

The Symposium

by Neptune

Hermione and Severus have had little contact with each other since the war ended, but now that they are both stuck attending the 847th Annual Symposium for Potions Academia, that is about to change.

Pajama Pants – Meteoroid Beater

Chapter 1 of 7

Hermione and Severus have had little contact with each other since the war ended, but now that they are both stuck attending the 847th Annual Symposium for Potions Academia, that is about to change.



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Team Notes: This, the first chapter of our story in the **Intergalactic Quidditch Cup Tournament**, was written by **Pajama Pants** and betaed by **lyn_f**. We hope you enjoy it!

There are times, Hermione Granger thought as she trudged through the buffet line, that I have truly enjoyed pursuing a career in academics. This is not one of them. She

sighed, earning herself a glare from the witch currently scooping up the chicken with lumpy gravy.

Her department head's insistence on mandatory attendance at the 847th Annual Symposium for Potions Academia should have been a tip-off that the event would not be pleasant. She'd bristled then at the requirement, haughtily announcing to Professor Cecil De Phial that she would be honoured to go and that any researcher worth their weight in powdered moonstone would be eager to attend such a prestigious conference. De Phial had simply raised a knowing eyebrow and assured her that she would understand the requirement soon enough. Honestly, she was a researcher! A symposium with the top minds in her field sounded like nirvana! She had gritted her teeth against his presumptions, determined to prove her dedication and interest in the field.

But within moments of arriving at the Welcoming Social this afternoon, comprehension had dawned. Simply put, there were reasons why academics normally hibernated in their laboratories or remained sequestered in the library stacks. She wavered between describing the crowd, which shuffled before her now, as the zombie apocalypse or refugees from the Ministry's Lost and Found Cupboard.

The Welcoming Social had been truly horrific. After perusing the selection of rather suspicious looking canapés, she had soon found herself stuck chatting with a Bulgarian wizard with enough ink spots on his cloak that it had taken twenty minutes for her to realize the mottled pattern wasn't intentional. Twenty minutes of listening to the wizard drone on about, of all things, cauldron thickness. The worst bit was that she suspected she had the best conversationalist of the lot, judging from the glassy-eyed stares of the room's other occupants.

The crowd had thickened for the Welcoming Dinner, though it had grown no more promising. Hermione's stomach twisted as she surveyed the hall, wondering which table would provide the least nauseating company for a meal that was sure to require at least two Stomach Settling Potions, if the conferences from her days as a Uni student were anything to go by. With relief, she spotted two tables near the back where her colleagues were congregating. Moving quickly for fear that all the seats would be snatched up, she turned, took two steps, and ran into a solid wall of forest green cloak.

"Do watch where you're going, Miss Granger," said the wall of cloak.

Thankful for her plate's Anti-Spilling Charm, Hermione craned her neck to stare at a wizard she'd not seen since his trial. "Oh, I'm sorry, Professor Snape, though it's Professor Granger now. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised to see you here."

Severus Snape sighed. "Only because Professor McGonagall now requires that all staff attend professional conferences within their field. She insists on..." He paused to set his plate on the table in front of him, a glare at the table's lone occupant sending the witch scurrying to find other seating arrangements. The corners of his mouth twitched minutely as he watched her retreat.

"Professor McGonagall insists on?" Hermione prompted.

"Networking," he said, disdain dripping from every syllable. "And I suppose you're here because the lecture schedule was so very fascinating?"

Hermione snorted. "Yes, well. After I looked over the schedule, I was a bit disappointed that the talks are so..."

"Vapid?" he asked.

"I was thinking bland, but I suppose vapid will work," she replied, turning to look at her colleagues' table. Her face fell as the last seat filled. "Professor Snape, would you mind if I joined you? I wouldn't intrude; only my colleagues' table has filled, and I believe I've had my fill of networking from the Welcoming Social."

"A bit green about the gills, are you, Professor Granger? One avoids the organised social events at all costs." Severus gestured to the table and sat down.

She slid into the chair to Snape's right. "And yet, you're here at the Welcoming Dinner."

Snape was saved the trouble of equivocating as the Symposium Chairwizard took the podium. His opening remarks continued the tone of the Symposium; within moments, she was glancing around to see if anyone was face-down in their soup. Honestly, she'd heard Percy Weasley give livelier speeches.

Some fifteen minutes later, the speech ended, and the audience was finally free to begin their dinner. As the table to their left raved about the Chairwizard's opening remarks, Professors Snape and Granger tucked into their meals. The caterers, it seemed, were top-notch, as the plates had been charmed to keep their meals fresh and warm, and the lumpy gravy was surprisingly tasty.

Hermione dabbed her napkin against her mouth. "Thank you for letting me join you, Professor Snape. I believe that table," she gestured to the still chattering group, "might have sent me over the edge."

Snape muttered something about 'the devil you know' before taking a bite of the unidentifiable, but seemingly delicious, pasta dish piled on his plate.

She had nearly resigned herself to a silent meal, which was unfortunate but certainly desirable to non-stop sycophants, when Snape volunteered, "I'm rather curious how you came up with the idea to incorporate Asian brewing styles into traditional Western European potions."

Hermione stammered, trying to be mindful of the politics of her situation for once, "Well, I... Well, I was listed as third author on that publication. Surely you can't expect me to speak for the team's ideas."

"Oh, please, Granger. As if I can't recognize your rambling prose after six years of suffering your essays. It was obvious from the first paragraph that your superiors were along for the ride."

Blushing at the unexpected praise, Hermione explained the foundational research, which had led to the idea, including one of Snape's publications on applications for crushed Japanese nettle.

Snape interrupted her, "You read my articles in *Herbology Weekly*?" His calculating gaze flickered across her face.

"Well, you cover a rather wide range of topics, Professor Snape. A number of my projects have been aided by your articles," she explained, reaching for her water glass in an attempt to camouflage her sudden nervousness.

"I haven't seen my articles referenced in your footnotes," Snape answered, his fork pointing her direction in accusation.

"My *current, unpublished* projects," she corrected as she swallowed the observation that he was following her professional publications closely enough to examine the footnotes. She was rather intrigued by the man, and his ideas were fascinating and inspiring. It wouldn't do to spook him with such personal accusations, though she had no doubt he'd noticed his slip.

The moment of awkwardness was interrupted by the arrival of the coffee and desserts they'd selected earlier, a raspberry trifle for Hermione and dark chocolate mousse for Severus. Again, the caterers had delivered food that might well make the conference worth the agony. They relished their desserts in what Hermione liked to think was a companionable silence. She supposed she didn't know Professor Snape well enough to distinguish amongst his seemingly endless varieties of silence, though she was keen to avoid being reintroduced to the one that preceded a blistering rage.

The raspberry and custard lingered on her tongue as she drank her last sip of coffee. The conversation in the room was winding down, and Hermione noticed that several tables had emptied, including that of her colleagues. Much as she might like to grill Professor Snape on some of his more recently published ideas, he didn't seem inclined towards further conversation.

She stood, gathering her handbag from the chair. "Goodnight, Professor Snape. Despite the coffee, I believe the Portkey travel has caught up with me." She hesitated a

moment before continuing, "Perhaps I'll see you later this weekend."

"We shall see, Professor Granger," he replied, scraping the last bits of mousse from his bowl.

Fishing her room key from her handbag, she mumbled a sleepy goodbye and headed for her room.

Challenge words used: ink, forest, equivocate

We'll see you again in seven days...belle4life is up next!

belle4life – Comet Chaser

Chapter 2 of 7

Hermione and Severus have had little contact with each other since the war ended, but now that they are both stuck attending the 847th Annual Symposium for Potions Academia, that is about to change.



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Team Notes: This chapter was written by **belle4life** and betaed by **Spiderwort**. We hope you enjoy reading it!

A well rested, but symposium weary, Hermione Granger walked into the first panel of the day. A young wizard at the door handed her a pamphlet with a list of all the speakers and their subjects. Her eyes scanned the word-filled page. She saw several names she knew and others that she had only heard bad things about...mostly bad.

She made her way down the aisle and sat down in a chair, looking around to see if she recognized anyone. Her eyes returned to the pamphlet, and she continued to read. The first name on the panel list was Dwight G. Umber, a man she had heard was not as gifted as he led people to believe. The paper said his talk was about an improvement to Veritas serum, a sort of "Super-Serum," as he called it. *How ridiculous*, she thought. *What? Does he use more than three drops and call it an improvement?*

A looming shadow fell over her chair, and she looked up to find the scowling face of Severus Snape staring down at her. With a panther-like grace and celerity, he claimed the seat next to her with his ever-present scowl, which clearly proclaimed that he did not want to be there.

"To what do I owe the honor of your presence yet again?" she questioned him.

"The fact that you are the least annoying person here."

"I do believe that was a compliment," she said with a wry smile.

"Yes, well, I have been known to say something nice every once in a while," he replied.

"Not to me, you haven't."

"Would you like me to leave?"

"No, please stay. I have a feeling this first panel is going to be horrendous. Look at the first speaker." She pointed at the pamphlet he held in his skinny, pale hand.

He groaned. "Not that pompous moron. Why do people listen to him? He couldn't put together a complete thought without using someone else's ideas. 'Super-Serum,' what a joke. What does he do, simply use more than three drops?" The scowl on his face grew darker as he sat there.

"I was just thinking the same thing when you sat down. Why does it need to be improved upon? I think regular Veritas serum works perfectly fine. It makes people tell the truth...is there something *more* needed?"

"I agree."

The hall was filling up, and loud voices began to bounce off the wall. An older wizard stood up on the dais at the front and placed his wand to his throat, activating the

Sonorous Charm.

"May I have your attention, please?"

The voices continued, and he cleared his throat, attempting to settle the crowd. "Attention!" he shouted. The hall quieted down immediately, and the wizard gave a small smile. "Thank you. We are going to begin the first panel of the day. Each member of the panel will get up and give their exposition, and then there will be an opportunity for all of you to ask your questions. Our first presenter is Mr. Dwight Umber. He is known for his excellent work in Potions and his ability to expand on useful potions and make them even more valuable to the Wizarding world." The announcer walked off the dais, and almost everyone in the audience clapped as Umber took his place at the podium.

Umber had a rather round figure, reminding Hermione strangely of a less docile version of Horace Slughorn. His beady little eyes scanned the crowd and fell on her and Severus, a smugly nasty look falling across his face. The look was fleeting and quickly became more of a smirk as the applause began to die down. He was clearly reveling in being the cynosure of his colleagues.

"Thank you, thank you, my fellow potioners. I am so glad to be here today in front of you telling you about my latest invention."

"Oh, right. I'll bet five Galleons it isn't his at all," Hermione whispered into Severus' ear.

"I have been working on this version of the ever-popular Veritaserum for the past year, and I am quite proud of the advancements I've made. It is a super-strength version of the original that, as opposed to merely making the person subjected to it tell the truth, forces them to bring out their unconscious and subconscious thoughts as well, their true emotional state, so to speak."

"Oh, yes, do let's unleash the unstable thoughts of all the crazy people out there," Hermione murmured into her pamphlet. "Please let's give it to Lucius Malfoy or, better yet, Bellatrix Lestrange. That would be useful."

If Umber heard her, he made no sign, but just droned on. "This new form guarantees that the whole truth will come out and that nothing can be kept hidden. And the best part of all is there is no means of preventing it, no antidote. It is far too strong for anything like that."

"A potion without an antidote...ingenious, truly," Severus muttered.

"All you need is two drops on the tongue, and the truth will come out. It lasts for 24 hours once the drops hit the tongue."

"That's not safe," Hermione hissed. She and Severus looked at each other and shook their heads slightly in amazement at the man's stupidity.

Umber raised his voice. "It really is a great improvement on traditional Veritaserum if I do say so myself. I am quite proud of my work on this potion."

"Oh, yes, all two seconds of it," Severus whispered.

"Is anyone actually buying this ridiculousness?" Hermione wondered.

Severus looked at the faces around him and sadly nodded his head at the stupidity of not only the man on the dais, but the people whose faces shone in awe.

Hermione tried to tune him out for the rest of his talk. He babbled on about his brilliance for a good twenty minutes before the master of ceremonies cut him off. The rest of the panel was relatively interesting, and Hermione and Severus paid attention to what each of their colleagues had to say.

The question and answer session was dominated by the foppish Umber, whose potion had raised many questions amongst their clearly clueless colleagues. People asked him everything from how he came up with the idea to how he actually made the potion to when it would be ready to be sold and the recipe for the potion would be released. He somehow managed to skirt answering most of the questions, distracting the questioners with his flowery words and vague explanations.

"You know, he may be scum, but I must admit, the man is a master of distraction," Severus said after the questions were over. "That is skill. Too bad he's such a pompous arse."

"Indeed," Hermione added, chuckling.

They stood up and began to make their way out of the hall, but they were quickly stopped by the rotund figure of Dwight G. Umber.

"My, my, Severus Snape and Hermione Granger. What a surprise! How did you enjoy my lecture?" he questioned, licking his lips in a perverse manner.

"Astounding," Severus responded.

"Yes, yes. I am so glad you thought so. After all, I would hate to make your work obsolete without you enjoying what I'm doing."

"I beg your pardon?" Hermione questioned, stepping closer to him as if she had misheard him.

"I said I would hate to make everything you two have been working on obsolete without you appreciating the genius behind my creation."

"How, pray tell, does your work affect either of ours?" Severus asked.

"Yes, I am wondering the same thing," said Hermione. "I am working on a potion to allow a mind to completely block any intrusion, including Legilimency."

"And I am working on an advanced form of Wolfsbane. Neither of these has anything to do with your so-called 'Super-Serum'."

"So you might think," said Umber, his voice filled with the obvious insult and threat that he was throwing at them. He waddled away from them, leaving the two of them standing there. Hermione's jaw dropped, and Severus' face spoke volumes of the anger coursing through his veins.

"I do believe he is baiting us, Granger, and not well, I must say."

"I believe you are right. It was, at the very least, uncalled for, extremely rude, and disrespectful. How can he be so cocky? He hasn't proven that his potion works. He presented no testing, no results. There's something fishy about him, and I don't just mean his smell."

"I agree. I think he needs to be put in his proper place. He has grown entirely too confident and comfortable in his cheating and lying ways. Someone needs to show him for what he really is. And do you know what?"

"What?"

"I think we are just the people to do it."

"I think you are right. We have an hour till the next panel. Would you care to plot over lunch? Say fish and chips? I could use some comfort food to settle the disgusting feeling I have from being in his presence."

"Sounds delightful."

Team Notes (again): The prompt words used in this chapter were: wand, celerity and cynosure. Once again, thanks for reading; stay tuned...Brandy01 is up next!

Brandy01 – Asteroid Beater

Chapter 3 of 7

Hermione and Severus have had little contact with each other since the war ended, but now that they are both stuck attending the 847th Annual Symposium for Potions Academia, that is about to change.



Team Notes: This chapter was written by **Brandy01** and betaed by **Lyn_f**.

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Two days passed, and neither Snape nor Hermione had another confrontation with the pompous and dubious Dwight G. Umber. He had not been seen by anyone at any of the sessions over the last two days and had only made an appearance whenever mealtimes came around. It seemed very much to Hermione that the man wasn't very interested in the Potions Community so much as he was interested in building a profile for himself and recognition for his seedy 'super serum'.

That day, lunch was served after four hours of session time. There had been two individual speakers, each presenting their research. It had been slow and boring, and Hermione didn't even have Snape to sit and talk with that morning. He too had been M.I.A. at the presentations so far for the day. She walked into the lunchroom alone, looking around to see if she could spot him, but her former professor was nowhere to be found.

At the buffet table she quickly filled her plate with what she would need to make a salad sandwich before moving to a secluded table towards the back of the room. As she was cutting into her sandwich, she glanced up just in time to see Snape striding towards her purposefully with a scary look in his eyes.

"Where have you been all morning?" Hermione asked him as he sat down across from her.

"It's a long story."

"We have time," she replied, taking a bite into her food.

"Two days ago, when we spoke of plotting at lunch, we had not yet realised that Umber wasn't attending any of the sessions throughout the day," he answered patiently, and she nodded for him to continue. "Well, I decided to wait outside his door this morning and to follow him for a while, which ended up not happening."

Hermione frowned in confusion. "So you didn't follow him around to see what he has been getting up to?" she asked.

"No, but I did manage to prevent his door from closing and take a look through his belongings," Snape said, an evil grin appearing on his lips.

"You know, in most countries that could be considered breaking and entering, not to mention trespassing," she stated simply, resuming the consumption of her sandwich.

"Rules were made to be occasionally broken," he said nonchalantly.

Hermione's mouth gaped open unattractively for a moment before she snapped it shut just as quickly. "Had I not spent the better part of the last two days in your company, I wouldn't be so sure it was really Severus Snape who just said that."

He rolled his eyes. "Getting back to the point of this conversation, I had a good search through his belongings and came across his potions journal. There wasn't a lot in there, but I am now fairly certain that there are illegal potions ingredients being used as accelerants to strengthen and increase the intensity of it as well as speed up the time it takes to affect the system."

"But that's dangerous!" Hermione exclaimed, clapping a hand over her mouth when she realised how loudly she had spoken.

"It is, but for the time being, I have no evidence of this, so I am unable to make any formal accusations," he answered. "All I'd need is to get my hands on some of that serum and a laboratory, and then I would be able to divide the ingredients to their simplest form."

"Well then, I suppose we're going to have to get our hands on some of that serum."

"My lab at Hogwarts is state-of-the-art, and I have only the finest equipment available," he continued as though she hadn't even spoken. "It would be the only lab I trust for this, of course..."

Before Hermione had a chance to speak, an announcement was made stating that the next block of sessions would begin again in five minutes. Frowning, she looked down at her mostly uneaten lunch and sighed. They really didn't give the delegates enough time for breaks and meals between sessions, and far too much time was allocated to each individual speaker. She certainly didn't want to spend two hours speaking in front of the Potions Community.

"Are you coming to the sessions this afternoon then?" she asked Snape.

"I might as well," he said. "I doubt that I'll be able to track Umber down before dinner."

They left the dining room together and entered the Symposium hall. After taking their seats at the back, they waited for all of the other delegates to arrive and for the next speeches to begin.

"What are we going to do about the Umber situation?" Hermione whispered.

"You seriously want to be involved in my campaign to bring Dwight Umber down?" he asked in surprise.

Hermione nodded fervently and was about to reply when out of the corner of her eye, she spotted none other than Umber himself enter the room. He was wearing robes made of a hideously bright shade of incarnadine, making him resemble a big round and squat tomato with a pink complexion to match. Hermione sunk down a little in her seat, hoping to lessen the chance of Umber spotting her or Snape, but it was hopeless. Snape's presence in black was so stark in comparison to a room full of people who were dressed in various other colours. Umber made a beeline straight toward them, ignoring the other potioners that were vying for his attention.

"Ah, Snape! Still here, I see," Umber said loudly, looking down his bulbous nose at them. "Forgive me...it's just that you normally do not attend the conference for the entire time."

"I'm not sure what you are implying, but I can assure you that my continued presence here is due to my academic interest in the Potions Community," he said curtly.

"Oh, I'm sure that's true," he said, grabbing Hermione's hand then and lifting it to his lips to kiss it. "Good day, Professor Granger, Professor Snape."

Snape glared at Umber's back as he walked away. "That man is a disgrace," he said, the venom in his voice dripping from his tongue. "His mother and father obviously never taught him how to behave in civilized society."

Hermione laughed softly at that. "The same might be said of you, Severus Snape," she murmured. "You didn't have to fall to his level and snap at him like that."

Snape snorted. "Just ensure that you wash that your hands sometime soon."

"Wash? Scrub. Scour." Hermione shuddered.

The remainder of the afternoon went on in the same manner as the morning, save for the fact that Hermione then had a brooding Snape for company. When time finally came for the delegates to return to their rooms for the evening to rest and freshen up before dinner, she had never been more relieved. It had been a tense and near-dramatic day despite the distinct lack of excitement that the presentations held. When the time came for dinner, she headed to the dining hall and took a seat at the same table as she had during lunch and waited for Snape to join her.

He walked in not long after and sat with her, sighing heavily as he did so.

"You don't look terribly rested or refreshed," she commented idly, flipping through the menu choices for that evening.

He murmured something incomprehensible in response, and Hermione decided not to annoy him too much that night. After they ordered their meals and they arrived at the table, she sat back to eat her meal. Looking over at the dark, brooding man, she noticed the crease of his brow and the slight frown on his lips. He was pushing the food around his plate, not really making a move to put any in his mouth. Even though he wasn't smiling or talking to her, Hermione thought he was strangely attractive. There was just something mysterious about the man, and his intelligence and dedication to Potions drew her to him like a moth to a flame.

After dinner, Snape and Hermione mutually decided to quit the dining hall together. As they were leaving, however, they ran into Umber as the man was entering the hall for dinner.

"Don't think I don't know that you're following me around Snape," he said quietly. "You won't find a thing on me, so I suggest you just give up now."

"We'll see."

Snape then turned on his heel abruptly and grabbed Hermione's elbow, directing her away from the round, pompous fool quickly. "I'll see you to your room," he said simply.

They took the elevator up to her floor, and he walked her right to her door. She unlocked it with the card key and turned to say goodnight to Snape.

"Goodnight, Severus," she said with a smile.

He took one of her hands and looked into her eyes with his own obsidian ones for permission, which she gave with a nod, before he lifted it up to his lips. He brushed a gentle kiss over the back of her knuckles and bowed a little before releasing it and walking back down the hall to the elevators. Hermione stood there, watching him walk, a blush staining her cheeks. That certainly hadn't felt like the wet, disgusting kiss she'd received from Umber earlier.

Sighing, she slipped into her room and closed the door. The next few days were bound to be very interesting.

End Notes: We hope you enjoyed week three! Ravenswing is up next!

Prompt words used: Incarnadine, Assiduous, Laboratory, Mother & Hogwarts.

ravenswing – Moon Chaser

Chapter 4 of 7

Hermione and Severus have had little contact with each other since the war ended, but now that they are both stuck

attending the 847th Annual Symposium for Potions Academia, that is about to change.



Team Notes: This chapter was written by **ravenswing** and betaed by **Soul Bound**. We hope you enjoy it!

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Hermione morosely pushed the rubber, yellow thing that may once have been an egg around her plate. She longed for a shot of espresso and a Danish from the little coffee shop down the street from Windsor Castle, between the shop that sold Cornish pasties and the tchotchke shop. Her mouth watered at the idea of real food, and she remembered she had promised her godchildren little knickknacks from her trip. They enjoyed her trips just for the odd little things she brought back for them.

With her plans firmly in place, she was surprised to see Snape pass her by and sit at a table three down from her own. Her surprise quickly morphed into anger but settled into a pensive hurt. It wasn't as if they had an understanding that at all meals they would sit together, the last three notwithstanding. But... he had placed that kiss on her hand last night, her romantic side argued, which apparently meant nothing, her practical side sniped back. Simply a polite gesture, she assured herself. Nothing more. And that thought, to her surprise, depressed her even more.

She found that she could no longer stomach the meager nutrition trying to pass itself off as food and began to make her way out of the room, taking great care to neither pass his table nor look in his general direction. "I am an adult. I am an adult," she muttered as she wove in and out of the tight quarters, nearing the prize of the open doors.

The clammy hand on her wrist stopped her short and nearly caused her to lose what little breakfast she had digested. She turned to find none other than Dwight Umber.

"Miss Granger. Trouble in paradise?" he asked lasciviously.

"Pardon? I'm afraid I'm not following."

"Why, the loss of your black shadow of course. Lover's tiff, perhaps?"

Hermione studied the little man in front of her and wondered honestly how he made any potions. The oiliness and sweat alone would taint his entire brew...she would swear it.

"Mr. Snape and I are not in a relationship, Mr. Umber. Although, I cannot see how that is any of your business."

"No need to get snippy, Miss Granger. I've never seen Snape interact with anyone at these conventions, especially a former student. I assumed you must have some sort of relationship with him," he replied with a slight leer. "Not that I can blame the old man."

Hermione felt breakfast fight harder to be released and promised herself another shower immediately. "Mr. Umber. I assure you that you are gravely mistaken. Furthermore, I do not appreciate the implication that..."

"Miss Granger, no need to be touchy. Where there's smoke, there must be fire."

Hermione narrowed her eyes and wondered if she could get a shot in before security noticed.

"I'm simply saying I have a way for you to get back at your one-time lover. I need volunteers for my new potion. I think you would be perfect."

"Mr. Umber, again, I have no relationship with Snape other than that of mutual colleagues. I doubt I can be of any help." Hermione resisted the urge to shudder when she realized that here was her opportunity to get her hands on that potion. "What exactly is your goal with this?"

"As a former student, wouldn't it be nice to let the world know what a bastard he is? I could get the truth out of you about his poor teaching methods and what students thought of him, and maybe..." After a quick look at Hermione's face, he quickly changed his tactics. "Out of all his former students, you are the only one he has even bothered to greet, much less sit with."

Hermione was taken aback by that simple statement. Of course, he would have former students. He had already been a professor for nearly ten years when she'd begun at Hogwarts. But she was the only one he spoke to? A feeling of delicious warmth stole through her, battling with the utter disgust she had for the man in front of her. "I'll consider it, Mr. Umber. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a date with the bathroom."

"Room 208, Miss Granger! Say three o'clock?" Dwight Umber called out after her.

Hermione nodded weakly as she ran towards the doors, her stomach resoundingly losing the battle against the garbage masquerading as breakfast.

Upon her exit from the restroom, she was heartened to find Snape waiting for her.

"Never eat the eggs, Ms. Granger," he intoned while handing her a bubblegum-pink potion. "The only thing that powdered concoction has in common with real eggs is that they both are yellow."

She greedily grabbed the offered antidote and drank deeply, feeling her stomach settle immediately.

"Did he fall for our ruse?" he asked in an undertone.

"Our ruse?" she asked indignantly. "I would think if it was *our* ruse, I would know something about it!"

"I do apologize for that. I'm afraid I recall your years as a sedulous student. You were not known for your Slytherin tendencies. I felt it was easier for you to honestly be vexed with me, rather than trying to pretend that was the case." At her nod, he found himself adding, "You did play vexed quite convincingly."

"Quite simply, you are the only one here with anything remotely considering a brain, and if you had joined me for breakfast, I would have learned the invaluable lesson regarding the eggs," she retorted. "As regarding your ruse, I think him yelling out his room number and a meeting time to the entire convention would be answer enough."

"Well then, Ms. Granger. May I suggest we adjourn for a true breakfast? I know a neighborhood coffee shop down the road that sells a decent pastry. The less we are seen together in this setting, the better for our deception."

Hermione dazedly took his offered elbow and allowed him to lead her out into the weak sunshine. Her view of the exterior of the shop across the street was temporarily cut off as Snape returned with their drinks.

"I took the liberty of assuming you would prefer a weak tea after the incident this morning," he said, placing a steaming mug in front of her. The little cup that he put down beside it surprised her even more. "I figured after the tea, you would appreciate the caffeine shot even more. We still have several speakers to sit through before they release us again."

She nodded gratefully. "I have been to symposiums before, but I swear this is the worst one in terms of food. You would think that potioners would appreciate good food," she reflected.

"That would mean they would have to be capable of good taste, which we know is few and far between in this group."

She laughed in agreement. "Did you see what Collins was wearing today? I would think that someone whose line of potions depend on the ability to differentiate between peach skin and coral shavings would know the difference between bright red and deep maroon. That truly was a horrible combination."

"Enough to lose your breakfast over?" he slyly inquired.

His wry grin surprised her, and she dropped her sharp retort and returned his smile. "It was a close race, mind you."

His bark of laughter warmed her more than the tea and coffee. A comfortable silence settled around them, one she rarely managed with Harry and Ron. She finished her tea and picked up the dark brew. "To caffeine," she intoned.

He nodded sagely in return and responded, "To potioners with good taste."

Her attempt at sagely nodding was destroyed by the shaking of her shoulders. Their eyes met in a moment of shared mirth, and her infectious grin was soon matched by a smirk of his own.

End Notes: Once again, thanks for reading...we hope you are having as much fun as we are!

The prompt words used this week were: Windsor Castle, Cornish Pasties, Tchotchke, Antidote, Sedulous, and Exterior.

Stay tuned: **Lyn_f** is up next!

lyn_f – Gravity Keeper

Chapter 5 of 7

Hermione and Severus have had little contact with each other since the war ended, but now that they are both stuck attending the 847th Annual Symposium for Potions Academia, that is about to change.



Team Notes: This chapter was written by **lyn_f** and betaed by **Soul Bound**.

Hermione was glad for the long breaks in the symposium schedule as she soaked in the small tub filled with fragrant soap bubbles. Certainly, the hotel's baths were not as luxurious as those found in Hogwarts' Prefect's bathrooms, but still, she thought these tubs were adequate for her needs.

She scrubbed her wrist hard at the memory of the objectionable Dwight Umber's clammy hand, hoping to remove any trace of that man's touch upon her. She shuddered even more at the prospect of having to meet the man in his room later that afternoon.

After she dried and dressed herself, she sighed as she re-examined the list of talks scheduled for the afternoon. None of the abstracts really interested her, and she wondered again why she even bothered coming to this symposium. This one was certainly nothing like the conferences she attended whilst reading for her Potions degree at Uni. She never thought the Potioneers whose work she followed avidly in the literature would exhibit such gaucheries as she noticed at this symposium. It was almost painful trying to interact with them.

As she went down to the foyer, she noticed Snape sitting alone in an overstuffed wingback chair, hiding behind a large newspaper. As she approached him, she noticed he put down his paper and greeted her with what appeared to be, for him, a smile.

"Skiving off the afternoon sessions, Severus?" she asked playfully.

Severus snorted. "As if there were any talks that would be worth attending," he said disdainfully. "Are you in the mood for sweets?"

Hermione was taken aback, and she frowned. "You? Sweets? I would have never thought you owned a sweet tooth."

Severus glared at Hermione. "I have a friend who owns a sweets shop not far from here. I assure you his sweets are top-notch, and people come from all over the country to sample them."

Hermione shrugged. "If you insist."

Severus stood and offered her his arm. "I do," he said.

They went to the shop, which had an interesting aroma of nuts, sweet syrup, and rosewater. Hermione marvelled at the Indian-style décor in the shop.

"Where is the owner from?" Hermione asked.

Severus's eyes brightened at the sight of his friend. "Bangladesh," he murmured.

A small, slight, dark-skinned man smiled broadly as he approached them and shook Severus' hand.

"Severus-bhai!" he exclaimed with a very thick Bengali accent. "When I heard the Potions Academia symposium was being held here, I was hoping I would see you again!"

Severus nodded. "It is a pleasure," he said softly. He gestured towards Hermione. "Masum, this is my colleague, Professor Hermione Granger."

Masum bowed his head slightly towards Hermione. "A pleasure, Professor Granger," he said. "Come. Sit in my café. I will bring you nice English sweets."

Hermione smiled at Masum's exuberance. "That would be wonderful...thanks so much," she said brightly.

Moments later, a nice spread of cakes, fudges, and puddings were placed on their table as well as a large, pot-bellied teapot containing fragrant Bengali-style milk tea.

"Harry always loved treacle fudge," Hermione said. "Any time it appeared on the menu at Hogwarts, he'd skip over the meal and go straight to dessert."

Severus scowled at the mention of Potter's name. "Indeed," he said, sniffing disdainfully.

Hermione frowned at Severus. "Surely you don't still hold any animosity towards Harry," she said. "After all, he does hold you as a role model to his own children. His second son is even named after you!"

Severus' scowl deepened at the thought of a Potter bearing his name. "Over-sentimental Gryffindors," he grumbled without any heat.

Hermione stared at Severus for a moment, but his face had such a mask of indifference that she could not determine whether or not his apparent animosity towards one of her best friends was genuine. Shrugging, she took another dainty forkful of the fudge. "I've never been very keen on treacle fudge," she said. "I'd always found it to be too sweet. But I will admit your friend really does make wonderful fudge."

Severus nodded. "I shall pass your compliments to the chef," he said.

Hermione smiled. "Thank you," she said. Sipping her tea, she frowned as more memories of Hogwarts came to her mind. "Severus, may I ask you a question?"

Severus sighed. "When do you not ask a question?" He raised his hand in the air and started waving it wildly, making Hermione blush hotly with mortification.

"Was I really that bad back then?" she whispered.

Severus snorted. "You were certainly over-eager," he replied. "To be honest with you, I had often wished I had a classroom full of students like you, as opposed to utterly incompetent students like Longbottom, Crabbe, and Goyle. Having more students like you would have made my teaching experience... less objectionable."

Hermione frowned. His assessment of her intellect and her work as a student surprised her, as he had always been chary of his praise... at least towards non-Slytherin students. She certainly did not expect him to refer to two of his Slytherin students in such a manner.

"You are an intelligent young woman, Granger," Severus said when he saw Hermione's expression. "I am certain you can work out for yourself why I had to publicly behave the way I did towards you and your two adolescent shadows."

Hermione sighed. "I see that now," she said as she sipped her tea. "I didn't see it back then." She smirked. "Harry, Ron, and I really hated you back then. We were very willing to think the worst of you. Our actions certainly did reflect that as well."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "I have not forgotten that a set of my warmest robes were set afire during a certain Quidditch match, nor have I forgotten a pair of raids on my potions storeroom."

"Well, *one* of those raids could be directly attributed to me," Hermione retorted. "I don't know about the other one, but I know it certainly was not me."

Severus shrugged. "Bloody Albus and his 'Greater Good'," he mumbled. "He would have said if the ends justified the means... There weren't many second-year students who could have brewed a successful Polyjuice potion."

Hermione chuckled. "Now I know the world has come to an end," she said mirthfully. "You've just praised me twice in one sitting."

Severus sat straighter in his chair. "So I did," he said. Looking intently into her eyes, he placed his hand over hers. "You are certainly one of the less-objectionable people I've met here. To be honest with you, you're the only reason why I haven't left this symposium yet."

Hermione, feeling Snape's warm hand over hers, felt an uncomfortable flip-flop in her stomach. It was as if the world had tilted on its axis and stopped spinning as she

noticed the intensity of his dark eyes. She wasn't sure what she saw, but his eyes were certainly not the cold, endless tunnels she remembered in her youth.

Any response she may have made was stilled when Masum came to their table. When Severus withdrew his hand, she felt bereft because of the absence of his warmth. Plastering a smile on her face, she nodded in acknowledgement as the teapot was replenished with freshly-made milk tea.

"I trust you are enjoying your sweets?" he asked.

"Excellent, as usual," Severus said. "Masum, I believe we are ready for the bill."

"No need, no need! I am very happy to see you again, Severus-bhai. This is my hospitality for you. Stay for as long as you wish, dear friend."

Severus nodded in acknowledgement as Masum withdrew from their table. He looked at Hermione once again. "I, for one, intend on skipping the rest of the sessions today, as nothing piques my interest."

"To be honest, I was really disappointed to see there were no poster sessions," Hermione said. "I suppose the organisers don't solicit submissions from students or apprentices?"

"Not to this particular symposium," Severus said. "They invite only those who they consider to be the best Potions masters and mistresses in the world to submit abstracts for their talks, and even then, they go on forever and ever, as no time limit is set upon them."

Hermione snorted. "That's how the foofaraw over work like Bellamy's spellotape adhesives, Stoyanov's cauldron thicknesses or Umber's so-called Super-Serum is allowed to happen." Shaking her head, she continued. "I never thought attending a conference with all these big names in the Potions field would be so disappointing."

"You have always been an idealistic young lady," Severus said. "You will have to shatter those illusions with this lot." He stood up and offered his arm. "Shall we?"

Hermione stood and smiled as she threaded her hand through his elbow. "Yes," she breathed as they swept out of the café.

In the shadows, a rotund man smirked as he observed Hermione and Severus leaving the café together. *This should be a very interesting next couple of days* the man thought gleefully.

End Notes: This week, the prompt words were:

1. Gaucherie
2. Prefect's bathroom
3. Storeroom
4. Spellotape
5. Foofaraw
6. Chary
7. Treacle fudge

All seven of them were used! We hope you are having a good time following our story. It's certainly been a blast to plot, scheme, and write together. **Soul Bound** is up next, so stick around!

Soul Bound – Black Hole Chaser

Chapter 6 of 7

Hermione and Severus have had little contact with each other since the war ended, but now that they are both stuck attending the 847th Annual Symposium for Potions Academia, that is about to change.



Team Notes: This chapter was written by **Soul Bound**.

Hermione sipped her tea slowly. It was her third cup, and she was trying to make it last as long as possible; she was fairly certain that pouring herself a fourth would just look desperate. She was just enjoying her lunch with Severus so much, and she didn't want it to end. The next sip, although small, brought the bottom of the tea cup into view, and she sighed.

Severus quirked an eyebrow, his amusement apparent. "Would you care for more tea, Hermione?"

Blushing, she replied, "No, I think I'd better not." She watched his lips turn upward in a smirk, and she hurriedly changed the subject. "At any rate, that twit Umber's presentation is tonight. We should be brainstorming ideas."

Severus frowned. "I thought we had settled this. Did you not agree to "volunteer" yourself this morning? He is expecting you at his room in..." Severus glanced at the clock on the wall beside their table, "...half an hour."

Hermione felt her eyes widen. "You *actually* want me to go?"

"Of course. This was the purpose behind our ruse. I was under the impression you wanted to see him taken down as much as I do."

"I do," she snapped. "I just didn't think... He's so..." she shuddered, "*foul*. I only agreed to meet in his room to get away from him. He was trying to lure me there with the implication that it would somehow hurt you, as if *that* would convince me." Realizing what she had just implied, she rushed on, hoping Severus wasn't dwelling on her last words. "He said I would be perfect for volunteering."

Severus snorted. "A mute would be perfect for volunteering, thus sparing the audience hours of meaningless confessions. However, I am quite certain that he will be asking for a volunteer during his presentation. This is the perfect opportunity for you to practice. We need to know how exactly the potion works...if it works at all, that is...and what to expect. If there is a way to shield oneself from the effects, then I am certain you will figure out what it is. What better way to discredit him?"

Hermione frowned, considering this. "That's true. If I go now, I don't imagine he'll keep me too long. He'll need to prepare for his presentation. That will give me time to research whatever I experience." He was right; this was the perfect opportunity, just what they had been looking for. "I'll do it."

"I expected nothing less." Reaching across the table, he grasped her hand gently but firmly, and she felt her skin begin to tingle, first in her hand, then her wrist, followed by the rest of her body.

Trying her best not to shiver noticeably, she focused her gaze on her empty tea cup. She felt so... warm with Severus. If only she didn't have to leave this moment so quickly to run off to that cretin Umber. Well, she did have a few more minutes... and it couldn't hurt. "You know, I think I will have more tea."

She squeezed his hand and was filled with more warmth when he squeezed back.

* * *

"One drop is all you will need, Miss Granger," said Umber, squeezing the dropper full of "super-serum" ever so slightly so that a single drop fell on Hermione's tongue. "Of course, to achieve the full effect, we would use five drops, but we can save that..." he smiled evilly, "...for the presentation this evening."

Hermione gulped, already wishing she hadn't agreed to this.

"We'll just wait a minute or two for the effects to take hold. You should feel a slight stinging sensation in your limbs, but it will pass quickly, and then we will begin. A slight headache to accompany the stinging is normal."

She was already feeling the stinging, but there was no pain in her...ah, there it was. Both the headache and the stinging reminded her of the time she'd been given Morphine through an I.V. after breaking her arm as a child. She wondered if there were some traces of narcotics in the serum. Of course, if that was true, there would have to be something else in the serum to amplify the mind-altering qualities...perhaps rose hips or maybe Kneazle hair. Some of the ingredients in Doxycide had been known to show stabilizing effects.

The stinging faded, followed closed by the headache, and she was left with just her anxiety at being in so vulnerable a position. So far, she felt completely aware and in control of her thoughts, and that was a good sign; with Veritaserum, the imbibor fell into a sort of trance immediately.

"Let's begin," Umber said softly, and Hermione didn't like the look in his eyes one bit. "What is your full name?"

"Hermione Jane Granger, though my mother did think about Jean as a middle name, but in the end she decided on Jane. I like it better than Jean anyway," she replied, then frowned. She hadn't meant to say all of that.

"What is your date of birth?"

"The 19th of September, 1979." This time she was aware as more words tried to crawl over her tongue, and she resolutely kept her mouth closed.

Umber smiled sickeningly and... waited.

After no more than ten seconds, Hermione's lips opened like a dam breaking. "I was three days early. My due date was actually the 16th, but my mother has always said I was in a hurry to get here. Always eager to get ahead." She took a deep breath and tried not to panic. If *one* drop was giving her a stream of verbal diarrhea to this degree, what would *five* be like? No one would stand a chance. The person under the super-serum might suffocate from not breathing between sentences! She closed her eyes tightly and tried to slow her heartbeat.

"Do calm yourself, Miss Granger. There is nothing to be alarmed about. We are just having a friendly little chat. In fact, I only have one more question."

Hermione opened her eyes to find Umber smirking at her, and she felt sick to her stomach.

"What are your feelings toward Severus Snape?"

She reached for her wand and prepared to Apparate away before she could answer, but her tongue was faster than her arm. "I'm falling in love with him. I have always respected him a great deal for everything he's done, but as I've been getting to know him, I've found that we have more in common than I ever could have guessed. He makes me feel safe, warm, challenged, and appreciated. I have always wanted for a man to value my mind, and he seems to. He's exactly the person I've been waiting for, and I never knew he was so close. It strikes me now that I should have realized how wonderful he is a long time ago. Once, when I was in sixth year, Harry and Ron snuck out to go to the Serpentine, and I stayed behind. It was a good thing I did because..."

"I believe that is sufficient, Miss Granger. Wouldn't you say? Swallow this." He reached forward with a new dropper, seeking entry to her mouth.

She choked uncomfortably as she did her best to hold her mouth open even as more words tried to form on her lips. She felt a single drop hit her tongue and swallowed reflexively. "...And he always protected us, even though he didn't have to, and so though he hated Harry so... much."

Taking several deep breaths to calm herself, she fixed a murderous glare on Umber. "You utter imbecile. What do you hope to accomplish with this? It would be no good in

the field. Suspects would ramble on about everything so long that the Aurors would fall asleep. Just because you can make something more powerful doesn't mean you should. Regular Veritaserum works perfectly...without all the needless drivel."

"Ah, I must disagree. You've only experienced a taste of the full effect. With a full dose in the blood, the imbiber lets all sorts of interesting tidbits slip. With Veritaserum, one can lie by omission, especially if the interrogator doesn't ask the right questions. But with super-serum, everything comes out. Everything. But not to worry, Miss Granger. Renowned researcher that you are, no doubt you are eager to experience this first hand. You will get your chance this evening."

"This is insane, and you are insane if you think I will be going to your *presentation*," she sneered.

"Oh, but you will."

"Over my dead body."

Umber chuckled. "That won't be necessary. It is as simple as this: if you don't attend my demonstration tonight, ready to volunteer, I will send my memory of this session, and everything you *disclosed*, to the *Daily Prophet*. I am quite sure a certain greasy professor would love to read all about your little crush on him."

Fury roiled in her stomach. "You... You... bastard!" This was turning out to be one of the biggest mistakes she'd made in years. It wasn't that she didn't want Severus to know how she felt; but it was so new, and of course he would push her away if he read that she was in *love* with him. It was too soon for that. They were only just getting to know one another. She couldn't risk it. "Fine, I will be there, but you will swear under Wizard's Oath right here and now that you will not ask me about Severus at all."

He smiled yet another evil smile and said, "Done." Holding his wand upright, he said, "I swear that I will not ask you, Hermione, about Severus or any other *persona*/ subject this evening." His wand flashed blue. "Satisfied?"

She was immediately suspicious that he had agreed so easily, but she couldn't find anything wrong with his wording. She nodded once and made for the door. "Mark my words, Umber. One of these days someone will knock you off your pedestal."

"You're welcome to try, Miss Granger."

She slammed the door as hard as she could and hoped it gave him a migraine.

* * *

She spent the remaining hours before the presentation holed up in her room, pouring through the books she had brought with her and trying desperately to think of a way to withstand the effects of the super-serum. If only she had a sample, then she could come up with an antidote, but it was too late for that now. She would just have to hope that Umber staying away from the topic of Severus would be enough to save her from total humiliation.

She doubted it would be.

* * *

After waiting until the last possible moment, she entered the auditorium. It was already full, of course. A quick glance around found Severus seated about half-way back from the podium on the right side. Both seats next to him were taken, and that was just as well. No doubt she was going to have to make a run out of the room when it was over. She took a seat on the aisle near the door and clasped her hands tightly in her lap.

"Welcome, ladies and gentlemen, to my presentation. No doubt you have all heard the rumors of my new invention, but tonight you will see my super-serum put to the test. You in are for quite a show, my friends. There will be a period for questions after the demonstration, of course, but first... I will need a test subject. As it happens, I have just the right person in mind."

Hermione closed her eyes and swallowed, waiting for the axe to fall.

"Severus Snape, would you be so kind as to join me?"

End Notes: We hope you enjoyed this chapter...only one more to go!

The prompt words used this week were:

Doxycide

Stream

The Serpentine

Stay tuned for the finale, brought to us be Spiderwort!

Spiderwort – Supernova Seeker

Chapter 7 of 7

Hermione and Severus have had little contact with each other since the war ended, but now that they are both stuck attending the 847th Annual Symposium for Potions Academia, that is about to change.





Team Notes: This chapter was written by **Spiderwort** and betaed by **lyn_f**.

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Learned heads swiveled, sibilating the name like a den of cobras.

Severus Snape... That misanthrope?... Well, yes, he's a solid theoretician, but dull, dull, dull.... What'cha say we clear out and go for tea... Nice little sweets shop down the block...

Wait a bit, wasn't Snape linked with You-Know-who?... And they say he was involved in Dumbledore's death.... Tried for treason, wasn't he? Let's stay a bit...

Hermione bristled at the childish gossip and stared at Umber venomously. He seemed a trifle out of countenance but played to his audience's humor. "Come now, Professor Snape, let's not dillydally."

Severus made his languid way to the podium. He conjured himself a chair and nodded at his captor, who was waving that noxious bulb of serum about like a Probity Probe. Umber administered the required number of drops as the audience leaned forward, so intense that Hermione thought she could hear them count: *one... two... three...*

She stared at her friend's crinkled brow, murmuring, "That'll be the headache. Oh, my poor dear..." In seconds, she relived her humiliation in Room 208. Severus, for all his seeming aplomb, was to be soundly traduced in front of an auditorium full of his fellow Potioneers, and she could not help him.

Umber demanded his name, profession, and birth information. Severus was voluble. He spoke of his mother as Hermione had of hers. There was a slight catch in his throat as he did so, but he did not mention his father, who Hermione knew had been a Muggle, ashamed of the family "peculiarity."

If Umber caught the wistful note in his victim's voice, he did not pursue it. This audience craved titillation, not empathy. He winked at them, opining, "I believe we've all noticed your choice of company outside program hours, Snape..."

"Company, oh... yes... my friend Masum. I've known him since I visited India... to study..." He launched into a wordy description of two young wizards on holiday, rambling across Southeast Asia in pursuit of the perfect hot beverage. Umber kept trying to stop him with another question, but every time he did, Severus raised his voice and drowned him out.

By the time the travelogue reached a tea shop somewhere near the Black Sea, Umber had become quite red in the face, and he huffed like a boiling samovar. "I don't mean him. I mean... your... former... student... Hermione Granger!"

The audience, which had been yawning over endless recipes for milk tea and the price of pekoe, sat up at this. Hermione Granger? That snippy little prodigy who was always asking tiresome questions? Wasn't she friends with Harry Potter, who, it was known for a fact, Snape loathed? All eyes fixed anew on Umber's captive.

"Hermione... Granger?" Snape murmured.

Hermione started chewing her sleeve. She should have told him everything that happened with Umber instead of slinking off to her room in shame. At least, they could have done some strategic plotting. "I'm such a Gryffindor," she muttered.

In the meantime, Umber was pouncing. "Yes, Hermione Granger, whom you've been devoting all your time to, at least so far as one could see. I mean, one couldn't follow you two up to your room, could one?"

"Your... room?" Snape repeated. "Oh, yes, I remember. You kissed her hand and invited her to visit you in *your room* this afternoon. She didn't want to go..."

The audience loved that revelation. Kissed her hand, did he?

Umber was unfazed. "I'm sure she told you that in some cozy little rendezvous."

"She was afraid you might make her take the Super Serum. Afraid you'd make her say all sorts of embarrassing things. And you did."

"What? How do you know that? She wouldn't tell you."

Snape sounded, for him, meek. "I saw it all."

"In my room?"

"No, just now, in your mind. I'm an expert at Legilimency, you know." He began regaling the crowd with some of his adventures in the art of mind-probing, including a hair-raising encounter with the Dark Lord. This tickled his listeners, and they perked up, hoping for more, but that irritating fellow Umber interrupted him.

"How can you be reading my mind when you're under the influence of my all-powerful potion?"

"Don't you remember?" asked Snape. "You told Granger that her potion to block mental intrusions was rendered obsolete by your Super Serum. But I believe you got your definitions mixed up. It would appear that the Serum doesn't enhance Occlumency, but Legilimency, for I am now so completely relaxed that my consciousness has oozed right through your paltry mental barriers and read your entire life's history."

"Impossible!"

"And what a story! I had no idea that you are the nephew of the late Hector Dagworth-Granger, who founded the Most Extraordinary Society of Potioneers, and that about two years ago, you turned up, Knutless, on his doorstep. So he made you a bottle-washer in his laboratory."

Umber bowed as at a tribute. "A humble beginning, I will admit."

"And all of your so-called discoveries have come since he died."

"I am merely carrying on his legacy..."

"That's easily done since you stole his notebooks."

Cackles of unholy glee greeted this revelation.

Umber began to fidget. "He willed them to me..."

"Actually, he didn't. They were to go to MESOP, but you managed to appropriate the most salient items."

"Well, I am a member, and as such..."

"No, you were merely an associate like all members' apprentices. You have to be sponsored to become a full member, and Sir Hector never recommended you. One has to wonder why."

"He was busy..."

"He managed to promote several other persons, including one I taught: Neville Longbottom. One presumes it is because of his Herbological expertise, not his knack for Potions. You know what I think? I think he realized you were a glib, unimaginative jack, good for nothing but scraping flobberworm guts out of flasks and cleaning exploded messes off his ceiling."

Umber turned pillar-box puce and began to splutter. The audience threw things...potions samples, balled-up programs, freebie cauldrons...and hooted him gleefully off the podium. Hermione rushed forward, but by the time she got to the top step, Severus had Disapparated.

He didn't appear at breakfast, lunch or any of the morning sessions. The list of topics for the afternoon included one he could scarcely resist: "Why No Amount of Tinkering with the Wolfsbane Potion Will Improve Its Taste or Hypolycanurgic Properties."

He was in a corner seat far from everyone else. Several people attempted to congratulate him on his unmasking of Umber, but he warded them off with his classic, scathing scowl. Eyes lowered, Hermione walked over to him and murmured, "Is this seat taken?"

He shrugged. The gesture hurt her more than if he had refused outright. This was the Snape of old, cold and unapproachable. Was he punishing her for not reporting to him yesterday?

Throughout the presentation, he kept mum even though Hermione knew he must be dying to refute the claims made by the presenter, who was almost as bad as Umber: all blarney and brag. When it was over, he stood up, and she followed. He looked to be heading for his room and allowed her to walk beside him, but he said nothing.

Nearing his door, she blurted, "Professor Snape, I wanted to tell you how brilliant your performance was yesterday."

"Thank you."

"And I wanted to say sorry."

"Whatever for?"

"I should have let you know that the potion worked so we could prepare."

"You didn't need to."

"Why?" She put her hands on her cheeks, which were burning now. "Oh, no, you... you didn't hear what I said to Umber?"

"What?"

"You told him that you knew what happened in his room."

He opened his door. "We'd better discuss this inside."

She entered the spare, neat room and caught a whiff of hydrogen sulfide. Had he been experimenting? How like him. She took a chair, sitting stiffly upright, but tried to keep her eyes low. Somehow the bed, so rigidly made up, disturbed her.

Severus walked to the window. "I didn't look for any of that in his mind. It would have been... hem... intrusive, but the fact that you didn't come to me after your meeting told me something terrible had happened. When I saw you at the demonstration, you looked... disturbed. I knew he had hurt you badly and that he was going to hurt you again. So I did an Imperius on him."

Hermione stood up in shock. "What? You did an Unforgiveable... in front of hundreds of witnesses?"

"Only long enough to get him to say my name instead of yours. He's such a ninny; I think he actually thought it was his idea."

"You didn't need to. He promised me he wouldn't ask me anything bad...Wizard's Oath."

"That's utter tripe. Quod fodder like him knows a hundred ways of circumventing that simple charm."

She started for the door. His criticism and, worse, his knowledge of her stung. He had shown her once again that she didn't know as much as she thought she knew and, what was worse, that he didn't need her for anything.

He called after her. "But you didn't trust him. Your face said as much."

She turned at that. His lips twitched briefly...a quirk of a smile. He sat on the bed. She forced herself to look at him. Yes, he acted like he didn't care for her, but he had risked an Unforgiveable in public and exchanged places with her on that podium, knowing he would be humiliated beyond endurance.

"How did you manage not to answer his questions? Did you find an antidote?"

"I certainly tried. As I told you, there were clues in those journals of his. Also, when he said his invention rendered our own experiments worthless, it made me wonder if Japanese nettle and aconite might be part of his recipe, as they are major components in our own."

Hermione brightened. "I remember Dagworth-Granger's monograph on aconite as an accelerant. And he once ranked the various nettles for their relaxing properties. *Urtica thunbergiana* was at the top of the list."

"By the way, he isn't..."

"No relation, thank heaven." She made a face. "That would have made me Umber's cousin!"

Severus smiled broadly for the first time in days. "So I reasoned that lecithin could form part of an antidote since it is the only chemical which counteracts the properties of both *Urtica* and aconite."

"Lecithin... that's in egg yolk."

"Which is why your breakfast tasted so bad the other day. I had to "borrow" every egg in the kitchen to extract a sufficient amount. I put them back together, but of course, they're never the same."

Hermione beamed. "It was worth the sickness because the antidote worked."

"Not entirely, though it did afford me precious seconds to think and manipulate the conversation a bit. And when I realized I could probe his mind, I knew I was... we were home free."

"Why did you run from me afterward?"

"I was still under the influence of the serum. I had to wait twenty-four hours before it was... safe."

"Safe... to talk to me?"

He nodded.

"Why?"

"I think you might guess the answer, but I beg you not to... not yet anyway."

"That's all right," she said softly. "I've had enough of this Super-Serum business. Let the truth come out as it's meant to, one experiment at a time."

End Notes: And there you have it! We truly hope you've enjoyed reading our story. We had so much fun writing it together. Thanks for coming along for the ride!

The prompt words used this week were: Dillydally, Traduce, Blarney, Probity Probe, Quod, Tripe and Pillar box.