

What Is This Thing Called Love?

by kittyperry

Severus is reinstated as Headmaster and calls his first staff meeting.

Chapter One: The New Year

Chapter 1 of 26

Severus is reinstated as Headmaster and calls his first staff meeting.

- (i) This chapter is in response to the September 2009's OWL theme on 'Teachers'.
- (ii) The characters and world of Harry Potter belong to J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this.
- (iii) And last, but by no means least, a big thank you to my lovely beta, Chelsea.

Severus Snape was furious. And no, before you impertinently ask, it wasn't because it was a bright sunny afternoon in July. For those previously unaware of this fact, let me enlighten you that summer was one of Severus' favourite times of the year. No annoying students and hardly any foolish staff members asking him ridiculous questions. No, summer and July were usually good times for Severus. However, this summer, the summer in which he had been reinstated as Headmaster of Hogwarts following the demise of the Dark Lord, when he had thought his troubles were over, some fool in the Ministry had decided that an educational reform was required. Severus did not particularly disagree with the need for reform; in fact, if the Ministry were not trying to interfere and suggest curriculum change, he would have instituted it himself, but what annoyed him and drove him to his current black mood, was being told to do it.

So Severus did the only thing possible: he objected. And being the Slytherin he was, he made use of the school's influential Board of Governors to back him up. Thankfully, Lucius Malfoy had managed to evade prosecution yet again. His argument that he had not participated in any form in the final battle, coupled with Narcissa's testimony that she had lied to the Dark Lord to help save Potter, were enough to allow them to carry on with business as usual.

Three days later, enough fear and pressure had been placed upon the Ministry that the smart arse, who had thought of enforcing an educational decree, was reshuffled into another department, and Severus was allowed to carry on according to his own devices. The fact that Dumbledore's portrait in the Ministry had vouched for Severus, and had insisted most politely that the Ministry had no cause to poke their noses into Hogwarts, helped tremendously. Being assisted by the dead old fart did not please Severus, but he was enough of a Slytherin to use all the aid he could get. Dire warnings and remarks about Umbridge and her time at Hogwarts in the now monthly Order meetings, where Severus was treated like a strange and curious butterfly, had the Potter brat speaking out publicly in *The Daily Prophet* supporting the current headmaster's decision to avoid Ministry meddling.

So Severus sat at his desk, toying with the idea of updating and modernizing Hogwarts curriculum. Finally, coming to a decision, Severus called McGonagall, Sprout, Flitwick and Slughorn, the Heads of the four Houses, to a meeting the following afternoon.

Minerva was the first to arrive. On seeing Severus seated not behind the headmaster's large desk, but instead on one of the armchairs cosily arranged around the low

coffee table, she smiled sheepishly at him. Severus smirked inwardly. Minerva had yet to get over the manner in which Dumbledore had tricked them all, and her guilt and remorse at her previous year's vindictive behaviour now made Minerva Severus' strongest ally. "Good afternoon, Severus," she said tentatively.

Severus nodded in greeting. "I won't start to explain why I've called this first staff meeting earlier than usual because there's no point repeating myself," said Severus briskly. Then pointing to the silver tea service, he asked, "Tea?"

As Minerva helped herself to tea, Filius Flitwick and Pomona Sprout arrived together. They too greeted Severus with bashful smiles.

Severus sighed. The two months since the final battle had done much to see him now hailed as a hero and dashing spy for the Order, but his staff who had been on holiday had still not come to terms with their previous treatment of him. This was going to be tedious, realised Severus, for even though he did enjoy watching them squirm, it would not lend itself to the smooth running of the school. "Have some tea, and we will begin once Horace turns up."

Not long after, Horace Slughorn arrived. He was panting, as if the mere act of walking was now starting to take its toll on the wizard. "Sorry I'm late," he said, when he had had time to get back his breath. Taking the cup of tea handed to him by Sprout, he sat himself down on the comfortable armchair left waiting for him.

"Right then," began Severus. "Since you all know how much I despise foolish time-wasting on pleasantries, let me get to the point directly. First, will you all kindly get over the fact that you all acted like idiots last year. You were meant to believe that I was a loyal Death Eater. If I hadn't been able to deceive you, then I wouldn't have stood much chance before the Dark Lord. This is a new year and a new beginning. Give me your bloody apologies so that I can accept them and we can move forward."

At this, there was a bark of laughter from Minerva. Pomona, too, twittered, and Filius chuckled. Horace who was the only one in the room, who had treated Severus with respect, smirked at the returning headmaster.

Standing up, Minerva walked up to Severus and gave him an awkward hug. Severus was not one for physical affection, but this he accepted. He even stood to hug Minerva back which caused her to break into tears and mumble into his shoulder about how sorry she was.

"There, there," said Severus, patting her back. "The war is over, and all is forgiven." When Minerva finally released him, Pomona came over and shook his hand. "We're pleased to have you back, Headmaster," she said. "This year, you'll see first-hand the loyalty of the badgers."

"I'm pleased to be here and I look forward to all the houses working together. There is much change ahead and I am eager to begin," replied Severus sincerely.

Filius wiped his eyes. "My dear boy, I am so sorry. I'm so glad you have given us a chance to apologise."

Severus nodded. He, too, was feeling unexpectedly touched by his colleagues' honest remorse.

"Now that that is over, let us go about the planning for next year." Severus, rather uncomfortable with his emotional display, was keen to move on. "Even before the Ministry attempted to meddle with the Hogwarts curriculum, I thought that it was time we made some categorical changes. Most of you have heard or know of the discussions I've had over the years with Dumbledore about the need to teach the students not only DADA, but also a more in-depth understanding of the Dark Arts, so that they may know the pitfalls in using such magic. The battle has made this understanding more vital than ever before. Many of our returning seventh years and sixth years have cast what were...due to their intent...Dark or at least Deeply Grey curses and hexes. This will have tainted their magic, changed their auras. We need to address this, especially in the NEWT-level classes."

Severus paused. "Well, speak up. Tell me what you think."

Minerva looked apprehensive, but finally nodded. "I agree, Severus. I know Harry and Mr. Longbottom have both used curses that, though relatively Light, have resulted in death. Miss Granger and Mr. Weasley have attested to killing parts of Voldemort's soul, and that's just what I know of some of my returning Gryffindors. There will be much need of your proposed reforms."

Once Minerva agreed, the others were quick to show their support.

"Right then," said Severus. "Now that we know we want to alter the curriculum with an introduction into the Dark Arts, specifically with how that relates to a change in magic and the control of magic, we get into the more tricky waters of staffing."

This comment was followed by a general air of amusement. Filling the DADA position had been for many years the year's biggest discussion.

Finally, it was Minerva who spoke. "I've been thinking; perhaps the junior years, especially the first to third years, could be taught by a combination of Mr. Potter and Miss Granger."

Severus was about to reject this plan, when Minerva raised her hand. "Please bear with me, Severus," she said. "Their DA produced and trained almost all of the children who fought in the last battle. Mr. Potter is, from all accounts, a good practical teacher, and Miss Granger is excellent in theory. If we can get them to do the junior years, then you can handle the Dark Arts part of the curriculum for the fifth- and seventh-year classes. This way, we only need to bring in someone part-time to teach the fourth- and sixth-years and fill in the gaps that remain in lesson construction, if you are unable to handle all of the fifth- and seventh-year syllabus. I know William Weasley is keen to spend more time with his family, especially now that his wife is with child, and he may be willing to step in."

"Hmm..." said Severus, thoughtfully. "Although I dislike the idea of Potter and Miss Granger on staff, the idea of Mr. Weasley coming in has merit. Let us put the idea before them and see if it is doable. Any comments or issues on this course of action?"

When the others did nothing more than show their agreement, Filius more gushingly than was required on Miss Granger's excellence in theory, Severus moved on to the next issue.

"Horace, I know you've been wanting to retire. Do you think you can go on for another year, or should we start looking for a replacement?"

A.N./ Love it or hate it, please to let me know what you think.

Chapter Two: Staffing requirements

Chapter 2 of 26

The staff meeting continues, and plans are made for the new curriculum.

- (i) This chapter is yet again in response to the September 2009's OWL theme on 'Teachers'.
- (ii) Thank you everyone for the kind reviews. Please do continue to let me know what you think.
- (iii) The characters and world of Harry Potter belong to J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this.
- (iv) And last but by no means least, a big thank you to my lovely, amazing beta, Chelsea.

Severus knew from long-term experience that Horace Slughorn had never enjoyed hard work. However, Severus also knew that there was no other Potions instructor available at short notice to fill the portly man's shoes. Thus, Severus's question of Horace's capability of carrying on for another year was more to appease and flatter than to encourage the Potions professor's retirement. Minerva, having long served as Deputy Headmistress, seemed quick to realise this move. It was something Severus himself had learnt to do from the old meddler, Dumbledore.

Horace seemed particularly pleased at being asked about his ability to continue. He felt that the question of his return was second only to the DADA situation. With a broadly sweeping gesture to himself, Horace said, "Oh, I think I should be able to manage one last year, dear boy. But if you could find me some help with the more difficult and time consuming brewing, and of course the marking, it would really help these old bones."

Severus looked thoughtful. As he contemplated who to use to fill in for Horace, Minerva spoke up. "Severus, I hate to say this, but based on OWL, and sixth year results, Miss Granger has been one of the best students in Potions for the last fifty years. The only person to have done better has, of course, been yourself. Perhaps we could have Miss Granger help with brewing the more standard Potions for the infirmary and, of course, assist with the grading. She would make an excellent teaching assistant."

"Do you want your bloody Gryffindor Princess to take over all of Hogwarts, woman?" demanded Severus. Unfortunately, even as Severus spoke up to challenge Minerva's suggestion, he could not help but agree. Miss Granger was the ideal choice. She was an excellent swot and would work diligently and be glad to be of help. As Severus finished speaking, he could see Minerva bristling and gearing up for a fight.

"Nonsense, Severus. You know Miss Granger is the most qualified of the returning seventh years. She's got plenty of experience having taught most of her house-mates, both in her year as well as in the years below. And she's the type that won't favour her friends or peers and will be a good teaching assistant."

Severus conceded the point. Rubbing the bridge of his nose, Severus finally said, "I am forced to concur. Miss Granger is a good option. But do you not want the girl to study for her NEWTs? Though, in all probability she could have taken her NEWTs in her sixth year if she wanted to."

Minerva laughed. Filius, too, seemed amused, and added, "Even though the children were on the run from You-Know-Who, I would wager a handful of galleons that it is most likely our remarkable Miss Granger has kept up and completed working through the seventh year syllabus already."

Filius' comment was met with much chuckling. The only one who looked concerned was Horace. "I don't agree, Severus. Harry out performed Miss Granger in all the Potions lessons I held. Why some of his brewing techniques were outstanding."

"Yes, Horace," said Severus. "But the boy was cheating. I know for a fact that he used my old Potions textbook, with my notations and alterations. If they used the same text, Miss Granger would outperform Potter every time. I will stake my life on it. Besides, Potter hates Potions, and he would have no ability whatsoever to mark a piece of writing."

"Oh, undoubtedly," said Minerva. "Severus is right. Harry is a good boy, and good at practical defence skills, but he's never been able to write a decent essay without Miss Granger's help." Minerva's remarks were met with much chuckling.

"Right then," said Severus. "We shall approach Potter and Miss Granger about their willingness to take on more tasks along with their NEWTs. Hopefully they will be willing to work with us. But I shall of course oversee all their work. I can't have standards at Hogwarts falling, Minerva, even if it means using a time-turner and teaching all the classes myself."

"I hope it won't come to that, Severus. We will all do our best. Please don't worry," said Minerva. She had seen first-hand Severus' attempts to keep the school together under the regime of the Dark Lord, and she realised how keen Severus was to put the school's reputation back where it had always been.

Once it seemed that Horace had no more concerns about Miss Granger acting as his teaching assistant, Severus went on with the next point in his agenda. "Well, the next order of business is that I want to introduce two new electives. One on Healing and Medicinal Potions, and the second on Recent History to augment Binns sessions on the Goblin and Giant wars. Though these subjects won't be offered at NEWTs which are Ministry held exams, given the recent events, I feel it is imperative that students are equipped for the future."

At every one's nods of agreement and looks of interest, Severus went on. "It is important for the curriculum to cover these topics. We could teach these at sixth and seventh year level. These students are in the most vulnerable of positions and getting a better perspective on the war will undoubtedly be useful."

Surprisingly, it was Pomona who spoke up. "Yes, that sounds like a brilliant plan, Severus. I did bring up the subject of Healing and Medicinal Potions with Dumbledore from time to time, because many of my Hufflepuffs are predisposed to Healing, but of course, the timing was never right, and we didn't have the resources. I think I can have some of my former students who are at St. Mungo's volunteer to handle some of the components of the elective."

"Thank you, Pomona," said Severus. "And perhaps if we ask Poppy, she would be willing to do some teaching, too. I don't expect that it will be a large group, but it would be good to have the option available for those who want it."

"Agreed," said Minerva. "But who would do the Recent History lessons?"

It was Filius who spoke up this time. "Perhaps it would be good to get two or more lecturers for this, or even have a monthly symposium, where different speakers address different topics? We could ensure the students understand the events from different perspectives then. And it would not be a burden for anyone to address the senior students once a month during a lunch-hour, or evening session."

Severus found the idea intriguing. "Hmm... that plan does have merit, Filius. I think I could even get Lucius to speak about the Death Eaters and the reasons why he thought the Dark Lord the only option for the purebloods."

Minerva seemed to blanch at the mention of getting Lucius to speak. But finally seemed resigned, and nodded. "Yes, it makes sense for the students to understand what drove the pureblood ideology, if only so that it can be analysed and refuted."

Severus was surprised and pleased that the others seemed to supportive of his changes. His countenance lightened significantly and his shoulders noticeably relaxed. "More tea?" he asked everyone.

Soon more tea was served. Into this mood of relaxation, Filius spoke. "Given Severus' plans for change, I feel it is important to have a redefining of Muggle Studies. We need to find ourselves a good teacher who can remove the damage done by the Carrows. Perhaps our Miss Granger could help with some sessions on this topic as well."

Severus couldn't help but laugh. "Does everyone feel that it is completely pointless for the Princess to come back to finish her education?"

"Oh, no," said Filius, quick to clarify. "I think it is vital Miss Granger come back, especially given the new electives and the DADA's change in focus. But we as teachers all know that Miss Granger finished working her way through the year's textbooks and curriculum long before she ever entered the classroom every September. She could

have sat for her NEWTs and passed at the end of her fifth year if she really had wanted to."

Severus sighed. Then said tiredly, "Minerva, will you draft the appropriate letters please, and invite the prospective staff members in for a discussion with me, and then us five sometime in the next fortnight? I shall begin working on the syllabi in the meantime."

A.N. Love it or hate it, please to let me know what you think.

Chapter Three: The Return of Miss Granger

Chapter 3 of 26

Minerva and Severus speak with Hermione. Plans are made about her return to Hogwarts.

(i) Thank you ever so much for the kind reviews. I'm really pleased to hear your opinion of the story.

(ii) The characters and world of Harry Potter belong to J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this, just endless enjoyment.

(iii) This chapter is in response to the October 2009's OWL theme on 'The Dark Arts'.

At the conclusion of the staff meeting, it was agreed between Severus and Minerva that she should owl Harry, Hermione and Bill, and arrange a meeting at Grimmauld Place. Sirius's old home and now Harry's abode was one again the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix.

When the owls arrived, much discussion arose.

Hermione was curious. She had not had the opportunity to see much of Professor Snape since his miraculous survival and pardon. She hoped he didn't blame her and the others for leaving him there on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. She chastised herself for her ignorance. Surely she could have seen he was going into potion induced shock and suspected the antivenin was kicking in to halt all motor functions. But no, she'd been fooled by the loss of blood, and it was left to the Bloody Baron, who had been given the charge of watching over the Slytherin headmaster, to raise the alarm and bring the Healers to retrieve Snape.

Harry was rather uncomfortable at the prospect of seeing Snape. He had spoken up and attested to Severus' role as spy and agent for the Order, but still found the thought of Severus' love for his mother slightly disturbing. He felt guilt and embarrassment and did his best to avoid meeting with the man whenever possible. He tried his best to avoid thinking about the reason for the meeting, though Hermione's constant discussion of the subject made it virtually impossible to ignore.

Following Harry's complaints of Hermione's frequent mention of Snape, Ron bluntly said to Harry, "I don't care if he was working under orders. He is still a slimy git and nothing is going to make me want to be his friend."

This cheered Harry considerably, and when Hermione next brought up the topic, he replied, "I really don't want to talk about Snape. I've never liked him and he's always hated me. Can we just drop it?"

"Oh, Harry," said Hermione. "So much of that may have been an act. Surely you realise he had to hate us if he wanted to maintain his cover as a Death Eater."

Harry was not convinced and grunted. "You can think what you like. I agree with Ron. He's a git. He'll always be a git."

On the day of the meeting, Ron, Ginny, and Molly, as well as Bill, Harry and Hermione were gathered around the kitchen table, awaiting the arrival of Minerva and Severus. There was a feeling of anticipation but also tension in the air. Minerva's owl had been to the point; she had requested a meeting but had given no hint to the reason behind it.

When the doorbell rang, Molly and Hermione both stood up. Though, finally, it was Kreacher who opened the door and announced the arrivals with the words, "Headmaster Snape and Professor McGonagall, Harry Potter, sir."

As Severus and Minerva sat down, Molly bustled about gathering the tea things and making sure everyone was served. Hermione found this slightly odd, since the house was now Harry's. *Shouldn't Harry or Kreacher do the serving of the tea?* mused Hermione silently. But she dismissed the thought as uncharitable and assumed Molly was just being her usual motherly self.

Minerva, however, seemed to have no such illusions. "It is nice to see you all, of course," she began, "but our meeting today is with Harry, Miss Granger and William."

Molly seemed to be gearing up for a tirade when Severus spoke up. "Perhaps if Miss Granger, Potter and Bill would like to accompany us to the library, we can proceed with our meeting."

Harry stood up, looking, as usual, uncomfortable. Bill, however, seemed perfectly at ease and said, "Of course, Severus." This left Hermione to smile brightly at Minerva before following the others into the library.

Once the group was seated comfortably in the library, Severus got straight to the point. "It has been agreed that the Hogwarts' curriculum needs to be completely rethought following the fall of the Dark Lord. We are especially keen to begin teaching the older students a more nuanced understanding of the Dark Arts." Here, Severus paused and looked at Minerva.

Seeing her cue, Minerva continued. "Harry, would you and Miss Granger consent to teaching the junior classes Defence Against the Dark Arts? I advised Severus of your proven skill in the practical aspect of the subject and of Miss Granger's excellent grasp of the theoretical concepts."

Hermione's face broke into a delighted smile at this praise from her Head of House.

Harry, however, seemed insulted; his face darkened. "I'm not coming back," he said rudely. "I've been speaking to people, and I've been offered a chance to play Seeker for the Tutshill Tornados. I'm done with studies."

"You never told me that," said Hermione shrilly. "Were you waiting until I was about to leave for the Hogwarts Express and break it to me, then? You need your NEWTs

Harry; there's so much we still haven't learnt."

"Quite," said Severus.

"I don't care," said Harry defiantly, interrupting Severus. "I don't want to go back. I want to move forward. Besides, you don't have the right to tell me what to do. I'm my own man now. It's time I had some fun. I've always done what others wanted me to do."

Severus and Minerva shared a troubled glance. Potter had always been difficult, but he had never been openly rude. This new development of unreasonable anger was worrying.

Minerva placated Potter. "Of course, Harry, it is your decision to not come back. We shall miss you, though."

Harry grunted in response.

Minerva shook her head sadly then looked over to Severus. At his nod, she said, "Well, Harry, I think your place in this discussion is over."

As Harry escaped the library, Hermione was left feeling doubtful. She had not missed the significant glances her professors had shared. She did not know what it all meant, but she did realise instantly that something was afoot.

Once the four were alone, Hermione said, "I want to come back, and if you want me, I'll help out, teach, whatever."

Minerva smiled, and Severus, who was watching the two women, hid a smirk. He didn't doubt that the know-it-all would be willing to do whatever was asked of her.

Bill now spoke up and asked, "All that's very well, but why am I needed for this discussion?"

"I'm coming to that," said Severus. "We were hoping that you would be willing to take on the senior students. You've got plenty of experience with defensive magic for the Dark Arts and Objects from your experiences at Gringotts. We felt that you would be ideal to work on a part-time basis. I shall, of course, cover the purely Dark Arts section."

Bill grinned. "I'd love the opportunity to come back to Hogwarts. I really don't want to be at Gringotts at present. The hours are killing, and I don't have enough time for Fleur. Do you think I could take on the DADA position full-time, especially now young Harry has turned your offer down?"

"Oh, that shouldn't be a problem," said Minerva. "We approached you for a part-time position because we didn't know if you'd be willing to completely leave Gringotts. This is a much better arrangement; don't you think so, Severus?"

"Definitely," agreed Severus. Then taking on a thoughtful tone, he said, "I might have to include a larger proportion of instruction than previously planned about the Dark Arts, if Potter's behaviour is an indication." Turning to look directly at Hermione, he said, "Miss Granger, has Potter's behaviour seemed erratic, destructive, angry or in any way changed since the Battle of Hogwarts?"

Hermione looked perturbed, then admitted, "We've all changed, really. I seem to lose control as much as the boys, though they seem more vindictive, more hurtful. Ron is especially difficult, irritable and crude." Hermione blushed then carried on in determination. "I think he's using food and sex for comfort. He pretends that I am still his girlfriend, but I know he and Harry have been going to clubs and getting drunk and picking up girls. Ginny doesn't know." She looked quickly at Bill. "Please don't tell your mother or Ginny, Bill. That's why I'm still staying at Grimmauld Place instead of trying to retrieve my parents from Australia. I thought it was important not to leave the boys to their own devices."

Bill nodded.

Hermione continued. It was as if now she had begun to unburden herself she could not stop. "I just seem to burst into tears more than I did before. I seem to not be able to control my emotions as much." Then, thoughtfully, she added, "Is that why you're changing the school curriculum?"

"Well spotted," said Severus snidely.

Seeing Minerva's cross look, he went on, "Magic is, in truth, neither entirely Dark nor entirely Light. Even the most simple and Light of spells can be used to hurt, if the intention is there. Think for example of the tickling charm; if applied continuously, it can be a method of torture. Much of magic is based on intent, and when even simple spells are used, the Darker intent calls upon the Darkness that lies within. It is insidious, silent and very dangerous. Potter, Weasley, Longbottom, yourself... you have all murdered a part of Voldemort's soul. Your act was for the greater good, but your intent was to kill, to destroy. This has brought out the Darkness within you, and the more Darkness there is, the more a person's personality can change. Knowing the Dark Arts allows the practitioner to understand the dangers, thus giving more control and protection to the user."

He paused. Minerva and Bill both nodded. They knew what Severus spoke of. At their sign of encouragement, Severus continued, "Forewarned is forearmed. Why do you think I begged Dumbledore repeatedly to let me teach the DADA position? I knew this would come to pass. I, myself, feed the Darkness swirling within me through my use of hurtful words, through anger, isolation. I can control the Darkness that cries out for more blood, more destruction, because I feed the beast within me through the manifestation of people's fear and dislike. It is not enough; it is never enough when you have walked in the Dark as much as I have, but it gives me some modicum of control."

Hermione's face registered her shock. But she was not afraid. She realised the intent behind Professor Snape's frank admission and his strong need to teach the students. Tentatively, she said, "If Bill is coming back full-time, what do you need me for?"

This caused Minerva to smile and think to herself, *Well done, Miss Granger*. For it was obvious the girl was shocked but determined to help. She was undoubtedly a true Gryffindor, indeed.

"Patience, Miss Granger," said Severus. "Let us deal with Bill here, first."

Then, addressing Bill, he said, "Will you be able to come in for an official meeting on Friday? We can iron out the details of your contract and your syllabus then. After that, I shall expect you to come in for a meeting with the Senior Staff Committee the following week."

"Of course," said Bill.

"How much notice do you need to give the Goblins?" asked Minerva.

"Just a month," said Bill. "Don't worry, I've got plenty of leave that's pending and should be completely done with all Gringotts matters by the first of September."

"Excellent," said Severus before walking up to Bill and offering him his hand. "Welcome on board."

"Yes," said Minerva. "It's wonderful to have you back, William."

Bill grinned at the two professors and winked at Hermione before making his way out of the room.

After Bill's departure, Hermione looked expectantly at her professors.

Minerva smiled kindly. "Miss Granger, Defence is not the only subject in which you excel and in which Hogwarts is short-staffed. As you know, Professor Slughorn came

out of retirement in your sixth year rather unhappily. He is keen to have more rest, and we were hoping you would consent to acting as his teaching assistant. You would do all of the marking, all of the basic brewing for the infirmary and run the remedial sessions for the failing students."

"Of course," said Hermione with no hesitation. "I've loved Potions from my very first lesson." She blushed again before looking up to meet Severus' dark eyes. "Your opening speech, Professor, it has stayed with me ever since I heard it. ...*The beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses... I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death...* It was the most powerful speech I've ever heard, and Potions has stayed one of my foremost favourite subjects ever since."

Minerva smiled. It was obvious that Severus was wrong-footed at Hermione's obvious reverence for Potions and the professor who taught the subject.

Severus was, indeed, extremely uncomfortable. He was very aware that he had never been kind to the young woman who looked at him with such shining eyes. He had abused her intellect, been cruel to her friends and done his best to reduce her to a quivering puddle whenever he was given the opportunity. To hear her speak of him and his subject with such evident passion caused him to wonder how much more she could have achieved if he had taken the time to actually instruct her. He, however, shook the thought aside; he had been a Death Eater; he had not possessed the opportunity to coddle a Gryffindor Muggle-born.

Feeling more in control, Severus said, "Good, I'm glad that's agreed. The next order of business is Muggle Studies. During the past year, it too has suffered under the brutal ignorance of the Carrows. We would like you to help teach a part of the course, as you know the Muggle world intimately. I am quite familiar with the Muggle world myself, but until we find a full-time professor, we will need help in getting the syllabus back on track."

Hermione was overjoyed at being asked to help out. Her delight was evident as she said, "Oh, yes, I'd love to help with Muggle Studies. It always seemed to me that the syllabus was extremely outdated, even before the events of the last year."

"Undeniably," agreed Severus.

"But what about my NEWTs?" Hermione asked. "When will I go to class?"

Minerva laughed before suggesting, "Could you not sit for some or even most of your subjects with the students who attended Hogwarts last year? You were always good in your work; I'm sure you've kept up."

Hermione blushed before nodding. "I had been studying while we were on the run. It seemed foolish not to take the textbooks with me. It was the one thing that kept me sane, especially after Ron deserted us. I clung to the hope of a normal future, where I would be able to sit for my NEWTs. And now with the tensions here, it is my solace. I can hide away in the books."

Severus well understood the escape books and work provided. He said almost kindly, "You will, of course, after your NEWTs, continue to follow the special Dark Arts sessions I will conduct, and even most of Bill's modules. We are also planning on introducing special electives on Healing and Medicinal Potions and Recent History, which I'm sure you will find interesting."

"Oh," said Hermione, her eyes shining with excitement. "I tried learning some Healing last year. I can't wait to learn more." Gathering her courage, she next asked, "Could I perhaps take on an apprenticeship? There is so much I still want to learn."

Severus shook his head. "The idea does have merit, but I would advise you to take this first year back as a teaching assistant settling in. You can, if you so desire, take on an apprenticeship the following year. What would you like to apprentice in?"

Hermione blushed. "Everything, really, but I think I'd like to begin with Charms. It's always come easily to me." Then she looked directly at Minerva and said, "I've always wanted to learn to be an Animagus, too."

Minerva chuckled. "I'll inform Filius to prepare himself for an apprentice in the not too distant future in that case. As for being an Animagus, if you have time during your busy year, we can work on it over the course of evening meetings. If not, the following year will suffice."

Hermione blushed. She was very pleased at the prospect of being able to indulge in her love of learning.

Severus, himself, had always wanted to learn to be an Animagus. That Potter, Black and Pettigrew had managed the transformation, while he had not, had pained him. Seeing a window of opportunity and knowing how Minerva was determined to mend their strained friendship, he said, "Well, Minerva, if you're giving private lessons, I, too, would like to be included."

Minerva was pleased. Smiling broadly she said, "Of course, it will be a delight to teach you both."

It was next decided that Hermione would present herself at Hogwarts the following Wednesday for an official meeting with Severus and a meeting with the Senior Staff Committee a week after.

Details concluded, the trio vacated the library to be met by Harry and the Weasleys.

Molly once again bustled about and suggested that they come to the kitchen for tea. Severus was about to refuse, but realised it was a good opportunity to observe Molly and the youngest Weasley male. He had not forgotten that Molly had killed Bellatrix Lestrange. Molly, too, would be feeling the effects of casting Dark magic.

Once everyone was resettled around the table, Ron said, "I'm not coming back, either. If Harry is going off to play Quidditch, then I don't see why I should be stuck at school learning pointless things. George needs help in the shop, and I've agreed to keep the books for him. I'll have money in my pocket and some freedom to have fun."

"Oh, Ron," said Hermione. "I'm going back, and it is really important to finish. Professor Snape is going to have special sessions for DADA. It will be really interesting."

Ron glared at Hermione and said rudely, "You've always been a swot. You can play with your books. I've got more important things to do than mess around with useless information."

Before anyone can intervene, Ginny piped up. "If Harry and Ron aren't going back, I don't want to, either."

This was too much for a listening Molly. Turning to look sternly at Ginny, she said, "Nonsense, young lady; as long as you live under my roof, you will go back and finish your seventh year."

The quote from Severus' opening speech is taken from J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997) p. 102.

A.N. Love it or hate it, please to let me know what you think.

Chapter Four: Preparations

Chapter 4 of 26

Ron and Hermione break up unpleasantly. Hermione returns to reside at Hogwarts.

- (i) Thank you everyone for the kind reviews. I'm really pleased to hear your opinion of the story.
- (ii) The characters and world of Harry Potter belong to J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this, just endless enjoyment.
- (iii) And last, but by no means least, a big thank you to my lovely beta, Chelsea.

Hermione spent the rest of July, following Professors McGonagall and Snape's visit, studying. The meetings at Hogwarts had gone well, and Hermione had accepted the post of Teaching Assistant for Potions. Following discussions with Professor McGonagall, who had insisted Hermione call her Minerva, Hermione had decided that she would sit for her NEWTs in Charms, Transfiguration, Potions, Arithmancy, Astronomy, Herbology, Ancient Runes and DADA. Thus, her days were spent reading and revising furiously. Harry and Ron ridiculed her efforts, Ron even commenting that it was obscene to sit for eight NEWTs. Hermione tried to grin, to pretend that they were merely teasing her as before, but the pain in her heart at their callous behaviour ate at her constantly. She tried to explain to Harry, who at least would occasionally listen, that studying was her mechanism for coping with the trauma of the war.

As she became more and more involved in her revision, Hermione tried to ignore Harry and Ron's increasingly alarming behaviour. Hermione felt that, as long as the boys pretended to come home at night, even as they continued to live their hedonistic lifestyle, nothing too bad could occur. All this changed on Harry's birthday.

On his birthday, *The Daily Prophet* printed an article on Harry's new career in Quidditch, an obvious publicity stunt by the owner of the Tornados. However, the article was accompanied by a series of photographs showing off their new star...Harry...out and about, enjoying London nightlife on his eighteenth birthday. Hermione had not been invited to the night out, and Ginny had not been given permission. Harry looked pleased and drunk, but what captured Hermione's attention was Ron. For in each of Harry's pictures, in the background stood an extremely smug looking Ron, generally kissing and fondling some scantily clad woman. Hermione had tried to ignore Ron's drinking and womanising, but this was just too much to dismiss. The photographs in the newspapers ensured that Hermione had to do nothing other than to display *The Daily Prophet* prominently on the breakfast table the following morning and wait for Ron to emerge as he usually did around noon to stuff his face with Kreacher's marvellous cooking.

Ron did not even attempt to deny the silent accusation in her eyes. He merely smiled cockily at her and said, "I guess you know I've found other women...real women...who are willing to show a bloke a good time. You're not the only cunt in town, Hermione, and since you're not ready for sex, and I was..."

His voice trailed off then. He suddenly seemed to realise that he was not only speaking to his ex-girlfriend, but also his long-term friend. He tried to grin sheepishly, but he failed.

Hermione did not respond for a long moment. Then, looking Ron squarely in the eyes, she said, "I understand you wanting to have sex. What I don't understand is why you had to lie. You could have just said we weren't working and broken it off like a man. Not waited for someone else to do the dirty work for you, like a cowardly child." Hermione laughed bitterly then shook her head as if to clear her thoughts. "I should feel hurt, jealous; instead, I just feel an odd sort of relief."

Ron shrugged again. He did not seem to care.

Once Hermione and Ron's relationship was officially over, living at Grimmauld Place became almost unbearable. The boys seemed determined to party all the time, to have strange women around, to drink and make as much noise as was possible. Desperate to find some peace and study, a week following Harry's birthday found Hermione writing to Minerva. She had, after all, nowhere else to go.

Minerva, on receiving Hermione's letter, immediately realised the unsaid pain underlying the request to relocate the Hogwarts earlier than anticipated. Minerva, like many others, had seen the photographs in the newspaper and could easily guess how uncomfortable the situation at Grimmauld Place now was.

Severus did not refuse Minerva's request to house Miss Granger. It was to his benefit if the girl was ensconced within Hogwarts. She could be better prepared for her duties.

Minerva's letter welcoming Hermione to Hogwarts arrived that very same evening. Hermione was so moved at the kindness in the letter and the speed in which the dispatch had been sent that she wasted no time in packing her belongings. Her year on the run had taught her well, and soon all of her things scattered around the library and the rest of Grimmauld Place were carefully packed in her beaded handbag. One last quick run around the house, confirming that everything was packed, a letter each to Harry and Ron informing them of her departure to Hogwarts, and Hermione was ready.

"Kreacher," called Hermione, her cloak and bag placed on the kitchen table. When Kreacher appeared, she said, "Thank you, Kreacher, for the excellent care and the wonderful food. I am leaving for Hogwarts tonight."

Kreacher did not respond.

Hermione smiled gently. "I know you will take good care of Harry and Ron, so I shall not tell you to."

Kreacher bowed low. "Miss be the best Mudblood Kreacher know."

Hermione laughed. "Thank you again, Kreacher," she said, before walking out the door and disappearing with a loud crack.

Hermione Apparated in front of the gates just as the first stars were appearing in the night sky. She wondered if she should have given warning that she was turning up almost instantly, but then she thought back to the carefully worded letter and suspected that Professor McGonagall expected her promptly.

In fact, not long after she approached the gates and touched them with her wand, she saw Hagrid lumbering towards her, his lantern bobbing in the evening gloom. Hagrid's warm hug, though bone crushing, was extremely welcome to Hermione, who was feeling particularly fragile emotionally. His cheerful welcome, his patter about the rebuilding of the castle and the putting to rights of the grounds, filled the minutes as they walked companionably up to the castle.

On reaching the Entrance Hall, Hermione was next met by a smiling Minerva, who opened her arms out to the girl. The sympathy so clearly visible in her Head of House's eyes was Hermione's undoing. She flung herself into the waiting arms and cried as though her heart was breaking. Severus, just leaving the Great Hall after a late supper, quietly backed away and stood in the shadows watching the reunion. He had read Miss Granger's letter and had listened to Minerva speculate as to the reasons behind Miss Granger's request for an earlier than expected arrival at Hogwarts.

Another lost waif finding a home in Hogwarts, thought Severus, not unkindly, for he acknowledged that he, too, was one such waif. His house in Spinner's End held no pleasant memories for him, and he, too, considered Hogwarts his real home.

Hermione enjoyed the quiet solitude of Hogwarts. She had fallen in love with the suite of rooms she had been given that lay quite close to the Potions classroom. She loved best her own tiny study, done up with walnut panelling and numerous bookshelves, all waiting for her collection. It had a sturdy desk, an almost feminine straight-backed chair, upholstered in a warm russet velvet; a comfortable, if well-worn armchair in smart brown leather, with a matching footstool which sat, most importantly, in front of a large fireplace to keep it all warm, since even in summer, the dungeons she now dwelt in became quite cold in the evenings. The room held no paintings, although the floor was thankfully almost entirely covered by a large and thick, if somewhat faded, Persian carpet in emerald green. A large faded tapestry depicting the goddess Venus rising from the waves led to her elegant bedroom. The bedroom itself was ivory and gold, with a large four-poster bed with elegant roses and vines carved on it. Another fireplace took up one wall, with a large window magically charmed to show the view from the Clock Tower which overlooked the old courtyard, occupying another. Yet another thick and faded, but stunningly beautiful, Persian carpet covered the flagstone floor, this time in shades of Prussian blue. She also had her own tiny bathroom in sumptuous white marble, and Hermione felt that she had been given the perfect place to reside. Her new domain was guarded by a painting of a haughty young witch with flashing green eyes, dressed in a long black cloak, by the name of Esmeralda, who upon discovering that Hermione was willing to chat, became much more cheerful and friendly.

She spent her days in the library and in her little study or out by the lake enjoying the glorious summer sunshine as she lay under a shady tree, her books spread out in a semi-circle around her. She helped finalise the Muggle Studies syllabus, as well as assisting anyone who wanted a second pair of hands. After the difficult days on the run and the trauma of trying to keep the boys together, even as they resented her for her interference since the fall of Voldemort, these peaceful, industrious days were a balm to Hermione's body and spirit.

As the hot days of August came to a close, the seventh and fifth year students sitting for NEWTs and OWLs returned. Hermione, despite the pain in her heart at the lack of communication from Harry and Ron following her move to Hogwarts, did as well as was expected of her. She had always been good at using work to distract herself, and on realising how much she had been used by her so-called best friends, she had promised herself to focus on getting the best results possible. Having Minerva's silent support and Pomona Sprout's motherly concern helped, too.

It surprised Hermione to see how many of her classmates sat for the delayed NEWTs. Watching them all, she realised that very few of her batch-mates would be returning to retake their seventh year. From the Gryffindors, only Neville, Dean Thomas and Hermione would be coming back. This did make sense however, for Hermione realised it would be mostly the Muggle-borns who had missed out on an entire year; the others had all been permitted to attend under Voldemort's reign.

Once OWLs and NEWTs were completed, the castle once more returned to a final weekend of solitude, as last-minute preparations for the arrival of the new students were undertaken. Hermione watched and assisted wherever she was needed. She somehow felt that coming back to Hogwarts had been the best decision she had ever made.

For Muggle Studies, Severus and Minerva recruited Andromeda Black Tonks. Andromeda was keen to leave her past behind, having lost not only her Muggle-born husband but also her daughter and her son-in-law in the war. Unlike other purebloods, Andromeda knew the Muggle world fairly well, and the selection was pleasing to everyone, even the Ministry and the Board of Governors. Her arrival early Saturday morning with her grandson Teddy Lupin caused almost ecstatic joy among the Hogwarts house-elves. There had not been an infant in residence at Hogwarts in over half a century, and the elves were delighted at the opportunity to devote themselves to Teddy's care. Hermione found this very amusing, especially now that she better understood the house-elves' need to serve.

Andromeda's arrival was soon followed by that of Bill and Fleur Weasley. They arrived around lunchtime, with a plethora of luggage. That evening, a special celebration was held in the staff room for the new team. The party, with its delicious food, laughter and gentle conversation, made the castle resemble not only an educational institution but also a home to Hermione. Surrounded by cheerful, happy people, Hermione felt like she was finally a real part of the Hogwarts family. A feeling of peace descended upon her, and she felt ready to take on her new role as Teaching Assistant.

A.N. Love it or hate it, please to let me know what you think.

Chapter Five: The first of September

Chapter 5 of 26

The students return. A prophecy is made.

- (i) Thank you for the kind reviews. I'm really pleased to hear your opinion of the story.
- (ii) The characters and world of Harry Potter belong to J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this, just endless enjoyment.
- (iii) And last, but by no means least, a big thank you to my lovely beta, Chelsea.

The first of September that year dawned on a Wednesday. Bill had been dispatched to ride the Hogwarts Express with the incoming students while everyone else rushed around double-checking that everything was perfectly prepared. There was an air of anticipation and excitement in the castle; Minerva had smiled brightly over breakfast before dashing off to speak to the house-elves. Even Professor Snape, who generally seemed so calm and collected, appeared distracted. Hermione began to realise that this would be a very important year for Hogwarts, given the many changes that the headmaster was instituting.

As twilight approached, Hermione made her way down to the Great Hall. She had taken more care than usual with her appearance, donning a pretty green robe with a wide square neck adorned with delicate golden thread work. She had even taken the trouble to apply a coat of mascara and lip gloss, something she hardly ever bothered to do. Today, however, Hermione wanted to look mature and authoritative in her new position.

Seated beside her was Professor Tonks, dressed in the sombre black robes of mourning. Andromeda had a kindly, friendly disposition, and though she looked so much like her sister Bellatrix, Hermione was surprised to find that it did not send her into terrified convulsions. Hermione supposed that it was because the two women had completely different personalities. It helped too, mused Hermione that Andromeda had kind, soft eyes and light brown hair that was styled in a very modern, indeed, Muggle way. Given that the pureblood witch was teaching Muggle Studies, Hermione thought that it was an excellent point, subtly made, and testimony to the witch's Slytherin background.

Even her conversation was comforting, thought Hermione as she listened to Andromeda chatting quietly away about how pleasant it was to have house-elves to help with Teddy. In response, Hermione spoke of her plans to use her coming year to prepare for her NEWTs in Muggle Studies and Care of Magical Creatures and to take on the newer electives being taught.

Soon enough, the returning students filled the Great Hall, taking their places at the House tables. From the distance of the Head table, Hermione looked out onto the many faces and felt a great pang of loss as she saw the empty spaces at the Gryffindor table. It felt strange to be at the opening feast without Harry and Ron. She tried to catch Ginny's eye, but failed in her task as the youngest Weasley did not turn to look up at the Head table. Hermione tried to cling to her hope that she and Ginny would be able to spend time together but knew deep in her heart that she and Ginny had never had anything in common. They were friends due to convenience and circumstance, not interest.

As Hermione continued to ponder over the changes wrought by the Battle of Hogwarts, Minerva brought in the group of nervous-looking first years. As they gaped in awe at the enchanted ceiling and the colourful house banners on the walls, the Sorting Hat was placed on the stool.

The hat spun around to look at the first years, then looked out over to the other students before opening its brim wide and beginning to sing.

*"This year I sing of hope and joy
Of friendship and the wonder-boy
We've seen sweet success amidst the pain
Hearts reunited once again
Hogwarts has stood for a thousand years
Through trouble, strife and evil-doers
But strong it rises once again
Like a phoenix birth through the flames.
Remember well brave Gryffindor did act when needed
And Ravenclaw, sound advice and intellect provided
Hufflepuff with loyal strength
Showed others what their tenacity meant
And cunning, crafty Slytherin indeed did prove
That it too could work silently to remove
Evil's minion from our midst
And bring about peace that was wished.
So come you young ones to be sorted.
I may be a hat, but I've not yet been thwarted.
Put me on, and your thoughts I'll read
And find you the right codes to mind and heed.
Remember, though, that unity is all.
For without it we are certain to fall
The houses must work in unity
Today, tomorrow unto infinity.
The Dark Lord's terrible time did teach us
The need to build bridges between us.
So while I sort you don't forget
To make friends with others and do your best
To build a future bright and shiny
That's filled with love, laughter and equality.
For Hogwarts' strength and future fame
Lie in the hands of lion, eagle, badger and snake."*

As the hat finished its song, Hermione mused over the words. She realised that it had once again sung about unity. Every year, its message was the same: unite or face calamity.

While Hermione was thinking, Minerva led the disorderly group of first years forward. As Zara Amirally became the first Ravenclaw, Hermione looked at the students seated below her. *Were we really that small?* she thought. She wondered if they would heed the hat's message as she then turned her attention to the Head table. She thought about Professor Snape and pondered the complexity that was the man. He had worked hard to protect the students even as Death Eaters prowled the corridors of Hogwarts, and yet, he had never really shown open affection as other teachers had done. She wondered what the coming year held for them all. Hermione realised that, although she had spent the last month in the relatively intimate circle of Hogwarts' staff, Professor Snape had remained distant, albeit civil and polite. As she thought over his behaviour, she realised that the taciturn man only seemed to soften in the presence of Minerva and Filius. Others were met with a formality that belied their long years of association. Glancing around the Hall once more, Hermione saw the sorting was nearly over, with Polly Yaxley being the last student sorted into Slytherin.

The sorting over, Minerva removed the hat and the stool. Once Minerva took her place at the Head table, Professor Snape stood up. He was dressed in his customary black robes, but these were of the finest spider silk, with satin Slytherin green piping round the cuffs and collar. He cut a starkly authoritative and powerful figure, very

different from the one Dumbledore had made while standing on this very same spot. Hermione was unable to take her eyes off Professor Snape. This was the first time she had seen him occupying Dumbledore's throne-like seat, for over the holidays the staff had sat around a large table in a much more informal manner. She wondered how hard it must have been over the last year to carry on, knowing that others believed him to be a murderer and a traitor even as he worked to bring about the success of Dumbledore's plans. Hermione had always admired and respected Professor Snape; she had known of his brilliant mind and his outstanding bravery, but tonight, watching him, her admiration increased significantly.

As Professor Snape stood looking down upon the student body, a hush descended on the hall.

Hermione, once again, was struck by the fear and power Professor Snape exuded by merely standing and staring out at students, both new and old.

As the silence intensified, Severus thought about what he should say. He realised that his words needed to be short, but he wanted to express his desire for a new start. Thus, he said, "Welcome students, new and old, to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Today is the start of a new year and a new beginning for us all. Enjoy the feast."

As Severus sat down, the feast appeared. The students, who seemed famished, began to tuck in hungrily.

Hermione, who had begun to grow accustomed to Hogwarts cuisine, was struck once again by its sheer quality and quantity. The house-elves had once again outdone themselves for the opening feast. Into Hermione's musings came the harsh, rough sound of Sybil Trelawney's gasp. As Hermione quickly glanced to her right, she saw Professor Trelawney, frozen as she reached for the bowl of roast potatoes. Into the now sudden silence, Trelawney recited,

"If snake and lion are entwined,

Then shall sorrow's grip be denied.

If these two cannot endure,

Anguish, loss and heartache follow.

Light from darkness,

Birth from death,

Love is needed for the Head.

Snake and lion must desire,

For Hogwarts' future they do rediscover."

Oh my goodness, thought Hermione. *That was a prophecy. Trelawney just made another prophecy.*

Hermione was not the only shocked listener. The entire Head table, as well as most of the students sitting in the front rows, had heard the pronouncement. Immediately, there was much discussion and twittering among both the staff and the students.

Hermione turned once more to look at Professor Snape. That the prophecy was about him was unquestionable, for it had mentioned the Head *but who could the lion be*, she wondered. Hermione was not the only one. Minerva seemed to be pondering the words of the prophecy closely, too.

However, watching the students gossip about what they had heard, Hermione's immediate reaction was one of anger and pity. She felt sorry for the headmaster. He had been working so hard, and this pronouncement was making a mockery of him on the very first evening. Hermione tried desperately to catch Ginny's eye to curb the uproarious and inappropriate laughter emanating from Gryffindor table at the expense of Professor Snape, but she was once again unsuccessful.

Once the feast ended, Hermione quickly made her way to the Gryffindor table. She wanted to do her best to curb the rumours that were bound to follow as students wrote home to inform their parents and friends of what had taken place.

The senior boys were joking about, and Hermione listened as Dean snorted, "Well, we all knew Snape needed a good shag. Maybe this will finally let him have one, so that he can stop being such a bastard."

Hermione felt annoyance flare up inside her. "Really, Dean, don't you realise that for the last twenty years, he was a spy? Professor Snape had to act like he hated all of us and that he favoured the children of the Death Eaters to keep his cover."

Dean seemed to accept this and nodded, but Ginny said, "You may be right, 'Mione, but he still has to shag a Gryffindor. Can you imagine one of us touching the Greasy Git? Yuck."

This hurt Hermione for some reason. She knew that she was no beauty either, but she felt that if she ever found love, outward physical appearance wouldn't really matter. Besides, Ron hadn't seemed to mind how she looked when he'd tried so hard to get into her knickers. Looking hard at Ginny, she said, "It is none of your business who the Gryffindor is. Since the prophecy spoke about it being true love, the person it speaks of won't have a problem with fulfilling his desires."

Ginny grinned viciously. "Sounds like you care, 'Mione."

"Of course I care," replied Hermione hotly. "We are all alive; we are all able to be here because of the sacrifices that man made. It's the least I can do." Then, suddenly realising that she was no longer a student, but part of the staff, she said, "Right, you lot, off to bed, now."

As the students grumbled, gossiped and returned to their common rooms, the staff gathered in the staff room. Hermione listened as wild speculations were made, until Minerva said, "Who the woman in the prophecy is, is none of our concern. We don't know when these events are going to take place. We have more important things to worry about than Severus' love life, like running this school."

Feeling chastised, the staff all ambled off to their chambers. It was only then, once Minerva was sure that everyone was abed, that she made her way to the headmaster's office. She knew Severus would be awake and probably waiting for her.

What a bloody farce, was Severus' thought at hearing the prophecy. He had just spent the better part of twenty years in misery because of one, and now, when he was finally free to make his own decisions and live his own life, along came another. Severus could, however, not deny that this prophecy was specifically about him, as he was the head of Hogwarts.

When Minerva entered, Severus was not surprised. "I knew you would turn up," he said bluntly.

"Of course, I would come," said Minerva. "Severus, do you know whom and what the prophecy spoke off?"

"Don't tell me you didn't understand," said Severus snidely. "Obviously, it spoke of me and some twice-cursed Gryffindor. As if any woman will want to have anything to do with me, especially after Potter announced to the world that I was still pining for his long-dead mother."

"Oh, Severus," said Minerva.

Severus scoffed. "I know what I'm like, woman. I don't do well in relationships. The only woman I ever loved, who happened to be a lion, was Lily, and she is dead. The prophecy is a load of bollocks."

"Not necessarily," said Minerva gently. "If you think carefully about Lily and remember all of the things you loved about her, you'd realise that, although Lily is gone, another much like her takes her place today."

"What on earth are you on about?" asked Severus briskly.

"Are you so oblivious, Severus?" said Minerva gently. "To me, it is blatantly obvious. The woman the prophecy spoke of is Miss Granger. No one is more like Lily than she is. Muggle-born, gifted...indeed, more gifted than Lily ever was. For Lily never did work as hard, or care as much, or display as much Gryffindor courage, true understanding and compassion and grace under fire."

Severus was appalled. His face contorted in rage, and he said in a voice soft and low, "Surely, Minerva, you are not suggesting that I seduce or make advances towards a student? I may be many things, but a paedophile I am not."

Minerva chuckled. "Really, Severus. What I merely meant is that you should not dismiss the prophecy out of hand. Hermione is eighteen and technically an adult. Besides, would it not instead be prudent to get to know the girl, especially since she is now a member of staff and a graduate who is merely taking electives?"

Severus shook his head. "Minerva, you are delusional. Do you think I would even consider getting to know the Gryffindor Princess in that manner? Are you so ready to throw your precious student to the wolves? You know what kind of man I am, the things I had to do while under the auspices of the Dark Lord. They were called Dark Revels for a reason. Besides, even if I did make a play for her, she would not look at me. I know what the students think of me."

"You may be surprised," said Minerva. "Miss Granger is a smart young woman and a strong one. There is a hidden depth to her, a core of strength that can never be satisfied unless intellectually matched. She is enthusiastic about learning, is passionate about potions and wants to spend the rest of her days at Hogwarts, taking on one apprenticeship after another. She is so like you in her thirst for knowledge and her love of reading that it is startling. Really, Severus, can't you see she's ideal? We must heed the prophecy: *Anguish, loss and heartache follow...*"

Severus scoffed again. "When has my life not been filled with anguish, loss and heartache? I've never known anything else."

"That may be," said Minerva heartlessly, "but you are consigning the same on a young woman who still does not realise that the prophecy rests upon her. If you care nothing for yourself, think of her, think of the future of Hogwarts."

Defeated, Severus sighed. "I shall think about it."

At Minerva's wide smile, Severus shook his index finger at her and cautioned with a glare, "Only think about it, Minerva! Please don't get overly excited. And for Merlin's sake, woman, don't go blabbering in the staff room about this. Let no one know that the lion is Miss Granger. We've got enough trouble with the gossip this prophecy is sure to cause than to have people speculating about my love life. If they attribute a partner for me, one who has just graduated and returned as a teaching assistant, the school's reputation will plummet. All our hard work to bring about a curriculum change will melt into oblivion as the Board of Governors takes umbrage over this issue."

"Of course, Severus," placated Minerva. "Not a word. I promise. I'm just glad you're going to think about it."

A.N. Love it or hate it, please to let me know what you think.

Chapter Six: Slytherin cunning is applied

Chapter 6 of 26

Severus weaves a complicated plot.

- (i) Thank you ever so much for the kind reviews. I'm really pleased to hear your opinion of the story.
- (ii) The characters and world of Harry Potter belong to J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this, just endless enjoyment.
- (iii) And last, but by no means least, a big thank you to my lovely beta, Chelsea.

That night, Severus hardly slept. He kept analysing the words of the prophecy, trying to rip apart the logic of Minerva's observation that the most likely candidate for his mysterious lover was Miss Granger. As the hours crept towards dawn, Severus was forced to concede defeat. Miss Granger was universally acknowledged in the staff room as the Gryffindor Princess. He even held the responsibility for coining the moniker, along with the other more widespread one bandied among the student populace of Know-It-All. Resigned, Severus decided that he would take Minerva's advice to heart and devise a suitably Slytherin way of getting to know the girl without letting on that he was doing so. He would verify the claims made by Minerva as to their compatibility before taking the ridiculous prophecy seriously.

The next morning, Severus called Horace Slughorn in for a meeting. Once the portly wizard had been comfortably plied with tea and cake, Severus said, "Now that the term has officially begun, I think it is time to put Miss Granger to work. She can start handling all of the basic brewing for the infirmary, but under close supervision, of course."

At Horace's moue of distaste, Severus sighed. "I know you don't like the idea of overseeing the brewing, Horace, but someone must make sure, at least in the beginning, that she is supervised."

"I've not undertaken complex brewing in years, you know that," said Horace frankly. "I'm too old, and I don't get about the laboratory as easily these days. Teaching is different; I don't have to do anything other than observe. Miss Granger is another matter entirely. She will ask me incessant questions and expect me to demonstrate technique. I would never hear the end of it."

Severus had known Horace would disagree. In fact, his plan rested on the Head of Slytherin's dislike of extra work. Over the last two years of his tenure as Potions professor, Severus had done all of the brewing for the infirmary. Smirking inwardly, Severus sighed dramatically again. Then he said, "Oh, all right. I will oversee the girl to

ensure that all is well."

Slughorn was very grateful. Smiling broadly, he said, "Thank you, my boy. I do appreciate it. These old bones just aren't what they used to be."

Severus nodded. "I do appreciate you staying on another year. It would be difficult to replace you, especially given the great losses we have all suffered these last few years." Severus stroked his lips with his index finger, pretending to be lost in thought. Then he sighed once more and said, "I will oversee the marking done by the girl, to ensure that standards aren't dropping."

Horace was, of course, gratified. He was happy to do as little as he could.

Once Horace had left, Severus sent one of the house-elves with a note to Miss Granger, asking her to come in for tea that afternoon. Operation Lion Hunt was about to commence.

Hermione was extremely nervous about being called into the headmaster's office. She hoped she was not already in trouble. Her first day as a teaching assistant had gone by rather quickly. She had helped the weaker students and prepared the ingredients needed for Professor Slughorn's classes. Thankfully, there had been no classes higher than the fifth years, so she had not had to deal with her peers. Tomorrow though, there was a seventh year Gryffindor-Slytherin class, which Hermione was dreading.

Upon entering the headmaster's office, she was greeted by an almost casual Snape. He had discarded his robes and was dressed in his customary button-down frock coat.

Seeing her slightly nervous entry, Severus smirked. He let his eyes rake over her figure as she stood awkwardly in front of his desk, awaiting his invitation to take a seat. She was no obvious beauty, but there was a quiet elegance to her appearance. She would never be buxom or voluptuous, but her curves were pleasing. He noticed that the year on the run had given her face, especially her eyes, an added maturity. Her bushy hair had finally grown long enough to be neatly pulled back and tamed into a chignon. This was the first time Severus had looked at Miss Granger as a woman. He had always seen her as the annoying Gryffindor Know-It-All.

Severus had not lied when he told Minerva he was no child molester. He had never paid the slightest attention to his students, even when his more sophisticated seventh years occasionally made a flirtatious play for him. A few cutting remarks and all coyness generally vanished. But as Severus took in her warm, amber-coloured eyes, her rosy cheeks, her mane of honey brown hair, he realised that if he pursued her, bedding her would not be a hardship. The robes she wore were in no way provocative, but they showed off her tiny waist and creamy skin to excellent advantage.

"Come in and have a seat, Miss Granger," said Severus pleasantly.

Once she was seated, he indicated the elegant porcelain tea service and asked, "Would you care for some tea?"

Hermione blushed and nodded. "Yes, Headmaster, tea would be lovely."

As Hermione sipped her tea, Severus leaned back in his chair and smiled. He saw her eyes grow wide at his relaxed posture and smirked inwardly. Gryffindors were so easy to manipulate. In as pleasant a tone as he could manage, Severus said, "Miss Granger, how was your first day of classes?"

Hermione began to relax at his gentle tone. Reminding herself that she had done nothing wrong, she said, "I think it went well. I'm a little worried about tomorrow, though; there's a joint Gryffindor-Slytherin seventh-year class."

Severus nodded. "You need to be firm from the very start. Don't let them get away with anything; dock points, give detention and ensure you establish your authority on day one. I was very close to your age when I took my first class. Start as you mean to go on, and it should go well. If there are any problems, come directly to me. I shall, of course, oversee your marking of all potions assignments each evening, at least for the first couple of months until I am sure that you are being harsh enough."

At this, Hermione smiled. "I remember your marking, sir. I won't be lenient."

"See that you don't, Miss Granger," said Severus with another smile. "Hogwarts has had outstanding potions results for years. We must strive to maintain standards."

Hermione nodded earnestly. She felt privileged to see Professor Snape relaxed and at ease.

Hiding a smirk, Severus said, "Now that you are an auxiliary member of staff, you might as well get used to calling me Severus. I see you've already made the transition in the case of Minerva and Filius."

Hermione blushed and nodded. "It may take me a while, but I shall try, sir... I mean, Severus," she stammered shyly.

"Splendid, and I shall refer to you as Hermione," he said.

Hermione blushed again. Hearing his honeyed tones glide over her name felt ridiculously intimate. It made her feel as though she had never really heard her name spoken before. Hermione had not expected tea to be a friendly meeting. She had been thinking that it would be far more official. She was pleasantly surprised that Professor Snape...Severus...was treating her like an adult, like one of the staff.

Seeing Hermione's bright and open smile and her shy blushes made Severus feel magnificently male at the way he had been able to manipulate her into informal association so easily. A little softening of his tone, an invitation to use his name and she was practically eating out of his hand. A better man may have felt a twinge of guilt, but Severus was not one to let his conscience stand in his way.

Letting his eyes sweep across her figure that was displayed rather fetchingly in her rust-coloured robes once more, Severus decided to push his advantage further. He was curious to see how far down her blush went. He was not a nice man, and taking advantage of an innocent young woman did not really fill him with any sense of remorse. "You know that Horace is staying on at Hogwarts as a favour. He is keen to retire and wants to do as little as possible this year. I shall not only oversee your marking, but I will also oversee all the brewing that you undertake for the infirmary. If there are any problems with potions, come to me. I've even asked Andromeda to take over as Deputy Head of Slytherin so that he has no responsibilities in that respect."

Hermione felt pleased that Severus was sharing staff information with her. She realised that he did not have to bring up the topic of Slytherin management. Unable to control her blush yet again, she said quietly, "I think I will learn more from you, anyway, sir."

Severus wondered if she realised her double entendre. He certainly planned on teaching her much more than she realised. Smirking inwardly at his surprisingly lewd thoughts and his almost instantaneous bodily reactions, he raised his eyebrow at her.

Hermione blushed once more. "I don't mean any disrespect, sir, but Harry certainly learned more from you when he was using your sixth-year potions textbook than he did in class." It was only after she had spoken these words that she realised what she had let slip. She gasped and clapped a hand over her mouth.

However, Severus did not react in anger, as she expected; instead, he laughed, low and deep. "Really, Hermione, we all realised immediately what was going on. The staff did find that amusing."

Hermione was shocked. "Amusing? You mean they knew?" she asked shrilly. Even as Hermione responded to his comments, she realised that this was one of the very few times that she had heard Professor Snape...Severus...laugh. He had a beautiful laugh: rich, earthy and very sensual. *Where did that thought come from?* wondered Hermione in bemusement before bringing her attention back to the man in front of her.

Severus used his index finger to caress his lips, watching as Hermione's eyes followed his movements. Realising that she was already aware of him as a man on an unconscious level, given her ready inclination to blush, he smiled to test his hypothesis. And, as expected, Hermione blushed prettily once more.

Severus couldn't resist a smirk. "Of course they knew. It was obvious. Besides, I made such a to-do in the staff room that they were left in no doubt about it."

Hermione giggled, then looked pained when she realised she was laughing at Professor Snape... Severus.

Severus chuckled darkly, which seemed to ease Hermione's conscience and made her giggle again.

Gosh, he's got a sexy laugh, thought Hermione before blushing furiously at the thought that she found something about Professor Snape...Severus...sensual and now sexy.

Something changed in him as he watched her open countenance. He wondered when he had last made a young woman blush and giggle. Feeling supremely in control of the direction of their association, he smirked inwardly at his success. However, he did not want to give away his hand this early in the game. Taking on a more serious tone, Severus said, "Hermione, you must work as hard as you can to ensure that Andromeda has as much support as possible for Muggle Studies. She has not taught before, and although she is more than competent, handling the practical aspect of Muggle Technology, for example, will be difficult. Young Teddy is bound to take up a lot of her time, despite the attentive care of the house-elves."

"Of course, sir," said Hermione immediately. "I'm more than willing to help in any way I can."

"Excellent," said Severus. "I've already spoken to Andromeda, and she is aware that you helped update the syllabus."

A.N. Love it or hate it, please to let me know what you think.

Chapter Seven: Settling in

Chapter 7 of 26

Hermione settles into her role as Teaching Assistant. She begins to spend more time with Severus.

- (i) Thank you ever so much for the kind reviews. I'm really pleased to hear your opinion of the story.
- (ii) The characters and world of Harry Potter belong to J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this.
- (iii) This chapter is in response to the October 2009's OWL theme on 'The Dark Arts'.
- (iv) And last, but by no means least, a big thank you to my lovely beta, Chelsea.

The days passed swiftly. Her DADA lessons were fascinating. Professor Snape was an enthralling orator, and his descriptions of the inherent dangers of Dark intent were chilling yet captivating. The lessons on grounding oneself after using Dark magic so that the pulsing energy was safely released into the elements proved immensely helpful. Hermione felt that she was better able to cope with her resentment and anger over Harry and Ron's continuing silence. She no longer had bouts of intense loneliness; instead, she would ground herself by going for early morning walks by the lake and making use of the comforts of the staff room and the company to be found there.

Hermione was totally caught up in her assistant teacher duties as well as her own studies. Her days began well before breakfast and ended late at night. Every minute of the day seemed to be accounted for. Mornings before breakfast were spent preparing for the day's lessons while evenings were spent marking and even running remedial sessions for the weaker students in both Potions and Muggle Studies. After dinner generally found her in Severus' private potions laboratory, where they would both brew potions and ointments for the infirmary. She worked on the simpler potions while he made the more complex ones.

The quiet evenings of brewing were some of Hermione's most enjoyable. She had always been aware of Severus' brilliant mind, but now she was introduced to his dark sense of humour. She learned to see beyond the sarcasm and appreciate the wit directed towards her. While they waited for potions to simmer or cool, they would discuss the marking she had done or the things she had learned in DADA or Healing. Eventually, as they grew more comfortable with each other's company, they even began to tentatively speak of personal matters.

Severus was very careful to be extremely correct in his behaviour towards the young Gryffindor. He used his voice, his eyes, his intellect to draw her to him, but he did not touch her or even flirt openly with her. He knew that Minerva was observing them in the shadows, and although he knew he could easily seduce the girl without alerting the watchful Minerva, he preferred to take his time. One did not become Europe's premier Potions Master without patience and excellent timing. For Severus had decided that his seduction would be so subtle, so discreet, that it would make Hermione come to him. Their relationship would progress because she thought she wanted him, not because he had pressured her into his bed. Severus had fucked and raped enough women, even men, during the Dark Revels to know his own twisted desires, and what he desired above all else was to hear a woman, his woman, beg him to fuck her. If Hermione was his destiny, then he wanted her so desperate for him that she would allow him to do anything he wanted. He had been controlled by two sadistic masters for most of his adult life; the only place he felt he had ever had control was in his own private chambers.

Lily had been his first love, his only desire. When Lily had married Potter, Severus had been a virgin; like a fool, he had been saving himself for her. In anger, he had gone out with Lucius and fucked every woman he could, pretending that they were her, that he was getting his revenge on her. After Lily's death, there had been no one in Severus' life. He could not bear to touch a woman because she could never be Lily. After the Dark Lord returned, he had been forced to rape, to fuck, to demonstrate his loyalty, and so he had done what was required of him, but he had not taken those women, those bodies, with any modicum of tenderness. In truth, Severus had never made love. He did not know how. He could rape, he could fuck, he could even on occasion seduce, but love...he had never really made it or shared it or expressed it or had it reciprocated in any shape or form.

One night as September drew to a close, and Severus and Hermione both waited for their respective potions to simmer, they got to talking about their favourite subjects. Hermione was not surprised to learn that Severus was deeply fascinated by the Dark Arts. She was, however, surprised to learn of his long years of ongoing studies into the philosophy of magical intent and the origins of magic.

"There is so much more to magic than what is taught at Hogwarts," said Severus passionately. "We hardly learn anything of the Eastern philosophies, or even the Middle Eastern for that matter. Hogwarts concentrates on European schools of thought. I've been researching into the most ancient of magical practices, those practiced by the Egyptians, the Sumerians, the Chinese and the Indian mages of old. There is so much information out there. We are so afraid of the taint of the Dark that we have completely removed all aspects of Blood Magic, of Sex Magic, which are some of the most powerful gifts bestowed to man from our customs and traditions. We have

removed all the magic that is reliant on the Earth and the elements from our curriculum."

Hermione's eyes shone with excitement. "I found a book on Sex Magic in the Black library our fifth year, but Professor Moody saw me looking at the title, and the next time I looked for the text, it had been removed. I've never really read anything about it."

Severus nodded. "Moody was one of the most deeply entrenched practitioners of the Dark Arts I've ever known. He worked for the Ministry, and that protected him, but his years as a Dark Wizard catcher honed his skills in the Dark Arts to levels even I have yet to reach in some aspects. You will hear Lucius speak of the horrors of Ministry torture following the first fall of the Dark Lord when he conducts his recent history seminar. That was Moody's speciality."

"I'm sure the presentation will be stimulating. I am really fascinated by the philosophy and ideology of the Death Eaters." Here Hermione met Severus' raised eyebrow and curious gaze and blushed furiously. "I want to learn everything," she said before blushing furiously again. "First I want to learn everything I can at Hogwarts before branching out."

Severus chuckled. "I know what you mean. I've always wanted to learn everything, too." Then, in a more serious tone of voice, he said, "That was one of the many reasons why I joined the Death Eaters. The lure of learning forbidden magic, of making potions with ingredients never before within my reach, having access to something completely denied at Hogwarts was irresistible."

Hermione nodded. She could on some level understand his decision. She, too, could not deny that she found his lessons in the Dark Arts completely compelling.

Severus, however, had lapsed into silence after admitting his desire for the Dark Arts. He knew he had probably said too much. She was, after all, the Gryffindor Princess. No matter her curiosity, she was in no way tainted.

Hermione waited patiently for Severus to continue. She had been enjoying hearing him speak of his interests, but she realised as she watched his countenance darken that he was not going to continue. Not wanting him to brood, as she had learnt was his wont, she said, "I've always been fascinated by Potions, especially those that are considered Dark."

At Severus' quick glance upwards, she continued, "When I was in my second year, I sneaked into the Restricted Section and stole a book to brew Polyjuice Potion. I know you know about that incident."

Severus smirked. He remembered her in whiskers and tail.

Seeing his smirk return, she smiled quietly to herself and continued, "I found reading about some of the Darker potions really interesting. It scared me, but I couldn't put the book down." Then in a more thoughtful voice, she said, "I think that after Charms and Transfiguration, Potions is my favourite subject. There's so much scope, so much possibility in Potions."

Severus was surprised. He was astonished that she had continued to speak as though he had not committed a great faux pas in mentioning his interest in the Dark Arts and his willing entry into the Death Eaters. He was also surprised that she had admitted to being enthralled by the scope of the Dark Arts. On a different level, he was also surprised that she had such a great interest in Potions. Her admission about his first year speech notwithstanding, he had thought she would be in love with Arithmancy. "I'm surprised," said Severus. "Septima speaks of you as though you are particularly gifted, a prodigy in fact."

Hermione blushed furiously, even though she was pleased at the acknowledgment. "I do enjoy Arithmancy, but there is so much more to learn, and I don't think that Arithmancy stretches me enough. I couldn't just focus on it to the exclusion of everything else."

"Well," said Severus with a chuckle. "You're welcome to stay on at Hogwarts for as long as you like and take on one apprenticeship after another if you so wish. We don't really get many students who want to carry on learning after they leave Hogwarts. Theoretical knowledge is seen as unimportant in the greater scheme of magical application. I know the other teachers would be ecstatic if you do stay on."

Hermione's smile rivalled the sun. Her face aglow, she said, "Sir, I am amazed you are being so nice and inviting me to stay on. I thought you hated me and only took me on for this year because you had no other choice."

"Really, Hermione," said Severus snidely. "You must realise that a lot of what happened while you were a student was an act. I had to hate you both for being a Muggle-born and Potter's side-kick."

Hermione nodded. "Logically, I do realise it, but I always felt that you disliked me particularly for some reason. That's why this past month has been such a revelation."

Severus did not know how to respond. Finally he said quietly, "You reminded me of myself. Your quest for knowledge, your love of learning, it was so much like what I was at your age. I feared for you; I hated you for what you could become, but also, I think I felt resentful because you were not alone. Unlike me, you made friends. I could see that you weren't destined to end up alone, bitter and driven to darkness."

Hermione shook her head. "You're wrong," she admitted softly, "I was and still am often alone, even when surrounded by people. No one seems to understand me. They find my knowledge useful, but that it all I've ever been to everyone, the walking encyclopaedia."

Severus nodded. He did not know how to respond to her candour. Honesty as an art of conversation was not often practiced among the Slytherins. It allowed opponents too many opportunities to use you. But her frankness was a welcome balm to Severus' suspicious nature.

Their evenings together allowed Hermione to gain additional insight into Severus' personality. She watched him as he brewed complex potions needed not only for the infirmary but also for St. Mungo's. She came to realise how very generous he was with his talents in Potions, for many of the people who benefited from his hours of brewing, of research were not even aware that they were the recipient of the former Death Eater's skill.

As Hermione grew more familiar with Severus' laboratory and his presence, she started to help him while she waited for her own potions to simmer or cool. She was especially moved when he trusted her to watch him brew the very difficult and touchy Wolfsbane potion for victims of Greyback's final days. She watched his long dexterous fingers as they chopped and diced, and she marvelled at his concentration as he added ingredient after ingredient at exactly the right moment. She hardly dared to breathe. She was so afraid that she would ruin the complex brew that demanded so much precision, skill and attention.

One evening, as she sat watching her own burn paste slowly simmer, she once again observed Severus brewing the much more complex salve that eased the tremors, if not all the symptoms of long-term Cruciatus damage. She let her mind drift, admiring the deftness of his hands as he prepared the ingredients and stirred the potion, his wrist movement controlled and precise. As she admired his skill, she wondered idly how those hands would feel against her skin. Would his touch be gentle or strong? Would his hands feel rough or smooth? Would he focus on a woman with the same fierce concentration he placed upon the cauldron? *Where do those thoughts come from*, wondered Hermione perturbed. *Am I really attracted to Severus?* She let her mind dwell on the feeling and realised that she did in fact find the darkness and the mystery of him not only interesting but also deeply arousing.

While Hermione was coming to the realisation of her startling attraction to the Headmaster, Severus too was spending a lot of time quietly observing Hermione. He watched her concentration as she brewed, the passion she displayed when they argued about something he had asked her to read. He realised that he was starting to not only appreciate her curves and smiles but also her mind and her personality. He had not felt drawn to a woman on such an emotional level since his teenage infatuation with Lily. Truth be told, it made him feel rather uncomfortable, as though he were once again a callow youth. He found himself getting lost in her eyes, which were bright like Polish amber or well-matured Firewhisky, especially when they sparkled with amusement at one of his biting observations.

She was a delight to teach, now that her penchant for frantic hand-waving had subsided. The DADA sessions he ran that dealt with the Dark Arts were better for her shining and attentive countenance. Severus was rarely surprised by people, but the not-so-little Know-It-All's attraction and desire for information on the Dark Arts did make him stop short and contemplate his previously held assumptions about her.

One night, as he was going over her marking, Hermione said, "Sir, could I have some extra reading on Dark Potions? I don't want to really brew anything, but the theory and the techniques are so different that I really would like to learn more."

Severus stroked his lips with his index finger and thought about her request. "I don't see why not, but you must be very cautious about falling into the trap laid by the Dark Arts. Knowledge is a fine thing, but it can lead you into something you cannot control."

Severus, of course, realised that this was a golden opportunity to spend even more time alone with the young woman. His slow, cautious steps of getting to know Hermione had thus far been successful, but he had yet to begin his nefarious seduction plans. "I will gladly let you have some books from my personal library, but on a few strict conditions. One, you must not remove them from my quarters, and two, you must not read them unsupervised. Firstly, because we can't have the wrong person seeing you with a Dark Arts text; the gossip mill would drive us both out of Hogwarts. And secondly, if you read them in my presence, if you have any questions, doubts or concerns, we can address them immediately. The worst thing you could do with a Dark Arts text is to let something that worries you fester and wind its insidious way into your subconscious."

A.N. Love it or hate it, please to let me know what you think.

Chapter Eight: Halloween

Chapter 8 of 26

Severus and Hermione deal with the ghosts of Halloween. Minerva lends a helping hand.

- (i) Please do take the time to leave me a review and let me know what you think of the story.
- (ii) The characters and world of Harry Potter belong to J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this.
- (iii) And last but by no means least, a big thank you to my lovely beta, Chelsea.

The days passed swiftly, and Hermione suddenly realised that it was nearing the end of October. Halloween was nearly upon them. The weather became noticeably colder and frost could be found lying over the grounds on certain mornings before the pale dawn sunlight melted it away.

For Severus, the end of October was a time that brought back to mind his greatest tragedies. He could not but help remember his beautiful Lily and his part in her death. He recalled his loss of faith and trust in the Dark Lord and the ability of Dark Magic to bring him his heart's deepest desire. His nights were filled with memories of how his beautiful Lily had grown to hate him, how her eyes that had once been filled with affection became tinged with fear and mistrust. Unable to bear a similar reaction from Hermione, who Severus believed deep down would one day come to her senses and begin to hate him for his manipulation, he began to distance himself. When she came to his chambers late at night to peruse a book, instead of the gentle smile he had begun to bestow upon her, he was cold, unsmiling and aloof. He did not speak; he just handed her the book and raised his eyebrow until she was tongue-tied. He watched her try to read under his dark presence and saw her flee when all her attempts at conversation failed.

Hermione was tremendously hurt by Severus' sudden change in behaviour. She had grown to long for the hours she spent in quiet conversation and reading in front of Severus' magnificent marble fireplace while lying on his plush emerald green Persian carpet. The private study in the headmaster's suit of rooms had become her favourite place in the castle. Some nights she would sit, curled on the window-seat looking out at the Quidditch pitch and Forbidden Forest beyond and listen to his gorgeous voice wash over her. Their Saturday night ritual of a glass of wine or an unusual cocktail that Severus thought she would enjoy were evenings she treasured as she scurried to complete her numerous tasks throughout the rest of the week. This Saturday, as she arrived for their quiet evening by the fire, she could not understand his curt responses, his unsmiling visage. Where had the man she had got to know, to desire, gone? Unable to bear the mocking silence of her little study, where she had not spent an evening in many long weeks, Hermione fled once more, this time to the staff room. It was there that Minerva found her.

Minerva had been a Head of House for a long time. She could see immediately that something had changed in Hermione. Gone was the bright smiling girl; in her place was a sad, pathetic waif. Wondering if Harry or the youngest Mr. Weasley were responsible, she opened her arms to the girl once more. Like before, seeing the motherly understanding in her former Head's face brought Hermione dashing into her embrace. Tears streaming down her cheeks, she held on to the warmth, the security that Minerva represented, and sobbed piteously.

Once Hermione's tears were through, Minerva offered her a handkerchief and then said, "Now that you've had a good cry, tell me what's wrong."

"It's Severus," said Hermione with trembling lips. "I thought I was getting to know him; that we were friends. We spend every evening together, brewing, marking, reading. But today, it was as if the past two months had never occurred. He looked at me like I was something the cat dragged in. I've lost everyone I've cared about: my parents, Harry, Ron. I don't think I can cope if I lose his friendship. And the worst of it is, I don't know what I did wrong."

"Oh, my dear girl," said Minerva gently. "Severus is such a complicated man. Halloween is the time when he relives one of his greatest sorrows. He's probably just hurting and pushing you away. Severus has never forgiven himself for losing Lily's friendship and blames himself to this day for her death. I've tried telling him that he didn't kill her, that the one responsible was Voldemort, but it makes no difference. He feels it is his doing."

Hermione nodded. "But why push me away?"

"I think, my dear, that you remind him of the one thing he has never had: a real friend. One does not like to speak badly of those who have passed on, but in my opinion it is a pity that Lily died. If she had not, Severus would have learnt to see her for who she really was: a marginally clever, but vain and fickle girl. Now, the Lily who lives in his heart is a figment of his imagination. He never knew her, saw her as a man, as an adult. Lily Evans was not the saint Severus makes her out to be. She was a smart young woman, but one who saw in James Potter a way into pureblood society, money and comfort. Severus had nothing to offer but himself; he had no wealth, no charming good looks and easy access to comfort. Lily was no fool; if she could gain the affections of Potter, the golden Head Boy of Hogwarts, then what was it to sacrifice her friendship with an awkward, unsociable outcast from the wrong end of town? Lily used him, first for his knowledge of the wizarding world and later on for his brilliance and skill. She never applied herself because she had Severus as a study partner who would do all the work and help her along. After their friendship ended, her school work plummeted. No, don't get me wrong, she didn't do badly in her NEWTs, but she didn't achieve the brilliance that had been expected of her after her OWL performance. Lily, of course, brushed it away saying that she was in love, that she had no time to study. But I, as her Head of House, knew better. She was too busy fooling around, being pretty and popular, to study. And James and Sirius were no better. They were both clever and talented and did the minimum to get by."

Hermione was shocked. "I had no idea."

"Well, after their tragic deaths, it made no sense to speak of their failings. And really, in the end, what did it matter? In stepping before Voldemort's curse, she secured a place for herself in wizarding history. She will forever be the saintly Lily Potter. I only tell you this, my dear, in the strictest confidence to forewarn you of what you have to face. Severus Snape is a complicated and difficult man. He has never known real love or loyalty, compassion or forgiveness. If you want to be his friend, if you want to be more than his friend, then you will have to work very hard to get through to him. He has very thick armour around his heart, guarding him from the hurt he is sure the world means to inflict upon him. And much to my shame, this last year, I hurt him with my behaviour more than I can ever know. He pretends otherwise, but I know better. He did not expect me to turn against him as vindictively as I did. I really hate Albus for the way he arranged matters."

Hearing Minerva's words about Lily and her manipulation of Severus, Hermione vowed to not push him away. When Harry had haltingly told her of what he had seen in the Pensieve and how it was Severus's worst memory because Lily had never forgiven him, Hermione had been appalled. How could one friend not forgive another? She had thought then that Lily had not been a true friend, if one misspoken word could destroy a friendship. The boys had called her all kinds of things, and she always forgave them. She knew that in spite of the strain to their friendship now, if Ron or Harry needed her, truly needed her, she would not ever push them away. Hadn't she even forgiven Malfoy for calling her a Mudblood, reasoning that he was blinded by prejudice and didn't know better?

Hermione promised herself that she would help Severus. She would show him what real friendship meant. Had she not put up with the boys and their carelessly hurtful ways for years? What then were Severus' attempts at distancing himself in comparison to his past history?

When the annual Halloween feast took place the following evening, Hermione watched Severus carefully. She noticed that he hardly ate or spoke to anyone else at the Head Table. Minerva attempted conversation, but she was brushed aside with a snarled reply. Now, though, Severus' behaviour could be put into perspective given the insights bestowed upon her by Minerva. Thus, Hermione observed and tried to understand his dark visage, his continuous drinking from his goblet. But what confused Hermione's musings was the way in which Severus spent most of the meal staring at her in what seemed like confusion, anger and unhappiness. When the students began gathering their things to leave the Great Hall, Severus almost wrenched himself from his seat and, with nary a nod or glance at his colleagues, departed with a swirl of black robes.

"Poor boy," said Minerva when they had retired to the staff room to share in a late night drink. "He is like this every Halloween. I did hope that you, my dear, would be able to bring him out of his deep annual depression, but I suppose I hoped for too much."

"I don't know what to do, Minerva," confessed Hermione. "I tried speaking to him this morning when I went to retrieve the marking I had left in his study, but he was so cruel, I could hardly get two words out of my mouth. He seems impossible to get close to."

"Yes," said Minerva with a sigh. "He can be difficult when he wants to be. But I'm glad that you are at least trying." Minerva reached across and patted Hermione's hand. "Don't worry, my dear, you're a good lass. You know you're the one person on staff that's not tainted by the last horrendous year and our deplorable attitude and behaviour towards him. That's why I had such hope for you being able to help him. Andromeda, unfortunately, looks so much like her sister Bellatrix that looking at her must remind him of his worst moments with the Death Eaters."

Minerva did not want to burden Hermione with the prophecy or the knowledge that she was the only one who could bring comfort to the stern Potions Master. However, she did want to help the young couple along in any way she could. She knew Dumbledore would be twinkling merrily at her meddling, but even the knowledge that he would approve did not stop her.

Not long after, Minerva said she wanted to have a relatively early night and left Hermione staring into the staff room fire.

Hermione spent some time trying to come to grips with all she had learnt concerning Severus and Lily Potter. Finally, though, she realised that it was growing late, and she made her way to her chambers. There, as Hermione was preparing herself for bed, she continued to think about her conversation with Minerva. As she brushed her hair, she pondered on the conundrum that was Severus. With sudden blinding clarity she realised that the problem lay with the fact that Lily had pushed Severus away. He had gone to apologise, and she had refused his advances. Hermione realised that Severus would never allow himself to be put into such a pitiful position again. If she wanted to speak to him, she would have to go to him and keep going to him until he relented. She would have to be different from Lily; she would have to prove to him that she was never going to walk away from their friendship.

Reasoning that there was no time like the present, Hermione once more slipped on her day robes over her thin cotton nightdress and made her way to the headmaster's chamber. As she approached the tapestry marking the door, she wondered what on earth had possessed her. It was already well past midnight. It would be impossible to pass this off as a mere social call or a visit to collect a reference book. Taking a deep breath and calling upon her Gryffindor courage, Hermione knocked on the door.

There was a long moment of silence. Then the door was wrenched open by a dishevelled Severus. His outer robes had been discarded, his frock coat buttons were undone, and his neck-tie removed. Even the top three buttons of his white linen shirt were undone, showing her his pale throat and his muscular chest. "What do you want?" he demanded, looming at the doorway. His voice was slightly slurred and it was obvious that he had been drinking.

"I..." began Hermione, only to realise that this was not a conversation she wanted to have out in the corridor. Reminding herself that she was a Gryffindor, she pushed past him to step inside the chamber.

"What the bloody hell are you doing here?" Severus demanded once more. "Have you come to gloat, to laugh at the poor besotted fool who is still pining over a dead woman who never loved him, who never cared for him?"

Hermione was silent, not knowing how to respond to his tirade. Instead, feeling decidedly foolish and almost regretting her impulsive decision to try and comfort Severus, she stood with her back to the fire, watching him cautiously.

He seemed to not heed her silence. Instead, he went to the sideboard to pick up his discarded tumbler and took another gulp of his Firewhisky. Then leaning against it with his hip in an insolent posture, he asked mockingly, "What, cat got your tongue? Did you come to look upon the murderer, the man who killed his best friends? Well, take a good look, little lioness. Take a good hard look at the man you've been befriending and spending time with. Look at the man who killed Lily, who killed Dumbledore, and be afraid." His voice changed then, and he next spoke with a bitter tone of voice. "Look at me, at the man who will probably be the cause of your death, too, if you continue with your pitiful efforts to be my friend."

"Oh, Severus," said Hermione softly.

"What?" asked Severus, slamming the glass of Firewhisky down onto the sideboard. "You don't believe me? You don't believe that I taint everything I touch, everything I get close to?"

"Stop being so foolish," she implored. "You're not tainted."

Severus stalked towards her and grabbed her by the top of her arms. "Don't you see?" he demanded. "If I care for something, for someone, that person dies. Run, little girl, run and save yourself while you still can."

However, instead of the fear he thought he would find in her eyes, he saw compassion, conviction. Furious, he wrenched his hands away and stepped back a step to watch her warily.

"I'm not a little girl, Severus," said Hermione earnestly. "I'm a woman and I am not afraid. I care about you. Can't you put it behind you? You know rationally that Voldemort killed Lily. That Dumbledore demanded that you kill him. You're not a murderer; you're a soldier who did what you had to do."

Severus scoffed. Then looking deeply into her eyes, he whispered, "How can you care about me, knowing what you do?" Then, as if afraid to hear her response, Severus swiftly turned away to pick up his discarded glass of Firewhisky once more. Gripping the tumbler tightly, Severus took another long drink and drained the last of the

Firewhisky. He felt he needed to buy time. In his intoxicated state, he reasoned that he was ill equipped to tease out the hidden meaning that was sure to lie beneath her words. *For surely, he thought, she can't mean what she said. How could she care for me? I'm obviously missing something. Perhaps she cares for me as a valued teacher, a mentor. Yes, that must be it,* he thought desperately. Slowly he walked back towards his armchair and sat down, his eyes trained away from her and locked upon the dancing flames.

Hermione stood silently, watching while Severus tried to come to grips with her confession of affection. Then, when she realised he was not going to add any more to his anguished question, she approached him cautiously, as one does a skittish unicorn foal. Slowly she raised her hand and laid it tentatively on his left shoulder. "Severus, how could I not?"

Then, letting her hand slide down his arm, she gently grasped his hand, which lay immobile on the armrest of the chair. "You're so brave, so strong, so passionate, so intelligent," murmured Hermione. "I'd be a blind fool to not realise how very special you are. And if nothing else, I am no fool."

Severus laughed. It was not a pleasant sound. It sounded bitter and hollow. He thought sarcastically that the know-it-all would never accept the appellation of a fool. Quietly, in a voice like rough molten lava, Severus said, "If not a fool, Miss Granger, you are at the very least delusional. You're building sandcastles in the air. There's nothing heroic about me. I'm a manipulative bastard. That thrice-cursed prophecy Trelawney made on September first spoke of you and me. Did you realise that? When it was brought to my attention, I manipulated the situation to get to know you. Did you never wonder why the headmaster of Hogwarts took so much time instructing a teaching assistant?"

It was now Hermione's turn to laugh. She realised that Severus was doing his best to push her away. She had not missed the way in which he had called her Miss Granger. Knowing that the next few words could either spell the end of their friendship or be the start of something much more precious, she said lightly, "So what?" She wanted to dismiss as best she could his admission of manoeuvring behaviour. "I'm glad."

Hermione glanced at the man sitting perfectly still before her. He could have been carved from stone, so still and rigid was his posture. Tightening her hold on his hand, she said, "Severus, I would never have gotten to know you otherwise. If Slytherin cunning and manipulation brought me my awareness of you and gave me access to the deeply hidden man beneath your impressive shields, then I am glad of it."

Severus could not believe she was taking his confession of manipulation so well. Gruffly, he said, "In the light of day, you'll see your folly. Recall if you will the words of the prophecy. Are you ready to give in to my base desire? I am not an easy man; if you are mine, you will be mine, forever. I don't share, and I don't let things go."

"Oh, Severus," said Hermione. His inability to accept that she could care for him tore at her heart. Releasing his hand to sit on the arm of his chair, she carefully draped an arm along the back. "I'm willing to take the chance. I can't speak about forever, but I do know that I have grown to like you, to value the time we share together."

Severus was still unconvinced. This was not the conversation he expected to have tonight, of all nights. In fact, if he had given any thought to the end of this miserable anniversary, he would have expected to find himself drunk and asleep in an undignified heap in front of the fire. He sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

Hermione realised that Severus would not make the first move. Emboldened by his admission of desire, she leaned over and gently kissed his lips.

When her lips met his, it was as if a dam had broken. Severus pulled her to him roughly, so that she was half sitting, half straddling his knees, and devoured her. His arms wrapped around her slim waist, moulding her to his firm chest.

Hermione was taken aback at his passion. She had only ever kissed Victor and Ron, and both were teenage boys, sloppy, exuberant in their display of affection. Severus was a man, and he kissed like a man who had been long starved of a woman's touch. She had never expected him to want her. Her fascination had seemed to be one-sided. This demonstration of his carefully guarded passion filled her with hope and worked to increase her desire for the taciturn man.

Hermione responded to his passion with her own, kissing him back without restraint. She matched his questing tongue with her own tentative exploration of his mouth. She mimicked his foray into her mouth, running her tongue along his teeth. Her arms were wrapped around his shoulders while his hands were buried in her hair, guiding her head as he directed the progression of their kiss. Gasping for air, she moaned into his mouth as he sucked her bottom lip and thrust his tongue yet again into her mouth. She was swept away by his force, and at the end of a kiss that seemed to go on for eons, they were both panting.

Severus pressed his forehead against hers before gentling his kisses. Slowly, haltingly, Severus pushed her away.

"Leave, Hermione, while you still can. I have had too much to drink tonight and can't promise to be a gentleman for much longer. Soon my darkness will take over, and I won't care that you want me to stop, that you are afraid or pure. The beast within me will be released," said Severus, his voice thick with passion.

Hermione shook her head. "I'm not afraid of you. I know you would never hurt me, even if the beast is released."

Severus growled at her. "Foolish woman, is this what you came here for? To be ravished and fucked while I'm in my cups with Firewhisky? Up to this moment, we have been acquaintances, friends. Do not make the leap into my bed without giving careful thought to what a relationship with me entails. What it means to your future, your reputation."

Chastised, Hermione nodded and replied truthfully, "No, I didn't come here with sex on my mind. I just saw you hurting at dinner and wanted to see you, to comfort you."

"You have seen me. I am fine," said Severus, his voice still rough with passion tightly held in check. "Now go back to your rooms and think about what has transpired. If you still feel that you want to pursue a relationship with me tomorrow, we will speak of this further. If you feel you cannot, we will forget this evening ever happened. Now go."

Hermione agreed. In her heart she knew that, although she had been caught up in the passion and fervour of Severus' mind-numbing kisses, she was not ready to really take things further. She smiled gently at him and leaned in for another long, breath-taking kiss before letting herself out of his rooms.

After Hermione's exit, Severus spent a long time trying to come to grips with what had happened. He had wanted her to make the first move, and this she had done. Things had progressed much faster than he had anticipated, given his carefully crafted timetable. In truth, he had no idea how this evening's tryst had come about, but he was honest enough with himself to admit that he was glad beyond measure. Still, he doubted that she would want to continue. In his deeply insecure mind, he reasoned, *she probably only kissed me out of pity. My display of passion, my admission of desire, is sure to have terrified her. No virgin could want me given how I just ravished her like a sex-starved animal. Hermione is the champion of the down-trodden, the enslaved, even the bloody house-elves, it must only be pity and compassion that had made her comfort me.*

When Hermione returned to her rooms she couldn't stop thinking about Severus and his heated kisses. She would never have believed that she could feel such desire. She had tried very hard to be aroused by Ron and his enthusiastic fumbblings. Even Victor had never really made her feel anything but mild curiosity. But this, this raging inferno of passion, this rather frightening need to feel Severus' touch, his skin, his hard cock... this was something completely unexpected. 'Think about it,' he had said. *What's there to think about?* Hermione knew she wanted him. If she had been braver and he had not been so inebriated, she would have insisted that he take her to bed this very night. Just thinking about it did things to her.

A.N. Love it or hate it, please to let me know what you think.

Chapter Nine: The dawn of a new day

Chapter 9 of 26

Hermione agrees to a relationship.

(i) Thank you everyone for the kind reviews. I'm really pleased to hear your opinion of the story. Please do continue to let me know what you think.

(ii) The characters and world of Harry Potter belong to J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this, just endless enjoyment.

(iii) And last but by no means least, a big thank you to my lovely, amazing beta, Queen_of_Stars, who kindly stepped in to fill the shoes vacated by Chelsea. I do appreciate you taking me and my project on.

Hermione woke up early the next morning. She was eager to speak with Severus and let him know of her decision to enter into a relationship with him. However, she did realise the need to give his considerations their due place. She thought about what a relationship would mean to her reputation and decided, *I don't care what the rest of the world thinks. They've never been there when I needed them the most. Minerva will support me.* If that was the case, then what everyone else thought was immaterial. After all, the rest of the world didn't seem to care that she was homeless and alone. No one else had offered her sanctuary when Harry and Ron changed due to the taint of Dark Magic. She knew her parents would not object; they had always been liberal and fair minded. If she and Severus were truly committed to a relationship, then her parents would not stand in her way.

Hermione wished more than anything though that she could speak to her mother. Jean Granger had always been a warm, understanding woman, and Hermione missed her dreadfully. But, Hermione knew that she was not up to the task of retrieving them from Australia at the present time. She had done the Memory Charm in desperation, but giving them back their memories... that was another thing altogether. They would need time to adjust, to come to terms with what she had done. Moreover, she knew that the likelihood of them turning against her...of not wanting to have anything more to do with her...was a distinct possibility. The short summer months when Hermione's emotions were in such turmoil had not been the right moment to go traipsing off to Australia. But now, now that she was more settled and aware of what was going on, Hermione longed to be able to retrieve her parents.

Realistically, though, Hermione knew that she would have to wait until Yule break at the very least. Besides, she was quite aware that she was not ready to carry out the task on her own. She had, at one point, envisioned going to Australia with Ron and Harry; however, that dream was now over. But Severus, well, if their relationship progressed, he would be the ideal person to go with her. He was strong magically, much stronger than Harry and Ron combined. Besides, he knew more about the magic she had used and the ways of countering it than almost anyone else in the country. His expert skills in Legilimency would not go amiss either.

Emboldened by her positive thoughts and decisions, Hermione dressed carefully for breakfast. She wore her favourite moss-green robe with its wrap-over style neckline and delicate gold braiding. She tied her hair back in a neat French twist, applied a lick of mascara and a coat of lip gloss. Feeling confident and ready, she made her way down to breakfast with a spring in her step.

Over her eggs and toast, Hermione tried very hard to catch Severus' eye. But no matter how she tried to lean forward and look to her right, she could not garner his attention.

Minerva, however, did see Hermione's attempts to catch Severus' attention. Hope blossomed in the older woman's heart as she watched Severus' blatant efforts to not notice the young woman. Something was decidedly up, and Minerva hoped against hope that Hermione had managed to breach Severus' tightly built wards.

Hermione was growing impatient though. Perhaps he did not see her; perhaps he was deliberately avoiding seeing her rejection, but whatever it was, Hermione was unable to convey that she was still keen to get to know him further. In frustration, Hermione followed him out as he was leaving the Great Hall and ran after him as he was attempting to disappear in a swirl of robes into his office. She was determined to speak to him before the day's flurry of classes began. She did not want to have to deal with Professor Slughorn or the rest of her work-load with the spectre of a disappointed and resigned Severus looming over her. For Hermione had begun to suspect that Severus thought she would reject him. "Wait, Severus, please wait," she called, not minding the curious students who watched their exchange.

He slowed down and turned a corner until he was in a deserted corridor. He looked decidedly uncomfortable, as if he was dreading what she had to say.

"Last night," began Hermione, before carefully looking both ways to make certain they were alone and not overheard, "was not a mistake." Checking the passage once more, she leaned up on her toes and brushed his lips with a kiss. Speaking against his lips, she whispered, "I've thought about it; I thought about it all night, and I would like to see where this goes, to get to know you better."

Just as her tentative kiss last night had acted as a catalyst to his passion, so did her simple display of affection release the flood-gates of his desire this morning. Severus had been sure that Hermione was trying to speak to him to tell him she was sorry. *It would be just like her Gryffindor mentality to want to apologise as soon as she could* so he had thought. Her agreement to enter into a relationship with him made him feel uncharacteristically hopeful. *Perhaps things are finally working out right*, thought Severus with a smirk as he slid his arms possessively around her body before pulling her into a hidden recess in the wall to kiss her with unrestrained passion.

Hermione was once more pulled headlong into an avalanche of feeling. His kiss was forceful, dominating and all-powerful. When he spun around to push her up against the wall and grind his obvious erection into her, she threw caution to the wind and wrapped her leg around his thigh, grinding her own rising heat against him.

Heated kisses turned into heated caresses as Hermione rubbed herself against him.

Severus' hands slid to her bottom to fondle her arse and lift her even closer to his pulsing need.

"Oh, sweet Circe," groaned Severus, kissing her exposed throat before biting down on the juncture between her neck and her shoulder. "You unman me, woman. This is neither the time nor the place."

Hermione smirked with satisfaction against his forehead as he licked her exposed throat. She had only meant to tell him she was interested in pursuing a relationship, and knowing how skittish Severus was, she had deemed that action definitely spoke louder than words. The subsequent heated tryst had been an unexpected bonus.

"Mm..." murmured Hermione as Severus kissed her possessively once more. "I didn't mean to start anything." However, she couldn't stop herself from sliding her hands into his silky strands of hair and raking her nails against his scalp.

Severus groaned as the pleasure pain of her gestures increased his level of arousal. "Wench," he moaned heatedly.

Hermione giggled delightedly. She was giddy with the thought that she could affect a man as taciturn and reserved as Severus to such an obvious display of affection. Kissing him gently, she slid her hands down to his shoulders before coming round to hold on to the front of his robes. "I'll see you later this morning. We've got a DADA

lesson before lunch."

Severus nodded. With a final heated glance, he straightened his robes, brushed back his hair and carried on down the corridor.

Hermione stood staring after him with a silly grin on her face. She could not describe the joy that bloomed in her heart. She felt strong, invincible. Then, as if realising the time, she gathered herself together and made her way down to the Potions classroom for a double period of Slytherin and Gryffindor seventh-years.

A.N. Love it or hate it, please to let me know what you think.

Chapter Ten: Hogsmeade Discoveries

Chapter 10 of 26

The gossip mill learns of Hermione's attraction to Severus.

(i) I would adore to hear your opinion of the story. Please do let me know what you think.

(ii) The characters and world of Harry Potter belong to J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this.

(iii) And last but by no means least, a big thank you to my lovely, amazing betas, Chelsea and Queen_of_Stars.

Hermione had been using meditation as a way of controlling her anger and resentment at Harry and Ron for their appalling behaviour towards her following the earliest of Bill's DADA lessons. She had also found Severus' tips of channelling her Darkness into other endeavours extremely helpful when the Darker emotions took over her rational mind. She would go for brisk walks in the early mornings, kicking and stomping the unfortunate ground beneath her. Occasionally she would berate the unfortunate student, whose assignment she was marking, with vitriol so sharp it, sometimes seemed as though it could have come straight from Severus' own quill. She was generally fairly successful at managing their lack of attention to their long years of friendship. Each week, despite their continuing silence, Hermione wrote the boys a joint letter, trying to convey her feelings of contentment and joy at teaching and learning. She was desperate in her own way to not lose their friendship completely. So when a letter arrived from Harry and Ron just before the first Hogsmeade weekend, which was to be in the first weekend of November, requesting that she meet them in the village, Hermione was over the moon. She thought it would give them all a chance to heal the breach in their friendship.

Hermione went down into the village to meet Harry and Ron with Ginny, Dean and Neville with a big grin on her face. She paid no heed to Ginny's sly looks and whispers of getting a room with Harry at the Three Broomsticks. Hermione felt young and carefree, and dressed in her comfortable, figure-hugging jeans, jumper and blazer, she looked just like any other senior student.

Severus watched her go with a surprising ache in his heart. He did not want to admit it, but he was almost afraid that she would, while away from him, come to realise the folly of pursuing a relationship with him. He realised he was old and jaded. *How can I compete with the joy and brightness these callow youths embrace so mindlessly?* agonised Severus in desperation. He had never been bright and joyful, even as a teenager. Watching Hermione's beaming face as she walked to the main gates made him realise how young she really was. *What is such a beautiful young woman doing with a bitter old man like me?* thought Severus. For he could see in her Muggle clothes how truly alluring she was.

However, when Hermione met up with Ron and Harry, things did not go well. Despite her joy at seeing her friends, Harry seemed distant and preoccupied with snogging Ginny. Ron tried to hug her suggestively and whispered, "I've booked a room for us, 'Mione, just as Harry has for Ginny and himself."

At Hermione's shocked expression, Ron grinned confidently and said, "Ginny said you've not been seeing anyone at Hogwarts, and I thought you'd be desperate for a good shag right about now."

Hermione was furious. "You know I'm not ready for something like that. Besides, I thought we were over, given your lack of communication and our last conversation."

Ron laughed. He did not like the attention they were getting from the rest of the group. "Come on, 'Mione, you know that I'm the only one who will ever have you...now stop being such a prude. Live a little."

Hermione remained silent, but her glare spoke volumes.

Ron, however, seemed not to notice her anger and resentment. "Come on, 'Mione," he coaxed again. "You know the only reason I was forced to be with the others is because you aren't able to fulfil your responsibilities as an adequate girlfriend. Once we start shagging regularly, I won't need them."

Hermione was beyond hurt; she was incensed. In a quiet voice that dripped of ice, rather like Severus' when he was enraged, she asked, "And how, Ronald, do you expect us to shag regularly when I am teaching at Hogwarts?"

Ron just shrugged.

Hermione shook her head. "I think," she spat coldly, "you and I are totally unsuitable for each other. We have never had anything in common but our involvement in Harry and his quest."

Ron was furious at her utter refusal to sleep with him. "You're nothing but a frigid tease. You've been stringing me along with your letters and now you refuse to put out."

"It isn't like that," replied Hermione heatedly. "I wrote to you and Harry because you are both my friends. I'm sorry, but the thought of sleeping with you just turns me off completely."

"Well you're not going to find anyone else to shag you. You're a cold, frigid bitch," sneered Ron angrily as he stormed off.

Harry and Ginny, who had been amongst the observing throng, were shocked. Ginny was incredibly hurt at Hermione's rejection of her brother. Turning away from Hermione, she remarked loudly to Harry, "Our 'Mione is too good for us, now. She's always with the professors. She thinks she'll be the one to rescue slimy Snape. She's desperate to shag the Dungeon Bat."

When Hermione's face turned red in embarrassment, Harry and Ginny both realised that Ginny had not been too far off the mark with her vindictive jab.

"What, do you want to sleep with the Greasy Git?" asked Harry in shock.

Hermione did not respond to the direct question. Instead she replied, "Really, Harry. You must stop saying things like that. You know we won the war because of him. He's a hero."

"He's no hero, he's a sick pervert. How long have you been sleeping with him? Is that why he asked you to come back to Hogwarts?" queried Ginny maliciously.

"Don't be silly," said Hermione. "I've only just realised how special he is. There's nothing going on. I've not slept with him, though it is none of your business if I do. I am now an adult."

"Ho, some adult to be taken in by that greasy bastard," countered Harry in disgust.

Hermione yelled furiously, "Don't call him that," before storming off back to the castle. She was so angry she didn't know what to do with herself. Her frenzied walk back to the grounds did nothing to help her cool off, and so she used another of Severus' tricks and began blasting the passing foliage.

Saturday dinner in the Great Hall was pure torture for Hermione. All the students sniggered at her or looked at her with shocked, even horrified expressions. When Minerva and the rest of the staff heard about the argument, for Ginny was not above telling everyone that Hermione wanted to shag the bat of the dungeons, they felt compelled to question a very irritated Severus.

In truth, Severus pretended to be irritated with Poppy's inquisitive question. However, a significant part of him was glad. Glad that Hermione had not been lured away by Weasley's youth as well as the fact that Hermione had not denied her attraction to himself. With the castle almost empty of its students, Severus had had time to think, and he had come to the unsurprising realisation that he more than desired Hermione. He had feelings for her, strong, almost Hufflepuffian emotions of tenderness and devotion towards her. Knowing that Minerva, especially, would put two and two together, he said to Minerva, "Oh, stop your needless questioning: nothing has happened. As usual the miscreants have got the wrong end of the stick and are making a mountain out of a molehill."

But Minerva was suspicious. She, unlike the others, knew to whom the prophecy applied. Furthermore, she had seen Hermione's tear-stained face as she had returned around lunchtime to the castle. Moreover, she had seen Hermione's flushed features when the gossip had spread around the Great Hall during dinner and the horrified look in the young woman's eyes when Poppy had questioned the headmaster.

After dinner, Minerva followed Hermione as she made her way to her chambers. There, once older witch had procured herself a cup of jasmine green tea and an after dinner mint chocolate, and made herself comfortable in the guest chintz armchair, she asked Hermione gently, "Lass, I don't disapprove. I just want to know if you are all right."

"Oh, Minerva," said Hermione. "I had such hopes for today. I so wanted Ron and Harry to be like they were before. Instead, all we did was argue and hurt each other." She sighed and tossed another log into the fire. "Nothing has happened between me and Severus. He's been a perfect gentleman. But I do like him."

Minerva nodded and took a sip of her tea. "Are you aware of the prophecy?"

Hermione nodded, "Yes, Severus informed me that he has been using the brewing sessions to get to know me better. But I don't mind." Looking directly at Minerva, she said, "I'm glad he took the initiative, for otherwise I'd never have gotten to know him at all."

Minerva nodded in understanding. "My dear, you know I am fond of you both. If you are sure about your attachment, then I can assure you that there is nothing in the school rules that stops an inter-staff relationship. Besides, your future apprenticeship will be with Filius, so there are no problems with regulations."

Hermione smiled her gratitude. "It's really good to know we have your support."

Minerva chuckled. "Always, my dear. I may be old, but I'm not blind. You both are so much alike that it pleases me that you have found solace in each other. Severus has been alone for too long. You will be good for him, and he for you."

A.N. Love it or hate it, please to let me know what you think.

Chapter Eleven: I've got sex on my mind

Chapter 11 of 26

Hermione and Severus finally begin to explore their mutual attraction.

Lemons; sweet, juicy, luscious lemons are to be found in this chapter.

(i) Thank you everyone for the kind reviews. Please do continue to let me know what you think.

(ii) The characters and world of Harry Potter belong to J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this.

(iii) And last but by no means least, a big thank you to my lovely, amazing beta, Queen_of_Stars.

Mid-November saw winter arrive in the highlands of Scotland with its earnest flurry of snow and sleet. In the fortnight that had followed their Halloween discussion, Hermione and Severus had not really advanced their relationship very much further. Hogsmeade gossip had certainly made their meetings more cautious, and Severus was content to be the perfect gentleman. He was now, more than ever before, keen to entice Hermione into making the next move in their relationship. He wanted her to come to him, to keep coming to him, so that it would always be Hermione who was emotionally vulnerable. He realised on a certain level that he was being callous, but he convinced himself that he was merely being prudent and cautious. *There is no necessity, he reasoned, to have my heart made weak and vulnerable a second time. I have suffered enough with Lily; this time, I am going to play it safe.*

Hermione was finding Severus' lack of initiative extremely frustrating. He knew she was a virgin. It was not easy for her to express her sexuality and desire. However,

Hermione did understand her dark would-be-lover, and so she continued to be the one who instigated their trysts. For Hermione was smart enough to realise that, although he did not lay himself open to rejection, once she initiated contact, he would always respond with passion and fervour. Nonetheless, at the end of their rendezvous, in spite of their urgent kisses and caresses, Severus always managed to keep his control over the situation and send her away at night, untouched.

One Sunday night, on the twenty-second of November to be precise, Hermione was up late working in the library when Severus came in. "Hello," she whispered with a smile. "Madam Pince has gone to bed for the night. She told me to lock up when I leave."

Severus nodded. "I won't be long. I'm only picking up a few books."

Hermione smiled. Their moments alone had become even fewer and farther between since the onset of winter had come with a flurry of maladies that kept them both busy brewing for the infirmary. But tonight, she knew no one would be around this late. She quietly stacked the books she'd been researching through and placed them all into her heavy backpack. Then she approached the Librarian's counter where Severus was now entering the books he'd checked out. She idly read the titles and, when he was done, slid her arms around him. "I've missed you," she whispered, her lips ghosting against his ear.

Hermione was always amazed at how startled Severus was with her simple displays of affection. But his reactions were always pleasurable to her hugs and caresses. He turned around and pressed her back against the counter. She slid her hands into his thick hair and scraped her nails against his scalp. She'd learnt that this pleased him and she was not mistaken.

Severus growled in approval and took her mouth in a forceful kiss, which she returned with equal fervour. Soon she felt his impressive erection pressing hard into her belly, and she wrapped her leg around his hip, trying to get it to press into her aching heat. "Oh God, Severus, I want you," moaned Hermione. "Please come back to my rooms so I can get you out of these robes."

"Hermione," he breathed against her ear. "You know I want you desperately, but this is too soon. We've not been together for long. There's still so much about me that you don't know. My passions are not those of a callow youth; my years as a Death Eater have made me much harder, and much more brutal. I could hurt you so badly if I lose control."

"Nonsense," said Hermione firmly. "You would never hurt me. Besides, I trust you. I know that even if you lost control, you would ensure my pleasure. What do you think I've been researching at the dead of night, hmm...?"

Severus laughed. "Don't tell me you were researching sex?"

"But of course," whispered Hermione seductively. "When I come to your bed, I will be a virgin, but I won't be a shrinking violet. I want to know how to please you, to return your passion."

"Oh, Sweet Nimue," groaned Severus. "Do you know what hearing you speak like that does to me?" He thrust his hardness against her, fucking her through their many layers before once again gathering his control like a cloak and walking her back to her chambers.

Three days later, Hermione was determined that she was going to see more of Severus' naked flesh. They had been in a relationship for almost a month now, and she knew that she was starting to go a little crazy with need. In truth, she was so frustrated that all she could think about was Severus and his row upon row of buttons, which she was desperate to undo. Deciding that she had to take the initiative once more, she ordered a daringly cut negligee in bronze-coloured silk from a Muggle lingerie catalogue. Waiting for the following Friday night, when she knew that Severus would be fairly unoccupied, she made her way down to his chambers. She had worn her work robes over the negligee and felt ready to take the next step in their relationship.

Severus was busy working at his desk on what seemed to be correspondence. He smiled tiredly at her and said, "It's lovely as always to see you, but I've got to finish all of this tedious work for the Board of Governors meeting tomorrow."

"Oh," said Hermione in disappointment. She realised she wasn't going to get the shagging she'd set her mind on. But, never one to dwell on what could not be, she merely said, "Let me help relax you a bit before you get on with it, then."

Severus looked perplexed but groaned softly when her hands began massaging his tired shoulders. "That feels divine," he murmured.

Hermione smiled, then, kissed him boldly on his lips. "There's something else that will feel even better," she whispered, before moving to kneel before him on the floor.

Severus' eyebrows disappeared into his hairline as she began parting his robe and frock-coat before unbuttoning the now straining fastenings of his trousers. "I don't..." said Severus, but he was quickly silenced by Hermione, who placed her finger against his lips.

"Please, Severus. I want to do this for you. Please let me," said Hermione softly.

He could not refuse her. Especially when all of his higher brain functions seemed to have shut down. Pushing aside the fabric of his wool trousers, she pulled out his now extremely hard and aroused flesh.

"God, that's beautiful," whispered Hermione, before running her fingers along his erection. Then, she smiled up at him and leaned over to take the tip of his cock tentatively into her mouth. She sucked and licked at it experimentally, getting a feel for its texture and taste.

Severus watched her spellbound. It was obvious that she had never done this before, but her fierce concentration as she gazed at his cock made him harder than he ever remembered being.

As Hermione took more of his impressive length into her mouth, Severus moaned. Unable to resist, he slipped his hands into her curls and used his hold upon her to slowly fuck her mouth. This indication of his desire seemed to act as a sign, for Hermione began working his flesh with much more certainty and ardour. As she sucked and swirled her tongue around his cock, Severus began thrusting into her mouth in earnest. Soon his tightly held passion was unleashed, and he lost himself in forcing more and more of himself into her mouth, gagging her repeatedly as he pumped in and out furiously. Hermione was extremely turned on by this, causing her to start moaning around his flesh. This excited Severus even more, and the last of his control vanished. Standing, he forcibly angled her jaw, ramming himself into her, forcing her to take him into her throat over and over again, until unable to stop, he came, groaning and gasping, flooding her with his seed.

When Severus was done, he sat back down shakily. He was convinced that she would now flee. He had told her that his passion was unrestrained. No virgin wanted to have her mouth raped, for rape was what he had done in the last moments of his passion. But instead, Severus watched in amazement as Hermione licked her lips like a cat making sure to get to the last drops of some precious cream. Then, looking at his shocked expression, she grinned cheekily up at him.

"That went better than I thought," said Hermione. She had been afraid that she would get her first attempt at fellatio wrong, but Severus' reaction, especially towards the end, had proved that she had managed to make the dark man lose complete control. "You're delicious," she next said, before perching herself on his lap to kiss him thoroughly.

Severus was speechless. *Who is this wanton and what has happened to the bookworm of Gryffindor?* Her kiss, however, distracted him, and he hungrily returned her kiss and revelled in the fact that he could taste himself on her. Eventually when he could think straight, he pushed her off him and straightened his clothes. Then, pulling her back on to his lap, he asked, "Were you not afraid? Hermione, another woman would have run screaming from the room, claiming correctly that I was raping her."

"Oh, Severus," said Hermione gently. "That was the most amazing experience of my life. You're always so in control, so rigidly in charge of every situation; to see you lose control was a real revelation for me. I can't wait to see more of it."

Severus kissed her tenderly on her bruised lips. Lips he had bruised with his cock *Merlin*, he thought, *but I'm a depraved fuck. I love the fact that it is my cock that gave her that pouty, red mouth.* "You're a treasure," he rumbled hoarsely against her ear. "I shall have to return the favour soon."

Hermione shifted restlessly against him. Severus knew she was frustrated. He could smell her juices and feel the clenching of her thighs. He felt like a right cad for being unable to pleasure her, but work did come first. "Not tonight, my pet, I am sorry to leave you in this state, but these responses must be sent off tonight."

Hermione pouted, before nodding her head in agreement. She did realise how much work Severus had due to his insistence on curriculum change at Hogwarts.

"I'll hold you to that," she said cheekily before flashing him a bright smile. Then with one final kiss, she left him to his work.

Hermione was spending another late Sunday night in the library. December had set in and the students were focused on the upcoming Yule holidays.

Severus, she knew, was in another lengthy meeting with Kingsley on the complaints some parents had made to the Ministry about Severus' decision to teach a more detailed Dark Arts curriculum.

Suddenly, the torches in the library were extinguished. She grabbed her wand and attempted to cast a "Lumos," but nothing happened.

Hermione started to panic. She knew sensibly that nothing could hurt her at Hogwarts, but sitting in the dark in the deserted part of the castle was frightening. As she attempted to make her way by touch to the entrance of the library, she was frozen by the feeling of chains wrapping around her. Hermione squeaked in fright. Just because the war was ended didn't mean there still weren't the family of the defeated in attendance as students in Hogwarts. She would always be an obvious target for revenge.

Slowly as if the chains were sentient, they wound 'round her hands before securing her in a position that left her with her hands pointing up towards the ceiling. Next, her feet were tied to the floor. Hermione was really afraid, but she tried to stay calm. "Who's there?" she called.

When there was no answer, she yelled, "Help, somebody, help."

It was then that she felt the first brush of magic unbuttoning her robes. Helpless, she could do nothing until she was completely stripped of the modest wool skirt she had on beneath her robes. Her cardigan and button-down shirt were opened, and then, her bra unhooked. Then her warm woollen tights and underwear followed. Exposed, she shivered with the intense cold of the castle.

But she could not deny that the utter stillness and silence of this seduction was starting to turn her on. The rush of adrenalin, the fear and the uncertainty of what was to follow were feeding the Darkness within, giving her enormous pleasure. For as her clothes had begun to come off, Hermione had realised that it was Severus who was wielding the magic behind this attack.

She grew wet with anticipation. She had no idea what he had planned for her. But Hermione trusted Severus completely, and she knew he was testing her, making sure that she could take his darkness and passion in stride before completely committing to their relationship.

When a gentle feather brushed her sensitized throat, Hermione moaned. She couldn't deny the passion this display was bringing forth within her. Next the feather circled her hardened nipples before moving down her stomach to flick at her weeping core. At the contact with her aroused flesh, she gasped.

"Severus," she called desperately. "Where are you? I want to see you... feel you," she begged urgently.

She was met by silence, but the feather was replaced by a cube of ice that drew circles on her nipples until she was nearly mindless with need. Just as she thought that she couldn't take the sweet torture being inflicted upon her, the never-melt ice cube slid into her gaping hole. Hermione gasped out loud yet again, and as the cube ground against her heated, needy nub, she shattered into a million pieces.

As she came, the ice cube was replaced by Severus' questing tongue that licked and sucked, driving her orgasm further. Even as she came down from her orgasm, his tongue did not stop its assault on her most intimate of places; instead he continued to lap, to nip at her clit until she was driven once more to the point of mindless frenzy. Doing her best to grind herself against him, she arched into him, trying to get as much of his tongue into her as possible.

She felt him chuckle darkly against her core, and the vibrations only increasing her desperation. "More," she begged, "oh please, Severus, I need more," as his tongue began to fuck her in earnest. As he plunged his talented tongue into her with ever increasing power she shattered once more, gasping, moaning her pleasure out loud.

A.N. Love it or hate it, please to let me know what you think.

Chapter Twelve: Yule

Chapter 12 of 26

Severus and Hermione journey to Australia to return the Grangers' memories.

Here be lemons; tart, juicy, delicious lemons.

(i) Thank you everyone for the kind reviews. Please do continue to let me know what you think.

(ii) The characters and world of Harry Potter belong to J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this.

(iii) A big thank you to my lovely, amazing beta, Queen_of_Stars.

(iv) This chapter is in response to the December 2009's OWL theme on "Yule".

As Christmas break drew ever closer, Hermione decided to speak to Severus about her desire to go to Australia to recover her parents. She'd thought about bringing the topic up on numerous occasions, but it had never felt right. She knew how busy he was ensuring almost all the children who had lost parents, still had a home, an actually

welcoming home, to go to.

Waiting until the seventeenth, when the castle emptied of all of the students and almost all of the staff, Hermione joined Severus for an after dinner brandy in his chambers. There, when they were relaxed in front of the fireplace, she said, "Severus, I would really like to go find my parents during the Yule break. Will you come with me to help me remove the Memory Charm I placed upon them?"

Severus studied the young woman before him intently. Finally, he nodded. "Yes, if you wish me to accompany you. I will do so. But may I ask, why now?"

"Well," said Hermione, "I waited until I was sure there would be no reprisal attacks from former Death Eaters. But now that all of them have been captured, it seems safe enough to bring them back home."

Severus was reluctant. He did not think Hermione's parents would take the news of their memory modification as well as she thought they would. He didn't want to break her happy monologue though, as she spoke of how loving her parents had been towards her on her visits home over the years.

It was obvious she hadn't heard the reluctance in his tone. For Hermione brought up the subject with Minerva over breakfast the next morning.

"I still don't think this is a good idea," he said to the two women when they had finished their conversation. "But I agree with Minerva. You should not go alone. That would be folly. And thus, I will come with you."

Once Severus agreed, the plans for their journey came together surprisingly easily. An international Portkey for the Heroes of the Wizarding World was no problem at all to arrange. This important aspect of their trip organised, Severus and Hermione departed for Australia on the twentieth of December. They had decided to take a week to locate the Grangers and inform them of their altered memories.

Hermione had thought that locating her parents would be a difficult matter. Sydney was, after all, a large, cosmopolitan city. However, finding the Grangers proved the height of simplicity. For once they had emigrated, the Grangers had opened an authentic British B & B called *The Wilkins' Place* that catered to the large number of backpackers and travellers who visited the city. Not only did her parents run the B & B, they also had a lovely British tea shop selling proper cream teas and other English delicacies like mince pies and Christmas cake in honour of the approaching holidays.

Hermione and Severus spent the first afternoon observing the Grangers bustling around the tea shop, chatting to their customers and basking in the Australian summer weather. It seemed odd to Hermione to hear familiar Christmas music and see traditional British festive food displayed in the bright sunlight.

As Hermione and Severus were the only customers to linger and openly ask questions about the couple, when the rush for afternoon tea had ended and the shop emptied of all its customers save Hermione and Severus, Wendell and Monica gladly sat down to speak to their fellow expatriates.

Surreptitiously ensuring that the door to shop was locked and the place silenced, Hermione cast the charm that gave them back their memories. It was a complicated exercise, and Hermione was momentarily drained by the high percentage of magic she had used. Once she had a few moments to recover, she ate the rich, dark magical grade chocolate that Severus quickly pushed into her hand. Then, she drank another cup of lovely hot Earl Grey and closely observed her parents. They, meanwhile, had done nothing more than sit shell-shocked in their chairs once the charm was applied, their eyes firmly closed as their memories flooded back.

When they finally had all of their memories restored, the Grangers stared in shock and fury at their only child.

"How could you?" were the first words that came out of Dr. Mark Granger's mouth. "I can't believe my only child would do such a thing to us without taking the time to discuss something this important with us."

"Daddy, please," said Hermione brokenly. "I didn't have much time, and I knew you would try to talk me out of it."

"Well, it was our right," said Dr. Jean Granger in a hard, cold voice. "How dare you think you could know what was best for us. It took us years to build up our practice, to create our perfect home, and for what... for you to take away our lives, our dreams, so that we could spend the last eighteen months running a B & B?"

"Mummy," implored Hermione, turning to her mother, "it really was for the best. I did all kinds of Arithmancy calculations and there was a ninety-seven percent chance that you would survive unhurt in Australia. If you had stayed on British soil, there was an eighty-six percent chance that you would die of a Death Eater attack. I couldn't take that risk."

"You had no right, young lady," said Mark in a disappointed tone of voice. "Besides, why would we be so highly at risk? Did other Muggle-born children hide their parents away that you had to do something so rash, so brazen?"

Hermione hid her face behind her hair. "I was more likely to have my family targeted," she explained. "I was one of Harry's closest friends, and we knew Voldemort would come for you, since I was one of the people in the front lines of the war."

"Yes," said Jean cruelly. "That's another thing I didn't understand; the *Daily Prophet*, the newspaper we were advised to buy to find out about your world, never believed the stories of your friend Harry. Why on earth did you all feel he was telling the truth?"

"Because he was," said Hermione urgently. "The *Prophet* is a lying propaganda machine. But we knew the war was coming, and I knew I would have to fight. I didn't want you to be another one of the casualties."

"Well we were, and we still are," said Mark simply. "I still think you should have told us the truth, given us a choice. I feel shock. I can't quiet explain how violated I feel. And I am so hurt and angry with your belief in your own superiority, in you playing God with our lives. You are no better than those pureblood wizards you used to tell me about who played with Muggles like they were toys created for wizard amusement." Mark sighed.

"I hate to say this to my own child, but you are no child of mine. I never want to see your face again. I will never be able to trust you, to look upon you with anything but anger and resentment at the way in which you have taken our old life and now this life away. You can take your fancy magic and go live in your bloody world. I am sorry that we ever had you."

Heartbroken, Hermione turned to her mother. "Mummy," she said desperately. "Please, Mummy."

Jean was a woman with a softer heart. Watching her only child plead, tears pouring down her cheeks, did affect the older woman. But she understood her husband's position. "Hermione, your father and I are very hurt and upset. I will abide by Mark's words. If you could remove us from your life for so long, without care or consideration, I am sure that we can learn to live without you."

Hermione was distraught. She could do nothing but sob brokenly, pleading, "Mummy, Daddy, please," over and over again.

Severus was furious, but he held himself in check with great difficulty. He realised that if he lost his temper at these ignorant Muggles they would never have the opportunity to mend their broken familial ties. Thus, Severus stood up, bowed politely as possible to Hermione's parents and Apparated the two of them back to his hotel room with a loud crack.

Once there, Severus held her tenderly as she cried piteously. Eventually, exhausted she fell asleep in his arms. Throughout her emotional catharsis, Severus had spoken not a word. He knew that in her grief, rational thought was useless. But he was determined to speak to her foolish parents before they left Australia.

When Hermione awoke the next morning, it was to find herself held tightly in Severus's strong embrace. She lay turned away from him, her bum pressed intimately against his front, his leg and arm thrown across her protectively. She noted that he had removed her shoes and clothes and that her naked form lay pressed against his own, which

was clothed in what felt like practical cotton pyjamas. As she recalled how she came to be in Severus' bed, she remembered her hasty departure and her parents' rejection. Her body stiffened in pain, and she felt Severus' arm tighten around her. Realising that he was awake, she shifted until she lay facing him.

As their eyes met, he raised his eyebrow questioningly. Hermione nodded in response and tried to smile, despite the pain still tearing at her heart.

Severus sighed. Then, he tenderly kissed her on her forehead and said, "Hello, dear one."

Hermione returned his gentle greeting with a soft, "Hello," of her own.

Pulling her even closer until she was practically lying on top of him, he said into her wild mop of hair, "Don't take yesterday as the end of all communication with your parents. Try to understand their position and give them time. You never know; in time they may change their minds, and they can always find you at Hogwarts."

Hermione listened to his surprisingly gentle advice and nodded her head. "I know," she said softly. "But I never thought my parents would not be ready to listen, that they would reject me like that. They didn't sound like my parents, they were so different."

"Well," said Severus trying his best to be gentle. "They have had eighteen months away from you in a different country and culture. They are bound to have changed in that time. Now, I want you to do your best to not dwell on this. Give them time."

Hermione tried to smile, but again, her smile didn't quite reach her eyes.

Severus sighed. "None of that," he said sternly. "You have faced much worse than this. You're a strong, resourceful woman."

Hearing Severus' words of praise were a balm to Hermione's fractured heart. The smile that next graced her face was, if not up to her usual brilliance, then at least more genuine and heartfelt.

"Besides," said Severus, "even if your parents never speak to you again, you now know that they are safe and well. That they are alive and they have their memories back. Take comfort in that."

Hermione nodded. "Thank you, Severus," she said with a warm and loving smile. "I'm so glad I have you with me. I don't think I could have managed this pain if I was on my own."

"Think nothing of it, my pet," he said. "If we are to move further in our relationship, then we must begin as we mean to go on. I am here for you, no matter what."

Hermione's smile was like the sun in its brilliance. Severus was not a wizard to make claims of that nature lightly.

"I'm going to send you back to your room to have a nice long bath now," said Severus next. "But I shall return in a little over an hour to collect you for breakfast. You did not have any dinner, and you need to keep your strength up."

"Yes, sir," said Hermione with another more genuine smile. She felt enormously grateful to Severus's kindness and no-nonsense attitude.

Once Hermione was occupied with the long, soothing bath that Severus had drawn for her, he Apparated to the Grangers' tea shop. There, he wasted no time in casting a series of spells that encouraged all the customers to depart post-haste so that he was left in the sole company of her parents. Then, before they could speak, he said, "I do not care if you never contact your daughter again. But it would behoove you and your supposed intelligence to listen to what I have to say."

The Grangers had spent the night discussing and trying to come to grips with what they had learned about their past and their new life in Australia. When they had not known who they were, where they had come from, their new life had seemed wonderful. The marvellous weather, the interesting, bohemian mix of people they saw walking through their doors... it had all been what they thought they had always wanted. Now, that reality was superimposed on their previous understanding of their social background, their life and successful business in England. Seeing the angry wizard, for they were adept enough to realise that he was a wizard, they stood quietly, though their posture radiated mistrust and fear.

At the Grangers' tense silence, Severus continued. "Hermione is a brilliant witch. As her former professor and current headmaster, I can assure you that she is one of the most extraordinary minds to come through the corridors of Hogwarts. I am confident that her Arithmancy calculations would have been meticulous. If she worked out that your leaving Britain was the best chance of ensuring your survival, then you can thank her for saving your lives. Are your old home and career more important than your worthless existence on this material realm?"

The Grangers had not believed their daughter when she had told them that their lives would have been at risk. They had dismissed it as Hermione thinking too much of herself. Hearing this angry and obviously powerful man speak made them rethink their previous assumptions.

Jean Granger had spent the past year mourning silently over not having a child. To find out that they did in fact have a daughter, only to lose her because Mark would not forgive her, had hurt her. She was willing to forgive, to try to understand. Her face softened, and she nodded cautiously while looking at her husband's angry glare.

Severus could see that the woman was starting to mellow. Looking straight into the man's eyes, Severus said, "Think about whether your business and home are more important than your worthless, miserable Muggle lives for a while before you reject your only child." Drawing his robes around him and standing even taller, he said imperiously, "I am a former Death Eater. I can assure you that all Muggle-borns were classified and targeted, and Hermione, as the poster-child who refuted all pureblood propaganda of Muggle-born inferiority, was one of the most wanted of fugitives. She spent a year on the run, living in a tent, struggling each day for survival. If it were not for her and her annoying little friend Potter, the world as we know it would be no more. The Dark Lord would have been victorious, and it would have not been long before the entire Muggle world was enslaved. She has been tortured and faced more Darkness and danger than you in your mediocre little existence can ever imagine. She is a heroine of the wizarding world, and your petty, mindless rejection of your only child has caused her more pain and suffering than the Darkness she has fought against her entire life."

At hearing that her only child had been tortured, Jean gasped out loud and clutched the hand of her husband. Even Mark, who had hardened his heart at his daughter's actions, was alarmed. As a doctor, if not a father, hearing about children being tortured pained him.

Severus could see that his words were having the desired affect on the Muggles. Using all of his skill as an orator, he said, "You disgust me with your self-righteous suppositions of fairness and justice. Your shop is decorated with memorabilia for a holiday that celebrates the birth of a child who spoke of love, peace and forgiveness. Don't you think it is hypocritical to reject your only offspring, yet attempt to uphold the trappings of the birth of Christ, the so-called son of God? If you can reject your own flesh and blood, then what does that say about you? Think hard about what you have done to your only child. She waited all this time to be sure that you would not face reprisal attacks from former Death Eaters on the run. She has always put your safety first. Is your life, your comfort more important than the happiness of your only offspring? And people wonder why the extermination of mindless, petty Muggles was wrong. If you think that your life now is lost, I could finish off the deed for you. Killing you would be but the work of a moment, and it would give me great pleasure to ensure that you never hurt Hermione with your worthless, thoughtless presence again."

Hermione's parents were terrified at the fury and power radiating from the angry wizard. It was obvious that he was an extremely powerful man, and they dared not utter a word as he vented his rage. They knew they had misjudged and misspoken yesterday. They were no closer to forgiving and forgetting what had been done, but they realised that they needed to understand the motivation behind their daughter's actions.

Severus finished his tirade and looked at them both closely. "If you change your minds, you know where to contact your daughter. I hope you don't, for she is better off without such weak, petty individuals in her life. She will go far, and you and your ignorance will only slow her down. But I know she loves you, and this is what has moved me to sully myself with your presence today. Good day." With that parting remark, Severus Apparated away to his hotel-room once more.

His visit to the Grangers' had taken a rather short time. He thus had plenty of time to plan the next course of action. When he went to collect Hermione, he had a meticulously designed itinerary. Knowing that the best way to deal with her disappointment was through intellectual stimulation, he informed her over breakfast that he

planned on utilising their time away from Hogwarts with collecting hard-to-find potion ingredients. This immediately perked up Hermione's curiosity, and they spent a thoroughly interesting, if not happy, day browsing the Aboriginal Magical ghetto of Sydney, where they bought a vast quantity of native Australian potion ingredients and texts.

That night, Severus took Hermione out for a romantic Yule dinner. Looking out at Sydney Harbour, they tried to put the fiasco of the meeting with her parents behind them. Severus ordered a bottle of fine Australian wine and once again involved her by explaining the history and background of winemaking in the region.

Hermione loved listening to Severus speak. His voice was like dark, rich chocolate, coating her in a haze of sensuality. Seeing Severus's genuine affection for her helped Hermione cope with the painful rejection of her parents, and she clung to the comfort of his words that perhaps in time, her parents would change their mind.

Severus found Hermione painfully easy to read. As her emotions flashed across her face, he gently squeezed her hand in silent support.

Hermione smiled. She could not believe that this understanding, gentle man was the same stern and terror-inducing Potions master of her younger years.

Dinner over, they lingered over their Christmas pudding, going so far as to order a second bottle of wine. By the end of the evening, both Severus and Hermione were pleasantly relaxed. Their walk back to the hotel was filled with gentle caresses and kisses. Severus, who had never been on a romantic stroll, found the experience of walking hand in hand with Hermione utterly satisfying. The envious glances he encountered for having a beautiful young woman who was clearly enthralled by him filled him with a deep sense of masculine fulfilment. Back at the hotel, the ride up to their rooms was filled with more sensual kisses.

Hermione wanted to show Severus how much she appreciated having him by her side. She had realised over dinner that she had fallen deeply in love with her complex Slytherin. He was everything she desired. As they reached her bedroom door, Severus kissed her possessively and said, "I shall see you bright and early tomorrow morning, my pet; sleep well."

Hermione rebelled at the thought of being parted from Severus. They had already spent their first night away from Hogwarts in the same bed, and she could not imagine wasting another moment of their time together apart from her beloved. "Please don't leave me alone," said Hermione softly. "I don't think I can stand to be parted from you."

Severus could not reject her. Holding Hermione last night had been one of the most moving experiences of his life. He had never shared his bed with a woman for an entire night. Seeing Hermione's trust in him had touched him deeply. However, Severus was still playing the waiting game. He did not want to seduce Hermione into his bed, despite their more than passionate encounters. Kissing her once more, Severus said, "Only sleeping, though. You've had too much to drink, and you are emotional. When we finally have sex, I want you to be sure, completely sure."

"Yes, Severus, I know. But I don't want to be alone tonight. Just hold me, please?" implored Hermione.

Severus could not refuse. He longed to hold her, to fall asleep beside her and see her as she awoke. Preparing for bed with a partner was yet another aspect of relationships that Severus had never experienced. Watching Hermione brush her hair, her teeth, and clean her face before slipping into her surprisingly sensual satin negligee was to Severus a revelation.

Hermione too revelled in watching Severus' nightly ritual. She smiled at the sight of his faded black cotton pyjamas and snuggled under the covers as she watched Severus's final setting of security wards. She was overcome with love for her stern, taciturn man. Once Severus joined her in bed, Hermione leaned over and kissed him. Soon their kisses become more and more passionate, as they always did. Severus tried to stop, to push her away, but Hermione was insistent. "Don't push me away, Severus," she begged, "please make love to me. I want you so much."

Hermione's words were everything that Severus had desired in his darkest fantasies, but he was still uncertain. "You'll regret it in the morning," he warned sternly. "You've had too much to drink tonight."

Hermione was adamant in her denial. 'I won't,' she said confidently. "I've wanted to be in your bed since Halloween." Smiling, Hermione sat up in bed. Then, utilising all of her Gryffindor courage, she lifted her nightdress over her head and threw it across the room.

Severus was left speechless as the sight of her nakedness. Unable to stop himself, his hands slid around her waist and gathered her tightly against him. "Bloody Gryffindor," he murmured in exasperation.

Hermione shuddered at the feel of his strong arms around her. "Please Severus, I need you tonight. We've been together for nearly two months, and all I can think about is having you love me. Please don't push me away," whispered Hermione.

"I can never do that," confessed Severus. "I want you... have wanted you for months now."

"Then love me, please; make me yours," urged Hermione.

Severus was undone. He realised that he could not continue to fight their twin desires and buried his head in her lush breasts. Hearing Hermione's throaty moan, he kissed her firm, round flesh, then suckled one dusky pink nipple until it was a hard peak.

Hermione thrust her hands into his slick locks. Scraping her nails against his scalp, she revelled in his groan before grinding her needy core against his hard erection.

Severus continued to kiss and suckle her right nipple before moving on to lave and suck at the other with ever-increasing urgency.

Hermione was awash in sensation. She was desperate to feel more of his skin against her own heated flesh. Sliding her hands down his broad shoulders, she began to unbutton his shirt. Soon her questing fingers pushed the fabric of the pyjama shirt aside to bare his strong, nearly hairless chest to her heated gaze. She skimmed her fingers along his firm skin before flicking her thumbs against his tightly furled nipples.

Severus growled deep in his throat before devouring her neck and clavicle. Hermione's untutored exploration of his body was driving Severus wild with desire. Wanting to show her how much he needed her, he took her mouth in another searing kiss. Their hands explored each other, caressing, stroking, teasing until Severus flipped her onto her back and took charge. He used one strong hand to hold her arms above her head and explored her curves in detail before slowly moving downwards. He kissed her flat stomach, then circled the dip of her belly button with his talented tongue before finally plunging himself into her waiting heat. She screamed as his tongue attacked her, as he licked and sucked on her throbbing centre. Soon she was a mindless ocean of sensation, and he pushed one, then two long digits into her heat, in preparation for his ultimate penetration.

Hermione was almost frenzied with arousal. "More, Severus," demanded Hermione breathlessly. "Love me; please, love me," she cried, begging her need.

Severus was undone. Never had a woman begged him to make her his. Never had a woman desired him, wanted him with no ulterior motive. Using all of his considerable control to avoid ramming his rock-hard cock into her that very instant, he fucked her hard and fast with his tongue until she felt like she was flying off the edge of a high cliff, only to be gathered up gently as he continued to suckle her juices as she came off her peak.

Hermione lay there on the bed in a boneless heap. Severus looked at her and smirked. His face was covered in her juices, and he gently kissed her sensitized folds one last time before moving back up her body to share her taste with her. This was the first time that Hermione had ever tasted herself on another, and it sent another spark of arousal through her. They kissed wildly, passionately. Soon Severus' fingers were thrusting within her folds, preparing her once more.

"No more foreplay," Hermione begged forcefully. "Just take me now. Please."

"Are you going to be this bossy in bed all the time?" Severus enquired with another smirk. He could not grin, he wasn't Gryffindor enough for that, but smirk, well he could do that for it conveyed his joy and wry acceptance of all his lover was.

Not that Severus minded Hermione's propensity to speak her mind. He was very glad his lover was verbose and demanding. He preferred a woman who knew what she wanted to one who lay there passively.

"Yes," said Hermione impatiently, before reaching down to push his pyjama bottoms off his slender hips.

Her eagerness fuelled Severus' desire further. In truth, he was so hard he felt that he would explode at the first touch of her flesh against him. However, something in Severus demanded that he try one last time to warn her. "This will, in all likelihood, hurt," he said gruffly.

Hermione was so desperate for him that she was furious at his hesitation. "Stop being such a bloody gentleman, Severus. Just fuck me."

The words shocked him into action. He complied and thrust himself in one hard push into her waiting core. She screamed at his penetration, which caused him to stop immediately.

"No," implored Hermione, "don't stop. That was amazing."

That was all the encouragement Severus needed. Nearly mindless now with his own long-withheld need, he began to move within her. First one long slow stroke in, before coming out nearly all the way only to plunge into her wet, tight heat again. "You feel so good," he groaned hoarsely in time with his hard, fast thrusts. "So incredibly wet, so unbelievably tight."

Hearing his rough, passion-filled voice speak so heatedly in her ear while he pushed into her waiting, needing heat sent Hermione hurtling towards orgasm with blinding speed. She did her best to match his hard thrusts, moaning, arching towards him.

Hermione's moans and sobs as he plunged into her shattered the last of Severus' impressive control. The Darkness within him rose until he took her body like a man possessed. He drove into her so hard and fast that Hermione could do nothing but shriek nearly continuously as he ploughed into her. Her short nails pressed into his shoulders and back as she tried to hang on. The pain of her nails raking his back only added fuel to the raging inferno of his need. Now there was no rhythm, only brute ownership of Hermione's body. He forgot that she had been a virgin just moments ago, that she was probably still in pain; all that mattered was his own pleasure. Throwing her legs over his shoulders, Severus took what he needed so very badly.

However, Severus' Darkness fed Hermione's own. She needed to be possessed, to be taken, and Severus' ownership of her body fuelled her own passion. Her orgasm when it came was unlike anything she had ever experienced before. It was so hard, so long, she nearly blacked out with the intensity of it.

Hermione's orgasm triggered Severus' own, and with one final hard thrust, he exploded within her, flooding her with his seed.

The explosive climax drained Severus completely, and for a few long moments, he could do nothing other than lie on top of Hermione in exhaustion. Finally though, he found just enough strength to roll over onto his back so that he could pull her onto his chest.

As Severus attempted to pull himself together following what was undoubtedly one of most intense orgasms of his life, Hermione curled around him sensually and began to pepper every inch of his flesh that she could reach with soft, tender kisses. Severus stroked his hand along her back and pulled her up further so that he could look her in the face. The sight that met his intense gaze was one that Severus thought would stay with him until the end of eternity. Hermione looked like a woman who had been well and truly fucked. Meeting his eyes, she grinned stupidly at him, and Severus was unable to do anything but grin stupidly back at her. They both realised that they had just experienced something completely out of the ordinary.

Finally, when she was able to speak, Hermione kissed him on his sharp jaw and whispered, "Wow. That was amazing. I can't believe you made me wait for so long."

Severus was darkly amazed he even had the strength to chuckle. Her words reassured him, and he tightened his hold upon her. Stroking her back once more, Severus said seriously, "Hermione, be warned. I don't take our relationship lightly. Now you are mine completely in every sense of the word, I'm never letting you go."

Hermione realised the importance of the moment. She kissed Severus tenderly on his chin and said, "Good. I don't want anyone but you," before kissing him softly on the mouth. Not long after, they drifted off to sleep, their bodies woven together.

In the morning, when Hermione awoke, it was to find Severus lying, propped up on his elbow looking down at her intently. She smiled, remembering the passion and the ecstasy of the night before.

"No regrets?" he asked softly.

"None," she replied with a grin on her face. Sliding her arms around him, she drew him to her until she was crushed under his superior weight. Kissing him boldly, passionately, she said, "I feel wonderful." Then, she slid her hands into his dark hair and scraped her nails against his scalp. As Severus groaned softly in pleasure, she said, "Severus, I am in love with you. I hope you realise this. I am yours completely, heart, mind, body and soul."

No woman, no person had ever said these words to Severus. Every relationship he had ever had, had been based on exploitation or power. He had never been loved so completely, so unconditionally. Raising himself on his forearms, Severus gazed intently once more at Hermione. Realising the absolute truth of her admission, Severus was filled with wonder.

The smile Severus returned at her words of love was so gentle, so shy, that Hermione realised that he had just unknowingly revealed his heart to her. Everything she had wanted to know, she could see in his eyes, his smile. There was no mask, no deception.

Kissing her gently on the tip of her nose, Severus responded, "I know." Then, with a gentle sigh he rolled on to his back, taking Hermione with him. As she continued to gaze at him, her head resting on his chest, he said, "Hermione, I've never said those words to anyone, but I want you to know that I care deeply for you. I will not lie to you or sully your confession. I will need to work up to saying the words to you."

Hermione laughed. "I know, my love. I am willing to wait until you can say the words to me, but in the meantime, I'll gladly accept you showing me."

Hermione's gentle yet saucy teasing was the perfect response to Severus' serious declaration. It helped to lighten the mood and ease the tension that had arisen within him. He laughed in delight at his wanton hussy and pulled her more firmly onto him for more breathtaking kisses.

A.N. Love it or hate it, please to let me know what you think.

Chapter Thirteen: A Tropical Island Getaway

Hermione and Severus visit the tropical island of Sri Lanka where they learn the groundbreaking treatment that is being tested for long-term curse induced nerve damage.

This chapter features a multitude of big, juicy lemons.

- (i) Thank you everyone for the kind reviews. Please do continue to let me know what you think.
- (ii) The characters and world of Harry Potter belong to J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this.
- (iii) This chapter is in response to the December 2009's OWL theme on "Yule".
- (iv) And last but by no means least, a big thank you to my lovely, amazing beta, Queen_of_Stars.

When they had made their original Yule plans, Severus and Hermione had thought to spend their time away from Hogwarts in Sydney, where Hermione's parents had been sent. But after the disappointment of rejection, Hermione could not stand to be in the same city as her estranged parents.

While they were having a leisurely breakfast in bed, Hermione brought up something that had been on her mind. "My love, I've been thinking. I really don't want to remain in Sydney or even Australia for Christmas."

Severus raised an eyebrow questioningly.

"Well," said Hermione with a deep blush, "couldn't we use this time to go away somewhere on a proper romantic holiday? We might not get any real time together until summer, otherwise. And just being on the same continent as my parents and not being able to see them, to spend time with them feels horrible."

Severus stroked his lips with his index finger thoughtfully and watched with an amused smirk as Hermione's pupils dilated with arousal. He still could not get over how easy it was to rouse his witch's desire for him. No woman had lusted after him before, and he loved seeing her eyes widen, her breath quicken with her passion for him.

Pulling his thoughts back to the question, he sighed. "Now that we are so far away from Scotland and relatively in the right part of the globe, I'm actually keen to go to an ancient Ayurveda treatment centre in Sri Lanka. It's by the beach, so we could have a sort of working vacation if you will. I've been in correspondence with an experimental native Healer working on a cure for long-term curse-induced nerve-damaged patients."

Hermione's eyes widened in fascination. This was why she was with Severus. "Wow."

Severus nodded and did nothing to bite back his smile. "Gunananda Devasiri, the native Healer I've been writing to, has been conducting tests based on his research derived from ancient Sanskrit scrolls. Sri Lanka has a large number of victims of Cruciatus and other curse-induced nerve and mind damage due to their own civil war."

"Oh," said Hermione. She knew very little about the wider magical world as most of her time and attention had been focused on surviving Voldemort and then adjusting to her new responsibilities as a teaching assistant. "I'd love to go. All I know about Sri Lanka is that they have wonderful tea, which my grandfather loved. He had been based in Ceylon briefly during the Second World War, and he used to tell me stories of the beautiful beaches and mountains."

Severus smiled. Trust Hermione to be enchanted with the idea of a working holiday. Any other woman would have pouted and said there was nothing romantic about going to an experimental healing facility, whatever the location. Once their decision was made, it was surprisingly easy to arrange for a special Portkey to Colombo and then procure another internal Portkey to the specialist centre in Unawatuna.

Unawatuna was everything and more than Hermione could have envisioned. They arrived mid-morning, and the turquoise water, the pale golden sand and the warm, ocean breeze made her feel like she had stepped into paradise. "Wow," she said in amazement. "This place is gorgeous."

"It is, isn't it," said Severus with a smirk. Taking her hand, which he had now grown accustomed to holding, they walked up to the Colonial-style villa that was the only wizarding hotel in the area.

Their hotel was fabulous and perched just by the beach with amazing views of the majestic sunrises and sunsets with colours that could only be glimpsed so close to the equator. That first evening, they walked along the golden beach, watching the colours in the sky change, and the darkness descend rapidly as it was wont to do in tropical climates. Hermione sighed, "Can I tell you something really silly?" she asked quietly.

At Severus's nod, Hermione said, "The worst thing about mummy and daddy's estrangement is that now, I won't be able to get Crookshanks back."

Severus chuckled and pulled her into an embrace.

"No," said Hermione impatiently, for she could see her dark lover was not taking her seriously. Taking a step back, she looked up at Severus. His face showed his lack of comprehension. Sighing, she asked, "You've never had a familiar have you?"

Severus shook his head. As a young boy, a familiar was too expensive, and his father would never have allowed a magical creature into their home. At school, he dared not inflict the pain he was sure the other students would have heaped on a poor innocent animal. And later on, well, no Death Eater really had a familiar, not when the Dark Lord used every possible avenue of vulnerability to hurt and humiliate.

Hermione saw his thoughtful frown and said softly, "We should get you one, then you'll understand. Losing Crooks was like losing a part of myself. The day I found him, I felt this amazing connection, like I had found a vital element that was missing in my life. Knowing that he is never going to come back home to me, that I am never going to be able to stroke him or whisper my thoughts and plans to his disdainfully singular audience is really painful."

Wordlessly, he slid his arms around her and held her tight as she looked out onto the dark midnight blue waters.

Finally, Hermione sighed again. "I'm so glad you're in my life," she said softly. "I don't think I could go on if it weren't for you and your strength."

The next day, before heading off to the Ayurveda centre for their appointment with the Healer, they took an early morning swim in the warm waters of the Indian Ocean. Severus, who had never truly relaxed, found the entire experience of letting go extremely hard at first. But he could see how much it seemed to help Hermione, and her joy fuelled his own.

While Severus and Gunananda were ensconced in the scroll room, discussing ingredients and brewing techniques, Hermione learned about the restorative magical massages that the Healer and his apprentices were pioneering. It involved placing a number of spells on the masseuse's hands to soothe and restore the nerves damaged by curses. This was followed by a meditative visualisation massage where the Healer repaired and reconnected disconnected nerve links. The final stage was the re-firing of the nerves and required a combination of high impact massage and strengthening potions. The technique was still being tested, but seemed to be easing long-term patients.

The days sped by as Severus spent his time learning the brewing technique for the potion, collecting a vast stock of the ingredients, since most of them were almost impossible to find in Britain, and in general discussing research with Gunananda. But the early mornings and long, tropical nights were for the lovers alone. They took long walks along the shore, explored the magical quarter of the ancient Dutch fort in Galle and made love ravenously. Severus, after the first day, even started to develop a tan through his prolonged exposure to the sun as he worked with the Healer's apprentices to collect potion ingredients. Though Hermione found Severus' tan incredibly sexy, he was very careful to drink the sun-block potion that Gunananda insisted they both take to avoid sun burn.

On Christmas Eve, they had a special meal at the hotel restaurant. Since it was run by an old Irish couple, the food was traditional Irish and British Christmas fare. After a wonderful dinner of goose and stuffing, cranberry sauce and wonderful elf-made wine, the couple wandered on to the beach-front ballroom where the band was playing traditional wizarding Yule favourites. Listening to Celestina Warbeck's "A Cauldron Full of Hot, Strong Love" brought back poignant memories of holidays with the Weasleys for Hermione, and Severus, seeing the look on her face, pulled her into his arms.

On Christmas Day they opened their small stash of presents. Minerva's owl had found them both with boxes of traditional Scottish shortbread. Severus had bought Hermione a beautiful jewellery box inlaid with Australian opals, and it brought tears to Hermione's eyes, for she realised that it was not often that Severus gave or received gifts. She was really thankful that she had found, in one of her own forays into the shops in Galle, a beautiful tooled collection of coverings for keeping notebooks, made from dragon-hide with a matching dragon-hide satchel for his potion ingredients collecting excursions. The hide had been worked until it gleamed with a soft sheen.

They had been invited to a special Christmas meal with Gunananda's family that afternoon. After they had opened their presents and made slow, sensual love, Severus and Hermione walked along the beach road to the Healer's white-washed bungalow. The gate was set in a low stone wall, and the outside of the house was covered in night blooming jasmine and bright orange bougainvillea blooms.

As they began conversing, Hermione discovered that Gunananda's wife, Kumarilata, was an accomplished cook who was equally skilled in the magical and therapeutic arts. The older witch soon learned that Hermione was interested in learning about medicinal potions and healing and taught Hermione much about the beneficial art of food. Hermione, who had never known that food could also be used as a sort of medicinal art, was informed of the different ingredients that could help ease various medical complaints.

"Is food not taken into the body?" demanded Kumarilata. "Then why can it, too, not be infused with magical properties to aid and cure?"

Hermione, who had never thought of food in this way, was ashamed of her ignorance. "I've never really thought about it," admitted the young woman. "At Hogwarts, the house-elves do the cooking. I've learned some spells to help with the actual process of cooking, but infusing food and its preparation with magic is something that has never been mentioned in any of the books I've read."

Kumarilata chuckled at the younger woman's consternation. "Never fear," said the older witch. "Now that your eyes are open, you can begin your learning. We in Asia have always used the art of food for the benefit of our families. It cures, it calms, it does so many things. Sometimes..." and then she looked around to make sure the men were occupied in the drinking of their locally brewed arrack "...women use food to entice and seduce their men. There are lots of recipes that can only be made by a woman for her man."

Hermione blushed. She wanted so much to ask the older witch for the recipes.

Kumarilata seemed to understand the younger woman's desire. She chuckled again and said, "Before you leave, I will allow you to make copies of my family notebooks. However..." and the woman stopped, once again to ensure they were not overheard "...you must protect them and ensure they do not fall into the wrong hands."

"Of course," said Hermione earnestly in agreement.

While lunch was cooked and eaten and the lazy afternoon passed, Kumarilata taught Hermione about the use of spices and herbs. She also taught the younger woman a number of traditional charms which were sung or hummed over the food as it was prepared and served. Hermione, who had never paid much attention to domestic spellcraft, was an apt pupil once more. Much to her delight, at the end of the day, she was allowed to copy down a number of hand written manuscripts belonging to Kumarilata's family. Hermione was overwhelmed by the generosity of the Devasiri family. As the two couples said their good-byes after an enjoyable day, a life-long friendship was established between the younger pair and the older, childless duo.

Their time away from Hogwarts over, Hermione and Severus prepared to return refreshed to Scotland. Over a quiet dinner in their beachfront hotel, Severus and Hermione wondered how to handle their new relationship.

Severus was reluctant to hide their newfound closeness. "I know it would be prudent to be circumspect," admitted Severus thoughtfully, "but I have lived a life of shadows for so long that I feel it is time to be open about who I am and what I am."

Hermione nodded in understanding. "I don't want to hide our relationship, either," she said softly. She reached out to stroke his hand that lay upon the table. "I'm not ashamed of my feelings for you. Minerva is, of course, on our side, and she's assured me that there's nothing in the school rules to stop an inter-staff relationship."

Severus chuckled. "Minerva is the one who first made me aware that you might be the woman mentioned in the prophecy," he admitted in amusement. "She'll be delighted to see us in a relationship."

Before retiring to bed, they went for a final walk along the beach in the moonlight. Severus, despite his claims of wanting to be open about his relationship, worried about the repercussions. She was so young, and his past was sure to come to haunt them.

Hermione seemed to understand what was going through his mind. She slid her arms around his waist and pulled him into a tight embrace, holding him as they looked out over the water.

Finally, with a sigh, Severus pulled himself together. With a sheepish grimace, he withdrew a tiny jewellery box covered in silver satin cloth. As Hermione's eyes goggled in amazement, he opened the box to reveal a beautiful ring. As she opened her mouth to speak, he placed his finger against her lips.

"Sh...", he said, silencing her. "This is a token of my heartfelt devotion. When you are ready...if you are ever ready...I will be glad to put it on your engagement finger. I'm not pressuring you in any way. I know this is a big step. But I want you to have it, to know that I am sincere in my desire for you, in my commitment to having you in my life."

"Oh, Severus," said Hermione, tears pouring down her cheeks. "You're such a silly man. There's no need to wait. I love you; I'll be more than happy to wear your betrothal ring."

Severus was taken aback. He knew she loved him. He had heard her whisper the words to him on a number of occasions, but he had not expected her to agree to marry him so quickly. They had after all been together for only a few brief months. "Are you sure?" he asked in disbelief. "We've been together for an extremely short time. You don't know what I'm capable of, Hermione."

"Hush," said Hermione furiously. "I know how brave, how good, how loyal you can be. I'm not afraid of your Darkness. I know you will always protect me, no matter what. Of course I'll marry you, Severus."

His eyes glowing with unrestrained pleasure and pride, Severus gently slid the ring onto her finger. It was a beautiful ring. Made of platinum set with a stunningly large, shimmering, bright red Gryffindor sapphire, with smaller red sapphires and diamonds forming bands on either side, it had runes in Sanskrit etched into the inside of the band. Then, as Hermione stood with her skirt trailing in the surf, with the waves lapping at her ankles, he kissed her with all of the love, passion and devotion he felt in his heart.

Hermione wrapped her arms around him and kissed him back wholeheartedly. In her wildest dreams, she had not expected the dark, dangerous and intensely private man to turn into this tender, romantic lover. Even though he kept bringing up his inherent Darkness, all Hermione could see was the purity and Light of his heart-felt affection and passion.

Severus had no words to express his sense of peace and joy at her agreeing to be his wife. Instead, he returned her embrace and her kisses, expressing through his actions how much he appreciated her unconditional love. Soon they were once again caught up in their mutual passion. Severus half carried, half dragged her back to their beach-fronted room, where he slowly, deliberately stripped her off her clothes. When she was naked, he guided her to their bed before standing before her to undress. She watched him, captivated, as layer upon layer of cloth was removed.

Soon he was standing proud and erect before her. She opened her arms wide and welcomed him to her. He came to her and captured her mouth with a searing kiss. Before long, the kissing progressed to frenzied stroking and grasping. Hermione was burning with desire, almost desperate for fulfilment. She took his hard length and drew it into her. They joined together with practiced ease; they fit together perfectly. She urged him to go faster, her heels pulling him into her. "Harder, Severus," she demanded.

Severus laughed. He had never thought that he would be capable of laughter while making love. Slowing his strokes further, to the obvious annoyance of his witch, he asked, "Will I never have you at my leisure, woman?"

"No," she replied cheekily, "not when I want you so desperately all the time."

Soon, though, humour was replaced once more with urgency. He started thrusting into her with all of his considerable power, and Hermione keened with need. Faster and harder he moved, grunting with exertion until he was completely lost in her heat, her tightness. She surrounded him, and he flew into a million pieces just as she started to orgasm. They were bathed with light at their simultaneous combustion. As they came back to themselves, they noticed the soft silver glow that still surrounded them.

"What is this?" asked Hermione in wonder.

Severus, too, was astonished at the manifestation of their emotion. Pulling Hermione so that she lay with her head nestled on his chest, he tried to explain. "The jeweller Gunananda took me to said that the ring had special charms and powers built into it. I was not told what they all were, but that they were to do with love, fidelity, fertility and prosperity. He said they would be released at opportune moments. I suspect we just released the first of them, love."

Hermione raised her expressive face to gaze at him with adoration.

Deciding that nothing other than absolute honesty was required of him, Severus said, "Hermione, I do love you. You have made me happier than I ever thought it was possible for me to be."

"Oh, Severus. I love you, too. I love you with all that I am and all that I have ever been. I am so glad you decided to take the chance to get to know me."

"My love, my own sweet love," was all he could murmur into her wild and tangled curls.

A.N. Love it or hate it, please to let me know what you think.

Chapter Fourteen: A return to Hogwarts

Chapter 14 of 26

Reactions to their relationship follow. Minerva defends her cub.

- (i) Thank you everyone for the kind reviews. Please do continue to let me know what you think.
- (ii) The characters and world of Harry Potter belong to J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this.
- (iii) And last but by no means least, a big thank you to my lovely, amazing beta, Queen_of_Stars.

The next morning Severus woke before the dawn. Kissing his still sleeping Hermione gently, he slipped out of bed and went out on to the beach for a long, contemplative walk. He needed to think, to ensure that he reconciled what had happened the previous night before they left for Hogwarts. The physical manifestation of their mutual love had shaken him deeply, for although Severus had proposed, he had not really expected Hermione to accept. Neither had he thought that his feelings were really that of love. He had not thought himself truly capable of love, or indeed, of being loved completely in return. Lily's capricious affections and pseudo friendship had hurt him so deeply that the scars were beyond all possible ken. Severus had, of course, known that he was devoted to Hermione, that he cared for her and that he lusted after her body and her mind. But he had avoided speaking the words, "I love you," for so long that, now that the extent of his emotions were out in the open, he felt vulnerable. Even though Hermione had agreed to marry him, even though her love had been confirmed by the manifestation of the power imbued in the ring, he still felt that she could leave him at any moment.

Thus, he decided that he would bind Hermione to him in every possible sense of the word. Plotting once more, the Slytherin rationalised that it would be perfectly acceptable if he made her consent to a binding so permanent, so elemental that they would be bound for all the days of their lives. He could not agree to a simple, modern Muggle or even wizarding marriage ceremony that allowed for the possibility of divorce or separation.

No, he reasoned, if I am to be her husband, her mate, I will insist on the most traditional of ceremonies. I shall tie her to me until death do us part, with no possibility of her leaving me, of being without me. I shall not make myself vulnerable to her growing up and wanting someone else, something else. She is mine; I shall ensure that she is mine, forever. He was a possessive man, and he had already told Hermione this. She could not refuse him this; she knew of his Darker desires, of his appreciation of the old ways. She could not refuse, especially since he had already admitted to loving her. Feeling better about his admittance of love, and of the decision he had reached, he made his way back to the hotel.

When he quietly entered their room through the sliding doors that led out onto the beach, Hermione was still asleep. She had not even felt him slip away. Gently sliding in between the sheets, he woke her with a slow, sensual seduction that started with gentle, tender kisses to her eyes before moving to her cheeks and her lips. His clever hands meanwhile had begun stroking and exploring her soft and bountiful breasts before sliding down to part her thighs.

Hermione awoke to the feeling of fingers stroking her already moist folds and Severus suckling her right nipple while rolling and pinching her left.

"Mmmm..." she moaned. "What a fabulous way to wake up," she murmured with a sensuous smile before sliding her hands into Severus' slick locks.

Releasing her nipple with a gentle last nip, Severus moved up her body to kiss her possessively, his fingers still stroking her heat, forcing Hermione to arch into his touch as he ignited the fire within her. "Are you mine?" he demanded darkly as his fingers began thrusting into her.

"Yes," moaned Hermione. Her body seemed to be in a constant state of readiness for Severus' ministrations, and she was now desperate for him to satisfy the burning within her.

"Say it!" demanded her dark lover. His fingers were replaced with his tongue as he quickly and expertly drove Hermione to the brink of ecstasy.

"I am yours, Severus," gasped Hermione, undone by his possessive attentions.

"Louder, witch," urged Severus, slowing his thrusts to long, almost leisurely licks of her weeping core. He wanted to hear her declare her love for him.

"God Almighty," moaned Hermione. "Please don't stop, Severus, I'm so close."

"Say it. Say you belong to me. That you are mine," demanded her dark lover once more. He knew he was being weak in demanding that she tell him again and again of her devotion, but he needed her to say it. He had already made himself vulnerable. He needed to hear her say the words.

Even in her nearly mindless state, Hermione realised Severus' need for reassurance. She had come to understand the vulnerability that her dark wizard cloaked behind his demanding, harsh and taciturn persona. "I am yours, Severus. I am yours completely, heart, mind, body and soul," gasped Hermione. "Now for God's sake, fuck me before I die of bloody agony."

Smirking, Severus swiftly moved back up her body and plunged his hard cock into her needy, greedy core as he kissed her with all of his emotions and desires. "Bossy witch," he groaned as he began to move powerfully within her.

"Your bossy witch, and don't you forget it," responded Hermione as she locked her legs around his hips and moved just as forcefully to meet his urgent thrusts.

"Hmm..." grunted Severus. Hearing her repeat her affirmation of belonging had sent him hurtling towards completion. Hanging on to his sanity, he slipped his hand between their bodies. Deftly, he pinched her nub between his fingers and groaned, "Come for me, come for me now."

Hearing his urgent plea and feeling his repeated attack on her clit shattered the last of Hermione's control. With a shuddering gasp, she came, her cry of "Severus," captured by him in a kiss as he, too, shattered at the further tightening of her sex.

On their return to Hogwarts, Minerva immediately spotted the engagement ring. "My, but that's a beauty," she commented with a twinkle in her eye.

Hermione smiled before sobering almost immediately. With a sigh, she narrated, "My parents have said they want nothing more to do with me or magic. So instead of spending our time in Australia with them, we went to Unawatuna in Sri Lanka to learn about an experimental technique to cure curse-induced nerve damage. It was there that Severus proposed." As she spoke of the proposal, her eyes once more filled with joy.

"Oh, my wee bonny lass," said Minerva, lapsing into her thick Scottish dialect in her happiness. "I am so pleased you have found each other."

Hermione and Severus spent the last few days of their Yule holiday time working on the potions and techniques that they had learnt in Sri Lanka. As their confidence in their mastery of the techniques grew, Hermione began to think of practical applications.

After some thought, she finally made the suggestion that was top-most in her mind. "My love, I'd really like to try out the technique on Neville's parents. I feel so much better since being treated in Unawatuna. If we can eradicate even a bit of their suffering, then it is worth it."

Severus nodded in agreement. The massages he had had in Sri Lanka had done much to ease his years of curse-induced painful joints and migraine headaches. "Testing the cure on the Longbottoms seems like a sound idea. But their minds have been affected, Hermione. We don't know if the potion will be of any use to them," cautioned Severus gently. He knew she wanted to help her friend's parents, but he was worried that she was expecting too much from a technique and treatment that was as yet only in its initial stages of experimentation.

Hermione's face showed her feelings so clearly that he could see that his words had disappointed her. Gentling his tone even further, Severus explained, "I'm not saying it won't be of any use, but we mustn't get our hopes up. They were tortured for hours when Bellatrix was at the height of her powers. You must realise that although the massages and the healing charms helped heal our damaged nerves we don't know how the potion will work on damaged minds. Even Gunananda hasn't really done much work with patients who've been mentally affected so severely."

Hermione nodded. She knew that Severus was being rational. "But we can try, can't we, Severus?" she asked softly. "Any help will make a difference surely?"

Severus sighed. He knew his tenacious Gryffindor Princess would not give up. "Do you think Longbottom will let his parents be the first British test subjects?" asked Severus. He was trying to be positive, but in his heart, he expected disappointment.

"I'm sure Neville will want what's best for his parents," replied Hermione confidently. "I'll write to him. If I explain how it has already helped me, I'm sure he'll be okay with us attempting to help his parents."

"Hmm..." said Severus disbelievingly. He was not convinced that Longbottom would give his consent.

The next morning, Hermione wrote to Neville and his grandmother. She spent a long time penning the missive. She was very conscious of how protective Neville was of his parents, and she wanted to reassure him that their intervention would not harm their condition in any way.

Once the letter had been sent, Hermione and Severus both tried to put the matter out of their minds. There was much to do in preparation for the students' arrival in a few days' time. The morning passed by swiftly, with Hermione double checking all the ingredient stores for the coming term while Severus worked with Bill on the DADA curriculum. Now that Severus had given the introduction to the Dark Arts, Bill was working on controlling, detection and defensive magic in general.

Thus, Hermione and Severus were both rather surprised when the Longbottoms responded to the missive with alacrity. Less than half a day had passed since Hermione had made her way to the owlery to send the letter. In his response, Neville stated that he and his grandmother were willing to let Hermione and Severus try their new skills on Frank and Alice. "Anything that can help my parents," wrote Neville, "is worth trying. I trust you, Hermione, and I know that Professor Snape is brilliant at what he does. Grandmum agrees and says she will meet you both at St Mungo's to sign any release forms that are required."

Hermione noticed that Neville's show of faith in Severus seemed to please him greatly. He had for so long been the hated and feared Potions master that any open acknowledgement of trust and belief made a big impact on him. Hermione was once again struck by Severus's vulnerability, and she vowed that she would do everything in her power to show him how much she loved him. She was going to make him realise how worthy he was of love, devotion and affection, not only from herself, but from others, too.

New Year's Eve was spent quietly at the castle. All the students had gone home for the holidays. Even orphans who did not have a home to go to had been found suitable holiday accommodation. Minerva and Severus had both worked hard to ensure that no child was left feeling unwanted and unloved. Severus knew first-hand what it meant

to be a lost boy of Hogwarts, and he had sworn to himself that no child would feel the way he had felt as a child. Given that all the students were away from the school, the staff, too, had taken the opportunity to visit friends and family. Only Minerva remained at her post.

Thus, after a lovely celebratory meal, the trio made their way to Severus' chambers. There, they saw in the dawn of the New Year together and toasted each other with fine, elf-made champagne. They spoke of inconsequential things and exchanged news of their time apart. Hermione blushingly narrating all the interesting things they had learnt from Gunananda and Kumarilata.

It did Minerva's heart glad to see the contentment and joy radiating off her two favourites for she knew how lonely they had been a few short months ago. Minerva had lost her one and only love in the first war against Grindewald. She knew how precious love could be, and she had long thought of Hermione and Severus as the children she had never had. Their happiness and contentment was therefore her own, and she was touched that they had included her in their celebration.

Severus had never spent such a contented holiday. He usually spent the New Year alone, drinking and remembering all of his mistakes. The only times he had been forced to leave the confines of his chambers had been when he had been forced to endure a Malfoy or other Death Eater gathering, with the prerequisite Dark Revel. He shuddered to think of the things he had done in his youth with the misguided perception that he was demonstrating his superiority over hapless Muggles. This quiet celebration was to the dark man a revelation. Basking in the love radiating off Hermione and the sincere affection of Minerva, he felt as though he had finally found the home and family he had always dreamed of.

Others would have found the trio's quiet evening sad and pathetic. But for Hermione, who had spent last New Year's Eve on the run, this eve with the man she loved and the woman who had come to stand in for the mother she had lost meant the world. She felt truly loved, truly blessed.

The first Saturday morning in January saw Severus and Hermione at St Mungo's, where they were met by a very worried but excited Augusta Longbottom and a pale but determined-looking Neville. Augusta shook Hermione and Severus' hands rather formally before signing off on the consent forms that allowed for Severus and Hermione to try out their experimentations.

While Augusta and Severus were in discussion with the Healers, Neville sat with Hermione. The two friends had not seen each other since the summer and had much to discuss.

"I was so amazed when I got your letter, Hermione," said Neville.

"Severus and I both benefited so much from the treatment," said Hermione. "I couldn't help but think that your parents were the best people to use as our first test cases."

"And you learned this technique in Sri Lanka?" asked Neville in verification.

"Yes," said Hermione with a smile. "We went there over the Yule break, and we learned the healing technique and the potion brewing methodology. We even brought most of the ingredients back from there."

"What were you doing in Sri Lanka with Snape?" asked Neville in wonder. He was still slightly in awe of the stern professor, and learning of Severus' duplicitous role in the war had only worked to strengthen both his respect and fear of the man who had been his childhood Boggart.

"We went on holiday," said Hermione with a smile. Then coming to a decision she went on, "You'll probably hear about it eventually anyway, Neville, but Severus and I are in a relationship."

Neville's eyes goggled in amazement. "A relationship, with Snape?"

"Yes," said Hermione with a grin. "He has even proposed, and I've said yes," she next said, extending her hand so she could show off her ring.

Neville was at a loss for words. Finally realising a response was required, he said in awe, "Blimey, Hermione. That's some ring."

Hermione just grinned before leaning over to give her friend a big squeeze. Other than Minerva they had not really told anyone of their engagement. The other staff members had been away on vacation, and if Bill Weasley had seen the ring on her hand when he had Flooed in to consult on the revisions he was making in his lesson plans, he had not thought it his place to comment or even to ask.

Once the Healers seemed satisfied, they all moved into a private room where Alice and Frank had been placed. With a final squeeze of Neville's shoulder, Hermione moved to Severus's side to begin the long, difficult process of massaging and reconnecting the nerves in Alice Longbottom's back, neck and head. They had decided that they would concentrate on those key areas before moving on to the rest of her body.

Hermione and Severus spent the entire day working on Alice. At the end of the long and arduous session, Alice did seem to be sleeping much better, and when she awoke at one point, her eyes seemed clearer than they had been in years. The Healers, who were monitoring the experimental technique with great interest, were quite pleased with the progress made, and they stated that they would not be opposed in allowing Severus and Hermione to return over the coming weekends to work on the Longbottoms. If the technique was proved to be a success, the Healers said that they were willing to send trainees to Sri Lanka to learn the skills first-hand. Any breakthrough would be a huge improvement to the merely palliative care they were currently giving their patients.

The following Monday saw both the rest of the staff and students return from the winter break. Severus decided with Hermione to stem the flow of excited gossip by quietly informing the staff before the opening feast that he had asked for Hermione's hand and that she had consented to be his wife.

The announcement was met with uproarious delight by everyone in the staff room. Hermione was a firm favourite among the staff and Severus' status as the defender and protector of the staff and students during the previous year had won the admiration of his colleagues.

Bill, who was the first to come up to hug Hermione, said quietly, "I'm so glad for you, Hermione. Severus is a good man. I'm sure you'll be very happy in the future. I can already see how good the relocation to Hogwarts has been for you."

Hermione smiled brightly. Bill was like an older brother she had never had. "Thanks, Bill," she said with a grin. "I am blissfully happy, happier than I thought I could be, given the way things have worked out."

Bill understood her oblique reference to the distance between herself, Harry and Ron. "I tried to get the family to discuss the changes brought about by the use of Dark Magic but that they are still resistant to the idea of their auras and personalities having changed. The atmosphere at home was so oppressive that Fleur and I were really glad we had told mum we'd be spending most of the Yule break at Shell Cottage. I don't think she could have stood living at the Burrow over the holidays given the nature of her condition."

Hermione nodded in understanding.

"Enough hogging the bride to be," said Poppy, coming up to embrace Hermione.

Bill smiled once more before moving off to shake Severus's hand.

"Good luck to you both," continued Poppy sincerely. "You know, my dear, even when Severus was Headmaster under the regime of You-Know-Who, he would continue to brew in secret and supply the infirmary with potions. You couldn't do better. He is a very good man."

After Poppy came Fleur, who cooed over the ring, and said, "It iz very pretty."

Filius and Pomona were next in the queue to congratulate Hermione. They both were full of support, too. Pomona dried her eyes that were brimming over with tears and said, "You're well matched. It's like the prophecy is coming true already."

Hermione blushed and smiled. She did not want to deny or confirm the story of the prophecy. She and Severus had decided to downplay the prophecy's influence so that there were no outlandish rumours among the students.

Filius squeaked his congratulations gleefully and said, "This means we will have you with us at Hogwarts for a good long while."

Hermione laughed. It was lovely to have the support of people she had come to love and respect. She realised that since the age of eleven she has known no other home but Hogwarts, and she was content to spend the rest of her days there.

During the opening feast, Ginny spotted the ring that was quite prominent on Hermione's finger. Ginny, of course, was gleefully vindictive when she saw the ring and raced back to her dorm after the meal to immediately write to Harry and Ron. She had heard Fleur telling Bill that the ring wasn't set with rubies but with much rarer red sapphires.

The next morning at breakfast, Hermione received a Howler from Ron. As the red missive exploded, it began screaming, "You're a Slytherin bitch and a slag, Hermione. You turned me down to sleep with the murderer of Dumbledore. How can you look yourself in the face, you traitor? Can't you remember what the Git said to you? How he made you cry? Our friendship is over. I never want to speak to you again."

Hermione put a brave face on in front of the gaping audience of the student body. She was furious and hurt at Ron's words and actions, but she had come to realise that her friend had changed beyond all recognition. Doing her best to mitigate the damage of the Howler, she said loudly to the angry and swearing Hagrid, "Don't be upset, Hagrid. It doesn't matter. Now Severus and I both know who our real friends are."

Even though Hermione's heart ached at the callous dismissal of their long-standing friendship, she hardened her heart. Had not Ron deserted her and Harry when they needed him the most? This was nothing new. She had Severus and the affections of the rest of the staff. All would be well.

The tender-hearted Hagrid seemed placated by her words, but he could still be heard to mutter, "It ain't right, Professor Snape and Hermione aren't traitors. We wouldn'ta won the war if it weren't for them."

Harry did not write. He, too, was angry, but he did not break off their friendship for which Hermione was glad.

Bill and Fleur were both appalled at Ron's behaviour. Fleur had never really warmed to her in-laws, and this behaviour just made her want to befriend Hermione more than ever.

The next few days saw the Frenchwoman do her best to engage Hermione in conversation at the High Table. Fleur was pregnant, and she had quit her job over the Yule break in preparation for her delivery. As their bond began to form, Hermione grew more comfortable in the sophisticated woman's company. Hermione had not had a true girlfriend, and having someone to discuss the change in her relationship was quite delightful. They would twitter and discuss Fleur's favourite topic, which happened to be sex. Fleur was very pragmatic about sex and sensuality. She made no bones about her sexual relationship with Bill and was keen to help Hermione go shopping for lingerie and even suggested Hermione surprise Severus with amazing wizarding chocolates and lotions designed for lovers. "We French witches have long been ahead of ze English when it comez to the art of love. Severus iz a man of dark passion; I am sure he will appreciate diversity. Bill and I love to experiment, and it helps heighten ze senses in so many wayz."

Hermione could only agree. Having Fleur introduce her to wizarding sex and the art of love was a revelation, for although her relationship with Severus was beyond amazing, she knew that she was still very new to intimacy. Anything that would please Severus was worthy of study and exploration. She loved him with all her heart, and she knew that everything she did to show him her devotion and love was an important step in assuring him of her commitment to staying with him forever. Despite her near constant reassurances, he still demanded that she tell him she was his during their intimate moments.

The following morning saw Molly send Hermione an angry letter. In it the Weasley matriarch denounced Hermione as a harlot for using and discarding Ronald and sullyng the name of Hogwarts with her cheap Muggle behaviour. This was just too much for Hermione. With a sob, she excused herself from the table and made her way to her chambers under the pretext of collecting some books before lessons began.

Minerva had seen Hermione's reaction to the letter. She looked over to Severus and met his concerned gaze. Standing up, she placed her hand on his shoulder and said softly, "Don't worry. I shall go speak to her. If you leave now, the students will gossip and our acknowledgement of her distress will only fuel the flames."

Severus rubbed his temples tiredly and nodded. He had not really had time to speak to Hermione since the start of term. He had been deluged with correspondence and meetings with the Board of Governors.

Minerva stared furiously at Ginny Weasley before making her way out of the Great Hall. She was very disappointed in the behaviour of her cubs.

When she got to Hermione's rooms, she found the young woman in tears. Taking the crumpled missive from her hand, Minerva read Molly's words with mounting fury. When she was done reading, she looked at Hermione and said sternly, "No tears." Then, the older witch placed a comforting arm around Hermione's shoulders and said more gently, "They are not worth your tears."

As Hermione nodded, Minerva pulled out a handkerchief and passed it to the young woman. Hermione, who smiled brokenly at the older woman and took the offered handkerchief and wiped her eyes before blowing her nose.

"Ron's Howler was horrid, but this was kind of like the last straw. The students did nothing but stare all day yesterday and giggle and point as I walked past. I thought I could take the scrutiny but it is so hard, Minerva," said Hermione brokenly.

Minerva nodded in understanding. "It will pass, lass. Look at how Severus handles it. He just pretends it isn't there."

"I know," said Hermione in a resigned tone of voice. "But I haven't really spent much time with him since term began. He's been so busy."

"Well, we will work something out so you can spend more time with him now that your relationship has been formalised," said Minerva practically. "Now go wash your face and head off to class. We mustn't let them see that they are affecting you."

Hermione smiled tiredly. She really appreciated Minerva's motherly advice and affection.

Once Hermione was ready to face her day, Minerva also departed to begin her lessons. However, she decided that she would write to the misguided Molly and give her a piece of her mind. How dare the busy-body write such tripe and accuse her star-student of being a trollop.

A.N. Love it or hate it, please to let me know what you think.

Chapter Fifteen: Happy Birthday Severus

Chapter 15 of 26

Hermione plans a special celebration for Severus' birthday.

This chapter features a multitude of big, juicy lemons.

- (i) Thank you everyone for the kind reviews. Please do continue to let me know what you think.
- (ii) The characters and world of Harry Potter belong to J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this.
- (iii) And last but by no means least, a big thank you to my lovely, amazing beta, Queen_of_Stars.

Three days after the start of term, Hermione was making her way down to the Potions classroom when she was stopped by Minerva.

'Hermione,' called Minerva. 'Slow down, lass, I want to speak to you.'

'Of course,' said Hermione, who immediately stopped short and began making her way back to the deputy headmistress. Since their talk the day before, following Molly's horrendously hurtful letter, Hermione and Minerva had not really had time for a chat.

Once the two witches were abreast, Minerva asked, 'Has Severus said anything to you about his birthday?'

'No,' responded Hermione in consternation, 'is it approaching?'

'It's this Saturday, the ninth,' said Minerva. 'I knew the boy wouldn't bring it up, and I thought you'd like to know.'

'Of course I want to know,' said Hermione indignantly. 'Thank you, Minerva, for telling me. Though I shouldn't be surprised, it's just like him to pretend it's not important and completely ignore the day.'

'Indeed,' agreed the older witch. 'But he's never been in a relationship before, and I felt you'd like to spoil him a little.'

Hermione smiled. She did indeed plan on spoiling her dark wizard. Hermione clearly remembered the words of the Sorting Hat and decided to use Severus' birthday to help heal the wounds of the war. The Recent History monthly symposium had allowed her to meet and get to know a number of people better. The first to speak had been Kingsley, who had spoken in September as a representative of both the Ministry and the Auror department. He had been followed by Minerva, who had spoken in October as the representative of the Order of Phoenix. Severus had spoken in November, describing the war and the trials of being a spy, the divided loyalties, and tried to give a picture from both sides of the debate. But what had impressed Hermione the most was, surprisingly, hearing Lucius Malfoy speak in December. He had spoken eloquently and convincingly of the reasons behind the pureblood ideology. His deep fear of the continuous loss of old traditions and values with the modernisation of wizarding Britain was something that Hermione was able to understand. She knew that Severus, too, was pained by the way in which ancient magical practices and traditions were so easily discarded by the younger generation. That Muggle influence should be blamed for this loss of tradition made sense, especially if it was the half-blood and Muggle-born children who influenced the changing practices through their introduction of their different, Muggle beliefs via Hogwarts. She had thought then that it was a pity that more people did not know what drove the Death Eaters, and that it was sad that Muggle-borns like herself were not taught more about old traditional practices and values.

Thus, Hermione immediately thought of having a small party to celebrate Severus' birthday. She would start small; she would begin by getting to know the Malfoys and build a bridge with the pureblood Slytherins, one family at a time. It was misunderstanding and fear that caused most of the issues.

'Minerva,' said Hermione thoughtfully, 'do you think we could plan a small surprise party to celebrate Severus' birthday? It could be just the staff, the Malfoys and Kingsley.'

Minerva blanched at the thought of associating closely with the Malfoys but acknowledged that outside Hogwarts, they were Severus' only friends. With a sigh, the older woman said, 'Yes, that sounds doable.'

'Excellent,' said Hermione briskly. 'I've got a free period mid-morning, I'll send off the invitations. We could have it in the staff room. Severus never goes in there on a Saturday night.'

Minerva smiled. She could see how excited Hermione was at the prospect of planning a surprise party for Severus.

True to her word, Hermione spent her third period writing out letters of invitation to the Malfoys and Kingsley. The staff she could inform personally. Once that was done, she made her way to the kitchens to inform the house-elves of her requirements.

Winky was the first to greet Hermione on her entrance into the kitchen. With a deep curtsy, the elf enquired, 'What can Winky do for Missy?'

'Hello, Winky,' said Hermione kindly. 'I'd like to host a surprise party for the headmaster and was hoping you would help me. It's his birthday on Saturday, and I think he needs to be shown how special he is.'

As Hermione finished speaking, she realised that the other elves had all overheard her request of Winky. They all seemed to be standing to attention, and when she looked at them curiously, an old and obviously authoritative elf came forward.

'I be Lola,' said the elf imperiously. 'I is knowing Missy. You is the friend of Harry Potter.'

'Yes, Lola,' said Hermione. 'Do you think you could all help me with the party?'

The elf nodded in agreement and said, 'We is proud to help with headmaster's party. Headmaster Snape is always kind to us house-elves. We is loyal to our master. What does Missy require?'

Soon Winky, Lola and Hermione had their heads together, plotting about how the staff room would be decorated and what food and drink would be most suitable for the party. Pleased with the obvious delight of the elves in helping, Hermione gladly handed over the burden of the party's actual preparations to the elves.

That done, Hermione began planning a suitable present for Severus. She wanted to give him a gift that showed him her complete devotion and trust.

The week rushed by. The Malfoys and Kingsley both responded to the invitations, writing to Minerva, as requested, with their R.S.V.P.s. Hermione knew Severus would be

suspicious if she suddenly received owls with missives that she did not share with him.

Friday night was spent, as usual, with the brewing for the infirmary. As midnight struck, Hermione did not betray with word or gesture that she was aware that Severus had just turned forty.

On Saturday, Hermione pretended that it was just another day. She spent the morning completing her marking while ensconced in the Headmaster's study, and lunch was taken as usual in the Great Hall. That evening, Hermione said she had a headache and retired to her rooms. She wanted to prepare for the party. She spent a nice long time bathing and purifying herself. In her extensive research, she had found an intriguing book of spells entitled *Captivating Your Wizard: Charms for the Charming Witch*, which had a number of really useful charms and spells for preparing the female body for seduction. She used one of the spells to give herself the magical equivalent of a Brazilian wax and giggled to herself about how impressed Lavender Brown would be if she had come across the Victorian text. Then, she charmed her hair into an elegant up-do that looked like it had come straight out of a Victorian fashion plate. It suited Hermione's features, though, and elongated her neck and showed off her shoulders rather fetchingly. Next she wore her newly delivered Muggle dress in velvet teal. It was long and came down to her ankles and had a deep V neckline with long, tight-fitting sleeves. It was a very grown-up gown that made her look extremely enticing. With the dress, she wore a necklace in the shape of a sinuous silver serpent set with green tourmaline from Sri Lanka. She had matching earrings that were dainty bars set with three square-cut stones. Underneath the dress, she wore no underwear; instead, she used a clever charm to lift her breasts and nip her waist as though she were wearing an invisible and vastly superior corset.

Dressed and feeling very confident in her appearance, she pulled her old black robes over the dress and made her way to Severus' chambers. He usually spent Saturday night in his sitting room, reading.

His wards had, of course, since their agreement to a relationship, been altered to allow her entry. She found him as expected, sitting in front of the fire in his armchair, tumbler of Firewhisky by his side. His book had been discarded, and he seemed to be brooding.

'Hermione,' said Severus, startled at her appearance. 'I thought you had a headache?'

'I had a nice long bath, and I'm feeling so much better,' said Hermione by way of explanation. She had asked the guests to be in the staff room by half past seven. It was now just a little before seven o'clock. She wanted to make sure that he was distracted and safe in his rooms. She didn't want him to go on one of his long walks around the grounds or castle and accidentally run into the guests who were being brought up to the castle by Minerva and Hagrid.

Hermione seated herself astride Severus and curled herself around him. 'I've been thinking,' she said thoughtfully.

Severus, who had been feeling lonely and despondent at turning forty, smiled into her hair. 'When are you not thinking, Hermione?' he asked sardonically.

She looked up at him and grinned. 'No, I'm serious,' she said, striving to keep the mirth off her face. 'I've been thinking of Animagus training. I've read all the books in the library and have even scanned some of your tomes. I really want to begin learning to transform. I know we have no time now, with the cure for the Longbottoms, but do you think we would convince Minerva to begin classes in the summer?'

Severus was distracted from his sober thoughts and brooding by this new direction of thought. 'Summer is a good time,' agreed Severus. 'The dunderheads will have gone, and we'll have plenty of time and space for our transformations.'

'I'm glad you agree,' said Hermione, before sliding her arms around his hard body more securely and kissing his sensual mouth. 'I love you so much,' she said next, before sliding her hands through his hair and rubbing her body against his sensually.

Severus, as always, was astonished at her easy ability to show her emotions and affections. 'Wench,' he said with a groan, before kissing her passionately.

Soon they were completely engrossed in kisses and caresses that had Hermione almost mindless with need. 'Here, or shall we retire to the bedroom?' asked Severus as he started to unbutton her robes.

Hermione came to with a start then. She had merely meant to distract him with their kisses, but now she realised that she had completely forgotten the time and the party that was probably on in the staff room. 'What time is it?' she asked instead.

Severus looked irritated. 'What does it matter what time it is, woman? It's Saturday.'

'I know, my love,' said Hermione, tenderly caressing his face. 'But I really want to talk to Minerva about our Animagus lessons. Perhaps we could catch her in the staff room before we retire for the night?'

'Surely this can wait,' said Severus in an extremely disgruntled tone. 'We've got more pressing things to think about at present,' he said, thrusting his hardened erection up into her bum, which was still pressed intimately over him.

Hermione kissed him softly. 'Later, Severus,' she said with a smile. 'You know how I am when I want to settle something. Once we speak to Minerva, we can come back and I shall give you all of my completely undivided attention.'

'Hurmph,' grunted Severus completely annoyed. 'It's a good thing I care about you, minx. You're starting to nag me already, and we're not even married yet.'

Hermione giggled. She was no longer afraid of her grouch. In fact, she found him extremely endearing in that condition. 'I promise I'll make it up to you,' she said cheekily, rubbing her body against him, her hand stroking his hardened flesh through the layers of cloth.

Severus glowered, but agreed. 'I shall hold you to it, wench,' he said gruffly.

Hermione had, in the meantime, managed to look at the carriage clock that stood on his mantelpiece. The time read ten minutes to eight. 'Minerva's sure to be in the staff room right about now,' she said enthusiastically. 'Please, Severus, come with me. And then we'll come straight back here.'

'If we must,' said Severus.

The walk to the staff room was done with haste. Severus had never really had a woman to share his birthday with, and although he had not told Hermione, he was looking forward to enjoying a very satisfying birthday shag. *Not bad, old man, for a man of forty,* thought Severus with an inward smirk. *I've finally got a beautiful woman who is all my own to spend my birthday night with. That makes a real change from every birthday I've ever had thus far.*

As they reached the staff room, Hermione stopped and looked around. Then, she stood on tiptoe and murmured, 'I love you with all my heart, Severus.'

Severus was touched. He was always undone to hear her unexpected and undemanding professions of love. He bent his head and kissed her softly. 'And I you, my pet,' he said equally softly.

Then, with a sly grin, Hermione stepped out of his embrace and opened the staff room door. As the door opened, a hush fell upon the room. Then came the calls and shouts of 'Surprise!' and 'Happy Birthday!' from the assembled group of people.

Severus stood as though struck by a hex, completely immobile. The only parts of him that moved were his eyes, as he scanned the totally transformed staff room. There were banners bearing the words, HAPPY BIRTHDAY SEVERUS! on two of the walls. The tables and chairs had been pushed back, and one wall was lined with a long table draped with a crisp white table cloth. On it was laid a generous collection of food and drink with a huge towering dark chocolate Guinness cake. By his side, Hermione gently prodded him forward.

As if coming back to himself, he looked down at her in shocked wonder.

Hermione smiled brilliantly, and taking his hand, she led him into the room.

The first to approach them was Minerva. 'Happy birthday, my boy,' said Minerva with a joyous smile.

Severus was quickly coming back to himself. 'Thank you, Minerva,' he said with a smirk. 'I take it my Gryffindor know-it-all is responsible for this.'

'Of course,' said Minerva. Then turning to look at Hermione, who was speaking to Kingsley as she shrugged out of her simple black robes, Minerva asked, 'Who else?'

Severus followed Minerva's gaze and watched as Hermione was revealed in her sensual splendour. He could not help but smirk in satisfaction to know that she was his.

Next to approach him were the Malfoys. As the four Slytherins conversed, Severus kept track of Hermione surreptitiously. He watched as she spoke to Hagrid and Filius. Not long after, Bill dimmed the lights, and Septima and Rolanda turned on the magical wireless, and sensual, erotic music filled the room. It was obviously tribal music of some sort, and Hermione's surprise at the selection was evident.

As soon as the music began, Bill and Fleur were on the floor. Wrapped around each other, they danced as though they were about to make love right there on the dance floor. Bill and Fleur's obvious lack of propriety seemed to set the tone for the party, and they were joined by Filius, who squeaked in unholy glee and asked Pomona to dance. Soon Hagrid was dancing with a clearly tipsy Trelawney. Not long after, Kingsley was on the floor with Andromeda.

As the music had begun to play, Hermione had turned to look at Severus. With a smirk, Severus realised that she had wanted to dance with him.

Excusing himself from the Malfoys, Severus swept up in his billowing robes to Hermione. 'Thank you for the party,' he said sardonically with a dip of his head. 'I so much wanted to spend my Saturday night with this lot, watching my colleagues copulate in public, rather than fucking you senseless in private.'

Hermione grinned. 'I know, my love,' she said, straight-faced. 'That's why I arranged it all.'

Severus chuckled darkly. 'I suppose I must dance with you to show my gratitude,' he next murmured.

Hermione's face was completely open and perfectly easy to read. Her shining eyes, her hopeful smile said it all. With a smirk, he put his arm around her and pulled her close to his body. Bending low, he murmured in her ear, 'You know I don't dance in public, pet. But tonight, for your sake, I shall make an exception.'

In truth, Severus was delighted to be able to dance with Hermione. He was proud to have such a young and vibrant witch as his very own. He, who was supposedly repulsive and universally disliked, had a woman to call his own, a woman who professed to love him and who wore his ring upon her finger. As the song ended and an even slower one began, Severus wrapped his arms around Hermione's slender waist and began to move.

Hermione twined her arms around him, pressing her body even more firmly against him. 'I love it that you're so tall,' she murmured in appreciation, her hands caressing the nape of his neck. 'I feel so safe with you, as though I am completely protected,' she said next, drawing ever closer to his hard and virile body.

In response, Severus' hands on her waist tightened. Her words, her body pressed flush against him, her fragrance of cinnamon and honey, intoxicated him. He suddenly wanted to take her hand and pull her into a darkened corner and ravish her senseless. Did the woman not understand how desperately he desired her tenderness? The one thing he had always wanted was to be needed, to be wanted, to be valued for himself. Hermione wanted nothing but the man that he was. She was not interested in his power, in his connections, in his ability to brew powerful elixirs. She wanted him, only him.

Wanting to ease the tension in his cock that was making it impossible for him to part from Hermione at the end of the song, Severus tried talking. 'You look ravishing,' he said in a passion-roughened voice. Then unable to control himself, he buried his sensitive nose in her hair. 'You smell divine. I want to pull you into a darkened corner, lift up your skirts and plunge into you this very second.'

Hermione moaned and rubbed herself even more provocatively against him. Then moving away slightly to look saucily up at him, she whispered, 'I'm naked under my dress. I've not worn any underwear.'

Severus nearly exploded. His rock hard cock was even harder at the thought of her nudity. 'Completely naked?' he asked in a voice that was molten lava.

'Completely, utterly naked,' said Hermione. Then, as she felt Severus pull her ever closer and begin to grind his erection into her, she groaned. Hermione had been teasing Severus, wanting to arouse him, but she had ended up arousing herself as well. 'God, I want you, now,' she said in a shuddering exhalation.

'Vixen,' he groaned. 'We are surrounded by these infernal people, people you invited to this bloody party. We can't leave now.'

'I know,' said Hermione with a breathy, needy sob. 'But I didn't think dancing with you would make me want you this desperately.'

'No, neither did I,' confessed Severus, 'though this isn't really dancing. This is merely frothing in public.'

Hermione smiled. Then, taking a deep breath to calm herself, she said, 'I'm going to go sit with Minerva at the end of this song. Talk to Kingsley and the Malfoys. We've got all night to ourselves. And I've got a special present for you that can only be given in the bedroom.'

Severus' eyes glittered. 'You really are a vixen, indeed,' he murmured with a smirk.

After their dance, the couple resolutely kept apart so that they would not be compelled by their raging libidos to fuck like hormonal teenagers in the nearest darkened recess. Bill and Fleur seemed to have no such compunctions, for they were in a dark corner snogging to their hearts' content.

Severus, however, was conscious that he was the headmaster. Thankful for his voluminous robes that covered a multitude of sins, he did his best to engage in conversation with the Malfoys. He spoke of his visit to Sri Lanka and debated the latest gossip in the Ministry. Severus enjoyed speaking to Lucius, Narcissa and Draco, and Kingsley seemed really pleased to be included in the select guest list. But inside, even as he did his best to mingle, Severus could not stop thinking about how blessed he felt. No one had ever gone to such trouble for him. Only Hermione, his treasure, as he was coming to think of her, had planned this. She had even invited his friends, the Malfoys, whom he knew she was still uncomfortable with, just for him.

When it came time for the cake to be cut, there was good-natured singing by the now thoroughly inebriated Hagrid and Filius. If Severus did not have years of experience in masking his emotions, he was sure he would have been blushing and stammering in delight. As it was, even Trelawney, who hardly ever came down from her tower, raised a goblet of wine for the toast to Severus' good health, and the room was filled with good cheer, all directed at the normally anti-social wizard.

When the Malfoys saw how happy and content Severus was, they were pleased for their friend. They realised that Hermione had included them in his celebrations. It heartened the Slytherins and demonstrated clearly that she was willing to include his friends in their future lives.

After the cake and toasts came the giving of a large array of presents, which Severus was very unaccustomed to receiving. Minerva's present was a collection of books on learning to become an Animagus. They were the latest texts that had been published. Smiling, the older witch said to Severus, 'Tell Hermione that when the students depart in summer, we can begin lessons in earnest.'

Severus smirked. 'That was her excuse to bring me here tonight. She wanted to ask if that was possible.'

Minerva smiled and said, 'Yes, well, I knew Hermione was working her way through all the books on the subject in the library. It seemed like she was about to bring up the topic.' Then Minerva patted Severus' arm. 'My boy, this is really a gift for the two of you, since you will learn and grow together.'

Severus was moved, not only because of the present, but because of the implicit support and encouragement for his relationship with Hermione. 'Thank you, Minerva,' he said gruffly. 'I do appreciate the gesture. I'm sure Hermione will read the books from cover to cover long before I get a chance to sit down with them.'

Minerva giggled, for she knew Severus was correct. Hermione was like a Niffler when it came to something new to read.

By all accounts, Severus felt that his first ever surprise birthday party had been a tremendous success. The food and drink had been plentiful and of excellent quality. The company had been convivial, and Severus had a nubile female, who loved him passionately, who was joining him in his bed. The thought that she would be naked in his bed at the end of the evening kept forcing a smug smirk onto his face. Severus could not believe his change in fortune. The four Marauders who had plagued his youth were dead, but he was alive and he had a woman half his age madly, passionately in love with him.

Once the guests had departed and the party was ended, the couple made their way back to Severus' quarters for the night. Once there, Hermione said softly, 'I've got a special present for you, my love. Will you be so good as to retire to your bedroom? I shall be with you in a moment.'

Severus smirked. 'As my lady wishes,' he said, stripping off his clothes as he walked to the bedroom. He heard Hermione's gasp of delight at his provocative behaviour, and he smirked in pleasure. He loved how easily aroused his young lover was.

For his birthday gift, Hermione had researched an ancient sex magic ritual that was performed by those of great power, usually also holding royal blood. She knew that Severus was fascinated with sex and blood magic, and she had chosen this ritual because it was one that could only be done between a couple who were deeply in love, for if the love was not pure, the results could be quite disastrous. Hermione reasoned that performing the ritual would demonstrate categorically to her beloved that she was his completely. The ritual allowed the caster of the incantation to give the recipient all of their magical power. It allowed for the mutual strengthening, sharing and growth of the magic of the lovers, for it was assumed that when the caster gave all of their magical strength to their partner, the recipient would in turn give all of their power, as well as that which was given to them, to the caster. Thus there would be, technically, a continuous mutual exchange until there was a flooding of each other with their personal and their partner's power. The goal of the ritual was for both participants to grow in strength and for the pair to embody the power of both.

The level of trust implicit in the ritual was tremendous, for if the recipient did not wholeheartedly return the magic given by the caster, the caster could and had on a number of documented occasions in history been completely drained of all of their magic and left in a Squib-like state. It was even suggested that this was the spell that Vivien had used to trap and rob Merlin of his power, for Merlin, in his unconditional love for Vivien, wanted to give her all of his power and magic, but she, once she had tasted the fire of his strength, could not part with it and so took it all to herself and left her older lover with nothing.

As Hermione watched his retreating back, she quickly made her preparations. She went into his bathroom and stripped off her dress. Then she quickly unpinned her coiffured hair and stepped under the shower. Chanting softly the purification charm she had found, she prepared her body and her inner being for the ritual. That done, she used her wand to cast a quick drying charm on her hair and rubbed her body vigorously with his Slytherin green towel. Hermione was very nervous about the ritual she was to perform. She realised that she was taking a huge risk, but she trusted him, and she wanted him to realise the level of trust she placed in him.

Then, calming herself and strengthening her resolve, she entered the bedroom naked.

Severus, meanwhile, had lighted the candles and turned down the bed. He was lying under the covers, propped up against the headboard. Watching her walk up to the bed, her breasts bouncing gently, brought his arousal up another notch. Soon, Severus thought, he'd be so aroused that he would explode as soon as his flesh met hers.

Hermione smiled as she walked to him. 'You're so gorgeous,' she said watching the ferocity of his desire writ plain across his face. His nostrils were flared to catch the scent of her arousal; his eyes were dilated and seemed as black as night, and in the glow of the candles, his naked torso was like that of an alabaster god.

Severus was still amazed at the fact that this young, sexy and vibrant woman found him so alluring. He could not help but thank his lucky stars. He knew what he looked like in the mirror, but if she found him gorgeous, who was he to dissuade her of her perception.

Instead, he opened his arms and she lowered herself to the bed and crawled up to him on her hands and knees. When she reached him, he pulled her to him forcefully. Their mouths met in a heated, desperate kiss and Severus devoured her, pouring all of his longing into his kiss. Soon, Hermione was pushing the covers down his body to rub herself sensually against his naked flesh. It had been almost a week since their last night of passion. The start of term was not conducive to a romantic liaison. Soon their kisses turned to heated caresses. Severus was rock hard, and Hermione was desperate to feel him within her. Rising up on her knees, she took his hardened cock in her hand. He groaned at the feel of her small hand enclosing his length. Then Hermione carefully slid her hot, dripping core onto Severus' rock hard length, causing both of them to groan simultaneously in bliss. There was hardly any tenderness in their joining. They were both too desperate for completion. Moving urgently over him, she felt her orgasm build. Having been without him for so many days, just feeling his hardness filling her was enough to send her tumbling towards orgasm. Doing her best to control her response to his hands digging into her hips, raising her, urging her harder and faster on his prick, Hermione began chanting and invoking the incantation. *'In perficio diligo quod perficio fides, EGO tribuo vobis totus mei, Unus in pectus pectoris, unus in mens, may nostrum veneficus existo iunctus'* The incantation literally meant, *in perfect love and perfect trust, I give to you all of me. One in heart, one in mind, may our magic be united.*

Severus nearly stopped his hard, fast thrusts into her as he heard the words of the incantation. Nearly overcome with emotion, his orgasm thundered towards him like a tidal wave. He could not believe that this beautiful, powerful, brilliant witch was willing to take the risk and trust him with all that she was and all that she could be. Her gift of herself, of her magic, was priceless, and it proved to him beyond a shadow of a doubt the depth of her love and trust in him.

As Hermione kept chanting the incantation over and over, Severus pushed her back roughly so that she was on her back. Now he was driven to make her scream her completion. His hands on her thighs, he pushed them up and apart until they were pressed against his chest. Then he began to pound into her, repeating the incantation with her. Soon they were unable to control the urgency of their magic and their passion. With a guttural groan, Severus demanded, 'Come for me now, Hermione,' and Hermione, long used to the voice of her professor, shattered.

Feeling Hermione explode around him allowed Severus to join her in ecstasy. With their completion thrumming through their bloodstream, Severus could feel the magic taking effect. Despite his orgasm, he was still hard within her, and he could not stop his body from continuing to move urgently inside her slick depths. He realised that this was the power of the magic taking over. Even as his cock pushed again and again into her body, hitting her in her sweet spot, she responded by pushing herself against him. Severus could feel her magical signature, her unique strengths and abilities flowing over him, saturating him, and he instinctively began responding by pouring all of his abilities and magic into her. As their bodies floated in the afterglow of a mind numbing explosion, even as they strove for a second orgasm, their magic kept passing between them, carried on their love for each other. Their love, their passion seemed to ram their magical energy back and forth until it multiplied exponentially and shattered, sending them both on another explosive, magically induced orgasm.

Later, Severus held an utterly exhausted Hermione tightly to his side. Looking down at her sweat drenched face and impossible hair, he said in wonder, 'Hermione, I am a Slytherin and a Death Eater. As a breed, we are manipulative, destructive. I could have taken all of your magic and left you with nothing. The kind of power you have given me is unheard of. This ritual has not been performed since the age of the Saxon kings in Britain.'

Hermione kissed his jaw and sighed, 'I know, but I trust you, Severus, completely and utterly. I knew you would not take my magic and leave me bereft. I know that you will use your increased power to change the world for the better. How could I not perform this ritual? It embodies all that we are, all that we value. We are one, my love, in our hearts, and now we are one in our magic.'

'You are such a Gryffindor,' he said fondly stroking her flank. Severus was extremely undone. Circe and all the Graces, who would have thought he, of all people, would find such an amazing woman to call his own.

Hermione blushed at his pronouncement.

Severus smirked. Then, pulling her so that she was lying over him, he kissed her tenderly on the mouth. Then turning serious, Severus said sternly, 'Never do anything like that again without discussing it with me, vixen. I don't want you to take any undue risks. You belong to me; you are mine. You must protect yourself, even from me. I have such Darkness within me, my pet. I worry sometimes that I shall hurt you unknowingly because you give yourself to me so completely.'

'Never,' said Hermione impassioned. 'You will never hurt me. I know this with every cell of my being.'

Severus chuckled darkly before whispering softly, 'My very own Gryffindor Princess.'

Chapter Sixteen: Oh, those Weasleys!

Chapter 16 of 26

Ron and Ginny hatch a diabolical plan. They do not, however, think it through.

- (i) Thank you everyone for the kind reviews. Please do continue to let me know what you think. I do like hearing back from you.
- (ii) The characters and world of Harry Potter belong to J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this. Pity, I could use a bit of cash right about now.
- (iii) And last but by no means least, a big thank you to my lovely, amazing beta, Queen_of_Stars.

Ron and Ginny were furious at the way in which everyone seemed to fawn over Hermione and Snape. They were especially annoyed when they heard the stern warning their mother had received from both Kingsley and Minerva over her accusations and treatment of the heroes. If Snape and Hermione were heroes, what were the rest of them, chopped liver?

Thus, Ron and Ginny cooked up a plan to humiliate and discredit Hermione. They wanted to drag her name through the mud, and they decided to use Muggle technology to get back at her. It seemed to Ron to have a kind of poetic justice to use Muggle means to slander the Muggle-born know-it-all. Using many of the old photographs that he had accumulated through their long friendship, which had been taken at the Burrow, at parties, outings and activities over lazy summer afternoons, the diabolical duo decided to leak scandalous photos to the wizarding press.

Ron had, over the course of his time working at George's shop, made friends with a Muggle who was an expert in graphic design. Mike Perry ran a small, privately owned company that designed many of the logos and stationery for George's shop. Being a Muggle, he thought it was purely a joke shop and found the challenge of designing wild and wonderful things a hoot. He was told by Ron that they were doing a fun gag for a close friend, as a sort of tongue-in-cheek gift for her recently announced engagement. Mike, poor ignorant soul that he was, was easily influenced via a bit of magical fascination by Ron, who had now completely slipped into his dark side.

Thus, photos were altered to show Hermione in skimpy attire, arms wrapped around Ron and other hapless Muggles whose photos Ron had taken randomly while out and about in London. Mike was a talented chap, and his Photoshopped pictures were like the real thing. The blending of fact and fiction was seamless, and the pictures...to a wizarding audience that had no experience with altered, Photoshopped photography...looked totally authentic. Some even showed Hermione in what appeared to be the throes of passion with multiple partners.

Once the photos were done, they were handed over anonymously to Rita Skeeter. When they hit the press, the uproar was instantaneous. Never had something so scandalous and therefore front page worthy ever appeared in the wizarding media. Photos of a known heroine of the Battle of Hogwarts, now teaching assistant at Hogwarts and supposed fiancée of the dashing spy and double agent and current Headmaster of Hogwarts in numerous relationships and poses, was too much for the Victorian morals of the wizarding world to take.

The first Hermione and Severus heard or knew about the scandal was when they opened their copies of the *Daily Prophet* at the Head Table over their eggs and toast. Hermione was having a wonderful morning thus far. She had spent the night in Severus' rooms and was basking in the afterglow of their shared love. But upon opening the newspaper, the shocked gasp that escaped Hermione was followed by the most awful silence the hall had ever known. Then as people began to look, the twittering, the giggling and the muttering began. Hermione did not know what to do. She sat there, looking at the lewd images, dumbfounded.

It was Andromeda and Fleur who came to her rescue. With a firm yank, Andromeda removed the offending newspaper from Hermione's hand and burnt it with a flourish of her wand. Then, she and Fleur simply continued speaking to her as if nothing had happened.

Not even taking the time to examine the article accompanying the photographs, the Slytherin immediately said, 'The photographs have obviously been tampered with.' As the Muggle Studies Professor, she knew enough about Muggle technology to realise what had been done.

Fleur was equally calm. 'If anyone took ze time to look closely,' said Fleur wisely, 'zey would realize zat your body looks nothing like zose of ze women in ze photoz. Why, it iz obvious zat ze bodiez don't even match from one picture to ze next.' Looking closely at her own copy of the newspaper surreptitiously Fleur went on, 'Zis woman haz much larger breasts zan ze ozer one, and look, zis one haz got a mole on her shoulder and zis one doezn't.'

Hermione nodded. 'No one's going to listen to reason though,' she said sadly. Hermione's despair was palpable. Looking over to Severus, who seemed to be unable to tear his eyes away from the immobile images in the newspaper, she said, 'Everyone's going to believe this. Poor Severus, the scandal is going to give him so much grief with the Board of Governors.'

Andromeda grimaced. 'Don't you worry, my dear, about that,' said the woman wisely. 'Have you forgotten that Lucius is on the Board? He will see to it that this is taken care of. I know a friend of Ted's who is a superb barrister. He works in both the Muggle and Magical worlds. I'll get him to send the *Prophet* a strongly worded letter, threatening to sue them for publishing something that is obviously a falsely produced bit of slandering. We'll see how long it takes before they retract the pictures and write a well published apology.'

Hermione smiled and hugged Andromeda gratefully. 'We are so lucky to have true friends like you,' said the young woman softly.

Then without fear, she reached across the table and took hold of Fleur's copy of the *Prophet*. Looking at them closely, she finally said, 'Actually, I recognise some parts of these photos. I think I have the originals from which these have been altered. The other copies must be with Harry and Ron.'

Fleur's face soured. 'Don't you worry,' said the French woman. 'My Bill will check with hiz family. If it iz Ronald who iz responsible, we will deal with him. Zis iz outrageous, and if it iz 'Arry, zen Kingsley will take care of it az ze Head of ze Order. We cannot have thingz like zis being done to our memberz.'

While Hermione had been scrutinising the photographs, Minerva and Severus had been paying close attention to what was being said by Fleur. Minerva, too, looked thoughtful. Then, standing up, she approached the Gryffindor table, where Ginny was holding court with the photos of Hermione prominently displayed. Her face stern, Minerva said authoritatively, 'Miss Weasley. Would you please see me in my office in ten minutes time?'

Everyone at the Head Table watched as Ginny's face showed her alarm at this very public of summons. Almost instantaneously, the entire hall broke into loud gossiping as they watched Minerva's Patronus erupt from the end of her wand before pouncing off.

Severus and Hermione looked at each other curiously. Returning to her seat besides Severus, Minerva whispered in explanation. 'I sent that to ask Ronald Weasley, Harry Potter and Kingsley to be in my office immediately. We will get to the bottom of the matter now. No time like the present. If they are the culprits, as the Head of the Order, Kingsley has every right to question them, even under Veritaserum.'

Severus sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. 'All right, then, Minerva. I shall go gather some Veritaserum from my personal potion stores and meet you in your office. Bill, Fleur, Andromeda, as members of the Order, you all had better be there as well. We can't have any mention made of conspiracies.'

Ginny had aided and encouraged Ron in his efforts to slander Hermione. She had even dug around Gryffindor Tower and commandeered photos from people in her year to aid in the plot against the so-called Gryffindor Princess. Ginny had, however, not thought of the repercussions of her actions. The two Weasleys had not thought of anything beyond hurting Hermione. Thus, to be publicly asked to the Deputy Headmistress's office brought the young woman hurtling back into reality. As she walked to the appointment on the first floor, she wondered what was in store for her.

On entering McGonagall's office, Ginny was surprised to find, not only Bill and Fleur, but also Snape, Hermione, Andromeda, her parents, Ron, Harry and Kingsley. They had all flooded in at the urgent summons of the Headmaster and Deputy Headmistress.

Once everyone was seated around the magically enlarged coffee table with conjured up straight back chairs, the interrogation began. It was led, unsurprisingly, by a furious Minerva. 'I've called you all today to discuss a most horrendous piece of slandering of Hermione. To have something of this nature published about a celebrated member of the Order of the Phoenix casts a shadow and a stain upon us all. We need to get to the bottom of this scandal immediately so that we can mitigate the damage it causes us, the Order, Hogwarts and of course, all Muggle-born innovations and cooperation.'

Ron and Ginny stared at one another. They had not given any thought to the far-reaching repercussions of their actions. Ron was starting to sweat under his collar, and Ginny had an unbecoming flush on her face.

Severus, who had spent more years than he wanted to count watching people for obvious signs of guilt, immediately spotted the guilt in the two Gryffindors.

Kingsley, too, as an Auror, was not slow in missing the obvious signs of fear on the faces of the two youngest Weasleys. Kingsley realised that he now needed to take over. 'Thank you, Minerva, for laying out the problem before us so clearly,' said Kingsley by way of introduction. 'As the Head of the Order, it is my duty to ask each of you if you know anything at all about these photographs.'

There was a hushed and dreaded silence. Then, Andromeda spoke up. 'Jeremy Hughes is a barrister and a good friend of Ted's from his Hogwarts years. I will contact him to begin the legal paperwork required for taking the *Daily Prophet* before the Wizengamot for publishing such false and slanderous pictures. We, as the Order, need to be strong and demand a retraction and a very public and obvious apology for something that is obviously engineered and doctored.'

Even as Minerva and Kingsley nodded in agreement, Molly spoke up. 'How do you know it is false? Hermione is a Muggle. This kind of behaviour is part of her culture.'

Hermione was furious. 'I am not a Muggle,' said the young woman in a steady tone. 'I am a Muggle-born witch. There is a clear distinction that I think you, Mrs. Weasley ought to realise. Moreover, your obvious prejudice and ignorance of the Muggle world is clearly showing, if you think behaviour of this sort is acceptable in good Muggle society.'

Severus was proud of Hermione for standing her ground and answering her detractors. 'Indeed,' added Severus clearly. Reaching over to stroke Hermione's hand, he said, 'As her fiancé, all efforts to slander Hermione affect me personally as well.'

Kingsley went back on the offensive. 'Hermione here states that she recognises some of the elements in some of these photographs. Since the only people to have copies of many of these pictures are Hermione, Ronald and Harry, I would like to ask you all if you have had anything to do with these being released to the press.'

Harry had spent the time since entering the office in shock. However much he may have disliked Hermione taking up with the Greasy Git, he knew his friend well enough to know that she was not in the least bit promiscuous. Hadn't Ron complained long and hard that she never put out? Unable to contain himself, Harry said, 'Well, these photos are obviously fake. Ron, you kept complaining that Hermione was not willing to sleep with you. So if there's a photo of the two of you in what is obviously a compromising position, it's got to be a forgery. Right, mate?'

Ron stayed silent. Inside though, he was furious that Harry had pointed out his lack of success in bedding Hermione.

Kingsley frowned. 'Right; if no one has anything further to add, Severus has some Veritaserum here to administer. It will allow us to all speak the truth, even the unconscious truth about the matter at hand. Since we are all members of the Order, I trust you all to not question anyone on anything other than this subject matter. Severus, if you will, will you begin with our youngest members first? Once they have been questioned, we can then move on to the older members.'

Bill immediately stood up to assist Severus in the administering of the three drops needed for the interrogation. Moving to stand before Harry, Bill said, 'Harry, shall we begin with you?'

Harry nodded. He had nothing to hide. 'Sure, Bill, let's get this thing over and done with.'

Because Harry had not refused, Ginny could not refuse either when Bill stood before her. Ron, however, looked most uncomfortable and tried to squirm out of the way when Severus approached him.

Kingsley's eyes were like those of a hawk. 'Is there a problem, Ron? Is there something you would like to tell us?'

Ron gulped. 'Um... no,' he said finally.

Severus smirked evilly and administered the three drops carefully. He then approached Hermione and stroked her cheek softly before administering the three drops to his beloved. 'It will take about five minutes for the drug to be effective,' said Severus quietly.

Bill nodded. 'I've been counting the time since Harry had the dose administered.'

Minerva added, 'And I've been timing Miss Weasley.'

Soon enough, the five minutes were up. 'I shall ask the questions as the Head of the Order,' said Kingsley in authority.

'Ginny, what do you know about these photographs?'

And so began one of the most revealing and telling narrations in Hogwarts history. Ginny Weasley could not stop speaking. Her family and her beloved Harry listened in horror as the young woman spoke of her hatred and jealousy. She told of how she had encouraged and, indeed, pushed her brother into finding a way to destroy the reputation of the woman Ginny saw as the bane of her existence.

Ginny had so thoroughly incriminated Ron that it was a matter of seconds after she finished her long tirade against Hermione and Severus for Kingsley to ask Ronald the very same question.

Ron, too, was incapable of resisting the effects of the truth serum. His resentment at Hermione's success, his jealousy of her good standing in the magical world, his dark need to dominate her sexually, and his fury at her rejection of his advances poured forth without restraint. He could not stop his own glee from manifesting itself as he narrated how he had fascinated Mike Perry into using Muggle technology to create incriminating photographs, and how he had then sent the images to Rita, who he said

hated Hermione, almost as much as he did.

Stunned, everyone in the room listened to the diabolical duo's narrative. Once the recounting of facts was complete, absolute silence filled the room.

Finally, after a lengthy pause, Kingsley spoke. 'As Head of the Order, I am appalled at this vindictive and petty behaviour. As a friend of Hermione and Severus, I am saddened that those who have known how hard these two have struggled for the Light have been treated. Ronald, Ginny, I cannot speak for the rest of the Order, or indeed, Minerva and Severus, as administrators of Hogwarts, but I do know that what you have done is a criminal offence in the Magical world. If Hermione and Severus wish to prosecute, I shall stand by them publicly and give evidence both verbally and via my memories of this discussion to the Wizengamot. Not only have you hurt Hermione, you have hurt the integrity of Hogwarts and the Order. These are much bigger issues than what was done to Hermione and Severus personally.'

Andromeda added. 'With this evidence, we can force the *Prophet* to retract their story and apologise publicly. Miss Skeeter will probably lose her job for writing the article that accompanied the photos.'

Minerva sighed. 'Mr. Weasley, Miss Weasley. I am more than disappointed. As the Head of Gryffindor, I find this behaviour despicable. Miss Weasley, until the Board of Governors meets to ratify the decision, I am suspending you indefinitely, with a pending expulsion from Hogwarts. You are not worthy of being a student at this institution of learning if you can conspire to destroy with false testimony the reputation of one of its professors.'

Molly gasped out loud. To be expelled from Hogwarts was serious. Very few students were ever expelled. To be expelled meant that no other magical institution of learning would accept a student for any course of study. If Ginny had any hopes of sitting for her NEWTs, her only recourse now would be to find private tuition and try to sit for the exams as a private candidate.

Harry sat through the narration of Ron and Ginny in stunned silence. Hearing the verdict of people he trusted and watching Arthur's pained expression, Bill's angry countenance and Kingsley's disappointed visage made the young man question his beliefs. Even though he, too, had disliked Hermione's behaviour of late, Harry was not a vindictive, jealous, or indeed, a malicious person. He could not understand the sentiments expressed in such a detail by Ginny and Ron. Harry realised that he would need to do some extremely in-depth soul searching. If his girlfriend and best mate were of that nature, what did that say about him?

Chapter Seventeen: A Different Sort of Valentine

Chapter 17 of 26

Arthur finally takes charge of his family. Hermione and Severus celebrate Valentine's Day.

- (i) Thank you everyone for the kind reviews. Please do continue to let me know what you think. I do like hearing back from you.
- (ii) The characters and world of Harry Potter belong to J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this. Pity, I could use a bit of loot right about now.
- (iii) And last but by no means least, a big thank you to my lovely, amazing beta, Queen_of_Stars.

After the meeting in Minerva's office, the Weasleys had returned to the Burrow where an emergency family meeting was called. At the family conference, at which even Charlie was present, Arthur forcefully and authoritatively admonished his wife and two youngest children for their shameful conduct. A usually quiet man, Arthur, when moved to anger, was a sight to behold. 'I am ashamed of your behaviour,' said the Weasley patriarch sternly. 'My wife, my children, to behave in a manner more fitting of the Malfoys is inexcusable. Is this what we fought so hard for, for our family's reputation to be brought to this low?'

Arthur glared furiously at Ron. 'How could you think to do that to Hermione? You have been friends for years. Did you think that you could destroy your friend and not destroy yourself?' Then Arthur looked down at Ginny. Angry and sad, Arthur said, 'My youngest and only daughter, the apple of my eye, who I would have given my very life to protect, how could you be so hurtful to a girl who has shown our family nothing but love and kindness? I am so ashamed. She is alone, she sacrificed her parents, her blood for our cause, and when she finds love in a man who sacrificed his entire youth to protect people like us, you repay them with hatred? Things in this family are going to change. Do you hear me?'

Molly, Ron and Ginny hung their heads in shame. Arthur never shouted or yelled. He was a mild mannered man, a loving father and husband; this tirade was most unlike him, and the members of his family heeded his words well. The words penetrated into their thick skulls and hearts that had been dampened by the darkness.

After much discussion as a family, it was decided that Ginny had to be sent away from the Burrow. She and Ron were to be separated and taught to control their darkness as soon as possible. Ginny was to spend the rest of the school year with Fleur's no-nonsense mother and complete her preparations for NEWTs in France. She would not be able to attend Beauxbatons, but Madame Apolline Delacour was a formidable witch who would prepare and home school Ginny for her exams. Furthermore, Ginny was to be given extensive lessons by the French witch on how to control and suppress her darker magical tendencies. The Veela had their own inherent darkness, and Apolline, who had Veela blood, knew how to control such inclinations. It was believed that being away from home would force the young woman to take her lessons more seriously.

Molly, too, was to be sent for magical control training with Auror Dante Strong. Auror Strong had recently finished a programme initiated by the ever innovative Kingsley on the ill effects of prolonged and sudden exposure to heavy doses of Dark Magic. It was felt that Molly needed to be taught to control her own vindictive streak. As an adult, her magic was the hardest to train, and thus she needed the most specialised training. Once Molly was deemed to have learned enough, Ron would follow. Arthur would work with his son in the interim.

Molly had been extremely ashamed when her husband and eldest son explained clearly to her how they had noticed her magic and behaviour change following her murder of Bellatrix Lestrange.

Bill went as far as to comment, 'Mum, the change in you is so huge that I don't know how to explain it all. Sometimes I think that Bellatrix' darkness has become a part of you. You used to be kind and loving. Lately you've turned into a power-hungry and tyrannical bitch, not unlike the dead Slytherin.'

Molly began to weep. 'Why did no one tell me?' she asked sorrowfully. 'Arthur, was I really that dreadful to live with?'

Arthur sighed and nodded his head. 'Molly, love, we hoped that it would go away. That you would bounce back and be able to cope with the inherent darkness. I am to blame, of course. Bill and I both knew what exposure to Unforgivables gives rise to. But we didn't want to admit that our family had been so drastically affected.'

George, who had always been up for a bit of a joke with Fred, had been angered and saddened that his brother had used his business contacts for malicious purposes. A joke was a joke, but vicious and hurtful destruction of a person's reputation was a different matter. George, who had been encouraged by Bill, had fired Ron. Ron was now

stuck at home, being forced to live off his parents' generosity. Not having had the foresight to save his wages, Ron was now unable to enjoy the women and lifestyle he had enjoyed as a war hero and friend of the Boy-Who-Lived.

Percy, upon hearing the diabolic plot, could not stop crying. He felt he had failed his family in not stepping in to confront the changes he had seen in his siblings over the Yule holidays.

The entire family was forced to re-evaluate their beliefs and attitudes. Things would not change immediately, but Bill and Arthur both felt that this latest trauma would help the family actually deal with the aftermath of the war.

Harry, meanwhile, was taken under Bill's wing. It was strongly encouraged by Kingsley and Minerva, and it was felt that Harry would benefit from learning to control his altered magic as well as with some sensible guidance. The Head of the Order was just glad that Harry had not been in on the plot to destroy Hermione's reputation.

The new term was even harder than her first for Hermione. Even though she told herself repeatedly that she was well shot of Ron and Ginny, their words had made an impression on the young and sensitive woman. She could not believe that people she had loved and cared for could see her in the way they had so vividly described. She tried her best to not let Severus see her tears, but many nights, when she returned to her cold and empty bed, she would weep for the loss of her childhood friends and the last vestiges of her own innocent and carefree days.

When Hermione was not mulling over or brooding over the scandal in the newspapers and the subsequent even more attention-grabbing public retraction and apology, Hermione was busy marking, brewing and studying. Together with the rumours and the gossip, there was hardly any time for Severus and Hermione to be together. Most nights, they usually ended up working in the Headmaster's office. He would be busy working on the administrative papers, finances and other matters while she would spread her work at the coffee table and study or mark assignments. Romance, sex and quality alone time seemed like a dream to the busy pair.

However, Hermione was not as successful as she had thought in masking her sadness at the loss of her useless friends. Severus could see the change in his lover, and he decided that he needed to do something to watch over her. He understood that his heavy workload as headmaster allowed him hardly any time to spend with Hermione privately, and it worried him. He realised that he needed to be there for her, to take care of her as she had done for him. Thus with careful deliberation, the taciturn man decided to ask Hermione to move in with him. A private and solitary man, this request was a very significant move, but he realised that, as they were betrothed, such an invitation was not an uncommon occurrence within the Muggle world.

Hermione had wanted to move in with Severus since their return from Sri Lanka. She had thought it would be the obvious solution to their inability to spend quality time together. Thus, she agreed with alacrity, and with Minerva's blessings and promises to help maintain decorum, the Floo from Hermione's room to Severus' were connected, allowing the move to be enacted with ease. If Hermione was wanted, the paintings had been roped into informing them.

Esmeralda, the witch protecting Hermione's chamber door, was thrilled to be involved in a romantic escapade and was delighted to act as go between. Esmeralda had gone from being a haughty witch to one of Hermione's fiercest defenders within the Hogwarts' portrait network. The witch had seen first-hand how hard the young woman worked to ensure that the standard of teaching and tutoring she provided was of the highest quality. Furthermore, Hermione had won Esmeralda's loyalty through her sheer politeness and kindness to the portrait.

Many witches and wizards paid no attention to the people in the magical portraits and treated them merely as irritants. But Hermione had always greeted and chatted with Esmeralda as if she were a living, breathing mortal, not merely pigment and paint. Hermione did not realise it, but her ability to treat all magical beings as equal was starting to win her a truly wide group of admirers.

As Valentine's Day approached, Fleur took Hermione shopping. Fleur had, after the atrocious behaviour of Ronald and Ginerva, decided with Bill's approval and blessing to do all that was possible for Hermione and Severus. Thus, on the weekend before the big romantic celebration, the two witches spent a lovely afternoon buying pretty things and erotic products. Hermione realised while on her excursion with Fleur that she and Severus had many friends and that she had not lost out in any shape or form because of Ron and Ginny's appalling behaviour.

Hermione was also learning slowly to come to grips with Severus' darker magical signature that was now part of her own aura. Just as her signature was making Severus more aware of her own lightness and purity that was now within him, she was dealing with his own stronger and fiercer magical properties. At DADA, her defensive and offensive spell casting became noticeably stronger.

Bill was very impressed with her suddenly altered performance. In quiet discussion after class, Bill said, 'Hermione, your speed of return and the strength of return has grown exponentially. You really are coming into your magical abilities.'

Hermione smirked in an extremely Snapish manner. 'Thanks, Bill,' she said with a grin. 'I guess being in love is helping my magic grow.'

'Indeed,' said Bill. He had no other explanation for her sudden surge in power, but he realised that Hermione and Severus had grown in more ways than were previously imagined.

Severus meanwhile found a strange fascination for Arithmancy. Even charms seemed much easier to perform. Over a quiet meal in their shared quarters they discussed the change to their magic. When they compared notes of the alterations, they both smirked in an unsurprisingly similar manner at their discoveries.

Stroking Hermione's hand that lay on the table, Severus mused on the changes his Gryffindor Princess had brought into his life *only they knew*, thought Severus with an inward grin, which was rather unlike his wont to do, *the bloody wizarding world would be astonished to learn that Hermione and I have successfully merged and shared our magical signatures*.

On Valentine's Eve Hermione arranged for a romantic meal in the Room of Requirement. Working with the house-elves, who were once again more than happy to help Hermione prepare a surprise for the headmaster, a traditional Sri Lankan meal was cooked, using Kumarilata's recipes. Then, Hermione had the Room of Requirement recreate their hotel room in Unawatuna with the soft golden beach outside. Once the room had been summoned, Hermione led her love inside.

Severus had been told only that she was planning a special treat for him, and although Severus had never been fond of surprises, the pleasant experience of his surprise birthday party reassured him that Hermione would not do anything to cause him discomfort.

As he entered the familiar hotel room, Severus felt a surge of devotion for his Gryffindor. Turning to a beaming Hermione, he gently pulled her into his arms. 'It is perfect, Hermione,' he said gruffly. 'Our days in Sri Lanka were some of the happiest of my life. Thank you.'

Hermione felt as though she would burst with joy at Severus' obvious pleasure. 'I'm so happy you're pleased,' she said with a grin. 'I missed our time away from all of this nonsense. I thought we could use a night of complete peace.'

'Indeed,' said Severus, pulling Hermione into a long and passionate kiss. Finally coming up for air, he stroked her cheek gently. 'Do you know how proud I am of you, my pet?' he asked softly. 'I loved how you told Molly that you were not a Muggle, but a Muggle-born witch. Never let anyone make you feel inferior. You are a strong and powerful witch, and your parentage has no say to your rightful place in our society.'

Severus was a man of few words, especially when it came to his emotions. That he was willing to speak of his pride in her action meant the world to Hermione. 'Oh, Severus,' said Hermione, overcome. 'I love you so much. I really do appreciate you telling me how you feel.'

'I need to learn how to show you and tell you how I feel,' said Severus tenderly, taking Hermione's hand and leading her to sit on the bed. 'But we have a lifetime of loving to learn how to communicate more effectively.'

Hermione smiled and pulled Severus to sit down beside her. 'Mmm...' she agreed as she began unbuttoning his robes.

Severus laughed. 'I see my vixen has plans for my person.'

'Of course,' purred Hermione. 'I've always got plans for your person. I can't get enough of you, Severus. I could touch you, be with you constantly.'

Severus kissed her then. It was the easiest way for him to show her how much her words meant to him. Lowering her so that she was lying on the bed, he stretched himself on top of her and poured his love into her by way of tender, sensual kisses.

Before long, their tenderness was replaced by burning hunger, and hands began to unbutton and push away unwanted clothing. Impatient with need, Hermione reached for her wand and, with a hastily muttered, 'Divesto,' had both Severus and herself completely unclothed. 'Ah,' she moaned as his warm skin rubbed against her own. 'God, I love the way your skin feels against mine,' she gasped, writhing against him.

Severus smirked and captured both of her hands in his. Drawing them to rest above her head, he teased her desperate need for fulfilment with slow, torturous kisses and caresses. He laved her throat before nibbling her sensitive collarbone.

Hermione moaned. 'I hate it when you take your time,' she said crossly before succumbing to further moans as he began suckling her nipple. 'Severus,' she gasped, 'for fuck's sake, stop mucking about. I need you, now.'

'Patience, my little princess,' he murmured teasingly. 'You know you love it when I drive you wild with desire. Now enjoy.'

'Beast,' she cried with a groan. But she did not complain further, for Severus' talented tongue was making its leisurely way down her tummy.

'Soft, like silk,' he whispered hoarsely against her skin as he kissed his way to her now wantonly parted thighs.

Severus' passion-roughened voice was like a bolt of electricity to Hermione's heated core. She shuddered with arousal. How she loved his voice. Soon, Hermione's hands were free to scrape against his scalp as Severus began to pleasure her needy core with his clever tongue.

Hermione crooned in encouragement as he tongued her bundle of nerves before plunging his tongue deep within her to taste all of her essence. 'Severus,' she gasped. She loved how well he knew her needs.

Severus chuckled while pressed against her core, and the vibrations acted as yet another stimulation to her already sensitised flesh. As Severus began to pound into her in earnest, the flat of his tongue penetrating her repeatedly, she came, a strangled sob of 'Severus' on her lips.

Severus kept sucking her, licking her until she could hardly take it. Then, he kissed her thighs before moving up her body like a panther on the prowl. Kissing her deeply, he shared her taste with her. His lower face was completely covered in her essence.

Hermione moaned in arousal. The first time she had tasted herself on him had been utterly erotic, and the act now made her body react to his promise of even more pleasure.

Grasping his hardness, she guided him into her heat. They both groaned together at their shared pleasure. Then, Severus began to move, Hermione wrapping her legs tightly around him, using her heels to pull him as close as she could into her body.

'Circe, woman, you feel so incredible,' said Severus hoarsely. He loved her heat, her snug fit. She felt as though she had been made especially for him.

Hermione merely groaned, another gush of wetness pouring out of her at her lover's voice.

Severus grunted as he felt her reaction to his words. Urgently, he withdrew from her, and at her gasp of disappointment, he growled, 'On your knees, pet.'

Hermione complied as quickly as she could. Once on her hands and knees, she turned her face to look over her shoulder and watch Severus. Seeing his desire for her was, to Hermione, better than the strongest lust potion.

With a look of utter pleasure, Severus plunged himself within her. Taking hold of her thick and unruly hair, he collected it into a chunky rope that he used to hold her secure with one hand, while with the other he used to hold her by the hip. Then he began to move in hard, powerful thrusts.

Hermione loved feeling him like this. She knew his darkness would soon be released, and she hungered for his complete domination of her body. Doing her best to meet him, thrust for thrust, she began tightening her vaginal walls, and Severus nearly shouted out his approval.

'Yes, vixen,' growled Severus, now pounding into her as hard as he could. He was completely in control, her hair forgotten as both hands held onto her hips, yanking her into his hardness even as he pounded into her. There would be marks on her body on the morrow. Groaning, gasping, muttering encouragement to his beautiful treasure, he commanded, 'Come for me now, my pet.'

Hermione, ever the good student, shattered on command, and Severus followed her, pouring himself into her waiting heat, an almost growled, 'Hermione,' on his lips.

Chapter Eighteen: A Romantic Meal, Sri Lankan Style

Chapter 18 of 26

Hermione and Severus continue to enjoy their Valentine's Eve together.

There are more lemons in this chapter as befitting a romantic interlude.

(i) Thank you everyone for the kind reviews. Please do continue to let me know what you think. I do like hearing back from you.

(ii) The characters and world of Harry Potter belong to J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this. Pity, I could use a bit of loot right about now.

(iii) And last but by no means least, a big thank you to my lovely, amazing beta, Queen_of_Stars.

Severus collapsed onto Hermione's back after his explosive orgasm. Even after nearly two months with his vixen, Severus found their sexual relationship startling for its very intensity. He still found it nearly impossible to come to grips with how much passion Hermione aroused in him and how utterly honest her responses to his advances

were. When sufficient strength returned to him, he rolled onto his back, taking her with him so that she nestled against his shoulder.

'Vixen,' he said tenderly, letting his hand caress her flank, 'you move me to such passion. You release the darkness within me, accept all of me. I am a very lucky man.'

'And I am a very lucky woman,' said Hermione, stroking his chest tenderly. 'Severus, we complete each other. Your darkness feeds my own, your strength, your domination of my being allows me to find the freedom, the release that I desire. No man could fulfil me as perfectly as you complement me.'

He buried his face in her horrid and glorious hair. For so long, he had thought he was tainted with darkness. He had been sure that he was incapable of love and of loving, and then Trelawney's bloody prophecy forced him into getting to know his impossible Gryffindor. He could not imagine living without her now. She was the centre of his universe. He vowed to himself that he would do everything in his power to show her each and every day how much she meant to him. He didn't care if he was seen as a sappy and lovesick fool. Nothing mattered but the amazing woman in his arms.

Overcome with emotion, Severus rolled Hermione onto her back and kissed his treasure gently. Hearing Hermione moan in appreciation of his tender ministrations fired Severus' desire once more. Gently, sensuously, he began to stroke her lush curves, her soft, silken skin with his long and ever-so-clever fingers. He rained kisses on her chest and torso, his aim to convey with his body how much he adored her.

'Oh, Severus,' moaned Hermione. Even though she was utterly sated by their recent lovemaking, Severus' knowing touch ignited Hermione's desire. Writhing against his hard body, she groaned as she felt his re-hardening erection. Gently, she let her hand trail down to grasp his cock and felt her dominant lover shudder at her sure and familiar touch.

Severus growled his approval. 'Yes, pet, just like that,' he said urgently, all thoughts of tenderness replaced by burning and driving need once more.

Hermione loved the power she wielded over a man who hardly ever let down his guard. To know that he allowed only her to see his vulnerability was a heady aphrodisiac. Moving out from under him, she pushed him onto his back and settled her centre to lie over his mouth, while her mouth engulfed his now utterly erect penis. Moving with confidence, she licked and swirled her tongue around his engorged flesh before taking him as deep into her mouth as was possible. She knew how he liked to be devoured, and it pleased her to pleasure him this way.

Severus, in return, used his strong hands to settle her ever more firmly over his face and let himself thrust his tongue into her waiting heat. He loved the taste of her, and their comingled flavours to him were like the sweetest drug. It was an affirmation of their passion, their love.

As Hermione felt Severus thrust his tongue completely into her sensitive core, she moaned around his cock. This sent another shudder through the taciturn man, and he redoubled his efforts to pleasure his princess. Soon, they had built a steady competition between them, each striving to bring the other to orgasm. It was Hermione who shattered first. Severus was skilled in the art of oral pleasure, and with his long, tapering fingers and wicked tongue, he had Hermione gasping and mindless as ecstasy overcame her once more.

Pushing Hermione off him, he moved until he was over her. Using his hands to raise her legs and push them up to her chest, he folded Hermione until her dripping centre was displayed in all of its lewd and erotic beauty. 'I love your body,' he groaned in appreciation and thrust home urgently.

Hermione screamed at the force of his penetration. She had had a number of orgasms and she was very sensitive. Severus was by no means a small man. Feeling him move powerfully in and out of her was driving her at breakneck speed into another mindless explosion. 'Oh, God, Severus,' she gasped. 'You feel so fucking huge.'

Severus loved how his polite and proper vixen would spout obscenities in the throes of passion. Knowing how hearing him speak drove her desire higher, he too began to murmur hoarsely in her ear. 'And you, my gorgeous vixen, you feel like sheer heaven. Your cunt is like a glove, so tightly does it clutch me.'

This was enough to precipitate Hermione's orgasm. With a loud keen, she shattered, her tight vaginal walls milking and squeezing Severus until he too grunted loudly. He wanted to maintain control, but she was too tight, too delicious. Pushing his body to slow down, Severus strove to hold off his imminent explosion. Moving so that his face was pressed against hers, he whispered to her, 'Vixen.'

Hermione shuddered in another pleasurable aftershock at his passion-roughened tone.

Her aftershock forced her to tighten her sleeve around him once more. This was just too much for Severus. Even though he had not been thrusting into her, the squeezing of her walls pushed him over the edge. 'Goddess,' he groaned, shattering in another powerful orgasm.

Severus' orgasm sent another ecstatic pulse through Hermione's sensitised folds. She was so attuned to him that his orgasms seemed to trigger her own. She nearly blacked out with the intensity of her reactions. Goodness but she loved her man. *I am so glad I am with Severus*, thought Hermione. She tried to imagine feeling this kind of explosive and all consuming passion with anyone else but failed utterly. Severus was her soul mate. Of this, Hermione was sure.

As they came down from their mutually incredible orgasms, Hermione and Severus cuddled for a while. Just as they were drifting off in sated slumber, Hermione's stomach grumbled loudly. With a laugh, she raised herself on her elbow to look down at the dishevelled face of her love. Severus looked like a reprobate of the highest order, and to Hermione's eyes, there could be no other more erotic sight. She felt her body gush in response to his well-fucked appearance and was amazed at her almost never-ending hunger for the dark wizard. She was exhausted, shattered, and still her body seemed to want him. Kissing him gently on the nose, she said, 'I guess it's time for dinner. I've another surprise besides the room.'

Hermione moved languorously to sit up, facing Severus who was still sprawled in repletion. She could not tear her eyes away from his erotic beauty.

Severus pushed himself indolently to sit propped by against the headboard and raised his eyebrow in enquiry.

'You're so sexy when you do that,' Hermione said with a slow grin before standing up gingerly. She winced as she moved, and Severus smirked in satisfaction. For a man of forty, he felt rather smug at his ability to thoroughly ravish his younger lover.

Once she had pulled on a Slytherin green dressing gown in spider silk that did nothing to conceal her pert breasts and lush body, Hermione called out, 'Winky.'

With a clap, Winky appeared. 'We are ready for dinner now, Winky,' said Hermione in a kind tone.

'Dinner be ready, Missy,' said Winky, before vanishing with another clap.

Not long after, the Room provided them with a highly polished teak dining table, not unlike that which had graced Gunananda's bungalow. Winky moved swiftly, and the table was soon filled with a delicious array of curries, chutneys and other Sri Lankan delicacies.

Severus' nose flared as the scent of spices and condiments seasoned the air. Pulling on his outer robe over his naked body, Severus joined Hermione at the table. Examining the brimming platters of food, he kissed Hermione on her temple. 'Everything smells divine,' he said in appreciation.

Hermione beamed. 'I used some of the recipes I got from Kumarylata,' she said by way of explanation. 'I remembered how much you enjoyed the crab curry that she prepared for Christmas lunch.'

'Indeed,' said Severus, pulling out a chair and helping Hermione have a seat before seating himself across from her.

Soon the two were busy enjoying a thoroughly enjoyable meal. Their incredible lovemaking had helped them to work up a good appetite, and the food was marvellous. The elves had outdone themselves with the exotic cuisine, and each dish was prepared to perfection. Given that they had spent their working vacation by the coast, Hermione's menu selection was heavily infused with seafood. Jumbo prawns in hot spicy sauce, known in Sri Lanka as Devilled Prawns, calamari in coconut milk, red crab curry, and lots of soft fluffy basmati rice soon filled their plates as Hermione and Severus began to do justice to the excellent efforts of the house-elves. Sweet mango curry, breadfruit

curry, sweet beetroot curry, coconut sambol, fried aubergines, lime pickle, date chutney and hot tempered potatoes complimented the selection. Severus, who loved spicy food, was in sensory heaven. This out-of-the-ordinary feast was indeed a treat for all of his well developed taste-buds.

For pudding, the elves had, with Hermione's insistence, managed to turn out a dish of Watalappan. Hermione had acquired a special liking for this traditional Sri Lankan Moorish treat. Made of coconut milk, eggs and jaggery, it was comparable to spiced coconut custard that had a hint of nutmeg, cinnamon and cardamom for flavouring.

Replete with good food, Severus relaxed in what he thought was the first time since his birthday. His belly was full; his sexual appetite nourished by his wondrously erotic fiancée, his heart and mind were at ease. Never in his wildest dreams had Severus thought that he would be able to enjoy such bliss. To survive the war had been unexpected, but to then find recognition for his actions as double agent and intelligence operative, to be reinstated as headmaster, and now, to meet the woman who fulfilled all of his long-suppressed but stringently desired dreams was, to the jaded man, a boon from the very gods themselves. Thanking the deities for the kindness, Severus finally realised that he had been repaid in full for the tragedy that had been his life for so long. No longer could he claim, even unto himself, that he had been misused by the world, for had the universe not eventually paid him back in full with unsurpassed and unexpected ecstasy on every possible front.

Standing up, Severus thought of a swinging loveseat. Immediately, the Room provided one in what was ostensibly the outside of their tropical hotel room. Reaching out for Hermione, he escorted her gallantly to the seat he had thought up. There he leaned back, pulling her so that she cuddled against his side. Gently kissing his beloved on the forehead, Severus let out a great sigh of contentment. 'I really needed this,' he said into her hair. Stroking her back, he murmured, 'Thank you, vixen. Tonight has been perfect.'

Hermione, smiled. 'There's more, my love,' she said tenderly. Slipping out from the circle of his arm, she moved back into the room and produced with a grin a bottle of Mendis Special Old Reserve arrack.

Severus recognised the bottle and smirked in appreciation. 'Good God, woman, where did you find that?' he asked, suddenly energised in delight. He had first been introduced to the coconut brew by Gunanada's chief apprentice, Jayantha, and had grown over lazy evening meals to appreciate the distinct taste of Sri Lanka's local alcohol.

'I owed Kumartilata,' said Hermione with a satisfied smile. Moving back to the swing, she positioned herself once more against Severus' body. Snuggling contentedly, she passed him the bottle and said, 'I actually wanted to get a bottle for your birthday, but it took a while for the owl to reach Unawatuna and for the bottle to arrive.'

'My know-it-all,' said Severus with another smirk. Taking the bottle from Hermione, he used the crystal tumblers provided by the Room of Requirement to pour them both a splash of the drink.

Hermione smirked at Severus in response. She could virtually see her lover relaxing and shedding the mantle of responsibility much like an unwanted robe. If only for tonight, she had wanted Severus to enjoy her company completely. The food, the surroundings and the memories of their time away from Hogwarts seemed to have done the trick.

Chapter Nineteen: Friends Reunited?

Chapter 19 of 26

Hermione does some research. Alice and Frank begin to show marked improvement. Harry finally gets back in touch with Hermione.

(i) Thank you everyone for the kind reviews. Please do continue to let me know what you think. I do like hearing back from you.

(ii) The characters and world of Harry Potter belong to J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this. Pity, I could use a bit of loot right about now.

(iii) And last but by no means least, a big thank you to my lovely, amazing beta, Queen_of_Stars.

With the rush of working on the Longbottoms and testing out the cure they had learned, as well as dealing with the aftermath of Ron and Ginny's slanderous behaviour and work, Hermione had had almost no time for private research. She was desperate to read the books Minerva had given Severus for his birthday on Animagus visualisation. She was also quite aware that red sapphires did not exist in the Muggle world. She had always assumed that if they were red sapphires, they were known as rubies. But Severus was always very precise in his wordings, and if he had called them red sapphires, she knew there was a good explanation for such a naming.

Finally, towards the end of February, another Hogsmeade weekend was announced. Hermione breathed a sigh of relief. The students would be out of her hair, the library would be almost entirely empty, and she could spend her day doing much of the reading that had piled up.

Her first course of action, however, as it had been every Saturday since the start of the New Year was to visit St. Mungo's. Together with Severus, she worked on Alice and Frank: massaging, chanting and hoping against hope that today would be the day when a more obvious sign was noticeable in the improvement of the Longbottoms. There were, of course, small improvements.

Alice would now, on frequent occasions, recognise Augusta and exchange almost lucid greetings with her mother-in-law. Frank and Alice both seemed to be sleeping much more easily, and they both seemed to be doing better at eating their food under their own steam and, indeed, carrying out some of their day to day activity without the aid of their Healers. But the moments of lucidity were sporadic, and Hermione wanted very much to have Neville reunited with his parents. Having lost her own so painfully, she wanted her friend to have the comfort she herself was denied.

On this particular morning, Severus was working on Frank while Hermione was working on Alice. They had both been given the potion in its latest and strongest form, and Severus was massaging Frank's forehead while intoning Pali verses. Hermione was doing the very same thing to Alice. Gunananda had sent the couple the most up-to-date of his research notes, and they had begun to experiment with it on their test-subjects. Suddenly, as Hermione and Severus began to chant together, they seemed to feel a building of momentum. Realising that collective intonation was raising the resonance of the magical build-up, they both redoubled their efforts, concentrating on the magic flowing through their hands as it was directed via massage onto the crown chakra. Neville, who was in the room, seemed to hold his breath and will his own magic to merge with Severus and Hermione as they came to the culmination of the chant. When they were done, they both sagged with exhaustion.

As the minutes passed and Severus and Hermione slowly moved to sit down, there was a shout from Neville. His mother had, for the first time, looked around the room with clear and lucid interest. As Severus and Hermione watched, Neville called for the Healers, even as he rushed towards the bed of his mother.

'Hello,' said Alice Longbottom cautiously.

'Hello, Mum,' said Neville. His voice was shaking with emotion, and tears were streaming down his face.

'Mum?' asked Alice, her voice filled with amazement. 'Neville, is that you?'

'Mum,' said Neville, throwing himself at her.

Alice struggled to wrap her arms around her weeping son, even as she tried to take in everything that was in the room. Her eyes alighted on the still prone form of her husband. 'Frank,' she cried, 'Frank.'

Neville seemed to come to himself, even as the Healers entered the room. Soon Alice was being subjected to a barrage of checks, even as she tried to look through the throng crowding her bed to catch a glimpse of her husband.

Finally the Head Healer turned to Severus and Hermione. 'I don't know what to say, but all of her vital signs and brain scans appear normal. It seems your experimental technique has finally done the impossible.'

Hermione and Severus beamed wearily. But their attention was once again captured by Alice. 'Frank,' she said, before turning to look at the Healer. 'What's wrong with Frank?'

This seemed to galvanise the Healers once more, and they all crowded around Frank Longbottom's bed.

Everyone in the room watched as test after test was done. Finally, the Head Healer turned once more to look at Alice. 'He seems to be asleep, Madam. Other than that, every sign seemed to be perfect.'

'Well,' said Alice decisively, 'wake him up.'

Neville laughed. 'Oh, Mum,' he said joyfully, moving to sit beside his father's bed. Looking over at the Healer, who inclined his head in agreement, Neville reached over and shook his father awake.

There was a grumbled mutter that sounded suspiciously like, 'Just five minutes more, Mum,' before Frank groaned and turned around. He seemed to start at the sight of a tall, strapping lad sitting on the edge of his bed, and a crowd of Healers surrounding him. Looking through the mob, Frank spotted his beloved Alice on the next bed.

'Alice,' he cried before struggling to push away the covers and sit up.

Soon the couple were united with their son and Augusta Longbottom. The old and stern witch was overcome with emotion. Tears poured down her cheeks unchecked as she hugged her son and daughter-in-law repeatedly.

Severus and Hermione watched the reunion with identical beaming smiles before quietly slipping out of the private room.

The Head Healer joined them out in the corridor and shook their hands in congratulation. 'Severus, Hermione,' said the Healer. 'Your work is extraordinary. Please convey my felicitations at this stupendous breakthrough to your partner in Sri Lanka. I would like to start setting up a link to have some of my people trained in this new procedure. We have a number of patients who could benefit from this discovery.'

Severus and Hermione were, of course, delighted. Severus knew that Gunananda had been struggling to find the financial resources needed to carry out his research. The infusion of British wizarding capital to his facility would ensure that the native healer would be able to further his research.

Exhausted but contented, Severus and Hermione returned to Hogwarts. Severus was planning on having a long, relaxing soak, but Hermione had plans to hit the library. She was too keyed up after the extraordinary events of the morning to rest. She had much to research, starting with the mystery of the red sapphires that made up her engagement ring.

Hermione loved the solitude of the library. Everyone seemed to be at Hogsmeade, and the quiet helped her come to grips with the magnitude of what they had achieved. She realised that it was the bond she and Severus shared that had helped them heal the Longbottoms. She suspected that Severus would be coming to the same realisation as he soaked in the bath. Putting that on her mental list of things to discuss when she was next with her beloved, she focused on solving the mystery of the red sapphires.

Luckily Hermione's many hours in the library had taught her where to begin her search. The ignored Magical Geology section soon provided the ever eager student with a number of books on magically formed minerals and chemicals. Red sapphires were listed in the third book she consulted called *Substances, Magical*. As she read the information, tears of amazement came into her eyes. The entry read:

Red Sapphires, also known as Sita's tears, are found only in a specific part of Ceylon. The exact site is a closely guarded secret, and the stones are mined by single caste of goblins known as the Randeniya. Legend has it that the stone came into being when the royal consort Sita was abducted and brought to Lanka by the demon king Ravana. At Sita's suffering over her separation from her beloved and godlike Rama, the pious Sita wept bitterly. As a tribute to her purity, devotion and piety, the gods transformed her precious tears into blood red sapphires with unique magical properties. Unlike normal rubies, red sapphires, when worn, bestow clarity of heart and mind to the wearer. They have the ability to cure infertility in women and, when crushed and mixed with unicorn milk, help bestow sight to the blind. When given as a token of pure and unconditional love, red sapphires bring the couple the gift of everlasting love, as was found by the holy Rama and Sita. Red sapphires are specially auspicious when worn by brides for they ensure fidelity, prosperity and loving kindness in the magical home.

Legend believes that the red sapphire was the stone that was given to Prince Vijaya by his demon lover and Yaksha Queen Kuveni, which allowed Vijaya to wrestle power from her brothers and become the first historically recorded king of Lanka.

Hermione realised that Severus had gone to extreme lengths to get her a ring that held within it strong magical properties. Not only was her engagement ring imbued with spells and enchantments to ensure prosperity, the stones themselves allowed for the couple to enjoy ever-lasting love. She understood that he was showing her how much he valued her and how much he craved her love and affection forevermore. It was obvious that he had spared no cost, wanting to show her his unconditional love and devotion. She could not forget that he had not expected her to accept his ring; he had merely wanted to give it to her as a sign of his fidelity. She vowed that she would always be worthy of the honour of wearing such a precious sign of her beloved's love for her.

The news of the Longbottoms' recovery made front page news of the *Daily Prophet*. Following so soon after the Weasleys' scandalous fiasco, it helped cement Hermione and Severus' place as heroes and saviours of the wizarding world. They were the much discussed and analysed couple. Severus, of course, scoffed at the sudden outpouring of letters offering them congratulations and felicitations. He could not forget the way he had been treated in the past. He scorned all the empty affectations of the public and became even more entrenched in his privacy. Hermione could not fault him on his desire for seclusion. She too knew how fickle the affections of the world were. They had each other, they had their true and dear friends, and they were content. Public adoration was nothing but a distraction and waste of time.

Harry, however, had begun to realise the error of his ways. When he learned of the work Hermione and Severus had put into helping cure the Longbottoms, he was ashamed. He realised that he had to seriously work on controlling his own Dark impulses. Quitting professional Quidditch, he enrolled in the Auror Training Programme. This was seen as a very good sign by everyone in the Order. In March, a now contrite Harry wrote to Hermione. In his missive, he said:

Dear Hermione,

I have had time to do a lot of soul-searching, and after much thought I realise that I don't really want to lose your friendship. I have still not been able to come to grips with the fact that you are now with Snape or that Ron and Ginny could hate you so much. However, I hope that perhaps with time I will be able to get over the way things have

changed.

Harry

Hermione was pleased to receive a letter from Harry, but it pained her that it was so very cold. She longed for the lengthy and childish letters he had written during their Hogwarts days that were filled with all of his thoughts and actions. Nevertheless, when she wrote back, she too admitted that she didn't want to lose their friendship. However, Hermione was very clear on the fact that since she going to be Severus' wife in the not too distant future, Harry had better accept the idea of her with Severus or lose her. Hermione insisted that she would not leave Severus or hurt him in any way.

Chapter Twenty: And now onto Transfiguration

Chapter 20 of 26

Severus and Hermione discover their Animagus forms.

- (i) Thank you everyone for staying with the story and for the kind reviews. Please do continue to let me know what you think.
- (ii) The characters and world of Harry Potter belong to J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this. Pity, I could use a bit of loot right about now.
- (iii) And last but by no means least, a big thank you to my lovely, amazing beta, Queen_of_Stars.

Easter break saw Severus take his Princess to spend a few quiet days at Spinner's End. The house was neglected and had an abandoned feel to it. But Hermione fell in love with the little garden that had at one time been lovingly maintained by Severus' mother and the extensive library of second- and third-hand tomes that had been collected by Severus. Her face beaming with animated enthusiasm, Hermione began reeling off a list of things that could be done to bring the house and the garden back into resplendent glory.

Severus listened to Hermione's chatter with a gentle smirk upon his harsh visage. It never failed to amaze the Slytherin how generous his Gryffindor was. Another woman would have turned her nose up at the common neighbourhood in which the house was situated, or at least made disparaging comments about the dark and obviously cheap decor of the interior. Hermione, however, only saw the beauty that could be re-found in his back garden, and the clean lines of the second-hand but good quality furniture that his mother had collected from charity shops. Indeed, when she was not making unrestrained love with Severus or cooking, Hermione spent most of her time polishing, cleaning and organising, and by the end of their stay, the house looked more like a home than it had ever done during Severus' youth and later, solitary occupancy.

Severus, too, began to see his little Victorian terraced home with altered eyes. Instead of the discomfort the house brought out in his soul at the remembered suffering that he and his mother had undergone and the anger and resentment against his father's weak and drink-induced behaviour, Severus found in his childhood home for the first time a sanctuary.

Hermione's enthusiastic reading of his mother's books on household charms prompted her to attempt to redecorate the cramped upstairs box-room used by Wormtail. For too long the room had held nothing but unpleasant memories. It had been Severus' childhood bedroom, and later, the place where he had housed his Dark Lord-appointed spy and helper. Now though, the room was emptied entirely of all of its furniture before being given a most thorough of spring cleanings. Then, the walls were magically painted a bright white with matching white woodwork. Once that was done, Hermione transfigured the old, stained carpet into a clean, bright rug in rich Prussian blue that now slumbered regally on the cleaned and polished floorboards. All of the old furniture in the room was then repainted to match in pure brilliant white and transfigured to take on more pleasing and elegant lines. Severus marvelled at the time and energy Hermione spent mending his mother's old and faded linen, but a little bit of transfiguration saw it all given a new and altered look with more modern designs and patterns. By the end of their stay, the box-room looked like the most inviting of reading rooms and provided a nice working space for Severus, who for so long had used his living-room as his study, library and sitting-room.

Hermione's success with the box-room had her raring to go in doing up the rest of the house. But she realised that she didn't have the time to go into a major redecoration project during their Easter vacation. Besides, she realised that Severus was not one to take in change easily. A little at a time, that was the way to go with her dark Slytherin. She had the rest of their lives together to make significant changes to their home, for that was what Spinner's End was turning out to be, their home away from Hogwarts.

Severus, too, realised that for the first time, the thought of coming back to Spinner's End at the end of the term did not fill him with dread. Instead, he looked forward to working on the garden and spending the summer with Hermione in quiet domesticity. It surprised and pleased him to realise that he was very different from his father, who had had no love for the home. Severus had always secretly feared that he would turn into his father, uncaring, cold and unlovable. His time with Hermione, though, had shown him a very different side to his personality, a side that for too long had remained hidden behind a facade of stoic disregard for anything that could be used against him.

Their evenings were spent reading, as the duo embarked on their long awaited Animagus training, while their nights were spent in passionate love-making. Having a few days to themselves allowed the couple to explore their sensuality without reservation. Severus, who had for so long been so reserved, was finally able to laugh during their exuberant trysts. This was another eye-opener to the dark wizard. Sex had always been about domination, about control and power; now it was about affection, love and joy. Never had he thought that he could laugh during copulation, that he could tease with his smirk and his raised eyebrow. But with Hermione, who found everything that he did utterly erotic and arousing, Severus was able to bring out his playful nature that he himself had not known existed.

Once they were both well-versed in the theoretical understanding of the magic, they arranged on their return to Hogwarts to spend three evenings a week with Minerva, practicing meditation and visualisation to bring out their inner creatures. Eventually, on the first of May, Minerva announced that they were ready to attempt their transformations.

Early morning, just as the dawn was breaking, they made their way out into the grounds by the lake. There, in a secluded niche, Hermione and Severus began their visualisations. Soon, Hermione felt the resonance of her aura attune to her inner animal and began chanting the incantation. With the chanting directing her magic inward, Hermione felt her magic beginning to change. She had been training ardently for months and was more than ready for the challenge. With a sudden shift in her aura, she transformed into a small, gray owl. Once transformed, she hopped around attempting to coordinate her wings and her vision before preening herself in front of Severus and Minerva. Then, gathering her suddenly altered sense of perception, Hermione broke into flight. She did not feel uncertain in the air; she felt as though she had finally found her place in the universe. Wanting to wait for Severus, Hermione didn't go far. She merely tested out her wings before returning to alight onto Severus' outstretched arm.

Severus stroked the soft down of Hermione's new form. Then, he released her to alight on Minerva's waiting arm. From there, Minerva and Hermione watched Severus go through his intensely concentrated visualisation.

Severus took much longer, and Hermione, perched as she now was on Minerva's shoulder, began to despair for her beloved. She knew she would be devastated if he failed, and Severus would himself be broken-hearted. She recognized that being able to transform had been one of his most ardent desires. As Hermione watched, her owl eyes fixed on the man she loved beyond life itself, there was a sudden burst of magic. Hermione felt the shift in the magnetic field surrounding Severus. With a sudden shuddering of his body, he transformed into a majestic golden eagle.

Minerva, who had watched the pair with rapt silence, thought Severus' form was apt. Like his Animagus form, Severus was solitary, sharp and a predator, but he also was like his transfigured form, a creature that mated for life and had an extremely caring, faithful and protective nature.

For a moment Severus examined his new appearance before spreading his wings and taking off in flight. Together, he and Hermione soared in the air, flying in tandem before he wheeled higher and higher above her small owl form as the air currents swept them away. It was glorious, and they revelled in their ability to play and twirl in the air. Severus was immensely pleased that Hermione, too, was a bird. They could now share their new domain together. It would have been slightly disappointing if she had not been able to take flight as he now could.

Flight to Severus was nothing new. He loved flying on his broom, and the best thing about being a minion of the Dark Lord had been when he had been shown the megalomaniac's secret of flight. Since the fall of the Dark Lord, Severus was the only living person capable of unsupported flight. It was something he cherished, something he adored. Now, there was a third dimension to his ability to fly.

Finally he beat his impressive wings and dropped down to Hermione's height, and together they descended to settle on either of Minerva's outstretched arms. She admired them and rubbed her face affectionately against their soft bodies before shooting them both off to transform back to their human forms. It was time for breakfast and a meeting about whether it was prudent to inform the Ministry and register their new forms.

Chapter Twenty-One: The End of the School Year

Chapter 21 of 26

The long school year is finally over. Severus and Hermione return to Spinner's End.

(i) The characters and world of Harry Potter are the property of the remarkably talented J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this.

(ii) Thank you to all the readers who have stayed with me through the writing of this tale. Your kind reviews have been enormously helpful. Please do continue to review and tell me what you think of the story. You have no idea how wonderful it is to hear from you.

(iii) And finally, much gratitude to my brilliant beta, Queen_of_Stars. You have been the most gracious of friends through these long months. I am so thankful that you agreed to help me work on, polish and present this story. All errors that ultimately remain are my own.

After their successful attempt at Animagus transformation, Severus and Hermione accompanied Minerva to breakfast in the Headmaster's office. Although the war was over, and all known Death Eaters incarcerated, the trio needed to decide if it would be in the best interest of Hermione and Severus, as well as of the Order of the Phoenix, to register the new abilities of the couple.

"I know you'd like to have your abilities acknowledged," said Minerva frankly, first looking at Hermione before turning to Severus, "but perhaps it would be best if we didn't inform anyone else that you have both mastered Animagus transfiguration."

Severus inclined his head in agreement as he watched the disappointment etch itself plainly on Hermione's face. But she was no fool, and she too sighed and nodded her head in agreement. "I know. I've been thinking the same thing. There's no reason to give away our secret advantages. We still don't know for sure how many Death Eater sympathisers there are in the Ministry. It's best to keep our abilities hidden in case any trouble emerges one day."

"Good girl," said Severus in approval, despite Hermione's expected grimace at his comment. "Never show your hand, even if you think the game is over."

Minerva sighed. "I guess it is too much to hope that we will have a long period of peace now that You-know-who is gone."

Severus raised his eyebrow at his colleague's naiveté. "Minerva, you know very well that peace is never permanent or long-term, and trouble can emerge from the most unexpected of corners. There has been a lot of darkness released in recent decades. The Weasleys are just one example. We still do not know the full extent of the damage caused due to the Battle of Hogwarts. We have done our best to mitigate the harm done by training the children, but these things are insidious, working like the most noxious of gasses, slowly, quietly, secretly. Besides which, the wizarding world has never really gone long before a Dark Lord or Lady emerges to take on the challenging of changing the world as we know it. This is the way of our world."

"I know, Severus," said Minerva in resignation. "But I am an old woman. I seem to have spent most of my life caught up in one war after another. If it isn't the bloody Muggles, it's our lot."

Severus chuckled darkly at Minerva's tone of disgruntlement, but he could not agree with her more. Whether Muggle or Wizard, the world seemed full of megalomaniacs and power hungry individuals attempting to impose their views on the rest of the populace.

May seemed to have suddenly acquired wings. The days passed in frantic work as students were prepared for the upcoming school exams, as well as OWLs and NEWTs. It was an especially trying time for Severus because it would be the first time that the altered curriculum would be tested. It was imperative for the reputation of Hogwarts and Severus' ground-breaking alterations that the students sitting for Ministry-administered examinations performed well, for it would undoubtedly reflect on the changes made since the fall of Voldemort. Hermione, of course, seemed to have no time to rest. If she was not busy running extra classes for remedial work in Potions or Muggle Studies, she was cramming for her upcoming NEWTs. She wanted to do extremely well, for it reflected on her capabilities, as well as leave a mark on her position as an Assistant Teacher.

But like all difficult and exhausting events, the exam week finally did pass. The students seemed to have done relatively well, and Ginny's graduating class finally left Hogwarts. Hermione was overjoyed. Having to deal with Ginny's friends in Advanced Potions as well as DADA had proved tiresome indeed. They had done their best to make Hermione feel guilty for Ginny's inability to complete her final year at Hogwarts. That it was Ginny's malicious actions that had caused the teen to be expelled was, in true Gryffindor style, ignored.

Finally, though, the summer holidays were upon them. School had ended for the year. The members of staff were finally free to enjoy themselves for a while. Rapidly, the castle emptied, and Severus and Hermione departed for Spinner's End to prepare the house for their summer in it together. Having had such success with the box-room,

the next project that Hermione tackled was the kitchen. Hermione had spent countless hours dreaming of what she'd like to achieve and had, on occasion, owled for Muggle books and magazines on interior design to discover how modern homes were done up. Thus, it took her hardly any time at all to have all of the pots and pans, crockery and cutlery transferred to the sitting-room so she could begin her Transfiguration work. Severus chuckled at Hermione's enthusiasm.

"Merlin's balls, woman. We haven't even been here for half an hour, and you're already turning this place on its head. Come to bed. I want to ravish you without the constant threat of interruption."

Hermione giggled at Severus' disgruntled tone. "My love, you know I've been thinking and drawing up plans for the house since Easter. It was my escape when studying, marking and teaching got to be too much. Every time I needed to relax, I would pull out a notebook and work out what I wanted to do to the house. Please, Severus, give me a few hours. I shall more than make it up to you."

"Hrmph," groused Severus. "Bossy wench! I suppose I shall just have to entertain myself by relaxing in the garden with a book or something."

Hermione smiled. "Thank you, love. I promise I won't be long, and I will make it up to you." Standing up on tip toe, she kissed him gently on his mouth.

The kiss and her promise seemed to have mollified Severus. With an exaggerated sigh, he made his way into the back garden. There was still a patch of green that had somehow managed to survive the years of neglect. Severus settled into the decrepit, wooden garden bench and allowed his mind to wonder. Before long, he himself began to plot what could be done to bring the garden back into shape. The vegetable patch could be turned into a place to grow herbs used for potion-making, and the flower-beds could be easily cut back to allow the roses more room to grow. Growing enthusiastic himself, Severus Accioed a piece of parchment and quill from his study and set to work on perfecting a plan for the garden. It could be his contribution to Hermione's efforts to tidy up and redecorate their home away from home, for Severus acknowledged in his heart that Hogwarts was and would always be his real home.

As he worked out the best times for planting the alterations to the garden, Severus paused in his self-appointed task. It surprised the dark man how quickly he had turned into a sappy lover. All through his service to Dumbledore, he had remained, in his heart, a Dark wizard. He had turned his back on Voldemort, but he hadn't given up his own immersion into the Dark Arts. That fascination had stayed with him. He could understand why Dumbledore had failed to give him the position of DADA Professor for so many years. It would have been too much of a temptation to let the Dark Arts totally dominate all of his reading and research. By being forced to also focus on Potions, Severus had been able to maintain some level of rationality. But now, even though he was finally free to pursue any avenue of study that he desired, he had turned into a Hufflepuff. He wanted to please Hermione; he wanted to make right the wrongs he had committed. He felt utterly foolish. He knew Lucius would laugh till he was almost rolling on the floor if he could read the thoughts running through his mind. Had they not discussed repeatedly that no Dark wizard would want to make amends, even if they realised their mistakes? Lucius had pointed out that a true student of the Dark would consider it their right to occasionally make errors in their pursuit of truth and knowledge. Scowling at his own altered mindset, Severus realised that his magic and darkness had been permanently altered by his witch's Light. For there was no real Darkness within Hermione. There was single-minded determination, passion for learning, but no true Darkness.

However, deep within his heart, Severus also realised that having Hermione's Light within him was a relief. He had often worried that as he grew into his power, he would become the thing he hated most: an unreasonable, uncontrollable Dark Wizard. Severus was no fool, nor was he blind. He had realised fairly early on that the power he had was phenomenal. He had spent most of his years as a teenager taking on four or more wizards single-handedly. Thus, Severus had come to learn that if his magic continued to grow at the rate it currently maintained, before long, he would possess the power and ability to rival and possibly surpass that of Dumbledore and Voldemort. Hermione's Saxon ritual of sharing and expanding their power had only added to the rate and speed of growth. This was perhaps why Hermione was suddenly working and manifesting her magic in such rapid leaps and bounds. A witch her age should still be a fledgling in terms of power, but she was coming into her own as an adult witch at an astonishing rate. Severus was amazed that Minerva had not brought it up with him already, for surely the other professors who worked with Hermione must have realised how suddenly her magic had altered and matured.

Severus smirked at the garden foliage. His witch was going to be the most powerful in Britain in the not too distant future. He once again shook his head in amazement at his good fortune. Never would he have thought that he would be so blessed. Now, losing Lily seemed to Severus a gift from the gods, a strong and silent, none-to-gentle shove in the right direction that put him in the perfect position to receive the blessing, the treasure that was Hermione. If he had won Lily, he would not have been able to pursue knowledge as single-mindedly as he had done in the last twenty years. He would have stunted his own growth and talent. He would never have become the expert that he was in two of the most demanding fields of magic. If he had married Lily, he would have not gone to work for Dumbledore or indeed, Voldemort. He would probably have died much earlier. Even if he hadn't died, then he wouldn't have been able to contribute as he had done to the cause. He was not being arrogant, but Severus could not help but think that the Order of the Phoenix could not have defeated the Dark Lord if it wasn't for his intelligence gathering. For two long decades, they had been able to undermine the Dark Lord's efforts; without the intelligence and support he provided, they would have been fighting blind with no hope of ever knowing how to counter his Machiavellian plots. Yes, Severus could now finally be truly grateful that the woman he had thought he loved was vain, shallow and blind. She had failed to see what was before her, choosing tinsel over the tarnished gold that he was. Knowing that Hermione would grin at him for his gloating thoughts, he once again bent his head to plan their garden.

A few days after the holidays had begun, Severus found Hermione staring unseeingly out of the kitchen window. Silently, he approached her and tried to see what had captured her attention. All there was, however, was the still relatively uninspiring view into the back garden. "Hermione," said Severus gently, not wanting to startle his witch.

Hermione seemed to rouse herself from far away. "Severus," she said, shaking her head.

He slid his arms around her from behind and kissed her softly on the curve of her neck. "Tell me what's wrong. I know there is something on your mind."

"Harry," she said with a sigh. "I had a dream about him last night. He seemed so lost, and...." She stopped and sighed again. "You know, he and I were two lonely children. He the orphan and me the only, and even though I never admitted it, misunderstood and unwanted child. We kind of latched on to each other. Ron was different; he represented the family we both dreamed of and wanted, but we, we were true siblings to each other. I miss him, Severus. I know he's been a prat, but he'll always be dear to me. I don't really care if I never regain my friendship with Ron, or any of the Weasleys for that matter, other than possibly Bill and Mr. Weasley. But I miss Harry. I miss mending his glasses that he is forever breaking. I miss straightening his clothes and making him grin bashfully as I tell him off. I miss him."

Severus sighed. He could not understand the kind of bond she shared with Potter, but he did realise that he was not enough for her. He had thought he had glimpsed something similar with Lily, but he had soon realised that she had never returned his depth of emotion. Seeing Hermione's affection for her friends, her love for him, made him realise that what he had felt for Lily and what she had felt for him was a pale thing in comparison. He had never really loved Lily. He had loved what she represented, what she seemed to have. In all honesty, Severus now realised that until Hermione had come into his life, he had always been a loner. Sure, on another level, he had been close to Lucius and Narcissa, but he had distanced his heart from them for decades now. He had always expected to have to kill his friends in battle, and that, if nothing else, had forced him to slowly learn to live in a world without anyone near and dear to him. That they had survived the fall of the Dark Lord was an unexpected boon, but they were not necessary for his continuing happiness.

Finally, thoughtfully, Severus spoke. "Write to him, my pet. Invite him to tea or something. I'll make sure I'm in the lab or the study so that you have me nearby if you want me, but you can, for the most part, meet him on your turf in private."

Hermione turned around to hug Severus swiftly. "You're so good to me," she said, looking up at him. "I know how much this place is a sanctuary for you. To let him come here, Severus, are you sure? I could meet him at the Leaky Cauldron for a drink or something if you'd prefer that."

"No," said Severus, tightening his grip on her waist. "I'd rather it be here, so that if he upsets you, I am close at hand. It would be harder to conceal your meeting from the public eye in Diagon Alley. You are both too well known to meet in public after such a volatile past." Bending his head, he kissed Hermione gently. "I love you, my pet. Of course, I realise that by making you mine, I am opening myself up to the horrors of associating with your bloody Gryffindors. I may not be comfortable in entertaining all of them in our home, but one or two at a time should be fine, if they are manageable. Just promise me that you won't have Longbottom dropping by to borrow a cup of sugar or some such inanity every other day."

Hermione laughed. She loved his sarcastic humour. His wit was one of the first things she had grown to love about her dark wizard. She could not deny how much it meant to her that Severus was being so considerate, despite his obvious dislike of having Harry under his roof. "I love you too, you know," said Hermione.

Hermione's cautious letter to Harry, inviting him for tea at Spinner's End, was met with surprised but grateful relief on the part of the Saviour of the Wizarding world. Having had plenty of time to think and reflect on Hermione's letter, Harry could not help but feel that she was justified in her curt warning to him. He was a prat if he thought she would put their friendship over her relationship with Snape. Harry was not really a fool, just pig-headed and for the most part blind. But working with Bill had allowed him to come to realise how childish and vindictive some of his behaviour had been. He was just thankful that he hadn't become as mired in Darkness as Ron and Ginny had been. Realising too how lucky he was that Hermione was willing to extend the olive branch by inviting him to tea, he wrote back immediately.

Dear Hermione,

Thank you for the invitation to tea. I shall be happy to come see you on Saturday. Will Snape be there? Don't get into a tizzy; I'm just asking because, if so, I would like to be prepared to grovel and apologise in a suitable manner.

Love,

Harry

Hermione couldn't help but laugh at Harry's letter. When she showed it to Severus over breakfast, he could not hide the upward twitch of his lips. "There's hope for the boy yet," was Severus' sarcastic comment. "If he is willing to grovel, then I am appeased."

Hermione laughed at this Slytherin response. "I'll write and put him out of his misery, unless you think it would be best if he met you too."

At Severus' aghast expression, Hermione laughed even harder. "Really, my love, sometimes I wonder who is more fearful and horrified of the other, you or Harry. You both get so disgusted at the prospect of having to spend time together."

"Enough," said Severus gruffly. "Write to the dunderhead and tell him I won't be taking tea with you. Just make sure he doesn't upset you, my pet. I'll have his guts for garters if he does."

Hermione smiled. "I'm sure he already knows that, Severus. Don't you think that Bill would have told him how protective you are of me by now?"

Severus scowled, but could not help but agree.

Saturday arrived soon enough, although, if one could have seen Hermione's anxious expression on Friday, it was too long in the coming. Worried, desperate even, for things to go well, Hermione had put all her magical and Muggle talents to the forefront and prepared with meticulous detail for afternoon tea. The sitting-room at Spinner's End had been cleaned, tidied and made to look as cosy and inviting as possible. Then, Hermione used one of Kumarylata's specific charms on the cake she had prepared, a rich chocolate concoction, to bestow rationality, love and a sense of peace on all those who ate it.

Severus had observed Hermione chanting over the mixing of the batter and had raised an eyebrow in enquiry.

Hermione had not wanted to divulge her secret and had just shook her head.

Severus sighed loudly in exasperation and said, "You know, Hermione, if you want to keep things a secret from me, you must learn to ward and guard your possessions much more carefully. I know full well what Kumarylata gave you. I'm not going to start using her magic. I'm just curious to know what you are doing."

Hermione blushed, but refused to answer. "Later," was all she was willing to mumble as she continued to chant. Finally, when the cake was in the oven, she explained what she had done as she put away the ingredients.

Severus nodded in agreement. His hands busy as he helped her tidy up the kitchen, he said, "I think that is a sensible course of action given Potter's volatile nature. Pity we cannot douse the whole bloody student body with something like your cake on feast nights."

Hermione laughed. She loved her dark Slytherin's biting sense of humour. Placing the last of the utensils that needed to be washed in the sink and casting the charm that would set it all to washing, she slid her arms around him to hug him tenderly. "I love you," she said softly. "I didn't mean to hide what I was doing, but Kumarylata made me promise to keep her family secrets and recipes safe. I didn't want to divulge her secrets."

Severus chuckled. "Silly woman," he said, stroking her horridly wild hair. "I'm sure she knew that I would make sure that what she gave you was safe and proper for you to use."

As Hermione prepared to tell him off, he gentled her by placing his hand across her mouth. "I don't mean to suggest that I don't trust you or her, my dear, but I'm a naturally possessive and cautious man. Surely, you must have suspected that Gunananda would have shared with his wife his knowledge of me and my methods. Thus, surely you must have known that they would have expected me to fully peruse everything that you were given in Sri Lanka."

Despite her anger at Severus' high-handedness, Hermione had to agree with his logic. However, she was not mollified. With a pout, she said, "It doesn't mean I have to like it though."

Severus smirked in response but could not resist her pouty mouth. "Goddess," he groaned before ravishing her with his kiss.

All argument forgotten in the face of Severus' passion, Hermione surrendered to his kiss. Soon the two were pushing aside their clothes to feel heated skin against skin. Severus picked up Hermione and laid her on the kitchen table.

Their passion, as always, flared fast and furious between them. He pushed, she pulled, and within moments, Severus was buried deep within Hermione's warmth. Even as he tried to slow down their furious coupling, Hermione used her heels to jerk him sharply into her.

"Wench," groaned Severus raggedly. Then, as he struggled to capture her legs and pin them against his shoulders, he growled, "Why must you always want to rush me so?"

Hermione tried to laugh, but was cut short as he rotated his hips in a leisurely circle. Smirking at the level of his witch's responsiveness, Severus began to make love to Hermione slowly. He was very deliberate with each move he made, kissing, licking and caressing her torso while he continued with the shallow thrusts within her.

Hermione panted with need as his torturous methods drove her passion higher. She did not think of the hard surface of the table beneath her. All she could focus on was the power of the man who surrounded her so completely with his passion. His utterly focused attention upon her was magical, and that alone was enough to keep her on the edge of orgasm. Desperate to come, she could only moan a hoarse, "Bastard." Doing her best to gather some control over herself, Hermione retaliated in their game of love by tighten her inner muscles in an attempt to make him lose control.

Severus smirked; though Hermione was gratified to see the beads of sweat break out across his forehead at her continued ministrations. Still, however, he maintained his slow, deliberate pace until Hermione was almost keening with need.

"Severus," she gasped, "if you don't get a move on soon, I'll hex you when we are done."

Her dark lover responded by slowing down his pace even further, bending low to whisper seductively in her ear, "My pet, you know you really love it when I torture you this way. Now, stop complaining and enjoy." Each word was punctuated by a slow, shallow thrust that was in itself a lesson in the art of seduction.

Hermione stuck her tongue out at him. Severus seemed to take it as yet another challenge, as he bent her even more completely to ravish her with further breathtaking kisses. Then, and only then, when he felt he could hold no longer, did he begin to thrust within her in earnest. Hermione nearly screamed with the renewed vigour of his hard strokes within her. "Oh, Severus," she cried, shattering as the avalanche of her orgasm overtook her.

Severus too was almost on the brink of orgasm. Feeling Hermione's tightening muscles sent him over the edge to join her in oblivion.

A.N/ Love it or hate it, do let me know what you think.

Chapter Twenty-Two: Tea with Harry

Chapter 22 of 26

Hermione meets Harry.

Chapter Twenty-Two: Tea with Harry

Hermione meets Harry.

(i) The characters and world of Harry Potter are the property of the remarkably talented J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this.

(ii) Thank you to all the readers who have stayed with me through the writing of this tale. Your kind reviews have been enormously helpful. Please do continue to review and tell me what you think of the story. You have no idea how wonderful it is to hear from you.

(iii) And finally, much gratitude to my brilliant beta, Queen_of_Stars. You have been the most gracious of friends through these long months. I am so thankful that you agreed to help me work on, polish and present this story. All errors that ultimately remain are my own.

Severus' seduction had helped relax Hermione thoroughly for her meeting with Harry. When the young, green-eyed wizard arrived at Spinner's End, Hermione wore a well-loved look upon her face. Her hug of greeting was cheerful yet laid back.

Harry, who had seen that particular look a number of times on Ron's face after a good shag before a Quidditch game, could not help but realise how happy Hermione seemed to be with Snape. It made him feel extremely uncomfortable to think about his best friend shagging the dungeon bat, but, if it could make her glow as she did, he realised that he had no room to protest. Doing his best to not betray his unease, he, too, smiled as broadly as he could as he tentatively hugged Hermione back.

'Thank you,' said Harry immediately, once he had been released from Hermione's warm embrace. 'I'm really glad you asked me to come. I've been a right fool, but I promise you that I've been working really hard with Bill and have learned to control the changes in my magic.'

'Oh, Harry,' said Hermione breathlessly. Harry's genuinely contrite expression went a long way in helping Hermione forgive her friend.

Leading the way into the sitting-room, Hermione sat down on the sofa. Harry followed. Once the two friends were seated, she politely indicated if he'd like some tea.

Harry nodded. Despite his apology, he was feeling tense at being in Snape's house. The look was distinctly Slytherin, despite the obvious presence of Hermione's eye for décor. Harry had spent enough time with Hermione to know how she liked to organise things. Moreover, the hundreds of books that lined the walls clearly illuminated the shared passion of the two lovers.

Once tea had been poured, Hermione handed out the cake. Then, settling back against the sofa cushions, she said softly, 'Harry, I know.'

Harry started awkwardly at that comment. It could mean anything. He felt like a guilty student being called into account. Hermione had always had the ability, along with Professor McGonagall, of making him feel always in the wrong.

Seeing the look on Harry's face, Hermione burst into laughter. She hadn't realised how her cryptic comment would terrify her friend. 'Oh, Harry,' she said, tears streaming down her cheeks, 'it is good to see you.'

Harry, despite his unease, grinned back at Hermione. It was good to see her looking so happy.

Hermione, too, relaxed further. This Harry who sat with that extremely guilty and contrite expression upon his face was the friend she had known before the Battle of Hogwarts. This was the Harry she'd bossed around and mothered all through their Hogwarts days. With a Snapish smirk, Hermione said, 'What I meant by my previous 'I know' was that I know about what you've been doing with Bill. Remember, I've been following DADA with him all of this past year.'

Harry blushed. 'You always do that, Hermione. I don't know how, it's like you channel McGonagall at her most knowing or something.'

Hermione giggled. 'Well, I have been spending a lot of time with her. Is it therefore not to be expected that I'll pick up mannerisms from her? Besides, I think I've picked up more from Severus.'

Harry blanched at Hermione's casual mention of Snape. He tried to appear cool and collected, but could not stop his twinge of discomfort.

'Harry,' sighed Hermione, 'you do realise he's in the house? He'll not leave me alone in case you upset me. But he's not going to come swooping down to deduct House points or something. You really need to get over your fear and mistrust of him.'

Harry nodded. 'I'm trying, Hermione, I promise. I don't hate him; it is so much more complicated than that. I just feel so guilty for not trusting him, for letting myself be fooled so easily. I also feel weird about him being in love with my mother for so long and even more odd about thinking how horrid Dad and Sirius were to him. I've been talking to Andromeda, you know. She knew them quite well, since she and Sirius were very close at one point. She didn't paint a favourable picture of their behaviour. I can see why he would have always hated me for looking so much like my dad. If he wasn't already dead, I think I'd easily hate my own father for what he did and how he was.'

'Oh, Harry,' said Hermione softly. 'They were teenagers, and everyone makes mistakes.'

'We were teenagers too, Hermione,' said Harry decisively. 'We may have made mistakes, but they were mistakes made due to misinformation and lack of knowledge. We didn't take on people or hex them for no reason. Even when we took on the Ferret, it was never all of us against him alone, and it was always evenly matched.'

Hermione nodded. She had long suspected something of the sort when she had learned about the Marauders and their deliberate focus on Severus.

Harry continued. 'My dad and Sirius used to torment Snape when he was utterly outnumbered, four to one. That's not a mistake; that's a malicious, unfair way of behaving. I think my biggest problem with Snape is that I feel like I should apologise for the actions of my dad and Sirius, which, despite the way I feel about their actions, makes me feel disloyal to their memory. Even worse, I feel I should apologise for my mother. She wasn't a nice person, Hermione. Do you know Snape spent the whole night outside Gryffindor common room begging her for forgiveness? The others laughed at him and called him all kinds of everything, but he didn't relent and spent the whole night trying to get her to forgive him for one misspoken word, one insult. If she had been any kind of friend, any kind of person, she would have forgiven him, even if she couldn't have continued as his friend. It was the decent thing to do, not laugh at him and step over him on her way to breakfast like he was dirt or something. I wanted to die when I heard from Andromeda about how my mother behaved. I've always been told how wonderful she and Dad were; this, seeing them from a different perspective that didn't try to make them appear to be perfect, was really an eye-opener. Remus tried to point me in the right direction, but Andromeda didn't pull any punches. She just told me how things were, without exceptions.'

Hermione was lost for words. She didn't know how to respond to Harry's heartfelt outpourings. She could see that he had given a lot of thought to what he was saying. He had idealised his parents for so long, clinging to their memory and that of Sirius. To hear the truth must have been shocking. That he could even want to apologise to Severus made her feel really confident that Harry had finally come to grips with and mastered his inner darkness. She had had these very same thoughts when she had been told about the Potters by Minerva, but Minerva had not given such a scathing account of the Marauders. Hermione supposed that Minerva had not known the full extent of their actions. But a niggling doubt made her think that even Minerva might have been blinded by her adoration for her Gryffindors. Sirius had always been flirtatious and charming, even when things did not go his way, and Remus, for all his quiet studiousness, had always possessed a relaxed friendliness. She could well imagine Minerva having a large blind spot where the boys, her boys were concerned. Finally, with a sigh, Hermione moved to sit next to Harry. 'Come here,' she said, opening her arms to him. She had known him long enough to know that a hug and a cuddle would help him.

Harry accepted her gesture with alacrity. He'd always felt safe with Hermione. She was the older sister he had never had. 'Should I apologise to Snape, do you think?' he asked into her shoulder.

Hermione stroked his back and sighed again. 'I don't know. I think it might help you, even if bringing it all back out into the open does make him feel uncomfortable. Though,' Hermione sat back to think about the issue more seriously, 'I think it would be a good thing. It would clear the air and allow you both to start anew. Sit here and have another slice of cake. I'm going to go fetch Severus from his lab.'

'Hermione,' said Harry uncertainly. He wasn't really ready to face Snape just yet. But she was off, a blur of motion as she dashed out of the room. Harry sighed and did as instructed. The cake was good, and eating it made him feel more in control somehow.

Chapter Twenty-Three: Conversations

Chapter 23 of 26

Harry and Severus have a much needed talk. Hermione meets with Ron.

Chapter Twenty-Three: Conversations

Harry and Severus have a much needed talk. Hermione meets with Ron.

(i) The characters and world of Harry Potter are the property of the remarkably talented J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this.

(ii) Thank you to all the readers who have stayed with me through the writing of this tale. Your kind reviews have been enormously helpful. Please do continue to review and tell me what you think of the story. You have no idea how wonderful it is to hear from you.

(iii) And finally, much gratitude to my brilliant beta, Queen_of_Stars. You have been the most gracious of friends through these long months. I am so thankful that you agreed to help me work on, polish and present this story. All errors that ultimately remain are my own.

Severus was alarmed to hear Hermione making her way down to his laboratory. 'What is it, my love?' he asked, looking up worriedly.

Hermione smiled reassuringly. She immediately realised that her appearance had caused an erroneous conclusion. 'Nothing's wrong, Severus. But I've been talking to Harry, and I think you should join us for tea. He has something he wants to say to you, something that I think you really need to hear.'

Severus' brow arched in query. 'Hermione, I don't think...,' he began, but then with a sigh, he nodded. He could not deny that Potter and his beloved were close. If he was to ensure her continued happiness, then he would have to accept the fact that Potter would not fade out of his life as he so dearly hoped he would.

Hermione smiled. 'Come on, are you in the middle of something? Or can it be left for a while?'

'I was just looking through the stock levels,' said Severus dismissively. 'It's nothing that can't be done later.' He sighed in resignation. Then, pulling her into his arms, he growled rakishly, 'I expect a reward, pet, for playing nice with Potter.'

Hermione giggled softly before reaching up on her toes to kiss his displeased countenance. 'Don't worry, I'll reward you. Now, come on, before he gets cold feet and decides not to say what he wants to say.'

Severus sighed once more but released his hold on Hermione and followed her up the stairs. His eyes locked on her swaying hips, he allowed his mind to wonder on how he would be rewarded. Thus, when Severus followed Hermione into the sitting room, his eyes held a definite predatory gleam.

Harry, who had been staring intently at the door, had a moment to glimpse the expression before Severus' usual bored and faintly sneering expression fell like a mask over his face. Harry inwardly squirmed. Seeing Snape's overtly sexual perusal of Hermione had felt decidedly uncomfortable. The usual sneering facade was something he was much more comfortable with.

Standing up as they neared, Harry extended his hand. He had had time to think about how he wanted the meeting to proceed. It wasn't going to be easy, but he wanted to make a fresh start, one without the past's lingering effects.

Severus stared at Potter's outstretched hand with a frown in his face. A prod from Hermione forced him to accept it. As he did, Potter spoke.

'Good afternoon, Headmaster Snape. My name is Harry Potter. I'm a friend of Hermione's. It's a pleasure to meet you.'

Severus was completely thrown by the adult and unexpected greeting. Not one to be caught wrong footed, Severus immediately realised the path Potter was taking. Surprised at the maturity behind the move, Severus inclined his head. 'Mister Potter.'

Hermione could see that the men were tense and awkward with no clear way of how to proceed. It was obvious that Severus was waiting for Harry to make the next move. With a loud sigh, she said brightly, 'I'm going to make more tea. I'll be back in a couple of minutes.' She realised that leaving them alone might be the best way to move forward. With her there, they'd both be too awkward to say what needed to be said.

Severus nodded absently. Sitting down on the armchair, he forced himself to politely indicate that Potter retake his seat.

Harry sat down and silence reigned. He drew in a deep breath, and then said, 'I don't know if this is the right thing to say, or the right way to go about this. But, I'm not my father, my mother, or my godfather. I'm me. Harry. I love Hermione; she's the sister I've never had. I'd really like it if you could not see me as an extension of my parents or Sirius, but for who I am as a person.'

Severus nodded. Doing his best to control the illogical resentment that rose in his heart at hearing Potter openly declare his love for Hermione, Severus instead focused on the earnestness that could clearly be read in the young man's mature address. Despite his discomfort in finding himself confronted with Potter in a social situation, Severus acknowledged that James Potter or Sirius Black had never felt the need to apologise.

Snape's silence was rather intimidating, but Harry took it to be a good sign. Snape seemed to be listening, something Harry knew was important if he was to get his point across. 'Sir, I'd like to apologise for everything I've done over the years to make your life and your responsibilities more difficult. And although I'd like to apologise for the behaviour of my parents and Sirius, it isn't really my place to do so. But if it helps, I now know that they were not the blameless, perfect individuals I always thought they were. For Hermione's sake, can you please put our past behind us? Can we try, at least for her sake, to start anew?'

Severus sighed audibly. He was really uncomfortable with having Potter speak like this, but he could see that the boy had given a lot of thought to what he was saying. For Hermione's sake, he could not refuse the boy's clearly honest and earnest gesture. 'My name is Severus, Potter. If we are to let bygones be bygones, then you might as well get used to calling me by my name.'

Harry's face broke into a surprised, pleased and relieved grin. 'Only if you'll call me Harry, sir,' he said smilingly. 'When you call me Potter, I feel like I'm back at Potions class. Not a good memory.'

Severus grimaced. 'Indeed,' he said allowing his face to relax somewhat. 'The less we do to recall the fiasco of your Hogwarts days, the better.'

Harry laughed. 'My thoughts exactly.' Then, drawing all his courage together, he said, 'Thank you, Severus, for allowing me to come meet with Hermione.'

Severus' lips twitched at watching the play of emotions on Potter's face. He had not missed the gathering of strength the boy had needed before saying his given name. Realising, though, that he would now have to do the same, he inwardly grimaced at what he was willing to do for the woman he loved and said, 'You're welcome, Harry. She was keen to re-establish ties. It was safest and easiest to have the meeting here.'

Harry nodded. Silence reigned once again. Harry was feeling much more relaxed now that the hurdle of speaking to Snape, no, Severus, had passed. Searching for a neutral topic to fill the silence until Hermione returned from the kitchen, Harry said, 'You must have a slice of this cake, sir. It's amazingly good.'

Severus' lips twitched again. He inclined his head and reached for Hermione's discarded plate and cut himself a piece. Now that the ordeal of hearing Potter out was over, he was more than ready to be soothed by a slice of Kumarilata's magical cake.

Hermione couldn't believe how well the meeting with Harry had gone. She had worried tremendously that Harry and Severus would not be able to sort out their relationship, but she'd been surprised to note, when she returned to the sitting room, that the two seemed to be seated in perfectly civil silence, demolishing her chocolate cake. Smiling in relief, she, too, cut herself a second slice and used the plate she'd brought with the fresh pot of tea on her tray.

Eventually, replete with cake, the three of them had attempted to make cautious conversation about the changes being made by Kingsley in the Ministry. It was a neutral yet totally absorbing topic, and it allowed both Harry and Severus to relax. Not long after, Severus had excused himself, claiming work, and Harry and she had returned to catching up on all their bits and pieces of news. Harry even listened, awestruck, to Hermione's narration of how she and Severus had helped the Longbottoms.

Indeed, so buoyant was Hermione that when she got a letter from Ron asking her if she would agree to meet him for a meeting, she didn't hesitate in responding. She hoped against hope that it was him trying to apologise for his shoddy behaviour. She'd learned that he was making progress in controlling his inner darkness, and so she agreed to a meeting in Diagon Alley. She needed to go shopping for a special dress robe for the Summer Solstice. The Malfoys had invited Severus and her for a celebration that was, according to Severus, a tradition among the purebloods for a number of years. The shopping excursion, therefore, seemed like the perfect time to meet with Ron. Arranging to meet for a drink at the Leaky Cauldron, Hermione had hoped that the more public setting would encourage the lanky red-head to behave in a more controlled manner.

The meeting, however, did not go to plan. Yes, Ron did apologise, but then, he pulled out his wand and surprised Hermione by casting a spell to reveal if she had been Imperioed.

Hermione was furious. Pulling out her own wand, she hexed him with itchy balls and pustulant boils on his arse. 'You bastard,' she cried. 'How dare you assume that there's something wrong with me for wanting to marry the bravest and best man I know? I hope the boils are especially painful,' she said spitefully.

'Bitch,' yelled Ron, jumping to his feet as the pain of the boils and the itchiness began to drive him crazy, especially because he couldn't do anything about the discomfort in public. 'I was only trying to help. You're a young witch; why you would want to spend your life with the greasy git is beyond me. But now I see that you're as vicious as he is; you deserve each other.'

'Thank you,' said Hermione sardonically. Forcing herself to remain seated despite her great desire to stand up and yell in return, she said coldly, 'I think so too. He is, after all, my soul-mate. If I am like him, it can only be to my advantage.'

When Ron had joined Hermione at the corner table that she occupied at the Leaky Cauldron, many of the patrons had openly stared. To see two known heroes of the magical world was always a treat. Thus, despite Hermione's desire for their meeting to be unobserved and uninteresting, for she had thought, what could be more mundane than two friends having a drink together, the subsequent spell-casting and hexing had garnered much attention. Furious with herself for not telling Severus about this meeting, for she was sure he would have insisted on being there, or as it had been with her meeting with Harry, doing it in a less public place, she willed herself to present a calm and unruffled demeanour. She wanted, more than anything, to rush out of the pub, but she knew that would cause even more of a scene. In a controlled tone of voice, she said frostily, 'Do take yourself off home, Ronald. I'm sure Molly will be more than happy to help you take care of your little problem.'

'Bitch,' said Ron again. He was now almost hopping as the pain was almost unbearable. 'I should never have written to you.'

'No,' said Hermione, with a sigh. 'You should never have assumed that you knew what was best for me. You should never have raised your wand to me without expecting me to retaliate. When you do explain to your family why you are going to be in this present condition for at least twenty-four hours...'

'Twenty-four hours!' interrupted Ron with a cry of horror. 'Merlin, you are a vindictive bitch.'

Hermione laughed sarcastically. She had learned much from Severus, for she sounded a lot like him. 'Think of it as a payback for all the pain and mortification you tried to cause me, Ronald.'

Muttering under his breath in pain and agony, Ron moved as swiftly as he could to Tom's fireplace from where he Flooed back home. It was obvious that he was in too much pain to continue the argument.

Hermione shrugged her shoulders. She knew Molly would never forgive her, but the hex was something that could be undone without too much difficulty. In the meantime, the pain would be an apt punishment for the foolish man. Hermione could not resist a little chuckle. She knew that despite the simplicity of the reversal spell, it required a very precise wand movement, one that Hermione knew Molly could not do easily. Hermione figured that Molly would have to summon Bill or Arthur, and that would result in the whole story coming out. Feeling slightly appeased at the thought of Ron having to explain exactly why Hermione had hexed him, she finished her drink with a slight smirk on her face. Anyone who knew Severus would have been a little startled to see how much she resembled him in that moment.

Hermione couldn't believe Ron's cheek. But she realised that it was too much to expect him to behave like a sensible adult. He'd never been sensible. He'd always acted without thought when his feelings were involved.

Percy had been sitting in another darkened corner when Hermione had arrived. He'd been gearing up his courage to approach the young woman when he saw his brother join her. Percy could only hope that his brother was finally growing up and learning to think, before he saw what happened. Deeply hurt and disgusted with his brother, he sighed before standing up. The time for Percival Weasley to ignore and avoid confrontation was past. He really had to do something.

Moving to Hermione, he did his best to smile reassuringly at the still obviously angry witch. 'Hello, Hermione,' he said mildly.

Hermione's eyebrows rose in a manner clearly copied from Snape.

Percy's own brows rose in surprise, and then, the Gryffindor's face blossomed into a familiar Weasley grin. In a manner that was sure to make the young woman think he was channelling his dead brother, Fred, Percy said cheekily, 'Fancy seeing you here.'

The jovial tone eased Hermione's ire and made her smile. 'I came to do some shopping and arranged to meet Ron. As you saw, that didn't go well.'

'No, indeed. I'm sorry my brother is such a prat.'

Percy looked extremely disappointed in his brother's behaviour, so much so that it looked to Hermione as though he wanted to physically shake some sense into Ronald's thick head.

Hermione smiled. She could well imagine Percy going home to relate the incident to his father. It was obvious now that the story would be narrated with accuracy. Feeling magnanimous and wanting the incident to be forgotten by the still avid audience, Hermione sighed softly and said, 'Why don't you join me for a drink? It'll stop the gossips if I'm seen to be still on good terms with at least one of the Weasleys. We can then just say that it was a spat between friends, nothing major to report as it were.'

Percy nodded. He could immediately see the sense in her decision. 'I'll just be a moment, Hermione,' he said, before returning to his table to retrieve his half pint of ale.

Once he returned, the two Gryffindors fell into a long established discussion of what they had recently been reading. Percy had been one of the few people Hermione had ever been able to discuss books with while a student. He may have been pompous, but he had taken his responsibilities as a prefect and then Head Boy seriously. He had always been happy to help the younger students, especially Gryffindors. During the first months of Hermione's time at Hogwarts, Percy had been a kindly presence who had ensured that she'd found her way around the library. Since then, they'd sporadically met and discussed their reading and their intellectual pursuits. Now, after years of not really having a chance to converse, the two mended their fences and sat down to an interesting half hour of conversation.

Finally though, Percy sighed and looked at his watch. 'I really need to get back to the office, Hermione. It's been wonderful talking to you. I'm really glad we've been able to put the past and my blinkered behaviour behind us.'

Hermione smiled and reached over and hugged Percy warmly. 'I'm glad too,' she said softly. 'It's nice that Voldemort hasn't been able to triumph by destroying our friendship.'

Then, standing up to walk out with Percy, Hermione said thoughtfully, 'I've been thinking. The best way we can ensure that we completely defeat Voldemort's reign is to make peace with the people who opposed us. If we continue to let his belief system prevent us from leaving the past in the past, he'll have won. We can't let that happen.'

Percy nodded. He could see her point of view. Convinced himself that she was right, he impulsively kissed Hermione on the cheek.

Hermione blushed, and then she laughed. All the patrons of the pub were still watching their interaction with interest. 'Give my love to Bill and your father,' said Hermione.

Then, with a last glance, she Apparated home. She had much to tell Severus.

Chapter Twenty-Four: Solstice Celebration

Chapter 24 of 26

Hermione and Severus go to the summer solstice celebration at Malfoy Manor. Steps are taken to bridge the gaps in understanding. Percy Weasley creates a stir.

(i) Thank you everyone for staying with this story until this point. Your kind reviews have meant the world to me. Please do continue to let me know what you think. I really would love hearing your views. It's the lovely reviews I receive that keep me writing.

(ii) The characters and world of Harry Potter belong to J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this. Pity, I could use a bit of loot right about now.

(iii) And last but by no means least, a big thank you to my lovely, amazing beta, Queen_of_Stars. You've been the most amazing source of motivation, and I know that I would have found it much harder to complete this story if it wasn't for your support.

Severus was understandably annoyed when he heard about Ronald's behaviour. Pulling Hermione into his arms, he said chidingly, 'You should never be afraid to tell me about your annoying friends, my love. The worst I can do is yell, and you're used to me yelling.' The dark man smirked down at his pouting lover. 'You know this meeting in the public eye is much worse than my blustering. What if you weren't able to handle him? What if there were some idiot Death Eater sympathisers, or even some fool people who thought you needed to be punished for being with me? You have to realise how precarious your position is, Hermione. Most people are dunderheads, and they will believe all the tripe they hear or read in the papers. You can't take risks. I couldn't survive without you by my side, my love. I know I am a selfish bastard, but you are my life. You must take care.'

Hermione's eyes filled with tears at Severus' confession. She knew how much it cost him to show her his weakness. He, who never spoke of his emotions, was laying himself bare. 'I know, my love,' she said, covering his face with kisses. 'I won't do it again. I just thought...' She sighed in annoyance. 'I just thought Ron would be able to show some level of maturity. Harry was so grown up, I just thought Ron would be too. I won't do it again. I realised as soon as I met up with him that it was a mistake, but I didn't want to walk out immediately. That would have caused even more of a scandal. Can you imagine him running after me, yelling or something?' She laughed in wry amusement. 'At least this way, he looks like the git, and I did have a good natter with Percy.'

At Severus' raised eyebrow, Hermione narrated what happened next with Percy. She was a little surprised to see her lover accept the older boy's behaviour with only a nod of agreement.

At her own look of surprise, Severus explained. 'He's always shown some level of sense. He never jumped to suppositions and wild imaginings, and while he did come to erroneous conclusions, he did the best he could to follow what he thought was the most knowledgeable opinion. He may have made mistakes by placing his faith in the Ministry, but then, if you look at it through his eyes, he placed his faith in the supposedly most well informed institution. I can see how he would now want to put that part of his youth behind him. Dumbledore never shared information; he never allowed the others to know what was being planned. For a young man who wanted something more than promises and words, it would have seemed foolish to go by what an old man said purely on trust. I told Albus repeatedly that he should allow others in the Order, if not myself, to know what was going on, but he couldn't, wouldn't let others know what was going on. Secrets and lies. That's what he fed all of us. No wonder a bright mind that was used to logic and reasoning refused to believe a blundering old man and a group of people who did things solely on his word.'

Hermione nodded. 'Yes, I do see your point. I knew Harry, and so it was easier for me to believe what was being said. But for Percy, it would have been so much harder to place all his trust in a child who had no gift for rational thought, for clear expression. When questioned, Harry would just end up getting angry or speaking irrationally. I think Percy's really changed since the war. He's loosened up a bit, but also, he's become more his own man. He's no longer as wont to suck up to people.'

Severus chuckled darkly. 'And how is sucking up a bad thing, pet? You know how much I enjoy it when you do it to me.'

Hermione giggled. 'Beast. I didn't mean it in that sense.'

'I'm sure you didn't,' purred Severus, drawing her into his arms and allowing his hands to slide down to cup her bottom. 'However, a little demonstration to show how well you've learned your lesson in not doing things without informing me might be useful, don't you think?'

Hermione pouted, but it was more in the way of inciting Severus to take action.

And take action he did. He swooped down to claim her lips in a mind-numbing kiss before hoisting her into his arms as if she weighted nothing more than a feather. Hermione was about to complain and insist he put her down, when she heard him murmur the Featherweight Charm. Hermione giggled.

'What?' asked Severus grumpily. 'Do you want me to put out my back, merely to prove my manliness and strength? I'd much rather I prove those qualities once I have you safely in bed, my pet.'

Hermione giggled again and kissed the tip of his nose. 'I'm just laughing at your romantic streak, my love. I can walk, you know.'

'I know,' growled Severus. 'But I enjoy having you in my arms. I'm just not that far gone in sense to risk my back while partaking of something I enjoy.'

Soon though all levity was forgotten as passion ignited between them. Reaching their bedroom, Severus wasted no time in divesting Hermione of her clothing. He loved her naked body. She was so young, so delectable. It did something to his darker impulses to have her thus, naked, while he was still completely clothed, completely in control. 'On the bed, on your knees, pet,' he growled. He knew she loved it when he took her from behind.

Hermione scrambled onto the bed as fast as she could. She could hear the dark possessiveness in his tone. Heat gushed into her core, and by the time she was arranged the way she knew he wanted her, she was dripping in anticipation.

Severus gave himself a long moment to observe Hermione waiting, exposed and vulnerable on the bed. Her arousal was clearly visible, dripping as it was out of her core. He breathed in deep, allowing the scent of her to etch itself deep into his psyche. He loved the way she smelt. Slowly, still clothed, he moved towards her.

Hermione moaned in anticipation. She was desperate for him to do something, anything. This waiting was driving her crazy. Finally, she felt the bed dip as Severus crawled on to it behind her. Then, she felt him blow across her heated flesh. She gasped as she felt the air stroke her. Then, she felt him lick her. Slowly, with long, lush strokes, he caressed her with his tongue before allowing his nose to press hard against her clitoris. She moaned desperately, 'Oh, God, Severus. Please, please, just fuck me.'

Severus chuckled and his tongue dipped deeper into her. He loved the taste of her, and he knew that the longer he took, the more impatient his beloved became. She was not one for slow love-making. She always seemed to want him, hard and fast. It amazed him. No woman had ever desired him so completely. She didn't need to be coaxed, to be aroused, she just wanted him, all the time.

Hermione groaned in agony as he continued his slow ministrations. 'Can you please, for once, stop mucking around?' she asked twisting and turning on the bed. 'I need you, Severus. Please, just fuck me now.'

'Soon, vixen,' he said, sliding three of his fingers deep into her. 'You know I love to watch you come. Let me pleasure you.'

Hermione just moaned again in response. His three long fingers inside her felt divine, and she nearly exploded as she felt his tongue brush against the tight hole of her arse. 'Oh, God,' she groaned. Severus had never taken her arse, but she'd been reading about anal sex, and she was more than willing to try it. It seemed so illicit, so utterly deviant and therefore utterly delicious.

Severus had been testing Hermione's reaction, but he hadn't expected her to be so amiable to being fucked in the arse. He nearly came with the sound of her obvious delight. 'Are you sure?' he asked, almost disbelieving.

'Yes, oh, God, Severus,' she moaned in response.

Severus growled and thrust his tongue into her waiting hole, while his fingers buried themselves even deeper into her cunt. She was so tight. He could just imagine how she would feel wrapped around his cock.

Hermione could not believe the sensation of having his tongue in her arse. She had never realised she'd enjoy something so much. She arched her back and ground herself against his invasion. She wanted more, much more.

Severus seemed to understand what she wanted. A quick spell was all it took to divest him of his clothes. Then, finally naked, he slid a lone finger into her arse while at the same time plunging balls deep into her cunt.

Hermione groaned. She loved the feeling of him plunging into her, but she'd been anticipating his cock in her arse. She was, to say the least, disappointed. But before she could protest, he was fucking her in a blinding, pounding rhythm. She was almost there, she could feel it. 'I'm going to come,' she gasped, frantic. 'Oh, Severus, bloody, fucking hell.'

Severus groaned and pulled out of her.

Hermione nearly cried as she felt him leave her. She couldn't take anymore of his teasing.

Severus pulled out of her before she could come. His cock was liberally covered with her juices. Not needing any further lubrication, he plunged his cock straight into her arse.

Hermione had just managed to moan a 'What the fuck...' when she felt him thrust into her arse. She screamed loudly at his penetration. She hadn't expected it, and though it hurt, it felt very good. She had never felt so full in her life.

Severus was lost to the sensations of Hermione's tightness completely surrounding him. He could hardly move, she was so snug. Pushing even deeper into her, he began to thrust as far as he could into her. Meanwhile, one hand wormed its way into her cunt, four fingers penetrating her as deeply as he could manage it as his thumb did its best to massage her clit.

Hermione was now screaming with each move he made. She couldn't take it any more. There was just too much sensation. Gasping, Hermione came, a hoarse scream of 'Severus,' on her lips.

Feeling Hermione's muscles contract around him, squeezing with a death grip was all it took to send Severus hurtling over the edge. With a growl, he bit down on her shoulder as his seed pumped out of him. He always seemed to have explosive orgasms with her, but this one seemed beyond even their usual magnificence. Barely able to move, he pulled out of her and collapsed in a heap beside her.

Hermione, too, could hardly move. She had never felt so possessed by him, not even when he had come upon her, silent and invisible in the Hogwarts' library at the start of their relationship. Slowly, when she felt she could move, she rolled onto her side and cuddled against his still-panting body. 'Jesus Christ, Severus,' she said softly, 'that was amazing.'

Severus smirked at her tiredly. 'Glad you approve,' he said, but his voice lacked the will to be sarcastic. Instead, he just sounded smug and completely sated.

Hermione giggled and kissed his shoulder gently. 'I love you so much. Everything you do to me is utterly exquisite.'

Severus rolled onto his back and drew her to lie against him. 'Well,' he said with a satisfied grin, 'I must ensure my young witch has no cause to go looking for a younger, more energetic lover.'

Hermione giggled softly. 'Idiot. A younger man wouldn't know what to do with me. He'd bore me to tears with his twittering. He'd drive me insane with his need for social stimulation, and he would have no idea of what really matters. A younger man, any other man, would never be able to stimulate me with just one look. You don't even have to take your clothes off to make me want you. A word, a smirk and I'm dripping with need.'

Severus merely smiled. He had felt a moment of worry when he had heard what Weasley had told Hermione. He knew he pleased her, but he had never had anything, anyone that was truly his. He couldn't stop himself from worrying that one day Hermione would wake up and realise she was wasting her youth, her power on an old, bitter man who had nothing to offer her but his position as the Headmaster of Hogwarts.

Hermione seemed to read the insecurity that lurked in his eyes. Pushing herself onto her elbows to peer into his eyes, she said softly, 'Look into my eyes, Severus. See yourself as I see you. I don't like you second guessing yourself. You are all I need. All I will ever need.'

Severus was floored by her invitation to look through her mind. He knew she trusted him. Had not the Saxon sex ritual they had performed confirmed it? But to give him access to her mind, to her thoughts, her memories. It was more than he had ever expected. 'My love,' he whispered, pulling her into a ravenous kiss. He didn't need to see into her mind. Her love was shining clearly in the warmth, in the softness of her eyes. Finally, when they drew apart, he stroked her hair and murmured, 'My love, my only love.'

A few days later, Hermione accompanied Severus to the Malfoys' Summer Solstice soiree. She had almost balked at the thought of attending; it would be a mostly pureblood gathering with all the purebloods families and their descendents being sent an invitation as was customary, but for Severus' sake, she attended.

Severus as a half-blood had always been a part of pureblood gathering, for his mother, despite marrying a Muggle, had, of course, been a part of the Prince family. Her parents may have disowned her, but for gatherings such as this, even if Eileen had refused to attend, Severus' participation was still expected. It was the way things worked. And Eileen, no matter her faults, had made it a point to send him to the gatherings. It was his birthright; even Tobias' worst rages had not stopped her making sure her son had claimed his place in the world she had been forced to leave behind. It was only through events such as this that he had come to meet his distant magical cousins, his snobbish grandparents and the rest of his clan. They may not have liked him, they may not have acknowledged the skinny boy in mismatched clothes, but once his magical power had started the manifest, and it had by the time he was very young, they had welcomed him for his obvious future potential. Now, Severus mused his family's long-term view had paid off. They didn't have to pretend to suddenly learn of his existence. They could bask in their connection with the double agent and current Headmaster of Hogwarts.

Hermione, despite her doubts, did her best to squash her fears. She hadn't forgotten the words of the sorting hat's song. She had vowed to herself then, even before hearing the prophecy that had so changed her life, to help inter-house unity. The war had taught them all of the importance of bridging their differences. She was Severus' fiancée, his future wife; she would make sure the Slytherins realised that she was proud to join them. She had heard enough and read enough of Muggle-born arrogance and prejudice to realise that the fault lay on both sides of the divide. She was not going to turn Severus away from people who had, after all, stood by him. She could not forget that, for all their faults, they had been true friends to Severus. He may have spied on them, betrayed them, but they had forgiven him, for they had found his cunning a move in keeping with their value system. If he had been a Gryffindor and turned against other Gryffindors, Hermione knew members of her own house would never have been able to be so magnanimous. They would have crucified him without a thought or an iota of guilt.

The summer solstice party at the Malfoys had been a long standing tradition. Neville had been the first to tell Hermione about it when she had asked him in her third year how he had spent his summer. He had said then that, for many years, he had still attended with his grandmother, because with Death Eaters locked up in Azkaban, Gran had felt that not attending would have allowed purebloods like the Malfoys to show their mastery over the people they considered Traitors to the old ways like the Longbottoms. So Hermione expected that she would probably know at least see some of her friends there. However, what she had not expected to find, on arrival, was Percy, Bill and Fleur Weasley. She gaped in shock at the sight of the Weasley trio standing slightly apart near the entrance, as though they were waiting for her and Severus before joining the throng in the Malfoy gardens.

Hermione could not stop herself from reaching out to clasp the hand Percy extended towards her. 'What are you doing here?' she asked in amazement. She knew that no Weasley had attended a Malfoy solstice party in decades.

Percy smiled tightly. 'I spoke to Bill, and he feels as I do. We've allowed the bad blood to continue for long enough. If my parents' generation can't put the past behind them, that's their problem. But we aren't them. We can see the need to mend our fences. So Bill spoke to Fleur, who agrees wholeheartedly with patching things up. So here we are. We were waiting for backup really. I knew having you and Snape would make things go easier. It's going to be interesting as it is.'

Hermione laughed and hugged Percy. Then turning, she hugged Fleur and Bill as well. 'I'm glad to have you here. Now they'll be too busy gaping at you lot to notice me. I was terrified to come, though Severus keeps saying I'm just over-reacting. I can't forget though that I was tortured by Bella in their drawing-room.'

Bill nodded his head in understanding. But he knew that Severus would have not brought Hermione with him if he had, even for a moment, doubted Hermione's ability to fit in, to be comfortable and to shine. 'Trust Severus,' said Bill gently. 'He'll never let anything or anyone cause you pain.'

'I know,' said Hermione, her eyes filled with love as she looked at Severus who was quietly speaking to Percy and Fleur. 'Besides, I know my duty. As the future wife of the Headmaster, I must learn to be impartial. To look at all my students equally, to know them all to the best of their ability.'

'That's why you're such a good teacher,' said Bill with a grin. 'You really care about the little monsters.'

The two laughed. All of the staff seemed to have their own names for their students. Severus had always called them 'dunderheads,' while Bill's chosen name seemed to be 'monsters'. Then, linking arms with Bill, Hermione followed Fleur, who was being led in by Severus, to the arched entrance-way of the rose garden. Percy followed alone.

Narcissa Malfoy's eyes widened at the sight of the approaching Weasley wife on Severus' arm. But good manners insisted that she greet Fleur graciously.

Lucius, though, could not resist raising an eyebrow at his old friend in query. This the Malfoys had not foreseen. He was waiting for the official introductions and greetings to conclude so he could find out what was going on.

Next in line were Bill and Hermione. Narcissa continued to smile graciously, but inside, her mind was buzzing with questions. Had Severus engineered this meeting? What did it mean for the family feud? How was she supposed to behave after this evening? What were the political connotations? Were they here merely as Hogwarts' representatives or as Weasley emissaries? Some of those questions were answered, however, by the presence of Percy. He did not work for Hogwarts. He was obviously present in a private capacity as a Weasley. Musing at the interesting development and what it all would mean, Narcissa tried her best to be as gracious as possible. Indeed, realising that there wasn't anyone behind Percy in the receiving line, she did not release his hand after he had bowed so correctly over hers. Instead, with a glance at Lucius, who was speaking to Severus and Bill, she said, 'Come, cousin Percival, let me introduce you to some of the people I'm sure you don't know. I think we can safely assume my hostess duties can rest for a moment or two.'

Percy inclined his head graciously. He had not known what kind of reception their arrival would arouse, but he was glad that the Malfoys, too, were doing their best to be inviting. It could have got rather unpleasant if they had not accepted their presence at the soiree.

There was a moment of shocked surprise on many a face as Narcissa was led into the garden by Percy. But soon, the shocked silence was replaced by excited chatter. They had made, by any stretch of the imagination, a grand entrance.

Narcissa smirked at the glances being thrown her way. She looked up into Percy's eyes, to see the redhead wearing a similarly amused look. In that instance, as the two shared a look of irony at the crowds' reaction, an unexpected bond was formed. She had never thought to have anything in common with the Blood Traitors; she tolerated the Mudblood because she seemed to make Severus happy, but the intelligence she saw in Percival's eyes amazed her. They were in no way naïve or clueless. She suddenly realised that, despite the gulf that separated them, they shared the same blood.

'Is this a clear statement of your political aspirations?' asked Narcissa frankly. She was trying to understand what was going on.

Percy looked thoughtful for a moment. 'It's a start for how I want the future to be,' he replied truthfully.

Narcissa hadn't expected such an honest reply. A Slytherin would not have offered one to her so frank a question. But in truth she realised that wasn't really sure what she had expected. But she knew she was seeing the start of a phenomenon.

Percy could clearly see Narcissa's surprise. She was hiding it well, and no one else would have noticed it. But he was standing right next to her. He could not fail to see the way her eyes reflected the thoughts rushing through her mind. Turning so that his back was blocking the crowds' view of them, he said kindly, 'Let me tell you something about myself. I've always been a loner and have never truly had a friend. My family have never understood me. Neither have any of my housemates. Even my girlfriend, Penelope ditched me as soon as we left Hogwarts. Everyone around me has always seen me as a priggish bore. I wanted so much to be understood, to be valued, to be seen for who I was. It seemed like it was an impossible dream. But then, despite all my actions, all my misguided thoughts, I realised something. I did have a friend, a friend who had stood by me through thick and thin. That person is Hermione. She has from the first been my friend because of a small kindness that I showed to her when she was a first-year. Even when I was a fool and a berk, she did not abandon me. Even when I was a pompous arse, she did not fail to remember me at holidays and on my birthday. That's true friendship. She made me realise that it was our actions as much as Riddle's that caused the last war. Without communication, Riddle's destruction will have achieved nothing. The problems, the fears have not gone away just because Riddle was defeated and the Death Eaters sent to Azkaban. I lost a brother. I do not want to lose another a few years down the road.'

Narcissa was shocked into silence. She could only listen. She had never expected to hear anything of this nature, ever.

Percy seemed to have given his speech a lot of thought. The silence Narcissa was maintaining did not seem to disconcert him. Indeed, it was helping him get everything he had wanted to say out in the open. 'We won. You lost. Big deal. What's more important is that people I loved, cared about, died. The future of the magical world is more important than our collective hates, fears and need for retribution. I don't want to see what happened in my youth, recur again for my children. I don't want ignorance and scaremongering to lead to war. I'm willing to do whatever it takes to ensure we keep the lines of communication open. No bigot is going to destroy this hard-won peace. If that means I as a Weasley need to attend a Malfoy home and speak to a Black, then by Merlin, I shall do so.'

Bill and Severus were having a similar conversation with Lucius. Hermione and Fleur had quietly stepped aside as they saw Lucius engage their men in conversation. Hermione still felt uncomfortable in the Malfoy patriarch's presence. Moreover, she knew that it would be better for Bill to extend the hand of friendship to the former Death Eater without too much of an audience. She was so worried. Looking at Fleur, who was trying to do her best to appear nonchalant and perfectly at ease, she asked softly, 'Are we doing the right thing?'

Fleur nodded. 'It iz for ze best, 'Ermione. We are one family. It iz foolish to let this division continue. It iz not good for ze Malfoyz and it iz not good for ze Weasleys. I don't want my children to be born into a world that iz still divided.'

Chapter Twenty-Five: Summer Solstice

Chapter 25 of 26

The Summer Solstice is a time for renewing vows of love, peace, prosperity and abundance. Old Magics are especially strong.

(i) Thank you everyone for staying with this story until this point. Your kind reviews have meant the world to me. Please do continue to let me know what you think. I really would love hearing your views. It's the lovely reviews I receive that keep me writing.

(ii) The characters and world of Harry Potter belong to J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this. Pity, I could use a bit of loot right about now.

(iii) And last but by no means least, a big thank you to my lovely, amazing beta, Queen_of_Stars. You've been the most amazing source of motivation and I know that I would have found it much harder to complete this story if it wasn't for your support.

Narcissa had been pleasantly surprised by Percival Weasley's obviously thought out speech. She acknowledged that what he was trying to say, however much it displeased her, was unfortunately correct. She and her family had suffered greatly following the fall of the Dark Lord. She and Lucius had managed to avoid Azkaban, but they had paid through their noses for the privilege of continuing to occupy their ancestral home. Their fortune in stocks, bonds and ready cash was in ruins, and other than for the property, which was entailed magically to their descendants and therefore held in trust for the Malfoy bloodline, they had lost almost everything. *Thank goodness*, thought Narcissa, *that the Potter brat had inherited the Black home, or that too would have been taken away by the hungry Ministry to pay for all the damages caused by the war. Everything that had been owned by Bella and the Lestranges was gone, as was almost everything that had once belonged to proud families like the Yaxleys, the Averys and the Notts. Many, many purebloods had been reduced to the level of paupers. They had their land, their homes, but they had no money to pay for upkeep.*

Indeed, things had become so bad for so many that this summer solstice, she had decided with her sister Andromeda and old Augusta Longbottom to perform special rites for prosperity and abundance. It was unacceptable that children from old families were unable to afford a Hogwarts' education. The school could, after all, only take in so many charity cases; the rest would then be denied entrance because usually the charity cases were half bloods and Muggle-borns. They were the ones that needed some form of education. Purebloods could, or so the argument went, be educated at home.

Thus, Narcissa realised that having Percival come to her now was a blessing in disguise. He would be able to help the pureblood cause. He would understand the need for children to be educated at Hogwarts. He would want for the purebloods to not be reduced to abject poverty. No good would come if they were lorded over by Muggle-borns and half bloods; that would only help to strengthen the position of people who favoured the Dark Lord's political message.

Taking a deep sigh, Narcissa finally spoke. 'Cousin...,' she sighed and went on, 'you're right. More than you know. I'm ashamed to say that Lucius and I were too proud to make the first move. You humble me with your willingness to put the future of the magical population of Britain above your own pride and position. I thank you graciously for attending this evening. I know my husband will be as willing to renew our connections as I am.'

Percy smiled in relief. He had been hoping for this, but no one understood better than he did how arrogance affected rational behaviour. It had taken him a long time to swallow his pride and make up with his family, even when he had realised, almost as soon as he had left his family home, what an error he had made. It had, indeed, taken the war and the destruction of all he cared about before he had returned to fight for his family. He could never forgive himself for the loss of Fred. If only he had come home earlier, if only he had made up sooner, then perhaps he could have avoided his brother's death, or at least, spent more time with the scallywag before he was taken forever from their midst. But the past was the past. It was the future that now mattered, the future he had sworn to Fred that he would protect. He had told Fred, when he had gone to visit his tomb one afternoon, that he would do all he could to ensure that children would grow up to a world of laughter, where jokes, pranks and mirth had space to exist.

Patting Narcissa's hand that lay on his arm, he said gently, 'Thank you, cousin. It is good to be united in our effort to see in a better and brighter world for our children. I knew I could rely on you to perceive the longer view. I apologise that my mother and younger siblings are still not as aware of what needs to be done. Dad agrees, and would have been here, but he did not want to abandon mum. She is still not fully back to normal. The war did things to her that are still taking time to heal.'

Narcissa nodded her head. Just as gently as Percy, she asked, 'Dark magic residue?'

Percy sighed. 'Yes, the Darkness is very strong in Mum, Ron and Ginny. George is over the worst, I think, but Mum, Ron and Ginny will take time to come to grips with the change to their magic. It's hard when you don't really believe it's happened.'

Narcissa inclined her head in agreement. She could never forget how the first kill Bella had made had altered her beyond recognition. Bella, too, had refused to understand the power of Dark magic over her. She had exulted in her alteration. Her sister's jovial and warm laughter had turned cackling and shrewish. Her smile that had once been loving and gracious had turned sultry and cruel. Indeed, every aspect of Bella had been transformed after her first kill, and the more she had used the Unforgivables, the more she had descended into the madness of Dark Magic.

Percy glanced over at his brother Bill. He could see that the conversation Severus, Bill and Lucius were having was coming to an end as well. Bill looked relaxed and Severus' eyes were twinkling, despite his usual stoic expression. 'Perhaps we should join the others?' enquired Percy politely.

Narcissa turned to look at her husband, and their eyes met. A silent communication later, Narcissa nodded. 'Yes, I think that would be a good idea.' Then, turning to look directly at Percy, she said cautiously, 'I think it would be good if you called me Cissy. It is what family usually calls me.'

Percy grinned. In that instance, there was no mistaking the resemblance he shared with Bill or indeed the twins. 'Then, you must call me Percy. Everyone does. The only one who has ever called me Percival is mum, and that's when I'm in big trouble.'

Narcissa laughed. She liked the relaxed charm and intelligence of Percy Weasley. She had not expected anything worth liking; she had thought it would be purely a political and social relationship. *Now*, she thought, *with time, that he could grow to be something more than a mere acquaintance.*

Lucius Malfoy was not usually taken aback. He was known for his ability to anticipate the twists and turns of the political climate. To have the Weasleys make such a public acknowledgement of their desire to mend the long standing family vendetta had come as a complete surprise. The Weasleys were on the winning side, after all: they didn't need the Malfoys, but the Malfoys needed them. However, listening to William explain why he and his brother had attended the traditional solstice gathering was the biggest revelation. It was clear that the young men had given a lot of thought to the position of the purebloods. They wanted to change the world, and they realised that further antagonising and persecuting those who had been on the losing side was detrimental to the world they wished to create. It was bold, it was insightful, and it was much more magnanimous than Lucius had ever expected these Gryffindors to be. This was not a politically motivated stunt; this was genuine altruism. It moved the Slytherin more than he was willing to admit. These were allies who truly cared about the future of Magical Britain. These were men who, like him, were willing to do whatever it took to ensure a prosperous future for their children and families. He himself had joined the Dark Lord for the very same reason. Riddle, Voldemort, had promised a secure future for purebloods. Lucius had believed the megalomaniac because he had not seen a better option. Dumbledore had been quick to ignore and turn away all Slytherins because he felt they were tainted by association with Dark Magic. The Ministry had and still was a corrupt, foul and totally useless institution. In this dismal situation, Voldemort seemed like the best bet. He had a vision, a plan. It was more than anyone else had.

Epilogue or Fertility and Prosperity

Chapter 26 of 26

The ring that Severus gave Hermione reveals its two final precious gifts: fertility and prosperity. The prophecy is fulfilled.

The union of Hermione and Severus brings forth a new era in both magical education in Hogwarts and as well as the magical world in general.

Epilogue or Fertility and Prosperity

(i) Thank you, everyone, for staying with the story until now. Your kind reviews have meant the world to me. Please do continue to let me know what you think. I really would love to hear what you think of the conclusion.

(ii) The characters and world of Harry Potter belong to J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this. Pity, I could use a bit of loot right about now.

(iii) And last but by no means least, a big thank you to my lovely, amazing beta, Queen_of_Stars. You've been the most amazing source of motivation, and I know that I would have found it much harder to complete this story if it wasn't for your support.

Once the Weasleys, Severus and Hermione had joined the Longbottoms in the garden, Lucius and Narcissa slipped away for their own private discussion. They had been planning a Solstice ritual, but they had originally prepared on only including women from the pureblood families, so this show of support from the victors of the war required a rethinking of their arrangements. While moving arm in arm through the crowd, the couple tried to decide how to play this new hand they had been dealt.

'I'm not sure what to do about the prosperity rite, Lucius,' said Narcissa quietly. 'Thank goodness I've only spoken to Augusta and Andromeda. Perhaps I should include Fleur and Hermione to join our magical ritual? They may not be pureblood, but they are known to be strong magically. It will also be politically significant. What do you think, Lucius?'

Lucius sighed. 'I do not know, my love. How many witches do you need to strengthen your spell casting?'

'Three witches is a good number, and that's what I had planned on using. If we were to include more, then possibly four, one each to call the quarters, although seven is also a very potent number.' Narcissa, too, sighed. 'We could only include Hermione, but that would seem to be too much like sucking up. If we had seven, then it wouldn't be so obvious.'

'It is up to you entirely, my dear,' said Lucius gently. 'You are going to be the priestess for this circle. I only know that we must make use of this opportunity.'

'I know,' said Narcissa. 'I wish Minerva McGonagall were here. She's so strong magically that having her would almost ensure my circle would be potent. Now, I'm not sure who to include for numbers six and seven.'

Lucius sighed and looked around the garden that was still buzzing with whispered conversations and glances at the latest arrivals. He did not want to miss this opportunity of showing the wizarding world that he had not lost his place in society just because he had come out on the losing side of the war. He and Narcissa looked at each other as if the answers they desired lay in each others' eyes before glancing around the gathering once more. Finally, Lucius turned to his wife and said, 'Perhaps you could include the young Misses Bones and Abbott. They were both in the so-called DA, weren't they? Including Bones would be our way of acknowledging the strength of her aunt. Having Abbott would please Augusta as she is supposedly seeing the young Longbottom.'

Narcissa smiled tightly, but gratefully at her husband. She disliked appearing to pander to the winners of the war. However, she was capable of seeing the reasons for Lucius' suggestions. 'Mm....,' she mused while looking over the crowd again. 'It is true that they are both young, but they have proved themselves in battle. They are both strong, and not being from Gryffindor makes them much more likely to be able to be seen as almost neutral members of the DA. You've always been good at seeing the more far-reaching repercussions of our actions, my love.'

Lucius grimaced darkly. 'Not good enough, my pet. If I was, I would have tried harder to avoid getting involved with the Dark Lord. If only I had taken some of Severus' quietly voiced suggestions more seriously. He tried to make me cross over; I can see that now. He couldn't speak openly, but I completely missed what he was hinting at. If I had, perhaps I could have spied alongside him and not be seen as such a blackguard.'

Narcissa reached out and squeezed her husband's hand. She knew how much he tortured himself on not reading the political climate before it was too late. 'At least we didn't fight in the final confrontation. We openly did nothing to aid the Dark Lord, and I lied to save Potter. They can't forget that. When it mattered, we didn't put all of our efforts to aid the mad man. That counts for something, my love. I wouldn't have had the strength to lie to him if I didn't know that you would stand by me no matter what happened.'

The couple shared a glance filled with love and understanding. They had been each others' confidants for a long time and had seen each other through the ups and downs of their life. Then, Narcissa squeezed her husband's hand once more and stepped away from the buffet table to begin her mingling through the crowd. She was on a mission to speak with the six women chosen to perform the prosperity ritual.

No one could have imagined the far reaching changes attending a simple party could bring. The summer solstice celebrations had changed the face of Magical Britain. For the first time, Hermione and Fleur met Narcissa on equal footing. The three witches had, during their preparatory conversations, realised that they truly were united in their vision for the future. Moreover, the summer solstice celebrations became the start of a true coven. For the first time, the seven women realised that they had sisters who wanted the same thing. Peace, prosperity, happiness, but more, a safe environment to bring up their children and grandchildren.

After the ritual had been performed and energy raised to praise both Father Sun and the Mother Goddess in her aspect of fertility deity, the women slipped away for a quiet grounding and bonding exercise. Hermione, who had never really worked in a coven before this, had a million questions to ask the older witches. Fleur, Hannah and Susan smiled; they had, of course, heard stories of older family members being part of covens, of performing such magic. But as Hermione's eyes shone in brilliant eagerness, as she begged to be given reading material to understand the power of women's magic and coven magical practices, a bond was born between the women. Andromeda, Augusta and Narcissa looked over the young women's heads and smiled. Despite their outward differences, they could see that here was a young woman who was keen to understand and celebrate the old ways. For too long, covens had been something practiced by older witches, something done in secret with only three or four women from the same family. This coven, consisting of women from different families and persuasions, was a far cry from the usual norm. Indeed, it had therefore provided more than the usual power because so much untapped potential had become a part of the magical workings.

There was something about being united in a common cause that forged a deep bond between the seven. They may have been on opposite sides with different views, but their goals were the same. In keeping with Hermione's determination to see Hogwarts united, before leaving, she asked the older women if they were willing to form a real, practicing coven that could meet on the eight Sabbaths and other occasions to venerate the Mother. A large practicing coven of this nature had not been found in Britain in many a decade. It would be a bringing back of older, more traditional practices.

Augusta immediately agreed. Not to be outdone, Narcissa, too, agreed. She said she would be delighted to work towards a brighter future.

Once the coven had begun to meet and practice, more changes trickled down to the community. For example, Narcissa, as the wife of a Death Eater, had known more than most about handling Dark Magical residue. It was she who taught Hermione and Fleur about the benefits of Herbology in curing the worst of the effects of casting Dark spells. Getting Molly, Ginny and others to work on the reconstruction efforts to the greenhouses at Hogwarts changed their demeanour in a matter of weeks. The earth was a kind and generous receptacle, for it did not care what type of magic was poured into it; it would take it all, for it grew a diverse range of plants. Nature wasn't restricted to what it could grow with the right effort. From the deadly to the life giving, all plants required love, and they all provided the Herbologist or gardener peace of mind, forgiveness and above all, control. Plants took time to grow, time that allowed for contemplation, meditation and grounding.

The next year saw Hermione return as not just a Teaching Assistant but also as a Charms Apprentice. She had decided that she would begin with her dear Professor Flitwick, for it was the easiest subject for her to master. She wanted to settle into something easy to handle since she was also working to understand women's magic and coven practice at the same time.

The year sped by. Hermione and Severus became more open in their relationship and became public in announcing that they were now living together. There was an uproar in the press, and Rita Skeeter was as vindictive as they had expected her to be. But when the couple announced that they had moved in together in keeping with modern Muggle practices, there was a slight pause in the vitriol. The *Prophet* did not, after all, want to appear supremacist towards the Muggle-born witch and heroine when they knew how much that would hurt their sales figures. Indeed, when the couple announced their planned wedding date for the following Summer Solstice, there were smiles and acknowledgements from people who had been a part of the previous summer's magical workings.

Hermione and Severus had planned to have a small and private summer wedding. However, when they revealed, under some pressure from Minerva, that they wanted to get married on the Summer Solstice, Narcissa Malfoy stepped in with an offer for the Malfoys to host the wedding at their annual Solstice party. Hermione and Severus both wanted to refuse, Hermione because she didn't want a big wedding and Severus because he knew Hermione wanted something small and private, but the political connotations of refusing would have been far-reaching. Moreover, since the women had formed their coven and Narcissa's suggestions had helped Molly and Ginny Weasley so much, it seemed churlish to refuse. So, according to Severus' desire, an archaic hand-fasting was planned. In keeping with the couple's deep love of the old customs, and indeed, the Malfoys' love of traditional practices, a ceremony rarely used and only practiced by the most traditional of purebloods was selected.

The ritual bound the couple in body and soul. It was only for the brave, for if the couple was not compatible, the vows were such that they could never be broken. Most couples today married in a much less binding manner. But Hermione said earnestly to Fleur, 'Nothing will tear us apart.' Indeed, in her mind, there was no doubt that they were ideally matched. The ritual she had performed for Severus' birthday proved as much.

Narcissa and Lucius, of course, agreed, for they, too, had used the same hand-fasting for their marriage vows. But then, the senior Malfoys had been revealed to be soul-mates. It was not uncommon for soul-mates to be tied to one another through eternity. As Narcissa succinctly stated, 'What does it matter to be bound to one's soul-mate for one solitary life on this earthly realm for this one incarnation when it is likely that our entire destinies are entwined?'

The wedding vows themselves were exchanged at a small, intimate ceremony at dawn of the Summer Solstice. Minerva and Kingsley stood in place of Severus' sponsors and parents, while Lucius and Narcissa stood in for Hermione. As the vows were exchanged, a golden glow surrounded the couple. The ring had given them its second blessing of eternal fidelity.

The happy couple were blessed with love, fidelity, fertility and prosperity. They lived a long and happy life together. They had three wonderful children: two girls and a boy named Sophia Minerva, Leila Ariadne and Alexander Severus. They, too, went on to be outstanding members of the wizarding world. Sophia became, in time, the Minister for Magic and the first woman of noted mixed blood heritage to hold that august position. Leila followed her parents into the realm of Potions and research and became the youngest Potions mistress in the world. She gained her title at the tender age of nineteen, just two years after officially graduating from Hogwarts. Her work specialised in magical DNA research. She pioneered potions that allowed for the alteration and infusion of DNA cells with remedial therapy so that magical diseases could be cured at the molecular level. Alexander, on the other hand, followed his parents into teaching and succeeded his father as Headmaster of Hogwarts.

In fact, it was a standing joke in the family that Severus only retired because Alexander was growing impatient to take over. In truth, Severus retired so that he could spend the prime of his life with his still beautiful Hermione. They had always wanted to travel the world and research other forms of magic.

However, until that time, Hogwarts prospered under Severus' leadership. He made sure that it became the beacon of learning for magical studies in the Western world. It allowed for much inter-disciplinary research methodology and promoted a wide range of esoteric and global magical practices. The ties that Severus made with institutions of learning in China, India and Central America revolutionised thinking throughout the wizarding world.

Hermione did, indeed, complete her apprenticeship with Flitwick, and then she went on to study with Minerva followed by Vector and finally Poppy. She became an influential speaker and, in time, a prominent member of the Wizengamot. Hermione was determined that there would be more done to ensure Muggle-born and pureblood understanding. Laws were introduced to allow for Muggle-borns to be twined for a time with pureblood families so that children learned from an early age the ways of behaviour and thinking of the world they were to be a part of. Similarly, the arrangement allowed for pureblood families to understand the concerns of Muggles and Muggle-born children. Hermione's proposals had, of course, been ridiculed by all sides of the divide, but she eventually was allowed to try out the concept with four select Muggle-born children of magical ability. Harry Potter and his spouse, the former Pansy Parkinson, were the first family who volunteered to be part of the scheme. They were quickly followed by Draco Malfoy and his wife Astoria, formerly Greengrass; Padma Patil, who had gone on to marry Theodore Nott; and Neville Longbottom who had married his beloved Hannah Abbott. Because so many prominent members of society agreed to participate in the programme, it brought attention to the scheme and helped bring about greater understanding and sensitivity. Moreover, Hermione became, in her own right, as well as in collaboration with Severus, a well-known researcher and writer. Together with Severus, she revolutionised the teaching of Hogwarts and magical education in Europe, bringing Asian and Eastern knowledge, especially in the arts of Healing, Potions, and domestic and culinary magic, into Western usage.