

This Time

by Subversa

After the fall of Voldemort, an inexplicable illness plagues the surviving Death Eaters. Albus Dumbledore has a plan to save Severus Snape—but how, exactly, is Hermione Granger involved?

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 16

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This Time

Chapter 1

Are these times contagious?

I've never been this bored before

Is this the prize I've waited for?

Run - by Collective Soul

Minerva McGonagall started out of her seat with such violence that she disturbed Filius Flitwick, who had been having a bit of an after-dinner kip at her side upon the

staffroom sofa. 'Sybill!' Minerva cried.

In spite of the heat of the late August night, the Divination teacher was wrapped in shawls and scarves. Just now, she sat bolt upright in her armchair near the fire, staring with unseeing eyes into the middle distance, her delicate blue china teacup smashed upon the stone floor at her feet.

Filius crossed the room and placed a comforting hand upon Professor Trelawney's arm. 'Sybill?' he said tentatively. 'Sybill, are you all right?'

Minerva darted to the hearth with surprising agility in a witch of her age. Snatching powder from the box upon the mantelpiece, she threw it into the fire, and when the flames flared green, she spoke the name of Albus Dumbledore.

When his head appeared amongst the flames, Minerva began to speak over the harsh, loud voice of Professor Trelawney. 'Headmaster!' she said urgently, 'Come quickly! Sybill is prophesying!'

Lucius Malfoy was dead.

Severus Snape stared at the newspaper, noting as if watching the hands of a stranger how the long fingers trembled upon the newsprint.

Malfoy, head of the well-known Wiltshire family, was serving a ten year sentence in Azkaban for war crimes. He is the ninth Death Eater to die of an unknown quick-acting illness in the last three days. Authorities are puzzled as to the origin of the disease, which has yet to be identified and which fails to respond to standard Healing Spells.

'We are taking the matter very seriously,' a senior Ministry official said, when contacted for comment. 'There is no sign of poisoning. Death Investigators are searching diligently for an answer to this mystery.'

When asked if the remaining six incarcerated Death Eaters were at risk for contracting this illness, the Ministry official declined to speculate.

The newspaper now bore damp spots and some of the type had smeared from the sweat of his palms. Severus let it fall to the tabletop and scrubbed at his hands with a serviette and then shoved the sleeve of his robes up and stared at the Mark on his left forearm.

'Stupid git,' he muttered to himself. The Mark had been the cause of virtually every ill to befall him in his adult life, up to and including his current confinement.

Why? Why had he been so stupid?

Lurching into the downstairs lavatory, he splashed water on his face then stared into the mirror over the sink, water dripping from his chin. His stringy black hair hung limply past his shoulders...why bother with even the most basic attempts at tidiness when he went nowhere and was seen by no one? ...and his hooked nose jutted above thin lips bracketed by lines of grim frustration. His black eyes stared out of a sallow face, made all the more unhealthy looking by three long months of virtual incarceration.

Resentment burned through him, bringing a teeth-baring snarl to his face. With a muttered curse, he strode back to sit at the rickety table, lifting a quickly cooling cup of tea to his lips. It had been three months since the fall of the Dark Lord, and still Severus lurked in Secret-Kept Spinner's End, awaiting the resolution of his fate, which remained, as always, in hands other than his own. Dumbledore worked tirelessly on his behalf...or so he claimed...yet the Wizengamot were steadfast in their refusal to grant a complete pardon to a 'known Death Eater' without first questioning him. The temptation to flee, to leave behind, one and for all, the memories of a life which had been wholly unsatisfactory practically since the moment of his birth, was with him constantly. Only Dumbledore's insistence that he remain to witness his own justification...the sweet victory *that* promised, over all the nay-sayers and detractors who had disparaged and demeaned him...held him hostage to his own desire to be vindicated. He knew, intellectually, it was weakness to want validation, but he *craved* it. Let his enemies live to regret their treatment of him...to behold him elevated to the rank of hero and awarded an Order of Merlin for his years of service...it would be sweetness beyond imagining to witness their teeth-gnashing mortification.

The wards on the Floo in the sitting room fluttered like fingers upon his skin, and seconds later, he heard the voice.

'Severus?'

Abandoning his uneaten toast, Severus hastened into the sitting room, where Albus Dumbledore stood, magically removing Floo soot from his deep purple robes.

'What's happening?' Severus demanded.

Ignoring Severus' question, Dumbledore said, 'Do you have Polyjuice Potion?'

Severus sneered. 'Yes,' he said bitterly. 'It's the only safe way for me to get the marketing done.'

Dumbledore did not miss this snide reference to Severus' near house-arrest. 'Then you will enjoy the outing,' he said, pulling two corked phials from his pocket. 'You can use a hair from either Filius or Remus.'

Severus received the phials with an expression of loathing. 'Such options? I am to choose between a dwarf and a werewolf?'

'Be quick about it,' Dumbledore said tersely. 'We have an appointment at Azkaban to examine the bodies of the deceased Death Eaters, Severus...don't you want to know why they're dying?'

His nostrils flared, and he glowered at his former employer. 'I'm *dying* to know why they're dying,' he muttered, and without further ado, Severus strode into the kitchen and fetched the phial of Polyjuice Potion.

The morgue at Azkaban was, if anything, more dank and dreary than the prisoners' cells. Four slabs held the undraped bodies of Severus' former fellow Death Eaters, whilst five other draped forms on magical gurneys were hovering against the far wall. The slab nearest the doorway held the nude body of Lucius Malfoy, his cold skin nearly the colour of the marble upon which he lay.

Severus looked upon Lucius, and his chest felt suddenly tight with grief. Lucius had accepted him...Lucius had welcomed him...Lucius had introduced him to the Dark Lord. *Damn you, Malfoy. With whom else on the planet can I ever again simply be myself?* he thought, holding his hands tightly fisted at his sides, his lips pressed firmly together. He sighed, wishing he could rid himself of these unwelcome, chaotic emotions as easily as he expelled the burst of air from his nose.

Thankfully, there was work to be done.

Severus set about his task with detached efficiency, examining his deceased friend's body minutely, looking for any sign of irregularity or blemish. He had chosen Lupin's hair for the Polyjuice Potion, and though the werewolf's body was very close to his in height, Lupin's hands were, in comparison to his own, thick-fingered and clumsy. He gritted his teeth over the indignity of his diminution in status from Dumbledore's right-hand man to that of the secret skulker who was forced to concede his favoured position to the likes of a *werewolf*, but there was no time now to indulge his dislike for Remus Lupin; there was work to be done.

He carried on.

In matters of Dark magic, Dumbledore almost always deferred to Severus' superior knowledge and experience. The Headmaster stood at his shoulder, asking occasional questions, but otherwise maintaining a respectful silence. Severus levitated Lucius' body to turn it over, and he noted with silent appreciation that Dumbledore gently adjusted Lucius' head to one side, so that the corpse lay arse-up but not nose-down.

'What were the symptoms of the illness that killed them?' Severus asked after a time, his brow furrowed. He had examined the body from the toenails to the top of the blond head, both front and back, and the only blemish he had found was the Dark Mark. He began to cast spells for the detection of Dark magic or other Dark agents whilst the Headmaster answered.

'Sudden onset of high fever which did not respond to Fever Reduction Spells or Anti-Viral Spells; there was no detectible bacterial infection.' Dumbledore frowned and turned to look at the collection of bodies crowding the room. 'The Healers were flummoxed; they tried every measure, including some experimental Muggle procedures, but to no avail. Within twenty-four hours, the body systems closed down one by one until the victims were dead.'

Severus scowled. The only Darkness in Lucius' body was an echo, contained in the Dark Mark. 'Do they have any ... current cases?'

Dumbledore glanced at him sharply. 'Victims who have not yet died?' he clarified.

Severus nodded once, his lips clamped and contorted with dread.

The Hospital Wing of Azkaban, although somewhat warmer than the morgue, was nevertheless a grim room with three beds, all of which were occupied. The Healer-in-Charge, a dodgy-looking character who had a faint smell of drink about him, insisted upon casting an Infection-Resistance Charm upon Severus and Dumbledore before allowing them into the room with the sick wizards. Severus approached the bed holding Walden Macnair, who appeared to be unaware of the presence of visitors. Macnair's eyes were closed, and his head tossed about on his pillow, sweat gleaming on his face.

Severus raised his wand and cast a series of Dark Detection Spells. Turning from Macnair, he repeated the process on Yaxley and again on Rowle. As the last spell dissipated, Dumbledore stepped forward and lifted Rowle's left arm.

'Do I interpret these spells correctly?' he asked sotto voce. 'Is the curse concentrated in their Dark Marks?'

Severus felt an icy, sick fear in the pit of his stomach. 'Yes,' he said. 'And from my memory of the sequence of events, it would appear that they are sickening...and dying...in chronological order from the time they received their Dark Marks.' He stared into the old man's face with unconcealed panic. 'Walden Macnair was four years ahead of me in school, and Yaxley and Rowle were a year behind him. I ...' he began, but could not continue. Instead, he turned abruptly, striding out of the room and down the corridor, his only desire to walk out into the fresh air and enjoy what was sure to be his last day on earth.

Severus Apparated into his sitting room, feeling the disquiet in his flesh that was the sign that the Polyjuice Potion was wearing off. Shuddering with thankfulness to be rid of the werewolf's body, he strode to the drinks tray, pouring Firewhisky into a glass and downing it in one go.

Dumbledore Apparated in an instant later.

'If you were the friend you purport yourself to be, you'd use the Killing Curse on me now,' Severus ground out.

'No, I am *not* going to kill you,' the old man responded, sounding slightly amused.

'Why not?' Severus asked querulously. 'I'd do it for you, if you asked me.'

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled, damn him. 'Then let us be thankful I never asked you to do so,' he said gravely.

'Go away,' Severus snarled, turning to refill his glass. 'I cannot abide your accursed cheerfulness!'

'Severus,' Dumbledore chided, 'I have only your best interests at heart.'

With a sudden loss of energy, like a balloon swiftly losing air, Severus collapsed into a shabby armchair and stared at his knees, the mind-numbing terror buffeting him relentlessly. 'Go away, Albus,' he repeated, dread transmuting seamlessly from heart-pounding fear to stomach-roiling nausea. 'I would prefer to be alone.'

The Headmaster conjured a comfortable chair and sat down, his knobby knees nearly touching Severus'. 'Listen to me,' he said. Hearing the change in Dumbledore's tone, Severus looked up into the kind old face. 'Have you ever known me not to have a plan?'

Severus felt a moment of hope. 'Do you know how to counter the curse?'

Dumbledore shook his head. 'No. If I could remove the Mark from your arm, you would not be affected by the curse, but in all the years we have researched it together, we have never been able to devise a way to remove your Dark Mark.'

Hope plummeted again. 'We don't have time for research,' Severus said quietly. 'I shall die within the day, I would think.' He passed a rather shaky hand over his eyes. 'Do you still have my will in your possession?'

Disregarding the question, Dumbledore said, 'Refresh my memory...how old were you when you took the Dark Mark?'

'I was eighteen,' Severus responded, considering the potions he had available, here at Spinner's End. He had brewed Dreamless Sleep, though he had been too stubborn to use it, preferring to suffer through the embittered, lonely nights awake. Perhaps the sleep potion would be just the thing to speed things up ...

'... should take care of the immediate problem, wouldn't you agree?'

Severus dragged his attention back to the Headmaster. 'There is nothing to be done,' he said.

'You're paying less attention than a firstie in History of Magic!' Dumbledore chided him gently. 'All we have to do is make you seventeen again, Severus...that will give us time to look for a different, long-term solution.'

Severus stared at the old man, his face twisted into an ugly sneer. 'You're *raving*. There is no spell to make me seventeen again! If there were, every witch in the world would be using it constantly!'

Dumbledore settled back into his chair, as if satisfied to have engaged Severus' attention. 'I am not referring to a spell in common use,' he responded. 'It is, I admit, a spell of my own devising ...'

Severus regarded him suspiciously. 'You woke up this morning and whipped up a spell to make me seventeen again?'

Dumbledore sighed. 'The theory behind the spell has been dancing around in the back of my mind for some time,' he admitted. 'Let us say, rather, that a prophecy was made at the castle last night, and the morning paper was delivered by owl post this morning, and *then* I created a spell to make you seventeen again.'

Reenergised by sheer irritation, Severus pushed himself up and began to pace, firing comments and questions like offensive hexes. 'Do you realise that you make less sense with every word you utter?' he demanded. 'Who made a prophecy? That deranged Trelawney woman? Have you gone mad?'

'Yes, the prophecy was made by Sibyll,' Dumbledore said, 'and it was indubitably about *you*, Severus...but I didn't realise the full import of it until I had read the paper this morning.'

'Well?' Severus said, stopping to glare down at his former employer. 'What did the prophecy say?'

'It said that your life will be in danger and that the means to save your life is at Hogwarts,' Dumbledore told him, keeping his eyes upon the hands in his lap. 'The method of the salvation is not clear, at this point, so I thought it would be best to have a way to remove you from this body and put you into one without a Dark Mark.' He slanted a look beneath shaggy silver eyebrows. 'You'll retain your knowledge, your memories...everything will remain exactly as it is, except you will be physically as you were at seventeen.'

Severus gave his head a shake, wishing now that he had not ingested the whisky on an empty stomach. He had climbed out of bed this morning, expecting another annoying day of hiding out in his dreary old house, waiting for the Ministry to determine whether they would pardon him or force him to make a run for it...and instead of that tedium, he had discovered that everyone bearing the Dark Mark was dying of an inexplicable illness and that he could expect to be dead within the next twenty-four hours. Now, before he'd even had a chance to accustom himself to the notion of impending death, Dumbledore was babbling about making him a whining adolescent. Was that truly preferable to agonising death?

He couldn't decide.

The nausea leached into a vague internal disquiet, no doubt ramping up to launch into a full anxiety attack. 'How long would I have to remain seventeen?' he asked. Then, before Dumbledore could answer him, another thought occurred to him. 'You *do* have a counter-spell, do you not?'

'Of course I have a counter-spell,' Dumbledore assured him. 'And it would only be necessary for you to remain seventeen until we find a way to counter the Dark Mark curse.'

Severus sat in his chair again. 'And you're confident that a counter-curse can be found?'

Dumbledore nodded. 'I am confident that a resolution can be found,' he said firmly. 'I will perform the spell, you will nip out to Diagon Alley to obtain the supplies you will need for school, and you will join the seventh-years on Monday for the new school term.'

'What?' Severus yelped, sounding rather like a dog whose tail has been slammed in a door.

'We must work together to find a way to disable the Dark Mark, Severus, and I will be at Hogwarts,' Dumbledore explained patiently. 'The best way to account for your presence there is for you to pose as a student. You'll have to assume a different name, of course, to keep the Ministry from attempting to interfere with our plans...'

'You expect me to live in a dormitory and go to classes?' Severus snarled in disbelief.

'It will be necessary, if you do not wish to draw attention to yourself,' Dumbledore stated, commendably maintaining his serenity. 'We will have a small influx of older students as a result of the closing of Durmstrang, plus a few who had been privately tutored, whose education has been disrupted by the war. Consider it a refresher course. You'll blend in admirably.'

Severus snorted. 'I have never blended in anywhere in my entire life, old man,' he informed him. 'I don't know why you imagine I will begin to do so now.'

Dumbledore cast him a measuring look. 'Severus, it will be necessary for you to make some ... significant changes in your usual routines and habits, if we are to make a success of this plan.'

Severus narrowed his eyes suspiciously. 'What sorts of changes?'

'You'll cut your hair, you'll wear clothing in colours other than black, and you will curb your unpleasantness to the best of your ability...otherwise, we have no hope of effectively hiding your rather singular identity.'

Severus' lips thinned and his nostrils flared. 'Do you have any other words of wisdom to impart?' he asked waspishly.

'I'm sure other things will occur to me,' the old man assured him blithely, ignoring Severus' biting tone. 'I'll just drop a word in your ear as they do.'

'What was the exact wording of this prophecy?' Severus asked, circling back around to argue through the reasoning again. Surely there was a way to accomplish this without him suffering the indignity of being placed in the body of his adolescent self!

Dumbledore began to recite.

'The servant who played the Dark Lord false is poised upon the brink of eternal night. Alone and lonely, he awaits the coming of the daughter of Menelaus. Born upon the cusp of autumn's equinox, the child of Muggles bears within herself salvation for he who is marked and scarred by Darkness, within, without.'

The servant who played the Dark Lord false is poised upon the brink of eternal night.'

Severus gaped at Dumbledore. 'Who the hell is supposed to be Menelaus' daughter?' he demanded with deep foreboding.

Dumbledore gave him a placid smile. 'Why, Hermione Granger, of course.'

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 16

After the fall of Voldemort, an inexplicable illness plagues the surviving Death Eaters. Albus Dumbledore has a plan to save Severus Snape—but how, exactly, is Hermione Granger involved?



This Time

Chapter 2:

You caught me under false pretences

How long before you let me go?

Supermassive Blackhole - Muse

The Headmaster stood briskly, as if he had an appointment elsewhere. 'We can discuss Hermione's involvement in the prophecy in more detail later. For now, let us complete our plans.' Stroking his long, silver beard, he studied Severus for a few moments before saying, 'We cannot risk placing another spell...such as a glamour to change your appearance...on top of my Youthening Enchantment. Instead, we must trust the changes in your hair, manner, and clothing to disguise you from your former students.'

Severus snorted and laid a finger along his hooked nose. 'Is *this* likely to go unnoticed?'

Dumbledore dared to twinkle again. 'You are not the only member of the wizarding population of the British Isles with a nose of that shape, Severus. If anyone mentions it to you, simply allow that you have heard that Professor Snape was a distant cousin.' He drew his wand. 'Shall we proceed?' he asked politely.

Severus shrugged with assumed indifference, closing his eyes and waiting for the magic to wash over him. The Headmaster drew breath and spoke in a powerful voice, words in a language Severus did not know. The sensation was like being plunged into a pool of oil and being pulled through it, unresisting. Then the sensation was gone, and he opened his eyes.

Dumbledore smiled with great pleasure. 'Oh, well done,' he murmured, 'even if I *do* say so myself.'

Severus glared at him. 'You don't expect *me* to say so, do you?' he demanded sourly...then gasped. That wasn't his voice!

Dumbledore's smile simply grew wider. 'Oh, excellent...you even *sound* seventeen!'

Severus resisted the urge to give him a two-fingered salute.

'Aren't you going to look in the mirror, Severus?' the Headmaster asked gently.

'Fuck, no,' Severus snapped.

Dumbledore nodded. 'As you wish, of course.' The old wizard walked to the fireplace, then turned to say, 'I'll need a name for your papers...O.W.L. results and such. What name will you use?'

'Prince,' Severus replied promptly. 'Merlin knows there are enough of them scattered through the West Country.'

'And a given name?'

Severus paused, riffling his memory until he hit upon a suitable name. 'Adin.'

'Adin Prince it is, then,' Dumbledore said. 'We shall look for you on September first.' And then, the interfering old wizard Flooded away.

In spite of his hopes to the contrary, Severus awoke in his bed at Spinner's End on the next morning to discover that it ~~hadn't~~ all been a dream. His first clue was the world-class erection with which he awoke, jutting at such an acute angle to his belly that it practically pointed at his chin. Morning erections were not a novelty, but the jaunty, youthful slant of it did not belong to his thirty-seven-year-old body. He was easily able to verify his status by stumbling into the bathroom and looking at his unlined face in the mirror. Scowling at the once-familiar visage, he turned to relieve himself, noting with purely male approval the perfect arc of urine that had been a thing of the past for some time.

Curious as to what other phenomena of the past might be back to mitigate his annoyance at this turn of events, he took himself in hand when he stepped into the shower, finding that very little effort was required on his part to incite his body to climax, the trajectory of his output against the tile wall bringing a self-satisfied smirk to his lips.

There were ... trade-offs to being subjected to another of Dumbledore's plans, he supposed.

Catching his breath, his eyes flicked casually over his rapidly diminishing member to the hand which had lately held it ... to the forearm attached to that hand ... and his heart began to pound in his chest. He jerked both arms before his face, comparing the unblemished white skin upon each of them, and an inchoate cry, somewhere between relief and disbelief, escaped his throat. Sagging against the tile, he shed tears whilst the steaming water beat down upon him.

He had never truly believed that he would ever be free of the hateful Mark of Tom Riddle.

He hadn't necessarily been a better person before he took the Mark...he had already been scorned by the girl he wanted; tormented and taunted by James Potter and Company; and tempted by the vision of a life of affluence and influence, which he had been deluded into believing the Death Eaters offered...but the vile tattoo had ever after been irrefutable evidence of his dashed hopes and futile folly. The Mark had not made him what he became, but it had been proof of his stupidity, and he had never been able to bear to expose himself to ridicule in that way.

Now, he took up the bath soap and began to wash the untarnished arm, wishing he had the choice to keep its pristine state when he returned to his adult body. It made him feel unutterably *clean*.

Finished washing, Severus exited the shower and contemplated his reflection again as he towelled his body dry. Dumbledore had insisted upon a definitive change in all the characteristics for which he was well known, and there was no time like the present. With a pang, Severus picked up his wand. Long black strands fell into the basin as he began to cut away his first and most personal shield against an unkind universe.

Severus had been forced to make alterations to his clothing before leaving for Diagon Alley, for at seventeen, he lacked an inch or so of the height he would attain at full maturity and his shoulders were a tad less broad than they would become. He slouched along the busy wizarding street, pleasure at being out of his house warring with discomfort at wearing ill-fitting clothing in public. Having suffered quite enough of *that* problem as a student his first time around, as an adult he had made a point of always dressing in a manner calculated to draw the least possible attention to him...odd that his manner of dress had become, instead, one of the singular things about him upon which his students and colleagues had always commented.

People were such fools.

At the very least, today was a stark contrast to his visits to this place with his mother at his side, picking through the available second-hand robes and books, resentment burning through him like acid. Now, he had a pocketful of Galleons...the means to measure up to any other average student in the matter of robes, clothing, and books. True, it was his life savings, but if he was to return to his own body only to die of the Dark Lord's last laugh of a death curse, why not spend it? Besides, the gold was his to do with as he wished, and there was a savage sort of satisfaction in the knowledge that he was using it to rewrite his own personal history.

Ducking into Madam Malkin's, he made quick work of procuring five sets of standard black school robes, followed by dress robes in lustrous midnight blue. The proprietress made the necessary alterations with her usual efficiency, following his lead and forbearing to chatter at him. Before leaving the shop, he changed into a set of the properly fitting everyday robes.

Back out on the street, he felt far more at ease, and he looked about him a bit as he debated whether to proceed to Flourish and Blotts or to go into Gladrags for clothing. People thronged the street, many of them students procuring school things. It was bit of a jolt for him to see a knot of fourth-years...no, they were fifth-years now...gossiping together in front of Quality Quidditch Supplies. He prepared a sneer for them, but they paid him no mind as he strode past them, save for a dark-haired Gryffindor girl...wasn't she called Romilda Vane?...who eyed him rather speculatively as he passed. He had forgotten that they would not recognise him in this incarnation; he wondered how many times he would fail to remember before he became accustomed to himself this way? On a last minute whim, as if in defiance of the past, he veered into the Quidditch store to investigate the latest craftsmanship in broomsticks...did not most seventh-year boys have their own?

Two hours later, he exited Gladrags with his everyday robes open down the front to reveal snug-fitting jeans topped by a lightweight, long-sleeved grey tee-shirt. His '*Reducio!*' had decreased the bulk of his new robes and casual clothes to easily fit in the oversized pocket of his robes, but his school books were stuffed into a bulging bag, and his sleek new Nimbus 3000 would be delivered to him at Hogwarts. His stomach rumbled insistently, and he smirked at this reminder of the perpetual hunger of adolescence; he turned obediently into Fortescue's for sustenance.

With an enormous sundae in the dish before him, he savoured his ice cream as well as his new textbooks at an outdoor table. Passing over the Charms and Arithmancy texts near the top of the pile, he tugged the Defence and Transfiguration books from the bag and flipped through them with an eager sort of anticipation. It had been years since he had been possessed of the leisure to read whatever he liked for pleasure alone, and he felt his spirits rise. There would be some agreeable elements to this ridiculous charade, after all.

Late afternoon shadows stretched upon the pavement as Severus strolled back down the street. Weasley's Wizard Wheezes had a large display in front of their premises, and the identical proprietors worked the crowd of mostly young people perusing their wares. Crossing the street to avoid the notice of the Weasley twins, Severus turned his attention to the storefront of the Magical Menagerie just in time to jump aside, avoiding the scrambling figure of a large-eared cat with black-spotted, creamy fur and a tufted tail.

'Beg your pardon, sir!' a young man gasped, following the cat out the door and hurling himself at it. As Severus watched, the creature darted to one side, avoiding capture, and spun around, reversing direction and skidding to a halt at Severus' trainer-clad feet. Apparently satisfied with itself, the cat began to clean its paw.

'Well, will you look at that!' the clerk cried.

Severus scowled at the shop clerk. 'Look at what?' he demanded.

'That thing is nothin' but bother,' the young man complained, 'gettin' up to mischief in the shop, teachin' all the other animals how to get out of their cages, raidin' the food after hours...and refusin' to go home with anybody who *wants* 'er...but she's taken a shine to you....' The young man eyed Severus speculatively. 'Madam Furbin 'as gone for the night...whaddaya say to takin' the thing off my 'ands, mate? I'll give you a good price on it...and I'll throw in the basket and a bag o' cat food free, see?'

As the shop clerk spoke, the creature completed its fur cleaning and looked up into Severus' face, its big ears pricked forward, its gold eyes fixed on his. He felt a tug of interest. As a boy, he'd never had a pet, and as an adult, he'd never had the time or thought to spare for the day-to-day care of another being. As they stared at one another, the cat cocked its head to one side and blinked once, as if in communication.

'Very well,' Severus said, without looking away from his new acquisition.

'Brilliant!' the clerk enthused, bustling back into the shop.

Severus followed more slowly, his familiar trailing behind with her tufted tail held high. He laid the gold on the counter, accepting the basket and cat food from the clerk. 'She is a Kneazle, I take it?' he asked.

'Pure bred,' the boy agreed, putting the coins in the till. 'What'll you call 'er?'

A smirk touched Severus' lips as he turned to leave. 'Come along, Bother,' he said, not bothering to answer the clerk, and knowing her name when she heard it, the spotted Kneazle did as she was told.

The excitement of being upon the secure station platform as the hour neared eleven o'clock on September first had not changed since Severus was young, and he found that he was not unaffected by it. Pushing his trunk before him, with Bother in her basket sitting atop of it, he moved slowly down the crowded corridor of the Hogwarts Express, looking for a likely compartment.

The compartments were jam-packed with students in Muggle clothing, putting their trunks up in the overhead racks and arranging themselves and their other belongings for a long ride north. Willing himself not to mind the press of humanity around him, Severus inched along. The line lurched forward a few feet and he was able to move past the compartment full of Ravenclaw sixth-years to stare into a new compartment ... but this one was far more interesting.

With her denim-clad bottom nearly pressed up against the compartment glass, a girl was bent over her trunk, undoubtedly rifling its contents. Her jeans were low-slung, belted tightly about her curvaceous hips, and her small white tee-shirt rode up, exposing a smooth stretch of creamy skin, unmarred and silken-looking...except, just above the cleft of her buttocks, there resided the tattoo of a tiny gryphon in flight. As he watched, the magical tattoo gryphon spread its wings and took flight, never moving from its fortunate place near the small of its hostess' back, but holding Severus spellbound by its gyrations, nonetheless.

Unconsciously, Severus licked his suddenly dry lips and swallowed audibly, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down in his throat. Lower down, he twitched to arousal, the speed of his body's reaction confounding him. Circe's knickers, this had been one of the *bad* things about being seventeen...the hormone-riddled adolescent body, willing to spring into action at any moment of the day or night.

From behind him a weary voice murmured, 'Move along, mate.'

Feeling himself colour with mortification, Severus turned his eyes resolutely from the gryphon tattooed derrière of the unknown female and pushed on down the miraculously cleared corridor.

In the next car down he found a compartment occupied by two people he did not recognise, and in relief, he opened the door. 'May I sit here?' he asked quietly.

Both faces turned to him, a boy and a girl, and there was a general murmur of assent. The boy, tall and sandy-haired, with hazel eyes, stood to help him heft his trunk onto the rack.

'Jared Józsa,' the boy said, turning to Severus with a friendly smile, his hand outstretched.

'Adin Prince,' Severus responded, shaking hands. 'Durmstrang?' he asked, noting the other boy's slight accent.

'Yes,' Jared agreed, gesturing to the other occupant of the compartment. 'We are both from Durmstrang. This is Allison Dyrda.'

The slender blonde girl shook hands with him as well, giving him a sunny smile.

Severus nodded and grinned in response, somewhat taken aback by the open friendliness of the Bulgarian students. Weren't this lot renowned for their Darkness?

They settled into their seats as the train began to move out of the station, and Severus was startled when Bother appeared, lightly springing into his lap and staring into his eyes, as if to inquire for permission.

'Settle down,' he muttered, pushing the pesky Kneazle onto the seat beside him, where she curled up against his leg, purring contentedly.

'What a clever cat!' Allison said, reaching over to scratch behind one large, spotted ear. 'Did you teach her to open her basket?'

'No,' Severus responded shortly, scowling at the unperturbed feline.

'You're a clever girl,' Allison assured Bother, who deigned to stretch her neck to receive the proffered scratches beneath her chin. With a measuring look at Severus, Allison sat back from her ministrations to the Kneazle and said, 'Our families have immigrated to England; both of our fathers work at the Ministry of Magic in International Magical Cooperation.'

'I see,' Severus murmured, averting his eyes from the rather impertinent inspection of the Bulgarian girl's almond-shaped blue eyes.

'What year are you?' Jared inquired, oblivious to the tension in the compartment. 'Allison and I are seventh-years.'

'Seventh,' Severus admitted. Remembering his cover story, he added, 'I was privately tutored...this will be my first year at Hogwarts, too.' After a moment, he asked, 'Are there very many Durmstrang students coming to Hogwarts?'

'Fifteen or twenty, I believe,' Jared responded. 'There were about five hundred of us displaced when the school was closed, but most of us went to Beauxbatons, in France...and some families decided to found a new school.' Jared shrugged. 'There are those pure-blood families who find it difficult to give up the old ways.'

Severus all but bit his tongue to refrain from uttering the sharp rejoinder which popped into his mind. The *old ways* were nothing but an excuse to cling to the practice of the Dark Arts...he hoped the Ministry for Magic in the country chosen for the home of the new school was aware of the founders' intentions. It might be necessary to provide an anonymous tip to make sure of it.

The three of them lapsed into silence as the Hogwarts Express pulled out of the station.

Severus pulled his Defence textbook from his own bag and flipped through to find the place he had bookmarked the night before, one hand idly stroking the spotted fur of his big-eared companion. The Durmstrang students began to converse quietly in what Severus assumed was the Bulgarian language, and Severus was soon lost in the printed word as the great steam engine powered steadily northward.

He was going back.

Author's Notes:

1) Adin was a Biblical exile who returned to Israel from Babylon. I liked the symmetry.

2) As they age, men's erections slowly devolve in angle, from the very acute angle of youth to more or less a ninety degree angle. Also, their urine streams and ejaculation strength diminish to less spectacular arcs and outputs. Boy stuff, but something a mature man would take note of if suddenly placed in a younger body again.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 16

After the fall of Voldemort, an inexplicable illness plagues the surviving Death Eaters. Albus Dumbledore has a plan to save Severus Snape—but how, exactly, is Hermione Granger involved?



This Time

Chapter 3

'Cuz you started something, can't you see?

I Only Want To Be With You - Bay City Rollers

Severus stood nervously in the Entrance Hall of Hogwarts, mightily battling the impulse to run. Most of the students had streamed right on into the Great Hall and found their places at the House tables, but the first first-years and the new students waited obediently under the beady eyes of Minerva McGonagall.

The unreality of the situation assaulted Severus from all directions. He had last stood in this place at the side of the Dark Lord, turning on him only at the very last moment, as Potter had cast the curse that had ended Tom Riddle once and for all. That very night, Dumbledore had spirited Severus away to Spinner's End, where the Headmaster had cast the Fidelius Charm and become Severus' Secret Keeper. From that day, Severus had lived hidden, with Dumbledore his only contact with the wizarding world, awaiting the Wizengamot's determination of his innocence or guilt. Being here again was bittersweet, nearly overwhelming in its intensity. He felt as if he were straddling a crevasse, one foot in the miserable existence of Severus Snape, and the other foot in the freshly minted life of Adin Prince. Given the chance, would he sweep up to the Staff Table and take his place as the Head of Slytherin House to watch the Sorting of the new students? Or would he choose to continue this pretence of adolescence, to relive his misspent youth, hoping to avoid his past mistakes?

He snorted. Of course he would never choose to be seventeen rather than thirty-seven! Why would he even *wonder*?

McGonagall addressed the assembled students, drawing his attention to her. 'Those of you who are not first-years, please move to the front of the line; you will be Sorted first. Follow me, please.'

McGonagall led them past the House tables, and Severus followed along, situating himself near the Durmstrang students and keeping his eyes averted as they approached the stool bearing the Sorting Hat. The deputy headmistress assumed her usual spot, with her list in hand, but the Headmaster stood and raised his hands, bringing all eyes to him, as the students quieted.

'The Sorting will begin in a moment, but I wanted to explain an irregularity to you all before we begin,' Dumbledore said. 'The end of the war has brought many changes in our world, one of which is the closing of Durmstrang Institute.' Murmuring broke out, but the Headmaster continued to speak. 'A number of students from Durmstrang are joining us this year, as are some other students whose private education has been disrupted by recent happenings. I trust that we will all make every effort to welcome these newcomers to Hogwarts, along with the first-years who will be Sorted tonight.' The Headmaster looked up and down each table, as if to impress upon the students the gravity of his words. 'We will begin with the older students and finish with the first-years. Let the Sorting begin!'

The Sorting Hat began to sing its yearly song, extolling the virtues of unity and tolerance in the post-Voldemort world, and at the conclusion of its commentary and advice, there was good-natured applause from the House tables.

At last, McGonagall raised her list of new students to eye level. 'Hector Arnaut!'

A gangly boy stepped up and sat on the stool; McGonagall placed the Sorting Hat on his spiky brown hair.

Severus found himself holding his breath, even though he had witnessed this ritual countless times over the last twenty-five years or so.

'Slytherin!' the Hat shouted, and the Slytherin table cheered, rising to greet Hector Arnaut as he came to sit with them.

Since everyone was looking at the Slytherin table, Severus allowed his eyes to rest on the students to whom he had been Head of House. The diminished number pained him. He knew that some had died in the war and that others had been hastily withdrawn from school, fleeing with their families to other places, away from a Ministry of Magic suddenly very interested in all persons even remotely associated with the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters. Still, he was sadder than he had thought to be to see so few sitting at the Slytherin table.

'Ekaterina Botev!' McGonagall called, waiting to place the Hat upon the straggly, pink-streaked hair of the girl who plopped down on the stool.

'Slytherin!' the Hat shouted, and Ekaterina Botev took her place amongst the smug-looking Slytherins.

'Davina Chernozemski!'

'Slytherin!'

Murmuring began to fill the Great Hall, and Severus was aware of nervous glances being traded amongst the staff. Everyone knew that the Dark Arts had been openly taught at Durmstrang; it had been no secret that the Durmstrang students who had spent the year of the Tri-Wizard Tournament at Hogwarts had fit in most comfortably with the Slytherins. But three students Sorted and all into Slytherin? Was Slytherin House big enough to accommodate all twenty of the Durmstrang Institute students who had transferred to Hogwarts, as well as any first-years it received?

'Allison Dyrda!'

Allison moved from her place between Jared and Severus and walked to the stool, her head held high. McGonagall placed the Hat on her long, wavy blonde hair, and the seconds seemed to drag on. Severus frowned as he watched Allison in an apparently complicated consultation with the Hat, reflecting, not for the first time, that it was a shame no one could hear what was being said between the Hat and a student except the two involved in the conversation. Allison really hadn't seemed like the cunning, ambitious sort to him ...

'Ravenclaw!' the Hat shouted, and the school as a whole let out a collective sigh of relief.

The Sorting proceeded quickly from then, it seemed to Severus. Jared Józsa Sorted into Gryffindor, and there were two girls who Sorted into Hufflepuff, one right after the

other, but as McGonagall worked her way through the alphabet, Severus found the palms of his hands becoming more slick with each passing moment.

He was really dreading this.

'Adin Prince!' McGonagall called, and Severus strode up to the stool.

His former colleague gave him a look full of exasperated amusement, and Severus knew that Dumbledore had alerted McGonagall to his identity. With no more than a glare to acknowledge her greeting, Severus slouched down on the stool, and McGonagall set the Hat on his head.

'You again?' the sly voice said.

'Shut up,' Severus snarled disrespectfully.

'I was right about Slytherin House,' the Hat continued gleefully.

'Shut *up*,' Severus snapped, every bit as irritated as he had expected to be.

'Well, do you have any bright ideas this time?' the Hat inquired, managing to sound both solicitous and mocking.

Severus fumed. He knew he could find a place for himself in Ravenclaw...a place where he could keep his head down and get his work done until he and Dumbledore could work out how to deactivate the problem with the Dark Mark. But he also knew what the Hat had in mind...the same thing it had proposed to him the first time he had sat on this stool...and he had his own reasons for accepting its judgment this time around, regardless of how smug the damned thing might be about it. Well, with any luck, he'd never be so unfortunate as to have to put the Sorting Hat on again.

'Just get *on* with it, damn you,' he snarled.

'Gryffindor!' the Hat shouted.

McGonagall whipped the Hat from his head, a half-smile of satisfaction upon her lips, and he rose to walk to the Gryffindor table, blood pounding in his ears. All of the Gryffindors were applauding enthusiastically; Jared Józsa smiled at him broadly, and with the wave of a hand, offered the seat between himself and Dean Thomas. A number of Severus' former students, including Neville Longbottom, slapped him on the back, welcoming him to their House. He allowed a small smile to touch his lips as he accepted the salutations, and he sat down, finding himself face-to-face with Harry Potter, who sat directly across the table from him, watching him suspiciously with Lily Evans' emerald green eyes.

'We had a teacher called Prince,' Potter said flatly, keeping his voice down, 'and he had a nose just like yours.'

'Harry!' Hermione Granger said urgently, leaning across Ronald Weasley to grasp Potter's arm. 'Don't!'

Weasley gently pushed Granger's arm away, never taking his eyes from Severus' face. 'Yeah,' he said, 'Harry's right. He was a Death Eater...and he looked a lot like you.'

Severus returned their regard, managing a placid expression of surprise. 'Really?' he said mildly. 'I understood that Severus Snape taught here...he's a distant cousin...but I didn't know you had a teacher called Prince. Who was it?'

Potter actually looked a bit relieved, and some of the hostility vanished from his demeanour. 'Snape is the one I meant,' he admitted. 'He called himself the Half-Blood Prince when he was a student here.' Belatedly, Potter extended his hand across the table, still speaking quietly. 'Welcome to Gryffindor House...I'm Harry Potter.'

Severus forced down the impulse to sneer and slap Potter's hand away from him; instead, he firmly grasped the hand of the Boy-Who-Lived, saying wryly, 'I know who you are.'

'Ravenclaw!' the Sorting Hat shouted from across the room, and another hand was thrust at Severus.

'Yeah, welcome to Gryffindor,' Weasley said, his blue eyes still a bit doubtful. 'I'm Ron Weasley.'

Having successfully navigated his first encounter with Potter, Severus refused to be unsettled by the reservations of Weasley. He gave the sidekick's hand a shake and turned his gaze on Granger, who was anxiously watching her two friends' interactions with him. As much as it went against the grain, now was the time to begin establishing a rapport with her...wasn't she his prophesied saviour? 'Aren't *you* going to shake my hand?' he said, deliberately pitching his voice low, as if his words were meant for her alone, managing to infuse his tone with both wistfulness and challenge.

He surprised a giggle from her, and she flushed. 'No!' she said, flipping her hair as she turned from him, but Severus didn't miss the interest which flared in her brown eyes...nor the irritation in Weasley's face.

Excellent.

After eating to his adolescent body's content, Severus trailed after the other Gryffindors up to the seventh floor, where Weasley, a seventh-year prefect, waited to inform them of the password.

'Flitterbloom,' he advised them, munching on an apple the size of a small melon.

Severus suppressed a smirk. *Flitterbloom*? What kind of a password was *that*? Slytherin House had certainly never had such useless, ridiculous passwords. With a mental shrug, he slipped through the portrait hole into the Gryffindor common room.

He wanted to gather a bit more information on his fellow seventh-years, so he settled in an armchair near the fireplace, where he was soon joined by Bother. Dean Thomas sat down across from him, an odd look of strain about his mouth.

'Strange looking cat,' he said, nodding towards Bother.

'Oh, she's not a cat,' Severus responded, unoffended. She *would* have been odd looking for a cat. 'Bother is a Kneazle.'

As if knowing she was under discussion, Bother stood and stretched, digging her claws into Severus' jeans before springing across the gap and landing in Thomas' lap.

'Push her off if she pesters you,' Severus advised, watching the other wizard closely.

But Thomas appeared gratified by Bother's attentions; he stroked her fur until she curled up on his legs. 'My mum doesn't let us keep pets,' he said.

After a few moments, Severus said casually, 'So, tell me about our sleeping arrangements.'

A shadow passed over Thomas' face. 'We've always had one big room,' he said, 'but this year, Dumbledore is allowing the seventh-years to arrange things however they want. You can have a room on your own or bunk with your mates.' He turned his suspiciously bright eyes to study Bother's spotted fur as if it were the most fascinating thing he had ever seen. 'My best mate died in the war,' he said, his voice sounding oddly scratchy.

Severus felt an immediate rush of emotion, Thomas' words bringing Lucius' pointed face before his eyes, his body lifeless on a marble slab. A painful sensation rose in this throat as he struggled not to cry...what the hell was *wrong* with him? Had he *no* control over his blasted emotions? 'That's harsh,' he managed gravely. 'What was his name?' he added, already knowing the answer to the question. The two had always been together in his classes.

Thomas dragged the sleeve of his jumper over his eyes. 'Seamus,' he answered. 'Seamus Finnegan.'

Severus nodded, but Thomas wasn't looking at him, so he said, 'Yeah, I remember reading his name in the *Prophet*.' He directed his gaze to the faded red rug beneath his feet, giving the other boy time to recover his composure and struggling to bring his own wayward feelings under control as well. At last, he said, 'So, have you got a room on your own?'

Before Thomas could answer him, a familiar voice interrupted them.

'Hi, Dean! Are you coming up to unpack?'

Quelling the urge to snarl at the speaker, Severus turned a neutral expression on Neville Longbottom, who held a squirming toad in one hand and a potted Screechsnap plant in the other.

'I'll be up a minute, Neville,' Thomas said. 'Have Harry and Ron decided what to do?'

'Ron told me they were sharing, but Harry just told me he's sleeping alone, so I guess Ron is going to be alone, too. I asked him if he wanted to be in with us, but he said no. The bloke from Durmstrang is taking a single room.' The round-faced Longbottom smiled uncertainly at Severus. 'Adin, you'd be welcome to muck in with us, if you want.'

Inwardly blanching, Severus maintained his blandest expression. 'Thanks, Neville, but I'll take a single, too.'

'Well, I guess I'll see you later,' Longbottom said cheerfully before heading upstairs.

Thomas chuckled, looking up again, all moisture gone from his face. 'I'll bet Ginny had something to do with Harry taking a single room,' he said with a grin. 'She's well up for it,' he added, sotto voce.

Severus stood, not feeling equal to the task of chatting about the sexual proclivities of former students. 'I think I'll turn in,' he said.

Thomas rose too, putting Bother gently on the floor. 'I'll show you up,' he said, his expression cleared of his earlier sadness.

A house-elf stood at the head of the staircase on the top floor of Gryffindor Tower, where the seventh-year boys were housed. 'Will sir be needing a single room?' he inquired of Thomas courteously.

'I'm in with Neville, Dobby, thanks,' Dean responded. 'See you tomorrow, Adin,' he added. 'Let me know if you need anything.'

Severus raised a hand in thanks, then looked down at the house-elf. 'I'll require a single, if you please,' he said.

The house-elf called Dobby bowed deeply before leading Severus to the fourth room down the corridor and opening the door. 'Sir will find his things here,' he said.

Severus entered to find the room prepared for him. A small fire burned in the grate, and Bother's basket was on the side of the hearth, near enough to enjoy the warmth from the fire. A single bed hung with crimson curtains was to the right of the fireplace, his trunk open at its foot, and near the deeply recessed window on the far wall was a writing desk, upon which his book bag had been placed. On the bookshelf set at an angle to the desk were the other books he had brought with him, those from his own personal collection. It comforted him to see his things in this place, and for a quiet moment, this room in Gryffindor Tower felt like home.

He puttered about for a bit, unpacking his clothes and putting them away, then he found his shower kit and pyjamas and headed for the bathroom. Potter and Weasley were standing side-by-side at adjacent sinks; Potter cleaned his teeth as Weasley talked.

'She tries to make out like she doesn't care, but she's bloody unhappy about it,' he said heatedly, lowering his voice when he noticed Severus. 'Macmillan says Dumbledore chose Parkinson as a show of faith in Slytherin House, but blimey, Harry...how could they choose anyone but Hermione for Head Girl?'

Severus turned away to hide his wide grin. So, Dumbledore had listened to him about one thing, at any rate! It wasn't as if Granger needed any additional attention to make her any more insufferable than she already was, and the Slytherins could use the boost of having one of their own named Head Girl, this year of all years. Shedding his dressing gown, he stepped into the shower and scrubbed assiduously, using a particularly harsh shampoo to discourage oiliness. God forbid that he should have greasy hair, in the manner of the dreaded Severus Snape.

As he lay in his crimson-canopied bed that night, drifting off to sleep, the girl with the gryphon tattoo flitted into his mind, and his adolescent dreams were flavoured with her saucy bottom, his fingers gripping those luscious cheeks as he plunged into her softness, the merry gryphon tattoo gyrating in rhythm with his thrusts.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 16

After the fall of Voldemort, an inexplicable illness plagues the surviving Death Eaters. Albus Dumbledore has a plan to save Severus Snape—but how, exactly, is Hermione Granger involved?



This Time

Chapter 4

The broken locks were a warning

You got inside my head

I tried my best to be guarded

I'm an open book instead

Broken - Lifehouse

The next morning, Severus awoke with the dawn...and with Bother standing on his chest, loudly protesting her empty belly. Pushing the Kneazle off onto the floor, he sat up, noting the mess in his pyjama trousers. *Bloody nocturnal emissions*, he grumbled to himself, stumbling over to fill Bother's bowl.

Grabbing his bathroom supplies, he headed for the shower again, making a mental note that twice-a-day showers might be the best way to combat the hair problem, anyway. This wasn't really news; he had always been aware of the best way to manage his overly oily glands. But as a youth, he had not even *had* shampoo...it was a luxury for which his parents would not pay. He had been forced to wash his hair with the same soap he used for his body, a generic compound ill-suited to treat the problem. By the time he was a fourth-year, the general greasiness of his hair and skin was so prevalent...and he was so reviled for it...that he was too damn proud to make an attempt to control it. In adulthood, his surliness on the subject only increased; he was damned if he would concede on the point after all the years of ignoring it. Now, however, Dumbledore had stressed the necessity of changing his habits and appearance, so he would just *do* it and not think about the past.

After all, Adin didn't *have* a past.

Dressing for breakfast, he assessed his appearance. He had a big fucking nose, there was no denying it...but didn't the old saw say that as the nose goes, so go other ... important appendages? Otherwise, he wasn't so bad, all things considered. He was tall, he had a strong jaw and relatively good shoulders, and he had a good bum. He smirked at himself as he deftly tied his tie, trying not to wince at the garish red and gold stripes. He shrugged on his black robes, now bearing the Gryffindor crest, and gazed into the mirror, from whence a tall, slender, dark-haired Gryffindor boy stared back at him. He wasn't handsome, but he had to admit that having short, clean hair improved his looks. Turning from the mirror, he slung his book bag over one shoulder and went down to breakfast.

Jared Józsa was the only other Gryffindor seventh-year at the table when Severus arrived in the Great Hall; Jared greeted him as if they had been friends from the cradle, and they exchanged desultory remarks about their first night in Gryffindor Tower as they sipped cups of coffee and consumed hearty breakfasts. The other seventh-years drifted in as Severus finished eating, and he acknowledged their greetings silently, pouring another cup of coffee and pulling the Defence text from his bag to read until time for class.

Hermione Granger was one of the last to arrive, coming in with a group of other Gryffindor girls, amongst them Ginevra Weasley, Parvati Patil, and Lavender Brown. All of the girls gave both him and Jared a thorough looking over, but Granger flushed when he caught her eye, and she looked away, feigning disinterest.

He smirked and took another sip of coffee. *Interesting*, he thought.

'Is that the new Defence text?' Lavender Brown asked, leaning over his shoulder, her perfume an assault on his sensitive olfactory organ. 'Are we having Defence this morning?'

Potter looked up from his eggs, his interest sparked, but the Weasley girl shook her head. 'We don't know; McGonagall hasn't handed out the schedules yet.'

Brown slipped into the seat beside Severus and smiled saucily at him. 'Then why are you reading the Defence book, Adin?'

Severus stared at the girl...was she chatting him up? What was the *matter* with these girls? Had they failed to receive the universal memo that he was ugly, greasy, and undesirable? How dared this little baggage chatter to him as if he were her inane equal?

She doesn't know who you are, idiot he reminded himself. *To her, you're just fresh meat in the Gryffindor male department.*

Severus looked her up and down once and sneered before returning to his reading. He was prepared to mitigate his well-honed anti-social skills to some extent, but *not* to the point of engaging in breakfast-table chatter with the likes of Lavender Brown.

He heard a muffled snort of amusement and shot a piercing look from beneath his brows to find Hermione Granger with one hand pressed to her lips, her warm brown eyes brimful of merriment. Brown turned an ostentatious shoulder to him, pointedly beginning a conversation with Józsa; Hermione removed her hand from her lips and allowed her smile to show. Acting upon impulse, Severus winked at her. He was treated for the second time that day to the delicate flush which covered her cheeks, and when she looked away from him in confusion, he chuckled and lowered his eyes again to his book. His youthful reputation as Severus Snape...and his general unpopularity, even with his own House mates...had never allowed for such light-hearted pastimes as trying to make a girl colour up. Adin, however, was a complete unknown...Severus could make of Adin anything that he wished...and if, in the meantime, he also secured the assistance of Granger in the ongoing quest to save his life, then so much the better.

No one had said he could not *enjoy* being Adin for a while, had they?

Don't be such a fool! his adult consciousness commanded.

Severus ignored the voice, beginning to read, instead. The next time he looked up, Minerva McGonagall was standing behind the Granger girl's chair, discussing class schedules. McGonagall glanced over at him, all business, and pulled a parchment from the stack in her hands.

'Mr Prince, here is your class list. Miss Granger will assist you to find your classes and give you some information on how best to navigate the castle corridors and staircases.' McGonagall drew another parchment from the stack and leant across the table to pass it to Jared. 'Mr Józsa, Mr Weasley will assist you in the same way. Good luck on your first day.'

Severus perused his timetable, his lips pursed. Today, he had double Potions, Defence, a free period, lunch, Transfiguration, a free period, and something called Special Studies.

Józsa leant over to glance at Severus' schedule. 'I, too, have this Special Studies class...do you know what it is?'

Severus shrugged. 'I'm sure we'll find out,' he muttered, standing and shouldering his book bag again. He turned from the table, heading for the Entrance Hall, on his way to the dungeons. He was dreading sitting in his own classroom as a student.

'Adin!'

His thoughts bound up in how he would respond to his former colleagues having authority over him, Severus failed to respond to his assumed name until Hermione Granger grabbed the strap of his book bag, dislodging it from his shoulder. 'What *is* it?' he demanded, turning to glare down at her.

Her chin lifted, and her expression was one of indignation. 'I'm *trying* to help you,' she snapped, sweeping past him. 'If you want to wander around the dungeons for the next two months, trying to find your way out, be my guest. But if you want to know the way to the Potions classroom, you can follow me.'

Half a smile curled his lips as the feisty little Gryffindor flounced away from him. She put up with no shit, did Miss Granger, and she had a rather intriguing sway to her hips as she walked ... but he *wasn't* going to think about that, he reminded himself as the traitor in his trousers stirred into wakefulness. Was he going to have to resume the two-winks-daily schedule he had enforced as an adolescent to control his bloody erectile hyper-function? Surely, as a mature adult, he had more control than that over his impulses.

But the portion of his body below the belt seemed bent on disagreement.

Bloody hell.

The N.E.W.T. Potions class contained students from all four Houses. Horace Slughorn, lured from retirement to teach again, cheerfully assigned them by twos to work tables; Severus found himself paired with Allison Dyrda, who quickly proved to be a trying partner.

'Who can tell me the properties of lovage?' Slughorn asked, and Allison's hand shot into the air a fraction of a second before Hermione Granger's hand did the same. Severus slanted a look at Granger, who was at the table to his right, paired with Blaise Zabini of Slytherin House. There was a look of stunned indignation on her face when Slughorn said, 'Yes, Miss Dyrda?'

This began a pattern which continued through the next thirty minutes, of Slughorn posing a question and the two girls vying to be the first to thrust their hands into the air. Slughorn's relative discomfort was evident, as he looked desperately about the dungeon for someone else to answer a question, but no other hands were raised; the students were perfectly content to watch the Hermione and Allison programme, almost as if it were a tennis match.

At last, they were given their assignment for the class period, and Severus settled into the comforting rhythm of chopping and brewing. Allison hovered anxiously over their cauldron, poking at the flames with her wand, and more than once, Severus had to stop her from over-stirring the mixture. Nevertheless, by the end of the class period, they had brewed a perfect batch of Befuddlement Draught.

Slughorn went from table to table, commenting on each potion. At Zabini and Granger's table, the old wizard uttered an exclamation of excitement and dipped into the potion, letting the opalescent mixture dribble back into the cauldron. 'Here is a perfect example, class...clear in the dipper, but shimmering in the cauldron.' Severus saw that Granger looked inordinately pleased with herself and that she chatted quite animatedly with Zabini as Slughorn crossed the floor to Severus and Allison's table.

'My word!' Slughorn murmured. 'Two perfect potions in one class period...I can't remember when that's happened before! Well done! Five points each to Ravenclaw and Gryffindor.'

Severus smirked and darted a glance at Granger, whose face had clouded over with dissatisfaction. He could barely repress the urge to laugh out loud at her ridiculous competitiveness. Someone ought to tell her that caring a bit less about such things would give her a more restful life.

Class ended, and Severus took his time packing up his belongings, allowing the others in the class to exit ahead of him. He heard a drumming noise and glanced over to find Granger standing at his elbow, tapping her toe impatiently.

'What's got up your nose?' he asked her, faintly amused.

'You might have more consideration for others,' she replied. 'Can we go to our Defence Against the Dark Arts class now?'

He frowned at her. 'Do we have *all* the same classes?' True enough, Granger was supposed to be an important part of his finding a solution to the Dark Mark Curse, but he didn't know if he could abide all Granger, all the time.

'I sincerely doubt it,' she sniffed, turning to lead the way to the door. 'I have Transfiguration this afternoon and a class for special students...you wouldn't be in that one.'

Severus sneered at the back of her head. 'No, of course I wouldn't,' he agreed meekly.

Granger froze in the doorway, and Severus stopped behind her, his complaint of her slow progress dying on his lips at what he saw. Zabini stood against the far wall with a sobbing Pansy Parkinson in his arms, rocking and soothing her. In all the years he had known her, Severus had never seen Pansy so distraught. He pushed past Granger to go to Pansy...he was her Head of House, it was his duty to calm her, to deliver her to Madam Pomfrey if necessary...but Granger caught his arm.

'I wouldn't, if I were you,' she murmured. 'Parkinson is difficult enough even when she knows who you are...I don't know how she'd be with a stranger.'

Severus stopped, realising the truth of Granger's words; Parkinson didn't know Adin Prince at all, and would doubtless not take kindly to intercession on his part. Damnation! There were many things at which he had never excelled as an adult, but he had taken *good* care of his Slytherins...it had been one of his successes, and now, he was to be robbed of that satisfaction.

He struggled with himself for a moment, knowing it would be pointless to approach Pansy. But why was she so upset? Straining, he listened to her anguished cries as she explained to Zabini the news she had received, and the words he could distinguish made him rush down the corridor, heedless of Granger's surprised questions, single-minded in his determination to reach his destination.

'Of course I was going to tell you,' Dumbledore said, sliding a cup of tea across the desktop to Severus. 'I would have contacted you during your free period, rather than interrupt your first day of classes ...'

'Bigger my first day of classes!' Severus shouted, pushing the teacup back at the old man. 'What has happened to Draco?'

Dumbledore closed his eyes briefly, then said wearily, 'Draco died this morning, as did his two friends, Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle.'

'Damn it!' Severus roared, rising jerkily from his chair, sending it tumbling backwards to crash on the floor. 'Why didn't you *do* something? They were just *children*! They deserved a second chance in life...far more than !'

Dumbledore rose to his feet as well, his kindly blue eyes now blazing in his terrible old face. 'Don't you think I tried?' he thundered. 'I attempted to gain access to each and every one of the Death Eaters in Azkaban, after I successfully performed the Youthening Enchantment on you.'

Severus bared his teeth at the old man. 'I am happy to have been of service as your *guinea pig*!' he snarled.

'But the prison administrators refused to permit me to cast the same enchantment on the remaining Death Eaters.' Dumbledore turned away from him, staring out the window at the sunny grounds. He added bitterly, 'I appealed to the Ministry, but they were still *debating* the issue when I received word this morning that Draco and his friends had died.'

Severus drew his wand and felt the plague of helplessness raging through him. He knew he was losing command of himself, but found he was unable to prevent the explosion of magic which burst from him, radiating out in every direction, shattering the tea service on Dumbledore's desk and the ornaments on the mantelpiece, ruffling Fawkes' feathers, and pushing Dumbledore until his crooked old nose was pressed to the glass of the window.

The Headmaster waited for the pulse of magic to pass, then turned back to Severus, his hands outstretched. 'Discipline yourself,' he said with quiet authority, 'or I shall have to restrain you.'

Severus flushed and sheathed his wand with slightly shaking hands, appalled by his display of adolescent pyrotechnics. 'Right. Sorry,' he muttered.

Dumbledore flipped his fingers and righted the chair, into which Severus thankfully subsided; the Headmaster then repaired the shattered breakables, allowing Severus time to collect himself. Severus stared down at his hands, seeing clearly in his mind Draco, aged two, clinging to his knee and calling him *Sev'wus* in his baby voice; Draco, aged five, soaring about the Malfoy Manor garden at tree-top level on his first training broomstick, saying, *Watch me, Sev'rus*!; Draco, aged eleven, springing from the Sorting stool and proudly taking his place in Slytherin House...and forever more, calling Severus *sir* and *Professor*. Tears came to his eyes, unbidden, and he was only recalled to the present with the Headmaster laid a crisp white handkerchief on his knee.

He took the handkerchief and dried his face, raising his eyes to those of his mentor. 'Remove the enchantment,' he croaked, his voice still roughened by the painful lump in his throat. 'I am the only one left, and I am not worth the effort of finding out how to remove the curse.'

Dumbledore looked down into Severus' eyes, his lined face inscrutable. 'Perhaps you are not,' he said neutrally. 'Nevertheless, Tom Riddle took a perfectly useful Protean Charm and perverted it into the Dark Mark which the Death Eaters bore...and then he perverted it further, introducing some sort of delayed death curse into it. I would feel the world to be a safer place if we had a counter-curse for that modification, wouldn't you?'

Severus could scarcely argue with the old wizard's reasoning, so he nodded once.

'Good,' Dumbledore said equably, returning to his chair. 'Then, since you are the only remaining bearer of the Dark Mark upon whom we can test our counter-curse once we have perfected it, I hope you will consent to continue with our plan.'

Severus sighed noisily, feeling simultaneously released and ensnared ... but wasn't that the way of things, for him? His life had no inherent value and never had done. The purpose of his existence was to facilitate the plans and designs of others. Why would it ever change?

Dumbledore cleared his throat and began to speak in his most serious 'Headmaster voice'. 'And now, Severus, since you have successfully avoided your first lesson in Professor Lupin's Defence Against the Dark Arts class, I hope you'll be careful to find out the homework assignment and complete it.'

With a muttered curse and a glare at the Headmaster, Severus snatched his bag up from the floor and set out for the refuge of the library.

The library had always been his favourite place in the school, since his very first year. Walking through the doors and past the disapproving glare of Madam Pince acted upon him as a Calming Draught, and when he entered the stacks and caught the first whiff of aged parchment and well-maintained leather bindings, he was restored to some semblance of equanimity. Moving purposefully, he headed for his favourite nook, also a relic of his childhood. In the deepest part of the oldest books on magical textual interpretation, he came to a windowless cubby hole, large enough for a scarred old rectangular table and two rickety wooden chairs. It was the least popular section of the library, because there were no windows through which one might gaze and wool-gather whilst one ought to be studying; it was the very reason why it was his favourite place. Spreading his books around him like a fortress, he flipped open his Potions text and began the essay Slughorn had requested regarding love, sternly reminding himself to write it like a clever seventh-year, rather than like a Potions master.

Granger found him at lunch and stopped behind him, ignoring the presence of Józsa and Dean Thomas, who flanked him.

'You never came to Defence class,' she said. 'You left so suddenly ...'

Severus raised his brows interrogatively. 'Did you have a question, or do you wish to continue making statements about facts with which I am quite conversant?' he inquired nastily.

She didn't reply to him but walked away without a backward glance; he immediately wished he had held his tongue. He *needed* Granger...the bloody prophecy clearly said so. He ought not to let his temper show with her.

When the meal was done, she left the Great Hall between Potter and Weasley, who had Józsa in tow. Granger never spared him another thought, apparently, for she certainly never looked for him. Feeling oddly miffed, Severus went off to Transfiguration, his forbidding expression discouraging anyone from trying to speak to him.

McGonagall's manner in teaching her subject had not altered since his first sojourn through her classes, he was pleased to see; that meant the course notes he had kept all these years might be of use to him. Glad he'd brought them from Spinner's End, he forced an attentive face for her lesson on human Transfiguration. When the bell sounded, he approached Granger.

'You left me,' he accused her.

'You deserved to be left,' she replied shortly, turning away from him.

'Wait,' he said, 'I have a class called "Special Studies" after break...I don't know what that is.'

She snorted in disbelief. 'You do *not*,' she said, clearly irritated. 'You're only saying that because I told you I have that cla...'

He thrust his schedule before her eyes. 'Do you see it?' he hissed.

She snatched the paper and looked it over completely. 'We have every single class together!' she gasped indignantly. 'Were you in the top of your class at Durmstrang? Because I know Jared was...and that girl Allison...but he didn't mention *you*.'

Severus removed the schedule from her fingers and made a show of smoothing the creases out. 'You're not doing a very good job of intelligence gathering, are you?' he retorted. 'I was privately tutored; I was top *and* bottom of my class.'

Granger blinked at him. 'Oh,' she said. She seemed a bit embarrassed by her outburst and added, almost kindly, 'I'm going back to the common room for break; if you'll meet me there, I'll take you to our last class.'

'Fine,' he said shortly, and turning on his heel, he went back to the library, wondering why talking to her made him so unreasonably cross.

Severus returned to the Gryffindor common room three-quarters of an hour later, and true to her word, Granger led him to the Special Studies class, which was taking place, strangely enough, in the Room of Requirement. Dobby the house-elf stood before the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy and the ballet-dancing trolls.

'Walk past the wall three times, thinking to yourself, "I want to go to Professor Dumbledore's Special Studies class,"' Dobby instructed them.

Severus and Granger obeyed him, and the door to the impromptu classroom appeared, just in time to admit Jared and Allison, as well. The four of them entered to find a typical classroom setting, with rather more home comforts, including a semi-circle of squishy armchairs, poufs upon which to rest one's feet, and a fresh tea service.

'Help yourselves,' Dumbledore said cheerfully from his place at the head of the room, where he was ensconced in his own plush chair with a cup of tea and a plate of fresh macaroons on the table at his elbow.

Severus ignored the tea service and was pleased to note that the Granger girl did, as well. The former Durmstrang students served themselves and settled in the semi-circle before the Headmaster.

'Is this the whole class?' Allison inquired, in what Severus thought was an irritatingly nosy manner. Who was she to question the Headmaster?

'Yes, this is all of us,' Dumbledore answered. 'First of all, I want you to understand that there are no grades given for this class and that participation is entirely voluntary. I have assembled the best minds in the student body to assist me in solving a rather knotty problem, but if, after hearing the particulars, you do not care to participate, there will be no hard feelings should you decide to leave.'

Severus sat tensely in his chair, wondering what the old man was up to now. Did Dumbledore actually think two Durmstrang drop-outs and *Hermione Granger* could assist them in solving the question of how to counter the Dark Mark Curse?

'Please, Professor,' Józsa said courteously, 'tell us more about the project.'

Dumbledore sat forward. 'As you may or may not know, all of the incarcerated Death Eaters have died in the last several days of a curse apparently embedded in the Dark Mark.'

Severus noted that the other three students gasped, and Granger recovered first, going immediately into her know-it-all mode.

'All of them, sir?' she asked.

'Yes, Miss Granger,' Dumbledore said.

'Including the former students?' she said, sounding horrified.

'I'm afraid so,' Dumbledore agreed gravely.

In the blink of an eye, tears were pouring down Granger's face, but she did not seem to notice, and her voice did not so much as waver.

'But what about Professor Snape?' she asked piteously.

Severus turned his head sharply to stare at her. She knew he was there...she knew who he was! That was the only reasonable explanation for her words! How were they going to make her keep quiet? How could the whole situation have gone pear-shaped so quickly?

'Professor Snape is safe,' Dumbledore assured her.

Granger looked as if she had gritted her teeth, and her chin trembled with the effort not to sob out loud. Her hands were in lap, and she twisted them together in great agitation. 'But will he stay safe?' she asked.

Dumbledore sat forward, looking directly into the girl's brown eyes. 'That remains to be seen,' he admitted.

Granger was quiet for a moment, then she spoke again, as if she could not force herself to be silent. 'How do we know he'll continue to be well?' she blurted. 'We have to do something now!'

Dumbledore sat back again. 'Precisely!' he agreed. 'This is the exact attitude we must bring to our work...we must do all we can to find a solution to the problem of the Dark Mark Curse so that Professor Snape can be safe...and so that no one else can ever again be hurt by this Dark magic.'

Allison sat forward now, her face alight. 'Please, Headmaster, tell us more...we want to help.'

And Dumbledore did just that, beginning to explain in detail how the Protean Charm worked and what had been done to alter it. The other three listened to the Headmaster, rapt, but Severus did not.

He was too busy staring at Hermione Granger, gobsmacked.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 16

After the fall of Voldemort, an inexplicable illness plagues the surviving Death Eaters. Albus Dumbledore has a plan to save Severus Snape—but how, exactly, is Hermione Granger involved?



This Time

Chapter 5

So come on, get higher, loosen my lips

Faith and desire in the swing of your hips

Come on Get Higher- Matt Nathanson

Severus took his concerns to Dumbledore that very night, but the Headmaster shook his head. 'No, Severus, she has no idea who you are. I slipped into her mind, to be sure. She was expressing genuine concern for her teacher, a fellow Order member, a war hero...she was there when Voldemort fell; she saw what you did. She never shared her friends' doubts about you, you know.'

Severus paced nervously before Dumbledore's desk. 'It makes no sense,' he argued stubbornly. 'There is no reason for her to say such things ...'

Dumbledore gazed at him shrewdly from beneath his shaggy brows. 'Perhaps you will have to accept that Hermione Granger possesses emotional depths of which you were unaware,' he said.

Severus could not prevent the derisive snort he uttered at this fatuous comment. Granger's emotional depths were not of least interest to him, providing she possessed the intellect necessary to solve the puzzle of the Dark Mark Curse.

The Headmaster glanced at the clock. 'Perhaps you'd best go to bed, Severus...it's been a long day for you, and this version of your body is not accustomed to the privations you have visited upon yourself in the last years.'

'Very well, Headmaster,' he said, knowing when he was being shown the door.

On Wednesday, he made his first appearance in Defence Against the Dark Arts. He followed Granger into the classroom, but she went to the front to sit with Potter and Weasley, right beneath the werewolf's nose, so Severus took a seat near Józsa and Allison. Lupin entered just as the bell rang, and seeing Severus at the back of the room, he smiled and said dryly, 'Welcome to class, Adin...we missed you on Monday.'

Severus scowled but did not speak, and Lupin said, 'Wands out...we'll take up where we left off with non-verbal Shield Charms. Pair up, please.'

Severus paired up with Dean Thomas, reminding himself that it was not his concern whether or not the students were well-taught, and besides, the war was over now, was it not? By the end of the lesson, though, Severus was forced to admit that Lupin was conducting the class well, thus far. Packing up, he went to the common room for his free period, resolving that he would keep quiet in the classroom and avoid contact with the werewolf as much as possible.

The week passed more quickly than he would have expected. He continued to stay close to Granger when the opportunity presented itself, torn between Severus' suspicions of her motives and Adin's physical awareness of her. However shallow, he was forced to admit that the concern she had demonstrated for him as Severus made her far more interesting to him as Adin.

Dumbledore's Special Studies class continued to meet in the Room of Requirement to share ideas and work on their theories. The best thing about the Room of Requirement as a classroom was that it always provided precisely what was needed: books for research, space for spell work, tea and crumpets for rumbling stomachs. In the first week of discussions, little had been accomplished, but several ideas had been ruled out, narrowing down the field of enquiry.

Severus felt that every moment not spent in trying to solve the problem of the Dark Mark Curse was a complete waste of his time. He had broached the idea with Dumbledore of him just moving into the Room of Requirement and staying there, researching and working until he had all the information he needed to solve the puzzle, but the Headmaster would not hear of it.

'If you disappear now, there will be questions about Adin Prince, Severus...you don't want that. Please, do your part and be patient...I am confident that we will find a satisfactory resolution, in time.'

So Severus attended classes and completed assignments, repressing his simmering resentment of his extraordinary circumstances. Some nights he worked in the common room, scowling over his textbooks and knocking enchanted paper airplanes, Fanged Frisbees, and Weasley's Whizzing Wallbangers out of the air when they flew too close to his head. His dormitory would have been quieter, but the only place he could see Granger in the evenings...and work to establish a friendly rapport with his prophesied saviour...was the common room.

Of course, half the time, when Granger *did* show up in the common room, she was either with Weasley...which irritated Severus...or she said something to get right up Severus' nose, and he ended up storming off to the library, anyway.

Friday afternoon after classes ended, a new parchment appeared on the notice board in the common room, announcing the first ever Hogwarts Club Night, to be held two nights hence.

'There'll be a band and dancing,' Neville said. 'It's a chance to hang out with girls, right?'

'It's all part of the Ministry's plot to get you to pair up and procreate,' Severus muttered, stabbing a chop from the serving platter and transferring it to his plate.

'Really?' Neville stared at him with big round eyes. 'Why would they do that?'

What a cock-up, you idiot! his inner Snape shouted. *You're not supposed to repeat things Dumbledore has told you!*

Severus shrugged. 'I heard a couple of the teachers talking about it,' he said hazily. 'The school will sponsor more dances and parties so we'll have more opportunities

to'...*makes fools of ourselves*his inner voice supplied...'ask girls out on dates.'

Neville nodded in understanding. 'I don't think I'll go,' he said dejectedly.

'I *know* I won't go,' Severus said, and Neville looked a bit more cheerful.

On Saturday morning, Severus was one of the first up and dressed for breakfast; he was eating a plate of bacon and eggs when owl post arrived. There were two large barn owls carrying a long package wrapped in brown paper between them, and he grinned broadly when they fluttered down before him. His broom! He tore the paper away, aware that he had attracted the interest of a number of other students, but he didn't care. Without ingesting another bite, he walked out into the crisp morning air, did up the zip on his jacket, and kicked off into the air.

He felt as if his heart lifted higher inside with each increase in altitude, and the wind blew his fringe back from his forehead as he flew towards the Quidditch pitch. Exhilaration wrung a whoop from him as he looped by the seventh-year dormitory, bringing a sleepy-eyed Longbottom to the window to gape at him.

It was brilliant! How could he have forgotten the sheer elation of flying? When, in his life, had flying ceased to bring this lightness of heart?

He streaked across the lake, turning back only when the magical barriers Dumbledore set to protect the school reminded him that he was hemmed in all around by the old man's protective measures...that his so-called freedom was nothing but an illusion. The grim realisation robbed him of the joyful sensation, sending him back to the earth and back into the castle, to *do his homework*

After spending Saturday slaving over the ridiculous pile of busy work considered necessary by the teachers conducting the N.E.W.T. classes, Severus was entirely ready for a Sunday in which there was nothing he had to do and nowhere he had to be. It was a day entirely his own, to spend as he wished.

He had a lie-in, and as a consequence, he was one of the last in the Great Hall for breakfast. Snagging a pocketful of toast before the house-elves could clear the food away, he meandered out into the sunshine, lifting his face to the warmth. Without thought, he began to wander down to the lake, to his favourite beech tree, and once there, he collapsed beneath it like a marionette whose strings had been cut. Pulling toast from one pocket and a book from the other, he proceeded to enjoy the day.

His book was a Muggle paperback edition of Dickens'*Bleak House*, and he frowned as he delved into the complicated story, wondering about this one's motivation and that one's scruples, until the drowsy warmth of the air lulled him into sleep.

'I think he's sexy.'

'Well, I think he's conceited and obnoxious!'

'And sexy.'

Muffled giggles exploded from the air over his head, and Severus opened one eye to glare at the gaggle of girls staring down at him. Gratifying and unprecedented though it might be to be spoken of as 'sexy', he had no intention of encouraging their behaviour.

'Hi, Adin!' the frighteningly forward dark-haired girl said, and her three friends giggled.

Severus scowled at them and addressed the aggressive one. 'Be a good girl and sod off,' he said, raising his book and beginning to read again.

'Would you mind if we sit here?' the pushy one, Romilda Vane, asked.

'Please, be my guest,' he said, moving himself into a sitting position.

The girls sat down, the hangers-on giggling whilst Vane looked triumphant. When they were settled, Severus inquired, 'Are you comfortable?'

The Vane girl gave him a bedazzling smile. 'Oh yes, thank you!' and her friends murmured their agreement.

'Excellent,' Severus said and stood, striding away from them to the castle, where lunch was being served.

'Adin!' Vane called, but he did not slow down or look back. The little tart was tempting him to descend into full Professor Snape mode, and he really did not wish to do that...Adin Prince was a pleasant fellow, after all...but she definitely needed to be put firmly in her place.

He sat with Józsa, Thomas, and Longbottom over his lunch, giving the impression of being one of the gang of Gryffindor seventh-years, even though his thoughts were far away, and his pleasure in a day of leisure evaporated with the reality of the impossibility of his position. How could he...why *should*he!...pretend to be living the uncomplicated life of a seventeen-year-old kid when his own *real* life was in such a shambles? Why should he be forced to loll about when he had a *real purpose* for being here?

With a short farewell, he deserted his companions after lunch, declining their invitations to join them for a bit of Fanged Frisbee on the grounds, and instead returned to his own room, where he extracted his notes from the Special Class and began to pore over them.

Surprisingly, he realised after half-an-hour of perusal, Granger's ideas were the most intriguing. She had actually adapted a Protean Charm two years before to act as a method for alerting the DA to their secret meeting times. Her suggestion that the Dark Lord had used some sort of time-released transfigurative conduit to channel the charm into a curse was ... well, sod it all, it was nothing short of *brilliant*.

The thought of Granger tugged him to the window, and from the lofty height of the pinnacle of Gryffindor Tower, he looked out on the grounds, over which the students were scattered, soaking up the unseasonably warm sun. Granger wasn't hard to spot, really, not with her bushy hair and the ginger lump in her lap. She was sitting with Weasley, whose own ginger hair was easily spotted from a distance, but he seemed to be paying her no mind, for Granger's head was bent over a book, and Weasley was speaking to a group of other people, his hands waving expressively.

Severus turned from the window in disgust. That daft lout had the cleverest witch in the school beside him, and all he could think to do was ignore her in favour of a set of fawning admirers. Pausing before the mirror, Severus took up his comb and dragged it through his clean, shining hair.

'Don't fuss, dear...you're tidy,' the mirror informed him encouragingly.

Severus whipped out his wand. 'What did I tell you about talking to me?' he demanded sourly.

'Oh, all right,' the mirror said huffily. 'Don't see why you have to be rude about it.'

Snagging his Transfiguration textbook from his desk, he went to the door, where he found Bother waiting with an expectant air. 'What?' he said, and as soon as he opened the door, she preceded him into the corridor. 'Fancy a bit of sun?' he asked her, but she did not acknowledge his words, simply led the way to the staircase with her tail in the air.

When Severus strolled nonchalantly up to the group beneath the beech tree, Weasley was nattering on about some Quidditch match or other, and Granger was sitting a foot or so behind him, her back against the tree trunk, reading from their Transfiguration text.

'Great minds think alike,' he said, and she looked up at him, an unwary, pleased smile touching her lips.

'Isn't it fascinating?' she said eagerly, touching a fingertip to the cover of the book he held at his side. 'Especially as it relates to you-know-what,' she added.

'May I sit?' Severus asked diffidently, trying to combat the bizarre swooping sensation in his middle from her apparent pleasure at seeing him, fending off the notion that she had touched *him*, rather than his book, with such gentle intensity.

'Please,' she said, indicating the spot beside her.

He lowered himself to the ground, aware of her rather keen scrutiny as he did so. 'What?' he asked her, passing a nervous hand over his mouth, wondering if he had somehow dirtied his face between his room and the beech tree.

'Sorry,' she mumbled, directing her eyes back to her textbook, pink flushing her cheeks.

He felt a heady triumph; Granger only ever coloured up around him when he flirted with her...she was obviously attempting to return the favour. Feeling an irresistible urge to press on with the advantage she had given him, he dipped his head close to hers, lowering his voice, consciously using it to lure her into sharing a confidence. 'Why were you staring?' he said.

She shivered, and as he saw the gooseflesh spread over her arms, he was aware of the rising tension between them; he had noticed it before, and he attributed it to his frequent irritation with her, but it had never raised the hair on the back of his neck as it did now.

'It's the way you move,' she admitted, her voice barely audible. 'Like a big cat...not like other boys ...'

Bother chose that moment to spring into his lap, breaking the taut thread between them like a strong breeze scattering a dandelion into a thousand puffs of fluff. Instantly, the ginger cushion in Granger's lap resolved into an angry tomcat, hissing menacingly at Bother.

'Crookshanks!' Granger said reprovingly. 'Be nice!'

Bother appeared neither alarmed nor offended; she simply extended her neck and sniffed delicately at the tomcat's smashed-in face. The tom retaliated by launching himself from Granger's lap and hurtling towards the group surrounding Weasley, causing two sixth-year girls to start away in alarm. Bother followed, joining in the chase.

'I don't know what got into him!' Granger said, looking indignantly after the cat and his Kneazle pursuer.

Severus had not a glance to spare for the felines; his attention was riveted on Granger. 'I do,' he muttered, opening his textbook and pretending to become engrossed in the material.

After a time, Weasley was tempted into joining a group of Whizzing Wallbanger players. 'You don't mind, do you?' he asked Granger, and she fluttered her fingers at him dismissively without looking up from her reading.

Severus watched the Wallbanger, which was, in essence, similar to an insane badminton shuttlecock. It could be thrown and caught by hand or propelled by small, hand-held paddles. Once launched, it would begin to zoom as if propelled by a tiny jet engine, streaking until it made contact with a solid entity...unless another moving object crossed its path, in which case it would follow that object until impact. Severus had batted a few out of the air in the common room, and he was aware of their unpredictable behaviour. He was, therefore, not altogether unprepared when the unmistakable whizzing noise heralded the approach of one of the pesky things.

'Don't move,' he muttered to Granger, who looked up, saw her danger, and immediately made as if to rise. '*Don't move*, girl,' he repeated, 'unless you want to try to outrun it.'

Granger subsided, and at the last moment, Severus lunged in front of her, whacking the Wallbanger with a two-handed grip on his Transfiguration textbook, sending it flying with great velocity over the trees, in the general direction of the Quidditch pitch.

'Thank you!' Granger said, pressing a quick kiss to his cheek, and then Weasley was bearing down on them, and Severus rose to meet the attack.

From beneath a tree nearer the water's edge, Potter had abandoned his girlfriend, Ginevra Weasley, and he, too, was rushing towards Severus. *All for a little kiss on the cheek?* he thought, squaring his shoulders to meet the Boy Wonder and his faithful sidekick.

Potter, who had been running, reached him seconds before Weasley did. Seeing that neither of the boys had wands drawn, Severus braced himself for the blow, but Potter turned to Weasley and said, 'Did you *see* that?'

Severus relaxed infinitesimally; apparently, the dunderheads were going to *discuss* the offence before trying to knock him down.

'Bloody right I did,' Weasley agreed, glancing over his shoulder towards the tree line. 'I wonder if it's stopped flying yet?'

Potter addressed Severus with barely suppressed excitement. 'Have you ever played Quidditch?'

Severus gaped at him. 'Have I *what?*' he blurted, wondering what Quidditch had to do with receiving a kiss from the dunderheaded duo's best friend.

'You have to come to team try-outs,' Weasley said enthusiastically, his eyes alight with a manic glee.

'Yeah,' Potter agreed. 'We haven't had a really talented Beater on the team since Ron's brothers left school.'

'And Adin's the one with the Nimbus 3000!' Weasley reminded his friend.

'Brilliant!' Potter said. 'Next Saturday, right after breakfast, on the Quidditch pitch, Adin...you'll come, right?'

'I...' Severus began.

'Brilliant!' Weasley said, and he and Potter each clapped Severus on opposite shoulders before turning away and walking off together, now in the mood to discuss Quidditch strategy.

'It's rather like being rolled over by the Hogwarts Express, isn't it?' Granger said knowingly, standing and beginning to dust off the seat of her jeans.

Severus was immediately distracted by the idea of smoothing his palms over the denim covered cheeks of her bottom. 'Need any help?' he offered, the words leaving his mouth before his inner adult could prevent them.

Granger laughed, her brown eyes bright. 'No thanks, I've got it,' she assured him before turning and heading back to the castle.

Severus sagged against the trunk of the tree, watching the devastating swing of her hips as she walked away. 'Oh, you've got it all right,' he muttered darkly, not caring to try to define what 'it' might be.

He stopped just short of the portrait hole after dinner, because Weasley and Granger stood before the Fat Lady, engaged in a heated discussion.

'You don't want to kiss me!' Weasley shouted, his face red. 'What do you care if someone else does?'

Granger thrust her face towards him pugnaciously. 'I *don't* care!' she responded. 'Go...enjoy yourself. Just don't you dare *ever* come back to me again after some bint drops you like last year's Cleansweep!'

Weasley barked an angry laugh. 'Why would I want to come back to you? All you ever do is read and study and *nag*...maybe if you did a bit of snogging, you'd beable to get another bloke to go out with you!'

Severus watched in fascination as Granger drew her wand and flourished it; Weasley obviously knew what was coming, because he threw his arms over his head and turned his back as a flock of angry yellow canaries attacked him. Granger did not remain to watch the resulting devastation; instead, she gave the password and fled through the portrait hole. When she disappeared, Severus drew his wand, immobilising the birds with one flick and Vanishing them with another.

'Lovers' quarrel?' he inquired sardonically, approaching Weasley.

'Hardly!' Weasley snorted, his face still alarmingly red. 'I pity the wizard who gets in *her* knickers.'

Severus felt a flash of inexplicable anger at this casual, disrespectful reference to Granger, but it dissipated as a momentary shadow passed over Weasley's face, and the redhead took a deep breath. 'She's been my best friend since first year,' he said. 'We keep trying, but I don't think we *click* that way, you know?'

He turned his earnest blue eyes on Severus' face, and Severus actually felt a twinge of sympathy for a fellow wizard, reflecting that the crush of his own school years had undoubtedly felt the same way about him...good for a friend, but not the material for a boyfriend.

'Witches,' he said vaguely.

'You said it,' Weasley agreed. 'Thanks for helping with Hermione's little birdie army,' he added bitterly. 'Just don't ever make her mad at you, mate.'

'I'll keep that in mind,' Severus promised solemnly.

Weasley gestured down the corridor. 'Are you coming to Club Night after dinner?'

Severus sneered and shook his head emphatically. 'No,' he answered shortly.

'Lavender asked me to go,' Weasley confided. 'It's what set Hermione off.'

'Good luck with that,' Severus said neutrally, turning away.

'I'd better change shirts,' Weasley said, following Severus through the portrait hole.

Anxious to escape his new 'friend', Severus settled in a chair and opened his Transfiguration book, acknowledging Weasley's good-bye wave with a simple nod of his head.

When the fourth- through seventh-years left for Club Night, Severus fetched his book bag from his dormitory and set up at one of the tables, hoping that Granger would make an appearance. If she wasn't going with Weasley to Club Night, perhaps she would come downstairs to study. Not that he wanted to see her, but he had some ideas about the Dark Mark Curse, and he wanted to discuss them with her.

He worked on his Arithmancy homework, scowling frequently at miscreants from the lower years, but his patience was not rewarded. When she hadn't appeared by ten o'clock, he packed his things back in his book bag and moved from the table into a battered old armchair in the dark recess beneath the staircase to the boys' dormitories; it was a popular place for snogging, but not for reading, because it was so dark. Severus read there anyway, opening his Dickens and lighting the tip of his wand. Soon thereafter, the Club Night couples returned, and he had to endure a number of face-sucking good nights before he had a clear view again of the girls' staircase.

In the late Sunday night quiet of the common room, he drifted into sleep and only awoke when he heard the sounds of a girl crying. All he had to do was open his eyes, and there she was, climbing the girls' staircase, the upper part of her body already in the shadows. Severus had only a quick impression of pyjama pants, a tiny tee-shirt, and a tattoo of a flying gryphon just above the cleft of the girl's swaying buttocks.

'Wait!' he called, lurching out of his chair, desperate to discover the identity of the girl with the gryphon tattoo, and he was able to keep his eyes on the tattoo as he hurried to the foot of the stairs, but the girl then turned at the bend of the staircase and passed out of his sight, never responding to his cry of, 'Please wait!'

Discouraged, he turned around and climbed up to his dormitory, castigating himself all the way up for falling asleep and missing his chance to discover the identity of the bearer of the tattoo, which still peppered his dreams. When he reached his room, he grabbed his shower things and marched to the bathroom, relieved to find the place empty. Shedding his dressing gown, he stepped into the shower, the mere thought of the tattoo stiffening his prick as his fingers closed over it. With one hand braced against the wall, he leant into it, the images of the heart-shaped bottom he imagined beneath the flying gryphon spilling over into his memory of the swing of Grangers hips as she had walked away from him and the beguiling scent of peppermint on her breath when she had kissed his cheek.

'Granger!' he gasped and spilled over his fist, turning then into the hot spray to rinse away his semen, hoping his confusion would wash away and down the drain, as well.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 16

After the fall of Voldemort, an inexplicable illness plagues the surviving Death Eaters. Albus Dumbledore has a plan to save Severus Snape—but how, exactly, is Hermione Granger involved?



This Time

Chapter 6

Try to understand that I'm

Trying to make a move just to stay in the game

I try to stay awake and remember my name

But everybody's changing

And I don't feel the same.

Everybody's Changing - Keane

Severus was surprised...appalled, really...at the ease with which he fell into the routine of being a seventh-year Gryffindor boy. After a turbulent childhood, in which he had never known what would happen from one day to the next, the steady, day-in, day-out happenings of Hogwarts had been the best thing to ever happen to him. Now, twenty years after having left school the first time, he found himself comforted, as before, by the sameness of the days.

Even more surprising, he found that he *liked* the Gryffindors. The silly sods accepted Adin at face value...accepted *him* as he presented himself to them, and they didn't seem to give a second thought to his motives. He neither had to hide his agenda from them...they didn't suspect him of *having* one...nor worry that they were planning behind his back to sabotage him in some way. What he had thought of them as their teacher...that they were a group of thoughtless, arrogant dunderheads...now, from the vantage point of their peer, seemed much more as if they were a group of spontaneously friendly people. Knowing that they had all taken up their wands and stood to fight for the Light only increased his esteem.

Feeling differently about the lot of them was quite unsettling, but in a pleasant sort of way which he was learning to appreciate.

On the next Saturday morning, he returned from breakfast to encounter all of the seventh-year boys in the common room. 'What's up?' he murmured to Thomas.

'Oh, we all go to Quidditch try-outs,' Thomas explained rather tensely. 'With Harry as captain, all of the positions are open for try-outs every year...even if you're already on the team, you still have to try out...if there's a better player, then you can lose your place.'

Severus went up to his dormitory to retrieve his Nimbus, wondering whose position he would be taking and hoping it was not someone who was particularly good at jinxes. 'Better safe than sorry,' he murmured as he set off down the stairs, and he cast a low-level Shield Charm on himself, just in case.

The weather, in just one week, had gone from summer to autumn, the air sharp, the leaves on the trees of the Forbidden Forest beginning to turn colours. Severus walked along with his broom on his shoulder, wondering why he was doing this. He was supposed to be here to find a counter-curse for the one the Dark Lord had put in his Dark Mark, not to befriend Hermione Granger, be a relationship counsellor to Ronald Weasley, and try out for the Gryffindor Quidditch team!

On the other hand, Granger was bloody beguiling...certainly worth having for a friend...and *someone* had to listen to Weasley moan and groan, because Potter wasn't doing it. He was far too busy smuggling Ginevra into and out of his room unnoticed ... at least, unnoticed by her brother.

And the Quidditch team?

Severus scowled. He had never owned a broomstick of his own until he was out of school, and in his student days, one could not try out for a House team without owning a broom...least of all for the Slytherin House team, where most of the students were pure-blood and moneyed. He had never before had the opportunity to even try for acceptance, much less for the kind of popularity enjoyed by the students selected to play for their House's Quidditch team.

Why the fuck do you care? the adult Severus demanded. *You're here for a reason! Stay the course! Keep your mind on your work!*

I care because I bloody well choose to care...and I don't give a Niffler's nuts what you think or how you feel about it! Seventeen-year-old Adin answered with youthful insolence, hurrying along to the pitch, ready to try out, at the personal invitation of the team captain, for the position of Beater.

Standing with the other hopefuls on the pitch, Severus pushed the voice of his scornful adult self out of his mind and waited for his turn to fly, his palms sweating.

'Beaters!' Potter called, when the Chasers had completed their trials. 'You'll fly with the three Chasers for your trials. You'll be judged on how well you protect the Chasers from the Bludgers and how well you hit the Bludgers. Kick off when I call your name!'

Jimmy Peake, one of the Beaters from the previous year, was the first to fly, and Severus let his gaze wander back to the stands. Granger was there, her face rosy from the nip of the air, her ridiculous hair even more impossible whilst being tossed about by the breeze. She was flanked by Józsa and Longbottom, with the bench before them occupied by Brown and Patil. One disadvantage of being seventeen was his unfortunate but undeniable interest in the appearance of the female students. Brown was conventionally pretty, if empty headed, and Patil was exotically beautiful, but Granger was the one who drew his eye. There was something about her...the intelligence that gleamed in her pretty brown eyes or the way she spoke about important things with such focussed intensity...which he found fascinating. How many females had he encountered in his life who possessed the ability to keep up with him...*to overtake you and make you feel stupid!* the disregarded voice in his head taunted...whilst still managing to be feminine?

And what would it be like to have that intense focus concentrated on *him*?

'Prince!'

'Adin!' Granger called. 'It's your turn!'

Severus jerked his attention away from Granger, who smiled broadly as he turned from her, and encountered the knowing grin on Potter's face. 'You're up, mate,' Potter said.

'Right,' Severus muttered, kicking off.

'Good luck, Adin!' several voices called, but he did not look to see who was rooting for him.

Severus hurtled into the air, beginning to weave amongst the Chasers, his focus on the black Bludgers zooming about the pitch. He swung the bat in his hand, feeling the complete satisfaction as he contacted the Bludger squarely and sent it flying away from Ginevra Weasley, swooping immediately to intercept the Bludger pelting for Demelza Robins, and then looping back to whack the whizzing Bludger away from Thomas, who promptly scored a goal.

'Brilliant, Adin!' Thomas whooped, but Severus didn't have time to rest on his laurels, because one of the Bludgers was now menacing the Robins girl again ...

His try-out lasted for no longer than ten minutes, but by his count, he hit sixteen Bludgers during that time and 'his' Chasers were never inconvenienced.

'Good job, Adin,' Potter called to him, wearing now a completely different grin...this time, he looked ... impressed.

That was bloody impossible.

Severus flew down, giddy with accomplishment and so light of heart that he didn't even feel like himself. As he approached the people on the ground, he glanced at the stands and saw all five of the seventh-year Gryffindors on their feet, clapping and smiling at *him*...and calling out his name.

It felt better than blasting rose bushes at the bloody Yule Ball.

Severus could only be impressed by the food and drink the Gryffindors had managed to pinch from the kitchens for the celebration that afternoon. There were cakes and sweets and loads of Butterbeer, and Dean Thomas had drawn an impromptu banner for the team, obviously revelling in his new position as Chaser.

Colin Creevey came bustling up to them. 'I need a picture of the team!' he said, and they all helpfully crowded together in their Quidditch robes: Potter, Weasley, Ginevra, Thomas, Demelza Robins, Jimmy Peake, and Severus, who was yanked into the photo by Thomas at the very last minute.

It was amusing, in a remote way, and gratifying, in an entirely *present* way, to see how differently people reacted to him, now that he was on the Quidditch team. Girls were crowding up to him, talking to him, asking him questions about himself, and he could not deny enjoying the attention. He saw that Potter and Ginevra were cuddled up together in an armchair, as were Weasley and Lavender Brown, and Thomas was standing close to Parvati Patil, giving her his undivided attention.

Longbottom and Józsa were sitting together on a sofa, drinking Butterbeer and chatting up the fifth-year girls. Their ring-leader was none other than Romilda Vane, who had not spoken to Severus since he had abandoned her on the grounds the week before.

Thank Merlin for small favours.

Yet the one girl he was interested in talking to had come nowhere near him...Granger was proving elusive. She hovered on the edge of the celebrating throng, sipping at her Butterbeer and surreptitiously reading from a book in her lap. How could he draw her in ... and why did he want to? Torn, he stayed where he was, allowing the girls to flatter and flirt with him, telling himself that it meant nothing...not as if Granger were the one chatting him up ...

That night, he lay in his bed in a glow of satisfaction from his day, determinedly pushing the voice of Severus, scornful and disapproving, further down into his unconscious mind. Every one of the Gryffindor seventh-year boys had shaken his hand to congratulate him, and each of them had been genuinely admiring. Best of all, Granger had come to speak with Potter and Weasley before going up to bed, and as she had passed him, she had smiled into his eyes and said, 'Congratulations, Adin,' in a soft, sweet voice he had never heard from her before.

No, his adult consciousness could sod off...he was entirely unwilling to give up the good feelings that caused him to fall asleep with a smile upon his lips.

In the Special Studies class, they worked now on Hermione's theory, even the Headmaster rolling up his sleeves and getting in the middle of their experimental spell-casting, his own excitement at being in the thick of true research infecting them all. By the end of the month, the four of them were at complete ease with one another, the three Gryffindors teasingly offering to make Allison an honorary Gryffindor, to which she replied, 'It becomes more obvious all the time that you are in sore need of some Ravenclaw leavening.'

The disturbing thing to Severus was that Józsa had begun to make up to Hermione, gently teasing her, flattering her, walking to and from classes with her, sitting with her at meals...and every time Severus saw Józsa show Hermione any special consideration, he felt as if his blood were boiling in his veins.

Not that he cared who she went out with...but Józsa's disgraceful carrying-on distracted not only Hermione from her work, but obviously upset Allison, as well.

One Friday afternoon, near the end of their first month of term, Severus leaned close to Allison and said, 'Why don't you just ask him out?'

Allison turned sad blue eyes to his face. 'He doesn't think of me that way,' she admitted sadly. 'We've known each other all our lives, and he never has ...'

Severus frowned. 'Did he tell you so?'

Allison shrugged. 'Not in so many words,' she admitted. 'But he has never shown the least interest in me *that way*.'

'Ask him to Club Night,' he urged her. 'Isn't there another one tonight, after dinner?'

Allison bit her lip, looking down at her notes and beginning to draw a series of broken hearts. 'He's already asked Hermione,' she said.

Severus felt the familiar, hated burning in his blood. 'Oh, has he?' he snarled.

Allison looked alarmed. 'You're not angry with him, are you?'

Severus gave her a rather strained smile. 'Then why don't you come with me?' he said.

Allison's face cleared, as if by magic. 'Really?'

'Absolutely,' he replied, staring daggers at Józsa whilst the other boy stood behind Hermione, placing his hand over hers to show her the wand movements for a spell.

'Adin?'

Severus dragged his eyes back to Allison.

'You broke your quill,' she said.

Severus looked down at the mutilated eagle feather quill and sneered, sending it to the waste bin with the flick of his wrist. 'It must have been faulty,' he said.

Allison looked doubtful, but Severus simply pulled out another quill and busied himself again.

'Where shall I meet you tonight?' Allison asked as the bell rang.

'I'll meet you in the Great Hall at eight,' Severus responded promptly.

Allison smiled at him, shy with him as she had not been before. 'Thank you for asking me,' she said, and surprising him greatly, she stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek before all but running from the classroom.

Severus slung his book bag over one shoulder, intending to walk out without looking at the offenders, but Józsa's comment stopped him cold.

'Hermione...you've broken your quill.'

Severus turned to look at her, and she was sending the broken quill to the same bin where his resided. She was flustered, fussing with her things, refusing to look at him. He took a step towards her, the impulse to make her meet his eyes pushing him forward; he wanted her to know that *he* knew why she had broken her quill, whether he actually did, or not. Suddenly, it was of paramount importance to back her up against the nearest wall and force her to admit that she didn't want Allison to kiss his cheek...that she didn't want to go to Club Night with Józsa, but with *him*....

Granger looked up briefly into Severus' face, a fleeting glance so full of confusion that *this* uncertainty vanished, and he took a step towards her. He could make it all clear to her...she would see and understand ...

'It's been a bad day for quills in our classroom,' Dumbledore observed cheerfully, and the sound of the Headmaster's voice intruded upon the loaded silence, instantly dispelling the thunder in the air between them as if it had never been.

Seemingly thankful for the reprieve, Granger turned her back on Severus, reaching out a hand to Józsa. 'I'm ready to go now,' she said.

Severus did not wait around to watch them holding hands; he turned and strode out of the Room of Requirement, fleeing to his dormitory. What was *wrong* with him? Never in his life had he been so obsessed with the actions of a female with less justification than now. What was it about the girl that made him act like such a fool?

His lips curled nastily as he thought about taking Allison to Club Night. Let Granger see how she felt about *that*.

The music was not bad...it was horrible. The Great Hall was dark, candles burning only on the small round tables scattered about, while several revolving balls of multi-coloured light floated about ten feet above their heads. The musical group, Deiter's Dementors, were fully illuminated and amplified, as well, which was a bloody shame.

Severus was sorry he had not thought to provide himself with earplugs.

Allison was in a festive mood, and she was a pleasure to dance with, moving lightly on her feet. After dancing twice, he spotted his friends, and he led her over to introduce her to them. He had no desire to ditch her, precisely, but he did want her to have someone nice to go out with, and if she left with some other bloke tonight, then all the better.

He greeted the group of seventh-year Gryffindors, who had commandeered two of the small tables and shoved them together. 'This is Allison,' he said, leaning in to be heard over the so-called music. He began pointing at the people from his House. 'This is Dean, Parvati, Ron, Lavender, Neville, and ...' He stopped abruptly. Adin had never received an introduction to this person, although he knew full well who she was.

'That's Luna,' Allison said, smiling at the sixth-year girl. 'She's in my House; we already know each other.'

The slightly bug-eyed Miss Lovegood looked up earnestly into Severus' face and held out her hand. 'It's very nice to meet you, Adin,' she said solemnly. 'Would you care to dance with me?'

Severus blinked at her; he really didn't *want* to dance with anyone. He would be very happy to be able to escape the horrible noise...but Hermione was here somewhere, with Józsa, and he wanted *her* to see *him* ... besides, there was no way to turn Luna down without seeming rather ruder than Adin was known to be.

'Yeah, thanks,' he said, catching Longbottom's eye and nodding to Allison.

Longbottom twiggged more quickly than his lack of skill in the Potions classroom might have hinted that he would. 'Care to dance, Allison?' he inquired diffidently.

Severus followed Luna onto the crowded dance floor and bit his lip to keep from laughing when she placed a hand upon his shoulder and held out her other hand to clasp his. The other dancers were gyrating wildly about the floor, the music was pounding, and the dotty Ravenclaw girl wanted to waltz with him. Well, being Lucius Malfoy's friend had carried benefits in the area of education in the social graces. Resigned to the inevitable, he placed a hand at her waist and began to waltz.

When they had circled half the room, with Severus making a game of weaving in and out of the other students, Luna looked up into his face and said sincerely, 'I'm so glad to see you, sir...I was very worried for you when I heard the imprisoned Death Eaters had died.'

Severus stopped breathing, his mind going into overdrive. Somehow, he had given himself away, which meant that the Ministry would soon know his whereabouts...he would have to leave. Tonight. As soon as possible. Years of practicing impassivity, regardless of the situation, allowed him to continue dancing, even as he was making a list in his mind of those possessions he would leave behind...he wouldn't permit himself to think of the people ...

'Sorry?' he said, smiling at Luna. 'I didn't hear you properly.'

'I know it's you, sir,' Luna said. 'You don't have to worry...no one else knows, except for the teachers, of course.' She patted him on the arm reassuringly.

He stared at her. 'Then how do *you* know?' he hissed.

'I see things,' she said simply. 'It was clever of you to be Sorted into Gryffindor,' she added ingenuously. 'Even if someone had suspected your identity, they would have dismissed it when they realised what House you're in.' She smiled beatifically, as if she had not just said something extraordinary.

Severus turned out of the dance, keeping a tight hold on Luna's hand, and pulled her into a relatively quiet corner. 'Whom else have you told?' he demanded urgently. 'With whom have you discussed this?'

'No one,' Luna answered patiently. 'Your secret is perfectly safe with me. I would never betray an Order member, sir.'

Severus looked nervously around them, verifying that no one was in hearing distance. What was the girl *up* to? What did she want from him?

'Keep your voice down!' he hissed. 'And call me Adin.'

'Yes, Adin,' she said serenely. 'I didn't mean to alarm you...I just wanted you to know how happy I am to see you well.' She tilted her head, her expression one of near-professional curiosity. 'I suppose the Headmaster youthened you to the time before you had your Dark Mark?'

Severus could only stare at her, his lips pressed into a tight line.

'And now you're trying to find a way to reverse the curse in your Dark Mark,' she added knowledgeably. 'My mother experimented some with spells of that type,' she said. 'It's in her notebooks.'

'What type of charms?' Severus asked, finding himself drawn into a serious conversation with the girl, in spite of his best intentions.

'Time-release components,' Luna said. 'It's a dangerous field of study,' she added sadly.

'Do you have them?' Severus asked eagerly. 'Your mother's notes?'

Luna nodded. 'Yes, I read them sometimes, when I'm lonely for her.'

Severus felt a stab of pity for the girl; she was so very odd, and at the same time, oddly perceptive. 'Luna, would you trust me to borrow your mother's notes and read them? For a project I'm working on?'

Luna watched him with her unblinking silvery grey eyes. 'All right, Adin,' she said at last. 'I trust you to be careful with them.'

He smiled at her, and she smiled back.

'I like your smile very much,' she said, 'I'd never seen it before you came back.'

Severus clenched his jaw to prevent his mouth from gaping. She liked his *smile*? Why the hell would anyone ever even *think* about Severus Snape's *smile*, of all the bloody things? But Luna looked up at him trustingly, guilelessness shining in her eyes, and he felt a moment of liking for her. Could it be that she was actually sincere in her pronouncements?

Resigned, Severus took her other hand and looked intently into her face. 'Luna, do you promise that you won't tell anyone who I am?'

'I already did promise, Adin, remember?' she chided him. 'Although I think you ought to tell Hermione who you are, sometime,' she added, as an afterthought.

'What?' he demanded, taken completely off balance by the non-sequitur.

'Oh, I can see that you're friends with her,' Luna said, the sudden directness of her gaze implying that she suspected perhaps there was more than friendship involved. 'And she's the cleverest witch of her age, you know,' she added ambiguously. 'It might be uncomfortable for her to find out ... later.'

Severus dropped her hands abruptly, the good-natured Adin fading decisively into the icy Professor Snape. 'I don't know what you're talking about,' he said coldly.

Luna nodded her acceptance, unperturbed by his hasty change of persona. 'There's no hurry,' she said placidly. 'You can think it over.'

Severus' lips thinned mutinously, but the dotty Miss Lovegood was oblivious to his displeasure.

'I'll bring the notes to breakfast in the morning,' she said, turning to walk away from him. 'Thanks for the dance!' she called over her shoulder.

Severus sagged against the wall, dumbfounded. So, the loopy Lovegood girl had known him on sight when no one else did, she had a clear idea of the sort of research he was doing, and she had information that might advance that research. How much more bizarre could the situation become?

As if she knew he had been denying any interest in her, Granger danced by him then, a slow dance, with her arms about Józsa's neck and his about her waist. With clenched fists, Severus whirled from the sight and went back to the table where his friends were gathered, but the only person there was an unhappy Allison; all the others were dancing.

Bugger it! He had invited the girl to be his date for this affair; it was his duty to dance with her.

'I'm sorry!' he said, coming forward penitently. 'Will you dance with me, please?'

She looked a little hurt. 'I thought you had left with Luna,' she said.

Severus offered her his hand. 'We were actually talking about time-release components in curses,' he admitted, hoping it would divert her attention from his absence.

Allison accepted his hand, and apparently, his apology, as well. She led him onto the edge of the dance floor and stepped up, placing her hands about his neck and swaying against him. Abruptly, Severus felt all thought fall away from his mind, replaced by the simple reality of a female body brushing against his own. Reflexively, he placed his hands upon her waist, and they joined the other slow-dancers. Allison seemed like a different person with her eyes closed, her head moving with the rhythm of the music. When her eyes opened again, she smiled at him, an unguarded, intimate sort of smile.

'I like that you're so tall,' she said, the fingertips of one hand tracing over the back of his neck, leaving a trail of flame in their wake.

Severus swallowed, wondering why he could feel her touch all the way to his toes. He frequently found her to be an annoying person, he reminded himself, trying to recover the power of speech. He had only asked her out because he pitied her ... to get back at Józsa ... to make Granger jealous ...

No...wait...that was just *mental*. He didn't care about that. He looked desperately around the room, giving his head a little shake; where were Józsa and Granger, anyway?

'Adin?' Allison said, sounding annoyed. 'Are you going to talk to me?'

The song ended, and Severus stepped back from her. 'Sorry,' he said. 'I was ... thinking about modifying the curse.'

Allison now *looked* annoyed. 'I'm so pleased to know I'm such interesting company for you!' she said angrily. She turned and walked away from him, heading back to the Gryffindor table, and he followed her, not knowing what to do. Why was she mad at him?

Girls really were more trouble than they were worth.

He sat next to Allison at the table, but she pointedly ignored him. She chatted amiably with his friends, seeming to redouble her efforts when Józsa and Granger joined them. Severus sneered at their greeting and consulted his pocket watch; when would this farce be over?

There was one more slow dance before it was over, and Allison turned from Severus to go with Longbottom. Somewhat relieved, Severus slouched in his seat, glaring as Józsa held Granger ever closer, seeming now to be whispering in her ear as they danced. His irritation grew with each passing moment, until he felt as if he would annihilate the next person to speak to him. Why should he watch this? Why should he stay? He was under no obligation to do so, was he?

Standing, he strode to the door, little caring that his path took him through the throng of slow-dancers. All he could think of was getting away from the noise, away from the press of humanity...*away from the sight of Józsa and Granger getting cosier and cosier* the voice in his head taunted...and being alone in his room: He'd had quite enough *socialising* for one night.

He stormed through the entrance hall and up the staircases, mentally upbraiding himself as his adult consciousness battered him with ridicule. *What is it to you if Granger*

likes being pawed by that Bulgarian berk? the voice that would not be silenced taunted. *What does her enjoyment of the evening's so-called entertainment have to do with you?*

'I *don't* care!' he muttered angrily, his young, fit body effortlessly taking the stairs two at a time.

Cowards run away, the snide voice whispered.

'Shut the fuck *up*!' he snarled aloud just before climbing through the portrait hole.

'Well I never!' the Fat Lady said as he allowed the portrait to slam closed behind him.

When he reached his dormitory, he slumped thankfully into the chair before his desk. At random, he picked up a book, only to set it aside and take up his quill, too agitated to settle on an activity. Bother leapt up onto his desktop and butted him with her big-eared head.

'No, it was horrible beyond words,' he said bitterly, as if the Kneazle had spoken to him. 'Take my advice and stay away from boy Kneazles,' he added.

Bother placed her paws on his chest and touched her nose to his, which made him chuckle.

'You understand what I say to you, I think,' he said, running his hand over her black-spotted fur, and she simply looked at him with her big eyes, as if to say, 'Of course I do.'

Severus passed a peaceful period of time with his familiar, stroking her and receiving in return her purring presence in his lap; he remained there, feeling himself calming, until he had the need of the toilet.

He put Bother on the floor. 'Stay out of trouble,' he advised her, then he went down to the bathroom. When he stepped again into the corridor, he passed Longbottom, who was heading for the stairs.

'All right, Neville?' he said in passing.

'Dean's got Parvati in there,' Longbottom said, stopping.

'Oh,' Severus said, not sure how to respond.

'And Harry has Ginny, and Ron has Lavender, and Jared has Hermione...'

Severus grabbed Longbottom's arm. 'In his *room*?'

'Yeah,' Longbottom said glumly. 'In all their rooms.' He brightened. 'Want to go down to the common room for a game of Exploding Snap?' he asked hopefully.

Severus released Longbottom's arm, feeling all the turmoil from earlier crashing back in on him. 'Sorry,' he said, turning away. 'I'm going to make an early night of it.'

'Good night, then,' Longbottom called after him, but Severus didn't answer.

Blindly, he entered his room, not noticing when Bother darted out the not-quite-closed door. He paced the floor, scowling. It was none of his business with whom she chose to sleep...hell, it was none of his business with whom *any* of them chose to sleep.

'Bugger fucking hell,' he muttered, sitting down at his desk and picking up *Bleak House*. 'I'm going to read,' he said out loud, as if saying it would make it true. He read a page, turned it, then realised he had not taken in a single word. Cursing under his breath, he turned the page back and tried again.

He had been labouring over the same page for nearly thirty minutes when his door opened, and Hermione Granger darted into his room, closing the door behind her and leaning against it with her ear pressed to the wood, as if to listen for a pursuer.

Severus glared at her all-too-alluring backside resentfully, waiting for her to turn and acknowledge him, but she didn't so much as look over her shoulder; her attention was concentrated on monitoring noise in the corridor.

At last, all of his irritation and indignation spilling over, he rose to his feet, straightened to his full height and said in his iciest voice, 'Do *you* *mind*, Miss Granger?'

He regretted the action the moment the words left his lips, for he heard himself, Severus Snape, Potions master, in the tone and delivery of the rebuke...and when Granger turned her shocked, wondering face to his, he knew she had heard him, too.

A/N: Canon supports the notion of Hermione choosing to evade an over-zealous date rather than hex him, as demonstrated by her hiding from McLaggen at Slughorn's Christmas party in Book Six.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 16

After the fall of Voldemort, an inexplicable illness plagues the surviving Death Eaters. Albus Dumbledore has a plan to save Severus Snape—but how, exactly, is Hermione Granger involved?



This Time

Chapter 7

I just wanna break you down so badly

While I trip over everything you say

I just wanna break you down so badly

In the worst way

Make Damn Sure - Taking Back Sunday

'Don't gape at me like a fish!' he thundered, advancing on her menacingly. 'I didn't invite you in here!'

She flattened her back against his door, her wide brown eyes troubled. 'I'm sorry! I'm trying to avoid Jared...he had some sort of Bulgarian liquor in his room ... it was foul!' She grimaced in distaste. 'He drank too much too fast, and then he wanted ...'

He sneered mightily, Severus' fear of exposing his identity to her warring with Adin's blood-burning jealousy. 'Spare me the details,' he snarled.

She raised her chin defiantly. 'I decided to leave, and then I heard him coming after me. I saw this open door ...'

Severus pulled her ungently away from the door and stormed out into the corridor, which was now empty, maintaining his less-than-gentlemanly grip on her arm. At the head of the staircase, he released her.

'Don't go to a bloke's room if you're not prepared for the consequences,' he snarled.

'You're mean!' she said. '*He* was just pissed and got out of hand, but *you!* I thought *you* were my friend!' And she fled down and away from him.

Severus gritted his teeth, fighting the urge to follow her, to stop her, to explain Explain what? That if she was going to be in someone's bed, it should be his?

'Damn it!' he snarled, pounding down the stairs to the common room. It was empty, save for Bother, who was curled up before the fire with Crookshanks. Brilliant...even his Kneazle had better luck than he did. Rather than going back up to his dormitory, he continued through the portrait hole, pacing down the chilly corridor, his hands clenched into fists.

What the bloody hell is wrong with you? You as good as show the girl who you are, then you chase after her like a lovesick moonling!

'Bugger off!' he said aloud, speaking to the adult Severus castigating him from within. This was bloody complicated. It became more difficult with every passing day to remain emotionally divorced from his seventeen-year-old life. Already, he thought of the seventh-year Gryffindors as his friends, cared about them, wanted to call them by their first names...he wasn't pretending to live this life, he was *floundering* in it, and he didn't know how to hold himself aloof.

*What if I don't want to be aloof?*his seventeen-year-old self queried. *What if I want this life?*

*You can't have it and you bloody well know it*this ever more distant adult self advised. *Avoid Granger. She suspects you...she makes you stupid.*

An odd, swooping sensation filled his torso. 'She makes me want to *be* seventeen,' he whispered aloud, realising it was true.

He was standing before the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy, and he knew what he had to do.

'I need a drink,' he thought, pacing up and down before the blank wall. 'I need a place to sit and drink.'

The doorway finally appeared, and Severus entered the room, irritated to find Dumbledore there before him. 'What the hell are you doing here?' he demanded aggressively.

The old man chuckled. 'Do you think I would permit a student to develop a drinking habit by way of the Room of Requirement?' he asked.

Severus stood just inside the room, his face twisted in a scowl. There were two leather chairs facing one another across a chessboard, a crackling fire, and side tables beside the chairs, each table bearing a decanter full of amber liquid and a goblet. 'I'm not a fucking student,' he snarled. 'I'm thirty-seven years old, and I need a fucking drink.'

Dumbledore waved his hand at the wingchair across from his. 'Sit; have a drink. I'm having brandy, but I believe yours holds Firewhisky.'

Severus found that he wanted the drink more than he wanted to walk out on the old man; he sat in the chair with ill grace and poured three fingers of whisky. Viewing the smoking goblet with satisfaction, he knocked back half of it in one go and fell into a violent coughing fit, feeling as if he had just ingested a lit candle.

It didn't help matters any that Dumbledore laughed. 'You may be thirty-seven in your mind, Severus, but your body is seventeen, and it is not accustomed to drinking like a man drinks.'

Severus sat back in his chair, wiping the sleeve of his jumper over his streaming eyes, feeling the heat of the liquor spreading through his body, putting a relaxed smirk on his face.

Dumbledore watched him closely as the whisky took effect. 'I'm not sure that you're thirty-seven in your mind, either,' he added, musingly.

Severus winced to hear the words spoken aloud. Hadn't he just been worrying about the same thing? 'This was your idea,' he reminded the old man.

'Certainly it was,' Dumbledore agreed. 'But it is the first time my Youthening Enchantment has been used...we're finding out how it works as we go along. Isn't it fascinating?'

Severus felt the intoxicant further relaxing him, loosening his tongue. 'I have all my memories...but I don't have as much control of myself as I did before.' He frowned. 'I'm not completely detached, as I thought I would be...I'm becoming *involved*,' he said, speaking the last word as if it were a filthy swearword. 'Granger burst into my dormitory tonight and I snapped at her, just as Professor Snape would have done...for a minute, I was afraid I had given myself away to her.'

Dumbledore looked grave. 'You had a female student in your bedroom?' he asked.

'I didn't invite her!' he retorted angrily. 'And I marched her out the door and watched her go down the stairs.' *But I wanted her in my bed* he thought.

'Severus,' Dumbledore said intently, and Severus looked up into the old wizard's face, concentrating on the crooked nose, avoiding eye contact. 'I don't think you can help becoming involved in this life, and I don't think there is any harm in you enjoying what you can of it...but you mustn't interfere with the girls you meet.'

'Interfere?' he blurted indignantly. 'Must you speak as if you're in a Dickens novel?'

The bushy silver eyebrows rose. 'Mr Dickens was a fine Muggle man, and we enjoyed following his serials.'

Severus chortled. 'I forgot you were his contemporary.' Then he frowned. 'I have no intention of "interfering" with anyone, Albus.'

The Headmaster sat forward. 'Listen to me, Severus...boys do things they never meant to do when they're impassioned.' He leant back again into his chair, one hand passing unconsciously over his crooked nose. 'Believe me, I know.'

Severus didn't feel the need to argue the point; in fact, he was feeling quite sleepy. The Headmaster, noting his heavy eyes, smiled indulgently. 'There's Floo powder on the mantel, and you'll find you can Floo directly to your room...you'd better get to bed before you fall asleep, don't you think?'

Leaving the rest of the whisky in his goblet untouched, Severus moved unsteadily to the fireplace and Flooed back to his dormitory.

As Albus Dumbledore was leaving the Room of Requirement, he glanced down the corridor and saw Hermione Granger moving stealthily along under a rather well done Disillusionment Charm. Not for nothing had he developed the ability to see those who attempted invisibility; it was an invaluable skill for a teacher in a secondary school full of magical students. Curious, he Disillusioned himself as well and followed her.

Silently, the two of them traversed the staircases and corridors, and he soon understood her destination: She was going to the library.

Hermione cast a non-verbal *Alohomora!*, and the library door opened to her. She entered, with Albus continuing to follow her at a distance, and went to the card catalogue, now wielding her lit wand, reading the cards on the fronts of the drawers, searching for her topic. At last, she tugged a drawer open, flipped through the cards, paused over a few, and then closed the drawer with a snap.

Patiently, Albus watched as she began to weave her way through the stacks, and he had to admire her obvious knowledge of the library, for she did not so much as pause to read the signs on the ends of the bookcases identifying the contents of the shelves. Instead, she moved steadily through the room, until Albus felt a tug of dismay, followed by a flash of admiration. The girl really was remarkably clever; there was no getting around it.

He trailed her, knowing now her destination, and increased his speed, wanting to see her face when she made her discovery. Finally, she came to a stop before the shelf meant to contain the few books the library possessed which included the subject of age alteration charms. Albus smiled when Hermione's head tilted to one side, her eyes narrowed, her brow furrowed with thought.

The shelf was empty.

Luna, true to her word, delivered her mother's notes to Severus at breakfast on Saturday morning, and he spent the best part of the next two days reading and magically duplicating the work of Cynthia Lovegood. Severus had known of her at school; she had been a seventh-year when he was a firstie, a Ravenclaw girl at the very top of her class. She had married an odd, older man and died a bizarre, early death. Severus had known she died because of a spell gone wrong, but when he read through her notes, he realised just how dangerous it had been for her to be experimenting with these time release spell components on her own. He would see to it that no one in his group played about with solo experimentation.

Hermione's face flitted across his mind then, and he snorted in disgust. Did he truly think he could control her in any way?

He had been slipping into and out of the Great Hall either very early or very late for each meal, hoping not to see her. He didn't know what to say to her, couldn't decide if he owed her an apology for his behaviour in all but pushing her down the stairs after she invaded his room, and so he did the best thing he could think of: he avoided her.

On Monday, his presentation in the Special Studies class of the Lovegood notes, as they came to be known, riveted them all.

As he spoke, Hermione watched him avidly; he could feel her eyes upon his face, the powerful focus that was uniquely hers trained upon him, and he found it intoxicating.

It's not you she wants, the voice informed him. *It's the information you have...she doesn't care about you. No one ever has, and you know it.*

As he finished his presentation, and the others began their discussion, he pushed the thought away from him, finding it easier to do so now than he had ever done as Professor Snape ... but wait. Wasn't Professor Snape the voice in his head? He frowned at the floor, working it out in his mind. If Adin's detractor was Professor Snape, then who the hell had been internally castigating Professor Snape for his entire life?

Whose voice was *really* playing in his mind all the time?

'Adin, look how far she took this concept,' Jared said, one finger running down his copy of the notes, amazed.

Severus obediently directed his attention to Jared, though his mind was still far away. It didn't really matter whose voice kept up a running commentary in his mind, did it? All that mattered was that it spoke the truth: He had no business having *feelings* for Hermione Granger.

It wasn't as if he could choose to remain Adin Prince, was it?

'If we can duplicate this experiment successfully ...' Allison began, drawing Severus attention to her.

'... then we can work out how to reverse the time release of the curse,' Hermione finished for her, the excitement of the discovery fairly crackling in her voice.

Professor Dumbledore looked up from Cynthia Lovegood's annotations, gazing into space. 'She was brilliant,' he murmured.

'Well, let's get on with it,' Severus said impatiently, rolling up his sleeves, carefully avoiding Hermione's eyes.

After class, he ducked into the library and hurried to his study alcove, tossing his bag onto the table and not noticing that he was not alone until he all but sat down in Hermione's lap.

'What are *you* doing here?' he demanded, just as she said, 'Are you *following* me?'

'This is *my* study space!' she cried, as he snarled, 'Why would I follow *you*?'

She stood and they were now toe-to-toe, both so angry they were fairly bristling with it.

'This is *my* place!' she reiterated shrilly.

'No, it's mine...and *you* must be the idiot who keeps moving the chairs about!'

She gasped furiously. 'I've had the chairs like this...' She threw out her hand to indicate the side-by-side positioning of the furniture under discussion. '...for the last six years. How dare you change them around?'

With careless insolence, Severus dropped into the chair she had vacated, shoving the second chair with his foot until it was at a satisfactory angle, and then he lifted his feet into it. 'Because I like to be comfortable whilst I study...why don't you clear out, now?'

Enraged past reason, Hermione leant across him and gave his bag a mighty shove, sending his books crashing to the floor; before she could question the wisdom of their relative positions, he jerked her down into his lap and stared into her eyes, both of them overwrought, breath coming in panting gasps.

Severus' heart was pounding, his mouth was dry, and the outraged protests of his inner adult were pushed aside with such violence that he couldn't even hear them. All he knew was the curvaceous armful now sprawled across his thighs, her jumper and blouse rucked up to show a bit of creamy stomach skin, her skirt hiked high up her thighs, showing him a breathtaking expanse of smooth legs in silky tights. He dragged his gaze back up her body, riveted momentarily by the expansion and contraction of her chest, causing the mesmerizing movement of her breasts, and then forced his eyes to her face.

He could hear her panting breaths, and their faces were so close, he could smell the peppermints she had eaten. Her eyes were wary, but she had not yet begun to struggle against him, and he realised that mere seconds had passed, even though it seemed as if time had stopped and as if she had been stretched upon him like this forever, his to look at for as long as he liked.

His cock stirred, responding to the press of female flesh against his body, and he looked at her lips, suddenly keen to discover the source of the Grangeresque peppermint scent. His hands, closed about her upper arms, began the quest up, towards her hair, and her throat, and her face, wanting to caress her softness before he claimed her lips ...

With sudden resolution, she placed her palms flat against his chest, pushing herself up and off of him, her uncommonly pale cheeks flushing pink now as she turned from him and began to straighten her clothes.

Disoriented, Severus regretfully watched her go. He was leaning forward to pull her down again where she belonged when she spoke, and reality came hurtling back.

'I'm sure we can share the space,' she said, her voice unnaturally high-pitched, as if she had forgotten how to speak.

He straightened, his feet hitting the floor, and he hunched over a bit to hide the tent in his trousers, thinking of unsavoury things to make it go away. Circe's knickers! What was the matter with him?

'Don't you think?' Hermione said, turning back to him without actually looking at him.

'Yeah, all right,' he muttered, desperately trying to remember what they had been talking about.

'We'll be fine as long as you keep your feet out of my chair,' she added, a slight attempt at friendliness leaking into her tone.

'As long as you keep your clutter on your end of the table, you mean,' he retorted, bending to retrieve his bag from the floor, sanity and memory now restored.

'Well, it's time for dinner, now,' she said hesitantly, and he looked at her, unable to withstand the appeal in her voice. 'Do you want to come down to the Great Hall with me?'

She forgave him for acting like an arse when he threw her out of his room...when he pulled her into his lap? She wanted him to sit with her at dinner? Him? Not Jared?

Reflecting that his natural inclination would be to follow wherever she led him, he marshalled his self-restraint and reined himself in, forcing a scowl as he opened his bag. 'I have work to do,' he said in a dismissive tone, giving every appearance of being engrossed in his Transfiguration homework.

Several seconds passed, and he knew she was watching him, waiting for him to look up...but he didn't. He couldn't. If she so much as looked *sad*, he would be on his feet, trailing after her like a ... like a *boyfriend*.

That could never happen.

At last she said, 'Right...see you later, then,' and her disappointment rang in his ears long after she had gathered her things and left for dinner.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 16

After the fall of Voldemort, an inexplicable illness plagues the surviving Death Eaters. Albus Dumbledore has a plan to save Severus Snape—but how, exactly, is Hermione Granger involved?



This Time

Chapter 8

There is a darkness deep in you

A frightening magic I cling to

You're All I Have- Snow Patrol

The days passed, the temperature dropped, and the pumpkins in Hagrid's patch reached enormous proportions. At breakfast, the week before Halloween, the Headmaster rose to address the students.

'Following our Halloween Feast this year, we will have a Masked Ball.'

A thrill of excitement ran through the females in the room, and Severus exchanged a long-suffering look with his mates.

'Madam Malkin will be here on Halloween night, with several representatives in each House. Those of you who wish to participate need only to visit Madam Malkin's associates to obtain your costumes and masks, which will be tailored to your personality and are guaranteed to disguise your identity. The traditional unmasking will take place at midnight, and the ball will then conclude at one o'clock.'

Neville poked at his eggs. 'I can't decide if that's a good thing or not,' he muttered.

Jared glanced down the table at Hermione, who was chattering animatedly with Ginny, and Severus followed his gaze.

'I think it's a good thing,' Jared said tentatively. 'It's a chance to get close to someone without them knowing who you are...to make a good impression with someone who might not give you a chance.'

Dean leant towards them, away from Parvati, who was whispering and giggling with Lavender. 'But how will we know which girl is which?' he whispered. 'What if you mean to talk to one girl, and by mistake you spend the night talking to the wrong one?'

Neville turned a concerned face to his roommate. 'I hadn't thought of that,' he admitted. 'I guess the blokes with girlfriends will have it even worse than the blokes without...think of the trouble you'd be in for dancing with the wrong girl all night ...'

Dean looked horrified at the notion, but Severus snorted in disgust. 'It would serve them all right if we stay in and play Knut-ante Wizard's Sweat,' he said.

Neville brightened. 'I'll do it if you do, Adin,' he said determinedly.

Severus slanted a glance at the round-faced Longbottom, of whom he had become rather protectively fond in the last two months. 'But you *want* a girlfriend,' he pointed out. 'This would be the perfect time for you to chat up a girl without worrying that you'll say the wrong thing. She won't know who you are...you can be anyone you want to be for a few hours.'

Neville's eyes grew contemplative as Severus spoke, and Severus couldn't help but be drawn by his own words. It was just one night ... for just one night, he could be just any other seventeen-year-old boy out for an adventure with a willing girl. That wouldn't be interference, would it? A bit of snogging never hurt anyone...and he could leave before the unmasking...then neither he nor the girl would ever know who the other was.

'What's the harm in that?' he said to Neville, but his eyes had wandered again to Hermione.

Four representatives of Madam Malkin's who had set up shop in the Gryffindor common room by the time they returned from the feast on Halloween night, and Severus allowed himself to be bullied into queuing up with his mates for a costume. The room was cleverly subdivided, separating the girls from the boys so they could hide their identities from one another if they wished.

Severus was torn between feeling excited and ridiculous. In his previous incarnation as a seventeen-year-old boy, he would *never* have participated in something like this...but he had been a completely different person then. Poor, ugly, greasy, scorned by the girl he loved, universally unpopular, and the favourite target of the two biggest bullies in his year, he had done his best to keep his head down. The situations were now poles apart...he had the gold for decent things, his looks were improved by the simple expedient of improved hygiene products, he was a member of the Quidditch team, had mates, and was no one's punching bag.

And there was no harm in taking one night off from fretting over the Dark Mark Curse, right?

'Right,' he said aloud, giving Neville's shoulder a shove. 'Go in, mate,' he said. 'You're next.'

Neville stepped into the tent-like structure, and Severus looked back at Dean. 'A Galleon says he gets his first snog tonight,' he said.

Dean grinned and shook his hand. 'You're on, mate...but I'm warning you, he's liable to throw up if he tries to kiss a girl. Our man Neville is a bit of a wuss.'

'Do you have a plan for meeting up with Parvati?' Severus asked curiously.

'No, we've agreed to just enjoy the ball,' Dean said, his face slightly troubled. 'But what if she meets some bloke she likes better than me?'

Severus shrugged. 'Then you'll meet a girl you like better,' he said.

Dean nodded towards the tent. 'You're up, Adin,' he said.

Severus turned back and saw that the door to the tent had been raised again, and he entered. Two well-dressed young men nodded to him courteously.

'May I take your measurements, sir?' the first one asked.

'I suppose so,' Severus answered, watching the magical measuring tape, which began to measure his arms, legs, fingers, ears, chest, waist, wrapped about his head as if measuring for a hat, and finished by measuring from the nape of his neck to the bottom of his heel.

'Excellent, sir,' the clerk said. He turned to his helper. 'Number eleven,' he said.

The helper turned to a wardrobe, tapped it once with his wand, and produced the evening garments of an eighteenth century gentleman, including a dark green brocade coat with heavy silver lace, a silver waistcoat, matching knee breeches, clocked silver stockings, and buckled shoes. The silver mask would cover his face, save for his lips and chin; it was attached to a man's wig from the time period, powdered and curled.

He turned his eyes doubtfully to the first clerk. 'Are you sure?' he asked.

'If sir will allow?' the clerk said, raising his wand.

'Yeah, all right,' Severus said doubtfully. He would either look like a prat or a prince, he supposed, and his clever play on words made him snort in amusement.

With an elaborate flick of his wand, the clerk dressed Severus completely in the ensemble.

The clerk stepped aside, and Severus stared at his reflection in the mirror, seeing a tall, elegantly attired man in a silver mask. He looked ... good.

'The mask will disappear at midnight,' the clerk explained. 'If, for some reason, you must remove the mask before then, return to us. The costume will disappear at one o'clock, and you'll find yourself again in your own clothing. Any questions, sir?'

Severus turned away from his reflection. 'No,' he said.

'Then you may take the lift to the Entrance Hall,' the second clerk said, leading the way behind the wardrobe to a waiting lift. 'Especially installed for the ball,' he explained. 'They'll disappear when the costumes do.'

Severus stepped into the lift, which was only large enough for one person wearing a coat as bulky as his, and stepped out again into the entrance hall. He blinked once when he saw the milling crowd of costumed figures; there were knights, pirates, soldiers and sailors, kings and queens, princes and princesses, djinns and genies, geishas and ninjas, ladies and gentlemen from every era, and others he could not begin to identify. The most mystifying thing was that he recognised no one, save the teachers, who were not in costume. Almost immediately, he found that he had stopped thinking of people by name and had begun thinking only by costume designation.

He moved towards the doors into the Great Hall, eyeing up the girls in the most revealing costumes as he went by. A Polynesian girl in grass skirt and coconut bra gave him a saucy wink before turning and walking away from him, and he was following her when a naval officer from the Napoleonic era bumped into an Arabian genie, causing her to drop the lipstick she held. The officer apologised, and the genie bent to pick up her lipstick ...and the harem pants she wore revealed the edge of a gryphon tattoo.

Saucy Polynesian girls were wiped from his mind as he advanced on the girl with the gryphon tattoo; he'd jinx the naval bloke, if necessary, to get her away from him.

The genie held up her compact as he paused at her shoulder and said, 'It's a nice colour, but you don't need it.' Severus started...whose voice was that? It didn't sound like him.

The genie looked up at him, her lips forming an "o" of surprise.

He smiled down at her, noting the intricate tracings of garnet filigree through her golden sunburst mask, and the waist-length silky black hair falling down her back. 'It might not be safe,' he said.

'Why?' she asked, and though he strained to identify her voice, he could not.

'Because your lips are already far too kissable,' he said, lowering his voice so that only she could hear him.

She seemed lost for words for a moment, then a smile curved those kissable lips. 'You're a bold one, aren't you?'

He bowed to her. 'I am your humble servant,' he corrected her. 'May I escort you into the ball?'

The genie's eyes danced behind her mask, and though he tried to discern their colour, he could not. 'All right,' she said, slipping her hand into the crook of the elbow he offered to her.

Severus walked with her into the Great Hall, relieved to see that Dumbledore had procured a better orchestra for this function. All around them, strangers in exotic costumes looked at one another with wondering curiosity, asking questions, laughing, trying to identify one another.

'Are you enjoying yourself?' he asked the genie, trying to keep his mind off her bottom and the gryphon tattoo.

'Perhaps,' she said coquettishly. 'Ask me again later.'

He grinned at her. 'Is that a challenge?' he asked.

'Oh, yes,' she said, and she did not pull away when he raised her hand to his lips.

'I accept your challenge, Genie,' he said solemnly, then he pressed his lips to the soft skin below her knuckles. He felt her fingers flex lightly in his hold, and her lips parted, her tongue darting out to moisten them.

Circe's knickers! he thought, feeling his cock twitch. *The girl is sensuality incarnate...*

The orchestra began to play, and Dumbledore led McGonagall out to dance, thus opening the ball.

'May I keep this hand for this dance?' he asked the genie with half a smile, exhilarating anonymity liberating him, allowing him to say and do things he never would have done otherwise.

'Yes,' she breathed.

Determined to be a gentleman...for the first bit, anyway...Severus took her hand and placed the other very properly at her waist, beginning to dance with her. She seemed a bit unsure at first, as if she were watching the steps of the dance, and he liked her for the uncertainty, for it made him feel more sure of himself. If nothing else, he could dance creditably, thanks to his friendship with Lucius...but no, he wouldn't think of that, not now! He fought back the tears that rose in his eyes at the memory of his lost friend, raising his eyes momentarily to the enchanted ceiling of the Great Hall to hide their over-brightness. The genie tightened her hold on his hand and stepped closer to him. Feeling calmer again, he looked down into her upraised face, and the smile curving her lips fairly took his breath away with its sweetness. They did not speak as they danced, simply looked at one another as if in silent communion of thoughts too tenuous to speak. When the dance came to a close, he released her regretfully.

'Must I lose your company now?' he asked, expecting any moment that another cavalier would come to dance with the enchanting genie.

She dipped her head, looking up at him from beneath her lashes. 'Is that any way to win our challenge?' she asked.

He felt as if his smile split his face, and he recaptured her hand, pulling it through his arm. 'I shall win our challenge by giving you your heart's desire,' he told her, 'which surely includes a glass of Madam Rosmerta's honey mead.'

Her little trill of laughter seemed to skitter over his skin like ringing bells. 'Oh, yes,' she agreed, 'surely it does.'

They picked up glasses of honey mead, and though he offered to sit with her at a table, she preferred to walk about the edge of the room, watching the other costumed students dance.

'Do you see anyone you know?' she asked him, when they paused for a moment.

He took her empty goblet and set it with his on an abandoned table.

'I see someone I very much want to know,' he answered, moving closer to her.

'You're an accomplished flirt,' she accused him with narrowed eyes.

Feeling that it was a night for extravagant gestures, and confident that no one, least of all his genie, knew who he was, he went down on one knee before her. 'I swear to you that I am not, Madam Genie,' he declared solemnly. 'I have no skill at all in flirtation...but I do want to know you.'

The current song ended, and she glanced from side to side, as if expecting to find an audience watching them. 'Get up,' she said, reaching down to grab his hand and give it a tug.

Obediently, he stood, and he smiled at her. 'No one is watching us,' he told her, stepping close again. 'Everyone is involved in their own intrigue, tonight.'

'Then dance with me,' she said as a soft, slow song began, moving into his arms and placing both hands upon his shoulders.

'As you desire,' he said, putting his arms around her.

She surprised him by moving closer, pressing her cheek to the brocade of his coat and tilting her chin up to look into his eyes.

He held her close for that dance, and the next, and the one after, pleased that the orchestra seemed to divine the mood in the air that night, providing only the most romantic accompaniment for the dancers. He knew that they stopped to share drinks, that they sat at a table for a period of time, their fingers entwined, but time seemed to turn on its side, simultaneously telescoping and contracting, making the minutes fly by while still lasting an eternity. By the last dance set, one of her hands was clasped in his and held against his heart, her cheek pressed to the right side of his chest, her fingers beginning to stroke the back of his neck beneath his wig, igniting a slow burn in his blood. Soon, she had moved their hands to within a whisper of her lips, which she ghosted over the back of his hand, drawing an audible gasp from him.

'Stop,' he murmured, lowering his face until his lips ghosted over her ear. 'Stop, or I shall have to kiss you.'

Opening her eyes very wide, as if to make sure he was paying attention, she parted her lips and pressed them very deliberately to his hand, and desire for her flooded through his body like molten magma.

With her hand clasped in his, he led the way from the dance floor, glancing frequently down at her face, watching for any sign of objection from her, but he saw none. They moved into the Entrance Hall, where he removed his heavy brocade coat and held it out for her to slip on over her rather insubstantial harem garb. He drew her out into the cool autumn night onto the decorated lawn, where out-of-season rose gardens bloomed, created especially for this evening. Numerous masked couples walked amongst the roses, whilst others had melded into the shadows, two figures twined into one.

Severus tugged her down the lawn, past the rose bushes, to the display of man-sized jack-o-lanterns. He pulled her behind the largest one, and looked down into her face again.

'Are you enjoying yourself?' he demanded, hearing the roughness in his voice.

She swayed against him, her palms flattening on his chest, then sliding up to his shoulders. 'Almost,' she whispered, lifting her face invitingly, and Severus kissed her.

The masks were bothersome, and he had trouble finding the proper angle for his head, but his lips were on hers, his hands pressing her close to him, and the heat which had cooled on the walk outside flared instantly to liquid fire in his body.

Her breath was sweet, and her soft, pliable lips moved beneath his, each tiny nibble sending shock waves of lust pounding through him. Dear Merlin, but he wanted to taste her, and he tentatively parted his lips, flicking the tip of his tongue lightly over her mouth. She gasped, which made him feel insane with triumph, and then she opened her mouth, her little tongue darting out, stroking between his open lips, and he truly lost his mind. All but crushing her to him, he devoured her mouth, tasting her, breathing her, wishing he could inhale the essence of her, his prick instantly like iron in his trousers, throbbing with each flutter of her tongue into his mouth. He pressed her against the pumpkin, desperately wanting to touch her bottom, to know the contours of the *derrière* about which he had dreamt for two months, but he battled back the urge. Kisses...he had promised himself kisses this night, not full-scale groping ... Of course he hadn't thought he would end up with the girl with gryphon tattoo in his arms, either ...

She tilted her chin, breaking their kiss, and his lips travelled hungrily across her cheek, his teeth closing ever so lightly on the lobe of her perfectly formed ear.

'Are you enjoying yourself?' he demanded, trailing scorching kisses down her throat, wringing a little cry from her.

'Yes,' she gasped, pulling his lips back to hers. 'Yes, I am.'

His mouth claimed hers again, less gently this time, her response feeding his passion as surely as paraffin incites a flicker to a flame. She tripped his last hold on himself when her hands smoothed down his back, sliding over his bum.

All senses compressed into one need...to possess her utterly...and his hands followed the path hers had done until the cheeks of her bottom filled the palms of his hands, and he pulled her softness against his hardness.

A wave of magic passed between them, breaking their kiss, and they looked into each other's faces, dazed and disoriented. Then understanding dawned on her, and she said, 'Adin!'

Severus blinked, and the glaring reality of the situation burst upon him: His hands were holding Hermione Granger against his erection, as if he were going to drill her against the side of a pumpkin.

He released her, stepping back, horrified. He had planned to leave before midnight! He had never intended to be seen...to be known! He had wanted only to have a bit of flirtation, a bit of a snog, to have a few hours completely outside the context of himself...*bigger* the fact that he had, at the same time, secretly been aching to have this particular girl in his arms for what felt like an eternity ... What a cock-up. He'd hoped for an innocent spot of fun, and *this* was where it got him.

'Adin?' Hermione said, her hands outstretched, as if to pull him back to her.

Severus looked down at her, his desire and his torment, torn between walking away from her and burying himself in her. *She* was the girl with gryphon tattoo. All of his

hopeless dreams and longings converged to one inescapable, shining point: Hermione.

'Adin?' Now she sounded fearful, her voice bordering on hurt. 'Did you ... did you not want to kiss *me*?'

Good God, of course he wanted to kiss her...had wanted to kiss her nearly from the moment he had been Sorted into her impossible House...and by Merlin, there was one more hour left of this night he had given himself to enjoy being seventeen...he would be the world's biggest fool to waste it.

'No one else but you,' he answered, catching her when she threw herself at him and pressing her back up against the pumpkin, his lips on the pulse of her throat, inhaling her scent as if she were his life's breath.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 16

After the fall of Voldemort, an inexplicable illness plagues the surviving Death Eaters. Albus Dumbledore has a plan to save Severus Snape—but how, exactly, is Hermione Granger involved?



This Time

Chapter 9

I'm just another mistake

That you're not gonna make

Another Mistake - Evan and Jaron

Severus cast the Warming Charm again, then pulled the dark blue hooded jacket more tightly around himself. The sun was rising in the east, slowly lightening the sky, dispelling the mist which floated just above the surface of the lake. It was November first, a fine autumn Saturday morning; later today, he had Quidditch practice, for their first game was in two weeks, against Hufflepuff. Normally, the thought of practice gave him a thrill of anticipation, but today, his heart was heavy.

In a life marked by perpetual self-loathing, he had seldom hated himself more.

She had set him alight with madness in her flimsy genie costume, flirting and teasing...not maliciously, but with the innocence of a kitten playing with a ball of wool.

You're the fool at fault for this insanity! the snide voice in his head informed him.

Ignoring the voice, he replayed that moment when he'd slipped the leash of reality...when he had seen the edge of the gryphon tattoo at the small of her back...and the unreality had not ended until they tore themselves apart well past the one o'clock curfew, both aroused beyond bearing from their kisses and caresses.

And she was the one responsible for that the relentless critic within reminded him. *She was burdened with the responsibility of acting as an adult because you were entirely lost in lust and beyond the call of reason!*

His prick stirred again at the memory, for he had clearly felt the warmth of her quim against his leg, pressed as it had been between her thighs. As they had clung and kissed behind the mocking jack-o-lantern, he had wanted nothing more than to bury himself within her, over and over, to expel the lunacy of desire in the rush of his seed within her body.

Severus closed his eyes. Now what the fuck was he supposed to do? How could he resume his everyday life as Adin Prince after that performance with Hermione Granger? What would she expect of him now? Would she want him to sit with her at meals and in classes, hold her hand as they walked down the corridors, and cuddle with her in an armchair in the common room? Would she expect him to be her *boyfriend*? His lip curled in self-derision.

As if.

Don't be a bigger dunderhead that you already are, arse! the scornful adult Severus in his head thundered. *No one has ever had any use for you in such a capacity.*

It was true, of course. There had been women...bed mates, transitory, emotionless affairs, but never had he loved or been loved...not since Lily, and then, only unequally, in different ways and with divergent intentions. He thought of her now with scarcely a pang, his first and only love...but the scars would always be with him.

Why? a traitorous, younger voice whispered, and he found himself far more willing to listen to it than to his older self. *Adin never knew Lily Evans...never loved her...bears no emotional trauma as a result of his loss of her friendship.*

'Shut the fuck up,' he snarled out loud, suddenly finding himself at odds with both of the voices vying for his cooperation. He lunged to his feet and began to walk, his mind whirling furiously.

He had been sidetracked by the dubious joys of adolescence: befriending the likes of Neville Longbottom; playing Quidditch with Potter and Weasley, neither of whom would have stood for his presence on their precious team if they had the least notion of whom he really was; frolicking at a bloody masked ball like an imbecile, snogging and groping a teenaged girl as if it were either wise or proper for him to do so.

What had he been thinking? He was Severus Snape, a pathetic excuse for a man who couldn't even keep himself in emotional check long enough to complete the research to regain his own body and his own reality.

What's so special about that reality? the younger, renegade voice whispered softly. *What's wrong with this one?*

He went still, staring with unseeing eyes across the school grounds as the question rattled about in his mind. Then he began to walk again, giving his head a shake for good measure. His stomach rumbled, and he realised he was trudging back towards the castle. No wonder he was plagued with ridiculous notions...he was starving. His seventeen-year-old body informed him that if he was going to insist upon being awake at this ungodly hour, then it would require sustenance. He reflected that few of the students in the upper years would rise to attend the meal after the debauchery of the previous night. He and Hermione had certainly not been the only ones to succumb to the lure of anonymous intrigue; there would undoubtedly be, at the very least, emotional fallout today from the happenings of last night. He grinned in amusement; it would be fun to watch the bloodshed.

And as for *his* problems, all he needed was a good plan...and he had not spent the best part of twenty-five years intimately associated with the denizens of Slytherin House without picking up a pointer or two on how to manipulate a situation to his best advantage. He had no wish to hurt Hermione...he would gladly take a curse for her, to keep her from harm...but it was his duty to protect her from *himself*, as well, was it not? Surely he could find a way to extract himself from the situation without exposing Hermione to lasting injury.

Feelings, as he well knew, were easily hurt, but soon mended...after a fashion.

He was deep in his Potions homework when she found him in their library alcove, and she had to speak to him twice before he looked up.

'Hi,' he said, standing courteously, glad to see that she was wearing jeans and a bulky jumper in an unflattering shade of orange. It would be an excellent thing if they could manage a day with no accidental tattoo sightings.

'Hi,' she replied, looking a bit self-conscious. 'I didn't see you at lunch ...'

'I wasn't hungry,' he lied, conscious of the cake crumbs in his pockets. Actually, he had loaded up on extras before leaving breakfast.

'Oh,' she said, looking as if she felt rather wrong-footed.

Ignoring the pounding of his heart and the inner voice that bade him to snatch her up and pick right up where they had left off the night before, Severus took pity on her and pushed a stack of parchment slightly to one side, providing a place for her to set down her books. With averted eyes and a shy smile, she took him up on his invitation and sat down.

Immediately, he set his plan in action, resuming his seat and speaking to her in tones dripping with sincerity.

'Hermione, I'm so sorry about last night...I hope you can forgive me and we can still be friends.'

She raised too-wide brown eyes to his face, and for a moment, he was distracted by her slightly swollen lips, still bruised, as were his own, by the mutual violence of the precious night's kisses. 'What do you mean?' she asked, drawing his focus away from her mouth.

'I was out to have a good time,' he said. 'I'm not looking for a girlfriend...and I respect you too much to have been mucking about with you.' Doggedly, he kept his eyes on her face, trying to gauge her mood, hoping that he had been correct in his estimation of her reaction.

She bridled, her lips pressed tight, and tossed her hair before flipping open her Ancient Runes text. 'Did you think I was looking for a boyfriend?' she demanded in a high, brittle voice. 'I don't have time for one.'

He felt a flash of disappointment...did she really have no further use for him? Had their time together meant so little to her?

You can't say I didn't tell you so, his adult voice informed him.

Still, he was relieved...she wasn't going to make a scene, and she was at least going to pretend not to be mad at him. He leapt from his seat and began to shove his books into his bag. 'Great!' he said. 'I've got Quidditch practice, so I'll see you later.'

He fled the alcove, almost certain that she followed his retreat with reproachful eyes. As he strode through the hallways, the ever-present turmoil filled his chest with emotion. No matter what action he took to deal with the Hermione problem, it seemed there was always some new difficulty to further complicate his life. In its way, trying to avoid having a relationship with Hermione Granger was every bit as difficult...and as treacherous...as being Dumbledore's spy amongst the minions of the Dark Lord.

Dean and Ron had their heads together in the changing room when Severus arrived for Quidditch practice, and they were all too willing to lay their woes on Adin, who had proved to be the giver of good advice in the past.

'... and it was Padma, all the time,' Dean moaned, banging his head against the wall in frustration. 'And Parvati was all tangled up with some Slytherin bloke...that handsome one, Zabini!'

Severus traded looks with Ron, and the ginger-haired wizard said tentatively to Dean, 'You snogged *hersister*, mate...she might've forgiven you for someone else ... but her own sister?' He shook his head regretfully.

Dean scowled at him. 'Well at least I didn't get caught out with a *fourth-year*,' he goaded.

Severus snorted derisively. 'A fourth-year?'

Ron turned his back on them both and pulled his Quidditch robes over his head. 'You should've seen the way she filled out that coconut bra!' he snapped.

Severus blanched. The girl in the grass skirt had been a fourth-year? Circe's knickers! That had been a near miss...rather too near for comfort. Good thing Hermione's tattoo had put in an appearance at just the right time ...

'You should've set up a place to meet,' Potter said, appearing beside the lockers, his Firebolt in hand. 'That's what Ginny said we should do, and it worked out fine.'

Dean traded a droll look with Severus; everyone knew Ginny kept Potter on a very short leash.

'That reminds me,' Severus said, 'we had a flutter on how Neville's night would turn out...have you asked him?'

Ron and Potter laughed, and Dean groaned and cradled his face in his hands. 'I didn't have to ask him,' he muttered, rubbing at his eyes. 'He wouldn't shut up...we didn't go to sleep until after five o'clock.'

Severus chuckled. 'In other words, you owe me a Galleon?'

'He didn't snog one girl,' Dean said, digging into his pocket and slapping a Galleon in Severus' extended hand, 'he snogged *three*.'

The team began to move out the door to the Quidditch pitch, and Severus followed, his Nimbus 3000 resting on his shoulder. 'Who were the girls?' he asked, genuinely curious.

'Not a Gryffindor in the bunch!' Ron said with a smirk. 'He snogged Millicent Bulstrode from Slytherin ...'

Severus' estimation of Neville's personal courage climbed a few notches; not many blokes would have the balls to kiss even a heavily disguised Miss Bulstrode.

'And Susan Bones from Hufflepuff,' Dean added.

'And Luna,' Potter finished for them. 'She was on to Ginny about it all the way through lunch,' he added darkly. 'I couldn't help overhearing them.'

'Good show, Neville,' Severus murmured to himself, kicking off to begin practice with a grin. As occurs in the glorious world of a seventeen-year-old boy, the troubles which had plagued him thirty minutes before had faded away to a whisper at the back of his mind, and he was gleeful in his enjoyment of this camaraderie.

At dinner that night, the Gryffindor table was still buzzing with the aftermath of the happenings at the ball. To Severus' discomfort, Potter and Ron took it into their heads to question Hermione.

'Which costume were you in again?' Ron asked her between huge bites of shepherd's pie.

'Never mind, Ronald,' Hermione responded tightly, keeping her eyes on her sprouts.

'You told *me* you were dressed like a harem girl,' Lavender said, stirring the pot spitefully.

Ron gaped, providing them all with a view of partially masticated potatoes. 'That was *you*?' he said thickly.

Potter frowned. 'I saw you,' he said. 'You danced the whole night with some bloke in a fancy green coat.'

'Who was it, Hermione?' Ron asked, pouring another goblet of pumpkin juice.

Severus froze, darting a glance at her from the corner of his eyes, but she was ignoring him, now cutting up her sprouts into tiny pieces, as if preparing them for a potion.

'I don't know,' she said stoically.

'I saw you outside with him,' Lavender said, keeping the cauldron boiling.

Hermione looked up sharply. 'What were *you* doing outside?' she inquired pointedly.

Lavender laughed with a malicious glance at Ron. 'I was getting a breath of fresh air,' she said.

'With Terry Boot?' Ron demanded angrily.

Hermione began eating again with some semblance of relief when Ron and Lavender began their loud squabbling, and Severus watched her with a mixture of admiration and relief. She would not permit her friends to bully her into talking when she wasn't interested in sharing...and she had saved him from some uncomfortable questioning by Potter and Ron. He would have flashed her a smile of thanks, but she did not deign to look at him.

'That's interesting,' Jared said, leaning towards Severus and speaking in a confidential tone. 'She went outside with someone ...'

Severus glared at him. 'What are you on about?' he demanded roughly.

Jared blinked his placid hazel eyes. 'Hermione,' Jared said cautiously, watching Severus' face. 'She's very nice, and terribly clever, and I was getting on with her very well before ...'

'Before getting pissed and taking liberties?' Severus said acidly.

Jared sighed noisily. 'That was unfortunate,' he admitted. 'It won't happen again. I shall have to go slowly with her,' he declared. 'Be patient and understanding ...'

Severus sneered at him. 'Do you think she'll be stupid enough to fall for that act?' he hissed.

'It will be no act,' Jared responded seriously. 'I would very much like to make her my girlfriend.'

Severus slammed his fork onto the table and stood. 'Allison wants to be your girlfriend, numbskull. Why don't you try looking at what's right under your nose?' he snarled before stalking away, reminding himself that it was none of his business if every seventh-year male in the entire school decided to pursue Hermione Granger.

His plan had delivered him from Hermione's reproaches, but it had not provided for his comfort beyond that initial reprieve, he realised as the November days passed and the breach between them lingered. She occasionally showed her face in their shared study alcove, but she was all business, actually studying and working on her homework and responding to his conversational overtures only as they pertained to their assignments. Her manner towards him in the Special Studies class was cordial, if cool, a marked difference from the warmth she demonstrated to Jared, who was making good on his plan of wooing her, a course of action which was making not only Severus miserable, but Allison as well.

'Did you enjoy the masked ball?' he asked Allison in desperation, when he saw her watching Jared and Hermione with tear-filled blue eyes.

'Not really,' Allison said. 'The boys who asked me to dance were all rather stupid.' She looked up into his face. 'I can't abide stupid boys.'

Edging away from her, he dipped his head and began to scribble in his notes. 'I can appreciate that,' he temporised, wondering how he had inherited the mantle of Allison's appeaser. Jared had been Allison's friend since they were children...why wasn't *he* supporting her spirits? Because Jared was an unfeeling git, Severus decided, and the git had no business trying to chat up Hermione, who deserved better.

Snap out of it, he chided himself, striding out of the classroom when the bell rang. *She can be with anyone she wants, as long as it isn't me.*

The next Saturday was Hogsmeade day. The students were lively at breakfast in anticipation of the treat.

'Are you coming, mate?' Dean asked as he and Neville pulled on their hats and gloves against the bitter wind.

Severus turned his shoulder so he would not have to watch Jared hovering solicitously over Hermione and shook his head, causing his fringe to fall into his eyes. He had kept his hair trimmed about his ears and along his collar, but he had allowed the fringe to grow out, finding it useful, at times, for hiding his eyes. As long as he kept it clean, he saw no danger in it increasing Adin's resemblance to Severus Snape.

'I'm staying,' he answered Dean, breathing an internal sigh of relief as he saw Hermione leaving the Great Hall with Jared following her. 'Homework,' he added vaguely, knowing his mates would wonder at his reasons.

At last, the Gryffindors cleared out, and he poured another cup of coffee, forcing himself to think about his Arithmancy essay rather than the snug fit of Hermione's jeans ...

'Good morning, Adin.'

He started, splashing a bit of hot coffee on his hand. 'Is there a problem?' he hissed at Luna, darting his eyes from side-to-side to see who was watching them.

'Yes,' she responded sadly, sitting down beside him and fastening her protuberant eyes on his face.

He swallowed nervously. 'What?' he bit out.

'Neville,' Luna said despondently.

'Longbottom?' he asked, beginning to feel that he and Luna were not having the same conversation.

'Yes,' she agreed.

'Well?' he said. 'What's the problem with Neville?'

'He kissed me,' Luna said, obviously unhappy.

'I'm sorry if you didn't like it,' he said, beginning to display his exasperation, 'but what do you expect me to do about it?'

'Oh no,' Luna said, 'I liked it very much...it was my very first kiss.'

He sighed heavily. 'I don't understand what you want, Luna,' he said.

'You're his friend,' Luna explained. 'I want to know if he liked kissing Susan and Millicent as much as he liked kissing me.'

He stared at her. 'You want me to do *what*?'

'Ask him who he likes and tell me,' Luna said simply.

Severus didn't bother to answer her; instead, he stood up abruptly and stalked away, pulling on his gloves as he went. Yes, he had worn his cloak down to breakfast, just in case he decided to go to Hogsmeade, after all. He hurried out into the icy air, intent on catching up to Hermione and her escort.

He had avoided the previous two Hogsmeade visits, but he had been at war with himself all morning about this one.

It's the perfect time to talk to her away from school, he thought.

You're not interested in talking to her, his adult self argued. *You want to get your hands on her arse.*

He scowled as he strode along the lane to Hogsmeade, keeping a keen eye out for his quarry. He didn't want to touch her. Even if he *did* dream about her every bloody night, he knew he dared not touch her. He just wanted to make sure that *Jared* didn't touch her. Jared was clearly unworthy of her, wasn't he?

Nodding curtly in response to the greetings he received from other students, he continued on until he spotted Hermione on the pavement outside Scrivenshaft's, with Jared in attendance. They entered the shop, and Severus glared at the door, debating whether or not to enter. Deciding that Jared could do little mischief in a crowded quill shop, he leant a shoulder against the empty shop-front across from Scrivenshaft's and waited.

Soon, the two emerged, and Hermione saw him. She looked directly at him before turning away and continuing on down the street to Honeydukes; from there, Severus trailed her and Jared to Dervish and Banges, then to Gladbags. As she exited each shop, Hermione met his eyes. He smirked; obviously, the lady had no objections to him trailing her on her Hogsmeade date...she was making no protest at all.

Finally, at noon, she led Jared to the Three Broomsticks, just in time for lunch. Severus' stomach growled as he followed them into the pub, and seeing Jared guide Hermione to a cosy table for two, he grabbed a chair and dragged it between them.

'I'm famished,' he said cheerfully.

'Adin,' Jared said, 'I'm not sure there's room for ...'

'I won't take up much room,' Severus assured the other boy. 'Just budge up a bit.' He pushed Jared's chair away from the table and turned to smile at Hermione. 'Isn't this nice?'

She was giggling too much to answer him.

On Sunday afternoon in their study alcove, she wasn't nearly so accommodating.

She walked in and set her bag on the table, watching him with a very serious expression. Her impossibly bushy hair was bound in a pony-tail, and today she wore jeans with a thin aqua jumper, woven of a material that looked so soft he longed to smooth his hands over it. Rather than sitting, she looked down into his face, her brow knit in puzzlement.

'You don't want me,' she said musingly, 'but you follow me all over Hogsmeade like some sort of stalker and sit yourself between me and a boy *whomight* be interested in being my boyfriend. What do you mean by it?'

Severus opened his mouth to refute her, but Adin's thought was the first one spoken.

'I never said I don't want you,' he answered levelly.

She moved quickly, sliding into the empty chair and leaning earnestly towards him. 'Then, why?'

His inner adult was shouting instructions, but he was not attending. She was right beside him, her body clothed in softness that was crying out for his touch, the puff of her

peppermint breath fanning over his face, inciting him to seek its source. Now, *he* moved quickly, leaning into the neutral zone separating them, watching her dark lashes sweep down as her eyes closed a fraction of a second before his lips found hers.

She raised a hand to his face, fingertips ghosting over his cheek before trailing over his neck in search of his hair. When her fingers laced in those strands, he reached for her, his hands closing on the silky softness of the pale blue sweater and smoothing down her back, then up again. The sensation was divine, the tactile feast of unbelievable softness over the undeniably lush curves of the body beneath. The very thought pulled a growl from him, and he was urging her with insistent hands from her chair to his lap, never releasing her lips, until he had her where he wanted her, her bottom feeling exactly right as it squirmed atop his aching prick.

What passed then was perhaps the longest kiss in the history of adolescence...certainly in the experience of one Severus Snape, whose protests had been entirely subsumed to the desires of Adin Prince, who needed the girl in his arms more than the next breath drawn into his lungs through his overlarge nose. She fed this notion with her entirely too enthusiastic response to their kiss, which she had bloody well brought upon herself by having the nerve to show up alone, wearing that jumper and looking at him just so ...

His hands, having mapped every dip and curve from her nape to her waist, as if making a topographical study for the benefit of a blind man, slid to her front, intent upon making the trip up her tummy to her ribcage, and from thence to the promised land of the breasts pressed enticingly to his chest...but she caught then at his wrists and broke their kiss, looking into his face with such slumberous, passion-smudged eyes that he wanted nothing but to kiss her again.

'Then why?' she asked again, her voice sounding thick, as if she were speaking through treacle.

Severus looked at her, this brilliant, ardent witch in his arms, and knew he had never wanted anything as he wanted her. 'I'm too old for you,' he admitted sadly, his own voice sounding every bit as husky as hers had done.

He knew he had answered incorrectly when she pulled away from him to stand on her feet, a frown puckering her brow as she struggled to surface from the river of lethargy they had created betwixt them. 'Too old?' she repeated. 'Are you even eighteen yet?'

The heat began to recede from his brain in time with the stiffness leaving his cock; he sat straighter in his chair and tilted his head, allowing the fringe to fall into his eyes. 'That's not the point,' he muttered, sounding exactly like a teenaged boy whose reasoning has been turned back on him.

It was alarming how quickly a female could make the transition from purely shaggable to entirely avoidable. Her hands settled on her hips, where lately his hands had rested, and the delicious, sultry tone disappeared from her voice. 'What's the *matter* with you?' she demanded, her eyes overly bright and her lips twisted, as if against severe pain.

His arousal having subsided to the point that he could stand again, Severus lurched to his feet and shoved his books into his bag willy-nilly. Adin had forced him to kiss the girl, and Severus forced him to flee from her. What was it going to be? Who got to decide?

'I don't need this,' he snarled and stormed away from her, his confusion at a crisis point.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 of 16

After the fall of Voldemort, an inexplicable illness plagues the surviving Death Eaters. Albus Dumbledore has a plan to save Severus Snape—but how, exactly, is Hermione Granger involved?



This Time

Chapter 10

Did I just close my eyes

Or did I open my mind

For the very first time?

Perfect Change - Dakona

On Monday, a new parchment appeared on the notice board, and Severus slouched down the steps and joined the throng of seventh-years reading it.

'More career counselling,' Neville said glumly. 'My gran wanted me to be an Auror, like my dad ...'

Severus glanced at him, seeing the self-denigration in the other boy and feeling an empathetic thump of concern. He knew precisely how that felt, as well as where it led.

'Sod what your gran wants,' he said gruffly. 'You go with your strengths.'

A defiant grin touched Neville's round face. 'Yeah,' he said, punching Severus' shoulder as he squeezed through the crowd to go down for breakfast. 'I can do what I want.'

Severus watched him go, a brief flash of satisfaction bringing a half-smile to his face. Professor Snape's experience wasn't *all* negative...he had cared fiercely for his Slytherins and done his dead best, as their Head of House, to guide them well.

The notice board also contained a sign-up sheet to meet with Professor McGonagall about one's career plans and a table full of leaflets for possible jobs was set up near the portrait hole. Severus stared at the announcement with a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. His mates were humming with excitement, but he could not join in. He didn't need career counselling. He'd had his counselling twenty years ago with fat old Slughorn, who had, by that time, ceased to have any use for Severus because Lily had already dropped him as a friend. Apparently, Slughorn had decided that talent would not be enough to make a success of Severus Snape if he did not also have the power of influential friends behind him.

Slughorn had been right, damn him.

And now, he was in no better case than he had been then. He looked like a seventh-year, he studied like a seventh-year, he even had a fucked up love life, just like a genuine seventh-year...but it was all a sham, wasn't it?

Who was he fooling? He might have his mates convinced that he was seventeen-year-old Adin Prince, and Hermione Granger might believe in his performance enough to want him for her boyfriend, but he *wasn't* seventeen. He was not their peer, and he had no business immersing himself in this life...and wanting it...as if he belonged here.

Turning away from the notice board, he pushed his way through the fringe of the crowd rather more roughly than he might have done on another day, only to come face-to-face with Hermione.

'Where are you going?' she asked him, seemingly alarmed by the expression on his face.

He paused, stunned that she would speak to him after their last encounter, longing more than ever to wrap himself around her and lose himself in the comfort she represented...but he had no right to her, in any way. Sneering mightily, he turned and retreated from her, blindly pushing his way to the portrait hole, intent on reaching the dungeon where his first class of the day would be held.

As he strode through the corridors, ignoring the insistent growling in his stomach, one thought pounded in his mind: He had to find the answer to deactivating the Dark Mark Curse and get out of this ridiculous charade before he was entirely lost in it. He had to get back to his old life...the one he had earned for himself by the accumulated merit of his past actions...and be miserable, as he deserved to be.

So you won't hurt Hermione, Adin agreed, adoration for the girl lurking like a candle in the gloom of his soul.

Because you don't deserve a second chance, his adult self sneered, unimpressed by the adolescent drivel of a lovesick school-boy. *Lucius and Draco didn't get second chances...by what corruption of logic do you imagine that you deserve one?*

'I don't,' he muttered, utterly convinced.

'The time release component comes before the intent adjustment, can't you see that?'

'No, it can't...look, if it doesn't come after, then what's to stop it from altering the outcome?'

Hermione stood at the chalkboard in the Room of Requirement, one arm flung up in demonstration of her point, whilst Severus stood across the room, scowling at her. Professor Dumbledore, Jared, and Allison watched them as if they were a tennis match.

'All right,' Severus challenged, plucking a chirping chick from the cage on the counter and placing it on the floor at Hermione's feet, 'if you're such a know-it-all, why don't you *show* us how it's done?'

'Adin, no!' Professor Dumbledore said, stepping forward to retrieve the chick. 'We haven't worked through the steps yet...you must be patient.'

Fighting the urge to shout at the old man, Severus whirled and brought his fist down on the countertop, making the implements there jump. 'I'm bloody *sick* of being patient!' he snarled.

'Perhaps this will be a good stopping place for us today,' the Headmaster said, returning the fluffy yellow chick to the cage with its fellows. 'Please review your notes and come to class on Wednesday with your comments.'

Severus clenched his jaw, fighting to control his irritation. The Headmaster was the first out of the door, with Jared and Allison following, their heads together in whispered conversation. Severus stalked out in their wake, glaring at the stone floor, but Hermione remained behind, staring at the spot where he had stood, her lower lip caught between her teeth.

Severus spent more and more time in his room studying at his desk and avoiding the library alcove, which called to him with a Siren song of almost unbearable seduction. He had no idea if Hermione had returned there, or if she avoided it as he did. Although he puzzled over the details frequently, he couldn't quite work out how he'd lost all control of the situation. He remembered with rather maudlin nostalgia his first two months in Gryffindor Tower, when he had been unfettered by the raging need to find Hermione Granger and shag her into submission ... shag her until they were lost in the bliss of one another ... shag her until he could forget his old self and his old life ... shag her until all that was left was his amazement that this woman wanted him as he wanted her...with every cell of his being ...

Overcome again by the vision of her in the genie outfit, he closed his eyes and imagined coaxing the harem pants down her thighs and thrusting into her warmth as he now thrust into his fist, replaying over and again in his mind the heat of her open-mouthed kisses, the silk of the bare skin of her torso beneath his questing hands, and the impassioned whimpers she had breathed into his mouth on Halloween night.

The day of their first Quidditch match, he was awakened at first light by the pounding on his door; when he opened it, he found Potter, Ron, and Dean all dressed in their Quidditch robes.

'Come on, mate!' Dean said. 'The team eats breakfast together on match day...where're your robes?'

At their table in the Great Hall, the team consumed their breakfasts in companionable silence. After a time, fellow Gryffindors joined them. Some wore badges, others House scarves, and Neville showed up with his face painted in House colours. Severus found the low drone of tension amongst the players to be electrifying, and the encouragement of their Housemates, whose unshakable belief in yet another Gryffindor Quidditch Cup bordered on fanaticism, cheered him immensely. By the time he stepped out into the weak November sunshine with the rest of his team, he had no thought for his troubles; he was simply a boy anticipating a morning of soaring about on his broom, being cheered on by the people in the stands.

Madam Hooch blew her whistle and they were off, crimson robes darting and swerving amongst the yellow. Severus wielded his bat, coordinating with Peakes to protect their players and to bedevil the Hufflepuffs. Time and again Severus nipped between one of the Chasers and a Bludger, whacking it and sending it towards a Hufflepuff

player. The Hufflepuff Beaters, Mulberry and Hazlitt, had been playing their positions opposite one another for five years, and their moves were synchronized to nearly an art form. Severus and Peakes did not have that fluidity with one another and were required instead to depend upon the keenness of their eyesight and the swiftness of their reactions.

The Gryffindor Chasers were clearly superior, for the score was soon 120 to 50. If Potter could catch the Snitch, the game would be over, with Gryffindor the winners.

Severus began scanning the sky for Potter, making it his business to know the location of each Bludger and his team's Seeker at all times. Kincannon, the Hufflepuff Seeker, dived, and Potter hurtled after him. But just as quickly as he had begun his whirling descent, Potter changed course, climbing straight up. Following Potter's line of sight, Severus saw the gold glint of the Snitch...and the other thing he saw made his blood run cold. Mulberry and Hazlitt, from opposite sides of the pitch, had each hit a Bludger towards the Snitch...and by Severus' estimation, the two black balls, the Snitch, and Potter would all soon attempt to defy the laws of physics by occupying the same space at the same time.

Flattening himself on his broom, Severus raced to reach the spot in time to prevent his Seeker from being knocked out of the air. He judged that if he were able to get between Potter and the Bludgers in time, Potter could catch the Snitch, and Severus could bat one of the Bludgers away ...

Severus and Potter arrived simultaneously. Moving to intercept the nearest Bludger, Severus whacked it with all his might, sending it flying towards Mulberry just as he heard Potter's victory shout. They had won!

In the next moment, the world exploded in blackness and pain.

Madam Pomfrey revived him with old-fashioned smelling salts.

'What the fu...' he began, struggling up, but blinding pain screamed through his head, and the room spun sickeningly. He sagged back onto his pillow and looked at the group surrounding him. His wind-swept team mates stood over him, their faces anxious. Ginny was crying.

'Adin,' she whispered, patting his arm, her eyes...not so pretty as Hermione's, but still big and brown...swimming in tears. 'If you hadn't hit that Bludger, it would've knocked Harry off his broom.'

'Yeah, you daft bastard, so you let it knock you off your broom instead.' Potter looked down at him gravely. 'I owe you a life debt, mate.'

'You bloody well don't,' Ron objected, peering over Potter's shoulder. 'You caught him and flew him back down to the ground, so I'd say you're even.' He grinned at Severus. 'You look like hell, Adin...how do you feel?'

'... not quite that good,' Severus managed to croak.

'I have to put him in pyjamas and treat his injuries,' Madam Pomfrey interrupted, making shooing motions with her hands. 'A fractured skull and concussion are nothing to sneeze at!'

Potter paused for a moment, resisting the matron, looking intently at Severus with Lily Evans' green eyes. 'Thank you,' he said.

Severus felt as if his head was about to split open, but he could not resist his Quidditch Captain's words. 'No problem, Harry,' he said quietly, realising it was the first time he had ever spoken the other boy's first name to his face. Harry, with the familiar green eyes ... Harry, whom he had always, always protected ... Harry, who trusted him now to protect the team, as well ...

For a moment, Harry gripped his hand, and then Severus was alone with Madam Pomfrey, hospital-issue pyjamas, and a nauseating array of potions.

The pain potion gave him a floating, spacey feeling, but although he drifted off to sweet dreams frequently, he did not sleep for long. Madam Pomfrey checked on him regularly for the first several hours, the last time coming to him in her dressing gown. 'Don't hesitate to ring if you need me,' she said, nodding towards the bell on his table. 'You should rest comfortably enough.'

He was sitting on a blanket beneath the beech tree by the lake on a warm, sunny day, with Hermione's hand in his, and all was right with the world...only someone had started a Muggle lawn mower, and the thing was bloody loud.

'Turn it off,' he muttered, but the noise continued, and then something rather cold touched his nose.

He opened his eyes to find Bother standing on his chest, purring loudly, her form illuminated by the single candle on his bedside table. He saw then that another figure hovered over him.

'Hermione,' he said, recognising the nimbus of bushy hair backlit by the candle. He wasn't sure why she was there, but he was certain she belonged with him. 'Hi,' he added, giving her a smile.

'Hi,' she whispered back with a little sob, reaching out, her fingers hesitating at his cheek, as if wanting to feel him. 'I'm so sorry you were hurt.'

He closed his eyes and pressed his face into her touch, reaching to hold her palm to him with one hand and beginning to stroke Bother with the other. Yes, that felt exactly right.

She made a sound, somewhere between a hiccough and a laugh, and he opened his eyes again, looking up at her face.

'Pets aren't allowed in the hospital wing,' she said softly, 'but Crookshanks led Bother to my room tonight, and she wouldn't stop crying until I brought her to you...she seemed quite sure I would know where to find you.'

He smiled at her again, feeling happy and safe, and her lips trembled a little bit as she smiled back at him, her eyes questioning.

'I wondered where you were,' he confided.

She pulled her hand away then, the beginnings of a frown crossing her face, and Severus felt an immediate twinge of unease. Why was she unhappy?

'I don't know what you're talking about,' she said stiffly, her withdrawal as complete as if she had pulled a curtain between them. 'I only came to bring your cat, and here she is, so I'll go now.'

He reached out to her then, and she stepped back, beyond the reach of his fingers. 'Don't go,' he pled.

Her expression contorted a bit, as if in indecision. 'Do you even remember why you're in hospital?' she asked.

'No,' he said, realising it was true. His head pained him, and he didn't remember anything very clearly, but he knew one thing for certain: Hermione belonged with him.

'You took a direct hit to the head with a Bludger,' she said, seemingly torn between exasperation and something else ... something that might make her stay, if he played his cards right.

'Was I in the stands?' he asked. Had he been sitting in the stands with the teachers? No, that wasn't right. He pushed to remember, and his head throbbed with pain.

When he grimaced, she reached again to put her hand on him, this time stroking his fringe back from his brow. He arched into her touch, which made the pain recede a bit.

'No, you were playing,' she murmured. 'You really don't remember, do you?'

He shook his head once and grimaced at the resulting ache. 'Don't go away,' he said. 'I'll try to remember, if you want me to.'

'Don't worry about that now,' she said, pulling up a chair to sit beside him. 'Just try to rest. I'll stay for a bit.'

Bother chose that moment to walk to the end of the bed, curling up at his feet, and Severus moved to his left, ignoring the thudding of the pain in his head. 'Sit up here,' he said.

'No,' Hermione answered, as if a bit scandalised. 'Madam Pomfrey wouldn't like that.'

'It doesn't hurt as much when you put your hand on my forehead,' he said then, pushing his advantage, watching her face from beneath his lashes.

'Adin,' she sighed, leaving the chair and easing onto the hospital bed. 'I don't know why I do the things I do for you.'

He smiled, happy to have her with him, and when she stroked her fingers over his forehead again, he almost whimpered at the lessening of the throbbing pain.

'Is that better?' she whispered.

He nodded, loving the feel of her hand moving gently over his skin as he did so. 'You make it better,' he said simply.

He drifted then, finding a space of comfort in her presence and her touch, allowing the cocktail of potions he had been given to cushion him as he healed. After a time, her hand was gone from his face, and the bed moved, as if her weight had shifted. Instinctively, Severus' hand found her arm and gave it a tug, until she laid sprawled half atop him. He circled her torso then with an iron grip and opened one eye, smirking into her indignant face.

'You said you'd stay,' he reminded her.

'You're going to get us both expelled!' she whispered. 'Let me go...I don't want to hurt you by fighting to get away!'

He held her more tightly still, turning his face into the fragrant tangle of her hair.

'But I need you,' he explained, closing his eyes again.

'You're impossible,' she muttered.

'Yes,' he agreed, knowing it was true.

She sighed. 'Does your mum tell you so?'

'Don't have a mum,' he answered, cuddling a bit closer to her, wondering if he could convince her to come under the blanket with him.

'Oh!' She sounded very contrite. 'I'm sorry, Adin, I didn't know. You've never told me about your family.'

'Nothing to tell,' he said, burrowing in her hair a bit, until his nose found her ear, which he nuzzled contentedly.

'Is it just you and your dad, then?' she asked, finally beginning to relax in his embrace.

'No dad,' he said softly. 'Just me.'

The cloud of her hair moved over his face, and he drew back a bit, until he saw her face upon his pillow beside him, her eyes distressed. 'Did they die in the war?' she whispered.

'Been gone a long time,' he said. Then, unable to prevent the words, he added, 'You're so pretty.'

The yellowish candlelight did not permit him to see any fluctuation in her colour, but she quickly averted her eyes from him. 'Your potions have addled your mind,' she said. 'I'm not pretty.'

'Are too,' he answered doggedly, sure of his facts. 'Prettiest girl in our year.'

'Hush,' she said, sounding pleased in spite of her words. 'You're not making any sense. Just be quiet and rest.'

'Want to kiss you,' he confided sleepily.

'No, you don't,' she answered firmly, making another bid to scoot away from him.

He tightened his hold and tugged her closer. 'Do,' he answered stubbornly. 'Later,' he added, when he realised that he didn't have the oomph to raise his head from his pillow.

'I'm not your girlfriend,' she muttered darkly as he began to drowse again.

'Doesn't matter,' he said, drifting into sleep, his mind supplying, *because I love you*.

When he awoke, the candlelight was guttering out, spitting and flickering, and Hermione was breathing softly on the pillow beside him. Her last words hung in his mind as if she had just spoken them, and the muzziness he had experienced before was gone: He knew exactly how he had got himself in hospital, and he realised what a villain he had been to pull this girl into bed with him...this girl whom he wanted but could not have.

'No,' he whispered to her, and her eyes fluttered open, as if she, too, were resuming their conversation where they had left off. 'No, you're not my girlfriend, but I'd be the luckiest bloke in the school if you were.'

She pressed closer to him, her warm breath fanning over his face as she spoke. 'All you have to do is ask,' she said.

He closed his eyes, the pain in his head gone, but the agony that began in his chest and streamed through his body very much present. 'I want to,' he said, 'but I can't.'

She was very still beside him, and he waited for the standard Hermione outburst, but it did not come. At last, she said firmly, 'Open your eyes, Adin.'

He did so, unable to deny her something so small, in spite of his fear of what he would see in her face.

'Why can't you?' she said seriously, looking into his eyes without flinching.

Old habits die very hard, and Severus was not proof against all of his old ways. A non-verbal incantation, and he was in her mind, his passage feather-light, her memories and emotions laid bare for him to know...but he could not bear to acknowledge what was so plainly there for him to see, and he withdrew from her, his exquisite agony amplified beyond measure.

You can't have it, the implacable voice told him, stirring into wakefulness in his time of vulnerability. *And even if you could have it, you couldn't keep it...not when she knows who you are...she'll be horrified.*

'I can't tell you,' he whispered brokenly, relinquishing his death-grip on her for the first time in hours and unsurprised when she pushed away from him and rose to her feet.

'If that's the way you want it,' she said, and she was gone, the bedside candle guttering into darkness in the wake of her passing.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 of 16

After the fall of Voldemort, an inexplicable illness plagues the surviving Death Eaters. Albus Dumbledore has a plan to save Severus Snape—but how, exactly, is Hermione Granger involved?



This Time

Chapter 11

I can't give you what you want

And it's killing me and I, I'm starting to see

Maybe we're not meant to be

Not Meant To Be - Theory of a Deadman

Madam Pomfrey allowed him to leave the hospital wing at curfew on Sunday night, and he returned to Gryffindor Tower with a heavy heart. Stepping through the portrait hole, he was relieved to see the round room deserted. He crossed to the boys' staircase and was brought up short by the sight of Hermione, sitting on the floor before the sofa, with Crookshanks and Bother tangled up in a mass on her lap.

When she looked up at him, he steeled himself, but her look was clear, direct, and amazingly intimate.

'Welcome home,' she said with a smile of painful sweetness.

'You're speaking to me,' he marvelled, and at the sound of his voice, Bother rose from the feline heap and arched her back before stepping delicately off Hermione's lap and sauntering over to him, circling his ankles and meowing piteously. To silence her, he bent and picked her up, never looking away from Hermione.

She pushed Crookshanks from her legs and stood, presenting her backside for one moment, and when she bent to retrieve her books from the floor, he saw the gryphon tattoo in flight. She straightened up and turned to saunter, with much the same insouciance Bother had shown, to the girls' staircase. At the bottom step, she looked into his eyes.

'Why wouldn't I be speaking to you?' she asked rhetorically, a tiny smile upon her lips. 'We've slept together, haven't we?'

'Fuck yeah, we have,' he muttered, watching the undoubtedly exaggerated swing of her hips as she climbed away from him. His libido, which had been slumbering beneath the influence of narcotic potions, came to life with a roar, and he turned to climb to his own dormitory, his mind a confusion of lust and longing.

'I am so doomed,' he said aloud as he opened the door to his room, and Bother preceded him inside, meowing as if she agreed with his assessment.

The next morning, Severus woke from a dream of Hermione, in which the two of them were lying safe and warm beneath the covers of his hospital bed, face-to-face, in blissful peace. Unlike the other dreams he had had about her, there was no sex in this one, only a devastating warmth and overall harmony, filling him with an emotion so powerful he could scarcely draw breath.

He gathered his things and headed to the shower, thinking about the dream. Did it mean he really wanted her for his own? Or that he trusted her? He couldn't work it out, exactly. He puzzled over it as he dressed, the residual tendrils of the dream's powerful emotion lightening his spirits. He grabbed his bag and headed down to the Great Hall.

The sight of Neville at the breakfast table pricked his conscience as he remembered Luna's anxious request.

'How're you doing?' he asked Neville, sliding into the place beside him.

Neville looked gratified to be addressed by the hero of the Quidditch team. 'I'm fine, Adin...but how are you?'

Severus shrugged. 'Madam Pomfrey patched me up,' he said. 'Listen, Neville, I never asked you about the Halloween Ball...did you have fun?'

The round face lit up. 'I snogged three girls!' he whispered, darting a look over his shoulder as if to check for eavesdroppers.

'Do you fancy any of them?' Severus asked, carefully studying the toast he was buttering.

Neville shifted nervously. 'I dunno,' he admitted. 'I mean, having *any* girl like you would be cool, right?'

Severus shrugged. 'Not necessarily,' he said, turning to Neville with a smirk. 'Have you ever met Romilda Vane?'

Neville blanched. 'She's *scary*,' Neville whispered, darting an anxious look down the table, where the fifth-year in question was queening it amongst her contemporaries.

'But what about the girls from the ball?' Severus asked, bringing Neville back on point.

Neville murmured something indistinct, stabbing his scrambled eggs repeatedly with his fork.

'Sorry,' Severus said, watching Neville with amused exasperation. 'I didn't quite catch that.'

'Bulstrode keeps talking to me,' Neville responded, still speaking quietly, 'but she's a bit of a bully ... I don't think I could like her.'

'You and every male in Slytherin House,' Severus said dryly.

Neville grinned at him, seeming cheered by his words. 'And Susan is going out with Zacharias Smith,' he added.

Severus made a face as if he had just bitten into a lemon. 'I suppose there's no accounting for taste,' he said, 'but any girl who would prefer that prat to you probably isn't worth your time, mate.'

Neville's grin became even wider. 'Thanks, Adin,' he said happily.

Severus waited for a moment, but Neville had stopped stabbing his eggs and begun to eat them again. Severus' stomach rumbled, so he began to eat as well, and they chewed in companionable silence. When Severus had cleaned his plate, he said, 'And who was the last girl?'

Neville choked on his pumpkin juice and had to pause a moment to cough. Severus waited patiently as Neville wiped his mouth and finally admitted, 'It was Luna Lovegood.'

Severus nodded. 'She's nice,' he said. 'I danced with her at Club Night.'

Neville glanced surreptitiously over to the Ravenclaw table. 'I kind of fancied her once, after we were both injured in the last battle, and we were in hospital together...but nothing came of it.'

Severus followed his gaze and saw Luna, sitting all alone in the midst of the other Ravenclaws, reading the *Quibbler*. 'I never knew you were injured,' he said truthfully.

Neville shrugged. 'It was no big deal, just a broken leg. But after we left hospital ...'

'How did you show her you fancied her?'

Neville blinked. 'What do you mean?'

'Did you ask her out, hold her hand, what?' Severus asked patiently.

'No...I didn't tell her or ask her out or anything,' Neville admitted, seemingly fascinated by the concept. 'She didn't seem interested.'

'Well, you hadn't snogged her then, mate. Girls like snogging...she might feel differently about it now.' *She might have been up for it then, if you'd done something about it!* he prevented himself from adding. Rising, he grabbed his bag. 'Gotta get to Potions,' he said, and left Neville chewing a piece of toast and mulling things over.

At lunchtime, Severus caught up with Luna in the entrance hall. 'Do you have a minute?' he asked her.

'Of course I have a minute, Adin,' she said blithely, turning her silvery-grey eyes on him. 'How can I help you?'

'Remember that question you asked me?' he said.

'About Neville?' she responded.

'Yeah,' Severus said, wanting to complete this assignment so he could get on with his life. 'He says he fancied you when you were in hospital together.'

Luna blinked. 'He did?'

'He thought you weren't interested.'

'Oh no,' Luna said earnestly. 'I was just ... unaware.'

'Right,' Severus said. 'Well, that's all I had to tell you...good luck.'

Luna gave a bright, happy smile. 'Thank you, sir,' she said softly.

The 'sir' brought him up short, and a thought occurred to him. 'Luna,' he said, lowering his voice, 'did you, by any chance, know who people were on Halloween...even in their costumes?'

'Of course,' she said. 'You looked very nice in your wig and knee breeches, and I think Hermione really fancied you...you really should tell her who you are, you know.'

Checking to make sure no one was listening to them, he said, 'Please be careful what you say, Luna.'

'Yes, Adin,' she said serenely.

'Look,' he told her, eager to end the conversation quickly, 'I'm going to eat now.' And leaving the spooky Miss Lovegood behind, he followed his nose to the steak and kidney pie.

Severus could not help but notice the change in Hermione's actions during the next weeks. Her challenging behaviours towards him lessened, and it seemed that Jared's attempts to engage her affections now fell on infertile ground. In some manner, without comment or ceremony, she had enveloped Severus in the ranks of her closest friends, and no matter what he did, she treated him with affectionate acceptance.

It was a filthy tactic and one that was difficult to counter.

Her devious scheme came to a head one night near the beginning of December, when Severus was stretched out on his bed, reading Dickens, with Bother curled up on his stomach. A firm knock on the door brought him out of the fog of nineteenth century London, and he said, 'Enter,' thinking Neville must be dropping by for his now nightly consultation on how to woo Luna Lovegood.

('She knew who you were *before* she let you kiss her. Just ask her out, mate, you're golden,' Severus had told him, but Neville's response was always a variation on, 'But what if she says "no"?'')

On this night, however, it was not Neville, but Hermione who erupted into his room in a flurry of bushy hair and crackling excitement.

'Adin!' she blurted, her face shining. 'Grab your Lovegood notes and come quickly! I think I've found...I'm almost sure...'

Ejecting an indignant Bother onto the floor, Severus surged to his feet, thankful that he was completely dressed.

'What is it?' he said, standing stupidly by his bed, trying to make his mind function when the only thing he could think of was the fact that ~~that~~ *she* was in his room.

Hermione rushed impulsively towards him, a welter of parchment clutched to her chest. 'Quick! Get your notes...I have to show you...come *on!*'

'Where are we going?' he asked, sitting to push his feet into his trainers.

'The Room of Requirement,' she answered, turning to his desk, where his school things were neatly stacked. 'Which one of these has your notes?'

'The top notebook,' he answered absently, bending to tie his shoes. Sometimes, she was a fascinating, alluring creature, but other times, Hermione Granger was nothing but a bothersome girl.

She snatched the notebooks on top of the stack and whirled back to the door. 'Hurry up!' she said and raced back into the corridor.

'What time is it?' he asked, following behind her, taking care to close his door.

'Almost curfew...come *on!*'

They attracted little attention as they hurried through the common room and out the portrait hole, and she did not speak again until they had successfully entered the Room of Requirement.

The oil lamps flared to light as they entered the classroom, and true to its purpose, the Room had provided the chalkboards from their last class meeting, complete with the Arithmantic equation Hermione had chalked on one of them.

Severus was torn, partly exasperated by Hermione's overblown excitement, partly intrigued by her air of *knowing*, and partly afraid of what she had found. What if she had solved the problem of the Dark Mark Curse? He would be able to turn his back on his ridiculous farce and resume his proper existence ... and he was not altogether sure he was yet prepared to pick up the threads of his old life.

Pushing the anxiety which accompanied that thought away, he slouched indolently into one of the squishy armchairs, lacing his fingers behind his head with a smirk. 'Well?' he challenged. 'Dazzle me with your perception.'

In her element now, Hermione neatly arranged her parchment on a work table, stacking Severus' notebooks to one side, and then she turned and wiped the blackboard clean.

'Oi!' he objected. 'Did you write that down first?'

'Oh, forget that!' she said, snatching up the chalk and beginning to scrawl a new equation on the board. 'I was all wrong.'

He snorted. 'I *told* you so,' he said, but she ignored the taunt, an unusual occurrence.

She wrote an Arithmantic string, then grabbed up her notes, consulting them before continuing. As she wrote, Severus sat a bit straighter in his chair, abandoning his nonchalant pose. Though he would never admit it, he sometimes had difficulty following Hermione's line of reasoning in Arithmancy. She clearly surpassed him in her understanding of the subject, and although his own marks in Arithmancy were better this time around than they had been on his first go, he still was not her equal. There were leaps of logic she made, the geneses of which were incomprehensible to him.

Standing now, he frowned as he worked through in his mind the steps she was delineating, and although he lagged behind her frantic scribbling, he found that he ~~could~~ *could* follow her reasoning from one element to the next. He was still scowling at the board with fierce concentration when she had been finished writing for several minutes; she waited impatiently for him to comment, shifting from one foot to the other like a small child in need of the toilet. When at last he turned his eyes to her face, she giggled, bounced, and clapped like a little girl.

'Do you know what this means?' she asked, her voice rising with excitement.

He crossed his arms over his chest and sneered at her. 'It means I was bloody right!' he all but shouted. 'The time release component *does* come before the intent adjustment!'

'Yes!' she cried, hurling herself at him jubilantly, 'but it also comes *after*, to preserve the outcome!'

'Know-it-all,' he muttered, but he caught her in his arms, infected with her elation. She flung her arms about his neck, her face raised invitingly to his, the union of her happiness, her proximity, and her overwhelming desirability combining to throw him into a mass of confusion. His stomach swooped, his heart raced, and his sheer *want* of her pounded in his head, drowning out the roaring of his adult self.

So, for the first time in nineteen days and untold hours, he kissed her, with her unmistakably unprincipled collaboration. She showed no sign of hesitation or reluctance, simply pressing against him and opening her peppermint laced mouth to his, breathing in his every exhalation as if they had been born to complement one another.

Their activities soon had them rather too overwrought to continue standing, and they retreated wordlessly to the armchair he had lately occupied. It seemed to have enlarged in his absence, as if the Room were accommodating even their adolescent drive to kiss and caress one another past the point of reason.

At last, when he had the fingertips of one hand down the back of her jeans, gently exploring the upper curve of her buttocks, and the other arm beneath her jumper, with his hand on her tummy, inching up to her ribcage, the oil lamps flickered and went out, leaving only a single candle burning on the table by the door. Severus broke their kiss, regretting it even as he pressed his forehead to hers, her whimpering sigh of protest a caress to his ego as well as his libido.

'I think that's a warning,' he said, his voice sounding uncharacteristically rough.

She seemed to struggle to control her breathing, trembling in his embrace like a leaf in the wind. 'I'm sure you're right,' she agreed, sounding a bit drunk.

Having no wish to be thus discovered by the Headmaster, he urged her to stand, keeping hold of her hand as she did so, and smirking to himself when she moved away towards the work table, her fingertips trailing along his palm until she was forced to break contact with him to reach her goal. He remained in the chair, enjoying the sight of her, rumped and disordered from their frantic snogging and petting. She began to shuffle her parchments back into some semblance of order, and slowly, her interest was caught again by her intellectual breakthrough. Accepting the loss of her undivided attention, Severus stood and straightened his clothing, making the necessary adjustments to facilitate his ability to walk back to the common room.

He was surprised when the oil lamps flared on to light the room again, and he looked up to see Hermione, wand in hand, now intently perusing his notebook. He approached her, puzzled to see his copy of the Lovegood Notes upon the tabletop, whilst Hermione read another of his notebooks...

Bloody fucking hell.

'Adin,' she said, looking up into his face, her eyes unreadable, 'why do you have classroom notes for Professor McGonagall's seventh-year Transfiguration class through June of 1978?'

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 of 16

After the fall of Voldemort, an inexplicable illness plagues the surviving Death Eaters. Albus Dumbledore has a plan to save Severus Snape—but how, exactly, is Hermione Granger involved?



This Time

Chapter 12

Sometimes we draw the line

And people remain where they don't belong

Believe Me - Tonic

He snatched the notebook from her hand. 'Who asked you to snoop through my things?' he snarled, panicked, scooping up his other notes, as well.

'You said your Lovegood notes were on top...I picked up two notebooks instead of one, just by accident,' she said patiently. 'Where did you get those?'

He strode away from her, pushing through the door and out into the corridor, his brain seething. What could he tell her? Should he perform a Memory Charm on her? Could he remove her recall of his Transfiguration notes without damaging her memory of her breakthrough...without robbing her of the memory of how she had kissed and caressed him?

'Adin!' she called, now following him down the corridor. 'Don't walk away from me!'

He quickened his pace, panicked. What could he tell her? What should he say? If she found out who he was, she'd be repulsed...she'd be horrified...she'd hex his bollocks off for misrepresenting himself to her....

Her hand closed over the back of his jumper and she gave it a tug. 'Tell me,' she insisted.

He pulled away from her without stopping or looking around, fear driving him into Professor Snape's persona. 'I loathe nosey people who can't mind their own business,' he snarled viciously, stopping before the entrance to Gryffindor Tower.

'Don't look at *me*,' the Fat Lady said, seemingly offended by his tone.

'Mince pies,' he snapped at her, and the portrait swung forward.

'I didn't take it on purpose,' Hermione hissed, crowding through the portrait hole behind him, 'but I want to know how you got those class notes!'

He wheeled about and stepped towards her, his expression ugly. 'It's none of your sodding business, Granger.'

She lifted her chin defiantly, refusing to step back. 'If you stole them, I'll have to report you,' she cried. 'I'm a prefect...it's my duty!'

'I didn't steal them, you insufferable little know-it-all!' he roared at her, spittle flying from his lips in his rage. 'They belonged to my mother!'

He didn't know where the lie had come from, but the effect on Hermione was almost instantaneous. The pugnacity fell from her stance, and she became penitent.

'Oh, Adin,' she whispered, 'I'm so sorry. Please forgive me.'

He fell back from her; the trauma of moving seamlessly from passion to inquisition to consternation to contrition was rather too much for his seventeen-year-old self to process smoothly...bloody hell, it was too much for *anyone* with a y-chromosome to process.

'Forget it,' he said gruffly, and turning, he bolted up the stairs to his dormitory. Seating himself behind his desk, he slammed the incriminating notebook into a drawer and buried his face in his hands.

Hermione's attitude towards him for the next several days was conciliatory, but Severus kept his distance. He had been very, very stupid...she had damn near sussed him out with that unforgivable blunder with his Transfiguration notes. He was floundering, losing touch with his true identity, absorbed with the life of Adin Prince amongst the Gryffindor seventh-years, whose foibles, fears, and everyday lives had become far more real to him...and infinitely more dear...than anything he had left behind at Spinner's End.

It didn't help that every passing day found him thinking more of Hermione than he had done the day before. Although the flying gryphon tattoo still occupied a very fond spot in his thoughts...and a prominent one in his dreams...he sometimes dreamt of simply being with her, always in quiet, intimate circumstances. The feeling from the dreams was nearly frightening in its power, and until now, one he had never thought to experience, either waking or dreaming.

He couldn't begin to fathom what it meant.

In the Special Studies class, Hermione's breakthrough had brought about the commencement of actual spell experiments. It was a huge leap forward in their research, and Professor Dumbledore had awarded twenty-five points to Gryffindor on Hermione's behalf. She had flushed pink with pleasure, turning to share her enjoyment with Severus, but he was quick to duck his head, scribbling unnecessary comments in his notebook.

Of one thing he was certain: None of them would want him, if they knew who Adin Prince really was. His friends would no longer want to joke with and confide in him, Hermione would certainly never want to kiss or caress him again...and Dumbledore would be *disappointed*, which was far more punishing than the old man's anger.

Under no circumstances could he let her...let *them*...find out who he was.

In the first week in December, new announcements went up on the notice boards in the common rooms, creating a buzz of anticipation in the entire school. The last two weekends of term would be enlivened by Christmas parties in each of the Houses. The first weekend would have a party in Slytherin on Friday and in Ravenclaw on Saturday; the next weekend would have a party in Hufflepuff on Friday and in Gryffindor on Saturday. Students from other Houses were permitted to attend only as the date of a House member. The excitement was immediate, and for Severus, rather amusing. As he intended to neither offer nor accept an invitation to attend a party, he could sit back and watch the intrigue.

Luna did not hesitate to stop the seventh-years on their way down to dinner one evening and invite Neville to attend the Ravenclaw party as her date.

'M-me?' he stuttered, dumbfounded.

Dean nudged Neville sharply, and Severus had to turn away to hide his smirk. Severus had endured numerous long, involved conversations with Neville on the subject of Luna, but poor Dean actually had to sleep in the same dormitory with him.

'I...I...' Neville tried, and Dean wrapped an arm around his mate's shoulders.

'What he means,' Dean said to Luna, 'is he'd be delighted...right, Neville?'

Neville nodded, giving Luna a shy smile.

'Good show, mate,' Severus said bracingly, sitting down beside Neville at the table. 'You're going out with her!'

Neville turned a slightly sickly shade of green and gulped water from his goblet.

Hermione seated herself unabashedly across from them, flipping her bushy mane away from her face and giving them a sweet smile. 'And who are you going out with, Adin?' she asked.

Severus felt his face flame, and he glared down at his chops, stabbing his sprouts with a vicious thrust of his fork. 'None of your business,' he muttered mutinously.

Neville gasped and attempted to tread on his foot under the table, but Severus ignored him.

'All right,' Hermione said placidly, beginning to methodically eat her dinner.

Severus finished his dinner in record time, then escaped to the library alcove and pulled out his books, trying to study for an upcoming quiz in Ancient Runes. He began a translation exercise, only to find his attention wandering as he considered Hermione's question about whom he was going out with. His study attempt petered out, and he was doodling a flying gryphon on the edge of his parchment when an intruder arrived; immediately, he covered with his hand.

'Hi,' Hermione said off-handedly, settling in her usual spot and opening her Ancient Runes textbook to study.

Severus glared at her, but she completely ignored him, flipping through the textbook pages and jotting notes on her parchment as if he were not even present. He tried again to translate the ancient Mesopotamian treatise, but every movement of her hands on her books drew his attention back to Hermione. Finally, goaded beyond bearing, he demanded, 'What were you on about at dinner?'

She raised her eyes to his, an expression perilously near to understanding in her brown eyes. 'If you don't ask me to go with you,' she said, 'I am going to go with someone else...and you won't like that, you know.'

He curled his lip at her, anger quaking through him. 'I don't give a damn what you do,' he spat. 'And you need to find somewhere else to do your homework...I don't want you here!'

With a pitying smile, she lowered her eyes again to her parchment, not dignifying his lie with a comment.

A ferocious arctic blast descended upon them in the next week, assailing the castle with a snow storm of blizzard-like proportions. Herbology and Care of Magical Creatures classes were moved from the grounds into the castle, and Quidditch practice was cancelled until further notice.

Undeterred, Hagrid dragged massive trees into the Great Hall, where the professors fussed about, decorating them. Suits of armour began to sing Christmas carols, and

the denizens of Gryffindor Tower began to decorate their common room for the upcoming Christmas party. Ginny Weasley marshalled a group of first- and second-years whose job it was to make paper chains, and Lavender Brown corralled the third- and fourth-years to decorate with holly and ivy.

Meanwhile, in the relative quiet of his dormitory, Severus frowned at the pendant he had bought on impulse in Hogsmeade the previous Saturday, trying to determine how he would give it to Hermione without her knowing whom it was from. The tiny golden gryphon, set with minute ruby eyes, had seemed to call to him, and although it had been rather expensive, he had justified it to himself, reasoning that it was the only gift he would buy ... the only gift he had ever bought for a girl.

On the Friday before the Ravenclaw Christmas party, Allison approached him in the Special Studies class. Dumbledore was sipping tea and chatting with Jared, and Hermione was sitting quietly beside Severus, scribbling on a piece of parchment.

'Adin,' Allison said softly, 'would you like to be my date for the Ravenclaw Christmas party?'

Severus blinked and set down his quill, taking special care to recap his ink, trying to think of a way to decline Allison's invitation. To his right, he was aware that Hermione had stopped writing, and he could almost feel the weight of her gaze upon his face. Nevertheless, it surprised him when she spoke up.

'How sad,' she said, her voice dripping with something that was definitely not sympathy. 'Did all the other boys turn you down?'

Severus inhaled sharply, wishing he could withdraw, like a turtle, into an impervious shell before the hexes began to fly. Allison's mouth was agape at this attack from an unexpected source; it seemed she was having difficulty gathering herself for a counter-strike. Taking full advantage, Hermione continued, 'Of course, poor Adin has had no invitations either, so I'm sure he'll be happy to help you out.'

The bell rang, and before Allison could respond, Hermione gathered her things and swept away without a backward glance.

'She's always been so nice to me!' Allison gasped.

'Pay her no mind,' Severus said, a smile tugging at the corner of his lips. 'She's upset because the bloke she wants to go with hasn't asked her to the Gryffindor party.' Darting a glance from the corner of his eye, he saw Jared with his back to them, pushing things into his bag. 'Ask *him*,' he urged her. 'Tell him you're going just as friends...you have to start somewhere.'

Without waiting to see if she'd take his advice, he sauntered out into the corridor, feeling rather pleased with himself. He'd got Allison off his back and pointed Jared in the right direction, which would hopefully prevent the Bulgarian from asking Hermione to the Gryffindor party. Not a bad day's work.

On Sunday afternoon, the snow stopped falling, and though the clouds were leaden, for the nonce, it was possible for the intrepid to venture out. Severus allowed himself to be lured out by Dean and Ron, who promised him a snowball fight with the Hufflepuff Quidditch team; he dearly wanted an excuse to knock down the Hufflepuff Beater who had put him in hospital.

The battle raged furiously for an hour or so, until the Gryffindors charged the Hufflepuffs' snow fort, and the Badgers surrendered. Victorious, Severus stood amongst the other participants, punching arms and slapping backs, until he felt a snowball hit him in the back of the head. Turning to find his assailant, he saw a Gryffindor scarf-wearing figure fleeing in the general direction of the greenhouses.

Pausing only to pack a few snowballs and to tuck them into the pockets he had waterproofed for such storage, he set out in pursuit, fully intending to bring his attacker to his knees. He lost sight of the other Gryffindor around the igloo-like mass of the first greenhouse, but as he rounded the end, another snowball, this one poorly thrown, smacked into his shoulder. Whirling, he returned fire, pelting the now cowering figure with three forcefully delivered missiles before he realised the squealing was definitely girlish, and the reality of the bushy brown hair burst on him.

Hermione lowered her arms, which had been crossed protectively over her head, and glared at him. 'That hurt!' she cried.

He advanced on her, and taking her arm, he pulled her to her feet. 'What did you expect?' he demanded, beginning to dust snow none too gently from her cloak.

She waited so long to answer that he stopped what he was doing to look down at her face. She gazed at him intently, her expression stealing the breath from his lungs.

'I wasn't sure what to expect,' she said softly stepping closer, her little bow of a mouth slightly parted, as if waiting for...

'You ought to have expected to have your face rubbed in the snow,' he said severely, fighting the impulse to kiss her, which she plainly deserved.

She extended her neck, a roguish smile playing about her lips. 'Rub away,' she invited.

He swallowed, trying not to think of rubbing her in any way, shape, or form. With a terrific exercise of self control, he stepped away from her. 'You got what you deserved,' he said stonily.

She smiled ruefully, extending a hand to him, as if to keep him with her. 'Any attention is better than none at all,' she said wistfully.

Her words struck him like pellets of ice, stinging upon impact, scoring his insides to bloody tatters. He wanted to give her what she wanted...to give her everything he had...but he could offer her nothing ... not a damn thing.

Wanting to speak, but knowing he couldn't, he turned from her pensive face and hurried back to the castle, suddenly chilled to the core.

That night he had the most vivid dream yet. He and Hermione were alone in the Special Studies class, where he pled with her whilst she stood with her back to him, her arms crossed firmly over her chest. He was not sure what he was asking of her, but he sensed it was something to do with the cure for the Dark Mark Curse. Then Dumbledore stood in the room with them, whispering to Severus, 'Don't forget her role in your salvation...don't forget the prophecy.' His dream self was assailed with terrible distress; he had forgotten she was to be the agent of his salvation...how could he have been so foolish? He begged her to help him, but she walked out of the room and left him there, alone.

He awoke in the indifferent light of morning, drenched in cold sweat. How could he keep her close whilst keeping her distant?

He couldn't be sure, but he suspected men had been trying to solve that conundrum since the dawn of time.

Rising from the bed, he grabbed his things and headed for the shower...it was as good a place as any to think.

Neville's date with Luna went so well that he mustered the courage to invite her to the Gryffindor party, while it seemed that Allison's outing with Jared had served only to make things awkward between them. Severus tried to keep his head down and not get involved with his friends' affairs leading up to the end of term, but it was still amusing to watch Dean turn himself inside-out to appease Parvati's lingering anger over the debacle with Padma at Halloween...enough so that she would agree to be his date for the Christmas party. Ron and Lavender seemed to be slowly resolving their differences from Halloween, although Lavender's blithe attendance of the Hufflepuff party with Michael Corner...'Just as friends, Ron, *honestly!*' she had said...had got right up Ron's nose and made him as grouchy as a bear.

Severus managed to get through the week by avoiding Hermione's eye whilst watching her obsessively when her attention was directed elsewhere. The constant, low-level longing had escalated to the point that it interfered now with his appetite, as well as his sleep. He wasn't sure what was wrong with him, but he had begun to suspect some sort of slow-acting spell that caused him to behave like a puppy dog.

On the last Friday of term, the students and teachers alike seemed to be in an infectious holiday mood. In every class save McGonagall's, the students were allowed to bunk off, amusing themselves as they liked. Severus made progress in his reading of *Bleak House*, pleased to think of the nearly three-week long Christmas hols, during which he could read to his heart's content in the deserted Gryffindor Tower. No one he knew of was remaining at school for the holiday, and he anticipated the solitude, wherein he would have an opportunity to reason his way out of his inexplicable preoccupation with Hermione Granger.

That day in Special Studies, the Room of Requirement had read the Headmaster's intent and provided a lovely tea, complete with little Christmas cakes and mince pies. Severus partook of the repast with enjoyment and was beginning to think it had been a near perfect day...until Hermione rose from her seat, saying, 'I'll just have a word with Jared.'

Before he knew what he was about, Severus' hand shot out and closed about her wrist. Hermione looked down at him, her eyebrows raised. 'Yes?' she said.

'Have a word with me,' he suggested.

She peeled his fingers from her wrist. 'I told you what would happen,' she reminded him.

He grabbed her hand. 'Sit down,' he said.

She pulled away from him, and he was on his feet like a shot.

'Go with me,' he blurted.

She turned to face him, her arms folded, her eyes narrowed, her lips in a thin line. 'Why should I?'

His brain whirled. She was seriously unhappy with him...she might very well ask Jared to be her date, and he didn't want that. He swallowed. 'Please?' he said, disliking the plea in his tone.

Her eyes softened slightly, and she sat again. 'Don't push me too far, Adin,' she said quietly. 'Even I have my limits.'

He looked down at the top of her bushy head, feeling foolishly relieved. 'Then you'll go with me?' he said.

'Yes,' she said shortly. The bell rang then, and she tarried only long enough to wish the Headmaster a happy Christmas before walking out.

Severus didn't care if she wasn't talking to him...he didn't mind if they spent the entire party not talking to one another...just as long as she didn't go with another bloke, nothing else mattered.

On Saturday night, Severus glared at himself in the mirror in his room as he combed his hair. *You're damn near thirty-eight years old*, he told himself. *It's bloody well time to start behaving like it.*

Eschewing the jeans and jumpers he usually wore outside of classes, he fastened a pair of slim black trousers about his waist and slipped a black cashmere sweater over his head, folding down the high neck with precise movements of his long fingers. He wasn't good-looking, and he never would be, but he had some measure of sophistication, if he could bring himself to remember it. So much of his existence before the Youthening Enchantment had become like a distant echo of a life he had once read about, rather than lived, but he could surely generate enough savoir faire to enthrall a teenage girl for a few hours...couldn't he?

Over the sweater, he donned the tailored black coat that matched his trousers, ending by pulling on highly polished black boots.

'Blimey,' the mirror breathed. 'Where've you been hiding that get-up?'

Severus smirked. 'Watch your mouth,' he reminded it.

'I would if I had one,' the mirror chortled as Severus let himself out into the corridor.

Dean came up behind him, dressed in a dark red silk kurta over matching trousers, looking very much like an Indian.

'Parvati wanted me to,' he said hastily, before Severus could speak.

Neville came along in Dean's wake, frowning at his feet as he came. 'But should I hold her hand?' he was saying and did not look up until he ran into Severus. 'Sorry, I...' he began, then his eyes grew wide, and he fell back a step.

'Neville?' Severus said, concerned.

'All right, mate?' Dean said.

'Adin?' Neville said softly.

'Yeah?'

'Merlin,' Neville breathed. 'You reminded me of someone for a minute ...'

Dean clapped his roommate on the shoulder. 'Come on,' he said. 'Let's get this party going.'

Severus watched them walk away from him, thinking with a wry smile that he knew exactly whom Neville had mistaken him for. Perhaps it was a bad idea to try to infuse Adin with some of his alter-ego's worldly wisdom.

'Oi!' Ron's voice echoed down the corridor, and he careened around the curved passageway, tucking in his shirt as he moved. Harry appeared behind him, making vain attempts to flatten his hair into some semblance of tidiness.

'Adin's not down yet,' Ron said over his shoulder to Harry. 'We're not the only late ones.'

The three of them tramped downstairs together, and Severus blinked when they reached the common room. Ginny's cohorts had produced enough output to make the room look as if it had suffered a paper chain explosion; the effect was simultaneously chaotic and comforting. He chuckled at Ron's muttered, 'Blimey, Ginny, kill a few trees, why don'tcha?'

Then Severus saw Hermione, and everything else was wiped from his mind.

She stood on the girls' staircase landing, wearing a cranberry-red dress of some slinky material that emphasized and clung to her breasts and hips, with long, tight sleeves which tapered to her wrists and a high, tight neckline which emphasised the fragility of her slender neck. Her hair was smoothed and pinned up; he had never seen her looking so much like a woman, and the fierce, possessive wave which passed over him then drove him to the foot of the staircase, where he paused and looked up into her face.

When her gaze touched him, her brown eyes lit with a blazing intensity that was meant for him alone, he found himself standing straighter, lifting his chin to meet her silent challenge. In the next moment, Hermione moved smoothly down the stairs and straight into his arms, as if it were her natural place in the world, and he grasped her waist

and swung her to the ground, maintaining his hold on her even after her feet, in their shiny high-heels, had touched the floor.

'You're amazing,' he said, his adult vocabulary deserting him under the influence of his adolescent reaction.

'Good,' she said, allowing her hands to rest upon his chest, 'that was my intention.'

He possessed himself of one of her hands and lifted it to his lips. 'You have succeeded,' he assured her.

She smiled at him, incandescent, and he slipped an arm about her, clearly marking his territory against any possible intruders...but it seemed, on the cursory examination he could spare from feasting his eyes on Hermione, that the other seventh-years were happily occupied, apparently unaware that Severus was in possession of the prize in the room. Neville gingerly held the hand of Luna Lovegood, who stood beside him in silver-spangled robes, her protuberant eyes fixed upon his face as he spoke to her. Parvati was magnificent in a gold silk sari, beaming up at Dean as he inclined his head to her, and Lavender and Ron were already entwined in a vertical wrestling match. Harry and Ginny stood at the centre of the room, and Harry was patiently enduring the admiration of the people who felt empowered to approach him tonight. A spread of refreshments had been provided beneath a banner proclaiming this to be the Gryffindor Christmas party, and an old-fashioned Victrola, which was being energetically manned by the younger Creevey, played Christmas music.

The only one of the seventh-years who was not happily coupled for the evening was Jared, who was pinned nervously in a corner by the rapacious Romilda Vane. Miss Vane was particularly intimidating tonight in a green velvet corseted dress, which pushed her rather imposing chest into unavoidable prominence. Severus could not find it in his heart to feel sorry for the berk; it served him right, really, for slighting Allison, didn't it?

'Shall we mingle?' Hermione asked him, reclaiming his attention. His arm was about her shoulders, and she fit perfectly against his side, soft, feminine, fragrant ... and his. *No, she's not*, the inner voice protested, but he ignored it; she *felt* like his.

'Merlin, no,' he replied. 'I don't want to share you.'

She coloured deliciously, slipping her arm about him, as well. 'Then let's find someplace quiet,' she suggested.

From the music, chatter, and laughter, Severus surmised that the party was a success, but he truly had little attention to spare to keep up with it, for Hermione was utterly captivating. They sat upon a loveseat he had magicked into a corner near the hearth; the firelight played upon the strands of her hair, turning some to vermeil and others to copper, and her eyes shone with intelligence as they talked, drawing him further and deeper into her toils.

'Do you do it on purpose?' he asked at one point, his eyes fastened upon the perfect bow of her upper lip, the scent of her spicy perfume adding his mind to the point of inanity.

'Do what?' she whispered, the glossy, cranberry colour upon her lips enticing him to taste her, to see if the flavour was as intoxicating as the sight.

'Ensnare me,' he murmured, speech becoming more difficult with each passing moment, the exquisite agitation slowly but inexorably building between them, driving him along a path whose end he could not divine.

'But it's mutual,' she breathed, turning her face until he felt her breath upon the skin beneath his ear, and sudden, inarticulate desire shuddered through him with a force which left him weak.

'Budge up, mate,' Dean said, and Severus looked up to see Dean and Parvati standing beside the loveseat. 'This one's close to the fire.'

Severus looked to Hermione, who rose and gracefully slipped into his lap, freeing up a cushion for Dean to sit and pull Parvati onto his knee. The two of them were soon lost in a long, deep kiss, but Hermione simply rested her cheek upon Severus' shoulder, her arms about his neck, her fingers twining in the hair at his nape. He retaliated by caressing up and down her spine, his cheek pressed to her forehead, and his nose buried in her hair. If his lips occasionally touched her ear, or her breath fanned over his throat, raising gooseflesh along his arms, he never properly kissed her, for what he felt was so far beyond words or thought, he feared he would be incapable of stopping once he had started.

In time, the room emptied, with only Harry and Ginny occupying the armchair across from them, Dean and Parvati beside them, Neville sitting upon the hearthrug with his arms wrapped about his legs, staring into the flames, and Ron and Lavender, moving slowly together to the music from the gramophone. The quiet camaraderie was perfect, a feeling of belonging such as Severus had longed for, but never experienced until now, and he knew that the provenance of that rapport now sat in his lap, her lips pressed to the pulse beneath his jaw.

Neville was the first to murmur his good-nights and go upstairs, and two-by-two, the others followed, all headed to the top floor of Gryffindor Tower. When he knew he must retreat or cover himself in damnation, Severus murmured into her ear, 'Thank you for coming to the party with me.'

She leant back from him, showing him the smouldering of her chocolate-coloured eyes. 'Are we going up now?' she asked, trailing her fingertips down the side of his face.

'Yes,' he said, moving her gently onto the cushion beside him before standing and taking her hand.

She rose, twining her fingers with his, allowing him to lead her across the room, through the detritus of fallen paper chains, until he stopped between the two staircases.

'Good night, Hermione,' he said, raising the hand he held to his lips, turning it at the last instant to press a burning kiss to the inside of her wrist.

She sighed, her breasts rising and falling. 'Sometimes, I would like for you to be ignoble,' she said.

'I'll keep that in mind,' he told her, nudging her toward the girls' staircase. 'Please go up.'

She gave him a long, measuring look, then acquiesced with grace. 'Good night, then,' she said, and he watched her until he couldn't see her any longer before making the long climb up to his empty bed.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 of 16

After the fall of Voldemort, an inexplicable illness plagues the surviving Death Eaters. Albus Dumbledore has a plan to save Severus Snape—but how, exactly, is Hermione Granger involved?



This Time

Chapter 13

If I don't say this now

I will surely break

Look After You- The Fray

On Sunday morning, the dormitory rang with the sounds of students packing their trunks to go home for the holidays. Severus sprawled in an armchair in the common room, watching the parade of people go by. Neville came down the stairs with his trunk levitated before him, clutching under one arm the basket containing his gloomy pet toad, Trevor. Spying Severus, Neville left his trunk under the stairs and came to sit down, a serious look on his face.

'You're not going home for Christmas?' he asked.

Severus shrugged. 'No, not this time. Thought I'd get some studying done for the N.E.W.T.s.' Severus had prepared this lie ahead of time and delivered it unblinkingly, even though he was far from planning to sit the examinations again.

Neville nodded. 'That makes sense,' he said. Shifting nervously in his seat, Neville stared at his hands for a moment, then looked up seriously into Severus' face. 'I wanted to talk to you about something.'

Severus felt a touch of discomfort. Why was Neville behaving so oddly? Had he actually recognised Adin as his former Potions professor? 'I'm listening,' he said neutrally, staving off incipient panic...time enough for that when he heard what Neville had to say.

Neville took a deep breath. 'I want to know when you started going out with Hermione.'

Severus blinked in surprise. 'I'm not going out with Hermione.'

Neville frowned. 'Then why were you cuddling her in your lap for hours last night?'

'We're friends,' Severus said, beginning to feel defensive.

Neville looked grim. 'Hermione's had Harry and Ron for friends ever since first year, and I've never seen her sit in their laps or look at either of them the way she looked at you.'

Severus opened his mouth to speak, but Neville stood.

'Hermione's got loads of friends, Adin...including *me*. Don't make us mad at you by hurting her.'

Severus closed his mouth and watched the boy whom he had always dismissed as a dunderhead walk away with his shoulders squared, undoubtedly by the courage of his convictions. Severus smiled wryly. Neville had been brave to stand up to him about Hermione. She was certainly fortunate in her friends ... with the glaring exception of himself, of course.

The students cleared out before lunch, and Severus had a very quiet repast in the echoing Great Hall. There were a few Ravenclaws and a handful of Hufflepuffs, but no Slytherins, and he was the only Gryffindor. He spent the afternoon lazing and dozing before the fire in the common room...certainly not thinking about Hermione...with Bother curled up in his lap. Only the insistent growling of his stomach convinced him to bestir himself to go back downstairs for his dinner. Finding that a day of lounging and reading...and not thinking about Hermione...had exhausted him, he went up to bed early, but could not lie down to sleep until he had pulled out the golden gryphon pendant and glared at it. Why had he not given it to her? Perhaps he should send it by owl...he didn't know where she lived, but an owl could find her anywhere, couldn't it? At last, he put the pendant beneath his pillow and slept deeply, his dreams a maze of deserted corridors, which he traversed endlessly in search of Hermione, to no avail.

He awoke in a snarling mood, his head aching, feeling empty and bereft. Could he not go twenty-four hours without having his life disrupted by a bushy-haired know-it-all? She accomplished her disruption even in her absence ... or perhaps *by* her absence. When she was not here, pestering him, his own thoughts did it for her.

He did not suffer fools gladly, but he would gladly suffer *her*...and more the fool she for permitting him near her.

Deciding to skip the morning shower, he threw on his clothes from the day before and slouched downstairs, his face like a thundercloud. When he reached the common room, an unexpected sight met his eyes: A great ginger tomcat with a smashed-in face lay upon the sofa by the fire, looking like nothing so much as a furry ginger cushion.

'Hallo,' he said. 'Did she go off and leave you, too?'

'Of course she didn't,' Hermione said, and Severus turned to see her behind him.

A thousand silly things to say crowded his mind, but he said none of them. Instead, he started towards her in the same instant she started towards him, and they met in an embrace so fraught with emotion that it felt like a tectonic shift beneath their feet. It was as if no time had passed, as if he had, just seconds before, sent her to bed alone after the Christmas party, and immediately, the charged air between them all but crackled with the words not spoken and the actions not taken.

She was the one who broke free, stepping away from him with a tiny smile about her lips. 'Let's go to breakfast,' she suggested.

He led the way to the portrait hole, his heart lifting with a joy perhaps one degree removed from pure giddiness. How could her mere presence make the everyday task of going down to breakfast such a happy event? Was it possible that, in a life shared with Hermione, contentment could be *normal*?

Snorting at such fanciful thinking, he allowed her to precede him into the corridor, taking the opportunity, when she slipped past him, to take a blissful breath of her hair.

Sitting over plates of scrambled eggs and bacon, he said, 'I thought you were going home for Christmas.'

'Oh, I changed my mind,' she said airily, spreading jam on her toast. 'My parents decided to go skiing, and that's really not my kind of thing.'

There was a part of him...the part that whinged and squirmed until he wanted to cast the Cruciatus Curse on it...that wanted to believe she had stayed because of him. The other voice, that of the ever more distant Professor Snape, told him that of course she hadn't stayed for him...what a fatuous notion!...and that he should hide himself away from her, for she was a danger to him in every imaginable way.

Severus had no wish to even listen to that part of himself, much less obey it. He had hidden and pretended for too long. Now, even though he was hiding at Hogwarts and pretending to be Adin, it was different, somehow. In the most fundamental ways, Adin was far more his authentic self than Professor Snape had *ever* been. Every instinct he possessed bade him to stay as close to Hermione as she would permit, and as that fit in precisely with his strongest desire, he was happy to follow the dictate.

They dawdled over their coffee until a house-elf confiscated the self-filling coffee pot and informed them, 'Breakfast is over, young miss and young sir!'

They surrendered their coffee cups, and as they left the table, Hermione said, 'Let's go for a walk!'

'You want to go out into the icy cold and walk in the snow?' he inquired.

Her smile could have lit the darkest dungeon, and he wondered fleetingly if she felt as gleeful as he did.

'Are you prepared for the consequences of such an outing?' he asked with mock gravity.

Her laugh, as she wrapped her scarf about her neck and fled into the cloudless, frigid day, was the only answer he received.

They walked about the lake, talking of nothing and everything, until Severus felt they were far enough away from the castle that casual prying eyes couldn't spy them. Then, he pointed to a snow covered boulder. 'That is your fort,' he informed her.

'My what?' She glanced at the lump and back to his face, her eyes alight with exuberance, and he struggled with himself not to grab her up and kiss her.

'Your fort,' he said again. 'You may have five minutes to amass your arsenal, and then you must defend your stronghold from the hordes of marauding, evil wizards.'

She bent to gather snow. 'What will happen if I fail?' she asked, laughter riming her voice like ice on the branch of a tree.

He formed snowballs with the speed and efficiency he had brought to chopping and brewing, his hands working independently of his mind. 'You don't want to find out,' he assured her.

The battle was rather one-sided. Even though Hermione had the benefit of the sheltering rock, she lacked one prime advantage...Severus' driving need to tumble her into the snow and pin her there. Trapped beneath him, she squirmed and struggled before falling still, immobilised by his superior strength...or was it by the strength of the agitation between them, which waxed and waned but never ceased?

At last she ceased to grapple and lay quiescent beneath him in the snow, her peppermint breaths coming in little panting bursts. The elation which surged through him then, stiffening his prick and loosening his resolve, had nothing to do with play-fighting and everything to do with dominance...and sex. He stared down into her brown eyes, his nose nearly touching hers, his head tilted slightly to one side, as if to kiss her. Her mouth opened slightly, the tip of her tongue darting out to moisten her lower lip, and he felt it like fire in his belly.

Sweet Merlin.

They were walking a very fine line between attraction and utter immersion, and he was afraid they were in danger of falling in

He had no intention of stopping.

He closed his eyes, his lips ghosting over hers ... and her stomach growled. They couldn't help it: They laughed like loons, and he rolled off of her before standing and offering a hand to help her up, as well.

They arrived back in the castle in time for an early lunch, after which they retired to the common room for an afternoon of wizard chess, Exploding Snap, and reading by the fire. Then they went down to the Great Hall for dinner and back to the common room to listen to the wireless, read, and talk far into the night.

'What do you think you'll do after school?' she said, sitting beside him on the couch in the darkened room, staring into the fire and stroking Bother.

Severus watched her hands upon his Kneazle's fur, imagining he was the recipient of her caresses and wishing it were so.

'Adin?' she murmured, and he tore his eyes from her hand and looked into her face.

'Dunno,' he admitted. 'I haven't given it much thought.'

'You should!' she said earnestly. 'It's what I'm always telling Harry and Ron...school is supposed to prepare us for life *after* school, so you can't spend it just arsing around!'

'I'd hardly call what I've been doing *arsing around*,' he grumbled.

She was gazing into the firelight again. 'I want to do something important,' she said. 'I want to help those who don't have a voice ...'

He snorted rudely. 'You want to free the house-elves, and they hate you for it.'

She pivoted, dislodging Bother, who sprang to the floor with a disgruntled meow. 'I know they don't want to be free,' she admitted. 'But there's no reason why they can't have more rights, if they choose to claim them...and other beings, such as centaurs and goblins, have seriously restricted rights amongst wizards. I want to make things fair for them.'

He watched her expression as he listened, unable to remain indifferent in the face of her eagerness.

'You actually believe you can make a difference,' he said when she paused.

Looking at him with her big brown eyes, she said, 'I know I have to try.'

He could only nod, realising he had entered Dumbledore's service with the same half-hopeless determination to stop the Dark Lord...and against all odds, he had succeeded. 'Of course you do,' he said, standing and offering his hand. 'But for now, we'd better get some sleep.'

Between the staircases, Hermione gave him a hug, then smiled up at him with such sweetness that he was driven to kiss her. She kissed him back hungrily, fanning the flames of the low burn of passion that persisted in her presence, regardless of their activity...and *this* activity was very difficult to stop once they had begun. It was agony to

part from her, drawing on every bit of the discipline his years of abstinence had taught him, releasing her lips and pressing his forehead to hers as he strove to catch his breath.

'Please go to bed,' he said raggedly, stepping back from her.

'I'd rather...' she began but took another step back, pressing a finger across his lips to shush her.

He watched her ascension of the stairs, his desire pounding in him with every beat of his heart, until she disappeared from his sight. He turned to go to his room, a very vocal Adin railing at him every step of the way.

Why? Why do we have to stop?

'Shut up,' he muttered, desperately trying to remember the answer to the question.

On their second day of solitude, he sprawled in an armchair near the head of the sofa where she reclined; they both held books.

'What are you reading?' he asked, leaning over to get a closer look at the book propped on her chest.

'Read your own book!' she said crossly, closing hers and pushing it into the sofa cushions.

'Is it smut?' he asked, with a perfectly straight face.

'No!' she cried, sitting up. 'What a thing to say!'

He darted her a sidelong look. 'Well, why else would you hide it from me?'

She huffed at him, crossing her arms over her chest, and he lunged for the book, somehow managing to tumble her onto her back again with him sprawled on top of her.

'*Bleak House*?' he said, frowning over the book title. 'Why are you reading *Bleak House*?'

She scowled and gave him a shove. 'Because you're going on about it all the time, aren't you? And I've never read it before, so I can't talk to you about it.'

He smirked at her, letting the heavy book fall on the cushion. 'I'm seven hundred pages in...you'll never catch up.'

She directed her patented pitying look at him, which never failed to get up his nose. 'I'm on page six hundred thirty,' she said smugly. 'I read all day on Sunday.'

'No wonder you weren't at meals!' he said, the mystery solved.

'I read in bed last night, as well,' she admitted.

He wasn't about to admit what he'd done in bed last night.

'You're such a swot,' he said, beginning to notice how soft she was beneath him, and how much nicer it was to pin her on the sofa in the warm common room than in the snow on the cold grounds.

'Pot, kettle, black,' she said, her eyes taking on the languorous look she had assumed the night before during their goodnight kiss, which had finally caused him to send her to bed before he ended up taking her to *his* bed.

Why shouldn't I? he wondered, shifting his weight slightly, only to have her shift in accommodation, her body cradling his as nature intended. *What can it hurt?*

He had been very disciplined, rationing himself to one goodnight kiss...although that one kiss had many small interruptions and went on for an hour or more...but why continue to deny what they both so clearly wanted? No one else was denying themselves, were they? All his mates had taken their girlfriends to their bedrooms, hadn't they?

She raised a hand to his face, stroking his fringe out of his eyes, then hooked her hand behind his neck, pulling him down towards her slightly parted waiting lips. He felt the stiffening in his trousers and knew he was playing with fire, but could no more turn away from her blatant seduction than he could choose not to take his next breath.

The roar of a lion caused him to jerk away from her, his concentration broken.

'It's just the clock,' Hermione said, reaching for him now with both arms. 'The lion roars on the hour...you know that.'

He did know, and the clock was striking five, so dinner was being served in the Great Hall...and he was preparing to rut in the Gryffindor common room with an eighteen-year-old girl.

He pushed himself to his feet, self-consciously turning from her to hide the tent in his trousers...not that she hadn't already felt it, wriggling about as she'd been doing.

'Adin?' she said, and he felt her hand cup his bum from behind, making him nearly jump out of his skin.

'I have to go upstairs,' he choked out, beginning to move away from her.

'Why?'

He could hear her moving behind him, but he dared not turn around; he had to keep moving, or he might do something he would regret.

'Go down to dinner,' he said, walking faster, his hand closing desperately over the handrail of the stairwell. 'I'll be down later.'

'Adin!' she called, now sounding annoyed...and a bit hurt?...but he did not pause.

He continued up the stairs as if the hounds of hell were on his heels, hurtling into his own room with great relief. A wank would set him straight...clear his mind...and then he would be able to be around her without wanting to shag her through the sofa cushions ... for a little while, anyway.

The next day was Christmas Eve, a grey and overcast day, which they enjoyed in their usual way, minus the snow snuggling. He was determined not to tempt himself, having determined, in a complicated line of reasoning which would have made sense to no one but himself, that it was okay to kiss her as long as he didn't shag her...that kissing one's former student was not nearly so bad as shagging said student, and that he could be forgiven for kissing, but that shagging was right out.

He could kiss her and walk away, but if he took her ... made love to her ... made *hehis* ... he would never be able to let her go.

His breath caught in his lungs, just thinking about it.

That afternoon, snow began to fall outside the mullioned windows in the common room, and they celebrated by conjuring cups of tea whilst Severus read aloud from *Bleak House*.

'Why don't you read?' he had said.

'I like to listen to you,' she had responded, and his vanity flattered, he had done as she asked.

Before long, she was curled up against him, her head upon his shoulder, and a contentment fell over them, so beguiling that his voice trailed off, and he set the book down, wrapping an arm about her shoulders and pulling her more closely to him as the light outside faded to darkness.

The clock roared five, and Hermione sat up. 'Let's have our own little tree in here,' she said. 'We can decorate it after dinner and listen to the Christmas programs on the wireless.'

Still relaxed back against the sofa cushions, he watched her face, in profile to him now, and admired the beauty in her, which seemed to grow more pronounced with each passing day.

'On one condition,' he said.

A smile curved her lips. 'Yes?'

'That you wear the dress you wore to the Christmas party,' he said.

'All right,' she said, 'but I'll have to wear my hair down...Lavender is the only one who can put it up'.

He tentatively touched her hair. 'I like it down,' he said.

She flushed with pleasure and stood up. 'Let's go down to dinner as we are now...I don't want anyone getting nosy about why we're dressing up.'

Joining her in the common room at eight o'clock, dressed, per her command, in the garments he had worn to the party, he could only admire her organisational skills. She had managed to nick a basketful of faeries from the trees in the Great Hall, as well as a fistful of everlasting icicles. She had conjured a tiny evergreen, less than two feet tall, which now sat upon the coffee table before the sofa, and she was kneeling on the rug, setting the faeries amongst the branches.

The wireless was playing traditional Yuletide fare, an abundance of harps and flutes and pennywhistles, and to his eyes, Hermione lit the room, her radiance putting the glowing faeries to shame. He sat in rapt contemplation of her, a swelling, gasp-inducing feeling growing behind his breastbone, making him want to run from her nearly as much as it made him want to cleave to her.

'There,' she said, placing the last tiny faerie atop the tree. 'Now, you place the icicles.'

He moved around the table and knelt at her side, then with a wave of his wand, he produced a length of ivy. A whispered incantation set the ivy to weaving itself into a circlet, which he placed upon Hermione's head, amidst the bushy curls. Then he plucked the icicles from the table, setting them to dangle from the ivy strands, until it looked as if she wore the winter crown of a wood-faerie queen.

'That's not what I meant!' she cried, but when he conjured a mirror and held it for her to see herself, she gasped with delight.

'Shall I put them on the tree instead?' he murmured.

'No!' She smiled at him, her enormous pleasure in such a simple gesture making him glad. 'They're pretty where they are.'

He flicked his fingers, Vanishing the mirror. 'They are striving to keep up,' he said quietly, picking up the remaining icicles and hanging them from the tiny tree branches.

She stood, moving back a few feet to survey their handiwork. 'It's a lovely little tree,' she said, and she did a little pirouette of joy in the middle of the room.

Severus watched her, feeling almost spellbound. He wanted to lift her onto her rightful throne and kneel at her feet, to keep the unworthy away from her...and he wanted to utterly possess her, to merge himself into her, to hear her shout of joy mingled with his own, even as their essences mingled into one.

She held out her hands to him. 'Dance with me,' she said, and he could deny her nothing.

He placed a hand upon her waist, and she moved confidently into his arms, sure of her welcome, so he retaliated by enfolding her as they circled in the dance. The music flowed, one song into the next, and they flowed with it, never moving very far away from their tree. After what seemed a very long time, the wireless program ended, and the sound of applause filled the room, ending the evening's programming.

Hermione moved away from him as she turned off the wireless, and he stood where she left him on the hearthrug, his arms empty of his own personal Siren.

'Are you tired?' she asked him.

'No,' he answered. 'Are you?'

'No,' she said, resuming her seat upon the sofa and patting the cushion beside her. 'Let's sit and look at our tree.'

He sat, placing his arm along the back of the sofa behind her, and when she curled against him, her fingers stroking the cashmere of his jumper, he draped the arm over her shoulders, his fingertips coming to rest upon her hip and beginning to lightly stroke her dress. In the dark room, lit only by faerie light, Hermione began to hum a Christmas song. She finished one song only to begin another, and when she hummed one he recognised, he hummed as well. Their impromptu duet pleased her so much that, when the song was done, she kissed him full on the mouth, her lips sliding over his in a way that had become delightfully familiar to him in the last week.

The lion roared, and when they counted the following bells, they knew it was midnight.

'Merry Christmas, Adin,' she whispered, and to his astonishment, she sat forward and laid a small, beribboned package upon his lap. 'Open it,' she instructed.

He sighed, wondering if he would ever manage to truly surprise the girl, and withdrew a package awkwardly wrapped in red tissue paper from the pocket of his coat.

'Only if you open yours,' he replied.

With a squeal of joy, she tore the paper open, and he did the same, finding a square flat black box, which he opened to find a broad hammered-gold bracelet, with a cut-out figure in the shape of a ...

'Adin,' she breathed, lifting the pendant so that it dangled from her fingers on its fine gold chain, her lips forming a perfect circle of amazement. 'Look!'

She lowered the figure of the flying gryphon until it lay upon its side, almost the perfect puzzle-piece fit inside the cut-out on the bracelet she had given him.

'How did you know?' they asked one another simultaneously.

'I didn't!' they answered, both sounding a bit indignant.

She recovered herself first, as she was wont to do. 'Fasten it for me, please,' she said, turning her back to him and offering the two ends of the necklace to be joined.

'Lift your hair,' he instructed, and with deft fingers, he fastened the necklace for her, giving in to his impulse and pressing a kiss to her nape as he did so.

She turned to him then, with a murmured incantation, and the high, tight neck of the dress was gone, replaced by a deeply scooped neckline, showing the ruby-eyed gryphon in flight against the milky smoothness of her skin.

'Now you,' she said, taking the dull hammered-gold cuff from its box.

Severus hesitated, inwardly quaking. It was one thing to give a girl a pretty trifle, but it seemed to him that it was another thing entirely to accept such a gift from a witch. The fact that it appeared that the two pieces had been fashioned from the same piece of metal also disturbed him...what did it mean?

'Don't you like it?' she asked, watching him with troubled eyes.

Damn, now her feelings were hurt.

'Of course I like it,' he said gruffly, 'it's just I've never ...' and he thrust his left arm out and watched as she fit the cuff over his wrist.

'It suits you,' she said, and he lowered the arm, allowing the sleeve of the coat to fall naturally, appreciating the slight gleam of the gold as the heavy bracelet slid to the juncture of his hand and his wrist.

'It does,' he agreed.

She sat back against the cushions, and he resumed his place as well, pressing a kiss to her temple. 'Happy Christmas, Hermione,' he murmured.

Her head came to rest upon his shoulder, and they sat and looked at their tree as the firelight died. When the lion roared at two o'clock, Hermione was asleep upon his chest, and Severus was rapt; all he could bear to do was Summon a blanket to keep them warm as Christmas morning stole over Hogwarts.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 of 16

After the fall of Voldemort, an inexplicable illness plagues the surviving Death Eaters. Albus Dumbledore has a plan to save Severus Snape—but how, exactly, is Hermione Granger involved?



This Time

Chapter 14

Break a heart, break a heart of stone

Open it up but don't you leave it alone

'Cuz that's all I got to give you

Believe me babe, it ain't been used

My heart's a virgin, it ain't never been tried

and you know I never cry

I Never Cry - Alice Cooper

Hermione met him in the common room at one o'clock to go down to the Great Hall for Christmas lunch.

'Oh, wait!' she cried, as he stood in the corridor outside the portrait hole and she remained within. 'I have little gifts for the teachers...I left them up in my room!'

Severus scowled impatiently, but she hung back. 'You go on...I'll meet you down there,' she assured him.

'All right,' he agreed, letting the Fat Lady close and heading off down the corridor. He traversed the way without incident until he reached the landing down from the first

floor, where he found a rather tiny boy in a Ravenclaw jumper huddled on the bottom step, sobbing. 'What's this?' he said in his best Head of House tones.

Beneath a shock of light brown hair, a tear-drenched face turned up to his. The little bloke was crying too hard to speak, and Severus moved down to the landing, crouching and producing a handkerchief. 'Here,' he said. 'Mop up...don't make me do it for you.'

As if under orders, the boy wiped his cheeks, ending by blowing his nose forcefully.

'That's the ticket,' Severus said approvingly. 'Now, what's your name?'

The boy's lips trembled. 'Simon, sir,' he said, obviously responding to the authority in Severus' voice rather than the slight acne breakout on his forehead.

'Well, Simon,' he said, gently but firmly, 'what's happened to upset you?'

Simon drew a shaky breath. 'I miss my m-mum,' he said.

Severus nodded gravely. 'I'll tell you a secret,' he said, beckoning, and Simon leant forward to hear it. '*Everyone* here misses their mum,' he assured the boy.

Simon blinked, diverted. 'What? Even Professor Dumbledore?'

Severus nodded solemnly. 'Especially Professor Dumbledore.'

Simon looked marginally more cheerful. 'I never would've thought of that,' he admitted.

Severus straightened up, looking down at the first-year. 'Be that as it may, keep this in mind: No one likes a sniveller. So, chin up and enjoy the Christmas feast...it's what your mum would want, after all...and there's nothing quite like a Hogwarts Christmas feast.' Severus offered his hand, and Simon grasped it, allowing himself to be pulled to his feet.

'Yes, I will,' he said determinedly, returning the damp handkerchief to Severus and marching down the remaining steps to the entrance hall.

Severus smirked and Vanished the disgusting handkerchief.

'But this is *your* first Hogwarts Christmas,' Hermione said, and he looked up to see her standing on the landing above, watching him.

'It is,' he lied smoothly, 'but the firstie doesn't know that.' He nodded towards the entrance hall. 'Come along, before we miss out on all the best of the food.'

She walked with him down the remaining stairs, but he had the distinct impression that she was not entirely satisfied with his answer.

On Boxing Day, they set out for their walk about the lake in the newly fallen snow, and when they were far enough away from the castle, she tucked her hand in his, a feeling of enormous satisfaction for him. He was almost honour bound, then, to tumble her in the snow and kiss her...kisses which she returned with a touch of sadness, a development which he found a bit puzzling.

Walking back to the castle with her, no longer holding her hand, the matter became a little bit clearer to him.

'I've relaxed for long enough,' she informed him. 'I've got to spend the days studying for my N.E.W.T.s...you understand, don't you?'

How could he respond to that? 'Of course I do,' he said gruffly, trying to sound as if how she chose to spend her days was of little concern to him. 'Maybe I'll actually get some reading done, now,' he added grumpily, as if he had not interrupted her reading as often as she interrupted his.

She looked slightly concerned, but resolute, as she recaptured and squeezed his hand. 'I'll still be in the common room after dinner, though, if you want to play chess or ... anything.'

He was unable to hide his relief at these words, though he strove to sound nonchalant as he said, 'I'll probably be there too.' He smiled at her...*like a lovesick lapdog!* Professor Snape informed him...making clear his feelings on the matter, in spite of his ambivalent words.

Hermione did some of her studying in the common room, where he had to struggle with himself not to interrupt her and claim her attention. She pored over Transfiguration and Arithmancy and spent hours translating Ancient Runes. She also brought out library books he had never seen before, books which she had charmed to remove the names from the covers. When she went up to her dormitory for some reason, he investigated the mysterious tomes, finding that she had placed Read-Me-Not Charms on them. The charm, which made the pages appear to be blank when the book was opened, was frequently used by parents to hide unsuitable material from their children.

'What are you up to, Hermione?' he murmured to himself. Checking to make sure she was not coming down the stairs, he gave her notes a quick look, as well, but found nothing alarming.

It was a puzzle.

In the evenings, though, her behaviour was completely reassuring. They spent increasing amounts of time kissing...long, drugging kisses which made it more difficult for him to part from her on each successive night.

One morning when they went down to breakfast, Hermione was hailed by McGonagall, and Severus continued on to the Gryffindor table. He poured coffee, adding cream and sugar to hers, as well, before beginning to eat his bacon and eggs. Owl post arrived, bringing to Severus the third letter he had received in the last couple of weeks from Allison and Jared. They were working on the Special Studies project during break, but Severus didn't want to think about that during this holiday, when he had Hermione's full attention all to himself. He shoved the missive into his pocket and watched Hermione as she hurried to join him, looking rather pleased with herself.

'The staff New Year's party is tomorrow night in the village, and Professor McGonagall wants me to organise a small celebration for the students.' She bit happily into her toast. 'Since the Head Girl's not here, I'm the ranking prefect.'

'You're stuck babysitting the whole lot of them for the night?' he demanded indignantly. 'Why can't *she* do it?'

'Because then she couldn't attend the staff party, could she?' Hermione said reasonably. 'Professor Vector drew the short straw, so she'll be staying behind to keep an eye on things...but she's got a bit of a head-cold and doesn't feel up to organising a party.'

Severus glared at the head table. He realised that Minerva McGonagall would not pass up an opportunity to drink the other staff members under the table...the woman had an unnatural head for Firewhisky, as Severus knew from personal experience. And *he* had no plans for New Year's Eve...other than spending it wound around Hermione in passionate necking, pushing the boundaries farther and farther with every encounter.

All right, it was a non-plan, but it beat the hell out of having her waste an evening away from him.

'Adin,' she said, and he brought his eyes back to her face. 'I don't have to entertain them all night...I can still be with you at midnight, if you want.'

'I want,' he muttered, thinking that if he were to complete that sentence, she would likely never speak to him again.

He skulked about the common room the next night, resisting the urge to crash the party Hermione and Dobby had arranged for the other students. He could imagine few things less appealing than a party full of little Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws. The only lure was Hermione, and she wouldn't be able to attend to him with ten or twelve younger students to look after. He passed time by flipping idly through a book on Quidditch tactics he had borrowed from Harry, unable to concentrate on the illustrated defensive moves.

When the lion roared eleven, he heard tapping on the window glass and saw an owl perched on the ledge. Curious, he dumped Bother and Crookshanks onto the floor and went to the window, where he removed a letter from the owl's leg, scattering a handful of popcorn on the snowy window ledge. 'It's all I've got, so it's no use complaining,' he said severely to the bird, which had let out a mournful hoot. 'Go to the owlery if you're hungry,' he added.

Closing the window, he broke the seal on the parchment, recognising Hermione's handwriting at once.

Dear Adin,

If you would like to join me in seeing in the New Year, please come to the ground floor Divination classroom at half-past eleven.

Love,

Hermione

A grin broke over his face and he took the stairs up to his dormitory two at a time to brush his teeth and use a breath-freshening charm.

He strode through the castle towards Firenze's classroom, an emotion between anticipation and anxiety roiling in his chest. What did she expect of him tonight? He had no plans, really, other than the half-formed ones that woke and flourished each time they began to kiss, which usually involved seeing just where she was going to permit him to put his hands ... and the unacknowledged ones that were mere fantasies, in which he and Hermione had a future together ...

At precisely half-past eleven, he walked through the door and found himself in a perfect replica of a forest clearing, complete with the winter stars in the sky. The room was as warm as the castle ever was in December...not toasty, but not frigidly cold, as the actual forest would be.

He saw a blanket spread on the ground, as if for a picnic, and a wicker basket from which the long green neck of an opened wine bottle protruded...then Hermione walked out of the trees, murmuring an Illumination Spell as she came and there was only *her*.

She wore a slinky little black dress, the décolleté neckline of which showcased her gryphon pendant, and high-heeled shiny black shoes which added three inches to her height. Her face was carefully made up, as he had never seen her before, giving her a rather elegant, older look. She moved purposefully, straight up to him, twining her arms about his neck and pulling him down to receive her greeting, a kiss hot enough to make her intentions plain: He was a marked man.

He wrapped one arm about her, encountering the low-cut back of her dress, and buried a hand in her hair, kissing her with equal fervour, giving as good as he got. It was Hermione who broke the kiss, stepping away from him and waving a hand at the blanket.

'Come have a glass of wine,' she said.

'Aren't you a resourceful girl?' he said, watching as she stooped to pluck two glasses full of sparkling wine from the interior of the wicker basket.

'I have useful connexions,' she said, placing a glass in his hand. 'Dobby was amenable to helping me with *both* of my parties, tonight.'

Severus touched the glass to his lips, feeling the bubbles tickling his nose, but Hermione raised her glass to him, and he hastily mirrored her action.

'To us,' she said simply and drank champagne.

He drank as well, trying hard to concentrate on the implications of her toast, but having a difficult time tearing his attention from her body, showcased for his benefit and entirely too appealing.

Hermione stepped out of her shoes and lowered herself to the blanket, reaching within the basket and withdrawing a crystal bowl and holding it toward him. He sat down on the blanket beside her.

'You've been raiding Sprout's secret stash!' he said, nodding towards the strawberries in the bowl.

She ducked her head to hide her smile. 'There are advantages to being at the top of one's class,' she said. 'Neville and I are the only students she allows to work in that greenhouse...and she'll never notice a few missing strawberries.'

She plucked a plump berry from the bowl, and Severus noted for the first time that her fingernails had been painted Gryffindor red, to match the toenails he had glimpsed when she shed her shoes. In spite of himself, he felt his cock twitch.

'Take a drink,' she instructed, her voice low and sultry.

He brought the wine to his lips again, drawing champagne into his mouth, and she rose on her knees as he did so, almost as if her torso was tied to the motion of his goblet. She trailed the tip of the strawberry over his lower lip, and he opened to accept the offering, biting into the sweet flesh of the fruit.

'The flavours enhance one another,' she whispered, the heavenly scent of her wine-flavoured breath ruffling across his lips just before she lowered her mouth to his, her tongue darting into his mouth, as if to share the marriage of flavours with him.

He was instantly aroused by her overtly sexual approach, thrusting his tongue against hers, almost in self-defence, and thrilling as he always did to her throaty little sound of pleasure. Too soon, she sat back from him, resting her bum upon her heels and watching him closely with ardent eyes.

He tracked her with ardency of his own, a self-protective sneer touching his lips. 'You're playing a dangerous game tonight,' he warned her.

'I think you're up for it,' she replied evenly, allowing the double entendre to hang in the air between them for a moment before adding, 'I think you've ... shouldered the burden for long enough, and it's my turn to drive this bus for a while.'

He scrambled wildly for mental purchase, finding it virtually impossible to think coherent thoughts when his adolescent body...and his pounding heart...were responding to the stimulus of Hermione Granger on the hunt for him. He licked his lips nervously, watching her as she bit into a strawberry and followed with a sip of wine, her eyes closing in pleasure and bringing a distinct throb to his stiffening member.

'Maybe you don't have all the ... information you need,' he said, valiantly struggling to remain on point.

She rose toward him again, bringing another berry to his lips, watching intently as his teeth penetrated the pulp of the fruit, and she tipped her wineglass, marked with the Gryffindor red of her lipstick, to his mouth to complete the flavour combination.

'Oh, I have sufficient information,' she said, trailing fingers down to cup his cheek before she lowered her lips to his again, her tongue greedily dipping into his mouth to

savour the sweetness there.

He retaliated, pressing his tongue aggressively into her mouth, his hands trailing up to cup her breasts, which he had never done before...almost as if he hoped to startle her into withdrawing from this encounter while she still could.

She reacted decisively, but not as he had imagined she might. A motion of her hand sent their wineglasses away, and she straddled his hips, her teeth closing gently over his lower lip before she sucked it into her mouth, her superior position giving her control of the kiss. He submitted to her aggression, reason leaching from him with each thrust of her tongue and nibble of her teeth. Dimly, he knew that they teetered on the edge of that precipice they had skirted so carefully for so long, and a decision awaited him. Would he somehow find the wherewithal to retreat from her? Or would he choose to plunge himself into the mounting conflagration? Sweet Merlin, what if he made that leap alone and found himself utterly lost in a girl who did not reciprocate his feelings? Hadn't he done that once already?

Then she released his lips and rose up on her knees, taking his hand and placing it beneath her skirt upon her nakedness...and he realised she had in this, as in many things, made her decision and taken the plunge before him.

'Hermione,' he said raggedly, breaking away from her kiss, unable to formulate a more concrete sentence...this would have to suffice for a final warning.

She responded by reaching between their bodies, her fingertips fumbling at his belt buckle. He groaned and took his plunge, flipping her over onto her back and moving atop of her, his kiss like a weapon in this war of sanity versus desire. He pressed himself against her, desperate to enfold her, to cleave to her, to possess her. The voice of Professor Snape protested loudly against his intent, but Severus had grown so distant from that part of himself that the objection scarcely registered with him. All that mattered was her mobile lips beneath his own, her vital presence in his arms, her glorious spirit, striving to twine with his, awakening him in ways he'd always longed for but never known.

He felt neither compunction nor restraint, only the imperative of claiming her, sure that their union would still the clamouring need that echoed through his mind and drove his actions. She was insistent in her response, as well, and when her fingers fumbled again at his belt, he was only too willing to assist her. He rose to push his jeans and pants down. Despite the passion thrumming through his body, he could not help but pause a moment to simply drink in her beauty...then she was pulling him down with cold hands, rising to meet him, her smooth legs moving over his hips, pushing his jeans even farther down his legs as she opened her body to him.

Not permitting himself to think, but only to feel and act, he found his way home, deep inside her body, filling her completely as their bodies joined. She gasped, and her hands found their way beneath his jumper, clutching, caressing, and urging, all at once. Rising over her, he was unable to look away from her eyes, the emotion he read there a reflection of everything he felt as he fucked her, marked her, made her his, forever.

Existence altered, narrowing to the sound of her whimpers and his laboured breathing, to the smell of her slick quim and strawberry flavoured breath, to the sight of her face, transcendent in pleasure and completion. Then she arched, crying out, and he was disintegrating, the air around him blurring until the only real ... the only solid thing on earth was Hermione, who held him tightly with arms and legs as he poured himself into her, on, and on, and on. Gasping, he buried his face in her throat, his hushed, '*Hermione*,' his reverent benediction for her.

Her lips were on him, kissing what she could reach of him, holding him to her. He raised his face to see tears upon her lashes.

'Did I hurt you?' he asked, gently disentangling her legs and shifting his weight from her.

She shook her head from side to side, mutely denying the charge. She raised her head toward him, her lips parted welcomingly, and he kissed her tenderly, imbuing his kiss with the feelings he dared not express.

When at last they broke apart, she stroked his sweat-soaked hair back from his face, radiant and wondering. 'I love you, Severus,' she murmured, her fingers tangling in his hair.

His eyes widened at her statement, one part of him judging it to be a perfectly sensible pronouncement and another part thrilling to hear from her the words no girl had ever spoken to him before.

Then the full import of her words penetrated his sex-soaked brain, and he was scrambling up and away from her, backwards on his hands and feet like a crab. She sat up at he moved away, his love bites visible on her throat, her hair wonderfully mussed from their tempestuous lovemaking.

'Don't be afraid,' she said, reaching to him with her empty hands, her voice pleading.

He clambered to his feet, jerking up his clothes and fastening as he went, glad that he hadn't actually had anything~~off~~, just unfastened. This made his necessary and hasty exit easier to accomplish.

She was on her feet now, as well, moving towards him with urgency. 'I love you,' she repeated, as if the words could possibly make any sense to him in this situation. 'I would never betray you,' she added, by way of illumination, implying that there was some link between the two statements.

'My name is Adin Prince,' he vowed, pulling his wand, wondering if he dared to alter her memory.

'No one else has a clue, Severus...except, perhaps, for Luna. She sent me a card for Christmas that said, "Look with your heart." I think she was talking about you...about *us*.'

'No,' he said, moving away from her, towards the door.

'You're too clever,' she began, ticking things off on her fingers. 'Your nose is distinctive, but only if someone is looking for evidence to support a suspicion that Adin and Severus might be the same person. You *move* like him...I mean, like yourself...I *mean*, Severus Snape is the only man I've ever seen who moves with the grace you do. You call me "know-it-all" and "insufferable" and "Miss Granger", and you do it in that tone of voice I remember so well. You tell me you're too old for me. You take care of the younger students, and when you do, you sound so much like a Head of House that they automatically listen to you and obey. You kiss me and then avoid me, kiss me and try to protect me from yourself all at the same time...just like you've always protected us. And the classroom notes from 1978 aren't your mother's...they're yours, Severus.'

Each tiny piece of the puzzle she delineated struck him like a blow, and he physically winced as she laid out her case against him.

'I don't care if you're seventeen or thirty-seven...I don't care about the mistakes *you* made when you were young...I don't care if you call yourself Adin Prince or Severus Snape!'

In his inattention, his inward flagellation for all the mistakes he had made, he had failed to note her position in the room and the fact that she now had his jumper bunched in her two fists as they rested on his chest.

'The only thing I care about,' she continued, looking up into his face with wild, desperate eyes, '~~is~~*this*...the magic we make between us when we're together...and I don't care what I have to do to keep it!'

Tears were gathering in the corners of her eyes, and he felt a detached sort of sadness that she was going to cry. It was the story of his life, in a microcosm; those he sought to protect always ended up hurt ... or dead ... and he was doing it again, hurting the one person in the world he most wanted to cherish. It was just further proof of that truth he had often suspected about himself...he wasn't fit for human companionship, and it would be better for everyone if he lived alone, away from anyone who knew him.

'You're not listening to me!' she shrieked, yanking on his jumper. 'Don't you dare ignore me!'

Taking a deep breath, he gently prised her fingers loose from his clothing. 'I'm not ignoring you,' he assured her. 'I am not *capable* of ignoring you...if I were, we would both be much better off than we are now.'

Bursting into a storm of tears, she threw her arms around him, and he stroked her hair with infinite care, commanding himself to memorise the smell and texture of the bushy mass, to print forever in his memory the feel of her soft body against him. 'You're all right,' he murmured. 'You're fine...everything's going to be all right.' They were nonsense words, the things you said to someone who was inconsolable, but whether he spoke to her or to himself he could not have said.

'No,' she sobbed, finding her voice. 'No, I can *feel* you pulling away from me...you're doing that stupid, pointless thing...you don't have to do it ...'

'I will always, always care for you, Hermione,' he swore, knowing that tears now fell from his eyes, too, and not caring. He *owed* this to her, this speaking of the truth, and once he said it, they would be over...she would never be his to hold, not ever again. 'But we will never be together, and I was the worst of villains to ever let you believe for one moment that it was possible.'

And in the nascent new year, standing in an artificial forest clearing, Severus Snape held Hermione Granger in his arms, shedding tears of bitter self-recrimination, swearing to himself that he would find a way to make her whole before he removed himself from her life forever.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 of 16

After the fall of Voldemort, an inexplicable illness plagues the surviving Death Eaters. Albus Dumbledore has a plan to save Severus Snape—but how, exactly, is Hermione Granger involved?



This Time

Chapter 15

This life is filled with hurt

When happiness doesn't work

Pain - Three Days Grace

Eighteen hours after having delivered Hermione back to their common room, Severus still sat on the chair behind the desk in his room, staring into the emptiness. He had only stirred to visit the lavatory, forgoing both food and sleep. The memory of her face, ravaged by tears...of her voice, desperately pleading...would not stop playing over and again in his mind, and it was simply more than he could bear. The only solution would be to force himself not to think at all...or to attempt to absorb himself in some other task.

Looking listlessly about his desktop, he saw the notes he had received by owl from Allison and Jared during the last two weeks. He had been far too preoccupied all holiday long with Hermione to have time to spare to think about what the Bulgarians had written, but perhaps ...

Dear Adin,

My parents say we must go to stay with the Józsa family over Christmas...I'm going to try again to show him how I feel! Wish me luck!

Allison

Adin,

Allison is here for the holiday, and we have been working on the Dark Mark Curse. We think it may be possible to affect the outcome by varying the order of the words in the incantation. Let me know what you think.

Jared

Severus dropped the letters back onto his desktop, feeling curiously disinterested in the possible progress of the non-relationship between the Allison and Jared. His own travesty of a love life was so painful he could not bear to consider someone else's.

From beneath the edge of his copy of *Bleak House*, he spied the faint lavender of Allison's notepaper, and he pulled it out...the last letter from her, which he had received one morning earlier in the week and failed to read. Now he broke the seal.

Adin,

We tried the re-sequenced incantation, and we're very hopeful! We promised the Headmaster that we would not experiment on a live subject without his supervision, but we are quite eager to try it as soon as we get back. Please be sure to tell Hermione about it...and Happy New Year to both of you!

Allison

P.S. I think he's finally beginning to see me that way ...

Severus dropped the letter, his weary brain tripping into sudden overdrive. The only way he could escape this current, impossible pain would be to find the cure for the Dark Mark curse...to regain his adult body and leave this school and its complications. If he were to give his complete attention to finding the cure, he would be too absorbed to think about Hermione and how he had broken her heart ... that his own was sundered, as well, scarcely merited mention.

Snatching his copy of the Lovegood notes from amongst his school things, he immersed himself in them, considering how the rearrangement of the incantation might improve the spell for the counter-curse. Anything to distract himself.

The next morning, he sent off an owl to Allison and Jared, requesting a meeting to brainstorm as soon they arrived back at the school. The students would return on Sunday...three days away... and he was anxious to begin the spell experimentation soon.

In the interim, he stayed in his room, brooding and alone, for he had not seen Bother since New Year's Eve. He suspected that she was with Crookshanks and Hermione...as if they were divorcing, and Hermione had custody of the cats. It might have been funny if he had not been so wretched ... he was not to be permitted to keep even one good thing from this entire miserable episode.

He took to visiting the kitchens outside of mealtimes to obtain nourishment. He doubted his ability to remain unmoved if he saw Hermione, and it was imperative for him to remain strong. She had honoured his request not to seek him out, sparing him the necessity of dealing with her, so it came as a harsh blow to him when he caught sight of her on Sunday afternoon, when the students returned from their holiday.

She was in the entrance hall, checking off the Gryffindors on her list as they streamed into the castle; he saw her from the first floor landing, and she looked like hell. Her hair had been gathered in a frightful bunch at her neck, her clothes looked as if she had slept in them, and her face was an unhealthy, greyish-white. Quailing at the sight of her, he fled back to Gryffindor Tower. He would stay in his room until it was time to meet with Jared and Allison to discuss the counter-curse.

Accordingly, he did not creep down to the common room until nearly eight o'clock that night, and as he attempted to move unobtrusively to the portrait hole, Neville loomed up in front of him, looking a bit like the Wrath of God.

'Hi, Neville,' he said, attempting to slip past the other boy.

'I'd like a word, Adin,' Neville said, his slightly trembling voice penetrating the dull roar of the crowd in the common room.

Severus froze in his tracks, aware of numerous pairs of eyes upon him. Harry and Ron sat together at a table, belatedly completing homework that was due the next day, while Ginny sat curled in an armchair with her pygmy puff on her shoulder, ignoring the unwavering stares of Bother and Crookshanks. Parvati and Lavender had been in deep conversation, but now, all of them were staring at Severus and Neville.

'Later,' Severus said shortly, making to move past Neville. 'I've got somewhere to be.'

Neville shifted to the side, blocking him. 'I want to know what you've done to Hermione.'

All other talk ceased as the common room occupants waited to hear the answer to Neville's question.

'I haven't done anything to her,' Severus snapped, moving to Neville's other side, only to have Neville place a hand on his shoulder and push him back.

'I saw her with you at the Christmas party,' Neville said clearly, 'and I see her now...and you're the only one who's been here with her. What did you do?'

From the corner of his eye, Severus saw Harry rise from his seat at the table, a frown on his bespectacled face as he stared at Severus. In response, Ron rose as well, and moving into the middle of the room, he glared around at the students from the lower years. 'Oi! You midgets clear out,' he ordered, making shooing motions, and a number of the younger ones fled up to the dormitories, away from the seventh-year drama.

'Mind your own business,' Severus snarled at Neville defensively.

Harry took a step towards him, a pugnacious set to his jaw. 'Hermione does look awful,' he said, staring hard at Severus. 'Did you hurt her? You know she fancies you.'

Ron stepped up to Harry's shoulder. 'She looked fine when we left, mate, and now she looks like she's been through the wringer...what do you know about that?'

Severus felt as if he were under the unforgiving glare of a microscope, being poked and prodded. In its way, it was nearly as bad as being interrogated by the Dark Lord...except he had never cared what Tom Riddle thought of him.

'Leave him alone!' Ginny stood up from her chair and crossed to stand in front of Harry and Ron, her arms crossed over her chest. 'Hermione's a big girl, and she can sort out her own problems.' She poked her brother in the chest. 'Did anyone ever call you out in public for cheating on her?' She transferred her stern look to her boyfriend. 'No one told *you* what a prat you were for breaking my heart, all those years.'

The duo dropped their eyes, and Severus had to marvel at Ginny's uncanny resemblance to her mother in that moment.

Neville looked troubled, but he stepped aside, and Severus wasted no time; he hurried through the portrait hole, reflecting that he owed Ginny a big favour.

Allison and Jared were waiting for him in the Room of Requirement with a whole new Arithmantic sequence on the chalkboard. Severus muttered a cursory greeting and stood staring at the equation for a long time, slowly following the progression of the logic. When he reached the end, he turned to them, a grim smile his answer to their anxious faces.

'I think you've nailed it,' he said. 'Let's give it a try.'

Jared looked interested, but Allison objected.

'No! We promised Professor Dumbledore we would not experiment without him.'

Severus sneered at her. 'Goody two shoes,' he muttered.

Jared interceded, his expression angry. 'Don't talk to her like that,' he said, drawing Allison into the protective circle of his arm, receiving from her a look of worshipful

adoration.

Severus flinched, stung by the evidence of the Bulgarians' caring for one other. Even the two most inept, clueless people he knew could manage a romance, but not him. 'Fine, we'll wait for tomorrow,' he snapped, slouching out of the room, away from the sight of the happy couple.

He started down the corridor, wondering if the not-so-welcoming committee would still be assembled to question him. Perhaps it would be better for him to find somewhere to wait until they all went to bed. He was reviewing his possibilities when Mrs Norris, the caretaker's cat, rounded the corner; he knew Filch wouldn't be far behind, and he had no wish to receive detention for being out after curfew...wouldn't that be a fine end to an already miserable day? Resisting the urge to give the unpleasant feline a kick in passing, he returned to the common room.

Ginny was the sole occupant, and she stood when he came in. 'I have something to say to you,' she informed him baldly.

He gritted his teeth and shoved his fists into his pockets. 'Then say it,' he snapped.

'I don't know why you're afraid of Hermione,' Ginny said, a frown between her brows. 'She might have overwhelmed you, because she likes you so much...but give her a chance. Don't be a coward about it.'

With a monumental effort, he hung on to the shreds of his temper. 'Anything else?' he ground out.

Ginny shrugged and began the climb to the girl's dormitories. 'Don't be a git,' she advised without looking back.

Severus stood in the common room, glaring at the floor, struggling with himself. He was *doing* the courageous thing, even if no one else knew it. It would be easy to just let things happen...it was much harder to do the right thing. He forcefully pushed away the notion that going to Hermione and begging her forgiveness would solve everything, ending the suffering for them both, making his mates happy with him again. How would that help in the long run? Their relief would be short-lived, because ultimately, he couldn't give Hermione what they both wanted: a life together.

Breakfast the next morning was a tense affair. He knew he could not continue to avoid Hermione forever...she was in all of his classes, for Merlin's sake...so he went down to the Great Hall, steeling himself for his reception. Of his mates, only Jared seemed to be speaking to him, and even he was a bit stand-offish.

Severus poked at his food, still unable to find his appetite, wishing he could skive off his classes until the Special Studies class that afternoon.

A small disturbance rippled from down the table, and Severus glanced over to see Harry moving to make room for Hermione. Her hair was tidier than the last time Severus had seen her...as tidy as the bushy mass ever was, he supposed...and her clothes were in perfect order. She was pale, though, and her eyes were deeply shadowed and red-rimmed. He felt sick at the sight of her, filled with guilt and longing in equal measure, and when she looked down the table, directly into his eyes, he could no longer stay there. Grabbing his bag, he strode away from the Gryffindor table, feeling as if the eyes of the entire school followed him to the door. He had now regained his rightful place in the universe: He was excluded, reviled, and comprehensively misunderstood.

The day was interminable, Hermione's presence in every class like a constant weight on his heart. Her friends were particularly solicitous of her, whilst giving him the cold shoulder, and he loathed himself for feeling the sting of rejection. He had nowhere to spend his free periods, unwilling to go to either the library alcove or the common room, for fear of finding her there. He was reduced to spending the time sitting in a little used stairwell, reading and doing his assignments. He did go to lunch, but he wolfed down the food as quickly as he could and departed before the knowledge of his isolation from the other seventh-years could depress him past the point of being able to function at all.

He entered the Special Studies class as a mass of raw emotion that afternoon, held together only by the thinnest veneer of composure. He was the first person there, but he did not sit; he was too anxious to be still. He set his bag on a worktable and paced along the back wall. When Hermione entered, she, too, seemed frayed and painfully vulnerable; he gripped the table edge to keep from going to her.

Her eyes sought him out almost instantly, questioning, but he avoided her gaze. She turned her back to him, settling in an armchair to await the beginning of class, her sadness saturating the very air of the room, making it hard for him to breathe.

Dumbledore entered with Allison and Jared, the three of them in excited conversation, and the Headmaster rubbed his hands together, smiling around at them all.

'I can't tell you how pleased I am to know that you all found the project so compelling that you worked on it over your holiday,' he said. 'In addition, you were quite right not to attempt the spell work outside of my presence...thank you for complying with my wishes.' He inclined his silver head to them formally, and Hermione took the opportunity to glare over her shoulder at Severus.

He shrugged, and she turned immediately back to the others.

'*Did* we work on it over the holiday?' she asked, her tone curt.

'Jared and I did,' Allison said, her tone condescending. 'Oh, and we owed Adin about it...didn't he share the letters with you?'

Apparently, Allison couldn't resist the female urge to grind her rival into the dust. Served Hermione right for being such a bitch about the Christmas party, he supposed.

Hermione did not deign to answer, but crossed her arms over her chest and glared at the chalkboard.

'Could we get started?' Severus asked. 'I think we're ready to try the spell on a living subject.'

Dumbledore looked grave. 'If you don't mind, Adin, I would like to go through the calculations one more time before we attempt to cast the spell.'

Huffing his annoyance, Severus waved a hand and leaned against the wall, his jaw set. He watched Hermione move to stand beside the Headmaster, the two of them studying the Arithmantic sequence line by line. At one point, Hermione stepped up to the chalkboard and placed her finger beneath a string of Arithmantic symbols.

'Headmaster,' she said, the intellectual exercise bringing vigour to her voice, 'Voldemort's intent was that his death would trigger the delayed portion of the Dark Mark Curse, causing those bearing the Dark Mark to die. What will be the intent in the curse we use on the experimental subject?'

Dumbledore looked grave. 'As much as it goes against the grain for all of us,' he began, ignoring the derisive snort from Severus' direction, 'I think the intent of the person who casts the corrupted Protean Charm must be death, as well...otherwise, we might not obtain authentic results.' The Headmaster then plucked a chick from the cage on the table and looked to Severus.

'Adin, will you please perform the infected Dark Mark Curse?'

Severus stepped away from the wall, every molecule of his body thrumming with purpose. With an ugly sneer upon his face, he pointed his wand at the chick, summoned intent, and cursed it. A sickly black light flowed toward the chick, engulfed it, and dissipated.

Gently, Dumbledore took the tiny bird in his hand and ruffled its fluff to expose the tiny Dark Mark now tattooed on its flesh. 'As you can see,' he said, 'the Protean Charm with the time-release component has been applied. Now, we will cast the cure for the Dark Mark Curse.'

He replaced the yellow chick on the table and turned to smile at Allison. 'Would you do the honours, Miss Dyrda?' he said.

They all stood back to give Allison a clear field. Smoothly, she swept her wand in a figure-eight and murmured the newly refined incantation. A brilliant blue light streaked across the room, illuminating the baby chick for several beats, then dispersed.

'Well done!' Dumbledore enthused. 'I could not have done better myself...which is saying something, you know. Twenty-five points to Ravenclaw!'

Allison beamed, and Severus glared at the Headmaster. 'How long do we have to wait?' he snapped...but it wasn't Dumbledore who answered him.

'Four days,' Hermione said quietly, drawing the eyes of the Room's inhabitants. 'In four days, we'll know if we can cure Professor Snape's Dark Mark Curse.'

Severus hoped he was the only one to detect the ineffable sadness in her voice.

Severus deposited his book bag in his room before going down to dinner. He felt a hollow confidence that the curse cure would work. The next question was how soon Dumbledore would consent to remove the Youthening Enchantment and cure his Dark Mark Curse. Then, in his old, scarred body, he could return to the horrible, dilapidated house he had inherited from his parents and commence his life alone. The years to come stretched before him in his imagination like a desert, devoid of anything save sorrow and regret. His mind was so full of conjecturing that he walked straight into Luna in the entrance hall.

'Adin!' she said, her pleasure at meeting him evident in her voice. 'I was waiting for you.'

He scowled at her. He ought to have been paying attention...the last thing he wanted was an in-depth discussion with Luna.

'Yeah?' he said unhelpfully.

'I've had a talk with Neville,' she informed him earnestly.

'You didn't tell him...'

'Of course not!' Luna said, her protuberant eyes shocked. 'But I've also had a talk with Hermione,' she said significantly.

Severus felt himself flush; he wondered how much Hermione had told Luna about their activities on New Year's Eve. He didn't say anything, only gave Luna a stony stare.

'I have one thing to say to you about her, sir,' Luna said. 'She knows who you are and she doesn't care...she loves you...and if you refuse to love her back, you are *not* saving her from unhappiness, so don't pretend to yourself that you are.'

Severus' nostrils flared as he sucked in breath with which to tell her off, but Luna did not stay to hear it; with a gentle smile, she wandered away to the Great Hall. *Damn the girl for being right!* Too furious to eat, Severus turned on his heel and went up to his dormitory.

Tuesday had its own brand of misery for Severus to endure.

When he went down to breakfast, he saw people crowded around the notice board, reading the new parchment posted there.

'Career Fair on Friday,' Jared said in answer to Severus' inquiring look. 'No classes that afternoon for years five through seven. Some employers will be interviewing.'

Severus shrugged indifferently at this news, but he felt sick inside as he trekked down to the Great Hall, he eyes downcast. Everyone else was preparing to begin their fresh, shiny lives when they passed their N.E.W.T.s and left school, and though he was loath to admit it, the emotion he felt when he thought about that was jealousy. There would be no fresh start for him, and in many ways, he felt he'd never had one.

He could think of nothing he would not give to be like the other seventh-years, on the brink of his adult life with a clean slate. With Hermione by his side and all the years of their lives ahead of them ...

Stop that pathetic air dreaming! the relentless voice in his mind commanded. *You don't deserve anything of the kind!*

'Leave me alone,' he muttered aloud, though secretly, he could only agree.

That night, hiding out in his room after dinner, trying to force time to pass faster, he was startled to receive a knock at his door. Rising to answer, he found Neville nervously shifting from one foot to the other.

'I've come to apologise,' Neville blurted, as soon as Severus opened the door.

'Forget it,' Severus said gruffly, beginning to push the door closed.

'Wait!' Neville slipped sideways into the room.

'What do you want?' Severus demanded aggressively, slamming the door closed. He was bringing his life as Adin to a close; the last thing he needed was further involvement in the lives of the other Gryffindors.

Neville swallowed. 'You always listened to me when I wanted to talk about girls,' he said, anxious eyes searching Severus' face. 'Do you need to talk to someone about Hermione?'

Severus knew, even as he was doing it, that the uncontrolled laughter would alarm Neville, but he would never be able to explain to his round-faced friend how pathetic it was that a thirty-seven-year-old man should *need* relationship advice from the person whose Boggart he personified.

The next morning, Neville greeted him at breakfast with a cheerful smile, and Severus took the seat beside him, hoping some of the warmth would counteract the cold shoulder he was still receiving from his other mates.

He couldn't help but watch Hermione from the corner of his eye. She was still pale and pinched looking, and her shadowed eyes looked as if she'd been crying again. Bloody hell! Couldn't she see that he was no good for her...that he was doing this for her own good? Why couldn't she just get *over* it? Hadn't he?

Keep telling yourself that, arsehole, his inner critic replied.

He had just begun to drink his coffee when owl post arrived, and although he did not receive mail, he saw that Hermione received her *Daily Prophet*, as always. She unrolled it and glanced at the front page, and Severus knew from the expression on her face that she had read something significant.

He didn't have long to wonder about it; she passed the paper to Harry, who gave a crow of approval and showed it to Ron. Soon, the whole table was talking about it.

'The Ministry of Magic decided not to prosecute Snape?' Dean said, grabbing the paper from Neville. 'It's about time they came to their senses.'

'He was always on our side,' Neville said. 'Everything he did was on Dumbledore's orders...even Harry says so now.'

Severus stared down the table, stunned by the reaction of the Gryffindors. They *supported* him?

'He's a hero,' Hermione said clearly, standing and pulling her bag over her shoulder. 'His life was endangered every single day. He *deserves* a medal.'

She turned and walked away from the table, but Severus couldn't help watching her go, a new spurt of light-heartedness faintly fluttering in his chest. Her friends didn't loathe him? The mention of his name didn't bring about a storm of disgusted protests?

With sudden hunger, he filled his plate with food, and ate a hearty meal for the first time in days, his brain mightily striving to sort it all out.

That afternoon in the Special Studies class, there wasn't much to do. Severus sat on the far side of Allison and Jared, forcing Hermione to take the seat farthest from him. There was another day to go before they could tell if the cure was effective, so they lazed about in the comfortable armchairs, drinking tea against the frigid sleet pelted the castle and engaging in desultory conversation about their project.

'Headmaster, how will we know the result of the experiment?' Allison asked. 'Classes aren't meeting on Friday afternoon, because of the Career Fair...do we have to wait until class time on Monday to find out?'

Dumbledore considered her over the tops of his half-moon spectacles. 'Would you prefer to know sooner?'

'Yes,' Severus said loudly, and the others echoed his sentiments.

Dumbledore nodded. 'Then I will have house-elves notify you as soon as the results are available. I think you have all earned the right to know.'

Severus did not look at Hermione, though he felt her eyes on him. Dipping his head, he let his fringe fall, shielding his eyes, his lips thinned to a straight white line. Just two more days...two more days, and he could detach himself from her forever, going back to being friendless, loveless, and alone...the way it was supposed to be.

On Friday morning, Severus awoke feeling oddly optimistic. He rubbed his hair dry before the mirror in his room, thinking that surely the chick would survive the activation of the time-delayed death curse, which meant he, Severus, would no longer be in limbo. And the Ministry had finally decided not to prosecute him. It wasn't exoneration...it was far from the medal Hermione had declared he deserved

Hermione. The mere thought of her name was enough to derail him into pointless, fruitless fantasies of a future that would never, ever be. Dragging his comb through his hair, he ruthlessly dragged his mind back to reality. Today the experiment would be completed, and he would leave this place and these people...*Hermione*...and never have to think of them...*Hermione!*...again. It would be best for everyone.

His positive mood lasted through breakfast but quickly eroded in Potions. Slughorn was in a jovial mood, and he rubbed his fat hands together as he explained their class assignment.

'Today, class, we will brew Pepper-Up Potion for use in the school infirmary. Those whose potion is sub-standard will receive a zero for today's lesson; those whose work is up to par will receive full marks plus five House points!' He beamed about at the students as if he were conferring a rare treat upon them. 'Good luck!' he cried and retired to his desk.

Severus immediately began to line up his ingredients. He had brewed literally thousands of batches of Pepper-Up in his years as the Potions master; he could do it in his sleep.

To his left he heard a distinct sniff, and he glanced at Allison, a frown on his face. 'What's wrong with you?' he demanded impatiently.

'Jared ignored me at breakfast,' Allison said, retrieving a tissue from the pocket of her robes and dabbing at her eyes.

'He was probably thinking about something else,' Severus said testily, beginning to chop the pepper-grass with surgical precision.

Allison grabbed his left arm, disrupting his work. 'Do you think so?' she asked, leaning in toward him anxiously.

A loud banging noise came from the right, and Severus jerked around to see Hermione crouched on the floor, angrily throwing porcupine quills back into her upended cauldron, whilst Zabini looked on in disgust. As she stood, Hermione sent him a look of burning reproach. Severus recoiled as if struck and turned back to his work station, only to find a now perky Allison had taken up her knife and begun chopping.

'You were chopping it too fine,' she said condescendingly. 'It says "chopped", not "minced".'

'I happen to know for a fact that the more finely it's chopped, the more efficacious it will be,' he hissed at her, snatching up the habanera pepper and beginning to meticulously de-seed it.

'You should wear your gloves for that,' Allison said bossily.

'It is not necessary if you cast a Shield Charm on your hands before you begin,' he snapped, wondering if Slughorn would notice...or mind...if Severus cast a Silencing Charm on his annoying partner.

'You're not supposed to cast charms in Potions,' Allison said indignantly.

Severus rounded on her, his silver dagger clutched in his hand. 'Know-it-all!' he spat at her angrily.

There was an audible gasp from Hermione's direction, followed by her voice, sounding simultaneously infuriated and tearful. 'No!' she shrieked. '*I'm* the know-it-all!'

Slughorn's head rose from his marking, his eyes wide with alarm; he obviously had no idea how to handle his prize student indulging in an emotional melt-down in the middle of his dungeon. There was a shocked silence, followed by snorts and titters from some of the other students, but Hermione did not wait to hear them. Grabbing her bag, she rushed out of the classroom without a word to anyone.

Severus didn't know whether to laugh or to swear. Allison had returned to mincing pepper-grass, acting as if nothing out of the way had occurred, but Harry and Ron were glaring daggers at Severus.

Ron tilted his head towards the door, man-to-man. 'Ball's in your court, mate,' he said quietly.

Severus pulled himself to his full height, the Potions master, preparing to annihilate Weasley with a few well-chosen words. The girl was, after all, *their* best friend, not his...he was going away, leaving her behind, leaving them all behind...and the broken heart from which she suffered would soon heal ...

No! He didn't want to go away from here, away from this life; he *didn't* want to leave her...and no one knew better than he that broken hearts bloody *wel*hever healed.

Adin's grief-stricken distress overwhelmed Severus' reasoned logic. Blindly, he turned from Ron and tossed his dagger back into his Potions kit, shoving it into his bag.

'Fine,' he muttered and stalked out of the classroom in Hermione's wake.

He hesitated in the in the entrance hall, debating where she might have gone, and eschewing the common room as too obvious, he climbed to the fourth floor and set out for the library. With each step he took, he fought to firm his resolve, deliberately stoking his anger towards her: for making a scene in public and involving him; for moping about for the last week, making him feel bad; for being too damn appealing and appallingly out of his reach.

He erupted into the alcove...*their* alcove...and dropping his bag on the table where she sat, he cast the Muffliato Spell and began to shout. 'Miss Granger, you are insufferable!' he thundered.

Hermione flung herself out of her chair, knocking it over in the process. 'You called *her* a know-it-all!' she screeched, her eyes wild.

Sweet Merlin, how he *longed* to hold her.

The magnitude of his folly burst upon him like a physical blow, and the inner professor began to scream at him. *Get out! Get out, you fool! You're alone with her! Leave now!*

He ignored the turmoil in his mind. 'It's not a term of endearment, you silly girl!' he snapped, shoving his hands into his pockets, striving desperately to hold it together.

Her lips trembled pathetically. 'It's what you called *me*,' she whispered.

Circe's knickers, she was crying. He loathed crying females; they were impossible creatures ... No, it was Hermione, and when Hermione cried, all he wanted to do was to hold her and soothe her and ...

He gritted his teeth, and in his pockets, his hands clenched into fists as words tumbled from his lips. 'She may be a know-it-all, but *you* are the insufferable one...and if I can't have you ...' He shut his mouth, appalled at what he had said.

'You *can* have me,' she whispered, taking a step towards him, hands outstretched.

Get out while you can, fool! the voice shouted.

He stood straight and leant back, as if to withdraw from the range of fire. 'I told you I *can't*,' he whispered, the agony rising in his chest, poisoning every breath he drew.

She took another step forward, her hands reaching for and grasping the front of his robes. 'I don't care about anything but *us*,' she murmured, her eyes fastened hungrily upon his lips.

Dear God, there had been a valid reason why he had avoided being alone with her ...

'You'll think better of that in time,' he said stiffly.

Her chin lifted. 'I can think better than you give me credit for, Professor Snape,' she said, and the invocation of his name...of his other identity...burnt him, as if she had spattered him with undiluted bubotuber pus. No...he was *Adin* to her ... She didn't know Professor Snape...didn't*love* Professor Snape ...

'I don't see how,' he muttered automatically, perilously close to babbling. 'I can hardly think in this situation.'

She moved closer still, her gaze never leaving his face. 'What situation is that, Professor?' she whispered, her loving, hopeful brown eyes pleading her case more eloquently than her words ever could.

He swallowed, unable to look away from her. Girls didn't look at *him* that way...Severus Snape had never been the sort of bloke to evoke such melting looks from pretty girls.

She is looking at you, she is talking to you, and she is loving you, Adin observed.

A physical shudder rippled over him from head to toe as something inside of him broke free. The sudden release of constraint had him backing her up against the wall, and she went willingly, a sort of blazing triumph in her expression. He dipped his head until his nose grazed her cheek and his lips touched the shell of her ear. 'The situation, my insufferable know-it-all, is that I love you past the point of reason or rational thought, and this is all I know to do about it.'

And he kissed her, hot and hard and needy, her open-mouthed reception suggesting that she approved his choice of action. They devoured one another, their week-long separation flavouring each thrust of their tongues with keen desperation. She tugged at his hair, caressed his jaw, and ran her hands up beneath his jumper, untucking his shirt and caressing the bare skin of his torso, as if to make sure everything was where she had left it. He breathed her, tasted her, pressed her to him as if trying to absorb her into himself. Leave her? Impossible! He had been insane to try. *She* was his reason, his hope, and his salvation.

Pop! 'Sir and Miss?'

They broke their kiss, and Hermione attempted to draw away from him, but he kept her trapped in the circle of his arms, merely turning an irritated face to the cowering house-elf.

'Speak!' he snarled, earning a protesting, '*Adin!*' from Hermione.

The elf bowed low and spoke to its knees. 'Professor Dumbledore is ordering Mooky to tell Sir and Miss when the little chickie experiment is over,' the elf explained.

A powerful combination of exultation and consternation assaulted Severus, and Hermione squeezed past him, only to grab his hand. Their eyes met and held, and he knew there was nothing to fear from this moment or any other: Their connexion was immutable. She smiled and tugged his hand. 'Come on!' she cried, and they ran together through the library, past an outraged Madam Pince, and thundered up three flights of stairs to reach, completely out of breath, the Room of Requirement.

Severus sagged against the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy and the rampaging trolls, gasping for air, but Hermione paced up and down until the doorway appeared. Together they hurried to the cage where the cursed chick rested in solitary splendour. The little fellow was in fine fettle, hopping about and chirping, just as if he had not endured the Dark Lord's most perverted spell.

'Shall I?' Hermione breathed, and Severus nodded. She released the catch and reached in to capture the baby chick, ruffling its down, revealing an unmarked body. Hermione had tears in her eyes as she held the chick out to Severus. 'Not only is it still alive,' she said, 'but it's no longer Marked...we did it!'

Severus took the little bird and performed a thorough examination of its body, even going so far as to cast a Dark Detection Spell. The chirpy little chap was in perfect health and free of any Dark taint. Severus returned the chick to its cage and looked to Hermione with amazement. 'We did it,' he breathed, repeating her words, and she flew at him again in her jubilation. He caught her, crushing her to him, burying his face in her hair.

It was too much...he couldn't wrap his mind around it: He could safely return to his rightful body and still be free of the Dark Mark. He could be himself again without fear of dying a horrible, pointless death. He could reclaim the life he had left four months ago, and the vital, glorious girl in his arms would love him still...want him still.

He tilted her chin up, his lips curved into a smile, his fingertips gentle upon her skin. 'I owe this to you,' he said.

Her smile echoed his. 'No, we all worked on it,' she objected. 'I may have found the way to include the time release component, but Allison found the way to cure it.'

She felt so right in his arms and smelled like heaven; he could not resist burying his face in her throat, his open mouth upon her skin, and soon they were locked in an embrace, picking up precisely where they left off in Firenze's forest clearing, touching one another urgently, as if their lives depended on it.

'My dormitory will be empty now,' he murmured to her.

It was Hermione who broke the kiss, stepping back from him, her face flushed and lips swollen from the violence of their kisses. 'We have to get to class,' she said. 'I can't wait to see Allison and Jared...do you think they know?'

Severus surveyed her with half-lidded eyes, debating whether he could convince her to skive off and go to his room. But she began to straighten her clothing, setting right the disturbances he had made whilst trying to caress every square inch of her body, and as he watched, a half-formed thought nagged at him.

'Go on to class,' he urged her, adjusting himself to facilitate walking and grabbing his bag from the floor. 'There's something I have to do.'

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 of 16

After the fall of Voldemort, an inexplicable illness plagues the surviving Death Eaters. Albus Dumbledore has a plan to save Severus Snape—but how, exactly, is Hermione Granger involved?



This Time

Chapter 16

It's crazy to do it again

But how can I possibly lose?

This time I'm in it for you

This Time - Player

He walked, his head down, coaxing the elusive idea niggling about the back of his mind to show itself.

What's wrong with this picture? he thought, passing through the great oaken front doors out into the clear, frigid January day. If Allison was the one who actually discovered the cure for the Dark Mark Curse, didn't that contradict Trelawney's prediction?

Frowning, he called to mind the wording of the prophecy.

'The servant who played the Dark Lord false is poised upon the brink of eternal night. Alone and lonely, he awaits the coming of the daughter of Menelaus. Born upon the cusp of autumn's equinox, the child of Muggles bears within herself salvation for he who is marked and scarred by Darkness, within, without.'

The child of Muggles...that *had* to refer to Hermione, for Allison was a pure-blood. But what, exactly, did Hermione bear within herself that was his salvation?

He stood now beneath the beech tree by the lake, his favourite spot...the place where Hermione had admitted that she liked watching him move...where she had kissed his cheek. But before he had created that shining memory in this spot, it had been the site of another banner day in his life...where James Potter had flipped him in the air to expose his dingy y-fronts to all and sundry...where he, Severus, had forever lost the friendship of the girl he had loved.

There had been two events that had irrevocably changed the direction of his life: The loss of his friendship with Lily Evans was the first, which in some way made the second, his taking of the Dark Mark, inevitable.

But as Adin Prince, he had never been sullied with the Dark Lord's Mark. Furthermore, the emotion he felt for Hermione so radically eclipsed what he had felt...*what I was capable of feeling*, he admitted...for Lily that it was difficult to put them side-by-side. It was rather like comparing a candle flame to a forest fire.

'How does she fulfil the prophecy?' he asked the frozen lake. But the likely answer...dear *God* let it be right!...already rested in his heart, a nugget of gold, its glow growing stronger and surer with each passing moment.

'She loves me,' he informed the icy tree branches over his head, daring to speak the words out loud.

Maybe the batty old bastard has been right about love all along, he thought, raising his face to the weak winter sun. *She's already begun to heal the Darkness within ... but we're bloody well not finished...not nearly.*

He turned from the lake and returned to the castle, resolve in his very bearing.

'Severus!' Dumbledore said, rising to meet him as he stalked across the Headmaster's study. The old man turned to a side table and poured two glasses of deep red wine, passing one to Severus. 'To Youthening Enchantments and Dark Mark Curse cures,' Dumbledore said, and he drained his goblet.

Severus touched the glass to his lips and set it down. 'I want you to make the Youthening Enchantment permanent,' he said without preamble, his manner aggressive. 'Don't tell me it's not possible...I don't care what it takes! If we have to carry on in the Special Studies class for the next two terms...'

Dumbledore's shaggy silver brows contracted. 'This is sudden,' he said. 'Perhaps you could sit down, and we could discuss it.'

Severus crossed his arms over his chest, a sneer upon his face. 'There's nothing to discuss. You're going to do it.'

'Severus, changing one's appearance does nothing for the mess we are inside...believe me, I know.' Dumbledore smiled ruefully, as if attempting to de-escalate the situation.

'This has nothing to do with how I look,' Severus snapped. 'This is about the life I'm living.'

Dumbledore looked grave. 'This has been merely a detour on the road of your life,' he said quietly. 'It would be irresponsible to simply abandon the life you were given for a new one.'

Severus slapped the top of the desk, making the quills rattle in their holder, and leant towards the old man. '*Don't* talk to me about responsibility!' he spat. 'I have accepted every responsibility you have ever laid upon me, and I have fulfilled every demand.' He lowered his voice, unyielding. 'You *owe* me, old man.'

Dumbledore frowned. 'What is this really about, Severus?'

Severus continued as if Dumbledore had not spoken. 'You owe Potter and Weasley and Longbottom their friend...you owe Hermione her *love*.'

The old man was suddenly very still, but his eyes blazed blue fire. 'What have you done?' he demanded, his voice raised.

'I have blended right in, just as you said I would,' Severus told him insolently.

'I specifically asked you not to interfere with the girls!' Dumbledore thundered. 'With a student...Severus, how could you?'

'Oh, open your eyes, Headmaster!' Severus said, matching the older wizard's tone. 'Allison discovered the cure for the curse...how exactly was Hermione *supposed* to be my salvation?'

Dumbledore's eyes narrowed, but his stance remained rigid. Severus knew he had thrown the old man for a loop; he subsided into a chair and waited for the Headmaster to think it through.

Minutes ticked by as Dumbledore stared off into space. Many times over the years of his servitude, Severus had witnessed the process by which his mentor evaluated information. Trying not to think of what he would do if the old man refused to grant the deepest desire of his heart, he stared at the rug and waited.

At long last, the Headmaster spoke. 'Please look at me, Severus.'

He had thought it might come to this...was it worth it to him, to permit the old man to know his thoughts? If it brought about the result he desired, then yes, he was perfectly willing. Severus raised his head, looking directly into Dumbledore's eyes and laying himself bare. He scarcely felt the passage through his memories; even the Dark Lord had not possessed the Headmaster's feather-light touch with Legilimency.

'I see,' Dumbledore said, and Severus watched him without breathing.

'I think you are correct,' the old man said, as if they had been discussing an intellectual point of contention. 'Hermione's love is your salvation...but your love for her shows that the healing of the Darkness has already begun. This is a wonderful thing for you, Severus.' Dumbledore smiled at him kindly. 'Even more exciting to me, as someone who has cared for you for many years, is this: For the first time in your life, you are fighting for your happiness.' The old man's eyes became very bright. 'Do you know what that means, my boy?'

Still afraid to breathe, Severus gave his head a negative shake.

'It means you finally know that you *deserve* it.' Tears fell onto the ancient cheeks, finely interlaced with wrinkles. 'The prophecy has been fulfilled.'

The Headmaster moved to stand over him, shaking back the sleeves of his heavily embroidered, midnight blue robes. 'The Youthening Enchantment needs only one adjustment to be permanent...are you quite ready?'

Severus rose to stand before the man who had been closer to him than any other for most of the years of his life.

'I am ready, Headmaster,' he averred.

It was late afternoon when he found he way back to the common room, and to his delight, Hermione was sitting on the loveseat by the fire, with the tangle of Crookshanks and Bother at her feet. Her smile when she saw him was like the sun coming from behind the clouds, and he hurried to sit down beside and pull her into his arms for a proper, thorough kiss.

'Oi, mate!' Ron objected, looking up from a stack of Career Fair leaflets. 'I'm glad you made it up between you, but can't you do that someplace else?'

'Leave them alone,' Lavender scolded him, but it was the two-fingered salute Severus flipped Ron from behind Hermione's back that made the ginger-haired prat chuckle.

'I've been forgetting all day to wish you happy birthday,' Hermione said when he let her come up for air.

Severus laughed out loud; he had completely forgotten it was his birthday.

'Where have you been?' she asked, threading her fingers through his fringe, her eyes brimming with love.

In answer, he produced the leaflets he had snagged from the Career Fair and fanned them out for her inspection. 'Which of these do you think suits me best?' he asked, sitting back with his arm about her shoulders, cuddling her to him just as a regular bloke would with his girlfriend.

But Hermione struggled away, pivoting to face him, her eyes shining. 'Do you mean ...' she began, her voice barely a whisper, as if to say the words aloud would wake her from a dream.

He stroked the mass of bushy hair back from her face and cupped her cheek. 'Well, it *is* my birthday,' he said, and knowing she would understand his meaning, he added in a whisper, 'Call me Adin.'

Although there were those who laughed at them for being soppy, Hermione and Adin announced their engagement to their friends on Valentine's Day, and after they sat their N.E.W.T.s, they were married in a small ceremony beneath their favourite beech tree, with Neville Longbottom and Luna Lovegood as their attendants. They each embarked upon their chosen careers and enjoyed success, as might have been expected from a pair who earned a total of fourteen Outstanding N.E.W.T.s between them.

The discovery of the cure for the Dark Mark Curse was published in no fewer than three scientific journals, winning for Allison Dyrda the coveted Nobel Prize for Wizarding Sciences. She and her husband, Jared, live in London, where they have a joint private Healing Clinic, and enjoy life with their five daughters.

Severus Snape was never heard from again, despite the definitive cure for his Dark Mark Curse, but the *Quibbler* continues to report frequent sightings of him, often in the company of Elvis and a Crumple-Horned Snorkack.

In their mid-thirties, Adin and Hermione Prince welcomed a son to their lives, a curly-haired, hook-nosed boy whom they *did not* name Severus.

These days, an owl to the Headmistress, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, will find them both.

A/N: The title of the story comes from *This Time I'm In It For Love*, by Player:

This time I'm in it for love,

This time I'm in it to win,

It's crazy to do it again

But how can I possibly lose?

This time I'm in it for you.

This story was written for DeeMichelle, my dear friend of more than three years in fandom, for the 2009 SSHG Exchange on Live Journal. SubHub, the love of my life, who generously permits Severus Snape to share our home, helped me plot the story. It was alpha-read by sshg316, and beta-read by AnnieTalbot. The incomparable Machshefa made invaluable suggestions as well, along the lines of a psychological beta. I wrote the story in two months, immersing myself in the music whose lyrics head each chapter and falling irrevocably in love with Adin.

This was DeeMichelle's prompt: Snape falls in love with Hermione in her seventh year, creates a potion, and goes back to see if he can woo her as his teen-aged self.

As you can see, I took a great deal of liberty with my interpretation of the prompt.

Much love to you all. I hope you enjoyed my last SSHG Exchange story as much as I enjoyed writing it for you. Your comments have filled my heart with joy. Thank you.