

Darkness Within

by neelix

Severus Snape bumps into his ex-student Hermione Granger, but she's not the Hermione he remembers. Unwittingly pulled into her seedy world, he uncovers a shocking secret.

Encounter

Chapter 1 of 22

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She was sitting at a small table in the corner of the crowded bar. He had been surprised to see her in the pub in the first place, and he was shocked to see how she was presenting herself. What saddened him, however, was her behaviour. He could see her face well from his vantage point, and his eyebrows rose as he watched her flirt outrageously with the young man sitting opposite her.

Severus sipped his whisky thoughtfully, and as she stood to leave with her date, he followed at a distance, waiting until they were outside before Disillusioning himself silently.

Hermione was drunk. It was a state of mind she was used to, and she was functioning as she normally did on nights like these. Her high heels clicked on the pavement, and the black skirt she was wearing was riding up her thighs as she walked, her hips swinging from side to side. She glanced over at the man she was with and tried to remember his name. Was it Jake or Jack? She couldn't remember, but the details were unimportant. She put her hand into the pocket of her black leather jacket and pulled out her front door key.

'I thought we could continue this at my place,' she purred to the man walking beside her, taking his hand in hers and squeezing it tightly.

The man, who was actually called Jake, looked at her and licked his lips. This woman was hot and obviously up for it. Her breasts were practically falling out of the top of her red blouse, and her equally red lips were full and pouty.

'Sure,' he answered, a little hoarsely as his cock throbbed and hardened despite the alcohol.

Hermione grinned lopsidedly and tried to focus on his face. His features were a little blurred, but his brown hair and tall, broad frame assured her he was male and, therefore, met her criteria. She increased her pace, and after a route march lasting almost ten minutes, they arrived at a row of converted Victorian villas.

Hermione pulled Jake down a row of stone steps leading to her basement flat, but before unlocking the door, she pushed him firmly against the rough brickwork wall and attached her mouth to his with force. She felt his lips move against hers and opened her mouth to allow him to thrust his tongue inside. Without warning, she suddenly pulled away, leaving Jake panting and gagging for it. He put up no resistance as she pulled him into the flat, slammed the door, and started to pull his clothes from him urgently. In moments, he was naked, and Hermione pushed him on her large, cushioned couch, lifted her skirt, and impaled herself onto his cock roughly. She closed her eyes and rode him hard, until he came with a grunt. It didn't last long, and Hermione didn't orgasm. She hadn't expected to.

She climbed off Jake's panting, sated body and walked over to her crammed bookshelf, lifting her wand. She gazed down at his prone body, and with a flick, he was fully dressed. Hermione registered the shock on his face and swore under her breath. She hated to Oblivate them, but sometimes it was necessary, usually when they weren't drunk enough. She pointed her wand and murmured the spell quietly.

'You will leave now,' she muttered and opened the door.

Jake walked shakily towards her and stepped outside, looking at her with a puzzled expression on his face.

'How did I get here?' he asked her.

'We were drunk. You walked me home. Thanks,' Hermione mumbled to him as she closed the door in his face.

In the shadowy corner by the basement steps, Severus stood and watched.

Consequence

Chapter 2 of 22

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One Month Later

Severus was sitting by his open fire, sipping at a glass of Firewhisky and reading through the *Daily Prophet*. He was waiting.

It had become almost a ritual, to the point where he wore the same clothes and followed the same routine. He glanced at the Muggle clock on his mantel and took another sip of his drink. He had ten minutes. He closed his eyes and took a slow, deep breath.

Shortly, he would leave. He would shrug on his black Muggle jacket and check his hair in the mirror, slug down the rest of his drink and Apparate to the Traveller's Rest pub in a rundown part of West London. Once there, he would purchase another whisky, usually Black Bush, and then sit on a bar stool and wait for Hermione to arrive. She wouldn't see him. She was, as a rule, intoxicated before she arrived. But he knew that she wouldn't be alone.

Severus looked at the clock again and folded his newspaper, laying it gently on the arm of his chair with a soft sigh. It was time to leave.

Severus caught sight of her as she pushed open the half door and held it open for her companion. With a subtlety that was a testament to his years of spying, he glanced with a blank face and blank eyes in their direction. Hermione looked towards him but didn't see him, and Severus registered her dilated pupils and slightly vacant expression. The couple walked past him, and Severus, ever sensitive to aromas, inhaled the unmistakeable smell of stale vomit and fresh alcohol on Hermione's breath. He turned his eyes to his drink and tried to ignore the clenched sensation of his stomach, and then he looked at Hermione's date for the night. If Severus didn't know better, he would have assumed that Hermione was a prostitute and that the man was her latest customer. He knew this wasn't the case, however. Hermione never took their money.

This one was different in some way, and Severus's senses were immediately on edge. For one thing, he was older than the others, and he was also considerably scruffier and unkempt. He had at least a week's worth of greying stubble on his cheeks, and his salt and pepper hair was dirty, pushed in slick lengths behind his ears. He was wearing Muggle jeans and an old, threadbare checked blue shirt.

Severus ordered another drink and waited. After twenty minutes, Hermione stood and took her companion by the hand, dragging him out of the pub. She was unsteady on her feet, and Severus frowned as he noticed the smirk on the man's face. He downed his drink swiftly and followed them.

By the time Severus had Disillusioned himself and caught up with his quarry, Hermione was having a hard time staying on her heels. He could hear her mumbling, and a deep, croaky laugh came from the man she was with. He watched as the man put his arm around her to hold her upright as they walked, and then without warning, he steered her into a side street. Severus's eyes narrowed as he followed closely behind. This wasn't part of the routine. Hermione was usually the one in control, but then again, she wasn't usually this inebriated.

The man paused at a gated alleyway, glanced around, and pushed the gate open, his hand grabbing Hermione's shoulder and pulling her with him briskly.

Severus increased his pace, his heart beating fast beneath his ribcage. His mind was racing as he pushed open the gate and walked down the alley behind a row of houses. He heard a noise from the backyard of the first house, and as he entered, he stifled a shout, pulled out his wand, and muttered '*Stupefy*' as quietly as he could.

The man stiffened where he lay and almost suffocated Hermione; she was unconscious beneath him, her skirt ripped, blood pouring from a split lip, and her legs akimbo.

'Shit,' Severus muttered. 'Stupid fucking witch.'

With a shove of his foot, he rolled the man from Hermione's body. The man's jeans were around his ankles, his cock still erect. Severus kicked him fiercely in the ribs and heard the satisfying crack of bone before turning back to the prone witch. He pulled what was left of her skirt down around her hips, trying not to look at her knickerless and hairless pussy as he did so. He bent to lift her and was shocked at how light she felt in his arms. The smell of alcohol assuaged his nostrils, and he fought down the nausea in his throat.

With a sharp crack, Severus Disapparated.

On The Edge

Chapter 3 of 22

Severus Snape bumps into his ex-student Hermione Granger, but she's not the Hermione he remembers. Unwittingly pulled into her seedy world, he uncovers a shocking secret.

A/N: This is not a pleasant chapter. I suggest you don't read it if you are eating anything.

Big Hugs to kizzy7, my amazing beta. She deserves chocolate and wine in large quantities for all her hard work.

Hermione awoke to the sound of a fire crackling in a grate. Her head felt as if it was about to explode with pain, and her mouth felt sore and strange. Her lips were swollen and dry, and as she opened her mouth to run her tongue across them, she tasted the sharp metallic tang of blood. She winced at the sting of saliva inside the very obvious split in her top lip, and she tried to push herself into a sitting position.

'I wouldn't try and move just yet, Miss Granger. You are weak and injured,' a soft, yet very familiar voice murmured close to her.

Hermione opened her eyes and rubbed at them to clear her vision. She hadn't been imagining things. Severus Snape was sitting in a tall-backed leather armchair beside the fire, and he was looking directly at her. He looked different. He was wearing Muggle clothes, for one thing. Black denim jeans and a black cotton jumper with a V-neck. And his hair was a little different as well, longer than she recalled. Funny how she could look at him and sum him up rationally, but couldn't fathom how or why she was in the same room as him.

'Professor...' she croaked, and then she coughed and almost choked as vomit rose in her throat. She put her hand over her mouth, and he was by her side immediately.

'This way,' he murmured and turned her gently so her head was hanging over the side of the couch. He held her hair away from her face as she threw up, retching into a bucket that had evidently been used already for the same purpose. Her stomach was so sore that she felt like crying, and as she lay back onto the soft cushions behind her, she closed her eyes, forcing back her tears and not allowing them to fall.

'Sorry,' she whispered.

'It is of no consequence. Rest. I will return shortly,' he replied softly.

Hermione watched through half-open eyelids as he lifted the bucket and walked from the room quietly. She wasn't aware of his return. She had already fallen asleep.

Severus stoked the fire slightly. He didn't really need to, but he wanted to do something with his hands. Hermione had been asleep for almost three hours, and he knew that when she awoke, he would need to provide her with the answers to the questions that would inevitably fall from her lips. He didn't know what to tell her. How could he explain his reasons for following her for the last month, observing her with her paramours? He wasn't a pervert. He derived no pleasure from his pursuit. So why?

It was a question he had asked himself time and again. In the beginning, he had intended to approach her when the opportunity presented itself. To talk to her and ask her why she was doing what she was doing, how she had sunk so low. To ask her what had happened to the brightest witch of her age. But either the chance had never occurred, or he had shied away from the opportunity. Severus knew the truth and was deeply ashamed. If he had acted sooner, perhaps he could have protected her. She was here on his couch because he had failed her.

He poked the fire angrily and swore under his breath.

'Professor.'

He heard her soft voice behind him and turned to face her, his eyes meeting hers as she looked up at him, questioning and almost, but not quite, trusting. His stomach clenched, and he walked towards her slowly.

'How are you feeling?' he asked her.

'Sore. My head is banging. I need a drink. Have you got any whisky or wine? Anything?' Hermione pushed herself into a sitting position and pulled the soft wool blanket up to cover herself.

Severus looked at her and noticed she was starting to shake.

'I will not be providing you with alcohol, Miss Granger. However, I have a potion that will temporarily suffice. And a potion for the pain, if you feel you can swallow them and not vomit them back up again?' He raised his eyebrow in that familiar way, and he noticed that her mouth twitched slightly in amused recognition.

'Throwing up is not my favourite pastime, so I'll do my best, sir. Otherwise, I assume it will be detention.' Hermione smirked at him, but the effect was lost as she winced at the pain in her lip. She put her hand up and felt her mouth gingerly.

'You have a split lip. I didn't want to heal you without your agreement,' Severus said as he knelt beside the couch and pulled two phials from the pocket of his jeans.

'Where am I?' Hermione's eyes narrowed as she watched him.

'In my home,' he murmured, avoiding her gaze as he removed the stoppers from the phials. 'Here, take these. Then I will answer your questions. I am sure there will be many.'

He handed the phials to Hermione with a small smirk, and she snatched them from him, downing them greedily. Severus watched as she started to relax, her eyes glazing over slightly. He hoped that the strong calming draught would curb her craving for alcohol long enough for her to eat and take in other liquids. She was seriously dehydrated and as thin as a rake. The scratch marks on her arms had not gone past his attention either, but first things first.

'Feel any better?' he asked her softly. Her eyes focussed on his and she smiled at him.

'Much. Thank you,' she said quietly.

'Good. Now,' Severus pulled his armchair forward and sat in it carefully, folding his hands on his lap, 'ask away.'

Hermione looked at him, and Severus could see that she was trying to work out what to ask first. It wasn't what he had expected.

'Did we have sex?' she murmured, gazing down at her hands.

Severus gaped at her for a moment.

'No, we did not have sex, Miss Granger. Next question,' he snapped.

'If we didn't have sex, then why am I here with you?' Hermione raised her eyes to his, and he could see they were full of shiny, unshed tears.

Severus took a deep breath. Honesty would be best, he thought to himself.

'I found you,' he began, and then he stopped as he looked at her.

His voice stuck in his throat as he took in her bushy hair, her deep, amber eyes, and the dark circles beneath them. This was not the girl he used to teach, or the flaunted hero who fought beside the boy-who-still-bloody-lived. She was a shell of her former self, and Severus could destroy her if he wasn't careful. She wasn't ready for this.

'Miss Granger,' Severus said, taking a deep breath as she looked at him expectantly, 'what happened to you?'

Please review... it really helps to have feedback! Thanks... nee x

The Calm Before

Chapter 4 of 22

Severus Snape bumps into his ex-student Hermione Granger, but she's not the Hermione he remembers. Unwittingly pulled into her seedy world, he uncovers a shocking secret.

A/N: Please note: this chapter includes a scene depicting self-harm. It is not gratuitous and is relevant to the story. However, I have no wish to upset anyone, so if this is too close to home or too distressing, please skip this chapter. Thanks.

Severus observed Hermione closely across his small kitchen table. She was sitting there, swamped in some of his own clothing that he had transfigured badly to fit her. He had misjudged just how slight her frame actually was, and she had rolled up the sleeves of the jumper and the legs of the jeans. But at least they covered her and provided warmth.

She was eating after a fashion, her fork dipping into the mashed potato on her plate and finding its way shakily to her mouth, where she held it until it melted and she was able to swallow with almost no effort.

Severus stood, and she jumped, not expecting him to move, her eyes darting up to him, her body flinching slightly.

'Relax, Miss Granger. I am getting you some milk,' he murmured quietly. He moved fluidly to his refrigerator and took out an ordinary carton of semi-skimmed milk, pouring it out into a tall glass. He placed this in front of Hermione, and she eyed it narrowly.

'I am aware that you would prefer something stronger,' he muttered, 'but you need the protein. Drink it.'

Hermione raised her eyes to him meekly and did as he told her, drinking the milk and trying hard not to gag.

'Slowly, Miss Granger,' Severus said softly, 'slowly.'

Hermione looked up at him, her eyes passionless. Severus wondered what she was thinking. Their earlier conversation had come to nothing, and she hadn't spoken to him since asking her last question. Making her some food had been a welcome distraction, but he was aware they were both avoiding the inevitable. This quiet impasse couldn't last, and he was bracing himself.

Severus watched as Hermione set the milk down in front of her. She ran her finger along the side of the glass, leaving tracks in the condensation. She was biting her lower lip, and he recognised the old Hermione in this unconscious gesture. For some reason, this touched him deeply, and he wondered where things had gone wrong for her. His heart was being wrenched as he observed her, and he desperately wished he could stride across the gulf that separated them and reach her. He wondered for a brief moment whether he should have taken her straight to St Mungo's and left her in the hands of the experts. But that would have raised even more questions that he was unwilling to answer. His reverie was broken when she spoke, and he was surprised at how clear her voice was.

'Why did you bring me here?' she asked, looking up at him.

'You needed help. There was no one else,' he murmured.

'Ha!' she laughed, her eyes hardening, 'My life in a nutshell.'

'Explain?' he asked gently.

Hermione stared at him.

'Why?' she asked. She leaned forward and rested her elbows on the table, pushing away the uneaten food as she fixed her gaze on his face.

Severus looked at her, not fully understanding the question and not really knowing how to answer.

'You need help, Miss Granger,' Severus stated.

'Don't we all. Call me Hermione, Professor... I'm twenty-three, not twelve, and I don't need to be treated like a child. I am no one's child,' she snapped at him.

Severus recoiled slightly and sat back in his chair. Hermione's eyes had never left his face, and he was feeling out of his depth suddenly. Perhaps this was beyond his understanding.

Hermione started to get agitated and pulled the sleeves of the sweater over her clenched fists, rubbing her arms up and down as she fidgeted in her chair.

'What is the problem, Hermione?' Severus asked her softly.

'I need a drink,' she muttered, staring with disgust at the half-empty glass of milk on the table.

'I will get you another potion. Wait here. I will be back momentarily,' Severus said as he pushed the chair from the table and walked from the room swiftly.

Hermione's eyes followed him and glinted as the door closed behind him.

When Severus walked back into the kitchen, his eyes were immediately drawn to Hermione. Her head was lolled against the back of the kitchen chair, her eyes closed and her breathing even. He stepped over to her, and his breath hitched in his throat as he caught sight of her exposed forearm and the blood dripping slowly down it. In her left hand, Hermione was holding a sharp kitchen knife.

'What have you done!' he shouted at her, grabbing the knife and throwing it across the room as he lifted her other arm to stem the blood flow.

'It's just a cut,' she said quietly, her eyes staring at him blankly.

'Are you trying to kill yourself?' he demanded, his face stern, a pulse beating hard in his throat.

'No, of course not.' Hermione pulled her arm away from his grasp and watched as the blood started to congeal in the small slice mark on her arm.

Severus stared at her and ran his hands through his hair. He was at a total loss and had no idea what to do with her. This situation was beyond him and yet he needed to do something. He wanted to – no, he needed to – help her. He sat down in the other chair and looked at her.

'Why did you cut yourself?' he asked her sadly.

'It helps,' she said softly. 'It takes the pain away.' She raised her eyes to his, and Severus saw how much she wanted him to understand. He sighed deeply and handed her the calming draught.

'It's getting late. I think perhaps we should try and sleep,' Severus murmured as he stood again. He needed space and time to think.

Hermione drank the potion down and closed her eyes a little.

'Sleep would be good. I haven't slept properly for a long time,' she replied, giving him a half smile. She tried to stand, her legs a little wobbly.

Severus walked over to her and offered her his arm.

'Lean on me. I do not wish to for you to fall and hurt yourself. It would be a waste of the pain potion,' he stated flatly.

Hermione looked up at him and sneered a little.

'Naturally,' she muttered, and Severus wondered when she had become so bitter.

He walked her up the stairs to his own bedroom and helped her to climb onto the high mattress.

'I will provide you with a shirt to sleep in. I will sleep in the chair; I would prefer to be here when you wake.' Severus spoke quietly as he pulled the dark velvet curtains across. He walked to a chest of drawers and pulled out a white shirt.

'Here. I will give you time to change.' He nodded at her a little and stepped outside the room.

While he waited, Severus paced the landing, running over events in his head. He wondered briefly what would have happened to her had he not been following her, and he shook his head to shake the image of the previous night away. After a few moments, he knocked on the bedroom door and entered to find Hermione curled up in his bed with the covers pulled around her tightly.

'Are you comfortable?' he asked her.

'Very. Thank you, sir,' she murmured, 'for looking after me.'

Severus felt a lump form in his throat as he looked down at her childlike frame, her eyes wide as she stared at him, her face gaunt.

'You are welcome. And please, call me Severus. I am no longer your teacher, nor am I a professor. It has been some years since I have taught at Hogwarts,' he said.

Severus pulled up two chairs and settled himself into them, Summoning a spare blanket from the end of his bed and covering himself with it.

'Severus?' Hermione whispered softly.

'Yes?' he answered her.

'Will you tell me tomorrow what happened? Please?' Her voice was light, and he had to strain to hear her as sleep drifted over them both.

'Mmmm. If you wish,' he replied.

The Storm

Chapter 5 of 22

Severus Snape bumps into his ex-student Hermione Granger, but she's not the Hermione he remembers. Unwittingly pulled into her seedy world, he uncovers a shocking secret.

Hermione woke and stretched slowly in the bed, pushing the covers down slightly. She opened her eyes and was surprised by the bright reality of Severus's bedroom.

Pushing herself into an upright position, she looked around the room, squinting a little at the sunlight streaming through the gap in the curtains.

She smiled to herself as she looked at the bed she was in. It was quite possibly the biggest bed she had ever seen, and the mattress was firm and deep. She was quite far from the floor, and she pushed her legs over the edge and watched her feet dangle for a moment. Stifling a yawn, Hermione pushed herself to the floor, taking a moment to test her balance. Apart from the stiffness in her upper lip and an ache at the back of her head, she felt better than she had in a long time, and she acknowledged that it was probably because she hadn't had a drink for over 24 hours. At the thought of alcohol, her stomach clenched, and she started to feel a little nauseous. Drink wouldn't help her concentrate on what Severus had to say to her; she knew this. But her body was craving the drug she had been so reliant on and was betraying her.

Severus had obviously risen earlier. The blanket he had used was folded neatly on one of the chairs, and Hermione noticed the whole room was very neat and tidy, not a speck of dust in sight. She wondered if he did his own cleaning. Then, she wondered where he was, and she decided to go and look for him.

She found him in the kitchen, cooking breakfast. The smell of the food made her want to vomit and eat at the same time. She stood in the doorway for a moment, trying to fight the way she was feeling. He noticed her immediately and helped her to walk to the kitchen chair before turning back to the bacon sizzling in the pan.

'I was going to bring this up to you,' Severus said to her.

Hermione smiled. She hadn't been this well cared for in a long time.

'I'm sorry to put you out like this. I feel ill. I don't know if I can eat it,' she murmured, linking her fingers and wringing her hands slightly.

Hermione was aware of his gaze, and she looked up into his dark eyes, unable to fathom what he was thinking.

'Is it nausea?' he asked her. Hermione nodded, and he opened a kitchen cupboard to pull out a small phial, different than the others. He handed it to her.

'Anti-emetic. Drink it, because I want you to eat this. You are too thin, Hermione,' he muttered as he turned back to his cooking.

Hermione drank the potion and then spoke without thinking. She immediately regretted opening her mouth.

'Do you prefer your women with more meat on them, Severus?' she purred and then laughed, an unnatural laugh that she used on her nights out. She was actually flirting with him, and she froze, horrified.

Severus turned to her again, and Hermione gaped at him as she caught the dark, steely glint in his eye.

'I'm sorry, God, I don't know why I said that, Severus,' Hermione stammered, her voice shaking. 'Forgive me.'

'I would much prefer it if you didn't put me into the same category as your paramours, Miss Granger. I have no interest in you in that way, I can assure you,' he spat at her, his voice edgy.

'I know,' Hermione said, looking at him beseechingly, 'I don't know why I said that, I didn't meant to. I mean, I don't think of you like that, either.'

Severus looked at her, and Hermione saw him relax his shoulders slightly. She let out a sigh.

'Maybe I should go home,' she murmured and looked down at the table. She felt rather than saw Severus sit down opposite her.

'I don't think that is a good idea, Hermione,' he said gently. 'You are not well. If you go home, who will care for you?'

Hermione shrugged. It didn't matter. None of it mattered.

'What day is it?' she asked him.

'It's Thursday,' he replied.

'I need to go to work today,' she said as she glanced up at him.

'Please do not lie to me, Hermione. You do not have a job. You lost your last job two months ago because you were too drunk to go in,' Severus stated flatly.

'Are you going to keep me here against my will?' Hermione flared up at him, her eyes flashing.

Severus looked at her, a small smile twitching at his lips.

'I would prefer you to stay of your own volition, Hermione,' he said silkily. 'However, I will keep you captive, if it comes to it. I have no intention of letting you go until I know you are fully recovered.'

Hermione snorted and glared at him. He was still a total bastard.

Severus laughed at her.

'Yes, I am a bastard. Get used to it!' He snapped. He stood and took two plates from the cupboard, plated up the food and put her breakfast in front of her.

Hermione forgot to be angry as she stared at the food in front of her. It looked delicious, and she felt her mouth water as she started to eat. She believed she hadn't tasted anything so delicious in a long time, and within a few minutes, her plate was empty and she was reaching for another slice of toast. Her eyes met Severus's as she looked up briefly, and she saw them dancing with amusement as he watched her.

'I was starving,' she said, shrugging and grinning at him a little. To Hermione's surprise, he smiled back at her for a brief moment; his eyes were genuinely warm. It changed his face completely, and she saw the man he might have been.

Hermione looked at him for a moment and acknowledged his hair, his pale features, his aquiline nose and his lips, soft and slightly parted.

'Nice,' she whispered to herself, and then she looked away quickly as she saw his face register what she had said.

'What did you say?' he demanded, his voice harsh.

Hermione bristled a little and met his stare.

'I said NICE. You look nice when you smile. That's all. I'm not interested in your cock, Severus,' she hissed at him. 'Stop being so fucking touchy.'

Severus glared at her for a moment and then let out a laugh that sounded more like a bark. His eyes crinkled in the corners, and he grinned at her for a moment.

'You really have changed. Not all of it is bad, either,' he conceded, smiling at her.

Hermione looked at him, bemused. She had no idea what was going on in his head.

'I think we should go out today. You need clothes, for one thing. And the fresh air would do you good,' Severus murmured as he finished eating.

'Can I have a bath first?' Hermione asked as she ran her hands through her grimy hair and grimaced. She could smell herself, and it wasn't pleasant.

'Of course. Come.' Severus pushed his plate away and held the door open for Hermione.

Hermione was aware of him following her up the stairs, and she paused for a moment.

'Severus, you will tell me what happened that night you found me, won't you?' she asked quietly. She had no memory of the night, and it was bothering her that he hadn't been forthcoming.

'I said I would, and I shall later,' he muttered.

Hermione hesitated and turned on the stairs to face him. They were at eye level as she looked at him.

'Was it very bad?' she asked him, her voice trembling a little. His face paled slightly, and Hermione noticed a dark shadow flash across his eyes before he answered her.

'Yes, it was,' he whispered sadly.

Hermione closed her eyes and felt a little faint. She felt his hands on her hips, steadying her. It was an unconscious gesture, and yet Hermione responded to it by wrapping her arms around his neck and hugging him close. She inhaled his scent, a mixture of sandalwood and the bacon he had been cooking. I feel safe, she thought to herself. Safe and protected. Tears were falling onto her cheeks, and she pulled away embarrassed, rubbing her face roughly.

'I'm sorry,' she whispered. She turned and walked up the rest of the stairs and avoided his gaze.

They were sitting beside each other on a park bench. The sun was high in the sky, and it was a truly beautiful day. Severus had taken her shopping, and she was now wearing Muggle jeans and a plain blue t-shirt. Her hair was clean, and she felt better than she had in many, many months. To a casual observer, she looked like any other young woman, but Severus knew there was still a long way to go. The t-shirt didn't cover the scars on her forearms, and the dark circles under her eyes were still very much in existence. But she had a little colour in her cheeks, and he was gratified that she had managed to eat and keep the food down.

Hermione took a sip out of the bottle of diet coke she had insisted on getting, and then she handed it to him.

'Try some; it's good,' she told him, smiling shyly.

'No, thank you. Artificial bubbles do nothing for me,' he murmured and smiled back at her.

'Your loss,' she replied as she grinned and took another slug comically. Severus laughed at her.

'You are feeling better,' he stated.

'Better than I have in a long time, actually.' Hermione gazed into the distance and her eyes clouded a little.

Severus withdrew his wand and murmured 'Muffliato'. There were other people in the park enjoying the sunshine, and he had no wish for them to overhear his conversation with Hermione.

Severus turned sideways on the bench and looked at Hermione, carefully considering his words. Hermione gazed at him, and he wondered if she knew what he was going to tell her already.

'I have been behaving badly, Severus,' she whispered, her eyes filling with tears.

'Have you?' he replied softly, resolving to let her talk.

'I think you know that I have. I must have been pretty drunk when you found me. I don't remember anything about that night.' Hermione frowned slightly.

'You were unconscious when I found you, but yes, before I reached you, you were very drunk. In fact, you could hardly walk,' he answered.

Hermione twisted to face him.

'Tell me. From the beginning. I need to know, Severus, and please, don't leave anything out.' Hermione said shakily as she looked at him, her eyes wide.

Severus took a deep breath.

'Very well...'

A/N: Big hugs to my beta, kizzy7, who has been a total star and very good friend. And apologies for yet another cliffie... these things take time, you know.

Oblivion

Chapter 6 of 22

Severus Snape bumps into his ex-student Hermione Granger, but she's not the Hermione he remembers. Unwittingly pulled into her seedy world, he uncovers a shocking secret.

A/N: Just a quick thank you to everyone who is reading, and a hug to those who are reviewing. Thank you so much! And to kizzy7, my lovely beta.. you're a star, love.

Severus watched Hermione with feeling as she stared into space, trembling all over.

'Are you cold?' he asked her.

She didn't look at him, but nodded a little.

'Let's get back. I can set the fire, make some hot chocolate,' he murmured, rising to his feet.

Hermione looked up at him with dead eyes, not focussing on his face, but at a point over his shoulder a little.

'Can we go by my flat? I need to collect my wand and a few books,' she stated.

Severus looked at her closely. He wasn't stupid, and he knew that at some point, if she felt the need greatly, she would try and escape his care. He would have to keep a careful eye on her.

'Very well, but I should warn you, Hermione. I will hex you if I feel it necessary,' he muttered.

'What do you think I'm going to do? Stupefy you when your back is turned? Don't you trust me, Severus?' she snapped at him.

Severus raised his eyes, thinking that was exactly what she had planned to do, but he said nothing. He motioned her onwards, and as they walked the few streets to her flat, Severus went over their conversation in his head. He had told her what he had seen the night he rescued her, and that he had been following her. Initially she had asked questions, but she had gone silent as he recounted the many nights he had seen her with different men and her behaviour on those occasions. Her face had flushed red and then paled as the reality and the shame washed over her.

They arrived at her flat, and Severus followed Hermione closely down the steps. She turned to him and smirked slightly.

'Constant vigilance,' she whispered conspiratorially as she opened the door, and Severus laughed.

'Indeed,' he murmured and grinned at her, relaxing slightly. She wouldn't try anything. Not this time.

He followed as she entered the flat, and he scanned the room. It was untidy, and there was a sour tang of stale alcohol in the air, like a pub the morning after a busy night. The cushions of her sofa were half-off the base, and as his eyes fell on them, a vivid image of her straddling some unknown male washed over him. Hermione followed his gaze and blushed to the roots of her hair. She lifted her wand and pointed it around the room, tidying the space and freshening it quickly.

'Severus, would you open the window while I gather the books I want?' she asked him quietly.

'Of course,' he said and turned to the small bay, unfastening the catch and pushing it open a little. He closed his eyes as he caught sight of her reflection in glass.

'Fuck it,' he cursed.

'Stupefy,' she murmured softly, tears in her eyes as he fell to the floor in a heap.

Hermione walked over to where Severus lay and pointed her wand at him again, Levitating him onto the couch slowly and carefully, tears rolling down her face. He looked so peaceful, as if he was asleep. He had been kind to her, and she hated herself.

'I'm sorry, Severus,' she mumbled and brushed the tears away from her face. She looked around the room a little and then she walked towards her bedroom, pausing before opening the door and glancing back at the prone body briefly. She pointed her wand at him as she pushed the door open.

'Ennervate,' she murmured, and then she walked quickly into her room, closing the door and adding as many wards as she could before walking over to her bedside locker. She lay down her wand and lifted the half-empty bottle of whisky, unscrewing the lid reverently before upending the bottle to her mouth. She drank quickly and shuddered as the liquid burned her throat. In a matter of moments, she had finished it, and she walked over to a cardboard box in the corner of the room. She grabbed another bottle and opened it quickly. She sat on the bed and started to sup, closing her eyes as the alcohol began to course through her veins and cloud her vision.

Hermione smiled softly to herself and didn't respond when Severus started to hammer on the bedroom door. Through the growing haze, she could hear him shouting at her to open up and let him in. She thought she heard him tell her there was a better way. Was there? She hadn't found one yet. She liked this way. She liked the way drinking made the time go faster, the way it filled her head so she didn't have to think any more. She liked feeling numb. Severus was still mumbling. What was he saying? She couldn't tell. He was further away now. Hermione closed her eyes and lay down on her bed, her stomach warm and full, and her limbs heavy. It was sleep or unconsciousness. Either way, it worked for her.

The bottle was empty before it fell from her hand with a clunk.

Constant Vigilance directly quoted from The Goblet of Fire by JK Rowling, said by Barty Crouch Jnr while polyjuiced as Alastor Moody.

Desperate Measures

Chapter 7 of 22

Severus Snape bumps into his ex-student Hermione Granger, but she's not the Hermione he remembers. Unwittingly pulled into her seedy world, he uncovers a shocking secret.

A/N: There are some more references to Hermione's issues in this chapter. If you think this will upset you, please skip to the last few paragraphs. Thank you.

Severus was furious with himself. He had let his guard down and trusted her, and she had done exactly what he had suspected she might try to do. Damn the witch!

He ran his pale fingers through his hair and sighed deeply, leaning his head against the door.

'Hermione, please,' he muttered, 'open the door.'

Hitting the doorframe in frustration, Severus took his wand from his pocket and started to work on her wards. His mind was racing as he imagined what she was doing to

herself, and he cursed silently. He should never have told her as much as he did. It had tipped her over the edge.

After thirty minutes, he had it, and he paused to marvel at how quickly she had put her wards up, given the complex nature of them. He pushed the door open and walked over to the bed in quick strides. He felt Hermione's neck for a pulse and let out the breath he was holding. He looked around the room in disgust. The place was filthy, and it was clear she must have spent most of her time here. The floor was littered with empty bottles, mostly whisky, but some wine and a few tin cans. There were bloodstains on the sheets, and beside the bed, a couple of old and bloodstained razor blades sat festering, congealed and stuck to the wooden surface.

Severus sat down heavily on the bed beside Hermione and watched her face as she slept. She looked peaceful and, he had to admit, very beautiful, despite her gaunt appearance. He tried to imagine how she would look if she wasn't battling her demons, and he knew she would be breathtaking without trying to be. A feeling of deep sadness was welling up inside him as he looked at her face, and he reached a hand out to stroke her cheek gently.

'What happened, Hermione? What was it?' he murmured.

Hermione shuffled a little at his touch and pushed her cheek into his hand softly.

'Daddy,' she murmured, and a small smile graced her lips.

Severus pulled his hand away and tears leapt into his eyes unbidden. He let them fall as he gazed at her. He needed to know. If he was going to help her, he needed to see it for himself. Severus left the room, closing and warding the door with his own wards this time to ensure sure she would still be in the room when he returned.

He Apparated quickly to Spinner's End and gathered the items he would need, specifically his potions, some food, and the small amount of Muggle money he kept for emergencies. He also took a change of clothes for himself and some spare bed linens, shrinking everything and putting it into the pockets of his travelling cloak. The sun had set by the time he returned to Hermione's flat, and as he walked back through the front door, he could hear her screaming his name from the bedroom.

'Severus!' she shrieked. 'Open the door, you bastard, I need to use the bathroom!'

Severus warded the front door and then unwarded the bedroom. Hermione burst out of the room like a banshee, her hair frizzing around her face like a banshee. She glared at him a little and walked shakily to the bathroom, not closing the door. Severus could hear her vomiting, and he turned his attention to the potions he had brought with him. He walked through into her small galley kitchen, used his wand to Scourgify the work surfaces, and set his phials out in order. When he walked back into the lounge, Hermione was sitting on the sofa with her head in her hands. She was sobbing.

He walked over to her and sat beside her. He wrapped his arm around her and pulled her close as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Hermione let out a wail and clutched the front of his shirt as she cried and murmured into his chest.

'I'm sorry, Severus. I didn't want to. I'm sorry, so sorry,' she cried, her voice pleading with him for forgiveness.

Severus stroked her hair calmly and stared at the wall opposite. Unconsciously, his eyes scanned her bookshelf, and he registered the thin layer of dust over her books. It was just another indication as to how low she had sunk, and Severus sighed.

Hermione pushed herself away from him a little.

'I'm sorry. I know I'm frustrating. I'll be fine if you want to leave.'

Severus looked at her and understood immediately.

'I don't want to leave. And the whole situation is frustrating, Hermione, but it's not you.'

Severus didn't remove his arm from her shoulders, but he tightened his grip with his hand and squeezed her until she looked up at him.

'I can't understand what has happened to you, don't you see? The last time I saw you, you were standing beside Potter, wand in hand, looking every inch the warrior witch. Now, I see this shadow, this empty shell,' he said, taking a deep breath. 'And I need to understand, because there is something so wrong with this picture, Hermione.'

Hermione started to cry again and nodded through her tears.

'I know. I hate being like this, but it's gone on so long. I don't know how else to be. I don't even know who I am any more,' she sobbed softly and tried to rub the tears from her cheeks.

Severus bent forward and wiped them away with his thumb, and Hermione paused and stared at him. As their eyes met, she smiled softly and laughed a little.

'What's so funny, witch?' Severus murmured, as he explored her face with his eyes.

'Imagine how this would look to anyone who knows us both!' She giggled a little and put her hand over her mouth. Severus took her hand in his and pulled it away from her face.

'Don't hide your smile, Hermione. It's wonderful to see it,' he said softly.

'I'm sorry I stunned you,' she whispered.

Severus looked at her and realised that he was staring at her lips. He sat back quickly and released his grip slowly, his lip curled in a sneer.

'It was my fault. I knew you would try something. You have an addiction, Hermione. It is in the nature of addicts to deceive those who wish to help them.' Severus stood up and walked to her bookshelf to avoid her gaze. 'Answer me something?'

'I'll try,' Hermione said softly. She was wishing he hadn't moved. His arm around her had made her feel safe.

'Do you want to get better? Have a better life than this?' he asked as he waved his hand around the flat a little.

Hermione stared up at him. 'Of course I do. Do you think I enjoy this?'

Severus looked at her and softened as he saw the pain in her eyes. He sat down beside her again and took her hands in his softly.

'Will you let me help you? Stop putting obstacles up? It will be painful for both of us, I imagine.' Severus caught her gaze, and his breath caught as he saw the trust there.

Hermione squeezed his hands tightly and bit her lip.

'I don't want to be like this any more, Severus. What do you want to do? Look inside my head?' She smiled softly.

Severus gaped at her slightly and couldn't believe that she had second-guessed him.

He nodded slowly.

'That's exactly what I want to do...'

Some Riot

Chapter 8 of 22

Severus Snape bumps into his ex-student, Hermione Granger, but she's not the Hermione he remembers. Unwittingly pulled into her seedy world, he uncovers a shocking secret.

A/N: Chapter title taken for the Elbow song of the same name.

Hugs to kizzy7 for making the story readable.

Severus had managed to clean Hermione's kitchen to a hygienic level suitable to cook in and prepared a light meal of pasta with vegetables. He needed to eat before they proceeded with the Legilimency, and he knew that Hermione still needed to build up her strength. He had encouraged her to take a sobering potion of his own formula, and another anti-emetic. He had another a Calming Draught to give her, but he wanted to see her eat first. He spooned the pasta into two brightly coloured dishes from Hermione's kitchen cabinet and pondered to himself the irony of their cheerfulness in such bleak situation. While he wanted to help her and bring her back to herself, he wasn't sure if he wanted to share her memories. Her reality was so sad that surely they must be terrible.

He carried the pasta into the lounge and handed a bowl to Hermione. The girl was curled up in the corner of the couch and covered with one of Severus's own blankets. He noticed with a wry smile that she had put on his black jumper from the pile of clothes he had brought with him.

'It suits you,' he said, smiling gently as he sat next to her and eyed her when she started to eat.

'It feels good, and it smells of you. It makes me feel safe.' She looked at him shyly before turning her attention back to her food.

They ate in silence for a while, and when Hermione had eaten as much as she could, he took their bowls back into the kitchen and returned with two glasses of water and the Calming Draught.

'Are you ready? You know that you will see what I see, Hermione. And you have to let me see it. I think there may be some memories you don't want to experience again, that you have tried to block out. If I come up against those, you need to try and relax and let me through. This should help,' he said as he handed her the calming draught. Hermione paused and looked at him for a moment.

'How will this help, exactly?' Hermione asked him thoughtfully, her brow furrowed.

'I am assuming, although you haven't told me anything, that something happened to you after the war that you have never shared with anyone. You have bottled it up, am I right?' Severus looked serious, his face that of the Professor explaining to a pupil.

Hermione had tears in her eyes, and she nodded, biting her lip.

'And I am assuming again that whatever it was, it was serious enough to turn your life upside down. Something shifted.' He was almost talking to himself as he thought his way through the process.

'Yes,' Hermione sighed softly, 'shifted, changed. Will never be the same again.'

Severus looked up at her. Hermione was staring off into the distance and was obviously remembering something.

'I think if you share it, you may feel less inclined to cover everything up with alcohol, or cut yourself to disguise your feelings. We don't have to do it this way, however. You could just tell me yourself, if you prefer.' Severus looked at her carefully.

'I can't talk about it; I can't say the words...' Hermione whispered sadly.

'That's what I thought. So,' Severus took a breath, 'shall we?'

Hermione swallowed the Calming Draught and straightened her position in the corner of the couch as Severus positioned himself opposite her.

'We need to maintain eye contact during the process, Hermione, and I will hold your hand for reassurance after we have finished. You will feel weak, as will I. I may not be able to speak to you immediately afterwards so please, be patient.' Severus took her hand lightly in his and rested them on his knee. 'Ready?'

Hermione took a breath and nodded, raising her eyes to Severus.

Severus murmured 'Legilimens' softly, and he was inside her head before Hermione had time to breathe in again.

Hermione was in a bright and airy sitting room. She was talking to Ginny Weasley. She looked healthy and happy, and they were chatting excitedly.

'When are you leaving?' Ginny was asking her.

'Tomorrow. I can't tell you how much I've missed them, Gin, really.' Hermione was clutching a photograph in her hand, and she gazed down at it with a warm smile.

'You will be careful, though, Hermione. I wish you'd let Harry go with you for protection,' Ginny said as her face creased with a slight frown.

Hermione laughed, a tinkling sound that rang around the room.

'Do you honestly think I would take Harry away from you now? You've only just got engaged, Ginny. Anyway, Australia is miles away. What could possibly happen?'

'Well, just be careful, Hermione. They're still out there, the renegades. You just never know.' Ginny shook her head sadly.

Hermione put her hand over Ginny's and smiled at her friend softly.

'I love you. You've been like a sister to me. I'll owl you when I come home. I promise. I should only be gone a few days,' Hermione said. She stood and walked towards an open fireplace.

The two young women hugged, and Hermione grinned as she waved at Ginny from the Floo.

The memory shifted and swirled slightly, and as the mist cleared, Severus followed Hermione as she walked up a paved path towards a white rendered house with a red door, the gold coloured knocker gleaming in the bright sunlight. Shadows were thrown across the footpath from the palm trees at either side of the entrance. Hermione knocked firmly, a smile on her face as she waited with obvious anticipation.

A woman with short curly hair opened the door. Her eyes were the same colour as Hermione's, and she smiled a little uneasily at her.

'Can I help you?' she asked, her voice a little tremulous.

'Mrs Smith?' Hermione smiled at her warmly.

'Yes?' the woman answered her, but her eyes were not focussing on Hermione's face, and they seemed a little blank.

Hermione obviously hadn't noticed and continued to talk to her.

'My name is Hermione. I need to speak with you and your husband. Can I come in?' she asked her brightly.

The woman stepped unsteadily to the side, and Hermione frowned slightly as she looked at her, withdrawing her wand as she stepped over the threshold. She had noticed that something wasn't quite right, and she observed the woman closely as she closed the door. Hermione was too slow, and her wand flew from her hand suddenly. She started to turn slowly but was grabbed from behind by a tall, male presence, his leather gloved hand over her mouth, and his other arm across her chest tightly.

Hermione started to struggle, kicking backwards and pushing her arms upwards, attempting to loosen his grip and hit her assailant in the face. It was futile. She stared at her mother, the realisation growing inside her that not only did her mother not recognise her own daughter, she was also Imperioused and not in control of her actions. Panic started to build, and she did the only thing she could do. She stopped struggling.

The man laughed behind her as she gave up her fight, and he started to drag her into the sitting room of the house. The blinds were down, and the room was in semi-darkness. From the corner of her eye, Hermione saw her father, bound and gagged and tied to a chair in the centre of the room. Behind him stood a Death Eater, complete with mask and robes, a wand in his hand pointed directly at her father's head. Hermione felt herself choking and started to splutter against the gloved hand over her mouth. The hand was released, and Hermione screamed.

'Daddy!' she cried out, 'Daddy!'

Hermione's eyes sought his, and although he looked at her, he didn't see his little girl, just a young woman with dark curly hair. He shook his head and fought against the gag in his mouth, mumbling slightly. Hermione sobbed.

'No, please...' she cried, 'not my parents, let them go. I beg you, take me, let them go... please!'

The man holding onto Hermione pointed his wand at her mother and murmured something under his breath. Hermione watched in horror as her mother sat obediently on a chair beside her father and allowed herself to be bound and gagged by the Death Eater. Hermione was suddenly thrown to the floor, hitting her head against the side of a small coffee table in front of a large leather couch. Dazed, she shook herself and tried to stand, but she was thwarted by a direct kick to her stomach.

'Stay there, bitch,' the man growled at her, 'I've only just started. I've been waiting for you, Mudblood. Now, keep your eyes down and listen to the floorshow. Then you'll get yours...' he hissed.

The memory started to fade suddenly, and Severus found himself back in Hermione's sitting room, her hand gripping his tightly, sweat forming on her upper lip. Her eyes were tightly closed to shut out the images in her head.

He took a deep breath.

'Hermione,' he whispered and put his hand gently on her shoulder. Her eyes were still closed, and she responded by slapping his hand away fiercely. Severus tried again and clasped her shoulder firmly, shaking her slightly.

'Hermione, it's me. Open your eyes. It's okay,' he whispered softly.

Hermione opened her eyes, panic etched in her gaze. She focussed on Severus and realised where she was, and then she fainted into his arms.

A/N: Please review if you can. Thank you.

Catharsis

Chapter 9 of 22

Severus Snape bumps into his ex-student Hermione Granger, but she's not the Hermione he remembers. Unwittingly pulled into her seedy world, he uncovers a shocking secret.

A/N: Warning: This chapter contains scenes of assault, abuse, rape and reference to character death.

Kleenex for the sensitive amongst you

Hermione awoke in her bed. She looked around the room slowly and sighed to herself. Severus had obviously been cleaning. She stretched a little and slipped her legs from under the covers, padding across the room and into her lounge. She saw him look up from the couch, and he went to stand.

'Sit down, Severus. I'm fine. Really.' She smiled softly at him. 'Was I sleeping long?'

Severus looked up at her. 'About an hour, that's all. Are you sure you're okay?' His face showed his concern, and Hermione walked over and sat beside him, putting her hand gently on her knee.

'I'm fine. Really. Thank you for cleaning my room. I'm ashamed it got into the state it did,' she murmured.

'It explained why your gentlemen friends never made it as far as the bedroom, anyway.' His mouth twitched, and Hermione's eyes sparkled a little.

'No one asked you to watch,' she said, smiling at him a little.

Severus blushed slightly and looked down at her hand on his knee. 'True,' he muttered.

'I'm glad you did, Severus. I think I was killing myself.' Hermione turned her haunted gaze onto his face as he looked into her eyes.

'What do you want to do now, Hermione? We can try again if you feel strong enough?' he asked her softly.

Hermione shook her head vehemently. 'No. I don't want you to see the rest of it.'

'But,' Severus started, but Hermione's fingers on his lips silenced him.

'I will tell you what happened. I think you are right about my needing to share it, so I'll tell you. Okay?'

Severus looked at her and realised this was the most determined he had seen her. It made his heart glad to see a glimpse of the old Hermione and he smiled at her.

'Whatever you think is best,' he concurred, and she rewarded him with a warm smile of her own.

'I think I need a drink, first.' Hermione stood and Severus grabbed her hand firmly. She turned and looked down at him, registering the look on his face. She smiled at him wryly.

'I meant a cup of tea,' she said, smiling sadly, 'would you like one?'

Severus sighed and rubbed his hand across his face. 'Yes, please. Tea. I'm sorry.'

'Don't be. I don't expect you to trust me after I Stunned you and crawled into a bottle of whisky.' She flashed him a smile and walked into the kitchen. He had been busy in here too, and she popped her head around the door to look at him, grinning. 'You can stay forever if you want to keep cleaning like this!'

Severus watched as she disappeared, a small smile twitching at his mouth.

Hermione walked back into the lounge with two steaming mugs of tea, handed one to Severus, and sat herself beside him, tucking her feet beneath her and hooking her hair behind her ears in a gesture Severus hadn't seen for a long time.

'You used to do that all the time,' he murmured, 'push your hair behind your ears. Infernal curls, always falling loose when you were bent over your cauldron. I'm surprised you didn't contaminate every potion.'

Hermione looked at him out of the corner of her eye and smiled softly. 'I'm surprised you remembered, but I'm even more surprised that you noticed,' she giggled.

Severus returned her gaze and shifted a little in his seat.

'I noticed everything. I just chose not to involve myself in silly conversations with silly students with nothing between their ears but bubotuber pus and Madam Puddifoot's fruit scones!' he snorted.

'Ahh, that's more like it. I had wondered who you really were and what you had done with my old Potions professor!' Hermione grinned at him.

'I could say the same about you. Let's not start comparing each other, shall we?' he said, smiling at her.

Hermione blushed a little. 'Point taken,' she murmured.

'I'm listening, Hermione, whenever you want to talk,' Severus said softly.

Hermione looked up at him and smiled, snuggling closer and resting her head on his shoulder. She sipped at her tea for a long time, and Severus realised she was trying to pluck up the courage to start.

Hermione took a deep breath.

'After I was kicked in the stomach,' she began, 'the Death Eater who had tied my parents up unfastened their gags. Then, he removed the Imperius Curse from my mother and started to ask them questions. About me.'

Severus shifted his arm and put it around Hermione's shoulder softly. Feeling reassured, she continued.

'He asked them if they had ever seen me before,' she whispered, 'and they said no, that they didn't know who I was. The Death Eater asked if I was their daughter, and they said no, that they didn't have any children. Well, they would say that. I had modified their memories, but not many people knew that. The Death Eaters obviously didn't.'

Hermione paused and finished her tea. Severus took the mug from her hand and placed it onto the coffee table.

'They got angry then. They screamed at my parents, telling them that they were lying, and that they would get the truth from them. They started to slap and punch my mother around the face, and my Dad shouted at them to stop. One of the Death Eaters pushed his chair over and started to kick him. I heard his arm breaking, and his screaming...' Hermione drifted off as silent tears ran down her face.

'I shouted at them to stop. I told them I had modified their memories and told them that they didn't know who I was, who they really were, even.' Hermione stopped, and Severus knew that there was more. She had paused mid-sentence.

'Hermione, if it helps, I know how Death Eaters treated their victims. Nothing you can say will surprise me, sadly,' he whispered softly.

Hermione shuddered, and Severus grabbed a blanket, placing it over her legs gently, then pulling her in close, resting his chin on the top of her hair. Tentatively, Hermione wrapped her arm across Severus's waist and closed her eyes softly as she continued to talk.

'The Death Eater that attacked me pulled me to my feet and forced me to stand in front of my mother. He tore my clothes from me, forcing my mother to watch. He touched me... he made me get onto my knees and...' Hermione sobbed a little and covered her mouth with her hand, inhaling a long breath as she tried to calm herself. 'He forced me to, well, you know.'

'Yes,' Severus whispered hoarsely as he tightened his hold around Hermione's shoulder.

'Then he raped me...' Hermione's voice was a whisper, 'and they laughed when they realised I was a virgin. Harry Potter's Mudblood whore, still a virgin. They took turns, I

lost count... and they forced my parents to watch.'

Severus had stiffened the more Hermione had spoken, his face pale and bile rising in his throat.

'The first Death Eater told my father to admit who he was, that I was his daughter, or face the consequences. But my father refused,' Hermione's voice caught in her throat, 'he said "I do not have a daughter."'

Hermione fell forward onto her knees and buried her head in her hands as wracking sobs ran through her body. Severus leant forward and pulled her to him, hugging her tightly until her tears abated slightly.

'Then what happened?' he whispered softly into her hair.

'They killed my parents. They died, and they didn't know I was their daughter,' she sobbed, and this time it made no difference how much Severus held her.

Huge hugs to my beta kizzy7, who told me this was a hard chapter to read. Thanks for all your hard work.

The Heart of the Matter

Chapter 10 of 22

Severus Snape bumps into his ex-student Hermione Granger, but she's not the Hermione he remembers. Unwittingly pulled into her seedy world, he uncovers a shocking secret.

They awoke wrapped in each other's arms, cramped together on Hermione's couch. Severus tried to extract himself and shift his legs, but he was trapped between Hermione's bony knees and the back of the sofa. As he tried to move, she shifted her body closer to his, and he found his face covered by a cloud of her curls.

'Hermione,' he mumbled into her hair and tapped her shoulder blade with his fingers.

'Mmmm, what?' Hermione murmured, and then she pushed her face back and looked at him in shock.

'I think we should move.' Severus looked at her in amusement, and Hermione blushed furiously as she pulled her arm out from around his waist and slid herself onto the floor.

Severus pushed himself up and ran his fingers through his hair slowly as he looked at her. She was staring at the carpet and running her fingers over the convoluted design, and he wondered what she was thinking.

'I think we fell asleep,' he murmured.

Hermione smiled at him shyly, 'Sorry. I did wake up, and I should have gone to bed, but...'

'But?' Severus looked at her gently.

'But I felt better lying next to you, so I stayed. I hope you don't mind,' she said, looking away from him again.

Severus reached a hand out and stroked her chestnut hair gently, and Hermione turned her amber eyes to his. She took his hand and held it against her cheek for a moment and smiled at him.

'You have been so kind, Severus. I wish I could thank you,' she whispered.

Severus looked at her, and his face flushed at the inference of her words and the feel of her hand on his. He pulled away softly, and he smiled at her.

'You can thank me,' he stated decisively and stood up briskly, firmly pushing away the image of her full lips and shining eyes.

'How?' Hermione pushed herself on the couch.

'You can make breakfast while I take a shower.' He grinned at her briefly, and grabbed his clothes, walked into the bathroom, and closed the door behind him.

Severus took a deep breath and leaned against the door, his eyes closed. He groaned quietly and shook his head. He had been without female company for longer than he cared to remember, and being in such close physical contact with Hermione had triggered his body to respond in ways he knew were particularly inappropriate, given the current situation.

With a small growl, he turned the taps and waited for the water to flow from the shower above the bath. Taking off his clothes, he stepped under the water and allowed the warm liquid to flow over his shoulders and down his narrow, sinewy back and over his buttocks. He raised his head and let the water soak through his hair, and then he massaged shampoo through the lengths. As he washed himself, his penis betrayed him and hardened. Severus gritted his teeth and ignored it, stepping out of the shower and drying himself roughly with a large towel.

As he stepped fully dressed and refreshed from the bathroom, his nose was assaulted by the familiar tang of whisky, and his heart sank.

'Hermione,' he called to her. There was no answer, and he paced into the bedroom without knocking, fully expecting to find her drowning herself again. She wasn't there, and Severus started to panic. Had she gone? Where would she go?

'Hermione!' he shouted, his voice hoarse.

'I'm in here, Severus,' he heard her call from the kitchen.

He rounded the corner at speed, his hair falling over his face, his mouth set in a thin line as he glared at her.

He watched her as she turned to face him, tears falling down her cheeks and a bottle of whisky in her hand. Then, his eyes flicked to the work surface. A line of empty bottles stood beside the sink, and he watched as Hermione unscrewed the cap of the last bottle and tipped the contents down the drain. Her hands were trembling, her

lower lip shaking, and as Severus realised how hard this was for her, he walked over to her and took the bottle from her hand, finishing the job for her.

Severus placed the empty bottle beside the others and turned to face her. She looked up at him, and her eyes were swimming with unshed tears. She stepped towards him, laid her forehead against his chest, and slowly wrapped her arms around his waist. Severus sighed as he looked down at her, and he wrapped his arms around her slight frame reluctantly. He felt Hermione relax against him, and he sighed softly.

'Hermione, I'm not sure this is a good idea,' he murmured.

Hermione pulled away slightly and looked up at him.

'Why not? I feel safe with you. I know you won't hurt me,' she whispered.

Severus extracted himself from her and looked at her a little coldly.

'How do you know what I will do or will not do? I was a Death Eater myself, or did you forget that?' he said flatly.

Hermione turned her trusting gaze onto him, and Severus felt his stomach falling slightly.

'You would never do to me what they did, Severus. I trust you and I care for you,' she whispered.

Severus snorted, 'You don't know me, Hermione. This is a pointless conversation.'

'Is it, Severus? Is it really? Tell me something. If it hadn't been me, would you have followed? What if had been Hannah Abbot or Lavender Brown? Would you have followed them for a month and watched them fuck their way around London? Would you have done for them what you have done for me? Or are you just not being honest with yourself?' Hermione was shouting at him, and her eyes were blazing with anger.

Severus stared at her, and his eyes narrowed. He didn't like what Hermione was inferring, and more to the point, he didn't like that she had come very close to the truth of it.

'Why does it matter? I can leave you now, if you want. You can go back to that life. It won't be so hard to pick up where you left off, after all,' he said smoothly, his voice dangerously quiet.

Hermione flinched, and Severus immediately regretted his words.

'That wasn't fair,' she whispered, tears falling freely down her face, 'I never wanted to be like that.'

Severus stepped towards her a little and put his hand beneath her chin, lifting her eyes to his.

'Why did you, Hermione? The alcohol, the cutting yourself,' he whispered softly, 'that I can sort of understand, but the sex... you never seemed to get anything from it. Why?'

Hermione inhaled deeply and wrapped her arms around herself. She walked to the kitchen window and stared out onto the small back yard.

'They took my virginity from me. Not that I was saving it for any particular reason, but with the war and everything, no one really came along that, well... it doesn't matter.' Hermione shook her head sadly and turned to Severus, her face sad and ashamed.

'I was having sex because I was trying to feel something, anything... I craved the physical contact, and I hoped that perhaps, if I kept trying, eventually I would feel something, anything, that would let me know I was still alive. I never did. I still don't. I feel totally numb, and I have, ever since that night.' She shrugged.

Severus didn't know what to say. For a woman as young and as beautiful as Hermione to never have experienced sexual pleasure seemed incredible, and yet as she spoke, he knew it was the truth, and his heart melted a little more.

'I'm so sorry,' he said softly.

'I know.' Hermione smiled sadly at him.

A/N : Thank you so much for the amazing reviews so far. Please keep letting me know your thoughts, I find it very inspiring.

Full of Spices

Chapter 11 of 22

Severus Snape bumps into his ex-student Hermione Granger, but she's not the Hermione he remembers. Unwittingly pulled into her seedy world, he uncovers a shocking secret.

A/N: Firstly, I just wanted to say a big thank you to all who have reviewed. Secondly, I just wanted to point out that the story takes a change in tack due to Hermione's opening up to Severus, so there will be few further references to her troubles :)

Hermione allowed Severus to persuade her to return with him to Spinner's End. Not that he had needed to coerce her at all, however. She had no intention of being too far away from him right now.

She couldn't understand what had changed for her over the past few days, but something definitely had, and Severus had been the catalyst. If he hadn't found her, and if he hadn't rescued her, Hermione didn't want to think what might have happened. And she didn't want to think about what might happen if he didn't catch her again if she fell.

She was perusing his bookshelf, running her fingers across the spines carefully. Some of his tomes were antique, and they looked as if they would fall apart if she tried to lift them. He had reassured her that this wouldn't happen, he had them all magically protected, but she was still feeling a little shaky. She stuck to what felt safest and lifted

down a copy of Hogwarts, A History, a small smile playing around her lips in recognition. There was something comforting about the familiar feel of the binding, the picture on the cover, and the familiar title. She hugged the book to herself and walked over to one of the large armchairs beside the fire, curled herself into it and opened the book to the front page.

There was an inscription on the flyleaf, and Hermione ran her fingers over the familiar writing gently, tears welling in her eyes. Albus Dumbledore had given this book to Severus. There was nothing special about the inscription, but the poignancy of the message touched Hermione, and she brushed the tears away before they fell onto the page.

'To my friend, Severus. With fondest regards, Albus.'

It was so simple, and yet it spoke volumes.

Hermione didn't see Severus watching her from the doorway, and she jumped as he walked over to the fireplace and sat down in the other armchair. He lifted a copy of the *Daily Prophet*, shook it out a little, crossed one leg over the other, and bent his head to read. Hermione looked up at him, the top of his black hair just visible above the newspaper, his long legs clad in black jeans, his black leather boots accentuating his long, slim feet. A little flutter started in her stomach, and she smirked to herself. He used to make her stomach flutter at Hogwarts too, although she had all but forgotten her teenage crush on him. It had been brief, fleeting, but quite intense, and the only time she had found it difficult to concentrate in Potions class. After three weeks, it was over, and her attentions had been diverted by the increased activity of Dolores Umbridge, and then the rise and subsequent fall of Voldemort.

But for three weeks of her life, Hermione had entertained some unspeakable fantasies about her Potions master. The thought of them now was making her blush furiously, and so she opened the book on her knee to one of her favourite chapters and started to read.

They sat together in companionable silence for over an hour, until Severus folded his paper and glanced up at the clock.

'Are you hungry?' he asked her quietly.

Hermione raised her eyes from the page, looking at him through a tumble of curls and smiling at him.

'Starving, actually. It's my turn to sort out the food though, I think,' she said.

She closed the book firmly and stood to put it back on the shelf. Severus stood at the same time and stopped her with a gentle hand on her shoulder, his eyes a mystery as he looked at her and met her gaze.

'I'll take it,' he whispered softly. Hermione looked down at the book and handed it to him with a slight nod.

As she walked into the kitchen, she paused and turned to look at him. Severus had opened the book and was reading the inscription on the flyleaf, one pale finger tracing the writing. His head dropped forward slightly, and his hair fell in a shiny black curtain, covering his face. Hermione didn't need to see him to know how he was feeling. His shoulders dropped and shuddered slightly, and Hermione walked back over to him and gently wrapped a thin arm around his lower back.

'You miss him,' she stated simply.

'Most of the time. I had forgotten about this,' he whispered.

'I miss him, too.' Hermione squeezed her arm around Severus, and then she let go and walked into the kitchen.

She explored the kitchen cupboards thoroughly and sighed. There was nothing in them that made her mouth water, and she smiled to herself. Walking back into the sitting room, she found Severus sitting in his chair again, his book closed on his lap, his hands folded over the top as he stared into the fire.

'Are you okay, Severus?' she asked him softly, not wanting to break his reverie.

'Yes, although I am wondering why I cannot smell food cooking?' He turned to her and smirked a little.

'I had a better idea. Let's go and get a curry,' she said as she smiled at him brightly, her eyes twinkling.

'A curry?' His face split into a smile as he registered the excitement on her face.

'Please? I know a brilliant place.' She smiled warmly at him and he nodded at her, standing.

'Lead on, then.' He smiled indulgently at her, putting the book back in its slot on the shelf before following her out of the room.

They were ensconced in a small booth in what seemed from the outside to be a basic 'greasy spoon' of a café. The chairs were orange plastic, moulded and fixed together onto simple Formica tables. Unlike usual Indian restaurants, there were no ornate decorations on the walls, flock wallpaper or fancy crockery with pink birds and gilt edging. Instead, the tables were lined up beside floor to ceiling plate glass windows that looked straight out onto the grimy street.

Hermione looked around herself and grinned at Severus.

'Isn't it awful?' she giggled at him.

Severus raised an eyebrow. 'It leaves something to the imagination, that is certain.'

'Don't worry, the food more than makes up for the lack of glitz. I love it in here. I haven't been here in ages.' She smiled at him, her hair bouncing around her face softly.

An Asian waiter walked over to them, and Hermione reeled off a list of dishes without looking at the menu and licked her lips in anticipation. Severus smirked at her, ordered a beef madras and pilau rice, and handed his menu to the waiter.

'Oh,' Hermione said, smiling quickly as the waiter turned to leave, 'I'll have a large glass of lassi too, please.'

The waiter nodded and smiled at her, and she turned back to Severus. He was looking at her incredulously and smiling a little.

'What?' Hermione asked him, leaning over the table a little.

'You just look different. Happy, almost,' he mused.

Hermione glanced down at the table before speaking.

'I feel as if a weight has been lifted. It's a good feeling,' she explained, smiling, 'and it helps that you haven't judged me. For a long time, I thought what had happened was my own fault.'

Hermione's eyes clouded over, and Severus sat back a little.

'Your fault?' he murmured. 'How on earth could any of it have been your fault?'

Hermione shrugged at him. 'I didn't do enough to stop it from happening. I thought like a daughter, not like a witch. It was stupid of me.'

'You acted from the heart, Hermione,' Severus said softly, 'like you always did.'

Hermione looked at Severus for a moment and bit her lip gently.

'I was a coward,' she whispered, 'I should have died with my parents, but I didn't. Even though I know deep down that they would want me to have a good life, it hasn't stopped me from feeling guilty.'

Hermione jumped a little as Severus reached out a hand and covered her own lightly. She looked up at him and saw pain etched across his face.

'Guilt is very difficult to deal with, Hermione. I know this from personal experience. Tell me,' he said softly and leaned forward, taking a firmer hold on her hand, 'how did you survive?'

Hermione grimaced a little, and her eyes fell on their hands resting on the Formica. She ran her thumb softly over Severus's long fingers and marvelled at the softness of his skin.

'I just lay there, lifeless, trying to work out a way of getting hold of a wand. I fully expected them to kill me, and I'm sure that they would have done if the neighbour hadn't disturbed them. It was thanks to her, really. She told me later that she had a spare key to the house so that she could feed my parents' cat when they went away. She thought something must be wrong when she saw the blinds were down. Anyway, she hammered on the door for ages, and then she let herself in. The Death Eaters Apparated before she came into the room.'

Hermione sat back and let go of Severus's hand as the waiter came back to their table with the food. She flashed a smile at Severus and attacked the food with gusto, insisting on sharing some of her food with him in exchange for a spoonful of his madras. She took a mouthful, and tears sprang to her eyes at the heat of it burning her throat. She gasped, grabbing her lassi and gulping some down.

Severus chuckled at her, and their eyes met. He laughed even more when Hermione stuck her tongue out at him, and the evening proceeded in amused camaraderie. Hermione reminded him of some of his most snarky moments in Potions class, and Severus pointed out just how annoying she had been in class.

When Hermione had eaten the last mouthful of mushroom bhaji, she licked her lips and rubbed her stomach in satisfaction.

'I'm stuffed,' she sighed. 'That was excellent.'

'It was very good,' said Severus as he nodded. He was pleased to see her eating so well.

Hermione smiled at him. 'I feel sleepy now. I suppose we should go back.'

Severus glanced at her and coughed slightly. 'Before we do, there was something I wanted to mention to you,' he murmured.

Hermione sat forward. 'Go on,' she said.

'I have sorted out one of the spare rooms in the house for your use,' he stated, not looking at her.

'Have you?' Hermione was slightly shocked, having assumed they would continue to share his own room.

'I thought it would be more appropriate for you to have your own space. Now you are feeling better, I do not think there is reason for me to keep such a close eye on you,' he murmured.

Hermione bit her lip and considered what he had said. He didn't think they needed to be in the same room any more, so he obviously trusted her. And he had sorted out a room for her. She had her own room in his house. So he was expecting her to stay. She smiled softly at him.

'Does that mean I can stay with you for a while?' she asked him quietly.

'If you find it agreeable. It is too soon to say how well you will cope alone, Hermione. I think you need someone around you, and as you are clearly not in contact with your old friends, it would seem that responsibility is now mine.' Severus didn't catch her eye and stood from the table, shrugging on his jacket.

Hermione got up from her seat and walked the short distance to where he was standing, took his hand in hers softly, and squeezed it.

'Thank you, Severus,' she said and smiled up at him.

Severus squeezed her hand back and then dropped it quickly, gazing at her briefly.

'It is no problem,' he murmured.

Hermione watched as he walked towards the door and held it open for her, and then she breathed a long sigh and smiled to herself.

Reacquainting

Chapter 12 of 22

Severus Snape bumps into his ex-student Hermione Granger, but she's not the Hermione he remembers. Unwittingly pulled into her seedy world, he uncovers a shocking secret.

A/N: Round of applause to kizzy7, who never tires of trying to make me into a better writer. Thank you so much!

Severus threw back his bedclothes and swung his legs to the floor. He could hear Hermione singing in her bedroom next door, and he smiled softly to himself. She was a little tone deaf, and every now and then she would hit a bum note. But Severus still found it endearing.

In the two months since she had all but moved into his house, they had struck up a routine of sorts, and Hermione was now assisting him in his own lab, preparing his potions for private sale, and sorting out his paperwork. Their relationship was easygoing and friendly. He was starting to appreciate her company more and more, and the thought of spending the day with her today put a spring in his step.

After a quick shower, Severus threw on his clothes and left his room at the same time as Hermione left hers. Neither of them was looking where they were going, and he walked straight into her and knocked her onto the floor.

'Fuck,' Hermione muttered under her breath, rubbing her shoulder gently.

'Oh, gods, Hermione,' Severus knelt beside her and wrapped his arm under her shoulders and helped her to her feet, 'I am so sorry. Are you alright?'

Hermione looked at him under her fringe of curls. 'My arm is a little sore, but apart from that, I'm fine,' she said with a twinkle in her eye.

Severus caught her gaze and the twitch of her lips and smiled at her sheepishly.

'My mind was on other things. Forgive me.' He smiled at her, and Hermione rewarded him with a loud but feminine giggle that made her wince and rub her shoulder gingerly.

'I need a pain potion, I think,' she said.

'Of course. Come.' Severus went ahead of her, and Hermione followed him as he walked down the stairs into what used to be the dining room of the house. It had been converted many years ago into a small but well-planned potions lab.

Severus lifted the small phial from the shelf and handed it to Hermione, who swallowed the contents and relaxed as it took immediate effect.

'Much better,' she said, smiling. 'Now, tea I think. Want some?'

'I'll get it. It can be my penance for not watching where I was going.' Severus smiled at her and went towards the kitchen.

'What distracted you, Severus?' Hermione asked him as an afterthought.

'Nothing significant,' he murmured as he walked into the kitchen. 'Only you, your beautiful eyes, and the way your mouth lifts at the corners when you laugh,' he whispered when he was out of earshot. He rubbed his hand across his eyes and shook his head firmly. This was not a good time to be thinking of Hermione in that way. In fact, there would never be a good time, and he needed to get her out of his head.

Severus made tea and toast and called Hermione through to the kitchen, just as his *Daily Prophet* arrived by screech owl. They sat at the table and had their breakfast quietly; the only sound was Severus, turning over the pages of his newspaper. An article caught his attention, and he coughed a little, peered over the top of the pages at Hermione, and paused slightly before speaking.

'Hermione,' he said softly. 'There is news in here that may interest you.'

'Me? I doubt it very much,' she said, snorting and taking a sip of her tea. 'You make excellent tea, Severus. I should let you bump into me more often.' Hermione grinned at Severus, and he raised his eyebrows at her.

'I really think you will want to read this.' He looked at her seriously and passed the *Prophet* over to her, pointing to the relevant article with a slim index finger.

Hermione started to read the article with interest, and then she took a small intake of breath. Her eyes welled with tears, and she brushed them away with her hand and laughed a little.

'That's wonderful news. Did you see what they called him? Albus Severus,' she said as she smiled warmly at him.

Secretly, Severus was flattered, but he was too concerned with Hermione to revel in the honour.

'You didn't know they were having another child?' It was really a statement and not a question.

'We lost touch. I didn't tell anyone I was back, you see.' Hermione bit her lip and started to curl her hair around her thumb absentmindedly.

'When did you get back? I know you stayed in the Muggle hospital in Australia for a while. We didn't get any further than that, did we?' Severus probed gently.

After it had been agreed that Hermione would stay with him, Severus had decided that he wouldn't push her to open up about what had happened. He would let it come out naturally. There were gaps in the story that intrigued him, however, and this was one of them. Her social isolation concerned Severus greatly. She used to be so close to her friends, but now it seemed as if they had never existed.

'I wrote to Ginny from Australia while I was in the hospital and told her I was going to stay there with my family. She thinks I'm still there, actually.' Hermione gave an embarrassed laugh. 'I couldn't face telling her the truth. I came back four years ago and, well, you know what happened then. I just couldn't contact anyone.'

Severus nodded his understanding. 'And now? They must miss you. I'm sure you miss them,' he murmured.

'I do miss them. I didn't go to their wedding, and now they have two children that I haven't met. But it would be so hard, walking back into their lives. They've moved on so much.' Hermione's voice trembled slightly as she spoke.

'You should tell them what happened, Hermione. You need your friends. You can't stay holed up in this dingy house with me for the rest of your life.' Severus stood and made more tea, unaware of Hermione's eyes on the back of his head as she contemplated his words.

'Do you want me to leave, Severus?' she asked him quietly.

Severus spun on his heel and faced her abruptly. 'If I want you to leave at any time, Hermione, I will tell you. I was not trying to infer anything.' His voice was almost angry, and he sat down opposite her and pulled his chair into the table with a scrape.

'I'm glad to hear it.' Hermione smiled at him softly, her eyes a little glazed over.

'So, will you contact the Potters?' Severus asked her, avoiding her gaze on him but feeling the weight of it all the same.

'I might. Would you come with me, Severus? I don't think I could face telling them on my own,' she whispered, her eyes never leaving his face.

Severus's face fell as he stared at her. He wanted to refuse. He had managed to shove his memories of the war to one side quite well. Looking into Harry's eyes, however, might just bring them all crashing back. The last thing he wanted to do was to call on Mr and Mrs now-very-happy-thank-you Potter, but as he stared at Hermione and saw her trusting face looking back, he knew he couldn't refuse her anything anymore. He sighed deeply.

'If it will help, I will do it. But only once, Hermione. I do not intend on becoming fast friends with the Potters. And under no circumstances will I be babysitting.'

He stood from the table and walked quickly out of the room before he changed his mind, leaving Hermione rereading the *Prophet* and smiling to herself.

Two weeks later, Hermione was walking slowly through the beautiful village of Godric's Hollow with a reluctant Severus trailing a little behind her. This time, it was her turn to be supportive, and she waited for him to catch her up and looked at his face in concern.

'I hadn't thought about how difficult this would be for you, Severus,' she whispered softly. 'I can do this alone if you want, if it's easier for you?'

Severus took a breath and shook his head firmly. 'No. I made you a promise. We both have some difficult memories to put to rest. This one just happens to be mine,' he murmured softly and smiled sadly at her.

They had never openly discussed Lily Potter. It was just understood that Hermione knew Severus's history. Hermione knew he preferred it that way.

Hermione linked her arm in his and squeezed him tightly. 'Come on. Let's get this over with, shall we?'

Severus glanced down at her arm though his and smirked. 'This will give them something to think about, in any case.'

Hermione laughed and her eyes danced. 'Won't it just?'

They arrived at the small cottage, and Hermione sighed softly as she pushed open the little gate and they walked up to the cheery yellow painted door. She noticed that Severus wasn't looking at the cottage and was keeping his eyes averted to his feet, his arm stiff and his demeanour dour.

'Stiff upper lip, Severus, my boy,' she whispered to him, mimicking Dumbledore perfectly, making him laugh just a little as she raised her hand to knock firmly on the door.

The door opened almost immediately and revealed Harry Potter on the other side, his face split into a wide smile as he held his arms open wide to his friend.

'Hermione!' he cried.

Hermione let go of Severus's arm carefully and stepped tentatively towards him, letting him wrap his arms around her tightly and hug her half to death. By the time he had let go, Hermione was laughing loudly, and tears were running down her cheeks.

'You've missed me, then?' she asked him, still laughing.

'What do you think?' Harry grinned at her.

Hermione beamed at him and was pleased to note he hadn't changed one bit, from the glasses to the unruly hair.

Harry's gaze drifted over to Severus, and he smiled softly at him, holding out his hand.

'Severus, it's good to see you after all this time,' he said.

'Mr Potter,' Severus replied as he shook his hand and nodded slightly. 'Please excuse my intrusion. Your friend can be very persuasive, as I am sure you will remember.'

'It's fine, Severus. Hermione told us you were coming; you're more than welcome. And you can meet your namesake,' he said as he grinned a little and blushed.

'Wonderful,' Severus drawled smoothly, 'I'm sure you can guess how much I love babies.'

'Severus, don't be mean.' Hermione giggled softly and put her hand through his arm again, pulling him after her into the small house.

They followed Harry into a small but light sitting room. A small child of approximately three years old was sitting in front of the fireplace, making little wooden blocks stack on top of each other with a wave of his hand. Once the blocks were precariously balanced, he flicked his fingers forwards and made them crash to the floor, letting out a giggle.

'Wandless magic already?' Severus murmured as he eyed the child suspiciously.

Harry grinned down at his son ruefully. 'Unfortunately, yes. Try explaining to a three-year-old how to control it. It's a nightmare. I have to have eyes in the back of my head at times.' He turned and grinned at Hermione. 'This is James, by the way.'

Severus snorted quietly and walked over to a window that overlooked the back garden of the house.

Hermione crouched down and looked at the small boy with a smile on her face. 'Hello, James,' she said softly. 'I'm Hermione.'

James Potter looked up at Hermione with wide, slightly grey eyes, his dark sandy hair falling over his forehead, his mouth tipped up in a small smile.

'Mione,' he said, and then he giggled as she poked at his chubby belly with her finger.

Hermione stood and looked at Harry. 'He's cute,' she said, laughing.

'Hermione!'

She heard Ginny's voice from the doorway and turned to face her, a huge smile on her face.

'Ginny!' She grinned, and then she gasped as her eyes fell on the small bundle she was holding.

Albus Severus Potter had a shock of dark hair like his father's that was already sticking up slightly. His soft, round face was smooth and pink, and his eyes were screwed up as if he was about to cry.

'He's beautiful, Ginny,' Hermione breathed softly, pulling down the edge of his white blanket to lift the tiny fingers of one hand.

'Yes, he is, isn't he?' Ginny smiled softly at her son. 'Here, hold him a moment while I make tea.'

Ginny placed baby Albus carefully into Hermione's waiting arms and caught sight of Severus, watching the tender scene from the window. She smiled at him and walked over to where he was standing, holding her hand out to him.

'Professor,' she said softly, her eyes shining with obvious awe, 'it's so good to see you.'

Severus took her hand lightly and stared at her in surprise as she covered it with her other hand and held it there for a long moment, squeezing softly. Ginny looked as if there was something she wanted to say, but she shook her head, obviously deciding against it. She let go of his hand and smiled at him.

'You should go and see your namesake,' she murmured and nodded to where Hermione was cradling the now sleeping baby. Severus smiled softly at her and nodded.

Ginny left the room, and Harry followed her quickly, leaving Hermione and Severus alone with the children.

'Look at him, Severus, isn't he lovely?' Hermione gazed down at the child and smiled softly.

Severus stepped up to her and placed a hand lightly on her shoulder as he peered down at Albus.

'He looks like his father, poor child,' he muttered, and then he smirked at the glare Hermione shot at him. 'I don't do babies, Hermione. In fact, I don't think I have ever been this close to one.' He frowned as he realised that he had spoken the truth.

At that moment, Ginny and Harry returned with a tray piled high with tea things, cakes, and small sandwiches. Once the baby had been put into his small Moses basket and Harry had poured tea for everyone, Ginny looked at Hermione with a determined look on her face.

'Right. Now, you can explain where the hell you've been, Hermione Granger.'

Mending Fences

Chapter 13 of 22

Severus Snape bumps into his ex-student Hermione Granger, but she's not the Hermione he remembers. Unwittingly pulled into her seedy world, he uncovers a shocking secret.

There was very little noise in the room. The only sounds were coming from a rather energetic three-year-old boy, who was repeatedly banging together two brightly coloured wooden blocks and singing tunelessly to himself. He was oblivious to the emotionally charged situation that was taking place between the four adults in the room.

Hermione had her head down, and her hair was covering her face. Severus's hand was resting gently on her forearm, and his face was etched with concern as he looked at her. Ginny was sobbing and brushing away her tears with a crumpled tissue. Harry was staring at Hermione, his face pale and his eyes hard. His jaw was set firm, and his hands had formed tight fists by his side.

James Potter was bored, and he stood shakily to his feet. He walked over to his father and put the two wooden blocks on his knee.

'Play, Daddy?' he asked him.

Harry looked down at James and then up at Ginny and Hermione. They were now both crying softly.

Harry looked at Severus and said, 'Come and see the garden. James could do with some fresh air.'

Severus looked at the two women and then at Harry. 'Good idea,' he said as he nodded.

'Hermione?' he whispered softly

Hermione raised her wet eyes to his and smiled weakly. 'I'll be okay with Ginny.'

Reassured, Severus stood and motioned to Harry, and they walked through the small kitchen into the neat back garden. They were followed by James, who grabbed a small, motorised broom and proceeded to fly at a low level around the garden.

Ginny moved to sit beside Hermione as soon as the men left the room with James. She wrapped her arms around her friend, and they cried together for a few minutes. Eventually, Ginny pulled away and took a deep breath.

'I don't know what to say, Hermione. I wish you had come to us sooner. I knew something was happening when you didn't answer my letters, but to be honest, I thought you had just fallen in love with someone,' she said.

'I was in a bad place, Ginny. I still am a little. I wasn't ready to see anyone, and God knows what would have happened if Severus hadn't found me. I'm so lucky he did; he's been very kind.' Hermione smiled a little.

'I can't believe you call him Severus,' Ginny giggled.

Hermione shrugged and grinned at her. 'I don't think of him as Professor Snape, Gin. Severus is a different person, and he's been a good friend, you know?'

'He's still being the hero, isn't he?' Ginny grinned at Hermione, and then she stood to lift Albus, who had started to grizzle a little.

'He's my hero, definitely,' Hermione whispered, and her gaze went to the window where she could see Severus talking to Harry in the garden.

Ginny lifted Albus and looked over at Hermione, following her gaze. She raised her eyes at the look on her friend's face, but said nothing.

'I'm glad you found her,' Harry said quietly to Severus as they watched James zoom around on his toy broom.

'So am I. The thought of what may have happened still haunts me. She is much recovered, but she still has a way to go, I think.' Severus put his hands into the pockets of his jeans slowly.

'The Death Eaters she mentioned. Have you any idea who they were?' Harry looked at him and his eyes were blazing.

Severus held his gaze for a brief moment and acknowledged that Harry's protective instinct made him want to seek revenge.

'Unfortunately, no. After your defeat of the Dark Lord, many renegades took on the mantle of the Death Eaters. It gave them carte blanche to rape Muggles and behave despicably in Voldemort's name. They could have been anyone,' he replied, 'but believe me, Potter, I share your need for revenge.'

Harry nodded his understanding. 'I just feel so fucking useless, Severus,' he snapped. 'I can't believe she had to cope with all of it alone.'

'She is still strong underneath, and she is still your friend.' Severus placed a hand on his shoulder. 'She needs you, Harry,'

Harry looked at Severus in surprise and then smiled at him ruefully.

'Shall we go and see if they have stopped crying? I don't know about you but I never know what to do when they start.' He laughed a little.

Severus surprised Harry even further by chuckling, and a smile spread across his face.

'Tissues, tea, and a hug, Harry. It works every time,' he murmured.

Harry grinned at him. 'I'll try and remember that,' he said.

Severus and Hermione were saying their goodbyes to Ginny and Harry. Hermione hugged Harry fiercely, and they promised to meet up again the following week. Severus acquiesced and agreed to hold Albus Severus for a moment. He held him a little awkwardly, but his face softened as he looked down into his enquiring eyes.

'If the hat asks, say Slytherin,' he murmured seriously.

Hermione giggled, and Severus caught her eye and smirked at her.

Harry looked at Ginny and nodded slightly at her. Ginny coughed to get their attention as they gazed at Albus, who was now gripping tightly onto Severus's finger and trying to pull it into his open mouth.

'Severus, there was something we wanted to ask you,' she stammered, unused to saying his given name and a little embarrassed by it.

'Go ahead,' he said, not taking his eyes from Albus's face.

'We, well, em,' she stammered again. 'God, you ask him, Harry.'

'What my wife is trying to ask you so inarticulately,' Harry said, laughing a little, 'is if you would consent to be godfather to Albus.'

Hermione gasped and stared at them incredulously, and then she looked at Severus, who had gone as white as a sheet.

'Me?' Severus asked them.

'Please, sir,' Ginny said, reverting to what was comfortable. 'We couldn't think of anyone who would do the job better.' She smiled at him warmly.

'What about Ronald, surely he?' Severus said softly.

'Ron wouldn't be the sort of role model we would want for our children, much as we love him. He is more interested in how many women he can bed.' Harry grinned a little.

'So you think an ex-Death Eater would be more appropriate?' Severus smirked, 'Naturally, I can see why you would choose me. I accept. Gladly.' He smiled softly at the baby now resting comfortably in the crook of his elbow and stroked his soft cheek with a pale finger.

'Wonderful,' Hermione sighed gently and smiled at Harry and Ginny.

Ginny nudged Harry, and he shifted a little uncomfortably.

'There was something else, before you go. I have something to show you, Severus.'

Severus raised his eyes and handed Albus back to Ginny very carefully before following Harry out of the room. Harry searched a drawer in the kitchen and pulled out what he was looking for. He looked at it for a moment, and then he handed it to Severus.

Severus gazed at the old, faded photograph. There were two people in the frame, one a beautiful young schoolgirl wearing a Hogwarts uniform and Gryffindor scarf, her dark red hair hanging around her shoulders, and her green eyes smiling out at him. Next to her was a shy and pale-faced young wizard with long, black hair and a sullen expression.

'Where did you get this?' Severus whispered.

'I found it when we moved in. The house hadn't changed much; it had been left exactly as it was. My parents' belongings were still in their room. It was a little odd, actually, almost as if they had just gone out to the shops or something. Anyway, my mum had a box of school mementoes, and this was in amongst them. I thought you would like to know she had kept it. There were only three photos in the box. This was one of them,' he said as he smiled softly.

'Thank you for showing me this, Harry.' Severus handed the photo back to Harry, his face unreadable.

Harry took the photograph and removed his wand from his jeans' pocket. He pointed it at the picture and duplicated it.

'Here. Keep it.' He handed Severus the original. 'You're part of the family now. It's time you started your photograph collection.'

Severus looked at Harry with tears in his eyes and nodded.

'Thank you,' he whispered.

Butterflies

Chapter 14 of 22

Severus Snape bumps into his ex-student Hermione Granger, but she's not the Hermione he remembers. Unwittingly pulled into her seedy world, he uncovers a shocking secret.

After Hermione had reconnected with her friends, Severus noticed a marked change in her. Her confidence rose dramatically, and her appetite returned, along with her

sense of humour and her interest in academia. Her physical appearance had benefited too, and her figure had filled out, her hair had grown lustrous and her skin had become almost luminous with health.

She had been sharing his house for almost six months, and it was agreed that she would give up her flat to just move in fully. The arrangement suited both of them, and they enjoyed each other's company. Severus started to give Hermione wages for her help in the lab, but she had counteracted this by insisting on paying him rent. An argument of phenomenal proportions had taken place, and it was at that moment that Severus knew Hermione was back to normal.

He was in the lab, clearing up after a particularly taxing day, making complex potions for a very exacting client. He stacked the unused phials back onto the shelf and took a small bit of parchment, scribbling down briefly the ingredients he needed to restock.

Hermione stuck her head around the door and smiled as she watched him. He was so graceful; he moved with hardly a sound, and she loved to watch him work.

'I'm nearly done,' he murmured without turning around. He had caught a whiff of her shampoo and knew she was standing behind him.

'Great. I'll grab our coats. It's starting to rain already,' she said.

Severus turned around and saw her still standing there, smiling at him softly.

'I thought you were getting the coats?' He grinned at her.

Hermione snapped out of her daydream and blushed. 'Yes, right. I am.'

Severus chuckled to himself and shook his head. They were going out for a curry. It had become their normal Friday night routine, one they both looked forward to. Severus wasn't sure what part of it he enjoyed the most, the food or Hermione's company. He feared it was the latter. His stomach clenched a little. It was taking all of his resolve not to try and entice her into a physical relationship, and he was sure she wouldn't protest if he suggested such a thing. But something stopped him.

Although Hermione now had a social life beyond Spinner's End, Severus suspected she had not embarked on a romantic relationship with anyone since he had found her. He was sure she would have told him. She told him everything else. Recently, he had caught her watching him a couple of times, and Severus wasn't stupid. He thought she probably had a slight crush on him, and he understood it but didn't encourage it. He was too old, too boring, and the thought of what having sex with him would do to her scared him. He could be a fierce and passionate lover, and after Hermione's past experience, he knew that wouldn't be good for her at all.

Severus sighed a little, and then he closed the door of the lab to be met by Hermione thrusting his jacket at him.

'Hurry up! I'm starving and it's pissing down now,' she muttered and walked to the front door.

Severus rolled his eyes and followed her.

Hermione was gesturing with her fork as she spoke, her eyes animated. She was telling Severus in great detail about her last visit to Ginny's, and in particular about Albus Severus. Apparently, he was now able to sit up unsupported, but James found it amusing to push him over whenever he walked past him.

'It sounds like sibling rivalry already. Can you believe it?' she said.

'I might accompany you the next time. I should like to see how my godson is progressing,' he murmured, taking a forkful of chicken jalfrezi.

'I wish you would. Harry and Ginny always ask after you.' Hermione smiled up at him warmly.

Severus felt his stomach lurch as he looked at her, and he held her gaze for a little longer than he should have done. Hermione blushed, and then she reached her hand across the table to stroke his face gently. Severus closed his eyes and sighed at her touch. He took her hand away softly and smiled at her.

'The food is getting cold,' he said quietly. Hermione held his gaze for a moment, and then she nodded.

They ate the rest of the meal in silence.

Hermione had made hot chocolate, and they were drinking it in front of the fire. Severus looked over to her and cleared his throat a little.

'I was wondering if you had thought about recommencing your studies?' he asked her.

'My studies? What do you mean?' Hermione frowned at him and curled her feet underneath her in the chair.

'I was wondering if that was what you had planned, if everything had gone well in Australia,' he murmured.

'I hadn't really decided. I was going to talk it over with my Dad.' Hermione's voice caught, and Severus eyed her with concern.

'I didn't want to upset you,' he said.

'No, no, it's fine, really.' Hermione gave him a small smile. 'I did want to go to University. I even thought of working for the Ministry for a while, but I would need my degree first.'

'What would you study? Potions? Arithmancy?' He smiled gently at her, encouraging her to continue.

'I'm not sure. I was thinking Muggle Studies,' she answered, laughing a little.

'But you were brought up as a Muggle!' Severus laughed out loud.

'Yes, it's silly, isn't it? But I wanted to work in the Muggle Relations Department, and without a degree in Muggle Studies, I wouldn't get past the selection process,' Hermione explained, still laughing.

Severus caught her eye and took a deep breath as they smiled at each other.

'I think you should consider it. You're still young, Hermione. You have your whole life ahead of you. You have all the time in the world to study, to make your dreams come true,' he murmured as he looked into her shining eyes.

'Perhaps I will. But it would mean moving out of here. I'm not sure I want to do that yet,' she whispered.

'You will always have a home here, Hermione. You could come back during the holidays and such.' He tore his gaze away from hers.

Severus heard Hermione move from her chair and walk over to him. He looked up at her uneasily. Her hair was shining in the light from the fire, and her eyes were burning amber as she stared down at him. She knelt down and rested her arms on his knees gently, gazing up at him.

'You have been so kind to me, Severus. I would miss you so much if I went away to study,' she whispered softly.

Severus looked back at her and smiled a small smile. He was so tempted to run his fingers through her hair and kiss her.

'I'm not planning on going anywhere, Hermione. I'll still be here if you need me. At any time,' he breathed.

Hermione smiled, lifted his empty mug from his hand, and stood slowly. She bent her face to his and kissed his cheek.

'Goodnight, Severus,' she whispered.

Severus waited until she had left the room and then let out the breath he had been holding, rubbing his face with his hands.

'Gods,' he whispered.

Thanks for sticking with this... and thanks to everyone reviewing. You guys make me very happy!

One Fine Day

Chapter 15 of 22

Severus Snape bumps into his ex-student Hermione Granger, but she's not the Hermione he remembers. Unwittingly pulled into her seedy world, he uncovers a shocking secret.

A/N: Chapter title taken from the song by The Chiffons...

Hermione was in the park, wrapped up tightly in a thick coat, hat and gloves. She was walking fairly briskly, enjoying the feel of the winter sun on her face. She caught sight of Ginny and waved at her, increasing her pace.

'Hi,' she said, smiling, 'sorry I'm a little late.'

'That's okay.' Ginny replied, grinning in return. 'Let's go and get a coffee or something?'

Hermione nodded, and they linked arms, crossed over the busy street, and headed for the nearest Costa Coffee.

Ginny went up to the counter while Hermione grabbed a comfortable sofa and commandeered it, taking off her outdoor clothes and shaking her chestnut hair around her shoulders. By the time Ginny walked over to her, Hermione was comfortably ensconced in the corner of the sofa and watching people as they walked past the cafe.

'Here you are. Cappuccino, and a maple syrup and pecan Danish.' She smiled at her.

Hermione grinned. 'Yummy!'

Ginny put the tray down and took off her coat as Hermione lifted the cups and pastries. She sat down and looked at Hermione, who had given herself a foam moustache from the coffee, and she giggled.

'So, what was so important that you just had to meet me today?' she said as Hermione licked her top lip expertly.

'I'm going away for a while,' she said quietly, sighing softly.

'What?' Ginny looked at her in surprise. 'When? Why, more to the point?'

Hermione looked at Ginny carefully, biting her lip in thought.

'Two reasons, really. Firstly, Severus suggested, ages ago, that I should think about going back to my studies. I've realised he's right, and that if I don't do it now, I never will.' She smiled at her. 'I've been accepted to the Ecole Centrale Paris.'

'In France, you mean? But that's so far away. You could have stayed here, Hermione.' Ginny's voice sounded sad.

'I know, but I want to travel, and being away will help me to concentrate. I'm scared I would be too distracted if I stay here,' she murmured, and she cast her gaze to her coffee again.

'Distracted by Severus, you mean?' Ginny asked her.

Hermione took a breath, and her eyes widened in shock. 'You know?' she asked her.

'Of course I know. It's obvious, to me anyway. You don't stop talking about him, Hermione, or haven't you noticed?' Ginny smiled indulgently at her.

Hermione put down her cup and buried her face in her hands for a moment.

'I haven't spoken to anyone about this, Ginny. Talking about it now makes it more real, somehow. Up until now, it was just in my head. I don't know what to do for the best. I really don't,' she said in frustration.

'Have you and Severus, well... you know?' Ginny nodded at her.

'Gods, no,' Hermione shook her head firmly. 'He has no idea how I feel about him. I don't even know, really, but the more time I spend with him, the more I can't keep my eyes off him. And I dream about kissing him,' she said with a shake of her head. 'It's a fantasy. He doesn't think of me in the same way, or if he does, he's very good at hiding it.'

Ginny covered Hermione's hand with her own. 'Maybe you should tell him how you feel?'

"What should I say? "I want you to kiss me, Severus?" Hermione giggled and blushed.

'Do you think that going away will stop you caring for him? Because I don't think it will. You have never cared for anyone the way you care for him. What if you love him?' Ginny was almost pleading with Hermione to stay, and she heard it in her voice.

'I don't know if I do love him, but it makes no difference if he doesn't feel the same way, does it? I know you don't want me to go, Ginny, but it's only for a year initially, then I'll be home for a while.' Hermione finished her coffee and lifted her Danish.

'What did Severus say about it?' Ginny murmured.

Hermione glanced at her. 'I haven't told him yet.'

'Oh, gods, Hermione, why ever not?' Ginny couldn't believe it; she knew Hermione shared everything with Severus now.

'I'm nervous about telling him. I don't think he'll be pleased about me going away.' Hermione looked a little sad.

'When are you going, Hermione?' Ginny eyed her friend with suspicion.

'In two weeks,' she whispered, and the tears she had been trying to hold back dripped down her cheeks softly.

'Bloody hell, Hermione,' Ginny hissed, 'you can't keep it quiet for much longer then, can you?'

Hermione sniffed and pulled a tissue from her handbag. 'I know. I'm going to tell him tonight. I'm going to miss him so much, Gin. Do you think I'm doing the right thing?'

Ginny looked at her friend sadly. 'I really don't know, Hermione. I really don't know.'

Hermione arrived back at Spinner's End with a tight knot in her stomach that she couldn't shift. Her arms were laden with carrier bags full of food, and she struggled through the front door and walked straight through into the kitchen with them. She unpacked the food and put a bottle of Firewhisky on the side for Severus, washed her hands, and started to cook.

Severus wandered through a few moments later and watched her silently.

'Talk to me,' he murmured softly.

Hermione turned and looked at him, and, unable to hide the fear and the tears in her eyes, she started to cry.

Severus walked over to her and wrapped his arms around her gently, holding her as she sobbed. Hermione wrapped her arms around his waist and hugged him tightly, closing her eyes as she felt his chest rise and fall beneath her cheek.

'I'm sorry,' she mumbled. 'I didn't want to cry.' She pulled away softly, and Severus looked into her face, his expression blank.

'Do you want me to guess, Hermione, or are you going to just say it?' Severus's voice was calm and quiet, and Hermione looked at him with a frown.

'You already know, don't you?' she mumbled.

'I know you have been planning something and keeping it a secret from me, yes.' Severus walked away from her and sat on one of the kitchen chairs.

Hermione poured Severus a glass of whisky and handed it to him before flipping over the two salmon steaks in the frying pan and turning the water on for the vegetables.

'I took your advice and enrolled in a college course.' She sat opposite him and put her hands through her hair.

Severus exhaled a deep breath. 'Is that all? I thought perhaps, well, it doesn't matter. What is the course?' He sat forward, his face interested.

'It's a foundation course, so it will cover most subjects, and then I can decide what to specialise in later. It's just for a year.' She smiled sadly.

'You should be pleased, surely.' Severus swirled the whisky in his glass and watched as Hermione stood to finish the food, plating up the salmon with a little hollandaise sauce and adding the lightly cooked peas and carrots.

As Hermione placed the plates on the table, she gazed down at Severus sadly and a small tear ran down her cheek. She sat down and picked at her food, sipping occasionally on a glass of water.

'There's something else,' Severus stated quietly between mouthfuls, 'or someone, perhaps?'

Hermione stared at him, her mouth agape. 'You know that if I was seeing someone, you would be the first person I would tell, Severus,' she snapped at him.

Severus put his fork down and glared at her. 'It makes no difference to me, Hermione, whom you are seeing. I have no claim on you; I am only the port in a storm.'

Hermione's eyes glinted at him angrily. 'How could you? You know how I feel about you, Severus, and don't pretend you haven't noticed. Yet you choose to remain cool and detached. I'm only Hermione Granger, after all insufferable know-it-all, a lost cause you played hero to. I know I don't mean any more than that. I am not blind.'

Severus's face went dark, and he pushed his plate away in frustration. 'Do not assume you know me, Hermione,' he growled.

'I'm not assuming anything. You are!' Hermione shouted at him and stood up, her hands gripping the edge of the table. 'And for your information, I am not seeing anyone, Severus.' She took a deep breath, and her shoulders shook with emotion.

'Well, what is it you haven't told me, witch?' he spoke so quietly that Hermione had to strain to hear him, and her eyes met his for a brief moment.

'The college is in Paris, Severus. I start in two weeks, which means I will be living there for a while,' Hermione murmured.

'You're leaving?' Severus stared at her, his face pale with shock.

Hermione nodded and started to cry again, and then she turned and ran from the room.

Severus sat and stared at Hermione's uneaten food, the silence in the kitchen pressing down on him like a tonne weight. With a deep, shuddering sigh, he wiped the tears from his eyes and reached for the Firewhisky.

My Best Friend

Chapter 16 of 22

Severus Snape bumps into his ex-student Hermione Granger, but she's not the Hermione he remembers. Unwittingly pulled into her seedy world, he uncovers a shocking secret.

Severus raised his head slowly from his pillow and winced a little. Rubbing his forehead, he remembered the Firewhisky and groaned softly.

'Fuck, I am so stupid,' he muttered.

He wondered where Hermione was, and he forced himself to climb from his bed. He threw on his bathrobe and fastened it tightly. Walking down the stairs, he strained his ears for a sign of Hermione somewhere in the house, but he heard nothing. Severus went into his lab and found a pain potion, which he swallowed quickly, grimacing at the bitter taste. He went into the kitchen, put the kettle on, and then put a large spoonful of coffee into a mug. He glanced around the room and realised it was exactly as he had left it, their uneaten food congealed onto their plates and the bottle of Firewhisky, now empty, lying on its side on the table. Severus cleared the table quickly and, using one of the few domestic spells he remembered, he started the washing up.

The kettle clicked off, and he waited a few moments before pouring the hot water onto the dark grounds. A small noise behind him made him jump, and he turned to see Hermione, looking pale and tired with large dark circles under her eyes. His heart broke at the sight of her, and he ran his tongue lightly over his lips, not knowing what to say.

'Can I have one of those?' she asked him quietly.

'Of course,' he replied, his voice raspy from the whisky. He took another mug from the cupboard and made Hermione her coffee, adding just the right amount of milk. He turned and handed it to her, pausing as her eyes met his and their hands touched softly.

'How's the head?' she asked, raising her eyebrow a little.

'Banging,' he muttered. 'Did you sleep?'

'No. Did you?' she asked as she sat at the table

'I have no idea,' he said softly, and he ran his fingers through his hair.

'Severus, I am sorry I didn't tell you sooner.' Hermione didn't look at him, but he saw her hands were shaking.

'You should eat something,' he murmured and sat opposite her.

'I can't eat. I feel sick,' she whispered.

'I am sorry we argued, Hermione,' Severus whispered softly, staring at the top of her bowed head. He noticed her hair was looking slightly bushy, and he realised she must have to work hard to keep it under control.

'I'm sorry too.' She looked up at him, and he saw red rims around her eyes where she had been crying. 'I was scared to tell you, I knew you wouldn't be happy.'

'You have been a good companion. I will be sorry to see you go. But you have to do what you feel is right,' Severus said quietly.

He was lying to himself and to her. He wanted to get on his knees and beg her not to go, to stay and make his life complete, to kiss him and make him feel whole again. He could see in Hermione's gaze that she knew he was lying too. He smiled a little and shrugged. There was nothing to say.

'We have two weeks,' Hermione murmured.

'Indeed,' he replied. *And each day will be agony, a day closer to you leaving me* he thought to himself.

'And I will owl you every week, I promise.' Hermione was starting to sound desperate. He could hear it in her voice.

'Mail is always welcome from a friend,' he murmured, sipping at his coffee.

'I am your friend, Severus. I hope I always will be,' Hermione whispered sadly.

Severus raised his gaze to her and smiled a warm, genuine smile that showed his teeth slightly. 'You are my best friend, Hermione, as you well know,' he chuckled softly.

'Only friend, you mean,' she parried back at him in their familiar way. This was an old joke between them, and suddenly they were in safer territory. Hermione smiled at him.

'We made a bit of a mess of things.' Severus looked at her, his eyes clouded slightly.

'Last night you mean? Well, crawling into a bottle of Firewhisky is never the answer.' Hermione looked pointedly at the empty bottle.

'Full circle, you might say.' Severus's eyes were twinkling now and Hermione laughed at him.

'Bastard,' she said, laughing.

'Always,' he said as he grinned at her.

'I'll miss you,' she said.

'I know,' he replied with a smug smile. He ducked as Hermione lifted a wet cloth and threw it at his head, missing by a mile.

'Arsehole.' Hermione glared at him and Severus chuckled.

'Come on, enough of this. I'll buy you breakfast,' he said.

'You're on.' Hermione smiled at him.

Four days later, Severus and Hermione were sitting in the small living room in the cottage at Godric's Hollow. Albus was on Severus's knee, and he was very entertained by the bubbles coming from the end of his wand. Hermione was reading a story to James, and she looked up briefly at the clock on the mantelpiece.

'I think it's bedtime for two tired boys. Mummy and Daddy will be home soon, so let's get you tucked in, and they can come and say goodnight in a little while.' She smiled at James, who was looking sleepy eyed and was rubbing his face with his small, podgy hands.

Hermione lifted James and sat him on her hip like an expert.

'Will you be okay if I go and take James?' she asked Severus.

'Of course. I can teach Albus some Slytherin secrets while you are gone.' He smiled at the giggling baby, who was trying to catch yet another bubble as it went floating just beyond his grasp.

'Say goodnight to Severus, James,' Hermione said.

'Night, Uncle Severus,' he murmured sleepily.

'Goodnight, Master Potter,' Severus murmured quietly. He couldn't quite bring himself to say James. Not yet, anyway. He knew himself that it was silly, but he just found it too hard.

Severus lifted Albus gently into the crook of his arm and flicked his wand quickly, turning out the lights. He sent tiny stars up towards the ceiling in multi-colours, letting them light the room and float in circles about their heads. Severus smiled as Albus snuggled closer into his chest, his eyes not leaving the ceiling as he watched the lightshow. Within moments, a deep breathing sound was coming from the child, and Severus grinned as he saw that he had fallen asleep. He stroked his tuft of dark hair gently, and he wondered to himself what his own children may have looked like, had he had any of his own.

Hermione walked back into the room and looked up at the ceiling and then at Albus, sleeping peacefully in Severus's arms.

'You really are good with him,' she whispered, 'and that is really pretty.' She pointed at the stars, and Severus smiled at her.

'I suppose I should put him in his cot,' he murmured.

'Good idea,' Hermione answered very quietly, and then she watched as Severus took the sleeping child and walked up the stairs.

Severus was back within moments and chuckled as he saw Hermione standing in the centre of the room, watching the stars as they continued to dance in patterns above her.

'You'll fall asleep too if you keep looking at them,' he said softly and walked to stand beside her, looking upwards.

'It's so lovely though.' Hermione smiled and turned her gaze to him.

'A simple trick, that's all.' Severus caught her eye and turned his face to hers slowly. Hermione was staring at his mouth, her tongue running slowly over her bottom lip. Severus took a sharp intake of breath as she stepped closer to him and tipped her chin upwards. He couldn't stop himself from bending his head to hers.

'Hello,' Ginny's voice called softly from the hallway, and Severus immediately stepped back, flicking his wand to turn the lights back on and extinguish the floating stars.

Hermione looked a little flushed, but walked over to Ginny quickly.

'James is waiting to say goodnight,' she said quietly, 'and Severus managed to get Albus to sleep just like that.' She clicked her fingers and grinned at Severus, who took a mock bow.

'I'll go up to them. Harry is just parking the car. Thank you so much for looking after them.' She smiled and walked up the stairs to check on the boys.

Hermione turned to Severus and smiled ruefully.

'Timing is everything, I guess,' she said softly.

Severus ran his hand through his hair and said a silent prayer of thanks that Ginny had stopped him doing something foolish.

Do you hate me for my evil cliffies? Hope not! Please keep reviewing, I love to know what you think.

Parting Is Such Shit, Really

Chapter 17 of 22

Severus Snape bumps into his ex-student Hermione Granger, but she's not the Hermione he remembers. Unwittingly pulled into her seedy world, he uncovers a shocking secret.

A/N: Please forgive the brevity of this chapter. It was necessary and I hope you will see why.

Severus was leaning on the door of Hermione's room, watching as she packed her bags.

'Are you planning on coming back at all?' he grumbled at her.

'If you promise not to hex me as soon as I walk through the door, then yes. I'm not taking everything, Severus.' Hermione folded another t-shirt.

'What if I want to let out your room?' he asked her.

'You won't,' she laughed, 'but if you decide to prove me wrong, owl me, and I'll get Ginny to collect everything. Then you will never have to see me again.'

Severus said nothing and continued to stare at her.

'What time is your train?' he said, for the sake of something to say.

'Still two o'clock this afternoon. I'll have time for lunch.' She smiled at him.

'Point taken. I'll see you in the kitchen.' Severus slipped off quietly to prepare the sandwiches.

Hermione paused as he left, and her heart leapt into her throat. All in all, it had been a nice two weeks. She had been able to put off thinking about leaving until last night, when she had finally started her packing.

The only thing that had irritated her was that Severus had purposely avoided any further compromising situations, or promising situations, as she preferred to think of them. She had been sure he would have kissed her if Ginny hadn't interrupted them, but every time she had broached the subject, he had started to talk about other things. Any time she had managed to wheedle her way closer to him, he had found a way out of it.

Hermione zipped her bag closed, grabbed it and her rucksack, and carried both down the stairs, leaving them near the front door. Then, she walked into the kitchen where Severus was sitting waiting for her, a large plate of sandwiches between them.

'Funny, I don't feel hungry, suddenly,' she murmured as she slid into her usual seat.

'Neither do I,' he replied softly.

'Will you be okay, Severus?' Hermione asked him.

'Will you?' he answered her, his eyes raised questioningly.

'I won't know until I get there, I suppose. I'm looking forward to the course, though. I checked my curriculum. Some of the Potions stuff seems quite complex, so I might need your help.' She smiled at him.

'That would be cheating, Miss Granger.' He stared at her just like her old Potions master, and she laughed lightly.

'This is really hard,' she whispered, staring him in the eye.

Severus held her gaze and nodded. 'Yes, it is.'

'I have a term break in about two months. I'll come back then, if I can,' she said.

'I will look forward to it,' he said.

Hermione glanced at her watch.

'I have to leave,' she said, pushing her chair back a little and standing.

Severus stood, and they looked at each other for a moment until Hermione walked towards the front door.

Hermione turned to Severus and smiled a watery smile; tears fell down her cheeks slowly.

'Look after yourself, then,' she said softly.

'And you,' he murmured, his face pale and his jaw set.

Hermione lifted her rucksack and put it over her shoulder, shrugging it to get the weight just right.

'I'll owl you as soon as I get there. I promise,' she whispered. She took a step towards him and almost choked on the sob that escaped her throat.

She threw herself at him, and he caught her in a tight hug, closing his eyes as he inhaled the scent of her shampoo for the last time. Hermione sobbed into the front of his shirt, and then she took a deep breath, pulling away. She grabbed her bag, and without looking back, she opened the front door and left, letting the door slam shut with a bang.

Severus stared after her for a moment, and then he stepped back and took a seat on the bottom stair. He felt the pain in his gut rising, the tears burning his eyes, and the sob wrestling with his courage as it tried to work its way out of his mouth. His courage won this time.

Later, when Severus went to bed, his courage lost.

The Letters

Chapter 18 of 22

Severus Snape bumps into his ex-student Hermione Granger, but she's not the Hermione he remembers. Unwittingly pulled into her seedy world, he uncovers a shocking secret.

Dear Severus,

As promised, my first letter. I haven't even started unpacking.

My room is small and basic and looks out over a small Paris back street that I don't know the name of yet. It's in an old and dusty building, and from my window, I can see a coffee shop and an ice cream and crepes parlour.

My landlady is called Marie and doesn't speak English. She looks almost Spanish, and she has a moustache.

I have my first class in the morning.

It's Potions.

Love, Hermione.

Dear Ginny,

I think I have made the biggest mistake of my life.

My room is dark and cramped, there are pigeons on the roof of the building opposite, and they make such a noise I can't concentrate properly. I had my first Potions class, and the teacher is hopeless. I had to intervene at one point, to stop her from blowing everyone up!

My landlady, Marie, is nice but very nosy, and she keeps asking me personal questions. I just smile and tell her I can't understand her. Today, she asked me about my boyfriend.

I miss him, Ginny. Have you seen him? How is he?

Love, Hermione.

Dear Hermione,

Just give up the course and come home. We all miss you.

Harry invited Severus for lunch, but he turned down the invitation. He has agreed to come and visit Albus next week, so I will let you know how he is.

I'm sure he feels the same way about you. You should have told him.

Write soon.

Love, Ginny.

Dear Severus,

I have been here almost four weeks, and you haven't replied to any of my letters.

Please don't be angry with me.

Have you visited Albus at all? I bet he is getting big now.

Please write. I miss you.

Love, Hermione.

Dear Hermione,

I apologise for not replying to your letters. I wasn't under the impression you expected me to write.

I have been particularly busy fulfilling recent orders, but your filing system is still working perfectly, and I can assure you I am up to date with the invoices.

I have visited Albus just this week after incessant invitations from Harry. And, yes, the child is growing, as he should.

I hope your course is everything you hoped it would be.

Regards,

Severus.

Dear Hermione,

I am worried about Severus. He came to visit Albus last week, and he looked awful, really tired. I think he's lost weight. I am sure he is missing you. I mentioned your name, and he couldn't look me in the eye.

I made him promise to come to dinner next week. If I feel brave enough, I'm going to ask him how he feels about you. It's ridiculous, both of you being unhappy like this.

How is your course? I hope you are miserable, because we all are without you.

Ginny.

Dear Ginny,

Please don't ask Severus about me. He will think I have put you up to it.

Do you think he might be ill? He wrote to me, but he didn't say very much.

And I am miserable. Thank goodness the holidays are only two weeks away.

Depending on how things go, I may need to come and stay with you, if that's okay? I will see Severus first though, but don't tell him. I want it to be a surprise.

Love, Hermione.

Dear Hermione,

I only just got your letter, I think your owl got lost or something.

I spoke to Severus about you, Hermione.

I told him you care about him, and that you are really missing him.

I think he loves you, even though he wouldn't tell me how he felt. I thought he was going to hex me at one point. Thank goodness I had a glass of wine to steady my nerves!

You really need to go and see him. He is missing you; he told me himself. He looks even worse than he did before.

I won't tell him you're coming home, but I know he will be pleased to see you.

Love, Ginny.

Dear Severus,

How are you keeping?

Ginny told me you have visited. I am glad you are staying friendly with her and Harry.

My holiday is coming up, but I have a mountain of studying to do, so I don't know if I will get away as yet. I hope to.

I think of you often. I miss our curry nights.

Love, Hermione.

A/N: Hi, everyone. I hope you didn't mind that little departure from the norm. Please stick with it because we're almost there now. Hermione comes back in the next chapter... sit back and watch the fireworks! Thanks for reading and letting me know your thoughts.

One Day Like This

Chapter 19 of 22

Severus Snape bumps into his ex-student Hermione Granger, but she's not the Hermione he remembers. Unwittingly pulled into her seedy world, he uncovers a shocking secret.

A/N: The title of this chapter is taken from the song of the same name by Elbow. It's on YouTube if you want to listen to it. It is quite beautiful.

And as a reward for all of your patience, here's Chapter 19.

Severus stepped from his kitchen with a mug of tea in his hand, his eyes focussed on the armchair he was planning to sit in. He had only taken two steps when he noticed her, and he paused, raising his gaze to her face.

'Hermione,' he breathed softly.

'Severus,' she whispered, smiling a little. 'I'm surprised; you didn't change your wards.'

'You will always be welcome here, you know that. You should have owled. I would have prepared dinner.' He smiled at her slowly, taking in her softly waved hair, her black blouse that was nipped in at the waist and accentuating her full figure, her slim black jeans, and her rucksack by her feet.

'You're staying?' he asked her, raising his eyes.

'If it's inconvenient, I can stay with Harry and Ginny. But I would much rather stay here. If it's okay with you?' Hermione's eyes were sparkling as she looked at him.

'You would?' Severus felt his heart starting to beat a little faster.

Hermione nodded, and her face broke into a warm smile.

'I have missed you, Severus,' she said softly. 'Very much.'

'And I, you,' he whispered, not taking his eyes from her face. 'Here, take this. I will get another.' He handed her his tea, and she smiled her thanks.

As he walked into the kitchen, he was unaware of Hermione following him, and so he was startled as he turned around to find her leaning against the door, watching him. His mouth went dry, and he placed his cup onto the work surface with a trembling hand.

Hermione took a step towards him and put her half-empty cup of tea down next to his. Their eyes met, and Hermione stepped in front of Severus and took his hand in hers.

'Hermione.' Severus couldn't take his eyes from her face, and she lifted her hand to his cheek and stroked his hair behind his ear gently. He shivered as she stepped even closer, allowing her body to press against his.

'Kiss me, Severus,' she murmured, her eyes bright as she stared at his mouth and ran her tongue over her bottom lip gently.

'I don't think that is a good idea,' he whispered, fighting every urge to do just as she said.

'Please, Severus,' Hermione pleaded with him, a small smile on her face.

'I cannot,' he muttered, and he closed his eyes.

Hermione stepped back and stared at him, her eyes starting to swim with tears as she bit her lip.

'Why?' she asked him desperately, her voice breaking.

'You have been badly hurt, Hermione,' Severus spat in frustration, 'and if I kiss you, I will not be able to stop at just a kiss. You do not want this, Hermione. Trust me.' His eyes blazed at her as he tried to make her understand.

Hermione shook her head incredulously and laughed a little.

'You don't get it, do you? I do trust you, Severus. More than that, I'm in love with you. If I can't feel something with you, then who else?' she spoke firmly. 'Who else, Severus?'

They looked at each other for a heartbeat, and then Hermione turned and walked from the room, letting the door close without looking back at him. She lifted her bag and threw it over her shoulder, and then she walked to the front door. As she put her hand on the door handle, she paused, breathing deeply and trying to stop the tears from falling down her face, closing her eyes and resting her forehead against the door.

'Don't leave,' Severus spoke from behind her.

Hermione took a long breath before turning to face him and looked at him in shock.

He looked paler than she had ever seen him. His eyes were haunted, and for the first time she saw the dark circles that told her he hadn't been sleeping. His hair was hanging in untidy lengths around his face, and his jaw was set firm.

'What?' Hermione asked him.

'Don't leave me again, Hermione, please,' Severus's voice broke raggedly, and he ran a hand over his face.

Hermione dropped her rucksack onto the floor and walked up to Severus, snaking her arms around his waist softly. She pulled him close and rested her head on his chest, inhaling his familiar scent deeply. Severus sighed and closed his eyes, wrapping his arms around her and hugging her tightly, nuzzling his face into her hair.

Hermione smiled a little and tipped her head to his. Her eyes held his gaze as he brushed her hair away from her face with his gentle fingers and then ran his thumb over her bottom lip.

'I have dreamed of this moment,' he said softly. His eyes glinted, and a soft smile graced his lips.

'Have you?' Hermione's smile widened and her eyes twinkled at him. 'Me too,' she murmured.

Severus gazed down at her beautiful face and bent his head to hers slowly.

Their lips touched briefly, grazing each other, and then they pulled away as they acknowledged the spark between them. Hermione gasped, and Severus felt the breath catch in his throat as he bent his head again to capture her lips with his own. Hermione's mouth opened voluntarily, and she moaned as he slipped his tongue between her teeth and explored. She moved her tongue to meet his, and she felt him tighten his hold on her.

Severus had an erection to be proud of, and it was pushing against Hermione's thigh firmly. He ran his hands along her back and pulled her blouse up a little. He caressed her skin and reached for the clasp of her bra. Deftly, he unfastened it and stroked the skin between her shoulder blades gently.

Gasping, they pulled apart, their eyes burning with passion. Severus looked at Hermione and raised his eyes in a silent question. Hermione nodded, and he gripped her hand firmly, pulling her up the stairs.

A/N: Yay! Finally some kissing! It's been a long haul, folks. Just three more chapters to go. Big hugs to kizzy7 for her sterling efforts. I wouldn't be here without her. Please reveiw. Thanks.

I Know You

Chapter 20 of 22

Severus Snape bumps into his ex-student Hermione Granger, but she's not the Hermione he remembers. Unwittingly pulled into her seedy world, he uncovers a shocking secret.

A/N: A reward for all of your patience... and thank you for all of the lovely reviews. You have all been very kind.

Severus pulled Hermione gently into his bedroom and flicked his wand at the window, pulling the curtains across and lighting the candle sconces. They were on each other in seconds, and Severus kissed Hermione passionately as he fumbled with the buttons on her blouse in his eagerness.

At the last button, his slim fingers were trembling, and he pulled away to watch her blouse slip from her shoulders.

He ran his fingers beneath the loose straps of her bra.

'May I?' he whispered softly.

Hermione could hardly breathe. Her lips were red and swollen from his kiss, and she nodded mutely, hardly daring to believe that this was really happening. Severus smiled at her, his eyes shining as he slipped her bra off. He stepped back and stared at her full breasts and their caramel nipples that stood proud, demanding to be touched.

Hermione shivered with anticipation and watched in awe as he stared at her, his face filled with not just his obvious desire, but also something else that she had never seen before. She felt empowered, and her confidence started to build.

Stepping towards him, she unbuttoned the front of his shirt and planted soft kisses on the exposed skin. She felt him shudder as her breasts grazed his chest, and she lifted his hands and placed them on her, pushing his palms flat against her throbbing nipples.

'Make me feel something, Severus,' she whispered.

Severus groaned and closed his eyes a little as he started to caress her, rubbing his thumbs over her nipples. Hermione gave a small sigh of satisfaction and let her hands explore his torso. She pushed his shirt to the floor and ran her hands over his shoulders, feeling thin scars with her fingertips. Severus sighed softly and moved his hands, wrapping his arms around her and holding her close, kissing the side of her throat a little.

'We have both been scarred by the war, Hermione,' he whispered in her ear.

Hermione felt tears pricking her eyes, and she let the laughter she was feeling bubble up from her throat.

'I can't feel them any more,' she laughed, softly smiling at him.

'I love you,' he whispered, his eyes exploring her face.

'I know you do,' she replied with certainty. 'I love you too.'

Severus smiled at her and covered her mouth with his, crushing her lips and forcing his tongue inside. His hands found the waist of her jeans and he ran his fingers under the edge of the denim, teasing her a little. Hermione moaned and unfastened her own fly in frustration, causing Severus to laugh out loud.

'Patience, witch,' he laughed.

'I have been patient already,' Hermione murmured as her hands found his crotch. She cupped his testicles and ran a finger over the bulge in his jeans, her breath catching in her throat slightly. 'You are huge, aren't you?' she asked him.

'Yes, I am,' he murmured, a smirk on his face.

'Show me,' Hermione whispered hoarsely, taking a step back, her eyes never leaving his crotch.

Severus's eyes burned as he saw the desire in her eyes, and his cock twitched in anticipation as he flicked open the top button and found the zip. He paused for a moment and caught Hermione's gaze, raising his eyebrow in amusement. He pulled down the zip, and the fabric of his jeans almost sighed with relief, sagging forward and revealing tight black boxer-shaped briefs. Severus motioned to Hermione to step closer.

'Take them down for me,' he whispered.

Hermione licked her lips and nodded, hooking her thumbs into his jeans by his slim hips, pulling them firmly downwards. Severus stepped out of them quickly and grabbed Hermione's hand, placing it over his crotch.

'Touch me,' he sighed, closing his eyes and reaching for her breasts as he bent to kiss her.

Hermione groaned as her fingers explored the outline of his cock beneath the stretched fabric. He felt incredible. She gasped as he tweaked her nipples between his fingers and she felt a gush of juices running into her knickers. She couldn't wait any longer, and she allowed her hand to creep into his underwear, taking hold of his thick length tightly in her hand.

'Gods,' Severus hissed as she started to pull the skin up his shaft, her thumb caressing the head of his cock softly.

Severus kissed her deeply and then pulled away sharply, staring down at her.

'Get naked, witch,' he murmured at her, pulling her hand from his cock so he could remove his underwear.

Hermione heard the urgency in his voice, and the butterflies in her stomach started to fly about with joy. Whether Severus was aware of it or not, Hermione had never experienced an orgasm with a man before, but she knew that this time would be different. She was close already, and her pussy was throbbing and very wet.

Quickly, Hermione pulled down her jeans and her knickers, revealing her glistening pubic hair as she did so. Severus was watching her, a feral look in his eye, and he inhaled sharply as he caught the scent of her sex in his nostrils. He grinned at her and took her hands in his, walking backwards until his legs hit the side of his bed. Severus sat down slowly and put his hands on her hips, drawing her closer. Hermione's hands rested on his shoulders as Severus leaned forward and licked at her navel with his tongue. His large hands caressed her buttocks softly, and he squeezed them a little as he let his mouth move downwards slightly to the top of her pubic mound. He nuzzled his large nose there for a moment and inhaled, and then exhaled warm air, making Hermione giggle as it tickled her.

Severus looked up at her and caught her eye, winked at her and shuffled his head downwards. Hermione gasped and grabbed his hair with her hands as she felt his tongue beginning to explore her curls, pushing and probing, and finally, as she hissed and threw her head back, licking.

Severus found her clit and ran his tongue across it slowly and then back again with tiny flicks. He pushed her buttocks forward with his hands and started to devour her, running his tongue around her labia softly and then going back and sucking on her clitoris very gently. He was running out of space, so he lifted her thighs and carried her with him as he laid back on the bed, leaving her straddling his face, her arms in front of her to give her balance. She tipped her head downwards and watched as he pleased her with his mouth. Hermione gasped and moved her pussy over him as she felt her orgasm starting.

'Severus, fuck, I think I'm coming,' she moaned softly, her head collapsing onto her arms. Severus increased his pace and then gently and very slowly inserted a finger into her tightening vagina. Hermione cried out, and her thighs started to shudder violently as her orgasm ripped through. She keened loudly, and her juices spurted over Severus's face forcefully. He smiled beneath her, but Hermione had gone to a different place and didn't feel it. It was some moments before she was back in the room, and

she felt him stroking her face, wiping away the unconscious tears she was now crying.

Hermione smiled up at him gently, her eyes heavy.

'Okay?' he whispered.

'Definitely.' She grinned at him and stretched luxuriously. 'Thank you.'

'Don't thank me yet; I haven't finished with you,' he murmured, bending to kiss her softly.

'Glad to hear it.' She smiled.

'You taste delicious. Do you know that?' he murmured as his hands drifted lazily to stroke her breasts.

Hermione blushed. 'No one has ever tasted me before, so no, I didn't know that,' she giggled.

'Really?' Severus looked at her in surprise, and then a smug smile crossed his face.

They started to kiss again, gently at first, and then with more passion until Severus rolled himself on top of her.

'I can't wait any longer. I have to be inside you,' he whispered, stroking her face with his hand gently and kissing her lips over and over again. Hermione gasped and nodded.

'Please, I want that too.' She kissed him back fiercely, and Severus moaned as he moved his thick cock to her entrance. He paused for a short moment and stared down at her.

'Are we really doing this?' he murmured in amazement, not really expecting an answer.

'If we're not, it's the best dream I've ever had,' Hermione whispered, and tears welled up in her eyes.

'No crying,' he whispered, 'but you can scream if you want to.'

Severus hissed and pushed himself forward, forcing his thick cock into her soft, warm vagina. He gasped and let out a long breath.

'Holy fuck,' he whispered softly, his eyes closed as he bent his head to hers, kissing her tenderly, his tongue snaking in and out of her mouth as it wrestled delicately with hers. He wanted to savour the moment this time, not rush things and have it over with too quickly. But her vagina was clamping down on him, and she felt so good, it was almost painful for him to hold back.

Hermione grabbed Severus's buttocks and urged him to move. Her eyes were tightly closed as she concentrated on the feel of him, and as he started to move his hips, she gasped and tipped her head back a little as he ground his hips against her and rubbed at her clitoris over and over again. He was large, for sure, and she could feel his girth stretching her, his length pounding into her, and his balls hitting her with each thrust. She felt her orgasm building, different this time, intensely burning from deep inside her, as he increased his pace and started to grunt. The sound of his pleasure made Hermione thrum with desire, and she felt a gush of warm moisture cover him as he slid his length in and out of her smoothly.

He was becoming more vocal now, grunting and then shouting out incoherently as he pushed himself up onto his arms for more purchase. Hermione watched his face contorting in pleasure, his sweat soaked hair swinging around his face as his lips twisted into a tight grimace, his eyes half closed. She stared at the sweat trickling down his slim torso and the trail of dark hair leading from his navel to where their bodies were meeting with force now. She could see his cock disappearing inside her, shiny and slick with her juices. His legs were shaking, his cock was going as hard as a rock inside her, and Hermione felt something explode inside her head as she came violently. Her body bucked as he met her with his thrusts, followed by a deep, guttural roar as he came, pinning her to the bed with his cock, pulses of semen hitting her inner walls as he continued to shudder and moan above her.

Hermione lay limp beneath him as he continued to thrust gently, sighing and revelling in the last moments of his pleasure. He opened his eyes and smiled a soft, sated grin as he gazed down at her. Her eyes were closed, her mouth turned upwards at the corners, her skin covered in a soft, glowing sheen of perspiration and her breasts rising and falling quickly as she caught her breath.

'Perfect,' he whispered softly, bending to kiss her soft, swollen mouth.

'Was it?' she smiled, half opening her eyes to look at him.

'Not it. You.' He smiled and kissed her again, so she knew exactly what he meant.

Sunshine

Chapter 21 of 22

Severus Snape bumps into his ex-student Hermione Granger, but she's not the Hermione he remembers. Unwittingly pulled into her seedy world, he uncovers a shocking secret.

A/N: Another little thank you to everyone who has been reading, and an extra hug to my reviewers. You are very much appreciated.

Severus woke early and stretched in his bed. His shoulder brushed against something warm and fluffy, and he glanced over to see Hermione, sound asleep, her hair splayed around her like a soft cloud. Severus smiled slowly, and then he swung his legs over the side of the bed and walked over to the window.

He parted the curtains with his pale fingers and saw the sun rising in the sky, its bright rays hitting him in the eyes and dazzling him as he blinked.

'I hope the neighbours can't see you,' Hermione mumbled from the bed.

Severus smirked and looked at her. She was peering up at him and running her fingers through her silky curls.

'Let them look,' he laughed softly.

'You are naked, Severus. Come back to bed.' She stretched her arm out to him sleepily.

'It looks like a beautiful day,' he said, letting the curtain fall back softly.

Hermione raised her head from the pillow a little and looked him in the eye, a small smile on her face.

'It does,' she said softly.

Severus climbed in beside her, and Hermione turned to him, eagerly pulling him towards her for a kiss. She wrapped her arms around his neck as he splayed his hands against her sides, letting his thumbs drift to stroke the undersides of her breasts.

Severus pulled back a little and stared down at Hermione, his eyes exploring her face.

'Where do we go from here?' he asked her tentatively.

Hermione smiled at him. 'Where do you want to go?'

'Everywhere.' He trailed kisses down her throat softly. 'Anywhere.' He took a nipple into his mouth softly and ran his tongue over it, making Hermione wriggle a little. 'I don't care, as long as you are with me,' he murmured.

'I'm not going anywhere,' she whispered and ran her hands through his hair, 'I'm not playing with you, Severus. I'm not leaving you again. It's been agony, being without you.' She stared him in the eyes.

'I've missed you more than I could ever say,' he said hoarsely.

'Why you didn't write to me?' It was a burning question she had to ask.

Severus paused and looked at her, his eyes haunted. 'I tried to write. I couldn't make it to the end of the letter,' he whispered softly and averted his gaze, 'without begging you to come home. I wanted you to come back because you wanted to, not because I was so desperate.'

'If you had told me you loved me, I would never have gone,' she said.

'I know. I have been very foolish.' He kissed her breasts softly. 'Forgive me, my love.'

'If you keep talking like that, I could forgive you anything,' she sighed, running her fingers through his hair.

'Kiss me,' he whispered, closing his eyes.

Hermione raised her head from the pillow to reach his mouth, and as her shoulders left the bed, Severus wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close as they kissed deeply, their tongues finding each other and exploring each other's mouths fervently. Gently, slowly, Severus rolled onto his back, pulling her on top of him and letting her legs fall to either side of his thighs. Her breasts pushed into his chest firmly as he held her tight against him and continued to kiss her. She tasted so sweet. He felt he could kiss her for the rest of his life, and as the thought ran through his head, he decided that was exactly what he would do.

Hermione's hair was covering their faces like a curtain, and Severus lifted his hand to brush it back across her shoulders, and then he used the same hand to cup her breast gently, stroking and caressing the creamy flesh. As they continued to kiss, small noises of desire started to escape their mouths, small gasps and moans as their hands started to explore each other. Severus's hand had wandered between Hermione's thighs, his fingers slipping between her labia smoothly, stroking and caressing her outer lips and gently skimming over her clit. Hermione's hand was in Severus's hair as she kissed him deeply, her other wrapped around his stiff cock and moving slowly up and down his shaft, causing him to jerk his hips as she squeezed.

'Make love to me, witch,' Severus whispered softly, nibbling on her ear as she closed her eyes and arched her neck a little. He moved his hand from her crotch and held her hips as she positioned his cock at her pussy, teasing the tip gently and rubbing her juices over him.

Hermione stared down at him, her hands in his hair and stroking his face as she kissed him, her tongue licking over his lips gently.

'I love you,' she whispered, and then she closed her eyes as she pushed herself firmly down onto his cock and gasped with pleasure, her eyes rolling slightly. She bit her bottom lip in concentration and moved her pelvis back and forth along his length. Severus groaned as she did so and cupped her breasts with his hands, and she moved herself into a sitting position. She felt him go deeper and groaned, sweat forming on her top lip as she started to grind herself on top of him slowly. She found a rhythm that suited them both, not too fast and not too slow, and she recognised her orgasm building to match his. Severus was squeezing her nipples harder now, pulling and tugging and moaning her name over and over as he gave himself to her.

Hermione let her fingers thrum her clit softly, and then she tipped her pelvis so that the head of Severus's cock could pound on her g-spot with each thrust as she quickened and started to bounce on top of him.

'Oh, Severus,' she gasped, throwing her head back. 'Yes, gods, yes, yes.'

Hermione came with a small cry, hissing as Severus started to buck his hips upwards, holding onto her pelvis with a firm grip.

'Oh, ahh, gods, now, fuck, oh, yes,' he sighed, thrusting hard upwards and nudging against her cervix as he came, his legs shuddering beneath her.

Hermione collapsed on top of him and Severus wrapped his arms around her softly, marvelling at how incredible making love to her was. He was no stranger to sex, but this was something totally different. He had no desire to fuck her brains out just yet, but he was sure that would come later. This was more than a physical connection. It was something to be treasured.

Hermione snuggled her face into his neck, and Severus smiled.

They couldn't stop smiling at each other. As they walked with their arms around each other, they kept glancing at each other with stupid, silly grins on their faces. It wouldn't take a genius to see that they were madly in love. At one point, they caught each other's glance and started laughing, and Severus grabbed her and kissed her thoroughly before swinging her around a little.

'I don't remember ever feeling this happy,' Hermione laughed at him.

'Last Friday, in the curry house. You were swooning over your Chicken Tikka Massala,' Severus stated flatly, his mouth twitching.

Hermione punched him in the arm playfully. 'You make me happier than any curry, Severus Snape, and don't you forget it,' she said, grinning. She grabbed his hand, and they walked contentedly through the village until they arrived at the cottage. Pausing at the gate, Hermione looked at him.

'You're sure you don't want to change your mind?' She bit her lip and frowned.

'I asked you, remember?' he chuckled.

'I know, but, well, it was the heat of the moment,' Hermione blushed, and an image of their limbs entwined, his lips on hers, swam into her view.

Severus stepped towards her and pulled her close, bending his head and kissing her again gently.

'I have never been more sure of anything. Come on.' He took her hand firmly and walked her up the path to the yellow door, where Hermione proceeded to step from one foot to the other nervously.

Severus watched her for a moment and rolled his eyes a little. 'I'll knock, shall I?' he murmured in amusement.

The door opened and Ginny stood with Albus in her arms, beaming at them both.

'Hello,' she said slowly, glancing from one to the other of them with a knowing look on her face.

They both stared at her and then at each other, and then they started to laugh.

'Thank God,' Ginny said, laughing at them. 'Come in, then.'

They stepped into the house quickly, following Ginny into the lounge. Albus had been straining to get to Severus since he had seen him on the doorstep, his arms outstretched, and Severus didn't need persuading to take the child from his grateful mother.

Hermione watched him with renewed interest as he expertly sat the boy on his knee and started to chat to him and keep him entertained. Ginny poked her in the arm, and Hermione jumped before turning to face her.

'Welcome home.' Ginny smiled, tears glistening in her eyes. They hugged tightly and Hermione wiped small tears from her eyes as she laughed softly.

'I missed you,' she said to Ginny, 'and Harry. Where is he?'

'In the garden with James.' Ginny nodded at the window. Hermione turned to look and saw Harry playing Muggle soccer with James, who had grown taller in the couple of months she had been away.

'I'll help you make tea, shall I?' Hermione looked pointedly at Ginny, who caught on pretty quickly that she wanted a girly chat with her best friend.

'That would be great. Severus, can you look after Albus?' Ginny asked him sweetly.

Severus wasn't fooled and looked at them with a raised eyebrow. He gazed at Albus seriously.

'We are lost to these women, Albus. There is no hope,' he murmured.

He waved Hermione and Ginny away with his hand and a quiet 'shoo', and then he withdrew his wand to provide some visual entertainment for his godson.

Ginny followed Hermione and closed the kitchen door, casting a Silencing Spell.

'Well?' Ginny grinned at her.

'Oh my God!' Hermione squealed, and then she jumped around the kitchen like an excited child for a moment.

Ginny laughed so hard her stomach started to hurt, and she choked a little as tears ran down her face, 'That good, is he? Thought he might be when I saw the grin on your face. I'm so happy for you.' She smiled at her friend.

'I feel like pinching myself, it's so amazing. He said he loves me, and...' Hermione stopped talking and bit her lip. She was interrupted as the back door opened, and Harry and a breathless James came into the room.

'Auntie Mione,' James shouted, and he threw himself at her, hugging her legs tightly as she ruffled his hair.

'Hello, you. Uncle Severus is here. Go and say hello and tell him the tea will be ready in a minute, okay?' She smiled at him and then grinned as he shouted Severus's name at the top of his voice and ran into the sitting room.

Harry smiled at her softly and looked her up and down. He glanced at Ginny, who nodded and smiled, and let out a long breath.

'Halle fucking luia,' he sighed, and he pulled Hermione into his arms for a long hug.

'How do you feel?' he whispered in her ear.

'Great,' she murmured back, smiling. Harry squeezed her tightly and then let go, grinning.

Severus arrived in the doorway and smirked at them all.

'Everyone caught up then? Excellent. I thought I might help "make the tea" too,' he chuckled.

Hermione smiled and walked over to him, pulling him to her for a hug. 'I haven't told them everything,' she whispered softly, and then she turned, keeping her arm around his waist gently.

Severus gazed at her slowly, gaping as she pushed him a little with her hand.

'Me? But they're your friends,' he murmured.

'Yours, too. You're family, more to the point.' Hermione glared at him, her face flushing as they continued their small domestic in front of a grinning Ginny and Harry.

'For God's sake, Hermione,' he whispered, urging her with his eyes.

Hermione sighed, 'Okay,' and turned to her friends shyly.

'We're getting married,' she whispered, saying it out loud for the first time and closing her eyes.

The sound of deep, booming laughter filled the kitchen, and three pairs of eyes turned on Severus incredulously.

Hermione grinned a little. 'It is weird, isn't it, seeing Professor Snape laughing?'

Epilogue

Chapter 22 of 22

Severus Snape bumps into his ex-student Hermione Granger, but she's not the Hermione he remembers. Unwittingly pulled into her seedy world, he uncovers a shocking secret.

A/N: Here we are then. Thanks to all who have read, hugs to those who have taken the time to review and a thank you to the admins here at TPP for being so kind.

Last but not least, a round of applause and a shiny award in the shape of a mis-placed comma for my fantastic beta, kizzy7, who has been educational and a very good friend. Thanks, honey.

Severus walked down the long corridor with wide strides, his robes billowing around his legs, and his silky, long hair blowing softly around his face.

He arrived at the outer office of the Ministry of Magic with only seconds to go, and he put his hand forcefully onto the desk of the small Reception Wizard.

'Snape. I have a meeting with the Minister,' he murmured.

Archibald Fothergill looked up at Severus over the top of his half-moon spectacles. He wasn't intimidated by the Professor for various reasons, the main being that he worked closely with the tall man's wife and she had, on occasion, shared some of their more comical domestic occurrences. Archie knew that deep down, Severus Snape could be a bit of a softie.

'Professor,' he replied, nodding, 'nice to see you again. I will let the Minister know you are here.'

Archie stood and walked across the impressive space, knocking loudly on a large oak door. A muffled voice spoke, and he smiled and opened the door, peering inside quickly. 'Professor Snape to see you, Minister,' he said clearly, and then he nodded and turned to Severus. 'You may go in, sir.'

Archie held the door open, and as Severus swept past, he said, 'Oh, Professor?'

'Yes?' Severus looked down at Archie, who bowed his head slowly.

'Congratulations, sir.' He smiled.

Severus flashed him a rare smile of his own. 'Thank you, Mr Fothergill.'

Severus walked into the office and the door shut firmly behind him. Archie felt a prickle of magic, and he knew that the Professor had cast his own wards and a Silencing Charm over the Minister's office. His face remained passive. He was the Minister's right-hand man and never revealed any secrets.

The Minister was standing behind a large oak desk, waiting for Severus to cross the room.

'Minister,' he said, nodding.

'Professor Snape.' The Minister smiled at him. 'Don't bother sitting down. Get yourself over here right now.'

'What you are suggesting would be inappropriate, given the circumstances.' He smirked.

'It is very appropriate. Now, come and kiss your wife, Severus.' Hermione put her hands on her hips, and Severus knew she meant business.

'Well, if you put it like that.' He grinned at her and walked around the ridiculously large desk and took her in his arms. He bent his head to hers and paused.

'I have dreamed of this moment.' He smiled.

'Me too,' she said softly, and her eyes filled with sentimental tears. Their lips touched and tongues met, and with a swift movement Severus lifted Hermione to sit on her desk. He pulled her legs around his waist suggestively and deepened the kiss. Hermione moaned into his mouth and reluctantly pushed him away.

'Not here,' she said quietly. 'I would never get any work done if I knew you had taken me on my desk. It would be too distracting.' She smiled at him as she fingered the buttons of his robes.

'That's why I always try and tempt you,' he whispered in her ear, making her shudder.

'Is everything ready for this evening?' she asked him.

'Of course it is. You have everything planned, so stop panicking. Nothing will go wrong.' He stroked her face gently and smiled at her.

'And the children?' she asked him.

'Organised to the nth degree, naturally. They take after their mother.' He smirked.

'Personality wise, at least,' she replied, laughing softly.

'I love you,' he whispered, and his eyes sparkled brightly at her.

Hermione smiled up at him softly. 'Even after all of this time?'

'Let's think.' He put his finger to her lips to keep her quiet, knowing she would try and cut to the chase as usual. 'Seven years as my insufferable student, one year as a friend, another year and two months as my intended, and twenty-five years as my wonderful, loving, and incredibly sexy, wife. I would say that's love, wouldn't you?' He grinned at her, and Hermione laughed out loud.

'You've been practising. Well done.' She grinned.

'I fall more in love with you each day, Hermione. I always will.' He smiled and kissed her tenderly, stroking her hair with his long, pale fingers.

'Oh, Severus.' Hermione sighed deeply and hugged him close, inhaling the musky aroma from his robes deeply. 'You were in the Potions lab,' she stated.

'I was, yes. I had to cover a class before I came here,' he said, stepping away from her a little.

'And how is Minerva today?' Hermione frowned slightly as she thought of her old Head of House.

Severus sighed deeply. 'She is not improving. I fear if she doesn't get better soon, I shall be stuck at Hogwarts for the rest of my life,' he muttered.

'It's only temporary, Severus. I wouldn't have asked you to cover for her otherwise and you know that. Who else would you have trusted to run the school? Most of the professors are far too young now to handle that level of responsibility. Anyway,' Hermione said as she pushed herself off the desk smoothly, 'Minerva only needs to rest for another few weeks, and then she will be up and about again.'

'Let's hope so,' he grumbled, and then he sighed deeply. 'To business?'

'Yes.' Hermione nodded briskly and sat in her chair as Severus sat in the one on the other side of the desk.

Pushing her hair behind her ears, Hermione lifted her quill and charmed it to take the minutes of the meeting. 'What's first?' she asked.

Severus smirked. 'House-elves, naturally.'

Hermione flashed him a winning smile. 'Excellent' she said.

Amber Snape rushed into the house, her long black hair rippling behind her as she ran up the stairs two at a time.

'Noah,' she called, 'where the hell are you?'

She threw open her bedroom door and dropped the shopping bags she was carrying into the centre of the bed.

'Noah!' she almost screamed. She was about to go and search properly for her brother when she looked up and saw him leaning against her bedroom door, his hands shoved into the pockets of his jeans, his black hair tucked behind his ears.

'Was there something, sister dear?' he drawled slowly, his eyes dancing in amusement.

'Please, tell me you finished the jobs list I left you.' Amber put her hand over her heart dramatically, and Noah laughed out loud.

'Of course I did. I wouldn't risk getting on your bad side, but more than that, I know this is a special night, Amber. Trust me.' He flashed her a smile, and Amber visibly relaxed until she saw the involuntary shuffle of his feet. Amber's eyes narrowed and she stepped towards him.

'What have you done?' she said quietly, staring him in the eye.

'Look,' Noah said, putting his hands up to protect himself, 'it's all done. That's all you need to know.'

Amber looked at him closely and bit her lip. She paused, and her brow furrowed a little, and then she clicked her fingers in triumph.

'You used Winky,' she hissed in disgust.

Noah groaned. 'Please don't say anything to Mum. She will totally freak out. Winky wanted to help, anyway,' he muttered.

'"Helping" is fine, Noah. It's when she does all the work and you just watch her that's the problem.' Amber curled her lip slightly.

'I paid her, okay? Happy now?' Noah looked indignant.

'Paid her with what? There is no way she would accept anything, Noah: I'm not stupid.' Amber looked at him incredulously.

'No, well, I offered to pay her. It's not my fault she refused it,' he muttered.

Amber sighed and ran her hands through her hair. She glanced at the clock. It was old and a little careworn, but it was one that had belonged to her grandmother on her father's side, and she loved it for that reason.

'Shit! Look at the time. We have to be there in half an hour. Go and get ready. I'll meet you downstairs.' Amber dismissed him with a wave of her hand and turned her attention to the shopping bags, tipping them up and emptying the contents into disarray. She pulled out the Slytherin green dress and heels, took off the price labels quickly, and then dashed into the shower.

Noah looked down at his shoes. They probably weren't as clean as they should be, so he rubbed at them with his sleeve just as Amber walked in the room. He looked up at her quickly and then did a double take. He had never seen his sister looking so beautiful and his eyes widened. Her hair was piled high with ringlets that she had pinned to her head and the black colour stood out starkly against the shimmering green of her dress. She was wearing the emerald necklace their parents had given her for her twenty-first birthday, and around her shoulders she was wearing a lacy, sparkly shrug to match the dress.

'Wow, look at you.' He whistled slowly.

Amber smiled and then shrugged a little. 'I wanted to look my best for Mum and Dad.'

Noah snorted and muttered under his breath, 'More like Albus.'

'I heard you, Noah Snape. If you breathe a word to Dad, I will personally tie your bollocks in a knot. Do you hear me?' Amber's eyes flashed dangerously.

'He will find out eventually, Amber. You know he always finds out your secrets.' He grinned at her.

'Is that right? I always suspected he had a little help in that area, myself.' She glared at him, and Noah averted his gaze, blushing furiously.

'Anyway,' Amber continued, 'you have a little secret of your own, Noah. Don't think I haven't seen the looks you've been giving Lily Potter.' She smiled smugly as Noah's face went from red to white in a matter of seconds.

'I don't know what you're talking about!' Noah snapped at her.

Amber just laughed at him, and then she turned to lift the gifts she had neatly wrapped the previous day.

'Portkeys?' she asked Noah quickly, her mind racing ahead.

'Sorted. Uncle Harry helped me out with them.' He nodded.

'And you haven't told them anything?' She glared at him again.

'No way. I can't wait to see their faces, actually.' He smiled. Noah loved his parents very much, but they had been particularly strict, especially when he and Amber were small. The thought that something had been organised without their knowledge made him rub his hands with glee. This would shut them up for a change.

'Right. Let's go.' Amber lifted a handful of Floo powder and stepped into the fireplace.

The party was in full swing. Ministry dignitaries, friends, family and even business acquaintances had been invited to the formal reception to celebrate the silver wedding anniversary of Hermione and Severus Snape, Minister of Magic, and acting Headmaster of Hogwarts School, respectively. A photographer from the *Daily Prophet* was zooming around the room, telling everyone that such an illustrious event was guaranteed a two-page spread.

Hermione's laughter could be heard punctuating the polite conversation occasionally as she and Severus mingled with their guests. She was wearing a tasteful velvet gown in a rich shade of chestnut brown, her hair styled in an elegant chignon at the nape of her neck. She was also wearing an understated necklace in gold, with a heart shaped pendant hanging from it that had been cut from a piece of amber. Severus had given it to her as a gift just after Noah was born. If she spoke the incantation and tapped it with her wand, the heart would flash up various memories of her, Severus and the children. But only she and Severus knew that. To the general observer, it was just a piece of jewellery.

Severus was being particularly attentive to her, cupping her elbow with his hand protectively as they moved from one group to the next, smiling and nodding their thanks at various wishes of congratulations, some genuine and some most definitely not. Once they had finished a circuit of the room, Severus guided Hermione over to the buffet table subtly.

'How are you holding up?' He eyed her with concern. The Ministry job was a hard one at the best of times, and the added pressure of organising the reception had started to tell on her face. She looked tired this evening.

'I'm exhausted, to be truthful. But it's going well, don't you think?' Her eyes scanned the room of guests in their finery, a small smile on her face.

'Have something to eat,' he murmured, handing her a plate of food.

Hermione shook her head slightly. 'I'm not hungry, Severus. Really, I'm fine. I could do with a glass of something.'

Severus stared at her a little askance. Hermione hadn't taken any alcohol since before they married, and this was the first time he had heard her mention it in many, many years.

'Do you want some champagne?' he asked her quietly.

Hermione turned and looked at him, her face clouded a little. 'No, I don't think that's a very good idea. I'll have some fruit juice.'

'What is it, my love?' Severus put his arm around her shoulder and pulled her closer to him.

Hermione sighed deeply. 'It's nothing, really. I was just thinking about my parents. They would have loved all of this,' she said as she waved her hand around the room, 'and it made me realise how much I have missed them over the years. They never met you. They didn't see their grandchildren. Neither did your parents, for that matter.'

Severus frowned down at her a little, and then he pulled her close for a hug.

'Your parents would have been incredibly proud of you. And the children,' he murmured into her hair.

'And you,' Hermione mumbled as she squeezed him tightly. 'Is it too early to leave, do you think?'

Severus chuckled slightly. 'A little early, I think.'

Hermione started to laugh and pulled away to look into Severus's face. 'Can you imagine the headline in the *Prophet*? "Minister leaves early to shag Hogwarts Head senseless?" Not a good idea.' She grinned.

'Great idea, actually. But it may raise a few eyebrows. Not least from these two.' He nodded over her head and she turned, smiling as her children came towards her.

She pulled them into a hug.

'Having fun?' she asked them, grinning.

'Amber is.' Noah grinned. 'She's getting loads of male attention.'

Amber rolled her eyes and caught Severus's eyes glinting a little as he looked at her interestedly.

'He's just joking, Dad. Honestly,' she muttered and glared at Noah, who winked at her.

'I hope he is not joking. You look beautiful this evening; it's only right you get attention,' Severus murmured. 'However, Albus is my godson, and I wouldn't want his heart broken, Amber.'

Amber's jaw dropped as she stared at her father, who smirked at her knowingly, and then she turned on Noah, her hands on her hips and her eyes flaring.

'You said you wouldn't tell him,' she shouted.

Hermione stood quickly between them as Noah took a step back.

'Hang on, Amber, just wait before you blame your brother as usual.' Hermione put her arm through her daughter's and pulled her to one side.

Hermione stared up into Amber's face. She took so much after her father in looks, her eyes the same dark obsidian, her hair jet black. And tonight she was stunning.

'You do look beautiful tonight, my darling,' she whispered and softly stroked the side of her face.

'Thanks, Mum.' Amber smiled, showing off her two dimples as she did so.

'I told your father about Albus, Amber. I thought it was better coming from me. Albus has been fretting for weeks, worrying about what your Dad would do to him if he thought he was sneaking around behind his back. You know they're close,' Hermione said calmly.

Amber closed her eyes and sighed. 'Was Dad cool about it?' she murmured, trying to catch her Dad's expression as he spoke with Noah.

'He has concerns; we both do. Albus is almost a cousin to you, and you have grown up together. But we won't interfere.' Hermione smiled warmly at her, and Amber

breathed a sigh of relief, hugging Hermione tightly.

'I love you, Mum,' she breathed softly.

Severus walked over to them and placed his hand on Hermione's shoulder.

'Duty calls, I believe.' He peered at her, his lips twitching. Hermione glanced over to where a huge cake sat on a dais, and they saw they were being beckoned over by the Chief of Catering, a house-elf named Bernard.

'Right.' Hermione nodded.

Linking her hand into his arm, Hermione walked with Severus as a huge round of applause rang out from the crowd. After a few congratulatory words from the Head of the Department of Mysteries, Hermione and Severus cut the cake to another round of applause. As they stepped down from the dais, Amber and Noah met them, smiling.

'Come with us,' Amber murmured, linking her arm through her fathers as Noah took Hermione and lead them through the crowd. On a small table in the corner of the room, a pile of gifts was sitting waiting for them, along with Harry and Ginny and their children, who were grinning broadly at them.

Noah looked at his parents and smirked. This was going to be priceless.

'You have to open your gifts,' he said and held up a small package and waved it at them. 'This one last, though.'

Severus looked at his son with a practised eye. 'What's going on?' he said, chuckling.

'That would be telling.' Noah grinned, and as he looked away he caught Lily Potter's eye and blushed. She smiled at him slowly, and he grinned back at her sheepishly.

Hermione noticed, as did Ginny, and they looked at each other with a "here we go again" roll of the eyes before starting to giggle together.

'Well, wife. Here you go. Open it.' Severus handed her one of the gifts, and Hermione smiled as she unwrapped it. It was a framed photograph of them on their wedding day from Harry and Ginny.

'Lovely.' Hermione smiled and gazed down at the picture, tears forming as she looked at Severus gazing into her face adoringly.

'Your turn, Severus. Take this one.' Hermione handed him a smaller package. A small, illustrated copy of the "Kama Sutra" fell out of the wrapping paper, and as Severus flipped over the label, he chuckled.

'Thanks, Son.' He said, smirking.

'Noah!' Hermione exclaimed, a little shocked.

'I thought a little spice might be a good idea.' He laughed slowly.

Amber dug him in the ribs and glared at him, but he didn't stop laughing. Instead, he handed them the smaller parcel and grinned.

'You have to open this together,' he said.

Hermione smiled up at Severus, and between them they picked at the Spell-o-Tape to reveal a snow globe, containing two crystal lovebirds, flying and spinning around each other within the glass dome. Severus held it to the light, and Hermione gasped as she realised the birds were real. She lifted a finger to the dome and touched it softly just as it began to glow with a soft blue light.

Severus looked at her in horror, and they stared back at their family as they realised the gift was a Portkey. The last thing they saw was Noah, waving at them cheekily as they felt themselves start to spin away from the party.

After what seemed like twenty minutes but was in reality much less than that, Hermione and Severus landed on their feet in a very familiar part of London.

Severus looked at Hermione and smiled warmly at her.

'Clever.' He nodded. Hermione put her hand to her mouth in surprise and started to laugh.

'Hungry?' he asked her, holding out his hand.

Hermione laughed. 'I am now.' She grinned at him.

Together, they pushed open the door of the shop and went to sit in their usual table. They got a few glances from the customers as they walked past in their evening clothes, but neither of them cared.

The waiter came to their table and grinned.

'Mr and Mrs Snape, congratulations, yes?' He smiled warmly at them.

Hermione smiled at him. 'You knew about this?'

'Yes miss. Miss Amber organised everything, and Mr Noah.' He smiled.

Severus chuckled softly. 'Might have known', he murmured, and then he turned as he heard familiar laughter behind him.

They watched as the door opened. Amber entered, followed by a grinning Albus, looking very smart in a black suit. Next came James, taller than his brother and already engaged to a blonde witch from Beauxbatons. Noah and Lily came in together, not looking at each other but blushing all the same. Then, Harry held the door open for Ginny, who was carrying the rest of the gifts. They grinned and waved at Hermione and Severus, who were laughing to themselves.

Severus took Hermione's hand in his and kissed her gently.

'Curry nights might never be the same again.' He smiled at her.

The End