

Recovery

by debjunk

Severus survives Nagini's bite, but his mental scars will take much longer to heal than his physical ones. Will he let anyone in to help him?

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 21

Severus survives Nagini's bite, but his mental scars will take much longer to heal than his physical ones. Will he let anyone in to help him?



So, this was death. It was very dark. Severus hadn't expected that. The darkness was so thick that he could almost feel it caressing his body. It seemed endless. Darkness enveloped him like a blanket, welcoming him to his new existence. How could it be so very dark? Severus had always thought death would be very bright, not dark. Perhaps, as in life, his death would also be filled with darkness. It seemed that no matter what he did, he never won.

His senses started to return to him. He was glad he would have those in the afterlife. Unfortunately, with those senses came something unexpected... pain. He began to feel a deep throbbing in his neck, which was slowly turning into a never-ending, searing pain. *Aren't you supposed to be free from pain when death takes you?* This really wasn't what he had expected at all.

He had known all along that he would die. How could he not? Either his *master* would find out his true allegiances, which was not likely, or he would be struck down by his supposed allies in the Order. Being the world's most hated man had its disadvantages.

Still, Severus was disappointed. He had been preparing himself for a long time for a possible confrontation with Voldemort over the Elder wand. He had known that once the Dark Lord had put the pieces together, he would make a beeline for him and kill him to take control of the wand. Knowing Voldemort, he had understood that just a simple Killing Curse wouldn't be enough for the sadistic madman. He'd known he would make his death as painful as possible.

The thing that Severus had figured would be the most painful would be the venom of the snake, Nagini. Insipid venom that it was, it coursed through the body and filled it with an excruciating pain, unlike no other. Its paralytic properties caused the victim to become frozen while the venom finished its evil work.

Unfortunately, I thought I had been ready for such a fate, he thought. *All of that antivenin I've been taking for almost a year... worthless. I must not have built up the tolerance I'd thought I had.*

Concern and puzzlement filled him. *And what about the potion I created to counteract the pain and other effects of the venom? Well, I guess it wouldn't work in the afterlife, would it? Even if I did take it right before the Dark Lord's summons to the Shrieking Shack, it only was to last for twenty-four hours. Little did I know that death would be as painful as life. Maybe I could have concocted a potion for that, too.*

What went wrong?

He had tested the potion repeatedly with a synthesized version of the great snake's venom. He had been unable to use the true venom for fear of alerting the Dark Lord to his plan, but the simulated tests had worked.

Something went wrong, though, for now I am in this endlessly dark place with pain coursing through my veins. Death won't be the release that I had hoped it would be, evidently.

As his senses became sharper, Severus came to a startling realization. He had been floating around in unconsciousness. His eyelids were closed. He could now feel them covering his eyes. His hands began to tingle, and he could feel the length of his legs lying along what he supposed was a bed. The pain had spread from his neck now. It was muted in the rest of his body...only a dull ache...but it seemed to fill his entire frame. This pain was the result of being very much alive! It seemed that his plan had worked after all.

He cracked his eyelids open and was still assaulted by darkness, but it wasn't as dense as before. His eyes could pick out shadows and shapes in this darkness. Yes, he was definitely alive, and he was in the most hated place of all... the Hogwarts infirmary. How he had come to be back at Hogwarts, alive and not murdered by those who had been his friends, was a remarkable mystery to him. He shifted his eyes back and forth and realized that he was alone in the infirmary. He was unsure what to make of that. Had Potter won and the Dark Lord been defeated?

Trying to move his neck, he found himself quite immobilized. He groaned as the pain in his neck shot all the way to his toes as he tried to move his head to look around. His groan did have a good result. He heard clacking heels approaching him and soon the face of Poppy Pomfrey was looking down at him.

"Severus?" she murmured. "Oh, you're awake! I thought you would never wake up. Goodness, you have given all of us a fright!"

Severus narrowed his eyes at Poppy. The last time he had seen her, she had yelled at him for the Carrows and their torturing of students. She had not had this benevolent look upon her face, that was certain. Perhaps word of his true allegiances had come out. It would be nice not to be sneered at all the time.

"P... Pop..." he tried to stammer.

"Severus, don't speak. Your vocal cords are still mending. You must not try to speak until they are healed, or you could damage your voice irreparably."

Severus narrowed his eyes at her. How could he get answers if he couldn't speak! Poppy seemed to understand his frustration and reached over to the table at his bedside. She removed a parchment and a quill from it and showed it to Severus.

"This quill is charmed to suspend itself. It will be able to read your mind and write what you want to say. You're almost healed, Severus, it should only be a week or so that you'll have to do this."

Severus nodded and then concentrated on the pen. *How long? Who won?* The pen scribbled furiously.

Poppy looked in Severus' eyes. "We won, Severus. Harry killed You-Know-Who. You have been unconscious for three weeks."

Severus' hands balled into fists. *Three weeks? How?* The pen wrote.

"It was an aftereffect of whatever potion you took to protect yourself against the snake. It kept you in a coma up until yesterday, healing much of the internal damage done by the venom. It also did a good job of healing your neck, but it has not quite finished its job, thus your inability to speak. I imagine that when it's done, you'll only have a few scars from this whole ordeal. It's healing you much better than I could have."

The dead? asked the pen.

Poppy told him of those who had fallen. Severus was shocked to learn that both Lupins had perished in the battle. It was incredibly unfair for the child they left behind. He was also saddened by the death of Fred Weasley. He had always admired the twins' ingenuity, even if they got carried away rather famously. His loss and the losses among the Hogwarts students were probably the hardest to bear. So many young lives simply snuffed out by a madman.

"Can I get you anything? Are you hungry?" Poppy asked as she rubbed Severus' shoulder.

Why are you being nice to me? The pen wrote, almost as snappishly as if Severus had uttered the words himself.

Tears formed in Poppy's eyes. "Severus, I'm sorry I thought so horribly of you. Harry Potter explained everything. Next to him, you are the biggest hero of the war. You've been cleared of all charges against you." Poppy squeezed Severus' arm. "I wish I had known, Severus. I should have known."

No one was to know.

"Still, I wish someone had. It must have been incredibly lonely having to bear such an awesome burden."

Severus looked away from Poppy. *I did what I had to do.*

Poppy nodded. "I know. I also know that even though you just awoke, you should try and get some sleep. The potion will work better if you're well rested. Send the quill and parchment if you need anything."

With that, Poppy squeezed his arm again and retreated back into her office, not to return until morning.

Minerva came to see him once she found out that he was awake. She hurried in and grasped Severus' hand in hers as she gazed upon him with eyes that were filled with sorrow and guilt.

"Severus, I'm so glad you're all right!"

I didn't get that feeling from you when I fled Hogwarts, Severus' pen wrote out.

Tears filled Minerva's eyes. "Why didn't you tell me, Severus? You let me go on and on about how horrible you were whenever I saw you. I was so bitter and angry about Albus' death, and I took it out on you. Why didn't you tell me?"

No one could know.

Minerva's jaw clenched. "Why not? Did Albus order you to keep quiet?"

Severus gave a curt nod.

"The man has always been a fool! One person knowing would not have threatened your position, Severus. I... I can't imagine how you've felt for all of this time."

I would not risk another's life just so I could have that person treat me better.

"But, surely, Severus..."

No! I did what was necessary. You are not to blame for what you thought. It needed to happen that way.

Minerva looked sadly at Severus. Severus grumbled and looked away. Changing the subject, Minerva cleared her throat and began to speak again.

"Poppy told you that the Ministry has cleared you of all charges."

Severus nodded.

"There's one stipulation."

There always is... Severus' pen scribbled.

"You are to stay on as a teacher at Hogwarts for five years."

Severus' head snapped back, and he winced in pain at his rapid movement. Finally, he was able to glare at Minerva loathingly.

*Why don't they just throw me into Azkaban if I am to be a prisoner here for five years?*The quill wrote.

"Severus, it's much better than a cell, and you know it! The Ministry held a trial, and Harry Potter was the star witness for the defense. When he was done telling your story, there wasn't a dry eye in the courtroom."

Wonderful, I'm a circus freak now!

"Severus, it wasn't like that. The Wizengamot took all of five minutes to clear you. They only want to assure your trustworthiness with this monitoring. They figured that you would be happy to live your life as you had before."

Severus eyes narrowed at Minerva. *How is this living as before? Was I not Headmaster just last month? The Wizengamot can clear me of murder, but they cannot trust me enough to run their prized school? No, I am denigrated to teaching, a position which I loathe! What will it take to convince them that I am not a danger? Do you have to kill me? Would it be better if I were dead? Then no one would have to worry whose side I'm on!*

Minerva took Severus' hand again. "I know this isn't what you want. I even appealed to the Ministry. Their decision is final. If you'd like, you may have the Defense position. I'll try to make this as easy as I can for you."

You are the new Headmistress?

Minerva nodded.

Severus put his head down and thought to himself for a while. *Which would be the lesser of two evils? Would I rather teach Potions or Defense?* Severus rolled his eyes. He'd had enough of exploding cauldrons to last a lifetime. It seemed his decision was made for him before he had even a chance to consider it fully. His head snapped back up, pulling a grimace from his mouth. The pen scribbled furiously.

I will take the Defense classes. I assume with Riddle's death, the curse has been removed.

"I would assume the same thing, Severus. Fine, I'll make the arrangements."

What hoops will I need to jump through to convince the Ministry that I am not the devil incarnate?

Minerva actually chuckled at Severus. "You will have to do nothing but live your life. There will be a tracer placed on your wand. If anything nefarious happens with it, the Ministry will know."

Severus scowled. *How am I to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts if I am incapable of using the Dark Arts in my classes?*

"That won't be a problem. I've already spoken with the Ministry. Your class hours will be provided to them. You will need to alert them when you are going to use and teach about Dark Magic. There will be an Auror present on those days."

Severus steamed within himself. *So, I am to be watched like a lab rat, the Ministry waiting for me to slip up at every turn, hoping against hope that I'll do something worthy of Azkaban?*

"I believe once they see that you are not evil, they will leave you alone."

The quill scratched the next statements in capital letters, Severus was so irate.

AND HOW LONG WILL THAT TAKE? A MONTH, A YEAR, ALL FIVE YEARS?

"I'm sorry, Severus, those are the rules the Ministry has drawn up."

Get out.

"Of course," Minerva said with a sigh. "I'll come by tomorrow. Work on getting better."

Minerva rose and nodded to Severus. He watched her go. Severus looked out the window and fumed. He had thought he would die, and that didn't happen. His plan, if he had survived, was to escape from Hogwarts and hide himself away from the world, but that could not happen now for five years. He would now be *Snake on Exhibition*, a puppet of the Ministry as they awaited his downfall.

Blasted life, blasted profession, blasted Ministry. How dare they put such stipulations on me! Why did they exonerate me if they don't trust me? Why didn't they just give me a long prison sentence and let me rot for the rest of my life?

Realization dawned on him. It was because of Potter. It must be a reward of some kind for his valor in the war. Now, not only was Severus stuck in a job he hated, he owed it all to Potter. Could his life get any worse?

A/N: Unfortunately, his life will probably get worse.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 21

Severus is released from the Hospital Wing.



Chapter 2

Severus Snape made his way through the halls, a bit less of a presence than usual. He had just been released from the infirmary. It had taken a full week for him to be pronounced well enough to go about his own business. The immobility charm had been lifted from him after his first day of consciousness. Still, Severus had tried not to move his neck too much. Even though Poppy had said the wound was almost healed, pain had shot through his body with the slightest movement. He had spoken little, even when Poppy had allowed him to speak. Despite his reticence to talk, his voice had healed quickly. The rich timbre was now restored, whether he wanted to use his voice or not.

With nothing to do while in the infirmary, he had spent an inordinate amount of time stewing about his former life and wondering just what he would do now that he was no longer a puppet for Voldemort or Dumbledore.

The pain that had coursed through his neck had receded to a dull ache now. Severus winced as he turned his head. If he moved too quickly, his neck would protest greatly. His gait didn't falter though. No one would know he was still recuperating. Fully recovered or not, he would not show his weakness in front of his colleagues.

Severus frowned as he continued down the hall. Minerva had told him he could either have his old room in the dungeons, or he could have the residence used by the Defense teacher. He was going to check those out now.

He quietly walked down the hall until he came to the door of the room. Entering, he frowned immediately. Carrow had filled the room with evil, and he could still feel the nastiness that came off the room in waves. The walls were painted black with thick curtains shrouding the windows. Severus sneered and took out his wand. He swished it around in a rectangular pattern and muttered "*Pulsum*". A golden light emanated from his wand and banished the evil feeling that surrounded everything in the flat. Severus lowered his wand and began to walk around the room. With the expulsion of the evil, the room seemed to breathe again. Severus went through the double doors that led to the bedroom. He marveled at Carrow's decorating. This room also was completely black. The focal point of the room was a huge poster-bed with a black velvet canopy. Golden fringe fell from the canopy and brightened up the look of the bed. If Severus decided to take this room, he would leave the bed as it was.

Severus wandered to the window and pulled back the dark drapes. This room looked out onto the lake. That was satisfactory.

After a quick look around, he pondered what he should do. He was comfortable with his old rooms, obviously. However, he hadn't resided in them during his tenure as Headmaster.

At least I don't have to return to that residence. I never felt comfortable there.

Of course, if he went back to the dungeons, he'd have access to the private Potions lab. *Tempting*. He walked back into the bedroom. He eyed the large closet that was off to the left. It was almost as big as a normal room. With a bit of manipulating, it would serve well as a private lab. He could use a regular wardrobe as his closet. That would suffice.

But the dungeons had been his home for a very long time. He had been sad to leave it in the first place. When Slughorn had arrived, he had insisted on taking residence in a brighter, more easily accessible room. *That had been a relief. I wasn't ready to give up my comfort zone just yet.*

The dungeon was his home in any case. With the war done, however, he could start anew with this residence. *What to do... What to do?*

Contemplating the location of the Defense residence, he frowned. *Second-floor, right in the middle of everything. Students and colleagues walking by at all hours. When would I find peace? And do I really want to spend any time where that inept Carrow may have laid his head? No, this won't do.*

He turned to leave, pausing in the doorway to look back at the window, where he'd left the curtains open.

It does have a nice view, though.

Turning, he left the room and headed to the Headmistress' office.

Severus settled himself into the plush seat in front of Minerva's desk and raised an eyebrow at her.

Minerva scoffed. "Severus, you have come to me, why are you giving me a quizzical look?"

"I'm here, Minerva, to inform you that I will be using my residence in the dungeons for the next five years."

Minerva nodded. "I can't blame you for choosing those. I found Carrow's room to be a bit dark for my tastes."

"I have already remedied that situation," Severus explained. "I have purged the evil left by Carrow."

"Ah, well, good. Is there anything else?"

Severus stood abruptly. "No."

"Severus?" Minerva said softly.

Severus arched his eyebrow again in reply.

"If you'd like to help with repairs, we're working on the Astronomy Tower right now. Everything else is back to how it was before the battle."

Severus nodded slowly and left.

"Ah, Severus, good to see you up and about," Filius Flitwick said as he cast a charm and watched a wall repair itself.

"Minerva said I might be of assistance," Severus replied.

"It would be a great help if you'd go up to the roof and secure it."

Severus nodded and climbed the stairs all the way up to the Astronomy Tower roof. As he opened the door, his jaw clenched. He had only come up to the tower roof when he was feeling excessively depressed since Albus' death. His last visit filled his mind.

Severus cast a Muffliato spell so no one would hear him. Going over to the edge of the tower he peered over it.

"If you weren't dead already, old man, I'd kill you again. Curse you for doing this to me. For making me an outcast among my own colleagues." Severus looked into the sky as he climbed onto the battlement.

"What do you think, old man? Should I do it? Should I cast myself over the edge? Wouldn't that be the ultimate irony? All that work you did, Dumbledore... for naught." He laughed caustically. "All those plans, ruined. Your prized spy... dead. His body broken in the same place where you fell. I'll do it, old man! I'll end it all right now!" He shook his fist at the sky. "I wish I'd never met you! I hope you're happy, you lousy excuse for a friend. You know I won't do it. You know I'll continue to walk around stoically while everyone looks at me as if I'm a monster. I'll take their glares and glare right back, and they'll never know how much it all stings.

"I don't care what they think. They can think what they want! They will anyway," he snarled. "It doesn't matter. I will continue as your puppet, you lousy filth. I'll go about my business as everyone thinks I'm the most horrible person who ever walked the earth. And believe me, Albus... I'm not doing this for you! It's for her. It's always been for her and for the future of our world. Do not even assume that I would do this for you!"

Severus' breath came heavily as he calmed himself. Like all the times before, he stared out over the school grounds for a while, letting himself become calm once again. Shaking himself, he finally turned and left the tower behind, his façade back in place so that no one would know that he had any emotions or felt anything. No one would ever think that Severus Snape was weak.

Now, as he stared at the tower roof, he saw that there were great holes in it. He wondered what part of the battle had happened here. He knew most of the fighting had been on the lower levels, but it seemed that the Astronomy tower had a knack for attracting attention during fights.

Severus gingerly eased out onto the roof, staying as close to the edge as he could. He began waving his wand and, bit by bit, the flooring of the roof began to repair itself. This task took him at least an hour, and Severus used his formidable mind powers to prevent any thoughts from entering his mind as he wove his way around the edge of the roof, repairing it from the edges and into the middle. Finally, he lowered his wand and assessed his work. The flooring seemed to look as it had before the battle. He carefully walked across it, testing it to make sure that the charms and transfiguring had done its job. He found that his work had been satisfactory.

Severus had been staring at the floor the entire time he had walked and tested it. He finally looked up to see that he was standing in the same place that Albus had been when he had killed him. Severus froze as the realization of where he was crashed over him. This was where the worst year of his life had started.

He looked down at the floor again and took his foot and traced a few of the tiles in the floor. This was where Severus Snape had become a monster. This was where his life had ended. Memories flashed through his head as he once again saw Albus Dumbledore pleading with him. Not pleading for mercy, but for Severus to kill him. In that one word that Dumbledore had uttered...please...Severus' entire life had crashed down around him.

He had not just heard the word 'Please', he had heard an entire monologue in his head.

Severus you must do this! You must hide yourself among the Death Eaters, it's the only way. Severus, kill me. It is the right thing to do. Never mind that you will be the most hated wizard in our world. Never mind that your friends will all turn their backs on you and treat you like a pariah. Never mind that you will spend endless hours locked up in your room and office, berating yourself for the evil that you have done. Never mind that your life will be over. Just do it!

Severus gasped as the memory flooded his senses. The shot of green light left his wand once again, coursing into Dumbledore's body. The old Wizard flailed. His eyes widened as death overtook him, and he fell backwards and over the battlement. Bile rose up in Severus' throat as he relived his friend's death once again... at his own hand. Revulsion filled him.

Severus crashed to his knees and put his head into his hands. He was still not over it. He would never be over it. This memory would haunt him for the rest of his life. He had killed his friend. Although he knew very well that Dumbledore was using him for his own devices, still, the man had cared somewhat for him. He had supported him when no one else had, and what was his payoff? A Killing Curse and an unfathomable drop to his death. It didn't matter that Albus had told him to do it. It didn't matter that the man was already dying. His life had been stolen from him before it had been his time.

While the war had been going on, Severus had been able to push all of this down into a little ball. He'd had many other things to occupy his thoughts. He had mourned some, but he had never let the real meaning of what he had done sink in. Now, it crashed over him like a tidal wave. Guilt, sorrow, and pain enveloped him. He had done the most heinous thing one man could do to another, and he had done it to someone he respected and had called a friend. How despicable could he be?

My soul... what about my soul? When he'd asked Albus about it, the older wizard had muttered something about it being a mercy killing. But it was a killing nonetheless. A cold-blooded killing. Even if my actual soul wasn't split or damaged, my psyche was shattered. His chest constricted within itself. He was filled with remorse. But the thing he felt the most was disgust...for himself and his actions.

Has there ever been a time in my life when I've done something good? Never. My actions only caused death and destruction. I have helped no one, saved no one. I've been nothing but a worthless pawn in this chess-game of a war. I am disgusting.

Wave after wave of guilt hit him. Severus put his hand up to his chest and clutched at his heart. He knew the organ was there, but he also knew that he had no heart. He was just a puppet who did what his masters had always told him. He was their marionette, dancing for them, lying for them, killing for them. He had never been his own man. Despicable, that's what he was. Disgusting and despicable... a worthless shell of a man who just existed to do other's bidding. A great groan escaped from Severus' mouth as tears streamed down his face.

"Why?" he screamed into the air. "Why didn't I just die in that blasted Shack? Why couldn't I have just been killed? That's the only thing I deserve!"

Severus gasped and tried to calm himself as tears continued down his face. His efforts were in vain. Finally, his tears lessened some, and his wild sobs stilled themselves. He fought for control. This outpouring of grief was uncalled for. Self-loathing filled him even more. *I cannot even keep control of my emotions. What kind of spy am I?*

Severus mentally quieted his raging emotions. He chanted, *Be still!* over and over again in his head. *I will not let my emotions dominate me! I will not lose control again! I am stronger than this! I fooled the Dark Lord. I am a master spy, not a weak coward. No, I must not go on like this. Anyone could come up here and see the mess I have turned into.*

It took great strength of will and quite a bit of time, but Severus finally became still. The tears that had been falling were wiped away before he stilled his shaking hands. Severus took great breaths and tried to quiet his racing heart. Staring at the floor, he used some calming techniques that had been part of his spy training for years. He finally felt the reserve that always shrouded him slip over his mind and body. He was himself again.

He slowly rose and left the tower roof. As he did, he let himself utter one more epithet. "A worthless thing like me deserves only death."

Slamming the door behind him, Severus Snape descended the stairs and retired to his room for the day.

A/N: Many thanks to my wonderful beta, Lilith Kayden.

For those of you who are wondering, our dear Hermione will be around in a couple of chapters. Bear with me. Once she arrives, she'll never leave! LOL

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 21

Severus hides from everyone.



Chapter 3

Severus didn't leave his rooms for an entire week. He took his meals in his quarters and secluded himself from the rest of the staff. That was why he wasn't surprised when a knock came at his door, and the Headmistress' voice sounded from behind it.

"Severus, open up. I must speak with you!" Minerva called through to him.

Severus sat in a winged-back chair in total darkness. In fact, he had been in darkness for the entire week. He could count on one hand the times he had lit a lamp to light his way during the past week. He was a creature of the dark and preferred surrounding himself with what he deserved.

"Go away, Minerva!" he called to her, hoping that it would be enough to send her away.

"Severus Snape, if you think I'm going to leave you to yourself when you've been holed up in that room for a week, you are sadly mistaken. Now open the door or I'll stand here all night until I've broken your wards."

Severus sneered at the door. He knew that when Minerva set her mind to something, it usually happened. He flicked his wand, and the door clicked and swung open. Minerva tentatively stepped into Severus' room.

"It's a bit dark in here, Severus. Do you mind if I give us some light?"

"Nothing I say will stop you from doing what you wish," Severus growled.

"That's true, but it is always polite to ask such things when in someone else's home. *Lumos.*" With a flick of her wand, two wall sconces came to life, showering the room in a low but somewhat cheerful light.

"Severus, you look horrid! When was the last time you bathed?"

Severus glared at her. It was his patented glare that sent most students running from him. But this was Minerva McGonagall. She was not so easily intimidated.

"Oh, don't you glower at me, young man. Do you think I haven't seen that look before? I believe I invented that scowl."

"What do you want, Minerva? For Merlin's sake, can't you leave me in peace?"

"Well, Severus, if I thought you *were* in peace, I would certainly leave you, but it is evident that you are not. You look like death, and you've been hiding in here for days. It's time to stop feeling sorry for yourself and live again."

"What do you know of it?" Severus snarled. "What gives you the right to tell me what to do? You lost that right when you accused me of being a monster, Minerva. Or did you forget that? What was it you said? Hogwarts deserves to be led by someone qualified, not by the monster that I am. That was it, wasn't it?"

Minerva stared at Severus with wide eyes.

"Or did you think I hadn't heard you?" he continued.

"Severus, I'm so sorry!" Minerva exclaimed.

"Save it!" he demanded. "Save your apologies and excuses for someone who cares, for someone who's worth the effort. You made it clear how you felt, Minerva. Now that I'm alive and proven to be trustworthy, why should your attitude change? I despise two-faced people, you know that. Now get out and leave me to my sulking. It's all a monster like me knows how to do."

"Severus, please..."

"Out!" he cried as he pointed to the door.

"I'm worried about you."

"Don't be. You never were before."

Minerva gave him a sad glance before she made her way back out of the room, closing the door quietly after her.

With a flick of his wand, Severus extinguished the lights and left himself in the dark again.

"Lily," Severus murmured as he pulled the red-headed witch into an embrace. "How I have longed to hold you like this."

Lily squeezed him tightly, but Severus felt no relief in her embrace. Why wasn't he reveling in her closeness? Why wasn't his heart racing, like it always had when he thought of this moment? She pulled back a little and kissed him passionately. He was finally getting what he had wanted for so long! He pushed into her and kissed her with equal passion, trying to convey his feelings for her. Unfortunately, his feelings weren't there. The kiss fell flat, and he felt empty. How could this be? He had longed for her for years, now he had her, and he felt nothing? What kind of hell was this?

He pulled away from Lily and gazed into her eyes. She stared back with love shining in them. He felt her sentiments were worthless. He felt that even though she was giving him the look he had longed to see, it didn't matter anymore.

Severus' eyes shot open, and he stared at the ceiling. Realization dawned on him as he told himself he had only been dreaming... but the dream had taken something from him. He no longer longed for Lily to be with him. How could that be? He had longed for her for all his life, how could he just stop longing?

He had loved her. He had sacrificed for her. Now, he felt that she had been removed from him, and was taking her rightful place as an old friend who had passed on years ago.

But I don't want that. I want to cling to her. I don't know how to do anything else! She was my lifeline! If I let her go, what will I do? She was the one who kept me warm at night with the thought of her embrace. She kept me feeling alive. If she disappears, what will I do? How will I survive?

"Lily!" he called into the night. Of course, there was no reply.

"Lily! Where are you?" He could no longer feel her presence.

His mind raced. What was different? Why was she deserting him?

The truth hit him hard. It had been the boy all along, not Lily. He had felt her presence because of the boy. His vow to protect him had brought Lily closer to him, and he had reveled in her imaginary presence as a buoy when life had become most difficult. Now, the boy... Potter... no longer needed his protection. He was safe. Potter was safe, so Lily's presence was no longer necessary. His connection was not needed; she was becoming what she should have become years ago... only a memory.

Sitting up, he urgently cried, "No! Lily, please... don't go!" He shouted it into the empty air. "I need you. I don't know what to do without you. Please, stay with me!" Severus cried out.

His delusional mind even conjured up a vision of his lost love. She smiled benevolently at him and waved as she slowly turned to smoke and disappeared. Severus sat up straighter in the bed and reached his hands out to the fading apparition.

"No! Come back! Lily... please!"

It was too late, her figure was gone. She was gone. He searched his inner being but found only fond memories of their time together and distant feelings of sadness at her death. The longing, the aching for her, and the guilt at what happened... they were all gone. He was empty.

He should feel free. He should feel as if a weight had been lifted from him. He should be happy.

He wasn't.

He had lived only for Lily for most of his life. Now, he had no one and nothing to live for. He was alone. The war had taken everything from him. He had lost his reputation, his friends, almost his life, and now, he had lost the only woman he would ever love. His worthless existence had now become bereft of meaning as well as worth.

Severus collapsed back onto the bed and curled into a ball. He pulled the covers over his head and buried himself as he shuddered. His heart filled with loneliness. *All those years loving a dead woman, for what? Abandonment. As in life, she was only looking out for herself. She was my friend until it became unpopular. She stood up for me until a prettier boy began to flirt with her. When my usefulness was over, she left me to the horror that was my destiny. Now, she's done it again. Without a need for me to watch over her son, she left me... alone.*

Instinctively, Severus knew he would never feel the closeness he'd felt for her for most of his life. *But I need that closeness. It's what has kept me going on for all these years. It's what has given me the strength to do the unthinkable. I don't know how to live without that strength. Without Lily's presence, I have nothing. I am nothing. How can I go on?*

Severus shuddered some more. He wrapped his arms around the knees which he'd pulled clear up to his chest. Bitter tears fell down his cheeks. The pain enveloped him. He let himself be drowned in it. The emptiness filled his soul.

Severus awoke the next day, bleary eyed and befuddled. What little sleep he had gotten had done nothing to ease his mind. He stumbled out of bed and went out into his lounge. He noticed a package wrapped in brown paper sitting on his desk. He wandered over and lifted the package, wondering what it might be. Tearing the paper, he found a golden frame. It had a black background in it, but that was all. Severus frowned at it. He feared what the frame would bring.

Walking over to the window, he pulled the drapes back and stared out of it. After inspecting Carrow's residence, he had created a window in his own room. Being in the dungeons, there really was nothing to look at but dirt, but a few charms had remedied that. Now, the window showed the same view of the lake as was seen in the Defense

residence. Up until now, he had kept the dark drapes drawn. He hadn't been in the mood for sunlight or happy scenery.

Now he gazed over the lake. It seemed peaceful. Looking back to the picture frame, he decided that prolonging the placement of the frame would do no good. He had a good idea as to whose portrait would be appearing in it. Glancing around the room, he decided that over the mantle would be a nice place to put the frame. Then, if he ever got the urge, the fireplace would not be far for him to have to go to throw the blasted thing into it.

He magically placed the frame onto the wall, centered over the fireplace, and stepped back to look at it. He flinched when a face appeared in it. An old, gray wizard smiled at him. Severus frowned.

"Albus, what is the meaning of this?"

"My boy, Minerva says you're not well. I wanted to have a chat with you. Knowing you would never come to me, I have chosen to make it possible for me to come to you."

"Perhaps I don't want to see you right now," Severus sneered.

"Nonsense! You wouldn't have put up the frame if that were the case. Sit, my boy, and tell me what is wrong with you."

Severus neither sat, nor spoke. Albus gave him a stern look. "You'll have to speak up, my boy. I'm willing to wait you out."

Severus snorted. "I have nothing to say to you!"

"Then simply tell me what's wrong."

"What's wrong? You want to know what's wrong? I'll tell you what's wrong," Severus snapped. "I am still alive!"

Albus gave Severus a fatherly look.

"Don't look at me like that, old man! You lost the privilege to look at me like that when you ordered me to kill you!"

"Severus, even though I'm dead, I still care for you."

"You were murdered at my hand! There is nothing more for the two of us to say to one another!"

"Ah, that's where you're wrong, Severus, my boy. Who has known you better than me over the years? Talk to me. Maybe I can help."

"Yes, like you always help," he spat. "By placing me in some dangerous situation where everyone suspects me of being nefarious and evil. I don't need help from the likes of you!"

"Severus, I'm sorry about that. We both did what had to be done. It was the only way."

Severus took a few steps until he was nose to nose with the picture. "There are always other options, Albus. You just ignored them. You risked lives with no thought of the person you were sending to the slaughter."

"And yet, you care for me nonetheless. Why is that, Severus?"

Severus shrank back. He was unsure of what to say to Dumbledore. The old man was right. Despite all the nastiness that had surrounded their relationship over the years, Severus still cared for the man. He'd cared enough to be devastated at having to kill him. He'd cared enough to miss the old coot when he was gone, even though they'd had many a conversation in the Headmaster's office. Severus, however, had always kept a distance between the two of them. As a dead man, their relationship had turned to nothing but Order business, and Severus was happier that way.

"Severus... you are hurting. You have not confided in me for a long while. I have missed our talks. Let me make up a little bit of what I put you through by hearing you out."

"No!"

"Severus..."

"There is nothing you can do, old man, so quit trying to meddle in my life! I am alive, which I shouldn't be, and I am learning to cope with that. I was so obsessed with living through the war that I gave no thought as to how my life would be if I survived! I wish that I were dead, but there's not much I can do about that. So, I will exist, being monitored for treachery by the Ministry. I will go from day to day and do what is expected of me. You will stay out of my affairs. Is that clear?"

Dumbledore sighed. "I just want to help, son."

"I am not your son. If I were, I wouldn't be the most hated wizard in all of Europe."

"You're blowing this out of proportion, Severus. Many feel you are a hero for what you've done."

"Misguided sots...the lot of them."

"Don't give up on life yet, Severus. There may still be something worth living for."

"Yes, there is... a lobotomy, so I don't have to deal with optimists like you all the time."

Albus chuckled. "I can always count on you to have a snappy comeback, even when you're miserable, Severus."

Severus narrowed his eyes. "When, exactly, have I not been miserable?"

Albus became serious once again. "Very well, I'll leave you to your wallowing. Call to me if you would like to chat. I'm pretty free nowadays."

"Goodbye, Albus," Severus said curtly and retired to his bedroom, slamming the door behind him.

A/N: Thanks to Lilith Kayden for looking this over.

It seems that Severus has a bit of a way to go. Thanks for tuning in.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 21

Severus continues in his depressive ways.



Chapter 4

Minerva stared grimly at the Headmaster's portrait.

"Albus, I'm not sure what I can do," she said in defeat.

"Minerva, he's hiding in the dungeons. Make him come out. I doubt he'll accept any other help, but you, as the Headmistress, can order him to meals at least."

Minerva sighed heavily. "That I can do, Albus. I'm just not sure that it will do any good."

"You have to try something. He needs to start living again."

"Who am I to tell him to live when I was so horrid to him? He has every right to want to ostracize himself from me and from the entire faculty. We all treated him like a pariah." Minerva's eyes narrowed at Dumbledore. "Why didn't you tell me anything, Albus? You were terribly cruel to let him suffer alone like that."

Albus looked over at the window, trying to avoid Minerva's glare. "It had to be that way."

Minerva harrumphed. "It only had to be that way because that's the way you wanted it! Come on, Albus. You could have told at least one person. One person could have helped Severus carry the burden of being thought of as a murderer by everyone else. You made him do that horrible deed and then you gave him no opportunity for solace whatsoever."

"In war, there is little room for solace," Albus murmured softly.

Minerva's eyebrows shot so far up her head that it appeared they might just fly off the top of it. "Any solace one can find in the throes of war is a welcome respite. You left your spy and friend desolate. You should be ashamed, Albus!"

"I am. I regret that his intense depression is mostly my fault." His eyes shot up to Minerva's. "But, Minerva, if I had to do it all again, I would change nothing. The war is over because of the sacrifices of that man. It surely is worth the outcome, even if he had to suffer a little bit."

Minerva stood and stormed to the painting. "Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, how could you excuse yourself like that? You have destroyed a man, and for what? So that a war could end, yes, but I believe that the end does not justify the means! He is a human being with feelings. You have crushed his spirit! I just hope that what is left within him is salvageable. I hope that he can see something worthwhile to live for. If not, my friend, you will have much to answer for!"

Minerva straightened up and stormed out of the office and up to her room. She sat down at her desk and glared out the window. The goal markers of the Quidditch pitch shone brilliantly in the sunlight. Huffing, she turned her attention to her desk, picked up a quill, and began to tap it impatiently. At long last, she grabbed a parchment and began to write furiously. When she finished, she placed the parchment on the leg of her owl and told it to find Severus Snape. In a flash, the bird was gone, leaving a worried Headmistress, arms folded, staring into space, obsessing about her Defense teacher and friend.

Severus sneered at the parchment as he read it. She had no right to order him around! He would take his meals wherever he pleased.

Professor Snape,

New policy states that all faculty members must be present in the Great Hall for both breakfast and dinner every day, without exception. Your lunch hour is yours to do with as you please. Any absences must be approved ahead of time, and unexcused absences will result in suspension of your position. I must reiterate to you that the Ministry's decree about your freedom is contingent on you being employed with this school. I will see you this evening.

Minerva McGonagall

Headmistress

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Severus grimaced in anger and ripped the note to shreds. She had him, and she knew it. The old bat was just as meddlesome as her predecessor. Fine, he would go to meals in the Great Hall. That didn't mean he had to be nice about it, or to speak to anyone. He would make Minerva wish she had never ordered him to show his face.

Severus stormed into the Great Hall, his robes billowing wildly behind him. Minerva glanced his way at his tumultuous entrance and swore she saw a dark black cloud billowing over his head. She sighed inwardly. At least he had shown up. That was a first step.

She watched him as he stalked over to his seat, pulled out his chair roughly, and threw himself into it. He grabbed a bowl of mashed potatoes and violently threw some onto his plate. He then stabbed a piece of roast beef and plopped it down next to the potatoes. Grabbing the gravy boat, he doused the entire plate in brown gravy before smashing the boat down so hard it almost shattered. Gravy sloshed over the edges as he glowered at the bowl, willing it to be still by his mere presence. After sneering at the boat for a moment, he violently grabbed his fork and began to eat.

Minerva glanced around at her staff. Everyone was eyeing Severus in shock. His entrance and noisy preparing of his plate had startled everyone, especially since he hadn't been seen at all for some time.

Severus ignored everyone and shoveled food into his mouth. He ate heartily, which pleased Minerva. She was glad to see that at least he wasn't starving himself. Within five minutes, his plate was empty. He stood abruptly, almost knocking his chair over as he did. He turned to Minerva and bowed low as he flourished his hand at her.

Straightening up, he stalked out of the hall just as dramatically as he had entered. Minerva watched him go and knew that he would act this way for the foreseeable future. She just wished he could climb out of his anger and depression soon. She was terribly afraid for him.

Severus entered his room and slammed the door behind him. His chest burned within him.

"Oh, how I hate them," he uttered as he threw himself into the wing-backed chair that faced his fireplace. His hands clenched into fists, and his breath came out in quick bursts.

He had gone to dinner to prove a point, and that had been accomplished. Unfortunately, he hadn't considered how he would feel as he ignored everyone and everything around him. Upon sitting at the table, loneliness had washed over him. He hadn't glanced around, but he could feel all of their eyes boring into him. No one had even attempted to speak with him.

"What did I expect?" he asked himself. "I came in like a freight train and looked at no one."

Nonetheless, he felt slighted. Perhaps there had been a smidgen of hope in the back of his mind that someone would attempt to be friendly. Why they should was uncertain to him. After the previous year, he shouldn't expect any such niceties from the lot of them.

The previous year... how horrible *that* had been. He had entered the school as the new Headmaster but had received none of the respect that position usually garnered. The Carrows had treated him as a co-conspirator, but never as a leader. The rest of the faculty had turned their backs on him. When he'd requested they do something, they'd snapped their answers at him. They had glared at him during meals, but luckily had never disrespected him in front of the students. The worst, however, was during faculty meetings. Their hatred toward him knew no bounds, and on the few occasions when the Carrows were not present at their meetings, they all had dropped comments about his being a murderer.

Severus stormed into the staff room, cape billowing behind him.

"Where are Alecto and Amycus?" he asked.

"They're probably torturing some children," Flitwick murmured.

"What was that, Professor Flitwick?" Severus demanded.

Flitwick raised his head and looked Severus straight in the eyes. "I said they're probably torturing children. Of course, compared to you and your past actions, they seem like angels."

Severus narrowed his eyes at Flitwick, but let the remark pass.

Severus had kept up appearances, but at night when he was alone in his room, he would mourn the loss of the few people who had treated him with respect in his life. Minerva's reactions had been the hardest for him to take, for she had been the most supportive of him, even when he'd been a student. During the past year, however, she'd hardly even spoken to him, and when she had, her tone had been filled with an ugly tinge that sent waves of sadness through Severus' entire being.

He'd known he couldn't let her know the truth, but he would have liked just one person to have known it. If only she could have not glared at him with hatred in her eyes, his months as Headmaster might have been a little easier to live through. But... that wasn't to be, and he hadn't been able to tell her the truth, so he'd endured her hatred and everyone else's as he'd continued down his path, hoping that the madman who called himself his master would be defeated.

When he'd walked down the hall...something he tried not to do often...he'd receive glares not just from the students, but from fellow faculty members as well. Each day had been a struggle for him as he had never felt so solitary or so ostracized in his entire life; most of the school year he had spent hiding away in his office.

Nothing has changed. They all still hate me. No one can forgive what I've done.

The pain that had been in his chest intensified as Severus clutched his hand to it to try and still it. *Will I ever find peace?* he thought. *Unlikely. Turmoil is only what someone like me deserves.*

Severus continued to berate himself until he could stand it no more. Exasperated, he rose from his chair and retired to his bedroom. Downing a Dreamless Sleep potion, he soon found himself asleep in total blackness, nothing penetrating his weary mind.

Two weeks had gone by and nothing much had changed. Severus stayed in his room except for meals. He would storm into the Great Hall, gulp down his food, and storm out as soon as humanly possible. A few brave souls had tried to talk with him, but his angry glower had kept them from trying too many times. Severus Snape got exactly what he wanted... to be left alone.

Even Minerva seemed to give up. She didn't even look up anymore when he burst into the hall, nor when he stalked out of it. She didn't know what more to do, nor what to say to the man she had misjudged so unjustly.

Standing outside of his quarters, she debated knocking. Her Gryffindor bravery won out, and she was soon rapping upon his door.

"Enter!" he bellowed, and Minerva pushed the door open, finding Severus seated in front of the fire. He looked pale and miserable.

"Severus," she called to him. He didn't look at her.

"May I sit down?" she asked.

"Do as you wish," he replied with an indifferent wave of his hand.

She pulled another wing-backed chair opposite his and sat down. She looked into Severus' face. It showed no emotion.

"Severus, please. I'm sorry for everything. What can I do to repair our friendship?"

Severus gave her an empty stare. "I'm not sure there's anything left to repair," he said in a hollow voice.

"Well, surely..."

"No, Minerva," he answered softly. "How am I to know if what you say to me is because you care? Am I not just your latest project?"

"Severus, you have never been a *project!*"

"Do you have some reason to be here that has to do with the school or teaching?" Severus asked tersely.

"I just came to see how you were. I wondered if we could share a spot of tea?"

"No, we can't. I am all out of tea."

"Maybe something else?"

"Goodbye, Minerva."

"Severus, please, can't we put this behind us?"

Severus got to the edge of his seat. "Put this behind us, Minerva? Is that what you want to do? I should just forget all of the horrid things you said to me, and you should just forget that I killed your best friend?" Severus' eyes narrowed. "Just how do we do that, Minerva? How do you forget my wand striking down Albus? How do I forget that you called me a pathetic waste of a wizard?"

Minerva blinked. "Severus, I don't know. But I was mistaken. You yourself said that I was supposed to suspect you... that I needed to think you were horrible."

"Of course that was what you were to think! But that doesn't mean that it made me swell with pride when you said I wasn't fit to run the Leaky Cauldron, let alone a school. No!" Severus rose and began to pace. "You expect me to forget everything that went on for the past year between us and pretend that it never happened? Well, I can't do that. How am I to trust anything you say to me?"

"Severus," Minerva cried as she stood. "I'm worried about you! You hole up in this room all day, coming out for a total of maybe fifteen minutes."

Severus stopped pacing and stalked up to Minerva. He was mere inches from her face. "Why should I spend any more time out of this room? No one wants to associate with me... a Death Eater and murderer!"

Minerva stood ramrod straight. "You're wrong, Severus. None of us see you like that."

Severus' eyes narrowed. "I find that hard to believe."

"Well, it's the truth. The sooner you stop feeling sorry for yourself, maybe you'd recognize it!"

Severus sneered at Minerva. His voice was low but menacing when he finally spoke. "Get out."

"Severus... please!"

"I said get out."

Minerva looked at Severus sadly. "I'm sorry again. You have every right to feel that the world has cheated you, for that is what we've done."

"Out!"

"Please, Severus. Please find it in your heart to forgive us."

"Why?"

"Because we care about you."

Severus snarled. "If you cared about me, I believe I would have seen it before now!"

"Severus, we thought..."

"I know what you thought. You were very quick to think it, weren't you?" Once again he began to pace. "How hard was it for you to believe that I was evil? Hmm? Did you stay awake at night wondering how I could have turned so quickly? Or did you simply tell yourself that you weren't surprised at all?"

"Severus..." Minerva looked at him sympathetically. "I didn't sleep for weeks! I wondered what we could have done to make you hate us all so. I'd trusted you, and you had betrayed that trust. At least, that's how I saw it in the beginning. How could I have known? The evidence... all of it... pointed to your defection. I spent many an evening crying because I thought you were lost to us."

Severus straightened and gave Minerva an incredulous look. "How am I supposed to believe that? You were merciless when I was Headmaster."

Minerva cringed. "I know it. By then, I had accepted what I thought was the truth." She stiffened. "Severus, what would you have done? You were the enemy. You had once been a good friend. I can't tell you how betrayed I felt. I mourned your loss in my own way, but whenever I saw you... I just wanted to strike back and hurt you like you hurt me. Like you hurt all of us."

Severus gave a quick nod, frowning intensely. "That is why this friendship cannot be salvaged. There is nothing left to salvage. My actions have destroyed any trust you may have had in me prior to the murder."

"Severus, you did what you had to do! I spoke with Albus. He was wrong. He would never admit it, but he was wrong. I should have known. I could have helped."

"How? By telling me what a martyr I was?" Severus' hands clenched. "Do you think that's what I wanted to hear? Do you think I wanted that kind of pity? I did not! Now leave me in peace!"

"I could have listened! I could have helped in some way. I don't know how. Having to deal with this all on your own was unconscionable on Albus' part. The man thinks of no one but himself."

"He won, didn't he?" Severus said in defeat. He turned and stalked to the fireplace. Setting his arms on the mantle, he rested his head down on them and stared at the flames.

"The end does not justify the means. He was wrong. Because of that, you have suffered needlessly."

"It's all I deserve," Severus muttered.

"What did you say?"

"Forget it."

"Severus, you deserve a lot more than that."

"Just go, Minerva. Leave me in peace."

Minerva closed the distance between them. Her hand came up and grasped Severus' shoulder. He flinched under her touch, but did not move away.

Minerva's voice was thick with emotion. "You deserve so much more," she whispered.

Severus finally shrugged her hand off his shoulder.

"I am here for you, Severus," Minerva said with a little more power in her voice. "Please, forgive me. Come by if you need to talk."

Severus didn't turn. Minerva slowly made her way out of the room. Closing the door behind her, she leaned on it for support. Heaving a great sigh, her head fell back against the door.

If only there were something more I could do for him. But he must work this through himself. I only hope he can get to that point.

Frowning to herself, she straightened and headed back to her room. She knew she'd have a hard time sleeping tonight.

Severus didn't move for a long time. His eyes stared at the flames as they flickered and snapped. Usually, he felt calmed by them. Today it seemed that they mocked him.

Lost opportunities. His life was filled with them. Grimacing, he turned from the fire and stalked into the bedroom. He flung himself on the bed, turned, and stared at the ceiling.

"Lily..." His eyes closed in regret. "I made so many mistakes with you. Would anything have been different if I hadn't called you that horrible word?"

He glanced at his forearm and traced the spot where the Dark Mark had been emblazoned. "The biggest mistake I ever made," he muttered. "What would life have brought had I not been hypnotized by the Dark Lord and his power? How happy would I be now if I had never fallen for his charismatic demeanor and his indulgent plan?"

He shook his head. "What's done is done." He traced his finger along his arm slowly. "I have suffered endlessly because of this!" His fingertips dug into his skin until they left marks. The Dark Mark had disappeared since the death of Voldemort. When Severus had first noticed, he'd stared at his arm for what seemed like hours, tracing the skin where the mark had been. Now, he wished he could just cut his arm off so he would have no reminder of his previous life.

"That was no life. It was servitude. The consequences of which have left me alone and broken."

Severus stopped torturing his arm and placed it behind him and under his head. He frowned as he thought of Minerva. The trust that he'd had for her was gone. He didn't know what her motives were for coming down here today, but it couldn't have been for friendship. She was just doing what she felt was her job. She was only trying to make peace with the help.

Things would never be the same between them. She would always hate him, no matter what she said. He would always be the killer on the faculty. *I'm stuck. I cannot escape my past because I cannot escape this school. The others will never truly accept me. Shackbolt has created the best punishment available. I am doomed to be surrounded by those who hate me with no means of escape for five years. I am stuck.*

A/N: Great thanks to Lilith Kayden for her beta work.

Poor Severus, he needs help fast. Wait, what's that in the distance? That little speck of a person walking towards Hogwarts, who is it? Why, it's Hermione! She's coming! She'll be here in the next chapter! But what can a little know-it-all do when everyone else has failed so miserably? Bwahahahahaha! You'll see!

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 21

Hermione arrives and readjusts to Hogwarts life.



Chapter 5

Hermione Granger breathed in the summer air and felt the breeze on her face. Her hair blew behind her as she walked along the pathway from Hogsmeade towards Hogwarts. She had purposely decided to walk to the school from the train station instead of Apparating. She wanted to take in everything slowly.

She was approaching the school now. The lake shimmered in the distance, and the turrets of the castle stood proudly against the deep blue sky. Her eyes took in the sight, marveling at the beautiful stone building that stood in front of her. The walls that had been destroyed were back in place, the windows gleamed anew. The castle had been reborn.

Her pace quickened as she neared the gates. She was eager to begin her new life. Hermione Granger was the new Transfiguration teacher. All the arrangements had been made, and she was reporting a month early for on-the-job training. Her stomach fluttered as she thought of her new position. She had thought about a career in teaching but had thought it would come later in her career. She had been pleasantly surprised to find the offer for a position so soon after the war. Disbelief and inadequacy had filled her mind when she had first been offered the job, but Minerva had assured her that by the time her training month was over, she would be more than ready to take on classes. The trepidation had turned to excitement with Minerva's assurances. After debating the offer for a few days, she'd happily sent Minerva an owl accepting the position.

Hermione smiled at Mr. Filch, who was waiting at the gates to give her access to the castle. He nodded to her but said nothing as he unlocked the gates and swung them open.

"Mr. Filch, thank you. How are things in the castle now? Are most of the repairs finished?"

"Yes, Professor. It took a long time to get everything as it was, but you wouldn't be able to tell there ever was any damage now."

Hermione smiled at him. "That's wonderful. It was so hard to see the castle so broken. I'm glad it's back to itself again."

Filch nodded and led her up the pathway. He didn't say anything more as Hermione followed along silently with her hands folded behind her back. Mr. Filch held the door open for her and told her to proceed to the Headmistress' office. Hermione thanked him, turned to the stairway, and went up. She marveled at the school. Filch was right. If she hadn't been at the battle, she would have never known what damage had happened within these hallowed halls. She smiled to herself as she ascended the stairs.

Hermione knocked on the Headmistress' door. She had found the staircase open, probably awaiting her arrival.

"Come in," Minerva called from within.

Hermione opened the door and entered the office. She smiled brightly at Minerva.

"Headmistress, it's good to see you again."

Minerva frowned at Hermione. "You can call me Minerva now, Hermione."

Hermione paused and then grinned. "I'm not sure if I can get used to that. I'm so used to correcting Harry and Ron when they spoke of their teachers without calling them professor. It's pretty ingrained in my head."

Minerva motioned for Hermione to take a seat. "You'll get used to it, probably a lot faster than you'd think." She gave Hermione a benevolent smile.

Hermione returned her smile and nodded.

"How are Harry and Ron, by the way?" Minerva asked.

Hermione gave a wry chuckle. "They are themselves. They've totally immersed themselves in Auror training. It's actually taken the forefront of most conversations, replacing Quidditch. I'm sure they'll start up on Quidditch again once the season begins. But, really, I think they're happy."

"Did they give you a hard time about taking this position? They wanted you to be an Auror with them, didn't they?"

Hermione nodded. "They did. At first, they tried to talk me out of it. I think after a few conversations, they realized I'd be much happier in an academic setting. I've had my fill of bad guys and fighting."

"Well, Hermione, tell them they are welcome here any time."

Hermione smiled broadly. "Thank you, Min... Minerva. I will."

"Do you have your things with you?" Minerva asked.

Hermione patted her pocket. "They're all in here," she explained.

"Good. I'll show you where your rooms are later. Did you look over the course description I sent to you?"

"Yes, the younger classes should be no problem. I am a bit nervous about teaching students who are only a year or two younger than I, however."

"Don't worry. You will be fine. The teacher's robes will give you an air of authority. You might enjoy the experience. I'm sure you will be able to connect with the students in the way an older faculty member could never do."

"I suppose you're right."

"How is your Animagus training coming?"

Hermione sighed. "I'm having a bit of trouble."

"Hermione, you don't have to be an Animagus to teach Transfiguration, you know."

"I know... Minerva. It's just that your transformation was such a wonderful display of what could be done by someone accomplished in the art of Transfiguration. I think there will be something lacking if I begin my classes without it."

"Pish posh, Hermione. It is five minutes of an entire year. You could come up with something equally dazzling with a bit of thought."

Hermione looked determinately at McGonagall. "I want to do this, Minerva. I'm not used to failing."

Minerva leaned back in her chair and folded her arms in front of her. "How far have you come?" she asked Hermione.

"I've read the book you sent and done some research of my own. I've practiced the spell over and over again, but it doesn't work on me."

"Have you thought about the animal that you think you might become?"

Hermione gave Minerva a quizzical look. "Neither of the books said that I was to ponder that. I just thought that I would automatically transform into what I was supposed to be with the spell."

"Well, technically, when you're ready, that's what will happen. Sometimes, though, it helps to examine your personality and try to figure out what sort of animal you might become. Doing that type of research and pondering helps you to know your psyche better, thus preparing you for the eventual transformation."

"Can you help me, Headmistress?"

Minerva nodded to Hermione. "Yes. Let's give you a chance to get settled in. We'll meet tomorrow. Today, once you're unpacked, decide what animals might fit into your personality. Study the behavior of the animals and look at as many pictures of them that you can find. The better you can imagine the creatures, the easier it will be to take form."

"Thank you, Minerva. I'll do that."

"All right. This next month, we'll go over teaching techniques, syllabus, record keeping, and the most important thing... keeping order in the classroom. I know that as a recent student, you will need a bit of guidance in that regard."

"Thank you. I appreciate your help. I'm a bit stymied as to how to do that."

"We'll have you ready for the students when the time comes. Fear not. If you don't have any questions, we'll head to your room."

Hermione rose. "I'm ready."

Minerva got up too and smiled at her new employee. "Let's go."

Hermione fell in love with her room the minute she saw it. The sitting area was filled with Victorian furniture in whites and reds. The bedroom, also a Victorian décor, had a beautiful canopy bed and a white dresser with a place to sit to prepare for the day. The best part of the room, by far, however, was the bathroom. Even the prefect's bathroom couldn't rival the one that was now hers. The tub resembled a small pool. There was a separate shower built into the side wall, and on the other wall there was a set of sinks divided by a marble countertop. Hermione planned to soak herself in that beautiful tub that very evening.

Right now, thought, she needed to think about her Animagus study. Reaching into her pocket, she pulled out her things. She placed them on the table and enlarged a backpack. Rifling through it, she pulled out a notebook and quill. She settled herself on the sofa and began to scribble notes. She listed all of the animals she thought might suit her personality.

She started with an otter, as that was her Patronus. She pondered and jotted down some other animals. Soon she had a bit of a list. Looking it over, she found that she had listed quite a few birds. Given her intense dislike of flying, she thought that to be odd. During all of her preparations and study, she had never imagined that she might turn into some sort of bird. Maybe that was the reason she had been so unsuccessful. She rose from the couch and decided to take her study to the library.

"Minerva, I think I'm supposed to be some sort of bird!" Hermione exclaimed to the Headmistress the next day. The two women were in the Transfiguration classroom, seated at one of the tables. Minerva had just asked how Hermione's studies had gone the night before.

"How did you come to that conclusion?" Minerva asked.

"Well, I made a list of animals and noticed there were quite a few birds listed. Then I researched birds in the library. It seems a good fit to me."

"Did you have any feelings as you studied?"

Hermione thought. "Just that I was on the right track."

Minerva nodded. "That's a good sign. Sometimes our subconscious helps when we are searching these things out."

"When can we get started?" Hermione asked.

"Right now, if you'd like."

The women rose and moved to the front of the classroom, where there was more space.

"What I'd like you to do," Minerva directed, "is concentrate on birds. Don't think of just one, picture all the ones you looked at yesterday. When you feel the urge, say the spell."

Hermione nodded. She pictured a myriad of birds in her mind, each one flashing across her brain in an instant. She saw sparrows, hawks, eagles, vultures, chickens, ostriches, and many others. As they flashed through her mind, her chest began to tighten. Suddenly, she felt compelled to chant the spell.

"*Novo bestia!*" she cried.

In a flash, Hermione felt much smaller. Her eyesight was incredibly defined, and she saw a beak protruding from her face. She turned her head to either side and spread her arms wide. Instead of arms, she had wings. It had worked!

Minerva clapped her hands. "Oh, Hermione, you did it! You are a beautiful falcon!"

Minerva transfigured a piece of parchment into a mirror and held it up for Hermione to see. Instead of her usual reflection, a grey bird with a red head looked back at her. Hermione cocked her head to the side in a very birdlike manner as she looked herself over. Her chest was white with horizontal stripes of dark grey covering it. She hopped around so that she could see her back better and saw her darker grey wings which also had the darker lined pattern on them. Her tail feathers were almost black. Her eyes were intelligent, and her stance was quite regal.

"Well, don't just sit there gawking at yourself!" Minerva chided. "Fly!"

Hermione looked up at the Headmistress. She wasn't sure what to do. Shouldn't this be instinctive? She spread her wings out and flapped them slowly. Nothing happened.

"Hermione, you must think like a bird," Minerva coached.

How does one think like a bird? She hadn't the slightest idea. Finally, she just pictured herself soaring through the air. The usual hysteria that accompanied her thoughts of flying wasn't there. Instead, excitement filled her. She was almost bursting with joy! Without even thinking, she felt herself lift off, and then she was in the air. *Freedom, sheer freedom.* Hermione circled the room several times, then flew toward the ceiling and did a loop. The air rushed past her beak and flowed over her wings. She could do anything!

"Come back down now, Hermione," Minerva instructed.

Dismay filled Hermione as she set back down onto the table nearest Minerva.

"Now the hard part," Minerva explained. "Turning back. Now that you've transformed, you will be able to do the spell silently. All you need do is think the spell, and you should transform back to yourself."

Hermione frowned within, but did as her instructor directed. In an instant, she was Hermione again... diminished.

"Minerva, that was indescribable!" she cried as she hopped down from the table.

"It is quite an interesting sensation, isn't it, Hermione."

Hermione nodded enthusiastically.

"Well, our work is done. I suggest you practice transforming on your own. Spend some time as a bird and get used to the feeling. Feel free to fly about the castle. Get used to your new body."

"Oh, thank you for your help, Minerva! I don't think I would have been able to do it without your guidance."

Minerva smiled at Hermione. "I'm glad I could help."

Hermione ran out of the room and transformed mid-stride. She soared down the hall and to the stairwell. Situating herself in between the stairs, she plummeted to the ground floor and swooped along to the front doors of the school. She landed at the doors and gazed upon them. *How can I get outside with the doors closed?* She tilted her

head and eyed the doors. She didn't need to ponder long, as Mr. Filch burst in at that moment and stared at her incredulously. Hermione bobbed her head up and down twice, and took off, leaving a puzzled caretaker shouting after her.

Ignoring the voice, she soared towards the sky. Up, up, she went and then leveled out as she came towards the Astronomy Tower's peak. She flew straight from there and soon found herself over the lake. She looked down into it. The water was so clear from up here. She could see shapes darting here and there in the water. She spied a fish swimming near the surface, and her instincts took over. Swooping down, she had the fish in her mouth in lightning speed.

I just caught a fish... in my beak! That's disgusting! She dropped the fish and watched it fall down back into the lake. She flapped her wings and headed over the Forbidden Forest. The treetops hid most of what was below, but Hermione enjoyed her flight and took in what she could see. Circling back, she made her way back to the lake. Her keen eyesight helped her to see a dark shape sitting on the edge of the lake, near the Forest. She lowered her altitude to get a closer look. It was a person... a man... dressed all in black. *It must be Professor Snape*, she thought as she got closer to the man. He was seated by the lake, looking out over it. His knees were bent, and his arms were wrapped around him. He seemed deep in thought.

Hermione landed right next to him and cocked her head. She screeched at him, and he glanced over at her.

"I've never seen you around here," he mumbled.

She screeched in short bursts at him again. Severus arched an eyebrow. He extended his arm, and she hopped onto it. He examined her, turning his arm this way and that so he could get a good look at her.

"You are quite a beautiful bird," he told her.

Hermione beamed at him, although he couldn't tell because she was a bird, of course. Instead, she spread her wings out at him.

"And you know it too, don't you?" He took his other hand and scratched Hermione's head. Hermione leaned into his hand as it massaged her neck.

"What brings you here?"

Hermione tilted her head again but said nothing.

"Ah, it must be a secret. Well, I am here to get away from there." Severus pointed back at the castle. "Horrid place, that. It's filled with people who scowl at me and think I'm evil. I'm not, you know. People just think that."

Hermione's eyes widened. Her heart panged within her. Her only desire was to convince Severus Snape that he was wrong. Wrong about how they felt about him. Wrong about the other's reactions. But she knew it would be a hard sell. If she had done all he had during the war, she would probably be a touch paranoid about other's feelings towards her too.

She stared at Severus, wondering what she could do, especially since she was just a bird right now.

"They try to tell me that all is forgotten," he continued as he turned his head to gaze out at the lake. "They lie. What I have done will never be forgotten, nor forgiven. It was too much."

Hermione moved her clawed feet carefully, so that she could get nearer to Severus' head. She bent low and nudged his cheek with the top of her head. He pulled back, startled. His eyes narrowed at the bird.

"Why did you do that?"

Hermione screeched again and butted his cheek. She pulled back and spread her wings at him. She knew he wouldn't understand, but she had to try to make him feel better about himself.

Severus deflated in front of her. He looked down at the ground for a while before looking back to the bird on his arm.

"You know, I wish I could believe them when they say they care for me. Do you know what I've been doing for the past month? Avoiding everyone. The less I see of them, the happier I am. They don't want to see me, and I don't want to see them. I'm just a burden here... forced to continue in a profession I despise because of the orders of the Ministry. It's demeaning and degrading. And they say all is forgotten." His head snapped away from hers. "If all were forgotten, I would be far from here and not under the thumb of the Ministry."

Hermione butted Severus' cheek a few more times until Severus' hand came up and rubbed the bird's neck.

"You should be off. I'm too depressing for such a beautiful specimen as you." He pointed to the air. "You should be up there, soaring high, enjoying yourself. Go... leave me to my misery."

Hermione's heart filled with sympathy for the dour man. She butted his cheek once more, before she took flight. She soared into the air and circled his head twice, before flying off, leaving the man to his depressing thoughts.

Hermione found an open window in the castle and soared through it. She transformed as she landed, her feet touching the ground lightly. She wiped at the tears that instantly had formed in her eyes and then let out a bark of a laugh. *Crying for Snape, how strange is that?*

Looking around, she realized she had entered the castle a floor above her quarters. Heading for the stairway, she quickened her pace. She needed to be alone. Racing down the stairs, she hurried to her room. Without a glance around her, she dashed up to the door, gave the password, and entered, slamming the door behind her. Leaning up against it, she sighed and caught her breath.

His voice had sounded so defeated. His eyes had lost their fight. His body was dejected. He was a broken man. The one human being who should be celebrating the most was a torn shell of a man. It wasn't fair. He had given the most, suffered the most. He should be peacefully enjoying life, not hiding from everyone, hoping to be forgotten.

Hermione wandered over to the couch and settled down into it. She rubbed her arms. They were aching after all of that flying. Images of her Potions professor flooded her mind. *Severus Snape scowling at her, calling her a know-it-all. The pride in his voice when he had thought he had captured Sirius Black and would receive the Order of Merlin. Snape dueling with Gilderoy Lockhart and sending him flying through the air.* The man was proud. Proud of himself and his accomplishments. At least he had been.

It's filled with people who scowl at me and think I'm evil. I'm not, you know. People just think that.

She had thought that. After Dumbledore's death, her esteem for Severus Snape had diminished to nothing. He was a murderer after all. When the truth had come out, she had examined her feelings. There had been a nagging doubt in her after Snape had killed Dumbledore, but she had just assumed it was the shock of what he had done. With the truth of his actions out in the open, she saw her doubt for what it had truly been. Her conscience telling her that there was more to the story. She had not been truly surprised by Harry's sharing of Snape's memories. Part of the story seemed to reinforce the doubt she had felt about his guilt.

Then she had felt her own guilt. She had assumed the worst about Severus Snape just like everyone else had. She had fallen into the 'Harry trap' of believing that he was no good. She'd not done that since her first year when she had set Snape's robes aflame.

So, while Snape lay in a coma, she'd fought for him. She was always right next to Harry when he plead before the Ministry. She'd helped to get all charges dropped against him.

Forced to continue in a profession I despise because of the orders of the Ministry.

Harry and she had been unaware of that caveat in the verdict. Had they known, they would have fought it viciously. The Wizarding world should be worshiping Severus Snape, not putting sanctions on his movement.

Hermione huffed in exasperation. *The man needs time to recover, but he's been thrown in with the very people who have hated him for so long. No wonder he's despondent. But how can he find himself again?*

A/N: Thanks to Lilith Kayden for her beta work and help when my computer drowned.

Thanks to all of you for reading and reviewing.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 21

Severus and Hermione have a chat.



Chapter 6

Severus rapped on the door of the Headmistress' office and entered without waiting.

"You wished to see me, Headmistress?"

"Yes, Severus, please have a seat."

Severus sat in the seat placed in front of Minerva's desk. He sat rigidly, awaiting whatever it was Minerva had to say to him.

"I would like you to consider taking the Deputy Headmaster position, Severus."

Severus scoffed. "What does the Ministry say about that?" His tone was bitter and a sneer had suddenly come across his face.

"I don't care what the Ministry says about it, Severus. This is my school, and I will appoint whomever I see fit in whichever position I desire."

Severus softened slightly at her defiant declaration. Sitting back, he put his hand up to his face and rubbed his finger against his mouth. Minerva waited silently for Severus to work through his thoughts.

"You trust me in this position?" he asked finally.

"Absolutely."

More silence and thinking ensued.

"There will be no restrictions on my position from either you or the Ministry?"

"None whatsoever!" Minerva replied adamantly.

Severus continued to trace his lips with his finger. Suddenly, he sat forward. "All right, I'll do it."

Minerva smiled at him. Severus almost believed it was genuine.

"Wonderful," she said. "There is one order of business we need to discuss immediately. The rest can wait until tomorrow."

Severus' eyebrow rose curiously.

"I have appointed Hermione Granger as my replacement in Transfiguration. She arrived yesterday and is acclimating to life at the school. I will take care of her training if you would be sure to see that she understands the rules and regulations of the school."

Severus' eyes had grown wide at the announcement of Minerva's appointment. "Isn't Miss Granger a bit young to be taking on such a position? She hasn't even finished her training here."

"The field work that Weasley, Potter, and she have done has given them all enough credits to have passed the seventh year. She took the few weeks before arriving to study for her Transfiguration NEWT and passed it with an 'O' last week. She is fully accredited and qualified for this position."

"She's only a couple years older than most of the entering seventh-years," Severus chided. "Surely that will be a challenge for her."

"Of course it will be, Severus. She is aware of that and will be fine. I didn't call you to debate my decision. I want you to train her in anything she needs to know outside of her immediate professorial duties, which I will handle."

"Very well," Severus said as he rose to leave.

"Severus?"

"Yes, Minerva?"

"You seem to be a little more at peace with yourself. I'm happy for that."

Severus harrumphed at her and stalked out of the room. *Blast it all! I thought I would be free from memories of Potter, being that he is off to Auror school to become the World's Greatest Auror. So much for peace and quiet. With Granger here, I'll have a constant reminder of Potter, his perfection, and his blasted mother, who has deserted my thoughts as of late.*

The emptiness that Lily's abandonment had left in his life was a gaping wound. Her constant presence, which he'd felt throughout most of his life, was now gone. A gaping hole sat in its place. Even she had deserted him. Emptiness filled his soul. He pushed it away. He had things to do. He needed to instruct Granger on conduct befitting a professor at Hogwarts. Rolling his eyes, he heaved a huge sigh. She had probably read all about it already.

Severus made his way to Granger's quarters. He knocked lightly and tapped his foot while awaiting her answer. He didn't have to wait long. The door opened, and Hermione looked up at him.

"Oh, Professor Snape, it's good to see you."

Severus frowned. "You must be delusional, Granger, if you think it's good to see me!"

Hermione opened her mouth to say something, but then shut it again. She stared at Severus for a moment before inviting him in. Severus stalked past her and into the room. He turned to gaze at her, with his arms folded in front of him.

"Minerva has asked me to go over the rules of being a professor here at Hogwarts."

Hermione's eyebrows rose. "Oh! Well, please, have a seat." She motioned to the couch.

She settled herself and waited for Severus to do the same.

He looked tentatively at the place next to Hermione and then decided to seat himself in the chair facing the couch instead. He thought he saw a smirk flit across the know-it-all's face as he sat down and made himself comfortable.

"I assume you've read everything you can about being a Hogwarts employee?"

Hermione gave him a quick nod.

"Then perhaps you can tell me what kind of conduct is expected of you."

Hermione tilted her head. "Contact with the students is to be on a professional level only. Mentoring is acceptable, but close friendships with students are discouraged. Relationships with students are strictly forbidden and can be grounds for dismissal. Punishments of unruly students will consist of points taken and detentions. No spells are to be placed on students as punishments." Hermione stopped for a moment and scrunched her eyes up as she thought. "Grading policies are to be fair and equal among houses. If a faculty member has a social life, it is to be kept private. Have I forgotten anything, Professor Snape?"

Severus gritted his teeth. "As we are *colleagues* now, Professor, you may address me as Severus."

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "Then I suppose you may address me as Hermione."

"You forgot, Hermione, that breakfast and dinner is required to be taken in the Great Hall daily."

"Oh, yes. That just seemed like an obvious one."

"They're all obvious if you want to take that route."

Hermione smiled at him. He scowled back.

"How are you feeling, Severus? Have your injuries healed fully?"

Severus' hand went absently to his neck. "I am recovered."

"I'm glad." Hermione stared at him for a minute. "I'm sorry we didn't do more for you in the Shrieking Shack. We thought you had died. Between your apparent demise and all that was on Harry's mind at the time, we didn't really think to check to see if you were still alive. I've regretted that ever since the battle."

Severus scowled. "I did not come here to speak of the past. I came here to ensure that your training is completed."

"Of course," Hermione responded. "I just felt the need to apologize. I'm glad you survived."

Severus scoffed. "Surely, Professor Granger, you don't think that I believe that? I know that you hate me. You probably did a dance when you thought I had passed on."

Hermione gazed at Severus levelly. "I never hated you, Severus. Part of me actually felt sad at the thought of your death. Despite thinking that you were a murderer at the time, I was saddened to see your loss. You are brilliant, and your contributions to our world would be sorely missed if you had truly perished."

"Enough of your hogwash, Professor Granger."

"Hermione."

"... Hermione then."

"It's not hogwash, Severus. It was extremely upsetting to see you lying there, apparently dead. I'm glad we were wrong and that you survived."

Severus glared at the carpet. He was uncomfortable speaking of his death. He preferred to forget the snake attack, but his nightmares never let him. He certainly didn't want to rehash the incident during his waking hours, and the last person he would want to be chatting to about the attack was Hermione Granger.

"I see that I'm making you uncomfortable," Hermione continued finally. "I won't bring it up again. I would, however, like to thank you for all you've done for us. You're an incredibly brave man, Severus, and everyone finally knows it. I know we would have lost the cause were it not for you and all you've done."

"Granger, I am not in the mood for your hero worship."

Hermione smirked. "Hero worship is a bit of an extreme description. I am thankful for all you've done, though."

Severus stared at her. She didn't shrink or grimace from his gaze, she simply gazed back. What was she up to? He had been the most hated teacher at the school and had treated her as if she were a pariah, yet she had the audacity to thank him for it?

"You are grateful that I insulted you at every turn?" he retorted with a snort.

Hermione tilted her head and regarded Severus thoughtfully. "I can't say that I enjoyed any of that, to be truthful. Do you really find me unbearable, Severus, or was that part of your undercover charm?"

It was Severus' turn to smirk. "That, Hermione, is my secret."

Hermione's mouth tightened and she regarded Severus. "I was hoping, Severus," she said tentatively, "that we could be amicable towards each other. Maybe even become friends."

Severus scoffed. "Why would you want a friend in me?"

Hermione looked to the ground. "I respect you. I would like to prove to you that I'm more than just a book-spouting know-it-all, as you like to call me."

"You do hold grudges, Hermione. I don't believe I have given you that name since you were quite young."

"Actions speak louder than words, Severus."

A raised eyebrow was her only answer.

"Is there more I need to know about my position?"

The next half hour was spent in going over the duties that were expected of Hermione, including rounds rotations and staff meeting attendance. Finally, Severus sat back, his arms folded in front of him, regarding her expectantly.

"You might find that the students have little respect for a professor so close to their age, Hermione."

Hermione folded her arms as well. "I've thought of that. I'm not quite sure what to do about it though. You began here when you were quite young, didn't you? How did you handle it?"

"I was a few years older than you are now." Severus got a faraway look in his eyes. Snapping out of it, he continued. "In any case, you must be strict and unyielding. Tell the students your expectations from the first moment the class begins. Do not try to be their friend. You can be less stern as term goes on, but you must show them that you are capable of keeping order and teaching them what is necessary."

Hermione nodded her head. "That makes sense. I will strive to do that."

"You will either do it, or you won't. If you don't succeed, your first year here will be a disaster."

Severus rose to leave. Hermione stood also. She hurried over to Severus and reached out for his arm. Her hand grasped it, forcing Severus to turn stop.

"Severus?"

He turned and gazed at her hand on his arm before looking up into her eyes.

"You're not alone. You have friends. Please let us in."

Severus frowned and pulled his arm from her grasp. "You know not of which you speak!" he growled.

Glaring at her, he swung around and stalked from the room without a backward glance.

That went well, Hermione thought as she watched the door slam behind him. On reflection, most of the meeting *had* gone well, she had just messed it up with her declaration at the end. He was obviously not ready to receive sympathy or comfort from the likes of her. She should have realized that before she opened her rather large mouth. *I'm constantly trying to fix everything, whether it wants to be fixed or not.*

Going up to the door, she placed her hand on it. "Severus Snape, you deserve to feel better about yourself. You may not appreciate my interference now, but I won't rest until you stop berating yourself and quit feeling unworthy. I'll just have to do it differently." She looked away thoughtfully. "Perhaps my falcon form can help in this."

She had been about to tell Severus that she'd been the falcon on his arm earlier that day, but when she'd looked at him to tell him, something had stopped her. The encounter with her bird-form had seemed to cheer him somewhat, but with the knowledge that he had exposed himself to one of his colleagues, she knew he would be enraged. Any peace he had felt from her appearance would be lost. In that instant, she'd decided to keep her other identity a secret.

Her stomach had done a small twist when she had decided that, but she'd chosen to ignore it. She'd rather be on good terms with Severus than have to deal with his wrath and possibly see him withdraw within himself even more. She wasn't one for keeping secrets, but she felt he would benefit more from her unassuming presence as the falcon than from the truth at this time. Maybe she would tell him later on. Much later on.

Hermione shook her head and turned from the door. She hoped her intense need to help wouldn't backfire on her. She'd been down this road before with less than stellar results. She couldn't help herself, though. She hated to see people miserable, and Severus Snape, of all people, did not deserve to feel such awful feelings about himself and those who cared for him. He deserved much more than that, and Hermione was bound and determined to help him get to a point where he was happy with himself and his lot in life.

A/N: Thanks to Lilith Kayden for her beta work. Thanks to you for reading.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 21

Severus stalks the grounds with his bird-brained friend.



Chapter 7

Severus Snape walked along the edge of the lake, his head down, not observing anything around him. His venture outside the day before had lifted his spirits somewhat, so he'd decided to repeat the endeavor again today. *Maybe this is what I need... some distance from the castle and everyone in it. Maybe it's time for me to venture out into the world too. I should take a trip to Hogsmeade. A wave of trepidation settled in his stomach. Not yet ready for that.*

He looked up to see a Thestral flying elegantly in the distance. It was a blatant reminder of everything he had seen and done in his life. The Thestrals had been visible to him from an early age. He was not proud of that fact.

The Thestral moved gracefully along as it flew through the air. He watched as it lowered its frighteningly elegant body and began to circle Dumbledore's grave. Severus grimaced. That was a place he'd been avoiding since recovering from his battle wounds. His eyes raked over the glittering white tomb that lay in the distance. A dagger seemed to pierce his heart. *Merlin, will this guilt and pain ever subside? There he lies, yet I still walk the earth. There's something definitely wrong in the justice in that.*

He felt something alight on his shoulder. He was so engrossed in his thoughts that his entire body jerked as sharp claws softly settled into place, lightly enough to not hurt him in the least. He stopped in his tracks, and his head snapped to the left. Perched there was the falcon from yesterday. He scowled at it.

"Do you mind? You can't just come up to someone and scare the daylights out of them by landing on their shoulder. You could have announced your presence!"

The bird spread its wings and took off, circling his head once while calling to him with shrill caws, then landed once again on his shoulder.

Severus smirked. "That's better," he informed the bird. "Now what can I do for you?"

The bird screeched.

"Ah, I don't understand you," Severus confided as he continued his walk by the lake.

The bird screeched again and tapped his cheek with her head.

Severus automatically snaked his arm around the bird and rubbed its neck. "You're an affectionate one, aren't you? I told you, you don't want to hang around me. I'm depressing."

Another tap to his cheek. Severus extended his arm out in front of him, and the bird hopped onto it. She cocked her head at Severus.

"You must like depressing things. Is that it?"

The bird bobbed its head up and down, causing Severus to laugh out loud. "And you understand me, how?"

Another screech emitted from the bird.

"Do you have a name, oh, feathered friend?"

The bird bobbed its head again.

"I suppose I'll never know what it is. I'll have to give you a name."

Another bobbing of the head.

Severus looked over the bird. "How about Pigeon?"

The bird's chest puffed out in indignation.

"Okay, not that one then. What about... Percy?"

Hermione screeched and spread her wings. Severus' eyes opened wide at her display.

"Are you a girl, then?"

She bobbed her head.

"Ah, then Percy is totally inappropriate."

Another head bob.

"Janice?"

The bird puffed her chest.

Severus studied the bird. "You're a difficult one, aren't you? How about... Red?" he asked as he regarded her red head.

The bird cocked its head to the left, apparently thinking. Then she hopped up Severus' arm and butted his cheek with her head. Severus laughed and pet her neck.

"Red it is, then."

He grasped the bird and settled her on his shoulder and continued his walk. The two were silent for some time until Severus spied Hagrid meandering toward him. He sighed heavily.

"Professor Snape! It's good to see yeh out and about. Are yeh feelin' well?"

Severus rolled his eyes. "I am fine, Hagrid." The heaving sigh through his words was quite audible.

"Who's yer friend?" Hagrid asked as he pointed to the falcon on Severus' shoulder.

"I haven't the slightest idea. She appeared yesterday and again today. For some reason she likes my company."

Hagrid got close to the bird and looked her over. "She's a beautiful falcon, Professor. I've never seen her around here. She mus' be a newcomer. Have yeh named her yet?"

Severus' cheeks turned slightly pink. "She's agreed to be called 'Red'," he informed the groundskeeper.

Hagrid put a giant hand forward, motioning for the bird to hop onto it. She did, and he pulled her close to his face.

"You're a smart one, aren't yeh? You've got intelligent eyes, you do."

Hermione bobbed her head up and down, which elicited a smile from Hagrid. "I've never seen anything like it, Professor. It's like she understands me!"

"Yes, I have found the same curious characteristic in her. I must be off, Hagrid, I have much to do."

Hagrid put his hand closer to Severus' shoulder, and Red jumped back to her original place. Hagrid said goodbye and was soon lumbering off to his hut. Severus watched him go before turning to return to his walk.

"His simple mind seems to have forgiven me for my past transgressions."

A furious peck at Severus' head sent his arms flailing in defense.

"Hey, what was that for?"

Red flapped her wings and landed on the ground. She looked up at Severus and screeched repeatedly at him. Severus stared down at the creature, trying to understand what the bird was so upset about. If only Legilimency worked on animals!

"You are upset because I called Hagrid simple?" he asked incredulously after the onslaught of screeches had stopped.

Red bobbed her head.

"You like him?"

Another bobbing of the head. Severus regarded the bird thoughtfully.

"I meant nothing by it. Simply that Hagrid accepts things more readily than most because he doesn't think things to death."

The bird looked at him skeptically.

"I'm serious. Hagrid has a certain innocence about him. At times it can be taxing, but he is a loyal friend because of it. I meant no disrespect by my comment. I am actually quite surprised that he treats me as nicely as he does after all I've done."

Red seemed to forgive him and flew back to his shoulder. She settled in as he once again resumed walking.

"You're a bit touchy, aren't you?"

She pecked him lightly in the head again.

"If you continue to do that, I will be forced to ask you to leave."

She screeched.

"Are you always this argumentative?"

The bird bobbed her head up and down vigorously, eliciting a smirk from Severus.

Severus was quiet for a while as they continued their walk. His depressing thoughts from seeing Dumbledore's tomb slowly dissipated. The farther away he got from that tomb, the lighter his mood became. His guilt was put away for now. He knew it wouldn't stay away forever, but it was no small relief to feel it shrink to a manageable size and finally be pushed aside.

After walking quite a ways from the castle, he decided to sit on the grass by the shore and stare out at the water. The lake was like glass as there was no wind today. The mountains in the distance reflected in the pool of the lake, shining purple. He stared at them for a while, not noticing that Red had dismounted from his shoulder and was now standing beside him. The bird was watching him carefully, but didn't screech or move to touch him.

"I think this is the calmest I've felt in years," Severus mumbled. "When I'm in the castle, I'm filled with remorse. Before the end of the war, I was constantly on edge, expecting the worst. Just sitting here looking out on the lake feels almost cathartic."

He turned and looked at the bird. "Since the war ended, I've felt empty. Even the woman who had given me comfort for all those years seems to have disappeared."

Hermione hopped onto Severus' crossed leg. She butted her head against Severus' torso.

"Oh, yes, I've got you. But you will fly off eventually, and a bird can hardly be considered a friend."

The next head butt was a bit harder. Severus looked down at the bird. "Disagreeable twit. Fine, you're my friend. Unfortunately, it's impossible to have a two way

conversation with you."

The bird cocked her head at Severus.

"Well, yes, I suppose we are having a conversation, but it's mostly in my head."

"Screech!"

Severus scratched at the bird's neck. "I know, you understand. That still doesn't mean that I have any people-friends."

"Screech!"

"Oh, what do you know of it? You're not there. You don't see the glares I get. Why just yesterday..." Severus stopped. Nothing had happened yesterday. No one had given him nasty looks.

"The other day..." No, no one had done so then either.

"It's just that..." No one had glared at him for weeks. In his angry, reclusive state he had just assumed that they had.

"Forget it. It doesn't matter whether they glare at me or not. How can they think anything but horrible thoughts about me?"

Red flew from Severus' leg and landed in front of him again. She bent her body low and spread her wings. She screeched and screeched at him. It was as if she was chastising him.

"And just who would think anything nice about the Bat-of-the-Dungeons?"

Red burst into the air and flew off. Severus stared after her, sad that his only friend had at long last, gotten fed up and deserted him. It was typical, really. He watched as she disappeared into the forest.

Hermione transformed in a clearing and began to pace. What could she do to convince this man that people cared about him? How could she help him to make that emptiness go away? She did the only thing she could think of at the moment.

"*Accio* Hogwarts picture."

After a few minutes she was holding a picture of the faculty in her hands. It had been taken at the beginning of her sixth-year. She had the picture stuffed in her journal. She hoped that she could convey her meaning to him with that picture. Looking down at it, she noticed that Severus was glowering as usual in the picture. He glared at her and then turned his head in disgust. Minerva was standing beside him. She swatted at him, but was smiling. Dumbledore was in the center, twinkling, if it was possible. He raised himself up on the balls of his feet and settled himself down again, smiling all the while.

The picture would have to do. It had everyone who was still teaching at Hogwarts. She shrunk back to her falcon form, took the picture in her beak, and flew back to Severus.

Severus stared at the sky where Red had disappeared. The emptiness that threatened to consume him only got deeper somehow. He couldn't even keep the company of a bird for long before it left in disgust.

Glaring at the sky where Red had disappeared, he got to his feet. *I don't need that stupid know-it-all bird! I don't need anyone or anything.* He began stalking back to the castle. As he stomped along, he looked up and noticed Red circling around his head. He stopped in his tracks as the bird alighted once again on his shoulder. Some of his anger dissipated at the bird's return. His eyebrows narrowed as he noticed the picture in the bird's beak. He grasped it and pulled it from her.

"Where did you find this?" he asked as he glanced at the picture. It was an old faculty picture from when Dumbledore was alive.

Red flew off his shoulder and over to the grass. She sat down in it and awaited Severus. He stared at the bird in puzzlement. Slowly, he left the path and sat down next to the bird.

"Screech!"

"What is it you're trying to say?"

She hopped over to the picture and tapped it with her beak. He gazed down at it again.

"These are my colleagues."

She screeched again.

"What?"

Her beak touched the photo. It pointed to McGonagall.

"That's Minerva McGonagall."

Red hopped onto his shoulder and butted his cheek.

"What about her?"

She butted his cheek again.

"Are you saying that she's my friend?"

Red bobbed her head up and down.

Severus' eyes narrowed. "She was the worst of them all! We had been friends. Rather close, in fact." He jabbed his finger at Dumbledore. "I was forced to kill this man, however, and when that happened, her friendship turned to hatred."

"Screech!"

Severus sighed. "She will never trust me again, no matter what she says." He fingered the picture of McGonagall as she smiled over at Albus. "I killed her best friend. It doesn't matter the reason. You don't get over that. What friendship we had was destroyed that night."

The bird kept butting his cheek. Severus looked at her. "I suppose you think differently? Well, you weren't there. You have no idea what I've done."

Red looked at Severus with a cocked head. Then she hopped down into his lap and settled down in the hole that his crossed legs made. She laid her head on his leg. Severus stared at the bird for a long while, not sure what to make of her. How could a mere bird be so alert and knowledgeable? There was something different about her. What could it be?

Perhaps he was assessing too many human emotions to the bird. Much of what had happened could easily be explained away. But the picture... and McGonagall, the one person he'd been agonizing over the most.

"Are you someone's familiar?" he asked the bird as he stroked her down her back.

"Screech."

"You're not being very forthcoming. How do you know all that you do?"

"Screech."

"Sorry, I'm not fluent in Falconese. Could you be a bit more direct?"

"Screech."

"Fine, don't tell me. I do wish I knew who you belonged to. I don't think they'd appreciate you having stolen this picture. It seems to be in good condition." He handed it back to the bird, who snatched it up in her beak. "Yes, you'd best return this before your thievery is discovered. Go on, off with you... I don't have all day to coddle you in my lap."

The bird stood, dropped the picture, and turned so she could gaze into Severus' eyes. She took her head and rubbed it against Severus' chin.

"You don't care what I've done, do you, Red? You seem to like me anyway." He smiled at her then, and patted her head. She rubbed his cheek once more before scooping up the picture again and extending her wings. She hopped backwards and out of Severus' lap. In an instant, she had taken off and was soaring in the sky again. Severus watched her disappear into the distance.

Hermione had taken the roundabout way back to the castle, circling around in the Forbidden Forest and then making a beeline for the castle so as not to be spotted by Severus. She had left her window conveniently open, so she could just return there from her adventure. She appeared in her room and landed on her bed. In a second, Hermione was herself again. She spit the picture out of her mouth, lay down, and grabbed the extra pillow next to hers. Hugging it to herself, she curled into a ball and pondered what had happened.

She was being too obvious. He would figure out that she was an Animagus if she continued showing him photos and other people-things. She couldn't help herself, though. It just came out of nowhere, this desire to make things right with Severus Snape.

When he spoke so despairingly, she wanted to transform and envelop him in a hug. Her heart had gone out to him. She didn't know how to convince him that Minerva held no ill will toward him. How do you convince someone of that when they're bound and determined to believe otherwise? How do you show someone what they're worth when they see nothing good in themselves? Tears began to flow from Hermione's eyes, over her nose, and into her pillow. A ball of tension filled her insides. Hopelessness washed over her. There was nothing she could do. He just needed time.

It wasn't a bird that Severus Snape needed. He needed a friend. He needed someone he felt he could trust. She would make herself that person. Her insides clenched. She would need to be stalwart and not let him get to her. She could do this.

Wiping the tears from her eyes, Hermione sat up. A determined look came across her face. She would not fail. She would help Severus whether he wanted it or not.

A/N: Ah, she's in deep now, isn't she? Thank you for reading, everyone!

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 21

Hermione takes some lessons from Minerva.



Chapter 8

Minerva and Hermione stood in the Transfiguration classroom. Minerva waved her wand and conjured a goblet out of thin air.

"Now, Hermione, please explain to me how to perform this spell as if I were a student."

Hermione thought for a moment. This was one of the harder abilities mastered in Transfiguration. She would need to be able to teach it to her N.E.W.T. level students. After gathering her thoughts, she began to explain the theory behind the spell.

"When one is about to conjure an object, there must be a distinct picture in one's mind of what is to be conjured." She glanced up at Minerva. "It's sort of like Animagus transformation!" she rambled excitedly.

Minerva smiled and nodded. She motioned for Hermione to continue her lesson.

"Once the object is fixed in the mind, you should do the wand motions. Make sure that these are well memorized. It should feel like second nature to do these movements, not something that you have to think about every second."

Minerva nodded again.

Hermione extended her wand. "The movements are thus: Raise your wand about two inches, swirl it twice in a clockwise circular pattern, keeping the circles small and tight, and then flick the wand towards the area where you want the object to appear. The incantation is pronounced *Inanimatus Conjurus*. It can be cast verbally or silently. As we move along with Conjuring Spells, we will learn certain spells that pertain to the conjuring of specific items, such as Aguamenti to conjure water."

Hermione lowered her wand and looked expectantly at McGonagall.

Minerva smiled. "That was well explained, Hermione. However, you forgot one important aspect of teaching."

Hermione looked at Minerva in puzzlement. "What did I forget, Minerva?"

"You must have me practice the spell, Hermione!"

Hermione giggled. "But... you just cast the spell, Minerva. I thought it would be silly to have you practice something you could do in your sleep."

"Pish-posh, Hermione. You are the teacher right now. I am the student. Teach me as if I were learning this task for the first time."

Hermione blushed. "Very well." She paused and extended her wand again. "All right, Miss McGonagall, please extend your wand. We will practice the movements only."

Minerva extended her wand. Hermione showed her once what to do, and then asked her to mimic her movements. Minerva purposefully made some errors, which Hermione was quick to correct. Soon the two were swishing and flicking in unison.

"All right, Miss McGonagall," Hermione continued, barely suppressing a giggle. "Let's try the incantation without the wand motions. Repeat after me... *Inanimatus Conjurus*."

Minerva repeated the spell, but butchered the pronunciation. Hermione laughed.

"Never laugh at your students' attempts, Hermione," Minerva chided.

"Oh, but... I was..." Hermione frowned. "You're right. This is a teaching moment, and I need to take it seriously. Sorry, Headmistress."

Minerva gave Hermione a small smile. "I know you were joking because we are colleagues, Hermione. I have, however, heard worse pronunciations, and it truly is hard not to laugh at times like that. You should be careful not to hurt the feelings of your students."

Hermione nodded.

"Continue, Hermione."

"That wasn't bad, Miss McGonagall, except the stress is on the 'ah' of *Inanimatus*. Also, the second 'i' is pronounced more like an 'e,' and it's 'conjooroos,' not conjaras. Please repeat it again... *Inanimatus Conjurus*."

"*Inanimatas Conjurus*."

"Good, you fixed what I asked, but there was one other mistake. If we're not precise in our incantations, things could go very wrong in our spell work. The correct pronunciation of the first word is 'Inaneematoos'. Try that with me slowly. Innnannneeemmattoos. Good, now try it by yourself, spoken at regular speed."

"*Inanimatus*."

"Excellent, Miss McGonagall. Let's combine the incantation with the wand movements, but don't cast the spell just yet."

They practiced together several times over.

"Good. Now let's try the spell. Before casting, picture the goblet in your mind. See every facet of it. Is it gold? Silver? Does it have any decorations on it? See those in your mind." She looked over at McGonagall. "Do you have it in your mind?" she asked.

Minerva nodded.

"All right. Go ahead and cast the spell."

Minerva did so, and a golden goblet appeared on the table, identical to the one she'd conjured before. She lowered her wand and looked at Hermione.

"You really explain things well, Hermione. You will be a wonderful instructor."

"Thank you, Minerva. I appreciate your help."

"That's probably enough practice for today. I'll see you again tomorrow."

"Minerva, may I ask you something?"

"Of course, dear."

"Would it be all right if I went to Hogsmeade during the dinner hour?"

"You know the rules, Hermione. You need to be present at that meal."

"I know, but what if I brought someone along... another faculty member? Maybe someone who really needs to get out and pull himself out of the deep depression he's fallen into... Would that be acceptable?"

Minerva regarded Hermione sagely. "He really doesn't want anyone's company, Hermione, but if you can convince him to accompany you, I think it would be wonderful. He truly needs something to lift his spirits."

Hermione smiled. "He does. I hope he accepts my invitation."

"I wish you luck. You'll need it!"

Hermione nodded and thanked the Headmistress. Soon she was out of the classroom and on her way to seek out a certain dour wizard's company.

Hermione knocked on Severus' door. No one answered. She knocked again. No answer.

"Severus... I need your help," she called through the door.

Waiting... It wasn't her strong point. Finally, the door swung open, and the raised eyebrow of Severus Snape greeted her.

"Oh good, you're home."

"You expected me to be somewhere else?" Severus drawled.

"Well, I know you're a busy man."

"Yes, I am. Perhaps you could tell me what it is you want instead of yammering at me about nothing."

Hermione shifted her weight back and forth on her feet. "Could I ask a favor of you?"

Severus scowled. "Hermione, I'm not sure who you think I am, but I'm not one to dole out favors."

"Would you accompany me to Hogsmeade for dinner?"

Severus' eyes nearly popped out of his head. "I beg your pardon?"

"Dinner, Severus, at Hogsmeade. Would you like to join me?"

"How is this a favor to you?"

She shifted nervously again. "I'm going stir crazy, and I've only been here a couple of days. I asked Minerva if I could go into Hogsmeade for dinner, and she quoted that silly rule about being at meals. The only way she'll let me go is if I go with someone else."

"So, you are asking me to go with you?" Severus said incredulously.

"Yes."

"You realize I'm not good company?"

Hermione laughed. "Perhaps as part of the favor you're doing for me, you could try to be decent company?"

Severus scowled. "Why me? I'm sure Hagrid is available."

Hermione shrugged. "I suppose I'm a glutton for punishment."

"First you ask a favor of me, and then you insult me. Are you drunk?"

"I don't drink, Severus. Please, just come. You've been cooped up in this castle far longer than I have. I thought you might enjoy getting away just as much as I would."

Something flitted across Severus' face. Hermione, if she had to describe it, would say it looked like trepidation. Within an instant his face was the emotionless mask that it usually was.

"Very well, but you owe me, Professor Granger!" he told her as his finger pointed into her face.

Hermione grinned broadly. "Let me just Floo Minerva and tell her we'll both be absent for dinner. May I use your fireplace?"

"You are awfully demanding, aren't you?"

Hermione gave him an innocent look. "I asked politely. Thank you."

She brushed past him and was soon talking to Minerva. The older witch seemed pleased and gave them her blessing immediately. After telling Minerva good-bye, Hermione pulled her head out of the fireplace and turned to Severus.

"Everything is set. When do you want to go?" she asked him.

Without a word, Severus walked past her and over to a coat rack. He pulled a traveling cloak off it and placed it over his shoulders. Tying it securely around his neck, he turned back to Hermione.

"I am ready now."

They walked silently into Hogsmeade. Severus skulked along, his head down. Hermione glanced at him occasionally, but couldn't think of anything to say. It seemed to take forever to get to the tiny town. The closer they got, the more agitated Severus seemed to become. He lifted his head and glared at anyone who passed by. He seemed to look startled as the townsfolk hurried by with nary a glance in his direction.

Hermione wondered at his behavior. "They won't bite, you know," she said finally.

Severus' head snapped around so he could glare at her. "What are you talking about?"

"The people walking by. You look at them as if they are going to attack you. To be honest with you, I don't think most people even notice what's going on around them. And if they did, they certainly wouldn't be mean to you."

"Granger, your bleeding-heart belief in the goodness of all people is heartwarming, but I am fully aware of what people think of me."

Hermione frowned, but decided to let the matter drop. They continued to walk along silently. Suddenly, they were approached by a woman. Her hand grabbed Hermione's.

"Hermione Granger!" the woman exclaimed. "And Severus Snape! Oh, my. I can't thank you both enough for everything you did to defeat You-Know-Who," she gushed as she shook Hermione's hand furiously. She turned to Severus and grabbed his hand, almost dislocating it with the fervor of her handshake.

Severus glared down at the offensive hand, then his scowl softened. He looked up into the woman's eyes.

"To think, that madman almost killed you after all you secretly did for us!"

Severus' eyes widened in amazement. The woman continued pumping his hand up and down until she gazed down and looked slightly startled.

"Oh, I wish there were something we could do for the two of you to show our thanks!" she continued, rambling on and on about how wonderful the two of them were.

"Really, we just did what we thought was best." Hermione countered, trying to dismiss the woman politely. She could tell Severus was very flustered by the whole affair. "Thank you, though. You don't know how much it means to hear you say what you did."

The woman blushed and laughed a little. "I have to apologize, Mr. Snape," she said, turning to Severus. "We all thought you were a cold-blooded murderer! Oh, that Dumbledore! He could really fool anyone, couldn't he?"

Hermione smiled tightly and nodded. "Really, ma'am, we must get going."

"Oh! Of course!" the woman cried with a wave of her hand. "I'll let you get on your way. Thank you again! We are all indebted to the both of you."

With that, she sauntered off down the street, leaving Severus practically gaping after her as Hermione carefully studied his reaction.

"I hate to say I told you so, but..." Hermione began.

Severus whipped around, his finger pointing at her. "Don't say a word!"

Hermione laughed and began walking again. In a few seconds, Severus came up alongside her, his head down once again.

"You do realize that most of our world feels the same about you? Once the truth came out, people began to see who you really are."

Severus stopped and turned to her. "And who am I? I am not some superhero! I did what was necessary. I did it, as you now well know, for Lily."

"Yes, of course. Simply for Lily." She looked up at Severus and met his eyes. "You know, I understand you loved her and that she was a motivating factor in what you did, but I honestly have a hard time believing that it was all for her and her alone."

Severus' eyes narrowed at her. "What if it was?"

She shook her head. "I just don't believe that. Severus, you went through too much for this all to have been some penance for a misspoken word in your youth."

"You seem to have forgotten that I killed her."

She gave a wry chuckle at that. "Voldemort killed her. You just reported what you heard."

"Which, without hearing, he'd have never gone after her."

Hermione shook her head again. "Severus, they were Order members. Anything could have happened to them. Your discovery of the prophecy probably just sped things along. Now, would you like to tell me why else you fought against Voldemort so faithfully?"

Severus glared at her. She glared right back, daring him to back off. Surprisingly, he did. "Once I realized just how demented the Dark Lord was, I set out to keep that madman from destroying our freedoms," he said softly.

Hermione gave a quick nod. "Thank you for being truthful," she told him as she turned and headed for the Three Broomsticks. It took a little longer for Severus to catch up with her this time, but he did. She smiled to herself as they made their way down the street and entered the pub. They made their way to a table and soon had two mugs of butterbeer in front of them.

Hermione looked up at Severus. Trying to smooth out the tension from their previous conversation, she took a sip of butterbeer and began to speak.

"You know," she mused, "I would have thought you'd have gotten yourself as far away from teaching as possible."

Severus scoffed. "Yes, well, if I had my way, I would never set foot into Hogwarts again. However, the terms of my hearing forbid me from leaving my position."

Hermione pretended to be unaware of the situation. "You're kidding me. After all you've done, Severus, why can't they just leave you alone?"

Severus leaned closer to Hermione. "Because I am an untrustworthy, ruthless, ex-Death Eater," he spat. "I will never be looked upon with any regard. I am forced to bow to the Ministry's demands or suffer the consequences."

Hermione folded her arms in front of her and huffed. Just then, Rosmerta came by and asked what they would like to eat. They ordered quickly and continued their conversation.

"Can't anything be done?" Hermione asked plaintively.

Severus relaxed and sat back. He was surprised that Hermione seemed to even care whether or not he was trapped in a job he hated. He stared at her for a while before answering. She gazed back, seemingly unaffected by his silence or his glaring.

"I believe everything that can be done has already been tried. I am stuck at Hogwarts for five years. At the end of that term, I will supposedly be able to do whatever I wish, but I wouldn't doubt that some other stipulation will keep me from truly being free."

Hermione looked angry. "That's simply not fair. You, of all people, deserve the Ministry's praise, not their disdain."

Severus stared at her in disbelief. If there were someone who he'd thought would support him, Hermione Granger was certainly not that person. Yet she was seemingly outraged at his plight. Not only that, she'd seen through him to know it wasn't just the love of an unattainable woman that had kept him going in the war effort. He wondered if perhaps he'd underestimated the woman. Maybe he'd grouped her in with her cohorts a bit too quickly.

His thoughts were interrupted by her speaking again. "If you'd like, I can speak to Kingsley for you," Hermione suggested.

Severus scowled. "That won't be necessary." The last thing he needed was help from her!

Hermione looked at him for a long while and then gave him a quick nod. "All right. Whatever you feel is best."

Their food arrived, and they tucked in. The table was silent again as they ate quietly. The silence, however, was not awkward, as it had been on their walk. It was just the quiet of two people eating together and being at ease in each other's company.

The meal had ended, and the couple had returned to Hogwarts. Hermione now sat alone in her room, staring into the fire. The evening had been quite pleasant. She found that even though Severus had been quiet at first, he hadn't been in a depressed mood. He just seemed to not know what to say to her.

Now that they had spent some time together, she found that Severus Snape was quite interesting. They had found things to talk about, and she had found him to be incredibly well-read on a series of topics. Instinctively she knew that if they wanted to, they would be able to chat for hours, never tiring of new subjects. That made her smile. It was quite nice to find someone as well-versed in everything. Her knowledge and ability to make intelligent conversation with him made her feel more of an equal to

him than anything else could have.

All in all, the evening had been what she'd hoped it would be. Severus had seen a positive reaction to him from a total stranger, loosened up a bit, and seemed to forget the things that were constantly dragging him down... at least for a little while. Hopefully she had helped him to feel a little better about himself in general.

Severus sat in front of his fireplace, staring into it with unseeing eyes. His evening with Hermione Granger had gone much better than he'd expected. From the shock of having a stranger thank him and wish him well, to the unexpectedly intelligent conversation he'd had with Hermione, the night had been quite enjoyable.

The know-it-all girl had turned into a lovely woman, one who wasn't constantly trying to please everyone. She'd grown into a woman who was comfortable with herself. He suspected that her sojourn in the woods with Potter and Weasley had caused her to do a lot of growing up. Somewhere in that time, she'd realized that life wasn't just about being able to recite textbooks verbatim. It had pleased him to no end to find he could have a conversation with her on various topics on which she could definitely hold her own.

His eyebrows came together as he frowned. Did it really matter in the long run that he could converse with her? She would not be seeking him out for any more dazzling discussions on anything in the near future.

Why had she even asked him to accompany her anyway? She didn't seem the type to fall all over someone in hero-worship, so that couldn't be it. He was sure the only reason she'd asked him along was because she pitied him. She was a bleeding-heart, always trying to fix things.

Just a project, then. Unfortunate... she was actually quite good company. Now that she's seen how I really am, though, she'll not have a desire to burden herself with my presence. He sighed heavily. Too bad. It was nice to not think of how awful I am for a couple of hours.

A/N: Many thanks to my beta, slytherinlaurel. She's awesome, and I appreciate all her help.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 21

Severus sees his bird again.



Disclaimer: No birds were hurt in the writing of this chapter. Also, all characters belong to J.K. Rowling.

Chapter 9

Severus sat on the grass by the lake and watched the bird soar overhead. In an instant she had landed next to him and screeched a greeting.

"Back for more, I see," he muttered.

The bird bobbed its head before settling down next to him.

"I suppose you're a glutton for punishment, then? Not enough depressing things in your life, you need to cling to me?"

"Screech!"

Severus smirked. "I wondered if you'd come along today. Your previous visits occurred a little earlier. I was just about to head back into my jail."

"Screech!"

"Yes, I'm sure you're very busy hunting whatever it is you hunt, but I've been waiting for half an hour."

The bird looked to the ground in a sheepish way and Severus regarded her curiously.

"However do you do that?"

"Screech!"

"How do you make it seem that you know exactly what I'm saying to you?"

"Screech!"

"Yes, I'm sure," Severus drawled.

Arching an eyebrow, he regarded the bird curiously. Bird or not, she was incredibly astute.

"Exactly where do you come from?" he asked. His eyebrow rose as he looked the bird over. She bobbed her head again.

"You must be someone's familiar. There aren't very many people in the castle right now. I wonder to whom you could belong." Suddenly his eyebrows drew close and he scowled. "You aren't here as some kind of joke, are you?"

He looked to the bird. She was looking at him, her head cocked to one side.

"You are someone's familiar, yes?"

The bird remained silent, her head tilting even farther to the side.

"Do not try to hide it. Did someone send you out to spy on me?"

"Screech!" The bird's cry almost seemed like a question.

Severus leaned in toward the bird and gazed into her eyes. He saw intelligence, but could not penetrate into the bird's mind. He looked her over from beak to tail-feathers.

"I wouldn't put it past someone to send you out to me daily." His head snapped back to the castle. They were quite far from it, but he squinted, looking for some faculty member gazing out at them, laughing hysterically. He could make out no one, but that didn't mean they weren't there. *Disillusioned, maybe.*

"I think someone would find it very funny that Severus Snape has taken to talking to animals. Maybe they'll start calling me by that Muggle character's name, Dr. Doonothing or something like that. They're probably going to say something at dinner tonight. I'll be the laughingstock of the High Table."

His gaze returned to the bird. She had risen and turned her body toward him. Now she flapped her wings at him. They grazed his arms. He shielded himself with his hands.

"Stop that this instant!"

A barrage of screeching assaulted his ears.

"Well, what do you expect me to think? You come by at the same time every day. Can you tell time? Or does your master send you out to have a good laugh at my expense?"

The bird stopped flapping. She folded her wings back and turned completely around so that her back was to Severus. Her head was held high and Severus could see her beak poking above the crest of her head.

"Indignant little thing, aren't you?"

The bird did not move.

"I never thought I'd be chastised by a bird, let alone receive the silent treatment from one."

A small adjustment of wings was the only response.

Severus studied her back. His eyes followed the pattern of her feathers. He really wasn't sure what to think of her. Obviously, she belonged to someone. Was the bird upset that he was besmirching her master's character, or that he'd accused her of spying?

"You are someone's familiar, right?" he asked.

Feathers ruffled.

"Did your owner send you to spy on me?"

The bird spun around and began a long string of screeches. Her wings shot out and she flapped them vigorously. When she was through, she turned her back on him once again.

Severus stared at her incredulously, then burst into laughter. He fell back, his hands surrounding his stomach, and lay on the grass, chuckling loudly. His eyes squeezed shut as he enjoyed the first true laugh he'd had in many years. When his eyes opened, he found Red's head jutting into his line of sight. Her head was cocked to the side and she was blinking at him. That caused him to roll over and laugh harder. He braced himself up finally, still chuckling softly.

When he could finally form words, he spoke to the falcon. "I take it you are extremely put-out?"

"Screech!"

"You're not a spy, then? Not here to alert the rogue Death Eaters that I'm alive and well and severely depressed?"

She blinked at him.

"Let's try one blink for yes and two blinks for no."

The bird tilted her head at him and screeched softly.

"Not willing to reveal your secrets, I see."

Severus stared out over the lake. He supposed he was being a bit paranoid about the bird, but those suspicious feelings didn't go away easily. They'd kept him alive for this long, he wasn't willing to let those instincts just whittle away to nothing. One could never be too careful. He'd keep an eye on the bird. Perhaps he could figure everything out simply by observing its actions.

Hermione paced back and forth in her room. Snape was too suspicious for his own good. In no time he'd figure out just what she was.

I should just tell him.

But I think he wants to talk more. I think he needs to talk more.

He's certainly not recovered from all the horrible things he's been through. Who else will sit and listen to him? Who else would he sit and talk to?

No, I've got no choice. I need my identity to stay a secret. I'll need to pull back on my reactions. I swear, the man drives me to distraction! If he figures out who I am, though, he'll hate me forever.

She shook her head. *He's going to find out eventually.*

... Hopefully, by then he won't need me any more. Hopefully, by then he'll be whole again.

He'd been meeting the falcon daily. Every afternoon, at the same time, he'd set out on a walk and the bird would eventually soar over his head and alight on his shoulder. Sometimes she would find him seated by the lake and join him. It had been almost two weeks since the bird had appeared and begun this odd relationship with him. Severus had been wary of her appearances for many days, but Red had done nothing to raise concerns. She'd acted rather bird-like, actually, although she did seem to be a good listener, and she constantly butted him with her head in affection. He'd begun to look forward to their meetings. Today, just like every day, she landed next to him.

Red hopped into his lap and butted his chest with her head. Severus' hand immediately came up to her neck, and he stroked her affectionately.

"I'm surprised you don't grow weary of my melancholy, Red."

The bird butted his cheek.

"You make me feel almost human," he said quietly. "Almost likeable."

The bird tilted her head at him and butted his cheek again.

"No one wants to be near me. I remind them of the worst things that happened to them. I am an outcast. Sometimes I feel that no one would notice if I disappeared."

"Screech!"

"Well, I suppose Hermione would wonder why the seat next to her was empty."

Severus had been startled when Hermione Granger had taken to sitting next to him at the High Table. He'd arched an eyebrow the first time she'd settled herself in next to him, but had been happy to have someone who could actually hold an intelligent conversation. He was quite bored with Pomona Sprout's idle chatter about potting soil. It seemed to be the only topic she ever spoke of.

Hermione gave him a curious look as he regarded her in puzzlement.

"Is something wrong, Severus?"

"No," he said quickly. "I just was expecting you to sit over by Flitwick as you usually do."

She nodded slightly. "Well, I enjoyed our little dinner away from Hogwarts last night. I also enjoyed our conversation. I was hoping to maybe discuss effects of Transfiguration on potions ingredients."

He'd stopped listening right after she'd said she'd enjoyed their outing. His mind marveled that anyone could possibly enjoy even five minutes with him. He came back to himself and realized she was looking to him expectantly, waiting for the answer to some question.

"I'm sorry, what was it you wanted to discuss?" he asked sheepishly.

"Well, what would happen if I were to Transfigure powdered moonstone into black beetle eyes? Would it increase the calming effect when added into Calming Draught?"

He blinked. "I have done some experiments with Transfiguring one ingredient into another. Unfortunately, the properties of the new item are all that is contained within. It holds no properties from the previous item."

Hermione took a bite of her roast beef and chewed, obviously deep in thought.

"I wonder if you could come up with a spell to capture the essence of the first item and transfer them into the Transfigured item." She looked over at him suddenly, her eyes slightly narrowed.

"Oh, I forgot. You don't take kindly to foolish wand waving." The smirk on her face told Severus she was only teasing. He frowned nonetheless.

"Foolish wand waving has its place, such as in Defense Against the Dark Arts. In Potions, however, it is cause for concern about safety, especially when mixed with inexperienced first-years."

Her eyebrows rose in surprise. "So, you don't shun everything to do with a wand?"

He gave her a caustic glare. "Professor Granger, I would be long dead if I eschewed everything that had to do with wand-work."

She smiled to herself. "Harry and I used to argue that point all the time. He'd say you couldn't stand using your wand. I would tell him that you wouldn't be as talented with it if you didn't truly appreciate the fine art of spell casting."

"You... you defended me?"

Hermione chewed her food for a minute, but nodded in response. "He's so obtuse sometimes. Harry, that is. He could only see the negatives in you for the longest time. I wanted to hit him over the head sometimes, he'd just be so adamant about something nasty about you."

"You mean to say you would take my side of things? More than once? With Potter?"

Hermione laughed. "Someone had to be the voice of reason!"

Severus looked down into his plate, his eyebrows furrowed. She'd equated defending him with reason. Odd. He wouldn't have expected anyone in that trio to even begin to try to see things from his point of view. Perhaps she wasn't as horrible as her friends. Perhaps she wasn't as judgmental.

She'd changed the subject then, pulling him from his musings. They'd spent the rest of the evening chatting somewhat amicably. Not expecting her to return to the seat beside him, he'd been floored the next night when she'd smiled and sat next to him again. After several days of the same routine, he'd come to accept that she was going to sit beside him on a permanent basis. He'd wondered why she did. Perhaps Minerva had Imperiused her to sit with him. Of course that was impossible, but he wouldn't put it past the meddling witch to have ordered Hermione to play nice to her once-hated Potions master. Nonetheless, he'd enjoyed the conversations they'd had.

The flapping of wings and an indignant screech brought him out of his thoughts.

"What?"

"Screech!"

"Yes, I know, you're upset by something I said. I fail to see exactly what it was that has upset you though."

"Screech! Screech!"

He watched her complain. She hadn't had such an outburst since those first couple of days, when they were both getting to know one another. The suspicions he'd had then came back now. He quickly ran through all their encounters in his head. Nothing menacing had been present from her in any of them. If someone in the castle had sent the bird to make a spectacle of him, there had been no repercussions from it. Surely someone would have cracked a joke by now if they were wanting to make fun of him.

He'd become quite fond of the winged creature. He knew that in some way, this bird liked him. She liked coming around for some reason. He had no real friends, so why should he question the bird's affinity for him? He tossed his suspicions away and looked at Red, who was still complaining, even if the volume of her screeches had lessened a little. He felt a warmth course through his body at her show of affection, even if she was boisterous and obviously upset.

"I really don't think anyone would be sad to see me go, Red," he said matter-of-factly.

The bird hopped onto his shoulder and rapped him on the head with her beak.

"Ouch! Would you please not do that? It's incredibly annoying!" Severus said through gritted teeth. "Why do you feel the need to argue with me? Can't you take my word that I'm an outcast?"

Her wings spread out once again. This time one of them rapped Severus in the head. He lifted his hands to shield himself.

"All right! That's enough!"

Red hopped off his shoulder and landed on the ground. Glaring at Severus, she cocked her head at him.

"Who would miss me? Name one person!"

The bird looked at Severus thoughtfully.

"See, you can't name anyone."

Red screeched again and hopped so that her back was to Severus. He chuckled.

"I suppose the fact that you can't talk might be taken into consideration, but even if you could, there's not one person you could name who would miss me if I were gone."

The bird hopped back around and moved into his lap. She settled herself between his crossed legs and looked up at him, her head tilted slightly to the side. Severus stared at her for a long time.

"I wish you were a person, Red. I bet you wouldn't hate me."

The bird's beak opened and closed a couple of times, but she didn't screech at him. Finally, she turned herself so that she was facing Severus. She put her head under his arm and kept it there. Severus felt himself choke up.

I am being an utter fool, letting a bird affect me this way. She has no idea what she's doing. I am simply attributing human characteristics to her. Squawking and batting her wings around just means she's probably seen some rodent in the background. Yes, she seems to understand me, but how much of that can be real? I've let my loneliness get the best of me, and I'm projecting onto the bird. Could I be any more pathetic?

"You should go, Red," he commanded in a gruff voice. "I'm sure you have better things to do than soothe my troubles."

Red pulled her head away from Severus' arm. She butted his chest and hopped off his lap. Severus reached out and patted her head. With a screech, she lifted off and was soaring in the sky once again.

"Goodbye, my friend," Severus murmured as the bird disappeared from sight.

"Severus," Hermione acknowledged as she sat down to dinner a few days later.

"Hermione," Severus replied with a terse nod of his head. "Do you have any more questions about Hogwarts protocol?"

Hermione thought for a minute. "No, Severus, you've been quite thorough."

"What about classes? They start in less than two weeks. Are you ready for them?" he asked gruffly.

"I have been working with Minerva daily. She is a thorough teacher. I will be ready when classes start."

"It would be wise for you to remember my admonition to be a strict disciplinarian," Severus snapped.

Hermione looked to him with a glare. "I intend to, Severus, thank you."

Severus turned to his food and was quiet for a while. Despite Hermione's calm answers, he could tell she'd been perturbed by his shortness. Moving his potatoes around his plate, he examined his behavior.

What is wrong with me? I cannot even give advice without sounding nasty. Is it a wonder no one wants to associate with me?

Hermione fumed. What had she done to deserve his snapping at her? She didn't mind his asking if she was prepared, but his demeanor and nastiness made her want to throw something at him instead of responding civilly. She glared at him out of the corner of her eye.

What was his problem? She couldn't reconcile the man who appeared by the lake with this one. Both of his personalities obviously were depressed, but this one lashed out at everyone without a cause.

She watched him covertly as she continued to eat. She looked straight on, but her attention was directed to the man beside her. He was frowning intently. Glancing over at her, Severus almost looked remorseful because of his sharp words. Hermione waited for him to say something, but nothing came from the dour man next to her. She sighed and continued to eat, never letting her covert eye stray from him.

Severus' lips curled in on themselves, and he appeared angry at himself. A flood of understanding hit Hermione in that moment. The man was so used to his life around others being an act that he'd simply continued on after the war. It was a defense mechanism. If he could shove people away, they would not hurt him. His snappish attitude was just part of that defense.

Her heart went out to him, and her anger disappeared. She wracked her brain, trying to think of something to say to him.

"Severus," she finally spoke.

Severus glared at her. Hermione almost burst out laughing.

"I appreciate your advice," she continued. "This is all very new to me. Obviously it's important for me, as a teacher, to be strict and to earn the respect of my classes. Thank you for repeating that. I think I had gotten too wrapped up in the other aspects of preparation and that admonition you'd given me before had slipped my mind."

Severus stared at her incredulously. Again, Hermione was tempted to grin. He seemed so out of sorts at her reaction to his yelling. This might actually be fun. She'd never expected to be eager to see odd reactions from Severus Snape, but when he looked at her like that, she felt her stomach flutter.

"Umm, it's nothing," Severus said tentatively.

"Did you read the article in *Magical Misconceptions* about the temperaments of Hippogriffs?" Hermione asked, thinking that a change of subject would ease Severus' discomfort.

"No," Severus replied, obviously relieved. "I missed that one."

She explained the article, and they spent the rest of the evening debating its validity.

Later that evening, Severus stared into the fire, thinking about the new Transfiguration professor. She totally puzzled him. He couldn't understand why she would even waste her time talking to him.

She is quite intelligent. I haven't had such stimulating conversations in years. It's hard to believe someone so young could have such vibrant views on just about everything.

He sighed in relief that his idiocy hadn't driven her away. I almost blew it. I honestly don't know what gets into me. I wish I could stop playing the role I've lived all my life. It would be nice to have her think of me as a friend, but if I keep up with the terse comments she'll just forget all about me.

He found it a bit disturbing that the thought of her ignoring him made him sad. He usually didn't let relationships and their ending affect him. He couldn't afford it. All his relationships ended badly because of his profession.

Your profession is now simply a teacher. You do not have to be that hard, calloused man. You can actually have friends, you know.

He guffawed loudly, then looked around, startled at his own outburst. Oh yes, it would be nice to have friends. I don't even think perky Granger would want to be my friend, though. Pity. I rather enjoy her company.

A/N: Thank you for reading, everyone. Major thanks to my beta, slytherinlaurel, for her hard work.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 of 21

Severus sees more of his bird.



Chapter 10

"Severus, as Deputy Headmaster, I wanted you to be aware that Roland Duvall will be returning to Hogwarts immediately."

Severus arched an eyebrow. "Why are you letting him return?"

"I would think that you, of all people, would understand the need for second chances."

Severus scowled at the Headmistress as he stood up, then glared at her incredulously. "Minerva, this is lunacy. There is a huge difference between my circumstances and Duvall's. The boy fought with everything he had against us. He belongs in a cell, not walking the halls of the school."

Minerva looked at him crossly. "He was influenced by his father. He deserves the chance to right his wrongs."

Severus frowned. He knew more about Duvall than Minerva did. The young man didn't need any prodding from his father to be the ruthless fighter he'd become on the night of the battle.

"It is ultimately your decision, Minerva, but I don't think that boy should be let anywhere near Hogwarts."

"I've made up my mind, Severus. He will get a second chance, and that's final."

So, Roland Duvall, son of a Death Eater, leader of a group of Slytherin students who'd fought viciously against the Order and fellow students during the battle, would now be given a second chance. It seemed that youth's misdeeds were oftentimes forgiven easier than those done in adulthood, no matter what the circumstances. He hoped that Minerva hadn't made a terrible mistake in her decision.

The next morning, Severus stalked along the grounds, his head bent down and a scowl on his face. He was still at a loss as to why Minerva had allowed that Slytherin boy to return to Hogwarts. To top everything off, she'd let him come to the school almost two weeks before classes started. Minerva had believed his obvious lie about wanting to start fresh. His plea to escape his now dismal home, unbearable since his father's early demise, had tugged at Minerva's heartstrings. She'd granted him early access to the school. Severus couldn't believe Minerva's gullibility.

A falcon flying overhead brought Severus back to the present. He scowled as Red landed on his shoulder and butted his cheek with her head.

"I'm not in the mood today, falcon," Severus snapped at her.

The bird sat silently on Severus' shoulder as he quickly paced along the lake. Severus kept his head bent down and fumed to himself. Finally, he began to sputter to himself.

"She is foolish for letting him come! The boy will be nothing but trouble."

Red bopped him with her head, and Severus stopped mid-stride. He looked to the bird and extended his hand for her to hop where he could see her better.

"Minerva has allowed Roland Duvall to return to school."

Red tilted her head quizzically.

"He's a Death Eater!" Severus glared at Red. "At least, his father was before his death in the battle, but Duvall follows in his father's footsteps. Nothing good will come of his return!"

Red spread her wings out and screeched at him.

Severus narrowed his eyes at her. "I know I was a Death Eater also, but I did not gather every Slytherin I could find to fight against us!"

Red folded her wings, hopped up his arm, and bopped her head against Severus' cheek. Severus relaxed some.

"I don't trust him," he spat.

Red sat quietly on Severus' shoulder and listened to his rant. It took a while for Severus to finally calm down enough to look at the bird again. They had covered a lot of ground in his frenzied walk. Severus looked into the bird's eyes and sighed. He motioned for Red to get off his shoulder. The bird flew to the ground, and Severus sat down beside her.

"You think I'm being paranoid, don't you?"

Severus could have sworn he saw the bird shake her head. He took his hand and patted her head. "Well, thanks for listening anyway. Minerva couldn't be bothered to hear what I had to say. She's made up her mind."

Red hopped into Severus' lap. She looked into his eyes and screeched. He smiled at her. "If only you were human. I'm sure we'd have the most wonderful conversations," he mused.

The bird settled into Severus' lap. They sat quietly, neither seemingly eager to move.

"You have a calming effect on me," Severus muttered. The bird butted his chest with her head. Severus smiled and absentmindedly caressed her feathers.

They continued to sit for quite some time. Finally, Red rose and flapped her wings.

"Yes, I suppose you have things to do other than baby-sit me and listen to my tantrums."

"Screech!"

"Be off with you then!"

The bird soared into the sky and soon disappeared from sight.

You've caused a fine mess, haven't you?

Hermione lay on her bed, worrying her lip. Her encounters with Severus while she was in her bird form were becoming too much for her, yet she couldn't make herself stop. She looked for him every day, and he was there... every day. She felt drawn to him like a magnet. The more she got to know him, the more she respected him. The more she respected him, the more she wanted to spend time with him. Unfortunately, every minute spent with him brought her closer to his finding out her secret.

She now regarded him as a friend. A very good friend. She wasn't sure how he felt about her. He never seemed put out that she chatted with him. Well, almost never. He had his days when he sat sullenly, lost in some regret. She'd come to the conclusion, though, that his sullen moods had little to do with her. He was still working through so much. She wished she could wave her wand and all his depressed thoughts would disappear. Unfortunately, even magic couldn't cure what he needed to work through on his own.

In general, though, he'd been... civil.

Could I label it friendly? Yes, friendly for Severus Snape. He hardly says two words to anyone else. He's always talking with me.

She sighed. *He won't want to speak to me when he finds out I'm Red. He probably won't even look at me.*

Tears formed in her eyes, but she blinked them away. *Merlin, I'm being the fool. He's become too good a friend to me. I feel the same kinship with him as I do with Ron and Harry. She shook her head morosely. Look what I've done, though. I've destroyed our friendship before it even started. I should have told him. I can't tell him now, though, because he'll never understand. I'll never be able to bear the revulsion in his eyes. He won't ever understand why I didn't tell him I was the falcon. He'll never forgive me.*

She knew her time wasn't long with him. She still intended to do her Transfiguration from falcon to teacher on the first day of classes. He'd find out then. She just hoped that would be enough time to help him overcome his grief. She hoped that when he found out, he'd someday be able to understand... and forgive. Unfortunately, she was all too aware that his forgiveness would probably not come for a very long time. Maybe not even in this lifetime. She would lose his friendship. She'd no idea that would hurt so much just to think about. How would she ever handle him shunning her in reality when it hurt so much just to imagine it?

Hermione soared through the sky, enjoying the feel of the air gliding over her wings. Truly, this was heaven. Lowering herself, she glided over the lake, her keen eyes taking in the movement beneath the lake's surface. A fish swam along, oblivious to her shadow, which was quickly approaching. Her talons readied. In a quick dive, she grasped the fish in her claws and soared away from the lake. If she could, she would have smiled. Before gaining too much height, she released her claws from around the fish and watched it drop back into the lake. She saw its body gyrate back and forth before it made a splash and disappeared from the non-aquatic world.

I bet he's thanking his lucky stars she mused.

Hermione found she actually enjoyed hunting. She never ate anything she caught, but just the act of stalking prey and successfully wrapping her sharp talons around it gave her an incredibly satisfied feeling.

This whole being-a-bird thing had actually surprised her. Having disliked riding a broom, she'd not expected to enjoy being a bird so much. As a bird, though, she instinctively knew she wouldn't fall. She was in control, and she loved every minute of it. There was nothing quite like soaring through the sky with the wind rustling her feathers.

Her birdlike mannerisms had taken some getting used to. The desire to swoop down and snatch a rabbit or other small animal had taken some time to control. One thing that had excited her was her ability to see so sharply. She could spy a squirrel foraging for nuts from very far away. Right now, she could make out Severus walking along on the grounds. She wondered what he was doing as he usually only walked in the mornings when she would visit.

Perhaps he'd like some company?

She altered her flight to speed toward him. She tried to gauge his mood from his posture. He was bent over a bit with his hands behind his back. His hair hung in front of his face, so the only thing she could see as she approached him was the tip of his nose. She'd grown very fond of that nose. Large as it might be, she couldn't imagine Severus Snape without it.

Circling overhead so he'd know she was there, she cried out until he looked up. He extended his arm, and she alighted onto it. Gazing at him with a cocked head, she chattered at him softly.

"Yes, I know we've already met up today. I actually wasn't expecting to see you on this trek," he explained.

Pointing at the Forbidden Forest, where he was heading, he told her what he was up to.

"I need some fresh belladonna. I find that which is sold at the apothecary is substandard to that which I can grow on my own." He motioned for Red to move to his shoulder, which she did, butting his nose with her head as she did so. Severus smiled and patted her as she settled in. "I have a cultivated patch deep in the forest, away from where students could stumble upon it. It grows year-round so I harvest it monthly."

Hermione listened to Severus go on about the benefits of fresh belladonna, eagerly taking in everything he was willing to give. He was so knowledgeable, and even though he spoke with her readily when she was a human, he was never this detailed in his descriptions. She drank it all in and wished for more.

It didn't take long for them to reach his patch of belladonna. Hermione flew down onto the ground so he could harvest it. Severus pulled a bag out of his pocket and carefully took out his wand. Kneeling before the patch of green, he swished his wand over the small plants, cutting them from the roots. Then he levitated the plants into the bag. Once they were secured, he put the bag and his wand away. Sitting back on the ground, he looked around at the tall trees that surrounded them.

"Despite its nasty reputation, I always feel peaceful in this part of the forest. Maybe it's because few wander here."

Hermione hopped over next to him, her wings extended for balance. Hopping into his lap, she butted his cheek. She swiveled her head around so she could get a good look at their surroundings. Without even realizing it, she'd turned her head almost completely around.

That's something new! She thought as she twisted her neck back around to its original position.

"That's quite the trick, Red. Are you sure you're not part owl?"

Hermione laughed internally. Severus had a propensity for dry humor, which she'd just become aware of recently. It was too bad he didn't see how much fun he was to be around.

She stared off to the left as his hand came down and stroked her back. She always thrilled at his touch. Understanding quite well that he wasn't the demonstrative type, she coveted those simple caresses that he'd give her. She was sure this contact was probably the only physical contact he received on a daily basis. Her heart felt heavy at the thought.

"Maybe I should just build a shack and live here when I'm not forced to teach dunderheads," Severus muttered.

Hermione looked at him. Expecting him to have a pained look, she was surprised at how calm he seemed. Maybe he was right. Maybe she did have a calming effect on him. She certainly hoped so.

"Would you come visit me if I holed up here, Red?"

"Screech!"

He smiled. It was a genuine smile, something he never did in the company of humans. He'd only smirk devilishly, never gracing his face with a genuine smile. She wished he'd feel comfortable enough around people to use that smile. Granted, people might fall down dead if he did, but it would be well worth it to see his face light up like that. He was always so serious around everyone.

He patted her on the head. "Just ignore me and my silly fantasies. The Centaurs would go to war if anyone tried to build a home in the forest." He sighed. "It was nice to ponder upon for a little bit though. Unfortunately, I'm still stuck in my stone jail."

"Screech."

"Oh, yes, it's quite beautiful in its own right."

Hermione loved how Severus would just come up with things to say to her, as if they were actually having a two-way conversation. The funny thing was, he was usually right about what she was trying to convey.

"But even the most beautiful place can be a jail when one is forbidden to leave it."

Hermione turned her head around and gently grazed Severus' hand, which had stilled on her back. He looked down at her.

"I don't think I'll feel truly at home until I'm allowed to move from this place and go on with my life."

Hermione twittered at him again, causing Severus to grin at her. "Would you come with me, Red? I could use a smart bird like you around. You're highly superior to the owls that flit around here as if they own the place."

She cocked her head at him, causing his grin to widen. "Now you're just humoring an old man."

"Screech!"

He rolled his eyes. "What did I say now?"

"Screech!"

"I may not look old, but I feel it."

Butting his chin, she pulled back and looked at him crossly. She was sure her expression was lost on him, though.

"When the time comes, I hope you'll consider it," he finished, looking at her with affection. "I do enjoy your company."

Hermione rushed into the Three Broomsticks, a smile on her face. She spotted them right off and headed for their table. They were standing with their arms wide before she even reached them. Suddenly, she found herself encased in two sets of arms.

"Ron! Harry! I've missed you both so much!"

"You too, Hermione," they cried in unison.

The trio separated and gathered at the table where Ron and Harry had been sitting. She looked from one to the other excitedly.

"You both look great!" she exclaimed.

"My mum's been feeding us until we burst," Ron explained.

"Why didn't you bring Ginny?" Hermione asked curiously.

"She's visiting Bill and Fleur," Harry explained. "Fleur is expecting. Isn't that brilliant?"

Hermione nodded and smiled broadly. "That's wonderful news!" She found now that she was reunited with her boys, she couldn't stop smiling. "Tell me about Auror training," she demanded.

Harry chuckled. "It's going great. Of course, we've only been there a week, but it's so much better than the book-learning we had to do at Hogwarts." He got a worried look on his face. "Not that that wasn't important too!" he cried, trying to mollify Hermione, who was frowning at him.

"I'm glad you see it that way, Harry. Without all that 'book-learning', as you put it, you wouldn't be in training right now."

"You have to admit, Hermione, chasing bad guys is much better than just reading about them," Ron piped in.

Hermione rolled her eyes good-humoredly. "Yes, I suppose that's much more exciting, but I've had enough of chasing the bad guys to last a lifetime. Besides, have you even had the chance to chase a bad guy yet as real Aurors?"

Ron beamed. "We were assigned to apprehend a thief yesterday. Our first assignment. Of course, we were monitored by our superiors, and it was just a robber, but blimey, it was great!"

They chatted on excitedly, Hermione telling her best friends what she'd been up to. She quietly told them about her Animagus training. She wasn't quite ready to be registered yet, so she didn't want it to be public knowledge.

"Wow, Hermione. That's... that's amazing!" Harry exclaimed. "And here we thought you hated flying."

She nodded. "I did until recently." With a giggle she explained how wonderful it was to fly. The boys both smiled at her.

They continued chatting for a long time. Finally, they seemed to exhaust topics.

"We'd best get going," Hermione said absently. "I have to be present at dinner. It's Hogwarts rules."

Ron glanced at Harry. He nodded and excused himself. Hermione stared after him curiously before she felt Ron's hand on hers.

"Hermione, there's something I need to tell you."

She looked at Ron. He seemed agitated.

"What is it, Ron?"

"I know we shared that kiss during the battle..." he said as he looked to the table.

"I sense a *but* coming," Hermione murmured.

"It's just that... Well, we kind of talked about it after everything settled down. You said you didn't want to rush into anything."

She nodded.

"After you left for Hogwarts, I ran into Lavender at the Ministry."

Hermione arched an eyebrow.

"We've been seeing each other every day since then." He squeezed her hand. "Look, Hermione, I wasn't trying to lead you on. I felt something for you. It's just that after all the dust had settled, you wanted to go your way, and I wanted to go mine. I got the feeling that you weren't comfortable with what had happened. If I were to be totally honest, neither was I." He sat back and folded his arms. "Is this making any sense?"

Hermione smiled ruefully and nodded. "Ron, after that kiss, it just felt awkward between us." She frowned. "You don't know how long I'd wanted you to kiss me."

"I can imagine. I wanted to kiss you, too, for what seemed like forever."

"When it happened, though..." She shook her head. "It wasn't what I'd expected." She reached out quickly for his hand. "Not that it wasn't a good kiss, it really was!" She smiled reassuringly.

"Hermione, I know. I felt it too. Well, I guess I didn't feel it."

He grasped her hand in his again. "I've been so worried. I felt like I was betraying you by going back to Lavender."

Hermione shook her head vehemently. "No, Ron, I pulled back because I was confused." She shrugged. "I'd just always assumed we'd be together. Everything pointed to that. Then after that kiss, I wondered what we really should be to one another."

Ron nodded. "Me, too. When you left, I felt as if you'd rejected me, but then I couldn't reconcile my feelings either. I was really confused. When Lavender started coming by, things became clearer."

Hermione snorted. "I know I should be seeing red, but I'm actually happy for you, Ron. For me, it was the distance that helped. I've been thinking about our relationship and examining my feelings. I love you, truly I do, but not like that. I think we're too different to make something like that work between us."

Ron nodded again. "I've been kind of feeling the same way."

She smirked. "I'm sure Lavender helped quite a bit."

Ron grinned and shrugged. "What can I say, there's something electric between us."

The two friends chuckled just as Harry returned. "I'm glad to see you're in one piece, Ron. I was sure she was going to hex off your privates."

That just caused Ron and Hermione to burst into further fits of giggles. After collecting themselves somewhat, the three of them rose and hugged each other once again.

"Don't be strangers," Hermione chided. "I know I'm just a lowly teacher, but I would appreciate a visit from my important Auror friends."

"Oi, Hermione, we know you're the most important one of us all. We won't forget you," Ron assured.

"Yeah, Hermione, we've seen you mad. We definitely don't want to get you angry with us."

Severus watched Hermione enter the Great Hall and sit down. She had a huge grin on her face. He noted the curious look in Minerva's eyes.

"Why so happy, Hermione?" she asked.

"I just visited with Harry and Ron," Hermione explained.

There was a flurry of chatter then. Minerva asked how the two men were, and Filius nattered on about what wonderful students they'd been, sure that they would be stupendous Aurors.

Severus rolled his eyes. "I suppose they already think they're the best Aurors that ever lived."

Hermione's head snapped around. "No, not yet at least."

"I'm sure they'll be spouting off how wonderful they are in no time."

Hermione sighed but let the comment pass. Severus was irked and didn't know why. He scowled into his plate, trying to understand the annoyance that was coursing through his body. Glancing over at Hermione, he noted she was still smiling to herself as she ate. Minerva had said something about Weasley and Hermione dating. That would explain the smile. He was surprised that she hadn't paraded him around on her arm to show off her ability to attract a man.

His eyes returned to his plate as he swished his mashed potatoes around absentmindedly. He knew Hermione wasn't vain like that. She wouldn't flaunt a relationship with Weasley. He tried to beat down the put-out feeling he had. It really was no business of his who or what Hermione dated.

"Severus, have you heard of the *Desino* spell?"

Severus shook his head.

"Harry was telling me about it. It's used as a deterrent for repeat offenders, compelling them to behave legally. He said it's only used in severe cases."

"I suppose they're thinking of using that on me?" Severus said gravely.

Hermione's hand came up and grasped his. "Of course not, Severus. You are a hero, not a criminal."

Severus stared at her hand until she removed it awkwardly. He looked up into her eyes. She seemed afraid she'd overstepped her bounds. She had, of course, but he had been more shocked that she would have the fortitude to touch him than the fact that he was being touched.

"I'm sorry," she said hastily. "I didn't mean to invade your personal space."

He nodded curtly but within himself he was amazed by her gesture. Of course, she could never know that.

"How does the spell work?" he asked in order to end the awkwardness between them. Half listening to her, he watched her animatedly explain the spell and what it did. Once again he recognized how well-spoken she was and how much he enjoyed conversing with her. His sudden anger earlier seemed to clarify itself. Certainly he wouldn't have these stimulating conversations if she were hanging all over Weasley. Suddenly he was thankful that the couple had decided to pursue different careers. He'd miss her constant insight if she were absorbed with explaining things to the ginger-haired simpleton. He was suddenly very glad that Potter and Weasley had decided to become Aurors.

A/N: Many thanks to slytherinlaurel for her wonderful beta work.

Thanks for your interest in this story, dear reader.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 of 21

Severus and Hermione spend more time together.



Chapter 11

The staff had been assembled in the teacher's lounge. They all sat around comfortably, awaiting the beginning of the meeting. Hermione sat next to Septima Vector, and the two were chatting amicably. They stopped their conversation when Severus stalked in. Hermione marveled at how the man could command a room without even saying a word. Everyone had grown silent and was now staring at him as he made his way to the front of the room and took one of the two seats set there. He was followed by Minerva, who nodded and smiled at everyone as she entered.

"Thank you all for being on time," Minerva said as she sat in the empty seat next to Severus.

"Our first order of business is to officially introduce the new faculty." She looked to Hermione. "Hermione Granger will be taking over my position as Transfiguration professor."

Everyone looked at her. Minerva moved her gaze to another woman sitting across from Hermione. "Carolyn Edwards will be taking over as Muggle Studies professor."

Everyone nodded to Carolyn.

"And Severus Snape will be assuming the Defense Against the Dark Arts position and will serve as the Deputy Headmaster."

All eyes were drawn to the dour man sitting beside the Headmistress.

Minerva stood and passed out class rosters to the faculty. "There are several new students entering this year, and we need to go over the new first-years," she explained.

Soon the faculty was deep in conversation about students.

Hermione scanned the names in front of her. "Roland Duvall," she mused. "He's been a student here before."

"And shouldn't be returning," Severus said under his breath.

That caused Minerva to glare at him.

"Mr. Duvall is a returning student, yes. I put him on the list because he has already arrived," Minerva explained.

"He had deep Death Eater ties during the war. He'll need to be watched closely," Severus interjected.

Minerva glared at him again. "Thank you, Severus." She turned back to the room at large. "He's here because, as Severus said, he fought against us during the battle, but he's also here for a second chance. Yes, keep an eye on him, but please give him the chance he deserves."

The staff all nodded in unison before they moved on to the next name.

After awhile, all the pertinent business was taken care of, and Minerva sat back, motioning to the staff that they might stay and visit one another. She gave a sidelong glance to Severus, who was about to get up. He sank back in his chair with a frown. Hermione bit the inside of her cheek to keep from giggling at him.

Hermione's attention was drawn back to Septima as she began to converse about a new type of parchment that she'd just heard about.

"It's spelled to anticipate what you're going to write and finish words for you," Septima explained.

Hermione looked duly impressed. "Really? I wonder if it works right. I can see it making up words you have no intention of using!"

Septima chuckled. "That's definitely a possibility. It's a new product, too. Sometimes they need to work the kinks out of those."

"Still, I'd like to try it out," Hermione mused.

Septima nodded.

"I need to make a trip into Hogsmeade today. I'll look for it," Hermione ventured.

Septima smiled. "Oh, if you find it, get some for me too!"

Hermione nodded as Septima rose. "I need to go rearrange my lounge," Septima explained. "The numbers showed me this morning that I'll get more accomplished if I move my sofa near the window. I'll see you later, Hermione."

Hermione grinned as the other woman left. Her gaze then wandered over to Severus. He looked incredibly uncomfortable. He fidgeted slightly, which was something he never did. His gaze was drawn down into his lap and from what she could see of his mouth, he was frowning. Minerva had gotten up and was chatting with Filius and Pomona, so the chair next to him was empty.

Hermione got up and sat down in it. "Hi, Severus," she said cheerily.

Severus looked up, a bit startled, but Hermione couldn't tell if it was because she'd been too boisterous or whether he was surprised that she'd come over at all. She figured it was the latter, given his state of mind as of late. She was hoping to help a little with that today, but it would depend on his mood, she was sure. She took a deep breath and plunged forward.

"I need to go to Hogsmeade today. I was wondering if you'd like to join me?"

Severus arched an eyebrow.

She tried to sweeten the deal. "We could get lunch."

Severus looked her over before responding. "What time did you want to go?"

She grinned broadly. "How about in an hour?"

He nodded curtly, then went back to studying his lap. Hermione felt a strong desire to wrap him in a hug, but she restrained herself. He'd surely call St. Mungo's if she did

something like that. She did lean forward in an attempt to look at his face.

"Severus?"

He glanced at her.

"What's wrong?"

"I do not appreciate having to sit here and endure all this endless drivel."

"Would you rather go to Hogsmeade now?" she asked.

Relief flooded his face. "That would be a welcome distraction. I will meet you in the entry hall in fifteen minutes."

Hermione rose. "All right, I'll see you then."

Severus stared into his closet. It was much too warm to wear his usual black attire. He needed something a bit lighter for a trip to Hogsmeade. Grabbing a tan shirt and blue slacks, he quickly changed. Rushing to the bathroom, he ran a comb through his hair. He really didn't know why he bothered; his hair was a limp, hopeless mess. No amount of combing would change that.

Turning, he made his way into the lounge. He was just about to exit when a throat cleared from behind him. Severus debated ignoring the bid for attention, but he was curious to find out what the old coot wanted. He slowly turned and walked over to the picture frame.

"Dumbledore," he acknowledged.

"Ah, Severus, where are you off to?"

"I am going to Hogsmeade."

"With whom?" Dumbledore asked innocently.

Severus' eyebrows knit together. "Is it really any of your business?"

The portrait shrugged. "I was just wondering who you were dressing up for?"

Severus' eyes grew wide with indignation. "For your information, it is still the middle of summer. It is hot outside. I do not want to turn into a sweaty mess because I'm wearing black."

"Ah," Dumbledore said as he nodded. "Not trying to impress anyone then?"

"I assure you, Miss Granger would never be impressed by anything I would put on!"

"Miss Granger? Now, now, Severus, do tell what is going on!"

The annoying old man had the audacity to twinkle at him! He sneered right back.

"Can you keep your nose out of my life, please? Whom I choose to have for friends is none of your business."

"Now, now, I thought you didn't have any friends."

Rage filled Severus. He pulled the frame from the wall and was about to throw it in the fire. Dumbledore was raising a ruckus, though, and he paused.

"Severus! Don't do anything hasty!"

He turned the portrait over and smirked at Albus. "You know I'll do it," he threatened.

The twinkle had left Dumbledore's eyes.

"Now leave me be," Severus snarled, "before you become nothing but ashes!"

Albus frowned, but nodded curtly. Against Severus' better judgment, he placed the frame back in its place. Narrowing an eye at his former employer, he spun around and headed out the door. As he left his room, he rolled his eyes as he heard Dumbledore tell him to enjoy his date.

Hermione's breath caught when she saw Severus. He seemed rather relaxed, his hands resting in his pants pockets as he walked smoothly toward her. His choice of clothing was what amazed her the most. She admired his form, which was usually hidden behind his billowy robes. She felt her stomach do flip-flops and quickly tried to calm herself down.

"Wow!" she exclaimed.

"Wow?" Severus asked with an arched eyebrow.

"You really should wear clothes like that more often. You look nice."

The look of shock on Severus' face had been well worth her comment. She smiled brightly at him and began moving out of the building. After a moment's pause, she heard him rush to catch up with her.

"So, where do you want to go first?" she asked.

"This is your excursion; I will go where you need to go."

"Don't you need anything?"

"I need some things from the apothecary, but we should visit there last, as the ingredients I need should be stored as soon as possible."

Hermione nodded. They continued walking. Suddenly, Severus stopped and bent low. Off the side of the path grew a small patch of peppermint. He examined the plants, moving them back and forth, before extracting a knife from his pocket.

"These are in excellent condition," he mused as he cut the peppermint. "I never noticed them growing here."

Hermione chuckled. She was met with a sharp glare. "Sorry," she apologized. "I just think it's humorous that you'd drop everything to harvest a small bunch of peppermint."

An arched eyebrow met her gaze. "This coming from the swot of Hogwarts? I believe you spent more time in the library than in your own common room. I would think *you* would understand the need to bury oneself in one's work over all else."

She regarded him thoughtfully. "I suppose you're right. I'm sure I'd drop everything if a Transfiguration magazine was sitting along the side of the road."

Severus nodded as he finished harvesting. However, he seemed perturbed as he stood and placed the plants in a small bag and put it into his pocket.

"That didn't take too long, did it?" he asked with a frown.

"No, of course it didn't. I was just teasing. Haven't you heard of a friendly tease?"

Severus knitted his brows together. "I find teasing to have negative connotations."

Hermione realized her error. Of course he'd be prickly about teasing. He'd spent his entire youth being teased.

"I didn't mean it that way. I would never tease you like that. I do find it funny that you just about jumped on those poor plants."

"I did not jump on the plants!" he hissed.

He started off without her. She frowned before going after him. Reaching out, she grabbed his arm to halt his movement. She turned him to her. He refused to look up.

"Severus?"

Finally turning, he glared at her.

"Severus, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you."

He didn't seem convinced.

Hermione's shoulders sagged. "Look," she said apologetically. "I don't know much about your youth, but from what I do know, it wasn't pleasant. I hope you don't think I'm the type of person who pokes fun at other people's expense. I've always found that type of behavior to be reprehensible."

"I know, Hermione," Severus said quietly.

"You do realize I have too much respect for you to treat you like that?"

She watched as he regarded her. There was a gleam in his eyes she couldn't place.

"Let's just forget it," he said. "I overreacted."

She grinned at him. "I fully understand. I have a tendency to take myself too seriously. I'm working on reacting less severely to things I think are affronts."

She moved next to him before they proceeded into the town.

After a long while, Severus spoke quietly. "Do you find you are succeeding at that?"

She glanced over at him with a rueful smile. "It's rather hit-or-miss actually. It oftentimes depends on who is delivering the comment. With Harry and Ron, even if they say something that seems rude, I'm comfortable enough with them and know them well enough to understand that they're just poking fun.

"With others it's harder for me to gauge. It's only been in the past year that I've become comfortable with myself and my abilities. I've a bit of an inferiority complex. Sometimes people's teasing hurts my feelings. I need to work hard to see comments from others' points of view. It's then when I can usually see that an offhand comment was just that, not something meant to be a cutting remark."

Severus had been watching her as she spoke. He seemed to be impressed with what she said. "You are wiser than your years, Hermione Granger," he remarked.

"War will do that to a person," she admitted.

"Indeed."

Hermione quickly took in the large stacks filled with parchment. She didn't even know where to begin. Wandering to the back of the shop, she smiled at the shopkeeper, an older wizard with thinning hair.

"Do you have the new parchment that self-corrects?" she asked the man.

"Third stack on the left, bottom shelf," the man directed.

Hermione went over, closely followed by Severus.

"What did you say you are looking for?" he asked her.

"It's a paper Septima was speaking about. It completes the words you begin, theoretically making writing much easier."

Severus huffed. "What if it fills in the wrong word?"

Hermione smiled to herself. "I had the same thought."

Locating the paper, she pulled about ten sheets off the top and returned to the shopkeeper.

"I'll take these," she told him, placing some sickles on the table. The man took three of them and pushed the rest back at Hermione. She thanked him, and they left the store.

"Are you hungry yet?" Hermione asked.

Severus nodded.

"Madam Puddifoot's then?"

Severus' head shot up, and he glared at her.

She chuckled. "The Hog's Head?"

"You go from one extreme to the other!" Severus declared.

"Just kidding," she explained, the grin not leaving her face. "Is the Three Broomsticks all right?"

A voice interrupted them from behind. "You should be ashamed to show your face in this town!"

Hermione and Severus turned to see a man glaring at them. Hermione narrowed her eyes at him.

"I beg your pardon?" she asked.

The man pointed at Severus. "You think you got away with murder, but you'll get yours! Not everyone is duped by your lies!"

Severus raised his wand, but Hermione's hand stilled it.

"And what, sir, did you do for the war effort?" she asked.

The man looked to her. "Ah, I'm a bit surprised that he's even duped you, Miss Granger. All the papers said you were the brains of the Potter operation, yet you come to this man's defense. Surely you can see that he is nothing but a liar trying to avoid punishment."

Hermione's hand clenched in anger. "I repeat, sir, what was your contribution to the war? While Severus Snape was risking his life at Voldemort's side, were you cowering in a corner, praying that you would go unnoticed by the evil that had taken over? When Hogsmeade was overrun by Death Eaters, did you raise your wand against them, or did you blindly follow like a dog?"

Anger filled her face as she drew closer to the man, who was now backing away.

"You dare to judge Severus Snape? I know your kind. You're too busy cowering when there is danger, but you can't keep your mouth from running off to criticize when someone else steps in and does all the dirty work." She pointed back at Severus. "You should be kissing his boots and thanking him for saving you and the rest of us. But no, all you can see is the bad. Open your eyes, and see the good for a change!"

She turned and stalked away from the man. Severus glared at him before turning also and following. Hermione walked quickly until they reached a small alley. She turned abruptly and went into it, leaning against the wall of one of the shops. She looked up and huffed.

Severus watched her. She was infuriated. "You know, you don't need to defend me," he snapped.

Her head moved down, and she glared at him. "I wasn't just doing it for you. I can't stand people like that!" She folded her arms in front of her. "Besides, you don't deserve to be spoken to in that manner."

Severus worked hard to keep the amazement from his face. Not only had she fought like a lioness for him, she was now trying to bolster his ego. He didn't know what to say, so he said what he always did.

"I am a grown man, Hermione. I can fend for myself!"

She stood straight and clenched her fists. "Fine! Then fend for yourself. Hex the oaf and get sent to Azkaban. I don't care." She moved away, then swung back to face him. "I am your friend, you know. Friends stick up for one another. But if you'd rather be alone... so be it!"

She turned once again and moved away from him. Severus spun around and grasped her arm.

"Wait!" he said.

She tensed beneath him, but stopped walking.

"I am not used to people defending me."

He felt her relax slightly.

"I am unaccustomed to it and am not good at gratitude."

She spun around then. "So, this is your way of thanking me? By berating me for coming to your defense?"

He had the good sense to look embarrassed. "Yes?" he winced.

She looked him up and down. "That explains a lot," she mused before turning and beginning to walk away again.

His hand reached out, and he tugged at her arm again.

"Hermione..."

She stopped again.

"The last time someone came to my defense, they were secretly smirking at me."

She turned and gave him a quizzical look.

"My faith in people dissolved that day," he continued.

She swallowed hard before speaking again. "Severus, I promise you, I wouldn't do anything like that. It's so two-faced. My friends are dear to me. I would never make fun of them in that way."

Severus looked to the ground. Hermione's words rang true. From what he'd seen of her, she was fiercely loyal. Of course, he'd thought that Lily had been fiercely loyal also. Her words when defending him years ago had seemed to show her loyalty, but that smirk, small, yet blinding, directed at Potter, had proven to him that even the closest of friends... even those you loved... could betray you. His terse reply to Lily's concern had sealed their future. His embarrassment and let-down had caused him to snarl the most hated epithet at her that he could.

Hermione moved a step closer to him, causing him to look up.

"You do realize that, don't you?" she asked tentatively.

He searched her face. He settled on her eyes, looking for duplicity. She looked at him earnestly.

Do I realize that? After all this time, can I let myself trust her?

Something within him assured him that he could, but he was wary nonetheless.

"I would like to think that you are not like that," he sighed.

She stared at him, and he waited for her response. Something within him feared that she would ostracize him now, realizing how broken he was and not wanting to deal with it. He didn't know what to think when she nodded at him.

"I understand. I hope that someday you will have no doubts about my intentions."

She looked down to the ground and seemed troubled about something.

"You are upset with me," he stated.

She raised her head quickly and shook it. "No, I'm not. Friends or not, we are just getting to know one another. You can't be expected to know everything about me. I imagine if I had to do all that you did secretly, I would be wary of others' intentions and motives also."

"Then what is it? Something is bothering you."

"No, really, it's nothing." She began to bite her bottom lip. "I... I was just sorry to hear that your experiences with others have been so negative."

Frowning, Severus decided to avoid that topic. "I am surprised more people like that *gentleman* haven't accosted me sooner."

"His opinions aren't what everyone else is thinking."

"So very trusting of the world, Miss Granger. I am surprised that your dealings with others during this war haven't tainted your view of humanity."

Her lips thinned as she thought of what to say. "Not everyone has an agenda."

His gaze was penetrating. He could tell he was making her uncomfortable. "We should move along. I find I'm in need of a drink."

She nodded in relief as they left the alleyway and headed for the pub.

Severus stalked along the dungeon hallways, making his way back to his room. Aside from the encounter with the dunderhead, his outing to Hogsmeade had been pleasant. Although the accusatory man's opinions of him hadn't surprised him in the slightest, the defense he'd received from Hermione had.

He had known before that for some reason she tolerated him. He hadn't realized, however, that she considered him a friend. It was really quite remarkable that she would. What was also remarkable was that her declaration of friendship had warmed his heart.

He wasn't exactly sure if he was happy about that feeling or not. He'd worked hard to bury his emotions. Being a spy had ensured the need of that. Since his awakening from the snake bite, he'd still kept those emotions buried, protective of them. He'd been hurt too many times to just let himself be duped by his former friends. Because of Dumbledore's plan, they were supposed to have thought him the worst possible person. Despite that fact, it had still dismayed Severus that everyone was so quick to accept him as evil. No one had seemed to question his motives for killing Dumbledore. It was then that he'd realized even those who professed to be his friends truly weren't. It was at that moment of realization that he'd felt the most alone that he ever had.

So, this sudden declaration of friendship had caught him by surprise. He didn't know what to think of it. Could Hermione Granger be a true friend, or would she become just like everyone else who knew him...quick to judge with no true faith in him?

He pushed down the spark of hope that had lit within him. He was not one to let himself hope for things... they never went his way.

Still, perhaps a little faith in her would be appropriate. She'd only treated him with respect. Perhaps she was being genuine in her proclamation that they were friends. Perhaps...

Severus rounded the corner, then ducked back into the shadows. The Duvall boy was in the hallway, crouched low with his wand extended. Severus watched him curiously, wondering what mischief the boy was up to. A spell left the young man's wand, and Severus heard a squeal coming from the corner Duvall was facing.

He rushed up to the boy. "Mr. Duvall, what is it you are doing?"

Severus peered over the boy, who had turned abruptly and stared at him smugly. Over Duvall's shoulder, he saw a rat trembling on the ground.

"You are torturing animals?" he asked in amazement.

"The rat deserved it. Ran out right in front of me," Duvall explained haughtily.

Severus felt apprehension surge through him. If Duvall cursed rats just for being rats, what would he do when the other students came along?

"You are to control your urges to lash out, Mr. Duvall. This behavior is unacceptable."

Roland Duvall straightened up. "Yes, sir," he said.

At least the boy still has respect left.

"Ten points from Slytherin. Go back to your common room. I do not want to see you out again tonight."

"Yes, sir," the young man said.

He watched Duvall turn and grumble to himself about not being able to have any fun. He stared after the boy warily. If this was his idea of fun, they were in for a rough year. He hoped Minerva wouldn't be proven wrong for her soft heart.

A/N: Many thanks to my wonderful beta, slytherinlaurel. And thanks to talesofsnape for the beautiful banner! You rock!

All I can say is... just when he's starting to trust...

Chapter 12



Chapter 12

Severus had Conjured up a bench today. He sat on it, sulking, while Red perched calmly next to him. Her head was tilted to the side as she looked at him. She wasn't sure what to do with him. He hadn't been this despondent in weeks. His head was cradled in his hands, and his fingers were tangled in his hair. Red decided to settle next to him to let him know that she was here for him as he agonized over whatever it was that was bothering him.

"Five days..." he muttered. "Five days and then everything will be back to the way it was."

Red butted his side with her head. Severus ignored her. "*They* will come back and will look at me as if I'm a pariah. They will mutter behind my back and make up foolish songs about my hair. I am so tired of this, Red. I hate teaching; I hate the students; and they hate me. Why didn't I just die on the floor of that bloody shack?"

Red hopped up and began to screech repeatedly. She flapped her wings and hopped up and down on the bench. Severus lifted his head and looked at her quizzically. He quickly looked away and buried himself once again in his depression.

"I don't know why I was so eager to survive. I should have just let the Dark Lord end my life. It's what I deserved anyway."

Red hopped onto Severus' shoulder and pecked him on the head.

"Ow! Red! Stop that!" Severus snapped irritably.

She hopped back and flapped her wings at Severus.

"Screech!"

Severus sighed. "You're right, what's done is done. My worthless existence goes on whether I want it to or not."

"Screech!"

Severus' head snapped over to Red. His face was pained when he spoke. "I will continue to be the most hated teacher, the most hated colleague, the most hated man at Hogwarts. I don't know why I thought anything would be different. Who can forgive a murderer?"

Red was at a loss as to how to react. How could she convince the man in front of her that he had worth? Perhaps a tirade would help? She proceeded to go ballistic. Soaring into the air, she circled Severus' head a few times before flying even higher. In an instant, she'd turned and plunged straight down, almost hitting Severus as she righted herself and sailed only inches over his head. She haughtily landed on the ground in front of him, turning and screeching at him for several minutes straight. In her own way, she told him just how much she admired him. Hoping to convince him that he wasn't as awful as he insisted, she continued her rant. Severus watched her as she threw her tirade, an odd look on his face.

Finally, she calmed and began to preen her feathers. Severus smirked, although he seemed almost reluctant to show it. He patted the seat next to him.

"Come back up," he instructed.

With a hop and a flap of her wings, she was back next to Severus on the bench. Severus looked at her emotionally. "Thank you, Red," he choked out. "I'm glad there's at least one being who might be able to forgive me, if they could understand the truth about me."

Red butted her head into Severus' arm. He reached around and patted her. "How I wish you were human, Red. You make all my worries seem trivial."

"Screech!"

"Yes, I would imagine my worries really are trivial, and I'm obsessing about nothing. Thank you for making me see that."

Red butted his side. Severus smiled affectionately at her. She felt a warmth within her that she was sure he felt also.

"You should go," he told her. "I'm sure there's only so much depression you can take in one day."

Red opened her wings and looked at him as if to offer to stay longer.

"No, go on. I'm sure you have lots to do."

"Screech!"

Red took off and headed toward the castle.

Roland Duvall was walking near the Owlery when he spotted something flying from the direction of the lake. He walked toward it and squinted to see it clearly. It was some kind of bird, but it wasn't an owl. Roland hated birds of all kinds. He resented the owls and only used them in an emergency. They were dirty, smelly animals.

This bird that winged its way toward him was about as big as an owl, but more streamlined. Roland frowned at it. The bird did not belong here. There were enough owls winging around on a daily basis; there didn't need to be another large bird flying around. Something needed to be done. He lifted his wand and aimed at the nasty bird.

Severus kept his eye on Red as she flew away. He admired her grace as she occasionally flapped her wings once, then soared for a long distance. She was truly a magnificent bird.

Suddenly a great jet of white light flew towards Red. Severus' eyes widened as he leaned forward, watching in horror as the light hit her in the chest. She tumbled over and

over in the air and nosedived. Severus was up and running before she hit the ground.

Hermione had been lost in thought when the spell hit her. She felt her body tumble as she flapped her wings furiously to regain her balance. It was hopeless as she couldn't even tell which way was up.

Before she even had a chance to get her bearings, the ground rushed up at her, and she slammed down into it. She thought the spell to change her body back into her human form before she lost consciousness.

Roland Duvall grinned evilly as he watched the bird nosedive and tumble to the ground. That was one less feathered monstrosity to have to lay eyes upon. Then something caught his attention. The bird, which had landed about five hundred meters away from him, turned into a woman. His eyes grew wide as he realized exactly who he'd just hexed. Roland turned and ran for the castle as fast as he could.

Severus approached the area where he'd seen Red fall. He saw the Duvall boy high-tailing it back to the castle at lightning speed. So, he was the one who'd sent the hex. Severus worriedly turned his attention back to where Red had fallen. Where he'd assumed he'd find the bird, a body lay crumpled on the ground. Severus stopped short of the body and stared at it.

"Hermione," he whispered before he rushed to her side.

Turning her over, he noted a large black burn on her robes. Suddenly, everything was clear. Red was no mere falcon. Hermione Granger was an Animagus, and Roland Duvall had just shot her from the sky.

Without thinking about what all of this meant to him, Severus stooped low and lifted Hermione from the ground. He rushed to the castle and within a few minutes had the woman lying on a bed in the hospital wing. He called out for Poppy.

The mediwitch came bustling out of her office and gawked at Hermione's still form.

"What on earth happened?" Poppy cried.

"Duvall hexed her when she was in her Animagus form."

Poppy looked to Severus curiously. "She's an Animagus?"

"Yes, it's news to me, too, but she's hurt, Poppy. Please help her."

Poppy went to work as Severus walked over to the Floo. He threw some powder into it and called out to Minerva. He explained that Hermione was injured, then stepped back to let Minerva come through. She appeared within seconds. Glancing over at Hermione she gasped.

"Good heavens, what's happened?" Minerva cried.

"Your star pupil, Duvall, thinks it's funny to hex birds in flight!"

"She was in her falcon form when Duvall shot her?" Minerva cried.

"You knew she was an Animagus?" Severus asked.

"Who do you think trained her? She just registered last week. Why on earth would that boy do such a thing?"

Severus scowled. "I told you, Minerva, it was a mistake to bring him back here. Now he's almost killed a teacher. What do you intend to do about this?"

Minerva bristled at Severus. "I intend to see how Professor Granger is, and then I will deal with Mr. Duvall!"

Severus settled down a bit. Both professors turned to Madam Pomfrey and Hermione. Minerva stepped up closer to the bed.

"How is she, Poppy?"

"She's got multiple bone fractures, and her heart has been weakened by the spell. I'm not sure if she'll make it or not. It all depends on whether I can stabilize her heart."

"Keep me up to date on her condition," Minerva advised. Glancing at Severus, she gave him a measured look. "I will go find Mr. Duvall." Turning, Minerva left the infirmary.

Severus eyed Poppy as she bustled around Hermione, administering potions and waving her wand over her rapidly. He pulled up a chair and sat down to wait. He looked on in worry, but part of him was furious.

Hermione Granger was his falcon. She had duped him since her arrival, and he had let his true self be seen by her. How she must have *laughed* at him each time she'd finished one of her voyeuristic sessions. She was no better than the rest of them, constantly looking for something to gossip about. Well, she'd scored the jackpot with him, hadn't she? He could see her now, chuckling as she flew away from him every day. He knew what she was thinking. Oh, he knew!

Snape is a mess, yes, he is! Hah, hah, look at how he whines and hates himself. What an oaf! No wonder nobody wants to be near him!

Enraged, Severus stood. His whole body shook, and his hands were clenched together into fists. He had never felt so humiliated in all his life.

"I will be in my room," he snarled at Poppy, causing her to look up at him sharply. "Alert me when she is stable."

Poppy nodded. Severus turned and stalked stiffly out of the infirmary.

Several hours later, a despondent Severus Snape sat alone in his darkened room. When Dumbledore had asked him what was wrong, he'd shot a silencing spell at the frame where the portrait insisted on lurking. Since then, only his bleak thoughts had kept him company while he sat morosely staring at the fire. He hadn't felt so deceived for a very, very long time.

The fireplace lit at last, and Poppy's face glowed in it.

"She's stable, Severus. She'll be conscious by morning, but will have to stay in the infirmary until school starts."

"Thank you," Severus muttered quietly and watched the light wink out in the fireplace.

He took his wand and cast a spell. The fireplace crumbled into a heap of rubble.

"Blasted nosy, insidious woman," he mumbled under his breath. "How dare she?! Who does she think she is, spying on me like that?" Severus sniffed. "This whole thing smells of Minerva."

Rising from his chair, he stalked out of his room and up to the Headmistress' office.

"Minerva!" Snape spat as he hammered on the office door.

Severus' face was so livid when he arrived that the gargoyle didn't even wait for the password, it just opened the passageway. Severus took the stairs two at a time.

"Minerva, open up!" Lowering his fist, he glowered at the door.

It finally opened to reveal a frowning Minerva McGonagall.

"You told her to do this, didn't you?" Severus snarled.

Minerva rolled her eyes. "It's been too long a day to deal with your temper, Severus. Either speak to me civilly, or we can take up whatever is bothering you in the morning."

"Granger! You told her to spy on me in her Animagus form, didn't you?"

Minerva gave him an odd look. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, come on!" Severus spat. "This just reeks of your interference. She comes to me every day. She pretends to like me and coerces me to spill my soul to her!"

Minerva eyed him curiously. Her response to him dripped of sarcasm. "Severus, I don't think Hermione, as a falcon, was able to coerce you to do anything you didn't already want to do."

Severus balled his fists. When he finally spoke again, his voice was quiet, yet strained. "That's beside the point. Are you, or are you not, to blame for this?"

"I had no idea she was visiting you, Severus," Minerva declared with a huff. "Now get out of my sight. If you must, go hole up in that room of yours. You are excused from dinner just for tonight! Maybe you can be more civil in the morning!" With that, she slammed the door in Severus' face.

Severus stared at the closed door. He heaved huge breaths and opened and closed his fists. If he didn't release some of this pent up rage, he was sure to go insane. Wheeling around, he stalked down the stairs and back out into the hallway. He turned and made his way up to the seventh floor.

His boots clacked sharply along the stone floor as he stalked to the Room of Requirement. He was in a destructive mood. After three passes by the room, a door appeared. He yanked it opened and smirked for the first time that afternoon. The room was filled with furniture.

Severus closed the door behind him and withdrew his wand. In an instant a dresser had exploded in front of him. He turned to the left and shot a hex at a couch. It, too, exploded, making tufts of fabric and foam fly into the air and rain down upon his head. Severus sneered.

"Stupid witch!" he spat as he blasted a table, which flew apart in all directions. His voice stayed low and menacing as he continued to shoot at the furniture.

"Trying to make a fool out of me!" He shot at a recliner, sending it crashing into the wall. "She will be sorry she ever landed on my shoulder!" He turned a nightstand into sawdust.

"That's what you get, Snape! That's what you get for trusting someone." Another table splintered into a million pieces. "You are nothing but a fool!" A bookcase disintegrated in front of his eyes. "She is nothing but a deceitful gossip!" He destroyed a bed stand.

A mirror was hanging on the wall. He went over to it and glared at his reflection. "Fool! You let her know how very broken you are! You let her in, and now she knows *exactly* what you are! You did this!" he snarled as he pointed at his reflection. "You and your need to trust something! You should have known better!" He stepped closer and gave himself a menacing look. "Why didn't you figure it out? What bird could act that way and *not* be an Animagus? How blind can you be? The answer was staring you in the face the whole time... mocking you!" Turning, he stalked away from the mirror. "Oh, you were so blind! Idiot! Stupid idiot! You are nothing but a fool!"

He turned back and shot off a spell that shattered the mirror. Turning to the rest of the room, he shot his wand at whatever he could see. Each word he spoke was now emphasized with a blast from his wand.

"You... are... nothing... but... a... fool!"

Smoke rose from the demolished furniture. Everything in the room had been turned to rubble, yet Severus was not appeased. "More," he demanded.

The room provided more. It took Severus over an hour to rid himself of his anger and return to his room. He fixed his fireplace before going to bed, drank a potion he hadn't needed to use for weeks, and slept a dreamless sleep.

A/N: Many thanks and a big hug to my beta, slytherinlaurel. She's awesomely amazing. To talesofsnape, who designed this banner, thank you! You're wonderful!

Well, you all knew it was coming. Now to see what comes of it!

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 of 21

Hermione recovers and is released from the infirmary.

Chapter 13

Hermione slowly opened her eyes and looked around. Recognizing the hospital wing, she struggled to get up. Madam Pomfrey had been awaiting her. She stood from her chair and placed her hands firmly on Hermione's shoulders.

"Now, Professor, lie still. You still have much healing to do."

Hermione gave Poppy a curious look. "What happened?" she asked weakly.

"Roland Duvall hit you with an Incapacitating Spell while you were flying in your Animagus form. You have severe chest injuries, and your heart was weakened by the spell. I've mended all your broken bones, but they will cause you some pain as they finish healing."

"My heart was injured?" Hermione asked. Everything was coming back to her now: the flight away from Severus, then the bolt that had hit and sent her into a tailspin. She remembered crashing to the ground and making herself transform before she lost consciousness.

"Yes. I've done everything I can to strengthen your heart, but you will have to be careful not to overexcite yourself for the next month or two. It could cause a heart attack."

"I didn't think wizards suffered from heart attacks," Hermione mused.

"They do," the mediwitch answered as she bustled about Hermione, checking vitals with her wand. "It's just very rare. With a heart injury like yours, you are susceptible to them."

"Will I have to deal with this for the rest of my life?"

Poppy shook her head. "No, the potion I administered is very potent. It will heal your heart fully in two months. After that, you won't have to worry anymore."

Hermione nodded absently. "Who found me?"

"Professor Snape brought you in."

Hermione's eyes grew wide. "Oh, no," she mumbled under her breath.

"It's a good thing he found you so quickly," Poppy continued. "Your injuries were severe, and you wouldn't have been able to survive very long without treatment."

"So, he knows I'm an Animagus?"

Poppy looked at Hermione crossly. "You almost died, and all you can worry about is whether Severus Snape knows that you're an Animagus?"

Hermione looked duly chastened. "Sorry, it's just that I wanted to tell him myself."

"Well, he knows now. Perhaps you should have told him awhile ago." Poppy bustled around the bed and took a potion off the side table. "Drink this."

Hermione reached for it and downed the potion.

"It's a Calming Draught. You need to rest, Hermione. You'll be able to get out of the infirmary in a couple days, once your bones have fully healed."

"But, Madam Pomfrey, I need to go..."

Poppy put a finger up to shush her. "No, you will do as I say. I will get you some books to occupy your time, but you must not get out of bed until your bones have properly mended."

Hermione frowned, but nodded solemnly.

"Now, lie down and get some rest," Poppy ordered before turning and disappearing into her office.

Hermione settled down in the bed.

Awakening awhile later, Hermione found Minerva sitting in a chair next to her. The older witch noticed the younger one's movements and placed a comforting hand upon hers.

"Hermione, I'm so glad you're okay. Rest assured that Roland Duvall has been expelled."

Hermione grasped Minerva's hand. "What on earth was he thinking?" she asked.

"He claims that he was just having some fun with a wild animal. I don't think the Ministry finds that excuse justifiable for his actions, so they have charged him with assault. I insisted he get an evaluation at St. Mungo's. The boy is quite disturbed and will be spending awhile there. Hopefully they can sort him out and help him to control his anger and outbursts."

Hermione frowned. "Isn't the Ministry being a bit harsh? He had no way of knowing I was a professor."

Minerva gave a quick nod. "The Ministry will drop the charge if he makes progress at St. Mungo's. The boy has a lot to work through. I hope he can find some inner peace at the hospital."

Hermione shook her head. "I hope so, too. It seems I was just unlucky to be anywhere in his vicinity," she muttered.

Ignoring her musings, Minerva gave Hermione a measured look. "Severus came by my office yesterday, accusing me of sending you to spy on him."

Hermione's eyes grew wide, and she groaned. With a sigh, she turned to Minerva and explained everything.

"I'm sorry, Minerva. It all came about rather suddenly. I stumbled upon Severus in my Animagus form, and he talked to me." She narrowed her eyes as she thought of her encounters with Severus. "He opened up and spoke of things I knew he would never tell anybody else." Shaking her head, she continued. "I should have told him it was me, but I knew that he would seal himself up if he knew who I was. I chose to let him vent his frustrations."

She gave Minerva a determined look. "I had every intention of telling him."

"Hmm... and when did you intend to do that?" Minerva asked, not unkindly.

Hermione's shoulders sagged. "I don't know. The longer things went on, the harder it was to figure out when would be the time to tell him. I would have told him before school started, though." The doubting look from Minerva caused her to wince. "I know, it's only a few days away. I was just putting it off as long as possible." She looked to her hands forlornly. "I've really messed everything up, haven't I?"

Minerva patted her hand in sympathy. "Hermione, he's quite furious. Maybe with time he can forgive you."

"I'll need to apologize to him first."

"Yes, you will. Keep your chin up, and be brave. Remember, Severus' bark is considerably worse than his bite."

Hermione looked down into her lap. "Yes, I know, but that doesn't make our upcoming encounter any easier."

It was the morning of the Welcoming Feast, and Hermione had finally been freed from the infirmary. She walked away from the doors of the hospital wing and headed straight for the dungeons. She needed to speak with Severus; the sooner the better.

Reaching her destination, she rapped loudly on Severus' door. The door opened a minute later, and she found Severus Snape glaring at her as if she were the most hated person in the world.

"Severus, I came to apologize," she said.

Severus scowled at her. "There's no need. I'm sure you are disappointed that your little game is up, and you can no longer laugh at my expense. I do not need your false remorse at being found out."

"Severus, you don't understand..."

"What's not to understand, Professor? You took advantage of me when I was vulnerable. I assure you it will never happen again."

"That wasn't my intent."

His eyes narrowed at her. "Do not attempt to cover your duplicity. You are just like your friends, constantly trying to meddle where you're not wanted. Now leave my sight. I have important things to do."

Hermione reached out for Severus' arm. He flinched and glared at her.

"I said leave!"

She stood frozen in front of him. She didn't know what to say to convince him of her sincerity. Finally, she decided to let the matter drop... for now.

"I'm sorry, Severus. I'll leave you alone."

Turning, she hurried away. Her mind whirled as she contemplated what she could do. At this point, she was totally at a loss as to how she could mend the result of her foolish actions.

Severus slammed the door after Hermione. He stalked away and began to pace around his lounge. Frowning deeply, he moved back and forth, trying to calm his rage.

The nerve of her, coming down here and expecting everything to be all right between the two of us.

She'd been caught in her deception, and he would not let her get away with fooling him a second time. She'd gone on and on about caring for her friends and never doing anything to hurt them.

*Friends. She said we were friends. **Friends** don't lie to one another. She has been fooling me all along. Oh, how she must have enjoyed seeing me at my worst. She will not get another chance, that is certain.*

He grimaced. Why he'd even been nice to her was now beyond him. He knew better. He knew that no one thought of him in a good way. *Why would she? How could she?* He turned and paced across the room once more.

No matter. I will not let her laugh at me again. She claimed that she didn't like two-faced people. She has been more two-faced than anyone! Deceit, that is all she is capable of, not the friendship she claims she feels. How despicable can she be? I want nothing to do with her!

As far as he was concerned, if he never laid eyes on Hermione Granger again, it would be too soon. He turned and extinguished the light in his room after finally settling in his chair by the fire.

At least she seems to have recuperated...

Not that I care...

It's just that she's a fellow colleague...

He frowned. *Just a colleague. Just like all the rest of my colleagues. Worse, even. She has proven herself to be a deceptive, gossip-mongering woman, and I will have nothing more to do with her... ever.*

Hermione had retreated to her room. Her mind was racing; her heart felt leaden. She'd known Severus would shun her when the truth came out, but now that it had, the reality of it was making her morose. She fought to calm herself down so her heart would not become overworked. Sitting down on her sofa, she tried to settle down.

Come on, Hermione, deep breaths!

She breathed for a little while, trying to think of calming thoughts. It worked well enough that her heart didn't feel like a dead weight within her chest anymore. Still, all she wanted to do was throw herself on her bed and cry her eyes out. She'd really blown it, and she'd lost a good friend in the process.

He's more than a friend, and you know it.

She blinked. Why would she think such a thing? Of course he was only a friend!

Only a friend you want to envelop in your arms and hold until the world ends.

Well, he needed a good hug. That's all that desire was. He needed comfort. She was good at giving comfort.

You want more than that; you're just afraid to admit it.

Fear... yes, she was fearful. She had been since the minute she'd concocted that stupid plan. Now her fears had been validated. She no longer had a friend in Severus Snape.

A great gasping sob escaped from her as she threw her head into her hands. Still the voice in her head assaulted her with thoughts she'd rather not think about right now.

You wouldn't be crying like this if he were only a friend. You have fallen for a man who hates you.

More bitter tears fell from her eyes. "And there's nothing I can do about it. He'll never forgive me. He'll hate me forever," she whimpered.

And you'll just keep on loving him despite all that, won't you? You knew the odds. You knew how he felt about himself, but that didn't stop you from letting your heart be stolen by him.

"Oh, shut up!"

He can never love anyone unless he finds acceptance of himself.

She cringed and wiped the tears from her eyes. It was a futile effort. More just took their place.

Whether he finds acceptance of himself or not, you will not be the one he looks to for love. You've totally destroyed any and everything good in your relationship.

"Oh, what have I done? I've ruined everything!"

She slid off the sofa and collapsed onto the floor. She couldn't take it anymore. She'd ruined her budding relationship with a man who she was utterly and hopelessly in love with. It had taken his caustic glares and yelling to make her realize the truth about her feelings for Severus Snape. She was doomed...doomed to be miserable because she'd been too proud and sure she could fix everything. What a fool she'd been.

Her heart was tightly wound, and her head began to feel fuzzy.

Oh, no! I don't need to give myself a heart attack!

She fought hard to control herself. She did the deep breathing that had seemed to calm her before. It helped, but the tears still came.

Think of something else! You're killing yourself, you dolt!

Thoughts of a conversation she'd had with Severus while in her bird form flew into her head.

No! That's not going to help!

Despite her plea, the memory ran its course.

"Lily..." Severus murmured as he gazed across the lake. "How I wish you were still alive."

Red butted his chest as she sat in his lap. He was stroking her absently.

"She was beautiful, Red. She had red hair like you and the most beautiful, green eyes. I loved her, but she didn't love me. She fell for another... my enemy, no less. How's that for irony?"

Red screeched and headbutted him again.

"I acted the fool. I hung on to a dream... a memory... a... wish." Severus' eyes narrowed as he sat deep in thought. "For far too long," he murmured.

Pulling out of the memory, she slowed her breathing more. She was beginning to feel lightheaded. She emptied her mind and thought only of the breaths she was taking. In... out... in... out... in... out. Reaching into her pocket she pulled out one of the vials Poppy had given her. She downed the Calming Draught and hoped it would be enough to settle her heart.

A bitter thought entered her head.

"I will be just like him... longing for a love I can't possibly have."

A/N: Man, when you saw the angst warning above, you really had no idea what you were getting yourself into, right? Thank you all for reading and for the lovely responses of those who choose to review. I treasure every single comment.

A heartfelt thanks to my beta, slytherinlaurel, who's amazingly fantastic.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 of 21

Students arrive.



Hermione had taken a long while to recover from her anxiety attack. She'd lain on the floor, covered in sweat, just breathing while tears streamed down her face. Once her heart had slowed to a normal pace, she'd continued to let the tears fall. They'd gone on for quite awhile before she'd gotten fed up with her melancholy, 'woe-is-me' mood. Wiping the tears from her eyes, she'd gone into her bathroom to take a shower, emerging awhile later feeling almost human again.

Now she entered the Great Hall purposefully. She gazed around her at the candles that floated in the air and at the tables set up in rows, awaiting the arrival of the students. Stopping suddenly, she eyed her chair next to Severus. He was already seated, drumming his fingers on the table, obviously awaiting the students' arrival for the feast.

Should I find a different place to sit? Hermione thought. Perusing the table, she noted that there was a space next to Trelawney. Hermione frowned. *She'll drive me to drink within a week. No, I made this mess, I'll struggle through it. He can't treat me any worse than when I was a student.*

With that thought, she made her way to her regular seat. Putting her bravest face forward, she nodded at Severus and said hello. She received cold silence for her efforts. Hermione chose to ignore him, turning to chat with Filius Flitwick instead. Her subconscious, however, kept careful watch on the dour man beside her. Severus continued to drill his fingers on the table. When the students started to file in, she saw him visibly tense up. He began to scowl as he saw students look towards him and whisper. Hermione wasn't sure whether they were talking about him or not, but she understood what Severus must be thinking.

Hermione noted Ginny Weasley and Luna Lovegood walking in together.

Goodness! I almost forgot they were going to be here this year! It's so good to see them. She frowned a bit, then. *I'm supposed to keep a professional relationship with all students... that means Ginny and Luna too. Oh, well, I can still talk with them; I just can't be as close to them as I'd like. It's only for a year. It would have been nice to have some girlfriends my age to chat with, though.*

Her gaze moved farther back into the hall where she saw some second-year Gryffindors point at Severus and whisper. They were definitely talking about him, but were they speaking harshly? The children's eyes widened as they looked upon Severus. It seemed more amazement than derision. She noted Severus' deep scowl and heaviness filled her heart. Angry with her or not, she couldn't just sit there and let him stew. Her hand shot over to his arm.

"Don't do this to yourself, Severus," she admonished. "They respect you."

Severus glared at her and pulled his arm away.

"Do not pretend to know more about me than you do, Professor Granger," he snapped.

She knew that the only reason she wasn't bawling right now was because she'd cried for so long in her room. Hermione blanched at Severus' remark but continued to observe him. She saw the pain in his eyes as he followed the movements of the students to their respective house tables. He clenched his fists in frustration. Her heart sank as she wished she hadn't ruined their tentative friendship, knowing that it could be something of a comfort to him. Would they ever regain what they'd started? She'd only wanted to help him, but in her efforts, she'd managed to hurt him more.

Good going! When will you ever learn that your desire to help is inversely affected by your belief that you know what's best for everyone?

Withdrawing into herself, she fell into self-berating. She didn't notice Minerva rising to give the welcome speech, nor did she hear the Headmistress introduce her as the new Transfiguration professor. A sharp nudge from Flitwick brought Hermione back to the present, and she rose and waved to the students. Sitting down, she regressed back to her dark thoughts. The feast went along without her, and before she knew it, everyone was rising and retiring to their rooms. She followed suit and once there, immediately went over to her desk.

Pulling out parchment and quill, she sat down and started a letter to Severus. She frowned as her words began to complete themselves.

Severus,

If you activate take the time to ready this and not buttress it on sight, I wander to thank

"What on earth? I didn't write that!"

She eyed the senseless statement carefully, examining the parchment it was written on. It was the new one she'd just bought from Scrivenshaft's: the self-correcting parchment. She'd not had a chance to try it out since the trip to Hogsmeade. She quickly vanished the whole thing while shaking her head. Obviously, there were a few kinks to work out with the new parchment. If she hadn't felt so melancholy, she would have chuckled.

Pulling out a new parchment, she ensured that it was the normal kind and began again. Severus may not listen to her, but she would explain herself to him. He could do what he wanted to the letter, but she would sleep better knowing that she'd apologized and told him why she'd done what she had. She was an optimist, so she would hope for the best.

Severus slammed his door and stalked into his bedroom. His hands were balled into fists, and his breathing was coming in short bursts. Between the students and their vile stares and Hermione's attempt to manipulate the situation, he was ready to throw hexes again. He moved to his bed and sat down heavily. Dropping his head into his hands, he let his fingers grip his hair tightly. This was so much worse than he'd even imagined.

*Will they all stare at me forever? Will **she** continue to goad me?*

His hands tugged at his hair all the harder. He was tempted to pull every last strand out.

He pictured Hermione's concerned look as she'd placed her hand on his arm during the feast. She was good, he'd give her that. If he didn't know better, he'd think she really was worried about him.

He chuckled to himself in irony. "She was just looking for a good laugh, you dunderhead," he said to himself. "I've given her enough material to last a lifetime," he whispered to himself bitterly.

His hands slid from his hair and covered his face. Sighing heavily, he let his shoulders sag forward as the rest of his body slumped down. He felt utterly defeated.

"I thought she was different...."

He stayed that way for a long time, his mind racing with ugly thoughts.

I should have never trusted her, but I enjoyed her company. She was becoming a friend to me. How could I have been so foolish as to let her get close to me like that? Why did she even bother? She knew what I was like; she knew how broken I was.

He frowned. *Her words were all lies. She kept her Animagus form from me so I would babble on about my pain. What kind of woman does that?*

His hands fell from his face. He looked up, misery in his eyes. "Everything she said was just a ruse to get me to show my weakness. She just wanted to goad me into showing what a mess I am. She must be incredibly disappointed that her trickery didn't work."

His mind argued with his logic. A niggling doubt whispered and caressed his psyche. His thoughts flashed to Hermione's vehement defense of him in Hogsmeade. That episode was a bit difficult to explain away. *Why would someone who was trying to make fun of me defend me in such a way? It wasn't the first time, either....* Clenching his fist, he slammed it into his open palm. Pushing any doubt far from his mind, he grit his teeth. "It doesn't matter. She has proven herself to be untrustworthy. She will not trick me again!"

He rose and stalked into the bathroom. He quickly disrobed and stepped into the shower. The water coursed over his body as Severus let his head drop back, allowing the water to beat upon his scalp. He put Hermione Granger out of his mind. She didn't deserve all the time he'd spent agonizing over her. His head came forward to let the water pound into his back. Steam surrounded him, and he breathed it in deeply. His eyes closed as he got lost in the feeling of the hot water pounding his skin.

A long time later, he regretfully pulled himself from the shower. After toweling off his hair, he slipped into his favorite robe, smirking at the burgundy color. He knew there would be a scandal among the faculty if they ever found out he liked a color so close to Gryffindor red. He arched an eyebrow. Perhaps he should parade around in it just for laughs?

He went back to his bed and settled into it, his back propped against the headboard. Pulling his teaching plans from his bedside table, he began to look over his notes for the next day. His trepidation at the reception he'd get from the students, however, caused him to lose his concentration repeatedly. His eyes wandered away from the page and stared off, unseeing.

The students will revile me.... At least as Headmaster I didn't have to see them in a classroom setting. It was hard enough receiving the cold stares from those bold enough to even look at me while walking through the halls.

I deserved it, though. I did something horrible. It hasn't ceased to be horrible, has it? Despite the true motives of my actions, they were still abominable. Everything I've done has been abominable.

His eyes came into focus, and he frowned intensely. Placing his lesson plans on the bed beside him, he got up and stormed into his lounge. Heading over to the fireplace, he scowled at the portrait carefully hung above it. Snatching it from its place, he glowered at the old man who was pretending to sleep.

"Why are you always here, Albus? Don't you have a larger portrait in which to waste away eternity?"

Albus' eyes opened, and he gazed at Severus. "You seem troubled, my boy."

Severus ignored the obvious bid for him to share his feelings. "Why?" he stated sharply.

"Why what, son?"

"I told you before, I am not your son. Why did you make me kill you?"

Albus' eyebrows creased. "I thought that was all clear."

"The only thing that was clear was that you wanted me to be the most hated wizard in our world. Why else would you have me strike down the most beloved one?"

"The plan, Severus. We had to follow the plan."

Severus' grip on the portrait tightened. "Who said that was the only way to accomplish your Machiavellian plan? Who said that I would have to do something so heinous I still cannot get over it? Who said that my life was so much less than yours that it could be sacrificed for your own devices?"

Albus lifted his hands in appeasement. "Now, Severus, you were agreeable to this."

Severus' eyes narrowed. He was tempted to snap the frame in half, but he wasn't done with his old taskmaster quite yet. "I was never agreeable to this. We argued endlessly over it. You ignored everything I said. I know you find me repulsive, but..."

Albus protested emphatically. "That's not it, Severus. I think of you as a son."

"A son who disgusts you, right? You've told me that repeatedly, or has your dead mind forgotten the details of that?"

"You are not..."

"Do not lie, *Albus!*" he chided sharply. "Was this some sort of punishment? Did you think that because I had once sided with the enemy that you needed to make me suffer for it? Did you not think that all that I had done prior to that one moment on the Astronomy tower was punishment enough?"

"Severus!"

"Did you not understand that I lay awake at night, berating myself for my foolish actions as a youth? Because of me, the woman I loved was killed. Was that not punishment enough for you, Dumbledore?" Severus was trembling now, he was so incensed.

"I wasn't trying to punish you! I was dying anyway."

Severus pulled the portrait up to his face and glared at it. "There were other ways you could have died! Why did you insist that I take it upon myself? Were you secretly hoping that I would be killed for it?"

Albus sputtered.

"That's it, isn't it? You wanted me dead, too!"

"I never wanted..."

"Then why? Why did it have to be my hand that struck you down?"

"It secured..."

"It secured my place! Yes, I know that. Do you know what else it secured? The hatred of everyone around me!"

"Severus, you are exaggerating. I do believe that perhaps it's your hatred of yourself that is spurring this argument. No one hates you. You are projecting your own feelings about yourself onto others. I've spoken with Minerva. She's concerned for you. So is the rest of the staff. They are your friends."

Severus sneered. "Friends? They barely talk to me! I am an outcast in what should be my own home, and it's because of you!" He stabbed the portrait mercilessly.

Albus looked to Severus knowingly. "This has to do with Professor Granger, doesn't it?"

"Everything is not about Granger!" he snapped.

"The children returning, then? Do you think they will treat you badly? Surely, Severus, you are used to that."

Severus' hand shook harder with rage. "Why do you think they treat me thusly?"

"Well, I assume it's because of your surly attitude."

"It's because of you, you idiot! It doesn't matter why I killed you; I am a murderer! I can never escape that. Because of you, I can never find acceptance in this world, and I am trapped within it."

Albus looked sternly at Severus. "You need to stop feeling sorry for yourself. That is when you will find acceptance, because you won't be condemning yourself."

"Can you not take responsibility for anything, you pitiful excuse for a wizard?" Severus scowled at the painted man looking sternly at him. "I am done with you. You cannot give me a good reason why you have made me suffer, and you insist on berating me for things beyond my control. Burn in hell for all I care!"

With that, he flung the portrait into the flames. He watched in satisfaction as Dumbledore shouted and ran from the portrait. Severus could have sworn Dumbledore's robes were singed as he made his escape.

Severus stood there until the frame was nothing but ashes, all the while what Dumbledore had said repeated itself in his head. Shaking his head, he pushed it away. The old man had never tried to truly help him in the past, why would he begin now?

Glaring into the fireplace, a smirk crept onto his mouth. He eyed the burning cinders, feeling a weight lift from him. He'd destroyed Albus Dumbledore once again. Unlike the brutal murder he'd committed before; this act had given him a sense of accomplishment. He felt lighter than he'd felt in months. Burning Albus had truly felt exhilarating.

A/N: Thanks to talesofsnape for the squeefully beautiful banner! Hugs to slytherinlaurel for the wonderful beta job.

Chapter 15

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The first days of school keep our teachers busy.



Chapter 15

Severus rose, showered, and dressed quickly, preparing himself for the first day of classes. It was a day he was dreading already. There would be no stopping the dunderheads from making their snide remarks. He would be liberal with detentions if he heard any of them outright, that was certain, but he could never be sure of what they were saying when they weren't in his presence.

Staring into the mirror, he did up the last few buttons on his suit coat. Truly, the students' attitudes were inconsequential. He was used to such treatment because he knew what everyone said about him. It didn't matter that his hair was now squeaky clean; they would call him a greasy git for the rest of his life. Even if he chose to leave his cape unworn, there would always be chants of 'bat-of-the-dungeons' aimed at him. How he hated teaching those rotten, spiteful children.

He shook his head at himself. *Maybe I really died all those months ago, and this is my own personal hell?*

Turning, he grabbed his cape and swung it around himself. He was brought out of his maudlin thoughts by a soft tapping on the window. He strode over and found a school owl awaiting entry. He let the bird in and took the parchment from it. The owl immediately flew off. He looked down at the folded parchment with his name written across it. He knew that handwriting. After six years of essays, he'd recognize it anywhere. Frowning, he threw the letter on his desk and left the room. Hermione bloody Granger could wait for him to get around to reading her letter. She would not force herself on him again.

Severus stalked into his classroom as the students all sat as straight as possible, facing front. His robes billowed behind him as he made his way to the front of the class, not eyeing anyone. Turning, he surveyed the room. The students seemed duly attentive. His eyes wandered to the back, where an Auror stood with arms folded and foot tapping. Severus scowled.

"Who might you be?" he directed at the Auror.

"You know exactly who I am, Snape!"

Severus glared before speaking tersely, "Class, may I introduce you to Auror Ronald Weasley? He has been appointed as guard dog in this classroom to ensure I don't turn any of you into blithering idiots, or even worse... Death Eaters."

"Might I have a word?" Ron asked politely.

"I am trying to run my class, Mr. Weasley."

"It will only take a minute, Professor."

Severus rolled his eyes. "Open your texts to page three-hundred and ninety-four and study the ways to disarm an opponent." He stalked to the back of the room and out into the hall closely followed by Ron.

"Look, Professor, this wasn't my idea," Ron said in a conciliatory tone. "I'm still in training and considered low man on the totem pole, so I've been assigned to you first. I know you're a total git, but you won't hurt the students."

Severus' eyebrow rose at Weasley's comment.

"I'll just stay quiet in the back, and you do your thing. I'm not here to judge your methods. Just do your job and the Ministry will leave you alone."

"I highly doubt that, Weasley."

"Well, that's the way it is. There'll be a different Auror for each day for a week. Then we'll only come around when you're doing Dark spell defense."

"Did you want to hold my hand? Direct my wand so it doesn't make any rash moves?"

Ron frowned. "Listen, Snape. This can be as difficult or as easy as you make it. Let's just get through the day, all right?"

"Or what? You'll throw me in Azkaban?"

"Just do your job. I'm sure you'd rather have a cushy teaching job than be behind bars."

Severus sneered at Ron. "I wouldn't be so sure, Weasley."

Spinning around, Severus stalked back into the room and began to teach. Ron remained in the back and observed, never saying another word to Severus.

All the better, Severus thought.

Severus entered his room much later in the day with a puzzled expression on his face. His classes had gone relatively well, and the students seemed to be somewhat respectful. There was the usual inattentiveness and chatter, but no one seemed to be glancing at him in either fear or loathing. Weasley had been quiet, and he'd even forgotten he was there for a time. Whatever could be the matter? He was truly at a loss.

Severus' eyes were brought to his desk where the discarded letter had sat since this morning. He walked over and picked it up, glaring at it, his mouth set in a deep frown. He was tempted to burn it instantly, but something within him begged for him to read it. *Foolish sentimentality*.

"What do you think is in here, old man? Could it be a heartfelt apology? An explanation about how she only was trying to help? And what would keep her from lying? Nothing at all."

Severus let the letter fall from his hands and drop back onto the desk top. He turned and went into his bedroom, closing the door behind him.

A silent dinner later found Severus once again in front of his desk, glaring at the letter. Hermione had strolled into the Great Hall with Weasley on her arm. He'd ignored the tightening in his chest at the sight of the two walking along, laughing and seeming like an old married couple. The disgusting display had continued as the mismatched pair had made their way to the opposite end of the table and chattered away without a care in the world. No one had sat next to Severus, so he'd quickly eaten and made a fast escape from the chatter of his coworkers and the students. Everyone had just been too chipper for his taste, and Weasley's caustic voice combined with Granger's seductive laughter had given him a headache.

The letter was right where he had left it. It seemed to mock him with its mere existence. He didn't lift it; he just glared. Perhaps if he glared hard enough, he could incinerate it with his stare. The paper sat forlornly on the desk, no sign of combustion in sight.

"Oh, for Merlin's sake!" he muttered through clenched teeth before finally snatching up the parchment.

He stalked over to his couch and threw himself onto it. Unfolding the letter, he began to read what was sure to be a pack of lies.

Severus,

If you actually take the time to read this and not burn it on sight, I wish to thank you. I cannot express to you how awful I feel. I'm sorry that my actions have caused you pain. I certainly had not intended for that to happen.

When I first stumbled upon you, it was the first day I'd been able to change form. I wasn't quite sure why, but you seemed to open up to me. I debated telling you who I was, but chose against it. I felt you might need someone who wouldn't judge you...or whom you felt wouldn't judge you...to unload upon.

I erred, Severus. I should have told you from the start who I was. Please forgive me. I didn't do it so I could gain knowledge against you. I didn't do it so I could laugh at you. I did it because I knew you needed to talk about how you felt but wouldn't do it with anyone else.

Your wariness of those around you is well founded. We have treated you shamefully.

Please know that my friendship as a human, and as a falcon, has always been sincere. I have never sought to expose you or your secrets. I will breathe none of what you've told me to a soul. I am still here for you if you'd like to talk about anything. I know you're not really one for talking, but sometimes it helps to unload. I will be here if you need that.

Please accept my apology, Severus, and know I didn't hurt you spitefully. I would never do anything to hurt you intentionally. I hope you can reach a time when just looking at me doesn't spark anger within you.

Yours,

Hermione Granger

Severus stared down at the letter for a long while, rereading it several times. He silently contemplated all she'd written. Part of him had leapt with joy at her words. He'd shoved that part down and buried it. Hope was not something that Severus Snape experienced. Hope had been his enemy for too long for him to take hold of it at this juncture in his life. No, he would not hope that she'd been sincere in her letter. That would definitely be too much to expect.

More likely, she was trying to ingratiate herself with him so she could get more dirt on him. Perhaps she and Rita Skeeter were working together. Maybe he'd open the *Prophet* in a couple of days and find an exposé on the 'Potions master who fell apart.'

Utter nonsense! his internal voice screamed at him. Even he knew that Skeeter and Granger did not get along. She would hardly be working with the reporter. He shook his head. *I am taking paranoia to a new level.*

There was no reason, though... no reason on earth... why she would want to help him. None at all. Despite that, a nagging feeling told him her letter was sincere. How he wished he could believe that! He already missed her friendship.

She does like to help others...

Why she would ever want to help him was beyond comprehension. His stomach clenched at the thought that she could possibly care about him in a minute way.

Severus Snape, you are a fool. No one cares for you in the slightest.

He felt his walls go up around him. No, he wouldn't let his guard down around her. She was dangerous. She knew too much and could exploit him in an instant. Whether this letter was sincere or not, he would not get himself involved with Hermione Granger again. Better to let her think he hated her. That would make her keep her distance.

He crumpled the letter into a ball and threw it into the air. It sailed across the room and landed in the corner. He left it to its solitude as he got up and returned to his bedroom, slamming the door behind him.

Hermione sat at her desk, preparing lessons for the next day. The first day of school had gone well for her. Her transformation had caused shocked looks from the first years and applause from all of her other classes. Unfortunately, the satisfaction she'd expected from the display was overshadowed by her misuse of her Animagus form with Severus. Nonetheless, her falcon-to-human switch had caught the attention of the students. Combined with her following Severus' admonition to be stern at the beginning of term, she'd gained their respect, which made the day fly by.

She'd been incredibly surprised to see Ron standing in the doorway when her last class was over. Greeting him with a big bear hug, she'd fussed over him and they'd gone to dinner, chatting until long after everyone else had cleared the room. It had been the first time since her arrival at Hogwarts she'd not taken notice of Severus Snape.

But now, despite her trying to prepare a lesson, her thoughts centered around him. Had he read her letter? If he had, he obviously didn't believe it, as she hadn't heard from him at all. She sighed heavily. It had been a long-shot, but she'd hoped things could be better between the two of them. Again, she felt forlorn in the loss of her friend.

A light knock disturbed her thoughts. She looked up and called for the person to enter. She was surprised to see Luna Lovegood standing there and smiling at her.

"Miss Lovegood! What a pleasant surprise!"

"Hi, Hermione," Luna responded dreamily.

Hermione smiled also. "Sorry, you'll need to address me as Professor Granger from now on, Luna."

"Well, that's why I stopped by."

Hermione looked at her curiously and motioned for her to pull a seat up to the desk. Luna grabbed a chair and moved it next to Hermione's. Hermione nodded for her to continue once she settled in.

"I've been asked to become a part-time apprentice for the year, so I can still call you Hermione as we're actually colleagues."

Hermione was surprised and excited in the same breath. "What are you apprenticing in, Luna?" she asked once she'd regained her composure. It wasn't that she found Luna's abilities lacking, far from it. It was just that being able to have one of her friends as basically a faculty member was more than she could have ever hoped for.

Luna smiled. "It's with Hagrid for Care of Magical Creatures."

Hermione smiled back. "That sounds perfect for you, Luna."

Luna nodded enthusiastically, then got a faraway look. "I hope Hagrid can help me figure out where to look for the Curly-haired Garooof."

Hermione held in her chuckle. "What's that, Luna?"

"Oh, it's a horse-like creature. It only stands three feet tall, and it's covered in curly hair. That's why it's called a Curly-haired Garooof, of course."

Hermione nodded. The two fell silent. Hermione's good mood at seeing Luna seemed to dissipate as thoughts of Severus flooded her mind once again.

"You're troubled," Luna mused.

Hermione's smile this time was more forced. "No, it's nothing."

"I noticed at dinner that Professor Snape was glaring at you."

Hermione snorted. "Leave it to you to see a thing like that."

"Is he angry with you?" Luna tilted her head and gazed curiously at Hermione.

Hermione looked down and fidgeted with her hands. "He's quite furious, actually. I don't think I can fix what I've done."

Luna's hand fell upon hers and squeezed it. "Don't worry, Hermione. He likes people to think he's one thing when he's actually the opposite."

"How do you know so much about him?"

Luna shrugged. "I spend a bit of time by myself. I like to watch people. Even last year I could see he wasn't all he wanted us to think he was."

Hermione thought about that. "Didn't you hate him because he killed Dumbledore?"

"I don't hate anybody."

Hermione gazed at her friend. She couldn't think of a single time she'd heard Luna badmouth anyone, even those who teased her or stole her shoes. She suddenly had a deep desire to become closer to the incredible witch who sat beside her.

"From the beginning I thought there might be another explanation for what he did to Dumbledore," Luna explained dreamily. "I admit I thought nargles had taken over his mind at first. I find the real reason much better, don't you think?"

Hermione smirked. "Yes, that does make much more sense, doesn't it?"

Luna nodded. "But anyway, he'll be all right with you. He seems to me to be the type that gets angry in public situations and then stewes about it. He'll lighten up."

Hermione shrugged. "I don't know, Luna. I shouldn't have done what I did."

"Hermione, I can't see you purposely hurting anyone."

Shaking her head, Hermione looked back to Luna. "I didn't do it on purpose, really. I omitted a vital piece of information about something. In other words, I lied to him. He's not really forgiving of liars."

Luna squeezed her hand comfortingly. "Is there anything I can do?"

"No, Luna. I got myself into this. I'll just have to see how it all turns out."

Luna squeezed Hermione's hand again before getting up. "I think when he sees your true motives he'll be able to forgive you," she assured.

"I'm not sure if that will ever happen," Hermione said while shaking her head slightly and looking forlorn.

Luna stretched out her hand. "Come on. I know when I'm feeling down chocolate is the answer. Let's go sneak down to the kitchens and have the house-elves prepare us a

nice, decadent chocolate cake or something."

Hermione grasped Luna's hand and rose, looking happy for the first time that evening. "That sounds like the perfect mood breaker. Let's go!"

Two days had passed, and two other Aurors had been observing Severus, Harry Potter being one of them. Severus had ignored the man, even when Hermione and the Boy Wonder had been boisterous at dinner, although he'd wondered at feeling that curious tightness once again in his chest as he watched them out of the corner of his eye.

Classes had remained consistently normal. Students had been respectful, and the Aurors had said basically nothing to him each day, although it had seemed that Potter had wanted to bare his soul to him. If they all were like this, Severus might be able to make it through the week and eventually the year.

But when Severus turned to the class on the fourth day his hackles rose. This Auror... was she even an Auror? This Auror was different. Dolores Umbridge stood in the back of the room with a frown on her face.

Hasn't that bint been sacked repeatedly?

Severus ignored her and began the lesson. He had said no more than two sentences when the obnoxious "Ahem, hem" of her voice accosted his ears.

"Auror Umbridge, what is it?" he snapped.

"I am not an Auror but am here on behalf of the Minister himself. I believe, Professor, that this type of Repelling Spell is excessive for this age group."

Severus stiffened. "Is that right, Madam Umbridge?"

"Yes, Professor. They only need to learn Expelliarmus at this age."

"And what happens, Madam Umbridge, when Expelliarmus has been used upon them before they have a chance to use it against their enemy? They should be defenseless against any spell their enemy then wishes to throw at them? With this wandless Repelling Spell, they can at least shield themselves from imminent danger if disarmed."

"They would never be in a situation where that would be necessary, Professor Snape."

Severus ground his teeth. "Have you forgotten the events of the past year?"

"Of course not, but there are no dangers to these little children now."

"I hardly see seventh-years as little children. They will be released into the real world in a matter of months. Not everyone in that real world has their best interests at heart. This defense can be used against a warlord as well as a mugger. Now... may I continue?"

"I disagree, Professor. Teach them another method."

The class had been silent while this confrontation had been going on. They remained silent, but Severus noted some of them cringing as he stalked to the back of the room and snarled for Umbridge to follow him into the hallway. The woman tittered and stepped in behind him, her heels clacking as she came out into the hall with him.

"What are you on about?" Severus snarled at Umbridge.

"I just don't agree with your methods, Snape."

"Why?"

Umbridge gazed at Severus as if he were an idiot. "Because you're a Death Eater. You're a murderer and can't be trusted. You should be banished from the magical world, but Potter saw fit to stand up for you. This type of magic is too dangerous for a man like you to be teaching."

"A man like me?" Severus asked as his eyes narrowed at her.

"Yes... a man who is nothing but evil. You should have been killed with your master."

Severus' wand was out in a flash and pressed into Umbridge's cheek. "When you are professor of this class...which will be when hell freezes over, let me assure you...you may teach what you wish. I have been appointed the teacher of these students. I will teach them what they need to know. You... as my watchman, will do just that...watch! If I do something that is harmful to the students, then... and only then... do you have the authority to interfere. Is that understood?"

Umbridge glared at Severus, but he saw the fear in her eyes. "Don't think Kingsley won't hear about this, Snape!"

"Do your worst!" Severus pulled his wand from her cheek and stalked back into the classroom where he continued to teach the Repelling Spell to his students. Umbridge returned, looking mad as a hornet. Severus was sure he'd be receiving an owl from the Ministry. He didn't care. It had felt good to intimidate the tittering hippo.

Professor Snape,

It has come to our attention that you have assaulted a Ministry employee. Consider yourself on probation. If any other instances like this occur, you will be sentenced to life in Azkaban.

Daniel Derwood

Head of Aurors

Ministry of Magic

Severus crumpled the letter up and threw it into the fire. He watched it burst into flames and eventually turn to ashes. Stalking over to his desk, he took out some of his own parchment and scrawled a reply to the Ministry.

Mr. Derwood,

Madam Umbridge tried to interfere with my class, then ordered me to stop teaching a perfectly harmless Repelling Spell. I will not allow Madam Umbridge into my classroom again. Send any other Auror you see fit, but she will be asked to leave if she appears to observe.

Professor Severus Snape

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

He sent the owl away and hoped he would never see Umbridge again.

A/N: Many thanks to slytherinlaurel for her beta work! Sorry there was no Severus/Hermione interaction in this chapter. We'll more than make up for it in the next one. Mwahahaha!

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 of 21

Things don't go as planned.



Chapter 16

Hermione sat in a soft chair in the staff room. This was the first official staff meeting of the year. A month of classes had flown by, and the group was gathering to discuss how the school year was progressing. Hermione relaxed as she eyed her colleagues. Filius Flitwick was chatting animatedly with Rolanda Hooch. Sybill Trelawney, sitting alone in the corner, had brought her own Crystal ball and was gazing into it with her owl-like eyes. No one made any effort to chat with her. Hermione sat next to Pomona Sprout, who was speaking with Hagrid. Across from her, Severus sat with his usual scowl on his face.

He looked at no one and spoke to no one. Most of the faculty had given up on trying to bring him out of his shell. Hermione hadn't, but she didn't dare speak to him. He'd taken every opportunity to avoid her. She still sat next to him at meals, but he never said more than four words to her, and they usually had to do with passing objects on the table.

In her mind's eye, she saw him night after night, hurriedly eating and departing without as much as a glance her way. She stared at Severus now, her heart heavy. His actions made her feel even more ostracized by him. She'd come to accept it, although it left her feeling hollow inside. Really, after her deception, she deserved his silence.

Nonetheless, she'd tried to start conversations with him. Of course it had been futile, with the only results being nasty glares from him. She'd eventually learned to take no notice of him and talk with Flitwick instead.

Severus was now looking down at his fingernails, still ignoring everyone. How Hermione wanted to sit next to him for support, but she knew her efforts would be unwelcome. She wondered if he'd read her letter. Sighing, she came to the realization that even if he had, he truly wanted nothing more to do with her. Her lips pursed together as she shook her head. She missed him and his conversations.

As they all waited for Minerva, Pomona Sprout turned to Hermione and pulled her from her musings.

"How have your first weeks been, Hermione?" Pomona asked.

Hermione reflected to herself before answering. "It's hard to believe how quickly they've flown by. At first I was so nervous I don't think I was incredibly effective. Luckily it didn't take much time to get to know the students and feel at ease."

Pomona nodded her head. "I had the same problems my very first weeks of teaching. I was scared to death! I was sure I'd just drop dead one day, and they'd bury me among my Venemous Tentacula."

Hermione laughed aloud. "I'm still trying to adjust to the schedule," she admitted once she'd composed herself. "All those papers to grade take up a lot of extra time. I hadn't truly realized how much time I'd be spending outside of the classroom simply preparing for the next day's classes."

Pomona smiled at her. "It gets easier, my dear. You've got a quick brain. You'll get your schedule settled and then you won't feel so stretched out."

Hermione nodded. She'd actually been quite thankful for being so busy. It had taken her mind off Severus. The only time she'd really had to dwell on her lost friendship was during meals and late at night. The flurry of the new school year had helped her get through the heartache she felt at her shattered relationship.

"I think I'm finally at the place where my schedule doesn't take up my entire day," Hermione mused.

"And your health, dear?"

"I'm doing much better," she said with a tentative smile.

It was true; she was doing better. The spell that Duvall had cast had left her in a weakened state, but her strength was slowly returning. She tried not to let school stress overwhelm her, remembering the admonition of Poppy about her heart. She could feel it drumming away in her chest at times and always took a few breaths to ease her anxiety whenever that happened. So far it had worked out, and she hadn't had any problems.

"I'm still taking it easy. The spell has some long lasting effects that I'm still overcoming," she explained to Pomona.

Hermione's eyes fell upon Severus again. His head was down, and his hair curtained and shielded his face. A desire to push that hair back and gaze into his eyes enveloped her. She pushed it away, chastising herself for her foolish thoughts.

Minerva entered, nodded at everyone, and began the meeting. Hermione kept her eye on Severus as the many topics were discussed. The only time he spoke was to voice his opinion on student detentions. Most in the room wanted to shorten the time a student spent in detention.

"The length is intrinsic in the punishment," Severus argued. "A student will not fear a short detention. It will not serve as any form of deterrent."

"I agree," Hermione said, causing Severus to glower at her. "The detention serves as a punishment and a deterrent. Yes, it's a major use of our time having to monitor such students, but in the end it keeps order in the school."

After a bit more discussion, it was decided to keep the length of detentions unchanged.

Other than that one comment, Severus remained quiet. He kept his gaze on the floor. He seemed solemn, perhaps depressed even. Resolve or not, Hermione couldn't just let him sit there wallowing in sorrow. She decided to approach him after the meeting and ask him how he was.

When the meeting finished, Severus sat in his chair, unmoving. He was usually the first one out of the room, but it was as if he was unaware of things around him. Hermione waited until the room emptied some and went up to him.

"Professor Snape, might I ask you something?"

Severus looked up at her, his eyes seeming to finally focus as he stood.

"I am in a hurry, Professor Granger," he said.

"It will only take a minute, but it's private."

Severus scowled. They waited until the last stragglers left the staff room before Hermione turned to him.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

Severus' eyebrows knit together. "My well-being is no concern of yours!"

"Severus, you seem out of sorts."

"And you seem to be as nosy as ever. When will you learn, Granger, to leave me alone?"

"Severus, I'm worried about you."

Severus took a step closer to her. He towered over her menacingly. Hermione shrunk back a step.

"I do not need the worries of a know-it-all Gryffindor; do you understand me?"

"Severus... I..."

"I see that you don't...."

Hermione's heart began to beat rapidly in her chest. She struggled to calm herself, but Severus was just beginning his onslaught. With each word, she felt her heart begin to pound harder and harder.

"You, Professor Granger, are a meddlesome bint. You think that everyone is your charity case. Well, I assure you, Granger, I am not a charity case."

"I'm just worried about you," she offered. She clutched at her chest as she said it, desperately trying to calm herself down.

Hermione felt small droplets of sweat begin to form at her hairline. She frantically tried to breathe normally. Her attempts to even out her breath did no good. It continued to come in rapid bursts, ignoring those attempts.

"Do I look like I care whether you're worried about me or not?" He moved in closer now, bending low, so that their noses were almost touching. Using his most intimidating voice, he continued to berate her.

"Do you think I want some harpy following me around asking me if I'm okay? Do you think I want your company?" he demanded. His voice was no louder than usual, but the venom in it made Hermione cringe inwardly as her heartbeat began to pound in her head.

"S-Severus," she stammered. Her eyes pleaded with him to stop, but he didn't. She was beginning to feel lightheaded.

His voice rose slightly, and his words became more pointed. "I don't, I assure you. You are nothing but a know-it-all swot who thinks she can fix everything! I assure you, I. Do. Not. Need. Fixing! You can keep your meddlesome questions buried deep within that overactive mind of yours! Concentrate on your students and leave... me... alone!"

He was glaring now, although he seemed to be a bit blurry.

"I don't want your help! I will not be your lab rat! Do you understand? Can that incredible mind of yours accept that one fact?!"

Hermione's breathing increased exponentially. She gasped for breath and clutched at her chest. Sharp pains shot through her entire body. She frantically tried to calm herself, but to no avail. Severus' closeness and the rage on his face sent her heart racing even more. She reached out and grasped his robes.

"Please stop," she barely whispered before she passed out completely, sinking to the floor.

Severus felt Hermione's hand on his robes and noticed her clutching at her chest. Before he knew it, she'd fallen to the floor, unconscious. He stared for a moment before pulling himself together and stooping down. Waving his wand over her, he realized she was in cardiac arrest.

"Damn!" he cried as he lifted her up and headed for the fireplace. Setting her down on the floor, he grabbed a handful of Floo powder, picked her back up, and went into the fireplace, dropping the powder as he called out, "Infirmary!"

In an instant he appeared in the infirmary fireplace and rushed Hermione to a bed. Poppy bustled over quickly.

"What happened?"

"She's in cardiac arrest," Severus explained.

Poppy set to work. "I told her not to overexcite herself or her heart would fail her!" she exclaimed in between waving her wand, administering potions, and casting spells.

Severus' chest felt as if a cement block had fallen on it. He staggered back as he looked at Hermione's still form. "I didn't know," he muttered.

Poppy paused long enough to glance at Severus before returning to her wand waving.

"Didn't know what?" she asked.

"I didn't know she could have a heart attack. This is my fault. I was being overbearing. I... I was berating her."

Poppy gave him another glance. "Will you get me the Heart Stabilizing Potion on the table over there?" she asked.

Severus ran to the table and looked for the potion. His hand shook as he brushed past a few other vials, knocking them down. Finally, he grasped the correct one and flew back to Poppy's side.

"Will she be all right?" Severus asked.

"We'll see once the potion is administered."

Poppy poured some down her throat, then took some and pulled Hermione's shirt low so she could rub it on her chest. She stood back and folded her arms in front of her.

"That's all I can do for now." She looked up at Snape and glared at him. "It would be best if you could curb your temper around her from now on, Professor. I don't want this to be an everyday occurrence. You've set her recovery back by several weeks."

Severus lowered his head. His eyes closed tightly. He'd killed her. By trying to keep her at arms length, he'd gone ahead and killed her.

Poppy seemed to sense his remorse. Her shoulders relaxed, and she went over to Severus, this time speaking in a calmer tone.

"You didn't know about her heart. I'm sorry I snapped at you. You know how I am about my patients. I've been overprotective of you enough times in the past." Her hand went to his shoulder as she looked to Hermione, whose color was already improving. "She'll be all right. Once her heart is fully healed, you may yell at her to your heart's content."

Severus' eyes never opened at her words. Finally, he looked to Hermione. She looked so frail. He had a sudden urge to envelop her within his arms and protect her, but who would he be protecting her from? Himself, of course. He was the villain here. With a grimace, he spun around and stalked out of the infirmary. Poppy watched him go, her eyes sadly following him as he stalked dejectedly away.

Back to the scene of the crime, Severus thought as he stormed up the stairs to the Astronomy tower. One of the many crimes you've committed. Fool! Now you've committed another one. He stalked to the edge of the tower and looked down.

You might as well just fling yourself over and rid the world of the biggest nuisance there ever was!

He knew he would never do it. He was no coward, running from his problems, but Merlin... it was tempting right now.

Worthless... You drive everyone off. The woman was just concerned about you, and you practically killed her for it.

If only he could escape this prison he was subjected to, he would disappear. Then no one would be cursed by his presence. Tears formed in his eyes as he gazed to the ground below.

Would this pain ever leave? Would he always feel so inferior...so culpable for everything bad that happened around him? Would he ever just... live... without the self-recrimination that flooded his every waking moment?

Thoughts of that bloody falcon filled his head. Hermione, in falcon form, pecking irately at his head, trying to knock some sense into him, screeching at him, trying to argue in a wordless voice, giving him affectionate head-butts.

He closed his eyes and put his hand up to his face, rubbing his eyes with his thumb and finger. What a fool he'd been. Slytherin that he was, he had suspected her of ulterior motives. Forgetting she was a Gryffindor, he'd ignored the fact that she had no malicious intent in her. She'd been sincere and caring from the start. He'd been unable to accept that from her, so he'd pushed her away at the first possible chance. He'd pushed her away so well that she now lay dying in a hospital bed.

"I am a fool."

"And it's about time you realized that!" a voice said from behind him.

He wheeled around and found Minerva standing haughtily behind him.

"I already have one professor fighting for her life; I don't need you taking the plunge from this roof, Severus."

He scowled. "I assure you, Minerva, I had..."

She held up her hand. "Save it! If you want to kick yourself for your actions, I'll gladly help you, but don't you even think of getting so depressed that you throw yourself off this tower, Severus Snape. That is behavior that is unacceptable in my school. Of course, if it weren't, I'd be happy to give you a push!"

Severus gaped.

"Don't look so shocked! Do you know how many times I've wanted to smash my wand over your head and knock some sense into you? You are being a fool, just like you said a minute ago. You bury yourself in your guilt and believe no one cares about you. I believe that it's evident that at least one woman cares for you, and I can assure you that I, too, care for you and so do the rest your friends."

Minerva glared at him for a minute before continuing. "Yes, Severus, you have friends. They're all around you; you just refuse to recognize it. Wake up! Pull yourself out of your self-imposed depression and live your life. I assume that's why you survived the war, so you can live!"

She looked crossly at Severus. "When Hermione awakens I want you by her bed, kissing her feet and begging her for forgiveness. Is that understood? She is a caring, loving young woman who doesn't deserve to be treated like dung by you, do you hear me? If anything like this ever happens again, I'll have you sacked before you can lift your wand."

Minerva turned and stalked away, leaving a very surprised and still gaping Severus Snape behind. He slowly sunk to the floor, still staring at the door where she'd disappeared. Her words echoed in his mind. *Self-imposed depression... beg forgiveness... friends... at least one woman cares for you...*

His hands went up to his face, and he drew his fingers along his cheeks. With a great sigh, he admitted to himself just how right Minerva McGonagall was. *I've brought most of this on myself. Ulterior motives, platitudes, deceit, that's what I thought I was getting from my... friends... There, I said it... I have friends. I've been projecting my own tendencies onto my... friends. Being a spy, I've had to live with deceit, but these people...these friends...don't have to live like that. Everything isn't a carefully orchestrated melodrama for them. They just... live. They have no reasons for deception.*

He'd been so busy wallowing in sorrow that he hadn't noticed that his... friends... didn't hate him. Even his students didn't seem to hate him. Oh, he was certain that they talked about him behind his back. They wouldn't be dunderheaded children if they didn't, but they didn't hate him.

Dumbledore's words from before Severus had cast him into the flames came back to him. He had not paid them any heed then; they had hardly registered with him, to tell the truth. How could they? He didn't trust the old man. He did trust Minerva, though, despite what had happened last year. He knew she couldn't help her feelings back then; they had been thrust upon her because of the circumstances.

The walls that had served him so well in wartime had now become his enemy, keeping him from seeing clearly and accepting reality. How odd that the very thing that had kept him alive in the past was now the thing that threatened to destroy him. Even odder was the fact that he no longer yearned to hide himself behind those walls. They were crushing him inside of them. They were destroying him from within.

Amazement washed over him as he realized that he need not live as he used to. He need not hide from the world. He need not fear the judgment of the world. It wasn't necessary for him to suspect every little nicety that came his way. He could even, perhaps, be somewhat nice himself.

That horrible, beautiful, evil, and amazing falcon came to mind again. Hermione had been trying to tell him that all along, but he'd refused to listen. Then when he'd found out who she was, he'd cast every memory of the bird out of his mind. They all flooded back to him once again, along with every kind word Hermione had showered upon him in her short tenure at Hogwarts. What a sheer and utter fool.

Oh, he'd follow Minerva's counsel and kiss Granger's feet and beg forgiveness. He'd kiss any part of her to have her accept him again.

Where did that thought come from?

More walls fell as he realized just what he'd been hiding from himself for all of these weeks. That woman... Hermione... had wormed her way into his soul. He cared about the swot of a woman. How he could care about someone and call her a swot in the same breath was a mystery to him, but examining his feelings, he had to conclude that caring was what he felt.

"I wish you were a person, Red. I bet you wouldn't hate me."

"How I wish you were human, Red. You make all my worries seem trivial."

He'd forgotten how he'd wished that. His wish had come true, and he'd ignored it. He'd longed for one thing...acceptance...and she'd given him that. Did he accept it when it was freely offered? No, he rejected her and treated her like a pariah.

Severus sighed. He'd really messed everything up. He needed to make this right, even if it took him all school year. He would make Hermione see that he valued her and the friendship she offered. He would make her know that he cared.

Severus returned to the infirmary. Settling into a chair next to Hermione's bed, he began the wait for her to regain consciousness. He eyed her unconscious form. She looked incredibly peaceful. He was glad to see that. She'd been so agitated when he was scolding her. How could he have been so cruel?

After a while, Hermione stirred, and her eyes flittered open. She looked around, her gaze falling upon Severus. She frowned immediately and turned so that her back was facing him. Severus cringed at her aloofness, although he realized she was fully justified in her actions. He cleared his throat, but Hermione did not move to look at him.

"Hermione?" he called softly.

She didn't respond.

"I'm sorry," he offered.

Silence.

"I've treated you horridly. I'm sorry I was so unreasonable."

Still no response.

"You were just concerned about me, and I berated you. I'm sorry."

"Go, Severus," Hermione said finally. Her voice sounded empty and dead.

"Please, Hermione, let me finish."

"No, Severus, just go."

"Hermione..."

Hermione turned and looked at him. Her eyes were cold, and her face was hard.

"You made your opinion of me perfectly clear, Severus. Now get out."

"I..."

"No! I said I want you to go; now go!"

Severus stood but continued to look at her.

"This isn't over, Hermione. I will let you get better, but we will have this talk."

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "You don't always get everything you want, Snape. I won't have you berate me again. Keep away from me."

"I have no intention of..."

"I said get out!" she cried, causing Poppy to emerge from her office.

"Severus," Poppy admonished. "You are not to upset Professor Granger!"

Severus looked to Poppy. "... I wasn't... I'm just leaving." With that, he turned and stalked from the infirmary.

As he returned to his room, he fretted. There had to be some way to convince her he was sincere. He racked his brain, trying to figure out something. As he made his way to his fireplace, his eye was drawn to a crumpled ball of parchment in the far corner of the room. Stepping over to it, he bent low and lifted it from the floor.

"Hermione's letter..."

He unraveled the ball and straightened out the parchment. His eyes scanned her words again. She'd had hope for them then, but that was weeks ago. His actions today had obviously driven any stray feelings of hope straight from her. She was a Gryffindor, though; they never seemed to give up, her especially. His eyes closed as he brought her letter to his chest. She had used words to try to get to him; he would do the same. Maybe if he wrote her a letter she would forgive him. He rushed to his desk and took up his quill. Beginning to write furiously, he stopped after only a line or two. Looking down at what he wrote, he frowned and vanished it.

He started again and again, but the words would not come. He was at a loss as to what to say that would make her want to listen to him. Finally, he wrote two simple lines, signed it, and folded it up. He'd send it to her in the morning. Hopefully, rest would help her to be in a forgiving mood.

A/N: It seems that the tables have been turned here. Can Hermione forgive him? More importantly, can Severus forgive himself?

More to come soon. My sincere apologies about the length of time between updates. I know this doesn't normally update as quickly as some of you would like. (Wiggles eyebrows at KingPhilipsWench) but please be patient. Both slytherinlaurel and I were involved in the SS/HG exchange and in the rush to get stories completed and betad, this got put onto the back burner. Updates will be quicker from now on. I won't leave you hanging too long, I promise.

Mega hugs to slytherinlaurel for her wonderful beta work.

Chapter 17

Chapter 17 of 21

Hermione recovers while Severus worries.



Chapter 17

The morning after Hermione's relapse, an owl flew into the infirmary and landed next to her bed. In its beak was a single yellow rose. The owl placed the rose on Hermione's bedside table and extended its leg for her to remove the note. It flew off once she'd unburdened the creature of its message.

Hermione unrolled a small scroll.

Hermione,

I know I don't deserve your forgiveness, but please give me one more chance. All I ask for is one.

Severus

Just then, Luna came in, smiling her faraway smile. Hermione put the scroll down and smiled back at Luna.

"Hermione! Are you all right?" Luna asked. She grasped Hermione's hand as she sat in the chair next to the bed.

"I will be, Luna."

"What happened?" Luna asked as she dreamily looked over Hermione's face.

Hermione explained. Luna squeezed her hand the whole while.

"I'm so sorry, Hermione. I thought by now Professor Snape would have forgiven you."

Hermione lifted the scroll and shrugged. "It seems that this little episode has opened his eyes. He sent me this just now, along with that rose."

Luna took the parchment and read it. She looked back at Hermione.

"What are you going to do?"

Tears formed in Hermione's eyes. "I don't know what to do. Luna, he was so awful. I saw nothing but hatred in his eyes. I don't know how that could go away in a matter of hours."

Luna stood and moved over to the bed. Sitting on the edge, she reached for Hermione's hand once again. "Remember, he hides his true self behind that wall that he shows to everyone else."

Hermione shook her head as a tear fell down her cheek. "I don't know, Luna. I don't think we can get past this."

"Might I ask exactly what you lied about?" Luna asked.

Hermione explained the whole thing as more tears fell down her face. When she was done, she found herself enveloped in Luna's arms.

"I'm sorry, Hermione. Try not to upset yourself too much. It's not good for your condition."

Hermione clucked her tongue. "You make it sound like I'm going to die."

Luna patted her back. "That is a possibility if you can't control your emotions, isn't it?"

Hermione said nothing for a bit. Finally she sighed into Luna's shoulder. "I don't blame him for hating me. I just wish it didn't hurt so much."

Luna pulled back and smiled dreamily at her. "Don't you see, Hermione? If he didn't care about you, he wouldn't have been so angry. I think your attack has awakened his real feelings for you. Professor Snape is such a good spy, sometimes he even hides the truth from himself."

Hermione looked a bit incredulous. "You're saying he berated me because he cares?"

Luna nodded as she gazed out a nearby window. "He seems like such a lonely soul. I don't think he'd know what to do with a true friend. Maybe he was unwilling to see that you were sincere in your friendship." She motioned to the parchment, which she'd placed on the table next to the rose. "It seems he's finally come to admit that you might be that true friend he's been longing for."

"I don't know, Luna...."

Luna rose. "Just think about it," she said with a tilt of her head. "You will know what to do, Hermione. You always do." After another quick hug, she pulled back and straightened again. "I need to go. Hagrid will think that I've been stolen by Trageletes if I don't get back soon."

Hermione couldn't help but chuckle. "Thank you, Luna," she called to her friend as the other woman headed for the door, stopping to wave to Hermione as she left the infirmary.

Hermione looked to the rose and picked it up while deep in thought about what Luna had said. She turned the rose in front of her. A yellow rose symbolized friendship and caring. Bringing the flower to her nose, she inhaled deeply, enjoying its scent. Looking down at the note again, she read it repeatedly. He was obviously asking for a second chance and wanting her to know he cared. It was an odd divergence from the treatment she'd received from him of late.

Before he found out I was his falcon, though, we'd been getting along well enough.

She let her hand with the rose drop into her lap. She was uncertain what to do. He seemed sincere, but was he?

The man is his own worst enemy, you know that. And he thinks he is unlovable. Give him another chance.

She huffed. Maybe she didn't want to give him another chance. Maybe she wanted him to suffer like she'd suffered, mourning her lost chance with him.

Despite his grousing, he doesn't feel that anyone can love him. You know that. He told you that.

Her mind went back to yet another encounter with Severus while she was a bird.

"I know I should have moved on from Lily. I tried... but I couldn't. She had some hold on me. A promise I made bound me to her. Now, the promise is fulfilled, and I no longer feel her presence." He gazed down at the bird. "I feel quite empty, to be honest. For the longest time I lived only for her."

"Screech!" The bird looked at him before her head rubbed against his cheek.

Severus smiled grimly. "I was a fool to cling to such feelings for a dead woman, especially since she had chosen another in life. It's just that..." He stared off into the distance. "I have longed for closeness for my entire life but was never able to attain it." He grimaced to himself as his hand stroked Red's back feathers.

"It was easier to cling to a memory than to admit that no one would ever care for me like that." He shrugged. "Why would they? Look at me."

Wings flapped and hit Severus in the face. He lifted his arms to protect himself.

"Red... Red... Stop it!" he cried. His cries were not in anger, but the bird was battering his head painfully.

"Why must you be so infuriating?"

"Screech!" Red said as she hopped from his lap and flapped her wings furiously.

"Ah, you are upset with me then."

Her head bobbed up and down.

"What did I do now?"

"Screech!"

Severus shook his head. "I don't follow."

More screeching and flapping of wings assaulted him.

"But it's true, Red. No one will ever care for me in that way. No one cares to get to know me well enough to possibly like me. I am destined to be alone." He shrugged. "I suppose I'm accepting of my fate. After all, it's all I've known in life anyway."

Red burst into the air and circled Severus' head a few times. She landed next to him and hopped onto his lap once again, settling herself in and preening her backside a bit. When she was done, she gazed into Severus' eyes. She could tell he didn't understand what she'd tried to convey. Her beak opened and closed, but she didn't call. Severus' hand came up, and he patted her on the head.

"I do appreciate your friendship, dear one."

Yes, he'd definitely opened his heart to her, but that was when he thought she was a bird. Now that the truth was out, he wanted nothing to do with her.

He apologized. He has nothing to gain from that. He wrote that letter. Give him a chance!

It did seem that he was trying to make amends. What would the harm be for her to hear him out just once? If he was unwilling to be civil, she could always end the encounter.

Part of her screamed at her to just back away and leave him to his misery. But the other part...the larger part...yearned to hear what he had to say. She longed to be able to help him see himself as he really was. She ached for him to see her as more than just an annoying colleague.

Could they possibly get beyond this, or were they destined to be stuck remembering the foolish things they'd done to one another? She didn't know. The one thing she did know was that if she didn't try, she'd never forgive herself. She decided then and there to let Severus say his peace. What he said and how he said it would help her to know how to proceed.

Despite her decision, Hermione let Severus stew. She didn't reply to his letter. He sent another. She ignored that one too. By the end of the day, seven notes were piled high on her bedside table, and seven yellow roses sat in a cup beside them. The last letter must have been written on some of the self-correcting parchment she'd given him, because it was quite incomprehensible.

It pains my back that you have not answered me. Please, Harry, I just ask you for one more chance... distrust that more.

Either it was written on the faulty parchment, or he was truly distraught and had gone totally off the deep end wanting to make amends with Harry, too. She giggled to herself as she placed the letter back on the stack. She knew Poppy would release her in the morning. She would tend to Severus then.

Severus paced back and forth, back and forth. His hand ran through his hair. He turned and paced some more.

Maybe I should send another note? No, I've already sent multiple notes.... She'd answer if she wanted to.... It's too late. She won't forgive me.... I've driven away the only person who actually went out of their way to take an interest in me.... Once a fool, always a fool.

Severus' introspection was interrupted by a tap on his door. He scowled and went over to it, placing a perturbed look on his face, hoping to express to whomever was on the other side that he wanted his privacy. Throwing the door open, he glowered at the visitor. His face softened slightly as he recognized Hermione standing at his door, her head slightly tilted to the side, regarding him thoughtfully.

"Well, are you going to invite me in, or do you intend to frighten me away with that glare?" she asked calmly.

The sneer fell away from his face and relief replaced it. "Hermione!" he said as he pulled her into his room, shutting the door behind her.

He pulled her over to the couch and pushed her down into it. Lifting a pillow, he set it down again with a slight scowl before placing it awkwardly behind her back. His hands stilled again as if he were debating the next move. Finally, he lifted her legs onto a nearby footstool.

Hermione watched him curiously as he debated each ministrations while he settled her into the sofa. She found his actions to be somewhat comforting even though they were a bit awkward. He certainly was going out of his way to assure that she was comfortable. Finally satisfied, he sat down next to her.

"Are you all right?" he asked finally.

"I'm fine, Severus," she told him, becoming serious at the thought of how she'd gotten injured.

"Hermione, I can't tell you how horrible I feel about causing this. I didn't know of your heart condition. I would have never..."

Hermione nodded slightly, silencing his rushed words. "I know you didn't, Severus. I also know you don't like people sticking their noses in your business. I should have expected a tirade from you."

"Please don't make excuses for me."

He looked down, and his hair fell in front of his face, shielding it from her stare. Hermione looked away anyway and stared at the fireplace. They sat awkwardly for a few minutes before Hermione said anything.

"You wanted me to give you a second chance, Severus. What did you want to say?"

Severus shifted uncomfortably. "I want to apologize." He looked back up at her. His face was filled with grief. "I acted unconscionably. I wouldn't blame you if you never wanted to speak to me again, but I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me."

Hermione looked at Severus. "I just have one question for you. How much of what you said did you really mean?"

Severus grimaced. "At the time... all of it."

Hermione frowned and looked down. "Then I guess there really isn't much to say. If that's what you think of me, there's no relationship to recover. You're entitled to feel what you feel." She rose and moved away from the sofa.

Severus rose with her and grasped her arm, holding her back. "Hermione, you don't understand. At the time, I thought I didn't want you worrying about me. I didn't want anyone to be concerned about me or to care about my well-being."

He turned her back around to face him. "I had falsely thought that your concern was simply to get a good laugh."

Hermione looked to Severus in frustration. "Do you not know me at all?"

"I know you. I just don't know why anyone would care about me for any reason."

Hermione folded her arms in front of her. "Why wouldn't I care about you? We're friends, aren't we?"

Severus looked down, avoiding her eyes.

"Severus, look at me," Hermione demanded tersely.

His head lifted ever so slightly as he gazed at her from beneath his hair. Hermione bent a bit so she could see his eyes better. "I am your friend. I care about your well being. I would never make fun of anything you told me. I... I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I were that type of person."

Severus' face was drawn and serious. He gazed at her for almost a full minute before giving a slight nod. Hermione straightened, and his gaze followed her as she did so. His mouth was drawn into a deep frown.

"So, basically what you are saying is that you took your insecurities out on me?" Hermione asked finally.

"That would be a correct assessment," Severus responded quietly, once again staring at the floor.

Hermione looked at Severus with a knowing expression. "So, what's changed your view?"

He looked farther away, his cheeks coloring slightly. "I came to the conclusion that not everyone has the same Slytherin tendencies of deception as I have."

Hermione chuckled mirthlessly. "You're trying to say that I'm not a sneak who is trying to hide the truth from everyone?"

Severus turned back to her and arched an eyebrow. "Something like that, I suppose."

Hermione closed the distance and looked up into his face. "I want to apologize to you, too... again. I should have told you right away that I was Red. I wanted you to trust me, but I didn't trust you to react well to my secret."

He smirked. "You know me too well."

"That doesn't make it right."

"I overreacted. You were just trying to help, and I conjured up all sorts of nefarious reasons why you would do such a thing."

"Nonetheless, I should have been truthful from the start." Hermione's eyebrows lifted as she gazed at him sadly. "We have really messed this up, haven't we? Perhaps there's no way to fix this."

Severus winced. "I would like to think we could get past it."

"All we've done is hurt each other. I don't know if we can move beyond that."

"I promise not to overreact and get angry like I did before," Severus vowed.

Hermione looked at Severus levelly. "And I promise to never lie to you again."

Severus nodded solemnly.

"So, then we can start over?" Hermione asked tentatively.

"That would be agreeable," Severus said with relief. He extended his hand to her. "I'm Severus Snape, Potions professor and all-around angry git."

Hermione didn't bother to hide her smile. She extended her hand and grasped his, shaking it firmly. "Nice to meet you, all-around git. I'm Hermione Granger, Transfiguration professor and insensitive do-gooder."

Severus bowed his head to her. "It's a pleasure, Hermione."

A/N: Thanks for your continued support with this story. Big hugs to slytherinlaurel for her beta work.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18 of 21

Things move along, and Severus realizes something.



Chapter 18

Severus walked along the lake, thinking to himself. He looked up when his eye caught sight of something overhead. Red flew past, circled around, and landed in front of him. She cocked her head and screeched.

Severus put his arm out. "Yes, you may join me," he agreed.

The bird hopped up onto his arm and then to his shoulder. She settled herself in as Severus began walking once again. Severus felt a tenderness towards Red come upon him. He reached up and patted the back of the bird's neck.

"You know, you make a beautiful falcon," he murmured.

Red straightened herself up and preened her feathers. She then butted her head against his cheek, which caused him to smile.

"Shall we sit for a while?"

The bird bobbed her head while Severus conjured up a bench. He sat down as Red hopped onto the seat next to him. He reached out and absently stroked her.

"Is it all right if I still call you Red?"

Her head-bob of agreement had Severus smiling down at her.

"Good, I like that nickname."

She butted his arm with her head again. He smirked as he continued stroking her back.

"All those weeks I talked with you and never had an inkling as to whom I was speaking." He shook his head. "I should have figured it out."

Red hopped onto Severus' lap and butted his chest. His hand lazily patted her head as he looked at her. "I do appreciate you listening to me rant on and on about my problems. I'm sure you had worries of your own."

The bird bobbed her head up and down and hopped back onto the bench. She stretched her wings out and flapped them before settling down onto the bench and gazing up at Severus.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Screech!"

"Do you think things will ever get easier?"

The falcon looked up at him and tilted her head to the side. In an instant, she'd transformed into her human form. Hermione gazed at Severus, who looked at her expectantly.

"I do, Severus."

"When?"

Hermione placed a hand over his. "I'm not sure. I do know that it may take a while." She stopped talking and stared out at the lake. "I know that in times past, when I've had hardships in my life that seemed to be insurmountable, eventually things got easier." She frowned. "We all lived through such horror. I think that even the happy times might be tainted with harsh memories of what we've experienced...obviously more so for you." She turned her head to look at him.

"You need to learn to forgive yourself, Severus. You don't like yourself very much, do you?"

He caught his breath.

"There isn't much to like," he muttered.

"You're very wrong."

Glancing at her, he scowled. "I'm a bitter, nasty man who's been destroyed by his past."

Hermione turned herself towards him. She squeezed his hand. "Don't you see, Severus? Your past is over, and you have your whole future ahead of you."

"My future will be no better than my past."

Hermione frowned. "You don't know that. In fact, I don't know how your future could be any worse than your past. Your past has been really terrible."

Severus couldn't help himself. He chuckled at her. She arched an eyebrow at him, which caused him to laugh harder.

"That must be the biggest understatement I've ever heard," he barked out through his laughter. Before long, he was doubled over from laughing so hard.

Hermione looked on in amusement as Severus continued to laugh. After a while he straightened up, still emitting a chuckle as he pushed his hair back out of his eyes.

"When was the last time you laughed like that?" Hermione asked.

Severus arched an eyebrow, the smile still gracing his face.

"It's been far too long"

"Then you'll have to do it more often."

"There hasn't been much in my life to laugh about."

Hermione's hand went to Severus' arm. "I'm sorry about that. Maybe you should start over. Forget about your past."

Severus glanced at her hand, then up into her eyes. "How do I do that?"

"Forgive yourself. Everyone else has."

Severus sat pensively, his gaze moving to stare at the ground. He shifted awkwardly. When he looked back at Hermione, his face was pained. "What I have done... there is no forgiveness for me."

Hermione scooted closer to Severus. She grabbed his hands in hers and plaintively looked into his eyes. In an instant she'd gathered him up in her arms and was hugging him fiercely.

Severus was shocked. He could not believe that Hermione Granger was holding him so tightly. He could feel her pressed up against him with her chin resting on his shoulder. His arms went around her as he enjoyed her closeness. What he'd done to deserve such a show of affection was beyond him.

She whispered in his ear. "The bad things you did have been long ago paid for. Severus, you must let them go."

She still held him, caressing his back while pulling him closer.

"Let them go. You have proven yourself worthy over and over again." She continued to whisper to Severus as she held him.

"You're not the same man you were then. Let it go and forgive yourself. No one should wallow in remorse when they've done all they can to rectify a wrong. Please... please, Severus. Let it go."

Severus listened to her whisperings as she held him. Pulling back, his eyes searched hers. Desperation showed in his face as he asked her, "How do I do that?"

"See yourself for who you truly are."

"I know who I truly am. I am a murderer."

Hermione frowned at him. "You are a hero... the man who saved us all. You made mistakes in your youth and have paid for those. The things you have done since then have all been out of necessity. Without those sacrifices, Harry would be dead, I would be dead, and everyone would be under Voldemort's rule."

As her soothing words penetrated his soul, he felt yet another wall come crashing down within him. His chest tightened. The tension mounted in him until a great gasp left his body. He grasped at Hermione and buried his face in her neck, his hands desperately clutching her back as the pain of the years filled him. He gripped her desperately as all his sins passed in front of his mind's eye. He mourned... everything. From his youthful mistakes in the choosing of friends to his hand in Lily's death, he mourned every single bad choice he'd made.

Hermione whispered again. "Let it out, Severus. They were mistakes. Some very serious and horrible, but they're done with. You should be celebrating all the good you have done since then."

Realizing how exposed he'd let himself become, he quickly pulled back and turned from Hermione. His shoulders tensed as he stared out over the lake. He tried to control his breathing, but his chest still heaved with the emotions he'd just let escape from deep within him. He felt Hermione's hand on his shoulder and immediately was filled with shame at his lack of strength.

"Severus, please... you need to let this out," Hermione said softly. "I would never judge you on your actions. They're not weaknesses... they're strengths. Unless you work through this pain, you'll never heal.... You'll never forgive yourself. Please..."

He sat stiffly next to her, feeling her squeezing his shoulder. He could not turn to face her for he knew he would see pity in her eyes. He would not accept that from anyone, least of all her.

"Would it be easier if I turned back into Red?" she asked quietly behind him.

Severus chided himself inwardly. She'd seen him in a similar state before... often. She'd never pitied him, only been there as he worked through his grief. Turning, he gazed into her eyes. There was no pity, only concern. He could live with that.

"Although Red would be a comfort, it's time for me to have a friend who isn't covered in feathers. Please stay as you are."

Her hand came up and held his cheek. "I want to help you work through this."

"I know you do," he whispered before pulling her onto his lap and cradling her there like a lifeline. He could neither let go of her, nor pull away. His head remained buried in her shoulder as he examined his past and worked through his grief. He struggled within himself not to shed tears, but they came unbidden. At last he stopped fighting and gave in to them, letting them wash away his pain. Hermione's arms surrounded him tighter, which caused him to pull her to him as if he were trying to make her one with him. She was the only thing that kept him anchored in the present, allowing him to sift through the horrors of his past.

She held him... almost cradled him... as he continued to mourn. At times he'd whisper "no" as a terrible memory passed through his mind. At one point he pulled his head back and yelled curses to the sky. She said nothing, only pulled him closer again once he was done and had again placed his head on her shoulder, letting him work through his grief. He was grateful for her silence. They sat there together for a very long time as he drew strength from Hermione while seeking his desperately needed release.

"Thank you," he said after a long while.

She didn't move, except for her hand, which massaged his back comfortingly.

"Are you all right?" she asked him.

He nodded into her neck and shoulder.

"Have you finally forgiven yourself?"

"I believe I have come to an acceptance of most of it," he answered, still with his head buried in her neck. "I'm a lot closer to forgiving myself fully."

Hermione picked her hand up and ran it through his hair. Suddenly realizing the positions they were both in, Severus pushed her back and looked at her sheepishly.

"I'm sorry," he croaked, his voice hoarse from his screaming and the internal battle he'd just waged.

Hermione smiled at him. "Don't be. I'm glad I could help."

She slid off his lap and sat next to him once again. He grasped her hand and squeezed it.

"Thank you, Hermione."

She squeezed his hand back.

"Perhaps we should get back to the school," he said after clearing his throat.

Smiling, she nodded.

He rose but didn't let go of her hand. She also rose, and they headed back, walking slowly, hands clasped, not saying a word.

A/N: Thanks to slytherinlaurel for her suggestions and great beta skills. Thanks to you all for reading and reviewing. Still squeeing over the lovely banner by talesofsnape!

Chapter 19

Chapter 19 of 21

A trip to Hogsmeade



Chapter 19

A stream of light shone through the window and straight into Severus' face. His eyes were closed, but that didn't keep him from squinting them shut even tighter. Turning over, he opened his eyes. It was morning already. Usually, the coming of morning for Severus Snape brought on an onslaught of bad feelings. This morning, however, he looked to the day with hope. His cathartic session with Hermione the day before had left him feeling lighter and more positive than he'd felt in an incredibly long time.

Getting up, he quickly showered and dressed, looking forward to what the day might bring. He was hoping to spend a little more time with Hermione today as it was Saturday and there were no classes. He thought that perhaps a walk into Hogsmeade for lunch might appeal to her.

Combing his hair, he looked at his appearance in the mirror. For the first time in a long while, he didn't loathe the sight of his own face. He didn't accuse himself of being the worst person alive. He just saw... well... himself. Of course, even if he didn't hate the person behind the reflection, he did know that he wasn't the most handsome man on the planet. Examining his features, he came to the conclusion that he looked as good as possible. He fully understood the flaws in his looks. His features were quite sharp and unflattering.

His light mood darkened a little. Hermione could never see him as someone she was attracted to. How could anyone ever be attracted to the face that stared back at him? He had a huge nose, stern eyes, and stringy hair. He rolled his eyes at himself. He wouldn't let his bad looks ruin his good mood. Pushing his insecurities aside, he headed out the door and toward the Great Hall.

Gliding down the stairs, he caught sight of Hermione on the floor below him. She was speaking with Ronald Weasley. Smiling brightly at the boy, she hugged him tightly to herself. Severus stopped where he was and watched as she pulled away from Weasley.

"Oh, Ron! I'm so happy!" she cried.

Weasley smiled. "Me, too."

"There's so much to do and plan."

"I know you'll do a bang-up job, Hermione."

"I'll stop by tomorrow so we can plan out everything. I'm sure Molly has a lot she wants to happen."

"You're so understanding, Hermione. Most women wouldn't want my mum meddling in the affair."

"I don't think anyone would be able to stop her," Hermione said with a giggle.

"Have I told you how much I love you?" Weasley asked.

Hermione chuckled and threw her arms around Weasley. "I love you, too, Ron, and I always will."

They hugged each other as Severus watched. His heart felt ill. He'd had a tiny bit of hope that Hermione might eventually feel something for him; however, it seemed she was involved with Weasley. He rushed down the stairs past the couple and hurried down to the Great Hall, his mind lost to the scene he'd just witnessed. It then ricocheted to the day before. Hermione had enveloped him in her arms, and he'd felt safe for the first time since his youth.

He scowled as he took his seat. How could he have thought that her concern could possibly be anything other than her desire to help every wounded creature on the planet? He was just her latest charity case. Bugger.

He slammed some oatmeal into his bowl and began to eat. Hermione soon settled herself into the seat next to him and said good morning.

"I wasn't expecting to see you at breakfast," Severus muttered.

"How come?" Hermione asked, her eyebrows raised.

"I saw Weasley with you a few minutes ago. I didn't think you would pull yourself away from him so quickly," Severus replied tersely.

Hermione looked at Severus curiously. "He just stopped by to ask me something."

Severus didn't want to know, but he couldn't help himself.

"What did he ask you?"

"He's marrying..."

Severus' heart clenched within him. "I guess congratulations are in order, then," Severus replied tartly, cutting off what Hermione was going to say. "When do the two of you tie the knot?"

Hermione moved her head slightly and eyed Severus with a perplexed gaze. "I am not the one Ronald is marrying, Severus."

Severus caught his breath. His head snapped toward Hermione as he looked her up and down. "I just thought..."

Hermione's head bent low, and she guffawed. "You should learn not to jump to conclusions, Severus. Just because you were a spy all your life doesn't mean you can divine the meaning of a conversation from just a few words."

Severus ignored her jibe and visibly sighed. "You're not marrying Weasley?"

Laughing, Hermione shook her head. "No! Oh, no! Lavender Brown is marrying *Weasley*. He asked me to help with planning the wedding."

Severus looked down into his oatmeal. He was silent for a little while. Hermione went back to her breakfast, leaving him to his thoughts. Finally, he spoke so quietly, Hermione almost missed it.

"I'm glad. He's not nearly good enough for you."

Hermione's heart leapt within her at his words. Maybe it wasn't so farfetched that he could be attracted to her after all. She closed her eyes at the thought. After yesterday, she hadn't been able to keep her mind off Severus. Even though he'd been a wreck, she'd reveled in his closeness, knowing that such an incident would not happen again. She'd wished, however, that such closeness could be something that happened often between them, and not because of such a torturous event.

Giving Severus a sideways glance, she noted he looked nervous. The man was a walking ball of insecurity. Maybe it was time she made her feelings known. If she waited for him to do something, she might very well die an old maid. She turned to speak with him just as he turned toward her.

"Hermione, I..."

"Severus, would..."

They both chuckled at the incident.

"What were you going to say, Hermione?"

"I was wondering if you'd like to go to Hogsmeade today. I wanted to buy a new quill. Maybe we can get lunch while we're there?"

Severus smirked contentedly. Hermione's eyebrows rose as she gave him a questioning look.

"I was just about to ask you the same thing," Severus explained.

A wide grin came over Hermione's face. "I'll meet you at eleven in the Entrance Hall."

"I'm looking forward to it," Severus acknowledged.

He seemed to realize what he said and quickly stared into his oatmeal, which he began to eat rapidly. Hermione grinned and went back to her own breakfast.

The outing had been enjoyable for both of them. They had gotten the few things each one needed, stopping at the quill shop and the apothecary. Neither was very hungry, so they had each gotten something light at the Three Broomsticks. Lunch conversation had centered on teaching techniques and dealing with children who only wanted to do the minimum possible to get by.

The two were now walking along the street, heading back towards Hogwarts. Severus stared off in the distance, quietly walking along, his thoughts very far away. Hermione walked silently beside him, she, too, seemingly engrossed in some faraway thought.

"Hermione?"

"Yes?"

"Would you mind accompanying me to the Shrieking Shack?" Severus asked.

"If you want me to, of course I will."

Severus reached out and took her hand for the first time that day. "I would appreciate your company."

Hermione smiled and followed along as he led the way to the place of his almost-death.

They continued to walk along quietly, side by side. Severus held Hermione's hand. The closer they got to the shack, the tighter his grip. He was unsure why he wanted to venture into the place where he'd almost died, but something was calling him there. They made their way along the path, through the fence, and over the grass until they were standing in front of the towering monstrosity of a building. Severus stopped and looked at the graying wood. It was falling apart in places. He wondered if it was even safe to enter.

Hermione's voice came from beside him. "We don't have to go in if you don't want."

Severus squared his shoulders. "No, I need to go in."

He went up to the door and pushed it open. They headed back to the room where Voldemort had struck him down. Severus resolutely looked around. His blood still stained the floor, although it had faded to a dull rust color. Memories of the snake's attack flooded his mind. He blanched as he saw Nagini coming at him, sinking her teeth into his neck, tearing him apart, and retreating back to her master.

Even though his memories of the event were quite vivid, he felt relief flood him. This was the place where he'd finally been set free. His killing of Albus a year prior had freed him from that old man's power. Ultimately, the attack upon his person had severed his ties to the Dark Lord. At that moment in time, Severus...although in excruciating pain...had been set free. A half-smile came across his lips as he realized that the shack and all that had happened there that night had been for his good.

He felt the hand that was still wrapped in his begin to shake. Glancing over at Hermione, he was shocked to note that tears were streaming down her face. Hermione withdrew her hand from his and buried her face in her hands, sobbing loudly. Her entire body was shaking with the force of her emotions. Severus placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Hermione, what is it?"

"Just seeing your blood on the floor," she sputtered through her hands. "It brings it all back as if it were happening right now."

Severus pulled her to him and surrounded her with his arms.

"It's over."

"Oh, Severus, I'm sorry!" Hermione cried as she buried her face in his robes. Her hands grasped them, and she gripped them forcefully. "I'm so sorry!"

Severus rubbed her back soothingly. "What do you have to be sorry for?"

"We... we just left you. We didn't know you were still alive! Severus, we just left you."

"Shh, it's all right. You couldn't have known."

Hermione pulled away from him and escaped from the room. She ran out of the shack, stopping outside the entrance. When Severus came upon her, she was still breathing heavily and tears were still coursing down her face.

He placed his hands on her arms and pulled her into him. "Hermione, don't do this to yourself."

"I was relieved," she whispered.

"What do you mean?" Severus asked as he turned her around.

She stared into his eyes for a time before answering. "When I saw you, dead on the floor, I was relieved. You'd killed Dumbledore and were dangerous. I was happy that one less Death Eater was a threat to us. You were lying dead on the floor in there, and all I could think of was that I wouldn't have to worry about you hexing me during the battle. How could I have been so callous? Severus..." She shook her head. "There's no excuse for the way I felt."

Severus shook her slightly. "Hermione, stop this."

"I knew... deep down I knew you were innocent, but I let what Harry saw influence me. By the time we'd come to the day of the battle, I had no feeling for you whatsoever. I was glad you were dead!"

She struggled to get out of his grasp. Severus shook her again. "Hermione, don't go down this road. You were supposed to think me a monster. You were supposed to think that I worked for the other side. You were supposed to rejoice at my fall!"

Hermione stopped struggling. She looked deep into Severus' eyes. Sadness came upon her face. "If I were half the witch I thought I was, I would have at least mourned your loss."

She finally pulled herself from his grip and turned. Hanging her head, she walked quickly away from him. Severus stared after her. He wasn't sure what to do. This woman who was berating herself for her past actions was the most compassionate woman he'd ever met. She'd gone out of her way to help him. She'd fought for his freedom while he was unconscious. She'd listened to him when he was feeling that the entire world hated him. Now she was filled with self-loathing for her own past. He understood those

feelings. He was just getting over them himself. He needed to do something before she consumed herself with guilt and became like him. He ran to her and moved in front of her. Turning, he pulled her to him.

"You are to stop this immediately," he ordered.

"How can you even touch me?"

Severus stooped a bit so he could look directly into Hermione's eyes. "For the same reason you can touch me."

Hermione looked puzzled. "Why wouldn't I touch you?"

"Because of the things I've done, Hermione. Why would anyone want to touch *me*? Why would they want to associate with *me*? No one would, except for you. You are torturing yourself for something that was forced upon you. The circumstances of Dumbledore's death could only lead to one conclusion: that I was a cold-blooded murderer. Do not..." he looked directly into her eyes for emphasis. "Do not torture yourself more about it."

"I was glad..." she said weakly.

"So was I! I hoped to survive, but even if I hadn't, I was glad to have been attacked. It freed me from his power and influence."

"That's not why I was relieved."

"Hermione, I don't care. I don't care if you danced next to my body with happiness at the thought of my demise. Stop berating yourself for a natural response."

"Severus, I..."

"How have you treated me since you found out the truth?"

Hermione looked down and said nothing.

"You have been my advocate and friend, have you not?"

She nodded her head slightly.

"I could not ask for a truer friend. You told me that I needed to forgive myself yesterday. Well, I'm telling you the same. You have more than made up for the thoughts you had about me. Thoughts that, I'd like to remind you, were very valid given the circumstances."

Hermione looked at him searchingly. "You don't hate me?"

Severus gave a half laugh and pulled her into him. "Far from it," he admitted as his arms wrapped around her. "Now stop this before you hurt yourself. You are still not fully recovered from your heart condition."

He felt her relax and almost melt into him. "I'm sorry, Severus."

"You need not apologize. I hold nothing against you."

Her arms went around him then, and she buried her face in his robes. He stood silently, just holding her, letting her pull herself together. She gripped him as thoroughly as he'd gripped her the day before, and Severus marveled at her show of affection toward him.

How can such a wonderful woman be guilt-ridden like this? It was obvious to Severus that she need not berate herself in such a way. He knew that no one would fault her for her reactions. He wished he could wave his wand and make this guilt vanish.

You need to forgive yourself. Hermione's words to him came flooding to his mind. His eyebrows furrowed as he thought of their situations. Hermione was acting very much like him. He'd thought it impossible for anyone to accept the things he'd done. Maybe, like his view of her confessions, others didn't look upon what he'd done as harshly as he judged himself. Of course, he'd murdered someone; many people would never see past that one fact. However, could it be possible that some of them could look beyond his actions and see him as a whole? Could they see more than Severus saw himself? He'd buried himself in guilt for so long, letting it color everything he did, thinking that even the smallest good deed was greatly overshadowed by the horrific things he'd done. He'd been unable to see what others could; that he wasn't the sum of all his evil doings, but the sum of everything he'd done. The good he'd done had far outweighed the bad in his life, he'd just never taken the time to examine that good.

With this realization came further forgiveness on his part. With that forgiveness came the understanding that others could also forgive him. Hope filled him. Perhaps the happiness he sought was attainable in this life? The warm body in his arms attested to the fact that happiness was not out of his grasp.

Perhaps there could be something more between Hermione and him. Maybe she could grow to see him as more than just her friend. Severus held Hermione close and enjoyed the nearness of her. He would do anything to have her close to him like this always.

"Hermione," he whispered in her ear. "You are a wonderful witch. Don't berate yourself for being human. I care about you, and I don't want to see you so upset."

"I care about you too," came her muffled response. She pulled back and searched his face. "We should go," she said finally.

Severus wiped her tears away and gave a quick nod. Before either of them knew it, they'd composed themselves and were headed back to the castle. Severus held his hand out to Hermione, and she grasped it and held it firmly as they walked. It seemed as if she were afraid he would flee if she let go. He smirked to himself. Little did the witch know that he was growing incredibly fond of her. It would take much more than a few tears to drive him away.

A/N: Many thanks to slytherinlaurel for the beta work.

I think you guys were hoping for some kissy smoochie here. I was too, but things were a bit too intense in the emotions department. Severus is just coming to the realization that he's a worthwhile person. He'll soon be ready to do something about his growing feelings for Hermione. Of course, as you all can imagine, Hermione will be thrilled.

Chapter 20

Severus survives Nagini's bite, but his mental scars will take much longer to heal than his physical ones. Will he let anyone in to help him?



Chapter 20

Hermione flew for a long time. She needed a good think and flying helped her to do just that. Her wings stretched out from her body. The gentle, warm wind coursed over her as she flew over the lake. This feeling was truly exhilarating. Pointing upward, she soared higher, flapping her wings to gain altitude. Leveling off, she looked down, finding the lake much farther below her. Pulling her wings flat against her body, she let herself fall for a while before extending them again and straightening her trajectory. She glided along as her mind swirled around the subject that hadn't been far from it for several days... Severus Snape.

She was at a loss as to what to do about that man. Her feelings for him were coming to a head. She wasn't sure how much longer she could act normally around him. The more time they spent together, the more she wanted to pull him to her and kiss him senseless.

Oh, Severus, if only I knew how you felt.

His actions seemed to show that he cared for her, but she couldn't be sure. They were friends... good friends... but did that translate into attraction? He seemed to enjoy holding her hand, which seemed utterly out of character for Severus Snape. He just didn't go around grabbing people's hands and strolling around with them securely within his. That little act had to mean something.

Should she say something to him? What if she'd read the whole situation incorrectly, and she destroyed the friendship she had come to find so dear?

Come on, Hermione, the main reason you feel this way about your friendship is because you're crazy about him. If you want him, tell him.

She flew on, her wings beating up and down in short bursts. Severus was the type who would question himself and any positive feelings shown him. Maybe he was just being insecure about his feelings. Maybe she would have to make the advances to get him to acknowledge how he felt.

Circling around, she began to head back to Hogwarts. Yes, ultimately, she would need to confess her attraction to him. She needed to do one other thing before that, though.

Severus paced in the Defense classroom. Classes were over for the day. He should be heading to the Great Hall for dinner, but his mind was racing so he had to calm it down before being seen there. He'd been bombarded by images of Hermione Granger all day. He'd actually passed her in the hall before the start of classes, and she'd given him a beautiful smile. That smile hadn't left his thoughts in over four hours. *Cursed woman, worming her way into my head like that. Why can't she just leave me in peace?*

He grunted. It was no mystery as to why his thoughts were centered on her. He'd been falling for her more and more with every passing day. His internal voices had argued with him over and over again about the intelligence of that choice. Deep down, he knew that her affection toward him was only her deep level of caring about every creature on the earth. There was no special place in her heart for him. She was just an affectionate friend. He'd seen her be incredibly demonstrative to Potter and Weasley also, and there was nothing going on there.

What if I'm wrong, though? She never recoiled when they held hands. Their hugs had shown genuine affection. Could she think of him as more than just a friend? Could that possibility be the case?

He'd agonized over this for days now. He'd never really know how she felt unless he asked her. Anxiety filled him. What if this was all one-sided? It would be Lily all over again...friendship without the benefits.

"Oh, hell, man, if you don't say anything, you'll never know," he said to himself. "It's better to have everything on the table. Then you can either move forward or get over it!"

So, there was his answer. He'd tell her. She'd laugh in his face, but at least he'd know with certainty that he'd been dreaming impossible dreams. He'd speak with her right after dinner.

Turning, he left his classroom and headed for the Great Hall. He waited for her until the last teachers and students had left, but Hermione never came to dinner that night. A gentle hand alighted on his shoulder. He looked up to see Minerva smiling down at him.

"She had an errand to run tonight, Severus. She'll be back late."

Severus gave a small scowl, berating himself for being so obvious. Minerva patted his shoulder. "I'm glad Hermione is your friend. I hope we can become friends again some day."

Severus eyed Minerva. "That would be acceptable if you are willing."

Minerva gave Severus a shocked look. "I didn't think you wanted..."

"I am trying to put the past behind me. New starts would be helpful in that."

Minerva nodded. "I think that after the war we are all looking for new starts. Perhaps tea in my office?"

Severus rose and extended his arm. Minerva grasped it and walked along with him. They were silent during the time it took to get from the Great Hall to the Gargoyle guarding Minerva's office. She turned to him then and gave him a small smile.

"Thank you, Severus. Your forgiveness means much to me."

"As does yours, Minerva, whether I've said it before or not."

"There was nothing in need of my forgiveness." Minerva murmured the password, and the Gargoyle moved aside. Severus motioned for her to enter the stairwell.

"That well may be," he replied. "I am still glad you could get over everything that happened last year."

Minerva moved past him, and they both ascended to her office. "You are an incredibly brave man. Thank you for all that you did."

Severus made no reply, but he gazed at Minerva in surprise. He felt relief flood him as he finally accepted her words at face value. He was looking forward to rekindling his friendship with her.

Hermione entered the large office. She'd been in this office many times after the war, arguing the case for Severus Snape. She approached the desk and looked at the man seated behind it. Kingsley Shacklebolt smiled brightly at her.

"Hermione, how are you?" he said with a grin.

Hermione extended her hand and shook Kingsley's. "I'm fine, Minister. How are you?"

Kingsley gave Hermione a stern look. "You know that I don't like it when you call me Minister, Hermione. We're too good of friends to use such formalities. It makes me feel like an overlord."

Hermione laughed. "Well, Kingsley, we might be going back to such formalities when you hear why I have come by today."

Kingsley motioned for her to take a seat as he sat back, waiting to hear what Hermione had to say. When Hermione was settled, she folded her hands around her crossed legs and looked up at Shacklebolt.

"This is about Severus Snape."

Shacklebolt frowned. "I didn't expect him to cause any trouble. What has he done?"

"That's just it, Kingsley. He hasn't done anything. As a matter of fact, the things he did before the war should be enough proof that he's on our side. We've had this conversation over and over again. Why has the Ministry put such horrid restrictions on him?"

"Snape feels comfortable at Hogwarts."

Hermione furrowed her brow. "You strip him of his status as Headmaster and throw him back into teaching...a profession he's never cared for...and you expect him to feel comfortable?"

Kingsley drummed his fingers on the desk. "The Wizengamot did what they felt was best. I figured he'd be fine once he got used to the idea."

Hermione felt her anger spread through her. She'd not expected to get the run-around, but Kingsley was pushing a bunch of lies right in her face.

"Kingsley... I know that Minerva came here before the school year and explained this to you ad nauseam, so don't try to play the innocent one here. You claim to be grateful for all that Severus has done for the Wizarding community, yet you treat him like a convict on parole."

"Look, Hermione, my hands are tied. The Wizengamot voted to have these restrictions placed upon Severus. I cannot go against Wizarding law just because I feel he's not a threat."

"Do you really feel he's not a threat, or are you just trying to appease me?"

"I believe that Severus Snape fought on our side, and that he's not a threat."

"Then do something about this!" Hermione cried.

"As I said, my hands are tied."

Hermione's shoulders slumped as she eyed Shacklebolt gravely. "How wide was the margin in favor of these restrictions?"

"Fifty-four percent of the Wizengamot voted in favor of the restrictions."

"That's only a simple majority. It can be overturned," Hermione said sagely.

"It's a majority, Hermione. The Wizengamot has ruled; there's nothing that can be done."

Hermione reached into her robes and pulled a miniaturized book from her pocket. Waving her wand over it, the book enlarged to its rightful proportions. She opened it to where a bookmark was placed and turned the book so that Kingsley could see it.

He read through it quickly and looked back up at her. "What are you implying?"

Hermione huffed. "I'm not implying anything, Kingsley. It clearly states that if there isn't a two-thirds majority, the Minister may overturn any ruling."

"I can't do that."

"Why not?" Hermione demanded.

"I will not go against the Wizengamot's ruling."

"Kingsley, it states right there that you, as Minister, have the right to do just that."

Shacklebolt slammed the book shut. "This is my job, Hermione. I know how to do it!"

"Then stop pandering! You are the Minister of Magic. Stop trying to make friends! You were elected to govern, so govern! This isn't a game, Kingsley. You are meddling with someone's life just so the Wizengamot won't be angry with you. Well, sometimes you have to make hard decisions."

Kingsley regarded her levelly. He began to drum his fingers on the table again in frustration. "What if I refuse?"

Hermione sat back and huffed. She folded her arms in front of her. "There's nothing I can do about it, is there? If you choose to appease the Wizengamot instead of doing the right thing, then I must abide by that decision."

"You wouldn't take this to the media?"

Hermione let her head drop in frustration. "Kingsley, what do you take me for? I know how the media twists everything. I'm sure I could garner sympathy by using that route, but I am reticent to have anything to do with the media. I'm not out to destroy your position; I just want you to rule wisely and justly."

Kingsley studied her for a while. "Thank you for that, Hermione. You're right, of course. I was trying to protect my standing among the Wizengamot. It is difficult to rule when they are your enemy."

"You can rule justly without making enemies."

"I did try. I argued Snape's case, telling the Wizengamot that he was unhappy at Hogwarts. They didn't care."

Hermione shook her head. "I never thought of you as a typical politician; pandering to those who yell the loudest. What's happened to you?"

"The realities of governing are far different from the ideals. There's constant bickering and underhanded moves. Things are improving, but it's very slow going. If I'm going to make any headway here, I need the Wizengamot on my side. In order to survive, one has to compromise one's standards."

Hermione leaned forward and placed her hands on the desk. "But you are the Minister! Surely, you have a say in how everything is governed."

"I'm working on getting those who are corrupt out of office. I am in the process of getting rid of Dolores Umbridge as we speak. Reform is a slow process and will take some time. To be honest, this matter with Snape seemed relatively simple, and I didn't want to take the time to fight about it."

"So, you just gave up..."

Kingsley's eyes narrowed slightly. "No, I did what I felt was best at the time."

Hermione's lips thinned. "How could you think that best? You just did what was easiest. You said so yourself just now."

"Despite my misgivings, I figured Snape would settle into a routine. I hoped he would feel comfortable eventually."

"How can he feel comfortable with the threat of Aurors watching his every move?" Hermione threw up her hands in disgust. "I truly expected better of you. What you've done... what you've allowed to be done... it's just wrong."

Kingsley studied her as he drummed his fingers on the table. "I do think he'd be happier freed from this decree and able to go about doing as he pleases. I always have."

"Then make this right! Help Severus to fully heal from everything he's had to go through for the last twenty years." She looked him straight in the eye. "It's the least you can do for a war hero like him. Do the right thing, Kingsley, please."

Kingsley regarded her for a long while, debating everything in his mind. Finally, he gave a slight nod and pulled a parchment and Dicta-quill out of his top drawer. The parchment had the official letterhead of the Ministry emblazoned on it in gold leaf. He quickly dictated an overturning of the ruling. Waving his wand over the parchment he made several copies and handed two to Hermione.

"Give one of these to Minerva; the other is for Snape. That should take care of everything."

Hermione looked to Kingsley gratefully. "Thank you. I'm sure he'll be relieved not to have to live under the thumb of the Ministry any longer."

"As you said, it's the right thing to do. I'll just have to deal with whatever fallout comes of it. Tell Snape good luck in his future endeavors."

Hermione rose and smiled at Shacklebolt. "I will, sir. Thank you again."

Minerva lowered the parchment and stared at Hermione incredulously.

"What on earth did you do to convince him to give you this?" she queried.

"I just told him the facts."

Minerva huffed. "Facts didn't seem to persuade him when I spoke with him."

"I believe my facts were a bit harder to ignore," Hermione replied sagely.

Minerva put the parchment on the desk. "Well, I'm glad he did it, but now what am I to do for a Defense teacher?"

"Maybe you can persuade Severus to stay until you can find a replacement."

"You're kidding, right? He'll have his things packed and be out of here before the day's end."

Hermione felt a sudden sadness envelop her. "Let me talk to him. Maybe I can convince him to stay around for a few weeks."

Minerva chuckled. "Good luck!"

Hermione stood outside Severus' room, pacing back and forth. In all honesty, she didn't know what to say to him. He had every right to just up and leave with this new decree. After all that he'd been through, she wouldn't blame him one bit. Unfortunately for her, the thought of him leaving left a wide gaping hole in her. She had come to treasure their moments spent together and would miss him terribly.

She debated within herself whether to tell Severus how she felt. She'd convinced herself before that she should, but now that the time was upon her, a great fear of rejection had settled in her stomach, and it screamed at her to just keep her mouth shut.

"Might as well go for it," she muttered to herself. "He won't be here very long if it all goes south."

With that, she stopped pacing and knocked on his door. She smiled at him as he opened it, but her insides were churning. She looked at him... really looked at him. He seemed a bit less tense and forlorn than he'd looked in a while. She was truly happy to see that. She took in the strong lines of his face and felt herself turn to mush. Some may think his features to be harsh, but Hermione felt they were distinguished. *Distinguished? I mean gorgeous.*

"Come in," Severus offered as he ushered her in.

She passed by him, taking in the fresh scent of mountain air wafting from him. It was enough to make her want to get closer and sniff deeply, but she restrained herself. Smiling at him instead, she headed into the front room.

Severus motioned for her to settle into the couch, and he took a place next to her.

"Hermione, I wasn't expecting you to stop by," he said.

"I have something for you, Severus," she explained while pulling the parchment from her robes.

She handed the scroll to him. Severus looked up quizzically. "What's this?" he asked.

"You'll have to open it to find out," Hermione offered.

Pulling the ribbon from the scroll, he unrolled it and quickly read its contents. His eyes grew wide. They shot from the parchment to Hermione's eyes in wonder.

"What did you do?" he asked in amazement.

"I told Kingsley to do his job."

"This... this says there are no restrictions over me. That means I can live my life as I wish!"

Hermione smiled at him. "I know, Severus. You deserve nothing less."

Severus stood abruptly. "Tell Minerva that I quit."

He turned and retreated to his bedroom, leaving a shocked Hermione gaping after him. She knew he was eager to leave Hogwarts, but she had no idea that he'd want to leave immediately. He hadn't even given her a second glance. She bit her lower lip. Maybe this wasn't the right time to bring up her feelings.

Rising from the couch, she wandered over to the bedroom door and looked in. Severus was standing over a box. Clothes were folding themselves and settling in the box, but Severus stood apart from it, staring off into the distance. Hermione watched him curiously. He seemed to be deep in thought and a large frown was upon his face.

Hermione moved into the room. She sidestepped the clothing and came up next to Severus.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

Severus came out of his reverie and glanced at her. He quickly looked away, his frown growing larger.

"Hermione..."

"Severus..." they both said at the same time.

"Go ahead," Severus offered.

"No, Severus, you go first."

Severus stared pensively at the wall before finally turning to Hermione.

"I am obviously ecstatic to be leaving," he began. "I was so excited that I rushed in here without thinking of the full meaning of my leaving." Averting his eyes from hers, he looked over her shoulder. "I have become very fond of you, Hermione. The realization that I won't be seeing you gives me pause. I... will... miss you."

For a man like Severus Snape, his simple statement probably could be construed as a furtive declaration of love. Hermione did not let that slip her mind.

Hermione took a step closer to Severus and smirked at him. "I was going to say much the same thing," she admitted.

Severus looked to her with guarded eagerness. "Really?"

Hermione pushed herself to be bold. Being forward had never been her forte. She knew, however, that it was either tell him about her feelings now or lose the chance entirely.

"Severus, I've found that as we've gotten to know each other better, I..." She was the one to avert her eyes now. "I've fallen in love with you."

Within seconds Severus closed the gap between them and lifted his hand to cup her cheek. "You love me?" he asked.

"Yes," Hermione answered.

His eyes flickered with emotion as he gazed upon Hermione. He spoke, but his voice was merely a whisper. "I love you, too." His hand caressed her face as he looked at every inch of it. "I don't want to lose you," he admitted.

Bending low, he placed a tender kiss on her lips. Hermione wasted no time in entwining her fingers in his hair and pulling him even closer. She turned his tender kiss into a passionately intense one, opening her mouth and allowing him to enter. She drank in his taste hungrily, giving a slight moan when he finally pulled away from her.

"This can't really be happening," he murmured.

"Why not?" Hermione asked.

"Things like this don't work out for me," Severus explained.

"Everyone deserves happiness, Severus."

"For a long time, I didn't think I did."

Hermione's hand snaked from his hair and caressed his cheek. "I hope you still don't think that."

"You have helped me to see that even I have a right to be happy, Hermione."

Tears formed, unbidden in Hermione's eyes. She pulled Severus close to her and hugged him furiously. "Severus, you don't know what it means to me to hear you say that. I've been so worried about you because you've been so dependant."

"Thank you for not giving up on me. I'd still be wallowing in guilt if it wasn't for you."

"I could never give up on you, Severus."

He smiled then. "How could I not love you? You buoy me up when I am at my lowest." His voice became husky, as he choked up. "Thank you," he uttered before pulling her close. "Even when I was horrible to you, you kept trying. You... you didn't let me drive you away, even though I desperately wanted to."

"I've been best friends with Harry Potter for most of my life," she replied with a laugh. "I'm adept at not being driven away. Harry tried it often, so I had to keep reminding him that I was his friend and that friends stick together. Severus, I do not easily abandon those I love."

"I'm glad for that," Severus whispered. "You have helped me to forgive myself. I am beginning to see that I've punished myself long enough for my youthful mistakes. I am ready to leave all that behind me."

Hermione pulled back and smiled so widely that her entire face lit up. "I can't tell you how relieved I am. Hopefully, you can recognize how wonderful you are now."

Severus scoffed. "You are the only one to think I'm wonderful, Hermione. That's just evidence that you've lost your mind."

"I am still in my right mind, you foolish man. I will always be here for you, Severus."

"I'm not sure that I deserve that from you."

Hermione smiled up at him. "Remember, you deserve much more than you give yourself credit for."

"But this... *This*, Hermione, is more than I could have ever hoped for."

Hermione stroked his hair. "Then maybe you should set your standards a little higher. You deserve this and so much more."

"You are what I need to be happy, Hermione."

Hermione looked at Severus seriously. "I know you are anxious to get away from Hogwarts, but do you think you could stay until Minerva finds a replacement for you?"

"The thought of leaving you makes me hollow inside. I will stay here as long as is necessary."

Hermione frowned. "I know you hate it here. I don't want you to stay just on my account."

Severus shook his head. "That's not what I'm suggesting. I will stay until a replacement is found and no longer. That should give us enough time to plan for my leaving. We should be able to have ironed out a way to see each other by then."

"I could leave, too," Hermione offered.

Severus pushed her hair behind her ear while smiling at her. "No, Hermione. You enjoy your position here. Besides, Minerva would kill me. That's one witch I want to keep happy."

Hermione looked deeply into Severus' eyes. They were filled with affection for her. His whole face mirrored a happiness that had never been present within it. Her heart soared at the thought that he could find happiness and that happiness included her. She smiled at him.

"We'll make this work, Severus. I don't want to lose you either."

Any other thing she may have said was quickly silenced by Severus' mouth coming down on hers. She quickly lost all sense of reason as his sensual kiss emptied her mind of everything except him. His intense male presence and the fingers that were curling through her hair sent her into sensory overload. Oh, everything about him was electric to her. Too soon, his kisses had ended, and he'd pulled back. His eyes bored into hers.

"My beautiful Red," he murmured.

She smiled at him before he took her mouth captive again, blissfully giving in to his every whim.

Chapter 21

Chapter 21 of 21

Severus survives Nagini's bite, but his mental scars will take much longer to heal than his physical ones. Will he let anyone in to help him?



Chapter 21

"How long will it take you to find a replacement?" Severus asked Minerva.

She leaned back into her chair and looked from Severus to Hermione and back again as they sat in front of her desk.

"How did you do it, Hermione?" she asked. Looking back at Severus, she continued. "I thought for certain you'd be gone by now."

Severus looked to Hermione and grasped her hand in his. "Hermione has some very convincing arguments for me to stay."

Minerva glanced down at the couple's hands clasped together. "Is there something you're not telling me?" she asked.

Hermione blushed scarlet, but Severus only looked at the Headmistress levelly. "Suffice it to say that I have a vested interest in staying."

Severus was surprised by the warmth in Minerva's eyes. Giving a quick nod to both of them, she continued on with only the brighter tone of her voice to show that she was pleased for both of them. "I'm glad she convinced you to stay until I can find a replacement."

Severus gave Minerva a slight nod in return. "So... how long?" he asked.

Minerva pursed her lips as she grabbed her quill. She flipped to a blank page in the notebook that sat in front of her and began to scribble names onto it. In a few minutes, she had a list of several people.

"I need to contact each one of these candidates and offer them an interview. The interviews should take me about two weeks. I think I might be able to have a Defense teacher in a month. As for your position as Deputy Headmaster..." Her gaze fell to Hermione.

"Would you like that position, Hermione?"

Hermione gaped. "No, no I wouldn't!"

Minerva seemed surprised. "Why ever not?"

"Minerva," Hermione began. "It is a huge job, and to be honest with you, I want to spend my spare time with Severus, not doing all the intricate extras that are needed for the school to run smoothly."

Minerva sighed. "There's no convincing you, then?"

Hermione shook her head as she grasped Severus' hand tightly. "No. Thank you, though. I appreciate your confidence in me. What about Filius? He's energetic and is very organized. I believe he'd do a wonderful job."

Minerva nodded. "He was my second choice." She scribbled something down on the parchment in front of her before looking at Severus again. "All right, I'll see what I can do to get this position filled as soon as possible. I must say, dear boy, I will miss you."

Severus scowled. "You are channeling your inner Dumbledore, Minerva. Please cease and desist at once."

The Headmistress scoffed. "My sentiments are genuine. I am not sure I would say the same for Albus."

Severus stared at Minerva incredulously.

"I do not agree with the way Albus used both you and Mr. Potter. That's all I care to say on the matter."

Severus swallowed as he gazed at the Headmistress and then up to the sleeping portrait of Dumbledore. He wondered what the old man was thinking. "I appreciate your sentiments, Minerva. Thank you."

Minerva stared at him before nodding curtly. "Good luck to you. Let me know if you need anything... ever. And don't think that because you will not be teaching here that I don't want to hear from you. An owl now and then would be welcome."

"Yes, mother."

Minerva scoffed and waved her hand at him. "Oh, get out of my office, you unbearable man." Turning to Hermione she shook her head at her. "Do not let him try to pull his indifferent act with you, Hermione. He obviously cares about you. Unfortunately, he has a tendency to stuff his foot in his mouth so no one will see he has emotions."

"Minerva..." Severus growled.

"Oh, enough from you!" Minerva said with a glare at Severus. Turning back to Hermione, she continued, "I know you won't let him get the best of you, dear."

Hermione gave Minerva a conspiratorial smile. "No, Minerva, I surely won't."

"I really do not take kindly to the fact that you both are speaking about me as if I weren't even present," Severus huffed.

Minerva shrugged. "Boss' prerogative. Now off with the two of you. I'll let you know tomorrow who I'm considering once I've spoken to these people." She motioned to her parchment as the two rose to leave.

"Thank you, Minerva," Hermione said, but Severus only grunted. They quickly left the office and headed down the stairwell. When they'd reached the bottom, Hermione turned to Severus.

"Really, why must you be such a grouse?" she asked.

Severus pulled her to him and kissed her soundly, leaving her breathless when he finally pulled away from her lips.

"I have more important things to do with my day than waste it with that old bird," he answered gruffly.

"You should have mentioned that sooner," Hermione retorted before pulling him down to her and returning his passionate kiss.

Hermione lifted her head from the essays she was grading to see Luna standing at her doorway knocking softly.

"Come in!" she offered.

Luna floated in and pulled a chair next to Hermione's. Her eyes were big as she looked to her.

"How are you feeling?" she asked in a wispy voice.

Hermione smiled. "I'm fine, finally. At my check-up last week Poppy said I was fully healed."

"So, Professor Snape can yell at you again?"

Hermione tilted her head. "Technically, yes, but I'm hoping that won't be an issue anymore."

Luna nodded. She gazed around Hermione quickly. "The Nargles around you are excited, Hermione. You have a different aura about you."

Hermione smiled at her friend. "I suppose you could say that, Luna. Something... happened yesterday."

"I thought it might have. That's why I stopped by. I was feeding the Thestrals this morning, and I got a very distinct feeling that I needed to come talk with you."

Hermione placed her quill on the desk and turned fully toward Luna. "I was able to get the Ministry to take off all the restrictions on Severus... I mean Professor Snape. He's free to leave the school."

Luna's eyes widened. "What will he do?"

"Once the Headmistress finds a replacement for him, he will move to Hogsmeade."

"So he can be near you," Luna concluded.

Hermione's mouth dropped open. "Luna, how did you know?"

Luna's hand came out and she grasped Hermione's. "He's finally told you, hasn't he? That he loves you."

"What? How could...? Has he spoken to you about his feelings?"

Luna shook her head. "No, Hermione, it was just obvious."

Hermione huffed. "Not to me, it wasn't."

"Sometimes the ones closest to the truth fail to see it clearly. I've been watching both of you for weeks now. He obviously loves you very much."

"I don't think he'll be happy to know his feelings have been clear to the entire school," Hermione said with a frown.

"Don't worry, I don't think anyone suspects. Most people don't know how to watch people. I inherited that gift from my mother. She could always look at someone and know much of how they felt or what they were thinking." Her eyes drifted over to Hermione's. "You're happy, right?"

Hermione gave Luna a large smile and nodded. "I've had feelings for him for a while now. I was thrilled to find that he feels the same way."

Luna hugged her tightly. Hermione returned the hug affectionately. "He's a good man, Hermione. I know some think he's evil, but just looking at him, you can see he has a good heart."

Hermione pulled back and gazed at her friend. "You truly are amazing, Luna. Most people wouldn't take the time to understand that."

Luna waved her comment off. "I'm just happy to see the two of you have finally figured everything out. I wanted to tell you both, but I knew you had to get there yourselves."

"I doubt I'd have believed you if you'd said anything." Hermione agreed.

"So, what will you do now, with Professor Snape not teaching here? You're not leaving too, are you?"

"No, no. I'm staying here. Severus will be close by, and we can see each other every day."

"Well, he seems to be the kind who needs reminders that he's cared for. You'll remember to remind him, right, Hermione?"

Hermione nodded vigorously. "Oh, I plan on it."

The women giggled to themselves before switching subjects. "How are things going with Hagrid?" Hermione asked.

"Very well," Luna said. "He's let me care for a lot of different creatures. In fact, he's given me free reign over the Horklumps. I feel bad raising them, actually, as they'll just be fed to Hagrid's gnomes." She shrugged. "I suppose that's part of learning to be an animal handler."

Hermione nodded.

"I heard from Neville yesterday. He sent a very long owl. He's speaking with Professor Sprout about possibly doing an apprenticeship with her next year. He says his gram is driving him crazy and he needs to have a good reason to get out of the house."

"Hmm, maybe I could talk with Professor Sprout and see what her thoughts are. I know she enjoyed Neville in class."

Luna nodded. "Poor Neville. I hope it works out for him."

"I'll see what I can do."

"What do you mean I have to stay until the change of term?" Severus growled.

Minerva gave Severus a withering look. "Your replacement cannot begin until January."

"Then find someone who can begin next week."

"Severus, it's impossible. I've contacted every possible candidate over these last weeks, and they are all involved in their own lives and can't possibly start until the beginning of next term. Besides, it's only another month. Wouldn't it be nice to spend Christmas here at Hogwarts?"

"The only good thing about that will be spending time with Hermione," he grouched.

"Well, that should be reason enough to want to stay. You are treating her well, aren't you?"

Severus threw his hands up in frustration. "Yes! Do you think I wouldn't?"

"Well, given your past track record."

Severus narrowed his eyes at Minerva.

"Tsk. I wasn't talking about Lily Potter. I was talking about your normal demeanor as a git. It can be very taxing to a young woman, even if she loves you."

Severus sat back and glared at Minerva. "I do not treat her poorly."

Minerva gave a quick nod. "See that you don't in the future. She is a rare treasure, and you are lucky to have her."

"Don't you think I know that?"

"I think you do now. Still, it is easy to slip into complacency. Don't let that happen. Your relationship is too important to ever ignore it."

Severus' glare softened. "You are right, of course. I will remember your words."

"I think both of you will be happy if you do."

Severus gave a curt nod of affirmation before rising and leaving Minerva to her job.

Severus smiled as Hermione opened the door. He held out a bouquet of dark purple tulips to her. Hermione gasped as she reached for them.

"Oh, Severus, these are beautiful!" Grasping his hand, she pulled him into her sitting room. She hugged him fiercely before turning to take care of the tulips.

Severus made his way to the sofa, watching Hermione as she transfigured a cat figurine into a vase and placed the tulips in it. Her face beamed as she did so. Severus felt his heart constrict as a shred of doubt entered into his mind.

Minerva had been right; he could never take Hermione for granted. She would lose interest in him in an instant if he did. He still didn't understand why she found him so intriguing. If the truth be known, he was expecting any day now that she would announce that she'd grown tired of him and walk out of his life. Time would tell, he assumed. His move out of Hogwarts would be a defining factor in their relationship. Would Hermione still want to take the time to be with him when he wasn't so readily available?

His musings were cut short by soft, sultry lips pressing against his. He became engrossed in the woman who was now sitting in his lap, showering him with affection. He would definitely take advantage of this as long as he could before she left him.

Hermione pulled back and looked into his eyes. "Thank you so much. I love tulips. How did you know?"

Severus shrugged. Despite trying to seem chipper, he looked at Hermione wistfully.

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked, her face filled with concern.

"It is nothing. I was just thinking about how beautiful you looked when you were arranging the flowers."

Hermione frowned. "So, that caused you to look depressed?"

Severus looked away and scowled. "No," he answered tersely.

Hermione moved his chin back in her direction. "Severus?"

"I find that, in my life, happiness is a fleeting thing," he remarked quietly while looking toward the ground.

"You think we will not last?"

"You make me happy, ergo, this cannot last."

Hermione stood and his heart sunk. He'd angered her, he just knew it. She would storm off and that would be that. His gaze moved up suddenly when the woman he loved sat back down into his lap, strategically straddling his legs so she could face him directly.

"Look at me," she said softly.

His eyes locked onto hers.

Her hands surrounded his face. "I love you."

He couldn't say a word.

"Do you believe me?" Hermione asked.

He gave a quick nod.

"We will make this work. Do you believe me?"

His hesitation made her frown.

"Do I leave behind those that I love?"

"No," he ground out finally.

"I love you, Severus."

"What happens when I move away? We will grow apart."

Hermione's face hardened with determination. "I won't let that happen. Neither will you. We will not lose what we have simply because we don't live in the same place anymore."

"You have given me hope in so many things, yet I find I cannot convince myself that this can last."

"Then you don't truly believe that I love you."

"Hermione..."

"No, that's what it comes down to. You say you believe me, but deep down you don't." She looked at him sadly. "I'm not sure what I can do to convince you of that."

"I can see it in your face, Red."

"Then believe what you see!" she said emphatically. "Why do you doubt what is staring you in the face? I love you with all that I am. The thought of being separated from you makes my heart ache."

"Why?"

Hermione looked taken aback.

"I mean, why me? Out of all the men in the world, why would you ever choose me?"

"Because despite you feeling unworthy and unlovable, the exact opposite is true. You deserve this, Severus. You deserve someone to love you and to want to be with you always. You're an honorable man who has lived a miserable life. It's time for you to have the happiness you've been denied for so long. I want to help you find that happiness. I want to be a part of it, always."

"I don't..."

Her finger came up and pushed against his lips, silencing him. "I don't want to hear you say that you don't deserve me, or that I'm too good for you. It's not true."

Her eyes met his once again.

"I would be empty without you, Severus. I love you. I have for a long time."

"I feel the same, Hermione. It's just that when I've felt this way before..."

Her lips silenced his. "I'm not her," she said once she'd pulled back.

"I know."

"I will never be her, nor will I treat our relationship as shoddily as she did. You are the most important person in my life. I don't think that she placed you in that key position in her own life or she'd not have tossed you aside so readily."

"I don't think I truly realized how deeply she scarred me," he said after a while. "Our friendship was solid for a long time, then it all fell to pieces."

"That won't happen this time."

He looked away. "You don't know that," he whispered.

Her voice was small when she answered, and when he looked to her, he saw the tears falling freely down her cheeks. "I am not her. I don't toss my friends away."

His hand came up and he wiped away her tears. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you."

"E...Excuse me," she said as she moved away from his hand and off his lap. She moved quickly out of the room and into her bedroom, closing the door behind her.

Damn.

He waited a few minutes, but he knew she would not emerge again tonight. He'd hurt her, and she needed to recoup before she came face to face with him again. He was just standing to leave when her door opened again and she came hurrying out. She had a book in her hands.

"Take this," she ordered.

He reached out as she placed the book into his grasp.

"Read it, then come back and speak with me."

"I'm sorry, Hermione."

Her face was puffy from crying, and her eyes were sad as she looked up at him. "Please, just go and read that. I'll speak to you when you're done with it."

Severus slowly nodded and turned to go. He looked back at her, wishing to say something to make her stop crying. He hesitated, but no words would come. She turned from him and went back into her room, closing the door behind her and leaving him alone in the sitting room.

Turning toward the door, he glanced down at the book. He paged through it and realized it was a diary: Hermione's diary, at least part of it. He sunk back down into the chair where he'd been seated before and opened to the first page.

Severus,

I copied these from my diary for you to keep. I don't know any other way to prove my feelings for you. I hope you will believe my writings and that you'll find the confidence to accept my love for what it is. I love you. I want this to work between us, but I fear you will never truly embrace my love because of the way Lily treated you. I'm not going to do what she did, Severus. I am yours and will not turn from you in the blink of an eye. I love you with all my heart, and I want this to work. I wouldn't lie about that, ever.

I love you,

Hermione

Severus hesitantly turned the page. The entry was dated a week after she'd arrived.

Professor Snape is an enigma. He hides away almost always, and I can tell he has turned inward in his depression brought on by the war. There must be something I can do to help him.

Severus buried himself in her diary for the next half hour, reading page after page of her battle about telling him that she was Red and then her grief at his actions when he found out who she was.

I love him. I know he hates me, but I can't help myself. I hope one day he can at least look at me without showing the hatred that permeates his features when he looks at me now. I've blown everything...

He read over and over again of her deep love for him, of how she wanted to be with him constantly.

Merlin, he loves me too! He told me himself. I don't think I've ever felt so cherished. I didn't think we could ever get to this point, but we have.

With every page turn came the realization that she was right, he hadn't believed that she loved him. He hadn't been able to accept such a purity of feeling.

His head lifted from the last page of script as he placed the book on the sofa next to him. He eyed her bedroom door before rising and knocking softly. When she didn't answer, he tried the knob, which turned easily in his hand. Severus peeked through into her room and saw her shadowed form in the bed. Hearing her snuffle, he was at her side in an instant.

Kneeling beside her bed, his hand came out and smoothed her hair.

"I am a fool," he murmured.

"Yes, you are." Hermione sniffled. She was quiet for a moment. "I know you're arching your eyebrow at me, even though I can't see you," she said sarcastically.

Severus continued to rub his hand gently over her hair.

"You should go," she whispered.

"I don't want to."

"Severus..."

"You were right, I didn't understand your love for me. I didn't see how you could feel so intensely for someone like me. No one has ever felt that way for me before. I didn't dare think it possible that you could."

A great sob escaped Hermione's throat. "Just go, please."

Severus watched her sadly for a moment before standing and moving over her, finally settling beside her on the bed. He turned her body to face his and pulled her to him, burying her head in his chest as he clung to her and embraced her fervently.

"Please forgive my lack of belief. It was not a reflection of you, but of my own insecurities."

More sobs came from the woman he loved. Her arms came around him and she cried more. He kissed the top of her head and rubbed her back comfortingly. After a long while, her cries began to soften and fade. She clung to him even tighter then.

"I won't lose you because you cannot believe in yourself," she murmured finally.

"As I said, I am a fool," he whispered into her ear. She gasped at the closeness of his lips. "I know you love me," he continued. "I am truly the most fortunate man that ever lived because I have your love. I am sorry I was such a fool."

He felt her body tense slightly at his words. Growing bolder, he nibbled at her ear. She gasped pleasingly again. "Forgive me?"

Her moan was his only answer. He kissed his way to her mouth and pulled back to look into her eyes. "Thank you, Red, for never giving up on me," he declared before capturing her lips in his. He kissed her possessively, and she responded in kind. His hand followed her curves and came up to caress her face as he lovingly apologized with his kisses. He tasted the saltiness of her tears and pulled back, examining her face.

"You're still crying," he stated.

"I'm just relieved that you understand now."

"So, you're crying?"

"Women do that. You'll have to get used to it."

He tweaked her nose with his. "Sounds insane to me."

"They're happy tears."

He ran his fingers through her hair. "So, if I continue to do this..." He kissed her along her neck and felt her arch seductively. "I'll have you sobbing?"

Hermione giggled then. "Sobbing for more, maybe," she said breathlessly.

Severus sobered and pulled back. "You know I love you, too, right?"

Hermione nodded.

"Just as much as you love me. That's why I was so upset before."

She nodded again before running her fingers through his hair. His mouth came down upon hers again as he claimed her with his kiss.

"I will not doubt you again," he whispered in between kisses. Pulling back, he gave her a possessive gaze. "You are *mine!*"

She smiled at him in reply. Pulling him down, she cut off anymore conversation with her own searing and possessive kiss.

Severus stared through the gates at the castle looming in the distance. He watched as his falcon winged her way toward him. She landed at his feet and morphed into Hermione. He felt her hand grasp his and squeeze.

"All right?" she asked him.

He sighed. "I've spent most of my lifetime living behind these gates. I thought I would be ecstatic to leave Hogwarts behind me when the time came, but now I find I'm melancholy and apprehensive."

Hermione wrapped her arm around his and placed her cheek on his arm. "What are you apprehensive about?"

"I have done nothing but teach for over twenty years. What am I to do with myself?"

Hermione stood on tiptoe and kissed him on the cheek. "Live, Severus. You are to live."

His arm went around her and he pulled her close, placing a kiss gently on her lips. "It's finally over, isn't it?" he asked.

Hermione nodded. "This is the final step in moving on, Severus. You can cut your ties with Hogwarts and be anything you want."

Severus smiled ruefully. "I just live down the road."

"Yes, but you won't be living here any longer, surrounded by memories of bad times. You're free."

"Free..." He turned to look at the castle once again. A weight seemed to lift off him as he mentally said a final good bye.

"You don't mind if I never come to visit you here, do you, Red?"

Hermione reached up and turned his head back toward her. "I never expected you to. My Floo is connected to yours, and I'm just a quick Apparition away."

"Let's go, then. I have a private lab to set up."

Hermione pulled his head down and kissed him. He pulled back eventually and smirked at her before taking her hand and leading her down the pathway towards Hogsmeade.

They chatted to themselves happily, and Severus never once looked back.

The End

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