

Power of the Mind

by gersknightlady

Now a professor at Hogwarts, Hermione Granger begins to experience fierce migraines and voices in her head. What is causing these headaches or who?

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 20

Now a professor at Hogwarts, Hermione Granger begins to experience fierce migraines and voices in her head. What is causing these headaches or who?

Hermione Granger, Professor of Potions at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, walked down the long, dark hall. She was making her rounds of the hallways, checking for students out of bed bent on general mischief or snogging. She loved the nights when she could just walk the halls in silence and not find anyone to deal with. It helped her concentrate on potion formulas she was developing in her mind. She had been the Potions professor for nearly four years. Once the war was over, she'd been pressed into duty. She wasn't qualified to teach, really, but she was one of the few survivors with the knowledge to take the post. Headmistress Minerva McGonagall had had difficulty filling the positions vacated by older staff who'd had enough of teaching or died.

They had temporarily held classes in the captured Malfoy Mansion until the school had been repaired. With the help of house-elf magic, the daunting task hadn't taken as long as expected. Hermione peered into several of the students' favorite nooks. Empty. She sighed and let her mind return to her calculations.

She'd been working on a cure for shingles. There were potions to make the skin lesions heal quickly and pain maskers. But the nerve damage could be felt for years afterwards in the most difficult of cases. There were poor Wizarding families who could not afford the pain potions. The few pain potions that worked could not be taken indefinitely. They could be addicting and cause many other problems.

She made her way back to the classroom and sat in the chair at the desk. She still found it impossible not to think about Severus Snape each time. The picture of him hunched over his desk working on stacks of parchment, quill in hand, was burned into her mind. He would often glance at her and her friends with a sneer. She shook away thoughts of him. It only made her feel guilty and sad. They'd done nothing to help him. She hadn't had her bag full of remedies when they'd encountered him. Harry's feeble attempt to hold back the bleeding had only given him time to share his memories with them. Those memories had changed their thinking about him. After Harry had destroyed the Elder Wand and they had stood looking over the destruction from the bridge, looking toward a future without Voldemort, Harry had cried out "Snape!" and turned and run. They had followed him back to the Shrieking Shack only to find it empty. The floors and windows were still stained red. They'd searched the area, finally theorizing that the vanishing Malfoys may have come to collect his body.

Later that night, huddled in blankets in a corner of the Great Hall, Harry had whispered to them all he'd seen in the Pensieve. Afterwards, they'd all pretended to sleep. But in reality, they'd been lost in their own thoughts, remembering how they had treated the cruel man over the years.

Hermione had some comfort because she'd always showed the man respect. Ron was vexed, finding it hard to fathom that what Harry said could be real. Harry had cried. He was furious with himself and was also finding it hard to reconcile the men Snape and Dumbledore had truly been. His feelings for them twisted together: more kindness for Snape and bafflement and anger toward Dumbledore. Why hadn't Dumbledore shared any of this with Professor McGonagall? If he didn't feel comfortable explaining all about Snape's true role, then he should have at least shared his plans to have Snape end his suffering and therefore his life to further his role in Voldemort's army.

Hermione growled aloud. It did no good to dwell on it. Instead of these thoughts and arguments fading with time, the whole thing just got more real and more frustrating lately. She wondered for the hundredth time whether she should ask Minerva to relocate her classroom. It might help to get away from all the negative memories.

She found herself rubbing her temples again. She had begun to have headaches quite often. She'd gone over and over the Potions room, looking for something that was leaking from the many potions and specimen jars that might be giving her headaches. But whatever was causing it was eluding her. She put her quill down and headed for her quarters. She knew she hadn't been getting enough rest lately. She found it hard to sleep when she was working on calculations. They seemed to pop into her mind just as she was going to sleep, and she found she couldn't sleep. Quite often she got back out of bed and worked till the early morning hours. Maybe it was finally catching up with her.

She changed her clothing and crawled into bed and took a dose of dreamless sleep.

The next night Hermione sat at her desk working through the parchments that her students had handed in that day. She laughed at some of the answers. Some of them really were clueless. No wonder Snape had been so grumpy. His life was already hell, and then he had to work with "dunderheads," as he had called his students. Hermione groaned. Why couldn't she get this man out of her mind? She realized she was rubbing her forehead again. *Not another headache.* Frustration pushed her to swear out loud, and she slammed her hand onto the desk, accidentally knocking her inkwell onto the parchments.

"Merlin!" She drew her wand and used a spell to siphon the ink off the papers, leaving the students' writing intact. Giving up for the night, she headed into her quarters. She went to the bathroom and opened the medicine cabinet, drawing out a vial of headache medication. Her hands were pressed against the wooden surface of the medicine cabinet.

Suddenly pain lanced through her head, and a shout of pain flew from her lips. "Oh Merlin!" She pressed her hands against her temples. Her vision faded. She fell to the bathroom floor, clutching her head. She managed to swallow the vial of potion and crawl to her bed. When she woke the next morning, she felt much better. She tried to remember how she'd gotten to bed and why she hadn't undressed, but she couldn't. She finally dismissed it and went about her day.

That evening during the dinner meal Hermione considered talking to Poppy about her headaches, but she decided to wait a bit longer. She vowed to herself that she would get more sleep. Then if they persisted, she would talk to the mediwitch.

She kidded herself that maybe she was allergic to grading papers. It always seemed to happen when she was bent over the students' parchments. Was there some sort of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes product that was causing her headaches? Try as she would, she could not detect anything.

She was in the middle of her stack of assignments when she heard it.

Help me! a voice whispered as pain lanced through her head.

Hermione whipped around, her wand in hand, but only emptiness and silence filled the room. "*Homenum revelio*," she whispered, trying to see through the blinding pain.

Help me! came the voice as the pain pushed her to her knees.

She heard the sound of her wand clatter and roll across the stone floor. "Ahhhh," she cried before her vision faded to black.

Hermione returned to consciousness. She groaned and pushed herself from the cold floor and slumped into her chair. Her head hurt so badly she thought she might vomit, so she lunged for the trash can near her desk. "What the hell happened?" she said to the emptiness of the dungeon classroom. "Oh God!" she cried as waves of nausea swept over her. "Gypsy!" she called.

A house-elf popped into view. "Missy Granger!" the little elf cried as she saw the condition of her favorite professor. The elf levitated her back into her chair.

"Get Madam Pomfrey," Hermione cried. A loud pop accompanied the elf's exit. Hermione felt herself slipping off the chair. The stone floor rushed at her, and she again slipped into blackness.

Her eyes opened slowly, and she found herself staring at the infirmary ceiling. There was a dull ache between her eyes, and she raised a hand to rub the spot.

"Hermione." Madam Pomfrey's face came into view. "How do you feel?"

"My head hurts. But it's not as bad as before. What's wrong with me?" Hermione cringed, dreading the answer. Did she have a brain tumor or something equally life threatening? "You didn't find anything in my head to account for the pain, did you?"

"In your head? You mean like a tumor? No dear, your mind is free of any physical cause. It was a magical connection."

Hermione sighed in relief. "Magical connection?" Hermione repeated, knowing she sounded like a first-year. Her brain was so confused.

The mediwitch frowned at her. "Legilimency, as far as I can tell. It was performed by someone who forced his way in rather clumsily, I should think. Do you remember hearing anything?"

Hermione frowned. "There was just pain...horrid, blinding pain." She thought back. "I heard someone's voice, and it seemed like it came from behind me. I whipped around, and then blinding pain seared through my head. I blacked out. I... Oh! The voice asked for help."

"Someone asked for help?" Madam Pomfrey came closer and peered into her eyes. She turned and took a vial off the nightstand and slipped a hand under Hermione's head and helped her sit up so she could swallow the potion. "It's for the residual pain," she told her.

Hermione drank the potion and then settled back onto the pillows.

"Legilimency? Are you certain? No one was close. I checked the room." Hermione pressed the back of her hand against her forehead in thought.

"Curious," Poppy said. "But you're right. I had Minerva go down and check. Being Headmistress, she has an affinity for the castle. It communicates with her. There was no one."

"But the voice seemed so real, so right there." She was adamant.

"Well, with Legilimency it would, because it comes from inside your head." Poppy looked concerned.

Hermione's face colored. "Of course. I'm not thinking clearly. Then someone's trying to reach me. But who?"

"Hermione, I have noticed you are working way too hard. I suggest you eat the meal I am going to have Gypsy deliver and then take this dreamless sleep and stay here for the night."

"Oh, Poppy, I promise I'll do that. But can't I go back to my room?" Hermione pleaded.

"Tomorrow," the woman said, and Hermione knew with the tone she'd used there was no arguing.

"Alright," she said, slumping further into the bed. "But if someone needs help..."

"If there is someone really in need of help, and it's not a joke, then we will get to the bottom of it. I don't have much skill as a Legillimens...only enough to diagnosis its effects. We may have to get a Healer from St. Mungo's to come help if this happens again. No one at Hogwarts is qualified. Now here's Gypsy."

The little house-elf had popped in with a tray. It held a bowl of soup and some dry toast.

Hermione sat up a bit and carefully sipped the soup and ate about half the toast before pushing it away. Her stomach still felt unsettled.

Poppy, who had watched with eagle eyes, nodded and took the tray. She held out a vial and said, "Now, take this and get a good night's sleep."

Hermione took the potion, turned on her side, and pulled the covers to her ear before slipping into a deep, dreamless sleep.

The next day was Saturday, so when Poppy released her after breakfast, she went to her quarters and took a long, hot shower and crawled back into her own bed. She still felt a bit unsteady and unnerved. The voice had been filled with desperation. She was almost ready to slip into a light sleep when she heard the same voice again. *Help me!*

Hermione felt the nausea sweep through her again, and she lay still, not wanting to get sick again. She said, "Who are you? What is this? Is this a joke?"

Help me! Trapp... ed... Mug... gle... hos... drugged.

The pressure in her head suddenly released her. She gasped for breath. Deep breaths helped steady her stomach and nerves. The person was gone again. She felt pain, but it wasn't as bad as before. She thought back on the words. A witch or wizard was some how separated from the Wizarding world. This person had spoken about Muggles. Was this person a prisoner? No, a wizard would be able to Apparate from any Muggle prison. Should she call Poppy? No, she would wait for the next communication. It seemed to be stronger and less disorienting this time.

Hermione stayed in bed a good part of the day. She Summoned a few books on Legilimency and read up on the subject. She had learned a little about it after Harry had started his lessons with Snape, but with all that was happening that year, she just hadn't tried to teach herself. She went through a few exercises and tried to reach out with her mind. It made her dizzy, and she slumped back into the bed and let herself drift off to sleep.

Several days went by with no more communication, and Hermione buried herself in her work. She made sure she ate and slept at least six hours each night, and by the end of the next week she was feeling better.

She had also thought about this mystery person. She made a few inquiries about missing witches or wizards. There was a list. But if it was a random person, someone she didn't know, why her? Was there something about her that made it easy to invade her mind? She thought about finding out if someone on the staff might teach her Occlumency. She was sure Professor McGonagall would know; but then if someone really needed help, she would be blocking him. It defeated the chance to solve the mystery. The voice was desperate. This person must be physically unable to free himself from the place he was trapped in.

She puzzled over it until it started to make her head hurt. Then she shoved the thoughts away and decided since it was Sunday she would walk to Hogsmeade and do a little shopping. Getting away from the castle might do her some good. She drew on her cloak; it was a cool spring day. She let herself out the front door and started toward the huge, warded gate. There was a lot of activity on the grounds. Students were having picnics and playing games. Brooms swept over their heads. Students were flying for the joy of the freedom it gave them. She envied their freedom. She'd never been too comfortable on a broom.

She let the wards down, slipped through the gate, and reset them. Even though Voldemort was gone, the wards were still as strong as ever. A few Death Eaters had escaped. She really thought they were long gone. They were probably living in other countries, staying under the radar and living their lives. Many of them were probably as thankful to be free as she was. But there were always a few deranged wizards who might get ideas. She stayed on alert as she walked down the long, tree-lined road. It was a peaceful day. A light breeze blew at her hair and caressed her cheeks. The light warmth of the early spring sun felt good on her pale skin.

She wondered what Ron and Harry were doing. They were probably on the trail of one of those escaped Death Eaters. They seemed almost fanatical about bringing them all to justice...being Aurors seemed to suit them.

She reached the patch of road that was fenced off and looked across the dry, dead area to the battered house. The Shrieking Shack. The once warm breeze now seemed to turn to ice, making her shiver. She saw the fence was down close to the edge of the forest, and she felt drawn to crawl over the barbed wire and walk across the expanse of dead ground. The Shrieking Shack grew bigger and more forbidding as her legs, seemingly on their own, carried her closer.

She found herself climbing the rotten stairs, and her hand reached for the old door handle. The door opened to a dusty room filled with the smells of age and mildew. She stepped in, and the door slammed behind her. She let her eyes trail around the room. Broken furniture littered the room, and tattered curtains flapped in the breeze from broken windows. A dim light filtered in, letting her see where she was. Her legs carried her to the room, and her heart was pounding against her ribs. Why was she here? She didn't want to see the bloodstain or remember the vacant eyes of the man who had given his life here.

But try as she might to turn around, she felt as if an unseen hand was pulling her forward. Then she stood at the door. The room was just as she had remembered it: filled with dust and broken bedroom furniture. Her eyes seemed riveted by the dark stain the floorboards. They had abandoned him when he most needed them. They had believed him dead. But that was the biggest mystery to date: What had happened to Professor Snape? His body had never been recovered. The room was empty with only the silence of the dead. She couldn't seem to stop herself from moving closer to the stain. Flashes of the professor's dead face... His empty eyes looked up at her. As the toe of her shoe touched the stain, pain pierced through her head.

"Ahhh," she cried, falling to her hands and knees, unaware that her fingers were now splayed over the gory stain.

Help me! came the voice she'd heard the other night in her office.

Miraculously, the pain faded. "Who are you?" she cried out.

Miss Granger? came a disdainful thought. *Bullocks! It's one of the glorious trio.* The voice dipped sarcasm.

She realized who it was. "Professor Snape?"

Brilliant! She knows, came his reply.

Hermione thought, *I must be going mad. What the hell is this?*

Legilimency, the voice said acidly. *You're supposed to be so smart.*

"Legilimency, then you must be..."

Alive, he finished for her. *Brilliant deduction, Granger. Now shut up and listen. I'm not strong enough for this...*

"But how, why, where?" she stammered.

Shut it! If I knew the answers, I'd give you my address. As to how, Blood Magic. Here in this place, you have the strongest blood tie to me. In my office, it's only hit and

miss, cut fingers, bloody wounds... His voice trailed off as he remembered.

"Sir, what can you tell me?"

I'm in a Muggle hospital. Large building. Maintenance for comatose patients, care facility...

"Do you know where?"

No. His voice sounded resigned to being there. *I sometimes break free of the medications and thrash. I cannot speak... throat... so they drug me again.*

"Oh God," Hermione thought, staring at the dark red/black stain. "How will I..."

You're the damn know-it-all. You figure it out!

Hermione felt the pain again as he withdrew and his thoughts and presence faded from her mind.

The blinding pain faded a bit, giving her a nauseated stomach. After gulping air for a bit, she staggered to her feet and leaned on the door jamb for a moment before slowly weaving her way through the other rooms and finally out the front door. She had been concentrating on not losing her breakfast; now she sucked in a deep breath of fresh air, and it revived her some.

Looking back into the door, she saw that it was later in the day. Had she been unconscious for a bit? The shadows were deep, and the day had gotten quite a bit cooler. She drew her light cloak tightly about her shoulders. Going to Hogsmeade now was out of the question. She had to get back to the castle. Should she tell some one? Poppy had said it was Legilimency. But oh God, it was Professor Snape. His being alive would set the Wizarding world on edge. She took a deep breath and started across the dead area toward the road.

Lisa, thank you for starting this new adventure with me. Your beta skills are so appreciated.

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 20

Now a professor at Hogwarts, Hermione Granger begins to experience fierce migraines and voices in her head. What is causing these headaches or who?

Hermione felt the headache grow fierce as she finally dragged herself through the gates and reset the wards. She stumbled up the now empty grassy hill toward the castle. She was completely exhausted. Now she understood why she was suffering the headaches.

Snape had been trying to find someone to help him. He had found the initial connection through Hermione touching the stain of his blood from minor injuries, which had seeped into the wood of his office desk over the years. Now, within the Shrieking Shack, the connection was so much stronger because of the massive blood stain caused when he suffered the snake bite. His mind, affected by Muggle drugs, was fighting to communicate.

As the nausea threatened to overwhelm her, Hermione thought ruefully, *Why me? ...then, Why not me? I still have nightmares about not helping him. I will do all I can* She collapsed, feeling the grass against her cheek before the blackness overtook her.

Waking again, she saw Hagrid's concerned face and felt his big arms holding her close. She could feel he was walking quickly. "Hermione, I'm taking you to the infirmary. Can you hear me?" he asked urgently.

Her eyes closed again, and the next thing she saw was the stark white ceiling of the infirmary. Poppy's face swung into view. "Professor Granger, can you hear me?" she asked briskly.

Hermione tried to nod, then groaned as even the flesh on her eyelids hurt. Poppy brought a vial to her lips, and she drank the bitter liquid. She closed her eyes in relief as the pain receded and the nausea abated.

She heard Hagrid's voice ask, "Will she be okay? Should I call Harry and Ron? Them's being her only wizarding family."

Hermione replied, "No... I'll be okay... thank you, Hagrid." She felt a huge hand pat her arm and give it a squeeze.

"I'll be goin' then," Hagrid said. He always felt out of place in the infirmary.

Hermione opened her eyes to see Poppy looking at her with concern. "Legilimens again? I will skin the child alive if I find out who's doing this."

Hermione groped blindly until she found the Medi-Witch's hand. Gripping it with her own, she informed her, "He's not a student, Poppy."

"Then who?" the woman asked, her brow creasing in a frown.

"Professor Snape," Hermione told her.

"What? The man's dead, gone for years now!"

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"No, he's in a Muggle care facility, dosed with Muggle drugs."

The woman's face paled. "He's alive? I must get Pomona in here, she has to know."

"Professor Sprout? Why would she care?" Hermione was confused.

"She was like a mother to him after his own mother died. She knows that man better than anyone here." Poppy turned away and conjured her Patronus. A winged snake

flew gracefully around the room and then off through the window.

"Poppy, you were a Slytherin?" Hermione asked, surprised.

"No, I'm only a healer. Most healers' Patronuses are winged serpents of one form or another," Poppy informed her.

"Oh, I didn't realize! Of course it makes sense," Hermione said, thinking about how Muggles used the winged, twin serpents as their medical symbol. "I can't see Professor Snape allowing Pomona to mother him. He's such a hard man," she mused thoughtfully.

"Well, he was a lonely, scared boy when he first arrived. He had such a thirst for knowledge, and Pomona took an interest in his abilities. Herbology is a huge part of Potions now, isn't it? He often took refuge in the Herbology green house when he was being heckled by the likes of James Potter and his lackeys." Poppy set about puffing up Hermione's pillows, helping her to sit a bit higher.

Hermione glanced at her fingers that were unconsciously twisting together, "It was hard for Harry to realize his dad didn't walk on water, and that he had been so cruel to Professor Snape," she said softly.

"I imagine it was," Poppy replied.

The door flew open and Pomona Sprout puffed into the room. Her hat was crooked, and sticks and leaves stuck about the band. Her short gray hair stuck out in all directions and she had a smudge of dirt on her nose. The apron that covered her robes was stained with dirt and green streaks. Hermione saw a deep kindness overlaid by a worried look in her eyes. She had never really studied the woman before.

"Poppy, what's wrong! What's happened?" she stammered, rubbing her dirty hands on her apron. Her wand was tangled in her hair above one ear. She pulled it out and, with a flick, vanished all the dirt, leaving herself in clean, but worn robes.

Poppy went to her and held out her hand, taking Pomona's hand in hers. "Brace yourself, dear."

"What... what's happened?" She noticed Hermione in the bed. "Do you need some rare herb or dangerous plant?"

"No, Hermione has been plagued with bouts of intrusive Legillimancy. She knows who is doing it."

"Who?" The woman's face was very perplexed now.

"Severus, Pomona. It seems he's alive!"

Poppy saw the older woman's face go pale, so she let go of her hand, whipped out her wand, and conjured a chair behind the shocked woman, just as Pomona's knees gave out and she slumped down into it.

"Severus... alive? I don't understand! How is that possible? Where?" the kind woman asked desperately.

"It appears he is in a Muggle facility for long-term care of coma patients," Poppy explained.

Pomona's face paled even more. "Oh Merlin, my boy. I know just the plants we can use to brew Potions to help him," she said briskly. The idea of seeing the boy she had practically raised restored to them filled her with joy and a sense of purpose.

Hermione looked down sadly at her twined hands. Pomona did not notice as she continued, "We must go retrieve him immediately!"

Poppy touched her shoulder. "We have no idea where he is. He doesn't know the name of the facility, or even what country he is in. It will take time, and it will be difficult to locate him. Spontaneous Apparition, when you're drugged with potions or out of your mind with pain, can take you quite far from home. Someone must have found him and taken him to a hospital. If he's still under the paralyzing influence of Nagini's venom, then Muggle medicine will never help him," she said gently.

"How was he able to communicate with you, Hermione? And please, forgive this question, but why you? There are people here who are far closer to him." Pomona could not hide the hurt in her eyes.

Hermione hung her head. "I'm sorry. I don't think he had a choice. He said something about 'blood magic?' The fact that his blood has seeped into the wood of his desk over the years must have made it possible for the rudimentary connections. Earlier today I was compelled to go to the Shrieking Shack and touch the stain caused by his blood there. It enabled a far stronger connection. He was finally able to tell me who he was."

Pomona stood somewhat shakily and came to stand next to the bed Hermione lay in. She reached out and touched the younger woman's hand. "I'm sorry, my dear. What you say makes sense. Don't pay any attention to me. I'm just an old woman."

"Hardly," Hermione said with a small smile, turning her fingers to squeeze the old Herbologist's. "We will find him. Summer is just a few months away. I can go to my parents' house on the weekends between now and then and do some research on my computer. I might be able to find Unidentified Person Files."

"Computer?" Pomona asked in a confused way.

"It's an electrical device that allows you to search nearly all the information in the world other than classified stuff. If I don't find any information there, we can theorize the areas he might have gone to. We also might ask Professor Vector to do some calculations." Hermione warmed to her subject.

"No!" the two women cried together.

"Why not?" Hermione asked, surprised.

"Snape and Vector didn't see eye to eye on much, and she is quite a Death Eater hater. She lost a son to them," Pomona informed her.

"Oh," Hermione said, "I didn't know."

"She might put the authorities or worse, vigilantes on your trail."

"Well, so what? He's been totally exonerated!" Hermione said indignantly. She and Harry had worked hard to bring the information Professor Snape had entrusted to them to the public light. She squirmed a bit. There would now be a reckoning for those actions. Since he had been *dead*, it had not mattered at the time, but now he would know that all his secrets were out. She paled at the thought of his anger.

Poppy stepped forward. "What's wrong, Hermione? Are you feeling nauseous again?" She raised her wand to set forth a diagnostic spell.

Hermione blushed. "No, I was just thinking. Professor Snape will be pretty angry when he knows so many people have seen his memories."

Pomona laughed. "He will just have to get over it." She patted Hermione's hand. "Severus..." she whispered to herself.

Hermione saw the professor's eyes fill with tears and wondered at the relationship between this Mother-of-the-Earth and the dour Potions Master. She could see the woman loved him, and she wondered if he felt the same way.

"Should we tell Minerva?" Pomona asked, snatching her patched hat off her head and running her fingers through her choppy hair.

Poppy was thoughtful. "I think not. She feels so bad about how she treated Severus that last year," she reflected.

Pomona said, "I've tried to tell her that was how she was supposed to treat him since he was deep undercover. She feels betrayed by Dumbledore and Severus... them not telling her of the role he played with Dumbledore's consent. It hurt her deeply."

Hermione said thoughtfully, "Well, let's see what we can find out before we decide whether to let her in on this situation. We may not be able to find him. He's got to get better at his part of the connection, too. I cannot be incapacitated every time he speaks to me."

"If you leave here, how will he connect with you?" Pomona asked.

Hermione replied, after a few moments' thought, "I will have to go back to the Shrieking Shack and take a piece of the floor with me. It will be stronger than the traces of blood in my office."

Poppy agreed, "The power of his mind must be formidable for him to be able to break through the condition he is no doubt in. I will work to procure knowledge about Wizarding comas and, Hermione, you can work on the anti-venom with muscle restoration and strengthening potions. His physical condition might be pretty bleak after all this time. It's really quite a wonder he's alive!"

"I will go harvest the items you need, Hermione. We'd best make the potions out of the freshest ingredients I can find," Pomona said.

Hermione nodded. "I will make a list and have a House-elf deliver it to you. Poppy, when can I get out of here? I want to go to St. Mungo's tomorrow and talk to a healer versed in Occlumency. If I can learn how to Occlude the over load and just let Severus' thoughts come through, I should have fewer side effects."

"That's an excellent idea. I would feel better if you stayed here tonight, though. If you go back to your rooms, he might try to speak to you again and you will weaken once more," Poppy explained.

Hermione nodded. She'd rather be free of this place, but Poppy had a point. "Alright... for tonight then. Tomorrow's Saturday, and I can go without alerting Minerva to anything. She knows I often go on the weekends to purchase ingredients."

"You might not be strong enough for Apparition. Best you try a shorter distance first. We don't want you ending up in a Muggle hospital half way to St. Mungo's. Now get some rest. I will wake you in the morning." Poppy patted her shoulder before leaving her alone.

Hermione snuggled down under her down comforter and let her eyes fall closed. She slept and dreamed. She was walking through a long hospital corridor with closed doors on both sides. When she tried the doors, however, they were all locked. She traveled further down the hall to some double doors.

She pushed them open and quite a sight met her eyes. Beds lined the walls and stretched in rows and rows. The room was huge, and buzzed and beeped with machines that were designed to breathe life into the bodies that were stretched out on the beds. Tubes carried fluid, blood and nutrients to the many comatose patients who lay in stony silence. There were no attendants present in the huge room, and Hermione shivered as she walked through the center aisle, searching the faces. The still faces were from all races and all walks of life.

She wondered if they were all forgotten, or if anyone came to visit them. Why were they left to sleep like this? Would they linger like this for years to come? Some had plump faces, but most were thin and gaunt. She assumed the thin, gaunt ones were patients who had been there for some time.

Every thing was clean and white, and she smelled the usual hospital antiseptic. She neared the end of the room and suddenly, there he was. The blanket was pulled up to his chest. His long dark hair fanned over the pillow. His face was as gaunt as ever. He was perhaps thinner than she'd ever seen him. His hooked nose appeared even more prominent.

Somehow, he looked younger. His face was relaxed and the lines smoothed. He didn't have the perpetual smirk or the nasty glint in his eye. Hermione stood looking down at him. She laughed softly as an idea occurred to her, and she bent over him and placed a small kiss on his thin lips.

Arms came around her and held her warmly as she felt the kiss returned and deepened. She parted her lips slightly and a warm tongue slipped over her bottom lip, meeting her tongue...

A hand shook her and Hermione gasped as the dream faded and she found herself looking into Poppy's face. The woman sported a curious look and her eyebrow rose when Hermione blushed a bright red. "Nice dream?" Poppy asked with a smirk.

Hermione shrugged. "Unusual, I'd say. Surprising! I never have romantic dreams!"

"Ah, you had the cat-that-ate-the-mouse smile," the Medi-Witch said, smiling. "Romance is a nice thing, even if it's only in our dreams. Well, dear, I think you are strong enough to leave. I want you to have a good breakfast first though... none of this toast and tea thing. Eggs most certainly and ham as well. You will need the nourishment to keep you strong today."

Hermione sat on the edge of the bed for a moment and then slipped to the floor. Her legs felt sturdy under her, thankfully. She grinned. "I feel so much better, Poppy. Thank you for your help. I'm going to my parents' house first, where I'll use their computer to make a list of facilities in this country and the surrounding countries. I can probably find some John Doe files and get descriptions. After that, I'll go to St Mungo's."

"What are you going to tell the healers at St. Mungo's?" Poppy asked. "They will be curious. You know what they say about curiosity. Besides they may very well see what's in your mind."

"You know some of them," Hermione answered. "Can you tell me which ones were Order Members? Which ones can keep a secret? They should be bound by their professionalism, but it is better safe than sorry." Suddenly, she feared for the whole plan. The more people who knew this secret, the more likely it would leak out before she had a chance to find him.

Poppy blushed. "Well, I could write a note to Chance Leurante. We knew each other at University."

"How well did you know this man, Poppy?" Hermione couldn't help teasing.

Poppy smiled a funny, secret smile. "Well enough, Professor Granger, but, it was a long time ago. I wanted to work here and he wanted to be in London. He has since married and had a family, and I came here. There was no way around it."

Hermione reached out and touched her hand. "I'm sorry. Are you sure I can trust him if you had a breakup?"

"There were no hard feelings. We lost track over the years, but are good friends when we happen upon each other. I haven't seen him for six or seven years now, but I see his papers in the medical journals," Poppy assured her.

Hermione saw a look on Poppy's face that she'd seen on her own when looking in the mirror. Poppy continued, "It's very hard to see them happy and not be part of it yourself. I feel that way at the Burrow. There are all the happy couples, Harry and Ginny and their baby and now Ron with his new wife and baby. It could have been me but I made other choices. I wanted to come here to teach. I wanted a career more than children. I would have ended up hating him and he was my best friend. I do understand."

Hermione reached out and hugged the older witch, receiving a hug in return. As she stepped back she said, "Thank you for confiding in me. I will keep it just between us."

Poppy wiped a tear from her cheek. "Thank you, Hermione. Now, you go make that list for Pomona, though I'd be surprised if she didn't have them all gathered. She knows what her plants are for. She will make an excellent educated guess on what will be required."

"Yes, she will," Hermione confirmed. "I have found her to be very helpful more than a few times."

"I will write the note and send it through the Floo to your office. Don't stay in there too long," Poppy cautioned.

Hermione slipped into her robe and said, "Thank you." She strode away and vanished through the infirmary doors.

Poppy turned to go to her office to write the note. She wished she were the one going to St. Mungo's.

Hermione ate her breakfast quickly, trying her best to fend off questions from the other staff. She told them she'd been working too hard. She'd put in too many hours, and had not eaten enough. It was partly true. Although she did not feel like having a big breakfast, she followed orders and ate.

Since it was Saturday, she informed Minerva that she was going home for the weekend. She left right after packing away the potion ingredients Pomona had sent. This weekend she would do her research, and on Monday, she would begin to brew the potions that would help Severus return to consciousness.

She had a small vial of Nagini's venom and one of the snake's blood. Slughorn had collected it after the final battle, and she had found it among the stores when she had taken over. She had never opened it, thinking it no longer necessary to study, but now she was grateful to the former Potions teacher for his foresight.

By mid-morning she was ready. She clutched her small bag, stuffed with shrunken clothing, parchment and quills for note-taking, and the note Poppy had given her, introducing her to Healer Leurante. Hermione walked to the gate and once she had cleared the wards, Apparated to Hogsmeade. When that worked well, she Apparated to her parents'.

Thank you, Suzanne and Lydia for your Beta work. A special thank you to my sister, Linda, who gave the chapter a final check over.

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 20

Now a professor at Hogwarts, Hermione Granger begins to experience fierce migraines and voices in her head. What is causing these headaches or who?

Hermione landed in her parents' backyard, which was enclosed by a high hedge for just this purpose. She hurried to the back door, eager to see her parents and start on her research. Finding it locked, she lifted a nearby flower pot and groped for the spare key. As she let herself in the door, she called out, "Mum, Dad! Are you home?" Hermione stepped through the kitchen and dining area and made her way down the short hall to the sitting room, still calling out. No one was home. She approached the tiny table by the front door. Her mother always left her a note, even if she knew she wouldn't be there, in case of emergencies.

Dad's watching a polo match and I went shopping. I'll be home around 5:00pm. Hermione, please stay for dinner if you can.

Love Mum.

Hermione sighed; these notes always left her feeling guilty. How many notes had her mother written that had never been read? Hundreds, she imagined. She had meant to spend more time with her parents since their memories had been returned to them and they had come back to London. But there always seemed to be that one more project she had to work on during the weekends. It had been several months since she had come home. She flipped the note over and wrote on the back:

Mum, doing some research for a very special situation. If I'm not here when you get home, I went to St. Mungo's to talk to an important Healer. I will be spending the night here, but I can't promise dinner. Please, save me a plate, I might be late.

Love Hermione.

Dropping the note, she turned from the table and went quickly upstairs to her parents' study. Making herself comfortable at the desk, she switched the computer on and got to work. While she waited for the internet to load, she thought of her plan of action. She could work here for a couple of hours before heading to St. Mungo's around midday. She would try to make an appointment with Healer Leurante this afternoon. She might also be able to do some research in the library at the hospital while she waited. Hermione hoped he would be there on the weekend. If not, she would have to make some excuse to Minerva on Monday. She would need to leave straight after work to see him during normal business hours.

Hermione spent the next two hours searching John Doe lists and printing out information to take with her. She was rather hungry and thirsty when she finished, and so headed to the kitchen to raid her mother's fridge and pantry. She snapped open a bottle of pop and made a quick sandwich, which she crammed into a ziplock and stuffed into her bag.

She slipped from the house, locked the door and returned the key to the flowerpot before Apparating to St. Mungo's.

Hermione stated her business to the mannequin at the front of the old store building and entered through the wards into the busy lobby. She went to the desk and waited patiently to be acknowledged. The attending Welcome Witch finally looked up.

"Oh," she looked startled, "Professor Granger!" She stood. "Please, follow me. Healer Leurante told me to bring you as soon as you arrived. I'm sorry I kept you waiting."

"It's quite alright, but how did you know to expect me? I came on the off chance that Healer Leurante would even be here today." She had to jog to keep up with the woman's long strides.

"I believe he had received a message from an old friend informing him of your arrival," the witch explained. They came to a fine wooden door. The Welcome Witch rapped on the door twice and without waiting for an answer, turned the knob and pushed the door open, announcing "Professor Granger to see you, Healer." She then stood aside

to allow Hermione entry into the office.

Before Hermione even cleared the door, a tall, thin, graying man was already on his feet, coming toward her, his hand held out in greeting. "Professor Granger, please come in. Thank you, Jeanette," he said, dismissing the receptionist.

The woman nodded and shut the door gently.

Healer Leurante stepped forward and took her outstretched hand, but instead of shaking it, he drew it up to place a tiny kiss on her knuckles. Hermione smiled at the chivalrous action. "Poppy did say you were a charmer," she observed wryly.

The older man chuckled, "She was special, that one. Please, have a seat, can I get you tea? I also have a variety of biscuits here."

Hermione nodded her acceptance, and the man made his way to a sideboard. She moved to sit on one of the comfortable looking chairs in front of his desk. While he was busying himself with preparing the tea, Hermione explained her presence. "Healer Leurante, I am hoping you can help me with a . . . delicate project." Hermione paused while she thought of the words to use to describe the situation. "Time is rather of the essence, I am so grateful you were able to make time for me today."

"Please, call me Chance," he said as he brought the tea tray to the desk.

"Then, you must call me Hermione." She smiled as he set his burden down in front of her. Hermione's stomach growled and she blushed. "I haven't gotten around to eating lunch, though I do have it here." She indicated her bag.

"Well, by all means, bring it out, and I will serve the tea and give you a plate of biscuits. There is surely time for a little chat while you eat. I admit, I was quite surprised to hear from Poppy. It's been quite some time. How is she doing?"

Hermione watched his face as he poured the tea and observed the same sort of wistful look on his face as she'd seen on Poppy's. "She's doing well. She seems to love her job, though she is quite stern with the children." She laughed.

He turned and smiled. "She was always stern. You should have seen her as a girl - studious and very serious, but quite beautiful." He sighed, starting to arrange some biscuits onto a small plate.

"How is your family?" Hermione asked, reminding him why they had parted.

He placed the tea and biscuits on a corner of the desk within Hermione's reach. A look of pride and happiness shone on his face at the opportunity to speak of his children. "Oh, my son and daughter are both married now. Chance lives in the United States. He's also a Healer. Darius, my daughter, lives in West Africa right now. She is working with a Wizarding native tribe. She's a Potions master such as yourself. She's learning quite a lot out there." He spoke of his children's accomplishments for a few minutes while Hermione ate her sandwich.

"How wonderful! I have always thought to visit there one day. And your wife..." she prompted as she took a sip of tea.

A sad look crossed his face, "Agatha died several years ago, Ratchets' disease. It was a long and difficult passing."

Hermione winced. She knew this disease had no cure in their world. It was a depletion of a witch's magic with side effects like Muggle Alzheimer's. "I'm so sorry to hear that," she sympathized.

Chance nodded and went to sit in his chair. "She was a wonderful woman. We had a good life." He looked up at Hermione. "But, there are always regrets with choices."

Hermione nodded. "Yes, there are," she said, unsure of whether to tell him that Poppy still might feel something for him.

Chance decided to get to the crux of the meeting. Hermione had finished her food. "Well, Professor Granger," he asked, "how can I help you? Are you ill? We cannot have one of our War Heroes not in the best of health."

Hermione smiled. "No, I'm not ill. Actually, I have a favor to ask. I need lessons in Occlumency."

"Occlumency?" He frowned sitting forward. "Is someone invading your mind without permission? Perhaps you need to report this to the Aurors' Office."

"No, sir, it isn't like that. I have reason to believe that this person is trying to communicate in the only way left to him. It is my belief that it is a Wizard trapped in a Muggle comatose ward."

The man paled and sat back in his chair. "Merlin," he said in shock.

"Every time he communicates, I get blinding headaches and black out. I believe the medication they have him on is keeping him quiet, making it easier for them to care for him. But because of this, he is unable to perform Legilimency to his usual ability."

"Do you know this man?" the Healer inquired.

Hermione, who had been taking a sip of tea, set the cup down. "Yes, I know who he is. Poppy assured me I could trust this goes no further than this office." She looked at him earnestly.

"Why the mystery? He must have a family who would be happy to have him back."

"Sir, he has no family, and he is quite famous in our world. He would never be given a moments peace to recover from his injuries."

"Famous, you say? Who is this man?" he asked curious.

"I would need a wand oath to revealed that at this time," she explained to him.

"It's that important, huh? Is he good famous or bad famous?" he asked, now exceedingly curious.

Hermione studied his face. She could tell he was a kind man. He had soft gentle eyes. His face was worn about his eyes and mouth from smiling, despite what he had evidently endured throughout course of his wife's illness. She felt she could trust him, but for the sake of Professor Snape, she would not reveal his identity without a wand oath. It was a simple form of binding magic, but would prevent this man from revealing Snape's name. "I assure you that he has been examined and cleared by the Wizengamot. However, I want to give him the peace he so richly deserves if we are able to wake him from the living death he seems to find himself trapped in. There are those who might still hold him responsible for certain war crimes. I want him strong and able to defend himself before he is revealed."

Healer Leurante stood, came around the desk and drew his wand. "I know your reputation, Hermione, and I trust Poppy."

Hermione stood and drew her wand, touching it to the tip of his wand. "Thank you, Chance," she answered. She cleared her mind and began the simple oath. "Will you do your utmost to help me save this man?"

"I will," he replied.

"Will you keep his identity confidential, to the very best of your ability?" she continued.

"I will," he repeated again never taking his eyes off hers.

She whispered the incantation, and a glow engulfed their wand hands, traveling up each of their arms to their hearts.

She stepped back and he returned to his chair. "You didn't require an Unbreakable Oath. Unusual," Chance ventured.

She smiled. "No Unbreakable Oath should ever be required in this new world of ours. I am sure that if you worked at it hard enough, you might be able to get around the phrase 'best of your ability', but to what end? After all, we will be helping a good man who has lived a tortured life."

"A spy from the war then," he mused. "It isn't hard to figure out who you're talking about, especially with your ties to Hogwarts." He allowed himself a moment of thought about the revelation. "This is astounding. I want to assure you that I have nothing but admiration for the man. He supplied us, secretly, with many special potions before the war. Without them, countless patients would have died. He worked tirelessly in all things required of him. I wonder how he survived what you saw happen to him. He must have had an antivenin, blood replenishers and strengtheners with him."

"I assumed he Disapparated and wasn't strong enough to concentrate on his destination." Hermione hypothesized. "He must have been found by Muggles and taken to a hospital. They, not knowing what was wrong, would have had no idea about the venom and the potions he had taken, and could not hope to revive him. He's been trapped in that comatose ward, for nearly the past five years." Hermione explained, and then she smirked. "I can tell you, he wasn't too happy to discover my identity." She laughed. "Harry, Ron, and I were quite a thorn in the poor man's side in our Hogwarts years."

Chance chortled, "I'm sure you were. If you have had enough tea, I will begin the instruction. I have given my schedule to another Healer this afternoon." He stood and indicated a couple of chairs facing each other in a corner of the room. There were plants around, all with soothing qualities.

Hermione recognized many of them. She stood, dusting the biscuit crumbs from her hands. "I'm ready," she affirmed. "I've read a lot of theory on this subject but haven't had the time to practice it much. I don't wish to block him, only narrow what I take in, and filter all the effects of the drugs that aren't allowing him to focus the signal. Can this be done?" she asked.

"Yes, certainly, but it may take a few weeks. I hope that you will be able to come several times a week," he said as they settled into the chair. They were close enough that their knees almost touched. He reached out to take her hands and rested them on her knees. "I am going to reach into your thoughts. I apologize if I see something you don't wish me to, but it's possible for me to stumble across just about anything once I'm in there."

Hermione giggled nervously, "I really have nothing to hide. I did have a very odd dream last night, the contents of which have never been even remotely a fantasy of mine." She blushed.

"What sort of dream?" he asked curious.

"Muggles have a fairytale about a sleeping princess who was awakened from an enchanted sleep by a kiss from her Prince Charming. I can assure you that I never fantasized, let alone dreamed, about kissing Professor Snape, while I was in his class." She laughed again. "I blame it on Poppy's potions and a lonely life," she confessed embarrassed.

Chance smiled at her. "Well, many of us live lonely lives. There is nothing to be ashamed of about that. Now then, let's get to work."

After several exhausting hours, Hermione stood. "Thank you, Chance, I am very grateful for the time you have given up for me."

"You're quite welcome. You're a fast learner, so perhaps only a few more sessions will be needed after all. You should have been a Healer, Hermione. It would have been a brilliant profession for you. You have a great deal of empathy. Perhaps one day, you will tire of teaching. If I am still here, come and see me," Chance instructed.

She smiled. "Maybe I will... one day." She gathered her bag and headed for the door. As she reached it, she turned. "This may not be my place, but I think Poppy is still quite taken with you. I know many years have passed, but you both might benefit from renewing your friendship. It's a place to start, sir." She saw his eyes widen and he nodded gently. She went out the door, shutting it quietly behind her.

When she returned to her parent's house, the light was on, and the door opened at her touch. "Mum, I'm back," she called out.

Her mother, looking like an older version of herself, came running into the kitchen and enveloped her in a strong hug. "Hermione, it's wonderful to see you! I'm so sorry I missed your arrival this morning." Her mother's voice was muffled by her hair.

Hermione breathed in the scent that was her mother. She had been so relieved to have been able to return her parents' memories after the war and to have been forgiven by them. It had taken some time, but now things were as they used to be. No more awkward silences enveloped them at times.

Her father appeared in the door and gave her a warm hug. "Hermione, my girl, look at you! You're different each time we see you. What a beautiful woman you're becoming."

"Becoming? Thanks, Dad," she groused with feigned irritation.

He laughed and hugged her again. "You'll always be my princess."

Her mother smiled at the byplay between her two favorite people. "Come, I have dinner waiting," she urged.

"Mum, I told you not to wait," Hermione admonished as she began peeling off her robes. She knew it was a good hour past their normal meal time.

"Nonsense. We love having dinner with you." They all took their customary places, and after grace was said, her mother started filling their plates.

"Wow, Mum, that's enough," Hermione said, stopping her mother from overfilling the plate.

"You're as thin as a rail, Hermione, and you look a bit peaky. You need to eat more. I know you - you get into your research and forget to eat or sleep," she scolded, the 'mother' in her coming to the fore.

Hermione laughed and flung a long curl of hair back over her shoulder, accepting the plate. "You do know me well. Poppy, the Medi-witch, is keeping me in line."

"And why do you need this person's help?" her dad asked pointedly.

Hermione squirmed like a child under their gaze. "I fainted a couple times."

"What!" her mother cried, "What's wrong? Did you go to St. Mungo's to be treated?" Her face was suddenly pale and her eyes wide. Her hand reached out to cover Hermione's.

"No, Mum." Hermione comforted her by squeezing her hand. "I promise nothing is wrong. Someone needs my help and they've had to contact me mentally. I went to St. Mungo's to ask the advice of a Healer on how to deal with the strength of their contacts, which often leaves me ill. Now, let's finish dinner, and then I'll explain it to you."

"Truly, Hermione?" Her dad asked, his eyes piercing hers as if he could read her mind. And sometimes she wasn't too sure that he couldn't.

"Truly," she assured him earnestly. "Now, let me tell you about some of my students. There's Hamish Barber... He never brews a potion without an incident. Why, only last week..."

Later, as they sat before the fire, Hermione lay on the sofa with her head in her mum's lap. No matter how old she was, she loved having her mum stroke her hair. It was mutual, and she found she always regained some strength from her visits. She made a mental note to try to come more often.

"... Healer Leurante is helping me with the Occlumency. He'll teach me how to filter out the signals that make me sick. Then it'll be much easier to communicate with the Professor," she finished, explaining her afternoon trip to the hospital.

"Is this safe, Hermione?" Her mother sounded worried. "I thought once this war was over, and you were working at Hogwarts, you'd finally be safe."

"Nothing in life is completely risk-free, Mum. But I can say that this is safer than it is dangerous. Actually, the lessons I am taking will make it even more so. I really want to help him. He was never nice to us - in fact he was downright nasty - but he had his reasons. He worked very hard to see us through the war in one piece, and he gave so much of his life for us. I'll return this favor and see him home. If not back to his old nasty self, then at least to St. Mungo's, where he can be cared for by his own people."

Hermione's mum smiled down at her. "I would expect nothing more from you, my precious girl. You have always had such compassion for others, even when you were little."

"The Healer told me today that I have empathy for people and that I would have made a good Healer." She turned on her side to look into the flames, and her mother's hand caressed her shoulder and arm. After a time, her eyes closed and she slept.

Hermione woke in the middle of the night and found herself tucked in with a warm blanket, a thick pillow under her head, and the embers in the fire place still glowing bright. Her parents had retired to bed. She smiled. *Just like old times*, she thought. Since she had gotten too big to be carried to bed, they'd carefully tucked her in and left her on the couch. She sighed, snuggling into her blanket, and went back to sleep.

She spent the next day doing some more research on the computer and spending time with her parents. Mid-afternoon, she Apparated back to Hogwarts, having promised that she would return home the next weekend. Her lessons would last at least three months. Not too long after that, the year would be up, and she would be able to take the summer off to search for Professor Snape.

Hermione had just settled down to read a book on Occlumency when there was a disturbance in her wards, followed by a light knock on her door.

Hermione put her book aside and stood to open the door. She found Professor Sprout on the other side, looking quite uncomfortable. "Pomona, please come in," she invited warmly, indicating the room behind her.

The older woman hesitantly leaned into the room and looked about her. She had been here several times when Severus was occupying the place. Her eyes widened with surprise. "You've changed very little in here." She stepped into the room and her whole body relaxed.

"You've been in here before?" Hermione asked quickly, then answered her own question. "Of course you have; silly me. Minerva gave me permission to keep Professors Snape's books since we had the same profession. I liked how it was all arranged so I just never bothered to change it. I guess I felt a bit guilty at the end of the war. I should have been able to do more for him. His death has weighed on my mind." She shook herself mentally. "Come, sit. I will bring you up to date on what I've been up to this weekend. Let me get some tea."

Hermione made some tea and set out a plate of chocolate biscuits. She watched with amusement as Pomona placed four sugar cubes into her tea and took several chocolate biscuits, eating one right away. After explaining her activities for the weekend, Hermione decided to broach a topic she had been dying of curiosity about. "Forgive me, but I never saw Professor Snape as a man who would have a mother figure here. I'm quite surprised by your relationship."

Pomona looked at her with that motherly kindness. "Well, it started quite by accident. Severus was eleven. I think James Potter and Sirius Black took a strong dislike to him immediately because he was friends with Lily. He'd often take refuge in my green houses. A number of times it was necessary for me to use my wand to clean him up a bit after being doused in various nasty substances. I saw right away that he was very intelligent, so I taught him all about my plants. He took to Herbology quite easily, and in classes here inside the castle, he excelled in Potions. It all works together. I think that's why he was so disappointed in Mr. Longbottom. The boy had such a gift for Herbology, yet couldn't brew to save his own life."

"Well that makes more sense now. He was always so hard on Neville." Hermione laughed.

Pomona laughed with her. "That boy is doing just fine despite his shortcomings. He's got quite a store of his own now, and he still comes to visit. It's been nice to have his company since Severus has been gone." Her eyes pooled with tears. "Have you heard from him?"

"No, but it's been on purpose. I've been able to Occlude him. I expect he'll be quite angry, but I couldn't risk him making me ill again," she explained. Pomona asked her some more questions pertaining to her lessons and research she had undertaken.

The Herbology Professor finally stood. She looked around the room again and then smiled at Hermione. "He will be pleased to know his books are well taken care of. Please give him my love. I'm so afraid of what he has had to endure. With all the pain he went through in those last years of the war, he was often reluctant to come see me. I think he was ashamed at the turn his life had taken."

"I'll do my very best to bring him home, Pomona," she said earnestly as she saw the older woman to the door.

"Oh, I know you will, Hermione," Pomona answered kindly. "I can think of no one else I would trust more with this job, except for Minerva, and we both know she's not up to it these days. We really should tell her soon. She would be quite hurt if we didn't." Hermione nodded her agreement.

The younger witch was surprised when the stout woman grabbed her in a tight, strong bear hug. Then she turned away and left, sniffing into a grubby handkerchief she had produced from her robe pocket. Hermione smiled after her fondly.

I've had a number of women who have volunteered to help me beta. I want to thank them for their work, Lydia, Susanne my Brit-picker, and Nicole.

I still needed a person well versed in punctuation. Gabby has stepped in and filled this position.

I thank you so very much, Gabby, for your help. I hope that you will be able to find time, in your busy life, to continue doing the beta work on this story.

Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 20

Now a professor at Hogwarts, Hermione Granger begins to experience fierce migraines and voices in her head. What is causing these headaches or who?

Hermione Apparated to Hogsmeade and then made her way up the road towards the castle. As she was passing the Shrieking Shack, she decided she had best go in and collect the piece of floor board. It would make it easier, at the castle, to connect with Snape, she reasoned. Eyeing the lengthening shadows, she hurried across the dead expanse of land to the dilapidated structure.

The room was cloaked in shadows when she entered. Using a slicing charm, she severed a square of wood about the size of her hand from the old, brittle floor. The entire fragment was stained a dark reddish-brown.

As she rose to stand, a wave of power caused her to stumble. *Where the hell have you been, Granger!* The voice of Severus Snape filled her head, an irate, frustrated Severus Snape.

Hermione grabbed for the wall as she tried to control her dizziness. She closed her eyes and took deep breaths.

Granger! the nasty voice called.

It made her shudder. *Shut up and give me a moment! If you don't, I'll black out again.* At that, there was a blessed reprieve of silence. She was tired and in pain and really wasn't in the mood to deal with his demanding attitude. Going through some of the techniques that Chance had taught her, she carefully built up shields around her mind, visualizing and focusing her thoughts through a hole in the middle, like a focal point. She was allowing the information in, narrowing it down and projecting it into her mind in a clearer fashion. *I'm ready, but take it slowly,* she finally thought to him.

Where have you been, girl? Snape demanded crossly.

Professor Snape, I am willing to help, but I assure you, you will be treating me with respect. I'm not a girl any more, nor am I your student. I'm your replacement at Hogwarts and a fully qualified Potions master.

Granger, I am fully aware of the fact that ten years of grueling work are required to achieve a mastery in Potions. Ten years which have certainly not passed since I last saw your insufferable self.

With all due respect, Sir, the war changed a lot of things. I was pressed into duty shortly after I took my NEWTs. Professor Slughorn apprenticed me for two years, and I undertook the rest of my classes by correspondence. I assure you, I've covered every bit of material in the syllabus, and much more besides.

I'm sure you did. You knew nearly as much as I did when I was still teaching you.

Hermione was momentarily shocked into mental silence, but quickly recovered. *Was that a compliment?*

No. You were a know-it-all little swot. Forget that, woman, and tell me what you have done to find me.

Hermione huffed with indignation, but was forced to concede the truth of the statement. She left the shack, clutching the small square of wood, her fingers in contact with the dark stain. The connection lessened a tad but remained strong enough to communicate with relative comfort. She hurried away from the shabby ruin, with its creaks and dark windows like accusing eyes, making her skin crawl.

Sir, I've done some research on Muggle computers, trying to narrow down the places you might be in Europe. I have also contacted a Healer at St. Mungos for Occlumency lessons to help me focus your thoughts. Your Legilimancy is somewhat flawed.

Impudent whelp, he snarled, *I am the foremost Legilimens and Occlumens of our time. I fooled the Dark Lord!*

No disrespect meant, sir. I think the muggle drugs are making your focus weak, and you were making me quite ill every time you attempted to communicate with me.

There was a long silence, and Hermione was about to assume he had fallen asleep when she heard him say *My apologies. It has taken me years to focus enough to reach through the haze of drugs. Whenever I show any outward signs of consciousness, they pump more vile substances into me. I shudder to think at what the imbeciles might be doing to my internal organs.*

Hermione felt tears burn her eyes. *I'm sorry, sir. It may take some time to find you. There are many facilities across this continent.*

I understand. The communication seems stronger. Why is that?

Hermione hesitated at the prospect of telling him what she had done.

Out with it, woman, Snape demanded.

I... I went to the Shrieking Shack and took a piece of the blood-stained floor. I have it in my hand! Hermione reluctantly informed him.

Ingenious. He barked. She was not supposed to have heard that. *It seems we may have to come to a truce. Sharing thoughts, as it were, will allow us both insights of each other.*

I would like that, sir. The more co-operation between us, the faster I'll be able to locate you. You must listen carefully. Do you have clues from your carers' conversations? Maybe they have mentioned a nearby restaurant, or a park, or some other kind of landmark? Anything you think might be helpful? Please, you must relate it to me.

Well, my hearing seems affected by the drugs that they give, and their voices are muffled, at best. I will start to focus on them. My information seems to come from smells. When I was a child, I had to endure muggle hospitals on several different occasions. Each time my eyes have been opened, I see only a white ceiling, and then they place moisturizer drops in my eyes. I can't... see through... it. His thoughts became more unfocused, and Hermione was forced to let him go. Her head was beginning to ache, and there was little more he could tell her. He was probably slipping into unconsciousness again.

She hurried up the remainder of the dark road, and after stepping onto the warded grounds of Hogwarts, she lit her wand to show her the way over the uneven ground to the castle doors. Slipping through the doors, she saw Hagrid heading into the Great Hall for dinner. She used a quick charm to clean herself and smooth her robes, and tucked the piece of board into her bag before entering the Great Hall. Hermione caught Poppy's eye and nodded a greeting to her.

Minerva was already seated and Hermione hurried to take her place. "Hermione," she called, "did you enjoy the visit with your parents?"

"Yes, Minerva. Very much, thank you. It made me realize just how much I've missed them. I hope to continue to go and see them on my weekends off."

"A wonderful idea, Hermione - you need more sunlight," the Headmistress insisted. "You've spent too much time holed up in those dungeons."

Hermione took the empty chair next to Poppy. Fortunately they were four chairs down from Minerva, and there was an empty space between them and Sybil Trelawney. Sybil always seemed to be in her own world. Nonetheless, Hermione cast an undetectable silencing charm around them.

Poppy asked anxiously, "How was Chance?" Then she blushed. "I mean, was he able to help you?"

Hermione smiled. "He was in good health and quite a handsome man for his age. He did help a great deal." She told her more details about their visit and the lessons, then about going back to the Shrieking Shack. Finally, she told her about the conversation she and Snape had had. "His communication was so much clearer. He understands that fighting their drugs only makes them give him more. He knows I'm his only hope now. He is becoming more alert, and his thoughts are much more concise - with my new connection and the lessons, I don't think I'll experience as many debilitating side effects. Poppy, I'm so grateful to you for sending me to Healer Leurantte."

"I'm glad he could be of help." The woman looked like she wanted to ask more, but she sighed and kept her peace.

"Chance seemed to be a rather lonely man, particularly with his wife having passed on several years ago," Hermione observed, taking a sip of tea.

"His wife's gone?" Poppy whispered.

"Yes, and his children live abroad. I really think he would welcome a correspondence with you."

Poppy blushed. "Do you really think so, Hermione?"

"Yes, forgive the fact that we discussed you, but he did say he had regrets and he thought you to be a beautiful woman." Poppy stared at her, and Hermione wondered if she would be angry with her.

"Oh, Hermione, thank you! This news is very welcome. But I'm not beautiful anymore." Her fingers stuffed a strand of graying hair back into the confines of her cap.

"You are, Poppy. And if you meet with him, you won't be wearing these robes. You can dress up - have your hair done. I can see that you would be quite fetching if you didn't have these matronly robes on. It's the image you need here to maintain your professionalism, but out there, you can be whoever you were before you took this job. It's time to cut loose the reins this place has on you. Take a chance and go for it!"

"Go for it?" Poppy laughed. "That's a phrase, alright. I'll send a 'Thank You' letter to start with," she said, decisively.

Hermione smiled. "I know he will be very pleased to hear from you again." She removed the silencing spell, and they talked about the potions Poppy needed for her stores.

After dinner, Hermione spent some time setting up for the next day's classes and then retired to her rooms. She took a hot shower before she crawled into bed, tired from the weekend's activities. She smiled, thinking about the visit with her parents, and she thought a lot about Snape and the daunting task ahead of finding him. She questioned the wisdom of keeping it between herself and the two older witches. If she told Harry, she had no doubt the whole Auror division of the Ministry would be put to the task of finding him. But then his re-entrance into the Wizarding World would be very public, and she would not have that. They had no idea how long or difficult his recovery might be. Being able to open only his eyes so far was not encouraging. She had no idea what other parts of his body had been affected by the venom. He had been so long without treatment. She hoped to create some potions that would destroy the residual poisons in his body and allow him to return to consciousness.

Hermione turned toward her bag on the bedside table and opened it, bringing out the piece of wood. She studied its dark stain. It now appeared to be part of the wood. No one seeing it would recognize it as blood. She let a finger slip down the side and thought *Snape?* Only silence met her, and in a few moments her hand, still clutching the wood, dropped to the bed, and she fell asleep.

Curiously, she found herself walking down that stark white hall again, and again she tried to open the doors. She hurried her steps toward the double doors and down the aisle between the many beds. She stood looking down at the visage of her sleeping Professor, and leaning down, she gave him the "Snow White" kiss. She was startled when the Professor on the bed opened his eyes and stared at her.

"Really, Granger, I'm not a prince in a fairy tale, I assure you."

Hermione felt her face heat up. *Oh God, he is in my dream. Furthermore, why am I dreaming such a stupid dream?* She had never been one to care much for fairy tales. Cold hard facts had been her *Modus Operandi* as a child. "One can hardly control 'silly dreams,' and what are you doing in my dream? It is rather personal and an invasion of my privacy," she primly informed him.

"Pardon me," he said with a sneer. "I have little control over when and where I can communicate. Now shut up, you foolish girl, I may not have much time."

Hermione leaned down nearly nose to nose with him. "I've told you, I am not a girl and I will not be abused by you. You will be civil, or I will let the Auror department search you out."

He drew back, pressing himself against the bed. "I am feeling rather desperate here," he said, in the way of an apology. "They could detect my alertness and sedate me again on principle."

Hermione's glare faltered. "Would they do that?"

"It's happened," he informed her.

"But why? Isn't it their goal to wake you up and get you well?" she asked.

"I think there is a different motive here. I detected a few words today. I listened so hard my head ached for hours. I distinctly heard the words... "This one... brings Government money.... Lots of it."

"Those scabs! I will blow that place wide open when I find you." Hermione was outraged.

"My, my, Miss Granger. Quite the hellcat, aren't you?" He had that same nasty voice which he had so often used to complain about Harry.

"Do you want my help or not? Keep a civil tongue in your head."

He glared at her.

"I have to go to a few more lessons in Occlumency," she continued. "During that time I will be brewing some potions that might help you regain consciousness. Also, I am going home on the weekends to search the internet for Muggle facilities within England and then the European continent. I know patience is not...."

He interrupted her, annoyed. "I am a spy; I have patience that would surprise you. I just don't have enough of it to waste it on know-it-alls or dunderheads," he growled at her.

"Well, I'm not seeing it here. You are the most aggravating greasy git!" she spat. If he was going to continue to insult her, despite her warnings, she would not put up with it. She would just insult him right back.

"It's not greasy, woman, it is baby-fine and extra shiny," he argued petulantly. "Potion fumes make it clump." His eyes flashed, showing a deep, age-old hurt from her words.

Was she able to see more of who he really was in the dream realm? After all, they were really connected by thoughts, and in his state it would be harder for him to hide his weaknesses. Seeing him vulnerable forced her to say, "Again I apologize. Can we try hard not to share insults, sir?"

He scowled at her for a moment before huffing and replying, "Agreed. Your plans are well thought out. I will attempt to catch the conversations around me..."

His thoughts faded away and Hermione woke from the dream. She lay there thinking about all they had discussed. Had it been a dream from start to finish or had he really invaded her sleep? It would be a better way to communicate - here in the dream world - actually looking into his face. He was so damned annoying. His few apologies had caught her by surprise. Her theory that he would be more exposed was panning out. She was surprised to find herself pitying this man. All the things he had been forced to endure, under such difficult circumstances, and he had never allowed himself to feel emotion. She had never seen him let his feelings show, except during the memories he had shared with Harry. Those memories had nearly sent her to her knees - the feelings he had had for Lily had made her see him in an entirely different way. She would have to try to separate all those bad encounters she'd had as a child with him and see him more as the man he had hidden away, the man he truly was. He was capable of fierce, never-ending love, and that made him a completely different person from the horrid teacher she'd dealt with for so many years. If she was to work with him, they would have to let the past go.

Work the next day took most of her attention and time. The potion she had assigned her students was a more difficult one for the upper classes, and she had to be constantly alert and watching for mistakes. After dinner she went to the library to look for certain books she remembered noticing as a student, books about herbal strengtheners that might help Snape's condition. She had little doubt that long misuse of prescription drugs would leave him physically impaired. His muscles would have atrophied, leaving his limbs thin and weak. She would have to combine this with a muscle re-growth potion. No matter what, she would have to have time to sneak in and Apparate him out.

For a few nights, she thought about the process of going in for a few nights once she located him and giving him the potions to help regenerate his body tissues before waking him enough to get him out. But then someone might notice the changes and take tests. Could she perform a competent enough Glamour Charm to give the impression that he remained weak and emaciated? There were so many variables to consider. If, by some horrid chance, there were Wizards or Witches involved in keeping him a prisoner... She decided not to worry about something like that now. She could make plans later. How many other people might this place be keeping in vegetative states to collect the money from the government? Was it her responsibility to expose this as well?

I want to thank all the people who have helped get this chapter into the Queue. Lydia, Suzanne, Nicole, and Snowfox. Their suggestions and corrections have helped to shape this chapter into what I hope is excellent condition. Ladies, I appreciate your help. I'd also like to thank writermerrin for her help and patience.

Chapter Five

Chapter 5 of 20

Now a professor at Hogwarts, Hermione Granger begins to experience fierce migraines and voices in her head. What is causing these headaches or who?

That next weekend, she went home again and used the computer in her father's study to make a starting list. There was a facility close to where she lived. She could at least look it over. She didn't expect to find him that close. That would be a miracle, and those were far and few in her life. She'd always had to work very hard for what she had.

She arrived early Saturday morning, moments after the start of visiting hours. She had prepared some documents and had taken on the role of an inspector. It seemed the best way to get a foot in the door without arousing suspicion. She kept her wand concealed in her sleeve in case she had to use the Imperius curse.

She stepped up to the desk of the call nurse on the floor of the comatose patient ward and stood, waiting to be acknowledged. The nurse, a severe-looking, rather large woman, ignored her.

"Ma'am," she said, "I wish to speak to the person in charge."

"I'll be with you in a moment," the woman said, not even looking up.

Hermione fingered her wand but did nothing, waiting another full five minutes. She pulled her papers out and then her transfigured badge. "Ma'am, I do not appreciate being kept waiting. I'm Health Inspector Phyllis McGalleon, from her Majesty's government. I wish to inspect this facility, and I wish to do it now!"

She'd been practicing so that she would have a much sterner voice than the one she'd used when she'd pretended to be Bellatrix. The memory of her performance that day made her mentally shudder.

The woman looked up quickly and took in her suit, the documents, and the badge. She stood immediately. "Inspector, please forgive my delay, I have some vital information I am relating to the different doctors on our severest cases."

Hermione decided to not press the woman's obvious lie. "Well, if you could call your director, I would be pleased to get on with this inspection. I have several more places to visit today."

"Right away, Inspector." She picked the phone up and, after pushing a few buttons, spoke into it, explaining Hermione's intent. As she put the phone down, she said, "The director will be with you in a few moments."

A man came from an office a few doors down the hall. He was straightening his tie, and he ran his fingers through his hair. "Inspector," he called as he came closer. "I am director Herald Goodman. If you like, I can take you on a tour personally."

Hermione held out her hand and they shook hands. "Mr. Goodman, or is it Doctor Goodman?"

He smiled. "Doctor."

"Well, then, Doctor Goodman, it is good of you to offer to take me personally. Your facility seems to be in top condition from what I can see from here." The halls were gleaming white, and the floor shone like glass.

"Come this way and we will get started." He gestured for her to walk with him. "I think you will find we run a state-of-the-art facility here."

"Please, tell me about it," she prompted as they left the annoyed nurse behind.

"We have on this floor 50 beds of which 39 are filled. We are a long-term facility on this floor and must take care of all the patients needs on a 24-hour basis. There are no fewer than 23 staff members here at one time. Many of our patients need constant monitoring and physical care. We have a physical therapy staff that also runs around the clock. Even at night, the patients must be turned, extremities manipulated to maintain circulation."

Hermione said, "I will need to make a count and see each patient."

"Of course." He stopped at a door. "This room holds five patients and has at least two nurses in the room at all times. Please, go on in. I will go back to my office and get you a printout of all the patients in our facility for your own records." He opened the door and informed the duty nurse of her purpose then excused himself.

Hermione stepped confidently into the room, though her heart was beating rapidly against her chest. The room was fairly bright. A soft music issued from ceiling speakers. There were sounds of the hiss and wheezes of machines, breathing life into the unconscious patients and checking their vitals. Two beds lined one side of the room and three on the other. One of the two beds had larger machines using up extra space. There was a space of four feet between each one giving plenty of work space. Hermione could see that this place was run with care and concern. Even now a nurse at the other end was brushing a sleeping woman's long dark hair. The woman talked to her patient as if she was awake and listening. Perhaps she could hear. Many comatose patients were known to report having heard music and conversations upon their awakenings.

Hermione nodded to the other nurse and wandered in and out among the beds. She appeared to be studying the machines and IV drips. She made notes but she was really searching the faces of the patients and found this room housed only women.

She quickly made her way through the room, and then as she neared the door, Doctor Goodman appeared. "Well, what do you think of this first room?"

"It's very well maintained and your staff is quite caring," she told the man.

He smiled. "You will find every room maintained in the same manner. I hire only people who want to be here. We have no abuse in this facility."

"How is your facility funded? Do you have private families paying for their loved ones care, or is this a government run facility?" She feigned interest by peaking into a door. It proved to be a therapy room.

"This facility is not a government owned hospital; we are an exclusive private hospital. Our clients are quite rich, and their families want the best for them." He frowned a bit. "Don't you have a list to tell you which places are private?"

Hermione didn't cringe but lied, "I'm sorry. I ran out of my office without that page. My secretary told me to get it from the printer and I was distracted."

"Of course. We all get distracted from time to time." He relaxed and the suspicion left his face.

Hermione followed him down the hall, rolling her eyes at her stupidity. She should have found that out beforehand. Of course an inspector would know.

"Doctor Goodman, in this facility would you ever get patients that are John Does? None of your patients are unidentified?"

This earned her another odd look. "No, you would have to go to a public facility to find such a patient."

"I see," she said, "I thought as much. I just wanted to know if you would take in such a patient."

"I believe we have had one or two emergency cases over the years: people we have stabilized and sent elsewhere. But nothing since I came here, and it's been a number of years now."

They went through the last ward.

"I have been here seven years," he told her as they exited the room.

So, she could cross this place off for clues to Snape's whereabouts.

"Doctor Goodman, this facility is in top shape; you must be very proud of your staff," she said as they shook hands once more at the main door.

He smiled and said, "Thank you, Inspector. Perhaps we will see each other again someday."

She said, "Perhaps we will." She turned and went through the door and out onto the street. Taking a deep breath of the cool air, she let it out slowly. The rooms full of silent people had unnerved her, and this hospital took extremely good care of their patients, but what of Snape in a facility where they kept him unconscious with medications so he couldn't wake, what of his care and for that matter, all the many others who were probably there? Her eyes burned with tears as she ducked into an alley and Apparated to her parent's house.

Her mother was sitting in the garden as she appeared in the yard. She scrubbed at her eyes with the sleeve of the jacket she wore.

"Hermione! What's wrong?" Her mother came quickly, enfolding her into her arms.

Hermione let her cheek rest against her mother's shoulder for a bit, then pulled away. "Sorry, I'm exhausted and still have so much more to do this weekend."

Her mother took her face into her hands and made her look at her. "Tell me what's wrong. I know it's wizarding business, but I'm still good at listening. You are my daughter and I want to help you."

Hermione turned away, running her hand through her hair. "Alright, Mom, but I want to change first."

Hermione lay down on her bed. Her head ached from tears and frustration. Her mother had listened and was very supportive. She'd told her that she was doing the right

thing.

Hermione turned over and plumped the pillow and then reached over and took the piece of wood from the drawer. An idea occurred to her. She retrieved her wand from the top of her dresser and carefully transfigured the wood into a bottle of polished wood. She got a chain from her childhood jewelry box and strung the chain through the top of the pendant and placed it around her neck. The chain was long; she knew she would be able to touch the bottle when necessary, yet no one would think it strange if she touched the small pendant on her chain. They might, however, have questioned her touching a small chunk of wood.

She touched the bottle, running her thumb over the wood as she slipped into sleep.

Again she found herself in the white corridor. Was this the actual corridor of the hospital he was in? Had he seen it with open eyes when he'd arrived, or was this all her imagination? She decided to look a little more closely at her surroundings, but found she was only staring at the ceiling and watching the lights flash past. She was on a gurney being pushed down the hallway. There were no details to catch. She now found herself in the darkened room of beds full of patients. She moved slowly to the bed where Snape lay.

"Granger." His voice behind her startled her.

She looked into his comatose face and then up at him standing beside her. He was dressed in his teaching robes. "Sir."

He stared at his own unconscious face. "This is becoming more bizarre. I'd guess I'm looking through your eyes."

"I suppose so, sir," she said, turning to him. "I visited the first facility today. Just to get an idea of what to expect. It was easy to get in and out but quite unnerving."

"Silence of near death can be emotional," he said, looking back down into his own silent face.

She turned to study his face. There was no anger, no disapproval, and no resentment on his face. He looked younger, much like his relaxed comatose face. She was surprised to find he was handsome in his own way. She suddenly realized Snape was studying her face. She felt her face burn with embarrassment, remembering he could read her thoughts at this time.

"I would question your sanity," he said with a raised eyebrow.

She shook her head. "I might question my own. This whole thing is crazy, and yet here I am with you and you haven't even insulted me tonight."

"It would hardly be conducive to your good will, Miss Granger. I need help, and as you are the one who has come to help, I must be grateful."

"Thank you, Professor," she said quietly.

"I am not your professor anymore," he answered.

"Mr. Snape, then," she said.

"Make it Severus. Mr. Snape was my father and I despised the man." The old anger covered his face again.

"I'm sorry. Severus, it is. I suppose you should call me Hermione. After all, I am no longer your student."

He allowed a slight smile to bend his lips. "I can see that quite well for myself."

Hermione stared at him and felt her face heat up again. She turned away to cover her blush and stared down into his sleeping face. "Are you in any pain?"

"No, none that I can detect at this time. When I am awake, I can feel a tightness about my neck."

They both bent down to look at the sleeping Snape's neck. A few lines of puckered skin where Nagini had struck him marred his neck. It was red but showed no signs of a raw, festering wound.

Snape straightened and stepped back. "This place is as quiet as a tomb. Only the machines make sounds."

"They played music for the patients I saw today. The nurses talked to them as if they were awake," she told him, walking over to where he was.

"I hear a word now and then. I feel rough hands on me as I am taken care of. There is little kindness here."

Hermione instinctively reached out and touched his arm.

He pulled back as if stung.

"I'm sorry," she said, coughing in embarrassment.

"No, I'm sorry. Touch is something that usually hurts. It's instinct."

Tears burned in Hermione's eyes for the raw child-like hurt in his eyes.

He frowned and snarled. "I don't need your pity, girl. Get out of here!"

Hermione found herself sitting in bed, clutching her blanket, her tears hot and running down her face. She flopped back on her pillow, grabbed another one, and clutched it to her like a large teddy bear. It had not been pity, only comfort she'd wanted to give him. *Damn the man!* she thought. *I suppose he can't help himself. I have no idea the hell he's lived. How will I get him to accept my help without thinking I have a motive or that I only feel pity? Doesn't he know what an amazing man he has been all these years? He had taken so much pain and hurt because of a promise to a childhood crush, maybe his one and only love. His sacrifice was the only reason Harry was alive to get to the end and destroy Voldemort.*

I have to get him to see he is worth so much more than he believes himself to be was a daunting task. She turned to her side, still clutching the pillow, and finally fell back to sleep.

Returning to Hogwarts late on Sunday, she came in time for the evening meal. Here amongst her colleagues and the school, she felt the weight of the stone castle comforting, and she let the magic of it soothe her nerves. She could not dwell on Snape much during the week. She had students to teach and papers to grade. There was a Quidditch game on Saturday, and Gryffindor was playing Slytherin. There wasn't the same bitter rivalry there had been before the war. Students mingled more, but there was still a house pride, and she hoped her house team would win.

She took some time in the evenings to study the papers she'd printed out. She did make a plan about which hospital comatose ward she would visit. She also looked into the wizarding world. Was it possible someone had him secreted away? She really didn't think so, but she thought she might go to St. Mungo's and talk to Healer Leurante about it to see if he knew of any other places that kept spell-damaged patients. She wanted to make sure no stone was left unturned. Maybe Snape's caretakers were Squibs and not Muggles.

Saturday found her in one of the Gryffindor towers, cheering on the players like a school girl. Minerva sat a few seats away and watched her with amusement. She'd been

worried about the young woman. Her face had seemed haunted lately, and she never looked rested. Was this job too much for her? There was no doubt Hermione had always been driven by her own self to complete more than anyone else. But, she thought that was a good quality. She was beginning to wonder. The woman had been going home most weekends lately, but seemed less rested each time she returned. The snitch was caught, and Minerva cheered with the rest of them. Her concern fading at the sight of Hermione's smiles and cheers.

Hermione walked along the banks of the Black Lake later than night. Her cloak was pulled tightly around her. She reached up with her fingers to caress the smooth wooden bottle. This had been the first night this week she'd had some time for a conversation. Well, if truth be known, she'd been avoiding him. His displeasure and anger had made her gun shy.

Severus, are you there? she called.

Hermione. His voice was controlled and benign.

She wrapped her arms about herself. *I'm sorry...*

No, he broke in, the fault was mine. I misread. You offered comfort.

She nodded, then realizing he wasn't seeing her right now, said, *Yes.*

He was silent for so long she thought maybe he had gone to sleep. She jumped when his voice came back. *I am... unaccustomed to anyone caring whether I live or die. I assumed you felt forced under these circumstances to help me. It did not occur to me that you... want... to help.*

Severus, I do want to help. It's true, I would help anyone. But, you are... She hesitated to tell him something she'd only been toying with in her own heart. *... important to me. I want to be your friend. I have never met a man who could teach me so much, carry on a conversation with me and not just nod because half of what I say would not be within your understanding.* Hermione was surprised when she heard a deep chuckle in her mind.

You have finally found that the knuckleheads can't keep your mind engaged, he said with a dead pan drawl.

Hermione laughed, letting him know she saw he was joking with her. *That's exactly right. When I find you, I hold you to having dinner with me at least once a month and letting me talk to my heart's desire.*

Again a silence and then his voice whispered, *What is your heart's desire, Hermione?*

Hermione felt him slip out of her mind, and she stood staring at the Black Lake, her heart pounding against her chest and her face flamed red. What had he seen in her mind?

She passed by the greenhouse on her way back to the castle and told Pamona that Severus had talked to her and she'd found him quite pleasant tonight.

As she slipped into her bed that night, his voice came back to her thoughts *What is your heart's desire, Hermione?* It made her shiver. Had he been teasing her, or was it possible he was flirting with her? She fell asleep, wondering if she would welcome his flirting.

Suzanne, thank you for your Brit picking. I appreciate your help.

Merrin, I am so blessed to have you volunteer to be my beta. I can't tell you how honored I am and how relieved to have such an expert. Thank you, so much.

Chapter Six

Chapter 6 of 20

Now a professor at Hogwarts, Hermione Granger begins to experience fierce migraines and voices in her head. What is causing these headaches or who?

Saturday found Hermione touring another London hospital. This one had many patients; most were in rehab people with traumatic brain injuries who were fighting their way back to health with physical therapy and physiological counseling. There was only one ward with patients who were comatose. These people had high brain functions. Some of them were just barely unconscious people who would eventually wake. Again the facility was clean, and the people seemed to care for their patients with kindness and respect. Hermione left the hospital with a bit of depression. She had known that finding Snape here was unlikely, but she wanted to look and she had hoped.

Hermione had not talked to him. Each time she closed her eyes, she would hear his tease, *What is your heart's desire, Hermione?* His voice had had that sexy deep quality she had dreamed of when she was a teenager. Snape, although he was the greasy git and bat of the dungeon, had captured her thoughts when she had been in her fifth year of schooling. He was such a brilliant man, and that, above anything else, had captured her attention. She also liked watching his hands as he prepared the ingredients during class demonstrations. He had long, thin fingers but really strong hands. They moved swiftly over the ingredients; chopping, crushing, and mixing with such dexterity.

His words the other night had changed him from that older professor to a man who had desires like she did... or did it? Had he been playing her? The fact that he had teased her at all made her wonder what sort of man he really was. As her teacher, he had been a terse, nasty, vindictive man. But here in her dreams, he seemed more vulnerable. He did say he needed her. She closed her eyes as Apparition took her back to her parents' home. Hermione had not felt needed by anyone in a very long time.

She and Ron had broken up after the war. Their short relationship had seemed to burn out quickly, once the heat and fear of the war had ended. They grew further and further apart as Ron and Harry had left to become Aurors, and she had been left in the big house all alone with just Kreacher for company. He had come to their defense during the war, and she would always be grateful. She was surprised at his knowledge, and she had learned from him. He seemed quite sad when she had taken the job at Hogwarts. She did write him occasionally and send him a treat or two on occasion. She always made it a point to spend some time with him in the kitchen when she went to visit for holidays.

She had lunch with her mother, had another session with Dr. Leurante then Apparated to a different hospital a bit farther from the city.

This facility was public, and she found it quite different. It was understaffed, a bit darker and in need of repairs. The rooms of silent patients had an odor of decay. The staff looked exhausted, and she saw some real concern for their patients, but they were just overworked and had little time to brush hair or even talk to those people under their care. Hermione was allowed to roam wherever she pleased, because the director was quite busy he had said. She walked each room, searching the faces of the patients. Some had had terrible head injuries but somehow hung on to this non-life. The place made her want to cry, and she held on to her emotions by sheer force of will. At one point she had reached for the pendant, just to feel the silkiness of the soft wood. She had found it comforting like a worry stone. She pulled her fingers back at the last moment. Now would not be the time to have him talk to her.

She left the place in the late afternoon and came back to her parents' house. Begging the need for a shower, she had gone into the bathroom turned on some music and the water and cried, laying her cheek against the smooth, cold tiled wall and letting near scalding hot water wash the pain away.

She was quiet at dinner, and her father asked her about her day. She told him she had had more lessons with Healer Leurante. He was a man who had many insecurities, and he would worry about her going to these places under false pretenses. "It was exhausting," she said, sitting back in her chair and pushing the half eaten plate of food away.

"Hermione, don't try to protect me, I know you're already visiting the hospitals. I use that computer too. I'm a nosey old dad. I looked at the history."

"I'm sorry, Daddy, I didn't want to worry you."

"I already knew you were going to be looking for Professor Snape. It's stands to reason you will need some sort of identification and a reason to get in. Come on, girl, out with it."

Harris Granger stood and took Hermione's hand. He pulled her with him to the living room and sat on the couch and patted the space next to himself. Her mother had followed them in.

Hermione smiled and climbed in next to him. As a child, when she'd had a concern, her father had tucked her into his side there on that couch, and she had poured her heart out. She told him about the day and the patients. It made her cry again. But she felt safe here now, next to him and her mother, who had taken one of her hands.

Hermione sat for a long moment just breathing in the scent of her parents, the Old Spice of her father and the jasmine of her mother. She felt like a child again, wrapped in the warm safety of their arms. She told her father more about Severus and the connection they had in her mind. She dangled the pendant in front of him so he could see the rare quality of the stained wood. It didn't seem to bother him that his daughter was carrying a blood-stained piece of wood.

"Hermione, what you're doing is very noble. This man will have a second chance at life, and when you find him, you may find what you also have been looking for: a brilliant conversationalist, among other things. I am concerned about who he was in the past, but you tell me your world has accepted him for the hero he was. So, that is comforting. These are, after all, hospitals and not government installations you're sneaking into. You have your wand handy. You should be relatively safe." He got up and went to a small wood box on a side table and pulled out a black, touch screen cell phone. "I want you to take this with you. Conceal it under your clothing, if something comes up, you can call for help. I dare say with your abilities it shouldn't be necessary, but humor me."

Hermione took the phone and slipped it into her jeans pocket. She had been meaning to get one. At Hogwarts, she could put a stasis field around it to protect it from battery drainage when she was there. "Thanks, Dad. I will feel better with this." She gave her father a hug.

Hermione laid her head in his lap, and her mother stretched her legs over hers. She felt such comfort. It had been a couple of weeks since she had cuddled up with them. She looked into the fire that warmed them, and then she fell asleep. She woke in the middle of the night and smiled as she saw now the dying embers of the fire place and felt the familiar knitted blanket covering her. She reached instinctively for the pendant, and the moment she touched it, she felt him. She closed her eyes and let sleep take her. She yearned to see him tonight.

She found herself in a small garden. Snape was sitting in a chair by a small table, reading.

She walked closer. "What is this place?" she asked, confused.

"Somewhere I escape to now and then when I am lucid enough to dream," he said, laying the book carefully on the table. He looked up at her. "Your progress?" There was no smile but also no anger. He was starting to accept her and the situation more for what it was.

Hermione came to stand before him, and she looked about for another chair. One appeared, so she pulled it around and sat facing him. There was about a foot of space between them. "I visited a couple hospitals today. One was mostly recovering brain injured patients and a few who were close to regaining their consciousness. The other place was a public facility." She felt tears burn at her eyes. "It was difficult to see so many in those conditions. The money is just not there for the care they deserve. And the place is in ill repair... I wonder..." She stopped and their eyes made contact.

"You wonder if I am in such a place," he finished for her. "In all likelihood, I am... a ward of the state." He stood and turned his back to her, finding her tears disquieting, remembering a time when he had badgered her to tears in his classroom.

She had come to stand near him. "Severus," she said, touching his arm.

He looked down at the small, delicate fingers there and felt the warmth of them. It all seemed so real.

"I will find you; you have my word," she said, squeezing his arm in reassurance.

He found himself touched by her determination. There were times in the last years he had felt so horribly alone that he had wished for death many times. Before he even realized it, he had covered her fingers with his other hand. "I know you will, I know of no one else I trust to keep their word than you, Hermione Granger." His eyes bore into hers.

She saw a gentleness there. *Was this a dream state? Or was this the real Severus?*

He bent to whisper into her ear, "This is as real as it gets for me." His breath was warm on her ear.

With a shiver Hermione woke with a moan of protest. He had slipped away again, taking his lovely little garden with him. She pulled a pillow against her chest and held on. She tried to chastise herself. She could not develop feelings for him. Who knew if the real Severus would ever truly be awake and functioning? She might find the man locked in his own brain. Maybe his wakefulness and his being drugged was a figment of his unconscious mind struggling for freedom. She felt hot tears run down her cheeks. She had had no idea she could feel so much for him. She knew it was not pity. She wanted to help him; at the very least, she wanted his friendship and maybe his approval that she was worthy to be befriended. She had tried so hard to win his approval as a child, and he had treated her with such disdain. But she had always known if she won his friendship and, dare she hope, his love, he would be worth all the tears and anger spent in his direction. For when Severus Snape loved, he would face the devil for you. She drifted off to sleep.

Monday morning found her back in her classroom teaching. She had to force her frustration with lost time searching into the back of her mind and do her job. She always made sure the pendant rested on her shirt under her robe or the outside of her nightwear.

She still had to take a deep breath, and plunge in, not sure if she would find him awake. The few times she had tried and he had not been there, it disappointed her so much she had refused to touch the pendant for several nights only to find him annoyed that she had left him alone so long. He seemed moodier and moodier as the week went by, some nights refusing to talk to her, only demanding details of her progress in finding him. When she explained she had not been able to go home on the weekend because of Hogsmeade duty, he had turned away, refusing to talk to her.

The next week she worked through Wednesday before she reached for the pendant again. She had dressed for bed and was snuggled under her covers. She liked the

dream connection the best. She liked being able to see him and feel him on the rare occasions they touched. She tried to figure out how that worked, but she gave up trying and just enjoyed it. "Severus?" she called.

She found herself in a dark room; there was a window looking out into a dark moonlit night. Her eyes adjusted to the dim light, and she saw that he was sitting in the dark, facing the windows. "Severus?" she called again, moving closer to him.

He did not turn or say anything, and she knew he was again upset that she had not contacted him earlier this week. She stood behind him, and she reached over the chair and touched his shoulder. He was taut and rigid.

"Am I only a hobby to you?" he asked, a touch of bitterness lacing his tone. "Will this take years? I was alone in my own hell before, Hermione. I had only myself and my wits about me. Now you come, bringing hope. Each minute I am here alone now, it feels like the entire time I was alone, each moment an eternity. I have been alone all my life. You would think I could handle it. But this aloneness has become unbearable since you came."

He slumped forward. She felt his shoulders shudder, and she released him and moved around, dropping to her knees to face him. She clutched at his hands that lay silent in his lap. "I'm sorry, Severus. This is hard for both of us, and I have my job...." The excuse tasted bitter on her tongue.

"I cannot be alone," he said again desperately, and she felt a tear drop on her hand.

Oh Merlin, I never expected this. I never expected him to fall apart. His pain tore at her. She rose up and put her arms around him, and he shuddered again and sighed. He did not cry anymore but just held on for dear life.

Finally, he pushed her away stood and walked over to the window. She now saw it was a sliding door. It was odd; there were no sliding doors in the Wizarding world. He opened it, and she followed him out into the moonlight.

"I'm sorry," he said softly.

"No, Severus, don't be. Tell me how I can make this better. I can't be here with you like this all the time. I have to be in contact with the wood. I can't teach and hang on to the wood all day and night." An idea occurred to her. "I could go to Minerva and ask to be released from my job. Explain what's happening. She could get a substitute until you are found."

"No, I cannot face more people knowing until I know if I can recover. Minerva already blames herself for a lot of things concerning me, and then there is Pamona. I will not have them come and cry over my near-dead body," he stated between tightly clamped teeth.

"Severus, these people love you..."

"NO!! If you will not do what I want, then leave me and never come back."

Hermione felt the tears sting her eyes, and she wanted to scream at him, but he had already lost control. If she pushed him, he would block her out and she would lose her connection to him. *Damn this stubborn man!*

She forced him to look at her. "I will do what you want, Severus. Tell me what to do."

She saw his pain flash in his eyes, pain and hope again. He was so unaccustomed to letting anyone see his emotion, maybe even admitting to himself he had it, that this display was unnerving him. She reached for him, but he cringed back. So she stood, not sure what to do or say... finally she just stated again. "I will find you; I will not stop until I do." She turned to look out over the darkness. The moonlight illuminated tree tops. They were in some sort of forest.

It seemed like an hour but was probably only minutes before he came to stand behind her and rest his chin against her shoulder for a moment. "I know you will, Hermione," he said quietly in her ear.

She fought the urge to reach up and caress his hair. And then she heard him suck in a deep breath and remembered he could hear her thoughts. So she thought *What the hell*. She reached up and slipped her hand up to the crown of his head and ran her hand down soft, fine hair. She was surprised when a hand slid around her waist and drew her close against his body. "Severus," she whispered.

She was about to turn her face to his when strange grating voices penetrated their little retreat.

"This one's awake, Sam." The voice had an Australian accent.

"Give him a good dose. He's been waking up too much. I got to meet my girl, and I don't have time to deal with this one," the voice said.

"But he's wakin' up. Ain't that a good thing?" the other voice asked.

"Damn it, Corey, just give it to him. He's a derelict. It won't kill him, just make it harder for him to wake again. The government has to pay for him to be here. This place needs that money. We need our jobs. Now give it to him."

Hermione turned in Severus arms, and his eyes were wide with fear. "Come for me, Hermione, come for me. I will still be there...." He vanished from her arms like a vapor.

"Severus!" she screamed, bolting up in the bed, tears leaving silvery streaks down her face.

She clutched the wooden pendant in her hand, but she felt nothing. He was not there. Was he unconscious? She pulled her robes on and flew down the halls toward the infirmary.

"Poppy!" she called frantically as she entered the room. It was late, and she ran to the mediwitch's private door and banged on it. "Poppy!" Scared for Severus, she was crying when Poppy opened her door.

Poppy's hair tucked haphazardly under her cap, she cried out "What, what is the emergency? Oh, Hermione dear, what has happened?" She grabbed Hermione about the waist and guided her into her private parlor.

Hermione couldn't even talk until Poppy gave her a small dose of a Calming Draught.

"They drugged him and we were just starting to talk. He's been so depressed and angry lately. He was so close...." She stopped and turned a bit red, taking a gulp of tea that Poppy had also given her.

"Close? What are you talking about? Can you feel him in your dreams?"

"Yes," Hermione said slowly. Then she saw the light dawn in Poppy's eyes. "You're not falling in love with him are you?" The woman had reached for her hand and patted it with compassion.

"He's so vulnerable, and he lets me touch him on occasion. He shares feelings with me. He was just opening up to me." Hermione unconsciously ran her finger over her stomach where his hand and slid to gather her close. She was sure he had been about to kiss her.

Poppy's eyes grew wide, and it made her heart patter to think that this young slip of a woman had gotten to the heart of the fierce Potions master. She hoped the fates

would find a way to let Hermione bring Severus home. She cautioned the young woman. "Real life may be far different than dreams, Hermione, guard your heart. He needs you now. He may not feel so open once he regains his own life."

Hermione nodded. "I know, Poppy. I am trying to talk some sense into myself, but I'm finding him so intriguing. I feel more alive with him in our dream life than I do in my real world."

They talked some more until Hermione had calmed enough to go back to her quarters.

"Take it slow," Poppy said. "Keep telling yourself this is just a dream."

"But it's more than just a dream, Poppy, because the man with me is really Severus Snape," Hermione reminded her.

"Yes, so he is. He's a very complicated man with a lot of baggage, my dear. Just guard your heart."

"I will try. Thank you for listening to me, I really needed to talk to someone about him."

"Hermione, why don't you change your tactics? Go to the police officials and ask about missing persons. You can always use a Confundus charm on them if they seem uncooperative. There should be records of Severus having been put into a facility."

Hermione gasped. "I should have thought of that! Thank you again, Poppy. It will give me a new direction."

"Oh, and Hermione, let the pendant touch your skin." She touched her heart and breast area. "Here. It will give Severus a sense of you at all times. When he wakes again, he won't feel so desperate."

Hermione walked back to her rooms, her fingers caressing the pendant. Only silence met her thoughts. She had always guarded her privacy. What Poppy was suggesting would take it all from her. When he woke, he would know everything she thought and felt about him. Yet, how could Hermione deny him that peace of mind? She slipped the pendant down under her shirt and felt it come to rest between her breasts. "I will find you," she whispered again as she neared the door to her quarters.

WriterMerrin, I can't tell you how happy and relieved I am to have you as my beta. I am so grateful.

Thank you, Suzanne, for your beta work and Brit picking.

Chapter Seven

Chapter 7 of 20

Now a professor at Hogwarts, Hermione Granger begins to experience fierce migraines and voices in her head. What is causing these headaches or who?

Hermione stood at the door to Scotland Yard and tried to steady her nerves. She had come earlier and watched the door for a while under a Disillusionment Charm just to get the feel of the officers that entered the door. Some of them seemed quite serious, while others joked with each other. Others still groaned at the early hour and gulped cups of coffee to wake themselves up. Hermione waited until the shift change was over, and then she hid around the corner behind a dumpster and became visible. She had a Glamour Charm on, one she was quite shocked to see in the mirror when she had finished casting the spells. She wore long black hair, and her skin was rather pale, her nose a bit more pronounced. She had decided she should masquerade as Severus' daughter. After all, who else but a family member would look for him after all this time? Her age made it more believable than a wife. She had photoshopped pictures of herself in the disguise with Severus. She looked a bit Goth: dark makeup and black baggy clothing. As herself, no one would believe she was his daughter. The idea of playing his daughter made her uncomfortable, but her mother assured her this was the best plan. She checked her sleeve again for her wand and entered the door, sauntering confidently up to the main desk.

A man in his fifties looked her over and scowled. "What do you want?" He was used to picking kids up of her caliber, not finding them coming to him.

"Sir, I'm lookin' for my father. He's been a missing like nigh six years or more. I been to a number of countries." The slang made her cringe inwardly, but it was all part of the charade.

"Six years, that's a long time. What make you think he's here in Her Majesty's kingdom?"

She shrugged and scratched her head. "Don't. It's another place I haven't looked."

"Go away, girl. I haven't got time for this joke. Why would a slip of a girl like you be looking all this time for her dad?"

Hermione had been prepared to give him an emotional scene. She covered her face with one hand. "Please. I'm so tired of looking, but he's got to be hurt. He was a good dad, and he just vanished on a trip. He was despondent when my mum died, and I came home one day and he was gone." She sniffled and let him see the tears brimming in her eyes. "He left a note, said he had gone to get his head straight, and he never came back. Local authorities found his car in an Italian airport parking garage..." She drew out falsified documents and newspaper articles with the story and dates from the war. The picture of her as a child with Severus was there.

The officer took them and studied them. He gave her a more sympathetic look. "Well, Miss, he's a lucky man to have a daughter so persistent. You're sure took after him. What makes you think he's still alive?"

"A feeling, sir." She touched her chest, feeling the chain of the bottle there. "I know it in my heart. Maybe he's forgotten who he is or is in hospital. Look, sir, all I want is to look at your unidentified persons files." She let the tears spill out and run down her face.

"Now see here, missy, no need to cry." He grabbed a tissue from a box on his desk and handed it to her.

"Thank you," she sobbed as she mopped at her face, black makeup smearing down her cheeks, making her look even sadder.

"I got books and books and books of pictures of people in hospitals and homes. You have no idea how many turn up lost and near dead about that time. There was some weird thing happenin', and no one knew what to make of it. But it passed. It will take hours for you to look. They are pictures from all of Europe. I know you been other places, but these are the latest books."

Hermione looked at him gratefully. "I have all day, sir," she said with a thankful smile.

The man took her to a small room; it had only a chair and a table. He showed her in and left her.

Ten minutes later he returned with his arms weighted down with photo books. He dumped them rather unceremoniously. "Bloody things are damn heavy," he said, huffing a bit.

She said, "Thank you," and grabbed the first one, eager to get started.

"I'm Inspector Mayfield," he introduced himself finally. "Let me know when you want a break or need some water or coffee. There's a buzzer on the door."

She nodded and opened the first book.

He stood there and she finally looked up. "The green ones contain the unidentified dead. I'm afraid some of the photos are quite grizzly." He seemed to want to apologize to her.

She glanced at the book and swallowed. "I hope it won't be necessary." She let more tears fill her eyes. She had been using the memories of Severus' tears from the last time she had seen him to affect her emotions, so that she would look scared and small. She knew what had caused all the mysterious disappearances and foggy memories he had spoken of earlier. Death Eaters had thought it funny to damage Muggle brains. There were many spell-damaged people in Muggle hospitals, and only a few Muggleborn Wizards and Witches who were carefully searching them out to see if they could help. It had been years, and still so many were yet to be helped. She had found this out only a few weeks ago while looking through some papers in the ministry library. The revelation had surprised her, and she carefully searched over the list of those recorded as helped or left, as they were beyond help. There had been no Severus Snape. If he had been found by a Muggleborn Wizard or Witch, he might have been left to rot. Not everyone believed Harry's story.

Hermione searched the names and faces of those in the pictures. So many lost and tortured people you could see it in their eyes. Haunted, not knowing who they were. Then there were those in facilities who lay upon beds as Severus was. Eyes closed, faces at rest. She would not think of them at peace, as they too were lost to this world.

She stared at the faces, hoping to recognize someone. So many witches and wizards had vanished in the war, never to be seen again, assumed dead. Once she found Severus, she would suggest to the Aurors that they conduct searches of these sorts of institutions for spell-damaged missing.

Hermione took a break when Inspector Mayfield brought her a coffee and a sandwich at about 2 p.m. She tried looking faster; she really did not want to have to come back again. She touched her chest every now and then, begging Severus to speak to her, telling him she was there looking. She had not heard from him since he had been drugged, and it was frightening her out of her mind. Three days of silence, three days of her begging and calling to him to speak to her. She was becoming more nervous as each page went by and she did not see him. A few faces made her heart lurch initially. Men with long black hair, but she could see once she focused on them that they were not him, and her heart sank. She was half way through the last book when she turned the page, blinking wearily from fatigue, when a face swam before her eyes. She shook her head, tears swimming in her eyes, distorting her view. It was probably another man, another lost soul, but she rubbed at her eyes with the back of her hand and refocused, a gasp issuing forth. There he was, his raven black hair fanned across the pillow! His neck was swathed in new bandages. Of course his throat had been gravely damaged by Nagini's bite. He had a cut across his cheek, and his face was deathly white, his nose pronounced.

She gasped again as Severus' voice called in such a slow low tone she nearly missed him. *Hermione?*

Severus! she thought back. *Oh, thank God, you're alive! I've been so frightened.* She looked about the page for some information to his whereabouts. There was only a code.

Are you okay? I heard you screaming my name. I was in such a black, lost place. Your voice came like a light in a tunnel, and I followed. Severus said, his voice getting stronger.

Severus, I've found you. At least I have a lead. She explained where she was. Hermione could feel his relief and tears. *Severus, you must remain as still as possible. Please, don't give them reason to drug you. It's very dangerous for you to have been asleep for three days. You must stay as still as possible, keep your blood pressure readings normal. If anything alerts them to your consciousness, they will drug you again.*

She felt him breathing steadily through his nose. Soon he said, *I am waiting for you to come, Hermione. Please hurry.*

Hermione ran to the door and hit the buzzer a number of times.

The Inspector came in a hurry. "What's happenin', Lassy? What's all the ruckus about?"

"I found him!" she cried. "I found him!" She grabbed the man's arm and dragged him to the table. "This man, number 1228, book 23. This is him this is S..amuel Smith... my father." She grabbed the book and held it to her chest. "Oh, my God, I found him, I found him!" The emotions were real, and it staggered her; she felt faint. She had been looking now for months. She sat back heavily into her chair and felt the room around her spin.

"Lassy, Lassy!" she heard the Inspector calling to her. "Here, drink this water."

Hermione took the glass with shaking hands, steadying them enough to drink the water. She found it cold and reviving. She took a shuddering breath. "Please, go find out where he is, please," she begged. "I cannot wait another minute, sir, please!"

The man nodded and took the book, leaving her in the small room with the stacks of other books.

Hermione collapsed on the table, her face buried in her arms. "Severus, I'm coming soon, please, wait for me."

Severus' voice came back, *I am waiting....* There was a pause and he asked, *Hermione, why do you sort of look like me?* He had seen her reflection on the shiny table when she had buried her face.

Hermione froze mid sob. *I... I told... them I was your daughter,* she stammered. *Please, don't read anything into that; it was the only way to persuade them to help me. I do not and have never wanted to have a father/daughter relationship.*

I should hope not... I would be disappointed...

Officer Mayfield came back; he had a computer print out in his hand.

Hermione took it and scanned the words on the page. "Attacked and robbed... throat lacerated... brain deprived of oxygen... assigned to Government facility... Shadowlane, Ireland," she read from the piece of paper. She was distressed when his location settled in her mind. "Ireland, my God, that's a long way away. I need to see him now!" Hermione cried.

"Lassy, you need some help. Why, I'd say we got a lot of good officers here, and if we passed the hat, we could well send you on your way."

Hermione looked at him through her tears. "I'd pay you back every cent. Once my Dad's up and about, we can both work." She knew she did not really need the money. She could get a portkey, and it would take her close by, but this man would not understand that. She would return the money. She could see he was now looking at her with pity. He had read the report; he saw the words *'brain damage'* as well as she did. He thought she would just go there to find a body in a bed on life support. He had no

clue that she was armed with potions that would give Severus nearly, if not all, his functions back. Nor did he know Severus' mind was nearly healed, that he was capable of complex thought, and that his body was on the verge of waking, if only he was allowed to.

"Well, I will go see what I can come up with," the kind Inspector said bracingly. "You just sit back down and relax. You're plum wore out."

Hermione gulped and sat back heavily into her chair. She definitely was *plum wore out*, as the Inspector had put it. She had been running here and there every weekend for months, and when she was not researching potions to help Severus, she had been teaching and taking lessons with Healer Laurant. She was so tired she often fell into bed, clothes and all, and woke only after a few hours of sleep. She had only two more weeks of school, and then she would be free to take care of Severus, but in the meantime she still had to get him out of wherever he was. She had to find someplace safe for them to stay for a few days, maybe weeks. Severus wouldn't be able to Apparate back right away.

She put her arms on the table and rested her head on them, succumbing to sleep within a few moments. She was immediately in the hallway, walking toward the room that Severus was in. She hurried and then ran, bursting into the room. He was lying so still, so pale. A man stood beside him and was adding medication into an IV. "This here will ensure you won't wake again." A nasty laugh followed. "I won't be having to feed you and mop up after you. You're always gonna be a half wit; no sense making this harder for me."

Hermione yelled, "Stop! Get away from him!"

"Well, what do we have here? A nice looking girl you are." He turned to her, and somehow his arms held her close to his body. "No! Severus!" Hermione screamed as she fought him. He slapped her onto the next bed and bound her wrists. He was just about to ram a needle into her arm when he slumped sideways and fell to the floor. Severus' face came into view.

"Hermione, Hermione it's only a dream. It's a dream! Wakeup. You're still in the station."

Hermione sat up bolt straight, and Severus' face faded. "Oh, my God," she cried, pulling the chain from under her blouse and grasping the pendant in her shaking hand. *Are you okay? A dream you say? You're okay?* she babbled on.

Yes, his voice came as a soothing balm, and she felt her rapidly beating heart start to slow.

The Inspector came back. "Lassy, what's all the screaming about?"

Hermione sat again and said, "I'm sorry I fell asleep. I had a nightmare that my Dad wouldn't wake up when I got there, that he was being drugged and kept there."

"Lassy, you poor dear, you're so tired from your search. Your dad is in a coma. There is no guarantee he will wake up," he said gently.

He stared at her, not saying anything until she let her face crumble and a tear run down her cheek. "I know, but I need to go to him as soon as possible."

He nodded, seeming to be convinced she did understand. "Look, one of the ladies who works in the business office end of the station has a friend who works at Heathrow. She can get you a seat on the next plane heading for Ireland."

Hermione did not want to wait; she could use a Portkey from the Ministry. But if she turned him down, he would be suspicious. Either way would take time. She would have to take the ticket and try to deal with the time it would take to get there. She grabbed his hand and clung to it, "Oh, Inspector, that would be so wonderful. It might take me weeks to work my way there on a boat or a job to get the money for a flight. How soon can I leave?"

"I think within the next two hours. Look... there's a shower room in the back, and one of the ladies here has some clothing she just got. She's a bit small like you. You might want to spruce up a bit. I've organized a car for you to be here in thirty minutes. That should be enough time for you to clean up a bit. There's... um, close quarters in those planes," he said diplomatically.

Hermione wanted to laugh; her glamour was designed to make her look thin and unkempt. She tugged at her greasy long black hair and just said, "Thanks." She had the foresight to look rather embarrassed.

He gave her a sympathetic look. "Lassy, any girl who's gone through what you have wouldn't have coped as well as you, I'm sure. Now, come on. Let's get you cleaned up and to the airport in time."

Hermione went with him and found herself in the Chief Inspector's private bathroom. She turned on the water in the shower for the benefit of the Inspector and the office lady waiting for her outside. She took out her wand and renewed the Glamour Charm, cleaning herself up a little bit. She quickly changed her clothes, then sat on the bench and concentrated on Severus, her fingers sliding over the wooden amulet at her neck. *Severus? Are you there?* she asked.

Yes, what's happening? Are you coming? His voice sounded hopeful and yet unsure.

Yes, Severus. I'm coming, but it's going to take a few hours. She explained to him the situation she had gotten herself into.

He was quiet for a long time. Then he said, *I understand, I'll be waiting.*

Please be careful. I'll be there as soon as I can. I will Apparate once the plane lands.

I'll be here. His voice was a bit unsteady.

Hermione felt a tear slide down her cheek. This delay was horrible for both of them. But there seemed no way out of it! *I'll stay in touch on the plane. We need to make plans on how I should get you out.*

Now, leave me be, woman, and get going. His voice was gruff, and he had that nasty bite to it, but she knew it was just disappointment.

Hermione heard a knock at the door. "You ready, Lassy? The car's here, I'm gonna take you there myself, make sure everything is okay with the flight."

Hermione stuffed her clothes in the plastic bag they had given her and followed him through the building. As she slipped into the seat, he took his spot behind the wheel and drove her in silence to the airport. Being it was a police car, he was able to park right in front of the doors, and he escorted her into the airport. At the ticket counter, he handed her some papers and a small wad of cash. "There's my number on this card. If you need to come back, call me at the station. I'll figure out something."

The airport was bustling, and Hermione spent a good 30 minutes getting her ticket and checking through security. She had a passport from her travel with her parents. She had altered her picture so that it looked like her glamour. The Inspector had followed her during the process. She turned to say goodbye before passing into the secure part of the airport. Hermione looked into his worn face. "Thank you, so much. You've helped me more than anyone in all these years. I'm gonna tell my dad all about you. I'll bring him to see you when we get back,"

The Inspector looked at her as if she had lost her mind again. When she let fresh tears flood her face, he stammered, "Please, don't expect miracles. But you're a determined lass; maybe he will hear you. Who knows, maybe he will wake, once he hears a voice he recognizes. Stranger things have happened." He stood watching until she had checked through security.

Hermione turned to wave at him. She said a short prayer, wishing a special blessing on the man. He had not known what she really needed, but he had given her

everything he knew to give, and that was rare these days.

Hermione stepped into a bathroom. The clothing had been a little loose, but she had used her wand to alter it. It was a simple print blouse and slacks.

She found herself stuffed into a window seat with two large men next to her. She squeezed over as far as she could and reached for the wooded amulet. She took the airline pillow and stuck it into the crook of her neck and let herself fall asleep.

She found Severus sitting on a bench in an empty, calm park. There was a soft breeze rustling the leaves on the tree. He turned as she approached, and the corners of his lips curved up in a slight smile. Hermione reached out her hand, and he looked at it for a moment before taking her hand in his and drawing her down beside him.

"I am waiting, I am quietly waiting. I have been awake for several hours now, and I am staying as still as I can. I am weak, and I am not even sure I can walk."

Hermione laid her head against his shoulder. "I have potions to help with that," she assured him. She looked at their fingers threaded together. "I'm coming as fast as I can. If I could, I'd Apparate from the plane. But then it would leave a mystery, and they would look for me at the hospital. I've left a trail. It's the only way to find you."

"I can wait. It's only a few hours." He pressed a kiss to her forehead.

Hermione was pleased and looked up into his face. When he frowned, she ducked away, embarrassed that he knew she had wanted a real kiss.

A strange guttural sound came from him, and Hermione realized it was a laugh. His fingers tightened. "I would kiss you, but the glamour you're wearing now is also what you have on in this dream. It would be a bit strange to kiss my 'daughter'."

Hermione's face reddened. "I forgot," she said, chagrined. "Severus, have we come to kisses? We hardly know each other. I have to admit I want it, but what do you want? I'm the know-it-all. You never liked me. I'm a means to an end here. What happens when you are restored to a life?"

He looked at her and then pressed his lips to her forehead, again. "Then we live, Hermione. We live and we explore the future. I know what I'd like it to be. You have given me hope and made it easy for me to want. But you have to see if you will like the man I am when I'm not in your head. You might find me different. No one ever wanted me."

"Maybe we have this advantage; we know now what we are really like. It's not just what's on the outside, Severus. The outside may be different, but I will always know the real you," Hermione said.

The scene faded as the wheels of the plane hit the ground and jarred Hermione awake. She took a deep breath and squeezed the pendant. *I'm coming, Severus.*

Merrin, thank you for your excellent beta work. I'm so honored to have you checking over my story.

Suzanne, thank you for your Brit picking. It is much appreciated.

Chapter Eight

Chapter 8 of 20

Now a professor at Hogwarts, Hermione Granger begins to experience fierce migraines and voices in her head. What is causing these headaches or who?

Hermione stood patiently, planning to wait for the men and other passengers to move down the aisle, as she was half way up the plane.

Hermione! The cry lanced through her mind, and she grabbed at her head as pain lanced through it.

She screamed, "Get out of the way, I'm going to be sick!" She frantically climbed over and past the passengers trying to get their luggage. She moved so fast even the stewardess at the door could not grab hold of her. Hermione ran down the hall and into the airport. She spotted the bathroom and ran, shutting herself into a cubicle. *Let them have a mystery*, she thought. It was much more important she find Severus than worry about keeping up appearances with Muggles she would never see again. She had planned to Apparate, but had decided a Portkey would be safer. Her attention might be diverted elsewhere in the escape, and she could not risk splinching Severus. She pulled out the Portkey she had made. It was illegal, but she would vanish it as soon as she and Severus got away from the facility. She grabbed the amulet in her hand and concentrated on Severus and felt his fear. She held her wand at the ready and activated the Portkey.

She landed in a hospital room, the disorientation from the Portkey momentarily blocking her vision of the scene in front of her. When she focused, Hermione felt as though she had fallen into her nightmare. The male nurse was standing over Severus' bed with a syringe in hand, and Severus was bound by straps to the bed. His eyes were wide with fear.

Hermione let a spell fly, and the nurse crumpled to the ground. Hermione ignored him and ran to Severus. She tore at the Velcro straps and pulled the IV line out, freeing his hands and feet as he struggled to sit with muscles that had not been used in years. She dug into her pockets and pulled out vials of potions, quickly popping the corks with her thumb. She poured them one by one into his mouth, and he struggled to swallow it all. They both knew they had only minutes.

Severus slipped his feet over the edge of the bed as a surge of energy flooded his legs and arms. He stood unsteadily, and Hermione slipped herself under his arm and placed her arm around his waist. He leaned so heavily on her she thought she might go down.

The man on the floor was suddenly conscious. He lurched at the bed, jabbing at the help alarm on Severus' bed and causing sirens to go off loudly. Hermione flung a second spell at him, and he crumpled to the floor again. They could hear shouts in the distance, and Hermione added her own, "The other Portkey is in my right pocket!"

Severus felt into the pocket of her trousers, and as soon as his finger touched the smooth object, he pulled it out. Hermione grabbed his hand and said the activation password. Severus felt the pull at his navel, the magic inside him rejoicing at the physical reconnection to his world. The room swam and they were gone.

They landed in a heap in a wooded area just outside of town. Hermione looked around wildly. She dropped the Portkey and vaporized it with her wand. They were so close that she could still hear the alarms at the hospital. She had used Google Earth in the airport while she had waited for the plane. The phone her dad had given her had all the bells and whistles. The pictures on Google had allowed her to set the Portkey, but she hadn't wanted to travel too far to an unknown place. These images would also allow her to Apparate Severus and herself to a small cottage thirty miles further in the woods. She had already paid for the place with a credit card. Being Muggle had its

advantages at times.

Hermione hoisted Severus up. He was pale and looked as if he might faint. She had to take the chance. She gripped Severus firmly and let him know what she was about to do.

Using the photos of the cottage to guide her, she spun into Apparition. They stumbled on arrival as the ground was uneven. Hermione's hand still gripped her wand, and she waved it at the door, unlocking it. She half-dragged Severus into the cottage. They struggled through a small drawing room and into a bedroom. She barely made it to the bed, and nearly falling in with him as he collapsed onto the mattress. His face was white and covered with sweat. "Severus!" she called. There was no response; he was unconscious.

Hermione felt for his pulse. It was slow but steady, and she knew some of the potions would make him sleep so that his tissues could regenerate. She had not realized how fast they would react because of his condition. She counted herself lucky they had made it to the bed. She looked down into his face. He was really here. This was not in her mind. He was thin and pale and looked wonderful to her. She reached out and touched his face. Her fingers traced his jaw line and then an eyebrow. She brushed long hair from his face and even ran her finger over the bridge of his long nose. With a sigh she got up and went to set the wards. This cabin was in the middle of a wood, and with her wards, it was now invisible. She went back into the bedroom. Exhausted, she used her wand to move him over, and then she sat on the edge of the bed and propped her back against the headboard. She was asleep within moments.

Hermione woke feeling warm and safe. She suddenly realized she was sleeping against Severus, her cheek against his shoulder. She started to pull away, embarrassed, and felt his arm tighten around her. "Stay," he whispered.

She sat up anyway and found his dark eyes open and looking at her with such tenderness. "Are you okay?" she asked as her own eyes filled with moisture.

"I'm alive, conscious; I'd say that was enough for now." His eyes never left her face.

Hermione tucked a fuzzy lock of her hair behind her ear, a bit self-consciously. "I'm a mess."

"You look good to me," he said.

"Well, that's something I never expected to come out of your gob, a compliment from Severus Snape," she teased him gently.

The corner of his mouth curled up. "I never thought to give you one. Hermione, you've done so much for me kept me sane, saved me. You have been a part of me these last months, inside my head. I don't have to hide anything from you, do I? I've never thought to feel this free with a woman."

She lay back down in the crook of his arm and slipped a hand over his stomach and hugged him to her hard. "No, Severus. You don't have to hide anything from me."

They lay there for a bit, and finally Severus groaned.

Hermione jumped up "Are you in pain? What can I do?"

His cheeks turned a bit red. "I have to go to the loo," he whispered. Hermione grinned at his embarrassment which got her a familiar smirk. "I also need to take a bath and remove certain hospital garments..."

It was Hermione's turn to look embarrassed, "I'm sorry. Severus. I didn't think."

"It's okay; it was what was necessary. Now that I am awake, I think I can make it to the loo and back. Your potions are excellent."

Hermione grinned. "Maybe too good, that's the second compliment you've given me."

"Well, woman, maybe the potions are warping my brain." He pulled himself into a sitting position.

Hermione giggled, heartened to hear him participate in the gentle banter.

He slipped his feet to the floor, and with Hermione's help, he got to his feet, and they walked slowly to the door of the small loo. He grabbed the wall for support. "I think I can make it." He turned away and Hermione shut the door.

"Hermione?" he called, "Can I use your wand?"

"Of course, let me get it." She ran to the bedside table and got the wand, and Severus opened the door slightly. She thrust her hand through the opening and felt his warm fingers slide over hers before he took the wand.

"Severus, take it slow; your magic might be faulty. Be careful," she cautioned.

"I will; I'll be out in a bit," he said, reassuringly. He knew this was no time for heroics.

Hermione went back to sit on the bed. She tried to run her fingers through her hair and found she could not. Groaning, she went to look in the vanity mirror. "Oh, Merlin," she complained. *I can't believe I looked like this for our first face-to-face conversation* she thought with mortification.

She automatically reached for her wand and remembered that Severus had it. Somehow, they would have to get him another. She was not sure what had happened to his. She wondered if Minerva knew. "Oh God, Minerva!" she cried. It was Monday morning, and she was missing class. She ran to the bathroom. "Severus, I need my wand. Minerva. It's Monday; I'm missing work," she called through the door.

After what seemed like an hour, Severus opened the door. His face was drained of color, but he was smiling in triumph. "I got cleaned up." His hospital gown was now transfigured into a wizarding nightshirt.

Hermione touched the side of his face, caressing his cheek. "You should have let me transfigure that," she admonished. "You're exhausted. Come on, I'll take you back to the bed."

She helped him until he was sitting on the bed again, then went to the window and sent out a Patronus. It would reassure Minerva that she was safe, just unexpectedly indisposed. She begged Minerva's indulgence and promised she would return in a week and explain. Luckily, Hermione's employment record in previous years had been impeccable. She was relying heavily on this fact and hoped Minerva would not be too vexed that she had disappeared without warning.

"Minerva's going to be furious that you kept this from her," Severus predicted.

Hermione bit her lip in nervousness. *So much for a vote of confidence from the dark-haired wizard.*

"Especially when she finds out Mona and Poppy already know," he told her as he settled himself against the pillows.

"Mona? Oh, Pomona. Well, I'm counting on Minerva being so happy you're alive she will forgive me," Hermione responded cheerfully.

"Happy? Last time I saw her, she tried to curse me. I hardly think she'll be happy to see me." Severus poured cold water all over that hope.

"Actually, Severus, she was pretty upset once Harry told her the facts of your memories," Hermione told him.

"Potter did what?" he whispered.

Hermione's eyes widened. Severus Snape never raised his voice; a whisper was the same as a yell. He looked dangerous and suddenly like the man she had known as a child. She drew back. Fear flashed in her eyes. "Severus," she pleaded, "he fought to clear your name... He had to share the memories."

Severus shut his eyes and took a deep breath. He was shocked by the fear he had seen in her eyes and on her face, the quiver in her voice. He reached out to her, holding his breath and letting it out when she took his hand and he drew her down to the bed against him. "I'm sorry."

She buried her face in his neck and said, "He did it for you. He's sorry for how he treated you."

Severus pushed her back so he could look in her eyes. "None of you have anything to be sorry for. It was supposed to be that way between us. The plan was designed to make me the bastard and Potter the saint. I was just surprised; I've always been a very private man."

A loud grumble in his stomach stopped him. Hermione nearly jumped off the bed, glad for something to do. "I'll go get breakfast." She nearly ran from the room.

Severus rolled his eyes and berated himself, *Fool, I must be gentle with her. She's exhausted from this whole ordeal and emotionally overwrought. I mustn't push her.*

Hermione stood, her hands resting on the porcelain edge of the sink in the kitchen. She was taking deep breaths and trying to calm herself. She had to forget who Severus was before. She had to be strong and stand up to him when he pushed, when he slipped back into the man he had been. Yet, he had a right to lash out. Those memories had been very private. Truth be known, Hermione was insecure about the love Severus had for Lily. She was not sure if he would ever truly get over Lily. What if she was second choice by default? She shook her head. She had found him and saved him. He was grateful. She knew they were friends. Good friends now. But would there be anything else?

She shook herself irritably. She was acting like a foolish school girl, falling in love with a man twenty years older than she was and expecting him to love her back. He was a lonely, hurt man; of course he responded to her kindness. She was so confused. She sometimes felt he did care more for her than he would a friend, but other times he reminded her of her Potions professor and she was right back to feeling like a child, in awe of the man's knowledge, but frightened inside. Frightened he would berate her and make her cry.

She turned, resting her back on the sink for support, and pushed that thought away. No, Severus, the man she knew now, was different. She had to let that pain go. She had to see herself for the adult she was and the man he is now a man with faults, who needed a strong woman who could stand up to him and also be as gentle and as loving as he could handle. He was not used to people caring for or about him. She took another deep breath and went to the refrigerator and opened it. Her stomach grumbled as she saw an array of eggs, meats, vegetables, breads and condiments. She set about making Severus some soft boiled eggs and toast. He had not eaten solid food in years, so he would have to start slow. Even with the regenerative powers of the potions that were now restoring his organs to full health, he would still have to take it easy.

When she returned to the bedroom with the breakfast, she found Severus sitting up in the bed. His head was propped up with pillows, but he had fallen asleep, exhausted from cleaning himself up.

Hermione sat the tray on the bedside table and leaned over Severus and touched his arm, "Severus, I have breakfast," she said softly. She took a moment to examine him. When he was asleep, he looked so young: the lines on his face so relaxed. She shook him gently and his eyes popped open.

"I'm sorry; I only meant to rest my eyes. The light's a bit harsh," he hastened to explain, trying to sit up more.

Hermione helped him by stuffing the pillows lower behind his back. She moved to the windows and drew the curtains so only a dim light filled the room.

"That's better," he said with a sigh of relief.

She placed the folding breakfast tray over his lap. "I hope your stomach won't rebel. You haven't eaten anything in a long time," she said.

"I feel like I could eat a cow," he said with a slight smile. "Hermione, I'm sorr..."

She placed a finger on his lips stopping his apology. "No, it's not necessary. As you said, it just took you by surprise. I expected you to be angry, and Pomona told me to tell you to just get over it. It was necessary."

Severus let out a rumbling chuckle that made Hermione's eyes widen with her own smile.

"Mona is quite the spitfire. I look forward to seeing her again. She was..." He stopped trying to find a word.

"... like a mother," Hermione supplied as she tapped the side of an egg and separated the shell.

"Yes," Severus said, "tough and outspoken, but she gave me something I so desperately needed as a child: encouragement, support and stability." He watched as Hermione scooped the two halves of the egg into a small bowl and chopped the whites into smaller pieces amidst the yellow thick liquid of the yolk. She repeated the process and then handed him the bowl with a spoon.

"Take it slow. One spoonful at a time and let it go down to your stomach. I didn't salt or pepper them as you might not be able to tolerate anything not bland right now," she instructed.

Severus took a small spoonful of the mixture and placed it into his mouth. His eyes closed involuntarily at the to him rich flavor. During his waking times, he had often been hungry and had dreamed of the simplest things like eggs, jelly, even broth, not to mention steak. He swallowed it and felt it slide down his esophagus. "It's good," he said, already filling his spoon again.

"I made some chamomile tea. It's soothing, and it will help you sleep during the day. You should sleep as much as possible these next few days," she instructed him.

"I have been sleeping, too much, for way too long." He took another bite and savored the taste. He slowly placed his spoon down, picked up the tea cup and took a few sips. "I would love a cup of Earl Grey," he said wistfully.

Hermione smiled. "I'll see what I can do tomorrow. I think I saw some in the cabinet." While he proceeded to eat, Hermione said, "You're doing good. I'll go take a quick shower and be right back."

"Maybe I can take a bath later. Cleaning spells only do so much," he ventured as he took a nibble of the toast.

"We'll see, maybe after a nap?" She smiled. Severus scowled at her continued attempt to get him to sleep. She grabbed her wand.

"Perhaps you can read to me while I rest," he bargained. "I'm sure that magic bag of yours has a book or two."

Hermione stood and laughed. "Or three... maybe twenty." She grinned as she grabbed her bag and vanished into the bathroom. She turned the water on, then pulled out some fresh clothing and her toiletries. She stripped quickly, aware that Severus was just inside the other room. Stepping into the hot water felt like heaven, but she did not waste time. She scrubbed herself and her hair. She stepped from the shower and towel dried before beginning to redress. She used her wand to dry and smooth her hair. The process took fifteen minutes. She found Severus asleep again, only half the breakfast eaten, the spoon still in his fingers. *Poor, stubborn, dear man, he has no idea*

how much his body needs to heal. He'll push himself to exhaustion before he'll admit he needs a break. She shook her head in fond exasperation.

Hermione took the spoon from his hand and removed the breakfast tray. The first potion he had swallowed back in the hospital had healed his throat and had rid him of the last traces of venom that had kept him in a coma for so long. Eventually, he would have woken on his own. His own body would have naturally rid his system of the poisons. But that place... that man could have killed him. Hermione shuddered and thought about the second potion: it had given his legs the strength to get them out of there. It was like an adrenalin rush. A boost that had left him exhausted, but it had been necessary. The third had begun the healing of his organs and body tissues and muscles. Sleep was normal. Hermione took the breakfast things back to the kitchen. Anything right now was a start. He needed the sleep as much as he needed the food.

She did the dishes and then went back to the bedroom. It was a one-bedroom cabin, and she wanted to be close in case he needed her. The bed was large, queen sized at least. Severus was stretched out on his back on one side. The excitement of the last few days caught up with Hermione, and she crawled onto the top of the covers on the other side of the bed. She used her wand to summon her robe. She covered herself with it before she dropped off to sleep.

Hermione woke to find herself again wrapped in Severus' arms. She could tell by his breathing he was awake. She could feel his thumb caressing her arm. "Severus, are you using wandless magic to get me into your arms?" she asked groggily. This was the second time this had happened. Not that she was complaining, of course.

A low rumble of laughter escaped his throat. "Hardly. I'm magnetic, don't you know."

Hermione raised herself up till she was looking into his face, and then she felt his fingers slide into her hair. He urged her closer, and before she knew it, his warm lips were against hers. It was better than that first dream. His kiss was hungry yet gentle. It was not a very long one, and when he released her, he looked uncertain, as if she might reject him.

Hermione dove straight back in, kissing him back softly. "That was nice," she said before she settled back down with her cheek against his shoulder.

Severus felt her shiver against him. "Are you cold?" he asked. "Crawl under the blanket."

"No, not cold. Excited and terrified. I don't want to get hurt, nor do I want to hurt you," she tried to explain.

"Excited and terrified?" he repeated.

"What about Lily, Severus? Can you leave her memory behind? If we are to go forward with this... if this pull we feel for each other is real, I need to know if she might come between us later."

He was silent for so long, Hermione felt tears slip out of her eyes. When they fell on his shoulder, he pulled her closer and held her tighter. "Please don't cry. Hermione, Lily is gone. She's been gone a very long time. I was a child when I felt myself in love with her. She was my best friend. A hormonal teen can get that all messed up. You know that with Mr. Weasley. You know now that wouldn't have worked."

Hermione sniffed and nodded. She could definitely understand that. It had been hard to say goodbye to Ron.

"Later, when I became responsible for her death, I vowed to keep her child, Harry, safe. I don't hate the boy... man," he corrected himself. "Every time he looked at me, I saw her in his eyes. I saw my guilt in her death. It tormented me. No, Hermione, Lily is but a memory of a misspent youth. A youth where choices were made that had terrible consequences." He put his fingers under her chin and tilted her head so he could look her in the face. "I am quite excited to get to know you. You're a beautiful, smart, talented woman, and I want to explore what we have started." He bent his head and kissed her again.

Hermione put her arms about him and held tight, crying for awhile, to release the tension that had coiled inside her, before settling down against him. As she felt herself fall asleep again, she wondered why she was having such a hard time staying awake, too.

Severus held her close and smiled. He could not remember a time in his life when the future had had such a positive outlook and such pleasant possibilities. After the last weeks, he had to admit they both needed a lot of sleep and rest. He let himself slip back into sleep, his arms holding the woman he was coming to love.

Merrin, I so appreciate your beta work. What a blessing it is. Your suggestions and corrections make this process so much easier for me.

Suzanne, thank you for your Brit picking, changes and additions to my work.

Chapter Nine

Chapter 9 of 20

Now a professor at Hogwarts, Hermione Granger begins to experience fierce migraines and voices in her head. What is causing these headaches or who?

Severus woke in the late afternoon to find Hermione gone. He found that, with some effort, he could get into a sitting position. He sat still and waited for his head to settle. Sitting had made him dizzy. "Hermione?" he called.

He looked at the bedside table, and discovered that her wand was gone. He frowned and got to his feet. He used the wall to steady himself as he moved across the room to the door. "Hermione?" he called louder. He opened the door and leaned into the door frame for support. His heart flipped when he saw the little cabin's living room was empty as well as the open kitchen area. Had she left him? Had she thought things between them not worth the risk? He was finding a heart-wrenching fear slip over him when the front door opened and Hermione came into the room, slipping a small black device into her jean's pocket.

She looked up at him and smiled, but her smile turned to worry and she rushed to his side. "Severus, what are you doing up? You look about to topple over," she scolded.

"You came back," was all he said as he leaned heavily on her.

"Came back? Oh God, Severus, you didn't think I left? I had to go outside the wards to call my Mum and Dad," she explained as she helped him sit back down on the bed. "I'm so sorry. You were sleeping so deeply, I thought I'd have time to fill them in on what happened."

Severus lay back on the pillow, suddenly feeling foolish. He turned his face away from her, angry at himself.

"Severus, will you look at me?" she asked him.

When he didn't, she climbed over him and lay down facing him. "Don't feel bad. It's going to take some time for you to trust me. You haven't had reason to trust many people. I know you've been hurt..."

"Tell me about your conversation?" he asked, trying to change the subject.

Hermione could see he was not ready to talk about his feelings, so she indulged him. "Mum was home. I told her I'd found you and I gave her our location. I did ask her to owl Pomona and have her tell Poppy. I also asked her to tell Pomona they would need to talk to Minerva and let her know why I'm not there. It's probably best for me if she knows and can cool off before we arrive."

"What?" he asked.

"What what?" she asked in return, confused by his outburst.

"You want me to go back to Hogwarts with you?" he asked, seeming to be digesting that information slowly.

"Of course. Where else would we go? I live and work there, Severus. I have to go back."

"I doubt anyone there will want me back," he said as he reached over and tucked a curl behind her ear.

Hermione smiled and moved to cover his hand with hers. He threaded his fingers through hers. "I want you there, and Poppy and Pomona do too. I'm sure there will be others."

"I killed... Dumb... He stopped when Hermione stopped him with her other hand, covering his lips.

"You relieved him of a great deal of pain and a cruel death. You gave him what he wanted. Everyone at the school knows that."

"I doubt Vector will be happy to see me," he pressed on.

"Well, she will have to get over it," Hermione said unrepentantly. "We can easily keep an eye on her. I really haven't gotten to know her well. She doesn't seem to mingle much." Hermione reached over and, returning his earlier gesture, tucked his black hair behind his ear. "Your hair really is so soft," she commented in wonder.

"Really, not the 'greasy git' you knew?" he teased, happy to change the subject. His ending of Dumbledore's life was probably the worst regret of his life. Regret that his potions and Dark Arts knowledge had not been enough to stop the death of his mentor and friend.

"Hardly," Hermione said; she could see he was still deeply grieving for Dumbledore. There was a deep pain in his eyes, and she wished they were still mentally connected. Maybe she would have a better idea of how to help him. To further distract him she suggested, "Perhaps you would like to try that bath now. I can get the tub filled, and you can soak. It will do you some good."

He nodded. "I think that's a good idea. I may require some help with my hair... my back," he ventured.

Hermione let her eyebrow rise and she grinned. "I would be happy to help. I will add some bubble bath, to protect your dignity," she said saucily.

He chuckled and teased in that soft silky voice, "Afraid?"

"Hardly, Severus, but if we go there, I want you to be able to finish what you start. Now's not the time." She climbed off the bed, leaving him with an open mouth which turned into a grin of his own. She intrigued him more with each passing moment they were together. She was a slight woman with soft, small curves but he found she was so beautiful. She had spirit, courage, and he admired her spunk.

She came back from the bathroom about ten minutes later and helped him to his feet. She supported him into the bathroom. "Call me when you're ready for some help," she instructed.

"Thank you, Hermione," he said as she left the bathroom and shut the door behind her. He pulled his nightshirt off and used the loo. Once he had washed his hands, he turned to the bath, testing the water with his hand. He climbed into the tub and let himself down slowly. The water was rather hot, but it felt wonderful. He used the flannel and soap that was placed close for him and began to wash himself. When he had cleaned as much as he had the energy for, he slumped back against the tub and let the soothing water take the stiffness from his joints. He was dozing when there was a knock at the door.

"Severus? Are you okay?" Hermione called softly through the door.

"Please, come in," he called.

The door opened slowly, and Hermione tentatively peaked around it. "I'm sorry. It's been awhile, and I was worried you'd fallen asleep again."

He nodded. "I nearly did. It might be a good idea for you to help me wash my hair so I can get out of here before my muscles turn to jelly. The water is very relaxing."

Hermione pointed her wand at the tub, and a new batch of bubbles appeared, covering Severus to the chest.

He smiled at her. "You don't trust yourself, do you?" He laughed at the expression on Hermione's face - guilt mixed with desire. Her expression relaxed at the sound of his laughter. It was a wonderful, free sound. Hermione wondered how long it had been for him.

Severus had a startled look on his own face once he realized the laughter had come from him.

Hermione's face had turned red. "I was just trying to give you privacy."

He turned back to facing the front of the tub. "Thank you," he said. He grinned privately.

Hermione went to the other end of the tub and took up the shampoo bottle. She was trying to give him privacy, but she found she could not really take her eyes off his bare shoulders within her reach and the tops of his knees above the bubbles. His long arms were stretched over the sides of the tub, and they had a dusting of dark hair. His lean fingers were relaxed and hanging over the edge... Was that a hint of dark hair on his chest?

"Hermione, my hair," he reminded her with amusement after there had been silence for too long.

"You love teasing me," she said, flustered. She transformed a small figurine, a decoration on the shelf in front of the small opaque window, into a cup.

"It is enjoyable," he said, leaning back so she could pour water from the cup over his head and not get it in his eyes.

Hermione averted her eyes from his body and concentrated on his hair. She wet it and soaped it up with the shampoo, working it into his thick hair and scalp. He let his eyes close and enjoyed her touch. She massaged his scalp for some time, and then he heard her sigh as she started to rinse the soap off.

When Severus' hair was done, she stood, "Do you need anything else before I vacate the room?"

"Could you scrub my back?" He was reluctant to let her go, and he was enjoying the attention.

"Of course," she said, but there was a bit of a quiver in her voice. The man had no idea how turned on she was by him even in the thin condition he was in. *Hermione, it's been far too long*, she thought to herself. She knelt back down and took up the flannel and soap. She rolled the soap over and over on the flannel and then said, "Lean forward." He leaned forward, exposing more of his bare back to her. Her eyes slid down his back, sadly noting his thinness as his backbone stuck out too much. She took a deep breath and began to wash his pale flesh. She saw there were a number of faint scars on his back but decided to not comment now. One day he would probably tell her about them. She had expected to find scars on the man. He had gone through hell being tortured by Voldemort. She had some of her own, and the thought of his seeing them unnerved her. She shook the thought away and concentrated on her task, but her eyes shifted to his soft shoulder again, and when the flannel fell into the water, she found her fingers suddenly touching his warm smooth flesh. "Oh," she said, flustered again. "I'm sorry."

"It felt good, Hermione," he whispered.

Hermione sighed and leaned down to lay her cheek against his bare shoulder. When Severus reached up to touch her face and she suddenly realized what she was doing, she pulled away and stood. "I'll go make dinner. I left my wand here for you to use to dry yourself and your hair...." She didn't look back.

Severus keenly felt her absence, but agreed this was not the time. He was a bit dismayed and pleased that he found his body had responded appropriately. He let the cooling water alleviate the problem, along with a recitation of potions ingredients in his head. He managed to climb out of the tub and found the use of the wand imperative as his strength was leaving him rapidly. He dried his hair and himself. After using a cleaning spell on the night shirt, he put it back on. Then he made his way back to the bed.

Hermione, in the meantime, had found a couple of cans of a thick chicken soup, which she warmed in a small pot on the stove. She made some more toast and placed some pear halves into small bowls and drizzled caramel sauce over them. She put the food on the bed tray and, taking a deep breath to calm her nerves, headed back to the bedroom. Severus was again asleep on the bed. She took her wand from the bedside table and put a stasis charm on the food. She went to her bag and pulled out a book and sat in a chair next to the bed to read.

Hermione suddenly felt the book tugged from her fingers, and her eyes flew open to find Severus peering at her from the edge of the bed. "You fell asleep," he said, setting the book on the bedside table.

She ran her fingers through her hair and stretched. "Oh Merlin, why am I so tired all the time? Every time you sleep. I do too."

He looked concerned, then something seemed to dawn on him. "Do you still have the pendant on?"

Hermione reached inside her blouse and produced the little potion bottle on the chain. "Yes, I have it here."

"Your empathy is strong, and you're still in contact with me through the blood bond. You can wear it, but don't let it touch your skin all the time. It will lessen the bond we have."

"We have? This won't break it?" she asked confused as she let the pendant fall against the material of her blouse.

He looked uncomfortable.

"Out with it, Severus," she demanded.

"We have dreamed together through the blood bond. It made a connection that is not easily broken." He waited for her to get angry that this had happened without her knowledge.

"Good," she finally said. "I don't want it easy for us to separate." She stood and came to sit by him on the bed. "Despite my flight from the bathroom earlier, I find I want you very much. Now is just not the time." She covered his hand with hers.

Severus took a deep breath and let it out. Did he dare hope that she really could care for him? She knew his worst and now knew he was capable of feeling for her, yet she was still here. He raised their hands and kissed the back of hers. "Do I smell the faint odor of chicken soup?" His stomach rumbled on cue.

Hermione laughed. "A man and his stomach. You're trying to change the subject." She retrieved her wand and released the food from the stasis charm. "Lay back against the pillows, and I will set the tray over your lap," she instructed.

Severus slid back into place and looked with relish at the thick soup. He was feeling weak from hunger he was sure. He looked forward to each meal because he knew it would make him stronger and he would be able to respond to Hermione in a more physical way.

Hermione crawled onto the bed again and sat cross-legged on his other side, and they ate their meal. Neither talked much during the meal as they were quite hungry and concentrated on their eating. It was late in the day, and they had only had breakfast.

"Tomorrow we will have three meals," she promised as she watched him sop the rest of the broth up with his toast. "I have another dose of potions for you to take tonight. It will help you get a good night's rest and we can try walking in the garden tomorrow. There's a bench swing just outside the back door. Fresh air will do us both good. I fear I have run myself ragged as well."

"You are a bit pale, Hermione. I guess that's a hazard of the job being in the dungeon so much." He sat back, content with his dinner and where he found his life to be right now.

"It's your fault!" she accused him with a grin. She took the tray from him and set it down on the floor. "You were such a good teacher it made Potions seem like the only avenue for my life to go."

He laughed again and held his arms out to her. She came to him and laid full length against him. "Hermione, your singular wit is a treasure."

"You are a treasure as well, Severus. You need to realize that. You need to know how much you are loved..." Her voice faded as she felt embarrassed and wondered if he might be ready to love again.

"Can you love me?" he finally whispered.

"Yes, Severus, I truly believe I can," she whispered in reply. She cupped the side of his face with her hand and caressed it.

Severus turned his face and kissed her thumb. "That's good because I think I can love you, too." He shifted a little, uncomfortable with his confession. He changed the subject again as he had been doing all day when they came close to a discussion of their feelings and what the new status of their relationship might be. "Why don't you pick a book out of the bag of yours and read me to sleep. I dare say it will be quick." He stifled a yawn with his other hand.

Hermione agreed and quickly climbed off the bed. She banished the tray and dishes back to the kitchen and retrieved the potions Severus needed. He made a quick trip to the loo after drinking them, and then he came back to settle under the covers. Hermione could sense a faintly minty smell as she smoothed the bedclothes around him, inwardly smiling at how he had obviously cleaned his teeth to get rid of the nasty taste of the potions. She started to pull a chair up to the bed.

"Aren't you going to join me? I'd be very disappointed if you didn't. Besides, you can't sleep on that little couch in the front room, and I quite enjoy waking up with you in my arms."

"Well, I could transform this chair into a cot. I didn't want to presume that my place was in your bed, now that you're so much better," she said as she took a book out of her bag.

"Hermione, we are in this together. I would love it, when you're ready for bed, if you would come read to me."

"Sure, I would enjoy that." Hermione put the book down at the foot of the bed and grabbed her bag. She went to the bathroom and shut the door. Her heart was hammering as she used the loo, brushed her teeth, and changed into a nightgown. It was flannel, and she wondered if he would laugh at her. It had long sleeves and a curved neck which barely showed her clavicle. She was afraid to let him see her scars. It was, however form-fitting over her breasts, which was attractive. It flowed to the tops of her feet in soft folds. She left her hair loose in soft curls about her face and down her back. She stepped from the bathroom, expecting him to be asleep, but his eyes lit up with appreciation as he looked her over.

Severus held out his hand. "You're beautiful," he complimented, drawing her to the bed.

"For a granny," she laughed nervously.

"No, for a beautiful woman," he said.

She took his hand and squeezed it, bent close and gave him a light kiss. She picked up the book, crawled onto the bed and under the covers. She arranged some pillows so she could be comfortable. All the time she was aware of his heat next to her, his eyes watching her. Taking a deep breath, she opened the book for distraction and started to read, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope...."

When she glanced at Severus ten minutes later, she saw he was already asleep. She put the book down, slid under the covers, and moved up against him. He reached out instinctively and pulled her close, and they both slept.

The next morning Severus woke feeling much stronger, and after they had showered and dressed, Hermione made them a breakfast of eggs, bacon and toast. She helped Severus into the little garden at the back of the house. There was a table there, and they ate, marveling at the flowers and the warm air. When they had finished, Severus stood and walked slowly toward the fence. Hermione rose to go with him.

"Stay, finish your tea," he said considerately. He made his way across the small yard with slow even steps, relishing the fresh air. When he stepped into the sunlight, he raised his face, closed his eyes and let the warm rays bathe him. It had been years since he had simply stood in the sun. The warmth sank into his skin. It all made him feel *alive*.

Hermione watched him enjoy such a simple thing like the warmth of the sun, and tears burned at her eyes. Tears for all the sunrises he had missed and joy for the fact that he was now here with her, free of the paralysis that had kept him a prisoner so long. She made a note to somehow alert the authorities to the treatment patients were getting in that hospital. There might be others on the verge of waking, if only they were allowed to. Perhaps her father could whisper into the right ears.

Some minutes passed, and then Severus was aware that Hermione had joined him, slipping her arms about his waist and laying her cheek against his back.

He covered her hands with his. "I look forward to going back to my home. Hogwarts was the best of times and the worst of times. But it is home."

"You did hear some of what I read..."

"Yes, I -" he stopped.

An owl had come flying over the fence and dropped a packet by their feet. Hermione released Severus and stooped to pick it up. "Oh, Merlin, it's from Minerva." She pulled the envelope open, and three packages fell out.

One packet tore itself from her fingers, and a face appeared. "A howler," Severus said reaching for her and pulling her close. She was trembling.

"Hermione Granger! How could you keep such a secret from me! Severus is important to all of us! I could have helped you! How dare you risk your health and the welfare of your students by working nineteen to twenty hours days with little food and no rest? I dare say we will have some words when you get back! I want you to come as soon as Severus is able!"

Hermione shrank away from the howler, and Severus held tightly to her.

The thing glared at them with Minerva's best glare, and then astonishingly it smiled. *"Severus, Pomona, Poppy and I are waiting. I have asked Vector to find another school. She will be going to Beauxbatons for this next year."*

Hermione sighed, expecting it to shred itself finally.

But then it finished, *"Hermione dear, good work."* The howler finally fell into soft pieces and floated to the ground.

Hermione gasped, and tears fell down her cheeks, the release of pent-up emotions being allowed free reign now that she knew Minerva was not truly angry with her.

"You know she had to pretend to be harsh. You may get a reprimand, but she will welcome you back with open arms. You are her prize Gryffindor." He laughed, hugging her close. "Now come on, dry those tears. It's okay."

"She must be disappointed in me," she cried.

"Hermione," he took her face in his hands and made her look at him, "she loves you. That's just Minerva venting steam. By the time we get there, she will be crying and hugging both of us."

"You think so?"

He smirked, "Yes, I know so. I've known Minerva many, many years, and she's really quite an emotional softy."

Hermione scrubbed at her eyes with the back of her hand. "I hope you're right."

"Now, let's see what's in the other two packages," Severus suggested. Hermione retrieved the packages and handed one to him. Severus' name was written on it, and he tore the paper away, suspecting what it held. It was a gleaming dark wood wand. Oak and phoenix feather about 17 inches.

Hermione said, "It's beautiful."

He touched it with reverence. "It is a wand Albus gave me. It was a backup wand. I often took it with me when I went on missions. He kept it with him when I didn't need it. It was his first wand. I seemed to have an affinity for it. He never used it once he had procured the Elder Wand. The feather comes from Fawkes. It was given to Gregorovitch long before the bird bonded with Albus. It has a fascinating story. It saved me on a number of occasions. I wonder how Minerva knew it was special to me."

"She's Headmistress. I think the castle actually communicates with the Headmaster or Headmistress," Hermione ventured.

"Well, it never spoke to me." His voice was bitter. "I knew it was sentient, but it knew I was evil..." His voice broke off.

Hermione grasped his arm. "I don't think that's true, Severus," she said earnestly. "It saw what you tried to do for the students. But, it knew you had to report to Voldemort. It had to protect a part of itself for the greater good."

Severus looked back toward the sun and saw the green vines and flowers and said, "It doesn't matter. That's the past, and I want to live in the future." He tucked the wand up the sleeve of his shirt that Hermione had produced from her bag.

"What's in that third package?" he asked.

Hermione opened it and found a cloth covered object with a note. *This is your Portkey home. It will deliver you to my office Sunday at 2:00 p.m. I trust you will want some time to be ready for your classes on Monday. I have spoken to Kingsley, and he has agreed not to file charges for the illegal Portkey use. He agrees it was necessary... though he said, 'Tell that woman to come talk to me before she goes off half-cocked the next time.'* Minerva

Whatever the object was, they would leave it wrapped in the cloth.

Severus smiled when Hermione said, "Shewwww, another bullet dodged."

Severus deposited the object in the pocket of his trousers. "Now, you promised me a walk about this garden. If we have to go back to that dungeon in a few days, we best start soaking up some of this sun," Severus said to distract her from her worry. He knew no matter what he said she would still worry until they saw Minerva.

Later, that evening after their walk, they sat again in the garden, and Hermione used her mobile phone to call Inspector Mayfield. "Hello, Inspector Mayfield, this is Hermione Smith.... Yes, sir. I did find my father; he's right here. I was right; they were drugging him. No... it's true. He has been waking up for months, and each time they gave him more drugs. We barely got out of there... Yes, he's is right here. I'll ask him." She covered the speaker on the phone so the Inspector would hear only muffled voices. "Will you talk to him, Dad?" she asked as per their agreement.

Severus had agreed to play the part of her father. He wanted to see that place inspected, even if he and Hermione had to come and testify. He reached for the phone. "Hello, yes, sir, I'm doing as well as can be expected. Thank you so much for aiding my girl in finding me.... Yes, she is a treasure. What she said is true. I don't know if the agency was involved. The men who cared for me wanted to keep their jobs and felt that if the patients all stayed in their vegetative state they would have job security. Sir, we would be more than happy to send your people the money they put out for Hermione to come find me... No. Well your help to my daughter and making sure she was safe is very much appreciated. We will keep in touch, and if you need us to testify as witnesses, we can do that once I am recovered. I am very weak, and even walking to the loo is taxing... Thank you for alerting the Irish Police.... Yes, sir, I will take good care of my girl.... Goodbye."

He handed Hermione the phone because he did not know how to turn it off. She ended the call and said, "That should get the process going. I hope they will find other patients in need of help, others that can be returned to their lives. The idea of more people trapped there like you...it tears my heart out, Severus."

"Your Inspector seems like a smart man, and he will get this case going immediately. Don't worry, Hermione, those people will get helped."

He held out his arms and held her close as they watched the sun set.

Merrin, thank you so much for your beta work. It's a pleasure working with you.

Suzanne, thank you for Brit picking and clarifying some of my sentences.

The above book and quote that Hermione reads Severus is from *The Tale of Two Cities*, Chapter 1, by Charles Dickens.

Chapter Ten

Chapter 10 of 20

Now a professor at Hogwarts, Hermione Granger begins to experience fierce migraines and voices in her head. What is causing these headaches or who?

Hermione made dinner later that night while Severus sat at the small table and watched her. She browned some chicken with a light peppering of seasoned salt and garlic powder, and she sautéed some peppers and carrots together. It was simple but tasty, and Severus enjoyed it very much. She urged him to sit on the sofa and relax while she cleaned up from dinner and returned the kitchen to its normal condition.

"I could help you, you know," he called to her from the sitting room.

"It's been a long day, Severus," Hermione called back to him. "And you didn't nap long."

He smirked. "If you call falling asleep on your shoulder as we sat in the swing 'napping'. I'm starting to behave like an old man." His voice was filled with disgust.

Hermione had finished in the kitchen and so came to stand over him. "You're recovering and it's going to take time," she lectured him. "Potions can only do so much. You need to rest between small excursions. It's the only way to build up your stamina." She ran her finger down the side of his face, bent and kissed him. The corners of his eyes wrinkled up in a smile.

"You're spoiling me; I won't be able to live without your kisses. It's a wondrous gift, Hermione." He pulled her down next to him.

She snuggled against him. "It is for both of us. I never thought to find a man I feel such an affinity with: your knowledge and your wealth of experience, your conversation and your sexy body."

That earned her a self-conscious laugh, and Severus said dryly, "Hardly, this body has seen way to many miles. You'll take one look and run screaming."

"I've got some miles on me as well," she said. Knowing it was time, she took a deep breath and with trembling fingers undid a button or two and exposed the top of the scar that Dolohov had given her.

Severus eyes got wide, and then his brow creased with anger. "Who did that?" he demanded.

"Dolohov, many years ago, but he's gone and dead now. I'm showing you because we both have scars, Severus. I hope you won't go running when you see this one. It goes across my upper body." She made a slow slash with her hand to show him where it was. She had considered plastic surgery when she was younger. Her brief romance with Ron had proven to her it did matter. He had been repulsed by it, and she had often worn a chemise when they made love. It had been one of the things that proved to

her that Ron did not really love her. After he had left, she was reluctant to open herself up again for that kind of hurt and convinced herself she did not want another relationship. She used her scars as a reason not to even look.

Severus closed his eyes and took some deep slow breaths to help let the anger go. He did not want to frighten Hermione again. If Dolohov had still been alive, he would have eviscerated the wizard. When he opened his eyes again, she was rolling up a sleeve.

Hermione had not realised he had been so affected by seeing the result of Dolohov's attack. She was still under the impression he needed to see all her imperfections. Hermione exposed her second scar, revealing the word carved into her arm. "Bellatrix," she said flatly, staring at the hated word. "Dolohov's was a curse; there was no way to heal it without leaving a scar. Poppy thinks Bellatrix's knife had a poison. I was so sick after it. I could have them removed the Muggle way, but I keep them now to remind me of how much better my life is. It makes me grateful for what I have now."

"Hermione," he whispered and took her arm and pushed the sleeve back further and placed small, soft kisses along the scar. He looked deeply into her eyes. "You're more beautiful to me now than you were ten minutes ago. You are a strong, amazing woman."

"It's the same when I see you, Severus; you stood before us in the face of danger many times, taking the pain and the torture so that we would grow and learn enough to survive the war, and we did survive and thrive. I have been happy working at Hogwarts. You have no idea how much safer I feel when I am there...." She paused. She had never admitted that to anyone. She had never told anyone she was still frightened of being kidnapped and tortured again.

"Hermione, the scars are not only on your body are they?" Severus asked.

She began to tremble, then tears started to stream from her eyes, and she found herself gasping for breath. It had been years since she had let her guard down and allowed herself to cry like this. Years...not since Ron had left her, tearing her heart out in the process. Sometimes she hated him. He had betrayed her in the worst way, taking her security and love away. She had not seen him in years, and she would be happy to never see him again. Until Severus had called to her mind, she had been happy to stay in the secure walls of Hogwarts.

He took her face into his hands. "Hermione, please let me join with you, take the pendant in your hand, and let me see."

She nodded, craving for him to be a part of her. She grabbed the pendant and felt that familiar coolness of his ordered mind slip into hers. She unconsciously allowed him to take control of her. She was unaware that he stood her up and walked her to the bed. He used the old wand to change her into her nightgown and him into his nightshirt. He placed her on the bed and pulled the covers up around her, crawling in beside her. As soon as their heads hit the pillow, they slept and immediately dreamed.

Hermione found herself drawn back to a time just after the war; she was staring at Ron as he was backing out of the house, some of his belongings clutched in his arms. Several items he clutched fell to the floor, but he did not try to retrieve them. "I'm sorry," he was saying, "I can't stand the sight of the scars. It reminds me of my failure to save you." Hermione felt Severus holding her against him.

She heard Severus mutter, "The bastard."

She felt safe looking at the memory. Her brow creased as she heard Ron's words for the first time. At the time, when he had uttered the words, "I can't stand the sight of the scars," a roar had filled her ears, her sight had dimmed, and she had heard nothing else. But now she heard him: he was not leaving because he did not love her; he left because of his own failure. "Severus, did he really say that?" she asked.

"It is your memory," he reminded her stoically, trying to give her a steadfast anchor. He wanted to strangle the man. How could anyone be so superficial as to not look past imperfections on the skin? By Weasley's logic, he would also have rejected her for a scar on her knee sustained at some point when he failed to keep her from falling! He hoped he never saw Weasley again; he would show the idiot boy just what it was to have to live with scars.

Hermione turned away from the memory, and it vanished like smoke. She stared into Severus's eyes. "Please, make love to me, here. In this dream, we can both be strong; we can be scar-less. We can be anything we want to be."

He looked into her eyes. "I don't want anyone but you, Hermione, as you are. I will make love to you here, but I want to see you as you really are. If we are not true to ourselves, we can be true to no one."

Hermione nodded, gulping and breathing deeply to calm herself. The scenery around them formed, and they were in their bed there in the cabin. Hermione knew it was just in their minds. She knew neither of them had the strength to make love right now. But here in their dream, it could be perfect.

He drew her close and kissed her. His tongue slipped out to taste her, and she opened for him. Their kisses deepened for several minutes. When the need for oxygen became great, Severus slowly broke from her lips and began to kiss her face and neck. His hand slid down the sleeves of her gown, and with his mind, he made them vanish. He felt her stiffen. "Hermione," he said her name silkily, "I've already seen your arm, and I'm here... Let me fill your mind with love and beauty; let me heal your heart with the love I want to give you."

Hermione relaxed and stared at the top of his head, her hand caressing his hair as he moved over her arms kissing and tasting her scarred flesh. She ran her hands over his neck and felt the scars there. Slowly and with care, he peeled the gown from her upper body, and his lips bathed her body with gentle kisses. Hermione clutched in turns at the bed covers or at Severus as he lit her body on fire and took her to places she had never thought to go. Fingers touched silken places and circled hard flesh. Hermione tasted, touched and caressed him until they clutched at each other, gasping for breath as their bodies joined and reached for the stars. Once they had achieved their desired release, Severus slumped against her, gathering her close and kissing her a few times. They then fell into the arms of Morpheus together.

Hermione's eyes opened in the morning as the warmth of the sun's rays moved across the bed and touched her first. She looked down at herself and found she was still swathed in her flannel nightgown, Severus holding her close. Severus' face in sleep looked even younger, healthier and happy. Yes, it had happened in their minds, but it felt just as real. She had made love to and with Severus Snape, and she was happier than she had ever been.

He sensed her state of alertness and opened his eyes. Hermione immediately gave him a firm, gentle kiss with an accompanying smile.

"Are you alright?" he asked. "Was it the right thing to do?"

She nodded. "It was amazing, Severus," she assured him.

He smiled in response. "I hope I can compete with that when I am able to be with you physically," he said, some of his own insecurities showing.

Hermione laughed. "If, in the *extremely* unlikely scenario, you can't, I think I would be more than happy to practice enough so we will get that good. You know the Muggle saying, '*practice makes perfect*.'"

"I could accept that," he said, drawing her closer for another kiss. As if on cue, his stomach rumbled.

Hermione laughed and pulled away. She crawled over him and made a dash for the bathroom. Once inside, she quickly used the loo then stripped and showered in ten minutes. Today she decided to dress in simple shorts and a tank top. When she came from the bathroom, Severus was standing by the door, looking a little pained. She smiled and caressed his face, which actually had some stubble; he would need a new potion to prevent that. "Sorry, you should have told me you needed the loo. I'm going to go make breakfast."

He slipped passed her and shut the door.

Hermione heard the water of the shower go on. She smiled and went to make breakfast, all the while thinking, *Once he's stronger, he can take his turn in the kitchen.* She

had never been one to cook much, and she had about exhausted her abilities to make anything different. She chopped some leftover peppers from the night before. Adding a fresh onion to the mix, she scrambled some eggs into an omelette. She made some toast and checked their supplies. There probably was enough left of the staples to last the week, but she had arranged for a delivery of some more fresh vegetables, fruit, and meat tomorrow. She liked this rental. All their needs were supplied. She would have to remember to take the wards off in the morning. She scrambled for a pen and paper, jotting a note and sticking it to the fridge with her wand. Really, she knew the wards probably were not entirely necessary, but it was an old habit, and she felt safe behind them. It also hid their use of magic from any other wizard in the area.

Severus came into the room. His hair was still a bit damp from his shower, and he was wearing a clean white shirt and the dark jeans Hermione had packed for him. His hair was quite long, and it made her heart pitter-patter to look at him. He had a nick on one side of his face from physically shaving. She smiled and came close, raised her wand and healed the tiny cut. "You did pretty well with that disposable."

"I think they used a cream on our faces to rid us of hair. It lasted a few days, saving them some time. I look forward to taking a potion for it again."

"You might look quite handsome with a beard." She scrutinized his face, imagining a beard. "As long as it was neatly trimmed," she clarified.

"Not happening. I've been on long missions in the summer, and I've had to wear beards as a disguise. They itch," he said with disgust, and he rubbed at his face from the memory.

"Well, perhaps you will let me see in a dream," she ventured.

"You want to go there again?" he asked as he took his seat at the table and eyed his food with interest. He took up a napkin and laid it over one thigh.

Hermione trailed her fingers over his shoulder and then slipped into the chair opposite him. "Most definitely," she replied enthusiastically. "I have never felt more cherished," she said earnestly, placing her hand over his.

"Get used to it, Hermione. I plan to do a LOT more cherishing. Oh, and by the way, I like your outfit. It's nice to see some skin." He smiled.

Hermione blushed, then bent to eat her food. "You could do with a little skin exposure yourself. But, then again, Severus Snape in shorts and a tank top..." She giggled.

Severus felt a warm fuzzy feeling and frowned, *I'm becoming weak!* But then he thought further, *It's my life. I'm just a wizard, not a spy. If I want to be softer, I will be.*

Hermione reached up and caressed the wood of the pendant without thinking, and Severus felt her thoughts drift past his. *I like the softer man.*

"Oh," she whispered out loud, "Sorry. Do you want me to take the pendant off? I will touch it occasionally without thinking. I've grown too used to it being with me all these months."

He reached out and touched her hand. "Wear it, Hermione; it's a link to me only a few people know of, and we can trust those people implicitly. I like having you in there with me." He pointed to his temple. "If we see something we don't like of each other, we can talk about it."

Hermione chuckled. "Severus Snape talking through his problems."

"Scary, isn't it," he admitted with a mock scowl. A laugh soon followed though. "It feels good to be almost normal," he said, a slight tone of wonder to his voice. "I haven't had normal in my life for nearly any of it. Being a man with a real relationship is quite new and really quite pleasant. I am becoming someone I don't recognize when I look in the mirror, and then I think, why not? Don't I deserve to be happy?"

Hermione threaded her fingers through his. "Yes, and you know what, Severus? I do too."

They went back to eating, and after the dishes were done with wand power, they took a walk about the garden.

"Severus," Hermione ventured, "I saw on the website there is a stream about a ten minute walk down the path out the back gate. Maybe we could take a picnic and go sit by the water and read. Would you like that?"

"That's sounds nice." He was sitting on the little love seat, fingering the old wand. He was actually caressing the wood idly as he talked.

Hermione smiled. "It is really filled with memories good and bad."

When Severus realized she was watching him, he told her, "This wand is quite special. With all I went through, I never took a life with it. Albus either. It has a feeling of goodness about it. Something that was not in the black ebony one I carried for so long."

She came and sat by him. "It may be an old wand, Severus. But it's here to help you start a new life. It was a gift from a man who loved you and asked terrible things of you. But he knew you needed that to remind you you're a good man at heart."

Severus stood, blinking tears. "What is this a therapy session?" His voice had a rough edge to it.

"I'm hardly a therapist, Severus. You and I both need therapy. If talking it out with each other - or dreaming it together - helps us what does it hurt? It will only make us that much stronger together," she explained. She kept her voice level, knowing he was working through some of his demons. Her getting upset would not help the situation.

"I'm s..." he started to say. "It is hard for me to talk about certain things, and Albus is one of them."

"No, I don't want apologies. We have nothing to apologize to each other about. We both have had some rough times, and though mine were far fewer..."

"... but not any less traumatic to you," he told her.

"Yes," she said, putting her arms around his waist and feeling the tension drain out of his body.

"You are a balm to me, Hermione. One hug or a kiss and I believe I can be normal." He pushed her gently away. "Let's gather our things for the picnic, and we can make our way there slowly before it gets too warm."

Hermione smiled, glad to get away from the heavy discussion.

The day was warm, but not too warm. They lowered the wards and slowly made their way down the path. The birds were singing, and the wind was blowing the leaves, making a wonderful rustling sound through the woods. Before leaving the cabin, Severus had asked Hermione to let the pendant rest against her skin so they could communicate but not really talk on the way to the stream. He could save his breath that way. It was wonderful to feel him there in her mind and not have to voice anything. They knew what each other thought about the hues in the leaves and the buzz of bees or the many colored flowers. This method of communication really allowed them to feel in tune with the nature surrounding them.

Hermione was pleased at how detailed everything was that Severus saw around him. She heard him chuckle and felt embarrassed; of course he was observant. Observing had been his life. They even stopped here and there to gather a few potion ingredients. Hermione realized that with her kitchen tools she could brew Severus a potion to stop the growth of his beard. It had always been one of the first things she had taught her students who were old enough to begin growing facial hair.

It took a good thirty minutes to get there with their delays, but they found a delightful flat area at the base of the path, no doubt maintained to be a picnic area but still looking quite natural. There were trees to shade the sun and a small water pump to bring the water from the stream to the bucket beneath for use there at the site. The

stream had variety after variety of plants and herbs growing nearby, and there were fish, birds on occasion and butterflies of every vivid color. Hermione and Severus spread the blanket and then sat to rest.

Severus used his newly obtained wand to cushion the tree before he leaned back against it. Hermione sat close, leaning back against his chest with his arm about her shoulder.

"I wish I had a wizarding camera," she said wistfully. She suddenly sat up, exclaiming, "Oh, the cell phone! It has a built-in camera." She got to her feet, and Severus watched with amusement as she pulled out the cell phone and opened the camera application. He was quite amazed at the little pictures. He knew cell phones communicated by satellite, but he had no idea they did all the things Hermione told him about as she went around snapping picture after picture.

She even took a few of him and had him take a couple of her by the stream. "I can download these on my Dad's computer and have prints made. They won't move, but it's better than nothing."

"I'm sure we will enjoy them for years to come," he said.

Hermione finally sat cross legged before him and smiled. "I like that, *Years to come*."

"I cannot imagine the future without you, Hermione," Severus said seriously.

She moved toward him, and he held out his arms, drawing her into his lap. Hermione found her mouth covered by his. His kisses were deep and longing. They kissed for several minutes. Hermione felt his hand touching her breast through her shirt. She pulled back slightly and said, "Severus."

He sighed and stopped. He held her tightly. "I want you so badly. In this world while we are awake. I know it's not time. Dreams are one thing, but its only information from both of us about our own bodies. Reality will be different."

"I know, I want you too," she told him, pushing his hair back over his shoulder. "I want to wait until you're completely well. Such activity may prove too much for you, and I don't want our first time to be laced with disappointment."

"I hardly think you would be disappointed. I don't have to expend a lot of energy to satisfy you. It could be done slowly and with great pleasure for me as well," he informed her with a smirk.

"Severus, please understand," she implored. She hid her face in his neck.

He sighed and caressed her back. "I do understand," he assured her. "I agree in my mind; it's my desire that's warring with me. I know my strength is not there. Well, since we can't play, why don't you get that book out and read to me," he suggested.

Hermione pulled back relieved, kissing him gently before moving to sit in front of him. She pulled the book out of the satchel she had brought and began to read.

That evening, after the dishes were done and put away, Hermione brought out the herbs and other potion ingredients. They prepared the items for the depilatory potion. Severus was surprised when Hermione pulled a small cauldron from her never-ending supply bag. She had some simple tools, and they also used kitchen knives to cut and chop some of the ingredients. Hermione found such a joy in the mutual preparing of the potion. They worked well as a team, and they didn't have to talk much; she didn't wear the pendant against her skin that night, and Severus didn't try to tell her how to do anything. He watched her hands and found a new joy in potion making that night.

As they washed up, he said, "I was working on some potion research before that fateful battle. I would love to show you my notes, assuming they are still around. We could develop potions together."

Hermione gave him a warm smile. "I would love that. I do have your notes....," she hesitated and then continued, "I have looked at some of them and I have done further research on a couple. I haven't published anything. I'm sor-"

"Belay that," Severus instructed, holding his hand up to stop her apology. "I'm glad you found them stimulating enough to continue. I look forward to seeing what you have done."

"I would have given you the rightful credit," she still tried to explain.

"I have no doubt you would have. You are honest to a fault, well most times when you're not deceiving your teachers in an effort to save the world."

Hermione laughed, coming to him to give him a tight hug. "Come on, I'm tired, and you're probably exhausted. Let's go to bed."

Severus said, "Actually this has been a stimulating day and I am tired, but I would love it if we finish that last chapter of the book before we sleep."

"Sure, but you may have to read it to me." She stifled a yawn.

"I think that can be arranged. Go get ready for bed, and Hermione, can you alter your gown to have no sleeves and not so high a neck?" He grinned a bit evilly. "I can at least look."

She smiled, "I'll see what I can do." She left the kitchen and went into the bedroom. She took a different gown from her bag. It was deep blue and had more feminine features. She took a shower and then used her wand to dry her hair in soft curls. Severus seemed to like them, and she was tired of trying to manage them.

He was waiting in the bedroom and slipped past her to take care of his night time ritual. As he passed he whispered, "You're beautiful, my Hermione." His fingers caressed hers as he continued on into the bathroom and shut the door.

Hermione retrieved some light-scented creams from her bag and moisturized her face. She chastised herself for forgetting all week. She had been so caught up with caring for and being with Severus that she had forgotten to take care of her own rituals. She could not afford to neglect them any longer...she was not getting any younger!

Hermione climbed into the bed as Severus came from the bathroom wearing only pajama bottoms. "Hey, that's not fair," she complained as he climbed in beside her.

"I usually don't wear anything to bed," he whispered near her ear once he had climbed into bed.

Hermione blushed and then playfully socked him. "You're not making this easy," she complained. She tucked the blanket up to his armpits to hide his enticing chest and then stubbornly opened the book and picked up the story where she had left off that afternoon.

Merrin, thank you for the beta work you are doing for me. I know it takes a lot of time, and I really appreciate it.

Suzanne, thank you for your Brit picking, and any other improvement's you have made to my work.

Becky, as always, you're my first reader, and keep me encouraged.

Chapter Eleven

Chapter 11 of 20

Now a professor at Hogwarts, Hermione Granger begins to experience fierce migraines and voices in her head. What is causing these headaches or who?

The next few days followed the pattern of that third day. After the supplies arrived on Thursday, Hermione set the wards again, and they walked further down the stream until the path was revealed to have disintegrated...fallen during some past storm. They were forced to turn back. They built a fire in the small fireplace that night and sat in the cozy living room. Severus had made a lot of progress in the last few days. With additional potions...and the walks...he was gaining strength by leaps and bounds. By Saturday night he was feeling good. He even had a little bit of a suntan.

Hermione was also well rested and tanned. They had heard from Minerva again. She had sent another owl, along with notes from Poppy and Pomona, keeping them up-to-date with developments. Hermione had also spoken with her mother on Friday morning.

They sat dressed for bed, staring into the fire and contemplating the dread they felt about returning to Hogwarts in the morning. For Severus it would be the loss of not having Hermione with him all day, and for Hermione it was facing Minerva again. Disappointing people was so hard for her. But she did have a scolding coming, and she knew now they had been wrong to cover it up for as long as they had.

"Hermione, stop worrying; there's nothing you can do," Severus said sympathetically.

"I know," she replied. "But I'm a worrier, I can't help it."

Severus thought perhaps he should try and distract her. He got up from the sofa and took her hands in his, pulling her to her feet. He bent his head and started kissing her. His kisses were urgent, and Hermione lost herself in them. When he pulled her into their bedroom and began to slide the straps of her nightgown from her shoulders, she did not protest. It was what they both wanted; they wanted to make love, physically, before returning home.

Severus' hands caressed her arms. His fingers lingered over her scar, and he massaged it gently. Hermione relieved him of his pajama top then let her fingers slide up his bare chest. She felt the many scars there: some tiny, some that made her cringe inside...not because of the sight of them, but because she could imagine the wounds they had once been. Their nightclothes fell to the floor.

Severus gently guided her into the bed, and he slipped in beside her, half covering her. His fingers gently touched her puckered flesh, and his kisses followed. When he took her damaged nipple into his mouth, she forgot her scar and just let herself feel. She felt the muscles in his back as she ran her hands over it. She felt the swell of his firm buttocks. She felt the hair of his legs tickling her as they slid against hers. She felt the sharpness of hip bones, still not covered by enough flesh, poke her hips, but it didn't matter...all that mattered was Severus and being with him.

Severus caressed and slowly explored her body; his hands cupped the roundness of her small breasts, and he felt her long legs tangle with his. It was exquisite. He felt her hands caress his body in return, and he felt his hardness against her leg.

With care they explored and gave each other all that they were. When Severus slipped inside her, they both gasped with the pleasure and let their minds soar as their bodies surged together.

Covered in sweat and with sighs, smiles and maybe a few happy tears, they lay still, tangled together, gasping for breath and giving small kisses. Severus asked, "Are you okay?"

"I'm perfect. You were right...dreams are but a shadow of reality." She lay facing his side, her arm over his stomach.

"They most certainly are," he agreed, kissing her forehead, his fingers caressing her hair. "Thank you, Hermione, for giving me back my life."

"It is most definitely *my pleasure*," she giggled, catching his double meaning as she ran a finger in circles around one of his nipples.

"Hermione, if you persist, I may be forced to try again, and I think I only have one adventure in me for tonight," he warned her. As much as he would love to go again, he was aware of his current limitations. *Soon, my love. Soon I will make love to you all night.*

Hermione moved to kiss the nipple, and then she drew back, but was still, just holding him tight. "Poor dear," she commiserated, half jokingly. "Sleep, my love, this is only the beginning."

Severus murmured an agreement... then was breathing deeply and steadily within the minute. Hermione let herself be lulled to sleep by the rhythm.

The next morning, Hermione woke to the smell of coffee. Her eyes blearily focused, and she found a single red rose on the pillow next to her. Moments later, Severus appeared with a tray filled with eggs, toast, bacon and fruit. "Oh, you're awake. I was hoping to get back in time to kiss you awake and give you your morning java."

Hermione smiled. "The rose is lovely. Thank you." She accepted the coffee and a gentle kiss. "What a lovely surprise. Breakfast in bed and I didn't even have to cook it." Taking a bite of the eggs, she exclaimed, "Oh Merlin, Severus. These are good! You can cook from now on."

He laughed. "I'll teach you."

"I'd rather you do it," she gave him that sultry look that melted him inside.

"We brew together, we cook together," he said, firmly with a smirk.

"Alright, but if I'm working long hours or vice versa, can we take turns?" she compromised.

"Agreed," he said with a nod. After Severus had finished his food, he got up to take the tray back to the kitchen. He could hear the water running in the bath when he got back. He was a bit disappointed, having hoped to be able to indulge in a short romp before they would have to get ready to leave. His disappointment was short lived when the door opened and Hermione seductively asked, "Will you join me?"

He grinned, feeling himself harden immediately. "Indeed," he said as he headed toward the door.

The tug of the Portkey pulled at their navels, and the room spun away. They suddenly found themselves in Minerva's office. Hermione stood by the hearth and watched as the three women who had been awaiting their arrival surged forward, wide grins on their mouths and tears in their eyes, looking at Severus in astonishment as if they had

not believed he was real until this very moment.

Pomona reached him first, and Hermione saw the short, stout woman reach out to him.

Severus went down on his knees and grasped her tightly to him. "Mona," he greeted her, his voice breaking.

Hermione, wearing the pendant close to her heart, heard and felt as he said the word that it was really 'Mama'. She was surprised and pleased that he laid his head against the older witch's breast and let her stroke his hair and cry all over him.

Poppy stepped around them and hugged Hermione. "Will you look at that? We did well. The potions look like they worked. How are you, dear?"

"I'm wonderful as well, Poppy." She glanced over Poppy's shoulder to see Severus stand up again to greet the Headmistress. Minerva, at nearly his height, took hold of him with trembling arms and held him tightly.

"It's good to see you, boy," she said in a quite steady voice. "I'm sorry. We should have looked harder."

Severus was surprised at the tears that had started when Mona had grabbed him, and now one spilled down his cheek. "I wouldn't trade the last week for anything, Minerva, even my freedom the last five years," he said reassuringly.

Minerva glanced at Hermione, "Well, my Gryffindor Lion wasn't at the top of her class for nothing," she said proudly. "She is the most resourceful person I know." Minerva released Severus, seeing the fear on Hermione's face, and held out her arms.

The tension in the room released, and everyone was hugging and crying. Severus found himself drenched in tears and crumpled from all the hugs, and he could not have been happier. He looked around the office, taking in the familiar space. Almost unbidden, he raised his eyes to see the portrait of Albus Dumbledore gazing at him with such love. The old wizard was dabbing tears from his painted eyes. Severus felt his legs buckle, and he fell into a chair that one witch or another had seen that he needed.

"Severus!" Hermione came and knelt at his side. "Are you okay?" she asked frantically. Her hand felt for his pulse. It was rapid.

"I'm just overcome," he told her, glancing back up into Albus' now concerned eyes.

Albus looked so life-like and so real. Neither saw any resentment or sadness, only joy.

"Severus," came his all-too-familiar voice. "It is good to lay eyes on you again and in the flesh. I wondered why you hadn't joined us."

"Albus," was all Severus could say.

"Thank you, my boy," the old man said before being overcome himself. He slipped out of his portrait and vanished.

Severus stared at the empty frame for a moment and then at the four women who stood or knelt around him with concerned faces. "I think I need my bed," he told them. What he needed was some alone time, well not *alone*, he needed to lay on a bed, holding Hermione close.

Poppy fussed a little. "I would like to check you over."

"After I rest, please, Poppy," Severus asked. He took Pomona's hand and gave it a squeeze. "I'll have Hermione come and get you when I feel stronger."

Pomona knew him enough to say, "Let him rest, Poppy. I'll look forward to seeing you, Sev."

Minerva and Poppy nodded.

"Go through the Floo," Minerva said, "I have it connected to your rooms, Hermione. I assume Severus will want his rooms back. I can have your..."

"No," Severus interrupted, holding up his hand. He stood with Hermione's help. "I will stay with Hermione in her rooms."

Minerva's eyebrow raised, but she only nodded, "Go then. Hermione, come and see me when you can."

Her look turned stern, and Hermione paled but nodded, "Yes, Headmistress." She supported Severus, and when they got close to the Floo, she grabbed a handful of Floo powder, threw it down and called, "Potion mistress Hermione Granger's quarters." They stepped into the green flames and spun away.

Hermione half dragged him to the bed. She laid him down and ran for a potion that would even out his heart beat and calm him down. It was simple shock from all the emotions and seeing Albus. Severus let Hermione loosen the buttons on his shirt, and she took it off of him. She undid his pants but left them on and pulled his shoes off. She tucked the blanket over him and uttered a wandless warming spell. She pulled her outer garments off and crawled in with him. "Severus, are you okay?" she asked gently.

Her gentle question opened a floodgate for Severus, and despite himself, tears started to flow. He knew he could let his guard down around her. Hermione cried with him. The pendant pulled their thoughts together, and she was able to share wordless feelings with him. Perhaps even take some of his pain and expend it through her tears. He finally fell asleep, exhausted, but she continued to hold him, murmuring words of love as she stroked his cheeks and arms, assuring him she was there for him. She kept the caresses going until she succumbed to sleep herself.

Severus woke to find Hermione draped over him, and he tightened his arms around her. He felt utterly drained, but the pain of having killed his friend was not there anymore. He marveled at the lightness of his heart and the amazing gift he held in his arms. Seeing Albus smiling down at him had been a terrific shock, and hearing the voice he had forever stilled thank him had sent him over the edge. All the pain from that one act had burst forth, overwhelming him. He did not know what he would have done if Hermione had not been there with him. Her love had calmed the chaos in his mind. Love was something he had always craved, and he'd had so little of it. He supposed that was why he had latched on to Lily. But she had not really cared for him once they had gotten older. His gravitation to the dark arts had scared her. Hermione was different; she loved him despite his past, and with her, he thought, it might be possible to live a normal life.

It is, came her whisper in his mind.

Are you eavesdropping, my dear? He tightened his grip on her and felt her returning hug.

She smiled against his chest. *I only woke to hear the part about a normal life. I hope I will be included in that.*

He whispered aloud, "Most definitely."

Hermione rose up to look him in the face. "I'm looking forward to it." Still connected with him, Hermione saw a flash of a scene: Severus and her holding a baby, and a shiny ring glinted up from her finger. She gasped. "Is that a proposal?"

Severus cleared his throat. "Would you like it to be?" he asked aloud.

"Absolutely, yes!" she cried as she threw her arms about his neck.

The kisses that followed were frantic and deep; hands explored contours and silken places. Bodies joined with such ease, and hearts beat faster and faster. Fingers

gripped, muscles strained and joint gasps of pleasure filled the room. They slumped back on the bed, spent. The blankets now lay on the floor with the remainder of their garments. Hermione snuggled against Severus, not needing to feel like she could crawl into his skin to get closer, because she was already in his mind. In just a few short months, this man had taken her life and turned it upside down. Yet, somehow, it seemed right side up for the first time in her life.

Amen to that, Severus thought into her mind.

Hermione lay there, feeling as content as she ever remembered. Then Minerva's words came back to her: *"Come and see me when you can."* She shivered.

Severus pulled her closer and chuckled. "She is just an old windbag, Hermione," he said with affection. "You already got the hugs and kisses. You know she loves you. Just stand there and take whatever she dishes out, and then we go on from there."

"You don't think she will fire me and offer you the job?" she ventured nervously.

"Absolutely not, and I wouldn't take it anyway. Vector's job is open, and I am smart enough to teach it, I'll have you know. Worse comes to worst, I can finish the year in that position, and we can see what else is out there afterward."

"You could probably teach any and all of the classes here, Severus," she told him.

"Ugh, not Divination. I stay away from that field. Far away," he said with extreme revulsion. "There lies within it all my ruined life... before I found you a few months ago," he added.

She pretended to spit and Severus smiled. "We have that in common. I can't say it's a bunch of hooy knowing what I know, but it is so unpredictable. I'd rather have facts."

Severus agreed. "I'm feeling pretty good. I think we should shower and have dinner in the Great Hall."

"Are you sure you want to do that? It will cause quite a stir, and the Owlery will have some exhausted birds by tonight. All of the Wizarding world will know by tomorrow. You're still not strong enough to take on anyone in a duel, and the press would be relentless."

"I'm pretty safe here at Hogwarts; I think I can manage. I'm ready to join the land of the living," he said adamantly.

She kissed him and then crawled off the bed and held her hand out. "Let's get ready for the land of the living then, shall we?"

Severus got out of the bed and then stood in the middle of the room, naked as a jay bird, with a thoughtful look on his face. "I don't have my robes. I wonder what ever happened to them," he mused.

Hermione blushed, "I think I can take care of that." She went to the cupboard. She poked around behind her robes that hung there and pulled her old school trunk from the very back.

Severus eyed her backside with relish and had to clamp down on his desire to take her again.

She knelt and opened it. She dragged it to the middle of the room and gestured for Severus to look inside. There lay three of his very best robes and his cloak.

"Why would you keep my clothing?" he asked.

"I always thought you hid behind all those folds, and I wanted to be reminded that behind those folds was a man with the heart of a lion." She pulled them out, and pushing her clothing over, she hung them next to hers. Beneath them was a set of his regular clothing: white shirt and black pants. His very best set.

"Well, you are a woman of many surprises." He took the garments, and Hermione chose clothing for herself for the evening. After a quick shower with a few stolen kisses, they dressed.

"Oh, Merlin, look at you," she said, tugging at his lapels. "I'm glad I never realized you were damn sexy in your robes when I was a teenager. I would have been in detention and tortured for even considering it." She laughed. "You're a little thin, but you look just as you did all those years ago, actually younger, no more pressure."

Severus nodded. "I definitely would have destroyed that crush. Oaf as I was back then. It would have been very uncomfortable."

"You always were too proper for your own good. Maybe, I should be grateful for that now. I have your heart, no one else."

"I want no one else, only you, Hermione, past or present," he said softly, caressing her cheek gently. "Come on. I'd rather be early than late."

Severus and Hermione stepped out into the hallway and headed for the stairs to the Great Hall.

There were only a few students already in their place as the couple entered the hall.

Conversations died as Hermione and Severus moved up the centre aisle past the students. A wave of whispers followed in their wake, all consisting of only two words: *Severus Snape?*

Hermione and Severus took their seats as though nothing were out of the ordinary. As though a man everyone thought long dead was walking, living *breathing* among them, was a commonplace occurrence. When Pomona arrived, she simply greeted Severus with a kiss on the cheek and took her place next to him.

The rest of the students arrived, and the Great Hall was now filled with silent, staring children. The new arrivals quickly spied the professor at the front of the room.

Even the teachers present were dumbfounded to see their old colleague there. No one approached him, and he felt for Hermione's hand under the table for courage. Would someone start flinging curses at him?

When Minerva arrived with Poppy, she came and gave his shoulder a squeeze.

"Are you alright, Severus?" Poppy asked, concerned.

"Yes," he replied. "Hermione took good care of me."

Hermione blushed and Poppy smiled. "I agree she has been doing just that. I have it on good authority that she would make a very good Healer."

Hermione grinned. "I'm glad to hear you have been communicating with Dr. Leurante."

Now it was Poppy's turn to blush.

At that moment, Minerva took her place at the podium, and everyone sat and turned their eyes toward her. "Welcome to dinner tonight, students. You will no doubt realize we have a very distinguished guest here with us tonight. You will recognize Severus Snape, war hero, from past news releases when you were much younger or our new history books. Our own Potions mistress, Hermione Granger, has found him in a Muggle hospital, still under the paralyzing effects of his war wounds, and has brought him home. I hope you will join me in welcoming Professor Snape back among us."

When everyone stood to their feet with a roar of cheering and clapping, Severus squeezed Hermione's hand to near pain.

Minerva turned to him and motioned him to stand.

He stood, and the noise got even louder. He was overcome and felt tears burn in his eyes. Then he realized the teachers had surrounded him. He felt hands on his back and arms and then one on his lower hip, and he looked down to see Filius looking up at him. His smile was infectious, and Severus found himself smiling down at the diminutive man.

"Thank you, Filius, it's good to be restored to health." He lowered his hand to reach for Filius' and noticed he still was clutching Hermione's. He saw Filius' eyebrow raise. "I have lots to tell. Hermione has agreed to marry me."

Minerva, who had joined the group, as well as Poppy and Pomona, gasped, and then there was more hugging and crying.

Minerva finally settled the teachers as well as the students and said to Severus, "You sure didn't step back into this new world slowly."

Severus Snape laughed out loud, and everyone was so shocked they stopped to stare at the wizard, newly returned to life.

Thank you, Merrin, I am so happy to have you as my beta. You do an amazing job.

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Without you four ladies, this wouldn't get done.

Chapter Twelve

Chapter 12 of 20

Now a professor at Hogwarts, Hermione Granger begins to experience fierce migraines and voices in her head. What is causing these headaches or who?

Hermione squirmed in the chair before Minerva's desk. She had been ushered in by the Headmistress, then left alone while Minerva went to get some special tea from her own kitchen.

A throat clearing made her look up into the crystal clear blue eyes of Albus Dumbledore.

"Is Severus alright?" he asked, concerned.

"Yes, sir. He's doing well. He and Filius are visiting in the teachers' lounge," she said, glancing at the door that Minerva had exited through.

"Don't worry, Hermione, her bark is worse than her bite. She loves you, and she would never send you away. She needs you too much. Truth be known, until Severus reappeared, she had planned one day to ask you to be Headmistress."

Hermione's hand flew to her mouth. "Sir!"

Minerva returned at that moment, and Albus exited his portrait quite rapidly.

Minerva glared at the empty portrait. "What has that old man been filling your head with?" she asked. Setting the tea tray on the corner of her desk, she proceeded to fill their two cups.

Hermione reached for hers and saw that her hand was shaking. She snatched it back and wrung her hands together.

Minerva eyed her and then set the cup within her reach.

"Ms. Granger," she said formally, "I trust you know how foolish this search on your own was."

"Yes, ma'am," Hermione said contritely, staring down into her lap, unable to look at Minerva.

Minerva's voice was quite stern and raised an octave or two. "You should have come to me immediately. You put your students in grave danger by your lack of food and proper sleep. Your fatigue might have cost them their lives. You left here on false pretenses a number of times. Now, I have spoken harshly to Poppy and Pomona. They were duty bound to inform me as well, and they did not."

Hermione glanced at her and saw the old witch's face was pinched with hurt.

"Headmistress, we only wished to save you from further pain if Severus proved to be disabled for the rest of his life. We all know how upset you were when the war was over and the truth came out," she begged her to understand.

"That was not your choice to make. This is my school, my responsibility, for all of you ... student and teacher alike. In attempting to save my feelings, you have wounded me in a way I cannot say." She seemed to lose her strength, and she sat heavily into her chair.

Hermione, distressed, ran to kneel at her feet. She grabbed the old woman's hands. "Oh, Minerva, please forgive us. We really thought to keep you from further pain until Severus could be returned home. Even he wanted it that way at first. He is the one who told me to finally inform you and that it had been the wrong choice."

Minerva pulled her hand free, produced a white handkerchief from her robe pocket and dabbed at her eyes. She looked down at her favorite teacher and once student and chastised her, "I warn you, Ms. Granger, you had better never repeat this sort of behaviour again... If I find I have one more reason to sack you, I will."

Hermione pulled back as if burned. Tears fell from her eyes, and she stood and turned away.

Albus' strong voice rang out, "Woman, do not say something you will regret. Remember your words sixty years ago..."

Minerva gasped, and Hermione turned to see the witch cover her face with her hands.

Hermione glanced up to see Albus' eyes flash like fire. There was an old unspoken pain between them.

Minerva seemed to suddenly lose years, her wrinkled face became pale, and she shrank into herself. Glancing up at Albus, her face crumbled, the pain fled and she reached out to Hermione, and then both women were hugging each other and crying, both asking forgiveness of each other.

When Severus knocked on the door an hour later, quite worried about Hermione, he found them laughing and sharing tea and biscuits.

The walk back to their rooms was quiet; both were quite solemn and drained from the emotional impact of being back. They slipped into the tub and just sat, Hermione leaning back against him and relaxed. They didn't speak or make love, just communed in silence, letting the weight and peace of the castle, of being home, sink in.

As they climbed into bed that night, Hermione finally broke the silence. "Severus, what happened between Minerva and Albus about sixty years ago? Do you know?"

Severus looked at her. "How did you know?"

She told him what had happened.

"They were going to be married, and Albus got a lead on the Elder Wand. He had to go immediately or the trail would be cold. Minerva challenged his love and told him if he went, she would not marry him, and that their relationship would end."

"Oh Merlin, Severus, such a waste!"

"Minerva's a very proud woman, Hermione. It tore her heart out, and it changed her. I wasn't here, of course, but Albus told me about it to demonstrate how much words can change a life. My pledge to him to help Harry would drastically change the life I'd chosen with The Dark Lord. He wanted me to know how much he regretted his choice to go get the Elder Wand; he wished he'd never seen or heard of it. He would have rather had the love of a wife. It took years, but they became good friends again. Minerva loved him and supported him, but she would never let him into her life again. It's odd that he confided in me, but he did that now and then...told me things about his life, things he never told anyone else. I guess it proved to me he trusted me with those parts of his life no one else knew about."

Hermione slipped against his side when he lay down, and he pulled her close. He could still feel her sadness and melancholy even without the pendant resting against her skin.

"It will all be okay. We all have adjustments to make and forgiveness to give and joy to learn."

"She's very alone in that tower, Severus."

"We won't leave her there. She can become an honorary great aunt to our children."

"That's a wonderful idea... Children did you say?" she asked surprised.

"Well, I don't want a brood, but I thought two might be nice...one of each sex," he said as if that was the easiest thing to do.

Hermione laughed. "One of each, and what happens if we get two girls or two boys ... will there be a third?"

"Hermione, I am a wizard and a Potions master. I think we can figure that out to our benefit."

Hermione rolled her eyes comically. "Of course, geeze where is my brain tonight? That was a foolish statement."

"I think you're just being emotional...and a bit more Muggle...tonight. It happens when you're upset."

"Oh, it does, does it?" She rose to her knees and started poking him in the ribs and tickling his side. He hated to be tickled, but she did it when she felt a need to reduce him to giggles to make herself feel better.

He grabbed her and returned the favor, and soon they were rolling about the bed. Tickles led to kisses, and kisses led to caresses, and caresses led to their bodies joining in a frantic dance to soothe emotional, stressed minds and bodies. They slept spooned against each other.

Monday morning Hermione returned to her classroom, and Severus sat in their sitting room by a fire, trying to concentrate on reading. He was at loose ends though, unable to just sit there. He slipped out of their rooms, disillusioning himself as he passed through the door. He did feel Hermione's silent question and eyes on him as he passed. She'd decided to wear the pendant against her skin that first day, claiming she would miss him as much as he would her, so she knew when he passed by.

I can't just sit there, I'm going stir crazy. I'm going for a walk, maybe stop by and see Minerva about a job.

Hermione nodded to him as looked back at her. *I love you*, she thought to him.

She was concerned that he was finding even the first day back with her teaching his class a difficult situation.

Hermione, I am happy for you and proud of your accomplishments. As you will remember, I was no longer the Potions teacher when I was here. I will talk to Minerva about the Arithmancy position; I know Filius hates teaching it on his free periods as well as Sybill, who has been filling in a couple periods a day. Her unfortunate students would go barmy in a few weeks with her at the helm, much longer.

Hermione giggled out aloud, and the students looked at her as if she was mad. She glared at them, and they went back to work.

I'll meet you in the Great Hall for lunch. The door opened and then closed behind him. A few students glanced at it curiously, but assuming it was a ghost or some other idiosyncrasy of the castle, they went back to their tasks.

Hermione could still feel him close to her heart, but her mind missed his proximity.

I am still here, Hermione, now get to work and let me take care of myself His voice was stern, and yet she felt his warm mental hug. Hermione turned back to her students. "You have twenty-five minutes left. You should be bottling and cleaning up in twenty minutes," she reminded them.

Severus went up to Minerva's office. The gargoyle was open and inviting. He glanced at it curiously, but then he supposed Minerva no longer felt the need for the extra protection in this era of peace. Personally, he would have been a little more cautious being who he was. But, he envied her ability to trust so completely.

He, too, felt the distance between him and Hermione physically, like a tight rubber band was trying to pull them closer. He knew in time she would have to place the pendant outside her robes. They could not stay this connected all the time. He felt her protest, and then after a few minutes, she agreed. They needed their own mental space to concentrate on their jobs. It was enough for him to know she felt it would be as difficult for her as for him.

He knocked on Minerva's door and found her hunched over a stack of parchment.

"Severus, come in, come in. I will get us some tea. Floopsy," she called.

A small elf with great floppy ears appeared. "Yes, Headmistress, what can Floopsy bring?" the little elf crooned.

"Tea?" Minerva directed the question toward Severus.

"Darjeeling," Severus requested.

Minerva smiled. "Darjeeling and some chocolate biscuits, please Floopsy. I need a pick-me-up."

The little elf popped away.

"Come, please sit, Severus. I was actually expecting you. I've never known you to be idle for long. Are you feeling alright today?" she asked.

Severus took a seat in front of her desk and stretched out his long legs, crossing them. "I'm well. I'm feeling quite good today."

Floopsy popped back in with a huge tray laden with tea and biscuits. Severus moved to help him, surprised for a moment when the tray floated onto the desk with ease. *have to get used to the elves again*, he thought.

"Thank you, Floopsy, that will be all," Minerva said, taking the tea pot in hand and pouring the contents into the cups.

"What is it you wish to discuss, Severus?" she asked, handing him a cup and saucer.

"Vector's job. Did you sack her, or did she leave willingly?" Severus asked, perusing the selection of biscuits. He took one, placing it on the saucer beside his cup before settling back and crossing his legs once more.

"She left willingly. I spoke to her in private about your return. She understood what you did for this school...and the wizarding community at large...but she did not trust herself to remain here and face you every day, knowing the things you had done to stay undercover and that perhaps her son was one of the casualties."

"I knew about Ruthford's death after the fact. I was not involved, Minerva. I was on another mission for Tom. I am surprised she didn't stay to confront me," he commented.

"I had Albus talk to her." She took a biscuit and set it on a little plate.

Severus glanced at Albus, but was relieved to find the portrait empty. "There are only a few weeks until school is over. I can handle Vector's job for that long," he told the older witch.

Minerva smiled. "I thought you might volunteer, but are you sure you're up to it?"

"It's mostly mental, not physical work, and I'll rest between classes. I promise." He smirked, letting her know he was annoyed at the motherly concern.

She smirked back. "I will inform the other teachers, and you can start Wednesday. It will give you some time to look over the curriculum and prepare your lessons for that day." She raised a challenging eyebrow. "You realize that OWLs and NEWTs are in three weeks?"

"Of course, I can be ready," Severus promised.

"Good, now tell me about yours and Hermione's plans," she said pointedly.

"Plans?" he repeated.

"When is the wedding, Severus?" she said plainly.

"Wedding?" he repeated her again, a bit stunned.

"This conversation will take a long time if you keep repeating everything I say, Severus," she said humorously before turning serious again. "If the two of you are going to continue living together in this castle, there had best be a wedding sooner than later," she informed him.

"Well, Hermione and I have not talked about it; we spoke of children last night," he told her.

"Well, then a wedding best be first. This is a school, and we have certain standards to uphold," she said firmly.

"Give me some time. If I'm going to propose, it should look like my idea and be a bit romantic," he stated with a smirk. "Romance is something quite new to me, and I have to ease into it." He heard Hermione giggle in his mind. *Drat! Out woman, this is a private conversation.* She giggled again and was gone. Severus felt her absence like an empty room.

"Have it done by the end of the summer, and Severus, I will expect an invitation," she said. She dismissed him.

Severus glanced once more at Albus's portrait, this time finding the man's blue eyes glued on him.

"Albus," he greeted simply before he turned toward the door.

"Come see me soon, Severus. We have a lot of catching up to do," Albus implored him.

Severus nodded, not trusting his voice to be steady. It was not quite the same shock this time, but he still felt a bit rattled. When he was out of the room, he decided to go see Pomona.

He figured if she had a class, he could wander through the greenhouses until she was free.

He walked out of the castle and toward the greenhouses out on the grounds. It was only slightly overcast, and the sun was warm. He felt Hermione slip back into his mind.

I missed you, she said. *Is it okay to come back?*

Always, he thought back. *I didn't really care if you heard the conversation. It took me by surprise to find you there, but you know, Hermione, I do want you with me for the rest of my life. Not just as a companion. I think you know that and expect that already.*

Yes, Severus. I would be lost without you.

Do you want the romance and the dinner and flowers? I am well able.

Ask me now, she thought back.

What! We are not even together, he said, unnerved.

But we are. Ask me, she begged.

Severus stopped on the cliff overlooking the Black Lake, and he let her see what he was seeing*Hermione Jean Granger, will you marry me?*His heart was beating so fast.

YES! her mental scream nearly staggered him, and he laughed out, then clamped a hand over his mouth and looked to see if anyone was around. He spied Pomona looking up at him from her small terraced garden down the cliff. He could see the curious look on her face. *You've made me a very happy man, Hermione. I wish you were here so I could kiss you.*

Hermione said, *I wish I was too. You can take me back there after dinner and propose again, tonight*Having seen Pomona in this thoughts, she said*Go visit your mum; my third period class is coming in.*

I love you, Hermione. I look forward to having you as my wife.

*I love you too, Severus. Ditto!*Then she was gone.

"Ditto, what the hell does that mean?" he asked out loud, but only heard her return giggle. He went down the steep cliff path and found Pomona, digging in the soft dirt. She was planting seeds.

She put her spade down and came and gave him a hug. He held on to her for a moment before setting her back gently. "Mona, it's good to be home again." He bent and gave her a kiss on the forehead.

"It's good to have you back too, Sev. I can hardly believe it. There hasn't been a day I haven't thought of you," she said emotionally.

Severus took the spade, as he always had done, and dug the hole before she dropped the seedlings into the fissures and covered them. "Was that an actual, out loud laugh I heard from up there? I have never heard you laugh. Are you sure you're alright?" She dropped another seedling in. Severus could tell there was real concern behind her gentle teasing.

"It was an actual laugh," he told her. "I'm fine...better than fine. Hermione was agreeing to marry me just then."

Pomona stood straight and looked up at him squinting against the sun. "But you were alone!" She had *that**maybe he's nuts* look sliding into her eyes.

He gave her a nasty smirk. "She's wearing the pendant." He told her about the conversation he had had with Minerva and how Hermione had been eavesdropping.

Pomona laughed. "Well, I never heard of a woman wanting to be asked to be married through*Legilimency*. But, if it makes you both happy, I'm all for it. She's a gem, Sev, a real gem." Her happiness turned to apprehension. "You seem to have gotten very close very fast; you've only been awake a week. Are you sure this is what you want?" She did not want him to rush into anything merely for the sake of propriety and appearance. His happiness mattered to her more.

"I want this more than anything, and we have gotten to know each other quite well over the last few months," he assured her. "She was my life line, and we found we had a lot in common. Within the bond formed through my mind and the blood magic, we had no secrets, and we found we enjoyed that freedom to be in each other's thoughts. I suppose in time we will try to wean ourselves off, but not right now."

"Well, it certainly is a unique way to fall in love. But then again, Sev, you were always a unique wizard."

"Thanks, Mum," he gave her a warm smile.

"Mum?" Tears filled her eyes at the name.

"You are, you know. I don't think mine would mind. She gave me everything she had in the time she was with me, and I'm sure she's very happy to know that you took up where she left off. After all," he said, putting his arms about her ample shoulders, "you're going be a grandmother in a few years, and we all have to make this family as strong and as good as we can for our children."

Pomona sniffled, bringing one hand to her nose while the other searched her pockets for a tissue to wipe the fluids running from it.

Severus laughed and pulled out a white handkerchief from his inside pocket. "It's a whole new world, and I have been reborn to a new life. Now, I'm going to go find my bride-to-be and give her a long-overdue kiss."

Merrin, thank you for being my beta. I appreciate your time and hard work.

Suzanne, thank you for Brit picking, and for adding a word or two here or there to improve the interest and clarity of the sentences.

Becky, thank you for pre-reading and your encouragement.

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter 13 of 20

Now a professor at Hogwarts, Hermione Granger begins to experience fierce migraines and voices in her head. What is causing these headaches or who?

It was lunchtime by the time Severus re-entered the Castle. He reluctantly made his way to the Great Hall. Kisses would have to wait for later, he supposed. Catching sight of Hermione already at the table, he strode the length of the room. He still garnered a good deal of silent awe from the students when he came into contact with them. He wondered if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

Hermione came running just then, and the room and all its occupants were forgotten as she flung herself at him and he caught her up and swung her around, his mouth descending on hers in a steamy kiss.

Minerva was watching; she frowned at first and then smiled when the room erupted in clapping.

Severus and Hermione stood staring lovingly at each other for a moment before both blushed and hurried to their chairs.

Minerva stood up and asked aloud, "Professor Snape and Professor Granger, do you wish to enlighten us as to what that was all about?"

Severus stood and drew Hermione to her feet. "That was a kiss for this beautiful woman who has agreed to be my wife."

Minerva's eyes suddenly became misty she had not been expecting that.

"Congratulations," she said sincerely. More cheers and clapping erupted, and Severus realized most of these students did not know him from before or had been very young then. His being a 'hero' from the war was all they knew. He turned himself and Hermione toward the students and bowed slightly.

Minerva took her place at the podium. "I think this calls for a celebration. We will have an unscheduled Saturday trip to Hogsmeade." There was a thunderous cheer. "Plus, there will be a special lunch for those who do not have permission to go." There was a small group of cheers from the students who had been disappointed about not having an outing to the village to look forward to. "Now, I also want to announce that Professor Snape will take over the Arithmancy class for the remainder of the year. He will help you prepare for your OWLs or NEWTs. Professor Snape is well qualified to teach this subject, though he has never done it before. He is a Potions master and a Defense Against the Dark Arts specialist. I believe you will find his teaching quite illuminating."

There was clapping from students and staff, the loudest being Filius while Trelawney seemed quite lost.

After lunch had been eaten, Pomona came to give Hermione a hug; then she took Severus' hand and placed a small box in it. "This was my mother's, and I want to pass it down to my son. I did wear it for a number of years before coming here. It's not good to have rings when you're in the dirt so much. And I do love my dirt," she said with a grin.

Severus and Hermione laughed. Severus opened the box, and Hermione gasped. Inside was a perfect one-carat princess-cut ruby flanked by two quarter-carat diamonds.

"It's beautiful. A blood stone for a blood-bonded couple. It couldn't be more perfect," Hermione whispered in awe.

Severus asked Pomona, "Mum, are you sure you want to do this?"

"Yes, very sure, Sev. It would make me very proud to have Hermione wear it," she said.

Hermione gave the rotund witch a hug and a kiss on the cheek. "Thank you, I will be very proud to wear it."

Severus hugged his honorary mother, holding her tight for an extra moment longer.

Pomona sniffed when she was let go and produced the handkerchief that Severus had given her earlier. It was already smudged with dirt. Severus chuckled as she wiped her eyes with it, leaving a small smudge under one eye.

Hermione watched, pleased as he tenderly rubbed the smudge with his thumb. There was so much to this man she still did not know, and so much she looked forward to sharing with him.

He slipped the little box into his pocket. "Hey, aren't you going to put that on my finger?" Hermione asked in mock consternation.

"Not yet, I don't think so. Maybe we need to have that romantic dinner."

Sprout exclaimed, "Oh, I know just the place. You'll need to wait a few days and then come down. Friday night would be perfect; come to greenhouse five."

Severus started to protest, as he wanted to plan it himself, but he knew to trust Pomona. She was one of the few who had never let him down. "Alright, is Friday seven o'clock okay with you?" he asked.

"Perfect," she said, turning to leave. Calling back, she reminded them again. "Seven o'clock Friday, greenhouse five don't forget."

Severus watched her waddle away and thought how lucky he had been to pick a greenhouse to cry in when he had been eleven. He fingered the little box in his pocket and drew Hermione close. "She called you a gem earlier, but she doesn't realize how much of one she is herself."

Hermione hugged him close. "We will have to remind her on many occasions. I hope one day you will tell me more about your relationship with her."

Severus drew Hermione along as they left the Great Hall. "Remind me." He walked her back to her classroom. A few students were milling about outside it, waiting for her. He gave her a kiss on the forehead. "I will see you later for dinner. I'm going to check in with Filius and see where his lesson plans are and, if I get up the courage, Sybill," he said with a small grimace.

"Courage?" Hermione asked as she opened the door to her room, and the students went ahead.

"She can never keep her hands off me." He shuddered.

Hermione giggled. "I would love to see that. Who knows? With a makeover, she might look quite nice."

Severus gave her one of his withering looks and left her giggling even harder.

Severus spent several hours in the Arithmancy room. He looked over the curriculum and checked on the students' progress. He observed a couple of the classes. He noted that the students under Filius were progressing well and had a good grasp of the material, but those under Sybill's direction were floundering. He knew he would have to crack down on them. He also knew he no longer wanted to be the most feared teacher at Hogwarts. In his heart, he felt the Severus Snape before the war was not who he really was. It had been a cover for his spy work. He could now relax with these new students. For once in his career, he looked forward to being in a classroom again.

He wondered about the DADA professor, who she was, and if she planned to stay next year. Arithmancy was really tantamount to weighing and measuring out formulas, so the work was not difficult for him, but he really had no desire to do it for the rest of his career. Minerva had not ventured to ask him about his desire to stay there the next year. What would he do if he were not working here?

The public might know about him quite soon. He was sure some of the students had already sent letters home.

Potter... what would he say to the man? How would they greet each other? He had no desire to go back to the animosity they had had, and he wondered if Potter was over it. He would have to ask Hermione. It was time she told her friends about him and quite soon, he thought.

Later that night as they lay in their bed, Hermione asked, "Pomona's ring is it really alright, Severus? Did you have something from your own mum?"

"It's perfect," he said as he ran his fingers over her arm. He turned to hover half over her and kissed her. "I do have a ring of my mother's, but it's a plain gold band, more suited to a wedding ring than an engagement ring. My parents didn't have a lot of money."

"Then they will go very well together," Hermione said, returning the kiss, her fingers slipping into his hair to draw him closer, one arm and hand around his back.

"You don't mind that they aren't new? I could..." he suggested.

"No. I love that they are from both your mums. My mum gave me a pair of diamond studs that were hers. I think they will all go perfect together."

Severus leaned in to kiss her neck and his hand slipped under her to draw her closer.

"Good," he murmured against her neck. He began kissing a trail lower on her body.

Hermione gasped when he sucked in a rose-colored nipple, and she let her senses take over as he made love to her and she to him.

All too soon it was Friday. In the last three days, Hermione and Severus had worked hard with their various classes. They had also agreed that the pendant/blood-bond connection was a little too distracting during their teaching hours, and they had slowly weaned themselves off it over the last few days. Hermione caressed it only a few times each hour to keep that connection. They missed each other terribly, but they found that spending time alone also brought the privacy they needed to each think about the other, without over-stimulating their partner. Hermione was continually amused that Severus thought about her sexually quite often on the spur of the moment. It was quite distracting.

His response was, "What? I'm a man."

Hermione loved to tease him during some of those hours when she had a free period by sending him visual aids especially during the times when she knew he was occupied. He would often Occlude her from his mind, causing laughter to erupt from her. It never made her angry when he did this; she understood she was playing a risqué game with him, and there were times it would be completely inappropriate for him to have a physical reaction to her stimulating scenarios. Coupled with the emotion of love he would flow back down their bond to her before leaving, the Occlusion did not bother her.

So when Friday night came, they were well primed for some major romance and knew the night would end with making love. It was a weekend, and they were also excused from Hogsmeade duty.

Pomona sent them a note instructing them to dress formally for their dinner. They took her order to heart, dressing in their finest. Hermione emerged from the bathroom after completing her preparations and was stunned at the sight of her fiancé. He looked magnificent in his finest dress robes.

Severus turned when he sensed her behind him, and his jaw dropped when he laid eyes on her. Hermione was dressed in a long, blue evening gown. The front of the dress was cut daringly low, the straps covering her delectable breasts continuing up and around her neck to hold the dress in place. As she moved, he could catch glimpses of the rosy sides of her breasts. The shimmery blue fabric hugged her curves enticingly until it reached her hips where the skirt of the dress flared out slightly to make it easier for her to walk. Severus could just see her toes peeking out from the hem of her gown, encased in matching blue sandals. Her arms were bare, and she was free of any adornments, only her hair, that riotous mass of curls he loved so much, was styled to complete her beauty.

Earlier, they had agreed she should leave off the pendant this evening. They would make this night memorable without the aid of the bond. Neither was sure how that would feel, but they were willing to try.

He came and took her hands. "You're beautiful." He kissed her and drew her closer.

She put her arms about his neck. "You look amazing, Severus. If you had come to the dances in that outfit, the girls would have swooned all over you."

"I doubt it, but you know I never had any desire for a student, Hermione, not once. It would have been very inappropriate."

"I know," she said, caressing his long, black hair as he bent to kiss one of her bare shoulders. Giggling at the tickling sensation she felt when his lips trailed to her arm, she continued, "One thing I know about you, you always had our best interest at heart. Come on, let's go. Pomona will be quite disappointed if we don't show up."

He sighed and took her arm. "You're right. I am curious as to what she has planned. I'm sure it will be nice; she's really very artsy, so I wouldn't expect it to be crazy like something Molly Weasley would perhaps do."

Hermione's brow creased at the mention of a Weasley.

"I'm sorry," he said as he opened the door for her.

"It's okay, I guess when I was a kid I always thought she would be my mother-in-law one day. Thank goodness, Severus," she told him as they climbed the dungeon steps, "it didn't work out. I am so deliriously happy with you, you can't imagine."

He smiled warmly down at her. "As I am with you." They came to the big door; there were a few students about who stood gawking at them. Severus nudged her; he bowed and she curtsied and applause broke out. More kids came running to see what was happening. Then they spied Minerva and Poppy watching from the door of the Great Hall. Severus grumbled, "I didn't know we were going to be putting on a show." Hermione giggled again. He had thought once to ask her if she was twelve when she did that, but it made him happy to hear it so he had kept his mouth shut.

They exited the castle, the big door closing behind them. Thankfully, they realized no one else was about. Arm-in-arm, they companionably wandered down the path toward the greenhouses. Severus could see a strange glow coming from greenhouse five.

The door opened of its own accord, and Pomona stood inside in a set of shimmery robes. "Welcome to my own fairy land," she said. "Don't worry; I'm only here for a few minutes."

Hermione and Severus each gave her a hug before looking around. The glow was from thousands of pale pink, glowing roses.

Hermione gasped and clutched Pomona's hand. "Oh my, look at your creation! They are just beautiful!" She gave the woman a hug.

"They truly are a wonder, Mum," Severus complimented.

Pomona blushed, "I have been working on them for years. They only bloom one night a year; the timing could not be better."

"But surely you want to stay and see them," Hermione exclaimed.

"No, no. I can come back later once the two of you have finished. They will be blooming until dawn. I'm very happy to have you enjoy them on this special night. Tomorrow's Saturday; I won't have to be up till noon. Sev, you have it, don't you?"

Severus smiled and patted his lapel pocket. "Yes, it's safe in here."

Pomona nodded, a little misty eyed. "Well, then I will leave you to enjoy. The house-elves have prepared a fine meal, and you stay as long as you want. Send me a Patronus when you're leaving." She gave them a hug each and, with a whirl, exited the greenhouse.

Hermione blinked her eyes. "I never spent much time thinking about Professor Sprout when I was a kid. Herbology was interesting and all. She was gruff and earthy and..." She let her voice fade out, hoping she hadn't offended Severus.

"Dirty...", he finished for her. He smiled and leaned to kiss her, showing her he had no problem with her observation. "Maybe that's what attracted me to her. I was always grubby and dirty as a child. I roamed the streets and the filthy river, just to stay out of my dad's way. He was not a kind man. But that's a sad story for another time. Let's go see what dinner looks like."

As they walked down the path, the roses drew back, making more room for them.

Hermione drew closer to Severus, and he laughed. "They aren't going to eat you."

"Where I was raised, plants don't move fast enough to be seen. I saw a movie once about this big plant that ate people. I was eight, and it scared the heck out of me," she told him. Despite the years that had passed, things in the magical world could still unsettle her at times.

He reminded her, "You have your knight in black amour here to save you."

She smiled warmly up at him. "Yes I do, don't I?"

"Notwithstanding the fact that you are a witch and quite adapt at defending yourself," he pointed out.

"That reminds me, Severus. I want to ask you if you would give me private lessons in wandless magic. I do know some. Maybe even continue my Legilimency training and start some Occlumency."

"I think that can be arranged," he said with a smile. He looked forward to teaching her some new skills.

The last of the roses parted, and Hermione gasped at the beautiful sight. There was a dining table surrounded by trellises of the beautiful roses that formed a canopy over the table. The chairs were ornate and quite formal with high backs. There was a candelabra lighting the space and small fairy lights floating around the roses. Covered silver trays and plates of fine porcelain were set on the table. There was a wine bottle chilling in ice and two finely crafted, etched, tall-stemmed glass goblets.

Severus curiously lifted the cloche on the biggest tray and discovered filet mignon and lobster tails. Another cloche held vegetables sautéed in garlic and butter. There was a dinner salad with colorful greens and flower petals, and for dessert, a chocolate mousse, which Hermione dipped her finger in and sucked off the creamy confection. "Oh my gosh, that's divine," she said.

Hermione dipped her finger in the mousse again, and this time teased Severus by spreading it on the edge of his lower lip. She was rewarded with a smolderingly sexy look as his tongue slipped out to taste it. Then he snapped forward taking her finger into his mouth and sucking the rest of the mousse off without taking his eyes off her.

He did miss the mental link, but he was finding it was very nice to actually be able talk to each other without the mental traffic of thoughts accompanying the words.

As if on cue, soft music began to play, and Severus took Hermione's hand, whirling her close to him as he started to dance.

"You know how to dance?" she asked a little breathlessly.

"Of course, Minerva taught here too when I was a student. She always prepared us for the Yule Ball. Later it came in handy when Tom would have his..." He stopped. "Another story for another time. I want to stay positive this evening."

They danced awhile, and Hermione reveled at the feel of his body swaying against hers and the velvety touch of his lips on her forehead now and then. Even the warmth of his breath made her want him.

Finally he said, "Let's eat. I have many plans for tonight, and most of them are going to take place in the privacy of our room."

Hermione smiled sexily up at him. "Promise?" Her voice was deep and sultry.

"Definitely," was all he said as he drew her to her chair. He pulled it out and said, "My lady."

Hermione giggled at his formality and took her seat.

Severus swept around to his chair before leaning in and moving the candelabra away from the center of the table so he could see her. He served Hermione first, then himself. They ate while they talked again about the beautiful flowers and what it must have taken for Pomona to have created this rare and beautiful species.

"She has a real gift. I think I will come down more often and gather the items I use with her. I usually just send a note by owl and the ingredients arrive by house-elf," Hermione commented.

"She would like that, Hermione. She is very creative and has such an affinity for her plants. You might be surprised what they do for her. I've seen them dance, sing... even walk to another pot."

"I'd like to see that. Is it magic or breeding?"

"A little of both, I think," he replied. "Pomona has magic in her hands."

"Enough to soothe a little boy's hurt feelings? Make a wound feel better?" she ventured.

"Yes, I don't know what I would have done without Pomona and Poppy's healing abilities all these years." Hermione reached out to cover one of his hands, and he entwined his fingers with hers. He always loved the feel of her small, delicate fingers in his long, thin ones.

"I wish I had known you had such a backup system. I did worry about you once I realized you were in the Order. Dumbledore wouldn't have let you in if he hadn't trusted you with his..." She stopped.

"He did, that's the horror of it. But I have a new peace about it since we saw him the other day. He seemed quite genuinely happy to see me, and I will go talk to him soon. I have missed him and those damnable twinkling blue eyes."

Hermione chuckled at his description. They ate their food, talking mostly about it and the various herbs that had been used to flavor it. The salad with vinaigrette was sweet and rather unusual with the flower petals but quite good. The lobster tails were tender, and there was a butter and garlic sauce to accompany them. When they got to the dessert, Hermione stood and came around to Severus and asked him to push his chair back. She climbed into his lap, and he held her securely with one arm around her waist. She fed him his chocolate mousse, alternating a bite for her and a bite for him, a finger full at time. He did not think he had ever had such a fine dessert. They kissed a lot in between bites. When his hand started to roam, Hermione stalled him. "Isn't there something else you want to ask me before we get to the real dessert?" she reminded him.

Severus nodded. "Yes, there is." He put her on her feet, and he stood and drew her to the center of the little dancing area, and then to Hermione's pleasure he dropped to one knee, pulled the little box from his inside pocket and asked, "Hermione, will you marry me?"

Despite the fact that she knew this was coming, she still felt tears sting her eyes. The adoring look in his eyes warmed her to her toes. She grabbed his hands and pulled him to his feet. "Yes, Severus, I will marry you." She threw herself at him, grabbing him around his neck, and he lifted her, pulling her body against his. He twirled her around as they kissed, finally setting her back on her feet. The soft music began to play again, and they danced closely for awhile. Their bodies moved against each other sensuously. Severus finally reached a point where he could wait no longer; he had to have this woman. With a loving glance about the beautiful greenhouse of magnificent flowers, they wandered slowly through and out the door toward the castle.

Severus pulled out his wand, sending his Patronus off to Pomona, informing her the greenhouse was free for her use once again. He noticed that it flew into Minerva's study window.

"The ladies must be having a gossip fest tonight," he said with a smirk. "I imagine we are a huge part of that discussion. They probably have the wedding planned." They glanced again to see Poppy, Minerva and Pomona waving at them from the window.

Hermione giggled and waved, and Severus gave the ladies a smirk. He imagined he could hear them laugh even from their position on the ground.

"Come, I have something to show you." He took her hand, and they ran toward a small garden near the rear of the castle.

I have a host of ladies who are trying to help me beta. Becky, thank you for your first read through. Suzanne, thank you for the second read through, and Brit pick. Zee, thank you for checking the chapter. Merrin, thank you for your beta work, you're the best. Also, nagandsev thank you for your TPP beta help. All these ladies get me through this process. Thank you all so much.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 of 20

Now a professor at Hogwarts, Hermione Granger begins to experience fierce migraines and voices in her head. What is causing these headaches or who?

Concealed by trees and other flora, Severus pulled Hermione on. "Come on, woman."

"What is it, Severus?" she implored him.

"You'll see," he said with mystery and a bit of childish glee. He took her through the small garden, and when she looked back the way they had come, the path had covered itself over.

"It's enchanted," he explained.

Hermione almost said, *Duh*, but she held her tongue and looked at it all as an adventure.

Finally, they came to the old castle wall. Severus pulled out his wand and tapped a spot in the wall while whispering a command. Instantly, a bit of wall vanished, leaving a small door-like hole in it. He bent, stepping through it and pulling her with him. The door vanished as soon as they passed through, and torches flared to life, lighting the way. Hermione was astonished when the light revealed a carpeted, narrow tunnel.

There were small alcoves with potion vials, ancient tapestries hung on the walls now and then. Little alcoves with fine, small sculptures pocked the walls. It was warm, inviting and comforting. Hermione began to have her suspicions as to what it was, and her eyes began to tear up.

When she sniffed, Severus looked back at her and stopped, pulling her close. "Dearest, why are you crying?" he asked.

"This was for you, wasn't it? It was a gift from Dumbledore to help you when you came back from Voldemort. To get healing potions into you quickly and encourage and give you the strength you needed to reach Poppy if necessary."

He took her face in his hands. "Yes. It's wonderful isn't it? Don't cry; you have no idea how wonderful this hall makes me feel. It was the only kindness I saw and felt other than those old meddling women in my life." His voice could not disguise the fondness he felt for them.

She knew he was talking about the three older witches who were now on their way down the path, by wand-light, to greenhouse five to enjoy the evening with the flowers.

"Come." His lightness of tone and childish glee was infectious, and she ran with him down the thin winding hall of light. A brighter light showed ahead, and he pulled her through a doorway into a room.

"I don't know why I hadn't thought of this since I woke," he explained.

They were in an ancient, luxurious bedroom. There was a gold leaf four poster bed with ornately carved posts, and golden shimmering drapes canopied the top and down the posts. There were shelves and shelves of books, a table with lit candles giving off a warm glow, and a fireplace with a roaring fire. Fine, soft furniture was placed about to comfort aching muscles. Fresh fruit and crumpets sat on the table with wine in tall, golden goblets.

"How...?" She moved through the room, touching the various things almost in wonder.

Severus smiled when she looked up at him. "You guess; you're the know-it-all," he said with affection.

She thought for a moment then babbled, "It's like the Room of Requirement. It gives you what you need." She was eyeing the thick rug in front of the fire.

"This one's extra special; it provides refreshments, of which I've desperately needed a number of times. Hermione gave him that smoldering look, and all thoughts of the past fled his mind. "It's totally unplotable, which means no one can find or interrupt us."

She walked to the fireplace and lowered herself to the rug, crooking her finger at him.

He felt his desire rise. He took his dress robe off and laid it over a chair, then unbuttoned the formal waistcoat and added it to the stack. He toed his shoes and socks off, then got them some wine and joined her on his knees. She was lying on her side, propped up with a stack of pillows under, her elbow with one knee drawn up. The

shimmering blue fabric of her gown draped over the curve of her hips. He handed her a goblet of wine. Once she had it firmly in hand, he said, "To us, to a long happy marriage with children and friends on into our old age together."

Hermione repeated what he said in her own words; the idea of being with Severus into old age warmed her heart. "To a life of love, children and friends. I will be honored to grow old with you."

They touched goblets and drank. Severus took the glasses and set them aside. He bent to capture her lips. "I love you... I want you... I can't imagine life without you," he said between kisses.

Hermione answered by sliding her fingers through his hair; she knew he loved it when she did that. His fingers found the clasp to the halter neck on her dress and nimbly unfastened it. The dress fell away to reveal her bare shoulders. He leaned in for a kiss, and Hermione quickly began undoing the buttons of his shirt. She pulled it from the waistband of his trousers and pushed it off his shoulders.

More clothing followed, and silken skin pressed against silken skin. Hands explored contours, lips tasted hot flesh, bodies arched against each other, and sighs of completion were heard.

Hermione lay wrapped in a throw, conveniently supplied by the room, against Severus and listened to his heartbeat settle while her own did the same. There was a bit of movement about them, and she cried out, "What!"

"Shhh," he cautioned, "relax." They were lifted silently and floated gently to the beautiful bed, whose covers had drawn back for them.

"Wow!" Hermione whispered as they were settled on the bed and were covered.

"Oft times I couldn't quite make it to the bed. But, when I woke, I always found myself in it. I suspected this happened," Severus told her.

Hermione snuggled closer. "Thank you for sharing this with me. This will come in quite handy, I think."

Severus, half asleep, said, "Yes, it will." His breathing evened out and he was asleep. She caressed his face *Poor dear. It's been a long week of work and changes, and I've plumb worn him out.* She kissed the side of his mouth, and he smiled in his sleep. With a smile of her own, she settled down against his shoulder and slept.

Hermione woke when Severus moved under her. She was laying half across his chest, and she felt his arm holding her against him and small nibbles against her shoulder.

"Are you hungry?" she asked with a chuckle.

"Famished," he said, nipping a bit harder.

Hermione sniffed. "Is that coffee I smell?"

She pushed herself up and looked to see a small table covered with breakfast items and the aforementioned coffee. She gave Severus a quick kiss and, pulling the sheet around her, slipped from the bed. She padded to the table and the coffeepot. He watched, amused, as she poured herself a cup, added milk and sugar and took a deep sip, her eyes closed in ecstasy.

Hermione looked back toward Severus, who still lay quite naked, propped on an elbow, studying her with amusement.

"Upstaged by a cup of coffee," he grumbled. His desire was apparent.

She grinned at him, her eyes following the length of him. She abandoned the coffee and rejoined him for a morning romp.

They fell asleep again after their play and did not wake until noon. Severus was first to get up and use the loo.

Hermione was waiting for him when he opened the door, ducking under his arm to get in the room. She was quite surprised at what was revealed. Beside the toilet there was a sunken tub reminiscent of the prefects' bath. It was huge, like a swimming pool, and reflected the golden colors of the stained-glass windows, which depicted scenes of sunrises and sunsets.

"Give me a minute and then you will join me won't you?" she asked him.

"Absolutely," he smiled, bending to kiss her, but she ducked away.

"Let me brush my teeth."

"Hermione, we made love twice this morning, and you didn't do anything but simple cleaning spells," he reminded her, anxious to make love to her again.

"I know, but I was in the mood and nothing would have deterred me then." She laughed, shutting the door.

Severus had found a pair of black silk pajama bottoms on the bed when he rose earlier, so he had put them on. He padded back to the table and made himself a cup of tea and bit into a warm, fresh scone. "Thank you, Albus, for this room. For letting it still serve me well," he whispered to the walls. He ate the rest of the scone in a couple of bites, and when Hermione opened the door, he was already striding toward the bathroom.

The final weeks of term slid by, and as the school year finished and tests were taken, Severus grew stronger and felt almost like his old self again. He found, as he wandered the halls during his night patrol duty, that he remembered more and more about the castle, more of the secrets he had learned as Headmaster, and he began to wonder why.

When he turned his last class over to the test monitor for their NEWTs, he found the Head Boy there with an envelope. He turned it over and noted it had the Headmistress' seal on it. He broke the seal and found a note.

Severus, come and see me when you are done for the day. It's time we had a talk. Minerva

Severus rolled his eyes. What had he done now? Was she going to force him to set a date for the wedding? It's not like he and Hermione had not already talked about several options; he just was not at liberty to share anything right now.

He made his way to her office and knocked on the door.

"Come," he heard Minerva call.

He opened the door and stepped inside. "You wished to see me?"

Minerva looked up at him and studied him in silence for a moment then indicated the chair before her. "Of course I do, man. We have a lot to discuss."

Taking a seat, he relaxed and crossed his legs.

Minerva took two tiny glasses from a desk drawer along with a bottle of amber liquid and poured them both two fingers full.

"Drinking on the job?" he quipped, but took it and sniffed the liquid before giving her a smirk as he lifted it to his lips. It burned like fire down his throat, and he resisted the urge to choke. Croakily, he exclaimed, "Albus' finest stash."

Minerva grinned. "He can't enjoy it, so I might as well." She gave a laugh.

Severus felt his insides freeze at her comment, but then her laugh warmed him and he felt free. If she could laugh about Albus being gone, then it was behind them all now.

A voice came from above. "I am quite happy to see you enjoy it."

Severus looked up to see the smiling face of his friend. "Hello, Albus," he said, genuinely happy to see him.

"You haven't been to see me," Albus reminded him.

"It's been really busy, what with teaching and Hermione," he said in excuse.

"How is Ms. Granger?" Albus asked.

Severus found himself blushing, "She's very well, thank you. We will be getting married this summer."

"I am very happy to hear that. I can think of no one you are better suited to," the old wizard told him.

Minerva turned in her chair to address the portrait. "Excuse us please, Albus, perhaps you can return when we are done with our meeting," she suggested.

Albus nodded and began to move away; then he paused. "Stay after you finish, Severus, it's time for that visit."

"Yes, sir," he said. He watched as Albus left his chair.

"I will have to ask him where he goes," Severus mused, looking back to see Minerva studying him.

"You're quite different, Severus. The man you always should have been," she observed.

Severus smiled at her. "It's because of Hermione."

"Yes, and because you are perhaps quite happy to be back in the land of the living," she said. "Free of your two task masters." She cocked the tip of her hat up at Albus' portrait.

"Perhaps," he agreed. "What is it you want to talk to me about, Minerva?"

"I wish to talk of your future here. I want Hermione to remain at the school, and I know that if you go, she will go with you. That's a reason, but not the number one reason."

He eyed her. "It's not?"

"No." She got up and came to stand at the side of her desk. Her wand flicked out and put up a privacy shield. She had no wish for eager ears to listen to what she had to say.

"Severus, I have looked at your private records during your time here as Headmaster. As you know, they are given to the next Head when he or she commences. I saw you were under a great deal of pressure and dark influences, yet you managed to save nearly every student from the worst. I cannot run this school alone. The war took a lot of my energy, and my magic is weakened. It's been years and it has not returned. I know my time is being numbered in years. I want you to become my Deputy Headmaster next year. Stay here, and help me make this school the very best it can be."

Severus, sat back, surprised. "I thought you were going to beg me to stay on as Arithmancy instructor, and I was afraid I couldn't do that. It's not something I enjoy teaching. But Deputy Headmaster, are you sure? Filius has been here many years, and his loyalty has never been challenged."

Minerva said, "I have spoken to him many times about the position before you were known to be alive, and he does not want the job. He loves teaching and his choir. A good Headmistress knows when to back off. I might have had to force the man into it; there was no one capable. I'd even thought of Hermione, but she is young, and right now she needs to learn and teach. When you take over for me, she can become your Deputy and later Headmistress, if you ever decide you are too tired and just want to sit in front of a warm fire."

Severus snorted at that notion. He gave her a smirk, "They will have to carry me out, but you're right...maybe a good, loving husband would like to see his wife succeed him. And warm fires *are* comforting to aching bones."

Minerva smiled at him. "You will know when it's time. I do, however, plan to live my days out here. It has been my home for many years, and one day I will take my place up here on this wall among my predecessors."

Severus glanced around the room. "I suppose if I want Hermione up there with me for all time, I best let her serve a few years."

"Yes, that might be wise. Funny that one should aspire to become a living portrait. Albus assures me it is a wonderful life in there," Minerva said almost wistfully.

"Maybe there's a chance to rescind bad decisions or take back ultimatums." Severus cringed inside, thinking she would lash out at him.

She stared at him hard for a moment and then surprised him by saying, "He told you about that, did he?"

"Yes, I guess even he needed someone to talk to, and since I was here so much, conspiring, he would talk occasionally on cold winter nights. It was a great regret of his that he went."

Minerva glanced up at the empty portrait frame. "In retrospect, knowing what I know now, he was right. Albus was a good man, and he learned to control his desire for power. He returned the cloak to Mr. Potter at a young age. He and he alone was able to use the Elder wand for good. And it ultimately was placed in Mr. Potter's hands, which is where it needed to be. It was my damn fault I made him choose. We paid the price for my pride."

Severus reached out to her covering her hand. "I made terrible mistakes too, and I suffered as well, but now I have more happiness that I would ever have believed. Happiness can be yours too, Minerva."

Minerva smiled sadly, before her face brightened. "You just see that the painter takes about twenty five years off this old wrinkled face." She took a sip of the brandy.

Severus threw his head back and laughed while Minerva choked in shock.

After he clapped her on the back, Minerva regained herself. "Now, I understand you want to speak to Albus. I'm going to go up to Gryffindor Tower and make sure the students are packing for tomorrow's train ride. I will see you and Hermione at the leaving feast tonight." It was not a question but a command; they had been missing a number of meals in favor of spending time in their secret room.

"Yes, Headmistress." He stood and bowed slightly as she stepped past him.

"Oh, Severus, I know you said you've been planning the wedding. Do let us old ladies in on that as soon as you can. We all have holidays to plan," she said pointedly.

"Of course," he replied, watching as she left the room.

When she was gone, he turned to find Albus sitting back in his chair. He took his seat again and crossed his legs. "Albus," he greeted.

"My boy, you have no idea how happy I am to see you. I thought you were somehow lost to us."

"Has a Headmaster ever not appeared in a Portrait?" Severus asked curiously.

"There was one; his crimes were too dire, and the castle disinherited him." Albus said, quite gravely.

"Did you think I had gone over to the Dark Lord when I didn't appear?" Severus asked, studying the old man's face.

"Severus, I would never have believed it. But you know, I know you better than you yourself did at times. There were others that weren't so confident."

"Like Minerva. I gave her good reason; I do not fault her for her disbelief in me. It was planned that way, wasn't it, to deceive the Carrows and the Dar..." He stopped and then said, "Tom."

"Yes, it was, and you pulled it off most effectively. Forgive me for expecting it all of you, but Severus, I had no choice."

"I know. I have made my peace with it all. Hermione has a way of reaching into my head and lighting all the dark, making the darkness fade and not come back."

"I am happy for you. Young love is the most precious of gifts." He seemed to look into himself... then he looked back at Severus and said, "Now tell me where you have been and how you came to be found."

Severus sat back and began his story...

That night as he lay in Hermione's arms, he let her use the pendant to see his discussion with Minerva and Albus. She was crying again when it was done. He chuckled at her and held her close. "You are an emotional little thing, aren't you? You seemed like such a strong-willed girl when you were a student here."

"The scary parts are over, and I don't have to be so strong. I couldn't cry then, and now I think it's all coming out. I cry at the smallest things, but it's not sad tears, it's sentimental and happy most times."

"Maybe you're crying some of my tears. It's been known to happen with this sort of bond," he told her.

Hermione was silent as she digested this theory before she said, "I'm very proud to shed your tears, Severus, it's easier for me." She snuggled tighter against him.

"Sleep with the pendant tonight, Hermione, it's time for a fun dream." He caressed her arm, and she sighed.

Please leave reviews, they are a fic writers only payment.

Thank you, Merrin. I really appreciate the work you do for me. It's a privilege to have you as my beta.

Suzanne, thank you for Brit picking and any other corrections you make.

Zee, I appreciate your corrections.

Becky, you are my first reader, and I appreciate your comments and the corrections you send.

Sometimes it does take a village to get my chapters through the queue. LOL

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter 15 of 20

Now a professor at Hogwarts, Hermione Granger begins to experience fierce migraines and voices in her head. What is causing these headaches or who?

The next day, Hermione and Severus walked down to the train station and watched the train come in to take the students home. There were lots of waves and goodbyes, and just as the train was filled and started to move, a lone figure stepped off it.

Severus heard Hermione cry, "Harry!" Then he watched as she ran to her friend and was engulfed in a hug and swung around. He found it slightly annoying. He felt himself gather his shields a little closer and flexed his wand hand, not sure that Harry Potter would not start flinging curses. He had known Hermione had sent Potter a letter by owl a few weeks ago, but it was a shock to see the boy... no man... holding his fiancée in such a tight embrace. He forced that emotion behind a screen. Hermione might find reason to actually be mad at him if he abused her friend now. He stood waiting as the hug ended, and Hermione linked her arm with Potter's and half dragged him over.

The two men stood for a minute looking at each other, and then Harry stuck his hand out and said, "Thank you, Professor Snape.

Severus physically would not allow his tear ducts to overflow, but the genuine look of gratefulness in the man's eyes was something he had never expected to see. He reached out and found his hand clasped warmly by Potter's. He said with a rather low voice clouded with emotion, "Thank you, Mr. Potter. I will not say it was my pleasure, but it was my duty."

Harry released Severus' hand and said, "Very little of that time was a pleasure, sir. I could have been civil. I could have been less pigheaded when people told me you were a good man. I didn't want to see my father for the bully he was."

Severus blinked again in surprise. "What boy wants to know his father wasn't the paragon he believed him to be? Come, let's go to the Hog's Head and have a drink. We might get mobbed out here."

Hermione smiled at her two favorite men. This was all so very promising. She linked her arms through theirs, threading her fingers in Severus', and the three walked slowly into town. They caused quite a stir as they came down the street. Severus had not been out much and Harry always drew a crowd.

To see the three war heroes together brought out the local news photographer and a picture or two was taken. A crowd began to gather, Harry and Severus spoke with the locals for a few minutes. Hermione could see that Severus was very uncomfortable with the adulation in some people's eyes, but when she stroked the pendant, he glanced at her and she could feel his gratefulness. She found he was quite touched with the thanks he was getting.

Hermione called to the photographer, "Please make me some prints and send them to Hogwarts."

"Certainly, Ms Granger. Professor Snape, you look good, we heard you'd been sick," the news man said.

Severus smiled tightly. "Come to the Hog's Head in a couple of hours, and Ms. Granger and I will give you a brief recap of the story. For now we wish to catch up with an old acquaintance... friend," he amended.

He glanced at Harry and saw the relief on the young man's face. They entered the Hog's Head and although everyone looked at them and saw who they were with interest, it was an established rule that no one bothered anyone within these walls. The trio selected a booth in the far corner, after placing their orders.

Harry opened the conversation. "I heard a rumor that Hermione had found you alive. I didn't really believe it until the letter came. It's amazing that you survived that long in Muggle care."

Hermione snorted. "If you can call it that," she muttered bitterly. Severus gave his defender a fond look.

"I wasn't aware for the first three and half years," Severus told Harry. "I slowly became aware of sound. But I was unable to move. I had only my mind and magic left to me, and I reached out... It took a very long time to make the connection with Hogwarts. Once a person has been Headmaster, the castle forms a bond with you. It hears you no matter where you are, yet it is not sentient in the way we would know it. It was necessary for me to contact another human, and I was able to do that with the blood I had shed in quite a number of places in my office and rooms."

Hermione squeezed his fingers, giving him her physical support, and she stroked the pendant slowly adding her mental support as well. Their handholding did not go unnoticed by Harry. He laughed nervously. "Hermione told me you were together, sir. I can't say this isn't a shock, but I do know of no one I'd trust to take care of her better than you. She deserves to be happy, and I know she would not pick you if you weren't deserving. You both are quite alike," he observed.

Severus sat forward and said to Harry, "I am glad you are alright with this relationship, if you hadn't been, I would have been forced to turn you into a turtle and place you in a pond." He gave Harry one of those nasty smirks that once would have brought the young man's anger to bear, but Harry saw the corners of his eyes turn up in mirth, and the younger man started to laugh, Hermione joining him a moment later.

Severus sat and glared at them, finally smiling when they were having trouble catching their breath. "You are both acting like twelve year-olds," he remonstrated mockingly.

Hermione beamed. "Isn't it wonderful?" she asked.

Severus gave her half a smile and replied, "Wonderful is not what I might have called it, but it is gratifying to put a big skeleton back in its box and lock the lid."

"Yes, can we have a permanent truce, sir? I am in your debt, and I would like it if we could be friends," Harry said quite sincerely.

"Being friends with you was never something I thought to work toward, but we both love Hermione, and I think we could be reasonable friends," Severus replied looking directly at Harry's eyes.

"Could I one day ask you to tell me about my mother?" Harry asked, cringing slightly, half expecting a verbal attack from the other wizard.

Severus looked at him for quite some time then said, "Perhaps around the holidays when you come to visit. She was my best friend. The story is a hard one for me to talk about mostly because of my guilt."

"Sir, I will not ask you about that time. I have seen your memories; I do not need to know about that. Just a few other stories about my mom. You paid over and over for your mistake. I can let it go... It was as it had to be for all of us to end the life of a monster. I've learned to let it go and be at peace. To save our world wouldn't we all go through it again?" he ventured.

"Not all if I could help it. For one thing I'd pull a machine gun out of my robes and shoot the snake before it had a chance to move." Hermione and Harry stared at him open-mouthed until the side of his mouth curved up and they started to laugh until they could not breathe again. Severus glared at them again, but he quite enjoyed seeing his fiancée so happy. "I could find a few of our childish adventures you might enjoy, to share with you."

Later Harry sat with them as the reporter took a short version of their story. He took a few more pictures, then thanked them and left.

Hermione could see the fatigue in Severus' face and felt it through the bond when she stroked the pendant. "Harry, we need to go. Will you walk with us to the castle?"

"Yes, I'm actually staying a few days. Minerva is expecting me and Albus requested a talk." He had a pained look on his face.

Severus told him, "I expected to feel really bad seeing him, but he loves us, Harry. May I call you Harry?" Harry nodded so he continued, "All I saw was love in his eyes. All I saw was his joy at seeing me again. No anger, no recrimination, just love and acceptance and he thanked me..." his voice cracked a bit, and Hermione squeezed his hand tightly.

They got up without another word and left the pub. It was later in the day now, and there were not many people around. They walked slowly back to Hogwarts. They did not even talk, a comfortable silence filling the space between them. Hermione had put the pendant inside her clothing to help support Severus along. He was emotionally exhausted. He was still having trouble with the realization that people now accepted him. The whole situation was stressful, physically and mentally, though a relief in many ways; he had not had time to assimilate it all yet, spending the majority of his time as he had sequestered within the walls of Hogwarts.

The three parted at the top of the stairs. Harry went to find Minerva, and Severus and Hermione ended up going to the secret room. Severus got into his night clothes and crawled into the bed. He was asleep before his head hit the pillow. Hermione sat next to him and stroked his hair for a while. Not feeling in the least bit sleepy, she selected a book and settled down to read until she fell asleep.

Severus woke the next morning to find Hermione peacefully asleep with a book open over her chest. He smiled and removed the book, setting it on the bedside table. He bent to kiss her, nibbling at the corner of her mouth with soft kisses. She smiled in her sleep and sighed, her body stretched in an arch up against his; her fingers slid into his hair and she opened her eyes. "What a wonderful way to wake up," she said with a sigh.

He kissed her deeply and she responded with equal enthusiasm. She sighed after awhile. "I need to use the loo. Maybe we can continue this in the tub," she suggested seductively.

"That sounds like a plan to me," he said, sliding from the bed and drawing her with him.

They padded to the bathroom and Hermione entered first. Severus waited patiently until she called for him to come into the room. She had slipped into the tub and waited

while he relieved himself under a silencing charm. He pulled off his nightshirt and slipped into the giant bath next to her, pulling her against him for more kisses.

"Harry will be waiting to have breakfast with us," she said.

Severus groaned then gave her a lascivious grin. "He will have to wait a little longer." He slid onto one of the built-in seats and pulled her onto his lap straddling him. His hands held her close for more kisses, and then they lost themselves in each other as hands began to explore and bodies joined.

Hermione and Severus wandered into the Great Hall about twenty minutes after they should have. Minerva took one look at them and flushed. They were both rosy-cheeked from their morning's exercise. She did not say anything, but bent over her food to hide her blushing cheeks.

"It's about time you two got here," Harry said with a grin. "I was about to send out a search party," he teased.

Severus gave him a scathing look and Harry laughed which made him groan. He would never be able to intimidate Potter again.

Hermione took the seat next to Harry, and Severus sat on her other side. He took up his morning coffee, grateful for the magic that placed it within his reach, at the perfect temperature, and in the flavor he most enjoyed. He sighed in satisfaction. Then Potter interrupted his blissful moment by asking, "Are you feeling better this morning, Severus?"

Severus groaned again. "Yes, but hush until I've had my coffee."

Harry glanced at Hermione. "I always thought he would have a nasty morning demeanour."

"He's actually quite affectionate in the morning," Hermione announced matter-of-factly, serving herself some toast in the process.

This time it was Harry and Severus who both blushed with bright red spots on their cheeks.

"Well, then it must be me," Harry said with a laugh.

"Please cease this general chatter until I've had my coffee!" Severus demanded again. "Now eat!"

Hermione grinned at Harry who grinned back. Minerva had been watching the exchange with interest as had Pomona and Poppy. They all laughed which earned more glares from Severus. But their laughter was infectious and he soon relaxed and gave them a smile.

When Pomona finished her breakfast she stood and moved to Severus' chair. She gave his hair a light tousle and said, "Sev, Hermione, come and see me when you finish, we need to discuss those wedding plans. No time like the first day of summer to get on it." She kissed Severus' cheek and turned and left.

Harry was watching with an open mouth. "What the bloody hell was that about?" he asked.

The corner of Severus' mouth turned up. Harry got half a smile and half a smirk.

"Pomona emotionally adopted me when I was a child. She's my mum now."

Harry stared dumbfounded. Hermione giggled.

"Well, where have I been all my life..." Harry stated.

"In a cupboard I expect," Severus said straight-faced.

It was Harry's turn to give him a smirk. "You really are full of surprises."

"Everyone has their secrets; many of mine wouldn't have had to be secret if I'd been able to live the life I was meant to."

"And if I wouldn't have had so many secrets kept from me," Harry returned a bit bitterly.

"Have you ever considered that your innocence and pureness of heart were necessary qualifications to defeat Tom?" Severus asked him.

"No," he said quietly thinking about that.

"You survived because of love, the love of your mother and the pure love you had for Hermione, Ron, Neville, Luna and all the others that played a part in the entire drama." He indicated all the teachers who were now listening.

Harry's eyes filled with tears. "I'm just glad it worked out." It was all he could manage.

Hermione took his hand and squeezed it. "We are all free and, I think, pretty happy now. My God... that reminds me, I forgot to ask last night, how is Ginny?" Hermione asked hoping to lighten the tension and defuse emotion.

Harry smiled, "I forgot the news too...Ginny's pregnant!"

"Oh, Harry, how could you forget that?" She laughed, giving him a congratulatory hug.

"How many is this, Harry?" Severus asked, having forgotten what Hermione had told him.

"The third," Harry said proudly. "The last I think. I'm not going to compete with Molly for the most number of children."

"Well, thank Merlin for that," Severus drawled.

Laughter lightened the rest of the meal.

Later as they walked down to the greenhouses to see Pomona, Hermione said to Severus, "I'm so proud of you. You and Harry took to each other so well. I was thinking you might come to spells yesterday when he got off the train. I saw you flex your wand hand." She was holding his arm.

Severus nodded. "I just wanted to be prepared; I didn't know what his reaction would be. I'm glad to see Harry's grown up."

"A lot of it is you too, Severus. You've changed as well," she observed.

"Only because of you, my love. Your acceptance of me as I am, scarred, with lots of nasty baggage, has meant the world to me. I do not know what I would have done had you not been willing to come and rescue me. Allow myself to die I expect."

Hermione shuddered and hugged his arm more tightly. "I think we need to make a pact not to look back anymore. The future started new when I pulled you off that bed and

we Apparated the hell out of there. Other people lived those lives before, not us."

He stopped walking and pulled her against him, bending to kiss her. He just held her for a moment before they started to walk again.

Pomona, Minerva and Poppy where sitting in one of the flower gardens of greenhouse three having tea. Severus observed them shrewdly for a moment before asking, "Now what is this, an ambush?"

Pomona smiled. "They wanted to be in on the plans as well."

"What did you do with Harry, Minerva?" Severus asked curiously.

"He is visiting with Albus. I daresay they may talk for hours. I wanted to give them their privacy."

Severus pulled a chair out for Hermione to sit in and then took the one next to her. "I daresay they will," he agreed, wishing he was a fly on the wall and nowhere near this wedding talk.

Pomona asked, "Have you set a date?"

"We thought the last Saturday of July. That would give us some time for the planning and also a couple weeks to travel before we need to return to prepare for next year." Hermione replied.

"But that's a mere seven weeks away!" Poppy shrilled. "It does not give you very long to prepare."

"We are magical, we can have the great hall ready for a wedding tomorrow," Severus pointed out. "The house-elves would have an amazing dinner prepared. Plus, we are working on a tight time schedule, we must be married before the students return," he said, staring at Minerva and daring her to contradict him.

"True, if you were only having Wizarding friends, but there are Muggles involved and we need to make it compatible for them as well," Poppy argued.

"Yes, of course, I know that. Just making conversation," Severus rejoined.

Pomona laughed, "Well, I have never heard you 'just make conversation', Sev. I love Hermione more and more each day. You are becoming a human now, as well as a wizard."

Severus snorted. "Get back to the plans, old woman." He gave her an affectionate smile.

They spent the next couple of hours discussing the wedding and who might be coming. Once they realized the only Muggles attending were Hermione's parents, who were well aware of what she was, they relaxed. There would not need to be any magical dampening spells or a need to hide the house-elves. They made a list of all their friends and a few dignitaries, like Kingsley Shacklebolt, who would need to be invited. They went round and round about the Weasleys. Hermione decided to let Harry bear the invitation home with him, and allow the individual members of the family to decide if they would attend or not. She would make sure he was aware, that no matter what, Ron was not included on the invitation.

As they returned to the castle, Severus could tell Hermione was upset. "What's wrong?" he asked.

She was silent a few more minutes and he waited patiently for his answer. "Ron is Harry's best friend. I hate to ask him to be the bad guy in this."

"Do you honestly think Weasley would be a problem? He walked away Hermione," Severus reminded her.

"I know he did. I always thought, even before I felt something for him, that the three of us would be together on my wedding day. It just makes me angry again at him for tearing our friendship to hell," she said vehemently.

Severus placed his arm about her shoulders and drew her closer. "I know," he said soothingly. "I could literally disembowel him for hurting you." He felt Hermione shiver. He stopped and turned her toward him and lifted her face so he could see her eyes, "I promise you, Hermione. I will never hurt a hair on his body, but I may very well give him a very harsh piece of my mind."

She smiled, "Just make sure I'm there to see it." Severus gave her a nasty smile and they continued walking back to Hogwarts.

Merrin, thank you so much for all the work you do.

Suzanne and Becky, you each read and correct these chapters. I appreciate every error you find.

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter 16 of 20

Now a professor at Hogwarts, Hermione Granger begins to experience fierce migraines and voices in her head. What is causing these headaches or who?

Later that night, Harry had come back to their rooms with them for a night cap, and Severus poured some wine into their glasses.

Hermione asked, "Are you okay, Harry? You've been very quiet all evening."

"I'm fine. It was strange seeing Dumbledore. Portrait lore is a very odd thing, isn't it?"

"Yes," Severus agreed, "very odd."

"He seems to have all of Albus' memories and knowledge. It's like he's really there. He was able to answer questions I'd never asked before." Harry took a sip of his wine and stared into the fire. "But, I saw Albus in the place between life and death."

Hermione stared at Severus a moment, her face worried.

"I think the portraits are a part of the memory of the castle. It witnessed and heard a lot of things of which we have no clue. The painting appears magically after a headmaster's death. It's sort of like a Muggle computer, recording and storing hundreds of years of data that can be fed back through the portrait. It knows the headmaster so well it can make them so real..."

"Or it might house their soul," Hermione said.

Severus said, "I hardly think that's correct." He sat near Hermione.

"Did you ask Albus what he thinks he is?" Hermione asked Harry.

"I should have. But it didn't occur to me. He apologized for not explaining so many things ahead of time. He reiterated what you said about the innocence. But how innocent was I? I killed a man with my bare hands at age eleven. No one ever talked to me about it, not after those first few weeks." As tears started to run down his face, Hermione threw Severus a worried look, and he nodded at her then at Harry.

She went and got on her knees and put her arms around him and let him cry.

Severus got up and put a hand on Harry's shoulder. "I was very unhappy when Dumbledore decided to leave you with your aunt. That woman hated me. I feared she would abuse you, and she did. But we both had to agree that the blood magic there in the house would keep you safer than anywhere else. It was a hard decision for him to make, Harry. I argued that you might become a bitter man who might want revenge, but he said we had to take the chance. He said that he believed you would have your mother's temperament and be a loving child no matter what. He was right. Looking back, there was no other choice."

Harry scrubbed at his tears with the back of his hand and nodded. "Well, it all turned out okay, didn't it? You had to suffer many things as well, sir. I will never complain about my childhood. Tom's gone and that's all that matters." He hugged Hermione tightly, then pushed her gently away. They got to their feet. "Thank you, Severus. I'm going to go to bed. This place makes me feel like a child again. It's exhausting," he said, trying to make excuses for his tears.

"Perhaps, it's time to shed the tears we were denied when we were younger. There's no shame in tears, Harry. We are all friends and we shared the past. Each of us a part of one whole puzzle," Severus told the younger man.

Harry looked up at the tall man. "I think the worst injustice from this whole thing is that I was denied your council and friendship."

Severus felt tears burn his eyes. "I should have been more like a father. Yes, Tom stole a lot from all of us." He pulled the young man into a quick, tight hug then set him back upright and stepped back. Reaching out, he pulled Hermione close.

"I could use the council of a father now and then, sir," Harry told him, suddenly. He seemed to suddenly register the words and just who he had spoken them to. His eyes widened in mortification, and he hastily backpedaled. "I'm sorry that's ... I'd best go." He turned to leave, but Severus' voice stopped him.

"I would be honored, Harry," Severus said in a low voice.

Harry turned, his eyes wide behind his customary round-framed spectacles. "My mother would be very happy for us both," he said, then he went through the door without turning back.

Severus sagged against Hermione. "I'm exhausted again," he said. "Why is it that the feelings are bubbling out like water and I can't stop them? I can barely manage a weak shield."

Hermione walked him into their room, and they undressed and crawled into bed. "I imagine it's because so many things are changing for you. Being in love," she said with a grin. "Having to deal with Albus again and now Harry, for you it's only been a few months since that final battle for your life. While you were in that bed, time stood still for you. There was no living. Maybe the poisons weakened your ability to make the shields. You lived behind them so long, and they aren't necessary anymore. You must have had a million tears hidden behind them from the abuse as a child to the horror your life was here as an adult. I love you, Severus; your tears are not a weakness to me. Let it all go. Let that burden that you've carried for so long alone be shared."

Severus pulled her to his chest, holding her tightly. "I am so glad you came for me," he said before the tears came and she held him as he cried himself to sleep.

Harry left the next morning to go back to his family. Hermione and Severus saw him to the gates of the grounds and then walked back slowly.

"We should go away for a few weeks. Some high mountain air would do us good," Severus suggested to Hermione as they walked.

"That sounds nice, but first you need to come meet my parents," she reminded him. She had mentioned it several times. It was now a month since he had been rescued, and her mother had written quite an anxious letter, asking her to come.

Severus groaned. "What if they hate me, think I'm too old or have too much baggage for their little princess?"

Hermione laughed. "They already know who you are, and my mother knew I was falling in love before I even found you. They just want me to be happy, Severus. You make me happier than I've ever been, and they will see that."

He sighed. "Alright, let's get it over with then. We can go this weekend."

Hermione reached up, standing on her toes to give him a kiss. "Thank you, Severus."

"What will I have to talk to them about? They are Mu...." He stopped abruptly, obviously embarrassed by his near-faux pas. "I'm sorry."

Hermione gave off a tinkling laughter. "It's okay. I call them Muggles too. I'd say just listen to my dad; he loves to talk. If you really want to make him happy, ask him what he does and be willing to listen to a long spiel about all kinds of Muggle dentistry. He is a doctor, and he does use a variety of medications. He might be interested in comparing your potions to his meds."

"You know I couldn't give him anything complicated," Severus pointed out. "Sometimes I think it's a travesty that we have things that would be a miracle to Muggles, like Skele-Gro."

Hermione sighed. "I know. I've thought about that for years. Why couldn't we market some of these things?"

"You know Muggles require years of research data to accompany their medications, and we don't have the time. We do put magic into some of them."

Hermione nodded, taking his arm, and they continued back to the castle.

Friday night they Apparated into Hermione's parents' backyard. Severus was visibly nervous, and if it were not so serious for him, Hermione would have laughed at him.

Severus moved away from Hermione and was looking around with interest at the small back yard. It seemed crowded with flora, but in the twilight, he could not see it all too well. They had been delayed by Pomona, who had wanted to clarify a few wedding details.

The light came on when Hermione stepped closer to the back door, and within seconds, a woman opened the door and cried out, "Hermione, darling." Hermione was engulfed in a tight hug.

The woman, who looked like an older version of Hermione, turned to Severus.

Hermione slipped her hand into his and drew him closer. "Mum, this is Severus."

Mrs. Granger tentatively stretched out her hand, uncertain as to how to greet the man, before deciding to throw all caution to the wind and reach out with both arms.

Surprised, Severus stepped into her quick welcome hug. "Mrs. Granger, it's nice to meet you," he said as she stepped back and gave him an uncertain smile.

Hermione was smiling up at him proudly, so he knew he had responded correctly.

"It's nice to meet you, Severus. I have been part of the drama of your rescue from quite the beginning," she told him.

"I am grateful for the support you gave Hermione, Mrs. Granger."

"Severus, you're going to be family; call me Margret."

He looked toward the door. "Where is Mr. Granger, Margret?"

"Yeah, Mum, where is Dad?" Hermione asked, a bit of nerves creeping into her voice.

"He got an emergency call from the office. Mr. Blackstone's boy fell off his bike and knocked his teeth loose. His father's a good friend," she told Severus. "So, he wanted to check the boy over. It shouldn't be too long. He asked me to beg your forgiveness. He really did want to be here."

"Patients come first," Severus said. "I quite understand." He saw Hermione give her mother a quizzical look.

"Really, darling, he's with a patient. Why don't you come in? I have tea waiting. You might need to warm the pot for me, Hermione. Now, don't fret about Dad. He's quite looking forward to meeting you, Severus," Margret said reassuringly.

Severus could not help his sudden thought, *As much as I would be to see Tom, again.* He felt Hermione's laughter and remembered she had been wearing the pendant inside her blouse for moral support tonight. They had become so used to each other's thoughts they would forget. He gave her a smirk as they went through the kitchen into a nice, cozy sitting room.

Hermione and Severus took the couch, and Margaret waited for Hermione to re-warm the teapot with her wand. Then she set about placing cups on saucers and serving the tea.

Severus took the cup and took a sip. "It's very good, thank you. My favorite."

"Well, Hermione wanted you to enjoy your visit. I dare say it's Harris's favorite too, so I always have it around." She served them small pieces of pound cake on china plates.

"You're looking well, Severus. I would have been happy to help if you had been able to come here." She took her cup and sat in one of the two chairs opposite the couch.

"Hermione took excellent care of me, though I'm sure it would have been comfortable here," he assured her.

Margret chuckled. "A kind word from a future son-in-law. But, I am glad you are at Hogwarts. I know they have protections there, and I always feel sad that we can't spend as much time with Hermione, but I know she is safe there."

"Hermione is a hero in our world. You shouldn't fear for her safety," Severus tried to assure her.

Margret looked him in the eye. "Until the next megalomaniac comes along," she said pointedly. "Power of any kind can warp a person's soul, and you all have a great deal of power we 'Muggles' can't even dream of."

"There's always a chance, but it will be many years before someone tries again. We have new magic in place to detect the use of Dark Arts. I dare say anyone with aspirations in that direction will find it rather difficult to rise above the cell they will find themselves in Azkaban."

Margaret smiled. "Well, from what I've learned of you, you are the best and safest knight for my daughter."

Severus allowed a small chuckle to escape. "Hardly a knight," he said in self-deprecation.

The front door opened, and they all glanced up to see a thin man come in. He pulled the hat off his head and placed it on a coat rack. Then he shrugged out of a white coat and hung it below the hat.

He stepped from the small foyer into the sitting room. "I'm so sorry I'm late." Hermione had come to him, and he hugged her tightly. "You're looking very healthy, my girl, better than the last time you were here." He kept an arm about Hermione.

Severus had stood when Hermione's father had entered the room. The man stretched out his hand and shook Severus' quite firmly. He was maybe 5'9", slightly balding, and had very kind eyes wrinkled with laughter. "Welcome to our home, Severus."

"Thank you, sir." Severus said, stepping back. "You have a nice home."

"Harris, Severus, no need to stand on formalities here. You're going to be family after all."

Severus returned to the couch with Hermione. "I do appreciate your willingness to accept me. Do you not wish to question me as to my fitness as a future husband for your daughter?" Severus asked candidly.

Harris sat and took a sip of his tea. "I trust my daughter. And even I can see how happy she is. I have not seen her look so fit and healthy since before she went to your school. That business with Weasley, well, I might have thrashed him myself if I'd known how to find him. I can't say I like the situation Hermione came into from the very start there at Hogwarts. I guess it was because we didn't know most of it that we allowed her to stay.

"She gave us a full accounting after the war. It was after they all thought you were lost, and it included a great deal about you, Severus. I'm only her dad, but I could tell how much she admired you, even back then. Then she decided to become a Potions master..." He stopped to take a sip of his tea. "I also read the full synopsis from your magical historian, Herald Bandwagon. You gave a lot of yourself to help Harry, Hermione and even Ron survive. Your action in getting the sword of Gryffindor to them was paramount to their survival." He reached out to take Margret's hand next to him. "Margret and I are very grateful to have our daughter with us. We understand what she did for us was out of fear for our lives and our safety. It's time we let the past all go and look forward to the future with Hermione and with you, Severus."

Hermione was looking at her dad with an open mouth; she had never heard him say so much in one span of a few minutes. "Thanks, Dad."

"Well, you're my little princess, aren't you?" He smiled at his daughter warmly.

Hermione's hand tightened on Severus', and he could feel her warm tears sting at her eyes. "Always, Daddy."

Severus stiffened at the word, *always*.

Hermione gasped in her mind, *I'm sorry!*

No, it's okay. 'Always' has a new meaning now, Hermione. I will love you always and forever.

Always and forever. I like that. She hugged his arm tightly, then realized both her parents were watching them curiously.

Her mum finally asked, "That mental thing?"

"Yes, sorry, Mum. Severus was just telling me how much he loves me."

Her mother smiled. "Well, that's nice." She wore a look on her face, as if she was not quite sure what to make of their connection, though. "I know we've had a bit of tea, but are you hungry? I have a roast in the oven that should be done in an hour. In the meantime, if you'd like, you can go up and get settled into your room. It's the big guestroom with the bath, Hermione; I didn't think you'd want to try and share the twin bed in your room."

Hermione blushed. "You don't mind?" She looked from her mother's face back to her father's.

Mr. Granger coughed a bit but said stoically, "You're a grown woman, and we know you haven't been out of each other's sight much since you found Severus, Hermione. Far be it from us to try to force you to hide from us that you share a bed."

Severus said, "Thank you, Harris, Margret. I appreciate your understanding. I would relish a bit of a nap before dinner. Travel still has an adverse effect on me."

"As does meeting the future in-laws I expect," Mr. Granger said with a mischievous smile.

"Yes," Severus drawled, giving the man an answering smirk.

"You should have no fear here, Severus. We want what's best for our daughter," Harris said. "With the strong connection you have formed together, I can tell she would never be happy with anyone else, and we are just grateful you return her feelings."

Margret chimed in, "I knew Hermione was falling in love weeks before she found you. I was so worried that you might not feel the same way...that perhaps she was reading your signs of gratefulness at being rescued as more than it was. I am quite happy to see that you care for her."

Severus drew Hermione close. "When I love, I love with all my heart," he said with emotion. "I used to think I would never have love returned to me, and now that it is, I can't imagine ever loving someone more than I love your daughter." He gave Hermione a small nudge. "Can we go to our room for a while?" he asked softly. "I really do need to lie down."

Hermione nodded. "Severus, are you feeling poorly?" she asked.

Come on, he urged her silently.

Hermione glanced over at her mum. "Will you call us when dinner is ready?" She could tell her parents were as concerned as she was. After her parents had given their assurance that they would let the couple know when it was time to eat, Hermione guided Severus up the nearby stairs and down the hall.

The room was warm and inviting, and when the door closed behind them, a ragged sigh escaped Severus. "Merlin, I am a weak man," he said huskily. Tears were leaking out of his eyes, and he scrubbed at them with a balled up fist.

Hermione felt him sag, and she struggled to get him to the bed. "Severus, what's wrong?" Her voice was full of concern.

"I didn't expect such kindness. I thought I would have to fight for you, lay out a case for why we should be together."

Hermione stood between his knees and cradled his face against her breasts. "Silly man," she said with such kindness and relief. "They will love you because you love me. They saw what Ron's rejection did to me. They just want to know that you will not do that as well, that you accept me as I am. They know that already by seeing you and me together. I would not have been this happy if we had the same issues between us. Now, lay back, my love, and sleep a little."

They crawled into the bed, and Hermione held him till he slept. As she stroked his hair, she prayed he would begin to understand the way of kindness and compassion. That he would grow strong in accepting kindness and love from people and not feel so overwhelmed. She knew that the potions he was on, in the combination he had taken them at first, also lowered his abilities to maintain his shield. But, soon he would be free of the side effects and would be able to rebuild those shields if necessary. She hoped he did not find it necessary. He was so affected by people's love; he had been so deprived for so long he was not able to accept it well. It confused him and made him emotional, which she knew he detested. It was a weakness to him. She hoped to prove as time went by that it was a strength, stronger than anything else in this world. Look what love had done for Harry. It had brought him through adversity after adversity whole, well and in victory over the strongest Dark Wizard to live in their world. She let herself fall asleep.

"Hermione?" There was a soft knock at the door. Hermione opened her eyes to find the space in the bed beside her empty, and then she distantly heard the toilet flush.

"Yes, Mum. We'll be down in a few minutes," she called through the closed door. She stretched and crawled from the bed as the door to the loo opened. Severus, who was already dressed for dinner in dark pants and a white button-down shirt, appeared in the doorway and crossed the room to take her hand and draw her from the bed.

"Mum was here; it's time for dinner. Let me use the loo, and we'll go down together."

Severus nodded and placed a soft kiss on her forehead. "I am starving," he said with a slight grin.

"Well, I'll hurry then," she told him as she grabbed her bag and wand and hurried through the door of the bathroom, shutting it behind her. In five minutes she was ready; she came out wearing a different skirt and a soft warm pullover. Her hair was in soft ringlets falling to her mid back.

"You look lovely, Hermione." When he held out his arm, she linked her arm in his, and they went out the door and headed toward the dining room downstairs.

Margret was just setting a basket of rolls on the table when she heard them and looked up. "Did you get some rest?" she asked kindly.

Severus said, "Yes, thank you, it was very refreshing. I sometimes forget I am still not fully recovered. The Apparition must have affected me."

Hermione and Margret shared a look. Neither woman believed that but allowed him to think they did to save the frail male ego.

Harris entered the room, carrying a bottle of wine. "This will top the meal off nicely I think," he said, setting it down on the table. "Please, sit. I'm going for the roast."

Severus held out a chair for Hermione's mother and then for Hermione before taking his own seat. Harris appeared just before he sat and placed the big roast on the table on a metal trivet. He then took his seat. Harris held out his hand to Hermione; she took it, and then she threaded her fingers in Severus' hand. He looked perplexed a

moment, then Margaret reached for him, and he found his other hand clasped in hers as she took her husband's other hand, completing the circle. Harris began to pray, and Severus bowed his head. Memories began flooding him: he was a small child, maybe four, his mum and dad had a hold of his tiny hands as his father said a prayer of thanks. He had forgotten that the man had prayed...even that his dad had been kind before he had discovered what his mum was.

"Lord, we thank you for this food..." Harris was saying, "We thank you for bringing Hermione home and for our future son-in-law, Severus. May you bless them both as they go forward in their lives together. Amen."

Margaret squeezed both the hands she was holding and let go. Hermione, having felt Severus' train of thought, held on hard, hoping he was not overwhelmed again. But this time, it made him feel good to know that he had a memory worth keeping of his family. Maybe being part of this one would not be so bad.

Harris was passing the rolls, and he took one, releasing Hermione's hand so he could pass the basket to her. "These smell wonderful, Margaret," Severus said.

Hermione chimed in, "Grandmother's recipe. I really need to start learning how to cook. We won't be spending summers at Hogwarts every year."

Severus smiled at her. "This would be a good place to start."

Harris laughed. "It will be quite a feat if you can get that one to put down her books long enough to learn to cook."

Severus looked at the man. "Well, Potions is a great deal of 'cooking' really, and I have learned a thing or two about cooking quick meals. I will make sure she learns a few of my tricks. You can make a mean stew in a cauldron."

"I bet you can," Harris agreed as he stood and began to slice the roast. He served pieces of the meat onto each person's plate before taking his seat again. "Please, eat."

They all tucked into their food with relish.

Later, as they sat in the living room, nursing small whiskey glasses in their hands, Hermione told them about her search for Severus and how she had managed to get him out of the hospital. Her mother sat with her hand at her throat, gasping here and there, her eyes wide.

Harris laughed at his wife. "She's a witch, Margaret," he reminded her. "She would have easily put them all to sleep, but I agree it was exciting to hear." He yawned. "Forgive me. It was a long day at the office, and I know travel has tired you both out. Why don't we set breakfast at 10am tomorrow, and we can decide from there what we will do for the day."

He stood and took his wife's hand, pulling her to her feet. "Good night, Severus and Hermione. I'm very happy you came."

"Goodnight," they both chimed as Hermione's mother and father dropped kisses on the top of their daughter's head and gave Severus a pat on the shoulder.

They watched as her parents went down the hall past the kitchen to their bedroom at the back of the house.

"Do you want to go to bed?" Hermione asked.

Severus shook his head. "Can we sit here for a little while?" The fire was warming him quite nicely. Even though it was summer, the nights were rather cool.

Hermione smiled and snuggled into his arms. "It was a good day, wasn't it?"

"Yes," he said quietly. "A very good day." He tilted her chin up to kiss her.

Please leave reviews. They are a Fic writer's only payment.

Merrin, what would I do without you? I'm so lame at the correction process. I could not do this without you. Thank you!!!

Becky and Suzanne, each of you perform a much needed service for my stories, and I very much appreciate it.

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter 17 of 20

Now a professor at Hogwarts, Hermione Granger begins to experience fierce migraines and voices in her head. What is causing these headaches or who?

Hermione woke to the sun shining into her face. She squinted at the blinds and snarled. She was lying against Severus' bare body, warm and comfortable. She did not want to move but knew she needed to use the loo. She glanced at the bedside table and saw it was only 8:30.

They had returned to their room the previous night and had made love very slowly and very quietly lest they wake someone. Hermione knew in her mind that with the wards and silencing charms that was not going to happen, but it felt odd making love in her parents' house. However, Severus was persistent, and soon she had forgotten where she was and let herself just feel the touch of his lips and the sliding of his hand over moist flesh, the tingle of his tongue against her breast or the slide of her fingers over the soft and hard places of his body. Their soft cries were almost silent against each other lips, and once they had finished, they fell asleep in an exhausted, satisfied sleep.

She rose half way and kissed him awake.

A smile touched his lips before his eyes even opened. "Good morning," he whispered.

"Good morning," she said. "I'll be right back. It's still early. We can go back to seep for a while or take a bath."

"We?" he said, waking up more. He peeked at her through half-closed eyes.

She grinned. "Yep, care to join me?"

"Absolutely," he said, "You go first and I'll come in a minute."

Hermione went and used the loo and brushed her teeth, then set about getting the bath ready. While Severus slipped in behind her into the separate room with the toilet, she enlarged the tub with her wand and filled it with hot, bubbly water. She sat at one end, and when he came from the restroom, she watched him brush his teeth, and then he slipped in, facing her. They both took up soap and flannels and washed their own faces and then each other's arms and chests. They found it quite relaxing and soothing. Severus stretched his legs out, and Hermione straddled them, coming closer until she sat in his lap. She washed his chest, all the while stealing kisses. He scrubbed her back side. Soon the flannels were abandoned, and they pleased each other.

They came down the stairs only minutes before ten o'clock. Hermione's mother was setting plates of steaming food on the table eggs with bacon, and fresh scones with butter and jam. There was the aroma of fine, strong coffee, and Severus felt his mouth water. Sex always made him ravenous.

He held the chair out for Hermione, and after she took her seat, he took his. Harris had said hello, then promptly vanished back behind his paper. When Margaret came with a pitcher of fresh orange juice, he set his paper aside and tucked a napkin in his collar.

Hermione said with a nervous laugh, "Dad really doesn't talk until he's had his first cup of coffee."

Margaret poured his coffee, and he took a deep sip of the strong black coffee. "Please, tuck in," she said.

Severus was perfectly fine with not communicating. He felt much the same way and was only too happy to eat his eggs and sip the excellent, strong coffee. "Ma'am, this is an excellent scone," he mumbled to Margaret as he chewed.

Hermione laughed and agreed, "Mum's scones are the best"

They all ate in silence, which was broken when Harris sat back and held up his cup for a refill. "Margaret that was a fine meal a fine one," he praised his wife.

Margaret blushed under his compliment, and Severus saw how close they must still be. He hoped that he was as sensitive to Hermione as Harris seemed to be to Margaret after as many years together. He vowed to himself that he would never treat her as his dad had treated his mum. He searched and found Hermione's hand under the table and squeezed it.

"Well now, what shall we do today?" Harris asked cheerfully. "Severus, have you ever done the Muggle tour of London?"

Severus' interest was piqued. "No, I have not had much time in many years to just take in the sights.

"What about a trip to Trafalgar Square and the Palace?" Harris suggested. "That will give Margaret a chance to take some pictures to show off to her cronies."

"Harris! My friends are not crones, but I would love to have some pictures of the sights with the two of you in them. I can't very well show them the Wizarding photos you've sent, now can I?" she held no malice in her voice; she was only stating fact.

"Well, then...," Severus said, feeling Hermione tense against him. She knew he hated such things. "I think a trip to Trafalgar Square is in order. We might have to have a few sit downs here and there. I'm still not up to full strength."

Margaret smiled. "I think we can have tea in a local café and sit in the park a bit. We will take it slow." She rubbed her hands together in anticipation. "I will just run and get my camera. Hermione, dear, you can make short work of the dishes can't you?"

Hermione stood. "Yes, Mum."

Harris stood. "I will go get my walking stick."

Severus watched as Hermione drew her wand and sent all the dishes to the sink. She then gathered the food with another few waves, and in no time, the table was cleaned and the dishes were washing themselves.

"Do you do that for your mother all the time when you are here?" he asked curiously.

"No, we sometimes wash them together while Dad reads his paper. It gives us a chance to talk. But occasionally when we are in a hurry, like now, I will use a bit of magic to get us on our way."

Severus nodded. "I sometime wash cauldrons by hand just for thinking time, as well," he said. "I'll go up and get us some light jackets. It's quite overcast today."

Hermione nodded. She walked up and kissed him. "Thanks for agreeing to go."

He smirked. "Mum told me not to piss off future in-laws," he confided.

Hermione giggled, and her mirth followed him up the stairs.

Midday found them in a small café, drinking tea and having a sandwich. Tired from the walk through Trafalgar Square and the Mall in front of Buckingham Palace, as well as posing for far too many pictures in his opinion, Severus sat back and relaxed.

Margaret had even asked strangers to take pictures of the four of them on several occasions. Hermione had finally begged her mother to stop, but secretly, she was looking forward to having Muggle pictures of her and Severus. She had enjoyed the day very much, and Severus had seemed inclined to make the most of it.

Margaret asked, "What shall we do the remainder of the day? Severus, are you exhausted? Do we need to go home for a lie down?"

"That would be welcome, but I think a night out to a play, movie or opera might be nice." He had seen Harris cringe when he mentioned the opera. He had been quiet most the day, and Severus realized he had come along mostly to make his wife happy. Another thing Severus filed for years to come: Do things you do not like if it makes her happy.

"Why don't we go home then. You can all rest while I take a look online to see what's available in our area," Margaret suggested.

They took a cab home, and Hermione went with Severus upstairs. Lying on the bed, they did not sleep but talked about the wedding. It was in just a few weeks, and there was still a lot to do. "My mum will want pictures, Severus lots of pictures. Is it possible to take pictures of Hogwarts? We could make them generic against a wall or in a garden setting. The rose garden could be any garden."

"I'm not sure if Muggle cameras will work at Hogwarts; plus someone might want to know where it is. Perhaps we could Apparate to another local castle and have the pictures taken by a Muggle photographer," he suggested.

"You would do that? I know all of that's pretty tedious to you." She snuggled up against his chest.

"Hermione, I would do anything for you." He shifted his position so that he could look down into her face, and he felt her hands caress his back. He kissed her slowly and trailed kisses over her face and down to her neck.

"Again?" Hermione asked in a whisper.

"Are you up for it?" he asked her.

"Always and forever," she replied as she pushed the shirt from his shoulders.

Later, their fingers threaded through each other's as they watched the magic of The Phantom of the Opera at a London theatre.

As they walked back after the play, Hermione's parents trailed behind, lost in their own whispered conversation. As Hermione and Severus walked, she hugged his arm and said softly, "You are my Phantom, Severus. Even when you wore the mask, I cared about what happened to you. I knew if Dumbledore trusted you, then you were a good man."

He did not reply, but drew her close. He was grateful for the support. He had known she did not see him the same way as Harry Potter had back then. He was pretty good at stealth and had heard her defend him on several occasions. "I'm sorry I was so rough on you when I first contacted you. I was so scared, and I needed to tell you things in the limited time I'd find myself cognizant," he apologised.

"Severus, that's all forgotten," she said earnestly. "I love you. I figured that out for myself and kept my peace."

"I know I just wanted to say it again. To make sure you know how grateful I am for all you give to me; my love for you is boundless."

Hermione stopped him and slipped her arms up about his neck before kissing him passionately. They were startled by a flash. "Mum!" Hermione laughed.

"It will be a good one for the album." Margaret defended her actions.

Hermione grabbed her mum and pulled her close to kiss her cheek. "I want one of those."

Harris had caught up. "Come on, there's a pub around the corner. Let's get a night cap."

They found the pub warm and dimly lit; candles on the tables flickered and cast shadows. Severus found himself quite comfortable in the shadows. They bought drinks of mead and talked about the play.

As Severus settled in the bed with Hermione against him that night, he said, "I'm very glad we came. This has been really nice. It's like being part of a real family. I never knew a man and woman could be so considerate of each other."

Hermione pressed a kiss to his chest. "You are a part of a real family, now."

Sunday found them back at Hogwarts. Pomona came hurrying across the grass to greet them. "Come, look at what the ladies and I have done this weekend," she implored them.

They followed her to one of the green houses. Stepping through the door, Hermione gasped. It looked like a cathedral made of vines and flowers. There was an altar of living saplings woven together. The glass between the vines was charmed to look like stained glass.

"Oh, Pomona!" Hermione cried. "It's beautiful! I can't wait for the next two weeks to go by. Will the flowers still be blooming then?"

"Oh, yes. These are in a stasis field. They will still be here. How was your visit with your parents?" She glanced at Severus, wondering how it had gone.

"It was wonderful," Hermione told her. "We had a great time with Mum and Dad and got some time alone as well a nice mini-break."

"Wonderful," Pomona said, clapping her hands together and rubbing them as she glanced at Severus for his input.

He nodded his agreement. "It was pleasant. Hermione's parents were very kind."

"Well, I'm sure you have things to do tomorrow, and I need to tend to some of my plants."

She gave each of them a kiss on the cheek, then dismissed them, turning away to go off and do her work.

Hermione chuckled as they walked sedately up the grass slope to the castle. "Pomona certainly marches to her own tune, but I like her so much, Severus."

"She does at that. Always very abrupt, but when I came in tears and she pulled me to that ample breast of hers, her love surrounded me in such a way that I had no doubt she would be there for me," Severus said pensively.

"I bet you missed that when you got older," Hermione observed.

"Well, there was more than a time or two when I'd come dripping blood on the leaves of her precious plants, and she would slip to the floor of her green house and cradle me, all the while using her healing techniques on me or sending for Poppy when it was too much for her."

Tears burned at Hermione's eyes as she thought about the scene he had painted for her. She hugged his arm tighter. "I'm so glad you are here with me now. You and I will make a very special life together."

He was silent and then asked, "Do you want to have a baby?"

Hermione looked up into his eyes in the dimming light. "I would like that very much. I didn't think you would though," she confessed.

"It would be a gift beyond belief. I never thought I might be a father, but with you by my side..." He leaned to kiss her forehead as they walked.

"I think you would make a wonderful father, Severus."

The weeks passed, and they did not venture out of Hogwarts. There were so many things to be done and potions to brew before the honeymoon that they spent a great deal of time in the lab working on refilling Poppy's stores for the next year. Three nights before the wedding, Hermione's parents arrived on the Hogwarts Express. It brought all the guests for the wedding from London. Harry and Ginny came with their son, James, and Ginny was just about bursting with her next one. Also, on the Express were selected members of the Weasley family, many Order of the Phoenix members and past classmates. Mostly they came for Hermione, but Severus discovered there were people there he had worked with over the years, such as Chance Laurente, some other Healers, as well as Order members.

Hermione could tell he was quite touched as they disembarked the train and came to tell him how happy they were for him. His fingers tightened on her for support. He had been working on his shields so that emotion would not overwhelm him, and he had made some progress. Hermione had realized, much to their dismay, that the pendant

kept him open to the sharing and made the shields impossible, so they had placed the wood shard in a secure location and worked on talking and on reading each other's body language more. Talking about his feelings was hard for Severus, but as he grew in his relationship with Hermione, he realized he could tell her most anything.

"Ginny!" she cried, grabbing her friend in a tight hug. "Look at you. You sure you're not going to have that baby while your here?"

Ginny laughed, rubbing her stomach. "Well, he's not due for another three weeks, but then, you never know. There are worse places to be born. Hogwarts feels like a second home."

Hermione also got a hug from Harry. "You look wonderful," he told her before shaking Severus' hand in greeting. "It's good to see you again, Severus."

As more people came for hugs and pats on the back, Hermione saw Chance Laurente get off the train. She heard a bit of a squeal, and then he was holding Poppy tightly. Their lips touched briefly. Hermione smiled to see it.

Carriages arrived then, drawn by Thestrals, to transport anyone who wanted to ride to Hogwarts. Hermione's parents chose to walk with Hermione and her friends to the castle. This being their first visit to Hogwarts, they wanted to soak up as much of the atmosphere surrounding the area as possible.

There was a short tour through Hogsmeade with promises to come back the next day to explore more thoroughly before the group slowly made their way to Hogwarts, stopping for a time to point out the Shrieking Shack and explain to Margaret and Harris its importance. Severus found that a number of hands reached out to touch his arm or back as he stared at the broken down house. He was not ashamed of the tear that escaped and ran down his face; he was grateful for all he had suffered. Today was probably one of the most satisfying in his life if he had to experience everything again to reach it, then he would do so.

He was going to marry Hermione, and Harry and his family were here to support him. Hermione's parents supported him, and others were there Neville and Luna, friends all.

Hermione heard the gravel crunching under footsteps and looked to see Poppy, arm linked with Chance's, strolling slowly toward them. They passed by the group, not even looking up. They seemed lost in conversation.

Hermione grinned and said, "Rekindled love." Severus' eyebrow raised in response. They all seemed to turn away from the Shrieking Shack, then, as the group in silence followed the older couple down the tree-lined lane.

When Hogwarts came in sight, Margaret gasped. "I thought it was rebuilt after the war," she said in disappointment. She had been looking forward to seeing the magnificent castle of her daughter's tales.

Severus pulled his wand out and waved it over Hermione's parents, who gasped collectively as the splendor of Hogwarts was revealed to them. They reached out as one to touch the gate. Hermione smiled at their wonder. All her life, she had hoped to share this with them. She would talk to Minerva about allowing the Muggle parents to come and see where their children were attending school. They were already keeping secret their offspring's special abilities; surely seeing the castle would not hurt anyone.

As they walked up the expanse of lawn, the others who had come by carriage were milling around outside the door. It swung open, and dignitaries and friends alike all climbed the steps and entered the foyer before they all went into the Great Hall. The student tables had been replaced by more formal dining tables with plush, high-back chairs, each table holding twelve people. People began to spread out and take seats.

Severus and Hermione encouraged Harry, Ginny, Neville and Luna to join her and her parents. They took a seat near the front, and Minerva and Pomona joined them. Chance and Poppy rounded out the group.

Minerva stood to make a welcoming speech. "Welcome, honored guests, friends and family. We are so happy to host you here on this momentous occasion of the handfasting of our two most famous teachers, Professor Severus Snape and Professor Hermione Granger. Tonight we will have dinner, then you may roam the castle. Feel free to visit all your old stomping grounds. Mr Potter, please stay away from the Chamber of Secrets, the Whomping Willow and the Forbidden Forest I will deduct points if I need to." The guests all laughed heartily at her joke. "For those who have not been here before, several house-elves have volunteered to give guided tours and answer as many questions as they can about the castle.

"I think you will be impressed with the rebuilding. For those of you who haven't been here in years and for those who have, the house-elves are constantly adding new features to help update the castle for a new generation. Tomorrow we will have a picnic by the lake, and the Merfolk have agreed to sing for us. I have contacted a few of our former all-stars, and they will come and play an exhibition Quidditch game for us in the late afternoon for those of you who are fans, and for Hermione's parents who have never seen a game. I hope you will all welcome Doctors Margaret and Harris Granger and perhaps regale them with fond stories of Hermione's time here.

"Now, please enjoy your meal." She waved her wand, and food of all kinds appeared on the tables before them platters of steaming roast beef and golden brown chickens, huge hams, loaves of warm, crusty bread and pats of sunny yellow butter. Massive bowls of every kind of vegetable dotted the tables as well. There were shiny porcelain plates before them and gleaming silverware. Their goblets filled with a light wine or water. For a time there were few words spoken as the guests filled their plates and began to eat.

Harris Granger filled his plate with the amazing food. Seeing that there was far more than humanly possible for the guests at the table to eat, he asked Hermione, "What will they do with all this food that's not eaten?" he asked. He had grown up in a house where he was taught not to waste food.

"It's magical, Dad. What's not eaten will be stored, until another meal. I've grown up with this bounty before me," Hermione explained.

"It's comforting to know you were always well-taken care of," Margaret chimed in. She took a fork and cut off a small bite of chicken. She tasted it gingerly, and then dove into the food with gusto.

"That last year before the war, I often dreamed of the tables of food here when we were off camping," Hermione reminisced. Her face darkened as she remembered the food being the reason Ron had left them.

Severus seemed to follow her thoughts and reached over to cover her hand and give it a squeeze. "I was thinking it might be fun to introduce your parents to the Fat Lady and, of course, Hagrid."

Hermione smiled. "Yes, they should meet Hagrid. I know he likes to stay to himself during the summer. He says he feels like he's on vacation when he doesn't come in to eat. But we need to make sure he's coming to the wedding. Neville, Luna, Harry and Ginny, maybe we can all walk down this evening and see him. I know it will make him very happy, and he will enjoy meeting my parents." They all agreed that that would be fun.

"Please, come to Greenhouse six afterwards, by nine o'clock. I have a special crop of night roses blooming tonight, and I know you will want to be there when they unfurl," Pomona added.

Severus' eyes sparkled. "We definitely don't want to miss that."

WriterMerrin, thank you for doing the beta work on this story. It's a huge job, and you are very much appreciated.

Suzanne, your alfa work and Brit picking are very much appreciated, as well.

Becky, you are always encouraging and helpful. Thank you.

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter 18 of 20

Now a professor at Hogwarts, Hermione Granger begins to experience fierce migraines and voices in her head. What is causing these headaches or who?

Hermione and Severus walked hand in hand along with the Grangers and the other former students over the hill and down the sloping path to Hagrid's hut. There was a small bonfire burning just outside, and Hagrid himself was sitting on the stoop with a flute in his hands. He was playing an eerie soft tune.

His eyes lit with the dancing fire as he rose to greet them with a shout. "Harry! Hermione! Well, look at ye all." He gave the two a bone-crushing hug and looked about the group. "Sev'rus," he said, looking with surprisingly kind eyes at the man. "It's good to see you. Now who have we here?" he asked, eyeing the Grangers.

Hermione happily introduced her parents to the half-giant. "Hagrid, this is my mum and dad, Harris and Margaret Granger. They have come for the wedding."

Hagrid rumbled forward and held out his massive hand. Margaret and Harris were both looking up at him with their mouths hanging open. Harris took a breath, shut his mouth and grinned; he held out his hand and tried not to grimace as Hagrid's paw engulfed his hand and half his arm. "Well, it's good to meet you," Hagrid said enthusiastically. "You have a right fine daughter here, you have. We are all very proud of our Hermione."

"It's good to meet you too, Hagrid; we have heard a great deal about you."

"Have you now?" Hagrid laughed, and everyone in the company felt the vibration of his merriment in their chests. He nodded to Margaret. "It's good to meet you, ma'am."

Margaret had recovered her manners and replied, "It's wonderful to meet you too, sir."

Hagrid ducked his head and then surveyed the company. "Look at you all. All grown up... and you a bit more'n most there, Ginny. Congratulations, you two." He said looking at Harry and Ginny. "Come, sit for a bit."

Severus pulled out his wand and rolled some nearby logs and rocks closer to the fire, and they all took seats. Pretty soon the stories were flying, and the laughter lifted up into the brilliant starry night.

Several hours later, Hermione crawled into bed with Severus following her. He reached out and drew her close. "It was a pleasant evening," he said.

She snuggled up against him. "It was very nice. I still can't believe my mum and dad are here. It's a dream come true, Severus, to share my life here with them. We must buy Minerva a thank you gift for allowing them to come."

"I hardly think a gift is necessary. She was happy to do it for you, but if you wish." He placed a kiss on her forehead.

"We can look tomorrow on the tour of Hogsmeade. There's a new jewelry store there near Madam Malkin's. A brooch of some kind would be nice for her. I need to pick up the wedding robes and have the last fitting."

Severus groaned. "You could take your parents on your own."

"Please come, Severus, I think the whole group from tonight will want to go, and we sort of made plans, while you were talking to Pomona, to have a drink at the Hogshead."

"If that's what you want, Hermione. I feel a bit out of place with all the younger people. People who don't know us will think I'm someone's father."

She smiled cheekily. "No, only my sugar daddy."

Severus sneered. "I hardly think that fits me. There is nothing sweet about me."

Hermione rose up, turning to look into his face, and grinned before kissing his cheek. "Hummm, pretty sweet here," she teased. She then kissed each of his eyelids as he looked on, amused. "Sweet as nectar," she praised. His fingers slid up her back and tangled in her hair. She then placed a soft kiss on his lips, "Yummy, honey...nectar of the gods." She giggled when he grabbed her and flipped her over and partially under him. She entwined her legs in his. "Yep, my sugar daddy."

The next day found the group walking back up the tree-lined lane to Hogsmeade. Ginny and Harry had insisted on coming, though she was lagging further and further behind. Harry stayed at her side.

Severus finally stopped the group, and they waited for them to catch up. "Ginevra, are you certain this walk is wise in your condition?" he asked, eyeing the sheen of sweat on her brow.

She nodded, a bit out of breath. "My healer tells me it's good for me to walk."

Severus got on one side and said, "Harry, take her arm. Hermione, will you cast a lightening charm, please?"

Hermione nodded. Pulling her wand out, she waved it over Ginny, who floated of the ground a couple inches.

Harris laughed. "I wish I could have done that for Marg the last days before Hermione was born. She was as big as a house."

Margaret punched his arm playfully, and Hermione laughed. "Nice, Dad."

"I was," Margaret agreed with a laugh as they continued down the street, the two men pulling Ginny along.

Ginny and Harry carried on straight to the Hogshead while Hermione the others took her mum and dad on a tour of Hogsmeade. There was not a lot to see there, but they seemed like two kids in a candy shop, staring at all the buildings and things they had heard about for so many years.

Harris bought some sugar quills and some exploding pop. Margaret bought some quills and ink as well as auto-correct paper. Neville and Luna went to the apothecary. Severus slipped in behind them for a few minutes while Hermione and Margaret went to the dress maker's. Harris tagged along with him, his eyes getting wider and wider as he read some of the ingredients on the many jars that lined the walls. "Dragon heartstring, eye of newt, unicorn horn... Severus, are there really unicorns?" he asked.

"Of course, how else would they get the horn?" Severus replied with a grin. "It is, however, very rare. They only shed their horn after their first year, and it's very small. It's a good thing not too many potions call for it, as it's a rare ingredient." He made a purchase and then beckoned the man to follow him out. "Longbottom, Lovegood," he called to the pair. "We are heading to the Hogshead."

"We'll be along in a few minutes," Neville called back. He was selecting a few seeds.

Their timing was impeccable...Severus and Harris met Hermione and Margaret coming out of Madam Malkin's at the same time. Severus quickly relieved Hermione of the large box she was holding, acknowledging her hurried instruction not to shrink the delicate garment within.

When they reached the Hogshead, they searched the large room and spotted Harry waving to them from the back corner. The Potters had settled into a booth and ordered some butterbeers for old time's sake. Hermione decided to do the same, encouraging her mother to have one as well. Severus and Harris chose to go for fire whiskeys.

Once they were all seated, Hermione noticed Ginny wince. "Are you okay?" she asked.

Ginny nodded. "Yeah, my back's hurting. It's from carrying all this weight up front."

Hermione squeezed her friend's hand supportively. "Maybe you shouldn't have come today. We could hire a carriage to take us all back to Hogwarts. Just say the word and we can go now."

Ginny waved her hand dismissively, "I'm okay. Besides I haven't been out in ages. I'm really looking forward to the wedding tomorrow."

"It wouldn't be right without you there. I'm so glad you and Harry came. I just wish..." She let the words trail off.

Ginny patted her arm, "I know; if he wasn't my brother, I'd take a switch to him. I love him, but he was a grade A git."

Hermione felt Severus lean closer to her for support. He might have been carrying on a conversation with her dad, but he was also able to discern her and Ginny's conversation. She glanced at him and saw he was concerned but not annoyed, and that made her love him even more.

"Owww," Ginny cried out. "This one is such a kicker." She pressed her hand to her large belly, to try and alleviate some of her discomfort.

Hermione glanced at her watch. It had only been about five minutes since the last pain. "Are you sure you're alright?" she asked her friend again.

"Hermione, when you're at this stage, everything hurts or is uncomfortable." She squirmed to get a better angle on her back.

Harry and the men were in a discussion about the seeds Neville had bought. Severus had asked about the properties of the seeds and what Neville planned for them. "Ask Pomona about them. She can tell you all of the plant's needs. I'm mostly versed in what can be done with the leaves and stem bark."

Ginny groaned again and Hermione glanced at her watch again, only another five minutes. "I may never have had a baby, Ginny, but I know most normal pains do not come in five minute increments."

Her question had come at a lull in the men's conversation. Severus turned and asked, "Ginevra, are you in labor?"

Harry immediately straightened his whole body and shouted, "What?"

Severus scooted out of the both and pulled out his wand and, uttering an incantation, watched as the colors danced about Ginny's form. "I thought you'd been through this before." He had that annoyed smirk.

"I have, but the pains were up front in my lower belly area. This feels like back spasms, plus it hurt a lot more last time; it's completely different today," Ginny said, stubbornly refusing to believe she might actually be about to have her baby."

"Severus, is Ginny in labor?" Hermione asked.

"Quite," he answered. Looking at the gobsmacked expressions of his companions, he quickly took charge of the situation. "I say we adjourn this discussion to a later time and get Mrs. Potter to Poppy post haste. Mr. Longbottom, will you please summon a coach?" he instructed the group. "Apparation is not advisable right now," he informed the nervous father. "Plus we cannot Apparate into Hogwarts anyway."

Harry scrambled from the booth, and the others quickly followed. Neville ran outside to hire the carriage.

Harry placed his arm about Ginny's waist, Hermione got on the other side, and they walked her out of the Hogshead. Outside the door, she groaned and her legs collapsed under her. Severus swooped in and picked her up.

Harry said, "I can do it." He held his arms out for his wife.

"Nonsense," Severus told the younger man. "I already have her and here comes the coach. You get in, I'll hand her into you. Hermione, send your Patronus to Poppy and let her know we are coming. We should have plenty of time. Don't these things take hours?" He murmured to no one in particular.

Luna said in her soft voice, "Things could progress quickly. Sir, I have been studying to be a midwife."

Severus waited till Harry climbed into the coach and then he lifted Ginny in. "By all means come with us." He clambered into the coach, and Luna followed. "Hermione, perhaps you and Neville can Apparate your parents back to the gates of Hogwarts."

Ginny cried out in pain, and Severus began to regret not suggesting the Floo. "I do not think this baby plans to wait too long. It's best you hurry. We will be along in a few minutes."

The coach pulled away. Inside, Severus waved his wand, placing a cushioning charm on Ginny, making the ride less jarring and bumpy. Harry sat next to her, and with a magical charm, the coach expanded so she could lay full out with her head on his lap.

Luna pulled her wand and began to check Ginny's vitals as she rode through another labor pain. All of a sudden, Ginny's waters broke, saturating her and Harry. "OH, MERLIN!" Ginny shouted as another strong wave of pain overcame her.

"I don't understand!" Harry said from behind Ginny. "It took hours last time!"

Ginny was panting through the pain. "Well, it's not going to this time. Oh, I need to push," she wailed.

"Professor Snape, have you ever delivered a baby before?" she asked.

"Yes." He said, his brow creasing with the memory. . . It had been under very rough circumstances...one of the young girls being kept by a Death Eater had gone into labor while he had been in attendance. As the only person present with even a remote amount of medical knowledge, he had been called upon to conduct the birth.

Luna got on her knees next to Ginny and conjured up a sheet to cover Ginny. "Well, it looks like you're about to help deliver another one. Harry, help her to sit up a bit. Bend your knees, Ginny." Harry moved quickly to comply with Luna's instructions.

"No, no!" Ginny cried in alarm, clenching her teeth against another pain. "I can't have this baby here!"

Severus said sternly, "Calm yourself, Witch. Breathe, this child wants to come into the world right now, and there's nothing we can do to stop it."

Ginny looked at Harry with panic.

"Ginny, you can do this, you can. You're strong." Harry soothed and encouraged her with a soft, gentle voice. He rubbed her lower back with one hand and braced the other one about her chest, holding her against him.

Harry looked at the determination in Severus' face and the soft calm countenance of Luna and felt at peace. He trusted these two people with his life, and Ginny and this baby were his life.

Severus chanted a pain-relieving spell, and Luna said, "Push, Ginny, push." She reached between Ginny's knees and felt the baby's head crown. "Sir, bear down on her upper abdomen when you feel the next contraction."

Severus went to his knees and placed a hand on Ginny's abdomen. He felt the coach come to a stop, and the door was flung open, and he felt Hermione close. He was aware that heads were poking into the door, all watching. He felt her contraction and gently pushed. Ginny cried out in pain, and Luna pulled the baby free. "It's a boy!" she announced. With her wand, she checked the baby's breathing, cleaned and warmed him.

Severus brought his wand up and severed the cord, tying it off with magic. He brought a vial from his pocket and placed some of the cord into it. "It might be quite useful for this child in the future. Many lifesaving potions can be created for him from it."

Harry, who had been looking at Severus strangely, smiled now. "Thank you, sir."

Hermione, who was now standing in the door, dug into her shopping bag and drew out a soft warm baby blanket. "Severus," she called to get his attention. He turned and smiled when he saw the blanket. He took it and handed it to Luna. She wrapped the baby into it and laid him down on Ginny's chest.

Ginny was crying, Harry was crying... big gulping happy sobs. "He's beautiful!" they said in unison.

Severus voice was heard over the din. "Merlin help us, another Potter."

Everyone turned to look into his face and saw, to their utter shock, tears of joy running down his face. They all laughed at the phenomenon, even Severus. Ginny laid a finger on the baby's soft hair and let a curl slide over her finger. "Albus Severus Potter," she said in a whisper.

"What!" Severus exclaimed, watching the magic of the naming swirl about the baby. "What did you go and do that for?!" He complained but reached out to touch the baby's hand. The little fingers wrapped about his pointer finger. Hermione saw his face melt, and she climbed into the coach and hugged his arm. Tears ran down all their faces at witnessing the miracle of birth.

The gate to Hogwarts swung open, and Poppy came running through. The baby started to cry. "Out of the way. Let me though," the medi-witch called.

Hermione and Severus crawled out of the coach, giving her room. Poppy climbed into the coach, waving her wand. "Well, I dare say you all didn't need me." She smiled at the group. "This boy is fit as a fiddle, and you did an excellent job, Miss Lovegood."

"With Professor Snape's help," Luna said.

"Is that a fact?" She watched as Harry and Ginny lifted the blanket to examine his ten tiny toes. "When you are ready, Mrs. Potter, I can float you up to the infirmary on a stretcher and check you both over."

Severus helped the medi-witch out of the carriage and watched as she conjured a floating stretcher.

Harry handed the baby out to Hermione, who stared at the tiny face as if she had never seen a baby before.

Severus and Harry got Ginny out of the carriage and laid her out on the canvas, covering her with a clean white blanket that Poppy had placed a warming charm on.

Hermione handed the baby to Harry. He turned to Severus and Luna. "Thank you," he said softly before turning away to follow after his wife.

"Wow!" Harris said, "You always seem to have so much drama around you. I'm quite happy to have experienced it firsthand this time. Come on, Margaret. I think we can find our way up to the castle. Let's let Hermione and Severus have some time together." He took his wife's arm, and with a wink, he guided her up the long drive to the castle.

Severus was finding the deluge of emotion draining, and he turned to Neville and Luna. "Thank you. You will make an excellent mid-wife Miss Lovegood. Mr. Longbottom." He gave the young man a smirk and then linked arms with Hermione, and they walked away leaving the two to smile with raised eyebrows at each other. Luna gave a crazy whoop and Neville followed. They danced about each other and raced up the drive past Hermione and Severus.

Hermione laughed, "They suit each other very well."

"Yes." Severus was quiet and Hermione just let him lead until she realized where they were heading. She grinned up at him as he led her to the secret door, through the hall and into the secret room.

Severus pulled her to him, kissing her with abandon. "That was exhilarating!" he said between kisses.

She looked at him with surprise at his lighter, amazing mood. It was a side of Severus she had not seen before. One she found very appealing. "You're positively giddy!" she laughed at him.

"I am, aren't I? I feel like I've been drinking." He threw off his cloak and waist coat and held out his arms to his soon to be bride. "Care for a romp before joining the others?"

Hermione grinned taking his hands, "Absolutely." Their lips met and clung to each other's as Severus backed them toward the bed. They fell back onto it in a laughing heap before crawling under the covers. Hermione looked up into his eyes. "The baby was wonderful wasn't he? I've never seen a newborn, not like that."

"Will you want to wait for a few years to have a baby?" Severus asked, a curious tone in his voice.

Hermione looked at his expectant face. What did he want her to say? She took a deep breath and told him how she really felt "Today made me want a baby now, Severus. Does that frighten you?"

His eyes had gotten round as saucers. Tears swam in his eyes. "It makes me very happy, very humble and thankful for my life with you, Hermione. I would like us to have a baby as soon as you are ready."

She caressed his face, and he turned and placed a kiss in her hand. "Let's try right now," she said with conviction.

His eyes crinkled with a smile and he said, "Doesn't one usually wait till after the wedding? Also, isn't it a custom for non-magical folk to not see each other the night before the wedding, bad luck and all that rubbish?"

"Severus," Hermione said with a grin, "everyone knows we've been together for a long time. I want to be with you tonight, and every night for the rest of our lives. I think we make our own good luck by loving each other with all our hearts."

"Yes, we do." he told her, gathering her close.

"I am coming up to the most fertile part of my cycle right now. I was going to be extra careful by taking the contraceptive potion during our honeymoon."

"I do have a potion that would make conception more likely for you at this time. It's in my lab."

"You keep that sort of thing on hand?" Hermione asked curiously.

Severus shrugged. "I'm trying to get my brewing skills back up to the standard they were before the Final Battle as you know. I'm brewing anything and everything I have the ingredients to brew with."

Hermione grinned. "Will tomorrow be soon enough?"

"Yes," he said. His voice got low and sexy. He bent to kiss her, and as their lips met, Severus vanished their clothing with wandless magic.

Hermione giggled, "You do know how to get down to it." Her hand ran over his back, feeling some scars and the muscles of his back. "I love you so much. I want more than anything to have your baby, Severus."

With hands that worshiped each other and lips that caressed and tasted, soft sighs and straining muscles, the promise of a possible life being created made them all the more eager to make love. Each time they were together was as sweet as the first.

Thank you, Suzanne for your beta work, It is much appreciated.

Merrin, I know I work you hard, and I so appreciate your help with the beta work. Thank you so much.

Becky, as always, thanks for your first look and your kind comments.

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter 19 of 20

Now a professor at Hogwarts, Hermione Granger begins to experience fierce migraines and voices in her head. What is causing these headaches or who?

Severus stood in the small bedroom in Pomona's rooms at the back of Greenhouse Four. She had moved out here years ago. It was small but cozy and was home in some ways to him. He had spent a number of hours hiding from James and Sirius here in these rooms. He felt his face heat up when he remembered the times he would sit at her feet and press his face to her ample leg and cry. He could still remember her fingers caressing his hair.

She was a mother to him, and he never told her enough. There was a timid knock on the door.

"Sev, can I come in for a minute?" Pomona's voice called, unsure.

He went and opened the door, grabbing her into a strong hug. He pressed a kiss to the old woman's gray hair. "I'm the interloper here; of course you can come in."

"Look at you; I never thought I'd see this day. Not after..." she let the words die on her lips.

He gave her a warm smile. "Neither did I, but I know now miracles do happen. I sometimes wake in a sweat thinking it all a delusion and I'm in a cell in Azkaban." He had never confessed that to anyone.

"Oh, Sev, you do deserve it. People can be forgiven for their mistakes, and you've more than made up for it." She patted his face. "Harry's waiting outside down the hall. He wants to come help you into your coat. I dare say it's a huge compliment that he's willing to leave his wife and new baby."

"Another gift I do not deserve...send him in." He gave her another hug. "Thank you for always being here for me. A man could not want for a better mother."

Pomona sniffed back tears. "No one could have a better son," she said with conviction.

"Go on with you, woman." he said with a smirk, his eyes warm and kind. "I hope I can live through all the sentimentality today. All of it yesterday with assisting in the birth of that baby just about did me in."

Pomona laughed. "Your heart sure has been softened up by that slip of a woman." She gave his hand a squeeze and went to fetch Harry, who arrived only moments later.

"Well," Severus said, "it's about time you got here, Best Man."

Harry smiled. "I think you've taken that title and rightly deserve it. You're a far better man than I'll ever be."

"Hardly, Harry," Severus said, turning to the mirror to tie his tie. His eyes met Harry's in the mirror. "You have always been good, even when you were getting in trouble. You always had the very best of intentions, and you broke rules only to save others."

"Well, I couldn't have gotten as far as I did without your help. I know I've told you before, Severus, but thank you."

Severus turned and began to button up his cuffs. Harry came forward and helped him. "Did you talk to Weasley?" Severus asked as he watched the younger man fumble with the silver cufflinks.

"Yes, last week," Harry said, his full concentration on his appointed task of helping Severus to prepare. "He is sorry for what he's done to Hermione. I think he's finally seeing what a shallow, selfish man he had become."

"Will he be here?" Severus asked. He was not sure if he would not curse the man if the redhead came within sight, but he loved Hermione and he knew there was that unspoken hole in her life left by Ron, one of her best friends. Ron the once-love was nothing to her. A bad dream she would rather forget.

"No, and I agreed. Today is not the time for it all to be brought up again. He wrote her a letter." Harry reached into the inner pocket of his dress robes and pulled out a plain white envelope. "He said to tell you he's happy for you both. Believe me, he was shocked at first, but then he said it made sense, you both love the same things."

Severus took the envelope. "Do you know what it says? I will not read it...it's not my place...but I do not want it to upset her."

"Yes, it's a very heartfelt apology. I made sure it wouldn't hurt her. I'm not sure if she's forgiven him. Maybe you could wait a few days before giving it to her. Today should be the happiest for her; even though it is a nice letter, it will still bring up memories that are best left unremembered today."

Severus nodded. He picked up his waistcoat and tucked the envelope into an inner pocket, and then with Harry's help he slipped into the jacket. "How are Ginny and the baby?" he asked the younger man.

Harry took up Severus' dress cloak and helped him put it on. "She's wonderful. She really is annoyed to be sitting out there and not being with Hermione, but she realizes that she can't. Albus Severus is rather demanding of her attention. He's quite a hungry child."

Severus grimaced, "Don't call him that, please, Harry. It is a huge honor, but it's best for him if you just call him Albus. It is a far more deserving name." Severus leaned down so he was eye to eye with the younger man. "I'm serious." He gave Harry that deadly stare he used to give him in class.

Harry laughed nervously. "If that's what you really want."

Severus tugged his collar and smiled. "It is," he said firmly. "How do I look?"

"Surprisingly handsome." He laughed uncomfortably. "Hermione will have eyes for no one else," Harry said sincerely. "I think my mum would have liked to see me here with you today," Harry said, changing the subject.

Severus placed a hand on Harry's shoulder and squeezed it. "I think you might be right," he agreed. "Now come, it's time for us to take our places. I am anxious to see my bride. Will you go and find out if she's ready?" He took a seat in a chair and picked up a book and opened it.

"Yes, sir." Harry smiled and left.

Severus brow creased. "How annoying," he said out loud to himself, "I'm becoming quite fond of that boy."

Meanwhile, Hermione fussed with her hair, missing Ginny. She had planned to have her close friend help her dress and prepare for the wedding. Ginny was now in guest quarters resting and would come down later to recline in a lounge chair for the wedding. Both she and the baby were doing very well.

Dinner the night before had been a happy, boisterous affair with excellent food and dancing. Hermione had enjoyed watching her parents dance. She prayed she and Severus would be able to look into each other's eyes with such love after they had been married for so many years. She was not fool enough to think there would not be hard times and a few raise-the-roof rows, as they were both stubborn, head strong people, but she knew they loved each other deeply. She did not question that they would live the rest of their lives together, raising children and furthering their interests and careers. As she pressed a hand to her abdomen, she knew it was her imagination, but she felt the tiniest of flutters. Probably nerves but in her heart of hearts she wished she was pregnant already. She was astonished that Severus wanted this baby, right now, as much as she did. Life could be altered in seconds.

She turned as her mother came to her carrying the dress. She lifted her arms and the dress went over her head and settled down around her in a soft whisper of silk. Her mother cooed over her as she began to work on fastening the many buttons up the back. "You're so beautiful, Hermione."

Her mother's voice broke. and Hermione felt tears sting her eyes in response. "Now, Mum, no crying, otherwise I'll start next and it will ruin my makeup."

Margaret laughed. "Oh piffle, you can repair it with your wand. I will not be denied my tears today."

Hermione twisted around to give her mother a brief hug. "I'm so glad you and Daddy are able to be here. I can't imagine having my wedding anywhere else. This castle has been a cornerstone in my life. You, Dad, and Severus make the other three, not necessarily in that order, but you know what I mean. Severus makes me so happy, Mum. I love him so much."

"Of course you do, as you should; you're marrying the man after all," she teased. "And he does you, too, darling, it is plain for anyone to see," she said, giving Hermione a small pat on her back indicating the buttons were done. "While he's not exactly the image of the son-in-law I once hoped to have, he's become the only man for you in my heart now. I see the devotion and love he has for you, and I can see that no one else will ever take your place in his heart. He's a forever man."

Hermione smiled at her. "I haven't heard that in years. You used to tell me I'd find a forever man, when you told me princess stories as a child."

"Well, I knew what I was talking about...I'd found my forever man, in your father," she said with a secret smile.

Hermione smiled again, she never knew what made that secret smile. That was for her mum and dad to know, but she always felt warmed by it. She probably would not have been able to put her feelings for Severus into words either and she hoped the love she felt for him reflected that same secret smile on her lips. She stood back from her mum. "How do I look?" she asked

"Perfect," Margaret said. "Just like a princess."

Hermione stepped closer and leaned in to press a soft kiss to her mother's cheek.

There was a knock at the door. "Hermione, are you ready?" Harry called.

"Yes, come in," she answered. She reached for a small silk bag...it was her old bag with a new charm to make it white and beautiful for today...she seldom went anywhere without it. It was an old habit from her days of traveling with the boys. Inside it held her most personal possessions and potions for all manner of things.

Harry entered the room and stopped to stare at her. "Hermione, wow, you're so beautiful!" He moved close and took hold of her hand, leaned in and pressed a kiss to her cheek. "I'm afraid to touch you. I just came to walk you to the front door; your dad will take you from there."

"How's Severus? He was gone when I woke up this morning. He wanted to do that whole 'not see the bride before the wedding' thing," Hermione said with a small roll of her eyes.

"He's good," Harry assured her. "I helped him get ready. Professor Sprout made a small dressing room behind the altar. He's patiently waiting. Last I saw him, he was seated in a high back chair pretending to read a book...all nonchalant and relaxed." He laughed.

"Pretending? How could you tell?" Hermione asked.

Harry opened the door and then held out his hand to her. "The book was upside down."

Hermione giggled and nearly choked. "Oh my goodness. I don't think I've ever seen him that rattled." She frowned as they went through the door. Her mother followed after them.

Harry saw the frown. "Don't you read anything into that, young lady," he said firmly. He knew how Hermione's brain could quickly analyze any given situation. "Everything is fine...he had a dopey love sick look on his face," he assured her.

Hermione smiled and felt that secret smile on her face like a reflection of her mother's. She fancied he was thinking about the baby they would soon create, just as she had earlier, and thinking about their lives together.

"Hah, there it is plastered on your face, Hermione. You two have got it bad for each other," he said, laughing.

"How is Ginny? Are you sure it was safe for her to come down for the ceremony?" Hermione asked.

"Poppy said she's in excellent health and it's good for her to walk. Some women do a lot more strenuous things than attend a wedding the day after they've had a baby. She and Albus are settled in a lounge chair near the front row. She was really put out that she couldn't come and help you dress, but she doesn't want to put the baby down for anything. James seemed a bit jealous."

Hermione squeezed his arm. "It will take him some time to adjust to not being the center of his mother's attention." She could now see her father waiting at the entrance of the castle. Her mother passed by them and hurried to her husband. She gave him a quick kiss and headed down to the greenhouse. Time for chatting with her best friend was at an end. "I'm so glad the baby came yesterday," Hermione said.

"Why? Didn't it entirely complicate your plans?" he asked in confusion.

"It made Severus and I want a baby," Hermione said, that secret smile on her face once more.

"Really... so soon?" he asked.

Hermione gave him a smile and kissed his cheek, leaving his question unanswered.

"Thanks for the talk, Harry." She watched him slip past her father with a quick handshake and head down to catch up with and walk her mother the rest of the way to the greenhouse. She turned and found her father staring at her, open mouthed.

"Honey, look at you, you're beautiful!" Harris Granger said in admiration. He kissed her cheek and gallantly held out his arm.

They walked down the stone stairs and across the huge expanse of green lawn.

"Hermione, the last few days here in this world have been amazing. I can see now why it calls to you so much. I could see after a few weeks each summer you would get a faraway look. You never really left here did you?"

"No, you know I love you and Mum so much. You did a great job of raising me those first eleven years, and I love you all the more for letting me go when I was so young to come to this place so alien to you." She tightened her grip on his arm.

"Well, we knew we couldn't teach you how to harness the powers you had, and though we feared letting you go, we knew it was for the best. I can't say it wasn't hard for us. Your mother was taken to task by her friends for sending you away so young. She even lost a few over it as they had more modern ideas when it came to child-rearing. In my opinion, she is better off without friends who try to dictate how we raise our child," he said with an obstinate tilt to his chin. Nothing perturbed Harris more than to hear that he and Margaret had anything less than Hermione's best interests at heart. "But," he continued, "she gained others who believed boarding schools are the best place for studious children like you. I see now we were given this amazing gift, and we are looking forward to the coming years. I hope Headmistress McGonagall will allow us to come here more often if we prove ourselves worthy of the secrets we now hold dear."

"I'm sure she will. You're part of Hogwarts' family now. I hope to convince her to allow other parents to visit. Charms can be devised to keep this place a secret, but parents should know where their children go." They were coming closer to the greenhouse, and Hermione could hear the music playing. The walkway up to the greenhouse had been charmed and had flowers in rows leading to the door that now appeared to be like a chapel.

Mr. Granger took hold of the door handle and opened the door. Hermione swept into the small alcove, and he took his place again at her side.

Hermione smoothed the bodice of her dress down and ruffled the flowing material that fanned out at her hips. The dress had a scooped neckline and long sleeves that ended in a point over her hands, just like a Disney fairy princess. She adjusted the veil so it flowed back evenly. It was not normal Wizarding wedding attire, but she had opted to do the traditional non-magical wedding in a nod to her heritage, as well as her mother's desire. She and Severus had discussed it, and he was fine with her choices. She smirked; he didn't really care what she wore as long as they got married. He would have been happy with just a Wizard of the Peace. She knew, though, that he would appreciate the effort she had gone through to prepare herself for this event. She still hesitated to say beautiful, because even after all these years, she had never thought herself beautiful. But the way Severus always seemed to look at her as if she were the most beautiful woman alive warmed her heart, and for the first time in her life, she felt maybe she was beautiful.

Her dad distracted her from her thoughts. "Hermione, Severus is a lucky man." Her heart swelled at hearing Harris' words. He had no idea what she had been thinking, but to hear him put voice to her blossoming belief could not have come at a better time.

"I'm the lucky one, Dad. You have no idea how blessed I am to have won his love. He's a formidable wizard and loves so deeply. I only hope I'm worthy," she said nervously.

"You are, my dear Daughter. You will make an amazing wife. It doesn't take much to see he wears his heart on his sleeve for you. I saw a few pictures of him in Hogwarts: a History and that paper of yours from before you were a serious part of his life, and there was no life in him, only anger. Look at him now."

Hermione reached over and hugged her dad. "I'm glad there are others that can see what I do."

Luna appeared in the doorway. "A gift from Pomona," she said, handing Hermione a bouquet of shimmering, iridescent roses. "They are ready for you." Luna wore a long, pale pink sun dress with similar flare to Hermione's on the hem. Hermione had asked her to step into Ginny's place last night, and they had transfigured a dress for her. With the wreath of pink roses she was wearing on her head, Hermione thought she looked like pictures of the hippies from the 1970's that she had seen in primary school.

Hermione took a deep breath, ready to feast her eyes on Severus. It had been a long morning since waking up without him. She smiled. "Thank you, Luna." Then she turned to her dad and linked her arm in his. "Are you ready and willing?" she asked him with a grin.

"Am I willing? Yes. Am I ready to give my daughter away? No. But I am happy that you're so happy." He kissed his little girl's cheek. The music started, the doors swung open, and Luna headed forward. They watched as she proceeded slowly down the aisle to the front. Hermione's eyes took in the amazing room of flowers and living vines...it was a wonderful sight to behold...then they rested on Severus. He stood even straighter, and Hermione drank in the dress robes and his hair long and laying softly against his shoulders. His eyes lit with the love they both felt. She felt her father tug her arm gently, and she started to walk down the aisle. She felt rather than saw her friends around her. She felt the touch of her mother's hand as she passed the front row and tore her eyes away to give her mother a smile. She saw that Ginny was there in the front, dressed in her Matron of Honor robes with the baby cradled in her arms. She smiled and turned her eyes back on Severus to see he was stepping forward and reaching out to her.

When his hand took hers and she stepped away from her dad, the room ceased to exist; there was only Severus and his eyes...deep dark, comforting...safe.

"You look amazing, Hermione, absolutely, stunningly beautiful," he whispered. He drew her to his side.

"You look so handsome, Severus," she returned the compliment.

He smirked. "Harry tells me the same thing. I suppose if you two agree, then perhaps today, I am. I am marrying the love of my life."

Hermione glanced past Severus' shoulder and smiled at Harry, who winked back.

The Minister for Magic, Kingsley Shacklebolt, cleared his throat. Severus and Hermione turned to him.

"Wizards, Witches and family," Kingsley began, "we gather here together to celebrate the joining of two lives heart and soul. Hermione Jean Granger and Severus Tobias Snape have come here today to join their lives in a magical binding. Hermione's father and mother have joined us here. Do you release your daughter into this binding with Severus?" He looked to the couple in the front row.

Margaret had risen to join her husband so they were standing side by side right behind Hermione and said together, "We do." They both gave Hermione a kiss then took their seats.

Hermione handed her flowers off to Luna before turning to face Severus, and they give their attention to Kingsley.

The Minister spoke to the entire gathering, "I have known these two people for years, and they are both heroes to our world. It is my honor to join them in this happy bond that will last for many years to come. We ask that they be blessed with fine children. This ceremony will be a blending of traditions from both families, Magical and Non-Magical. The union of Harris and Margaret Granger has given our world a witch, Hermione, who has served her people with exemplary courage and grace. We all know the sacrifice and dedication Severus provided for our people. This union gives me great joy. Please, hold hands."

Severus and Hermione turned to each other, Severus' large hands encompassing her small ones. Neither could help the small sigh that escaped them at the other's touch.

"Hermione Jean Granger, do you take this man in Holy Matrimony, for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and health, till you travel to the great beyond?" Kingsley asked.

Hermione smiled, looking deeply into Severus' eyes. "I do," she said, squeezing his fingers tightly.

"Severus Tobias Snape, do you take this woman in Holy Matrimony, for better for worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and health, till you travel to the great beyond?" Kingsley directed his question to Severus this time.

Severus said, "Yes, I do." His eyes were full of love and hunger for her.

Hermione blushed and looked down slightly.

Kingsley cleared his throat. "Please take the rings," he said. Hermione turned and took the ring Luna offered her while Severus did the same with Harry.

"Hermione, please repeat after me: Severus, this ring is without beginning or end. Please take it as a symbol of my unending love for you." Hermione spoke the words requested in a clear voice. Kingsley asked Severus to speak the same words to Hermione. For once, the man struggled to be heard in a large crowd. Hermione heard him perfectly though and gave him the sweetest smile as he slid the ring onto her finger. Unable to help himself, Severus dipped suddenly and kissed Hermione deeply.

Kingsley and the guests laughed. "You may not kiss the Bride yet, Severus," the Minister for Magic reminded him.

Severus pulled back and turned to Kingsley with a small smirk. "Too late," he said. He looked again at Hermione still dipped in his arms. "I love you, wife," he said as he stood her upright again.

Hermione placed a hand on his cheek. "I love you, husband."

Kingsley said in his booming voice, "Now I will bond this witch and wizard to each other for a lifetime and beyond. Please, Severus and Hermione, face me. Severus, take Hermione's right arm and place yours along it." He produced a cord that gleamed like copper and gold woven into a fine braid. He wrapped it around their wrists and up their arms, binding them together. He took a golden pin and pricked their pointer fingers and collected a tiny drop of blood from each of them with his wand. They sparkled like rubies in the sun as they floated before them. He let the drops mingle, and they formed one drop. He held a small vial up, and the drop fell into the clear fluid, turning it blood red. He then poured the potion over the copper and gold threads. They shimmered and formed more small thin bands a couple of inches above Hermione and Severus' hands. He plucked the bands from the air and placed them on their fingers next to the non-magical bands. There was a flare of fire, and the bands became one. "It is done." Kingsley announced.

"Hermione and Severus, you are wed and bonded; you may kiss your bride, again."

Severus cupped Hermione's face in his hands and gently kissed her.

Hermione could see the tears glistening in his eyes. "You are a dear, precious man," she whispered for only him to hear.

"And you are the love of my life, forever and always," he whispered back to her.

At the kiss, the crowd roared and stood to their feet, clapping. The Magical guests raised their wands, and colored sparks flew toward the ceiling, crackling and putting on an amazing display of light. The flowers waved, emanating a sound of soft music. Fairies flew here and there, sending down glittering fairy dust. Severus and Hermione were grabbed and hugged and kissed as everyone wanted to congratulate them. It was chaos.

Feeling a warm hand on his arm, Severus looked to see Pomona smiling up at him with tears glittering in his eyes, and he took her in his arms, holding her close for a minute. "You did an amazing job with your flowers and the decorations. It's all stunning," he told her as he drew back. "Thank you, Mum."

She choked on her tears and patted his face, "Be happy, Sev." She then turned, heading away from the crowd. He smiled after her fondly, knowing she would retreat to some quiet corner and find comfort in her plants; she would come later to the party in the great hall.

Suddenly, he was engulfed in a hug by a mountain of a man and looked up to see Hagrid smiling down at him. "Unhand me, you oaf," he said with a growl, but he smiled warmly up at the huge half-giant. Hagrid laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. It nearly knocked him over, and he might have stumbled if Harry had not grabbed his arm to steady him.

"Careful there," Harry said. "Severus, I know you will take care of Hermione. I trust that you will visit us," he said, a mock warning tone to his voice.

"The invitation goes both ways, Harry," he told the younger man. "It is my hope that our children will grow up together and become fast friends. We wouldn't want to end the tradition of Potters, Weasleys and Granger-Snapes now would we." He gave the younger man a quick hug. "Your duty to me is at an end; go spend some time with your wife and new child."

Harry nodded suddenly overcome with emotion. "Thank you, sir. Thank you for everything."

Severus nodded, not trusting himself to speak. He felt Hermione's small fingers slip into his hand, and he closed his fingers around hers. He watched as she received a

hug from Harry and then he was off. He turned, slipping his arms about her and drawing her close. "How long do you think we must stay?" he asked.

She grinned. "At least four or five hours."

"What, that's impossible. I have wanted you since I left our bed this morning."

She blushed and looked to see if anyone was close enough to hear. Finding themselves alone for the moment, she said, "And I have wanted you. But really, we are adults; we can wait."

He groaned but threaded his fingers again with hers and turned as the Weasleys came up to congratulate them. Molly hugged them both, and Arthur kissed Hermione on the cheek and shook Severus' hand. "Be happy," she said, before dragging Arthur away.

Hermione blinked back tears. "That was kind of her," she said, hugging Severus arm. "I miss my friend."

Severus' hand covered the pocket that hid the letter. He saw that her eyes had followed his hand. Glancing around, he took her hand and drew her behind the trellis where they were married and through the concealed door into Pomona's living room.

"Hermione, I did not want to have you hurt today, but maybe..." He drew the envelope out.

"What is this?" she asked, staring at it.

"Harry spoke to Ron last week, I asked him to. He wrote you this letter. I have not looked at it." He held it out, his hand trembling slightly.

Hermione covered his hand with hers and kissed his knuckles. She then took the letter and opened it. She read aloud... much to Severus' relief.

"Dear Hermione, please forgive me. I treated you horribly. I was an absolute git. We were friends first, and should have never tried to go further. I know now it wasn't your scar, it was only an excuse to get away from feelings that didn't work. I hope you know what I mean. I can't explain it. Harry tells me that you and Snape are getting married. I am surprised on one hand and find it makes perfect sense on another. You always valued learning, and your happiness was a good book or a project of some intellectual pursuit.

I wish you a long, happy life with him. Maybe one day you will both allow me to visit. I do miss you, my friend. Love Ron."

Hermione was in tears by the time she finished, and the droplets fell onto the paper, which distorted the ink and caused it to run.

Severus face fell. "I'm sorry I shouldn't have..." Inwardly, he berated himself for causing her distress on this happiest of days.

Hermione looked up at him, sobbing, and cried, "No, Severus, this is a good thing." She let the letter drop to the floor and threw her arms around his neck. "Thank you, I can finally let it go. That tiny dark place in my heart that held all that hurt is now flooded with love, for you."

He pulled her against him and held her, feeling relief wash over him. "Hermione, please put on the pendant for me. I want you closer and since we can't..." He grinned.

She giggled while she pulled her bag open. Drawing the pendant out, Severus took it and placed it over her neck. As there was really no way to explain the innocuous piece of wood, and since it definitely did not go with her dress, he placed an invisibility charm on it. He really only needed to feel their connection through it to know it was there.

She felt a healing charm wash over her face, bringing her swollen red puffy eyes back to normal. She grabbed Severus' hand. "Let's join the party."

Thank you, Merrin, for your beta work. Your work is vital to mine being posted, and I appreciate it so much.

Thank you, Stronghermione, for your beta work, and for enhancing some of the wording as well as Britt Picking.

Becky, thanks for reading my work and for your kind comments.

Chapter 20

Chapter 20 of 20

Now a professor at Hogwarts, Hermione Granger begins to experience fierce migraines and voices in her head. What is causing these headaches or who?

Hermione and Severus returned to the gathering of friends and family. Hermione had retrieved the letter from the floor, and Severus had tucked it back in his pocket. He was relieved that the letter had helped Hermione say goodbye to old pain. He knew now that it was the right thing to do, having Harry contact Ron. He would always be grateful to the red-headed idiot for rejecting her. If he had not, he Severus wouldn't be here today.

The wedding party walked in a loud, laughing, talking group up to the castle and into the Great Hall. It was transformed into a wedding reception, a great mountain of a cake sitting on the stage. A table laden with food stood to one side of the room. There was a clearing for dancing in the center, and the walls were lined in sections with stuffed chairs and couches. It was a warm, comfortable gathering area for people to visit and mingle.

Fairy dust and bubbles fell from the ceiling, but faded before touching anyone or the floor, tall faux-stained white glass windows floated on both sides of the room, veils of iridescent shimmering fabric hung in the air, fluttering as though in a soft breeze you could not feel. It was magical.

They held back a moment till everyone had gone ahead of them, and then Hermione and Severus swept into the room hand in hand, and there was a round of cheering and clapping.

Music came from the bubbles around them; Severus swung Hermione into his arms and they danced. With the aide of the pendant connecting them, they moved as one. It was a faster dance, and they stepped, swinging here and there, her dress and his robes flying. Hermione could not take her eyes away from his. He bent to kiss her, his lips lingering as they slowed, and the tempo of the music left them swaying softly together, barely moving. Their kiss broke as Hermione's dad tapped Severus on the shoulder, and Severus sighed and turned his wife over to her father for their dance. He looked for Hermione's mother, and finding her, he bowed to her and took her hands. They

moved onto the dance floor with Hermione and her dad.

Margaret gushed, "Severus, the wedding was perfect. Your mother's magic with plants is amazing. I've never seen anything so wonderful. This place is truly one of a kind."

"Thank you. She worked hard with her plants. She has a magical touch that goes far above a normal Herbologist," Severus told her. He found himself a little uncomfortable with small talk and being this close to Hermione's mom.

"I've been afraid Hermione would never find a man who could look past her bookishness and love her for who she is," she explained to him.

He gave a curt laugh. "It's one of the things I admire most about her."

He felt Hermione slide through his thoughts; she was enjoying her dance with her dad, but she missed him. He sent his love back to her as Margaret continued to talk.

"I am so happy to be here. I am reluctant to go home," Margaret admitted.

will be welcome at any time."

The music came to an end, and Severus placed a kiss on her cheek. "You must come often; I am sure Minerva will be happy to have you visit. I will eventually become the headmaster here, and you and handed her back to her husband. He was going to take Hermione back into his arms when Harry stepped up with an expecting look on his face. Hermione shrugged her shoulders and pecked Severus on the lips. "Go find your mom, Poppy, and Minerva. They worked hard on this wedding and deserve a dance. I want to dance with Neville and visit with Ginny, too."

"After that, no more. You're mine for the evening," he told her.

"We will go to the table up front and deal with the cake shortly after. I'm famished." When she turned to dance a few feet away with Harry, Severus turned to the sidelines and spotted Pomona.

He hurried to her. "Care for a dance, Mom?" he asked.

"I'd like that," she blushed as he took her hands.

To Minerva and Poppy, who had been talking, he said, "Hang around here; I will be back for you next, Minerva, then Poppy."

He took Pomona out on the dance floor, and they danced a slow dance, talking about the wedding, her plants and also about his childhood.

Hermione swayed with Harry, remembering another dance they had had together out in the Forest of Dean. It was sort of like this, no Ron, but Hermione was grateful for the letter. "Thank you, Harry, for talking to Ron."

Harry said, "You know about that? I thought Severus was going to wait a few days. He didn't want you upset on your wedding day."

She smiled. "I spoke about Ron with regret, and he decided to share it with me. It makes me feel so much better. Like I found the missing piece of a puzzle. I've always loved him, Harry. It just wasn't that kind of love. We should have never tried to change our friendship. It was a train wreck."

"True." Harry laughed. "I'm happy it is getting back on track. I'm very glad you're happy, Hermione. You deserve this and so does he." He nodded toward Severus and Pomona, saying, "They seem like an odd pair."

"She gave him a lot of emotional support when he was young. She's really quite a wonderful woman when you get past her curtness. She's brilliant with plants, and plants are a huge part of potions. She taught him a lot when he was a kid. He needed her. Same for her."

A sadness crossed Harry's face. "I'm glad to know his life wasn't all bad. My dad..."

"Harry, he's put that in the past. He's let all that go. He really is quite fond of you, now," she told her friend.

"I am fond of him, too. Can you imagine that?" He blushed a deep shade of red.

Hermione smiled and caressed his cheek. "I'm so happy for all of us." The music came to an end. "Thank you for the dance, Harry. I'll come along in a little while to see Ginny. She's looking a bit bored over there on her couch. You best get over there."

Harry glanced at Ginny. "I'll go get her some food and a drink first." He kissed Hermione's cheek. "Be happy."

Hermione saw Severus take Pomona back to her chair; then he bowed and took Minerva's hand. She scanned the room for Neville. She also spotted her parents sitting with the Weasleys. *Arthur must be in seventh heaven.* They were deep in conversation, so she headed to where Luna and Neville had their heads together. When she got about ten feet away, Neville bent to kiss Luna, and they took each other's hands and wandered further away from her. Hermione smiled after them and decided to go talk to Ginny.

"Ginny," she said as she came close.

"Hermione! I'm so glad you came over. Harry won't let me get up. I'm feeling wonderful."

Hermione sat by her feet. "Oh, it feels good to be off my feet; these heels are killing me." She kicked one off, crossed her legs and reached down to rub her stocking-clad foot. "How's Albus?" She watched James run in and out of the nearby couches.

Ginny glowed with pride. "He's wonderful." She pulled the blanket away from his sleeping face.

Hermione peered at the tiny face. "He's beautiful, Ginny. I'm so glad I was there to see his birth." She glanced around them. "Severus and I decided to have a baby," she whispered.

"What! Oh, Hermione, that's wonderful. When?"

Hermione giggled. "Maybe last night!"

Ginny gasped. "Oh, my. You don't waste time. That's some news. Imagine Hermione Granger possibly pregnant at her wedding." She giggled now too.

"I know Severus' magic is fool proof, but it's hard to believe I could have a tiny life growing in my womb." She pressed a hand to her flat stomach.

"Believe it," Ginny said.

"Believe what?" Harry asked, coming with a plate and glass in hand. He handed the glass to Ginny, who drank deeply from the spring water.

"Thank you, Harry. I was dying of thirst," Ginny said. "Take the baby, Harry, while I eat." She carefully handed the baby to Harry, who'd forgotten his question, and Hermione saw Ginny wink at her. They visited for a while while Ginny ate."

Finally, Severus appeared at her side, and Hermione took the hand he offered, and he drew her to her feet. "I missed you." he said, slipping an arm about her waist, pulling her close.

"Ginevra, how are you and young Albus tonight?" Severus asked.

"Ginny, sir. You called me Ginny yesterday when I was birthing Albus," she told him.

Severus blushed, trying not to remember the intimate details of child birth. He nodded. "Ginny then, and you must call me Severus."

"He's adorable, Hermione," Ginny said.

"Yes, he is." Severus said, thinking she was talking about the baby.

Both girls giggled, and the men exchanged confused looks.

Severus said, "I hope you will excuse us. I am anxious to get this meal and cake thing over with so I can get Hermione to myself. It's been a long day."

Ginny nodded. "Come visit us when you come up for air." She giggled again.

Severus said, "I think your wife's had too much Champagne, Harry." He grinned. "We will, but don't expect to see us soon."

Hermione said, "We'll come say goodbye on our way out." She reached down to stroke the baby's hair and then allowed Severus to guide her toward the stage, the cake, and their meal.

The meal was a blur, but they both forced themselves to eat, as they hadn't had a meal since breakfast, and even then had eaten lightly. People came by to give them their best wishes, and Hermione's mother fussed over her, her dad giving marriage advice.

Hermione just grinned at the look on Severus' face.

Finally, they stepped up to the cake and allowed the photographer to take magical pictures. Hermione's dad had brought his camera and took photos, making sure that the backgrounds were out of focus so as not to show any identifiable landmarks.

The cake was cut, and they fed each other pieces of it. Finally, it was time to go.

Severus led Hermione over to say goodbye to her parents and Ginny and Harry. Little James was still running circles around their couches.

Margaret grabbed Hermione in a tight hug. "Be happy. Keep in touch. Thank you for sharing this all with us." She turned and grabbed Severus in a strong hug. "Take care of my girl."

Severus said, "I will, Margaret. I'm very glad you were able to come here as well." He turned to shake Daniel's hand and said, "I will take care of your Princess." He grinned at the older man.

Daniel said, "See that you do, Severus, or you'll answer to me." He grinned as he said it, though Severus could see that he was serious by the hard glint of his eyes.

Severus drew Hermione to his side. "You have my promise, sir." He drew Hermione away from her parents. Their many friends and family stopped to watch as they neared the Great Hall door. Well wishes and waves followed them out the door. Severus grabbed Hermione's hand, and they ran down the hall toward their quarters. But once down in the hall close to their rooms, Severus drew her to the secret hall and the special room he had there. As they came to the door, Severus bent and picked Hermione up, and the door opened. He carried her over the threshold and into the room. The door closed behind them. Hermione gasped as she took in the room. The decoration had changed. The room was decked out in white and gold. White drapes on the bed decorated in a gold key design. The bed spread matched. An overstuffed couch and chair set off a living area with a white marble fireplace. A fire burned there. The mantle had gold vases filled with white roses. White candles in gold glass and metal glittered from every flat surface.

"Oh, Severus, it's wonderful." She ran to the bathroom and found it was all white and gold as well. The tub was already steaming. Severus had removed his robes and waist coat and had followed her. He now came behind her, and she felt him begin to work on the buttons of her dress. His lips pressed softly against her shoulder. "Is this a payoff for all the times you've had to unbutton all of my buttons?"

Hermione turned around, her hands snaking over his shoulders to entwine behind his neck. "I quite enjoy undoing those buttons. It makes unwrapping the wonderful gift that you are so much more fun." She pulled him down till their lips met, and her tongue slid against his lips. He opened his mouth to join his explorations with hers.

"Hummm." He groaned with pleasure. He put his hands around her back and continued to undo the buttons. Her fingers were working on the buttons on his button-down white shirt.

"I'm glad we decided to stay here. They all think we are gone, but we will just stay hidden. A vacation in a tropical setting or a mountain setting is not what I need. I just need you, Severus." She teased his lip by nipping at it.

Severus pulled her dress down over her shoulders, and it slid to the floor. "Hermione, you're beautiful." She wore a white lace teddy under the dress.

Hermione pushed Severus' shirt off, and slowly their clothing made a pile on the floor.

Severus took her hand, helping her down into the huge tub before following her. He drew her to him, and they sighed as bare flesh pressed against bare flesh. Their hands explored, their lips tasted, and they took their time exploring each other. Groans of pleasure and sighs of contentment echoed off the walls of the bath. After some time passed, they dried off, and Severus carried Hermione to the bed where they made love again.

Later, Hermione was propped up against pillows, in a half sitting position, and Severus lay in the bed, his head resting against her breasts and his fingers making slow soft circles around her abdomen. "I'm so blessed that you are my wife. The baby we created or will create is another impossible dream."

Hermione smiled and caressed his hair. "Our both wanting a baby is a dream come true."

He looked up and she kissed him. He crawled up to the pillows and drew her against him so she could rest against his shoulder. They just held each other until sleep took them.

The next days, they woke each morning to a table set with wonderful food and hot coffee. They spent the days lounging in bed, talking, making love, and reading. At night when the castle was sleeping, they walked along the Black Lake, to stretch their legs and get fresh air. They spent some time discussing potions and formulating ideas for improving some existing potions. They sat and played chess, Severus teaching Hermione in a way that finally she was able to appreciate the game. With the use of the pendant, she finally got the game.

Sometimes Hermione wore the pendant as they made love and other times not. One night they found a thick white fleece before the fireplace and made love there. By the end of the week, they were rested, happy and ready to reenter their lives.

The first thing they did was go see Poppy. She would be able to confirm the baby's existence, though Severus was sure of his potion.

They wanted to be sure before telling anyone.

Severus and Hermione entered the infirmary and found Poppy inventorying her stores.

"Hermione, Severus, you're back. Are you okay?" She dusted her hands off on her apron.

Severus said, "We are wonderful. We have a favor to ask."

Hermione clutched Severus hand; she had this fear that something had happened and the potion hadn't worked. She knew it was illogical, but she was nervous about finding out for sure.

"Of course, do you want to come into my parlor for some tea and tell me what you need?" She indicated the door down the right side of the room.

"It might be better out here. We need a diagnosis," Severus explained.

"Which one of you?" She looked back and forth between them, trying to see if one of them showed signs of ill health.

Severus gave her a slight smile. "Hermione," he said.

Poppy watched Hermione slide a nervous hand across her abdomen, and it suddenly dawned on her.

"Well, this is a surprise and quite soon," she said. "Hope up on this bed, Hermione."

Severus said, "It was planned, and I gave her a potion to increase the likelihood, during her fertile period."

"Well then, this should be only a formality," Poppy said with conviction. "Hermione, just lay back and relax. I'm going to pull your t-shirt up and expose your abdomen, and when I say the spell, a light will appear over your womb. Do you know the rune for a boy and for a girl?"

"Yes," Hermione said, clutching Severus' hand.

"Good, I thought you might." She drew her wand from her robe and held it over Hermione's stomach. "You ready?"

"Yes." Hermione took a deep breath and held it.

"Breathe normally, Hermione," Poppy instructed.

Hermione willed herself to relax, though she could feel her heart beating with excitement.

Poppy chanted her spell, and the light appeared, the symbol in the middle of a circle was blurry beyond their ability to decipher, and then it clarified like a lens focusing on a camera.

"A girl," they both whispered, stunned. Then Hermione shouted, "I'm going to have a baby!"

Severus swept her up in his arms, pinning her against him, and she slipped down his body to stand on her own feet as they kissed.

Poppy smiled as she watched the newly married couple continue to kiss, obviously happy over their impending child. Snape and Hermione Granger-Snape were going to have a baby. There hadn't been a headmaster with a child in many, many years. It would bring new life to the old castle. Life about the castle was going to change. And change was a good thing.

Merrin, thank you for you beta skills. Your help has been much appreciated.