

The Delusion of Love

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Chapter 1 of 1

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AN: Thanks so much for taking the time to read! If you could take a moment to review, I'd really appreciate it. :) Thanks a bunch!

It began, of all places, in the shower.

Severus Snape, Potions Master and educator of half-minded twits whose only purpose in life, it seemed, was to destroy precious ingredients and cauldrons, had been peacefully taking his morning shower, letting the warm streams of water drip down the length of his tired body. The hot water enveloped him in a relaxing embrace, soothing tense muscles and drawing out a careless silent stream of consciousness, letting his mind wander over useless facts and mindless speculations.

He decided that Nigel Wordsworth was a careless oaf and should not be allowed near a cauldron again. He was certain that Susan Ollerton was Slytherin's best chance at Head Girl for the following year. He determined that the Quidditch match against Gryffindor had been nothing but a farce, as it was clear the Gryffindor seeker had some sort of illegal advantage over his competitors. He made a mental note that he should avoid Professor McGonagall for a decidedly long period of time thereafter.

And it was there, in the middle of the perfectly natural stream of thoughts, that an idea so bold and so radical appeared and jarred him enough that he hit his head against the firm stone tile lining the shower.

He was in love with Hermione Granger.

It was a ridiculous idea, really, considering that Severus didn't much like *anything*, let alone fancy or, Merlin forbid, *love*. He was far too sensible for such a useless waste of energy and time. He was a busy man, he had things to do. He had no time for something as sentimental and purely maudlin as love.

And with that, the idea was thrown away and pushed to the back of his mind, left to be forgotten through the passage of time.

The only problem was, the more Severus seemed to deny the thought, the more it seemed to want to make its presence known. The absurd idea began taking on a life of its own and pestering him of its own accord, much like an irritatingly persistent child, tugging demandingly at his robes at all hours.

He found himself cursing his students for including Hermione's name in their essays. He'd violently slash the word with bloody red ink and scrawl unintelligible insults in the margins, immediately assigning detention to the whole of the class for their obvious prank.

Of course, the moment he'd realized that the word he'd so horribly mutilated had, in actuality, been *hellebore*, his mood significantly worsened.

After he found himself spotting Hermione sitting with the Gryffindors in the Great Hall (when it was a well known fact that she'd graduated five years prior) and accidentally saying her name mid-sentence during his instructions in class, he decided that he'd best face his problem head on before he found new and further degrading ways to destroy any sense of dignity he still retained.

So, with a glass of firewhisky in one hand and a fire burning in the fireplace, Severus sat in his study one evening soon after, determined to place this illogical stirring of feelings into perspective. He allowed his mind, for the first time since his epiphany in the shower, to ponder his situation and, more specifically, Hermione herself.

The first time he'd seen her in more recent times had been a glimpse of her as she left the gargoyle guarded passageway to Dumbledore's office. He hadn't thought much of it at the time, save for mild surprise at her presence.

She was a mere child at the tender age of eighteen when he'd last seen her four and a half years prior, when it was her talent (along with that Weasley boy) that had aided Potter in defeating Voldemort during the last battle. Celebrations had erupted throughout the wizarding world, but as soon as the revelry died down, Hermione Granger had disappeared from Severus's life and, to tell the truth, he didn't much miss her.

It was not long after his catching sight of her near Dumbledore's office that he'd been told the reason for her presence. Of course, at the time it didn't mean much to him at all, save for a warning that he should prepare more batches of headache brews for his own stock.

It was during the weekly staff meeting that Dumbledore announced to the staff that Hermione Granger, the Gryffindor star of years ago, had opened her own clinic of sorts in Hogsmeade. Granger, being the eternal philanthropist, had succeeded brilliantly at her studies post Hogwarts and had pursued a career as a healer after the war. After her certification, as Dumbledore explained, she'd decided to open a small clinic for the villagers of Hogsmeade, where ailments and injuries could be treated without the need to travel the distance to St. Mungo's.

The news, at the time, hadn't impressed Severus very much. In fact, he didn't think anything of it at all...as long as she stayed out of his way, he could happily forget the fact that the insufferable know-it-all had returned to close proximity of the castle.

Of course, things were never quite that easy, and Hermione made sure that Severus didn't forget that she was nearby.

It had started one particularly stormy Saturday afternoon. Severus had been in his office, correcting a short stack of third year essays, when Hermione had come into the classroom, requesting a favor. She wanted to make her own healing potions, using his facilities.

"Please, Professor?" she had pleaded. "I can buy my own ingredients...I just need a proper laboratory to brew the potions in."

He knew that Dumbledore would have happily given Hermione free range over Severus's lab, but she'd thought to ask nonetheless and for that he was mildly grateful. Not much, but grateful enough that he'd suffered a temporary moment of weakness and given her permission to use his labs.

It began uneventfully. Whenever Hermione entered the lab every Saturday, she stayed much to herself and dutifully prepared her potions. Severus found himself glancing at her every so often, simply suspicious of the silence.

Then came the day when Hermione had asked Severus where he'd learned his talent for potions. He later attributed his willingness to respond to the fumes of the powerful potion Hermione was brewing, but he, in as little words as possible, explained.

That had started it. Immediately after, it became apparent to Severus that any desire to get work done during the hours of Hermione's presence in his lab was a futile attempt. She insisted on asking an endless barrage of questions and he grudgingly answered them.

Soon, it became apparent that Hermione had grown increasingly comfortable with Severus during those hours in his lab. She would slip off her shoes while working on a particularly demanding potion and she would slip off her robes (revealing sensible, comfortable Muggle clothing underneath) to keep full use of her arms without fear of damaging the draping sleeves of her wizarding clothing.

It was during this time that Severus had begun noticing things about Miss Granger that he hadn't noticed before. It was unsettling, really, the way he studied her from afar as she laboriously worked over a particularly trying potion. It bothered him that he knew that the soft clicking sound she'd make with her tongue was an indicator of impatience and frustration. He was furious with himself for noticing the gentle, pleasing curve of her neck when she'd pull her eternally bushy hair up during the course of her work.

It especially, above all else, irritated him that the curious tingling he'd get in the pit of his stomach when Saturdays would draw near was linked to the admittedly intriguing conversation, interesting company, and warmth that Hermione Granger seemed to bring to his dark, cold dungeons.

Still, he hadn't thought much of it. Or, rather, *herefused* to think much of it. He was a man, after all, and it was perfectly natural for a man to develop feelings of lust or desire for a moderately attractive female working in close conditions. That was all it was, he had decided. Desire for Hermione Granger, which (as absurd as it sounded) was still considered perfectly normal and acceptable, had been the culprit of the foolish stirrings of his stomach and pounding of his heart. That was all.

Of course, he hadn't counted on her becoming ill.

He'd been doing his nightly rounds about the castle, bound and determined on catching a foolish Gryffindor on a late night quest, when he'd heard pounding at the front doors.

He followed the echoed pounding to the entrance, where Filch had just opened the heavy doors. With a lantern in hand, he surveyed the visitors, snarling inquiries. Standing before him was a silver haired man who looked panicked beyond all form of reason. It was then, as Severus approached the doors, that he saw what the man carried in his arms.

Hermione Granger, unconscious.

Severus, overcome with a strange sense of fear, took the limp body from the stranger's arms and, lacking the presence of mind to use a simple levitating charm, carried her to the hospital wing.

He kicked open the doors to the ward, shouting Madam Pomfrey's name. She appeared from around a corner, hair mussed as she wrapped a robe around her nightgown.

"What is it?" she cried, rushing to him.

"It's Hermione," he managed amidst gasping for breath.

He was too panicked to notice that he, for the first time, had used her first name.

Severus stayed in the hospital wing the remainder of the night, monitoring Hermione as she slept. Her body glistened with the sweat of a burning fever and she writhed and twisted in her sleep, whimpering softly long into the night.

Madam Pomfrey had assured Severus that the only way to fully heal was to let the fever break naturally, without magical aid, leaving him suffering from a suffocating sense of helplessness. His own sense of reason assured that Severus could not quite understand the rationale for staying there that night, but inexplicably he knew that he *had* to...that she needed him and that somehow his presence would ease her suffering.

So, without questions or explanations and with that thought firmly in mind, Severus stayed.

He hadn't realized that he'd fallen asleep until the following morning, when an intrusive Ravenclaw had wandered into the hospital wing and not refrained from letting out a gasp of surprise at the sight of her Potions professor asleep in a chair beside one of the beds.

Severus jolted awake, instantly sending the Ravenclaw running from the hospital wing. For a moment, Severus was utterly confused and disoriented as to why his neck was sore and body stiff from sleeping in an uncomfortable chair in the hospital wing, of all places. Then his gaze fell on Hermione.

The odd fluttering in his stomach returned and the corner of his mouth twitched into an unconscious half-smile at the sight of Hermione sleeping peacefully. He carefully stretched out his hand, risking a touch of her forehead. It was cool to the touch...her fever had broken. Severus admirably tried to ignore the way Hermione seemed to unconsciously nuzzle into his hand and whimper when he pulled away.

His breath, however, had suddenly caught in his chest and he found himself struggling to ignore the warmth that was resonating from his chest. It was more than simple desire or lust. It was something else, something stronger; something he couldn't quite yet name.

Severus left the hospital wing soon thereafter, not at all intent on being caught by another student or, worse, Dumbledore himself. Instead, he left for his quarters and immediately stepped into the shower to relax his sore muscles.

And it was there that he was finally able to put a name to the warmth that seemed to bury itself into him whenever he thought of the woman lying in the hospital wing. It was love. He was in love with Hermione Granger, and it had been the thought of losing her to illness that had been his undoing.

So, as Severus sat in his study that night, determined to put his feelings into perspective, he remembered everything about Hermione, from her laugh to the way she looked in that hospital bed, and came to one conclusion: he was in love and he was mad if he thought anything could be done about it.

He'd managed to stay away from her for the time being. She was still a patient of Madam Pomfrey's whom, for the first time, Severus was grateful for. Madam Pomfrey's endless care when it came to patients was notorious and it was a well known fact that she would not allow Hermione to leave her care unless she was fully healed. Thus, Hermione had been kept in Madam Pomfrey's care (despite her arguments) for a full week and was rumored to be released that Saturday afternoon.

Severus hadn't been to see her since that first night. With a constant parade of visitors and friends (namely Potter and Weasley), there was little hope that Severus could slip in to check up on her progress unnoticed. He decided it was probably better in the end, considering the nature of his sentiments for her. Staying away from her would be easiest, as any hope of her acceptance of him as anything other than a former professor was impossible. Thus, Severus kept to his dungeons and kept himself updated on her condition through the gossip of other professors amongst one another.

But then came Saturday afternoon, and Severus felt a strange sense of loss. His lab was oddly empty and lacking in the warmth that they usually resonated with by this time in the week. The whole business put him firmly into a foul mood, leaving him no other option than to correct essays and exams, using the margins as a place to relieve his sour disposition.

It was just as he was insulting a fifth year Hufflepuff's chances at passing the O.W.L. exam for Potions that a soft knock sounded at the door.

"Come in," he drawled, crossing out another word in the miserable excuse for an essay.

"Um, Professor?"

The paper suddenly became drenched in a flood of blue-black ink as his hand jolted and spilled the ink well. Muttering curses under his breath, he drew up his strength and looked up.

Hermione was standing in the doorway, watching him curiously.

He cleared his throat and attempted to compose himself so that he still retained some modicum of dignity, no matter how disarrayed. He stood up from his desk and did his best to remain indifferent to her presence. "Miss Granger," he said. "I see you're doing better."

Hermione's cheeks turned a faint, pleasing shade of pink and she smiled shyly. "Yes, I am. Madam Pomfrey has finally given me permission to leave the hospital wing."

"As I see," said Severus unconcernedly. "May I ask, Miss Granger, what you are doing here?"

"I came to see you," said Hermione, taking steps toward him and closing the distance. "I was told that you took me to the hospital wing after Walden brought me here."

"Walden?" asked Severus, unable to keep the question from leaving his lips.

"My assistant," Hermione supplied. "I was also told that you stayed with me during the night."

Severus looked down, unable to meet her warm, searching gaze any longer. "I was simply doing my duty, Miss Granger, and I..."

"Don't lie to me," said Hermione, stepping forward. "I know what you did, Severus, and I truly appreciate it."

With that, Hermione slipped her warm hand into his. His fingers unconsciously curled around hers and his heart began pounding as it never had before. Her hand, so warm and soft, fit perfectly into his and, though he knew it was simply the delusion of love that inspired such thoughts, he felt a surge of happiness that he'd never managed to feel before.

Hermione squeezed his hand tenderly and met his gaze. Slowly, carefully, she stretched to her tiptoes and closed the distance between them, placing a soft, shy kiss against his lips.

"Thank you," she whispered, smiling timidly and never tearing her gaze from his.

Severus suddenly felt that he couldn't think, move, or even breathe. All he saw, all he felt, all he ~~h~~*knew* was how much he loved Hermione.

"I was wondering," Hermione began, her voice unsteady and betraying some sense of nervousness. "Would you like to come over for some tea?"

Severus, too entranced by the sparkle in her eyes, the warmth of her hand still in his, and the overwhelming realization that this was happening *to him*, the miserable, greasy git of Hogwarts, simply nodded.

Hermione's face relaxed and she smiled brightly, making Severus's heart pound a few beats faster than before.

"Yes," said Severus softly, raising his hand and letting his fingers trace gently over the curves of Hermione's face. "I believe I will."