

Transfiguration of the Heart

by Losille

Hermione returns to Hogwarts as Transfigurations professor after a year away from the magical world. She hopes for a quiet year, but then again, she has never known a quiet year at Hogwarts. Why should she expect one now, especially when feelings develop for a certain greasy-haired, black-clad colleague? Some Hermione/Krum. Labeling this AU for safety.

Changes

Chapter 1 of 29

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This is a mixture of both movie verse and book verse, as I like to have the best of both worlds. Posted at Fanfiction.net, in it's current 24-chaper entirety for those of you who can't wait for more. ;-)

Disclaimer: I bow to the greatness of J.K. Rowling. These are her characters and I apologize now to her and to you for bastardizing them to suit my needs in this fiction. I do not claim to even have a fraction of her genius, or possession of anything having to do with the series of movies and books. Thanks, J.K., for allowing people like to me to take your characters and play a bit with them.

A huge thank you to Shanastay, my lovely and amazing beta.

transfiguration (n.)

1. A marked change in form or appearance; a metamorphosis.

2. A change that glorifies or exalts.

Chapter 1- Changes

Hogwarts was just how she remembered it being when she left it a year ago. The high castle turrets poked out of a low cloud of fog in the dusk light, with the orange and yellow flames of candles and fires beginning to glow inside the windows. The land surrounding the giant stone structure remained as green as ever, and the Dark Forest loomed off in the distance.

Little had changed inside the castle as well. More paintings had been added to the walls in honor of those great wizards and witches who had fallen most gallantly in the face of evil and the War. Statues moved, ghosts conversed, and poltergeists wreaked absolute havoc. Madame Pince still ruled the library, the old, musty smelling temple

of tomes Hermione loved above all else. The children in the Great Hall seemed a bit smaller than she had ever remembered being, even as a first-year, but they seemed as awed by the school as she had always been.

As a matter of fact, the only real difference in the school was this: there was no real 'living' trace of Albus Dumbledore. During her seventh year, during the height of the war and following Professor Dumbledore's death by Severus Snape's wand, everyone held the memory of their great headmaster close at heart. Harry held it closest of all. But it seemed in the year since the war had ended, and she had been away from the wizarding world, despite her frequent owls to and from the Weasleys, the memory of Dumbledore had slowly faded into a gray mist. It was almost as though Dumbledore had ceased to be a real wizard who fought for good and became a myth to those who did not know him personally. He had been relegated to the halls of legends, much like the green-eyed boy whom he vowed to protect, to the best of his abilities, from the Dark Lord.

The war had been difficult to say the least, but everyone knew it would be, considering what they were up against. Magic was powerful enough as it was when used for good, but when used for the wrong intentions, it spelled disaster. It took calling upon every little resource the magical world had to combat the darkness constantly flooding the good. But finally, they had succeeded in the Final Battle. The battle had lasted the whole of two days and ended in the death of many of her friends, including Harry Potter. Even to think about that loss now was nearly impossible to do without shedding a tear or two. What he had given up to save the world was a gift no one should have ever been able to, or allowed to, forget.

Sadly, some already had.

Just as they had done with Dumbledore, Harry had become nothing more than a legend. Of course, he had always been somewhat of a legend in life, considering how he received his famous lightning-shaped scar. But now that he was not a physical being...a simple boy struggling through the world like everyone else...he had become a great legend like King Arthur and Merlin himself. What they, the children, remembered of the War was nothing more than reports in the Daily Prophet and tales of the spectacular deeds done by gifted magical people. For all they knew, except for those children who had lost family to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, none of it had ever really happened.

It was a story, a fairytale at best.

Minerva McGonagall sat at the Head table, looking as prim and proper as ever as she surveyed the children below through her square spectacles. The tireless headmistress of Hogwarts bore the brunt of the war here. She blanketed the children with protection inside these grounds through books, lessons, homework, and Quidditch, while many of their parents were away fighting in the War on the sides of both good and evil. She had seen so much in her life, and yet still seemed as spry as she did one year before, after Hermione and her friends graduated. Yes, there were a few more lines of worry gracing her face, and her hair was nearly a solid grey with a light, silvery sheen. But the headmistress seemed ready to face the road ahead, and not look behind her.

Beside McGonagall sat Severus Snape, the Greasy Git, dressed in his customary black robes and as dour an expression upon his face as always. Hermione knew of all the circumstances surrounding his loyalties since that fateful night two years ago. She had followed everything as closely as she could manage while not appearing too curious. Had Harry or Ron known that she had not thought him completely guilty for killing the headmaster, they might have just disowned her as a friend. She would not have put it past them, with all the stress that had been placed on their relationship throughout the War.

Nonetheless, it had been a great surprise to come back to Hogwarts and find him here. After Snape had killed Dumbledore, Hermione had imagined there would be few places left for him in the wizarding world...even Hogwarts...despite the fact he had done the deed on Dumbledore's orders. No one had enjoyed his presence before, and even after he had been captured and exonerated of all guilt in the death of the revered headmaster, no one knew if they could ever really trust the ex-Death Eater. She was one of those people.

If anything, he was still the most unpleasant man in the world. That sneer he gave her when he found out she would be teaching Transfigurations was nothing less than hateful.

Perhaps this was the only place he would ever be accepted now, even in the smallest degree, just as it had been directly after the first War. Hogwarts was where he would most likely remain to the end of his days, in his dungeons, scaring first years into tears and mentally abusing the others. Except now he was Deputy Headmaster, a much more cushy position than just a Head of House, and it meant that he held even more power over the students.

Around them sat Hagrid, towering over Flitwick, and Professor Sprout nearer Madame Pomfrey, who had come from her hospital wing for the Welcoming Feast. There were a few faces she did not see, however, and she knew that through retirement or war, they would no longer teach at Hogwarts.

Two of the remaining members of the Order of the Phoenix had come to teach in these empty positions. Tonks had come to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts, rather than continue on with the Ministry as Auror while they searched for any remaining Death Eaters. She said that it was because she had already seen too many horrible things in her life, but Hermione thought otherwise when she learned that Remus had been asked to come back. Lupin had been named the new Astronomy professor in Sinistra's place. Hermione had thought that a bad joke on someone else's part...she rather enjoyed Professor Lupin...but she learned that he had asked for the position. After all, who better to teach about astronomy than a man whose life was dictated by it?

Trelawney, the daft old bat, sat in a dark corner, mulling over the hot tea leaves in her ceramic cup, undoubtedly preparing to spout a new prediction of death and destruction. Hermione quirked her lips in a faint smile, wondering where the woman's beloved sherry was. Had she sobered? Most likely not, but at least if Hermione had to listen to a prophecy tonight, it wouldn't be amidst slurred words.

Hermione was the newest professor, the low witch on the totem pole, who had come to teach Transfigurations. Professor McGonagall had arranged for an old friend of hers to teach the class during the previous two years. Now that her friend had decided to retire, McGonagall had gone searching for one of her "best, most capable" students. And one that would "clearly make the finest teacher," or so Minerva had said to bait her into accepting the position. Hermione would have preferred to take over Professor Vector's place in Arithmancy, but the chances of that happening any time soon were small.

So Transfigurations it was for Hermione Granger, fresh back from a year of leisure in the Muggle world.

Well, as much leisure as one could experience while settling their parents' last will and testament. This was the original reason for her leaving the wizarding world for a full year. Her parents had been killed in the fight against Voldemort, and she needed to spend some much needed time sorting everything out, finding her own place to live and switching her Muggle funds (which happened to be a startlingly large sum) into Galleons. That, she supposed, was why she had taken this position at Hogwarts before all others. She needed a place where she felt at home. And there was no other place in the world that she felt more comfortable. Magic was her life, and any Muggle connections she had had in past, she had severed before the War.

But now she was back, and committed to be the best educator she could. After all, she had a lofty reputation to uphold, following in Minerva's shoes. And also because of her own reputation here at Hogwarts, being Head Girl and (she liked to think) one of the most intelligent witches in her year. Who was she kidding, though? Of course she was the most intelligent in her year. She smirked slightly, sipping at the warm wine in her pewter goblet. War had changed her from the relatively quiet, teacher's pet know-it-all, to a more hardened, braver and opinionated know-it-all.

"Miss Granger, are you prepared for your lessons to begin?"

The baritone, gravelly voice startled her out of her reminiscing, and she turned to find dark eyes watching her, not completely malevolent, but unkindly enough. Still, it was a change for him. He had never addressed her or looked at her all those years he taught her without an outright hate and annoyance for her existence in the world.

"I'd prefer that you would call me Professor, instead of Miss," she responded, "Or Hermione. I am no longer your student, Professor Snape."

The chance of Snape using her given name or giving her consideration as a fellow professor was slim to none. So it was no surprise when he sniped, "Granger, do you still insist on trying my patience?"

She stared back at him, hoping he would turn away. She hated him as much as he hated her. But it worried Hermione that he was trying to make conversation with her.

What was he getting at? "Why do you care if I am ready for my lessons or not?"

"It is my job as Deputy Headmaster," he said flatly.

"So it is," she sighed and set her goblet down. "Yes, I am prepared for my lessons. Thank you for asking."

"You *think* you are, anyway," he prodded. "Just wait until you spend ten minutes trying to get these miscreants to listen to you."

Hermione looked out at the students. Is that what all teachers thought of them? She tucked a piece of curly hair that had fallen out of her bun behind her ear and turned to look at his cold black eyes again. "I doubt they are *that* horrible."

"Every year they get worse," he warned. "Most of them are not as serious as you were about learning."

The last comment froze her in place. Had he just paid her a compliment? Surely she had heard wrong. Hermione tried not smile, but it was hopeless. To hear even one miniscule smidgeon of a compliment from him was enough to make her day, especially after all those years in classes when he told her she was not good enough, even if it was a mistake on his part. He did not dwell on his obvious gaff, though.

"May I have your attention, please?" McGonagall stood at the podium, holding her arms up to quiet the room, rather than straining her already shrill voice.

The hall quieted remarkably fast, but then most students had food in their mouths to aid them in being silent. Hermione wondered what the headmistress could possibly have forgotten. After all, the silver-haired witch had droned on quite a bit before the feast began, explaining things in the same fashion Dumbledore used to. Already students knew that Hermione would take the place of Gryffindor Head of House. Lupin could not continue on with that stress any longer. His monthly transformations were taking an ever-increasing toll on him physically. They already knew that Filch had a list of restricted items tacked up in his office. The Dark Forest was off limits.

"Hogwarts has recently signed up as a trial school for exchange professors. It is a new program, created by magical ministries around the world to strengthen foreign relations." She spoke slowly, looking around the room. Hermione was surprised she had not heard about this before. Perhaps it had slipped McGonagall's mind in the meeting the previous day. "One of our instructors, Madame Hooch, wished to do some traveling and volunteered for the test run. That is why she is not here with us today. Madame Hooch's replacement this year will be in charge of first-year Flying and will also teach the new elective class involving wizarding broom sports."

An excited murmur spread through the students, especially from those who were particularly into Quidditch.

Hermione had a good idea as to who was going to walk through the large door at the end of the hall.

Viktor had been instrumental during her seventh year and the War, his training in the Dark Arts at Durmstrang particularly helpful to the cause. She had wondered after he had decided to join the Order and come all the way to England for it, whether or not he had done so because of her. If that was the case, then she was flattered. But she had thought she made it perfectly clear a few years back that she wanted to be nothing more than a friend to him. They still corresponded frequently. Though their letters to each other had died off recently, as she had been away and he was involved with the new Quidditch season.

But she *did* know that he had taken to teaching broom sports at Durmstrang during his off season for the Bulgarian National Quidditch team.

"I expect all of you to show your new instructor the diligence and respect you show the others. He will have full rights to remove points and hand out detentions should you not," McGonagall continued.

Hermione also knew that in his time with the Order, Viktor had impressed Minerva, despite the professor's initial beliefs that he was a bit slow on the uptake.

The door creaked open at the end of the hall, and out marched the man she had suspected all along. Resplendent in fur coat and hat, walking with an air of authority down the center of the room, he looked around. Most of the students let out gasps of surprise. Hermione smiled to herself, remembering the first time he had entered Hogwarts' hall with the same flourish and whispers following him. She had not thought much of him at that time, but that had changed rather quickly when he started coming to the library for her.

He had changed a bit, though, in physical appearance. Yes, he was still large and muscular, but his dark hair had grown out a bit longer. His brows were a bit more groomed, and his nose was not so hooked...and that was only because of a ricocheted spell hit him in a battle and a mediwitch then fixed it. He had been handsome before, but she could not quite recall him looking so attractive.

His eyes searched the professors' tables now. He passed over her quickly, obviously having not expected her to be there, but quickly turned back, his lips curling into a slow smile. Whatever Minerva had said after that point, Hermione forgot, as she looked down at herself and tried to straighten her robes. Of course the robes were already straight and pristine, but it could not hurt to make sure. If only she were not wearing the robes...

Before she knew it, he had climbed up on the dais to shake hands with the others there, before stopping in front of her. She had forgotten just how tall and bulky he was compared to her. He smiled a large, eye-reaching smile before promptly pulling her close and hugging her. She squeaked when he did this, having not completely expected it, but he was always the exuberant, physical one. He set her back down on her feet and placed a kiss on her cheek.

"Herm-own-ninny," he said.

She rolled her eyes, knowing that he did indeed know how to pronounce her name correctly and only used this pronunciation as a rather ridiculous pet name for her. "It's so lovely to see you, Viktor."

"Not as lovely as it is to see you," he said, his accent thick, though his English had improved.

Realizing that all eyes had fallen on them in curiosity, Hermione smiled back and motioned to the empty seat beside her. At least this explained the reason why there was an empty seat. She was the closest to him and could help him as he began his tenure here at Hogwarts.

He took off his heavy fur-lined jacket to reveal the Durmstrang colors of deep blood red and black, and slung it over the back of his chair before sitting down.

She had a feeling that the chances of this year at Hogwarts being a quiet one were slim to none.

Young Love

Chapter 2 of 29

His blacker-than-black mood was solely due to the cheeky disposition of the girl sitting nearest him on his right. It was

not even a full day into the new term, and already he was anxious to hand out detentions and deduct precious points away from Gryffindor. He wanted nothing more than to see those rubies fly away, out of their glass holder.

Thank you so much reviewers! I really appreciate your comments... it means so much to have your support.

Once again, a huge thanks to Shana for betaing.

Chapter 2- Young Love

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose, wishing that the evening would end just as quickly as it had started.

His blacker-than-black mood was solely due to the cheeky disposition of the girl sitting nearest him on his right. It was not even a full day into the new term, and already he was anxious to hand out detentions and deduct precious points away from Gryffindor. He wanted nothing more than to see those rubies fly away, out of their glass holder.

Unfortunately for him, he could not take points away from a professor, much less a Head of House.

While he was not one to question Minerva's judgment in regards to whom she thought appropriate to hire as an educator, he was seriously beginning to wonder about possible senility setting in. Chiefly considering that this dreadfully unprepared witch was taking over her favored subject. Minerva had held herself to the highest possible standard while teaching, and she would expect no less from someone taking over the class. That was, apparently, until now. Something had to be slipping from Minerva, and he worried that it was indeed her mind. Not that he would begrudge her that. After all she had suffered through the wars, she deserved at least *some* much needed rest.

If letting her mind go was how she did that, then so be it.

However, magic *was* powerful, and put into the untrained hands of someone teaching others, it was potentially destructive. She had only graduated herself a year ago. She was a brilliant witch, he would freely admit, but she was simply not ready to face the task of molding the minds of the future, even though she *thought* she was. It was just too soon for her to follow in the footsteps of her favorite professor.

Could you imagine Hermione Granger as a professor? Hermione Granger, the resident know-it-all, incurably impudent, too-brave-for-her-own-good one-third of the Golden Trio, a professor? She did not have the temperament to teach. She was not even twenty years old! She had had no apprenticeship beforehand with Minerva. The only training she had was while in Minerva's classes. These classes she had, more often than not, skipped out on because of War business her final year at school. It was utterly absurd to think her capable of handling this position.

After all, it was *his* obligation to assure that the students of Hogwarts received the highest level of education possible from gifted wizards and witches, even if student incompetence knew no bounds. This was the least he could do to repay the community he had taken so much from while working as a double agent for the Order and the Dark Lord, peaking in the murder of Dumbledore. He had every right to question the girl's aptitude to teach. And the more he questioned it, the more he knew for certain that Hermione Granger was surely not the best that could be found. Even if the wizarding world had lost many due to imprisonment or death, there had to be at least *one* person out there a few years older than her.

He might have even tolerated Lockhart again, if he had not had his mind obliterated years ago by Weasley's faulty wand.

When he and Minerva had had their first discussion about Granger's appointment, he originally going to her office to request that she rethink her decision, Minerva had only gazed at him over her square spectacles with a twinkle in her eye. It was eerie just how much like Dumbledore it had been, though his gaze would have been done over his half-moon spectacles. And they had the same Cheshire cat smile as well. As though they knew something he did not. So it had to be pure lunacy that had driven her to hand over these powers as Transfiguration professor and head of Gryffindor House to the girl.

"She is much more prepared for this than you give her credit for, Severus. Besides, she's a Gryffindor. I have no doubt she'll come out smelling like a rose."

A week. He would give Granger *one* week. If the students did not scare her away, surely working with the likes of him would.

Suddenly, the young witch laughed at something Krum said, seemingly just to taunt him, though he knew well enough that she had not given his already frayed nerves a second thought. Being under so much stress these past years would make anyone's nerves threadbare, and in turn make anyone unbearable to live with, as was his case. But he freely let people know he did not like them much either. No one really ever gave him a second thought because of this, unless they were on the receiving end of one of his punishments. That was just the way Severus Snape liked it. He could wallow in his own miserable life alone, in his personal chambers, and reflect continually on what he could have done different in his life.

The girl laughed again, the sound grating on him, intensifying the headache already creeping up from the base of his neck.

Severus scowled. All he needed to complete the picture was a little black rain cloud, complete with miniature lightning bolts flashing, hovering over his head.

That boy would deter her, should she ever wish to depart from her current position. Perhaps *that* was why McGonagall had arranged for Krum to come here? Did she worry that Granger would indeed be scared away without having another incentive to stay?

He was not completely unaware of the eyes she had made at Krum when he entered the hall. Did a relationship still stand from his time here at Hogwarts for the Triwizard Tournament? Possible, but utterly preposterous. Krum's family was *very* Bulgarian and *very* *pureblooded* Bulgarian, at that. They would balk if they knew Granger was a Muggle-born, despite their son's obvious enamored state. Besides that point, he could not conceivably understand what such a gifted witch could see in someone like Krum. While handsome and cheerfully sweet much of time, usually to those of the female persuasion, Krum clearly was not what one would label "sharp."

But then again, Potter and Weasley were not incredibly intelligent either, and she ran around with them for seven years.

Severus really did not care what she did with her life, whether she stayed here or not, even if her staying meant countless headaches to him. It was her life, and if she *did* stay here, she would have to learn who was in charge. But somewhere, deep within his black heart, he thought that she should not saddle herself with this position yet. Being a professor at Hogwarts was for those who wished never to settle down and make more incompetent magical people, or were otherwise incapable of wooing the opposite sex to do such a thing.

Like him.

Or for people who were ex-Death Eaters and had murdered the greatest wizard that ever lived.

Like him.

She was none of those things. She was a hero in her own right after the war...Order of Merlin, First Class...and teaching at Hogwarts clearly was not what she should have condemned herself to. So that left one question: What had drawn Hermione Granger, a disrespectful and opinionated girl with so much bright future ahead of her, back to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry? No matter what Minerva's skill at roping people into doing what she wished, the bushy-haired witch clearly had *wanted* to come back for some other reason.

Minerva excused the prefects to show the first-years the way to their common rooms and dormitories, giving him what he wanted: a quick end to the evening, so that he could escape down into his dungeons and not be required to reemerge until the following morning for breakfast.

"Severus, would you be so kind as to show Viktor where his office and private chambers will be?" Minerva asked.

He bowed his head in acknowledgement, motioning to the ape of a man to stand up and follow him. Could Filch not do this? Apparently not.

Krum stood without complaint, but stopped when Granger stuck her arm out and stopped him. "Minerva, if there is nothing Professor Snape needs to speak with Viktor about, I would be happy to show him where his rooms are. They're the ones that were being prepared this morning, correct?"

Severus didn't know whether or not he should be thankful Granger had jumped in and taken the responsibility away, or upset that she had obviously thought this task beneath him. He sighed heavily. Well, Krum could have gone to Hades for all he cared. So perhaps he would be thankful for the girl just this once, even if this provided a wonderful opportunity for the two to sneak into the room and do who knew what. He met her eyes, both bored and cold, and he thought for a fleeting moment he had seen that look somewhere else.

Minerva gave her a motherly smile and a quick nod of her head. "Very well, Hermione."

Just don't stay too long. You have classes in the morning. The venerable headmistress did not say so, but her look conveyed it perfectly.

A slight pink flush crossed Granger's cheeks as she turned to Viktor, who towered over her by two heads. "Ready, Viktor?"

Nodding his impossibly large, but incredibly empty head, Viktor grabbed his fur-lined coat and offered Hermione his arm. Severus shook his head. The look on the man's young face was enough to tell him that he was very pleased that Granger was the one showing him to his room. They disappeared out of the hall, following the last of the students out.

Minerva sighed happily, "Ah, young love."

Just by looking at her, one would peg Minerva as a staunch believer in rules, and very much a disbeliever in the emotions of the heart. Everyone who knew her a bit better knew that Minerva had a softer side. She was a closet romantic. She was utterly... female.

Severus arched an eyebrow up toward his hairline, knowing that his sneer had only deepened at her comment.

Minerva looked back at him, "You know what young love is like, Severus."

"Lily and I were never in love," he stated flatly. "It was pity she felt for me and nothing else."

Snape stalked away from the Headmistress. He was quite content that he had never felt enamored with another woman again after that unfortunate crush. The one time he had let his guard down and really fell in love, she had only been around him for help with school work or for pitying him because of the malicious actions her true paramour and his friends engaged in. She had been the reason he became a Death Eater. His hatred for all Muggle-borns was created in the moment he spied her and Potter together in a dark corner at the end of their seventh year. Never again would he think about a woman as he had thought about her. It would inevitably kill the last, living portion of his beating heart, and he could not afford that chance.

It was self-preservation at its finest.

"Do not go yet, Herm-own-ninny."

The voice traveled through the empty halls despite the effort by its owner to be as quiet as possible. With the unmistakable accent, there was little point hiding that he was talking despite the effort to be quiet. And *Merlin*, did he despise hearing Krum call her that!

"I've got to stop at my House common room, Viktor. To make sure all my students are accounted for," she said softly.

"Then you should come back," he suggested.

Severus drew closer to them, but paused for a moment in the shadows, curious to see how this would end. If Granger resisted the temptation, then he might start to think she was actually serious about her position as a professor.

"Viktor," she purred. "Classes are tomorrow. I have some last minute preparations for my lessons."

"Herm-own-ninny," he said, almost in a whine.

Severus rolled his eyes.

Been a long time since your last conquest Viktor? Severus thought. It probably had been too. After all, the World Cup had been a long two weeks ago. Surely he had plenty of witches to fill his bed that night. Two weeks with nothing was quite a drought for him.

Granger's annoyed sigh was audible. "Viktor, what I told you last time still stands."

"Vot is that?" he questioned.

"You are one of my closest friends, but nothing more," she answered.

Viktor chuckled, "That is vot you think *now*."

Severus shook his head. Really, he was waiting for the ape to fall to his knees and beg. At least it would be humorous. Severus did know that the girl was an obstinate one, and when her mind was set, she would stick with her decision. And her decision was apparently *not* to entertain Krum's advances. He had to give her points for making the distinction quickly that she could do much better.

A dreadful smacking sound filled the still air, one that was distinctly created by lips coming together. It was time for him to leave. He may have enjoyed eavesdropping, but he certainly would not enjoy it if he would have to listen to *that* some more. Straightening his shoulders, he began his descent into the bowels of the castle, but ran smack dab into Hermione, who was hastily trying to get away. Her curly hair was springing from all angles out of her bun, and she looked flushed. But it was hard to discern if she was flushed over the kiss, or because she was angry. All he could see in her eyes was complete exasperation.

First Day of the Term

Chapter 3 of 29

"This smile was different, though, than all the others she had afforded him. It was not one that gave the slightest hint of gloating, or showing off, or intellectual superiority. It was a true smile, a smile that lifted his spirits a degree higher. It was a smile that would have made any other man stop in their tracks and take a second look."

Thank you all so much for your kind reviews. They mean so much to me.

Thanks Shana!

Chapter 3- First Day of the Term

The morning had gone smoothly thus far. So smoothly in fact, that Severus was worried an even bigger evil than a melted cauldron, or a minor explosion, would bare its ugly face by the end of the day. Never had he had a first day of term go like this. The Creevey kid had not done anything to injure himself. First-years were following his rules exactly, beyond expectations. The other students were behaving themselves as well, unlike the days of the Malfoy/Potter feuds where arguments in class were endless.

Even the Transfiguration class he sat in on that morning, during his free period, had gone off much better than he had expected.

Alright, not *much* better. It went perfectly. He couldn't have possibly conducted a more organized and informational lecture than she had, nor lead a more painless practical portion of a class. Granger's control of the students was impeccable as well, even if her style of control was a bit different. Where he controlled his students by the sheer dominance of his presence, Granger ruled with a soft, but strict hand that still seemed to command some ounce of respect from her students. Besides that, the students knew well enough who *she* was and that she was *his* friend. She had once known the only person who could defeat the Dark Lord. She had fought by his side. She had wept when he was interred into the soft ground.

Professor Granger was a hero, and each and every child in that class looked upon her with doe-eyed wonder.

Perhaps that would change in the future. But he still had an uncanny feeling that she would rise above and beyond his expectations. Though he had had his doubts about her ability to handle this task, he should have known that Hermione Granger would not let her duties as a teacher fritter away. She had probably read every Transfiguration book she could get her hands on, and practiced spells until her eyes were blurry. Her mirror had probably heard her lectures many times over.

Much to his chagrin, there was really no doubt about it. Hermione Granger would be staying at Hogwarts for some time to come, especially if that observed class had been any indication.

He would only admit it begrudgingly, though. Granger was well qualified for this.

Bloody hell.

Watching her teach the class from the back of the room had struck something in him, some sense of pride deep within. It was strange at first, the little niggling voice of approval. But when she had looked at him and offered him that Cheshire smile, it firmly planted an innate smugness in his mind.

Perhaps *this* was what some Muggle families felt when they learned that their son or daughter was magical. Or what parents felt if their child had received some excellent mark or award at school. It truly satisfied him to know that, in some part (though she would probably never ever admit to it) he had helped her become the educator she was. Sure, she had other fine examples of professors through her years. But he had a very distinct feeling, through certain nuances of her teaching style, that he had been one of the select few she used as a model for effective teaching.

He left the class in some of the highest spirits he had ever been in, truthfully, looking forward to the rest of the day. He knew, academically anyway, that having a brighter disposition would make one's life much simpler. But he had never had the opportunity to test the hypothesis until now.

It worked, even though he was only feeling a small bit better than normal, and his outward actions had not changed. If anything, his new happiness had only converted itself to a stronger presence of arrogance and self-importance. Some might have noticed it in his eyes or in the way he carried himself. But he certainly did not want to abandon his old ways. His old ways meant no one would want to be friendly with him. He would not form attachments.

It was just the way he liked things.

Severus swept through the halls, up from the dungeons and to the Great Hall for lunch, a few second-years cowering in his wake. He smirked at their reaction and continued on toward the Head Table, his seat waiting for him. While seats were not assigned, everyone knew that his seat was next to McGonagall. It was just the way things were done. He was pleased to find that neither of the new professors had forgotten this. Granger sat beside Tonks and Remus, talking animatedly about something, most likely their classes. Krum was nowhere to be seen, and he was thankful for that, though he didn't know why. He just was.

He still did not know how Tonks and Remus had come together. Age should have been a concern, if Lupin's werewolf status was not enough to end a relationship before it even began. Tonks, a Black by birth, though shunned for her impurities, was a New Age witch with bubblegum pink hair. She wore Weird Sisters shirts and denim jeans. Remus, when not transformed, wore shabby robes and sweater vests. Tonks appreciated strict discipline, especially in the Dark Arts. Remus only wanted everyone to like him. They could not be more different from the other. But he supposed it proved that opposites attract and seemed to last.

Sitting in his seat, he reached for the pumpkin juice. He looked out at the students milling about and talking to their friends about the first half of their classes that day.

"I thought Hermione would be easier than Professor McGonagall," said one fifth-year Gryffindor, one who had known Hermione when she was a fifth-year herself.

"How much do we get?" asked a Hufflepuff, who had not yet had their double class with Ravenclaw.

The fifth-year sighed. "A foot of parchment on the Switching Spell."

"That shouldn't be too difficult," the Hufflepuff responded. "It will only take awhile to finish."

Typical.

"How have your classes been today, Professor?"

It took Severus a moment to realize he was being spoken to, but even longer to comprehend that it was Hermione Granger who was speaking to him from across the table.

"Unbelievably dull," he replied.

She looked at the hourglass full of rubies and then back at him. "It must have been. Only a negative ten points from Gryffindor."

He could not believe that she was trying to make polite conversation with him, not after the way she had snapped at him the evening before. Wasn't she embarrassed at all about running into him after her little "exchange" with Krum?

"You need not worry, Miss Granger," he assured. "I am sure I'll find a way to deduct more before the sun sets."

She nodded, resigned to this comment. She knew that he treated the other houses unfairly when it came to punishments, and above all else intensely disliked Gryffindors. His prejudices had only been amplified through the years, of course. And Harry Potter and Ron Weasley had become regular offenders. Hermione had also been known to be on the receiving end of his prejudices plenty of times, because of who she chose to associate with, or because of the way she handled herself in class. She knew that it was futile to disagree with the way he doled out consequences.

Then she asked *the* question. "So, Professor, do I pass your test?"

He looked at her and met her brown eyes. Hope filled her eyes, obviously anticipating that he would say she had passed his test, despite the fact that there was also a hint of challenge there. She was daring him to say that she had not. But he knew Hermione Granger better than she thought he did. All she wanted was assurance that all the work she had done preparing for this wasn't for naught. Like him. Truth be told, they were both very insecure creatures. Granger hid her insecurities with her pretentious, ever-flapping mouth, and he hid his with his snarky attitude.

When he did not answer, a small, extremely pleasant smile found her lips, and she turned back to the conversation going on beside her. Severus sighed to himself and looked out at the students again. Despite his pride for what he had seen earlier, he could not tell her exactly what he thought of her lesson.

The question was: Why, exactly?

"Professor Snape!"

He spun around at the call from across the entrance hall. Lunch had finished, and he was moving back toward his dungeons at top speed. Anything to get away from Minerva's incessant questions about the new Transfiguration professor. If he had to listen to her gloat one more time about how she had been right, he did not know what he would do exactly, but it would not be good. He stopped when he saw that it was Hermione, waiting for her to catch up to him before he started his descent to the dungeons again. She fell into step beside him, having to take two just to keep up with his one, but she did it easily.

"What do you need, Miss Granger?" he questioned.

"I was wondering if I could possibly steal some hellebore syrup," she said.

Snape stopped suddenly, a student that had been following too closely behind them almost colliding with his back. "Funny you should use the word 'steal,' Miss Granger."

"I thought you might enjoy it," she replied. "But I am beyond stealing, by definition. That is, now."

He pursed his lips together, trying to repress a sneer. Normally, they would start out the conversation just barely courteously, but quickly escalate to such a point that he would wish he could hex her into oblivion. This time, though, it had started out civilly, and even friendly, and he strangely found he preferred it this way. He got along well enough with the other professors on a surface level. He should do the same with her. However, relaxing enough to do that, with a former student he could barely stand for so many years, was incredibly taxing on him. It had become such a habit to berate her, he almost felt as though he *needed* to be angry with her just to communicate.

Do something to make me angry, Granger.

"What are you concocting?" he questioned.

"A Peace Draught," she answered and chewed on her bottom lip, as though worried he would deny her the ingredient. "Your sitting in on my class did not help my anxiety at all."

He wanted to smile at that, so badly. But he trained his face to an expression of impassiveness. "I'm sure that Poppy has some made up."

"I know she does," Hermione said, "but I prefer to do things myself."

"Why do you not ask for help when you need it?"

"I do not need help making a simple Peace Draught, *sir*," she said.

For a moment, he saw a flash of the insufferable bushy-haired, know-it-all peek out from beneath her smoother, more cultured appearance. The usage of "sir" only made that young witch more visible.

He grumbled, "Your normal detention time, then, Miss Granger."

She scoffed at him for a moment and shook her head, turned on her heel and headed back in the direction of her class. Watching her go, he let out another long breath. What was it about her that just made his ire rise insurmountably? For so long he had been able to play a double agent, keeping his secrets from everyone. He had trained himself to never let his emotions, any emotion, happiness, anger, grief, flare to such extremes as they did when around Hermione Granger.

What was it about her that affected him so much?

Minerva stopped her for a moment, a large smile plastered on the Headmistress' face. Hermione accepted her praises without any difficulty, her chest puffing with haughtiness as they continued. When Minerva was finished and excused herself to go back to her office, Hermione's face lit up even brighter than it had been before. Now she knew exactly what he thought. He had told Minerva everything that had happened during the class he sat in on. While he had not thought what he said was extremely flattering (he always managed to somehow put a negative twist on everything), apparently the way Minerva had explained it, it was extremely gratifying to Hermione.

But then, of course, he supposed any recognition of her talents, coming from his mouth, might have caused her to light up like she had.

That was when he realized he was still standing there, watching her closely. Students made a wide path around him, for safety's sake. But some were watching his reactions, and that just would not do. He made to turn around, but her eyes caught his for just a moment longer. She smiled again, her teeth perfectly white and straight and so beautiful. This smile was different, though, than all the others she had afforded him. It was not one that gave the slightest hint of gloating or showing off or intellectual superiority. It was a true smile, a smile that lifted his spirits a degree higher. It was a smile that would have made any other man stop in their tracks and take a second look.

He did not take the second look, though. Even if he had wanted to, he could not. He was late for class, and that would not do on the first day of a term.

Misunderstood

Chapter 4 of 29

Hermione gave a snort of indignation and shook her head, "If you want me to believe for one minute that the Malfoys and Snape were only 'misunderstood,' you're going to have to provide much better evidence."

Thank you so much. I cannot stress how much the reviews mean to me.

Shana, you're awesome, and I truly hope things get better for you!

And to Notsosaintly: Again, I thank you for your time and help with this.

Chapter 4- Misunderstood

Hermione dropped heavily onto her bed, letting her tired body sink into the soft feather mattress as she let all the air out of her lungs. Facing and defeating Voldemort had not been as hard as this teaching thing was. Never had she felt so taxed in her short life. Never had she been so nervous to face such large groups at regular intervals through the day or had she been responsible for keeping their rapt attention the entire lecture.

She was solely responsible for their foundations in Transfiguration. If she omitted something by accident in her lessons, it could be disastrous. Preparing for class had been nothing compared to the reality. It was entirely different to stand up in front of them and command their attention and even harder to listen to the grumbles of complaint when she assigned homework on the first day of the term. She had almost decided to tell everyone that the essay was optional, but she held firm. What would have happened if McGonagall had done that when Hermione was a student?

Well, Hermione would have still done the essay, but the others in her class most definitely would not have completed it and would not have learned a thing. Harry and Ron would have gotten the parchment out, made a few ink splotches, and then would have quickly decided that Quidditch practice was more worth their time than any old essay in Transfiguration. She smiled softly at the memory, turning to look at the bedside stand and the framed moving picture there.

It was taken in the summer between their fourth and fifth years, while at number twelve, Grimmauld Place. They were all laughing and fighting with some doxies that had flown out of a curtain. Not many fun times could be had at Sirius' house, especially since it was Order headquarters, but more because of the state of things in the magical world. It was rare to have a picture of them after that where they were all smiling and happy to battle insignificant little doxies, rather than other, darker things.

A flash of memory passed through her head as she thought of Sirius. In particular, the memory of the time Snape and Sirius had each other at wand-point at Grimmauld Place, ready to hex and curse each other into oblivion. The situation had dissolved rather quickly when they realized that they had acquired an audience. Sirius had appeared fine afterward, but Hermione had noticed that the tension remained in Snape's shoulders. It was the first real indication any one of them had had as to what their relationship had been like when they were boys at Hogwarts. Though Harry refused to believe that his father and godfather could act in such a way to Snape.

Later that year, he had looked in Snape's Pensieve, and everything became clear. Hermione had lost a good deal of respect for Sirius when Harry told her and Ron what he had seen.

It was the first time Hermione felt sorry for Snape, and her feelings only bloomed from there. She knew what it was like to be a bit of an outcast. It was true she had eventually made friends with Harry and Ron, but that still did not mean she was widely accepted. Being an insufferable know-it-all meant that not many people wanted to be a friend unless there was help with school work involved. She could empathize with Snape. Of course, this was all after the story had been retold to her from Harry's skewed vision of Snape's original prospective. She had not seen it for herself, but ever since then, she had had a little more respect for the Potions master of Hogwarts.

She knew how hard it was to face Voldemort when working for the good. But to be Snape and working both sides of the fence, having to kill Dumbledore on the headmaster's direction? Put simply, she could not possibly imagine what he had gone through, arguing with himself constantly over the right course of action. She could not begin to try to dissect his psyche to better understand him, and she wouldn't dare, too. All she knew was that perhaps he had earned the right to act the way he did so often. He had suffered so much. He deserved his secrets.

"Why the hell am I thinking about Snape?" she muttered to herself, turning onto her side and closing her eyes for a few moments. She knew the answer to her question well enough. He had been on her mind ever since lunch. The elation that had come over her upon hearing Snape's praises second-hand from Minerva was incomparable to anything else she had ever experienced. Learning that she had received mostly all Os on her O.W.L.s or finding out she was going to be Head Girl were nothing. She had worked so hard all of her time here at Hogwarts for his approval. And she had thought she might never get that approval she so desperately needed, even now that she was teaching. But people never ceased to surprise her.

There was a knock at the only entrance into her personal chambers, and she let out a low grumble. "Who is it?"

"Viktor," came the accented voice.

Hermione rolled her eyes. She loved Viktor, but he really could be thick-headed when he wanted to be, especially when an answer he received was not to his liking. Last night had only reminded her quickly of that particular shortfall. Being the sports star that he was, there was little that he could not have, and women repeatedly fell at his feet. When a woman like herself resisted him, he only pressed harder. She had hoped he thought better of her, though. She had hoped he would realize she would not give in to his advances.

She ran a hand through her hair haphazardly before pulling the door back. He really was handsome, though, in that entirely too-big-for-his-own-good way. If anything, he would look fine for a little while, going around with her. Hermione cringed at herself. Never before had she been so shallow, but she rationalized that she was allowed to be shallow at some point in her life. She was only nineteen after all; she had a bit of time before she had to think of a serious relationship. Still, she did not want Viktor to get the wrong idea. She needed to find someone that could at least carry on an intelligent conversation beyond Quidditch.

"How was your first day, Professor Granger?" he questioned, a slow smile forming on his lips.

"Tiring," she said quietly and smiled. "Yours?"

"Good," he nodded. "The Quidditch pitch here is very good."

She nodded, her stomach grumbling as though in conversation. Viktor laughed at her. "That answers my question."

"What's that?"

"Whether you are hungry or not," he answered. "Would you like to go to Hogsmeade with me?"

Hermione sighed, meeting his eyes. "Let's stay here tonight. I'm meeting Snape this evening to borrow some ingredients from his stores."

Viktor raised a curious brow. "What are you brewing?"

"A Peace Draught," she said and stepped out of her room, shutting the door and warding it.

"If you need relaxation, all you have to do is ask. I am very good at relaxation," he said, the innuendo dripping from his words.

Hermione chuckled lowly. "Oh, really? What did you have in mind, Viktor?"

He looked around them as they walked along the corridor toward the Great Hall. His eyes paused on her for a moment, an enthusiastic glint lighting in the dark brown of his eyes. "I would say, but I think there are too many young, prying ears."

"You are awfully confident, Viktor," she said.

"Am I not veering you down?" he inquired innocently, the left corner of his lips twitching up into a sly smile.

She wondered idly just how many witches that smile had lured into his bed because it was most potent. And she had often felt lightheaded after being on the receiving end of such a look from him. At least she had not yet given into him. If he really wanted her, he would have to work for it.

She grinned. "You're going to have to try a lot harder than this, Viktor."

"Then I shall make it my mission," he said, "Herm-own-ninny."

A swish of cool air passed by them, and Hermione looked up in time to see Snape striding quickly past and into the Great Hall. "Lovely. He's in one of his moods tonight."

Viktor chuckled. "He is only misunderstood. Most of his kind are."

Hermione gave a snort of indignation and shook her head. "If you want me to believe for one minute that the Malfoys and Snape were only 'misunderstood,' you're going to have to provide much better evidence."

She had been to those Wizengamot hearings where Lucius Malfoy was in danger of being sent to Azkaban for the rest of his life. He, at the very last minute to save himself, had given the Ministry some very pertinent information on Voldemort's whereabouts and the workings of the upper echelon Death Eaters. That information had secured him the leniency he needed. He got off without as much as a black mark on his record. He swore that he was impelled under the Imperius curse, that he had never *really* hated Muggle-borns. He had even gone so far as to say that it was all a ploy. Voldemort had threatened him about something or another if he did not join.

To be completely honest, she had lost interest in that trial when Lucius started to blow hot air. The only trial she had ever really been interested in was Snape's, and it was not just because his transgression involved killing Dumbledore. She had been worried for him. She had been worried for Severus Snape. To this day, she could not possibly begin to comprehend why.

"True, but Snape is different," he said. "You know that well from your time in the Order, Herm-own-ninny."

She nodded.

"And funny you should mention the Malfoys," he said.

"Why is that?" she asked. "Are they at it again?"

He shook his head. "No, but I am to stand up for Draco at his wedding."

"His wedding?!" she spat out. "Somebody is actually *marrying* that ferret boy?"

"That ferret boy is a friend, Herm-own-ninny," he said.

"What about Crabbe or Goyle? Surely he's closer with them..."

Viktor let out a painful little chuckle. "I am not immune to people aligning themselves with me because of who I am. The Malfoys are looking to present a humble front, now that the war is over, and this is their first large soiree. I was a member of the Order, and considering my many recognitions, pureblood family and place in the Quidditch world, I was the logical choice."

Unfortunately for Lucius, most of the wizarding community believed he was as apologetic for his atrocities nearly as much as they believed Dementors were fluffy little kittens. Even if the Ministry had turned a blind eye to it because he was a wealthy benefactor, he had still been shunned from many social circles. Hermione supposed a large wedding with famous people in attendance would bring good press to the family.

"I just thought he would want a closer friend to stand up for him," she said. "That's what weddings are for, sharing that special union with close relatives and friends."

"If they only invited close friends and relatives, no one would make it. Most are in Azkaban, and the others would not come because they are on the run from Aurors," he pointed out.

Hermione nodded. "I suppose you're right in that."

"But I am a friend of Draco's, even if the friendship was first based on my position in the world," he said.

"I am surprised that he even speaks to you, knowing your allegiance with me," she replied.

Viktor smiled. "Draco has changed. But that brings me to my question."

"What question?"

He sighed. "I will need an exceptionally beautiful woman to accompany me as my date this weekend."

Hermione blushed. "I am sure any woman would be happy to go with you."

Viktor rolled his eyes and laughed. "You know I am talking of you, Herm-own-ninny."

"You've been hit one too many times in the head by a Bludger, Krum," she responded, scoffing at him. "If you think, for one minute, that I am going to enjoy showing up to *that* wedding, only to endure all the nasty looks and insults just because I am a Muggle-born, then you are sorely mistaken."

He looked at her as though she were an impudent child. "If they say anything or do anything, they will have to contend with me, Hermione. You do not spend some time with the Malfoys without procuring *some* evidence for leverage purposes. Please, come with me. I would much rather spend the weekend with you than any other woman."

"Weekend?!"

"We will stay at Malfoy Manor," he said matter-of-factly.

"I heard there were Repelling Charms on the grounds for people like me." She looked at him defiantly. As curious as she was to accompany him to this wedding, and see

Malfoy Manor, it was not at all worth the time or effort to go through when the Malfoys' anti-Muggle sentiments were still fresh and not completely gone.

Viktor sighed. "They will be lifted. There will be some other Muggle-borns and half-bloods there."

"Who is Draco marrying?" she questioned.

"Pansy Park-," he began, but he stopped short when he noticed her glare.

Hermione shook her head. "Do you even *know* what that girl did to me while we were in school?"

"No," he sighed, stopping them before they entered the large double doors to the hall. He grabbed her hands and held them in his, close enough to his chest that she could feel heat radiating off his clothes and the slow beat of his heart. "Please go with me, Herm-own-ninny."

Hermione looked at him for a long time, the debate raging in her head. There was no clear answer for her, as she really did despise the Malfoys, but she was insatiably curious about the manor and as to whether or not they really were repenting their old ways. His eyes were pleading, almost as though he did not want to face the weekend alone with them as well. "If anyone so much as *looks* at me with disgust, you will spend the rest of your long life making it up to me, Viktor."

"Do you require an Unbreakable Vow?" he questioned.

"No," she replied. "I think you're trustworthy enough."

"And if I am not?" His right brow quirked up in challenge.

Hermione shrugged. "I'll find the vilest punishment I can."

He acquiesced to this and chuckled, turning to look into the Great Hall. "Shall we eat?"

Hermione took his offered arm and they continued in for dinner.

She had given others in the room little attention since she had sat down, but his hasty retreat caught her interest. Snape disappeared from dinner quite early on in the evening. Hermione watched him go, wondering what could possibly require his attention so quickly. Unless he had handed out a real detention and needed to get down to the dungeons before said student made their way down to face a punishment for whatever foolish infraction they committed. Usually Snape would draw his meals out for as long as he possibly could so he would not have to face the insolent youths that were his students, but not tonight. No specific student seemed to be cowering in fear or looked as though they were trying to suck up enough courage to follow the Potions master. He could not possibly have headed down there so early for her, could he?

Not that she was in any rush to get away from Krum.

Viktor kept her occupied through dinner, explaining to her the finer points of the Wronski Feint. Ron and Harry had tried to explain such a thing to her their fourth year. And she did not understand, or care what it was for that matter, then any more than she did now. However, his eyes were nice to look at when they were animated and talking about things he loved so much. That and the bobbing of the Adam's apple in his throat mesmerized her to some extent. Once he was finished with the Feint dissertation, he turned to the specifics of Draco's wedding...an even more tedious subject if there ever was one. They were to leave Friday after their lessons ended. They would go by broom to Hogsmeade, so they would not have to carry their luggage, and then apparate to Malfoy Manor from there. He also assured her that he would owl the Malfoys in the morning to warn them that she would be coming.

And it was supposed to be a formal affair.

That posed a bit of a problem, now that she looked into her wardrobe. Never one to be over-ostentatious in the way she dressed or groomed herself, this weekend meant she would need to act the part of a soft-spoken, well-groomed, pureblood witch. She had a few skirts and dresses that would do. But nothing particularly for a wedding, except for the mostly modest dress robes she wore when she received the Order of Merlin.

As much as she did not want to stand out this weekend, she also had the fleeting thought that perhaps showing up in a flashy dress would do her a world of good. At least it would present her as confident. Even though she would be a mouse in the snake's den. Either that or they would call her a "filthy Mudblood" for wearing such clothes and promptly blame her for taking the attention away from the bride.

She would pack lightly, using charms and transfiguration to aide her in changing items to whatever suited her at the time.

Oh, what the hell was she thinking? She was willingly subjecting herself to this harassment, for the sake of being a good 'friend' to Viktor. She had never liked the Malfoy family. Lucius was deplorable. His son was a carbon copy. And even though they had found some common ground her seventh year, he still was utterly snooty and an unbelievable prat when he wanted to be.

Then there was Pansy Parkinson, his fiancée. How did that happen anyway? The most attention Pansy had ever received from Draco was when he was looking to be doted over. When she fawned over him, he would give her the world. The last time Hermione had seen them together, the love had been one sided at best. Why were they dooming themselves to a life of indifference?

Wait, she was thinking about Pansy and Draco. They deserved each other. It would be interesting to see who snapped first in that relationship. Their competing vanities would be most humorous pitted against each other. If anything, this weekend would provide her with some memorable moments, even if she was being shunned.

Glancing at her watch, she let out a small squeak. Snape did not appreciate going out of his way to accommodate her need for hellebore syrup. And most definitely would not appreciate being made to wait until she deigned show up. Throwing a thin sweater over the shirt and jeans she had changed into when she came back from dinner, she stuck her wand in her back pocket and grabbed a book from a side table. She hoped that he would not be angry seeing this tome. But she had always thought he might like to have it back. After all, the book, or at least what was written by the previous owner on the inside, was what had eventually helped to destroy Voldemort.

She hurried through the castle, reaching the cold dungeons in record time. It had been a long time since she had come down here. But the instant she smelled the dankness of the wet air around her, she felt suddenly as though she were back to rushing to one of his classes. She slowed her pace, stopping at the door that led to the Potions room, lifting her hand to knock.

She only needed to hit the heavy wood once before he answered, "Enter."

Hermione sighed. She just *had* to be late, didn't she? The tone of his voice did not bode well. She stepped inside and shut the door softly, finding him hunched over his desk and reading. Through the dim candle light, it was hard to make out his expression, but his attitude was quickly revealed in his next comment.

"You're late, Miss Granger," he said, not looking up at her.

"I'm sorry, Professor," she replied. Why did everything that came from his mouth make her feel like she was his student again, vulnerable to his punishments and verbal assaults, and not a colleague?

But then he did something of a most unexpected nature. He looked up at her. "Surely it wasn't Potter or Weasley that kept you?"

She laughed, despite the mention of Harry. Wait, did he do that to make her laugh? He couldn't possibly...

Realizing that she had let him see her laugh because of something he said, she quickly quieted and cleared her throat. She trained her face to be as impassive as possible, just like his. His dark eyes met hers, and she thought for a moment that he was debating gaining access to her mind. But he turned his eyes away and she did not feel an intrusion, like Harry had once explained it. All she knew was that whenever he stared at her like that, it made her feel a bit uncomfortable and wobbly.

"It turns out Poppy needed more of the potion," he said, pointing to the vials of sky blue Peace Draught on the table beside him. "So I took the liberty of brewing it. You may take a vial."

"Um... thank you?" she said, really unsure of what to say. He had turned back to his book as she walked to the table and took one of the vials. "You just don't want me messing around with hellebore, do you?"

He looked up at her again, "Miss Granger, you know as well as I do that there is no other person I would trust more with such a volatile substance as I would you. Unless you've forgotten yourself since I last taught you."

She shook her head. "I may be a bit out of practice, but not that out of practice."

Snape nodded and turned back to his book. She stayed glued to her spot, watching him. What had caused this change in attitudes? She had expected him to actually attempt giving her a detention for being late. But he was being *pleasant*, if not a bit jovial. It took her a moment to notice he was gazing up at her again, this time expectantly. "Do you need anything else, Miss Granger?"

"Oh!" She jumped slightly, remembering the book in her hand. Placing it down on his desk in front of him, she sighed. "I thought you might like to have this in your safe keeping."

He considered it for a moment before looking to find his imprint. Sure enough, it was his. "Miss Granger, I do not want to think for one moment you were responsible for aiding Potter in his cheating that year."

"I told him to turn it back in," she said, having expected such a response from him. "Some of the things in there... they just..."

"You don't need to say it. I am well aware of what's inside," he said darkly, some of his ebony hair falling over his face. He brushed it back quickly. "Those spells were products of a lonely, bored boy, nothing more."

She stayed still for a moment, not sure what to say to him. "It was useful in defeating Voldemort."

He cringed at the name, even now. "I have no doubt it was."

"Well, that's all then. Thank you for the Peace Draught, Professor," she said, looking at the bottle in her hands. She knew she had said too much and wanted to get out of the room as soon as she could manage. Hermione turned on her toes and quickly moved for the door, the sudden sound of his deep, uninterested voice making her pause just as she pulled the heavy wood back.

"Thank you," he said, "Hermione."

She turned to glance back at him, but he had already buried his nose back in his book. Closing the door behind her softly, she made her way through the halls with a large smile on her face.

In the Snake's Den

Chapter 5 of 29

When his obsidian eyes did leave hers, however, they did not turn to something or someone else. Instead, they made a rather lengthy perusal of her body, starting first at her neck, dropping to her bust, and further down. It made her a tad uncomfortable, and she fidgeted to switch her weight to her other foot. Whether it was from lack of knowledge with women, or from being out of practice, it was quite obvious he was enjoying studying her. Being who he was? the master of illusiveness? she had thought that if he had ever looked at her in this way, it would have been done without her knowledge. Apparently not.

Thank you so much to all my readers and reviewers. As always, your comments mean so much, and I hope you are all enjoying.

Chapter 5- In the Snake's Den

Hermione adjusted the bag she carried on her shoulder, looking along the lengthy stone drive up to a giant shadow of a house in the distance. Lights filled all of the windows facing the front of the house, casting an orange and yellow glow out onto the very front portion of the grounds. She was sure she had never seen a house so large. Okay, it was not a "house." It was an estate and an incredibly large estate for that matter.

Even Viktor's parents' house in Bulgaria was not as large this, and his parents were of the richest in that country. For a moment, she wondered just where Malfoy got the money to keep such a place like this *and* spend as lavishly as he did elsewhere. She knew the answer, though she had never seen complete evidence. Either through inheritances or business dealings that were not necessarily kosher, he was able to keep his family at the peak of wealth and prominence in the community.

"I can't believe I'm doing this," she uttered under her breath.

Viktor chuckled in the quiet night air as they continued their walk up the long path. "You will be fine, Hermione. I will be with you."

She rolled her eyes, hoping he did not see it in the dark. Really, already this weekend was much more trouble than what it was worth. After a very stressful first week teaching, all she wanted was to sit with the other professors and have some Firewhiskey. That was all she wanted.

Instead, she had voluntarily been accosted by an overzealous broom as they made their way to Hogsmeade, just because she was going with Viktor. They could have shrunk their luggage very easily and walked to Hogsmeade, but he had insisted on riding brooms. Honestly, did he not get enough of it every other day of his life?

At least Apparating had been simple enough. They shrunk their luggage once at Malfoy Manor to carry it the rest of the way up to the front door.

Hermione stood still for a moment under the grand, columned outside entrance and looked up around her. This house was even bigger than it had appeared further down the stone drive. "You're sure you sent them an owl, and they replied back to you?"

Viktor looked over at her in the bright light, his smile widening, "Relax, Herm-own-ninny. Lucius smells fear and preys on it."

"Thanks," she said blandly, crossing her arms protectively over her chest. Why was she here? It was an insult to Harry's good name to be here, she was sure of it. Surely it was an insult to all Muggle-borns that she had actually decided to show up to this event and try to act the pureblooded date, even if everyone knew she was not.

Viktor raised the heavy knocker, in the shape of a snake, on the front door. Its eyes glowed red for a minute and then went to nothing.

How appropriate.

The ornate door soon opened wide, and it took her a moment to realize that she needed to look down to find who had opened it. She had forgotten about the house-elves! How could she have forgotten that Malfoy Manor would be crawling with them? Oh, this would most certainly be an unpleasant visit. If Lucius so much as raised his cane toward one of them while she was here...

Calm down, Granger. You're just angry because you can't sit in front of the fire and read your weekend away.

"Mr. Krum," the house-elf said and bowed his head in reverence. "Miss Granger."

"Hello," Hermione smiled. "What's your name?"

"Lugknut, Hermione Granger," he said. "Lugknut will show you to your room?"

Hermione tried to retain her luggage and carry it up herself. But the dejected look Lugknut gave her was enough to make her pause for a moment, allowing the sprightly elf to yank it out of her hand. Why did they not want freedom? Couldn't they see what wizards did to them? She sighed and watched the small house-elf hobble further into the foyer, beckoning them in. Viktor motioned for her to enter first.

No words could quite describe exactly how she felt about the house. All she knew was that, on the inside, it was much more beautiful than she could have ever imagined it being. After all, being owned by dark wizards was enough to make anyone believe the main color pallet would be bleak blacks and greys.

No, that's just Snape, Hermione.

She smiled at the thought. In the past week, they had elevated from a relationship ripe with short, clipped remarks, to full conversations, and even intellectual debate, if they found something they disagreed on. Sure, he still spoke snidely to her, *and sneered and smirked*. But she figured that it was so engrained into his being that it would take some time to break him of those habits. Not that she was planning on it, though. She was simply thrilled that he could look at her as a colleague, rather than as a student. That was all she could ask of him.

"Vere is Lucius?" asked Viktor.

"He and the mistress are dressing for supper, Mister Krum," Lugknut said. "Lugknut is to inform you that you and Hermione Granger are to dress and meet in the dining room."

Viktor nodded and slowed his pace a bit, looking over at Hermione. "Nice house, is it not?"

"It is," she admitted. "Actually, it's quite surprising how light and cheerful it is."

He chuckled. "That could be Narcissa. You will see soon enough that she is very different from her husband."

"If she is anything like her sister..."

"She is definitely *not* like Bellatrix," Viktor admonished gently.

Silence fell over them so that they could hear a clock somewhere in the house chiming the hour. The house was eerily quiet, but she supposed what with the vastness of such a place, everyone was so far spread out that it was hard to make any loud sounds noticeable.

They climbed a large staircase up to a second level and turned down a long hall lined with many old artifacts and pieces of furniture. Because of the size and the way the house was laid out, it reminded her more of an old, luxurious hotel she had once stayed in with her parents on a trip over the summer holiday in France than it did a house. It certainly did not feel warm and cozy like the house where she grew up.

Perhaps *that* was why Draco was so cold.

"Hermione Granger is to stay here," Lugknut said, opening a door and inviting her in. He set her things down on a chair, snapped his fingers a few times to light the candles in the room, and turned to leave quickly. She watched as the door shut and Viktor disappeared to somewhere else in the house, probably to a more stately room, nearer the groom and his parents. After all, the Malfoys would most likely want to keep her as far away from them as they could. Hermione let out a long sigh and turned to look around the room.

She had to concede that it really was not too shabby, but it was hard in her present surroundings at Malfoy Manor to think *anything* was shabby. She was sure even in the oldest, most musty-smelling room, there was a level of beauty and charm. There always seemed to be in huge, old estates like this anyway.

The room was decorated in neutral tones and clean. The bathroom to the left of the room was small, but elegant, and connected another room. Hopefully Viktor would not be on the other side of this second door. It was just a tad too close for comfort. Even if she knew appropriate wards and alarms to put on her own door should he try to sneak in during the night.

She laughed at herself. Why was she so worried about him anyway? She had no romantic feelings for him. He was only a friend. She had told him that. But then again, Viktor was not necessarily delicate in the way he handled things. He was rough and took what he wanted in any manner it called for. She had seen his rage at certain times, and it worried her greatly to see that immense power building in his equally immense, powerful form. What would he do if she denied him?

Quickly fixing her luggage, she began the difficult task of deciding what she would wear for the night. By the time she was done with that, she felt hopelessly Muggle. Not that she was ashamed that it was so simple to tell, but she had hoped for a more magical appearance this weekend, in an effort to blend in. It was a vain effort, though. Lucius had probably warned all who were to attend that she would be here.

A few waves of her wand later, and the loose cotton summer dress had been transfigured and charmed into a sexier, form-fitting one of emerald green. For a moment, she thought it funny she chose such a color in this house, but decided against changing it. It might behoove her, before this weekend was finished, to conform.

She thought to throw on her robes, just in case, but scrunched her nose at it. Damn it, she was going to show her Gryffindor courage if it was the last thing she did. Any looks the Malfoys gave her would only be because they disliked her to begin with. Viktor would be appreciative of the way she looked. At least he better, because she was not just doing this for her health. Even though she had to admit that feeling like a woman, a sexy one at that, did have its psychological benefits. And really, when would she

ever get to do this at Hogwarts, where she was required to project the image of a serious professor?

She fought with her hair for a bit before using magic to tie it back from her face. Sometimes she wondered why she didn't just shave it all off. It would certainly make a statement.

Hermione laughed at herself, quickly finishing her primping with a bit of makeup. Deciding not to wait for her accompaniment, she headed out of her room and in the direction of the large grand staircase. It would not hurt to do a little exploring, though she would be polite and leave the closed doors closed. Her idea to explore was dashed, though, when she stepped down off the bottom step and looked up in the direction of voices in time to see Draco rounding the corner with Pansy on his arm.

"Well, well, well," drawled Draco, his characteristic sneer plastered firmly in place. "I didn't expect you to show up, Granger. I thought you would chicken out."

"I see you haven't changed at all, Draco," Hermione replied, making note of the blonde's expensive robes and Pansy's dress. Hermione did not feel so out of place now in her dress, as Pansy wore something of a similar design. The wizarding community was making a large effort now, after the fall of Voldemort, to infuse more Muggle culture into everything. The Ministry wanted more cooperation, and not so much division, in hopes that another Voldemort, preaching the virtues of pureblooded heritage, would not be born of this current generation. However, it was still pretty easy to tell makers of clothes apart, and Pansy's was made by someone magical.

"You didn't tell me *she* was coming, Draco," Pansy whinged.

Draco looked at his fiancé. "We were only informed a few days ago, darling. Viktor brought her."

Pansy sneered to match Draco's expression.

Hermione sighed. "Please, both of you, let's not tarnish this occasion with our old feuds."

They seemed to consider this for a moment, but did not reply. So what if she was asking for a truce? She was the better witch for it.

"Anyway," she said after some silence. "Congratulations, both of you."

Both Pansy and Draco looked at each other, smiled and turned back to her. Maybe they were in love. "Ah! Severus, there you are!"

Hermione turned to find him walking down the stairs, blowing by her without notice, to greet Draco with a friendly hug. He kissed the backs of Pansy's fingers, acting the perfect gentleman. She had never seen Snape act like this before with another human; for that matter, with another animal of *any* species, but she had always known he was close with the Malfoys, even after the trial, and it had come out that he was a double agent.

Apparently, Lucius knowing that Snape had betrayed their leader so absolutely was small change compared to the fact that Snape had made sure to complete the task originally appointed to Draco. Lucius knew well enough what could have happened if *no* one had successfully killed the old wizard. As it was, Draco was found barely alive after the Dark Lord had paid him a visit. Snape had gained eternal friendship with Lucius for his discretion, protecting Draco.

Snape then kissed Pansy's cheek.

For a moment, Hermione was jealous. *Very* jealous, as a matter of fact, but she did not know why. It was Snape, after all. He had just begun to see her as a colleague. Why should she expect him to have the same familiarity with her as he did with Draco, his godson, and Pansy, his former Slytherin student.

But when he was finished with Pansy, he did realize there was someone else in the room and turned to her. "I didn't think you were invited, Professor Granger."

Hermione smiled demurely. "Viktor invited me."

"Ah," he said, nodding his head, his eyes not leaving hers.

When his obsidian eyes did leave hers, however, they did not turn to something or someone else. Instead, they made a rather lengthy perusal of her body, starting first at her neck, dropping to her bust, and further down. It made her a tad uncomfortable, and she fidgeted to switch her weight to her other foot. Whether it was from lack of knowledge with women, or from being out of practice, it was quite obvious he was enjoying studying her. Being who he was...the master of illusiveness...she had thought that if he had ever looked at her in this way, it would have been done without her knowledge. Apparently not.

This was wrong on so many levels. Why was he looking at her like this anyway?

He is a man, Hermione. It's what men do.

But this was cold, immovable, vindictive Professor Snape, who loathed her above any other thing in the world, well, except James Potter, his friends, and his son. Yet he was looking at *her* with that appreciative, male twinkle in his dark eyes.

She had to be imagining it. She just had to!

Luckily, her attention was diverted from that burning gaze when Viktor came down with Lucius and Narcissa.

Contrary to Popular Belief

Chapter 6 of 29

Despite the popular consensus of the world, Severus Snape was a man who had the same sexual inclinations as everyone else.

Thank you all for the comments!

Chapter 6- Contrary to Popular Belief

He tried not to pay attention to it. He tried to train his mind to the intense conversation going on between the Malfoys and Krum. He tried to think of anything else in the

world...even the Dark Lord...just so he would not have to concentrate on her legs. Unfortunately, that was just what drew and held his interest.

At dinner, the only thing he could pay attention to was her, sitting across from him. The way she cut her meat, the way she chewed thoughtfully and then swallowed, mesmerized him absolutely. The way she sipped from her goblet of wine, or dabbed her mouth with the cloth napkin was delicate and so unlike the Miss Granger he once knew. He had never had a chance to watch her at dinner at Hogwarts, as she was never in front of him. But this elegant dance she did during dinner was exceptional, and so very feminine.

Even that dinner conversation, during which she stayed curiously quiet except to answer questions directly posed to her, he could not concentrate on the damned words being spoken. All he could focus on was the way a few tendrils of her hair had slipped out of her hairdo, tickling the back of her neck, or the way her breasts rose and fell under the relatively revealing dress, in a delightful shade of green, he noted, barely covering her body.

Shortly after dinner they had all adjourned to the sitting room for coffee and desserts. He had thought he could break this spell during the move, but he found quickly that as she sat down, he could not. At least at the dining room table, he had not had a good view of her legs. Now, though, as she situated herself in a wingback chair and crossed her legs, his full attention was on her, even more so than it had been at dinner. And, oh, how he loved the way the material of the dress rode up a bit on her thighs when she sat.

Surely she had bewitched him. That was the only explanation for this. She had bewitched all the men in the room...

He was not oblivious to the fact that Viktor was stealing multiple glances at her, or that even Lucius and Draco had given her appreciative, yet snide, looks. He was jealous, though. For some inexplicable reason, he was jealous that Hermione Granger, bane of his existence, was being ogled by so many other men. This just would not do.

Perhaps he was finally losing it. It could have been some delayed spell from the Dark Lord, one that caused you to lose your mind, because he definitely would have never entertained such thoughts about a woman like Granger without a spell. She had been his student, and now she was his colleague. Entertaining such thoughts was immoral.

Wasn't it?

Damn it all to hell.

He had many sleepless nights before, but never were they due to a woman and the visions she left in his head. Wandering about the dark house, he tried to find some solace. Nothing offered what he sought, though, so he wandered towards the library. Maybe he could immerse himself in a book.

Oh, who was he kidding? There was nothing else that more symbolized Granger than a damned book. And to be surrounded by thousands of them would only mean more unwanted attractions.

Still, he found himself drawn towards the large double doors into the library. Letting himself into the room, he found that a fire lapped at the sides of the stone hearth, and candelabrum about the room flickered yellow and orange. Someone else was not sleeping. He closed the door softly and took a few steps inside, looking at the small sitting area near the fire. No one. Then around the bottom level. No one. Then his eyes caught movement on the top level, finding a body hanging precariously from a ladder with one hand, the other holding her wand for light.

Damn.

So much for *not* thinking about her.

There she balanced, in a fluffy-looking dressing gown, that only made him wonder what was beneath it, if anything at all.

Bloody hell.

"Professor?"

Had he verbalized that?

"Yes, Miss Granger," he said, walking into the light.

She busied herself with pulling a thick tome from the shelf and carefully descending the ladder, allowing him an opportunity to get ahold of himself. It was a fruitless opportunity, nonetheless, because he could only concentrate on her movements. Before he knew it, she had come down the stairs to the floor level and was looking at him curiously.

"Couldn't sleep?" she questioned.

He nodded.

"Welcome to the club." She chuckled ruefully and went to plop into one of the large chairs by the fire. She curled her legs up beneath her and opened the book, seemingly not caring that he was still in the room. Sure, the time they spent together at Hogwarts was slowly becoming less strained, but neither of them was completely comfortable with the other, yet. However, at that moment, she acted like this was absolute normalcy for her.

The dressing robe slipped away, exposing a bit of her leg. He drew a sharp breath.

Whenever he would see an old student of his, specifically one that was grown, had a job and a family of their own, he still only saw them as they once had been. They had always remained an insolent child in his mind's eye, and nothing more. But it was extremely difficult to make himself believe that Hermione Granger had once been his student and was still very much a child. At present, noticing Granger's very feminine form, he was beginning to see that she was indeed no longer a student. She was a woman, and a very fetching woman at that.

No!

He could not possibly be thinking like this. Not now, not ever.

He had not found a woman so alluring in the longest time, and usually only sated his needs through the work of his own hand. He had just never bothered looking, wanting to be alone for the sake of his involvement with the Dark Lord. No one would ever understand him or his associations. And he certainly did not want any of these feelings for a woman. Not after Lily and what she had done to him.

But then again, these feelings were instinctual. What he felt was a base lust like any man had probably felt at some point and time in their lives. It was not an emotional attraction. It was not an attraction like the type he so feared. He was no idiot, though. He knew that a physical infatuation oftentimes led to other things, even deeper and sometimes destructive feelings for a partner.

Perhaps in the past he had been so concerned with other problems that he had been wholly unaware of such interest, had he encountered another suitable woman in his day-to-day machinations.

However, now that the war was over, and the enemy vanquished for a time, he supposed this could be his first real test. Now he could actually contemplate a relationship with a woman, and his mind was telling him that. That was almost certainly the only reason why he noticed her now. Or perhaps something else was telling him he needed to think of other things, so that he would not wallow forever in his own self-pity.

It was the natural way of things, after all--the chemistry of opposite sexes. It had played out like this for eons. Friendship, love, attraction, sexual need. Who was he to rewrite the evolution of Muggle and magical people alike? Despite the popular consensus of the world, Severus Snape was a man who had the same sexual inclinations as everyone else. His had only lain dormant for some time out of the necessity to keep his mind fully on his tasks at hand with the Dark Lord.

Yet he still failed to see what any woman would want with him, the Greasy Black Bat of the dungeons of Hogwarts. Why should he even try? He could pursue women openly. But the probability of them returning his affections was slim to none. He was not attractive in the least; he knew that. His attitude was surly, at best. And he truly was comfortable by himself, alone and able to do as he pleased without someone else to think of.

Why the hell was he thinking of this anyway? They weren't getting married. They weren't seeing each other. They were simply colleagues at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, nothing more. They weren't even friends, for Merlin's sake!

And this was Hermione Granger he was thinking about.

"Are you just going to stand there, or will you join me?"

He met her eyes for a moment, and she shifted her gaze to the chair opposite her.

"You're either incredibly foolish or incredibly courageous to come with Viktor," he remarked in a vain attempt to take his mind away from the path it was currently traveling. He sat in the chair and let out a long sigh.

She let out a short, unladylike grunt. "I think it's a mixture of both, Professor, but I was curious."

"Curiosity killed the cat," he said automatically.

"I am well aware of that," she replied. "Though Lucius and Draco do little to scare me."

"They should scare you. If you only knew what was hidden in this house, or knew what they could do to you with a flick of their wands."

Hermione shrugged and gazed at him. "I've faced the Dark Lord himself. In comparison, I consider Father and Son Malfoy unimportant. And I was under the impression that the Ministry had raided the premises multiple times."

"Lucius has places that even magic can't find," he said flatly and sat back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest. "Aren't you intimidated at all?"

"Only when they start spouting their pureblood ideologies," she replied. Then she gave him a small smile. "Besides, I put up with the likes of you for seven years. I should think I at least learned something in dealing with less than amiable people."

He sighed, eyeing the liquor on the other side of the room. A bit of Ogden's sounded very nice right now. "Would you care for something to drink, Miss Granger?"

She looked up at him and then in the direction of the crystal decanters. Clearly she was surprised that he had even deigned to ask her. He smirked.

"Hmm?"

"Oh, um, just a bit," she said quietly. "I'm quite the lightweight when it comes to the hard stuff."

He went to filling two glasses half full of the amber liquid and carried hers over to her. Again she took her attention away from the book to look up at him. "Here."

She took the glass, her soft fingers brushing his, and considered the liquid for a moment. "That's a bit?"

With a shrug, he sat back into his chair again. "What has caught your attention tonight?"

"I'm not quite sure," she said, looking at the leather-bound book. "I can't very well concentrate with you talking to me."

"Then I'll stop," he replied. Not that he minded at all. It meant more time that he could watch her.

She shook her head and closed the book. "No, don't stop. It's nice to have a conversation without you biting my head off. I like to think that maybe I have impressed upon you that I'm not like I once was."

He let out a derisive laugh. "You haven't changed one bit, Miss Granger. Perhaps you have grown up physically a bit, and learned to control your outbursts a bit more, but you are still the same insufferable know-it-all that you were."

"Good to see *no one* changes then, not even you," she remarked, taking a long sip of the firewhisky. She set the glass down on the hardwood floor in front of her.

"No one ever really changes, Miss Granger," he pontificated. "Perhaps you may eventually learn something new about a person that changes your *opinion* of them, but no one ever changes themselves."

Her eyes held his for a long time, letting that comment seep into her brain, and she let a small smile form on her lips. "What happened to you referring to me as Professor Granger or Hermione?"

"Old habits die hard," he replied, pausing for a long moment. "Hermione."

"That they do." She nodded and looked back at her book.

They spent some time like this in silence, the only sound in the room coming from the popping of the fire beside them. He tried not to look at her, consider her, or appraise her physical qualities at all, but it was useless. She was the most fascinating thing in the room at the moment. Actually, he was quite sure that she was the most fascinating thing in the entire manor for the entire weekend. But he would not tell Draco or Lucius that.

After a bit, he felt eyes watching him closely, and he looked up from staring at the fire to meet her eyes. She had closed her book and placed it beside her on the ground, holding the whiskey to her lips now, taking small sips as though it were tea.

"How were your classes this week?" she questioned.

"Quite boring," he answered. "No one did anything truly horrid. I only took fifty points away from Gryffindor in total."

She laughed. "Perhaps you're just getting soft."

He fixed her with a harsh glare, and she blushed slightly. "No one changes," he repeated. "Your perception only changes."

"As far as I see it, you're still the same old Snape; the most malicious, cynical, antisocial, and unpleasant wizard in all the world. I don't think my perception has changed at all. And I still think that you may be getting soft."

It was hard not to let the corner of his mouth twitch up into a smile, hearing exactly what she thought of him. He knew that none of his students liked him--most feared him--and even his Slytherins had a healthy indifference to him. But never before had someone been so frank with him. Well, perhaps besides Albus or Minerva. "Twenty points

from Gryffindor for being an insufferable, bushy-haired know-it-all and for disrespecting an elder."

She scoffed and shook her head. "It's good to know where we stand, then, Snape."

"It is." He nodded.

The girl was silent again and uncurled her legs, placing her feet on the floor. "Do you really still see me as I was?"

He would damn her for asking the question, but he had to give her credit for picking up on his interest at dinner. Not that his watching of her movements had been at all secretive.

"Professor?"

"Hmm?"

"Do you?"

Severus sighed heavily and considered the remainder of the amber liquid in his glass before swallowing it. He reveled in the burning sensation spreading down his esophagus and stomach and then through the rest of his body before meeting her questioning eyes again. She wanted an answer, and he would give it to her. But he was certainly not going to sit around and have to explain it to her, or discuss it. He was much too tired and the liquor was finally making him sleepy.

Standing from his seat, he walked over to the decanters of liquor, and set the glass down before heading toward the doors. He stopped and looked back at her. "That's the problem, Hermione. I don't see you at all like I used to."

He was sure he left her in a state of complete confusion, but he did not necessarily care. Actually *he* did not even know what he meant by it.

The problem? A problem for him, maybe, but he had lied a bit. She was still insufferable and an incurable know-it-all. However, she was insufferable in a different way now...the way that it was almost impossible to be in the same room with her without getting those confounded thoughts of bare legs and elegant dances.

This was, without a doubt, the most maddening experience in his life. To him, everything had a clear-cut answer, even in the most ambiguous years when he played a double agent. But there definitely were no clear-cut answers in this department of attraction. In some ways, though, he did not wish to have a clear-cut answer, at least not yet.

Should he treat her like he always did, admire her from afar, and protect himself from the possibility of getting hurt? Or should he take the chance and try to get to know her better? Did he really need a mate?

If he did not need a mate, then he certainly needed some sexual release with a capable being. But she was too good for that. Even if she were attracted to him--which she most certainly was not--she would not give herself over to pleasure without more of a relationship with him. He had seen that firsthand with the way she acted with Krum. If he truly wanted her to sate his lust, he would need to risk having his heart ripped out and stomped on... again.

The question was: Could he handle it if she did that to him?

As much as these thoughts and questions of the feminine Hermione Granger annoyed him, he did enjoy the knowledge that he was capable of having such feelings. A few years ago, in the darkest part of the war and after killing Dumbledore, he had thought his life over whether he was sentenced to death, to Azkaban, or exonerated of all wrongdoing. And for a time, until she had come back to Hogwarts, he had had little care of anything beyond his classes besides retreating to his dungeons to drink himself to sleep. He had been, by all rights, dead to the world.

Now, though... now that she was back and aggravating him constantly, he did not feel so lifeless. Her presence, even when she was younger, made him volatile... *slavely*. He liked knowing that he was still alive, not to mention healthy and virile.

The rather obnoxious arousal in his trousers only proved that.

Enigmatic

Chapter 7 of 29

*?I always knew that part of the reason why Pansy treated me the way she did was because she was jealous of me, ?
Hermione said bashfully, though with a bit of sarcasm in her voice. Even she knew that during her school years she
cared more for her homework than her physical appearance. ?Though I?m not sure what she found so envy-worthy in
my life.?*

Thank you all so much!

Disclaimer: Jo owns it all, I own nothing. Hey Jo, spread the wealth, huh? ;-)

Enjoy!

Chapter 7- Enigmatic

Hermione woke to bright sunlight filtering through the large windows of her room. She had finally fallen asleep when the sun was beginning to peek up over the horizon. She would have given anything for a few moments more of uninterrupted slumber, but she knew that once she was awake, she was awake. The bright sun only aided in getting her moving.

Sleep was troublesome for her, at best, ever since the end of the war. And when she did manage to shut her eyes for a little while, it did not mean she would be rested when she woke. Dreams came to her continuously, most of them dark nightmares of scenes of her clashes with Death Eaters and the final showdown with Voldemort and Harry replaying in her mind. Oftentimes the scenario would change and other people would be killed off, instead of those who actually were, adding a whole new dimension of grief to her heart. Other times, the nightmares would be about losing her parents and not having her mother's sage advice anymore, or her father to make her laugh.

Or her mind would skew the previous day's events into things she would rather not ever entertain. This was especially true after a rather perplexing night like the last, and her conversation with one Severus Snape.

After he had left her in the library with that particularly confusing comment, she had tried to dissect its meaning immediately. She had gotten as far as deciding that he did indeed see her as a woman and a professor, not as a student, and that was probably solely because of what she wore that evening at dinner. So what? Did he mean more by his comment? Even though she was talking about Snape here, she had never once doubted that he shared the same urges as everyone else. He was a man that found her aesthetically attractive. Okay, fine, she could understand *that* even if he did not like her much. After all, she'd had a crush on Draco at one point, just because of his appearance with that sort of suave, superior attitude.

She was sure plenty of women wore such things around Snape. For that matter, most were likely much more attractive women than she when wearing those things. What was so different about this situation? Did his admission mean so much more? He had always done so well being sarcastic and hurtful, that for him to come out and say what he had to her, of all people, was most startling. After all, she was the "insufferable know-it-all" that he loathed to such an unfathomable extreme, especially for her friendship with Harry. She was the girl he did not believe was capable of teaching. She was no more than an annoying gnat flying around an expired potions ingredient. The fact that he had said anything...

Merlin.

Throwing her legs over the side of the bed, she decided it best to go about her morning routine as well as she could and push this out of her mind. Clearly, she was putting too much thought into this thing, just like always. Overanalyzing had always been one of her least endearing qualities. And overanalyzing wherever Severus Snape was involved never worked. He was Slytherin, after all. He could be cunning in the most devastating ways, and she always managed to interpret things wrong with him.

Oh, it was just so confusing!

But then, he's a confusing man, Hermione.

She was pretty damn sure he liked it that way too, so no one would ever truly know Severus Snape. He was merely protecting himself from someone like her knowing him. The information she would glean from being close to him would be the perfect weapon to use to hurt him. It was self-preservation at it's finest. And ingenious of him, really.

However, it was too bad for him that she was Hermione Granger, and the tedium of trying to dissect someone's actions and motives down to their very base had always been one of her favorite pastimes. The Gryffindor know-it-all had the courage to face a difficult man like him and the ability to study something until she fully understood it. She may not have his predisposition toward stealth in working such matters out, but her tenacity in learning something new far outweighed any Slytherin's.

Two could play at this game.

If it was the last thing she did, she was going to figure this man out, whether he liked it or not. Here was one last frontier she had yet to tackle in her education. And that was why Professor Snape was the way he was. Now, though, his comment added urgency to understanding him. She would learn Professor Snape. Even though she knew it would most likely not be as pleasant as trying to learn how to transfigure an animal into a goblet.

At least she had a bit of information to start with. Actually, now that she thought about it, she found she had a lot. She had just never purposefully employed it before. Snape was a half-blood. He was a former Death Eater. His friends were along the likes of the Malfoys. He was uncommonly intelligent. He had hated James and Sirius more than any other wizards in his class. No one, save his parents, maybe, had truly loved him. He had never been able to trust anyone, because of cruel pranks in his school years, or because of the deceit of his years as a Death Eater. Nor could anyone trust him because of his double life.

For a moment she thought she had taken on too much of a task, but steeled herself to it. She would not attempt anything underhanded. This task would just give her an opportunity to speak with him, and possibly build a trust with him that would allow her to dive deeper into what it meant to be him. He would most likely figure out what she was trying to accomplish rather quickly. But perhaps he would find it slightly flattering to know that someone wanted to know him so well. Maybe.

"Ouch," she muttered, not realizing she was brushing her hair so harshly and had caught on a tangle. Wait... She was brushing her hair?

Hermione looked down at herself, finding that she was bathed and fully dressed. She could not possibly have been so deep in thought over Snape to not notice what she was doing. Could she?

It was a miracle she had not fallen and cracked her head open in the shower. Or heaven forbid she had muttered the wrong charms to dry her hair or apply her makeup. Granted, it was all so second nature to her now that the likelihood of that happening was small. But she was at Malfoy Manor, and any ill-used magic would surely give the master of the house the opportunity to ridicule her for being an "incompetent Mudblood."

After grabbing her wand and throwing her hair back into a ponytail, she headed down to the main floor to scavenge for breakfast. There were already a multitude of people moving about, but most were there to prepare for the wedding ceremony that would take place later that day, and were either by cooking or decorating. From what had been put up so far, Hermione had no doubt that this would be a very formal, lavish affair. Which would also mean she would have to transfigure an equally stunning dress. But she had already decided it would not be green to appease her hosts.

She went in the direction of the dining room that had been the location for dinner the previous evening, and found that it was quiet, all except for the man sitting and brooding over a porcelain cup of tea. He looked up quickly when she entered, his floppy black hair falling into his eyes for a moment before he brushed it back.

By the distant expression on his face that took some time to change to his normal, uncomfortable sneer, it looked as though she had interrupted a rather deep thought. She shook her head and walked to the sideboard that had been set up, by house-elves no doubt, to make herself some tea. Did he always have to have that unpleasant scowl on his face? She was certain that if he smiled a little more, he could be quite attractive.

Not that she cared at all.

Hermione carried her cup and saucer over to the table, a muffin in her other hand. She debated for a moment where she should sit when Snape, in a moment that threw her completely off guard, flicked his wand with a spell that pushed the chair opposite him out. "Thank you."

He grunted and ran a hand through his hair.

She knew well enough that he certainly was not a morning person. She had run into him plenty of mornings, and those were the times he had always taken the most points away from her. But she still tried to make conversation. If she was going to accomplish her self-appointed task, she would have to start as soon as possible.

"Where is everyone?"

"Most likely still in their beds," he answered. "It is only seven. Did you not sleep at all?"

"A few hours," she muttered, slicing her muffin in half and taking a small bite full of blueberries. "I don't sleep much any more."

There was silence as she felt his obsidian gaze on her again, so much like the night before, appraising her. Still, there was no invasion into her mind.

"And why could that be?" he asked, a hint of concern in his voice.

She did a double take, trying to discern if that really was concern she heard or her imagination playing tricks on her. It could be possible, if only on a clinical, professional level.

"What's this, Miss Granger? I've asked you a question and you will not answer freely?"

Hermione frowned and sipped her tea. "I do not sleep much any more because of certain things that plague my dreams."

Silence again, then a low sigh. "I have them as well."

"Have what as well?"

"Those nightmares of what I suffered under Him and because of Him," he said quietly, a long, calloused thumb running over the rim of his tea cup.

Hermione gave him a weak smile and shrugged her shoulders. "I cannot even imagine what you have endured, Professor. I know ~~what~~ have, and still it is only seven years. You endured the torment for so much longer."

"It was not always torment, Hermione," he said softly. "In the beginning it was bliss... when I was the Dark Lord's pet, proving my worth readily, doing anything he asked. He gave me so much praise. It was what I craved. I was given things I never dreamed of... but why would you want to know this?"

She wanted to press on, but noticed him quickly rebuilding the portion of his wall that had been, just for a quick moment, dissolved. And she did not know if she really wanted him to continue on. The way he spoke so fondly of his time as one of the lead Death Eaters in the Dark Lord's inner circle was most distressing. It almost sounded as though he missed it. But *something* had to have changed his mind for him to repent to Dumbledore and work for the Order.

"I would think everyone would be up on a day such as this." Hermione deftly angled away from the sensitive topic.

He seemed grateful for the change of subject. "If you had not noticed, this is merely a marriage of convenience. While there is an affinity between Draco and Pansy, there is nothing more."

"Then why do they not wait for someone they love?"

Snape let out a derisive snort. "The likelihood of finding someone they love, and that person being half-blood or a Muggle-born is very high. Why risk them getting out into the wizarding world and meeting new people? Pureblooded families like the Malfoys see that as a problem, of course, and one you have had no worry about."

"We're talking about Draco and Pansy," Hermione said flatly. "If either of them so much as *looked* at a Muggle-born for longer than a minute, their heads would surely explode."

He was silent for a moment, letting the conversation die off. She sipped her tea and chewed on her muffin thoughtfully. That was when he sprung the next comment on her. "You would be surprised, Miss Granger, the number of times I've spotted Pansy looking at you in envy, and Draco in lust."

"I always knew that part of the reason why Pansy treated me the way she did was because she was jealous of me," Hermione said bashfully, though with a bit of sarcasm in her voice. Even she knew that during her school years she cared more for her homework than her physical appearance. "Though I'm not sure what she found so envy-worthy in my life."

Snape was quiet and leaned back in his seat, resting his elbows on the arms of his chair and crossing his long fingers in front of his face. She watched as two long, white index fingers stretched out and rested against his thin lips thoughtfully. Then she felt his gaze on her, starting at her eyes. He held her eyes for a moment, slowly traveling down the curve of her neck, to her breasts, to her waist, and he paused, staring down at the table as though he could see through it and to her crossed legs.

Hermione fidgeted self-consciously.

What the hell was this? Last night had been discomfiting enough, but now he was truly looking at her like an animal eyeing a piece of rather juicy meat. Or maybe she was just reading this all wrong. Perhaps it was disgust on his face? Perhaps he was preparing to make a snide comment about not seeing why Pansy would be envious of her either.

"Hermione..." He let her name hang in the air. "...don't fidget. Nervousness has never become you. You're quite..."

Whatever he said was lost on a loud scuffle outside the doors of the dining room, followed by a clattering of serving platters and muffled curses. Both of them were on their feet with wands at the ready as they rushed out through the door to the main entrance. Hermione was only vaguely surprised to see a flash of pink hair and a Weird Sisters shirt on the person in the middle of the commotion. She chuckled and shook her head, shoving her wand back into her pocket.

"I might have known. Tonks." Hermione laughed as an accosted caterer cast new charms to gather fallen serving platters.

The pink-headed witch looked up, her cheeks rosy with embarrassment. "Trust me to make an entrance, eh?"

"I didn't know you were invited, Hermione."

She looked up to find Remus just entering through the large front doors. "I might say the same about you."

Snape sighed and interjected in a bored tone. "I would not be surprised to see all of the Order members here, Miss Granger. The Malfoys are trying to put up a good face to the rest of the wizarding world."

"I'm sure the Weasleys will be here as well." Remus smiled.

Tonks stood beside Hermione now and whispered, "Besides, it never hurts have a few extra... 'protections'... in place should things get out of hand."

Hermione nodded. While Tonks was, by definition, no longer an Auror, Hermione knew that the witch was still very much involved in Ministry business. Her position at Hogwarts helped with the security of students who might be affected by the remaining Death Eaters on the run.

"Lugknut is showing you to your rooms," the house-elf interrupted, reaching for the scattered luggage, the only remnants of the earlier commotion.

Hermione watched the pair disappear up the stairs before turning to her side to look for Snape. He was gone. His gaze from earlier still made her feel very uncomfortable, but she was not entirely sure it was an absolutely terrible "uncomfortable."

The Approved Professor Snape Grading Method

Were she and Snape really so much alike?

Thank you so much to the reviewers. I've been remiss in thanking all of you for your kind comments in the past few chapters. Just know that it's a fuel that keeps my plot bunnies burning bright.

Chapter 8- The Approved Professor Snape Grading Method

It became clear, shortly after Tonks' unceremonious entrance, what the reason was behind no one else being up and moving around. According to a rather haggard-looking Viktor, after their desserts the previous evening, the men had gone on the wizarding equivalent of a stag night while the women spent the evening together drinking and telling stories. Hermione was not surprised that she had not caught wind of this until now. But she had thought that Viktor might have told her what his plans were beforehand.

Not that she had thought once about him the previous night after they parted company.

His absence had allowed her some time to talk with Snape, something that was quickly becoming a favored thing to do. She had never thought she would ever be able to say she enjoyed speaking with him, especially taking into consideration having had to endure his constant berating while in his classes for seven straight years. But he was different now. Changed, perhaps, but he said no one ever truly changed, and she was beginning to believe that. Had she really just learned something more about him that had enlightened her to whom he really was? Or perhaps it was Snape finally learning that she was an adult woman now? And one he could at least converse with, without having to be rude and arrogant about it. Not that he still did not have that tone in his voice.

But he had not gone on the stag night either.

She had never understood the concept of a stag or hen night...going out, drinking and then watching women or men take their clothes off. What was the purpose of it anyway? Someone was about to married, for crying out loud, and should not have been indulging his or her fantasies at a burlesque lounge. If the marriage would be successful, both the man and woman entering into the union should have been able to quell the straying fantasies of the other. Of course she knew that was an idealistic viewpoint, and perhaps why she was as inexperienced and standoffish as she was around men coming on to her, but she still thought such nights an outdated institution.

Did Snape think so as well? And was that why he wandered into the library? Or had he not been invited either?

After breakfast, Hermione found herself walking about the grounds in the light of day, investigating. Those who were involved with the wedding were making ready, and she very much enjoyed the time to be alone with her thoughts. Well, that was until she came upon Remus and Tonks feeling each other up in a secluded section of the gardens. The couple had parted quickly upon noticing her, a red tinge spreading across Tonks' cheeks and Remus' ears. They welcomed her, though, and laughed at being caught. It was not a widely confirmed fact that the couple were together or that they shared chambers at Hogwarts, as neither had ever wished to be quite public about it. After all, the restrictions on werewolves were quite stifling and could only hinder the relationship if someone knew about them with complete certainty.

"So, you came with Viktor Krum?" Tonks asked, looking down at her as a small smile played on her lips.

Hermione always pictured Tonks as the older, slightly crazier, sister she never had. Tonks had, from the very beginning of their friendly relationship, always taken to that position as well. The Metamorphmagus had said more than once that she considered herself Hermione's sister as well. They argued, they laughed, and they both looked out for the other. They really were two peas in a pod, to use the old adage, even if their personalities were on opposite sides of the spectrum.

Asking about Viktor and the possible love interest between them was only one of Tonks' sisterly prerogatives.

"I did," Hermione said quietly.

"You have good taste," Tonks responded, receiving a short scoff from the man walking beside her.

"As do you," Hermione replied, glancing at Remus. He smiled. It was odd for her to say something like this to him, as he was one of her former professors. It just felt wrong to her. But if she were to say that about someone like Snape, she was not entirely sure she would feel so strangely about it, and that was just plain frightening.

"Thank you, Hermione," he said and raised a challenging brow at Tonks.

Hermione smiled. "You're quite welcome."

"Do you two need a room?" Tonks questioned harshly, but the smile on her own face betrayed her tone.

"No," Hermione dismissed. "Remus is all yours, *Nymphadora*."

It was indeed odd to call herself a friend to a man who had run around with Harry's father in his youth. But she had slowly been realizing that after twenty, age did not really matter anymore as long as you were a productive adult in society.

"It's a good thing I like you, kid," Tonks said and chuckled. "I know you've been in contact with Viktor for some time outside of the Order. Are you two hiding something?"

Hermione shook her head and let her eyes drift to the light blue sky, laced with fluffy white clouds. "It's nothing. He keeps pushing for more, but I keep pushing him away. He doesn't take the hint."

Tonks gave her an incredulous look. "I've seen you two the past week. Sometimes it seems like you're egging him on."

"I'm guilty of it," she admitted. "But it's something to entertain myself with. I've exhausted the supply of reading material in the library, so I don't have that to entertain me."

"You should be grading papers," Remus remarked.

Both she and Tonks scoffed, brushing him off. Hermione shrugged. "I'm taking to the 'Approved Professor Snape Method of Grading.'"

"And what's that?" Remus asked.

"Give everyone a failing grade unless I particularly like them," Hermione explained. "It makes everything a bit simpler."

"That's unfair, Hermione," Tonks said with a short laugh. "He never really liked you and still you faired well enough."

Hermione nodded. "True."

Unless he liked me more than he let on.

"But I've found out that a lot of what those children write is quite awful and horribly researched," she pointed out. "Professor Snape was right. We were all once dunderheads."

Remus and Tonks both laughed at that. Both had known the Potions master from different eras of his life, Remus when he was a teenager, and Tonks when he was a professor. But they still both understood her observation and choice of words. Calling his incompetent students "dunderheads" was one of his habits. And from the way it sounded, Snape had said the insult many times as a boy. Severus Snape apparently had not changed since his childhood.

"You would have gotten along well with Severus," Remus mused. "I know we were never really friendly with each other when we were at school together, with my associations with James and all, but I did know Severus pretty well."

"Really?" Hermione asked. She had not once thought that she could prod for more information on Snape from Remus, until he mentioned it.

Remus laughed. "Knowing how much time he spent in the library, and how much time you spent in the library... Had you been in school the same years as him, you would have developed some sort of kinship, even if you are a Gryffindor."

Hermione chuckled and shook her head. "It's possible, though it's hard for me to think he could see me as anything other than an insufferable know-it-all, as he's called me many times."

Remus snorted. "Insufferable. It takes one to know one. That is all I have to say."

She had always suspected as much, considering how the Marauders treated Snape.

"He probably sees so much of himself in you that he can't help but be bitter," Remus continued.

Hermione held her hand up to stop him. "I doubt that. Snape and I are two very different people."

"That you are." Tonks nodded as they walked out of the alcove of high hedges and toward the large manor house again. A quiet lunch followed for them, talking about nothing spectacularly important, though Hermione's mind was in overdrive.

Were she and Snape really so much alike?

Severus backed away from the tall hedge, a million thoughts going through his head. The first and foremost thought was that he was thankful for not being caught. But he also had to laugh at himself for that. After all, he had been a spy for so long, he did not know how not to sneak around and listen in to conversations without being discovered.

The next group of thoughts was a mishmash of things that he could not even begin to separate for the life of him. There was one central theme to them, though, and that was Hermione Granger.

He was never one for over-sentimentality (as a matter of fact, he found such things disgusting and demeaning). But he could not help but feel somewhat stricken with the insane need to profess a love he really did not have for the girl, and only because of what he had just heard. *That* conversation, though... That conversation would be on his mind for quite a long while.

Remus would receive a year's supply of the finest brewed Wolfsbane Potion for no compensation whatsoever. Only because of the conversation he just had with Hermione that was unknowingly overheard.

Usually he would be livid that his younger years were being discussed without him being present and without his permission...with a former student no less...but now, hearing that Hermione at least understood where he was coming from as a conflicted ex-Death Eater and professor was priceless. Just the fact that she seemed to understand that everyone was indeed a dunderhead, no matter how you looked at it (though some were worse than others), was amazingly surprising in itself.

But to hear that tone of awe in her voice when she was describing her grading troubles was enough to make him...

He was mad. That's what he was... mad! Loonier than the Obliviated Lockhart.

This was Hermione Granger. Gryffindor. Know-it-all. Potter's friend. Little child Miss Granger. She had no breasts, curvaceous hips and long legs. No, no, no!

He should not have let his mind wander this far, especially after last night! But that conversation at breakfast had gotten him to thinking. Perhaps they were more alike than he dared to admit? Apparently Lupin saw it.

He could not believe how flustered he had gotten earlier in the day, almost admitting aloud that he found her particularly pleasing to his eyes. He could thank Nymphadora for being such a klutz as well. That fiasco had saved him from the potential of a very awkward situation, had he needed to explain away his observation of her beauty.

His stomach growled. He had nothing to eat at breakfast, only his tea, and his body was screaming for sustenance. Did he dare follow them to the dining room? Did he trust himself enough to not let his tongue slip and get himself into trouble for eavesdropping, or for much more damning things? He could employ his sarcastic defenses again. But he just did not feel up to maintaining them at the moment. Not now and with all this happening.

He felt like a lust-driven teen again, on his way to rendezvous with...

Lily.

Now *that* did it. The decidedly happy, incredibly flimsy, little bubble that had built up around him burst instantly as the thought of the beautiful, intelligent, red-haired witch reared in his mind. True, there was no Potter to contend with, but Krum was no better. He had seen the exact same things happen and heard the same when he was a teenager. Lily had never been really enamored with Potter in the beginning, and only entertained the arrogant prat because she had nothing better to do. At night or in the library, Lily would see him, and they would talk. He had always known her better than Potter ever did, and still she chose James.

Look at how that turned out...

But Hermione was not Lily.

He hated conflict like this more than anything else.

Now that he truly took a moment to think about it, that tone in Hermione's voice was most likely just one of admiration she felt for him as a professor, not as a person or anything more. There was no need to jump to conclusions with only a tone of voice as evidence. He knew better than that.

Before he knew it, he found himself sweeping into the dining room and gathering food on a plate before settling into a seat at the furthest end of the long table away from Hermione, Tonks and Lupin. They must have sensed his mood and gave him a wide berth for a few moments. That was until he heard her voice.

"Must you sit so far away, Professor?" she asked. "Really, we won't bite..."

He met her eyes.

"Well..." She giggled. "...one of us might on a full moon..."

And that was what finally sent him over the edge. If she only knew how close he had come to being bitten by the werewolf sitting beside her. Had it not been for that damned Potter saving him...

"You find that amusing, do you Miss Granger?" His voice would have wilted the heartiest flower.

She did not shy away one bit and only gave him a disinterested look before turning back to her friends and her meal.

If his mood could get any worse, it did when Krum walked into the room and dropped heavily into a seat beside Granger.

Hermione looked at her paramour and smiled slightly. "Aren't you supposed to be with Draco?"

"Lucius is giving him his last bits of fatherly wisdom," Krum said.

Severus tried not to snort at that comment, but it was too hard to hold in. He noticed Hermione's glance at him and the quirk of her brow before looking at Viktor.

"Fatherly wisdom? Be a snob, carry a big stick, beat your house-elves... and above all else, maintain the pure Malfoy name, or so help him he will 'take Draco out of the world,' just as he brought him in?"

"Cissy would never let that happen," Severus said before he could stop himself.

And Viktor had the audacity to agree with a nod of his head and a chuckle. "Lucius would be gelded if that happened."

The thought quieted the room a bit, and he noticed both Remus and Viktor shudder at the thought. Severus rolled his eyes and turned back to his meal, trying not to pay attention to the low talking and little giggles Granger was affording Krum. Really, that boy could have anything his heart so desired, why did he have to have Hermione?

Because she's the last thing that has withstood his charm, Severus.

For that matter, what did the girl see in the overgrown brute anyway? He was not smart, he was not exceptionally handsome, but *he* *did* have gobs of money and was admired by many, many women around the world. No doubt that Granger's insatiable need for being recognized was being fulfilled whenever she went anywhere on Krum's arm. And they would have reasonably attractive children. Viktor had so much to offer her, as she was concerned, but Severus knew that Krum was not right for the insufferable girl.

Though, Severus knew he had none of those things to personally offer to someone like her. No looks, no notoriety, no life outside of Hogwarts. His funds were sparse, and he certainly would not produce attractive children with her. Oh, but how intelligent and powerful they would be.

Merlin's balls.

Why was he thinking like this? He *did not* like her, and he most certainly *did* not envy Krum. Severus Snape was not an envious person. He was a spiteful, lonely man who wanted nothing more than to never have to plead with someone to love him again. He would not, and could not, do it, especially in such similar circumstances.

One thing was for certain, though. Hermione would be receiving a large stack of old books from his personal collection so that she would not have to spend her free time affording Krum the attention she gave him born out of an idle mind.

Dances With Wolves? and Death Eaters

Chapter 9 of 29

Like a ghost roaming the halls of Hogwarts, she moved across the dance floor, carefully maneuvering herself out of the way of the swirling dancers. The red fabric of her gown moved around her body sensuously, pulling and gathering slightly about her rounded hips as she walked.

I really can't thank you all enough! Thank you! And hugs to Shana, the best beta ever.

Chapter 9- Dances With Wolves... and Death Eaters

Hermione turned from side to side, gazing at her profile in the long mirror. She smoothed the elegant silk fabric over her flat abdomen and over her hips, shifting it slightly.

The likelihood of her being able to successfully wear such a gown with enough courage the entire evening was slim to none. Not now, not ever, would she have the confidence to wear such a garment in public. It felt like nothing more than a very thin nightgown that did no part in concealing her body... What one might wear on a honeymoon night before it was thrown haphazardly off in the corner of a room. The high slits in her skirt and low neckline only aided in making her feel exceptionally bare to the world.

"Tonks, I can't," Hermione whined, crossing her arms over her chest, causing the top curve of her breasts to peak out of the plunging neckline some more. She knew she should have thought twice before allowing her slightly crazier and much more brazen 'sister' to transfigure her drab black funeral dress into a formidable evening gown.

"Yes, you can," Tonks chuckled, smoothing out her own slightly odd gown while admiring herself in the mirror. Tonks had brought a gown made of many different, vibrant colors all patched together and sexy in the way only she could manage. She almost looked like one of those Muggle glamour rockers like David Bowie with her vibrant pink hair and clashing dress covered in glitter and sequins. Hermione could not say she had expected any less from the Metamorphmagus.

But Tonks also apparently needed a sophisticated creative outlet as well, and Hermione was the perfect mannequin for her foray into clothing design.

It was a very beautiful, gown of deep red, even with all of its baring attributes. Tonks most likely would have had a successful career in fashion should she have chosen such a career.

However, this dress was not for Hermione Granger.

She might have been able to pull off the low neck and high slit halfway up her thigh, but the fabric laying so smoothly against her skin that she could not wear proper undergarments without it looking tacky was something entirely different. For a woman who wore jeans and bulky sweaters on her off days, and non-descript robes for others

with the main purpose of covering and protecting her body from rather seedy looks from men, it was a big difference.

"Where's that Gryffindor courage?" Tonks questioned with a short laugh, nudging Hermione's ribs.

Hermione glared at her. She had courage, but Tonks had the trademark Gryffindor courage in spades and apparently thought everyone else did as well.

"I have to be comfortable to be courageous."

Tonks rolled her eyes and muttered a simple charm to do away with a loose thread on the side seam of her dress. "I highly doubt you were comfortable with all those acts of courageousness you did during the War, but you did them anyway."

"Because I had to, for my friends," she said. "Harry would have done the same for me. Wearing a dress and fighting a war are completely different things."

"You'd be surprised just how similar they can be." Tonks smiled and uttered another charm with her wand pointed at Hermione's face.

Hermione felt the weight of makeup set on her face, and let out a low sigh.

"Think about it this way. You *have* to do it for Viktor." Tonks' eyes twinkled mischievously.

"I don't *have* to do *anything* for him... and I already told you what I think of him," Hermione said, fussing with a renegade tendril that would not stay flattened into her intricate hairdo.

The Metamorphmagus giggled. "Then do it for other attention. Maybe Ron or one of the other Weasley boys. I'd go for Charlie. Taming dragons is a very sexy thing."

"Would you please stop it!" she said, exasperation surfacing.

"Or you could always do it for someone like Snape, but I doubt even he has a human bone in his body," Tonks said softly, shrugging her shoulders.

Hermione froze still for a moment and watched the woman beside her closely. Did she know? Was she a Legilimens? Had she seen the memories of last night still fresh in her head? No, Tonks was not a Legilimens. Hermione was sure she would have known that by now, considering the amount of time they had spent together. Maybe she had said or done something that had led Tonks to that conclusion? Was Hermione really so obvious? She may have had a craving for being noticed, but she had at least thought she kept some mystery to herself, especially over such a matter as Severus Snape.

Perhaps, though, the thoughts ceasing her mind were so strange and something no normal woman should have that they were just there sitting visible on her sleeve.

Now that she really thought about it, what would he do when he saw her tonight? He had barely been able to tear his eyes away the previous night, and that dress was considerably modest compared to this one.

Oh, Merlin, the notion had not even crossed her mind.

Why the hell did she care? It was Snape, after all.

"Hermione!"

"Huh?" she jumped at the stern voice, looking at her friend.

Tonks gave her a questioning look and then shook her head, laughing. "It seemed like someone had put you under the Imperius for a second there."

"O-oh," Hermione said, shaking her head. "Just thinking."

I think

"Well, we should head down there," Tonks said, checking herself one last time in the mirror. "Remus was ready to go when I left a half hour ago. I'm sure he's getting bored."

Hermione laughed. "He's probably used to waiting on you by now."

"You know, he deserves to wait his entire life for me," Tonks scoffed. "I waited long enough for him to come around."

"Too true," she said and ran her fingers over her bare neck. "I really think this neckline should be higher. I don't have a necklace to wear on my bare chest."

Tonks gave her a small smile. "I don't think you need to worry about that."

Hermione sighed and looked at herself in the mirror. "You aren't going to let me change it, are you?"

"Nope." Tonks shook her head and smiled.

"Thanks." She rolled her eyes and grabbed her wand. She looked down at herself. "I don't have any place to put my wand."

Tonks chuckled. "I doubt anything is going to happen to you tonight, Hermione."

"But I'm in Malfoy Manor. I rather be prepared than not prepared," she said.

"Well, there will be no hiding it under your gown," Tonks said and held her hand out. "Give it to me."

Hermione reluctantly let her have it, not knowing what she was going to do with it, but Tonks only smiled and shrunk the wand down with a flick of her own wand. She had never heard that charm before, and in all reality, she thought it impossible to shrink a wand...considering what a powerful magical instrument it was.

Tonks smiled triumphantly at her work, dropped unceremoniously it into Hermione's small evening bag, closed the clasp, and held it out to her. "There. It'll be different if you have to use it, but at least you'll have it with you. Same power, just smaller."

"I'll just hope I don't have to use it," she said and sighed, looking at the purse in her hands. She really did hate being a girl, and the epitome of one at that, with the way she was made up and outfitted for the evening.

"Don't look like that," Tonks laughed. "Embrace your ability to knock men off their feet for one night."

A fleeting memory of the Yule Ball in her fourth year surfaced and she smiled. Tonight was almost exactly like it had been then. She had wanted to show off her attributes and that she was indeed a girl, despite the popular belief of some of her classmates and friends. It had worked well, too. But now she had no one to particularly impress. Sure, there was Viktor, but he would still hound after her (for some unknown reason) if she were dressed in a burlap sack. And, yes, there was Ron, who was supposed to show up only for that evening's festivities and then go back to his home. During the Yule Ball, she wanted to make him regret not asking her first. While he never admitted it, she knew that he did regret it and the ensuing arguments. However, tonight he would most likely show up with his girlfriend and she had no intention of showing Susan up.

A knock interrupted them, and Tonks was the first to reach the door and pull it back to reveal a rather dashing Viktor, dressed in black dress robes and black bowtie. Tonks glanced back at her, gave her a wink and disappeared quickly through the door, leaving her alone with a slightly gaping Viktor. The Bulgarian's suave nature soon replaced the dumbfounded look on his face and he smiled.

She hated this. She *always* hated this. The way men stood back and made that leisurely perusal of her body when she even so much as dared to wear something out of the realm of school robes. It always made her so self-conscious. The few dates she had been on the past year with Muggles and also the ones before with wizards made her fully aware that men where men and would do it no matter what world they lived in. Some were more respectful than others with the way they went about it, but Viktor was certainly not one of those men.

Hermione crossed her arms over her chest uncomfortably, covering the skin of her cleavage and looked down at the ground. Before she knew it, Viktor swept into the room and stood before her, lifting her chin with his hand. She met his eyes for a moment, blushing hotly. He smiled brightly and moved his hands to peel away her shield.

She let him do it for some strange reason. With a simple touch, she dropped her hands for him. Tonks had been right. She was giving Viktor the wrong ideas, even though she had already warned him she did not see him as anything more than a friend. But it was diverting, at least.

"You are beautiful," he said quietly, his smile never leaving his face, "Herm-own-ninny."

She could not keep in her chuckle at that and shook her head. "You don't look too horrible yourself, Viktor."

"I am nothing, compared to you," he said. "But you are missing something."

"Yeah, about a meter of fabric," she replied. "And knickers."

She wanted to take that last comment back, but it was out and Viktor only wiggled his eyebrows in a suggestive fashion before laughing at the admission. "I vill pretend I did not hear that, for your sake."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Thank you for your... discretion."

He laughed and brandished a velvet-covered box from inside his robes. She thought that it was a ring box for a moment, but he also took out his wand and expanded it to its full size. "I owed my mother, and asked her to bring these for you from our safes. Vot you are missing are some extravagant jewels."

"Viktor, you didn't need to do anything like that," she said, and met his eyes.

"You said I would have to try harder to vin your heart," he opened the box and held it out to her to peruse.

She glanced down, finding something she never thought she would see in her life...many diamonds and rubies encrusted in a necklace and two earrings. "You don't have to bribe me with jewelry."

"I am not bribing you," he shook his head. "I am merely wooing you."

"It takes a great deal more than sparkling stones to woo me, Viktor," she said quietly.

He held the box out to her and motioned for her to take it. "Oh, I know this. This is only the beginning."

She accepted the box and removed the earrings first to put them on and then followed with the necklace. It was a heavy weight around her neck with the size of the jewels, resting on her collarbones, but she would get used to it. Hermione turned to face him. "So?"

"Perfect." He smiled and kissed her cheek.

"You asked Tonks to make sure my gown was red."

Viktor nodded slightly and offered his arm to her. "Shall we?"

Hermione smiled and grabbed her purse again, following his lead out of the room. The dramatic descent down the main staircase was short-lived as they were quickly immersed in a sea of people, most of them familiar to her. Actually, she was a little surprised that a few of the people present had shown up to the festivities.

Many of Draco's former Slytherin classmates were there, and each of them, when they caught sight of her, either had to look twice, not believing that she was actually in attendance at Malfoy Manor, or sneer at her. Viktor directed her toward his parents, whom she had only met on one other occasion shortly after the War. They spoke amicably enough, complimenting her on her jewelry.

Then Lucius found Viktor and pulled him away to attend to Draco. Hermione, meanwhile, caught a flash of red hair. Unable to control her smile and the happiness flooding her senses, she excused herself and went straight for the small huddling of red hair only to find most of the Weasley family. She was only a little surprised to find them here, even considering their previous ties with the Malfoys. The families hated each other, but the Weasleys *were* purebloods, and Lucius obviously could not deny that. Neither could he ignore the fact that their fortunes had greatly improved when Fred and George went worldwide with their business, and then directly after the war with top Ministry positions and other paying engagements.

Harry had also contributed to this by leaving Molly and Arthur, his only real examples of loving and doting parents, his fortune in the advent of his death.

However, the Weasleys did not let their leap in social standing go to their heads at all as might have happened with lesser magical people. They still lived at the Burrow, though they had made some much needed renovations on the property and extended it out a bit. They no longer needed second-hand clothes or school supplies. Other than that, the entire family seemed pretty much unaffected by their wealth and Hermione always found that so refreshing about them.

"Hermione!"

Ginny was the first to notice her and pull her into a long embrace.

"What are you doing here? I thought you were at Hogwarts," Ginny said.

"Well, you have to know the right people." Hermione laughed when she looked at Ron's stunned face.

" 'Mione," he said, half beside himself as he pulled her close and placed a kiss to her cheek.

He certainly had grown up and had become much more secure of himself, Hermione noted. That peck on her cheek only proved that. "Oh, Ron, I've missed you so much."

"You could've come to visit," he replied, smiling.

"I've been busy." It was a blatant lie, but a necessary one. The last thing she needed was to really tell him how bad her life had been the past year, and it eventually getting back to Molly. Molly was the embodiment of the over-protective and ever-doting mother, even now that her children were grown.

His greeting, fortunately, was followed by Molly and Arthur, both commenting on her appearance and nudging Ron to take a long look at her. Apparently he and Susan were no longer together.

"So who are you here with?" Ron asked.

"You don't think that I was invited by myself?"

Ron was silent for a moment, thinking. He then shook his head. "Um, no."

Hermione nodded ruefully. "I came with Viktor."

"Vicky!" he exclaimed. "Haven't you had enough of him?"

"He's an exchange professor at Hogwarts, and he invited me," she replied. "I had nothing better to do, and really, must you revert to that?"

Ron shrugged his shoulders. "I suppose not."

"Good," she said and wrapped her arm around Ron's. It had been like this forever between them; bickering seemed to be the only way they could communicate. "Now, let's go sit down, my feet are already killing me."

Severus' seat at the ceremony was placed in the front row next to Narcissa and Lucius. On any normal occasion he would have preferred to blend into the scenery by standing in the back of the room, so he could slip away if need be. Tonight was different, though. He would much rather sit up front so that he could pay attention to the real reason why he was here, and not on the movements or actions of one female who had taken an un pitying hold of all of his thoughts and would not let go.

He had come to the determination that he was indeed crazy...never having a moment's respite of his thoughts of her...but he did also decide that at least it was a wonderful way to lose one's mind. Severus was certain that the likelihood of him finding a more intriguing, intelligent and beguiling witch (in her own know-it-all, insufferable ways) to think about while going mad was impossible.

Hermione Granger was one witch in a million.

Nonetheless, he had come to some other conclusions. It was very wrong for him to think and feel anything like this with her in mind. After all, he had only been her professor a year ago. There was too vast an age difference. What would she ever see in him if he pursued her like he so wanted?

Also considering his Dark background, he knew he should steer clear of her. She surely wanted no part in spending time with him. In the past, he may have been ready with hurtful comments to say to her or filled with malice for her friend, but not now. He could not hurt her. If only he could express that to her.

Perhaps he *had* gone soft?

No, no, he had not gone soft. He was still as antisocial and nasty as ever, but he had realized quite suddenly after seeing her descending the stairs with Viktor that evening that he did indeed care for her much more than he had always thought. He had never learned how to show his care for another person appropriately, and had only ever shown her that in barbed comments and insults. He figured it was as good a time as any to start learning, though.

In addition, he had convinced himself that he only cared for her as a father might, or even to the extent of a trusted friend he had fought side-by-side with. Yet, he still found himself inexplicably drawn to her in a most unsettling way.

He watched her closely the entire evening, dancing with Weasley and then a few with Viktor, before he was called off for other reasons. He had watched her smile and watched her talk animatedly with her old friends, becoming entranced with her all over again. Remus had parted from Tonks for a song and a turn around the dance floor with her, provided by the small string quartet.

He wondered idly what it would be like to have her laughing and smiling because of him. Would he ever be able to earn her trust enough to get her to throw her head back and laugh unbidden?

Now, though, she sat alone, nursing a tall flute of gold liquor while watching the revelers around her. That was, of course, until her eyes fell on him. She then did the unthinkable. She stood slowly, asking Ginny sitting beside her to watch her bag, and then she turned toward him and floated. Yes, floated.

Like a ghost roaming the halls of Hogwarts, she moved across the dance floor, carefully maneuvering herself out of the way of the swirling dancers. The red fabric of her gown moved around her body sensuously, pulling and gathering slightly about her rounded hips as she walked.

When she stopped in front of him, he found himself bewildered. She was purposely seeking him out now, even with all the other people she could spend time with here?

"You look like someone stole your puppy," she said, smiling at him. Now that she was closer, he could make the faint red glow on the apples of her cheeks created from a mixture of makeup and a little bit of alcohol...an altogether healthy redness.

The rest of her face was painted appropriately for the formal festivities of the evening, but he had to admit he liked her much better without such covering on her face. It was a fake beauty when she was naturally attractive enough... for him, anyway.

"Why would you care if they had?" he questioned flatly, trying desperately to look away from her.

Hermione shook her head and sighed. "Must you always reply like that? I was trying to make a joke. Don't you ever laugh?"

"No," he said.

She stood still for a moment, studying his face before sighing again and crossing her arms over her chest nervously. Unfortunately for her, that action probably did not have the affect she so desired. What had happened was the round curve of her breasts pressed more prominently out of the deep neck of her gown, and made his eyes travel to that spot. Realizing his rather obvious stare, he quickly diverted his eyes up to hers. He may have been a man, and such an action was expected of him, but he would not treat Hermione like any other woman being ogled by another. She was better than that.

Hermione smirked, though, when he glanced back up and met her eyes. She placed her hands on her hips, and her obviously unbound breasts jiggled slightly into place beneath her gown.

Oh, Merlin, did she have any clue what she was doing?

Perhaps she did have some semblance of a clue, and it was just the alcohol she had consumed causing her to act brazenly. Or was she doing this on purpose...on complete purpose because she had been dared by one of her friends to add to their enjoyment of the night by making a fool out of him?

"Then do you dance?"

"Excuse me?" he said, sipping his Firewhisky and nearly spitting it out in a fine mist when he heard her ask this.

She chuckled. "I asked you if you dance. At all the functions we had at Hogwarts, I never once saw you dance."

"Why is it of such importance that you know?"

"Because I would like to know," she said. "I thought perhaps you might like to... er... dance with me?"

He was sure the dumbfounded look on his face was enough to let anyone in the room want to know what had caught him so off guard. Nothing had ever surprised him like that question had. "You want me to dance? With you?"

"That's what I said, isn't it? I'm not speaking a different language, am I?" she asked, shifting her weight from foot to foot anxiously. That sounded strangely like something he might say, and in that exact same tone as well.

"No," he shook his head.

"No, what?"

"No, you are not speaking a different language, and no, I would not like to dance with you," he said.

Only because I couldn't control my bodily reactions if I were so close to you.

Hermione grunted and rolled her eyes. "Perhaps you don't know how?"

She knew exactly what she was doing by baiting him into this. A challenge like that would not go unanswered by the likes of him; he would do anything to prove her wrong (and whoever had put her up to this) that he was not incapable. As a matter of fact, he was completely capable of sweeping a woman off her feet; he had only never had the chance to do it.

When he finally made up his mind to dance with her, she had turned on her heels and was headed back toward her seat. He reached out a hand, curling his fingers over her wrist lightly. She stopped in her tracks and turned back to look at him. Her left brow arched over her eye questioningly. "What?"

"Miss Granger, Hermione, would you care to dance with me?" It was exceptionally difficult to get that out without it sounding like a command or anything nasty, but he had succeeded--somewhat anyway. She smiled. It was a true smile, and meant only for him.

A dance ended, and a new one began as he pulled her to an empty spot on the floor. There was a moment of apprehensiveness on her part, and he wondered if she was having second thoughts about asking him to dance, but he noticed quickly it was because she was unsure of where she should place her hands.

"I'm beginning to think you are the one who does not know how to dance," he said.

Hermione looked at him with a defensive glint in her eyes. "I didn't think you'd actually accept!"

"Then why did you ask?" he asked, placing his hand on her thin waist, wrapping his fingers around to rest at the back of her hip.

"Because you looked so glum," she said. "It's a happy celebration. And while I think you might be completely incapable of happiness, I thought I might try to at least lighten your spirits a bit by showing some interest in talking to you."

He paused for a moment, pulling her against him quite harshly. Severus had meant such a movement to have a bit of force behind it, but not as much as it really had. "I do not need your pity, Miss Granger."

"It's not pity, Professor," she said, shifting against him, and relaxing into his grip as he took her other hand and led her into the dance. "I merely don't want to look at you frown all night."

"Ah, so now you are self-serving. A very Slytherin characteristic, Gryffindor," he said.

"Though it may be," she paused a moment, meeting his eyes, "I also have an ulterior motive."

"And that is?" he questioned.

Hermione sighed. "To get to know you a little better."

"Why?"

"Because you interest me," she replied.

"I'm not some experiment that you can observe," he said.

Hermione chuckled and shook her head. "No, you are not, but you are something that can be researched."

"As you were doing this afternoon while speaking with Lupin and Tonks?" he accused, and instantly wished it had not come out as it had. Normally, he was controlled and would be able to keep from blurting things out like that.

But again, Granger brought the volatile Snape out of his shell.

"You listened into the conversation?"

He nodded, turning her sharply around a few times and pulling her back against himself. "I did."

"Damn you and your spying," she said.

"No one ever changes," he said.

Hermione met his eyes. "Well, you shouldn't be so huffy about it, considering what I said about you!"

"Did I say I was angry that you were talking to them?"

"You didn't have to," she said. "Your tone says enough."

"You shouldn't rely on one's tone to tell you how one feels," he said. "If I had taken your tone into consideration from that conversation earlier, I would have thought you had much more than a healthy respect for a former professor and colleague."

Her feet rooted into the ground with that comment from him, and the surprise in her eyes was enough to tell him he had struck a cord somewhere deep inside her. She pushed hastily away from him, giving him one last glance before turning and walking quickly toward the manor house.

Way to go, Severus.

How did he always manage to push the people that seemingly cared about him, even only as a research project, so far away?

"Every single time," he muttered to himself and looked around, finding many curious glances turn away quickly. He waved them off and receded into the dark corners of the

large tent that the reception was being held in. He needed to sulk alone.

Playing Favorites

Chapter 10 of 29

Hermione went over the edge with this comment, but successfully harnessed her anger from spilling over. ?Leave it to you to judge me on playing favorites, Snape!?

So glad you all are enjoying this as much as I am writing it!

Chapter 10- Playing Favorites

"Home again, home again, jiggidy-jig," Hermione muttered absently, falling into her bed, inside her comfortable, cozy, three-roomed dwelling, located just down the hall from the entrance to Gryffindor Tower.

That was certainly a weekend she never, ever wished to experience again for as long as she lived. If the stress had not worn her down enough, then the new task she had appointed herself of dissecting Snape's mind had finished her off completely. Surprisingly, the Malfoys had been fine, as were the other guests. Also surprisingly, Viktor was taking a slow approach to trying to bed her. And *not* surprisingly, Snape was the regular, nasty, domineering, antisocial git she had known ever since her first Potions class at Hogwarts.

Actually, it would have been a rather pleasant weekend if Snape had not been there or if she had just stayed out of everyone else's business. However, it was her nature to be nosy.

She had tried to find a chink in his armor, but it had not worked. He had only rebuffed her with snippy questions designed to throw her off guard, and called attention to her rather obvious display of more-than-passably-respectful intrigue and friendliness she so suddenly felt for him. At least he had danced with her. That was a start, anyway. But now she felt like she was back to square one, with her courage to face Snape nearly vanished, and being replaced by her own shy embarrassment after what had last happened between them at the wedding reception.

Hermione could not believe she had let him get to her so easily, but at that moment he had gotten her hackles up, and made her forget the placidity she had adopted whenever she was around him. Her anger had made her more susceptible to low-aimed remarks meant to mess with her mind.

But really, was he trying to mess with her mind? Was the comment he made about her tone of voice so lowly aimed? No, it was not. Unfortunately, he made a rather astute observation as to what she had been feeling in that moment while describing her fondness for Professor Snape...not that she should have expected any less from him. He had been a spy and double agent for so long that reading between the lines had become second nature and almost completely natural for him. Besides that, he was a damned intelligent man.

Why hadn't he just used his Legilimency skills on her to find out what was really going on in her head? Surely that would have taken care of her, to invade her, theoretically rape her, so that she did not keep coming back and annoying him like it seemed was all she did. After all, she would have been powerless to stop such an invasion. No one had ever taught her Occlumency. No one had ever had the time.

Hermione rose from the large bed and moved inattentively, divesting herself of the dirty clothes of that day. She dropped her bra on the ground, hearing an upset "meow" in return. Crookshanks struggled out of the padded cloth covering him, and mewing again at her before hopping on the bed, buried himself under her discarded shirt. "You are so strange sometimes."

The half-Kneazle flicked his bottlebrush tail in recognition and yawned before closing his eyes.

She smiled to herself and shook her head. He definitely was not the most pleasing thing to look at, nor did he have the greatest of tempers, especially around people or things he did not trust. He was wise, though. No one had wanted him back when she found him circling his cage like a crazed lion, ready to strike out at the next thing that went by. However, the instant their eyes met, she knew she had to have him. There was an affinity between them, and when he reached his paw out of the cage to bat at her hand playfully, she was lost to him forever.

And strangely, it reminded her of Snape. Uncannily like Snape. No one really wanted to know him or care for him. He was certainly not handsome, nor were his temper and nastiness things to brag about either. But the instant she had met him her first year, and through subsequent years, she had come to realize that there was certainly an affinity between them as well. He was uncommonly intelligent, and she often wondered if she was the only one of the Gryffindors that had truly appreciated his barbed comments, even if they were directed at her or Harry, Ron or Neville at the time. However, where Crooks had taken to her instantly, Snape was only beginning to warm up to her. Was he even warming up?

Yes, he was. At least he talked to her and called her Hermione now.

Shaking her head again, she let out a low groan. Why did every single one of her thoughts turn to him? Ever since she had come back to Hogwarts, her thoughts would always drift to him...whether she was angry with him, or not? This just would not do.

She sighed. "Crooks, I think I'm becoming delusional."

He raised one eyelid, giving her an uninterested look before shutting it again, his purring becoming much louder.

"Fine friend you are." She frowned. "See if you get any catnip for Christmas this year."

With that, she turned and headed for her lavatory and jumped into a long, hot shower. The sharp spray of water stung at the back of her neck and shoulders, and she closed her eyes. It had always been such a relief to get into a nice, hot shower after a long day for her. The demands of teachers and friends disappeared with the dirt and grime on her skin.

She wasn't quite sure how long she had been in the shower. It had been quite awhile because her fingers were pruned, when she heard an incessant pounding on the bathroom door. Shutting the water off, she glanced around the room, and found that it was silent. Was she just imagining things? Reaching for the towel resting on the toilet beside the shower, she wrapped it around herself.

There was the pounding again, followed by a, "Granger, your assistance is needed in the Headmistress' office when you are decent!"

That particular gravelly voice, the low growl ever present, was easy enough to place.

But she froze. Had she not put up her wards? And what could possibly be so important that she had to leave her rooms on a Sunday evening during her true leisure time? If this was to see to a student's offence, the student would pay dearly for it.

"Thank you!" she called, hearing his heavy footsteps leaving her bedroom and then exiting the door.

Hermione stepped out cautiously, looking around the room. Crooks was sitting up, but he had obviously not made an attempt to harm Snape. And then, with sheer horror, she realized that Snape had most likely seen her knickers crumbled into a tiny ball near the bathroom door, and then her bra where Crookshanks had left it.

How long had he been pounding on the door before she noticed him? How long had he been in her rooms?

Her mind reeled as she quickly pulled on a pair of jeans and a jumper, sliding her feet into a pair of shoes before grabbing her wand and leaving quickly through the front door. She locked and warded it simply, heading in the direction of McGonagall's office. On her way, she mumbled a small drying charm for her hair, not caring that it would be a huge ball of frizz. There had been times where she had surely looked more hideous than this.

A certain incident involving rapidly growing front teeth came to mind. The thought added a whole new anger to her annoyance, remembering just who had been the professor dealing with that situation and just what he had said to her then.

"I don't see any difference."

She knew she had hated him for some reason, and it was for instances like those that she hated him the most. How could he act so aloof sometimes? Granted, he could not show any sympathy for "the Mudblood." What with Draco, Crabbe and Goyle all there? Word would have gotten back to Voldemort. But still... Saying things like that were extremely detrimental to a girl with an already fragile self-image.

At least she had come out of that ordeal with regular-sized teeth that her parents had originally not let her fix using magic.

"Scottish Shortbread," Hermione uttered at the gargoyle standing guard over the staircase up the McGonagall's office. Instead of candies, the source of Dumbledore's passwords, Minerva tended to favor baked goods. Or, for a little variety, she chose other Scottish-related words and phrases that were impossible for the normal person to say correctly.

The gargoyle jumped out of the way, and let her ascend the staircase to the Headmistress' office. Hermione rapped lightly on the wooden door and waited to be beckoned inside by the shrill voice of her superior. She stepped inside and looked around the room. She had not yet had the chance to come back to this office after returning to Hogwarts, but now that she was in it, it gave her an odd sense of security to find that not much had changed. The magical instruments still littered the room, and past paintings of Headmasters and Headmistresses hung on the walls. However, there was a new addition, surrounded by a flashy gilded frame that showcased the characteristics of its inhabitant.

She smiled past Minerva and at the painting. Dumbledore looked back at her with twinkling blue eyes through half-moon spectacles. "Miss Granger! How good it is to see you!"

"And you, Professor." She smiled again and turned to look at the other, live, people in the room.

McGonagall sat behind the desk, glaring at the sixth-year Dennis Creevey. Snape stood behind the second leather seat in the room, where one of his younger students, a Daniel Rutgers, sat. Daniel Rutgers, however, was suffering from a rather obvious hex that had shrunk his nose so small that he had to breathe through his mouth. In addition, he looked particularly scared to be in the room.

Snape crossed his arms over his chest and stared at her, waiting to see what she would do. Hermione looked at Dennis and sighed. "What happened, Mr. Creevey?"

"I was doing my duties, Herm--" He paused suddenly and looked at her with wide eyes. Some of the Gryffindor students in the upper years were having some trouble in getting used to addressing her as Professor Granger, rather than the Hermione they had spent time with having fun in the common room, or in DA meetings. "Sorry, Professor Granger."

"It's alright, Dennis. Continue." She looked at him and then at the shiny prefects' badge.

He gathered his courage. "I was patrolling the corridors, when I came across Rutgers in the halls with his mates. It was past curfew. I took ten points and sent them to their dorms. T-then he called me 'Mudblood' and started taunting me."

The rest of the story was apparent, and she looked back at Rutgers and let out a long sigh. She had thought she would be prepared for disciplining her house members, but now faced with the problem, she was a little wary to do so. Especially under such a circumstance as someone calling Dennis a Mudblood. She knew what it felt like to be taunted for not having a witch or wizard as a parent.

Hermione looked at Snape. "What do you suggest for Mr. Creevey, Professor?"

Dennis nearly went into convulsions then with Hermione conferring with Snape for his punishment.

"A week's detention with Filch, fifty points lost and for him to be stripped of his status. It is wholly immature to take his aggression out on another, much less younger, student who could not adequately defend himself."

Hermione nodded and glanced at McGonagall. "Professor McGonagall, do you have anything to add?"

"No." She shook her head. "His punishment is up to you. I have already spoken to Mr. Creevey about what being a prefect means."

Hermione looked at Dennis. "You'll remain a prefect, but serve two weeks of detention instead *and* lose fifty house points."

"Yes ma'am," he said and made to stand up. "May I go Professor?"

She nodded and watched him move as quickly as his short legs could carry him toward the door. Turning back to the remaining occupants of the room, Hermione noticed Snape reach his hand out and clamp it on Rutgers' shoulder, pushing the boy back into his seat. "A week's detention for you, Rutgers."

The student was crestfallen and sighed.

"Now you may go see Madam Pomfrey." Rutgers made a beeline for the door in the same fashion that Dennis had. "Learn some tolerance for the less fortunate as well!"

The door closed with a loud rattle, and Hermione looked at the dark-clad man. "Tolerance, from a Slytherin?"

He shrugged his shoulders and turned to look at McGonagall. Hermione sighed and did the same, waiting for a comment from their fearless leader.

Minerva dismissed them without another word and only a wave of her hand.

Why did she feel like she was the one in trouble and not Dennis? Probably because she had been on the receiving end of McGonagall's punishments too many times in the past.

Hermione moved out of the doorway before him and stepped down onto the first step as Snape closed the door. A sudden electricity filled the air which made her queasy enough to shut her eyes for a moment to control herself. *What was that all about?* Most likely she was still embarrassed to be in his presence after last night...this was the first time they had seen each other, after all...but it was still extremely odd.

The stone tower was eerily quiet as they descended the stairs, and it was only when she stopped at the bottom and turned to watch him step down and off the last step that the quiet ended. He pulled his black robes more securely around himself as though he were chilled and crossed his arms to hold them in place. It was a very domineering stance from the man, especially when he was shrouded in black and looked at her with such a dreadfully piercing gaze.

"What is it, Miss Granger?"

"Was it really necessary to have that happen in front of McGonagall?" she questioned, meeting his eyes and holding his gaze for as long as she could manage before quickly looking away.

"Of course it was not," he said, sweeping past her a few steps. "But I knew that under pressure you would not let your house member off easily."

Hermione rolled her eyes and shook her head. "As though living up to your standards was not pressure enough."

He stopped suddenly and spun back to look at her. "What did you say?"

"You heard me, Professor," she said quietly.

He snorted in disbelief. "The way you and your friends operated, I never thought you had much respect for my standards."

"I had a great deal of respect for your standards and for the power you had," she countered. "But I never felt very respectful when you were being particularly cruel to me or my friends."

"Hmph," he grunted. "You deserved everything you ever got, Miss Granger."

"Did I, now?" she questioned. "Just on the way over here, I remembered a time when someone hexed me to make my teeth grow. I hardly think I deserved what you said to me."

He met her eyes, the memory obviously going through his mind. His voice took on his smoother, more *friendly*, tone. "I was under a good deal of stress, Hermione. You should have known that."

"Would it have hurt you to show a little sympathy, though?" she asked.

"I'm not a sympathetic man, Hermione," he stated.

"Why?"

The question hung in the air between them, each staring the other down, trying to be the victor in this match of wills. He opened his mouth several times to speak, but nothing came out, and he snapped his lips together to sneer and frown alternately. Finally, he came up with an answer. "Because no one was ever sympathetic to me, growing up."

"No one? Not ever?" she pressed. He was hiding something; she could see that in the way he fidgeted to get out of the present situation. She had never seen him become so bothered before, over any other subject, even the Dark Lord. But now he was bothered. Why?

"I do not wish to speak with you about this, Miss Granger. It is none of your business," he snapped, "and entirely besides the point."

"What is the point?" She looked at him.

"That I can trust, in the future, that you will make the correct decisions when it comes to the concerns of your students. I have ensured that you will not play favorites, nor will you make sure that everyone is your friend at the end of the day," he explained.

Hermione went over the edge with this comment, but successfully harnessed her anger from spilling over. "Leave it to you to judge me on playing favorites, Snape!"

With that, she turned on her heel and stormed off toward her rooms, completely forgetting about Snape breaking past her wards and into her rooms without her knowledge, or that he had seen her underthings. All she could think about was what a perplexing, contradictory man he really was and how much he utterly infuriated her.

A Charming Man Underneath

Chapter 11 of 29

Could his eyes even twinkle?

Thanks to all my reviewers! I love every single comment you leave me, and I am truly sorry for the wait on this one. Unfortunately, I was in a pretty serious car accident last week and it has slowed me down quite a bit... but I'm back and hoping you all continue to enjoy this little piece of my imagination.

Chapter 11- A Charming Man Underneath

A week later, Severus found himself agonizing over what exactly he was going to do about this little... "situation." Actually, it was not so much a situation, as it was a minor catastrophe in the making. Yes, *catastrophe* was the correct word to use. That could be the only accurately defining term to use for his clearly crazy, and rapidly rising ardor for the young Transfiguration professor and former student.

He had used this past week to try to push away those thoughts that had surfaced at Lucius' home. He had tried so very hard to forget what she looked like both evenings in flattering and revealing finery. Each time that he tried to forget, though, all that would stay in his mind would be the sight of the curve of her breasts, or the smoothness of her legs. Even when she walked about the corridors of the school in her nondescript teaching robes, he could imagine seeing her form beneath it, and in nothing more than a few strategically placed bits of cloth, as well.

Seeing the sublime laciness of her pale pink underthings in her chambers last Sunday was^{not} any help at all, either.

As much as he tried to tell himself this was just a base lust, coming from the instinctual, male portion of his brain, he knew otherwise. He knew very much otherwise. There had been times during the years that he felt particularly in awe of her for her brilliance. There were just as many times that he had wanted to hurt her for speaking out of turn and making him grade an extra foot of parchment for an essay he had assigned. But there had always been a certain sort of kinship between them. Though she may have thought some nasty things about him for punishments he had given out over the years, or for the things he may have said to her in the past, she had always respected him. She had respected his intelligence.

He had insinuated otherwise on Sunday, but he had been lying. Something always seemed to surface when he spoke to others that made him contradict what they would say. He had always felt like he had to go against everything he ever felt, or he would have been seen as weak. Perhaps it was a self-defense mechanism that had long since become so ingrained that he could not overcome it.

He was an obstinate ox, that was what he was.

One thing had become evident this past week, though, while she maintained her distance from him and afforded him only dirty looks. He could just not leave what he felt alone and hope to maintain the status quo. Something had to change between them, even if he knew any true change was impossible. While he hoped a certain thing would eventually change between them, he had no idea where he was going to start at actually transfiguring it completely.

Funny that her expertise is in Transfiguration.

By all rights, he should have gone to her to ask for help in transforming this relationship between them, from that of colleagues to something much more. But Severus Snape did not ask for help. And neither did he let something out so blatantly, and only to explain his situation of lusting after her. He was a subtle, sneaky Slytherin after all.

He was on his own. From somewhere in the dark recesses of his mind, he would have to recall what impressing a woman meant, and then implement it without scaring her off. He would need to think back to those days he would spend with Lucius, watching the pureblood go through romancing witches and then sending them on their merry ways like there would be no tomorrow. That ladies' man was somewhere inside of him, wasn't it?

No, it could not be inside of him. He certainly was^{not} Lucius, nor did he ever wish to be so. But then again, he never wanted to be like his own father either. It bewildered him now to look back on how two men could be so spectacularly different and that, as an older male or father figure in his life, he had never found a happy medium. Not even Dumbledore had helped. All three men were very different points to a very equilateral triangle.

Would he be able to find the center of that triangle and combine the best aspects of each male personality successfully? Probably not, but it was a good place to start. That was, if he could choose the correct aspects to begin with. He knew Hermione would most definitely not appreciate it if he chose to use smooth-talking lessons from Lucius, or the completely bastardly nature of his father, while accomplishing it all with a sadistic twinkle in his eyes like Dumbledore.

Could his eyes even twinkle?

Perhaps the best option was to just be himself. If she could not understand him for who he was...which was nothing pleasant...then she was not worth his time. He had understood very early on that if he was ever lucky enough to be in a relatively committed relationship, it would be to a remarkably understanding woman. Or an insane one. One insane enough to even look twice at him.

One thing he had done was find a good sampling of books from his collection. He had taken the entire week, looking through his bookshelves, appraising each tome carefully to decide upon which ones she most likely would not have read, or ones that were so rare, her mouth would water at even being able to touch the leather bindings. In the end, he had chosen five. There were many more suitable ones for her, but these were the best. Five books probably would not last long in the hands of Hermione Granger. But he hoped that by that time, he would not have to keep her away from Krum. Hopefully, by then, she would be seeking him out before she even thought of anyone else. Hopefully, by then, she might be coming to his rooms to choose her own books, rather than him having to choose for her.

The house-elves should have taken them to her room by dinner time, and she should have deciphered the note he had sent with it by now. He could nearly set a clock by her problem-solving after so many years, trying to decode so many different mysterious happenings. The letter he had sent would not be particularly difficult, and a few hours should have been enough, especially judging by the look of deep concentration she had on her face during dinner that night.

He had grown anxious sitting around in his rooms, though, to learn of her reaction to this gift and had decided to take a stroll about the dark grounds. Never could Severus resist the opportunity to slink around in dark shadows, catching unsuspecting, trysting children in the large bushes around the castle grounds. Any found were punished severely with loss of house points and detentions. It was sad, really, that the only thing that made him happy these days was punishing.

What he found on his walk, though, was not trysting students. What he found was a quiet, sullen-looking Hermione Granger sitting on a stone bench and looking up at the evening sky. He watched her shiver in the cold, and he realized that she had no cloak or jumper to protect herself. In one particularly gallant move (at least he thought so), he made to pull off his wool robes and walk over to her. Instead, he stopped suddenly when a twig snapped beside him.

Severus clutched his wand in his hand, holding it at the ready for whatever danger might befall him or Hermione, when a tall, hulking form moved out of the side bushes, pulling his own heavy fur-lined coat off his shoulders. When the man stepped up behind Hermione and dropped the covering over her shoulders, she snuggled into the warmth as though it were second nature to her to do this. Severus felt an intense pang of jealousy when she smiled softly at the Bulgarian and kissed his cheek in gratitude as he sat beside her.

"Thank you, Viktor," she said softly, resting her head against his shoulder.

The massive brute wrapped his arms securely around her, pulling her close beside him, his nose and lips lingering in her hair at the top of her head for a moment. Hermione did not seem to mind this, and Severus felt even more jealousy bubble in his blood. He had given her much more than a warm coat and shoulder to lay her head against! Where was his thanks?

"You are very welcome, Herm-own-ninny," the accented voice said.

Severus thought it very odd the way the Bulgarian was acting. Krum was a much more pushy person than this, in all aspects of his life. Severus hardly could see Viktor soft spoken and acting like this with a woman.

"Have you decided vot you vant for your birthday?" Viktor questioned.

Birthday?

Hermione shook her head. "I don't need anything."

"Every voman has something very special they vant," he said. "Perhaps diamond earrings?"

"They would be nice, but there is certainly nothing I need," she said. "A week away from Hogwarts might be negotiable, though."

"I could step in for your classes," he offered.

Hermione laughed. "No, you can step in for Tonks, and Tonks can teach my classes. At least I'll know my students are learning something, even if it is only about how a Metamorphmagus can change her nose from a pig's to a human's in no time flat."

Viktor chuckled at that, wrapping his arms more securely around the girl. Her small, fragile frame was positively engulfed by the large man.

But what Snape thought Hermione might find to be frightening, apparently was not. She buried her face against the Bulgarian's chest and turned her head to the moon shining over them. She seemed much too content in his arms.

"I hope Remus took his potions," Hermione said faintly.

"I do not know if he took them, but I was present when Snape handed him the vials this week," he said.

She nodded and readjusted herself. The look of complete triumph on Krum's face was enough to make Severus want to hex it right off so that he could never look like that again. This was all a game to Krum, wasn't it? Snape thought to make his presence known, to pull the couple apart. But he stopped when he heard his name on her lips.

"He is so confusing," Hermione said.

"Who, Remus?" Viktor asked.

"No, Snape," she replied and pulled a bit away from the man to look at him. "I try my best to be a friend...or at least someone that understands...and at every turn he rebukes me. Then this evening, I go back to my chambers to find that I've received a gift from him. I just can't seem to pin who he wants to be down."

Was it a good sign that she was thinking about him while with Krum? After a millisecond of thought, he decided that, yes--yes, it was ~~æ~~very good sign.

"Even when we were working together for Order things, I couldn't get a true feeling for the man," she continued. "I didn't know until the final battle whether he was on our side or their side. And even then, I question him at times."

Krum listened intently to her and waited until she was quiet to speak. "I remember everything you have ever told me about him, Herm-own-ninny. It's true he is not a very nice man much of the time, but he tries. When he gets confused about how he should be acting, he gets flustered and that results in his nastiness."

Maybe the oaf was not as dense as he had once thought, but it was also unsettling that Krum could deduce this from what little they spoke together. Of course, he knew Karkaroff. Perhaps that had helped with this thesis.

"I just wish there was some way I could break through that icy shell," she sighed.

He did not know whether to be relieved that Hermione understood him that well, or worried that she too had the intention of trying to get closer to him.

"Why would you want to break it, Herm-own-ninny?" Krum said. "I think he likes keeping everyone at a safe distance. And he surely would not thank you for doing it."

"I'm not going to go at it with explosives," she said with a short laugh. "I'm trying to be Slytherin about it... You know, pick away at the ice a little bit at a time."

She was much sneakier than he gave her credit for. When he thought she was only trying to annoy him, what she was really trying to do was make him rise to the occasion, to pull him out of that impassive, cool shell.

"What happens when you find that you do not want to know what is leashed on the inside?" he questioned. "It will not always be pleasant, and will most likely be dark and harmful."

Hermione shrugged her shoulders and pulled further away from the man. "Viktor, I appreciate your concern, but I have a feeling what lays beneath that exterior is really a charming man. Circumstance only made him adopt this manner for so long, beginning with his childhood, and then later on in the Dark Lord's service."

"You will be picking away for an awfully long time to get to that desired center," Viktor warned.

She would, Severus nodded.

"Then so be it!" Hermione said, in a sudden flourish of anger, her Gryffindor aggressiveness taking over. She stood up and pulled Krum's coat from her shoulders, handing it over to him before stomping away toward the castle.

Krum watched after her with a hurt look in his eyes. Maybe the boy would get the hint now that she was only entertaining him because she had nothing better to do.

But he knew her intentions, and it made him feel utterly *wanted* to know that she wished to get to know *him*. As odd as it was for him, though, he thought that for the first time in twenty long years, he might just let his guard down for a woman. He would let her see him. Of course, he was not exactly like she suspected, but he would let her see. And he would let her decide if she continued to pursue it. He would make it *her* choice.

Only, he would not make it spectacularly *easy* for her to make her choice. Nor would he let her go without a bit of "sneaky scheming" of his own.

Friends

Chapter 12 of 29

Snape raised a brow. ?None of them true. Most of my friends are either former Death Eaters or at the very least were in Slytherin house. Friendship and camaraderie is not to us what it is to every other house. We had associates who could help advance us. But we were all out for own good.?

Thank you ALL so much for sticking around and reading, reviewing... whatever you do to show me that you appreciate the story. It means a lot. I could say it over and over again, but know that you all are amazing. Also, wanted to let you know that everything is well with me and the car accident is long from my mind. Now I'm celebrating with the money I got from the ordeal.

Sorry for the wait on this, I wanted to wait until the new SH Mage site was up and running at Sycophant Hex before I posted to keep my posting of chapters together, so I don't get ahead of myself at The Petulant Poetess and behind at Ashwinder. Since it appears that move will be a further out, I'm going to try to get this one in under the wire.

I have not thanked my beta in long while, so this update is for Shanastay, who has put up with all my "writerly vision," telling me when I should just stuff it. Thank you so much, my dear, for putting the amount of time into this that you have.

Chapter 12- Friends

On the following Wednesday, Hermione still had not come to him to thank him for the books. He was getting slightly worried that perhaps her little talk with Viktor had knocked some sense into her and she had wisely decided to give up the fight and not try to 'crack' him. It would have been so much simpler that way for him, knowing that she really did not care to put such an effort forth. He could decide to leave her be without too much of his own grief from the emotional mess he might potentially become while pursuing her, thus preserving whatever part of his heart that still beat with any life.

But he was Severus Snape, the consummate Slytherin, and things were never, ever that simple for him.

He was quite anxious to see what the witch had in her arsenal to accomplish such a difficult task as getting under his skin. Of course, he already ~~new~~ knew that she was well under his skin, and would most likely never leave again. But she did not need to know that. Not just yet. For now, he would watch. He would not completely resist her, but would definitely not make it easy for her to achieve her goal. If that meant confusing her at every turn, only to see how far she would go and how dedicated she really was to this cause, then so be it.

If she was going to use Slytherin tactics against him, then she sorely needed to be taught a lesson about what Slytherin tactics entailed.

However, he knew Hermione Granger. And Hermione Granger would never back down. *Stubborn Gryffindor*. She would rather die than give up on something. If this was at all like the house-elf campaign, he had nothing to worry about. Even if she were confounded much of the time about him, especially when she was unknowingly being schooled in the way of Slytherin duplicity, she would still stick to her cause.

And if she could withstand learning who he really was, then perhaps she was worth all the inner turmoil he was going through, trying to decide just why he found her so appealing all of a sudden.

Wednesday was her birthday, and it was filled with gifts and well wishes from the rest of the staff throughout the day. He had stayed conveniently away from her, hoping not to be caught in the shuffle. He had already given her his gift, though he had not known at the time that it could double as a birthday gift. And he did not wish to draw attention to the fact that she had yet to thank him. Actually, he did want to draw attention to it, but he would do that later when they were alone. *Then* he could really cut into her and get an unguarded reaction.

Later never came, though.

It happened as he was sitting down to grade some papers before dinner that he heard the knock at the classroom door. He had thought not to answer it, but decided against it. "Enter."

She stepped carefully into the room, shutting the door behind her softly. He watched her closely and placed his quill down on the his desk, waiting for her to come toward him. It seemed that she was tentative about continuing closer, but he saw the light in her brown eyes alter from timidity to bravery rather quickly. What was she thinking about, anyway? She stepped forward on her left foot, hesitated again, and then shook her head giving herself a silent chuckle before striding the rest of the way over to his desk.

She retrieved a book from her robes and placed it on his desk. "Thank you."

"You are quite welcome," he said.

She eyed him curiously for a moment, fidgeting slightly. "Why?"

"Why what, Miss Granger?" he asked.

"Why did you give them to me?" she pressed on. "Every time I talk to you, we end up in an argument of some sort. Or you end up criticizing me and I storm away. Honestly, if these are from your personal library, I'm a little confused as to why you would give them to me. I know how you are with your books. And if you dislike me so, why did you send them?"

"So you could ask me why I sent them to you," he stated flatly, finally meeting her gaze.

She rolled her eyes and placed her hands on her hips. "I half expected a test or an essay assigned to me."

"I could do that, if it would make you happier," he offered, dropping his attention back to the papers before him.

"It wouldn't!" she exclaimed.

"Are you quite sure about that?" He raised a curious brow at her. He knew he was annoying her with his impassiveness, but this was what she could expect if she was going to engage in secretive operations to draw him out of his shell.

"You are positively insufferable!"

He tried desperately not to feel some kind of mirth at that statement, but it was impossible. The smile tugged at the corners of his lips, and he glanced up at her.

She fell silent and instantly curious.

Nosy Gryffindor.

Now she would want to know what had caused him to smile. Had he ever smiled when she was around before? Not likely. Her stance softened and she let out a calming sigh, meeting his eyes.

"Are you finished, Miss Granger?" he asked.

"Quite," she said.

"Good." He stood from his desk and straightened it absently. "Perhaps you would accompany me to the Great Hall for dinner?"

She eyed him suspiciously. "You really aren't going to give me an exam?"

"No." He shook his head. "I merely thought I might send you some reading material, since you said you had exhausted Madam Pince's supply. I certainly could not see you forced to find your diversions elsewhere."

It slipped out before he could stop it. Regrettably, it was not lost on her, and she glowered well enough to rival him even in his foulest mood. "Did you hear the entire conversation that day?"

"I did." He nodded. "But, if it would so incline you, I might be willing to have a few academic discussions about the books. I am sure none of the other people in the castle have read it, and I know your absolute... *need*... to regurgitate everything that you've read, word for word."

She considered him carefully for a moment, as though not understanding why he was offering to spend more time alone with her. He did not want to know what she chalked it all up to, but he was satisfied in knowing that she would be even more confused than she was last weekend during her talk with Viktor. "You don't have to be so nasty about the way you ask."

"I wasn't asking anything," he pointed out. "I merely offered."

"Professor," she began, but paused for a moment before continuing. "I'd be honored if you'd give me a few moments of your time."

I'll give you much more than a few moments, Hermione.

"Are you free this evening?" he questioned. Yes, this was just enough to startle her, make her wonder, and throw her slightly off balance so she would have to reevaluate what she was doing. Or, at the very least, make her question again why he could be so hot and cold at times.

"I am," she said.

Was it so wrong that he considered letting out a sigh of relief that she had accepted his invitation, and not said she had plans with Krum? Speaking of whom, he thought it a very good sign that any of Viktor's plans for her birthday had not won out on her list of things she wanted to do that evening to celebrate her birthday.

"Don't look so surprised, Professor," she said. "I have plans this weekend rather than tonight."

"I see," he replied. "It must be difficult to be a professor at twenty, stuck in the castle."

She shrugged. "I'd rather spend time here than anywhere else. Why do you think I let McGonagall talk me into this so easily?"

"I wasn't quite sure," he admitted.

"Well, now you know," she stated. "I go out merely for the sake of appeasing my...*friends*."

"Why do you find the castle so pleasing?"

She smiled softly as they paused outside the doors to the Great Hall. "It brings back happy memories. My most treasured in recent years have always been here or at the Burrow."

With that, she was gone and walking toward the high table for dinner. Severus stood still for a moment, watching her go. How could anyone have treasured memories with the Golden Boy and his faithful sidekick Weasley at his side?

"Now's not the time to think that over," he mumbled to himself. His stomach growled and he sighed. He was very, very hungry, and he had a very certain feeling somewhere that he would need to eat a lot to keep his energy up for the evening. Being in the same room with her was taxing enough without his misplaced emotions adding in to the mixture. He could only imagine it now.

Oddly, though, he looked forward to it.

Hermione still didn't know why she was purposely subjecting herself to these meetings. Was it for the sheer fact that she wanted to get to know Snape and befriend him? It was almost like the time she tried to service the plight of the house-elves. Imaginary as the plight apparently was, she had tried to get to know them. Of course Dobby had never been a good example. He was an oddity amongst elves, to say the least, and with an unhealthy admiration of Harry. But still, she felt like she should make badges and pass them out. But what was she trying to do? Liberate Snape from his black cloud?

Yes.

Amongst other things.

She chewed slightly on her bottom lip, considering the wooden door before her. When had this wanting to be a friend changed to wanting to be something a little more than friendly? Why did she even think she could be *friendly* with him? He certainly did *not* want to be friendly with her. But then again, he *had* sent her those books. The underlying meaning to that was that he was trying to keep her away from Viktor. Perhaps he only thought she could do better? But better with whom? Himself? Was that what he was trying to say in his own roundabout Slytherin way?

Oh how she hated Slytherins!

"Are you going to stand there all day, or are you going to come in?"

His silky, yet derisive, voice filled her ears, and she realized she was staring at a black chest. Lifting her gaze slowly, she met his obsidian eyes in the low light of the dungeon hallways. How had he known she was here? And when had he opened the door without her noticing?

Hermione, you need to stop getting lost in your own thoughts.

She straightened her shoulders defensively and chuckled at herself. "Sorry, just have some things on my mind."

He stepped out of the way, motioning for her to enter the room. A fleeting thought crossed her mind that she had only ever walked past these doors once before, and had always wondered what was inside...if it was as dark and gloomy as the Potions classroom...but she was pleasantly surprised to find that it indeed was not. Of course there was an atrocious amount of green in the room, which was most likely already there when he moved into the Slytherin Head of House chambers. However, offsetting the horrid green were brown leather furnishings and a warm fire stoked in the hearth. Yes, very different than she had ever imagined. Not that she had ever really been able to form a picture of it in her mind. He had always been too enigmatic to pin his personal tastes down accurately.

This was a big step for him, she realized suddenly. He certainly did not entertain many in his private chambers. He had always maintained the adage that whatever was private, was just that, and others did not need to see or hear about those private things.

She jumped when he cleared his throat.

"What, Miss Granger? Did you expect to find a coffin leaning against the wall?" he asked incredulously.

"N-no." She shook her head hastily. "I just..."

"Just what?" He raised an eyebrow in curiosity.

She shrugged. "I did not expect such a warm, cozy feeling. I mean, compared to your classroom..."

He shook his head. "I do not always have a fire."

Hermione nodded and looked around the room again, her eyes stopped on the bookshelves lining one wall. "You only sent me five?"

"Installments, Miss Granger," he said and motioned toward the settee. She sat carefully, crossing her jean-clad legs. It was very, very bizarre to say the least. Firstly being down in the dungeons to purposely seek out Snape, then being invited into his private quarters and asked to sit down to talk. *Bizarre* most likely was not the appropriate word to use, but her brain was not functioning on all cylinders this late into the evening.

And now he was handing her a goblet of deep red wine. She took it, eyed it suspiciously and then glanced up at him.

"Oh, go ahead."

She felt the heat of her blush creep into her cheeks and she drew her wand, casting a short charm to make sure he had not drugged anything. He was the Potions master, after all. She would not have put something like that past him, if he had wanted to obtain information from her. What information, she did not know, but there was never really any telling with Snape.

"Appeased?"

"Quite," she said and took a sip of the wine. He sunk into the wingback chair nearest her, looking at her thoughtfully. She knew well enough that when Snape looked at someone like that, they better run and hide or else. But he did nothing, and only sipped his wine. Was he waiting for her to start? Silence remained until he let out what sounded like a grumble.

"As much as I enjoy listening to the crackle of the fire, I do believe we are here to discuss the book you read," he began.

Hermione nodded and glanced at the fire, entranced by the flames lapping the stone behind and to its sides. She turned her attention back to him and sighed. "I really don't want to discuss the book."

"I had surmised as much," he said, relaxing back into his chair.

"You would," she countered.

He gave her a curious look. "And just what would an insufferable know-it-all like to speak about?"

"I'm not sure," she admitted.

"Alright, then, allow me to ask *you* some questions," he said. "I have a few that have bothered me since you left Hogwarts the first time."

Hermione nodded. "And they are?"

"Why do you insist on speaking out of turn?"

She blushed sheepishly and looked down into the dark liquid in her goblet. Hermione chuckled, nervously. "Well, you know, being friends with Ron and Harry didn't allow me much time to get a word in edgewise. Sure, I was bossy, but I had to be that pushy to even be heard. I suppose it's a habit I picked up because of them."

"Funny you should use the word habit," he said, taking another sip of wine. "My other question was, why were you there?"

"I don't understand the question, sir," she said.

He shifted uncomfortably and looked straight at her before answering. "At the Wizengamot. You were there every day."

She had thought she had stayed well hidden. "I... uh..."

"My, my... Miss Granger is at a loss for words," he mused.

"I was there because I didn't think you were guilty," she stated bravely. "Well, of course you did it, but I knew it wasn't because you wanted to. You may not have always gotten along with Dumbledore, and even resented him at times. You may have even hated him on some occasions. But you were loyal to him. He gave you a second chance. No one had ever given you a second chance before."

He was silent. "How do you know this? How could you possibly piece this together?"

"You underestimate me, sir," she said, just a little smugly.

"That is apparent," he replied, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"I knew there must have been some way to prove that Dumbledore asked you to do it. He didn't want Draco to suffer through it. Sure, some said he was begging for Harry's life on the tower that night...Harry himself believed that...but it just did not make sense that you would deflect every single curse and hex Harry flung at you as you were escaping, and not get a good jab in there at some point. Something more had to have been going on," she explained.

"Where were you when I needed witnesses in my favor?" he asked.

She stared at the fire, unable to look at him. "Harry and Ron would have disowned me. They were my only friends. I couldn't stand to lose them."

He harrumphed and shook his head. "Imagine, having friends."

"You have friends," she said quietly, taking another sip of her liquid courage.

Snape raised a brow. "None of them true. Most of my friends are either former Death Eaters or at the very least were in Slytherin house. Friendship and camaraderie is not to us what it is to every other house. We had *associates* who could help advance us. But we were all out for own good."

"So that's what's wrong with you," she said. "It's not that you've never*had* a friend. You just don't make them like others do."

He rolled his eyes. "I fear that it is really a combination of both."

Realizing that her wine was gone, she considered the goblet for a moment, wondering if she should ask him for more. But she resisted the urge. Good wine or no, she really did not want to wear out her welcome. Or worse yet, she certainly did not want the conversation to go any further, leading into a situation where her foot would end up firmly planted in her mouth. He had been too forthcoming with information already. She couldn't push it. No, she had to build him up to longer stretches of her curiosity.

"I have some things I must prepare for my classes tomorrow," she said softly, standing up. "Thank you, Professor."

He considered her for a moment, and something changed in his eyes. "I've invited you into my private chambers, Miss Granger. I should think that means you can refer to me as Severus."

The allowance was startling, in the least, and she had to do a double take. Did he really mean it?

"S-Severus," she said, trying it on for size. Surprisingly, it fit, and he seemed pleased with it as well.

"But don't let me keep you, Miss Granger," he said.

She nodded and made a hasty retreat for the door. She needed to get out of there before she did something completely stupid. Once outside the door, though, Hermione let out a short chuckle.

It couldn't actually be this easy to break into Severus Snape's psyche, could it?

A sick feeling filtered through her subconscious then.

He knew.

Play the Game

Chapter 13 of 29

But she liked talking with him much more than she had ever thought she would. She found him intelligent, and his sharp off-color humor was rather funny. That was, of course, when one realized most of his remarks were product of a searing wit.

I would just like to mention to everyone... I started Chapter 13 on Friday the 13th... on a full moon... if anything, that should create some interesting writing. Hope you all enjoy!

Thank you all so much for your kind reviews. And if you haven't reviewed yet, I would love to hear from you!

Chapter 13- Play The Game

How did he know?

When did he find out?

Why did he find it so bloody appealing to play with her?

Did the man really have no mercy?

All he had to do was tell her that he had figured out her intentions. Then she would not have had to play the fool all through their conversation last night. What must he have thought, sitting there and watching her go on through the motions? Did he take some sadistic pleasure in knowing he had beat his enemy's game before it ever really got off the ground? Somehow he had found out that she wanted to get closer to him. Simple enough to just tell her that he knew, and be done with it. At least to her, it was. But he seemed to dangle that fact out in front of her under no uncertain terms...teasing her with it. Of course, it was Snape doing this. It was a way of life for the man. But surely he would have guessed it would not take her that long to put two and two together.

He is so aggravating.

If he had *not* known, he would have gone on being as unapproachable as ever. The fact that he had invited her to discuss the book with him, knowing all along that they would not end up talking about the book should have alerted her in the beginning. Then to have him invite her into his *private* space, and give her fine wine, and give her permission to address him as Severus...

All clues had been there, but she had just chalked it up to good fortune and turned off all good sense.

Truth be told, she was rather surprised that he had not resisted more in this game. Maybe he wanted this? Maybe he was not as horrible as people always thought? Perhaps all he ever needed was for someone to show some interest in him before he started opening up.

Or perhaps this was how he was playing with her, like a snake slithering along the ground, preparing to strike its victim.

That thought had kept her up most of the night. And when she finally found sleep, it was restless. Her eyes opened at six the following morning, and she decided it best to get out of bed. Tossing and turning would only tangle her further into the mass of bedcovers that would lead to an unhappy house-elf that was stuck fixing this instead of helping elsewhere.

She had no idea how to approach the situation now. Should she just continue on, letting him think he had the upper hand? Should she play back?

It was a dangerous proposition to say the least, to think she could play around with him. What would he do when he realized what she had decided to do?

Snape would figure it out much more quickly than she had ever done last night. And she had never really been one for much sport, unless it was debating an academic topic. Even at that, she wanted people to take her word for it and leave her alone. Anyone contradicting her would receive the wrath of Hermione. And she certainly did not wish to do anything that might make him think less of her. At this point, the fact that he was willing to talk to her at all was amazing enough, if not a rather large ego booster.

But she *liked* talking with him much more than she had ever thought she would. She found him intelligent, and his sharp off-color humor was rather funny. That was, of course, when one realized most of his remarks were product of a searing wit.

Best to take the simple approach, she thought. Lay it all out on the table between them and decide where they were to go from there. Slytherin or not, he should be well acquainted with her very Gryffindor tendencies. She did not deal in shades of grey. She dealt in black and white. If he was purposely playing along with her, it would be on her terms, *not* on his.

Would he curl back up into his shell, or would he allow her to prod further?

She truly hoped for the latter. Let her be damned for it, but she wanted to know who he was, beyond what she already knew of him. She wanted to know him at his nastiest times, and at his most fragile. Surely there had to be *some* moments in his life where there was some weakness.

Snape wanted the control in any friendship or partnership...whatever this was coalescing between them. But she would have to make him see that he needed to treat her like an equal, if he wished for her to treat him with some respect.

Hermione sighed to herself as she walked along the quiet castle corridors, the only sound following her was the reverberations of her slightly heeled shoes on the hard stone ground. There had been times when she was here as a student where she could not sleep and would be up this early. It had always held some enchantment for her to watch the sun rise higher in the sky and listen to the sounds of life slowly beginning to filter throughout the castle. It was as though the castle itself was asleep and was waking with the sun, pushing its vitality and warmth through its inhabitants.

Breakfast in a quiet hall was always the best, as well, for her overachieving-self to get some extra studying in, or to just let her mind wander without interruption from her noisy friends. Besides that, she was able to eat the first offerings from the kitchen...often times the best of the morning...and not have to painfully keep her meal down while watching Ron shovel food into his own mouth.

It would be a question that would weigh heavily in her mind for the rest of the day, whether or not he had been stalking her since she had come down from Gryffindor Tower, but not now. Right now, she was more concerned about his overt manners. He stepped up to the Great Hall's large double doors before she reached it, pushing it open carefully and allowing her to enter before he let it shut with a swoosh and thud. What was he playing at anyway? Was he trying to kill her with kindness?

It's working.

Yes, he was doing the exact opposite from what he would have normally done, just to confuse her endlessly.

She paused for a moment, letting him pass by her so that she could watch him. When he realized that she had stopped, though, he did as well, swiveling back on his heels to make his dark robes billow. His dark eyes met hers. He was issuing a challenge to her. He sneered and straightened his shoulders before turning and walking toward the Head Table where a few other professors sat quietly. Hermione watched him go, pull out his seat and settle himself.

He looked back up at her from across the hall, glaring. So he understood that she had figured it out that he had figured it out.

I'm confusing myself now!

"What are you looking at, Hermione?"

Hermione was not quite sure what utterance she let out, but it was a mix between that of a very loud banshee and a wailing child. Her heart beat in her throat, and she desperately tried to catch her breath, whipping around and off balance only to be caught and steadied by Viktor's strong hands. She met his eyes, and let out a shaky chuckle. How could she have been so absorbed in the Black Bat that she had not felt Viktor sneak up behind her?

Silently cursing herself for letting her guard down, Hermione quickly pushed back from Viktor's grasp. "You frightened me!"

"I did not mean to," he said with a short laugh. "You are not usually that skittish."

"And I wasn't looking at anything. I was merely caught up in a thought," she said, glancing around the hall at the questioning looks of the few students and adults who were watching them. It may have been well known that she and Viktor were friends, but a few of the students remembered the rumors of her fourth year and the Yule Ball. There had been whispers since Viktor had been back to Hogwarts that she had ignored, but there would definitely be a new buzz now.

Viktor nodded his head and stepped beside her, offering his arm. "Come have some breakfast, Herm-own-ninny."

Hermione took his arm, moving her eyes back up to the spot where Snape sat. He was glaring again. Why had he been glaring a few minutes before? He could not possibly have been that angry she had discovered his game so early on. If anything, he should have been impressed. Or was it because he had seen Viktor slinking up behind her? It was obvious he did not like Viktor much, but Hermione had not yet figured out why that was. And if that was the reason, why was he now so vehemently glaring at the junction of her hand and Viktor's arm?

A chill ran up her spine, and Viktor must have felt it. "Are you cold?"

"No, I'm fine," she said, seeing more curious glances. Finally they made it to the table, and Viktor sat her down, quickly going through breakfast, but with much more dignity than Ron would have ever mustered.

"Why are you in such a rush?" she asked.

"Some of my teammates should be Apparating to the gates shortly," he said with a smile. "They are to help with the Quidditch tryouts."

Hermione chuckled. "It's only an excuse to spend time with your mates."

He gave her a devilish grin. "Of course, but you would not begrudge me that, would you? This weekend will be dedicated to you."

"No, I wouldn't," she said.

He finished shortly afterward and said his goodbyes, striding out of the hall quickly. Hermione glanced to her left, looking for Snape, but he was already making a hasty retreat for the entrance.

"You're not getting away that easily, Snape," she muttered, jumping from her seat and following him. By the time she was out in the main corridor there was no trace of black robes or black boots. There were only so many places he would go to, though, so she headed down to the dungeons. When she arrived, she found his private storeroom open, but no Snape.

Hermione had a feeling that if she continued inside, she would regret it with the door shutting behind her. Snape was one to spring those sort of traps, especially after her second year and a very brief foray into the art of kleptomania for the ingredients to make Polyjuice Potion. She stepped inside the door, waiting with bated breath for something to happen. Nothing did. It was odd for him to just leave something like this open, but it must have been with good reason. Perhaps Peeves was playing a nasty joke he needed to take care of...or had other urgent issues with a student.

"Severus?" she called, peeking her head around to the small, dark cubby area in the room that could hide a person if they had wished, as well as the potions ingredients that could not be exposed to light.

"Looking for something, Miss Granger?" His voice was deceptively silky, but it had all the element of surprise he was hoping for.

Hermione sprang back, her head and shoulders painfully connecting with the wooden shelves, rattling the glass jars and vials together. He loomed over her with all the dominance he could gather, and she shrunk back further, wishing that the wood would be a bit more yielding. But she stopped. Why was she so frightened? She was *not* doing anything wrong... for a change. She was merely looking for *him*.

"Do you have some fascination with my storeroom?" he asked, taking a step toward her. She met his eyes defiantly. Hermione had never realized just how tall the man

was, even when they had danced at Draco's wedding. Standing this close to him in the darkened room...

"Only when I feel like breaking school rules," she retorted boldly.

"You seem to do that often," he said matter-of-factly.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "I only ever broke a few, Professor."

A brow arched critically, and a glint of pleasure went through his eyes. No doubt he was overjoyed that she was openly admitting her wrongs.

"You knew all along. Why did you need me to confirm it for you?" she asked.

"What? That you are a rule-breaking, insufferable know-it-all?" he asked. "I knew that well enough. It is just particularly nice to hear the perpetrator confessing."

"You're a sick bastard," she responded.

"Am I?" he asked.

Hermione lifted her eyes again, "You enjoy these little games of cat and mouse. I honestly could not imagine playing at it all the time."

"Hence why you are not a Slytherin," he said.

"Funny, I thought that was only because I was Muggle-born."

Silence passed between them, and she sighed.

"How did you find out?"

"Find out what, Miss Granger?" he asked, appearing incredibly innocent. But she knew Snape, and innocent was definitely not one of his characteristics.

"About..." She stopped herself. "You just want another confession."

"Perhaps," he shrugged and loomed closer. "If I knew what we were speaking about, then I might give you a clearer answer."

Hermione felt her ire rising quickly. "You know very well what I am talking about! Who told you?"

"Told me what?"

"Believe it or not, I *can* hex you into the next millennium," she warned.

He smirked. "I would like to see you try, Miss Granger."

His tone was suddenly soft and frighteningly personal. She closed her mouth, trying without any luck to read his face and his eyes. He hid everything too well. Especially in the dim light of this little cubby...that should have only held enough space for one person and now held two full grown people in very close proximity to each other...she could barely make anything out. That was, of course, except for one thing.

"Your eyes," she said, barely above a whisper.

"What about my eyes?" he asked.

She felt herself blush, but hoped it was hidden well enough. "Your eyes aren't really black."

This caused both his brows to shoot up to his hairline in question.

"They're a very dark brown," she observed.

"Only you would notice something so inconsequential in the position that you are in."

"Is it so inconsequential?" she asked. "You *are* so very close to me, I cannot help but notice anything else about my present surroundings."

He smirked again, his mouth mere inches from hers. The electricity between them was evident, and it was slowly changing from that of the energy between constant, somewhat friendly combatants to that of two...

Oh, Merlin, no.

In that moment Hermione felt that something had changed... transfigured.

"Why do you toy with that boy's heart when you know you won't see it through?" he questioned. "You are doing yourself a disservice in the long run."

Her breath caught in her throat as his arms snaked around her ribcage and rested for a brief moment beneath her shoulder blades. Acutely aware of his surprisingly warm hands flat against her back, and the route they were taking lower to the curve of her behind, it took a moment for a retort to form on her lips.

"Aren't you doing a disservice to yourself then, playing with me?" she asked quietly, her eyes fixating on his lips.

"Miss Granger, I thought it should be obvious in your situation," he said silkily, his deep gravelly voice rumbling in his chest. "I am most certainly *not* playing with you."

She felt her stomach plummet to the ground and then jump back up into her throat a few times, as that comment slowly...agonizingly slowly...cleared its way through the haze that was her mind. Yes, she knew that at Malfoy's he had looked upon her with some attraction. But this... this was most unexpected.

Or perhaps it was all still a game to him. She was the one who was supposed to be on the mission to get closer to him. He was not supposed to turn the tables on her. And if he had known what she was up to, this would not be out of the realm of possibility for him to fight back.

His hands shifted lower, resting and squeezing firmly on her rump, causing her to shift forward to rest against him. His warm, slow breath was on her cheek, and on her lips, as he inched closer to her. A tingle of excitement burned through her body. What was she doing? What was *he* doing? Oh, this had to be a huge mistake.

Didn't it?

"Are you actually at a loss for words, Hermione?" he asked, his abrupt shift to using her real name did not go unnoticed. When she looked up at him, surely a tad cross-eyed and still trying to make sense of this, he let a look of triumph spread across his hawkish features. "I must remember this tactic in the future."

Future?

Workplace Romances

Chapter 14 of 29

*?Perhaps you misheard the conversation, Minerva. Miss Granger could not ever want more than a friendship with me, ?
he stated blandly.*

Fast update again... I finally have all the chapters corrected from my beta, so my posting should be pretty quick from now on. Hope you're all enjoying!

Chapter 14- Workplace Romances

"Miss Granger, you mustn't look so flabbergasted," he stated blandly, stepping away from her and back out into the light. She watched him for a moment to see if he would do anything more before she let out all the air in her lungs in one long sigh. She gasped again for breath, letting her breathing regulate into a steady, slow rhythm. *Then* he had the audacity to smirk at her.

"What?" she asked, her brain still fogged and trying to sort out the fact that Snape had just been pressing her back against a wall of shelves in his storeroom, clearly dominating her, and taking such a delight in confusing her. He had almost kissed her, though. Hadn't he? Yes, yes, he had. He had been so close, but then it was as though a sun shade had been pulled down in front of his face, and he was back to regular, old Snape, moving as quickly away from her as was possible.

Wait, she thought. *Severus Snape almost...*

Hermione pinched herself, wishing that this was a dream or a hallucination of some sort. She had never wanted to be that close to the man before. All she had wanted was to be *friendly* with him. That was all. Had she sent him the wrong signals? Or had she sent him the correct ones subconsciously?

"Don't look so confused. It does not suit you," he said and walked over to the far wall in the storeroom, looking through the glass jars for a few things in particular. Or perhaps he was just trying to occupy his mind with other tasks. If that little moment had had such an affect on her, surely it was still replaying in his mind. It had to be... especially with such charged air that had passed between them. Even a cold, nasty man like Snape would have had to be melted a tad.

"B-but," she began and swallowed harshly. "You hate me."

"I clearly have never hated you, Miss Granger," he replied. "Disliked at times, yes. But I've never hated you."

"And I've annoyed you."

He nodded. "All the time."

"Then why..." she asked.

Snape looked at her, his jaw clenching for a moment before he spoke. "I've started to think about you differently."

"I knew something had to be wrong when you sent me those books," she fished, "and then agreed to let me into your private chambers to discuss them."

The left corner of his mouth quirked up in what looked to be a smile. But it was always hard to tell if it was intended to be genuine or was supposed to be a slightly softer smirk. "I am not completely to blame for this turn of events. I heard you speaking with Krum that evening."

"I knew it!"

"Here is a lesson for you, Miss Granger, one that you should not push aside in the future. One cannot successfully employ Slytherin strategy when the need to be an arrogant Gryffindor is engrained into your very being," he lectured.

"I don't understand," she admitted.

He rolled his eyes. "Slytherins would never discuss their toils out in the open like that. Gryffindors have the innate need to boast about their plans to everyone."

"I thought we were alone!" she cried. "How was I to know that you had chosen that moment to sneak about the castle grounds?"

"There are always eyes and ears that can overhear things," he continued, "especially at Hogwarts. *You* should know that by now. You were lucky students did not hear you, or some very vicious rumors would have spread. Some very vicious, untrue rumors about you liking the Black Bat much more than you would ever willingly admit."

Hermione scoffed, "You're not a Black Bat. And you know most of the rumors would not have been untrue. All I want is to be your friend, Severus."

"Why? I am not like the house-elves," he countered. "I don't need you to save me. And I certainly don't need a *friend*."

"I'm not saving you. Is it so horrible that I find that you can be a most interesting conversationalist when not in one of your *moods*?" she asked. "And you do too need a friend. If not a friend, then certainly someone you can speak with that isn't completely inferior to you. I know you'll say that I am inferior to you, but you know as well as I do that whenever we battle wits, you enjoy it."

He considered this for a moment and inclined his head in a slight nod. "Perhaps."

Hermione nodded and could not help a smile crossing her face. "You like it because it's a challenge to best me. You cannot deny that."

"I suppose," he said and turned back to her, one of his dark brows lifting quizzically. "There is a problem, though."

"And what is that?" she asked quietly, her throat scratchy from all the needless exclamations issuing from her lips.

He met her gaze and held it for a long while until he spoke. "I do not want a friend."

"You don't know it, but you do," she tossed back.

Snape gave her a look of disbelief and shook his head, glancing away from her and down at the jar in his hands. "I want something much, much more than a friend. And it seems to me that it is something you are unwilling to give."

Hermione was sure that she looked like a fish standing there, with her eyes bulging and her mouth opening and closing. If she had gills, it would have completed the look, she was sure. But that was not what was important now. What was important now was that Severus Snape was being completely truthful with her, completely stripped for one moment of all sneaky tendencies, and had told her what he intended. No, not *intended*. What he *wanted*. And the admission floored her... completely floored her and stunned her into silence.

"You do not even understand what it is I want, apparently," he observed.

"I do understand completely, and that's the problem," she replied, finally, in a strangled whisper. Sure, she had thought about him on slightly different terms as of late, but it was still a very large shock to her to learn that he had contemplated her on the exact same things.

He looked at her then with wide eyes of his own, but she saw the familiar sign that he was closing up and pushing away. The man could be so hot and cold at times. "And that is why you should stay away from me, if you are unwilling to fulfill what I require."

"Severus..." she said quietly. "Don't be like that."

He grunted and walked out of the storeroom. "If you would kindly step out of there, I have a class to tend to."

Hermione followed him out. He shut the door with a slam, whispered a few locking incantations and wards. She thought it odd that he would use verbal spells with her standing right there and able to hear what he said. Especially since she was the last person to be trusted since her second year. He gave her a short glance and turned on his heel down the corridor, robes billowing about him.

As he moved away, she heard him mutter between the clapping of his boots on the stone floor, "I am too old for these games."

Someone was going to pay, but he did not know who it was necessarily going to be, yet. It could be his seventh-year Advanced Potions. Or perhaps an unknowing Hufflepuff scurrying in his path. But someone was going to pay for this. First for his rather horrible morning in which he had gotten an answer from Hermione that he had not expected. He had fully expected her to rebuff him, turn her nose up at him, and leave. It would have all been much simpler that way. But she had not. She stood there and practically admitted she wanted the same things, which scared him. Severus Snape had been terrified of the situation after that. She was not supposed to... to... like him. What he had done was intended to scare *her* away.

But then again, she had not *admitted* her feelings outright. She had only said she understood what he wanted. He supposed that was the most unsettling... realizing that he, indeed, was not alone in having such thoughts. It was realizing that now, if she did rebuff him in the future, it would hurt so much more.

Trying to dissect the conversation over and over had only led to him being preoccupied during his lessons that morning, nearly leading to a catastrophe of sorts when a Gryffindor nearly mixed in the wrong form of hellebore.

Now he was doubly cross because he had found out that someone (Minerva) had allowed all of the Bulgarian National Quidditch team into the castle to visit Krum. And evidently to cause a great commotion amongst the adoring students. On top of that, the dastardly Krum had set each of his admittedly handsome Bulgarian teammates around Hermione. They were all fawning over *her* like she was some sort of sports star herself. She looked uncomfortable around them, but played it off well, with her broken usage of Bulgarian that she had learned from Krum on a few trips to the country.

They seemed genuine in their fawning, though, and that's what troubled him. Especially when each of the men got up to the leave, they took her hand, bowed over it, and placed a kiss on the backs of fingers. Krum was the last to leave, and did not bow, but leaned over and kissed her cheek before disappearing out the side door to join his friends in a little Quidditch practice before the second half of the day started. What gave them the right to do that, anyway? Didn't they know what had happened earlier in the day? What gave her the right to enjoy it?

As soon as they were gone, Severus noticed Hermione visibly relax, leaning back in her chair and taking long sips of her tea. She glanced around the large Hall, her gaze landing on him in no inconspicuous manner. She lifted one finely-shaped brow high in question and made to stand up. He thought for a moment that she would come to sit beside him, making his mind race for something to say that would not anger her, but she continued on her way to sit beside a giggling Tonks.

"Severus," observed Minerva, "it has been a mighty long time since I've seen you so dour."

He glared at the witch, who dismissed his look with a wave of her hand. He had given such a look to her so many times in the past that she completely disregarded them now as it lacked its original potency.

She considered him for a moment longer before continuing. "I was headed down to the dungeons this morning to discuss with you the arrival of Viktor's friends, but I was unexpectedly waylaid by Peeves terrorizing a few first-years."

The old Gryffindor got more and more like Dumbledore every time she started out a story like this.

"On my way back to find you, I encountered something of the most peculiar nature."

If his face could have gone more pasty, it would have.

"Your conversation with Professor Granger was quite enlightening," she said.

"Was it?" he muttered, sipping his tea and trying to not look at her knowing eyes.

"I only suggest you should be more careful with the way you conduct your conversations, especially with such a delicate topic as you two were discussing," she warned. "It could be heard by the wrong people and spread around the castle."

Like you would make sure to do.

He knew the woman was just aching to go tell it on a mountain. Or a crag, in her case.

"Is there anything else, Minerva?"

"Aye," she said and nodded. "I do not condone workplace romances, Severus, just as Albus did not. They, more often times than not, end badly. And with children who could be affected by it, I must ask for you not to push forward."

Now *that* was a double standard if he had ever heard one. Weren't Tonks and Lupin seeing each other? They clearly were not quiet about it, either. Hadn't Minerva herself had a fling with Albus many years ago? Wasn't *she* the one who was trying to match up Krum and Hermione? Perhaps she was trying to protect a fellow Gryffindor from the likes of him.

"Perhaps you misheard the conversation, Minerva. Miss Granger could not ever want more than a friendship with me," he stated blandly.

Minerva nodded. "I do not want to begrudge you some happiness, but tread lightly, Severus. I urge you to think about what the students might say, if you take up with a former student... one barely out of school."

"Noted."

"And what trouble could occur between you and Viktor," she said finally.

So *that* was the whole purpose of this conversation. She thought Viktor a better match for the girl. Unfortunately, Severus had to agree, but definitely begrudgingly.

"If you are finished, I need to go prepare some things for my next class," he excused himself.

Minerva sighed and told him she was indeed finished. For being a romantic to everyone else, the woman sure did not show it when he was in context. Severus quickly stood up and made his way toward the Hall entrance, only to feel someone watching him closely. He turned slightly to the side, spying the fact that both Tonks and Hermione were the ones watching him escape. It was only slightly gratifying when Hermione quickly snapped her eyes back to Tonks and blushed deeply.

He grumbled to himself. Someone was definitely going to pay dearly for this decidedly horrid day.

Viktor's Prerogative

Chapter 15 of 29

Hermione turned on her heels and headed quickly down toward the dungeons. Suddenly remembering what she was wearing when the cold dungeon air prickled her skin, she crossed her arms over her chest. It was definitely not what one would wear if they intended to help with brewing potions? or intended to have a serious conversation with a possible? whatever.

Here is another chapter that I hope you all will enjoy. A HUGE thank you to those of you who have left me your kind comments. I love them all. I am always accepting of constructive criticism as well if you find something is not up to par...

Shana, you're awesome.

Chapter 15- Viktor's Prerogative

After two horribly exhausting days trying to stay as far away from Snape as was humanly possible, Hermione was ready to go insane. Not that she *wanted* to stay away from him necessarily, but she had needed some space...some time...to decide what she was going to do about this matter. That little experience in the storeroom was enough to completely turn her world upside down. She had been unable to shake him from her mind, even during her classes when she should have been concentrating on her students.

For so long she had only thought it was some juvenile infatuation she had entertained. But now, here it was, presented to her in real life...the opportunity to get much closer to Severus Snape.

Who would have even pegged Severus Snape capable of lust? Or even of "like"? The man had never shown anyone more than a sneer, or given anything else than an intentionally hurtful comment. And yet, here he was saying that he wanted to know her much more... personally... than she had ever planned. Just the fact that she had heard from his own lips...such impossibly interesting, enticing lips they were...that he was even *fond* of her was startling enough.

As far as she was concerned, her answer to what she would do with this quagmire had been made up the minute Severus had pushed her back up against the shelves in the potions storeroom in a completely non-threatening, but wholly dominant, way. She had always been a sucker when it came to strong men, only because they were just so hard to find nowadays. Even Viktor was a little too in touch with a more feminine side, like many Wizard and Muggle celebrities were. Snape had conviction. He was extremely intelligent. He was masculine in every sense of the word; at least to her he was. That edge of unpredictability and danger constantly followed him around. What she enjoyed most about him was that he was going to be and do what he wanted, no matter what others said. This was who he was, take it or leave it.

And she was definitely not ready to leave it.

It was now just a matter of letting him know this, without making a fool of herself. He certainly would not appreciate it if she was timid about it. But he did not seem keen on being around her much either, missing meals in the Great Hall and sitting as far away from her as he could at the faculty meeting Friday morning.

Viktor's friends had been helpful, though, in making her forget about Snape some of the time. And if anything, it was doing a world of good making Snape jealous, spending time with each one of them, and now out to London on an evening with Viktor for her birthday.

Hermione sat across from the brute of a man, watching him carefully, wondering if he could tell her sudden change of heart. If he did, he was playing it off very, very well...and she knew he was not that great an actor. His real thoughts always showed on his face.

Was it so horrible that she was only slightly regretful for thinking of Snape while being shown an exceptionally lovely time out on the town in London? This confused and unsettled her even more. Normally she would be completely ashamed to be thinking of another man, while another... another one that she *should* have been entertaining thoughts of love and marriage with...was spending gobs of money and pampering her to the best of his abilities.

He had even set her loose in a two-floor bookstore, and had endured two hours there before finally pulling her out the door and to dinner.

But she wasn't ashamed. She wasn't ashamed about thinking about Snape.

"Herm-own-ninny, are you vell?"

She jumped slightly, pulling her gaze from the fireplace beside their dinner table in the posh, expensive little restaurant in Diagon Alley. Blinking a few times cleared her thoughts and the sight of dancing orange flames from her eyes, allowing her to focus on Viktor's concerned features.

"I am," she said and sighed. "I'm just... thinking."

"About?"

Hermione shrugged. "How amazing you are."

He let out a pleased chuckle. "I am glad that you think that, my Herm-own-ninny."

The comment crawled up her spine, causing her to shiver from discomfort.

"Viktor..." she began, but stopped herself for a moment. "You've really outdone yourself for my birthday, but I don't deserve it, really."

"Oh, yes you do," he said. "You just say this because you think I will be wanting more from you for it."

"Won't you?" she asked, sitting a little straighter in her seat.

He shook his head. "I cannot believe you think so little of me, Herm-own-ninny. Yes, I wouldn't mind your attentions, but I would never expect anything."

Hermione sighed, feeling a blush creep to her cheeks in response to his statement. "It's not that I think little of you. I just am a little worried you're getting the wrong idea here."

"Wrong idea?" he asked.

"I've said that you can try to win my heart, but I only meant it playfully. I never wanted you to really woo me," she said. So much for letting him down easily. "I just want you to be my friend, Viktor. I love you... as a friend. But I already went through a relationship with a friend that almost killed me from the inside out."

Viktor nodded his head and steepled his fingers in front of his lips. "Ron is different than I am."

"I know that, Viktor, but..." she paused. "I don't want to take that risk. I couldn't bear to lose you."

He considered her carefully for a long minute before shifting in his seat and letting out a low, resigned sigh. "Herm-own-ninny, I really do care for you. You are not some conquest like you have seen before with me."

Well, he *was* putting up more of a fight than she had first thought he might. Perhaps there was more behind his advances than she had originally believed.

"Viktor, no," she sighed.

"Are you absolutely certain?" he asked.

The thought that she was severing any relationship she might have had with this wonderful, handsome man for the snarky Potions master crossed her mind for a fleeting second. Was she really that insane to do this? She could have had a wonderful time with Viktor if she played into his advances. She did love him, even if it wasn't in a completely romantic way. But now she was accepting her fate with Snape... and the possibility of a relationship that would never be a smooth one.

She was daft, nuttier than squirrel droppings.

"Yes I am," she nodded. "More certain than I've ever been of anything in my life."

He nodded his head quietly in acceptance of her wishes, and sighed. "I suppose I knew this. I only did not want to believe it."

"I know," she admitted. "I don't want to believe the fact I'm passing up this opportunity with Viktor Krum."

Viktor laughed loudly at that. "Well, you must know that my door is always open for you."

She knew that he would not accept this resolutely. This was not the type of man he was, one to sit back and not fight for what he wanted.

"So who is the man you would rather pursue you?" he asked.

"There isn't another," she evaded. "And even if there was one, I wouldn't tell you. You'd go try to scare him off."

Not that it would work with Snape.

"I would," he said with a roguish grin. "It is my prerogative."

"I'll remember that."

They returned to the castle a few hours later, but still early into the evening and still friends. Hermione felt as though a weight had lifted off of her shoulders, but a new sort of dread was settling back down on her. How was she going to tell Snape about all this anyway? Fortunately, or unfortunately...only time would prove that...an opportunity presented itself that evening as she was headed back towards Gryffindor Tower and ran directly into Tonks.

"Woah, Hermione. You're back awfully early," said the pink-haired witch. "I'd've thought you'd be indisposed by now."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Hopeful, are you?"

"Is it that apparent?" she asked. "Juicy information is hard to come by all the way out here in the middle of Scotland."

"I highly doubt that," Hermione countered.

Tonks shrugged her shoulders and wrapped her arm in Hermione's, pulling her down the corridor and away from the tower. "How was it, anyway?"

"Perfect," she said, "like you'd expect from him."

"And still no shag?" Tonks asked.

Hermione scoffed. "No! I like him, but you know I don't fancy him like that."

Tonks grunted. "Do you know how many women have tried to get in that man's pants and have been unable to? Here he is throwing himself at you, and *you* push him away."

"Viktor doesn't throw himself at anyone," Hermione responded. "Bulgarian men are incapable of showing affection like that."

"Please," Tonks argued. "I know what he's been doing to get your affections."

Hermione nodded and looked down the long corridor. "And as much as I appreciate them, I can't accept them."

Tonks shook her head in dismay, muttering something about being blind and dumb, but looked back up at Hermione with wide eyes. "Who is he?"

"Who is what?" Hermione asked, confused.

"Obviously you got a better offer from someone else," Tonks fished. "I know you are not that thick skulled to pass up good opportunities. If there was a better one than Viktor... I'm just saying it makes sense that you wouldn't want him. Though, it's hard to imagine who could be better than Viktor with the present state of things. And if you say Remus, he's not going to live to see the next full moon."

"The full moon is in two days." Hermione laughed. "And Azkaban wouldn't suit you, Tonks."

"I suppose not," she conceded. "But who is it?"

"There's no one, really," Hermione replied, but knew Tonks would not leave it at that.

Tonks laughed. "Uh-huh. I believe that."

"Well..." Hermione felt a blush creep to her cheeks.

"Come on, Hermione, out with it!" Tonks instructed. "Please tell me who could possibly be better than Viktor or my Remus."

Hermione hesitated for a moment, looking up at the other witch's inquisitive, dark eyes. "It's not that he's better than either of them. He's just more my type."

"Your type?" Tonks asked.

"You know, the strong, intelligent type," Hermione offered. "Sort of."

"I see," Tonks answered, tapping one forefinger against pursed lips. "Well, it has to be someone here, because you haven't had much time outside the grounds recently except for Draco's wedding."

Hermione pursed her lips into a thin line, praying that the witch did not make the connection that she was hurdling towards. Tonks stopped suddenly, letting out a gasp of air. "You're kidding me."

Hermione shook her head, ashamed and unable to meet Tonks' eyes.

"I *knew* something was going on there! I just can't believe I didn't see it right away. Usually I'm pretty good at that stuff," Tonks chided herself.

"Nothing's 'going on' there," Hermione whined. "I've just been curious about him."

"Right," Tonks said, incredulously. "Speaking of which, he was looking for you earlier."

"He was? When? He knew I was going out with Viktor..." Hermione stopped herself. Tonks had just gotten all the confirmation she needed in that little outburst.

Tonks laughed. "Nothing going on, eh?"

"No," Hermione said. "Not yet at least."

"You know, normally I would think someone was mad to be talking about this *with*him in context," Tonks added. "But surely you're in your right mind."

"Sometimes I don't think I am," Hermione admitted. "I mean, what the bloody hell am I doing thinking I could have a relationship with him? Oh... I am daft."

Tonks laughed again. "You know, he might not be so bad. And if anyone could stand that man, it's you."

"Thanks." Hermione sighed. "You think?"

"I do," Tonks said. "But in the circumstance of the common witch, you're one egg short of a dozen to be going *after*him."

Hermione chuckled lowly. "You know, I'm not quite sure who is pursuing who right now. I'm confused. And we really shouldn't be talking about this out here where others could hear us."

"I think I'd know if someone were around and shouldn't be," Tonks boasted.

"But Snape..."

"Isn't here," Tonks cut in. "He was looking for you earlier. A batch of the Wolfsbane St. Mungo's brewed was contaminated, so the Healers contacted him to help with an antidote and brewing some more of the potion before the next moon, and I think Snape needed help."

Hermione shook her head. "Since when has Snape asked for help? And why could he not ask another of the other many qualified teachers here?"

"True, he never has, but he *was* looking for *you*," Tonks pointed out.

"Should I go down there?" Hermione asked.

Tonks nodded. "I would. It could be important, and not related to you-know-what."

"I should think 'you-know-what' is pretty bloody important," Hermione said and parted from Tonks. "I'll see you tomorrow at breakfast."

"If you're not there, I won't worry," Tonks said, waving her off.

Hermione turned on her heels and headed quickly down toward the dungeons. Suddenly remembering what she was wearing when the cold dungeon air prickled her skin, she crossed her arms over her chest. It was definitely not what one would wear if they intended to help with brewing potions... or intended to have a serious conversation with a possible... whatever.

The door to the Potions classroom was open slightly, and she heard someone moving about. Maybe he*had* needed help, but for him to break down and ask *for*her help...

She pushed the door open further and stepped inside, not finding the man in question, but a door opened back into his private lab area. There she found him hunched over a large cauldron. He did not bother to look up at her, and continued to stir the concoction.

"Fifteen points from Gryffindor, Miss Granger, for keeping me waiting."

"But..."

"No buts," he said flatly and pointed over to an empty cauldron.

"I didn't know I was serving a detention," Hermione said sarcastically.

"Wolfsbane, now!" he responded curtly, flicking his wand to pull out the lab bench for her to sit on.

"Why me?"

He stopped for a moment and glanced up at her quickly. "Because I enjoy your company more than the others."

Hermione could not believe he had admitted such a thing. But he had, and it made her smile to know how difficult it must have been for him to say it. She nodded her head resolutely, walking over to the empty cauldron and sitting down.

Severus' Punishment

Chapter 16 of 29

Severus had never actually worked side-by-side with another person before or in such close quarters. Potions was a singularly solitary pursuit, and that was why it had suited him all these years. Nothing was more satisfying than being left alone, and never had he relished spending time with people he did not like, or people that simply could not measure up to his standards as an intellectual. It was a field tailor made for a person like him.

Some sherbet lemon for everyone! Not really a lemon, but you get the idea... I'm just bribing you with sweets because cliffhangers are evil.

Chapter 16- Severus' Punishment

Severus had never actually worked side-by-side with another person before or in such close quarters. Potions was a singularly solitary pursuit, and that was why it had suited him all these years. Nothing was more satisfying than being left alone, and never had he relished spending time with people he did not like, or people that simply could not measure up to his standards as an intellectual. It was a field tailor made for a person like him.

Tonight was different, though.

Whether he tried to convince himself that she was in his private lab for the sole purpose of helping brew much-needed potions or not, he knew why he had really asked her to help. Sure, Minerva could have helped him. As a matter of fact, any of the other professors in the school could have helped him... but when he had been presented with this problem, the only solution that had come right to his mind was to invite *her* to help him.

It was laughable. He had asked *her* for help! Him! Severus Snape!

But she had been out... out on a date with Krum, which had disheartened him. He had sufficiently pushed that thought out of his mind when he had first learned about it a week ago, and had only been reminded of her engagements when he had been searching for her. Tonks had been the one to remind him. She had also been the one to give him that curious look, wondering why he was searching so thoroughly for Hermione. He knew well enough Hermione's and Tonks' affections as sister-like confidants. She would start to wonder even more. And what would Hermione say if Tonks questioned her? Would Tonks let it slip to Minerva?

He had retreated to his dungeons, worrying over this silly little thing, feeling surprisingly defeated, though he could not quite understand why. It certainly was not the end of the world not having that know-it-all around.

Or was it?

He had not expected her come at all. He had expected her to have a wonderful time with the rich Bulgarian, and end up in his bed. All signs had been leading up to that climax, as it were, why should he have thought anything less? The girl had a head on her shoulders, he would give her that, and given the choice he would have thought she would choose Krum over him. He would admit, albeit begrudgingly, she *should* end up with the Quidditch star, but she had not gone to Krum's chambers. Instead she had come to the dungeons quite early into the evening. Perhaps it was a good sign for him, but he was not one to get his hopes up, even if all it meant was that she had forgone a free evening to be cramped up inside a small lab with him and hunched over boiling cauldrons.

He dared not look up at her when she had arrived and for the next hour or so, worried that his eyes would betray his normally steeled countenance. Of course, the potion he was working on took a great deal of attention as well, and he would have been sure to lose all concentration if he had looked at her. He was glad he had enough foresight to think of that too when he did have the first chance to sit back and relax while his potion was simmering.

She sat in front of him, slightly off to the side, at a work bench originally cluttered with a menagerie of things he could find no other suitable place for. That curly brown hair of hers was rolled up precariously on her head, her wand holding it place. He smirked at that. Ollivander would have turned over in his grave if he knew his wand was being put to this use, but at least there was no "foolish wand waving" going on.

The heat of the room had increased ten fold since her entrance, not just from her presence, but also from the two cauldrons set over tall orange flames. It had not really affected him much until now; and only now did it finally affect him indirectly as he could finally feast his eyes upon her without her knowledge. Seeing the renegade curls plastered to the back of her long neck and the fine sheen of perspiration across the smooth skin of her back, elegantly displayed in a rather fetching and revealing dark blue dress, was doing things to his libido he never thought possible. Had she not even taken a moment to change out of her finery before traipsing down to help him?

Not that he was complaining.

Watching her work was cathartic in an odd way... the way she knew exactly where to reach for the correct ingredient, or the way she measured them out. The fine muscles in her back moved and shifted as she ground some seeds with a mortar and pestle. Her long fingers carefully held the sharp knife, slicing a root vertically, and then moved quickly up to brush a wisp of curl out of her eyes and behind a perfectly formed ear.

Sure, he had been overcome by her appearance on occasion before this, clean and acting the perfect lady. But he found quickly that he liked her much better this way, even though he was pretty certain there was *one* other way he would enjoy much more, but that was a fanciful wish at best.

"I never thought I'd say this," he heard her mutter faintly, her stool scratching on the stone ground, "but it's rather warm in here."

"Excuse me?" he questioned.

She turned to look at him, fixing him into place for the first time with a most captivating glance. "I'm usually freezing in the dungeons, and here I am perspiring so horribly."

"I am sure the classroom is much like you remember it, if the heat is too stifling," he said, wishing that his nasty tone would change. It did not seem to affect her much.

"I'm sure," she said and sighed, turning back to her cauldron. "This should be ready in the morning. If you need another batch, I can go fetch another cauldron..."

"No, no," he replied, stopping her. "St. Mungo's does not serve that many with lycanthropy. They simply do not have someone qualified enough to make the potion correctly. If they had, they would not be in this mess."

"I suppose not," she said. "I had thought it was just a faulty ingredient, though."

He shrugged and turned back to his work. The antidote to the botched Wolfsbane took a shorter time to brew, but it could wait until morning to bottle up.

"Will you need help in the morning to vial these?" she asked, turning to look at him again.

"I believe I can manage that on my own, Hermione," he said.

Though I would not be abject if you so chose to join me in the morning. Or better yet, stay the night with me?

"You've helped a great deal," he said, his gratitude at the tip of his tongue. The look she gave him was one of complete disbelief, knowing it was there as well, without having to hear it outright.

"You're welcome, Severus," she said and began organizing her ingredients back to the way they were in a nervous sort of way. He stood up slowly, stretching his long legs out, the joints crackling in protest and made his way over to her, staying her hands. She started at the touch and jumped back slightly, bumping squarely into him, and then swirling around to face him. "Sorry."

"Do not worry, Granger," he said.

She rolled her eyes. "For some reason, your usage of *Granger* holds an amazing amount of affection for me."

"Miss Granger," he said again.

"As does that," she replied quietly, hoarsely. "I was the only one you ever called Miss."

"You were the only one who deserved the title," he said, "no matter how much I may have said and shown otherwise."

Hermione let a slow smile cross her lips. "I like Hermione, though."

"Hermione," he said. He liked the sound of it as well coming from his mouth, but not as much as he liked the way his name rolled off her tongue.

He had not realized until now that he had pressed himself up against her, and she was leaning back against the workbench. All he would have to do was lift her up slightly, and she would be at a perfect angle for...

Especially in that impossibly short dress.

Stop thinking like that, Snape! She only wants to be your friend and nothing more.

Her hands lifted from her sides and rested on his chest for a moment before pushing him away with a firm, but not overly angry, force. He let the momentum carry him backwards, unaware that the stool stood directly behind him until his legs connected with it and he fell back onto it in a sitting position. For a moment, he thought she was going to laugh at him in disgust, and then leave him there to wallow in his own misery.

"You should know," she began slowly, walking toward him. Her hands were on his knees for a moment, spreading them so that she could fit between.

"What should I know?" he asked, trying to put on his bored tone, but it was clearly evident that he was getting very bothered by her actions, especially as she moved ever closer to him.

"You should know that I don't appreciate being dominated into submission like that all the time," she said.

"And you should know that's who I am, and what I do," he said flatly, meeting her yes directly, feeling slightly uncomfortable being in this state of equality with her. He had no trouble looking down on people, but meeting them eye to eye always made him anxious.

She apparently knew this though. "Severus, if anything is going to work between us, we're both going to have to change a little bit."

"I've already told you no one changes," he said.

"No, they don't, but they *can* learn to be tolerant of certain things," she said.

He raised a brow at her, challenging her.

Hermione let out a short chuckle and shook her head. "If you really do want me, then you'll learn to do that, or you won't have me."

"Are you issuing an ultimatum, Miss Granger?"

Of course she is, you dolt!

Truth be told, he still could not get his brain around the fact that she was standing there so close to him and telling him that she too wanted him. Well, at least that she was fine with this being more than a friendship, or being a tolerable working relationship.

"I believe I am... Severus," she said, his name hanging in the air as her hands found his cheek and brushed away some of the limp black hair hanging in his eyes. "Do you want me?"

"Could you be more straightforward?" he asked.

"Gryffindor," she said. "Something else you'll have to be tolerant of."

"Just as you'll have to learn it's not in my nature just to lay everything out at your feet," he said.

Hermione let out a low laugh. "Trust me, Severus, I've already been more than tolerant of that since the term started. But you still haven't answered my question. Do you want me?"

He met her brown eyes, holding her gaze for a moment, trying to divine some information from her, but it was hopeless. "I should think whether I want you or not was rather obvious, Hermione."

Her lips quirked into a small smile, her thigh brushing against his rather obvious arousal. "Yes, quite."

This time she smiled wickedly, moving her soft fingers across his lips for a moment. He knew what she was planning to do, but he had not been prepared for how short it would be. In a blink of an eye, her lips had brushed across his, as light as a feather and pulled back. By the time he had reached up for her, to pull her back to him, to kiss her appropriately, he was grasping at empty air. He looked toward the door to see her escaping and stood quickly to follow her. Strangely she only pulled her wand from her mass of hair, holding it at the ready.

"Don't follow me," she said.

"And why the bloody hell not?" he asked.

"Because," she replied slowly and stopped at the door.

"You're insufferable," he said.

"Not insufferable, Severus," she said. "I am only getting back at you for doing this to me in your storeroom the other day. You had your chance to snog me then. Why didn't you just do it? I was putty in your hands."

He sighed. "I didn't think you would appreciate it."

"I would have appreciated it much, much more than you pulling away from me and leaving me cold," she said. "So this is your punishment."

"Punishment?" he gave her an incredulous look. "Hermione Granger is handing out a punishment to me."

"I am." She nodded towards his nether regions, "And I think it will get my point across as you try to tame that beast tonight without me."

With that, she was out the door and out of the classroom in short order, leaving him standing there completely dumbfounded... for the first time in a long time.

Sprouting Blueberries

Chapter 17 of 29

Hermione laughed. ?No, Severus. For dinner? I need to know how to dress.?

?With clothes,? he replied, in a completely serious tone. He stood up and straightened his frock coat. ?Though, if you were to wear nothing, I would not complain.?

Thank you all so much! You're all quite amazing, and I'm glad you're enjoying!

Chapter 17- Sprouting Blueberries

"So? How'd it go?"

Hermione barely had a moment to sit down and situate herself at the head table before Tonks was probing for information. Hermione, however, was not in the mood to go straight into details and giggle like a little schoolgirl. She had exhausted every possible scenario in her head last night while trying to fall asleep, and when she did manage to fall asleep, it was riddled with dreams of him and what she had almost allowed him to do in the laboratory.

She was sure anyone would agree that after a fitful night of pseudo-sleep, giggling or even thinking about the man in question was the last thing her pounding head needed. Tonks should have picked up on that.

"Oh, come on," Tonks said. "You can't stay mum like that."

"Watch me," Hermione said, reaching over for the water kettle and bag of tea.

It sounded like Tonks whined. Hermione let a satisfied smirk cross her lips.

"I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to end this right now, if your being around him makes you as snarky as he is."

Hermione rolled her neck slightly from side to side, trying to get the stiff muscles to loosen a bit. Tonks continued to glare at her for not immediately dishing on the evening she had spent with Snape, and then at her own cup of tea until Remus hobbled into the Great Hall. He sat down slowly into his seat, letting out a long sigh. One day until the full moon and already she could see the change taking its toll on him, instead of directly afterward. It was such a vile, incurable disease.

"How are you two lovely ladies this morning?" he asked, leaning over to kiss Tonks on the cheek.

"I'm fine," Tonks said. "Hermione, on the other hand..."

"Bad date last night?" he asked, raising a sandy-blond brow at her. "Viktor didn't seem too happy this morning either."

"You saw him?" Hermione asked.

Remus nodded. "He was with his mates, and they were discussing women. Well, what I understood of it anyway. Mostly just body language and whatnot. I'm definitely not an expert at Bulgarian."

"Well, I suppose I was the topic that started that then," Hermione said. "I told him to back off, but in nicer terms of course."

"I see," Remus said. "He was good for you, though. Why?"

Tonks made to open her mouth to answer her paramour, but Hermione quickly silenced her with a well-placed kick to her shin. The witch let out a loud yelp and grabbed at her leg. Remus only laughed at her. "I see, then. You're keeping a secret from me."

"I'm keeping a secret from a lot of people," she muttered under her breath.

"It didn't sound like Viktor was planning to give up on you anytime soon," he said. "Be careful there."

Hermione sighed. "But he seemed fine last night when I told him I didn't want to see him romantically. I thought he might just give up and move on and find some other witch richer and more beautiful than I am. I mean, he is Viktor Krum, Quidditch Star. Surely there are legions of beautiful women out there just throwing themselves at his feet."

"There are," Tonks said.

"But he wants you," Remus added. "Not them. And if you don't mind me saying, you obviously haven't been looking at yourself in a good mirror recently."

Hermione felt a low blush creep to her cheeks, but she hid it with a sip of her tea instead. She could feel the force and swish of the air created from his black robes and swift glide before he even said a thing. Or perhaps she had just felt the electricity of his presence?

"Ladies," said a deep, silky voice from behind them. "Remus."

He sat down in his usual spot, leaving Minerva's space free between him and Hermione. Severus moved about gathering a few bits of food on his plate, and a goblet of pumpkin juice, obviously trying to show that he was not concerned that Hermione was looking at him inquisitively. It took him a few moments to look up through a curtain of dark hair, though, and instead of remarking on her blank stare, he glanced over to Remus.

"The potion is ready for you when you need it, Lupin," he said.

"Thank you," Remus said with a nod and turned back to his meal, as did Snape. It was a strained silence at best, and Hermione always wondered why it was when Remus and Severus spoke to each other. They had gotten over all the Sirius and James wrongs from the past, hadn't they? Nonetheless, though, the head table clouded over with only the sounds of metal utensils hitting the pewter plates sporadically.

Hermione found that she was not very hungry, and only picked at the muffin in front of her, considering closely the blueberries inside it.

"You won't grow a blueberry bush by staring at it, Miss Granger, no matter how magical you are."

Hermione looked up quickly to see Professor Sprout walking past Snape and down a few seats for her breakfast. The plump teacher smiled, her cherubic cheeks glowing pink with mirth. It was hard not to smile whenever the woman smiled at you, no matter how bad you felt.

"Thank you, Professor," Hermione said and pushed the plate away from herself, elbowing Tonks to stop laughing at her expense.

"You're just lucky Snape didn't comment on it," Tonks said lowly, but still loud enough that Severus would clearly hear the comment.

Hermione grumbled and glared at Tonks. "I have some papers to grade and a lesson to research. If you need me, I'll be in my office or in the library."

Her whereabouts not necessarily hinted at in the most veiled of terms, Hermione knew that Severus would seek her out eventually that day. Or perhaps he would not, only to play with her emotions some more. Perhaps it would be good to be completely free of the man for a day, now that she had issued her provocations. Like a draught wizard chess match, the next move was up to him now, and he knew that well enough. It would be his choice if he continued to confuse and play with her, or actually get down to the physical business of checkmating.

"Sometimes I wonder," Hermione muttered to herself, placing her quill down on the table beside the stack of essays. How could anyone think that this rubbish was worthy of a passing grade? It was like reading one of Harry's or Ron's essays over and over, never able to change anything to add more detail or to even make the writing appropriate English, including sentences with subjects and predicates.

"You wonder what?"

She jumped at the sudden intrusion into her quiet little cubby, but relaxed when she realized who it was. Severus was never this predictable. What was he doing here anyway? But then again, she knew how the male mind worked, and in the pursuit of sexual pleasure, any male mind was the most predictable thing in the world.

"This drivels," she said and reached up to pinch the bridge of her nose. She really should have had more for breakfast than the tea and the bit of muffin. Her caffeinated energy was quickly crashing and causing her original headache to worsen.

"Now you know why I am the way I am," he said.

Hermione shook her head. "You are like you are for other reasons. This just catalyzes the nastiness."

"I suppose," he said and sat down into the chair catty-corner from her. He pulled a leather-bound book toward him from her stack, considered it carefully for a moment and then pushed it back. "Muggle?"

"Hm?"

"The book," he said. "Is it Muggle?"

"Oh, that," she said, drawing herself from the void of her thoughts. "Yes. It'll add a little bit of Muggle-study to my next lecture. A lot of the things magical people don't understand in the Muggle world are like the things Muggles don't understand in our world. Transfiguration is just one of those things."

He smirked. "That's an entirely different class."

"It's called cross-curriculum teaching, Severus," she said.

"That would be like allowing wand work in my classes," he said.

Hermione nodded. "Exactly."

"Never." He shook his head.

"And you can use Arithmancy in Divination, though I wouldn't wish to muddle such a sound science as Arithmancy with the reading of tea leaves," she said. "We really incorporate a lot more than we think."

"But Potions is Potions," he said.

Hermione scoffed and rolled her eyes. "You know, it could do you a world of good to see outside the box for a change."

"I like my box, thank you," Severus answered and leaned back in his seat, crossing his arms over his chest. Hermione went back to her grading under the watchful eye of her former professor-turned friend-turned... whatever. It made her slightly uncomfortable that he was sitting so close and watching every word she wrote or correction she made, but it was also quite rewarding when he gave her a satisfied smirk after reading over one of the essays she had already gone over.

Hermione knew what the smirk meant and only chuckled lowly. "What do you expect? After seven years with you grading my papers... I should hope I at least learned how to grade properly."

"You must have seen Potter's and Weasley's essays then," he said. "I do not recall an over usage of red ink on your own parchments."

"I saw theirs," she said, "but nothing compared to Neville's."

He grumbled. "How that dunderhead made it into Auror training, I'll never know."

"Because you weren't his Potions professor the last two years," she said. "You intimidated him so much and he was confused easily."

She knew that this conversation was getting them nowhere by reminiscing about times past, but she was enjoying it, strangely enough. It was just skirting around the real reason he had surely come to speak with her about, but the ball was in his court. He seemed to sense where her train of thought was going and let the conversation drop after her mention of Neville and him being intimidating, considering her closely. Hermione glanced quickly at his eyes and then darted them back to the parchment in front of her, feeling a blush on her cheeks.

"I see the brave lioness retreated into her den," he remarked.

"She's resting," Hermione replied.

"Is she now?" he asked, crooking a brow up. "Then perhaps she will make a reappearance later on this evening?"

Hermione paused for a moment, her mouth falling open at his comment and question. It almost sounded hopeful. The last thing she would have bet on was Snape actually enjoying her taking control of that situation last night. "Excuse me?"

"It was refreshing for a change not having to dominate," he replied with a suggestive tone to his voice. "I suppose I am like that in every aspect of my life, and I am ashamed to say that I am tired of being that way all the time."

Hermione scoffed. "Who are you and what did you do with Snape?"

He gave her a roll of his eyes, settling back into his impassive state. "I assure you, Miss Granger, no one has made effective Polyjuice Potion in this school since your fourth year. I took care of protecting the ingredients after Crouch."

No one ever quite said "Miss Granger" like he did. A large part of it was his voice, and anyone under Polyjuice could imitate that, but in the way he said, it almost made it sound like an endearment. No one else had ever made it sound so nasty and so... so... amazing at the same time. It had to be him.

"I believe you," she said.

"Would you care to join me for dinner this evening, to discuss this more in depth?" he asked, pinning her to her seat with his gaze, daring her to decline his offer.

Hermione chuckled, "Severus, I wasn't going to say no, even if you were put up to this as some horrible prank."

"And if you found out that this was all a jest?" he asked. "And I had no interest in you at all, except for a horrible little game and winning a bet?"

"I believe you have more respect for me than that, even if you show otherwise outwardly," she said.

He nodded and sighed. "I do."

"Where should we meet?" Hermione asked.

"Outside the front gates at seven," he said.

Hermione tried not to wonder why he had requested meeting her outside the front gates, but it was hopeless for Hermione Granger not to wonder and try to find an answer. Perhaps he was just not in practice? Or perhaps he did not want to be seen with her inside the castle? It was most likely just a fanciful thing, or a Muggle tradition to be picked up at your door, but still... it would have been nice...

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Out," he said.

Hermione laughed. "No, Severus. For dinner? I need to know how to dress."

"With clothes," he replied in a completely serious tone. He stood up and straightened his frock coat. "Though, if you were to wear nothing, I would not complain."

"You know what I mean," she said.

He rolled his eyes in disgust. "Witches and their clothes! Is that all you ever think about?"

"Not all of us have such fashion sense as yourself," she said sarcastically. "Though I admit having only one style of clothes to wear all the time does have its appealing qualities."

He moved toward the door of her office, the one she had not heard him sneak through, and stopped to look at her. "Choose whatever you like, Miss Granger. You know what I shall be wearing."

Hermione chuckled. Of course he would give her that roundabout answer, wouldn't he?

Hades and Persephone

Severus sat quietly, watching her in the glowing light of the small grove.

He really had no idea where he should go from here. The book he had read with ideas for dates had only gotten him up to this point.

::clears throat:: Well, another chapter. I hope you all enjoy. Some of this is based on the Hades/Persephone myth, and I thought of it on my own...no infringement on anyone else who used Snape and Hermione as Hades and Persephone and wrote it in their wonderful stories.

Hugs to Shanastay for being a wonderful beta.

Chapter 18- Hades and Persephone

Hermione spent much of the afternoon and early evening trying to figure out what she should wear to such an auspicious occasion as an actual "date" with Severus Snape. She could dress down in Muggle jeans and a jumper. Or she could dress "up" like before in one of the still-transfigured dresses from Draco's wedding. After trying many different things on and transfiguring a few more articles of clothing, she felt awkward in everything she owned.

And she had one agonizingly large headache. The characteristic cramps and other vile symptoms had only made their appearance later in the afternoon.

It seemed fitting enough.

So, rather than choose anything too suggestive that would make the man overly aroused, as she was not planning on letting anything happen just yet, she ended up with a brown skirt and a fuzzy off-white sweater. It was still attractive enough, with the knee-length skirt and high slit in the side, but it also covered herself a little bit more on the top so that he would not get too many ideas while at dinner.

Not that she thought said "ideas" were going to be trouble.

It was a quarter past seven when she was rushing out the front gates, knowing that this was certainly not the way to impress Severus, in any relationship. Showing up late was something that seemed to grate on his nerves more than anything. It would usually do the same to her, too, but today she just did not care if she was a little late or not.

"It's about time," said his deep voice.

She stopped in her tracks, turning to her right to find him sitting on a stone bench there, arms crossed over his chest. Damn him and his unchangeable condescending ways. "You're lucky I even came."

"And what is that supposed to mean to me, Miss Granger?" he asked.

Hermione raised a curious brow. "Shall I go back to my chambers and not allow you entrance? And then you'll see what it should mean to you."

"You are very testy tonight," he said.

"If you are allowed to be testy, so am I," she said. "It works both ways."

He nodded his head slightly and appeared as though he were trying to suppress a smile from forming on his lips. "Shall we... Hermione?"

Hermione looked at his offered arm and had to do a double take, looking up at his face for a few fleeting seconds before back at his arm. She had never, ever expected him to extend such a simple courtesy toward her (or anyone for that matter) even if she were his date for the evening. Just the fact that he would do something only the perfect gentleman would do was astounding enough. But to have it extended toward her was something completely different.

She took the few steps over to him, sliding her arm between his and his body, resting her hand on the crook of his elbow. He seemed to let out a thankful sigh that she had accepted the gesture and relaxed the tenseness in his arm in such a way that the hold rested against his body now as it should.

"I didn't bring my wand," she said. "So be forewarned."

"You trust so much in me?" he asked.

Hermione looked up at him. "Shouldn't I?"

"No one ever has," he replied. "Why should I think people would start now?"

"There was never an instance that I didn't trust you," she said.

"Never?" he asked. "You never had any doubts about loyalty after... Dumbledore...?"

Hermione sighed, adjusting her hold on his arm as they walked. "For an instant, perhaps. But you had a chance to hurt Harry as he was throwing curses at you afterward. You didn't. You had your one chance after all these years of hating him and his father, to at least get one satisfying blow in. You didn't. That said more to me than anything else."

He grunted and shook his head, looking forward. She took the opportunity to look at his profile, noting that he seemed different. Not in a bad sense, either. He seemed relaxed, almost laid back in her presence, not as on edge as he normally was, or as impassive and nasty as he usually was.

Perhaps this was completely normal for him to be taking a woman out for dinner. It could have been entirely possible, and Hermione knew she should have never thought otherwise about him. Just because he was not what one would see as classically handsome, surely there were plenty of women out there that had found him attractive in other ways.

Merlin knew that there were Death Eater women out there just perfect for his often times sadistic nature. She had, admittedly, only been a student before, and he could have had many trysts before she even came to know him as a teacher, as well as after. He was a secretive man, after all.

As Hermione looked closer, though, she noticed that his jaw was clenched horribly tight, as though it were the only thing keeping him from showing what he really felt. It certainly belied his relaxed nature, especially when he swallowed harshly... one attribute of nervousness she had noticed him do only a few times before.

"Where are we going, Severus?" she asked.

"Away," he replied.

"Can't you just give me a straight answer for once?"

He shook his head. "Is it so difficult for you to understand that I may want it to be a bit of a surprise, Hermione?"

"N-no," she said. "Sorry. I just like to be prepared."

"Some mystery is good," he replied. He pulled her to the side of the road and proceeded to explain to her that where they were going required Side-Along Apparition, since she had no idea where she should be concentrating on. Before she even had a chance to change her grasp on him, she felt the familiar pull at her waist, a few odd swirls in front of her. When her sight came back to her, she glanced around quickly, the overwhelming scent of flowers finding her nose.

"Flowers?" she asked.

"The Kew Gardens," he said.

Hermione raised a brow of concern. "Muggle London, Severus? I am surprised."

"The gardens are closed to the *Muggle* world until the morning," he said.

"So we're breaking and entering?" she asked.

"You're a witch, Miss Granger," he said flatly. "And when has anything as inconsequential as locks or rules stopped you from doing something?"

"I suppose you're right," she said, looking around the dark grounds again. From the scent of the air, she would have guessed they were somewhere around roses, but she was uncertain until he drew out his wand and waved it about, charming the bushes and trees around them to ignite in soft yellow light. It was not candlelight. Actually, it looked more like millions of tiny lightning bugs giving them the light.

"I thought we were going to dinner," she said.

He chuckled. "So little faith."

"You mean to tell me that you, of all people, planned a picnic?" she said as he extracted a small basket from his frock coat. This certainly was not a date she would have ever thought she would be on with Severus Snape. Maybe, if they did venture into Muggle London, they could have had dinner and then gone to the Tower of London. Or perhaps he could have taken her to some place with a grim, but interesting, past. That was what she had expected. She could have never expected something so thoughtful, nor so... romantic... from a man like him.

"You don't like it."

That was said in more of a statement than a question or an insult, even. And he sounded particularly sheepish about it. Who the bloody hell was this man standing in front of her? Hermione knew she deserved it. She *had* been the one who started this whole thing with her insatiable curiosity, and wanted to get to know him better. Here he was, truly trying his hardest to show her a decent time without being nasty or brooding, and there she was questioning him and his motives.

"No, no!" she said quickly, placing her hand on his arm to stop it from reaching for his wand to end the charm on the plants. "Severus, I love it. I just didn't expect it from you."

"You haven't expected a lot of things from me," he replied.

Hermione nodded. "Perhaps I should not judge a book by its cover."

The corner of his mouth lifted in a small, lopsided smile.

"Shall we sit?"

Hermione followed his lead as he drew out what looked to be a small towel and charmed it to grow much larger so that they could both sit down. She sat down carefully, curling her legs up at her side and leaning her weight over onto the palm of her hand in the most ladylike fashion she could manage.

He followed her, sitting just far enough away that he would not have to touch her. She thought it odd after the past few times around him, pushing himself on her, that he would not sit closer, but only shrugged it off.

She decided she should not have any preconceived notions about him, or what he was really like. He was not going to let her know anything about him or do anything unless he damn well pleased to do so.

Severus sat quietly, watching her in the glowing light of the small grove.

He really had no idea where he should go from here. The book he had read with ideas for dates had only gotten him up to this point.

Right now he was just thankful he had made it this far, and had chosen a decent place to go. What would she say if she knew that this was the first evening out with a woman he had ever orchestrated? Or that she was even the first female that he had ever found the courage to ask out to dinner? She would probably laugh at him in disbelief. She had already done it when she found out that they were to have a picnic out here this evening; what would stop her from doing it again?

He had never been so nervous in his life, and he found that funny. Not only had he faced things and lived through things so horrible that some people would never be able to imagine, but he lived through two wars and being a double agent. Day in and day out for years, he had the constant threat hanging over his head that someone would be there to kill him because his secret was out. He had to worry then.

After a while, though, it had not weighed so much on his mind. This date, however, brought the first time he had ever been asked to kill someone by the Dark Lord himself back into harsh reality. He was frightened beyond anything he had felt before. And what he found more frightening was that he was comparing a date with Hermione to a murder.

He felt like an awkward teenager again. No, not a teenager. He had never really grown out of his social awkwardness, especially around women. The awkward teen had only grown into an awkward, lonely man.

Why had he even asked her to come? And why the hell was she playing along with him? Certainly all those things she said last night, allowing him... teasing him... was all an act? There was nothing, this beautiful, young, powerful witch could possibly see in him... the old, sallow-skinned Greasy Git.

She brushed a few strands of hair that had fallen in her face behind an ear, the gold in the honey-brown hair catching the light, and turned her face to look at him. "Are you going to feed me?"

Smooth, Snape. Really smooth.

He enlarged the basket of things to its former size. He hoped the house-elves had made something decent enough. Inside, it looked like a pretty simple dinner. Bread, cheese, fruit. And a red wine.

Very French, he thought.

She followed his gaze and looked into the basket, helping him remove the things inside, stopping for a moment to look at him questioningly.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Dobby packed this for you," she said.

"How do you know?"

Hermione chuckled and pulled out a large round fruit. "Pomegranate. My favorite fruit. He keeps them fresh for me because they're so hard to find in Scotland. Did he pack this for you?"

"He did." He nodded. There was no point in lying now.

She smiled and set the hard fruit aside. He busied himself uncorking the bottle of wine and pouring it into the pewter goblets he found in the basket. Hermione pushed the wicker contraption away, arranging the packages of food and then letting out a long sigh. When everything was settled again, and he had passed her a goblet of wine, he felt more at ease with her. She was not going to laugh him. Perhaps she really did care for him?

He reached over and picked up the hard fruit, considering it carefully. "I've never had one before. I've used it in certain potions before, but never had the fruit."

Hermione glanced at his hand. "They're messy, but when I was on holiday with my mother and father in Greece, I fell in love with them."

"I find the connotations of the fruit oddly unsettling, though, in our present situation," he said.

She chuckled and met his eyes. "I hadn't thought of that until now."

"Does it bother you?" he asked.

"Does what bother me?"

"The myths surrounding this fruit?" he asked. "It's the fruit Eve supposedly gave Adam in the Bible."

Hermione grinned. "Why would they? I think the Greek myth is very fitting, though."

"I did not kidnap you," he said flatly.

"No," she said. "But you're as close to Hades as I'm going to get."

"Persephone would not eat, though, because she hated him so," he replied.

"But she would eat the pomegranate," she said.

He sighed and appraised the fruit carefully. "They say Hades giving Persephone the seeds and her eating them are the act of their eternal consummation."

She blushed deeply at that and looked away from him. After a moment, she looked back at him, straight into his eyes. "It's a good thing I don't have a mother who will not allow the change of seasons if I don't return to her."

Did that mean what he thought it did?

"Hermione," he began, but paused when she shifted closer to him.

She sighed, "This isn't some dream or some horrible joke or bet on my part, Severus. This is real. I am real. And as insane as I must be to have ever started considering this with you, I *am* considering this, and I don't really care what others might think."

He was silent, looking into her brown eyes, trying to ascertain if she was really telling the truth. What he found there was not what he had hoped. He had hoped he would see the lie that she was spinning, so that he could push her away and never speak to her again. What he did see was the truth of her words, right down to the Gryffindor passion there in her expression.

"Don't just stare at me, Severus," she said quietly. "You act as though no one has ever said this to you."

"No one ever has," he replied bitterly.

Hermione smiled softly and whispered again, "Then they were foolish."

One more author note, to keep in mind for the future:

In this story, I've been trying to do a few things a little differently, away from the normal Snape and Hermione clichés. I haven't succeeded all the time, because it is so damn easy to fall into them. This chapter, though, sets into progress an element of the story that I hope is a little refreshing.

Most SS/HG stories I read, Snape is certainly not a virgin, and he is also nearly always quite experienced in the ways of sexual goings on. Sure there may be fanon 'facts' to back up Severus raping Muggles and Mudbloods when with other Death Eaters, but I don't think he would have ever done that even in JKR's wildest dreams. I think, being the secretive, socially awkward man that he is, he would have had limited, if no, sexual experience at all. That notion is what I will be operating on from here on out.

Like Peppermint

Chapter 19 of 29

It seemed like ages since they last spoke to each other.

A/N: Long time no see!

Since Mage is now up and accepting submissions, I will finish posting this story pretty regularly. And possibly add a new one into the mix.

This chapter is just as much Shanastay's as it is mine. She was a real help in getting me re-Snape-ified in this chapter.

Chapter 19- Like Peppermint

It seemed like ages since they last spoke to each other.

After he had doled out the wine proportionately and they sat back to munch on their meal, their conversation had come to an abrupt end. Hermione had no idea where she should continue the conversation after their exchange about the Greek myth. Did she continue on that line and inch closer to him? Or did she lay off him? Should she play the wilting flower? When she had inched closer to him, just a little bit ago, it appeared to her that his dark eyes had widened tenfold, surprised that she was doing that. Was he scared? Nervous? That could not possibly be. Not with Snape. Something had to be done though, or this date would officially be the worst she had ever had.

She breathed in the aroma of the night around them, shutting her eyes and smiling to herself. It was the first time she had ever gone anywhere without her wand, but she had purposely left it behind. There would be little use of it tonight, and she trusted him completely. Powerful witch though she might be, she knew that if they encountered any threat, he would be the one to push her behind him so that he could block the attack. Not to mention that he knew much more potent, dark magic than she did and would likely do much more damage than any spell she could ever cast.

"Roses are my favorite flowers," she said softly, standing up from her spot and walking toward the nearest bush of small pink roses. "I'm surprised these are still blooming."

"The gardener here is a wizard," he replied. "He uses magic to keep the flowers so well preserved."

Hermione glanced back at him to find him still sitting in his spot and watching her curiously. "So we aren't trespassing."

"No," he said, shaking his head. "He is a former student of mine. Very good, but Gryffindor."

She let out a short laugh and shook her head. "Are we really that horrible, Severus? And tread lightly with your response, or you may not have a second evening out with this Gryffindor."

"Some are better than others," he remarked flatly.

"I see," she said and turned back to the rosebush, moving on down to the next one, admiring the soft pink petals of the tea roses. "Am I one of the better ones?"

Silence reigned as moments passed, but she knew that he was beside her now, the heat of his body radiating through his clothes and teasing her with a curious, almost electric, current she had not felt before around him.

"I should think the answer to that was obvious, Hermione."

She straightened herself, lifting her eyes to his. "Sometimes I still question it."

"And sometimes you are still insufferable," he replied.

Hermione watched his expressionless face for a moment longer before brushing past him to walk further down the line of bushes. He followed her quickly, falling into step beside her, pausing when she did to look at the small blooms. After a few steps, her curiosity had gotten the better of her.

"Severus?" she asked, sniffing the bright orange bud in front of her.

"Yes?"

"What made you despise my House so much?" she questioned. "I've always wondered about it. I know a few reasons, but I just can't see how you could really hate a House that much for wrongs a single person committed."

He sighed heavily, clasping his arms behind his back, taking a moment to consider how to respond. "I hate Gryffindors because of the characteristic arrogance they display."

"That's it?"

"You know of the problems I had with Potter and his band of 'Marauders,'" he answered, tightly controlled, but still with some obvious anger simmering beneath. "I'm sure Potter Junior told you what he saw in my Pensieve that night."

Hermione frowned. "Harry told me many things, Severus, about those Occlumency lessons... and I would appreciate it if you wouldn't get so defensive and bitter with me. I am only asking you simple questions. That's what you do on dates. You talk and ask questions and get answers, so you can get to know the other person better."

He gave her an indignant look, but relented almost instantly. "Then you know some of what happened... the way they treated me."

Hermione pressed on. "But not all Gryffindors were like that. Be honest with me and yourself. Please? What about Lily? She saved you..."

As soon as the words left her lips, she knew she had hit the proverbial nail on the head. She knew in that instant that *this* was the epicenter of his hate for Gryffindors. He did not hate her House-mates because of the arrogance they openly exhibited, or for what Sirius did to him, or even the way he was teased as a gawky teenager. No, he hated Gryffindors because of a *girl*... because of Lily Evans... because of Harry's mother.

Suddenly it made so much sense. Why hadn't she ever considered this before? After Harry told her the story of Lily yelling at James to release Severus in the Pensieve memory, she had not thought further on it. She had been too concerned with Umbridge to even really try to connect it all. But *now*, she understood. She understood his intense hatred for everything Potter... and nearly everything Gryffindor.

The revelation clear on her face, he patiently waited for her eyes to find his. "You see now," he said softly before turning his eyes away from hers as though ashamed.

"She hurt you," Hermione said.

He snorted derisively, his defenses slamming back into place almost audibly. "She did not *hurt* me. She destroyed me. I loved her so dearly, and all along it was her *pity* that kept her coming back to me." He whirled on her, eyes blazing with restrained emotion. "Do you pity me, Hermione? Is that why you are here with me?"

"N-no," she gasped, nearly taking a step back under his intense glare. "I can't believe you'd think that!"

"You are so much like she was," he mused. "Sometimes I wonder if I'm not replacing her with you... all while knowing that I will likely lose you to a better man."

Hermione closed the distance between them and placed her fingers lightly to his lips in an effort to silence him for a moment. She had never seen him like this... so raw...

so open, yet still defensive. This was all she had ever hoped for in trying to be friendly with him... a trust in each other that they could talk about things other than their profession. But she had not been prepared for this sudden deluge of his past and what was going through his mind. She had not been ready for the flood. She fleetingly wondered if he had let it all out in an unconscious effort to push her away and keep himself from being hurt again.

Resolute, she countered him. "Severus, you aren't going to lose me. We don't even have anything to lose at this point. But whatever this is, you aren't going to lose it to someone like Krum."

Placated for a moment, he visibly relaxed at her words. His hands removed her fingers from his lips, warming the cold digits and wrapping around them securely.

"She was the reason I joined Voldemort... why I hated Muggle-borns," he admitted quietly.

"It's in the past now, Severus," she said. "I don't care. Everyone has decisions they'd rather change, but I don't care. If this continues between us, the only way it will end is because of mutual understanding. I'm not like her. I am not *her*."

"You are very young," he offered. "What could you possibly see in me?"

Hermione could not believe the level of his insecurity and vulnerability. But it was endearing to see the strong fort built up around him quickly crumbling away because he *did* trust her... a trust she had believed they had not yet established.

"I see you as my intellectual equal," she answered. "And we're magical. Witches and wizards are longer lived than Muggles, so age doesn't matter."

"But my--," he started to protest again, but she silenced him quickly.

"I don't care what you think you look like, Severus," she said and sighed, masking her slight annoyance.

They stayed like this, in complete silence for some time, staring at the other, wordlessly daring the other to make the next move or say something.

"You came back to the light because of Lily," she said, finally taking up the silent challenge.

"And why do you think that?"

Hermione smiled gently. "You joined Dumbledore after the Potters were killed. You *loved* her. Even though Harry was the progeny of your worst enemy, you wanted to help him, her son. Of course you could make his life and the lives of his friends a living hell, which you did quite frequently, but you protected him multiple times. That's why in the Shrieking Shack..." She paused, eyes widening, "Oh, it just makes so much sense now. I was so blind... I should have seen it."

"Are you quite finished, Miss Granger?" he interrupted sarcastically, but with a hint of fondness in his voice that had not been there previously.

"I suppose," she relented. "I'm sorry. I'm rambling."

"Do not be sorry," he murmured quietly. "I happen to find you quite stunning whenever you deduce the correct answer. I always have. Your face positively glows."

Hermione blushed deeply and looked away from him. "You're very different than I expected."

"Well, you should not expect this while we are around others," he teased uncharacteristically.

She chuckled. "I would never expect that. Severus Snape doesn't wear his heart on his sleeve for just anyone to see."

Yet, somehow, she still knew he had not revealed his whole heart. There were still some bits there tucked away, but she was satisfied with what she had received and been allowed to see. What she liked most was that he clearly trusted her.

Trusted her!

"Thank you," she murmured softly.

"For what?" he asked, brows furrowing, a note of confusion in his voice.

"For trusting me enough to tell me this. It means a lot to me." Hermione smiled again before pulling her hands away from his and walking back toward their things.

Severus stayed rooted on the spot, watching her. He could not believe he had just let all that come flooding from his mouth. But oddly enough, he was comfortable with the fact that she knew about it. She knew of his past and what he had felt for so long regarding the Potters. He was not alone in that anymore, bottling the rage up inside of him. What stunned him though, was the fact that she was not running away from him now that she knew.

He had thought she would leave him, but she was right. There was nothing between them at this point to lose. Perhaps there needed to be something more certain.

"Where are you going?" he called after her.

"Putting these things away," she replied, glancing back at him. "It's getting late, Severus. I still have some things I need to do before tomorrow's classes."

His brain did not quite register exactly what she was saying. All he could really focus on was the fact that it seemed like she was rushing to end this... date... with him.

Frowning slightly, she seemed to pick up on that fact, though, and stopped what she was doing. Slowly, she stood from her kneeling position and smoothed the imaginary wrinkles of her skirt over her thighs.

"I'm not trying to run away," she said quietly. Giving voice to his silent fear, she walked back over to him. "I'm being quite serious. After you left me this afternoon, all I could think about was this evening, and I wasn't able to finish my grading."

"Really now?" he asked.

Hermione nodded, taking ahold of his hand. "You're welcome to sit with me while I grade, to see for yourself that I'm telling you the truth. But I can assure you that if you do sit there with me, I will be unable to grade at all."

"Perhaps I should, then," he replied, only half-joking.

Soon enough, everything was packed, and they found themselves back at the front gates of the castle. He had seriously hoped that their evening would not end as quickly as it had, but his professionalism was clashing with his personal life. Did he let her go back to finish her grading and whatever else she had to do for her classes the following day, like a good Deputy Headmaster should? Or did he not leave her and take her mind away from her work? It was a perplexing situation with no clear answer, and he understood now why there were certain rules in place prohibiting those in a working relationship together from becoming romantically involved... especially when this relationship was between a new professor and her superior.

Possible outcomes rolled through his mind. It could end up causing many, many problems for students not getting the full attention they needed, or worse yet, end in his favoritism of her over other educators who had been in the profession much longer than she. Of course he was Severus Snape, and he had never had any trouble seeing things objectively before, but he worried now that his heart was involved. What would happen?

"Has Minerva spoken with you?" he questioned.

Hermione looked at him curiously. "About what, Severus?"

"Nothing," he dismissed, offering his arm to her.

"Are you certain?" she asked and took his arm, falling into step beside him as they walked up the long pathway to the castle, and then inside the main hall.

"Yes," he said, maneuvering her in the direction of her chambers. "If she wishes to speak with you, she will."

Hermione seemed disbelieving of his sudden tight-lipped responses, but he was not ready to discuss it with her. He would rather live happily whatever few days this relationship would last than worrying about Minerva or having Hermione worry.

"Well, thank you for a lovely evening, Severus," she said quietly, parting from him now that they stood in front of the entrance to her rooms. "You are welcome to come in if you like."

"No, but thank you for the invitation," he said resolutely, hoping his desire to join her did not show too much. In the future, he might follow her in, but for now he knew that this step was probably one of the last he was prepared to take.

She giggled suddenly and stood on her toes, kissing his cheek gently. "You can be quite the gentleman when you want."

"Can I?" he swallowed quickly, his throat inexplicably dry. He found himself suddenly... inexplicably... anxious.

"You can," she lowered herself back down onto her heels and smiled, studying his face. "It suits you, too."

"Does it?"

He must have sounded like a dolt, answering her in questions, but his brain did not seem up to working correctly. The only thing he could think to do was wrap his hands about her waist and not let her go into her chambers just yet.

She laughed again, placing her palms flat against his chest, her fingers proceeding to play maddeningly with a button on his coat. Her lovely, inquisitive brown eyes found his again, moving with maddening slowness from her hands to his face. "This is where you're supposed to kiss me, Severus."

Merlin, was she stunning. He couldn't restrain himself and leaned into her, capturing her lips. He had no idea what to do after he had made this move, but soon enough instinct found him, and his lips moved of their own accord. She tasted sweet and spicy... like peppermint.

The initial surprise gone in an instant, he felt her responding to the kiss. And how good it was to feel her delicate, soft lips against his, countering so feverishly.

Her hands now flat on his chest, she pushed herself back and away from his embrace, so that she could meet his eyes shyly. The look was so fleeting that he had little time to catch his breath before she returned with a force that surprised him.

Quickly twining his fingers in her hair, he did not care if he pulled it from its bonds. Moments passed, he was not quite sure how long, though he knew it was certainly too short a time before she pulled back from him again to catch her breath. Her eyes twinkled, her cheeks tinged a slight pink, and her lips were swollen slightly from their exchange.

She was beautiful.

He brushed his thumb across her lips, and she pressed back in a soft kiss. He caressed the swollen petals, his thumb moving across them and down her chin, along her jaw line to twirl a piece of her curly hair around his forefinger. He so wanted to kiss her again. Should he?

Hermione seemed to sense his indecision and gently disengaged from him. "Goodnight, Severus," she murmured demurely.

Before he knew it, he found the wooden door shut in his face.

Snarky Snape

Chapter 20 of 29

It would have been cliché for her to say she was walking on air the following morning.

Please note that I will always accept constructive criticism if you have it to give. I'm always looking for ways to improve this, especially if I eventually want to make money off of writing when I "grow up".

Also: Imelda Staunton, who will be Umbridge in the next movie, played a character named Vera Drake. It is a semi-homage to Umbridge's nastiness and Imelda in this chapter.

Chapter 20- Snarky Snape

It would have been cliché for her to say she was walking on air the following morning, after their date and a first kiss with such unmistakable chemistry. But there really was no other way Hermione could think to describe what, exactly, she was feeling.

She had been on a fair number of dates, and she had kissed plenty of men in her time. Each one had been nice. The dates were relatively enjoyable, as was the kissing and light petting. But never before had she felt this type of *connection* with another. She felt stronger, empowered even, knowing that he found her beautiful and even the slightest bit intellectually stimulating enough to consider a relationship after having lived a life devoid of love.

Hermione found it extremely odd and a little frightening, if not twisted (even in the extreme perversity that was their world), that she could feel this way for a man she had loathed for so long. Well, she had not exactly *loathed* him. No, she had disliked his attitude, and the way he treated her and the others of her house. She had always respected him, though, as an educator.

Now, because of their talk last night, she understood why he had acted the way he did. It became apparent to her then that old prejudices never really died. They only grew to such a point that they nearly consumed the person with such hate that they could lead a strong man like Severus Snape to the Dark Lord.

But there was one redeeming quality there, inside of him, no matter how snarky or bastardly he could really be. He had turned back because of love. An unrequited love, yes, but it was love nonetheless. It was because of that love that he had protected and helped Harry defeat the greatest evil.

That little glimpse into him, into his tormented soul, was a priceless one, and she cherished the fact that he had felt comfortable enough to speak with her about it. She only hoped he would continue to be so open with her in the future.

"Professor?"

Startled from her thoughts, Hermione jerked her quill across the parchment on the desk and looked up at the student eyeing her closely. She cursed under her breath and tried to shake the cobwebs from her mind, to concentrate on her class. She had set them to an exam, after dismal scores on their essays, and had retreated to her desk for the rest of the Double Transfiguration class to daydream.

Now that her eyes were focused, though, she realized that the room had emptied, there was a stack of parchment at the front of the room on a stool, and Dennis was standing at her desk.

"Yes, Dennis?" she asked.

"I only wanted to make sure I didn't need to send for Madam Pomfrey," he said. "You stared out into space the whole class period."

Hermione frowned slightly. "I'm fine, Dennis. What were you doing watching me when you should have been concentrating on your exam?"

"The whole class was watching you," he informed her. "I know it's not proper for me to be so frank with a teacher, but really, after the whole DA thing, we know each other a little better than the others. You were very un-Hermione-like during class today."

"Was I?"

He nodded.

Hermione chuckled lowly. "Well, I suppose you should count your blessings then. Apparently I wasn't as horrible as I usually am."

"No," he responded and gathered his things more securely beneath his arm. "Well, I better head off to my next class."

"Good," she replied, waving him out the door. Hermione waited for him to shut the door before letting out another long sigh and smiling brightly. Maybe it would not be so horrible, after all, having Severus around. But what dumbfounded her the most was the fact that it was indeed Severus who had made her loosen up a bit.

The bell for the next hour rang throughout the castle, signaling her free period before lunch. Glancing over at the towering stack of sixth-year Advanced Transfiguration exams, Hermione decided quickly that the task of giving her students mediocre marks could wait until the evening. Even then, all she had to do was cast a small grading charm and the multiple-choice exam would be graded quickly. Right now, she needed to do something. She was not quite sure what, exactly, she needed to do, but it felt as though she were bursting out in all directions, unable to focus her energy in one place.

For once, Hermione Granger's answer was not to study, to prepare for a class, or to sit down with a good book. Hermione Granger decided to wander about the grounds and get some fresh air. That, however, was cut short when she heard feeble sniffles coming from a bush.

She thought, for a moment, that it could just be an injured garden gnome or another garden variety creature. But after a few moments, she knew that the shuddering breaths were only that which a human could produce. Hermione crept slowly over to the bush so as not to startle whoever was hiding behind it.

There, sitting in the wet mud, was one of the small Hufflepuff first-years, Jane Kelly, looking quite the sight. Her clothes were covered in mud and torn in various places, bits of leaves and other plant debris tangled into her nest of hair that had not been washed in a long while. The girl had reminded her of Luna when Jane first stepped into her class, but this girl was much shyer and much more susceptible to the cruelty of her classmates. Where Luna was aloof and did not seem to care about what others said about her, Jane internalized every little comment from the ridiculing student body.

When Jane realized who was standing over her, she let out another horrendous sob.

Hermione sighed and lowered to her knees, looking over the girl closely. She did not seem to be physically hurt; her fragile ego had gotten the worst of it. Well, that and her glasses. A skinny, baggy-clothes-wearing boy with green eyes flashed quickly through her memory and was quickly followed by a pang of grief for her lost friend.

"I-I-I'm so sor-r-r-y," Jane tried to speak through her gasping sobs, but her words were nearly incomprehensible. "I s-should b-be in c-class."

Hermione smiled softly, reaching into one of the pockets on her robe for the tissues she always kept with her. Being prepared was a good thing at times. "First of all, stop crying."

Jane nodded feverishly and took the tissue from her hand. She dabbed at her running nose and tears, reaching for another one before it made any difference.

"Now," Hermione began, "Let's get you out of here and into the castle. You should see Madam Pomfrey. She can fix those scratches up in no time."

"O-okay," Jane said, her breathing slowly returning to normal.

Hermione motioned her up, back into the castle and in the direction of the corridor that would take them to the infirmary. "Take a deep breath and tell me what happened."

"I-it was Vera and her friends, Professor," she said. "They called me names and pushed me into the bush."

Hermione nodded slowly. Being slightly prejudiced against Slytherins, she had initially thought that's what she would hear from Jane. Instead, she received a big surprise when she found out that it was indeed a gang of Gryffindor girls. "Thank you, Jane. I will take care of it."

"I-I know they're your House and everything, and I understand if you don't want to do anything..."

Hermione gave her a silencing look. "Don't worry about it, Miss Kelly. They will receive appropriate punishment."

After all, I am not Snape.

Jane wiped at her nose again, and Hermione handed her another tissue. Seeing the state of the girl's glasses again, Hermione drew out her wand and pointed it at the girl. "*Oculus Reparo.*"

With a pop, the frame was fixed and the scratch down one of lenses vanished. The look of surprise on the girl's face was similar to that of Harry ten years prior. Hermione

smiled faintly.

"Now go to Madam Pomfrey," she said. "I will let your professor know what happened. Which class do you have now?"

"Snape," Jane said, her nose wrinkling slightly.

Of course.

"We have that class with Gryffindor, Professor," Jane added.

Hermione waved the girl off, her mind suddenly trying to decide whether she should interrupt one of Snape's lessons, or to wait until later to punish her students. She knew that Severus hated to be interrupted, but perhaps he would make an exception for her now? Her choice made, she swiftly headed down to the cold dungeons and to his classroom, lifting her hand to knock lightly. Without waiting for a response, she pushed open the door and stepped inside.

Clearly in the midst of insulting a student for his lack of capability, Severus looked up toward the door, his trademark sneer firmly in place. He did not flinch, either, when he saw her. "What do you need, Professor Granger?"

Hermione heard the venom in his voice, the same venom that had not been there the evening before, or when he had been around her recently. It brought back so many memories of her school years. She felt a great remorse for whoever was on the receiving end of such a tone of voice in the class.

"I need Vera Drake, if it is feasible to remove her from your lesson," she said, trying to keep her voice as neutral as she could manage.

Snape did not reply, his sneer growing stronger, as he swept through the rows of students toward the Transfiguration professor.

"MacDonald, you are to make sure no one kills themselves for the few moments I am away reminding Professor Granger that I do not like interruptions," he said, motioning for her to move out of the room. He followed and shut the door soundly behind him.

Hermione looked at him for a long moment before sighing. "Must you be that way?"

Snape grunted. "You know very well that I do not appreciate anyone interrupting a lesson."

"I was not interrupting a lesson, Severus. I walked in on you berating a student for making an honest mistake," she said. "You're just sour because you couldn't finish."

"You know as well as I do that an honest mistake could be deadly," he bit out.

"With first-year Potions?!" she exclaimed. "Come on, Severus, be reasonable."

He shot her a dirty look that stopped her next heated, retaliating retort cold on her lips. Snape crossed his arms over his chest, considering her down his nose, his temper barely reined in for the moment, teetering precariously on an outburst again.

"Why do you need the girl?"

Surprised that he was asking this, it took her a beat too long to answer him.

"I haven't got all day, Granger," he ground out.

"It is none of your concern, Snape," she replied defensively, placing her hands on her hips in an aggressive pose.

"Then you cannot speak with her now. I will tell her to find you in your office after class," he turned sharply on his heel and walked back into the classroom, closing the door behind him with a bit more force than Hermione thought was necessary to get his point across.

She knew it had been a gamble to come down here and interrupt, but she had sincerely thought he would not mind much. She would have not interrupted his lessons if it were not for a very important reason. He knew that, didn't he?

His unreasonable attitude toward her was still completely unwarranted. She was not a student any longer. Yes, she was beneath him in the hierarchy of the castle, but she still deserved some respect from him as a fellow professor, especially in front of students.

Her "perfect day" sufficiently sullied, Hermione sighed heavily and shook her head. He would never change. She knew she should just accept that and be done with it, but Hermione Granger never, ever was satisfied with the status quo. He would hear about this later whether he wanted to or not.

Let's Get One Thing Straight

Chapter 21 of 29

Hermione returned to her office utterly livid. How dare he? She was a professor now. Anyone else who had interrupted him and asked to see a student would have gotten what they wanted, begrudgingly or not. Why was he treating her like this? He should have been a little more lenient with her now, especially after last night.

Have a wonderful week, I love you all.

A special thanks to Shanastay for being a wonderful beta.

Chapter 21-Let's Get One Thing Straight

Hermione returned to her office utterly livid. How dare he? She was a *professor* now. Anyone else who had interrupted him and asked to see a student would have gotten what they wanted, begrudgingly or not. Why was he treating *her* like this? He should have been a little more lenient with her now, especially after last night.

Oh, it made her so angry.

To take her mind off of the surly, horrible man, she decided to grade some of the work her seventh years would expect back tomorrow. It became clear, though, that taking out her aggression on the grading was not going to make her students very happy or herself when she gave more work for poor grades. But she did not care. It was just too bad that she was going to take off for missed punctuation today. She was positively fuming.

Time passed too quickly once she fully invested herself to the violent strokes of her quill on parchment. So deep was her concentration that she was not prepared for the crashing of her wooden office door against the stone wall, that she jumped out of her chair in a movement of sheer awkwardness, nearly falling to the ground from her tangled feet. Luckily, she caught herself on the edge of the desk, and looked up to find Snape following the cowering first year into the office.

Damn him and his entrances! Can't he ever enter a room like an ordinary person?

Why was he here anyway?

Vera stopped in front of her desk, making sure to keep her eyes lowered. At least the girl was intelligent enough to know she had done something wrong, and that she should be submissive now to her Head of House to lessen the severity of her punishment. Snape stepped up behind Vera, his obsidian eyes burning into her, the sneer from earlier still firmly planted on his lips.

Resigned to the fact that she had no choice but to handle this in front of the surly Potions master, Hermione sighed and crossed her arms over her chest. "Do you know why you're here, Vera?"

"Yes, Professor," she said quietly. "It's about Jane..."

"Exactly," Hermione acknowledged. "And what do you have to say in your defense?"

"Nothing, Professor," Vera muttered.

"Was there anyone else with you?"

"N-no," Vera shook her head resolutely.

"Think wisely, Vera, because I know there were others involved," Hermione said. If only she had some Veritaserum and could use it on a student. "It will mean the difference between a month's detention, or only a week, with Filch."

Vera looked up at her, eyes wide. She shifted her weight nervously from foot to foot before settling down and steeling herself to the challenge. *Good Gryffindor.*

"Yes?" Hermione intoned.

"Paulette and Georgiana," Vera said quietly.

She nodded her head. "Very well. Report to Filch after dinner for your detention, and in the meantime, I will speak to the others. You may go."

Vera sighed resolutely and turned on her heels, heading back out into the hall and away to lunch as quickly as she could without running. Hermione waited until the girl was gone before letting out a heavy sigh of her own, brushing some of the curly hair in her eyes out of the way before turning to Snape. The sneer was not there any longer, but his eyes still shone with such intensity that it brought back the feeling that she was being scolded all over again for interrupting him, just from the look of utter loathing there.

"And you!" she turned on him, walking around the desk to face him squarely.

"We have nothing to discuss, Professor," he said.

"Oh, I think we do," she said, her scolding finger pressing into his multitude of robes. "You have no right to treat me like an insolent student any longer, Snape. I am a professor here, whether you like it or not, and deserve just as much respect as Pomona or Minerva... or anyone else for that matter."

"Honestly, *Professor*," he drawled out, his eyes focusing on the finger pointing harshly into his chest. Treating it as a mere, annoying gnat, he grabbed her hand with his right, and pulled it away forcefully. "If you wish me to treat you like a staff member, then I suggest you start acting like one."

Hermione scoffed, her mouth dropping open out of disbelief. "I did nothing wrong and you know it! Just because you're in a foul mood does not suddenly make it okay for you to piss off everyone else!"

"All you had to do was tell me what you needed to speak with Miss Drake about," he responded, that ever-annoying arched brow in attendance. "It was quite simple, Granger. If it seemed severe enough, I would have let her leave."

"You did not need to know what the problem was! It was my situation to take care of," she continued, "and if you trusted me at all as a colleague, then you wouldn't need to know why I wished to see Miss Drake. You wouldn't have questioned it if any other professor had done what I did. Why am I so different?"

The muscles in his jaw visibly clenched and unclenched, as he apparently debated on how to continue. At least he did not just let loose on her like he might have with anyone else. He restrained himself... somewhat.

"Hermione," he began, his tone now incredibly low and even, perhaps, gentle? She knew not to take it for granted, though. He was such a master at hiding things, this could be a matter of deception until at the last minute, when she had her hackles down, he decided to strike. "You need to understand something."

"And what is that?" she asked, meeting his eyes and holding on to the last bit of defiance she had left.

Damn him.

"I must treat you the same, if not much harsher than I treat the others," he replied, "because of our... relationship."

"I don't see how our working relationship has any bearing on our personal one," she said.

He sighed. "Minerva happened upon us when I caught you in the storeroom, and she warned me about our conduct on school grounds."

"We wouldn't be like the children trysting in the bushes, for crying out loud!" she exclaimed.

"No, we wouldn't," he shook his head. "But you see how this could be a conflict of interest in my place of power, if the newest and youngest professor on the staff suddenly gets special treatment from the one person who not only ardently dislikes Gryffindors, but could not stand her or her two friends when she was a student? Do you see the need to act like I did this morning for that reason?"

Hermione chewed on her bottom lip thoughtfully. "I do see it, but you don't need to treat me any different than the others, Severus. I won't ask for special treatment. I never have in the past. I'd just break the rules before I ask for special treatment."

"That's just the problem, Hermione," he said, a wry smile breaking on his lips for a fleeting moment. But his face turned again, to something she might call embarrassment. There was something else that he wanted to say, but somehow could not find the correct way to phrase it.

"What?" she asked.

He shook his head. "It's nothing."

"It is something. Tell me, Severus. I'm not going to laugh at you," she said.

Severus rolled his eyes in a bored fashion again and grumbled, "You will be the death of me yet. I had thought all along you would kill me by your seventh year, but I see that the gods have a much more prolonged fate in store for me, having you return."

"Is that what you wanted to say?" she asked. "How utterly *romantic*."

"I don't appreciate your sarcasm, Miss Granger," he replied, "Especially when I am not by nature a very open man."

It was Hermione's turn to roll her eyes. "What else is new? Now answer me! Why would me *not* asking for special treatment be a problem? There aren't many rules I can break now that I am not a student."

He sighed heavily and bent his head, his right hand coming up to pinch the bridge of his nose. "I worry that you may ~~not~~*ask* for special treatment, but that I may just slip up at a crucial moment and give it to you anyway."

She raised a quizzical brow at him and crossed her arms over her chest. This was not the same man that she had spoken with earlier, or the man that had walked into the room only a few minutes before. Sometimes she wondered how he could be so duplicitous, even in his personal life, but she knew it was something that would forever be one of his characteristics. He had practiced for much too long to ever see another way of living.

"You'd never do that," she said. "Because every time you are around me, you will remember this conversation and stop yourself. You're not hasty in your words and actions like I sometimes am, you can stop yourself."

"I am surprised you have so much confidence in me," he said.

Hermione smiled softly. "I have no reason not to."

Silence prevailed over them for a few long moments, until he carefully placed his surprisingly warm hands on either side of her face, steadying her enough to lean in and brush his lips across her forehead. She had never expected such a gentle sentiment from him, but she was not going to question it. It was nice to see that, perhaps under an incredibly crusty exterior, there was an affectionate man.

"Shall we go to lunch, Hermione? You were not present for breakfast," he chided.

"Together? Will that not raise suspicions?" she asked.

He waved a dismissive hand, "I am sure the Hufflepuff and Gryffindor first-years have spread the incident around enough that they'll think we were just coming back from me scolding you."

Hermione frowned, but nodded. "I suppose so."

They headed in the direction of the Great Hall, the corridors nearly devoid of students, though some were mingling about. Keeping a safe distance from each other, Hermione did not dare to turn to glance at him for fear of her expression betraying her carefully crafted aloofness. There was a slight problem, though, when they reached the open doors to the Great Hall and Snape stepped aside to allow her to enter first. It was not her problem, she found it very gentlemanly of him, but the students who had caught the interaction noted and quickly internalized it.

After all, in the seven years she had been at this school as a student, or now as a teacher, she had never, ever seen Snape act in such a way toward another human being, not even with Minerva. In an attempt to minimize the potential damage, Hermione raised a quizzical brow and narrowed her eyes in what she hoped was a passable approximation of suspicion.

Hermione did not wait for him and continued the long walk to the head table, finding her now customary seat next to Tonks. The Day-Glo-orange-haired witch looked at her curiously for a moment, her smile growing larger as she tried to take a sip of her pumpkin juice to mask it. Hermione sat down and arranged herself carefully.

"Nice to see you, finally," Tonks teased. "Must have been one hell of a night if you weren't even up for breakfast. He *must* have gotten the upper hand of the deal."

Hermione shook her head. "For your information, Nymphadora, he was a perfect gentleman and we arrived back at a perfectly respectable time."

"That doesn't mean someone didn't spend the ni-," she began but was silenced by some other force. Tonks glared first at Hermione, who knew that a Silencing Charm had been placed on the Metamorphmagus, but was not the one who cast it.

"I didn't do it," Hermione murmured, turning to find Snape walking behind them. His fingers skimmed the edge of her chair, grazing her back lightly as he passed and sat down.

"Cat got your tongue, Tonks?" he taunted, not looking at her.

Tonks made a quite powerful guttural sound of disgust come from deep within her. Hermione found the whole situation quite humorous, even though she knew that Snape had done it so that the notoriously loud Tonks could not go off getting them into "trouble." Extracting her wand, Hermione uttered a reversing spell, freeing Tonks' voice from its muteness.

"We'll just see who lets the werewolf out tonight," Tonks muttered, glaring at him.

Hermione paused, hoping that this did not escalate into a much more serious argument. It was low of Tonks to bring that up now, in front of Severus. Especially after the previous evening and what all they had discussed. Of course it was not Remus' fault that Snape had been in the wrong place at the wrong time, but it all brought a sour taste back with the reminder of those days, even for Hermione.

"If he takes his potion as planned, then I have nothing to worry about," Snape retorted, and turned to concentrate on his meal.

Dinner on the Mediterranean

Another week had passed, and they had only been able to share their customary, furtive glances or touches in passing. He was glad for a weekend, finally, hoping that they might get down to ?business? and stop this walking around on eggshells, like they did continuously during the week.

Thank you all so much! Sorry about the wait... life has been very crazy and promises to become more crazy as the holiday season progresses.

Thanks to my beta Shana!

Chapter 22- Dinner On The Mediterranean

For the first time in Severus' life, he felt oddly content with himself and with what was going on around him. Classes were going surprisingly well, considering all the dunderheads this year had brought him, and he had none of the near death experiences that often were his only excitement within the castle walls. Grades for his students were steadily improving because he did not feel so vindictive wielding his red-inked quill. People were treating him with an ounce of respect for a change, and that was befitting of a Deputy Headmaster. Things that would have normally annoyed him greatly before, like a Gryffindor's brashness or the chattering and laughing of students in the corridor, rolled off of him a bit more easily now. It was a strange, pleasant feeling, all brought about by a female named Hermione Granger.

Had someone told him that it would be a past student to bring him out of his partially self-imposed celibacy, much less one he had loathed during her seven years at Hogwarts, he would have laughed in their face and then hexed that someone horribly.

Yet, here he was pining over a woman, a very young woman, at that. One who found him attractive in some incomprehensible form of the word. Alive, perhaps, and even a little softer around the edges than he had ever been. Just because someone had given him the chance to be something other than Severus Snape, Greasy Git, Overgrown Bat, and ex-Death Eater turned spy for the Order of the Phoenix. She somehow saw him, as him, and still was not running away.

But this also brought up many complicated and equally frightening possibilities in their future together.

He was a man who was so well versed in the Dark Arts and the sheer beauty of a difficult potion. He loved to read and expand his mind, as it had been one of the few joys and solaces in the past besides Ogden's. He had always considered himself more intelligent than most of his peers and could learn anything presented to him. He was confident of that fact.

Until now.

Would he ever be able to learn to love adequately? Hell, was he even capable of accepting love from a woman? He was certain he had only ever been loved by his mother, and at that, she had grown to resent him because of his startling likeness to his father. No one had ever shown any more feeling than what was absolutely necessary at a given time. Could he even love at all? Would he be able to learn? He hoped above all other hopes that he could. She deserved that much.

Something troubled him even more, though, and that rested wholly on the knowledge that he was a tabula rasa, as it were, in the acts of sexual discourse. How could he ever please her when it came down to that? If their relationship progressed and moved down that path, it would most likely be expected of him. It was a healthy part of any relationship, just as arguments and misunderstandings were. He did not know the first thing about doing, well, anything. Sure, he had read his fair share of less-than-savory publications. He had heard stories, seen drawings and paintings and photographs.

But he had never, ever had hands on experience. And as a teacher, he knew well enough that a student was useless unless they had practical application, as well as book learning. Well, he *knew*, in all certainty, what was supposed to happen. He knew what his body responded to and, from books, knew what a normal female body might. But he hadn't the faintest idea how to really pleasure her, or what made her completely weak in the knees.

Would Hermione expect that he knew more than he did? Would she be patient with him? He was already asking so much of her patience in just spending time with him outside of the professional arena, and he knew she had very little to give. Would she laugh at him if, or when, she found out that he was nothing more than an inexperienced schoolboy?

Face it Snape, for the first time in your life, you're utterly besotted, even more than with Lily. You're terrified about what could happen.

He had a very strong feeling the next few months would yield a high percentage of firsts for him.

"A Knut for your thoughts?"

Startled, Snape glanced up at the entrance to his darkened classroom and the witch standing in the doorway. How long had he been sitting here, anyway? He remembered letting his last class go for the weekend, but beyond that, he remembered nothing, other than his wandering musings. It had been like this for a few weeks now, drifting off so deep into thought that he did not know where he was or what he was doing, ever since their evening together at the gardens.

They had not seen much of each other after the Monday following their date for reasons he had no control over. Their effort to remain as secretive as possible was much harder than he thought. The only times they ever had time to spend together were on weekdays after curfew for the students, so no one would notice her going to the dungeons or him to Gryffindor Tower. Almost any educator would tell you, though, that at the end of the day, and after grading many things, the last thing they were physically able to do was spend quality time with a paramour.

That weekend was booked, as Hermione had duty in Hogsmeade accompanying the students, as she would for every other Hogsmeade weekend. Cursed schedule! At the time he had made the schedule, he had not been having these feelings for her. At the time, she had merely been the youngest and newest professor, which meant she received all the grunt work that no one else wanted to do. Now, all he longed to do was change it. But he could not. People would question, and he would not be able to tell them why. It would be *wrong*.

Another week had passed, and they had only been able to share their customary, furtive glances or touches in passing. He was glad for a weekend, *finally*, hoping that they might get down to "business" and stop this walking around on eggshells, like they did continuously during the week.

"It is nothing," he said, meeting her brown eyes.

She smiled and moseyed over to his desk, in no hurry, stopping beside him and settling down on top of a stack of papers on the corner of his desk. "How about assisting in my movement for inter-house unity?"

"What does it entail?"

She chuckled. "Dinner with me."

"Are you asking me out on a date?" he asked incredulously, both brows going up, meeting her eyes.

"I think that's what I'm doing," she said plainly, considering her nails for a moment before glancing back up. "Why?"

"Isn't it supposed to be the male half of a relationship that orchestrates and implements?" he asked.

Hermione snorted slightly. "Don't be so old fashioned, Severus. It's the new millennium."

"Not yet," he replied. "But I believe I will have to take you up on that offer."

"I knew you would," she said. "You have a choice. We can go someplace with lots of people, or we can go someplace quiet and you'll have to endure my cooking."

"If your cooking is anything like your potion-making, then I imagine it cannot be too horrible, Hermione."

"I really must start a log to take down every time you compliment me." She giggled. "So I can reflect on it when you're being snarky."

She probably had a very good point. They were in short supply with him, but he had the insane urge to do it more often whenever she was around.

Hermione stood from her spot and let out a short sigh. "Do you like the ocean?"

"Yes, why?" he asked, slightly confused.

"Because," she replied. "I'll meet you outside the gates in a half hour, Severus. Wear something comfortable for a change, and bring an extra set of clothes."

She was out the door before he could even scowl appropriately at her. What did the little witch have in mind, anyway?

Hermione inhaled deeply the warm, heavy ocean air. The hand on her arm loosened slightly, the tall body stepping away from her to look around him. He was trying to orient himself and plan for escape. He may not have admitted that much, but she had noticed this slight paranoia from him since the War, and even more so now that they had been spending more time together.

If they were in an enclosed place, he kept his back to a wall so he could look out at the entrance to be prepared for attack. When they were walking in the gardens, he walked with her, his eyes always moving to try to detect the slightest movement, almost reminiscent of Mad-Eye Moody. She could only imagine just how uncomfortable he was, being told to pack an extra set of clothes and having to Side-Along Apparate with her to unknown territory.

"I assure you that it's safe," she said with a small smile. "But you're free to investigate if you like."

"Where are we?" he asked, looking out over the ocean, the sun beginning its descent.

"You are in the south of France, on the Mediterranean."

He turned to look at her curiously. "France?"

She nodded. "My family always used to visit here on holidays for the warm weather, and this is the place of some of the happiest times of my life. After the War and everything, I came to the place where I knew I would find tranquility. My parents' home in London seemed too empty, so I settled their estate and will and bought this."

Severus slowly looked up at the moderately-sized home, the side facing the lapping, foaming beach, built out of clear glass. "A Muggle portion of France. That's why no one knew where you were. They were looking in Wizarding areas."

"Hence the appeal," she acknowledged. "I had to get away."

"I know the feeling," he admitted.

An awkward, silent moment passed between them until Hermione decided to break it by smiling. "Well, let's go inside. I'm hungry."

"You aren't planning on staying the evening, are you?" he asked. "We'll need to be back for the Quidditch match tomorrow morning."

Hermione nodded. "We'll be back in plenty of time, trust me."

"I will," he said and followed her up the short staircase to a flat deck with chairs and a table set up on it.

"Get comfortable," she instructed, glancing at his attire again. She had not remarked on it before, but now she hoped that he would consider it ridiculous to keep that heavy woolen frock coat on. He eyed her suspiciously as well, and knew in an instant what she was thinking. "I'm not asking you to disrobe completely, for crying out loud, just the coat. Relax. Don't be the normal, formal, uptight Snape."

He considered her for a moment longer. "Then I would like you to not be uptight Hermione either."

"I hardly think you'd be able to handle me parading around in my normal beach attire, Severus," she said and giggled. "Okay, fine! Do what you want. I'm fixing dinner."

He disappeared for quite some time, most likely looking around and acquainting himself with the Muggle home, allowing her the opportunity to prepare everything she needed to bake in the oven. She was glad she had the foresight to Apparate back here earlier in the week during her combined free hour and lunch to shop and get everything ready. Secretly, she had hoped he would pick this date rather than going out and about. The last thing they needed at this point in time was publicity.

"It is certainly different from Hogwarts," he remarked, coming around the corner and into the kitchen.

"I hope that means you like it." She giggled lightly and turned to glance at him. She truly had not expected him to take the frock coat off, but she was extremely pleased that he had. She had always liked the strict look, but this was a welcome and different version of the man who was slowly but surely opening up to her. Rolled up to his elbows, the white shirt that normally lay beneath appeared to be a rather fine weave of cloth.

The left corner of his mouth curved in a nervous smile. "Need I remind you that you were the one who asked me to remove the coat?"

"I did," she nodded. "I just didn't expect you to actually do what I asked."

He spread his hands in a "make of it what you will" gesture before crossing his arms over his chest. She smiled and rolled her eyes, finishing up drying the last of the utensils she had used to prepare the food now in the oven.

"Would you like some wine?" she offered.

"Please."

Retrieving a bottle of merlot, she pulled the corkscrew from the kitchen cabinet, hoping he would get the idea to open it, while she went searching for suitable goblets.

"Why not use magic, Hermione?" he asked.

She glanced back to find him inspecting the contraption closely. "Don't you ever get tired of magic?"

"No," he replied smoothly.

Hermione chuckled. "Well, sometimes I like to do things like a Muggle."

"But it is the difficult way," he pointed out.

"I like conquering difficult tasks," she responded quietly, meeting his eyes.

The ubiquitous curiously-arched brow appeared again. "Perhaps that is what you find so appealing about me."

"I find many things appealing about you, Severus," she hedged. "Now, are you going to uncork the wine, or will I have to?"

"What, though?" he pursued, suddenly interested. "What *do* you find so appealing about me, besides me being a difficult riddle to crack?"

Hermione sighed and took the corkscrew from him, pressing the point down into the cork, rotating slightly, hoping that a decent answer would come to her mind. Truth be told, she did not have *one* answer to his question. She had many. And she was not quite sure she was ready to let him know everything.

"You don't know?" he pushed lightly, his voice low and the emotion indiscernible.

"I *do* know," she sighed. "But you'll balk at me and say I'm mad."

"Tell me, Hermione." His voice was almost pleading, as though he were looking for some sort of validation in pursuing her...so long as she wanted him, then it was fine for him to want her.

She set the corkscrew down on the counter and laced her fingers together, trying to still her faintly trembling hands. "I don't know what it is exactly, Severus. You've always interested me. Call me a sucker for the troubled, mysterious type, but I find you unbelievably attractive."

"The way you make it sound, I feel as though I am still only one of your charity projects," he countered.

"Don't," she admonished. "Yes, it started out like that. I just wanted to be a friend. I knew you'd be happier with someone to talk to. But it changed. I can't explain it, Severus. You'll just have to believe me that I find you, oddly, undeniably... I can't think of the right word."

"Bah," he spat, and took the wine from her, using more force than necessary to turn the screw.

Hermione chewed on her lower lip. "Alright! I find you... oh, gods, I can't believe I'm saying this... I find you... sexy."

"You would be the first." He stopped and met her eyes.

"Then let me be the first," she huffed. "If people haven't noticed it before, then it's *their* loss."

His eyes narrowed at her, as though he were again trying to decide her truthfulness, his gaze boring deep into her. She wondered, for a moment, if he was going to employ his Legilimency, but she breathed a sigh of relief when he did not.

"You need to quit worrying that I'm going to be like her," Hermione ventured. "I wouldn't do that to you, Severus. I've pitied you before, but when I'm with you now, and when I kiss you, I don't pity you. As a matter of fact, I don't think anyone would pity you. They should envy you."

"And why is that?" he asked, clearly bewildered.

"Because you somehow scored a catch like me," she replied with a small wink and a flip of her hair.

He laughed. For the first time since she had met him so long ago, he laughed. And it wasn't a pleasant little chuckle, but a full laugh, coming from deep within, causing the lines in his face to deepen and his crooked, ivory teeth to show. It was a wonderful sound too, considering the rich timbre of his natural voice.

"Damn your Gryffindor arrogance," he teased.

She inched closer to him, removing the bottle from his hands and placing it on the counter. "You know you wouldn't have it any other way, Severus."

He shook his head, looking down at her and snaking out an arm to pull her close. "You know, I do not think I would."

Tattoos and Standards

Chapter 23 of 29

He laughed. ?Standards you may have, but I am very impressed with your impulse control in this matter.?

A short update, but fluff ahoy!

To those who celebrate it, have a lovely Turkey Day weekend!

Hugs to Shanastay for being a wonderful beta.

Chapter 23- Tattoos and Standards

The bright silvery light of the growing moon cast an ethereal glow down onto the foamy sea. High tide had come in, bringing the frothy, lapping waves go with only a few feet from the wooden deck. It was incredibly warm for the time of year, but still required a light sweater. Normally easily susceptible to the cold, Hermione was sure she would have needed much more covering were it not for the man sitting with her, his long arms wrapped amply around her. His breathing was slow and even, his heartbeat strong but steady, creating a very lulling, relaxing setting in the midst of the chaos of the world.

If only she had had this during the War. If only *he* had had this during the War. They would have both been better off having this complete and utter feeling of shelter and respite.

A cool, ocean wind blew over them, ruffling her hair and slicing straight through her sweater. She curled into him a bit more, not caring what he would think, resting her head on his shoulder. The hand that had been resting on her calves, draped over his lap for some time now, tightened slightly, but relaxed after a moment and a short, questioning glance at her.

It had become quite clear that he was not comfortable yet in situations like this, and she could not blame him. It was an understandable thing that he was a virgin, so to speak, in this area. Clinical knowledge he may have acquired through certain events during his time as a Death Eater. But gentle implementation with no practice was a wholly different Quidditch pitch, especially knowing he had never been on a "date" date before her.

His hand inched higher up her leg, and she stopped his progress with a hand over his. The dark, ugly mark on his forearm caught her attention then, for what seemed the hundredth time that night. She had been good and quelled her urge to ask all the questions she wanted to. The last thing she wanted was to be scolded for her inane questions again. The night was just too perfect for her to go and spoil it with her big mouth.

But it was eating away at her horribly.

She turned his hand so that the palm lay up, revealing the Mark completely. She had never seen one up close before, and was a bit surprised that the design had not yet faded away like many others had. Trailing her thumb up the inside of his wrist, she stopped for a moment at the head of the snake, brushing at the skin there as though the gesture would make it go away. He shivered slightly beneath her, and she quickly pulled her hand back, looking up at him. She fully expected him to go off and roar at her, but instead he smiled softly.

"It's not that, Hermione," he replied.

She chewed relentlessly on her lip and looked back at the Mark.

"Just ask me. I know you have many questions," he said sarcastically. "I'm actually quite surprised you withstood the temptation until now."

Hermione frowned and rolled her eyes. "I know how you get when I question."

"I'm beginning to get used to it," he said.

She smiled gently and rested her head back against his surprisingly comfortable shoulder, with the perfectly sized dip for her head. Silence passed between them for a few moments longer, as she appraised the Mark and continued to run her fingers along it in a testing manner.

"What was it like, Severus?" she asked quietly.

"Receiving the Mark?" he clarified.

"Yes."

"One of the most painful experiences of my life at that point," he replied quietly. "I was so young then, when I received it. I was foolish. I thought I could withstand any pain. I could already withstand all the emotional pain, why not the physical? How wrong I was when it came to His power."

Hermione nodded slowly.

"It was the seal of our pact with the Dark Lord. He made sure we would remember all that we had promised to do. Like kings in medieval times that would slap those they were knighting so they would not forget their vows. There have been times that I was tortured within an inch of my life, and that was the first."

"I see," she murmured. "Does it still bother you sometimes?"

"No," he shook his head. "It itches quite frequently, but never burns like it did when he was still..."

Hermione considered this for a moment, as his voice trailed off into the night air, and sighed heavily.

"I know it's not much to look at," he replied almost lackadaisically.

"Be quiet," she scolded. "It doesn't mean what it used to, and I don't mind it at all. At least it wasn't a drunken whim of fancy that led you to a defacing mark like that."

"Drunken, no," he said, and gave her a curious look. "Why did you say that?"

Hermione giggled and stood up. She grabbed her wand out of her back pocket and lifted the left side of her shirt, revealing her hip.

His eyes went wide for a moment, but when he realized her shirt would go no higher, he sat back again and watched.

Muttering a revealing charm and tapping the skin just above her waistband, three small stars done in gold metallic appeared together in a cluster. "It was Harry's birthday," she admitted. "We downed too much Ogden's and other spirits, we got onto how we thought it was funny that you called us the 'Golden Trio' and snuck out of the Burrow for Diagon Alley."

"Without anyone to guard you?"

"Yes," she replied. "It's past now, Severus, no use harping about it."

"How would it have felt if that little jaunt had completely mucked up all our chances?" he asked, bemused.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "It's not important now. We weren't caught. Voldemort's gone, Harry's gone. I'm just showing you the stupid mistake we made that night."

"As much as I hate what that tattoo obviously symbolizes," he smirked slightly, "I do find it rather becoming on you, and in that particular location. You don't need to cover it up."

"But it also symbolizes the idiotic choice I, Hermione Granger, perfect student and keeper of *most* rules, made," she huffed.

"As you said, it's in the past." He stood up and moved closer to her, backing her up against the side railing, his warm hand covering the bare skin there.

A pleasant shiver ran from that point through the rest of her body. She giggled.

"Now, have you any more questions of me?" he asked.

"Not right now," she shook her head, running her hands up his chest and entwining them behind his neck.

"Good," he dropped his head to run his lips slowly across hers. "I'm getting cold out here."

"I think, perhaps, cold is good for right now," she teased. "If you were too warm, it might escalate to the removal of more clothing."

"Would you be completely adverse to that?" His lips connected with hers again, this time ardent and demanding.

Hermione giggled against his lips, breaking away for a quick moment. "This isn't what I had planned tonight when I told you to bring extra clothes."

"It isn't?" he teased silkily.

"No," she retorted, sitting back on the railing.

He pushed even closer, situating himself squarely between her thighs and pressing against her. "Are you quite certain?"

"No," she admitted, his lips traveling down her neck, as her insides turned to warm goo. For a man who, practically, knew little about women, he certainly made a very good case for natural-born talent.

"I thought so," he said.

Hermione pressed on his chest, making him take a step back. "Severus..."

"I know," he replied slowly and sighed. "We'll wait."

She gave him a feeble smile and chuckled. "Not that I really want to wait. Tonight has just been perfect. But you understand, don't you? That since we've only been together for such a short time..."

His lips silenced her before he again pulled away. "I understand, Hermione. We'll wait until you are convinced I'm not in this relationship only for gratification."

"That isn't what I think," she scoffed. "A witch just has to have her standards. And this *is* only our second date... technically."

He laughed. "Standards you may have, but I am very impressed with your impulse control in this matter."

"I do have impulse control," Hermione smiled. "Only when you would ignore me did I get impulsive."

"So your logic tells me that I should ignore you completely until you feel impulsive enough to wait nude in my bed for me," he mused. "Ah, I am beginning to understand the way your mind works now."

Hermione moved away from him and back toward the sliding door to the house. "You shouldn't get complacent in thinking you know how it works."

"You needn't worry, Hermione," he said. "I don't think anyone could ever understand that quagmire."

"Look who's calling the kettle black." She stepped inside the warm house and let out a long, relaxing sigh.

This "having standards" stuff was for the birds. She needed release in some form soon or she would go insane. And the constant, hardly harmless teasing both of them partook in was wearing her reserve to a very thin thread. Just a little longer, though. She should wait just a little while longer, though she did not know why exactly. It just felt right to wait. Woman's intuition or not, she was going to follow her gut feeling for a change.

"Where did you get this?" asked the copy editor, looking up at the tall, blonde reporter.

"Don't ask me where I got it, just print it," the reporter said, tapping her bright red lips.

The copy editor shook his head back and forth, letting the air out of the space between his two front teeth in a low whistle. "What do you have against this girl anyway?"

"She's nothing but a horrible little snitch," she spat out.

"What did she do to you?" he asked. "Whatever you did, you most likely deserved it."

"The War is over. I'm registered. She has nothing on me now," she turned her nose up in the air. "Print the bloody story, Barnabus."

The portly copy editor sat back in his seat, considering the photographs accompanying the article. "This will either ruin us or promote us."

"Let's hope it's the latter," she said with a short sigh.

"You do realize you're taking a huge risk with these two, right?" he rephrased his worry. "Especially him."

She grunted in an unladylike fashion and tossed her rigid curls to the side. "Print it, Barnabus. Everyone likes a little bit of juicy gossip now and again. And without the Boy Who Lived... Well, the dearth has lasted for far too long. If you aren't going to print it, then I'm going elsewhere."

"Where? Witch Weekly? The Quibbler?" he let out a pretentious laugh. "I'd like to see what credibility you have there. You're lucky you're here as a free lancer, and using a different name, as it is. If the people here only knew who I kept getting these salacious stories from..."

"If they want to burn me at the stake, then so be it," she said. "But I'm going down in the flame of glory, knowing I have gotten my revenge on that witch."

"Fine!" he exclaimed. "And don't say I never did anything for you."

Overexposure

Chapter 24 of 29

He pried her fingers away from the paper to hold it himself, but the moving, smiling faces on the page were enough to alert him to what it was that had Hermione so angry. Looking more closely at the picture and the article, Severus did not know what to say or do. He was, for the first time, utterly speechless and unable to comprehend what this meant. It couldn't be them. No, not at all. They had been completely alone on that beach. He would have felt it if someone else were there and snapping pictures.

As always, Shanastay is wonderful. Thank you, my dear, for catching those silly mistakes and syntactical errors.

Chapter 24- Overexposure

After a rather peaceful and relaxing weekend, Severus was not ready to return to his duties as Deputy Headmaster. Actually, he was not ready to return to anything even remotely connected to work, or children, or the bureaucracy of the magical world, nor did he ever think he would be willing to return in a hundred years' time.

Unfortunately, winning and dining a woman would take funds, and that was certainly one thing that he did not have in his arsenal. So, back to teaching it was for what seemed like the rest of his life at this point. He sincerely liked Hermione, if not felt more for her, and he was not going to take a chance losing her to a man who could show her a better time because he had disposable income.

Not that he thought she would be so fickle as to leave him because of monetary issues. The reason she might leave him would be solely because he was no longer working at Hogwarts and was reduced to being a hanger-on, looking for handouts because he was unemployable elsewhere. He was confident that would be the reason she would leave, and he would not blame her if she did leave for that reason. He would have little respect for himself if he were to sink that low.

"Severus?"

He started at the voice coming from the sitting room.

"Are you there, Severus?"

"What the bloody hell does *she* want this early in the morning?" he muttered to himself, buttoning the last few buttons on his frock coat and running a comb through his lank hair.

"There you are," she said as he stepped out of his bedroom and into the line of sight of the head sitting in his fireplace.

He grumbled, "What is it, Minerva?"

"I'd like to see you in my office before you go to breakfast," she said, her voice rather surly. "Thank you."

Before he could respond, she was gone, and he was left in silence again. What could possibly be so problematic that it could not wait until the faculty meeting later in the day? Or, more troubling, for discussion over breakfast? Finished preparing for the day, he headed out the door and toward the Headmistress' office, wishing to put off this meeting for as long as he possibly could. He stopped to take a few points from a Hufflepuff couple behaving lewdly in the halls and took the long way around through the corridors.

The first thing he heard upon riding the circular stairwell up to the office entrance was Hermione's exasperated voice, cursing in several tongues and speaking unintelligibly otherwise. Had something happened to her? His chest suddenly ached with that thought, and he quickly pushed the door open, not knowing what he would do, if anything, to help her.

Hermione stood in front of Minerva, grasping a Daily Prophet so tightly in her hands that her knuckles were turning white. Her face was a bright red, and her expression was livid. He had never seen her so angry before, barely restrained as her temper was, and he would be lying if her anger and resulting wrath were not frightening things to behold.

"It just arrived," Hermione said, looking up at him as he inched closer. She thrust the paper into his face, too close for him to focus.

He pried her fingers away from the paper to hold it himself, but the moving, smiling faces on the page were enough to alert him to what it was that had Hermione so angry. Looking more closely at the picture and the article, Severus did not know what to say or do. He was, for the first time, utterly speechless and unable to comprehend what this meant. It couldn't be them. No, not at all. They had been completely alone on that beach. He would have felt it if someone else were there and snapping pictures.

Hell, he should have heard it and seen the flash.

His fury began to brim then, though not for the fact that they had been caught. He was angry for the sheer fact that he had been so involved by what was going on between them, and his beautiful, young paramour, that he could not have stopped this overexposure. What was wrong with him anyway? Severus Snape *should* have been able to sense the presence of gutter snipe.

"I had an early morning Floo visit from the chairman of the Board of Governors, Severus," McGonagall said. "They received their Daily Prophets before we did. The owls hadn't arrived here yet."

"This is ridiculous," he fumed. "How?"

Hermione snorted. "I know who did it. It was Skeeter."

"That isn't who it says it is," Minerva said.

"Oh, trust me, it's her," she seethed. "She has some sort of fascination with me."

"Perhaps they were just looking for a juicy story, Miss Granger," said the Headmistress as she walked around the edge of her desk and sat down. "It is possible, with all other sources of information. You know how it has been for the Weasleys after the War, especially Ronald. It could be your time to be in the light. That *is* a minus to being Harry Potter's friend."

"I don't care!" Hermione stomped her foot. "This woman is nothing but the basest evil. She doesn't care who she hurts along the way. How did she even find me there?"

"Is there something you haven't told us?" Severus asked evenly, meeting the woman's furious brown eyes.

She grumbled and fell into one of the chairs facing McGonagall and covered her face with her hands. Letting out a short groan, she began. "Do you recall those stories she wrote during the Triwizard cup? All the trouble she caused?"

"Vaguely," he said flatly.

"Well, I captured her in her illegal, unregistered Animagus form," she explained. "It's a beetle. That's how she got all those stories. I had her in a glass jar until we needed that article for The Quibbler. Then I let her out. She has since registered herself. Who knows what she does now to get stories."

"But this clearly is not her name," he remarked.

Hermione shook her head. "Is it so hard to imagine she writes under a different name now? Her credibility was shot a long time ago."

"How did she know where we were?" Snape asked.

"I don't know. There are millions of different possibilities, Severus," she said and ran a hand through her hair. "Oh, Merlin. Why did this have to happen now?"

"Why did it happen at all?"

The third voice startled them from their own worlds, and they turned to look at the stern woman with square spectacles.

"Minerva?"

"I warned you, Severus, that this could get out," Minerva admonished. "I told you not to push forward."

Hermione jumped in before he could. "He didn't push. No one pushed, Minerva. It just happened."

It was a small lie, but a needed one.

"Yes, but he is your *superior*," scolded the elder witch, giving Snape a pointed glare. "And I have had a conversation with him regarding my policy on workplace romances. He should have discouraged this a while ago."

"You have no right to dictate what we do in our personal time!" Hermione exclaimed, leaning her hands onto the desk and meeting Minerva eye-to-eye. "We're both grown *adults*."

That ruffled Minerva's feathers, and Severus was definitely not dim-witted enough to jump into the fray between two lionesses locked in a heated argument.

"Yes, you may be, but you are only *twenty*, Hermione. Severus is *forty*," Minerva countered. "The Ministry doesn't think this is very good publicity for the school. And neither does the Board of Governors."

"And they *definitely* may not dictate what we do with our personal lives!" Hermione frowned. "Especially the Ministry. What do you want, Minerva? We took it off school grounds. We were discreet. We had no way of knowing this would happen."

"And what will happen when something happens here?" she asked. "What will happen when your ~~former~~*professor* decides to play favorites amongst his colleagues? Weren't you one of those unfortunate Gryffindors who received his wrath when it was Draco who should have been punished? You so disliked his favoritism."

Hermione rolled her eyes, exasperated. "We've discussed that already, and we have come to the conclusion that it won't happen, no matter the circumstances."

Minerva sighed heavily and sat back in her seat. "This is going to cause a rather large problem, and I am not going to stop any disciplinary action or whatever else occurs. As you say, it is *your* choice. But if this affects our students in any miniscule manner, I *will* get involved and you will *not* like the consequences."

"Fine," Hermione said and stood quickly. "I'm going down to breakfast."

Severus glanced at Minerva, who was pinching the bridge of her nose. The elder witch caught his eyes and waved him out of the room after Hermione. As soon as he had stepped out of the door and shut it behind him, Hermione was there, throwing herself into his arms. "I'm so sorry, Severus. I didn't mean for this to happen."

She was on the verge of breaking out into tears.

Oh, Merlin, don't cry. Please, don't cry. I can't deal with women crying. I can't deal with you crying.

"Hermione, I don't know what you're sorry for," he said, trying his hand at tenderness with the sniffling woman resting against him for support.

"This whole thing. If it's not this, it's that. Can't we ever just have peace in our lives?" she asked.

He shook his head and wrapped his arms around her. "You are Hermione Granger, and I am Severus Snape. We were never meant to have peace."

"But this could ruin one, or both, of us *and* our credibility," she bemoaned.

He let out a low chuckle. "Hermione, my credibility has been damaged and rebuilt so many times in my life, and for much more sordid dealings, that I certainly don't think this is going to ruin it forever. It's fodder, is all it is. After a week they'll forget about us and move on."

"Not if it's Skeeter," she insisted. "She will keep eating away..."

"Hermione, we'll be fine," he soothed. It was peculiar to soothe rather than berate for a change. He found he strangely liked it.

She sighed and nodded her head. "This is just ridiculous."

"I know," he said.

Hermione fell against him a bit more when the stone stairs started to move downward, but she pushed back from him in an effort to appear separate for whomever had spoken the password at the bottom entrance. There stood Tonks, a rolled up copy of the Prophet in her hands. "I see she already found out."

Severus nodded his head at the brightly-colored witch. "Yes. We've been summarily reprimanded and sent on our way."

Tonks sighed. "Well, she's the least of your problems. You know how news spreads in this castle. Everyone in the Hall knows... and is awaiting your entrance."

"Lovely," Hermione muttered and stepped out into the corridor.

"What are you going to do?" Tonks asked, looking between the both of them.

Hermione sighed. "Get even."

With that, Hermione walked away, pushing her sleeves up to her elbows in a determined fashion. Gods forbid whoever crossed her path this morning. Severus was quite sure that this irate Hermione Granger was not one to tangle with and was definitely the rival to his own moods at the worst of times.

Tonks looked back at him and smiled brightly. "Well, now that I can safely break the secret Hermione and I had about this relationship, may I be the first to say that I'm happy for you?"

"You may." He smirked slightly.

"It looks as though you had quite the night at her place," she remarked and winked at him.

He stepped out into the corridor and straightened his robes. "You haven't any idea."

Hypocritical Headmistress

Chapter 25 of 29

*Hermione ranted. ?Here we are facing this? this? fiasco! And you're thinking about the next time you can feel me up!
Don't you care about what could happen??*

Thank you all so much. We're in the homestretch for this story, and I hope you have enjoyed it thus far! I love the reviews.

Thanks Shanastay for keeping me in line!

Chapter 25- Hypocritical Headmistress

While desire for revenge was the prominent emotion coursing through her body at the moment, a smaller, much more disabling emotion was beginning to peek its head out of the shadows. She was worried. Worried about how all of this would turn out with both of them teaching in the same school. She was worried how her colleagues would view her now. What would the children think...the children that knew her first as a student and knew about her problems with Snape? She worried about Viktor's reaction. Where was he anyway? She worried how Ron and the rest of the Weasleys, her surrogate family, would react. What would former Death Eaters think now that Severus was seeing a Muggle-born?

Hermione hated all the unknowns, especially when there were no definitive answers for the questions. There were so many possibilities, that she did not know how to play her hand. Everyone could be exceptionally accepting, and it would blow over. Or Skeeter would print more salacious stories to sell more copies, and everyone would be up in arms. Or worst of all, people would look at her critically every time she passed and point and laugh at her for her choice in men.

It was, perhaps, vain of her to think that after all the reassurances she had given Severus these past weeks that she wanted him no matter who he had been, or what he looked like, or how unpleasant he could really be. But it *would* bother her to hear the jeers, and she would care if people were snickering behind her back. A courageous, arrogant, and opinionated Gryffindor she might be, but aloof to hurtful things, she most definitely was not.

Tonks arriving at the bottom of the stairs to Minerva's office and alerting them to what they would face in the Great Hall had not been comforting either. She thought she might be able to handle the scorn of the student body well enough, but not combined with the disapproval of those teachers who would be eating breakfast as well. And what if Viktor was still there?

Oh, Merlin.

"Believe it or not, you will wear a divot into the stone floor if you pace long enough."

The silky voice washed over her, and she looked up to find Severus, robes billowing behind him, walking briskly to catch up to her. She glanced to her side, realizing that she had indeed stopped just outside the entrance to the Hall, and had been pacing quite feverishly while thinking. It was one of those habits she did in stressful situations...lose complete semblance of reality and retreat into her own little world while she tried to think things through or come up with solutions. Instead of chewing on her nails, she paced.

"Sorry," she muttered and shook her head to clear the cobwebs.

He attempted a smile, but it turned into more of a sneer. "Think of any good revenge plots?"

Hermione chuckled, "No, you?"

"Not at all," he said. "Two heads are better than one, though. Perhaps this evening we could discuss it."

"I don't believe you," Hermione said incredulously.

"What don't you believe?"

Hermione ranted. "Here we are facing this... this... fiasco! And you're thinking about the next time you can feel me up! Don't you care about what could happen?"

He gave her a silencing glare, one that had silenced her many times before. Stepping forward, he pulled her to the side and into a dark alcove, casting a Disillusionment charm on them. "With all due respect, Professor, I do care about what could happen, but I know nothing *will* happen. I've been around longer than you have. The bloody Dark Lord returned for an entire year, and they all turned a blind eye. And that was *important*. This is merely an annoying little infestation problem. We squash it, and we go on. There is no reason not to behave normally."

"But the way Minerva....," she began.

"Minerva would have been like that no matter if the Board of Governors had congratulated us or removed us from our positions," he explained. "Don't you see?"

"See what?"

"She fancies herself a matchmaker, Hermione," he pointed out quietly. "The reason Krum wanted to come to Hogwarts was because she told him you were going to be here. She thinks you two are perfect for each other, and had every intention of you two finding deeper feelings for each other this year."

"But we're both professors as well..." she trailed off. "That's so hypocritical!"

Severus waved a hand dismissively. "Yes, but he will be gone in a year. He does not hold an authoritarian position like I do. And you would not influence flying lessons, as he would not get close to Transfigurations. We have the opportunity to influence each other's academics. It would not have been as 'horrible' with entanglements as it is between us. "

Hermione sighed heavily and leaned against the wall, resting her forehead on the cold stone. "I just can't believe..."

"Believe it," he cut her off. "Minerva is not as innocent as you would like to believe. Besides all that, though, she still resents me for certain things I have done."

She correctly inferred the meaning of his words and nodded her head. "I knew that she and Dumbledore were close, but not that close."

He chuckled. "They were not like us. They had a very deep, abiding friendship though. He and I were the only ones that knew what would have to be done. And she resents me for doing it, and Dumbledore for not telling her what I was to do. She has acted like this ever since I came back."

"Oh," she replied.

Severus grinned slightly and placed his hands on her shoulders. "Now, we will discuss this tonight?"

"I suppose," Hermione relented.

"Breakfast?" He pointed toward the Hall.

"Must we?" She frowned. "I don't think I'm ready."

Severus snorted. "You have faced vile Death Eaters and the Dark Lord himself with unquestionable courage, and you are afraid of a bunch of children? Honestly, Miss Granger."

Hermione glared up at him and pushed away. "Terrified doesn't even begin to describe what I felt those times. But I suppose you're right."

"Then *together* we shall face the executioners," he offered.

She gave him an odd look. "I never thought you'd refer to the children so severely, Severus. I didn't think you were scared of anything."

"Snake-faced wizards are one thing," he responded with a smirk, "but malodorous, incompetent children are wholly different."

"Malodorous, Severus?" she asked, quirked a brow at him. "How will you ever have children of your own without being scared of them? Little ones are *especially* smelly."

"If I ever have children, they will *not* be incompetent," Severus answered. "So I would be more indifferent than scared of them. If one of them were a girl, though, then I would still be terrified."

Hermione chuckled and stepped out of the alcove after him. "Ah, Severus, an indifferent father. Girls aren't that bad."

"If they were anything like you, then they *would* be that bad," he said flatly, meeting her eyes. "At least, though, *I know* they would not be incompetent. Perhaps I could make an exception."

It was obvious he had not meant to let that statement out, and an odd red tinge colored his cheeks. "What's this, Severus Snape blushing?"

"If you are going to mock me, then I will make sure never to do it again," he said bitterly.

"I'm not mocking you," she soothed. "I'm only impressed that you can blush."

He frowned.

"Fine! No more teasing," she said and walked toward the entrance. "I'm ravenous."

They stepped into the large hall together, though not touching in any form. She had considered taking his arm or hand, but had decided against it. That would have entirely ruined his image, and he would not thank her for that. However, she was glad she had decided against it as well. The low hum of talking that always accompanied mealtime stopped dead when they appeared. It was disconcerting to have every student focusing on her. But she took a deep breath and bucked up the courage to put one foot forward, and then the other, until she was walking briskly down the center aisle for the head table.

Focusing on Remus rather than looking around, she gave him a sheepish smile. He returned the look with a playful roll of his eyes. How had he taken this shock?

Hermione took her seat carefully, leaving the one beside her open for Tonks should she return, and the other for Severus. She had almost forgotten that he had been walking with her and followed closely, until he brushed by her in the most innocent, but tantalizing of ways. Struggling to maintain her composure, she looked out at the inquisitive students, willing them to turn back to their friends. They did not. As a matter of fact, they did nothing until someone cleared their throat beside her. She glanced over at the man now standing, to find his most severe warning glare etched into his face.

"You really must teach me that," she said softly as he lowered back into his seat.

"I don't think you'd be able to handle the power, Hermione," he answered with a straight face and turned to his breakfast.

Remus moved from his seat, over to the one beside her, and leaned over to her. "And when were you two going to tell me? Tonks knew and I didn't?"

"Tonks was the *only* one that knew," Hermione said. "But now everyone knows. Have you seen Viktor?"

"He was in here this morning, but left before the owls arrived," he informed her. "Good thing Harry isn't around to see this. If the War hadn't killed him, then hearing that his best friend was seeing the person he hated the most surely would have."

Hermione frowned and felt Severus tense up beside her. "He wouldn't have died because of it, and if he did, that would be his problem."

"Defending him? You must really be in love," Remus remarked with a short laugh.

"I do care for him very much," she acknowledged softly. "Now, may I please eat something? I need my energy to be combative."

"Fine, fine," he said, backing away. "And, Severus, I suppose I should say that I'm happy for you. You couldn't have picked a better one."

Severus nodded sullenly and looked at Hermione. "You have a very serious problem enticing former professors, don't you?"

Hermione scoffed. "Oh, please."

"She's not a student any more, and I am fully able to comment on the beauty of the gender," he replied.

"Would you two stop? You're reminding me far too much of Ron and Harry," she scolded.

Remus chuckled. "We definitely can't have that now, can we?"

Severus glared at him.

Hermione sighed and reached for one of the large muffins in the bowl in front of her. She stood up from her seat, the legs of the chair grinding painfully on the stone ground. "I'll be in my classroom if anyone needs me. See you at lunch."

With that, she turned and headed back out the way she came.

"What's her problem?" Remus asked.

Severus shrugged. "I've not a clue."

"I really am happy for you, Severus," Remus responded. "You probably deserve some happiness more than any of the rest of us, though not everyone will appreciate that you chose a former student."

"I understand that, but they need to know I'm not letting her go," he replied, sipping his pumpkin juice. "No matter what they throw at me."

Remus smiled brightly. "You will most likely get this from Ron and his brothers, but you'll get it from me as well. Do know right now that if you hurt her, I will not hesitate to hurt you."

"Who appointed you or the Weasleys as her guardians?" He scowled.

"It's unofficially for a good friend of mine and his son," Remus answered. "Besides, someone needs to look out for her."

Severus sighed and looked levelly into Remus eyes. "While I appreciate your concern, she has someone else to protect her now. No harm will come to her. Trust me."

Remus chuckled and then stated, quite matter-of-factly, "Severus, you *are* in love."

"Of course I am, dunderhead," he spat out. "Now let me finish my meal in peace."

Black and White

Chapter 26 of 29

After all, these elder students knew the intricacies of a romantic relationship, and were eager to speculate on Snape's sexual prowess. Granted, they had all been courteous enough to whisper about it, and not speak to her directly. But she was acutely aware of some of the things being said.

Thanks to everyone!

Chapter 26- Black and White

The repercussions of the *Prophet* article were felt quite swiftly and with a force of backlash Hermione had not been prepared for. How was she supposed to get any teaching done anyway with students finding her lecture boring and her choice in supposed bedmates much more worthy of their attention? Her pupils seemed to all have a one-track mind today, and giggling about the article was the only thing their minds could fathom at the moment. As far as this relationship was a stretch and hard to fathom, she had hoped her sixth and seventh years would be better behaved.

They had only been worse.

After all, these elder students knew the intricacies of a romantic relationship and were eager to speculate on Snape's sexual prowess. Granted, they had all been courteous enough to *whisper* about it and not speak to her directly. But she was acutely aware of some of the things being said.

Was he the dominant type?

Could you even *imagine* sleeping with that?

Did Snape keep a cage in his bedroom?

Are there any rope burns on her wrists?

What about fang marks hiding under her hair?

Bugger it all!

The end of the day could not have come swiftly enough for her aching head. Even skipping lunch, to tend to the bushel of letters brought in by owls throughout the morning, had done nothing to calm the twitter. It had only increased it. Apparently Severus had not shown up either. Apparently that was enough to spark new rumors that they were in some dark alcove snogging. Seeing her last student out the door at the chime of the last bell was a relief she was sure would rival that of an orgasm. Only about fifteen more hours until she would have to see them again. She was looking forward to a quiet dinner in Severus' chambers.

The note he had dropped in her office for her during his free hour had given her the feeling he had encountered the same trying day.

At least they could commiserate together.

Hermione sat at her desk in the classroom and began opening new letters just arriving. She had received fan mail before, especially after the war and the accounts of her standing by Harry until the very end. There had been a steady stream of it, according the Weasleys, since the Order of the Merlin awarding ceremony. But she had asked them to take care of it for her. Now that the world knew she was here at Hogwarts, they knew where to send her owl post.

Dear Hermione,

Are you just plain idiotic?

Yours,

G.

She placed the edge of the parchment in the flame of the candle upon her desk and watched it shrivel and darken. Transfiguring her scratch parchment bin into a flame resistant vessel, she dropped the letter in with a satisfied sigh. Glancing at the other letters, numbering into the hundreds, Hermione stood up and began the long process of dumping them in handfuls into the burning bin. She had never contemplated arson, or even considered herself a pyromaniac, but this exercise was oddly gratifying.

Now if only she could find that bug and squash her.

The door opened behind her, and too concerned with her present task, she did not look up. "You've come just in time. Pull up a seat, warm yourself."

"I would rather not," said the accented voice behind her.

Hermione spun around on her toes to come face to chest with Viktor. She slowly looked up into his eyes and stepped back a meter. "What is it Viktor?"

He held out the paper for her. "Vy *him*, Hermione? Ven you said there vasn't someone else ... even if there vas someone else ... I did not think it would be him. Perhaps Ron or someone like him, but not *him*."

"Do you have a problem with it?" she asked, her annoyance rising rapidly.

"Do I?" he asked incredulously, his large fist crumpling the paper in his hand. "Of course I have a rather large problem with this. How does one choose him over me? Tell me!"

Hermione withdrew her wand from her teaching robes. "Don't step closer, Viktor, or *will* hex you."

He help up his hands in defense. "Tell me, Hermione!"

"Viktor, I love you, you know that. You're very special, but I am not the woman you want. Trust me." Hermione kept her wand leveled with his chest. For anyone who had been gifted enough to be around him, they knew that he was imposing. But irate, he was utterly frightening.

"I would like to think for myself voo classifies as vat I vant!" his accent grew thicker with each heightening rung of anger he passed.

"Viktor," she began slowly. "I know his past. I *know*. Trust me, I do. But he really is a good man, underneath it all. I can't explain it to you. We just go together so well. Like black and white. We're two complete opposites, each of us powerful in our own right. We're fine separate, but we're amazing together."

He inched closer. "I refuse to believe this Hermione. You cannot!"

Obviously, the sometimes slow Bulgarian was not going to take "no" for an answer, or at least needed a much more forceful Hermione. She pushed back her robe sleeves, muttering an *Aguamenti* at the fire burning at her side, and then turned back to him. "Viktor, I'm serious here! We had our fun, and I'm never going to forget it, but you must just let this die."

"Vat does he have that I do not?" he questioned. "He's got no wealth. He is a *Death Eater*. He cannot even be handsome to you! Vat, Hermione?"

"And I, *Viktor*, would like to think for myself when it comes to what attracts me," she exclaimed. "You hav~~no~~ *right* to come in here and do this! You have no claim over me. You know that. All you need to know is that I find him amazing."

With that, she left the irate Bulgarian alone in her classroom, leaving through the door. The resounding wooden slam, she hoped, would be heard by all the castle inhabitants, no matter how remote their quarters were. Marching purposefully through the throng of students on their way to the Hall for dinner, she went straight down to the dungeons, seeking some relief for the screaming in her head. He had told her the password to his chambers Friday evening, but she did not need it, finding the door open and the wards off.

Stepping into the room and slamming the door behind her, the man across the room putting a book back into one of his bookcases spun around to face her. "The doors are old, Granger, I wouldn't test them like that."

Sending a deathly glare at him, she stomped over to the liquor cabinet he kept, poured herself a tumbler of Ogden's and downed it all in one short gulp.

"I see your day was about as lovely as mine was," he noted sarcastically.

"The day was nothing compared to the argument I just had with Viktor," she huffed, falling onto the sofa, finding blissful oblivion in the warmth of the Ogden's coursing through her body and the warmth of the orange fire on her skin.

"Ah," he intoned, moving lithely through the maze of furniture to sit carefully in the seat beside her. "How did the ape take it?"

Hermione frowned. "He didn't. I left him in my classroom. I couldn't stand his prattle."

"So I haven't lost you to him yet?" he asked, almost in complete wonderment.

She scoffed and looked at him, "You have nothing to worry about, now be quiet and hold me."

He raised one of his brows curiously, but complied with her wishes and pulled her close to him, draping her legs over his so that she could rest fully against his chest. It was a surprisingly strong chest, and just comfortable enough that she would rather be in that spot than in any other place in the world... ever. His arms were soothing, shielding appendages as well. His light woodsy scent and bodily warmth were only a plus, almost like she were wrapping herself in that old security blanket with the puppies on it.

"I do believe this is the first time anyone has ever come to me for comfort," he remarked.

Hermione giggled into his neck, placing her lips there lightly, her hand traveling up his chest and around his neck to rest on his other shoulder. "I've waited all day for this."

"So have I," he admitted. "However, I am quite hungry. Skipping lunch to deal with that mess of mail in my office was not a good idea."

"I burned all of mine. It was oddly satisfying," she suggested. "You should try it."

"Floo the kitchens for food, and I will go get the mail. We will see just how satisfying it is," he replied.

Hermione begrudgingly unfurled herself from her spot, allowing him to stand up and leave the room. He left through one of the back rooms, and she wondered if there might be another door connecting his office there that she had never seen before. Flooding the kitchen quickly, she began the process of removing her teaching robes. For it always being spectacularly frigid in the dungeons, his private chambers certainly were warm. She set the robes across the back of the wingback chair in the corner of the room and returned to the settee. He reappeared a minute later with a rather hefty pile of letters.

"Have you read any of them?" Hermione asked, as he set the box down in front of the flames.

"No," he shook his head. "I don't think letters saying 'you sadistic bastard, how dare you do that to such a perfect child!' are quite my taste."

She giggled and got up, sitting cross-legged on the rug in front of the fire. When he did not immediately join her in the same position, she glanced up at him curiously. "Don't just stand there."

"Severus Snape does not sit on the ground," he scoffed, crossing his arms imposingly over his chest.

Hermione scoffed back and reached for the hem of his frockcoat. He stepped back and out of her reach. "Then conjure a damned chair."

Severus glanced across the room, at one of the easily moveable chairs, and reached for the wand in his pocket. Instead of calling it to him, he turned back for a moment to consider her.

"Why do you have to be so difficult about it?" she asked, reaching deep into the box, pulling an armful of letters out, and tossing them into the fire. The parchment cracked and sizzled, shriveling away into black and grey ashes. When she glanced back, expecting to still find his boots firmly rooted to the ground, she found he was carefully lowering himself into the spot across from her and onto the floor.

He settled down, eventually deciding he would have to unbutton his frockcoat to sit comfortably, and looked at her again. "You do realize, now that I am down here, I most likely will not get up."

"You're not that decrepit, Severus," she admonished, reaching in for a handful this time. "Now, get to it."

The next half hour continued in this fashion, each of them stopping every so often to read a letter or two...to gauge the public's opinion...by choosing letters at random. Most of them were accusing Severus of causing the debauchery of a beautiful young witch, who could do much better with that Ronald Weasley or Viktor Krum. Others were incoherent ramblings of past students.

"Oh, now this one is interesting," he said, his eyes scanning the parchment again. "Very interesting."

"What does it say?" She looked up at him and caught the hint of a playful twinkle in his dark eyes. In the past she might have considered it an evil glint, but she knew now that they were merely flashes of humor from a thought he did not express aloud.

"Nothing, it's for my eyes alone," he said, folding the parchment again and made a show of slipping it into his pocket.

"That is certainly not fair!" she exclaimed, reaching for it.

He batted her hand away.

"You know that not knowing is going to kill me!"

"Not kill you," he grinned wickedly. "Cause you a great deal of pain, yes, but it most certainly will not kill you. Do not give me that face. You know very well that it does not work on me."

She harrumphed and crossed her arms over her chest, glaring at him as he merrily went along emptying letters into the fire. How dare he? This was pure torture to her! He knew very well that her head would explode if she was not allowed to see the contents of that letter. It would keep her up at night until she knew. She would become so sleep deprived that she would not be able to do her job correctly, and she definitely would not be pleasant to be around. Did he really want that?

Hermione felt for her wand in her pocket and cursed under her breath. Of course she had left it in her robes, not that it would matter much. He would expect her trying to use magic, verbally or nonverbally to get the letter. Severus was coiled enough like a spring as it was. She could not imagine what he would do if she tried to use magic now.

In an instant, she formed a plan and implemented it.

It was not a very well thought out plan, though. Indeed, as soon as she had lunged at him, and pushed him back onto the ground, she decided it was actually a rather awful plan. Her idea had all the good merit of a well-placed surprise attack, but it was not one to use on the man of her current admiration, who apparently also felt the same about her.

Perhaps felt even more ardently about her, according to the rather prominent bulge now pressing against her thigh.

Neither did she think he would be stronger than her, but his reflexes were fast and his muscles unusually powerful for being so stringy. She quickly found herself on her back and pinned to the floor.

"I'm terribly sorry, Miss Granger," he said lowly, "but you've misjudged your enemy."

"Apparently I have," she said, trying to decide which would be better to pay attention to, the fact that he had insinuated his thighs between her legs to hold her down or the fact that she was in a very vulnerable position with her hands pinned over her head. "Though, I can't quite admit that I'm unhappy at how this turned out."

The left side of his lips curled up into a devilish smirk. "Neither can I."

His lips and the sensation of them touching hers was originally fleeting, but in an instant he had come back to her and engaged her in a searing, completely mind-numbing kiss with lips and tongues dueling in a heated battle. Her wrists were freed as his own arms traveled to more easily support himself over her. She snaked her hands up his arms and across his shoulders, entwining her fingers in his hair.

Thank the gods he was a quick learner. That is, *if* he was learning.

What if he wasn't?

How many women had he slept with in the past?

Damn being logical!

He had sensed her apprehension apparently and backed away a bit. "What is it, Hermione?"

"I...," she began, but paused. There really was not couth way to ask this. Hopefully he would not take it the wrong way.

"Continue," he urged.

She felt a blush on her cheeks, adding to the already rising temperature of her body created from his amazing lips. "I, um, you see, I know a few things about Death Eaters... and I know what happened to certain Muggles and Muggle-borns captured by Death Eaters."

"I suppose we have not talked about that, and we should," he said quietly, easily lifting himself up and depositing himself to her left, resting on his side to look down at her.

"I'm just curious, Severus," she said. "It won't stop this from happening, but I just need to know."

He gave her good-natured roll of his eyes. "Of course."

"Well?"

"There were times when I was invited to do it, Hermione, but I never did," he replied. "I couldn't do it. Even in the depths of my days when I truly believed anything having to do with Muggles was bad. The way they cried and begged some of those men to stop...my friends...it brought back too many memories from my childhood, and I could never do that to a woman, Muggle or not."

He paused a moment, his hand finding her waist and squeezing slightly.

"I know what you're going to say, 'But you killed people. How could anything be any worse than killing?'" he asked the quiet room. "You have killed as well. As have Ron, as did Harry, as did Krum. But you wouldn't for a moment believe them capable of hurting a woman like *that*. It is the same with me. I killed because I had to. Fortunately, my bitterness did not extend far enough to women."

Hermione reached up and brushed a lock of his black hair behind his ear.

"As vexing as women are, I do hold them in the highest esteem," he said. "Especially you, my dear."

She smacked his chest playfully and laughed. "I won't deny that I'm vexing."

He laughed with her.

"Have you had any experience at all?" she asked.

He lifted a brow tauntingly. "Knowing what you do about Lily, and now knowing that I did not participate in the Death Eater revels, I should think it leaves little question as to my knowledge."

"Never?!"

"Don't sound so surprised, Miss Granger," he said.

"You never once paid for it? There were no Slytherin girls in your school years that tempted you enough for that one night stand? Never ever?" she clarified.

He grumbled lowly, but nodded his head. "As for Slytherin girls, they were all after Lucius, and then Regulus, not mention their penchant for ill mannered Gryffindors. As a spy, I didn't allow myself the pleasure. It would cloud my mind and ruin everything. And that year in Azkaban... Well, let's just say I would have been much happier with Bellatrix as a suitemate than Crabbe and Goyle Senior."

"Oh, yes, quite a stretch to spend time with Bellatrix," Hermione said.

"It is," he said. "She knew my secret, and she let me know everyday that as soon as she got her wand back, I'd be subject to a particular Unforgivable Curse."

"Ah," she smiled, giggling lightly. "Okay, I'm satisfied with your answers. Now, to get back where we were..."

"Not so fast," he said, pulling back from her grabbing hands. "What about you? I think it is only fair you tell me your experience."

"Oh, you don't want to know that," she said and shook her head.

"I think I do," he replied. "Who was it? Weasley? Potter? Krum?"

Hermione sighed. "Not Ron."

"It was a Weasley, then," he said.

"Charlie. Don't you *ever* breathe a word of this to Ron."

Both of his brows shot up to his hairline. "Why Miss Granger, I'm surprised."

She felt the heat of a blush rise to her cheeks, "Okay, enough of this. It was two weeks of complete insanity when we were on a mission for the Order."

"Only him?"

"As far as sex goes, yes," she said. "Now, can we get back to where we were?"

He gave her a small smirk. "Certainly."

Just as he was leaning back down to kiss her, a resounding *pop* startled them both out of their embrace.

Annoying Friends

Chapter 27 of 29

Severus woke early the following morning to the smell of lavender, vanilla, musk, and the insane urge to sneeze.

Thank you all, again. I know I am cruel giving you little bits of foreplay here and there, but I promise there will be one decently long scene here in the future. Just you wait!

A special thanks to RobisonRocket... she knows why.

Thanks to my beta, Shanastay.

Only your real friends will tell you when your face is dirty. -- Sicilian Proverb

Chapter 27- Annoying Friends

Severus woke early the following morning to the smell of lavender, vanilla, musk, and the insane urge to sneeze. It took a few moments for him to realize that this was due to the fact that there were long, curly strands of brown hair in his face. But he moved away in time, so as not to wake his slumbering bedmate. She lay on her side, tucked into a tight ball, her hands beneath the pillow to help support her head. The buttons on her blouse had been undone in such a way, that as he lifted himself up on an elbow, he could just make out the curve of her breast.

His own hands and arms had somehow remained wrapped around the lithe woman during the course of the night.

The previous evening had not progressed like he thought it might, but he was pleased with how it did go. After being rudely interrupted by a house-elf delivering their food, they had shared a leisurely dinner and finished burning the rest of the letters. When they had completed that task, they had settled down together, like any normal couple, to finish off the open bottle of wine and spend those few valuable, close hours together before they would have to part.

He did not care too terribly much when she had kissed him goodnight, resulting in her never making it to the door, or her own room for the night.

One kiss quickly became ten, and ten eventually became a hundred as his hands took on the task of mapping her body and learning; learning her curves, her smooth skin, and her sensitive areas of flesh. It continued until the removal of clothes ensued. But they only had progressed as far as what they had fallen asleep in. Apparently, the wine had been more potent than was necessary. That, added to the Ogden's she first downed upon arriving, had sufficiently knocked her out, more sufficiently than any sleeping potion might have.

Her body began to animate, rejoining the living world. First with a barely noticeable twitching of her nose, then a few flutters of her lashes, followed by a tensing under his left hand that lay splayed across her cloth-covered abdomen. She yawned widely, bringing her hand up to her mouth to cover it. Turning, she settled onto her back and slowly let her eyes focus.

"Go back to sleep, it's still early," he said softly, nuzzling her ear and placing a soft kiss there.

"No use," she said groggily. "I'm up. I won't fall back asleep."

"Ah," he replied and pulled her close to him, holding onto her firmly. Her reaction to shift even closer to him was met with surprise, but definitely not displeasure. As a matter of fact, after he realized that she was indeed trying to get as close to him as possible, he found he quite liked the feeling and would not have opted to change this moment for anything else in the known or unknown world.

Just the realization that someone wished to get *this* close to him inspired such a sense of wonderment, he could not imagine ever fully understanding why. He supposed that he would just have to take it for what it was worth and thank whatever perversion of Fate made this beautiful woman and her feelings happen.

She sighed lightly and let out a little giggle, her warm breath ruffling the hair lying against his neck.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I could get very used to this, Severus," she admitted tenderly. "Of course, we've got a while until I should begin moving my things in. But I could definitely get used to this."

Severus could not help but laugh at her proclamation. "I see. And what makes you think I would ever allow you to move your things into my quarters?"

"Because," she said. Taking a hold of his left hand, she pushed aside the open neckline of her blouse and set his hand atop the supple mound. "If you ever want more than this, and regularly, you will make some concessions."

"You drive a hard bargain, Miss Granger," he remarked, the corner of his mouth turning up into a smirk. "But how do you know I will make some concessions for more?"

Hermione scoffed. "I know more about the male psyche than you think, *Professor*."

"Do you, now?" His trademark brow rose, challenging her. "Then you would know my mind, and what I am thinking right now."

"I could use Legilimency for that, if I wanted, but I'd have to learn it first," she conceded, meeting his eyes. She afforded him a small smile. "A man always wears his heart on his sleeve, or his arousal prominent in his trousers."

To illustrate her point, as though she needed to, her delicate, traveling hand slid away from his own hand resting on her breast and down his front to rest on the rigid length in his pants. He drew in a sharp breath and glanced quickly down at her hand, then darted back up to meet her eyes. She squeezed slightly and giggled when he let out a low growl.

But just as quickly as she had made that contact, her hand was gone. And she had somehow gotten out of his arms. "I should head back to my rooms now. It will cut back on the rumors today if they don't see me sneaking back there before breakfast."

He wanted to be angry that she had gotten his hopes up like that, only to leave him cold, but he could not bring himself to scowl...not this morning and not having woken up to her in his arms. "You wicked minx."

She turned to glance at him from her side of the bed before stepping down to the floor to search for the remainder of her clothes. "I prefer flirt, or tease, they're much less derogatory. But I could make an exception with the way 'minx' sounds coming from you."

"I would have never pegged you to be like this, Hermione," he said, watching as she stood from the bed and stretched her arms over her head, causing her blouse to ride up to her ribcage and give him a full view of the rather skin-like knickers covering her rounded arse. She glanced back at him again with a coquettish smile before bending over to pull her pants up her legs. She walked around to his side of the large bed and leaned over him to place her lips to his in a light farewell kiss.

"I'll see you at breakfast," she said quietly.

He shook his head. "I think I will need to stay here to *relieve* myself."

Hermione laughed at him. "Then lunch."

"You'll see me before that, Professor," he said with a slow smile. "You have your second month review today."

"Minerva will likely make sure she does it herself," Hermione said. "I wouldn't complain about that either. Do you even know what the class would be like if you were sitting in the back after all this?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I'll be there, Professor. You can plan on it."

Hermione nodded her head. "I shall see you then."

Snape watched her leave the room, collecting the bra that lay spread across the floor by the doorway as she went. He rested back onto his pillow and looked up at the green canopy on his bed. It was amazing to him, considering where he had come from, that his entire life had changed so drastically in only a little more than a month's time. He had never expected this to happen...ever...and especially not with Hermione Granger. But he should have realized by now that those who governed the universe had sick senses of humor. Perhaps he and Hermione were only puppets in that game, but he was going to enjoy it while he could.

"Mr. Malfoy!"

The squeak from the front room brought him back to reality, though, and he bolted upright.

"Ah, Miss Granger," said the drawled voice from the front room. "What an exceptional pleasure it is to find you here."

Severus stepped out of the room to find that it was not Lucius in the Floo, but in person and standing in the doorway. Hermione stood there, apparently still a little stunned that she had opened the door to find the pureblood standing there. Had Lucius even knocked on the door? Perhaps that was why she squeaked.

"I should be going," Hermione replied and pushed past the platinum-haired man.

"Oh, no, stay for a moment, Miss Granger," Lucius insisted, his hand clasping her shoulder. "I will be quick."

"You're calling and doing business rather early this morning, Lucius," Severus said, meeting his friend's cold, grey eyes.

Lucius smiled. "I only came to personally invite you and Miss Granger to the Halloween masquerade Narcissa is hosting for Draco's and Pansy's return from their honeymoon."

"You're just here only to see if the rumors were true," Hermione interjected and wriggled out of his grip on her shoulder. "They are."

"I am not here to criticize. After all, there's certainly no accounting for taste in bedfellows, Miss Granger," he said.

Severus clenched his fist and realized that his wand was still in the other room and had been thrown somewhere haphazardly the evening before. Hopefully Lucius was not here to stir up trouble. He may not have been the one to throw the first spell, but Lucius was nearly always behind planting the seed.

"I don't need to listen to this. Severus will talk to me later," Hermione seethed, marching away down the corridor.

Lucius waited until her footsteps were barely audible and then stepped the rest of the way inside the room, shutting door easily. "I hadn't thought you were a Muggle-lover, Snape. Just when you think you know a wizard," he said, his voice drawling.

Severus sighed. "It's a new world, Lucius. You would do well to embrace that."

"Never," he replied. "Never will I embrace *that*."

Severus shook his head and walked around to the settee and dropped down on it. He was not in the mood for discussing anti-Muggle sentiments right now. And really did not care to ever do it again, especially with the most staunch believer in a pureblooded world.

"Have you really come to invite us to the manor for Halloween?" Severus asked, hoping to push the domineering wizard out the door. "Or are you here to tell me what I *should* do?"

"My intentions for visiting are real, Severus," Malfoy replied.

He sneered. "You came all the way to Scotland for something you could have done through the Floo or by owl. I know you better than that, my friend."

"You need not worry about my intentions," he said.

Severus shook his head. Lucius nearly always meant the opposite from what he said. Why had he come, though? Just to see if it were true? To see if he could scare Hermione? Or was he here to plan an intervention of some sort with other fugitive ex-Death Eaters to bring him back to the Dark side?

"Cissy will send an owl with the specifics," Lucius continued and headed for the door again, his cane hitting the ground rhythmically as he went. "I do hope you and the Mud...Muggle-born, will make it. Draco and Pansy would be delighted."

He was gone before Severus could even bring himself to reply in a half-civil manner. Under any normal circumstance, he would not have hesitated to set straight those who were disrespecting something he cared about, but he had always had the utmost restraint when around Lucius. They *were* friends, even if they were now friends with different ideals. Right now, though, he had the insane urge to hex the bastard, short of a powerful Cruciatus or Killing Curse. In no time, Malfoy would be muttering alongside Lockhart in a St. Mungo's ward, comparing their "Most Charming Smile" techniques.

However, the most important thing to figure out was *why* Lucius had been here, and *what* was he planning?

Hermione waited for her students to file into the room and get settled into their seats before she stood up and tried to lecture them. Today they seemed much more respectful of the fact that she did not appreciate the chatter revolving around her choice in men, nor did she think it was worth the speculation they put toward thinking about it. However, that would change when Severus arrived to do his evaluation.

The final bell rang, and Severus was nowhere to be seen. Where was he? He would not be late for this review and would have tried to sneak in as quietly as he could manage through the door after the last student had run in. He knew well enough that if the students realized he was there...whether their secret had been blown open or not...it would cause a heavy blanket of anxiety to cover the room. It was what he inspired even in the most confident, insufferable know-it-all. In the classroom setting, Professor Severus Snape dominated a room even if he did not intend to.

Time to start.

A movement out of the corner of her eye as she stood up to begin her lecture made her turn. A large, black-billed raven had flown in one of the windows and was looking for a place on her desk to rest. Crookshanks, who had followed her today to class, wary that she would not return again as she had not the previous night, jumped up onto her desk. The orange half-Kneazle considered the intruder carefully before reaching out and pawing the feathers on the bird's long, black, wedge-shaped tail.

The bird turned its neck and caught one of Crookshanks' toes in his beak. Letting out a horrible wail, the half-Kneazle's fur ruffled and Hermione understood. There was no other way to describe the surly attitude of the bird, the large beak, or the black body. Clearly, the bird was Severus' Animagus form.

"No, Crooks," Hermione said, swatting the cat away from the magpie. The bird obligingly nodded his head at her and captured the tip of her finger with a light grasp in his beak. She laughed. "Very funny, Professor, come sit at the front of the class. I promise I won't transfigure you into anything."

If a bird could scowl, it would have, as he begrudgingly stepped up into the palm of her hand.

"Okay, class, settle down!" Hermione called, walking to the front of the class and placing him on her work table. "Today we'll be discussing changing your animals into goblets."

Hermione fell back into the seat at her desk, letting out a long sigh as she rolled her neck. "They get more and more annoying each passing day."

The raven flew off the table and in mid-flight transfigured back into billowing black robes, and a long, lean body. He did not miss a step coming out of his flight, continuing his lengthy stride over to her. Stopping behind her, he reached his hands out and began to slowly knead away the knots formed in her neck with his amazing fingers.

"Do I pass?"

He let out a low chuckle. "Did you think you wouldn't?"

"No one ever quite knows when you're involved," she murmured. Crookshanks jumped up into her lap, eyeing Severus curiously from that spot.

"Bloody cat almost pulled out a tail feather," he remarked. "But I am impressed you could make the distinction from my actions. I don't think anyone knows what form I take. They probably all think I'm a bat."

Hermione shrugged. "I always favored a crow. At least I was close. And I can't say I'm surprised."

"You think it's fitting, then?" he asked.

"What other animal has such different beliefs surrounding it? To some a raven is magical and powerful, to others it represents death and melancholy. The voice thing fits. Besides, it's the smartest bird in the world," she said. "It only fits."

"Why, thank you, Hermione," he said, his smile evident from the tone of his voice.

Hermione laughed at him. "And there's also evidence that they mate for life."

"Well," he began, but paused for a short moment. "When and if said 'mating' does happen, I'll decide then."

"Only *you* could take the romance out of it," she scoffed good-naturedly. Just the fact that he was considering "mating for life" already, made a slight, not wholly unpleasant, shiver run down her spine.

Did he really mean it?

Hermione stood up slowly so that Crookshanks could jump off and turned around to face him, sitting back on her desk. "So what did Malfoy want?"

"Just what he said," he replied quietly.

"You believe him?"

"Oh, I believe there is a masque for Draco and Pansy's return. The Malfoys will throw a soiree for anything to show off their wealth. But no, I don't believe his only intention was to invite us to it," he conceded.

Hermione nodded her head.

"I've never wanted to hurt the man more than I did this morning, especially after you left," he admitted.

She smiled. "Well, I'm used to it by now from the Malfoys."

He stepped closer to her, insinuating himself between her legs. "Do you want to go?"

Hermione raised a curious brow. "When, in your knowledge, have I *ever* said no to a mystery needing to be solved?"

"True," he said, leaning down and placing his lips where her ear lobe met her jaw.

"In the classroom, Severus?" she asked with a short laugh, his warm breath tickling her. "Someone could walk in on us."

He chuckled lowly.

"Like me?"

"Oh bloody hell! Are we to be visited today by every friend we have?" he snarled, stepping away from her and looking at the door behind her. Hermione knew who it was without turning around, but she had to admit that she was not quite ready to face him. "Next time I'll lock and ward the door."

"Thanks," she said, pushing herself off the desk and turning around to the advancing, tall, red-haired wizard. "What brings you to Hogwarts, Ronald?"

Ron frowned. "I hate when you get that tone! You sound just like Mum."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "You didn't answer me."

"Children, must you bicker?" Snape intoned after watching that exchange.

"Too bad you can't take House points," Hermione teased and turned back to Ron. "What brings you all the way to Hogwarts?"

"George and Fred asked me to come up and see how things were going at their Hogsmeade store," he explained. "Which gave me a convenient excuse to come and check up on you."

Hermione sighed, shaking her head. "All through school you couldn't be bothered with my life. Now you're wanting to make sure I'm fine?"

He gave her a stern look.

"You don't have to worry about anything. I'm completely sane. I've not been put under Imperius, nor has Severus threatened me into a relationship. I don't like Krum like I do Severus. Yes, he's older than me, but I don't care. And yes, he's Severus Snape, the bane of Harry's existence, but I don't care about that either. He'd understand," Hermione finished, daring the redhead to defy her words.

Ron let out a small huff. "Well, I guess that pretty much covers it all then."

"And you can tell the rest of your family that," Hermione said.

"Ginny will be sending an owl soon enough," Ron warned her. "Fleur couldn't believe it, either."

Hermione glanced quickly at Severus, who was remaining surprisingly quiet during this exchange, and then back at Ron. "If I cared what others thought all the time, I'd not have any life. And Fleur, of all people, should understand loving someone for who they are, *not* for what they look like. At least I don't have people questioning me about my motives, like I encountered while I was with Viktor."

"What questioning?" Ron asked.

"Don't give me that, Ronald," she warned. "You were the worst of them."

"But...", he began.

"Save it," Hermione cut him off.

Ron froze. "Did you say you loved *him*?"

Hermione looked quickly between both men, Ron's disgusted tone hanging in the air. Oh, Merlin, her and her big mouth let it slip. "I didn't say that. I was just using Fleur *loving* Bill as an example. I didn't mean..."

"Look at you blush," Ron teased.

Hermione reached quickly for her wand, having had enough of his teasing, and cast a voice muting hex. He mouthed, "Bloody hell," and started wild gesticulations with his hands.

"Fine Auror you make," she admonished. "I would have seen that one coming from a mile away."

"'Mione!" he mouthed again.

Severus let out another small chuckle. "You have this handled?"

"Yes, why?" she asked.

"I'm going to lunch," he stated, heading toward the door, making a quick getaway.

Hermione had the sneakiest suspicion that Severus Snape did not want to stick around for any other talk of "love" that would ensue once the hex wore off of Ron. Not that she was ready to talk about it, either, but she had not expected him to be so shaken up about it. Or perhaps he did not want to stick around for the ensuing bickering between friends.

Whatever the reason, though, she knew they would have to face it some time in the near future. He just better be ready to talk *then*.

Malfoy Manor Part Deux

Chapter 28 of 29

Arriving at the Manor, Hermione found it to be just as it had been the last time she had come. However, she found it a strange twist of fate that they would end up here, seeing as this was the exact place she had decided to delve deeper into the crustiness that was Severus Snape. Her room was considerably more opulent than it had been last month for Draco's wedding. But she imagined this was due to the fact that, by some coincidence, the Malfoys thought it prudent to plan upon them sharing the same room.

Chapter 28- Malfoy Manor Part Deux

Two weeks passed quickly for the couple. No more stories had been published, and the letters had stopped coming. Everyone who had a care in the world about them had contacted them and either voiced their disapproval, their indifference or their approval of the relationship. Besides Ron, most of the Weasleys took it well. Tonks and Remus remained the two people who were the most approving of it. Minerva made sure to give them stern glares from across the room if they ever got too close, or appeared as though they were too friendly with each other. Viktor took his meals away from the Great Hall and invited his teammates back to the school for the Ravenclaw/Hufflepuff game.

The students, after realizing no special treatment would be given to them from the Transfiguration or Potions professors, loosened up. There were still wary glances when she and Severus passed each other in the halls, as though they were waiting for Snape to throw her against a wall and have his way with her right there in front of everyone.

For the most part, at least she thought, their decorum in front of each other was just as it had been before. The only difference was that they spoke a little more openly and animatedly with each other. No one had a reason to take issue with them, even with their being in each other's chambers. As a matter of fact, during most evenings in a week, they did not spend any time together because of grading or hall patrol.

There was a tension there, with not everyone understanding or accepting the relationship, but it was lessening. What made Hermione the happiest, though, was that the article had not done as much damage as Skeeter had probably hoped. This was not to say that Hermione was giving up on trying to find a way to avenge the slander they had already suffered. But she was not in quite as great a hurry as before. Right now, she was more focused on her career and her growing relationship with Severus. And the intense work they did have to put into the relationship to keep it going.

Hermione had wondered briefly these last few weeks just what exactly she was doing with the man, who truly was unpleasant any way you put him. Whatever the attraction was, Hermione could not bring herself to *not* be with Severus. Even with all of his problems, all of his dark past, greasy hair, big nose and all other flaws... she loved him. She had not told him outright yet, but it *was* definitely there. It was a magic she had never experienced before...this undeniable magnetic pull to another that should have never happened in the first place.

However, with a rather peaceful two weeks behind her, the sudden realization that she would be made to parade around Malfoy Manor for an evening was causing a great deal of stress for the insufferable know-it-all. Severus had tried to calm her and tell her not to worry about the masquerade, saying that nothing was going to happen. But Severus was neither a very soothing person, nor was he able to hide the fact that more had passed between him and Lucius the morning after the original article was published.

When she had shown up at Draco's wedding on Viktor's arm, she knew that she was being tolerated at best. But a second appearance at the manor was asking a lot of a man who still had a vendetta against Muggles and Muggle-borns, and most particularly those who had stood by Harry's side in the numerous battles that made him look bad in his Lord's eyes; including his botched attempt to retrieve the Prophecy from the Department of Mysteries.

She certainly did not relish the fact that Narcissa had owled them the day before their departure, asking that they stay for the weekend. Besides that, Viktor was sure to be there. He had stood up for Draco, after all.

What could this weekend possibly have in store for her and Severus?

Hermione looked across the room at the stony-faced man, deep in concentration over the article in the *Evening Prophet* that he was reading. Ever since the episode with Skeeter's article, he had made it his duty to scour the pages of the paper to know what he would be facing before being called to Minerva's study to be scolded. His lank, dark hair fell over his eyes, and every time he blinked, his long eyelashes shifted the hair.

Apparently having gazed at him for too long, his eyes found hers, and his expression turned to one of annoyance, being interrupted from his reading. She sighed, "Sorry."

"Humph," he muttered, turning back to the paper.

"Lovely," she said and closed her book on her lap. "Don't you think we should be going? It's nearly six. Dinner is at eight."

He frowned deeply and looked up at her again. Folding the paper up, he placed it on the table beside him and nodded. "I suppose we should."

"You really don't want to go, do you?" Hermione asked.

Despite Severus' change in allegiance, he had never stopped being friends with Lucius. Their friendship had only become stronger when word reached Lucius that Severus was the one to make sure Draco's task was completed in a satisfactory manner, thereby lessening the wrath of Voldemort on his family. Even if their beliefs were different from the other, they were friends. And she had expected him to be a little more anxious to go.

"I hate these things," he admitted. "A weekend at the manor I'm fine with. But Lucius knows how I dislike social events."

Hermione chuckled quietly. "At least it gives you a chance to see me when I actually care about what I look like."

"You needn't worry, Hermione," he remarked, picking at an invisible something on his trousers. "You could be covered in mud, and I'd still find you irresistible."

"Thank you," she replied. The resulting blush from the unabashed praise was hot on her cheeks, and she glanced down at the ground. Hearing his compliments, even if they had nothing to do with academics, always made her feel especially amazing.

"Shall we?" he asked, coming to stand in front of her. "I believe we've prolonged this long enough."

Hermione nodded and took his hand to steady herself as she stood. She sighed. "I take it we're going by Floo? You wouldn't have told me to meet you here otherwise."

"Perhaps I just wanted to spend some time with you before we left." He raised a challenging brow.

"Are you feeling well?" she teased, lifting her hand to his cheek.

Severus snarled. "Of course I am, you dunderhead. I try to show some affection and you act like this!"

Hermione laughed it off and pushed up onto her toes, brushing her lips across his. "Let's go."

Arriving at the manor, Hermione found it to be just as it had been the last time she had come. However, she found it a strange twist of fate that they would end up here, seeing as this was the exact place she had decided to delve deeper into the crustiness that was Severus Snape. Her room was considerably more opulent than it had been last month for Draco's wedding. But she imagined this was due to the fact that, by some coincidence, the Malfoys thought it prudent to plan upon them sharing the same room.

Hermione did not mind this much. It was something that they had been working up to, sharing a bed and other common facilities for an extended amount of time. But she worried more about Severus' comfort than her own.

He was very obviously not used to sharing living quarters with another person, much less a woman whom he cared for. Perhaps it was a little inconsiderate of her to begin the process of disrobing and walking over to her luggage, without realizing that the most they had ever seen of each other was her in a blouse and her knickers and him without the white dress shirt on. Though it was a testament to how comfortable she had become in his presence.

"Sorry," she said absently when she realized she was being watched very closely and looked up at him to meet his gaze. And what a lustful, questioning, yet utterly terrified gaze it was. Was it really a terrified gaze? Or was it more than that?

"Don't let me stop you," he replied quietly, his dark eyes scanning down her body.

It was such a thorough gaze that made her feel as though she really had nothing on. But then again, any gaze he afforded her, in malcontent or in lust, always made her feel like she was wearing nothing. At least she knew her bra and knickers were firmly in place. Or perhaps, that was what was enticing him so much, knowing that he was so very close to beholding it all, and yet unable to.

Hermione pulled the same green dress she wore the first evening with the Malfoys out of her suitcase and considered it for a moment. She smiled evilly. "Was *this* what made you think differently of me?"

It took him a long moment to draw his attention from her breasts back to her eyes and realize what she was asking. He replied in his most schooled, bored tone. "A man would have to be dead not to have noticed you in that."

"That's what I thought," she teased, taking her wand and changing a few things about the dress. "Why do they have these formal dinners all the time? I understand the occasional party, but doesn't it get a little overdone to do this pomp and circumstance every evening?"

"There's something to be said, Miss Granger, for tradition," he replied. "Perhaps an old Victorian tradition, but it's a tradition that pureblood families cling to."

Hermione frowned. "But it's so *cold*. There's no room for fun in the festivities."

"Look at whom you are referencing, dearest," he pointed out quietly, turning away from her and rifling through his things.

Taking this to mean that that discussion was done, Hermione turned back to her dress, considering it for a moment longer. Tapping the fabric with her wand, a charm to turn the fabric black began at the tip of the vineyard and extended throughout the rest of the dress. "You know, pretty soon this dress will be so over-transfigured and over-charmed that it will just fall apart around me."

He let out a low chuckle. "Won't that be an interesting development when it happens?"

"For you, at least," she acknowledged, smoothing the fabric into place over her abdomen.

"Oh, I am certain *all* the males present will find it quite interesting, married or not," he remarked, playing with one of the buttons on his frockcoat.

Hermione glanced back at him. "Must be nice not having to change into something."

"Hence the appeal, love," he admitted, taking three long strides to close the distance between them. Swooping down over her, like a giant bat, he brushed his lips across hers. And then was exiting the door into the hallways, before she could even comprehend what had happened. Hermione followed quickly behind him, as she usually had to take two steps to match his one. But she found that, pleasantly enough, he had slowed down to her pace and offered his arm to her in a most gallant action.

Their trip down the hall and the large main staircase was a quick one. He guided them through the maze of hallways and corridors, obviously having spent much time here, and learned the labyrinth well enough that he could maneuver through it with his eyes closed.

They ended up in the grand dining room of the manor and found themselves facing a group of people already being seated and seen to by eager house-elves. Lucius poked an elf with his cane, moving it along to the decanter of deep red wine on the sideboard much more quickly than it had been going.

She had not noticed the fact that she had taken a defensive step forward and was grabbing for her wand in the robe she was not wearing, until Severus' long fingers curled around her wrist in a tight grip to keep her in place. Hermione glanced up at him, feeling quite sheepish and let out a short, disgruntled sigh.

"Ah, there you two are," Lucius announced to the room. "Please sit."

There were two seats open, and both were not beside each other. Lucius sat at one end of the long mahogany table, Narcissa to his left. At the opposite end of the table sat Draco with Pansy to his left and a very angry looking, thick-browed Bulgarian frowning to his right. Next to Pansy sat the blonde-haired witch who had stood up for her, but one that Hermione had not cared to remember the name of.

Hermione had expected as much, unsurprised at not being sat beside each other, but she had completely forgotten that Viktor would most likely be at the manor this weekend. Though Lucius' purpose was still unclear to her, she did have a sneaking suspicion that his trip to Hogwarts to invite them to this weekend soiree had to do with the Bulgarian Seeker. What were they planning anyway?

The biggest question at the moment was whom she would rather sit next to: Lucius or Viktor.

Deciding that Severus sitting nearest Viktor would be a very bad idea indeed, she quickly moved toward that side of the table to sit. Severus had made to follow her and help her into the seat. But Viktor was just as quick and had grabbed the chair at the same time. Sensing the looks of complete hatred each of the men were sending each other from behind her, she turned to look at them. Hermione grabbed one of Viktor's hands and one of Severus', pulling their death grips away from the wooden back.

"Thank you very much, gentlemen, but I believe I can sit on my own," she said, slipping into her seat and sliding the chair forward.

The tension in the room did not lessen though, even as Severus continued around to the seat beside Lucius. The daggers Severus was sending toward Viktor with his glaring, obsidian eyes were enough to worry her about what might happen between the two wizards... one of whom apparently still incorrectly thought he had chance with her.

"Now that that is taken care of..." Lucius drawled, his fluid voice bringing the room back into the present.

Everyone Is A Dunderhead

Chapter 29 of 29

The end.

To my faithful readers past and present: I must give you my most grateful thanks for all the comments you have left me, including those that may be left for this chapter. This is the end of the road... per se. I plan to eventually write a sequel short story or two. If you feel that this end was like falling off a cliff, I am truly sorry as I had intended to do this. This was a natural ending place for me and a personal choice, and one that was left way open for the sequel stories I mentioned.

Please stay tuned!

And to those who have waited, please enjoy this offering of tart lemon.

Thank you, dear Shanastay. You were amazing. The lemon in this chapter is mainly hers, as I seem to have momentarily lost my mojo for writing steamy lemons. Thank you!

Chapter 29- Everyone Is A Dunderhead

"Severus," said Lucius, "how long have we been friends?"

"Since our school days," he replied, considering the untouched glass of Ogden's in his hand. He knew what the platinum-haired wizard was trying to do, and he was not gullible enough to fall for it.

Lucius sneered at the glass as well, seeing that his plan was not working.

"You will have to do much better than this, Lucius, if you're attempting to incapacitate me," Severus warned in a quiet tone, not meeting his eyes. "I'm actually quite surprised you haven't employed some of your fine Dark Magic yet."

"You know as well as I do that I am on magical probation for ten more years," drawled the rich wizard. "My wand will send a signal to the Ministry should I try anything... unsavory."

Severus nodded his head. "Then why are you doing *this*, Lucius? Surely the old Slytherin tactics haven't abandoned you completely."

"No, but I must say that my heart is not into this deal I have made with an... associate," he admitted. "I have not tried my hardest."

"So you are in league with Krum," Severus remarked, frowning. "Did he come crying to you for help?"

Lucius gave a haughty laugh and leaned back in his seat. "No, he seemed rather full of rage."

"You still feed off of that?" Severus questioned, shaking his head.

"Not as much as I used to," Lucius admitted. "Viktor did have some very good points to make for his case, though."

Severus grumbled.

"I fail to see what the fascination is with this Mudblood. Besides the fact that she would serve as a rather eye-catching caged pet," Lucius said. "You should just let the kid have her."

"The one time I'm happy with my life, and you try to ruin it," Severus growled.

"I know I am not being a very good friend in this argument, Severus. But you have to consider the facts from where I stand. What could the girl possibly see in you? You have no money; you're condemned forever to Hogwarts. Compared to Viktor, you look like a toad," Lucius explained.

Severus pursed his lips together. "Lucius, I'd rather not discuss this."

"Oh, but I have to draw attention to the fact that it was like this once before. Has she said at all that she cares for you as you care for her?" Lucius questioned.

"She doesn't need to," Severus snapped, knowing exactly where this was going.

Lucius raised a brow at him. "Signals can be mistaken Severus, like it was with that other Mudblood. And what happened in the end? She went to the more handsome, wealthier wizard."

Severus wanted to cast a particularly nasty Unforgivable on the man right then. And yet he could not keep those thoughts, now masquerading around like an ugly monster, at bay. He was not yet secure enough in himself to know in all certainty that his relationship with Hermione would never end. Lucius was a very convincing speaker, no less, and what he was saying was suddenly making a great deal of sense. So much sense, as a matter of fact, that he could feel the bile rising in his stomach and his blood beginning to boil. Though he did not know who he was more angry at...Lucius, Hermione or Krum.

"What could Hermione possibly be using me for?" he asked. "This is a different situation, Lucius."

"Perhaps you're only a pawn to make Viktor jealous? Perhaps he was not showing her enough sincerity in his actions before, and she is testing him?" Lucius offered this. And while Severus knew none of it was true, the planted seed of doubt began to grow rapidly inside his mind.

Severus stood up quickly and deposited the tumbler of amber liquid to the table on his right. "Thank you, Lucius. I believe I've had enough for the night."

He headed for the room they were staying in, debating whether he wanted to yell at Hermione or tell her to pack her things so that they both could leave together. He had never been so insulted before!

How dare Lucius say that, anyway! Hermione would never...

But then again, he still did not know her that well. Taking a right instead of left where he should have, Severus headed straight for the library, where he had a feeling he would most likely find her, rather than in bed and waiting for him.

Hermione sighed to herself, pulling yet another leather-bound tome from the vast shelves of the Malfoys' library.

She needed sleep desperately, to prepare herself for the following day. But like the last time she had been at Malfoy Manor, sleep did not come easily. And when it did, it was riddled with nightmares. This time, however, her slumber was not so much interrupted by the thoughts of the past. But instead was littered with trepidations about what could happen in the next twenty-four hours with both Severus and Viktor in such close proximity to each other. Not to mention the fact that Lucius obviously had something up his sleeve, even if he was trying to put on a good face. Hermione had learned a lot in her short life. And she knew when that man was lying through his teeth, even if he did put on quite a good show.

Something was going to happen, she just could not figure out what or when it would. Viktor had most likely asked for Lucius' help with the matter and could have been the reason why Lucius and Severus had disappeared after dinner with a bottle of Ogden's. Perhaps they were trying to drink Severus into such a stupor that they could do any number of things to him... From modifying his memory, to other more horrible things. She would not put it beyond them, friendship or not.

"It is late, Herm-own-ninny," said the accented voice from the corner of the room. "You should be in bed."

Hermione shook her head and turned toward the dark shadow moving along the far end of the library, stepping into the low glow of the fire, and then over to her. "Nice display at dinner."

He grunted.

"Viktor, I really wish you would just drop it all." She sighed. "Your pride is hurt and nothing more."

"You believe that is so?" he asked, stepping closer to her and pushing her back against the shelves.

"I *know* it's so." She frowned. "Please step back, Viktor. I would appreciate it."

He did not move, his warm breath wafting on her face, carrying with it the faintest scent of alcohol. "I like it here, thank you."

"Don't be such an arse, Viktor," she said lowly. "You know very well that you'll regret it in the harsh light of day."

"I do not think I vill," he said and insinuated his meaning by rubbing his rather startling arousal against her hip.

A wave of nausea flooded through her.

"I have finally decided why you left me for Snape," he said. "You needed someone much more forceful with you. I was being too courteous."

Hermione felt her face screw up into an expression of utter confusion and indignation. "What? I never left you! There was never anything to leave!"

"Vhat ve had was nothing?"

The giant Bulgarian was quickly becoming frightening. And Hermione was wedged into such a spot that there was no way she was going to get her wand out of her robe to do any damage without him noticing and stopping her.

"Yes, nothing," she said and placed a hand on his chest, pushing him back slightly, but only enough so she could breathe. "Please step away from me, Viktor. You're making a big mistake. This is definitely *not* the way to win me, if that is what you are trying to do."

"I think it *is*, though. You just play hard to get," he returned, pushing her more forcefully against the shelves.

Hermione thought for a moment that she should scream out for help. But knowing the manor, no one would ever hear her. Besides, she was Hermione Granger. She had faced Voldemort, and Death Eaters, and any like of frightening beasts. A measly, over-confident, slightly buzzed Bulgarian brute was easy work.

Or so she thought.

Severus stood rooted into place, watching the scene play out. He did not know what to do. Was this all part of the plan Lucius and Viktor had concocted? Or was Hermione

really playing into the Bulgarian's arms? The Hermione he knew was quick to anger. And she would have had the man on the floor in a full body bind by now, if she was not enjoying what was going on. Had he really been that much a fool to believe that Hermione had cared for him and loved him?

And then the disgusting Bulgarian kissed her... kissed her deeply. And there was no attempt on her part to get away.

In that instant, he felt his heart shatter.

As quickly as his whole life had fallen apart, though, the drama in front of him changed just as drastically.

Viktor was staggering backward, holding his groin from an obviously well-placed knee. And Hermione had her wand drawn in no time, a few tears trickling down her cheeks. "Don't you *ever*... dare... do that again!"

"Herm-own-ninny," Viktor pleaded.

"I *respected* you, Viktor. You were my friend!" she exclaimed. "And *this* is how you act?"

The Bulgarian was silent.

"And don't you forget for one bloody moment that I can think for myself! I never needed to be dominated like that. I'm not some worthless witch you have to think for!" Hermione continued. "Severus may be domineering and downright sadistic at times, but *he* at least treats me with the respect I deserve. Never once has he thrown himself at me when I have said I did not want it. Viktor..."

She paused for a breath, never lowering her wand.

"I told you I did not want anything, and I meant it," she said. "Now leave me alone."

"Herm-own-ninny..." The Bulgarian whined. He actually whined.

"Don't give me that!" She shook her head. "You know how to say my name properly, so do it. As a matter of fact, from now on, call me Professor."

"I still believe you are under Imperius," he said boldly.

Hermione let out an exasperated sound that could have resembled a call of a Horntail. But Severus did not much care for thinking of magical creatures right now, not with Hermione doing and saying these things.

"I'm not. Do any test you want! You won't find a thing. The only thing you will find is that I never want to speak to you again."

"But Hermione..." he said.

She sneered frightfully. "Don't!"

"Her..."

"I said don't!"

Silence passed in the room, the only sound was the crackling of a log in the fireplace.

"I love him, Viktor," she said, suddenly calm. "No one understands it, and I have to say that neither do I right now. But *love* him. I know *that* much."

Viktor sighed heavily and looked down at the ground. "Have a nice life and lots of gangly children you will never be able to support." He turned and stalked heavily toward the other entrance into the room.

Hermione lifted her wand with determination blazing in her eyes, casting a non-verbal spell that had no obvious outcome. She dropped her arm to her side and looked around. With a "pop" she was gone.

How dare he anyway? How dare he push himself on her?

Hermione paced the room hotly, the event replaying over and over in her mind, and only served to anger more, rather than calm her with a rational explanation. The fact of the matter was, there was no logical explanation to what had just happened. She had thought Viktor a harmless, close friend. But how wrong she had been. She had wanted to trust him, to think he was better than that. But all along, he had never been any better than another affronted man. The only difference was, he was a powerful man who was easily twice the size of her in muscle mass, who could insinuate himself all he wanted.

"Hermione." The deep, silky voice washed over her, and she turned quickly to look at the man standing near the door of the bedroom in the dark shadows. Even though she knew it was him, her reflexes were still running high, and her wand and arm shot up at the ready. He did not sneer at her though, like he might have in the past. Instead he glided over to her in a few short steps, his hand circling around her wrist and removing the vine wood wand from her grasp.

He tossed the wand to the bed, but did not remove his grasp from her hands. "Your fingers are like ice."

Hermione grunted as he took the other hand and wrapped his long fingers around her clasped hands.

"You saw it, didn't you," she said matter-of-factly.

"Saw what?" he asked quietly, his dark gaze meeting her own.

Hermione sighed. "You saw what went on in the library. Normally you would have said something sarcastic about me thinking I could do something bad to you with my wand. You'd laugh in my face and call me a silly girl for having the notion that I could take you."

"You are a silly girl for thinking that the only way you could harm me is through the usage of a wand," he remarked, stepping closer. "As a matter of fact, you can hurt me in many other ways, all having nothing to do with magic and no wands at all."

"Severus," she said, sniffing slightly. "I didn't... you didn't... you heard and saw all of it, I hope? Not just the bad parts?"

He nodded his head slowly, the silvery moonlight filtering in through a window catching his shiny black hair as he dipped his head, so as not to look directly at her. "Is it true? I tried to ignore it a few weeks ago when Weasley showed up. I didn't want to face that conversation with you. I suppose now is the time."

Hermione shrugged. "It's not that big a deal, Severus. I mean, the notion of it is. But it's not like anything will change between us with it being said."

"No, it won't change. But it is very difficult for me to say, and even think about, Hermione," he said slowly. "I've come from a life of hate. And being thrust into this uncharted territory is a rather large step for Severus Snape to take."

She smiled slightly. "I love you, Severus. I do."

"It sounds surprisingly wonderful with my name in context," he murmured. "No one has ever really said they loved me. Not even my own mother."

Hermione reached up and brushed away a few strands of hair from his face and behind an ear.

He smiled softly. "I had never thought the insufferable know-it-all would be here and in this position with me."

"Face it, Severus, you know you like the fact that I am an insufferable know-it-all," she teased. "It has given you many years of pleasure torturing me and my Gryffindor mates."

"It has," he replied and leaned in, resting his lips over hers in long, sweet kiss. Releasing her mouth, he pulled her close to him in a bone-crushing embrace, his lips resting beside her ear. There he whispered quietly, barely audibly, but it was there. "I love you more than you could possibly comprehend, Hermione."

She giggled and pulled away from him, grabbing his hand and looking toward the bed. "Now, if you'll let me, I believe the insufferable know-it-all has some knowledge that her professor doesn't."

He quirked a brow up at her. "Five points from Gryffindor, Miss Granger, for suggesting that I am a dunderhead."

Hermione laughed lightly. "Everyone's a dunderhead at some point in their life, Professor."

Hermione tugged Severus toward the enormous bed. She stopped when they were standing by the side of the bed. She lifted her hand to cup the side of his face, drawing him in for a slow, gentle kiss. She broke contact when she felt his lithe hands moving up her arms to slide her dress's straps off her shoulders. "Severus..."

"Hmmm...?" His gaze was hooded, desire-dilated eyes glittering at her from beneath his lashes.

"I need you to promise me something."

His voice was a low, silky drawl. "And what would that be?"

Hermione took a deep breath and plunged forward, Gryffindor courage bearing her through. "Promise me you won't be embarrassed by whatever happens tonight. Being as we're both entering pretty uncharted waters here, things..."

"Things..." he prompted, eyebrow arched comically, considering the situation.

"Things might not go exactly as we've envisioned?" she offered. "I've been told that 'first times' are never like the romance novels make them out to be. Things might be awkward, even with all the research I'm sure both of us have already done."

"I was under the impression that you had already done this with a Weasley?"

"I did, but that was three years ago. And it was horribly embarrassing for me. Even though we are talking about you, I do believe you could find it embarrassing as well," she replied. "Just because I have had... liaisons... does not mean that I necessarily care to remember that night or got much from it."

The brunette already looked a bit flustered and sheepish with her little speech.

Severus appeared to consider this a moment. "Agreed."

He withdrew his wand and quickly cast a Silencing Charm around the perimeter of the room before setting the length of wood on the nightstand. At Hermione's arched brow, he explained. "We don't wish the Malfoys to know just what we're engaged in, now do we?"

Hermione threw back her head and let out a full-throated laugh, wondering why *she* had not thought of that first. She had planned out just about everything else in her mind. Her laugh turned into a gasp as she felt Severus' lips on her exposed neck, trailing kisses from her jaw down to her shoulder. His hands had settled on her waist, and she leaned into his touch, her fingers sliding up the planes of his chest to fumble at the buttons at his throat. She started snickering as she encountered difficulties after the third button. Severus withdrew enough from her to grant her unrestricted access to the confounding buttons. A small smile, redolent with amusement, played about his lips. "Is this what you were referring to?"

The slight witch giggled. "Yes." A trace of annoyance beginning to rise in her, she teased him. "*You could* help me out here."

He chuckled lightly, but acquiesced, working his way up from the bottom of the coat, as she made her way down, meeting somewhere in the middle.

Hermione slid her hands up over his shoulders, pushing the outer garment down his arms. She had it bunched halfway down his arms before she realized her error.

Severus' arms were trapped by his sides, caught at the wrists by his still-buttoned cuffs. He growled lightly as she snickered again, turning to grant her access to the offending buttons. He twisted the other way, once she made short work of the first cuff, presenting her with the opposite one. Freed of the impediment, the garment made its way to the floor. In unspoken agreement, he pulled the shirt beneath from his trousers. It was dealt with in the same manner, the Potions master offering her his wrists, so he would not become entangled in his clothing again.

Shirt gone, he pulled Hermione flush against his bared chest. The silk of her dress rubbed enticingly against his skin, his nipples hardening into sensitized peaks. He dipped his head to claim her mouth, devouring it with a breadth of emotion that made no secret of how aroused he was. As if the hardened length pressing against her abdomen wasn't indicator enough.

Lithe hands rose to her shoulders again, this time allowed to push the thin straps there aside. Running on instinct, and what he had gleaned from various How-To manuals, including an explicit variant on the Muggle *For Dummies* series, he bent his head to trail kisses across the skin exposed by the descending fabric.

He encountered his first real impediment when he attempted to unhook her bra while still attending her neck and chest. He pushed her hands away when, giggling, she lifted them to take care of it herself. He took her by the shoulders and spun her about, glaring at the evil clasp as if his gaze would undo it. His quarry visible, he made short work of it, littering kisses across her bare shoulders as the bra's straps joined the descent of the dress straps.

Hermione let the undergarment drop to the floor before she was again spun about, her breasts fully bared to his view. She first sighed, then jumped, aiming a light smack at the back of Severus' neck, as he sucked on one pert nipple and nipped a bit too hard. "Ow! Not so hard."

A muffled, "Sorry," was his answer. He followed the apology by laving the flat of his tongue across the offended bud before moving across to pay gentler attention to its match.

Her own impatience rising, Hermione pushed him back with a light shove to the shoulders, his mouth disengaging from its task with a wet pop. A growl of annoyance rumbled out of his chest as his gaze remained fixed on her flushed and heaving breasts, wanting nothing more at that moment than to return to ravishing them. She successfully diverted his attention by putting her hands over his and, with a shimmy of her hips, helped him push her dress off. The silk fell in a puddle at her feet. She stepped away from it, back toward him, leaving her shoes behind as well.

She caught him holding his breath at the sight of her wearing nothing but an abbreviated pair of satin knickers. She withheld a giggle as he started at the touch of her hands at the waist of his trousers, the enraptured wizard finally remembering to blink and breathe.

His control was clearly reaching the end of its tether, as she felt him trembling noticeably under her touch. Cautiously and carefully, she unfastened his trousers, carefully avoiding the source of his distress. The woolen fabric fell off his hips, pooling around his ankles. Deep, forest-green silk boxers were revealed to her gaze. She could not help herself and reached out to stroke the hardened member that tented his shorts.

It was more than Severus could take, and he stepped forward, forgetting all about the trousers encircling his ankles. He promptly tripped himself, sending his body pitching forward, catching Hermione in the process and bearing her down onto the bed in an awkward tangle of limbs.

Their entangled bodies bounced on the mattress before they came to rest. Severus lay sprawled across Hermione, his ankles still trapped in that blasted garment. They caught their breath and looked at each other. Wry smiles morphed into outright laughter, the Potions master rolling onto his back so he was beside his witch. They were half-on, half-off the bed, giving voice to the utter absurdity of the situation.

Finally mastering his amusement, which he was sure that under any other circumstances he would have been utterly mortified, Severus sat up, bending over to remove his boots and free his ankles of the irritating garment. He turned back to find Hermione had turned down the coverlet, and lay half under the sheets, her arms open to him in a silent invitation. He didn't need any further urging and crawled up the bed to join her.

Hermione stopped him before he could slide between the sheets, hooking her thumbs under the waistband of his shorts.

"Wait." He caught and removed her hands, sliding back to stand beside the bed. "I would hate to make the same mistake twice." That said, he removed that last article of clothing, keeping his eyes locked on hers as the green silk descended to the floor. He could not hold back a smirk at the gasp she released, taking in the sum of his endowments. He positively slithered back into the bed, pulling Hermione against him, only to discover she had already doffed her knickers.

Damn. I missed that.

They kissed feverishly, hands roaming over bared flesh, exploring each other's body to a soundtrack of low gasps and moans. When their actions became more daring, more insistent, Hermione again took the initiative.

She pried his hands from her breasts, guiding them up over his head and silently telling him to leave them there with a hard look. Like she was observing some new, strange animal, Hermione's gaze was fixed as she drew just the tips of her fingers along a vein on the underside of his swollen length.

He hissed, his hips thrusting up reflexively.

Emboldened, she experimentally wrapped her fingers around it, stroking gently, not wanting to hurt him. She nearly jumped as she felt one of his hands come down to rest against her back, caressing her skin. She looked up to meet his hooded gaze. Encouraged, she increased her pressure a bit, stroking him firmly.

"Hermione, stop!" His other hand wrapped around hers, stilling her movements.

"Severus, please. You are too keyed up. This will take the edge off. You won't feel so... rushed. Trust me."

"And you would know this how?"

Hermione blushed deeply. "I do talk to Tonks on occasion."

"You WHAT?" He choked audibly, eyes wide, face flushed with mortification.

"No, no, NO!" She rushed to reassure him. "You have nothing to worry. It's just something we ended up discussing last week over tea. She knows *I'm* still pretty inexperienced, not you. Actually, she seemed to be under the impression you're some kind of 'sex-god' to have ensnared me the way you have."

His expression was now somewhat smug, his ego effectively appeased. "And...?"

"And she told me she wished she had known the 'first round' would be so short, so she could have prepared accordingly. She said 'round two' was much more to her liking, as he lasted a *lot* longer."

His gaze had narrowed. "Are you suggesting, madam...?"

"I'm suggesting nothing, Severus. It's a simple, physiological fact. *Trust* me."

He sighed. "I do."

Hermione snickered. She could not help it, not with that sarcastic brow arched just so. Her overactive mind just went down the wrong path with those two words. Swiftly mastering herself, she went back to kissing him, languidly stroking his still insistent arousal.

This time he did not protest, instead wrapping his long-fingered hand over hers again, silently directing her movements, showing her just how he liked to be touched. He disengaged her mouth, his head falling back to the pillow, eyes closed, gasping and moaning. He urged speed to her ministrations, hips bucking as he rushed to the edge, howling her name as he came in great, shuddering jets.

She watched, totally enraptured, as Severus' face contorted and his jaw clenched, his whole body tensing. Valiantly, she did not flinch as he howled and came, his length convulsing strongly under her touch. It was a heady, powerful feeling, knowing she had been the cause of such ecstasy. And all she had done so far was to give him a hand job. She was very glad she'd paid attention to Tonks' more-than-detailed reminiscing.

While Severus recovered, Hermione surreptitiously retrieved her wand and cleaned them up, quite proud of herself as she slid back into his embrace. All their previous urgency gone, they kissed languidly, hands gently and thoroughly mapping every inch of exposed skin. The continued attention and contact kept them both sensitized.

After several aborted attempts by Severus to return the favor she had bestowed on him, Hermione followed his own example, taking his hand in hers. She directed his movements by both touch and words, smiling at the mixed look of wonderment and concentration creasing his brow. Following her instructions, he quickly had her writhing beneath his touch, moaning and trembling in her ecstasy.

She utterly lost it when he shifted down the bed, experimentally replacing his thumb with his tongue. Three strokes and she was gone, her passage convulsing around the two fingers he had pressed inside her, warmth flooding out of her to be eagerly lapped up by that persistent mouth. The look on his face was undeniably smug as he returned to her side, meticulously licking his hand clean, clearly savoring the taste. She couldn't resist her own curiosity and drug his face down to hers, tasting herself on his lips.

Hermione's responses had engendered a reaction of Severus' own, his interest returning perforce. She felt his again-hardened length pressing against her hip and decided it was time. Still kissing him, she urged his body above hers, spreading her thighs to accommodate his hips.

It took him a moment to situate himself, finally bracing his weight, balanced somewhat awkwardly on his elbows and knees. He frowned slightly as she grasped his buttocks, pressing his lower body against hers.

"Are you sure?" he asked, trying to keep the fear he felt out of his voice.

She smiled up at him. "Yes. You don't have to hold yourself like that. I can handle most of your weight. I just need to be able to breathe, so try not to crush my chest."

Gods, he looks positively terrified.

"I love you." That seemed to reassure him.

"And I, you."

He shifted his stance, sliding down just a bit. They both moaned as he rubbed himself against her wet mound, desire enflamed between them. He suddenly realized he had a slight problem. While he was finally balanced, he did not exactly have a free hand to guide himself. The point became moot as Hermione arched against him, lodging the head of his arousal at her entrance. They both shuddered at the contact, Severus just barely holding back the urge to thrust into her.

"Do it quickly."

"What?"

"Enter me hard and fast. I'm not accustomed... I think it might still hurt. So just do it," Hermione ordered him.

His fear had returned in force. He had no desire to hurt the woman he loved. Not like this. Not ever. His arousal was beginning to falter in the face of his insecurity.

"Severus!" She smacked his shoulder, breaking him from his reverie, and pulled his face down to bestow a scorching kiss.

He did not even think about it, he could not.

Inflamed, already having braced himself, he slammed home in her depths, feeling acutely the stretching and how difficult it must have been for her to accommodate him. She cried out into their joined mouths, her thighs clenching against his hips, preventing him from moving. He released her mouth and let his face drop to the curve of her neck, panting hoarsely.

The feeling was indescribable, being buried within her hot, wet, clutching body. Nothing had prepared him for the sensation of being embraced so intimately. He could not have moved right then if he had wanted to. He could feel every twitch, every spasm of her passage around him. Now he knew just what he had been missing all these long years. He realized with a start that he could easily become addicted to this and that he never wanted to experience this with anyone else.

A shudder ran through her as she mastered the sharp pain. It gradually died off into a burning sensation, as her passage adjusted to his length and girth. Slowly coming back to her senses, she realized she could feel every inch of him seated within her, every ridge, every vein. She felt... full.

"Tis a shame this is not your first time," he said as he slowly moved away and lifted himself up a bit more. "There's a good deal I could have done with your blood."

"Know that I would have let you collect it had it been with you, but let's not think of that. Where were we?" she asked rhetorically, pulling him back down to her.

He growled, shifting around until he had himself positioned again. "I believe we were here." He watched her face this time as he slid slowly into her welcoming warmth, reveling at the way her eyes fluttered, and her passage clutched at his length. He pressed forward until he was seated all the way to his bollocks, the head of his arousal pressing insistently against her cervix. He was waiting for a signal from her.

"Move, Severus."

"As you wish." He pulled out slowly, groaning at the exquisite sensations. He tried valiantly to keep his pace slow, focusing on bringing her to completion first. He could not hold back long, her moans and clutching thighs and hands his undoing. Grunting, his pace increased, thrusting into her again and again, racing her to the precipice.

It was incredible, indescribable. Feeling him inside her completed her in a way she had never known was missing. He stretched and filled her, touching places inside she never knew existed. His thatch of pubic hair rubbed against her sensitive clit in such a way that drove her wild. She was not going to last, not with this sensory overload.

He felt his orgasm racing down his spine, his thrusts now erratic, as she screamed beneath him, her passage gripping him almost painfully. He howled in chorus to her cries, spilling himself deep inside her, before collapsing against her, utterly spent.

Had either one actually been paying attention, they might have been chagrined to register the sounds made by their coupling. Luckily, they were too caught up in the sensations wrapping around them to either notice or care.

He grunted as he felt a poke to his ribs, having no desire to move at the moment. He lifted his head just enough to look at her when he was nudged, not so subtly, again.

"Off," she ground out.

He furrowed his brow at her, not comprehending.

"Can't... breathe," she gasped.

Understanding coursed through his orgasm-addled brain. He twisted to the side, and onto his back, his softening length leaving her with a wet sound. "Sweet Merlin..." he murmured.

"Second that."

He turned his head to meet her satiated gaze. Insecurity suddenly flared in his chest, constricting his breathing. "Did you...? Was I...?" Her finger pressed against his lips, silencing him.

"Don't." She shook her head slightly. "Don't do this. Don't go there. If you're looking for an in-depth analysis, it's not happening. Not tonight anyway. All I can say is wow. Just... wow. And, I love you." She rolled onto her side, cupping his face with her hand as she kissed him, slowly and sweetly, wanting to reassure him that all was well.

He returned the caress, relieved that he apparently hadn't mucked things up marvelously. He pulled her close, his arm wrapping around her shoulders. Hermione molded herself to his side, her head on his chest, hand pressed flat against his abdomen. He reached down to pull the covers up over them, before his free hand found its way there, their fingers interlacing loosely. He buried his nose in her hair, inhaling deeply of her familiar scent, now mingled with the unmistakable muskiness that accompanied that act of making love.

Both emotionally and physically exhausted, they drifted off into the welcome embrace of sleep, wrapped securely in each other's arms.