

Shining Through

by PlaidPooka

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Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: This rather long one-shot is in answer to Potter Place's Makeover/Sexgod!Snape challenge. The challenge rules can be found over on Potter Place, which is Sun's Yahoo Group, so if you haven't been over there yet, now's a good time to go. The addy is: http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Potter_Place/

Vaughn was sweet enough to beta this for me, and it was quite a job. I think this is about 3 times my usual chapter length and I'm convinced it had 10 times my usual errors, lol! Thanks, Vaughn! You rock!

Disclaimer: They are not mine; I only take them out to play.

It was horrible. It was ghastly. It was inhumane.

Sitting in a slightly shabby chair before the fire in his private quarters, Severus sat with his head in his hands, rocking slightly, as he contemplated the utter horror that he had just witnessed. It hardly seemed fair. For the first time ever, he had finally started to be somewhat comfortable with his life. Oh, he still had baggage from his old life; there was no doubt about that. Two wars in which he was a spy all topped off with the trial for the murder of his closest friend will leave a person with a few issues to settle. Until today, Severus had thought he was doing rather well.

If anyone had suggested six months ago that he would ever be back at Hogwarts teaching, he'd have laughed in their face. Either that, or burst into tears. No, he would never have allowed himself such a human reaction, at least, not back then. However, he would have thought the idea laughable in the extreme. No school would re-hire a teacher who had killed off his Headmaster. It simply wasn't done. One month-long trial later, and here he was, back at Hogwarts. Though his name had been cleared, the Ministry had not been pleased. They had released Snape under the condition that he return to Hogwarts, where other wizards and witches could keep an eye on him. Severus rather imagined that they meant this as some sort of punishment. Instead, it was a much desired outcome. During his chaotic life, Hogwarts had long been the one stable influence, as well as the only place Severus had ever truly called home. Happy to comply with the Ministry's wishes, Severus had returned to Hogwarts and was once again the terror of the first years. For the first time in his life, Severus had felt content. Well, he'd felt content until the tragedy that had accosted him one bright, spring afternoon--an afternoon where he had accidentally looked into a mirror for the first time in twenty years.

Severus had been a singularly unattractive teen. Spotty, lanky, uncoordinated, he'd been teased unmercifully by the other students. During his seventh year, that had begun to change. The spots had cleared, his shoulders had begun to fill out, and his confident...if not graceful...manner of movement had banished the fumbling of his youth. He'd not been handsome by any means, but he'd become passable and that had been enough of a transformation to suit Severus just fine. Then he had joined the Death Eaters, and Severus had stopped looking in mirrors altogether.

It was an unbelievably easy thing for a wizard to do. When there were charms for shaving, brushing one's teeth, and hair combing, a wizard had little actual need for

mirrors. The psychologists who worked at St. Mungo's would probably have a field day with the reasons that Severus stopped looking in mirrors, but Severus himself had never given the matter much thought. The crux of the matter was simple: Severus had made some choices in his youth that he couldn't quite live with. Having lost the nerve to look himself in the eye, he had simply stopped looking. Once he had acquired the habit, he thought no more about it.

Until today. Today, Severus Snape, Potions master of Hogwarts, had passed a mirror which hung in the corridor outside the Great Hall and had casually glanced at it. The shock of the simple action had caused him to forget his Saturday afternoon's employment of going into the forest to look for some wormwood and, instead, sent him scurrying back down to the dungeons. There, in the safety of his rooms, Severus had conjured a mirror and taken a good, long look.

Standing on slightly shaking legs, Severus went again to the mirror and stared. It was little wonder the students had such cruel names for him. He was horrible. He was ghastly. The "passable" promise of his seventh year had fled, and Severus was left with a visage that he was certain that not even his mother...gods rest her soul...could look at without flinching. The hair combing charm he had made use of had obviously never been intended for long term; it had left his hair lifeless and somewhat greasy. There was also a great deal more grey in his hair than any wizard of his age should be sporting. The tooth cleansing charm had indeed cleaned his teeth, but they were a dingy yellow color and far more crooked than Severus remembered. His nose, always large, was crooked and hooked from too many Nasum Infractus hexes. His skin was pale and had an unhealthy sallowness to it. Though Severus had been gaining a bit of weight since the end of the war, he was still painfully thin, and that too was reflected in his face. His cheeks were hollow; his forehead bony. Altogether, he was a travesty of a wizard.

The study didn't stop with his features. Severus also took in the sight of his robes. Careful perusal showed that they had seen better days, as had his boots. His hands were also studied. They were chapped and the nails were bitten to the quick. Red and brown stains were apparent on his fingers from the marking he had done that morning and the potion he had been working on.

Returning to his shabby armchair, Severus stared into the fire, his expression one of deep thought. It rather frightened him that he had gone so many years of his life seemingly blind to simple matters of personal care. He had money, not a lot, but enough to be comfortable. There was simply no reason for him to be going about in neglected robes like some tatty werewolf. How had he let such matters go for so long? Shaking his head at his predicament, Severus decided that it was of no matter. For whatever reason he had been so negligent, he was aware of the problem now, and there was no reason that he couldn't set things to rights. The school term was almost over and he would have the whole summer's break to work on the problem in relative privacy. Starting with the easiest things to fix, Severus resolutely left his rooms and spent the afternoon in Hogsmeade rather than gathering wormwood. By the time he returned, he had new clothes from head to toe. They were still black and in the style he was used to wearing, but he no longer looked like he was wearing someone else's old castoffs.

At dinner that night, Minerva nodded at him approvingly. "You look quite nice, Severus," she said kindly. "It's about time that you spent some money on yourself."

Severus knew exactly how kind she was being, now that he knew what he looked like. But he only smiled at the older witch and said, "You're quite right, Minerva. It is time I did some things for myself."

Until the end of term, Severus did little else about his appearance. Leaving off the charms he had grown used to, Severus now brushed his teeth by hand and combed his own hair, all the while staring into the small mirror he had purchased to go over the sink in his lav. Appalled by how long he had neglected himself, Severus now forced himself to look into the mirrors he had hung around his rooms. By doing so, he broke the habit of years that had left him automatically shying away from any sight of himself, and he also began planning exactly what he wished to change. When the term ended, he was ready.

On his first day of freedom from students, Severus headed straight for the library. Though he had a rather massive private library, it was little surprise that he owned not one book which had anything to do with personal appearance. Entering the library, Severus was disappointed to find the new librarian, Hermione Granger, going through the stacks while she tidied and straightened the books left in disarray from the end of term exams. When Madam Pince had retired, Miss Granger had jumped at the chance to replace her. For the past year, she had been tending the library and making up the classes she had missed when she had left school at the end of her sixth year. Privately, Severus admired the fortitude it took the young witch to return to her studies when she could have ridden on the coattails of her friend, Potter's, celebrity. However, it would be a chilly day in hell before he actually told her so. While he knew that Miss Granger planned on staying through the break, he was disappointed indeed to see her hard at work, so soon after the students had fled for the summer. He'd hoped for some privacy.

Spotting him, Hermione gave Severus a friendly smile as she said, "Is there anything that I can help you with, Professor?"

Staring at her for a moment, Severus realized that only Minerva and Miss Granger ever looked straight at him and smiled like that. Though the other professors were friendly to him, most everyone seemed to avoid looking at him outright. It seemed heartening to him somehow, that two witches of his acquaintance were able to ignore his appearance and speak to him like a human being. Perhaps they only had particularly strong stomachs.

"No, thank you, Miss Granger," Severus said, carefully giving the young witch a small smile which did not show his crooked teeth. "I've a bit of private research to do and I can manage on my own. You need not interrupt your work."

"All right, then. Do let me know if I can be of assistance." With another smile, she returned to her work.

Relieved when Miss Granger took herself off to the Restricted Section, Severus left the potion journals he had been impatiently thumbing through and headed to the section of the stacks which held spells and charms for personal use. It was in this section that Severus the student had found his hair combing and teeth cleansing charms. A bit distressed by how large that section had grown, Severus spent a moment simply looking through the titles. *How to Land Your Wizard* by Anita Mann--no, not quite the thing. *1001 Charms for More Impressive Mammaries* by Ampliadora Mellon...definitely not! *Temporary Tattoos in Thirty-one Flavors* by Dolcetta Inchiostro...rubbish! Giving the whole section a quick search, Severus pulled out the most worn...and therefore most read...book in the section. It proved to be *Letting the Inner You Shine Through* by Gilderoy Lockhart. Snorting in disgust, Severus almost put the book back immediately, and then he hesitated in thought. Yes, it was true that the man was an incompetent boob about most things, but if anyone would know how to make the most of one's appearance, it would be that overdressed popinjay. With a sigh of resignation, Severus began to walk towards Miss Granger's desk to sign the book out. What was he thinking! The last thing he wanted was the complete and utter embarrassment of having Miss Granger know that he checked out a book such as this. With sudden smirk, Severus shrunk the book and slipped it into a pocket of his new robes. What the little witch didn't know wouldn't hurt her...or embarrass him.

Once he was safely alone in his rooms, Severus took the tiny book out of his pocket and restored it. A glance at the table of contents was enough to show Severus that this was the sort of book he was looking for. It had everything from hair dying charms to wizarding fashion. Remembering Gilderoy's idea of what constituted fashion, Severus decided to skip that section altogether. He was looking to improve his appearance, not trying to look like some model for Madam Malkin's robe shop.

Not wanting the changes to be too abrupt, Severus looked through the section on teeth. The way his teeth looked bothered him almost as much as his broken nose, so he thought that he would start with that. An hour later, Severus looked into a mirror with a pleased smile. The charm that Lockhart had recommended for teeth straightening had been very weak...Severus had to cast it four times before he was satisfied. His teeth weren't perfect--nor did Severus especially want anything akin to Gilderoy's unnatural mandibles--but they were much less crooked than they had been. The top set looked quite nice, and the bottoms only overlapped slightly. Once he got them whitened a bit, he would no longer be embarrassed to return Minerva and Miss Granger's friendly smiles. With the confidence of having one of his experiments come off well, Severus turned to the section on teeth whitening potions.

Two hours later, after carefully brewing the potion which the book had recommended, Severus stared in the mirror in abject horror. Yes, Severus' teeth were white. They were far whiter than the purest snow. They were more blinding than the sun at high noon. Severus rather thought that he would no longer need a Lumos Charm to guide him through the darkened corridors at night; all he would have to do was open his mouth and he could see from the light of these unholy teeth! It took the rest of the day to get his teeth back to their normal color. The next day, after deciding that Lockhart wouldn't know a decent potion from hippogriff droppings, Severus studied the matter himself. An afternoon's brewing resulted in Severus making his own potion...one which promised more subtle and less blinding results. He was fairly confident that its daily use would cause the subtle changes that he was hoping for. A week long experiment proved that he was correct. His teeth were now both straight and considerably lightened, but not inhumanly so. When he smiled at Minerva at dinner one night, Minerva smiled back and her only comment was to tell him that he should smile more often. That suited Severus just fine. He didn't want anyone making jokes about his sudden interest in his appearance. Subtle changes seemed to be the key to accomplishing just that.

Made confident by his success with his teeth, Severus decided to tackle the next large problem...and large it was. Personally, Severus couldn't be bothered about the size of his nose. After all, he wasn't trying to get himself into *Witch Weekly*. However, many instances of it being broken and not properly set had left their mark. This was one problem that Severus could not deal with on his own, as he had little knowledge of the healing arts. Set against asking Poppy for assistance, Severus decided on the relative anonymity of going to St. Mungo's to get it fixed. Once he arrived at the hospital, he ignored the floors dedicated to magical ailments and headed to the floor which dealt with more mundane problems. The Healer who helped him chided Severus for not having the breaks dealt with properly in the first place. Biting his tongue, Severus did his best to be civil while the Healer fussed over him. In an hour, Severus was on his way, his nose still large but now no longer disfigured.

That night at dinner, Minerva again smiled at him and told him that he looked particularly well that evening.

"You know, Severus, I just can't quite put my finger on why, but you are looking quite nice this evening. Did you get a new haircut?" Minerva asked, looking at his hair with a somewhat puzzled expression.

"No, Minerva, I haven't," Severus answered with a smile, which showed off his improved teeth. "Although, now that you mentioned it, it's past time I got one. I usually have one of the house-elves take care of it."

"Oh, Professor, not really!" Hermione exclaimed from her place two seats to his left. "The house-elves are notoriously bad at hair cutting. I suppose that explains...well..." Here Hermione paused, blushing. "At any rate, if you want a decent haircut, you really ought to go into Hogsmeade. There's a wizard there that runs a shop right next to Dervish and Banges, and he's quite good."

"I'll take that under consideration," Severus said, and then he smiled at the young witch as he continued. "I thank you for the recommendation, Miss Granger."

He was rather surprised when Miss Granger blushed again and hastily returned her eyes to her plate. It seemed that his slow transformation was having some good results already.

The next week, Severus decided to tackle the problem of his hair. It was less greasy now that he had stopped using the hair combing charm, but it was still rather lifeless and far greyer than he cared for. He was still a young man, by wizarding standards; there was no reason for him to put up with grey hair. One of Gilderoy's charms was tried but soon abandoned. True, the charm had turned his hair black, but it was a dreadful, flat black which left his hair looking as unreal as his teeth looked after he had tried Lockhart's potion. Deciding that Lockhart's book was a complete loss, Severus threw it disdainfully to the floor and went to consult his potions journals.

The journals that Severus subscribed to all had sections that dealt with household and personal potions. It was a section that Severus had rarely wasted his time on in the past. Now he tore through his back issues with a vengeance. Though it took him hours, he eventually found exactly what he was looking for. It seemed that a daily dose of pantotheic acid would do for his hair what his own potion was doing for his teeth. It would gradually fade out the grey and keep it out. Severus also found several articles which discussed what herbs and minerals were beneficial to the skin and hair. The best part was that all of these things could be added to his teeth whitening potion with no harmful effects. By the end of that day, Severus had changed his teeth whitening potion into a morning cocktail that encompassed all the things he needed to take on a daily basis. It was easy. It was subtle. Severus liked easy and subtle.

Within a week, the grey in his hair was slowly starting to fade. One morning at breakfast, Minerva remarked that he was looking years younger and that the end of the war seemed to be agreeing with him. Severus readily agreed, which was honest enough, and that excuse let him continue to avoid talking about the changes he was making. He wasn't ashamed of wanting to look better exactly, but he certainly didn't want to discuss it at table. Or at all. With anyone.

With a little imagination and a little attention, Severus' hands were soon in better shape. An ordinary lotion had dispensed of the dry skin and chapped appearance. Better attention to his person in general saw to it that Severus never again went around with ink or potions ingredients on his fingers. For a while, he was stumped as to what to do about his fingernails. He tended to bite them when he was reading and scarcely realized that he was doing it unless he bit them so close that they bled. A moment of inspiration and he had the answer. Severus simply charmed his nails so that they were impervious. As they grew, he negated the charm long enough to clip and file them. The time came when he no longer put his fingers in his mouth, and Severus didn't need the charm any longer.

Eventually, Severus made his way to the shop in Hogsmeade and let another wizard cut his hair for the first time in twenty years. The man knew what he was about, and that night found Severus staring into his mirror, amazed by the difference a good haircut could make. It wasn't a miracle, this haircut. It didn't make him suddenly handsome. However, where once his lank hair had hung in unattractive strings, it now barely brushed his collar. The barber had cut it in such a way as to leave short under-layers, which had seemed strange to Severus at the time. Now he could see that it gave his hair a body that it hadn't had before. It framed his face now, and made his features look less cadaverous. All in all, Severus decided it was a most pleasing effect and decided to never ask the house-elves for their assistance in such matters again. That resolution was strengthened when Hermione Granger complimented his new haircut at dinner that evening. He was so pleased that, for the first time since Miss Granger had returned to the school, he invited her to use his given name. The charming smile and blush that accompanied her first use of his given name made Severus catch his breath. She really was an intriguing little thing...if she only weren't so young.

It is inevitable that with all of Severus' successes, he was bound to run into at least one disaster, and run into it he did. Having given up entirely on Gilderoy Lockhart's book, Severus had taken to reading his potions journals when looking for ideas. To be honest, he trusted potions far more than he trusted charms and such. If he had limited himself to potions of his own making, he might have avoided a very embarrassing situation. However, made over-confident by how well everything was going, when Severus saw the advert for a potion that would get rid of the sallowness in his skin and give him a light tan, he never hesitated. He immediately owed the mail order company and impatiently awaited the potion's arrival.

When Severus Snape began keeping to his rooms, no one was at first alarmed. It was normal for the Potions master to sequester himself for periods of time over the summer as he worked on new potions research. However, when Hermione realized that no one had so much as glimpsed the man in over a week, the kind young witch became worried. They had been getting along rather well since she had returned to Hogwarts, and Hermione had grown fond of the touchy wizard. True, he wasn't an easy man, but he was very intelligent and his dry, sarcastic wit had made a transformation in her mind from horrid to naughtily charming when it was no longer aimed at her. With this in mind, Hermione resolutely journeyed down to the dungeons. Determined not to leave until she at least laid eyes on the man, Hermione knocked firmly on the door that led to his rooms.

"Go away," was the only response to her knock.

"No," she said simply. "No one's seen you in over a week. We were getting worried. I don't care what you are working on; I'm not leaving until I've seen that you are all right."

Hermione was worried about him? Well, best not read too much into that; she was an uncommonly kind young woman. She was too kind, and far too curious by half. It would be best to get rid of her as soon as possible. "Miss Granger," he growled, "I assure you that I am perfectly fine. Now why don't you return to whatever it was that you were doing before you came flouncing down here?"

"I do not flounce!" Hermione began heatedly, before she returned to the matter at hand. As she continued, her voice softened and her concern was easy to hear. "Severus, it's clear that something is amiss; if all were well, you would have hardly hesitated to open the door and berate me face to face. Won't you please open the door? Whatever is the matter, I'm certain that we can get it sorted."

Surprising as it was, Severus hesitated. It was true that he needed assistance. He'd spent all week trying to counteract the effects of that blasted mail-order potion, and to no avail. Now that he thought on the matter, it seemed easier to confide in this kind young witch than it would ever be to let one of his contemporaries see him like this. After all, Hermione was nearly half his age. No matter how much she smiled at him, it was inconceivable that she would ever consider him anything but a friend and coworker. Deciding that he would be burning no bridges if he allowed Hermione to see him in such a state, Severus went to the door.

"All right, Hermione. You win. I'll open the bloody door, but do try not to laugh."

Stepping through the opened door, Hermione turned to face Severus and froze, and stared, and--despite her best intentions--she began to giggle. There stood the Potions master of Hogwarts, barefoot, in trousers and a white shirt that had the sleeves rolled up to the elbows. Every inch of Severus' skin that was visible was an outrageous,

virulent orange. Hermione heard Oompa-Loompas singing in her head as she tried valiantly to stop giggling and deal with the man before her, who appeared to be getting more and more agitated with each stray giggle. The Oompa-Loompas were not helping.

"I'm so sorry, Severus!" she managed at last. "It's just that I was expecting you to be hurt in some way, not dyed like an Easter egg! Tell me, are you orange...everywhere?" she teased.

"How charming," Severus said, his voice cold with anger. "This is exactly why I've kept to myself! The last thing I want is the other professors sniggering at me; bringing up this story year after year. They'll never let me forget it!"

"Severus," Hermione said softly, stepping forward to put a hand on one bright-orange forearm, "I can't help laughing, but it's not going to be like that. I know that you don't like to be teased. I'll help you get this sorted and the other teachers will be none the wiser."

Though he had flinched when Hermione touched him, Severus hadn't drawn away. True, there was still amusement lurking in Hermione's eyes, but there was honest concern there as well. Letting her soft voice calm his ruffled feathers, Severus did his best to let go of his sudden anger. "I could use some help," he finally admitted. "I've tried everything I can think of and I've made no progress."

"Did that idiot Lockhart's book have something to do with this? I told Minerva that we needed to get rid of such rubbish, but she insists that the book is harmless and too popular not to keep in the stacks."

Gaping a bit in surprise, Severus managed to stutter out a question. "How...how did you know...I didn't check it out--"

"Severus," Hermione began, smiling at his discomfort, "any book taken out of the library is automatically registered in the ledger. Not to worry," she soothed, "that ledger is for my eyes only; your secret is safe with me. I would like to say, if you will permit me, that it's good to see you taking better care of yourself."

Severus could not find one word to say about that and only nodded in response.

"Now then, was it Lockhart's book that did this? I swear, if I have to go to St. Mungo's myself and hex that idiot--"

"No," Severus interrupted with a rueful smile, "it wasn't his book. I found out rather quickly that his book was indeed rubbish, and I've been meaning to return it." With a sigh of resignation, Severus motioned Hermione to a chair and went to find the potions journal that contained the advert for the disastrous potion that he had tried. Putting the journal into Hermione's hands, he sat next to her and waited for her to call him several kinds of fool for trying such a product. The contempt came, but it was not aimed at him.

"Those imbeciles!" Hermione said, her eyes flashing with fire. "How dare they pawn such complete and utter crap off on unsuspecting people! We are going to deal with this and we are going to do it immediately."

Going to Severus' writing table, Hermione pulled a blank piece of parchment towards herself and then shocked Severus by pulling a bright-red Howler quill out of her bag. When Severus tried to ask her why she had such a thing, Hermione shushed him. For several minutes, Severus was highly entertained by watching Hermione furiously write. Then she sealed the parchment and painstakingly wrote the address from the advert on the front of it. As she tapped the letter with her wand, color spread from the point of contact until the whole missive was a bright, angry red.

"Have you an owl?" she asked.

Nodding, Severus called his owl, which some idiotic previous owner had named "Mouse." Mouse was a smallish, non-descript brown owl that preferred roosting in Severus' quarters to the school's Owlery. Severus rather suspected that the other owls bullied Mouse a bit, and let him live wherever he chose. Normally, owls didn't like carrying Howlers, as they were known to sometimes go off before they reached their intended target. Mouse stood patiently on the table while Hermione gave him the letter, bobbing his head and making the low throaty sound that passed for owlish amusement. Waiting for Severus' to open the door, Mouse then flew down the corridor and disappeared. Closing the door, Severus spared no time worrying about the letter being delivered. Mouse might have been small and rather scruffy, but he was very fast and quite dedicated to his work.

It seemed that there was now nothing to do but wait until the authors of the advert that Severus had answered grew brave enough to open Hermione's Howler. It was long past time for dinner, so Severus invited Hermione to stay and eat with him. The meal that the Hogwarts' house-elves provided was good, and the time spent in casual conversation was a welcome change from the solitary week he had spent. Soon, dinner was over, and both Hermione and Severus were startled by a tap at the door.

When Severus opened the door, Mouse flew in, looking smugly pleased with himself. He carried a small package that he dropped unceremoniously onto Hermione's lap before he flew off to his perch in Severus' sitting room. Severus suspected that his owl must have been most insistent to get such a quick reply. He hoped that Mouse had pecked the perpetrators of his recent discomfort severely.

Making quick work of the wrapping, Hermione found a small potion phial and a note. "This is the antidote," she said. "I knew they must have one or they'd be ears deep in lawsuits over that dreadful product."

"Do you think it's safe?" Severus asked, taking the small phial from her and studying its contents doubtfully.

"I imagine that it is. They wouldn't risk what would happen if they sent a truly harmful product...especially not after the threats I sent in that Howler. I was quite creative, if I may say so myself."

Severus was rather glad that he hadn't been on the other side of that Howler. Kind, Miss Granger may be, but she was also clever, devious, and very protective of others. With no more hesitation, Severus uncorked the phial and swallowed the contents. Within seconds, his skin had returned to its normal, if pale and sallow, coloring.

"There! That's much better!" Hermione exclaimed. "Honestly--I think that if you want to improve your skin coloring...natural and more gradual means might be best. Potions and charms which promise instant results are usually worth less than the parchment they are written on."

"My recent experiences lead me to agree with you. These so called 'instant fixes' tend to have wildly unnatural results. I'm not sure what to do about my coloring...perhaps I should just give up the idea altogether."

"I hardly think that is necessary," Hermione began with enthusiasm. "There is nothing wrong with you that a little sun wouldn't fix."

"Be that as it may," Severus said crossly, "what would you have me do? Go gallivanting around the Hogwarts grounds in a swimming costume? I think not."

Chuckling a bit at his reaction, Hermione then said, "There are other places for you to go gallivanting. Places where you won't risk your disdainful reputation. It's too late to go tonight, but if you will agree to suffer my companionship tomorrow, I'd be happy to show you a place I like to go when I'm looking for a bit of sun and relaxation."

"Your companionship is hardly something to be suffered," Severus replied with a crooked smile. "Indeed, if I thought so, I would never have let you in here tonight no matter how you blustered at my door. I shall be pleased to accompany you tomorrow wherever you wish."

Once again Severus was treated to the charming sight of a blushing Hermione. After making plans for meeting in the morning, Severus escorted Hermione to the door, and she took her leave. Remembering that blush as he readied himself for bed that night, Severus found himself considering that the idea of himself and Hermione being more than merely friends might not be that inconceivable after all. Minerva certainly never blushed like that when he talked to her. There must be some reason for it. Thanks to Hermione wanting to help him, he'd have an excellent opportunity to study the matter further.

A quick trip to Hogsmeade first thing the next morning and Severus was ready to meet Hermione. He stood just outside the gates of the school and waited for her. Dressed

casually, Severus had on light, summer-weight trousers and a short sleeved shirt. Underneath his trousers, Severus was wearing the reason for his early morning trip. Having not been swimming since he was a student, Severus hadn't owned a single pair of swimming trunks. A shop in Hogsmeade had rectified the lack, though he'd had to search through racks of the skimpy style that most wizards preferred to find something more suitable. The pair he had chosen were a dark blue and, while short, were not nearly as disgustingly revealing as the more popular styles he had shied away from. If he must be forced to go frolicking in the sun, he was determined to do so with as much dignity as he could manage.

When Severus saw Hermione approaching him, his breath caught for a moment. True, the young witch was no great beauty, but Severus liked looking at her, and that was all that mattered to him. Dressed as she was in a simple cotton sundress, Severus thought her quite pretty. Strappy sandals adorned her feet, and her hair was caught back in a tail low on her neck. Very pretty, actually, especially when her smile of greeting lit up her features.

"Ready for our outing?" she asked, still smiling up at him.

"As ready as I'll ever be," he said dryly, his own smile belying his tone of voice.

"Better grab hold, then," she said, spots of color appearing in her cheeks, "and I'll Apparate us."

When Severus put an arm around her waist and pulled her firmly against his side...a bit closer than was strictly necessary...Severus was pleased to see the young witch's blush deepen. Dropping her eyes from his face, she concentrated for a moment before beginning the turn. They turned together perfectly, like dance partners long used to being paired together, and with a loud pop, they disappeared.

There was no stumbling on their arrival like there would have been on a badly done Side-Along. Instead they simply finished their graceful turn in what appeared to be a dark, disused alley. Keeping Hermione close at his side for much longer than was required, Severus took his time in assessing his surroundings.

"Are you certain that this Apparation point is secure?" he asked.

"Yes, very," Hermione answered, drawing away from him slowly, almost hesitantly. Severus mentally sighed at the loss; it had felt sinfully good to have her warm, fragrant body pressed against him. "This is an official Apparation point," she continued. "The alley itself has a gloom charm on it, as well as several Notice-Me-Nots, so that the Muggles won't come into it by accident. Come," she said, taking his hand in hers to lead him, "let me show you."

The smile she turned on him was radiant with her excitement. Docilely following her as she tugged at his hand, Severus thought that he just might follow Hermione into hell itself if she continued holding his hand. When they exited the gloomy alley, Severus noticed that they were on a steep hillside. Houses painted in cheerful colors grew on the hillside terraces like barnacles. Steep little roads wound through the buildings and led down to a rocky shore. A bit of beach could be seen amongst the rocks, and Severus could see people there playing in the gentle waves and lounging on the strip of sand. As they stood there on the sidewalk, Hermione still holding his hand as she let him look his fill, two people walked by. They spoke in a language that was easy for Severus to identify, though he didn't speak it himself.

Turning to Hermione, he asked, "Italy?"

"Yes," she said, giving his hand a gentle squeeze. "This is Riomaggiore, part of Cinque Terra, the Five Lands. I came here for the first time with my parents, and we stayed in Monterosso. It's got a bigger beach, but I like Riomaggiore best. It's a longer hike down to the water, but the beach is less crowded and more secluded."

He'd heard of this place, Cinque Terra. Looking around, he noted that the descriptions he'd heard of it had been accurate, though they hadn't done the place justice. Five villages nestled in the hills on this northwestern part of the Italian shore. The villages were not connected by any roads; anyone who wished to travel between them had to either go by boat or use the many foot paths which connected them. The paths themselves sounded intriguing; he'd heard that they wound through terraced vineyards and olive groves as well as parts of the hills which had been left wild, full of cacti and other interesting plants. Perhaps later he might interest his young companion in a walk.

"I love this place," Hermione said with a happy sigh. "It's perfectly lovely, it hardly ever rains, and the food is absolutely divine. Fresh seafood as far as the eye can see!"

"I like seafood," Severus offered.

"Good. We'll stop in my favorite lunch spot later. But first, the beach!"

Slowly, they made their way down the steep little road until they neared the beach. For several blocks, Hermione continued to hold his hand. Eventually she seemed to realize that she was still holding it, and she let loose his hand while she blushed again. Severus enjoyed the blush, but couldn't help wishing that she had forgotten for a while longer. Suddenly, his hand--which was well used to being on its own--seemed oddly empty. When Hermione stumbled on a rough bit of pavement, Severus took her hand and tucked it into the crook of his arm. Not nearly so enjoyable as hand holding, but it was encouraged by the standards of normal etiquette and gave Hermione no excuse to take her hand away. Indeed, Hermione left her hand there as they continued down the street, all the while chatting happily about the village, the surrounding lands, and the many historic sites in the area.

When they reached the beach, Severus wasn't sure what was proper. He'd never visited a beach before. Hermione simplified his dilemma by taking a large towel from the bag on her shoulder, laying it out on the sand, and nonchalantly beginning to remove her shoes and sundress. The bathing costume that this revealed showed a disconcerting amount of skin. At least, Severus found it as disconcerting as he found it arousing. Turning from the nearly naked witch to hide his reaction, Severus removed his own outer wear and shoes. Rather worried that Hermione would find him lacking, Severus hesitated before turning to face the witch.

Hermione's reaction was all he could have hoped for it to be. It was clear that she was surprised, but she seemed pleasantly so. Indeed, throughout the morning, she seemed to have trouble keeping her eyes off of him, though she was discreet about it. Encouraged by the attention, Severus showed no such hesitation when he looked upon Hermione's form with clear interest.

They enjoyed their morning together. Playing in the waves gave them both an excuse to splash and to touch each other. When they rested, lying side by side on the large towel, their time was filled with pleasant conversation and comfortable silences. Lunchtime approached and Hermione noted that he'd had more than enough sun for one day, and suggested that they walk one of the paths after they stopped at a café.

The meal was everything that Hermione had promised. Fresh seafood, cooked only as the Italians could manage it, was consumed greedily between glasses of local wine. After the meal, they spent an interesting half hour on a path which connected Riomaggiore to its neighboring village, Manarola. Blushing prettily, Hermione remarked that the path was colorfully named Via dell'Amore, the "Route of Love". When Severus dryly commented that he thought the path aptly named, Hermione's blush deepened, and the normally verbose woman had little to say for herself for some time.

As evening came, they made their way back to the alley in order to Apparate home. Though he no longer needed a Side-Along Apparation, Severus wrapped both arms around Hermione and gazed down into her eyes. Even with the encouragement that the day had brought, Severus half expected the young witch to push him away. Instead, she gazed up at him with parted lips and wide, shining eyes. When Severus dipped his head to brush his lips against her own, Hermione wrapped her arms around his neck and sighed into his mouth. The kiss deepened of its own accord; soon they were both breathless with it, as they pressed against each other deep in that gloomy alley.

When their lips finally parted, Hermione said simply, "Take me home, Severus."

With a graceful turn, they disappeared.

When they appeared outside the gates of Hogwarts, they were still wound around each other. After one more breath-stealing kiss, Severus disengaged himself enough to walk. Holding tightly to Hermione's hand, he led her to the entrance to the castle. When they reached the stairs, Severus hesitated, a question in his eyes. Giving his hand a firm squeeze, Hermione turned towards the stairs that led down to the dungeons and pulled Severus along behind her. Smiling at her eagerness, Severus decided that if her mind was made up, he needn't hesitate again. Reaching his chambers, Severus wasted no time in pulling Hermione into his bedroom and then tightly into his arms.

So heady was his arousal that Severus felt drunk with it. He couldn't remember the last time he had a woman in his arms, and never did he have one which he respected and cared for as much as he did Hermione. Hermione seemed as impatient as he. While he was working on getting her out of the simple sundress as quickly as possible, he was shocked to find her hands confidently unbuttoning his shirt, and then his trousers. In no time at all they fell onto the bed in a tangle of limbs, with only their bathing costumes creating a barrier to perfect bliss. Hermione's skimpy swimming top was the first casualty, and she moaned in pleasure as his lips found an already crinkled nipple. His enthusiastic mouthing of that nipple was interrupted when Hermione cupped his cock through his swimming trunks and gave it a firm squeeze.

"Off," he muttered into her breast, "must get them off."

In a trice, he removed both his trunks and her bottoms, and then he was lying cradled between her thighs, gazing into her eyes as he plunged into her. Their coupling was fiery and fast, coming as it did after an entire day of what can only be described as extended foreplay. Finding a rhythm almost forgotten, Severus surged into her blessed heat again and again, his hands restlessly roaming every part of Hermione's body as his lips devoured her mouth, her neck, her ear. Hermione writhed beneath him, lifting her hips to meet his every thrust. Sweet, crooning sounds of pleasure fell from her lips and spurred his thrusts to even greater speed. Nearing the end of his control, Severus worked a hand between their bodies to stroke and press at the tiny, hidden nub of Hermione's pleasure. Soon she was crying out with her release; her body twitching around his pumping cock, grasping him, milking him as he succumbed to his own bliss.

When it was over, he held her tightly in his arms and she seemed content to remain so until the end of time. Hoping that this was so, Severus held her even more tightly, as if he feared that she might vanish.

"It's all right, Severus," she said with a throaty chuckle. "You can let me breathe. I promise that I have no desire to escape."

"Good," he said simply, "because I have no intention of letting you go."

When Hermione settled happily into his slightly loosened embrace, Severus sighed in pleasure. He'd never even dared to imagine that something as unexpected and wonderful as this might happen. When he had started taking better care of himself, he'd had no higher hopes than to be once again considered passable in the eyes of others; to have people stop turning away from him because of his appearance. He'd never dared dream that this journey would lead him to companionship and perhaps to love. With another sigh, Severus slipped to sleep, his Hermione still wrapped tightly in his arms.