

The Slytherin, the Witch, and the Vanishing Cabinet

by Anastadne

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Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: Our answer to the Truthsayer Challenge on OWL: "One character must be given Veritaserum." This story takes place at Christmas, during ~~HBP~~. Enjoy! ~ Anastasia and Ariadne

It was nearing midnight at the Yule Ball, and the band was taking its last break. Harry, Ron, and Hermione were gathered by the punch bowl, peering into it.

"I'm fairly sure it wasn't orange earlier," Ron said, looking doubtful.

"Yeah," Harry agreed.

Hermione picked up the ladle and smelled the punch. "It's fine. The Aromantia flowers have dissolved, is all." She poured a ladleful into her cup and drank. "They enhance the slight cinnamon flavor."

Professor Slughorn appeared suddenly at Harry's elbow. "Ho ho, Harry! How noble of you to give the young lady a chance to answer first! Fifteen points to Gryffindor, for gallantry! So like your mother... always so kind..." He waddled away, misty-eyed and chuckling.

"He's been into something stronger, eh mate?" Ron laughed.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Probably still drunk from his party last night." He looked around for Ginny. "If you're sure it's safe, Hermione..."

"Honestly. Who's actually paid attention for the last five and a half years?" she sniffed.

Harry poured two cups, and headed for the corner where a group of Fifth Year girls were clustered around a familiar flash of long, red hair.

"So... you - erm... look," Ron muttered to his cup, to his shoes and then to Hermione's hemline.

Hermione sighed, "Ron, please. You're going to hurt yourself."

Redness crept up past Ron's collar as he forced himself to look at Hermione. "Sorry, it's just-"

"Just what?" Hermione asked.

Ron shrugged, and said in a voice that was barely above a whisper, "I wanted to say I lov-"

A great boom startled both of them into dropping their cups and staring at the Great Hall doors.

Severus Snape strode up the Hogwarts grounds, his robes billowing out behind him in a long, rippling wave of black fabric. He had long run out of curses in English, had run through the world languages, and has started on ancient dialects that no one in their right mind would recognize.

The Death Eater meeting had been beyond disastrous. He had only barely been able to fight the Veritaserum's effects long enough to survive without revealing everything he ever knew of the Order's plans. His only recourse in fighting the potion was to randomly destroy things to keep his mind occupied.

As he obliterated another hapless tree, sending it twisting off its roots to fall in a graceful arc to the ground, he stalked onward, growing angrier by the moment. As he passed the Whomping Willow, it dared to gesture at him threateningly, and Severus immediately set it ablaze, laughing out loud as it waved its limbs frantically. Knowing the old wizard would have him in his office, lecturing him on trees' rights and the history of the particular specimen for hours, Severus quickly put out the flames and immediately sought out another target.

Severus saw the light coming from the Great Hall doors, heard the music start playing, and groaned. He would rather be groveling at Voldemort's robes than attending the Yule Ball. Unfortunately, he needed to get to Dumbledore immediately to deliver his report. Severus knew that Voldemort was planning additional attacks, and he had also obtained rather interesting information on other Death Eaters while they were under the influence of the serum.

Standing in the Entrance Hall, Severus heard noises from the far side of the Hall and growled. Raising his wand, he lit every torch, bringing the Hall to a glaring brightness, exposing an amorous pair of Hufflepuffs. He didn't need to say a word, as the two scrambled to their feet at the mere sight of him and tore up the stairs in terror.

Striding towards the Great Hall doors, Severus swung his wand violently and the doors flew open with such force that they slammed into the inside walls. The sounds of every window in the Hall shattering startled every person in attendance. Once they realized they were not under attack from without, they all turned in his direction.

Severus fought the urge to smirk as the stunned silence was broken by one last window giving up one last, large shard of glass.

It fell to the ground, punctuating his entrance as he stood in the doorway.

The collected denizens of Hogwarts Castle fell silent.

Only the Bloody Baron dared to speak.

"Severus Snape, to what do we owe your

Dignified entrance and smooth demeanor

As you grace the season's festivities

So suavely, as is your usual wont?"

"You bloody, daft, blank-verse-spouting bugger," Snape sneered, hexing the punchbowl into a waterfall of orange. "How do you expect to maintain discipline in Slytherin House if you reveal that you are nothing but a poncy Shakespearean poser?"

Taken so far aback that he actually floated several feet in reverse, the Bloody Baron sputtered, "I say, Severus... " before flitting through the wall.

Several nearby students tittered nervously.

"And you - " Severus rounded on them. "You call yourselves Slytherins. Standing around *enjoying* yourselves in a group. If you had any real right to be in Salazar Slytherin's House, you would instead be hidden in dark, shadowy alcoves plotting deviance and seducing Hufflepuffs... it's all they're good for, after all."

A red-faced Professor Sprout made several inarticulate vowel sounds.

Spotting Ernie Macmillan, Severus drawled, "...although I have often wondered about even that."

Eyes raking the Great Hall for another victim - *Must. Find. Dumbledore.* - his glance next fell upon Minerva McGonagall, who was hurrying toward him, waving her hands in a vain effort to keep him quiet.

"That *hat*, Minerva. Thistles. Honestly," he snorted, laughing weakly. "It's no surprise you haven't had a proper snogging since the fall of Grindelwald."

"SEVERUS, PLEASE," Minerva shouted. "What has gotten into you?"

"I should have thought that would be obvious, Minerva, even to one whose bloody hat delivers acupuncture to the brain."

She stopped and raised her eyebrow at him.

He bowed mockingly and returned the gesture.

Oh, dear, Hermione thought frantically, looking around for Professor Dumbledore. She had spotted the Death Eater mask slipping out of Severus' pocket.

"The Dark Lord treated all of his followers - " several students gasped, more from titillation than from real shock - that rumor had circulated for years - "to Veritaserum this evening."

The agony on Severus' face was real. He knew what he was saying, what he could say, what he might say if -

"Bloody well done, *Snape*."

Severus' eyes closed. *Draco. Not now.*

"I'm sure my family will be fascinated to hear of your... "

Snape closed the distance between himself and Draco in two strides. He had his fist around the boy's robes, twisted so tightly that Draco literally could not speak.

"Perhaps your schoolmates would be equally fascinated to hear of your visit to your dear *Aunt* Bellatrix last summer, Draco," he said, his voice low and despairing. "She reported your... athletics... in detail... *loving* detail," Severus' voice caressed the last two words. "Her shame was... how shall I describe it? Naked."

WHERE IS PROFESSOR DUMBLEDORE? Hermione's mind was racing as she circled around the edge of the crowd encircling Severus at the illusion of a safe distance.

She and Severus caught sight of the headmaster at the same moment, and heaved nearly identical sighs of exhausted relief.

Severus saw Potter edging towards him out of the corner of his eye with that infuriating questioning look upon his face. Just as Severus tried to make his way past Minerva towards Dumbledore, Potter appeared before him.

"Sir, it's important. I believe Draco is doing something-" Harry started.

"Of course he's doing something, you imbecile. He was born and bred for it. I'll tell you exactly what he's doing, he's-"

Suddenly a flash of white hair and robes entered Severus' line of sight and thankfully Harry was gone. The music flared to life and instead of looking at Potter's face, Severus found himself unceremoniously shoved onto the dance floor and into the arms of a startled Hermione Granger.

Severus stepped back, too stunned to speak. If he so much as opened his mouth to offer an apology for ramming into her, he just might...

"I'm sorry, Professor," Hermione gasped, stepping back as well. She smoothed out her dress and looked questioningly at Dumbledore, who passed her a stern but amused look that said in so many words, "Dance".

The torchlight dimmed as both Severus and Hermione stood motionless. When the music slowed and moved into an emotional, smooth, love song, they still remained motionless.

Severus looked mortified.

Hermione watched as Professor Snape stood before her, looking positively stricken. Figuring if she didn't say something he might pass out soon, she smiled slightly, held out her hand and said, "Would you?"

Severus' eyes widened at the sight of her not only not fleeing his presence, but offering her hand. He looked at Dumbledore, cursing him through Legilimency, but the old fool only raised an eyebrow and made a "Go on" motion with his hand. When Severus scowled and reached for his wand, hoping to cause another diversion to extricate himself, he was startled to find it gone.

Dumbledore lazily held up Severus' wand, his eyes twinkling just enough to enforce the fact that he was far more powerful, had more sense and was enjoying the show.

Severus almost snarled before catching himself, and turned towards Hermione. She was still holding her hand out, her face falling a little as every second passed.

With one last scowl towards a now broadly smiling Dumbledore, Severus politely nodded and tried against all odds to keep his mouth shut. He took her hand and tried to ignore how he wanted to tell her every intimate thought that had ever passed through his infernal male mind.

As he placed his hand around her waist, he tried to stare at the High Table, only Minerva was openly glaring at him and Draco looked paler than pure white snow. That distraction failing, he concentrated on holding Hermione's hand, intertwining their fingers, shoving his thoughts of how soft her hand was against his, how they fit together perfectly, how much closer she was getting, the smell of her hair, the soft curls held up in a style that showed the curve of her-

"Dammit!"

The startled look on her face told him without a doubt that he had said that aloud.

"I apologize, Miss Granger. I-" he started, effortlessly sending her into a graceful spin which did nothing to dispel his rampant thoughts, which were galloping full-force through his brain, leaping over every obstacle he threw in their way and gleefully heading directly towards his lips.

"No need, Professor," Hermione said, interrupting him as, finishing the spin, she again took his hand and drew closer.

Visibly relaxing somewhat, Severus tried to ignore all the stares and to keep from professing his every wish to the young witch in his arms. He was beginning to think he could wait out the Veritaserum's effects when Hermione placed her hand on his chest.

"Slower song, Professor," she pointed out.

He nodded, cursing himself for looking into her eyes. She tilted her head, half in question, half to, without thinking, lay her head against his chest. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Ron, sitting at a table, a look of abject rage on his face.

Severus stared at the ceiling, wishing against all hope to just keep quiet. He was concentrating so hard on remaining silent that he was unprepared when she raised her head and was barely inches from his face.

His mouth fell open in shock and he could no longer keep time with the music. They stood still, the dance forgotten.

Hermione's eyes watched his as he struggled to remain silent. She flexed her hand in his to prompt him to move, but he stood frozen. In barely perceptible movements they were drawing closer, knowing in some small part what was happening, but not attempting to stop it either.

Severus frantically tried to drag his common sense to the forefront of his brain, but failed. This couldn't happen, not here; the things he might say would be catastrophic. He would rather spill every secret he ever knew about both Voldemort and the Order if by doing so he might only delay what he might say to her.

He felt himself drawing closer to her, the scent of her, her breath close enough to measure. He registered that her hand was on his chest, fingering the buttons on his frock coat. He violently suppressed the comment that threatened to escape his lips that would ask her if she liked all the buttons. They were mere inches away from each other, painfully close.

It was almost a complete blur. The dance floor was ripped from their sight, a glimpse of Dumbledore standing with his wand raised and a look of determination on his face, a closet, a slamming sound, then darkness.

Their bodies were slammed against each other as the door closed, and at the feel of her pressed so close, he groaned.

Her eyes sought his, but she could see nothing in the darkness. Thrown against him in an impossibly small, dark space, she could feel his heart beating - or was it her own? She tried to step back, but his arms were around her waist, one hand working up her back, into her hair, a murmur releasing the charm that held it in its complicated, elegant arrangement...

It was the first truth he'd spoken all night that hadn't gut-punched him, and - he would feel guilty about it later. Not now.

Feeling his long, cool fingers on her neck as her hair cascaded down her back, Hermione whispered, "Oh..."

And his lips met hers, and she felt the world spin away.

In that moment, only two things mattered. The feel of her soft hands on his face, and her lips yielding to his increasing demands *Can she really want this?* - and the fact that the cabinet that they were in seemed to land with an enormous bang, throwing them both against its opposite wall, pressing his body firmly into hers.

Reflexively he cushioned her head with his hand, catching most of his weight with his other, palm flat against the wall.

Some small amount of light pierced the cabinet door, and Severus saw her look up at him, questioning, breathless, and *happy*?

"Hermione - ?" He winced. *The truth will out.* She'd not been "Miss Granger" in his mind for longer than he cared to admit, even to himself.

It was all the question she needed. "Severus, I - " and her hand flew to her mouth.

He breathed his laughter into the ticklish spot behind her ear. "Hermione... it is a well-known fact about Veritas serum that its effects are communicable through certain intimate means."

"You never told us that in Potions class."

"That particular effect is reserved for N.E.W.T.-level classes, of course."

"Oh."

He chuckled. His hands were tracing her face, soft, gentle brushes, a sweep on her forehead, her neck, her shoulders, lower - "Perhaps Professor Slughorn has not addressed that part of the curriculum?"

"Ah - no. No, he hasn't - oh..." she breathed.

From somewhere deep within his conscience, he wrenched the next words out into the open, "The effects can be resisted, Hermione."

"No."

Her "No" was the best "Yes" he'd ever heard. Gripping her shoulders, he bent over her, lips moving on hers with the ferocity of a lifetime of passions held in check, passions denied with increasing exertion, passions focusing on her - "You are a dangerous distraction, Hermione," he breathed, drawing her to him as easily as he drew breath, "and thoughts of you have been my forbidden solace." *Damn. Silence, Snape, silence.*

"Severus - can you really - do you really - "

"Want you?" a long-imprisoned voice, sensing the light. "Oh, gods... Hermione. Yes, yes, I want you."

Running her hands into his hair, she cupped his face and let her delight show in her eyes.

He saw it in the flickering light, and -

Instantly his finger was over her lips. Where were they? He peered through the small apertures in the door, and touched her forehead.

Legilimens, he thought, thanking Merlin that that particular skill did not require a wand. *Hermione, get us out of here.*

She looked at him, astonished.

The earth really did move, Hermione. We're in Dervish and Banges, and the place is crawling with Death Eaters. Just grip your wand, and think "J'y reviens."

She looked at him as if to say "Not Latin?!"

Only the French could design something as whimsically fatal as this Cabinet. Do it. NOW.

She felt the force of his command, and, as he drew his cloak around both of them, she thought, *"J'y reviens."*

In a twisting swirl of darkness, Severus felt himself thrown against the cabinet door, and he felt it give way behind him. He braced himself for a hard landing, but was surprised to find himself lying on a bed. He had only a split-second's time to register where he was when his world was eclipsed by Hermione crashing down on top of him.

Hermione found herself lying directly atop Severus, who had his eyes shut in what looked to be an attempt to keep from yelling. She quickly shifted to get up, asking, "Did I hurt you?"

"No," he half groaned, daring to open one eye.

Hermione raised both eyebrows as she looked around the room. They had, indeed, landed on a large bed. She rose to kneel, and held up her hand, allowing the rose petals she had in her fist to fall. What must have been thousands of candles floated in the air, giving the room a rose color, as if they had landed directly in the center of a flame.

"No question," she said, looking back at Severus, "someone is setting us up."

A hand reached up and pulled her down. "Is that a problem?"

Hermione found herself staring into Severus' eyes. All apprehension was gone from his face.

"No."

He smiled slightly. "You may say more than one word, Hermione. I believe the occasion demands it."

Raising up, he closed the distance and kissed her, softly at first, then pushing stronger. He distantly noted that her hands were reaching into his hair, pushing him back down. When she moved to straddle him, he fought to keep going, to not register his shock at having a woman on top of him, surrounded by too many rose petals, far too many candles, and too much Hermione to remain completely sane. A hand, maybe it was his, he wasn't sure, was fumbling for whatever invention was holding her dress on, hoping she wouldn't come to her senses. It was Veritas serum, after all, not the Imperius.

Her hands left his hair and moved to his neck, feeling without breaking the increasingly passionate kiss. The kind of desperate, needful expression that only spirals hopelessly, gloriously upwards, ignoring all rational thought, spiraling so high that when the logic regarding how to unbutton a frock coat is required, it becomes, by necessity, an exercise in teamwork.

Somehow her dress fell forward, lying against him, interrupting their cooperative effort to free him from his coat. Their eyes met, and Hermione sat up, pushed the dress down, removed it and tossed it to the ground.

Without hesitation, she returned to work on his frock coat, batting his increasingly useless hands away, stating, "I have dreamed of this too, Severus."

He groaned at the sound of his name in her voice.

A smirk appeared on her face as she leaned forward, her fingers blindly working the third button. "It is mine. Don't - " she whispered, allowing the button to fall free as she said, "- interfere."

Severus only stared at her, not daring to speak a word for fear that she would stop. He ran his hands over her body, memorizing her, feeling the heat as she stared into his eyes and undressed him, agonizingly, intensely. She seemed to know exactly what she was doing to him and was loving every moment. Him, she wanted him and the part of his brain still questioning why was shoved aside into the darkness, beyond the reach of the candlelight.

Hermione watched his eyes, glittering with an amazing intelligence as she moved lower. His eyes slipped closed as she pulled open his coat, made amazingly quick work of removing his shirt, and removed his trousers.

As she sat back up, he raised up, grasped both of her shoulders roughly, and twisted to shove her down. He positioned himself over her, his hair obscuring most of his face, creating a small space between them, their ragged breath mingling.

"Perhaps words are not needed after all," he murmured as she stared up at him, her eyes wide and blurred with passion.

She reached her hand to his face as he moved over her, brushing his hair away so she could see his eyes. Fathomless, her world consumed by their endless depths, a depths in which she saw a beginning, an ending, his indomitable will bending around her own, spiraling upwards...

The feeling of skin on skin, a hush in which the only sound was in the inaudible sigh of the candle flames brushing against the air that enflamed them, the searing of the wax as it melted, and the soft whisper of rose petals as his hands splayed down her sides, drawing her hips closer against him, the smoothness, the softness, the whisper of his hair on her cheek as he moved, slowly, intensely, warmed, enraptured within the comfort of the only peace he'd ever known.

He paused and held her face in his hand. Her eyes held his - wise, warm, open, wondering... "Severus..." she whispered. "Don't stop - please - don't ever stop..."

"My love," he whispered.

"Yes..." she replied, her mind a whirlpool, drawing her, falling, deeper into him, his hands, his voice, his breathing...

And every breath a touch, every touch a wish, every wish a dream, a hope, and the terrible, unbearable sweetness of lost thoughts forbidden dreamt alone in darkness burning, blazing into the hidden light, and the candles in the Room of Requirement gleamed, and glowed, brighter, more intense, brighter still, until Severus and Hermione, lost, together, awakened in a single glowing flame wrapped in a whispering eternity of rose petals all the sweeter for the thorns.

And the light softened, and darkened, and the edges of vision hazed and blurred until it was just him, just her, and she murmured his name, soft, sleepy, and he drew her close beside him, wrapped protectively in her whispering, her head resting on his shoulder, and, slipping, falling gently into silence, the truth of the serum long since burned away by the truth of passion, love, and the freedom in her kiss, he traced one finger along her cheekbones and asked, "Really?"

And she answered, "Really."

And they slept, two people, wrapped in a single truth.

As the stone gargoyle slid back into place and the stairs spiraled upwards, Minerva turned to Albus.

"I suppose you're going to tell me what all that was about?"

Making a mental note to break the Cabinet again the next day, Dumbledore replied, "Minerva, the somewhat tactless comments about 'thistles' notwithstanding, surely you could see that the poor boy was in a bad way."

She sniffed. National pride thus satisfied, she continued, "Of course, but... Miss Granger?"

Albus' eyes softened as he looked at Minerva. "Surely you can't have missed the signs?"

"Well - of course not, but - " Of course she had, and she was too flustered to hide it. "Oh, Albus," she said, half-irritated, half-amused, and all too lost in a memory that only they shared, she leaned weakly against the banister. "This will make things... difficult."

"No, Minerva," he said gravely. "Quite the opposite. It will ultimately make them much easier." Softly, to himself, he added, "Ultimately."

"It's already the talk of the school, Albus! If it hadn't been you who'd very obviously orchestrated their Vanishing act, I can only imagine... and as it is, Albus, you're going to have to do a fair bit of talking to smooth this over."

"Indeed."

"And - " Minerva's expression changed to one of alarm, " - you know how private a person Severus is. When the Veritaserum wears off, Albus, he's going to kill you."

"Yes. I rather expect he will."