

# On Greenstone Lake

*by Somigliana*

Unspeakable Granger goes on a field trip and discovers more than she bargained for.  
A Valentine's Story.

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*Chapter 1 of 1*

Unspeakable Granger goes on a field trip and discovers more than she bargained for. A Valentine's Story.

*Preface*

*Sunday 13th February 2005*

*Taupo, New Zealand*

"Unspeakable Snape, formerly from your own country, I believe," said the large, Maori wizard.

Snape stood in the doorway, backlit by golden light. His hair was shorter than it had been, falling in sable strands over his eyes. He looked bigger...taller, broader, stronger...and he seemed to have more vitality and grace than she'd seen him display before. He didn't look surprised to see her; she was the one who was bunny-eyed in the headlights.

He smiled at her...the bastard dared to smile at her...and he walked smoothly across the restaurant to join them.

"Granger! Lovely to see you again," he said, smiling like she was an old acquaintance whom he was delighted to see.

Hermione managed a grimace of a smile. "Lovely, yes."

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*Ten days earlier*

*The Leaky Cauldron, London*

Hermione took a sip of her tea while Ginny dug into her second helping of Jam Roly-Poly with lashings of custard.

"Merlin," Ginny said between bites, "I love this eating for two thing." She belched delicately behind her hand and rubbed her pregnant belly.

Hermione hid her amused smile behind the rim of her teacup.

"I need to buy some new robes soon...these are getting tight." Ginny pulled at the side seam and grimaced. "Harry and I thought we were having two because I was growing so quickly, but the Healer says there's only James in there."

Hermione chuckled. "Well, I'll go with you to Madam Malkin's on Saturday if you like...I've got to get some new work robes made up."

Ginny eyed Hermione's high-necked, indigo robes. "Well, they're better than those horrid chartreuse robes you used to wear over at B&B."

B&B was the Ministry in-house vernacular for the Department of Magical Creatures and was short for 'Beings and Beasts.'

Hermione made a gagging noise. "I know. I'm lucky I didn't choose to move to the MLE. They've just implemented mauve robes with *lavender* inserts for the Wizengamot aides. Shame, I felt so bad...Gawain looked so disappointed when I told him that I was moving down to the Department of Mysteries."

Ginny laughed merrily and dragged her spoon around the edge of her dish to gather up the last clings of custard. "So how is your new job going?" she asked curiously.

"It's--" Hermione made a strangled, gargling noise when her throat constricted. She closed her watering eyes and cleared her mind of the words that she'd been planning on saying. The sensation of being throttled eased.

She gave Ginny a pained smile. "Unspeakable."

Ginny snickered appreciatively. "Confidentiality Charm, huh?"

Hermione gave Ginny another pained smile. "I can't talk about anything pertaining to work without having my oxygen cut off," she said, wiping her eyes.

Ginny smirked slightly. "I'm sure everybody is just devastated, luv."

Hermione made a little snorting noise of mock protest. Ginny was right, though...Harry and Ron had barely suppressed their glee that she'd moved from Magical Creatures down to Level Nine and was now unable to tell them all about her latest bit of legislation or research.

Ginny eyed her empty pudding bowl mournfully. "I heard that Blaise Zabini is an Unspeakable, too. Is he still so arrogant and full of himself?"

Hermione snorted. "Unspeakably so," she said dryly.

"Well, at least there's eye-candy at elevenses," Ginny said brightly, waggling her eyebrows and making pouty, kissy expressions with her lips.

"Yes, but that hardly makes up for that fact that he--" Hermione coughed and spluttered again. "Oh, for the bloody love of Merlin," she said, sighing.

"You'll get used to it eventually, I suppose." Ginny grinned. "Lucky you don't talk in your sleep, eh?"

"Small mercies," Hermione said sourly.

A synchronous scraping of chairs against the wooden floor had Hermione checking her watch. A large number of Ministry workers chose to eat at the Leaky Cauldron instead of the Ministry cafeteria, and it was a mass exodus back to the Ministry after lunch hour.

"Well I'd best get to it, Gin," she said as she deposited a handful of Sickles onto the table and stood up, gathering an armful of mostly-invisible files from the table.

Ginny stood and gave Hermione a big hug over her large and expectant tummy. "Don't forget the Anniversary planning meeting tomorrow night at our house."

Hermione pulled a face. "It's that time of the year already?"

Ginny laughed and nodded. "Seven years already, can you believe?"

"Who are we doing this year?" she asked, pulling on her heavy cloak and fastening the silver clasps one-handed.

"Snape."

Hermione scowled.

Ginny sighed. "Well, we've already done all of the Fallen," she said. "And you know how Harry feels about Snape."

Hermione snorted derisively. "He won't come to the celebrations, you know."

Ginny shrugged. "I doubt it as well. Harry doesn't even know where he is, but he's still adamant about honouring him anyway."

Hermione sighed. "I'll see you then," she relented.

As she stepped back into the brisk February cold, she muttered, "Snape. Bloody bastard."

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*Later that afternoon.*

*The Ministry of Magic, Level Nine, Department of Mysteries*

The intercom coughed importantly. "Meeting in the conference room in five minutes!"

Hermione glanced up from her work and took off her Runescopes, then rubbed her eyes. Arithmantic analysis wasn't exceptionally exciting work, but she was just starting out in the department and couldn't expect to jump right into the high-level mysteries. At least she wasn't cataloguing prophecies, she thought.

She gathered a blank roll of parchment and a quill to take notes with, and she joined the flow of Unspeakables heading towards the conference room.

*Circe on a stick! The lot from the Chamber of Love reek of Amortentia* She wrinkled her nose and took a seat on the opposite side of the room. The Lovers were a giggly lot anyway and far too inclined to cop a pinch.

Blaise Zabini sauntered in and pulled out the chair next to her. "Granger," he drawled as he slouched elegantly in his chair, crossing his long legs at the ankles.

"Zabini," she said curtly.

He smirked and rotated his heavy, silver Slytherin alumni ring indolently. "You're all cross-eyed, Granger," he said, sounding idly amused.

"And you reek of Preserving Potion," she returned waspishly.

He scowled at her but sniffed his sleeve circumspectly when he thought she'd glanced away.

"All right, all right, settle down." Their Department Head, Kermit Croaker, clapped his hands and waited for his diverse bunch of Unspeakables to quieten down and pay attention. Hermione was used to his bald head and bulging eyes now, but the first time she'd seen him, she'd struggled not to smile...he truly did look like Kermit the Frog.

Hermione picked up her quill and unrolled her parchment. She ignored Blaise's snide little snicker.

Croaker...trailing cobwebs from one of his sleeves...flicked his wand, and a large, luminescent model of Earth hovered in midair, spinning slowly on its imaginary axis. Instead of the traditional lines of latitude and longitude, shimmering stripes criss-crossed the globe in a complex network of diamonds. Where the lines crossed and coalesced, bright spots pulsed, some more quickly and intensely than others. There was a mixed reaction from the department...some brightened and even rubbed their hands, others slouched in their chairs and sighed or scowled intermittently.

Hermione leaned forward in her chair, elbows on the conference table. *Wow. That is beautiful. What on Earth is that?*

"As you might have guessed, it's time for Vortex measurements again, crew."

Hermione tried not to look too blank or bemused...she hated looking uninformed or unknowledgeable about something. It was rather difficult to do when working for a department that dealt in mysteries she'd never studied or heard of before. She'd have to go and look it up in the Unspeakable Archive.

"For the newbies," Croaker glanced at Hermione first, then two other recruits, "magical Ley Lines transmit and receive magical energy around the globe between the Vortices." He gestured with his wand at the pulsing concentrations of light scattered around the globe.

*Oh, of course!* Even Muggles pondered the mystery of Ley Lines, although they ascribed them to electric or magnetic energy, and the Vortex sites were called geophysical anomalies in some scientific circles.

"Once a year we measure the magical properties of each Vortex with a wide range of sensors. The data is then analysed and compared with historical data once you're back on London." He raised his eyebrows. "Any questions?"

*Only about a million!*

"I still don't understand why we have to schlep halfway around the world," one of the Love Room lot complained. "I miss Valentine's Day every year, and the wife gets grumpy."

Croaker looked displeased. "While it is true that we have an agreement with the European nations for data sharing, we do not have quite the same relationship with all the nations," he said pointedly. "And we do not want a repeat of 1953, when Kiev fabricated their results and sent almost every Ministry into a flat spin."

Hermione made a mental note to look that up; it sounded like quite an interesting scandal.

"It has been decided that it is best to take measurements as part of an international team at each site," Croaker said. "Think of it as your contribution to International Cooperation."

The wizard muttered in grudging agreement.

Hermione raised her hand, and Blaise snickered again.

"Yes, Granger?"

"Why are we measuring the magical energy in February, sir? Why not at Beltane or Samhain or such?" she asked.

Croaker nodded. "Good question, Granger. While it is true that magical energy flows more rapidly then, we are more interested in the baseline level when the Ley Lines and Vortices are quiescent. There is too much magical interference and variability at the Sabbats for any reliable measurement to be made then.

"Right. If there are no further questions, here are your assignments. As always, allocations have been made randomly. Make your travel arrangements with Marge at Transport, and don't forget to collect and hand in receipts for any other expenses when you get back." He gave one or two of his brood a sharp look. "No massages this time around, if you please."

Hermione put her hand over her mouth and tried not to giggle.

Croaker tapped a pile of parchment with his wand, and each page fluttered through the air to an Unspeakable.

Hermione unfolded hers eagerly.

*Unspeakable Granger.*

*Elemental Vortex...Water: Lake Rotopounamu, North Island, New Zealand*

She forgot her annoyance at Blaise and turned to him. "What did you get, then?" she asked, grinning.

Blaise smirked, sloe eyes narrowed and sleepy. "The Fire Vortex in Hawaii," he said smugly.

"Oh, you lucky bastard. Hawaii!" exclaimed somebody from across the table. "I'll trade you Ayers Rock?"

"Not on your life," Blaise said, folding his piece of parchment meticulously and tucking it away in his pocket.

Complaints and offers for trading buzzed around the room.

"I'll give you Egypt for Sedona."

"Here, Ardour, I got Stonehenge...if we swap you can please the wife and be home for dinner."

"The bloody Bermuda Triangle. Honestly! That's twice in five years!"

Croaker clapped his hands. The globe disappeared, and he crossed his arms over his chest. "No trading. I want to see you all on your original assignments. Instructions for each location will be in your pigeon hole by tomorrow. Enjoy your field trips, people."

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*The following evening*

*Potter residence*

*Godric's Hollow*

"Hermione?"

"Oy, Hermione! Are you even listening?" Harry sounded exasperated.

Hermione snapped out of her daydream...warm summery sunshine on rolling, green hills littered with sheep...and turned to Harry with a quizzical expression.

"What did you say?" she asked.

Lavender...who sat on the floor, leaning back against Ron's legs...tittered. "I don't think she was listening, Harry," she said.

Hermione resisted the urge to snap at Lav-Lav...remembering the promise she'd made to Ron in the pursuit of peace...and shrugged. "Sorry, Harry," she said. "What were you saying?"

Harry ran his hand through his hair. "I asked if you wanted to give a speech as well."

Hermione shook her head. "No," she said shortly.

Ron leaned forwards over Lavender's shoulder and scooped up a chipful of guacamole. "Not still pissed at Snape, are you?"

Hermione's lips thinned, and she crossed her arms defensively.

"You are!" he crowed through a mouthful of green avocado.

"Ew, Ron!" chorused Lavender, Ginny and Hermione.

Hermione couldn't help but chuckle.

Ron shrugged nonchalantly and leaned forward to snag another handful of chips.

Harry sighed. "No then?" he asked, looking at his list mournfully. "What about you, Nev?"

Neville laughed loudly. "You're kidding, right? I kill the snake that almost bloody murders him, and you know what the wanker says to me?" Neville sat upright and coughed, then launched into his best Snide-Snape imitation, "Well, it's just as well you used the sword, Mr. Longbottom, appalling as your wand work is."

Although they'd heard the story many times over the years, they all cracked up laughing.

"Ron!" Lavender moaned. "You're getting chips in my hair, luv."

Hermione thought that she'd made quite a good getaway, all things considered.

Harry put his list down next to his chair and gave up on getting volunteers to give glowing Snape speeches for the moment.

"So we're all going to the Ministry's Valentine Ball, yes?" Ginny asked.

"Of course," cooed Lavender, giving Ron a doe-eyed look.

Neville nodded. "Yup."

"Are you taking that Russian woman from B&B?" Lavender asked, a drop of acid etching her sugary sweet tone.

"She's Albanian, and yes, I'm taking her," he said mildly.

*Ah. Lav-Lav is still sour that Neville broke it off with Hannah.*

Ron snorted. "No offence, mate, but she's a right ice-queen, that one. All the Aurors think so."

*Oh, Merlin. Tactless.* Hermione decided to rescue Neville, who had gone bright red and looked like he was formulating a suitable reply in his mind.

"I'm not going," she said.

"What?" chorused the entire room (except Neville, who expelled a deep breath and shot Ron a dirty look).

"Don't you have anybody to ask?" Lavender asked sweetly, adding another drop of acid. "Yesterday at the cafeteria, I heard Blaise telling Theo that he wouldn't mind having a go in the prophecy stacks with you. I'm sure he'd love to go to the ball with you."

Hermione gave Lavender a fake smile. "I wouldn't ask Zabini, no. He shags anything with a pulse."

Lavender's smile faded a bit; everybody knew she'd had a good go with Zabini after Ron had dumped her in sixth-year.

"I won't be here," she said. "I'm going to--" She coughed, feeling the Confidentiality Charm threatening her words. "I've got a work thing."

"What work thing?" Ron asked.

She smiled at him...her most saccharine smile. "It's Unspeakable."

Hermione found herself being pelted with chips and peanuts from all directions.

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*Sunday 13th February 2005*

*Taupo, New Zealand*

Hermione checked into her room at the hotel on the northern shores of the picturesque Lake Taupo. She had arrived via a direct Portkey to the specially appointed Magical's Arrival lounge. The owner of the hotel was a wizard, and although he catered primarily for Muggles, he loved to show off for wizarding tourists. Apparently the New Zealand Ministry had paid a good number of Galleons for him to shut the entire hotel for the next two days so that they wouldn't have to be concerned about the Statute.

Hermione stood on her balcony after changing into a smart pair of Muggle trousers for dinner. It was so beautiful here...hot mineral streams and fresh, cool lake waters mingled, producing a magical mist that hovered over the lake in the sultry twilight.

A while later, Hermione hovered at the entrance to the restaurant. A row of wizards sat at the bar, talking in a low baritone rumble. A witch and a wizard sat in low armchairs near the unlit fireplace, sipping wine and, if their body language suggested anything, flirting up a storm. A solitary silhouette was smoking on the deck, enjoying the dusk.

A tall, powerfully built wizard slid from a barstool and approached her, smiling broadly. As he neared, she saw that his face was tattooed in an intricate design; bold, dark lines of ink curved and twisted in graceful arcs and spirals.

"You must be Unspeakable Granger!" He thrust out a large hand. "I am Tane Kani--"

She took his hand and smiled. "New Zealand's Minister of Magic," she supplied. "It's a pleasure to meet you, sir."

"Welcome to New Zealand, Granger." He gestured towards the bar. "Come and meet the rest of the crowd and get yourself a drink. Shrug off that stiff upper British lip, eh?" He laughed loudly.

"This is Unspeakable Granger from London," he announced to the room.

He gestured to the wizards at the bar who had turned to face her. "Unspeakables Lukyanenko from Moscow and Chang from Beijing."

The Russian was short and swarthy with thick, dark eyebrows hooded over even darker eyes. He raised his shot glass of clear liquor and grunted slightly. Chang was even slighter and reed thin with a receding hairline. He gave Hermione a thin-lipped smile.

He turned towards the duo, who had ceased their murmuring and were watching her with curious eyes. "Ambrose from Washington, DC." He gestured to the Lockhart lookalike, who gave Hermione a smile that would have had her mother swooning. "And the Unspeakably beautiful Santos from Brasilia." The exotic woman smiled, but her gaze narrowed at Kani as soon as he turned to gesture towards the deck.

"And out on the deck is our own man from Auckland." The shadow flicked his cigarette into the bushes and stepped into the room. "Unspeakable Snape, formerly of your own country, I believe."

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*14th February 2005*

*Taupo, New Zealand*

Hermione was still in a snit when she woke up the next morning.

Throughout dinner, Snape had been unspeakably sarcastic and snide to her. All in a subtly stinging murmur from the seat he'd snagged to her left.

She tugged on her jeans, muttering to herself. What had started out as a delightful trip to a part of the world she'd been longing to see had degenerated into a nightmare.

Over entrees, he'd given her a sidelong smirk and said, "Well, well, Unspeakable Granger. They should have made you Unspeakable at school. It would have saved us all a lot of trouble."

Under his acidic assault, her exquisite wine had turned vinegar on her tongue, and her food had tasted like sawdust.

And then as they were perusing the dessert menu, he'd smirked at her and said, "Well, either the Ministry thought you'd do brilliantly well as an Unspeakable, or you annoyed the living shit out of Gawain Robards and the Wizengamot and they didn't want you in the MLE. Ten Sickles on the latter."

It didn't occur to Hermione that Severus Snape must have been keeping tabs on her career.

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*Later that morning*

*Lake Rotopounamu, New Zealand*

The Vortex was located beneath the serene, dark green lake, which nestled on the side of Mt Pihanga. Also known as the Greenstone Lake, Lake Rotopounamu took its name from the word Pounamu, which was Maori for Greenstone.

Hermione sat in a deck chair on the edge of the lake and wrote down the next reading from the Enchantoscope. The measurement of the Vortex's output had proved to be spectacularly boring after she'd initially cast the probe into the lake like a fisherman...she just had to write down the numbers and runes from the display box each half an hour.

Ambrose and Santos had set up their monitoring station across the lake, and Hermione was very pleased not to have to watch their nauseating mating display. Especially since it was Valentine's Day, and she was alone, and she hadn't received any Valentine's cards, and she had to put up with Severus Snape for twenty-four more arduous hours.

Hermione closed her eyes and tried to relax. The sun was pleasantly warm, and she could hear birds twittering in the pristine native forest that surrounded the lake.

"Tut, tut. Sleeping on the job, Granger?" Snape drawled. "That is rather uncharacteristic, or have you become lazy since Hogwarts?"

"Bugger off, Snape," she said without bothering to open her eyes.

"Now that is spectacularly rude and unfriendly," he said mildly.

She opened her eyes to witness him setting up a monitoring station right next to her. "Well, you were never very polite or friendly to me," she pointed out, scowling at his deckchair and instrumentation. "Can't you bloody well do your measurements somewhere else?"

*As far away from me as possible.*

"As host Unspeakable I have to spend at least an hour with each member of the team," he said with a supercilious smile.

"Joy," she said sarcastically, and she closed her eyes again and tried to ignore him.

She heard the swish-splash as he cast his Enchantoscope into the water and then a creak as he settled into his chair.

She lay for at least ten minutes in excruciatingly uncomfortable silence. Snape started humming to himself in a low, appealing baritone. She opened her eyes and glared at him. He sat with a smile on his face, sunglasses pushed back into his short, black hair, filling in a crossword puzzle.

"Do you mind?" she asked sharply.

He looked up at her, both eyebrows raised in what she was sure was a mock expression of surprise. "What is it, Granger?" he asked.

"Nothing," she snapped, and she crossed her arms crossly, inexplicably annoyed and aggravated and put out.

Snape put his quill and paper down next to his chair. "Do you wish to talk about it?" he asked.

"Talk about what?" she asked sullenly.

"Why you're being an utter bitch?" he said bluntly.

Hermione sat up straight in her chair, incensed. "I didn't start it. Granger should have been Unspeakable at school, Granger wasn't wanted by the MLE, I should have taken fucking bets on Granger." She sank back into her chair, bottom lip extended in a pout.

Snape, instead of hitting back with some spiteful, hurtful retort, laughed out loud. His laughter was deep and beautifully rich, but she was in no mood to appreciate it.

"It's not funny," she complained in a sulky tone.

That set him off laughing again, throwing his head back and laughing so that his frown lines disappeared and he looked ten years younger.

"What?" she asked, still sulky.

"You're even easier to annoy than Minerva was," he said, still chuckling. "I'm rude to everybody, Granger," he said, shaking his head.

She sniffed and picked up her quill to record the next measurement.

"Oh, lighten up, Granger," he said. "How is Potter?"

Her mouth opened, and she stared at him for a moment, speechless. She shook her head and huffed through her nose. "What do you care?"

Snape shrugged elegantly. "Curious," he drawled.

Hermione crossed her arms again. "Ginny's having a baby soon."

"Oh, joy, another Potter graces the world with his presence," Snape said sardonically.

Hermione's nostrils flared, and she picked up her notepad and threw it at him with an inarticulate cry of rage.

Snape dodged the notepad, laughing again. "Tell him I say congratulations, Granger." He tossed her notepad back next to her chair. "Croaker wouldn't be pleased if you lost that."

"Hmmpf."

Snape recorded his own measurement on his notepad and then shifted his chair to face Hermione. "Out with it, then," he said.

"What?"

"Obviously, your resentment stems from something more than a few amusing barbs last night." He raised his eyebrows. "Well, spit it out."

Hermione scowled at him and pressed her lips together for a moment before she exhaled noisily and turned to face him. Her nostrils flared as years of pent-up resentment spilled up from her heart.

"I was the one who figured out that you weren't dead, and I was the one who called Madam Pomfrey, and I was the one who helped her to fix you, and I was the one who fetched you tea and books and whatever the bloody hell you wanted, and I was the one who put up with all your fucking insults when you were grumpy and nasty because I thought you were recovering and deserved a little slack, and I was the one who planned a get-well party for you!"

Bright red in the face now, she took a deep breath and continued shrilly, "And then you didn't show up for that party, and you disappeared for more than six years, and you didn't send me even an owl, and then I came here, and you were a *bastard* to me last night and now here you are, and you *sit* there and *laugh* at me!"

His eyes were wide and dark, and his face was a mask...blank and unreadable. For a long, silent moment, she held her jaw tight, but she felt it wobbling. Her vision swam, and she dropped her head. Warm tears flowed freely down her hot cheeks and dribbled down her neck.

After what seemed like an eternity of misery, an elegant hand with long fingers took hers, and Snape knelt in front of her chair. "Oh, Hermione," he murmured. He moved his other hand to stroke hers from wrist to fingertip, and then he lifted it to stroke a tear from her jaw line. He put a finger under her chin and lifted it so that she was forced to look into concerned eyes. "I didn't realise."

He stared at her for a long while tears flowed freely down her cheeks. He seemed to be making a decision, weighing words in his mind, formulating that which should have been said years ago.

"I am sorry," he said, and then he licked his lips...an uncharacteristically nervous gesture. "I... I was not then ready to face such an event, you must understand," he said quietly. "You were a friend to me when I needed one most, when I felt I deserved no friend, and I did nothing to return that warmth of heart. You have my most sincere apologies."

Another tear welled over her eyelashes and streaked down her cheek. He tucked a wayward strand of her hair behind her ear. He was so close she could smell his cologne, the same he had worn six years ago. Caught in his serious gaze and his regard and her astonishment at his sudden confession, she could scarcely breathe as she remembered how her heart had *ached* when he'd left without word, how her fragile dreams had shattered like glass.

"You hurt me," she said in a strangled voice.

"I know," he said, and she could see the pain that her words gave him darken his eyes. "Allow me to make it up to you," he whispered.

She stared at him, unable to speak through the unbearable ache in her chest and her throat, and then his wristwatch beeped loudly, making her jump.

"Bugger," he muttered. "I have to go," he said regretfully. He brushed her cheek with the back of his fingertips and pulled back from her.

She watched him pack up in silence, her heart unbearably full and hopeful.

"I'll see you this evening, Hermione," he said, smiling crookedly.

He left her sitting in her deckchair on the edge of the Greenstone Lake, sniffing and repeating his beautiful words in her mind.

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*That evening.*

*Taupo, New Zealand*

Tane Kani joined the Unspeakables for dinner again that evening, toasting international cooperation and extolling the beauty and magnificence of the Water Element Vortex.

Lukyanenko pressed icy clear shots of vodka on everybody. "Za Vas!" he said loudly to each as they downed the shot, and then he grinned and bellowed, "Za družbu myezhdu narodami!" He was a lot more cheerful now that the work was done, Hermione reflected.

Hermione was overly aware of Severus' presence throughout pre-dinner drinks and then while they ate. She felt uncharacteristically shy, and she felt her cheeks warm

when he touched her elbow lightly with long fingers or when he smiled as he offered to fill her wine glass.

When the last serviette was tossed, crumpled, onto the table and there was a synchronous sigh of satisfaction for a delicious meal, the owner of the hotel cleared several tables to the side of the dining room with a sweep of his wand. A sultry swell of music filled the night, and the lights dimmed to a soft rose.

Ambrose stood and offered his hand to Santos, and they swept onto the dance floor. Hermione fidgeted with her bracelet and cleared her throat nervously.

"Hermione?" Severus' smooth voice caressed her senses as he took her hand. Instead of leading her onto the dance floor, though, he led her outside onto the deck. The setting sun gilded the surface of the gently rippling lake, and a candyfloss mist had begun to gather in the distance.

Severus didn't let go of her hand as they stood on the deck and looked out over the lake.

"I wish to show you something, if you would permit?" he asks.

Hermione nodded.

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*Later that evening.*

*Raglan, New Zealand*

Severus squeezed her hand gently as she blinked her eyes after the tight squeeze of Apparition. A completely different set of scents and sounds surrounded them: a salty tang on the breeze and the soft rush of the ocean.

"Where are we?" she asked, gazing out towards the horizon where the sun had dropped halfway below the sea already. Its warm light seemed to ooze into the ocean like watercolour paint. Behind them, tall green hills rose sharply to ring the beach. The beach was empty, but there were several surfers in the ocean, taking advantage of the lingering light.

"Raglan, on the west coast of the North Island," he told her. "My home is close to this beach. I like living near the ocean."

She turned to him and smiled...that was perhaps the most personal thing he'd ever shared with her, and although it was a simple statement, it touched her heart.

"It's beautiful," she said softly.

His thumb rubbed the length of hers as they stood watching the sun slide liquidly away. Just as it dropped and relinquished the land to night, a bead of emerald hovered on the horizon momentarily, and then it disappeared as quickly as it had appeared.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "Did you see that?"

"I did for the first time in six years," he said. He turned his head and smiled at her. "There is a legend that says that a person who has seen the green flash can see closely into their heart and that they are incapable of being deceived in matters of sentiment."

Hermione felt a flutter in her stomach. Severus' thumb moved to trace her palm gently. "Do... you believe it? The legend?" she asked, unable to shift her eyes from his, caught in their depth and soul.

"I believe that I can no longer deceive myself," he said, and he lifted her hand to his lips, pressing a soft kiss to her inner wrist where her pulse beat rapidly. "Six years ago you gave me so much when I thought I was done. Attaining one's life goal was rather less exciting than I'd imagined." He chuckled softly. "I needed time to grieve for everything and everybody, and so I left."

Hermione lifted her hand to his cheek. "I think I understand that now." She'd been bitter and angry at him for a long time, but it had all shifted into perspective now. She closed her eyes for a moment and examined her soul, listened to her heart. "I had a lot of growing up to do. I don't think I'd have been ready for this." Her thumb traced the plane of his cheekbone. He half-closed his eyes in enjoyment.

"Are you ready now?" he asked.

She slid her hand through his short hair to the nape of his neck, and urging him gently to drop his head, she gave her answer, rising on her toes to press her lips to his. He slid both of his arms around her and returned her kiss eagerly.

"Ah, that you had always been so eloquent," he said. His voice was somewhat breathless and deliciously husky. The warm tone of his voice resonated with the strings of her heart, and finally she understood that his sly and snide comments of the past were mostly thinly veiled affection.

She laughed. "And I would hope that you'd follow my example," she retorted.

Shadows slid from the hills onto the beach, and the Valentine's night enfolded the new lovers in her cool, glittering embrace.

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*Epilogue*

*2 May 2005*

*Town Hall, Hogsmeade.*

Harry picked up a flute of champagne from the table. "And so I ask you to raise your glasses to the bravest man I have ever known. Severus Snape!" He lifted his glass. "Prosit. Ad multos annos!"

Glasses clinked together, sounding like crystal bells, and a repetition of Harry's toast rippled around the hall, followed by enthusiastic clapping and whistling. "Speech! Speech! Speech!"

Under the tablecloth, Hermione squeezed Severus' hand encouragingly. For a long moment, it seemed that he would decline, but then he rose smoothly and cleared his throat.

Severus turned to Harry, who sat with baby James in his arms. "Thank you for that, Mr. Potter. And just when I had despaired of you ever redeeming yourself of dunderhead status."

Harry rolled his eyes good-naturedly, and laughter punctuated the expectant silence of the crowd. Severus turned to address the witches and wizards seated at large, round tables.

"In return I ask you to raise your glasses to three exceptional people. First, to Harry Potter, who is ultimately the reason we are all here this evening." He waited for the ensuing cheers and whistles to die down.

"Second, to Neville Longbottom, who rid the world of the vilest reptile I have ever had the misfortune to come across." Severus' eyes lingered on the sable-haired witch next

to Neville. "Just one warning, though...I know Miss Bhargova's family well, and if she is anywhere near as skilled as her mother, you'd best behave."

For a moment, stunned silence met this unexpected humour, and then George Weasley started to laugh loudly, setting off another round of clapping, laughter and whistles.

Severus held up his hand and smiled wryly in acknowledgement. "And finally to Hermione Granger, who saved me and brought me back, not once, but twice."

"Does this mean that you're staying?" Hermione asked Severus as they danced later.

"I believe it does," he answered.

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Author's Notes:

I picked the locations of the Vortexes from a variety of sites on the internet. They are referred to as energy vortices, energy chakras, and vile vortices, depending on where you read. Some of the theories about the energy site locations are fascinating, and they made my scientific little heart very happy!

Jules Verne introduced the legend of the green sunset flash in his 1882 novel *Le Rayon-Vert*. Of course the legend has been debunked as false; the phenomenon is attributed to physics and refraction of light. But wouldn't it be nice if it were true?

Dictionary:

Za Vas To you.

Za druzhbu myezhdu narodami To friendship between nations.

Ad multos annos to many years.

Prosit may it be beneficial.

Neville's girlfriend, Aeris Bhargova, belongs to my dear friend, Gelsey, who is also my beta-reader. Thank you, luv!