

Of Course

by Anastasia

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Chapter 1 of 1

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AN: Been a while.... Endless gratitude to Ariadne. Of course and always.

I wrote this more than seven months ago on a whim and am not sure where the prompt came originated (thinking the last exchange).

Prompt: After the war, Hermione and Snape worked together to cure Lycanthropy, and then both went their separate ways. For the last ten years, they have met at the same conference in Paris to teach a class on the proper brewing of their potion. On the 10th Anniversary of their discovery, they are told that there will be no more seminars, since there is no longer a need. How will they handle the fact that they have run out of excuses to see each other anymore? You can make it long, short, light, dark, fluff, angst... Just make it romance.

Hermione leaned back in her chair and stared intently toward the door where bored witches and wizards poured in, gesturing at each other with scrolls in hand, obviously arguing yet another boring subject at yet another boring conference. Next to her, was a very sweet, yet very, yes, boring, Neville Longbottom, who was currently rambling about some new plant he had discovered that only grew on the underside of rocks leaning at a forty-five degree angle on the West side of a cliff with moderate humidity, and -

Then he was gone, shoving his chair nearly sideways as he practically climbed over to the next row.

"Miss Granger," a voice greeted her, causing her to jump, twist in her seat, and stare directly at an impossible number of black buttons.

"You startled me."

Severus Snape sat next to her, set an ancient looking black leather bag down, and stared at her as he removed his gloves, one finger at a time. "I am doing well, and you?"

Hermione sniffed. "Every year."

Placing a glove on her lap, Severus grinned as she pressed it between her palms, slipped his finger under a scroll's seal and read. Leaning forward, he muttered, "We have a change in plan."

"How so?" Hermione asked, tucking the glove into her robes and staring down a group of witches who were shuffling past, their eyes watching Severus with clear disdain.

"Being canceled," he said flatly.

"What? I don't - " Hermione started, pausing to gently extricate the scroll that was rapidly becoming a crumpled ball from Severus' fist.

"Oh yes," a cheerful voice announced. Miss Filsworth had suddenly appeared in the row ahead of them, a quill in her hand whipping back and forth as she furiously scribbled something down before addressing them again. "We, the Board actually, considering the current climate of the wizarding world, given the war has long become history, and we are at peace." She paused to look down her nose at Hermione and Severus. "Well, you both know that."

She chuckled nervously and straightened her glasses, hesitating when Severus glared at her and made a small but unmistakable "go on" motion with an impatient finger.

Heaving a sigh, Miss Filsworth continued, "We've decided this will be a vastly improved conference without many of the darker subject areas that were necessary during more... trying times. Do hope you understand."

She turned and waved in Neville's newly relocated direction clear on the other side of the room, announcing, "We're expanding our gardening and Herbology offerings! You both know Mr. Neville Longbottom, I presume?"

"Obviously," Severus growled.

Miss Filsworth let out her thin laugh again as she shuffled her parchments around in her arms. "Yes. Yes, of course."

As Severus stared at her flatly, the flustered witch slid sideways, clutching her things to her chest as if a great wind threatened to snatch them all away, and hurried down the aisle.

Hermione sighed and tilted her head as she watched the schedule slowly change on the crumpled parchment she had smoothed out on her lap. "Must you do that?"

"Yes," he said in a low voice, placing his other glove square on the parchment she was reading. "Yes, I must."

Sitting by candlelight in a cramped room, Severus spread a parchment over a table, his brow furrowing as the schedule neatly ordered itself and the pictures of the presenters preened in their appointed squares. Quill in hand, he slowly swept the point over the short descriptions under each session's title, cursing under his breath at most, clutching his fist a little tighter at others.

His ironwood trunk sat at the base of his slender bed looking like a war-worn soldier, his robes for the next day draped over the top along with his traveling leathers. His broom was set next to the bed and, as his gaze fell upon it, started to twitch in anticipation and angle itself slightly toward the window.

His books had re-packed themselves while he was at the opening feast, letting out muted cries of despair when he pulled them back out upon his return. His fingers traced the embossed leather cover of the one resting before him, his memory of the research he and Hermione had performed ten years prior still fresh in his mind. The cure, as well as the book's publication, weren't the only results of that unlikely partnership so long ago, just the only ones tangible.

From somewhere several floors below, the painfully horrid sounds of a tortured piano accompanied by several obviously inebriated voices brought him out of deep thought. His mind shifted away from years past and the schedule with its preening occupants and toward the capacity for magic to travel through multiple layers of wood. In the dim light, his wand rested on the edge of the table, rolling from side to side under his fingers as he extended a gentlewizard's reprieve once, twice to be generous, then no more. With a touch and a casual angle of his wand, Severus grinned as he reached for his tea. Several more seconds of infuriating merriment continued, then transformed abruptly into a confusion of muffled keys, shouting voices about fire and curses and then blissful silence.

As his traveling leathers neatly folded themselves and found their place in his trunk, Severus dipped his quill's tip and began making marks in the margins.

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The thin fabric band always got tangled in his hair and was infuriating to deal with day after day. Shoving it to the side only raked the frayed edge around his collar, irritating him further. Tucking the cheaply made identification card between two buttons, Severus surveyed the room and sighed.

"Bored already?" Hermione muttered, pausing to read over her notes before adding another.

"I cannot fathom what you are taking notes on already. He's yet to start."

"There is such a thing as pre-work for these types of working sessions."

At Severus' raised eyebrow, Hermione pulled the schedule from her bag and pointed to the session description. When he responded only by crossing his arms and shrugging, she let her hand fall into her lap.

"Professor Snape, did you forget to do your homework?"

The look he shot at her nearly sent her for the door, then she reminded herself that it was more than a decade since he'd taught last, yet old habits clearly died hard, and even older memories of a different time, of him in front of the class came flooding back, and -

"I'll thank you to remove that smirk from your face Miss Granger. I *do not* forget."

Nodding to herself and using her hair to hide her now defiant smirk, Hermione watched witches and wizards settling around group tables, hauling their notes and potted plants up with them.

"Then you didn't *forget* that they changed the session time's focus from, erm, disarming lethal Dark Arts Magical objects found in common areas to..." Hermione searched the description paragraph which now had festive flowers circling serenely around it along with gently blowing grass lined underneath. "... growing colorful flowers for indoor decorative crafts and household medicinal properties? See, they're going to also expand on the -"

But the parchment had disappeared out of her hands and reappeared in Severus'.

Grinding his teeth as the speaker took his place at the podium, a large stack of parchments floating obediently next to him, Severus growled, "I knew that."

"Really."

"Of course."

"You, Severus Dark-Arts-and-Potions Snape, who cursed Professor Sprout's prized creation to howl at the moon and bleed profusely at the top of every hour, willingly signed up for a Herbology session in its current form, including flower arrangement."

"There is no proof of that, and yes."

"Are you quite certain?"

"Quite, on both counts."

Hermione nodded, folding the schedule and tucking it away, then asked, "Why are you still here? I would have thought you'd have left immediately once our presentation

was removed, yet here you are on day..."

She paused for a moment, the massive amount of information, the mountains of parchments threatening to overtake her room, the meals taken at random times to fit one more session in, all were a blur, yet something was the same throughout.

"Four," he supplied with a sneer.

"Four," she repeated.

Severus then turned to her so suddenly, she gripped her quill almost to the breaking point.

As the speaker shuffled his notes, straightened his glasses, and began his presentation, Severus leaned forward and interlaced his hands on the table. Hermione followed suit, finding herself leaning in as if he was about to share a great secret. After a long pause, his eyes fixed on hers, he stated in a dark voice, "No reason."

She blinked. "No reason."

"No."

"None?"

Severus' eyes flicked to the podium where the speaker had warned in a monotonous drone that the supplies for the session were known to bite. "None."

Hermione leaned back in her chair, her quill forgotten in her hand as Severus stood and walked more through than with the crowd to where the supplies were being distributed. Looking down, she saw Severus' leather bag sitting next to his chair, a tangle of parchment scrolls crowding around the opening. Keeping an eye on the black woolen back weaving through the parting crowd, Hermione quickly pulled the well-worn conference schedule from Severus' bag, her eyebrows furrowing at the marks he placed next to sessions such as "The Future of Ancient Runes." Holding the parchment up closer to her face, she squinted at the mark.

"Looking for something?"

Hermione found herself looking up the row of buttons to Severus' raised eyebrow. In the crook of his arm, he held a pot, and as Hermione slowly rose, schedule still in hand, the fanged purple plant suddenly lunged and snapped.

Leaning toward her, Severus held his hand over the plant, sending it into a shuddering cringe. Grinning at her, he said, "They bite."

"So I heard," she said slowly, placing the schedule into Severus' waiting hand and shuffling carefully past the plant.

Watching her go, Severus set the potted plant on the table and leaned over to shove his schedule back into his bag. Sitting back up, he found the plant on its side, feebly trying to use its leaves to pull itself away.

Watching its struggle for a moment, Severus, said, "Come now, at least put up a fight."

The plant responded by gnawing on the table's edge. Everywhere it touched left scorch marks in the wood.

Severus sighed, righted the pot, and watched as Hermione approached with her plant, which was busily trying to ingest her sleeve.

"Problem?"

Hermione used the blunt end of her wand to dislodge her plant, which then turned its rage onto Severus'. The two snapped at each other several times before Severus made a motion with his hand and his plant began to spit fire, sending Hermione's to try to cower with its leaves hovering over its head.

Slamming her wand on the table, Hermione snapped, "No...."

A witch in a loudly floral hat made a hushing noise from a nearby table, trailing off when Severus turned in her direction.

Turning back to Hermione, Severus said, "I could ask you the same question."

"What?"

"Why are *you* still attending this conference? Herbology? Honestly? As someone who's performed over a decade of post-graduate work in the realm of Potions, including a certain cure for Lycanthropy for which we are both quite well-known, not to mention authoring untold reams of reasons to purchase decorative bookends on the subject of Ancient Runes, you are the last individual I would expect to find in a remedial seminar on aggressive plants that any First Year would be comfortable in."

Hermione glared at him as she snatched her notes from her plant's teeth and used them to beat his plant into submission, then pointed the singed scroll at him. "Remedial or not, we are in a classroom setting and should act, well not like children."

"That doesn't answer my question, Miss Granger."

"Neither does 'No reason'," she snapped.

At Severus' raised eyebrow, Hermione repositioned her pot and turned her attention to the presenter, who was currently pointing out to the smoke-filled room the plant's fire-breathing capacity.

The presenter's droning voice spun out over the course of the following hour, interspersed with periodic cries of surprise and rapid beating sounds or rushed spells. Hermione remained steadfastly riveted on the extremely boring presentation and on dutifully following the instructions to subdue the plant to collect the valuable pollen it contained, none of which she needed, nor believed she'd ever need in the future, yet manners won out.

Daring to look over in Severus' direction, she observed his plant bent over, its leaves draped forward, the plume of a feather twitching next to its head. Hermione watched incredulously as the plant carefully extended a leaf to steady a parchment as it took notes.

Trying to recover from her amazement as the plant paused, quill hovering as the speaker thanked everyone for their participation and asked for their favorable review, Hermione said, "You were supposed to obtain the pollen."

Severus quirked a grin. "An hour ago. One only need to ask the beast politely. The teeth and fire are a defense mechanism against force."

Hermione watched as Severus' plant carefully placed the quill down, then threw itself on its side, determinately sliding itself toward Hermione's plant. Liquid fire trailed from its mouth as it moved. Hermione's plant stood its ground though, then it leaned over, breathed deeply, and shot fire to where the notes lay, setting them ablaze.

"I see," Hermione observed, watching with a suppressed grin as Severus slammed his hand down amidst the charred parchments.

The closing feast's speaker rambled on, pausing only to shuffle through reams of curled parchments to find names. Witches and wizards largely ignored the speaker as

background noise, their banter nearly drowning him out until he waved his wand to raise his voice's volume for the fourth time.

Hermione sat between an elderly witch whose hat contained a live mongoose and a wizard who had asked her for her name so many times, she started telling him "Elderberry," which only served to send him into a lecture of the medicinal properties of her imaginary name. She had stopped scanning the room for a black wool silhouette two hours prior, telling herself to simply quit it, he'd likely gone in his usual manner, departing before the closing feast and sending a politely worded owl mentioning their companionship and working relationship afterward. Then nothing more for another year.

The wizard had ended his lecture on berries, and the witch was instructing her hat to please not dig its claws into her head as she rose to gather her things. Hermione sighed and slipped her bag over her shoulder. Making her way back to her room, her mind kept wandering back to the time in the lab: their initial circling around respect, partnership, exchange of ideas, and their eventual evolution into a free-form exchange of ideas, theories and shared passion around finding a cure. His intense gaze as she spoke, his eyes only leaving hers to make a note or observe a test potion's hue, something worlds apart from the vacant stares Harry and Ron gave her while her words simply soared over their intellectual heads. Their amazing achievement when their first test subject stood out on the castle's grounds, moonlight shining on his unchanged form, his arms raised in a universal gesture of victory. Severus had taken her hand for a moment, his expression one of someone preparing to share words to remember for a lifetime, then had simply stated, "I'll draft an owl." He had then turned on his heel and descended the stairs, leaving her to watch their brave test case hold out his arms to his wife who was running toward him, overcome with joy.

Looking up, Hermione found herself where the session rooms ended and the sleeping chambers began. With most of the attendees either leaving via Floo or remaining for the reception, the cavernous hall seemed even more empty. Moving to turn toward her room, Hermione halted in front of a session chamber where the parchment posted outside covered over another. Something made her slip a finger under the corner and pull the top layer back, revealing their session title on the brewing of their cure for Lycanthropy. Her fingers worried the parchment's edge as she looked at it for a time, finally pulling it free from the wall.

"Collecting souvenirs, now?"

Spinning around with the parchment clutched in her hands, Hermione was met, yet again, with not only with the usual vision of Severus in black wool and buttons, but also a hooded traveling cloak that dragged the floor as he approached.

Watching as his cloak settled down around him, Hermione suppressed a smile. "Dramatic."

"It's cold," he stated flatly, gesturing at the open session room's door. "A word?"

Once inside, Severus said, "It is no secret that we no longer belong here in the future. Do you agree?"

Hermione opened her mouth in reflexive protest, but paused when she could come up with none. "Yes, well..." she managed.

Watching her carefully, Severus took her hand, paused as he passed his thumb over her palm, and said, "In the absence of desperate times, this world has moved on. We are still young, but relics just the same."

Nodding slowly, Hermione brought herself to look into his eyes. "You never answered my question."

A ghost of a smile touched his lips. "Nor you, mine."

Hermione watched his thumb as it traveled over her hand in a slow arc, the lightest of touches. "I think I know..."

"Why we are still here," he finished for her.

"Yes," she said softly, her free hand's fingers finding its way into his cloak's button loops, slipping through - hanging on.

"I am not going to kiss you," he breathed, slipping his hand into her hair.

Absently letting her bag drop from her shoulder to the floor, she whispered, "Of course not."

Her hair fell through his fingers slowly, his eyes searching hers. "It would not be proper. So soon."

"Not at all," she agreed and leaned back to find warm wood.

"Another ten years - at least."

He nodded, tilting his head until they were standing resting against each other, his fingers tracing the line of her jaw, her throat, her neck and back again in a low, sweeping wave. His breath falling down on her neck, she twisted both hands into his cloak tighter still and the sound of leather creaking sought to drive her over the edge. Swallowing suddenly took an eternity of effort, and reason held on by a thread.

"We could do this for years."

"Decades."