes.

"The world is finally right again...or at least as right as it can get without those who are gone. But that's life, isn't it? People come and go, and we have to carry on," she said with tightness in her throat.

"Yes, my love, we have to carry on," he agreed with her, and then he took a deep breath. "Hermione, you know I love you more than life itself, don't you?" He had stopped dancing and put his hands around her face so that he could look into her eyes. "I cannot imagine my life without you, but I don't want just a partnership or a live-in wench," he teased with a devilish smile.

Hermione felt her heart begin to beat rapidly.

Severus suddenly took a step back and dropped to one knee before her. Holding her hand in his, he reached into the pocket of his coat and pulled a small, black box out.

Hermione gasped, and her other hand flew to her mouth.

"Hermione, please say you will be my wife." His eyes held hers, begging her to say yes.

Hermione saw a hint of fear and uncertainty in his eyes. "You dear man." She caressed his face with her fingertips. "Of course I will. There is no life without you, Severus."

Severus took the ring out of the box and slipped it onto her finger. Hermione grabbed his hand, pulled him to his feet, and then they were kissing. Everything around them had ceased to exist. It was only Hermione and Severus. Suddenly Hermione realized there was a thunderous clapping. She pulled back and saw a smug look on Severus' face. When she looked around the room, blushing furiously, she saw there was a crowd looking their way. Hadn't they been nearly alone a few minutes ago? She blinked away her tears and was able to make out individual faces.

There was Minerva, of course, and Alastor Moody had appeared with a big crowd of people. There was Molly and Arthur, Bill and Fleur, Neville and Luna, Frank and Alice, Charlie and George with their dates. There were many staff members among them: Pomona Sprout, Poppy Pomfrey, and even Argus Filch stood to the side with Mrs. Norris. Hagrid had somehow gotten Olympe to come, and they stood like two giant chess pieces at one end of the room. There were former classmates: Dean Thomas, Susan Bones, Katie Bell, Terry Boot, Padma and Parvati Patil (with matching, handsome twin dates), Cho Chang with Michael Corner, Lee Jordan, and more plus their spouses and partners. There were even dignitaries from the world of wizarding. But thankfully the only reporter was Xenophilius Lovegood.

"What is this?" Hermione asked Severus.

"This is your engagement party, my dear." He took her hand and said to the crowd, "Please come greet my fiancée, Hermione Granger."

Everyone crowded around them, and there were hugs, kisses, handshakes, and tears...especially from Molly.

"I always thought you'd be my daughter-in-law, Hermione," Molly said. "But in retrospect, you and Ron would have never lasted. You need someone to challenge your mind. He was a sportsman." She laughed. "I loved him, but academics were never high on his list."

Hermione let tears swim in her eyes as she thought of her lost friend, and she felt Severus squeeze her hand.

"Thank you, Molly," she said as she hugged the woman. "I will always feel part of your family anyway."

"You're right there," the woman said with feeling. "You and Severus are now honorary Weasleys."

Severus let out a faux groan. "Ah, joy, my fondest wish has been realized." Then he laughed good-heartedly. "It's an honor, Molly." His eyes nearly bugged out when Molly grabbed him and gave him a sound hug.

Everyone around them laughed, too.

"You must have your wedding in my garden," Molly offered.

Hermione looked up at Severus.

"Whatever makes you happy, my love." He smiled at her.

Hermione never failed to feel her heart flutter when he smiled like that. He was so handsome. She reached up and caressed his cheek, and he kissed her fingers.

Just then, Harry's voice broke through the crowd, and everyone gave him their attention. "I have a toast for the new couple." Magically, everyone had a glass of champagne for the toast. "It is my honor and privilege to pay tribute to my very good friends. Hermione has been at my side since we were children, and Severus' many sacrifices helped me bring the war to an end, and he restored my life to Ginny and me," he said, pulling Ginny close. "May my friends be blessed and be given long, happy lives together filled with love, friends, and babies," he said with a smirk. "Hear! Hear! Cheers!" He lifted his glass, and everyone else followed.

Hermione turned to Severus and whispered, "Thank you, my Raven, my Severus, my love." It slipped out before she realized it, and she stood frozen for a moment.

Then Severus said, "Wench, I love hearing my nickname from your beautiful mouth. I am he, and he is me. We come to both names." He laughed and swung her off her feet and around in a circle. Then he let her down slowly, her body sliding along his until their mouths met. He kissed her deeply.

When they came up for air, they noted that a number of ladies were fanning themselves with conjured fans. Harry and Ginny were sitting on one of the big ottomans at the side of the room, leaning against each other and smiling.

Severus said in a booming voice, "Please enjoy the food and the dancing."

He waved his hand, and music began. Enchanted fairies floated above them, bringing thin, colored fabric to form a tent of color, and hundreds of fireflies flitted around, making twinkling strings of lights dancing here and there. Flower petals floated to the floor like snow flakes, and the room was scented like spring.

"This is wonderful, Severus," Hermione gushed.

"You bring color to my life, Hermione. It was black and white before you found me." He bent to kiss her gently.

For the first time, Hermione really looked down at her ring. There was a two-carat, perfect, blood-red ruby held up by the rim of a cauldron with its handles. Wrapped around the cauldron were two delicate raven's wings of gold. Hermione realized the stone was the potion in the cauldron. "It's perfect, Severus," she said.

He smiled. "I thought you might like it."

Hermione slipped her arm around Severus and watched her many friends dancing on the floor.

"Dance with me, Hermione." Severus urged, holding out his hand to her.

Hermione took his hand and they dance for nearly an hour.

"I thought I had no one left in my life when I ran," she said, "and now look at us, Severus. We have family and friends."

"Yes, we do." He kissed her again. "I can't wait to get you alone tonight," he whispered into her ear. "But alas, we still have guests." He looked around and saw that Ginny was sitting next to an almost-sleeping Harry. "I think your newly awakened friend needs rest, though. Why don't we go send Ginny and Harry home? He looks exhausted."

"I have a better idea. Let's send them to my rooms," Hermione said. "I still have my stuff there; but since I don't use it, they could spend the night. I think one of your nightshirts is there."

When he cocked an eye at her, she explained, "I couldn't sleep without you after we first came back, so I took one of your shirts to hold on to at night."

"I'm sorry; I was a real ass back then. I wanted you so badly, but I didn't think I could have you because you loved Raven. I didn't think there was a snowflake's chance in Hell that you could ever love me."

"Severus, I loved Raven's kindness and gentleness, but your mind is what stimulates me and keeps my life interesting. Your magic makes my body sing," she said, getting closer so only he could hear. "Your drop-dead gorgeous body is a huge plus."

"Yeah, if you cut this head off, you'd have a good-looking man," he said dryly.

"I love your face. I wouldn't change a thing, Severus." She kissed him again and then said, "Let's go take care of Harry. Then we will take care of ourselves."

She smiled and guided him toward Harry and Ginny.

"I am happy you finally realized I could love both your halves."

"Me too." He kissed the top of her head.

Ginny said as they got nearer, "I'm going to have to take sleepyhead home," nudging Harry, who was resting his head on her shoulder.

Hermione said, "I have an idea. Why don't you both stay the night in the castle, and we can all have breakfast together."

Ginny and Harry looked at each other and smiled, nodding.

"That sounds good," Harry said. "I love this old castle. What was it you had to show me, sir?" he asked Severus.

"It will wait till tomorrow. It's a good thing, Harry," he assured him.

"Dobby," Hermione called.

With a pop, there stood the little house-elf.

"Harry Potter! Dobby is happy to see you, sir."

Harry smiled sleepily. "It's good to see you too, Dobby."

"Dobby, can you take Harry and Ginny to my rooms and see that they have everything they need for the night?"

Harry stood, and Ginny supported him.

Hermione hugged them both, and Severus found himself in a joint hug from them all.

"Ah, group hugs, very therapeutic," he grumbled.

The women giggled, and Harry blushed. Severus smiled down at him.

Dobby took Harry's and Ginny's hands, and with a crack, they were gone.

Hermione said, "I hope we didn't wear him out too much. He was up way too long."

"He'll be fine; he just needs sleep. He insisted on being here when I shared my plan with him," Severus murmured, leading her back to the dance floor. "Let's go tell Molly and Arthur so they won't worry about them."

They wandered over to Molly and Arthur who were talking to Xenophilius.

"Ah," Xenophilius said, "The happy couple. May I please take a couple of posed shots of you for *The Quibbler*?"

Hermione looked at Severus with a question in her eyes. She wasn't sure he would like that at all.

Severus said with a warm smile, "Of course, Xenophilius. That's why I asked you to come tonight. I want our real story told. Perhaps, if you don't mind spending the night here, we could sit down tomorrow and tell you our story. I know it's late."

The man's eyes kind of waggled back and forth, and he said, "I will stay. I owe you all a debt of gratitude. If it wasn't for you, Miss Granger, I might be still in Azkaban. I would be honored to print your story."

"Excellent," Severus said. "I will ask Minerva to make arrangements for you."

Minerva thought it a good idea to extend the invitation to the entire party. The visitors' dormitories would be open to those who wanted to stay.

Dobby and a group of other house-elves gleefully set about getting the rooms ready. House-elves loved having people to wait on.

Minerva came to them and bid them goodnight. She looked exhausted but very happy.

"In the early morning, most of the students will head for the train to go home to visit their families for the next couple of weeks. We can have a nice breakfast and catch up with old friends." She hugged Severus. "What a party, Severus. I didn't know you had it in you."

"I have a lot of surprises up my sleeves, Min. I'm a new man. I can hardly get out the gruff roar anymore," he admitted to her. "I don't even feel like I can be serious for too long. I have to work on that. I feel almost like a young adult at times, wanting to play and make jokes. It's horrifying."

Hermione and Minerva laughed at him.

Hermione teased, "I can think of a few avenues of 'play' to try out."

Minerva harrumphed. "I bid you goodnight." She hugged them and then chuckled to herself as she walked away. "Play indeed. Oh, to be young again. Albus," she said as she passed his portrait, "I'll call you back to the office when I get there."

"Thank you, my dear." Albus nodded.

Hermione giggled at the thought of their play that night. "Severus, when do you think we can escape this party? Some of these people look like they will stay up all night."

Severus said, "Let's go say hi to Albus before Minerva summons him back to her office. Then we will bid everyone a good night."

They went up to the platform and stood before the portrait of the ancient wizard. He regarded them with twinkling eyes.

Severus said, "If I didn't know better, you old goat, I'd think you maneuvered this whole big adventure that brought Hermione and I together. It would have been right up your alley."

Albus smiled. "I think a higher power had you two in mind. The biggest joke on Voldemort was you two, falling in love."

"You have that right, Albus. If he had a grave, he'd be rolling over in it."

Hermione regarded him quietly. "The whole portrait thing is such a mystery. Are you really Albus Dumbledore?"

"Well, that's a good question. We should discuss it sometime." The old wizard regarded her with sparkling eyes.

"I'd like that, sir." She smiled. "Thank you for coming."

Albus said, "I wouldn't have missed it for the world. I just wish I could give you both a hug."

Severus swallowed. "I do, too, Albus."

"Always remember, Severus, it's as it should be, and I love you more for the things you did for me that you didn't want to do, son," Albus said before turning and vacating his frame, emotion plain on his face.

Hermione grabbed Severus' hand and pulled him away from the empty frame as it vanished off the easel.

"Come on, Severus, let's go," she urged him.

Shaking away the sadness he was feeling, Severus said, "You're an anxious wench, aren't you?" His smile was warm and loving.

"You've got that right! Let's bid our guests goodnight," she said, practically dragging him along.

He laughed his wonderful laugh, and it flowed over her like music.

Severus spoke up, "My friends, Hermione and I grow weary, and we beg your leave. Stay as long as you like and enjoy the party. Those of you who are staying the night, we will see you at a special brunch about 10 a.m. Most of the students will be gone, and we can visit."

They got a few more hugs and claps on the back. The minute they were out of the door, Severus grabbed Hermione and kissed her until she pulled away, gasping for breath and laughing.

"Come on!" She grabbed his hand, and they literally ran down the stairs to the dungeons and through the classroom to Severus' rooms.

He warded the doors instantly and took her in his arms and kissed her. Then he moved to her bare shoulder and kissed her gently. Hermione buried her hands in his hair as he kissed across her shoulder and neck to the other side. Slowly, with purpose, he slipped one strap from her shoulder and down her arm, and Hermione pulled out of it. His hands went around her back, and he found the zipper, and slowly, still kissing trails across her shoulder and neck, he undid the zipper and the dress fell away. She stepped out of it, and he laid it over a chair.

"Did I tell you how very beautiful you were tonight, my dear?"

Hermione's hands went to his shoulders and helped him take his tux jacket off. "Yes, you did, but I love hearing it again, my Raven-haired knight."

"Hermione, I love hearing you call me Raven, but it's complicated isn't it?"

She undid each button of his shirt, smiling up into his face. "Yes, Severus, it is." Finally, when half of them were undone, she pressed her lips to his chest.

Severus threw his head back and closed his eyes as she kissed his chest and helped him take his shirt off. Her soft, small hands caressed his body. He could never get enough of her touch. He felt her hands at the fastening of his pants, and he helped her by stepping away as they fell to his feet. He drew her slip over her head and went to his knees to undo each of her stockings. The garters came away, and he rolled the stocking down so she could step out of her heels and each of her stockings.

Severus' hands ran over her legs, and soon she was quivering with desire for him.

He came back to his feet and took her bra off and caressed her breasts. She pulled at his hand and led him to the bed and then drew him down with her.

His touch was gentle, and there was no urgency in their caresses. They knew they had a future; it rolled out in front of them with many happy choices. Their hands and lips explored each other slowly, and when their cries rang out from their completed desire, they held each other tightly and let the rolls of thunder cascade through them. Sleep came gently to them, sated as they were. Their hands were still gently caressing each other as their eyes finally closed.

A very special thanks to Lisa, my beta, whom I can not do without.

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Chapter 45

Chapter 45 of 63

Having fled the Wizarding World, Hermione comes face to face with her past.

The next morning Hermione and Severus made it down to breakfast right at 10 a.m. They would have loved to have stayed in bed for half the day, but they felt their guests would not have taken their absence too well.

Most of their friends were already assembled at the long Gryffindor table, awaiting them. There was a virtual feast. Sausages, pancakes, eggs, toast, bacon, and biscuits were piled on huge platters along the table.

As Hermione slipped in next to Harry and Ginny, out of old habit, she found her head turning to look for Ron. Her eyes filled with tears as she thought about the loss of her friend. She blinked them away and felt Severus give her hand a sympathetic squeeze as he slid in beside her. She leaned against him, and he put an arm around her.

"How did everyone sleep?" she asked to get her mind off the past.

"We all miss him," Harry whispered to her and then nodded to Severus. "I slept like a baby. It felt really good to have the castle around me again. I felt like I was home."

"Mr. Potter," Minerva called from down the table, "you might consider the DADA position next year. We will have a vacancy. If you truly want to come home, it's here for you."

"Seriously, Professor McGonagall?" he asked, his eyes lighting up. He looked over at Ginny, and she nodded. Then he looked at Severus. Hadn't he wanted to take that position for years?

"I'm where I want to be," he told Harry, reassuring the young man he would not mind him taking the post.

"Consider the position filled," Harry told McGonagall. He grabbed Ginny and hugged her. Molly and Arthur, who had also spent the night, watched with a happy sadness. They enjoyed having the kids living with them.

Severus groaned and said loudly, "...and I thought I was done with the miserable little whelp always being under foot."

Those who didn't know Severus very well froze until he started to laugh, and then they all joined in.

Harry grinned. "It will give us time to really get to know one another, Severus. You know, sir, you have a very contagious laugh; it becomes you."

Severus took a deep breath; he was touched by Harry's words. He wondered how Harry would take the memory. He hoped it would help Harry to hear his mother's words and see her hold him and fawn over him.

"Thank you," Severus said quietly.

Everyone started to ask questions, so Severus rearranged the table into a square so they were facing each other. He and Hermione stood in the middle and told their story. It took nearly two hours. Xenophilius asked questions here and there to clarify points for his article. The rest of the people were quiet as they listened, enraptured by the tale.

Everyone agreed that Severus and Hermione should write it all down in a book. The public was going to eat up any story by the famous spy Severus Snape and war hero Hermione Granger.

Hermione tugged on Severus' sleeve and whispered something into his ear. He thought a moment and then nodded.

Smiling, Severus said, "I hope that's the last time I have to go through that. Xenophilius, if you wish, Hermione and I would like you to write the book. We can meet a few times to add details and clarify things. Neither one of us wants to think too much about the past."

Luna gasped; this was a huge opportunity for her father. Neville drew her close as Xenophilius got to his feet. "Sir, Madam, you honor me. I would be happy to undertake the duty of telling your story."

"We all had rough times during the war, and you always supported Harry when it was rather dangerous to do so. For that, we are grateful," said Severus.

"Hear! Hear!" the rest of the group said. This broke the group up, and the people milled around, talking to their many friends and acquaintances. Hermione was pleased that it did not seem to matter to Severus that none of these people had been Slytherin.

Luna and Neville came forward and stood waiting for their chance to speak to Severus and Hermione. Neville stepped forward and held out his hand to Severus.

"Sir, I want to thank you for what you have done for my parents. I am so very grateful. I never dreamed that I would be able to talk to them and have them answer me back. It's a miracle."

Severus shook the young man's hand and said, "It was my pleasure. No child should grow up without parents, and many of us have suffered that loss. I'm glad that you have a chance to get to know them now."

Luna said, "Hermione, Severus, we would be happy if you would come to our wedding. It's in a couple of weeks."

Severus bowed slightly. "It would be an honor. Just send Hermione the specifics, and we will be there."

Hermione said, "I wouldn't miss it." She gave the woman a hug.

Neville smiled. "Sir, I am opening an herbal store in Diagon Alley. I'd be happy to supply you with anything you might need for your potions in the future. I will be growing 92% of the herbs myself."

"You always had a gift for Herbology, Neville. I'm sure your store will be a huge success," Severus complimented the young man. "I will definitely come to do my business there."

"Thank you, sir, you will always have a special discount," Neville said to him. He then took Luna's hand, and they wandered away.

Finally, everyone started to leave, and Hermione stood with Harry while Severus was talking to Minerva.

"It's going to be so good having you close," she told Harry. "You go home and get strong. By the end of next summer, I'm sure you will be ready to take on anything."

"I hope so. In the meantime, I can take some correspondence courses to get my teaching certificate. Headmistress McGonagall seems to have a lot of faith in me." He ran his hand over his shaggy hair. "I need a haircut," he said absently. "I don't think it's been this long since 5th year."

"You certainly do, Mr. Potter," came Severus' deep voice, so close that it made Harry and Hermione jump.

She slapped him playfully. "I know you're enjoying scaring everyone, but stop!"

Severus eyes twinkled. He leaned in and whispered to her, "It turns you on, doesn't it?"

She laughed. "Yes, so stop it," she hissed under her breath.

Harry's eyes sparkled. "Good to know the old man hasn't lost his touch."

"Old, you whelp! Detention, Mr. Potter," he stated dryly. "Be in my classroom in an hour."

Harry laughed. "I will be there, sir."

"Severus, Harry, Severus," he reminded him. He squeezed the young man's shoulders.

"Will I see you there, too, Miss Weasley?" he asked Ginny, who was standing close by watching the exchange.

"Yes, sir. I'd like to be there for Harry," she agreed.

"Then you shall be," Severus told Ginny with a smile.

Harry took Ginny's hand, and they left to talk to the few lingering former students."

Severus turned to Hermione and said, "I think we can go back to our rooms. I think we've said our goodbyes, and I want to center myself before Harry comes."

She took his hand, and they walked out of the big hall.

"Center yourself?" she asked, amused, as they went out the door.

Severus whispered, "I'm in serious need of shagging, my soon-to-be wife. I was thinking of our time in the lair. We had some good times before I got to be too mentally young to enjoy you."

Hermione grinned. "Yes, we did." She grabbed his hand, and they dashed along the hall and down the stairs to the dungeon.

Inside their room, their clothes made their way to the floor quickly. They made love with a fervor because of the shortness of time. By the time Harry and Ginny arrived, they were both showered and dressed and waiting with rather rosy glows on their faces.

Harry turned red when he saw their obvious afterglow. He said quite wistfully, "I wish I had the strength and agility for extracurricular activities."

Ginny turned red. "Harry!" she exclaimed, thumping him on the shoulder.

Hermione laughed. "You'll get there. Give it some time. You've been lying around a very long time."

Severus was a bit stunned at the openness of their conversation, but he had to remind himself that Hermione had grown up with two boys for companions. It made sense they had ended up talking about everything. He was not sure how he would deal with Hermione having a best friend, who was a man, so close on a daily basis. However, he also realized that Harry and Ginny would marry soon, and he and Hermione would as well. He knew their friendship was bound to change as they each focused on their marriages. He had a bit of jealousy still in his heart, and he knew he would have to work very hard to expel that before it did any damage to his relationship with Hermione. Jealousy had destroyed his relationship with Lily. Now, in a way, he could make that up to her by becoming a mentor and friend to Harry. He found the idea comforting, and he also realized that looking into Harry's 'Lily-like eyes' now was also comforting.

He cleared his throat, and they all turned to look at him. "Harry, when I was Raven, Hermione and I found some beads in my mother's bedroom. There were a number of memories implanted in them by a magical spell. I want you to see the last one. It has your mother in it."

"What?" Harry said, turning pale. "If it's with you, sir, I'd rather not."

Severus shook his head and smiled. "No it's not with me. I had no clue about this memory until I saw it a few days ago. It actually aided in restoring my memory. When I was able to give up the pain I felt at your mother's death, it restored me to myself with all of Raven's memories as well. Your mother gave me back my life to start over again with Hermione."

"What's it about then?" he asked, suddenly curious.

"Your mother came to talk to my mother about me. It does reveal some little-known facts about my life outside the wizarding world. I ask you to keep a particular one in confidence. You will know which one. The reason I want you to see this is that your mother is holding you, Harry. I thought you might like to see it. You have so few memories of yourself with her."

Harry's eyes had gotten as big as saucers, and he nodded, too emotional to speak. Severus brought out the beads and showed Harry which one to touch. He urged Ginny to go with him.

Harry grabbed Ginny's hand, and they both reached out with the tip of their fingers to touch the bead at the same time.

Harry and Ginny found themselves standing in a little, overgrown garden. They saw the woman at the door and could see her resemblance to Severus Snape. Harry's eyes widened with emotion as he watched his mother come into the scene. He drank in his mother's face and saw her distress. He heard her worry over Severus. He saw how much she had loved him and how forgiving she was. He knew in his heart that she would never really hold him responsible for her death. Harry moved close as his mom kissed him, and he stared into his own baby face. He heard her horror as she realized Severus had been forced to kill his father. Tears rolled down his face when he heard that his mother had sent Severus away. This memory did not include why, and he made a mental note to ask Severus. He was surprised when his mother told Snape's mother that she had hoped he would be Harry's godfather. He thought of Sirius and how different he and Snape had been all those many years ago.

Finally, the memory faded, and he seemed to falter. Severus, who had been watching his face closely, moved to his side and helped Ginny move him to the couch.

Hermione asked, "Harry, are you okay?"

He nodded. "I never saw her hold me before. I mean, I have a photo of the three of us, but there are only seconds there. It was amazing to see her kissing me and soothing me. He looked up into Severus' face. "Thank you, sir."

Severus nodded. "You're welcome, Harry. I knew it was something you should have in your memory as well."

"Severus," Harry said, "Your mother obviously loved you. Why did she send you away? She must have grown to hate your father. I would have thought she'd be happy he was dead."

"She explained in another memory that she thought if I never went back to the house, my Muggle life would not hurt me anymore. She was wrong. It might have changed many things in my life if I'd had her support. I think she may have realized that after Lily's visit, but she thought it was too late," Severus explained.

"Severus, maybe there was a greater power orchestrating us all. There had to be to do what I did...and you also," Harry observed.

"You believe in a higher power?" Severus asked in surprise.

"I heard a lot about God in the Dursleys' house. They were hypocrites, but it did not change the fact that they shared the right stuff with me. Prayer worked well for me. It also gave me someone to talk to, and there have been small answered prayers over my lifetime."

"Raven believed, so I guess I do, too," Severus admitted. "Raven went to church. It was a mission church that fed the homeless. But he heard a number of sermons there."

"When I was locked in that curse, I had a ton of time to think," Harry said, "so I thought about all the things I'd learned in church. Sir, your lessons in mind control came back to me in a way I never expected them to. I was able to go look through my past. It helped me survive. My mother, like Christ, gave her life for me. I could understand that sacrifice. I was also reliving good things and I had Ginny's voice. I took that as a blessing from God, too. I was still at a point when I thought I might go mad if I stayed that way much longer. Then you came, and I knew he'd answered my prayers. I almost convinced myself the first time was an absurd dream. Who could fathom a dead man coming to sing me to life?" He laughed. "Then you came back..."

"...and the rest is history," Severus finished for him.

"Yes." Harry got to his feet. "Thank you, Severus. I will keep that secret for you, and it was self-defense," he said, trying to comfort the man.

"I know. I'd just rather not give any fuel to someone like Rita Skeeter who could twist it and make my life miserable again," Severus explained.

Severus stepped away from Hermione and held out his hand. "Go to the Burrow and rest. We will be there in a few days for a visit. We can talk. I can help you with the DADA class if you need any help. But you are a very capable man, Harry."

Harry took hold of Severus' hand, and instead of shaking it, he pulled Severus into a hug.

Severus was so surprised he stiffened up, and then he relaxed and held the younger man against him. Harry was a bit shorter, and he placed his hand on the back of Harry's head.

"Lily would be proud of you, Harry," he said, giving the young man a squeeze before pushing him gently back and looking him in the eyes. "You are the best of her and your father. They were good people."

Harry nodded, astonished that Severus would admit that to him. He turned and gave Hermione a hug. He could not speak, but he could see that Severus did not need him to. He took Ginny's hand, and they left the room.

Severus turned to Hermione and pulled her close, pressing a kiss to her hair.

"It just keeps getting better," he said.

The Quibbler

Hermione Granger and Severus Snape Engagement

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In the surprise event of the year, it has been brought to the attention of this reporter that Severus Snape, newly reinstated to Hogwarts as Potion Master, and Hermione Granger, a former student of the school, part of the Golden Trio and newly appointed Charms Apprentice, are engaged. Professor Snape surprised Miss Granger with an engagement party after the annual Yule Ball. Attendees at the party were friends of the couple. Guests included Frank and Alice Longbottom and Harry Potter, recent beneficiaries of a newly discovered potion and spell. The couple used the spell and potion to reawaken the three victims who were suffering from a mysterious curse. The Nuptials have not been set as yet, but this reporter has been given the exclusive rights...

I want to thank Lisa, my Beta. I really appreciate all your hard work.

Becky, thank you for the Quibbler page and article. It is wonderful!

I hope my readers enjoy the manip I made.

Chapter 46

Chapter 46 of 63

Having fled the Wizarding World, Hermione comes face to face with her past.

The next morning was Christmas. Hermione slipped quietly from the bed and called Dobby to ask him to do her a favor. She then used her wand to quickly wrap all the gifts she had bought. Another house-elf came with a Christmas tree; she'd asked Dobby to send it a few days earlier. She worked quickly to decorate it and put the gifts she had bought for Severus under the tree. She then crawled back into the bed and snuggled up to Severus, who slipped his arms around her and held her close. Despite her intentions to wait for him to wake up, she slipped back into sleep.

Severus cracked an eye at her and smiled; she had been so busy when he'd awoken that he hadn't had the heart to spoil her fun. He slipped from the bed and placed a couple of his own gifts under the tree and then crawled back into bed beside Hermione.

An ear-splitting roar made them both jump and grab each other. Then a huge, furry mountain landed in the bed with them. "Grendel! What are you doing here?" Severus cried out as he threw his arms around the hairy mountain.

"Surprise!" Hermione said. "I had Dobby bring him. He's family, Severus."

"What about my lair?" he asked curiously.

"Dobby assured me that house-elf wards are impenetrable," she informed him.

"You know, Hermione, I sometimes think they are more powerful than we are," he said as he held the big animal close. "Why they don't take over is beyond me."

"They have a gift of servitude. It's what truly makes them happy. I learned that a long time ago," she murmured happily. "Come on, you have presents!" She squealed like a child as she threw the covers aside and jumped out of the bed.

Severus followed, not ready to admit he was as excited as she was. He hadn't had a tree or gifts under a tree in many, many years. Even though he always gave the gifts he'd told Hermione about, they really hadn't made it feel like Christmas to him. Minerva had always given him a bottle of Muggle Scotch. He'd never had the heart to tell her it made him think of his father, so he'd always poured it down the sink. He just couldn't get past the smell to drink it. Albus had always given him a book, and he'd felt that was his best gift each year. Albus knew books, and he'd known Severus better than anyone beside Min.

Hermione was sitting on the warm, circular carpet that went under the Christmas tree. Grendel was lying next to her, gnawing on a bone big enough to have been taken from a dinosaur. Getting closer, he realized it was many strands of woven rawhide.

"Where did you get that thing?" He smiled warmly at her, watching his pet chew on it with obvious glee.

"It was in a Muggle pet shop. It was a display item that was on sale. I told them I had a Great Dane. I couldn't resist, and look how much he loves it," she replied, her eyes bright and happy as she looked up at him. He was wearing only a pair of black, silk pajama bottoms.

Oh my gosh, he's handsome, she gushed to herself like a school girl.

"When did you buy that?" he asked, noting that she was blushing. He wondered where her thoughts had wandered. He took a seat across from her by the tree and crossed his legs Indian style.

Hermione laughed. "It was during one of the times you sneaked away. I've got lots of pockets, too, and I didn't try on that many dresses." She laughed again at his look of surprise. "We witches can move fast when we want."

He pulled her into his lap and kissed her deeply. "Thank you for bringing Grendel here. It's a wonderful gift."

At the sound of his name, Grendel dropped his bone and came to lie near them. Then he pulled up his head and looked into Severus' eyes and whined.

"What's wrong, boy?" Hermione asked him, moving next to the big animal.

Severus reached out to touch his head. "He's just confused; he's never really been away from the lair since he was a cub. He was huge, but pretty young when Hagrid gave him to me. I think he's very happy to see us, but he feels I'm very different now, and I think my happiness confuses him."

"You got that by touching him? Severus, can you read his mind?" she questioned, astonished by this new revelation.

"I can't read his mind, but I can sense his feelings. He's as intelligent as a human. He doesn't have a language, but he feels so much more. It's hard to describe the communication we have. He's taken my injuries into himself, and he's suffered a great deal for me. It's kind of like the Christ story: He took on our sins so we might have everlasting life. That's what Christmas is really about, isn't it?" He nearly laid over Grendel and hugged him. "I love him so much, Hermione. He's like my mother, child, companion, and healer...it's a lot."

She slipped into his lap, again. "I know, Severus. Was it wrong to bring him here today? Does it hurt him?"

"No." He hugged her. "He just has to learn that our lives have changed, and he no longer is just a guard 'dog' and a healer. He can be a real friend. But he can't stay here for too long. If anyone comes close that's really ill, he would respond to him or her. I'm not saying that's a bad thing. Maybe, in time, we can help our friends with him, but I don't want him so drained that he's the one who's sick. He's very rare, and if someone in the outside world or even ours found out his abilities, like Lucius Malfoy, we might lose him. He's worth billions to the right person."

"You're right. I'm sorry. I just wanted him here. I love the big guy, too."

Severus hugged her. "I really am happy to see him. I miss him when I'm away." He grinned. "Hey, did you say I have presents?"

Hermione kissed him and then grabbed a box from under the tree and set it in his lap.

Severus admired the gold paper and shiny red ribbon. He ran his hands over the package. "It's beautiful." He was touched and overwhelmed by the fancy wrapping on the gift. As a child, he'd always envied his classmates their gifts. He'd watch them unwrap their gifts from the background in his dorm room. Slytherins mainly came from wealthy families, so they nearly always got nice things.

"Open it," she urged, trying to swallow the emotion that overwhelmed her. She was realizing this might be Severus' first wrapped gift under a tree in years...maybe his life. He was trying so hard to blink away his tears.

Severus tore the paper off, letting it fly, and then lifted the lid off the box. Inside was a beautiful lounge jacket...what they used to call smoking jackets. It was black with brocade silk panels on the lapels.

"It's beautiful," he said, running his fingers over the lapels. He was unable to stop the tears then, and his face reddened with embarrassment.

Hermione pushed the box away and held him close and let him cry.

"I thought I was all cried out," he finally managed, gulping for breath, holding on to her like a life jacket.

"These are happy tears. I hope you'll have many of those over the years," she said as she stroked his hair.

"It's the best Christmas ever, even if I hadn't gotten gifts, Hermione. Just being with you is gift and blessing enough for any man for a lifetime." He cleared his throat and tried to sound like his old self. "All this bloody emotion is for the birds."

Hermione laughed when Grendel came bouncing off the floor at the sound of the old Severus and nearly knocked him over by rubbing against him.

She said, "I'm with you, Grendel. I like hearing the grumpy old professor myself."

"You do?" Severus asked in astonishment. "I thought you liked Raven's mannerisms best."

"Severus, I love both your halves. I love when you grouch and complain, and I love your soft, dry humor. I love your soft side, too. It's all part of you."

"Well, wench," he said, grabbing her and tickling her. "I will have to make sure you see both sides of me. All this goody two shoes stuff was nauseating me." He laughed.

Hermione laughed and planted a steamy kiss on him. He obliged her and then set her aside and reached behind the tree and brought out a small box.

"I was so excited about your gifts I forgot you bought me a gift." She grabbed the little box. It was covered in simple brown paper and had a string around it.

She ran her finger over the wrapping and said, "It's beautiful."

Severus threw his head back and laughed his wonderful deep laugh. "I'm glad you approve." He caressed her face with his fingers. "I saw this in Diagon Alley, and I thought you might like it."

Hermione's fingers trembled when she opened the box. On a bed of black velvet lay a pendant with a golden chain. The woman's head and face were carved in whalebone. She was wrapped in ravens' wings on one side, and a cauldron was in front of her. The cauldron had a ruby on its side, to match her ring. "Severus, it's beautiful," she said, leaning forward on her knees to give him a kiss. "Please, put it on me."

He took the chain, and she turned as he fastened the chain while she held her hair to one side. As he kissed her neck, she reached back and caressed his hair while he trailed some more kisses across her shoulder.

"I love your hair, Severus. I hope you decide not to cut it shorter." She moved away, on her knees, to pick up another box, and then she turned and handed it too him.

It was a small box, and Severus opened it carefully and lifted the top. Inside on a bed of green velvet was a gold pendant; there was the head of a lion with a serpent wrapped seductively around it. The lion had a peaceful, content look.

"It's wonderful," he said, again overcome with emotion. "Your turn: Would you put it on me?" He was sitting cross-legged on the rug by the tree, so she came and kneeled behind him and fastened the chain as he held his hair out of the way. She continued to return the favor by placing some soft kisses along his neck.

"Hermione, if you continue, we may not get to the rest of the gifts," he gasped.

"There are more gifts? Couldn't they wait for a half hour?" she teased.

"Unfortunately, they can't. I always have breakfast with Min on Christmas morning, and time is running out. But I promise that you will not go to sleep unsatisfied tonight."

She flipped around and landed in his lap, wrapping her arms about his neck. "I will hold you to that promise."

Severus groaned. "Darn, bloody breakfast." His voice was slow and grumpy as he sat holding her for a minute before releasing her.

Hermione smiled at him and went to get his next gift.

He opened the box and found a nice quill and an ink bottle with his initials embossed on it. "It's wonderful, Hermione. My old quill is about shot." She also gave him a nice journal with a leather binding.

"I hope you like your gifts," she said.

"They are wonderful," he said, running his hands over the fine leather cover. "I have never received such nice gifts." He leaned over to kiss her.

"I do have another gift for you, my love," he said, "but I am a bit apprehensive about giving it to you now that I have gotten it."

He reached again behind the tree and brought out a huge dress box. "Women's moods change so quickly." He smiled at her near protest. "Please, if you don't like it, it can be exchanged." He handed it to her reluctantly, like a child afraid to be rejected.

"Severus, I love everything you have given me. I'm sure it will be wonderful."

"It's not the usual Christmas gift, and I got it on a whim," he tried to explain. "I thought about keeping it a surprise till next week, but I want you to be able to give me some feedback on what you really want."

Hermione said, "Now you have me curious."

She tore the plain white wrapping away from the box and opened it. There on a bed of fine paper lay the beautiful wedding dress she had been trying not to drool over in the dress shop. The moment she had seen it, she had known that would be the one.

"Oh, Severus, it's the dress I wanted. How did you know?"

Severus felt himself caressed as she said his name. "It was hard to miss your longing stares. You should have said something."

"But you hadn't even asked me to marry you yet. I did not know if you wanted a marriage."

"Yes, I know. I'm sorry; I hope it's an appropriate gift," he said. "I want you to marry me, you know that, but you don't know that I have asked Molly and Ginny to make arrangements for the wedding and reception for New Year's Eve. I know it's not many days away, but I love you and want you to be my wife as soon as possible."

Hermione dropped the dress and threw her arms around him. "I'd marry you at a moment's notice." She kissed him. She felt him let go of his breath and relax. "You silly, wonderful man. You do not have to be afraid of what I will say or do, Severus. I love you, and I will *never* stop loving you. I can't say there won't be arguments...we are both stubborn people...but I will never stop loving you."

He trembled against her, letting out a ragged sigh. "These emotions are killing me." He laughed to let her know that it was a joke.

But Hermione knew this whole thing was still rough for him. Remembering didn't make experiencing everything easy for him.

She sat back and playfully yelled at him, "You let Molly plan the wedding? There will be a thousand people there and hippogriffs pulling Cinderella's coach."

He stared at her chagrined until she laughed at him. "We can go see her tomorrow and head off some of her crazy ideas. I'm sure it will be wonderful. Best of all, I will start the new year as Mrs. Severus Snape."

"No, Mrs. Severus Raven Snape," he said gently, pulling her to him.

They were a little late for breakfast, but Minerva brightened when they came through the door, and then nearly jumped on the top of the table when Grendel sauntered into the room.

"What the devil is that?" she roared.

"Min, meet, Grendel. This is my secret keeper and my secret healer," he whispered, since they were now close enough for only her to hear.

"This animal?" she said, surprised. She reached out to the hairy beast and caressed his head, and her eyes closed a moment. "It must be a Curanderian: They are legend. Where did you get him?" she whispered back.

"Hagrid," he answered quietly.

"I should have known." She turned back to her meal. "You're late!" She said loudly enough for the other teachers to hear.

"Sorry, Min," Severus replied. "This was a very different Christmas morning." His gaze drifted toward Hermione as he spoke.

"I'm happy for you, Severus and Hermione. Come sit, and that thing," she said, pointing her finger at Grendel, "can sit behind you, I guess." She gulped as if she expected

Grendel to try to eat her.

"What is that?" Filius asked, cowering down in his chair.

Severus said gruffly, "Just a half-breed monster Hagrid gave me years ago," he fibbed. "I use it for guard duty. It's really just a pet now since I'm retired from spy work."

Hermione giggled. She loved his slow, deep voice, and now she knew when he was laughing behind his voice.

Hagrid came through the door. "Sorry to be late! My piggwilys got out, and I had to..."

His voice broke off as Grendel came barreling off the stage and down the isle. He hit Hagrid in the chest, knocking him down, and proceeded to slobber all over his face.

Everyone laughed when they heard Hagrid say, "Why, bless me, he remembers his mummy."

Thank you, Lisa, my beta. You have stuck with me through so much. You are so appreciated.

Becky, thanks for your support and enthusiasm.

Chapter 47

Chapter 47 of 63

Having fled the Wizarding World, Hermione comes face to face with her past.

That afternoon, Hermione and Severus took Grendel back to the lair via the Gypsies' camp.

There was a light snow on the ground, and the trees around the camp had been decorated with paper ornaments made by the children. There were strings of popcorn on the trees, and snowflakes of tinsel fluttered there as well. There was a big party taking place with music and food that smelled so divine that Hermione's stomach rumbled.

As they walked into the camp with Grendel, the whole company became aware of them. The music stopped, and every face turned their way. Grendel gave a roar, and the children screamed with delight and swarmed over the huge animal. They had all been waiting for the magical day when Raven's big monster would come to see them. Grendel loved the children, and they followed him in dancing lines as he lead them weaving in and out amongst the trees.

Nicholi came with open arms and hugged Hermione and Severus.

"Welcome, my friends. Come and sit by the fire. Have some food. The children were just speaking of your huge, wooly friend. He is quite a fierce-looking beast, isn't he? Your story is often told as we sit around the campfire. The children have not yet tired of hearing it."

He gave them places by the fire and filled plates of food for them. He watched as a couple of small ones clamored upon Grendel's back. He glanced at Severus to see if there was any harm but saw the man smiling at his giant beast.

Severus noted Nicholi's concern. "They will be fine. Grendel is as gentle as a 10-day-old puppy."

Hermione asked, "Where's Magi?" She looked to see that the old woman was not there.

Nicholi shook his head, "She sleeps a great deal these days, and she has grown weak. We fear we will lose her soon. She is 123 after all."

"One hundred twenty-three!" Hermione gasped. "We had no idea."

Nicholi laughed. "She does not like people to know her age, and she is my grandmother's mother. She is the last of our ancient line. My parents died in an accident many years ago on a steep mountain. The wagon rolled down the mountain. My grandmother died of a broken heart after that. But Magi stayed with us these many years. She will come to the fire in a while. She went for a nap earlier."

The music and dancing resumed, and Hermione and Severus sat watching the festivities as they ate their food. Hermione saw Severus' brow was creased, and he was deep in thought.

She tugged at his sleeve. "Are you okay," she asked in a whisper, concern creasing her own forehead.

He smiled down at her and reached out to touch her, and she felt his mind join hers. *"Yes, I was considering the ramifications of introducing Grendel to Magi. Old age is part of life, yet she is a very treasured part of this caravan of life. Grendel cannot stop death, but he can take her pain and give her some years of life and maybe even her eyes. But it's a serious healing, and I would have to ask him. She would also have to be told. Maybe she's looking forward to life beyond this plane. Maybe her magical insight is because of her blindness. It's very complicated. The camp would then know what Grendel is. Right now their children might be receiving his energy and simple healings. We cannot keep Grendel here too long among the whole group."*

Nicholi, who had been dancing, noticed the silent communion that his two friends were having. He came close. "Is there a problem?"

Severus stood. "May we speak to you alone? I would like to talk to you about Grendel, and Hermione would like to visit Magi alone if it is possible."

Nicholi was obviously curious, he but said, "Of course, Hermione. I know she would love to see you."

They went toward the wagons, and Grendel came from the trees to stop before Severus a moment. Severus placed a hand on his head and bent to talk to him. The big beast gave his hand a soft lick and then bounded off to play with the children some more.

Nicholi watched the exchange, curiosity plain on his face. He led them to a bright red wagon and rapped on the door, Magi's frail voice bid them enter.

Hermione said, "I will speak to her, Severus." She vanished into the wagon, shutting the door behind her.

Severus turned to the curious Nicholi and said, "Can we walk out into the trees? I crave some privacy."

"Of course, Severus."

Nicholi was a wise man and knew when Severus was ready he would explain. He did not need to ask the questions that burned through his thoughts.

Finally Severus looked around and used his wand to place a silencing charm around them.

"Forgive the mystery. Grendel is a very special animal. You may have felt his power."

Nicholi nodded. "Yes, I have never encountered a creature that has a magic about him like this one."

"Nicholi, Grendel is a healer." Severus looked the man in the eye. "He can help Magi, if she wishes it. It may or may not extend her life many years, but it will definitely add quality to the life she has."

Nicholi's eyes tearing up, he went to his knees in the dirt.

"You would offer this miracle to one of us? We are but a humble people. She is the life of this caravan. We are aggrieved at her suffering."

Severus, touched by the man's emotion, squatted to talk with him eye to eye. He reached out to place a hand on Nicholi's shoulder.

"One can never be ready for those closest to them to die, but this must be her choice. She may be ready even if we are not. She is a very special woman. You have been a great support to Hermione and me, and we want to be able to give back. We must be careful, though. Grendel cannot give life, and what he gives will drain him. He has patched me up many times at the brink of death, but it costs him weeks of lost energy, almost as if he is arthritic. His body needs to rebuild its magical energy just like we need our strength from food. He spends a great deal of his life alone."

Nicholi looked alarmed. "Will the children tire him?"

"He's having a great time with them. He's never spent time with children before," Severus explained. "Come, let's go back to the wagon and see what Hermione has discovered."

Meanwhile: Hermione moved into the tiny, dark wagon and found Magi reclined on a small bed in the back. She was covered in many colorful quilts and a small candle was burning on her bedside table. She was stroking the fur of a small, orange cat that reminded Hermione of Crookshanks.

"Magi, how are you?" Hermione asked, taking a small stool by the bed.

The old woman reached out a hand to her, and the small cat scooted away.

Hermione took her hand. "It is good to see you, my friend."

"Old and weak have I become," the tiny woman said.

"It's not so unusual for a 123-year-old," Hermione teased with affection in her voice.

"Nicholi," she said with a sigh. "He knows I do not like my age told."

Hermione said, "I wish I had known. I would have plied you for your stories before this."

"I have lived in a caravan most of my life. I have seen many wonders in our travels but none of the modern world of the Muggles. I have no references to compare."

"Well, the wonders of these mountains would be enough."

"Has that man asked you to marry him, yet?" Magi asked curiously.

Hermione nodded happily and told her about the dance and the proposal." She extended her hand to show her ring to the old woman.

"He's a good man. His life has been hard, but he is now the best of men," the old woman told Hermione. "If I were 80 years younger, you would have to fight for that one," she said with a cackle that ended up a cough. "Darn old age; it takes away the joy."

Hermione held her until the coughing stopped. "If you had a chance at a longer, healthier life, would you take it?" Hermione asked, squeezing the old woman's shoulders affectionately.

"Life is precious, and I have had more than my share. Yet one never wants to leave the children."

Hermione said, "Severus and I have brought Grendel. He romps among the trees with the children. He is a very special beast, Magi. He has the ability to heal, give strength, and make your body stronger."

"A Curandarian!" she said, her white eyes widened with surprise. "Many years ago, I heard about a man who had one. But it was a story from my childhood."

"Grendel is rare, but he's very much real. He has agreed to help you if you wish it."

She sat now on the edge of the bed. "This is true; you really have the animal here?" Her face was alight with possibilities, and Hermione knew she was very excited about the possibilities of a better, longer life.

Hermione squeezed her hand and held her arm with the other.

"Yes, he is here. I take that as a positive answer. Lie back. I think if we are careful we can squeeze him in here with a little magical enhancement."

She used her wand to widen the inside of the wagon. Then she went to Magi and stroked the old woman's hair.

"I will be back."

She opened the door and spotted Nicholi and Severus coming from the trees. She ran to Severus.

"She will do it. She wants to live."

Severus nodded, smiling down at her, though he was worried. He had never asked Grendel to heal someone else. Was this too much for his friend?

There was a rush of voices, and the children came from the trees with Grendel in the middle. They all walked at his side with their hands buried in his fur. Grendel came and bowed before Severus. Severus knelt before the beast and put his hands on the sides of Grendel's face. He leaned forward and pressed his forehead against Grendel's. For a long, silent moment they communicated with feelings and thought. There were no words. Grendel then swiped Severus face with his big tongue and walked past him. He licked Hermione's hand as he went by, and then he crawled into the little wagon. It sagged under his weight.

Severus took his wand and magically closed the door. He went to Hermione's side. He took her into his arms and held her.

Hermione felt him trembling against her.

"He will be all right, Severus. He's very strong, and he will know when to stop."

"Will he?" he whispered against her hair.

"Yes, he will, Severus."

Nicholi stood with them as they watched the little wagon. The children, not knowing what was happening, stood silent with them watching. The music had stopped, and the rest of the group gradually stood with them watching but not asking...not knowing why they all watched. Perhaps some thought she was dying. Some waited just knowing something wondrous might be happening. They could see the expectant looks on the faces of Severus, Hermione, and Nicholi.

It was nearly two hours that they stood and waited, and then a roar from the wagon sounded and the door opened. Magi walked out steady and strong. Her eyes were a piercing blue, and her nearly white hair was now a dark grey. She looked 50 years younger. She placed her hands on Grendel's head, and he climbed down the stairs a bit unsteadily and lay upon the snow. The children ran to him, their hands touching his body, and he licked a hand, an elbow, a face as they poured out their love on him. Severus saw the bleakness and the strain on his friend's face. He'd seen it many times over the years, but as he watched, it seemed to reverse and was soon gone. Grendel climbed to his feet and came to him, pressing his head against Severus' hand, and then he gave a happy yap and tore off with the laughing children.

Severus stood dumfounded. Hermione stared after the happy animal as the Gypsies swarmed around Magi, their old mother, as they cried. They started to sing and dance. Instruments were summoned, and they had a celebration of life. With the children, Grendel, and Magi in the center, they danced into the night, and Hermione and Severus danced with them.

That night as they fell into bed in the lair and Grendel snored from his bed in the corner, Severus held Hermione close. He caressed her skin with gentle strokes, and his lips pressed against cool skin that warmed as their passion was ignited. Her hands and fingers sought to ignite his ardor as well. The dance of the night became their bodies' rhythm, and they danced an age-old dance of love. Their cries of ecstasy were soft and gentle against each other's lips. They lay spent, and Severus said against her temple as he pressed a kiss, "Christmas is truly about love."

Chapter 48

Chapter 48 of 63

Having fled the Wizarding World, Hermione comes face to face with her past.

When dawn arrived on their wedding day, Severus was up and busy getting his clothing laid out. Hermione had stayed the night with Ginny at the Burrow, and he'd had a hard time sleeping without her. But he comforted himself with the fact that they would probably never have to sleep alone again.

Last week's visit with Molly had headed off some of her more outrageous plans. Severus had some secret plans of his own today. He'd asked Ginny help him with several things. One was to give Hermione a box and have her open it alone in her room. So, at the appointed time, he dressed in a black tux. His hair was shiny and long, and his polished shoes shone. He made his way out of Hogwarts and Apparated outside the gate.

Hermione had woken that morning after a fitful night's sleep; she, too, had a difficult time sleeping alone.

She bathed, fixed her hair and makeup, and went down for a light breakfast with Harry and the family. She was too excited to eat much. When she returned to her room upstairs, Ginny was there with a big box.

"What's that?" Hermione asked curiously.

"I'm not exactly sure," she said, not looking Hermione in the eye. "Severus instructed me to give it to you and then leave you for a couple hours," she lied. "Maybe it's a memory. After all, he is the dirty old Potion's master." She laughed, hugged Hermione, and left her alone.

Hermione took the large box to the bed. When she opened it, she found another wedding dress. It was sleeveless and made of soft silk; the tight bodice was adorned with pearls and beads.

What in the world? she thought.

There was a note on the top:

Hermione,

I ask the pleasure of my fiancée to attend our wedding at St. Patrick's at 11:00. I want to marry you in a church in the sight of God. I hope that you will come.

With all my love,

Raven

Hermione could not stop the tears that slipped out of her eyes, but she brushed them away and stepped into the beautiful, simple dress. Severus was such a dear. The wizarding wedding they had planned was going to be glorious, but Hermione had found herself thinking about the kind of wedding she would have had with Raven. Had he caught bits of her thoughts when they made love, or had he just known, being Raven? Severus knew what he would have wanted in the situation had Severus never returned. It was still confusing at times.

Hermione left under a Disillusionment Charm to escape Molly's watchful eye and Apparated from the Burrow's gate to St Patrick's. Mary, Raven's old friend from the city, met her on the steps. The lady was dressed well, and her hair was done up. She was barely recognizable. She gave Hermione a hug and handed her a beautiful bouquet of flowers.

"Raven is waiting inside," she said warmly. "Do you know the wonderful thing your soon-to-be husband has done for me?"

"Please tell me," Hermione said as they began to climb the steps to the church door.

"He bought me a boarding house. I have renters now. The rest of the warehouse's inhabitants have been given a trade, work they can do there in the warehouse. It's a new life for all of us. There's going to be big changes."

Hermione wasn't surprised. She had known he had been up to something all week, but she'd been too busy with all the wedding arrangements.

They had arrived at the door. Hermione reached out and took Mary's hand and said, "I'm so glad for you."

Mary said, "Now take a deep breath, Deary, and step into your future."

Hermione stood before the inner doors of the huge church and took a deep breath; she closed her eyes and said a prayer. She asked God to let her parents watch her wedding and for Severus and her to have a blessed life together.

She opened her eyes and nodded to Mary to open the door. It was a huge cathedral. It had rows and rows of seats, and there were candles across the front. There were flowers along the aisles. There was a white silk walkway in front of her already strewn with rose petals. Raven stood at the front. He wore a simple black Muggle tux with a white shirt, grey tie, and shiny leather shoes. There was even a photographer ready to make the day's memories permanent.

Ginny stood to one side as her maid of honor and Harry to the other side as Raven's best man. Harry walked to the side, and she lost sight of him. She stepped up to the silk aisle and was pleased when Harry stepped to her side and held out his arm. She linked her arm in his, and they slowly walked down the aisle as music came from some unseen balcony in the church. There was Minerva, dressed as a Muggle, and the Weasleys, and rather oddly Albus' framed portrait was there to the side. She wondered what story they had told the minister for that one. Albus was doing a very good job of being a still painting, but she saw him wink as she came past. She realized this was her family. A quiet church wedding with her family was just what she had wanted for Raven and herself.

She let everyone else fade into the background and rested her eyes on Raven. Since he had sent the invitation, she decided to think of him as Raven for this hour.

Raven stood tall and proud; he locked his eyes on hers and sent her warm, loving feelings.

When they got to the front, the minister asked, "Who gives this woman to this man?"

Harry squeezed her hand and said, "I do." He kissed her cheek and placed her hand in Raven's and stepped away.

Hermione whispered, "Thank you, Harry. I love you."

He nodded, tears swimming in his eyes. He stepped back into the best man position.

Hermione turned and handed her flowers to Ginny, who reached over to kiss her cheek. "He's a keeper, Hermione. Be happy."

Hermione nodded then turned to Raven. "Thank you, my love."

He squeezed her fingers, and they turned to the priest. "This marriage is a bond between this man and this woman. This is a bond that will last a lifetime and a covenant between you both and God. Severus Raven Snape, do you take Hermione Jean Granger to be your lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward...

Raven repeated the words with his soft, gentle voice, his eyes tearing with his emotions overflowing.

"Hermione Jane Granger, do you take this man, Severus Raven Snape, to be your lawfully wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward..."

Hermione repeated the words.

"Do you have rings?" the priest asked.

Hermione looked uncertainly at Ginny, and Ginny handed her a thick, plain gold band.

"Hermione, place the ring on Raven's finger and repeat after me, 'With this ring...'"

"Raven place the ring on Hermione's finger and repeat after me, 'With this ring...'"

Hermione noted that her engagement ring was now invisible; she could feel it but not see it. She was amazed that Severus had even thought of that. She assumed this priest might not understand the symbols on the ring.

Finally came the words "... I now pronounce you husband and wife in the sight of God. You may kiss your bride, Raven."

Raven leaned forward, kissed her gently, and then held her close for a moment.

"I love you, Hermione. Thank you for the life we had," he said.

"I love you, too, Raven. I wouldn't have missed it for the world," she said. Somehow she knew this was the last time she would call Severus "Raven." This afternoon she would be Severus' wife, and that made her very happy. Somehow Severus had known that.

The priest said, "I present Mr. and Mrs. Severus Raven Snape."

He stepped away, and their friends all crowded in to wish them a happy life. They spent only a few more minutes there. Molly and Arthur left first. She was in a dither about last-minute preparations for the many wizarding world guests that would be arriving in a couple hours at her home. Minerva came and gave them both kisses and hugs and wished them a happy life."

"Minerva, I'm so glad you came," Hermione said.

Minerva said, "Hermione, please call me Min. You're Severus' wife now, and we are all family at Hogwarts."

"You will be at the Weasleys', won't you?" Hermione asked.

"I wouldn't miss it, but I need to change. I feel half-dressed in these Muggle clothes." She indicated the knee-length dress.

Severus said dryly, "You do need to cover those knobby knees, Min." He laughed at the scathing look she gave him. "Don't forget to take the old goat with you, Min. I see he is going to be as nosey in death as he was in life."

Minerva laughed again. "I have him here right next to my heart." She patted her chest and then Apparated away.

Severus turned grey. "I didn't need that image of Albus tucked in her bra."

"Neither did I," Harry said, starting to laugh. The more they thought about it, the more they laughed. As Harry bent to pick up a flower that had fallen from Hermione's bouquet, they heard the photographer snap a picture. "Oh, that one's going to be a winner," he said.



Hermione laughed until tears came to her eyes. She walked with Raven to the steps of the church after everyone else Apparated away and said to him, "Thank you. This was wonderful and so perfect you can't imagine. Have you been reading my mind again, Mr. Snape?"

"No, Mrs. Snape," he said, smiling and kissing her gently. "This truly was the wedding Raven dreamed of."

"Severus, I love you. I'm going to enjoy my life with such a thoughtful man." She kissed him. She held her finger up to see that her engagement ring was back, and the thin gold band that he had slipped onto her finger had somehow melded itself to her ring.

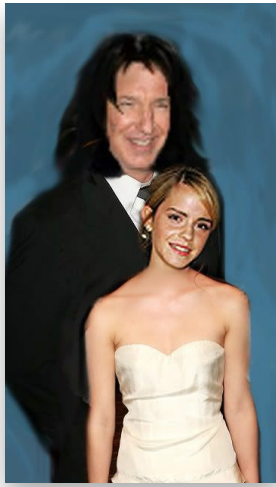
"Hermione, Raven will always be a part of our lives and our past." He was silenced by her finger across his lips.

"You don't have to explain. I already know. I agree." She smiled. "Now let's go get married in our world. Molly will have a heart attack if we aren't in the house pretty soon."

Severus laughed. "We wouldn't want to cause her any difficulty. She really has been an amazing help. I never thought I'd say that about a Weasley."

Hermione grabbed his arm, laughing. "Lead the way, Mr. Snape."

Soon the steps of the cathedral were empty, save a rose petal.



Thank you, Lisa, your beta work has helped me so much. I appreciate all your hard work.

Becky, thank you for your support.

Chapter 49

Chapter 49 of 63

Having fled the Wizarding World, Hermione comes face to face with her past.

The Burrow was a beehive of activity. Hermione was ushered upstairs as soon as she arrived. Ginny was waiting for her, and Hermione carefully took the beautiful dress off and hung it up. She laid her bouquet down; she planned to carry it for this wedding as well.

Ginny helped her into the white gown. It was cut low and had thin straps. The bodice was covered with silver designs. Above her breasts were gathers of white silk that created two drapes that hung below her shoulders and over her arms. The lined, silk-covered skirt hung to the ground and was slit up the front to just below her knee. She did her hair rather simply, preferring attention to be on the beautiful dress. As she put on silver heels that matched the top of the dress, she blushed, thinking of Severus slowly slipping them off later that night.

Ginny laughed at her. "Hey, keep your thoughts on the wedding."

Hermione smiled. "You can't imagine what he does to me."

Ginny said, "I would rather not, thanks. Hermione, if Harry hasn't broached the idea of marriage to me by mid-summer, can you give him a nudge?"

"Sure, Ginny. He hasn't mentioned it at all?" she asked.

Ginny shook her head rather grimly. "Not even when talking about this wedding. I can't understand it." Her eyes were brimming with tears.

"He's probably just concentrating on getting his health back," Hermione said as she checked herself in the mirror. "He did look to you for an okay to work at Hogwarts. I don't think he would have done that if he hadn't planned for you to be with him," she encouraged the girl.

Ginny appraised her appearance. "You look the perfect wizard bride, Hermione...like a fairy princess. This is a beautiful dress. The other one was so... Muggle."

Hermione laughed. "Perhaps, but it was Raven's dream dress, and I am Muggle-born. It's very beautiful," she said, touching the fabric of the dress.

"I'm sorry," Ginny apologized. "That was a stupid thing to say."

"I understand. Sometimes I think the same thing. Being a witch kind of makes me feel a part of this world."

"You are, Hermione. You're one of the brightest and most talented witches I know."

Hermione hugged her. "I think I'm ready. It's nearly time to go downstairs. I can't wait to see Severus. Every minute away from him is a part of our lives together lost."

Ginny laughed. "You've really got it bad for him. I have to admit he's growing on me. He treats you like a precious stone. It's very endearing."

"Just keep your hands off my man," Hermione warned her with a fake stern look.

Ginny laughed again. "I have my own, and I plan to keep him. I have Severus and you to thank for that. Come on, Mum will get really anxious if we aren't at the door in two minutes."

Hermione picked up her flowers. "I'm ready." They went down the stairs and found the house was deserted.

Ginny went first, making sure the way was clear. Ginny grabbed a bunch of flowers that were tied with ribbon from the table and stepped out the door, and Hermione

followed. Then she motioned for Hermione to step to the door.

Suddenly Molly stepped up in the front near the canopy, music wafted out of the air, and her high voice belted out an old-fashioned Muggle wedding song. Hermione remembered it as something her parents listened to when she was quite young. She saw Severus' eyes widen when Molly's voice didn't quite hit the right note. But Hermione stifled her giggles and listened to the words. Tears filled Hermione's eyes as she thought about her mother and father. The song was not perfect, nor was Molly's voice, but it warmed her and made her feel like they were close.

At last

My love has come along

My lonely days over

And life is like a song

Ooh at last

The skies above are blue

Well my heart was wrapped up in clover

The night I looked at you

I found a dream

That I could speak to

A dream that I could call my own

I found a thrill

To press my cheek to

A thrill that I have never known

Well

You smile

You smile

Oh and then the spell was cast

And here we are in heaven

For you are mine at last

I found a dream

That I could speak to

A dream that I

Could call my own

I found a thrill

To press my cheek to

A thrill that I have never known

Well

You smile

you smile

Oh and then the spell was cast

And here we are in heaven

For you are mine at last

Ooo yea

You are mine

You are mine

At last

At last

At last

At last

She grinned at Severus' grimace but smiled at Molly as she finished. She wondered what other surprises Molly had in store for them.

Hermione took one more look around before she started down the aisle. There was a floating, white muslin canopy above their heads. Small hummingbirds flitted in and out of the garden, which had been enchanted to look more like spring and heated with a warming spell. There were flowers everywhere. There were rows of chairs, friends, family, and a few dignitaries from the Ministry. The Minister of Magic himself stood ready to seal their marriage.

In the back row, Hagrid was sitting on three chairs that were bending under his weight. Hermione, whose wand was embedded in her flowers, sent a silent strengthening charm toward the chairs.

The path to Severus was a fresh aisle of mowed grass. He stood under a trellis of colorful flowers that furled and unfurled. Severus wore robes similar to his teaching robes: black, buttoned up, and proper. She wouldn't have wanted it any different. This was her Severus...the man she loved. She realized as she walked toward him that she might even love him far more than she'd ever hoped to love anyone. She also noticed that flowers were springing in the places her feet had trod. She rolled her eyes but forgot about the flowers as Severus stepped forward and took her hand in his and they turned to the Minister of Magic.

He stepped forward and took her hand in his, and they turned to the Minister. There was no repeat of the vows they had given earlier in the day. That was not the wizarding way. They took their wands and touched the tips together, and it created a glow about them. The color was a warm orange, and it signified to the watching community that they were committed in a relationship built on love.

Then the Minister asked, "Severus Snape and Hermione Jean Granger, do you commit to this marriage in the eyes of your friends and family?"

Severus and Hermione said together, "Yes, I do with all my heart."

There was an exchange of rings. Hermione and Severus had chosen a matching set of gold rings with ancient runes engraved around them that said *Loves heals all wounds and lasts forever*.

The Minister then took a golden chain and wrapped it around their joined hands and up their wrists. He touched it with his wand and said, "I, Minister of Magic, seal this union now and forever. May you find the happiness and joy in your last day together as you do this first day as married wizard and witch."

The chain began to glow and shimmer. Then the glow sunk into their flesh, joining them forever. Severus picked Hermione up in his arms, kissed her, and then turned to the crowd and said, "She's mine! Every single man here can weep...and maybe a few of the married ones."



Suddenly, a spell was activated and a rather fat, naked cherub appeared before them. He drew back his bow and let an arrow fly toward them. It struck Severus in the chest and burst into hundreds of butterflies that covered Severus and Hermione. Severus looked horrified a moment and then started to laugh. Hermione laughed with him, and as they kissed, the butterflies vanished into the air.

The crowd erupted in laughter and clapped for their happiness. Some of them stared at the new Severus, wondering if he had gone nuts during his ordeal. Others thought it odd that such a young woman could love the old Bat of the Hogwarts' dungeons, and others envied the man his happiness.

Fireworks erupted into the sky, and the music grew louder. Food tables, laden with everything one could think of, appeared. Hermione laughed when she saw the wedding cake. The cake topper was a tiny Severus and Hermione on a broom. She had her face pressed against him. As she watched, the scene changed to her and Raven's wedding and then their ceremony only a moment ago. It was corny and wonderful. They were all special moments for them, and she was warmed that Severus included this tiny reference to Raven.

The chairs magically moved away, clearing a place for dancing. The grass vanished, and a polished floor appeared. Severus took her hand and walked her to the middle of the floor. He took out his wand and waved it toward an empty area in the yard. There was a flurry of activity and then the Gypsies appeared to play music. Nicholi came forward to take Hermione's hands and place a kiss against her cheek, and Magi came to give her a hug.

Hermione cried out with happiness, "Oh Severus, thank you!" She squeezed his hands. "Did you see the wedding?" she asked her friends.

Nicholi smiled warmly. "Yes, we were under a Disillusionment Charm. Severus wanted to surprise you. Now dance, and we will play." He clapped his hands toward his fellow musicians, and they brought their instruments up and started to play.

The Gypsy children ran here and there, chasing the hummingbirds.

Hermione took Severus' hand and let him swing her up against him. A beautiful melody washed over them, and as she lifted her face to his to receive a gentle kiss, Hermione realized he was asking permission to join her mind. She called, *Yes!* to him with her own mind. He began to step and sway to the slow music, and as if they had been trained to dance together, they moved of one accord. She felt so wrapped in love. Words were not necessary. They danced, looking into each other's eyes and stealing kisses here and there. When the first song ended, Harry came and asked, "Severus, may I have a dance with Hermione?"

Severus nodded his permission although he did not want to let her go. "I do want to dance with Minerva. For you, Harry, I will let her go, but woe to any other man who may try to take her from me," he warned with his old Snape voice.

Harry laughed. "Thank you, Severus. I promise to guard her well, and I will return her shortly."

Hermione smiled and took Harry's hand, feeling the loss of Severus immediately. She gave him a wistful smile, and he took Minerva into his arms and moved a bit from her.

"Well, you've really done it, gone and married the git, no less than twice today." He laughed fondly.

"Harry! You need to get that word out of your vocabulary. You're not a child anymore," she chided him. "I'm happier than I ever thought I'd be, probably happier than Ron and I would have been. I still wish he was here."

"No, you don't. He would have never accepted you marrying Severus. He still hated him even after I told him about the memories."

She sighed and pulled him close. "You're right. He wouldn't have." She was quiet as she held on to him.

"Hermione, I'm going to ask Ginny to marry me," he told her.

"Really," she hugged him excitedly. "How come you haven't mentioned it before? We've been talking weddings all week."

"This was your time...yours and Severus'. I wanted to wait until it was all done. At first I wanted to wait till I knew what I was doing. You know, how I was going to make a living for us. Then you got engaged, and I wanted to respect your time to shine. Has Ginny mentioned it?"

"Just once," she said as they moved around the dance floor. She was watching Severus talking with Minerva as they danced. He was laughing and looked so handsome.

"Do you think she'll say yes?" he asked, a bit of uncertainty in his eyes.

"Oh, Harry, now you're the git. Of course she will! You ask her tonight. Ask her as soon as we leave, and don't you wait another minute."

The music was coming to an end. Hermione looked around for Severus and saw he was already headed back to her.

Harry said, "Thank you, Hermione. I hope you and Severus have a wonderful, happy life."

Hermione hugged him and then turned as Severus grabbed her up against him and swung her around.

"I missed you; I could barely stay the whole song." He crushed her lips with a steamy kiss. "It's been a long day, and I don't want to stay too much longer, my wife."

"Neither do I, my husband." As they danced they exchanged words with couples who passed by to wish them well: Molly and Arthur, Frank and Alice.

Neville said, as he and Luna danced by, "This was a beautiful wedding."

Luna said, "I hope ours is as nice."

It was Severus who answered, "I'm sure it will be will be, Miss Lovegood. Neville, we are looking forward to your wedding."

Neville smiled happily. There was no fear in his eyes anymore when he spoke to Severus.

"Thank you, Professor Snape," he said with genuine affection. Then off he and Luna went.

"Harry came by with Ginny, and Hermione gave her the thumbs up behind his back. Ginny blushed with happiness.

"What was that about?" Severus asked.

She whispered into his ear, "Harry's going to ask Ginny to marry him tonight."

"Well, I hope they are as happy as we are going to be."

"Severus, where are we going tonight? I really hadn't thought of it. It hardly seems like a wedding night if we stay in the castle or Spinners End."

"Don't you worry. I have that all worked out," he said. His deep voice rumbled soothingly over her skin.

She sighed. "This has been a perfect day, Severus. Thank you for bringing the Gypsies here and for my wedding this afternoon. It was wonderful."

"It was as much for me as it was you, my love. It seemed right. You are marrying me, but you loved both halves of me separately in the beginning."

"But you're not two men anymore. You're one Severus Snape, whom I love and want to spend my life with."

"I am very blessed and grateful. It seemed appropriate to stand before God as well as our own people," he told her.

"I think maybe my parents were watching. I prayed that they were." She held him a little tighter, overcome with the emotion of thinking about her parents again.

He drew her away from the dance floor and out into the overgrown section of the garden. There were roses and lilacs blooming. "I'm sure they were, Hermione." His lips claimed hers, and he kissed away her sadness. "Let's go cut that cake so we can get out of here."



Hermione nodded gratefully. "Yes, I do want to get out of here. I want you all to myself, husband..."

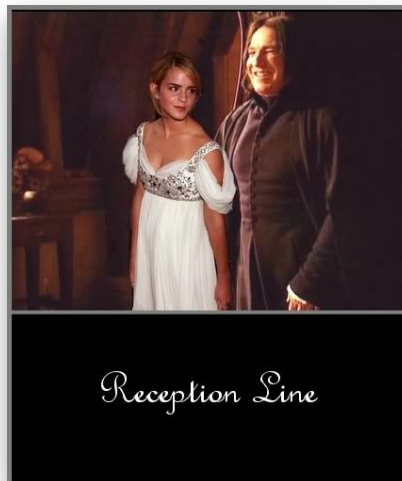
"... As I do you, my wife." He kissed her again, took her hand, and they went back to their guests.

They took their place by the cake and everyone gathered. The Gypsies continued to play soft music in the background. There had been a wizard photographer at both weddings; now he asked them to pose for a few pictures. Hermione wanted some with Harry and Ginny and with Neville, Luna, Frank, and Alice. Hermione wanted one with all the Weasleys, as they had been her family and would continue to support her and Severus. It took much more time than planned originally, and Severus' voice started to get a little tense and deeper.

Hermione finally said, "Let us cut the cake. Severus and I want to be on our way." She took the knife and placed it in his hand and covered his hand with hers. When they sliced through the cake, the little cake topper spell faded away.

Severus picked up a piece and held it for her to take a bite. This was all a bit Muggle for him, but they'd had this discussion, and he'd agreed to let her have the wedding album of her dreams.

Hermione fed him a piece of cake, and they turned to their audience. "Thank you so much," she said. "I never thought I'd be this happy six months ago. You have all been such a support and so patient and never once yelled at me for vanishing on you." She reached out and took Severus' hand. "Now, my husband and I want to take your leave."



It took nearly 30 minutes to finally break free of the hugs and kisses. Hagrid was crying so loudly that everyone was laughing at him.

Minerva held Severus a moment longer than need be. "Be happy, boy," she said affectionately. She had always called him "boy" when he was young since he really wasn't her son.

"I will be, Mom," he said affectionately, kissing her cheek. "You don't mind a surrogate son, do you?"

"You've been the son of my heart for years. I'd be honored. Now I want some grandchildren." She turned away, wiping tears from her eyes.

Severus turned and held Hermione against him and guided her to Albus' portrait.

"Goodnight, you old goat. Now you can go back to haunting the castle," Severus said.

Hermione placed a kiss on her finger and put it against Albus' cheek. The portrait was warm, and she smiled affectionately at him. "Thanks for coming; I wish you could have been here to seal our marriage. But it's a comfort that you will always be at Hogwarts."

Albus actually blushed. "You have a wonderful life, both of you."

Severus said sarcastically, "Thanks, Dad." But his eyes swam with tears. "I will come visit, and we will have a long talk after Hermione and I return."

"I would like that, son," Albus said, wiping his eyes with his sleeve.

There was another flurry of goodbyes and suddenly a flying carpet swept out of nowhere. Severus and Hermione tumbled onto it awkwardly as it swept them off their feet. It flew into the air, and they hung on for dear life. It trailed sparks of color, weaving a pattern as it went across the sky around the garden. Severus used his wand to right them, and he settled back and held Hermione against him. He knew Molly was responsible for this spectacle. It finally hovered near the gate to the property. Severus tumbled off the carpet. He climbed to his feet and helped Hermione onto the ground.

"Molly," he roared, "Get your body over here!"

Everyone froze and stared, shrinking into themselves and wishing they were somewhere else suddenly. The music stopped and all eyes were on Molly as she stood white with fear.

Ginny, who was standing near her mom, whispered, "Oh Merlin, now you've gone and done it. I told you that was too much."

Hermione tugged at his arm anxiously. "Severus, please!" He winked at her, and she felt the tension leave her.

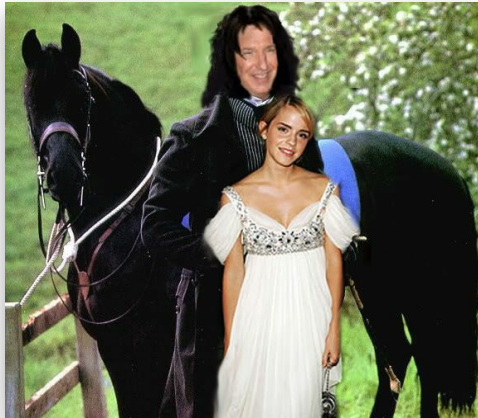
Molly came slowly, shaking. Severus in full Professor Snape mode stood towering over her and glaring. "Molly, that was the most undignified thing you've come up with so far. What possessed you?"

"I... I," she stuttered.

Severus roared with laughter, picked her up, and swung her around. "That was brilliant! I would have been disappointed had you not tried something totally outlandish."

Molly, relieved, laughed as the rest of the wedding party did too. Her legs nearly collapsed under her as he set her down. Arthur, who had come forward to fend off Severus' attack, laughed and slipped his arm around his wife's waist. "My Molly," he said affectionately, placing a kiss on her forehead.

A horse was waiting at the garden gate. Severus used his wand to change his outfit to a more comfortable black suit. They stood for a moment in front of the horse to allow another picture to be taken. He mounted the horse and drew Hermione into his lap.

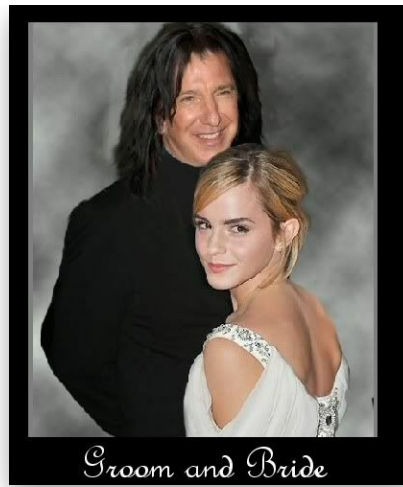


Hermione laughed with joy and kissed him deeply, giving him promises of the night to come.

Severus said for her ears only, "Wench, if you do not want to cause a spectacle here, you will allow me to get us away before igniting my passion."

Hermione's beautiful laugh rang out, and she said, "Let's away then, my love."

Severus smiled and turned the horse away from the garden, and they rode away, vanishing into thin air.



Thank you, Lisa, for all your hard work. I couldn't do this without you. You're the best!

Becky, thanks for your design work around my manips. They turned out fantastic.

At Last sung by famous Etta James

Chapter 50

Chapter 50 of 63

Having fled the Wizarding World, Hermione comes face to face with her past.

One minute Hermione was riding away on a horse safe in Severus' arms, and then they were suddenly in the snow. She was wrapped in a thick white fur cloak, and the entrance of the lair was looming in front of them.



She laughed when she saw Grendel at the entrance; he was wearing a top-hat on his head and a bow tie around his neck, both magically held on by a spell.



Severus swung down off the back of the horse and reached up to her. His hands slipped around her waist as he helped her off the horse. She realized her feet were now clad in thick, soft leather boots.

She looked at Severus with surprise and pleasure, and she was stunned by the look on his face. He looked so very happy. His eyes sparkled with glee as he held out his hand and led her to the entrance.

Grendel bowed low, and if that beast with all his teeth could smile, Hermione swore he just had.

She hugged his neck, "It's good to see you, Grendel." He licked her face and then headed into the cave. They followed. Hermione was wondering why Severus hadn't just used a Portkey to transport them into the lair when her mouth dropped open with a gasp.

"Severus!"

The many crystal formations shone like diamonds. There were candles floating throughout the cave, lighting the beauty of the crystal. Colors of the rainbow glanced off everything, making it a virtual world of color and light. The candlelight also warmed the cave, sending gentle, warm breezes around them like soft, warm blankets. Severus helped Hermione out of her beautiful fur cloak; with a wave of his hand, he created a small dance floor for them that was like a frozen pond. He took her hand as soft music played, and they danced slow and close, their bodies a single entity moving in sync to the music.

Grendel yipped and they turned to look at him fondly. He was dancing to the music with happiness.



Severus turned Hermione's face back to his, their lips met, and they kissed gently. Their hands caressed each other's faces, shoulders, and backs. Severus finally slipped an arm around Hermione, and they walked slowly through the cave. It was no longer the cold, lifeless cave it had been. Hermione could hear water before they came to a pond with water coming from a wall above, creating a waterfall. It was a replica of the pond she and Raven had swam in, with thick rich plant life around the rim and flowers blooming.



"Oh, Severus, it's wonderful. How did you do all this and when? You've been busy all week."

He squirmed a little. "I asked Dobby to help. I described what I wanted, and he made it happen. I wish I could have done it myself."

"It doesn't matter; you had it done. It comes from your heart," she whispered against his lips and gave him a soft, warm kiss.

"Come, we will bathe tomorrow in this pond; there is more to see," he said as he took her hand and led her further into the cave.

Grendel walked before them like a guide. He was so excited with the changes in his home that he bounced here and there, unable to hold in his happiness. There was a forest of trees next and pathways through the greenery. Rails lined the edge of a deep chasm, making it safer to pass by. The air was warm, fresh, and clean with flowers and real fruit trees, making it like a Garden of Eden.



"You are a romantic at heart. This is too much," she said, hugging him to her.

Finally they reached the wall with the hidden door.

Severus said, "Press your hand to the wall, Hermione."

She reached out and touched the wall. This time the wall shimmered, and a large oak door formed. Severus grabbed the doorknob and pushed the door open.

Hermione gasped. The inside was no longer a rough cave with boxes, treasure, furniture, and potion ingredients. Instead it was like a luxury hotel room in some posh resort. There was a living room with thick, warm carpet and a fireplace with a white, fur rug in front of the roaring fire.

When Hermione glanced at him seductively, Severus felt himself harden from her look. He took her in his arms and kissed her, his tongue dancing with hers a moment, and then he dragged himself away.

"Come see the rest, quickly!" he said with a laugh. "I can hardly contain my need for you, my wife."

Hermione turned to Grendel, gave him a pat on the head and whispered to him, "Guard duty."

Grendel bowed again and then went happily through the heavy door that closed behind him. He was quite happy to go frolic in his new jungle.

Severus cocked an eyebrow at Hermione. "You don't want to see the rest of the place? The bedroom is magnificent and so is the bathroom."

"Later," she whispered against his lips. "I want you now, Severus."

He bowed, swinging his hat off his head and letting it fly across the room. Neither of them saw it land. Severus guided Hermione to the soft thick white rug before the blazing fire, and they fell laughing with the joy of just being fully and completely married. He kissed her with such desire that she felt weak as she pressed herself against him. Severus' lips found her neck and then her shoulder, and he kissed a path over her bare shoulders and slipped the straps of her gown down her arms.



Hermione's hands worked to push the coat way from his shoulders and arms, letting it slide off behind him. She quickly undid his shirt and pressed her lips against his chest. Trailing her tongue around one of his nipples caused him to shiver, and Hermione smiled against his skin as he groaned with pleasure.

Severus loosened her hair letting it fall in cascades over her bare shoulders. He buried his hands into her hair and held her lightly against him as she kissed her way over his chest. Feeling her hands at his belt, he helped her undo the buttons there and then he pulled her dress over her head. His hand cupped one of her breasts gently and he kneaded it, thumbing the nipple into a hard little nub. Hermione pressed herself harder against his hand. As their tongues danced alternately with kisses on each other bodies and their fingers caressed each other almost reverently. With a flick of Severus fingers the rest of their clothing vanished.

Severus let her down gently, and followed her, covering her body with his. His lips went to her breasts, she buried her fingers in his thick, soft hair and held his head gently against her, urging him on. Her leg curled around him on one side, her foot caressed his leg. She could feel him rock hard against her thigh, and she slid her hand along his chest and down to his stomach until her fingers closed over the hard shaft. He drew a deep breath against her breast, moving his hips to press against her hand.

One hand slid to his neck and down his back, as she urged him to join her. She called out with her mind and found his thoughts there ready to join hers. She felt wrapped in such incredible warmth and love. She sent her love to him in return and knew that his eyes stung with tears. Full, complete overwhelming love was still hard for him to fathom. Then he moved and slid inside of her, a quick full stroke that filled her and caused her to groan with pleasure.

He began to slowly move in and out, drawing nearly all the way out before thrusting deep into her once again. Her legs wrapped around him, and she held him tightly against her as her hands traced over his back and then his buttocks as they moved, drawing him in and out. As she felt herself climaxing, she cried out his name, and he called out hers as they fell over the top.

They clung together and lay side by side with their legs entwined, their arms holding each other close. "Mrs. Snape, you're amazing," Severus whispered to her.

"Mr. Snape, so are you," she whispered lovingly as she kissed him again.

They cuddled together for a while, both exhausted from the days events.

Severus called, "Accio cape," and Hermione's white, fur cloak covered them in a cloud of warmth as they drifted off to sleep.

Hermione woke wrapped in unbelievable warmth, comfort, and contentedness. When she opened her eyes, she found Severus' face inches from hers. She kissed the tip of his nose softly, and he stirred, opening his eyes.

"Come," he said, smiling at her. Getting to his feet, he extended his hand and led her through the room to the bedroom door. Inside was a room with a four-poster, king-size bed that had thick bed posts carved with intricate designs. The posts held up a beautiful canopy. The bed was the show piece in the room. The wood was dark and heavy. The bedside tables, even more intricately carved, were mirrored. There was a fireplace along one wall. Lamps designed like Muggle electric lamps lit the room with soft candlelight. There were lounge chairs and wonderful shelves of books along the walls on the other side of the massive room.

"All the comforts of home," she called, pulling from him, running to look at the spines of the books. She looked like a naked wood nymph. "It's wonderful," she murmured, trying to take the splendor in.

She looked back at him, and he took her breath away. He stood tall and proud, not even trying to hide his nakedness. His body was strong and tight: broad chest, arms thick with muscles, narrow hips, and long legs with muscles all in the right places.

She left the books and walked over to him, drawing him against her.

"It's all so perfect and wonderful."

"You don't mind that we didn't go to a real resort or private island?"

She took his face in her hands pressed herself against him and slid her foot up his leg. "You won't hear me complain, Severus. This is wonderful. I only needed a private place to be alone with you. This is perfect, and I got to see Grendel. I can't tell you how cute he looks in that hat." She laughed. "He's like a person now. Like a family member."

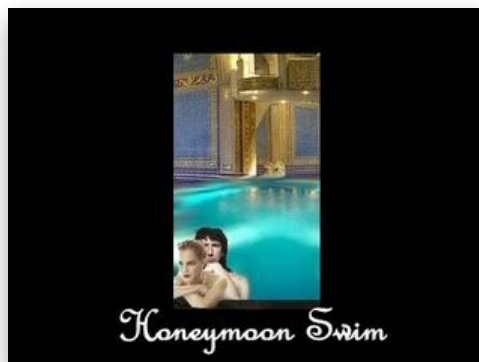
"He was my only family for years," he whispered and a tinge of sadness colored his voice.

"I know, my love, and he's so wonderful. I'm glad you had him with you."

He picked her up and carried her through a door across the room. Inside was a midnight blue, marble bathroom with a deep, Jacuzzi-style tub so big it was like a small pool with steps and he walked with her right into the pool.

It felt heavenly. He took bottles of soaps and shampoos and shampooed her hair and washed her body with a soft sponge. She in turn did the same thing for him. They laid against one side of the pool and kissed occasionally and talked.

Severus told her, "I couldn't imagine my life would turn out like this when I was digging in trashcans less than a year ago. Sometimes, I feel so blessed that I can hardly contain the emotion, and I do not want to cry all the time." He leaned against her shoulders as she leaned on the edge of the Jacuzzi. She'd braided her hair up out of the way. He bent and pressed a kiss against her shoulder.



"Severus, crying doesn't make you weak in my eyes; it makes you stronger. I know you have a million tears inside you that were not shed over the years. You stuffed

them all inside, and it's okay to feel. A lot of what you are feeling is happiness, and it's okay to cry when you're happy, too."

"Sometimes the emotion will not be denied." He let out a low, reluctant, nervous laugh. "I have a horror of really breaking down in front of Harry and begging him to forgive me for the way I treated him all those years."

Hermione turned in his arms and put her arms around him. "Let that go, Severus. He already has forgiven you. You both have finally begun to heal. If you have to ask forgiveness of him, he will understand and not think less of you. I think he's already beginning to love you. He sees you so differently now. He's a man now, and he's let go of the childish anger he had. This is the life and the happiness you both always deserved."

"Deserve... I doubt that, forgiven and a gift from God is more like it," Severus admitted.

"You really have embraced faith in God haven't you?" She led him out of the tub, and they slipped into thick robes and went to sit cross-legged on the bed.

"Yes, Hermione, I have. Harry's, Lily's, and Grendel's sacrifices have only given me glimpses of the love God had for us." He took her hand and kissed her palm. "You loving me is the icing on the cake. I am a forgiven man. Jesus lives in my heart, Hermione."

"That's good," she said, "because he lives in mine, too."

Severus drew her down into the bed, lying on his back he pulled her across his chest and kissed her. "Hermione?" he asked after a long quiet minute, looking up into her face.



"Yes, Severus," she replied, looking into his dark brown eyes.

"Do you want to have a baby someday?" he asked, almost afraid that she didn't.

Hermione felt her heart beat in her throat. What did he want her to say? Yes or no? She took a deep breath and said, "Yes, Severus. Nothing would make me happier than to give you a child."

He kissed her and said, "If it's a boy, I'd like to name him..."

They whispered together, "Raven."

The end...or perhaps the beginning of many more adventures to come.

I most want to thank Lisa, my beta. Her steadfast work and dedication to my stories has been such a blessing to me. She has hung in here for me, probably close to a year now. She even wants to beta more of my work. For that I am very grateful. Thank you so much, Lisa. The completion of this story would have never happened without you.

Becky, I want to thank you for your many kind words, encouragement, and support. The Quibbler page is wonderful, also the wedding and honeymoon manip frames and captions. The special effects on the "dance" manip is perfect.

beaweasely2, I want to thank you for teaching me so many things during the first three-fourths of this story. You helped me to improve my writing a great deal, and I

learned about punctuation, too. I was a difficult student.

I hope you all enjoyed the manips I did for the last couple chapters. I thank you, all, for the many reviews and thoughtful comments.

TPP Ladies, you put up with a lot from me. I appreciate your help and patient. Thank you SO much. We made it to the end!

I have written a "five years" in the future One-Shot. It should be up soon following Chapter 50.

I am only borrowing these characters. No infringement of JKR's rights intended.

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