

Explorations

by Mint Stick

Hermione and Severus finally get around to learning to be Animagi. Crookshanks is thrilled.

One-shot

Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: This was written as a birthday gift for Ayerf, whose prompt was: 'Hermione and Severus finally get around to learning to be Animagi. What does Crookshanks think of this?' Many thanks to Ayerf for providing the prompt and then beta-reading her own gift!

'Concentrate, it says,' Hermione muttered. 'Concentrate. As if that wasn't exactly what I was doing!'

She very nearly threw the book down in anger. It was only the habit of many years the knowledge that books should always be treated with respect that kept her in check. Instead, she let out a frustrated sigh and turned to Severus.

'Any luck with yours?' She had fully expected Severus to grasp the basics without much effort. He was, after all, incredibly skilled at mental magic. Clearing his mind, focusing his thoughts, finding his inner core... All that rubbish, really, that Hermione was finding increasingly difficult to achieve.

Severus shook his head, looking rather morose. 'I very much doubt the author of this one ever achieved as much as a coherent thought, let alone an Animagus transformation. He waffles on and on about what one must not think about, but has nothing useful to say at all.'

Hermione massaged her temples. This had seemed like such a perfect idea. They had both always been far too busy to even think about becoming Animagi, but the idea had appealed to her from her very first Transformation lesson, when Professor McGonagall had so effortlessly demonstrated that magic, real magic, was far more amazing than just waving a wand around and Conjuring lifeless objects. Not that that hadn't been amazing for her. It had been like something out of a film! And Severus he had once whispered to her, once the lights were off, that there were two things he had envied James Potter for. Lily, of course, was one; his majestic animal form was the other.

She petted Crookshanks, who had curled up between herself and Severus. 'Oh Crooks, if you only knew how much I envy you sometimes,' she whispered. 'Life as a cat what could be more wonderful?'

She sighed once more and picked up another book. The pile of volumes read and discarded was getting irritatingly high, and soon they'd have exhausted all the material there was. No wonder there weren't more Animagi around. This was hopeless.

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Crookshanks climbed up to his usual place on the sofa, between his mistress and her... special friend. He gave an annoyed huff at the thought. He was very fond of the dark man he wasn't bad, as humans went but Crooks really didn't care for the way he tended to monopolise his mistress's attentions.

At least his mistress never forgot about him for long. She always had a kind word for Crooks, and something tasty to offer. Except that lately she just patted him absent-mindedly at times, but otherwise mostly ignored him. Ignored him! Him, her most beloved companion! And Crooks couldn't even blame the man, as he was spending all his free time with his nose (and what a nose that was!) in the books, same as his mistress.

Researching something again, he concluded. Although... Wait, now they were finally getting somewhere. Interesting, he mused to himself, as his mistress got up from the sofa and stepped in the middle of the room.

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Hermione took a deep breath and closed her eyes. *Do not attempt to visualise any specific animal, the book had cautioned. You may think you know what beast best represents your self, but you might find yourself surprised. Confusing your mind may lead to danger; eyewitness accounts describe accidents worse than Splinching when an Animagus Transfiguration attempt has gone wrong.*

This wasn't easy. Her mind was always so busy, swarming with thoughts, decisions, curiosity... She wondered if she might be an otter. She realised that her Animagus form might not reflect her Patronus, but there was also nothing speaking against that. And being an otter wouldn't be that bad. She rather liked water.

Severus had attempted to teach her some methods of keeping her mind blank, but his patience, never infinite, had been sorely tried. In the interest of keeping their relationship intact, they had agreed that she should continue on her own, finding what worked best for her.

She was sitting on the floor, having made sure there was plenty of space all around her. She didn't think she'd be an elephant, but well, the book said she might be surprised.

She decided to try and focus on nothing but the incantations. With any luck, exercising the mental energy that doing spells non-verbally still demanded of her would keep any stray thoughts at bay.

When she felt her body start to change, she very nearly lost her focus. It was only with sheer stubbornness that she hung on, determined to see this through. She knew Severus was right there, ready to turn her back, in case anything went wrong; they had gone over that part of the theory repeatedly before even trying anything else.

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Crookshanks stopped all pretence at being asleep once he saw his mistress writhing on the floor, her long and ungainly limbs shortening as her body was getting smaller and smaller. Was that...? Yes, it was fur, sprouting all over her body. Dark, silky, lustrous fur, covering her from the tips of her triangular ears to the very end of her elegant, fluffy tail.

She was, in a word, gorgeous. The most beautiful feline that Crookshanks had ever laid eyes on and in his respectably long life, he had seen, and known, more than his fair share of those lovely creatures.

He got to his feet, pointedly ignoring the man who was still seated on the sofa, his mouth open in silent shock, jumped down, and sauntered over to his mistress.

'Well, hello there,' he drawled, pleased that he would finally have the chance to chat with her properly.

'Crookshanks? You are that is did you just say hello?'

Her large light green eyes sublime! were full of questions, as she looked around, taking in her surroundings.

'I most certainly did,' agreed Crooks, giving her a tender headbutt and using the opportunity to take a polite, discreet sniff at her.

She was amazing, and she was his. Oh yes. Now that she had finally found her true form, he had no doubts about it. At all. His charms were, after all, legendary. Even the strictest of the cats at Hogwarts, that lovely tabby, had let him seduce her one night in the library... and then another night in the fifth floor corridor... and then there was that night in her office...

Crookshanks smirked to himself. Oh yes, females were most certainly susceptible to his rakish grin and suave behaviour, and that included those who spent most of their time in human form. He had nothing to worry about.

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Disoriented. That was the only way Hermione could describe what she currently felt.

The sitting room looked, and felt, so *large*. The sofa seemed miles away well, not miles, but certainly further than the two steps she had taken before. And Severus was HUGE! She had never realised how big the man was; he was positively towering over her, even from his seated position.

'Well, hello there,' drawled someone right next to her. She didn't recognise the voice, although it sounded vaguely familiar. It certainly wasn't Severus.

'Crookshanks?'

She tried to shake her head, hoping this would clear her mind. She could have sworn Crookshanks just talked to her.

That meant... She looked around, trying to get a good look at her new body.

A cat. A dark grey cat, with a shiny, silky coat and a fluffy tail, as far as she could tell. She felt a strange urge to swat at the tail, tempting her the way it was. This was certainly well, no, it wasn't truly a surprise, or shouldn't have been. She wondered fleetingly if her stint as a half-cat in her second year had somehow affected the outcome, but decided then that deeper analysis could wait.

First, she needed to research this new state.

Crookshanks' headbutt reminded her that she wasn't alone; for a moment, she'd nearly forgotten. She eyed her familiar with a new appreciation as cats went, Crookshanks was certainly a fine specimen, appealing to the new part lodging in her brain. The human part of her brain was still in control, though; thus she banished the thought firmly, promising herself that she would never ever mention this to anyone.

Certainly not to Crookshanks. And *certainly* not to Severus.

Hermione wondered if cats could blush.

'Right,' she said to herself. 'Some exploration is in order, and then, I shall see if I can manage to turn back.' She hoped that Severus would understand. They had spent so much time on this that he really couldn't expect her to change back immediately.

Ignoring the rather rude way that Crookshanks had been sniffing at her ('He's only a cat,' she reminded herself), she walked to the door. She thought she really did rather well, getting her paws mixed up only once or twice. She didn't look back at Severus, not wanting to see his reaction over her stumbles.

Crookshanks followed her. She was grateful that he had remained silent after the initial greeting; he must have realised how confused she was over all this. They could have a chat another time.

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If Severus was being quite honest with himself, Hermione's success left him with mixed emotions. He felt proud of her; elated even. At the same time, he was also more than a bit disappointed that she had managed it first. He was, after all, incredibly skilled at mental magic. It should have been easy for him to achieve the required focus on nothing.

He schooled his features into a neutral expression, just in case Hermione was paying attention. Disappointed or not, there was no need to ruin Hermione's moment of triumph with something as petty as envy.

When Hermione had stumbled out of the room off to do some exploring and stretching her newfound paws, no doubt followed by her beloved familiar, Severus took a deep, decisive breath and stood up. It was now or never.

He sat down on the floor, in the same place Hermione had occupied only moments before, vaguely hoping that the aura of that particular spot might help him along. The very thought irritated him: had he really started to believe in that nonsense?

Once again, he focused on clearing his mind of all clutter, and started the incantations.

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Crookshanks was openly admiring the sight of his mistress walking just a few paces ahead of him. She wasn't perhaps the most gracious or elegant of cats, but he was fully confident she only needed a bit of practice. Not everyone was born perfect; he had always felt like a bit of an exception.

She was headed to the bathroom. Good. It was a lovely, private place, where they could have some time alone.

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Hermione wasn't sure why she was heading for the bathroom instead of some other room. The kitchen might have been a more obvious choice, but she didn't feel hungry (and the idea of sharing Crooks's food was a bit off-putting).

In any case, she wanted to explore, and the bathroom was probably as good as any other place.

Crookshanks was still following her. Hermione smirked to herself, wondering what her faithful companion was thinking. Surely this must have been a bit of a shock to him.

Wait... Not again. Another headbutt? She barely managed to stay on her feet. Crooks's headbutts had always had some force behind them, but now that she was considerably smaller than her normal self, she found she had to readjust. Why was he being so friendly anyway? Not like she could give him food right now.

It wasn't until she'd paused in front of the bathtub, considering her next move jumping up onto the washing machine was a tempting idea, but so was curling up in the sink, perhaps even seeing if taking the soap off the holder and throwing it down was really as much fun as Crooks seemed to think when she was suddenly, and quite determinedly, mounted.

'No!' Hermione yelled, shaking Crooks off. 'What the '

He headbutted her again. 'You're so beautiful. If you could only see yourself... As soon as I saw you like this, I knew that you and I were meant to be.'

Hermione backed away from him. 'Crooks, I love you, you know I do, but... Not like this!' She took a few more steps backwards, finding herself underneath the bathtub.

Crookshanks sat back on his haunches, looking rather lovelorn. 'Would you like me to serenade you?' he asked, a speculative look in his eyes. Hermione guessed he was calculating whether he could fit under the bathtub as well. She felt fairly safe there for a moment Crookshanks was much larger than her own new form, so he probably wouldn't.

'Er... thank you, but no. I'll just, uh, sit here for a while. You could go and see if there's anything tasty for us in the kitchen. Or how about checking on Severus?' She knew she was babbling, and felt more than a bit stupid, having this conversation with a cat (A cat! Crookshanks, out of all cats!), but she really, *really* wasn't ready to take this particular relationship to the next level yet. If ever. ('NO!' her mind shouted at her. 'Not now, not ever! Don't even think about it! Yes, he's gorgeous, but he's a cat! Remember Severus!')

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Crookshanks could hardly hide his disappointment. His mistress was so lovely, and yet she was denying him. Perhaps she was just being coy. He could wait for her; she couldn't stay under that bathtub forever.

His sharp ears caught some sort of commotion from the direction of the comfy room with the sofa, but he figured his mistress's friend could take care of it, whatever it was. True, she had asked him to check on the man, but Crookshanks knew his witches and wizards, and this particular wizard was very good at what he did. The way he waved that stick around... He could definitely make things happen.

Crookshanks let out a low growl, nearly forgetting the need to impress his mistress with impeccable behaviour. He liked the man, he really did, but now, he was competition. He wondered idly how the man would react if, say, a pillow accidentally found its way to his face at night... Or perhaps Crookshanks could just fall asleep on his face. Yes, that might work too. His mistress might be sad, but surely she wouldn't blame him.

From the way his mistress's ears twitched, she must have heard the noise as well. There was a loud crash, and growling? Irritated, loud growling at that. Crookshanks could almost make out the words, but not quite; it was as if whoever was doing the growling was a foreigner.

He turned around, deciding to take a look after all. It was possible they had an intruder, and it was his duty to protect his mistress. Perhaps the intruder had dealt with the dark man already? His ears perked up at the thought. That would certainly make things easier.

'Wh...'

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Hermione crawled out from her hiding place. A few moments of intense concentration and she stood in the middle of the bathroom, once again in her human form.

She grinned at the large lion that was standing in the doorway.

'Thank you.'

The lion raised an elegant, if bushy, eyebrow.

'I had a bit of a misunderstanding with Crookshanks. Nothing important. I'm rather glad you turned up though.'

They both looked down at the fainted feline.

'I should probably wake him up,' said Hermione, 'but perhaps not until you've changed back as well. You're very handsome, by the way.'

The lion growled.

'No, seriously! It suits you. I mean, I didn't actually expect you to turn into the Gryffindor mascot, but... Can you imagine Minerva's face when she finds out?' She couldn't help but giggle at the thought. A part of her brain was also wondering why she was taking it all so calmly Severus Snape as a magnificent lion surely merited a stronger reaction but then again, after having just been propositioned by her cat, not much could shock her today.

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'*Rennervate!*' someone said as if through a thick mist. Crookshanks shook his head, feeling groggy. He'd just had the strangest dream... Or was it?

The End.