

The Polyjuiced Soul

by neelix

Severus Snape reluctantly agrees to assist new Potions Professor Granger with a new project, with unexpected consequences.

1. Conflict

Chapter 1 of 21

Severus Snape reluctantly agrees to assist new Potions Professor Granger with a new project, with unexpected consequences.

A/N: Apologies for the short chapters, it's just the way I write. I aim to update Friday night UK time where possible. Review if you feel like it :)

1. Conflict

'First they ignore you, then they ridicule you, then they fight you, and then you win.'

— Mahatma Gandhi'

Outside the staff room of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Hermione Granger was steeling herself. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath and shook her shoulders to release the tension that had gathered there in her walk from the dungeon.

'You're twenty-two, not twelve. You are a fully qualified Potions Mistress. You have an Order of Merlin, First Class. Undeserved, but never the less, it has your name on it. You are bright, smart, and more attractive than you used to be. Most of the people behind that door love you. Be a brave Gryffindor...' she muttered to herself.

Unfortunately it wasn't 'most of the people' that Hermione felt the need to protect herself from. In fact, there was only one person who could possibly have the effect of reducing such a paragon of the Wizarding world to a boneless and pathetic bunch of quivering nerves and that was Severus Snape, Defence Against the Dark Arts Professor and Deputy Head of the school.

Ever since Hermione had joined the staff in September, Severus Snape had taken great pains to make her life a misery whenever he saw her. He belittled her, sneered at her, tried to undermine her in front of the other Professors and was downright bloody rude. She couldn't understand it. She had been so looking forward to working alongside the man she had admired for years, and not just because he truly had been the saviour of their world. His skills with Potions surpassed anything she had ever encountered, and she could only hope to come close to his achievements. After completing her NEWTS, Hermione had absorbed everything ever written by Severus Snape, Potions Master, and she had quickly come to see why he had been such a harsh tutor. He had an intuition and a natural instinct towards the subject that Hermione had never fully understood as a student, and it was only now that she was furthering her studies that she understood that recipes and methods were simply guidelines that could be tweaked and improved upon if the potion maker felt it necessary. Trying to teach Potions to such a limited group of students, while at the same time playing such a pivotal role in the war, must have tested Snape's patience to the limit. Hermione had thought that surely now that the war was over he could relax his spy persona and at least be civil, but apparently not. Although he looked healthier, and his school robes were of much better quality, his personality was just the same. Hermione had already given up trying to be nice to him, and was now practising being polite to him in front of others but privately calling him all the names under the Goddess Moon in her head at the same time. In fact, coming up with creative ways of referring to him that didn't include the words 'greasy', 'bat' or 'git' was fast becoming one of her favourite hobbies. Hermione decided she wouldn't give Snape any ammunition to goad her with, so she took a deep breath and pushed the door open, striding in with as much grace as she

could muster.

'Hermione, you're just in time.' Minerva eyed her from over the top of her glasses and gave her a brief smile before gesturing her to sit. Hermione returned the smile and looked around the table. Her stomach clenched as she realised that the only spare seat was between Snape and Professor Hooch.

'Of course it is,' she thought to herself, while trying to maintain her outward appearance of calm indifference. She walked towards the spare chair as if she felt totally comfortable. 'Professors,' she said, nodding at each of her colleagues in turn as she sat. She noticed Professor Snape stiffen and lean slightly away from her, a sneer curling his lip oh-so-slightly, and in her head she came up with the best insult she could think of at short notice.

'Wanker'.

Severus Snape was not in the room. He was in a hot country, far, far away from Hogwarts, sitting in a bar getting pleasantly pissed and watching sultry senioritas giving him the glad eye. He was absolutely not listening to Minerva's waffle or taking any notice whatsoever of the Most Irritating Witch That Ever Lived writing quick, scratchy notes on a parchment pad beside him. Nor did he observe said witch scrawl the word 'Wanker' in the margins, surround it with lightening bolts and then silently vanish it with a huff. He snorted in amusement, and his wool-gathering was abruptly halted as Minerva called the meeting to a close. He didn't miss anything, he was certain of that, and even so, he was sure that Winky the house elf would be despatched with the minutes before the start of his first class.

Ever since the war, it was always thus. He spent every meeting not contributing and planning his escape. He hated teaching. He had only come back because Minerva had begged him, and on the understanding was that the post would be temporary. He had categorically refused to teach Potions. The classes were stark reminders of his other life, the one he had supposedly moved on from. He hadn't expected to survive, so he hadn't bothered saving any money for a rainy day or made any plans for a future. He had spent his money on Potions ingredients for the Dark Lord because it had been expected of him, and copious amounts of Firewhiskey to drown his guilty sorrows. He would never admit it to anyone, but the reality was that he had returned to Hogwarts because he simply had nowhere else to go. Since the war, he'd had the feeling that he was simply treading water and that somehow, his happily ever after had been given to someone else. He had a sneaking suspicion that person was Harry Potter, who was married to someone so physically like his own mother he should probably spend a good deal of time in therapy. The only pleasure he had, now the opportunity presented itself, was whittling down the ego of an over-inflated Gryffindor witch.

He waited for said witch to leave before making a move. He enjoyed following her down the corridors, watching her rear as she sashayed away, her cheeks brushing together even faster as she became more aware of his heavy footsteps behind her. There wasn't much excitement to be had these days, despite what the end of the war might have promised. He had to grab what small pleasures he could. He continued to wait, and then realised that Granger wasn't going anywhere and that Minerva was staring at him expectantly.

'Headmistress?' Severus raised an eyebrow and sat up straighter, knowing that something had been asked of him and that he didn't have a clue what. He purposely ignored the sigh that slipped from the rosebud lips of the witch to his left.

'Severus, were you listening at all?' Minerva chuckled and looked pointedly at him.

'I was actually considering my next class, Headmistress, which is due to start in ten minutes. If I appeared distracted, it was solely for the greater good of the students,' he lied smoothly. This time even Granger had the audacity to laugh at the incredulous look on Minerva's face, and the little mischief imp inside him started to dance with glee.

'Professor Granger,' Snape spat as if her title was ashes in his mouth, and turned to look down at her. 'I should think that even you would understand the importance of prior thought being given to a forthcoming lesson?' He smirked as the colour drained slightly from her face.

'Indeed I do, Professor Snape.' She turned her eyes up at him. 'But I thought that was what lesson plans were for?' Her voice sounded innocent, but the spark of amusement and challenge in her eyes belied her outward appearance. The cheeky little ...

'That's enough, both of you.' Minerva interrupted, spoiling what had promised to be the best part of Severus' day, and he scowled at Granger before turning back to his only slightly less irritating boss.

'We don't have time for this, Professors,' Minerva continued, her voice stern, 'and in the circumstances it would do my heart good to know I can trust you both to be in each others' company without killing each other.'

Severus frowned, and spoke without thinking. 'What circumstances are you referring to?' Damn. Now it was clear that he really hadn't been paying attention. Granger sighed again, and he clenched his fist around his wand reflexively.

'Hermione is going to need an assistant for her project, Severus. She had suggested Miss Gilroy, from your own House, but I fear it is far too dangerous to risk a student.'

'Miss Gilroy is a very competent student, Minerva, and I am sure that whatever 'project' Professor Granger is attempting will pose little danger,' he said, his voice positively swimming with sarcasm. The witch was bright, but he was certain that everything she had achieved was by sheer fortune of circumstance. The ability to memorise verbatim any text book in front of her nose, and her association with the Boy Wonder, was surely all she had needed to secure her current tenure.

'The project is for your Mastery, Hermione, am I right?' Minerva smiled indulgently at the witch, and Severus thought he might have to throw up in the few minutes he had left before his classes.

'It is,' Granger said quietly. Severus had to admit his curiosity was piqued when she didn't divulge the nature of her project or bore them both to tears with a detailed, four parchment essay on the subject. Minerva graced him with one of his own trademark eyebrows, and he pinched the bridge of his nose. He had been caught in a pincer movement that even Albus would have been proud of. If he didn't help, he could put a student in danger, negating the sole purpose of his life so far. He gave in, albeit on his own terms.

'I shall look it over, if it will satisfy you, Minerva. Then I shall assess the level of risk to Miss Gilroy.'

Minerva smiled at him, triumph in her eyes, while Granger leapt from her chair and all but ran for the door before any more could be said. He pondered this as the last curls of her hair disappeared, and a frisson something started in his stomach. He smirked to himself, realising that he would be alone in the dungeon lab with Professor Granger. Such opportunities shouldn't be wasted.

2. Challenge

Severus Snape reluctantly agrees to assist new Potions Professor Granger with a new project, with unexpected consequences.

A/N: So sorry this is a day late. I was socialising and gossiping with a girlfriend, and you know how important that is, right?

2. The Challenge

'Honest differences are often a healthy sign of progress ~ Mahatma Ghandi'

Hermione was pacing. She was really trying not to, but every time she tried to sit, her leg started to jiggle. Pacing was preferable to jiggling, but even that was annoying her no end.

It was all Snape's fault, of course. Perhaps if he had been more reasonable towards her in the past, or even showed her the same respect he paid to his other colleagues, she wouldn't have been suspicious, but given his recent record, Hermione could only surmise he had an ulterior motive for agreeing to Minerva's request, and she would have to stay on her mettle around him.

She glanced at her watch and jumped at the sharp knock on the door. Bugger Snape and his anal timekeeping. She smoothed her hair away from her face and took a deep breath before opening the outer door to her office. It was made all the more awkward when she suddenly remembered that during the war years this had been his office. His robes billowed in contempt as he strode in past her and sat in the chair before her desk, telling her clearly that he hadn't forgotten this, either. Hermione slowly let the breath go, and turned to Snape with false calm.

'Come in, Professor Snape, make yourself comfortable.' She didn't bother to glance at him as she made her way to her desk, but when she finally sat and looked up at him, his face was a pale mask. He looked at her with narrowed eyes, and crossed his arms. What went on behind the façade she would never know, but it was clear he didn't want to be here any more than she wanted him to be.

'I know you don't really want to help me, Professor, so why don't we make this simple?' She sounded braver than she felt, and when Snape didn't respond but just continued to look at her blankly, she decided to plough on regardless. 'Rather than wasting your time, you could just let Minerva know that there is no risk attached and allow Miss Gilroy to help me.'

Snape's eyes narrowed further. 'And what would happen if a mishap did take place and Miss Gilroy was injured? Are you prepared to explain to Minerva that, in your wisdom, you chose to overlook her direct instruction and risk a student, rather than spend any amount of time with me?' he said slowly.

'That's not why I'm suggesting it!' Hermione looked at Snape in horror. 'I would be more than happy to have your help, Professor. Your knowledge and skills far surpass my own and I could only wish to gain Mastery to your high standards. However, you have made it clear from the start that you don't rate me as a teacher, or as a person. I was trying to make both of our lives a lot easier!'

Snape looked away from her, hiding his face with his dark hair, and shifted in his seat before her. Hermione smirked inwardly. She hadn't changed any of the furniture in the office, and Snape was sitting in the same chair that countless of students had endured during his infamous detentions. 'Not quite so comfortable now', she thought.

The silence grew between them, and Hermione gathered together the copies of her research, finally making a decision.

'Fine,' she said resignedly. 'You win. Here are my notes. You can read through them if you want to, I don't care either way. I intend to carry out the first run next Friday after classes.' Hermione stood and pushed her chair back, walked over to Snape and handed him the pile of parchments. She didn't look back at him as she slipped through the back door into her quarters.

Severus was still sitting in the uncomfortable chair five minutes after Granger had left. He hadn't even given a thought to the parchments he was holding, but was looking at the shelf behind what had once been his desk. It was actually still his desk by rights. He had found it in an old junk shop as a teenager, and his mother had bought it for him as a present. It had sat in the house in Spinner's End until he started teaching, and he had brought it with him after his mother died. It was his one tie to his life before the Dark Lord, an anchor to the old Severus Snape. He had never been happy, but back then he did at least have hope. He pondered vaguely the chances of Granger giving it back to him, but the way things were between them didn't make for cordial gift-giving. He was more likely to be hexed in the back, and he knew he probably deserved it.

His eyes drifted back up to the shelf. Instead of the jars and bottles holding nondescript specimens he had kept to put the fear of Medusa into the students, Granger had a row of photographs. They were all Muggle, the still faces smiling out from a moment captured in time. He stood to get a closer look. The first was a photograph of a child with mousey hair, caught in bunches fastened with bright pink bobbles. She had a gap in her toothy smile and was sitting beside a large, tabby cat. Given Granger's obsession with felines, he assumed it was this childhood pet that gave the image pride of place. He didn't think she would have kept the picture of her teeth, and he grimaced as he remembered his cruel comment he'd made in her 4th year. He had been particularly cruel that day, and he felt his stomach roil at the memory.

The second picture was of a couple who were obviously Granger's parents. She had inherited Mrs Granger's hair, and Severus grunted at the irony that they were both so genetically linked to their mothers. The last photograph was of an older Granger with her parents, and Severus narrowed his eyes as he took in the witch's strained smile and dark shadows beneath her eyes. She had to have been a student when it was taken, and already the toll of the war had been showing. Severus sighed to himself. So many young lives were affected, and he often chose to forget that Granger was one of them. He knew deep down that he shouldn't be so hard on her, but every time he saw her, he was reminded of everything he was trying so hard to forget. He was starting to get maudlin. With a shake, he left the office without a backward glance. If he was to read yet another essay written by Hermione Granger, he would need a comfortable seat and plenty of Firewhisky.

Hermione was in her quarters, marking papers and absently scratching Crookshanks between his ears as he lounged on the sofa beside her. Like her outer office, she had hardly changed anything since taking her post, and the set of rooms that came with her job were bare and functional. Horace Slughorn had never used these rooms, preferring more spacious quarters with a window overlooking the Quidditch pitch. It had been one of his stipulations to Dumbledore before he agreed to return to Hogwarts that fateful year. It was ironic that Snape now had Slughorn's old rooms, because although she could have moved the furniture around, or exchanged the battered leather chair by the fireplace for a newer one, for some reason it reassured Hermione to know this was how Snape had lived during his own tenure.

The fire in the grate was the only sound as it cracked and spat out the occasional burning cinder, and the peace and quiet would usually have relaxed Hermione and given her space to think, but not this night. Her head was full of her project and the probability that she would have to run the trials with Professor Snape. It had the potential for disaster written all over it. She wondered how far he had got through her research, because she knew without a doubt that he wouldn't be able to resist but to read it straight away. With a sigh, Hermione gave Crookshanks one final rub of an ear and put the pile of marking on the table beside her. Stretching, she stood and walked over to the small desk she had purloined from the Room of Hidden Things. It was dark mahogany, sturdy and plain with a lockable drawer to the front. It was the only bit of furniture she had added, but it was small and discreet enough not to raise any questions should she have guests. Her life's work was locked in the desk. Her Mastery project, along with other research she had started but not given further time to, and the contract from the Ministry Auror Office that she hadn't signed yet. Hermione shuddered slightly as she began to dismantle the wards on the desk and thought ruefully that she probably should be less suspicious. The problem was that since the end of the war, Hermione had become less the brave Gryffindor hero, and more a timid lion cub. She had tried to curb it, but even the sight of a student withdrawing their wand made her flinch and cold shivers run down her spine. The desk unlocked with a gentle click. She ignored everything but her Mastery research, pulling the file from the desk and locking and warding it again securely. Clutching her research to her chest, she waved her wand to extinguish the fire and the candles in the wall sconces, and retired to the bedroom to reread her work yet again.

Severus Snape put down his empty glass and pulled his glasses from his face. He ran a hand through his long, black hair and frowned down at the page before him. He was never in doubt that Hermione Granger was an extraordinarily intelligent witch, but this research had totally blown him away. He was mightily impressed and more than a bit frustrated. Teaching Potions at Hogwarts was no place for a mind like hers.

He shuffled through the parchment and read through her list of ingredients again. At first glance it could be passed off as simply Polyjuice, something the witch could probably brew in her sleep. But the addition of pine needles to extend the efficacy was inspired. Tests would need to be carried out to ensure the time span, but the possibilities were endless. Add in the Transfiguration and Personality charms, and Hermione Granger could well have invented something that could be used as an effective tool in the right hands. Snape groaned as he realised the enormity of the project he was holding, and his hand started to tremble. This was the kind of secret weapon the Dark Lord could have only dreamed of, and the thought of it falling into the wrong hands made Snape feel weak.

He whistled softly, and a small Screech Owl fluttered to him from the perch in the corner. He scrawled a hasty note, rolled it tightly and hooked it onto the owl's leg.

'Thank You, Rufus. As quick as you can, please,' he murmured. He watched as the owl flew through the part open window, and hoped he was worrying needlessly.

Confrontation

Chapter 3 of 21

Severus Snape reluctantly agrees to assist new Potions Professor Granger with a new project, with unexpected consequences.

A/N: Thanks to everyone who is reading and many thanks to those of you who have reviewed :) Happy Friday everyone .

'A man who was completely innocent, offered himself as a sacrifice for the good of others, including his enemies, and became the ransom of the world. It was a perfect act.'
~ Mahatma Gandhi

Severus paced around Minerva's office, watched by the portraits around the room. They had seen him pace before when he was numbered amongst their own, and they well remembered the darkness that had held him so constrained. They exchanged concerned glances with each other, and some stared accusingly at the sleeping form of Albus Dumbledore. On the odd occasion that he did leave his frame, Dumbledore became main topic of conversation. Opinion was divided as to whether he was a genius or a manipulative bastard, but one thing they all did agree on was that he had treated Severus Snape very shabbily indeed.

'Severus, please sit down.' Minerva sounded exasperated.

He stopped mid-step and looked at Minerva blankly before acquiescing to her request. He had explained to her in the simplest of terms the danger that Granger was messing with, but in her wisdom the Headmistress had desired to hear her pet Gryffindor speak for herself. That had been ten minutes ago and still, they waited. He glared across the desk at Minerva and crossed his arms.

'Oh, for goodness' sake, Severus.' Minerva stood and walked around the desk to stand directly in front of him. With a wave of her wand she conjured a large glass of Ogden's finest and handed it to him with a wry smile. His worries were genuine, she knew that. But Hermione had no scrap of evil intent in her body, she was sure of it. Severus took the glass after a moments' pause and Minerva clasped a gnarled hand on his shoulder reassuringly. 'Just relax, dear boy.'

Against his better judgement, Severus softened in the face of Minerva's genuine concern and sighed deeply.

'I cannot bear to see this project falling into the wrong hands, Minerva. Granger probably hasn't even considered...'

'Considered what?' Hermione Granger silently closed the door to the stairway and approached the desk with her wand sticking out of her jeans pocket and a frown on her face, both seemingly aimed at Severus. Her stance was already defensive, and Snape looked away from her hostile glare to contemplate his drink.

'Hermione, please take a seat. We have been talking about your Mastery project, as I'm sure you've already gathered.' Minerva rested against the desk, clearly placing herself between her two professors.

'Yes, I did. I would be interested to know exactly what Professor Snape feels my research is lacking.' Hermione sat down with a resigned slump, and her lips pressed together firmly.

'Severus has explained to me the nature of your project, but perhaps if you tell me how you see it, and some of your motivation behind it? It sounds quite extraordinary.' Minerva moved back around to her chair, seemingly content that her colleagues wouldn't hex each other immediately.

'As I'm sure Professor Snape has told you, I am trying to increase the effective length of Polyjuice Potion, in the first instance. This in itself would be a great benefit and enable users to remain in form for many hours at a time without having to constantly re-dose themselves. The second part of the Project involves a Charm cast while taking the potion, which I hope will imbue the user not only with the physical characteristics, but also the personality traits, of the person they are intending to be.'

Minerva sat back and smiled proudly at Hermione, and Snape couldn't hold back a snort.

'Honestly, Minerva. Granger may have been one of the Golden Trio but here and now she is an employee, and a green one at that. Stop pandering to her like you did when she was a student and cut to the chase,' he said. There was no bite to his words, but he was frustrated beyond belief at the special treatment Granger was getting. If it had been him presenting this idea, he would immediately have been mistrusted and made to jump through hoops to prove his innocence yet again. Minerva looked at Severus over the top of her spectacles and seemed to be scrutinising him closely. After an uncomfortable moments' silence, she frowned and sighed deeply.

'Very well. Hermione,' she said, her tone more serious as she addressed the witch. 'Can you explain to us why you chose this particular project? On the surface, while to my limited knowledge and experience it appears commendable, it doesn't seem to have a purpose.'

'I know it's not a healing potion, and it won't change the world, but I still feel it has validity. I have experienced Polyjuice potion in the past...' Hermione was interrupted by a particularly unpleasant snort from Snape, and she closed her eyes and took a deep breath before continuing. 'Obviously there was the time in second year, which I have already been ridiculed for far more than was justified, if you ask me. But we also used it when we tried to hide Harry's escape from Little Whinging. The Polyjuice potion started to wear off far too early, and we were very lucky that Harry managed to get away before he'd been spotted. It was dangerous and foolish, and we lost Moody in the

process. If we had all changed to our normal forms too soon, Harry would have been a sitting duck, and we wouldn't be sitting here now.'

Hermione voice had softened to a whisper, and Severus shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He remembered that night all too well, and his own role in it. He downed the last slug of Ogden's and tried to push the memory of hexing George Weasley to the back of his mind. Granger seemed to realise who she was sitting beside, and when Snape looked up he saw her staring at him.

'I'm sorry, Professor. I forgot that you were there too,' she said softly.

Severus stared at her in shock, and nodded to accept her apology. He said nothing, not knowing what to say anyway.

Minerva coughed lightly to remind them she was there. 'And the Charms?' she prompted.

Hermione sighed and rubbed her arms as if she was feeling suddenly cold. Her face seemed to pale, but she spoke clearly. 'While Harry, Ron and I were searching for Horcruxes, I had to Polyjuice myself as Bellatrix Lestrange,' she said.

Severus sat forwards at this, and slight growl coming from the back of his throat. He had never known the details of their search, only that it had obviously been a success. This was news, and disturbing news at that. He had known they were reckless, but this... He shook his head.

'After taking the Polyjuice, I practiced in the mirror, trying to get her mannerisms right. I had seen enough of her at Malfoy Manor to know how she operated, and I felt sure I could pull it off,' she said, her voice starting to shake. 'But I couldn't. She was too different, too far removed from anything I could imagine. I didn't respond like her, and I didn't want to. I nearly gave us away more than once. I could have cost us everything...' Hermione's hands began to tremble, and she put her head down as the memories finally overwhelmed her.

Severus looked at the younger witch with newfound admiration. He had been aware of her torture at the hands of Bellatrix. The mad witch had always taken too much pleasure in Crucio, and to have been let lose on the Mudblood Granger would have felt like Christmas to her. He shuddered, but acted swiftly. Waving his hand, his empty glass refilled itself, and from his inside pocket he withdrew a calming draught. He always kept them on his person when he was teaching first years, because there was always one who needed it. He pushed the glass and the vial along the desk towards Granger, who looked up warily through her curls. She actually smiled at him half-heartedly.

'Not going to berate my Gryffindor sentimentality, Professor Snape?' She sniffed and took the calming draught gratefully.

'I think under the circumstances, that can wait,' Severus replied quietly. 'Having been on the receiving end of Bellatrix's wand, I feel some empathy.'

'She hexed you?' Hermione asked, her eyes wide in disbelief.

'Oh yes. The Dark Lord liked to reward her from time to time, and I was her favourite toy.' He ground his teeth together in memory and said yet another silent prayer of thanks for Molly Weasley and her quick wand.

'She was a mad bitch,' Hermione muttered with feeling, and then she let out a short gasp as a faint, pink tinge flushed her cheeks. 'I am so sorry, Headmistress.'

Minerva chuckled and pushed her glasses on more firmly. 'No need for an apology, my dear. I quite understand. Bellatrix was always on the hysterical side, even at school. I think Molly Weasley did us all a great favour.'

The room was quiet then, with all three professors silently contemplating the Headmistresses' words. It was Severus who finally broke the silence.

'If I may ask a question?' He turned to face Granger and addressed her directly. The witch seemed surprised and wary, and Severus supposed he deserved it. He hadn't been the easiest of colleagues, and suddenly his Granger-baiting seemed childish and immature. He wasn't the only survivor, and he made a mental note to be mindful of that fact in future.

'Go on,' Hermione said quietly.

'Who do you see using this, if it's a success?' His brows narrowed as he watched her formulate her answer, her teeth troubling her lower lip in a gesture he recognised well.

'I was hoping to patent it and go into a contract with the Auror office. I'm still undecided on that, however. The one thing I want to be sure of is that it doesn't end up in the wrong hands.' Hermione said firmly.

Severus was convinced in the first telling. She had never been good at bluffing, even as a student. He let out an audible sigh of relief.

'Well, Severus. I believe you have your answer?' Minerva's voice was light again, and she smiled warmly at them both. Severus nodded, but a sense of weariness had suddenly washed over him and he stood.

'My thanks, Minerva, Professor Granger,' he murmured. He gave them both a brief bow and left for his quarters.

Hermione sipped gingerly at the firewhisky left by Professor Snape, and then asked the question that had bugged her since she had arrived.

'Headmistress, why is Professor Snape so concerned about my project? I would have thought that he, of all people, would be able to see it for what it is,' she asked quietly. To say the Professor had confused her was an understatement. She was used to his snide remarks and at times, his untoward temper. But he had been different during their conversation, and Hermione sensed there was more going on than she knew.

Minerva McGonagall removed her spectacles and laid them on the desk, and conjured a glass of firewhisky for herself. She raised her glass before downing it in one, and Hermione couldn't stop a grin escaping. Minerva fixed her with an amused stare.

'Scottish blood needs whisky every day, Hermione, especially mine.' She paused and glanced back at Dumbledore's portrait. Sometime during their meeting the wily old goat had disappeared, and Minerva shook her head. He had avoided Severus since he had returned to the school, and no amount of berating or cajoling would make him actually talk to the man. With a sigh, she turned back to answer Hermione's question.

'Severus is a changed man, Hermione. I know he may not appear to be on the outside, but he was ever the skilful spy, as you know. Part of that skill was disguise, and he uses his mask, even now. He would never say this to you, but he is scared.'

'Scared?' Hermione looked at the Headmistress aghast and laughed in disbelief.

'I know it is hard to fathom, but believe me. Voldemort may be dead, but we all thought he was dead the first time. Severus is absolutely terrified that he, or another, will return. Your project, in the wrong hands... well, you can understand his concern.'

Hermione stared as she tried to understand what she was being told. It hardly seemed right, but then, of course it was. Professor Snape projected an untouchable persona, scattering first years, and first year Professors, in his wake. She had thought it was the war that had made him so prickly. It never occurred to her that he was creating an image, acting a clever charade.

Without a doubt, Hermione didn't know Severus Snape at all, but she now knew they had something in common. They were both damaged by the war.

4. Surprises.

Chapter 4 of 21

Severus Snape reluctantly agrees to assist new Potions Professor Granger with a new project, with unexpected consequences.

A/N: I have been remiss in not thanking a couple of people. Firstly my very good friend Aro, who sorts out my punctuation, and secondly Cybrokat for giving this the once over before I let it out into the ether. I offer you both endless gratitude and a bar of Honeydukes Special Caramel.

Thanks to all of you who are reading and reviewing.

4. Surprises

A sudden bold and unexpected question doth many times surprise a man and lay him open. ~ Francis Bacon

The following morning, Hermione slept in and was almost late for breakfast in the Great Hall. She could have asked one of the house elves to bring her food in her quarters, but she knew from experience that staying in her rooms could be habit forming. She forced herself to go and eat with her colleagues, knowing that it was the only time she would get adult conversation. By the time she arrived, the only chair left was on the end of the table, beside Professor Snape. Ordinarily this would have filled her with trepidation, but after their conversation the previous evening, and the insight the Headmistress had shared with her; Hermione was starting to see Severus Snape in a different light. With this in mind, she held her head up and caught the Professor's gaze as she approached.

'Good morning, Professor,' she murmured quietly, giving him a small smile before pulling out her chair to sit.

'Professor Granger,' he replied with a slight nod of his head.

Hermione hadn't expected a sudden change in his attitude towards her, but there were no barbed comments. Viewing this as progress, she smiled again and helped herself to porridge and some strong, black coffee. Perhaps their shared hatred of Bellatrix Lestrange had mellowed him towards her, but whatever the reason, she would take it. Hermione glanced at Snape's plate. It held the remains of what looked like a bacon sandwich, and as she stared, she giggled softly.

'Professor Snape. I would never have had you down as a brown sauce man,' she said, keeping her voice low so that only he would hear.

'Is that so,' he replied. He turned and raised an eyebrow at her and refused to be drawn into conversation, but he wasn't sarcastic. Hermione chose to say nothing more and concentrated on her breakfast. She cast her wand briefly, and gasped when she saw the time. Grabbing her coffee, she placed a stasis and shield charm over the cup and made to leave. She paused when she was addressed directly.

'Professor Granger,' he said slowly. 'What time do you intend to begin your trial this evening?'

'Around seven, if that suits you?' Hermione turned toward the Professor, and he too stood to leave, waving her to continue walking. They left the podium together, Snape's robes billowing almost immediately.

'I shall have to check my diary. You are aware that my life is one mad social whirl?' he muttered dryly.

Hermione tried to hide her grin behind her coffee cup. 'Much like my own, then. Seven it is, then.' They passed through the doors of the Great Hall and were about to go their separate ways when Snape stopped. Hermione looked at him, puzzled, as he scanned the hallway for students surreptitiously. Seemingly happy that they were alone, he bent down to Hermione's ear.

'Ketchup is for cissies,' he whispered. Hermione started to laugh out loud, but before she could say anything, he walked swiftly away, leaving her dumfounded. He had just been amusing. Twice. She shook her head and headed back down the dungeons feeling more than confused over the enigma that is Severus Snape.

Severus stood in the middle of the classroom and watched as the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw fourth year students practised their Shield spells. He smirked at the look of determination on their faces. These students had only been first years during the war, and the fear of the Dark Lord had stayed with them, as so many things do at such a young age. Severus was always mindful of this always when teaching students this age and older, and had even permitted them to ask questions about the war on occasion. He encouraged them to be prepared for all eventualities whilst reassuring them that yes, the Dark Lord is dead and gone, and no, there is no possibility he could return. He sometimes felt like a fraud, or that he should secretly cross his fingers behind his back. He spoke the words, but he didn't necessarily believe them.

'Make your stance wider, Mr. Judd. Give yourself balance, that way you can stay upright. It's always harder to protect yourself lying on your back.' He held out a hand to Aaron Judd, a Ravenclaw student, and pulled him back to his feet.

'Thank you, sir,' he mumbled, his face reddening.

'We all had to learn, Mr. Judd. I wasn't always perfect,' Severus said quietly. He almost laughed at the look on surprise on the young boy's face. 'I know that is hard to believe but I assure you it's the truth. However,' he whispered, 'if you share that with anyone, there will be consequences.'

Aaron Judd nodded and his eyes widened. Snape smirked and walked away, but as he glanced back, he saw to his satisfaction that the boy was surer of himself, successfully blocking the spells his partner was sending his way, and this time without falling over.

'Stop.' Severus raised his voice. 'Change around, you have ten minutes.' He continued to pace, watching each student with a critical eye, and seriously hoped he was only teaching them for all eventualities and not preparing yet another generation for a war.

Snape's mind drifted to Hermione Granger, as it so often did when he was teaching such a class. The witch was a talented spell caster herself, and he wondered if she would be a willing to participate in a demonstration duel for the seventh year students. They weren't evenly matched, he knew that, but she had been even younger than these students during the war. If that wasn't enough to give them hope, he didn't know what was.

Hermione was in her private lab. The Polyjuice potion was finally complete, and she had Miss Gilroy assisting her to fill the flasks on the bench. The student was diligent and adept, but she was also very quiet and only spoke when she was spoken to. She was polite enough to her Potions teacher, but Hermione knew that her family connections made it difficult for her to fully relax around her.

Hermione lifted two flasks and set them to one side. 'Would you seal the rest of these, Phoebe, and place them in the store room?'

'Of course, miss.' Phoebe Gilroy concentrated as she sealed the top of each flask with wax, placed them into the crate and carried them into the store. When she returned, Hermione smiled at her warmly.

'Thank you for all of your help with this, Phoebe. There will be extra credit in your final scores. Have you given any thought to what you will do after Hogwarts?'

'I'm not sure yet, Professor. My father was talking about sending me to Salem to continue my studies.' Phoebe's face was calm, but Hermione caught the brief shrinking of her pupils and the look of sadness that passed across the young student's face.

'And what do you want to do?' Hermione asked gently.

Phoebe sighed. 'I want to be a Medi-witch. My father won't hear of it. My brother is in the Ministry, and father has his businesses. Mother has never worked and is content with that, but after the war, and everything that I saw, I know this is what I want to do.'

'Sometimes our parents have ideas that don't fit our own. If being a Medi-witch isn't good enough for your father, what about being a Healer? I know there aren't many female Healers, but that will change. It would perhaps satisfy your father, and you are certainly bright enough.' Hermione walked over to the witch, and was gratified to see her face brighten with a smile.

'Do you really think so, Professor?'

'I do. I can arrange for you to meet with Augustus Pye, if you want to talk it over with him. He always takes on an apprentice at St Mungo's and so far, I don't think any other student has expressed a desire for it.'

Hermione guided Phoebe to the door, her hand on her shoulder. There was a spring in the student's step that hadn't been there before, and Hermione smiled to herself. She well knew the feeling when a talent was suddenly recognised. Phoebe turned briefly and her eyes shone with barely concealed excitement.

'Thank you, Professor Granger.'

'You're welcome, Phoebe. Now, you'd better hurry to dinner before Professor Snape catches you. You know he likes his Slytherins to stay healthy and I would hate to be on the receiving end of his wrath now I'm no longer his student.' Hermione smiled wryly and Phoebe nodded, closing the door firmly behind her. It was no secret amongst the older students that Hermione had been on the receiving end of Snape's sharp tongue, and Hermione had even shared a few stories with Phoebe while they were brewing. It had helped them to bond, whilst ensuring both the Slytherins and the rest of the students that Hermione bore her former Professor no ill and actually had a huge amount of respect for him and all that he had done during the war.

Checking the time, Hermione realised had thirty minutes before Professor Snape arrived, and given that he would probably be Polyjuiced as her for a time, it was only fair that she showered and changed her underwear before he arrived. The sudden thought of Severus Snape wearing her best silk knickers made her giggle out loud and blush even louder.

Her last thought before she stepped into the shower was that she should transfigure them Slytherin green.

Severus stood outside the door of Hermione Granger's private lab for a full five minutes before he tried to open it. He felt a frisson as her wards shifted, and his eyes widened in surprise when he realised that she had altered them to allow him access. He refused to acknowledge quite how good it felt to know that she trusted him not to tamper with anything in her lab, and he relaxed as he stepped through the door and locked it again out of habit.

He glanced around the lab he had used for more years than he cared to remember. It was mostly the same, and he smirked as he realised he had replicated it precisely in his own private lab next to his newer quarters. He couldn't help but be impressed with the pristine condition of the workbench and the orderly manner in which her equipment was stacked on the shelves. He was just as organised with his lab, and he mused on the idea that brewing with a partner as fastidious as Granger could be a very interesting experience.

There were two flasks on the workbench, and Snape recognised them immediately. He walked over and went to lift them, only to be hit by a mild Stinging Hex that made his fingers smart. He smirked and shook his head. He didn't blame the witch for protecting her work. He would have done the same and perhaps not been as kind in the level of hex. When the door leading from the Potions professors' quarters opened swiftly, it was also clear that she had set a personal alarm on them to alert her should the potion be threatened. Severus had the grace to look suitably caught.

'I apologise, Professor Granger. I was simply curious,' he said mildly. He looked at the witch as she walked over to the bench beside him. Her hair was still slightly damp, caught in a loose ponytail that hung down her back, and the scent of her shampoo caught his delicate senses. She had showered, and he suddenly felt even more abashed that he hadn't given that any prior thought, even though he was well aware of the task ahead.

'Did you get stung?' She looked up at him with a definite glint of amusement.

'A little,' he admitted.

Hermione chuckled and gestured to him to lift his hand to her view. The ends of his fingers were red and throbbing, and she rested his hand in one of hers and lifted the hex swiftly with a brief wave of her wand.

'There. All better,' she said softly. She cancelled the hex on the flasks and lifted them. 'I thought we'd be more comfortable in my quarters?'

Severus stared at her, knowing that her mouth was moving, but not hearing her at first. He was still getting his head around the fact that she had touched him, without flinching. Not many people would dare, or even want, to do that. He mentally shook himself and nodded at the witch. She gave him a quick smile, and he followed her without question.

The First Trial

Severus Snape reluctantly agrees to assist new Potions Professor Granger with a new project, with unexpected consequences.

A/N: Hello everyone :) A nice early update for you - I really hope you enjoy it, I have a feeling it's what you've been waiting for.

Just to let you all know - this story is complete, I'm just being cruel by drip-feeding the Friday updates. I will update every Friday where I can, but no sooner and definitely not more than one chapter at a time. Thanks xx

NB: I mention crisps in this chapter. For my U.S.readers they are what you call 'chips', but of course, Severus is English so - they're Crisps!

Trust is to human relationships what faith is to gospel living. It is the beginning place, the foundation upon which more can be built. Where trust is, love can flourish.
~Barbara Smith

There was something off putting about waking into his old quarters and as he looked around, Severus realised that it was because nothing really had changed. The only thing different was the desk in the corner, the fact that Granger hadn't amassed anywhere near the same amount of books as he had kept here, and that there seemed to be a sleeping mound of ginger fur on the couch.

'Take a seat Professor; I just need to grab some parchment so I can document the trial from the beginning.'

He watched as Granger set down the flasks of Polyjuice potion on the mahogany desk and then took his usual seat beside the fire. He closed his eyes momentarily as memories of other nights sat in this very chair threatened to overwhelm him. None of the memories were pleasant. Waiting for a summons from the Dark Lord, or recovering from one, sprang most immediately to mind. But the memory he fought down the most was sitting here with Dumbledore, a glass of Ogden's in his hand, planning strategy or just listening to the old man waffling on. He had irritated Severus beyond measure, but he had been a constant in his life for what had seemed like forever, and Severus missed him, regardless. He sighed and forced himself to focus as Granger came over to him. He hid a smirk as she headed, unseeing, to sit in the chair he occupied. She noticed not a moment too late, changing direction swiftly to take the chair opposite. She had almost landed in his lap; he mused, and tried to ignore the errant thought that he wouldn't have minded all that much. She was no longer his irritating student but a grown, very womanly, witch. He would have to be a blind idiot not to have noticed.

'I hope you're going to remove that?' He pointed at the sleeping kneazle with a look of distaste on his face. 'Don't want any little accidents.' He smirked at the glare she gave him.

'Don't worry Professor, I've already cast a protection charm around him just in case he sheds any hairs.' She squinted and turned her face to the side. 'I don't think ginger would suit you anyway. Shall we?'

Granger handed him one of the flasks and he eyed it carefully. It was the colour of mud, but thankfully the witch had become an expert in brewing and he had no doubt it was perfect. He had taken Polyjuice before on a few occasions, and even once had used it to circumvent a particularly harsh punishment from the Dark Lord himself early in his servitude. Looking back, he couldn't believe his own audacity, but he had been young and desperate to get away. It had worked, too.

'I don't suppose you have anything to wash this down with?' he murmured as he eyed the thick, muddy potion with distaste.

Of all the people she could trust and yet be suspicious of, Severus Snape would be suspect number one, but Hermione knew that she was prone to allow her paranoia to rule her head. She had silently unwarded her desk, turning her body to discreetly hide the drawer that was usually concealed, and then she had withdrawn the contract from the Ministry. Tapping once with her wand to signify the start of the trial, she then spelled a sheaf of parchment to duplicate all of her notes and recordings. She shuddered at the enormity of her undertaking threatened to overwhelm her, but she couldn't show weakness in front of Professor Snape, of all people. She shook her head, wondering yet again what had happened to Hermione Granger the War Hero, scared of nothing and no-one and willing to dive headlong into a battle with no thought for her own mortality. She hoped there was still a glimmer of her somewhere.

'I'm sorry, Professor, only water at this stage. We need to take the potion simultaneously, and I can't risk anything contaminating the effects on your system. Not even the finest Ogden's,' she said with a small smile.

Professor Snape looked at her blankly, but not before she caught the slight look of surprise on his face.

'I found a bottle in the secret cupboard in the bookcase. I had intended to give it back to you sooner, but...'

'But I wasn't exactly approachable,' he said, finishing her sentence.

Hermione nodded and shrugged. She wasn't going to pretend that things had always been cordial between them when they both knew the truth. That he acknowledged it, however, was something she hadn't expected.

'I imagine having the Gryffindor know-it-all as a colleague wasn't the best surprise for you,' she said quietly. She stood and placed another log on the fire. Her statement was likely the truth, but she didn't particularly want to see it written on his face now that things had improved.

'Never the less,' he said, 'I have not behaved well towards you since you joined the staff and no matter how irritating I found you as a student, there is no excuse. I hope you can accept my apology.' His voice was soft and low, and imbued with a sincerity she had never heard from him. She found herself blushing and hoped that he assumed her pink cheeks were the result of standing closer to the fire.

'I imagine it's a once only offer, so I'll accept your apology, Professor,' she replied with a smile.

'Thank Merlin for that. You have no idea how that almost choked me,' he said with a smirk. Hermione laughed out loud, and was graced by the briefest of smiles from her colleague. His face softened, his eyes sparked with amusement, and Hermione felt very glad that he had agreed to assist her. Her thoughts were immediately taken up again by the task at hand, and she lifted her flask of Polyjuice Potion and uncorked it.

'In order for the trial to work, we will have to transform in front of each other. It was either that or have two witnesses, and I rather thought you would value your privacy during transformation.' Hermione didn't wait for an answer but pulled two of her recently shampooed hairs briskly from her scalp. She then watched as a slight breeze ruffled the Professor's hair and she realised he had cast a silent cleaning charm. He looked a little uncomfortable, so Hermione said nothing. Personal hygiene hadn't come up in previous conversations and she certainly didn't plan to start now. The Professor pulled a few of his own hairs and they leaned across to exchange them. Their fingers brushed slightly, and Hermione was pleased to note that Professor Snape was a warm-blooded creature and not a vampire, as some of the first years had asked her.

'I have foreseen a problem,' he said, quirked an eyebrow, and she paused with the hairs above her flask.

'Already?' Hermione's heart sank. She should have known it was going too well.

'There is a distinct difference in our height and body shape, and I don't see any spare clothing. I don't fancy seeing my body forced into those Muggle clothes you're wearing. They'll only fit where they touch.' He actually grinned at her, and Hermione blushed. The thought of Professor Snape in her underwear wasn't so amusing now that he was sitting here in front of her.

'I have it covered,' she said, wincing at her unintended pun and blushing even harder. The fact that Professor Snape started to laugh meant he had also picked up on her unfortunate phrasing, but it broke the ice at least, and she smiled at him.

'I'm glad you find this amusing Professor. Next time I'll be sure to wear something slightly more revealing so that you can fully embrace the female form,' she said with amusement.

Professor Snape's face fell. 'You wouldn't.'

'That depends on you. Now, do you trust me enough to give this a go?' She stared into his eyes, and they widened slightly before she saw them relax.

'I've always trusted you, Granger.'

The Professor dropped Hermione's hairs into the flask and they both watched as the potion started to bubble and steam. After a few moments, the mixture became almost translucent, with a faint shade of pale blue. Hermione then put the Professor's hair into her own flask, and the process repeated itself. It took longer for the potion to settle, and when it did, the result was an opaque liquid, almost dark purple with flecks of silver through it. It was quite beautiful, and Hermione stared at it in awe.

'Wow,' she said softly. She glanced up at his face briefly and smiled. 'Your Polyjuice is beautiful, Professor.'

He held her gaze, a look of disbelief on his face, and Hermione looked away quickly and grabbed her quill and parchment. She wrote down the colours of each potion and the time each took to be drinkable, and then she put down her quill and sat up straight.

'Together, then?' she asked him. He nodded and raised his flask to her as if toasting her honour, and they watched each other as they took the first mouthfuls. Hermione tasted the potion, noting that it wasn't sweet, but had a woody, slightly smoky taste. She tipped her head back and downed the rest of the potion, then filled the glass with water and drank that too. She looked over at the Professor and noticed that his flask was already empty, and a small smile played around his lips.

They waited for a few moments for the potion to take effect, and it was Professor Snape who started to change first. His hair started to kink at the roots and turned a shade of chestnut, and at the same time his face melted and melded. His nose shrank before her eyes, and his body twisted and bent until he was a mirror image of her, albeit drowned in his own robes. At that moment, Hermione started to feel a little strange, and pain shot through her arms and legs as they lengthened. Her consciousness was drifting, but she still had enough about her to wave her hand briefly and suddenly, she was wearing Snape's clothes, and he was wearing hers. Hermione wanted to laugh at the look of surprise on the Professor's face as he looked down at himself, but her own body was still morphing into his form. She could feel his hair hanging loosely around her face now, her bushy locks no longer there, and then her nose lengthened, completing the jigsaw. They looked at each other, and Hermione smiled.

'Well, how did it taste?' For some reason Hermione was hoping that her potion wasn't disgusting to him, but by the look on his face it hadn't been too unpleasant. He did smirk at the sound of her voice coming from his body, and the sight of the familiar twist of lips on her own face was fascinating to Hermione.

'Bubblegum is the nearest thing I can compare it to. Sweet, almost fruity,' he stated, his smooth, low voice seeming off kilter with his feminine frame. This would be dealt with later, with the Charms she planned to use, but for now it helped her to remember who they really were. Hermione smiled, quickly noting down the information he had given her, relieved that she hadn't tasted too bad after all.

'Yours was a little like smoky bacon,' she said quietly as she wrote.

'My favourite crisps,' he said flatly.

'You're joking?' Hermione flicked her eyes to him quickly, and saw the tell tale quirk of her mouth before he schooled her features into a typically blank Snape face.

Hermione glared at him, and smirked to herself when she saw her mirror image recoil and her eyes widen. He had obviously never been on the receiving end of his own ire, and Hermione resolved to have a lot of fun with that later.

'Watch it Professor, or I might have the sudden urge to take a shower,' she said firmly.

The realisation of what that would reveal to her while she was Polyjuiced brought a distinct blush to his cheeks, and Hermione started to laugh. Agreeing to the Professor's help had suddenly become a lot more fun.

Severus felt more than a bit ridiculous. He was wearing a pink, fluffy jumper, for one thing, and a pair of skin tight denim jeans that were far too clingy to be comfortable. What worried him most of all was that he was wearing Granger's underwear. He felt a perverted frisson of pleasure at the sensation of lace over his nipples and silk between his thighs, and couldn't look at her for a moment, certain his face would give him away. Once he had gathered himself he stared at Granger, sitting in front of him in his own body, and eyed the transformation with a typically critical eye. He had let himself go, it seemed. His stomach was slightly more obvious than he remembered it, and his face had an unhealthy, almost sickly pallor to it. Some of that was due to Nagini's venom and his subsequent overuse of Blood Replenishing serum, but the lines and dark shadows beneath his eyes were more telling. When had he started to look so old? His hands were thin and wiry where he had once thought them slim and dexterous, and his hair... Well, there was the evidence of the Greasy Git he still heard the first years moaning about.

Severus had never been a 'catch', as his Grandmother would have termed it, and his past obsession with Lily Evans was doomed from the start because she had never seen him as anything other than a fair-weather friend. But he had mused once that some day in the future, if he was lucky enough to have a future, that perhaps there might be a witch for him.

He looked resignedly at the saggy, greasy and sallow looking man before him, and felt another dream turn to dust.

A Single Friend

Chapter 6 of 21

Severus Snape reluctantly agrees to assist new Potions Professor Granger with a new project, with unexpected consequences.

A single rose can be my garden... a single friend, my world. ~Leo Buscaglia

Hermione closed the door to her quarters and sighed. In between their transformations and waiting to return to their own forms, something had happened and Professor Snape's mood had changed from being amusing and affable to miserable and grumpy. She had offered him the chance to browse her books to pass the time, but he had refused none too politely. She had then tried to engage him in conversation about the most recent articles in *Ars Alchemica*, but he had been dismissive and refused to be drawn. His face well, her face looked downright miserable. They had spent an uncomfortably quiet half an hour, and then he had departed as swiftly as he could once he was back to himself. He didn't even wait for her to give him his hidden bottle of Firewhiskey, and Hermione was left wondering what on earth she had done wrong. She couldn't deny the overwhelming sense of disappointment, and she wondered where this would leave them in terms of future trials. Perhaps she would have to look for another guinea pig after all, and she immediately thought of Harry. After all, the project had been his idea too, and she was doing this as much for him as for her Mastery. But Ginny was pregnant with their first, due within the month, and she couldn't rely on Harry being available when she needed him. It was a sad fact that she needed someone with no outside distractions, much like herself. She sighed again and gave herself a mental shake. She wasn't going down that train of thought tonight. The last hour with Professor Snape had been exhausting, and she still had the rest of her notes to write up before she went to bed. She steeled herself and picked up her quill again.

Severus Snape stormed into his rooms and through to his bed chamber, threw off his teaching robes and started to unbutton his coat roughly. At the sudden appearance of Winky the house elf, he let out a low growl from the back of his throat and glared, making the elf shake and her ears tremble. Her eyes widened in sudden fear, and she grabbed his robes quickly and vanished without saying a word. Severus stared angrily at the empty space that once held the elf, and let out a shuddering moan. He sat down with a resigned slump on the edge of the bed, and held his head in his hands. It wasn't the elf's fault he was in such bad temper. It wasn't even Granger's, although he was well aware that he had taken it out on her.

'Damn it all,' he muttered. He let out a long breath and continued to undress, slower this time, his fingers deftly unbuttoning his cuffs and slipping his coat off his arms. Toeing off his boots, he padded in his sock soles back into his living room, opened the now not-so-secret cupboard beside his fireplace and poured himself a large glass of Ogden's. He didn't light the fire, but stood, staring into the empty hearth as he replayed his recent behaviour towards Granger. He closed his eyes in shame. The witch had been surprisingly good company, witty and bright, and she had done her best to make the experience a pleasant one. But he was too far into his own self-pity to respond any way appropriately.

He walked to the wall and removed the curtain that covered an unnecessary mirror. He looked closely at the dark shadows beneath his eyes, his pasty skin. He ran a hand through his hair and could feel the build up of grease. He showered daily, but it seemed to make no difference and there was little else he could do with it, other than to give himself a short back and sides. The very thought of it brought back unpleasant memories of his father, who had taken great pleasure in berating his only son about his hair at every opportunity. He looked away from the mirror in disgust and downed his whisky in one long slug before heading to refill his glass. He paused after lifting the bottle, wondering if he should add 'practising alcoholic' to the list of his negative traits, and replaced the bottle slowly without adding a drop to his glass after all. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. His father had taken that route, frustrated by unemployment and disappointment in his family. Severus had almost followed in his father's inebriated footsteps, but then he supposed that being manipulated by two masters and having absolutely no-one to turn to would do that to a wizard.

Most of his problems had ended once Voldemort had been finished off, and he had slowly come to notice his distinct lack of friends. The war had afforded him scant opportunities for social interaction, and his years at Hogwarts had robbed him of his only childhood friend. He had known, deep down, that he had lost Lily as soon as she met James Potter, but to lose the potential of her love was less painful than losing her friendship. He had even been lonely within his own house, his half-blood status setting him aside for the patronising acquaintance of the Purebloods in his house whenever they were feeling gracious. Lucius Malfoy had left the country with his family in tow, and for all Severus knew he had changed his name and reinvented himself. He couldn't blame him. Any true friendship they had shared had been forever tainted by the Dark Mark, and had faded along with the tattoo they both wore. Severus had thrown himself, body and soul, into the destruction of the Dark Lord and all that he had stood for, not knowing it would take years and leave him fighting to prove his loyalty to the Light after all of his blood, sweat and bitter, stinging tears.

With sudden clarity of thought, he knew without a doubt that he had no wish for his remaining years to be friendless. He grabbed a sheet of parchment and a quill, and then called for his owl.

Hermione was just climbing into bed when the small screech owl barrelled through her Floo and then tumbled and fell, flapping, at her feet. She couldn't help but laugh at the disgruntled, almost boss-eyed look the owl gave her, and she lifted it carefully to remove the rolled parchment. She had no owl treats in her bed chamber, so she carried the owl through to her office, where she had a secret stash of Muggle chocolate. She broke off two squares, and gave one to the bird, who hooted warmly and shook his feathers back into place. Hermione smiled and scratched his head, laughing as he closed his eyes in evident pleasure. Then she unrolled the scroll, revealing Professor Snape's usually elegant writing scrawled hastily across the page.

'Granger,

Please forward me the dates of the subsequent trials forthwith if you require my services.

I am available over the weekend should you wish.

Severus Snape'

Hermione smiled. He hadn't said sorry, but she could read between the lines well enough. He still wanted to help her, and actually seemed eager to do so. Perhaps she hadn't done anything wrong after all?

She lifted a quill and wrote a short reply on the bottom of his letter, tied it back onto the leg of the owl and opened the door of her office into the dungeon corridors. She didn't approve of sending them through the Floo network just in case there was an accident. The little owl flew away swiftly, and Hermione popped the spare square of chocolate into her mouth and headed back to bed.

At breakfast the next day, Severus lingered over his toast and black coffee. He told himself he was relaxing on his weekend off, and he made a show of slowly reading that day's Prophet to explain his extended presence. His reluctance to leave finally arrived in a hurry through the staff door to the main hall, and it was clear from the unkempt state of her hair that Granger had overslept and almost missed breakfast again. He waved his hand over the place setting beside him, and as the witch slid into her seat, a large mug of tea and a bacon sandwich with ketchup appeared before her.

'How on earth did you know?' she said, unable to keep the grateful tone from her voice.

'Severus Snape. Master Spy,' he murmured, leaning slightly so that only she could hear. 'There is a clue in the title.'

He couldn't help but smirk as Granger caught his eye and giggled. He was doubly gratified when she took a bite of sandwich and sighed with pleasure. He found himself staring at her as she ate, and quickly folded the Prophet and stood to leave before he drew attention to his own desperate need for her company.

'Professor Snape,' she said, raising her voice as he stepped down from the Dias. He turned and looked at her, and she smiled at him, a twinkle in her eye. 'Don't forget, dungeons at seven.' She mimicked his arched eyebrow, and he rolled his eyes at her.

'Detention, I know,' he muttered, recalling her scrawled reply to his note the previous night. 'Five points from Gryffindor for being a cheeky witch.'

The sound of her laughter as he left the hall almost put a spring in his step.

For Hermione, the rest of Saturday seemed to drag. She spent the morning tidying up her rooms a little, and then in the Forbidden Forest to collect some fresh pine needles for the trial. The afternoon she spent reading, and then writing to Harry and Ginny. She also dropped a note to Ron, but she didn't expect to hear back from him at all. Their relationship was cool at best, but Hermione still hoped that he would get over her enough for them to find their way back to a friendship at some point. It seemed like it had taken twice as long for seven o'clock to come around, and it was only when Professor Snape finally knocked on her door that she realised just how much she had been looking forward to spending time in his company. She pulled the door open quickly and smiled as he walked straight past her without waiting for an invitation. It was becoming a habit, it seemed.

'Shall we get started?' She handed him a flask of Polyjuice potion, and grinned at the moue of distaste he gave as he swirled the sludge around lightly.

'I live for nothing else,' he murmured, but he followed her into her quarters nevertheless.

My Heart, My Pain

Chapter 7 of 21

Severus Snape reluctantly agrees to assist new Potions Professor Granger with a new project, with unexpected consequences.

"Hearts are breakable," Isabelle said. "And I think even when you heal, you're never what you were before". — Cassandra Clare, City of Fallen Angels

Over the next few weeks, Severus and Hermione met each Friday and Saturday to carry out more trials of the Polyjuice Potion. It wasn't smooth sailing. Severus was prickly, despite Hermione's best efforts. To try and help things along, she had suggested they have supper together and had asked Winky to prepare Severus's favourite foods. He had been pleasantly surprised and expressed his gratitude by sharing a rare Potions book with Hermione at the next session. Hermione had been gratified by the way things were going, but the cordiality didn't last long. Hermione had asked one too many questions, and Severus had spectacularly blown his top and Floo'd back to his own rooms before he had even changed back to himself. It had taken a heartfelt apology and a bar of Honeydukes finest before Severus gave in and let Hermione have her clothes back, and a detailed explanation to the house-elves, who had misinterpreted the sight of women's' clothing in Professor Snape's bedroom and had become overly excited at the prospect of babies being born at Hogwarts.

The turning point came one Friday after a seventh year Potions lesson between Gryffindor and Slytherin. Hermione had a relaxed teaching style with the older students, allowing conversation and discussion provided it was relevant. During this class, the subject of Severus Snape had come up. Hermione was actually surprised it hadn't been broached before. Most of the students remembered Severus as a Potions teacher, but they hadn't been involved at the front line of the war and many of the details of Severus' role had been skewed by badly researched and biased articles in the Daily Prophet that made him out to be a murderer despite the evidence against that claim. For the students, it had been a confusing time and even now, some of them didn't quite know if they could trust their Defence Against the Dark Arts professor.

Hermione was walking through the rows of cauldrons when Masie Thornton put her hand up.

'Professor Granger? Will you tell us what Professor Snape is really like?'

Most of the students were aware that the professors were working together on a secret project and it was fast becoming the new gossip. Hermione smiled knowingly, but she also saw it as a chance to tell the truth on Severus' behalf. What she hadn't known at the time was that Severus was standing right outside the door, waiting for the class to end so he could walk Hermione to her lab. He had heard every word.

'Professor Snape is actually a normal human being,' she started. There were snickers from some of the students and Hermione grinned. 'I know, it's hard to believe, isn't it? But you have to remember that before, when I was still a student and the war was starting, the Professor was in a very stressful position. Can you imagine having to spy on Voldemort and how dangerous that was?'

Hermione took in the puzzled frowns as some of the students tried to imagine what that must have been like. 'Now imagine doing that and having no-one to talk to about it. Professor Snape couldn't trust anyone, apart from Headmaster Dumbledore. And you all know what he had to do. The Headmaster was dying anyway, but he made Professor Snape promise to kill him when he demanded it of him. The only person Professor Snape had to talk to, and he asked the unthinkable of him. And afterwards, he must have felt so alone...' Hermione put her hand over her heart as her voice caught. Speaking her thoughts out loud had triggered such a feeling of heartbreak she had tears in her eyes, and so did some of the students. 'Anyway,' she said, taking a deep breath. 'Bottle your Calming Draughts and leave them on my desk. And just remember what I said. Perhaps you could remember that Professor Snape is a bigger hero than Harry Potter and treat him with the respect he deserves?'

Hermione watched as the students filed out and almost fell over a desk when Severus walked in after the last one had left.

'You heard all of that, I take it?' She smiled ruefully, blushing to her roots. He was looking at her with such disbelief, the tears that had threatened suddenly spilled, and she brushed them away with the back of her hand. 'I meant it, you know. And I think it's important that they understand.' Hermione walked up to Severus and placed her hand on his arm, squeezing slightly. 'Come on, let's go to my lab.' She walked out of the classroom, but he called her back.

'Granger... Hermione,' he said softly. 'Thank you.'

Hermione smiled and nodded, and they walked down to her quarters side by side.

Things had gone so well since that time that Severus had invited Hermione to call him by his given name, and she had started to view him as a friend. Conversation was easier, they shared many common interests, and the Polyjuice testing had become more than just that for Hermione. He still insisted on calling her Granger, but she found that she liked it and let it go. They had completed almost twenty trials so far, but this time test was proving to be the most challenging of them all.

Going by the previous trials and gradually increasing the addition of pine needles to the potion, they determined that they should be able to remain in their changed forms for approximately eight hours. They had agreed that they would stay in Hermione's rooms for the duration, and she was trying to read to pass the time. She had discovered early in the trials that Snape wore reading glasses, something she wasn't used to. But it wasn't the wire and glass spectacles that were causing her problems. For six hours she had been Polyjuiced as her former Professor, and three glasses of water later, she desperately needed to pee. In a normal situation, this wouldn't have been a problem. The person being imitated wouldn't know that his hair had been borrowed for Polyjuice, thus he wouldn't know that a stranger was manhandling his genitalia to 'point Percy at the porcelain'. This wasn't the case for Hermione. She tried to ignore it and sat with a book on her knee, crossing her legs tightly and praying to Nimue that the urge to would go away. The problem was that the more she thought about it, the more the thought persisted. She looked across the hearth at Severus Snape and coughed to get his attention. It wasn't the brightest thing she'd ever done, because the pressure on her bladder was instantly heightened.

'Severus,' she said lightly. He looked up, pushing Hermione's curls out of his face and raised his eyebrow. Hermione took a breath and cursed herself for not even thinking that this situation might arise. 'I really need to pee.' she said in a rush.

The colour drained from his face, and he scowled at her furiously. 'This is why you need an antidote, Granger. I shall accompany you.'

'What?! No way! I can't... GO, with you in there!' Hermione felt herself blushing brightly. 'I'll wear gloves if it makes you feel better!'

Severus glared at her, and Hermione stood suddenly, her agitation obvious. 'Fine! But if you look, I will hex you from here to Durmstrang.'

Hermione all but ran to her bedroom and into the adjoining bathroom, immediately grappling with the fly of Snape's trousers. She groaned in frustration.

'Who has buttons on their fly?' she said angrily, fumbling as fast as she could to open them. Finally, she felt a chilly breeze, and stopped suddenly in shock. Snape wasn't wearing any underwear, and his meat and two veg were very aware of the cooler air circulating. Unfortunately, so was Hermione and the need to use the toilet overrode all rational thought, including any promise of wearing gloves. She hastily grabbed at Snape's cock and tried to aim it into the toilet bowl. She refused to look down, told herself that holding Professor Snape's cock in her hand was an everyday occurrence, and then let go with a sigh. The feeling of peeing through male genitalia was strange and alien, and to Hermione's dismay, the more urgent the stream, the seemingly harder it was to control. Without warning, Snape's cock jumped slightly upwards and pee hit the lid of the toilet and splashed back at her. She was so shocked, she let go but didn't stop the flow, and she cried in dismay as the stream of urine spurted around the toilet and then slowed to lesser flow all the way down Snape's trouser leg. She was too late, so she just sighed and waited for it to stop. Shuffling over to the sink, she washed her hands and then used her wand to clean up the mess and Scourgify Snape's trousers as best she could. She sighed as she fastened the fly, and then looked in the mirror. Her face Snape's face looked tired and drawn, and she unconsciously ran her fingers through his hair, something she had been dying to do. It was greasiest at the roots, but softer and silkier than she had imagined. She wondered if her own shampoo would help to counteract the grease, but resolved that the hair situation was a discussion for another day. With a deep breath, she steeled herself and opened the bathroom door.

Severus scowled down at the page he was trying to read and tried hard not to think about what was going on in the bathroom. In her haste, Granger had left the bed chamber door wide open, and he gave in to the urge to explore in an attempt at distraction. He stood, shaking Granger's curls from his eyes, and walked over and leant against the door jamb. He didn't mind curiosity but stepping into the room was going too far, even for an off-duty Slytherin spy. He scanned the room quickly, noticing that the bed was neat and tidy and that she had obviously done this herself rather than leaving it to the house elves. He also noticed that the counterpane was the one he used to use on this same bed, a dark green candlewick that had once belonged to his Grandmother. It was old and threadbare, and held no sentimental significance to him, but why Granger had decided to hang onto it baffled him somewhat. On the bedside cabinet was a stack of books, and thanks to Granger's perfect eyesight he could read from here that they were romantic novels of the Muggle variety. He shook his head in disbelief. Granger didn't strike him as the romantic type, and he wondered why she would fill her head with such clap-trap. He didn't have time to peruse the room further. The bathroom door suddenly opened, and rather than scurry back to his chair like a bad child, he stood straight and glared at the carbon copy of himself.

'What the hell were you doing in there?' he demanded.

'Calm down Severus, I didn't look. Anyway, what makes you think I haven't seen a penis before?' Granger as Snape arched a perfect eyebrow and walked past him with what looked suspiciously like his own smirk on her face.

Severus felt his stomach sink. He hadn't been as foolish to assume Granger was an innocent virgin, but he didn't want to dwell on such matters now that they had become friends, or whatever this was. Unfortunately, his very male brain had formed an lewd but gratifying image of Granger's hand around some unknown but throbbing, erect phallus, and unbidden, he felt himself blush combined with a twinge of something between his legs. Damn Granger and her female physiology. Blushing was something he didn't do, but in this body, he was sure that his innermost feelings were being played out all over his face. She had turned him into a Gryffindor.

He turned with as much dignity he could possess and walked back to his chair. He lifted his book to cover his face and made a pact not to speak to her until he was back in his own body. He tried to focus on his book, but all he could think about was Granger's previous sexual experiences, and his imagination ran riot. He guessed that it was Weasley, given the amount of time they had spent cosied up together in a tent during the war, and he squeezed his eyes shut in a bid to block out the image. He couldn't understand why it bothered him so much, apart from the fact that Granger should never waste herself on someone with such a lack of intelligence. But then, he supposed they could have spent most of their time shagging rather than talking. No wonder she got bored with him. Or...

'Are you still in touch with Weasley?' he asked suddenly. His own face fell as he stared at the shock on Grangers face and waited for the fall out.

Hermione stared in surprise. What on earth had prompted such a question, and from Severus of all people?

'I am friends with all of the Weasley's, but I suppose you mean Ron?' she replied ruefully. She shrugged and decided to answer Severus truthfully, even though she rather thought it was none of his business. They hadn't spoken about their lives beyond Hogwarts at all before this. 'I try and stay in touch. He doesn't. We had a misunderstanding, after the ball to celebrate the end of the war.' Hermione looked away and closed her eyes as the memory threatened to overtake her emotions.

'I apologise,' Severus said softly. 'I didn't mean to pry, but I heard you speak about Potter and his wife to Filius, and I was curious when you didn't mention the third wheel. I shouldn't have asked.'

'No,' Hermione sighed. 'It's fine. I should talk about it to someone, really. Not even Harry knows the truth of it. Ron and I... we were together for a while. You probably already know that. I had started to realise it was a mistake almost as soon as it started, because although we were friends, the only thing we had in common was Hogwarts and fighting the war. After that, our differences were so obvious even Neville could see we were wrong together. But Ron didn't see it. I tried to let him down lightly, drop hints...' she paused, and let out a long, slow breath. 'Ron had too much to drink at the ball, and tried to force himself on me. I had to Stupefy him,' she whispered. 'He felt terrible the next day, kept apologising and promising never to do it again. But I could never trust him, afterwards. I moved out of the Burrow and back in my parents' house the same day, and he hasn't spoken to me since.'

Hermione stopped talking and looked up at Severus. There was a look on steel in his eyes and his mouth was set in a thin, determined line. Hermione looked at him curiously and wondered if this was the look she wore when she felt someone had wronged a person she cared about. She gave him a small smile, grateful that he was angry on her behalf, and unthinking, she reached across and took a hold of his hand.

'I'm fine, Severus. Really,' she said, giving his hand a soft squeeze.

Severus stared at their hands for a moment, and then took hers more firmly in his. He valiantly fought the urge to pull her close and hold her, to take away the hurt she was feeling.

'You deserve better, Hermione,' he said quietly. He rather thought that he would like to be the man she deserved, and had an urge to make himself into someone worthy of her affections. He wished that he could fix everything for her. This witch had offered him friendship, and she had shared things with him that she hadn't even shared with Harry Potter. She was his bright light at the end of the tunnel, and now he was staring to see it. He deliberately ignored the voice in his head that was telling him not to confuse Hermione with Lily.

He was so far into his own thoughts that he felt rather than saw Hermione let go of his hand, and realised that they were both transforming back to themselves and that today's trial was finally over. Hermione waved her hand at the right moment, swapping their clothes, and suddenly, he was staring into Hermione's lovely face again. There were tears pricking her eyes, and it was clear she wanted to hide them from him. She stood then, all business.

'I should write up my notes and then get to bed. Thank you for your help, Severus. I'm sure you must have had better things to do than hang around here all night.'

Severus stood, aware that he was being dismissed and not knowing quite what to say. His eyes narrowed as he followed her through the lab and he paused as she opened the door, but refused to meet his gaze. He had never seen the witch act like this around him, but it was clear he was no longer wanted.

'Goodnight, Hermione,' he muttered as he left. He suddenly felt wrong footed, and his resolve to win the witch for his own crumbled at his feet. It was a ridiculous notion to think that just because she opened her heart to him and chose to touch him that her feelings would stretch any further. He was just in the right place at the right time, a listening ear.

He would do well to remember that, if he wanted to keep his heart in one piece.

8. Fear

Chapter 8 of 21

Severus Snape reluctantly agrees to assist new Potions Professor Granger with a new project, with unexpected consequences.

A/N: Thanks for the kind reviews everyone xx

We fear things in proportion to our ignorance of them. ~ Christian Nestell Bovee

Rather than write up her notes, Hermione Granger sat in her armchair by the dwindling fire and had a damn good cry. For some time now she had been hiding her feelings about almost everything, but the small show of concern from Severus had demolished her carefully constructed defences. That it was him, of all people, made Hermione cry all the more. Her feelings for him had changed at some point from just friendship to something more, and quite what she was going to do with that she had no idea. She sniffed in a very unladylike way and rubbed her eyes with the cuff of her sweater. It was futile exercise, because the more she thought about everything, the more tears she shed.

Ever since the war, Hermione had practised the art of being strong. On the surface, she was still the same person, the brightest witch of the age, a bookish, curly-headed know-it-all. Only Hermione knew that this was just for show. She played her part well, even convincing Minerva that teaching was all she had ever wanted to do. That was a lie, just like the rest of her life. She had accepted the post to return to Hogwarts because it was the only place that she felt safe. The real Hermione Granger was a mess, scared of being at the end of someone else's wand, frightened beyond belief of the wizarding world beyond Hogwarts gates, and addicted to Dreamless Sleep. She saw Death Eaters around every corner, worried constantly about her parents, was desperately jealous of Harry Potter even though she wanted to just be happy for him, and she missed Ron, with his stupid grin and daft sense of humour and ready smile. She didn't love him not in the way she should have done but she missed his friendship and the fact that with him, she didn't need to make any effort. She could just be herself, and he would just be himself, and it was easy and safe. Somewhere down the line, Hermione had lost her way.

With a huff of frustration, Hermione sat up and rubbed her eyes for the final time. Taking a deep breath, she called for Winky.

'Miss? You is asking for Winky?' The small elf looked at Hermione with a wary gaze, still not quite sure what to make of the Muggle witch. Hermione felt a bubble of laughter and the strange look Winky gave her, and couldn't help but grin at her.

'Winky, please could you bring me a large mug of hot chocolate? I'll be in the bed chamber.' Hermione stood as the elf disappeared. Her notes would have to wait until tomorrow. From her top drawer she pulled out a small phial of Dreamless Sleep, thanked Winky for the hot chocolate and added the potion to it. Climbing into bed, she pulled the covers up over her shoulders and inhaled the familiar woody scent of Severus Snape that seemed to cling to the bedspread. Normally, it would make her feel safe and happy. Tonight, she just felt lonely. She drank her chocolate, and within moments she fell asleep.

Hermione didn't notice that Winky had been watching her from the doorway with a worried frown on her face.

Severus took breakfast in his own rooms the next day. He had spent a restless night pondering his feelings for Hermione, and when he did finally sleep, his dreams had been full of fragmented snatches of conversations, fantasy imaginings of frantic kisses, and then Hermione's face transforming into Lily Potter's. It had done nothing to sweeten his mood, and as he finished his coffee, he decided to leave the castle for the day. It was the only way he could guarantee not bumping into her.

Severus was not a romantic man. He had never harboured desires of a wife and family, not even with Lily. His parents' relationship had been so destructive that he had decided a long time ago that marriage was not for him. It had taken Lucius and Narcissa to show him that not all marriages were violent and soulless, that there could be love and passion that stood the tests placed upon it. What he felt for Lily had been something else, not a love that leads to marriage. At one point, when his teenage hormones were rampaging, he had taken a notion that perhaps he did feel something like that love for Lily. It was also true that when she finally fell for James Potter, the jealousy that raged within him had coloured his view of the world and forced his hand into taking the Dark Mark, tainting his life forever. That he was now entertaining such thoughts about his former student was baffling to him, and he couldn't allow his mind to dwell on what would never be. He had suffered enough.

Severus grabbed his thick, woollen travelling cloak and slipped out of his rooms and silently along the corridor. He paused before a darkly framed portrait and nodded at Phineas Nigellus as he passed.

'Headmaster,' he said softly. He was about to walk on, but was stopped mid-stride.

'Headmaster,' Phineas replied. 'You would do well to talk with the elf on your return.'

Severus sighed. Phineas insisted on referring to him by his former title, forcing Severus to remember that dark time in his life, but he held far too much respect for his fellow Slytherin to correct him on it. He frowned slightly.

'You are referring to Winky?' he asked.

'Yes. The drunken one.' Phineas smiled at him slightly, and then slipped from his frame. Severus stared at the empty space as he tried to fathom what Phineas was implying. Winky had stopped drinking Butterbeer when Severus had enlisted her service to him personally during his tenure as Headmaster. Whatever had caused the elf to take solace in drink was really none of his business, but if Phineas had thought it important enough to mention, then so be it. Resolving to see to it later, he continued down

the hall and then down the staircase to a statue of the goddess Artemis. He waved his hand before her, and the plinth she stood on moved silently aside, revealing a passage that descended sharply and came out into a hidden cave beside the Whomping Willow. As he left the cave at the other end, Severus was forced to ruefully admit that being Headmaster did have its uses. The castle had given up all of its secrets to him, and he carried them with him to this day.

He had been putting off today's task for some time, but if ever he were in need of a distraction it was now and so with a sharp twist, Severus Snape Apparated to Spinner's End. The house looked almost derelict. The windows had been boarded up for years, a useful deterrent to any Muggle who might think about calling. There was very little in the house, but he knew that the land it sat on was worth a small fortune in Muggle terms, and he had no use for the house now. Someday he would purchase a house for himself, but in the meantime he would change his sterling into Galleons and allow it to gather interest at Gringotts.

At the front door he felt his wards shift to allow him access, and he stepped into the gloomy hallway and sneezed violently as the disturbed dust motes swirled around. He grabbed his wand and placed a Shield Charm around his person before venturing around the rest of the house. He boxed the books he wanted to keep, threw the remaining items in his wardrobe into his old Hogwarts trunk that still sat at the end of his old bed, and rescued his mother's blue china teapot from the kitchen. He vanished everything else, shrank his trunk and slipped it and the boxes into the pockets of his travelling cloak. Once the house was totally bereft of anything, he took his time to dismantle the wards that had kept him safe for so many years. They were complex and layered, and by the time he was finished he was exhausted. He would write to the estate agent from Hogwarts on his return, and hopeful that he would get a good price, he left the house without a glance. There were no sentimental feelings, no tears of regret. It was just bricks and mortar. Any memories they had harboured had long since been siphoned off into small glass vials, and they no longer haunted him.

His last stop before leaving his old home was at the playground where he had first seen Lily Evans. It had changed beyond recognition, the swings and slide replaced with brighter, modern versions, surrounded by garishly yellow railings. He slowed to look around and saw a group of local boys chatting up three girls on the replaced swings. They were laughing, and one girl with auburn hair was smiling shyly at the boy who was talking to her with a confidence Severus would never have possessed at that age. He was a different person now and nothing he could do would change that. With a frown, he turned and walked to his apparition point, wondering how much different his life would have been had he been born to different parents.

Hermione was in the Astronomy Tower, looking towards the castle gates. She had spent the best part of her day looking for Severus, and finally resorted to using the Marauder's Map. She hated the thought of spying on him, and even having the map in her possession hadn't been her idea. Harry had insisted she take it when she returned to teach, telling her that it was no use to him. She had thought it might give her an added sense of security if she knew who was just around the next corner. But when she had looked at the map and realised that Severus was not in the castle, her heart fell. There was so much about him that she didn't know, of course. He was a very private man after all. But just knowing that he was in the castle somewhere made her feel safe. His absence now had the opposite effect, and she stood, rigid with irrational panic, praying for his swift return and knowing that her fear was ridiculous and unfounded.

She saw a brief movement from the corner of her eye, and shifted her gaze towards the Whomping Willow. There was nothing there, but she could have sworn she had seen something. Pulling out the map again, she scanned it carefully, willing the name of Severus Snape to swim up from the page. She watched, and then suddenly, it was there in the corridor two floors down from his rooms. Hermione sighed with relief and two fat tears fell down her cheeks. She brushed them away, feeling stupid, and watched as Severus walked, not to his rooms, but down to the kitchens. It was of no matter. Hermione had no intention of seeing him. But he was home safe, and now she was safe, and everything was alright again.

Severus entered the kitchens and was immediately surrounded by eager house-elves. He couldn't help but laugh. For a long time they had been his only companions as a student, and they had always welcomed his late night visits to the kitchens, plying him with pumpkin juice and slices of apple pie with cream, his favourite. Then later, as a Potions Master, they had treated him reverently, calling him Master Snape instead of Master Severus. When he became Headmaster, they had almost wet themselves with happiness. For some reason, Severus Snape had the oddest and most loyal group of allies, and he never once took their friendship for granted.

'I need to speak with Winky,' he said quietly. He was met with a sea of sad eyes, and the elves parted to allow him to walk through to the pantry where he knew Winky slept. There, in a dark corner, Winky was sleeping soundly, four empty bottles of Butterbeer beside her.

'Carlos,' Severus called. An older male elf came forward and nodded.

'Here, Headmaster Snape,' he murmured.

'Please take Winky to my rooms and stay with her until I get there.' Severus left the kitchens swiftly, quickly thanking the elves before he went. When he arrived in his rooms ten minutes later, Carlos had laid Winky on the sofa and was hovering, his eyes full of relief as Severus walked through the door.

'I shall have to give her a sobering potion, Carlos. Do I have your agreement?'

Severus knew that house-elves had different views about the ways of wizards and they didn't all agree to the use of wizard magic on an elf. But Carlos trusted Severus and nodded emphatically. The Headmaster had cured Winky before and would do so again. Severus gathered a small stoppered bottle from a locked cupboard, and then knelt beside Winky, giving her small drops of the potion and waiting for it to take effect. Slowly, the elf roused and blinked up into the concerned faces of Carlos and her Master. With a wail, she jumped up, but Severus was ready and grabbed both of her hands firmly to stop her running away.

'Winky, you will do exactly what I say or you shall be given clothes, am I clear?' Severus spoke softly but firmly, and felt more than a twinge of guilt as tears welled up in Winky's eyes.

'Yes sir,' she mumbled miserably. 'Winky has been a bad elf, Headmaster sir.'

'Have you indeed?' Severus raised an eyebrow and wondered at the elf's definition of 'bad,' but he let it go. Winky hadn't turned to drink for no reason, and he had to get the truth from her. 'Forget about the Butterbeer, Winky. It is of no matter. What I must know is why you are drinking again?'

Winky's lower lip trembled slightly, and tears dripped down her face an off the end of her pointed nose. 'Winky has seen something bad, very bad. Winky thinks that He Who Shall Not Be Named is still among us, Headmaster sir.'

Severus felt himself blanch at her words. To hear his worst fears spoken by the elf almost made him shout out in horror, but he took a breath to calm himself and spoke with far more confidence than he actually felt.

'Tell me what you saw, Winky, if you can please?'

'Winky saw the Headmaster's mistress taking the No Dreams magic potion, just like the Headmaster did when the wizards was all fighting. When the mistress doesn't take it she is screaming and crying all of the time and calling out the Headmaster's name. You is never having screaming dreams now, Headmaster sir. But Mistress Hermione is having them all of the time. Winky is scared that she is possessed by the Dark Lord!'

Winky shouted the last dramatically, and Severus allowed Carlos to comfort her before taking her back to the kitchens. Severus collapsed onto the sofa and ran his trembling hand through his hair. Winky had scared the living daylights out of him, just because Granger was having nightmares. But the fact she had turned to Butterbeer in fear was not acceptable. His stomach sank. He would have to speak to Hermione, but the way he had departed from her the last time didn't give him much hope that she would welcome his intrusion into something so personal. Never the less, he was worried about her. He had a feeling there was a lot more going on than he knew.

Drink

Chapter 9 of 21

Severus Snape reluctantly agrees to assist new Potions Professor Granger with a new project, with unexpected consequences.

A/N: Yay!! It's update day... Enjoy the fireworks!

To her own heart, which was shaped exactly like a valentine, there came a wing like palpitation, a delicate exigency, and all the fragrance of all the flowery springtime love affairs that ever were seemed waiting for them in the whisky bottle. ~ Jean Stafford, The Collected Stories of Jean Stafford

Hermione managed to get to breakfast at in the Great Hall on time for once, and she sat down beside Severus with a small smile on her face.

'Hello Severus,' she said quietly. 'I didn't see you around yesterday.'

Severus nodded in her direction. 'I was out of the castle all day.'

Hermione felt a twinge in her stomach when she realised that he was in no mood for conversation and that more than that, his previous good humour with her seemed to have vanished. She looked at him out of the corner of her eye. His hair looked worse than she had seen it in a while, and he looked even more tired than she herself felt. He was staring out at the students with a familiar scowl on his face, and Hermione worried her bottom lip with her teeth before trying again.

'I was hoping to start the next phase of the trial on Friday, if you are free?' Hermione felt him tense at her words, and she sighed deeply. She should have known there tentative friendship would crumble at the first sign of weakness on her part. 'Obviously, if you've changed your mind I could approach someone else?'

'Did I say I had changed my mind?' Severus looked at her with a steely gaze and his jaw clenched.

'No, but... I just thought.... Well, never mind then.' Hermione felt tears pricking her eyes at his cold response to her. There was nothing of her friend Severus in that gaze, but all of Professor Snape. Suddenly Hermione found she wasn't hungry, so she pushed her plate away and stood to leave.

'Goodbye, then,' she said miserably. Severus just looked at her blankly and didn't reply, so she walked away as fast as she could, hoping against all hope that he couldn't see how upset she was. With a heavy heart, she hurried down to the dungeons and into the Potions classroom.

There were days when Hermione didn't feel at all confident in her ability to teach, days when she felt was too young and should still be sitting facing her Professors. Today was going to be one of those days, and she opened the drawer of her desk and withdrew a Calming Draught, swallowing a good mouthful. She felt the effects almost immediately. She had created the potion herself, making it stronger and longer lasting. If she was honest with herself, she knew full well that she was immune to the regular strength potion due to overdosing herself with it.

She put the instructions for today's potion on the board, and stared at the rows of potions benches before her. In her minds eye, she could see herself, Harry and Ron in their usual places. Her face would have been alert and eager to learn, whereas Harry would be stony and most of the time furious with Snape even before he had opened his mouth to speak. Ron would just try and keep his head down and try to get through the lesson as quickly as possible, without drawing attention to himself. Hermione wondered how her own students viewed her, and if she inspired any of them with her teachings the way that Severus had inspired her. It was one of the things she would probably never know.

A knock at the door pulled her out of her daydream, and she smiled with a confidence she didn't feel when Phoebe Gilroy entered the room.

'Good Morning Professor,' Phoebe said as she took her seat. Seeing that her student was early, Hermione took the opportunity to talk with her before everyone else arrived.

'Hello, Phoebe. Did you get chance to discuss the Healer apprenticeship with your father?' Hermione watched as Phoebe took her potions text book from her bag, obviously stalling before answering.

'I'm going to Salem, Professor. My father feels it is for the best.' Phoebe looked at Hermione, and she could see the disappointment and sadness in the girls' face.

'Oh dear. Perhaps if I wrote to him...' she started.

'No!' Phoebe exclaimed, a look of horror on her face. Hermione stared at her in shock as the reality of the situation hit her. Gaius Gilroy would not allow his precious Slytherin pure-blood daughter to be influenced in any way by her Mudblood Potions teacher, even if it was for her own betterment. Hermione felt her anger bubble up, and she turned away from Phoebe briskly as the rest of her students filed into their seats. It wasn't Phoebe's fault, Hermione knew that, but her temper flared at the thought of such an outdated way of thinking damaging the potential of such a gifted student.

'Quiet everyone!' Hermione raised her voice, something she rarely did, and her students looked up at her warily. 'Instructions are on the board. Get on with it,' she said, her voice harsh. She resolved to seek out the Head of Slytherin House at the earliest opportunity and tell him exactly what she thought of Phoebe Gilroy's admirable parentage.

Severus wasn't fairing much better in his first class of the day, Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw first years. He had set them a test but allowed them to refer to their text books for reference, and the room was filled with the sounds of scratching quills and pages being turned. He sat behind the desk, giving the semblance of concentration. It was trick he had learned during the Dark Lord's revels, to remain calm and still while his thoughts ran riot, with no-one any the wiser.

He was feeling guilty at the way he had treated Hermione at breakfast, and his stomach was roiling with it. It wasn't her fault that he had been so cool towards her, and he hadn't meant to take his bad mood out on her the way that he had. Spending time in Spinner's End and then dealing with Winky had triggered off a familiar nightmare, and he hadn't been able to shake the sense of dread afterwards. He wished that communication between them was smoother, that they could talk in the easy way she did with Harry Potter.

The reality, which had hit him as soon as the witch had scurried away, was that he had grown to care for her far more than he had realised. He couldn't call it love, but he knew that it had the potential to be, and now he had hurt her and was feeling like the total shit that he was. He wanted to apologise, to grovel at her feet and beg her to not turn away from him as Lily had done. He didn't find it easy, dealing with emotions, and he lacked experience with relationships. Communicating with women really wasn't his strong point, and although he knew he had had treated her badly, he had no idea how to make things right again.

He focussed his attention on the class, and noticed a Hufflepuff girl with her hand raised.

'Yes, Miss Carson?' He stood and pulled his frock coat down smartly before walking over to the witch. The girl started to tremble under his gaze, and he mentally sighed. His reputation preceded him still, and he wondered if there would ever be a day that he would just be seen as a Professor and not a former Death Eater.

'Sorry, Professor,' Sally Carson said quietly. 'I don't feel well.' She cast her eyes down to study the toes of his boots.

'Go to Madame Pomfrey, child. You may return after supper tonight to complete your test.' He tried to inject kindness into his words, and as the girl looked up at him with grateful eyes, he felt a tingle of warmth. He stood aside to let her pass by, and heard her whisper a soft thank you as she passed. Heartened, he walked slowly down the rows of desks to the bottom of the classroom and marvelled at how a simple word of thanks had made his heart feel suddenly lighter. Perhaps apologising to Hermione would be as easy. He walked back to his desk and checked the time, then turned to the class.

'Tests on my desk. You may leave. Quietly,' he added, wincing at the sudden scrape of chairs on the wooden floor. As he went to close the door on the last student to leave, he saw Hermione walking towards him, her face full of fury. He braced himself for the storm, thinking he was about to get his just desserts and not blaming her one bit.

'Can I speak with you, Professor Snape? It is a school matter,' she said firmly, as if speaking to him about anything else was the last thing she wanted. Severus felt himself shrinking beneath her gaze and ushered her in, closing the door to the curious gaze of students walking past.

'What can I do for you, Professor Granger?' Severus fought to keep his face blank and clasped his hands behind his back to stop himself from reaching for her. Her hair had come loose from its ponytail, and he itched to tuck the stray curls behind her ear. Her eyes flashed with anger, and she took a breath before letting rip.

'Gaius Gilroy is a total bastard, Severus!' Hermione spat at him. 'I managed to secure a fantastic opportunity for Phoebe with Augustus Pye, but because I suggested it, because the idea came from her Mudblood Professor, he won't even entertain it! Honestly, he doesn't even care what the girl wants, and Severus, she is so talented, so skilled. She deserves so much better!'

Severus crossed his arms and leant against his desk as he watched Hermione pace and shout in front of him. Her breathing was laboured by the sheer force of her temper, causing her breasts to rise and fall with each breath. Her robes flared as she walked, almost rivalling his own, cheeks held two, rosy pink spots, and her eyes sparked as she vented on behalf of her student. Severus imagined her passion in the throes of orgasm as he watched her, and felt the urge to grab her and kiss her to shut her up. He settled on letting out a small chuckle instead, and immediately realised it was the wrong thing to do. Hermione turned and started towards him, her eyes narrowed.

'Something amusing you, Snape? I suppose you think I'm getting my comeuppance, don't you? I mean, how dare Hermione Granger, Mudblood witch and friend of the always despised Harry Potter think she has the right to teach Slytherins!'

'Hermione,' Severus tried to interrupt her, holding up his hand to stop her and failing.

'No. I've had enough. You don't like me. I get it. But surely even you can see that Phoebe deserves this chance? Or perhaps I was wrong about you and you still uphold the Dark Lord's beliefs after all?'

Severus blanched at her words and reeled back as if struck. Suddenly he saw himself in her eyes, still a Death Eater and not to be trusted. He felt himself shudder at the coldness that ran through him, her words chilling him as she cut him to the quick.

'You forget yourself, Professor. I will consider Miss Gilroy's situation, and I will thank you to get out of my classroom.' Severus turned, his cheeks burning at her words and waited for the door to close behind her.

'Severus, I'm sorry... I didn't mean that, I didn't,' Hermione whispered, her voice trembling.

'I have a class in two minutes. Just leave,' he muttered. He sat in his chair and pointedly ignored her, and was grateful when his next students arrived and left her no choice but to go. He sensed her eyes on him as she left, and he waved his hand to close the door on her without looking up.

Hermione felt the flutter of nerves as she approached the door to Severus' quarters. She clutched his old bottle of Ogden's in her hand and hoped he would accept it as a peace offering, even if it had been his Firewhiskey to begin with.

He hadn't appeared for lunch or dinner in the Great Hall, and Hermione couldn't blame him. What she had said was rude and unforgivable, and she really hadn't meant it. She desperately wanted him to take her seriously, to not treat her like a student. He had laughed at her, but that was not an excuse for her words. She didn't understand what was wrong with her. She knew exactly what Severus' role had been during the war, and the huge sacrifices he had made. Hermione had such respect for him and had grown to care for Severus in a way she hadn't even begun to unravel, and she would never knowingly hurt him. She just had to make him believe that.

Hermione smoothed down her white shirt, then ran her hand subconsciously over the back of her hair in a vain attempt to tame it, and then knocked firmly on the door. She waited a moment and was about to knock again when the door was wrenched open. Severus looked dishevelled, his frock coat open to reveal a white shirt, unbuttoned at the neck and giving a glimpse of pale, smooth skin. His hair was lank and seemed greasier than ever, and Hermione caught a whiff of whisky on his breath as he grunted at her.

'What do you want now?' he snapped, blocking the doorway and not letting her get a toe over the threshold.

'Please, Severus. I want to apologise. Can we talk?' Hermione looked up at him with pleading eyes, but his eyes darkened and he took a step closer. She wasn't going to allow him to intimidate her now she had come so far, so she stood her ground and stared him out, hoping he couldn't tell that her knees wanted to give way.

'I do not want your apology, Granger. Just leave me be,' he muttered. He stepped backwards and made to close the door, but Hermione could sense the fight had gone from his words and decided to use a little Slytherin in her approach.

'If that's what you want, Severus, I'll just go and drink this by myself,' she said quietly, lifting the bottle of Ogden's to his view. 'Of course, if I drink the whole bottle I might have a few problems teaching the Slytherin third years' tomorrow morning.'

Hermione held his gaze, and was about to walk away when she saw him give in.

'Don't be ridiculous, witch. And if I'm not mistaken that bottle is mine anyway. Come in, if you must.' Severus stepped aside, and Hermione felt her stomach flip over at her victory. She hadn't thought it would be so easy.

She walked into Severus' quarters and realised immediately why he had wanted to live here instead of the dungeon. The room living room was spacious and bright, the walls painted with a pale stone colour that worked as a backdrop to the comfortable furnishings. An ornate rug sat before the hearth, surrounded by a comfortable-looking brown sofa and two matching armchairs. At the opposite side of the room a large, stained glass window looked out over the lake and beyond that the Forbidden Forest. She almost jumped when Severus spoke in her ear.

'Jealous, Granger?'

She turned and glared at him for startling her, but laughed when he raised his trademark eyebrow and grabbed the bottle from her hand.

'Glasses are on the table beside the fire,' he murmured.

Hermione smiled at him and went to collect two glasses. When she turned back, the bottle was on the table in front of the sofa and Severus was nowhere to be seen. Shrugging, she sat on the sofa and poured a small measure of firewhisky for herself and a larger one for Severus. She lifted her glass and swirled the liquid, wondering where he had gone to in such a hurry. Her question was immediately answered when he stepped out of what she assumed was his bedroom, dressed in a black t-shirt rather than his shirt and frock coat. The fabric of the t-shirt clung to his torso as he walked, and she found herself transfixed by the broadness of his shoulders and the sliver of flesh that appeared when he bent to lift his glass and the t-shirt rode up his back slightly. Hermione looked away quickly and took a slug of her drink to distract herself. Unfortunately she was not used to drinking neat spirits, and the whisky almost choked her as she swallowed. She started to cough, and then splutter, until she felt a warm hand on her shoulder and took the glass of water Severus held for her. She drank the cool liquid and gave him a rueful grin, trying hard not to sigh at the loss as he removed his hand.

'Thanks. Making a good showing so far, aren't I?' Hermione put the two glasses down and sat rubbing her legs in anticipation of what she needed to say.

'You should mix a little water with it,' he said, gesturing at the drinks. Hermione watched as he slumped into the chair beside her and stretched his long legs out before him, crossing his sock-covered feet at the ankles.

'I am so, so sorry for what I said to you this morning, Severus. You know that I didn't mean it, don't you?' Hermione looked at him as he sipped his whisky and closed his eyes. It was always so hard to tell what he was thinking.

'You should engage your brain before you shoot your mouth off,' he said. 'I have had worse said to me, Granger, and I have no energy left in me to fight.' He opened his eyes and looked at her. 'We are and have always been on the same side.'

Hermione laughed in relief, and raised her glass at him. 'You and me against the bad guys,' she said, then swallowed the rest of her now diluted firewhisky.

'Indeed,' he murmured in agreement. He leaned forward and shoved the bottle in her direction, and Hermione grabbed it with a grin.

Understanding

Chapter 10 of 21

Severus Snape reluctantly agrees to assist new Potions Professor Granger with a new project, with unexpected consequences.

A/N: Don't look now, but Severus and Hermione are in bed together!

A friend should be one in whose understanding and virtue we can equally confide, and whose opinion we can value at once for its justness and its sincerity ~ Robert Hall

Severus rolled over in his bed and groaned. His head felt like one hundred house elves were dancing inside with hobnail boots on their feet, and his mouth tasted like dragon dung. He ran his hand over his face, noting the slight growth of stubble on his chin, and then he chanced to open one eye to the clock beside his bed. However, instead of his clock, his gaze was met with the sleeping face of Hermione Granger and her out of control mop of hair.

'Granger,' he growled lowly. 'What the fuck are you doing in my bed?' He couldn't even summon a smirk at the shock on her face as she startled out of sleep.

'I was too pissed to get back to the dungeons in one piece, and your bed was nice and comfy. Shit,' she muttered. 'My head hurts.'

Severus couldn't help but grin at that. He had tried to insist that she slow down her drinking, but instead, Hermione had matched him drink for drink. If he was feeling rosey, he could well imagine how she was feeling. He moaned in pain when Hermione suddenly leapt from the bed and ran into his bathroom, and sniggered to himself as she started to retch into the toilet. Ruefully realising that he really should fix her, he almost called for Winky, but remembered at the last minute just how the elf felt about Hermione at the moment. He called for Carlos instead.

'We need two blue potions and a pink one, Carlos. Actually, make that three blue. Quickly please,' he said quietly. He glanced at the clock and saw they still had two hours before classes, and he snuggled back down under the covers and closed his eyes again. His dozing was ruined almost immediately when he felt the covers lifting and then being pulled from around his shoulders.

'Granger, what are you doing back in my bed?' he muttered half-heartedly. Not that he would have minded her being in his bed, but not when he felt like he'd been floored by a hippogriff and her breath smelled of vomit.

'Shut up, Snape. It's bloody freezing and I feel like death, thanks to you.' Hermione snuggled under the covers and wriggled her legs to get comfortable, and her feet landed on her bed mates. Rather than move them, she rubbed them up and down on the top of his feet.

'Fucking hell, Hermione. Your feet are cold.' Severus yanked his feet away and muttered a warming charm.

'Thank you,' she said gratefully. 'I should have done that instead.'

'Did you forget you're a witch?' he asked. He didn't expect her to turn around and glare at him in response, but the combination of unruly hair and indignation on her face did for him. He started to laugh at the ridiculous situation they were in, and to his utter relief, Hermione joined in. He caught her eye, and grinned at her broadly as tears ran down her face, followed by her hands clutching at her head.

'Oh god, Severus. Don't make me laugh, it hurts too much.' Hermione closed her eyes and scrunched up her face, and Severus was shocked to realise that even in her hung-over state he found her more than endearing. His musing was interrupted by the return of Carlos, and he held his hand over the covers and Accio'd the potions to him.

'My thanks, Carlos. Before you go, however. This is not what it appears to be,' he said, vaguely waving a hand between himself and Hermione. 'I trust you not to gossip about this.' Carlos grinned and then disappeared, and Severus rolled his eyes. He sat himself up in his bed and the covers fell to his waist as he swallowed a blue potion and then nudged Hermione with his foot.

'Here. Take these,' he said. 'You'll feel better and then I'll get some breakfast sent up. It might be prudent for you to Floo to your quarters, too. It wouldn't do your reputation any good to be seen leaving my rooms so early in the day.'

He watched as Hermione gingerly sat upright and swallowed the potions gratefully. Her white shirt was askew, and he caught a glimpse of lacy bra where a button had

popped open. His body responded appropriately and he shifted sideways to cover his growing erection with the covers. Unfortunately he wasn't quite subtle enough, and as the potions did the trick, Hermione stared at him in sudden realisation.

'Severus! Are you naked?' she asked, her voice rising.

'It's my bed. I always sleep naked.' He stared back at her, trying to keep the smirk from his face.

'But... you let me sleep in your bed, knowing you had nothing on?' Hermione blushed furiously.

'You didn't give me much choice, Granger,' he said with a smirk, pushing the covers further down as he made to get up.

'Oh, for goodness sake.' Hermione shook her head, and Severus couldn't help but laugh again as she almost ran out of his bedroom.

Hermione bit into another slice of toast, ravenously hungry thanks to the Ogden's the night before. They ate in mostly silence at a table by the stained glass window. Carlos had done them proud, providing a full English breakfast, endless tea and toast and a bottle of HP sauce for Severus and Ketchup for Hermione. Reaching over to grab another slice of bacon, Hermione caught Severus watching her with amusement.

'I've never seen you eat so much in such a short space of time,' he said with a smirk.

'It's the hang-over. I mean, it's gone and I don't feel like I want to worship your loo any more, thanks to your potions, but they don't take away the need for food and tea.' Hermione lifted her mug and took a long slurp, proving her point. Finishing her toast and bacon, she finally felt full and sat back in her chair with a sigh. 'That was amazing,' she said.

'We aim to please.' Severus waved his hand over the detritus of breakfast and it disappeared back to the kitchens, and Hermione found she was staring across the table at him. His face was no longer smiling or teasing, but serious. His eyes held a look of grave concern, and she wondered with panic if he was about to call time on their newly restored friendship now that he was sober. Distracted by his change of mood, Hermione found herself mentally cataloguing his features so as not to forget them, just in case he was about to throw her out for good.

His eyes were darkest brown, not black as most people thought. There weren't cold either. She had noticed warmth in them, amusement and often, anger and sadness. They crinkled at the sides when he smiled, making his whole face look younger. His skin was alabaster pale, but his beard when it grew was an almost salt and pepper smattering of black mixed with grey. Her eyes drifted to his mouth, set in a firm line, his smooth, pale pink lips pressed together. But when he was relaxed, his bottom lip looked full and... she had to admit it, kissable. All in all, Hermione felt that she would never get bored of looking at his face.

'Hermione,' he said softly, interrupting her thoughts.

'Sorry. Miles away.' She shook herself and stood briskly, hoping he hadn't realised that she was staring at him and not lost in her own thoughts. 'I should go,' she said. She was startled when she realised Severus had come to stand beside her. She looked up at him and almost jumped when he gently took her hand in his.

'Come and sit a moment. There is something we need to discuss.'

Hermione was non-plussed but allowed him to lead her to the sofa. He lit the fire and then ushered her to sit. She was surprised when he sat beside her and turned to face her. He didn't normally like people too close, and the feel of his knee pressing against hers was welcome but disconcerting.

'You're making me nervous, Severus,' she said quietly, and raised her gaze to his. He seemed to be considering something, and then shook his head and smiled softly.

'How long have you been taking Dreamless Sleep, Hermione?'

Hermione felt herself pale as his question. Whatever she had expected him to say it certainly wasn't that, and she wondered what had prompted it and more to the point, how the hell did he know?

'A while... now and then, after the war. Why?' Hermione sat back and crossed her arms, aware that she was being defensive.

'I am sure I don't need to remind you of its addictive properties,' he said, his voice gentle.

'I'm a Potions Mistress, Severus,' she said a little angrily. 'I only take it occasionally. How did you know?' Hermione narrowed her gaze. Surely Severus wouldn't use Legillimency on her without permission? She glared at him as he took a breath.

'Winky.' Severus ran a hand through his hair in seeming exasperation. 'During the war, when I was Headmaster, Winky was my personal elf. She was there at all times to fetch and carry, but more than that, she nursed me back to health on more than one occasion and I owe her my gratitude and loyalty. Understand, Hermione, that of all people, I know what nightmares are.'

Hermione's heart was beating loudly in her chest. Of course, Winky would know everything. She hadn't considered that her loyalty to Severus would mean her telling him, but it made sense. Winky was caring, in her own way. She watched as Severus stood and started to pace before the fire. Not knowing what to say, she waited. His face was a mask of pain suddenly, and he turned to her in obvious anguish.

'Winky was the only one who knew the reality of my life at that time. There was no-one else. I was so alone... so scared... I hardly slept, in between keeping the children safe from the Carrows and waiting... waiting for the Dark Lord to call or to act, and worrying about the three of you, off on Dumbledore's foolhardy quest. But I was exhausted, at the end of my tether. I started using Dreamless sleep, but one night I overdosed myself and almost gave Winky a heart attack when she failed to wake me. She thought I was dead, and when I finally woke, she had destroyed all of my supplies of the potion and I didn't sleep another night free of nightmares until the Dark Lord was ended by Potter's wand.'

At some point, Hermione had walked over to Severus and was stood with her hand on his forearm, looking up at him with tears in her eyes. She couldn't believe he trusted her enough to tell her all of this.

'I'm telling you all of this because I trust you, Granger. And I can't stand by and watch you make the same mistakes.'

'How did you stop the nightmares, Severus? How?' She heard the desperation in her voice and realised she had never once spoken about the horrors she kept inside her head at night.

'I removed the memories. Every meeting with the Dark Lord. Every attack I was forced to attend... Every face of every child who died while I stood by and did nothing to stop it. Here...' Severus strode over to his bookshelf and revealed a secret door behind it. A small cupboard sat behind it, lined with rows of narrow shelves, all of them full of vials, each vial containing a memory. On a plinth to one side sat Dumbledore's old Pensive and Hermione looked at him, a question clearly on her face. He shook his head.

'No. I never look. I don't need to. Removing the memory doesn't stop you forgetting. It just blurs it, making it seem at a distance. It was the only way for me to cope, after the war. You may add your own, if you wish. It may help.' Severus spoke quietly as he eyes scanned the myriad vials before them. Hermione felt tears streaming down her face at the thought of the horrors he had seen and lived through. And he had shown this to her because he cared about her, she was sure of it. She would bet that no-one else, except perhaps Winky, had ever seen this cupboard or its contents.

'Thank you, Severus.' Without pausing to think, Hermione put her arms around his waist and hugged him tightly to her, letting her tears seep into the wool of his coat. After

a moment, she felt his arms wrap around her shoulders and his chin resting gently on the top of her head. His hand drifted upwards and smoothed her curls, and Hermione realised that it wasn't Hogwarts that made her feel safe.

It was Severus.

Changes

Chapter 11 of 21

Severus Snape reluctantly agrees to assist new Potions Professor Granger with a new project, with unexpected consequences.

A/N: Early update as I'm busy busy tomorrow. Happy Hollowen everyone x

The only way to make sense out of change is to plunge into it, move with it, and join the dance. ~ Alan Watts

Hermione and Severus were standing in her lab with the cauldron of Polyjuice sitting between them and ready to be added to the flasks. Phoebe Gilroy was also there, because for this part of the trial they needed an assistant.

'Phoebe, these are the final stages of the trial for tonight. Please would you write them up on the board?' Hermione smiled at the witch reassuringly before handing her a sheet of parchment, and received a small smile in return. Phoebe walked to the chalk board without speaking and started to write down the next steps.

Relations between them had cooled somewhat since it had been decided that Phoebe was to go to Salem, the younger witch being so withdrawn that Hermione was really starting to worry about her. When she had mentioned as much to Severus, it had been his suggestion to include her in this part of the trial so that he could observe the witch for himself. The concerned glance that passed between him and Hermione told her that she hadn't been imagining it.

'Miss Gilroy, I understand you are to attend Salem after Hogwarts. I hear it is a fine academic establishment,' Severus said quietly.

Phoebe Gilroy was not stupid enough to ignore her Head of House, but Hermione saw her gather herself before speaking, and there was nothing Phoebe could do to hide the tremor in her voice. 'Yes, sir. My father is an acquaintance of the Principal, and he is very keen to have me there.' Her features were schooled into a pale mask, but Hermione knew that Severus wasn't fooled by it. Hadn't he perfected the art of dissembling himself?

'Any establishment will be fortunate to have you, of that I have no doubt, Miss Gilroy. And there is still the opening with Healer Pye, should you change your mind of course?' Severus looked at Phoebe's face closely and flinched as she bit her lip and turned back to board without speaking. He looked at Hermione helplessly, and she shook her head. She didn't want to upset the girl, so she decided it was better to concentrate on the task in hand.

'Right. Step one,' Hermione said, smoothing the front of her robes as she walked to the board. 'We will fill two flasks for our trial now. At this stage, Phoebe can add the pine needles I'll count them for you, you just need to add them,' she said, catching the brief look of panic on Phoebe's face. 'You can flask and store the rest of the potion later.' Hermione looked at Phoebe and Severus and they both nodded their agreement. 'Professor Snape and I will go through the incantations while you prepare the flasks, Phoebe. We'll be in the other room, but we'll be back shortly.'

Giving her final instruction, Hermione walked to the bench and carefully measured out the pine needles from a stoppered bottle, leaving them in a small dish beside the cauldron. She lifted a sheaf of notes and then walked through to her rooms, followed closely by Severus. She turned to him and smiled.

'Are you ready for this?' she asked him playfully. They had decided to take this stage of the trial further by appearing as each other among their colleagues at breakfast. It would be a good test to see if any of them noticed that Hermione was Severus, and vice versa. She had teased him mercilessly over the past three weeks leading up the trial with tales of various items of underwear she might choose to have him in while he sat at the teacher's table in the Great Hall, while he had threatened her with a worse fate of going commando. In the end they had agreed to no underwear tampering, and Hermione was just happy to be back on good terms with Severus. He had become her confidante, and she had shared some of her more gruesome war memories with him before he helped her to remove the worst of them. It had been a slow and emotional process, but it had the benefit of bringing them closer. In Hermione's opinion, she was getting the very best of Severus Snape, and it made her feel very special indeed that he had allowed her to get to know him so well.

'I'm ready.' He sat swiftly in one of Hermione's armchairs and stared broodingly into the fire. Hermione could see he was troubled, and she thought she knew why. She sat in the chair opposite and leaned towards him.

'Severus, Phoebe is a bright girl. She will excel wherever she ends up, even if it wasn't her first choice. She won't let me approach her father, so my hands are tied. I don't know what else we can do,' she said softly.

'I am not in a position to help either. Gaius Gilroy and I were never friends, even before the Dark Lord. I have little influence,' he mused.

'Perhaps Minerva could think of something? I'll try and speak to her tomorrow after the potion wears off,' she said decidedly. 'Now, Professor Snape. I believe it's time I got you out of those clothes,' she said teasingly, wagging her eyebrows as Severus suggestively. It had the desired effect, and Severus laughed out loud at her innuendo.

'I sincerely hope Miss Gilroy isn't behind your door with her ear pressed against it,' he said with a chuckle.

'Imagine the scandal,' Hermione replied with a grin. Secretly, she thought that getting Severus out of his clothes was quite a good idea, but she couldn't allow herself that distraction right now. She had spells to cast, and the last thing she wanted to do was to get any part of them wrong. She lifted the sheet with her incantations on and copied it for Severus, and they each practised without their wands to ensure they had the pronunciation correct. Severus looked up at Hermione finally and nodded, and they stood together and walked back into the lab.

Phoebe Gilroy stood by the cauldron of Polyjuice and slowly ladled the last of it into a clean flask before adding it to the crate with the others. The prepared flasks sat on the end of the bench, and she waited patiently for further instruction as her Professors stood before each other with their wands ready.

'The next step it to cast the incantations and then immediately take the Polyjuice,' Hermione said, for her own benefit more than anything. They had been over this so many times she could recite it in her sleep, but speaking it aloud was reassuring.

'Uncork the flasks please, Phoebe.'

The student did as she was asked, and watched with fascination as her Professors removed hairs from their heads, added them to the flasks and then swapped them with each other, holding a flask in one hand and their wand in the other. Hermione charmed the incantation sheet to hover beside them so they could each follow the wording, and with a nod, they began to chant together, lifting their wands in precise, smooth movements.

'Res Vocem. Res Lineamentum. Qualitates Verto. Mutat Personam.'

A shower of sparks flew from their wands, surrounding them in golden light, and as one, they lifted their flasks and swallowed the contents quickly. They began to change features, and Hermione waited for the right moment to cast her charm that swapped their clothes over. Phoebe gasped as Professor Granger became Professor Snape, and he became her Potions Mistress. It was the first time she had seen Polyjuice at work, and she gave her Professors a genuine smile when they finally stood in front of her as each other.

'That is so cool,' she said in awe. Hermione, as Professor Snape, couldn't help but laugh, but instead of her light, feminine laughter, she let out a chuckle that she immediately recognised. Her spells had worked, and not only did she look like Severus, she also sounded and acted like him. At Phoebe's look of shock she had never heard Professor Snape laugh. Hermione graced her with a Snape eyebrow, and then grimaced at she saw her student reel back in surprise.

'I think you have convinced at least one person that you're me.' Hermione turned at the sound of her own voice, and realised that Severus was smiling at her in amusement.

Hermione pulled herself up to Snape's full height. 'Indeed,' she said with a smirk.

Severus and Hermione had agreed that for their deception to work, they would have to part ways and go to their respective rooms just in case a student should need them. This was on the understanding that they would not discuss personal things like using the bathroom or being naked, and they would treat each others bodies with respect. After all, it was unreasonable to expect the other to not undress for bed or shower the next morning.

Only Minerva knew of their current trial in case of emergencies, and Phoebe, who had been sworn to secrecy. Thus, Severus, disguised as Hermione, was currently in his old dungeon quarters. He wasn't enjoying it very much. The chairs were the same, the décor the same, and the slightly damp and fusty smell was the same. He had no desire to stay in rooms that brought back so many unpleasant memories, and given that Hermione had given him free rein, he assumed this meant he could change things around a little. Taking out his wand, he started with the chairs, transfiguring them from stiff, green leather to softer burgundy velour. He used a bath towel and changed it into a rug similar to his own, in muted colours of red and ochre with a hint of moss green. In the lab, he found a supply of lavender oil and sandalwood and added this to some plain candles. He lit them, and after a few moments the dank, dungeon smell started to lift, along with his mood.

He wandered over to the bookshelf and noted with amusement that the highest filled shelf was as eye level, leaving the three top shelves empty. He realised this was because Hermione couldn't reach, but he was puzzled still. She could always use her wand to get a book down from the higher shelves. He resolved to question her on that later, and started to scan the spines of the books in front of him. There were potions books, some of them rare and all of them he also had in his own collection, along with a series of books on flora and fauna appropriate for a Potions Mistress. Then there were Muggle books on philosophy and sociology, chemistry and biology. He shook his head and wondered of what use they would be to a witch, but assumed Hermione must have had them for a reason. Severus had a sudden thought and grinned to himself. There were some Muggle books he had been curious about for some time on Hermione's bedside locker, and this was the perfect opportunity to get a better look.

With purposeful steps, he made his way to Hermione's bedroom. The bed was neatly made with the old green bedspread, which Severus immediately turned into deep, purple chenille. The room looked cosier than the rest of his rooms, and he saw a pair of fleece pyjamas folded neatly at the end of the bed that he presumed Hermione intended him to wear. He shuddered at the thought. He slept naked at all times and tonight would be no different, despite his change of physical shape. He scanned the rest of the room and saw the books he was looking for on the bedside locker. He sat and lifted the first book, and let out a light giggle at the cover illustration of a raven-haired beauty swooning in the arms of muscular Lothario, paused before the inevitable kiss, his shirt open to the navel, his torso rippled and shiny with sweat. The title of the book was 'Beauty and the Beast,' but Severus was willing to bet that the contents were nothing to do with the Muggle fairy story. The pages of the book were obviously well-thumbed, and as he held the book it fell open in the middle of the fourth chapter. Severus frowned as he saw the corner of the page turned down, thinking that Hermione would never treat a book so badly as to damage the page. However, when he started to read, he began to understand why she might want to skip to this section more than once. Unconsciously, his hand drifted to his crotch and he rubbed his hand firmly against himself in response to the distinct tingling and throbbing between his legs.

Severus tore his eyes away from the book, not aware that his cheeks were pink and his breathing a little faster. His heart was beating loudly in his ears, and he couldn't help but imagine Hermione frigging herself along with the book. He groaned and closed his eyes, imagining what her slim fingers would look like slipping between her folds. When he opened his eyes they were heavy with desire, and he ran the tip of his tongue over his lips. Almost without thinking, he stood and walked to the bathroom, and in front of the mirror, he started to undress.

Of Forbidden Fruit

Chapter 12 of 21

Severus Snape reluctantly agrees to assist new Potions Professor Granger with a new project, with unexpected consequences.

A/N: Hello there! Happy Friday everyone :)

There is a charm about the forbidden that makes it unspeakably desirable. ~Mark Twain

Severus was staring. He couldn't help himself. He stood in Hermione's body, just wearing her underwear, his eyes transfixed by the creamy swell of her breasts, the dark shadow and tell-tale raised points of her nipples as they showed through the thin white lace of her bra. His eyes followed her slim frame to her stomach, softly rounded with a raised mole just above the start of her right hip. Her knickers, plain white cotton with a strip of lace at the edges, covered her pubic area, but didn't disguise the splay of her hips or the firm, tempting flesh of her thighs. He looked up then and caught the flush in his cheeks and the look of lust in his eyes that he couldn't hide no matter how hard he tried. With shaking fingers, he slipped the straps of the bra from the slim shoulders, and let the cups drop down to reveal Hermione's breast to his hungry gaze.

'Fuck,' he whispered, biting his lip unconsciously. Hermione's breasts were rounded but tipped up invitingly at the peaks, her nipples a pale caramel surrounded by dusky areolas. Without a thought, he ghosted the palms of his hands across her hardened nipples and felt a ripple of sensation go straight between his legs. Cupping the breasts, he stroked the sensitive skin and tweaked the nipples between his fingers, watching as he did so. The nipples became firmer and all more sensitive to his touch, and he couldn't help but moan lightly as he increased the pressure. He let one hand fall as if in a daze, sliding beneath the fabric of Hermione's knickers and slipping his fingers though the moist folds of her labia. Slowly, he explored, rubbing lightly over the nub of Hermione's clitoris and sending shockwaves of pleasure through himself. He paused and

stared in the mirror, and watched closely as he removed the slick fingers and raised them to his mouth. He had often wondered how Hermione would taste, and given that he would never get the opportunity in his real existence, he simply had to. He licked his fingers clean and groaned deeply. She was sweet and musky and fresh and more... He needed more. With one last glance in the mirror, he turned and headed back into the bedroom, shedding Hermione's underwear as he went.

Hermione had Severus' nose in a book. The fire crackled, and she swirled a glass of Firewhiskey as she sat with her boot-clad feet on the table. She had spent a little time exploring the rooms, and couldn't deny a slight pang of jealousy at how warm and cosy they were. She resolved to smarten up the dungeon rooms when she returned there tomorrow, starting with the bedroom.

Severus had a double four-poster bed, covered with a thick, jewel red chenille blanket and deep purple bed linen. The bed hangings were ornately decorated in gold and purple swirls and matching tie backs and the rug beside the bed was a thick, white sheepskin. Hermione paused in her reading as she thought about the room, and she made a snap decision that she should embrace her experience of being Severus Snape and slip beneath his covers. She closed the book and replaced it on the bookshelf, doused the fire and the sconces and headed for the bedroom. She opened a couple of drawers in a futile search for pyjamas until the sickle dropped that Severus obviously slept naked. Hermione bit her lip and tried not to think about that too much, and remembering their agreement, she doused the candles in the room and started to undress in the dark. She fumbled with the buttons of his frock coat and struggled to get her feet out of the tight, dragon-hide boots, and wondered, not for the first time, why Severus insisted on dressing in such a constricted fashion. The air in the room felt slightly chilly to her bare skin, and she slipped between the sheets quickly. The feel of the satin against her skin made her sigh, and she had a sudden understanding as to the joys of sleeping naked. Snuggling down into the pillow, she closed her eyes and fell asleep.

Somewhere between the bathroom and Hermione's bed, Severus had felt his conscience pricking him. He had promised to be respectful of her person, and even though in reality the body he wore was still his own, albeit Hermione-shaped, it seemed wrong on many levels to abuse the fact that he had unlimited and unsupervised access to Hermione's body. The fact that he was also curled beneath the covers of his old bed had also served to dampen his libido somewhat. There had been many a wank had in this bed, urgent and frantic at times. But this was something different. He cared for Hermione, and there was a part of him that hoped to sample the many delights of her body as himself.

Severus closed his eyes and wished for sleep, and tried as hard as he could to ignore the throbbing of his nipples and the tingling between his legs.

Hermione woke abruptly from her dream, her breathing rapid and her vision slightly blurred. Unlike her nightmares, this dream had been surprisingly enjoyable, even though she had awoken before the good bit, as always seemed to be the way. It didn't take her long to realise that Severus Snape was all man, and that she was sporting a rather impressive erection. Her face flushed at the thought of it, and she couldn't deny the urge to have a look. But she was still Hermione Granger and she refused to just lift the covers. She threw back the bedclothes and headed for the shower, where she would have no choice to look at Severus' nakedness but would feel more justified in doing so.

Hermione let the water run for a few moments, forcing herself to keep her gaze on her task. She stepped briskly into the shower and let the warm water run over Snape's sinewy arms, and then let her eyes drop downwards. Snape's cock bobbed slightly as she gasped aloud. She had expected him to have some length, given that he was so tall, but the girth was a surprise. He wasn't hung like a horse, as Lavender Brown had once speculated, but he was certainly plenty enough for Hermione Granger. Unable to stop her inquisitive fingers, she cupped the testicles experimentally, noting their weight and the feel of the skin stretching taut at her touch. She wrapped her other hand around the shaft of Snape's cock and gripped slightly. She closed her eyes at the immediate desire to move her hand up and down the length, and she shifted the skin over the purpling head, feeling a shot of lust as her thumb passed over the ridge beneath. Her mind was immediately taken back to her dream, and coherent thought abandoned her. Her hand started to move swiftly, and she leant her head against the wall of the shower as her hand pumped even faster. In her mind, she imagined Severus thrusting his hard length inside her, his face twisted with desire, and with a harsh, guttural cry, she felt her orgasm spill from her. She opened her eyes in shock and watched as the milky come dripped over her hand and down the wall of the shower to be washed away.

'Bugger it all to hell,' she moaned lowly, feeling totally ashamed of her actions. Severus was no doubt being more than respectful to her image in the dungeon, and she had just abused the trust he'd placed in her. Perhaps it was something to do with being male, but it had felt that once she had started, rational thought disappeared and she simply couldn't stop. With a shake of her head, she decided that the only thing she could do was look after his body as best as she could from this moment on. She summoned the special shampoo she had created for him and proceeded to test it out, trying as hard as she could to ignore the sense of mellow contentment that followed the orgasm. She didn't know how she would be able to look Severus in the eye again.

Severus had awoken early and spent a leisurely hour browsing through the stack of books beside Hermione's bed. He had chuckled to himself when he realised each book fell open at particularly fruity sections of the story they held. He found himself unconsciously brushing his hands across Hermione's nipples as they hardened, and no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't stop his hand drifting south. He closed his eyes as his fingers quested for their prize, and as he brushed lightly against her wet, sensitive clit, he bit his lip at the sensation of pleasure that rippled through him. Abandoning all pretence, he kicked the covers from the bed and spread Hermione's thighs wide. He found the entrance to her passage and dipped a finger inside, then thrust deeply. The sensation of having something inside him was interesting, but not enough. Hermione's fingers were slim, and as his inner walls clenched, he felt the need for something fuller. He summoned his wand and cast a spell to thicken the end of the shaft, and then inserted it. He groaned at the sensation, and whispered a spell that caused the shaft to vibrate. His fingers sought out Hermione's clit again, and he started to stroke in firm, steady circles across the firm bud. He felt the beginnings of an orgasm somewhere deep inside, and the sensation of the wand intensified with each flick of his fingers. A low wail came from his mouth, and his legs began to tremble as he was suddenly gripped by the waves of the most intense orgasm he had ever experienced. He gasped as he removed the wand, fascinated despite his pleasure as the orgasm continued to dissipate slowly. The sensations were different, but just as satisfying as his usual orgasms, and he sighed as a languid sense of boneless lethargy washed over him. He lay in the bed for a few moments longer, until he felt the sensation filter back into his legs, and he couldn't help but grin as he walked slowly to the shower.

Phoebe Gilroy arrived at breakfast early, anticipation flooding her veins. She helped herself to toast and jam and a large glass of pumpkin juice, but she couldn't concentrate on her breakfast. She was far too excited.

'What is going on with you, Gilroy?' Hector Bulstrode asked dryly. 'You seem to have Acromantula's in your underwear this morning.'

'I'm fine. Christmas is coming. I'm just looking forward to getting home, that's all.' It wasn't a lie. There was only a week left of term, and Phoebe couldn't wait to get home and spend time with her mother. She missed her desperately when she was at school, and there were already plans in place for shopping and expensive lunches together. Phoebe was interrupted from her musings when the side door to the Great Hall was flung open and in walked Professor Snape. Phoebe smiled to herself, knowing that this was really Professor Granger, and she watched with undisguised glee as her professor walked with purposeful strides to the teacher's table and took a seat beside the Headmistress. She watched as the professor glared out over the hall as if daring any student to look in her direction, and then began to eat a bacon sandwich with the deft, fine fingered movements that were so typical of Professor Snape.

Professor Granger entered then, her hair bouncing as she walked. She paused and took a seat between Professor Snape and Professor Flitwick, said a brief hello to the former and then began an animated conversation with the Charms professor.

It all looked perfectly normal, and Phoebe wanted to applaud them both for what was obviously a successful deception.

Hermione and Severus left the Great Hall together, as was often their wont. No-one batted an eyelid as they walked side by side towards the dungeon, Hermione walking

that little bit faster to keep up.

'For God's sake, Granger,' Severus hissed in a whisper. 'Do you have to walk so damned fast?'

'If I want to pass as you then yes, I do,' Hermione replied with a smirk. They arrived at the dungeon and Hermione opened the door and walked straight in. Severus glared at her with his hands on his hips.

'What happened to chivalry?' he asked pointedly.

'I always enter before you, Professor Granger. Hadn't you noticed?' Hermione's eyes sparked with amusement and it was clear to Severus that she was enjoying their transformation, and was perhaps emulating him far too much.

'How long before we change?' he asked, changing the subject.

'Any minute now. I worked out the timings perfectly,' she replied.

They waited. And waited some more. After twenty minutes, Hermione started to frown and pinch the top of her nose. It was a gesture Severus knew all too well. It was almost time for classes to begin, and Severus looked at Hermione in obvious panic, only to be met with a face stoic and unreadable.

'It appears we have a problem,' she murmured slowly.

Troubles

Chapter 13 of 21

Severus Snape reluctantly agrees to assist new Potions Professor Granger with a new project, with unexpected consequences.

13. Troubles

Friends show their love in times of trouble, not in happiness. ~Euripides

Minerva sat at her desk, her face a picture of shock and surprise as her two professors followed each other out of her Floo. She checked the time and frowned.

'Shouldn't you both be in class?' she asked mildly.

'There is a problem,' said Hermione.

'And it's her fault,' said Severus, crossing his arms and huffing, totally unaware that in his ire, his hair had begun to frizz.

'Severus?' Minerva looked at Hermione with a puzzled frown.

'Sadly not. She is Severus. I'm Hermione, and actually, it is not my fault.' Hermione glared blackly at Severus, who jutted his chin out even further.

'For goodness' sake.' Minerva let out a huff. She had quite done with drama following the war and this was something she could really do without. 'Sit down, the two of you, and you,' she pointed at Hermione, 'You explain what the haggis is going on or so help me, I'll Stupefy the both of you!'

Severus felt abashed at Minerva's tone, suddenly very aware that he had responded like a petulant student, and he sat meekly, a flush to his cheeks. Hermione flashed another glare in his direction and sat ramrod straight in the chair next to him. Neither of them saw the brief look of incredulous amusement on Minerva's face as she looked between the two of them.

'I apologise, Minerva. There was a mix up with the potion. It should have worn off by now, but it would seem that instead of adding the measured amount, Miss Gilroy added the remainder of my supply. I have no idea how many needles were left.' She crossed her arms and refused to look at Severus, who was looking at her pointedly.

'You could hazard a guess,' Severus murmured.

'If I were to hazard a guess, of course,' Hermione said through gritted teeth. 'I would say there were over three thousand needles left.'

Severus groaned. 'How long, Granger? Just tell me how long I have to remain like this, dealing with your ridiculous hair and your confusing underwear?'

'Confusing underwear?' Hermione stared at him, her eyebrow raised.

'I have never worn a bra before,' Severus mumbled, blushing yet again.

'Well I'll trade you my bra for your totally unnecessary amount of buttons! And seriously, do you have to wear so many layers?' Hermione barked out a laugh.

'Professors,' said Minerva, a touch of impatience in her voice. 'Please. We do still have students to attend to for the next week, so let's cut to the chase. How long, Hermione. If you were to hazard a guess?'

Hermione's face went blank as she mentally calculated, and Severus stared at her as she went even paler. 'Three months,' she whispered. 'Give or take a week or so.'

'Holy fuck,' Severus said with a gasp.

Minerva stared at them as the enormity of the situation started to sink in, and then she started to laugh. The scowl they both shot across her desk made her laugh even harder, and tears started to fall down her face. It took her a good five minutes to gather her wits again, and when she looked at her professors they were still glaring at her.

'I'm sorry. If I didn't laugh I'd have to hex you both. I would have thought that you, Severus, as Head of Slytherin, would have been keeping a very close eye on Miss Gilroy when she was adding ingredients. And you, Hermione. How on earth could there have been such a mix up?' She shook her head in disbelief, and raised her hand when Hermione went to speak. 'No, I don't want excuses. What we need to do now is work out how we're going to get through the next three months. Potions shouldn't be a problem, of course, but you will have to go through your lesson plans with Hermione, Severus.'

Hermione stared at Minerva aghast. There was no possible way she could teach Defence Against the Dark Arts. The thought of it sent shivers down her spine.

'Minerva, couldn't you just get a stand in teacher? There is no way I can teach Severus's classes as well as he can. The students will see through me in an instant,' she said, a little pathetically.

'Nonsense, Hermione. You are quite up to the task with a little guidance from Severus, and this is the perfect test of your new potion, don't you think?' Minerva smiled sweetly but Hermione knew there was a little glee behind it. She supposed she did deserve it, after all, so she nodded, giving up what would have been a futile battle.

'Now, Christmas is in a week's time so I suggest you collaborate together on how you intend to spend your holidays. I imagine Severus will need some background information on how to spend Christmas with the Weasleys.'

Minerva stood, ending the conversation and not seeing the look of horror on Severus's face. Hermione felt a stab of sympathy for him; after all, this wasn't his fault. With a shooing motion, Minerva forced them from her presence, her huge grin hidden behind the door of her office as it closed behind them.

'My quarters, Granger. Now!' Severus pushed past Hermione, digging her in the ribs slightly with her own bony elbow as he went. Of all the absurd, ridiculous situations he had ever had the misfortune to find himself in, this was surely the very worst. To be stuck in Hermione's body for the next three months, possibly even longer, filled him with dread. Not because he was stuck in her luscious, ripe body. Oh no. That was the only saving grace, and he intended to fully embrace the experience. No. The worst thing was that in his current form, his best friend was Harry Bloody Potter.

He entered his quarters forcefully, his magic blasting open the door and causing his drapes and the stack of parchment on his desk to swirl around in the backdraft. The very air was starting to thrum, and his hair reacted violently to the static and became a frizzy, uncontrollable halo around his face. It was at this point that he stopped to marvel at the blue and silver sparkling pinpricks of magic that escaped unbidden from his fingertips, and he realised that this was not the way his magic normally behaved. He was still staring at his hands when he heard a cough behind him, and he turned, narrowing his eyes.

'I can see that you're angry, Severus. Quite literally. That's what happens when I lose it.' Hermione stood with her wand out in readiness, just in case Severus let his temper run to its full height. Knowing her magic as she did, and how angry Severus could become, she was a little bit scared for her safety, not to mention the integrity of the castle, should he really let loose. 'You need to breathe deeply and let the magic dissipate, before you destroy your lovely rooms,' she said mildly.

Severus closed his eyes and took a deep breath, despite his misgivings. There was something about her voice that made him feel safe, he mused. Then he shook himself at yet another ridiculous notion, given that it was his own voice he was listening to, and it had never made him feel safe before. Spending time as Hermione was quite obviously adding to his brains.

'I hope you're quite satisfied, witch,' he hissed at her. 'Living as you for one night was quite enough, but now this.' He gestured at himself, flailing his hands around until he forced himself to stop. This was yet another thing he didn't do. Histrionics were for Gryffindors.

Hermione lowered her wand and sighed. 'I really am sorry, Severus. I hate this as much as you do.' She ran her hands through her hair, and Severus narrowed his gaze again as he watched. Unable to stop his curiosity, he approached her and grabbed a handful of hair, letting it slip like liquid silk through his fingers.

'What the bloody fuck did you do to my hair?' He glared up at her with his hands on his hips, and Hermione couldn't help but smirk. Seeing herself like this had been quite an eye opener and she had sudden insight into why Ron and Harry had been so afraid to get on her bad side at school.

'I took care of it, which is more than I can say about this!' She lifted a hank of hair in front of his eyes, and even he could see the mess it was in. 'If you're going to walk around pretending to be me, use the Sleakeasy's in the bathroom cabinet. Otherwise you'll look like you've had an electric shock after every potions lesson.'

Severus and Hermione glared at each other silently for a brief moment, suddenly at a loss for words, until Winky appeared between them, her large eyes taking on a hint of caution.

'The Professor in the Headmaster's office wished me to tell you that you both have classes to attend, Professors.' With a brief bob of her head, she disappeared almost as soon as she had finished speaking.

Hermione paled and sank into the nearest chair.

'I can't do it,' she whispered.

Severus grinned at her. At least he would have no problems teaching Potions, and it really did serve Hermione right for making such a glaringly ridiculous first year error.

'It's fifth year Slytherin and Gryffindors first thing this morning,' he said with far too much enjoyment. 'I wouldn't leave them alone for too long, Granger. They do have a habit of waving their wands about if left to their own devices.' Severus turned and left to deal with his first Potions class of the next three months.

Hermione stared after him and thought she might vomit.

After realising that Severus had been serious about his warning, Hermione dashed along the corridor to the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom in haste, not wanting to be blamed for any injuries the class might inflict on each other. Before opening the door, she steeled herself and took a deep breath, remembering to channel Severus, or at least what she could remember of him from her own Defence classes. She pushed the door open with a bang and glared, she hoped in an authoritative way, at the students. Some were sitting on their desks chatting in groups, some had their noses in their text books, and they all jumped up as she walked in, flicking her wand discreetly to close the door loudly.

'Who can tell me what we covered in the last class?' She said, clasping her hands behind her and walking between the rows. The students looked from Hermione to each other with puzzled faces, until one student raised his hand.

'Yes, Parkinson. At least someone paid attention. Go on.' Hermione walked to the front of the class and turned on her heel, staring all of the students down firmly.

'We were practising our blocking spells, Professor Snape.' Hubert Parkinson, Pansy's younger brother, couldn't keep a slight tremor from his voice as he spoke, and he looked around at his classmates warily.

Hermione felt herself shake slightly, but carried on regardless. 'Correct, Parkinson. Now for the fun bit, you will all write an essay on the most effective way to block or counteract each hex and curse within your text book. Begin,' Hermione snapped at the students and turned to sit at the desk. She was immediately aware, however, that none of the students had gone to gather parchment or quills, but were simply looking at her blankly. At the back of the room, a student, Emily Walker from Gryffindor, raised her hand slowly.

'What is it, Em... Walker? Hermione liked the girl and had almost slipped up by calling her by her first name, something Severus never did.

'I'm sorry, Professor, but you did say we could practice some hexes today in readiness for our test next week?'

Hermione felt her stomach flip over. 'Did I really say that?'

The class all nodded and made noises to the affirmative, and Hermione closed her eyes for a moment. *Damn you, Severus*, she thought to herself. There was nothing she

could do. She was Severus Snape to all intents and purposes, and if he had promised them hex practice, then that's what they would have to do.

'Very well,' she said, standing swiftly. 'Prepare the room yourselves, pair off within your houses, and practice hexes you already know. Keep them light. I don't want to have to manhandle any of you to the hospital wing today.'

The students grinned at each other and in a matter of moments, the room was cleared of furniture and detritus, and they had split into pairs, each facing each other with their wands out. Hermione couldn't look for a moment. She breathed deeply, trying to calm the panic she could feel welling inside. This is just the same as Dumbledore's Amy, just keep reminding yourself that. Hermione stood to one side and motioned with her hand for them to begin. There were Stinging Hexes, flashes of red and blue light from wand tips, and the sounds of shouted surprise when a spell hit its target.

Hermione felt herself drifting before she could stop herself, and suddenly she was back at Malfoy Manor with Harry and Ron, incapacitated because of far too many Crucios, helpless to defend herself or to help them in the fight to escape. She saw a wand pointed in her direction, but it wasn't Chrissie Hart from Slytherin, it was Bellatrix Lestrange, her hair flying backwards and her eyes maddening with the strength of the hex she sent forth.

Before she knew what was happening, Hermione was out cold on the classroom floor.

Longing

Chapter 14 of 21

Severus Snape reluctantly agrees to assist new Potions Professor Granger with a new project, with unexpected consequences.

14. Longing

"See how she leans her cheek upon her hand.

O, that I were a glove upon that hand

That I might touch that cheek!"

— William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*

Minerva entered the Potions classroom without knocking. Severus was checking the progress of a simple cough remedy with a group of Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff second years and he glared at the door, ready to reprimand the intruder, until he saw the unmistakeable look of panic on her face.

'Cast a Stasis spell over your cauldrons. I will complete them later and you will all be credited fully. You can leave,' he said softly. He had never seen Hermione teach, so he was trying to temper firmness with kindness. To his surprise, it seemed to be working.

He waited until the last student had left, then turned to Minerva in haste.

'What happened?' He thought he could guess, and his heart was doing somersaults.

'Hermione is unconscious in the hospital wing. Poppy doesn't know if she just fainted or a hex hit her. The students can't say; they were all in the middle of their practice when she went down like a ton of bricks.' Minerva wrung her hands together.

'Dammit,' Severus muttered. He should never have let Hermione walk into that class unprepared. His anger at their circumstances had clouded his judgement yet again, and he had hurt someone he had come to care about deeply. 'Come. We can Floo from here.'

Chrissie Hart sat by the door of the hospital wing and looked up as the Headmistress and Professor Granger arrived.

'Chrissie?' Minerva looked at the girl kindly.

'I am so sorry, Professors. I think Professor Snape was a bit confused. I was nearest when I saw him looking like he was going to faint, and when I asked him if he was alright, he called me something else and then fell,' she whispered.

'What did he say?' Severus demanded. He wanted to get to Hermione as quickly as he could.

'He said 'Bellatrix,' Professor Granger.' Chrissie looked between the Headmistress and her Professor with a worried frown. 'Did he mean Bellatrix Lestrange, do you think?'

'Quite possibly,' said Minerva gently. 'You know how much Professor Snape did for us during the war, don't you Chrissie?'

Chrissie's eyes shone with unshed tears, and Severus had to look away. Minerva had no right to talk about him like he wasn't there.

'Professor Snape saved all of us, didn't he, Headmistress?' Chrissie stated plainly.

Severus took a sharp intake of breath and decided he didn't want to stay around for whatever might come next.

'I'm going to check on Professor Snape,' he said, his voice thick with emotion. He had no idea he was the subject of such hero status amongst the students, and although it was gratifying to be acknowledged, the way it made him feel was more than uncomfortable. He turned and walked to the end of the ward, the bed he had always occupied under Poppy Pomfrey's care, and he pulled back the curtain softly.

Hermione was still out cold, and Poppy was bent over her with a confused look on her face. She cast diagnostics over and over and then shook her head.

'It just doesn't make any sense,' she muttered.

'What is the problem?' Severus asked her.

'I'm comparing my readings with Severus's last check up and they are completely different. I don't understand it,' she said.

'I can explain that, Poppy. I apologise for not informing you before. That is not Severus Snape. That is Hermione Granger, and I am Severus,' he said. Poppy glared at him as if not believing him and she was in no mood to mess about. Severus sighed.

'In fifth year you treated me for a broken wrist,' he paused. 'And when I was twelve you healed the welt marks on my back when I returned after the Christmas break.'

'Severus?' Poppy stared at him with wide eyes and then back at the unconscious doppelganger in her bed. 'What the bloody hell is this all about?'

'Hermione's Polyjuice project. We had a mishap and we're stuck like this for approximately three months. I am sorry Poppy. We should have told you.' Severus could have kicked himself. Neither he nor Hermione had considered the potential health risks connected to a change for any length of time. It would have been prudent to have included Poppy from the very start.

'You are both adults, I suppose. You're entitled to keep your secrets and make your own mistakes,' Poppy said with a sniff. 'What the effects of long term transformation might be I have no idea but I imagine we will find out, won't we?' She stared at Severus, disappointment shining from her eyes, and Severus felt a lump in his throat and his own eyes welling with tears. Damn Hermione Granger and her emotional well-spring.

'I really am sorry Poppy,' Severus whispered.

'Well. Let's put it behind us shall we. I insist that you are both monitored weekly from now on, and I do believe you there is one problem than you have not considered.'

'What problem?' Severus found his gaze drawn to where Hermione was still unconscious on the bed. He felt the urge to run his fingers through her dark, glossy hair and a pang of something as he looked at her pale mouth. He shook himself. He shouldn't be having such thoughts about himself, surely?

'You have both taken on different physical forms, and different genders. Hermione is a fully functioning female, Severus, which means that once a month... well, I don't need to spell it out for you, do I?'

Severus looked at Poppy, momentarily puzzled, and then his mouth fell open in understanding.

'This is what happens when you mess about with Polyjuice Potion,' said Poppy, suddenly all matron-like and back to treating him like an errant schoolboy. She moved to Hermione's pillow and adjusted it slightly, then smoothed down the already smooth covers. 'You can stay for a while if you must. I shall be back shortly and much as I don't like to, if she is not awake I shall resort to enervating her. I much prefer my patients to come around naturally, but we'll see.' Poppy pursed her lips and sighed as she gazed at Hermione, then she hurried off, leaving Severus alone with her.

He pulled up a chair and sat as close to the bed as he could, then tentatively took her hand. It felt strange, but different, to be holding his own hand. It was warm, and the long, pale fingers seemed to swamp Hermione's own. Severus leant forward and stroked the hair from Hermione's forehead, and fought the urge to plant a gentle kiss there. Holding his own hand was fine. Kissing himself was simply not on.

Hermione felt strange. Her head was sore, and although she was lying perfectly still she could have sworn that the room was spinning. Her awareness began to spread to the rest of her body and she could feel the unmistakable sensation of someone stroking her hand with soft, gentle fingers. She opened her eyes a little, peeking beneath her eyelashes surreptitiously. Severus was there, his face set as a mask as he gazed down at their hands. She hadn't ever seen her own face when she was worried about something but she had a pretty good idea that this was how she looked.

'Hello,' she whispered, wrapping her hand around his fingers and squeezing softly. Severus looked up instantly, and Hermione didn't miss the look of relief and the soft gasp that escaped his lips. She smiled at his concern, and at the slight flush of pink that suddenly coloured his cheeks. She was never any good at hiding her emotions, and now poor Severus had to manage a face that told everything.

'How are you feeling?' Severus started to move his hand away, but Hermione just tightened her own grip. She knew instantly that he was about to take the blame for what happened in the classroom, but it had been no-one's fault but her own.

'Since the war, I have had an overwhelming fear of wands,' she whispered. 'And any spells that cast a light. With people I know and trust, it doesn't worry me. You weren't planning on hexing me, were you Severus?' Hermione smiled gently, and tried to inject a touch of levity into her words.

'You should have told me before,' Severus said with a sigh. 'I apologise for earlier. This mishap was not your fault.'

'It was, actually, but it's too late now. And as for the class. I thought it was about time I got over it. I don't think I have,' she admitted. She looked up and caught his eye and smiled at him warmly and Severus felt his heart speed up slightly as she sighted it. He noticed the way her eyes crinkled at the corners and took in the pale luminescence of her skin, and his eyes drifted to her softly parted lips. He felt a sudden urge to run his tongue along the crease of her mouth, and realised too late that he was staring and practically drooling over himself. Hermione started to laugh softly.

'I am alright, Severus. Please stop worrying.' Hermione squeezed his hand one last time before stifling a yawn, and the moment, whatever it had been between them, was fully interrupted when Poppy returned.

'Thank goodness.' Poppy withdrew her wand and Hermione immediately closed her eyes as she cast yet more diagnostic spells. 'You'll live, Professor. But I will tell you what I told Severus. I cannot begin to imagine the risks you have put yourselves in with this Polyjuice malarkey. And you might want to explain to Severus just how your hormonal changes manifest themselves, just in case he feels the need to sob for no apparent reason in class.' Poppy looked pointedly between the two of them before turning on her heel swiftly.

Hermione huffed in annoyance. 'I have never broken down in tears while teaching,' she muttered under her breath/ *normally wait until I'm in my quarters*, she thought to herself, but Poppy had a point. She couldn't in her wildest dreams imagine Severus Snape successfully coping with her menstrual cycle. She looked back at Severus hesitantly.

'It's a bit of a mess, isn't it?' she said softly.

'Just a bit,' Severus agreed with a small smile.

'You don't suppose we could discover an antidote for Polyjuice within the next three weeks, do you?' Hermione said, her eyes rolling as she said it.

'The idea has merit. But we have three months, Hermione. Why do want to rush it into three weeks?' Severus frowned at her in puzzlement.

Hermione coughed lightly and looked up to the ceiling, measuring her words carefully before speaking. It occurred to her that this was part of Severus, because she had a tendency to just speak and then think afterwards.

'In three weeks time, I would rather not be in your company. Like Poppy said, we didn't exactly think this through.' Hermione scowled slightly when Severus gulped and went pale.

'That soon?' he whispered, not having any real clue about such things. 'Then I think we will be burning the midnight oil, Professor Granger.'

Hermione yawned again, and she felt Severus pat her hand as he stood to leave.

'Get some sleep. I'll be back later,' he said softly.

Hermione opened her eyes a little and watched as he walked away, and she couldn't help but appreciate the way his jeans clung to his peach-shaped behind. With a snort, Hermione closed her eyes and mentally berated herself. The sooner she was back in her own body, the better.

Undercurrents

Chapter 15 of 21

Severus Snape reluctantly agrees to assist new Potions Professor Granger with a new project, with unexpected consequences.

A/N: Sorry for the late update - posting two chapters as an apology!

15. Undercurrents

"...There is the heat of Love, the pulsing rush of Longing, the lover's whisper, irresistible...magic to make the sanest man go mad."

— Homer, *The Iliad*

The next few days passed slowly for Hermione. Minerva had acknowledged that a substitute teacher would be needed for the remainder of Severus' classes and had called in Remus Lupin, who had been more than happy to accept. This didn't really suit Severus, but he had come to realise that he would do just about anything for Hermione, and this thought had stopped him in his tracks.

They were currently in the dungeon lab, and Severus was having a hard time keeping his eyes from Hermione as she prepared a base for their experimental antidote. He was fascinated by her hands, for one thing. Her fingers were long and pale, and her movements were precise and deft when chopping and slicing. He found himself wondering how they would feel against his skin, and despite knowing that these were his own hands he was fantasising about, he simply couldn't help himself. The other thing he was obsessed with was the way the buttoned collar of her frock coat brushed against the soft, pale skin of her neck as she moved. He remembered the sensation of it, but for some reason he had the urge to unbutton the top three buttons and lave his tongue against her flesh there. He closed his eyes and tried to hold in a moan as he felt his nipples pebble against the fabric of the bra he was wearing. It was almost impossible to concentrate on his reading.

They had decided to search for ingredients that had the opposite effects to Polyjuice, returning them to their natural state and keeping them like that. Severus thought that after this, he would never want to use Polyjuice again. The whole experience was humiliating and confusing, and the only saving grace was that he had seen Hermione naked. Even the novelty of being able to play with her breasts and finger himself to oblivion was starting to wear off.

Severus looked up when Hermione walked over to him and smiled. She paused momentarily and arched an eyebrow.

'Anything?' she asked him. Severus bit his lip as he caught her gaze, and he caught his lower lip beneath his teeth slightly before shaking his head.

'Not yet. I was thinking I might go to the library and see what's in the Restricted section.' He didn't really need to do this, but the urge to throw himself at Hermione was starting to cloud his judgement.

'I'll keep searching here if you like. The base is ready, but we need something to put into it. And, I was wondering,' she paused and looked at him hopefully. 'Will you have dinner with me here tonight? Pretending to be you is all well and good, but I could really use the break.'

'I know the feeling,' Severus said. 'Very well. Will you inform Minerva?' He slipped from the stool he was sitting on and handed the heavy book he had been reading to Hermione.

'Of course.' Hermione held the book to her chest in a typically Granger pose and Severus grinned at her. Old habits died hard, it seemed. He headed for the door but was stopped in his tracks by a hand on his shoulder.

'Hermione?' There was an odd look on Hermione's face, but before Severus could take another step, she had put down the book and pulled him into her arms for a huge hug. His senses were immediately assailed by the aromas clinging to the clothes Hermione was wearing, the sharp tang of herbs and the soft undercurrent of the sandalwood soap from his quarters. He felt himself melting against her chest and fought the urge to play with the buttons on the coat. He gazed slightly upwards and saw the flash of skin where the collar met her neck, and he closed his eyes. With reluctance, he pulled away, and knew without a doubt that he was blushing.

'Thank you, Severus. For helping and everything.' Hermione smiled at him, then grabbed the book and walked into her quarters, leaving him nonplussed and more than a little aroused.

Hermione closed the door to the lab with a firm push and then leant against it, breathing deeply. What had possessed her to grab him like that? She must be going stark raving bonkers to be lusting after him in her own body, for goodness sake. The problem was, the more she was with him, the stronger the urge. She put her hand to her crotch and adjusted the evidence of her arousal, hoping he hadn't felt it when she was holding him close.

With a slight groan, she walked over to her bedroom and was about to walk into the bathroom when she noticed the pile of books beside her bed. They were in a different order to how she had left them, and when she looked closely she realised that that Severus had used spare strips of parchment to mark certain sections. She didn't need to be a genius to know which bits he had marked, which begged the question; Why?

As soon as she asked it, she knew the answer, but rather than feeling angry that Severus was making free with her body, the thought of him touching her breasts and his fingers trailing through her lower lips made her cock even harder and more eager for attention, and the image of Severus in the throes of orgasm sprang to mind. She couldn't help but rub her hand over Severus's cock, and deftly opened the buttons on his fly, something she was getting quite good at. She wrapped her hand around the shaft, and with a few brisk pulls, she shuddered and shot come over her hand with a low moan. In her mind's eye, she was fucking herself, and she shook her head. Surely this must be a side effect of being Polyjuiced for so long? She couldn't think of any other reason for it. Of course, she knew that she had developed feelings for Severus, but that was as himself. How on earth could she have fantasies about him when he was waking around as her? Hermione decided she would have to do some further research into the spells she had used, because it was more than obvious she had missed something. She wondered if Severus was having the same problem, but dismissed that idea. After all, she had feelings for him, which would explain her feelings of sexual attraction. She was under no illusion that he felt that way about her. They

were friends, and she had to be content with that.

Hermione cast a quick cleansing spell and tucked herself away before heading for the Floo. She had a feeling they would need help, and she knew exactly who to ask.

Severus returned to the dungeon with a pile of books that he had shrunk and put into his pocket. He entered the lab and was surprised to find Phoebe Gilroy chopping what looked to be ginger. She looked up as he entered, and to his surprise she actually approached him, rather than continuing her task.

'Miss Gilroy?' Severus saw that the girl was pale and her eyes a little red, and he was immediately concerned. 'Whatever is wrong, girl?'

'Professor Granger told me what happened, sir. I am so, so sorry,' she whispered. Her eyes were glassy, but like a true Slytherin she wouldn't allow her tears to fall, especially not in front of her Head of House. Severus felt a pang of regret.

'You have nothing to apologise for Phoebe. The error lies with myself and Professor Granger, I can assure you. You were merely following instructions. Think no more of it.' Severus placed a gentle hand on Phoebe's arm and squeezed lightly, noting the look of grateful surprise on her face. It made him feel good to be kind to the girl.

'I told her that too,' Hermione said as she walked back into the lab. 'Once you have the ginger chopped, could you go to Professor Sprout and ask her if she has a mature Mandrake plant, Phoebe? Professor Snape and I will be having dinner here but you can return after you've eaten with your house if you wish?'

Phoebe couldn't disguise her happiness, and smiled at them both before nodding in agreement. Severus followed Hermione back into her quarters before removing the books and spelling them back to their original size. He looked at Hermione and recognised the look in her eye and she grinned at him.

'You've thought of something.' It was a statement, but Hermione shook her head.

'Not me. Phoebe. She's been reading the updated version of Hogwarts: A History, and she reminded me of the basilisk. The Mandrakes were used to return us to normal after we were petrified, and when I looked into their properties, I think they might be what we need!' Hermione couldn't hide her excitement, and Severus laughed as she spun on the spot, making her robes flay out like a dress.

'That is actually quite brilliant. And the ginger?' Severus could feel his own excitement mounting to match Hermione's. If they were lucky they might be back to normal by Christmas Day.

'Well, it's in Wit-Sharpening potion, but it will also counteract the bicorn powder in the Polyjuice. Once we have the antidote, we will have to cast the counter spells as we take it, but hopefully that will be that.' Hermione sighed happily.

'Does that mean I carted these back for no reason?' Severus waved his hand at the stack of books on the table.

Hermione fought back a chuckle at the chagrin on his face, but straightened her face to Severus' usual blank stare before raising her eyebrow. 'Obviously,' she said sternly.

'Very funny,' Severus muttered. 'How long before we can return to normal?' He turned a serious gaze on Hermione, and when their eyes met stepped closer without really thinking about what he was doing. He saw Hermione's mouth open slightly, and the tip of her his- pink tongue licked her lower lip, making him want to chase after it with his own. He was thankful that at least Hermione was sensible. She turned away and walked to the small table and chairs he had added to the dungeon so that he could eat there, and she motioned for him to follow her before sitting.

'If we are able to get the mandrake, then I think we could take the potion on Christmas Eve,' she said thoughtfully. 'Which reminds me. I still need to write to Molly.'

Severus poured a glass of water and picked up his fork. 'They will miss you,' he stated. 'Why don't you wait until you know for definite?' Why he was giving her a reason to leave the castle at Christmas he really couldn't fathom. He would hate it if she was away for even a few hours, but he couldn't imagine any reason she would choose to stay here at Christmas.

'I don't think I want to go anyway,' she said quietly. 'Ron will be there.'

'Ah. And you and he are..?' Severus looked up and Hermione shot him a glare. 'None of my business. I apologise.'

'No. I'm sorry. I didn't think you would be interested in my personal life,' she grinned at him ruefully. 'I don't have one. There, now you know it all.'

Severus felt a flood of relief wash over him. He has assumed that she wasn't seeing Weasley, but to hear her mention his name has gripped him irrational panic for a brief moment. Still, he picked up the touch of sadness in her tone and looked at her with concern.

'You wish you were still with him,' he stated softly. Hermione fixed him with a gentle gaze, and he saw the flash of warmth, and something else he couldn't name, as she smiled at him

'Definitely not,' she said quietly. She held his gaze for a moment before looking away. Severus felt the frisson of her wards that alerted them to Phoebe's presence in the lab. Hermione smiled at him and shrugged, and he watched her thoughtfully as she walked back to the lab.

It's Christmas Time (of the month)

Chapter 16 of 21

Severus Snape reluctantly agrees to assist new Potions Professor Granger with a new project, with unexpected consequences.

16. It's Christmas Time (of the month)

Christmas waves a magic wand over this world, and behold, everything is softer and more beautiful.

~ Norman Vincent Peale

Christmas fever was gripping Hogwarts. Students were in a flurry of packing and last minute gift giving, the ghosts were practising for their Christmas Day sing-along, and

the house elves were busy helping Professors Flitwick and Sprout with the castle decorations. There was always a touch of over-exuberance, with Filius Flitwick announcing to anyone who would listen that 'It's what Dumbledore would have done.' Severus sniffed as he walked past, his eyes blinded by the clash of colour and the bright, sparkling fairies that seemed to light up every dark corner. Three more days and he could finally relax in his own quarters with his whisky and a good book. It couldn't come soon enough.

If there was one thing he had realised from being Hermione Granger, it was just how popular she was as a teacher. The past few days had seen a steady trickle of students, mostly girls, stopping at the desk in the Potions classroom and leaving small gifts of chocolate or inexpensive toiletries, and from one thoughtful student, a set of hair clips encrusted with red stones. Severus had found he felt grateful and humbled on Hermione's behalf, and he planned to visit her after supper to deliver them to her safely. He had a feeling she would be glad of them once they had returned to their normal selves. With a small smile to himself, he entered the Great Hall and walked up to the head table, slipping into Hermione's usual seat and saying a friendly hello to Hagrid two seats down. He ordered chicken and salad, and watched as Hermione walked purposefully through the doors and strode between the tables of students gathered for their last meal before catching the train the following day. His eyes narrowed as he saw some of the first years flinching at the sight of Professor Snape walking past, and noted the distinct lowering of volume as conversations became whispered murmurings instead of excited pre-holiday chatter. His reputation had not been tempered by the passage of time, it seemed, and he found that thought made him feel more than a little sad. Unbidden, Severus felt tears pricking his eyes and the irrational urge to burst into tears. He cast his eyes down to his plate, but found his appetite had suddenly waned. In fact, all he wanted to do was curl up in his bed and have a good cry.

Hermione sat down beside him and ordered her food before she noticed that he hadn't even said hello.

'Are you alright?' she whispered quietly, trying not to draw attention to their conversation. They had fallen into a set routine of dissembling between them, and usually Severus would give her a bright and cheery hello and a smile. She would respond with a brief but courteous greeting and they would concentrate on eating in silence. This was a definite change in their usual exchange and Hermione picked up on it immediately, as Severus knew she would. He couldn't help it, and he couldn't look up either. He knew that as soon as she looked into his eyes she would see the tears there, and the last time Severus cried in front of anyone he was eight years old with a grazed knee.

'You're not eating,' she persisted. Severus shook his head and sniffed without really wanting to, and he felt Hermione stiffen at his side. He almost started with shock when he felt Hermione touch his arm softly. Without a word she vanished his meal and then tapped his plate again with the tip of her wand. A large bowl of chocolate mousse appeared, topped with a more than usual amount of chocolate sprinkles, and Severus knew without a doubt that he needed this dessert more than anything else and that if he ate every last mouthful, he would feel a whole lot better. He turned and gave Hermione a watery but grateful smile, then lifted his spoon and started to eat. He couldn't help but moan with pleasure as the chocolate hit his tongue, and he felt Hermione chuckling beside him.

'I know exactly how you feel. Three more days, and then I'll take those nasty hormones back, okay?'

Severus could hear the teasing tone in her voice, but he didn't care. There was chocolate mousse to be eaten, and right now it was the most important thing in the world.

If there was one thing that Hermione hadn't contemplated when setting out on this trial, it was maintaining contact with her friends. She couldn't write to them in Severus' handwriting, so as a consequence they hadn't heard from her in almost a month. They had no idea what a disaster her trial had turned out to be or that she and Severus were pretending to be each other, and it was just typical that Harry had decided to check on his friend in person rather than waiting any longer for a missive that wasn't coming. The day before Christmas Eve, a harassed Severus stood outside the door of his own quarters with an equally harassed looking Harry Potter, neither of them looking best pleased with the other. Hermione stared at them with a mixture of amusement and shame at keeping Harry in the dark, and she rolled her eyes at the ridiculousness of the situation.

'Harry,' she grinned at him. 'Severus?'

Severus pushed past her and into his own quarters in annoyance, his arms crossed in front of himself, and he glared angrily at both her and Harry but said nothing.

'Hermione? Is that really you?' Harry stared at Hermione and walked around her slowly, looking her up and down.

'Do you mind, Potter? Stop looking at my person like it's something a Hippogriff left behind,' Severus grumbled.

'Yes it's me. I'm so sorry Harry. I did mean to write, but, well, there was an accident and a mix up and... well, this happened.' Hermione waved a casual hand between herself and Severus. 'Oh, Harry, it's so good to see you!'

Hermione went to give Harry a hug as she normally would but was stopped in her tracks by the look of utter horror on Harry's face and a grunt of amusement from Severus. Hermione realised at once that Harry was seeing Severus and not her, and she had a sneaking suspicion that she knew exactly what had Severus in a snit. She started to laugh out loud.

'Oh my god! He hugged you, didn't he?' She grinned at Severus, who flushed red and turned to inspect a particularly ugly portrait beside the fireplace.

'He hexed me in return. He's almost as good as you, actually.' Harry started to laugh, and the atmosphere began to thaw a little, apart from Severus, who had drifted over to his own bookcase and studying it like these were books he had never read before.

'Let's have a drink. I have a favour to ask you, anyway.' Hermione motioned Harry to sit on the sofa in front of the fire and poured three generous measures of Severus' own firewhisky. 'Severus, stop sulking. There's whisky,' she said playfully waving the glass at him.

Severus looked at her blankly, and then shrugged. 'I suppose I should drink it. It is mine, after all,' he muttered.

Hermione sat in one of the chairs beside the fire, leaving Severus to take what was essentially his chair. She missed the quizzical look that Harry was giving them both as she took a long sip of whisky, but she smiled at him when she realised he was looking from one to the other of them as if watching a tennis match.

'We're sort of used to it now, I think. I know it's a bit weird. But tomorrow we'll be back to normal thank goodness.' She smiled at Severus and was gratified when he smiled back at her. Harry choked on his drink and coughed loudly, and Hermione rolled her eyes again.

'Honestly Harry. You didn't really think that Severus never, ever smiled? I'm sure that even during the war he must have smiled now and then.'

'Not much.' Severus had decided to join the conversation. 'I find I have more to smile about now,' he mused. He was staring into his glass, and Hermione smiled softly as she watched him. She loved him when he spoke without thinking. He showed more of himself than he realised.

'You'll be back to normal in time for Christmas then? That's brilliant,' Harry said warmly. Hermione's heart sank.

'That was the favour I wanted to ask you. I can't come to the Burrow this year. It's just too awkward, with Ron and everything,' she said quietly. 'I'm sorry.'

'I thought you might decide to do that. I get it, really. Ron is being a total git at the moment and not just to you. Come to me and Ginny on Boxing Day instead? You too, Severus. You're more than welcome,' Harry said clearly.

Hermione watched as Severus turned his face towards Harry and a ghost of a smile

crossed his face. Two pink spots appeared on his cheeks and he nodded in acknowledgement of Harry's offer. Hermione couldn't help but feel her heart burst at his gesture. He could have cut him to the quick with some sort of a barbed comment, but he had handled it more than politely even if he hadn't accepted outright. The urge to pull him close and kiss him senseless was almost overwhelming for a few moments, and Hermione had to drag her eyes away from him. She shook her head, trying to

understand just what was happening. She was more than aware of her own feelings for Severus, but this. This was different and it was wrong on so many levels. She was living life as Severus, experiencing his reactions most of the time, being in touch with his feelings about certain situations. It had helped her to understand him better than she would ever have been able to ordinarily. As she mused her current line of thinking, oblivious that Harry and Severus were now staring at her, unable and unwilling to talk amongst themselves, Hermione felt herself pale as a sudden realisation hit her. She needed to read through her spell books again, and quickly.

'Harry, I'm really sorry but I've just remembered something I have to do. I'll see you on Boxing Day, okay.' Without another word, Hermione left both Severus and Harry alone in front of the fire and almost ran out of the room, slamming the door behind her. Harry looked at Severus with a wry smile and shrugged.

'She's still got a bit of herself in there, then,' he stated with a chuckle.

'Have you ever seen me run like a girl, Potter?' Severus tried to glare at Harry but it didn't seem to have the desired effect, and Harry lifted the almost empty bottle of Firewhisky and topped up both glasses.

'First time for everything, Snape. Happy Christmas.' He raised his glass to Severus and downed it in one.

Hermione stood in the dungeon lab, the workbench now clear of ingredients and now covered in open spell books. It was here somewhere, she just knew it. There was something that just didn't add up and she had to get to the bottom of it before they reverted to normal the next day. Reading through the personality spell, Hermione came to the conclusion that this wasn't it, and she growled in frustration.

'It's not actions,' she muttered as she ran her hand through Snape's hair. 'Feelings, and intent...' she whispered, pulling another, larger tome towards her. This was a text she had taken from the Restricted Section, most of it rambling nonsense about spells to influence another's feelings, but there was one paragraph...

'Here!' She pulled a candle towards her to better see the faded words scratched into the cracked parchment.

'The need for one to affect a spell to change the depth of feeling of another will be instantly negated by the presence of already held stronger feeling. Thus, if a spell is ineffective, assume that the individual is already held in thrall by the deeper feeling that that which is intended.'

Hermione stared at the page as the sickle dropped, and she felt a tear fall down her cheek. She watched as it landed on the ancient script, and she waved her hand to dispel the salty liquid and wiped her face, her breath coming in low shudders.

She wasn't lusting after herself after all. She wasn't harbouring some strange fetish or a deep, narcissistic love for herself. These feelings were not hers to feel at all.

They belonged to Severus Snape, and he was in love with Hermione Granger.

Love Actually

Chapter 17 of 21

Severus Snape reluctantly agrees to assist new Potions Professor Granger with a new project, with unexpected consequences.

A/N: Friday Update... and another one to follow :)

17. Love, Actually

'Christmas is a time for people with someone they love in their lives' ~ Billy Mack, Love, Actually

Hermione didn't sleep. She found herself pacing, something she knew came from Severus because she had seen him do it so many times before. She decided she might adopt the strategy herself when she was back in her own body, because it seemed to reduce her stress levels and it certainly helped her to think. Not that she came to any conclusions. Severus loved her and she loved Severus. These were the facts she had managed to conclude all by herself. Convincing Severus of the same might be more than a bit tricky and it was this she was pondering.

She knew better than anyone else at this moment just how Severus Snape would choose to think. He would bang on about being too old, or that as her former Professor it would be highly inappropriate, or that she could do much better. Hermione snorted at this thought. Had she not once fawned over Ron Weasley? And hadn't that turned out well? Even she knew that Severus was a much better match, both intellectually and physically. She had a feeling their libidos would be on a par, and she knew that they could share stimulating conversations, or sit and read together in comfortable silence, from past experience. And although she might say that Harry Potter was her best friend, the reality was that she spent far more time with Severus and thought about him far more often than Harry. She knew without a doubt that if she were parted from either of them for any length of time, it would be Severus she would miss the most. So maybe there were other intelligent men out there. Hermione only wanted *this* one.

She stopped pacing and sighed deeply. Thoughts of throwing herself at him on Christmas morning and declaring her undying love flitted though her mind, along with certain images of pale skin and fingers and nakedness and gasping... But knowing Severus, she would have to be patient. At the moment she was the only one who knew the truth. For all Hermione knew, he wasn't even aware of his own feelings towards her, and if he were, he might choose to ignore them rather than act and risk being hurt.

Hermione decided that she would have to think like herself to come to any sort of viable conclusion, and that would only be fully possible after tomorrow. She stretched her back and winced at the popping sound from Severus's neck. With a groan she caught sight of the clock. It was almost 3 a.m. The first thing she was going to do when she was back to normal was have a long sleep in her own bed.

Severus waited in the dungeon lab, absently straightening the jars of ingredients on the shelving units along the wall. He was there early, waiting impatiently for Hermione to arrive. He hadn't had any sleep, and he knew that it more than likely showed on his face. He had spent a large part of the night wondering exactly what he should do next where Hermione was concerned. He cared for her deeply, he knew that. He didn't know whether he was brave enough to call it love, but it was certainly more than he had ever felt for another person. The thought of Hermione with any other man made him feel nauseous, and he felt the need to protect her, to touch her, to... well, everything he had imagined doing to her while lying in her bed with her fingers thrusting frantically inside her folds. He shook his head to clear his thoughts, just as Hermione stepped into the lab. She was early, too.

'I couldn't sleep,' she said by way of explanation.

'I understand,' Severus said, not quite admitting to the same, but not denying it either. Hermione's gaze narrowed and he could tell she knew exactly what he wasn't telling her by the dark circles under her eyes.

'Minerva will already be awake. Shall I Floo her?' Severus was eager to get this over with, and at Hermione's nod, he went back into his quarters to get the Headmistress. When he came back with Minerva in tow, Hermione had the flasks of Polyjuice antidote ready and her amended spells on a fresh bit of parchment spread out of the workbench so they could both see it.

'Well. I can see you're both keen,' Minerva stated. 'I sincerely hope this will work, Professors. While it has been more than amusing watching you play acting, I cannot tell you how many more grey hairs I've got because of this shambles.'

'I assume you mean grey cat hairs?' Severus said pointedly 'Honestly Minerva, do you really think that either of us has taken any pleasure from this situation?'

Severus stared at Minerva and then glanced at Hermione, who for some reason couldn't look at him. She kept her gaze firmly down at the parchment, but Severus didn't miss the tell-tale pink spots that sat high on her cheeks. Severus gasped, understanding perfectly why Hermione was blushing at his words. He looked away, feeling his own blush rising and knowing that he had been far from innocent in leaving the more interesting parts of her body alone. He supposed he couldn't really blame her.

'I'm ready. Shall we?' Hermione had gathered herself and stood with a perfect facsimile of Severus Snape's most deadpan expression on her face. 'Minerva, if you could observe closely and then tell me everything afterwards I'd be very grateful.' She gave the Headmistress a small smile and then handed a flask of antidote to Severus. They withdrew their wands together and said the spell out loud, and then swallowed the antidote.

Minerva stared at them through her spectacles, as if waiting for a miracle to occur. After a few moments, the first changes became apparent when Severus's hair lost its curl and started to turn black at the ends. Hermione gasped in pain as she started to shrink, and the shock of reverting back to normal meant that she only remembered at the last minute to swap their clothes. Minerva burst into an impromptu round of applause.

'Oh, well done, Hermione! Severus, so good to have you back with us!' She positively beamed at them in relief.

Hermione smiled at Severus as she ran her hands excitedly along her torso, arms and legs as if checking she wasn't missing anything. 'Oh, Severus! Isn't it brilliant?'

Severus couldn't help but smile back at her briefly. 'Indeed,' he murmured. 'Now, if you will excuse me. I would like to reacquaint myself with my own bed.'

With that, Severus swept from the dungeon, desperate beyond reason to put space between himself and Hermione. He had been overwhelmed with the desire to kiss her as soon as she had turned her brilliant smile towards him, and as he walked briskly towards the moving staircase, his hand clutched at the untoward ache in his chest.

Hermione languished in her bed far longer than she had intended. Her books had beckoned to her and she had spent a pleasurable half hour reacquainting herself with her body and her own orgasms. The fact that she knew what Severus looked like in the flesh, and just how well blessed he was, made the experience even more satisfying on one level. The one thing she couldn't stop thinking about were Severus' lips, and as sated as she was, she was left with the emptiness of having no kisses, no warm, wiry arms to hold her, no bare legs to entwine with her own. She admitted to herself that she was lonely, despite everything, and that there was a gap in her existence that only Severus could fill. She had a terrifying feeling that she would never have him, and that she would feel the lack of him forever.

Tomorrow was Christmas Day, and for the first year she could ever remember, she had no plans. She had managed to mail order some token gifts for the staff, and had even bought Severus a new scarf and gloves knowing that his were wearing a little thin. But a scarf and gloves didn't say 'I love you', and short of sitting in front of him and saying it the very thought made Hermione shed a tear as she imagined Severus' blanket rejection of her affections she was still no further in her desire to be with him. With a huff, Hermione rubbed at her face to remove the last signs of her tears and sniffed.

'Stupid bloody witch and stupid bloody hormones,' she muttered as she threw back the covers. She padded on bare feet into her sitting room and stared at the detritus. Piles of books and parchment covered with her writing and Severus' spiky script, broken quills and spilled ink. All signs of the feverish research her project had become, all due to a stupid mistake. Hermione sighed and flicked her wand, and the parchment shuffled itself into a neatly ordered pile, the ink and broken quills vanished and the open books closed themselves obediently and waited for their next customer. She lifted a few of the small books and put them back on her shelf, and then gathered the rest of the books to return to the library. It was soothing and familiar, and Hermione glanced at the books in her arms with a small smile, knowing that no matter what she would always have them in her life as a way of escape. The top book was the one that had unlocked the final bit of the puzzle, and she frowned down at it momentarily before making a decision. She put it back on her table and headed towards her door, her lips pressed together in a determined line.

It was Christmas morning, and Severus sat with a steaming mug of his favourite coffee as he half-heartedly opened the small pile of gifts that had appeared by the hearth overnight. He was feeling maudlin, wishing that Hermione was with him so he could at least share some disparaging comments with her about receiving yet another pair of mismatched socks from the house elves. But she hadn't been at supper the previous night, and she hadn't contacted him either. He couldn't blame her really. They had spent more time together than he had ever spent in the company of any witch, and he was sure she had taken her fill of his presence and staring at his miserable face in the mirror each day.

Severus lifted an envelope, saw Minerva's handwriting and huffed, letting it drop onto the table without opening it. He knew it was a voucher for Flourish and Blotts, the same as every year. The next gift was unexpected, however. It was weighty, but soft on top, and there was no tag on it. He opened it slowly, and smiled as the dark green scarf and gloves slipped from the wrapping with a small note from Hermione.

'Happy Christmas Severus, love Hermione'

Severus stared at the simple message, his eyes lingering on 'love, Hermione', and then he slipped the paper from the rest of the package and frowned as he recognised the book Hermione had been using from the library. There was a green ribbon marking a page, and he flipped the book open and started to read, confused and intrigued at the same time. He read the first two paragraphs and frowned. They didn't seem to mean anything important, but Severus was sure that Hermione wouldn't have 'gifted' him a book that wasn't hers if it wasn't for a very good reason, so he carried on reading as his coffee went cold.

Carlos the House Elf popped into the room unnoticed and started to tidy up quietly as Severus continued to read. He was startled by the sound of a book falling to the floor and the sight of the Headmaster almost running to his bedchamber. Carlos shrugged. He was very used to the unpredictable behaviour of his Master, and he continued his tasks until Severus returned, fully dressed and dashed to the door. He paused and looked at Carlos and gave him a huge smile that caused the elf to worry just a little.

'Happy Christmas, Carlos,' he said, and then left, slamming the door behind him. Carlos shook his head and rolled his eyes. He would never understand wizards as long as he lived.

Finally, It Has Happened To Me

Chapter 18 of 21

Severus Snape reluctantly agrees to assist new Potions Professor Granger with a new project, with unexpected consequences.

18. Finally, It Has Happened To Me

'The way I feel about you, it just can't be wrong' ~ CeCe Peniston, Finally

Hermione stood beside the balustrade of the Astronomy Tower. It was breezy, and the wind was whipping her hair around her shoulders. She unconsciously wrapped her cloak around her tightly and gazed over at the Forbidden Forest. Thestrals were flying and landing and she could see the school owls as they flew to and from the Owlery, the morning sunlight catching their wings as they glided silently. She tried hard not to cry, biting her lip and digging her fingernails into the palms of her hand, until as if she had willed it, she knew that he had come. He had found her, walking with silent footsteps as he always did. She turned and looked at him. His face was no longer the emotionless mask it usually was. His eyes were bright, and a small but unsure smile played on his lips.

'Severus?' she said softly. She watched as he walked towards her. He stopped and stared but didn't speak for a moment, until he took in a sharp breath and swallowed.

'Is it true?' he said quietly.

'You read the book,' she stated. Her mouth went dry, but he was here, so surely that was a good thing. 'Yes. It's true. We were in each other's bodies for so long, sharing each others thoughts and feelings. What you were feeling were my feelings. What I was feeling were your feelings. It took me quite a while to understand what was happening.' Hermione felt herself shiver, and she looked away, unable to watch if Severus decided to walk away.

'Hermione,' Severus said, a note of pleading in his tone that made her turn back to him. He held his arms open, and she let out a soft sob and closed the distance between them, wrapping her arms around him and hugging him to her as if she would never, ever let go. The soft wool of his new scarf brushed her tears from her cheeks, and she smiled as she felt the soft kiss of his lips at her temple.

'Your hair is out of control,' he murmured.

'And your hair is in great condition,' she replied, teasing him. She pulled away and looked up into his face, but he held onto her firmly so she couldn't go any further. It was a wonderful feeling, and she smiled. 'How did you find me?'

'It would seem that I know more about you than I ever realised. I also seem to have acquired a taste for ketchup,' he said, rolling his eyes.

'You do realise that makes you a cissie?' she said with a giggle.

'It makes me a most fortunate man indeed. For that is not all I know,' he whispered.

His eyes explored her face as if she were the most precious thing he had ever seen.

Hermione felt herself blush, but held his gaze against her will. His eyes were clear and were looking right into her soul, but if he wanted to keep hold of her this tightly she wasn't about to complain. She smiled at him.

'I love you,' she said, her voice unwavering.

'I know,' he replied with a note of disbelief. 'And I, you.'

'I know. I was so scared you would run away from it,' she whispered.

'I was unsure,' he murmured. 'I couldn't believe was I was feeling, what I was seeing through your eyes... It was a dream I would never have dared to believe...'

His voice cracked, and he gathered her to him again, nuzzling her neck with his nose. He kissed her skin gently, and Hermione turned her face to his. They stared into each others eyes for a brief moment, their lips so close they could taste each others' breath. Severus let out a gasp, and then crushed her lips to his finally. Hermione clutched the back of his coat with her fingers, scared that she would collapse at his feet. Her head swam as he swept her lips with his tongue, and she opened her mouth to allow him entry. His tongue found hers, and they kissed like they had been starved of it all of their lives. Severus tasted of honey and chocolate, and something else she knew was simply the taste of his kiss. Hermione's fingers found his hair, and she slid her hands through his silky lengths, drinking him in until they slowed their passion. The kisses became softer and tender, and when they eventually broke apart, Severus grinned as Hermione whimpered at the loss of his beautiful lips. He rested his forehead against hers, and they stood smiling at each other for what seemed like the longest time. Severus ran his hand through Hermione's unruly curls and held her to his chest, resting his chin against her head as he held her close. Hermione hugged him to her, closed her eyes and immersed herself with finally being held by the man she loved.

They almost ran back to Severus' quarters. Hermione couldn't help but laugh as he all but dragged her down the stairs and along the corridor, his hand gripping hers so tightly she thought he would never let go. She felt a thrill rush through her, and her stomach flipped at the control he was exerting. When they reached his door, Severus paused for a short moment and looked at her, his eyes dark and glittering with suppressed desire. Hermione had often wondered what Severus would be like in the throes of passionate lust, and she had a sense that this was just the tip of the iceberg as she licked her lips and nodded at his unspoken question. There was no going back now.

'Yes, Severus. Yes. I'm not going to change my mind,' she whispered urgently. It was clearly what he had needed to hear, and the door flew open with a wordless spell. Severus pulled Hermione forward and pushed her into the room before him, his hand splayed against her lower back as he applied a little pressure. Hermione shuddered and closed her eyes, every slight touch making her feel like she was trembling. She turned to see Severus leaning back against the door just watching her. His eyes stared into her, but he seemed almost afraid to come closer to her, so she went to him. She took his hand in hers gently, and caressed his cheek with her palm, and he closed his eyes, pressing his face against her hand with a soft groan.

'What is it?' she said softly.

Severus opened his eyes and Hermione saw a touch of sadness mixed with what she knew to be love. 'This will change everything,' he whispered. 'I don't want to lose my

best friend.'

Hermione felt her eyes pricking slightly as her heart swelled with love for him. Severus was such a damaged soul, and she knew that they were going to be treading carefully through the minefield of his emotions if they embarked on this relationship, but she knew she could be strong enough for the both of them, because he was worth it.

'I'm not going anywhere. I love you, Severus. I love you more than I have ever loved anyone in my whole life. I'm yours, for as long as you want me. This will change everything, you're right. Change can be good, Severus. We can be good. I just know it.' She lifted his hand and placed it over her breastbone before kissing his knuckles gently and letting the tip of her tongue just slip out to lick a little.

Severus let out a grunt at the sight of her playful tongue and allowed her to pull him away from the door. Without speaking she used her small, deft fingers to untie his scarf and loosen the buttons of his coat.

'Do you think you'll always get away with being so bossy, witch?'

'Are you going to keep complaining, or are you going to kiss me?' Hermione shrugged his coat from his shoulders and ran her hands up his arms slowly, and she saw the glint in her eye just a moment too late. With a squeal, Hermione found herself thrown over Severus's shoulder and taken purposefully to the bed chamber.

The candles were casting soft, sensual shadows along the walls. Severus and Hermione were lying on top of his purple blanket, his leg slowly insinuating itself between hers as they kissed passionately. Severus' shirt was open, as was the top button of his fly, and Hermione's top was somewhere on the floor.

Severus moved his mouth from Hermione's luscious lips and trailed kisses across her chin and beneath her ear. He licked her lobe and sucked, and he felt Hermione shudder. He couldn't help but smile against her skin as he continued to kiss and lick her creamy throat, allowing his lips to dwell in the hollow between her neck and décolletage before slipping his tongue between her breasts and moving to kiss the soft mounds as the spilled from the cups of her blue, lace bra. His hand drifted up, and he let his thumb drift over her raised nipple, gratified when Hermione gasped and arched into his touch. Unable to stop himself, Severus pulled the cup of her bra downwards, the slight rent in the lace sounding loud in the quiet room. The urgency of the sound ignited something inside Severus and his lips immediately sought Hermione's needy, pebbled point. He took it between his lips and played his tongue across the very top, then swirled and laved around her aureole, taking as much of her breast into his mouth as he could. His hand drifted lower and tentatively cupped her pussy through her jeans, and Hermione moaned and pushed herself onto his hand and squeezed her thighs as much as she could to create greater friction.

'Severus... we need to get naked,' she gasped.

Severus lifted his eyes to hers. 'Patience,' he murmured, smiling at her wickedly. He pushed his thumb against her covered flesh, and as her eyes clouded with lust, he felt a catch in his throat. She looked so beautiful to him with her hair spread out like a halo on his pillow. And the way she responded to his touch. He had never known anything quite like it before. Holding her gaze, he slipped the button at the top of her jeans and allowed his fingertips to tease beneath the lace of her knickers. He looked at where his fingers met her flesh bent his head, letting his tongue follow their path. Hermione squirmed beneath him and groaned.

'Severus, please...' she begged. 'I love you, and I appreciate the gesture, but I have been wanting you to fuck me for months...please, I want you so much,' she whispered as he looked back to her. He couldn't help but smirk. He had just known she would be a demanding lover.

She caught her lower lip between her teeth and opened her eyes wide as his fingers slipped even lower and slid between her soaking wet folds. He ran the rough pad of his index finger across her clit, knowing it was exactly what she would need. Her mouth opened in a soundless gasp and her eyes closed as she shifted her hips, trying to get more friction. Severus smiled and withdrew his hand. Hermione was right. They both needed this, and he had teased them both long enough. He sat up and grabbed the top of her jeans with both hands, pulling them firmly off in one brisk, rough movement and making her bounce onto the bed. Her breasts jiggled with the movement, her exposed nipple just begging for more attention, and he almost launched himself on top of her naked body. He sucked her nipple into his mouth as his fingers sought her pussy, and he thrust a finger in as far as he could, crooking the tip forward. Hermione grabbed hold of his hair and pulled his face to hers, kissing him fiercely and thrusting her tongue in and out in time with his finger. Awkwardly, because Hermione didn't seem to be in a position to help, he used his free hand to fully open his fly, shoved his trousers half way down his arse and groaned as his erection sprang free and immediately found the dampness of Hermione's pubic hair. He moved his finger and quickly replaced it with the head of his cock at Hermione's entrance, and he pulled his face from her demanding kiss to look down at her as he pushed forward into her tight, wet heat. Her eyes closed and her head tipped back in ecstasy as he filled her to the hilt with his hardness.

'Yes,' she hissed, 'Severus, oh Gods...'

'Fuck,' he growled. 'Fuck, oh, fuck...' He closed his eyes at the incredible feel of her tight walls grasping at him, and started to move slowly, withdrawing and then pushing back in, revelling in the tightness that was already starting to build behind his balls. Severus pushed himself up on his arms, and his hair fell down in curtains and moved back and forth as he started to thrust faster. He snapped his hips forwards, and moaned loudly as Hermione lifted her hips to meet his thrust and grabbed his arse, gripping with her sharp nails, encouraging him to fuck her harder. A sheen of sweat appeared on Severus' upper lip, matched by the trickle between Hermione's shifting breasts. Her face was almost out of focus, but he saw the tensing of her jaw as he twisted his hip and caught a spot inside her just so. She was close now, he could feel her walls starting to grip him harder, and he slipped his hand between their joined bodies to find her engorged clit. Thrusting harder, he started to grunt with his own impending orgasm, and he rubbed, three, four times, until a cry of pleasure came from Hermione and she started to shake beneath him. Her walls clamped down on his rock hard cock and he shouted out incoherently as he came. He could feel his semen hitting her walls, over and over, until his arm could no longer hold his weight and he collapsed on top of her, his nose buried in her mass of curls. The only sound in the room was their panting breaths, but Severus could feel Hermione smile against his shoulder, and he couldn't stop the grin that spread across his own face, unseen.

It was the middle of the night. Or early morning, Severus neither knew nor cared. Hermione had her hand wrapped around the shaft of his cock, her legs either side of his thighs as she positioned and then lowered herself onto his hardness. Her lips were plump and red from a lengthy bout of snogging and her neck was marked by teeth and sucking. Her breasts were pink from his grip, and he held onto her as she started to move. He tweaked her nipples between his thumbs and forefingers, making her gasp with pleasure, her skin flushing as she started to move faster. She shifted her hip, and the tip of Severus' cock hit the front of her walls and made her moan out with pleasure. The bony ridge was catching the sensitive spot below the head of Severus' cock, and he held her in place as she moved, wanting more of it.

'Gods Hermione, that's amazing, don't stop, please... oh Gods,' he garbled. He couldn't seem to string a sentence together; such was the power of her sex to him. He watched, entranced, as she licked her fingers and then slipped them to her slit. He watched as she moved them frantically, her movements increasing as she started to moan.

'Coming,' she gasped, and Severus thrust up to meet her as she tightened around him. Severus held her in place as she started to fall boneless against him, and with two sharp, deep thrusts, he came, shuddering as he shot his load hard inside her. Hermione slipped softly down to rest on his chest, and Severus wrapped his arms around her and held her close, keeping himself inside her for as long as he could before he softened and slipped from her. He brushed her hair from her face and kissed her softly.

'I love you, witch,' he whispered.

'I know,' came the mumbled reply.

Forever Love

Chapter 19 of 21

Severus Snape reluctantly agrees to assist new Potions Professor Granger with a new project, with unexpected consequences.

A/N: Happy Update Day

19. Forever Love

"The very first kiss with your Prince will change your life. When your lips touch for the first time, the earth will feel like it stops moving, but in the same moment, the world around you spins. It'll feel like fireworks in the night sky. Like a bright light in the darkness. You'll feel your heart beat fast in your ears but silence will surround you. And when you pull apart and open your eyes and look at each other, and really see each other. You'll know it in that moment, through that kiss, that you've just let someone own a piece of your heart, and you'll live happily ever after." ~ Jay McClean, More Than This

Hermione dressed slowly. Her legs ached, but more than that her heart ached. She had promised Harry and Ginny that she would visit on Boxing Day, but she desperately wanted to stay with Severus. Now that they had found each other she had no desire to part from him, especially when he was lying naked in bed with his long legs on show and only a sheet to cover his midriff. He rested his head on his arms as he watched her with his hooded gaze, his hair a mussed mess. Hermione thought he had never looked sexier.

'You could come,' she said quietly, knowing what his answer would be.

'Not this time,' he said. 'You understand why.'

'I do. It's okay,' she sighed. She pulled her t-shirt over head and then turned to him, grabbing his hand with hers. 'Is it too soppy to say that I'll miss you?'

'Probably,' Severus said with a soft smile. He turned his palm and threaded his fingers through hers, and Hermione stared at their joined hands, feeling tears threatening to spill. She squeezed his hand and stood.

'If I don't go now I'll never want to leave.' She bent in and kissed him, shocked when his hand came up to cradle her head as he deepened the kiss and slipped his tongue between her lips gently. Hermione sighed and fell into the kiss, allowing him to explore her mouth, until she reluctantly pulled away. 'I'll try to hurry back, I promise,' she said, a little sadly.

'Good. Now shoo,' Severus said with a chuckle, waving her from the room with his hand. Hermione grinned at him, and felt silently grateful that he was making it easy on her. Deep down she knew that he didn't want her to go either. With a huff she walked into the sitting room, grabbed the pile of gifts she had waiting and Floo'd to Godric's Hollow.

Severus was pacing. For the first time in he couldn't remember how long, he was lonely. Hermione had been gone just over an hour and already he was missing her like she would never return. He had tried to read, but he couldn't concentrate of the text. Instead, his mind wandered to the previous day, to thoughts of Hermione's glorious breasts and the feel of him inside her.

He wondered if she had told Potter. He guessed probably not given that she was still with them and hadn't been ejected due to her obviously poor taste in men. He could just imagine the conversation, but it wouldn't do to wallow. He loved her, and she loved him, and thanks to his time in her body, he knew this to be true. He had felt drawn to her when she was in his guise, had found her attractive, had admired the swirl and billow of her robes and had felt the urge to kiss his own lips. These were Hermione's feelings, and the thought of it settled in a warm, happy sensation in his stomach. He smiled. He was happy. Truly happy. All thanks to Hermione. His mind drifted again to the swell of her lower lip, made fuller thanks to her sexy habit of biting it, and he had the urge to pull it with his own teeth and lick his tongue across it. It was almost an hour and a half since she had left him. An hour and a half too long. Severus grabbed his travelling cloak and left for the Apparition point just beyond the castle gates.

Hermione sat nursing her glass of wine, not really listening to what Ginny was saying. The house in Godric's Hollow was cosy and comfortable, and Harry had made a great job of redecorating and remodelling the interior to suit their needs. A Christmas tree sat in the corner of the warm lounge, fairy lights twinkling in time with the wizard stereo that was playing something suitably Christmassy. James was sleeping peacefully in his Moses basket, and Ginny kept bending over him to stroke his soft cheek. All of this was going on around her, but Hermione just wanted to be with Severus.

'Sickle for your thoughts,' Harry said, nudging her with his toe.

Hermione smiled. 'Nothing, really. I'm still getting used to being back in my own body, you know?'

'I still can't believe you had to live as Snape!' Ginny let out a peel of laughter. 'Oh my God, I've just realised. You must have been naked for some of that! Tell me, does he really keep the snake of the dungeon in his trousers?' She broke off again as a fit of the giggles took hold. Hermione was thankful that Ginny didn't notice her blush, but she had forgotten just how observant Harry could be.

'I'm sure Hermione doesn't want to think about that. Must have been a bit weird though, going to the loo as Snape?' Harry grinned, knowing that he was just embarrassing Hermione further.

'Can we change the subject?' Hermione was starting to feel uncomfortable. Now that she and Severus were together she had no desire to talk about his nakedness or his privates, even though to her mind they were well worth talking about.

'I'll grab some more wine, I think.' Ginny was sitting on the floor between Harry's knees but stood and walked through to the kitchen. Harry looked at Hermione out of the corner of his eye and Hermione pretended not to notice.

'How is Severus, anyway? I take it you couldn't persuade him to come?' Harry smiled knowingly and Hermione rolled her eyes. She decided to tell him everything and make him swear not to tell Ginny yet, when there was a firm knock at the front door. Harry frowned at Ginny as she walked back into the room with a bottle of wine, a tray full of cheese and biscuits and a large bar of Honeyduke's Luxury Caramel Spice chocolate. 'Are we expecting anyone?' he asked.

'No. Unless it's Neville and Luna? I did tell them you would be here, Hermione. I hope you don't mind?' Ginny handed the chocolate to Hermione and sat back down beside her.

Hermione smiled at the thought of Neville and Luna. They had been a couple since the end of the Final Battle and being together seemed to bring out the best in both of them. Hermione hadn't seen them in ages, and she looked up expectantly as Harry came back into the room.

He coughed lightly and shrugged. 'It's for you, Hermione.'

'For me?' Hermione shook her head. The only person who knew she was here was... 'Severus?'

Harry nodded and grinned as she leapt to her feet and pushed past him to the door. Severus stood on the front doorstep, looking awkward and almost shuffling from foot to foot. Hermione hurried to him and immediately put her arms around his neck, kissing him firmly and letting her fingers trail through his hair. She felt him sigh in obvious relief as he returned the kiss with enthusiasm, his arms tightly around her waist as he pulled her firmly against him.

'So glad you're here,' Hermione gasped between kisses. 'I missed you so much.'

'It was only an hour and thirty-five minutes,' he said through smothered lips. His tongue sought hers, and Hermione moaned and shifted her legs to straddle one of his thighs. There were too many layers, too much clothing, and she couldn't get close enough to frof against him.

'I think you need to let the poor man breathe, Hermione.' Harry stood in the hallway, a look of amusement on his face. Hermione pulled away from Severus sheepishly and blushed at the look of mortification on his face.

'Shut up, Potter,' he muttered. 'I was about to die a happy man.'

Hermione giggled and Harry let out a laugh. 'Not on my doorstep you don't. Come in, Severus. Have some wine with us,' Harry said warmly. He noticed the unsure look that passed between Severus and Hermione and said 'Please?'

Hermione smiled at Harry over her shoulder and pulled Severus forwards. He followed, much to her relief, and they headed back into the cosy sitting room.

Eight days later, Hermione and Severus sat at the head table in the Great Hall, finishing their evening meal and making small talk with Filius, Pomona and Minerva. They had spent the day preparing for the returning students with heavy hearts, knowing that the bubble they had been in since Christmas day was about to burst. For over a week they had barely been apart, spending most of their time in Severus' quarters, apart from New Year's Eve, when Severus had Apparated them both to London. They had eaten in a small, intimate restaurant, and then stood in St James's Park to watch the fireworks. They had talked, made love, read together and soaked up each other as much as they could before having to go back to reality. They needed to tell Minerva that they were together, but decided to wait. They weren't sure what the fall out would be, so in the meantime, they decided to be as discreet as possible and use the Floo to travel between their quarters.

Severus felt Hermione nudge him slightly with her foot, their given signal that it was time to depart. He heard her say her goodbyes to Filius and Pomona and felt her chair shift.

'Goodnight, Professor,' she said quietly.

He nodded at her and muttered, 'Granger,' before turning back to Minerva. He was stilled by the amused look on the Headmistresses face and looked back at her innocently. 'What?'

'Honestly, Severus. You and Hermione have spent the best part of this year together working on her project. Do you think you could try to be a bit nicer to the girl? I think if you gave her a chance you could even be friends.' Minerva shook her head and turned back to her dessert, and Severus had to turn away to stifle a laugh that was desperately trying to escape. He disguised it by coughing loudly until the urge went away, and Minerva clapped him hard between the shoulder blades.

'My thanks, Minerva. Next time you want to kill me, perhaps you should suggest I marry the chit?'

He shoved his chair back in what seemed like a fit of pique, scowled at everyone and marched swiftly from the hall, until he let the doors close behind him and dissolved into a heaving fit of laughter.

Hermione checked the time and smiled. She lifted her beaded bag, and stepped into the Floo. 'Severus Snape's quarters,' she said firmly.

She arrived gracelessly at the other end, stumbling over the hearth as she went. She was immediately caught by long, strong arms, and smiled up at him. 'Hello,' she said. 'Thank you for catching me.'

Severus smiled at her. 'I'll always be here to catch you.' He bent to kiss her softly, and she smiled beneath his lips.

'Do you think it will always be this perfect?' She grinned up at him as the look of wonder crossed his face. She was still surprised by his almost disbelief that they were together, and it made her love him even more.

'Define always,' he murmured, bending to nuzzle her neck and planting kisses against her skin that made her shiver in anticipation.

'Always, forever, never ending... You and me, and no-one else for either of us, ever,' she whispered.

She felt Severus still against her and he pulled away to stare into her eyes. 'You mean that, don't you?'

'You know I do, you git.' Hermione poked him in the stomach playfully and he grabbed her hand before she can do it again.

'Fine then. Yes. It will always be this perfect,' he grinned at her. 'But if you poke me again I shall have to spank you.'

Hermione flushed and her mouth opened softly. She dropped her beaded bag, looked Severus in the eye, poked him hard, and ran.

Making The Choice

Chapter 20 of 21

Severus Snape reluctantly agrees to assist new Potions Professor Granger with a new project, with unexpected consequences.

20. Making The Choice

The risk of a wrong decision is preferable to the terror of indecision.

~ Maimonides

It had taken Minerva a little time to notice that things were different between Hermione and Severus. That they had both left the castle together on his birthday should have been the first clue. Catching Hermione in Severus' quarters on more than one occasion should have been another. But catching the two of them snogging in the curtained alcove by the Great Hall was the moment the sickle dropped, and she failed to take points from Slytherin and Gryffindor for the poor example set by her staff, simply because she was far too happy for them both. What had followed was the most romantic and intimate wedding, organised in tandem between Molly Weasley, Minerva and the house-elves, and six months after declaring their love for each other, Professors Granger and Snape were man and wife. Now things were official, Hermione had agreed to empty out her quarters. It wasn't clear where they would live long-term, but neither of them had a desire to teach and had tendered their notices to Minerva to leave Hogwarts a year from now, giving her ample time to fill their vacant posts and for them both to plan their future.

Hermione emptied out her desk. A pile of parchment, documents and official looking scrolls now sat on the table by the fire, ready for her to go through them with Severus. She scanned the almost bare dungeon and smiled to herself. This was a special place even though it was cold and uninspiring and she could only hope that the next occupant would find some happiness here, as she had.

'Winky,' she called out. The house-elf appeared with a smile on her face and Hermione couldn't help but smile back.

'What is Winky needed for, Mistress Snape?'

'Can you take this desk into my office and put it where the old one used to be, and then let Professor Snape know that I need him?' Hermione had not even finished her sentence before the desk and the elf disappeared with a light 'pop', so she turned her attention to the paperwork. There were research notes that might be useful at some point, so she put them to one side. There were her unsigned and undated Ministry agreements for the Polyjuice Project. Hermione put them to the other side. Their wedding certificate, sealed with Gryffindor and Slytherin colours, she lifted and held in her hand, and was wondering if they should get it framed when Severus stepped out of the Floo. Hermione looked up and smiled at him. He was wearing black jeans and a green, v-necked sweater, which meant one thing.

'Everyone gone?' she asked.

'Every last annoying, whinging, intrusive, nosy, cheeky, spotty one of them.' He grinned back at her.

'Thank goodness.' Hermione handed Severus her research notes. 'Start with these? If there is anything you think is worth pursuing, keep them. Anything you know won't work, incinerate it.'

'Whatever you say, dear,' Severus said dryly. He raised an eyebrow at her and sat beside her on the couch, nudging her shoulder gently. 'You're still bossy, you know.'

'Shush, Severus, I'm reading,' Hermione muttered between pursed lips. Her Polyjuice Project was in her hand. All the months of research, detailed accounts of the mistake they had made included. The important points about misuse and the risks involved. Her spells were clearly and painstakingly written out in long hand, alongside the diagrams of wand movements. Hermione frowned and shook her head.

'Severus, can I ask you something?' She turned to her husband, obvious concern in her eyes.

'Of course.' He put down the sheaf of parchment and took her free hand in his.

'Do you still feel different? I mean, of course, we're both different. We're married now, and being in love, that changes a person anyway. But after the trial, I noticed differences and I think they're still there. I'm no longer scared when someone takes out their wand, for one thing. That's something I have kept from being you, I think.'

'I see what you mean.' Severus looked over Hermione's shoulder as his thoughts drifted, and a smile played over his lips. 'I still have a taste for ketchup? Does that count?'

Hermione laughed and bent to catch his lips with her briefly. 'Idiot.'

'I think I laugh more, if that's the sort of thing you mean. I feel lighter, happier inside. And I don't think that is just because I have finally found my true love,' he said softly, stroking her face with his pale fingers. 'The things that used to make me irritable don't seem to affect me in the same way. I have more patience, I think.'

Hermione nodded in agreement. Severus had definitely mellowed, and she had never been quite sure what had triggered the change in her, or the Polyjuice. Perhaps it was both, but she would never know the real answer.

'This is what worries me. We have both changed because on some level, but we're fortunate in that the changes have all been positive.'

'Apart from the ketchup,' Severus interrupted.

'Be serious.' Hermione laughed again. 'Imagine that an Auror has to go undercover, to disguise themselves as someone they would never wish to be. A Death Eater, or a murderer. Now imagine that they have to be that person for weeks at a time. We know from experience that it can change the very nature of a person. I think I've created a monster, Severus.' Hermione shook her head and put the papers on to the table as Severus pulled her into a hug. He stroked her hair and started to kiss her ear lightly, and Hermione pressed herself against him as her fingers slipped beneath the edge of his jumper to find bare skin. She sighed as Severus started to speak.

'You are an incredible witch, Hermione. What you have created is incredible, too. But I have to agree with you. I have always worried about the use of this formula in the wrong hands, you know that. But it's not wasted research. You own this, so you can choose what you share and don't share. The Long-Life Polyjuice and the antidote are both viable products, but keep the spells to yourself. You'll probably never need them, but you'll know that you have them and perhaps that will be enough.'

Hermione shook her head against Severus' warm chest as he tightened his arms around her. 'No. I can't keep them. There will be a time when I'm no longer here, and who knows what would happen then. No,' she said, sitting up. 'There is only one way to do this.'

Hermione sifted through her papers and pulled out all of the sections detailing the personality spells. She withdrew her wand, and they disappeared in a puff of smoke. She immediately felt a weight lifted from her shoulders.

'Sell the Long-Life Polyjuice and the Anti-dote, Severus. The spell never existed,' she said with a smile.

Severus grabbed her hand and pulled her towards him, kissing her softly at first and then deepening the kiss, his fingers drifting from Hermione's slim neck to cup her ample breast.

'We have an hour before we leave for the hotel, wife. I have a few ideas on how we can pass the time,' he murmured. Severus nipped Hermione's nipple between his thumb and forefinger, and sucked at her soft flesh. He pulled away briefly and chuckled to himself.

'Don't tease, Severus,' Hermione said, squirming until she had pulled him on top of her and began to unfasten his fly. 'What were you laughing at?'

'I just remembered something else I've taken away with me from being Polyjuiced as you,' he rumbled against her. His hand slipped under the waistband of her jeans and he deftly unbuttoned them, sliding his fingers lower until they probed her moist lips, rubbing frustratingly close to her clit.

Hermione groaned, then slid her hand inside Severus' fly and grasped his hard cock firmly. 'Tell me,' she whispered huskily.

'Well,' he said, kissing her lips swiftly and slipping his tongue between her teeth, 'I know how to frig you until you're almost about to come... and then tempt your lovely cunt until you beg me to thrust home.' He smiled seductively as he dipped his head lower, sliding his wet tongue across her belly and then up, catching a pert nipple between his lips and sucking firmly.

'That's because you cheated and played with my body without permission. Don't think I didn't guess,' Hermione said, panting as Severus slipped his hand even lower and teased her entrance with the tip of his index finger.

'And you were totally innocent, of course,' he growled. He pulled his hand away and hooked his fingers around the top of Hermione's jeans, pulling them and her underwear downwards and trapping her knees with the bunched fabric. He shuffled downwards, and nuzzled at her lower lips, snaking his tongue out to lick her juices.

'Not innocent,' Hermione gasped out. 'Just wanted to know... Gods, Severus, please!'

Severus looked up into Hermione's face and grinned. 'My favourite know-it-all,' he growled, then he plunged his tongue into her, licking and flicking in turns, until Hermione came with a cry, her hips undulating forward and pushing her quim further onto his eager mouth. He watched with a smile as she finally collapsed back onto the sofa cushions, totally spent, her curls now loose and wild from her orgasm. Her eyes fluttered closed, and Severus felt his heart swell with love. He still couldn't believe she was here, with him, that they were married and planning a future together. He needed her as much as he needed to breathe. Taking advantage of the lull, he divested Hermione of the rest of her clothes, and then lay gently between her open thighs, resting his cock along her damp crease as he planted feather light kisses on her softly-parted mouth.

'Make love to me,' she whispered, gazing into his eyes.

He stared at her for a brief moment before shifting his hips and sliding into her tight heat with a low moan. He held himself there, feeling her muscles clenching, and he gasped as Hermione ran her fingernails over his bare buttocks and gripped him. Taking the hint, he started to move with slow and steady thrusts, and he lifted her hips beneath him. He curled into her, and then increased his pace, slamming himself deeply into her until they were both grunting and moaning incoherently. Severus felt his balls tighten and with a shout, he came, his semen coating Hermione's tight cunt in sure, steady spurts. Slowly, carefully he laid them both back down, being careful not to crush his precious witch and keeping himself inside her.

Hermione kissed Severus on his cheek and brushed his hair from his face. He opened his eyes, and smiled.

Daily Prophet ~ Exclusive Report

'Snapes launch revolutionary Polyjuice Potion.'

'In an exclusive report, this Daily Prophet reporter can announce that Professor Hermione Granger-Snape has spent the majority of her teaching hours in lining her own pockets, and that of her husband, the dubious War Hero Severus Snape.'

We can reveal that this project, developed exclusively for the Ministry Auror Office, was fraught with problems and issues and required the services of an exceptionally gifted Slytherin student, Miss Phoebe Gilroy, daughter of the highly respected Gaius Gilroy, to sort out the mess they created. For further details of this and another exclusive interview with Miss Gilroy on her new apprenticeship at St. Mungo's, turn to page 34.'

The Final Duel

Chapter 21 of 21

Severus Snape reluctantly agrees to assist new Potions Professor Granger with a new project, with unexpected consequences.

A/N: Here we are then at the end of our tale - thanks to ARo and Cybrokat for their help with grammar, spellings and generally poor grasp of the English language. And thanks to you for reading :)

21. The Final Duel

One Year Later

Severus stood at the front of the class, his eyes meeting all of his students individually. He assessed each of them in turn, particularly a couple of Slytherins who had been troublemakers over the years. That this was his last class at Hogwarts wasn't lost on him. There was nothing more he could teach them anyway, and it was time to move on. Two more days and school would be closed again for the summer, and this time, they were leaving for good. Hermione, against all odds, had decided to not work for a few years, except perhaps to assist Severus with his Potion Making business. They had premises ready in Hogsmeade, with a cottage attached. A large garden at the back was already bearing fruit, and the work inside the cottage would be ready when the time came. Severus was content. He just needed to get through this class.

'I had promised you a demonstration of duelling by two of the most competent fighters I know. They brought down Tom Riddle, or as you may have heard of him, Voldemort.' He paused at the gasps and whispers around the room and the narrowed gaze of the two Slytherins. He mentally shook his head. Some families would never learn.

Severus raised his voice. 'Enough,' he said. 'Clear the room. Put away your wands.' He stared at the Slytherins, who complied with scowls on their faces. 'Move.' He waved his students to the sides of the room and cast a shielding charm around them for protection. He looked around at the expectant faces and his mouth twitched.

'Very well. I would like you to welcome our guest, Professor Granger- Snape.'

Severus flicked his wand to reveal Hermione, who had been sitting behind his desk, disillusioned and waiting patiently. She stood, and there was another sharp intake of breath as she joined Severus in the centre of the room. She had her hair tied back severely behind her head, but what had caused the reaction was her attire. Hermione wore a skin tight black catsuit in latex, made especially to help her to move freely while allowing her skin to breath. It clung to her toned body in a way that Severus found especially pleasing, but he was used to seeing her dressed in this way and was well practised in managing his libido. Hermione turned and waved at a couple of the

Gryffindors from her Potions class, and Severus coughed and stared at her incredulously. She grinned, but said 'Sorry, Professor Snape.'

'Let's get started,' he murmured. Hermione nodded and walked to the end of the room, turned and took her fighting stance, bent slightly at knee with her wand in her right hand. Severus walked back to his desk and unfastened the buttons of his jacket, and turned as something caught his eye. A Slytherin had his hand in the air.

'Yes, Brent?' Severus stared at the boy who met his gaze coolly.

'Sir, I thought there were two fighters?' he asked.

'There are.' Severus continued to remove his coat, flicked his wand to tie back his hair and then turned to face the class. He was dressed in a similar fashion to Hermione, and although his trousers were not quite as figure hugging, they left little to the imagination. There were a few 'oooh's' from the girls, and Hermione smirked.

'You have some admirers, Professor Snape,' she teased. 'Perhaps you should take your clothes off more often?'

Severus' mouth twitched. He knew she was taunting him in readiness for their duel, and he responded in kind. 'I will if you will, Professor Granger-Snape.'

There was a ripple of laughter around the class room, and it was clear that the class were enjoying the banter. Severus saw Hermione's finger twitch and he readied himself. Without warning, a hex flew in his direction, and they were off. Hermione was lithe and supple, and she rolled and ran around the room after Severus, casting spells, curses and hexes for all she was worth. Severus followed her lead, bouncing her spells off his shields and disillusioning himself to get behind her. She was too quick for him, and she cast a hex over her shoulder as she crouched and rolled away, and then stood in the middle of the room. She gathered her magic and waited. Severus crept slowly up to her as she glanced around trying to spot the tell tale shimmer of his spell, and as he raised his wand, she let out with a loud 'Expelliarmus!'

Severus lost control of his magic, and shimmered back into visibility as the force of the spell threw him back across the room. He landed with a thud against the wall as his wand arced and landed in Hermione's free hand. Sweat was rolling down her face, and she grinned around the room, triumphant. The students went wild, cheering and clapping at the sight of Professor Snape bested by a girl. It took them all a moment to realise that the Professor still wasn't moving, but Hermione saw immediately that something was wrong and she ran to his side, lifting his head tenderly.

'Severus? Oh, God, are you alright?' she whispered. She lifted her wand. 'Enervate,' she said quietly. Severus' eyes flickered open, and Hermione gasped in relief. 'I thought I'd killed you,' she said.

'Don't be daft, witch.' He winced and pushed himself to his feet, ignoring the concern on Hermione's face. Smoothing down his hair gingerly, he turned to face the class and wordlessly removed the shield around them.

'You may go. But before you do, let this be a lesson to all of you. Never, ever underestimate a Gryffindor.'

The class cheered again as laughter rippled around the room, and as the last student left and closed the door, Hermione raised her eyebrow as Severus turned to her.

'Well done. You were brilliant,' he smiled and opened his arms to her. They held each other for a moment, until Hermione sniffed and pulled away.

'We should shower before heading to St. Mungo's,' she said.

'And we're agreed. This was your last duel?' Severus grabbed Hermione by the hand firmly and made her face him.

'Yes, Severus. Although you're making a fuss. Healer Gilroy has already said it's safe until the second trimester,' she said soothingly.

'Well, Healer Gilroy thinks the sun shines out of your arse. You could get her to agree to anything.' Severus smirked at the look of agreement in Hermione's eyes and knew he had no chance.

He wouldn't have it any other way.

Four Years Later

Severus closed the shop, secured the wards and extinguished the lanterns. Saturday evening was his favourite time of the week, because the shop was closed on Sundays and he had the day free to spend with his growing family. He gathered his cloak and threw it over his arm, picked up the small Honeydukes bag he had slipped out for earlier in the day, and walked through the back of the shop and through the adjoining door into the Snape family home.

'Daddy!'

He was accosted by a curly haired ball of energy that grabbed him by the knees and would have almost floored him if he hadn't been expecting it.

'Hermione,' he called out in mock fear. 'I'm being attacked by a monster!'

'I'm not a monster. I'm your little princess.' His daughter looked up at him with large, black eyes and a pouting lower lip, and he couldn't help but laugh.

'Don't panic, Hermione. It was only Sadie,' he called again. He bent and wrapped his free arm around Sadie's waist and hoisted her beneath his armpit, carrying her like a giggling rolled up carpet into the front room. Hermione was lying prone on the sofa, her feet raised and her hands resting softly on her rounded stomach. He paused at the sheen of sweat on her upper lip, and placed Sadie on the floor swiftly. 'Here, darling. Put this in the kitchen, it's a treat for after supper.' He handed the bag of chocolate to Sadie, and she ran off with a happy squeal. He went to Hermione's side and took her hand.

'Tell me,' he murmured.

'Five minutes apart,' she said. 'Molly's coming over as soon as you Floo her. Help me up, I need to walk around.'

Once Hermione was on her feet, she began to walk around the sofa, pausing every now and then.

'I'll get your bag, shall I?' Severus was growing concerned and was loathe putting off the trip to St Mungo's for too long.

Hermione nodded as she bit her lip. 'Severus?' she called to him as he walked from the room. He put his head back inside the door. 'Thank you for looking after me,' she said with a watery smile.

Severus walked over and kissed his wife on the lips gently. 'I always will,' he said softly.