

First Friday in April

by *linlawless*

Sometimes, everything changes in an instant. Written for Summer 2013 Promptfest at LiveJournal.

A Oneshot

Chapter 1 of 1

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Author Note: Thanks to my beta/Britpicking team TeaOli, karelia, and Proulxes who are always fabulous and who always improve my offerings. As an inveterate tinkerer, I can only hope I haven't undermined any of their hard work since they returned it to me. Thanks also to pigwidgeon37 for the inspiring prompt (shown at the end of the story). I hope you enjoy the result! And finally, thanks to the Promptfest mods for offering us another opportunity to spotlight, honour, and enjoy my OTP.

I know the moment I arrive at work on the third of October that it's happened again. For the fiftieth well, all right, if you insist on absolute accuracy, the *fifth* time in the past year.

I know, I know. He's *always* grumpy. He *always* looks like he'd rather be anywhere but here. Maybe even like he'd rather be dead. Or worse, in Azkaban.

But today, his glare has that extra something. And he already has his coffee, which he Apparates to Turkey to buy, so it's not a lack of caffeine that has him starting the conversation with 'you left the asphodel shipment in the wrong place' instead of a simple 'Hermione'. Or even 'Granger'.

"Who was it this time?" I ask, knowing perfectly well he won't answer.

True to form, he doesn't. He glares and says, "The asphodel, Granger. I needed it *ten* minutes ago, and if I don't add it in the next four and a half, the base for the Wolfsbane will go to waste. I've looked on your desk for it already."

"I prepared it before I left yesterday, Severus," I say. "Just like I always do." I walk over to *his* desk and remove the Stasis Charm from the large bowl standing plain as day, dead centre, as I take it over to his cauldron and add it myself. "Who was it this time?" I ask again.

He harrumphs and adds the betaine before asking, "If you think I'm going to give you another opportunity to say you told me so, Granger, you're sadly mistaken."

I rein in my irritation and say as mildly as I can manage, "I have never once said 'I told you so', Severus. I don't know why you should think I'd start now."

"I know what you're thinking," he grouses.

Has he been using Legilimency on me? Would I even know if he had?

He adds, "And before you ask, I have no need for Legilimency when your every thought is clearly written across your face."

"No one *else* can tell what I'm thinking," I mutter as I prepare for the final incantation before we bottle.

He raises an eyebrow, looking smugly self-satisfied, but he says nothing more on the topic until forty-five minutes later, after we've bottled and prepared the Wolfsbane for posting. Still, his mood seems improved slightly as we work together, the silence almost companionable. "No one else knows you as I do, Hermione," he says at last.

He's right, I acknowledge silently. He *does* know me, just as I know him. He knows all about me, including my worst tendencies, and he seems to like me for, rather than in spite of, them. He knows practically every detail of my divorce; the minutiae of my children's lives; what I like to eat and read and wear and talk about; he *listens* to me, even when I'm updating him on Ron or Harry's latest exploits. He let me cry all over his best robes when Crookshanks died!

And we get into wonderful academic discussions sometimes. We spent hours once debating the question of 'what might happen if we added a few sprinkles of Pixie dust and a drop of brandy to that potion?' He rolled his eyes, of course, but I caught the tiniest twitch of his lip just before he suggested we settle the question by trying it.

(When it exploded, he refused to unward the door until I gave him a wand oath never to breathe a word to Neville. I still giggle when I imagine Neville's reaction if he ever found out, though.)

But I digress. The way we know each other the way we understand each other it's why we work so well together, probably; Severus had frightened away five other assistant-brewers-cum-business-managers before I tricked him into hiring me.

After the fourth time this happened the fourth time *overall*, I mean, not the fourth time in the past year. That would be the eleventh, overall he even said, "Hermione, why can't I find someone who understands me the way you do?" He was well into a bottle of Old Ogdens when he said it, but even so, what could I say? 'You have rubbish taste in women'? He does, of course, but that was beside the point then, even more than it is today.

I say now, "True enough, I suppose. Merlin knows Ron never figured it out in twenty-odd years."

He gives me another one of those annoyingly superior half-smiles, but this time there's a hint of real humour there. "You didn't seriously expect he would, did you?" And then, in the way of men everywhere, he actually defends Ron (sort of): "Besides, you can't count the adolescent years. All those hormones and Quidditch matches." He gives an exaggerated shudder. "Not to mention trying to outwit a megalomaniac. It's a wonder he remembered his own name."

I can't help myself no, really, I *tried* I smirk at him and point out, "It must be especially bad this time if you're actually defending Ron." In all the months when Ron and I were going through the divorce, Severus kept me entertained with ideas for how I could get my anonymous revenge. He refused to believe me when I told him it wasn't Ron's fault and I wanted to keep things amicable for the children's and Harry and Ginny's sakes. Fortunately, Severus believed that revenge enacted on my behalf would be less satisfying for me, so he didn't take matters into his own hands.

Severus says, "It was rather worse than usual this time. She tried to cast that Bat-Bogey Hex your friend is so fond of. If I hadn't joined the duelling club in Hogsmeade, my *Protego* would likely have been inadequate."

"Who was she?"

He gives me that look that the men in my life all seem to have been born with you know the one I mean the one that says, 'Erm... well, I was a bit of an idiot not to have seen this coming...' He mumbles a name, which I can't decipher the first time.

"Excuse me?" I ask.

"Gabrielle Delacour," he says irritably.

I just barely manage not to roll my eyes. What is it with men and Veelas? For that matter, what is it with men and women who are half their age? I silently agree with that look he gave me before he confessed: he's an idiot.

How on earth an intelligent man of fifty-two and one with a complicated history and an even more complicated psyche thinks he's going to be happy with a woman half his age whose primary recommendation is her pretty blonde hair, I have no idea.

All right, fine, I *don't* know her well enough to know if that's her primary attraction; *it's*, however, the one thing she has that I truly covet.

In any event, he sighs. "Go ahead and say it, Hermione. You know you want to."

"I do *not* want to," I insist. "For one thing, you already know, and for another, I don't have any intention of adding insult to injury for my dearest friend."

His lip twitches, and he sounds amused when he says, "And now you've managed to say it without actually saying it, haven't you? Well done." He pauses, sobering, then asks in a small voice, "*Am* I really your dearest friend?"

I'm stunned he has to ask. How can he be uncertain in the face of all we've gone through together? When I've seen him through *eleven* no, *twelve* now! break-ups? The very thought that he doesn't *know* to the depths of his soul makes me weepy. I say softly, emphatically, past the lump in my throat, "Never doubt it, Severus. I would be lost without you."

The full smile that grows on his features transforms them. I've seen it so rarely that I am amazed at its brilliance; for all his crooked teeth and limp hair and *impressive* nose, he is handsome when he smiles. Energy of an unexpected sort buzzes through my body as I wonder how many people in his life have seen it.

He asks, "Why have I never...erm... that is... Why have *we* never...?"

Caught off guard, I blurt out the truth truths, actually; there are several. "Because you've never asked me. Because I was married. Because you've jumped from one relationship to another so fast I never got a moment in between to ask you. Because I don't want to be another rebound or worse, another mistake for you." I pause before admitting, "Because I've been afraid to lose what we have."

He nods slowly, as if he is assimilating what I've said. After a long silence, he says softly, "Yes." Just that, but I know what he means. He means yes to everything I've said, and yes, he also doesn't want to make another mistake, especially with me, and yes, he, too, is afraid.

We stare at each other. Eventually, he turns away to begin cleaning the Wolfsbane cauldron. I feel let down, though I try not to show it; I don't know what else to do, so I begin sorting the ingredients for Pepper-Up.

An hour and a quarter later, he breaks a pregnant silence. "I need to be single for a while, I think." A pause. I'm still trying to figure out how to respond to that when he asks cautiously, "Will you have dinner with me, then? Perhaps... on the first Friday in April?"

And just like that, my soul bubbles up; I can feel it spilling into a delighted smile.

"It's a date."

Prompt: S and H have been friends for years. Not for the first time, Severus falls for an unsuitable (in Hermione's opinion) woman, and she has to pick up the pieces. Can end in SS/HG becoming a couple, or just continuing as friends.