

Love Vigilantes

by *potionmistress23*

They thought the war was going to be difficult enough, but Hermione and Severus find themselves fighting more battles than they bargained for. Can they make it out alive?

Molasses

Chapter 1 of 24

They thought the war was going to be difficult enough, but Hermione and Severus find themselves fighting more battles than they bargained for. Can they make it out alive?

A/N: I began working this story, my first fanfiction, almost a year and a half ago, and for one reason or another, I've finally plucked up the courage to begin posting it. I would like to thank, first and foremost, my beautiful beta and best friend *s and h forever*. I never would have written this without her urging and support. She is an inspiration.

Reviews would be lovely, but please, no flames. My muse would appreciate being fed, not strangled to death.

Disclaimer: You recognize it? I don't own it. The world I've been privileged enough to play in has been lovingly created by the wonderful J.K.R. She deserves all the credit here.

"I know it 'cause you wrote it down a hundred times, but you say that you're doin' just fine. Say there's something better, but today, there is a cold moon rising." (Molasses, by The Hush Sound)

The sun streamed through the window panes as Hermione Granger woke to the smell of new books and parchment in the Gryffindor girls' dormitory. She quickly jumped out of bed at the thought of her first day of classes as a sixth year Hogwarts student and gazed fondly at the bookshelf she had organized the night before upon her arrival at the castle. After reminding herself not to appear *too* excited for the day's classes at breakfast, Hermione eagerly packed her bag and headed off to the Great Hall to meet Harry and Ron.

"Good morning, you two! I trust you both slept well?" inquired Hermione as she sat down to breakfast.

"Wow, you really *are* excited for today, aren't you?" replied Harry, shocked and slightly disturbed by his friend's noticeable enthusiasm.

"God, am I *that* obvious?" Hermione, despite her self-proclaimed love of learning, was discomforted by the transparency of her academic fervor and promised herself that she would become more proficient in hiding her emotions. Just one more goal she had to add to her growing to-do list.

"Yes, you are," Ron stated matter-of-factly, his lack of sleep apparently setting in already. "You have this weird glow around you. It's sort of freaking me out a bit, actually."

"Well, at least *I'm* determined to enjoy myself today instead of wallowing in my own self-pity. Poor Ronald, you're actually going to have to do work today. I don't know how

you're *possibly* going to survive!" rebutted Hermione, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Whatever." Ron shrugged, unwillingly admitting defeat and wondering how Hermione *always* managed to be right.

"Anyway, it was nice talking to you boys, but I'm going to head to our first class early. I still have to write headers on all of my notebooks!" Hermione attempted to gather up her things from the table, but was promptly interrupted by Harry.

"Well, obviously you don't remember what class we have first, or you wouldn't be rushing to get to it." Harry and Ron exchanged knowing glances; their very expressions screamed, *Kill me now!*

"Oh, sod it," Hermione gasped as she threw her bag back down. "We have Potions first, don't we?! Well, maybe the headers can wait."

"Hmmm... not as excited for today's classes as you thought, Hermione?" Ron was thrilled at the chance to find Hermione reluctant to go to class.

"No, I'm still excited; I find Potions fascinating. I just wish it wasn't taught by that insufferable excuse for a teacher!" For the past five years Hermione had held her own personal battle with Professor Snape, disgusted by his favoritism and refusal to acknowledge her hard work in his class. She was determined to make him appreciate her love of Potions and knowledge in his field, but couldn't bear to be around him long enough to even begin a conversation about the latest issue of *Potions Weekly*.

"WAIT! You actually like Potions? But he's greasy!" Ron glared at Hermione as if she had just stabbed a knife into his back. "Harry... we have to do something about this!"

"Yes, I like Potions, Ron, but that doesn't mean I like *Snape*. I'm surprised you would even think something like that after being subjected to my almost daily rants after class about how much I can't stand him!"

"That's true." Ron knew Hermione wasn't exaggerating; she complained about Snape almost as much as Harry did. "I guess I'm still a little tired."

"Don't worry about it, Ron. Well, I guess it's time we went down to the dungeons anyway. It's almost time for class." *Great*, Hermione thought to herself, *time to be reminded of how much I hate Severus Snape.*

It was going to be a long year.

Foundations

Chapter 2 of 24

It's the first Potions class of the term! But is it just Hermione, or is Snape crankier than usual?

Again, many thanks to my betas *and h forever* and my lovely friends who had read and helped me with this story long before I even considered posting it.

As always, none of this wonderful material belongs to me, no matter how much I wish it did.

"Yes, it was childish and you got aggressive, and I must admit that I was a bit scared, but it gives me thrills to wind you up!" (Foundations, by Kate Nash)

Hermione, Ron, and Harry jumped as Snape threw open the classroom door behind them. *Here we go again*, Hermione thought to herself as the formidable Potions master stormed by her desk, the dungeons seeming to grow even colder with his presence.

"As always, there is to be no foolish wand waving in my class. Your silence, attention, and respect are demanded. Now, let us begin." Snape's tone was so dangerous that even Malfoy didn't dare to speak.

"Is it just me, or does he seem more irritable than usual?" Hermione asked Ron, hoping that it was, in fact, just her.

"No, he definitely does. I wonder what's made him an even bigger git than usual. He didn't even try to impress us by telling us all about the cool stuff we can do if we pay attention to him. We've been taking this stupid class for five years already, and I have yet to liquefy lust or pickle victory," Ron replied, giving Hermione exactly the answer she had been dreading.

"You mean 'bewitch the mind and ensnare the senses? Brew glory and put a stopper in death'...?"

"Hermione, stop. Please tell me you were not just reciting Snape's first-year speech!"

"No, Ron, I just..."

"Miss Granger. Ten points from Gryffindor for your complete ignorance of the meaning of the word silence." Hermione couldn't exactly determine the look in her professor's eyes as he berated her; what she saw confused and discomfited her more than she was willing to admit. It was a glare filled with absolute hatred, yet she thought for a moment that she saw a glimmer of remorse. After regretting that she had managed to make him hate her only five minutes into class, she quickly focused her attention on Snape's lecture.

"As I was saying before we were all *sorudely* interrupted, seeing as Polyjuice Potion has been utilized as a 'battle' tactic of the Dark Lord, it seems necessary that we study it more in depth." Harry tensed at the mention of Polyjuice Potion and glanced over at Hermione and Ron, who looked equally as uncomfortable. The three friends had long suspected that Snape knew about the Polyjuice experiment they conducted in their second year, but they had never heard him mention the potion until now.

Snape continued. "Although the creation and use of this potion by students is forbidden, and should be unknown to all of you, perhaps Miss Granger could tell us the ingredients required to brew it?"

Oh God. Hermione began to panic. *He's challenging me. He must know I brewed it second year. I need to get out of this.*

"Miss Granger, answer the question." The class could tell that Snape was getting angrier by the second.

"But sir, I didn't even raise my hand. How could you possibly assume I know the ingredients needed to brew Polyjuice Potion?" Hermione hoped her answer would be enough to sate him.

"Well Miss Granger, considering that you *are* the school know-it-all, I felt at liberty to assume that you would know the answer to such a simple question as this. Are you trying to tell me that you don't know the answer? If not, this would be a momentous day indeed."

Hermione heard Malfoy snicker across the room and cursed Snape under her breath. *He did not just say that!*

"No, sir, I know the answer. Polyjuice Potion requires lacewing flies stewed for twenty-one days, powdered bicorn horn, leeches, knotgrass, shredded boomslang skin, fluxweed picked at the full moon, and, finally, a small piece of the person into whom you desire to transform. The specific nature and preparation of the ingredients in the potion results in a lengthy brewing process." Hermione sighed as she eased back in her seat. Normally she lived for moments like this, but she had a bad feeling about where Snape's line of questioning was leading.

"A surprisingly thorough answer, even for you and your precious text books, Miss Granger. Such detail usually comes from personal experience." Snape paused to let his words adequately affect Hermione. She was floundering. He sensed the panic in her eyes as she struggled to remain calm. "It seems that your expertise in this area merits further questioning. Tell me, what would happen if someone were to accidentally introduce a piece of an animal in the final stages of brewing?"

Oh bugger. He definitely knows. How did he find out!? Why is he bringing it up now of all times? Hermione had just dug herself a very deep hole and Snape had proceeded to push her into it.

"I'm sorry, Professor; did you just ask me what would happen if Polyjuice Potion became the essence of an animal instead of a human?" Hermione asked, hoping that she had simply misheard him.

"Yes," Snape answered abruptly.

"Well then, thank you for clarifying. Polyjuice Potion is not to be used to transform into an animal. If it is used for that purpose, a partial transformation takes place, the effects of which do not wear off normally as in human transformation and require extensive medical attention." Hermione shuddered as she thought of her short time spent as a cat in her own Polyjuice fiasco. She had never been more humiliated in her life. Except for now.

"Yet another incredibly extensive answer. Finally, Miss Granger, is there any known way to differentiate between the drinker of the potion and the actual person being reproduced?"

"No known way exists. The Ministry currently advocates a password system for every witch and wizard. The password or question should be something that only the person whose identity must be verified can answer. This method is clearly not fool-proof, since any good impersonator would need to have an extensive knowledge of the person they have transformed into anyway in order to avoid suspicion and capture. In addition..."

"That is quite enough, Miss Granger. A simple 'no' would have sufficed. In all of my life I have never heard someone enjoy listening to themselves talk as much as you do. Do you ever stop?"

"She sure doesn't!" Ron blurted out before he could catch himself.

"Ten points from Gryffindor, Mr. Weasley, for being unable to keep your anserine comments to yourself. An additional thirty points are taken from Miss Granger, for her continual inability to remain silent and persistence in being an insufferable know-it-all. Class dismissed."

Before Snape could finish, Hermione had already rushed out the door, slamming it behind her with a strength she didn't know she possessed. She ran as fast as she could to the Gryffindor common room; she had to scream and at least retained enough of her composure to realize that it wouldn't be the best idea to do it in the hallway. As soon as she entered the room, she let out a scream so shrill that even Bellatrix Lestrange's hair would stand on end. She collapsed in a chair in front of the fireplace and thought of how nice it would be to set Snape on fire... lots and lots of fire.

I shouldn't be thinking like this. There must be some reasonable explanation for Snape's lecture today, but what? Hermione's rational side was finally regaining control, saving Hermione from her brief moment of insanity. Before she could even begin to theorize about Snape's bizarre behavior, Ron burst into the common room.

"I CAN'T BELIEVE THAT GREASY BAT! I CAN'T BELIEVE HE TOOK AWAY POINTS BECAUSE I SAID YOU TALK A LOT! I WAS BASICALLY AGREEING WITH..., OH, MY GOD, I AGREED WITH SNAPE!" Hermione rolled her eyes, frustrated by her friend's complete focus on himself.

"Oh yes, Ron, that class must have been so terrible for you. You had to spend the whole class being personally challenged and attacked by Snape in a blatant and direct attempt to humiliate you!" Hermione couldn't handle being irritated with two people at once and hoped Ron would get her hint.

"Sorry, Hermione... I just hate him so much! Yeah, what Snape did to me was nothing compared to what he did to you. The craziest part of it is that he was really only trying to make *you* feel uncomfortable. I mean, he didn't humiliate you in front of the class any worse than he usually does. The class didn't even understand how incredibly awkward that entire Polyjuice conversation actually was!"

Wow, he's usually not this observant. It must be because it has to do with Snape being a bloody idiot! Hermione thought, impressed by how much Ron had gathered from what happened during class. "That's exactly what I was thinking," Hermione agreed. "I'm completely used to his constant ridicule, but today he's taken it to a whole new level. It was as if just seeing me in class made him hate me more, I have no idea why!"

Ron was nervous seeing Hermione so desperate and confused. She'd never been like this before; at least he'd never seen her like this. She needed to be the sane one of the Golden Trio. Ron was having trouble imagining how they could defeat Voldemort, Death Eaters, or Dementors with Hermione in this state.

"Well, don't worry too much about it, Hermione," Ron said, clumsily trying to comfort his best friend, "it's only Snape! It's not like me and Harry started a vicious rumor that you're pregnant or something. Okay, so maybe that wasn't the most comforting thing I could have said."

"It's alright, Ron," Hermione replied, "you tried your best. You're right. I shouldn't even care what Snape thinks of me. I think I'm going to take a nap before Transfiguration." Hermione headed up the stairs and practically fell into her bed, chastising herself. *Why can't I get him out of my head? Okay, time to end this.*

Hermione tried to clear her mind before falling asleep but couldn't stop seeing Snape and the cold look of hate in his eyes *This isn't going to be as easy to forget as I had imagined...*

Ruin It

In which the reader learns the secret that's making Snape so grouchy, well, grouchier than usual.

I can still barely believe I'm finally posting the work I've done so far on this story. Thanks to my betas *and h forever* as well as my Potter-obsessed friends who have always believed in this fic, even when I didn't believe in it myself. I hope you all are enjoying it. I know these first chapters are short, but I promise they get longer! If you have the time, consider reviewing. Many thanks to those of you who have reviewed. Your comments have been greatly encouraging.

As always, I own none of this, but am ever thankful to J.K.R for devising such a wonderful world for me to twist around.

"So this is what I'm looking like these days? I'm all grown up, so full of hate. But I don't want to let go of my age, 'cause it's the salt that brings the taste. So where am I to decide that I'm not right?" (Ruin It, by Alkaline Trio)

Severus Snape lingered in his classroom a moment before heading into his study for a drink. He had scarcely taught one class before wishing that the school year was already at its close. He eased into his chair, Firewhisky in hand, hoping to tear his thoughts away from one Miss Hermione Granger.

I shall conquer this... I shall.

Reflecting on the past five years, he couldn't remember when his feelings towards Miss Granger — Hermione, as he suddenly and irrationally felt compelled to address her — had changed. At some point, the little overachiever he loved to hate turned into an intelligent young woman. Despite finding the notion absolutely preposterous, Snape admired everything about Hermione: her brilliant mind, her strong will, her natural beauty, and more. She was perfect to him.

Severus had only experienced this strength of emotion once before, and he knew the road down which it led. It was not a place he wished to visit again.

Making matters worse, his desperately unwanted sentiments concerned Hermione Granger. When he first noticed the way he was increasingly drawn to her, he attributed it either to indigestion or the onset of some sort of flu, but, grudgingly, he came to acknowledge that he was in perfect health. His mind was sound, at least, as sound as it could be, given his current circumstances. She was best friend of the boy-who-just-had-to-keep-on-living and his dimwitted sidekick. He hated Harry and Ron more now than he ever thought possible.

They don't deserve her regard, he thought, they can't even begin to comprehend how clever she is. I doubt they'd even be alive if not for her. Escaping the Devil's Snare? Hermione. Potter uncharacteristically knowing where to find the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets? Hermione. Using the Time-Turner to save that prat, Sirius Black? Hermione. Snape's mental notes of the debts Potter and Weasley owed her were stacking.

Severus would never admit to himself that he was in love, if that were indeed the sentiment he was experiencing; it wasn't in his nature. He had found that, in his life, love did him little good. The only thing he knew was that he wanted to make Hermione his own, and that he hated himself for it.

For the past year, Snape had been attacked by his own feelings of devotion, pain, and guilt. His mind was racing at every moment of the day, his despair deepening by the hour. She could have someone so much better than him, Severus Snape, a broken man haunted by his violent past. A life with him would not be easy; he wouldn't wish such a fate on anyone. Hermione deserved all the joy in the world, and he was determined to sacrifice his happiness if it meant ensuring hers. He willed himself to stop feeling, but relief would not come.

Perhaps there could be some way... no, never, there is no hope, Snape argued with himself, an almost constant occurrence that plagued his days and robbed his nights of sleep. *She would no more think of me than she would of Professor Flitwick... she's too busy fawning over that twit, Weasley... at least I'm taller than both of them.* Snape cringed at his own inarticulate thoughts, disgusted by his loss of control and the immeasurable power Hermione had over him. He would put an end to it once and for all, continuing with his plan.

During the time he spent safely hidden away from students throughout the past summer months, Severus had come to the realization that if he could not control his own feelings towards Miss Granger, he must control hers, giving her every reason to loathe him above all others. He had set his plan into motion that very morning in class, and, from the hostile manner of her exit, he assumed that it was working.

The warmth that flooded his soul when he saw Hermione walk into his classroom had been quickly overshadowed by the gravity of his situation. It tortured him to see her so angry, knowing, that in that single moment, all the hatred in her body was directed solely at him; however, he knew it was necessary.

After she had stormed out he wanted nothing more but to run to her and apologize for everything he had said. She deserved to know why he had hurt her, how he felt. But she could never be told the truth; too much pain would be caused for them both. For now he would have to suffer alone with his thoughts; he would do so gladly. Since when was he one to back down from pain and anguish? They had been constant companions through all of his life.

It did not serve Severus Snape well to hope; he failed to see the usefulness of such a virtue. During this war, many witches and wizards were clinging to hope; not Snape. He preferred to harbor his grudge against the world. It was impossible for people to disappoint him if he failed to expect anything from them in the first place. However, he did expect great things from Hermione.

If only I weren't a bloody teacher... or twenty years older than her... or one of her best friend's worst enemies... or — damn it, that witch is going to be the death of me... if Voldemort doesn't kill me first. Snape's argument of self-depreciation raged on in his mind.

He felt as though he were dying. His loathing of weakness was a close second only to his intolerance of stupidity, and he perceived his reactions towards Hermione as both stupid *and* weak; he could hardly bear it. He would almost prefer Voldemort to kill him than to admit his own vulnerability.

Grimacing, he took another drink from his quickly emptying bottle of Firewhisky, appreciating the way it loosened the vise-like grip his anxiety held on his sanity, before preparing for his next class of dunderheads.

It was going to be a long year.

Time passes, things continue to get worse, and Harry takes action.

I will never be able to thank my beautiful beta,s and h forever, and my wonderful friends enough for their support.

"You try to lift me, I don't get better. What's making you happy is making me sadder. In your golden cage all I feel is strange." (Strange, by Tokio Hotel)

A little over three and a half months had passed, and there seemed to be no relief in sight for Hermione. She never would have imagined that Snape's daily attacks would have lasted this long or have been this brutal. At first, she thought she could just wait it out, let him avenge whatever his grievances were on her, and move on, but it was clear now that there were no limits to his hate. Each day's class was worse than the last, even more confusing and painful.

Some days, he just completely ignored her, even though it was obvious to anyone with a pulse that Hermione was the only one paying attention to their professor's lectures. She used to fight it, sitting at her table, waving her arm around like a lunatic, but he would continue to scan the classroom, looking right through her as if she weren't even there. Harry and Ron even stopped speaking up in her defense, fearing that, if they continued, Gryffindor wouldn't have any House Points left by the end of term. It was humiliating for Hermione to be treated thus, and most days, she simply stopped raising her hand.

Of course, in true Snape style, these were the very days he chose to call on her. He never asked her about topics remotely related to the sixth year Potions curriculum; she doubted the information he required of her was even taught at the apprentice level. In her mind, she imagined Snape poring over ancient, mildewed Potions texts that no one even read anymore, finding countless questions with which to stump her. Admitting defeat when he asked such questions of her was disparaging enough, but his snide comments that accentuated her failure were intolerable. Even the Slytherins in her class section were sympathetic.

Hermione had never been so unsure about anything in her life and was consumed by her thoughts of Severus Snape and his anger. They distracted her from her classes and kept her up at night. The Hogwarts faculty became worried as they noticed the slip in their star student's grades, but their concerns were nothing compared to the discomfort felt by Harry and Ron at the loss of their friend's sanity. They knew Dumbledore should be informed of what was happening, but they needed a way to convince Hermione to tell him.

Potions that chilled December morning was as miserable as had been expected, and Hermione all but flew out the door the minute class was dismissed. Ron and Harry knew exactly where to find her and headed up to their common room. It was time to take action. They discovered Hermione sitting in her usual chair in front of the fire, gazing into it as if searching for answers. Harry cleared his throat before addressing her.

"So, rough class again today." *Great*, Harry thought to himself. *Way to start of the conversation; make Hermione remember how miserable she is. Good one*

Harry was expecting Hermione to leap out of her chair and start yelling at him, but he only received a comatose "yeah" in return. With her practically being a zombie, he decided that it was safe to continue.

"Uh... Hermione, Ron and I were thinking that this whole Snape-being-a-git thing has gone way too far, and that you should... uh... tell Dumbledore what's been going on."

Finally acting as though she was aware of the conversation, Hermione's head snapped up, and she glared at Harry and Ron. They fell silent immediately, almost as if they had just been petrified by a Basilisk.

"I'm fine. I can handle this. I don't need your help. I don't need to tell Dumbledore anything." Her voice was dark and strong, warning them not to push her any farther.

"We know you don't want to," Harry added, "but don't you think this has gone on long enough? You know you're not yourself. Dumbledore could set Snape straight in a second! We're just so worried about you, Hermione."

Although she saw the worry on their faces, Hermione wasn't ready to give in just yet. She didn't exactly like the idea of making matters worse for herself. "So what? You want me to rat out Snape? Sign my own death notice? Are you CRAZY? I can't give Snape another reason to hate me. You've had some stupid ideas over the past five years, but congratulations, you've outdone yourself this time. Please, will you both just leave me alone?" All Hermione wanted now was some time to think, but Harry had a much different idea.

"I didn't want it to come down to this," Harry began somewhat shakily, afraid of incurring Hermione's wrath, "but if you won't tell Dumbledore... I will." Hermione chuckled menacingly in reply.

"Will you stop running around trying to save everyone? I know you're the 'Chosen One' and everything, but I will *be* fine." Harry just stared at her blankly in return, unresponsive. Hermione's listless gaze met his for a brief moment before she continued.

"For God's sake, you're really going to make me do this aren't you, Harry?" Hermione sighed in resignation, realizing that it would be better telling Dumbledore in her own fashion than to let 'wonder boy' barge in to her rescue. "Fine, but you have to let me handle this the way I want it done. I'll write Dumbledore asking to meet with him after the Christmas break, since we leave in a couple of days anyway. Then I'll tell him everything. Okay?"

"That's wonderful, Hermione. So, are you going to write that letter *now*?" Harry asked, hoping that she wouldn't think he didn't trust her; his enthusiasm could be taken the wrong way.

"Alright, Harry, if it makes you feel better." She was touched by his insistence; it showed her that he truly cared. "Do you mind if I borrow Hedwig? I don't really like using the school owls."

Harry was about to respond, but was quickly interrupted by Ron.

"Well, that's what you get for buying that stupid cat of yours instead of a proper owl!" Ron looked around nervously, as if Crookshanks would leap out and attack him at any moment.

"Oh, right, Ron, because your pet 'rat' wassooooo much better. Last time I checked, Crookshanks isn't secretly a man, and he hasn't helped the Dark Lord return... or betrayed any of our friend's parents, or helped almost kill Harry, or —"

"You've made your point, Hermione." Ron sat back down in his chair, demoralized yet again by Hermione's acerbic wit.

After sending off her note to Dumbledore with Hedwig, Hermione went up to her dorm for a nap, feeling the most relaxed that she had all term. She drifted off to sleep, hopeful that her trials with Snape were finally at an end, while trying to ignore the annoying, tugging feeling in the pit of her stomach; she still felt as though there was so much she didn't understand.

The Christmas holiday couldn't come soon enough.

Hysteria

Chapter 5 of 24

Hermione's meeting with Dumbledore finally arrives, and some surprises are coming her way.

Thanks to *s and h forever* for her undying faith in this story, or, as we like to call it, my baby.

Thanks also, to those of you who have reviewed. It's nice to see my story being well received. I hope my story continues to provide enjoyment.

"It's bugging me, grating me, and twisting me around. Yeah, I'm endlessly caving in, and turning inside out."(Hysteria, by Muse)

Hermione's vacation was certainly not as relaxing as she had hoped it would be. Every minute she didn't spend skiing with her parents, she was thinking about her problems with Snape, the work she still needed to get ahead on, and her upcoming meeting with Dumbledore. With Harry and Ron staying at Hogwarts for the break, and Hermione's parents hardly able to understand what Polyjuice Potion was, let alone why her professor's references to it among other things were so humiliating, Hermione had no one to whom she could vent; the feeling of insanity she had wanted to be rid of slowly came creeping back. Not only was she still baffled by Snape's mysterious attitude and cryptic in-class comments, but she also became paranoid about what consequences complaining about him would bring. She was serious when she mentioned signing her own death wish to Harry, and had no doubts whatsoever that Snape very well could make her life even more miserable than it already was, should he find out that she had seen Dumbledore about him. She didn't exactly know how he would do it, but, if there were a way, she was sure Severus Snape would find it.

Hermione was an emotional wreck the night before her appointment with Dumbledore, and decided to calm her nerves by making note cards chronicling Snape's offensive behavior towards her since classes began. She soon realized, however, that it would be rather unimpressive to whip out note cards during a meeting with any Headmaster, let alone Albus Dumbledore himself, and she chose to get some much needed sleep instead.

Hermione woke the next morning buzzing with anticipation, going over everything she had to say in her mind until she reached the gargoyle that served as the entrance to Dumbledore's office. After timidly whispering Dumbledore's most recent password, *Acid Pops*, Hermione ascended the winding staircase and knocked on the great wizard's door. She immediately felt awkward, like she was somewhere she wasn't allowed, until her thoughts were interrupted by a soft "Come in," followed by a cheerful smile from Dumbledore. She hardly had a chance to greet the Headmaster before there was a loud and sudden knock on the door behind her, which caused Hermione to jump. She waited patiently in the chair Dumbledore had directed her to as he answered the door, trying to calm herself before he came back and saw her fidgeting. However, she soon lost all control after hearing him greet his newly arrived guest.

"Ah, Severus. Please come in. I believe I need to have an important discussion with you and Miss Granger."

Hermione's eyes went wide, and her mind immediately began racing. *Merlin's balls, what is going on? How did Dumbledore know I needed to talk to him about Snape? Why would he invite Snape to hear how horrible I think he is? Oh great, now I'm dead. Okay, Hermione, calm down. Pretend you have no idea what's going on... It'll be fine... just freaking fine.*

Hermione's attempt to compose herself was quickly interrupted by the Potions master himself. "Miss Granger, I assume that, after six years, you are accustomed to seeing me in your general presence. Would you be so kind as to stop gawking at me and close your mouth?" Snape replied, clearly not amused.

"Oh, I'm sorry, sir, I just didn't realize you would be here for my appointment with Professor Dumbledore. How was your holiday?" Hermione couldn't believe that she had been staring open-mouthed at Professor Snape and hoped that her question would take his mind off her inappropriate welcome.

"I assure you, Miss Granger, you would have missed nothing should you have chosen to stay at Hogwarts," was his only response, and an incredibly awkward silence fell over the room.

"Well then," Dumbledore began, "I believe I know why Miss Granger has arranged this meeting with me, and I decided to resolve her situation completely before the break was even over!"

Hermione normally would have been grateful to the Headmaster for his foresight in resolving her problem, but something about the twinkle in his eye warned that his plan was not something she expected.

Dumbledore continued, "The faculty and I have been noticing the slight slip in your grades, Hermione. It is our belief that the school's class material has become so mundane, for your level of intelligence, that you have stopped devoting your energies to academia. As a result, I have decided that a more advanced independent study is in order. Since you clearly have expressed a special interest in the field of Potions, your independent study for the rest of the year will be with Professor Snape. There are many ways that your research can help the Order in the war against Voldemort, and I trust both you and Severus to work closely together to help us."

"WHAT?" Hermione and Snape yelled in unison. Hermione couldn't believe what she had just heard. Though he hadn't mentioned it, Hermione was now positive that Dumbledore *had* known about Snape's treatment of her in class, but couldn't understand why his 'brilliant' plan involved forcing them together. She was convinced that Snape would tear her apart, but she would consent to participate in the independent study regardless. It was true that she loved Potions, and was happy that, since it was compulsory that she work with Snape, her efforts were, at least, benefiting the Order. She had long felt that she had a greater responsibility to the war effort than the help she was currently giving, and she would be grateful for the opportunity to do more.

Hermione wondered how Snape was dealing with the news, and she glanced across the room in an attempt to gauge his reaction. As Snape stared back at her, she saw that he was straining to hide his emotions. She couldn't tell exactly how he was feeling, but could only assume that he was livid.

Why is this man so damned hard to read? The years of spying have helped, I'm sure, but, still, he should let go once in a while... what am I saying? I'm trying to do the exact same thing he is. Maybe once this independent study starts...no, I can't begin thinking like that...

Hermione shoved her thoughts out of her head. She needed to be alone, to think on her own. She couldn't afford to lose herself in front of Snape and Dumbledore.

"Is that all, Headmaster?" Hermione inquired, eager to escape to the solitude of her room.

"Yes, I think that I've covered everything. You can set up the details with Severus personally. Anything to add, Professor?" Dumbledore's smile widened with every word, and Hermione couldn't understand where his enthusiasm was coming from.

"Miss Granger, please meet me in my office tonight after dinner to discuss the particulars of our work together. Shall we say eight o'clock?"

Hermione nodded in response, silently acquiescing to his request. She had no idea what to expect from him that evening and didn't want to admit that she was slightly excited by the idea of a Potions independent study, even to herself. It was finally her opportunity to seriously study something she loved, but...with Snape?

How the hell am I going to do this? I'm sure I'll get used to it... maybe it'll turn out that he's only bitter in class... yeah, in my wildest dreams. He's got to be like this all the time. Ugh, wait until I tell Harry and Ron that I'm going to be spending all my spare time for the rest of the year with Snape. They'll looooveeee me for that.

Hermione's train of thought was broken, yet again, by Dumbledore. "So, if that will be all, I'll see both of you later. Have a wonderful day!" Dumbledore's perkiness was really starting to bug to Hermione, and she exited his office through the door Snape was holding open for her.

Wait...what? Snape held the door for me? I'm sure it was just absent minded. He couldn't be going out of his way to be nice. No, not at all.

Hermione pushed her thoughts to the back of her mind as she made her way to the common room. She couldn't afford to be second guessing herself now and would need a clear mind to deal with a man as difficult as Severus Snape. She climbed through the portrait of the Fat Lady to find Ron and Harry already waiting for her.

"Wow, Hermione, it's about time you got here. We thought you'd never come! How was your meeting?" Harry was obviously interested in hearing about how Dumbledore was going to tell Snape off, and Hermione cringed as she considered the outrage with which Harry would respond to her news.

"Well, things didn't exactly go as I had planned. Ron, Harry...I have something to tell you..."

Apocalypse Please

Chapter 6 of 24

Hermione and Snape absorb Dumbledore's news.

Boatloads of thanks go to my beta and best friend,s *and h forever*. Her excitement for this story is astounding.

I know this is a short chapter, but my updates get longer from here on out! Thanks so much for reading! Reviews are always welcome and encouraged!

"Declare this an emergency, come on and spread a sense of urgency."(Apocalypse Please, by Muse)

"YOU HAVE A WHAT?!" Ron and Harry were clearly not taking Hermione's news well at all.

"I have... an independent study in Potions with Professor Snape," Hermione repeated, scarcely believing it herself; it had been only twenty minutes since Dumbledore had told her the news. She recounted the morning's events with no traces of emotion in her voice.

"I don't know the details yet, so don't ask me, but the two of us will be working on some projects to help the Order. I have an appointment with him already scheduled for this evening. I'm assuming we'll discuss when we're meeting, what we'll be working on, and other particulars, so it looks like you'll both be writing your own essays tonight."

Hermione winced, never thinking she would actually miss doing her friends' homework until that very moment. Normally, she berated the two of them whenever they approached her with any problem remotely academic. She rarely listened to their pleadings, reassuring them that they would thank her when they had to take their N.E.W.T.s without her help; she was a strong believer in the 'do-it-yourself' approach. Now, however, she'd kill for the opportunity to write their essays; anything seemed better than a private meeting with Severus Snape.

"I'm so sorry, Hermione. I have no idea what Dumbledore was thinking when he decided to stick you two together like that but I'm sure something good will come from it. I've discovered that it's best just to trust Dumbledore when it seems as though he's off his rocker." Harry knew Dumbledore's unusual problem solving methods all too well and could only hope that the old wizard knew something none of them had the ability to foresee; he usually did. If Harry were honest with himself, he would admit that he found Dumbledore's aloof omnipotence just a tad annoying but he loved the crazy old man too much to let it bother him. Dumbledore had always believed in him; Harry looked upon him almost like a father, despite what Harry conceived must be an eighty year age difference, at least.

"Thanks, Harry. I'm sure everything will be fine. I probably won't even have to talk to Snape much. He'll just tell me what to do, and I'll do it. That's how it's always been; I doubt much will change simply because we're working one on one. For all I care, he can just stay sitting behind his desk pretending I don't exist. Actually, I'm sure I'd prefer it that way. Although, if he tries to treat me like he does in class, I might not be able to stop myself from hexing him. If you both don't mind, I'm going to try to make sense of all this in my room. I'll see you at dinner, okay?"

"Sure, Hermione. How great would that be if you *did* hex Snape?! It would be the highlight of the year! You'd probably be more popular than me! That came off as awfully conceited, didn't it? I just meant that you'd be the new school hero! Anyway, we'll see you at dinner in the Great Hall," Harry replied enthusiastically, hugging her in support. He was desperate to lighten the quickly darkening mood. Hermione appreciated the concern in her friends' eyes as she left and soon found herself in the familiar confines of her room.

God, I've spent far too much time in here brooding over Severus Snape Hermione thought to herself. *I shouldn't let him get to me... I don't even know why this whole thing with him has been such a problem. Well, he **did** start it all—but am I just making it worse? Why do I even care what he thinks of me? I doubt I'm going to understand him better any time soon; I may as well just accept it and admit that there are just some things I don't know... But how? This year has been nothing like I planned.*

At that moment, Hermione decided not to let Snape stand in the way of her love of Potions. She promised herself that she would get the most out of the independent study and do her best to ignore Snape's obvious contempt towards her. She would be the better person but, if need be, she'd tell him off. Dumbledore cared enough to ensure her academic well-being; surely, he wouldn't punish her for retaliating if Snape were acting like a total prick. With that realization, Hermione set to working ahead in her other classes, more relaxed and confident than ever.

Severus Snape slammed the door behind him after entering his private chambers, enraged by Dumbledore's open disregard for his sanity. He silently cursed the empty bottle of Firewhisky sitting on his desk as he made his way to sit over by the fireplace.

"Great," he muttered aloud to himself, "I'm going to have to deal with this completely sober..." He still couldn't believe what Dumbledore had just set into motion and was struck by the disastrous effect that the independent study would have on his plan to distance himself from Hermione. He gazed into the flames, his constant companions in lieu of alcohol, and began to grapple with the problems of his circumstance.

Will the old man never run out of ways to torture me? Surely, my years of service must mean enough to him that he would just leave me in peace. I've only desired to be alone with myself, and he's taken that very chance away from me... Who does the senile wizard think he is? This year has been nothing like I planned.

Exasperated, Severus sank further into his chair, holding his head in his hands. The charade that his life had become was practically pushing him deeper into the cold leather. Everything was going to have to change. He realized that he couldn't be as brutal and harsh with Hermione as he had before. They wouldn't be able to accomplish anything if she weren't able to stand being around him entirely, and he wouldn't have any of her glaring at him with disdain every minute they were together. But Severus was a smart man and understood that he could never fully let Hermione respect or trust him. He feared that working so closely with her would break down his defenses day by day, and he imagined the consequences if he were to lose hold of his passions. His will had been tested countless times before but he felt, somehow, that this time was different; he was by no means invincible. For her sake, however, he would try; he was eager to witness the results of his new apprentice's brilliance in their field, no matter what the personal cost would be.

Our field. Snape let the words linger in his mind. *It's remarkable how much she resembles—no.* He shuddered, immediately banishing his own thoughts as he unwillingly rose from the chair and began to make preparations for his evening meeting with Hermione, more depressed and bitter than ever.

Uninvited

Chapter 7 of 24

Snape and Hermione meet for the first time, and he has one unusual request.

Tremendous thanks to my beta and second self, *s and h forever*. I am so thankful to have a beta that knows me so well and has been so instrumental in the writing of this story.

"But this is not allowed. You're uninvited, an unfortunate slight."(Uninvited, by Alanis Morissette)

Harry and Ron were sitting in the Great Hall with Hermione, being made extremely nervous by both her pensive attitude and apparent loss of appetite. This wasn't the Hermione they knew and loved, and although she certainly hadn't been the same since Snape began verbally abusing her at the beginning of the year, she never once looked as utterly depressed as she did now. They wanted to say something, to give her some comforting words of advice, but nothing came to mind. They were still speechless when they considered everything that had taken place that morning and only wished that it wasn't their best friend being thrust into the vengeful path of the most loathed teacher in Hogwarts history.

Unfortunately for Harry, he knew exactly what would await Hermione that evening, having been subjected to private Occulmency lessons with Snape just the previous school year. It had been such a miserable experience for them both that they were barely able to make it through more than three lessons before Snape refused to continue teaching him. Harry had never shared the details of his lessons with anyone; he had seen things he never should have been privy to and knew that Snape would have no reservations in saving Voldemort the trouble of having to kill him, should he reveal the information he now knew. Harry thought that Hermione had forgotten all about those days, until she asked the question he had hoped he wouldn't have to answer.

Hermione solemnly looked up from her untouched plate of food, stared Harry in the eyes, and said calmly, "Harry, I know you had private lessons with Snape last year. I want you to be honest and tell me how they were. I need to know what to expect. You know, 'constant vigilance' and all that."

Up until she left for dinner, Hermione had been feeling confident; she was certain that she could handle anything that Snape could throw at her. He was only human, after all. She didn't fear for her personal safety per se, just for her mental stability. Considering the quickly increasing list of her recent misconceptions, she grew more and more nervous as each passing minute brought her closer to their meeting. She thought she already knew what Harry's answer would be but was more than willing to take a chance and hope for the best.

Harry noticed the pleading look of desperation in her eyes, wishing that he could tell her everything was going to be fine, but he knew that he couldn't lie to Hermione. She'd hex him into next week if he did. "To be honest, Hermione, it was hell. I don't know what else to tell you. I'm sure it will be better for you, though. You're way smarter than I'll ever be... and I'm sure Snape hates me more than he could ever hate you."

"I seriously doubt that, Harry. You've gotten off easy with Snape this year, since all of his attention has been focused on demoralizing me. But thanks for being honest. It's not like I was expecting tonight to be all clouds, butterflies, and warm fuzzies. By the way, what time is it?"

"It's seven fifty-seven," muttered Ron, as he shoved yet another piece of cake in his mouth.

"FUCK," Hermione yelled, attracting the attention of far more students than she had intended. "Snape will kill me if I'm late. I've got to go! I'll fill you both in later!"

She leapt from the table and began sprinting to the dungeons, hoping that she would make it in time for her meeting with Snape. After knocking over several Slytherin first years and practically flinging herself down the stairs on her way, Hermione quickly found herself at the Potion master's door with exactly thirty-four seconds to spare. She hesitated a brief moment to catch her breath, wanting to maintain some semblance of control when she entered the room in order to spare herself a scathing remark from the professor before she even said "good evening" to him. She raised her fist, ready to knock on the large wooden door, but stopped suddenly as a harsh "Enter, Miss Granger," sounded from within. Before Hermione had time to consider the ways that Snape could have known she had been standing outside his door, she walked into the Potions classroom and found herself face to face, yet again, with Severus Snape.

God, I'm never going to get used to this, am I? Where the hell do my reactions come from? He's just another professor.. Hermione chastised herself for complaining and becoming flustered this early into their appointment, and she tried to make small talk to calm her nerves.

"Good evening, sir. I hope you had an enjoyable dinner. I myself had a very meager appetite and wasn't inclined to eat much at all, but the roasted chicken did look delightful tonight." Hermione grimaced, noticing that her voice had gone up several octaves in the course of her conversation, and hoped that Snape wouldn't mistake it for genuine enthusiasm. If there was anything she wanted to avoid, it was acting like the eager "insufferable know-it-all" he loathsomely accused her of being.

Severus, of course, immediately noticed her discomfort at being with him alone. He himself was made rather uncomfortable, but for an entirely different reason, one that he

wouldn't like to become public knowledge. He soon interrupted her, deciding to make their meeting as painless as possible for the both of them.

"Miss Granger, I am in no mood to humor your futile attempts at small talk. I wish to make this meeting brief and succinct so that we may both enjoy the rest of our evenings. Now, if you will follow me to my desk, there are some matters I would like to discuss with you before we begin your rather rigorous independent study." Snape turned on his heel and glided over to desk, gesturing for Hermione to take the seat across from him.

"Now, Miss Granger, in order for this to be a pleasant experience, I feel it necessary to set some ground rules. First, I expect that you keep all events and details specifically related to our work for the Order completely private. My definition of private includes your two miserable excuses for friends, Potter and Weasley. Should any of this information get to the Dark Lord, we would be in explicit danger of losing our lives and putting others at risk. If this means that I will have to give you private Occulmency lessons, so be it. We will cross that line if and when the time comes. Have I made myself completely clear on this matter?" Snape looked deep into Hermione's eyes, trying to gain some understanding of how she was handling the weight of his words, but found nothing. Severus began to think Hermione was shocked into silence, until she responded, meeting his burning gaze with one of her own. He hadn't expected such a strong reaction from her.

"Yes, sir, I understand the risk I am taking by helping you and the Order. I want nothing more than to protect those I love." Hermione stared down into her lap once more, lost in her thoughts of her family and friends, desperately hoping that she and Snape could find a way to keep them alive in the upcoming war.

Severus' gaze softened as he saw Hermione's pain and anxiety. *She carries such great burdens for being so young. She doesn't deserve this. She loves too much for her own good.* Before he got carried away by his thoughts, Snape continued describing the terms of Hermione's independent study.

"Second, as I'm sure you will expect, you are to perform all of your work diligently and in a timely manner. You will have free access to the Potions labs as well as my personal stores whenever you wish, so long as I am not teaching. Dumbledore has also requested that you have rooms installed in the dungeon wing of the castle, should you ever be required to work in the labs after curfew. I ask that you do not misuse this privilege nor let your curiosity get the best of you. I am a very private man, Miss Granger, and do not wish to have my personal affairs meddled with."

"I would never think of doing anything of the sort." Hermione wanted to make it clear that their work was a priority. "I assure you that my work will be done to the best of my abilities. I surely hope that in my five years as a student here at Hogwarts I have never given you reason to doubt my academic integrity. And I will gladly respect your demand for privacy. It seems that you've covered everything there is to discuss. Is that all for tonight?" Although their meeting wasn't as dreadful as Hermione had been anticipating, she was looking forward to an evening of reading in the common room and was hoping to leave soon. It was rare that she allowed herself a free night of recreation.

"I have one more provision to ask of you, Miss Granger..."

"Please, call me Hermione, Professor. You're going to have to address me personally much more than in our regularly scheduled classes, and hearing you call me Miss Granger all the time can be quite tedious." Hermione looked up in horror, mouth open, shocked by the words that had just come from her lips.

Did I really just invite Snape to use my first name? Have I gone completely mental? I can't have Snape going around calling me Hermione. It would be far too unprofessional, not to mention exceedingly creepy and bizarre. Hermione was soon put out of her misery when Snape replied to her interruption.

"I will do no such thing," Snape responded, looking slightly stunned. "I shall continue to refer to you as I have done for the past five years, as Miss Granger. I see no need for any greater familiarity between us simply because we will be working together academically. This leads directly to my third and final point of the evening. You are to speak to me as little as possible during our lessons together, unless absolutely necessary. I am very busy and will not tolerate being interrupted for superfluous chatter. You are not to 'stop by to see how I'm doing'. Personal calls will not be accepted. I refuse to be added to the list of people you see fit to run your mouth at unceasingly; save *that* practice for your common room. You may not bring your personal problems to work with you. As much as I don't care to share my personal life with you, I don't care to hear about yours. I know this may sound callous, but I am truly acting in your best interest."

There, Snape thought. That should prevent her from even entertaining the idea that I could be a pleasant person with whom to seek a friendship. Hopefully, she'll keep her distance, and I'll be able to do this without losing control of this already unpleasant situation. Well... not so unpleasant, he thought as he looked up at Hermione sitting in the chair across from him. *God, she looks so...no, I will not let this happen now. Not ever.* He needed to get her out of his classroom quickly and asked her once again if she accepted his terms of agreement.

Hermione looked back at him with hesitation. "Um... sure, Professor," she replied, confused by his unusual request. Still, she supposed there were much worse things he could require of her. "I'll try to talk to you as little as possible. May I go now?"

"Yes, Miss Granger," Snape answered softly, "you may leave now." He watched her as she crossed the room to his door, his eyes meeting her own when she turned around to look at him once more before leaving.

"Good night, Professor," Hermione said before closing the door behind her.

"Good night," he called after her, and waiting until after she had left, whispered, *Hermione.*

Capturing Moods

Chapter 8 of 24

Hermione does some explaining, a relationship develops, and she has yet another close call with the professor.

Many thanks to my betas *and h forever.*

Thank you to all of you lovely readers who have reviewed. Keep them coming, if you see fit.

"I don't mind waiting if it takes a long, long time. I don't mind wasting the best years of our lives. I don't mind racing through our goodbyes." (Capturing Moods, by Rilo Kiley)

Hermione leaned against the cold, stone wall of the dungeon corridor after saying goodnight to Professor Snape, sighing as she went over everything he had said once more in her head. She should have been thrilled that the meeting went so smoothly, with very little insult from Snape, but Hermione found something about the evening

unsettling. Maybe it was the realization that all of this was in fact happening, that she was doing something monumental for the good of Wizard kind. Maybe it was the calm yet forbidding way in which Snape informed her of his expectations, almost as if reminding himself of his own rules. Or maybe it was...

Yes, that's it. Hermione's mind screamed as the memory dawned on her. *The look in his eyes when he mentioned the third rule! It was the same look he had the first day of Potions; it's so much different from his normal attitude. Too bad I haven't been able to do a thing to discover what that look could possibly mean! Ugh, how can he be this infuriating even when he's not being brutal?*

And then as if struck by lightning, another thought came to Hermione.

*Maybe this is so unnerving because Snape actually **wasn't** brutal tonight. He seemed to actually care about the independent study. Oh, shut up, Hermione,* she retorted, berating herself. *He doesn't care. He just wants to get this over with and get away from you. God, I really need to stop overanalyzing Severus Snape. He's been forced to reduce his entire life to a lie. If he's such an incredible spy, I can't expect to gain any truthful insight about his character just from a look. I'm not going to get anything done at this rate...*

Reminding herself of her promise not to let Snape get in the way of her success, Hermione headed back to the common room; she would have bet ten Galleons that Ron and Harry would be waiting to pounce on her the minute she walked through the door, expecting to hear all about her meeting. Regardless, Hermione didn't really want to talk about it now; she was confused enough as it was. She took a deep breath as she approached the Fat Lady, called out the latest password, and waited for the painting to swing forward on its hinges.

Hermione was shocked at how fast Harry and Ron ran to her side after she climbed through the portrait, almost as if they didn't expect her to be able to stand or walk after her encounter with Snape. Before she could even start to tell them that everything was fine, Ron began yelling in her ear.

"OH MY GOD, HERMIONE, ARE YOU OKAY? WHAT DID THAT IDIOT DO TO YOU? I SAT HERE WORRIED ABOUT YOU ALL NIGHT! I COULDN'T EVEN BEGIN THAT ESSAY FLITWICK ASSIGNED FOR CHARMS, I WAS SO NERVOUS. I..."

"Ron, you need to calm..." Hermione's 'inside voice' was clearly not getting through to Ron, who continued his assault on her ear drums. Finally, Hermione, summoning all the energy she had left, screamed, "RONALD BILIUS WEASLEY, YOU NEED TO CALM DOWN FOR JUST ONE SECOND."

Instantly, the room went silent, and Harry and Ron turned to stare at Hermione, surprised at how she hadn't started ranting about Snape the minute she walked in the door and was actually having to tell *them* to calm down.

While they were still silent, Hermione grabbed at her chance to explain herself, hoping that if Ron and Harry thought she had disclosed all the details of her meeting, they wouldn't ask her any questions she wouldn't want to answer.

"First of all, Ron, you wouldn't have started that essay anyway, but it is nice to hear that you were worried about me. Second, I really am fine. Surprisingly, Snape wasn't mean and didn't give me any of his usual crap. It was actually... professional. He set down the rules, I agreed to them, and he let me leave. That's really all that happened." She held her breath, hoping that they would be satisfied by her account, and slowly let it out as Harry responded.

"Wow, that's a shocker. I can't believe he didn't go on and on about how much he didn't want to do the study in the first place, but Dumbledore made him and blah, blah, blah." Harry rolled his eyes, practically hearing Snape complaining in his head. "Anyway, we're glad it went well for you, Hermione. When do you start working with him?"

"Oh bloody hell! We didn't set up a time. He must have forgotten, and it completely slipped my mind to ask." The minute Hermione responded to Harry, an owl tapped at the window, begging to be let in from the freezing January night air. Hermione opened the parchment it carried and read the note aloud.

Dear Miss Granger,

I apologize for ending our meeting without discussing when we shall reconvene. If it is agreeable with your schedule, would you please meet me in the dungeons at 8 o'clock tomorrow evening to further discuss the content of your independent study and future scheduling? No reply is necessary; I will be in my office regardless of whether or not you choose to come. Thank you for your agreeable and mature response to my requests this evening...

Here Hermione paused, her eyes going wide, but, after looking up at Ron and Harry and biting her lip nervously, she finished the missive.

...Sleep well.

Professor Severus Snape

Potions master, Head of Slytherin

"Since when does Snape go around telling people to sleep well?" questioned Ron, inadvertently speaking his thoughts out loud.

"I don't know, but at least he's not telling me to bugger off and die in my sleep; at the moment that's all I can hope for." Hermione sighed, finally letting herself sink into the couch in the common room, hardly believing that things had managed to go *too* well that night. Ron soon came and sat beside her, uncharacteristically putting his arm around her. Hermione let her head slide to rest against his shoulder, thankful that her friends cared so much about her. In that moment, she felt more safe and understood than ever before and looked up as she noticed Ron begin to say something.

"I'm really sorry that this is going to be so complicated, Hermione. I wish I could be there to help you."

"I know," Hermione whispered back, wrapping her arms around his waist. As soon as she did, however, Ron jumped off the couch, looking rather surprised and confused.

"Wow, look at the time," Ron muttered, clearly uncomfortable. "I guess I should get to bed. You should too, Hermione. You'll want to be rested for another night of meetings with Snape!"

"Yeah, Ron... I guess I should. I'll talk to you in the morning. 'Night." Hermione ran up the stairs, eager to get some sleep, but, before long, memories of the evening invaded her mind.

No, I will not do this now... I refuse to dream of Severus Snape. The constant battle between Hermione's will and mind raged on. Still, she managed to fall asleep despite Snape's voice echoing in her head, but not until she saw that look in his eyes once more.

I am truly acting in your best interest...

It had been a long night for Hermione. She had barely been asleep for more than twenty minutes before waking up again, her mind being plagued by the memories of what had happened that evening. Curled up in a ball by her headboard, Hermione reflected on Severus Snape. She couldn't fathom his extreme shift in behavior and could think of no reason for the change. He certainly hadn't been friendly towards her at their meeting but he was by no means the cold-hearted bastard that she had to bear during her daily Potions classes. Even the way he demanded for her to communicate with him as little as possible had an almost subtle tone of regret. And that look, the look that haunted her. When she looked into his eyes that night, she saw nothing and everything at the same time; it scared her. No, she wasn't afraid of him, not anymore, but of the secrets he kept. The unknown darkness of his past terrified her, yet she yearned to know everything about him. But she would never ask; she would honor his request

for her silence. All she wanted now was to learn from him, to help the Order and her friends.

At the thought of her friends, Hermione began to consider her other little problem, the one also known as Ronald Weasley. She had never expected him to actually be worried about her, let alone comfort her the way that he did. She had always looked to Ron as a brother, but recently their relationship had become more and more awkward. Ron was constantly showing signs that he wanted their relationship to go farther but would immediately recoil and find some obscure reason for which to excuse himself. Hermione didn't exactly know how she felt about the prospect of being in a more serious relationship with him but she would be willing to try if he just got up the nerve to ask. She soon found herself desperately wishing that life were less complicated and more logical. She was good at logic; she could handle logic. Being attacked by every human emotion imaginable, Hermione curled up under the scarlet covers of her bed and cried. She couldn't remember when she had last taken the liberty of having a good cry; she normally viewed such practices as signs of weakness. However, on this night, her tears were cathartic and somewhat therapeutic; she knew she needed to let them fall.

The next morning Hermione woke with a headache.

Great, just a perfect way to start my day, Hermione thought to herself. She quickly got ready for the long day of classes ahead and ran down to breakfast with Harry and Ron in the Great Hall.

"Good morning, Hermione!" Ron and Harry cheerfully greeted her, obviously getting more than enough sleep the night before.

"Morning," Hermione muttered under her breath, distracted for a moment after noticing that Snape had also just arrived to breakfast, looking as miserable as ever and making her think she had completely imagined the sense of normalcy of the previous night.

"Um, Hermione, are you okay?" Harry's question brought Hermione's attention back to her friends. "I don't want you to get offended or anything, but you look awful. Did you not sleep well last night?"

"Actually, Harry, I slept a total of one hour, thanks for asking, but let's not discuss that at the present. I've just had a lot to think about lately, and hopefully all of my work will keep me occupied. Let's get to class!" She ran off before they could ask her any more questions, hoping they were actually following behind her. She didn't bother to look back, however, and headed off to their first class of the day, Potions.

The three friends went through the rest of the day as usual: Ron and Harry fell asleep in class and Hermione vigorously took notes and answered questions. All seemed right in the world, until they were sitting in the common room before Hermione's evening meeting with Snape. Hermione looked up from her book to see that Harry had mysteriously gone missing, and that Ron was looking oddly stiff for sitting in one of the most comfortable chairs in the common room. He stood and walked over to her.

"Uh... Hermione..." he said, awkwardly shifting his weight from foot to foot. "Do you mind if I talk to you for a minute?"

"Sure, Ron," Hermione replied, putting down her book and noticing Ron's obvious discomfort. "I'm listening. You've got my attention until I have to meet with Snape!"

"Well thanks, Hermione," Ron added weakly, "I'm glad I get precedence over your homework." He continued. "Anyway... I've been thinking. And, well, we've been friends for a long time, haven't we, Hermione?"

Although Hermione thought she knew where Ron's conversation was *finally* headed, she played along. Best not to distract his train of thought, she reasoned.

"Oh, yeah, Ron, we've known each other for a little less than half our lives. I'd say we're very good friends." She hoped Ron would just get to his point and not carry on with idle chatter about friendship but she decided it was best to let him proceed at his own pace.

"Well... I was thinking..." Ron began again, but was quickly cut off by Hermione. She was getting impatient and wanted to take a nap before her meeting with Professor Snape.

"Yes, Ron, you've made it very clear that you've been thinking. Go on."

"Oh, right... sorry, Hermione. Anyway, I was wondering if you ever thought about us being more than... um... just friends." As soon as the words left his mouth, Ron let out a huge sigh of relief, as if forgetting that Hermione hadn't responded yet.

"Well, Ronald," Hermione began to answer, "I must admit that I've entertained the thought myself and find it rather agreeable."

"So... you mean... you'll be my... uh... girlfriend?" Ron began stuttering while his palms grew moister by the second. He couldn't believe he had actually asked Hermione to go out with him and was shocked to find that she gave him an answer that resembled a "yes".

"Yes, Ron, I will go out with you." Hermione's eyes lit up as the tension that had been building between them for the past several years melted away. They hugged for a minute and then began cuddling together on the couch. Whether Hermione fell asleep or not, she couldn't remember. All she knew was that she felt as though her problems with Snape seemed to be a thing of the past. Thinking of her problems with Snape reminded her of their meeting, and she quickly sat up from the couch, causing Ron to fall over into the empty space she created by moving.

"What the hell, Hermione? You're supposed to warn me when you're gonna get up. What's wrong?"

"RON, WHAT TIME IS IT?" Hermione couldn't believe she had allowed herself to lose track of time yet again and hoped that she wasn't late.

"It's seven fifty-seven again, Hermione. Wow, even when you're cutting it awfully close you're always consistent. How do you do that?"

"I DON'T KNOW, RON!" Hermione screamed in her haste. "But I have to go... I'll see you later! You don't have to wait up for me if you don't want to."

"Don't worry, I will," Ron replied sweetly with a smile. And with that, Hermione bolted out the door, running to the dungeons yet again, thankful that she had someone like Ron to wait up and make sure Snape wouldn't literally kill her for being late.

I have to stop doing this. Cutting it close isn't the safest thing to do for an appointment, let alone one with Snape. As soon as she made it to the Potions classroom, she found Snape already waiting at the door for her.

"Ah, Miss Granger. How kind of you to have taken the trouble to come this evening. I was beginning to think you weren't going to be able to make it. I see you must have had something important beforehand, however, from the way you're out of breath."

Shit, Hermione thought to herself as she realized she was leaning against the Professor's doorframe panting like an overexerted dog! *must look like an out of shape, incompetent girl from the way I've presented myself... wait... I didn't present myself. He was just waiting for me at the door like he knew I was coming. What gives? Here I go again, assuming things that I've probably imagined to begin with... great.*

"I'm sorry for the state in which I've arrived, sir, but I simply dozed off in the common room and woke up a little later than I had anticipated. I'm truly sorry for the inconvenience, Professor."

"Your apology is accepted, Miss Granger, although you managed to run fast enough to make it here with one minute to spare. Excellent timing. Now, shall we get to work? If you'd please make your way back to the lab, I will be with you shortly. We have a few things to discuss."

Hermione walked into the adjacent room as Snape rested his forehead against the door he had closed behind them. Shutting his eyes for a moment, he mentally prepared

himself for the night ahead.

I shall conquer this... I SHALL

Calling All Skeletons

Chapter 9 of 24

Hermione is assigned the first task of her independent study, and their first session goes much differently from what either Hermione or Severus expected.

As always, I owe so much to my beta,s and *h forever*, who owns such a large part of this story.

Thanks again to those of you who have been reviewing. Having my story posted here is enough of an honor, but knowing that some of you are enjoying it has exceeded my expectations. Happy reading!

"Now the time has come. I just wish I could erase all the damage done to your name and your keepsakes. It's only just begun, it's been fun. We were blind, deaf, and dumb. There's a party in my closet calling all skeletons." (Calling All Skeletons, by Alkaline Trio)

Snape quickly followed Hermione into the lab, gestured for her to sit, and remained standing so that he could talk to her as he did in class, lecturing her. He knew that if he wanted to maintain what was left of his sanity, he would have to keep their meetings strictly teacher/student oriented. If that meant conducting the independent study like a normal class session, so be it. He couldn't afford having Hermione feel comfortable working with him; it would change the nature of their entire relationship. Severus didn't want to suffer any more than he already had to that evening; things were complicated enough for him as they were, and so he began describing Hermione's first assignment.

"Miss Granger, as I'm sure you've already deduced," the wizard began, "the projects you are to undertake with my guidance are going to be incredibly difficult. Some may even say they are impossible. Albus Dumbledore and the majority of the Hogwarts staff, however, have complete faith in your capabilities. Your first assignment is to attempt the creation of a potion designed to counter the effects of the Cruciatus Curse," he stated rather matter-of-factly.

Severus glanced over at Hermione to gauge her reaction, finding it just as he was expecting. The surprised look on her face was priceless: her mouth dropped open almost instantaneously, and her eyes were wide with shock. It took all of Snape's self control not to chuckle at the young woman sitting stunned in front of him, but fortunately, he found himself able to continue instructing his apprentice.

"I know this may seem to be an incredibly heady project to assign as your first, but it has been deemed necessary by the Order, and I will do everything in my power to help you succeed. Tonight, we will be working in the library so that you may begin preliminary research and formulate some kind of plan for your experimentation. Now, unless you have any further questions, let us retire to the library." Snape walked out of the lab, robes billowing behind him, and turned around suddenly as he sensed that Hermione was not following in his measured steps.

"Miss Granger, have I not made myself clear, or are you somehow morally opposed to our little 'field trip' this evening?" Severus knew his words would affect her; he knew how much she loved books and the wealth of information that was reserved in the Hogwarts library. If it weren't for the student curfew, he was certain she would choose to sleep there instead of in the comforts of her own room. He couldn't have been more correct, as Hermione's mouth finally closed, and she turned to look at him.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, sir. I'm just trying to take all of this in. You're correct; this seems like a monstrous task. But yes, I'm ready now." Hermione awkwardly shuffled by him, trying to avoid his gaze, as they made their way to the library in silence. Snape finally addressed her again as they entered.

"Now, Miss Granger, I will ask very little of you this evening, except that you do not disturb me. I have papers to grade, and I daresay you have enough work to occupy you. I will stay here with you as long as you wish, and you have access to any book or record you may choose. If you are in dire need of direction, you may seek my assistance, but I will not put my work on hold to suffer your interminable questioning. Do you understand?" He quickly dropped his stack of papers onto one of the tables, the swift *smack* accentuating his question, before looking to Hermione for an answer.

"Yes, of course, sir. I wouldn't want to distract you. I'll get to work, then."

She doesn't want to distract me? She has no fucking idea what a distraction she is.

Before Severus had finished his thought, Hermione disappeared into the aisles of the library, leaving him with the peace and solitude he so desired.

Hermione trotted back from her trip through the library almost an hour later with a cart full of books, humming to herself. She loved every minute she got to spend in the library truly by herself; well, except for Snape being there, she was by herself. She saw him look up briefly from his grading as she made her way back to the table opposite him and, giving him a quick smile, sat down to read.

Wow, maybe I am a little too excited about this. Smiling at Snape? What's gotten into me? It's like I don't even know myself anymore. Next I'll be skipping in front of Voldemort, asking for him to take me to Madam Puddifoot's for tea!

Hermione gasped at her own trivial thoughts and opened the first book she had found on the Unforgivable Curses. If she needed to make a potion to combat the Cruciatus Curse, she certainly needed to know what she was really dealing with. Of course, she knew all about the subject, Barty Crouch Jr. had made sure of that in her fourth year, but she hadn't been required to take the sort of meticulous notes that such a task as this would necessitate.

Ah yes, the Cruciatus Curse. Wow, there's a lot of information about this. Feeling slightly tingly, as she always did when doing research, Hermione took out her quill and began eagerly taking notes.

The Cruciatus Curse

Latin for "I Torture"

The Cruciatus Curse, being one of the three Unforgivable Curses, inflicts severe, perhaps fatal, physical pain on whomever it is being cast against. It is most commonly utilized as a measure of torture in order to gain confidential information that could not otherwise be obtained. The effects of the Curse depend upon the desires and emotions of the caster, the type of pain involved being the kind deemed most excruciating by the controller of the Curse.

*To cast the Curse, one cannot simply yell "Crucio" and expect their victim to fall in agonizing pain. In order to achieve this targeted effect, the caster must wholly desire the person on whom they are casting the Curse to have such terrible pain inflicted on them. Not only that, but the caster must **enjoy** the prospect of forcing such anguish on another wizard or witch.*

The Cruciatus Curse, if taken too far, can have disastrous and even deadly effects. People suffering under the Curse for long periods of time have been known to lose their ability to think rationally, reducing them to a level of permanent insanity. At this point in time, there has been very little progress made in attempts to both reverse and restore such altered mental conditions. Perhaps the best example of these lasting negative effects can be seen in the case of...

Hermione knew what was coming and wasn't sure she wanted to read on. She had imagined that reading so much about the Dark Arts would be hard for her, but she hadn't been able to foresee the personal level to which it could be taken. Although her mind screamed a resounding *no*, Hermione solemnly finished the sentence.

Alice and Frank Longbottom.

Hermione pushed the book away violently and let her head drop into her hands. *I'm not going to be able to do this,* Hermione thought. *I don't want to know all of this. For once, I feel like I have too much knowledge... it's just too horrible. I don't understand how any witch or wizard could bear to do such a thing to another person. But I can't give up. I need to solve the problem, so that things like this won't happen to good people again. I shall conquer this... I shall!*

She sat in silence, for many minutes, with her head resting on the table at which she was sitting. She was trying to clear her mind before she read the rest of the chapter on which she was diligently taking notes. Her methods of relaxation seemed to be working, and Hermione was in danger of drifting off to sleep until a murmur from the other side of the room got her attention. She sat up straight.

"Hermione."

Hermione looked around at the sound of her name, but could only see Professor Snape, who had fallen asleep at his table.

Seems he had the same idea as me. Obviously, a result of grading incompetent and inarticulate papers all evening Hermione shuddered, thinking of all the poorly written papers Severus Snape must have read in his lifetime. *God, how can he stand it? He can barely tolerate his students in class. Having to deal with their written words in his spare time must be excruciating. But he looks so peaceful when he's sleeping, as if he can leave all the horrors of his past behind him. What was it that Dumbledore said about dreams? Something about swimming in oceans and climbing mountains. Whatever it was, I'm sure it was inspirational. Wow, Snape actually looks kind when he's asleep. I wonder if he's ever let his guard down, formed a true friendship with anyone. Hm... maybe we could talk and... I could make it a sort of side project. It wouldn't be that bad. I'm sure he's actually quite a fascinating... anyway, she forced herself to stop before her mind took her too far, now I can add "hears things" to my growing list of issues... goody.*

Hermione looked back down to continue her rigorous note taking, deciding that she had wasted far too much time already. She had been at it for another hour or so, until another whisper stopped her on the spot.

"Hermione."

Her gaze rose again, but there was still no one there, just Professor Snape asleep on the

Oh. My. God. There's no one else here... that means that the voice has to be coming from...

And before she could finish her thought, Hermione watched as her name escaped from the lips of her sleeping teacher once more.

"Hermione."

Merlin's fucking balls. Hermione needed to wake Snape up as soon as possible. She didn't care how, she just needed him awake *But his voice... it's just so... so...* The voice of her innermost thoughts was telling her things she didn't want to hear. She tried to drown it out, but it only seemed to crescendo.

"STOP!" Hermione yelled, not realizing she had actually screamed out loud until she saw Snape, quite literally, jump out of his chair.

Oh shit, I'm screwed now. Hermione began hyperventilating. *Oh well, at least I stopped myself from saying that Snape's voice is FUCK! I'm doing it again... stop Hermione, you're going out with Ron... Ron... Ron... I need to get back to the common room.*

"What the hell are you playing at, Miss Granger?" Snape was evidently not amused by being roused so rudely from his nap, even though it hadn't been on his agenda for the evening.

"I'm so sorry, Professor. It's just that..." Hermione needed to think of something fast. "Well... I was researching the Cruciatus Curse more fully, and the book I was reading mentioned the Longbottoms as a case study for the lasting disabling effects of the Curse. It kind of struck home, if you know what I mean." Hermione looked up at him and watched as the anger left his eyes, thankful that she hadn't had to completely lie to Professor Snape, knowing that he would surely notice if she didn't tell him some form of the truth.

"That's quite alright, Miss Granger, although I suggest that you work on controlling your emotions. Many of the things you come upon in your research are bound to 'strike home'. Thank you for waking me, no matter how loudly. It seems to have gotten rather late. We'll continue this later; I'm sure Albus wouldn't appreciate you being overworked so soon. I will owl you tomorrow with our next meeting arrangements. If that will be all, I will bid you good night, Miss Granger." Snape headed towards the door, but stopped as Hermione ran after him.

"Wait Professor! Um... what were you... oh, not asking personal questions... never mind. Good night, Professor Snape. I'll see you tomorrow in class." Hermione grabbed her bag from the table and exited, leaving Snape alone in the library.

What personal question could she possibly have asked me? All I managed to do this evening was fall asleep... unless... that dream. O GOD, NO! the realization of what must have happened hit Severus, he stormed back down to his chambers to mull what happened that night with the help of his newly purchased bottle of Firewhisky.

Clearly, their first session had been more than either of them could ever have anticipated.

Moratorium

Chapter 10 of 24

What just happened? Hermione tests her theory and discovers more than she anticipated.

I'm sure it seems as though I'm running it into the ground, but I owe so much to my lifesaving beta,s and h forever.

Thanks to those of you who have been keeping up with this story and have found the time to review. Please continue to share your input with me.

"I declare a moratorium on things relationship. I declare a respite from the toils of liaison. I do need a breather from the flavors of entanglement. I declare a full time out from all things commitment." (Moratorium, by Alanis Morissette)

Hermione sprinted through the halls, trying to get back to the common room before she lost her composure again. In her mind, she felt as though she were trapped in one of the strange horror films she watched back at home with her parents, as if some horrible creature or serial killer were chasing her through the school. Actually, now that Hermione considered it, this felt *exactly* like all the other times at Hogwarts when horrible creatures were chasing her, but this time, Hermione was only running from herself. At that moment, she almost wished that she was being pursued by a mountain troll, Acromantula, werewolf, dragon, Dementor, or even Voldemort himself, rather than face the situation she was avoiding. When she reached the portrait hole, she practically threw herself into the common room, thrilled to see that Ron actually had kept his promise to wait up for her. She had a rather unsettling theory that was sinking uncomfortably to the pit of her stomach and needed to test it as soon as time would allow.

Ron looked up as she entered and asked how her evening had been. "Oh, hello, Hermione! Did you get your first assignment? Do you think that..."

"Ron, kiss me," was her only terse response to his questions, soliciting nothing more than a dazed stare from him in return.

Ron was sure he was imagining things. This was Hermione, not just another boy-crazed, hormonal, Hogwarts teen. Knowing Hermione, she would test him to make sure he had done his homework and could tell her the twelve uses of Dragon's Blood before giving him permission to snog her. The startled girl he was looking at now couldn't possibly be Hermione. Could she? Ron endeavored to find out.

"WHAT? Hermione... did you say what I think you just said? You only agreed to go out with me about four hours ago! Don't you think you're rushing things a bit? What's the matter? Something must have happened tonight for you to be like this. Don't get me wrong, I've certainly thought about kissing you, but I don't think..."

"RON, I DON'T CARE WHAT YOU THINK, JUST KISS ME, DAMMIT!" Hermione demanded as she stood panting in the center of the room, waiting, the wild look in her eyes startling Ron. It was true that he wanted to kiss Hermione, he had for some time now, but he didn't want to ruin their new relationship by moving too fast. He was still barely able to accept that Hermione's earlier agreement to try for a relationship with him was real and not a dream. He would never have imagined her to be the kind of girl to jump into things like this. Even still, with every fiber of his being telling him not to give in to her, that she wasn't in her right state of mind, Ron made his way over to where Hermione was standing and kissed her. They started off slow and awkward, neither of them knowing what forces had exactly brought them to that moment nor how to handle what they had initiated. Regardless, Hermione felt herself relax as their kiss progressed, letting her hands work their way up to wrap around Ron's neck, pulling him closer to her. At her encouragement, their kiss was deepened, and Ron grasped Hermione's waist in response. She felt... she felt... nothing. Hermione suddenly arched into him, expecting to feel something more, hoping that she could force stars to explode behind her eyes or make her head swim with intensity, but it didn't come. She didn't feel anything.

"FUCK!" Hermione screamed as she quickly pulled away from Ron and ran upstairs to her room, leaving him unbelievably confused and wanting much more of Hermione.

Hermione slammed the door to her room and burst into tears, her experimental kiss with Ron proving her "theory" correct.

How the hell did I let this happen to me? What the fuck am I going to do now? No wonder I've been losing so much sleep over this. No wonder I've been overanalyzing, worrying, and thinking about him all the fucking time. I can't believe it! I... I... I... I must fancy Professor Snape! What other explanation can there be? Bugger... this isn't going to be good.

Hermione gasped as she finally admitted the truth to herself and sat down on the edge of her bed. She didn't know when her feelings had changed; perhaps they never had. She had always been fascinated by the Potions master since her first year, hanging on to every word he spoke about the art of potion-making as though her life depended on it. She loved it when professors were passionate about their work, and Snape was certainly one such professor. She may not have appreciated his snarky attitude or disdain for her intelligence; in fact she most certainly did not, but there was no way for her to deny that she deeply respected him.

She admired his intellect. Hermione was painfully aware that people of true intelligence were hard to come by, especially among her peer group, and she couldn't help but notice the quiet knowledge that Snape seemed to exude. Although she questioned his particular methods of instruction, she appreciated that he didn't coddle his students. Snape held her peers responsible for their actions and study habits; she knew that a passing grade was well earned in his classes. And despite his seemingly constant ridicule, this made her feel good about herself. She didn't know why, but all she had ever really wanted during her years at Hogwarts was for Snape to acknowledge her, to be proud to have her as a student. She knew she was brilliant, but for one reason or another, she had an irrational longing to hear the words directly from his mouth. It was a desire that she hadn't been able to explain until now.

As her thoughts continued, Hermione began to realize that her admiration for Snape went beyond the realm of scholarship. She noticed it after their first meeting about the independent study. Meeting with him alone was something Hermione had never experienced and, for some reason, it made him appear more human to her. There were no snide remarks or whispers about him coming from other students for her to filter out as she listened to him talk. It had been just him and her. She was actually beginning to see who he really was or at least some glimpse of it. Seeing that side of him, his exhaustion as a result of the difficult life he led, had made her feel something for him that she couldn't describe. She felt angry and concerned that he was sacrificing himself for so many people but was impressed by his strength and courage all the same. He worked too hard and got too little respect. It seemed as though the past two days had brought up emotions in Hermione that must have been dormant for years.

Earlier, when Snape had whispered her name in his sleep, a warmth had enveloped her that set her on edge. She willed the feeling to disappear, but part of her never wanted it to end, the memory of it reminding her how exquisite something as simple as his voice could make her feel.

What just happened to me? Hermione thought, never imagining that so much could occur in one evening. God, the way Snape said my name tonight made me wish he had been awake saying it. But why did he say my name? My first name? I should have had the nerve to ask him! Of course, he wouldn't have told me the truth. Maybe he'll fall sleep again during our next session... hmmm... OH GREAT... now I'm a creepy student who has a thing for her professor and enjoys watching him sleep. Scratch that; I'm a creepy student who has a thing for her professor and enjoys watching him sleep even though she already has a boyfriend! Hermione's inner monologue had completely pulled her attention away from the fact that she still had Ron to worry about. Her thoughts immediately turned towards him.

I thought I knew what I wanted. I was happy to think of being with Ron, but what now? I can't believe I made him kiss me... but I had to know! Snape made me feel something by doing so little and, with Ron... I should have felt something! How could I have felt... nothing? ABSOLUTELY NOTHING? REALLY? But what can I do now? I've already said I'd go out with him, and it's not like I'm going to get anywhere with or anything from Snape. I don't really want to hurt Ron; he's been waiting so long for this. It'll all be fine. I'll stay with Ron, and over time, I'll stop thinking about Snape any more than I should. We can be... friends, if he'd even be okay with that. It's worth a shot. What do I have to lose? Everything will be fine... completely fine. I will forget that I ever stopped to think of Severus Snape. I'm probably imagining all of this anyway; I

haven't been sleeping or eating well lately. Yes, I must just be tired. I can't like Snape. What a preposterous idea. I will be happy with Ron. We will be happy.

Somehow, Hermione didn't have very much faith in her own promises and was dreading Potions the next morning. She couldn't imagine how she would be able to tear her focus away from Snape; she had so many things to think about, all of which concerned him. Now that she needed to deal with her own feelings for Snape, or Severus as she now felt inclined to call him, she was going to have to be very, very careful. She couldn't have anyone noticing how she changed by being around Snape, whether working with him or just listening to him lecture; her life would be a living hell, of that she was sure. It wouldn't do to appear as though she were paying close attention to him. But she had a plan and would throw all of her efforts and emotions into her relationship with Ron. Despite her apprehension about the next day, she succumbed to the exhaustion that had been gripping her since the new term began, slipping off to sleep. But she couldn't escape her thoughts, not even in her dreams, as her mind's eye saw him waiting, calling for her.

Hermione.

Not As We

Chapter 11 of 24

Hermione's conflicting emotions battle for dominance the next day in Potions.

Tons and tons of gratitude to my beta, *s and h forever*. She deserves some sort of award.

As always, reviews would be lovely.

"Day one, day one, start over again. Step one, step one, I'm barely making sense. For now I'm faking it 'til I'm pseudo making it from scratch. Begin again, but this time I as I, and not as we." (Not As We, by Alanis Morissette)

The next morning came all too fast for Hermione. Although she had fallen asleep quickly, the quality of her rest left much to be desired. Whenever she had closed her eyes, she saw either Ron or Snape staring back at her accusingly, as though implying that she were ruining both of their lives. As such, she preferred to stay awake alone than fall asleep with their imagined company, and so her vicious cycle of exhaustion continued. Her head was still spinning, and she felt a strong nervousness about the day ahead, one that tricked her body into feeling ill. She took her time getting ready and gathering her things for the day, hoping to enter Snape's classroom as late as possible and delay, however minutely, the arrival of the inevitable double-edged sword that was prepared to stab at her. She reached the foot of the stairwell that led from the girls' dormitory and stopped dead in her tracks as she saw Ron staring at her from his chair in the common room. In her previous night's frenzied search for answers about her strange attraction to Snape, Hermione had almost forgotten that she would have to face Ron after using him so cruelly, even before she had to see her professor. She made her way over to where Ron sat, not knowing exactly how to bring up what had occurred between them.

"Good morning, Ron. I was wondering if we could talk." Hermione stood self-consciously, waiting for him to respond and wondering if this was the feeling that Ron experienced whenever he tried to tell her how he felt. It was hell.

"Talk about what, Hermione? Last night? Don't even think about it; you have enough to worry about with this Snape independent study on your plate. Spending so much time with that git would make anyone go a bit bonkers!" Ron sped on with his explanation, seeing that Hermione was about to interrupt him and ask questions. Clearly, Ron thought, she had expected him to be upset. "I completely understand; this relationship is new for both of us. We've been friends for so long, trying to be more than that must have been too intense for you last night. It's okay, Hermione; we have plenty of time before we have to worry about that kind of thing. I hope you haven't been too anxious about it." He smiled at her, and Hermione felt a sharp stab of both pain and guilt, realizing how much Ron really cared about her.

Why does he have to be so damned understanding? Everyone else in his position probably would have thrown me out flat on my arse the minute I tried to talk to them, instead of letting me explain. I should feel so lucky that he's my 'boyfriend' but... This is going to be so much harder than I thought.

"Wow, Ron, thanks. I'm really sorry for the way I reacted. I've just been under a lot of stress lately, what with getting ahead in and revising for classes, as well as this independent study. Adding 'us' to my list of concerns was a tad overwhelming. I'm sure that screaming 'FUCK' at you, then running away, wasn't the best thing I could have done." Hermione meant what she said. She was thoroughly embarrassed by the lack of self control she had exhibited and couldn't believe she hadn't had the presence of mind to save her personal reactions for the privacy of her own room.

"No, no it wasn't. I much prefer hearing your expletives screamed in Snape's general direction than mine, thank you!"

At that, Hermione had to laugh, thankful that Ron didn't know just how many times she had cursed Snape in her thoughts. They left for Potions holding hands, giving Hermione the hope that she could possibly make things work with Ron.

Her hope was short lived. As soon as she entered the classroom and saw Severus, something in her changed. She suddenly found herself unable to move. She was supposed to be busily convincing herself that she was completely unaffected by Snape, but now, Hermione didn't care; her mind was elsewhere, and all she could see was him. She felt the warm pull in her stomach, reminiscent of the night before, resurrect itself, magnifying the strength of her professor's presence. She couldn't take her eyes off him, noticing how strong and pensive he looked simply just by sitting at his desk. She had always appreciated a good brooder; brooding demonstrated a true level of thought, as opposed to an air of disinterest. Now that she looked at him with the express purpose of finding Snape either attractive or not, she was forced to admit she had some sort of a 'thing' for the professor. She didn't know what to call it, exactly, but it was definitely a 'thing'. She was well and truly screwed.

I wonder what he's thinking Hermione asked herself yet again. *How could I have not noticed this before? He's absolutely incredible. I don't even know what it is exactly, but it's incredible, well, except for practically all of his personality. He can't actually be that cold and bitter all the time. He can't! Even still, I've never felt like this...* Hermione let her mind continue to ramble, mesmerized by the rise and fall of Snape's chest as he breathed, and the rippling muscles in his forearm as he wrote. *This is so wrong*, she thought. *He hates me. How can I like someone who hates me?*

Suddenly, Snape looked up from his papers, as though he knew she had been watching him, and their eyes locked. In that moment, time seemed to stand still for Hermione, as a feeling of weightlessness took over her body and consciousness. She didn't realize she had been holding her breath and was probably just making herself light-headed, until she felt Ron's arm snake around her waist, guiding her to their seats. She turned to sit down and then looked back at Severus, who nodded at her quickly, raising an eyebrow in question as Ron pulled her hair from the side of her neck and kissed her on the cheek. Hermione blushed as she began to get ready for class, not because of Ron's kiss, but as a result of her intense awareness of the Potion master's gaze on her.

The class sat in anticipation, waiting for Snape to begin, unnerved by his silence and the apparent fury building within him. There wasn't explicit rage in his expression, but the students could tell that something was amiss; whatever it was, it couldn't bode well for them. They expected him to lash out at them instantaneously and assign some impossible potion in the hopes of failing them all, but no such action came. Instead, he simply wrote an assignment on the board and glared at the class before demanding that they begin. He made his way back to his desk, sat down, and rested his head in his hands, as though afflicted by a rather severe headache, while the students began working on their tasks.

Hermione was continuously looking up from her work, transfixed and puzzled by Snape's actions. She figured it must have been his disapproval of Ron's display of affection for her, but she couldn't imagine why it should affect his mood so strongly.

Don't be stupid, she chided herself. Snape couldn't give a rat's arse about you. He's probably just not feeling well. Hermione shook her head violently as her inner battle raged on, eliciting several stares from her fellow Gryffindors. She determinedly stared back down into her own cauldron, intent on driving away her thoughts of Snape.

She managed, as usual, to complete the assignment with time to spare, despite the distractions that Snape, Ron, and her own thoughts provided. She walked to the front of the room, turned in her vial and, quite uncharacteristically of her, asked to be excused. Potions was wrecking havoc on her nerves; never in her life had she so looked forward to Charms. The answer Snape gave, however, astonished her.

"No, Miss Granger, you may not leave early. I'm sure Mister Weasley would appreciate it greatly if you stayed with him until he has finished his miserable excuse for a potion, anyway." He took pause to smirk at her before he continued. "To be honest, I'm surprised you can't think of something to work on during this rarely afforded free time. For example, you could continue the research for your independent study. Speaking of which, is this evening at eight o'clock agreeable for you to continue your work?"

"Yes, sir. Eight o'clock will be fine. Since you've brought it up, should we just plan on meeting every evening at eight? I would feel less anxious being on a dependable schedule, as opposed to deciding when we are to meet on a day-by-day basis. Considering that we've met for the past two nights at eight, I'm assuming this arrangement will be satisfactory?" Hermione felt the stares of the rest of the class hot against her back as her dialogue with Snape continued. She desperately hoped they wouldn't notice the growing tension between them.

"Yes, Miss Granger, your assumption would be correct. That arrangement is, indeed, most satisfactory. You may return to your seat and wait for your escort," he replied, glancing at Ron, who was fumbling over his cauldron, clearly oblivious to the conversation being held around him.

Hermione attempted to review her notes on the Cruciatus Curse, trying to recall what work she had actually accomplished the previous night, but was unable to concentrate. Instead, she laid her head on the desk in front of her and unwillingly dozed off, exhausted already by her morning onslaught of emotions coupled with the lack of sleep she was already experiencing. Before she knew it, Ron was calling to her and nudging her shoulder, urging her to wake up.

"Hermione, class is over. Let's go back to the common room before Charms."

"Oh my God! I fell asleep? What's going on?" Hermione was startled to find that no one was left in the room but her, Ron, and Snape.

"You seem to be getting in a bit over your head, Miss Granger. Have you not been sleeping well?" Snape muttered shortly from behind his desk.

"No, Professor Snape. I haven't been sleeping well. There's just a lot that I've been thinking about lately. I'm sorry, sir. It won't happen again. I'll see you tonight." Hermione turned to leave the room, and Ron quickly ran up beside her to grasp her by the hand. They exited quickly, leaving Snape to consider what he had just witnessed.

Severus knew he had no grounds to be jealous; it was only a matter of time before Ron and Hermione became an item. Practically the entire student body and staff expected it from them. Still, a wave of anger had hit him when he was forced to silently watch that idiot pull the hair from her face, wishing that it was his hand brushing her cheek instead.

He doesn't deserve her. He never will. He can't imagine how lucky he is that she would show a meager interest in him...

And then it hit him. Her interest. Hermione had seemed completely disinterested in Ron's advances that morning. Replaying the progression of the class in his mind, he recalled the moment when his gaze met hers and remembered the nervous discomfort he found in her eyes.

Was it because of her hesitancy about being with her new 'boyfriend' in public... or could it be about... shit. I'm right, aren't I? It must have been something that happened last night. I must have said something when I was asleep. Fuck.

After Hermione had left the night before, Snape began obsessing about what she possibly could have had to ask him without even considering that he could have spoken in his sleep. Once he thought of it, however, the idea seemed completely plausible. He remembered his dream vividly. He was sitting in his private library with Hermione, holding her tightly as she read. She had just finished a particularly heady book and placed it on the floor before looking up into his eyes and whispering, 'Severus, I love you.' Her declaration, even in his dream, had shocked him, but before the dream could go any further, Hermione's scream had woken him. He had accepted her explanation about being disturbed by her research then, without a second thought, but her behavior this morning made him think differently.

I need to find out what happened... but how? It would be inappropriate to use Legilimency on her without her knowledge. I may be a Slytherin, but she deserves more respect than that. It's certainly going to be a long night; I may as well begin preparing for my afternoon classes. Why do I even keep this bloody job? If I would just quit, I could get away from her. Who am I kidding? I could never leave. Albus wouldn't accept my resignation anyway, the meddling fool.

He left the room, desperate for an escape, anything to avoid teaching, or even thinking, for that matter. Firewhisky, as always, seemed to be a possible option, but he couldn't afford to develop an impressive drinking habit. It could quickly become an addiction, not to mention that it would detract heavily from his sound financial standing. It wouldn't do to have more than one drunkard running through the halls of the school; Hogwarts had enough to contend with by having Sybil Trelawney on staff. With little time to do much else, he opted to pace the room, occasionally breaking various objects for good measure.

Severus Snape, for once, was not looking forward to seeing Hermione Granger.

Lose Control

Chapter 12 of 24

Both Hermione and Severus remain conflicted, and they discover where their emotional distresses can lead.

Many thanks to my beta, *s and h forever*.

Reviews are always welcome. I love when they light up my inbox. Thanks to those of you who have reviewed.

"Can we play the game your way? Can I really lose control? For once in my life, I think it'd be nice just to lose control, just once, with all the pretty flowers in the dust!" (Lose Control, by Evanescence)

Hermione, Ron, and Harry were in the Great Hall for dinner. Between Hermione's overloaded class schedule and her work with Snape, it seemed that meals were the only opportunities the three friends had to share together. Normally, Hermione would have been pleased to have the chance to spend time with her comrades, but not on this particular evening. She remained distraught after the morning's events and had come to no reasonable conclusion as to which course of action she should take. She knew in her heart that she should make the best of her relationship with Ron, but the way she reacted to seeing her professor earlier made her feel otherwise. It was clear that Ron cared for her much more than she cared for him, at least romantically, but she somehow couldn't bring herself to end their relationship; she didn't want to hurt him after he had been so good to her. She realized that she was going to be miserable either way and was saddened by the darkness that seemed to be overshadowing her future. She stared into her soup as Ron and Harry argued about Quidditch on either side of her, until the feeling that she was being watched wrenched her gaze away from her dinner. She shifted her gaze upwards to see Snape looking intently at her from his place at the staff table. Vowing that she wouldn't subject herself to the menacing anxiety of his presence, Hermione addressed Harry and Ron for the first time since Potions.

"Sorry to interrupt your otherwise *riveting* conversation, but I'm really not feeling very well. I think I'm going to go back upstairs and rest until I go to work tonight. I'll see you both later." She turned to go to her room, vaguely aware of Snape's eyes following her, until Ron called out her name.

"Wait, Hermione, I'll go with you. I don't want you to be feeling poorly all by yourself." Ron smiled at her again, making her feel even worse as they made their way back to the common room in silence.

Hermione started towards the stairs after they arrived, but Ron interrupted her again.

"You know, Hermione, maybe it would be better if you just slept down here. That way, I could make sure you don't sleep too late. Come here. It'll be fine, I promise."

Hermione walked over to him while he sat on the couch and gestured for her to lie down. She placed her head in his lap, comforted by the way he was holding her. She didn't know what to say in response to his kindness, but she tried her best.

"Thank you so much, Ron. You can't imagine how much your friendship has meant to me over the past couple of weeks." Hermione flinched, hoping that he wouldn't realize she had only mentioned their friendship.

"I think I'd do anything for you, Hermione. I guess that's what happens when you love someone." He glanced down at her in his arms until he saw her fall asleep, yielding to her exhaustion.

Little did he know that Hermione was very much awake, panicking after hearing his admission. She was completely astounded to hear of his love for her. It seemed like an awfully fast conclusion for Ron to come up with. Hermione assumed that he must have felt that way for years and felt the familiar stab of guilt as her mind screamed that she was being unfair to him. But the knowledge that she felt *something* for Snape was getting in the way of her capacity to love Ron, at least in the way he wanted her to love him. It made her feel sick. Sitting around in this manner would do her no good; she needed to do something productive.

Hermione sat up quickly, escaping Ron's embrace. She couldn't bring herself to be with him again and make him used to being with her until she had a plan. She looked over to Ron on the other side of the couch and attempted to give him answers to the questions his perplexed look seemed to ask of her.

"I'm so sorry, Ron. I think the only thing that will make me feel better is working. You know how happy being productive makes me. I know, I know, it makes me a phenomenal dork, but it works. I'm going to see if Snape's available to meet early. What time is it, anyway?" Hermione walked towards the portrait hole, stopping to grab her bag and wait for Ron's answer.

"Hermione, it's only six thirty. Do you really want to hang out with Snape for an extra hour and a half? What's wrong with you?" Fortunately for Hermione, Ron looked more confused than angry, giving her the confidence to make her way out the door.

"I'm sorry, Ron. I just can't stay here. I can't sleep, and you know I can't manage just sitting around doing nothing. It's just not who I am. I should be back later tonight. I don't know how late I'll be. Please, don't wait up for me. Get some sleep. You'll need it. Quidditch practice really picks up this week, doesn't it?" Hermione knew exactly what to say to Ron to make him feel better. All she had to do was mention Quidditch, and she could probably get him to sell her his soul.

"Yeah, that's true, Hermione. I have to be well rested. The team relies on me, you know! Well, I don't get why you'd want to do more work, but have fun! I love you," he added bashfully. "I know it might be too soon to say, and you don't have to say it back, but I just thought you should know. I've felt this way for some time now."

"I know," was all that she could say in return before walking down to the dungeons. She took her time, reveling in the feeling of finally being able to take a leisurely stroll to the dungeons. She certainly wouldn't be late this time around. When she arrived, she knocked softly on Snape's door, not exactly sure if she actually wanted him to answer or not. She could always just hide in the library until eight and avoid both Ron and Snape. Even if she started working with the professor now, they'd just be going up to the library anyway. She was taken aback by her own stupidity as she realized she could have just done research on her own. If she needed Snape to answer any questions, she could have just saved them until their eight o'clock meeting. Now that she had knocked on his door, however, she was forced to remain there in silence, seriously doubting the title bestowed upon her as the brightest witch of the age.

Just as she convinced herself that he was either at dinner or talking with one of his colleagues, the handle of the door turned, and Severus Snape stood before her, rather confused. Apparently, he didn't get many unexpected visitors. Before she could begin to explain why she had appeared at his door so uncharacteristically early, he abruptly grasped her lightly by the shoulders and asked her softly, "Miss Granger, are you alright? Has something happened? You do know that it's only six forty-five, do you not?" Snape could fathom no reason for Hermione's sudden appearance, unless something was wrong. He saw no circumstance under which she would voluntarily seek his company.

The intensity of the concern in his eyes startled Hermione. Compared to Harry or Ron, the level of his expression was conservative, but, considering that she was dealing with Severus Snape, any vestige of emotion was monumental. She had never once considered that Snape could ever be caring or compassionate, let alone to her, his least favorite know-it-all. An unexpected wave of guilt overwhelmed her, and she scrambled to convince him that she was fine. To Hermione, discussing her innermost emotions was a sign of weakness; she had trained herself to deal with her own problems, to shut people out, to stay strong. Demonstrating such a weakness in front of the Potions master would be immeasurably humiliating.

"Professor, nothing has happened. Like I said earlier when I fell asleep in class, there's been a lot on my mind recently. I realized after dinner that, funnily enough, the best way for me to relax is to work, so I was coming to see if you wouldn't mind getting started early this evening. I understand if you're not available at the moment; I'm sure you appreciate any time you can spend by yourself." Hermione replied, pleased to see that she had been able to calm Snape down with her explanation; he had backed away slightly and removed his hands from her shoulders. She was even more pleased by his answer.

"Miss Granger, I do not mind at all. I'm sure the evening will be quiet enough for me if you continue your work as diligently as you did last night. But, before we continue to the library, would you mind if I ask a question of you?" He walked back to his desk, leaning on it for support as he awaited her answer. He hoped that he would be able to glean the details of the previous night's events from her response, but he had to tread carefully. Startling Hermione would do him no good.

"Certainly, Professor, you may ask me anything you wish," Hermione responded, relieved that her tone hadn't given away her true thoughts. She felt her pulse quicken as

she imagined what he could have to ask her, desperately hoping that he hadn't figured out what had happened the night before. Embarrassing the professor and revealing her sentiments would do her no good.

"Thank you for the permission, Miss Granger. I couldn't help but notice that you looked rather uncomfortable this morning. I truly hope that your uneasiness has nothing to do with the situation of our independent study. Has anything happened that has caused you to feel discomfited while we've been working together? Your feedback here is just as important as in any other course. I would hate to think that I am doing you a disservice through my tutelage or am impinging upon your success."

Severus hoped that his question was vague enough that, if nothing had happened, Hermione wouldn't be suspicious of his intentions in asking the question, yet clear enough that, if something had happened, she would realize it was acceptable to discuss it with him. Fortunately, he didn't have to worry for long, as Hermione considered his question for a brief moment before answering.

"No, sir, nothing has happened," Hermione lied. "I'm thrilled to be working with you. I hope I didn't make you think that I wasn't enjoying our time together. I appreciate it very much, I assure you."

Hermione hated lying to him about what had happened the night before, but she certainly wasn't ready to tell him what he had said in his sleep, afraid of where their conversation could go. She wasn't ready to engage herself in a discussion of her affections and couldn't comprehend having to tell Snape about them. Instead, she insisted that they continue on to the library; she was looking forward to continuing her research and informing Snape of her desire to create a brewing plan, so that they could work in the labs the next night. She dearly loved the feel of sturdy parchment under her hands but was eager to chop, pour, and stir, as well.

As soon as they set foot in the library, Hermione dashed to the cart she had left on reserve, pulling out piles of books and throwing them onto her worktable. She set to reading them enthusiastically, trying not to remember that she was alone with Severus Snape again, knowing that it wouldn't do well for her to lose her focus during such an important project. She was on a mission to save the wizarding world and wouldn't let her emotions get in the way.

Hermione began scribbling notes, continuing for practically five hours at the speed of light, until she had a concrete plan of how to begin formulating her potion; her hand was horribly cramped, and her eyes stung from her prolonged reading. As she berated herself for not charming her quill to write on its own when dictated to, she looked up and saw Severus. In a flash, all of the emotions and memories she had repressed through the evening came back to her full force. In her mind, she saw Ron's declaration of love while simultaneously feeling her emotional pull towards Snape. Her system was in overload, and her body couldn't handle the immeasurable amount of stress. She was about to have a panic attack.

Hermione was no stranger to panic attacks. In fact, they happened to her rather frequently. Her parents had been severely distraught at their onset, trying everything to get her to stop crying and hyperventilating whenever they occurred. Thus far, nothing had ever worked; Hermione simply internalized things too much. It was a part of how she handled the stresses of her plans for achievement. She couldn't afford to worry about her studies constantly; her schedule was too busy, so she pushed the paranoia to the back of her mind and focused on following her daily routine religiously. However, when her mental reservoir of anxiety began to overflow, Hermione was a force with which to be reckoned. She briefly recalled the first and only time, during her Muggle education, that she received a B; she had gone home and sobbed for nearly four hours. It had been a painful experience for her entire family; her parents simply couldn't understand the imagined pressure she forced upon herself, and it had taken Hermione days to recover from the migraine into which her tears had resulted. Since then, Hermione had been able to control her panic attacks, but the one she felt choking her throat was of an entirely different nature. Academic panic attacks she could handle; this one was more personal.

Hermione closed her eyes, willing her mind to hold back her frustration. She could deal with a panic attack almost anywhere, but not here. Her body, however, had an entirely different idea. Her exhaustion didn't even give her a chance to put up a fight.

She felt as if fire were spreading through her body, and unable to hold back any longer, she began to cry. As soon as she started sobbing, Hermione sensed that Snape's eyes were on her, and before she knew it, he was by her side.

"Miss Granger, don't lie to me. I will be able to tell if you do. Something is wrong. I know I told you that our personal lives should never enter into our conversations, but this simply is not healthy. I've sensed the tension in your mind; you've practically been broadcasting it to the world. If you are comfortable, you may discuss anything you wish with me. Your rate of tear flow implies that you have found no one suitable to whom you can relate your problems. I assure you nothing you say will change my opinion of you."

Snape had thrown his promise of detachment out the window the minute he had heard Hermione's first snuffle. He didn't care what hell he would put himself through by endearing himself to her. He simply wanted to see her healthy again. Snape would have been blind to not notice her recent decline. She had told him herself that she hadn't been sleeping well, and from what he could observe at meal times, she wasn't eating well either. Propriety be damned, he was going to help her.

"Let me assist you."

Severus' small words of kindness only caused Hermione's sobs to become more violent; the hyperventilation accompanying the panic attack wracked her body and caused her to crumple to the floor. He knelt by her and tentatively pulled her to him, holding her still in his strong arms. The shaking stopped, but her tears continued. He remained silent and let her weep into his shoulder, tortured by his witness of the pain she was experiencing. When it seemed that her crying had subsided, he addressed her.

"Miss Grang..." His attempt was ended even before it began, as he found himself being pummeled by Hermione's small fists. She was frantic again.

"PROFESSOR SNAPE, YOU *WILL* CALL ME HERMIONE. I can't even consider letting you help me if you insist on treating me like a child. You know I'm sure mature than that! That's why we're doing this bloody project in the first place!" Her eyes went wide as soon as she realized she had been screaming at him, and she softened her voice before continuing. "Professor, just call me Hermione. *Please*. My name is Hermione."

Severus let her go, satisfied that the panic attack had been curbed, before conceding. There was little use in arguing with her when she was in such a state. "Fine, if it makes you feel more comfortable, I'll do it. Now, Hermione," he paused for a moment as he listened for the haunting echo of her name through the rafters of the library, "I want to help you, but I can't, unless you tell me what's wrong." Severus was getting nervous. He was breaking every single one of his own rules and didn't like the feeling one bit. He was going to regret this later.

"I'm so sorry, Professor. I'm feeling so many things I don't want to feel. I don't know what to do. I've never felt like this before, and my own uncertainty is killing me."

"I see. Miss Gr... Hermione, are these feelings somehow associated with your Mister Weasley?" Snape looked down at Hermione and felt her unknowingly tense at the sound of Ron's name.

"In a way they do. Since you asked, you must have noticed that our relationship has changed slightly. Well, the other day, Ron asked me to be his girlfriend. I said yes, thinking that such a relationship with him would make me happy."

Hermione's voice gained strength as she continued her narrative. She maintained her composure by imagining herself answering a question within the context of a Potions class rather than being in a personal conversation with Snape. It seemed to help. She couldn't believe she was spilling her guts to Severus Snape. She was going to regret this later.

"Tonight, after dinner, Ron told me he loved me, and, well, I don't feel the same way. To be honest, I don't feel any of the things he feels for me. Our friendship means the world to me, but I can't see it becoming anything more. I'm afraid that if I end things with him, I'll break his heart. I can't have that weighing on me. I can't. I don't want it, any of it." Voicing her feelings only made them more real to her, and she began crying again with a renewed vigor.

Severus waited for her to quiet down before speaking to ensure that she could hear him. "I know my opinion cannot possibly have any impact on your decisions. I've given you no reason to trust my judgment, but I believe that it would be best to end things with him now, if that is truly what you desire. Your continued silence will only make things worse when you leave him later. I know you wouldn't want that for either of you. It could ruin your friendship... forever." Severus was telling her the truth; it wasn't at all out of jealousy. He thought it fair that Hermione should tell Ron of her feelings as soon as possible instead of leading him on. He knew, all too well, the sting of being

rejected by a person to whom one is so devotedly attached, and he wouldn't wish the same fate on anyone, even if that anyone was Ronald Weasley.

"And, while I'm giving you advice," he continued, "I think it appropriate that, while we are together in the capacity of your independent study, you use my given name, since you have given me permission to use yours. Would that be acceptable?" He quite literally bit his tongue the moment he had offered Hermione the liberty of using his first name; the control he had over his situation with Hermione was fast escaping him. If he hadn't been so expertly skilled at hiding his emotions, he would surely have been afflicted by the same sort of panic attack that Hermione had just exhibited. Unfortunately, it was too late to rescind his invitation.

"Yes. Thank you so much for your comfort and... friendship... Prof-Severus."

Hearing Hermione say his name drove Snape to a whole new level of insanity. She had said his name with a tender reverence that he couldn't comprehend, and it made him want her to say it again, and again, and again. He was astounded by her capacity for trust. They had scarcely shared one full conversation, and she already considered him a friend? He should have been thrilled, and part of him was, but he found himself enraged at the same time. There could be no more stern ridicule, no more scathing remarks, no more belittling her intelligence. She would actively seek his friendship. Severus almost had himself convinced that he was dreaming, until his thoughts were disrupted when he felt something heavy leaning against his side. Hermione had fallen asleep, slumping against him for support. Severus was certain that the look of peace on her face was the most breathtaking thing he had ever seen, especially considering the state she had been in only minutes ago, and was reluctant to wake her.

"Hermione," he whispered, "I know you're tired, and you've done more than enough work for one evening. If you'd like, you can stay in the rooms Albus prepared for you in the dungeon wing for the night. I'm sure you don't feel like returning to Gryffindor Tower after the day you've had."

"Yes, I'd like that very much. Thank you, Severus." Hermione immediately fell back to sleep, completely drained, both mentally and physically, by her outburst.

Severus sighed as he carried her back to the dungeons and into the rooms that had been arranged for her. He laid her in the center of the bed and gently kissed her forehead before returning to his chambers.

In his room, Snape collapsed into his own bed. He was furious with himself. He hadn't anticipated ever letting his guard down with Hermione, let alone to do it so soon into their work together. Seeing her cry was more discomfiting than he cared to admit; he prided himself on being immune to emotional displays. She had thanked him for his friendship. She had found comfort in his presence. He was elated, he was losing sight of his goal, and most of all, he was conflicted. He supposed that he could survive a friendship with her. He was acting as her mentor, after all. After lengthy consideration, Severus caved in to his irrational side and decided that a professional friendship would, indeed, be suitable. However, it was not without the promise that he would never let his feelings slip again. His thoughts returned to the last time his feelings got the better of him, and he refused to make the same mistake with Hermione.

Snape stopped himself before being carried away by his regrets and fears. He hated to dwell on them; he preferred to avoid the inevitable self-loathing that accompanied a reflection on his past. Instead, he focused on the sound of his name escaping from Hermione's lips, the very syllables lulling him into an uneasy sleep.

Severus.

Versions of Violence

Chapter 13 of 24

Just how many emotions can a girl have in one day?

Thanks go to my beautiful beta, *s and h forever*, for her inspiring assistance with this story.

Thanks to those of you who continue to stick with my story. Reviews are always welcome and encouraged.

Considering the current length of the queue, this will most likely be my last chapter for a while. Next week, I'm leaving for a two-week concert tour of France with one of the choirs with which I sing. I will be gone until the beginning of July. I'll be sure to have the next chapter ready to submit the second I get back!

"These versions of violence are sometimes subtle, sometimes clear. And the ones that go unnoticed leave their mark once disappeared." (Versions of Violence, by Alanis Morissette)

The room was dark, and Hermione's head was pounding. It took her a considerable amount of time to summon the strength to raise her head and examine her surroundings; all she could see were shadowed, blurred figures and some faint, flashing lights in front of her. She had no idea where she was. Suddenly, a series of low groans, voiced in a startlingly familiar, deep tone, brought Hermione's attention to the present moment, as though they were dousing her with cold water. Her eyes adjusted to the low light, and things became clear.

Hermione was chained to a chair in the presence of the Dark Lord, being forced to watch as he tortured Severus mercilessly. Her professor was profusely bleeding on the floor, on the brink of his own death. He must have been beaten and cursed the entire time she had been unconscious. Ordinarily, she would have been horrified to know that someone or something had knocked her out, but she felt immensely grateful after realizing what had been taking place in her 'absence'. Hermione stared in wide-eyed shock at the fresh wounds crisscrossing Severus' back; many of the old scars that his years of service to the Dark Lord had produced had also been reopened as a result of Voldemort's assault on his prone form. She was astounded by Snape's unwillingness to vocally demonstrate his pain and was convinced that any other wizard in the same situation would have been dead already; in fact, Hermione would have thought the Potions master to be already dead, if it were not for his subtle hisses of pain and the way his body still convulsed under the curses. From the amount of blood on the floor, she guessed he had been tortured for hours. She expected nothing less than this exhibited stoicism from the Potions master and knew that he would rather be killed than give Voldemort the satisfaction of knowing what significant agony he was experiencing.

When she finally absorbed the horror of what she was witnessing, Hermione began sobbing for Voldemort to release Severus, straining against her bonds in a feeble attempt to end his suffering. Her protestations, however, had no impact. A Silencing Charm had been placed around her, and the Dark Lord smirked murderously as he watched her silent screams escalate and her face contort in terror and rage. Her heart was pounding. She felt as though she was going to be sick, and an odd pressure was constricting her throat. After a while, Hermione's voice became hoarse, and she slumped in her chair, admitting defeat. Her body hurt from its physical strain, and there was nothing she could do now but cry, though she knew it wouldn't do any good.

Voldemort began to hex Snape more slowly, knowing that he was finally losing the will to fight. She considered that he very well may have been fighting Voldemort's attack mentally, but his body was far too weakened to reflect his inner strength. This physical and visual torture continued for both of them, several moments longer, until something in Voldemort's expression clearly changed; his face had darkened, but his eyes seemed to grow eerily bright. Hermione knew that this was the end. It seemed that Severus did as well.

He pulled himself up to look at Hermione and whispered, "I'm sorry," before being claimed by the green flash of light emitted from the Dark Lord's wand. It happened in the briefest of moments; there was something oddly clinical about Voldemort's final blow. Hermione mustered the strength to scream once more as she watched Snape's body fall limp to the ground, the life leaving his eyes.

"SEVERUS!"

Hermione sat up in bed, sweating and still screaming from the shock of her nightmare. She frantically began looking around the room, trying to remember where she was. Just like in the dream, she couldn't recall what exactly had brought her to the strange room in which she now found herself. She panicked, imagining that she hadn't woken up at all and that she was still trapped in her dream. Or was it reality? Her memory was soon restored, thankfully, as Snape threw open the door and stood at the end of her bed. He was most certainly neither dead nor dying.

He had heard her screams despite the two rooms that separated her dungeon chambers from his and now realized, as he watched her look around wildly as though searching for something, that she was screaming his name. He fought the urge to take her into his arms as he had before, but he had already been remiss in his affections that night. Instead, he remained where he was, his knuckles white from grasping the bed post in determination. He was relieved that, upon seeing his entrance, Hermione had stopped her screaming. She was looking at him, eyes wide and unblinking, seemingly unable to speak. In light of this uncomfortable silence, Severus addressed her.

"Hermione, I'm here. You're okay; you're in the dungeons, in the rooms Albus set aside for you." In recalling the nightmares he himself had, both as a child and an adult, Snape remembered to inform her of where she was. If she weren't already aware, knowing she was still at Hogwarts would make her feel safe. "We were working on your independent study. Do you remember? What's wrong?" Severus hoped that she would readily reply. Her nearly petrified state of silence was beginning to worry him.

"I... it was horrible. He wouldn't stop. I screamed, begged, and cried... I tried... so hard... and then..." Hermione couldn't finish, being continually interrupted by her sobs and gasps for breath. She sat for a moment, staring at Snape, as though still confirming his presence, before she started again from the beginning. She realized that her previous summary left much to be desired, and her voice gained strength as she calmed down. "We were prisoners of the Dark Lord. He... he made me watch while he tortured you. I knew you were going to die, but there was no way for me to help you. I felt so desperate to save you, but no one could hear me. And then... he..." Her story dissipated into silence, and Hermione stared into her lap until Snape's question broke her concentration.

"And then... Hermione, Voldemort killed me in your dream, didn't he?"

"Yes." She shuddered as she remembered the vivid image of the blood flowing from his lifeless body. It had felt so real. "It was horrible, Prof...Severus. I need to figure out the potion; I need to create it. It needs to work. I won't let my dream happen to anyone. He needs to be stopped, now." Hermione sat up as her determination grew. "Do you mind if we work early again, today? I can get you a list of ingredients that I'll need to start brewing, before lunch. Is that alright?"

"We can work as early as you'd like. When would you like to begin?" Severus replied, taken aback by Hermione's instant reversion to professionalism despite the horror she had just experienced. But he remembered what she had said earlier about using work as a coping mechanism and didn't question her further; to each her own.

"I'm done with classes at one o'clock. Could we start then, or do you have classes to teach in the afternoon?" replied Hermione, hoping that some miracle would allow her to formulate the potion that night. Her dream had made her current goal even more significant.

"Hermione, that will be fine, if that's what you want to do. Are you sure you wouldn't rather rest?"

"No, Severus, I'm fine. What time is it? I need to gather some things from Gryffindor Tower before we have class."

"It's five a.m. You can Floo back to your common room. These chambers are also equipped with their own fireplace. I'll see you in class, Hermione. Please take care of yourself until then. Try to get a little more sleep. It will do you good."

"Thank you for everything, Severus. I'm looking forward to working tonight. For some reason, I feel really good about the project." One handful of Floo powder later, and she was back in the common room, finding herself face to face with Ron, who had clearly never gone to sleep. He immediately began questioning her.

"HERMIONE, WHERE WERE YOU? I've been up all night worried about you! You could have been hurt, and I wouldn't have had a clue!"

"Ron, Ron, stop. I'm fine." Hermione yelled, getting him to listen to her. "I was only working late; this independent study is going to require a lot of my attention. Dumbledore had rooms installed for me in the dungeons so that I could stay there if I was working past curfew. I'm sorry I didn't contact you. Listen, while we're talking, I have to tell you something. I don't know exactly how to say this, so I'm going to be blunt. I don't think we should go out anymore. It's too much for me right now, and subjecting you to my own inner conflict isn't fair; I value our friendship too much. I'm so sorry, Ron. I hope that you'll forgive me. I never meant for this to happen." Only after Hermione finished talking did she look at Ron, seeing him back away from her slightly as if she had slapped him. She must have been more tired that she had first thought; she hadn't planned on breaking up with Ron until she could rehearse what she was going to say to him.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, Ron responded. "Thanks, Hermione. I'm really happy that you were honest with me, and I understand. I don't want to push you if you're not ready. Just remember that I'll be here when you want me. I meant it when I said that I love you. I'm not about to take it back."

Hermione felt tears well up in her eyes as she walked over to Ron. "I don't know what I did to deserve a friend like you, Ron. I can't believe how understanding you've been about all of this. I have to get some things ready for classes today and maybe sleep a little more, but I'll be back soon, okay? We can walk to Potions together." His nod of approval sent her practically flying up to her room to collect herself for the day's activities.

When the two friends, followed by Harry, entered the Potions classroom a few hours later, Severus immediately looked up from his desk, allowing Hermione to glimpse the concern in his eyes before they turned black with the coldness he reserved for his students. Hermione nodded at him discretely in return, hoping that he would realize that she was alright after the intensity of their time together. When class had finally been dismissed, Hermione worked her way up to Snape's desk to give him the list of things she would need for her work. She told Ron to go ahead without her, but he insisted on waiting and remained standing by the door.

As soon as she reached him, she saw that the Severus she had encountered the previous night had returned. This was the way she now liked to think of him: caring, gentle, and surprisingly kind. She gave him a quick smile before placing her list of ingredients on his desk.

"Here's the list I promised, Professor. I'll see you around one o'clock, then?"

"Yes, Miss Granger, looking forward to it. You appear much improved. I assume all is well?" Snape looked over her shoulder at Ron, and Hermione immediately grasped his meaning.

"Oh, all is incredibly well, sir. Thank you for asking. Things are going better than I could have hoped. Well, enjoy the rest of your morning."

"I'm sure I will, Miss Granger. You do the same."

"Will do, Professor." Hermione walked back over to Ron and closed the door behind them as they left, noticing that Ron looked immensely discomfited.

"Hermione, I couldn't help but notice that Snape didn't get all mad at you today and stuff... and well... you had a normal, borderline pleasant conversation. Are you guys friends or something, now?"

"Well, Ron, I guess we've discovered that it's just easier to be civil instead of ripping each other to shreds every time we're together. Don't worry; I'm not going to start hanging out with him instead of you. Anyway, go on ahead to lunch. I'm going to do a little more research before I start working this afternoon. I'll talk to you later!" She gave him a quick hug before bounding up the stairs towards her room, glad that things finally seemed to be going her way. It was a bizarre feeling, having some sort of an understanding with Professor Snape. She certainly considered Dumbledore and McGonagall more than mere teachers, but to think so of Snape was something entirely foreign. There was no conclusion for her to come to regarding the reason behind his change of demeanor, but she discovered that she didn't really care. She found her situation not at all unpleasant, despite the nagging reminder in the back of her mind that she had a 'thing' for him. It was just nice to talk to him like a normal person, without having to worry about being ridiculed or belittled.

Hermione showed up at Severus' door later that afternoon, humming to herself, thrilled by the fact that she was finally going to be able to start brewing a potion of her own invention. The magnitude of the project on which she was about to embark gave her a feeling of euphoria that was only heightened as Severus opened the door to her and led her into his private lab. Hermione was simply excited to see him and was thoroughly convinced that she was going insane. She couldn't recall a time in her Hogwarts career when she felt happier. She pushed the thoughts to the back of her mind as she focused again on the task ahead of her.

"Ah, yes. It appears as if you were telling me the truth," Severus began, pointing out her enthusiasm. "You seem much improved from the state in which I left you in this morning. I've collected all the ingredients you requested. You seem to be considering an awfully intricate potion, Hermione, and I wish for nothing more than your success. If you need me for anything, I will be at my desk reading what I'm sure are highly unintelligent essays. Good luck."

Hermione stood completely stunned as she saw what she thought she would be the first and probably only person to ever witness: Severus Snape smiling. He certainly must have expected her to be sympathetic to the rubbish assignments he had to read on a regular basis as a Hogwarts professor. And she was. Hermione was a strong believer in the power of the written word and of good grammar, and she assumed that Snape would undoubtedly be the same way. Her stomach flipped at the unexpected sight of his smile, noticing how happy he looked in that brief moment. She knew how hard such happiness was to come by for him, considering the hard and painful life he led, and she was delighted to think that it was somehow her doing that brought about his joy.

"Thank you, Severus. I'm sure I'll be talking to you again quite soon. You might need a break more quickly than you think. I can only imagine the horrible work you must have to mark."

Hermione turned to begin organizing her ingredients, feeling the familiar power that surged through her veins whenever she was working course through her once again. A fire had been ignited in her, and it was stronger than any sort of magic she could ever conjure. Hermione Granger was on a mission.

Miracle

Chapter 14 of 24

Successes and failures abound as Hermione works on her potion.

I'm running out of creative ways to thank *and h forever* for her invaluable work. Thank you.

Thank you all for waiting for this update. I had a wonderful trip to France and am excited to get back to my story.

As always, consider reviewing if you have the time. Thanks to those who already have. The insights have been refreshing, and the praise, humbling.

"When this memory fades, I'm gonna make sure it's replaced with chances taken, hope embraced. And have I told you I'm not going? 'Cause I've been waiting for a miracle, and I'm not leaving. I won't let you give up on a miracle, when it might save you." (Miracle, by Paramore)

Hermione sighed as she stopped stirring her cauldron to tie her hair up. It had been over five hours since she started working, but her high had yet to wear off. She savored the steam that rose as she stirred her meticulously planned creation and reveled in the rhythm she found when chopping ingredients. Her work was therapeutic, almost making her forget that the man with whom she was currently infatuated was right in the next room and that she was one door away from his private chambers. In fact, her potion making did just that, replacing her anxiety over Snape with an entirely different brand of concern.

Her dream, aside from providing her with the horrifying vision of her professor's death, had made her painfully aware of the true magnitude of her project. Until now, Hermione had considered it to be just another task to add to the load of her course work, but, in light of recent events, she realized that her potion truly had the potential to change the course of the looming war. Taking the power of the Cruciatius Curse away from Voldemort would surely be a monumental blow to his coercive influence; not only would lives be protected, but information would be safeguarded as well.

Hermione was determined beyond measure, but her own fears of failure were nagging at her from the back of her mind. Since childhood, Hermione's greatest fear had been of failing or of others being disappointed in her. She placed an incomprehensible amount of pressure on herself and, as such, was terrified by the thought that her potion might not succeed. She could already hear the remarks and see the glares of displeasure from both Severus and Dumbledore floating around in her head like the ghosts that haunted the corridors of Hogwarts. She recalled with fondness her early academic career. She had been simply satisfied with her natural tendency to excel. She didn't have to push herself to extremes; achieving came naturally to her, and she saw no reason to interfere with the inclinations given to her at birth. She remembered the days in which she went to school not to obsess over the day's tests, quizzes, and assignments, but to be with her friends. School had been fun for her, once upon a time. Hermione balked at how she had changed and mused over the length of time it had been since she felt good or, dare she say it, happy? She loved Harry, Ron, her other friends, and Hogwarts, but was she really happy? She was unspeakably proud of her achievements, but did *they* constitute her happiness? Was she missing something? She honestly couldn't provide herself with an answer to her inquiries; it was a horrible sensation. She felt the all too familiar tension of her muscles and constricting of her throat, but her impending panic attack was interrupted, as Severus called her name from the adjoining classroom where he was presumably still grading.

"Hermione, would you mind placing your work on hold for a moment? I would like to speak with you."

"No, I don't mind at all, Severus. I'll be right there. I'm just going to charm the cauldron so that it will stir itself."

Right before she exited, she glanced back at her potion; she was well aware that it could be ruined in a second and was very afraid to leave it alone. She entered to find

the professor in his usual position, seated behind his desk. She unwittingly smiled to herself, before he looked up at her in some semblance of a greeting.

"Hermione, you must be starving. You've been working in there for nearly six hours." In an attempt to disguise his fixation on Hermione's own well being, he quickly added, "But, regardless of your current dietary needs, *I'm* starving. If your work ethic is anything of what I expect it to be, I'm sure that you'd rather eat with as little distraction as possible." He continued, encouraged by her nod of approval at his assumption. "In that case, let me suggest that I prepare some sort of supper. Do you have any allergies that I should be aware of beforehand? I would never forgive myself for killing the brightest witch of our age as a result of a neglected peanut allergy. I understand such aversions are quite common." He chuckled at his own statement and was happy to discover that Hermione seemed to be amused as well. Laughter suited her.

"Well, I am rather hungry, now that you mention it," she began. "And it's not like you have anything edible in that lab of yours. At least, there's nothing that I could eat without being immediately poisoned, or having some other horrendous fate befall me. And, no, I don't have any food allergies. Nor am I picky about what I eat. I'm sure anything you could make would be delicious. Surprise me; I enjoy a little risk."

Hermione blinked quickly as she realized that she had just been openly flirting with her professor. Hoping that he didn't notice, she attempted to continue the conversation and give it a quick and painless ending.

"I'm going to return to the lab and check on my potion. Call me when dinner is ready. I'm looking forward to it, Severus. You have been far too kind to me. I'm sort of worried, to be honest. Your general hospitableness has been most unexpected."

"For you and me both, Miss Granger. If anyone is to be worried, it should be me. However, I've found serving as your mentor not to be taxing in the least. I'll admit that I was rather loath to begin working with you, but it has been much easier than I had anticipated. You're quite amicable when not focused on impressing those around you with your knowledge."

"And you can be quite amicable when you're not ripping me to shreds for it," Hermione responded glibly. "It seems we both may have underestimated each other."

"Indeed," said Severus thoughtfully. He was secretly elated at this suggestion that her opinion of him was improving. "I'll be in to retrieve you when dinner is ready. You should get back to your work."

Immediately, Hermione ran back to the lab, shutting the door behind her; she was thrilled to see that nothing had visibly gone wrong with her potion. Her thoughts returned to Severus as she continued stirring her potion, and she felt her pulse noticeably quicken at the thought of having dinner with him. She must have been talking from her stomach when she gave him her reply; she wished she had given more consideration to his offer. True, she was looking forward to spending time with the professor, but at the same time, she was less than thrilled at being presented with an opportunity to let her feelings slip. Hadn't she already flirted with him one too many times this evening? She hadn't even been aware of it until the words escaped from her lips; she clearly had no control over the situation. Hermione made the mental note to count to two before ever responding to Snape in the future.

Her mind continued its abstract ramblings, and she absentmindedly poured the salamander blood and pomegranate juice into her potion, snapping back to reality as she realized that she had just added the final two ingredients. Hermione's eyes shot downward to look into her cauldron, but she saw nothing different. Her potion was the same dull brown that it had been three hours ago. If Hermione's formulations had been correct, she was certain it should have turned some brilliant, sparkly, vibrant, yet to be determined color. Undetermined, but sparkly nonetheless.

"FUCK! Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, FUCK," Hermione screamed as she paced around the lab, trying to figure out what she was missing. She desperately grabbed for her notebook, tearing through her notes in an attempt to find the missing link. She didn't bother looking up as Severus stormed into the lab. It was doubtful that she would have even noticed if he had hexed her.

"Hermione, what happened? Did something go wrong?"

"What do you think? Everything has gone wrong, Severus!" she exclaimed and started shaking from her anger. "I added the final ingredients, and nothing happened. Not a bloody thing! I don't know how I could have been wrong. It all should have worked! Ugh, I might as well dump it."

Hermione raised her wand with tears in her eyes, ready to vanish the potion in one fell swoop, but was stopped suddenly when Severus grabbed hold of her wrist, locking his eyes with hers.

"Hermione, stop. I can't let you do that. This will work. You can't expect something like this to be perfect on your first try. This is, by far, the most complex and comprehensive list of ingredients I've seen, dare I say, in the history of potion making. You're just missing something, and you will find it. Do you realize how many lives you could save with this? Wizardkind would be talking about your achievement for years, decades even. Your creation would be a miracle, and I won't stand by while you give up on it. Do you understand me? Just come have dinner and think about the potion later. Step back from it. The cauldron will still be here after you eat."

Without letting go of her wrist, he guided her to the table he had set for them in his study. She grudgingly followed.

"Alright, fine Sever...Oh my God. It's beautiful!"

Hermione gasped in shock as she saw the room before her, only lit by the candles in the center of the table and the reflections that mirrored off of the silver table settings. It was simple, but exquisite in a way Hermione had never seen; everything at Hogwarts seemed to be a tad too ornate for her tastes. She was astonished by the trouble to which Severus had gone.

"Hm... green and silver? Always a Slytherin through and through, aren't you, Severus?" Hermione commented, noting his choices in decoration. She hadn't expected anything less from him and already assumed that everything he owned fit the color scheme of his own House. "I hate to admit it, but green has always been my favorite color. Don't let that get back to anyone in my House, though; I'll have to kill you if you do." She smirked at the fact that she had just threatened Severus Snape, knowing that there was no way she could harm him, even if she wanted to. "I don't know what to say. Thank you so much. It's lovely. And you cooked steak? Do you have any idea how much I adore steak? This is perfect..."

Severus walked across the room and pulled out one of the chairs for her. He silently waited for her to sit and watched as she visibly let go of her earlier tension. He made no attempt to put himself in a favorable light; his efforts were not by any means self serving. He only wanted Hermione to eat; he had duly noted that she couldn't have possibly been partaking of three square meals a day. She looked peaked. Severus smiled as he sat down to join her, pleased that he had succeeded in calming Hermione, if only for a moment, and watched as she began to devour the food he set before her.

"You certainly underestimated yourself when you said that you were merely hungry, Hermione." He waited to address her until she had finished eating. He was hardly afforded the opportunity to do otherwise; Hermione had barely come up for breath once during their meal. Consequentially, there was nothing for Severus to do but eat in amused silence. "I don't think I've ever seen anyone eat like that in my life."

"I'm sorry, Severus. I know I've been incredibly unladylike, but yes, I was famished. Actually, come to think of it, I'm pretty exhausted as well. I don't think obsessing about this potion tonight will give me the answers I need. Thank you for getting me to realize that. I apologize for not being a better dinner companion or providing any riveting conversation, but I think I'll head back to Gryffindor Tower, if you don't mind. Thank you again for dinner. It was wonderful. Don't brag about it, but the steak was better than any my father has ever made. Take it as a hefty compliment; that man knows his cuts of meat. I'll see you tomorrow."

As she rose from the table, Severus grabbed her wrist again, preventing her from walking towards the door. She spun around to face him and felt a spark pass through her at the touch of his hand.

"Hermione... you're so... welcome."

He abruptly let go of her and stared at his hand as he heard her leave, wishing that he hadn't let her go. But he realized the necessity of her departure, however regrettable

it was. He had almost forgotten himself again. He couldn't understand how his years as a spy failed to prepare him for this. Severus could endure the Cruciatus Curse without uttering a single syllable, yet at the mere sense of Hermione's presence, he felt compelled to divulge his most well hidden secrets. Remembering what chaos would be caused were his feelings to be discovered, Snape steeled his mind once more and returned to his grading.

Out in the dungeon corridor, Hermione reflected on the evening. She hadn't anticipated leaving so soon but felt herself in danger of revealing her growing fascination with the professor. His thoughtfulness had been unexpected, and it pleased Hermione to know that Severus was able to tolerate her presence. Still, she needed time to collect herself before spending another extended period of time working with him. As she walked back to her rooms in Gryffindor Tower and completed her work for the next day of classes, she found herself wishing that there were some way to turn off her own brain. She needed a break from thoughts of her potion and of Severus Snape. A long, quiet, uninterrupted break.

On Your Shore

Chapter 15 of 24

Time has passed, results are few, and Hermione's nightmare becomes a reality

Worlds of gratitude to my beta, *s and h forever*.

If you have the time, please review. Comments are always encouraging and immensely helpful.

"In my heart I know you couldn't see in the dark or find your way through me. Now I'm alone, my hands are numb. How do I carry on? At the turn of the tide, I feel this part of me die. Am I washed on your shore, barely alive?" (On Your Shore, by Charlotte Martin)

A month had gone by since Hermione's potion hadn't produced the spectacular results she anticipated, and she was no closer to finding the answer than she had been before. She spent all of her evenings in Snape's study, silently scrutinizing every book his private library housed, looking for some hint as to what it was that she possibly could have missed. She was having little luck.

Most of these nights of investigation ended with her in tears while Severus tried to calm her, watching as her desperation grew day by day. She clearly wasn't used to waiting this long for favorable results. He tried to help her but had no idea how; her problem with the project even escaped his knowledge as a Potions master. The only thing he knew to do was to make her take care of herself, a seemingly impossible task, considering how engrossed she was in her work. Severus was certain that she would have been dead already if he hadn't guilted her into eating by cooking for her before she had the chance to object to meals, and getting her to sleep by adding a mild Sleeping Draught to her drinks each night. He despised himself for deceiving her in this way but convinced himself that it was for the best, vowing that he wouldn't stand by idle as she suffered.

Despite all of their hardships, a friendship grew between the pair, something neither of them would have ever expected to come to fruition. True to their words, neither Hermione nor Severus asked questions about the other's personal life, but they settled into an easy and comfortable routine of academic debate. Hermione seemed to be continuously bouncing ideas of how to fix her potion off of Severus, and he would readily challenge her, teaching her to fully examine each of her options for potential pitfalls. Their conversations soon included the other magical disciplines as well, and they found themselves talking for hours each evening as Hermione worked. Although they teased that either he was distracting her or she was wearing on his nerves, Hermione and Severus found their time together to be enjoyable. In fact, it was their favorite time of day. Hermione enjoyed being able to have the sorts of discussions she could only dream of having with her peers, and Severus was pleased to find someone with a well rounded intellect. The conversations he had with his colleagues at Hogwarts were often one-sided; each professor was intent on turning the subject towards their specialty rather than examining the interconnectedness of all magical abilities.

Both of them had managed to keep their emotions well checked and hidden. This growing friendship had served as a distraction from their near obsessions with one another, and it drew their attentions away from the nervous energy that, on occasion, pervaded their meetings. Of course, they each mused on their feelings when alone, but the ability to freely converse without disastrous results calmed their fears. It was proven that they could be in contact with one another even if they couldn't act on their growing attractions. As much as they could be, they were content.

On one such evening of research, Hermione sat in what was now 'her' chair in Snape's study. She was poring over a book that detailed the intricacies of combining various potions, in the hopes that she would realize her mistake in attempting to mix the properties of Strengthening Solutions, Calming Drafts, Dittany, and the Elixir of Euphoria to combat the degenerate effects of the Cruciatus Curse. Her research was swiftly suspended, however, as she heard Severus yell from his office.

"FUCK, NOT NOW!"

Hermione ran toward the sound, discomfited that it was Severus who was screaming obscenities instead of her. She had never seen him *truly* upset about anything and was afraid that she wouldn't be able to help him. She opened the door and gasped as she saw him slumped over his desk, clutching his left forearm in pain, his hand covering the area where she knew he had been branded with the Dark Mark. Immediately, Hermione realized what was happening and felt a new wave of fear take hold of her; it was a kind of fear she had never felt before, not even for Harry. Sure, Voldemort was purely driven by his desire to kill Harry, but the boy-who-was-still-living only met his nemesis face to face around once a year. Severus was at the mercy of the Dark Lord's whims rather frequently, something Hermione hadn't taken the time to adequately consider... until now.

"Oh, God, he's summoned you, hasn't he?" Hermione whispered as her shock washed over her, reluctant to speak too loudly, worrying that it would only cause him more pain. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to go to the Dark Lord, you silly girl. What else would you expect? Would *you* like to explain to Voldemort that my schedule was so busy that I just couldn't fit in a summons tonight? I'd love to see his response to that. He'd Crucio you into next week," Severus replied, slowly standing straight as the stabbing pain of his Mark began to subside.

"I'm sorry, Severus. I'm just so worried for you. I understand you're angry, but that's no excuse for you to speak to me in that manner." Hermione would have been lying to suggest that she wasn't hurt by his ridicule, but she understood that he was in the process of transforming into the Death Eater who would soon stand in the presence of Lord Voldemort. It had to be hard on him.

"I am not angry... at least, not at you. I apologize for speaking to you so harshly. Now, you need to agree to what I'm about to request of you, Hermione, no matter how

much you may not wish to comply. Do you understand me? Will you do as I say?"

"Yes..." Hermione answered hesitantly. She wasn't sure that it was a good idea for her to agree to something without first hearing what that something would require of her, but she wanted to please Severus. He needed something to go right for him at the present, and Hermione was determined to provide the certainty of assistance that he desired.

"Hermione, you will not be here when I return. I want you to go back to your rooms in Gryffindor Tower as soon as I leave. I will contact you to schedule our next meeting. Do not try to contact me before then. Please do this for me. I will not have you burdened by the suffering that is only mine to bear."

Severus' request was met with silence as Hermione stared at him in disbelief. She assumed that she must have heard him incorrectly. How could he ask her to leave him to Voldemort? No one else in the castle knew of the evening's summons. What if he was injured and too weak to call for help? He could die if she didn't stay. The astonishment in her eyes soon turned to rage as she realized the multitude of results implied by his request and responded with full force.

"NO! You can't force me to promise that. I won't do it, Severus; I won't. You may refuse to subject me to the difficult life you lead, but refuse to stand aside and let you be hurt without anyone to care. I *will* be here for you, whether you like it or not. I can handle this. I choose this. It's not fair for you to deal with this on your own. You might not want to admit it, but you need *someone*. At this moment, that *someone* is me. You need me."

Severus turned away from her, knowing that he wouldn't be able to hold his resolve if he looked at her now. He couldn't allow himself to be swayed by her pleading. God forbid she start to cry; he hated it when she cried.

"Hermione... please. You cannot begin to comprehend Voldemort's power and cruelty; what you've seen him do with Mister Potter is child's play. You don't know what you're getting into. I know that I cannot force you; you're more determined now than I've ever seen you before. All I ask is that you consider how you could be affected if you stay. Remember your dream. I urge you to leave immediately. Please."

With that, he stepped into the fireplace and disappeared, leaving Hermione in tears on the floor. She sobbed into the empty room as though it could offer her some bit of advice or assistance.

"I'll wait for you, Severus."

"Ah, Severus, I can't say that I am glad to see you. I didn't wish to be summoning you so soon. You have greatly disappointed me. Of all the faithful, I would never have expected such incompetence from you," Voldemort spoke, standing from his chair, as he saw Snape approach him and kneel in submission to his power.

"I fail to understand your meaning, my Lord. I have done all that you have asked."

"You have not done it well enough. I have neither the time nor the patience for your excuses tonight." Voldemort cut him off instantly, disinterested in hearing his explanation. "The boy is not succeeding. He is weak; his fear controls him. Did I not make you responsible for his actions? You are my sole influence at Hogwarts. Was I not clear that any failure on his part would also be a failure on yours? How else am I to ensure that my plan will succeed?"

"You were explicitly clear, my Lord, but I can hardly be expected to control his emotions. I have kept him on track, demanding that he complete the tasks you have assigned to him. It is his family's impositions, not mine, that are the cause of his weakness." Severus looked up at him from his position on the ground, anticipating that his answer would be satisfactory. He had become quite adept in maneuvering around the Dark Lord's anger during his many years of service. With any luck, this time would be no different. Unfortunately, the menacing glow in Voldemort's eyes led Snape to think otherwise.

"It is true that his family has held him back, but you are wrong in thinking that you cannot control his emotions. You know very well that persuasion is one of your strengths. You've kept Dumbledore hanging off of your every word for years. He trusts you implicitly. As such, there is no doubt in my mind that your efforts could convince the boy to succeed. You could assuage his concerns in an instant; you know that. All you have to do is enter his mind, tamper with it. This you have not tried, Severus, and for that, you have disappointed me. I demand excellence from you, nothing less... CRUCIO!"

Severus collapsed to the floor in agony, shaking as the all too familiar curse ran its course through him. He looked down to see the blood flowing from the gashes now striping his body. It seemed that his scars never had time to heal properly before he was tortured again; the mere involuntary twisting and convulsing of his body was enough to reopen his wounds. He desperately hoped that Hermione had the good sense to leave before he returned; it wouldn't do well for her to see her nightmarish vision come to life. He could barely imagine the panic attack she'd have upon seeing him in this state.

Severus was only vaguely aware of the wave of hexes being thrown at him as he began to retreat deep into his mind, blocking out the pain. Voldemort may have broken Severus' body, but could never break his mind; that was his escape. He let the numbness wash over him as he willed himself to survive, if not for himself, for her. He would suffer it all for Hermione. Just as he, in some way, needed her that night, she needed him as well.

Hermione had fallen asleep in the center of the floor in Severus' office, unable to fight off the fatiguing demons whose war raged on inside of her. Her sleep was continuously plagued by the flashing images of Snape's lifeless body from her nightmares until a low groan from across the room woke her. She knelt up to see Snape lying in front of the fireplace completely broken and unable to move. She had no idea how he had come to be there, but it was hardly of any concern to her. She crawled over and reached for him, noticing just how badly he was injured; his blood began to stain her own clothes as she drew him to her. When Hermione gasped at the contact between his blood and her bare skin, Severus finally opened his eyes and began to speak.

"Hermione... you stayed?" he whispered, knowing that he only had a brief moment with her before his loss of blood and physical trauma would force him to hurdle towards unconsciousness. It was a routine to which he was accustomed. He almost welcomed the heavy, empty feeling of his blackouts. It was as though they were able to erase even his most vivid memories. In those moments, before he succumbed to the weakness of his own body, and his mind was wiped clean of any thought, he felt at peace. He knew it was unhealthy to practically welcome these near-death experiences, but he found them to be a valuable catharsis, considering that he had no one with whom to share his inmost, torturing thoughts.

"Of course, I stayed, Severus. You knew that I would. If not, you should have known. How could I leave and let you come back to an empty study?" Hermione choked out through the weight of her unshed tears as she held his damaged body more tightly in her arms, "I couldn't bear to let you handle this alone. You were right. I didn't know how badly he was going to hurt you, but I'm still here. I won't run away from you. Not now. I'm so sorry, Severus. I'm sorry for so much: for the years you've had to go through this alone, for every time you've been tortured. If only my blasted potion was finished! You could have been spared this. I will make it work, Severus. We will make it work. But what can I do to help you now?" Hermione cut her ramblings short when she saw the disconcerting way the professor's eyes were drifting shut and reopening. He wasn't going to last much longer.

"Hermione, go find Madam Pomfrey. She knows what to do; you may help her heal me, if you wish. Then tell Albus what happened. Someone will have to instruct my classes. But, Hermione... why did you stay? I've been the cause of so many of your life's anxieties. How could you possibly concern yourself with what happens to me?"

Hermione paused to think before answering him. "I don't know, Severus. I can't begin to describe how I feel right now," she reflected as the image of his battered body wrecked havoc on her senses. "I've never felt like this before, and I'll admit that it scares me. I've never worried as much in my life as I did for you tonight, and I've certainly never seen anything this horrific. This goes so far beyond anything Harry, Ron, or I have ever experienced. All I'm sure of now is one thing."

Her final words were the last he heard before being claimed by dreamless sleep at last.

"Severus... I trust you."

Weight of the World

Chapter 16 of 24

Hermione reflects, Snape revives, and progress is made.

Three cheers for my wonderful beta, *s and h forever*.

Thanks again to those who have reviewed. I'd always love more, though!

"Feels like the weight of the world. Like God in heaven gave me a turn. Don't cling to me, I swear I can't fix you. Still in the dark, can you fix me?" (Weight of the World, by Evanescence)

Hermione woke up in a panic as she tried to remember what had happened the previous evening. Nothing felt real to her. She had lost all sense of time that night and only had flashes of memory with which to piece together what had actually occurred. She vividly remembered pacing around Severus' prone form as she waited for Madam Pomfrey and Dumbledore to arrive; it had seemed like an eternity. Images from her dream were projected onto her thoughts, manipulating her into confusing fantasy and reality; she was certain that they were too late to save Severus and that he was already dead. The Headmaster and Mediwitch had tried to convince her otherwise, but she was too distraught to believe them. Traumatized and exhausted, Hermione turned on Albus with her wand drawn dangerously, the very second he suggested that she leave to return to her dormitory for the evening. Recognizing her compromised emotional stability, he had no option but to relent. Hermione finally lowered her wand victoriously and sat still as a stone while she watched Poppy attend to Severus. She was somewhat relieved; Madam Pomfrey wouldn't be using the time and resources needed to heal him if he was already dead. She relaxed slightly, after reluctantly admitting that her assumptions had been incorrect. She felt hopeful. After that moment of reassuring clarity, her memories became blurred. She could only assume that she fell asleep during his healing process; the next thing she could remember was waking up to the crimson red of the bed curtains that were pulled securely around her. She was in Gryffindor Tower.

She threw her arms over her head in embarrassment with the realization that someone must have had to physically move her back to her rooms. When the scattered memories she had of the night's events finally came rushing back, her mortification deepened. She had acted like a complete maniac and was surprised that she hadn't woken in St. Mungo's instead of in her own bed. What was it that had made her snap so uncharacteristically? Staring at the canopy of her bed in silence, Hermione reflected on the past month and a half.

She shook her head in resigned fascination at the way her feelings toward Severus had progressed. Yes, he had been her least favorite person in the world after, of course, Voldemort, but she now realized that even her general dislike of him came from some source of admiration. She had hated him for his intelligence; not for that fact that he was intelligent, that was what she admired most about him, but that his intelligence refused to acknowledge her own. He made horrible, sweeping generalizations regarding the skills of the students in her year, and she wanted nothing more than to prove that she was the exception to his rule. Since hearing his first year speech, Hermione had what she considered to be an unnatural desire to please her professor, but now she felt more. She wanted him to like her, talk to her, and be her friend. Her wishes had been granted in rather quick succession, never allowing her the time to notice how she had changed, how he had changed, and how *they* had changed. It wasn't until he was hurt that Hermione had realized how attached to him she had become. She was by no means surprised; she was spending practically all of her free time with him. It was only natural that she would come to care for him. She meant what she had said. She trusted him. She couldn't explain it but felt it in her gut. And it pained her not to know whether her professor, her mentor, her *friend* was alright.

Although his body had healed, Severus remained unconscious for days, leaving Hermione alone and angry that the Hogwarts staff prevented her from seeing him. Dumbledore knew that it was cruel to keep her in the dark regarding Snape's health, but was sure that if she were allowed visiting hours, she would then refuse to leave and need to be removed by force as she had been the night of the summons. It would be best for all those involved if such trauma could be avoided. He didn't want the other students to notice that something was amiss and was confident that Severus would revive within the week.

Hermione remained unconvinced. The dark circles that began to form under her eyes from anxiety and lack of sleep worried Harry and Ron. They realized that she wasn't alright and wanted to help her, but she refused to answer their questions and avoided them at all costs. Their best friend had changed, and they were certain that Severus Snape had something to do with it. They simply assumed that either he was being a right git to her, or her project wasn't going well at all.

On the afternoon of the sixth day, Ron and Harry were with Hermione in the common room, watching her reading intensely as always, almost afraid to talk to her. Harry, finally building up his famed "boy-who-lived" courage, decided to break the thick silence that hung over them.

"Hermione, if you told us what you're working on, we might be able to help you out with the answer. We really want to help." Harry knew as soon as he spoke that Hermione was anything but agreeable to his suggestion.

"No offense, Harry, but if Professor Snape and I are having trouble solving a Potions problem, do you *really* think that you and Ron, who neither care about the subject in the first place nor have any particular aptitude for it, could do anything to help? I realize I've seemed very distant and angry, and I appreciate your concern and desire to help, but I need you both to back off. I'm sorry. If you really want what's best for me, you'll leave me alone." Her tirade was interrupted by a peck at the window from one of the school's owls. Harry and Ron watched as Hermione strode over to the bird, took the letter, and, seeing that it was meant for her, read it. They noticed that the tension in her body seemed to melt away, and she breathed an almost instantaneous sigh of relief.

"What does it say?" Ron asked.

"I'm meeting with Professor Snape tonight. We're working on the potion. Oh, thank God." Hermione smiled as she looked down at the note in her hands, knowing that he was finally alright.

"Well, it's about time." Ron responded to her news. "What the hell has he been doing for the past week?"

"Ron, that's an extremely insensitive question. He very well could have been sick. How would you have felt then?" Hermione didn't expect anything more from Ron with his clear dislike of Snape, but she couldn't help feeling slightly hurt by his crass comment.

"I would have felt just fine. It's about time he gets paid back for making all of us so miserable." Ron smirked as he crossed his arms over his chest, pleased at the thought of Professor Snape being miserable.

"God, Ron, that's an awful thing to say. I'm going now. I'll see you both later." Hermione stormed into the corridor, shrugging off the odd, protective anger that was welling up inside of her. She let herself into the Potions room, as she had become used to doing, and walked into the study to find Severus in front of the fire. The happiness that

overtook her was indescribable, but she knew better than to express it, not wanting to appear to be throwing herself at him. She couldn't even comprehend the awkwardness that would await them if he were to discover her feelings. She coughed lightly to make Severus aware of her presence, and he stood from his chair to face her. Aside from his significant loss of weight and color, he looked fairly healthy, his voice maintaining its defining strength as he spoke.

"Hermione, thank you for being able to come on such short notice. I'm sorry for my lengthy recovery; I'm sure you were hoping to get back to work before now."

"Severus, why would you say something like that? Don't apologize for your body. There was nothing you could have done! Certainly you realize how foolish you sound. I'm just glad you're alright. I take it that you're feeling better?"

"Yes, much better. Hermione, I've never been one to adequately express my appreciation for others, if I indeed have such an inclination, but I want to thank you for your help. I wish that you had chosen to go back to your rooms as I had requested, but I cannot let your dedication and support go unacknowledged. I understand they literally had to drag you back to Gryffindor Tower; very admirable indeed." He smirked at her as he noticed her discomfort.

"Yes. I suppose I was somewhat of a lunatic that night. I think at one point I may have threatened the Headmaster. He didn't look too pleased with me." Her eyes lit up as she heard him chuckle at her statement.

"Albus failed to mention that particular moment. Warming up to your Slytherin side are you, Miss Granger?" He tried to conceal his smile from her. However much he might try to convince himself otherwise, he had missed the witch now standing before him. He couldn't resist the urge to laugh as her mouth dropped open in rage; he loved to push her buttons.

"I most certainly am not! I didn't threaten him for the hell of it, Severus. You told me I could stay and heal you once I found help. Dumbledore and Madam Pomfrey were going to prevent me, so I fought back. If anything, I should be threatening you! Do realize what sort of panic attack I had after you passed out? It was awful. It was like my nightmare was coming true." She shuddered at the thought, finding that the room seemed to have suddenly grown colder.

"I won't try to understand your concern, Hermione. You have no reason to care what happens to me." He turned to face the wall, not wanting her to see the way his body language would most likely betray his inner conflict.

"Yes I do, Severus. I know that you'd like to maintain the façade that you still don't like me on principle, but you've got to admit that we've grown to know each other fairly well over the past two months. I enjoy our work together; I like to talk to you. I missed this, missed you, terribly while you were unwell. I..." She stopped abruptly. She had said too much and struggled to think of an appropriate thought with which to end their conversation and change the topic. "I was incredibly worried, Severus. You were so hurt. I would have given anything to spare you that...WAIT, THAT'S IT. I would have done anything to spare you the pain! No wonder I didn't think of it before!" Hermione dashed into the lab without another word, Severus running right behind her.

His eyes went wide as she grabbed a knife from the table and moved over towards her cauldron.

"Hermione, what on earth are you doing? Put that knife down; you might hurt yourself in such a state!"

"Exactly."

Hermione looked straight into his eyes before slowly working the knife's blade into the arm she was holding directly over the simmering potion she had kept stable over the past week. As soon as her blood trickled into it, the murky brown liquid suddenly began sparkling; it almost immediately produced a vibrant, green hue that filled Hermione with such joy that she forgot the pain in her arm entirely.

"I knew it! Severus, we've done it! The potion's worked! I'll have to thank Harry at some point for that, I suppose. It just hit me that my desire to make this potion work and the sacrifice that I would willingly make to spare any wizard the pain of torture would make my blood strong enough to fortify the potion, just like Lily's sacrifice for Harry. I can't believe it really worked." Hermione swayed as she looked down to the sight of her own blood dripping to the floor.

"Severus... I don't feel so..."

And before she could finish her sentence, Snape rushed forward to catch her falling body as she fainted. He quickly bandaged her arm and carried her back to her common room, practically kicking through the portrait in his haste to return her to the comfort of her own bed. But as he entered, Ron and Harry approached him, driven by the sheer heat of their rage. As Harry opened his mouth to speak, Ron uncharacteristically pushed him back.

"No, Harry. I'm going to handle this." His face reddened as he noticed the fresh bandage on Hermione's arm, and he instantly let go of any reservations he may have had in telling off his professor. "What have you done to Hermione, you twisted fuck? She hasn't been the same since she started working with you, and now she's hurt. I want to know what the hell you're working on and why it's killing our best friend. You're screwing with the one person that I care about the most, and I swear if you ever hurt her again I'll... I'll..."

"You'll what?" Snape interjected. "You'll kill me? Well, here I stand. Go right ahead. I haven't done anything to your friend. I'll have you know that she just completed what is possibly the most incredible potion in all of wizarding history. It so happened that she discovered one of the necessary ingredients to be a sacrifice of her own blood, hence the bandage. She did it to save you twittering idiots, so before you go accusing me of harming the most brilliant witch of our age, consider the facts. Now if you'll excuse me, I am going to let Miss Granger get some much needed rest. I suggest you do the same."

"Why the hell should I believe you Snape? You've given us no reason to trust you. If I find out that you're not telling the truth, *will* kill you. You will regret the day that you..."

This time a different, much weaker, voice interrupted Ron, as Hermione began to wake up. "Ron," she muttered through her emotional and physical haze, "just trust him. Let it go. He hasn't hurt me." Her eyes fell shut again, and Severus brushed by Ron briskly on his way to deliver her to her rooms.

Ron was still standing in the same spot when Snape came back down but didn't speak until his professor was halfway through the portrait.

"I meant what I said, Professor. Hermione means the world to me, and I'll never forgive you if you hurt her."

"I know," Snape replied curtly before swinging the portrait shut behind him, leaving Ron dazed and confused in his wake.

My Confession

Chapter 17 of 24

Potions and boundaries are tested.

S and h forever is a beautiful, beautiful beta. I adore her.

Thanks to all the readers and reviewers out there! Continued feedback would be lovely!

"Now I feel myself surrender, each time I see your face. I am staggered by your beauty, your unassuming grace. And I feel my heart is turning, falling into place. I can't hide, now hear my confession." (My Confession, by Josh Groban)

Hermione woke to the throbbing pain in her arm, a reminder of the night before. Despite what had happened, she slept well... really well, better than she had in weeks. The memory came rushing back as her mind's eye saw Severus carrying her back to her room and his ensuing confrontation with Ron. Their voices had brought Hermione back to consciousness, and she had been shocked to find that they were actually fighting. She would never have guessed that Ron could have garnered the courage to take on Snape in such a forceful manner, having some recollection of Ron throwing the phrase "you twisted fuck" in their professor's general direction. She chuckled to herself as she made her way down the stairs to explain what had happened but was slightly taken aback by the greeting that awaited her. Harry and Ron didn't look the least bit distraught; she had expected an onslaught of frantic questions the minute she appeared. Instead, they looked as though she was getting up for just another ordinary day. Did she dream that her potion had worked? She shifted her gaze quickly to her arm. The bandage was still firmly in place; it was no dream. Why then, were they so calm?

"Good afternoon, Hermione! You certainly seem to have slept well!" Her two friends smiled at each other as they saw the shock register on her face.

"AFTERNOON? I've completely slept through half the day? Why didn't you send someone to get me! I can't believe you've let me miss classes! What time is it? I can probably still make it to Ancient Runes. I have to get my bag!"

"Hermione, calm down, it's Saturday. There are no classes," Harry replied before she could charge back up the steps, taking far too much pleasure in her panic. It was rare that Hermione got worked into such a frenzy, let alone forgot which day it was, and he planned on savoring every minute of it. "We knew you had a rough night with work, so we were happy when you slept in so late. You've been way too stressed out lately and needed the sleep. By the way... what's really up with the bandage? We were a little... worried when we saw you last night."

Hermione felt a new twinge of pain at the mention of her arm, agonizingly aware that Harry and Ron's stares had immediately fallen upon it the instant she had walked into the room. She took a deep breath as she began telling her story, careful not to reveal too much about her work with Snape.

"Worried? I'd say you were a little more than worried. I'm surprised I didn't wake up to hexes flying around the room! Well... Professor Snape and I are working together on various potions for the Order, as I've mentioned before. I thought I had successfully completed my first assignment, but when I stirred in the last ingredient, nothing happened. It's been about a month or so since then, and I've been busy trying to rework my original calculations. It certainly didn't help that Professor Snape was unable to help me in his absence, hence my exhaustion and frustration. Then last night, it hit me that the power of the potion needed to come from something extraordinary, something that normal ingredients couldn't supply. And then I thought of you, Harry, and the sacrifice your mum made to save you. So I decided to try pouring my own desire to help the Order and defeat Voldemort into the potion, using my blood as a catalyst. Snape did try to stop me, Ron. He didn't know what I was going to do with the knife and got worried that I was going to harm myself. I hadn't planned on fainting, of course. That sort of just happened. I haven't been getting enough sleep or eating very well, lately. I guess that, mixed with the pain and sight of my own blood, made me a little light-headed. Anyway, it was certainly none of the professor's doing. You shouldn't have snapped at him like that last night, but I do appreciate your concern." She smiled at him softly, not wanting to belabor her point but hoping that he felt just a tad guilty.

"Wow, Hermione. I definitely wouldn't have guessed that was what happened. I mean really, how could you blame me for thinking that Snape had hurt you when he carried you in passed out with a HUGE bandage on your arm? What else was I supposed to think? I guess I did react a little strongly... oh well, he'll get over it."

Hermione smiled as Ron struggled to come up with excuses, finding his clumsiness somewhat endearing.

"It's okay, Ron. I'll tell Snape you've realized that you overreacted last night. I'm going to let him know that I'm alright now, anyway. Oh, and I should check on my potion! I'll see you both at dinner!"

Hermione practically tore down Severus' door as she let herself in, desperate to find out what had happened to the potion in her absence. She ran by his desk without bothering to acknowledge him, completely forgetting that she had stopped by to let him know how she was doing. Noticing her urgency, Severus followed quietly behind her into the lab. Hermione sighed as she gazed proudly at the masterpiece simmering in the cauldron beneath her as if it were her newborn child and she was already letting it go into the world to find its destiny. Oh yes, she was feeling much better.

"Yes! Severus, it's stabilized. What test should we administer to find out if it really works? I suppose we could always test on animals. I'm sure we can convince Professor McGonagall to let us use her students' Transfiguration assignments gone wrong; those poor creatures deserve to be put out of their misery. I'll run over to her office now and..."

Severus cut her off before she could finish, knowing that his silence would only prolong the inevitable. "We can't test on animals; the entire purpose of this potion is to protect *wizards and witches*. Unless we know how our own species will react to the digestion of the potion, we can't begin to distribute it within the Order for more general use. I took some of the potion myself, a little over half an hour ago. Congratulations, as of yet there are no noticeable side effects. So, now all you have to do is cast the Cruciatius Curse on me."

She nodded her head in agreement, hardly hearing his invitation to curse him as a result of the disinterested, matter-of-fact way in which he said it. Hermione mentally followed his chain of reasoning once more, but this time her eyes went wide as she realized the gravity of his request. There was no way in hell she was about to curse him, and before she knew it, she was yelling at him with all her strength.

"Damn it, Severus! Do you enjoy causing me pain? How could you ask me to do that?" Her eyes began to water as she remembered him bleeding on the floor the night he had been tortured.

"Hermione, why would this cause you pain? Your potion is practically guaranteed to work; it's green and sparkly for God's sake. I'm sure if you focus hard enough on the anger you and your little friends have harbored over the years at my expense, you'll have no problem motivating yourself to conjure the curse. Now please, let's finish this sometime tonight. I'm waiting."

Snape was egging her on and he knew it. The staff had told him how strongly Hermione had been affected by the appearance of his mangled body, and now he wanted to find out for himself exactly how she felt. She hadn't even been the least bit distraught when she recovered from being Petrified in her second year. Why was she so upset about his own pains? No ordinary feelings of friendship would merit such a significant reaction. He watched as Hermione struggled with herself, trying to figure out how to respond to him.

"You said it yourself, Severus, I was not prepared to see the things of which Voldemort was capable. He's unnecessarily cruel, merciless, and sadistic. Knowing what I know now, there is no way I could bring myself to curse anyone, especially you. I won't watch you writhe in pain knowing it has been delivered by my hand. Surely, you wouldn't wish that on me." She may have responded calmly, but her eyes pleaded him to stop pushing her.

Still, Severus fought back. He wanted answers. Her sanity be damned.

"Hermione, you will cast the curse, and nothing will happen. Everything will be..."

"But what if the potion doesn't work? What then? I won't do this. You can't make me! Tell me, Severus, *why should I* do this?" Hermione was tired and unwilling to play games with him. Not now, at least. He had a point about the need to try the potion on humans instead of animals, but why couldn't they slip some to Draco? She'd be more than happy to Crucio *him*.

"For the sake of research!" he responded ardently, unknowingly raising his voice as well. He knew to expect it but was taken aback by her fervent response all the same. "Even if it fails, my pain will spare countless witches and wizards the same fate. I am willing to accept that! You would only need to curse me one, short time! I have experienced far worse. You know that! How is this any different from you slicing your arm open? Why are you being so goddamned stubborn? Tell me, Hermione, *why shouldn't* you do this?" He turned away from her when he had finished yelling, afraid that his rage would take control of him. He was well aware of all that he was capable of when he was angered; he had been in the service of the Dark Lord for years, after all. He would rather die than hurt the bewildered young woman standing before him.

"Please stop, Severus. I just can't bring myself to do it. I can't; I won't!" She was no longer screaming, but her voice came out in choked sobs, causing Severus to wince. Nothing pained him more than seeing Hermione cry, especially if it was because of him, but he was determined to get the answers he sought.

"WHY THE FUCK NOT?"

"BECAUSE I THINK I LOVE YOU, YOU THICK BASTARD..."

A sharp silence claimed the room as Hermione realized what the pressure of his questioning had caused her to reveal. She wished that she could melt into a puddle on the floor and disappear. Her face burned, and her pulse quickened as Severus turned and rushed towards her, his face completely devoid of emotion. The determined look in his eyes frightened Hermione into thinking that he might strike her, and she immediately began apologizing.

"Shit. Oh God, Professor, I'm so sorry. I don't know what came over me; that outburst was completely uncalled for. I wasn't thinking. I'm so sorry. I've ruined everything. I didn't even realize I felt that way... well, not completely. All I wanted to do was say no, but you just wouldn't let me. You just kept pushing and pushing! You gave me no choice!" She began scrambling for words as Snape came closer and closer to her. "I understand if you don't want to work with me anymore. I'll talk to Dumbledore and ask for a different independent study. You can just go ahead and take full credit for the potion if you want. I'll..."

At that moment, Severus silenced Hermione's ramblings by claiming her mouth forcefully with his own. Her body didn't have a chance to relax after realizing he hadn't actually hit her, and she tensed at the new sensations assaulting her senses. Her mind screamed for her to stop; everything about this was wrong. Her professor was kissing her, and she was pretty sure that she was kissing him back. It was irresponsible, immoral, and could probably get her expelled, but it felt so indescribably perfect. The questions constantly plaguing her recent internal monologues were proven correct: she wanted Severus. Hermione leaned into him as the kiss deepened, her need matching his own, each releasing the passions they had desperately tried to suppress for so long. Severus' hand pressed firmly into the small of her back in response, drawing her even closer as his lips moved to her neck. Hermione let her head roll to the side as an incredible explosion of heat spread through her veins. Her skin felt as though it were on fire wherever he touched her, and she found herself melting into him, opening herself to the slow, delicious burn of her desire. She lost herself in his kisses and moaned into his mouth as his lips met hers once more. Her reaction brought Severus back to reality, and he quickly pushed her from him. She stepped towards him in response, but found herself unable to move any farther as his hands grasped her shoulders tightly, holding her in place.

"Hermione, stop," he whispered as he closed his eyes. It appeared as though he were in pain. "This never should have happened. You need to leave now. Just... just go." He relaxed his grip on her and turned away abruptly, moving towards the door to his bedroom.

"My God, Severus, why do you always have to avoid everything? Your feelings are not bad. My feelings are not bad. Ignoring me will not solve this problem. I will still want you. And you will still want me. Yes, Severus," she continued as she noticed how his muscles tensed upon hearing her statement. "You can't run from the fact that you want me. Don't lie; I could feel it the second you touched me. We need to talk about this. I don't want to leave. I want to stay here... with you. I meant what I said; I think I love you. I've never felt like this about anyone before. No matter how hard I tried with Ron, he never made me feel the way I do now. What else could it be, if not love?"

"No, we are not going to talk about this. I obviously cannot deny that I feel something for you, I wouldn't have kissed you otherwise, but I refuse to either act on or classify it. Forget that this ever happened. I will say no more on my own sentiments towards you. You are still a child, Hermione; you have no idea what you want. Believe me; you do not want to stay here right now, and you certainly don't love me. You only think you do. Love is simply a delusion of the mind, a figment of the imagination. It doesn't exist, especially not in my world. I am sure someone as intelligent as you can figure that out." His own words stabbed at his heart as well as hers, and he saw a new wave of anger swelling inside of Hermione. She wasn't going to make things easy for him, was she?

"Don't call me a child, Severus! How dare you tell me what I want and how I feel! *We will* talk about this... I *will* make you hear me! Why can't you let yourself be happy for once in your life? Why are you so afraid? What happened to you?"

"You have proven my point by your clear inability to control your emotions. You leave me with no choice but to judge your declaration of love as a misdirection of juvenile attachment. You will leave my office immediately and never speak of this to anyone. There will be severe consequences if you do. Good afternoon, Miss Granger." He turned his back on her yet again, and the last of Hermione's resolve disintegrated; she swiftly raised her wand.

"CRUCIO!" she yelled, hurling the curse at Severus' unsuspecting body. She expected him to fall to the floor, but nothing happened. He merely looked over his shoulder to smirk at her before entering his chambers and closing the door, leaving Hermione fuming behind him.

"Dammit, my fucking potion worked," Hermione muttered before storming back up to her rooms, thinking of all the things that she had yet to say to Severus Snape and how she could make him listen.

Hermione was planning her revenge, and oh how sweet it would be.

The Poison

Chapter 18 of 24

Hermione gets the answers she desires, but will they help?

Thanks, as always, to *s and h forever* for her constant support. I couldn't ask for a better friend and beta.

Thanks to all who have reviewed. I'm thrilled to hear that you're enjoying this. Keep them coming!

"I can be pensive, you can be so sure. You'll be the poison, you'll be the cure. I'm alone on the journey, I'm alive nonetheless. And when you do your very worst, it feels the best." (The Poison, by The All American Rejects)

Hermione found Ron and Harry still waiting for her in the common room when she returned. Normally, it would have pleased her to see how much her friendship meant to them, but now they were the last two people in the world she wanted to see. She was still reeling from Severus' belittling of her intelligence and the way he referred to her emotions as juvenile and misplaced. It had been why she cursed him, in the end. The way he spoke to her was so reminiscent of their previous relationship: the one in which he spent his classes ridiculing her, and she loathed him with all her being for it. If there was one thing she couldn't stand, it was being treated like a child. And before Ron could even mutter his first syllable of greeting, Hermione lost control of herself once more.

"Do you two seriously have nothing better to do than sit around and wait for me all night? Read, or even do homework, for God's sake! No wonder I end up doing everything for you! Do you realize how much smarter you both would be if you stopped being lazy or talking about Quidditch and just studied? A day is going to come when I won't be there to hold your hands; you might as well get ready for it now."

All Ron and Harry could manage to do in response was stare at her. They were used to Hermione's frequent outbursts but usually knew why they deserved them. Completely bewildered and slightly hesitant, Ron finally asked the only question that he could think of that would explain her tantrum.

"Um... so I guess your whole self-sacrifice theory was wrong, then? I'm sorry your potion didn't work, Hermione. It sounded pretty cool... even though I don't know what it was supposed to do... or anything about it... but I guess the fact that you were making it was cool."

"No, Ron. The damn thing worked. It did exactly what it was supposed to do. And yes, it's very, *very* cool, as you managed to so eloquently articulate."

If Ron had been perplexed before, it was nothing compared to the uncertainty was experiencing now. Normal Hermione would have been bouncing up and down, hoping to share her good news with them, but this was clearly not normal Hermione.

"Uh... correct me if I'm wrong, Hermione," Harry began, realizing that Ron had given up hope in trying to get sensible answers from her, "but isn't that a good thing? Shouldn't you be thrilled? I mean we're thrilled *for* you, but you're kind of killing all the joy."

"Of course it's a good thing, Harry. It's bloody fantastic; it's just that the potion decided to work at the wrong time." She clenched her fists as she felt her resentment for Snape stir again.

"Care to elaborate? What's the potion do anyway? You can't keep us hanging. And since you're working to help me out anyway, I think I'm entitled to know what's going on."

Hermione laughed darkly in response to Harry's claim of self-importance. "You never stop thinking about yourself, do you, Harry? Your scar doesn't entitle you to anything you want, but I guess you do deserve to be filled in. I've created an Anti-Cruciatius Curse Potion. I'll need to work on the name, won't I? Anyway, Snape took the potion and asked me to curse him. When I couldn't bring myself to do it, we started fighting. It got to the point when I wanted nothing more in the world than to cause him pain. That's when I cursed him and discovered that the potion worked. That's why I'm angry. He didn't feel anything. Not a fucking thing."

"Hermione, that's brilliant!" Harry hugged her quickly before adding, "Although I can see how you'd be angry that you couldn't hurt Snape. I'd pay money to watch you Crucio him. Don't let it get to you, just be happy that you've done something completely amazing! Can I tell people?"

"NO, HARRY!" Hermione screamed before she was able to stop herself. "I wasn't even supposed to tell you and Ron. If word got back to Voldemort that we have this potion, the results would be disastrous. So just please don't tell anyone until we decide how to distribute it in the Order." Hermione finally smiled as Ron and Harry agreed before encouraging her to get some sleep.

As Hermione shut the door to her room, a long, harsh wail erupted behind her that sounded almost exactly like a Muggle classic rock song she liked to listen to when she went back home to visit her parents. She turned around, shocked to see Crookshanks stuck in the door, trying to figure out a way to free his tail from its wooden prison. Hermione reopened the door to release him and felt him rub up against her legs as if communicating that he understood her feelings and was trying to comfort her. After changing, Hermione finally climbed into bed, quickly followed by Crookshanks, who lovingly curled up beside her. Hermione realized that she had been spending far too much time neglecting her cat and was thankful that he was still willing to give her some much needed cuddle time.

"God, what did I make him do? What have I done to him? He's probably worn the carpets in his bedroom down with his incessant pacing. Well, either that or he's drinking himself into a coma," Hermione noted as she remembered the vast collection of alcohol in his study. "Nothing can be easy when it comes to that man, can it? He's a walking contradiction! It's almost as if he's been building some mystery that I'm not supposed to be able to figure out, as if my discovery of his truth would be too painful. If only I could see what goes through his head; I'm sure it would be fascinating. Too bad I don't know Legilimency. What have I gotten myself into, Crookshanks? Perhaps you have some better idea about how I should handle my little problem with Professor Snape?" Hermione rhetorically asked, signaling the end of her ranting monologue.

Crookshanks immediately hissed in response, recognizing the name of the Golden Trio's least favorite teacher.

"Ha, my thoughts exactly!" Hermione smiled, petting her cat. She knew that getting Snape to reveal how he really felt would require her to release her inner Slytherin. She would have to be careful and sneaky to make sure that when it happened, Severus wouldn't know what hit him. Then, as if suddenly inspired by Salazar Slytherin himself, Hermione knew exactly how to corner Severus Snape. She resolved to execute her plan the following night and was looking forward to watching him be the one under duress for a change. She fell asleep quickly, eagerly awaiting the morning.

If Severus Snape was building a mystery, she was about to tear down its walls.

Hermione woke the next morning, tingling with delirious excitement. The thrill of implementing her plan was fresh in her mind, and she practically skipped down to breakfast in the Great Hall, ecstatically humming to herself as she went to meet Harry and Ron.

"Wow, Hermione," Ron stammered, his mouth still fairly filled from his last bite of breakfast, "I haven't seen you this happy since the first day of school! It seems like ages ago! Are you sure you're okay? Last night seemed pretty tough for you." As quickly as his head had shot up to speak to her, his face was back into his food, eating as though he had been starved for days.

"Thanks for interrupting your breakfast to notice, Ron. I'm great, actually. I've come to terms with a lot of what's been going on and got a full night's sleep for a change! God, I love weekends, don't you? No classes, just all day to do whatever you want. It's a glorious thought." She smirked as she looked up to see Snape enter the Great Hall and take his seat at the head table.

"Uh yeah, Hermione, it's great... are you sure you're okay?" Harry asked her, completely astonished at her change in attitude. He was accustomed to her staying holed up in the library on the weekends, getting ahead in her work so her overloaded class schedule wouldn't *completely* kill her, but something in her had changed. In Harry's estimation, she was a little too perky for comfort.

"Oh, I'm *perfectly* fine, Harry. Never been better." She continued to watch Snape as he ate, unsuspecting of the event Hermione was about to set into motion. She certainly hoped he was enjoying his day. He wouldn't know what hit him when she was through. The butterflies in her stomach began to flutter with a renewed vigor as Hermione thought of all the answers she was finally going to get. He wouldn't be able to help himself. It wasn't her intention to vex him terribly, but she was going to enjoy watching him struggle. Her inner self chuckled as she excused herself from the table and headed down to the dungeons to prepare for that evening.

She knew that she would have enough time. Potions was her first class of the day, and she was sure that Severus would wait as long as possible to arrive; he would, no doubt, want to avoid her. Her assumptions were correct. She managed to make it through the class without so much of a word to or glance at Snape, giving him the false sense of security that she was going to take his advice and ignore what had happened between them. If those were, indeed, the thoughts of Severus Snape, he was dead wrong.

Later that night, after reassuring Harry and Ron for what seemed to be the millionth time that she was alright, Hermione descended to the dungeons once more. This time, however, she knocked hard on the door, fully intending to have a little run in with her professor. Snape opened the door, quickly hiding the surprise of his countenance before addressing Hermione, snarky as ever.

"Well, Miss Granger, I had anticipated the inescapable reality of your eventual visitation, but I must admit your timeliness in returning to the dungeons has found me quite unprepared."

"Oh, so it's back to Miss Granger now, is it?" Hermione answered, taken aback by how much her voice was beginning to adopt the very same tone of the Potions master himself. "Surprising change in demeanor, considering our last meeting involved your tongue being shoved down my throat." She glared at him as she entered the room, shutting the door behind her and silently locking it.

"Her...Miss Granger, I've already admitted my mistake in regards to last night, and you know very well that's not what happened at all. I at least deserve more credit from you than that. You certainly weren't acting like a victim then. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have business to which to attend." He turned from her again as he always did, walking towards his chambers.

"Professor, wait! Are you really such a coward? I expected so much more from you than this. You're really not going to talk to me about what happened, are you?" The look in Hermione's eyes begged Severus to stay, while her grip on the wand at her side tightened.

"No, Hermione. I'm not going to talk about this. I told you it would never be mentioned again. I'm a man of my word, and my promise will be kept."

"I thought as much."

Severus ignored the hushed reply of Hermione's disappointment and turned again to leave. Before he could yell "*Protego*", spells began swirling around him, strong ropes materializing and binding him to his office chair. The rage that raced through him was apparent as he struggled to release himself. Hermione chuckled, knowing there was no chance of escape for him now. He was at her mercy, and she hoped to make the best of it.

"You will not laugh at me, you insolent, little witch. Let me go this instant, and there will be no punishment in return!"

"You're hardly in a position to be making demands, are you, Severus? I'll let you go when I'm done with my little experiment, so you might as well accept it and relax. You won't talk to me of your own volition, so an act of coercion is clearly required. You've brought this all on yourself, you know." She watched in enjoyment as he continued to strain against his bonds. She was gaining confidence, now that it was proved the ropes were doing their job. "Still fighting, Severus? Perhaps you could use some Firewhiskey to make you more comfortable before we talk; I know how fond of it you are. I've never seen such a vast collection of liquor in my life. Would you like that, Severus?" There was a dangerous sparkle in her eyes as she continued to taunt him with his own vices.

"Yes, Miss Granger, I would value that greatly," he curtly responded, hoping she would take his hint that it would take some great miracle for her to force any meaningful sentence out of him.

"This one will do just fine, I think." Hermione murmured as she chose a bottle from his shelf. "Drink up, Professor." She lifted the glass to his lips and watched silently as he drank in appreciation, the familiar burn trickling down his throat into the pit of his stomach.

"Alright, Severus, time for warm-ups. I plan on getting some serious answers tonight, but we'll start with something easy. From what I've seen, I feel as though I can safely conclude that you're a heavy drinker. Why is it that you turn to alcohol to solve your problems?"

His mind told him to scream "*none of your fucking business*", but as he opened his mouth to speak, an entirely different answer came.

"Something wonderful happens to me under the influence of alcohol, Hermione. When I'm blind with drink, I somehow like the world I see. It's as if the world's the way it ought to be, the way I'd like to imagine it. My pain seems to disappear, if only for a little while, and for me, it's well worth the cost." His head shot up, and his eyes locked with Hermione's in disbelief. He suddenly realized what she had done to him.

"Fuck you. Fuck you to hell. That Firewhiskey. You... you..."

Hermione interrupted his ramblings scathingly. "Fuck me to hell? That's a new one, Severus; feeling creative, are you? Oh, and if you're thinking that I came in here this morning and spiked your beloved Firewhiskey with Veritaserum in some twisted plan to force you to answer my questions, good call. I'm astounded that you weren't more suspicious of me before. My little scheme actually worked; I'm quite proud of it, actually. To be honest, I'm surprised that the Slytherin poster-boy would have accepted a drink, once my intentions for this evening were made clear. How does it feel, Severus? Relinquishing your control to a Gryffindor? It must be terrible for you. I'll admit that this situation pleases me; not because you'll have to completely surrender to me under the Veritaserum, but because I'm finally going to get the answers I want. The effort of trying to figure you out has been plaguing me for too long. But it ends tonight. Now, where were we?" She smiled menacingly as she pulled up another chair in front of him and sat down. Completing her dialogue and confirming her victory over him, Hermione allowed her features to soften, coming to the realization that she was most likely going to inflict a great deal of pain her professor, forcing him to reconcile with his own emotions. Her reflections were cut short however, as Snape began berating her again.

"You should have been sorted into Slytherin, you damned, manipulative know-it-all. If you had been, you would know just how dangerous fucking with me can be. Don't make me take this matter to the Headmaster. Drugging a teacher? I doubt that would look very good on your record, Miss Granger." Despite Severus' best attempts to match Hermione's threats with his own, he knew the last thing he would want to do was consult with Albus. Snape hated talking to the old wizard enough as it was, and their meeting would just end with him being force fed lemon drops.

"Oh right, Severus. You go tell Dumbledore. I'm sure he'll be thrilled to hear that I had to tie you up because you wouldn't talk to me about a particularly steamy kiss that we shared. A student-teacher relationship? I doubt that would look very good on *your* record, *Professor*. Stop trying to get out of this, I can tell you right now that nothing will work."

"What we have is not a relationship, Miss Granger," Snape corrected as he finally leaned back in his chair, acknowledging his compromised position.

"But you'd like it to be, wouldn't you, Severus?" Her gaze narrowed as she focused on his reactions. It looked as if he were about to vomit, trying to keep the words in his heart from escaping through his lips. He let his head fall to rest on the back of his chair and closed his eyes in defeat before he verbalized the strained word fighting its way to life.

"Yes." His fists clenched as he heard the single syllable echo through the room and the painful silence that followed. He lowered his head to look at Hermione, noticing how her eyes began to water.

"I knew it," she whispered, talking more to herself than to him. "But why, Severus? When did it happen? I thought you hated me." Her heart ached as she saw a change in his expression. She had seen it before. It was the look: the look that had haunted her dreams and nightmares, but this time, it was different. She always knew it must be a tortured look of pain, but never until that moment did she think of associating his turmoil with her.

"God, Hermione. I honestly don't know when it happened. One day I just looked up, and there you were, sitting with those two idiots you consider worthy of your friendship. It angered me. They don't deserve your attention; they have no idea how brilliant you are. Your intellect may be wasted on them, Hermione, but I assure you that it was never wasted on me. You have so much courage, Hermione, so proud of all that you are. Everything you do has a purpose, and you're not happy until that purpose is achieved. Your determination is astounding. You're going to do great things, and I'm honored to be a part of your journey. When I saw all this in you, my feelings turned into something different. I don't know what to call it, and no matter how hard you press me for an answer, I won't be able to come up with one. All I know is that I want you to be happy. I'm sure that you could never find that happiness with me. I'm not a nice man, Hermione. The life I've known has ruined me. My world is one of despair and loathing, a place in which you don't belong. You deserve someone perfect, someone so much better than me. So I chose to make myself as appalling as possible for you. I wanted to make you hate me, to push me as far from your mind as possible. I sought to ensure that what we're going through now would never take place. Obviously, I failed. You can thank Albus for that. But even still, with me tied to this bloody chair, I don't regret any of it. It has brought me closer to you, if only in bettering your poor opinion of me." He paused as he saw the tears flowing freely from Hermione's eyes, hating himself for admitting everything to her, even though he knew there was no way he could have prevented it. "Hermione, stop. I am not worth the tears you waste." Severus closed his eyes, signaling the end of his monologue. He hoped it would suffice.

"My God, Severus, I had no idea. That was truly the most beautiful thing I've ever heard. I really don't know what to say to you right now; I have no more questions. You've told me what I want to know. I've already made it clear how I feel about you. I want this, Severus. I know that it will be hard, but I want your happiness too. I can make you happy." She gazed at him as he opened his eyes.

"Hermione, please don't torture me any longer. Knowing you feel something for me in return is a pain entirely on its own."

"It doesn't have to be. I know you're hurting, Severus. I'm hurting too. We need to think about this. I realize that your life has been harder than I could ever imagine, but I'm willing to take the risk of entering into it. Just let me try. Let *us* try. I'm going to leave now, Severus. I'm sorry that it had to happen like this, but I think, in the end, it will do us both a world of good. Please think about what I've said. I meant every word. Goodnight." As she left the room and shut the door behind her, the magic surrounding him was lifted.

And for the first time in fifteen years, the first time since the night he had given up on love, hope, and happiness, Severus Snape was moved to tears.

Letter to Hermione

Chapter 19 of 24

Resistance, acceptance, and expectations are made known.

Lots of love to my fabulous beta, *s and h forever*, for her undying support.

As always, reviews are welcomed and strongly encouraged. Many thanks to those of you who so consistently review. They are most appreciated and have been most motivating.

"The hand that wrote this letter sweeps the pillow clean, so rest your head and read a treasured dream. I care for no one else but you. I tear my soul to ease the pain. I think maybe you feel the same. What can we do? I'm not quite sure what we're supposed to do. So I've been writing just for you." (Letter to Hermione, by David Bowie)

Hermione hadn't slept well at all, reflecting into the night and early hours of the next day, instead. No matter what she tried, she couldn't shake her feeling of surreal weightlessness mixed with the nervousness that made it seem as though she were going to vomit at any second. Her stomach was exercising a plethora of gymnastic contortions, and her thoughts were completely devoted to Severus Snape. She could scarcely believe she had practically taken her professor hostage but supposed that she hadn't been put into Gryffindor for nothing. Or was he right, and there was more Slytherin in her than she knew? However disconcerting the thought may have been any other day, Hermione hardly cared. She had gotten what she wanted.

Although he had not made his admissions of his own free will, his words still carried the same significance. He felt something for her. Hermione certainly deduced as much when he impulsively kissed her, only a few nights ago, but had no idea of the full extent of his regard. He cared for her deeply. He seemed to understand her more than anyone had been able to before. He was willing to make sacrifices for her own good. She was completely astounded; had it not only been months ago that she cursed the man's very existence and was utterly convinced of his hatred? For years, she had considered his capacity to express any human emotion, besides anger, to be nonexistent. Oh, how things had changed. She should have been ecstatic but knew better than to let herself relax in the glow of his suppressed affections. Severus was going to make things difficult enough as it was, not to mention that, first and foremost, she was his student. He was her teacher, her mentor, and the most loathed professor at Hogwarts. He had been a Death Eater, for God's sake. That certainly couldn't bode well for her. Bearing all this in mind, she finally fell into an uneasy sleep, feeling an odd mixture of contentment and anxiety.

The next morning came all too soon for Hermione, who groaned as she made a mental note that she desperately needed to stop creating uncomfortable moments between her and Severus. It seemed that more often than not, their meetings ended awkwardly and resulted in her running from his chambers without resolving anything. It wasn't the fact that their interactions were awkward that bothered her. She could handle awkward; she was friends with Ron, wasn't she? What irked Hermione was that she was always left with the same fate: facing Severus the next morning in Potions, whether she was ready to do so or not.

That day was no different as the Golden Trio walked to class together; Hermione's own private death march resounded in her head while her two friends chatted about Quidditch, completely unaware of her distress. As soon as she stepped into the classroom and saw Snape, she could tell that he wasn't alright and couldn't help but wince at the pang of guilt that convinced her that she had taken too much of his pride the night before. The dark circles under his eyes accented the unhealthy, pale tone of his skin. His eyes were eerily bloodshot, making it clear that he hadn't slept since their last meeting. It hurt her to see him in such pain, especially knowing that it was her doing. She wanted to say something, to apologize, but didn't think that Harry and Ron would appreciate it if she confessed her love for Snape in the middle of their Potions class. Actually, she knew they would throw their friendship out the door and murder her on the spot if they ever found out. Hermione moved to sit silently at her desk, slightly unnerved by Snape's refusal to acknowledge her. She could understand his avoidance of conversation, but for him to refuse eye contact as well? In her estimation, he was being unnecessarily cold. Surely, he knew that she hadn't intended to hurt him. Didn't he?

After everyone was seated and settled, Severus merely pointed to the instructions he had written on the board before muttering, "You have until the end of class to brew and bottle this potion. Begin."

The rest of the class busily got to work, thrilled that they had been spared one of the Potions master's daily tirades, but not Hermione. As Snape tiredly slumped forward to lean on his desk, her hand shot up in a determined effort to force him to call on her.

"No, Miss Granger. We will not be meeting tonight for your independent study. Think of it as a well deserved day off," Snape answered resolutely before her question was even asked.

"But, Professor, you didn't even listen to my question! I didn't say a word!" Hermione gasped in shock. She was not amused.

"I'm very well aware of that, Miss Granger. However, it was the question you were seeking to have answered, was it not?" Snape put as little effort as possible into continuing their conversation, his eyes never leaving the stack of papers in front of him.

"Yes. Yes it was. But, sir, we will be meeting again soon?" The subtle change in her tone of voice was an indication to Severus that she was no longer discussing the terms of their independent study. She had moved on from brutal tenors of shock and frustration to a soft cadence, akin to pleading.

He rubbed his temples slowly as he tried to fashion an appropriate answer. He wasn't ready to talk to Hermione. She knew too much, now. Things could never go back to the way they had been before. "The timeliness and nature of our next meeting is yet to be determined, Miss Granger." He closed his eyes, finding some semblance of security in his own ambiguity but was provoked once more. It seemed as though she had not been satisfied with his response.

"But you *will* contact me when you have come to a definite conclusion, Professor?"

"Yes, I suppose I'll have to, won't I, Miss Granger? Now, unless you would like to receive a failing grade for this morning's assignment, I suggest you get to work." He glanced up at her for a brief moment, long enough to note her desperate stare, before returning to his papers.

Despite Hermione's intentions to force him to keep conversing with her, Severus' threat had the desired effect; she would let no one, not even Severus Snape, ruin her perfect academic record. As she returned to her cauldron, Ron placed his hand on hers in a gesture of empathy, which only served to make her even more miserable. She pulled her hand from under his, in order to make quick work of their assignment. She bottled and carried her completed potion to Snape's desk with fifteen minutes to spare, waiting for some form of acknowledgement from him that never came. As she placed her work down on the desk before him, a soft whisper fell from her lips.

"Coward."

She turned on her heel and left the room, not waiting to see the way in which Snape's muscles tensed upon hearing her accusation, and hurried to Transfiguration to get a head start on the day's assignment, there. She was highly dissatisfied with the way the morning had gone.

The rest of the day continued as per usual for the three friends, until they were finally able to relax together at night in the common room. Hermione sat in front of the fire, reading *Rare Ingredients in Potions Making and How to Use Them* while Harry and Ron fought each other in a game of Wizard's Chess. After Ron soundly beat Harry, cornering his king and causing the group to recall their own chess victory years ago, Harry left for another of his increasingly secretive meetings with Dumbledore. They had been happening rather frequently since the start of the term, but Hermione was often too busy to catch up with her friends and learn of their occurrences. Normally, it would have bothered her that she knew so little about Harry's plans to defeat Voldemort, but she had her own war-effort to maintain. She was sure that when the time came for her to be filled in, Harry would bring it up. As soon as Harry left, Ron looked over at Hermione, who never took her eyes off the book she was reading. He tried to leave her alone, but his inability to remain in silence for even short periods of time forced him to tear Hermione's attention from her studies.

"So... super advanced potions making, huh? That's... cool." Hermione's gaze shot up to meet Ron's as she shoved her bookmark between the pages of the thick tome, saving her place.

"Ron, I'd be happy to talk to you. You're only making a fool out of yourself by pretending to be interested in Potions, let alone a rare book such as this. Anyway, what would you care to talk about, Ron?"

"Well, don't you think it's weird that Harry keeps having random, secret meetings with Dumbledore? You'd think he'd tell us what's going on!"

"Not really, Ron. It's Harry's mission to defeat Lord Voldemort, and anything that can help him do that is invaluable. Clearly, Dumbledore must be trying to help him. And it makes perfect sense that Harry wouldn't tell us anything. You know what happened last year when Voldemort invaded Harry's mind. He could just as easily do the same to us. The spreading of information in times like these can be fatal. That's why I probably shouldn't have told you about the work I'm doing with Se...Professor Snape." Hermione gripped the arms of her chair, hoping that Ron hadn't noticed how she had almost used their teacher's first name. She finally relaxed once he began speaking again.

"Yeah, I guess you're right. But still, I think he should tell us. I mean really, when you think about it, we're the ones who have saved his prophetic ass all the time. I mean, you give him all the smart ideas or just whip spells out of nowhere that keep us alive, and I... well there was that one time that I basically defeated Voldemort indirectly, because if we hadn't made it through that chess match, Harry never would have gotten to the mirror and..." Hermione smiled at Ron's enthusiasm before cutting him off.

"Yes I know, Ron, you've been incredibly brave, and I'm incredibly smart but..."

"BUT NOTHING!" Ron yelled back at her, jumping up in anger. "All we get for helping Harry out is stupid House points and millions of Death Eaters trying to kill us, while he walks around in his pathetic, little bubble of glory. We've done just as much to save everyone, if not more, than he has! We should be getting so much more credit." He sat back in his chair, completely dejected.

Hermione watched in amusement from across the room, giving him some time to cool off before responding. "You're right, Ron, why on earth are we friends with him?" she replied sarcastically.

"I don't know, Hermione. I really don't know," answered Ron, in all seriousness.

His sudden disdain towards Harry caused Hermione to erupt into a fit of laughter that was quickly interrupted by a tap on the window. Ron walked over to open it, letting in an owl which flew directly to Hermione's shoulder as if it were her own. Hermione smiled, taking the letter that it carried and releasing the bird back into the night.

"Wow. Sooner than I expected," she mused aloud, not noticing Ron's less than thrilled attitude.

"Oh... well, obviously, it's from Snape, then, isn't it? I swear, Hermione, if I didn't know you hated each other so much, I'd think you were friends... *something like that*" He raised one eyebrow as if implying something more and was upset by the brief retort that followed. He had meant to get a rise out of her.

"Well, it's good that you know then, isn't it? I'm going to go upstairs and see what he wants. I'll probably just stay up there and study for the rest of the night. I'll see you in the morning." Hermione ran up the stairs with more speed than she thought humanly possible and leapt into the middle of her bed, alarmingly giddy at the thought of Snape taking the time to write to her, regardless of the message. As soon as she opened the letter, a sudden fear came over her. She realized that she was about to find out what he had decided to do about the delicate *situation* in which they found themselves and was hoping with every fiber of her being that he hadn't rejected her. She hadn't even been given the chance to state her case. Eagerly, she began to read.

Dear Miss Granger...Hermione,

Let me begin by apologizing for my cruel behavior towards you this morning in class. I will not lie to you; my cold demeanor was completely intentional but necessary to the evaluation of my own, personal conflict in regards to the discoveries we so recently made together. As I imagine you would expect of me, I spent the entire night heavily considering what you want, what I want, and what I think is right: a complex pro and con list of sorts, if you will. What I found was exactly what I feared, for several reasons.

I remain doubtful of your ability to make a fully informed decision about what you truly want. Whatever you may think, you do not know me, Miss Granger. And despite your high expectations, a relationship with me would not give you access to the information that you seek. As long as the Dark Lord lives, the details of my life will be a mystery

to you. I will do nothing to ease your mind regarding my loyalties; you have given your trust to me far too willingly, and I refuse to take responsibility for your foolishness.

As mentioned previously while being questioned in your little quest for truth, I, at this moment, cannot even tell myself, let alone you, what I want. All I know is that I feel something for you, and those feelings are stronger than I would care for them to be. I am certain that the only result of the mutual ignorance of our desires will be destruction and pain. I would rather not inflict any of that on you.

Considering this, I realize that I've already caused you a great deal of pain through my rejection of you this morning. Your accusation made me feel, for the first time in more years than I can count, a true sense of guilt, knowing that you were suffering because of my inability to, in your words, "let myself be happy." Let me assure you, I am no coward. And while I have given myself every reason to say no to you and end this once and for all, I somehow find myself unable. I have come to the conclusion that the best course of action would be to conduct what I am going to call a social experiment. You may choose to label it as a "relationship," but considering that I have never been a participant in this sort of endeavor, I would not put too much value on that particular word in our situation. I will promise you nothing, except that I look forward to spending time with you that won't involve me grading the papers of your incompetent classmates. We cannot have what many would consider a normally working relationship, so long as I am your teacher, and I will not entertain a conversation of what will happen afterwards until you graduate. I ask you to please refrain from beginning such a dialog.

I'm sure that this is not the kind of missive you were anticipating this evening, but I would like to ensure that you refrain from developing any delusional, romanticized picture of me. As I've told you before, I am not a nice man; I won't have you forget that. And while I will do everything in my power to prevent it, I am warning you now that this may not end in the way you hope.

Nevertheless, I do want to be with you, Hermione, very much so. Thank you for everything you have done; already, it has been too much. I would be honored if you would join me tomorrow evening at six for dinner in my study before continuing our research. However loath I am to admit it, you are right; we need to talk. You may inform me in class if this is agreeable with your schedule. I hope these words will bring you the rest you have been lacking.

Sleep well, Hermione; I will see you in the morning.

Severus

Hermione lay back on top of her sheets when she finished reading the letter, hardly believing that she was still awake. But it wasn't a dream. She, Hermione Granger, was in a "social experiment" with Severus Snape, whatever that meant. She giggled out loud as she imagined him sitting at his desk in an attempt to come up with some phrase to describe what he wanted for them. She made a mental note to devise some term in between social experiment and relationship. Social experiment sounded like some sort of laboratory project. The whole situation was absurd, and she loved it.

For once, the perfect, rule-abiding Gryffindor had a dirty little secret of her own, and nothing in the world could have made her happier.

Drumming Song

Chapter 20 of 24

The "social experiment" begins, but are there more doubts than certainties?

Just in case I haven't mentioned it enough, I love my beta,s and h forever. She's all sorts of fantastic.

Continued reviews would be lovely, if you see fit. Thanks to those of you who have provided feedback!

"As I move my feet towards your body, I can hear its beat. It fills my head up and gets louder and louder. There's a drumming noise inside my head that starts when you're around. I swear that you could hear it. It makes such an almighty sound. Louder than sirens. Louder than bells. Sweeter than heaven and hotter than hell." (Drumming Song, by Florence and the Machine)

Despite her best intentions and Snape's best wishes, Hermione had gotten very little sleep the previous evening; it was becoming a rather disturbing pattern. After re-reading his letter for what felt like, and probably had been, the millionth time, she finally fell asleep, only to wake a few hours later to get ready for class. She walked down to the dungeons, accompanied by Harry and Ron, with a strange feeling of apprehension working its way up to her throat; it made her feel as if she would vomit at any second. The feeling was getting old, but this time, it was laced with the slightly giddy feeling she got whenever she remembered Severus' words. He wanted to be with her. She had no idea what to expect publicly from Severus that morning but figured he would most likely ignore her and let the awkward tension between them fester. Needless to say, Hermione was a little less than thrilled with the prospect of spending yet another class period struggling to stay calm with her professor in the room. However, they were making progress. He had agreed that they would need to have a serious discussion. She had been trying to get him to do that for weeks. At least this time, it would be voluntary on his part.

As soon as she was settled in the classroom, Hermione began working on the assignment written on the board before Snape even had a chance to look at her, fearing that any eye contact with him would break her resolve not to think of him and his letter. It seemed to be helping; she quickly felt the familiar tug of the pleasure she derived from academic success as she chopped and stirred her ingredients. In that moment, she almost forgot that the object of her affections was in the room with her. The nausea went away, and she was relaxed. She felt good. Hermione was so immersed in her work, stirring the cauldron in front of her relentlessly, that she didn't notice Snape's presence behind her until he reached to wrap his hand around her own and whispered darkly in her ear.

"Miss Granger, you want your potion to succeed, do you not?" The timbre of his voice turned Hermione's legs into jelly; how did she let him just sneak up on her like that? She struggled to support herself with one hand on the table next to them and appear unaffected by even his most innocent of words. But were they innocent? He had given her no indication of his intentions in his letter. Maybe she didn't know what she was getting herself into by starting something with Severus Snape. Did he know what his voice did to her? Was he trying to get this very reaction from her? At that point, Hermione didn't really care. She just wanted him to keep talking.

"Y-yes, Professor," she managed to stammer in response, just as his hand began to move over hers, guiding her in stirring the potion. Her breath hitched in her throat as she considered that every student's attention could very well be on her and Snape. She looked frantically around the classroom, her head turning wildly, until she was satisfactorily convinced that this wasn't the case. Surely, he wouldn't have been so bold in his actions while anyone was watching. He was the epitome of discretion. Hermione relaxed somewhat after this realization.

The man himself broke her concentration once more when he chuckled after seeing her paranoid reaction to his attentions. Her focus was brought back solely to him as he began to speak again.

"Then you should take care to practice more patience when you work. The full strength of a potion can't be forced out mechanically. You need to coax it out, develop its full characteristics with your reverent devotion. You should stir more slowly... yes, like that, Miss Granger. *Romance* the potion, if you will. I assure you that the results will be to your liking. I take it that I'll be seeing you this evening for dinner? I've decided that a change of venue might be welcome and appropriate, after spending so much time here. Albus thinks it's a wonderful idea, you know. He said that it was about time we celebrated your achievements, and I most readily agreed. What do you think he'd say if he knew what you really wanted to celebrate, Miss Granger?"

Hermione's mind was reeling as Snape continued to speak to her. She never would have expected anything like this from him. It was true that he expressed a desire for her, but his physical manifestations of it were scarce. He was so reserved around her. What caused him to change now? Was he trying to scare her? Make her rethink her acceptance of him? She was overanalyzing; she knew it, and it seemed as though Severus did as well. She was brought back to reality by his voice once again.

"Is this plan agreeable, *Miss Granger*?"

All Hermione could do was nod her head slowly in agreement. In fact, at that moment, she probably would have agreed to anything he asked. Having his answer, he left her alone with her assignment, breathless and in shock that he would stand so noticeably close to her with other students present. Hermione could think of it as nothing less than a close call.

She quickly gazed back down into the liquid simmering beneath her hand, her face flushed from more than one kind of heat. Snape was right; her potion was glowing just a little bit brighter when she turned it in at the end of the lesson. She moved away from his desk to leave and noticed the laughter in his eyes as he observed her discomfort. She gathered her things and headed towards the door with Harry and Ron but quickly looked back at Severus, hoping that he would realize how much the words of his letter meant to her, no matter how much he had tried to distance himself from her with them. He discerned the meaning behind her earnest glance and nodded silently in response as Hermione was whisked out the door by her two friends, who were eager to get out of the dungeons as quickly as possible. It appeared as though things were going to be just as difficult as she imagined.

Hermione stood in her room about an hour before her dinner with Severus, staring at her wardrobe.

"Why didn't I bring anything remotely attractive to school?" She berated herself as she tossed her uniform, jeans, sweatshirts, tee shirts, oversized sweaters, and sensible shoes aside. "Oh right... because I didn't really plan on coming to school to seduce Professor Snape, let alone go on an actual date with him."

Within the context of their "social experiment," Hermione didn't exactly know what to call their dinner. She chuckled at the thought of him referring to it as some sort of individualized test observation or associate meeting. Regardless, they were going to dinner away from Hogwarts. They were going to talk, presumably about things unrelated to her independent study. In her books, it was a date. Hermione continued to muse to herself as she ransacked her closet and dresser, looking for something suitable for the evening. Only after all of her clothes were strewn about the floor, a thought struck her.

"Damn... Well, I guess I'm not taking Transfiguration for nothing. I'll just fix something up to look semi-decent." Although others may have called Hermione crazy for talking to herself while alone in her room, she found that it significantly calmed her nerves. However loath she was to admit it, Hermione was incredibly nervous for that evening's dinner. She desperately wanted things to go well, for there to be some semblance of normalcy between her and Severus.

She continued to sift through the piles of clothes that now engulfed her room until she found one of the unnecessary sundresses that her mother always insisted on sending with her to school. She could hardly believe she was finally going to use one after the five years she spent convincing her mum that they were just wasting valuable packing space that she could have filled with more books. She hung the dress on the back of her closet door next to the pair of shoes she decided were somewhat suitable for Transfiguration and stepped back as she envisioned what she wanted them to look like. Hermione closed her eyes and muttered a few well-timed spells, opening her eyes after she felt the magic leave her wand.

"Perfect."

She slipped into the dress and smiled proudly at her reflection before throwing her cloak on over it and taming her unruly curls into a somewhat manageable twist. She walked towards her fireplace, threw in a handful of Floo powder, and stepped into the green flames as she screamed, "Severus Snape's study!"

She recovered quickly after being launched out of Snape's fireplace and smiled as she noticed the pile of pillows he had placed there to break her fall. She called out to alert him of her presence, in case he wasn't fully prepared for her arrival, and sat in his more than comfortable leather chair to wait for him. She sighed contentedly as she closed her eyes before a familiar baritone drawl addressed her from across the room.

"Enjoying yourself, Miss Granger?" he asked as he walked towards her, slowly noticing how she seemed to relax at the sound of his voice. He smirked inwardly as he remembered their morning conversation.

"Oh, very much so... *Professor*."

Something about reclining in Snape's chair waiting to surprise him with her rather provocative choice of apparel, all while using his proper title, excited Hermione to no end, and she raised her head to look at him. The view she found drained every ounce of confidence her mind or body had ever known. She knew she was staring but couldn't help it, entirely entranced by the man before her. He was leaning against the mantle of his fireplace in what Hermione noticed to be much more form-fitting black trousers, with the sleeves of his white shirt rolled up to the elbows and enough buttons undone from his collar to be deemed slightly inappropriate for work. His appearance was simple and clean, effectively displaying the body the billowing robes of his daily wardrobe hid.

"Severus, you look fantastic. I mean, your teaching attire certainly suits you... but... God." Hermione found herself lost for words as she sat upright in the chair, suddenly nervous and self-conscious under his gaze. She certainly hadn't intended to tell him how wonderful he looked. She had already let her guard down significantly in Potions that morning and didn't want to give him yet another glimpse of just how much he affected her. No doubt the Slytherin in him would somehow find a way in which to use it against her. She stared down at her hands when she felt him move closer to her and noticed that they were slightly shaking.

"Yes, well, there's no way I could possibly teach with you ogling me through the entire class; you'd never be able to complete an assignment, and believe me, I wouldn't enjoy it. Also, as you're well aware, I have no desire to present myself in a remotely attractive manner to my students; I prefer to enforce an atmosphere of fear and silence. Shall we be off, then?" He took her hand, helping her out of the chair, and instructed her to hold onto him as they suddenly Apparated together from the castle. The instant they arrived, Hermione turned to him in astonishment.

"Wait... We just... but you... in *Hogwarts: A History*..." Hermione stammered, completely frustrated by her hindered ability to construct coherent sentences with Severus near her.

"Hermione, calm down. Dumbledore and I can both Apparate in and out of Hogwarts. It seemed a natural exception to make, considering there are some evenings that I'm not physically able to travel back to the castle after my meetings with the Dark Lord," Severus explained as he stroked her back softly, knowing that any mention of his meetings with Voldemort discomforted her.

"Oh, yes. Well, I suppose that does make a great deal of sense. It appears, then, that you and Dumbledore have made Hogwarts history. Well done, Severus," she mocked, in an attempt to prove to herself that she wasn't as completely awkward that evening as she had imagined.

As they ventured further down the dimly lit street, Hermione realized that she actually was every bit as awkward as she imagined, having to practically skip in order keep up

the pace that Severus' long strides set for them. Her left hand unceasingly darted in and out of the pocket of her cloak as she battled with herself to garner the courage to grasp his hand within hers as they strolled towards their destination. She didn't know if Severus was the hand-holding type, but some innate sense told her that he wasn't. Ultimately, she decided that it would be less embarrassing to not touch him at all and resigned herself to follow him blindly to their destination in silence, hoping that she would at least get a good meal out of their date.

Hermione's mind corrected itself immediately, remembering Severus' insistence that everything that occurred between them was a part of his "social experiment." It wasn't a date. She cringed as she thought of the issues she must have, still being attracted to someone who clearly stated his aversion to anything romantic. Wasn't that what she wanted? Someone romantic to sweep her off her feet? Hermione hardly knew anymore.

Suddenly, she looked up, noticing that Severus was no longer beside her. She turned around to see him several paces behind her, stopped in front of a lovely restaurant that shone like a beacon in the midst of the twilight's darkness. He raised a questioning eyebrow at her, which only heightened her mortification and caused her to become even more agitated by the way the evening was progressing.

"Severus, you don't get to look at me like that. Not now, not tonight. And before you ask or just let yourself into my mind, I'll be honest. I was thinking... about us. It upsets me, because I know that no matter what I ask you, you won't answer. So I apologize if I seem a little tense and distracted. I just don't know what to make of all this, and I'm trying to figure it out as best I can."

"Hermione," he replied softly as she retraced her steps back to his side. "I will answer any question you ask of me, if it is in my power. You know there are many things I cannot tell you, even if I desire to, at least until the war is over. I will be honest with you now, when at all possible. You have my word. It was never my intent to frustrate you."

"Now *that* I don't believe," she replied, laughing. "All we've done is attempt to frustrate each other as much as possible! You can't deny it, Severus. Your little stunt this morning in class all but deems my point infallible."

"Again, Hermione, you confuse my motives. I was merely instructing you in bettering your brewing skills. It's not my fault that you seem incapable of controlling yourself in my class."

Even from the way his eyes shone as he taunted her, she knew he was lying but didn't feel like arguing the matter with him now; it was getting cold, and she was starving.

"Keep trying to convince yourself of that, Severus. Now can we *please* just get something to eat?"

"As you wish," he answered, ushering her through the door and to the table he had reserved for them.

"The surprises never stop with you, do they, Severus? I never would have pegged you as the fancy-dinner-by-candlelight type." She smiled in amusement as she imagined him reading poetry in a room filled with roses and found it slightly unnerving.

"Nor would I. But as you would probably expect of me, my incredibly particular tastes also encompass the realms of the culinary. It just so happens that this establishment meets my standards. I took the liberty of ordering before we arrived. I hope you enjoy lobster." He stepped behind her to remove her cloak and hung it on the rack behind their table.

"It's one of my favorites. I'm really looking forward to it, Severus. So, I was hoping that our conversation this evening could be more informal, less work related. Would that be alright with you?" She stood rifling through her bag, trying to find her mirror, when she realized the silence that followed her question.

"Severus..."

She looked up to see him staring at her, entirely confused until she remembered what she was wearing. She had been right; the dress was perfect. Its halter straps revealed the toned plane of her back, while the plunging neckline showed enough cleavage to be considered only mildly inappropriate. The hem cut off right above her knee, subtly featuring the length of her legs. To top it all off, the dress was fashioned out of green satin, Severus' House color. She knew it would drive him crazy, considering that he had already exhibited his proclivity for the color in the table settings of the dinners he had prepared for them while she had been working on her potion. It showed off her best features, but left much to the imagination; it was classy and tasteful. From the way Severus' eyes raked over her body, she felt like a present wrapped in a giant, luxurious, Slytherin bow. Her complexion went florid as she sat at the table, more confident *and* self-conscious than she had ever been before.

She gave him a moment to collect himself before breaking the growing tension between them. "Severus, why don't you sit down so we can talk?"

"Oh, yes... Yes, of course. What would you like to discuss, Hermione?" he replied, shaking his head before sitting down as if he had just been arguing with himself.

"Oh, I don't know, Severus, anything really. I don't know what I'm allowed to ask you; I want to know whatever you can tell me. How did you end up where you are now?" Hermione wished she could have taken those words back the second they left her lips, and he winced. She knew the memories of his past were incredibly painful.

"Hermione, there are many things I cannot tell you about my past and many details I don't wish to share with you. It is not because I don't want to trust you but because I want to spare you the burden of my suffering. I have no doubt you would internalize my pain as your own, and I won't have you endure that for me. My childhood, not surprisingly, was an unhappy one. My father was not a nice man and constantly channeled the rage he felt into his treatment of my mother and me, something neither of us deserved. My mother was a brilliant woman but never had the courage to stand up to him, weathering his abuse in silence. The knowledge that there was nothing I could do to help her tore me apart; I would have done anything for her if I could have. The day I received my letter from Hogwarts was the happiest of my life. It was my freedom, the refuge from the anger which bound me to the house I would never call a home. But the happiness I sought was not to be found at Hogwarts, a consequence of my cursed love for..." Severus hesitated for a brief moment, closing his eyes slowly before continuing. "... Potions. Clearly, my luck hasn't changed. But that doesn't matter anymore. I would ask about your childhood, but seeing as you've spent most of it here at Hogwarts, with most of it being written about in the *Daily Prophet*, there isn't much I don't know."

Hermione sat in stunned silence, desperately thinking of something to say that would lighten the quickly darkening mood of their date. There would be time to discover his past later, after the war was won, but now was neither the time nor the place. In directing the conversation towards her, he had made it clear that he wished to leave his past alone.

"Severus, I'm so sorry. No one should have to go through something like that so young. But on a more lighthearted note, I've thought of a question that has always fascinated me. If you were given the choice, what form would you like your Patronus to take? I'm rather happy with my own, but I think it would be nice if it were a monkey. For some reason, I've always liked monkeys. You know, the little, jumpy ones. They're adorable." Hermione was babbling again and, for once, didn't care. She just needed to change the subject and decided to have some fun at his expense while she was at it to make things interesting. After all, he hadn't he had his fun with her earlier that morning?

"Well, I've never given it much thought, really. You certainly do overanalyze things, don't you, Hermione? I don't think I could imagine you with a monkey for a Patronus. It wouldn't suit you. A fox, on the other hand, would be perfectly appropriate, especially after that clever little trick you pulled with the Veritaserum." Severus smirked as he evaded her question, but Hermione wasn't quite ready to give up.

"Fine, then. If you get to come up with one for me, I can pick one for you: a bunny." She wished more than anything to be able to read his mind as Severus registered what had just happened.

"My Patronus most certainly would *not* be a bunny. Those vile creatures don't deserve such regard!"

Hermione giggled at his response, motivated to egg him on further. "But don't you love bunnies, Snape-y-kins? They're so cute and fluffy!"

"No, I do not love bunnies. Do I seem to be the kind of person who would enjoy things commonly labeled as cute and fluffy? Not only are those animals the source of one of the most horrendous Muggle clichés of all time, in reference to the magical world, they're not even cute; they're twitchy, for God's sake! And what's with all the fucking carrots? What do bunnies need such good eye sight for, anyway? The existence of their species is completely unnecessary, and I'm sure that people could get their cute and fluffy fix elsewhere, like with a pillow. Pillows are useful, bunnies are not. Bunnies are...did you just call me Snape-y-kins?" Severus stopped mid-rant to glare at Hermione as he fully absorbed her previous statement. If it was his intention to intimidate her, he had grossly miscalculated her reaction. He could do nothing but watch her burst into laughter. His belief that she should have been sorted into Slytherin was solidified; her penchant for revenge was significant.

"I did, Severus. I'm just trying out some pet names I'm considering. You know, lots of couples have them. Snape-y-kins is my personal favorite, but if you don't like it, we could always go with Sevviepoo or Snapelfluff or Snape-a-doodle or Severpuss or..."

"No. No pet names, Hermione. My given name will be more than appropriate. Oh, wonderful, our food has arrived." Severus delighted in the silence that accompanied their meal, as both of them were far too preoccupied with eating to carry on a decent conversation.

After they finished, Severus and Hermione Apparated back to the entrance of the castle, standing in silence, each waiting for the other to speak.

"I know I may have made tonight incredibly uncomfortable for you, Severus," Hermione began, "but I want to thank you for a fantastic evening. And thank you for being so honest with me; I know it was hard for you, and I appreciate it very much. I should be getting back to my room. I'll see you tomorrow, Severus." She began moving away from him, but he caught her by the hand and brought her back to him.

"You... you were beautiful tonight, Hermione; breathtaking. I should have told you that before. Hermione, you know how much I would like to be with you. Starting this with you is one of the most selfish things I've ever done. But I meant what I said about wanting nothing more than your happiness. Please reconsider your affections. I...I'm going to hurt you, you know," he said softly as his hand moved from her wrist to her cheek, wiping away the tears that were beginning to fall from her eyes. "I'm not going to be able to stop it, and it's going to kill me." The light left his eyes as the words he had been meaning to say all along spilled out.

"Severus, you wouldn't hurt me. You might not know it, but I do." She covered his hand with her own, gazing into his eyes, trying once again to see what was going through his mind.

"Hermione, you don't, you can't understand. I..."

"Shhh. It's going to be alright. You won't be anything like your father. You won't hurt me. I trust you."

"You shouldn't," was the only reply he could manage before Hermione leant forward to kiss him.

The kiss was just like their first, her lips seeking to give him the comfort he needed as the energy of her passion flowed into him. Severus felt as if he could have stayed in that moment forever but found himself wanting more, something different, something he knew he shouldn't have been thinking. He backed away quickly, angered by his own thoughts and emotions. He had prided himself on his ability not to care. He couldn't begin feeling now.

"Hermione, stop. We can't do this now. You'll only convince me of what I want. I'm not ready to be sure. I can't think when I'm around you; the effect you have on me is unexplainable. It's too much; you're going to push me too far. I want to give you so much more than I have to offer, but I'm only going to cause you pain. I know you don't believe me now, but in time you will. You will think I've betrayed you and hate me for what I've done. I would rather die than live with you thinking I've deceived you. If you're smart, you'll stay away from me." He leaned against the wall behind him, trying not to be swayed by the concern revealed in Hermione's face.

"Severus, you don't frighten me. I want to be with you, you want to be with me, and that's all that matters. We can make this work. ~~We~~ will make this work. You're not the man you think you are. When I look at you, I see so much more. Please don't fight me, just let me be a part of your life; that's all I want. I can handle myself."

"I need to go, Hermione. I'm sorry. I will see you tomorrow morning in class. Thank you for accommodating me this evening." With that, he Apparated to his chambers; he wouldn't have been able to bear turning his back on her and walking slowly away.

Hermione remained outside, alone and confused in the dark. No matter how much Severus denied it, she knew that he cared for her and couldn't understand why he was constantly pulling her in then pushing her away. She thought on what he had said as she climbed the staircases that led to the Gryffindor common room and her bed. She couldn't bring herself to believe what he had said, that he would hurt her. She couldn't understand why he continually brought it up, unless it was a means of scaring her away, but found herself wondering if there was some truth to his words.

Surely, he couldn't be so certain. Could he?

Lie to Me

Chapter 21 of 24

Hermione needs reassurance, but something goes horribly wrong.

I have so much love and respect for my beta,s *and h forever*. I've loved being able to work with one of my best friends on this story.

Reviews would be lovely, as always!

"It's inside you, and I don't know if I want the truth tonight. So take what you've learned, lay back and close your eyes. Pretend that there's an answer and that everything's alright." (Lie to Me, by Brandtson)

Hermione groaned as she rolled over to discover that it was time for another morning of Potions. She felt absolutely miserable after her late night of contemplation upon returning from her date with Snape and decided, for the first time in her life, that it would be better to skip his class than face him. She realized that there must have been something seriously wrong with her if that was the conclusion to which she came, but she was growing tired of Severus' cryptic moodiness. She knew that she wouldn't be able to avoid him for long; he had a way of making her talk to him whenever he saw fit, but she needed time to think of what to say. It would be a difficult task to change the mind of Severus Snape, but Hermione was determined to accept the challenge and emerge victorious. She wanted nothing more than to be able to have a discussion with him that didn't end in either one of them being angry or sullen; they hadn't really had one yet, and if that was all of which they were capable, Hermione wasn't sure she

wanted to continue their relationship. She needed a reason to hope that they would be alright, and she wanted him to feel the same way. His increased openness the night before gave her some reason to believe that he would be reasonable, but she would need all her strength to confront him.

Just as she fell back asleep, someone began pounding on her door. She knew that it would either be Ron or Harry, since they always walked to Potions together in the mornings, and silently cursed her Head Girl's room for not having the same sort of magical staircase the rest of the House dormitories featured. She would have loved it if they were unable to access her rooms, sliding backwards to the floor instead, and she mentally fashioned some semblance of an excuse to give whoever was currently outside.

"Hermione, are you okay? You've overslept! We're almost late for Potions! Snape will kill us! We're not even going to have time for breakfast! Ugh, today cannot possibly be a good day. Come on, get up!" It was Ron who was frantically screaming outside, knowing that something must be wrong if Hermione wasn't on time for class.

"Ron, I'm not feeling very well this morning. I think I'm going to skip Potions for the day. Don't worry, I'll be fine. I've already outlined the next three chapters and can make up today's assignment sometime during my independent study. Just tell Snape I'm a little under the weather. He should understand. He won't get mad at you. Let him know that I look terrible. That should satisfy him." Hermione pulled the covers back over her head as she heard Ron retreat to the common room, no doubt to tell Harry what had just occurred. It wouldn't surprise her if her two friends spent the day guessing what sort of bizarre sickness she had. Actually, it wouldn't surprise Hermione if a majority of the Hogwarts faculty and students wondered what had happened to her. In her entire academic career, she had never missed a class. With the Time-Turner in her third year, she had even managed to be in two places at once. Her absence that day would be unprecedented, and Hermione wondered if it was worth the extra sleep to only be bombarded with questions and comments when she emerged from her rooms. It could be much more stressful than she had first anticipated. Only five minutes into her decision, Hermione was second guessing herself. She almost immediately felt a headache coming on and realized that she certainly did need the extra rest.

Finally alone in the silence of her room after quelling her own troublesome thoughts, Hermione fell into a deep sleep that took her late into the afternoon. Miraculously, she had no dreams or nightmares to interrupt her, but an uninterrupted day of sleep and relaxation was clearly not in the cards for Hermione.

Suddenly, Ron burst back into her room without knocking, and Hermione sat up straight and threw off her covers, startled by the intrusion. She realized that it was probably fortunate that Ron had woken her so that she didn't sleep the entire day away but was perturbed nonetheless.

"RON! What are you doing? You scared me! I was sleeping. What the bloody hell do you want? You're not supposed to be in here... at least not without my permission!" Hermione gasped as she realized she was wearing nothing but her short boxers with a matching camisole and quickly reached to pull on the over-sized Gryffindor sweatshirt she had left on the floor beside her bed.

"Sorry, Hermione, but it's Snape. He seemed really pissed that you missed class this morning, even when I told him you weren't at all well. He told me that if I didn't tell you to go see him tonight, so you can make up the material you missed, there would be hell to pay. I don't think he's joking; I mean, he's Snape. So, I ran up here to tell you right after all our classes were over. You should really meet with him, because I know you wouldn't want me to have detention with Snape for all eternity!" He looked over at Hermione as she pulled her knees to her chest in the middle of the bed, distressed by Snape's apparent anger.

She had expected Severus to give her time to rest if he was made aware that she was feeling unwell. He was always so concerned when it appeared as though she weren't taking proper care of herself, but she supposed that things were different now that he knew that he was the primary cause of her discomfort. Hermione sighed in resignation, realizing that she was going to have to talk to him that night. She had been hoping to put it off until tomorrow, at the earliest. But Ron did have a point. She'd feel more than mere guilt if she got him even a week's worth of detentions from Snape, let alone an eternity. And she'd gotten more than enough sleep that day. She convinced herself that she could handle Severus once again and started to get her things ready, reassuring Ron of her trip to see their disgruntled professor.

"No, Ron. I wouldn't wish that on anyone. I'll go talk to him." She waited for Ron to leave, but he seemed intent on just standing there in her room and looking around for the rest of the evening. "Uh, Ron," she muttered, "could you... leave so I can change?" It was true that they were friends, but they weren't *that* close.

"Oh, right. Sorry, Hermione. I'll see you later. I hope Snape isn't too hard on you! You look better; he might think you were faking!" Ron shut the door behind him as he went downstairs, giving Hermione the privacy she needed to throw on a pair of jeans and a tee-shirt over her sleeping attire. She walked the path to the dungeons that she was convinced she could now even traverse blindfolded and knocked swiftly on Snape's door.

"Who is it?" Severus yelled, most likely from his desk.

"It's Hermione. Ron told me you wished to see me. Is now a bad time?" She stood waiting for his answer, silently praying that he was too busy for her. Usually, she looked forward to their meetings, but Hermione felt nothing but apprehension now.

"No, Hermione. Now will be fine. Come in."

She stepped into the classroom and sat down after he motioned to a chair near his desk. She looked dejectedly into her lap, unable to meet his gaze. Her previous offensive strategy had gotten her very few results thus far, and she decided to take a different approach. She didn't know what he was going to say and wouldn't venture a guess. She would wait for him to talk, to make the first move. Finally, after what seemed to be an eternity of silence, Snape finally spoke.

"Hermione, I have not asked you here to punish you, though I admit that you have been the cause of a rather disappointing morning."

Hermione stared at him blankly, completely ignorant of the point he was trying to make. Although she made an attempt, she could barely listen to what he was saying. She felt oddly detached from him, the way she had felt nothing emotionally when Ron had kissed her. It made her feel even more uncomfortable, and she wished that Severus would just be forthcoming with her. It seemed that there was so much she didn't understand, and it scared her. His voice brought her back to reality once again, as it had done so many times before.

"Hm... so it seems that you *did* think I had you summoned to penalize you for your absence. I can't say that I'm sorry you were made uncomfortably anxious, as it is the same fate you inflicted on me. Did you even bother to think this morning, while you lay in your bed all afternoon, that your indiscriminant nonattendance of any of your classes, especially my own, would have me extremely concerned?" he asked, pain evident in his tone.

Hermione didn't know how to react to his question; she felt waves of anger and happiness simultaneously flowing through her veins but was determined to answer noncommittally, forcing Severus to reveal the truth behind his words. She always said so much, and he so little. Even in this state, Hermione desired to turn the tables on him.

"To be honest, I didn't even consider that a possibility. I figured it wouldn't be an issue, seeing as you disregarded me before completely disappearing last night. I'm not your problem anymore, Severus. You've made that quite clear. Whatever happens to me won't reflect poorly on you. Ron led me to believe you had work for me to do. Is that true or just another one of your lies?" Part of Hermione wanted her words to hurt Severus, to give him some feeling of what she had been experiencing for months, but deep down, she wanted nothing more than for him to prove her, the know-it-all, wrong.

"You can't mean that, Hermione."

The change of Snape's tone, his complete vulnerability before her now, startled Hermione. It was disconcerting for her to see this side of him, but at the same time, she acknowledged the trust he had in her by allowing her to witness it. It was a heady realization. She continued to listen to him in amazement.

"You must know... surely, you must know that all of this has been for you, even the pain. I left last night because I couldn't bear to harm you further, because... I care for you. Just because I don't know what I want doesn't mean I don't care. On the contrary, I care very much. You don't deserve to be hurt like this." He stared past Hermione, lost in his own mind, not noticing her moving from her seat to kneel next to him.

Hermione's detachment was immediately cast aside upon hearing his admission. She was elated. He cared. For others, it might not have been the most romantic of conversations, but to Hermione, it meant the world. It wasn't love or any sort of promise, but it was more than he had been willing to say before. It was progress. She had

gotten the hope for which she had come and immediately began her campaign to win over Severus Snape.

"But you *are* hurting me. Can't you see it?" She grasped his hand in hers as she pleaded for him to hear her. "I know you're convinced that you're going to hurt me even more, but don't you want me to be happy until then? You don't know what you want, and that's okay, just let me give you what I can. But give me a lie, Severus. I'll deal with the pain when it comes, but, for now, I don't care. Please say you'll lie to me, just for a while. I've cried and lost so much sleep for you. Just make it stop. Please."

Severus turned his face towards her as he heard the urgency in her voice and saw the tears forming even now in her eyes as she spoke.

"Hermione, how can you ask that of me? What kind of man would I be if I lied to you?" His eyes spoke more than his words, conveying all the doubts he would never have let anyone else but her see.

"You would be who you already are," Hermione stated bluntly, shocking him. She realized that her last hope was to use logic to convince him, and if it hurt him to hear it, she would let it be. "If what you said before is true, that I'm going to hate you because you will 'betray' me, then it means you've already been telling me lies. I'm just asking you to tell a better one. Make it a lie worth telling; get the most out of it while you can. I'm saying it's alright. I want to be able to sleep at night, to not be tense in class wondering what you think of me, to enjoy the time that we have. I won't think any less of you; you won't lose my trust. I *trust* that you'll deceive me, create an illusion. I know you can do it, but will you?"

A heavy silence fell over the room as she waited for his answer. When she had almost given up hope, thinking that his contemplation had lulled him to sleep right in front of her, Severus responded.

"Yes."

With that one word, he gave Hermione the freedom she had been so desperately seeking. She rose to her feet to stand in front of him before sitting on his desk, raised to a position only slightly above his own.

"Then show me," she demanded, watching as Snape raised his mouth to hers, never breaking contact as he stood to his full height.

Immediately, they both sensed that what they were sharing was different. The kiss lacked the unbridled lust they experienced before but was no less passionate. Feeling as if they had all the time in the world, the couple began a slow exploration of how beautiful a lie could be. His arms enveloped Hermione, and she wrapped hers around him in response as he leaned forward to press feather light kisses along her jaw line and neck. When he felt the pounding of the blood through the veins of her neck under his lips, his mouth became more demanding, feeling how her pulse quickened under his touch. She stroked his back, urging him on and gasped lightly before he began kissing her mouth again, causing a familiar ache to spread through Hermione's body once more. She wrapped her legs around his waist, digging her heels into the back of his thighs, persuading him to deepen their kiss. Her hands ran over the front of his robes as he opened his mouth to hers, completely lost to the feel of her body against him. Minutes later, she pulled back from him, noticing the disappointed look of concern on his face. She smiled to herself before whispering to him in reassurance.

"Touch me, Severus." She leaned back further on his desk, watching as half of him groaned in desire while the other half battled for propriety.

"But I *am* touching you," he replied silkily as he stroked the sides of her arms.

"You know what I meant, you insufferable man. Now shut up and touch me." She kissed him quickly before he pulled back.

"Bossy little Gryffindor, aren't you?" Severus quipped before returning her kiss.

"Is it working?" Hermione retorted, silenced again by his mouth. She reached to pull her shirt off and tossed it on the floor behind her, remaining in the camisole she had been sleeping in earlier that morning. She was aware of Severus gazing at her in appreciation before he answered.

"Yes." He leant forward again, resuming where they left off, until his office door suddenly swung open.

"Professor Snape, I need to ask Hermione something, and Ron told me she was down here, so...MERLIN'S BALLS!"

"SHIT!" Hermione yelled simultaneously with Severus', "FUCK" as they both turned to see a very shocked and red-faced Ginny Weasley standing at the door. Before any of the three could say another word, Ginny fled into the corridor, and Hermione was trying to get her shirt back so that she could chase after her looking somewhat decent.

"GINNY, STOP!" Hermione called, running out the door and slamming it behind her, leaving an incredibly frustrated Potions Master behind.

Severus went to his rooms for a nice, long, cold shower, hoping that when he was finished, Hermione would have made Ginny Weasley see sense. It appeared as though it was going to be a long night.

Not What It Seems

Chapter 22 of 24

Hermione tries to make Ginny understand, and Severus has some second thoughts.

A/N: I apologize for my lack of posts. Things have been a tad crazy between classes, work, and extracurriculars. However, no matter what, this story will not be abandoned.

As always, I have the utmost love and respect for my beta,s *and h forever*. She's phenomenal.

Reviews would be lovely and most appreciated! Enjoy your reading!

"If ever these questions were yours, what would you say? You don't know, but I'm writing the answers on cheap paper napkins. And now he's turning off, and now she's shutting down. And it's not what it seems, nothing's the same when you give it away. No, it's not what it seems, it's just what you think it is." (Not What It Seems, by Something Corporate)

"PLEASE, GINNY, STOP RUNNING. WE NEED TO TALK!" Hermione panted as she ran through the halls, trying to catch up with her best friend and close the gap that Ginny's head start had granted her.

"TALK ABOUT WHAT?" Ginny screamed at the top of her lungs, stopping just before the staircase at the end of the hall to turn and face Hermione, "THE FACT THAT YOU'VE BEEN FUCKING PROFESSOR SNAPE? IS THAT POSSIBLY WHAT WE MIGHT NEED TO TALK ABOUT? HAVE YOU GONE COMPLETELY MENTAL? HE'S A TEACHER! IT'S SNAPE, FOR GOD'S SAKE! WE HATE HIM. YOU HATE HIM! IT'S SO MANY DIFFERENT LEVELS OF WRONG, I DON'T EVEN KNOW WHAT TO CALL IT!"

Hermione rushed forward to her so that she could respond without screaming. She swore that she would murder Ginny if anyone had been able to hear her little tirade. She could already imagine the humiliating nicknames the Slytherins would come up with if they knew that she fancied their Head of House. There would be no place in Hogwarts for her to hide. And if her enemy House started all sorts of jokes and rumors, there was no doubt in Hermione's mind that news of her relationship would get back to Harry and Ron. She was convinced that she would rather die than to have that happen.

"Ginny. You. Need. To. Stop. Yelling... Now."

Ginny was immediately silenced by the intensity in Hermione's voice and followed her silently into a nearby classroom.

Hermione shut the door swiftly and then turned on her. "If anyone heard you, Ginny, I swear to God I'll never speak to you again. It isn't that big of a deal. I am not sleeping with Snape, so calm down."

"I most certainly will not calm down!" Ginny snapped back. "You may not be sleeping with him, but you two were sure as hell on the way there! What the fuck is wrong with you? You and Snape are polar opposites! He's old enough to be your father! His actions toward you have been nothing short of sadistic ever since you got to Hogwarts. Apart from Voldemort, he very well could be our greatest enemy! He..."

"We don't know that, Ginny. We don't know anything about his loyalties, but I trust him. I have to trust him." Hermione cut her off abruptly, lowering her voice dangerously, anger swelling within her upon hearing Ginny's accusation.

"Oh, my God," Ginny gasped, "you've fallen for Snape, haven't you?" She stared at Hermione in amazement, noticing her growing discomfort. Normally, she would have ceased her questioning after realizing that Hermione was becoming uncomfortable, but since Ginny had already seen her professor and her best friend snogging, she didn't think much of it. Best to get things out in the open, she figured.

"So it would seem." Hermione bit her lower lip in embarrassment, hoping that her confession wouldn't set Ginny off the deep end again. Hermione wanted to make Ginny understand her situation; it would be nice to have someone she could talk to about Severus. She was still having little luck trying to figure things out on her own. Fortunately, Hermione thought she saw Ginny's eyes light up at her own admission. Perhaps owing her an explanation wouldn't be so difficult.

"Hermione Jean Granger, I would never have expected anything like this from you! I'm not going to pretend to understand it yet, but I want to hear everything, every single detail! Has this been going on long?" Ginny was practically panting with excitement at the prospect of getting some gossip from her best friend, even if it *did* have to be about Professor Snape.

"No, not really; it's only been since February. Even so, it's never really been a proper relationship." Hermione caught herself about to giggle as she thought of all the ridiculous things she and Severus had gone through in their attempts at normalcy. She was about to continue her story, but Ginny, never one to suffer silent pauses, charged on with her interrogation.

"Well, from what I saw tonight, it looks like you have one now! So, how did it start? I'm sure it's a great story. I can't imagine you and Snape having a romantic, love-at-first-sight moment; it must have been much more excruciating than that!"

Hermione smiled, noting that for someone so upset just a minute ago, Ginny was certainly taking an interest in her romantic endeavors with Snape. Their conversation took on a completely different tone than at its beginning, and Hermione was eternally grateful.

"Yeah, it was pretty bad. Let's see, you already know about all the horrible Potions classes I had to sit through at the beginning of the year. And then there was the independent study that Dumbledore sprung on us. Well, Severus and I..."

"Wait! You're calling him Severus now? Isn't that weird for you?" Ginny asked, shaking her head in amazement.

"It was at first. It was really weird, actually, but I'm pretty used to it now. He calls me Hermione, I call him Severus... it's pretty standard, I suppose. I tried some pet names that I thought would set him off. It was amusing, but none of them caught on. Anyway, I started working on a potion to deter the effects of the Cruciatus Curse. We were spending a lot of time together, and I guess I started liking him. Of course, I didn't want to admit it, and it took me ages to realize it for myself. Then Ron asked me to be his girlfriend and..."

"WOAH, WOAH, WOAH. Hold on a second!" Ginny interrupted once more. "My brother actually asked you to be his girlfriend? Wow, I never thought he'd grow the balls to do that. He's been meaning to ask you out for years! Mum and I always knew he fancied you, though. He was always talking about you at home during the school holidays. Anyway... you said no, and then what happened?"

"Um..." Hermione continued nervously, "actually... I said yes."

"YOU WHAT? Hermione, for someone so smart, you have some major issues." Ginny knew she should have been more upset that Hermione had somewhat used her brother. However, considering that Ron seemed just as happy as ever and hadn't even mentioned his brief stint as Hermione's boyfriend, Ginny supposed that everything turned out alright.

"I know," Hermione replied dejectedly. "But at that point, I didn't think I really liked Snape. I thought I could make it work with Ron. Then, when it became clear that Ron felt much more for me than I could feel for him, I broke things off. I felt awful, but we had only been 'going out' for around a day or two, and I was with Snape most of the time. Of course, it didn't make me feel any better that Ron was so sweet and understanding. I was quite surprised, actually. I expected him to get all territorial and angry, but he didn't. You've got a wonderful brother, Ginny. So, anyway, I kept working on the potion, and Snape and I became friends, in a way... and then, long story short... Snape was summoned by Voldemort and returned in a state of near death, I used my own blood to stabilize my potion, I admitted that I loved Snape, and then he kissed me right before I had to *Crucio* him. He wouldn't talk to me about it, so I chained him to his chair and gave him Veritaserum to find out how he really felt. Then he decided to give us a chance, even though he's calling it a fucking 'social experiment.' Our first date was just as awkward as I had anticipated, he's convinced he's going to hurt me, and he finally decided to give in and make me happy when you barged in." Hermione took a quick breath as she finished, realizing how ironic it was that even the abridged version of her story was long-winded. Being magical certainly made life much more interesting. She afforded a quick glance at Ginny, who was now sitting across from her. Her eyes were wide as saucers, and Hermione could only imagine the thoughts running through her brain.

"Wow, Hermione. If I didn't know any better, I'd almost think we're all just some part of a huge, bizarre romance novel. Who would have thought... you and Snape? That's one hell of a story. And I'm assuming no one else knows?" Ginny's mind was reeling as she thought of the implications of everything she had just heard. Harry and Ron would be livid if they found out, and she was certain Snape would hate her even more now for knowing his secret.

"I'm still alive, aren't I? Of course, no one else knows! And now that you've found out, I'm sure things are going to go back to the way they were. Severus is just going to shut me out again. I'm going to have to start everything over. Just please, Gin, I'm happy that I have someone I can finally talk to about this, but don't tell anyone. I trust that you wouldn't, but it would ruin both my future and his career if you let something slip. Not to mention that it could cost us our lives at the hands of Voldemort."

Ginny was amazed at the passion in Hermione's eyes as she pleaded with her, finally realizing that all of what Hermione had been saying was devastatingly true. Although she was happy for her best friend, she found Hermione's situation to be entirely heartbreaking.

"I wouldn't do that to you, Hermione, or anyone you care about... even if it is Snape." She chuckled, watching Hermione relax a little as she moved towards the door.

"Thanks, Ginny. I'm going to go see if I can talk to Severus. I'm sure he's either extremely pissed, brooding, or drunk right now. I'll see you tomorrow. 'Night, Ginny, and thanks for understanding."

"'Night, Hermione. Just one more question... can Snape actually kiss?" It was the question Ginny had been holding back throughout their entire conversation, but her curiosity had finally gotten the best of her.

Hermione stopped turning the doorknob and looked back over her shoulder.

"Like you wouldn't believe," she replied before heading out the door and down the corridor.

Ginny got up to leave after her and looked down the hallway to the door from which she had just witnessed Hermione and Snape going at it on his desk. She laughed at Hermione's answer to her question, but couldn't help but still be slightly disturbed. She tried to absorb what had just happened and turned her back on the dungeons, hoping that all would be well in the morning.

Hermione walked down the remainder of the corridor and tapped on Snape's door, suddenly nervous at the thought of seeing him. She hadn't experienced such a feeling in a while where he was concerned, and it set her even more on edge.

"Severus, I'm coming back in. Everything's alright." She pushed open the door, relieved that he hadn't replaced his wards to keep her out, and walked through his classroom, office, and lab to reach his study. The room was dark, save for the soft glow that radiated from the slowly dying embers in the fireplace. She would never have seen him sitting alone in the silence if the motion of his head dropping to his chest as he heard her enter behind him hadn't caught her eye.

"You didn't think I'd come back? Surely, you know me better than that by now. You need to talk to me or none of this is ever going to work. I can't do everything." Hermione talked to him softly as she moved to sit on the floor by his feet, knowing that even one misplaced word could ruin everything.

"No, Hermione, I knew you'd come back. I was just hoping that you wouldn't. As far as I'm concerned, we have very little to discuss. What happened tonight between us was inexcusable and dangerous. We...I almost lost control; I can't chance that happening again. And while the situation is extremely regrettable, I suppose we should be thankful that it was only Miss Weasley who witnessed our indiscretion."

Hermione winced as she listened to him; she knew what was coming next. He was using his teaching tone with her, trying to regain the professional distance of their former relationship. He was going to shut her out.

"You're right. It was only Ginny, and she's okay. She doesn't completely understand or approve but is being supportive. Right now, that's all that matters. I trust her; she won't tell anyone. Please, Severus, it won't happen again. We'll just have to be more careful next time." She hadn't realized that her hand was now resting on his knee until he flinched at the contact and stood up to stand next to the mantle.

"Hermione, there will not be a next time." He sighed and closed his eyes, not needing to see the look of shock and pain that was inevitably on Hermione's face; he knew it was there. He had seen it far too many times, had been the cause of it too many times. He heard her sit in the chair he had just left vacant, the well worn leather creaking gently behind him. He knew what was coming next. She was going to try to persuade him that he was wrong, and he was going to do his best to fight her. Their conversations always seemed to end this way, and it was getting harder and harder for him to resist her.

"I don't understand. When you say..." Hermione's response was low and broken. She felt the tears coming and didn't want to fall apart in front of him, not now. Fortunately, he cut her off.

"I mean that, as long as you remain my student, I will not touch you again. There can be no 'us' while you remain at Hogwarts. If we were discovered, the consequences would be disastrous. You would be expelled, and I would be fired. There would be no exceptions; files would be created, charges would be pressed, trials would be carried out. Both of our lives would be permanently damaged. I could care less about teaching Potions to your insipid classmates, but you have so much ahead of you, a life filled with so much promise. Already, you could have lost one of your best friends because of me, Hermione; I won't let you ruin your life for my sake. Without me, you have everything. You should get out of this before it's too late." Even though he knew he shouldn't, Severus turned around to look where Hermione sat. She was completely doubled upon herself in his chair, grasping her knees tightly to her chest and hiding her face completely from his view. He didn't need to look into her mind to know that she was crying and stood back to wait for her response. He wasn't going to push her; she needed time.

"You looked that up while I was gone, didn't you?" she finally responded, talking to a point past his shoulder instead of looking directly at him. "You wanted to know what would happen and use it against me. I can't believe you. You have no problem breaking rules or facing the Dark Lord. You are probably the best spy the world has ever seen. Yet, you're not willing to go behind Dumbledore's back with me? Do you even realize how hypocritical you sound?" Hermione now focused her gaze directly on Severus, wishing more than ever that she had convinced him to teach her Legilimency.

"Yes, Hermione, I consulted the Hogwarts' faculty code of conduct regarding our situation. If you were in my place, I'm sure you would have done the same thing, bookworm that you are. Faculty advances on a student are explicitly forbidden, and the consequences are precisely as I described. I'm not using it against you. I'm telling you this because I care about what happens to you, Hermione, more than I care what happens to me. I'm not trying to hurt you."

"Why is it that every time you say that, it still hurts? I know you're saying this because you care. But right now, I'd give anything not to have these feelings for you. I've tried to let them go, and they won't go away. I know deep down that you're right, and maybe that's what causes my pain. So, we can't see each other... until I graduate? I'm not sure I can handle that, Severus." She stood and walked over to him, remembering their new 'no touching' rule and resisting the urge to take hold of his hand.

"It's not as bad as it sounds, Hermione. I'm still your Potions professor, and we still have your independent study. We'll still be able to spend time together and talk, we just won't be able to pick up where we left off this evening. No more dates, no more kissing. You can't throw your shirt on my floor. You'll be fine." He knew she wouldn't believe him, but was trying to convince himself that they'd be able to handle the separation as much as he was trying to convince her. It wasn't working.

"I won't be fine, Severus; that's practically a year and a half! I'm perfectly content with just spending time with you; it's not like I'm some overly hormonal sex addict...okay, that came out horribly wrong... but there's still a part of me that wants you every time you're near me. I don't know if I can try to ignore it for that long. The look in your eyes tells me that you feel the same." Again, her hand unwillingly found its way to his, causing him to step away from her.

"Hermione, you need to control yourself. I'm known for my reserve and self-restraint, but if you keep that up, you will push me too far. I'm not unbreakable. I know it's going to be hard for us, but please, just hold on until you graduate. I'm not worth risking your future." He looked at her, pained to see the fresh tears streaming down her face. "Hermione, stop please, what's wrong? You need to talk this out. Holding it in will only make you miserable."

"It's just... you're worth so much more than you think. I can't even put into words the good that I see in you. Your life is worth living, Severus, never doubt that. I'm not a victim because I have feelings for you; don't treat me like one. And the feeling of how much I want you to hold me right now, how much I want to show you that I care, and knowing that can't happen, is making all of this worse. I need to go. I'll see you tomorrow, Severus. Good night."

"Good night, Hermione. This will be worth it in the end if you still have the slightest interest in me after your graduation."

"I seriously doubt anything will change that." She smiled at him before leaving his study and closing the door softly behind her.

"If only you knew..." Severus muttered to himself before retiring to his chambers, facing a long and restless night alone.

Beautiful Life

Chapter 23 of 24

Thanks to the Grangers, Severus and Hermione take some time for themselves.

Tons of love to my beautiful beta, *s and h forever*. None of this would be nearly as exciting without her.

Thanks to my friends, Katie, Kristy, and Andrew for giving me much of the material for this chapter. I miss playing games with the three of you.

And, as always, thanks to you who are reading this story. Your feedback would be most welcome and appreciated.

"Live like there won't be tomorrow. See through your sorrow, see it through your own eyes. Try to remember these days down the road and try to remember this time. The sun may come up and go down again, and I'll still swear it's a beautiful life." (Beautiful Life, by Charlotte Martin)

Hermione woke up to a brilliant, new feeling. For once, since the beginning of the school year, she didn't feel panicked or scared, dreading the day ahead. She certainly wasn't thrilled with the way things had ended with Severus the previous night, but she finally had the sense of hope she had been anticipating for so long; she felt, already, as if it were going to be a good day. She practically bounced down the steps to the common room but stopped as she saw the looks of pure confusion Ron and Harry were giving her.

"Um... good morning? What's wrong? Is there something on my face? Is something wrong with my hair? Okay, don't answer that last one. But seriously, what's up with you two?" Hermione was almost too busy trying to figure out the source of their reactions to realize that she was smiling ridiculously and nearly giggling again. The giggling was becoming a nasty habit of Hermione's, one that made her completely uncomfortable. She didn't giggle. Until now.

"Hermione," Ron began, "the last time I saw you, I was telling you that Snape was pissed off his arse about your missing classes. You felt sick the entire day and then had to go put up with whatever he had to say. Harry and I waited up for you forever, but when you still weren't here around midnight, we went to bed. What sick detention lasts that long? We figured you would be miserable this morning, but here you come, skipping as if birds are going to come out and help you clean something at any moment. What the fuck? Oh, and by the way... did you happen to see Ginny last night? She got back pretty late, too. I hope she wasn't sneaking around with some boy. If she had been, I'd have to kill him."

He looked over at Harry in what Hermione guessed was a bid for sympathy and solidarity. Harry, however, only looked uncomfortable. Hermione was once again taken aback by the concern her two best friends had for her well-being but couldn't help feeling slightly annoyed. Not everything was their business.

"God, Ron, you need to learn to relax. You really get startled far too easily. We just ended up working on some... independent study stuff. Everything is fine! Snape was only a little upset. He got over it when he saw that I wasn't feeling well. And no, I didn't see Ginny; I'll ask her about any boys she's seeing, if you want. Anyway, let's get to Potions, shall we?"

Hermione practically ran out the door without waiting for an answer, disturbed by the ease with which she was able to lie recently. All she wanted was for Ron's interrogation to end. Well, she also wanted to see Severus, but she was trying to get those thoughts out of her head as quickly as possible.

As soon as she entered the room, Hermione could feel Severus' gaze rest on her. She looked up only when she had reached her desk and smiled at him as she bent over to get her textbook from the bag she had set on her chair. For a moment, she saw his features soften and a light come to his eyes before he turned back towards the class, transforming into the Potions professor everyone loved to hate.

"As always, your assignment is on the board. You have until the end of the period to correctly brew this potion. Get to work and, for Merlin's sake, don't cause any accidents. I won't stand any of you sixth year students subjecting me to the same explosions as the first years. I would hope that you all are more intelligent than that, although I'm all too convinced that isn't the case for some of you." He paused to glance at Ron, making it clear to whom his statement was directed before sitting at his desk.

Hermione chuckled under her breath before getting to work, soon becoming distracted by the thoughts emanating from her subconscious while she waited for just the right moment to finish stirring her cauldron; they were thoughts that no decent witch should be having at so young an age.

As with all things, Snape realized what was happening the instant that her eyes glazed over and her face flushed. He didn't think it was from the potion fumes; it was far too reminiscent of the look she had after being kissed thoroughly on his desk, the very desk at which he was currently sitting. Just as he was about to lose himself in his own inappropriate thoughts, he noticed that Hermione's potion was on the verge of being stirred past the correct variation of royal blue that would guarantee its perfection. He needed to stop her wandering mind for both of their sakes.

"Miss Granger, would you be so kind as to not daydream in my class? I'm sure you wouldn't want a silly little reverie to ruin your Potions grade."

Hermione's head shot up at his call, just in time to add the last ingredient to her now boiling cauldron. "No, Professor Snape. Thank you for calling my attention to the state of my potion. It would have been a disaster had you not."

He smirked at her before she went back to work, greatly satisfied that he had caught her thinking of him; somehow, Hermione didn't seem to mind very much.

The class continued without distress, and Hermione turned in her completed work. Severus addressed her again as she gathered her things to leave.

"Miss Granger, I believe it's due time for the work on your next project to commence. If you're available, perhaps we could meet for dinner here at five o'clock before embarking on the task at hand?"

"Yes, professor, that sounds fine. I'll see you then." She smiled at him once more before Ron dragged her out the door, no doubt ravenous and wanting to get to the Great Hall for food as soon as possible.

Later, as Hermione sat watching Ron devour his fourth plate of food, the mail owls flew in overhead, one dropping a fairly large package in front of Hermione.

"That's odd. I never get mail. It's from my parents!" Hermione opened the box and began to read the letter attached to its basic brown wrappings.

Hermione,

I hope this package finds you well and much better off than you were earlier, at Christmas. Your father and I have been worried sick about you. I hope you haven't had any

more problems with that awful teacher you were telling us about. Hopefully, you've given him hell for us since you've gotten back, and he's leaving you alone now. Regardless, I thought you'd appreciate these comforts from home. I'm sure they'll make you feel better! If you have the time, we'd love to hear from you. Hope all is well at Hogwarts. Say hello to Ron and Harry for us. Stay safe.

Love,

Mum

"Oh my goodness! I absolutely love my parents!" Hermione screamed as she dug through the package, throwing Ron a rather awkward looking, round device that was blue with silver buttons before grabbing an extensive set of books and looking at them lovingly. "My parents are wonderful people," she sighed. "Ron, do you have any idea what that is?"

"No, Hermione. It's kind of weird looking. What is it?" Ron was surprised that there was some Muggle contraption he didn't know. Between his father's work and his friendship with Hermione, he thought he had seen it all.

"It's the best game in existence, Ron! It's called Catch Phrase. A word comes up on the screen, and then you have to get the other person to say the word without saying any part of the word itself. Let's give it a shot! Press the start button and give me clues! GO!" Hermione was positively glowing with happiness despite Ron's hesitation.

"Hermione, I don't really see the point. I..." Ron looked down as the phrase "sex appeal" flashed up on the screen. He grimaced at how the fates seemed determined to make his life as awkward as possible.

"Please, Ron. Just try it once. If you don't like it, I'm sure I can find someone else to play with me."

Ron's eyes were wide as Hermione looked at him the way children look at their parents on Christmas day as they beg for someone to help them try out their gifts. The sight of her so happy was slightly unnerving.

"Um... okay, Hermione. Shit! Why is it beeping at me?" In Ron's mind, it sounded as if he were holding some sort of ticking pipe bomb.

"It's just the timer, Ron. The faster it gets, the less time you have. Now, GO!"

"Um, okay. So, when you see someone... and you want to... Um... you want to... You think they have this quality. And..."

At that moment, the tiny machine buzzed loudly, and Hermione dropped her head into her hands.

"Ron, that was awful. There was no way I could have gotten whatever that was from the clues you gave me! What was the phrase?"

Ron hesitated before answering her quietly. "Sex appeal."

Hermione burst out laughing, finally understanding Ron's initial bewilderment when the game had started.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Sometimes things like that can come up. I can't believe that happened on your first try, though. We don't have to play now. I'm sure I'll be able to find someone else. I'm going to head back up to the common room. My parents sent me some of my books from home! I'll talk to you later!"

Hermione spent the rest of the afternoon reading alone in her room, relishing the quiet quality time she was spending with Jane Austen, her favorite Muggle author. She had just finished reading one of her favorites, *Sense and Sensibility*, in record time, before looking down at her watch. It was four-forty, and she had to meet Severus in twenty minutes. She rushed to change out of her favorite sweats and brush her hair before running down to the dungeons with her box. If she had her way, it was going to be a very fun night.

She showed up at his door right on time and let herself in, as she was now accustomed to doing. She ran straight through to his study, where she knew he would be recording his grades from that morning's assignments; he always liked to have his grades finished before dinner. She smiled at him as she walked in and sat down on the couch, quite pleased with herself and still gazing lovingly at the box her parents sent her.

Severus was astonished. He hadn't seen Hermione this happy all term. She usually treated him indifferently when he made decisions that didn't agree with her plans for them, but something about her this night was different. He certainly wasn't about to complain. It seemed that, even though he had convinced her to put certain aspects of their relationship on hold, they were making significant progress. He didn't want to ruin it again.

"Hermione," he began, "are you alright?"

She finally looked away from the box next to her to answer his question. "I'm perfectly fine, thank you. Never better. But I will be rather disappointed if you actually expect us to do work tonight, seeing as I've come up with a much better way to spend our evening."

Severus was taken aback by the mischievous look in her eyes. The only two times she had looked at him like that, he found himself either strapped to his chair or snogging her. The former he never wished to happen again. The latter he was forced to postpone, however unwillingly.

"Well, it depends on what you have in mind, Miss Granger. I've already had to rule out a number of activities that you seem to find so... enjoyable. I assure you, you will not sway me again." His raised eyebrow confirmed Hermione's suspicions; he was definitely referring to their discussion of the previous night.

Of course, she hadn't been thinking of what he was implying, but was disappointed by his determination nonetheless; a year and a half was a long time to wait. Not to mention the fear nagging her from the back of her mind, a fear that constantly reminded her that Severus could be killed in the war at any moment. Sure, it was selfish of her, but she wanted him to be there for her, for him to live for her. His movement from behind the desk brought her back to the present, and the broad smile returned to her face.

"No, Severus. I've thought of something *far* better." She looked over her shoulder to smirk at him, knowing her emphasis had most likely stung at his pride. "We're going to play a game!"

"I do not play games," was his only response before he shuffled some papers around on his desk.

"Oh, come on, Severus. Have some fun. Besides, you actually have to think to play this game. That's probably why Ron was such a failure at it. Now, if you don't think you can do better, I won't force you, *but*..." Hermione let the end of her sentence finish itself in Severus' mind. She knew it would sound like a challenge to him and hoped that it would be enough to get him to play. He was really her only hope for a decent game anyway. She doubted any of her other friends would be much good at it.

"Fine, I'll play your stupid game. What is it?" He sighed, admitting defeat. He hated that Hermione knew the weakness of his pride; he would never miss an opportunity to show someone up, especially her half-witted ex.

"Excellent! It's called Catch Phrase. We try to get each other to say the words on the screen without actually saying any of the words. It'll be fun, I promise! Here we go... you can start! When you press the time button, it will start beeping. When it gets faster, you know you're running out of time, and then when it buzzes, whoever is stuck holding it loses. GO!"

Severus blinked as he watched the word "wristwatch" pop up on the screen. He looked at the phrase for a brief moment before calmly looking up at Hermione. "Alright. You wear this at the intersection of your radius and your ulna."

Without a second's hesitation, Hermione screamed her answer. "A wristwatch!"

Severus nodded in approval before passing the game back to her. She looked down to see the word "angel".

"Okay. Those who come from above. Gabriel was one of these..."

"An angel."

"Good."

"Well, this one is difficult, isn't it?"

"Just go on!" Hermione was getting nervous as the beeping of the timer sped up. She hated losing.

"Fine. The first part of the first word is used to describe a large center of stores at which Muggles shop."

"A mall?"

"Good. The second part of the first word is a synonym for taunt. I understand that it can also be done to one's hair."

"Tease?"

"Right."

"The first word is Maltese? Oh wait... it's Maltese Falcon!"

"Hermione, how the hell did you get that?"

"Don't talk, just pass me the game!"

The clock was ticking faster and faster, and Hermione was not about to lose to Severus Snape. As soon as the game was back in her hands, her eyes were glued to the screen, waiting for the next word to pop up. "Sex." Hermione was mortified and immediately sympathetic to Ron's situation when he tried to play with her earlier that morning. Still, she was determined to get him to guess the word.

"So, that other night... what Ginny thought was going on. She thought more was going on than there was... and she thought we were going to have..." Her eyes bugged out at Severus as she hoped he would just say the word that would end her misery.

"Sex," he replied soberly, accepting the game from her before it buzzed loudly in his hands.

"I win!" Hermione yelled triumphantly, somewhat startling Severus with her enthusiasm. "Okay, maybe we should do something else for a while. That was a little intense."

"Quite," he replied. "But I will admit that was one of the more entertaining games I've played in my lifetime."

"Good, I'm glad you made the best of it. Let's see. What else did my parents send me? Oh, I know! We can read *Pride and Prejudice* together!" Hermione could see the hesitation in his face but was determined to get her way. "Don't look at me like that. It's one of my favorite books of all time. Plus, you might learn a thing or two from Mr. Darcy."

"I highly doubt that. If my memory serves me correctly, this book has served as the source of many Muggle women's disappointment at being unable to find their perfect gentlemen. I, for one, will never understand such outrageous devotions to literary characters. They aren't real." Severus looked over at Hermione to see her pouting and looking quite put out with him. He supposed that she must be one of those women. "Anyway, I guess we have nothing better to do. Will you be reading it or shall I?" Severus asked, more as a rhetorical question than anything else. He knew the effect that his voice had on people, especially Hermione, and had no doubt she had been planning for him to read to her all along.

"If you wouldn't mind, I'd love for you to read it. No offence to my own gender, but I've always thought Mr. Darcy quotes sound horribly silly when read by a woman." She walked over to hand him the book before taking a seat on the other side of the sofa, waiting for him to begin.

Hours passed as Severus read, and Hermione was fascinated by how much he seemed to identify with Mr. Darcy. The more she thought about it, the more she began to see their similarities, and her mind started racing. Both Mr. Darcy and Severus generally preferred to be self-sufficient and were averse to being in highly social situations. Each was incredibly reluctant to display emotions and valued his pride above almost anything else. Both placed great emphasis on trust and considered betrayal one of the greatest crimes against humanity. Both expressed their courage and goodness in secret, expecting nothing in return. Just as she was wondering how she hadn't noticed these likenesses before, she was interrupted by Severus' narration.

"In vain I have struggled, it will not do. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you."

For the briefest of moments, Hermione forgot that he was reading and quickly tried to stifle the gasp that was beginning to slip from between her lips. She mentally berated herself, knowing that there was no possible way that Severus would admit something like that to her. She remembered his vow not to classify his feelings for her, admitting his own confusion, and sighed heavily.

Severus noticed her sudden reaction and stopped reading to look at her.

"Hermione, are you alright? You look a little upset." If he wanted to, he could have just used Legilimency to find out how she was feeling, but he found himself wanting Hermione to tell him what was going on simply because she trusted him.

"Oh, nothing. I'm just tired. I'm going to go up to bed, okay? Thank you for this evening, though. It's been wonderful. I needed this." She got up to leave, collecting her things and noticing that Severus looked slightly disappointed by her answer. She hoped that it was because he wasn't ready for her to leave.

"That's fine, Hermione. I wouldn't want you to wear yourself out on my account. I'm glad we got so much work done," he said, smiling. "However, I did enjoy our time together. I'll remember where we stopped reading. I must admit that I'm coming to respect Mr. Darcy. He's decent and respectable. Goodnight, Miss Granger."

"Goodnight, Professor Snape. I'll see you in the morning," she returned, glancing over her shoulder before closing the door behind her. When she reached the end of the hall, she turned back to look at the door, wishing she could know what he was really thinking. If there was anything she hated about him, it was his stoicism. Despite her frustration, she laughed as the memories of the night flashed in front of her eyes. She mused to herself over how wrong she had been about Severus and how much she now enjoyed being with him before going up to bed, highly satisfied with the progress they had made.

Wonderwall

Chapter 24 of 24

Hermione gets a surprise the next morning in Potions.

Hugs to my fabulous beta, *s and h forever*. Words cannot adequately express how much you mean to me.

I heartily apologize for the delay in posting. Life has become much more hectic than I would wish for it to be. Regardless, thank you for sticking with my story. Reviews would be lovely. Please continue to enjoy your reading!

"I don't believe that anybody feels the way I do about you now. And all the roads we have to walk are winding. And all the lights that lead the way are blinding. There are many things that I would like to say to you, but I don't know how. Because maybe, you're gonna be the one that saves me. And after all, you're my wonderwall."
(Wonderwall, as covered by Ryan Adams)

Hermione got ready quickly the next morning, hoping that her fervor would make the school day pass more speedily. She was looking forward to finishing *Pride and Prejudice*, knowing that she and Severus hadn't reached some of her favorite scenes the night before. She could practically hear Severus' insults in her head when she thought of how he would react to Lydia's running off with the disreputable Mr. Wickham. Sure, he had previously thought Hermione was insufferable, but Hermione was certainly no Lydia Bennet. She just hoped that he wouldn't give her too much grief for the sentimental blob of mush she would become at the story's close. She couldn't help but love seeing Elizabeth and Darcy together. Their relationship was an inspiration to her; their love had overcome serious challenges. Despite it being a work of fiction, Hermione found a great deal of hope in it. Musing on these thoughts, Hermione relished in the deliciousness of a full breakfast and conversed convivially with her friends. It felt like the first time she had done so in ages. She was finally beginning to feel like herself again.

She made her way back down to the dungeons with Ron and Harry in tow, but stopped in surprise when she found Professor McGonagall behind the door. Harry and Ron high-fived each other almost instantly, but Hermione felt as though her heart was working its way up to her throat as she realized that Severus' disappearance could mean that something was horribly wrong. He would never miss a class if he could help it, and she was convinced that he would have told her if he was planning on leaving. She sat down at her desk, stunned into silence and waiting to start their assignment, hoping the work would take her mind off the ominous feeling hanging over the room. She hoped that she was only overreacting but couldn't help remembering what had happened the last time Severus had been called away from Hogwarts.

"Good morning, students," Professor McGonagall began. "Unfortunately, Professor Snape has been called away and is clearly unable to moderate his classes. He has, however, left plenty of assignments to keep you busy, the first of which is written on the board for you to copy. I suggest you get to work. I will be available to answer your questions to the best of my ability."

Hermione immediately began copying the notes that had been prepared for them, noticing how her usually immaculate handwriting had become uneven from the slightly anxious shaking of her hand. She couldn't bring herself to focus; her mind was reeling with seemingly endless questions. McGonagall had said that Severus left plenty of assignments. Did he know that he was going to be gone for a while? Was he making arrangements in the event that he didn't return? Hermione's mind was plagued with such morbid and distracting thoughts. She finished the notes, all the while berating herself for her level of concern. The rest of the period passed agonizingly slow for Hermione even despite her ability to complete the assigned potion under the duress of her feelings. After they were dismissed, she wanted nothing more than to lie in her bed and think before Charms began, but her plans were soon tossed aside when Ron and Harry dragged her to the Great Hall.

Hermione ate very little during the meal, arousing the suspicions of her friends, who immediately began asking questions. She was too tired and upset to answer them but let the inquisition begin. She hadn't been around her friends much and wanted to make an attempt at reconnecting with them. She realized how little she knew about Harry's progress in his plans against Voldemort and made a mental note to catch up with him later. For now, she focused on Ron, who was currently talking to her.

"Hey, Hermione," Ron started quietly, as if afraid to startle her, "you seemed a little off in Potions, today. Harry and I know something's bothering you. There's no point in pretending that there isn't, so you might as well just tell us."

"Yeah," Harry added halfheartedly, attempting to get in on the conversation.

"Fine, but if you make fun of me, I'll push you off a cliff," Hermione replied, noticing that she had surprised them with her readiness to comply, even despite her mildly humorous death threat. "I'm just concerned about Professor Snape not showing up in Potions. He didn't say anything to me when we were working last night, and our work is so important that I'm sure he wouldn't miss an opportunity to continue it, unless there was some severe sort of distraction. Then, when McGonagall said that he had left plenty of work for us to do, it made me wonder if he had planned this entire thing out, like he knew he was going to be gone. And I know I have no right to complain, but if that's the case, I wish he had told me. Anyway, I'll get over it; it's no big deal. I seem to be the only one worried about him, anyway. I'm sure McGonagall would have looked worried if something were amiss. Go back to your food." She stared at them when they did nothing, wondering why they persisted in making her life miserable.

"Well, that very well could be the case, Hermione," Harry initiated after an uncomfortable two minutes of silence, "but I don't think it's best to jump to that conclusion. I mean, really, Hermione, think about it. No offense, but you would probably be just like Snape if you were a professor." He continued quickly with his explanation after seeing Hermione move to cut him off in protest. "Professor Snape is exactly the kind of anal retentive control freak who would have his entire year of classes planned out before the term even begins. It wouldn't surprise me if he had all sorts of crazy schedules and lists and calendars, just like the ones you make for yourself. The answer to your problem could be as easily solved with him waking up with a head cold. I know it's not the response you're looking for, but if you consider it, it might make this day better for you. I'm sorry you're upset, though. Even though I don't understand it, I get the respect that you have for him." He watched her as she registered his hypothesis, hoping that what he said had some impact on her. If there were some way to make her feel better, he would do whatever he could. He painfully remembered each time Dumbledore had left the school without informing him first. Although he knew that he had no right to question the Headmaster's wisdom, Harry couldn't help the knots that would form in his stomach when Dumbledore was gone. He always ended up feeling unfortunately vulnerable. If Hermione were going through anything like he had, which Harry could only assume was the case, she was going through hell. Even though he hated to admit it, Harry agreed with Hermione and found it unlikely that Snape would leave without mentioning it either to her or his classes. He, of course, would never tell her that; he didn't want her to be miserable.

"Yeah, thanks, Harry. I'm sure it's nothing big. He'll probably be back tomorrow. I'm going to get to Charms early. I'll see you there."

Harry and Ron watched as she walked away, turning to look at each other nervously, knowing that Hermione still didn't believe a word they had said.

Hermione didn't show up for Charms. In fact, she didn't show up to any of her classes for the rest of the day. Ron and Harry knew better than to go looking for her; when Hermione wanted to be alone, she meant it. It was not that she was ever anti-social; she merely appreciated the value of personal time, something that was hard to come by when living in a dormitory in which everyone hung out with everyone all the time, every day. Even her private room as Head Girl failed to afford her the silence she craved, on occasion. So, the boys continued on with their days as though nothing were wrong, as if she weren't missing. They told their teachers she wasn't feeling well. It wasn't exactly a lie, per se, just a manipulation of the truth. They knew that wherever she was, she was trying to figure out what was wrong with Snape, though they had no idea what gave her reason enough to care. They couldn't be happier that he was missing in action, although they'd never tell Hermione that. He may have stopped being malicious towards Hermione, but it wasn't enough for them to change their opinions of him. He was still a right git, in their minds.

Knowing that Ron and Harry would inevitably cover her back, Hermione had spent the afternoon sitting under a tree by the Black Lake, thinking things through. She knew

she should stop worrying and focus instead on more important things, but something nagging at the back of her mind told her that she should be concerned. So, she had sat there, doing nothing all day, loathing her own procrastination. She knew she wasn't helping anyone by sitting around in the grass, but somehow, the life in the woods around her and the gentle rippling of the lake gave her room for some of the clarity she so desperately craved. She felt a part of something greater than herself and her problems, something that was content to simply exist. Still, she felt an odd pressure rising in her chest and finally decided to relieve some of it by writing. It was not the kind of writing she was used to, the kind of writing that had become like a second job to her, academic writing. No, she wanted to write like she did when there was no one watching, no one grading, no one expecting the best. She wanted to write for her, without the constant pressure of impressing her teachers and classmates. It was this kind of writing that she preferred to keep all to herself. Through her entire magical experience and all of her adventures as part of the Golden Trio, Hermione's writings had kept her sane. She found it quite easy to translate her worries, fears, and emotions into poetry and prose; it was a secret she never planned on sharing, not even with Severus. Her private work was too personal, too much a part of her to be comfortably shared. So that afternoon, she took out the journal that she had kept over the years and began to write again. It had been months since she had last written in it. She wasn't exactly the journaling type; she just didn't have the time. But now, with no one to talk to, no one to understand her unease about Severus, she decided that writing was perhaps the only outlet for her conflicting thoughts. And so she began to write.

March 5, 1997

It's not fair. Today was going to be the second day in a row that Severus and I were going to be "normal," so to speak. A new record. That's the way it should have been. But no, things are turning out just as they always do. As soon as things in my life start to go right, the world pushes me back down, waiting to make me miserable. "Wait, Hermione's about to be happy, we can't let that happen!" the fates say, and so the universe fucks me over yet again. Every year, the cycle begins anew. Harry, Ron, and I think the worst is over, and then something else comes and ruins it all. Now, with Voldemort back, who knows when we'll have that sense of security again?

I'm so sick of it all. I'm afraid, too paranoid to become close to people for the fear of them being ripped away from me at the first opportunity. So I push people out. I push them away and instead hold on to my books, theories, and essays. My knowledge will never leave me, facts will not betray me, but my friends can and most likely will. I've gone through my years at Hogwarts comfortably numb, detaching myself from those I love the most, hoping it won't hurt as much if they should die in the war. I know it won't help, but I can at least try. Up until now, it's been working. Up until I let Severus Snape into my life. Up until I wasn't able to let him go. I should have seen it coming. I felt myself hoping that it would work, hoping that we could be happy. I convinced myself things would be different this time. It's my fault he's gone. I couldn't detach. I let myself trust. I've brought the world's revenge on myself yet again and pulled him with me into my own personal hell. He's gone, disappeared. He could be in pain or dying right at this moment, and I could never know. I could lose him at any minute. Images of his torture flash through my mind, just like in my dream. We won't make it out of this together, but how I want to.

I shouldn't care this much. It shouldn't hurt. I know he doesn't love me, at least not the way I love, yes love, him. So why do I still care? Why am I putting myself through this? I'm jumping through hoops to impress him, make him notice me, and I know he never will, not the way I want him to. I'll never be good enough for him. I should hate him for everything he's put me through, and I did! I hated him with everything I had, and then all of a sudden, it changed. How could I have been so stupid? There is nothing logical about what we have, no plausible argument for my emotions. What happened to that part of my intellect that shut down, that told me to run when I had the chance? I hate myself for feeling, staying, caring, defending, hoping, and loving. I hate myself for him. I can't forgive myself for caring more about what happens to him than what happens to Harry or Ron. I owe them more than that; they're my best friends.

But I still can't help thinking that Severus is going to be the one that saves us; that one day, we're going to owe everything to him, that people will see him the way I do. But no matter what happens, he'll never feel the way I do about him. How can he when he doesn't even love himself? But I won't give up. I will never lose faith. I will never lose heart. I will stand by his side, even if he doesn't want me there. Because I know it's too late to turn away. I've tried and failed. I'm too involved to let go now. If he hurts me, fine. I shouldn't expect anything more from him. Nothing's worked out to begin with, anyway. Why should this be any different? Whatever way this ends, I will lose.

Hermione's inner turmoil continued to flow out through the ink of her pen, making her situation seem even more real, more vivid. She knew she was being melodramatic and childish but didn't care. She needed this, the catharsis of getting her worst, most desperate emotions out on paper. It made her sick to look over them. Instead of calming her, as her writing often did, it only worsened her depression. She leaned back against the tree, placed her notebook on the ground, unable to finish, and closed her eyes. She needed some way to deal with her pain, something new, something different, for the pain she was experiencing now was indeed new and different, as well. But until she figured out what that would be, she laid down in the grass and cried until she fell asleep from exhaustion, not caring if anyone would be worried enough to look for her. She didn't care if the next day came or not.

Perhaps it would be better if it didn't.