

A Time for Goodbyes

by gersknightlady

On her last night at Hogwarts, Hermione goes to say goodbye to her grumpy, cruel Potions professor.

Chapter 1: Leaving Hogwarts

Chapter 1 of 20

On her last night at Hogwarts, Hermione goes to say goodbye to her grumpy, cruel Potions professor.

I thought of this story while trying to sleep one night. It kept at me, the next day, until I had scribbled it all on paper. I hope you enjoy it. There will be more chapters from time to time.

After the first chapter, this story becomes very adult.



Hermione slipped down the stairs to the dungeon, leaving the others to enjoy the end of the Leaving Dinner.

She was packed and ready to leave Hogwarts. A new life and new possibilities were stretched out before her. She was excited and terrified at the same time. As the evening of celebration had wound down, she had found that one person was missing. Yet, he was the one person who she wanted to make sure to say goodbye to. So she had sneaked away and headed for the dungeons.

She stood before the rough, wooden door and took a deep breath. It was likely that he would toss her out on her ear. She was sure he was probably partying in his own way...overjoyed to see the golden three leaving Hogwarts for good...if he was capable of feeling any joy, and she really wasn't sure he was. Having survived the war, Hermione had been surprised that he had returned to Hogwarts and continued teaching. He'd been just as nasty and terse with his students as always.

She pushed open the classroom door. Its dark, cavernous depths made her feel sad. Despite the challenges of having Snape for a teacher, she had learned a great deal here. She could see that a candle flickered in the slightly open door of his office. She went to the door and knocked.

"Come," came a snarl.

Hermione took another deep breath and pushed the door open. She slipped into the room, closing the door quietly behind her.

He was there bent over a stack of papers. She knew grading was done, so she assumed he was working on a personal project or some sort of year-end report.

He glanced at her and snarled, "Did you forget something, Miss Granger?"

She shook her head. "I did not see you at the dinner, and I wanted to say goodbye."

He arched an eyebrow at her and frowned. "Why would you want to do that? I have never been nice to you in any way. I would think this would be the last place you would want to think of ever again." He placed his quill into the inkwell on his desk and sat back in his chair.

Hermione moved forward. "Despite the fact that you have hated my friends and me all these years, I am rather fond of this classroom."

"But not its teacher," he growled.

"On the contrary, sir. I respect you immensely. You proved yourself over and over. You may not have liked us, but that did not stop you from nearly dying to help us kill Tom." No one said Voldemort anymore. Riddle was now known as Tom. No respect was given his chosen name at all.

Snape reached for his quill again. "Well, goodbye then, Miss Granger." He started to write on the parchment before him.

Hermione moved forward and stilled his hand with her own. "I am not finished, sir."

Snape froze at her touch. No one had touched him gently in years, and the warmth of her hand spread quickly up his arm and made his heart beat faster. He closed his eyes to commit her touch to memory.

Hermione was fascinated with the look on his face, and she tightened her grip.

"Sir?" she whispered.

His eyes snapped open, horrified that she had caught him "feeling."

He moved to stand, planning to snatch his hand away from her, but she turned her hand and gripped his fingers tightly. She moved quickly and slipped an arm around his narrow waist. He found himself enveloped in her arms. Her cheek was pressed against his chest, and her bushy hair was tickling his nose.

"Miss Granger, what are you doing?" His voice came out ragged.

"Giving you a hug," she said, though her voice was deep with emotion.

"This is highly inappropriate," he told her. But he did not make any effort to move away.

She laughed, and her laughter washed over him like a gentle spring breeze. He closed his eyes again. He forced himself to not groan out loud with pleasure.

"Sir, I'm nearly 19 and leaving tomorrow. I may never see you again. I do not think this so inappropriate for a man who saved my life on many occasions."

"It was not personal," he stated flatly. "I did it for Albus."

"I know. He was like a father to you, wasn't he?"

"Yes." He closed his eyes again as he breathed in the scent of her shampoo...peaches and honey he thought. He flicked his hand at the door and locked and warded it. It would not do for Minerva to find him in this position, but he could no more move away from this young woman than he could breathe on the moon.

"Say what you came to say," he said, allowing his hand to caress her hair.

Hermione's eyes opened wide at the gentle touch. She had seen before that he was starved for attention, and she found such a cathartic feeling at being able to provide this for him. She tightened her grip.

"I wanted to tell you that, despite the fact that you appeared to hate us and treated us with such disdain over the years, I learned more from you than from any other teacher. You opened my mind to great possibilities, and I wanted you to know how much I appreciate it."

Snape felt his mouth drop open. He'd been horrid to the little witch who was now holding tightly to him. He placed two fingers under her chin and tipped her head up so he could look into her eyes. When had she grown into a woman? He saw strength and certainty in her eyes. Power, magical and of mind, emanated from her.

"Miss Granger." His voice was husky, and his eyes were unable to move away from the soft lips that were so close. He lowered his head...then she gasped.

He stumbled back toward his chair, trying to disengage from her tight grip. He fell into his chair and suddenly found his lap full of witch. She had tightened her grip on him.

"Please, Severus. I was just surprised. Don't push me away," she pleaded. "I need this as much as you do."

Gobsmacked at hearing his given name on her lips, he tried to relax his body, but it was tight, and his muscles had contracted into hard cords. This was wrong; this was highly inappropriate, and yet he wanted to hold her as much as she wanted to be held.

Her fingers touched his cheek. "Just listen to what I have to say, and I'll go."

The idea of saying goodbye to this woman, now, made his heart heavy. Why had he never tried to cultivate the immense mind of this witch? There were so many lost opportunities.

"Say what you came to say." The old bitterness tried to creep back into his voice, but he squashed it.

"As I said, you gave me so much knowledge, and you pushed me to be better than I was. I have decided to pursue a Potions career."

Her fingers were sliding down to his neck, and it took him a few seconds to realize what she had said.

"I am sure that you will do a brilliant job, Miss Granger." His fingers were tangled in her hair. It didn't feel bushy; it was soft and silky.

"I am going to Cambridge. It's partly to make my parents happy and get a Muggle degree. But they also have a magical program for Potions hidden there in the University as I'm sure you are aware of."

"Yes, I took a few summer courses there when I was much younger. Tell Marston you were a student of mine. I know he is still there, though close to retirement."

Hermione looked into his face. Their noses were only inches apart.

"I want an apprenticeship when I am done there. I was wondering if you would recommend someone to go to, Severus."

His name on her lips sounded amazing; his name had always been harsh and cruel to his ears.

"Miss Gran..."

"Hermione," she pleaded. He swallowed, and she watched his Adams apple bob in his throat. God, when had he become so sexy? His voice was doing things to her she hadn't thought possible.

"Hermione," he whispered, and she closed her eyes. He had to clear his voice to speak; the sexual tension between them was ripe in the air. "I would be honored if you would return here to me for an apprenticeship."

Her eyes opened wide, and he saw that she was shocked, surprised, and relieved.

"Really!" she squealed, wiggling in his lap.

He forced his body not to respond.

"Really," he assured her. His lips quirked up into a smile. The radiant smile she was giving him made his year. He was starting to relax.

She stared at his mouth.

"Contrary to all belief, Hermione, I do know how to smile." A deep chuckle slid from his throat, rumbling through her.

"Oh, Merlin, I wish I wasn't leaving now."

He wished she wasn't leaving either. "Promise you will come back," he begged. The shame of his raw emotion made him go pale.

Hermione felt tears sting her eyes at his sudden vulnerability. She hid her face in the crook of his neck. "I promise," she said, losing her heart to this man. "You promise not to get married or leave here. I'm holding you to this verbal contract."

A nasty laugh fell from his lips. "Married, that is highly unlikely. And why would that be an issue? An apprenticeship is a job...not a life commitment." He tried to staunch the hope of something more in her meaning.

"If I come back here, Severus, I want to have the option of committing myself to the job. I do not want to compete for your attention, and I want to see if this feeling that overwhelms me right now has a future. I know four years is a long time to wait..."

"Four years is a drop in the bucket compared to what my life has been. What are you saying, Hermione?" He gulped again, not caring that his voice broke as he spoke. "Do you want a... relationship in the future?"

"I wanted to say goodbye when I came down here tonight." She laughed nervously. "This," she indicated her sitting in his lap, "never occurred to me. But now I think it will be hard to leave... but if I can come back, I definitely want to find out what this overwhelming feeling could mean."

"You'll probably find a college man to steal your heart," he said with a heavy heart.

"I will make an unbreakable vow with you, Severus, that I won't do that if you wish it," she promised.

"No, no vows. I've had enough unbreakable vows to last a lifetime."

"But you will take one more if I so wish it in our future?" she asked. *What is this? I feel he is already a part of me.* She'd heard of soul mates, but she'd never believed it. She let her thoughts remain unspoken. It was too early for that. School first, and then she would return.

"Yes, I will," he promised.

Hermione sighed and reluctantly climbed from his lap. "I'd better get back, or Ron and Harry will come looking for me. I do not want this moment with you spoiled."

She drew him to his feet.

He looked down into her liquid brown eyes, memorizing her face as she looked at him with such tenderness.

Her fingers slid behind his neck and urged him closer.

He bent and captured her lips. His kiss was warm and moist, and he urged her to open her mouth for him so he could taste her. Her tongue moved timidly at first against his, and then the kiss turned into a deep, raging torrent of feeling. It overwhelmed them both, and they sagged against each other.

Merlin, where had this woman come from? Was this a gift from God? *Am I finally going to get rewarded for my years of sacrifice?* He broke the kiss, groaning, and trailed his lips across her cheek.

"Hermione, please go, before I take what is not mine yet...nor would it be right tonight."

She nodded. If she let him make love to her, she would not leave, and she needed to finish her schooling.

"Alright, but I will be back, and I will be free to continue this when I do come back." She reluctantly stepped back. Her heart was pounding in her chest.

"I will be here, waiting, and I will be free, as well," he promised. He bent one last time and grazed her lips with his.

She smiled at him and then turned and ran from the room.

Severus stood in the clock tower, watching the seventh year students trudge across the grass for the last time. He saw Hermione dancing away from Ron and Harry as they teased her. He did not feel pain watching her leave; he felt hope for the first time in his life. He had a future that he never thought possible. He knew in his heart that whatever had happened between them, in his office, had been life altering for both of them. He believed she would come back.

She stopped suddenly, and her eyes searched the school walls. When she found him, she waved.

Severus Snape lifted a hand and waved back. Then, turning, he left in a billow of robes.

Hermione grinned to herself and turned back to follow her friends. Her resolve to not see him for four years faded. She already was planning to write him about the place she had rented in the South of France for the summer.

Thank you, Lisa; your beta work is always appreciated.

Thank you to Becky, Beth, and Lydia for reading this chapter and for their comments.

Chapter 2: A Time to Be Together

Chapter 2 of 20

Hermione has invited her once hated grumpy Potions master to her place in the south of France. Will he come?

Here is Chapter two. I hope you enjoy it. I would not leave me alone until it is written. Please let me know what you think about this chapter. I really appreciate your reviews.

Hermione stood anxiously staring out of the window of the kitchen into the small, enclosed backyard of her cottage. For four days, she had been standing at the same place, at the same time, watching the same spot. Five days ago, she had sent an owl to Severus inviting him to come to the cottage in France for the rest of the summer. She'd sent a Portkey made of a tiny, metal heart. It was set to activate each day at 4 p.m. for one week. If he hadn't come by then, she would know that he'd changed his mind about wanting her. Granted they had agreed to wait the four years she went to the university. If he'd decided to hold her to the agreement, why hadn't he sent an Owl

back? The first day he hadn't come, she'd told herself that he had to tie up loose ends. He had things he did at Hogwarts during the summer to prepare for the next year. On the second day, though unshed tears had burned in her eyes, she'd told herself the same thing. On the third day, she had sat on the floor by the fireplace and cried. Her chest was heavy, and her eyes were burning with tears; she was trying to hold them back even now. Maybe he'd decided that those few minutes in his office were an old man's dream, and he didn't want to hold her back. But didn't he realize she would never get a better offer than his? He was the best.

What if he was so afraid that he'd be hurt again that he'd crawled back into that dark shroud he wore as tightly about himself as he did his cloak and robes? For a man so closed off, his pain flowed out of his eyes like a dark beacon.

Hermione's tears started to slip down her face, and she nearly turned from the window when suddenly he was standing there among her flowers and vines. He was wrapped in his cloak and had a small traveling bag over his shoulder. He looked hopeful and scared at the same time.

Hermione was already moving to the back door and throwing it open. "Severus!" she cried before throwing herself at him.

"Hermione." He groaned as he buried his face in her hair. She was sobbing.

"I thought you weren't coming," she gasped, trying to catch her breath.

"I almost didn't." His lips captured hers for a searing kiss. He smirked at her. "We did agree to wait for you to finish school." His voice was deep and hoarse with emotion.

He picked her up and held her against his body. Then he carried her into the small cottage, dropping his bag inside the door.

"I couldn't bring myself to tell you no, but I couldn't make myself come until the pain of staying became overwhelming. I'm sorry."

He ignored the kitchen and went into the parlor. A small, stuffed love seat sat close to the fireplace, and they tumbled back into it. His mouth devoured hers. He tasted her salt tears as well as the sweetness that was Hermione. He'd dreamed of her every night since she'd left Hogwarts a week ago.

Those minutes of their goodbye had seemed unreal. When he'd gotten the owl, he'd spent hours holding the note and staring at the words. If he came, he knew he would lose himself in her. She would consume who he was and change him into someone he did not know. Finally, he decided that wouldn't be such a bad thing.

He groaned against her lips as their tongues dueled, and their lips became bruised with their need to become a part of each other.

He'd had so little affection in his life that he was starved for it. He could not imagine why this beautiful, young woman wanted him. He'd been so afraid he would arrive and be rejected that he'd buried himself in his work and brewed potions Poppy needed for the infirmary. He'd tried hard not to think of the softness of Hermione's skin or the pressure of her tight little bum seated in his lap.

He'd realized the third day that he would go. He was drowning in his need for her. He'd finished and bottled the potions and had informed Minerva he was taking the rest of the summer off to travel. She'd been delighted. Had she seen the changes in him? Yet, he felt that if she knew where he was going, her smile would become a grimace and tighten into a hard, stiff line with disapproval. Bloody Hell, he might agree with her. Hermione was still a child in some ways, certainly compared to his age and life experiences. No matter what, she would always be 20 years his junior. But he'd come anyway. The need inside was trying to claw its way through his chest. He'd finally swallowed his fear and had packed and come. He knew that if rejection came, as he surely believed it would, he would never allow his emotions freedom again. But the chance to really be with her and have her surrender her body to him finally had outweighed his reservations. She was too young to know her heart, wasn't she? She would go to school and find another man, a younger one. But for now, she would be his and fill his dreams for years to come in a way no one else ever had.

Hermione felt his strong arms go around her as she had jumped at him. She'd buried her face in his neck. The feel of his soft hair enveloped her, and the warmth of his body and skin made her body sing.

"Severus," she whispered as she felt him gather her into his arms, and then he was carrying her into the cottage through the kitchen before falling into a heap with her onto the sofa. Their lips and tongues danced, and Hermione remembered his taste: spices and musk. She buried her fingers into his hair. She felt one of his hands cup her bum, and the other caressed her breast through the thin fabric of her half shirt. His fingers grazed the flesh on her stomach, and she felt butterflies and an ache between her legs. His hand slipped into her hair, and he held her closer as their kisses got even deeper.

He finally broke the kiss and sighed. "Hermione, are you sure you want this? Lust and desire fade." He pressed his forehead against hers, stealing a kiss now and then as his words came out haltingly.

Hermione could feel him trembling, so she tightened her grip on his. "I will not change my mind. I am a woman of my word. You cannot know how much a part of me you are. What happened in your office overwhelms me with feeling. It is lust, desire, certainly, but it's also belonging. When you kissed me, you became part of my soul. Didn't you feel it, Severus?"

"Yes," he admitted, drawing her closer. "The last few days have been torture. Complete agony. I was conflicted."

"Afraid," she filled in for him.

"Yes," he admitted. "Love has never been kind to me. Yet, I desire it with all my heart. I thought it would be best to let you go to school. If you'd found someone and your life changed, I would not have let myself become a part of you. It would have been a dream, and I was used to that."

Hermione pulled back. "I want you, Severus." She looked deep into his eyes. "I want *you*," she stressed again. She captured his lips again.

He growled with his need of her and got to his feet and picked her up. He'd spied the bedroom loft above their heads when he'd thrown his head back to let her kiss his neck earlier. He carried her up the stairs. Once inside the loft, he set her down on the carpeted floor. Hermione stood watching him with her big brown eyes, and her desire made him hard. He undid his cloak and tossed it onto a nearby chair.

He watched her eyes widen when she took in the white Muggle shirt. His two top buttons were undone, giving her a glimpse of his chest and dark curly hair. Her eyes slid down, taking in the sleeves of his shirt, which were unbuttoned at the cuffs and folded up to his elbows. Then her eyes lingered a moment over the black denim jeans that fit tightly over his body, then lower to pass over a rather large bulge in his jeans.

She giggled. "You are happy to see me."

"Quite," he said. He felt a blush rise into his neck and face, and he knew that the scars on his neck would deepen in color and become more obvious. He saw pain flash in her eyes as her eyes registered what she was seeing. He expected her to back away. His neck and throat were distorted by the scar tissue from Nagini's bite.

His eyes widened when she reached up and continued to undo the buttons on his shirt. Then she leaned in and kissed the scarlet scars. She turned her cheek and laid her cool skin against his heat.

Any remaining doubts he had about her fled as her tongue traced the scars and her lips caressed him gently.

She pushed the shirt back, baring his shoulders, and she leaned in to kiss his clavicle. She heard him draw in a near silent breath as her fingers slid over his chest, and she felt him relax under her touch. Hermione realized her acceptance of his scars helped him to trust her feelings.

Severus reached to free her from the little top she wore. It was half a shirt that left her stomach bare; only two buttons held it together between her breasts. He pushed the

shirt back and freed her arms with a tug.

Hermione looked up into his eyes; her heart was beating fast at being exposed to him, and excitement coursed through her veins. He had an almost adolescent stare, almost a look of worship as he stared at the tops of her exposed breasts; the tips were covered by the sheerest of black lace. He leaned down, and she felt his lips touch the top of one breast and then the other. She arched her back, raising her chest, and he took one lace-covered tip in his mouth and sucked. She moaned with pleasure.

Encouraged that his actions were bringing her pleasure, he fumbled and then unhooked her bra and dropped it on the floor. She closed her eyes and buried her fingers in his hair as he took her bare nipple into his mouth, sucking and nipping the tip into a hard pink nub.

"Beautiful, Hermione," he whispered against her.

She urged him to rid himself of his shirt, and he pulled it quickly away. Hermione led him to the bed and pushed him to sit on the edge. She went to her knees and pulled off his boots and socks. Then she tugged at his belt, releasing the buckle, and pulled it free of the loops and set it aside over his boots.

He watched her as she undressed him, thinking, *I've died and gone to heaven.*

She pulled him to his feet and tugged the buttons open. His fingers pulled the snap and zipper open on her jeans. Taking turns, they slid the jeans off each other. Standing a little apart, they looked each other over. Severus squirmed under her gaze; no one had ever looked at him in this state of nakedness. He wore only a pair of black silk boxers with serpents in silver woven into them. He thought she might laugh at them, but she stepped forward and ran her hands over his chest, feeling the many scars there.

"You're exquisite," she breathed as her fingers traced one scar after another. "Scars of sacrifice and scars of love, Severus. That's what I see."

She urged him to kiss her, and he pulled her hard against his chest. They gasped as flesh pressed against naked flesh.

Severus picked her up again and turned and placed her near the middle of the bed. He climbed in, kneeled next to her, and gently pulled her knickers off and drew them down over her thighs, freeing her legs. He suddenly laughed with abandon. The sound was amazing to Hermione's ears. She watched as he twirled her panties on his index finger. Then pulling the elastic, he slingshot them across the room; neither saw them land. Hermione held her arms out to him, and he covered her body with his. Hermione slid her hands under the waistband of his boxers and gave him a squeeze.

"Hermione," he growled, feeling things he'd never felt before.

Severus helped her take the boxers off, and then they were naked. Flesh against flesh. Breasts to breasts, hips to hips, legs entwined. Hands and mouths explored each other hungrily: a nip here, a kiss there. Caress after caress, they learned each other's pleasure points.

Severus slid his fingers into the little triangle of curls and found her wet and ready for him. She moaned, arching herself against his fingers.

Hermione felt his hard shaft pressed tightly between them. He shifted, and she slipped a hand between them and slid her fingers over it. She took him in her hand, and he arched, pressing himself against her fingers. "Hermione," he groaned.

"Please, Severus, I want to feel you in me. Now!"

She didn't have to tell him twice; with her help to guide him, he moved into position and slowly pressed himself into her hot, moist heat. It was bliss. Then he realized there was a barrier. His Hermione was a virgin. He would cause her pain.

Then she pressed herself hard toward him, and he broke through and slid deeper. She didn't cry out from pain, but wrapped her legs tightly around him, drawing herself even deeper. "Oh, Severus, you feel wonderful," she cried out.

Encouraged by the fact that she didn't seem to hurt, he began to move, creating a rhythm that threatened to strip their sanity away with the complete uncontrolled passion that swept over them both like a tidal wave.

Hermione slipped over the edge first. Her passionate cries and the spasms of her vaginal walls around him drove him over the edge, and he spilled his seed deep into her.

Severus collapsed onto her, and she held her tightly. Their hearts beat against each other's chest.

Severus kissed her gently as he calmed and caught her breath. "You are a slice of heaven, Hermione. I have never felt so accepted and cared for in my whole life."

She released his hips, and he rolled to his back, afraid his weight was too much for her. He drew her half across his chest. "That was amazing," she said, still trying to calm her breathing.

"Only amazing?" he teased.

"Amazing, fantastic, stupendous." She laughed, pressing kisses against the tip of his nose.

He sobered. "You should have told me it was your first time. I had no idea."

"Would it have made a difference?" she said, looking down into his face.

"No, I guess not, but I would have been more nervous. Hermione..." he said softly.

"Yes," she whispered, placing kisses over his eyelids.

"It was my first time too," he admitted, ashamed that he had still been a virgin at his age.

Her eyes flew open, and she pulled away and bound across the room.

Severus was horrified for a moment, but then he realized that she had retrieved her wand and two small vials. She came and crawled back into the bed and waved her wand over them; she spoke the words of an ancient spell. The fluid from their combined lovemaking collected and mixed. She divided it and filled to two small, heart-shaped vials.

She held the vials up, and he watched as the fluid inside each vial began to glow. Then it shimmered into a powder, sparkling into silver and gold dust. It was one of the rarest of potion ingredients.

Few knew how to collect it and store it into a magical stasis field that would produce the end result. She was grinning like a child with an amazing secret. "I had no idea you were also a virgin. I found a rare book in London, and this spell was in it." She began to describe her research.

Severus laughed, taking the bottles from her fingers and setting them on the table next to the bed. "You are a treasure." He gathered her to him. "A woman after my own heart."

"I'd better be, because I've given you my heart and I claim yours," she said with all seriousness as she gazed into his eyes.

"You have my heart; it's yours. It was yours in my office at Hogwarts." He slipped his fingers into her hair, guiding her closer for another kiss. "What will you do with the

crystals?" he asked curiously.

"I'm going to attach a chain to each vial and wear one around my neck. I hope you will wear the other one."

"But if people see..."

"What if they do? Muggles will think it gold and silver dust or sand. Some Wizarding people, too. Those of our people who know what it means will envy us. This could save our lives, Severus. It will put a stopper on death, but only for you and me."

Severus drew her back into his arms. "You're amazing; We make love for the first time and you still have the clarity of mind to collect rare, precious potion ingredients to help us in the future. I will be proud to wear it, Hermione. That's my girl," he said, hugging her close.

Hermione beamed. "Finally, a compliment about my knowledge."

Hermione lay on her side against him; one arm was around his waist, and her cheek was pressed into the cleft of his shoulder. She could feel his hand stroking her hip.

"There will be no stopping us when we are a team," she ventured.

"None at all," he agreed as they slipped into a deep, peaceful sleep.

The summer would end and there would be more goodbyes, but for now they could sleep peacefully in each other's arms.

Lisa, thank you. Your amazing Beta work allows me to keep writing. You are very much appreciated.

Chapter 3: Yule Vacation Part 1

Chapter 3 of 20

On her last night at Hogwarts, Hermione goes to say goodbye to her grumpy, cruel Potions professor.

Please leave reviews. They are food for the writer's soul.

Yule Vacation: Part One

Severus headed to Minerva's office. He dreaded her questions. After leaving all summer and coming back tanned and unable to stop the occasional smile from slipping out, he knew she would be curious if he asked to leave during the coming Yule holidays.

It didn't really matter what she thought; he was going. It had been a hard semester. He'd kept busy trying to keep from thinking about the touch of Hermione's lips against his and the feel of her fingers as they slipped lightly over his bare stomach. He found he missed the smell of her hair as he leaned over her to help her with her summer studies course. They had spent a great deal of time making love, walking on the beach, climbing the cliffs, and brewing potions. They'd brewed some rather complicated ones, and he'd been proud of how easy it was for her.

Hermione wrote to him at least once a week...sometimes two...but she had a lot of work to do at school. It had been nearly four months since he had seen her.

On his last morning in France, she had clung to him. Tears had stained his robes, and he wasn't sure if the wetness on her face was all her tears or if some of his had mingled in. Saying goodbye had been harder than he expected. For the first he'd felt he belonged somewhere...there with her at the cottage. He'd Apparated to Hogsmeade and walked slowly back to Hogwarts, trying to get himself under control. It had been difficult, but he'd managed it. Now as he stood before the gargoyle to Minerva's office, he had to take a moment to compose himself. "Chocolate cherries," he finally said. He watched the gargoyle slide away and then stepped onto the stairway and rode the stairs to the office door.

McGonagall looked up at him when he stepped into her office. "Severus, to what do I owe this visit?"

Severus found himself glancing up at Albus Dumbledore's portrait. He was stunned to see the old wizard's eyes open and smiling at him.

"Severus, my boy. It's good to see you."

Severus stared at him. They'd had quite a row when he'd returned to Hogwarts. Albus had slept through the war, not giving any advice, and Severus had needed his counsel more than ever as Headmaster. Since then, Albus had feigned sleep whenever he was in the office.

Severus forced the tears that clouded his eyes to retreat. "Albus," he said.

"I'll go. I only wanted to say hello," Albus said, getting up from the chair he sat in.

"Don't bother. I only came to tell Minerva that I'm taking a vacation during the Yule holidays."

"Excellent," Albus said, sitting back down.

Minerva looked at him with that hard smile of hers. "You're going away again? That's very odd."

"Is it? I have spent nearly all my adult life closeted here out of necessity. Voldemort is gone, and now I want to take time away from here. I have vacation time saved up for years, Minerva. You cannot deny me." He stood and paced before her.

"I did not say I would deny you, Severus. There is no doubt you deserve the time off. It's just that someone else will have to be denied vacation, and we have a number of teachers here who spend time with their families."

Severus nodded. "Yes, well, I'm sorry. I'm done giving all of myself. I need some time to myself: this one and any other holiday to come for the next two to four years."

"Two to four years? What's going on with you?"

"I have never explained my business to you, and I do not plan to start now. I'm going."

"Very well. I will see you after the holidays then." Minerva got up and followed him to her door. "Severus, come back rested and healthy like last time. It has done you a world of good." She reached out to squeeze his arm, and he gave her a rare smile.

"Thank you, Minerva." He turned and left.

Minerva turned to look up at Albus, whose eyebrows were elevated. He said, "I wonder who she is?"

Minerva gasped. "You think there's a woman?" She glanced back at the door that had just closed behind Severus.

"Yes, I do. I have never seen him so happy," he replied as his fingers came up to stroke his long, white beard.

"He did smile, Albus," she said.

"Indeed he did," Albus said with a laugh. "And he spoke to me." The old man wiped his sleeve across his eyes.

"You old fool," Minerva said tenderly.

Severus Apparated to a small alley in a suburb of London. He walked down the street, carrying his travel bag again. He pulled a piece of paper from the pocket of his Muggle jeans and checked it against the addresses on the apartments down the next street.

He pulled his coat closer around his body. Even with the warming charm he'd cloaked himself in earlier, he could still feel the cold. Snow threatened to fall at any moment. Finally finding the address, he climbed the few steps and pressed the button for the intercom by the door. A doorman answered, "Name, flat?"

"Severus, flat eight." The door buzzed open.

Severus pushed it open and stepped into a foyer with stairs at the end. He crossed the floor and nodded to the doorman, who sat behind a small desk with a computer on it.

"Sir, Miss Granger is expecting you. You have a right fine daughter there. Right fine."

Severus started at the man. *Daughter?* Had Hermione told this man he was her father, or had he just assumed he was? The idea that someone thought that suddenly sobered his good mood. He turned without comment and went up the stairs.

He found the proper door and stood staring at it. Sudden doubt about what he was doing with Hermione clouded his mind. A summer affair was one thing, but should he continue it? He turned away and went back down the stairs and out the door.

The doorman called after him, "Hey, she's been waiting."

But Severus continued on.

The doorman hit the intercom button. When she answered the speaker, he said, "Miss Granger, your father was here, and he left."

"Father? Oh, God, you didn't call him that, did you? He's not my father. I'm coming down."

Hermione flew down the stairs. "Which way did he go?"

"Left, I think. I'm sorry. I assumed..." But she was gone.

Hermione stepped out in the street. The cold hit her like a wall; she'd forgotten her jacket and her wand, but she would not let Severus get away. She ran down the street dodging the few people who were brave enough to be out. They were laden with shopping bags. Christmas was only the day after next.

She prayed she didn't slip on the ice. The frigid air tore at her lungs. She thought she caught sight of tall, dark-haired man, and she sped up.

"Severus, please! Wait," she called.

He continued away from her. Afraid he would Apparate at any time, she sped up.

"Severus!" He turned now, and she saw it wasn't him. She ran faster. *Damn, Forest. How could he have made such a mistake?* She ran a ways further, but the cold was hurting her now, and she couldn't draw a deep breath. She felt faint. She'd lost feeling in her toes and fingers. Unable to go further, she sat on a bench with tears freezing on her face.

"Severus," she whispered in a weak voice.

Severus, his mind clouded with what others might think of him, continued on past the holiday shoppers. He was a teacher at Hogwarts. What had he been thinking making love to a child Hermione's age? People thought him old enough to be her father, and he was. But he was so enamored by her; he could see nothing around them when they were together.

He stopped and looked around. He thought he'd heard his name, but maybe it was the wind or wishful thinking. He had no idea if there was an Apparation point nearby, so he turned around and headed back. He'd use a concealment charm near her flat so she wouldn't see him pass. He was late, so he had no doubt she would be waiting. Perhaps she was watching out a window like last time. He felt like a foolish, old man and as he continued down the street. He suddenly realized there was a small crowd by a bench. Curiosity got the better of him, and he moved closer. He felt cold terror hit him when he saw Hermione slumped over in the cold: no coat, no gloves, no hat. Her face was white. He pushed his way through and picked her up.

"I know this woman. I will take care of her," he shouted as he ran down the street. He cast a wandless warming charm over her. When he finally reached her building, after running two long blocks, he, too, was feeling the cold deep in his lungs.

With wandless magic the door flew open, and he ran past the opened-mouthed doorman.

"Bring some extra blankets. "Why didn't you stop her? It's too cold outside to go out dressed this way."

He bound up the stairs and found the door to her small studio flat wasn't even closed. He laid her on the bed and used his wand to send a deeper warming spell over her. She was so pale, and he was so scared.

"Damn, Hermione, why did you go out like that?"

He knew it was his fault, of course. She would have come after him. Of course she was frantic like she had been the last time. For all her brains and know-it-all knowledge,

she was very insecure. He grimaced...insecure like he was. What did it matter that he was older? Hadn't she already proven to him that she wanted them together for the long haul? In the South of France it was normal to see older men with younger women; no one had given them a second glance. But here in the city...

He ran to the bathroom and checked her medicine box. He found what he was looking for and returned, pouring a small amount of the fluid into her mouth and massaging her throat so she would swallow it. He was relieved when she groaned. The door burst open, and a pile of blankets entered. The doorman, quite frightened now of Severus, peered out from behind them.

"Over there." Severus pointed to a chair. He grabbed one and covered Hermione with it.

"Should I call a doctor?" he asked.

"I'm a doctor." *Well, I'm a Potions master who makes many medications and knows how to use them.* But he only said, "Now get out. I'll call you if I need you." He watched the man go, and then he locked and warded the door. He pressed his hand to Hermione's head: no fever, that was good. He went to the bathroom and discovered the claw tub she'd told him about in one of her letters. He filled it with warm water and then went back and undressed her and himself. He climbed into the tub and then levitated her in. The warm water surrounded them in a soft gentle cocoon.

After a few minutes, Hermione eyes fluttered open. "Severus!" she cried out in despair.

"Shushhh, I'm here, Hermione." He wrapped his arms about her tightly. "I'm here."

"What?" she asked in confusion.

"You've got a case of hypothermia; the bath will warm you slowly. Just lay back. Relax."

She relaxed against him and covered one of his hands with hers, threading her fingers with his. "I've been dreaming about getting you naked. But not like this. I'm sorry. I should have told Forest you were my boyfriend."

"I'm sorry I left. It shouldn't have mattered what someone else thought. It was one thing for us to be alone in France, but here people will comment. I am not brave when it comes to others' opinions. I cannot even tell Minerva about you."

Hermione reached back and touched his cheek, and the water from her fingers ran down his neck. "When you're ready, you will tell her."

Severus nodded. "Come, let's get you into bed." He helped her stand up. He then grabbed a towel and wrapped it around her. Then he climbed out behind her and dried them both with his wand. He picked her up in his arms, and she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him rather soundly. "Do not ever endanger yourself again!"

"I won't," she promised solemnly, as he tucked her into the bed then crawled in next to her. She wrapped her body around him and planted kisses across his chest.

"Hermione, you should sleep. Your body is recovering."

Hermione continued her exploration of his chest. When she sucked one of his nipples into her mouth and swirled her tongue over the tip, he sucked in a deep breath and groaned. He buried his hand in her hair, cupping the back of her neck. His other hand caressed her back.

"Hermione, you really shou...." He didn't finish because she had taken hold of him and was caressing his hard shaft.

"I've been wanting you each and every day, every hour since you last were with me. She rose up to look into his face. "We can go slow. Please, Severus, I need you."

"Alright." He turned her onto her back. "Let me." He kissed her and caressed her body until she moaned with pleasure. Finally, he slipped into her, and with slow, deliberate movements he brought them to fulfillment. Finally sated, she slept. Severus lay a few minutes with his eyes traveling around the flat. He smiled when he saw a small Christmas tree in the corner on a table. There were a few gifts there. There was a fireplace, and he used his wand to make a fire before he slipped into sleep.

Hermione woke feeling better, and she smiled as she realized she was curled up next to Severus. She slowly remembered them making love last night. She had been so tired and sleepy from the healing potion, but she had needed that assurance that he was really there with her. She had needed to be one with him. She slipped her fingers over his stomach and felt his stomach muscles tighten. She grinned. Last summer she had found he was ticklish, and she had tortured him from time to time. But they had always ended up rolling around the bed, and he'd trap her and tickle her till she screamed, and then he'd make love to her. She set about tickling him some more.

Severus hand shot to hers, trapping it against his stomach. "Hermione, desist," he commanded.

Hermione giggled and attacked him with her other hand. He flipped her onto her back, pinning her arms above her. "I would love to continue this, but I am in need of the loo, and I'm starving. I didn't have dinner last night.

Hermione sobered. "I'm sorry. Let's get some breakfast. There's a little café at the end of the block."

Severus kissed her softly before crawling from the bed. "Let me go get it." He grabbed his clothes as he went. "I don't think you should brave the cold as yet. He came back from the loo dressed, and he said, "Anything special you wish? What's their specialty?"

Hermione was sitting in the bed with the sheet only to her waist, and Severus could not help gazing at her breasts. They were the most beautiful things he'd ever seen. He loved her body, and he loved that she didn't mind being naked with him. Hermione grinned knowingly. "You sure you are hungry?"

"Yes: for you and for food. Once I get back and am fed, don't plan on anything for the rest of the day," he promised, leaning in and kissing her.

He didn't wait for her to tell him what she liked. He turned and raced out the door. Hermione laughed and ran to the loo; then she took a quick shower and rubbed herself with lotions and used her wand to straighten the frizz and then make long curls from the top of her head down. She changed the sheets and put on the black silk sheets she had bought. She was back in the bed waiting when he returned.

He glanced over at her and the bed. "You're beautiful," he said as he set down the package he was carrying and stripped off his coat and sweater. He undid and pulled the belt from his black jeans and kicked off his boots. Hermione watched him strip with desire. Then he changed his jeans to a black silk pajama bottoms. Hermione found that she was starving as he opened the containers of food. They sat cross-legged on the bed and ate omelets and hot scones and butter. They drank hot thick coffee, rich and creamy. "Oh, Severus, I see they told you what I like."

He smiled. "Yes, seems they know you quite well."

"They do. I don't cook if I can help it." She forked a bite of omelet into her mouth and chewed it.

"You were doing so well last summer," he told her as he chewed a large bite of scone.

"After you left, I realized without you it wasn't as much fun. And I have so much class work that I seldom have time."

Severus took a drink of coffee and sighed. "How are your studies going?"

"Good. I don't have much time to think about my life. I seldom get enough sleep. You must know how it is." She reached out to caress his cheek with her fingers. "The

minute I have time to think, I realize I miss you with each breath I take."

He covered her hand with his. "It's the same for me."

"I don't know how I will make it through the next three and a half years," she said. A sadness overwhelmed her, and her eyes filled with tears.

Severus quickly pulled the near empty trays away and set them aside and gathered her in his arms. "Hermione, I am more than capable of teaching you the things you need to know to pass your examination after you have finished two years. Cambridge has a correspondence program for upper graduates who are in full apprenticeships."

"What! Are you certain?" she asked, clutching his arms.

"Yes, most certain. It is only offered to students in the very top of your class, which you are."

"Where would we do this?" she asked, slipping into his lap.

"I will have to ask Minerva if you can come to Hogwarts," he said seriously.

Hermione hugged him hard and whispered in his ear. "I would love to be back at Hogwarts."

"I would love to have you there. But if you come, I think Minerva will insist we marry."

"What?" Hermione pushed him back so she could look into his eyes.

Stay tuned for part two of Yule Vacation

Lisa, thank you so much for your beta work. You are the best.

Becky, thank you for being the first set of eyes to read these and for your feedback.

Chapter 4: Yule Vacation Part 2

Chapter 4 of 20

On her last night at Hogwarts, Hermione goes to say goodbye to her grumpy, cruel Potions professor.

Thank you for all your reviews. Each and every one is very much appreciated.

"We would after all need to be an example to the students," he explained. "Living together would not be possible if we aren't married, and I do not want to be without you if you are that close."

"I could have my quarters, and we could be discreet. How would they know?" she asked suddenly.

Severus paled. Had she just turned him down?

The man can't admit he loves me, she thought or that he hates being without me during the school months. She tried to understand where he was coming from. He had no vocabulary for words of caring. But didn't he show her every time he kissed her or held her. She sighed. "Oh, Severus, you know I want to marry you. I would have consented to marry you in France had you asked." She leaned forward to kiss him.

"You would have?" He seemed sad that he hadn't thought of it.

"Please, don't take offense. Is this what you really want? To be married to a college woman...a woman who doesn't even live with you? I really wanted to have the college done with by then. I can't imagine being married to you and not living with you. But of course I will marry you before I come to Hogwarts if you think it's best. It has always been my intention to marry you when school was done, if you still wanted me."

Severus gathered her close. "I'm selfish, and I want to bind you to me. I will not lose you. Perhaps, I should have taken you out for a formal dinner and dancing before I asked you."

The fear and pain in his eyes warmed her heart. "Well, I don't see a ring box in your hand, so I suppose you could still do that," she said shyly.

"A ring? Those are so Muggle," he said.

"I am a Muggle. I have been dreaming of rings since I was a child."

"Hmm," was all he said before kissing her.

"A proposal from a half-naked Potion's master is very romantic," she murmured against his lips.

"Is it?" His hand covered one of her breasts.

"Very. Now shut up and make love to me," she demanded.

Later, as Hermione showered, Severus went to his travel bag and pulled out a few tiny gifts. He expanded them and placed them under the tree, but he slipped one small one into his pocket.

Hermione came from the bathroom with only a towel wrapped around her head.

He grinned. "If you want to stay clean and not be ravished, you'd better cover yourself, woman." He caught her against him, capturing her mouth in a searing kiss.

She held him close and his lips moved to her neck. Hermione glanced over his shoulder and caught sight of the Christmas tree and its new packages.

"Severus!" she squealed. She pushed him away and ran to look at the packages. "You brought me presents!"

He grinned at her, waved his wand, and clothed her in a soft robe. "No, they are all for me, you whelp."

She smiled as she ran her hands over the soft robe. "It comes off just as easily," she teased.

She picked up each package, one at a time, and shook them. He watched, greatly amused and touched. So many of his Christmases had been spent alone, staring at the bottom of a glass of fire whisky.

"Tonight is Christmas Eve," she said, laying the packages back under the tree, "but I've always opened my gifts Christmas morning. My parents and I usually went to a candlelight service at church on Christmas Eve." There was a bit of wistfulness in her voice.

"Why didn't you go home this Christmas?"

"My parents went to Australia to visit good friends there. I suppose it's my fault since they met those people after I sent them there. They still haven't quite forgiven me for taking their memories from them."

Severus hadn't been to a church in many years...far too many. To make her happy he said, "If you would like to go...to church..." He let his voice trail off when she looked up at him with her eyes filled with tears.

"You would go with me?" she asked with wonder.

"I haven't always been a soulless monster, Hermione. I am half Muggle. I went to church when I was a child. Although my father was a monster, he always dragged us to church on Christmas Eve and Easter. I guess he thought it would save him somehow."

Hermione came and put her arms around him. "I've never thought of you as a soulless monster, Severus. Of course you've been to church. I forget about your dad since you are a Slytherin. I'm sorry, we have a lot to learn about each other yet."

"We didn't exactly talk much last summer," he said as he pulled her close.

"No, we spent our time in bed or on my summer projects and lessons."

"I liked the bed part the best."

Hermione laughed, nipping at his neck. "The bed was fun, the love seat, the kitchen table..." She sighed wistfully and then giggled when he tickled her in the ribs to stop her embarrassing him.

"We'll have many years to get to know each other," he added.

"Absolutely." She pressed a kiss to his lips. "Can we go out tonight then? We can have a nice dinner before church. There is a restaurant two blocks away. It's nice and romantic," she added, going past him to retrieve her wand and dress herself properly for the day.

"Romance, bah. If they have a good steak, I will be happy." He did, however, finger the tiny box in his robe pocket. He followed her to the vanity.

She laughed. "I bet you could be very romantic if you'd put your mind to it." She pulled the towel from her head. Her long hair tumbled out, and she set about brushing it dry. He came behind her and asked, "May I."

She glanced at him in the mirror of her vanity, smiled, and handed him the brush. "I know you can be romantic; you just have to do it."

"Name one time I was romantic last summer," he said, beginning to brush her hair.

"Well..." she thought, "you did bring me that little piece of driftwood shaped like a dragon. I still have it. It makes me smile on nights when I'm lonely."

"And..." he said.

She sighed. "Well you could learn couldn't you?"

He leaned in to kiss the top of her head. "I suppose I could try. Romance is not in my nature. But I got the 'making love' part down pretty good, didn't I?"

She turned and slipped her arms about his waist, "Absolutely. I'm not complaining. I wouldn't trade you for the best romancer in the world."

"Really?" he asked, his insecurities plain in his eyes.

"Really, Severus. Please don't doubt my love for you. I'm as bound to you as if we were married Muggle style or legally Bonded. You're part of my soul...don't you feel it?"

"Yes," he said as caressed her hair. "I'm sorry, old habits of wanting to hold on to something I have so hard is one of my faults. I usually chase away the very thing I want so bad."

"Not this time. I understand you more than you think. I will do my very best not to let you feel lost." She turned back around so he could keep brushing her hair. "I suppose I could petition the ministry to connect this fireplace to the Floo."

Severus went to his knees, and she turned toward him, again. "You would do that?"

"Only if you promise to not distract me so much that I can't get my work done," she teased him. "And only if you do not let yourself get hurt if I don't come home because some new school project has come up after we have made plans. I am constantly having to change my schedule to deal with the unexpected demands of a potion."

"I promise," he said. "I promise."

Severus buried his face between her breasts and promised, but he wondered if he could keep the promise and not resent her times away from him. This was a very dangerous thing. It would be hard expecting her to come and spend the night with him and then having her change her plans. He had always been easy to anger. Should he go back to the original plan and only see her during holidays? He did not want to fight with her. She was such a part of him. It hurt to be without her; he needed her. So many years of deprivation of his physical and emotional senses made her like water to a man in the desert.

Hermione felt him shudder, and she knew it would be hard for him. It would be hard for her, too, but she decided to try because she needed him just as much. There had been many nights she could not sleep because he was not there beside her.

"I have an assignment I need to read today. If you like, we can lie in bed, and I can read it out loud. But you have got to promise not to tear it apart and tell me all the things that are wrong. I will allow you to discuss it with me after I am done."

Severus nodded, "Lying in bed with you sounds like a good deal."

They spent a good part of the day lying in the bed with Hermione reading her assignment. They stopped for a light lunch and she continued, stopping to make notes. At one point, she noticed that Severus had fallen asleep, but she kept on reading. Sleep was good for him.

Early in the evening, she dressed in a mid-length, black, cocktail dress, and Severus transfigured his robes into a suit. He also transfigured her coat into a soft, fur, full-length coat and his cloak into a full-length leather jacket.

Hermione ran her hands over the coat. "With your skills, who needs to go shopping? Thank you, Severus. It's beautiful. I will need my everyday jacket back, but not at midnight." She laughed.

He raised an eyebrow at her.

"Cinderella...don't you know?" she asked.

He seemed to search his mind, "Oh, yes, that princess story. Hermione, I was a boy...a boy with a very male father. I guarantee it will not change back in the middle of the church service."

She reached for his hand, and they left the apartment for the first time together that day.

There was a different doorman. "Hey, Carlos." Hermione waved as they came down the stairs.

"Miss Granger, you okay? Forest told me you got a bit of frostbite," he told her as he came around the desk.

"Yes, I'm fine. Carlos, this is Severus, my guy. He's allowed up any time...day or night."

"Yes, ma' am. I will make sure to pass that on." He eyed Severus with curiosity. "Sir, nice to meet you."

Severus nodded back. "See that you take good care of my Hermione."

"We all do, sir. She's a fine woman," Carlos told him. He stepped back behind his desk. "Have a good evening."

Severus held out his arm to Hermione, and she smiled up at him and hooked her arm through his. They went through the door and found that there was a light snow coming down.

"Oh, Severus, fresh snow for Christmas. It's wonderful." She hugged his arm.

"It is?" He eyed the white stuff like it was ash falling.

Hermione snickered. "Come on. It's cold out here, and the restaurant is this way."

They walked arm in arm quickly down the road; not too many people were out. There were a few last-minute shoppers, but mostly there were people heading to family or friends for dinner or their own Christmas celebrations.

They finally got to the restaurant and checked their coats. It was dark and lit only by candles.

There were few people, and Severus asked for a secluded booth. Hermione watched him as he held her chair out for her. As she sat, he brought out a perfect, red rose from nowhere and handed it to her.

"Severus, it's beautiful. Thank you." She took the rose and held it to her nose. It had a sweet, delicate scent. She set it down gently and reached for his hand. "I love it."

He smiled. "I'm glad you like it. What do you think you would like to eat?" He let her hand go and opened the menu.

Hermione said, "You order, Severus. You know what I like. We did enough cooking last summer."

He nodded, and when the waiter came, he ordered a fine wine and two rare Filet Mignons. There was a soft music coming from someplace, and Severus stood, held out his hand, and said, "Dance with me, Hermione."

Hermione took his hand, and he pulled her to her feet. "I'm not sure they have dancing here." She looked around.

"There's hardly anyone here, Hermione. I don't think they will mind, and we really aren't going to move much." He pulled her close, and they moved in a tiny circle.

"I was wrong," she whispered as her arms snaked around his neck and she laid her cheek against his chest.

"About what?" he asked.

"You can be romantic." She felt his lips touch the top of her head.

"I am trying," he admitted.

He stepped back and suddenly dropped to his knee.

"Severus! Are you okay?" She tried to raise him up.

He laughed. "Hermione, stand still and listen."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the little box. Hermione's eyes got huge and moist, and the candlelight flickered off the tears that formed. "Severus," she whispered as he took her hand.

"Hermione Jean Granger, will you marry me?" he asked. "I love you, and I don't want to wait another three and a half years. I promise to let you do what you need for your education. I want you to be free to ..."

Hermione put her fingers on his lips. "You're babbling; let me answer." She laughed. She pulled him to his feet and looked into his eyes. "I love you, too, Severus. I will marry you." She held out her hand, and he took the ring from the little box and slid it on her finger.

Severus bent and captured her lips. They kissed gently as they danced again. Their food arrived, and they sat and ate, talking and laughing and sharing their food. When dinner was done, they got their coats and walked to the church. They sat near the back and watched, sang, and prayed. Hermione kept looking down at the beautiful ring on her finger. It was a white gold ring with an S of diamonds with two beautiful emeralds nestled in the S's curves. It was very Slytherin, but it made her smile for her man was all Slytherin.

Later they crawled into bed and held each other tight as they watched the tiny fairy lights Severus had spelled onto the tree. They both thought this was the best Yule vacation they had ever had.

Lisa, thank you so much for all the work you do for me. My beta process is so much easier since I have found you.

Becky, thank you reading my story and giving me feedback on it.

Chapter 5: A Surprise Visit

Chapter 5 of 20

On her last night at Hogwarts, Hermione goes to say goodbye to her grumpy, cruel Potions professor.

It had been three months since Hermione had seen Severus despite their efforts to have the Floo connected. The Ministry had denied the request since Hermione lived in a Muggle neighborhood. Officially, they only did such things if the couple was married and there was no choice in the matter. Kingsley had been quite surprised at the situation but had agreed to keep quiet; secretly, he feared Severus' power and respected Hermione a great deal. But he'd made it clear that he would not break the rules. Should Severus marry, he could come again with his request. So they had reluctantly decided to continue to see each other on holidays.

Easter came late that next year, so it had been months of letters and a few stolen phone calls from Muggle neighborhoods Severus had Apparated to. He'd finally relented and gotten a cell phone. He still had to Apparate about 10 miles from Hogsmeade to get a signal, but he usually exhausted his batteries each time he called. He'd began to time them so they at least could whisper words of love to each other before the batteries went dead. He had to keep his battery supply in a special stasis box to keep them from being affected by the magical wards in the castle.

Severus was anxious to see Hermione. Each time he left her, he wondered whether she would still be his when he came again. He was sure she loved him, and he was sure she meant well, but he was so much older, and he didn't have the confidence that she always told him she had, that she would not find a younger man. It plagued his dreams. He found he was not able to sleep many nights, so he prowled the halls, getting meaner and meaner as the months between visits lengthened.

One night Minerva called him to her office. "Severus," she said after she'd made him sit. He was scowling at her like a teenage boy. "I don't know what's going on with you. But you have to get a grip. You come back from your leaves as happy as can be. Time passes, and you're an angry man again. You cannot continue to take it out on your students. If this is simple frustration, deal with it yourself. Whoever she is will not be happy to see what you look like this time. You're walking death right now. You don't eat, you don't sleep..."

"Minerva, mind your own business." He stood, turning to go. She'd guessed it might be a woman. What would she say if he told her? A woman was different than a student only six months out of school.

"Severus, please, we have been colleagues for many years, and I consider myself a friend of sorts. Surely you know I will keep your confidences. I have the welfare of your students at heart."

Severus sighed and sat down. "Okay, yes, it is a woman. Actually, we are engaged."

Minerva clapped her hand over her mouth and gave a little squeal. "Severus, I'm so happy for you."

"You might be until you find out who it is," he said with a frown. He dreaded telling her. He respected Minerva. She was a good, strong Headmistress, and working under her had been easier than working under Albus. He tried to remind himself that those had been different times, but still, in this place in his life, she was not a bad boss. He usually avoided looking up at Albus. He'd forbidden the man to talk to him, needing time to heal. So far Albus had feigned sleep, except that last time he'd said hello, and that was okay. Right now he felt the old wizard's eyes on him, and he, against his better judgment, looked up.

Albus was smiling down at him. "Tell her, Severus. She has the kindest of hearts and a very romantic heart."

Severus, taken back by this, looked at Minerva, sighed, and took his seat again. "Last year at the end of school, on leaving night, a student approached me. She expressed her thanks to me and..." He hesitated, feeling a sweat break out on his brow, "Minerva, it was not my intention or even hers, I don't think, but she touched my hand. Something happened. It was as if a magnet drew us together. Then she hugged me and expressed her interest in being a Potions Apprentice." He ran his hand through his hair nervously and looked at Minerva for that incriminating look, but she was only watching him with guarded eyes. He took a deep breath and decided to leave out the *sitting in his lap* part. "When she started to leave, I wanted to kiss her, and she wanted it as much as I did. So I did." His eyes closed with the memory.

Minerva was shocked but also fascinated by the deep emotions that Severus was displaying.

Minerva gasped, "You didn't...?"

Severus gave her a nasty look, "Of course not. She was my student until she exited the train in London. We agreed she would go to college to a Potions program. She left, and I thought that's that, now I get on with my life, and it will be an absolute miracle if I ever see her again." A trickle of sweat ran down his forehead, and he wiped it away.

Minerva watched in fascination. Whoever she was, she must really be under his skin. Was it Pansy or one of the other Slytherin girls? It was not unheard of for a professor to have an affair with a girl just out of school. But it surprised her that Severus Snape was sitting here telling her he was actually involved. She'd wondered over the years if he was a sworn celibate. He'd never shown any inclination for any woman before, not since Lily. "Go on, Severus," she told him.

"She wrote me a letter a week after she left here. She wanted me to come to the south of France. I tried, Minerva; for four days I tried not to go, but the pull was too hard. The desire..." He gulped.

"Who is she, Severus? Why the great mystery?"

Severus glanced at Albus again; encouraged by the warm smile he found there, he looked Minerva square in the eye. "It's Hermione Granger."

Minerva sat back in her chair with a thump, obviously taken aback. "Miss Granger! I can't believe it. Didn't you hate that child? You were nothing but cruel to her and her friends."

Severus leaned forward. "Yes, it's shocking even to me. But gods, Minerva, I love her. I love her with every fiber of my being. I never expected anything good in this life. I'm terrified of losing her."

Minerva was shocked by this news. She had to tread carefully here. She needed Severus at the school, and if she said anything against this relationship he would walk. Looking into his face, she saw a different man. He was a man free of so many barriers that had ruled his life. Would it be so bad to support him? She felt guilty about not

believing he had the school and the students' best interests at heart when he served as the Headmaster right before the war. She swallowed her reservations and said, "Hermione Granger is a lovely girl, and she's always been very level headed, Severus. If she has entered this relationship with you, she must be serious. And she has always taken her commitments very, very seriously."

Severus sagged with relief into his chair. "I never thought you'd approve."

"I can't say it's not a damn shock, Severus. But Hermione is an adult and much more mature than her fellow students ever were. She has always known what she wanted, and she works hard to get it. Why are you so frantic about this all?"

"The Ministry refused to let us connect our Floos. I have not seen her in three months. Contrary to your belief that I am the strongest man around, as you told me as I recovered from Nagini's bite, I have fears that she will lose interest in me because of my age. She's in college for God's sake, Minerva, surrounded by virile young men."

Minerva forced herself not to laugh or even smile, hiding the emotion behind a cough. Seeing a vulnerable Severus was quite a sight and a relief. The man was human after all.

"She's in Cambridge, right? Severus, take the weekend off and go see her. Floo to the Ministry, and then go from there. I'll find someone else for hall duty," she told him.

"Seriously, Minerva?" He seemed to relax. He'd been strung as tight as a bow when he'd entered the room.

"Go now. Perhaps you can spend the entire weekend. Friday night included." She stood.

Severus stood and did something Minerva never thought she'd ever see. He grabbed her up, swung her around, and kissed her soundly on the cheek before running from the room like a Love Potion drunk teenager.

"I'll be," Albus said quite merrily.

"Indeed," she replied, grinning up at him.

Severus hit the Floo running, and from the Ministry, he Apparated to that little place in the alley near Hermione's apartment.

Severus went up the stairs and found Forest there. "Is Hermione home?" he asked halfway up the first flight of stairs.

Forest seemed to pale. "Yes, sir. She's got company."

Severus stopped. "Company?"

Forest squirmed a bit. "Yeah, a college buck. He's been up there quite a bit the last five weeks."

"Did Hermione say who he is?" Severus felt his heart start to pound. Did he just pour his heart out to Minerva and then have to go back and tell her it was over? He turned and looked up the stairs.

"Fellow classmate, she says." He rubbed his temple with his fingers nervously.

Severus nearly turned and left, and then he remembered the last time. He'd almost lost her to the cold. If he was going to have a chance with Hermione, he was going to have to trust her. She was his fiancée, and last week on the phone she'd told him how much she'd missed him.

He nodded to Forest and turned and headed back up the stairs. He got near her door and he heard her laughing. He nearly lost his nerve as the deep voice of a man laughed with her.

He put up his hand to knock and then he heard, "Hermione, you're the best. I could kiss you."

Severus glared at the closed door and nearly pulled his wand, but the door opened and he found himself staring into a tall, blond-haired, handsome man's face. His fingers flexed at his side with an itch to close them around this person's throat when a scream shocked him. Both he and the young man looked into the apartment.

Hermione came, nearly pushing the man off his feet. "Severus!" She hit him with her body, nearly bowling him over. He felt her arms go around his neck and her legs clamped about his hips. Her lips covered his.

The man forgotten, Hermione was kissing him with such fervor that Severus forgot all about the third person and just let himself feel her desire for him wash over him.

Finally she pulled back. "Oh, Merlin, I've missed you. What are you doing here?"

Severus let her down back onto her feet and half turned to see Hermione's company was staring at them in amusement.

"This must be Mister can-do-nothing-wrong fiancée." He stuck his hand out. "Hi, I'm Alan, Hermione's Potions Lab partner."

"Lab Partner?" Severus said.

Hermione said, "Alan and I have been working on our final project for this year. He has been coming here because we wanted to keep our ideas private."

Severus saw Hermione was a bit anxious at him finding her with another man, and he wanted to relieve her fears. He stuck his hand out and said, "It's nice to meet you, Alan."

"Sir, you're a well known Potions master, the honor is mine. Well, I'm going to go now and let you two catch up. Hermione's always moaning about how much she misses you. Hermione, thanks for finding that information for me." He waved some papers in his hand. "You're an angel."

"Indeed," Severus said, looking down at Hermione. He caressed her cheek, sliding his fingers over her chin. "I miss her a great deal as well."

The minute Alan turned away, Hermione dragged Severus inside her apartment and locked and warded the door.

"I thought he would never leave," she sighed as she began working the buttons on his coat open. She urged him to kiss her.

He looked down at her as she pushed his coat off, and it fell to the floor. She was already running her hands under his shirt, which she had pulled free of his pants.

"Anxious are we, my wanton girl?" He urged her to step back, and he pulled her t-shirt over her head, dropping it on his coat. She wore a plain bra, not a sexy one with lace like she usually wore when he was with her. Considering that she had not expected him, it made him feel comforted. His lips covered her mouth, and his tongue slid slowly over hers. She tasted so good. He had been so hungry for her. His finger touched her breasts through the cotton bra, and she pressed herself into him. Her fingers now worked on his belt, and it fell open with a clunk.

Severus heard the zipper of his black Muggle jeans go down and then felt his pants slide down his hips as her hands pushed them down and clamped onto his buttocks. She giggled into his mouth.

He pulled back a bit and asked, "What is it you find so amusing, my pet."

"I still have a hard time undressing my old Potions master without being euphoric," she said. "You are the sexiest man I've ever seen. Sometimes I think, what would Harry or Ron say if they saw me shagging you?"

"I can wait for them to find out. I really want to keep all my parts." Severus stepped away from his pants. He now stood only in boxers, and Hermione was still dressed other than her t-shirt. "I must be losing my touch," he whispered. "You're still dressed."

She slipped her arms about his neck. "Well, here I am, undress me." She pressed herself against his hard shaft, and he groaned. He managed to pop the clasp on her bra and it fell away. He went down on his knees and fumbled to open her jeans, and then he peeled them down her legs. She quivered against him as his tongue slid around and into her belly button.

Severus pulled her high-cut cotton knickers down her legs, and she stepped out of them. He ran his hands up her legs.

"Severus," she urged, "come to the bed." He allowed her to pull him away from his intentions. He pushed his own boxers down and left them behind.

She urged him to lie on his back, and she climbed up and straddled him, sitting against his thighs. His hard shaft bumped up against her stomach.

"You are so beautiful, Severus."

Her fingers slipped around him and slid up the thick shaft.

"Hermione," he groaned. His fingers reached out to clutch her legs, and he ran them over her legs and up her hips. She leaned down, trapping the hard erection between them, and their kisses became passionate. Severus explored her back and hips then urged her to straddle his waist so that she could lean over him and he could tease her nipples with his tongue, teeth and lips. He loved to watch her face and hear her moans as she thrust her nipples deeper into his mouth. He cupped her buttocks and caressed her legs. One hand finally slipped between them and stroked her thick thatch of soft curls. She was damp and ready. He took her by the waist and lifted her, and she slipped down over his shaft. They groaned with their combined pleasure.

She began to move, and he helped her. Their eyes locked on each other as their thrusts got quicker and their breaths labored as she pressed harder against and down on him. She finally threw her head back and cried out. He felt her clamp around him, and he came, pumping his seed into her. She collapsed onto his chest, and he held her tightly, feeling their hearts beating rapidly against their chests.

He rolled her from his hips to the bed and held her against his side; she slipped a leg over his.

"I've missed you," he said. "I couldn't wait for the holidays."

Hermione caressed his face. "You're looking tired, Severus. Have you been okay?"

"I'm fine. It's hard to sleep without you," he admitted.

"I'm sorry, Severus. It's been hard for me, too. But most nights, I'm exhausted, and I sleep like the dead. Hey, how did you get away? What did you tell Minerva?"

Severus kissed her and then said, "The truth. She knows."

Hermione rose up on her elbow to look into his face. "What did she say? Are you still employed?"

Severus laughed, pushing a handful of her hair back out of her face. He urged her to lean down to kiss him again. Finally he said, "I think she was shocked. I was surprised that she seemed okay with it."

Hermione laid over his chest and let him hold her. "I'm glad. I love Minerva. I would hate for her to be unhappy with me."

"Albus was awake and seemed quite happy, too. I think he somehow knew. I swear he always could read minds."

"I agree," she said. "Severus, are you here for the weekend?"

"Yes." He was caressing her side with his fingers.

"Good, I've definitely needed the stress relief as much as you. Alan is always telling me to stuff it when I start going off on him. He's a lot like Harry and Ron. He's brilliant but lazy like they were."

"Do you want me to talk to him?" Severus said, disapproval plain in his voice. Maybe this young man wasn't so great after all.

"No, Severus, I can handle him. He's really quite sweet and puts up with a lot of my moods." She dismissed Alan from her thoughts and said, "Maybe Minerva can get Kingsley to okay the Floo now that she knows. I'll even go to the Ministry and use theirs if necessary. Now that Minerva knows, she might give permission for me to come visit more often."

He picked up her hand and kissed the ring on her finger. "I think she would be happy for you to visit. I'm not sure about us sharing a room while we are still single."

Hermione grinned at him. "You just want me to marry you. I know you, Severus. You're so possessive, and this is hard for you. You have to know I will never love anyone the way I love you."

Severus said, "I know. I'm sorry. I do want you to be married to me. I want you to have the right to come and go, and I want that right, too. Even if it's to be here waiting for you when you come from a very late night of Potions lab, at least when you do crawl into bed you won't do it alone."

Hermione snuggled into his side again. "That does sound wonderful."

"Yes, it does," he said. He felt her drift off, and he sighed and let himself sleep. Maybe tonight for the first time in months he would sleep through the night.

When he returned to Hogwarts on Sunday afternoon, he was much more relaxed, and he smiled at Minerva when he came to dinner that night.

"Thank you for the leave. It was very re... lax... ing." That last word was said slowly, and he closed his eyes, lost in thought, as his tongue ran sensually across his lips.

She blushed. "You're welcome, Severus." Minerva watched him walk down the table to his chair thinking, *Hermione Granger is a lucky woman.*

Lisa, thank you for your amazing Beta work. I appreciate you getting this to me before your vacation.

Chapter 6: Easter week

Chapter 6 of 20

On her last night at Hogwarts, Hermione goes to say goodbye to her grumpy, cruel Potions professor.

Hermione ran home from her last class. She'd been working fast and furiously all week so that she would not have any work to do during the week of Easter holidays. Severus was coming in about two hours, and she had work to do to get ready for him. It had been three weeks since his surprise visit, and she had missed him nearly every minute. He was right. There was no way they could stay apart for another three years. This one was over in another six weeks, and she had big plans for the summer. She used her wand to clean up the apartment. Most times she just barely slept there, and things got really messy. She transfigured the flowers Severus had given her last time, now dead, into silk flowers.

She got into the shower, washed quickly, and shaved. She dried off and then rubbed scented cream on.

She had a summer dress with thin straps to wear. It had tiny flowers of blue and yellow that blended into a soft green when you stood a few feet away.

She made sure her ring was clean and shiny. She often sat for minutes at a time and stared at it, remembering the night Severus had given it to her. She sometimes wished he could teach her all three years. She was having a hard time facing the next year, thinking of them being apart months at a time. She shook the thoughts away and rechecked her bag. Severus was taking her someplace, but he hadn't really said where. She turned to make the bed. She was just finishing when there was a loud knock at the door. She ran and threw the door open, and there stood Alan.

"Alan! What are you doing here? I told you Severus is coming today. He's due to arrive any minute. I'm on vacation!" She tried to bar his way into the room, but he pushed past her.

"Hermione, what do you see in that old man? Come on, I'm here for you. I want you." He grabbed her and tried to kiss her.

Hermione had just pushed him back and landed a sound slap on his face when he was pulled away from her. Hermione realized Severus was holding him by the neck.

The next second stood out like an hour.

In slow motion Severus raised his wand. "Ava..."

"No, Severus," she screamed as she grabbed his arm. "No, please, he's just a hormonal boy. He didn't hurt me."

Severus looked down at her and then flung Alan down the hall and slammed the door shut. He turned to look at Hermione and saw fear on her face...fear of him, not Alan. He dropped his wand and covered his face with his hands. He'd nearly lost his humanity. He'd arrived and had seen Hermione struggling with Alan and had seen red. He hadn't uttered that spell since the night Dumbledore died. He'd vowed that he would never say it again, and he'd nearly killed a man just now.

He moved away from her and sat heavily on the stuffed chair by the fireplace.

Hermione stared at him with her heart pounding. She saw his shock and horror at his actions, but she couldn't reach out to him. Seeing the killer in Severus was sobering. After staring down at him for a long time, the fear in her began to leak away, and she finally found she could move. She came to him and reached out to touch his hand. The minute she did, she forgave him, and the feeling of love she had for this man swept over her. She knelt beside him and put her arms around him.

He moaned with relief and dropped his head onto her shoulder and buried his face in her neck.

"I'm sorry, Hermione, I don't know what came over me." His body was shaking against hers.

She ran her hand over his hair. "It's okay, Severus. He arrived only a minute before you did. I told him you were coming. He's never once ~~ever~~," she stressed, "given me a hint he wanted more than friendship. I swear to you, Severus."

"I believe you." He held her tighter. Then he stood. "Come on, grab your bag and let's get out of here."

Hermione slipped a short, denim jacket on over her sundress. Travel by Apparition or Portkey could get cold. They left the apartment with Severus carrying Hermione's bag. They went down the stairs and past Carlos.

"Carlos, I'm going to be gone for a week," Hermione told him as they went by.

"Yes, ma' am," he answered. Curiosity about her fleeing lab partner was plain on his face.

"Oh, Carlos, Alan Copper is no longer welcome in this building. Will you let Forest know?" Hermione called over her shoulder as they went through the door.

"Of course, ma' am." It wasn't hard to fill in the missing pieces. He'd seen the smeared lipstick on Alan's face. He'd wondered about that man. He'd seen him looking at Hermione a time or two when they had left together. He was just glad Mr. Snape had come. He turned back to the work on his desk.

Severus and Hermione went down the street to the Apparition site. Severus shrunk her bag and slipped it into his pocket. He grabbed her about the waist and with a mischievous grin Apparated them away.

They appeared in the Ministry and then Severus produced, from his pocket, a handkerchief. In it was an ornate key. "Touch it when I count to three."

Hermione knew only long distance travel was done by Portkey, suddenly excited she exclaimed, "Severus, where..."

He didn't wait for her to question him. He reached out toward it. "One... two..."

Hermione touched the cold metal as he said, "Three..." The tug of a Portkey pulled her away.

When they landed, Severus reached out to steady her. They were in an ornate parlor decorated in rich gold brocades and dark woods. It had tiled floors and stained glass windows.

It had a very definite castle feel to it. She looked at him curiously. "Is this a tower at Hogwarts I'm not familiar with?"

He grinned. "Come look out the window." He took her to a window, and Hermione felt her mouth fall open. Before them was the main street of Disneyland, filled with Muggles, balloons, flags, and Disney characters.

"Severus!" she squealed. Unable to see the city beyond, she asked, "Is this California?"

"Yes, you told me in France you wanted to some day see Disneyland, the original one."

She jumped at him, and he caught her. He felt her legs wrap around him. Her arms were around his neck, and her lips descended softly onto his, and she kissed him tenderly.

"Thank you, Severus. This is amazing. How did you manage to rent this room? This is quite exclusive."

"I'm not a wizard for nothing," he said with a grin.

She raised her eyebrow but didn't comment. "I can't imagine you riding Disney rides."

He let her down on her feet and bent to touch noses with her and whispered, "This was a fantasy of mine when I was a child, too. It was before I knew I was a wizard and before magic ruled my life."

"Come on, let's go. Oh, I want cotton candy, Severus. I've heard of it, but I've never seen it."

"Let me change. I doubt a black sweater and black Levis are the thing to wear in California." He turned, pulling her bag and his from his pocket and expanded then.

Hermione watched as he pulled out a pair of Khaki pants and a Hawaiian shirt of black, tan, and white. He changed quickly and turned.



She looked up from her unpacking and stared. "Wow, you look amazing." She abandoned her suitcase and slipped her arms around him. "I'm tempted to take those right back off you and ravish you."

"We could go down later," he suggested, his voice deep with desire.

Hermione's answer was to slip her jacket off and toss it on the bed. She pulled her wand, and their clothes were removed and laid over a chair. Severus reached for her and took her to the other bed. He laid her on her back and then crawled into the bed. His touch was gentle and slow, and he caressed her as she caressed him.

"I've missed you so much," he said as his hands cupped and caressed her left breast. His lips took the tip into his mouth and gently teased her breast.

Hermione lay there with her fingers in his hair. She did not urge him to be quick but just gently urged him on by guiding his hands on her body.

His finger slipped into her warm, moist center, and he rubbed the tight nub until Hermione cried out, arching against his fingers with a soft, gentle climax. She urged him up and guided his hard shaft to her opening, and he slid slowly in, filling her with his length. He stayed that way nearly a whole minute, feeling her warmth around him, and then he started to move deliberately but slowly, feeling her thighs against his hips and her feet at the back of his legs. Her hands had slipped onto his buttocks, and she clutched them tightly to herself each time he thrust slowly in. They stared deeply into each other's eyes. Severus began to move more quickly, and then urged by her hands, he pounded into her.

He felt himself slipping over the edge when he saw her eyes close and felt her spasm around him, her vaginal walls massaging his penis. He felt his control shatter as he climaxed.

She clamped her legs firmly around him, and he collapsed onto her. Afraid he was hurting her, he started to move away.

"No, stay. I love the feel of you inside me," she whispered.

"But I am spent," he informed her. "I must be heavy."

"No, I'll let you know when you get heavy." She guided him to lay his face against her breasts, his lips against her hair, and she let herself drift off to sleep.

Severus moved off after a while and held her close. He would wake her in a bit, and they would bathe and go down to see the sights when it got cooler. But for now, he let himself drift to sleep.

They stepped from the castle door and were immediately caught in a wave of people heading toward the front of the castle. They heard music, and the streets were lined with thousands of people. Soon a parade of different Disney characters came by. Severus didn't really know many of them, but Hermione started to jump up and down like a child next to him naming off: Cinderella, Pocahontas, Sleeping Beauty... The only ones Severus knew, other than Mickey Mouse, were the Jungle Book characters; he'd seen an old movie with similar characters when he'd been a child. All in all it was nauseating...all the music, dancing and laughter...but he endured it with a grin because Hermione was so lit up with happiness that it made his discomfort worth it all.

After the parade crowd dispersed, they walked from ride to ride and stood in line. Severus was beginning to wonder what had possessed him to think this would be even remotely pleasant. Some of the rides were fast and furious, like Space Mountain, making him physically nauseated, and others were sickening sweet. There were a few that piqued his interest: like the Pirates of the Caribbean and Indiana Jones rides. He liked the Jungle Cruise and thought maybe one day they might go on a safari. They ate dinner in the darkly lit restaurant by the Pirate ride. Hermione held his hand and stared at the make believe fireflies. The sounds of the nightlife were relaxing even if they weren't real. Severus relaxed and watched his fiancée enjoy her dinner and soak up the atmosphere. They took the train around the park to see what they would visit the next day. After the fireworks, they made their way back to their exclusive rooms.

Severus stripped the Hawaiian shirt and khaki pants off as soon as they were in the room and slipped on his robe. Hermione smiled at him. "You feel pretty out of place here, don't you, Severus?"

"It is a bit too Muggle. But it was very interesting."

Hermione threw her arms around his waist. "Thank you for doing this. I know it's not what you wanted. I love you for the thought though. Why don't we see the rest of the park early tomorrow and then go back to my place. We can spend the rest of the week in my apartment making love and eating bon-bons, if you want. I do have some Potion's questions for you. Now that Alan is no longer my partner, I'd like to show you what we were working on and get your opinions."

"Well it's a bit out of order for me to give you any help. But I can at least look at what it is you are doing." He held her close and leaned in to kiss her gently. "You know, a bath in that big tub would be relaxing."

Hermione smiled. "A man after my own heart." She left him and went to turn the water on. She filled the tub and found a rich, bubble bath and added it.

Severus came dressed only in black boxers. He reached for her and pulled her sundress over her head and then unhooked her bra. His hand slid over her breast with such gentleness. He bent to capture her lips, and then they quickly stepped from their knickers and down into the huge fantasy tub. The warm water and bubbles covered them with their gentle caresses. Hermione nestled into Severus' arms, and they lay close, just floating in the warmth of the water. He planted a soft kiss on her head and held her. It was relaxing just being in this amazing set of rooms with their rich history...so like their world, yet so far from it. They lay for a long time in silence and then gently washed each other. Severus dried them with his wand, and they crawled into one of the two large beds and slept.

When they woke in the morning, they ordered room service. They sat in bed and ate pancakes shaped like Mickey Mouse, bacon-wrapped-sausage, and eggs. There was a dark, rich coffee and warm cinnamon rolls.

Hermione said as she licked frosting from her fingers, "I'd like to see the Country Bear Jamboree and ride the Matterhorn. I really don't have much interest in kiddie land."

"Thank Merlin for that," Severus said dryly.

Hermione laughed. "I would like to see you ride the Peter Pan ride or the Mr. Toad ride, but I will not ask that of you. I do want to keep you for a while longer."

Severus leaned forward and kissed her, tasting cinnamon on her lips. "Thank you. I know you want to see the Small World, but I'm not sure I can handle that one," he said with a smirk.

"But you have to go. It won't be fun without you," she protested.

He groaned. "I will go, but pardon me if I vomit afterwards, Hermione. I can only take so much cute stuff."

"Oh, Severus." She laughed again, but she wasn't sure he hadn't turned a little green at the prospect.

They left their rooms. Hermione was dressed in shorts and a tank top, and Severus was wearing jeans and a blue muscle shirt. Instead of enjoying the sites, Hermione found herself watching Severus more. He looked so good, and she could see that many of the women who passed them kept stealing looks back at them. She held tightly to his hand as they walked along. The Country Bear Jamboree was fun, and Hermione laughed at all the silly things there. Later, as they walked through the streets eating frozen bananas, Hermione whispered, "I can't wait to get you back to our room. This banana reminds me of one of your finest features."

He smirked. "My nose?"

Hermione giggled, stretched up, and kissed the tip of his nose. "That's your second best feature." They had arrived at the Small World. They stood in line and finally climbed into one of the little boats.

There was a repeat of one of the parades, so they were getting through the lines quickly. Severus thought, "*The faster this goes, the better.*"

He sat with his arm around Hermione as they floated through the ride. The song was annoying, but he had to admit there was visual appeal, and Hermione seemed to enjoy it so much. It was a bit alarming that she looked exceptionally young today. He wondered if everyone thought he was her father.

They went through one of the gift shops, and Severus bought her a large Minnie Mouse and a set of Minnie Mouse ears.

Hermione tried to put a set of Mickey Mouse ears on him, but he glared at her. She stuck her tongue out at him and made a face but put them back without another word.

He did accept an Indiana Jones-style hat and a whip. He had an evil, sexy glint in his eye when he cracked it in the store.

Hermione laughed at him in his hat, but she found him so handsome. They returned to their rooms late in the afternoon spent from the heat of the warm California sun. They crawled onto the bed to take a nap. Hermione spooned against Severus and clutched Minnie Mouse.

"You're not going to sleep with that thing, are you?" He watched as she snuggled up to it.

"I have always wanted one of these, Severus, indulge me. I won't bring it to bed again."

He watched her fall asleep with her cheek against the doll. She was so beautiful, and he felt rich and blessed. It had been certainly a different sort of two days, but he had enjoyed watching Hermione enjoy the experience of Disneyland. She'd confided a lot of her dreams and hopes to him during their first summer together, and he had a mental list that he promised himself he would work through as they spent their lives together. He started to think of the plans he'd already made for the summer, and he drifted off to sleep.

They returned to London the next morning. They made love and read to each other. One day, they went out to Stonehenge, disillusioned themselves, and walked among the huge rock formations, feeling the magical power of the stones.

Another day they did the tourist things and walked through Trafalgar Square and stood with hundreds of other people to watch the changing of the guard. They walked hand in hand along the Thames, eating hot scones and sharing a coffee. They spent time going over Hermione's notes. Severus wouldn't say much, but the pride in his eyes was obvious to Hermione, and she knew her potion was a good idea.

Finally the day came when Severus packed his bag and they held each other, loath to let go. Hermione had tears on her cheeks when Severus said goodbye. With a last tender kiss, he tore himself away and hurried down the hall and down the steps. He stopped for a moment to make sure Forest knew Alan Cooper was not allowed upstairs again. That taken care of, he went to the Apparition place and returned to the gates of Hogwarts. Home, was it? He didn't feel that sense of returning anymore, only leaving his heart behind him.

Back in the flat, Hermione fell onto the bed and cried. After a time, she got up, washed her face, and grabbed her notes. Not only did she have work to do, but she planned to give Alan a good talking to. She left the flat with a determined look on her face.

Hermione found Alan in the Potion's lab, as she knew he would be. He cringed under her gaze. She walked up to him and slapped him so hard it knocked his face sideways.

"Hermione!" He held his hands up, begging her not to come too close, but she'd pulled her wand. There was no one else there at this time on a late Sunday afternoon. "Hermione, please don't hurt me. I didn't mean harm. I'm sorry I overstepped our friendship. I hope you and Severus are okay."

Hermione got in his face and pressed her wand to his chest. "Alan, you know how much I love him. You might have jeopardized everything. I have not and never will look at another man. You have no clue how much Severus is a part of my soul."

Backed up to a workbench, Alan stood pale and silent. Her face was so fierce that he felt his knees knock together. Merlin, she was beautiful. Not even thinking, he reached for her.

"*Petrificus Totalus*," she screamed, backing away.

Alan felt his arms slap to his sides and his legs locked together, and then he was falling sideways onto the floor. All he could see now was her sandaled feet. She kicked him onto his back and bent close.

"If you ever try to touch me again, you will have no use for a woman ever. Do you understand me?" She lowered her wand and poked him in a very private sensitive place and whispered, "Intorpidito."

A strangled sound issued from Alan's white face. His eyes were as big as saucers.

"Don't worry, it will wear off. Change your schedule, and if you see me, turn the other way. I do not want to speak to you again. If you try anything, Alan, I assure you the next time it will not be numb. It will just not be there."

She left the lab and closed door behind her. No one would find him till tomorrow. It would give him something to think about. Hermione stopped, glanced at the door, and took a deep breath. She was shaking, and she willed herself to calm down. She finally smiled and left the building.

Lisa, thanks you so much for the beta work you do for me. Without you I wouldn't be able to get this done so well.

Becky and Angela, thanks for being my first readers and for all your feedback.

Chapter 7: Summer Vacation Again

Chapter 7 of 20

On her last night at Hogwarts, Hermione goes to say goodbye to her grumpy, cruel Potions professor.

Summer finally arrived, and Severus stood in the observatory tower watching the students heading for the train. There were streams of them laughing and frolicking, excited to be heading home.

A throat clearing behind him made him turn, and he saw Minerva climb the last step and slowly make her way to stand next to him. She stood silently. Finally she said, "Severus, I want to retire as Headmistress. I'd like to do it this year. I'm tired of dealing with the Ministry and the board of directors."

He turned to stare at her. "Why haven't you said anything before this? This is a huge decision. You should have spoken to all of the staff about this."

"The staff will do what they are told. This job is yours, Severus. The board has already approved the change. You just have to say yes or no."

He stared at her, unable to voice anything at the moment. Headmaster! He'd not been very happy the last time. Granted, things were much different now, but if he took the job, what about Hermione? Would he still be able to apprentice her?

"What do you think, Severus?" she asked, watching all sorts of emotions cross his face.

He focused on her. "Minerva, I have offered Hermione a Potions apprenticeship. We planned for her to come here after her next year at Cambridge. We want to marry, and I want to be her Potions master."

"Why do you want to marry so soon? She won't be finished for three more years." There was dread plain in the old woman's voice.

"I am capable of teaching her everything she needs to know. There are precedents allowing her to Apprentice and do her last two years through a correspondence course. You and I both know Hermione is well capable of succeeding in such a program."

Minerva eyed him discerningly. "Is this for her sake or yours? I know this long-distance relationship has taken a toll on you, but won't she benefit from the whole 'college experience'?"

He turned away. "I want her with me. I need her to be with me, and she feels the same."

"Does she?" Minerva came and laid a hand on his arm. "Severus, I need you to take over. I can't do this anymore. It's too hard. Teaching is one thing; I enjoyed that. But the day-to-day administrative duties are wearing me thin. No one else here wants the job, nor are they as capable. This school needs your leadership and wisdom."

"What are you going to do, Minerva? Will you sit on a beach or haunt a castle somewhere?" The last comment was spoken bitterly. "For the first time in my life, I have the opportunity to be happy. I will not give more of my life to this school if it means losing time with the woman I love. I will not do it, Minerva." His voice was filled with venom and longing.

Minerva gave him a smirk. "Actually, I thought I'd continue to teach here on a limited schedule. This is my home, and unknown to many people, I have a contract that says I can live my life out here in my apartment just as Sybil has been granted rooms to live in."

Severus turned. "What if I do this: I will help you with the duties this year. I have enough hours alone now, and it will help the time pass faster. Next year, I'll spend six hours a day as Headmaster, and you take two hours. I will do the most difficult tasks, but I reserve the right to teach advance Potions and have Hermione as my Apprentice for two years after this one. You can have her teach the first- through fifth-years. She will be very capable of that by the time she arrives. I will remain here during half the summers, as long as Hermione can come visit if she wishes. When she graduates in three years, I will take the full position, and she can replace me as Potions master."

"Done," she said, suddenly looking quite pleased.

Minerva got that spark in her eye, and he realized she'd already been prepared to do at least half the job.

"You are a manipulator, Minerva. You had no plans to retire." He glared down at her.

"Not retire...just not be the administrator. Teaching is what I do best. I enjoy it. You don't, really. I know it's been better now that the war and all that other business is over. You will be good at the administrative job, and I need to go back to the creativity of teaching." Changing the subject, she asked, "When were you going to tell me about Hermione coming here?"

"Probably at the end of this year." He gave her a wry smile. "I was going to threaten to quit unless she was allowed to come."

Minerva laughed. "Always the manipulator." She stepped forward and held out her arms, and he stepped forward and allowed her to hug him. They had been friends many years and rivals for only a short time. She was like an aunt he was fond of. He gave her a hug back and then stepped back.

"I'm good at it," he said. "You do agree that Hermione can come here?"

"Of course, Miss Granger is always welcome here. I would imagine she is well capable of teaching first- through fifth-year now. I expect you to be discreet when she visits until you are married."

"I think we can manage. I do have plans to leave tonight. Hermione and I already have plans for this summer."

Minerva turned to walk away. "I know, Severus. Have a good summer, but be back here August 15 to help me with the schedules. Bring Hermione for a visit. I would love to see her. I wish to talk to her."

"Will you be looking to see if I have enchanted the poor girl?" Severus let out a short, stiff laugh.

"Of course." Minerva giggled, letting him know she was just joking.

Severus watched the old witch go. Actually, he was quite pleased. He had enjoyed the administrative aspect of being headmaster and the control. Wartime had been the worst of times to deal with the Carrows. But all that was behind him. He wanted to see that the talented young witches and wizards got the best education they could. There was a new society to build.

In the meantime, Hermione was getting ready to pack her bags for the summer. She wasn't quite sure where they were going. Severus had told her it was a surprise, so she shrunk and packed nearly her entire wardrobe because she wasn't sure what climate to expect. Being a witch had its advantages. She had decided she was content letting him pick their destination. She had too much work to do at school, and she didn't have time to plan trips.

She turned to put her bag by the door. She'd finished her classes yesterday and had turned all her work in more than a week ago. She was looking forward to some sun...she hoped...and she was looking forward to being with Severus again. It had been months, and the few phone calls and letters did not make up for the warmth of two bodies entwined.

She hadn't seen much of Alan other than the few classes they still had together. He'd been smart enough to keep his distance, and for that she was glad. She hoped he would decide to go to another college or at least see that their classes did not match up next year. She missed their friendship. He'd been a distraction during the hours of loneliness she suffered when she wasn't with Severus. This semester had been so busy it had gone by quickly and had given her little time to be too depressed. Her project had turned out well, and she realized she really had not needed Alan's help. She wondered if he had fared as well. She shook the thoughts of Alan away and concentrated on preparing herself for Severus.

She was nearly trembling with desire for him when he rang the doorbell.

She ran, flinging the door open, and stood staring at him. He took her breath away in his black jeans and gray button-up shirt. His hair was free, glossy and getting much longer.

He quirked an eyebrow at her, held out his arms, and stepped into the apartment as she flung herself into them. The door magically closed and warded behind them as he held her tightly against his chest.

She let her fingers snake into his hair, breathed in his scent, and gave herself over to his powerful kiss. Magic seemed to swirl around them. Her knees went weak, and he snickered against her lips as he held her tight against his body. He sighed, breaking the kiss, and gazed into her face.

"I've missed you, Hermione." He placed a kiss on her cheek.

She held him close and listened to his heartbeat. She smiled when his hand caressed her hair. "I've missed you." They were content to hold each other and be.

Finally Severus said, "Perhaps we should travel to our destination before the clothing begins flying."

She laughed. "It is surprising after all these months that we aren't in bed yet. But you're right. It feels wonderful just to stand and hold on. My anchor is back. When I take the time to just sit and think, I often feel that I'm flying away. There's nothing to anchor me to my life until you are here."

Severus stood back and tilted her chin up as he gazed into her face. "I feel the same. That dungeon gets lonely at night."

"How will we get through another entire year?" she asked, holding on to him again.

"I suppose just like this last one. It will be an even busier year for you. You will have to take the one extra theory class here; it's mandatory that you be on campus."

"I can handle it." She moved out of his arms and picked up her bag. "I'm ready. Let's go to this mysterious destination and get naked."

With his desire plain on his face, he extracted a cloth-covered object from his pocket. He opened the cloth and took out a tiny, golden flask. He counted, "One, Two, THREE."

Their fingers connected with the flask, and they were whisked away in a flurry of magic.

They landed on soft, thick carpet in an opulent suite of rooms decorated with ornate furniture and brocade wallpaper. A black arch highlighted the entry to the bedroom. The bedroom beyond had gleaming wooden floors and fine hand-woven carpets. Many of the room's furnishings were done in deep reds and black. Severus grabbed Hermione's hand and pulled her to the double doors that went out onto a terrace.

Hermione squealed with delight. There before her were the canals of Venice, Italy. Ancient buildings nestled in canals of deep blue. The gondolas floated by, carrying passengers from all over the world. Curved bridges of stone arched from one side of the canal to the other, allowing some foot traffic. The colors of cream, reddish pink, and white buildings rose on either side of the canal, promising all sort of wondrous adventures. Flower boxes hung from many windows, offering colored blooms. The sky was clear blue, and a warm breeze wafted over them.

Hermione ran to the edge of the balcony and looked back and forth up and down the canal. "I've always wanted to see Venice," she exclaimed.

"Many great potion makers came from this area. There is much we can study here."

She grabbed him around the waist and peered into his face. "Also a lot of romance and play."

He grinned. "Definitely play. I suggest we start on that right now." He picked her up and carried her to the huge bed where he proceeded to carefully remove her clothing piece by piece. His fingers touching and his mouth tasting each body part, he caressed her until she writhed beneath him with her fingers clutching his body and caressing what she could reach. His lips sucked at her breasts, and his fingers dipped into her warmth, causing her to writhe against them. When he slipped into her warm depths and felt her legs close around him and draw him closer, he let his thoughts go and surrendered to feeling.

That evening they showered and dressed-up and walked to an outdoor café with soft violins playing and the fragrance of flower boxes. They sat in a secluded garden corner and ate pasta and drank a sweet wine. They stole a kiss every now and then across the tiny, round table. Later as the moon rose high, they walked arm and arm along one of the canals. They watched people pass, listening to their language as they played, argued, laughed, and lived their lives. Tourists bustled past them, still seeming to be in a hurry.

Severus and Hermione leaned over one of the many carved bridges and looked into the dark waters. Then he turned to face her, taking her face in his hands, and leaned in for a kiss.

Hermione slipped her arms about his neck. "This is wonderful, Severus. I'm looking forward to exploring tomorrow."

He smirked down at her. "I suppose you will want to do the regular tourist stops."

"Absolutely," she said with a grin. "I'd like to do that for the first few days. Then we will look for those Potion masters, the libraries, and the museums. I can't think of where to even start."

He laughed at the brightness of her eyes in the moonlight. He saw the desire for knowledge that he recognized from looking into the mirror so many times in his life. "I did not bring you here for you to get lost in piles of dusty books. This is one of the most romantic cities in the world."

"Ah." She teased his lips with her soft fingers. "So it is romance you want."

"Among other things."

"We have two months, Severus. There will be time for all of it."

"Well, not exactly two months...more like six weeks. Minerva wants you to come visit for a couple weeks at the end of summer. I have to be there for new duties."

Hermione stood back, suddenly realizing he had some news...news he was excited about.

"What's going on?" she asked, tugging on his shirt.

"Minerva asked me to take over most of the Headmaster duties."

Her face fell. "But what about me coming and apprenticing?"

He took her face in his hands. "I said *most*. I negotiated with her. She will continue as Headmistress this year, and I will spend some of my lonely nights helping her. When you come, Minerva has offered you the position of teacher for the first- through fifth-years." He stopped talking long enough for her to really hear what he'd just said.

Her eyes glowed. "Really, Severus? Do you really think I could do the job?"

"Hermione, you could do the job blindfolded. Once this year is done, you will more than capable of teaching those students, and you will assist me as my apprentice in the last class of the day: Advanced Potions."

Hermione said, "It sounds like a dream I had...you and I working together. Severus, you'll make a wonderful Headmaster."

He snorted. "We'll let's hope the parents feel the same way. I do have a past that's hard to put behind me."

"Severus, if they objected, you would not be teaching now. They know what you did and why." She grabbed his hand as they walked in the direction of their hotel.

"I suppose you're right. I wish it were as easy for me to forget the life I was forced to live. When I am alone, it often comes back to haunt me."

Hermione said, "When I marry you, your bad dreams will fly away. You will never be alone again."

Severus smiled. "I look forward to that."

"You could always tell me about those times. They say confession is good for the soul." She squeezed his hand warmly.

"Those times are best left unsaid. I do not want you to know what I was and what I did," he confessed softly.

Hermione did not insist. She wasn't sure she wanted to know, but if it would help him, she was willing to listen. She tugged on his hand and hurried her steps.

"Come on, I know of several ways to vanish all thoughts of the past for tonight."

The past was forgotten as the desire in her voice splashed over him like a warm blanket.

He grinned. "Only a few?" he asked, hurrying along with her.

There was a dark alcove in a small, deserted garden. Hermione pulled Severus into the darkened corner, and with a wave of her wand she warded it and put a repel spell on the area. She started to undo Severus's buttons and kissed a trail down his naked chest. He felt her pull the shirt off his shoulders, and he threw his head back as she latched onto one of his nipples. Her hands were busy at his belt and then the zipper on his jeans. Knowing no one would come into the garden or see them still did not stop them from hearing the voices of those who passed close by. He found her willingness to have sex with him in a near public place turned him on, and he was hard when she pulled his thick shaft from his jeans. She slid her hands around to the back of his jeans and tugged them down over his buttocks. He hadn't put underwear on, so her hands slid over his nakedness.

"I love your body, Severus. You are so perfect."

He moaned as the night air flowed over his body. Her hands slipped low, caressing him.

"Hermione," he groaned. He pulled her dress off her shoulders. His lips caressed hers, and his hands cupped her now-naked breasts. He pulled her dress up and tore her knickers away. He picked her up, and she placed her legs around his hips. He let her down on his hard shaft, and she groaned with her need for him.

Severus froze as laughter nearby made him aware that people were close.

"Severus, don't stop please," she begged. He closed the laughter from his mind and started to push in and out. She placed her hands against his shoulders and lifted

herself as he slammed into her. She felt her back slide against the stone wall. She threw her head back and let the orgasm build in her until she cried out.

He felt himself cum, and he pulled her tightly to him as his seed pumped into her.

Hermione woke wrapped in Severus arms; they'd spent hours making love...slowly and gently reclaiming that tight bond they built with each other each time they had vacation.

She stretched with a soft groan. Feeling soft fingers trail over her hip, she turned toward Severus. There was a smile on his lips, but his eyes were still closed. She leaned in to kiss his lips then each eyelid.

"Good morning," she whispered against his ear.

Sun was pouring through the open window, and a soft breeze blew the sheer curtains.

Sounds of the busy city wafted up through the window...people calling to one another, children's laughter, and music. They could smell the water.

Hermione slid from the bed and went to the loo. He followed her, and when they came back into the room, he slid back into the bed. Hermione ran to the window. She grabbed the sheer curtain and held it about her as she peered out the window.

"Come on, Severus. Let's dress and go out to eat."

Severus watched her backside appreciatively. She was perfection: narrow waist and ample bottom. Her hair hung in curly waves to her buttocks. She turned, and he saw the curve of her breast. He loved her enthusiasm. It lifted him from the darkness that had always surrounded him. It gave him a life he could actually look forward to. He crawled from the bed and came to stand behind her. His hands slid about her waist, and he bent to kiss her shoulder.

"Must we go out just yet?" His voice was deep sexy and made her shiver.

"Severus, you're insatiable."

"I've been storing it up for more years than you've been alive."

She turned back to him. "We can call for room service and go out later."

"I like that idea." He swung her up into his arms and carried her back to bed.

Lisa, thank you for your beta work. You make my work so much easier. You are very much appreciated.

Becky and Angela, thank you very much for pre-reading and for your comments.

Chapter 8: Summer Vacation Again #2

Chapter 8 of 20

On her last night at Hogwarts, Hermione goes to say goodbye to her grumpy, cruel Potions professor.

Room service was forgotten as the couple got back in touch with each other. As the afternoon waned, they took a bath and dressed. Starving, they went out into the city to find a street café and have some food. Then they slowly walked through the streets; and as the sun started to go down, they found themselves in the Piazza San Marco. It was filled with tourists and pigeons. People threw seeds and bread into the air, and the pigeons flew in flocks about the square. Severus and Hermione sat at one of the tables and watched the shadows go up the building. The Basilica di San Marco was beautiful as the sunlight lit the gold-embossed paintings and statues. They drank some wine and just relaxed. Hermione produced a digital camera from her pocket, and Severus watched as she took pictures of people and the amazing buildings. He sat back, feeling as if he'd never been so relaxed and content in his life. Each moment with Hermione was life to him. He finally followed her down the side of the huge church, and they stood watching the boats come in and out of the harbor.

The streetlights came on, and musicians stood on street corners and played their instruments. The couple walked slowly back toward the Grand Canal, and Severus hired a gondola to take them back to their hotel. Their driver sang as he steered the boat along, and they sat back amongst cushioned seats and looked at the ancient buildings as they passed. The centuries of time showed on the buildings worn and sometimes crumbling facades, but they were beautiful. They had withstood so much history. Hermione sighed, leaning into Severus' shoulder to share a kiss.

"I wish the buildings could tell us their stories. So many famous people have traveled these waterways."

Severus whispered against her forehead, "There are ways to see the stories of the past. There are places here Muggles do not know about."

Hermione's eyes widened. "I look forward to that."

"I think we should go to Morano Island tomorrow. There are several bottle makers I wish to visit. I have heard of their amazing creations and wish to get some of their vials for my collection."

"I'm looking forward to seeing some more of Venice," she teased, "if I can get you up and out early enough."

Severus smirked. "I think you were just as insatiable as I was, my dear."

Hermione laughed. "I was, wasn't I? Well, let's get a better night's sleep so we will have the energy for a little sight seeing."

Severus frowned. "Am I not to be allowed a little play tonight?"

Hermione slipped a hand behind his neck and drew him down for a deep, long kiss. "I think a little play is always in order," she said, teasing him with the look that always made his jeans tight.

"Behave yourself," he hissed, shifting to get more comfortable.

Hermione giggled and snuggled closer.

Hermione said, "We must go back to the Piazza San Marco in the early part of the day so we can tour the basilica. I'd like to see it."

"We will do anything you want. But I reserve the right to pick half the destinations."

"Of course, Severus. You probably know some of this city's amazing secrets."

"A fair few," he said, smiling down at her in the dim light.

When they reached their hotel's dock, Severus hopped from the boat and reached down to draw her up to the dock. He paid the man and then slipped his arm around her. When they walked into the brightly lit hotel foyer, Hermione was stunned again by its opulence. She knew that if she'd come here on a student's budget, she would have only been able to afford a tiny one bedroom, and her bathroom probably would have been down the hall. Or worse, she would have had to share with other students on holiday at some sort of youth hostel.

They went to the main dining room and had a long, relaxed dinner. Severus even danced a few slow dances with Hermione. In their room, they made love slowly, tired from their long night before and busy day. They fell asleep as the moon arose and filtered through the sheer curtains, bathing them in light.

The next morning they ate a hearty breakfast and took a motorized ferry to Morano Island. The little island was filled with shops crammed with all kinds of glass. The people there were famous for blown glass creations of many kinds.

There were glass animals so fine they were afraid to try to get them home in one piece. There were large vases and glass lamps and tiny glass pendants. Severus purchased a clear heart with a red rose embedded in it. He had it placed on a sliver cord, and then he fastened it around Hermione's neck.

Hermione beamed at him, fingering the cool glass. "It's beautiful, Severus," she exclaimed, giving him a kiss.

"It's not as beautiful as you are," he said seriously, looking into her face. He took her hand as they exited the shop. His eyes darted from landmark to landmark as he pulled her down the street.

Hermione didn't say anything but went with him, knowing he was leading them to one of their wizarding destinations. He finally pulled her through a garden gate, and they went through a thick copse of trees. There was a wall much like the one outside Diagon Alley. Severus pulled his wand out and gave a series of taps totally different from those of Diagon Alley's. The bricks moved silently apart, revealing a new street of wizarding shops. Once they had stepped through, Hermione took in the wonders of this new wizarding community. The colorful shop windows boasted amazing creatures and colorful clothing. There was food that made her mouth water...chocolates to tantalize the mind and body. Severus guided her past all these things to a potions shop that held rare ingredients and glass bottles.

Together, they walked through the many aisles of the magically enhanced building and looked at vials in all shapes and sizes. Many of them were magically enhanced to store potions for much longer periods of time than normal glass bottles. They wanted to take many of the bottles with them but knew they couldn't afford them all, so they carefully chose vials that fit projects they were currently working on or formulating. Even then, they spent a great deal of their money on vials and potion ingredients native to this part of the country. Things that cost a great deal more in Diagon Alley were less expensive here.

They spent more than four hours browsing and collecting the things that fascinated them the most. Then they paid for their items, and Severus shrank the large bag and put it into his pocket. They wandered down the road, looking in all the amazing shops. Hermione begged him to let her choose some new robes.

"If that is what you wish. I can wait for you out here," he said, looking at the woman's dress shop with horror.

Hermione laughed and grabbed his hand, dragging him inside with her.

"Hermione, really, I don't think ..." His voice faded when he saw there were a number of mannequins wearing alluring lingerie. "Well," he said, giving her a look full of desire, "if you will model some of those for me, I could be persuaded to stay."

Hermione giggled and pulled him deeper into the shop. They spent a good two hours there while she tried on a few garments. Severus' eyes got bigger each time, and his jeans got a bit tighter.

Finally he begged in a whispering hiss, squirming in the chair he was sitting in, "No more or I will not be able to walk out of here."

Hermione giggled and bent to cup his chin and give him a soft kiss. "I don't think I've ever had such fun looking for clothing before. Thank you, Severus, for indulging me."

"I have the promise of one or more of those garments making it back to the hotel with us tonight, don't I?"

"Absolutely," she said, turning to slip back into her street clothes.

They took her purchases to the counter, and Severus insisted on paying for them.

They then found a quiet corner in a street café and had a fine meal of pasta and wine.

It was still early when they rode the ferry back to the mainland; they went to the Basilica di San Marco and toured the inside. It was magnificent: the gold, the paintings, and the rich, carved wood. They stood next to the tomb of St. Mark and studied it in silence.

Later as they walked across the square to take a gondola back to their hotel, Hermione said, "I always enjoyed the stories in the book of Mark in the Bible when I was a child. It's amazing to stand there and look at the place where his body rests. He lived it all and saw it all. I envy his time of life."

"We are fortunate enough that he wrote it all down," Severus said.

"Have you read the Bible, Severus?" she asked a bit surprised.

"I did have a Muggle father. He wasn't such a bastard until he found out what my mother was. It seemed to poison what he believed, and he turned cruel and heartless. Hermione, I know what the devil is like. Between my father and Voldemort, I have experienced hell on earth. I do not wish to live in hell and eternity."

"You believe!" She was obviously surprised.

"I do. I can't say my life is on track at the moment, but I do believe an all-knowing being created this world. I do accept that he sent his son. There is such an order to how things work and fit together if you are smart enough to understand and see the magnificence of this world. You and I have been given the gift of understanding potions. We see things in way common wizards and even some Muggles can't see them. I've always thought a combined world of religion, magic, and technology would be fascinating. But it is not to be yet. People would not accept us as we are, so we must keep ourselves somewhat isolated for the most part."

Hermione slipped into the crook of his arm. "Well, I just learn more and more fascinating things about you every holiday."

"I hope you approve," he ventured.

"Absolutely! I am a Muggle-born witch, and there are many things in science, religion, and technology that I find interesting, as well. I've often thought the two worlds would easily mesh if people would just let them."

They had finally reached their hotel, and Severus climbed from the boat and helped Hermione onto the deck. He paid the driver, and they turned to walk into the bright lobby.

They did not linger tonight but went straight up to their room. Severus shrugged out of the Muggle clothes and pulled a soft robe over his head, sighing with pleasure.

"I can only take those jeans so long. They have the most rigid fabric."

Hermione smiled. "Yes, our robes are much more comfortable. I guess I'm used to jeans." She came and slipped her arms around him, and he bent to kiss her deeply. Their tongues dueled as they kissed. "Do you want to go to bed, or would you fancy a bath then some fun? I could wear one of those new garments I bought." Her eyes were full of desire and bright with anticipation.

Severus tightened his arms about her. "I am never too tired to make love to you, Hermione. You are food to me. You brighten my soul as it has never been brightened in all my life."

Hermione beamed up at him. His actions told her time and time again that he loved her, but she loved it when he found the courage to tell her so.

She took his hand and led him to the bathroom. With her wand she filled the huge tub with warm water and bubbles. She knew he didn't mind the bubbles because she loved them. She slipped out of her clothes as he watched, and then she helped pull the robes from him. They stepped into the tub, and she sat in front of him. He took a rag, soaped it, and ran it over her back as she leaned forward, getting bubbles into her nose.

He pulled her back against him and soaped his palms and gently rubbed her body with his hands cupped. He circled her breasts gently, and she sighed, leaning her head back against his shoulder. "I love your hands. I used to watch you cut and dice things with such alacrity and precision. I actually fantasized about your hands. I never thought I'd be in this position."

"What did my hand do?" he asked, his voice getting slower and deeper. His hands rubbed at the muscles around her ribs and then lower, crossing her stomach.

She felt him getting hard against her back, and she smiled. They wouldn't be making it to the bed for a while, and she would not wear one her new outfits tonight. It would keep for another time.

She placed her hand over his hands and guided them across her stomach. Then she slid one up to her breast again, where she groaned with pleasure as he slowly circled her breast with his hand. Then his fingers pinched her nipple gently. His other hand rubbed gentle, slow circles around her stomach and then lower. She drew her knees up a bit and spread herself open for him, and he dipped a finger in between her folds. She closed her eyes as he made small circles over her already stimulated nub. She pressed herself against his hand and moaned into his chin.

"You're so beautiful, Hermione," he said as he watched his hands explore her body. He loved how his hand fit over her full breasts and how her ribs expanded when she breathed deeply. He liked how her legs began to quiver with excitement as he brought her closer and closer to completion. His fingers dipped into her, and she writhed on them. Water splashed as she moved against his hand. His own erection was pressed a bit uncomfortably between them. Hermione cried out softly as she climaxed, shuddering against him. He urged her to turn, and even though her body wasn't finished yet, she slipped onto his hard shaft and rode him, building her climax into another roller coaster ride of feeling. He lay in the tub, staring up at her face. Her breasts bobbed up and down before him, and he was bathed in her long hair as she dipped down to kiss him and drew herself up again. Throwing her head back, she closed her eyes and let him guide her on and over his thick member each time. He had his hands on her waist, and she was gripping his forearms tightly.

Severus thought, *if this isn't heaven, what is?* He felt his own climax build just from the feel of her warmth encasing him and her look of ecstasy as she brought herself to another climax. He felt his seed burst from him, and her vagina clamped around him, milking him, and they both cried out with pleasure as she collapsed onto his chest.

They held each other tightly, breathing hard from the exertion, and Severus wondered if his back would hurt when they climbed from the tub. He smiled. He didn't care as long as Hermione was with him. Making love to her was the sweetest thing he'd ever had the pleasure of doing in his whole life. Hermione made him think that life was finally worth living.

"I love you," he whispered.

Hermione raised her head, looking into this face. "I love you too, Severus. I know it's hard for you to say it, but I love hearing it." She gave him a sweet kiss. "Maybe we should go to bed. My backside is getting a bit cold."

Severus grinned at her and helped her rinse off, and they climbed from the tub. He used his wand to clean the tub, not wanting to lose the afterglow of this time with Hermione.

Curling up against each other in their warm bed, they drifted off to sleep.

The next day found them traipsing through a thin alley between some old, clay-colored houses.

"Severus, where are we going?" Hermione asked for the tenth time, running to keep up with him.

He had a Cheshire cat smile when he turned to look back at her. "It's a surprise," he said. They stopped by a dark door. Severus taped his wand on the door and whispered a charm.

Hermione eyed the door with a little trepidation. "Are you sure you know where we are going?"

The door had opened to reveal a dark entryway.

"I am well able to defend you should anything arise, but it won't. This place is a library of sorts. I thought you might find it interesting." He held his wandless hand out to her.

Hermione eyed the gloomy passageway with a little less fear. She took a deep breath and grabbed his hand, and they plunged into the dark hallway. It was more like an entrance to a tunnel, as it started to go down and down into an underground destination. Lit torches appeared on the walls, casting a sinister glow as they flickered into the dark corners, shedding only more frightening shadows.

As they neared a solid wooden door, an eerie light flicked beneath it, and glints of silver blue flickered enticingly.

Severus used his wand to tap a series of knots in the wood, and the door creaked open. They were bathed in the strange light. It danced in their eyes, blinding them.

Hermione followed Severus though and gasped when she realized the source of the light. There was a series of Pensieves in rows back as far as the eyes could see, and shelves that spanned hundreds of feet and rose stories above them. She clasped his hand tighter.

"Severus, what is this place?" She spoke in a whisper, not wanting to disturb the absolute reverence.

He smiled and waved his hand, encompassing the entire room. "This is the history of our people...those who have shaped the growth and built the foundation of our people. Many key people have been approached and asked to archive precious memories here. Sometimes they are plain, common people who have seen amazing steps in the history of our people."

"But Harry's never said a word about this. No one has asked me..." She trailed off, realizing how conceited that sounded.

Severus squeezed her hand. "Well, Harry was sworn to secrecy. And I have two reasons for our trip to Italy. One was to share this summer with you, and one was to bring you here so that you might share some of the memories you have of the war. They are slowly collecting those thoughts."

Hermione shaded her eyes and peered deeper into the room and realized that here and there wizards and witches were bending over Pensieves with their faces buried in this or that memory.

"What happens if I give them key memories? They will be gone from my head. I don't want to lose what I was." She felt her body tremble.

Severus pulled her against him. "There is a special charm that will allow the memories to feel a part of you one again once you revisit them. It's a daunting process. You must select the memories, and then you must view them...in essence relive them...so they are back in your memory. The spell duplicates the feel of them once again as real memories instead of that of an observer."

"Harry consented to do this. His life was hell. He wouldn't want to live those memories again."

"He did. It wasn't easy, but he knew the importance of it all. It was also part of his Auror training. I did come with him on several occasions where I was involved." He cringed when Hermione gave him a scathing look.

"When did all this occur? Why was I kept in the dark? We could have come together."

He gave her a pained look. "I am sorry, but those of us who are privileged to know about this place are mainly masters, doctors, and highly placed professional people. It was not my place to tell you until now."

"Why you, and why me now?" she asked. "Do they know about us?"

"Not in the sense you are talking about. I had to register my intent to take you on as an apprentice. I was sent an official owl asking that I accompany you here. You could not gain knowledge or entrance to this place without a sworn member of this secret place. The Hall of Memories is well guarded."

"I don't know if I want people parading into my fears and some of the things that happened. I don't know if I want to live through everything again," she said. "I would like to see a few things I've always wondered about, though."

Severus smiled down at her. "Let's select a memory, and you can think about what you might be willing to share. Hermione, no one will force you to share what is most private. They wish to see the final battle from your point of view. The Hall of Mysteries events you were a part of. Perhaps even the ride on the thestral to get to London. Not all the memories have to be horrible ones. They can be fun and there to show the viewer who Hermione Granger was and how she supported the Chosen One."

Hermione smirked at him. "The Chosen One."

He smirked back. "I know he never wanted his role just as I never wanted mine. We all had to do what we had to do. It's as simple as that."

Hermione smiled, but it was hard to swallow the lump in her throat. "You gave them memories?"

"Yes," he said dryly. "It was not pleasant, and I reserve the right to allow only those I deem necessary to watch them. But they are here. Once I am gone, they will be given free viewing."

He moved them to a desk, and they pressed their hands against a charmed document that took their sworn oath to not reveal the secrets they would be allowed to see.

"What is your pleasure, my dear?" Severus asked, curious what her lifelong dream was.

She gave him a mysterious grin. "I want to see Godric Gryffindor."

Severus groaned.

Chapter 9: Venice Continued

Chapter 9 of 20

On her last night at Hogwarts, Hermione goes to say goodbye to her grumpy, cruel Potions professor.

Severus groaned, "Must you!"

"Please, I've always wanted to know what he really looked like. There must be a memory of him here," Hermione begged.

Severus smirked at her. "Gryffindor to the core."

"Yes." She sidled up to him. "But I love a Slytherin."

He gave her a pained smile and said, "All right, if you must." He took her hand and they went to the receptionist desk to the side. "My companion wishes to see Godric Gryffindor."

The woman, like many librarians, looked severe. She was small and had a tight bun of black hair at the back of her head. Her robes were of the purest black, and she had half-moon glasses perched on her nose. She looked up at them with disdain, as if she was annoyed at being bothered.

"Wands, please," she demanded, looking back at the parchments that covered her desk.

Severus raised his eyebrows but produced his wand and laid it on the desk. "I am Professor Snape, currently teaching at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. This

is my apprentice, Hermione Granger."

Hermione followed his example and placed her wand on the desk.

She didn't speak, but she brought her wand out and touched the tips of their wands and watched as a trail of color rose. She eyed them now. "Professor Snape, Miss Granger, your reputations proceeded you. What is it you wish to see?"

"My apprentice wishes to see the real Godric Gryffindor. I would prefer to see Salazar Slytherin. Is there something that we can both watch?"

She studied both their faces. The learned professor was holding his apprentice's hand. *They must be lovers*, she thought. Now that was interesting...and good gossip for the meeting next week.

"I have one that few people have the rank to see. You're both war heroes. I think that qualifies you."

"Why the mystery?" Severus asked.

"It's quite special, but it was viewed through the eyes of a house-elf. House-elves' minds are a bit different. You are an Occlumens, aren't you?"

"Yes," Severus said. He was quite interested now.

"Have you ever been inside the mind of a house-elf?"

"Yes, on one occasion," he said. His face was tight with emotion.

Hermione made a note to ask him about that at a later date.

"Good, then you are familiar with their thought process, and you will be able to control the flow and eddies that are within the house-elf's mind. It is good that you are familiar with their eye sight." She turned to Hermione and said, "Their eyes are huge and let a massive amount of light in. You will need to use your talents to focus the scene. Do you wish to continue under these conditions?"

"Absolutely," Severus and Hermione said, trying to control the curiosity her explanation had piqued.

The woman got up from her chair, opened a drawer, and took out a shiny, gold key. "Follow me." She headed down through the aisle of Pensieves, weaving here and there and avoiding those who were deep in memories.

She did not speak until she had opened a door in the back and they had followed her into a secluded room. A fantastic obsidian Pensieve rose from the floor. There was a glass case with vials of memories. The witch used her wand to lower some quite impressive wards and then inserted the key. There was a flare of light, and the glass door swung open. She selected a vial and then closed and warded the case again.

She turned and poured the memory into the Pensieve. It was different from human memories, which looked like quicksilver. This one had swirls of gold in it.

"It would be best if you perform Legilimency on Miss Granger before entering the memory. When you take her with you, you can control what she sees through your occluded mind. I warn you, do not let her go. She would not be able to find her way out."

Severus nodded. "Hermione, are you sure you wish to see this? There is no shame in bowing out."

"I trust you, my love," she said, slipping an arm around his waist.

Definitely lovers, the old witch thought. "Ring the bell when you are done. Because of the rareness of this memory, you must be locked in. "

"We understand. Please leave us," Severus requested softly. He was already doing mental exercises to prepare himself for performing Legilimency and Occlumency. It was difficult to perform both at the same time, but he was the best. It was not pride; it was a simple fact. He had managed to fool the Dark Lord...the most powerful wizard of their time. This would not be too difficult.

Severus pulled her close when the witch shut the door behind her. They heard the lock click into place.

"Hermione, look deeply into my eyes and concentrate on me and only me."

Hermione nodded and gazed into his eyes. She heard him say "Legilimens" and felt herself pulled into darkness for a moment. Then light flooded her senses, and she was looking at herself. Was it a mirror? No, it was Severus looking down at her. She felt a massive magical power surround her. She was Severus Snape, and she felt so much raw power flowing through him to her it nearly staggered her. She'd had no idea. She felt his hand on her arms, steadying her. She felt love flow around her, and she knew that if she'd ever had a tiny spark of doubt about his love, it was gone. They were one in a way sex could never accomplish. She was he, and he was she. He was gazing at her, thinking how beautiful she was and how she completed his life in a way no one else had ever had or would again. She caught a bit of his fear at somehow losing her, but it was replaced with waves of secure love and admiration.

"Severus," she whispered. She thought mischievously, *We need to try this while we are having sex.*

"Indeed," he said. "Come, let's begin this adventure." They turned as one and plunged their faces into the river of memory.

There was a blare of light, and then the picture focused. Hermione clung to the edge of the Pensieve to steady herself, and she felt Severus' arm tighten about her.

A room took form around them, and they appeared to be watching from a small, hidden door. They looked up upon two tall, magnificent-looking men. One was bronzed and muscled and had a thick mane of red hair. He wore a short, gladiator-like skirt of woven Gryffindor red and gold. A tunic top covered part of his bare chest. There were cuffs of gold at his wrists. He looked as strong as a blacksmith.

The other man was pale...almost white skinned. He was thinner than the first man and had black hair streaked with silver that hung to his shoulders and a mustache and beard. His eyes and brows, black as night, gave him a striking look. He wore long green and silver robes. Power radiated from him.

"Godric, your views are flawed. You must see the whole picture. If we do not keep our bloodlines pure, our people are doomed. Our magic will fade with each generation until there are only tricksters playing at magic."

Godric turned to stand by a blazing fireplace. The sides were ornate, and two proud lions carved in dark wood adorned the sides of the mantel.

Severus/Hermione thought, *We must be in Godric's rooms.*

"You are being pigheaded and ridiculous, brother. You have seen the Muggle-borns with their powerful magic. They come to us for teaching. Some of their abilities are far beyond some of your pure-bloods. If we do not teach and include them, someone else will, and they will rise against us. Do we not wish to include all magic people in our society? Sides must not be drawn."

"Helga and Rowena will side with you, as they always do," Salazar spat at him. "I am the only one who sees that we must stay separate. Only pure-bloods will be able to maintain a proper wizarding society."

"And what of the half-bloods? Their magical parents are part of your society, but what about their spouses? What would you do about them? We live in this world, Salazar. We must integrate ourselves into this world eventually. It may take a thousand years, but if we segregate any of those who have the ability to do magic, then we create more factions in a world already divided by non-magical and magical birth."

"I will not stay here and look on these half-breeds and Muggle-borns anymore. I cannot stand the thought of them learning our secrets. You mark my words: One will be born who will take over this society of wizards and set our world on fire. And when the fire burns itself out, only pure-bloods will remain." He raised his wand menacingly.

Godric looked at Salazar and asked, "Would you kill me, after all we have been through together?"

Salazar did not say anything but finally lowered his wand. It vanished amongst his robes.

Godric took hold of Salazar's arms and pulled the man against him. Salazar stood stiff and unyielding. Then he slumped against Godric, his arms tightening in a hug.

Godric said, "We built this school together, my brother. You know that I love you. It rips my heart out to see you tear down that which we built."

Salazar seemed to shake himself, and he pushed Godric away. "Your words of love and brotherhood will not sway me. If I cannot have what I want here, I will go elsewhere." He went to the door and grabbed the ornate doorknob.

"Salazar, please listen to me. Do not leave this way," Godric implored.

Salazar hesitated a moment and then opened the door.

Godric called to him, "I will not disband your house. It will remain here as a testament to you and your ideas. You can always come back."

Salazar stepped out the door and pulled it closed behind him without looking back.

Godric turned back to the fire and laid his forehead against the mantel for a moment. Then he took a deep breath and stood strong, staring into the fire. The fire danced in his eyes, giving him a fierce look.

Severus and Hermione felt themselves take a step back, and silently the door closed before their eyes and blackness overtook them. They rose up from the memory and stood unsteadily. Severus held on to Hermione and then slowly drew his mind back, releasing her. He saw her face was streaked with tears. She threw herself against him.

"Severus, that was the most crucial event in the history of Hogwarts. I had no idea it was preserved. What other wonders must be in this place."

Severus held her close and said, "What indeed."

They stood for a while without speaking until they felt steady enough to go. Severus rang the bell, and soon the witch in black released them from the room. She seemed to know they were deep in thought, so she said simply, "Come again."

Severus and Hermione left the building and returned to Muggle Venice, Italy. They walked in silence, thinking about their house founders. Severus thought about the devastation pure-blood thinking could do to their society, and he thought about the immense power his beautiful, Muggle-born fiancé had. He had known for a while that the houses needed to be integrated. He also knew that Minerva would one day step down as headmaster, and he would be offered the position. Would he have the courage to tear down the barriers the school had kept going for so many centuries? Was it time?

Hermione thought about Godric's strength, the power that had emanated from him, and his fearlessness in the face of death. She seen the hatred fill Salazar's eyes for a brief moment, but Godric had not drawn his wand; he'd stood strong and brave. Each man had been so like the history that was written about him. But now she had real pictures of flesh-and-blood men in her mind. It was staggering that that moment in time was preserved.

They did not speak as they returned to their hotel. They climbed into their bed fully clothed and held each other. Just before they fell asleep, Hermione whispered to Severus, "You must integrate the houses."

Severus whispered back, "I know."

They woke hours later still feeling exhausted from the Pensieve experience. They ordered food and sat cross-legged on the bed with their meal between them.

Neither felt like talking, but they watched each other with veiled glances and finally felt buoyed by the food and drink.

Hermione dusted the last of the breadcrumbs off her hands and slipped from the bed. She leaned into Severus' shoulder. "I want to take a shower. Will you join me?"

"Absolutely," he said. "Let me clear the plates, and I will come right in."

Hermione entered the bathroom, stripping off her shirt and unhooking her bra. She reached up and turned the water on to let it warm up and then peeled her jeans and knickers off and slipped under the warm water. She heard the door open through the sound of the ceiling fan and smiled when she felt Severus slip in behind her and draw her against him. He held her close with his arms around her waist and chest, and she held his arms, leaning down to kiss his arm. She felt him caress her neck with his lips. He held out a hand, and she grabbed the body soap and squeezed a couple dollops into his hand. She threw her head back against his shoulder for a kiss, and his hands slipped over her breasts in a soft, warm caress.

"Severus," she moaned. "You have hands of gold."

He chuckled against her shoulder, planting kisses against her warm wet flesh. "My hands are fine instruments," he said in a low, sexy voice.

Hermione giggled. "Definitely! I appreciate their expertise all the time." She ran her hands over and around his fingers and palms, gathering some of the soft soap, and turned in his arms and lathered his chest with her hands. He bent to capture her mouth, and his tongue slid in to dance with hers. It seemed a soft music filled the air, and they danced a bit, rocking back and forth as the water splashed down around them. Hermione realized that Severus was playing the music in his head and somehow she'd been drawn in with a soft, wandless *Legilimens*.

She felt his love surround her again...love that had no words but just was, love that touched every part of her...and she surged forth with her own feelings and felt him gasp against her lips. He pulled her tightly against him, and she felt his hard shaft trapped between them. She slid one hand down and captured the rigid member and slid her hand down and up it a few times. He picked her up, backing her against the tiled wall. She raised herself by pushing against his shoulders and wrapped her legs around his hips. She was always amazed by his strength. "For an old man..." his thought echoed in her brain, and she froze.

"Severus, you're eavesdropping. Maybe this isn't a good idea. I'm sor..."

He silenced her with a kiss, and she heard him laugh. "I am an old man in years."

She relaxed and giggled again. "A sexy, amazing, old man." She felt him slide into her, and she pushed down on him, getting a groan of pleasure from him.

"Silence, Hermione," he teased. "I'm going to give you the ride of your life."

She let her thoughts go and just concentrated on his body and the way he was making her feel: the grip of his hands on her hips and the water that made them slippery and added in the smooth dance of love. His rhythm became fast and deep, and she clung to him. Her breasts rose up and down before his face, and he nipped the tip of her nipples when he got a chance, loving the soft cries of pleasure that slipped from her mouth. As he felt his orgasm coming, he whispered, "Cum for me, Hermione." And

then louder, as he felt himself burst inside her, he said, "Cum for me, my love."

He felt her muscles clinch around him and heard her cry of pleasure and felt her completion. It was amazing. They were one as they had never been each a part of the other.

Hermione slumped down onto his shoulders and hugged him as she gasped for breath and felt her body calm. He stepped from the shower, still carrying her, and with wandless magic, they were dry. Severus carried her to the bed, and they climbed in and made love again, slowly touching, tasting, and caressing until they fell into a deep sleep of contentment.

Lisa, thank you for your beta work. You outdid yourself this week.

Thank you, Angela, for pre-reading and for your encouragement.

Chapter 10: Venice Continued

Chapter 10 of 20

On her last night at Hogwarts, Hermione goes to say goodbye to her grumpy, cruel Potions professor.

The days of summer passed quickly. They spent a great deal of time studying potions at the Venice Libraries. They returned to the Pensieve Library and took several more adventures. They walked along the streets hand-in-hand and made love in their rooms. The living room carpet, the couch, and the shower became favorites when they didn't make it to the bed in time.

As the days waned and it became apparent that it was time to pack and head back to Hogwarts for several weeks before Hermione had to go back to school, Severus asked her out to a special dinner. They were staying at one of the most exclusive hotels already, so he reserved a special dining room upstairs. It had a balcony and a view of the city. It was warm, so Hermione dressed in a black lace evening gown with high slits on the sides. She wore black-laced stockings and four-inch heels. Her hair was up off her neck because she knew Severus loved to nibble. Then, when the time was right, he loved letting her hair loose. She wore ruby red earrings and a black lace choker around her neck.

When she stepped from the dressing room into the bedroom, she took a deep breath and stared. Severus was dressed in a black Muggle tux with long tails, and he had a cloak tied at his shoulder and lying over one arm. His hair, now past his shoulders, was brushed to shine. He held an ebony cane with a gold lion's head in one hand. His mouth fell slightly open at the sight of her.

"Hermione, you look amazing. If we don't get out of here right now, I will start peeling all those fancy garments off your body and ravish you."

Hermione giggled and bashfully glanced down. Her thick eyelashes rested on her cheek for a brief moment before she raised her eyes to capture his. She held out her hand and said, "Lead on, oh magnificent one. Merlin, Severus, I didn't think you could look even more edible, but you do tonight. It will make dessert more special, don't you think?"

"Absolutely." He took her hand and led her to a wide staircase. They began to slowly climb to the top floor and toward the private balcony. It was a pleasant night with a tiny breeze ... perfect.

"I would have assumed you'd have a serpent's head cane," she ventured.

"I've had enough serpents in my life. I'm rather fond of my brave lioness. I was thinking of you when I bought it."

The magnificent cane was hooked over his arm, and she ran her hand over the gilded lion's head. "It's beautiful, Severus. I think you have a great deal of Gryffindor in you. I've never known a braver man."

"I think each child has a bit of all houses in him or her," he admitted.

Hermione stopped him, climbed on step higher, and leaned to kiss him. "I agree," she said. "I look forward to working with you on that endeavor, once you are headmaster."

He took her hand again, and they continued up the stairs. "I look forward to the challenge, but I cannot imagine Hogwart's without Minerva. I hope she will stay, as she said she would. We have been friends for many, many years."

Hermione nodded. "We will convince her to stay. Maybe we can make her part of our family. Our future children will need a grandmother." Her eyes widened as if the idea had caught her by surprise, as well.

Severus stopped her again. "Children?"

Hermione suddenly had a guarded look on her face. "I assumed it was the natural course of our relationship. I'm sorry if I presume too much."

He felt her stiffen and move away.

He caught her hand and pulled her close. "I never dreamed of having children. Then again, I never dreamed of having you. We have a few years of getting to where we are free to think of children, but I am not opposed to family. They could have no better mother or grandmother." He kissed her deeply and was not surprised when he felt a warm tear hit his cheek and slide down. He was blinking back his own. Her hands had slid around his neck and into his hair, and she caught her breath and buried her face into his neck.

"I never thought of babies much; but with you, Severus, I think I could be a mother. Having your baby would be the ultimate blessing in this wondrous relationship."

He nodded, not able to speak, and they continued on their upward journey.

They finally reached the top step and entered the balcony. Candles softly lighted it, and violin music filled the air. Severus had been assured that they would have complete privacy. He walked her to the edge of the flower-rimmed balcony, and they gazed at the lights of the city.

"I hate to leave," Hermione said. "I have had the best time here. I love having you all to myself."

Severus turned her to face him, and he kissed her deeply, his tongue sliding gently against hers, and his hands sliding over her back. "I have had an amazing time here, as well. The magic of this city is quite captivating. If I weren't so attached to Hogwarts, I would convince you to move here. It has such a huge Potions underculture. I have learned a number of things here myself."

"It's a nice dream, but we can always make this our main vacation spot, and Hogwarts will be home."

"You're not agreeing to stay there because of me?" he asked.

She smiled. "No, not just for you. It's the one place in this world I truly feel at home. It's the first place I was accepted for what I was. I look forward to working there...especially if it's where your heart is. My heart is with you. I couldn't be happier."

He drew her close, and they started to dance to the soft music. He swayed expertly, and she moved against him as if they were one. They swirled around the small area with their eyes locked on each other's face. A small bell rang, and Severus brought Hermione to halt as a waiter bearing a large, covered tray appeared at the top of the steps.

"Signore and Signorina, dinner is served. The wine will be here shortly." As he set the tray on a side table and placed the plates of steaming food on their table, another waiter appeared and brought the wine, which he poured into their goblets. Then he placed the rest of the bottle close to them. The two men walked backwards bowing.

The first man said, "There is a small bell by the stairs. If you wish anything, ring for it; otherwise, no one will disturb you again. Enjoy your dinner."

Severus reached out and placed a nice tip in the man's hand and said, "Thank you." He pulled out Hermione's chair and then took her hand and guided her into it. He took his cloak off and laid it on a chaise lounge before taking his seat. The meal...pasta with eggplant Parmesan...was delicious. There were fresh loaves of bread with olive oil and a bit of garlic and herbs for flavor. The wine was an earthy Pinot Noir that complemented the tomato sauce perfectly. When the meal was done, Severus filled their glasses again, and they wandered back to the edge of the balcony and sipped their wine while they looked out over the city. They caught the laughter and music of the people and watched the tourists go by below.

Severus turned to her and said, "I have waited long enough." He took his wand out and cast an Imperturbable Charm and a Repelling Spell. Another flick of his wand transformed the chaise lounge and cloak into a wide bed with silk sheets and a down cover.

"I will not trust the Muggles to stay clear as they promised." He gave her a devilish grin. "I don't want them to see my bare backside."

Hermione giggled. "I love seeing your bare backside."

"And I love yours." He captured her lips, and she surrendered herself to him. His desire matched hers.

They kissed deeply for a long time, just enjoying the taste of each other. Severus nibbled at her neck for a while and then let her hair loose. The one strap on her dress was soon hanging beside her arm, and his lips made a warm, steamy trail over her shoulder. She was arched against him, pressing her breasts against his chest, her hand buried in his hair. Her eyes were closed and her head thrown back. The deep ache for him was growing by the moment. "Severus..." she urged.

"You always want me too soon. You will wait while I devour you inch by inch, my wonton witch."

Hermione groaned and shivered with anticipation. She undid his tie first and then pushed the tux-coat from his shoulders and began to work at the buttons on his shirt. It was his turn to groan when she pressed her lips against his bare chest and swirled her tongue around one of his small nipples.

Hermione pressed into his hand, which somehow now covered her bare breast. How had he gotten her dress down and her bra off? "You cheated," she said. She felt her magic surge forth, and his shirt was gone.

He chuckled. "Not so fast. I will enjoy removing those stockings manually." He pushed the dress down over her hips, and it dropped to the floor. She sidestepped out of it, and he pulled her to stand closer to the bed. A soft rug was there, covering the stones. He knelt before her and slowly pulled off her high heels. His hands slipped over her stocking-covered leg, and he undid the first garter and then rolled the stocking down her leg. Hermione watched him until he pressed a kiss to her inner thigh and then she threw her head back. Her fingers were again buried in his hair, and she looked into the sky. The stars were brilliant. She could not concentrate on them or make out any constellation as he rolled the second stocking down. She closed her eyes and let feeling take her over.

His hands went to her garter belt, and she felt it pulled away. Then he took hold of her thin knickers and pulled them down. She gasped as he buried his face in her triangle of curls and sighed. He urged her to sit on the edge of the high bed, and he spread her open and dipped his tongue in.

Hermione gasped with the pleasure and fell back onto the bed, arching toward him as he placed her legs over his shoulders and pressed his tongue against her tight nub. He began to alternate manipulation and sucking, and she cried out with pleasure, her fingers clutching at the silk bed sheets until she came hard against his mouth. He stood now, as she watched, he undid his belt and pants and pulled them down over his hips and stepped out of them when they had fallen to the floor. His penis was thick and hard against his stomach, and she held her hands out to him. She scooted back into the bed, and he came with her and covered her with his body. They lay exploring each other's bodies with their hands and their mouths as they just let themselves surrender to the total pleasure of being together. As Severus finally thrust into her, Hermione felt his mind join hers. They became one as their bodies slammed together. Hands gripped warm flesh, and sweat gave them a shiny sheen. Kisses and groans of pleasure filled the air. Hermione cried, "Faster, Severus, deeper, harder." She loved the feel of his muscles as he pushed into her. She opened herself far more than she ever had and felt him slip even deeper. He hit a spot that sent her spiraling into darkness, as she came harder than she'd ever cum before.

She cried out as she felt his hot seed deep inside. The pulsing of that seed was wondrous; she was so happy she could give this strong man such pleasure. She felt his love. She was his love.

"As you are mine," he heard her say back to him.

He collapsed onto her, and then rolling, he drew her across his chest and held her against him, still breathing fast. "Hermione," he gasped, "I will never get enough of you."

She raised her face and looked him in the eye. "That's a good thing because I plan on having you for the rest of my life." She kissed him deeply and then laid her ear against his chest to listen to his still rapidly beating heart. She felt the comforter slide over them, and she snuggled down against his side, his arms still holding her close.

When she was breathing deep in sleep, Severus, who was still awake, said, "That's good because I will never let you go, my love." Then he drifted off to sleep.

Hermione opened her eyes to find them in their own bed in their own room. She assumed he'd brought them there by Apparition. She found he was still deep in sleep, so she slipped out of the bed and went to use the loo. She took a quick shower and, warm from the water, crawled back into bed. Severus was just rousing from sleep. He pulled her to him and sighed. "You smell good." He cracked an eye open. "You showered?"

She smiled. "Yup. I didn't want to wake you."

He slipped out, "I'll be right back... Don't go anywhere..."

She snuggled down into the bed and let herself doze in the warmth of the silk sheets and feather bed. She heard him flush and then she heard the shower, so she let herself drift off only to be woken, what seemed like minutes later, as she felt Severus pull her to him. His lips latched onto one of her breasts, and she groaned with pleasure. She lay there, letting him suckle while she just lazily stroked his hair. He didn't seem to want much more, finally laying his cheek between her breasts with a sigh.

"Last night was wonderful, Severus," she said, letting her hand trail down over her shoulder and then back up again.

His arm tightened about her waist. "It was the very best."

She asked, "Will you lay on your back and let me pleasure you?"

He raised his head to look at her, his eyes wide. He nodded and turned onto his back, drawing her on top of him.

She sat straddled across his waist and bent to kiss every part of his face, almost whispers of kisses. He kept his eyes closed, and his hands idly stroked her side and down over her hips. She left a trail of kisses over his collarbone and across his chest. His hands slid up her back, feeling her back bones as they protruded more as she bent to administer the kisses. Her fingers trailed down over his ribs and stomach, making his jump with anticipation. He watched her for a while as her tongue swirled over his nipples and her hands kneaded his muscles. Then he closed his eyes as she slipped further down his body and came to kneel across his thighs. Her finger slid through the black thatch of hair and admired the hard deep erection. She heard him gasp as she bent and licked the tip of his engorged penis.

She dipped down, and her tongue slid up the entire length, her hand gently massaging his velvet scrotum as she took him into her mouth, opening her jaw further to slide him deeper into her throat. She heard him groan her name, and she began to move up and down.

Severus cracked an eye to watch her bob up and down on him. He was awash with the pleasure of her mouth over him, and he closed his eyes again and gripped the sheets with one hand and tangled his fingers in her hair to guide her rhythm.

Finally, when he felt his climax coming, he gripped the sheets and cried out as he came.

Hermione sat up after a few moments of swallowing and grinned, licking her lips. "You enjoyed?"

He pulled her up to cover him and said, "Yes, very much. You have hidden talents."

He pulled her over him and slipped two fingers into her, feeling her hot and ready. She was so turned on that it only took a few thrusts of his hand before she cried out her pleasure.

They lay, holding each other for another hour, and then with out a word they climbed from the bed with a sigh and took a shower and dressed quickly. Check out time was nearing, and they had to be out. They packed in silence and then stood on the balcony, committing the sounds and scents to their memories one more time. Severus finally placed an arm about her waist and slipped a hand into his jeans pocket and grabbed the Portkey, and they were whisked away.

Hermione found herself standing before the gates of Hogwarts, still clinging to Severus' arm. She gasped at the magnificence of it. It had been over a year since she had seen the castle, and it rose with such splendor before her eyes.

"Oh, Severus, I feel like I just came home."

He squeezed her arm and released her. "I'm happy to hear that." He took out his wand and brought the wards down, and they slipped through the huge wrought iron gates. With a wave of his wand, the wards reset. Shouldering their bags, they walked hand in hand to the castle.

A yell stopped them, and there was Hagrid coming from the edge of the forest. He came and engulfed Hermione in a bone-crushing hug.

"Hermione! What you doing here with this scallywag?"

Hermione gasped but then saw Hagrid smile fondly at Severus. Severus glared at him but shook his hand warmly.

"Are you friends now?" she asked as she hugged Hagrid's huge arm.

"Quite," said Severus. "This man is brilliant at finding rare potion ingredients in this forest, and he's not afraid to venture in. The creatures know and respect him. He's become an invaluable help."

"Severus, why haven't you told me?" she asked, warmed by the news.

"A man has to have some surprises." He touched her cheek with his finger. His eyes were full of love.

Hagrid's eyes got wide. "So, it's like that, huh?"

Hermione went into Severus' arms. "Yes."

"You might have told me Sev'rus," he said with a pout in his voice. But his eyes twinkled with excitement. "No two people fit together better. Conversation at your table must ney be borin'."

Hermione laughed, grabbing Hagrid's huge hand, and they turned to continue toward the castle. "No it's definitely not. That's not the only talent he has." Her voice was teasing and full of mirth.

"Hermione!" Severus hissed, glaring down at her.

She laughed at him and looked so happy that he smiled at her. "Behave," he warned.

Hagrid watched their banter with a grin of his own. He'd never seen Hermione so happy. And Severus he was glowing. He'd known something was different with the man since the war, but now he knew what it was. The man was head over heels in love. He'd watched Severus sulk around the castle since he was a boy. It did his heart good to see him glowing with happiness and love.

They had reached the castle door, and there was Minerva waiting for them. "Miss Granger!" she gushed, enfolding the girl who'd run forward to give her a hug,

"Hermione, please, Headmistress. It's wonderful to see you again. I've really missed this place."

Hagrid stood back and watched as Minerva hugged Severus as well. "Well wonders never cease."

Minerva stood back and observed the giant's damp eyes and silly grin, "You told him?" Not waiting for an answer she said, "Good, might as well come out of the closet you two."

"Yey haven't told no one yet? What about Harry, Ron?" He seemed concerned.

Hermione face clouded a bit. "No, I haven't. I really haven't seen them since I started college. I'm so busy, and Severus and I have been spending all our holidays together."

"I thought Harry seemed down when I've mentioned you. He said you'd been a travlin during the holidays... something to do with your studies." He muttered under his breath, "Some studies..."

Hermione laughed. They entered the near-deserted castle and went into the huge hall toward the teachers table. "I do need to talk to them," she admitted.

"Do it soon, lass. They are stumped about your not talking to them."

"I will, Hagrid. I promise." She dreaded the confrontation. Would they be horrified, or would they have grown up enough to see how happy she was and be happy for her?

There were other teachers at the table waiting for Minerva, and many of them got up to greet Hermione and Severus. Their eyes were full of questions as they flitted from Hermione's to Severus' faces. Some, like Poppy Pomfrey and Pomona Sprout, had smug smiles. They finally understood the changes in Severus Snape, and they watched as the two people's hands sought each other as they turned to take chairs. They caught Minerva's eye, and she nodded. They'd asked her what had happened to change Severus so much numerous times, but she'd evaded their questions and would only give them a smug, "You'll see."

Minerva took a chair next to Severus; Hermione was on his other side. "Well, my friends, I am glad to see you all back for the start of the new year. I trust you had a wonderful summer break and are ready to face the *dunderheads* in a couple weeks. We have a special guest that will be staying with us for a couple weeks before she returns to Cambridge for the coming year. I have a secret to divulge. Miss Granger will be joining us as a Potions Apprentice after this next year. Severus and I have agreed she should come here and work with him. She will also teach some of the younger students." Murmurs started up, but Minerva held up her hand. "I have asked Severus to work with me as a Deputy Headmaster this year and next year with the agreement that once Miss Granger's apprenticeship is done, he will become headmaster, and I will return to the classroom."

"Minerva," Poppy gasped, "Is that what you really want?"

"More than you can imagine. I have enjoyed some of my duties, but my heart is in the classroom. I really want to have that be all that I do here. You won't see me retiring anytime soon," Minerva continued. "The wonderful thing here is that we will have Severus and Hermione to fill in the gaps." She turned to look at Severus. "Do you want to add anything?" Severus looked at Hermione, and she smiled and nodded.

He stood, drawing her to her feet. Still holding her hand, he addressed the curious bunch.

"You will no doubt have noticed a change in me the last year. I owe it to this beautiful woman next to me. Not only has she agree to be my apprentice, but she has also agreed to be my wife."

"What?" "Oh, my! "I knew it!" Comments rang around them as everyone got to their feet again and came to give out hugs, which surprised Severus when he found himself the receiver of a number of them.

Finally, everyone sat, and lunch was served. As Hermione began to eat, she glanced at Severus. She could clearly tell he was overcome with the happiness that was battering him. She reached under the table and squeezed his leg. Then she slid her hand up till she got his attention.

Emotion forgotten, he glared at her, and she just smiled.

Thank you, Lisa, for your excellent beta work.

Chapter 11: Visiting Hogwarts

Chapter 11 of 20

On her last night at Hogwarts, Hermione goes to say goodbye to her grumpy, cruel Potions professor.

After dinner that night, Severus and Hermione went for a walk by the lake. The moon was bright, so they were able to see the path quite well. The August night was reasonably warm.

Hermione hugged his arm as they strolled slowly down the slope toward the lake. "This is wonderful. I'm so glad we came here. Seeing all the teachers again has been nice. I love the idea of coming here to work, Severus. I'm happy that you will be headmaster. You deserve that position, and you have the power and knowledge to do a wonderful job now that you are free of the past."

"I'm not sure I will ever quite be free. It is my past. But I am very happy with how it is turning out." He stopped her and leaned down to kiss her softly before they continued on their way.

"I am, too. I just want to be done with school. A year, Severus. It seems like forever."

"Kingsley did say that he would connect our Floos if we were married," he said, not looking down at her.

"He did," she whispered.

Severus sighed. "I know you don't want to be living separately when we are married, and I accept that, Hermione. If you find you want to change your mind, then I will be most willing to take that step." They had discussed it several times during the summer: nights. She'd turned from him and went to sleep crying. He didn't understand why she wanted to wait. But it was her choice, and he would not force anything on her. He was sure of her love. He would just have to be patient and wait.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, pressing her cheek to his sleeve.

He stopped walking and turned her toward him, drawing her tightly to his chest. "You must do what feels right to you." His heart hurt though.

"I don't know why it's important to me. I just know it is, Severus. When we are close, I feel such magic between us. I feel that when we bond, there will be such a magical cord tying us together that we will not be able to be apart. Living in two different countries will be physically draining for both of us. I know my studies, while I am at Cambridge, will be consuming, and I don't want to hurt you unnecessarily with my distance. You don't know how I am there when I'm immersed in a project. I barely have time to sleep and bathe. Sometimes I use cleansing spells because I have so much work. I would feel the need to take care of you, and my work would suffer."

Severus was silent.

Hermione cried, "Either way you get hurt. Tell me how to do both, Severus. I could use a time turner, but the last one nearly did me in when I was a student here."

He held her tightly. "I think we both hurt from the separation."

"Yes," she said, clinging to him.

"We already got through one year; we can do one more. Maybe I should relent and get one of those computers with a camera, and we could talk sometimes." He bent to kiss her tear-stained face. "I've been working on spells to make one work here. I hired a company to bring broadband to Hogsmead, and Aberforth is willing to have the signal amplifier on his roof."

Hermione smiled up at him. "That would be wonderful. Provided you can handle missing each other. We will both have demanding schedules, and we must make sure we get enough sleep."

"Agreed," he said, now smiling.

"And you must come whenever you can," she begged him. I loved your surprise visit last year. Even if I have should happen to have plans I can't get out of, we will still be able to sleep together at night." She knew that was loaded with all sorts of problems. What if he came, and she was in the lab all weekend. There were times when that had happened to her.

As if he'd read the frown that creased her forehead, he said, "I can sit on a bench in the lab with you. I'm sure I can get visitor privileges, and kisses can be stolen over a brewing cauldron." He kissed her deeply, and she felt his desire hard against her stomach.

"Thank you, Severus," she said when he pulled back.

"For what, my dearest?" he questioned, sliding his lips across her forehead.

"Thank you for accepting my choices even though you hate it all." She turned away, drawing him further down the path.

"I do hate being away from you. But the last time I looked, I'm the older of us and should see things with more maturity." He let a low, pained laugh out.

Hermione hugged his arm again. "I don't feel very mature when I'm lying in bed, crying and wanting you there beside me...wanting your hands on me, wanting you inside me."

Severus groaned. "Hermione, if you do not desist, I will take you here on the ground."

Hermione smiled up at him. "We could go back to your classroom. I've had quite a fantasy about your desk."

"Really," he said. His voice was deep and seductive, and Hermione shivered with pleasure.

She grabbed his hand, and they literally ran back to the castle and down the stairs to the dungeon. Severus flicked his hand back as they entered his room, and the door was sealed and warded.

Hermione said, "Go sit at your desk, Professor Snape, and grade papers."

He grinned at her, took a deep breath, and put on his professor face. He strode up to the desk and sat, grabbed a pile of exams from the previous year, picked up his quill, and began to scratch on them.

A throat cleared and a small voice said, "Professor Snape, may I speak with you?"

He looked up to see Hermione standing by the desk she had shared with Harry Potter for years. Her robe was open and the garment underneath was low cut and revealing. He gulped and felt his face redden. This was a bit strange here in his classroom. But he'd thought about Hermione on his desk, too, since they had first declared their desire for each other.

"What is it, Miss Granger?" he asked gruffly, looking back down at his papers. He shifted a bit. His pants were getting rather constrictive. He briefly grabbed his wand and soundproofed the room.

She sashayed up, reached out a finger, and ran it over his hand. "Professor Snape, sir," she continued in her ridiculous voice. He had to concentrate to keep from laughing and gathering her to him. He was curious to see how this played out.

"I don't have all day, Miss Granger." He turned a glare on her that would have withered her back when she was a student.

Her eyes glittered with mirth and devilishness.

She placed a hand on his chest and pushed, rolling his chair back away from the desk. Then she slipped up to sit on the desk in front of him. "Professor Snape, you know you're really uptight most of the time. I have a few ideas that would help you relax." She ran a finger down the side of his face and then across his lips. He nipped at her, and she grinned.

She leaned in to kiss him, and he drew back sharply. "Miss Granger, this is highly inappropriate.

"That's the idea, Professor Snape," she whispered, stretching closer. Her lips slid past his, barely touching him. Her fingers started to work on the buttons of his frock coat.

He could no longer keep his hands off her and slid his fingers and palms up her legs.

"Hummm," she sighed, pushing his coat off his shoulders and leaning in to kiss his neck. Her fingers were already working the buttons on his white button down shirt. Soon he was sitting his chair half naked. His hands were still sliding up and down her legs, which were now bare. He pulled her robes away, and then she let him pull her thin, Muggle top off. She wore a sexy, black, lace bra and matching panties. He reached behind her and unclasped the bra, and it fell away, leaving her only in the panties. Her perfect breasts drew him, and he took one into his mouth. He loved the feel of her fingers as they slipped into his hair, urging him closer.

He pulled back briefly to loosen his pants and slip them down, where they pooled around his feet. He could no longer stand the tight restraint.

"You are happy to see me, Professor Snape," Hermione said, admiring the thick, erect shaft that was tight against his stomach.

"Indeed," he said in a voice thick with desire.

His hands cupped her breast, and then he pushed her back gently till she lay across his desk. He pulled the lace panties off and placed her heels on the desk, spreading her before him and staring at her as if she was a meal before a starving man.

Hermione gripped the side of the desk and closed her eyes, begging him with a whimper not to leave her too long without his touch. He pulled his chair closer, and his hands slid over her legs and then down the inside of her thighs. Her thatch of curls was already moist with her need for him. He trailed kisses along her thighs, and they began to tremble. She gasped, crying out with pleasure when he dipped his fingers into her and then replaced them with his tongue. He gripped her hips and pulled her even closer, and he sucked and teased her with his lips and tongue.

Hermione shifted to get into a more comfortable position, throwing her legs over his shoulders. Her fingernails scratched at the worn surface of his desk, leaving light furrows in the wood.

When he nipped at her tight nub, she moaned with pleasure and came, bucking against his face. He took her legs from his shoulders, pushed back in his chair, and pulled her down onto his lap, impaling her on his thick, ridged shaft. "Hermione," he groaned as he filled her. The chair kept sliding here and there, and she had no way to lift herself up and down. They finally tumbled, laughing, to the floor. Hermione rode him till he came, crying out her name, and she came and collapsed onto his chest.

Hermione lay against him and then started to giggle. "That wasn't one of my best ideas...though the first part was highly satisfactory. You do that so well."

He held her tight. "The desk was a wonderful idea. The chair was my idea, and it didn't exactly work." He laughed. "It is highly unlikely I will be able to sit here during class and not think of you ever again."

She whispered into his ear, "That was the whole idea, Professor Snape."

"Shall we retire to my bed? It's a bit hard on my back down here, and my backside is freezing."

Hermione nodded. With his help, she got to her feet and took his hand, pulling him up. They gathered their discarded clothing and headed through the storeroom to the hidden door to Severus' rooms.

After a quick shower, they lay in bed and talked until they fell asleep.

In the morning, they dressed casually and went to breakfast. Minerva, who was at the breakfast table already, said, "Severus, I don't think I've ever seen you without your frock coat on."

Severus smirked. "Well, you have to credit that to Hermione. She insists I'm still on vacation."

"So you are, or should be. Thank you for coming back to help me." She took a plate of eggs and placed two on her plate. She handed the plate off to Hermione and then took up the platter of bacon and sausage. "I have a time table in my office. It will help us cover all the things I need your help on in the next two weeks. I have also worked in some time for you two to both enjoy the castle and its grounds."

Severus nodded, taking the plate of eggs from Hermione. "Thank you, Minerva. I'm sure Hermione and I will be quite grateful for any time you can spare."

Hermione said, "It is difficult to face the coming year with only a few visits planned."

Minerva nodded. "I expect it is. The time flies so quickly these days. Soon it will be over, and you will be back here at Hogwarts with Severus." She took a sip of her coffee and then said, "I am so happy you'll be joining us here. I have no doubt that this school will benefit from Severus' and your leadership in the future."

Hermione blushed. "Thank you, Headmistress. I know Severus will be a brilliant headmaster."

"Yes," Minerva agreed, "I'm sure he will be, again." Her words referred to his past stint as headmaster during the war. "While I keep Severus busy, you will enjoy having the library at your disposal. I have told Madam Pince that you have privileges equal to staff."

Hermione beamed. "Thank you." Her fingers flexed as if she was grabbing a book.

Severus smirked and said, "Thanks, Minerva. I will never see her now."

"I doubt that," she said with an answering smirk of her own.

They talked about the schedule as they ate, and then Hermione walked with Severus and Minerva to the gargoyle that guarded the entrance to the headmistress' office.

Severus leaned and kissed Hermione briefly. "I will come gather you at the library when I am done this morning. We can have lunch together."

Hermione said, "I look forward to that." She bid them goodbye and headed down the hall toward the stairs that lead to the library, quite prepared to lose herself among the books.

Severus found her four hours later with her nose buried in a thick, dusty volume of potions. She didn't even react to him until he bent and placed a kiss on the back of her neck.

"Severus." She smiled up at him and reached up to caress his cheek. He leaned over her shoulder to see what she was reading. "This book is amazing. It's giving me all sorts of things to think about."

He took the book from her hands, placing her bookmark into the page and closing it. "It is quite interesting, but now it's my hour. I have to go back for a while this afternoon. Come on and walk with me. I've asked Winky, the house-elf, to pack us a picnic lunch. It's warm by the lake, and we can spend some time together."

Hermione looked wistfully at the old book but grabbed his hand and let him pull her from the chair. She told Madam Pince that she would return to continue reading after lunch.

They hurried through the corridors of the castle and burst out the great door into the sunlight. Winky was waiting on the top step with the basket.

Severus took the basket and said, "Thank you, Winky. I appreciate your help."

The little house-elf bobbed her head up and down and stared up at Severus' smiling face with wonder. "It is giving me pleasure to help you sir, madam," she said, nodding at Hermione. She watched, her big eyes growing even bigger, as they clasped hands and ran toward the lake. "They will never believe Winky when I tell them Master Snape is happy," she muttered as she turned to go back into the castle.

Hermione and Severus sat on a blanket by the lake and opened the basket. It was full of fried chicken, biscuits, and baked apples.

They ate until they were stuffed, and then Severus lay on his back and Hermione sat close by his hip and looked down into his face as they talked. She grabbed a blade of grass and trailed it over his face until he grabbed her and rolled her onto her back and snogged her senseless.

They didn't know that Minerva was watching from the window of her office with a satisfied grin. "Albus, I wish you could see them together. It's a wondrous sight to see him happy. I never would have imagined."

"Perhaps you will invite them to tea sometime soon," he said.

She turned to smile up at him and said, "I will do that."

Lisa, thank you so much for taking time to beta this chapter after just getting back from vacation. I appreciate it so much.

Chapter 12: A surprise Visit to Hogsmeade

Chapter 12 of 20

On her last night at Hogwarts, Hermione goes to say goodbye to her grumpy, cruel Potions professor.

Returning to school, respectively, was difficult for both of them. Hermione was left at her flat with tears running down her face. Severus, having escorted Hermione home the night before, had to blink the tears away when he Apparated to Hogsmeade. He used the walk to Hogwarts to get his emotions under control.

The days ahead were filled with a lot of activity as the students arrived. Severus, with his newly added duties helping Minerva, buried himself in his work so he would fall into bed at night exhausted and not dwell on the ache in his heart at having to sleep alone. He worked hard at pushing the loneliness deep into his heart as he mentally counted off the days until Christmas break. The computers had proved to be a technical and spell nightmare, and they'd had to give up on them.

Hermione buried herself in her class schoolwork. With the extra theory class, she often found herself working late into the night. On Sundays, she slept most the day when she could, trying to catch up on the lost sleep. Yet she often found herself in the lab on Sunday afternoon and into the night as she tested those new theories

They wrote a few letters and managed a few calls. The days passed one by one, and the time finally came for them to make plans for the holidays.

Hermione came in late one night, dropped her coat by the door, and stooped down to pick up a letter one of the doormen had slipped under her door. She froze when she saw her mother's handwriting. She hadn't heard from her parents in quite some time. They had decided to go back to Australia after last year's visit. They'd found the life they had there much better. Their relationship was nearly non-existent.

She slumped into the nearest chair and with trembling fingers opened the letter.

Dear Hermione,

We are doing well here in Australia and don't miss the winters in England. Business is booming. Your father and I would like you to come for the holidays. I know that you've been seeing someone, and we think it's about time you introduced us.

Your father and I have been feeling the strain of our estrangement with you. We have talked this situation over many times and feel we have been too hard on you. You were, after all, trying to save us...and you did. I believe it's time we get to know you again.

Please consider this invitation seriously. With your abilities, we know you can make the trip with ease. Bring your young man as well. There is a lot to see and do here, and you don't have to stay with us the entire trip.

Please come. We miss you.

Love,

Mom and Dad

Hermione was shocked when a tear fell onto the letter and distorted the word love. She watched the ink run down the page.

They wanted to see her, but this would seriously compromise her time with Severus...and she needed to be with him as much as possible during the holidays. Would he go with her? She could not go alone and not see him, and she couldn't say no to this olive branch her parents were extending. Having Severus had helped soothe the raw emotions she had toward them. It had helped her to ignore the pain of their rejection and live a reasonably full life. It had been more than ten months since she'd last seen them. When they'd written to tell her they were going back to Australia permanently, she'd assumed they meant to leave her behind for good. She had resigned herself to concentrating on school and Severus and had pushed the emotions deep inside, totally ignoring their existence. After all, it had been her fault. She couldn't blame them.

She finally got up, laid the letter on the bedside table, and crawled fully dressed into her bed and pulled the covers over her head. She cried herself to sleep. By the end of the week, she'd chewed her nails until her fingers were bloody. On Friday night, she knew she would have to see Severus and ask him if he would go with her. Would he be willing to change the plans he'd hinted at in his last letter? She Apparated to Diagon Alley and sent an owl to Headmistress McGonagall asking if she could come to Hogwarts on Saturday. After the owl left, she returned to her apartment. It was still three weeks till the holiday; but she knew if she was going to be able to concentrate on her work, she would have talk to Severus soon.

Several tense hours later, an owl was pecking at her window. She ran and let the owl in and took the letter from its beak. She gave it a piece of her morning biscuit, and it flew away. She turned the envelope over and broke the wax seal.

Hermione,

Of course you may come. You are welcome here any time. Severus has to accompany the students on their trip to Hogsmeade tomorrow, but I will ask Hagrid to bring them back. You can have him all to yourself Saturday and into Sunday, if you so wish it. I'm glad you are coming; he's been rather grumpy and short tempered. I'm not sure we would have made in another three weeks without a grand roar. I will ask him to meet you in The Three Broomsticks at noon. I won't tell him whom he's meeting, and I may come in Animagus form and be there to watch the reunion. It gives me such a lift to see him happy.

Minerva

Hermione clutched the letter to her chest. She was going to see Severus. She smiled at Minerva's last two lines. It made her happy to see him happy, as well. She found her heart was pounding with excitement and anxiety at the same time. She tossed the letter on top of her mother's and ran to bathe and pack.

She Apparated to Hogsmeade about 11:30 and went into The Three Broomsticks and got the back booth. None of the students had arrived, for which she was grateful. She really hadn't wanted anyone to recognize her and come to talk. She felt a slight brushing against her leg and looked down to see a large tabby rubbing against her leg. It winked at her and went to stand behind a potted plant.

Hermione chuckled and whispered, "Hello, Minerva. Thank you for letting me come."

The cat gave a soft meow in reply.

It wasn't long before the room started to fill up with students and instructors. Hermione hid in the shadows of the booth and sipped her butterbeer a bit nervously, wishing she'd ordered a fire whiskey to calm her nerves.

Severus had really never lost his temper with her, but she also knew he hated surprises in front of an audience. She was just about ready to get up and take her coat and go outside to head him off when the door darkened and there he stood. She watched as he surveyed the room, looking for the customer that had some mysterious package for Minerva.

He ventured further into the room, a nasty scowl on his face. He asked the bartender, "Professor McGonagall asked me to pick up a package here. Do you know anything about it?"

The bartender shrugged. "Sorry, Professor Snape. I wasn't told ena...thing." He turned and went back to his work.

Severus ventured further into the room, and Hermione stood, her heart beating against her chest. Her "Severus" came out in a strangled whisper.

His head whipped in her direction, and she saw his mouth fall open. "Hermione?" he mouthed. Then he was running toward her. He picked her up as she threw her arms around his neck, swinging her around as his lips descended onto hers. He kissed her so thoroughly that she sagged in his arms, and he had to support her.

Suddenly Severus realized the room of at least a hundred people was dead silent. He froze and then drew back, looking around as Hermione sagged against him.

He saw shock and disbelief on many faces and a few amused smiles. He looked back into Hermione's face and saw her fear. He knew this could go two ways: He could duck his head and leave her standing there or just get it over with. The public would have had to find out about them sooner or later.

He spied Minerva hiding behind the plant and gave her a withering glare that promised retribution. Inside he felt relieved. He stood up a bit straighter and pulled Hermione against him, feeling that she'd finally recovered her legs.

"Well," he said, clearing his voice, "Perhaps you would like to join me in a drink to my beautiful fiancée. Barkeep, a drink for everyone."

The room erupted into pandemonium. Everyone was talking at once about the amazing revelation.

Severus looked down and asked, "Hermione, what are you doing here?" He held her tightly against him as if he was afraid she would vanish.

"I needed to see you. Something's come up," she said, encouraged that he wasn't frowning at her for having to reveal their relationship in this very public place.

"Are you okay?" he asked, looking her over as if he would be able to see what the problem was.

"I'm fine. I just need to talk to you about vacation..." Her words trailed off as drinks were stuffed into their hands and a sea of faces pressed close.

A voice behind them commanded silence, and the whole room ceased talking.

Hermione turned to see Professor McGonagall back in human form and holding her glass up. "I wish it known that I was aware of this relationship, which started after Hermione left school. I want to wish Professor Snape and his fiancée the very best."

She raised her glass. There was a clinking of at least 100 glasses, and then they all drank.

"Now go on back to your own entertainment, and leave these two in peace."

The students sighed, and they backed away. Headmistress McGonagall was not one to cross. Nor was Professor Snape.

Severus guided Hermione back into the booth from which she'd come and slid in beside her. He glared at McGonagall, who had slid into the opposite seat, and said, "Minerva, you could have warned me."

She grinned at him. "That wouldn't have been as much fun. I'm an old woman, Severus. We have to get our fun when we can."

"Well, this will be in the papers by tomorrow," he said distastefully.

Hermione gasped. "Harry!"

"Indeed," he said. "I'd hoped we could avoid his reaction until after you finished this year."

"Me, too," Hermione said, staring down at her ruined hands.

Severus glanced down and saw the sore fingers and chewed nails. "Hermione, what's wrong?" Concern clouded his voice.

Minerva handed over a key. "It's for a room upstairs. Go around to the side entrance, and Rosmerta will let you in."

Severus took the key and said, "Thank you, Minerva. Can you keep the crowds from following?"

Minerva said, "Of course. Disillusion yourselves outside the door, and I will bar the way." She got up and headed for the door.

Severus nodded. Worried, he grabbed Hermione's hand and they followed her. They ignored the questions and comments as they made their way through the long room, and then they slipped out the door into the winter sunlight.

Severus gave a twitch of his hand, and Hermione felt the spell of Disillusionment Charm cover them. She gripped his hand tightly, and they slipped around the side of the building. Rosmerta stood holding a door open. When she felt them brush past her, she closed it.

"Come," she said, guiding them through a long, dark, wood-paneled hall. She stopped before the regular stairs and pushed a panel on the wall. A door slid open, and a smaller set of stairs greeted them. "It's a secluded apartment. Stay as long as you wish."

Severus let the spell go and he said, "Thank you, Rosmerta," as he pulled Hermione quickly up the stairs. The door slid closed silently behind them. There was a small landing at the top of the stairs, and a thick wooden door was on the other side. Severus slipped the key in the lock, pushing the door open. After they went through it, he shoved it closed with a bang and locked and warded it.

He turned to Hermione, who was looking rather ashamed. "Please tell me what's wrong. You're scaring me."

Tears leaked from her eyes and ran down her face. "I'm sorry. I handled this all wrong. I wanted to surprise you, and I didn't realize it would only compound our problems."

"What problems?" He picked her up and carried her to the bed and laid her down, crawling in with her. They usually did their best talking in bed. Once they were settled among the pillows and he was holding her tightly against him, he demanded, "Tell me."

She took a ragged breath. "My mother wants me to come to Australia for Christmas."

Severus took the news with dread. He needed to spend time with her. And he knew it was the same for her. Could they take months more of separation?

"Oh," he said flatly. He took a deep breath and said, "You must go, Hermione. They may not ask again."

"I know, but you had plans. I don't want to disappoint you, Severus," she cried.

He held her against him. His heart nearly stopped. He was terribly disappointed, but they would somehow make it. And after this year, she wouldn't have to leave him ever again.

"They want you to come, too. I hate to ask you to meet them when things aren't right with them." She buried her face against his frock coat.

Severus felt his heart rate increase. "They want me to come?" Suddenly, he felt so relieved he didn't care where they were as long as they spent time together.

"Yes." Her voice still had dread in it.

He pulled her up across his chest so he could peer into her face. "Hermione, I don't care where we are as long as we have some time together."

He saw relief flood her face, and her mouth covered his in a hungry kiss. Pulling back, she sniffed. "I'm so afraid to face them again. They were so angry with me."

"I know, but they want you to come, and they want to meet me. That's a good sign," he said. "Are you afraid they will be so shocked over our relationship that you will lose them again?"

She nodded. "Severus, we must make them see how happy we are together. They just have to accept you. My future is you, and no one will change my mind on that." Her face reflected her fear but also her determination.

"I can see why you're so...what is the term you use?...freaked out. But, Hermione, never be afraid to talk to me. I will always do what's best for you."

She laid her cheek against his shoulder. "I'm sorry. I do need to let go of my fears. I just don't want to be faced with your anger ever again. It nearly undid me when I was a child."

Severus felt heartsick; he knew her fear was valid. He'd been horrid to her when she was his student. It was a miracle that she was in love with him, and he had no idea how to take her fears away. He could do nothing but love her and hope one day she would let the past go completely. He knew he sometimes was afraid something would take this happiness away. He understood her fear of seeing her parents. She wanted their love so badly. She wanted them to forgive her for stealing their memories and their choices. He knew he could endanger this chance by just being who he was. He suddenly realized she'd fallen asleep. She must have been emotionally exhausted.

He summoned the blanket and covered them and let himself sleep, too. He had been running on pure force of will lately.

Tiny kisses against his eyelids woke him, and he stared up into Hermione's eyes. They were so close they were all he could focus on. The corners wrinkled a bit as she smiled down at him. "You're way overdressed, Severus." He was glad she didn't apologize for falling asleep.

"I am?" he said. A smile creased his eyes. He could feel her fingers already working the buttons on his badly creased frock coat.

Somehow she had got about 10 buttons open and a few on his shirt. She pressed a kiss to his warm flesh at the base of his neck.

"Hmm, that's nice," he said as his arms encircled her. One slid over her back and one eased down to squeeze her bum. "I've missed you so much."

"Probably not as much as I did you," she said, continuing to peel button after button from its hole.

He gave her another squeeze. "These Muggle jeans might as well be made of steel. You should wear more skirts; they can be lifted away from desired body parts."

Hermione giggled, crawling off of him. "This will be faster if we undress ourselves."

"Yes, it will be," he drawled sexily, "but maybe not as much fun." He got off the bed and started to pull at his own buttons rather quickly.

"We can save the fun for later, Severus. We have all night and a good deal of tomorrow. I want you now!"

He laughed. "Always, my wanton girl. It's one of the many reasons I love you." He peeled his coat and shirt off and then started to work at his belt. He stood letting his pants fall to the ground.

She was already pulling her jeans down over her legs. "I never get enough of you, Severus." She reached up to release her bra, and he stepped up and unhooked it for her as he pulled her close to kiss her.

He picked her up and laid her on the bed. She wore only sexy lace panties in pale green.

"Nice color," he said as he pushed his boxers down and crawled in beside her.

Hermione surrendered herself to his touch. His fingers slowly slid over her breasts, and then his lips sucked and teased them. He kissed a trail over them and then down her stomach. She laughed when he took the band of her panties by his teeth and pulled them down over her legs.

She urged him up, and he covered her body with his. She caressed him as they kissed over and over.

His hands ignited her passion. She opened herself to him, and he finally pressed into her, sheathing himself in her fiery warmth.

She urged him to move, and he did, pounding into her with need. She clung to him, pressing against him with equal strength and desire until they climaxed, sending them both over the edge of sanity. They clutched each other as their breathing slowed.

"Severus," she breathed, "it only gets better." She sucked in air to help her calm her beating heart.

"Yes, it does." He slid to the side, drawing her tightly against him. After a bit, he said, "I don't think I would have survived the next three weeks. Minerva was about to give me the boot."

Hermione giggled. "Actually she wanted me to meet you at The Three Broomsticks so she could watch the reunion. She said she loves to see you happy."

Severus caressed her breast. "She said that?"

"She loves you, you know?" Hermione said as she ran her hands over his chest.

"I know. She's like my great aunt. We've been through a lot over the years. She's never been afraid to tell me like it is. Sometimes it was hard to hear, but I always listened. She's not afraid of me. I respect that."

"I'm not really afraid either; it's more that I hate disappointing you. I know you wanted to be alone with me. I know you already made plans."

"Plans can be changed, Hermione. Your parents are important."

"Thank you." She hugged him tighter. "Severus, have you ever been to Australia?"

"No. Have you?" he asked, his hand sliding down over her stomach.

"No, it will be an adventure for both of us." She fell silent as he slipped his fingers into her moist warmth.

Chapter 13: Australia: Part 1

Chapter 13 of 20

On her last night at Hogwarts, Hermione goes to say goodbye to her grumpy, cruel Potions professor.

Too soon, Hermione found herself back in her apartment. The weekend was over, and she had classes the next morning. She went to get her writing materials and her mother's letter. But try as she might, she couldn't find it. She nearly crawled under the bed, thinking it had blown out from under her letter from Minerva, but she didn't find it.

She finally shrugged. It had to have fallen someplace. She had the envelope and the address, so she dismissed it from her thoughts and sat down to write her mother. She and Severus had decided to Portkey to Australia on December 23. They would visit for a few days, do some traveling, and leave Australia the day after New Year's. As long as they had a lot of private time, she would be happy. Hogwarts resumed on January 3. They had laughed as they made their plans, and neither of them had voiced any reservations about how the visit would go. Would there be reconciliation and acceptance? Or would the relationship between Hermione and her parents be totally severed?

Hermione threw herself into the last project of the year; she worked almost 18 hours a day on the potion she was creating. Her paper was written after many nights of research and preparation. There were times when she'd come from her shower to get something...a brush, a hair tie, or a garment...only to find it gone. She thought she was losing it. She chalked it up to the disaster her rooms were in and overwork, making her forgetful. She counted the hours until she finally handed in the paper and her potion samples.

She used her wand to put everything away, stuffing it into drawers and pushing it under the bed. Severus only planned to be in her apartment for a few minutes. She'd packed last night and prepared herself for Severus, doing all those things she usually didn't have time for.

This morning she'd made herself sleep late and had gotten up for a quick shower and to dress carefully for him. She had transfigured a spoon into a new hairbrush and was brushing her hair when there was a knock. She ran and opened the door.

"Severus," she cried, throwing her arms around him.

He caught her up and held her to him, "Hermione." He breathed in the scent of her.

They backed into the room, and the door shut behind them as they kissed. She finally stepped back and he smiled. "You're beautiful." She was dressed a bit conservatively but still ravishing. He knew the conservative part was for her parents' sake.

She brushed a curl off to the side of her face and glanced nervously at her bag. "I suppose we'd best get going. The Portkey will leave in eight minutes.

She moved away to get her bag, and Severus caught an odd scent that was somehow familiar. "Has anyone else been here?" he asked.

"No, I don't think so. Maybe the super came in to fix that pipe in the bathroom. I haven't paid attention."

Severus nodded. He grabbed her bag from her and shrunk it and added it to the coat pocket where his was. She grabbed his hand, and they left the flat and went quickly down the hall the stairs and out the front door. They ran down the street to the Apparation point and Apparated to a hillside outside the city. A tin can sat before them. Hand-in-hand, they stooped to touch it. It whisked them away seconds later.

They landed on a small beach with lots of rocky formations around them to shield them from being seen. A small opening led them to a low cliff with stone steps. When they climbed them, they found themselves on a street lined with houses and small gardens.

Hermione held Severus hand tightly; she was so nervous that she was literally shaking.

"Hermione, they are your parents, and they love you. If they didn't want to see you, they wouldn't have asked you to come and bring me."

"But they don't know it's *you*," she said.

He leaned close and said, "Well, if you haven't noticed, I'm a bit tense as well. I know this might be hard for them. But I will do my utmost to show them how much I love you." He kissed her gently and turned her so they could look out over the ocean.

"It's an incredible color, isn't it?" she said.

"Yes," he answered quietly, letting the sound and motion of the water calm them.

Finally, Hermione drew a map out of her pocket, and they followed it up several streets. A huge U-shaped curved cul-de-sac greeted them, and they counted the houses and checked the number. "Sixth house on the right," Hermione read. "It has a white picket fence, and it's white with yellow around the windows."

They walked up and stood before the gate. It had a nice cheery look and flowers under the front windows. A wisp of lace curtain could be seen on the edges of the windows. Severus grabbed the gate and pulled it open and stepped back so she could walk past him. He heard her take a shaky deep breath, and he sucked in one himself, praying that they would react like she was the prodigal son returning home. He did not have to wait any longer.

The door was flung open, and a small lady with blonde hair with wisps of gray at her temples came out crying, "Hermione!" She drew Hermione into a hug, and Severus saw that both women had tears running down their faces.

Severus was shocked to see that she looked like an older Hermione...maybe late 50s. She was still beautiful. He hoped that his Hermione would look that way when they were old and graying.

A man came out more slowly. His steel gray hair was thinning, and his eyes were moist with unshed tears. He greeted Severus with a nod. A crease of confused recognition passed over his face. Then he turned his eyes on Hermione.

Hermione released her mother and cried, "Dad!"

The older man enveloped her in a firm strong hug. "Baby," he whispered.

Severus watched this all play out as he stood several feet away, not sure what to do.

Hermione finally broke away from her dad and grabbed her mother's hand, still clinging to her dad's hand. She turned them toward him.

"Mother, Dad, this is my fiancé, Severus Snape. Severus, these are my parents, June and Paxton Granger."

Hermione's parents looked at him, taking in his age first, and then his name seemed to register. "Isn't he the man who helped Harry and you? The spy?" her dad asked. The man stepped forward to shake his hand. "Welcome to Australia, Severus."

Severus felt himself let out a deep breath he'd been holding; that had not been the first thing he'd expected out of her father's mouth. Severus said, "Thank you, it's good to meet you, sir, ma'am."

Hermione stared at her father; she hadn't expected that either. "Yes, Dad. He was the man who was a spy and helped us so much even though we didn't realize that for so long."

Hermione's mom was now smiling at him and reaching her hand out. "Pleased to meet you, Severus. Please, why don't we go inside? I've made tea."

Hermione let go of her parents and came to him, slipping her arm around his waist and guiding him to follow her parents. She had a huge smile on her face, and Severus leaned to plant a kiss on her forehead. "I told you it would be alright," he whispered. But secretly he said a thank you prayer.

The house was homey and modern. It was an open design: The living room, dining room and kitchen were separated only by space and furniture. It was sunny and bright. There was a staircase up to a second floor and a hall toward the back of the house.

Hermione's mom led them to sliding glass doors in the dining area, and they went out onto a small patio that had a table and chairs. The garden housed many flowers and trees. Hermione's mom fussed about them, motioning to chairs and busying herself with pouring the tea and offering them chocolate biscuits.

Hermione's dad seemed to just be studying Severus with that curious look. He finally asked, "Weren't you Hermione's Potions teacher?"

Severus said, "Yes, sir, I was. But this relationship began after Hermione left school." They had agreed long ago to tell no one about the lap sitting or the kiss that last night at Hogwarts.

Hermione broke in to explain, "Actually, Daddy, I initiated it. I came to him the last night at Hogwarts to ask him for a recommendation for a Potions master to take me on as an apprentice. He offered to teach me himself once I finished the university. Professor Snape had no idea I wanted more from him, and I didn't either that night at first. It was magical..." She left her voice trail off.

Hermione's dad looked at them for a full, rapid, heart-beating minute and then nodded. "I see. Is it your practice to succumb to your students' desires?" His eyes were stern, and his voice was guarded.

"Hardly, Mr. Granger. Your daughter is very persuasive. For most of my life, because of my duplicity, I wasn't able to have a relationship with anyone. You might say this relationship caught me by surprise as much as it did you and Mrs. Granger. But as I have come to know your daughter, I find that I love her very much, and I will take very good care of her."

Mr. Granger glanced at his wife, and somehow a message passed between them, though Severus couldn't see a signal. Then Mr. Granger smiled. Then he winked at Hermione and said, "My daughter has always been apt at getting what she wants. She has great courage." He reached out to give Hermione's hand a squeeze. Then he looked back at Severus. "Welcome to our family, Severus."

Everyone at the table relaxed. Severus saw Hermione's mom sag with relief. And he realized that no matter who Hermione had come home with, June Granger had forbidden him to mess it up. But he'd wanted to make them squirm. Severus could respect that. He grinned at Hermione as she beamed up at him and hugged him. Severus said, "Thank you, sir."

"Well, June and I want to repair the rift we have had with Hermione," he tried to explain.

Severus said, "Then you might wish to address her directly, sir. For your information, it's unlikely you would be alive today if Hermione had not taken the actions that she did. If you would like, I would be more than happy to take a walk and let you speak in private."

Hermione had taken his hand and was clinging to it for dear life.

Paxton Granger nodded, still looking at Severus. "You would know, I suppose."

Severus sighed and squeezed Hermione's hand. Obviously Paxton Granger was not as ready to forgive and forget as June was.

He decided not to take it as a criticism because he very much wanted to defuse this visit as much as possible for Hermione's sake.

"Yes, Paxton, I would know. I served under two difficult taskmasters for a long time. One handed out physical torture for his own pleasure. The other expected me to take that torture and not complain for the good of the cause. I shielded Mr. Potter...and by association your daughter...from a number of serious threats on their lives. I did what I had to do. It very nearly cost me my life." His hand went to his throat, and he could feel the scars beneath his collar. He supposed some of them showed because he saw Mr. Granger's eyes narrow. Severus turned to smile down at Hermione. "I would do it all again for your daughter. She's quite *forgiving* and loving. I assume she learned that through your teaching and demonstrations of love as she grew up." He could feel Hermione's hand trembling in his.

Paxton nodded. "I am sorry, Hermione. It's been more difficult for me to accept mind alterations than it has been for your mom. I love you, I do, and I ask you both to have patience with me." He glanced at his wife. "We both really want you to enjoy this time with us, and I will try very hard to contain my feelings."

Hermione said, "Please, Daddy, tell me what you feel. Let's get it out and discuss it all. I can tell you more about how it was, and Severus can tell you what he knew to be happening from inside Riddle's camp."

Hermione's mother's eyes were full of tears. Her hopes for a good visit seemed to be ruined. But she didn't say anything.

They sat for three hours till the sun started to wane and discussed. At times there were loud voices. At other times there were tears, but Severus held his temper by sheer force of will, using a few of the tricks he'd learned during the war. He would not be the cause of Hermione running out of this home. He knew if she did, she wouldn't come back. It was time to fix the situation. So with great patience and care, he told the Grangers what life was like back then and what Hermione had faced. He tried hard not to tell them too much about what he had been forced to do when he was a Death Eater. He didn't want to revisit those memories himself.

As the hours passed, Paxton Granger got quieter and quieter and just listened to the stories Hermione and Severus told him. As non-magic-folk some of the things they heard seemed almost like fantasy. Their worlds were separated by a huge gulf. But they could not deny the scars on Severus' neck or the things that had seemed to come

from nowhere and attack the Muggle world.

They moved into the house as the evening stretched into the later hours. Paxton finally seemed to sag with exhaustion and, Severus thought, resignation and understanding.

He looked at Hermione and held out his arms. She flew into them, and he cradled her on his lap. "I'm sorry, baby. I'm an old fool. You were right to do what you did," he soothed her as she cried.

Severus watched, slowly breathing out a sigh of relief. Perhaps this vacation could be salvaged. He felt fingers on his hand, and he looked into June Granger's eyes as she said, "Thank you, Severus."

He turned his hand and squeezed the older woman's hand. "You're quite welcome. I would do anything for Hermione."

Since they were all exhausted from a day of emotional upheaval, they ate a quick dinner in near silence and then June said, "Let me show you to your rooms."

Severus caught Hermione's eye and mouthed, "Rooms."

Hermione shrugged, her eyes begging him to not say anything.

He told Paxton goodnight and followed Hermione up the stairs.

June said, "Paxton's and my room is downstairs, so you will have the upper floor to yourselves. There are three rooms up here. She indicated the first one and said, "This one has a large bathroom. The other two have a bathroom two doors down."

"Mum, why did you get such a big house?" Hermione asked, peeking into the first room.

"Well, we had to have a house big enough for you and the grandchildren we hope to one day have visit, didn't we?" she said with a warm smile.

Hermione blinked back tears. "I thought you and Daddy had left me behind when you left England."

June stepped up and hugged her daughter again. "I know, I'm sorry. He was so angry and forbid me to see you. I knew it would take some time, and I did work on him. I'm sorry. I should have written to you. We've all made a lot of mistakes."

Hermione said, "I'm here now, Mum, and I think it's going to be fine. I understand what I did was bad. But I would do anything for you and Dad."

She hugged Hermione again. "I know, dear." She got a bit closer and whispered, "Now, I know you two sleep together, and I know you know a spell to soundproof this floor. Where you sleep is no concern of mine, Severus, but at least make the other room look like you stayed in it in case Paxton decides to help me clean up afterwards." She grinned and squeezed their hands and then retreated down the stairs.

Hermione sagged against Severus and put her arms about his neck. "Thank you, Severus. You were amazing today."

"I love you," was all he said. He guided her into the bigger room and used his wand to lock and ward the door. "Let's take a quick shower and get you to bed. I think you've had more than enough for today." He could see she was running on reserves that were about to give out.

He guided her into the bathroom. They found, to their delight, that there was a large Jacuzzi tub and a big shower. He helped her undress, and then he undressed quickly and stepped it to the warm shower. He washed her quickly as she stood drained, hanging on to his shoulder as he stooped to wash her feet. Afterwards, he barely dried her off because she was already falling asleep on the edge of the bed. He smiled down at her and picked her up and put her into the bed. He crawled in behind her, and she snuggled back against him, spooning herself against him.

Lisa, thank you so much for all the beta work you do for me. I couldn't do it without you.

Chapter 14: Australia: Part 2

Chapter 14 of 20

On her last night at Hogwarts, Hermione goes to say goodbye to her grumpy, cruel Potions professor.

Hermione woke the next morning feeling more hopeful than she had in ages. She thought about the discussions from the day before and knew they might still get some resentment from her father; but his feelings were out in the open, and perhaps time would heal it all. She felt Severus' body pressed against hers. His breathing was still steady. She slipped away from him to use the loo. When she came out, he was standing next to the door with his eyes still shut. He squinted an eye open and bent and brushed her forehead with his lips. "I'll be right out."

She crawled back into the bed, snuggling down under the covers and facing his side of the bed.

Soon he came out and crawled in next to her. "Hmm," he murmured as she kissed his lips. He slipped his arm around her, drawing her closer, and hooked a leg over hers. "Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, peppering his face and eyelids with soft kisses. "Thank you for being so reserved with my dad. I know it must have taken a huge effort to not strangle him a time or two." She felt his hand caress her breast softly, and she pressed herself into his hand.

"It was necessary to give you the best chance at reconciliation. I know when to keep my mouth shut. I've had practice with masters."

"I'm sure you do. How about performing some of the mastery on me right now?" she asked, her voice becoming sultry with sexual desire. She gave him a searing kiss. "We've been together nearly 22 hours and have not made love."

He answered by pushing her onto her back. He proceeded to kiss her and then work his way down to tease and nip at her breasts. His hands caressed her as she caressed him. One of her hands was buried in his hair as the other slipped downwards to grip him and guide him in.

He buried himself in her moist warmth and stared down into her eyes as he began to move. He loved to see her eyes grow larger and then glaze over with their passion as he brought them to a mutual orgasm. She clapped her legs round him and clung to him, crying out his name softly.

He slumped to the bed, drawing her to his side, and flipped to his back. "If we weren't here, I'd keep you in bed all day."

"I'm sorry. That does sound lovely," she said, nuzzling his breast.

"Don't be, my love. This was important. By the way, I didn't see any decorations downstairs. This is Christmas, is it not?"

"Mom was waiting for us to get here. I assume we will decorate together, tonight."

There was a knock on the door. Severus stiffened and then bound into the bathroom.

Hermione giggled and lowered the wards. "Yes?" she called.

Her mother opened the door and peered into the room timidly. "Hermione, breakfast is ready." Her eyes scanned the room.

"He's hiding in the bathroom," she said. "I wasn't sure if it was dad."

June laughed. "He was afraid to come up and get you. He knows you sleep together, but he doesn't want to see evidence of it. Mess up one of the guest rooms to keep his fantasy going."

Hermione nodded, still holding the sheet to her neck. "We'll be down in a few minutes, Mom."

June nodded and closed the door.

Severus came from the bathroom, already wearing his boxers and an undershirt.

Hermione slipped out of the bed. "I didn't know you could move that fast." She laughed.

"We'll if it had been your father, I'd rather not get my nose broken again. One old man's anger is enough for me." His voice was bitter.

"I'm sorry, Severus." She slipped her arms around him, and he cheered himself up by giving her firm bum a groping until she laughed and twisted away from him to grab a quick shower and dress.

"Hermione, I'm going use the shower down the hall to save time and pacify your dad."

"Thank you," she called over her shoulder.

Fifteen minutes later they were dressed and heading down the stairs. Hermione found they were eating out on the patio again. It was a warm summer day.

Severus had dressed in kaki pants and a gray, short-sleeved shirt. His hair was tied back with a black ribbon.

Paxton was coming from the kitchen with a pitcher of orange juice and a tray of glasses. He bent to give Hermione a kiss on the cheek and said, "Good morning, baby." Then he said, "Severus, I trust you slept well."

"Very well, sir. Thank you. Is there anything I can help you with?"

"No, please take a seat. This is the last of it." He set the tray onto the table.

Severus observed, "The food looks wonderful. I am starving."

Hermione hugged her mom and took a seat. "Yes, I'm famished as well. Do you use this table for nearly all your meals?"

June nodded. "Yes, it's so warm this time of year, and the garden is lovely."

"May I ask who does the gardening?" Severus asked to make conversation.

"Paxton takes care of the trees, shrubs, and the succulents. I plant the flowers."

"I would appreciate a tour later. I see some very fine specimens of species I could take clippings from, if you would allow it."

Paxton seemed pleased. "Of course, Severus. After we eat, we can take a look. I think June wants Hermione to decide which decorations we will put up this afternoon. Why don't we let them do that while we take a look? You can tell me what I have here. I honestly put out some of them because they are an attractive grouping."

"Well, from here I see some interesting combinations. I haven't studied the plants of Australia much. I use a few that I know come from here for my work. Nearly every plant can be of use in my line of work."

"You can say Potions, Severus. June and I want to be more involved in Hermione's world. We wish to learn more about our daughter now, and we want a more open relationship." He was addressing Severus but looking into his daughter's eyes. "We wish to be more prepared should danger ever arise again."

Hermione stared back at her dad. Was this another put down because of what she had done to them?

But then he gave her a warm smile.

"Next time, we go into hiding together. We don't want to lose our daughter anytime soon. Speaking for June as well as myself, we also don't want to lose out on the joys of grandchildren."

"Dad!" Hermione exclaimed, blushing. "It's a bit early to pull out the grandchildren card."

"I realize that, Hermione, but you will give us hope?" he asked.

Severus said, "Once Hermione has finished her apprenticeship and has established her career, there will be time to think of children. But that might be four or five years in the future."

Hermione grabbed Severus' hand under the table and squeezed it. She was warmed by the fact that he wanted children in the future but would wait for her to be more ready. Four or five years didn't quite seem enough for her, but she knew he was not getting any younger.

"You did say you were engaged, so grandchildren are inevitable...right?" June asked, pouring herself another glass of orange juice.

"Yes, Mom, we are going to get married after I finish my second year this coming June. Severus feels it would be best if we were married since we will be living at Hogwarts together. I know Headmistress McGonagall feels the same way."

"And how do you feel about it?" she asked, handing Severus a tray of bread.

Severus sighed inwardly. This situation might not be comfortable for some days. He had never had to deal with anyone's parents; it was tedious.

Hermione said, "I would prefer to finish my schooling, but I understand their point of view, and I am looking forward to being Severus' wife. I just can't promise children for a few years. I want to finish my two years of study under Severus and get a couple years of teaching Potions out of the way. A baby can be wonderful but very time consuming."

Paxton asked, "You're going to teach Potions at Hogwarts? What will you be doing, Severus? I can't imagine you'd want your wife taking your job from you."

Severus explained, "I will be taking the Headmaster's job once Hermione is done with her apprenticeship. Minerva wishes to retire from the position and has offered me the job. I am already the deputy Headmaster in training." He decided against telling them he had already been Headmaster for a time. It would bring up too many things to explain...like being on the enemy's side.

Paxton's eyes seemed to take on a new light of pride. "My son-in-law will be the Headmaster of an exclusive private school. I like that. It's something to share with my golfing buddies."

"Daddy, you're still playing golf? I'd forgotten you were taking lessons a few years back."

Paxton put his napkin down and sat back, apparently finished with his meal. "I love it, and it gets me out of your mother's hair a few hours a week. There are some wonderful golf courses in this area and the neighboring city. Do you play, Severus?"

Severus looked confused. "Golf ... hmm, isn't that the game with the sticks and the small ball you hit from a distance into a tiny hole?"

Paxton smiled in amusement. "Yes, I forget how isolated your world is with ours at times. Why don't you come with me this morning? We can try the practice field. We'll take the garden tour this afternoon," he said, dismissing the garden with a wave of his hand.

Severus groaned inside, looking longingly at the plants. Hermione squeezed his hand rather painfully. "Well, I can at least observe, sir. I do not think I would do well at that sort of game."

"Oh, you'll enjoy it. Sunshine and good air. It will be good for you."

June stood and gave Hermione's shoulder a squeeze. "We can have some girl time. I wanted to have you help me get the decorations out of the shed. The tree is in the shed, too, out of the sun. I didn't want the needles to dry."

Paxton stood and said, "Come on, Severus. Let's get out there before it gets too warm. I have an extra pair of golf shoes you can adjust to fit yourself."

Severus stood and drew Hermione to her feet. His eyes implored her, *Do I have to go?*

Hermione reached up and kissed his cheek. "Have fun, I shall miss you."

He sighed and followed after Hermione's father.

June watched them vanish into the house. "Come on, Hermione. Let's sort through the shed for the decorations. I'm sure there are things we can just get rid of. I don't know why I didn't do it when we moved."

"It hardly seems like Christmas without the freezing rain or snow," Hermione observed, already missing Severus.

"Well, I for one am quite happy with the warmth. I ache much less. Business has been good for your father here. But I really think he will retire in a few years and just enjoy our lives here. Personally, Hermione, you couldn't have sent us to a better place. It's wonderful here. Why we stayed in that bitter cold place for so long is beyond me. I guess we didn't know any better. It was home. But I can say I'm very happy here. With your abilities to travel like you do, it really doesn't matter where in the world we are, does it?"

Hermione, warmed by her mother's enthusiasm for the place, hugged her as they walked across the yard to the shed. They entered the darkness of the shed. Her mother pulled a light cord, and a single bulb lit the shed with dim light. Hermione instinctively pulled her wand and said, "*Lumos*." The wand light brightened the room considerably.

She realized her mother was looking at her with wide eyes.

"Sorry," she said and started to lower the wand.

"Leave it, Hermione. I dare say it will help us find what we want easier. Your dad and I really want to be a part of your world...not just because of grandchildren but because we love you, and we want to support what your life is and the things you have accomplished there. You're a brilliant woman and witch, and we have never praised you for all that."

Hermione let the wand sag at her side and enveloped her mom in a hug. "Mum, I'm so glad Severus and I came." They cried a bit and hugged, overcome with emotion. Hermione finally drew back and relit her wand. "I hope Dad goes easy on Severus. He's really a wonderful man, Mum. I love him so much. Despite our age difference, we are perfect for each other. We are interested in all the same things. He's very well read, even in Muggle literature. He's brilliant and inventive. We can talk for hours."

"And make love for hours, I'd imagine," June said, bending to open an old cardboard box.

"Mum!" Hermione felt her whole body flush with heat.

June only laughed. "Well, that's rather important in a marriage...at least when you're as young as you are. He's quite handsome, isn't he?"

Hermione fanned herself, feeling the sweat pour over her forehead. The shed's heat seemed to be overwhelming. She laughed nervously and said, "I have no complaints. He's quite wonderful in whatever goal he sets."

June nodded as she pulled a string of lights from the box. "I quite thought he might be. You look so happy...happier than I've ever seen you, Hermione. I always wondered, with your bookishness and intelligence, if you would find a man that would be your equal. It appears you have. I was rather afraid you'd settle for Ron, and you and I both know it wouldn't have worked. He may be a best friend, but he's not husband material for you. He'd have wanted at least six kids, and I know you and Severus aren't likely to have more than one or two."

Hermione was so pleased that her mom was getting her. "Thanks, Mum. I think Severus understands that a child or two is all I will want. I think his life has been so hard that he never expected to fall in love. He's a precious, special man who's had a lot of bad things to deal with in his life, but he went through those years with dignity and loyalty for the side of good. He's an amazing man with an amazing story, and it makes him all the more thankful for what he has now."

June said, "I'm happy for you, and I'm so glad you both have come through that war and can make a life. Now grab that box and we will take them to the patio and sort it all out."

Severus rode in near silence to the golf course. He looked out the car windows with interest, trying not to show his nervousness at being in a car. The thing could easily become a twisted mass of metal on this busy highway.

Paxton finally broke the silence. "Listen, Severus. I'm sorry about yesterday."

Severus waved his hand dismissively. "I understood, sir. You had a lot to hear and a lot to say. Just, please know that Hermione's actions in the past were only because she loved you so much."

"No man likes having the say in his life taken from him, does he?" the man stated.

"No, I can definitely attest to that." Severus admitted.

"Son, I hope you won't be angry, but I read about your history in the wizarding papers. I was rather shocked to find out you were with my daughter. But I can see you're a fine man, and you adore her. I can see you will have the strength and fortitude to keep her safe. I only ask you continue to make her happy," he said, guiding the car into a parking lot.

Severus waited until he'd pulled into a parking lot and stopped. "I will do everything in my power to keep her safe and happy. You have no idea how she brings light to my life."

"I will ask that you send us a Portkey for the wedding. June and I want to be there," he said adamantly.

"I will see to it personally, Paxton," Severus promised.

They got out of the car and retrieved the clubs from the trunk. Severus shouldered the bag for the older man and followed him to a row of people who were standing near the little balls that seemed to be resting on a small stand. Severus eyed them with trepidation.

Paxton laughed. "You'll get the hang of it. It's really quite a skill mathematically, angles and all. With your intelligence, it should be no problem. Oh, and Severus, I know you're sleeping with Hermione, but be discreet for June's sake."

Severus eyebrow climbed, but he didn't say anything besides, "Thank you, sir. I will be careful." He turned his head so he could roll his eyes in private. Now about this game... he wasn't too sure as the man next to him hauled off and with a crack sent the ball many yards before him to land only inches from the tiny hole.

Hermione laughed when Severus sagged onto the bed in the afternoon and took a nap. The morning's fun had exhausted him mentally and physically. The sun seemed to sap his energy, and the tension of being with Hermione's father on his own wore him out. Though Paxton had been nothing but encouraging and supportive, as he'd missed ball after ball or sent them into sand traps. The time change was getting to both of them, and they had begged for a nap.

The tree was decorated, and they had a couple hours before a late dinner. They both dropped off immediately, wrapped in each other's arms.

Hermione was awakened by the gentle caress of Severus' fingers against her arm. "Is it time yet?" she groaned, wishing for more sleep.

He murmured sexily, "No, I'd say we have about 45 minutes. Care for a romp?" He kissed her, letting his tongue slide over hers in a slow lazy manner.

"You have the wards and Muffliato in place?" she asked, letting her hand roam over his chest.

"Of course. I daresay I will not be caught shagging their daughter by either of them. By the way, your father told me it was okay for us to sleep together...just don't let June know."

Hermione, awake now, laughed, throwing her head back against the pillows. Severus covered half her body with his. She lay back as he leisurely kissed her body, and she caressed his hair as she hooked one leg about his waist.

He slid further down her body, and she clutched at the sheets, no longer able to touch him. He kissed a trail over her legs and into her thighs and then bent her knees. She opened herself to him. Her thighs quivered with her need for him by the time he was done kissing her with feather light touches. His fingers slid softly over her nub, teasing her. When he plunged his tongue in, she shrieked and clapped her hand over her mouth. As if reading her mind, he murmured, "They won't hear you; let it go." He went back to making love to her, determined to leave her boneless. His tongue plunged in and out, and he nipped and sucked at her nub till she bucked against him and cried out his name again as she shattered into a powerful orgasm. The world went dim with her passion. She never tired of oral sex. She loved the care he took to make her cum so strongly that she almost fainted each time.

He moved up, and she grasped his hard shaft, guiding him in and clinging to him as he plunged hard over and over into her. His ability to forget the world and just be with her never ceased to amaze her. She stared into his face. His eyes were closed, and his body arched above hers. He was magnificent. Her hands roamed over his back, feeling his muscles tighten and relax. Her fingernails dug light streaks into his back. She was proud to be able to give Severus Snape so much pleasure. His body spasmed over hers, and she let herself go to experience a second orgasm. "Her...mio...ne," he groaned, slipping to her side. He drew her close, kissing her softly a few times, and then let her rest against his heaving chest. She listened to his rapid heartbeat until he calmed. His hand was caressing her side gently.

"I could lose myself in you," he whispered.

"I feel the same way," she said, pressing a kiss to his chest.

He sighed, his lips pressing together for a moment. He rubbed at his eyes and said, "I wish they weren't waiting for us. I'd be content to just lay here with you the rest of the night. Tea filled me up enough."

She let her fingers run through the dark hair on his chest. "It's only a few more days, and then we can go home and shag each other silly for the rest of the holidays."

"I'm looking forward to that." He grinned.

Hermione finally pushed against his chest and moved off the bed. "Come on! Let's take a quick shower. We can dry off with our wands. We've got about 15 minutes."

Severus swung his legs off the bed and climbed to his feet. "Shall I use the shower down the hall?"

"No, come on. We can scrub each other's backs." In no time they were bathed and dressed.

Thank you, Lisa, for your beta work. I appreciate your willingness to keep doing me this huge service.

Chapter 15: Australia Part 3

Chapter 15 of 20

On her last night at Hogwarts, Hermione goes to say goodbye to her grumpy, cruel Potions professor.

Severus was wearing a pair of black dress pants and a white, button-down shirt with tiny strips of silver in the fabric. Hermione wore the red dress she'd bought for Bill and Fleur's wedding. She'd recovered her bag from the Malfoy mansion after the war.

Remembering Christmas Eve rituals, Hermione sucked in a breath and said, "Severus, they will want to go to the midnight service. Do you want to go with us?" She gathered the gifts they had brought and expanded them to normal size.

"Of course," he said, pulling her hand to his lips and kissing her knuckles. "I did enjoy last year, didn't I?" He took a bunch of the gifts and helped her carry them from the room.

"Yes, it's hard to believe we have been engaged an entire year already." They came into the living room. The tree was lit, and there was a stack of gifts under the tree.

Hermione's parents had been standing by the tree waiting for them, and they turned to them with smiles.

"Hermione, you look lovely," her mother said, coming to give her a kiss on the cheek. "And you look very handsome, Severus." She gave his arm a gentle pat. "Wow, look at all those gifts. I dare say this Christmas will be a fine one, but all we really needed was you both here...and you are." Her eyes shone with unshed tears of happiness.

Paxton said, "Let me help you with those, Severus." He took the gifts one by one from their arms and laid them among the other gifts. "Let's have dinner and then we can walk to church. It's only about five blocks, and the night air is so warm it will be a nice walk. There are some impressive yard decorations between here and the church."

"The typical Australian Christmas dinner is cold ham and turkey slices," June explained. "I thought we could make sandwiches. But fortunately, Christmas pudding is still the thing here...not that we would have to eat them, but I thought when in Australia ..." She laughed.

The table was spread with platters of turkey and ham and condiments for the sandwiches. They all took plates and filled them and sat in the living room with TV trays and ate and enjoyed the lights on the tree.

Later the couples, hand in hand, walked to the church, taking their time and admiring the many yards decorated with Christmas lights. Many had Christian themes and not just the Father Christmas theme.

The church service was long, but the music was beautiful. A choir sang, an organ played, and they all relaxed and enjoyed it. They walked home a different street to see more lights. Even though it was well past 1 a.m., there were still lights here and there, and other people were also out walking home.

Severus thought he might enjoy this warmer weather and thought Hermione's parents fortunate to be able to enjoy traditional Christmas things in a much warmer climate. It had been cold and snowy at Hogwarts, and the students had had a bad case of cabin fever before the holidays. He'd had to be extra vigilant for pranks, errant spells, and cavorting in hidden corners.

As they climbed into bed that night, Severus told Hermione, "I'm glad we came. This has been a productive vacation and quite relaxing in the warmth here."

Hermione smiled at him. "Thank you, Severus. I was worried that you wouldn't enjoy this at all. I knew how difficult and intolerant my parents could be. But they have changed, and I think we can finally be close again. I'm so happy and relieved."

They snuggled together and fell asleep.

On Christmas morning, Hermione struggled to open her eyes when her mother knocked on the door. "Hermione, breakfast is almost ready," she called.

"I'll be down in a few minutes, Mum." Hermione turned and nudged Severus awake.

He groaned, rolled toward her and said, "Didn't we just go to sleep?"

"Yeah, about four hours ago. We can nap later in the day. Breakfast is on, and then we open gifts."

They took turns using the loo. Severus cleaned himself with his wand and pulled on the black sweat suit Hermione had gifted him with last night. She'd assured him that casual on Christmas morning was a must.

She came from the bathroom with a robe and slippers on, and they went down to the breakfast nook to eat. It was a more traditional English breakfast: eggs, bacon, mushrooms, beans, tomatoes, toast, and lots of rich coffee.

Finally stuffed, they retired to the living room, and Hermione took her place on the floor by the tree to hand out gifts. Severus sat in a stuffed armchair behind her, and she leaned against his legs as she opened her gifts. He watched her, feeling more content than he had in many years. This was a real home with real parents who loved each other. This Christmas was as wonderful as last Christmas...maybe more so because he was part of this family. They gave him some wonderful books and a journal and quills. He got a fine sweater of silver and green. Hermione got robes of emerald green that he looked forward to seeing her in. They gave her combs for her hair and a set of fine quills, as well.

Severus had brought Paxton a set of potions that would deaden the gums of his patients in a much more efficient way. He had also bought the man a fine, white shirt.

He gave June a broach with yellow topaz and pearls and a potion for curing cuts and kitchen burns.

He watched their faces as they studied the vials of potions. A bit of skepticism crossed Hermione's father's face but he promised to try it on a few of his patients who had sensitive gums that were not able to be deadened easily.

Severus said, "You might find it works much better than your Mu... pharmaceuticals." He altered his words when Hermione gave him a look. "Forgive me," he said, "old habits."

Paxton nodded, "Of course." He gave Hermione a slight grin and said, "Our girl forgot herself a time or two after being at Hogwarts the entire year. To be honest, I sometimes refer to you as 'those people.'"

Severus stared at him for a moment and then laughed. "Well, it is difficult to find names that separate us since we are all human." He felt Hermione relax, and she squeezed his toes. "You could hardly refer to us in the company of your friends as Wizingkind."

"True, June and I find it frustrating to keep such a secret at times. We see suffering that we know can be alleviated in Hermione's world."

Severus nodded. "I know. That is one thing that preys on my mind as well. I have been telling the Ministry for years that we need to do some cooperative sharing in the form of research that your scientists can understand without sharing the magical parts. But often a potion is laced with spells, and that is something we cannot share. Witch-hunts are not enjoyable, and we have managed to avoid them for many years. I trust you will not reveal your source for that potion."

"Of course not," Paxton promised. "It would only be a problem if someone was moving. I won't even mention using it."

Hermione felt Severus knew the risks, so she didn't say anything. The fact that he'd shared a potion amazed her and showed her that he was putting faith in her father that she hoped her father was up to.

Hermione handed Severus a gift that was obviously a book. He held it for a moment, feeling a hum of magic about it, and then carefully peeled the paper away to reveal the title: *The Magical Potions of Sojey*. He gasped and let his hand slide over the cover in a reverent way. "Where did you find this? It's almost nonexistent. Even copies are hard to find."

She had turned to him and was on her knees. "I found it in a little hole-in-the-wall bookstore in London. The store looked as if no one had been through the door in years. The proprietor was ancient. It had years of dust on it. I got it for nearly nothing."

"It's very rare. Are you sure you want to give this to me?" he asked, rather touched.

"Of course, Severus. I know you will take good care of it, and I can always study it when I need to."

He bent forward, the book still clutched in his hands, and gave her a long kiss. "Thank you," he said as he sat back. "I will treasure it."

Hermione saw the slight glint of moisture in his eyes and hugged him tightly. "You are my heart..." she whispered in his ear before pulling away.

"... And you my soul," he said. He looked past her to see her parent's exchange satisfied looks as they grasped each other's arm with their fingers entwined.

Severus pulled back and reached into the pocket of his pants and pulled out a small box. It was wrapped in silver and black paper and had a rather clumsily tied bow in green. He handed it to Hermione.

She grinned at him. "Slytherin to the core."

"Of course," he said with a smirk. "You would not love me otherwise."

Hermione laughed and pulled the wrapping off, like a small child digging into a birthday gift. She found a red velvet-covered box and opened it with shaking fingers. A diamond and emerald bracelet in white gold flashed up at her. "Oh, Severus, it's beautiful."

He reached past her and took the bracelet from the box. She held her wrist out, and he managed to clasp it after a couple tries. "I'm glad you like it." He soon had his arms full of Hermione again and felt a tear touch his face as she kissed him.

"I love it, thank you." She pulled a small box from her pocket and handed it to him.

He looked at the intricately carved lid that was rimmed with runes of love. He pulled the clasp open, and cufflinks of silver with tiny emeralds flashed up at him.

"I'm sorry they are small stones. My budget..." she stammered. She looked down at her bracelet, and they suddenly seemed insignificant.

"Shhhh... They're wonderful. I have never had a finer pair than these."

Severus gave her another gift...an enchanted notebook for her thoughts. "All you have to do is speak to it. It will save you time when trying to formulate new potions."

Hermione caressed the fine, leather cover. "It's very thoughtful, Severus. I will use it all the time."

Finally, they all stood, and Hermione's mother suggested they take a nap before lunch. She and Paxton were going to get lunch ready and would call them in a few hours.

Severus headed for the stairs with his and Hermione's gifts in his arms.

June gave Hermione a hug and whispered, "There's nothing like a bit of Christmas delight in the mid-morning."

"Mum!" she hissed, laughing. She realized her mother meant sex, and it made her face burn. Well, there were always silencing charms.

"Your father and I enjoyed our time alone before you came, and now it's your time before children grace your lives. Enjoy it. Enjoy all the stages of your life, Hermione. They can be as blessed as the last stage. I love you, darling, and I'm so glad you came and brought Severus. I can see he will protect you with his life."

"Thanks, Mum. Pray that part has already happened." Hermione kissed her mother's soft cheek before following Severus up the stairs.

Severus pulled the sweat suit off and folded it onto a chair. Hermione stepped up behind him and ran her hands over his back and down the sides of his ribs. "Would you join me in the tub? I think a long, hot bath would be wonderful."

He answered by pulling her in front of him. He untied the robe and slipped it off her shoulders and placed a kiss on the base of her neck. They went into the bathroom and Severus brought his wand. As Hermione stood with her mouth open, he enhanced the facilities until there was a large, sunken tub filled with steaming water and bubbles. Discarding their remaining underwear, Severus held her hand as she stepped down into the tub. He locked the doors and set the wards and silencing charms and stepped down to gather her close. His kiss ignited her passion, and she pressed herself against him, finding he was already stimulated. She ran her hand down his chest and over his stomach and then grasped him. She teased him, sliding her hand up and down; her thumb slid over the tip gently.

"Hermione," he gasped, "not so fast. I won't be able to last. I've been wanting you all morning."

She laughed and threw her head back, arching her chest toward him so he could take one of her nipples into his mouth. He sucked and teased it. She was sitting on his knees buoyed by the water. He ran his hand over her sides; one kneaded the other breast and one slid down to cup her bottom as he pulled her closer. Hermione released him and wrapped her arms around him, kissing him hard. Her thighs slid along his upper legs. He slowly moved his hand down her body and finally caressed the thatch of hair between her legs. She moaned into his mouth. She pulled back from the kiss and trailed kisses along his cheek and down to his neck. He lifted her and slowly impaled her on his hard, thick shaft. She groaned as she slid down over him, and he echoed that sound. She began to move slowly, pulling back and pushing him deeper into herself. His fingers interlaced with both of hers. He whispered a containment field, and the water splashed up upon an invisible barrier. He loved watching her face as she worked to pleasure him and herself, and he pushed deeply each time she came down on him.

"Severus," she finally cried out. As she came down shattering around him, he felt his own shattering climax as she slumped down onto his shoulder breathing hard. She ran her hands over his back and chest, sitting back to smile so lovingly into his face that he felt his heart skip a beat. What would he ever do without this woman? His life would be empty beyond belief. "I love you, Hermione. Never forget that."

She frowned slightly and said, "I won't. You'll always be close to tell me after this year is done. I love you too, Severus." She leaned into kiss his nose, and Severus wrapped his arms tightly around her and pulled her to his chest.

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

"Nothing, Hermione. I just wanted you to know," he said quietly.

They took an afternoon nap, and when they came down, dinner was ready. They joined Hermione's parents for the meal. They suffered through a couple of Australian comedies before her parents begged to be excused for the night, leaving them sitting on the couch alone.

They looked at each other and Hermione giggled. "That show was terrible. I'm sorry, Severus. My dad can have a wicked sense of humor."

Severus drew her close. "Hey, why don't we go into the garden and look at the stars? I'm not feeling a bit sleepy."

She smiled. "That's a good idea. I think there's some wine in my father's office liquor cabinet. He often buys very good wine. He seldom uses it, but he brings it out when company is here."

"Shouldn't we ask?" Severus questioned, seeing the mischievous look in Hermione's eyes.

"What would the fun be in that?" She grabbed his hand and dragged him down the hall to the study. They slipped in the door and found the cabinet. It was locked. Severus raised his wand.

"No, we are sneaking. You have to open it with this." She produced a pin from her hair.

"Hermione I hardly think..." He was stopped by the challenge in her eyes.

He shrugged, took the hairpin, and began to rattle the lock. Hermione stepped back and knocked a book from the reading table. It seemed extraordinarily loud, and he couldn't help feeling like a silly teenager.

Hermione giggled, pressing her hand over her mouth when they heard Hermione's dad call down, "Is everything alright down there?"

Hermione ran to the door and said, "Yes, Dad. Go to sleep. We're just talking."

There was a sharp click behind her, and Severus swung the door to the cabinet open. He grinned, handing her back the hairpin, and selected a bottle. "Now, you go out, and I will get the glasses and bring the wine. I have more practice at sneaking than you do. You're as quiet as a rampaging bull." He followed her into the hall, and she reached up to kiss him then went off toward the patio. Severus slipped into the kitchen and found some goblets. He picked up the wine and headed for the door, looking forward to the night air and perhaps some good old-fashioned snogging in the moonlight.

Lisa, thank you for your excellent beta work. You make my life so much easier.

Chapter 16: Fear!

Chapter 16 of 20

On her last night at Hogwarts, Hermione goes to say goodbye to her grumpy, cruel Potions professor.

Hermione stood in the garden. It was near midnight. The moon was bright, and the stars shone in a brilliant pattern...different from the one she was used too, but beautiful. Severus was in the house sneaking around and getting wine glasses for them. He was trying not to wake her parents. She had been giggling too much and knocking things over, so he'd sent her out and went to retrieve the goods, arguing he was better at stealth than she was. The fact that he was an ex-spy made it hard to argue. So she stood in the yard at the edge of the hedges, looking at the pale flowers her father had growing there. She picked a flower and held it to her nose, breathing in the strange scent.

Suddenly a pair of arms came around her. She started to say, "Severus," but she never finished because a hand clamped over her face and a cloth covered her nose and mouth. The strong smell of chloroform blazed like fire up her sinuses, and then blackness descended. The flower dropped unnoticed to the ground.

There was no one to see her being thrown over the shoulders of a tall figure dressed in black as he carried her out the back gate and headed toward a dark van. The door opened of its own accord, and he tossed her into the back like a sack of potatoes. Then, as he headed for the driver's seat, he flicked his wand back, and the door closed without a sound. He drove away in silence.

Severus, juggling two long-stemmed glasses in one hand and a bottle of champagne in the other, fumbled with the latch of the door. He wished he could use a spell, but he didn't want to do much magic where Hermione's parents were likely to show up. He knew it made them uncomfortable even though they would never say anything.

"Hermione," he called. "Can you help me with this? Do..." His voice trailed off as the hair on the back of his neck stood up. His eyes tried to pierce the backyard's deep shadows. Fear. He could smell it. The bottle and glasses fell unheeded to the ground with a terrible shattering sound.

He drew his wand and sent out a detection spell: "*Homenum Revelio.*"

His heart beat wildly in his chest as he next said, "*Lumos Maxima.*"

Light flew from the wand, and the empty back yard was revealed. The back gate hung open. He spied the newly picked flower and picked it up. He sniffed the stem and caught the faint scent of Hermione's skin. He'd been able to detect scents nearly all his potions career. It had helped him time and again while teaching. He was able to stop cauldrons from exploding when he noticed the scent of a potion gone wrong.

Lights were coming on in the house, and he could hear footsteps coming across the tiles of the kitchen.

Paxton came to the door still tying the robe that was barely over his shoulders.

"What's happened?" he demanded. Spying the broken glass and wine bottle, he started to look annoyed. Then he caught sight of Severus' horrified face. "What's going on?"

Severus' fear nearly overwhelmed his ability to act. Only once in his life had he felt so devastated...the night Lily died. "She's gone. She was taken."

June skidded up behind Paxton, catching the last words. She cried out as her fist covered her mouth.

Paxton drew her close to him.

Severus clamped his emotions down and left her father gaping after him. He went to the alley and detected the faint scent of an automobile and cast a spell.

It revealed the shape of a van and a trail of tire tracks. But even as he watched, they began to fade...washed away by a counter spell.

Paxton was now behind him. "Who would do this?" he demanded.

"It was a wizard or witch. The trail has been washed away with a spell."

He flew now, leaving her stricken parents behind. He cast spell after spell, but the trail was fading. After only a few twisted blocks, it was gone.

"Hermione!" he cried.

In this new country, with no knowledge of anyone, he needed help to find her. He would have to go back to London. He needed men and women who were sensitive enough to magic to listen for the tiniest whispers. He knew Hermione could perform a number of wandless spells and that she was capable of clarity of thought and knowledge in battle. She might be able to work her way out of this, but in the meantime, he would call in any and all help he could.

He felt cold even in the Australian heat as he made his way back to the Grangers.

Paxton was at the end of the alley when he came into view. He saw the man slump with horror when he did not see his daughter.

"Severus, what can we do? Who would do this?"

"It could be someone who hates me." Then a thought occurred to him. "Or it could be Alan, her lab partner."

"Do you mean her lab partner from school? Why?" The man was puffing, trying to keep up with Severus' long legs.

"Jealousy. He fancies Hermione, and I caught him trying to kiss her. I threw him out. That was a year ago. If he is obsessed, he may have come back for her."

"But how would he know she was here?" Paxton found June at the gate and shook his head at her tearful inquiry.

Severus turned to her parents. "I must go back to England and search her place. I'm sorry, but I must go now. I will send my Patronus with news. It's a..."

Paxton waved his hand and said, "Go. I know what it is."

Severus ran through the house up to the bedroom. He grabbed the Portkey and his jacket. He Apparated from there to the Portkey sight and from there to London. He ran down the street; using his wand, he opened the door. Forest was on duty and came forward.

"Hey, hold on! Oh, Mr. Snape! What's going on?"

"Forest, have you seen Alan around here lately? Since I kicked him out last year?"

"Well, I thought I saw him across the street a couple times. But there are lots of students in the area. He only lives a few blocks away. I never saw him on this side of the street. What's wrong? Where is Miss Hermione?"

"Taken." Severus stopped, wondering how he could explain how he'd gotten here from Australia in only a matter of minutes.

"But weren't you in Australia?" the man asked. Then he said, "Ah, a Portkey."

Severus' mouth hung open, and then he snapped, "How do you know about Portkeys?"

Forest said, "My mother was a witch, an Order member. She died in the war. I was born a Squib." He saw the frown deepen on Severus' forehead. "The Order wanted Miss Hermione protected. There are still Death Eaters about," he explained. "I'm just a watcher, like Mrs. Figg watched out for Harry when he was young. We can only report suspicions. We have a direct link to other Order members."

Severus waved his hand and said, "I don't care. We can talk later. Please alert the Order. Give me Alan's address and send Harry Potter there when he comes. I believe Alan came to Australia and took Hermione. He's much more than he appears to be." He flew up the stairs and used his wand to access Hermione's rooms. He stopped dead. The room was in shambles, and all the clothes he kept there were torn into ribbons. Black paint was slashed across the wall of the bedroom: "MINE!!!"

As he turned, he saw the remnants of a letter. After picking it up, he realized it was from her mother. The address of their home was circled in red pen. He could smell the man's cologne; it reeked in the air around him.

He turned, knowing for sure now that it was Alan and not a random Death Eater. It did not make him feel better. Alan was obviously unstable, and Hermione was in great danger. It had been literally 18 minutes since he'd discovered her missing. Yet it felt like an eternity.

Forest handed him a paper when he came down the stairs at a dead run. "I alerted Mr. Weasley." He waved his cell phone at Severus, and Severus found he was not surprised. "Mr. Potter will be sent directly to that address."

Severus glanced at the address and knew it to be just a few doors from the restaurant he and Hermione went often. Why hadn't she told him that Alan lived close by? He went into the alley and Apparated to the back door of the restaurant. Harry appeared a moment later. His eyes were wide as he came forward.

"Snape, what the hell's going on? What was that I read in the paper... you and Hermione?"

He grabbed Harry's arm and dragged him into the door to the apartments. "That's not important. Hermione has been kidnapped in Australia by her former wizard lab partner. I have no reference in that country, no familiarity. I cannot find her alone."

"Why would he do that?" Harry asked, following Severus up the stairs.

"Jealousy. He wants her." Severus pulled out his wand and blasted open Alan's apartment door.

"He could have Portkeyed anywhere." As they looked in the door, both men's mouths dropped.

The walls were plastered with Muggle pictures of Hermione. They showed her buying a paper at the newsstand, walking down the street, working in the lab at school, in the market, even bathing. Severus grabbed the picture and tore it to ribbons.

"I will kill him."

But his resolve gave, and he staggered sideways.

"Whoa!" Harry exclaimed, grabbing his arm.

He saw the horror and despair in the man's eyes. He'd forgiven Severus Snape his trespasses from his early life. He'd seen the memories. He'd known what this man had done for him, but they had never really spoken. He'd been furious to see Severus' and Hermione's pictures in the Spectator last week. He'd felt confusion and hurt that she hadn't told him, even though she had known the paper was going to print the picture. But all of it was put aside for now; Hermione needed him. He moved into the room casting spells. Ghostlike figures of Alan moving here and there appeared. It was like a surveillance image...only in 3D.

Severus shook himself and studied the images. They watched him make phone call after phone call, and then he left and came back and packed for severely cold weather. They saw several duplicate outfits, some obviously for a woman.

Harry said, "He's not going to keep her in Australia."

Severus glared at him. "Obviously."

"Let's fan out and see if we can find anything concerning a cold-weather destination."

The two men were deep in drawers and papers when there was a voice from the door: "What the bloody hell is going on?"

Harry stood glancing at Snape and saw him scowl.

"Weasley," he growled. He couldn't stomach the boy since that incident in the dark hall when he'd caught Hermione and the boy snogging.

"We are going to need all the help we can get," Harry growled back at him.

Severus turned away and continued looking.

Harry left the bedroom and went to fill Ron in. After that, more Aurors appeared, and the small apartment seemed to be full of people searching.

Severus was growing more afraid by the minute. It had been several hours since Hermione had gone missing.

Then Tonks shouted from the living room, "I've got something!"

Severus found her sitting in front of a computer. "What did you find?" he demanded.

"He tried to erase the hard drive, but he didn't quite understand that the information wasn't gone, just decoded so it could be covered over by the next documents. He rented a small cabin in a backwoods area of the Swiss Alps. The date of occupancy started a week ago!"

"Are you sure?" Severus demanded. "We do not have time to waste. How do you know about this computer?"

Lupin came to stand close and said, "Severus, my wife is brilliant on these things. If she says it's there, it's there."

Severus looked into Lupin's eyes and saw only truth and concern for Hermione there.

"Let's go then."

Snape took his wand out and waved it, changing the pillow on the couch to a warm down jacket. His shoes became boots and his pants thick jeans.

Harry watched only a moment and then began doing the same thing. The others followed. Kingsley was quickly filled in, and he, being the Minister of Magic, created the international Portkeys. Soon the group stood on a mountain about a mile from the cabin.

One hour after her abduction, Hermione woke with a splitting headache. She groaned when she tried to move her head. She was lying in a bed with thick quilts. There was dim light coming from shuttered windows. She could feel a strong ward just out of reach. She lay still. She was unable to move and also did not want to alert the man who had her that she was awake. She turned her head to take in her surroundings. The shutters were made of metal and locked down.

She reached out with her magic to nudge the ward and test its strength. She wondered where she was, and she worried about Severus. No matter what, she would get out of here and back to him. He was her life; more important, she was his. She knew if something happened, he would give up on life. He would not be able to face that loss twice in his life. She realized who had taken her. She was familiar with the cologne he wore. With gut-churning realization, she knew the only way to get Alan to drop his guard was to convince him she wanted him. If she could get herself released from this binding spell, she might be able to fight him.

Hermione saw the door swing open, and a tall silhouette blocked the light.

"I know you're awake, Hermione."

"Alan, thank goodness it's you. Severus has old enemies. I'm glad it's you. You have no idea what they might have done to me."

He came and knelt down. His face was in shadow. "You have no idea what I might do to you, Hermione," he whispered. His voice was cold and hard.

Hermione forced herself not to shudder. "Are you still mad at me?"

"You bitch! You humiliated me in front of the instructor and a number of students. No one will take me seriously anymore, and they laugh behind my back."

"I'm sorry for what I did. I thought my life was with Severus. Thank goodness you rescued me from that place." The lies felt bitter on her tongue. "Severus has had me bound to him by a spell intertwined with a potion he makes me take."

"You lie," he spat. But she could tell his voice wasn't as certain anymore. His obsession made him want to hope.

"No, Alan. You know he was a Death Eater. He still is. He fooled us all. He's a very good actor. After all, he fooled Dumbledore, didn't he? I was fooled as well. If he has his way, I will be married to him by the end of this year and entrenched with him in that dungeon of Hogwarts. He wants me to teach there. Can you imagine the life there buried under loads of essays and in danger from sniveling brats' experiments?"

Each lie she spoke out seemed to sear her heart. Right now, she would find that job to be the happiest she could imagine. She wanted to be there with Severus, cuddled up on his couch, reading the evenings away. It seemed like heaven.

He stood and flipped a light on.

Hermione stifled a gasp at the hardness of his face and eyes. Gone was the young carefree man she had known. She felt a guilt grip her. Had she changed him so much just by her rejection? There was a dark look...evil, for want of a better word. Dark Magic. Alan had delved into Dark Magic.

"Please, let me up. I'll show you how happy I am to see you." She flashed him a smile. Inside she cringed as he came closer.

"You know you are trapped. My wards won't let you use more than simple magic. I felt you test my wards, Hermione. You cannot escape me." He waved his wand, and the body bind was gone.

Hermione moved slowly, taking a moment to check out the room. She saw that not only did she have to deal with the wards, but it was also more like a prison cell. Well, if she could not use magic, then she would have to use the hand-to-hand skills she had learned as a teen. Knowing war was imminent, she had taken self-defense classes for several summers. Wands often got knocked out of wizards' hands. The danger here was that she had to convince him to come closer, and closer made her want to run the other way.

She stood and was dismayed to find herself in a negligee. Knowing he'd changed her clothing made her stomach roll. She felt dirty as she caught his leer.

He came close, his wand reaching out to caress the side of her face, and then he slid it down between her breasts. "You're one hot woman, Hermione. You will find my touch quite agonizing. I could have once been gentle, but now, I have a debt to settle."

He reached out and grabbed her arm. His mouth was on hers before she even had time to react. His tongue forced its way into her mouth, and his fingers bruised her arm. He was pushing her back onto the bed. She found her fingers clutching at his arms. He was so much taller than she was; her plans might need a bit of revision. She knew of one sure way to bring him down. But she had to get a good grip, and that would mean encouraging his attention.

She was encouraged a moment later when she heard the soft thunk of his wand as it hit the floor. His hands painfully gripped and twisted at her breasts. She groaned and forced her words out: "Yes! Oh, Alan."

"You like it rough, huh? Well, I can show you rough."

Hermione could hear him working at his pants, and she stared at the ceiling as he manhandled her body, pressing her into the bed. *Severus!* her mind screamed.

She had no doubt that Alan would use her and then kill her. But she was still not able to make her move, so she ran her hands over his back. "Yes, Alan," she cooed.

He was pushing the gown up over her hips, and she felt horrified and vulnerable.

He then gave a frustrated grunt and pulled back. She saw him push his pants off over his hips, and she spied her goal.

"You're magnificent," she said. "Please let me..." Her hands reached out, and she saw his resolve continue to falter.

She moved back into the bed and beckoned him. Rolling to her side, she patted the bed.

He climbed in, and she reached for him. Her fingers clasped him, and his eyes closed as he thrust against her fingers.

"Hermione," he groaned, forgetting his revenge for a moment.

She took that moment and did two things: She dug her fingers in and pulled with all her might. Then she twisted his penis and brought her knee up and over to crash into his testicles.

He screamed in rage, but vomited, twisting and folding into a fetal position on the bed. His hands cradled his damaged parts.

Blood was spreading on the bed. Some of it splashed her before she crawled from the bed, her eyes frantically searching for his wand. She spied it on the floor nearly covered by his discarded pants. As she dove for it, she felt his hand grab her hair.

He pulled her back as her fingers clutched the fallen wand.

As she swung the wand toward him, she saw his hand slip under the pillow, and the glint of a knife caught the light. She screamed, *Defendo!* as a fiery pain pierced her side. The spell hit him in the chest and knocked him over the bed. He hit the wall hard on the other side and fell between the bed and the wall. He whimpered with pain, vomiting again.

Suddenly the door was blasted in, and Severus filled the doorway. Hermione slipped to the floor.

Thank you, Lisa, for your beta work. It's a talent I will never grasp.

Chapter 17: The Rescue

Chapter 17 of 20

On her last night at Hogwarts, Hermione goes to say goodbye to her grumpy, cruel Potions professor.

Severus took in Hermione's blood-spattered, half-naked appearance as he moved into the room.

Harry slipped in behind him. He was afraid Severus would murder the man, and he didn't want Hermione to have to deal with the consequences.

Severus heard Alan screaming, "You bitch. I'm going to flay you into little pieces."

Severus raised his wand and was about to blast the man when Harry grabbed his arm.

"Severus, think of Hermione. She needs you. Please see to her. I will take care of this worthless piece of shite. A life in Azkaban will be worse than a few minutes of painful death." He flung a spell at the injured man, and Alan was bound and gagged.

Severus stared into Harry's green eyes and finally nodded. Turning, he pulled his jacket off and went to his knees. A pool of blood was spreading across the floor. In the dim light, he saw a knife protruding from Hermione's side. Her breathing was labored.

"Hermione!" he cried. He raised his hand, and it was covered in her blood.

"Potion," she gasped.

Her words woke Severus from his shock, and he looked at her neck. The bottle was missing.

"Harry, look for a small bottle on a chain!"

"There's one around this snake's neck." Harry grabbed the bottle, breaking the chain and cutting Alan's neck in his haste to deliver the bottle to Severus.

Severus pulled his chain from his neck; his hands were shaking. He only registered that Ron had entered the room and was hauling Alan away. He heard the thud of fists against flesh, but he did not care. If Hermione died, the man was dead.

"Harry, you must open Hermione's potion and add mine. My hands are shaking, or I would do it. Please, hurry."

He watched as Harry did as he was told. Then he took a deep breath, steadied his hands, and reached out.

"I can give it to her," Harry said.

"No, it must be fed to her by her lover's hand." He took the bottle from Harry and held it to the light. The liquid inside was sparkling.

Hermione's eyes met his and she gasped, "I love you." Then her eyes closed, and her chest stopped rising.

Severus pried her lips open and poured the elixir in her mouth. His other hand massaged her throat muscles. He then grasped the knife and pulled it free. He pressed his hand over the wound.

Harry was sobbing next to him, holding one of her bloodstained hands in his. "Is it too late?"

Harry glanced at Severus' face. It was deathly pale.

Seconds ticked by...each seeming to last an hour...and then Hermione took a deep breath, and her eyes fluttered open.

Severus sagged in relief. He lifted his hand and saw that the flesh had healed itself. He bent and bathed her face with tears and kisses.

Hermione was crying and trying to cover herself as he gathered her to him and held her tightly.

Harry pulled the sheet from the bed and draped it around her.

"Leave us," Severus said, looking up and seeing that Remus and Tonks had joined Harry and Ron in the room.

"Shouldn't we get her to a Wizarding hospital?" Harry asked.

"She will be fine. Please, Harry," Severus said, holding her to him.

"Let's go. Severus knows what he's doing," Harry said. He grabbed at Ron's arm and pulled him to his feet and through the door. The others followed, leaving the couple alone.

"Hermione," Severus whispered, "are you okay? Did he...?"

She shook her head as she clung to him, feeling the safety of his strong arms. Finally she stammered, "I need to bathe."

He nodded, wanting the stench of the man off her as much as she did. He drew her to her feet and supported her around the waist as they walked slowly to the bathroom. He laid a towel over the toilet seat and sat her down gently. In the light of the bathroom, he could see healing bruises and a few bloody scrapes. Her face was puffy where Alan's nails had cut her. It took an iron will not to leave her and go kill the man. But Hermione's need outweighed the need for revenge...at least for now. And he knew he was a different man now. Hermione's love had changed him.

As the tub filled, he gently drew the torn gown over her head and incinerated it with his wand. He picked her up and lowered her into the warm water. Hermione sat quietly, not looking at him or reacting to anything around her. Shock. He wished he'd taken the time to bring other potions. They had been on holiday, and he'd allowed himself to get out of the habit of carrying an arsenal of potions in his pockets. He took a warm cloth and soap and gently started to wash her. He cleaned the blood off her face and healed what damage he could with his wand. The potion was working inside out. He told her over and over, "I love you Hermione. You were so brave." He caressed her back gently with his hand. He soaped her hair and rinsed it. Then he Banished the dirty water and refilled the tub with clean water. She had started to cry again, and when he went to push her wet hair back, she laid her face in his hand, pressing a kiss there.

"You came," she whispered.

"Of course I came. I'm sorry I wasn't here earlier. But I knew my brave, wonderful girl would best him somehow. You did him some real damage."

"Severus, if he had..." She couldn't finish. "I had to pretend to want him. I had to touch him. I'm sorry."

The thought chilled him, but he took her face gently and turned it so she could see his eyes. "You have nothing to be ashamed of. You did what you had to. I'm so proud of you." He kissed her forehead as he reached for a big towel and helped her out of the tub and dried her off. He was just beginning to wonder what he would dress her in when there was a knock at the door.

Tonks called out, "I have a robe Hermione can wear."

Severus opened the door, and Tonks handed the robe over. "Does she need medical help?"

Severus took the robe and said, "Thank you, Tonks. She's okay. A pain potion and Calming Draught would be a good idea. And it would nice to have some Dreamless Sleep just in case. Is there another bedroom?"

Tonks nodded and said, "Yes, down the hall. I cleaned it. This one, too." She gestured over her shoulder with her thumb. "Harry and Ron took Alan to Azkaban. He'll be lucky if he's not missing some of those damaged parts by the time they are done."

Severus nodded, clearly exhausted. "I'll bring Hermione out in a minute. I want to take her to the other room."

"I'll send Remus for the potions, Severus."

He nodded, turning back to Hermione, who was sitting wrapped in the towel with tears running down her face.

"I need my mother," she said. Her voice was flat.

He got back down on his knees, pulled the towel away, and helped her into the robe. It was soft and warm.

"Hermione, I don't think you will be able to travel right now. Please, let me take you to another room here in the house so you can sleep. I know that Harry will come back soon, and I will ask him to go get your parents. Do you think they will come by Portkey?"

"Yes."

He picked her up, and she buried her face in his neck. "I'm sorry, Severus," she said.

"There is nothing to be sorry for, Hermione. I would do anything for you. I'm sorry I wasn't able to get here sooner." The words seemed flat and empty.

He found that Tonks was waiting for them. She held the door open and warmly rubbed Hermione's arm as Severus carried her past. He noted that the room was now clean, and the shutters were open, making the room look totally different. But he still carried her through the room and down the hall. He saw Lupin standing in a doorway and nodded as he passed. He heard Tonks give him the potions order, and then there was the sound of Apparition.

The other room had a large four-poster bed. All personal effects were gone. It had the look of a hotel room that was clean and ready for an occupant. The bed covers were turned back, so he placed her on the bed. She held tightly to him and said, "Please don't leave me."

Tonks had followed him into the room. "Severus, stay with her. I will bring the potions when they come. I asked Remus to bring some dittany as well."

"Thank you, and please thank Remus for me," Severus said. He watched Tonks nod and leave the room and close the door behind her.

Severus drew his wand and called out, "*Expecto Patronum*." The big, fat otter danced around the room and then vanished.

"I promised your parents I would let them know when I found you."

Severus slipped into the bed and pulled Hermione close. He could feel tears running down his neck.

"Do you want to talk about this, Hermione?" he asked softly.

"No," she whispered, clutching him tightly. "Just hold me."

He felt her tremble against him, and he felt at a loss to comfort her. He wasn't sure he liked that she needed her mother and not just him. But he tried hard to understand. His mother had never been much of a comfort to him.

He prayed Remus would come soon with the Calming Draught. He must have gone to a local apothecary since he hadn't left by Portkey. He continued to caress her and whisper soothing words. Eventually, Tonks knocked at the door.

"Come," he called.

Tonks came in, and Severus glimpsed Remus behind her.

"Severus, I have the potions," she said. "And Harry and Ron just came back. They would like to see Hermione for a moment."

Severus asked, "Do you want to see them?"

She nodded. Her eyes apologized to him because she needed to see her friends.

"Send them in. Remus, thank you, for getting the potions." He'd never been friendly to the man, and now he saw all the old history was nothing in the light of them all working together to help Hermione.

Lupin nodded, bowing his head slightly and backing out of the room.

"Tonks, give me a few minutes with the potions and then send the men in." Severus took the pain potion and had Hermione drink it. Then he gave her the Calming Draught and watched as the trembling abated. "Better?" he asked. He began to spread the dittany on her wounds.

"I feel better," she said, but tears still leaked out of her eyes.

The rest of the golden trio appeared at the door, and he motioned them in. He started to pull away saying, "I'll leave you."

"No! Please don't leave me, Severus."

He settled back beside her. He felt better that she did not send him away.

Harry and Ron went to the other side of the bed and knelt down. They reached out, one taking a hand and the other touching her shoulder.

"Hermione, are you alright?" Harry asked. His voice wavered as he took in the bruising that was still visible. He watched the flesh on her face heal under the dittany.

Ron seemed to be seething inside and didn't trust himself to say anything. Severus wondered if it was because of him or the situation. He smirked; maybe it was both.

"I'm sorry, Harry, Ron, that I didn't tell you about Severus. It just happened, and I wanted to keep him to myself." Her fingers tightened on Severus' hand. "I have never been so happy in my life. I have been a coward about sharing him with you. I didn't want to lose your friendship."

Ron found his voice and said, "It doesn't matter. We are here now. Severus called us immediately to help. That tells me he's changed, and I have eyes. He lives for you." He glanced up, and his eyes met Severus'. "You'd best continue to take good care of her."

In any other circumstances, Severus would have laughed at his threat. But he only nodded and said, "With my life."

Hermione sat up to hug each young man, and then she turned back, sliding into Severus' arms and laying against his chest.

Severus said, "Gentlemen, maybe you can come back later. She needs to sleep. Harry, will you and Ron go to Australia and get Hermione's parents. I think Tonks will have gotten Portkeys from Kingsley."

Harry said, "Of course. Sir, I can't say seeing you two in the paper wasn't a damn shock. It did make me angry only because I wasn't told. I know what you did for me, and I appreciate it. I also figured Hermione was old enough to know what she wanted. And I know you only commit yourself when you have given your heart. I can see she is in the best of hands." He smiled at Severus and then turned.

Ron said, "Same here, sir." He nodded and followed Harry out the door.

Hermione whispered against his neck, "Amazing."

Severus said, "Your friends have finally grown up. Now, sleep, my love. I will wake you when your parents come."

He settled down into the bed against the pillow, and Hermione snuggled up against him and fell asleep, lulled by the Calming Draught. Severus held her close and was surprised to feel tears leaking down his own face. He continued to lie there, awake and alert, as he caressed her arm and murmured over and over, "I love you, Hermione."

As the silence grew, he had to deal with all the rage inside. Years ago, he would have used *Sectumsempra* on Alan and watched the man's life blood seep into the bed and carpet. As he lay there, he found that he might be able to commiserate with the man. If he loved Hermione as much as Severus did, what would it do to him if she were with another man? Would he revert to the horrible man he'd been before her love had changed him? Granted, a lot of the things he'd done had been war or under the orders of two powerful men. But he knew in his heart he'd enjoyed his early days of being a Death Eater...until Lily had died, and then it had all become a nightmare that

stretched until Hermione had reached out that night to take his hand. He knew he would eventually have to help her accept that Alan had changed because of her rejection. He finally let himself sleep.

It seemed like he had barely closed his eyes when the door flew open and Hermione's parents came rushing in. Hermione roused quickly at the sound of her mother, and then both women were crying and clutching at each other. Severus moved away and faced Paxton.

"Severus, thank God you got to her." He came close and asked, "Did he...?"

"She says no." Severus ran a hand through his hair.

Paxton nodded. His eyes were full of tears.

Severus said, "I will be in the kitchen."

Hermione called, "Severus."

He went to her and said, "Please, if you can talk to your mother, talk. I promise I will not leave the house." She nodded, flashing him the tiniest of smiles. He squeezed her hand and moved away, seeing that her father had taken his place on the side of the bed to envelope both his women.

June was saying, "I thought we'd lost you just when we got you back. Hermione, darling..."

He closed the door and sagged back against it. He felt utterly spent, and a pressure was building inside. He tried to find comfort in the fact that he had his Hermione back. He knew things would take time now. Alan had destroyed her peace for now. He'd seen enough victims to know there would be consequences for both of them.

Harry appeared in the door that led to the kitchen. "Tonks made some strong coffee; it might do you good."

He nodded and pushed himself to his feet. He swayed a bit, and Harry stepped forward and grabbed his arm, steadying him. Suddenly, he knew he could not go into the kitchen with everyone there. He pulled Harry into the other bedroom. He fell to his knees and was able to pull his wand and cast a silencing charm before ragged cries tore from his lips. He didn't know how long the pain tore at him, but he finally realized Harry had a hold of his forearms. It wasn't a hug but an anchor...just what he needed. He saw Harry had tears in his eyes, too.

"I do not know what I would do without her," he found himself babbling. "He's damaged her. He didn't rape her, but she will never have that freedom of spirit she has always had."

"You don't know that, Severus. Hermione has a huge capacity for forgiveness. You just have to be patient and loving. I can see she already depends on you to be there for her. It would be far worse if she was withdrawing from us all...especially you, sir."

Severus freed one hand and rubbed it across his tear-stained face. "I will have all the patience she needs." He struggled to his feet with Harry's help. "I should wash my face."

He left Harry standing there and went into the bathroom, splashed cold water on his face, and then dried his face slowly on a towel. He waited a good 10 minutes for the redness to fade some, and then he came out to find Harry waiting for him.

"Thank you, Harry. Your mother would be very proud of the man you have become."

Harry smiled at him and said, "Thank you, sir."

"Severus," he said, giving the young man permission to call him by name.

"Severus," Harry repeated, "come have that cup of coffee. It should revive you a bit. Your spoon will stand up in it." He tried to laugh at his joke, but it fell like sand on his tongue.

Severus nodded with understanding and followed him to the kitchen.

Hermione clutched her mother tightly and cried for a long time. Finally she fell quiet and just held on; her grip was so strong that June knew she would have bruises, but she didn't mind. She held Hermione close, stroked her hair, and cooed soft things mothers say to babies as they comfort them.

Paxton sat by feeling utterly useless...not even brushing away the tears that fell down his face.

"Paxton, please go get us some tea. A nice cup of tea might help us settle our nerves."

Hermione was lying with her head against her mother's breasts.

"Okay," he said, glad of something to do. "Are you okay, my girl?" he asked as he stood.

Hermione nodded and said, "Thanks, Daddy."

Paxton smiled; she hadn't called him that in years. "Anything for my girl."

Severus was just sitting down at the table when Paxton came in the door. The man looked years older than he had that morning. Severus started to stand. "Is Hermione okay?" he asked.

"She's fine, Severus. Have your cup of coffee. June's got her. As much as a woman can love you, there's nothing like a mother to soothe a body."

I wouldn't know, Severus thought bitterly, but he understood. He was eternally thankful that they had made up only days ago. He picked up the coffee that Lupin had set before him and smiled weakly at the woman and men who sat trying to not intrude on his space. They all still feared the man they used to know.

Paxton asked, "May I have two cups of tea for June and Hermione?"

Tonks said, "Mr. Granger, sit. I'll take the tea to them. Have some tea or coffee yourself. There are some chocolate biscuits here as well. She put the cups on a tray, poured the tea, and gathered a couple chocolate biscuits to take to the women.

Paxton sat, placing his face in his hands for a moment to collect himself, and then turned to Severus and said, "I've never been grateful for the magic before. Without it, we would have lost her. It might have taken weeks for you to all track her down the...what is it you say?...the Muggle way."

Severus said, "Even then, it was not fast enough. She had to practically save herself. If we had been delayed any longer, she would have gotten out of there on her own." He didn't tell him about the knife or the potion. "I'm sorry, sir. I failed her. I did not keep her safe."

"Severus," Paxton said, "You could do no more than you did. What you all did is a miracle in my world. I'll not hear about failures. Hermione survived the worst, and she's returned to us. She's tough, and she will come out of this. She's worried about you, Severus. She's worried you won't be able to look at her the same."

Severus' brow creased and he said, "She is not changed in my eyes. I only feel more love for her."

Tonks came back in and said, "Severus, Hermione wants you."

Severus stood and looked at the others in the room. "Harry, Ron, can you go back to Hermione's place and repair the damage? I don't want her to see it like that. Remus, will you please go see Minerva and explain what's happened. Ask her if we can come there. I think Hermione might feel safer inside the wards of Hogwarts."

Remus nodded and said, "Of course, Severus." He kissed his wife and said, "I'll get Teddy from your mother's and take care of him till you come back."

Harry and Ron stood. "We will get right on it, Severus," Harry said. They went out the door.

Severus turned and went to the room Hermione was in. When he opened the door, June looked up at him with a small, tear-filled smile. "She's asleep," she whispered. "Come and take my place."

He slipped under Hermione, and she moved out the other side.

Lisa, thank you for your beta work. I appreciate your help.

Chapter 18: Healing

Chapter 18 of 20

On her last night at Hogwarts, Hermione goes to say goodbye to her grumpy, cruel Potions professor.

Severus settled back against the pillows and held Hermione. Even in her sleep, he could feel her body trembling. It broke his heart, and he pulled her tightly to him and felt her relax a bit more.

"Severus," she whispered, gripping his arms tightly.

"Hermione, you're safe now. As soon as you want, we can take you out of here," he whispered to her as he kissed the top of her head.

"Sleep... forget." She slipped into sleep, and her body slumped against him. But it was only minutes before she began to twitch, and she screamed, bolting up in his arms to stare around wildly. "Severus!"

"I'm right here, Hermione," he whispered to her. "I've got you."

The door flew open, and Paxton and June rushed in. Hermione had miraculously fallen back to sleep.

"She had a nightmare," Severus explained and watched as they relaxed. "I am thinking it might be best to take her to Hogwarts as soon as possible. She always seems to be able to relax there, and I will have my potions at hand should they be needed."

Paxton said, "We hoped you might bring her to our home again."

"I'm afraid she would not do well there for now because that is the site of her abduction," Severus explained.

June said, "Of course, you're right. We just want to be there for her."

"I could ask the headmistress if you could stay at Hogwarts for a few days," Severus ventured.

June's eyes got big. "Do you think it's possible? We've always wanted to see the school where Hermione spent so many years."

"I will ask, and we will know soon," Severus told the couple. He knew it was not policy to let Muggles into Hogwarts, but he thought Minerva might make an exception under the circumstances.

As the Grangers turned to leave the room, there was a knock at the door. Harry stuck his head in and said, "The apartment has been returned to normal. That guy was pretty..."

Severus hissed, "Shhhh..." His glare spoke volumes, and he shook his head.

Harry looked down at Hermione and remembered that she didn't know Alan had messed the place up.

Severus said in a hushed voice, "Harry, I asked Remus to tell Headmistress McGonagall what happened. Can you ask Minerva if Hermione's parents can accompany us to the castle and stay for a few days or more? I don't want to take Hermione anywhere he was until I know how she will be once she's rested."

Harry nodded, his face full of worry. "I will go immediately. I've got to tell you, Severus, that bastard had a few more bruises by the time he got to the Azkaban infirmary."

Severus smiled. "If I had taken him, he would be dead. For Hermione's sake he needs to pay, and that place will make him pay. And it won't take me from her either. Harry, you have no idea how much I love this woman." His arms tightened around her.

"I can see that, sir." He turned away and said, "I'll go now and talk to Minerva."

Severus nodded and relaxed again, holding Hermione. He looked into her face and found she was smiling at him. It was a weary sort of smile...but no less a smile.

"I love you, too, Severus." She sat up, basically climbing into his lap, and kissed him. Then she buried her face in his neck, and he felt more warm tears on his skin. "The potion worked." She sighed.

"Yes, my love, it did," he agreed.

"But it's gone, isn't it? What if you need it?"

"Hermione, I've already had my miracle...two, in fact. I survived the war, and I found love with you. I think it was your turn. You being alive is as much a miracle to me as it is for you. Without you, there is no life for me." He stroked her hair.

She nodded and didn't speak. She just burrowed harder against him as if she wanted to hide in his very skin.

"What can I do for you, my love? Tell me how to help. It breaks my heart to see my beautiful girl so hurt." He felt tears sting his eyes. She clung to him like she'd never let go.

At least she's not pushing me away, he thought ruefully. In the past, he would have taken Alan to the forest and flayed him alive. The idea now turned his stomach. *Damn his hide. It's my fault. I should have recognized that scent. How had he gotten past Hermione's wards?*

"You're doing it. Just hold me. Don't let me go for now. Let me take the initiative in touching. I don't know if I might be sensitive if you reach out. Severus, if I cringe, know it's not because I don't want you or love you. I need time."

"I understand," he said, but he knew it would hurt when she did pull away.

"I need to get out of here," she said. "I know you're all here. I know he's gone, but this place reeks of him."

Severus got out from under her and picked her up. He spelled a blanket to wrap around her. "We will go to Hogwarts. I don't think that your place or your parents' place would be a good idea right now."

Hermione held tightly to his neck. "I don't want to go back to my place ever, Severus. I need to be with you. But school..." She left that unfinished.

"We will get it worked out. I think that Kinsley can help us. Let's not think about it now. We have a couple of weeks to figure it all out."

"I need my parents still, Severus," she whimpered.

"I know, Hermione. I have sent Harry to ask that they be allowed to come with us to Hogwarts for a few days." He spelled the door open and walked into the hall. Ron and Tonks came to the kitchen door.

Severus said, "I am going to take Hermione to Hogwarts. Can you wait with the Grangers? When Harry comes back, can you escort them to Hogwarts? I have no doubt that Minerva will say yes."

Tonks nodded and then reached out to caress Hermione's face. "You okay, honey?" she asked.

Hermione shook her head and said, "I will be. Severus is here for me, and he will get me through this."

Tonks stepped back as they entered the kitchen, and June and Paxton stood.

Severus told them again what he was doing, and they nodded. Her parents gave Hermione a kiss, and then Severus took hold of the Portkey, and they were gone.

When they landed, the gates of Hogwarts loomed before them. After dealing with the wards and the gate, Severus carried her up the long expanse of grass. It was covered in a few inches of powdered snow.

"It's beautiful here," Hermione said. "I always loved this place." She rested her cheek on his shoulder. Her body shivered.

"Are you cold?" he asked.

"No." She burrowed her face deeper into his hair. "I'm sorry."

Severus sighed. "Hermione, please don't apologize. I know it's going to take time for you to feel safe again."

He had been walking pretty fast, so they got to the great door fairly quickly. Minerva opened it immediately; her face was lined with concern. Severus carried Hermione into the hall, and the door clanged shut behind them. Hermione relaxed further, and he understood. *She's always felt safe here.* Those doors were a visual barrier between her and the outside world.

Minerva said, "Hermione, please let me know if you need anything. I have arranged for your parents to stay in a guest wing. Dobby will take good care of them and guide them to you. I will have the Floo connected to Severus' quarters so you can speak to them or they can come directly to you if they wish to."

Hermione felt a giggle rise and saw the surprise on both Severus' and Minerva's face.

"Sorry, I can't imagine them using the Floo."

Minerva said, "Well, we shall see. Severus, I know you can take care of Hermione, but I want you to take her to see Poppy." Her stern look told him no wasn't an option.

"Alright, we will go up now." He did concede he wasn't a trained medical professional. If there was anything more she could suggest, he was all for it.

Hermione said, "Let me walk. You can't carry me up all those steps."

"Nonsense, I am well capable." He was already breathing deeply and saw her glare.

"Alright, a bit of a hover charm then." He preformed the charm, and even though she was still holding him tightly, he could not feel more than a little pressure. He thought, as he carried her up the several flights of stairs, *I need to start working out. I'm getting soft.* But he knew his time with Hermione in bed on vacations wasn't something he would trade for any amount of fitness. He convinced himself that was exercise.

Minerva followed them up and opened the door to the infirmary.

Poppy came forward. "Miss Granger! Severus, put her on this bed and give me a few minutes to check her over."

Hermione clung to Severus. "Please, let him stay."

Poppy nodded and said, "Alright, Hermione. If that is what you need."

Minerva stood outside the enclosure and listened to Poppy.

"I understand that he did not complete his intentions."

Hermione had her eyes closed tightly. "No," she whispered. Still seeing Alan in her mind, she opened her eyes and fixed them on Severus' eyes.

"You had some deep bruising. No doubt Severus would have provided aid for you already, once he arrived there."

Severus nodded. "*Virgo Curatio*."

Poppy gasped, "Merlin, Severus." She didn't say anything else, but her face tinged a bright pink. "What was the injury it was used for?"

Severus ignored her reaction. "Her left lung was pierced by a knife." He watched as Poppy examined the healed flesh. Then she left them and came back in a few minutes with several potion vials. "Take this one now. It's only a vitamin supplement and something to give you some strength. Severus and you have both provided a potion I wish I could somehow copy. But alas is it only for special people such as yourselves apparently. She handed the vial to Severus, and he opened it and brought it to Hermione's lips. With a smirk, he watched her grimace at the taste.

"Severus, with all your knowledge, you can't figure out how to make these taste good," Hermione complained, nearly gagging.

"What would be the fun in that? Medicines are supposed to be for maladies...not something people want to take." He was pleased she was talking.

Poppy said, "Normally, I'd have you stay here for a few days. That one potion was only for the life-threatening wound or malady. You will still have the bruising and some pain to deal with. But under the circumstances, you would no doubt be more comfortable in a more secluded and controlled place. You can go to Severus' room, but I will come check you each day, and you are to Floo me if you need anything day or night." She took more vials from her apron pocket and gave them to Severus. "For pain, calming, and sleep."

Severus started to explain that he knew how to care for Hermione, but Poppy stopped him with an icy glare. "I am the medi-witch here in the castle. You have to accept my rules." She glared back at him.

He nodded, seeing the satisfaction in her eyes. He and Poppy had been through a lot together. She had nursed him more often than not, and he cared about her as more than just a friend. She had been like a substitute mother on occasion. She'd held his secrets. Just as Minerva had. He smirked at her and saw her smile.

"As you wish," he said. He didn't tell her he already had the same potions in his pockets.

Poppy asked, "Minerva, can you sit with Hermione for a moment? I need to give Severus her medication schedule."

Hermione's eyes told him she didn't believe Poppy, but she let go of Severus' hand and latched on to a surprised Minerva when she took his place at the bedside. "Hurry back," she said in a weak, scared voice.

"Hermione, I will only be a few feet away. I'll be right back."

Poppy motioned him a bit further and talked to him in a whisper. "She may need someone with her constantly for a while; don't leave her alone. She will have nightmares, maybe even sleeplessness. She might get angry or sad. Her moods could change quickly. She might fear loud noises or have panic attacks, and Severus, she might be sexually aggressive." Her cheeks pinked up, and he smirked. "She may have a need to have you with her to block out the pain of having dealt with this man touching her, hurting her. I'd advise you to go slowly. Do not take any initiative. Let her get what she needs, but don't push her away right now. It's best to go with it. If she stops, stop with her." She turned back.

Severus nodded. With his wand, he conjured a paper into being with the medication schedule and turned back to the enclosure.

He thanked Minerva and gathered Hermione into his arms. "May we use your Floo? I want to get Hermione tucked is as soon as possible."

Poppy said, "I know you have more of these potions in your quarters. If for some reason you need more..." She let that go, as she knew Severus would only make a fresh brew if he did need it. She also knew he wouldn't let Hermione use some of them for too long.

Severus turned to Minerva. "Will you bring Hermione's parents down when they have settled in? I know they will be anxious to see her."

Minerva said, "Of course, Severus." She reached up to squeeze one of Hermione's hands. "This is your home, Hermione. Feel free to stay as long as you wish."

Hermione, half asleep from all the activities, nodded. She turned her face to Severus' chest, and fresh tears leaked out.

Severus saw the tears and carried her quickly to the Floo. Poppy tossed the Floo powder in, and he stepped through. "Potion master's quarters," he said.

He didn't even look around but carried her straight to the bedroom. He commanded the blankets to draw back and cast a warming charm on them. He laid her down, pulled out his wand, and changed her clothing to a soft sleeping gown. She cried his name, so he crawled into bed and pulled her close. She woke only minutes later, screaming again. He accioed the dreamless sleep and gave it to her. He watched for 20 minutes as she slept peacefully, and then he crawled out of bed. He quickly cleaned his quarters and tried to neaten the stacks of books that sat everywhere. He knew Hermione's parents would be arriving at any time.

No sooner was he finished then there was a knock at the door. He opened it and found Harry and Ron with the Grangers. He eyed the redhead in annoyance, not really understanding where the feeling came from. He'd been there for Hermione and quite polite to Severus himself. So he was careful not to show it.

"Please, Mr. and Mrs. Granger, and gentlemen, come in." He ushered them to the sitting area. "Hermione is asleep. I had to give her some dreamless sleep. She keeps having nightmares. I'm afraid it will keep her sleeping for hours."

June asked, "May I go see her a minute?"

"Of course. She's through that door." Hermione's mother hurried into the bedroom.

"Gentlemen, would you care for a drink? I have some Fire whiskey." He went to fetch some small goblets and measure out two fingers for each of them. He noted they all looked exhausted, worried and frazzled.

"To our brave Hermione," he said, swallowing the entire amount.

The men said, "Here, here!" Ron and Harry threw back their drinks while Paxton smelled his first and sipped it carefully, blinking his eyes against the sting.

"Wow, I guess that's an acquired taste. Good, but powerful." He wasn't sure he approved that they all seemed to be oblivious to its strength.

"It's a magical drink, Paxton. Each drinker can make it as strong or as weak as they wish. You expect it to be strong. Most people do because of its name. I have been drinking it for many years. It was necessary to dull the senses, on occasion, when I was a spy. With Hermione in my life, I seldom touch it anymore."

They sat, not really knowing what to say. Harry finally asked, "Will she be okay, sir?"

"Severus, Harry, no titles are necessary between us," he reminded the younger man. "I think, in time, once she realizes Alan is no longer a threat. I will do everything to assure her."

Ron said, "Thank you for alerting us all."

Severus said, "You're welcome, Mr. Weasley."

"Hermione needed us all," Severus continued. "If we'd had to go back to Australia, I would have had to have more help listening for her magic. Besides who would have gotten her parents here? I must thank Remus and Tonks again for their help." Severus ran his hand through his hair.

Paxton said, "You're exhausted. We can all come back tomorrow. Let me go give Hermione a kiss and fetch June." He excused himself and went to the next room. Harry and Ron stood. "Severus," Harry informed him, "we vanished the graffiti and tidied up the place a bit. There should be no sign that he was there. That man was really messed up. I can't imagine how he was able to hide it."

Severus said, "Hermione hadn't seen him in months, and we just assumed he'd gone on with his life. He appeared to be just a hormonal young man when I met him. I didn't sense the darkness at all." He berated himself. He should have seen it, felt something was amiss. Being around Hermione had given him tunnel vision. He could only see her.

Harry saw the signs of anger flash in the older wizard's eyes. "Severus, do not withdraw or lose yourself to anger now. If you do, you will lose her. I rather think he decided on the darkness after you saw him last. Throwing him out of Hermione's life was the best way to keep her safe. No one could have known the man had a twist in his soul back then."

Severus sighed, closing his eyes. "You're right. Anger has always kept me at arm's length. I will not do that to Hermione."

Both men were surprised when Ron said, "You are the man to keep her the safest, sir."

Severus regarded him a moment and then said, "Thank you, Ron. I will do my best."

Paxton and June came from the bedroom. Ron and Harry moved toward the door.

Harry said, "We will be back in a day or two to see Hermione. We are also scheduled to attend Alan's hearing in the meantime. I don't think they will need anyone else's testimony. You take care of Hermione, and we will take care of Alan. He will not see the outside of Azkaban for a very long time."

It best be never, Severus said to himself. He called, "Dobby."

The little house-elf appeared, and June gave an involuntary squeak.

Severus smiled and said, "Dobby, this is Mr. and Mrs. Granger. Please take them to the room you have prepared. You may answer their questions. Make sure they come down here for breakfast tomorrow morning."

"Sir, Ma'am, Dobby is pleased to meeting you. Please come following. I is taking you to your rooms."

Paxton had a delighted look on his face...as if he'd just woken from a fantasy and discovered it was real. He said, "Goodnight, Severus. Take care of our girl."

June nodded. Her eyes were still on the tiny elf.

Harry and Ron grinned at Severus and followed them out.

Severus sagged a bit. He took his outer jacket off and let it fall on the chair. He went to check on Hermione and found her sleeping deeply. He eyed the bathroom door and then went and took a quick, hot shower. She had not been the only one wanting to shed the smell of Alan's place. He put on his black pajama bottoms and nearly crawled in beside her. Then he thought better and added the pajama top. He drew her close, and she whimpered a bit, latching on to him.

He tried to sleep but exhaustion of mind and body wouldn't let him. He finally had to use an old calming technique to clear his mind and force himself to sleep.

Lisa, thank you so much for your beta work. You are very much appreciated.

Chapter 19: Coming to Terms

Chapter 19 of 20

On her last night at Hogwarts, Hermione goes to say goodbye to her grumpy, cruel Potions professor.

When Severus opened his eyes, the sun was just filtering in through the enchanted stained glass window. He found Hermione staring at him with warm, brown eyes. She leaned in and kissed him softly and then snuggled close.

"Are you alright?" she asked.

He nodded. "I should be asking you," he said, caressing her cheek with his hand. She kissed his palm. He noted there was a small smile, but it did not reach her slightly haunted eyes.

"I'm okay, for now. I cannot imagine what he might have done to you if I hadn't already disarmed him."

"You were spectacular, Hermione."

She trembled. "I didn't know what else to do. I really hurt him."

"He might have killed you if you hadn't. Sometimes we must do the thing we don't want to do to survive." He seemed to withdraw inwardly.

Hermione took his face in her hands. "You also did what you had to. I understand that more now. You did what you were ordered to do, Severus."

Severus pulled himself out of the past. "It's gone, just as yesterday is gone, Hermione. Don't let that bastard rob you of your joy. It gives my life meaning when I see you're happy."

Hermione cringed. She would not be able to stand to see Severus hurt, and right now she felt disconnected from nearly everything but the small lifeline she had holding on to him. "I need your joy right now," she told him.

Severus looked shocked.

She let hot tears flow again, and Severus chastised himself. But heaven help them, they were in trouble if he needed to have joy to bring her out of this. Joy was one thing he only glimpsed when Hermione shined hers at him. He wanted to cry with her. But he just held on and let her cry. Later he took her to the loo and helped her shower and dress. He tried to get her interested in books or a discussion, but she seemed to want to sit by the fire and watch the flames in silence.

He was grateful when her parents came and begged her to show them the castle. It seemed to draw her out of her shell. He went along, holding her hand, as she gave them a tour. They were fascinated by the moving paintings and a little freaked by the moving stairs. The Great Hall amazed them. Most of the students were still on holiday, so there were only a few people in the Great Hall for breakfast. Hermione insisted they stay and have breakfast there so they could meet some of the people who would one day be her colleagues. Her father was quite taken by Filius, and they got into quite a discussion. June sat back and just watched. Minerva made some effort to talk to her, and she finally convinced June to tell funny stories about Hermione when she was a child. Hermione joined in now and then. Severus saw that it helped her to act as if she was fine, so he encouraged her mom and enjoyed Hermione's protests about the secrets being shared. Whatever distracted her now was a good thing.

He saw her looking at her hands sometimes. Her fingers would twitch a bit, and then she'd wipe them on her robes. He realized she was still seeing the blood on them. He remembered feeling that way the first time he had been forced to kill someone without magic. The horror gave him nightmares for years. Then he'd gotten jaded and, for a time, allowed himself to inflict that which he was forced to without cringing. The thought made him cringe now, and he saw a shadow pass over Hermione's eyes as she glanced again at her hands.

He covered her fingers, and he felt her try to draw away. "Hermione, your hands are clean. There's nothing there," he whispered.

She looked into his eyes and saw the truth and relaxed a bit, but the haunted look stayed.

He wondered how he would be able to help her. He could take the fear away with his skills, but he thought the idea would be repugnant to her. Maybe he could teach her to push the fear behind a wall. It might give her some peace of mind. He knew the best way was to just let time take the sting away.

He'd wished Alan had given him a reason to kill him. If Alan had been armed, the man wouldn't be alive today.

When breakfast was over, they took a short walk out to the lake. The snow wasn't too deep. With a warming charm over the group, it was quite pleasant, and the scenery breathtaking.

June said, "I can see the beauty of this place, Hermione. I understand now why it means so much to you. You'll be an excellent teacher. You've always had such a love of learning, darling, and you will love passing that knowledge on."

Hermione smiled at her mother. "Thanks, Mum. I really feel safe here." It was all she said before turning to look out on the lake.

Suddenly the giant squid popped out, and its long tentacles reached out to them. Paxton gasped and drew June away from the edge as her scream was dying in the frozen air.

Hermione started to laugh. She laughed and laughed until tears came from her eyes. She grabbed Severus' robes, and her tortured eyes bore into him.

He realized she was hysterical. He grabbed her up and ran back to the castle, down into the dungeon and into their quarters, depositing her on the bed. He got a calming draught, and she drank it down. The laughter died, and she sobbed. "Oh, Severus." She clung to him. "I couldn't stop."

He held her close and said, "It's okay. The outing was too much. Your emotions are going to be all over the place for a while."

"How will I ever go back to school or to my apartment?" she asked. "I realize now he was stealing my things: a letter my mom wrote, my hairbrush, other small items. He'd been in my apartment several times. How was he able to get in through my wards undetected? I will never feel safe there again."

Severus rubbed her back to comfort her and said, "He's in Azkaban, Hermione. He cannot come for you. Never the less, I am going to ask Kingsley for a special request to the university. I want to have them allow me to finish this year with you. You completed the Theory class this term. If they do not agree, I will take leave for the rest of the year and go with you. You can get another apartment, Hermione. I know the problems seem insurmountable to you, but they can be worked out one at a time. Let me work it out. You concentrate on finding peace again."

"How?" she whimpered against him.

"I can teach you how to wall up that fear. You could look at it only when you're stronger, or I could take the memory from you."

"No!" she drew back and looked at him in horror.

He smirked. "I knew that would be your answer, my Gryffindor Lion, but I had to offer." He had pride in his eyes, and she let a small smile play across her lips. The calming draught was making her sleepy, and she snuggled down into the bed. There was a knock on his door and he said, "Hermione, your parents probably want to see you. Should I let them in?"

She nodded.

He went and opened the door and found her parents standing there with worried faces. Snow was still packed on their boots.

He banished the snow and said, "Please come in. I gave Hermione a calming draught, and she's resting. Please go in." He followed them into the bedroom, and Hermione immediately went into her mother's arms.

"Mom, please lie with me," she begged.

June looked at Severus. When he nodded, she crawled onto the big bed and laid on her back. Hermione went into her arms and laid her check against her mother's shoulder. It was a beautiful sight, Severus thought.

"Daddy?" She held her hand out.

Paxton looked a bit embarrassed but joined them when Severus said, "Please. Do whatever she needs."

Severus said, "Hermione, would you mind if I go to Minerva's office and make that connection with Kingsley?"

Hermione shook her head sleepily. "No, I'm okay with my parents."

He turned away and went through the door. He was feeling a little left out, but there was no room for him in the bed. He smirked at himself at such a thought. He knew he should not be jealous of the fact that she needed someone else beside him. He didn't understand the deep connection with a parent. His father had been abusive, and his mother had been a strict and elusive woman. He found he envied Hermione more than he was jealous. He was grateful her parents had come and wanted to help her through these first days. He had to button down his anger at Alan's attack. He wanted to go beat the man to a pulp.

By now he had arrived at the gargoyle. "Chocolate creams," he said, and it leaped out of the way. He rode up the stairs and knocked on the door.

"Come," Minerva called. "Severus, how's Hermione?" she asked when he got close to the desk.

"Fine for all appearances one moment and panicked the next. Her emotions are all over the place." He wearily sat down, his shoulders showing his defeat.

"Be patient. She will come around. What can I do for you?" Minerva asked.

Severus told her his purpose, and for the next hour they spoke to Kingsley and explained what had happened. Then they spoke to the magical administrator of the university. The man had been horrified at his student's behavior. Wanting to placate the Minister of Magic, he agreed that Hermione could finish her work at Hogwarts. They would send someone periodically to monitor her work, and she would have to come take the exams at the university.

Once the connection was broken, Severus sat back wearily in his chair. Running his hands through his hair, he leaned on the desk and covered his face with his hands and sighed. "That was easier than I thought it would be, but I'm exhausted."

Minerva called Dobby, and he brought them tea.

Severus took the cup thankfully in his hands, and it warmed him a bit. He sipped the strong tea and found it calmed him. He had always found Minerva's presence calming. She had an ancient wisdom about her. Once they had gotten past the period of his headmastership here, they had slipped back into a camaraderie. He'd never held her mistrust of him against her. He had fostered that to make the situation more real. Knocking out the Carrows before escaping had been in his plan from the beginning.

He sat, and they talked about Hermione's parents and how Severus would handle her instruction among all his other duties. Severus asked Minerva if she would allow Hermione to teach the first and second years. It would give her something to do and free him up for the administrative duties he'd agreed to take on. They both agreed distraction and love would work toward her healing more than anything.

Severus finally thanked Minerva and returned to his quarters. He found Poppy just leaving. "That's quite a sight." She indicated the three people, now sleeping. "I didn't want to disturb them, so I just did a wand check. She's agitated, but the draught helps." She squeezed Severus' arm and said, "You're doing a good job. Her parents' support means a lot right now."

"I feel helpless. She's in so much pain."

"Just be there for her in any way she wants you to be, Severus. She will want to reconnect soon, so take it slow."

He nodded, and Poppy took her leave. He watched for a few minutes as the three people slept on his bed. He smiled and then stretched out on the couch and fell asleep.

A light kiss on his lips woke him, and he found Hermione once again gazing into his eyes. She smiled this time. "I'm sorry we displaced you."

He sat up, drawing her into his arms. "Think nothing of it. I was perfectly comfortable." He smirked, and she giggled. He gave her a big smile, realizing that her giggle was such a wondrous thing. He saw a genuine smile back. *Joy reflecting joy. Maybe I do have some to share*, he thought.

Paxton came from the bedroom, tugging at his wrinkled clothing. He said, "Thank you for letting us take care of Hermione. Were you successful in your endeavors?"

June had followed him out of the bedroom. She was combing through her hair with her fingertips.

Severus nodded. He took Hermione to the chair opposite the couch and sat and pulled her into his lap. Then he nodded for the Grangers to sit on the vacated couch. He told them all what he had discussed with Minerva, Kingsley and Mr. Hallings.

Hermione hugged him tightly and said, "Thank you, Severus. I could not face going back. I would have had to quit or find another school. How could I be farther from you?" She seemed to have gained some confidence now that some of her biggest fears were no longer an issue.

Severus chose not to remind her that he had told her he would have gone with her.

Paxton stood, and they all stood. He reached out his hand and said, "Thank you, Severus. June and I know you will take good care of Hermione. I think we will go up to our rooms and get ready for dinner. I missed my lunch, and I can be right cranky when I'm hungry."

Severus smiled and said, "We will meet you in the Great Hall in two hours. I think we are all hungry...though I did have tea with Minerva. Just call Dobby if you need a snack or even lose your way to your rooms."

Hermione kissed and hugged her parents and watched them leave, still clinging to Severus' hand. When they were gone and the door was locked and warded, she dragged him into the bedroom. "Please, Severus, make love to me," she begged. "I need you. I need you inside of me. I need to be with you." She'd pulled her wand and changed the sheet and blankets, wiping out all evidence that she'd been laying in the bed with her parents.

"Hermione, do you think this wise? It's only been a day." But she was already pulling his robes off and opening the buttons on his shirt. He wanted her, but it struck fear in his heart. What if she panicked or froze? Would she be unable to separate his hands and his body from Alan's? The idea that Alan had been so close to her while she was naked was something he'd been wrestling with.

But God help him, he wanted her. He wanted something between them that was after this attack. He surrendered when she nipped one of his nipples. Her hands were everywhere, and her aggression only seemed to increase as she shed her own clothes and pulled him into the bed. "Severus, take me, please!" He could see tears now; her desperation to be with him was overwhelming her.

He took her arms gently and said, "Slow down. Let's do this right, if that's what you want. You have no idea how much I want to be with you, too." He lay in the bed and held his arms out to her. "Come to me, Hermione. Come to a bed filled with gentleness and love."

She scrubbed the tears away. With a small smile, she threw herself on him, and they kissed deeply. It was a slow process of getting back in touch. Hands softly caressed warm flesh, and lips tasted damp skin and salt tears on occasion. Fingers caressed warm depths or hard ridges. Hermione lay on top, feeling his large hands, gentle and soft. She finally interlaced her fingers with his, and he supported her as she lifted herself to slowly sheath him in velvet warm. She moved slowly, a slow rocking motion. He stared into her face and saw her bliss as she closed her eyes and her paced stepped up. Their fingers tightened. Their breathing became more rapid, and then they were both crying out softly from a shared orgasm. Hermione collapsed on his chest. "I love you, Severus. Nothing or no one will ever take me away."

He murmured against her ear. "That's good, because I will never let anyone take you, Hermione."

The next days they were busy getting the work set up for Hermione's first classes and then New Year's Eve came. Minerva had a staff party in a small ballroom in a seldom-used wing. Hermione thought it might be the same room as Slughorn's party years before. But the room had gold and white drapes, and sparkling snow drifted from an enchanted starry sky, only to vanish when it touched you. Everything sparkled, and the night was magic. Severus held Hermione close on the dance floor. He wore black dress robes, and she wore a midnight blue silky, flowing dress. Her parents were still there, and she loved watching them dance and share a kiss occasionally. She smiled as Filius danced with Minerva; he was enchanted to float before her. Hagrid, Madame Maxim, Harry, Ginny, Tonks, and Remus were there, too. Ron came, bringing a lovely witch named Sara. She had fiery red hair to match his

It was magical. She laughed out loud for the first time as they reminisced, and Severus smirked at all their antics. Their kiss at midnight was magical, and when they fell in bed that night and made love, the world seemed to nearly right itself a little more for Hermione.

Her parents left the next morning. There were lots of tears and hugs. Harry saw them home safely. Hermione and Severus walked hand in hand back to their rooms. She sat on the couch and stared into the fire, and Severus' heart skipped a beat. Would she slip into depression? He knew it was too soon for her to be all right, yet these last days she'd been up, having her friends and family to reflect joy off of. Now it was up to him, and he wondered if he could do it. He sat down and pulled her to him. "You okay?"

She said, "Yes, but you have to stop asking me that."

"I'm sorry," he apologized. "I've never been good at reading emotional needs, Hermione. I only know if I ask."

She smiled up at him. "I know. It was easier to be happy when there were so many people here. I loved spending time with my parents and friends. But I also love being with you. I think I will take you up on those Occlumency lessons. I don't want to forget, Severus. But maybe I can dull the images...put them behind an opaque wall. I'd like to dull the actual touch of his hands."

Severus held her a bit tighter. "I think that's a good idea. I can also teach you to direct your dreams at night so you can push the nightmares away. You cannot take much more Dreamless Sleep."

She turned in his arms and kissed him. "You've been wonderful, Severus. I would welcome any help you can give me. I'm a bit nervous about Monday, but I'm excited."

He smiled at her. "I will be in the classroom for a few days to start you. But I will only be there as an observer and for support. You will be the teacher."

"I would have gone stir crazy in our rooms with you teaching all day. I am glad of a task in the morning and my studies in the afternoon. I hope I will not be too hard for you to work into your schedule."

Severus let a chuckle out. "I dare say, Hermione, you could teach yourself. You probably know all of it by now. Exactly when did you read the texts you are using now?"

She blushed and said, "In my seventh year."

He laughed now and said, "I thought so." He kissed her until she sagged against him. "Your mind is so sexy to me. You have so much ability and potential. I find it turns me on," he admitted.

She was surprised and grinned. He had never told her that before. "That's a good thing because I'm not beautiful."

"Hermione Granger, you are the most beautiful woman there is. I even love your bushy hair. The sight of you makes my insides mush," he admitted, his face coloring.

She looked at him curiously and said, "You're so much more open."

"Your love has opened me. I'm starting to feel that I can finally let go of all the past and have a normal life."

That really set her laughing. "We live in a dungeon of a magical castle, that's normal?"

Loving her laughter, he smirked. "For a wizard and witch, I guess it is."

"I suppose it is." She proceeded to kiss him back, and they ended up back in bed.

The days stretched into weeks and then months. There were good days and a few bad ones. Depression usually hit around Hermione's cycle, and Severus made a potion to ward off those bad days. With a little trial and error, he was finally able to help her even out her feelings. The Occlumency lessons helped a great deal.

Hermione loved teaching, and she loved working with Severus through her own lessons in the evening in the lab and their quarters. Many late nights would also find them amongst the stacks of books in the library.

Finally the end of the year loomed, and exams were coming up. She knew she was going to have to go back to the university for the tests. Hermione was stressed, and it brought back a few nightmares. Severus had NEWTs to give and couldn't go with her, so Harry took her to London and to the university.

It took several long days and, Hermione thought, even longer nights, but she passed her exams and was declared an official Apprentice to Severus Snape Potion Master of Hogwarts. A huge party was held in a ballroom decked out in Gryffindor colors. Hermione's parents, many students, as well as old friends and dignitaries attended the celebration.

They were dancing, and as the music faded Severus got on his knee and asked, "Hermione Granger, you know how much I love you. Will you Bond with me? Be my wife?"

She fell to her knees crying and hugging him. She cried out, "Yes! Yes!" before kissing him.

He pushed her back, gently holding her arms and looking her in the eyes. "Everyone we know and care about is here right now. Bond with me now, right here, tonight...?" He let his love wash over her.

She looked to her mother and saw her mother nod slightly. She turned back to Severus, leaned in, and kissed him softly. "Yes, Severus, being your wife in a bonded marriage would make me very happy." He drew her to him and sighed with relief.

Hermione said, "Silly man," as she kissed him again.

Please leave reviews. Reviews are a writer's only thanks.

Lisa, thank you so much for your beta work. Without you my work, would never make it to the Queue.

Chapter 20: Body and Soul

Chapter 20 of 20

On her last night at Hogwarts, Hermione goes to say goodbye to her grumpy, cruel Potions professor.

Hermione was shuffled off by her mother, Ginny and Tonks. Luna followed them with a starry-eyed look.

Hermione's face was flushed with happiness, and she said, "You all knew, didn't you?"

Her mother nodded. "Severus wrote to us. I think he was afraid you'd reject the idea because you weren't in on the plan. But I told him you'd once told me you would marry him in a second if he asked, so I advised him to ask."

Hermione looked around her and realized they were in the room that she'd stood in many years ago waiting for the sorting. There was a mirrored dresser with a magnificent medieval-style wedding dress floating nearby. Pearl white lace stockings, to go with the white bustier she already wore under her dress, lay on top of the dressing table. She quickly pulled off her dress and changed as the ladies held the dress. It fit her perfectly. She realized it was spelled to fit once it was on. Ginny laced the back up. Her hair was done simply...tied up on the sides and allowed to flow down in the back. She didn't care that she hadn't been in on the plans. She knew that once she was bonded to Severus, there would be a connection to him that no one could break. He would always know where she was and be able to come to her at anytime. She thought, *Finally I can be at full peace.*

June handed her a gift and said, "Something old. This was my mother's. I've always kept it, knowing I would give it to you on your wedding day."

Hermione took the box and popped it open. Inside was a brilliant diamond necklace on a fine gold chain.

"It's beautiful." Tears clouded her eyes as her mother fastened it around her neck.

"Your dad and I are so happy for you and Severus. When you came to Australia, we were concerned...him having been your teacher and who he was...but he proved rather quickly to have only your best interests at heart. He loves you more than his own life. We couldn't want more for you, darling." She kissed Hermione's cheek. Unshed tears shone in her eyes.

"Oh, Mum. I love him just as much," Hermione said.

"I can see that, dear."

Ginny moved closer and produced a pale blue garter. "Here's something blue."

Hermione put her leg out, and Ginny dropped to her knees and slid it up Hermione's lace-covered leg. "It's beautiful, Gin." She thanked her with a hug as the dress settled back around her feet.

Tonks came now. "Something new," she said, holding a pair of white silk, lace-covered high heels to match the stockings. Tonks kneeled to place them on her feet. They fit perfectly.

"They are beautiful." She hugged the woman and saw Tonks' hair flush red.

Luna handed her a small bag of herbs. "Something borrowed to attract Snuffellumps. They are good luck for a bonding," she explained.

Hermione glanced at Ginny, and her eyebrows went up, but she tucked it into her bustier. "Thank you, Luna, that's very thoughtful. I can use all the good luck there is. I'll make sure it gets back to you." She gave the odd girl a hug.

"My mother made it for me for my bonding one day," Luna said in her soft voice.

Hermione was touched when she realized this was very special to her friend. "I will take excellent care of it. I promise. I'm so glad you and Neville came. Are you seeing each other?"

Luna's pale face turned pink. "He's asked me to go steady."

Hermione thought, *What an old fashioned idea.* "That's wonderful. You're perfect for each other. Luna, can you go tell everyone I'm ready and see if they want me to come out?"

Luna nodded. When she opened the door, Paxton was waiting outside. He stuck his head in the door and said, "Are you decent? Can I come in?"

Hermione laughed and said, "Yes, Daddy, please." She came forward and grabbed him for a big hug and a kiss.

Paxton pulled back and looked at her with tears in his eyes. "Look at my little girl. When did you grow up? You're beautiful, honey." He reached out to his wife. "She's beautiful, isn't she, June?"

Hermione's mother smiled warmly and said, "Yes, she is. I'm so grateful to be here." The tears escaped now, sliding down her soft cheeks.

Hermione gazed at them with such love and happiness that a tear slid down her father's cheek. "I'm so happy to have you here." Hermione could now hear instrumental music. "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring" by Bach was playing.

Luna returned and said, "They are ready. You will walk the length of the hall to the stage."

Hermione's eyes filled with tears. It was a tribute to her Muggle upbringing. She reached out to her father and said, "You are going to walk me down the aisle, aren't you?"

"Absolutely, honey." He hooked his arm through hers. June gave her hand a squeeze and placed a kiss on her cheek. Then she left the room to take her place.

Hermione said, "Who is going to walk with me? I need bridesmaids. Ladies?"

Ginny grinned. "I thought you'd never ask." She drew her wand and changed Tonks' and Luna's dresses to long icy blue gowns. She changed her own to a slightly darker shade. She then conjured four bouquets of glittering white roses and gave Hermione the biggest one.

"Will we do?" she asked, waving her arms to include the other two women.

"Perfectly." Hermione hugged them all. "Let's go."

They all went to the door of the Great Hall. Luna went first, then Tonks, and then Ginny stepped into the room and started to walk to the front. When they were at the front, the music changed, and the traditional wedding march came from the very walls.

Hermione stepped out the doorway with her father and gasped. The previous party decorations were gone. Now every thing was white...a virtual winter wonderland. It was summer, but she had told Severus once that winter was her favorite time with him. It gave her an excuse to snuggle more. A flash went off in her face, and she realized a photographer was there. Icicles hung from the ceiling, and white candles lit the room in a soft white glow. Trellises of white flowers made a high arch down the middle. Severus stood on one of the stairs leading to the stage. He was dressed in a dark black silk suit with an amazing white shirt and white bow tie.



She sighed. He looked amazing. His black hair was laying in soft plaits over his shoulders. It had grown long, and Hermione loved it that way. She knew her friends were there because everyone from the party was still there. But she registered her surprise seeing Harry, Ron, and Remus standing with Severus. It made the room blur, and she blinked back the tears. She didn't think she could love Severus more than she did at that moment.

She glanced at her dad.

"You ready, honey?" he asked, giving her arm a squeeze.

"Absolutely," she said.

They began the walk slowly. Her dress trailed behind her, and the enchanted snowflakes dusted the floor before her. She saw very little of it because her eyes were locked on Severus' and his on her.

Finally they reached the front. Severus held out his hand, and she slipped her hand into his. She turned to kiss her father's cheek and then gave Severus her full attention.

"You okay with all this, Hermione?" he whispered with an edge of worry in his voice.

"It's perfectly wonderful, Severus. I can't wait to be your wife." He guided her carefully up the stairs to stand before Kingsley.

Kingsley's rich voice filled the Great Hall, no doubt enhanced by a Sonorus Charm.

"I have the privilege to join this wizard and this witch in a Holy Bonding, in a blend of Muggle and Wizarding traditions.

"Who gives this woman to be wedded and bonded to this man?" he asked.

Paxton stepped forward. "Her mother and I," he said proudly.

As he stepped back to his wife's side, Hermione turned briefly to give them a warm smile. "I love you," she mouthed.

She turned back to Severus. "You have outdone yourself. The joy you give me tonight sears away any darkness that was left."

Severus returned that compliment with a flash of joy that spread across his face.

Kingsley cleared his throat, and they turned to him. "I will ask of you these questions, and you will answer yes if you wish this marriage to proceed."

"Do you, Hermione Jean Granger, wish to bond with this wizard? This bond can never be broken except by death."

"Yes," she said, looking into Severus' eyes.

"Severus Tobias Snape, do you wish to be bonded to this witch? This bond can never be broken except by death."

"Yes," he said. His silky voice made her shiver.

"Will you both bring all that you have and all that you will have to this bond and this bond alone?"

"Yes," they said in unison.

"Will you protect and serve and love each other for the rest of your lives?"

"Yes," they said.

"Now I will add the Muggle vows," he said, opening a small book.

"Hermione Jean Granger, do you take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband, from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until death do you part?"

"I do," she said. She smiled, and her eyes slowly closed for a moment in a silent prayer.

Severus saw her delicate thick lashes rest on her cheeks for a moment, and then she looked back into his eyes.

"Severus Tobias Snape, do you take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife, from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and health, to love and to cherish, until death do you part?"

"I do," he said. His voice was nearly a purr.

"Present your right hands, and clasp them together." He took a golden chain and wrapped it around their hands and then tapped it with his wand. The gold vaporized, passing into their flesh, and then reformed a few inches above their hands into simple golden bands.

He cautioned, "Once these bands are placed on your fingers, the bond will be for life. Is there any objection?" he asked those present.

Not a sound was heard.

"None," they said.

They took the rings and placed them on each other's fingers.

Kingsley started to speak, and Severus produced a diamond solitaire and added it to Hermione's hand.

She gasped, "Severus, it's beautiful."

Kingsley said, "By the powers vested in me by the Ministry and by the province of Scotland, I hereby pronounce you wizard husband and witch wife." He laughed at the tongue-tying words. His deep voice brought everyone to laughter as Hermione launched herself at Severus. He caught her up, laughing aloud, and swung her around, kissing her deeply as she settled against his chest. They both laughed with pleasure as the bond spread from their hearts to their limbs and filled them with well being.

There was a tingle of magic in the room, and the trellises vanished. A dance floor was cleared, tables lined the floor, and candles twinkled into being. There was a tall cake on the stage now, and a pyramid of filled champagne glasses appeared. Everyone, probably a good 200 people, gathered around.

Harry stepped up to give a toast. "Friends and family, we are gathered here to celebrate the marriage and the bonding of two special people...two of the greatest heroes our world has ever seen."

Both the bride and groom opened their mouth to protest. Harry interrupted. "No, Severus, Hermione. I may have had to deliver the final blow, but you both know that it wouldn't have happened without your support and knowledge and sheer courage that kept me going day to day.

"It is my sincere pleasure to be with you here today. Fences have been mended, and my best friend is happier than I have ever thought possible...and with our Potions professor, no less."

That got a snicker from the crowd.

"I thank this man for my life and for my friends' lives. Hermione, you are one of my very best friends, and I am so happy to see you with the man of your choosing. I see he brings you great joy. May you be happy for many, many years to come, and may the babies you have grow to be phenomenal wizards and witches. With you two as parents, how can they not be?

"Blessings," he said and raised his glass, and everyone around the room raised theirs and then took a drink from their glasses.

Severus turned to Harry and said, "Thank you, Harry. As I look back and see the end of all this, it was my pleasure."

Hermione stepped closer and hugged Harry hard. "Thank you for accepting the love of my life."

"Hey, do I get one of those?" Ron chimed in.

"Absolutely," she said, turning to give Remus and him a hug. Sniffing a bit, she said, "Please gather your significant others and dance. I want a moment with my man."

They all nodded and left the newlyweds.

Hermione dragged Severus into a corner behind some decorations and kissed him breathless. "I'm so happy. This is the best surprise of my life." She looked down at her wedding set and flashed the diamond back and forth. "It's beautiful, Severus."

He held her around the waist and leaned to kiss her neck. "You look ravishing, my dear. How long do you think we need to stay here?" he asked, his desire obvious.

"Hold that thought," she said with a grin. "I plan to enjoy this party. It's my wedding day, Severus."

He groaned but then grinned and stepped back. "Well, Mrs. Snape, what do you say we go mingle and dance?"

She said, "I'd say that's a wonderful idea, Mr. Snape. I do want to dance with my father after our first dance. And I am sure Minerva and Poppy hope to trip the light fantastic with you."

"What?" he said and then laughed. "Oh, another Muggle phrase. I'm not sure I remember that one. My father watched a lot of sports."

Hermione said as they headed for the dance floor, "You didn't stop Harry from wishing our children well. Does that mean you want more than one?"

"Only if you do. The idea of holding our child in my arms makes me weak kneed. It's an amazing thought."

"It is, isn't it?" she said, feeling a thrill from the bond wash through them.

He gathered her to him. The floor cleared, and they began to dance as if they had practiced. They didn't talk but just enjoyed the sway of their bodies as they stared into each other's eyes.

There was a thunderous clapping when they were done, and other couples took to the floor.

Hermione took her dad's hand, and Severus took her mother's hand, and they danced, never moving too far from each other.

Dance after dance the night passed. When the dancing was done, the cake was cut, and the pictures were taken, Severus said, "We're going. I cannot wait another moment."

Hermione smiled that sexy little smile that turned him inside out and said, "Neither can I."

He took a small object from his pocket and grabbed her up against him. He called out loudly, "We're going. Thank you so much."

"We love you all," Hermione said, throwing a big kiss from her lips to her hand and out to the crowd.

Severus ran his thumb over the Portkey, and they vanished.

"Severus, where are we?" Hermione asked in awe.

He whispered in a hushed tone, "Minerva said it was her hideaway."

They stood near a small mountain enclave. A cliff fell away about 60 feet from the cabin, and nearby they could hear a bubbling brook. The trees were alight with fireflies or perhaps fairies. Mountains and valleys stretched out as far as the eye could see. The climate was warm and the vista green. Mountains ranged from blues to purple in the distance, and the sun was setting before them. They watched as the sun went down and then light came on behind them, and they turned to the enchanted mountain cottage, nestled in a valley, surrounded by mountains.



"Oh, Severus, it's beautiful."

He agreed, "Yes, it is."

Severus swooped low and picked Hermione up in his arms. The door slid open as he carried her into the amazing cabin.

They really didn't see much of the room as he carried her through. Another door opened for them, and a room that looked as if it was carved from the very mountain greeted them.

The room was curved, not square, and it had several wall nooks with some sort of natural glowing quartz that lit the room in a soft, warm glow. There was a huge carved dark wooden bed with red hangings laced in gold. Severus set her down on her feet, frowning. Hermione snickered as Severus smirked at the bedding. He brought his wand into view and the colors turned green and silver.

Hermione laughed, hugging him tightly. "Slytherin to the core. I don't care what the color it is, Severus. Make love to me."

He grinned and tossed his wand onto the nearby dresser and shrugged out of his jacket.

Hermione was unbuttoning his shirt, her fingers working quickly to open the buttons.

Severus began to undo the ties that held her old-fashioned dress together. He sucked in a breath as her hands slid over his bare chest, and she leaned to kiss his clavicle. His fingers slipped through her hair, letting her hair free of its ties. It fell in thick, silky curls over her now-bare shoulders. He pushed her dress over her hips, and neither saw it puddle around her feet. Hermione stepped away from it, led closer to the bed by Severus. Their lips pressed together hungrily.

Her hands were at the buttons of his pants. Hermione sighed as the tightness of her bustier fell away, and Severus' warm hands gently cupped her breast. His thumb teased the tip into a hard nub. Then she felt the rest of her undergarments fall away or vanish. "Magic... has... its... advantages," she stammered between kisses.

"Indeed," Severus agreed. "You are so beautiful, my wife."

"And you are exquisite, my husband." She finally got his pants undone, and she pushed them and his boxers down his hips.

Severus kicked them free, vanishing his own shoes and socks. The sheets drew back by magic. He picked her up and placed her in the middle of the bed and climbed in. They faced each other, their hands exploring, their tongues tangled and their fingers traced silken flesh, their legs tangled, sighs and groans laced the air. Severus held himself above her for a brief moment. Their eyes locked, and their minds flowed into each others. They became one...body, soul, and mind. She saw and felt what he did, and he saw and felt what she did. She sheathed him, and they found a rhythm that sent their feelings soaring until the earth shattered around them and they cried out together. They collapsed into a pile of tangled limbs, their hearts beating hard against each other's breasts. They lay again, side by side, holding each other tightly. Severus' lips were pressed against Hermione's forehead. She was slowly running her fingers through the light hair on his chest.

Severus said, "Each time is as the first."

"You are silver tongued, Severus." Hermione sighed, looking up into his face.

He smiled...the most content, warm smile Hermione had ever seen on his handsome face.

She cupped the side of his face with her fingers, and he bent to give her a soft kiss.

"Do you know what's even better, about all this, Mrs. Snape?"

She nodded, and they both said it as he drew the covers over them and they settled against the pillows, "No more goodbyes." They drifted off to sleep to the sound of the crickets as the moon rose high into the starry night sky.

The end of goodbyes and the beginning of their life together.

Fini

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