

A Slip of the Tongue

by GinnyW

Ron wonders why he and Hermione have yet to start a romantic relationship and he takes drastic measures to find out.

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Chapter 1 of 11

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Ron, Harry, and Hermione had been friends since their first year at Hogwarts. At the end of their sixth year, there had been the horrendous Death Eater attack on Hogwarts. Harry had then decided it was best to not pursue any sort of romantic relationship with Ginny during their search for the Horcruxes or the fight against Voldemort, for fear that it would interfere with their concentration.

Ron had just started to admit to his feelings for Hermione after a year of dating Lavender, but instead of eagerly starting their own romantic relationship, Hermione decided she and Ron should follow Harry's example. She reasoned that it would make them all more focused on what was most important ... helping Harry to gain control over his own life and defeat Voldemort once and for all.

Now, however, the war was over. Voldemort was dead and not coming back. Most of the suspected Death Eaters had been rounded up and had already undergone trial by the very slow wheels of justice in the Wizengamot. But now that the battle was over and that things were finally settling down, Ron found that whenever he tried to bring up the topic of their relationship, Hermione would change the subject or they were interrupted. Living at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, was like living in a train station everyone came through.

Ron was growing increasingly impatient. He paced in his room at Sirius' old house, pondering how to best deal with the issue. He had been interested in Hermione for such a long time that the lines between being "just friends" and "girlfriend" seemed to have blurred some time ago. The flirting that they had been doing since they were students at Hogwarts was now second-nature to both of them.

His patience grew thin as he noticed his baby sister and Harry growing closer each day. The first moment after Harry had finally killed Voldemort, Ginny was sobbing in Harry's arms and peppering his face with kisses. When Ron turned to Hermione, she gave him a warm hug, and then, all too soon, she told him they needed to go and make sure the others were all right.

It was now several months later and things were no different. The moment that Ron tried to do anything more than hug her or give her a soft kiss on the cheek, she became distracted, or they were interrupted. He was certain that Hermione was just nervous; they had just spent too much time trying to suppress their feelings for each other.

No point in mentioning that their adolescence had not been exactly what one would call a "normal" wizarding upbringing. He snorted. Still, there was no way he'd trade their days at Hogwarts for anything.

Ron knew that all he had to do was just get Hermione to admit her feelings for him, and then they could build the relationship that they were always meant to have. He

loved her, he knew that, and of course she loved him. She just needed to voice it. After all, it was the truth.

"Bloody hell! That's it!" he exclaimed, as he stopped his frenzied pacing. "Congratulations, Ronald Weasley, you are brilliant."

~*~

Hermione walked in the front door and up the stairs at Grimmauld Place. She knew that she only had a short time to dress and be ready for dinner at the Burrow that evening. Sighing, she rubbed her eyes as she entered her room.

Following the war, she, Harry, and Ron had taken up residence at Sirius Black's childhood home. It suited their needs for the time being, while they were each settling into their various new jobs. Harry was currently the second-string Seeker for the Wimbourne Wasps and was likely to be made first-string next season. Ron was in his first year of Auror training, which he had begun before the conclusion of war with Voldemort and his Death Eaters. Being her normal, behind-the-scenes self, Hermione was working a desk job in the Portkey Office at the Ministry of Magic. It wasn't very exciting work.

She threw her cloak on the bed and stripped off her work robes, before opening her wardrobe to flip through the garments to find something suitable to wear to the Weasleys' for dinner. This was going to be a large gathering, with most of the Order present as well. Harry and Ginny were set to announce their engagement.

Hermione heaved another heavy sigh and settled on pale-yellow robes; they looked more festive than she felt. She was a mass of confusion over her feelings. It was not that she didn't *want* to progress her relationship with Ron. She did. Well, at least she *thought* that she did. "If that's the case, then why haven't you done anything about it before now?" she muttered.

Summoning the brush from her vanity, she tried to run it through the bushy, unruly mass of curls, before finally giving up and instead tying it back with a large elastic. Perhaps, like her hair, relationships weren't worth the trouble. However, seeing how happy both Ginny and Harry were, she knew that she was likely missing out on something.

Maybe it was time she took the next step with Ron.

Looking at her watch and realizing the lateness of the hour, Hermione grabbed her cloak and rushed to meet Harry and Ron. "Sorry," she said as she descended the stairs.

Both young men flashed her a smile; however, Ron held her gaze, extending his arm for her. Feeling a touch flustered, Hermione accepted the arm and allowed him to lead her to the door.

Harry smiled at his friends. "Are we ready, then?"

Ron attempted to discreetly pat the pocket of his robes just before nodding his head; he feigned ignorance at the puzzled glances that Hermione and Harry shared as Harry led the way out the front door and onto the Disillusioned porch. Hermione released her grip from Ron's arm so they could each Apparate on their own. The trio each disappeared in turn with a loud *Crack!*

~*~

They arrived just outside the gates to the Burrow.

Ron carefully rubbed his hands over both of his eyebrows before they began heading up the path. He grabbed Hermione's hand again. "You know, you could've snagged us an official Portkey and then we wouldn't have had to Apparate here," Ron grouched.

"Just because you hate the way it makes you feel, Ron," Hermione said, rolling her eyes as they trudged up the path.

"That and he's paranoid about losing half an eyebrow like he took his Apparition test," joked Harry, laughing slightly at his own jibe.

"Apparition is much more practical than Portkeys," Hermione began in her lecture tone.

"We know, we know," Harry said. He held up his hands to stop her usual explanation of why she couldn't go around issuing them Portkeys without the proper forms signed in triplicate. He looked at Ron and they shared a sympathetic look with one another.

As the trio neared the house, they could hear the voices of those gathered outside in the yard. Hermione disengaged herself from Ron and gave Harry a reassuring squeeze on his shoulder before he went off to find Ginny.

The entire Weasley clan was gathered and mingling outside, along with other members of the Order. Hermione caught sight of Professor McGonagall nattering with Neville's grandmother. She went into the house through the back door and greeted Mrs. Weasley, finding herself momentarily engulfed in the older woman's arms.

Harry and Ginny made the announcement of their engagement, which was applauded and cheered. Within minutes, Hermione was helping the Weasley matriarch Levitate platters and bowls laden with food out to the tables in the grass, where people eagerly began filling their plates.

Hermione mingled throughout the crowd, sharing in bits of conversation and nibbling off of her plate of food. She paused for a bit longer to enjoy part of a discussion on the new Border Patrol Laws and how they were affecting her job, as well as those of Tonks and Percy Weasley.

After wandering around for awhile, she stopped to gaze at the people she was surrounded with and found herself wondering who was missing *Of course*, she thought. *Professor Snape never comes to these things if he can help it.* The only person who ever would have been able to force him to attend such an event would've been Dumbledore, and even for him, that would've been a feat.

Hermione shook her head and went to find Ron. She found him out in the garden with Harry and Ginny. Ron put his arm around her, but the moment his hand began to move down her shoulder to the small of her back, Hermione stiffened.

"Er... Hermione, would you like something to drink?" Ron asked.

"Please, that would be nice," she answered as he stepped away.

"I'll go with you," Harry offered.

"No, that's okay," came Ron's quick reply.

"What's going on with you two?" asked Ginny, once Ron was out of earshot.

"Nothing at all."

"That's what I mean," said the redhead, rolling her eyes. "Why ever not?"

"I don't know," Hermione answered defensively. "We've all just been busy. Things are still settling right now. First there was the war, then the trials, and now we're all starting our jobs..."

"Hermione, the war has been over for three months, Ron started his Auror training four months ago, and you've been working in the Portkey Office for nearly two months. I

think that *other* things should be starting to *settle*, don't you?" Harry asked. "Is there something else you're not telling us?"

"No, of course not."

"Everything all right here?" Ron asked from behind them, handing Hermione a drink and trying to lead her away from his sister and Harry.

"Yes, thank you," she said, eyeing the remainder of the group and taking the proffered glass from Ron. Smiling, she took a sip of the sweet, elf-made wine, followed in quick succession by another, not noticing as Ron watched her closely for any reaction.

Hermione felt the effects of the wine after only the first few swallows and looked at Ron quizzically. He shrugged his shoulder, took her arm, and again attempted to lead her away from Harry and Ginny.

Sensing an ulterior motive and no longer trusting him, she yanked her arm from his grasp and nearly fell to the ground when she was overcome by a sudden wave of dizziness. Her cheeks felt flushed, her vision was slightly blurred, and her mind began to feel slightly numb. Once she caught her balance, and trying to keep her thoughts straight, she started to yell, "WHAT THE BLOODY HELL DID YOU DO TO ME?"

"I-I-I... Are you all right, Hermione?" Ron stammered, trying to help her to steady herself.

She hopelessly tried to push his hands away as other people began to crowd around them. "NO, I BLOODY WELL AM NOT 'ALL RIGHT.' YOU DID SOMETHING TO ME. WHAT DID YOU DO?"

The group of concerned people around them grew swiftly due to Hermione's unusual outburst, and they each began asking her questions.

"Are you all right?"

"What happened?"

"What did you drink?"

At each question, she found that she could not help but answer each question as she heard it. "No! I'm NOT all right. Something is very wrong. Ron gave me that drink!" she cried, indicating the spilled glass of elf-made wine on the grass, "and I only had a few sips of it and I feel like I've had half a bottle of firewhisky!" She swayed slightly as she wrenched herself out of Ron's grasp. "I just drank the wine. There must have been something else in it." As the last words fell from her lips, she whipped herself around to face Ron. "What did you put in my drink, Ron?"

"Why would you think I put something in your drink, Hermione?" Ron asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

The crowd that was gathered around continued to watch with bated breath as the bickering pair continued their spat.

Hermione was on the verge of screaming at him again when her first word changed mid-stream, and she again found herself compelled to answer him, "Ro-! Because from the very minute I took a sip of that wine, I felt like I had drunk over half of Madam Rosmerta's stock, and now I feel compelled to answer every single question people have asked, honestly." Hermione's eyes unblurred slightly when she said the last word. She narrowed her eyes at Ron as the fuzziness of her brain seemed to clear and realization dawned.

"You can't mix Veritaserum and alcohol, Ronald, without it being noticeable! It makes the drinker nearly instantly drunk," she said, tears welling up in her eyes. "Besides that, the use of Veritaserum is controlled by very strict Ministry guidelines. I'm not the one in Auror training, and even I know that!"

"Hermione, I'm..." he started to say as he reached for her.

Instead, she stepped away from him and nearly fell, tripping over her feet as she staggered sideways.

"Stay away from me," she warned.

At that, Mrs. Weasley stepped forward and put her arm around her. "Come here, dear. I'll take you inside so you can have a lie-down. Minerva has already gone to Floo the school for an antidote. All will be well." The older witch shot her son a nasty glare and she led the young witch to the house.

Hermione was barely aware of the confused mumblings of her friends, although she could quite clearly hear Tonks berating Ron in front of all and sundry, but inwardly that only made her feel slightly better.

Once inside, Mrs. Weasley led Hermione up the three flights of stairs to Ginny's room, where she flicked her wand, turning down the bed, and then helped the young witch to climb in.

Hermione gratefully laid her head to rest on the pillow. She expected Mrs. Weasley to leave her to sleep off the effects of the potion, which she knew would last much longer than normal due to the alcohol; or wait until Professor McGonagall brought the antidote like she was told. Instead, she felt the end of the bed dip as the older witch sat down.

"How are you feeling, dear?"

"Still a bit dizzy," Hermione dutifully replied. "I would like to try to go to sleep."

"Of course, dear. Of course."

Closing her eyes, Hermione slowly began to drift off when the older woman asked her another question.

"When are you and my boy Ron going to be making the same announcement that Ginny and Harry made today?"

"Never," she heard herself mumble.

"What? Well, why ever not?"

"Because," she replied a bit more alertly, "I don't love your son that way. I fancy Professor Snape."

"Bloody hell!" came a shout from the door, causing the weight of Molly Weasley on the end of the bed to jump.

Hermione opened her eyes and saw two people standing in the doorway: the tall, lanky one was quite obviously Ron; the black, ominous man was none other than Severus Snape.

A/N: Thank you to my wonderful betas, SnarkyRoxy and JuneW!

This story will be multi-chaptered and was inspired by Potion Mistress' Truthsayer Challenge over at OWL.

The Truth Hurts

Chapter 2 of 11

Ron wonders why he and Hermione have yet to start a romantic relationship and he takes drastic measures to find out.

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Hermione let out an audible groan when she realized the exact words she'd just uttered and the company in which she'd uttered those words. Squeezing her eyes shut and gulping down the bile that had begun to creep up her esophagus from her churning stomach, Hermione wished that the bed she was still lying on would swallow her whole.

"Hermione!" she heard Ron shout. "What did you just say?"

In an attempt to fight the Veritaserum, Hermione tried to block all her thoughts, but the dull senses caused by the alcohol made Occlumency nearly impossible and only caused the quivering in her stomach to increase. Finally giving up and opening her mouth to answer Ron's question, Hermione promptly vomited all over the floor.

"Weasley!" barked Snape. He pulled out his wand, held it inches from Ron's face and began speaking again in a threatening whisper. "If I hear you utter another question anywhere near Miss Granger, I shall make sure you are turned into the *Weasel* that you have proven today you truly are. Only an utter imbecile would mix Veritaserum with alcohol."

By the time Snape finished speaking with Ron, Hermione was done heaving the remains of her evening meal onto the floor, and Molly was dutifully attending to her, and the mess, with a quick wave of her wand. As soon as Hermione was able to breathe normally again, she felt the urge return to answer Ron's earlier question. The Veritaserum was still affecting her.

"I had said that I don't love you the way that Harry and Ginny love each other." Hermione gulped and squeezed her eyes shut, willing herself not to cry out from humiliation. She continued, "I said that I fancy Professor Snape."

This time, after she admitted her feelings for the dour man who was now standing in the room, she heard him sneer in disgust at her words.

"Spare me your accolades of love, Miss Granger. I can assure you that your *silly little schoolgirl crush* is in no way reciprocated."

"Now, Professor Snape, see here," cried Mrs. Weasley, standing up from the bed.

"Oh, stuff a sock in it, Molly," Hermione snapped, her eyes now wide-open, staring at the older woman. Hermione had surprised herself at her own rudeness, although she felt that she was now beyond the point of caring. She was quite irked at the woman for taking advantage of her situation several minutes earlier.

Mrs. Weasley stood next to the bed, a shocked look on her face as she stared down at the younger witch. Pursing her lips, she inhaled sharply through her nose, opened her mouth to speak and then promptly closed it. The Weasley matriarch gave a cursory glance to both wizards and, with nothing more than a huff of indignation, turned on her heel and stormed out of the room.

Hermione sat herself up in the bed as Ron stared after his mother. "Honestly, Ron, you look as if you lost a puppy. What do you want? You can't possibly think that I want to see you right now."

Ron opened his mouth to speak, but before he could utter a sound, Snape interrupted, "As interesting as your little lover's quarrel no doubt is, I have more important things to do." He pulled out two phials from his robes. Unstoppering them, he handed them to Hermione, who drank the first and then the second in quick succession. Snape took her face in his hands, his fingers lightly caressing her chin, and Hermione found herself lost immediately in his penetrating gaze.

Of course, he was merely examining her reaction to the potions she had just consumed. Hermione knew this. She could rationalize this on an intellectual level. However, an entirely different part of her was ignoring the logical portion of her brain. Butterflies began tap-dancing in her belly and slowly tickled their way to her spine. *What the hell is the matter with me? I've never felt like this before*, she berated herself. *You've also never admitted to liking the man before*, she reminded herself quickly.

Snape's hands dropped from her face, but he held her gaze. "How are you feeling, Miss Granger?"

"Like I've been run over by a Hippogriff," Hermione answered.

The Potions master studied her face a bit longer and hummed sourly in reply. Shooting a snide look at the other occupant at the room, he asked, "And, Miss Granger, what are your feelings for me?" When Hermione started to answer his question, he added, "And let me be clear, I welcome the term 'greasy git.' It is a reputation that I have spent years perfecting and I have no intention of changing it, especially for the likes of *you*," he snarled.

Hermione opened her mouth to call him exactly that, as well as a few other choice names that Ron and Harry had come up with during their school days. "Severus Snape, I find you to be one of the smartest, bravest, and most loyal people I have ever had the privilege to know. I love the color of your eyes and your..."

"I think I'm going to be ill," Ron interrupted.

"Shut up, Ron," Hermione snapped.

"Obviously, the antidote did not work," Professor Snape snipped. "Mr. Weasley!" he bellowed, although the young man was merely steps away from him. "What ~~exactly~~ did you mix the Veritaserum with?"

"I-it was house-elf wine, sir," Ron stammered.

"I KNOW THAT!" he shouted and then took several breaths to reign in his temper. Though the next words were barely audible, Ron could feel the anger behind them more powerfully than from the shouting. "From whom? Which house-elf?"

"Winky, sir."

"That ruddy excuse for a house-elf is pissed more often than she's sober. There is no telling what the hell she put in that wine! Go back downstairs and get me whatever is left of it!" Ron nodded his head in understanding and turned around to go out the door, pausing only when Snape added, "And give me what is left of your Veritaserum; who

knows which half-witted dunderhead brewed it."

The Potions master held out his hand until Ron handed over a small phial containing a tiny amount of the clear liquid. Ignoring the young man who had given it to him, he gave it a closer look.

Ron looked over his shoulder at Hermione. "Will you be okay with him?"

"Yes, Ron. I'm quite sure that after being drugged and humiliated, I can survive being alone with Professor Snape for all of two minutes," she snapped, grateful that her answer, though truthful, could still be snide.

Hermione barely heard the mumbled apology that came out of his flushed face as he turned and left the room. Burying her face in her hands, she breathed deeply and tried to regain her composure.

"Oh, do spare me your Gryffindor dramatics, Miss Granger. I have more important things to do than sit around here all evening. Get up and follow me." His sneering tone grated through to her bones, causing her to cringe, and reminding Hermione of the years spent as his student.

Ensuring her face bore a mask of indifference before she dropped her hands, she slowly stood up from the bed and followed him out of the room. "How much longer am I going to feel like this?" she mumbled.

"Tell me, what do you know about the attributes of Veritaserum when it is mixed with alcohol?" he asked as he began traversing the stairs slowly, as she was still tipsy.

"It initially causes inebriation, regardless of the amount of alcohol consumed, which often lowers the level of inhibitions for people who would normally be 'on-guard' to protect themselves from Veritaserum via Occlumency. The Truth Serum portion is highly unpredictable and can last anywhere from several hours to several days, and at any number of levels from a full very revealing 'truth' to something much more 'generic.' My truths are bordering more on the revealing side," she added unnecessarily.

Snape paused momentarily and glanced at Hermione. Arching his eyebrow, he sneered, "You state the obvious, failing to note the subtle but more important facts, Miss Granger. You have just consumed the antidote, which works in over 96% of the cases. When it does not work, it is typically because of a reaction between an added ingredient in either the Veritaserum or the alcoholic beverage. Seeing as the wine was made by none other than an alcoholic house-elf, there is no telling what she may have done to alter the vintage."

"Then I'll just have to wait for the Veritaserum to wear off," Hermione replied, trying to wrap her brain around the idea of being a slave to her answers for the next several hours. "I'll just go home and sleep it off. I'm sure that..."

Her words were cut-off mid-sentence as his hand came up in front of her. "That is not an option, Miss Granger. As you stated, the length of time is an unknown factor; it could be a few hours up to several days, or longer. I am certain that you do not wish to be under its influence for that long. Nor do any of us. Despite the war being over, the Order still holds a great many secrets," he lectured.

"What am I going to do?" Hermione asked, suddenly feeling overwhelmed as the repercussions of Ron's actions finally sunk in and she realized that this went beyond just a few minutes humiliation.

Snape never answered her question because they reached the bottom of the stairs and the Weasley living room, where they were met by Professor McGonagall, Lupin, Harry, Ginny, and Ron.

Ron immediately handed a glass bottle to the professor. "Sorry, sir," he said. "There isn't much in there, but that's the stuff." He looked to Hermione, giving her a pleading look, but she only shot him an icy glare in return.

Professor McGonagall came over and helped Hermione the rest of the way down the stairs, protecting her cub. "Severus, has anything worked at all, yet?" she asked hopefully.

"No, nothing," he said while glaring at Ron. "I need to go back to Hogwarts. I'm certain that once I can analyze the wine then I will be able to brew an appropriate antidote."

"Of course," said the headmistress, nodding. "Hermione, it would likely be best for you to go with him. I'm certain that you understand that not only do we want you to be comfortable, but you are also a security risk for some of us. Not everyone knows some of the more... er... creative things that we had to do during the war, and it would be safer if you were someplace secluded. Besides, you'll want to take the antidote as soon as it's ready," she reasoned with a small smile on her face.

"Hermione, we'll... uh... talk to you about... *everything* after Snape gets you the antidote," Harry stammered, looking between his two best friends while Ginny looked on encouragingly.

Biting her lower lip slightly, she nodded, feeling a bit nervous at the thought of accompanying Snape, especially given her recent confession. "Yes, of course."

Professor Snape was already walking towards the door, and once he reached it, he shot her only a cursory glance and clipped, "I haven't got all night, Miss Granger."

Seeing the uncertainty on her face, Professor McGonagall led Hermione to the door and whispered, "Don't fear, child. Just remember that he can't deduct House points or give you detention."

"Not unless you want me to," he murmured silkily in her ear. Before she could respond, Snape firmly grabbed her arm, pushed her out the door and outside of the household wards of the Burrow, then Apparated them to the gates of Hogwarts.

A/N: I realize that this chapter was short. I'm sorry about that, but the Muse said to stop there. She really is demanding. The next chapter, if all goes as planned, will be longer.

Thanks go out to my wonderful betas SnarkyRoxy and JuneW, they're priceless. :)

To Tell the Truth

Chapter 3 of 11

Ron wonders why he and Hermione have yet to start a romantic relationship and he takes drastic measures to find out.

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As soon as she and Snape appeared in front of the gates of Hogwarts, he immediately let go of her.

Hermione, in turn, promptly dropped to the ground, her legs feeling exactly like two globs of jelly. She decided that Apparating while intoxicated was similar to being squeezed really quickly through a tube of toothpaste ... Hermione only hoped that her body had a bit more substance to it than the pile of goop she presently felt like.

Reaching down to grab her arm, Professor Snape sneered, "Playing the hurt damsel in distress doesn't suit you, Miss Granger."

Hermione immediately jerked free from his grasp. "I am not some flighty little maiden who requires a dark knight to come in and rescue me. I can stand up on my own," she snarled back at him.

Snape looked down his long nose at her and cocked an eyebrow before turning and lowering the wards to open the gate.

Hermione took a deep breath and heaved herself off of the ground, grateful that she now had feeling back in her legs, but aware she was still drunk on house-elf wine. Brushing the dirt and grass from her robes, she staggered the first few steps through the gate and up the path to the school.

"You still appear to be having some difficulty walking," the professor observed dryly, less than a step behind her.

"Thank you for the update," Hermione retorted, obviously trying to straighten out her stride. "Remind me to watch you try to walk the next time someone drugs you."

"That is the difference between you and me, Miss Granger. No one would be able to poison me unsuspectingly."

"What am I supposed to do? Become suspicious and cantankerous in my old age?" she shot back. The moment the words left her mouth, she lost her footing, and yet again, her legs buckled out from under her.

"Ah, so clearly you are not as enamored of me as you previously stated," he said, catching her around the waist just before she hit the ground. Once she was again standing on her own two feet, he moved his hands from her waist, brushing one hand along the small of her back before stepping away from her and starting up the steps. "Pity."

Hermione stood there, momentarily stunned by what seemed like his second sexual innuendo in the span of ten minutes. She refused to give him the pleasure of knowing that he was affecting her, however. Catching up to him in the entryway of the school, she carefully formed the words in her head before she spoke.

"Fancying you does not leave me unaware of your many faults, Professor. I am just as aware of your good qualities and they just happen to outweigh the bad ... in my eyes at least. Damn!" she cursed. Hermione had not intended to tell him that last bit; the Veritaserum was still working.

"Tsk, ts, Miss Granger. Please remember that you are in a school," Snape reprimanded, leading her down into the dungeons.

"A school that is currently not in session, *sir*."

"True. However, that should not change either your manners or your respect for authority."

"Bloody hell! You talk like I am some errant first year!" Hermione fumed.

Snape looked at her, with what she could only describe as an evil smirk, and opened a door, ushering her inside.

Walking into the room, Hermione found herself not in the Potions classroom where she thought they were going, but in a sitting room. The room was rather small, with a sparse amount of furniture. Only a worn settee sat facing the fireplace with a small end table next to it. The walls, however, were lined with bookshelves and enough tomes to keep Hermione occupied contently for quite some time.

"Where are we, *Severus*?" she asked stressing his given name.

"My quarters, obviously. Do try to use that brain of yours, *Hermione*. Playing the dimwitted dunderhead doesn't suit you." Moving past her, Severus went towards one of two doors off to the left. "Come."

Suddenly panic-stricken in regards to what she'd gotten herself into ... and with whom ... Hermione stood her ground. "If you think for a moment that I'm going to go to bed with you, Severus Snape, then you have another thing coming!" she asserted. "I may be pissed, but I am not that far gone to not be able to make a rational decision."

Severus crossed the room in three long strides to where she was standing and stopped only inches in front of her.

Knowing that he expected her to cower from him, Hermione remained still. Despite her courageous stand, though, Hermione's heart was beating wildly in her chest. She could feel her hands beginning to sweat; and her stomach, which had previously felt like it was full of tap-dancing butterflies, was now a giant knot.

Severus placed the fingers of one hand under her chin and forced her to look into his eyes.

Hermione had to make a conscious effort to contain an excited shudder at his touch.

"Don't flatter yourself, my dear," he sneered. "I have no desire to sully myself with a simple child only to become the brunt of your jokes the moment you change that flighty little mind of yours."

"I am not a child," she hissed. "You have no idea exactly how I feel. I never said that I thought I was in love with you, and *obviously* you shouldn't have any reason to doubt my words. If you must know, I haven't acknowledged to myself that I harbor anything for you aside from respect and admiration."

Severus held her gaze a moment longer; Hermione could tell that he was searching her for the validity of her words. She wondered how he could doubt her with the Veritaserum and elf-made wine still coursing through her veins. Hermione supposed that he suspected that the potion was wearing off, and it left her curious how lonely it would be to always doubt the words of others.

Dropping his fingers from her chin, Severus stepped back and whipped around towards the door he'd motioned to before. When he spoke, Hermione could only describe his voice as holding less venom than it did before. "Now, come, Hermione. This is the way to my private lab."

God, help me to survive the rest of this night, she silently prayed, following him through the door.

Severus Snape's private Potions lab was unsurprisingly much smaller than the classroom. There was one worktable and three stools in the center of the room, and a counter along one side that housed several cauldrons, vials of potions, and numerous jars of ingredients. On the other side of the room was a large cabinet where Hermione assumed the remaining ingredients were housed. The aisles down either side of the table were hardly wide enough for one person to walk, let alone two.

Severus pointed to a stool at the far end of the table and indicated that Hermione should sit there.

Walking past him and around to the other side of the table, she perched herself on the stool. Hermione rested her elbows on the table and her head in her hands as she took a deep breath, exhaling slowly in an attempt to relax. She hated feeling this way. The tension had been building up all evening even before she'd been slipped the

potion. It hadn't helped to have the added stress of having to keep her wits about her while around her old Potions professor. She was grateful that her mind was clear enough to be able to think. If she'd had even one more sip of that wine, she was sure that she'd not be able to have *any* control over the words that were coming out of her mouth.

Ignoring the clatter of cauldrons and the slamming of cupboard doors, she began to massage her temples in her continued attempts to relax. Her head was beginning to throb. She'd already been having a tough enough time trying to keep her senses while speaking, the last thing that she needed was a headache.

The sarcastic tones of the *good* professor made her drop her hands and look up at him.

"Are you going to sit there feeling sorry for yourself all evening, or are you going to help?" he demanded.

"I am *not* feeling sorry for myself. I simply have a horrible headache, I'm tired, and I didn't think that you would actually want me to help you with anything. The Potions master I know prefers to work alone. Besides, I really don't think that I can take much more of your *polite conversation*," she replied with forced honesty, unable to fight the Veritaserum.

Severus did not respond to her remarks; he simply began slamming everything around even louder than he had been before, causing Hermione to cringe from the noise. He continued working, and never once even glanced up to look at Hermione.

Watching him for over a quarter of an hour, Hermione began to feel somewhat guilty. After all, he had made a comment implying that he wanted her help. Not that she thought he needed it, mind. Which left her with the question of why would he want her assistance. As he worked, however, it seemed that he was making a conscious effort to avoid looking at her.

Hermione used the silence to her advantage. She'd not had a chance to even think about the conversations that she'd had thus far that evening. Ron had humiliated her, then Molly went a step further and had not only embarrassed her, but she'd betrayed a trust. Not that Hermione had held a wide amount of affection for the woman, but the Weasley matriarch had abused her motherly role, making Hermione feel secure when she'd been interested in no one's feelings but her own ... and her son's.

A small part of her almost felt a sense of loss, knowing that she'd finally made a decision about her relationship with Ron. However, mostly she felt relief. Acknowledging that Ron was not the right person for her, and not only that, but admitting that to an audience (however small it was) meant that she could move past this chapter of her life.

Now, the other realization about "fancying" her old professor was something else to ponder. This was something that she'd not admitted to herself until the words had slipped out of her mouth. Obviously it was true, since the words had been spoken under Veritaserum. *But, what does that mean?* she wondered. Pushing past the fog that seemed to be floating around her brain, she could rationalize that she *liked* the man. That did not mean that she was foolish enough to proclaim an undying love for him.

What she'd said to Snape earlier about respecting and admiring him was correct, and would likely form the building blocks to these newly-realized feelings. Hermione had been the one to discover Dumbledore's last will and testament which declared Severus Snape was innocent and had only done the things he'd done because of an Unbreakable Vow. Once Dumbledore had died, the Vow had been fulfilled, so Severus' ultimate decision to still serve the Order and help Harry defeat Voldemort was solely his decision not forced, like others had tried to insist.

After the war, Severus had come back to work at Hogwarts. Rumor had it that he'd outright refused the Defense Against the Dark Arts post when the headmistress had offered it to him; he'd reportedly insisted that he would rather not test to see if Voldemort's curse was still in effect. Hermione smirked; now watching him, she thought that it was obvious that he truly loved Potions and that was the real reason he'd turned down the DADA job. Severus had three cauldrons out on the table, and was working on finely chopping and adding ingredients. He still held a rather nasty scowl on his face, though she figured that had more to do with the company than with the project.

Despite the way he was ignoring her now and the remarks that he'd made earlier, Hermione had the feeling that some part of him had enjoyed the banter. His remarks and sexual innuendo certainly were not something that she'd ever heard from him before. Could there be a part of him that found her to be attractive on some level? She wasn't foolish enough to think that he'd find her physically attractive... he wasn't much of a prize either, although his voice had definitely been doing things to her this evening. (Not to mention the fact that she had a very strong desire to see what it would be like to kiss his thin, pale lips.) It was his intelligence, his wit, and the way that he carried himself that she found herself drawn to. And though she'd not admit it aloud (unless forced to, of course), there were things about their short conversations over the evening that she'd enjoyed.

Yes, but how much of these thoughts are alcohol-induced? she wondered. She knew that alcohol would lower her inhibitions, but would that truly cause her to have these feelings for him? Almost reluctantly, she had to admit that with the Veritaserum, her responses that evening had all been truthful... whether it was a truth she'd already admitted to or not. Besides, though she felt tipsy, she really didn't feel horribly inebriated. She was quite certain that the difficulty she'd had walking earlier had more to do with Apparating than the alcohol. More than anything, the wine was preventing her from using Occlumency and just going home to deal with the side-effects of the Veritaserum on her own.

Hermione desperately wanted the potion out of her system, and the alcohol cleared from her head, so that she could spend some more time analyzing her feelings. Perhaps, when this was all over, she could...

"If you are done staring, would it be too much to ask for you to stir that cauldron nearest to you?" he snarled, drawing her away from her thoughts. "All of this is, after all, for you."

"Yes, of course," she answered, slipping off of the stool and walking over to the cauldron nearest to her.

Pointing to a stirring rod, he instructed, "Stir ten times anti-clockwise followed by twice clockwise. Repeat that pattern once and add the belladonna, stir clockwise six times and remove it from the flame."

Recognizing his instructions and what she was now brewing, she gave him a questioning look and asked, "You brewed me a headache potion?"

"It was purely a selfish decision, I assure you. I will need someone competent to help with the other two potions and since your mind is already clouded with the alcohol, it makes little sense to make it worse with something as simple to cure as a headache."

Hermione fought the urge to smile as she followed his instructions and finished the brew. Once completed, she decanted it into the empty phials that he'd set on the worktable and set about cleaning the mess while the potion cooled. As soon as she was done, the potion was cool enough. Grabbing a vial, she downed the headache potion.

~*~

Severus had ignored her presence for as long as he possibly could. It was easier when she'd been sitting at the far end of the table. Although he'd known that her eyes had been upon him, he could almost pretend that she wasn't there. Now that she was standing next to him as she worked on the Headache Relief Potion, it was harder to do so. Frequently glancing at her surreptitiously, he tried to wrap his mind around her startling confession.

When he'd first heard it, of course, he treated it with as much disdain as anything else. The last thing that he wanted was a child fawning over him ... especially because when he first heard her words, he highly doubted the validity. That was before he'd seen how badly the Veritaserum and wine had affected her. Once he realized this, he wanted nothing more than to figure out why she'd say such a thing. Initially, he had wanted to discourage her. The fact that this involved toying with her wrought and strained emotions had made the situation somewhat tolerable.

Severus watched as she drank the headache potion, closed her eyes, and gave an audible sigh indicating that the potion had begun to take effect. He had to admit, he was curious about her. The way that she stood up to him, even in her present tipsy state, spoke volumes to him about the type of person that she was. For having drank the

potent wine, she was very in-control. It made Severus wonder what it would take for her to lose control for a change.

For the first time, he took in her appearance. The pale-yellow color of the robes that she was wearing was definitely *not* flattering on her; he wondered if she'd chosen them intentionally because of her floundering feelings for the Weasley prat. Next, his eyes took in her figure. *Definitely no longer a schoolgirl*, he thought with a sly smirk, noting her cleavage.

It was her face and her eyes that truly gave away her age. She wasn't old, by any means; however, her face, and especially her eyes, showed the world that she was not naïve. They were the eyes of one who had stood before Lord Voldemort and survived.

Determination, willingness to work hard, intelligence, and loyalty were what he saw when looking at her. He saw bravery etched there as well. However, of all of the attributes a person could have, bravery ranked fairly low in Severus' book – at least that is what he led people to believe. Before he could stop himself he found himself thinking that getting to know her better wouldn't be wholly...

"Are you just going to stare at me all evening?" Hermione snapped, pulling him out of his reverie.

Deciding that it was easier, and far more fun, to throw her off balance, Severus stepped closer to her and brought his hand to brush across her cheek. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?" he asked with a sly smirk.

Her eyes went wide as she searched his face. "No, I don't enjoy being watched," she answered carefully.

Severus narrowed his eyes and studied her reaction. He had to give her credit; she was certainly learning how to evasively answer questions under Veritaserum. "Then what would you like?" he dared to ask.

Hermione swallowed hard and Severus could almost swear that he saw her brain processing the best possible answer to his question. Her face paled, and he could feel her already rapid pulse quicken underneath his fingers. Severus ran his thumb across her lips and gave her another devilish grin.

"I-I would like to be out from under the influence of this ruddy potion," she answered softly.

Severus had to admit that he was impressed by her answer. "What I believe to be the proper antidote for the wine is nearly finished brewing. Once the alcohol is contradicted and the alcohol is cleared from your system, I believe that the slightly more potent Veritaserum Antidote that I brewed will work effectively. *That* potion is finished brewing. Just a little while longer," he told her, his voice did not hold the normal sarcasm that he usually tried to instill. "So, tell me, Hermione. What else would you like?"

"What I would like is for you to stop taking advantage of my situation and trying to humiliate me," she replied.

Stifling a chuckle, he replied, "I always take advantage of any situation given to me, Hermione. You should know about that by now." Then, leaning in towards her ear, he whispered, "However, you should know that my intent is *not* to humiliate you." Dropping his hands from her face, he moved away from her and spun around to attend to one of his cauldrons.

Once she found her voice, Hermione stepped towards him.

Severus maintained his indifferent mask and went about pouring the finished Veritaserum Antidote into a goblet for her. (He had decided that not only a more potent version was needed, but a larger dose would be in order as well.)

"I don't know what game that you're playing, *Severus*. But, I can assure you that I have no intention of participating in it."

Completing his task, he ignored her words, knowing that would upset her even more. Placing the cauldron back down, he moved the goblet out of the way and pointed to the mess on the worktable. "Make yourself useful."

He was surprised when she let out an exasperated sigh and went to work at cleaning the area. *Well, she is certainly not what I expected*, he mused. Severus had even surprised himself at the some of the remarks he was making. What was it that he wanted? Although the simple answer was that he wanted the upper hand, he had to admit that there was something more about the girl that he was finding himself attracted to. *Don't be foolish*, he reprimanded himself. *Only an hour ago she was nothing more than an annoying, former student!*

Hermione was meticulous in her cleaning. Severus, however, had the distinct impression that she was taking her time, and mostly doing everything by hand, solely in an attempt to ignore him. Not that he minded. He had expected her to talk non-stop this evening, and so far he'd had to coax most of her speech. Of course, she was afraid of humiliating herself even further. For that, he couldn't blame her.

Completing the brewing of the Alcohol Inhibitor, he decanted it into another goblet. With wand in hand, Severus quickly cleaned up the final area while the potion cooled. He finished his task at the same time that Hermione finished hers.

"Are they ready?" Hermione asked hopefully.

"They are," Severus replied simply. As Hermione reached for the goblet of Alcohol Inhibitor, he placed his hand over hers to halt it. She gave him a questioning look, to which he responded, "Is there anything else that you wish to say before releasing yourself of the potion's effects?"

Hermione appeared pensive for a moment before and then answering, "I would like to say 'no.' However, I know that I would not be able to get away with that answer, and the Veritaserum would likely make something much worse than what I'm thinking now be said." She fidgeted with her hands in front of her. "I feel that you should know that the words that you overheard earlier were not planned. I had simply answered Molly's question without thinking, I didn't even know what the answers were going to be. I-I... erm... meant the words and I am sorry for any embarrassment that this ordeal has caused you. The only thing that I can do to make it up to you is assure you that Harry and Ron will not harass you. This the way I feel about you – has to do with me and is my problem. I am sorry that you ever had to be involved. I know that you'll likely have nothing to do with me after this, but I want you to know that I meant everything that I said." Hermione heaved another sigh and spoke softer, "Thank you."

Severus absorbed her words, but maintained his stony mask to her and simply gave her a small nod in reply. Releasing her hand, he allowed her to grab the first goblet and drink the contents. Once she'd finished that potion, he handed her the second and watched as closed her eyes and allowed the potions to take effect.

"Well?" he inquired.

"Severus Snape, you are a slimy git and I hope that I never see you again."

A/N: See? A longer chapter! :)

Thanks go out to my wonderful betas SnarkyRoxxy and JuneW, they're priceless. :)

Truth and Consequences

Chapter 4 of 11

Ron wonders why he and Hermione have yet to start a romantic relationship and he takes drastic measures to find out.

Disclaimer: I solemnly swear that I am up to no good. JK Rowling owns it all, but I promise to return her characters in 'like-new' condition when I am done with them.

"Wipe that smug smirk off of your face, *my dear*. It's very unbecoming," he snarled at her, although Hermione was certain that she caught a glimmer of amusement in his eyes.

Her smile only grew. "For some reason, I have the feeling you don't really mean that. After all, I did simply tell you what you said you wanted to hear."

"You are becoming more and more insolent as the evening wears on."

Rolling her eyes and snorting at his comment, Hermione retorted, "You just don't like the fact that I refuse to cower at your remarks."

Severus studied her face for a moment before he answered her in a gentler tone, "Perhaps."

Feeling uncomfortable under his lingering gaze, Hermione began to fidget with her hands and look around the room. She could look anywhere but ~~at~~him. "Erm... I think that I should probably leave now."

The uncomfortable silence between them only grew after her remark. Severus appeared to be studying her, while Hermione did her best to avoid looking at him. It was hard for her not to shirk under his intense scrutiny. Out of a childhood habit, she began chewing on her lower lip, trying to figure out the best way to leave. The aisle between the table and the counter was incredibly narrow, and to walk past him he either had to move or she would have to brush up decidedly close to him.

"You're in my way," she said, finally forcing herself to look at him.

Severus' eyes narrowed slightly, and it appeared as if he was going to make another sharp retort, but instead he merely turned and led the way out of the room.

Once his gaze was focused elsewhere, Hermione felt that she could breathe comfortably again. Quietly, she followed him out the door into his sitting room. When he continued leading the way out of his quarters, then up the stairs and to the entryway of the school, Hermione spoke up again. "You don't have to walk me out; I know the way."

It wasn't that she truly wanted him to leave her just now, it was more that she didn't want him to feel obligated. Besides, the sooner she was alone, the sooner she'd feel comfortable enough to sift through her thoughts about what had occurred this evening.

Severus stopped walking at her statement and turned slightly to look at her. "That would make me a very poor host, would it not? Have you thought for a moment that I may *want* to walk you out to the gates?"

"No, but after the way that you've been treating me this evening, I would think that you couldn't get away from me fast enough," she countered.

Taking a step closer, his words much lower, Severus said, "And in what respect do you not like the way I have been treating you, Hermione?"

Indignantly, she huffed, "You've been doing nothing but toying with me all evening! I think it was your goal to get me as riled up as possible just so you could have something more to hold over my head."

He took the final step towards her so they were only inches apart. Tilting her chin up towards him, he leaned his head down to her slightly as he gazed deeply into her eyes. "I know exactly what it's like to have someone lord over me, taunting and teasing. If that was my intent, then trust me, you would've run from my rooms screaming the moment you had consumed the antidote."

Hermione was so lost within the confines of his black eyes that she had difficulty concentrating. Her heart was now racing, her face was flushed, and her breathing was shallow and quick. "Then what do you want?" she whispered, wishing that she could inconspicuously wipe her sweaty palms on her robes.

"Trust me," Severus replied as he began to close the gap between their mouths.

Allowing her eyes to close, Hermione could feel his soft breath on her lips. He nudged her chin a touch closer with his fingers...

BANG!

The noise caused Hermione to jump a step back from him. She turned towards the sound and saw a very flustered Minerva McGonagall, her wand drawn, finishing the walk up the steps to the front doors that had just burst open. Giving Severus a quick glance, she noticed that his emotionless mask was back in place as he watched the aggravated witch enter the school.

As soon as Minerva caught Severus' eye she began ranting. "I swear, I've never seen a more immature group of people! First there was Ron's little stunt, then the twins thought it would be funny to shoot off an entire slew of those fireworks in the house! Oh, and you should've heard the things that Molly was saying! I just cannot believe the mess over there! And all of this on the day that was supposed to be just for Harry and Ginny."

"Indeed," Severus remarked dryly.

"Oh, Hermione! I'm sorry, dear. You're both up here, I see. Does that mean that you found a cure, Severus?" Minerva asked, looking between both Severus and Hermione.

"Of course, Minerva. I was just escorting Miss Granger to the gates."

The older witch nodded curtly to Severus before facing Hermione. "I hope that Severus hasn't been too hard on you. You'd already had quite an ordeal, I must say."

Feeling herself beginning to blush, Hermione squirmed slightly as she shot a glance at Severus before speaking to Minerva. "S... er... Professor Snape has been very accommodating. I appreciate everything that he's done."

"Good, I'm pleased to hear it." Turning to Severus, she continued, "I'll walk Hermione to the gates, Severus. You've done enough this evening. I'll come down and see you when I'm done."

Severus nodded to Minerva, and looked to Hermione. "It's been a most interesting evening, Miss Granger," he said silkily. Spinning on his heels before Hermione could

answer, he made his way back to the dungeons.

"Come along, Hermione," Minerva said, forcing the younger witch to pull her sights away from watching the retreating Potions master. "You've had a long day. A good night's rest will help to set things straight in your mind."

"Yes, I suppose you're right." Forcing a smile, Hermione began to follow Minerva out of the school.

~ * ~

Arriving at the doorsteps of Grimmauld Place, Hermione took a deep breath before opening the door. In anticipation of a screaming row with both Ron and Harry, when she left the school, she had almost Apparated to her parents' home. However, that would just lead to an entirely different discussion than the one she was faced with by just going home. Her mother could always read her like a book, and it was not a discussion that she'd much enjoy having with her mum. True, her mother was a bit more anonymous than the inevitable discussion with the boys, but she really couldn't put off the boys for very long. They'd likely be searching her out if she was gone for the night. Plus, there was the promise she'd made to Severus that he wouldn't catch any flack from the boys. If she didn't go home, Hogwarts would be the first place that they'd look for her.

The sight that greeted her was a blissfully quiet house. Closing the door behind her, she trudged up the stairs to her room. She barely made it to her door when a sound of footsteps behind her caused her to turn.

"So?"

Sighing, Hermione replied, "I'm fine, Harry."

"Ginny is down in the kitchen preparing some tea. We'd like it if you'd come join us in the library."

"Look, Harry, I really don't want to see Ron right now."

"Oh, don't worry, Hermione," Harry quickly answered. "Ron's not here. Just Ginny and I. Please." His voice left little room for argument.

Resigned, Hermione followed Harry to the library where they found that Ginny was already there waiting with a tea service. Taking a seat in the corner of the settee, she curled her legs up under her and waited for Harry and Ginny to begin their interrogation.

Harry sat in an armchair opposite her, while Ginny sat next to Hermione on the settee. Hermione looked on while Ginny set about preparing tea for them all. With cup and saucer now in hand, Hermione prepared herself for the worst. When the silence continued as both Harry and Ginny sat fiddling with their own tea cups, Hermione forced herself to break the silence. "Where is Ron?"

Ginny seemed to relax at the question, obviously relieved that she no longer had to think of a way of breaking into conversation. "He's at home with Mum and Dad. Tonks threatened to hex his bollocks off if he came back here to harass you tonight," she said with a snicker.

Hermione smiled softly. "Good."

Sitting up a bit straighter in his chair, Harry asked, "He really feels bad about what he did, Hermione. Ron said that he never intended to hurt you. I think that he was just hoping to get an admission of your feelings for him. Honestly, the way he was talking earlier tonight, I think that he was planning on asking you to marry him."

"Marry him!" Hermione exclaimed, sloshing a bit of her tea. "We've never even dated!"

"I know, I know," Harry said trying to calm her. "But think about it. You two have been friends since you were twelve. You can't blame him for thinking that he could skip a few steps."

Hermione snorted. "Leave it to Ron to not think things all the way through," she muttered.

"He's not stupid," Ginny chimed in.

"No, he's not. But sometimes he gets overzealous and doesn't consider the consequences of his actions. And in some ways, that's worse," Hermione remarked.

Ginny nodded her agreement.

"So, Hermione, do you mind telling us what exactly happened? I mean. We know that Ron slipped you some Veritaserum in some wine. But, when Mrs. Weasley and Ron both came back downstairs from seeing you, they didn't seem too pleased. Ron said that you had said something about never wanting to be with him and that..."

"Go on, Harry," Hermione prodded, setting her cup and saucer on the small end table next to her. "He said that I had some horrible crush on Professor Snape?"

Looking uncomfortable, Harry nodded slightly. "Er... Yeah, pretty much."

Sighing out her exasperation, Hermione propped an arm up on the settee and leaned her forehead against her hand for a few moments to collect herself. Once she felt ready to again face her friends, she replied, "It's not a silly little crush. I admire the man. Ron is just sore because I announced to the occupants of that room that I was never going to date him."

"You admire Snape?" Harry asked incredulously.

"Yes, I admire him!" Hermione shot back. "We all should. Have you forgotten that it's because of him that you were able to find where Voldemort was hiding so that you could kill him?"

Harry growled in frustration. "And how was your evening with the greasy git?" he ground out.

Willing herself, unsuccessfully, not to blush, Hermione clenched her hands in frustration. "It was fine," she sneered. "Nothing happened, and I daresay that Professor Snape showed more respect for me than either Ron or Molly. At least with Professor Snape, he was only acting within the confines of his natural personality. I expected him to bait me and tease. Ron and Molly betrayed my trust."

"Hermione," Ginny began, "what happened with you and Professor Snape once he took you away from the Burrow? I mean, he'd heard your confession, too. At least, that's what Mum said. How did he take that?"

Relaxing and smiling slightly, Hermione thought about how best to answer her friends. "I got the impression that he wasn't pleased at first. But, regardless, the evening was pleasant enough. He was much nicer than I thought he would be." Looking at the suspicious faces of her two friends, she continued, "Look, I really don't want to talk about this until I've had some time to think. Even if I hadn't had spent a couple of hours alone with Professor Snape in his quarters, I think that I'd be done in. What I said about not ever being with Ron took me a bit by surprise, too. I really believe that I answered honestly, but Molly asked me right as I was trying to relax and caught me by surprise. The words were out of my mouth before I had a chance to process them."

"What do you mean that you spent a couple of hours in Snape's quarters?" Harry asked accusingly.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Honestly, Harry. It wasn't anything like that. He has a private Potions lab in his quarters. That was all. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to go to bed," she said while pulling her legs out from under her and rising from her seat.

"Oh," Harry replied, looking abashed. "Yeah. Good night, Hermione."

Smiling again to acknowledge them both, Hermione leaned down and gave Harry and Ginny each a brief hug before heading for the door. "G'night."

~ * ~

Severus was sitting on his own settee in his rooms, nursing a glass of firewhisky and awaiting the company of the school's headmistress. It had proven to be an interesting evening, and despite his expectations of having to spend more than five minutes in the little know-it-all's presence, Severus had to admit that he had found the evening to be *satisfactory*.

The girl woman could definitely hold her ground against him. It had been a long time since Severus had found a woman that could match wits against him. She was definitely a challenge. He smirked. A challenge, yes, but in other ways she was easy to manipulate. But did he really want to manipulate her? Severus had enjoyed baiting her and forcing her to speak without asking her direct questions. Although, she held up very well.

A knock on his door broke him from his reverie. Lazily waving his wand towards the door, he heard it open. "Welcome, Minerva," he said idly.

He heard the door click shut and the sound of footfalls behind him. "Good evening, Severus."

Motioning his hand to the settee, he invited Minerva to sit down. "Care for a drink?" he asked.

"No, thank you," replied the witch as she sat on the other end of the settee, next to Severus. Without preamble, she began, "Thank you for helping Miss Granger this evening. I swear, I have no idea what got into Ron."

"I'm afraid none of us can decipher exactly what Mr. Weasley was hoping to accomplish."

"Well, no. The boy is truly remorseful, though." She eyed Severus seriously for a moment. "Then there was Molly," she added.

Preparing for the worst, Severus groused, "Yes, Mrs. Weasley has the impulse control of a gnat."

Minerva snorted. "Well put, Severus. However, that does not eliminate the fact that Hermione made an admission to a small group of people. One of those people, she is sharing a house with."

"Obviously neither of the Weasleys were able to keep their mouths shut about the incident."

"Of course not!" berated the witch. "Since when has Ron Weasley been able to keep his mouth shut when it comes to things like this?"

"Never," he said, after taking a sip from his glass. "Now, what is *thereal* purpose of your visit, Minerva?" he asked, raising an eyebrow at her.

Contemplating how best to respond, the headmistress studied the man she was sitting next to before she answered. "Leave Hermione be. The girl is young and innocent."

Severus snorted.

"Well, innocent enough! And she doesn't need the likes of you harassing her at every turn. I've known you for a long time, Severus, and no disrespect intended, but you're the last thing that she needs."

He opened his mouth to speak, but stopped when Minerva held up her hand.

"Don't even try to deny it, Severus. I could tell by the way she was looking at you."

Severus conceded defeat. "Fine," he replied shortly.

Giving a stiff nod, Minerva stood. "Thank you, Severus, and thank you again for helping her out of that horrid predicament she was in. She's still so young, and I believe very confused. Things will settle soon."

"I'm sure that they will," Severus all but sneered. Turning his head to watch the older witch leave his quarters, Severus was quite disgusted that Minerva would still be so protective of a former student. The woman had no place to talk or judge. She'd been involved with Dumbledore for well over three decades.

With a soft click, Severus was again left on his own with only his thoughts to keep him company.

A/N: Minerva has rotten timing. Don't you think? The reference about Molly's impulse control level was nearly a direct quote from Potions Mistress. The line was too good not to work it in here someplace.

Thanks as always to my wonderful beta SnarkyRoxy. Any mistakes that you find are mine.

The Owl Cometh

Chapter 5 of 11

Ron wonders why he and Hermione have yet to start a romantic relationship and he takes drastic measures to find out.

Disclaimer: I solemnly swear that I am up to no good. JK Rowling owns it all, but I promise to return her characters in 'like-new' condition when I am done with them.

When Hermione went to bed Friday night, she'd expected to toss and turn for hours in an attempt to try to sort through the events of the evening. It was surprising, therefore, when she woke up late Saturday morning with only a vague recollection of her head hitting the pillow. She strongly suspected that she'd been slipped something again, and upon finding Ginny reading in the drawing room, the younger witch confirmed her suspicions.

"I'm sorry, Hermione, it was only a bit of Calming Draught," replied the redhead, ducking her head in fear of Hermione's wrath.

"Ginny, why would you drug me?" Hermione implored, while trying to keep her simmering anger under control. "Don't you think enough people did that yesterday?"

"I know, Hermione. Honestly, it wasn't *you* I was trying to drug. I wanted to slip some Calming Draught to Harry. Well, at first I was going to put it just in his teacup, but then I worried that I'd give someone the wrong cup, so I went ahead and added the Calming Draught to the entire pot of tea. So, really... if you think about it... I didn't give you anything that I didn't give the rest of us. I mean, honestly, did you want to deal with Harry last night without it?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "He wouldn't have been *that* bad."

Ginny snorted. "You didn't see him after you left the Burrow last night. He loves you, Hermione, but trust me... the Calming Draught I put in the tea was the only thing that kept us all from getting upset. I mean, think about it, you not only announced that there was no way you'd ever marry my brother, but that your affections lay with Dumbledore's murderer!"

The small bit of anger that had been simmering within Hermione was now at full boil. "He's NOT a murderer! He was..." Her words were cut off when a smiling Ginny stood up and grabbed Hermione's arms gently.

"I know, Hermione. I know. Thank you, by the way, for illustrating my point. See how riled up you got in just a couple of minutes? Besides, I doubt that you would've been able to sleep last night if I hadn't spiked the tea."

Relaxing when she realized that she (and Professor Snape) weren't under attack, Hermione sighed, exhaling some of the tension in her body. "I guess you're right. You just can't blame me for being upset about that, Ginny."

Squeezing Hermione's arms affectionately before dropping her hands to her sides, Ginny nodded. "No, I don't blame you, but it wasn't that you were singled out. I just didn't want any fights. It really helped Harry, and probably me, too."

"Speaking of... where is Harry?"

"He went back to the Burrow to see how Ron is this morning. Don't worry. Ron will be staying there for a few days," Ginny reassured her, upon seeing Hermione's worried look.

"I appreciate that, Ginny."

"You're welcome. Harry and I both think it's best that Ron spend some time away, and Mum seems to think that, too." Ginny noticed Hermione's grimace at the mention of Mrs. Weasley and wisely decided to steer clear of the topic. "So, what are you going to do today?"

Hermione sighed. "I'm going to try to sort through everything that happened last night and see if I can figure some things out."

"What kind of things? Anything you want to talk about?" Ginny asked. Her voice was laden with concern, although Hermione could also detect a slight bit of eagerness at the chance to hear details about Hermione's love life... or lack thereof.

"No, thanks. I just need to see if I can figure out what I'm doing. I... there's just a lot to think about," Hermione answered with a shake of her head.

"Whatever it is that you're thinking about, Hermione, everything will be all right," the younger woman replied. "Take your time thinking, analyzing, and planning... it is, after all, what you do best."

Chuckling softly in spite of herself, Hermione had to agree. "I think that's what I'm going to go do now, actually. I really need to get some of this figured out."

"Okay, Hermione. If you need anything, though, I'll be here."

Clearly recognizing the genuineness of Ginny's offer, Hermione felt somewhat comforted. "Thank you."

~ * ~

Ron was sitting on the old rock wall that bordered the garden at his parents' home. He'd not lived there in at least two years, although he felt as if he'd moved out long before. He'd been out here since dawn this morning, watching the sun rise and trying to figure out where he'd gone wrong. In a way, he was glad that his mum had insisted he stay there for the night, but he strongly suspected that she'd tell him he had to stay for longer.

Part of him was dying to go home and confront Hermione... another part of him never wanted to see the witch again.

Well, that's not true, he conceded nearly the moment after he thought it. He was angry with her, but she was one of his oldest and dearest friends. No matter what, he'd always want to be friends with her. That didn't stop him, though, from trying to figure out where he'd gone wrong.

"It must be because I dated Lavender!" he said aloud.

"This has nothing to do with you dating Lavender Brown during sixth year," came a voice from behind him.

Ron turned his head and nodded to his approaching friend. "How do you know it has nothing to do with that, Harry? Did she tell you something?"

The dark-haired, bespectacled young man ran his hands through his hair and sighed. Sitting down on the wall next to his friend, he answered, "No, Ron. Hermione really didn't tell me much of anything. I think she was too tired to have an in-depth conversation last night. But what I do know is that she was appalled at what you did to her."

Ron's face reddened at the reminder of his blunder.

"Ron, I don't know what possessed you to do that to her, but really... If I were her, I'd be furious with you. Bloody hell! I am angry with you. How could you do that to her?" Harry jumped off of the wall and began pacing in his frustration.

"I know, Harry. I really shouldn't have done that. It was wrong. I was just hoping... I don't know what I was hoping." Ron sighed. "Well, that's not true. I had envisioned giving Hermione the Veritaserum and forcing her to admit her love for me and then... er... then I was going to propose to her," he said, looking down at his shoes.

"I thought as much," Harry admitted. "Not that I think it was a stellar plan, mind. For one thing, you can't jump from Point A to Point C without going through Point B. Even if you had gotten the profession of love you were looking for, you'd have to slip her something a lot stronger than Veritaserum to get her to agree to marry you before you'd ever even dated."

"Well, I wasn't planning on marrying her tomorrow, Harry. I just expected that if we were committed to each other that it would help. I thought she just needed a push. Admitting how she felt about me was supposed to liberate her so that we could be free to have our relationship."

Harry snorted. "Well, I think that you liberated her, all right."

"It wasn't supposed to work that way!" Ron cried, jumping to his feet. "She was supposed to profess her love to *ME*! Fuck, Harry! Did you hear what she said? She said that she 'didn't *feel* that way' about me! She said she 'fancied' a fucking murderer! A murderer, Harry!" Ron walked up to his friend and looked him in the eye. "I don't care if he was acquitted! The bloody Wizengamot was high on Billywigs! He killed Dumbledore!"

"I know, Ron," Harry answered, grabbing Ron's arms gently in a half-hearted attempt to placate his friend. Truthfully, Harry understood Ron's anger. The other man was voicing his own fears, but now was not the time to go jumping off his broom while it was still soaring upwards. Harry knew that in this situation it was best to leave Hermione alone for a bit; he was confident that she'd come to her senses if given enough time.

Not much calmer, Ron shook Harry's hands off of him. "Do you know what the term 'fancy' means? Well, I do. I looked it up," he stated with venom as he pulled a small bit of parchment out of the pocket of his robes. He scanned the list of definitions, mumbling under his breath until he found what he was looking for. "Here! *Amorous or romantic attachment; love.*"

Harry grabbed the list from him and read it quickly. Rolling his eyes, he pointed to another item on the list. "Or it can mean this *To like*. Nothing wrong with that, Ron," he said, handing the paper back to his friend.

Grumbling, Ron shoved the parchment back in his pocket. Before he could say anything else, however, an owl swooped down from overhead, dropping a scroll on his head before it flew off again. Ron grabbed the scroll; noting the Ministry seal, he quickly opened it. "It's Saturday. What the hell are they doing sending me something on a Saturday?"

"Maybe they sent it yesterday," Harry supplied.

"Not bloody likely," Ron scoffed, unrolling the scroll and beginning to read.

Harry noted that Ron's normally pink face began to pale by the second to the point where even his freckles seemed to fade. "What is it?" Assuming the worst, he asked, "Hermione didn't press charges, did she?"

Ron only answered by shaking his head to Harry's question. He was still trying to process everything he was reading; the only word he could manage to utter was, "Fuck."

"What is it?" Harry repeated.

In response, Ron shoved the letter at Harry, still unable to speak.

Harry's eyes ran over the document and only one word could sum up what he was thinking. Passing the parchment back to Ron, he simply said, "Fuck."

"Yeah, fuck."

~ * ~

Hermione spent the rest of Saturday sifting through all of the details of the previous evening and writing them down. In the course of one day, she broke her finest quill, and used over half of a bottle of ink and several feet of parchment. She wrote down everything that she remembered had happened. This was no small feat, as her mind had been slightly fuzzy during the incident. The act of writing actually helped her to remember the small details that had evaded her the night before.

It took all of Saturday for Hermione to sort through all of the details and record them. After detailing the events, she began to make lists. Hermione liked lists; they were an organized way for her to go through her thoughts.

By Sunday, she'd felt the need to try to distance herself from everything, hoping that by doing so she'd be able to relax. Typically, when she felt the need to clear her mind, she'd go for a walk in the Hogwarts cemetery. Though some found such a thing morbid, Hermione found it very peaceful. It always gave her the opportunity to remember those who had come before her and the contributions they'd made to the world... it was a chance to focus on other people instead of her own problems.

This Sunday, however, Hermione didn't feel comfortable going to Hogwarts. She still had much to sort out regarding one of the school's residents. Instead, she settled for an afternoon walking through one of the local parks near her parents' house. She spent the afternoon watching the children play and remembering what the world had looked like to her when she'd been that age.

No matter how hard she tried, however, thoughts of Ron, Mrs. Weasley, and Severus Snape continued to seep into her mind.

Sitting on a park bench, Hermione stared out at the small pond in front of her, finding peace in the tranquil water. If she was going to be honest with herself, she had to admit that she felt bad about what had happened with the Weasleys. Deep down inside, she could acknowledge that there'd been a reason why she hadn't pursued a relationship with Ron. Hermione knew this, but she had just been trying to avoid the issue rather than deal with it head-on, like she should have done. The only thing that she could blame it on was her desire not to hurt her friends in the aftermath of war. And crushing Ron's illusions would have hurt him. It was for this reason alone that Hermione quickly realized that, no matter what, she'd forgive him.

She would not, however, be forgiving Molly Weasley any time soon. Hermione felt more betrayed by that woman than she did by Ron. In one fell swoop, Mrs. Weasley had completely and totally humiliated her. Of course, Hermione doubted Molly saw it that way. The matriarch assumably felt like she was completely in the right in seeking out information for her son. However, Hermione felt that the woman had betrayed a trust and a bond. Not that they were overly close, but Hermione had always looked up to the older witch. She'd respected her and felt that she was a kind, motherly woman.

Now, Hermione knew the truth. Hermione allowed a smile to form as she remembered what she'd said to the older woman to get her to leave the room.

Recalling that event, however, led Hermione to thinking about exactly whom Molly's exit had left her with and Hermione wasn't thinking about the redhead.

After pouring out all of her memories on paper, Hermione did her best not to think about Severus Snape. This worked about as well as telling herself not to think of a purple polka-dotted Hippogriff.

To say that she was confused about her feelings for the man would be a gross understatement. Hell, she wasn't even certain what her feelings for the man had been before the Veritaserum incident. Now she had to sort through the way he treated her. When she'd made her list, she'd become wholly aware of all of the sexual innuendos the man had made. At the time, the few remarks had merely shocked her. Now, however, she wondered what exactly would have possessed him to say such things. Surely there'd been more effective ways for him to keep her off-balance?

From what she recalled, Snape hadn't seemed overly thrilled with her little announcement. The man simply sneered and snarled at her, until...

Not unless you want me to.

Hermione let out an involuntary shiver at the memory of his breath tickling the back of her neck when he'd made that little remark after Minerva had tried to reassure her that Snape couldn't give her detention. For a brief moment, Hermione entertained the idea of going back to the school, pounding on his door, and begging him for detention. She quickly reminded herself, though, that she had no idea what he truly thought of her. The man had done a very good job of confusing her.

It had been an evening of having to stay on her toes and keep her wits about her... at a time when it was extremely difficult to do either. She could not figure out his motives. And then his words in the Potions lab had confused her further.

Trust me.

What the hell was that supposed to mean? Hermione had been almost certain that he'd been about to kiss her. Why would he do that? The only answers Hermione could come up with were either that he was toying with her again, or that the man was truly attracted to her in some way. *Yeah, or he was just curious how you'd react.*

There was no use in trying to figure out what Severus Snape was thinking. Quite frankly, Hermione was certain that Snape would let her know if he was interested in her. But even if he was, she wasn't certain how she felt about him. It was a long way from being somewhat physically attracted to someone and admiring them for things they'd done to getting to know them. And Hermione had a sinking suspicion that Severus was not the easiest person to get to know, not to mention that she was certain there were things about him she might not want to know.

There I go, putting the finished potion before the brewing. It's a moot point, she reminded herself. None of that mattered unless the man was interested in her, and so far she hadn't heard anything at all from him.

She growled softly and stood up. Slowly she made her way out of the park towards a nearby alleyway so she could Apparate home.

Monday morning found Hermione back in the confines of her office, sitting at her desk and attempting to focus on the pile of paperwork that was demanding her attention. With a soft *Pop!* a scroll appeared on top of the Portkey requests. Grabbing it and breaking the Ministry seal, Hermione unrolled it and read.

Dropping the scroll to rub her temples in an attempt to eliminate the suddenly forming headache, she muttered the only word that seemed appropriate, "Fuck."

A/N: Sorry this took a bit longer to post. I got a bit side-tracked when another plot bunny attacked. (Quite viciously.) I'll try to get the next chapter up on time, though. :)

Thanks to SnarkyRoxy and JuneW, betas extraordinaire!

A Victim's Rights

Chapter 6 of 11

Ron wonders why he and Hermione have yet to start a romantic relationship and he takes drastic measures to find out.

Disclaimer: I solemnly swear that I am up to no good. JK Rowling owns it all, but I promise to return her characters in 'like-new' condition when I am done with them.

Standing in the office of her superior, Tonks sighed as she took in the deep look of disappointment etched on the man's face. She'd been at this job long enough to have gone through two department heads, and she was secretly hoping that a third would be coming up soon.

"Why didn't you report this incident to me the very minute that it happened?" the man behind the desk asked.

"Quite frankly, sir, the incident occurred at a private party, and I did not feel it was my place to report the incident until after I had the chance to speak with all of the parties involved."

"And when were you planning on doing this, Tonks?" Gawain Robards asked. It was obvious by his narrowed eyes and sharp tone that he felt this task should have been performed immediately.

"Sir, you need to understand the dynamics. Miss Granger and Mr. Weasley have been best friends for nearly ten years. She was hurt by his actions, but she needed a chance to think about things. I spoke with Miss Weasley and Mr. Potter several times over the weekend, keeping tabs on Miss Granger's well-being. My intention was to speak with her later this morning and take her to lunch."

Mr. Robards' eyebrows rose quickly at her last statement. "Ms. Tonks, where in the protocol does it state that it's acceptable to take victims out to lunch when you are obtaining a statement?"

Tonks ground her teeth in exasperation before answering her boss' foolish question. "I was not anticipating taking a statement, sir. I really wouldn't have expected Hermione to press charges. If for some reason I thought that she *was* going to give a statement, I would've ensured that I brought her back here to do so!"

Gawain watched as the younger Auror's hair began to change from the bubblegum pink, which was typical for her, to white obviously a sign of her anger. He flashed her a warning glare and sat back in his chair smugly when violet streaks began to appear in her hair. Slightly relieved, he spoke again, "Regardless, charges have been pressed by one of the victims. And the next time you witness such a heinous crime, I expect to be notified immediately. Especially if said crime is committed by one of our recruits!"

Tonks snorted. "Of course, sir," she replied dutifully.

"I expect I do not need to remind you of Auror ethics involving the theft of Ministry property for personal use, and an Auror breaking Ministry guidelines for the use of Veritaserum. The fact that you are personal friends with the Auror trainee makes no difference in your responsibility to report such actions. Indeed, you owe it to the public to help safeguard the standards of the Auror Department; we are not exempt from our own guidelines."

"Of course, sir," she replied, abashed.

The wizard nodded his head and waved his hand to dismiss her.

She left his office quickly and weaved her way through the cubicles to the lift.

Victims? Tonks wondered as she rode the lift to the sixth level. She racked her brain to try to figure out who else had fallen victim to Ron's idiocy that evening. No one else had consumed the wine laced with Veritaserum. Hermione had been with Ron, Harry, and Ginny when it happened. Of course, after Mrs. Weasley had kindly escorted Hermione to the house, Tonks had spent some time berating Ron, so she might have missed seeing something.

Tonks had to admit that she had a soft spot for the young man. She knew all the Weasleys. It had been solely on her recommendation that Ron had been admitted into the Auror program to begin with. His Hogwarts marks alone certainly didn't earn him the privilege. She had spent quite a bit of time defending young Mr. Weasley's job application, and told the recruiting board everything that she was allowed about what Ron had done up to that point in helping with Voldemort's downfall.

Stepping off of the lift at level six, Tonks walked quickly down the corridor. Reaching the end of the hall, she rounded the corner to the Portkey office, hastening her steps as she got closer. Tonks entered the office and found Hermione Granger, seated at the first desk, with her head resting against her hands as she massaged her temples.

"Hermione?" she asked tentatively.

Snapping her head up, Hermione spied the Auror. The look on her face began with uncertainty, but once Hermione was able to process exactly who was intruding on her privacy, anger became quickly evident.

"Tonks," the younger witch replied in a biting tone.

"What?" Tonks asked, trying not to sound defensive.

"How could you?" Hermione began. "I you are supposed to be my friend." Her voice began rising with each word spoke.

Tonks' eyes narrowed as Hermione's anger grew. "What are you talking about?" she asked carefully.

The younger witch grabbed the scroll on her desk and shoved it in the Auror's face. "This is what I'm talking about!"

Taking the scroll and skimming the contents, realization dawned on Tonks. "This is why I came to see you," she said carefully. "I didn't tell anyone about what happened at the party."

Hermione's lips formed a fine tight line. "Then who did?" she hissed.

"I was under the impression that it was *you*."

"Tonks, what would make you think that I would do such a thing to one of my best friends regardless of what he did to me?"

"Trust me. I was rather surprised to hear that you'd do that, especially so soon after the incident. I've known you for a while, Hermione, and you usually don't make rash decisions," Tonks replied calmly.

"So tell me, if you didn't file a complaint against Ron and I didn't report it, then who else could have?" Hermione asked, her brows furrowed in thought. She couldn't think of anyone else who would interfere in her non-existent love life.

"I don't know. The only thing that Mr. Robards said was that the grievance was filed by one of the victims. I thought that meant you."

"Victims?" Hermione asked, standing from her chair. Suddenly, comprehension was evident on the younger witch's face. "Oh, my God," she muttered. "I'm going to hex him so fast..."

~ * ~

Severus sat in his office, his lips curled up in a close facsimile of a smile as he read over the scroll that the Ministry had thoughtfully sent him earlier that morning. The contents of the letter assured him that Mr. Weasley had received an owl bright and early Saturday morning suspending the boy from his foolish Auror training, and that Weasley had been summoned to appear at a formal inquiry for his actions against Hermione Granger.

His mock smile grew to a feral grin at the imagined look on the Headmistress' face. Minerva would have kittens when she found out what he'd done to one of her beloved cubs.

After Minerva had left his rooms on Friday evening, Severus had spent quite some time thinking of what the woman had said to him. The more he thought about it, the more he'd disliked it.

Leave Hermione be. The girl is young and innocent. You're the last thing that she needs.

Indeed!

It wasn't as if he'd ever had any designs on the young woman before that evening. He'd never stalked her or forced his attentions on her. However, Severus had to admit to himself that there was something about her that he'd been attracted to. He'd never intended on kissing her either, until he found himself standing so close to her in the entrance hall, trying to convince her that he didn't wish to take advantage of her situation.

That was a complete lie.

Of course he was taking advantage of the situation. That is what he did best. He was a Slytherin. But after Hermione had gone, and after Minerva had gone as well... he'd started to think that there was more truth infused within his words than he had initially thought.

Not to mention the fact that he found himself thinking that he truly did wish he'd been able to kiss Hermione. The idea of a willing witch, one that he didn't have to beg or pay, was too nice a novelty to wish to refuse. (Not that he'd begged any woman for favors since he was quite young, but the scar of *that* humiliation was as fresh as if it'd happened yesterday.)

Severus hated to admit that he was finding himself more and more attracted to the former bane of his existence.

It was this last realization, coupled with Minerva's damned arrogant remarks, which had led him to contact the Ministry's Department of Magical Law Enforcement. They, in turn, had flooded Mr. Robards at home, and Severus had found himself speaking with the Head of the Auror Department less than an hour later.

"What the bloody hell did you think you were doing?" a woman yelled at him, pulling him from his thoughts.

Severus looked up to see a very angry Hermione Granger standing in front of his desk. Easily masking his surprise, he eyed her levelly and carefully formed his words. "Kindly tell me what you're going on about, woman."

Her eyes narrowed accusingly as she reached over and grabbed the parchment that he'd been holding in his hands. "This! Damn it, Severus. What gives you the right to get involved?" she railed.

"Why, you did, my dear the moment you uttered my name as being the object of your affections."

Hermione's lips tightened further and her eyes flashed. "None of this had anything to do with you! And you know that! It was *not* your place to file charges against my friend. I may have allowed myself to be duped and been foolish enough to allow Molly Weasley to weasel information out of me, but that doesn't give you the right to take vengeance against my friends by using me!"

Quirking an eyebrow at her accusations, Severus remained calm in the face of her fury. "Who ever said that my actions were simply an effort to seek revenge on your friends for what they did to me following the Dark Lord's demise? Am I not the subject of further disdain and mockery from your friends, following your confession? Is it not my responsibility as a citizen to report the misbehavior of an Auror employee? How do you know that I was not merely wishing to preserve your honor?"

She snorted. "Yes, and hell is freezing over as we speak."

"Oh, do spare me your histrionics, Hermione." Severus rose from his chair and leaned over his desk, finally allowing his disgust at her audacity for questioning his motives to seep into his speech. "You have no right to question the validity of my words. How do you know that the words I speak are false? What gives *you* the right to question my intentions? You're doing a fair job of showing exactly why I was not thrilled by your childish confession the other night." Standing tall and dropping his hands to his side, he lowered his voice, infusing it with as much cold venom as possible before giving his final, calculated blow. "Pity. And to think that I was just sitting here thinking that you'd

grown into a lovely and mature young woman. I guess this proves even I can be wrong on occasion."

Severus took pleasure in watching the warring emotions flicker across her face as he finished his little speech, and he found himself having to fight to contain his amusement.

Apparently settling on fury, the fiery witch began shouting at him again. "Why you... you vile, arrogant, man!" she shouted. "You can take that vaunted ego and arrogance and shove them up your arse! You may have thought that I was easy to manipulate the other night, but I feel I must warn you that I'm not always inebriated and *you* will NOT take advantage of me so easily again!"

Hermione turned quickly and stormed out of his office, waving her wand and muttering something under her breath at the door as she left. The door slammed loudly, and just as Severus moved to sit down, the door opened again. Looking up to see what else the woman wished to say to him, he watched as the door slammed again... then again... and again.

Well, that didn't go as I had planned, Severus thought with disgust. He had planned on informing Hermione what her former Head of House had said, thus laying some of the blame on the old tabby. Although, this little spat did rid him of the gi...woman, just as Minerva wished.

He dropped back down in his chair, massaging his temples at the pain that had started the moment the witch had started yelling at him.

SLAM!

Reaching into his top drawer for a phial of Headache Relief, he downed the contents quickly. Next, he pulled his wand from his sleeve and waved it at the door to stop the incessant banging.

He settled into the blissful silence, and cursed when the tiny niggling of guilt began to approach the outer recesses of his brain, slowly creeping in. He was beginning to feel bad for the way he'd treated Hermione...

SLAM!

"Damn witch," he snarled.

"Really, Severus, one would think that you wouldn't say that about your employer."

Looking up, he growled as his eyes met the glare of the Headmistress. "To what do I do the honor this time, Minerva?"

"What on earth did you do to the girl to put her in such a snit? I was outside the staff room when I saw her leaving the castle. I've never seen the poor girl so upset, not even at the Weasleys' party."

"I merely did what you asked me to, Minerva. I believe that your words were *to leave her be*. Were they not? You made your meaning quite clear: *I am the last thing she needs*. Isn't that right, Headmistress? Well, you need not fear, because I don't believe that it will be an issue any longer," Severus replied, every word laced with venom.

"I didn't mean for you to hurt her," Minerva tsked.

Severus shrugged.

"You are an impossible man!" she snapped.

"Indeed. Now, if you don't mind, Minerva. I have a terrible headache and would like some peace and quiet. Oddly enough, neither peace nor quiet exist in the realm of your incessant nattering."

The witch shot him a deadly glare. She, too, stormed out of the room, ensuring that she slammed the door firmly behind her.

"Women!" Severus snarled at the closed door, wanting nothing more than to escape to the sanctuary of his private quarters. He waited until Minerva had time to be safely out of his dungeons before he left the room... careful to slam the door on his way out.

A/N: Hermione isn't nearly as weak or easy to manipulate as Severus thought. :)

Thanks to SnarkyRoxy and JuneW, betas extraordinaire!

Him, Him, and Her

Chapter 7 of 11

Ron wonders why he and Hermione have yet to start a romantic relationship and he takes drastic measures to find out.

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Hermione looked through her wardrobe in her room at Grimmauld Place, carefully selecting her robes for the day's proceedings. This was not like the day of Harry and Ginny's engagement party at the Burrow. That day she'd worn something comfortable, and something she had known was not flattering. At the time, she had been subconsciously trying to discourage Ron's interest in her.

Today she wasn't sure exactly what her motives were as she pulled down a set of robes in a light green. How should a witch dress for a formal inquiry against one of her best friends?

She knew that it would be better if she forgot about *him* completely, but no matter how she tried, she couldn't get him out of her head. Severus Snape consumed every waking and sleeping thought that she had. The fact that he'd gone out of his way to prosecute Ron in an overly chivalrous display was, in some strange respect, endearing. Frustrating, irritating, galling, trying, exasperating, maddening, annoying, overly troublesome on so many levels that she could hardly begin to even think about it... but

endearing.

It was safe to say she was still mad at him, though.

That didn't negate the fact that, on some level, she knew Severus was right. As Hogwarts students, childish pranks were punished with loss of House points and detentions. As an Auror trainee, Ron should have been above such childish pranks and he most certainly was NOT above the law. It was time that they all started taking responsibility for their actions. When they were students, they'd always had some way of getting out of trouble; however, it was highly unlikely that they'd have been able to have that same luck follow them throughout adulthood. No, as adults, it was time that they admitted their wrongdoings and accepted the consequences of their actions.

Hermione believed that.

And that was precisely what she told Ron last week Monday, after she'd spoken with Snape.

And she in turn listened to Ron scream and rant at her for hours as he insisted that it was all fine and good for her to say such things when ~~she~~ she wasn't the one facing the formal inquiry with the risk of having to stand before the Wizengamot.

"Hermione! How could you let your *boyfriend* press charges? I can't believe that you would betray me, your best friend, like that!" he'd said.

"Me? Betray you? That's the pot calling the cauldron black! Bloody hell, Ronald Weasley! Severus was right to report you! Honestly, Tonks should've been the first one to report what you did!" she'd replied. "Well, no," she'd corrected herself. "You never should've done something so utterly stupid to begin with. I still can't believe what you did. And I'm really not ready to forgive you yet."

Needless to say, it had not been a pleasant conversation.

Hermione sighed, looking at the robes in her hands again before she began dressing hastily. She was nervous about facing both Ron and Severus today, in the same room. Thinking about the way she'd yelled at Severus in his office the day she'd discovered he'd filed the charges against Ron, her face flushed red.

"You're a Gryffindor, Hermione," she reminded herself as she finished dressing. For some reason, ever since she'd yelled at Severus after receiving the notice of Ron's inquiry, Hermione hadn't been able to get Severus out of her head.

Growling at her inability to control her emotions and her still overzealous hormones, she pulled a brush quickly through her hair and grabbed a clip to pull it out of her face, before she ran out the door and down the stairs. Ginny and Harry were both standing there waiting for her.

"Ready?" Harry asked.

"As ready as I'll ever be," she said with a nod.

The three of them stepped out the door of Grimmauld Place.

They Apparated to the Atrium of the Ministry of Magic, and from there, they made their way to the Auror Department.

Hermione had to take several calming breaths while in the lift, trying to calm herself before the gates opened on level two. They walked down the hall towards the office that had been named in the scroll Hermione had received notifying her of the hearing. Steeling her nerves, she turned the doorknob and entered the room.

It was nothing more than a waiting room.

Tonks was seated in a chair nearest the door on the opposite side of the room. Along the opposite wall, Ron sat on a couch, flanked by his parents on either side of him. And standing in the corner was a scowling Severus Snape.

Ron looked up and made eye contact with her, and Hermione frowned. Mrs. Weasley crossed her arms and refused to look in her direction, while Mr. Weasley gave her an apologetic smile.

Looking back towards the corner, Hermione met Severus' gaze as he assessed her. *At least he doesn't look as if he wants to kill me* she thought, relaxing slightly.

Hermione let Harry guide her to the other sofa in the room where she, Harry, and Ginny sat. The room crackled with uncomfortable tension as everyone shot glances at each other, although Hermione was certain that most were aimed in her direction. The worst glances were coming from Molly Weasley and her son.

Groaning softly and covering her face with her hands, Hermione wanted nothing more than for the sofa to swallow her whole. Or better yet... for the other sofa to swallow Ron. Or maybe a far better fate awaited her dear friend, for it was then that the wheels truly began spinning.

Before she could think much further on it, her thoughts were interrupted as a door opened from the opposite end of the room, capturing everyone's attention.

"Well, I appreciate everyone coming this morning," said Mr. Robards, after clearing his throat. "I wish that these were, of course, better circumstances." There was a meaningful glance shot at Ron with the last words, and a brief pause, before the Head Auror continued. "I intend for this to be a relatively short proceeding. I do not wish to take up any more of your time than is truly necessary. My goal is to ensure that the community is best served here. But let me just say that it would be a crime to lose such a hardworking and dedicated recruit for something as foolish as revenge for a broken heart," he said, shooting his gaze at Hermione.

Clapping his hands together, he said, "Well, now that the little stuff is settled, let's get on with it. Professor Snape and Miss Granger, come with me, please."

Harry squeezed her shoulder as she stood up and made her way towards the door that Snape now held open for her. Hermione reached the door and allowed her gaze to linger on Severus Snape's expression. His face was still closed to emotion, and Hermione found herself wondering how much more the man hated her today. After all, it had been just over a week since she'd gone into his office and yelled at him, and slightly longer since she'd confessed to having feelings for him.

Hermione seemed to hold her breath as their eyes met, and they wound up walking into the meeting room together. Severus came up and led her the rest of the way into the room, where there was a single long table with several chairs.

They approached the table where Mr. Robards now sat at the head. On one side was Kingsley Shacklebolt and on the other sat a man with long blond hair tied back in a ponytail. Robards introduced him as Gavin Williamson. Both men were Aurors who worked with the trainees. Additionally, Kingsley was now just under Robards in the hierarchy of the department.

These three men would be asking all the questions. With his hand on the small of her back, Severus guided Hermione to the center of the table, and pulled out a chair for her, politely helping her to sit down.

The entire process was, just as Mr. Robards had requested earlier, very quick and direct. Not what Hermione had truly been expecting. She gave her account of events, starting with when Ron gave her the Veritaserum-laced house-elf wine, up until when she'd consumed the antidote that Severus had been able to brew for her later on at Hogwarts. She skipped over the part where Mrs. Weasley had questioned her; Severus caught her eye, but refrained from saying anything. *After all, this is Ron's inquiry, not Molly's*, she reminded herself.

Hermione had decided that she would leave out as many details as she thought she could get away with. There was no reason for Mr. Robards, Kingsley, or Williamson to know about how Snape had baited and teased her while she was under the influence of Ron's Veritaserum. Hermione had considered that if she was truly seeking

vengeance against Ron in this way, she would sacrifice that information about herself in an effort to paint a bleaker picture. However, as it stood, it wasn't worth it to her.

And though she wanted to get back at Ron, she knew that a formal lawsuit up with the Wizengamot was not the way to do it. She had no desire to make herself look worse in the process either... people did not need to know the things that Snape had truly said to her the evening that they'd brewed the antidote.

The thing that surprised Hermione the most during everything was Snape. She had expected the man to do and say just about anything possible to ensure that "justice" was served. After all, it was Severus who had first alerted Mr. Robards to the behavior of one of his recruits. Instead, Severus had offered his account of events, which varied from Hermione's only slightly; he gave pertinent details where she'd not been able to, including exactly how the antidote had been brewed.

The three other men asked a few questions about the ordeal, including how Snape had come to consider himself to be a victim. Hermione's face flushed as Snape calmly told the story of her humiliation by Mrs. Weasley.

"Mrs. Weasley took advantage of Miss Granger's state. Not only did she ask a direct question, but Mrs. Weasley, being an older woman and a motherly figure, was someone that Miss Granger had always trusted. She helped Miss Granger to lie down and just as she was relaxing..."

He continued to retell the events with absolutely no emotion while Hermione initially went from finding her fingers interesting, to staring at the top of the table. Then, as Severus reached the climax of his tale with no other emotion than a disgusted sneer, she looked the other three men in the eyes.

"And this made you a victim, Professor Snape?" asked Mr. Robards.

"It involved me unnecessarily in the entire messy affair, both on a personal and professional level. I had no desire to be a pawn in their childish little love games, or ridiculed by my fellow Order members and Hogwarts staff. After this little incident, I was called on the carpet by the Headmistress herself," the man next to her snarled.

At his biting tone, Hermione's stomach instantly soured. *Come on, Snape, tell me how you really feel*, she thought.

When Kingsley caught Hermione's gaze she could see the condolences in the kindly Auror's eyes. Not that he knew the entire story, of course. But he, like most of the wizarding world, knew how cruel Snape could be through simple words.

Suddenly his words sunk in. "Wait. You mean that Minerva cornered you about what I said?" Hermione asked him.

Carefully choosing his words, Severus answered, "My superior reminded me of my obligations and responsibilities, Miss Granger."

Hermione wanted to protest, however something in the way that he said her name caused her to close her mouth again. It was a discussion for a later time, she decided, and again the room quieted.

Before the dreadful silence could take hold of the room and its occupants again, Robards cleared his throat. "If there is nothing else that you'd like to add..." he said, allowing his voice to trail off and looking at Hermione and Severus each in turn.

Hermione shook her head and Severus said nothing further.

Robards stood up. "Then I will go get Tonks and Mr. Weasley."

Still feeling rather ill, Hermione turned her head and looked to the man sitting next to her, who was simply ignoring her. "Severus?" she asked.

He quit staring at the wall to look at her and raised an eyebrow in question.

"I just wanted to..." she began just as Ron and Tonks came into the room.

"Miss Granger," he hissed, cutting her off, "this is neither the time, nor the place."

Wisely, Hermione chose to say nothing more to Snape as both Ron and Tonks took chairs directly across from them.

Hermione held her tongue as Ron recounted the events, including how he'd procured the Veritaserum from Auror Training just the day before the incident. Apparently the trainees had used the potion on each other, and Ron just ensured that there were three extra drops left in his vial.

He looked at Hermione and smiled. "I thought it was rather clever, that. Just like something you would've done back when we were all in school. Eh, Hermione?"

Shaking her head slightly, Hermione covered her face with her hand. "Oh, Ron."

"Right, then," Ron said, awkwardly. He went on to tell everyone that originally he thought that he'd wait to give it to her, but the night of the engagement party he was feeling pressured by his mother and wanted to finally put some things to rest. He chose the house-elf wine that had been brought to the house by Dobby because Ron was hoping to help Hermione relax a bit as well. Ron said that he knew not to mix Veritaserum with firewhisky, however, he thought that house-elf wine was mild enough to not have any effect.

Hermione snorted loudly. "Yeah, maybe if it hadn't been wine made by Winky!"

"Yeah, well," Ron continued, "things didn't go as I'd planned."

"You do realize, Ron, that even if everything *had* gone as you'd 'planned' and I had made some profession of undying love for you that evening, *that then* would not have been the right time to propose marriage, right?" Hermione asked.

At the sight of his now enflamed red cheeks, Hermione rolled her eyes, and Severus snorted. Hermione again remembered that there were others present in the room because there was a sudden fit of coughing and snorts from amongst the other inhabitants as they attempted to cover up their snickering.

"Well," interrupted Mr. Robards as he continued to try to mask his grin, "I think we have a clear understanding of the events." He then asked Tonks to relay anything else that she knew, though by this point there really wasn't any new information to give to the Aurors.

"Now, Professor Snape and Miss Granger, you have the option to bring in any other witnesses to support your claims at this time."

Hermione looked to Snape who continued to sit with his arms crossed, appearing bored. "It doesn't seem to me that anything we've said is being refuted," Hermione said. "Harry and Ginny came with me and they'll support everything we've said, but that will just waste everyone's time."

Severus simply nodded his head once in agreement.

"Good. Glad to hear it," said Mr. Robards. "Then the rest of us can be left with our jobs of deciding what we are going to do with Mr. Weasley. Tonks, would you please escort Professor Snape, Miss Granger, and Mr. Weasley out, as well as their guests who are in the waiting room? Mr. Weasley, you will be summoned sometime within the next three days to appear before a general assembly with the other Auror Trainees, and your punishment will be read to you at that time. Professor Snape and Miss Granger, you will receive notification of our decision via Owl Post. Thank you for your time," he said, clearly dismissing them.

"Owl Post?" Hermione asked, slightly angered.

"Yes, these decisions take time," Mr. Robards answered.

And that was the moment that it became clear to Hermione that Ron would receive nothing more than a slap on the hand. Sure, it may be humiliating to be read a chastisement in front of one's peers, but that was hardly the same as the mini-holiday in Azkaban that Ron *should* be receiving for his idiocy.

Not that she *wanted* her best friend to go to prison, even if it was only for a few weeks, but it didn't seem quite fair that he should get away with... nothing!

Hermione stood up as her anger grew and she huffed. Just as she opened her mouth to shout at Robards, she felt a hand on her shoulder. Her mouth snapped shut instantly.

"I am sure, Mr. Robards, that you will see to it that Mr. Weasley is properly punished and no longer dispensing strictly-controlled potions to innocent citizens," Snape said with a snarl. With his hand still on her shoulder, he turned and led Hermione back towards the door.

Before they reached the door, Mr. Robards' words stopped them. "I can assure you, Professor Snape, that my recruits are not above the law. They face punishments just as any other law-abiding citizen does, and Mr. Weasley will learn a lesson... one way or another."

"Indeed," Snape replied as he reached for the door.

Tonks and Ron also left the table, and Ron quickened his pace to catch up to Hermione and Snape.

"Hermione, I just wanted to..."

"I know, Ron. You just wanted to say how sorry you are."

"Well, yeah," Ron said, lamely.

"I don't need any more apologies from you, Ron. I need my friend back. My friend, who actually knows *how* to be a friend," she responded as Severus opened the door for her.

"I'm sorry, Hermione," Ron muttered.

"Yeah, I know, Ron."

The four of them entered the waiting room, where all eyes turned to them instantly. Tonks, thankfully, spoke for all of them, informing the waiting Weasleys and Harry that they were all going to have to wait a few days to find out what was to come of Ron's career as an Auror. Casting a careful look at Severus and Hermione, Tonks informed the others that things looked "good" for Ron at this point.

Mrs. Weasley gave a relieved sigh and put her arms around her son. "Oh, Ronald, I'm so pleased. We should go have lunch to celebrate; there's a new restaurant next to Florean Fortescue's. Ginny, you and Harry should come along, too."

Ginny looked from her mother to Hermione and stammered, "Oh, well..."

"Well, yes, of course. Hermione, dear, you're invited to join us. You and Tonks, and you too, Severus," Molly insisted after only a few flustered moments of hesitation.

"Thank you, Mrs. Weasley," said Hermione. "But I have plans this afternoon with my mum." She could hardly bring herself to look Molly in the eye as she fabricated the lie and knew that nobody would believe her, but there was no way she was going to spend the afternoon with Ron's family 'celebrating' his idiocy and dumb luck, all at her expense.

"Yes, and I need to help Gawain and Kingsley close up Ron's file," answered Tonks.

Molly looked expectantly to Severus. They were all Order members, weren't they? All on the same side?

"I ensured that the charges were filed against your son, Molly. There is no way that I am going to attend a celebratory luncheon when it appears that he is not going to have to pay any penance for his crime," he answered, staring down his long nose at her.

"Oh," Molly said, looking somewhat abashed. "Well, Ginny, Harry, Arthur, Ron?"

Hermione nodded her assent to Ginny and Harry, letting them know that she had no ill feelings towards them for leaving her for the afternoon.

Harry and Ginny then answered Mrs. Weasley in the affirmative, and the group of five left the room for their celebration.

Tonks looked between Hermione and Severus and gave Hermione a sly grin before saying, "I really do have some papers to file. Have a good afternoon, Hermione. Good day to you, Severus."

"Thanks," Hermione said as her friend left.

Once the room was empty, Hermione turned to Severus and prepared herself for the hurtful and stinging remarks that were certain to be coming from his tongue.

"I owe you an apology," she began.

"Indeed."

"Though I think you could have gone about things a different way," she said in an effort to justify her rant several days ago. "I apologize. You were right to bring the incident to the attention of the Ministry. Even though it appears that such a thing is rather pointless because they won't punish their own recruits."

"Yes, now you have some idea what I went through for years, dealing with you and your friends, Potter and Weasley."

"Indeed," Hermione replied with a mixture of sympathy and amusement.

A few minutes of silence passed as Severus debated his next move. Finally making a decision, he looked at her with an odd gleam in his black eyes and said, "There are other, more satisfying ways to ensure that people pay for their crimes, Hermione."

"I don't want him to be hurt, Severus."

"I am not talking about anyone getting hurt, nor anything illegal."

"Go on," Hermione prompted, intrigued.

"Would you care to join me for lunch, Hermione? I've always found that revenge is best discussed over a meal." Severus extended his arm to her.

Smiling, Hermione nodded her head, sliding her arm through his, and the pair walked towards the door. *Hmm, perhaps I can talk him into going to the new restaurant next to Florean Fortescue's*, she thought wickedly.

A/N: I am so sorry about how long it has taken to update. I always think that I'll have more time during the summer to get some writing done, but it never works that way. Truly, having four kids at home makes it much more difficult. They go back to school in two weeks. YAY! :)

I am proud to announce that *"A Slip of the Tongue"* has won in Round 6 of the Multifaceted Awards in the Pride category. Please know that I am truly humbled by all the support I have received from everyone. Thank you so much to everyone who voted.

Thanks to SnarkyRoxy and JuneW, betas extraordinaire!

The Truth Without Veritaserum

Chapter 8 of 11

Ron wonders why he and Hermione have yet to start a romantic relationship and he takes drastic measures to find out.

Disclaimer: I solemnly swear that I am up to no good. JK Rowling owns it all, but I promise to return her characters in "like new" condition when I am done with them.

Thank you to my wonderful betas, SnarkyRoxy and JuneW. Without them, this story would not be possible.

Arriving at the restaurant, which held the single title of *Vane's*, Severus requested a quiet table near the back. The host promptly ushered them past the other patrons, including the boisterous Weasley party. Ron clearly thought his old friend Hermione had come to her senses. Molly Weasley even stood up as they approached, obviously under the impression that the couple had decided to take her up on her generous offer to join the Weasley family for their celebration.

As Severus and Hermione neared the full table and continued on past with no more than a glance, they left a stunned and silent matriarch in their wake. Severus noticed that Hermione appeared angry at the fact that the group was there to "celebrate" too angry to find any humor in it. However, once the host seated them out of the line of sight of the mostly red-headed party, her anger began to ebb and she began to relax, much to his amusement.

The restaurant was rather nice, but had a casual air about it. Taking a brief glance at their menus, the pair ordered. Glasses of port appeared instantly in front of them, and they began sipping, an awkward silence falling into place.

Severus was uncertain whether he should jump into discussing his plan of revenge or begin with some gentler "small-talk" to ease the tension. Observing his lunch date, it appeared by the look on her face that they still had some unfinished business.

He attempted to draw her into conversation, first about the recent Death Eater trials, and when that proved fruitless, the new Border Patrol Laws. When she continued to remain largely uncommunicative, Severus became frustrated and slammed his hand on the tabletop harder than he intended, causing an upsetting of the silverware at his place setting.

"What is with you, woman?" he growled.

"What do you mean?" she asked innocently.

"I mean that normally you are nearly impossible to shut up, but for some unknown reason, I cannot seem to get you to talk about anything right now. I invited you to lunch to discuss some things with you, but I had also foolishly thought that I might take advantage of this and get to know you a bit better as well!" he railed.

In the middle of his rant, Hermione's face changed from the innocence she was attempting to portray to one of clear interest. Composing herself, she said, "Well, I had hoped for an apology."

Severus snorted.

"An apology, Severus. You keep talking to me as if I'm some errant first-year who you caught sneaking into the Restricted Section of the library or stealing from your private stores, when in truth, you're no better. You bait me at every turn, you take your enjoyment in trying to confuse me, and you cannot deny that you took great pleasure in humiliating Ron like that."

"I was simply ensuring that he was being held accountable for his actions, my dear. What, pray tell, is wrong with that?"

Hermione's eyes widened as she realized what it was, exactly, that she'd said. "I didn't mean it like that," she mumbled.

"Indeed," he replied. He fingered his glass for a minute longer as he watched her. When it became clear that she was not going to say anything else without his prompting, he spoke again. "Fine. Although I believe that I was correct in bringing this matter to the forefront with the Auror Department, I admit that I should have sought your permission before doing so, since you were the primary victim."

A warm smile grew on his lunch companion's face, and as loath he was to admit it, it warmed a small corner of his heart.

This white flag allowed them to ease into the uncharted grounds of "small talk" that he'd attempted to venture into earlier. Severus' dish of shepherd's pie and Hermione's plate of roast chicken and potatoes appeared before them. As they ate, their conversation slid from Severus' own trial to the inevitable arrival of students at the school.

When their stomachs were full and their plates had conveniently vanished, Hermione broached the first of the uneasy topics of conversation that Severus had been anticipating. He had been surprised at her restraint and was impressed that she had managed to hold her tongue for so long.

"So," she began. "Tell me exactly what Minerva said to you about what I'd said to Molly."

After a long pause, Severus answered, "Your former Head of House simply feels that I would be a bad influence on you. She has requested that I ... what were her exact words? Ah, yes ... *leave you be*. I am sure that she believes that this is merely a flight of fancy that will pass if given enough time."

Hermione huffed. "She has no right to say that to you! I'm no longer a student and I haven't been for three years! How dare she..."

Severus held up a single hand, bringing a halt to her tirade. "Minerva meant no harm by it, Hermione," he said with forced calm. "The nosy woman means well. I personally believe that she simply spent too much time in the presence of Albus Dumbledore to be able to stay out of other people's affairs."

At this, the witch sitting across from him snorted. It was at this interruption when he realized he was attempting to convince himself of Minerva's well-meaning at the same time as he was trying to convince his companion.

"The woman was your Head of House for six years, and Headmistress for your last year of school. Not only that, Hermione, but she led the Order of the Phoenix following Albus' death. You cannot deny that she feels some degree of responsibility for you, that she'd feel some sort of maternal instincts."

After another minute, Hermione nodded her head, conceding that Severus' assessment was likely correct.

"That leads me to the next obvious question then, Severus," Hermione began.

"Excuse me, sir," came a voice from beside them.

The couple looked up to see their waiter, who had remained blessedly out of sight until now, standing at their table.

"What?" Severus snapped.

"I'm sorry, sir, but you have neglected to Summon or request anything since you have finished your meals. I feared that there was something wrong with the food, or the dessert menu did not offer enough selection."

"I know how to order at a bloody restaurant," Severus snarled.

"Yes, sir," the man said before hastily leaving the table.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him and he smirked in reply. Deciding it would behoove him to behave in a somewhat gentlemanly manner, he asked, "Would you care for something else?"

After another look at their menus, they each placed an order to the table. Quickly, a dish of trifle appeared before each of them, as well as a cup of coffee to their individual specifications.

Severus looked back to Hermione. "Now that the waiter is gone, you may continue."

"Oh," she said as the color of her cheeks took on a much darker shade of pink than was typical for her. "You did a fair job of explaining what Minerva thinks of me. I would like to know what *you* think of me."

This girl truly needs to learn something about Slytherin subtlety, Severus thought. True, it wasn't as if he hadn't anticipated the question, he just hadn't expected her to ask it so soon. He swallowed the bite of his trifle in his mouth and took a sip of his coffee before speaking. "What do you wish for me to say, Hermione?"

"I want to know the truth, Severus. I feel as though ever since I said those words at Harry and Ginny's engagement party, we've been involved in some sort of dance with one another, only I'm not sure which one of us is leading."

She met his gaze, and for a fateful moment, Severus felt as if she could see into the very depths of his soul, every fiber of his being, every secret he'd safely tucked away... the very essence that made him Severus Snape.

He surprised even himself when he didn't lash out at her in self-defense. Severus never allowed others to see any part of his true self. No one, save Dumbledore, had ever been able to see past the years of barriers he'd built since he'd left school as a teenager. Perhaps in time he'd be able to tell Hermione

She had just put down her spoon and was starting to push away from the table.

"I think that I have not imbibed nearly enough wine, nor have I swallowed any Veritaserum," he said smoothly.

She moved to get her purse.

Damn! Not caring if he made a fool of himself or not, Severus grabbed her wrist to stop her. "Hermione, I have not finished."

The expression on her face was obviously warring between hurt and anger, but to her credit, she stayed in her seat and kept her eyes on him, giving him a chance to explain himself.

"As I was saying, I've not consumed enough of either of those things, however, I do not need wine or Veritaserum to be honest with you. You were my student for six years five years in Potions, one year in Defence. In that time, you were best friends with my school rival's son."

As he was speaking, she turned her face away, refusing to look at him, and he felt her try to pull away. Severus gripped her arm harder, keeping her where she was, and continued talking. "Then the war came to a head, as you well know." As he said the next words, he gradually loosened his grip on her arm. "You have grown into an attractive, intelligent, and forthright woman. I had not realized it before you made your confession, had your epiphany, or whatever it is you wish to call it, but I do know that you are a far cry from the child I once taught. I would like a chance to come to know the witch you have become."

Hermione finally looked at him and blinked.

He smirked.

"I'm sorry, Severus, I am a bit surprised. I mean, you said something similar a bit earlier, but I didn't really know what to make of it... I mean," she said, looking down at her hands, still somewhat visibly shaken. "I don't know what I mean."

Only then did Severus realize that he was still holding her wrist. He released her and sat back. "You asked for the truth. I simply gave it to you."

"Yes, you did. Thank you for that."

Severus nodded and wondered if perhaps Hermione was now feeling the same way he'd felt just a couple of weeks ago when she had made a similar profession regarding her feelings for him. Perhaps her thoughts were now just as muddled as his own had been then. How badly had he just thrown the girl off-balance?

In an effort to distract her, he leaned over his place setting and requested their coffees be refilled. Once the dark liquid appeared, Hermione dutifully picked up her cup and began sipping.

Severus waited a touch longer before he settled back, picking up his own cup and sipping from it and waving his half-eaten trifle away from the table. "Now, Hermione, I believe that the reason that I asked you here was to discuss my ideas for a revenge plot."

When a smirk grew on the young woman's face to rival his own, Severus knew that the image of the little girl that he'd known was indeed melting away before his very eyes. He was very much enjoying the challenging company of the woman who had taken her place.

"Yes, Severus, I believe that is correct."

"Then, tell me, when is the next large get-together? Preferably one that includes more than just the Weasley family."

As Severus watched that smirk grow to an outright smile, he was well and truly lost, though he was not ready to tell her that, just yet.

~ * ~

Hermione was in the makeshift Potions lab just off of the kitchen at number twelve, Grimmauld Place. It was a small room in which she'd spent countless hours cleaning, organizing, and, of course, brewing. This was where she had brewed many of the potions used by the Order members during the war, and where Ginny had swiped the Calming Draught she'd slipped Hermione a couple of weeks earlier.

Hermione's smile grew as she watched the potion continue to brew. It was maturing exactly as Severus had said that it would.

Two weeks, she reminded herself. She could easily wait two more weeks until she was able to even the score with Ron. Besides, she had another potion to start brewing.

Waving her wand, she Levitated the cauldron, removing it from the flame to the cooling rack. It would need to sit for thirty-six hours and then be put back onto the flame, at which point the final ingredients would be added before it had to simmer for five days with only water being added twice daily. Then this potion would be completed.

The second potion was a touch trickier to create. However, if all went well it would also be completed long before she needed it.

Severus had asked Hermione when the next get-together was going to take place. A small part of her had wanted to snap at him, only because she was quite certain that he full well knew what was happening. "This is the first time since Harry was a year old that he is free from the threat of death," Molly Weasley had declared, before starting her plans for a huge birthday party for Harry at the Burrow.

It was to be a true celebration of life.

"Everyone" was invited and Hermione was positive that meant that Severus was on the guest list. She could tell from his grousing that he had no desire to attend, but somehow she'd managed to coax him into escorting her. It had taken quite a bit of talking before he'd agreed, however. Well, more arguing than talking. It certainly helped that the event promised to be the perfect place to inflict revenge on Ron, and hopefully Molly, if everything went according to plan.

Still, Hermione couldn't help but wonder how much power she now held over Severus. She wasn't about to delude herself that he fancied her in return. But the simple fact that he was intrigued enough by her to say that he'd like to get to know the person she'd grown up to become ... that spoke volumes.

When they'd said goodbye to one another outside of the restaurant, he had simply said that he would see her again, but no plans were made. However, if Hermione closed her eyes and thought hard enough, she could still feel the press of his lips against the back of her hand as he bid her farewell. She knew she'd be wearing the silly grin on her face for days.

Even without a date to look forward to until Harry's party on the twenty-eighth of July, Hermione was sure that she could think of a reason or two to make her way to the castle. After all, there was a certain Headmistress that she needed to have a discussion with.

That thought firmly in her head, Hermione pulled down the second cauldron from the shelf, and began preparing the ingredients to begin the second potion.

A/N: I'm sorry about the delay. Kids are all back in school and life is getting back to normal... finally! :) I am trying very hard to get caught up on reviews. Please know that I love them dearly (they help encourage me to write when I'm feeling blue) and if I haven't responded to yours yet, it's only been because I've been spending my free time writing.

Yes, I do know Harry's birthday is 31 July. So, before I get a bunch of comments telling me to learn my canon facts, look at your calendars for July 2002 and you will see that to have his party on a Sunday, it either has to be 28 July or 4 August.

Finally, Severus' meal of shepherd's pie and trifle was not because it was the only thing that I could think of. It was purely to amuse me and to pay homage to one of my all-time favorite *Friends* episodes. Seriously, it makes me laugh out loud every time I see it. *smirk* *"It tastes like feet!"*

True Colors

Chapter 9 of 11

Ron wonders why he and Hermione have yet to start a romantic relationship and he takes drastic measures to find out.

Disclaimer: *I solemnly swear that I am up to no good. JK Rowling owns it all, but I promise to return her characters in "like new" condition when I am done with them.*

Thank you to my wonderful betas, SnarkyRoxy and JuneW. Without them, this story would not be possible.

Hermione stood before the gates of Hogwarts, not-so-patiently awaiting admittance.

On her last visit, she'd been lucky that Hagrid had been outside mucking about and able to allow her through the school gates. That was just after she'd learned that Severus had reported the Veritaserum incident to the Ministry, and that Ron was facing a formal inquiry. At the time, she'd been so angry that if she'd been forced to wait very long she likely would've found a way through the complex wards herself. Not that she believed she could have truly accomplished that feat, but she would've given it a damn good go.

Today, she wasn't angry yet but she was still waiting for the Headmistress to make her way down from her office. They had made arrangements via Owl Post to meet for afternoon tea. Since Hermione had written her note on parchment and not a Howler, surely it gave the impression that it was just an innocent social call. Surely Minerva didn't know that Hermione was there to discuss her former Head of House's undue influence on her love life, and to tell the older witch to stay out of her personal affairs. If Minerva did know, then Hermione could blame that knowledge for the Headmistress' tardiness.

Hermione was not looking forward to the encounter. She looked up to Minerva. The simple fact that the woman had been her Head of House for six years made the Headmistress a strong maternal influence on her. Every time Hermione thought about it, she couldn't help but think that Minerva had her best interests at heart. The niggling question that kept bothering her was: what was it about Severus Snape that made the Headmistress reluctant to trust him?

Waiting... waiting... still waiting...

Kicking the closed gate in front of her, Hermione looked at her watch and began to pace. They'd agreed to meet down here at four o'clock precisely. Why, then, wasn't someone there to greet her?

It just served to anger the young witch even more that she'd been kept waiting for more than ten minutes. Frustrated, she brandished her wand and sent her Patronus scurrying off towards the castle. She watched as the silver otter found an open window on the lowest floor and disappeared inside the castle.

Hermione pocketed her wand and leaned against the gate, settling in yet again. If someone didn't arrive soon, then she'd head into town for a while.

It was only a couple of minutes before a flurry of black robes was making its way towards the gate. Hermione couldn't stop the grin that was growing on her face even if she tried. It had been a week since she'd seen him last, and she could still feel the tender kiss that he'd placed on her hand.

"Hermione," he said as he arrived at the gates.

"Good afternoon, Severus. Thanks for coming down here to let me in."

"Well, it seems I had little choice. That otter that you sent to harass Minerva interrupted what was left of a staff meeting, and it would not see fit to allow us to continue until someone agreed to come down here to permit you onto the grounds. Much to Professor McGonagall's chagrin, I volunteered for the task. I believe she was preparing to send Filch," he said as he opened the gate, allowing her admittance. "You didn't tell me you were coming here today."

"Well, I haven't given you a full rundown of my social calendar," she replied as she followed him through the gates, and they began the familiar trek towards the castle. However, unlike the last time she walked with him along this path the night of Harry and Ginny's engagement party, when she was drunk on house-elf wine Severus maintained a leisurely pace which was easy for Hermione to keep up with.

The two had exchanged letters on a daily basis since their lunch date. Although none of them could be considered overly romantic, Hermione was pleased with the small pieces of Severus that he was slowly beginning to reveal to her.

"The Headmistress and I were supposed to meet at four o'clock for tea. I am assuming that your staff meeting ran overlong."

"During the summer holidays we only meet once a month. Today, Hagrid saw fit to present his argument on why he believes it would be beneficial to teach the basics of dragon breeding to his seventh year Care of Magical Creatures students; he would use it as an incentive to retain enrollment in the course. Teaching the information is one thing, but he is very adamant that students learn best by practical application. Apparently, he's been speaking with both the Ministry and Charlie Weasley in Romania, trying to convince them of the idea as well. We never thought he'd take such initiative in something like this. Hogwarts is certainly no place for a dragon, even one that has been newly hatched."

Hermione couldn't keep in the giggles that were fighting to get out at that statement. "No, I agree, it's a foolish idea. And if Hagrid helped hatch one, you'd have a horrible time getting him to give up the bleeding thing. You should've seen him the last time."

Severus snorted. "He hid it well. Although, Dumbledore always suspected something was amiss."

"He did?" she exclaimed as they climbed the steps up to the castle doors and into the school.

"Yes, it was difficult to miss the unusual amount of empty brandy bottles and chicken carcasses around the groundskeeper's hut. And the plain and simple fact that the man was busy nearly all the time."

"Ahhh. That would be because he'd had to feed Norbert brandy mixed with chicken blood every thirty minutes."

"He named it Norbert?"

"Yep." Hermione smiled as Severus rolled his eyes. "Things were much better once we were able to convince Hagrid to give the dragon to some friends of Charlie's. It had just been tricky to actually get the dragon to them without anyone knowing, since we had to take Norbert to the top of the Astronomy Tower."

They reached the gargoyles which guarded the stairway to the Headmistress' office. Severus murmured the password under his breath and the gargoyles moved away, bringing the stairway into view. He motioned for Hermione to stand on the stairs and he followed her.

As they rode the moving staircase up he leaned down and spoke softly in her ear, "Please do not tell me that you and your friends actually still believe that Dumbledore did not full well know what you three were up to when you trekked up to the Astronomy Tower that night."

They reached the top of the stairwell and Hermione turned around slightly to face him. "Nobody knew," Hermione started to insist. "Harry and I only got caught by Filch because..."

"Who do you think lowered the wards around the school so Mr. Weasley's friends could ride their broomsticks to the Astronomy Tower?"

"I ... I never thought about that," she conceded.

Severus looked smug.

He obviously enjoyed winning any debate, even a minor one, she thought.

"I would imagine that Minerva should be in there by now, as she was going to use you as an excuse to speed things along," he said, nodding his head towards the office door.

Hermione took the last few steps towards it and knocked. Just as she heard the customary "enter" from the other side of the door, Severus opened the door for her and Hermione stepped aside.

"Thank you, Severus," she said, only to turn to look at him to find that he was no longer there.

Somewhat disappointed that he'd left before she could really have a chance to talk to him or at least make plans to meet with him later, she went in to join Minerva in her office.

~ * ~

Hermione was sitting in a comfortable armchair in the Headmistress' office, with a steaming cup of tea in hand. She had sent the owl to her former mentor with the intent of confronting the older witch. Thus far today, they had done nothing more than the exchange of a few pleasantries, and Hermione was not certain how to broach the subject of Minerva's past comments to Severus.

This wasn't a matter of bravery, Hermione reminded herself. It was simply a matter of stating things in a mature manner without sounding at all like the child or student which she was sure her former Head of House still saw her as.

Minerva McGonagall seemed to be studying her from her own armchair, as she too sipped her tea. After many long moments, she finally spoke, "I appreciate the visit, Hermione. I haven't seen you since the night of the engagement party. Severus told me about Mr. Weasley's hearing last week." Putting her teacup and saucer on the tea tray in front of them, she looked at Hermione seriously. "You and Ron are so well suited for each other. I do hope that his brief lapse in judgment wasn't so much that you won't be able to work through your differences."

"A brief lapse in judgment? You don't really mean that, do you?" Hermione asked, setting her cup down next to McGonagall's and trying to force a calm façade.

"I watched you two ... well, you three, really ... grow up. So, of course I mean that. Ron Weasley just wasn't thinking things all of the way through. He cares a great deal for you, Hermione. Do not allow one mistake to come between the two of you. I am sure that if you examine things closely you'll see that you have both made mistakes, and that with patience you can work through them all."

Hermione sat there shaking her head and struggling to keep her emotions under control. "I don't love Ron in that way, Professor. In fact, one of the reasons that I came here today was to tell you that..." At this she paused and took a deep breath and started again. "That I don't appreciate you telling Sev ... Professor Snape ... to leave me alone. I want to spend time with him. I am interested in him. I fancy *him*. Not Ronald Weasley."

The older witch sighed. "Hermione, child, I know that it has been a rough time for you. I think that you need to give this more time and think things through."

"I am hardly a child anymore. I don't have anything to think through. You don't know all of the facts and aren't seeing the complete picture here. All that you know of my relationship with Ron and Harry is what you saw of us here at school and while we were in the Order. You know of our daily routines when we were in the common room, the Great Hall, the library, and in your classroom. Oh, and the few times we were in the hospital wing. You have no idea of the personal nature of our friendship or how ill-matched Ron and I truly are.

"But I do," Hermione continued firmly. "It's something that has been bothering me a great deal as of late. It just took me a very long time to face it."

"Perhaps it took you so long because you know that Ron is really the best person for you."

Hermione snorted. "How can he be the best person for me? We have nothing in common. Before, we at least had school, our coursework, and the fight against Voldemort. Once all of those things were taken away, I found that there was nothing that I could grasp on to that still tethered us together."

"You still have your experiences, Hermione. Cling to those."

"I am not going to spend the rest of my life living in the past just to please you." Hermione stood up. "The only reason I even bothered telling you any of this or even came here today was out of respect, but if you are not even going to listen to me then this conversation is pointless. You are not my mother, and I won't even let her tell me who I can and cannot have a relationship with."

"Sit down, Hermione." When Hermione remained standing, Minerva took another deep breath. "Please."

Her patience thin, Hermione sat on the edge of her chair and looked directly into Minerva McGonagall's cat-like eyes.

Giving a sharp, stiff nod, Minerva spoke again. Her words came out as those of the firm disciplinarian that she'd always been known for, as long as Hermione had been growing up in the school. "You may think that I am being unthinking or unfeeling, but when I say that I am looking out for your best interests, Hermione, I truly am looking out for *your* best interests. I could hardly help look after you for seven years as an educator and help lead you in a fight against the Darkest wizard of our time without developing some feelings of responsibility for you. The feelings that you are having for Professor Snape ... fine, for Severus ... are nothing more than hero-worship."

Hermione opened her mouth to vehemently protest when Minerva held up her hand to stop her. "Let me finish," she said firmly. "I do not deny that he is an admirable wizard. But there is a considerable age difference between the two of you. He was your professor for several years. You looked up to him. He was a spy for our side. Then we thought that he betrayed us in the worst possible way, and then he turned out to be a hero. He saved our lives in the end. Even though he's not the most handsome man out there, it could be easy to see him as a dashing hero, as a knight in shining black armor. But you cannot forget that he truly was a Death Eater and *is* a murderer."

Hermione gritted her teeth through Minerva's speech, barely containing herself until the other woman was finished speaking. The straw that broke the proverbial camel's back was her statement that Severus was a murderer. "How dare you presume to even think you know what I'm thinking or feeling?" Hermione hissed. Rising again from her chair, she looked down at the woman that she'd formerly looked up to. "I don't owe you an explanation. As I stated, I was here out of some odd sense of respect, but even that has fallen by the wayside during our conversation. You have no say in my relationships, whether they be with Severus Snape or Ronald Weasley, or if I decided to start fucking the Giant Squid! You have nothing to say in the matter!"

She shot a glance to the portrait which hung directly behind Minerva's desk, and fought the tears which threatened to well-up in her when she met the sad eyes of Albus Dumbledore.

The Headmistress made no move to stop Hermione as the younger witch stormed towards the door.

As she opened it, Hermione turned around. "I can't help but wonder: why would someone who thinks of Severus as nothing more than a Death Eater and a murderer be willing to bring him back as a professor to teach and influence a school full of children?"

When Minerva didn't answer, Hermione shook her head in disgust and slammed the door firmly on her way out.

In the office, the portrait of Albus Dumbledore looked down at his friend, colleague, and former lover. Leaning forward, he coughed slightly to get her attention.

"Leave it be, Albus," she said, acknowledging him.

"No. I believe that it is time for you to take your anger at my death out on the right person, Minerva. Forgive Severus. It is the very least that he deserves."

She picked up her now cold tea and took a sip for no other reason than to have something to do. "Of course I've forgiven him. I hired him back, just as you asked. Haven't I? Leave me alone, Albus."

"Minerva, you..."

His words were cut off as her porcelain cup shattered against his canvas and she stormed out of the room, leaving Albus to wipe off the tea that was now splattered over his portrait.

~ * ~

Hermione was on her way down the stairs to the dungeons. It was at times like this that she greatly missed the wooden stairs of Grimmauld Place, the Burrow, or even her parents' house... no matter how hard she tried, stomping on stone steps was wholly unsatisfying. Especially when she was in such a mood.

How dare Minerva treat her that way? What right did she have?

Making her way down to the dungeons, Hermione didn't even bother to knock on Severus' office door. She entered to find him hunched over his desk, with his quill in hand, staring intently at a long sheet of parchment.

"Do come in," he said without raising his head. "I trust you have a reason for not even giving me the common courtesy of knocking on my door."

Hermione walked directly in front of his desk and stopped, resting her hands on his desk. "You will never believe what that woman said to me."

"I trust that your meeting with Minerva did not go well," he said, now looking up from his scroll.

"No, it did not."

Silence filled the air between for a moment as Severus waited for her to continue. Giving up, he finally asked, "Are you going to make me force this out of you?"

"Sorry. I'm just having a hard time with this." She pushed her hands off the table and began pacing in the small room. "I trusted her and I feel betrayed."

"I see," Severus said as he went back to focusing on his parchment.

"She said that my feelings for you weren't legitimate. No, those weren't the words that she used. It was more like she said that the way I feel about you was nothing more than hero-worship." Hermione stopped and looked to Severus expectantly. "Well?" she asked when he failed to say anything.

"Well, what? Of course she believes that. That is what everyone believes. I have only seen you socially once. And I admit to wondering that at times."

"How could you even begin to think that way?" she shouted. "I have tried to be very upfront with you on this. I've already told you, this isn't some girlish crush. My attraction to you is genuine."

"It just took being inebriated and drugged for you to realize it."

Hermione cringed as Severus continued to scribble notes. After another moment, to her relief, Severus finally put his quill down and pushed aside the parchment he'd been concentrating on.

"It's about time," she muttered under her breath.

He glared at her as he stood from his desk and walked out from behind it, but he remained silent.

"I thought we already had this discussion, Severus. I am not going to argue with you on this subject each time that I see you or even mention that I want to see you. If it was about hero-worship than there are men closer to my own age that I could idolize and fantasize about."

"Yes, you should be having fantasies about a younger man who is undeniably better looking," he said with a sneer.

He was infuriating. Hermione wanted nothing more than to scream at the man. How could she ever hope for any sort of relationship with someone who was so bloody negative? After her confrontation with Minerva and now this spat with Severus, Hermione no longer knew how to feel. The cyclone of emotions that were encompassing her brain and her body were making it near impossible for her to think straight.

She'd never felt so exposed and under attack as she had been in this single afternoon. Instead of screaming she took a breath, and suddenly catching the slight twitch at the corner of the Potions master's mouth she exhaled some of her frustrations. "Yes, someone definitely better looking," she said, locking eyes with him. "And without the sarcasm and surly disposition."

Severus smirked, closing the gap between them.

She looked into his black eyes as she willed her heartbeat to slow back down to a rate befitting a well-behaved young woman, not that of an overzealous bunny rabbit.

"I suppose that your ideal fantasy involves someone with blond hair and a well-cut physique, and who spouts off disgustingly sappy and romantic sayings at every opportunity?"

"Indeed."

"Well, if that's how you feel, then I will be sure to inform Draco of your interest in him when I write to him early next week," Severus said casually. He moved away a step, confusing Hermione yet again.

She was tired of the dance that they'd somehow found themselves in, yet again. Hermione needed to do something to turn this back around. He had been teasing her just moments ago, she was certain of that. But she couldn't figure out why he suddenly turned away from her, unless some part of him was truly was insecure. For the first time since arriving in the dungeons, Hermione realized that she needed to take control of the situation to prevent it from turning horribly sour. She felt like they were already teetering near the edge of the abyss, and she couldn't help but wonder if this was Severus' way of diving into the hole rather than stay with her on the edge and further things along.

It was especially irritating because she thought they had made good progress over the last week. Even though she'd not seen him, they had been writing to each other daily, and while she'd never call any of his letters romantic, they were slowly becoming more and more personal as their correspondences had continued. At the first of the week, the more informal letters began with the casual: *I trust that you are well.* In contrast, yesterday's letter contained explicit details on the current research Severus was working on, complaints about his colleagues that he'd run into while at the school, and a short note telling Hermione that he had been thinking about her while he was inventorying the Potions storeroom and he'd come across the Boomslang skin.

She closed the gap between them again, lifting her hand to Severus' cheek, gently turning him to face her. And then she couldn't think of anything more as she tipped her face up to just inches in front of his, while at the very same moment he leant his head down towards her. As she pressed her lips tentatively to his, her insecurities began to melt away. The kiss quickly moved from careful and hesitant to greedy and demanding. Hermione moved both hands up to the nape of his neck and through the long locks of hair.

Severus, in turn, brought an arm securely around her, pulling her closer to him, while entwining the other in her hair. A soft moan escaped her lips when Severus darted his tongue across the crease of her lips and Hermione found that she no longer cared one whit about Minerva McGonagall's opinions on the matter. Then again, she didn't care about much of anything except the feel of Severus' lips on her own, the way his tongue began to explore her mouth, and his hand moving down from the small of her back to cup her arse.

He nipped at her lip, and slowly began trailing kisses down to her the side of her throat, just below her ear. Hermione moaned again as she felt a shiver run down her spine and brought her hand from the back of Severus' head to run the line down the buttons of his frock coat. As her fingers reached the bottom most button of his coat, they reached the top of his rather prominent erection. After a brief moment of indecision, she ran her hand along the front of his trousers and firmly cupped him through the fabric.

A guttural groan came from her companion. After another moment longer, he brought his mouth up to her ear and softly whispered, "Stop. Or there will be no going back."

"I don't want to stop," she answered while placing more pressure on his arousal, to reiterate her response.

In response, Severus brought his mouth back to hers for a bruising kiss while moving his hand from her arse up to under the front of her jumper. Her nerves seemed to come alive as his finger explored the flesh of her stomach before meeting the hindrance of her bra. He brushed his thumb over her nipple, before pinching it through the thin scrap of silk and causing a jolt of electricity to run from her breast down to the juncture between her thighs.

"This explains the Headmistress' towering temper a few moments ago," came a snarling voice from doorway.

Their kiss abruptly halted, Hermione dropped her hands from her companion as her cheeks reddened.

"This has nothing to do with the Headmistress," Severus growled at the caretaker as he stepped back slightly and removed his hands from her.

Hermione tried to calm her breathing and her heart rate at being caught when she felt something butt up against her leg. She looked down to see Mrs. Norris, who had now worked her way between Severus and Hermione as if she was trying to push them apart. Which, Hermione realized, the cat probably was.

"I just came to deliver a message from her, Professor. She wanted to let you know that she's leaving the castle and won't be back until tomorrow." With the message delivered, he left with Mrs. Norris, who gave one final butt of her head at Hermione before following the caretaker out of Severus' office.

Once the cat was out of the room, Severus pulled his wand from his sleeve and flicked it at the door, causing a rather loud slam.

Hermione smiled and looked up at him, blushing even further when their eyes locked.

"Erm... Why was that message so important, Severus?"

"It only means that I cannot go home this evening."

"Go home? For some reason I thought that you stayed here," she said, feeling embarrassed and realizing that she'd been thinking like a student who thought all teachers lived at the castle and didn't have a real life.

"No. I have quarters here, which is obviously where I reside during the school year, but in the summers I spend the majority of my evenings in my home. Usually I'm not here so much, but there is quite a bit of work to be done since Slughorn left. And, believe it or not, the laboratory here is larger than the space that I have to work in my own home. I stayed after the staff meeting today because I had a feeling that you would be down to see me before you left."

"And are you sorry that I did? Come down to see you, I mean."

"I would have been rather aggrieved if you hadn't," he said, brushing a finger along her cheek.

Hermione leaned into him again and kissed him softly in reply.

Pulling back, Severus smirked. "Would you care to continue this someplace else?"

"Please."

He took her hand and led her to the wall on the far side of the room, where there were shelves filled with the most gruesome jars of what Hermione could only assume were ingredients for the darkest of potions. Tapping his wand on the jars in a sequence similar to the one needed to enter Diagon Alley, all the jars disappeared and the shelves reassembled themselves into a door.

"You didn't really think that I kept those around to add charm to the room, did you?"

"Of course not," she said as she followed him through the door. "I always just thought they were to scare those of your students who were foolish enough to get detention with you."

Severus shot her a quick glance as the door shut and disappeared behind them. "No, that is the reason for my pleasant disposition. Not every student sees my office, after all." He tugged her around to face him again. "Now, where were we before we were so rudely interrupted? Yes, I remember."

Hermione only caught a brief glimpse of his feral grin before he once again pulled her into a searing kiss.

A/N: Again, I apologize for the wait. I have been working on the Winter Round of the SS/HG Gift Exchange. I do hope that you all enjoyed the chapter, though! I will post another as soon as I possibly can. Cheers!

Pain and Potions

Chapter 10 of 11

Hermione prepares for Harry's birthday party.

Disclaimer: I solemnly swear that I am up to no good. JK Rowling owns it all, but I promise to return her characters in "like new" condition when I am done with them.

Thanks go out to my beta, JuneW. She is absolutely priceless!

It had been nearly a week since she had left the castle. At this point, she had no desire to return, although she knew she would be forced to eventually. Her impromptu sabbatical thus far was not doing anyone any good. Not even herself.

She didn't even know how she was going to go back to her office. *He* would be there, taunting her... haunting her.

Why couldn't she let it go? The portrait was a constant reminder. But she *had* been able to cope. Hadn't she?

Barely.

It was purely because she had been entrusted with jobs that needed doing; people had been depending on her, and she'd dared not let them down. Not only had there been people depending on her, but in some scope it had been the entire Wizarding world.

Somewhere in the middle of all of that, those same people had failed to see that Minerva McGonagall had reached her breaking point and could no longer hold the pieces of her life together. The things that she could once balance were now shattered bits around her feet.

Her undoing had been the hiring of Severus Snape.

Minerva had only rehired Severus at the goading of Albus' portrait. The man was dead, but that didn't stop him from meddling in affairs that had nothing to do with him. Well, they involved Albus Dumbledore, the man, but they had nothing to do with a blasted portrait that contained merely a small fragment of the original's personality.

Portraits were not people. They were simply an imprint of the person they represented. A drop of Albus' blood mixed with the paint, then activated and sealed with an incantation. The only reason that Albus' portrait had known so much was that Albus had been anticipating his own death. He'd been preparing for it. He had spent

countless hours informing the portrait of his actions and plans for nearly two years.

The portrait had been her lover's one true confidant, the only one who'd known all of the man's plans. Albus had cleverly spelled the portrait not to spill the secrets until it hung in the Headmaster's (or Headmistress' as it were) office among all of the previous Headmasters and Headmistresses of Hogwarts.

Albus hadn't even trusted Minerva. Why hadn't he trusted her? That had hurt her almost as much as his death. The fact that the man whom she'd loved had been carefully planning for his death and preparing for it, had been a huge blow to her.

Now, looking back at all the things she'd been trying to juggle over the past few years, she could understand why she'd finally fallen apart. The meeting with Hermione had been the final straw.

After that disastrous discussion, Minerva had stormed out of her office and off to her quarters. When the portrait of Headmistress Glisp had come looking for her and had then admitted that she'd come at the request of portrait-Dumbledore, Minerva had had enough. She'd Summoned an overnight bag and, with a few slashes of her wand, filled it with items and clothing to last her for a couple of days... and then she'd left.

Now, she was wishing that she didn't have to go back. She wasn't ready yet to face Albus... or Snape for that matter.

Rationally, she could think through things and knew that she shouldn't blame Snape for Albus' death. However, the mind of a woman who had lost the love of her life was often clouded by emotions... and she was a Gryffindor, after all. In true Gryffindor fashion, she tended to wear her heart on her sleeve. She never had been a very good Occlumens.

The morning after she'd arrived at her Unplottable house just outside of Kirkwall, she'd sent off a letter to the Deputy Headmaster and explained that some urgent business had come up that required her attention.

Professor Flitwick, being the intelligent and clever Ravenclaw that he was known to be, had written back to Minerva, telling her to enjoy her holiday and to take all of the time she needed.

Minerva was half-tempted to send off a reply to him, wishing him luck and telling him to enjoy the position of Headmaster. It was by pure Scottish stubbornness that she refrained.

Finishing her dinner, she sent her dishes to the sink and stood from the table. She gripped her wand firmly in her hand and, with the concentration that could only belong to a master in the field of Transfiguration, her body shrunk down into the body of a tabby cat.

In this form, she didn't have to think, her feline brain wasn't as complex and therefore her emotions no longer overwhelmed her. Feeling that weight removed from her shoulders, she crept over to the rug in front of the fire, curled herself into ball, and fell asleep.

She would return to Hogwarts in the morning.

Hermione finished decanting the aquamarine potion into the flask. Once it was further cooled, she would pour it into the vials that she had sitting in the rack on the table. It had been just over a week since her last trip to the castle and since she'd last seen Severus Snape. And in those last several days, she found that she was missing him dearly.

She'd spent the night at the castle, of course... once Hermione had begun kissing Severus in his office, she had known that she'd be sleeping in the professor's bed that night. Well, sleep was such a relative term.

Her cheeks still flushed at the memory, and a sappy little smile appeared upon her face. She forced herself to ignore the small traces of discomfort that consistently accompanied the pleasant memories.

It was after allowing herself a few minutes of recollection that she shook her head and began to focus again on cleaning up the rest of the workspace.

Severus was set to be there at any moment and she needed to have the second potion ready for him. She quickly finished cleaning the first workspace, and then moved over to where a cauldron sat on the table with a Stasis Charm surrounding it. Waving her wand over the cauldron, she ended the spell and deftly Levitated the cauldron to hover over the now burning flames.

Hermione eyed the clock. It would take a bit of time for the potion to reach the necessary temperature. Once that happened, if Severus still wasn't here, then she would need to reapply the Stasis Charm. The potion would then keep at the necessary temperature for at least two hours before she needed to reheat the contents again. Although she really didn't wish to do that, as reheating too many times could drastically decrease the potency of the potion. She'd just wait for Severus to arrive before attempting to heat the potion, but it took nearly thirty minutes to heat the contents at the slow, even pace required for this concoction; she didn't wish to spend too much time on it.

She kept reminding herself that Severus Snape was rarely late.

Pulling a vial out of her pocket, she looked carefully at the hairs she had gathered several days ago. The hairs had come from Ron's bedroom upstairs. Not that he'd been staying here at Grimmauld Place since the incident at the Burrow several weeks ago, but it was *still* his room. Unlike when she had been a second-year brewing Polyjuice for the first time, Hermione was certain that these hairs were, in fact, human hairs. For one, the only cat at Grimmauld Place was Crookshanks, and one of the first things that Hermione had done when she had moved into the house was cast wards on all of the bedroom doors, excluding her own, that her familiar could not pass through. Crookshanks hadn't been in Ron's room. However, that didn't stop Hermione from inspecting the red hairs carefully until she was certain that they matched the hairs on Ronald's head in color, length, and thickness.

Using tweezers, she carefully removed three strands of hair and added them to the potion just as it started to bubble. It began emitting a red-hazed steam, and Hermione stirred it twelve times clockwise.

"Hermione!"

Hermione looked up from the cauldron she had just finished stirring, stepped away from the cauldron that she had been focusing on, and watched the bubbly redhead as she entered the potions lab. "Hi, Ginny."

Her friend came over and peered into the cauldron. "What are you brewing?"

"Oh, erm... it's just something that I made up for Severus," she answered. It was a semi-truthful answer, after all. "What are you doing here? I thought that you and Harry had plans tonight," she asked in an attempt to get the girl's mind off of the potion.

"Oh, we do. I just wanted to come in and make sure that you were actually going to come to Harry's birthday party at the Burrow tomorrow. You know that Harry would be devastated if you let this ordeal between you and Ron get in the way of his birthday."

"Don't forget the problems with your mother," Hermione said with a snort.

"Well, I've been clashing horns with my mum since my first words."

The cheeky grin plastered on her friend's face caused Hermione to giggle.

"Yes, she can be a bit..."

"Overbearing?"

"Yeah, that's the word."

Ginny smiled and put her arm around her friend, briefly. Then she sobered and said sincerely, "Hermione, I'm sorry that things didn't work out between you and my brother."

"I'm not sorry. I mean, I am... but I knew long ago that things wouldn't work out between us. Ron is better as a friend."

"Yeah, I have a feeling that if he'd had his wish and married you, then you wouldn't have wasted any time before sticking a ring through his nose and leading him around by it until the end of his days." Ginny looked thoughtful for a moment. "Not that there's anything wrong with that."

"No, but I would've been bored."

Ginny nodded. Silence fell between the two young women, each lost in thought. Finally, the redhead looked thoughtfully at Hermione. "Snape is a good match for you."

"He definitely keeps me on my toes."

"I'm serious, Hermione. I never liked the man much when he was our teacher. But he is smart and I think that you need someone that can challenge you on that level. Not that Ron isn't smart. It's just... you know."

Hermione grinned. "Yes, I know."

Ginny peered over the cauldron again and sniffed at the contents. "This smells vaguely familiar," she commented.

Hermione remained silent on the subject. She truly didn't want her friend to know what she was concocting, for then the inevitable question would be "why." She didn't need to worry, because it seemed that Ginny was merely trying to distract her before she pounced with her next question.

"How do you feel about him?"

"About Ron? I told you, he's my friend. Nothing more."

"No, Hermione. How do you feel about Snape?"

She looked up at her redheaded friend and thought about her answer carefully. "I don't know exactly," she finally said.

Ginny shook her head. "That's not an answer."

Hermione mulled the thoughts through her mind. Before the silence grew to be too thick, a voice from down the hall called, "Hermione, Snape is here!"

"Send him down!" Hermione called back.

"Ginny, hurry up, we're going to be late!" Harry hollered next.

"Oh, I'd better go. Have fun tonight, Hermione," Ginny said as she gave the cauldron one final curious look and walked towards the door. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Hermione laughed. "Is there anything you wouldn't do?"

"No, not really," Ginny said with a winning smile. Then she looked at her seriously. "I just don't want you to get hurt, Hermione."

"I know. Thanks."

Not more than two minutes later, Severus Snape was in there, giving the room a discriminating look.

"Hello," she greeted with a quickly growing smile.

The man, dressed in his customary black robes though of a much nicer cut and quality than his standard teaching attire moved to her side and bestowed a kiss on her waiting lips. Memories of their night together flooded her mind. She suddenly felt almost as if his hands and mouth were presently exploring the most intimate parts of her body just as he'd done the last time they'd been together. The sensations were so intense that Hermione couldn't help but wonder if he was using a form of Legilimency to share the images with her, or if it was her own mind becoming overwhelmed from being alone with him for the first time in nearly a week.

"A little bit of both," he muttered against her mouth.

Hermione pulled back from him, surprise abruptly halting the onslaught of sensation that had begun to consume her. "You're reading my mind?"

"You're as rudimentary in your explanation as Potter always was. Legilimency is not mind-reading."

"No, it's not, but you answered my question," she accused.

Severus smirked. "I merely anticipated your question based on your emotions, Hermione. There is a difference."

She playfully shoved his shoulder and moved away from him to go attend to her potion. "You're incorrigible."

"Yes, I believe that is one of the reasons why you fancy me, foolish woman."

Hermione wisely stayed quiet. At least he hadn't gone so far as to say that she loved him. She may be young, but she was smart enough not to confuse sex with love. She knew there was a difference between the tingly and besotted feeling that one often feels when they are initially infatuated with someone or at the start of a new relationship, versus that of real love that is deep and meaningful.

No, she simply quirked an eyebrow at him like he was so famous for doing, as if daring him to try to accuse her of such a thing.

He then turned his attention to her potion and gave it an appraising sniff. "The potion appears to be satisfactory, Miss Granger."

Was that an actual compliment from the snarly Potions professor? But she wisely chose not to comment on that aspect. "Thank you, Professor. Do you have the hairs for me?"

He pulled a small glass vial from his robes and handed it to her. Hermione wielded her wand and cast the necessary incantation over the brew, and then added the hairs. "Did you tell him what you needed them for? Or did you even tell him you were taking them?"

Severus snorted. "Of course, I told him. He says he looks forward to helping to bring Mr. Weasley down any way he possibly could."

"So, he'll be there tomorrow?"

"Yes."

Hermione smiled and turned her attention back to the potion, which had now turned a shocking shade of pink. Grabbing the stirring rod, she gave the potion several quick stirs until the color muted to a paler hue. She looked up to Severus for confirmation. He scrutinized the potion again and after giving it a small sniff, he nodded.

He walked over to a shelf on the far side of the room, grabbed a large vial to decant the mixture into, and brought it back to the worktable. "This isn't as strong as the Amortentia, of course, and as such the potion doesn't last as long. The benefit is that anyone can brew it for a group of people. If, for example, you had wanted to brew it for the entire class of Gryffindors from your year, all you would've had to do is add hair samples from each of your classmates at the final reheating stage and stated the incantation to seal them. Then all of them would have feelings for Mr. Weasley's would-be paramour," Severus lectured.

"And he'll know who he's infatuated with? Immediately?"

Severus nodded.

She waited for him to say something else, but Severus remained silent. Therefore, Hermione went about cleaning up. As she scrubbed out the cauldron, Severus sealed the vial and then he moved to stopper the now cooled vials of the aquamarine potion.

"Have you heard from Minerva?"

"Yes, she arrived back to the castle this morning as if nothing had happened. Just back from a short holiday, she'd said."

"Molly invited her to Harry's party."

"Then she'll likely be there."

Hermione found herself feeling exceedingly discomfited by this fact, but she knew that there was no point in voicing her concerns. Severus was already aware of her feelings and the situation.

"Finished?"

"Yes, I believe ... oh." Hermione gasped as she found herself back in comforting, strong arms.

"It's time to leave," he whispered into her ear, the tickling sensation running directly from her ear down to the flutter in her stomach.

Hermione shook her head slightly, her mind too clouded to quite find the words to speak.

Severus chuckled softly, kissed her neck, and then lightly licked her ear lobe. "Workbenches are not all that comfortable. Then there is always the hazard of knocking equipment over or getting slivers in your arse. And I'll be damned if I am going to have you in a house that belongs to Potter and once belonged to Black."

She swallowed and took a breath as she tried to gather her hopelessly scattered wits. "I just need to grab my bag."

Just as they were leaving the room, Severus grabbed the finished potion vials and handed them to her to put in the pockets of her robes so they wouldn't be forgotten tomorrow. And with that, they left to retrieve her things.

Several hours later, Hermione woke up curled up against Severus' chest. Then she allowed her mind to wander enough to fully appreciate her present situation. As with any woman who was caught up in a new romance, she found herself constantly thinking about how things were going, where they were going, and if she was even doing this properly. It wasn't as if she'd had loads of experience.

Although she knew enough to know that things were moving along rather quickly between herself and Severus. She liked the man, cared for him, but other than the few times she'd spoken with him, she didn't feel that she truly *knew* him. As a result, she felt that the waters were quickly rising above her head.

Sex was nice, but she found herself wondering why she'd been so eager to jump into bed with him the moment that the opportunity had presented itself. (Okay, sex was better than "nice," but that was beside the point.) The issue of sex was starting to confuse her. Her only excuse was that it was so easy to become swept up in the passion. And surprisingly enough, when it came to matters in the bedroom, Severus Snape was passionate.

The problem was that last week when she'd gone to speak with him after her encounter with McGonagall, once he'd begun kissing her, there had been no further discussion. At all.

The next morning, when she'd been preparing to leave, it had been very awkward between them. He'd said little more than that he would be by Grimmauld Place before Harry's party to help her complete the potion. It wasn't until later in the week when he'd finally sent her an owl that he'd finalized his plans with her.

He came to see her, they finished bottling the final potion, they'd left and gone directly to his home. A ramshackled, rundown house in a town that she'd not even caught the name of. He'd led her into the house through the back door and into the kitchen. Next he rushed her through a sitting room and then up a concealed stairway before she could even get a proper look at her surroundings.

Even now, she couldn't get a proper view of things. The sun had long since set, and the only light was the sliver of the moon that shone through a crack in the draperies. She shifted slightly in the bed and looked up at the man she was currently nestled against. Hermione could barely make out the lines of his face in the shadows.

She shifted again.

This time, when she moved, she felt him shift. Another moment later, he murmured a soft, "Not sleeping?"

"I did. Well, for a bit."

"Hmm."

They were both silent for several minutes and Hermione was worried that the stilted discomfort was slowly beginning to seep in between them. Before she began to fret too much, however, Severus began slowly running his hand over her hair, which had been relieved of the elastic it had been pulled into earlier that day.

After several more minutes, she heard an exasperated sigh from the man who was now acting as her pillow. "Say whatever it is you are thinking, Hermione."

"There are too many jumbled thoughts to put into words."

"Try."

It was a simple word, but she could hear the growing irritation behind it. Hermione contemplated her words carefully before she spoke. Her hand was still resting firmly on his heart, but she was unwilling to lift her head to look at his shadowed face.

"Where do you see this going?" she finally asked.

His body grew rigid. "It's a bit early in our dealings with one another to be contemplating our relationship, don't you think?"

At this, she did lift her head up from his chest and looked at him. "Well, yes... I mean... no." She sighed. "I don't know."

"That much is obvious," he snarled.

Hermione pushed herself up even further in hopes of being able to get a better look at his face in the dark room. "Don't be that way," she snapped back. "I'm trying to explain this to you."

"Oh, yes, and you're doing a marvelous job. Well done, Hermione."

"You are a git. Did you know that?"

"My dear, I have been cultivating that image since before you were weaned from your mother's teat. I am quite aware of how others perceive me." She was certain that if she could see his eyes clearly in the darkness that he would be glaring daggers at her right now.

Hermione closed her eyes and gritted her teeth. How was she ever supposed to get a word in edgewise if he constantly turned everything into an argument? Was it some sort of defense...

Her eyes snapped opened and tried again to readjust to the darkness. A defense mechanism. He was just trying to protect himself... from her.

"Severus..."

"I think it's time that you left."

She felt as if she'd been slapped, and she moved herself further away from him so that they were no longer touching. "I haven't had many relationships, Severus."

He snorted.

"I'm not very good at this sort of thing. I just wanted to know..."

"Get out. I don't care what you want to know," he said, cutting her off.

It was his last words that caused the sickening turn of her stomach to spark quickly into anger.

"Well, I guess that answers my question anyway," she spat out with as much venom as she could as she pushed herself off the bed. It took her longer than she would've liked to gather her scattered clothing and to find her wand... especially in the dark. The entire time, she noted, his face was turned towards the wall. Before she left the room, she waited, for any sign that he wanted her to stay.

When he continued to ignore her, she grabbed her bag and left. She made her way out of the house nearly as quickly as she had arrived.

A/N: I know, that was a terribly lengthy delay. I truly am sorry. Among other things, I was struck with a horrible bout of writer's block. However, I do think that my muse has finally returned. *crosses fingers*

The next chapter is started, though. Thank you all so much for reading! :)

Convenient Truths

Chapter 11 of 11

Ron wonders why he and Hermione have yet to start a romantic relationship and he takes drastic measures to find out.



Thank you to JuneW who beta read this with lightening fast speed. I am eternally grateful for her patience and her advice. :)

Disclaimer: I solemnly swear that I am up to no good. JK Rowling owns it all, but I promise to return her characters in 'like-new' condition when I am done with them.

And after an extremely long wait, for which I apologize profusely, I give you the final chapter (with the epilogue included) of "A Slip of the Tongue." Thank you to all of my readers for your patience and encouragement. Merry Christmas!

Severus stared at the ceiling. He ignored the small niggling in his head that was urging him to get out of bed and follow the woman down the stairs.

Moments later, he heard the back door slam shut loudly. He wondered if she'd used another charm to get the sound to echo through the house deafeningly or if it was

simply a sign of her anger.

There was no way that her anger could match his own. Although, whether he was angrier with her or with himself, he couldn't say for sure.

It shouldn't have surprised him that she was questioning the direction of their relationship. It certainly wasn't the first time that she'd done so, but Severus viewed it as the same thing as questioning his character. What did she think he was going to do? Drop her a note in a few weeks to tell her he was bored?

He wasn't like that and, quite frankly, he didn't like that she had insinuated otherwise. However, her treatment of him was no more than what he had expected from lowering his standards and...

And what?

Was it really the issue that he had chosen to see someone so much younger than himself? Or worse, had chosen to see a member of the Terrible Trio?

What in the name of Merlin had he been thinking? Of course, Minerva had been right; there had been only one way that this liaison could have ended.

The moment Hermione had begun raising questions... questioning him and then going so far as to insult him... well, from that moment on, he knew that he was better off to destroy whatever it was that was beginning to grow in their new relationship... before he knew what it was that he had and before he grew to care too much for her.

Besides, he was only living up to his image. It could hardly be a surprise to the girl.

And she was just a *girl*. Only a year or two out of school.

This entire fiasco had all just been one giant mistake.

Realizing that his thoughts were now only going around in circles and satisfied with his own reasoning, Severus pushed himself out of bed, grabbed a robe and his wand, and went downstairs in search of tea... and something else to occupy his mind. There was a new article in *Potions Monthly* that he had bookmarked to read, or he could always brew. It was nearing the full moon, and before he knew it Lupin would be pounding on his door requesting Wolfsbane.

As he entered his kitchen and set about preparing a pot of tea, Severus tried to ignore the leaded guilt that was currently sitting in his gut.

He realized he would never be able to concentrate on reading, so fresh tea and a potion to brew would have to silence the nagging voice in his head which sounded oddly like Minerva McGonagall. Perhaps he could drown his conscience with the tea.

And when that failed, there was always firewhisky.

~*~

Hermione spent the rest of the night sitting in the dark living room at her parents' house. She hadn't wanted to return to Grimmauld Place for fear that Harry and Ginny would see her and start asking questions.

When she'd arrived at her parents' house, she'd quietly let herself in through the back door and into the kitchen where she made herself at home at the table. As if on cue, her mother came down the stairs and joined her.

Diane Granger hadn't needed to be incredibly perceptive to figure out that something was wrong. Before long, Hermione was telling her mother everything that had happened, from the disastrous event at Harry and Ginny's engagement party to the resulting hearing. She complained about the way that Professor McGonagall had treated her and admitted to the equally nasty things that she had said in return. She whined about her confusing relationship with Ron and her even more confusing relationship with Snape. Hermione found herself revealing truths that she'd not even fully realized herself, like the fact that she hated her dead-end job and that she no longer felt as if she fit in at Harry and Ginny's place.

Reflecting hours later, she decided that unloading her burdens onto her mother was very much like taking Veritaserum mixed with elf-made wine. The truths that were spoken were more shocking to her than they could ever be to anyone else.

She ended by telling her mother what had happened earlier that evening.

As mothers often do, Hermione's mum had lent a sympathetic ear and fed her daughter chocolate biscuits to go with a pot of soothing tea. She'd then given Hermione an afghan and left her in the living room for the night.

Sleep found her early that morning when her mind finally stopped puzzling over the events of her life from the last several weeks.

"What are your plans for today?" Hermione's mother asked at the breakfast table.

"Harry's birthday party is this afternoon," she said before taking a bite of toast.

Mrs. Granger seemed to think for a moment before asking, "Why don't we go shopping today, instead? I'm sure that Harry would understand if you weren't there."

"Harry is one of my best friends, Mum. I really do need to be there."

"We can make it short shopping trip then," she said with a coaxing smile.

And Hermione couldn't say no.

Besides, a shopping trip was a nice distraction, though she knew that her mother was intending on using the excursion to impart advice and wisdom to her daughter. It was, after all, another thing that mothers did best.

While they were out, Hermione didn't mention that she'd been so childish as to plot revenge against both Ron and Molly Weasley and had planned to carry through with it during Harry's party later that day. But as the morning continued to slug along at a snail's pace, Hermione realized that she no longer wished to have her revenge. She had no desire to attend Harry's party with the singular goal of humiliating her ex-boyfriend and She Who Ruled The Burrow. Hermione only needed to be there to keep Severus from doing anything that could land him back in Azkaban.

If he was even still planning on being there.

She thought of the potion vials that were sitting in her bag and decided that once she got back home to Grimmauld Place, she'd dump the potions down the drain. She didn't know if the potions could be poured into the pipes of a Muggle house or not, but she certainly didn't wish to risk causing a problem.

~*~

Severus swept his hand across the table, knocking all of his ingredients onto the floor in one fell swoop. He had just ruined the Wolfsbane potion he'd been brewing. It was his third attempt at brewing that potion since he'd pulled himself out of bed hours earlier.

This was unlike him.

Brewing potions was always what he did when he needed to relax, when he required his mind to focus intently on something else... anything else. It was an avoidance tactic, this was true, but it was a highly effective one. One that had served him well for many years.

The art of potion-making was the closest thing to caring for a child that a man like Severus Snape could imagine. He would pour all of his energy into that potion. Whether it was anger, frustration, or purely sexual tension, it didn't matter. Severus had learned early on that a good potioneer was one who gave everything that they had to their brews, and so he'd learned how to channel his emotions into them.

But for whatever reason, today he couldn't get the bushy-haired woman out of his head. And even though his mind was telling him that he should be more angry with her now that he'd ruined over 100 Galleons worth of ingredients because of *her*, he couldn't bring himself to actually blame her.

The truth of the matter was he knew that he'd been an arse. A complete and utter git.

Severus placed his palms flat on the work table as he pushed his weight against the surface. If someone else had been in the room with him, they would have seen the anger and frustration emanating from his body as if it was crackling sparks.

With what felt like exceedingly little effort, Severus tossed the large work table over and spent a few brief moments enjoying the sounds of the few remaining ingredients, the cutting stone, his best knife, and large silver cauldron...still full of the already ruined Wolfsbane potion...as they clattered and splashed against the stone floor of his basement workroom.

Not even caring to assess the damage, Severus turned on his heel and climbed the steep stairs to his kitchen. He took pleasure in slamming the door to his workroom behind him.

Although that, too, made him think of her.

He pulled his wand from his sleeve and flicked it at the door, and watched as it opened again on its own accord and slammed back rather loudly, only to again open and slam shut again.

It was rather satisfying.

And in spite of himself, he felt the corner of his mouth quirk up into a small smirk.

Glancing at the clock on the wall, he came to a decision, making his way up the stairs to change his clothes. He had a party to attend after all.

He didn't even bother to stop the charm that was currently slamming the door to his workroom.

~*~

Hermione arrived at the Burrow, wearing a new dress and new shoes, courtesy of her mother's insistence on a short shopping trip and lunch before Hermione had to leave for the party.

She walked into the sitting room, to a frosty greeting by Mrs. Weasley. Grabbing a glass of punch, she made her way to the far side of the room and placed her purse on the floor next to her chair. After a quick glance around the room to ensure that no one was staring at her, she cast a discreet revealing spell on the contents of her glass before taking a sip.

Sure, it was considered to be rude to do such a thing, but after her last visit to the Weasley family home, no one would be able to blame her. (Though, she was still likely to receive some nasty looks.)

And as if on cue, someone sat on the stool next to her chair and whispered in her ear, "I saw what you just did, Hermione."

"Hallo, Remus."

"Hermione," he said with a nod of his head.

She smiled as she looked into his tired, pale eyes. He was a constant, a familiar face that was very much like a favorite blanket. She'd had it since childhood and it provided a sense of comfort and security like little else.

"I haven't seen you since the engagement party." His words were cautious as he scrutinized her reaction to his statement. When Hermione refrained from reacting, Remus visibly relaxed.

"I have been busy and..." Hermione looked around the room. "I honestly didn't think that I would be all that welcome with everyone. I only came today because Harry was rather insistent."

"Well, he grew up without a family. To him, you and Ron are his family."

"And you, Remus. You're very important to him too."

Lupin silently nodded. He wrapped his arms around himself as if he'd felt a chill run through the room. His demeanor was suddenly solemn.

Hermione wondered if he was saddened by the idea of being Harry's family. Then, she realized that such thoughts easily reminded him of the deaths of Remus' closest friends.

"How are things with you and Tonks?" Hermione asked.

He dropped his arms back to his lap and Hermione decided that this was easily a safe topic of conversation.

"Things are going well, I think. Tonks is... easy to love, but I often find myself feeling very..." He took a breath and sighed. "Inadequate."

She looked down at his hands which were now fidgeting with one of the buttons on the front of his robes. For the briefest of moments, Hermione felt herself wondering what it would be like to be with him. To have someone as warm and caring as Remus Lupin to hold her at night and to make her feel loved. To feel his soft hands as they touched her skin. And then she focused on his final word. *Inadequate*.

So like Severus. Hermione instantly felt the uneasiness, tension, guilt, and outright worry as they grew in her chest and made her heart feel heavy. "Remus, when was it that you knew that you were in love with her?"

Remus looked over to where his pink-haired girlfriend was currently chatting away with Fleur, and then his amber gaze came to rest on Hermione. "Tonks is so joyful and secure and full of life. I don't know if there was ever a time when I didn't love her. She was a perfect counterbalance for my moods."

Hermione smiled, but didn't reply. She allowed the silence to settle between them as she took another sip of punch and watched the activity in the room. Her attention was drawn back to Remus when he spoke in a reluctant tone.

"The last thing about you that I heard was that you were seeing Severus."

"I was."

"Were..."

Hermione heard the pause as he waited for her to explain. She didn't want to explain. Hell, she didn't even know how to begin. And she felt all of these thoughts as they skittered across her face; judging by the look in Remus' eyes, he recognized them for what they were.

"Are.... Were.... I don't think that I know anymore," she finally answered.

Remus stood up from his chair and held out his hand to her. "Let's go take a walk."

Hermione grasped his hand as she stood. She followed him out of the sitting room and out into the yard which was surprisingly empty in the hot July sun. *Well, maybe not all that surprising*, she acknowledged. There weren't nearly as many guests today as there had been for the engagement party a few weeks ago. Also, many guests were inside so they could see the newest home improvement. Mr. Weasley was rather proud of the "air freezing machine" he had received as a gift from Harry earlier that summer. He did like to use his new toys.

"What has happened between you and Severus?" Remus asked as they walked towards a grove of trees on the far end of the property.

"We were at his house last night, having a perfectly pleasant evening, when somehow...in the matter of a few minutes...I found myself being thrown out of his house and into the street. I'm not even quite sure how it happened."

Her companion mumbled something under his breath which Hermione believed was, "Why am I not surprised?"

Instead, he turned to her and said louder, "What happened before that? Before you wound up on your arse in the street."

She took a deep breath and sighed, leaning against one of the trees in the shaded grove. "I somehow managed to ask him where our relationship was going," she finished in a hurried rush.

Remus narrowed his eyes at her. "Is that so?"

She was surprised that he had even managed to understand her. "Don't even start with me, Remus. I know that it's too soon for talking about things like that. We are just getting to know one another and we've only seen each other a handful of times since the engagement party."

"If you knew it was too soon, Hermione, then why did you say anything?"

"I didn't mean to! He asked me what I was thinking and I foolishly stumbled my way into it!" She pushed herself away from the tree and began walking again. "And then he quickly became nasty and next thing I knew, he told me to leave."

"May I ask what you were doing before this argument occurred?" Remus asked as they slowly began walking towards the house together.

"We had been sleeping."

"Ah. My fault for asking, I suppose."

"I know, it was too soon. But I am afraid that I wasn't thinking all that clearly and then I suddenly began questioning my feelings, his feelings, and it was all a jumbled mess in my head. It still is."

He nodded. "And forgetting all of the other things, how do you feel about him?"

"I like him, Remus. I mean, *I really* like him. He's intelligent, witty, and I adore his smile. Not that he smiles all that much, but I have seen him do it a time or two and it positively melts my insides. And even when he's being a complete arse, I enjoy his company." She paused and thought for a moment. "Except when he's shutting me out. Which, I got the distinct impression last night that *that* was what he was doing. Pushing me away to protect himself."

"That sounds like a very Severus-like thing to do."

"Yes."

"So, what do you plan to do about it, Hermione?"

She sighed again and looked at the Burrow where there was now a tall, thin man dressed in black robes with long, black, greasy looking hair, standing in front of the door. With him was a younger man, with green robes and white-blond hair. As she watched them, the older man looked towards her and she felt completely lost. "I don't know, Remus. I'm torn between telling him that he's right and that I think it's best that I go spend some time growing up. Or if I should tell him that he can't scare me off so easily."

At that moment, Severus looked back towards the door and entered the Weasley home.

Hermione and Remus walked in silence for a moment more, then he said, "You will make the right decision."

She turned to him and smiled. "Thank you, Remus. And Remus, you are anything but *adequate*."

~*~

Severus stood on the doorstep of the ramshackle old house with Draco by his side as his eyes began to survey the yard. There she was, walking with none other than Remus Lupin.

She looked comfortable, and at peace. And as a pair they looked incredibly...cozy. Severus wondered what Remus' multicolored-haired witch would think about that. He took a moment's pleasure in thinking about the irrational ways that Nymphadora Tonks was likely to act, before the front door was opened and he was welcomed into the house by Arthur Weasley.

He walked in and looked at the other people in the magically enlarged main floor. The house was nearly full of redheads, when the yard was nearly empty. But Severus quickly realized why they were all inside, as he felt himself nearly shiver from the cold breeze that seemed to be blowing from a Muggle-looking box sitting in one of the front windows.

And in his long black robes, he could appreciate the coolness of the house versus the heat outside.

July and August always were miserable months.

Somebody tell me again why I even bothered to show up here today? He didn't say that aloud, of course, but damn, he certainly thought it. He'd had no intention of coming to the party at all when he'd risen from his bed hours before. (Hell, it seemed like he'd been up for days.) And in that time, he'd accomplished nothing. He'd ruined potion after potion, he'd not been able to focus on a single article and he'd nearly fallen asleep in his plate of bangers and toast. At that point, he'd decided he should go back to bed but found that he could not even tolerate being in the room. It smelled of her. Her perfume lingered in the air and on the sheets, and all he could think of was how

abruptly he'd ejected her from his house and from his bed.

He wasn't even sure why now. He knew what he'd been thinking, for certain, but he also realized that sometimes the thoughts that hit us when we first awaken are not the rational ones that should be acted upon.

At this moment, as he was standing in the Weasleys' living room, his anger and hurt began to bubble up. He was angry with Hermione for making him feel obligated to attend a party honoring Harry Bloody Potter. Severus wanted to walk up to Minerva, who was pleasantly nattering with Molly about God only knew what, to tell her what he really thought of her and to quit his job. He wanted to do far more than simply cuff Ronald Weasley on the head for the way he'd treated and had ultimately hurt Hermione. Severus wanted to scream at Hermione for taking him at his word and actually leaving him last night. And finally, he wanted to take her in his arms and kiss her senseless.

He turned to Draco to tell him that this entire thing was pointless and that they were leaving. Instead, he was interrupted when one of the Weasley twins God only knew which one it was smiled at him in greeting and handed him and Draco each a glass of pumpkin juice just as Hermione and her companion entered the house.

"Good to see you here, Professor," Fred or George said jovially. "We're going to say a toast to Harry."

Severus groaned. It was the last thing that he wanted to do and there was a very real possibility that Hermione had already slipped her potions into the juice.

As if hearing this thought, the young witch walked up to him and whispered, "I've decided not to go through with it. You and Draco can leave... but please stay for the toasts. Despite what you think, I know that Harry would like you both to be here."

She stepped away from him silently. For whatever reason, he stayed.

~*~

As soon as she stepped away from Snape, Hermione felt a cup being forced into her hands as well, and she looked up and smiled at George... until she noticed that her cup held water. She shot a worried look back at her now open bag which was still on the floor in the corner; she could clearly see the vial of Babbling Beverage Concentrate. The vial was full and she breathed a sigh of relief, but she wondered why George had bothered giving her a different drink if he hadn't poured the potion into the pumpkin juice. He nodded to her cup, grinned, and mouthed something that she couldn't understand. She shot him a puzzled look just as they heard Arthur clang his glass with a knife, calling attention all in the room.

"I wanted to thank you all for coming here today," Arthur said. "Harry Potter has been an integral part of all of our lives. In the years that we've known him, he has become another member of our family. And he is about to become an even closer member of our family when he marries our daughter this Christmas." Arthur paused and smiled at Harry and Ginny.

"But we aren't here today to celebrate that joyous occasion," the Weasley patriarch continued. "We are here to celebrate Harry. It hasn't been very long since he helped lead us into our final battle against Voldemort and his Death Eaters and when Harry single-handedly brought down the Dark Lord himself. This birthday marks an important time for our friend. It is the start of the first year that Harry Potter will be able to live a life without being treated like the miserable offshoot of a disgraced family, and a time when he will no longer have to live in fear of an evil Dark wizard with the desire to kill him." Then Arthur smiled. "He'll only have to worry about treating our Ginny as she deserves, and the repercussions from his soon-to-be in-laws if he doesn't."

Arthur raised his glass and finished by saying, "To Harry."

"To Harry," the majority of the people crowded in the house said in unison, and then they sipped from their cups.

Even Severus and Draco drank to the toast, though Hermione doubted that they were truly drinking to Harry. It was more likely that Severus was miming the actions of everyone else so that he could leave as discreetly as possible.

She didn't realize that George was still standing near her until she heard him whisper, "Now is when the fun begins."

Hermione whipped her head around and stared at him in surprise. "What did you do?" she hissed.

"Oh, you'll see. Let's just say that we found something much more beneficial than the Babbling Beverage that you came here prepared to inflict people with. Still, the love potion that you had intrigued us and we could tell that it was specially designed with specific people in mind, so we thought we'd slip that in too just to see what would happen."

"What? George! I decided not to go through with any of that," Hermione said as loudly as she dared without drawing attention to them.

"Yeah, we kind of figured that. So, we thought we'd do it for you. No guilt and all of that."

God, that mischievous grin on his face is growing annoying! she thought. "What, exactly, did you do?" she asked, instead, in a tone that bore no mistake that she was deadly serious and that she was on the verge of losing the final remnants of her control.

"It's something new that we created, a little potion that we like to call the Inconvenient Truth Serum," George said proudly. "It's not quite like Veritaserum which will make someone answer you a bunch of questions. Nah. With our Inconvenient Truth Serum, the drinker will simply spout two or three secret truths to someone before it wears off. This was our first chance to test it on a wide variety of people. We had to take advantage of that. Look, Hermione, I think that our first victim is about to reveal something."

Hermione looked on in horror as she watched Minerva McGonagall approach Molly and say, "I have always found you to be an obnoxious, loud-mouthed, bossy cow who didn't know how to keep her legs together, and I feel the need to tell you that what you did to Hermione a few weeks back to be unforgivable and absolutely appalling."

And that was just the beginning. Within moments, after the initial shock had worn off, people were approaching each other and revealing their deepest secrets. Most of the secrets told were some of their vilest thoughts about people who were their family and had been friends.

George stood stock still with his mouth gaping open and a horrified look in his eyes. This obviously hadn't been what the twins had planned.

"You and Fred must not keep very many nasty secrets from each other, do you?" she asked him snidely.

"Er... no."

"Don't you have some way to stop this?"

George shot her a worried look and shook his head. "It should wear-off very quickly."

For everyone's sake, she hoped that he was right. She didn't hear most of what was being said in the large room as she watched the lives of her friends be turned upside down by their words. When she saw Minerva move on from Molly to Severus, Hermione's heart fell into her stomach, but she couldn't stop herself from moving closer to hear.

"I hate you, Severus," the older witch said. "I hate you for what you did to Albus. I don't care if he asked you to kill him. I don't care if it was only your devotion to him that made you do it. I hate that you took him from me. But even more than that, I hate him for leaving me like that. For not telling me that he was dying and for not confiding his deepest plans to me." Tears were streaming down Minerva's face. "And I hate him for hurting you the way he did. For the way that he manipulated and coerced you into carrying out his most vile and horrid plans."

Hermione stood in silent awe as Minerva sagged into Severus' chest and sobbed.

His arms came up around the old woman and soothed her with soft shushes and reassurances. "It's all right, Minerva," he said softly. "I hate you too." And Minerva gave a soft laugh as she hugged Severus tighter.

Which led Hermione to ask George, "Why isn't Severus saying anything else to her?"

He snorted. "Do you think we're stupid? We didn't give Snape or Malfoy the potion."

Hermione wasn't sure if she was happy about this revelation or saddened by it. She didn't have much time to think about it though before she saw Ron move away from his mum. The Burrow's queen had just been berating him for being such a disappointment first for dosing Hermione with the Veritas serum a few weeks ago, and then for pursuing someone like Hermione in the first place.

Hermione could only imagine what Molly would say next. She poked George in the side and told him to watch as Ron walked directly to Draco Malfoy and kissed him.

"Oh my God." Hermione looked with surprised eyes at Severus and then back at the now lip-locked Ron and Draco. "Severus!"

George turned to her and clapped her on the back. "Oh, Hermione, that is priceless. Well played!"

"But I didn't... He wasn't supposed to... Severus!"

Severus, meanwhile, was now pulling the two young men apart. Draco looked surprised, while Ron was still trying to get close enough to kiss him again.

Before Hermione could get any answers, Molly had stormed across the room and was again screaming at her youngest son. At this point, Hermione actually was feeling sorry for Ron.

She walked closer to Severus. "What happened? You said that he'd just profess his love for him, not that he'd try to snog him senseless."

"I don't know enough about the other potion that they ingested. None of them are acting as if they've consumed a Babbling Beverage."

"They didn't. It was some invention of Fred and George's. They are calling it Inconvenient Truth Serum."

"Of course it would have something to do with those two morons. How long does the potion last? Did they say?"

"George said that each person will reveal two to three truths to someone before it wears off. But instead I'm seeing people tell a few truths to one person, and then move on to the next person, and the next it's not wearing off."

"Where is a natural disaster when you need one?" Severus mumbled under his breath. "And did *George* tell you why you and I aren't currently professing our deepest secrets to all and sundry?"

"Yes. He and Fred were wise enough not to dose us or Draco. I think that they value their lives and careers too much for that."

"Mm. I believe that the problem with your previous beau is that he really does have a hidden infatuation for Draco."

And Hermione laughed. The very thought was so amusing, so ridiculous, so absolutely ludicrous.... And, oh God, it was probably true. For whatever reason, this made her laugh even harder.

Unfortunately this drew attention to her Molly's attention. It appeared, by the look in the woman's eyes, that Molly had a third little something that she wanted to say and that Hermione was the perfect target.

Apparently, Hermione wasn't the only one to recognize that she was about to fall under attack by the Weasley matriarch. By the time Molly said a rather loud, "You!" while pointing at Hermione's chest, several heads were turned towards them and conversations had stopped.

If she hadn't been gearing up for the sure-to-be loud shouting match to come, Hermione would've been impressed by the fact that Molly's face was nearly the same shade of red as her hair. Instead the brunette was more concerned about what to say to the woman to finally put her in her place once and for all.

But she didn't have to. Like the knight in black shining armor that she was always certain that he could be (though she never would admit that to anyone else), Severus stepped between them.

"Do not even think of setting your nasty claws into Miss Granger, Molly," the Slytherin growled. "She is a feisty and powerful woman who has more intelligence and wit than you could ever even dream of possessing. She would eviscerate you in only a few moments." He turned to Hermione, grabbed her arm, and began to lead her to the door. "That is a warning, Molly. Not a threat."

Hermione stumbled after him, mildly surprised at the way he had just spoken about her. "Wait," she said. "I need my bag."

Severus stopped as Hermione relieved herself of his grip and went back to the corner of the room where her bag was. As she walked back to Severus, she saw both Ginny and Remus smiling at her reassuringly. She joined Severus by the door and took his arm again.

"Is Draco coming with us?" she asked.

"I believe that he will be able to take care of himself," Severus answered while nodding towards Draco and Ron, who were both engaged in what appeared to be a rather intimate conversation.

"Ah. Then, shall we?"

Severus nodded and led the way out of the house... leaving the much calmer but still somewhat chaotic house behind them.

~*~

Moments after leaving the Burrow, Hermione found herself on a familiar looking back stoop the same stoop she'd been on less than twenty-four hours before, when she'd arrived at Severus' home. The memories of what had occurred in the house the night before were fresh, as were the wounds, but Hermione knew that she now had her chance to repair the damage inflicted and it might be the only chance she ever got. She just didn't know where to start.

He pulled away from her to unlock the back door.

Silently, she followed him through the door and into the kitchen, where she stood still, staring at him. Her humor from the events at the Burrow was quickly slipping away.

Severus, for his part, wasn't looking her at all, but instead busily setting up a tray of tea things.

Slam!

Hermione jumped. "What was that?"

Severus said nothing, but pulled his wand and waved it in the direction where the noise had come.

"Is someone else here?"

"No."

It was presently a warm summer afternoon and there was no draft in the house. She smirked when she thought of the mindset Severus must have been in to have ~~cast~~^{er} Door Slamming Charm.

Severus waved his wand again and Levitated a tray and began to walk towards the sitting room. "Come. It's time for tea."

Hermione followed him into the sitting room and sat on the sofa while Severus poured the tea. She busied herself by adding milk to her tea... it didn't busy her very long. A splash of milk and then another, a quick stir with her spoon and she was done. Finally she could either keep her mouth occupied by drinking said tea, or she could quit stalling and deal with the giant pink elephant in the room.

"I'm glad that you came today, Severus."

"It appeared that you didn't need me," he replied with a sniff. "Though it was almost ~~enjoyable~~."

She smiled and took a sip of her tea. "I notice that you said 'almost.' You'll have to thank Draco for me."

He said nothing, but he pulled a small bottle out of his robes and placed it on the tea tray.

"What is that?"

"A new variation of Veritaserum that I've been working on."

Panic began to fill her as she looked between the bottle and the cup of tea in her hand. It took every ounce of control for her to keep from dropping the cup onto the floor. "So, you decided to douse me up with your sample brew so you could harass me further?" she asked, each syllable louder than the first.

"No."

"No? Then what are you doing? Attempting to threaten me?" She placed her cup and saucer onto the tray with a clatter.

"If you would forgo the hysterics, Hermione, you would have the chance to hear that I am offering the chance for you to question me."

Hermione snorted. "And then you will proceed to tell me whatever you want while Occluding the potion. I did rather well in Potions class ~~Professor~~, if you'll recall."

"If you would have listened to what I said, *Miss Granger*, you would know that I said that this is a 'new variation' of Veritaserum. I had been working on it for several years, but after your experience with the house-elf wine a few weeks back, I've had a breakthrough. There is no Occluding this variation." He sat back in his chair as if to study her. "In fact, unlike traditional Veritaserum, this potion can be absorbed through the skin. There is no spitting it out, or stopping oneself from swallowing. And once skin contact has been made, no amount of handwashing will render it inert."

Hermione listened raptly. Was he truly offering himself to her for examination? "What's the catch? What do you want in return?"

"Nothing. I only wish for you to listen to what I have to say."

"You're a Slytherin. Do you really expect me to believe that?"

"You just said it. I'm a Slytherin. Which means that I am cunning, and I have multiple angles and multiple reasons for the things that I do and the way that I choose to do them. Just because you don't fully know all of those reasons does not mean that I am lying to you now. It simply means that I have decided that this is the best course of action for me in order to secure what I want."

"And what do you want?"

He picked up the bottle and handed it to her. "Don't you think that is a question best asked once it's been administered?"

Hermione took the bottle from his hands. "But what's to prevent you from talking your way around and twisting every sentence simply so you don't have to blurt out any truths?"

"Nothing. Except that it's easy to tell when someone is doing that simply by what they say. If you don't like my answers, you simply have to ask for me to be more concise and I will do my best to accommodate you.

"And, I cannot lie."

She knew that this statement wasn't exactly true, however. The problem with Veritaserum was that if a person knew that they were under the influence of the potion, then they could carefully avoid direct answers by the way that they answered the questions. It had been that way when she'd been under the influence of it. However, he was right. At least she'd be able to tell that was what he was doing. And sometimes that told just as much as the words.

She took the bottle from his hands, carefully opened it, and placed a drop of the potion on Severus' outstretched hand. It instantly vanished through his skin. If she hadn't been worried of a bit of the potion rubbing off on her, she'd have touched the skin to see if it even felt a bit damp.

"How long does it last?" she asked.

"Fifteen minutes."

"That's not very long."

"Another dose can be given, but I would rather not have to do that."

"It was just an observation." She readjusted herself in her seat. "Okay. What are your feelings for me?" she asked baldly.

"You don't beat around the bush, do you?"

"Gryffindor. Remember?"

"How could I forget?"

"And you are attempting to hedge the question, Severus. I'll ask you again: What are your feelings for me?"

"I find you to be clever, witty, and enjoyable to be around. I had not given you much more than a passing thought up until the night that you spent the majority of the evening in my potions lab. However, from that point on I have not been able to eject you from my mind." He paused for a moment before his next words and took another

sip from his tea. "I can easily see myself with you for a very long time."

"Then why did you throw me out of your house last night?"

"You mean, why did I throw you out of my bed, don't you?"

"You're avoiding the question, Severus. But fine. Why did you throw me out of your bed?"

"You began treading on a subject that I felt was far too soon to contemplate."

"That's not the only reason. I knew it was too soon, but sometimes we can't stop ourselves from wondering. And that's still no reason to treat me the way that you did."

"You're right. It wasn't."

"Then why?"

He said nothing, but Hermione noted that his face was growing paler than usual for him.

"Severus, answer my question or be sick all over your sitting room floor. But you'll likely wind up telling me something more than you have to," she said without an ounce of pity in her voice. She wondered how she'd been able to do that because in reality she was feeling terribly guilty about forcing him to reveal something that he wasn't ready for. She was just about ready to give him an out when he answered her.

"I did not like the fact that you were getting too close and that somehow my barriers were crumbling around me."

"I..." she began.

"I'm not finished." Severus stood up from his chair and began pacing in the small room. "You have to understand what life was like before the end of the war, Hermione. I was not supposed to survive the end of the war. In fact, Albus told me that after I'd accomplished all that he'd ordered of me, then I could finally be at peace and die. It was my reward for all that I had done."

"How can that be a reward? When is dying a reward?" she shouted.

He snapped around and walked towards her. "When the majority of your life has been lived in serving penance for your past sins. When you are the one responsible for the deaths of the *only* people that you ever loved!"

"Oh, God, Severus," Hermione said with a soft sob and she stood up and moved to put her arms around him.

"I don't want your pity, Hermione," he said snidely as he pushed her away.

"Damn it! It's not pity! No one should have to live the way that you did. No one! You made mistakes as a child. My God, Severus! We all make mistakes, even as adults!"

"And you know this because of your advanced years and wisdom?" he sneered.

"I never said that. I make mistakes all of the time," she said. She wanted to add *I'm probably making a mistake right now*. But she held her tongue there. It wouldn't do to antagonize him any further. "What you're not understanding is that I think I'm starting to fall in love with you and I hate seeing you hurt. I would give anything to take away your pain and to show you how important you really are."

He turned his head to the side so that he was no longer looking at her.

Hermione took a deep breath and sighed. "Do you even want to try to have a relationship with me or is this entire exercise for naught?"

She was wholly unprepared for his quick movements as he crossed the small span of carpet to her and grabbed her face with his hands. His eyes bore into hers and even without the skills of Legilimency, she was able to read the pain, hurt, and... hope that was swimming in his eyes.

Severus' face lowered to hers. Soft, warm lips met her mouth and she instantly felt a tingle down her spine. His kiss was needy and Hermione wanted nothing more than to feel the void in his heart. And despite all of their recent trials, she knew that she was the one who could do that.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Five months later...

Hermione dipped her head back into the warm spray of the shower as she began the long process of rinsing the sudsy shampoo from her thick, bushy hair.

Things had come a long way in just five months, and even the simple memories of that journey brought a smile to her face.

For starters, Remus and Tonks were married. Apparently the incident at Harry's birthday party hadn't been all bad, as the Weasley twins' Inconvenient Truth Serum had caused Remus to profess his undying love to Tonks. In turn, she had told him that he had best stop feeling sorry for himself and worrying about hurting her, because she wasn't leaving his side for anything.

They went off and eloped eight days later.

Severus quit his job at Hogwarts. He and Minerva had made up, as it were, and were actually quite close now. However, he said that he had only taken the teaching job after the war because he'd felt duty bound. Minerva had tried to convince Severus to stay, but she let him go when he insisted on it.

With the patching of Severus and Minerva's relationship, came the repairing of Hermione's relationship with the Headmistress. It had been Minerva's anger with Severus that had caused the animosity between them and once that had been resolved, her relationship with the younger witch had begun the healing process.

Severus was now running his own apothecary in Diagon Alley, and his little shop was giving Slug & Jigger's a run for their money. Especially since Severus had created and patented his new variation of Veritaserum and was now selling it to the Ministry of Magic. As the inventor, he was the Ministry's sole supplier.

Hermione had quit her job at the Portkey office to help him. Lately she'd been managing the sales end of the shop while he worked on the brewing and research side of it. Then, with Harry and Ginny's wedding approaching, she hadn't wanted to remain living in their house as a third wheel. So, at Severus' insistence, she'd moved in with him at Spinner's End. That was when she'd found that the amount of time they were together was a bit excessive. At her suggestion, they were going to hire someone to brew the basic potions for them at the shop, and Severus was going to continue brewing the specialty potions at Spinner's End.

Fred and George had perfected their own truth revealing potion and had released it before the Christmas shopping season as part of a new party game. Both she and Severus agreed that they would never attend a party where *that* was a game. She'd already seen the disasters left in wake of truth serum used before large audiences and she had no desire to see it again, thank you very much.

The hardest thing for her to believe was that Ron really was deeply in love with Draco. At first, Hermione was convinced that she'd botched the love potion somehow so that it wouldn't wear off. However, Severus examined it quite thoroughly, and also combined the love potion with the twins' Inconvenient Truth Serum; he believed that the

only thing that had resulted was that Ron was no longer suppressing his deepest urge. Even harder for her to believe was that Draco was equally devoted to Ron, which explained why he'd been so willing to go along with her crazy plan. Molly wasn't pleased, of course, but she was coming to terms with it and really, she had other things to worry about.

Like Ginny's wedding today to Harry.

It was also Christmas, but that holiday only seemed like a minor blip on the radar for Hermione right now. The wedding was to take place at the Burrow and Hermione was not looking forward to returning there. She'd not been back since July, even though she had made peace with Molly since then. That, however, had been done in neutral territory.

Thinking of the wedding in a few hours, she knew she had to start getting dressed. Hermione shut the water off and climbed out of the shower, grabbing the fluffy red towels that she'd stocked the bathroom with when she had moved in just a fortnight ago, to wrap around her body.

Spinner's End was nothing like living with Harry and Ginny. It was an adjustment learning to live with her boyfriend. Well, being with Severus Snape in any fashion took some adjustments. But he was a good man, and he loved her. And she loved him, too, with all of her heart.

That didn't mean that she didn't want to pull her hair out by the roots any number of times during the day, however.

Just last night he had suddenly grown surly with her about everything that she did, from the way she chewed her food to the way she turned the pages of her book. It wasn't until later that she learned that the reason for his attitude was because he'd been upset about the way she'd decorated the Christmas tree. Of course, it had taken him five hours of discomfort and annoyance before she'd learned that Severus preferred to have candles on his Christmas tree rather than fairy lights. He'd muttered something about "dozens of tiny fairies' ears listening to our every word," and belittled her theory that the noise from the fairies' wings prevented them from clearly hearing human voices. "There are still dozens of fairies' eyes watching us!" he said petulantly.

In exasperation, Hermione told him to fix it himself if it bothered him that badly and had gone upstairs to bed. Alone.

She'd lain in bed for nearly two hours before she'd finally been able to fall asleep. When she awoke this morning, Severus had been there beside her. She had no idea when he'd joined her, however. She let him sleep while she prepared for today's event at the Burrow.

That was an hour ago. Hermione finished toweling off, and then grabbed her wand to cast a quick drying charm to finish the job. She flicked her wand at the towels she used and sent them to the laundry chute in the wall. Next, she Summoned her terrycloth robe from the hook on the door and put it on before she left the bathroom.

He was likely to be awake by now, and she wondered what sort of mood he'd be in. She knew that even if he no longer was cranky about the fairy lights, he was likely to be irritated about having to go to the Burrow. She sighed, rubbing her hand over her forehead and mentally preparing herself for whatever was to come; and then opened the door that led to the bedroom.

The bed was made, which meant that Severus was up, likely in the kitchen brewing a pot of tea. She went to her wardrobe to pull out the dress robes she was to wear today and grimaced. They were white with gold trimmings, complete with a wreath of holly for her hair. She looked like the ruddy Ghost of Christmas Past from several of the adaptations of A Christmas Carol she'd seen as a child. Of course, there was no point in explaining that to Ginny, who had selected these robes for her maid of honor.

Just as she was about to pull the robes off of the hanger, she felt an arm reach around her waist as Severus moved behind her and began to nuzzle her neck.

"Happy Christmas, Hermione," he said softly in her ear.

She leaned back against him and closed her eyes. "Happy Christmas."

"I apologize for my... well, for last night." He brought his other arm around her and slipped it through the gap in the top of her robe and began gently kneading her breast. "And I want to make it up to you."

Hermione moaned softly. She quickly came to her senses and tried to take a small step forward, but he pulled her back against him.

"I would love to, but I don't have time, Severus. We have to be at the Burrow in an hour. I'm sure that Molly is frantic which means that Ginny will be on edge."

"We have time," he insisted as he lightly pinched her nipple, instantly causing the nerves in her clit to ache and thrum. "I just spoke with Draco, who said Molly is in a surprisingly calm mood this morning. It could have something to do with the sedative that one of her offspring placed in her coffee this morning, though I wouldn't know anything about that. And there are still several hours before the ceremony. Miss Weasley will be fine for a bit longer."

Despite her best intentions to stop things for now, Hermione found herself sagging against him as he loosened the tie keeping her robe shut, and his hands began exploring the exposed flesh of her breasts and stomach. She knew him well, and when he wanted to apologize in such a way, it was very enjoyable to let him. Even if this time she knew that part of his reason was to avoid the Weasleys for as long as possible.

He began kissing her neck, and then he pulled the robe off of her left shoulder and he began focusing his efforts there. His hands continued their exploration of her body, but just as one of his hands began to make its way to the pulsing crux between her thighs, he stopped and released her.

Hermione felt the cold air hit her body as he pulled her robe the rest of the way off of her, and he turned her around to face him.

"You are beautiful," he whispered.

She smiled as she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him down to kiss her.

Lips.

Teeth.

Tongue.

She felt as if she could devour him and still not get enough.

It was not long before he pulled back, breathing heavily, and led her again to the bed. The back of her knees pressed against the mattress and he gently eased her to lay down on her back. Then he stood in front of her and pulled off his own robe and underpants. Severus knelt at the edge of the bed, spread her legs, hooked his arms around her knees, and pulled her towards him so that her arse was at the edge of the bed. Once there, he put his nose against her heat and inhaled deeply.

"Lovely," he said just before opening his mouth and running his tongue up to her nub.

Hermione closed her eyes and groaned at the sensation. She felt him alternately flick his tongue and then suck on her greedy clit. And just as she felt as if she needed something more, she felt him slip two fingers into her heat. That was all it took for her to come undone.

As her breathing slowed and she opened her eyes, she found him staring at her, his black eyes dancing with mischief. He was such a cocky bastard.

When Severus stood from his knees, Hermione scooted back further up on the bed. He crawled up to her, first stopping to place a kiss on her stomach, and then pausing for a bit longer at her breasts before kissing her mouth. She tasted herself on his lips and tongue, and it sent a new wave of heat through her body.

The kisses grew greedy. Hermione felt herself arching up against his erection, begging for its intrusion.

"Such an impatient little thing," he said with humor.

"Yes. Especially when you start things *that way*."

"That, my dear, was merely a slip of the tongue," he said as he pushed his erection into her.

Hermione gasped at the sensation as he filled her and then began to move rhythmically with her, causing the tingling in her nerves to return with even greater intensity than before.

It was only a few minutes later when she reached her plateau and her walls began to spasm around him, and only a moment after that when she felt him stiffen deep inside her.

After he rolled off of her, he pulled her tightly against him and one of his hands smoothed her unruly hair.

"That was wonderful," she said. She placed a hand on his chest, over his heart, and enjoyed the last few minutes that they would have alone that day. "Happy Christmas."

Severus pressed a kiss on the top of her head before releasing her and grabbing a small gift off of the nightstand that she hadn't noticed before. He handed it to her and she opened it quickly, heedless of the wrapping paper. The small black box within opened to reveal a sapphire ring.

"Marry me," he said simply.

Her eyes brimmed with tears as he placed the ring on her finger and said, "Marry me, Hermione, and make me happier than I ever thought possible."

Her words were stuck in her throat, but she nodded and kissed him.

The journey to heaven had taken her straight to hell and then back again, but it had been worth it. And none of it would have been possible if not for her own slip of the tongue, thanks to one Ronald Weasley.

Leave it to a former potions master to find his happiness due to a dunderhead's potion.

~Fin~