

More than Brushstrokes

by debjunk

Hermione, as Headmistress, commissions a portrait of Severus Snape. The results are more than she expected.

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 18

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Disclaimer: JKR owns these characters. I just muck up their lives more than usual.

Prologue

Hermione entered the Head's office and looked around it. Her gaze finally lit upon the visage of Minerva McGonagall smiling at her.

"Welcome to your office!" Minerva exclaimed cheerily.

Hermione gave her a small smile. "It's not truly mine until after tomorrow morning when you leave for your exciting trip around the world."

Minerva grinned also. "Yes, I've been looking forward to that for years. Merlin, it's taken that long to plan!"

Hermione gave her a wistful look. "I do envy you, traveling the globe to research with the most preeminent Transfiguration masters of our time. What a wonderful thing to do in your retirement years."

Minerva frowned then. "I don't really want to think of it as retirement, Hermione. That makes me sound so old and used up. It's more of a change of occupation."

Hermione nodded. "Yes, you're definitely not old or used up. It's a perfect thing for you really. You'll keep active in mind, body, and spirit with your travels. Think of all the people you'll meet," Hermione mused.

"Are you ready to take over, my dear?" Minerva asked kindly.

Hermione nodded again. "Yes. Well, as ready as I'll ever be. I want to thank you for recommending me as the new Headmistress. It's a wonderful opportunity."

Minerva chuckled. "I was afraid you would turn down the offer."

Hermione gave Minerva an odd look. "Why would you ever think that?"

Minerva waved her hand dismissively. "You have quite the reputation at the Ministry. I thought perhaps you enjoyed that job too much to even consider this position."

"Oh, no, not at all. I did enjoy my position with Magical Law Enforcement, but your offer was very timely. It's time for a change for me, and this is just the right position."

"Are Harry and Ron happy for you?"

She nodded. "To tell you the truth, with Harry's retirement from the Ministry a few months ago, I haven't heard from him much." She leaned forward and continued in a conspiratorial tone, "but it will be nice to get away from them for a bit. Don't get me wrong, I love them dearly, but for years they have both been playing matchmaker with me. It's quite frustrating. With the distance between us, I'm hoping they can go back to just being supportive friends and not meddling cupid."

"Hermione, they just want to see you happy."

Hermione gave a wan smile. "I am happy, though. They can't seem to understand that. Yes, it would be nice to have someone special in my life, but I'm certainly not crying in the corner because I'm not in a relationship right now."

"And it's not like you haven't had relationships, too," Minerva agreed with a nod. "Whatever happened to that nice boy you were dating... Paul Sterling?"

Hermione looked off wistfully. "He seemed perfect for a while, but it just wasn't right. He was brilliant—which I loved, but passionless—which was incredibly frustrating." She looked back at Minerva. "I know Harry and Ron have my best interests at heart, but whenever they tell me that I'm not getting any younger I just want to hex their noses off!"

Minerva snorted. "Oh, Hermione, you're only thirty-eight! That's almost a child by wizarding standards." Smiling sagely, Minerva continued. "Yes, it's hard to find all the right qualities in a man, but when you do find that someone, it will have definitely been worth the wait. When that time comes, hold on to that man for dear life."

Hermione smiled. "I will, if I ever find him."

"Positive thoughts, my dear, positive thoughts."

Original Prompt by angel_mischa: 1) Snape doesn't live. Hermione seeks out a magical-portrait-painter talented enough do a work from photographs that can hang in her (the Headmistress') office. Will the magic work? Will Snape be as he was in life? Possible consequences of the unorthodox method? (Could be funny or angsty...)

Chapter One

Chapter 2 of 18

Hermione, as Headmistress, commissions a portrait of Severus Snape. The results are more than she expected.

Chapter 1

Hermione settled into her chair and gazed around the room at the portraits. All the former Headmasters were in different positions within their frames. Many snoozed, some weren't even present, and others looked at her curiously. Her eyes fell on Phineas Nigellus Black. He was glaring at her.

Hermione's eyebrows arched. "Have I done something to offend you, Professor Black?"

He scowled then and turned around, huffing to himself.

"Oh, he's just upset about the usual," Dilys Derwent said.

Hermione turned to the elegant lady. "What exactly is the usual?" she asked.

Black turned around then. Hermione could almost see steam escaping from his ears he looked so livid. "The *usual* is that we are still missing a colleague."

Hermione scanned the mass of portraits but could see no one missing. She racked her brain, mentally scanning Hogwarts a History. No, everyone was accounted for.

"Do you mean Professor McGonagall? She's just retired. Her portrait won't be added until her death."

Black seemed to swear under his breath. "I am fully aware of that! I was not referring to anyone living."

Hermione looked once again. She gasped. It was so obvious that her brain had just ignored it.

"Professor Snape is missing," she whispered.

Black finally calmed and smirked. "It took you long enough."

"Why isn't his portrait here?"

"Your predecessor could not bring herself to have one commissioned."

Hermione frowned. "Minerva always felt sorry for the way she treated him."

Black snorted. "Obviously not sorry enough to give him his rightful place on these walls."

Hermione shook her head. "No, there's got to be some other reason."

She pulled out a parchment and wrote a quick note. Summoning her owl, she sent the missive on its way and sat back, biting the tip of her quill while deep in thought.

It had taken several days for Minerva to answer Hermione's letter. Hermione was glad when it finally arrived. She unfolded the response and read through it.

Dear Hermione,

The fact is, Professor Black is partially right. I hesitated in commissioning the portrait. By the time I'd decided to have it done, the man who usually paints such works had passed away. I was so busy that I never took the time to find someone else to do it. I suppose you'll need to put that on your list of things to do. After all, I won't be around forever, and I'll need my everlasting mark to be placed on the wall. Please get Severus' portrait done soon. I feel badly that I put it off for so long.

Minerva

Hermione looked crossly at the note. How could Minerva have forgotten about Professor Snape's portrait for twenty years? No matter, she would see that Severus Snape got his portrait.

Studying the list before her, Hermione read the seven names that were printed on it. These were names of the most preeminent artists in the Wizarding world. Two were located in London. Hermione looked at their names and descriptions, trying to figure out who would be the best to paint a former Headmaster's portrait. The first artist's name was Franco DiGregorio. He was originally from Italy but had spent his schooling at Hogwarts and stayed in Britain afterward to practice his art. He was quite old... one hundred twenty-five. His specialty was heirloom portraits.

The other artist was Jacob Fischer. He was quite a bit younger at age fifty. He specialized in portraits of live subjects, though. He wouldn't do, unfortunately, as all she had were pictures of the former Headmaster.

It had taken her a bit of time to find those pictures. She'd scoured the castle looking for photographs of him but had only found two. She also had a chocolate frog card that she'd gotten about a year after the end of the war, when Severus was finally considered a hero. A trip to the Creevey home had uncovered another photo of Severus seated at the head table, glowering at the students.

She pulled the photos out of her desk drawer and looked at them again. As she flipped through them, her hand stilled as she examined the chocolate frog card. The picture was actually very flattering except for the dark frown he gave her as she looked at him. Hermione mused that the facial features she'd thought of as harsh as a youth now seemed to be distinguished. His gaze was hawk-like, yes, but in some way she found his sharp features appealing instead of frightening, as she had when she was a child. She wondered if it had something to do with the fact that she was basically the same age as he was in the picture. Shaking her head, she moved on to the next photo. This one looked her over from top to bottom and turned with his nose in the air. She couldn't help but chuckle.

"You'll have to stay facing forward if you're going to be any help at all," she told the photo. Snape didn't move.

Moving on to the next... the Creevey photo... she saw Professor Snape's eyes sweep over the hall. A small frown, and what seemed like despair, crossed his features. She wondered about that. *Given his position as spy, it must have been incredibly hard for him to play his role all the time* In an instant the pain in the professor's face had disappeared, and he was glowering once again.

Hermione sighed. Severus Snape had been so misunderstood throughout his lifetime. It really was a shame he hadn't survived. She wondered if he would have been able to lead a normal life if he had.

Gathering up the photos, she left her office and headed to the Apparition point. The only way she would know if Franco DiGregorio would be the right artist to paint Snape was if she spoke with him in person.

Appearing in Diagon Alley, Hermione gazed around her. She spied the small shop instantly. The brave storefront held its own even though it was smashed between the ever popular Madam Malkin's and Gringotts. The letterhead read *DiGregorio Studio* and in the window were several portraits, including a young lady in a long, 19th century Victorian dress. Her hair was black and curly, and she held an umbrella over her head. She smiled and waved at Hermione with a gloved hand. Hermione smiled back, thinking about how incredibly realistic the likeness was.

She entered the shop as a little bell suspended over the door rang. The interior of the studio was filled with more portraiture, and they all seemed to be gazing at her curiously. She smiled tentatively at them. A portly, old, balding man with glasses shuffled out from the back room. He looked at her and smiled broadly.

"How may I help you, signorina?" he asked Hermione in a thick Italian accent which made him sound quite fatherly.

She moved toward him and extended her hand. "My name is Hermione Granger. I'm the newly appointed Headmistress of Hogwarts."

The old man's eyes lit up. "Ah, Professore Granger, your reputation precedes you." Extending his hand, he brought hers to his lips, placing a respectful kiss on it. "I'm Franco DiGregorio. What can I do for you?" he asked.

"Sir, I have a request. There is no portrait of Severus Snape in my office, and I would like to rectify that."

A tinge of excitement filled the old man's eyes. "You want me to paint Severus Snape?"

She nodded. "Obviously all I have to offer you are pictures. Will that suffice?"

"Let me see them," Franco requested.

She pulled the small stack of photos out of her robes and handed them to Franco. He flipped through them quickly. The photo that had turned his back on Hermione now looked curiously at the artist. Franco smiled, which caused Snape to scowl.

"Ah, you are going to be a difficult one, I can see that already!" he said to the picture. Looking back to Hermione he nodded his head. "These pictures will do. They give me several aspects of his silhouette and facial features. It shouldn't be a problem."

Hermione smiled. "How long will it take you to do this, Mr. DiGregorio?"

"Ah, please, call me Franco," he said. "It should be about six weeks."

"Please spare no expense. Hogwarts prides itself on the portraiture of former Headmasters, and I want this one to be as exceptional, if not more so, than its predecessors."

Franco's hands reached out, and he took hold of Hermione's once again. "Don't worry, signorina. I will make you a painting that everyone will be amazed at. That's what I do, after all!"

Nodding, Hermione smiled at him. "I can see that from your displayed work, Mister... erm... Franco. I knew the minute I saw the lady in the window that this was the right place to come."

Franco nodded, continuing to shake her hand. "Ah, I see you have an eye for quality. I will begin the portrait today. As I said, it should be ready in six weeks."

"Thank you. Just owl me when it is ready, and I'll arrange for it to be transported to the school."

Franco finally released her hand, but immediately reached for her shoulder as she turned to go. "No need. I will hang it myself."

"All right, thank you again."

With that, Hermione left the small studio, excited to see what Franco DiGregorio would create.

A/N: And so it begins!

Chapter 2

Chapter 3 of 18

Hermione, as Headmistress, commissions a portrait of Severus Snape. The results are more than she expected.

Chapter 2

Franco DiGregorio was a master. He'd been painting for over one hundred years now, and he understood what it meant to bring a portrait to life. He gazed at the photo of Severus Snape, which continued to frown at him. Looking back at his own work, he added a brush stroke to Snape's rather prominent nose. Moving back a little, he nodded in approval. The portrait was nearly finished. Severus Snape, with his jet black hair and brooding eyes, was now staring back at him. It had taken six weeks to get to this point, and finally just a few more brush strokes and the painting itself would be complete. Once done, Franco could cast the spell that would instill the portrait with movement.

His eyes went back to the frowning photo of Snape. He frowned a little to himself.

"Look, Professore" he told the picture in his flowing Italian accent. "You'll have to do more than frown if you want me to get you right in this portrait. I need to see all of your emotions, not just the negative ones."

Snape huffed and folded his arms in front of him.

Franco shrugged. "It's up to you. If you want this portrait to really reflect who you are, then you will have to show me who you are. Otherwise the magic will only conjure up a poor representation. You don't want that, now do you, Professore?"

Severus motioned up to his face, which was still frowning.

"Yes, I know. You didn't smile in real life. I also know you were a spy and probably couldn't smile or you'd be killed. Ay! Just because you show me a smile and some other *positive* emotions doesn't mean that your portrait will be happy all the time. It just helps to give a more complete view of who you really are... I mean were."

Snape scowled at him for another moment, then his lips curled up in what Franco assumed was a smile. It looked tense and forced.

"Well, that's a start. How about a laugh?"

Severus scowled again.

"I'll tell you a joke. Why did Professore Snape stand in the road?"

Severus' eyes narrowed.

"So no one could tell which side he was on."

This elicited an actual smile from Severus Snape.

"Ah, very good. Here's another one. What do you call a Hufflepuff with one brain cell?"

Severus raised his eyebrow in question.

"Gifted!"

This time the joke worked, and Franco saw Severus Snape actually break into a silent belly laugh. He was amazed at how the act lightened the man's face. Franco immediately began adding little touches to his work.

Half an hour later, the artist sat back again and looked at the portrait. His eyes went back and forth from photo to painting. He flipped to another photo and compared. When he'd done that with all four photographs, he nodded to himself.

"It is done."

He rose and went over to his bookshelf, pulling a thin book from it. The spell to give simulated life to a portrait was intricate and had to be done exactly right. Franco quoted it straight from the book each time he enchanted a painting. The results had always been spectacular.

Even though he'd performed this spell hundreds of times, he took the time to read through the entire section once again.

To enchant a painting, one must be very precise with the incantation. Even the slightest error in inflection could cause the spell to fail. Practice the spell carefully to ensure success.

Dare vita at non cor ad hic effigies *ive life but not soul to this portrait.*

Franco pulled out his wand and made the wand movements silently, practicing them several times before he was ready. He looked to the portrait of Snape.

"Are you ready, signore?" he asked in his heavy Italian accent. "Well, you must be, for I am ready."

Lifting his wand, he began the movements and started to say the spell.

"Dare vita at..."

At that moment, an owl flew into his back room, startling him. His wand movements hesitated as he lost his train of thought. It only took him an instant to recover, and he completed the spell.

"Cor ad hic effigies!" he cried and cast the spell. Golden light flew from his wand and covered the painting. Franco frowned as he lowered his wand. He knew better than to

leave the door to his private studio open when he was enchanting a portrait. The owl had distracted him, and he hoped beyond hope that the spell had been correct. If not, he'd have to begin another painting: for once the spell was ruined, the portrait could never be enchanted.

Walking up to the portrait, he gazed upon it with trepidation. The magic of the spell was still surrounding the picture, slowly seeping into the colors on the canvas. Finally, all the golden light was absorbed, and Severus' eyes moved. Then his head looked from side to side.

"What's going on?" he said slowly.

"Ah! I thought I had made an error, Professore! It looks like everything is as it should be though! Welcome back to the wizarding world!"

Severus' eyes narrowed. "What is the meaning of this?"

"I have painted you. You are a portrait to be hung in the Headmistress' office at Hogwarts."

"But... I was just under a tree... reading. What did you do?"

Franco looked at the portrait curiously. Never before had a painting expressed knowledge of the time after death.

"I cast the Enchantment Spell upon you to give you life. You say you were under a tree? Perhaps that's a memory from your previous life?"

Severus narrowed his eyes. "No, you dimwit. I was just reading under a tree. I've been doing that since I died. It's amazingly relaxing, not having to deal with anyone. Now you've brought me here where I'll have to... speak... with people."

Franco looked at the painting with concern. Perhaps something had happened when he'd cast the spell some odd combination of factors that gave this portrait a bit more awareness than others he'd created. Still, the painting was doing what it was supposed to do, mirroring what Severus Snape would normally do.

"A bit of extra self-awareness probably won't hurt," he muttered to himself.

"Send me back," Snape demanded.

"I am sorry, Professore. I can't do that. Once the elements of your personality are in the portrait, they cannot be removed."

Severus balled his hands into fists. "Do you mean to tell me I'm stuck in this tiny frame forever?"

"Well, it's not really tiny. It's three feet by four..."

"I don't care how big it is, you sorry excuse for an artist. I want to get out of it!"

Franco smiled then. "Oh, once I've hung you in your rightful place at Hogwarts, you'll be able to wander throughout the castle from portrait to portrait."

"Will I be able to read under a tree?" Severus asked caustically.

Franco shrugged. "I'm sure you can find a tree in one of the paintings, and there are books too. There are lots of paintings with bookshelves. And there's the painting of the library in the library."

"I am not interested in imaginary books! I want to read real books."

Franco shrugged again. "They'll be real to you. You'll be able to remove and read them just as if they were real."

Severus seemed slightly appeased. "How long since I died?" he asked.

"It's been twenty years, Professore."

Severus' eyes narrowed. "Twenty years?" he spat. "McGonagall is just getting around to having me commissioned now, after twenty years?"

"The Headmistress isn't Professore McGonagall, signore."

"Who is it then?" he ground through his clenched teeth. His hand came up, and he pinched the bridge of his nose, seemingly awaiting bad news.

"It's Hermione Granger, signore."

Severus shook his head, all the while squeezing his nose tighter and tighter. "You've brought me from heaven to hell," he muttered at last.

Disclaimer: All jokes cited above were taken from a Harry Potter joke website: <http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20090605192745AAoUwtY>

Chapter 3

Chapter 4 of 18

Hermione, as Headmistress, commissions a portrait of Severus Snape. The results are more than she expected.

Chapter 3

Hermione Granger stood outside her office impatiently. Franco DiGregorio had come to hang Professor Snape's picture, and she was waiting for him to finish. It didn't take long, and soon he was descending the stairs with a smile on his face.

"He's all ready, Signorina Granger. He's in a mood, though, and has been ever since he came alive. I'd be careful with what you say if I were you."

Hermione smiled and shook Franco's hand. "Thank you, Franco. I appreciate your hard work. I'm excited to see him."

The artist shook her hand vigorously and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "Remember, Professore, any time you need a painting for Hogwarts, or for anything, I am here."

Hermione nodded as Franco released her hand and made his way down the corridor, waving before turning and descending the stairs. Hermione turned to her own staircase, which was moving in anticipation of her ascending to her office. She was excited and nervous.

She got on the bottom stair and let the staircase bring her up to her door. Entering the office, she gazed above her chair. There he was. Her breath hitched as she eyed him. It was him down to the curve of his nose and the black of his hair. Franco had truly captured Severus Snape. Even his scowl was perfectly placed.

"What are you staring at?" Severus snapped.

"Welcome back, Professor," Hermione said in awe.

Severus snorted. "Why would you welcome me here, Granger? Didn't you dance on my grave after the war?"

Hermione's mouth dropped open as she gave him a mortified look. "Certainly not! I'll have you know I cried at your funeral, and I still lay a bouquet of flowers at your grave every year on your birthday!"

A slightly shocked expression came across Snape's face as he seemed taken aback at that. His expression turned back into a scowl instantly.

"That may be, but I am in no mood to be welcomed by you," he snarled.

Hermione marveled at the reality of the man before her. If she wasn't staring at a painting, she would have sworn that Severus Snape was alive and as grouchy as ever. That made her smile.

"What's so funny?" Severus demanded in a regal tone.

"I'm sorry; I'm not laughing at you. It's just that Mr. DiGregorio has done a wonderful job, and if I didn't know any better, I'd say you were still alive."

Severus harrumphed at that. "Sorry to disappoint you, but from what I understand, I've been dead for twenty years now."

Hermione's smile faded. "That's right," she said softly.

"Miss Granger..."

"Please, sir, I am the Headmistress now, just like you were. Either address me as professor or refer to me by my given name."

"You expect me to use that mouthful of a name whenever I address you?"

"This coming from a man with your moniker?"

He smirked then. Hermione was quite taken aback that she'd possibly amused him.

"Touché, *Hermione*."

Her eyebrows rose. "May I call you Severus, or would you prefer I continued to use 'professor' when speaking to you?"

Severus stared at her, seemingly amazed that she'd given him a choice.

"How old are you, Hermione? You certainly don't look like the little girl I remember with her hand stuck in the air all the time."

Hermione blushed. "I'm thirty-eight."

He gave her a curt nod. "And you are no longer my student, correct?"

She nodded.

"Then you may call me Severus."

Her radiant smile made her face light up. "Thank you. As I was saying... welcome back, Severus. I'm sorry it's taken so long to get your portrait done. Minerva... well, she was very preoccupied with running the school, and the artist who..."

"Don't... Hermione. Don't make up excuses for her. She was unwilling to forgive me. I understand."

Hermione shook her head vehemently. "No, it's not that."

"Professor Granger, I am not stupid. Now if you're done blathering on about how wonderful it is to see me, I have been cooped up in here long enough. I am anxious to get out of this blasted prison."

Hermione looked at him curiously. "Blasted prison?" she asked incredulously.

Severus motioned about him. "This frame. This limited space behind me." His hand shot backwards, indicating the winged-back chair where he sat, the table and the book next to him, the only other things in the portrait. "That idiot who painted this didn't think that perhaps I might feel like only a chair and table were stifling. He didn't think to paint in more of a room... no. Just this bloody chair and a book I have now read three times since I got here."

Hermione didn't quite know what to say.

"And the background... dark green. Why would I want to look at dark green for the rest of my life?"

"I can have him repaint it red," Hermione quipped.

Severus sneered. "Very funny. I bet you think you're quite clever getting one over on the painting. I would expect much more from the *brightest witch of her age*"

His comment stung just as badly as his comments had in the past. The venom in his voice seeped through her veins and chilled her good will toward him. She narrowed her eyes at him.

"Fine. If you don't like your portrait, then by all means leave it. You know you are free to wander the place." Her tone was harsh and her gaze accusatory.

Severus blinked. He nodded to her crisply, then turned and was gone. Hermione stared at the empty leather chair and dark green background. She wondered if her decision to honor Severus Snape would come back to make her life miserable.

Shaking her head, she made her way to her desk and sat down. She really didn't have time to worry about it right now. The school term had not been going on for long. She had much to do.

Severus glided from his frame and found himself outside the Headmistress' office across from the gargoyle. He took in his surroundings. He was standing by a pond looking out at three swans. The swans floated on the water majestically. To the left of the pond sat a huge willow tree.

"Ah, finally," Severus muttered to himself. "This is a tree worthy of reading under. I wonder why I never noticed this painting before?"

His eyes studied the large trunk of the tree as he contemplated the painting. "Probably because I was always concentrating on either going to see Dumbledore or what horrific thing Dumbledore had just told me."

He had no desire to review his tenure as Headmaster and why he'd never noticed the painting then.

He walked around the edge of the pond and went over to the tree. He felt the trunk. It certainly felt like a tree trunk. Reaching up, he felt the leaves of one of the hanging vines that made up the body of the tree. It, too, felt real.

"At least if I have something that seems real, this hell might be tolerable," he mumbled to himself.

Looking around, he noticed a bird flying off in the distance. That was a nice touch.

"But I need something to read. Off to the library."

It was odd, but Severus just instinctively knew how to move from picture to picture. He wondered if the spell DiGregorio had used gave him that knowledge. He was glad of it, because he was in no mood to be popping into paintings he had no intention of ever visiting. A shudder came over him as he thought of the Fat Lady. May he never bump into her in the eternity he'd be trapped here. If Trelawney was bad in the real world, the Fat Lady would be ten times worse. She was well known for her flirtatious nature as all the paintings mumbled about her throwing herself at the painted men.

Severus quickly appeared in the painting of the library. He'd never quite understood why the library had a painting of itself here, but now he was very thankful it existed. Perhaps the main reason was to give the portraits something to do in their spare time.

Heading for the Restricted section, he smirked as he rounded the corner. There seemed to be many more books in this Restricted section than in the 'real' area of the library. His fingers brushed some of the dusty texts as the truth dawned on him. These were all the texts that ever had been here, even those that were now removed for one reason or another.

His hand stilled on one dusty tome: *Potions and Spells before Merlin's Time* His eyebrow arched as he pulled it from the shelf and gingerly flipped through the brittle, old pages. Closing the book, he tapped the cover with his finger and disappeared, heading for his tree.

A/N: Thanks to slytherinlaurel for the fine beta work!

Chapter 4

Chapter 5 of 18

Hermione, as Headmistress, commissions a portrait of Severus Snape. The results are more than she expected.

Chapter 4

A full week had passed, and Hermione was surprised that she hadn't seen much of Severus Snape at all. She had been so busy with a mound of paperwork that only she could take care of that Hermione hadn't really had time to ponder on the elusive and sharp-tongued man. As studied her work, she didn't notice Severus slipping into his frame. He cleared his throat.

Hermione looked up, slightly amused that he would be clamoring for attention from her. She found, though, that when she looked behind her, he wasn't looking at her at all; he was peering into some book.

"Did you need something?" Hermione asked.

His gaze lazily moved to her. "No."

"You cleared your throat, I just thought..."

He looked back down at his book, effectively ignoring her. Hermione frowned at him. She then cleared her throat. He didn't look up. She gave an exasperated sigh and went back to her papers. She was drafting a letter to the Board of Governors to ask for more funding for new brooms for the Quidditch teams. The current brooms weren't in very bad shape, but according to Minerva's records, they hadn't been replaced in eight years. It was surely time.

Unfortunately, the words were blurring on the paper and the numbers seemed to melt into one another. Hermione realized she was squinting in frustration because of Snape's surly attitude. His diffidence made her unable to address the task at hand because all she could think of was his lack of respect toward her. Finally, unable to control herself, her head snapped up, and she turned to face his portrait.

"You know..." she began. "You could *try* to be a little nicer."

"No, I couldn't."

"Yes, you could."

"Make me."

Hermione's eyebrows drew together. "What did you just say?"

Snape leaned forward and looked directly at her. "I said... make me."

Hermione bristled. "You do realize you are a portrait? Your scowls and intimidation ploys do not have half the power they used to."

"Yes, but they do still have power, Hermione, don't they?" he asked sultrily.

Hermione felt a jolt run from her head to her toes. His tone sent shivers down her spine, and all he was doing was goading her. Her eyes narrowed.

"You forget, *Severus*, I have a wand, and you don't."

"That may be, but I am adept at wandless magic," he purred, sending another shiver down her spine.

Merlin, control yourself! she thought.

Pulling herself together, she narrowed her eyes at Severus even more.

"You will behave, or you will be sorry," she warned.

He scooted even further to the edge of his seat. "I will do as I wish," he sneered. "I am dead; I don't have to answer to anyone, especially a swot like you!"

Hermione stood, her hands balled into fists. "This is my office, sir, and you will respect me within its walls! *Oratio innuo confuto!*"

A bright blue light shot from her wand straight at Severus' chest. He was thrown back into his chair. After a second, he shot back to his original position.

"Why you r..." His mouth abruptly snapped shut. "You..." Again his mouth closed. His lips drew back into a sneer, showing his crooked teeth. "What have you done to me?"

She looked at him smugly. "It's just a little spell to ensure that you'll behave yourself when speaking to me."

He rose to his feet and slammed against the invisible wall that was his portrait. "Take it off!" he snarled.

She tilted her head. "No, I don't think I will."

With that, she turned and left her office.

"Granger!" Snape called after her. "Granger get back here and remove this spell, or I'll mmph..."

Hermione chuckled as she strolled away from her office. There was something incredibly satisfying in pulling one over on Severus Snape.

The Headmistress didn't stay away too long. Firstly, she had work to do; secondly, she wanted to see just what Severus Snape would say to her now that she'd left him to stew for a bit. Entering her office again, she glided to her chair and gave the portrait behind it a toothy grin.

Severus glared at her. "Remove this spell immediately, Professor Granger."

Hermione became serious. "I'm sorry, Severus; I'm not going to do that. You obviously don't like me, and as I said before, I will not have you badmouthing me in my own office." She turned and eyed Phineas Nigellus Black. "The same goes for you, Professor Black. No chants of Mudblood while I am the Headmistress, or you'll suffer the same fate as Professor Snape."

Black grunted and immediately left his frame. Dumbledore chuckled from his corner spot, which earned him a death-look from Severus. Turning back to Hermione, Severus scowled and narrowed his eyes at her.

"You are a mmph!" Severus said darkly.

Hermione couldn't help but giggle. He was trying so hard to be furious, but his inability to call her names was so comical.

"I'll remove the hex when you've proven that you won't be nasty," she told Severus.

"Mmph, Professor mmph Granger!"

Hermione shook her head. "I wish I had more time to devote to listening to you try to badmouth me, Severus, but I have much to do."

Turning her back on him, she sat down and continued with her paperwork. Silence reigned for some time with only the scratching of her quill against paper interrupting it.

"What are you working on?" Severus asked after a long while.

Hermione sat back and turned slightly so she could see his portrait. "It's a financial report to the Board of Governors. I'm trying to convince them that new Quidditch brooms are a necessity for the children."

Severus huffed. "They will never go for that. The Board is incredibly stingy with Hogwarts funds. Despite the fact that most of them are Quidditch fanatics, they cannot justify the use of those funds for something non-academic like sports."

Hermione chewed on her quill. "That was twenty years ago, though. Do you think the current Board would still be so rigid with allotments?"

"Are the members of the Board well off?" Severus asked.

Hermione nodded. "Most are pure-bloods from long lines of wealth."

Severus looked down and met her eyes. "They don't keep their wealth by spending frivolously. They are all tightwads. You will need to have very good reasoning to convince them."

Hermione huffed and looked down at her paper. "I suppose that the fact that the old brooms are at least eight years old will not tug on their heartstrings."

Severus chuckled slightly, which caused Hermione to glance back up at him. She was sure it was the first time she'd ever heard the man laugh. The sound was rather nice.

"The Board does not have heartstrings. You must appeal to their pride."

"How do I do that?" Hermione asked, truly at a loss.

"How many have children or grandchildren attending here?"

Hermione thought for a moment. "They all do."

"There is the key."

Hermione grinned at him conspiratorially. "If their precious children are kept from winning because of old brooms, the students and their families will be embarrassed. The

Board members represent all of the houses too, so one house could not have better equipment than another. Severus, that's brilliant!"

Turning quickly, Hermione took another parchment and began redrafting the letter to the Board of Governors. She missed entirely the startled look on Severus' face at her exclamation.

Severus sat under his tree, reading. He'd come to enjoy the landscape and the portrait had become his favorite place in the castle. It was peaceful, and despite the times when the hallway outside his painting was noisy with students, his surroundings seemed to keep out the extraneous noise so he could concentrate.

At this moment, his back was against the tree, and his legs were bent in front of him with the book propped up against them. There was a small stream toward the right end of the painting that emptied into the pond. The constant gurgle of the rushing water gave Severus a peaceful feeling. He glanced up with a smirk on his face as he watched the swans swim gracefully around the pond.

"There you are!" Hermione exclaimed. "I looked for you upstairs, but you were obviously not there. I wanted to tell you that the Board of Governors approved my petition for new brooms. I really have to thank you." She gazed into the painting, taking in the landscape. "You like this painting, don't you?"

Severus rolled his eyes at her, annoyed at the disturbance of his quiet time. "Obviously I like it, you mmph mmph!" He scowled at his inability to say what he really felt. Glaring at Hermione, he arched an eyebrow at her accusingly.

"Oh, no!" she warned. "There's no way I'm lifting that spell off you. Obviously you have no intention of being nice to me yet."

"That was only in your office!" he snapped.

Hermione shrugged. "The hex doesn't distinguish place, just attitude."

"You are an in... mmph! Blast it, woman, this is ridiculous."

Hermione nodded, her tone becoming very serious... sarcastically so.

"I know, Professor Snape. You'd think you'd be adult enough to not use foul language when speaking to me." She shrugged. "How old are you? Oh, yes, thirty-eight, right?"

Severus stood, knocking the book from his lap. He stalked around the pond so that he was at the edge of the picture. His fists were clenched, and he looked as if he were going to punch her.

"Who do you think you are, speaking to me like that?"

She looked him up and down. "I know who I am, Severus Snape. I am the Headmistress of this school, not some child who quakes in my boots whenever you look at me. I am a woman who is your age, and I deserve your respect. If you won't give it to me, then you'll be forced to through that spell. Now grow up!"

"I am not a child either! You needn't treat me as such!" Severus said tersely.

"When you start acting like an adult instead of a spoiled teenager, I'll think about lifting that spell."

Rage filled Severus. How dare she speak to him so. He felt his hands trembling.

"You know," she continued, oblivious to his increasing ire. "I thought that maybe your surly attitude was because of the war. I romanticized you into some sort of hero who was just playing a part, but I was wrong. You're nothing but a bastard!"

"Why you insol... mmph!" Rage filled him as he reached out toward her. He grasped her robes and pulled her up next to him, his nose touching hers.

"How dare you judge me?" he glowered.

Hermione's eyes went wide as she struggled to pull herself from his grasp. Severus looked around, noting exactly why she looked so terrified. She was right in front of him... in the painting.

A/N: Thanks to slytherinlaurel for the lickity-split beta job.

Chapter 5

Chapter 6 of 18

Hermione, as Headmistress, commissions a portrait of Severus Snape. The results are more than she expected.

Chapter 5

"Let go of me! What did you do?" Hermione cried as she struggled to escape Severus' grasp.

He blinked and looked around him. "... I don't know." He released her, and she turned and walked to the edge of the painting. She attempted to walk through it and back to her own reality, but she just bumped against the wall of the canvas.

Turning again, she looked at him with a bit of fear in her eyes. "What did you do?" she reiterated.

"I swear, Granger, I don't know." He moved over to her and tried to push through the canvas with his hand. Nothing out of the ordinary happened; his hand bounced off the invisible wall that made up the canvas barrier.

"I was furious with you; so furious that I wanted to shake you to knock some sense into you. I reached out and grabbed you, but now I can't reach out. What the devil is going on?"

"Well, put me back!" she retorted.

Severus spun around. "You i... mmph. Didn't you see me try to reach out of the frame? I can't. I don't know how I did it, but now I can't reach out into the hallway."

Hermione turned and ran at the canvas. She bounced back off it, landing directly in Severus' arms. He looked down at her with an amused expression on his face.

"Do you always run headfirst into everything?" he asked her.

She huffed at him and removed herself from his grasp. She looked from the edge of the canvas to Severus. Closing her eyes, she took a few breaths. He watched her for a moment until she looked into his eyes.

"All right, I'm calm now," she explained. "There's got to be a way out of here, right? Maybe you have to be holding me, then you can put me back."

Severus studied her for a moment. "All right. I'll try that."

Grasping her robes, he pushed her away from him forcefully. She slammed into the canvas, her face smashing up against it unflatteringly. He pushed harder, and she gave a high pitched yelp in protest. He dropped his hands from her and folded them across his chest.

"Merlin, you didn't have to break my nose!" she grumbled as she rubbed the aching appendage.

"You wanted me to push you..."

"I wanted you to do it logically. Obviously I wasn't going through, why did you continue to push?"

"It's probably because I'm just a child and don't understand the workings of giving you a subtle push."

Hermione quieted and stared at him for a minute. She finally looked away.

"I'm sorry. You're obviously not a child. However, I wish you would just stop being so nasty to me. It's fine if you don't like me. I'm not asking you to, but please be civil!"

Severus stared at her, his eyes boring into hers. "It would be easier to be civil if I wasn't being forced by some hex to be polite."

Hermione frowned and removed her wand. She looked down at it. "At least I still have this. Maybe it can help us." She swished and flicked before a purple light shot into Severus' chest. "There... I've lifted the hex." Her mouth formed a frown. "I'm sorry about that too. I suppose I should learn to live with you the way you are."

"Stupid, know-it-all pest."

Hermione's eyes narrowed, and she frowned even harder.

"I was just testing out my new found freedom," Severus explained. "I will force myself to behave in the future, no matter what foolish thing comes out of your mouth."

Hermione sighed and shook her head. "You're incorrigible."

"I pride myself in being so."

Her eyes met his. He let her see the mirth that was there. He saw her resolve crack and before he could blink, she was laughing.

"You have a strange sense of humor, Severus Snape," she coughed out between laughs.

He arched an eyebrow at her. "You are the one laughing, not I."

She rolled her eyes. "Incorrigible."

"Yes, that's all well and good, but it doesn't solve our problem."

Hermione sobered. She looked down at her wand. "Maybe a simple Apparition?"

He nodded in agreement.

She turned on the spot. Severus heard a sharp crack as she disappeared... only to reappear on the other side of the pond.

"Dang it!" He heard her from the distance. She tried it again, this time landing by his willow tree. A third try landed her in the middle of the pond. She lost her balance and fell backwards, making a horrible splash that sent the swans flying off hurriedly. Severus couldn't help himself; he burst out laughing.

The pond wasn't very deep, and Hermione, once she'd emerged, was only half buried in the water. She spit sharply, getting the pond water out of her mouth, and shook her head. Her mass of curls had now been flattened almost straight with the weight of the water. Taking her hands, she cleared her wet locks out of her eyes.

"Your hair is lovely, my lady," Severus quipped.

Hermione glared at him.

"Come on, you have to admit, you look a sight," he said between chuckles.

She looked down, spreading her hands away from her. Her eyes met his, and he saw an attractive flush of pink on her face. Before he knew it, Hermione Granger, straight-laced swot, was laughing hysterically. He'd have never taken her for one to guffaw like that, especially when the joke was on her. Evidently she wasn't the only one who needed to learn more about the other.

Ambling up to the pond, he extended his hand. "Here, let me help you."

She waddled along to the edge of the pond, reached out, and took his hand. Before he could react, a sinister grin covered her face, and she yanked him hard. He careened into the pond, landing face first in the water. Sputtering, he turned and got his feet planted firmly under him. His glower made her smile disappear.

"Oh, you will pay for that!" he snapped. Grabbing her robes, he pulled her to him. She struggled furiously, causing both of them to sink under the water. When Severus surfaced again, Hermione was once again sputtering and coughing. His smile disappeared as he slammed his hand against her back, trying to get the water from her lungs.

"What are you trying to do, kill me?" she sputtered.

He made sure she was fully recovered before answering. "I was just trying to tame that mane you call hair. It was beginning to dry, and I was afraid it was going to strangle me."

She punched him in the chest then. "Incorrigible!" she cried. Her fists slammed into him some more. "First you insult my teeth, now my hair. Is there anything else about me that you think is ugly?"

He stilled her flailing fists. "I have never said any part of you is ugly."

She relaxed as her eyes met his. He found them to be quite appealing. He didn't have a chance to ponder that, though, because she pulled out of his grasp. Moving away from him, she motioned for him to follow.

"Enough playing around. I have things to do. We need to figure out how I can get out of here."

He frowned as he pulled himself from the pond. "What if there's nothing we can do? What if you're stuck here?"

She shook her head as she pulled her wand out and dried their sopping clothes. "That's impossible. You pulled me in, there's got to be a way to put me back. We just need to find it. I wish we had access to the library."

"Oh, we do. There's that painting of the library in the library."

Hermione nodded slowly. "Oh, that's right. I forgot about that. I also forgot you can travel from picture to picture." Her head snapped up. "Do you think I could, too?"

He shrugged. "I don't see why not."

"How do you do it?"

His lips thinned. "I'm not sure. I just do it. It comes naturally, like breathing."

"That's really not helping me."

He extended his hand. "Here, take my hand. I will guide you."

Her lips thinned as she thought it over. Finally she gave a crisp nod and extended her hand. Before she grasped his, her eyes shone mischievously.

"You aren't going to fling me into the pond, are you?" she asked in a brazen voice.

"Madam, you wound me," he said with his hand on his chest in a display of sincerity.

She shook her head before grasping his hand. "Incorrigible."

In an instant, they were gone.

A/N: Now how will they get themselves out of this mess? thanks to slytherinlaurel for the magnificent beta work.

Chapter 6

Chapter 7 of 18

The library is helpful... somewhat.

Chapter 6

Severus and Hermione walked into the painting of the library. Forgetting her hand was placed firmly in Severus', Hermione looked around in amazement.

"Wow, this is wonderful! It's just like the real library."

"For me, it is the real library."

"Of course," Hermione said softly.

Severus gave her a measured look. "You will not mourn my death. I certainly didn't. As a matter of fact, I was quite happy with it until I appeared in that stupid portrait you commissioned."

Hermione looked back at him quizzically. "What do you mean, Severus?"

"My death... you know, before this time?"

She shook her head. "I thought that portraits were just imprints of the person. You shouldn't remember anything except what happened in your life. I've never heard of a portrait remembering being dead."

"Well, now you have," Severus said shortly. He walked back to the Restricted Section and began fingering the titles.

Hermione watched him with a concerned look on her face. She moved a bit past him and began her own search. Her eyes scanned the books on the shelf. She muttered to herself as she searched.

"I know that book was right here."

Severus looked up at her. "What are you looking for?"

She shook her head slightly. "I can't remember the title, but I know that book is always here between *Death Where is thy Sting?* and *Afterlife: A Glimpse*."

Severus meandered over to her. "That's odd. I've found that there are many more titles on these shelves than in the actual library."

"Could it be that someone else has it?"

He shook his head. "There are innumerable copies. If I remove this one," he said as he pulled a book from the shelf, "a new one appears in its place."

Hermione nodded as a new book appeared in place of the one Severus had pulled.

"So, the book I'm looking for doesn't exist in this painting?"

"Perhaps it came out after this painting was commissioned," Severus offered.

Hermione's eyebrows came together as she thought. "No, I'm sure it was an older edition." She waved her hand at the bookshelf. "Maybe it was acquired after the painting was created, though. Oh, well. I'll just have to look for it when I get back to the real world."

Severus scowled but said nothing. He went back to the shelf where he'd been looking before. Realizing her error, Hermione went over to him and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"I know that to you this is the real world. I meant no offense. It's just that my world is out there." She pointed to the canvas edge, where children could be seen at tables with books surrounding them. Severus gazed out at them and gave a curt nod before losing himself in his search once again. Hermione sighed.

"What are you looking for, then?" she asked him.

"It is a book entitled: *Enchanted Portraits and How They Work*"

Hermione scanned the shelves, spying the book on the top shelf of the stacks. She pointed up.

"Is that it, Severus?"

He looked up and nodded. Reaching up, he pulled the book down, motioning for her to follow him as he went to a table and sat down. He opened the book and pushed it between the two of them. Scanning the contents, his finger stopped at a chapter title. *Moving from Picture to Picture*

"We might as well start with that," he said.

She turned to the page, and they both began to read. After a few minutes Hermione looked up at Severus.

"So, it's kind of like Apparating. You think of where you'd like to be, and you get there."

"Evidently, but I have found that it doesn't have to be as specific. If you're not sure where exactly you want to go, you can concentrate on a general location. You can think, 'Third floor hallway past the stairs,' and you'll appear in a painting there.

She nodded. "Severus, can I ask you something?"

He looked to her as his eyebrow arched.

"Did you know you were going to die?"

"Everyone dies, Hermione."

"What I mean is..." She hesitated for a minute. "Did you have any inkling that Voldemort would send his snake after you?"

Severus winced. He looked off in the distance, reflecting on her question. "I didn't expect to survive the war, no. Actually, given my past, I was hoping for death over incarceration. Did I think the Dark Lord would use Nagini on me? I did."

"But... couldn't you have had some sort of antivenin or something?"

Severus nodded absently. "I thought about it. I even brewed one using some of the snake's own venom. I had it all planned out. I would take the antivenin daily to save myself. In the end, however, I chose not to take it."

Hermione shook her head. "Why not? Why would you let him kill you?"

Severus glanced at her, seemingly surprised that she was so concerned about him. He shrugged. "What did I truly have to live for? Everyone thought me to be a murderer. I had no desire to spend the rest of my days in Azkaban. Death was welcome."

"You were cleared of everything, Severus." Her hand reached out to his. "You would be free right now."

Severus frowned as he stared at her hand. "I am free... at least I was. Spending eternity within these walls is not so bad anyway."

A tear fell from Hermione's eye. Severus looked to her and frowned. "I chose my fate. I am not unhappy with it."

"But..." she sniffed. "Think of what you could be doing now. Think of the freedom you would have." She turned her face away so he wouldn't see more of her tears. "It just seems to be such a waste."

"Look at me," Severus demanded.

Hermione quickly wiped the tears from her eyes and turned her head back to him.

"Why are you crying for me?" he asked in astonishment.

"I... I just don't think it's very fair. You spent your entire life working toward defeating Voldemort. You never got to find out what it would be like to not have him around."

Severus smiled then. "Yes, I did. It just doesn't fit into the parameters that you've set up."

She searched his eyes and nodded finally. "Would you do the same thing? If you knew you'd be cleared and could live a normal life, would you still choose to let Voldemort kill you?"

Severus looked away, his eyebrows narrowing as he thought. Finally he looked back at her. "I honestly don't know. It would be nice to live without being under the thumbs of both Voldemort and Dumbledore, but I have not been unhappy in the afterlife. There would have to have been something... special to make me choose life."

She nodded and frowned slightly. "I think I can understand that. I truly felt lost after the war. People I cared about had been killed, I wasn't sure whether to finish school or move forward, even my relationships with Harry and Ron seemed to change overnight."

Severus arched an eyebrow. "You mean you're not close with those two dunderheads still?"

Hermione chuckled. "Oh, of course I am. It's just that... Harry had a hard time. One minute he was elated, the next, he was depressed because he felt that everything bad that happened was because of him."

Severus growled. "It was not the boy's fault."

Hermione gave him a curious look. "I thought you hated Harry."

He shrugged. "Hate doesn't really fit into the peace I felt after death. Harry Potter didn't matter anymore. No one did. Not even..."

"Lily?"

He gave a slight nod. "I suppose all my secrets came out after my death."

"I doubt all of them did, but many did, especially your love for Lily."

"We chatted now and then... in the afterlife. I actually was excited to see her the first time. I'm not sure exactly what I was expecting, but it was different than I'd hoped when I was alive. With my debt to her repaid, everything sort of fell into its proper place. Of course I still felt love for her, but it was more as a close friend. And Potter, I didn't even feel animosity towards him. It seems that given the reality of life after death, some things just don't have as much weight as they used to." He shrugged. "You were saying about your Potter?"

Sighing heavily, she continued. "He was like a rollercoaster, and nothing I did or said helped. I decided to move out of Grimmauld Place and be on my own. Ron threw a fit. We had started into a relationship, and it was going all right. After the war, however, my perspective changed. I realized what was important to me. Ron was important, don't get me wrong. So was Harry. As someone I was dating, though, Ron just wasn't right. We parted ways as a couple, and eventually everything smoothed out when he started dating an Auror. They eventually wed. Harry married Ginny. I sort of felt left out."

"Surely you..."

She smiled. "Oh, believe me, I've had my share of relationships. It's just that the right person has never come along." She looked over at Severus. "That combined with the solitude I felt after the war... I can understand your feelings about being alive. If it were me, I would want something worthwhile to stick around for."

He nodded and looked back to the book. He was quiet for awhile, and Hermione left him to his thoughts. She turned to the pages, too, and began to read through them. Severus tapped the page.

"When you tried to Apparate, what were you concentrating on?"

"The hallway."

He nodded. "Maybe you can just walk out, like you can walk from painting to painting. Why don't you try this method and attempt to walk out of here."

Hermione read through the procedure once again quickly, then nodded. She rose and walked over to the canvas wall, followed by Severus. She looked back at him and smiled, then got a determined look on her face. Concentrating as hard as she could on the floor in front of the painting, she moved toward the canvas edge. Her heart began to race as she got closer. It had to work!

Bang!

She bumped right into the edge, unable to go any farther.

Her shoulders sagged in defeat. Turning she gave Severus a plaintive look. "What are we going to do? How am I to run the school from a picture?"

His gaze was intense, and she felt as if he were examining every bare inch of her. "We'll find a way," he said quietly. "We should alert someone to your predicament. Filius, perhaps?"

She nodded. "There's a painting in his office we should be able to get into."

"The one with the sea? Do you really want to land in that boat? It's very stormy."

"We have no choice. I'm unfamiliar with any other paintings nearby. It'll have to do."

"I can't think of any others either," Severus acquiesced. "If I recall correctly, that's the only painting in his office."

Hermione extended her hand. "Help me along. After that last try, I'm not feeling too confident in my abilities."

He took her hand and led her out of the library. In a second they were standing on the boat, which was being tossed to and fro on the waves. Hermione stumbled into Severus, and he caught her in his arms. "It seems that you are constantly grabbing me, madam," he said lightly.

She looked up and caught her breath. He was giving her a smoldering look; his touch sending shivers down her spine. This was not a reaction she was expecting. Staring into his eyes and drowning in their depths was not something she'd planned on with this surly man. He was dead and made of brush strokes. She definitely shouldn't be *attracted* to him!

Clearing her throat, she pulled away. His gaze lingered on her, and she felt that uncomfortable sensation in her stomach again. This was truly bad news.

Turning away from him, she looked out into Flitwick's office. Luckily, the small man was behind his miniature desk, grading papers.

"Professor Flitwick!" she called out.

His head rose as his eyes concentrated on the painting across the room from him.

"Hermione? Is that you? With... Severus?"

The little man hopped off his bench and hurried over to the painting.

"Merlin! How did you end up in a painting?"

Hermione could feel herself getting seasick with the rolling waves. She leaned into Severus for support as the rocking boat threw her to the side again.

"Oh, Filius, I'm glad I found you. Something's happened; we're not quite sure what."

Filius listened to her explanation, nodding here and there. Finally she finished.

"Well, let me try something," he muttered. Raising his wand, Filius chanted, *Hominem Extrictus* and sent a shot of light to the painting. He frowned when nothing happened.

"I suppose that was too easy a solution," he said.

He tried several other charms, none of which brought Hermione back into her world. By the time he was finished, Hermione was turning green.

"Filius," Severus called. "Professor Granger is ill. I'm going to take her to a different painting. We'll research on our end, and you see what you can figure out."

Filius nodded vigorously. "I'll get right on it!" he said before the two painted figures disappeared.

A/N: Once again, many thanks to slytherinlaurel for the beta work. I'm glad you're all enjoying this!

Chapter 7

Chapter 8 of 18

Hermione, as Headmistress, commissions a portrait of Severus Snape. The results are more than she expected.

Chapter 7

Severus eased Hermione down onto the grass. After the roiling sea in the last painting, he was happy to have solid land under his feet. He figured Hermione was too, as she lay down and curled herself into a ball. He stooped down and examined her.

"I'm sorry I don't have any nausea potions on me," he said. "The dead really don't need such things."

This caused Hermione to giggle, despite still holding her stomach as if she were about to retch.

"Incorrigible," she said.

He felt something within him stir. He had an intense urge to pull Hermione Granger to him and hold her tenderly. He shook his head to clear it. It would never do to have fantasies about her. She would go back to her living state outside the painting soon enough, and he would be forced to stay behind. Nonetheless, he found her intriguing. She was much more than he'd expected. Not only passionate about what she believed, but caring too. He'd found few in life that had cared about him, and her obvious concern earlier had given him pause.

Hermione moaned, and his gaze concentrated on her once again. His hand reached out to her.

"What can I do?" he asked.

She shook her head. "It just needs to pass."

Without giving it much thought, he rubbed her back. She lay still with her eyes closed, swallowing now and then. It took her some time, but finally he felt her body relax under his hand. Her eyes finally opened, and she looked up at him.

"Thank you," she said gratefully.

He nodded and stood up. Bending low, he offered her his hand and gently pulled her to a standing position. She gave him a wan smile. He couldn't help but tease her now that she seemed recovered.

"I never thought that I would see someone literally turn green from being sea-sick."

Hermione rolled her eyes and shook her head. "Definitely incorrigible."

"You're feeling all right, then?" he asked, ignoring her jibe.

She nodded. He removed the book from his robes and motioned to the willow tree.

"We should continue our study," he replied, feeling a bit awkward as she stared at him.

Hermione nodded and followed him over to the tree. They spent the next two hours poring over the book with no results. They discussed the theories behind moving from painting to painting, but nothing seemed to translate itself into moving out of a picture. After an intense debate about combining Apparition with movement through pictures, Hermione looked to him and thinned her lips.

"It won't work. I'll splinch myself in the process."

Severus nodded.

"I'm hungry," Hermione said offhandedly.

Severus gave her a curious look. "I think I am too. That's odd."

"Why?"

"I haven't wanted food since I died."

"You mean you don't eat?" Hermione asked.

"I can, I just haven't had any desire to do so."

Hermione tilted her head and looked at him curiously. "So, where can we get some food?"

"There's that giant painting of fruit by the kitchen," Severus suggested.

Hermione nodded. "I guess that will have to do."

Severus rose and reached down to offer his hand to Hermione. She took it and pulled herself up. She was smiling a bit to herself as she did.

"What?" Severus asked sharply.

She smiled at him. "Oh, it's nothing...." His scowl made her reconsider her comment. "It's just that I would have never taken you for such a gentleman before now. I'm used to you snarling at everyone."

Severus found himself turning red. He looked away. "I was just helping you up," he said quickly.

She gazed at him for a bit, making him shift and look farther away crossly. Her light, tinkling laughter caused him to peer at her curiously. She didn't say a word.

"Shall we go?" he ground out roughly.

She grinned at him, her eyes seemingly filled with some unknown secret. "Yes," she agreed. "Would you mind guiding me?"

He stared down at her outstretched hand before nodding uncomfortably and grasping it. He found when he took her hand that he secretly wished he wouldn't have to let it go. Angered with his foolish emotions, he tugged her a little too hard when moving out of the picture so when they appeared in the fruit painting, she slammed into his side.

"Ow!" she cried. "Please don't be so rough!"

"Sorry," he mumbled. Slight annoyance flit through him as he realized she wasn't moving away from him. He glanced over and saw the reason why. She was smashed between him and a giant pear. *The pear*, he thought to himself as he gazed at it. It was so much bigger now that he was just a painting himself. The green-skinned beast loomed up behind Hermione. Severus tried to move away from her, but found he was equally as crushed by an apple that was pressing into his side. He turned his body, trying to move away from the woman, but his chest was now pressed into hers. Hermione gave him an exasperated look before chuckling.

"I suppose we should have thought about what this painting looked like before we leapt into it," she said.

Severus cleared his throat. "How on earth did we end up in the bowl?" His eyes grew wide. "Your... your hip is..."

"Oh! Sorry!" she exclaimed as she twisted to avoid pressing against his pelvis. That really didn't help at all. Severus jerked back and bumped into the apple. It wobbled and bumped into the bunch of grapes behind it. They began to shake. Severus and Hermione stared in horror as the whole bunch tipped and began to slide down over the apple and toward them.

Severus would have advised them to duck, but the pair couldn't move. He grabbed Hermione and pulled her to him, shielding her with his hands and head. The grapes made their descent, bouncing off him. One particularly juicy one landed hard and exploded, sending grape juice in every direction, but mostly all over Severus. When the grapes had settled, he pulled back enough to see Hermione.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

She nodded. Looking up at him, her face turned red. She quickly looked away and slapped her hand over her mouth, obviously trying to avoid cracking up in front of him.

Severus felt his hair. It was sopping with grape juice. It was running down his face in little rivulets and some had pooled at the tip of his nose and was dripping onto his once white shirt. He frowned intensely.

"You think that's funny?" he asked.

She nodded, but didn't look at him. Reaching up, Severus grabbed his hair and held it over the top of Hermione's head. Squeezing the juice from his hair onto hers, he got a satisfied look on his face.

"There, now you can laugh at the both of us."

She looked up then, a look of horror on her face. Severus couldn't help it... he burst out laughing too. The juice had wet the top of her hair so it was quite flat, but the rest of her mane was still in its raucously curly splendor. She looked like a half-drowned poodle.

Hermione frowned and tried to move, but she was quite pinned by the pear and the grapes.

"Severus, I'm stuck," she advised him.

Severus pushed a grape out of the way and climbed on top of the others. Turning, he reached down and pulled her from the boulders that were trapping her.

"I don't know why we are not to scale in this picture. You'd think we would be gigantic," she complained.

Severus steadied her, then bent down and grasped a basketball sized grape.

"Dinner?" he asked.

"I need to get cleaned up," she said. "I'd rather find something else to eat anyway. Giant grapes were never my favorite."

Tossing the grape over his shoulder, he took her hand. "I know just the place to go." He pulled her along, stepping gingerly around the grapes to the side of the painting, then walked out of it.

They appeared in a bathroom. The room was white and yellow and in the middle of the picture was a footed tub. A woman sat in it, covered in bubbles. She looked at Severus and Hermione and screamed.

Severus averted his eyes. "Sorry, madam. We need to use the tub."

"Well, I'm in it right now! This is *my* tub time!"

Severus frowned and glared at the woman. "I know for certain that this is not your portrait. Lady Carillion is supposed to occupy this frame. She's obviously given you permission to take a dip. She has told me that I might use her bath whenever I wish. As you can see..." He pointed to his grape-juice sodden hair and body and then to Hermione. "This is an emergency. We will turn our backs on you, and you may exit."

The woman looked at him haughtily, her nose in the air. "Well, I never!" Yet she began to lift herself from the tub, even as she complained. Severus and Hermione wheeled around so as not to see anything private.

"I want this bath back in half an hour!" they heard the haughty woman demand before she left the painting.

Slowly they turned back to the bath. Hermione looked at Severus warily.

"Umm... how are we going to do this?"

"Oh, I thought we'd bathe together," Severus said matter-of-factly.

Hermione's mouth dropped open in shock.

He smirked at her. "You first. I will step through to the neighboring picture." He pointed to the left.

Hermione nodded dumbly as he headed for the picture edge. Turning back, he smirked again. "Just come get me when you're done."

Disappearing into the next painting, Severus was happy to see that it was empty. There was a large mountain in the background and the sky was a rich blue. Severus sat on the grass and awaited Hermione.

He batted a sticky lump of his hair from his eyes as his mind drifted to the woman and what she was doing. He was tempted to peek into the other frame and catch a glimpse of her in the tub.

Merlin, you are a lecherous dead-man! She would probably scream louder than that old bat we chased out of the tub if I were to look in on her.

And yet, he couldn't help his mind from wandering and wondering just what she might look like under all the bubbles in the tub.

Well, who wouldn't? She's a beautiful woman... who's my age.... Despite the fact that I'm dead, I'm still a man!

He rolled his eyes. Thoughts like that were pointless. If he wanted to start something up with someone, he should choose one of his peers in the paintings. Hermione Granger was a living, breathing woman who would return to her own world, leaving him behind. Severus frowned, disturbed that the thought of her leaving stung quite deeply within his psyche.

Baths done and hunger satiated, Severus and Hermione returned to the Headmistress' office. The plan was to try to exit from Severus' portrait there, as this was her own office and might have some importance to her, triggering her egress from the painting.

They tried everything. She tried to walk through the painting. He tried to push her through. She tried to Apparate; he tried to push her through again... gaining him a glare for his efforts. He smirked at her.

"Maybe I didn't push hard enough the first time?" he asked innocently, his eyebrow arching in a teasing manner.

She shook her head and looked out into her office. "Incorrigible."

"Any other ideas?" he asked.

She shook her head slowly. "I'm fresh out." Severus watched her turn away from the outside world and sigh unhappily.

A/N: Thanks to slytherinlaurel for her great beta work.

Chapter 8

Chapter 9 of 18

Hermione, as Headmistress, commissions a portrait of Severus Snape. The results are more than she expected.

Chapter 8

"Filius, have the students assemble in the Entrance Hall for the Hogsmeade weekend. Professor Dawson and Hagrid will chaperone, right?"

Filius nodded.

"You're sure you've found nothing about my condition out there?" Hermione asked in desperation.

Filius shook his head. "I'm sorry, Hermione. I've searched every possible book I could find. There's just no trace of this type of thing being documented."

Hermione folded her hands in front of her. "Well, that's going to be the *first* thing I do when I get out of here."

Filius smiled wanly and nodded. Excusing himself, he made his way out of her office. Hermione turned to Severus with a look of defeat.

"He's given up. He doesn't think I'll ever get out of here." She looked down, trying to hide the tears that were threatening to come.

"I'm about to give up, too," she whispered. "It's been three weeks, and we've found nothing. Nothing we try works." Her head came back up, and she frowned at Severus. "I'm stuck here, aren't I?"

Severus' lips thinned. "I don't know, Hermione. You're right, we've searched everything, but I can't believe that you must be consigned to such a fate. We're missing something."

She gave him a hopeless look. "But what is it?" she asked. Her shoulders sagged in defeat as she buried her head in her hands. "I can't run a school from a bloody portrait!"

She felt his arms surround her. She fell into him, the tears she'd tried so valiantly to hold back streaming down her face. "I should just accept it and resign my position," she wailed between sobs.

His hand was stroking her hair. His other arm was around her, comforting her. Despite her desire to get back to her life, she couldn't deny that a part of her was enthralled by his nearness.

"We'll figure this out, Hermione," he soothed.

She pulled back and looked at him. "What if we don't?" Her voice quavered with emotion.

"Then you will make this work."

A sharp breath escaped her. "How on earth will I do that?" she muttered.

"You are a resourceful witch. Look at what you've done all your life. From the time you entered the wizarding world, you have made a place for yourself. You have determination, and you succeed in everything you wish to achieve."

She blushed. "I just do what's expected of me," she said, trying to minimize her accomplishments.

"I have watched you work, and I have spoken to the other portraits about you. You far exceed what's expected of you, Hermione Granger. I know that whatever happens, you will rise to the occasion."

Hermione sighed. She reached up and wiped the tears from her eyes. "Of course you're right. I'll figure a way to make this work if there's nothing more I can do." She gave him a tentative look. "You'll still be my friend, right? I've grown accustomed to your grousing."

Severus arched an eyebrow, and she felt her stomach drop three feet. "As long as you keep your incessant babble to a minimum," he groused right back at her.

She shook her head and smiled. "Incorrigible..."

She'd gone back to her book search, but it didn't last long.

"You need a break," Severus told her. "You've done nothing but pore over books ever since you got here."

"If I don't..."

His raised hand stilled her.

"You need a break," he said sternly.

Hermione sighed and lowered the dusty tome she'd been studying. "What would you rather do, then?"

He rose and arched an eyebrow. "I'll be right back."

He walked to the willow tree and reached behind it. Pulling a picnic basket from it, he strode back to her and reached out for her hand. She smiled slyly at him and let him pull her up.

"How did you hide that from me?" she asked.

"As I said, you've had your nose in that book all day. You never noticed me leave or come back."

Hermione's eyebrows rose. "Maybe I do need a break," she muttered.

"Indeed..."

Severus motioned for her to follow him, and they made their way around the pond to the back part of the picture. He set the basket down and removed a blanket, spreading it on the grass. The two of them were soon settled on it and munching on sandwiches.

"Where did you find these?" Hermione asked.

"There's a painting of a village on the third floor. There was a restaurant in it, and I had them package it up for me."

Hermione nodded absently as Severus studied her sad face. Obviously she was still upset about her present dilemma. He didn't know what to do. Any conversation would lead her to thinking about the life she'd left behind and only make her more upset. He chose to remain silent, continuing to eat instead.

After what seemed like an eternity, Severus cleared his throat.

"You know, you can still be viable, even if you're trapped here."

Hermione looked at him with a sour expression. "How? You know our world. We don't pay much heed to paintings."

Severus frowned. "You can do research."

"I suppose," she said softly while looking to her lap.

Severus studied her, unsure of what to say next. He surprised himself by blurting out the one thing that had been on his mind ever since he'd pulled her into the picture.

"Despite your propensity for blathering on endlessly about whatever subject suits you, I will miss your constant presence when you find your way out of this."

He snapped his mouth shut and wished he could Disapparate away. He'd not planned on telling her that. He'd not planned on admitting that to himself, but it was the truth. The last weeks had been... fun. He enjoyed conversing and sparring with her on different topics, and he found that the usual solitude he craved in death seemed to pale in comparison to spending time with her. She was... intriguing... to say the least. Pretty, too.

His eyes narrowed. *Don't go down this road. It can only lead to heartbreak. It always does.*

Hermione's head snapped up, and her eyes met his. She searched his face, looking for deception in his last statement. Finally, she smiled. His heart was warmed by it.

"You'd really miss me? I thought you couldn't stand being around me."

"You improve with age," he said blandly while looking away, trying desperately to make less of what he'd said before. He didn't want her to know he was attracted to her. She would think him a fool.

She laughed lightly and muttered about how incorrigible he was. Severus was horrified to feel himself blush. This really wasn't leading in the right direction at all.

"I... I mean..." he stammered.

Her hand came over to his, and she stilled him with a squeeze. "I know what you mean. I've learned to appreciate your dry wit and caustic mannerisms."

He glanced up at her. She was smirking. He frowned and pulled his hand from hers.

"If I am that disagreeable, perhaps you should find somewhere else to dwell."

She cocked her head at him, and he secretly found it alluring. "See, there's an example of those mannerisms. I was joking, Severus. You don't need to fly off the handle at every word."

Her hand came back and gripped his a bit more firmly. "As I said before, I want us to remain friends. I find I enjoy our time together."

He removed his hand a bit slower this time, enjoying the contact with her and not wanting it to end quite so suddenly.

"I suppose I enjoy your friendship as well."

She beamed at him. "See, that wasn't so hard to admit, was it?"

Ignoring her, he fiddled around in the basket, pretending to look for something he could stuff in his mouth. He found a large chocolate chip cookie, which he proceeded to devour with gusto.

Hermione turned away, but not before he heard her mutter "Incorrigible," under her breath. He couldn't help but smirk as he chewed.

Chapter 9

Chapter 10 of 18

Frolicking in landscapes.

Chapter 9

"Let's try that one over there," Hermione advised as she pointed across the large hall.

Severus studied it intently. "I don't know. It doesn't look like the safest of environments," he muttered. "It looks like a jungle."

"I've always wanted to visit the jungle!" Hermione grabbed his hand and before they knew it, they were standing in the other painting. A huge giraffe walked by them, and Hermione craned her neck to see its face high above them.

"I don't think this is a good idea, Hermione. I'm sure I've seen some wild cats in this picture before."

Hermione looked around. "I don't see any now," she said. Her hand stayed firmly in his as she tugged him along. "Come on! Where's your sense of adventure?"

"I had enough adventure while I was alive, thank you. I have no desire to give my dead heart the chance to fly out of my body in fear."

She turned back to him with a grin. "I bet you can't find me!" She flicked her wand at him, temporarily blinding him. He heard her move away quickly.

"Hermione! Hermione! Get this hex off me this instant!" Severus demanded. Silence was his only answer. Within a minute things went from black to grey, then to fuzzy, and finally he could see clearly again.

He grit his teeth together. That witch was in for it when he caught her. Sauntering off, he began to covertly look for her. The trees in the area had very thin trunks, so she was definitely not hiding behind one of those. He spied a large bush and set his mouth determinedly as he rushed behind it. She wasn't there.

"Woman, show yourself!" he commanded. He was unsurprised that she ignored him completely. Looking around, he noted that the forest seemed to get thicker a little ways off. He made his way toward that area. He was just about to scatter a pile of leaves when he heard a blood-curdling scream. Looking up, he saw Hermione bounding toward him with a look of sheer terror on her face.

"Run!" she cried.

He didn't wonder for long about why she was so terrified. Only a few yards behind her, a lion snarled and bared his teeth as it bounded after her.

Hermione caught up to Severus, and he pushed her ahead of him. They ran as quickly as they could to the edge of the picture; all the while, the vicious cat gaining on them. Severus looked back and was terrified to see the lion mere feet from him. He hoped the beast wouldn't decide to leap before they could escape.

Reaching the edge of the painting, he pushed Hermione and jumped out of the picture. He landed in a heap on top of her in the neighboring frame. Rolling off her, he looked at her in fury.

"Are you insane?" he demanded.

Hermione lifted herself up on her arms and glared at him. "How was I to know that lion was going to think I'd make a good lunch?"

"I told you the picture was dangerous, yet you ran off all by yourself." He kneeled so that he could look into her face and grabbed her shoulders. "Do you realize you could have been killed?"

She gave him a furious look. "Why do you think I was running?"

"You could have been killed."

"I understand that..."

"No, you don't understand anything!" Severus shoved her away, stood and stalked off. Taking in their surroundings finally, he found them to be on a boat dock next to a motorboat. He eyed the boat angrily before lowering himself into it and unwinding the tether that moored it.

Hermione had gotten up by this time. She rushed toward him.

"What are you doing?" she cried.

He glared at her. "Going for a boat ride, what does it look like?"

She stood there, looking forlorn. "Severus..."

"No."

He turned to set the boat free, started the engine and zoomed away, leaving Hermione calling after him on the dock. As soon as he cleared the small harbor, he pushed the accelerator to full throttle and sent the boat speeding along the water. He did nothing but let the wind blow his hair and cloak back behind him. He tried not to think at all, but he found that task almost impossible. Finally, after five minutes he killed the motor and sat down heavily in the captain's chair.

His breathing was labored, and he felt as if he was about to explode. He fought not to destroy anything in front of him. Bending his legs up, he put his arms on them and buried his head. He let his terror wash over him. He'd almost lost her.... What would he have done if she'd been killed?

Perhaps if she were killed, I could have her painted in with me...

He lifted his head and smacked his fist into his palm. That wasn't what he wanted. For the first time since his death, he wished he were still alive. He wanted to be alive so he could live forever with Hermione Granger. He was lost... utterly lost... because she would never be his, no matter how she might feel about him.

Reality was a harsh dictator. Their being together was impossible. He was kidding himself to even let these thoughts about her continue on.

She is just... a friend, a flesh and blood friend who will return to that state soon. She can be nothing more.... Nothing more...

Severus beat down his frustration and took in several large breaths. Composing himself, his thoughts were drawn to Hermione, who he'd left at the dock. He felt guilt well up inside him for his caustic departure. Starting the engine, he turned the boat around and headed back to shore.

He saw her as a little dot when he was approaching the pier. As he neared, he saw that she was sitting at the edge of the dock, her head cradled on her arms, which were rested on her drawn up knees. Hearing the boat approach, she lifted her head.

He drew the boat into the dock, wrapped the tether around the mooring, and climbed onto the wooden frame. Hermione hadn't moved, but was staring at him. Her eyes were puffy from crying.

He walked over to her and sat next to her on the edge of the dock. She stared at him as he stared forward, not looking at her. He knew if he turned his head in the slightest, he'd be in danger of scooping her into his arms and never letting her go. His peripheral vision caught her head turn as she stared straight ahead with him. He cleared his throat nervously.

"I shouldn't have rushed off like I did. I had no intention of leaving you here for long. I just wanted to clear my head."

Hermione said nothing. Severus shifted uncomfortably.

"I'm glad you weren't hurt," he continued weakly.

Hermione stood. He didn't dare look up at her.

"No, the lion didn't hurt me at all," she said in an accusatory voice.

He heard her footsteps, heavily banging on the dock, as she moved away. His gut felt as if it were twisted in knots. He glanced behind him, seeing that she stood at the other side of the dock with her arms crossed, looking off behind them. Her back was rigid, and she had an angry aura about her.

Can I blame her?

He arose finally and made his way back to her. His footsteps rang in his ears as he closed the distance between them. He put his hands on her shoulders once he had come up to her.

"Hermione..."

She wheeled around, anger filling her face. "You know, it's not as if I intended to make that lion chase us! I had no idea it was there until it sprang from behind a bush and started chasing me."

"I told you that picture was dangerous," he replied, his voice showing his annoyance at her lack of regard for his previous caution.

Her face softened slightly. "You were right." Her shoulders sagged. "I'm sorry I didn't listen to you." She looked away from him.

She seemed so vulnerable in that minute that even though his mind was screaming at him to leave this whole incident alone, he pulled her to him, turning her before enveloping her in an embrace.

"I shouldn't have screamed at you," he whispered.

"You scared me, Severus. You were just so livid. I don't think I've ever seen you in such a state before."

"Certainly you've seen me angry like that before," he murmured, still keeping her locked in his embrace.

She pulled her head from under his chin and looked up at him.

"No, not like that. There was something in your eyes. I can't even describe it."

Before he could stop himself, his explanation fell from his lips. How could she do this to him with only a few words?

"I've never felt like that before. I thought you were going to be killed. Being that you're not truly a painting, I had no idea what that would mean. The thought of losing you was unbearable."

Full realization of what his statement implied caused him to stiffen and pull away from Hermione. He turned and stalked back along the pier. It wasn't long before she followed him.

"Severus?" she asked from behind him.

He couldn't turn to look at her. If he did, he knew he would be lost and all his secrets would be open to her. Despite years of hiding things from his two masters, this slip of a woman had him saying things he knew he should keep to himself.

Feeling her hand on his arm, he turned his head in her direction, but didn't make eye contact.

"I'm sorry I scared you. I didn't think of it from your point of view. Of course you would have been scared."

He nodded curtly.

"I care for you, too," she said simply.

His eyes snapped to hers and that was his undoing. Her face radiated love... toward him.

"It is utter folly..." he murmured.

She smiled wanly at him. "Nonetheless, it is how I feel. I can't deny it any longer."

"We can't..." he tried to argue, but she shook her head at him.

"I know; it's seemingly impossible. I know that. I can't help myself, though. I'm falling in love with you."

"Hermione, I am nothing but a mass of brushstrokes."

She gave a wry laugh. "Don't you think I've told myself that repeatedly? It doesn't matter. Brush strokes or not, you have a soul, Severus Snape."

He looked at her in wonder. Never in his wildest dreams had he thought he could earn the attraction of a witch such as she.

Giving him a determined look, Hermione continued. "I don't care what you're made of, Severus."

He turned to her then and grimaced as he tried to get his point across.

"So, what happens when you are out there?" He pointed outside the picture. "How can you and I be together? Will you stroke my paint and tell me how much you miss me? Will I hopelessly reach out to you, never being able to reach past the canvas? What are we to do then, Hermione?"

She squared her shoulders, looking at him intently. "I don't know. All I know is that I will not deny this feeling any longer. Not to myself, and not to you."

"Do you realize what you're saying?" he asked incredulously.

She took a step toward him. "I'm saying I can't stop thinking about you. I want to be with you. I... want... *you*."

Their eyes locked, and Severus felt his walls crumbling around him. What would be the harm in confessing his feelings and maybe getting some comfort before she found her way out of his world? No harm at all.

"Merlin, I want you, too," he told her before pulling her to him and kissing her. His lips captured hers, and he nearly died a second time from the wonderful feeling of her kiss. He was enveloped in the sheer headiness of the feeling of her in his arms. His hand came up and tangled itself in her curls. Her hands followed suit and entwined in his black locks. A flood of emotions showered over him. Love, desire, amazement, and intense passion enveloped him. Having her kissing him was like heaven.

And then it came to him...

The reason why he was able to pull her into the portrait was so simple he'd hadn't even considered it. He pulled back from her delectable mouth and stared at Hermione sadly. An intense feeling of loss enveloped him. He'd just found her, and now he had to send her back. Neither life nor death was fair.

AN: Sorry, guys. I'm really evil here, I know. Thanks to slytherinlaurel for the fine beta work.

Chapter 10

Chapter 11 of 18

The paint peels.

Chapter 10

"What is it?" Hermione asked as she looked up at Severus.

She was still in his arms, and he was still looking at her gloomily. The answer to her return was so simple. It wasn't until he felt the intense emotions her kiss wrought that he understood what he needed to do.

"I will miss you when you are gone, Hermione," he told her as he took her arm and began to lead her lazily toward the edge of the canvas.

"Well," Hermione said. "We have a little while yet."

He nodded absently as they approached the border between picture and reality. Hermione didn't seem to notice where he was leading. That was probably for the best.

When they were within a few feet of the edge, he turned her to him and pulled her closer. Looking into her eyes, he prayed she'd understand.

"You are precious to me, Hermione. Never forget that."

Leaning into her, he kissed her again. The passion filled him at once. He basked in the feelings that surrounded them, but it was all too short. Grimacing into the kiss, he took his arms and thrust her hard away from him and to the edge of the canvas. She fell backwards, and with a mixture of elation and grief, he watched her be thrown from the painting.

Hermione flew back and landed on the floor in front of the picture with a *Oomph*. She sat up and looked at Severus crossly. It seemed to take her a minute to realize what happened. Springing to her feet, she approached the picture.

"How did you do that?" she asked incredulously.

He tried to smile, to make her see he was unaffected with her departure, but he knew he didn't succeed.

"It was my emotions, Hermione. Intense anger drew you into the picture. My intense feelings for you released you from the imprisonment."

He could see the realization in her face. "It was the emotions that gave you the power to move me from one existence to the other?"

He nodded.

"But..."

"It was the right thing to do, once I realized."

"Severus..."

"I should be going..."

"What do we do now?"

He stared at her for a long, long time. "We go on as before. It was lovely while it lasted."

He turned and began to make his way to the corner of the portrait.

"Wait," Hermione called to him. He turned and looked at her. She reached up and stroked his face with her finger.

"I shall never forget what we had."

"Nor I..." he murmured.

He saw determination cross her face. He was about to ask her what it was she was thinking about, but before he had the chance, she wheeled around and raced down the hall, up the stairs, and out of his life. A weight fell onto his chest as if he'd been slammed against a wall. He couldn't take this. He left the painting and appeared in a black canvas deep within the dungeons. Slytherins often felt the need to be in solitude, and this blank portrait had been set up for just that purpose. Phineas Black sat there now.

"Get up, I need this chair," Severus demanded.

"I had it before you."

"And you have had it long enough! Get up!"

Black stood with a huff. "You're lucky I was done," he growled before exiting the painting.

Severus sunk into the chair, which faced the back of the portrait, and hung his head in his hands as despair washed over him.

I did the right thing once again... the thing that was warranted. So, once again I must suffer for doing what is right. I already miss Hermione and her optimism.

She has become a part of me.

What will I do now?

Reading under the willow won't have the same appeal without her...

He felt empty. Looking into the future, he could see nothing but loneliness. He should have never given in to his feelings.

If I hadn't, though, I'd have never figured out how to free Hermione.... No, this is for the best. I have always been alone; my eternity will be no different.

Sitting back, he stared out into the blackness of the picture.

Maybe when she's lived her life and her portrait graces these walls...

"Dammit, that's so long from now..."

Severus avoided Hermione for several days while he licked his wounds. Finally, when he felt he could look upon her and not be filled with loss, he moved back into his portrait in the Headmistress' office. He was disappointed to see the room empty. Looking about, he noticed Phineas Black eyeing him sharply. He nodded a greeting to him.

"Where've you been?" Phineas asked gruffly.

Severus shrugged. "Just wandering about the castle."

"Thought you were with the Mudblood."

Severus eyed Black sharply. "Both of us have asked you not to call her that."

"Well, she's been gone a while too. Popped in here after she came out of your picture, grabbed a few things, and left. Hasn't been back since."

Severus pondered that for a minute. "Did she say where she was going?"

Black looked at him as if he were a dolt. "I'd have said if I knew."

Dilys Derwent clucked her tongue. "Phineas, please! We're all colleagues in this room. Show some respect."

"I'll show respect when he stops asking stupid questions," Black grumbled while turning and going to the back of his portrait.

Severus ignored him and those around him as he sank into his armchair and pondered just where Hermione Granger had gone.

Several days earlier:

Hermione entered the old master's studio and smiled to herself as the bell tinkled overhead. Franco DiGregorio came out from his back room with a grin which widened considerably when he saw the Headmistress. He extended his hands out to her, about to embrace hers in his, when he noticed his hands were covered in various shades of paint. He pulled them back and grabbed a towel that hung from his belt. Wiping vigorously, he cleaned every drop off before taking Hermione's hand in his.

"Ah, Professore Granger! How wonderful to see you again!"

Hermione smiled at him. "It's nice to see you too, sir."

"Ah, ah, ah," he chided with a wave of his finger in front of her face. "What did I tell you last time?"

She shook her head with a grin. "Franco, then."

"Much better! What can I do for you? Do you need another portrait? I thought Professore McGonagall was traveling the world. I hadn't heard of her passing."

"Oh, no!" Hermione exclaimed. "It's nothing like that. Although I do want to thank you for your work. Severus Snape is... incredibly lifelike."

"Grazie, grazie! I pride myself in my enchantments."

"There's just one problem, Franco."

The old man's eyebrows rose quizzically at Hermione.

"He's a bit too... lifelike."

"Perdone?" DiGregorio asked.

She pulled a thin book from her robes. The title was emblazoned in gold letterhead across the top of the cover... *Trapped Souls*. The cover was completed with a wispy form of a male ghost trapped in a cage. Franco looked down at the book and looked back to Hermione.

"He oftentimes speaks of remembering an afterlife of which he was very much a part. He remembers interacting with other departed. It got me thinking so I got this book out of the Hogwarts library."

She moved over to a counter toward the back of the studio showroom and placed the book down, opening it to a bookmarked page. She tapped the heading: *Picture Trapping*

"Is it possible, Franco, that you not only enchanted the portrait with his essence, but also his soul?"

Franco moved to her side and read through the description in the book.

"I've never heard of anything like this," he mused.

She nodded. "It's odd. I had just pulled this book out of the library and read it about a month before you finished the portrait. When Severus started talking about past lives, it set me thinking." She turned to Franco.

"Did anything happen differently when you cast the spell to awaken him?"

Franco narrowed his eyes as he thought. In an instant they grew wide again. "An owl!" he cried in his thick accent. "Now I remember. An owl came as I cast the spell. I cannot tell you how much it frightened me! But I finished the spell, and everything seemed fine. I did not really think anything of it."

"Could an owl do something to the spell?"

Franco motioned for her to follow him to his back room. He walked through the door and went to his bookshelf, pulling his spell book from its place. He began flipping through the pages.

"Ultimately, an owl has nothing to do with the spell," he murmured as he continued to flip. Finally, he came upon the page with the enchantment on it. He pointed to the words of the spell.

"The owl interrupted me while I was saying the incantation. I was sure I did it correctly, but if it is done incorrectly, anything can happen. Usually if it is not performed right, the painting does not come to life. However, it is possible for other effects to occur."

Hermione studied the incantation. Finally she pointed to the wording in the middle.

"*Dare vita at non cor ad hic effigies*" she murmured. "What would happen if you left out the word *non* in the spell. It would translate to *give life and soul to this portrait* instead of *give life but not soul to this portrait*."

Franco's eyes met hers. "It's entirely possible that that's what happened."

"So, Severus Snape's soul is trapped in a portrait?" Hermione asked as a mixture of fear and elation filled her.

"Santo cielo, what have I done?"

Hermione looked at Franco levelly. "The real question is can it be undone?"

Franco shook his head. "I have no idea. It is unheard of. How could we even begin to know how to send him back to his afterlife?"

Hermione's lips tensed. "What about pulling him from the picture? Can that be done?"

"He is made of paint strokes!"

Hermione nodded her head. "I know. Believe me, I know."

She explained what had happened for the month and a half she was stuck in the picture, conveniently leaving out the feelings that had grown between Severus and she.

"You should have called me, Signorina Hermione. I might have been able to do something."

Hermione shrugged. "I should have, but I was so wrapped up in trying to solve my predicament myself, I didn't even think to consult you." Her eyebrows knit as she thought deeply. "We found that intense emotion caused Severus to be able to pull me in and cast me out of the picture."

Franco shook his head. "Unbelievable. Was that what tipped you off about his soul?"

Hermione nodded. "It was the last piece of a puzzle that had been bothering me the whole time. He displayed a form of magic. Portraits can't do that. There was obviously something more in the portrait than just brush strokes." Hermione took a step forward. "Franco, if we could pull him from the picture..."

"Hermione, bella, he could disappear into nothing when we do."

"So, what would happen to his trapped soul? Even if his body disappeared, wouldn't his soul return to the afterlife?"

"Theoretically it is possible, but we cannot be sure. What if his soul is destroyed when the body dissolves?"

"What if his body doesn't dissolve at all and he comes back to life?" Hermione asked with anticipation.

"I... I don't know if that's possible..." Franco said with a downcast glance.

"Well, we'd better find out, then."

"Professore Granger..."

"It's Hermione, remember."

"I just do not want you to get your hopes up. It seems Professore Snape has become very important to you in these last months. I don't want you to set yourself up in an impossible scenario."

Hermione studied him for a long moment, turning over what he said in her mind. She gave a curt nod finally. "Of course you're right. Unfortunately, I'm not quite sure how to not get my hopes up."

The old man's hand fell on her shoulder. "Let us research, then. Knowledge will help us know what is possible and what is not. This may take some time."

"I've taken a short vacation from the school. Filius Flitwick, my deputy, has been doing such a wonderful job with everything... and when I explained my theory, he insisted I explore it."

Franco nodded. "If you would like, I have a private room next to mine above the store. You may board there while we investigate this phenomena."

Hermione smiled brightly at him. "That would be perfect," she said with a nod of agreement.

"Come, I'll show you to your room, then." He beckoned for her to follow him up a stairway, well hidden in a corner of the room.

"Once you are settled, we will begin."

She nodded, even though his back was turned and he couldn't see her. She followed him to her room, trying desperately to quell the spark of hope that was steadily growing within her. She wanted Severus Snape alive and standing in front of her. It seemed that she had a chance to make that possible. She hoped with all her heart that he could be brought back to life.

A/N: Thanks once again to slytherinlaurel for a fantastic beta job.

I know the Latin isn't perfect, but you get the idea.

Chapter 11

Chapter 12 of 18

Severus does what he does best.

Chapter 11

Severus paced back and forth with his hands behind his back. He'd found the perfect picture in which to pace. Located on the seventh floor, it had a view of the Gryffindor common room. Gryffindors, being what they were, cringed and hurried along their way upon noticing Severus' black-clad body pacing in the painting. That had given Severus a slight bit of satisfaction.

Not nearly enough, though. He glanced out of the gazebo where he paced and looked out into the 'real' world. No one was about as it was class time. Severus was thankful for that. He wanted peace and quiet so he could mull.

Where on earth could she have gone? It's been two weeks and no one has said anything about her. Filius knows, he just won't say. What could she be doing? Surely, she'll be back soon.

The fear that she would never return niggled at the back of his mind, but he cast it away. Hermione Granger didn't shun her responsibilities. No matter what had happened between the two of them while she had been in the painted world, she would not just leave Hogwarts for good. There must be another explanation.

He grimaced as his eyes wandered the empty hall before him. Why did she run? Was she that upset about them not being together that she had to escape? Or was it something else entirely? The selfish part of him wished it was because she was so very distraught about their inability to be together. The more practical part of him knew she wouldn't abandon her post for anything less than an important matter.

"It's over between us..." he muttered. "Get it through your head, man."

The loneliness he'd been feeling since he'd pushed her out of the painting enveloped him again.

Will this feeling of loss ever diminish?

He took up his pacing once more. His mind raced with thoughts of Hermione. He wanted to see her again, despite never being able to touch her hand or run his fingers through her hair. He just wanted her back where he could watch her and think of what might have been.

His dark musings were interrupted by a crashing noise coming from the far end of the hall. His head snapped up just in time to see Peeves zoom around the corner with a cackle. He floated here and there singing one of his made-up songs.

The Mistress is back

She's back, she's back.

But none will stop me

When I want to attack!

The poltergeist repeated his chant over and over again as he floated about past Severus' painting and away from him, knocking down a suit of armor in his wake. Severus'

eyes grew large as the meaning of Peeves' little rhyme became evident. He hurriedly rushed out of the painting, his heart hammering in his chest with the anticipation of seeing Hermione Granger once again.

When Severus entered his portrait, he saw Hermione looking around quizzically. The old man who painted his likeness was standing there with her. Severus couldn't take his eyes off Hermione. He felt a deep sadness settle over him.

"I wouldn't know where to find him," Hermione was telling the old man.

Her gaze went back to his portrait and relief flooded her eyes. Severus felt his heart clench within him. He knew seeing her again would bring a flood of regret, but he hadn't anticipated it being so intense.

"Severus!" she cried as she rushed to the picture. Her hand went out, and she stroked his painted cheek. He tried to touch her, but no matter how he tried, he could not make contact with her hand even though it was stroking his face. He pulled away in frustration and stalked to his armchair, sitting down heavily into it.

"Where have you been?" he snapped. He hadn't meant to sound so sharp, but the frustration of their situation had grated on him for too long now, and the inability to touch her had made him rue the day he'd ever appeared in this bloody portrait.

Hermione moved away, a bit taken aback at his sharpness.

"We are here to help you, Professore," Franco DiGregorio explained from behind Hermione.

"Help me?" Severus asked as he eyed the old man narrowly.

Franco stepped behind Hermione's chair and in front of the portrait. "I owe you a great apology, signore. I did not know."

Severus looked from DiGregorio to Hermione and back. "Didn't know what?" he asked tersely.

DiGregorio looked at Hermione. She gave him a small smile, then turned to Severus.

"Evidently, when Franco cast the spell upon your painting, he left out one word."

Severus arched an eyebrow. "And..."

"Instead of instilling the portrait with simply your essence, he imbued it with your entire soul."

"Excuse me?" Severus asked incredulously.

Hermione explained again. Severus' eyes grew narrower and narrower as she told him how his soul was trapped in the portrait. He turned to DiGregorio and clamped his lips together in anger.

"So, I am to be trapped in this..." He motioned about him furiously. "Two dimensional *prison* for eternity?"

Hermione stepped back to the side of his frame. "Severus, I know this is a lot to take..."

He turned to her, wanting to sneer and rip her head off because of his situation, but he found he could only sigh deeply and hang his head in resignation.

"You have no idea what it feels like to be a prisoner of circumstance. I was hoping to escape that in death."

Hermione gave him a sympathetic look before continuing. "We've been researching ever since I left," she explained. "We think we've come up with a solution."

He looked out from behind the hair that hung in front of his face. "Solution?"

She nodded.

"What sort of solution?"

Stepping in front of the portrait, Hermione ducked low to try to see behind the curtain of hair Severus was hiding behind.

"We're going to try to pull you from the portrait."

Severus' head shot up. "How? How could that even be possible?"

"You see, Professore," Franco DiGregorio began. He was silenced by a quick flash of Severus' hand.

"She will explain... not you," Severus demanded.

DiGregorio gave him a slight bow of his head and retreated a few steps back, leaving Hermione to explain all.

"We've worked out a spell to pull your soul and painted form from the painting. It's complicated and needs both of us to cast it properly. In theory it will pull you out of the picture, and you will be alive once again."

"In theory..." Severus ground out.

"Yes."

"Have you tested this theory?"

"We tested it on a pet that had died recently. It seemed to work well enough."

Severus moved to the edge of the canvas. "Well enough? What does that mean? Who is to say that you will perform this spell and instead of saving me, you will send my soul into oblivion?"

Hermione gave him a pleading look. "Severus, we don't truly know. If you don't appear alive outside of the portrait, then you will cease to exist. As for your soul, we don't know where it will go. Hopefully back to the beyond, but we have no guarantees."

Severus scowled. "Leave me. I must contemplate this new development before I let you perform unknown magic on me. There is no guarantee that I will exist in any form once you do so. I need to contemplate that."

"Severus..."

"Leave! Come back in an hour. I will let you know of my decision then."

Hermione stepped to within millimeters of the painting. She whispered at Severus. "I'm sorry. This is all we've been able to come up with. I'm afraid too, but if we don't try it, you'll be trapped in this portrait for eternity."

Severus stared at her. He watched her nod to him, turn, and leave her office with DiGregorio in tow. He wanted to reach out to her and touch her, but he knew he could never do that. Not in this state.

Looking down at his painted hands, he smoothed them along his legs. Could their spell possibly work? He knew Hermione. She wouldn't suggest something unless she was sure it would work. Unfortunately, every new spell had a chance of failing. What would it be like to not exist at all? No consciousness, no form, nothing.

Nothingness, a painted prison, or the chance to walk the earth again... which should he choose?

Once he put it like that, the choice seemed simple. If he ceased to exist, he'd never know it, but if he were trapped in the portrait, he would always regret not trying to escape it. He would spend eternity as a two-dimensional painting. He'd watch Hermione Granger age and die, never being able to touch her again. After that, what? There was the possibility of spending eternity with her as a co-portrait, but how fulfilling could that be when her true soul would be in the beyond, and she would only be an imprint of what she'd been in life? It would fall short no matter how lifelike her portrait would be. Would he wait for her only to be disappointed with her reincarnation?

She was still quite young. He'd need to wait nearly one hundred years to be able to touch her. It was too long. An eternity too long.

No, he really only had one possible road, and that was to try the spell and hope to return to life. A new life he'd never thought possible during the war. A new life with a beautiful woman by his side. If Hermione's spell worked, all that would be possible for him.

"I'll do it," he muttered to himself as he settled comfortably into his chair and grabbed his book to await the return of the woman he loved and the man who'd made this new opportunity possible.

The usual thanks go to slytherinlaurel. Thanks, hon, for your constant positive suggestions.

Thanks to you, dear reader, for your enthusiasm for this story. So glad you are enjoying it.

Chapter 12

Chapter 13 of 18

Will the spell work?

Chapter 12

Hermione entered her office tentatively. Her throat felt as if she had a stone lodged in it. She was frightened...frightened that he would say no, and yet frightened that he would say yes. What if after everything they'd worked out, he disappeared into non-existence when they performed the spell? She didn't think her heart could take that.

They had experimented, and everything had seemed to go fine when they cast the spells on the pet they'd returned to the living... but a grown human was a different thing. It was definitely a long shot.

She held her breath as she looked to Severus' portrait. He was sitting and reading. He looked up when she appeared in the doorway. Giving him a tight smile, she moved to her desk and his picture. Franco DiGregorio was close behind.

"Did you make a decision?" she asked him softly.

He nodded. "It seems the only real choice is to let you cast this spell. If it doesn't work, I will never know."

Hermione frowned at him. "It will work, Severus."

Placing his book on the table beside his chair, he gazed at her levelly.

"What do I need to do?"

Hermione turned to Franco. "Just stand," he offered. "We will do the rest."

Severus stood and swatted at some imaginary dust on his shoulders. He looked up to Hermione.

"I am ready."

She stepped closer.

"Severus, if this..."

The dark wizard held up a hand to still her voice. "You will have tried your best, Hermione. Do not regret anything if this doesn't work."

Hermione reached out and drew her fingers along Severus' jaw line.

He leaned into her slightly. "At least you won't have to worry about me haunting you if I don't exist."

"So, very incorrigible..." she murmured softly, trying not to let her voice break. "Never forget what I said to you when we were together in the picture."

"I will remember that until I cease to exist."

Hermione felt tears well up in her eyes. She fought them back. She needed to have a clear head to do this spell correctly. Clearing her throat, she backed away and gave Severus a nod. Turning to Franco, she positioned herself next to him and raised her wand.

"Are you ready?" She asked.

Franco gave a swift nod of his head.

The two wizards lifted their wands in unison and began chanting the spell.

Libera te de morte aeterna

Libera anima omnia defunctorum de poenis inferni

Requem aeternum dona ea, et lux perpetua luceat ea

Red light shot from both of their wands and enveloped Severus' portrait.

"Good-bye, Hermione," she heard him say to her as he was enveloped in the red light. Holding her breath, she watched the spell do its work. In less than ten seconds, the red light absorbed into the picture, and Severus Snape was gone. She eyed the floor in front of the frame, but there was no trace of him.

"Oh, Merlin, where did he go?" Hermione muttered mostly to herself. "He was supposed to appear right in front of the painting!"

She felt her heart begin to race. "It didn't work! We've killed him!" she cried.

Franco looked from the painting to her in despair. "We did what we had to do."

"No! No, this can't be right!" Fear gripped her. He was gone. They had sentenced him to nonexistence.

Her breath caught in her chest as Franco motioned behind her. Spinning around, she saw a large, black lump lying on the floor in front of her door.

She rushed over to it, hoping that it was him and not some malformed lump of paint. Reaching out, she felt the softness of Severus' cloak. She turned him onto his back and studied his features. He was unconscious but looked whole.

"Oh, thank Merlin!" she cried.

Severus let out a low groan and slowly opened his eyes. Hermione stroked his cheek like she had before they'd cast the spell. His eyes met hers, and his hand came up to clasp hers within it.

"I can feel you..."

She smiled at him through the tears that had formed in her eyes. "And I can feel you."

Pushing himself up, Severus' eyes never left hers. He reached out and touched her cheek. "I can't believe it worked. I'm here, alive... with you."

Franco cleared his throat but the two didn't turn to him. "I'll just...ahem...leave you two alone," he stammered. In an instant he'd left the room, shutting the door behind him.

Hermione sighed in relief. "I thought... when you disappeared..."

"Shh, it worked." Severus put his other hand up to her face, cupping it and pulling her close. "I'm real. You saved me."

Hermione sobbed and closed her eyes. His lips touched hers tenderly. "You have given us a chance to be together, my love. Thank you."

Her arms flew around him, and she buried her head into his shoulder. "I was being selfish. I wanted you with me so badly that I was willing to sacrifice your existence just to make you mine."

Severus wrapped his arms around her and hugged her to him. "I was being selfish, too. I would have rather ceased to exist than to spend eternity without you."

She pulled back then and searched his face. "Do you think this can work between us? I mean, now that we're both real and alive, can we make what we found in the paintings real between the two of us?"

Severus' hand was on her cheek again as his eyes swept over her face. "I certainly want it to. We won't know unless we try."

She nodded. "I want it to work, too."

"My feelings for you, Hermione, they are real."

She smiled at him before stroking his cheek. "Mine are too."

"Remember when we discussed my having a reason to not die? I've finally found it."

He couldn't continue for he found himself being assaulted by the woman in his arms. Her lips crashed against his, and he felt elated at her touch. He was really there, on the floor of her office, enveloped in her embrace with her kissing him senseless. His head spun with the wonder of it and the feel of her. He would do anything to keep her with him... anything.

Hermione and Severus stood just outside of the Great Hall. Hermione looked to Severus, who looked back and arched an eyebrow at her.

"Are you certain this is the best way to announce my return from the dead?" he asked her.

Hermione smiled. "I don't think there's really any good way of doing it that would avoid mass confusion. Besides, I know how you love to spoil the students' appetites."

Severus smirked and squeezed her hand in his.

"Are you ready?"

"I'm always ready to make an entrance," Severus acknowledged.

Hermione shook her head and muttered, "Incorrigible."

Severus came in close to her ear and nuzzled it with his nose. "And you love me for it, don't you?"

A shiver shot down Hermione's back. She pulled back and looked at Severus. "I'd have to admit that I do; however, let's allow everyone to get over one surprise at a time. I don't want the older professors to drop dead at the dinner table when they discover not only are you alive, but that I'm madly in love with you."

Severus smirked. "Have it your way," he said with a shrug.

Hermione turned and took a deep breath. She was about to proceed into the Hall when Severus pulled her to him and kissed her soundly. She was lost in him for what seemed a long while. Finally, Severus pulled away as Hermione sighed.

"What were we going to do?" she asked him as she gave him a dazed look.

"You were about to announce the miracle of my existence."

"Ah, yes..." Hermione straightened out her Headmistress robes and moved through the door and into the Great Hall. Severus followed her. She'd chosen to enter from the student's entrance so Severus and she could walk up to the teacher's table before she had to say anything, allowing everyone to take in the sight before them.

Forks clattered onto plates, students gasped aloud, and looking to the teacher's table, every faculty member stopped what they were doing and simply gaped in amazement. Hermione and Severus made their way up one of the rows toward the front of the Hall. Hermione knew that Severus would be strutting and acting as imposing as ever, so she did her best to look the part by stalking ahead of him with her head held high. Never let it be said she could not be dramatic. Every eye was drawn between Severus and her as they made their way, walking quickly and purposefully. Hermione stepped up to the platform where the teachers sat and made her way to her seat. Waving her wand, she made a chair appear on her left and faced the students as Severus took his place next to her.

Placing her wand at her throat, she gave her voice the volume it would need to be heard in the hall, even though there was dead silence all around her.

"Attention, students and faculty. I am pleased to announce that Severus Snape has returned to the living through a magical mishap during the animation of his portrait. Not simply his essence, but his very soul had been conjured into the portrait by its artist, Franco DiGregorio. With Mr. DiGregorio's help, I was able to free his soul from the painting. He is the same person that he was before his death, so please treat him with the respect afforded any faculty member here. And try to refrain from staring."

Hermione sat down. Silence reigned for several moments until a very gray Sybill Trelawney pointed from her spot at the end of the table. "My eye saw this outcome! Did I not say the Dark One would return?"

Suddenly the entire Great Hall burst into commotion. All the students were talking and pointing, and the professors were doing much the same. Hermione laughed inwardly at Trelawney's comment before noticing Filius Flitwick jump down from his chair and bustle toward Severus with his hand outstretched.

"Pleasure to have you back among the living, Severus!"

Severus stared at Flitwick's hand before cautiously grasping it. Filius pumped his hand up and down vigorously. That was the catalyst for the rest of the teachers to rise and shake Severus' hand or give him a hug. Hermione was surprised to see a teary-eyed Hooch grab Severus and give him a bear hug. The woman was usually not the demonstrative type. After everyone on staff had given their welcome, the noise in the hall finally settled to a dull roar, which was actually quite normal for the dinner hour.

Severus settled back into his seat.

"That wasn't so bad," Hermione mused.

Severus arched an eyebrow at her. "You were not the one accosted by a gaggle of people trying to assuage their guilty consciences."

Hermione shook her head. "Oh, Severus, they are all genuinely glad to see you."

Severus harrumphed. "They're nothing but a bunch of kiss-ups," he muttered under his breath.

Hermione shook her head and muttered in an equally quiet tone, "Incorrigible."

Latin taken from Requiem mass (slightly modified):

Deliver me from eternal death.

Deliver the soul of the departed from the pains of Hell.

Eternal rest give unto him and let perpetual light shine upon him.

There are a few more chapters left before we end this tale. Thanks for your wonderful reviews, and thanks to slytherinlaurel for her beta work.

Chapter 13

Chapter 14 of 18

Planning

Chapter 13

Hermione and Severus walked down the hallway. Despite the announcement at dinner, students passing by would get a wild-eyed, crazed look and hurry by. This caused Severus to smirk outwardly.

"We shouldn't have told them anything," he mused. "I could have snuck around, scaring the children. Imagine two snogging students behind a curtain having me pushing the curtain aside. They'd scream their heads off."

Hermione rolled her eyes and shook her head. "Incorrigible..."

Severus stopped and pulled her to him. "I do love it when you call me that." He placed a passionate kiss on her lips. After a moment, Hermione pulled back with a glazed look in her eyes.

"Completely and utterly incorrigible," she repeated before pulling him back to cover him in kisses.

A gasp from behind Severus had them pulling apart suddenly. The couple turned to see a fifth year student with her hand over her mouth and her eyes wide.

"Miss Hartman, it's almost curfew. Please get to your common room," Hermione commanded.

"Y-yes, ma'am!" the girl stammered as she hurried past the two and nearly broke into a run to get to where she belonged.

Hermione sighed after her. "I guess our secret is out, then." Giving Severus a caustic look, she batted him on his chest. "This is all your fault, you know."

"I didn't see you pushing me away when I kissed you."

"How am I to resist those lips?" she asked plaintively as her fingers circled his lips. "They're just so perfectly kissable."

Severus felt himself redden at her compliment. He cleared his throat before making good use of his lips on Hermione. The woman had the nerve to pull back slightly. He pulled her head closer and continued his onslaught.

"Severus!" Hermione said breathlessly after a few minutes of being thoroughly snogged. "Come on!" she cried as she grabbed his hand and pulled him along. "Our secret is out; we don't need to scare any more students."

"My dear, I live to scare students. I thought you understood that about me."

Hermione stopped and looked at him. She seemed to be trying to look through him, which made Severus rather uncomfortable.

"What?" he ground out.

"You're different," she said.

Severus arched an eyebrow at her.

"I mean... You're so unreserved. I would have never imagined you to grab me and snog me senseless in the hallway. You just always seemed so..."

"Uptight?"

Hermione gave him a small smile and nodded sheepishly.

"Yes, I would have to agree. Death, however, has given me freedom."

Hermione's smile widened as she tilted her head to gaze at him thoughtfully. "I'm actually glad of that."

"Now, woman, would you please show me to my room?"

Hermione took his hand and led him down the hall to a tapestry that had a dragon on it. When they stood in front of it, the golden dragon turned its head and smoke curled from its nostrils.

"Prothero, this is Severus Snape. He will be occupying the rooms you guard until further notice."

Fire shot from the dragon's nostrils. He looked to Severus with narrowed eyes. "Password?" he asked.

"Ebony."

Hermione smirked at him, which earned her a scowl. "What?"

"Some things, evidently, don't change."

The tapestry disappeared, leaving a doorway visible. Severus opened the door and pulled Hermione into his room. He looked around, noting the wood paneling, the comfortable couch in front of the fireplace, and the desk against the far wall.

"This will do nicely."

"What are you going to do now?" Hermione asked. She gave him a tentative look. "Do you wish to return to Hogwarts as a teacher?"

Severus grimaced. "Heavens, no. The farther away from these dunderheads I am, the happier I'll be."

Guiding Hermione to the sofa, he settled in next to her. "That does leave us with a dilemma. I cannot live here indefinitely."

Hermione looked at him seriously. "You are welcome to stay as long as you'd like. I'm the Headmistress; I have the authority to allow you to stay."

Severus frowned. "I don't mean to sound unappreciative, but I must move on with my life. I've been dead for twenty years. I have nothing." He looked to Hermione as realization hit him. "How am I to live with no money?"

"Actually, Severus, you do have money. All that you had in your Gringott's account was placed into a special account here at Hogwarts. Minerva set it aside to help needy students in buying Potions supplies for classes."

"Then there would be hardly any left," Severus said with a sigh.

"On the contrary, Minerva actually has a great knack for investing. There's more in the fund today than what you left at your death, even though the fund has helped numerous children throughout the years."

"That money belongs to the school in any case."

"It is your money. If you would like to leave a small amount to continue the fund, then you may, but that all belongs to you."

Severus pondered that silently, his hair falling in front of his face as he thought about what he would do now that he was alive again.

Hermione brushed his hair away so she could look at him. "What would you like to do?"

Severus' eyes lit up. "I will create a line of potions to preserve youth. The Dark Lo... Riddle had me research such things when he was alive."

At Hermione's concerned look, he held up his hand. "It's not what you think. Yes, I could probably create some evil, dark elixir to stopper death, but I was thinking more along the lines of revitalizing solutions for both the body and mind." He smirked. "We could call it *Dead Man's Secret*."

Hermione's eyes grew wide. "We?" she remarked. "And isn't that a bit of a morbid title?"

"Well, I was dead, and it will be my secret."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. "Incorrigible!"

Severus placed his hand upon hers. "I know you are busy as Headmistress, but would you be interested in being a partner in this venture? I would assume your brewing skills have improved in the twenty or so years since you were in my classroom?"

"I am a competent brewer, thank you very much."

"Perhaps I should see your skills before offering a position," Severus said barely hiding his smirk.

Hermione huffed at him. She stood and glared. "Come on!" she ordered.

Severus stood. "We just got here. Where are we going?"

"To the Potions lab. I will not have you thinking I'm not qualified to work with you."

"Hermione..."

"No. You brought it up. We might as well get this out of the way. I wouldn't want to blow up your lab the moment I stepped into it."

She stalked out with Severus following behind her. "I was only joking," he offered.

"Come."

Severus shut his mouth and followed her, eyeing her all the while. Her normal, relaxed posture was now stiff. She was annoyed with him, of that he was sure. They walked in silence all the way down to the dungeons, and with a flick of her wand, the door to the Potions lab opened. Hermione sauntered over to the stocked shelf and pulled a cauldron and stirrer from it. She placed it on the table nearest her.

"What would you have me brew?" she asked Severus.

"Perhaps an elixir that will help me to keep my mouth shut so as not to put my foot into it?" Severus offered.

Hermione's gaze softened. She looked down at the cauldron and ran her finger along the edge. "I know you were just joking, but in the past it was my knowledge that you always would rail against. I suppose some of that feeling of always being a failure in your eyes made me a bit peevish."

Severus walked over to her. "You were at the wrong place at the wrong time, Hermione. I admit, I wasn't drooling at the mouth about you like your other professors, but I did recognize your brilliant mind. Had the times been different, and I hadn't had to play the role that I did, I would have urged you to pull yourself from your book knowledge in perhaps a more positive way."

She eyed him narrowly. "You thought I was a horrible student."

"You were a Gryffindor, the friend of Harry Potter, and a Muggle-born witch. In my position, I could treat you no better. If word had gotten back to Riddle that I was treating you with respect, I would have had much to answer for."

Hermione stared at him for a bit longer. "Thank you," she said finally.

He tilted his head questioningly.

"For explaining that to me. I wondered if that was the case after everything came out about you, but it was impossible to know what your true motives were."

"If the truth be known, I admired you for not falling to pieces with the way I treated you."

"Except for that time with my teeth."

Severus glanced to her mouth. "It all seemed to work out in the end."

"You couldn't have known, but those teeth were an incredible sore spot throughout my youth."

"Of course I knew. Why else would I have said what I did?"

She gave him a hurt look. "You just said..."

"I said that I had to act that way with you. To do so, I needed to know exactly how to insult you in the worst way."

"Riddle wasn't even back during that incident. You could have..."

"He came back that very year. When he interviewed my *colleagues* he found that I had been horrible to everyone outside of my house, especially to those of Muggle descent. It proved that I had remained loyal to him and had just been awaiting his return so that he would have a pawn at Hogwarts. Believe me, Hermione, everything I said and did was measured for or against me when he returned. It could have well cost me my life had I shown you any mercy whatsoever."

"I understand," she said hollowly.

"Hermione..."

"No, it's all right. What do you want me to brew?"

Severus eyed the cauldron in front of her. "A burn-healing paste. The creams we will be developing will be similar in creation to that."

She nodded and amassed the ingredients. Quiet fell over them as she chopped the ginger and placed it into the cauldron. She added seven drops of aloe Vera and stirred the mixture for five minutes.

Severus watched her all the while. He studied her intently, making sure she would be a good match with him in the lab. After half an hour, the paste had turned its trademark orange and was ready. Hermione looked up at him.

"Your technique, my lady, is impeccable." He moved to the cauldron and spooned out a bit of the mixture, letting it drop back into the cauldron slowly. "The consistency is as it should be. You have brewed the potion satisfactorily."

Hermione nodded. "Do I get the job?"

Severus met her gaze. "You know I am not quick with compliments, but I will admit that you are well advanced for a non-master. I apologize for all the years I had to degrade your skills. You were truly a fine student who has blossomed into a brilliant woman. I will offer you the position with the understanding that I will not be gushing on about your abilities in the future, but I will never degrade you as I did in your youth."

Hermione finally smiled. "I accept both the job offer and your apology. In my old age, I have learned I don't need to be fawned upon for my skills. A simple thank you now and then will be sufficient for my ego."

"You are not old."

"I'm no child either."

"Thankfully," Severus added as he stepped close to her. "You aren't angry with me any longer?"

"I overreacted, and I'm sorry. I should be encouraging your joking instead of blowing up at it."

Severus smirked. "Perhaps we can find a way to make it up to each other?"

Hermione came closer and drew her finger along his jaw. "What could we possibly do to make it up to one another, my good sir?"

His lips were on hers instantly. She returned his passion and gasped in between his onslaught. "Mmm, yes... I think this... is the perfect way... to... make things better."

"Shut up, and kiss me, woman."

Chapter 14

Chapter 15 of 18

Harry gets in on the news.

Chapter 14

Two days later, Harry Potter appeared at the Headmistress' doorway with a *Daily Prophet* folded under his arm. He brandished the paper and dropped it onto Hermione's desk.

"When were you planning on telling me about this?" he asked.

Hermione's eyebrows rose. "Harry, you have been hiding away with your family for months now. I didn't know you wanted an update."

Harry sighed heavily. "Look, I'm sorry I've neglected our friendship for the last little while. The days up to my retirement from the Ministry left me exhausted. I just needed a break from all of society. I'll admit having Ginny and the kids all to myself has been intoxicating, and I have just gotten around to poking my head up and looking at the world around me. Imagine my surprise to find that Severus Snape was alive and well and living at Hogwarts."

"Well, he won't be living here much longer. He is seeking a flat in Hogsmeade as we speak."

"So, this article is true?"

Hermione glanced down at it. "It is."

"From Skeeter?"

Hermione laughed. "Well, after the Minister was through chastising me for announcing to the whole student body that we brought a portrait to life, we decided we needed a good cover story. Skeeter was happy to add a little bit of intrigue in exchange for full bragging rights on airing the story."

"Well, which is the truth?"

"Let's just say Dumbledore didn't place any spell on Severus to 'hold his soul from the beyond' so it could wait for a portrait to be commissioned. It does make a nice cover story, though, and now Wizards all over Britain won't be trying to pull their departed loved ones off the wall and into their arms."

"Skeeter outdid herself this time. It's so seamlessly woven into everything else, and it makes perfect sense, too."

Hermione nodded her agreement. "It also affirms that Dumbledore was working with Severus during the last year of his life, and held no ill will against him for his death."

"I bet you thought that up, didn't you?"

Hermione shrugged and smiled sagely.

"I can't believe he's really alive..."

Hermione smiled inwardly. "Neither can I."

"I've got so much to say to him," Harry continued.

At that moment, the door to Hermione's office burst open, and Severus Snape strode in.

"Hermione, I've found the..." Severus' words died in his throat as he gazed upon Harry Potter.

Despite his knowledge of the truth, it seemed that Harry had seen a ghost himself, as he was now as pale as Severus.

Hermione cleared her throat. "Harry saw the paper and wanted to know if what he'd read about you was true."

"Yes, it seems that I had a crowd surrounding me wherever I went in Hogsmeade today," Severus said tartly.

"That will slow down as they get used to the fact that you're alive again," Hermione replied.

"I probably should have waited to venture out for a week or so, but I did find a suitable flat." Severus turned to Potter then. "You can stop gaping now, Mr. Potter."

Harry clamped his mouth shut, but continued to stare. Severus waited, then rolled his eyes. "Please, get it over with, whatever it is you find you must say to me."

"I wanted to say that I... I underestimated you during the war... and I'm sorry for that. You are the bravest man I have ever known. I suppose I could have told that to your portrait, but I've been rather busy as of late."

Severus eyed Potter and finally gave him a curt nod. "I expect we won't need to speak of this again?" he asked finally. "The past is over."

Harry extended his hand. Severus gazed down at it for a while before grasping it.

"I'm not quite sure what you want here, Potter. We were never meant to be fast friends."

Harry nodded in agreement as he shook Severus' hand. "I know that, sir. I would just like to have peace between the two of us. I won't ask you to tea, nor will I expect to hang out with you on weekends. However, after all this time, I hope that when we do cross each other's paths, we might be civil to one another."

"I can agree to that," Severus responded as he shook hands with Potter.

Their hands dropped, and Harry shifted his stance from leg to leg. He looked over at Hermione and smiled. "I'd best be going."

Hermione stood and wrapped her arm in his. "Let me walk you out," she offered. Looking back at Severus, she smiled at him. "I'll be back in a few minutes, Severus. You may wait here if you'd like."

Severus gave her a slow nod before she turned her attention to Harry once again.

They were half-way down the stairs when Hermione spoke.

"There's something else about Severus I should tell you before you go, Harry."

Harry looked at her curiously. "What is it?"

"I was trapped in a painting with him for some time before we were able to pull his soul from his portrait."

"Wow! What was that like?"

Hermione smiled. "It was quite interesting. I felt normal, and my surroundings seemed more than just brush strokes. In any case..." She looked tentatively at Harry.

"Go on..."

"Severus and I fell in love while I was trapped in the painting."

Harry stopped dead on the stairs. "Excuse me?"

"I'm in love with Severus Snape."

"You fell in love with a painting?"

Hermione huffed. "I know. It seems impossible, but his soul was trapped in that painting, and I fell in love with him."

"Does he treat you well? Isn't he an all around git to you?"

"He has his moments, but he's actually quite considerate to me."

"Hermione, will he make you happy?"

Hermione looked at him seriously. "He does make me happy. That's why I'm telling you about us. I think we might have something long lasting between us."

Harry started down the stairs again, his arm firmly anchored in Hermione's. He was quiet for a while, and Hermione let him ponder to himself. Finally he looked straight ahead and sighed.

"If he makes you happy, who am I to say it's wrong? I've underestimated him all my life. When I finally learned the truth about him, it was too late. This is a chance for me to see what Snape is really like. Just... don't let him hurt you, Hermione. You deserve the best in a relationship."

Hermione smiled as she clasped his hand in hers. "I'll be fine. I'm a big girl. He does make me happy, and I hope that continues for a very long time."

When Hermione came back into her office, she found Severus pacing back and forth. He looked at her with a look of dread when she came through her door.

"Well?" he asked.

Hermione gave him a curious look. "Well, what?"

"You told Potter about us, correct?"

"Oh, yes I did."

"I understand if you choose him over me."

"I beg your pardon?" Hermione asked in puzzlement.

"He certainly wouldn't approve of our relationship, Hermione. I know you see him as a brother. I will not be a cause for you parting ways with him."

Hermione came up to him and pulled her to him, embracing him fiercely.

"If he had been difficult, I would have told him to stop whinging and grow up. In any case, he's happy for me."

Severus pulled back. "He is?"

Hermione nodded.

"I thought for sure..."

She smiled and pulled him into a kiss. "He's not the impulsive boy you remember. He just wants me to be happy, and I assured him that I am."

Severus pulled her to him again. "I was worried."

Hermione sagged within his embrace. "You don't trust me, do you?"

Severus placed a kiss atop her head. "It's not that. I'm just used to things never going as I want them."

She met his gaze. "That was in another lifetime. I have no intention of leaving you. If my friends don't accept us, they'll have to deal with that themselves. I want this to work just as much as you do."

He smiled and pulled her into a quick kiss. "Thank you, Hermione. Once again, I have underestimated you. Forgive me."

Running her fingers through his hair, she nodded to him. "It's all right. We are still learning about one another. I suppose if I had lived your life, I would expect every good thing to slip from my fingers as well."

"Speaking of good things, I found it."

Hermione's eyes lit up. "You found a flat?"

"Not just a flat. It's a small store with an apartment above it. It's perfect for my needs. Do you have time to see it with me?"

Hermione glanced at the clock above Dexter Fortescue's portrait. "I have about an hour before I need to do anything. We can Apparate over now if you'd like."

"Excellent." Severus took her by the hand and led her out of the office enthusiastically. Hermione couldn't help but smile at him. To anyone else he'd just seem to be in a hurry, but she could tell that he was excited about his find and eager to share it with her. She delighted in each new discovery about the usually stoic man she was in love with. Being able to see what so many others just didn't understand made her feel so much closer to him.

They appeared in front of the shop, and Hermione gasped inwardly. "You do realize what shop this used to be, don't you, Severus?"

He shrugged. "Why do I care if hordes of lusty children used to sip tea and make eyes at one another in this place? It suits me perfectly. Come."

He dragged her through the door in his eagerness. She hid her smile and appeared to be all business as she walked around the room, surveying its interior.

"I do see what you mean by it suiting you. There's plenty of room to show your products in an open atmosphere."

"And we can have a testing counter over there," he said while pointing to the far wall. "Some shelving behind it with the tester products displayed will work perfectly."

"How do we get to the apartment?" Hermione asked.

"Through this back door." He led her through the door, which opened to a storeroom with a staircase on the left. They climbed the stairs and entered the lone door that was at the top landing. Hermione noticed the hard wood floors immediately. She wandered from room to room.

"It's bigger than I imagined," she remarked. Going toward the far door, she noted a room with no windows. "I wonder why this has no windows. Do you suppose Madam Puddifoot brewed herself? Perhaps she added something *special* to every cup of tea she served?"

Severus came up behind her. "I wondered much the same when I saw this room. I guess she's taken her secrets to her grave, but the room is perfect."

"Wooden floors, no windows... it certainly will make a perfect Potions lab." She turned to him and grinned. "I definitely think it's perfect, Severus."

"The best part is the building is within my budget," he said seriously.

"Did you tell the owners that you would buy it?"

"I wanted your opinion first," he said, looking a bit disgruntled. "Should I have done otherwise?"

Hermione threw herself into his arms and kissed him. "No, of course not! I just thought that you might have been excited and taken the place already."

"This is a joint venture. I would not make a large decision like this without your approval."

"You should definitely buy it. I want to put down half on the purchase."

Severus scowled at her. "Hermione, this is my venture. I do not..."

"You said we were to be partners. I will put in my share."

"I am not asking you to be a partner only to use your money."

She frowned at him. "I assumed you were asking me to be a partner because you enjoy my company and think that I would be an asset to your business."

"That is so."

"So, as your partner, I will contribute half toward the purchase of the building."

"The building includes a flat. You do not need to invest in half of my living quarters."

"All right, then. I will just pay for half of the store. Agreed?"

He gave her a curt nod. "I appreciate that, Hermione."

She pulled away from him. "Come on, let's go make an offer to the owners."

Severus pulled her to him again and kissed her. She felt weak at his kiss and fell into him.

"You really have to stop doing that," she said breathlessly once they'd pulled apart. "I can never remember what we are about to do when you kiss me like that."

"We're buying a business..." he offered with a smirk.

"Ah, yes... Well, we should be off then."

Severus grasped Hermione by the hand, and they were soon headed down the stairs and out the door. They moved to a shop two doors down that advertised Wizarding vacations and real estate. Severus held the door open for her to enter as a man looked up from a desk filled with travel brochures.

"Ah, Mr. Snape, what did you decide?" the man asked.

"Mr. Montgomery, this is Hermione Granger, Headmistress of Hogwarts and my business partner. We would like to negotiate a price on the building I looked at this

morning."

Forty minutes later, Severus and Hermione emerged from the office. Hermione's eyes gleamed at Severus as they prepared to Apparate back to Hogwarts.

"What?" he asked sharply.

"How did you get him to settle for half of what he was asking?"

"Simple Slytherin cunning, my dear," he replied as he spun away. Hermione smiled and shook her head before following suit.

Chapter 15

Chapter 16 of 18

Life moves along, but it's not always smooth.

Chapter 15

Six months later:

Severus placed his newest product onto the shelf carefully. Hermione had taught him how to display an item to its best advantage, so he now arranged the product attractively as he mulled over the past several months.

It had taken two months to get everything started, but business had been steady from the opening of the shop. The store now brought in a modest profit, and both he and Hermione hoped business would increase exponentially as word of his products got out.

He stared at the tall thin bottles he was shelving, all with a slight curve to the right. The delicate decanter had been chosen by Hermione. Gazing down at the label, he smirked to himself. It had taken them quite a long time to settle upon this logo. Severus had insisted they use his original name of *Dead Man's Secret*, despite Hermione's protests. She had balked at it and at the picture he'd drawn up of a skeleton in a top hat, bent over a cauldron, brewing.

"Severus, this logo is hideous."

Severus walked over and looked at it. "I like it. It suits me."

Hermione shook her head. "It's ghastly."

"Would you prefer I use a giant bat instead of a skeleton?"

Hermione giggled. "Of course not. It's just that..." She looked up at him. "No woman in her right mind would purchase anything with such a terrorizing logo on it."

Severus studied the logo for a few minutes. "Perhaps if we put a wide grin on the skeleton?"

Hermione batted him with the drawing. "No skeletons!" she demanded sharply, softening her sharpness with a quick kiss on Severus' lips. "You want this to succeed, right?"

Severus nodded.

"Then trust me on this."

They'd eventually compromised and created the logo before him now. A handsome, wispy ghost now stirred the cauldron. His black hair...not unlike Severus'...was sleeked back, and his dark eyes studied the cauldron as he stirred it. The logo was enchanted so that the ghost looked up every now and then and winked at the customer. Severus had to admit that Hermione had done brilliantly. It never ceased to amaze him when a woman would squeal in delight as the handsome ghost winked at her. The products flew off the shelves. His male customers didn't seem to mind it either. Evidently, they felt they would become as handsome as the ghost in the logo if they used Severus' products.

He hoped that this new item would be just as popular. It was a 'do-it-all' for hair. Given Hermione's difficult mane and his lackluster locks, they'd both agreed that such a product was timely and definitely necessary. He placed the last bottle on the shelf when he heard another squeal of delight coming from a customer.

Straightening, he went over to find Madam Sondra Barton squealing again. She was a regular customer and could never get enough of the ghost winking at her. Severus had learned in the last few months that certain customers required certain handling. He sighed as he approached her because unfortunately, for this woman to remain his customer, he had to be extra nice and... somewhat flirty. The task always made him cringe, but she only came in once a month. He found it well worth his while to play nice because she always left with one of everything in the store.

"Ah, Madam Barton, a pleasure to see you again," he rumbled in his dark bass voice.

The woman turned to him, and her face lit up with a smile.

"Master Severus! Oh! I can't tell you how much I adore this picture on your products!" she cried.

"My lady, have you seen our latest item?" He eyed her hair. "Of course, with such beautiful hair as yours, you may find you are not in need of it." He cringed inwardly at his sugary tone. Thank heavens this only happened once a month.

He led her to the shelf with his new hair product on it. The woman took a bottle into her hand.

"Oh, it's lovely! What does it do?"

"It's a hair tonic, but not just any hair tonic. It's intelligent. It can sense any need your hair may have, and it fixes it. I'm wearing some myself." He motioned to his head.

"My, Master Snape, your hair does look most luxurious today." The woman reached out and ran her fingers through his hair. He closed his eyes in disgust, but she continued with her onslaught.

"It feels lovely. It makes me want to run my hands through your hair all day." She ran her hand through it again, closing her own eyes in satisfaction. Severus controlled the urge to pull away and hex the daylight out of her. *Never hex the customers. Never hex the customers!* He repeated the mantra over and over in his head until the desire to grab his wand subsided.

"Well," she sighed finally. "If it works so well on your hair, I'll have to try it for my own. And I'll take the usual assortment, too."

He gave her a slight bow as he gathered her purchases into his arms and took them to the register.

"You know, Severus... You don't mind if I call you Severus, do you? We really should get together sometime. Maybe have some dinner?"

Severus froze. This was the first time she'd gone so far as to ask him out. He cleared his throat nervously.

"Madam... I am currently involved with someone."

Sondra Barton straightened up and pulled on the edge of her suit coat. "Well, I wasn't proposing marriage! It was just dinner."

He cleared his throat again. "I understand that, Madam, but I must decline."

The woman gave him a crusty look. Severus decided he'd had enough of playing nice with her.

"Indeed, Madam Barton, even if I wasn't involved, I would decline. I am not the rogue you believe me to be. Are you not married yourself? I would imagine that your husband might find it untoward if we were to engage in such activities."

Madam Barton lifted her nose in the air and walked out, leaving her unpaid purchases on the counter. Severus scowled to himself as he picked up the large number of bottles and began to put them back onto their appointed shelves.

Hermione bustled in at that moment, carrying a box. She went directly into the back room. Severus put down the items he was shelving and followed her in. By the time he'd gotten to the doorway, she was already on her way out. She gave him a peck on the cheek as she whizzed by.

"I'm sorry I can't stay," she called over her shoulder. "I've got an important meeting with the Board of Governors in ten minutes."

With that declaration, she spun around and disappeared. Severus frowned after her. Their time together had been waning in the last weeks. Her position as Headmistress had taken up the majority of her time, and Severus was feeling a bit neglected. He tried to shrug it off...after all, she had a job to do...but he couldn't help feeling slighted as she went about her business, only taking time out to peck him on the cheek or give him a compulsory hug now and again. It was beginning to bother him, and he wondered if perhaps she'd grown tired of him.

Later that day, Severus looked out the window and found Hermione standing in front of the shop talking animatedly with Ronald Weasley. She had a huge smile on her face...the one she usually saved for him. Severus felt anger and jealousy well up within him. Suddenly, Hermione threw her arms around Weasley and hugged him furiously. Pulling away, she said something else, then kissed him on the cheek, much like she'd done to Severus earlier.

So, that's how it is, then... he thought as his jealousy took over his senses. *Her heart has returned to that buffoon.*

Hermione burst into the shop only a few seconds later. Severus scowled at her.

"I have no need of your services today, Professor Granger," he said sharply.

Hermione frowned immediately. "Severus? What's wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong; I just do not need your help today."

"But I..."

"Go!" he demanded, glowering at her.

She seemed upset. *The treacherous wench also seemed to care for me, too.*

"I just..." she tried again.

"Get... Out."

Hermione looked hurt, but spun around and quickly departed. He watched her go, hoping that his harshness would make him feel better about the situation. It only made him feel worse. His heart sank at what he'd done.

What is wrong with me? I know she's friends with Weasley; it was probably only a friendly sign of affection. Why am I so upset?

Stalking up to the door, he locked it and flipped the sign to closed. His customers would have to wait until tomorrow to get their coveted potions. He was in no mood to deal with them.

Turning, he stalked into the back of the shop and up to his room where he slammed the door behind him, stalked to his bedroom, and flopped onto the bed. Staring at the ceiling with his arms behind his head, he grumbled to himself for some time, finally getting around to thinking about what Hermione Granger truly meant to him.

I am in love with her... I have known that for months now. Love... Who would have thought I'd have found it again? Who would have thought I'd have once again let it slip through my fingers?

...

I should have known it was too good to be true...She is too good to be true. Nothing good ever stays with me for long.

...

A new chance at life... bah... This is the same life, only more miserable because now I have lost what I treasure the most.

He sat up then, with a look of determination on his face.

"You are a Slytherin, surely you will not let her go without a fight?" he said aloud.

He got out of the bed and went over to his closet to grab his cloak. As he put it around his shoulders, he heard an owl tapping on his window. Looking out, he saw it was

Hermione's owl. He rushed to the window, took the missive from the bird, and threw it an owl treat. Looking down at the envelope his Slytherin cunning left him and a deep-seated fear replaced it. There was something oddly shaped in the envelope. It wasn't a note, but something small and bulky.

He opened the envelope tentatively and peered within. Her locket was nestled there...the locket he'd given her as a sign of his affection. His heart sank as he gazed upon it. The locket was broken, the front part with her picture was missing, leaving only the part with him secretly smiling at her lying within the envelope. It was a bit battered because she'd evidently ripped the front from it. His heart sank. This message was one he couldn't ignore. He'd upset her, and she wanted nothing more to do with him. Once again he'd driven the woman he loved far from him, and, once again, he knew he would remain unforgiven.

Grief stricken, he reached into the envelope, gathering the necklace in his hand...and felt the strong pull of a Portkey transporting him out of his room.

A/N: Thanks again to beta slytherinlaurel for her beta work. Thank you, reader, for your reviews and love for this story.

Chapter 16

Chapter 17 of 18

Just where did Severus get pulled to?

Chapter 16

When Severus rematerialized, his head snapped up to see Hermione in front of him. She grabbed him and pushed him into a chair, which was strategically placed behind him. Straddling him, she looked down her nose at him.

"What is the meaning of this?" Severus snapped. His grief from before was forgotten in the shock of being transported to Hogwarts and manhandled by the woman he loved.

"I've placed a binding spell on the body of the chair so you can't escape me. You will listen to me, Severus Snape, you incorrigible man, and don't make me cast Langlock to keep you quiet either."

Severus stared at her with his mouth slightly agape. She'd never spoken to or threatened him in such a way. He was sure the worst was yet to come... but didn't he deserve that?

His face softened as he looked at her. He would surely miss this beautiful witch who was straddling him. "Hermione..." he said finally.

"No! You will listen to me Severus Snape!"

With that she leaned in and hugged him furiously. "I'm sorry!" she exclaimed.

Severus eyes widened at her apology. "Sorry for what?" he asked incredulously.

"I have neglected you horribly, and I'm sorry." She pulled back, and he saw tears forming in her eyes. "When you yelled at me before, I was furious, but when I thought about why you yelled, it all became clear. I've been so busy that you must have felt neglected, then when you saw me being so friendly to Ron... Oh, Severus, don't you know how I feel about you? Ron and I are close friends; I've told you that. That was all it was outside the shop, a friendly peck on the cheek."

Severus opened his mouth to say something, but found her lips on his, kissing him. Hope and elation filled him at the possibility that their relationship wasn't over.

Hermione pulled back. "I'm sorry. Everything has been so crazy here with the end of the year approaching that I haven't had a moment to visit for any decent length of time. That's why I was stopping by, to tell you that my entire night was free. I wanted us to have some quality time."

"What was that with Weasley?" he asked, unwilling to let the scene go without a decent explanation.

"You know how Ron has been about us. Well, he stopped by today to chat and when he found I was coming to see you, he asked to walk me to Hogsmeade. I was a bit wary, wondering if he was going to berate me about you again, but he didn't. He said he could see that I was happy, and that's all he'd ever wanted for me. He's finally come around about us, Severus. Can you believe it?"

Severus' hands found themselves entwined in her hair as he gently pulled her toward him. He rested her forehead upon his and looked into her eyes.

"I'm sorry I yelled like I did. I... you know I..."

"Shh... I know. I'm sorry, too."

He closed the distance to her mouth and kissed her. Her hands wrapped around him as she pulled him tightly to her. He delighted in her closeness and the feel of her lips upon his. No matter how many times they expressed their love in this way, he still was enchanted by her touch and her kiss. He was lost in her from the moment she'd pulled him close.

She pulled back for an instant and looked deeply into his eyes. "I love you, you know. I always have."

He groaned within himself and pulled her to him once again. His lips worshiped hers, showing her just how much he loved her as well. He put all his emotions into the kiss, yet it wasn't enough.

"I love you, too," he whispered in her ear. "I have since the paintings. My love for you is only stronger now that we have been together."

"Oh, Severus!" she cried before hugging him furiously.

"Weasley is all right with us then?" he said quietly after a moment of enjoying her arms around him.

She pulled back again. "He was, once I told him..."

"Told him what?"

"I told him what we mean to each other."

His arched eyebrow made her suddenly redden and look away.

"I mean... I told him what you mean to me, and what I hope I mean to you."

"What do I mean to you, Hermione?"

Her eyes met his once again. "You're everything to me. I couldn't live without you. It... it was actually hard to describe to him exactly how I feel. Words really can't describe how much I love you."

His eyes glistened with adoration for her as he sat speechless at the depth of her devotion to him.

"What about you?" she asked nervously.

He stroked her cheek softly and reverently. "I came back to life for you," he whispered. "You are my reason for living. I..." His gaze was filled with love as he continued. "After I threw you out, I knew I had blown it. Then when I saw that locket... I thought we were over, and my heart was torn in two."

"The locket can be fixed," she interjected. Severus gave her a quick nod.

"I know that your job is hard, having done it myself, but I am a jealous man. I want you all to myself." He struggled to move within the chair. "Hermione, please release this binding spell."

She quickly did so, allowing him his freedom.

Severus lifted Hermione reverently off his lap and stood her in front of him. He moved off the chair and got onto one knee. Grasping her hand in his, he kissed her palm, then the back of her hand before looking up into her eyes.

"I want you to come home to me every night, my love. I want you to be with me whenever you don't have to be at the school. I want to show you exactly how much I love you each and every minute of the day while we are together. You once spoke of never finding the *right* man to spend your life with. I hope I can be that right man for you. Will you marry me?"

The tears in Hermione's eyes brimmed over and ran down her cheeks. She smiled at him and nodded before kneeling alongside him and throwing her arms around him again.

"You are definitely the right man, Severus, and I would have no other," she cried before kissing him fervently.

His mind filled with wonder as he grasped the witch in his arms. He tried to speak, but was too choked up to say anything. She knew what he was like, yet wanted him nonetheless. Lifting himself up, he guided them both to a standing position.

"You really want to marry me?" Severus asked in astonishment.

Hermione nodded vigorously.

"Even though...as you like to remind me so often...I am incorrigible?"

Hermione smiled, and Severus' heart exploded with joy. "Especially because you're incorrigible. I would have you no other way."

Hermione awoke to bright sunlight. She blinked a few times, then turned away from the window. The view on this side of the bed was much better anyway. Her husband of two months lay peacefully sleeping beside her. She had an urge to reach out to him and stroke his face, but she didn't want to wake him.

She had to admit that she'd never been happier. It seemed that Severus had never been happier either. She had marveled at just how much the man could smile; all his smiles being for her benefit alone. Of course they'd had their disagreements, the neighbors could attest to that, but all in all, they were happy.

Unable to contain herself any longer, she reached out and caressed his cheek, pushing away a lock of hair that had fallen across his face. His eyes opened slowly as she did so.

"Ah, I see you're finally up," he remarked.

She shook her head. "Here I thought I had awakened before you."

"I was just awaiting you. I thought we could go for a walk before I have to open the shop."

"A walk, huh? Well, that does sound nice, but I was thinking we could do something a bit more... involved." Her eyes sparkled mischievously.

Severus pushed up on his elbow and arched an eyebrow at her. "What exactly did you have in mind?"

"Well..." she murmured as she drew a finger across his bare chest. "You did remark yesterday about wishing you could just forget about everything and spend the day in bed with me."

Severus shuddered slightly, but looked at her gravely. "It's Saturday. We'll lose quite a bit of business if we don't open today."

She smiled coyly at him as her hand moved farther down his body. "That's true, but think of the business we could take care of in here if we just forgot about the world for... just... one... day." Her last three words were emphasized with kisses to Severus' torso.

Severus' eyes filled with passion. "Just what did you have in mind, witch?" he asked.

Her hand moved even lower, causing Severus to let out a groan. He pulled her face up and kissed her passionately. "Now, that's an offer I simply can't refuse."

He pushed her back down into her pillow and continued the kiss while caressing her body. Hermione fell into his deep kisses, once again unable to think now that he'd taken possession of her mouth. Pulling away for a split second, she whispered into Severus' ear. "I knew you'd see things my way."

A feral growl was her only answer, that and his wanton ravishing of her body for the rest of that day.

A/N: Many thanks to slytherinlaurel for her beta work. Only an epilogue left! Thanks, everyone, for your kind reviews along the way.

Chapter 18: Epilogue

Chapter 18 of 18

The end of our little tale.

Epilogue:

Severus and Hermione Snape lived a long, happy life together. They had one child, Annelise, who was spoiled profusely by the both of them. Annelise grew up to be a Potions mistress herself and was named Headmistress of Hogwarts like her parents before her.

Annelise stepped into her office and made her way to her desk. Her eyes were riveted to the large portrait that was judiciously placed behind it. She smiled as she walked up to the painting as the inhabitants both eyed her.

"Mum, Daddy... I hope you're happy with your portrait."

Severus gazed about him for a few seconds, but his eyes eventually were fixed on Hermione, who was at his side, right where she belonged. She had been by his side for over one hundred years. She hadn't left his side when he'd fallen ill, and she had closely followed him in death, unwilling to spend many days without him.

His eyes took in her youthful appearance.

"You've chosen well, Annelise. Your mother looks divine."

Hermione gazed up at Severus. "As does your father." She smiled at him, and he felt his paint-brushed heart beat all the faster.

He knew this time that there was no magical spell trapping his soul. His soul had gone on to the beyond, and he was sure it had embraced Hermione's soul at her arrival. Nonetheless, he couldn't help but feel a bit of anticipation as he thought of the years that lay before them as portraits. Not only would his soul be with his love for eternity, so would he as a portrait.

Annelise smiled at them. "I'm glad you're both happy. It's... it's wonderful to see both of you again." She sniffed and wiped a tear from her eye.

Severus arched an eyebrow at her. "You do realize you didn't have to become Headmistress to see us."

Annelise laughed heartily. "Oh, Daddy, you always make me laugh. I'm glad that the artist captured that aspect of your personality." She clasped her hands together.

"Well, you both know the drill," Annelise said casually. "Feel free to roam about as you'd like."

Severus got a glint in his eye. "Is that painting with the pond and the willow tree still across from the entry to your office?" he asked.

Annelise nodded.

"Very well, we will see you later, young lady. Your mother and I are going on a picnic."

With that, he took Hermione's hand and brought it to his lips. "Shall we, my dear?"

Hermione smiled and kissed him on his forehead. "Lead the way, my love."

With anticipation, he pulled her along and out of the frame, leaving their daughter smiling knowingly behind them.

The End

A/N: Thank you all so much for following along with this story. I'm glad you all enjoyed it as much as you did. It wouldn't have been half as good without the help of slytherinlaurel and morethansirius who helped not only get my t's crossed and my commas placed, but suggested things to make the plot more cohesive. Until next time!