

# Obsession

*by alicat*

"He knew he thought about her more than what was entirely appropriate. The worst thoughts though, were the ones he had when he was alone."

## The Reason Why

*Chapter 1 of 10*

"He knew he thought about her more than what was entirely appropriate. The worst thoughts though, were the ones he had when he was alone."

Disclaimer: Don't own it. Wish I did, but what can ya do?

This first chapter is unbeta'd, but it is the only one.

The Reason Why

He kept telling himself it was for her own safety, ever since Draco Malfoy had attempted to rape Hogwarts head girl Hermione Granger, he hadn't let her out of his sight.

He had spent the remainder of the school year stealthily following her to all her classes and secretly trailing her upon her nightly rounds.

There were still a lot of his Slytherins that would wish her harm and he thought that if he didn't watch, then something was bound to happen.

He would watch her from the shadows, viewing her as she walked the silent halls. Sometimes her hair would be streaming down her back in golden honeyed curls. Other times it would be swept up into a loose French braid, a few free tresses hanging down, showing off her long elegant neck.

Sometimes she would have her uniform on under her robes and others she would be wearing tastefully casual muggle clothes that made her look so much more mature than her peers. One thing that never changed was her warm brown eyes. He watched how they darted around the corridors looking for rule breakers.

She always looked a little pre-occupied. He figured she was thinking of her NEWTS and what she would be doing once she left Hogwarts. He had overheard Minerva boasting in the staffroom about how the people in the ministry were working really hard to sway her into accepting a position there. But she was undecided on what field she would like to pursue and refused to give them an answer till she had come to a decision.

Personally he thought she would be best suited for research, especially in potions. She had a quick mind, was very focused and had a gift to view things from an entirely different perspective. He watched her climb through a portrait of three golden unicorns and into her head girl suite, before he continued on to his own quarters.

She was safe.

Hermione couldn't quite explain it. She was apprehensive about making her rounds and going to classes since Malfoy had attacked her, luckily Filch had seen what was about to happen and knowing a squib wouldn't be capable of much against an enraged wizard, had gone immediately to fetch Professor Snape.

The only reason she could attribute to his decision of not fetching her own Head of House was that he got along better with Snape. He may also have considered since it was one of the professor's precious Slytherins, he would be the best person suited to take control of the insane young wizard.

Snape had quite aggressively reprimanded Malfoy before he could get any further. Sure, she had received a few hard blows to the face which left her with a bloody lip and a gash above her eye, along with the purple bruises that had turned up on her upper arms and legs from his hands and fingers.

But they were nothing compared to what he had said he was intending to do to her. He had ripped her underwear and was readying himself to take her, when the head of Slytherin had come to her rescue.

Forcibly tearing Malfoy from upon her body, he threw him against the nearest wall and proceeded to beat him senseless, before body binding him and scooping her from the floor, taking her straight to madam Pomfrey in the infirmary.

It wasn't until she was alone the next morning that she wondered idly why Professor Snape hadn't used magic to stun Malfoy in the beginning, instead of physically attacking him.

When the Headmaster had offered to excuse her from doing her nightly rounds of the castle in the future, she had declined.

"It is part of the head girls responsibility to make sure the castle is secure and that no students are breaking curfew."

She had received a worried glance from her Head of House for that and a sceptical look from the headmaster, so she continued.

"Besides, if I don't carry on with my normal life, that means Malfoy wins and I'm not willing to let that happen."

Dumbledore eyes had twinkled brightly after that and McGonagal gave her an encouraging smile before telling her that it was very Gryffindor for her to think like that.

Truth be told she was actually terrified. The attack had caught her off guard, not that she had been on guard to begin with.

Now that the war was over and Voldemort was defeated, she hadn't thought there had to be much left to be cautious of, but apparently she hadn't accounted for death-eater progeny.

Nevertheless, she had to show that she wasn't going to be cowed by the likes of them, no matter what they threw at her.

So on the next night of her rounds as she was preparing to leave, she made sure she had her wand readily accessible and that her robes and hair weren't going to prove to be an obstruction if she needed to manoeuvre quickly.

She was feeling apprehensive and nervous. What if she was attacked again and froze? What if she was taken by surprise like last time? What if there was no one there to aid her this time? What if she forgot everything she had learned while training for battle? With these uneasy thoughts she headed from her rooms out into the cold, quiet corridors of the castle, to start her rounds. All she could hear was the clickity clack of her shoes on the castles stoned floors. It was eerily quiet and the only light was coming from random torches alight along the walls. The torch flames were dancing hypnotically as she passed them, causing shadows to dance along the edge of her vision. Oddly enough she realized she wasn't feeling nervous anymore. It was as if she had a companion, someone to watch over her and keep her safe. She knew it was a ridiculous notion, but she didn't feel alone anymore.

It was with this thought and feeling alone that she found the confidence to complete her rounds every night and move on with her life. All she had left to occupy her mind was what she was going to do once she left Hogwarts?

Severus Snape had never had much of an interest in women, not that he didn't physically desire them, because he did. He actually possessed an insatiable appetite when it came to physical pleasure. But no female had yet to capture his interest and admiration. Until he looked more closely, at one strong willed woman by the name of Hermione Granger.

At first he noticed her vast intellect, he always knew she was smart, but he had just thought she had a knack for remembering all of her studied text. It wasn't until he was perusing through some of the academic journals he subscribed to, that he noticed just how 'smart' she was.

She had managed to be published, not just some little essay that was required to be handed over in class. But a ground breaking theory on what could be accomplished when crossing charms and transfiguration where combined with potions.

Halfway through the article, he found himself excited by the idea and was already out lining possibilities on parchment.

It was then that she transformed, in his eyes from the Gryffindors walking encyclopaedia into a highly intelligent woman. Once he had had this epiphany he took to discretely observing her in the great hall and during his classes.

He came to realize that not only had her intelligence matured but so had her body. She was a woman now and had become very aware of it. Gone was the skinny, awkward, scraggly headed, buck toothed girl. In her place was a perfectly shaped, confident, highly intelligent, silky haired goddess.

He would never be able to view her in her past persona again.

The night she had been attacked by Malfoy, he had been beside himself with fury and concern. He would have killed the boy if he hadn't noticed Hermione was bloodied, bruised and still on the floor.

Luckily she had passed out after he scooped her up, so he wouldn't have to explain his actions. He had stayed away from the infirmary when she was awake, choosing only to watch over her as she slept. He was relieved to discover that she had only suffered superficial wounds and that he had arrived before Malfoy had the chance to penetrate her by force. He would have gladly gone to Azkaban in the name of vengeance had his goddess been violated.

He knew he thought about her more than was entirely appropriate but he couldn't help it. She consumed his every thought, no matter what it was. On everything academic, he found himself wanting to know her opinion and thoughts. None of the essay's he graded measured up to her own and he often found he was requiring that standard.

The worst ones were the thoughts he had when he was alone in his bed or he consumed one to many fire-whisky's.

He would picture her before him, wearing that warm smile she wore for her friends, the sparkle of intelligence in her eyes that he had come to cherish from his classes. With her arms spread apart reaching for his to embrace.

They were the longed-for images.

The ones that left him needing and wanting were his lust filled ones.

The vivid images he would create of her, underneath him panting and screaming or on top of him grinding her self to climax.

The ones where he could picture her silky locks bobbing up and down on his throbbing cock, while she looked at him mischievously with those warm brown eyes.

And what he longed for most of all, his head buried between her legs lapping up her essence from her dripping sex, while screaming his name to the heavens,

He wanted to hold her, claim her, and consume her. He would never let her out of his sight and he would never let her go.

The only problem was she didn't belong to him and probably never would. Not only that: in two weeks she would walk past the Hogwarts gates and out of his life for good.

He couldn't bring himself to allow that to happen.

It was time he spoke to the Headmaster.

A/N: I had to get this one out, I even shot out of bed to do it lol.

PLEASE REVIEW. xoxoxox

# Slytherin Cunning

*Chapter 2 of 10*

"He knew he thought about her more than what was entirely appropriate. The worst thoughts though, were the ones he had when he was alone."

## Slytherin Cunning

The ministry finally presented Hermione with an offer that interested her greatly. A new department had been created and she was going to be a part of the new team, R.O.A.M. (Research On All Magic.)

It was a godsend really. She was having a terrible time trying to pick one field of magic to pursue. When the ministry contacted her with news of their new department and offered her a place on the team, she was elated. She would be able to water her thirst for knowledge and get paid for it, further her studies, research some of the more obscure subjects, and experiment to her heart's content. She couldn't wait.

Severus couldn't believe it: he was finally leaving Hogwarts. His conversation two weeks ago with the headmaster had gone better than he expected. He had presented his case in a long speech, determined to convince Albus that he had done all he could to atone for his past 'indiscretions' and that he could do more to help the Wizarding world if he were to leave Hogwarts behind him and enter into research.

The headmaster just sat there for a good five minutes, his eyes twinkling, before he replied. "Severus, I never meant to make you feel as if you owed me a debt. The fact that you saw the error of your ways all those years ago was enough for me to forgive you. I am delighted that you have finally decided to forgive yourself."

He remembered scowling at the headmaster's words, thinking that the old wizard had finally gone from falling slowly into dementia to landing with a resounding thunk and splash at the bottom of that well. But with his next words his expression changed.

"Am I correct in assuming that this research endeavour will be self funded?"

He explained to Albus that he had substantial funds left in his possession being the only Snape left. He thought it was only fitting since his families actions had only been of ill intent, that he put the galleons to the use of good.

"Well maybe you would consider contacting the Ministry about your plan. I believe they would be interested in teaming you up with other scholars who would like to pursue their interest in research."

The way it turned out was better than he could have expected. When he contacted the Ministry, and they learned that this endeavour was to be fully self funded, they had offered him an entire floor to house his work and the pick of the Wizarding world's youngest and brightest wizards and witches to assist him in his goal.

When he received that owl he laughed out loud heartily, his rich baritone laugh bouncing around the dungeon walls.

They must have considered him a fool if they thought he had no idea what they were up to. He was after all an ex-death-eater, head of Slytherin house and a Slytherin himself to the core.

He responded with a drawn contract stating that any breakthroughs and discoveries made would be patent and owned by the individual who made them. Also, that he would be running his department with no outside interference from the ministry personnel. He included a list of people he would find up to par for placements amongst his team.

His one unalterable requirement was that if they could not secure Miss Granger's place amongst that list, then he would be withdrawing his offer to work within the ministry in this endeavour. It took four days to hear from them and he was beginning to feel slightly nervous about the volume of demands he had made.

When the owl had finally arrived he found that they had agreed to all of his stipulations. They went on to apologise profusely about the time it took to reply, saying that they had been trying to get Miss Granger to commit to working within the ministry for a good six months and had been awaiting her reply regarding this latest offer. They were proud to say she had agreed.

He was wearing the utmost sinister smirk across his features as he read. If anyone had of been in the room, they would have run for their lives. He looked like the epitome of evil.

'Soon' he thought, soon he wouldn't have to admire Hermione from afar. Soon he would have her working right along side him where she belonged.

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Hermione was making her final rounds of the castle's halls; this was the last time she would walk these corridors as head Girl. She was feeling extremely sentimental at the moment for she had knocked back quiet a few alcoholic concoctions in the common room in honour of their final night at Hogwarts. She didn't usually partake in anything so juvenile, but between her best friends Harry and Ron nagging her to let her hair down for a change, and the fact that she really didn't have to study, she gave a warm chuckle and caved in.

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Severus had been following her for half an hour and he noticed that she appeared uncharacteristically disheveled. He had heard the ruckus coming from the Gryffindors common room and realized the seventh years were partying up their last night in the castle and finally realized she was drunk. And the walking around she was doing was only serving to enhance her intoxication by way of circulation.

Her condition had him slightly worried. From the looks of her dragging feet she didn't drink often and she started to stumble a little bit. He ducked behind a suit of armour when she came to seat herself on a window ledge. He could see her sitting there against a starry backdrop, with the moon creating an ethereal glow around her body. He

had never seen her look so forlorn and beautiful all at the same time. She turned and faced the calming night sky with a small sigh.

He didn't know what came over him in that moment because suddenly he was standing right behind her. The smell of vanilla was invading his senses; it was such a warm and welcoming aroma. Then he found himself reaching for her shining locks, believing them to be the source of the exquisite scent. At that very moment he was pulled from his self induced trance. When the object of his obsession turned abruptly and greeted him quietly.

"Hello Professor, making rounds?"

He cleared his throat before he answered, mainly to sweep the befuddlement from his mind.

"No, not really Miss Granger, just stretching my legs. But that's not to say that I would not delight in the chance to remove house points, on my final night in the castle."

Through Hermione's alcohol induced haze she managed to come to the conclusion that one, Professor Snape was talking civilly to her 'on her final night, figures.' Two, she was fairly certain that he had just made a joke 'well it is the Wizarding world, stranger things have happened.' and three, her dour potions master was leaving Hogwarts.

"Going on holidays professor?"

"Nooo," He drew his reply out, as he sat upon the windows ledge next to her.

"I have decided that I no longer hold a ..... Passion, for teaching and have decided to end my time here at Hogwarts."

"Oooh, oh I'm sorry to hear that Professor."

"Well you would be the only student to think so Miss Granger."

Hermione let a chuckle escape past her lips at his words.

"Your probably right, Professor." After which she quickly placed a hand over her mouth, cursing the fact that alcohol loosened your tongue.

Severus found her embarrassment completely endearing. Her eyes were wide and her cheeks were flushed crimson. He could see she was awaiting a reprimand for her outburst.

He chuckled to himself at that thought alone, how could he berate the goddess before him when he now considered her his equal. He waved a hand at her dismissively and said, "Do not fear Miss Granger, I find your alcohol induced slip quite refreshing."

At those words she looked at the stone floor and blushed even harder, if that was even possible. He knew she had been drinking.

Until she realized she wasn't going to be taken to task and thought it was best to take advantage of the potion master's unusually relaxed mood.

She turned upon him wearing a warm sincere smile that made his heart leap and his breath catch. Oh, how he had longed for her to look at him like that.

"Sir?"

"Hmmm."

Was his only reply, he had no idea what she was about to ask or say, he still wasn't able to form words after seeing that smile.

"I... I just wanted to thank you for everything you have done for me."

"Malfoy?"

"Yees, but not just that. Merlin knows I am thankful for that. I... I was talking about your work for the Order sir."

Severus was a little stunned no one but Albus had acknowledged the suffering and risks he took to go to those vile meetings and revels. She was the last person he had expected to recognize his actions.

"I did what I had to do Miss Granger."

There was a stretch of silence that felt like an eternity, but realistically lasted all of about sixty seconds.

Tentatively she continued. "Sir?"

He let out a sigh, he wasn't sure he could take much more of this self induced torture. He was hard pressed not to sweep her off to his rooms and shag her senseless as it was.

"Yes Miss Granger?"

"I... I just wanted to say also... that... sir..."

"Spit it out girl, you sound like Longbottom."

It came out more harshly than he intended, but by Merlin he was ready to just grab her.

"I... It has been my honour to learn my craft from such an accomplished and gifted master and I... I just wanted to say thank you for that also."

He looked a little dazed and she took this opportunity to make her retreat. She was going to die of embarrassment in the morning...she just knew it. So, with a quick, "Goodnight, sir" and a soft, affectionate kiss on his cheek, she hastily made her way, face burning, back to her rooms. He didn't even see her walk away. For him, time had come to a standstill the moment her lips had touched his cheek.

His fingers found their way to where her lips were only a few moments ago. They had been warm and soft. She wasn't too quick about it either, he noticed. It wasn't just a peck on the cheek--it was a genuine sign of affection.

He realized with sadness that no one had ever touched him with such a sincere sign of affection. Not since he had been a little boy.

# A Sugar Coated Snape

## Chapter 3 of 10

"He knew he thought about her more than what was entirely appropriate. The worst thoughts though, were the ones he had when he was alone." (Rape warning only for chap1)

A/N: Huge thanx to Dryad for being my Beta goddess!

### A Sugar Coated Snape

Hermione had arrived at the ministry bright and early on the Monday after graduation to meet with her new boss and research partners. She was feeling nervous and excited all at the same time, completely unsure of what to expect from the new path her life was going to now be travelling. After dodging the flying inter-department messages which filled the elevator, she stepped out onto the floor that she knew she would come to view as a second home.

The first thing she noticed was that the floor that had been allocated to their department looked like a building in its own right. There was at least a third of the floor sectioned off for what looked like an indoor greenhouse. She could make out some greenery with spurts of colour showing through the frosted wall. When she looked a little more closely she also noticed that some of the foliage appeared to be rustling. She came to the conclusion that someone was intent on researching entirely upon Herbology. She mused that having fresh ingredients on hand for the trial potions she had in mind was going to be a big plus.

The floor was covered with what looked to be wool carpet of a very rich burgundy. She also noticed an extremely large square jarrah table that looked like it could possibly seat at least three people on each side.

The table already held quills, parchments, inkpots, candles and a few thick books upon its surface. She summarised that someone had already begun on his or her research projects and that they must be pretty keen, for as far as she knew this department had only just been created. They had obviously started work as soon as they arrived.

There were two desks in a far nook of the room that were pushed together, facing one another. Who ever was to occupy that area were evidently going to be working closely together.

She also noticed a rather grand fireplace located near this area. With four comfortable looking, green rich velvet armchairs and assumed that they were set up to encourage discussion.

Upon scanning the rest of the room she nearly fainted. Aside from a decent sized office that was tucked away near the greenhouse, the walls were lined from floor to ceiling with books, texts, and knowledge. There was even a balcony running around the inside of the walls, to make it easier to reach all of the tomes.

Dazed, she dropped her bag where she was standing and made her way over to the shelves, running her hands lovingly over the spines as she perused them.

Severus had spent the entire weekend decorating, transforming, and transfiguring everything around the space he had been given by the Ministry. He was very proud of the finished product. It wasn't a feeling he had associated with any of his past actions but things were different now. He had a real honest chance to start over, to do the things he should have been doing from his youth, instead of the shameful things he had done. This was going to be his new beginning and he'd be damned if he was going to fuck this up. This time he was going to make a difference, and he was going to be accomplishing this by doing something he truly enjoyed, with the goddess he worshipped by his side.

He arrived at around seven a.m. via the floo to get some last minute things ready, when he spotted Arthur Weasley emerging from the lift. Though Arthur was not a scholar like Severus, the two men had formed a respectable friendship with one another, during their time of service to the Order.

Arthur had often come across the troubled and worn man in the library, looking very tired and stressed. He held Severus in high regard, for he knew the role he chose to play was hard on him. He would never condemn Severus in his mind for the mistakes he made, for if it wasn't for those mistakes, they wouldn't have had a very valuable well-placed spy to relay important information that gave them the upper hand in the end.

Severus for his part held Arthur in high esteem. It wasn't often during his years, that he had come across genuine people and Arthur Weasley was definitely a genuine person. No subtle layers to his personality or hidden agendas, he was just Arthur and that was it.

Truth be told Severus had to admire the man. Loyal to a fault and a huge family full of love and respect. He was even employed to do something he loved and thoroughly enjoyed. He never made Severus feel ashamed of his past, never portrayed himself as being on a higher moral ground and always treated Severus with respect. So Severus had always shown Arthur the respect and consideration he deserved.

Let's face it, he only had to teach the brood of troublesome Weasley boys; Arthur had to deal with them all the time for his entire life. That thought alone had always been enough to give Severus the willies.

Severus walked over to greet him as he had recognised the shock of red hair immediately.

"Arthur, you're in early," Severus said shaking his hand.

"I could say the same for you Severus. Eager to start are you?"

"Of course. Would you expect anything less from me?"

"No I suppose I wouldn't," Arthur replied with a friendly chuckle.

"My, you have done a wonderful job with the place. I must say I am extremely envious of the team you will be working with."

Severus smirked a little at Arthur's words, his earlier pride from this morning swelling in his chest.

"Thinking of changing fields Arthur?"

Mr Weasley laughed out loud at that.

"No, no, I enjoy playing with muggle stuff too much for that, besides I would be asleep after skimming two paragraphs for research."

Severus chuckled good naturedly thinking about how all his boys, with the exception of Percy, were exactly the same. They were all hands on.

They sat down in the armchairs by the fire, with their backs to the entrance and received a tray of tea and coffee from his department's house elves and continued their light conversation.

At eight o'clock he heard the lift doors again and muttered a charm into his coffee to be able to view the person who had entered. When he saw it was Hermione, he wasn't sure if he should reveal himself or not. But when he noticed his goddess examining the room he decided to leave her be for the moment. He gave Arthur a glance that communicated that he wished for them to remain silent and continued to observe her exploration.

It had only been two days since he'd laid eyes on her last, but to him it had felt like an eternity. His eyes greedily took in her form. Her hair was tastefully pulled back in a French braid and she was wearing a little dusting of makeup making her look so far more mature than the simpering fools her own age, who covered their faces in paint. She wore an above-the-knee grey pencil skirt that showed off her smooth creamy legs and what looked to be a white silk blouse. All in all she made a very sophisticated and alluring picture.

He couldn't stop the smirk from settling on his features when he saw her eyes glaze over at the sight of all those books. Most of them he had brought from the Snape family library, while the remainders were either Ministry property or on loan from various Wizarding libraries.

He watched her closely as she caressed the lucky tomes that were within her reach. Oh how he longed for her to give him such undivided attention. He saw her eyes flash and recognised that excited sparkle instantly. She had obviously found something that piqued her intellectual interest.

Severus shared an amused glance with Arthur, as Hermione had instantly buried her nose into the book and wandered distractedly towards their armchairs. When Hermione reached them she still hadn't removed her attention from the text.

Arthur was hard pressed not to giggle as he watched Hermione perch on the arm of Severus' chair. Snape sat stock still, torn between wanting to begin working with her and thoroughly enjoying her closeness. He was saved however from making that particular decision, as she proceeded to slide over the arm of the chair and into Severus' lap.

He didn't dare even breathe. She hadn't even noticed.

The situation was completely laughable, he saw Arthur start to blush as Hermione wriggled her pert little bottom around trying to get comfortable. Snape, on the other hand, was trying to deal with the effect she was having on his own body. Clearly, his goddess had a one track mind when she was trying to quench her thirst for knowledge. He decided he had to make his presence known and cleared his throat.

"AAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHH!"

Hermione let loose an extremely startled scream and leaped from the chair, tumbling over the coffee table in the process. Severus' rich baritone laugh vibrated through out the vast room at the scene that had just played out in front of him. At that very moment, Neville Longbottom emerged from the lift, quickly assessing the situation, and immediately coming to the wrong conclusion. He reacted immediately, running to Hermione, placing himself between her and her attacker and drawing his wand in defense, pointing it directly at his former Potion Master's eyes!

Severus too had his wand drawn. He wasn't known as one of Britain's top duellists due to luck after all.

"What do you think your playing at, Snape?"

"Mr. Longbottom, I would strongly advise that you not hex your boss as it would most definitely not, make for a good first impression," Snape said quickly.

"Sssir? Boss, Sir?" Neville stuttered out, eyeing Snape sceptically.

"Yes Mr Longbottom, boss. Do you honestly think I, of all people, would claim something if it were untrue?"

"Nno, sir." Neville lowered his wand hesitantly, unsure whether he should submit or not. Snape rose from his chair gracefully and folded his arms while raising an eyebrow in question. There was still tension in the air and finally Hermione spoke, breaking the uncomfortable silence, changing the subject.

"Mr Weasley, it has been too long. How is Molly doing these days?"

Arthur rose from his armchair and embraced Hermione in a warm friendly hug, which made Severus envious of their casual closeness.

"It has been too long my dear. Molly is fine. I think she is having a bit of difficulty coming to terms with the fact that she only has one baby left now though. And how are you, Neville?" Arthur reached out to shake Neville's hand, thus encouraging him to holster his wand.

"Poor Molly," Hermione replied. "What will she do when Ginny finally decides to leave the nest?"

"I dare say she will go back to medi-nursing like she did before we started a family."

"I never knew that she was a qualified medi-witch!" Hermione replied surprised.

"Of course. What, did you think we left Hogwarts and started having kids straight away?" Arthur asked with mock indignance.

Hermione blushed at Arthur's reply, slightly embarrassed about the fact she took for granted that there was no life before her generation.

"I should really be off and let you lot get to work and all that," Arthur announced, addressing the odd group of three before him.

He embraced Hermione once again, giving her a quick squeeze before parting, letting her know everything was okay. He then shook Neville's hand again, telling him he would be fine. Severus then walked him back to the elevator.

Neville and Hermione eyed each other nervously, wondering what the hell had happened for them to be answering to Snape once again. Severus turned from the lift to face his new colleagues with a smirk upon his face. They looked so confused and apprehensive. He wasn't sure if he was going to be able to hold back the laugh that threatened to burst forth. Suppressing the urge though, he strode purposefully towards Neville and extended his arm in a formal greeting.

"Mr Longbottom, I apologize for this morning's events. I completely understand your response, given the scene you observed." He grinned as he noticed Hermione's blush. "And I would like to welcome you to your new position as a part of R.O.A.M." Neville was quite dumbfounded and out of sync with this new incarnation of his fearful potions master.

"Thank you, professor, sir."

Severus chuckled lightly before answering.

"Severus. My name is Severus. As I am no longer your professor and we are no longer at Hogwarts, I trust that I may call you Neville? Now come, I will show you where your research area is."

Severus strode off towards the area of the floor that had been sectioned off for the use of the greenhouse, opened the door and ushered a still-confused Neville and an inquisitive Hermione through. What ever Hermione had thought of the outside it was nothing compared to the inside.

There were rows upon rows of some of the most exotic and obscure magical plants she had ever seen. She watched as Neville's wide eyes took in everything before him, running his hands along the more harmless foliage and peering carefully around some of the more dangerous. She also noted a lot of what was there was going to be very useful for some of the potions she had in mind to try out.

Hermione's gaze then snapped up to Snape. She watched him as he watched Neville and drank in the sight of his accomplishments upon his new colleague's face.

"Pro... Sir... Severus. I... I don't know what to say... Why?"

Severus pulled himself together and cleared his throat before he answered. He had been caught off guard when Longbottom had spoken.

"You may have been an abysmal potions student, but Professor Sprout informed me that you have been gifted without a doubt in the area of Herbology, especially in crossbreeding different species of plants. I wanted to give you the opportunity to explore the field you showed so much promise in."

Severus had a slight blush staining his cheeks by the time he finished. After stating his reasoning, he strode from the greenhouse leaving Neville to gape at his new work area.

## Zest Of A Lemon

*Chapter 4 of 10*

"He knew he thought about her more than what was entirely appropriate. The worst thoughts though, were the ones he had when he was alone."

A/N: Huge Thanx to Dryad for her Beta-ing services! xox

Zest Of A Lemon

'Dammit all to hell,' Severus thought. He wasn't out of Hogwarts four days and he was losing his touch.

He couldn't decide if it was a good thing or a bad thing. He had seen the looks Hermione had been shooting him throughout the tour of the greenhouse. They were a cross between puzzle and awe. He was certain if he could just show her that he was not just the cold-hearted head of Slytherin House, she could come to view him as any other normal man. Hadn't he had proved that by giving Longbottom a chance and being civil to him.

He wasn't losing his touch, he was just playing a different role as a means to an end.

After Hermione finished exploring the greenhouse and had reassured Neville that everything would be just fine, she made her way out of the room and back to the main area of the floor. She was so in awe of the place where she would be working that she never noticed Severus had come to stand beside her.

"Hermione," came the soft whisper of his voice in her ear, "would you like to see your work station?"

Hermione gulped visibly, trying to fight down the sudden shiver of anticipation that she had felt with Snape so close to her ear.

"Y...yes. Yes, I do believe that would be an acceptable start..., sir."

"Sir? As I told Neville there is no need for such formality here; we're equals now. You may, you, ah, should call me Severus. Please." he purred.

Hermione watched as he strode fluidly by her and towards the two desks that were pushed together, facing one another. What more could she do? She followed him to the desks. He tried to appear less imposing as he pointed out the work area.

"This shall be our work place," Severus said gesturing with his hands to the area that surrounded the two desks.

"Our? Sir...Severus."

Severus felt a jolt of pleasure shoot straight through his lower groin upon his name leaving her lips. He decided it would be a wise move to seat himself down, less he wish to give his goddess something to really become flustered about. Somehow he didn't think she could handle that much in one day. He would just bide his time and wait it out. So he seated himself down at one of the desks, gesturing for her to do the same.

Hermione gracefully placed herself in the chair behind her desk and looked across at him with a puzzled expression.

"After reading some of your published theories Hermione, I have come to appreciate your keen intellect and I am very interested in working with you in following them up."

She was thrown more than slightly off kilter at her former professor's words. For so long she had wanted the praise from this man that she was now receiving. He had never called upon her in class, never complimented her on her outstanding brewing skills never praised the amount of research and effort that gone into all her essay's. To finally receive the recognition she had desired from him was not only extremely unexpected, but an incredibly surreal experience. She was certain the theme for the 'Twilight Zone' was about to be played.

Wait a minute.

"You want to work with me? Why?"

He could hear the bewilderment in her voice and see it on her face. Merlin, she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen in his entire life. He wanted to pull her across their desks and ravish her thoroughly.

"As I said before Hermione, I am interested in some of your theories and wish to pursue them with you."

Well, he couldn't just come out and say. 'Because I think you're a goddess, looking absolutely edible and I can't stand to have your brilliance out of my sight.' Honestly. She'd apparate away in the blink of an eye. He noticed though that she did look a little crest fallen at his words and couldn't figure out why? Had he not just praised her

intelligence? Had he not commended her on having such a fine mind?

"Come," he said rising from his chair and walking towards the large jarrah table.

"I have pulled out some relevant text that I thought would be prudent for our starting point."

Truth be told, Hermione had been a little crest fallen at his reply. He was only interested in her brain, just like everybody else.

It wasn't that she was thinking along the lines of a romantic relationship with the man. She wanted to form a professional friendship with the man. She had been foolish to think such things. Her keen mind was the only reason anyone ever sought her out. She might as well accept it... she was nothing more than a brain with legs. He was obviously only being nice to her so he could openly pursue her theories. If he pursued them without her, he would be ridiculed in the world of academic's for stealing her ideas since she had already had most of them published.

She supposed the small blessings were that she had been given the opportunity to use her intelligence, and she really did enjoy using it. She'd be an idiot to pass up this opportunity over hurt feelings.

They worked the morning away. Severus was in his element.

As he expected, when it came to academics she was a force to be reckoned with. He was elated really as they scattered parchments and opened books all around them. Scribbles of theories and half compiled lists of experiments had been drawn up.

When he had doubted her idea, saying that Mandragora at a young age was to unpredictable as a potion base, she started vehemently defending her reasoning, saying.

That baby mandrake root would be the best possible option to use as a base to counter the after effects of over exposure to the cruciatus curse, seeing as how the mature Mandragora was successful in re-animating those who had suffered from total petrification.

She was adamant in her reasoning that at a younger age of harvesting their properties could be easily manipulated, with the aid of properties from a mind-opening drug that the muggle Indians used, known to others as Marijuana. The result could be an aid in coaxing the sufferer from an insanity-induced daze. After all, in essence it was the same: the mind would shut itself down to protect the body from actually feeling the pain, rendering it's self trapped and unable to find it's way back after being under crucio to long.

Where as in petrification, it was the body that stilled the brain's function, shocking it into total unawareness.

They just needed the impressionable properties of the underdeveloped Mandragora to go along with a key, in the form of a mind unlocking substance to be able to aid the mind in escaping its own prison.

Thus being, that the mind would be able to right itself with no affect to the body, as they would have manipulated the Mandragora to affect the mind alone. All they had to do was find something that would manipulate the Mandrake into only affecting the mind.

Had Severus been paying attention he may have cut in with a dry, 'Be that as it may, but what's to say we don't end up with a bunch of highly childish, stoned psychotics?'

But poor Severus didn't hear a word. After he expressed his doubt he ended up just drinking in the picture she made while defending her theory, Nodding dumbly every few sentences, so as not to stop her from continuing.

Her warm brown eyes were sparkling with intelligence and excitement as she defended her theory. Tresses of hair had come loose from her braid and were framing her face and neck beautifully. Somehow a large black and white speckled, eagle owl quill had found its way to fasten into the top of her honey brown braid.

Her hands were waving about in gestures that were clearly meant to prove her point. Her delicate fingers were smattered with ink stains, which went along charmingly with the smudge that was across her cheek. He awoke to realize that she had started riffling through papers, looking for her quill. Before he even thought about his actions, he rose in a trance and walked around the table to stand in front of her.

Severus was so close to her, that he could smell her delectable scent of vanilla once again. The way her body wore it made it the most alluring aroma he had ever come across. All he wanted to do was bury his nose into her hair and breathe deeply, maybe even dare to taste her creamy, vanilla scented skin.

Hermione stood immobile when Severus had come to stand before her. His eyes blazing with a look she didn't recognise. No one had ever looked at her like that before.

This was... different. No... this was bloody intense.

His fathomless eyes were glittering with such fierceness and determination it made her heart leap. Her breathing had become deep and fast in anticipation of what he was going to say or do, not once allowing her eyes to waver from his. The air crackling between them was palatable as he raised his hand to the top of her head and removed the quill from her hair. She had felt a sizzling sensation, work it's way down to the base of her spine at his gentle touch upon her hair.

She refused to break eye contact throughout the whole odd event, until she noticed he was slowly bringing his thumb to his face. Her eyes snapped immediately like a striking asp to his tongue as it languorously caressed his long elegant digit. Her breaths were now becoming faster into a shallow pant with her lips parted slightly and a flushed face.

Her eyes fell closed at the feel of his delicate touch on her cheek, the cool contact a welcome reprieve from the heated flush her face had been building. She could feel his thumb easing over cheek hypnotically.

Backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards. Lulling her into a state of contentment. She leaned into his touch as she felt his whole hand come to cup the side of her face. She could feel warmth spreading through her body and became acutely aware that she and Severus were standing very close to one another. Her eyes snapped open upon this revelation and were instantly met with black bottomless ones, staring straight back into her very soul.

Her face was so close to his own that he could feel her breath washing over his features. He was lost in her gaze, so innocent, open, inquisitive and awed all at the same time. Neither one was willing to break the fragile spell that had managed to ensnare them, slowly drawing them closer and closer to one another.

Their lips tentatively met, softly at first until slowly Severus parted his lips and ran his tongue across her plush bottom one, luxuriously seeking permission to deepen the kiss. She answered him by parting her lips slightly and shyly allowing her tongue to caress his in return.

The taste of her was exquisite, her warm moist mouth flavoured with rich coffee and fresh fruits. The smell of vanilla wrapping itself around his senses, as he felt her move to deepen the kiss further. She slid her smooth hands up his chest, over his shoulders to behind his neck and threaded her fingers through the hair at the base of his skull.

He breathed in deeply through his nose as he plundered her mouth more forcibly, captured by the pure ecstasy of her being so close. He wrapped a strong arm around her body, splaying his fingers between her shoulder blades, pulling her into him even closer.

He could feel the rise and fall of her panting breathes against his chest, as she pressed herself further into him and tugged upon his hair, demanding more of him.

Suddenly there was a resounding THUNK, a loud high-pitched DING, and the sound of doors sliding open.

They sprung apart at the first sound of the lift coming to a stop, each looking completely dishevelled by the other's attentions. Hermione was burning crimson red to the roots of her hair as she tried to right herself, while the lifts doors were opening.



What the hell happened?

Oh. My. God! How fucking embarrassing is this?

What the hell had come over her to do that?

Her inner monologue could barely scrape an answer for her uncharacteristic actions when she heard.

"Moine?" She recognised that voice instantly.

"Ron... what are you doing here?"

Of course Ron hadn't seen anything... they had been too quick for that but he eyed Hermione and Snape curiously. He figured he was there to help with researching some kind of boring stuff, while Hogwarts was out for the summer.

Until...

"Yes, Mr. Weasley." Severus sneered folding his arms with the look of pure loathing upon his features. He paused for a calming breath that didn't aid him much as he continued and snapped out.

"What exactly do you think, you are doing here? I know for a fact that you don't belong on this floor. Your mediocre intelligence barely allowed you to pass your NEWTS."

Severus was pissed!

He couldn't remember; how it happened? Hell, he didn't fucking care! All he knew was that he had had her in his arms, responding to his touch, and wanting more. This might go over more smoothly than he expected. Mind you, the glare that he was now receiving from Hermione didn't look too promising.

Must have been his words to Weasley.

Well what did she bloody well expect! He had finally succeeded in holding her, touching her, and tasting her. Only to be interrupted by ... a... an imbecile! That's what the boy was, a total and utter imbecile. Snape knew he was not intellectually gifted, and now he had managed to ruin one of the best experiences in Severus' whole life. Just because Severus wished for a relaxed and intellectual environment to work within and therefore given his new colleagues leave of his usual snarky self didn't mean he was going to extend the privilege to all the dim witted morons that crossed his threshold.

The reason it turned out for Ron's impromptu visit was... lunch. That's right, lunch! He had been at the office for Magical Games and Sports, filling out forms registering for the reserves, so he could legally play for the Chudley Cannons. When he saw it was lunchtime, he thought Hermione might like some company since he knew she was starting her first day in a new department there.

That was the reason why Hermione was now seated in the Leaky Cauldron, across from Ron, slowly picking her way through a questionable looking salad.

"Really 'Mione, I don't even know how you can stand the thought of working for Snape? Let alone actually working WITH the greasy bat."

Hermione sighed heavily. She was so confused, shocked and embarrassed that she didn't even know where to begin with her thought process and Ron was just making things worse. She really didn't need this.

"Well, it's good that I'm working 'with' him and not 'for' him then, isn't it Ron?"

Ron was about to start up again and she cut him off before he got a chance to do so.

"Besides he's not like he was in school, Ron. He even told Neville and I to call him Severus."

Hermione watched in grotesque amusement as Ron started to sputter and then choke wildly on the butterbeer he had been drinking at the sound of Snape's name coming from his friend's lips. He really did turn a rather unattractive red colour at times like these.

"Mione, your not going to are you? Call the greasy bat by his name? I mean he was a real git to us at Hogwarts."

"Honestly, Ron," Hermione sighed, rising from her chair. "When are you going to grow up?" She fished through her purse for a few sickles to pay for her lunch. "We're in the world of adults now. Why don't you send me an owl when you come to terms with that fact and decide to join the rest of us?" With that last remark, she tossed her sickles on the table and headed into Diagon Alley for the rest of her lunch break. Hopefully she would be able to pull herself together before she had to return to the Ministry and face Severus.

How the hell was she going to get herself out of this mess?

Another small voice in her head spoke up softly, 'is it really a mess?'

## A Spot Of Trouble

*Chapter 5 of 10*

"He knew he thought about her more than what was entirely appropriate. The worst thoughts though, were the ones he had when he was alone."

An unholy amount of thanx to Dryad!

A Spot Of Trouble

Legs stretched out and ankles crossed, Hermione was seated under a shady tree upon a well-worn pine bench. Her dazed mind was trying to organise all the events that had occurred today while she slowly lapped away at a vanilla and peach swirl ice cream, from Fortescue's.

She had arrived early under the guise of making a good impression. And even as she sat alone with her icy treat, she managed a blush at the memory of her unforgettable

introduction. Now that she thought about it with more attention, she was absolutely horrified. He had been forced to alert her to his presence as she had been wriggling around in his lap totally oblivious to his person.

Hermione groaned heavily with embarrassment.

Maybe that was why he had kissed her out of the blue like that? Had she given him some kind of signal with her actions? Surely he would have noticed from her shriek and embarrassment, that she had not noticed he was there.

'That kiss,' she thought as she closed her eyes inhaling deeply, the cool ice cream sliding around on her tongue. That kiss had been unlike anything she had ever experienced. Tender. Tentative even, then demanding. So demanding that in the end, it had consumed her. It had swallowed her whole, wrapping her up in the most breathtaking experience of her life. And it had taken her breath away, that much was for sure.

Sighing softly in confusion about what to make of this new development in her life, she finished her cone, dusted herself off and headed back to the ministry for an unwanted conversation.

"OF ALL THE IDIOTIC AND IMMATURE... WHATEVER POSSESSED YOU?... HOW YOU MANAGE TO RUN A BUSINESS?.. "

Hermione heard snippet's of a one-sided argument when she stepped into the room and the first thing she thought was, 'Poor Neville'.

She could hear Severus doing his pumpkin pie at some poor sod, but couldn't see Severus anywhere. She did a double take when she heard the word business, so that had ruled out Neville who was obviously avoiding coming anywhere near whatever was taking place at the moment. Just then she saw a large bookcase swing open to reveal a very pissed off Snape, two totally cowed looking Weasley's and what looked like a state of the art potions lab. She had wondered where he had located that.

Apparently the Weasley twins Fred and George. Had heard that Snape would be heading up a new department in the MoM (via Dad) and decided that they were feeling a little mischievous.

And as mischief-makers do, they brainstormed and experimented for at least a week before they came up with their latest invention.

Inkling ink.

It truly was a crafty piece of magic; it would give those working with it, the need to do something. And they had decided to make that decision for the users of the ink. By adding pheromones, which would make them open to some rather lusty, urges.

The boys had managed to create a potion that replicated both male and female Pheromones and seeing as how the gland that detects the pheromones, which is called the Vomero Nasal Organ. Is separated from the organ in the nose, that is responsible for scent, they would be able to slip it by their ex-Potions Master's keen nose undetected.

So all they had done after that was come up with three nifty charms, to be able to use the pheromones without the person or persons in question becoming suspicious.

The first step to ensure this was to apply a binding charm. To avoid having the potion separate from the ink; this had to be applied as soon as they came into contact. The next and the final step was the trickiest. As it consisted of two charms, that had to be cast simultaneously with equal strength. One of them was what produced the inkling; it was a simple charm. Much like what happened to muggles, if they came across Hogwarts. They would have to turn off an iron, oven or maybe even a tap. It was irrelevant what it happened to be, they just had to do something.

The other was a time-release charm, which was why you had to be careful to cast them with equal strength because if you weren't, someone with the frantic need to do something, without something to do, would probably go insane. Needless to say you would have a huge mess on your hands.

The way it worked was quite ingenious actually. You dipped your quill in the ink and used it as per usual. When the slow release started to go off after a period of time. You would start to get your inkling. It would be a subtle change so you wouldn't notice. You would just start feeling like you should be doing something. Combine the unnoticed urge, with the fact that you're breathing in all those Pheromones at the same time. Of which more are being released as time goes on and there you have it, Inkling ink.

The twins figured they'd be doing the greasy bat a bit of a favour; it wasn't as if he could actually attract a witch with his winning personality.

To say Severus hadn't seen it as a favour was to say the least. The only reason he had been enlightened at all was due to those idiot boys finding Hermione was the one working with him and had blanched in horror at their realisation. They had then torn out of Arthur's office like sparks from a wand, to try and prevent them from using their custom made ink.

Suffice to say things hadn't turned out to well for Fred and George.

Hermione was currently sitting in one of the armchairs by the fire, Severus across from her with Fred and George occupying the two in the middle.

Once she was brought up to speed by a confession from the twins. Hermione had been absolutely mortified and couldn't figure out which was worse. The fact they had done something so stupid and thoughtless. Or the fact they actually knew, what had happened.

She didn't even know where to start. With her elbows on her knees and her head in her hands, she had decided that today was forever going to be, the worst day of her life. She had managed a huge feat in gaining the acknowledgement of the ever stoic, Severus Snape. Even after she had made a fool of herself when she arrived. And now. Now she really did look like an idiot and they had done it. It was their entire fault. All because they had wanted to what? Have a laugh at Severus' expense.

Poor Severus, no wonder he had done his pastie; he was probably horrified that she had kissed him. Not to mention the fact that he was their main target that much was evident, as they hadn't known she would be working here. Come to think of it, they didn't even inquire or care about whom the witch involved would be. To her that seemed cruel and extremely low on their part. How dare they?

The man had suffered through Merlin knew what, risking his life for their own. He had walked a very fine line indeed between the light and dark, to keep them ahead in the game. She wasn't stupid, she had a fair idea of what death-eaters were capable of and expected to do. She knew to maintain his role; he would have had to do some pretty disconcerting things, she wasn't that naïve. It was no wonder why he was so snappish and terse with them all the time. Well not with his colleagues, but still he would have been put through a tremendous amount of stress and been under an extreme, wealth of pressure.

And this was how they saw fit to repay him for his sacrifices? This was the treatment he garnered for his efforts? Humiliation! Embarrassment! What for, detention's and a few cutting remarks? She was shrieking internally now.

Hermione stood up abruptly shocking the three males before her; she came to stand in front of the two culprits with her back to the fireplace allowing it to lend her an a vengeful glow. Eyes blazing ferociously with scorn, hands clenched into fists at her sides. Nails cutting into her palms, her back straight and stern as she managed to make them shrink in their chairs, fearful of what was to come from the picture she made.

Barely opening her mouth she hissed. "Careless. Cruel. Ungrateful. Immature boys, that's what you are. You make me sick the both of you. I don't know how you can call me friend" She swiftly pulled her wand out, gave her wrist a subtle flick and the sound of the boys receiving a simultaneous slap resounded through the room. She sheathed her wand back up her sleeve, nodded tersely to Severus by way of good evening and strode off into the lift.

Once the lift doors closed Fred started, "we really are,"

"truly sorry Professor," George finished.

Severus rose to his full imposing height and sneered leaning in, as he said, "I am not the loving, loyal friend that you have just hurt and humiliated. I suggest you save all your apologies for Hermione, if she ever sees fit to look at you again." He leaned in even closer looking very serious at the boys, who had unconsciously leaned back further in their chairs. "You will not mention this to anyone. Do you understand? Good. Don't think you've heard the last of this though." Here he straightened up and folded his arms with a sinister smirk. "After all. Revenge is a dish best served cold, is it not?"

Fred and George looked absolutely horrified at his last statement, "revenge". Oooh, they were definitely on a pitch full of bludges with no beater.

"Now get out of my sight, before I change my mind and hex you six ways from Sunday this instant," Severus barked out and then watched in amusement as the two boys scrambled to get out of the room and away from his presence as quick as they could.

Severus quickly turned to the fireplace grabbed a hand full of powder and shouted "Baker's Delight." Before stepping into the floo.

Twenty seconds later the greenhouse door opened just a crack and Neville's wide, nervous little eye darted around the area. Before he flung the door open with great vigour and hurled himself towards the elevator as quick as his pudgy little legs could carry him.

Severus was determined to catch up to Hermione. He knew it would take her a while in the lift but he didn't want to risk missing her. So he flooed into an abandoned bakery a few blocks up. The ministry had commandeered it for emergency purposes in case they fell under attack. The tiny little shop had been barren apart from a few benches the fireplace and an extreme amount of dust. Which was doing a good job at irritating his sensitive nose. He carefully moved over to the window less he disturb any more particles. Just in time to see Hermione burst through the phone booth door with as much vigour as she had left the room with a few minutes earlier.

He cast a quick notice me not charm and strode quickly along so he wouldn't lose her. Severus had been surprised to find out that after graduating Hermione had bought and moved into her own flat. Severus hadn't laid eyes on her since her graduation until this morning. Now that he had it, he wasn't about to give up his opportunity to know where she was. He had kept at least five meters behind her in case she felt the magic near by; she had slowed in her gait now obviously having walked out her initial anger and was now strolling along with ease. He noticed that they had been walking for quite a while and briefly wondered why she hadn't apparated before swiftly concluding that she was probably worried about splinching herself, which had worked to his advantage so he wasn't complaining.

They had now made what must be their last turn, as he could see her looking up, smiling at the middle townhouse in a set of three. It was the only one out of the set that looked well loved, the face of her home was painted in a cross between a Tuscan and heritage pink colour. The balcony railing which was wrought iron, was curling around in the pattern of creeping ivy and had been painted a rich heritage green 'almost Slytherin green,' he thought. Severus noted that in the terracotta planter boxes upon the railing, was a mixture of cooking herbs and spices along with some basic healing herbs.

Severus' eyes snapped up to the French doors on the top floor because they had been opened with force. She was still hanging onto the doorknobs when she thrust herself outward into the area of the balcony, while breathing in the breezy fresh air Mother Nature had to offer. The white fine lace curtains hitching a ride, out the doorway upon her gift, making Hermione look every bit the goddess he believed her to be. He viewed her as she tilted her features towards the heavens to try and catch the last touch of warmth from the afternoon sun. He had to leave. He had to get out of there now, lest his resolve fail him. And he didn't think she would be able to take much more today.

Severus apparated home to Snape Manor. One of his favourite rooms in the grand dwelling was the library; he had often found himself in this room the way he was now. He leaned back in the arm's crook of a much-loved chestnut brown, long leather sofa. He remembered fondly, a time when he was but a small child of five or six. How he used to make up his own little games counting all the buttons. They had been sewn in a sporadic diamond pattern across the surface.

Now though, as he reclined upon his dearly loved Chesterfield, he was not interested in counting the buttons. Seated so one of his lean silk pyjama-clad legs was stretched out languidly across the sofa, with the other slightly bent resting upon the plush carpeted surface. He lay comfortably against a few airy cushions, propped up just the right amount to be able to sip upon his brandy with ease.

This always happened when he had a few drinks. The thoughts he had wanted to escape were always the ones that persisted on coming forth. How could they not though? How could he not want to think such things? When it was these thoughts he had wanted to torture himself with; to think about 'her'.

He would never forget today. How she had been so passionate in her explanation trying to make him see that she was right, that she knew, that she was on the brink of figuring it out. The sparkling intelligence that had shone through her eye's as she defended her reasoning. The way her hands gestured frantically in a dance of their own, hypnotising his mind into watching the elegant flow of her movements, making him unable to tear his eyes away from them. How some of her wayward tresses had fallen down to frame an already perfect picture. The quill that had sat comfortably tucked away in her locks so she could work with ease was waiting patiently. Obediently. Cocooned in a vanilla scented, honey brown heaven until it would be needed again.

He knew it wasn't the effects of the Weasley's ink that had made him view her like that, for he viewed her that way all the time.

"Hermione." He caressed her name with a whisper from his lips; just the weight of the word was enough to make his chest hurt and his groin ache.

Even though her response had been induced, it didn't change the fact that he had experienced her responses.

The way she had gazed at him with wonders and questions in her eyes. He casually trailed light-fingered touches down his neck and chest, hissing as he dragged a nail over one of his nipples. The way she had sought out the touch of his hand and willingly leant into it eyes closed with trust as he caressed her cheek. He allowed his hands more pressure as he ran them down his stomach. How she had looked into his eyes after that, searching his very soul for answers. He gently teased his erection with nimble fingers. The sweet scent and feel of her warm abating breaths against his features.

He grasped himself firmly after he released his pulsing member. When she had shyly met his mouth with her warm swelling lips. Holding it tightly he pumped himself fiercely. And that sweet aroma, of vanilla that had wrapped around him when she had pulled upon his hair closer drawing him closer into her. The way it felt to feel her warm and responding body under his hands. He exploded hot sticky come up the front of his torso. He had held onto her for his life, thinking that if he were to lose her touch, he may very well wither away and die.

Somewhere through his lust filled foggy mind, he registered that he had brought himself to climax at the mere thought of his beautiful goddess. Before his body took over his mind and demanded his sleep, he succumbed willingly with a contented smile playing about his lips.

## Musings and New Resolves

*Chapter 6 of 10*

"He knew he thought about her more than what was entirely appropriate. The worst thoughts though, were the ones he had when he was alone."

Hermione knew that it was early morning as the sun had yet to peak its warm face through her bedroom window. She slowly moved her body within the cocooned warmth of her blankets. Arching her back in a feline gesture with her arms stretched out and her legs tucked under her she let out a deep, purr-like sigh.

Crookshanks sensed his mistress stirring and lazily stalked his way across the bed to garner her attention.

Hermione smiled when she felt the demanding, familiar nuzzle against her face he made with his furry head. She lifted her hand from within the blankets and reached up to scratch him firmly behind his ears, eliciting a purr of appreciation from her fluffy charge.

While she lay there (her cat contented with the fact his mistress was distracted enough to unconsciously lavish attention upon him), Hermione was analysing her fierce reaction to the twins' prank yesterday.

She'd never condoned the way her peers had spoke ill of the Professor in school and had never been shy about reprimanding them for doing so. She knew he was an asshole of the largest kind, with a sharp tongue and a quick wit many never grasped, all wrapped up in a sour demeanour that was completely unapproachable. Hermione always thought, that it wasn't his fault they couldn't read between the lines and understand his subtle humour and backhanded compliments. She thought he was rather funny, if you were quick enough to decipher and understand everything he was saying. Hermione often found it hard to hold herself in check and keep from laughing out loud in class at some of his comments and quick-witted drawls. Less she found herself on the receiving end of a glare, point loss or worse, detention.

But she didn't have to worry about being punished with point losses and detentions anymore. And by the way things had been going with Snape shedding his snarky potions master persona (even with all the embarrassing events of the past twenty-four hours) she wouldn't have to worry about the glares either.

Hermione thought about the way Snape...no Severus now, had been so far. He was obviously eager to shed his intimidating nature with his colleagues, as he had been nothing but charming and polite to them both. Which made her briefly wonder where the other person who was to join their department had gotten to.

He held the same love and excitement she did for research and was extremely sharp, which she had always respected him for, along with all the sacrifices he made and danger he had put himself in line for.

Research was such an extremely open field to be working in that there were no guidelines or structure to follow. It was all about expanding your mind beyond the box you lived in. Ignoring the guidelines and rebuilding the structure, that's what it was all about; that's what she loved about it, the freedom to make your own rules. She vaguely wondered if her friendship with Harry and Ron along with all their adventures was what had influenced her desire to work outside the box.

She didn't doubt that herself and Severus would be making some major breakthroughs in the future, they were both sharp, dedicated scholars for the sheer joy of it and she found herself smiling and genuinely happy over the prospect. Obviously he valued her intelligence and input or she wouldn't be a part of his team at R.O.A.M. Right?

Things had been messed up badly yesterday. What a disaster that had been. She sighed and propped herself upon her pillows before laying down again, with her fingers interlaced behind her head she watched as the first rays of dawn filtered across her ceiling.

Crookshanks was a bit miffed about losing her attention but he settled for making himself comfortable on Hermione's chest. Laying his head on her shoulder in the crook of her neck he purred contently as he cuddled into her warmth.

Hermione tilted her head and laid her cheek upon the comforting warmth his body he provided, while she pondered how to handle the uncanny events from yesterday. She closed her eyes against the vibrations her familiar's purr was emitting, allowing a smile to play across her lips as she recalled the intensive kiss she had shared with her intelligent, quick-witted boss. Truth be told she had enjoyed the experience, more than she would be willing to admit to anyone else.

Did he actually kiss like that all the time? Was he normally that attentive and intense?

Hermione supposed that it was in fact a magical induced experience and that she might as well forget about it and put it behind her. There was no point in dwelling on it, since it was highly unlikely that it was about to happen again. She didn't want the awkwardness of the situation to have any ramifications on their work and resolved to be an adult about it and carry on as if nothing happened.

She found herself feeling a little disappointed over the fact that it hadn't been real and idly wondered if the intensity or reaction towards one another, would've been the same had there been no magical aid involved.

Hermione sighed and distractedly pet her cat on last time, before deciding that this line of thought was useless and unproductive if she wanted things at work to resemble normalcy. So with a resolve in place, that she wouldn't allow either party to feel uncomfortable. She hauled herself gracefully out of bed for breakfast.

With her morning coffee and a plate full of fresh fruit she made her way through the French doors onto the balcony breathing in the crisp morning air that met her there. She placed the platter of fruits upon a little round, café style table and approached the balcony savouring the first taste of her morning coffee.

Hermione gently brushed the palm of a hand along the tops the herbs that rested in one of the terracotta planters that hung from her railing. She breathed in deeply and smiled contently, enjoying the peacefulness of early morning and the aroma's that drifted into her senses. She reached back to her breakfast platter and gracefully snagged a sliver of mango that drizzled sticky juices into her palm and down her arm.

She was wearing a rather expensive teddy made of soft peach silk, the wrap to match left casually open. It had been a graduating gift from her mother. So not wanting to stain and ruin her lovely sleepwear she shrugged of the wrap quickly and carefully, the second the morning air caressed her unshielded body she felt her nipples tighten and goose flesh rise on her skin. She greedily lapped away at her arm running her tongue from her elbow to her wrist, openly groaning at the effort to contort her self and moaning from the sheer pleasure of tasting the sticky sweetness upon her skin.

After she finished eating her fill of the sweet fleshy fruits she had prepared, she slowly licked and sucked the remains of sticky goodness from her fingers savouring the left over juices.

She snapped her head up with alert eyes staring across the road she could have sworn she heard a pop from apparition. Which was odd since she lived in a muggle neighbourhood. She shrugged lightly after sensing no one around, coming to the conclusion that it must have been a car backfiring somewhere on the block. She lovingly tended to her basic little potion and herb garden before she headed inside for a shower and then got ready for work.

Poor Severus. He hadn't been able to help himself. Hermione was like a drug to him and he had succumbed wholeheartedly, becoming addicted. He had woken up before dawn and tortured himself yet again with yesterday's events. He wasn't sure how much more he could endure but he knew if he acted on impulse he could ruin everything. He just had to see her though, just a glimpse a quick look to satisfy his need for her. With that resolve in place he quickly cast a cleansing charm, summoned his clothes on and apparated outside her flat.

When he arrived the sun was just breaking over the horizon and seeing as how he didn't have the cover of night's darkness he cast a quick 'see me not' charm lest he be spotted.

He sighed with relief when he spotted shadowy movement within her apartment she was up and about, he would be sure to get at least a peek at her as she would surely come out onto the balcony and tend to her plants before she left. He wasn't disappointed either for when she did come out onto the balcony his breath hitched and his trousers tightened.

He viewed what was most likely her morning routine the way she sashayed through the French doors with a small contented smile with such grace, was a tell tale sign that she did this often. The beautiful silky nightclothes she wore only aided to make her body look more graceful and shaped. The peach colour of her garments accentuating the creamy skin that wrapped around her body, adding an exquisite backdrop to her bed tussled golden curls. He decided that this was definitely his favoured view of her

she looked so warm and inviting in her relaxed state.

He was about to leave feeling that he'd got the glimpse he came for, when all of a sudden she started to shrug out of her wrap and proceed to lick and suck at her arm. His cock jumped at the site of her own mouth lavishly working her flesh and he could clearly see the darkened colour and tightness of her nipples through her nightie. Gods, how he wanted this woman, this intelligent warm lovely creature that stood but a few yards away. He had to get out of here he was sorely tempted to apparate onto her balcony and ravish her senseless. As he apparated away a plan started to form in his sly little mind, if he was going to claim her as his he was going to have to work more quickly, his body and mind were becoming impatient.

## An Interesting Luncheon pt1

*Chapter 7 of 10*

"He knew he thought about her more than what was entirely appropriate. The worst thoughts though, were the ones he had when he was alone."

### An interesting luncheon pt1

Hermione exited the lift at work and was greeted with the sight of Severus casually resting back in one of the chairs at the large jarrah table, viewing a book that was comfortably sitting across his lap that had an ankle resting upon his knee. As she walked over, she couldn't help but take in the domestically exotic picture he made wearing a long sleeved white cotton shirt with the first few buttons undone, allowing a view of some sparse black hairs to peek through. He had his hair tied back at the nape of his neck with a few strands breaking free across the front side of his face and he wore... glasses. Little silver framed glasses that were perched halfway down his sharp aristocratic nose. Tailored black trousers covered his lean legs with leather boots upon his feet. She felt her mouth go dry; she'd discovered her penchant for leather last summer. She licked her lips unconsciously as she watched his nimble fingers slide down the side of the page before turning it, remembering how they had felt when they were upon her body yesterday.

She placed an armful of parchment on the large table and cleared her throat before saying, "I didn't know you wore glasses, Severus."

Severus gave her a warm smile when he looked up and was pleased to see her eyes had a bit of a glazed look about them, so she definitely liked the sight of a casually relaxed Severus after all and mentally congratulated himself as he rose from his chair, greeting her with a small bow and chuckling lightly.

"Unfortunately years and years of pouring over text have not been of any assistance in keeping my eyesight as it once was."

Though he didn't add that he had extremely keen vision when it came to long distances and that it was only reading up close text that caused him bother, she seemed to like the glasses. He did as well. As a matter of fact, he thought they softened his features.

"Well, they suit you," she answered quietly and kindly as she sat down and started to go over some notes.

They heard the elevator door open and Neville greeted them with a quiet "Good morning," and a bit of a flush to his features.

"Neville," Severus started. "I'm glad you're here, we didn't get a chance yesterday as things were a little new and hectic," he was pleased to see Hermione look at the tabletop and blush at this. "And I thought it might be good idea to have a luncheon together so we could get to know one another a little better. What do you say?" He looked between Neville and Hermione for an answer.

Neville looked sheepishly between the two before he answered. "Actually I, um, have other plans." He blushed a little and cleared his throat before he continued on. "You see, I'm already meeting someone for lunch. But I wouldn't mind the company when it comes time to go. That is if you don't mind?"

Severus allowed a small smile to grace his lips and raised an eyebrow feeling decidedly happy about this turn of events as he would now have Hermione to himself for the duration of lunch and would be able to show her another side of his private persona.

"I don't see any real problems with that. Hermione?" He then turned to make sure that this would be acceptable to her.

Hermione felt a little unsure about the prospect of being alone with Severus at the moment but nevertheless, she had decided that she wouldn't allow awkwardness to interfere in the workplace and figured this was the sort of thing normal colleagues did. So she voiced her agreement to the arrangements, noted the pleasant smile Severus gave almost to himself and watched as Neville excused himself and made a beeline for his greenhouse.

They worked diligently all morning on various papers, Hermione and Severus stealing contemplative glances at one another when the other was distracted. At lunchtime Neville appeared from within his well-supplied greenhouse and proceeded to ask where they would be heading for lunch, to which Hermione answered, "Well really, there's only The Leaky Cauldron, unless you want to head into Muggle London."

"Tut tut Hermione, I see you haven't been taken out in the Wizarding world before." Severus held up a hand to forestall the interruption he could see forming on her face. "We shall just have to introduce you to one of the many hidden things you have yet to encounter. Won't we, Neville?"

Neville nodded in agreement with a small smile, feeling glad that there was at least something he could be of assistance in besides his talents in Herbology.

"There really are some delightful little places to dine in the Wizarding world, Herms."

Severus and Hermione both winced at the butchering of Hermione's name, which was obviously meant to be a casual endearment. They all went to freshen up before heading over to the fireplace and flooing into The Leaky Cauldron.

Severus ushered his two younger colleagues ahead of him as they entered Diagon Alley through the back of the pub. He found he preferred to watch Hermione as she conversed with Neville while he strolled elegantly down the alley.

Today she was wearing black sandaled flats and a slinky black, ankle length skirt that swayed hypnotically with her hips. While watching said swaying hips he noticed how it smoothed over her firm rounded bottom perfectly, giving the illusion of being underwear free, though upon closer scrutiny he realized she was wearing one of those thongs the Muggles were in favour of wearing. Gods just the thought of that scrap of material resting between her perfect cheeks was nearly his undoing and decided to remove his gaze from that particular area, lest he be caught ogling her wares by a passer-by. Her shirt was a collared short-sleeved affair of navy blue that possessed a silver shine with her movements. Her hair was piled upon her head in a loose bun with wisps of stray curls fluttering around her neck and face as she strode along.

Coming to their turn along the alley he moved to walk beside her, placed a hand in the small of her back and turned her gently towards the other alleyway.

"I present to you 'Rathskeller Row', Hermione. For all your dining requirements," Severus said gallantly as he watched her eyes dart around the alley they had just entered. It seemed to meet her approval as she wore a beautiful smile upon her features making her eyes sparkle with enthusiasm over all the new things to be seen. He shared an amused glance with Neville before they headed along the pathway.

It really was an amazing place, so many different styles and settings in the one area, all set apart at a tasteful distance from one another. There wasn't the cramped hustle and bustle feel to it that you encountered in Diagon Alley. All the buildings held something unique about them, most with themes of all different shapes and sizes (magic really was a useful tool for business). The cobblestoned lane possessing a wide berth to allow for carriages (and for the eccentric, flying cars). You could stroll with ease along the pathway without bumping into or brushing against anyone else. The place held a very relaxed air about it and you could easily picture the romantic environment that would emerge after dusk. The trees lining the street with the moon, stars and night sky for a backdrop.

Neville thanked them for their company on the walk and took his leave while Severus performed his gallant duty by offering Hermione an arm to take hold, of which she accepted with a blush and headed towards a charming little Italian restaurant, located halfway down the lane called 'The Olive Garden'.

The moment they entered the restaurant their senses were immediately assaulted with the fragrant and intensely aromatic flavours of citrus, olives, capers, garlic, dried fruits and the underlying scent of chocolate.

Hermione's head was reeling from the onset of scents, her brain was working overtime trying to identify and categorise each one. She hadn't realised how hungry she truly was until smelling the superb ingredients floating through the air around her. With a small smile upon her lips she breathed in deeply enjoying the invading aromas.

"Lord Snape, how have you been?"

Hermione opened her eyes to see a portly looking Italian man around the age of fifty, (but who knew with wizards) greeting Severus in his native tongue with a brief embrace and a kiss to the cheek. She goggled, bewildered, when she realised Severus answered in Italian. Hermione herself wasn't adept in the language, but she could decipher a few words here and there. She knew enough to know that Severus had asked after this man's family so he must know him well.

"Good, good. Very well and healthy, but who is this beautiful woman? By Zeus, Aphrodite herself would be jealous."

Severus prayed to the gods that Hermione didn't understand Italian, though he couldn't help the pride that bubbled up when his old friend commented on her beauty. "Your cheek grows with your age, Michael," retorted Severus good-naturedly and looked on with amusement as Hermione looked completely lost having not understood the conversation.

"Ci, I am afraid so," replied Michael in English before continuing on in his native tongue with, "but you cannot help admire such a beauty, no?" He looked at Severus raising his eyebrow a knowing twinkle in his eye, very reminiscent of his former employer.

"Effettivamente," was all Severus replied.

They were led through the Tuscan styled restaurant, up a grand marble staircase and out onto a glorious terrace. Hermione gasped audibly at the view before her and Severus allowed himself a satisfied smile as he watched her quickly shuffle over to the balcony's edge, lean out and hungrily devour the scenery in front of her.

He had obviously been right in assuming she would be pleased with this setting, judging from the colour scheme and style of her own terrace he figured she had a keen interest in this style of environment.

Hermione broke the silence with a wistful sigh saying, "Oh, it's beautiful, Severus." Her eyes never left the scenery before her. She couldn't stop the shiver tingling down her spine when she felt Severus' whispered reply of, "Yes, yes it is."

They stood there for at least twenty minutes blissfully contented; him watching her, her watching the scenery.

She was hungrily viewing everything in front of her with a keen interest. Miles of vineyard, rows upon rows of green vibrant vines bursting with plump, healthy grapes. She could see people dressed in comfortable gardening clothes made up of loose cheesecloth shirts, which allowed the occasional breeze to dry their sweat. Beige baggy pants were worn for unrestricted movement and comfy open sandals, which were only to be topped by fairly large straw hats to protect them from the sun's harsh glare. Hermione noticed that some wore gloves and were tending to the vines and their beds, while others were randomly walking around sampling their wares. She breathed in deeply, closing her eyes once again and enjoyed the scents of a fresh summer's day, a mix of ripe grapes and fresh herbs. There was an underlying smell of sandalwood, spices and potions, which she found just as pleasing and smiled lightly knowing where the last ones had come from. Opening her eyes and looking fondly upon the village just beyond the vineyard she broke the silence with a saddened double-edged question.

"It's charmed. Isn't it?"

Severus had been but a breath away from her the whole time. So close yet oh so far away. Her straying curls had been caught on the small breeze and were dancing across his upper chest just enough to tease him into touching the vanilla scented honey browned locks. The elegant creamy white expanse of her neck a mere few inches from his aching lips, if he were to just dip his head a little his mouth would be able to taste her again and oh how he longed to do that with every fibre of his being. She sounded almost disappointed in her questioning when she spoke and wondered if she had realised the double innuendo of her words.

"In a way." Was the only answer he would supply her with, thinking about how pleased she would be later when he revealed the meaning of those words, maybe in both instances if the moment was right. "Come," he said offering up his arm and leading her over to a round table set for two. The chairs were set closely together but not so close that they would be unable to view each other and converse comfortably. The point of this positioning was to allow both diners to be able to enjoy the calm and peaceful scenery on display before them.

"Are all the restaurants like this Severus?" Hermione asked gesturing around at the extravagant detail.

Severus gave a small lip twitch. She never really stopped asking questions. "Some are. It depends upon the owner really. Michael is very much in love with and proud of his homeland. I think you'll find the attention to detail is for his benefit more than ours."

"Aahh," Hermione answered in understanding. She had visited Italy one summer during one of her Hogwarts' breaks and had instantly fallen in love with the history-filled laidback country. Everything about it was beautiful; from their historic buildings to their richly vibrant landscapes. She had enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere of the place and its people but that could have been because Voldemort had finally been defeated and she had been more inclined to relax at the time, unlike in previous years. She had grown a lot as a person that summer. It had been when she finally felt centred and found herself. And for that reason she had always held its charms close to her heart.

She supposed that seeing as how Severus had shucked his prick of a Professor persona, that he to had managed to find and centre himself also. Little did she know that she had been ninety percent of the reasoning behind it.

They had ordered their meal and were interrupted from a discussion on a theory about how to reduce the addictive effect the dreamless sleep potion held, when their starters arrived.

They had both ordered a Tortellini dish, the little hat shaped pasta parcels were stuffed with home grown sweet potato, mortadella cheese and just the right amount of freshly chopped parsley. The sauce was made from a light, creamy butter with freshly shredded sage tossed through it. Severus had complimented it nicely with a bottle of Soave which was a mild and delicate white wine originating from Verona, with a very distinctive bouquet she was sure she would never forget.

"You know, Hermione, there is a story behind the discovery of the tortellini you are consuming," Severus said after sipping his wine and placing it back upon the tabletop.

"Oh?" Interest decidedly peaked, as she hadn't heard of this tale when she had visited.

Severus sipped his wine once more enjoying the texture and cleared his throat before he continued. "There is a story that tells of an old pasta maker, the best of his skill, in love with a young girl of whom he was teaching." Severus didn't break contact with her eyes as she sipped her wine, innocent brown eyes peering at him over the rim of her glass. "Before she started her tasks for the day, she would go into the back room and change her clothes into something more suitable for kitchen work." His tone of voice had taken on a lowly rough quality. "And one day. One day the owner gave into temptation and went to spy his love through the keyhole of the door as she changed." He had said temptation with the caress of a whisper and then raising a perfectly sculptured eyebrow continued. "All he could see was her navel. But he had found it so beautiful that he picked up a small disk of pasta and mimicked its shape." Severus diverted his eyes, sipped his wine and said. "So this as legend would have it, is how the first tortellini was born."

"Some say that he was a lecherous old man that should never have even considered looking at his young protégé. What would you say, Hermione?"

His gaze on her was intense while Hermione seemed to ponder this for a moment as she placed another morsel of said pasta in her mouth she caught his eye before replying with. "I would say that no matter what form a muse takes on, it is that it inspired that matters."

Severus' eyes searched Hermione's for an indication as to what she was thinking. He had always been able to read her thoughts from the expressions on her face, it was one of the drawbacks of possessing a warm, honest, caring personality and she had yet to transform from that nature through all his observations. It was a little disconcerting to him now that he realised he couldn't tell what she was thinking. What had she meant by that statement exactly?

He only had three possible answers to choose from. Hermione was either saying that were he to make his interest known and pursue her, she would not find the attention unwelcomed. A green light so to speak, according to the Muggles, or that his interest was noted and pleasing but he would have to be inspired from afar.

Which was an answer to his layered question that he refused to accept. She would be his; he wanted her, he craved her, he lusted after and loved her madly. Severus would find a way to make that happen. Even if it came to going about it by... questionable means.

His last option... was as simple as what she had said. Meaning that she hadn't picked up on the underlying question he had been asking. What would she think of having the attentions of her former and aged tutor upon her?

He smirked, she blushed.

Or... she didn't want to acknowledge that she knew what he was asking. He would accept that and she knew it to, cheeky minx. It wasn't exactly a bow from a Hippogriff so to speak, but he hadn't gotten his arm ripped off for his efforts either. He could work with that. It was time to get her into a comfort zone; people were so much easier to coax when they were relaxed and off guard.

A/N: I would like to acknowledge all the reviewers who not only give me a gr8 buzz but also a good kick in the pants to lol. Who am I to deny such great reviewers.

'Rathskeller Row' comes from 'Glinda' who was kind enough to pass on the whisper that it is infact another name for pub or bar.. many thanks goes out to her.

Dryad brought to my attention that 'The Olive Garden' is infact an Italian food chain in America... as I am in Australia this has happened unintentionally sorry for any inconvenience.

'Effettivamente' is a loose translation of 'Indeed'.

This chap has a second part to it that I have only half finished at the moment as I don't want anything to go ooc and am trying my hardest to keep them in character at the cost of my sanity \*grins\*

Also I just found out that I am to be blessed with the miracle of a third child merlin help me I am very happy about it but extremely tired at the moment hopefully as I move out of my first trimester I won't feel so bad, so bare with me as 15 min in front of my pc tends to make me want to sleep for a good eight hours.... Hopefully it won't be long b 4 you hear from me I am plodding along best I can...

Please review you know I love 'em and they keep me motivated huge XXXX and OOOO alicat

## An Interesting Luncheon pt2/Lemon Juice

*Chapter 8 of 10*

"He knew he thought about her more than what was entirely appropriate. The worst thoughts though, were the ones he had when he was alone."

This chapter is dedicated to 'prettylittleowl' Happy Birthday cheeks! Also huge thanks to my god-like beta Dryad, who had this swiftly returned in record time to post on Ash. Go read her stuff it's fantastic!

Lemon Juice

They moved onto on to the main course, consisting of a Tuscany style grilled chicken tasting delicious with the combination of fresh garlic, lemon and sage all blending together perfectly, to make one of the most magnificent meals either had had the pleasure of consuming in a long time.

They were drinking a full-bodied wine at Hermione's request this time. She had selected a smooth red Barolo that had been aged for eight years, another superb Italian wine that was a little on the high side for alcohol content, but one of the finest wines they could ever have the pleasure sampling.

Each was marvelling over the surreal experience of being flushed in face, relaxed and conversing with ease. They got rather smiley all of a sudden; that stupid impish grin you can never manage to wipe off your face when experiencing the warm glow from a wine buzz.

After polishing off a second bottle of the smooth red, Severus decided that now would be the ideal time to step things up a bit and asked if she would be interested in a leisurely stroll around the grounds to walk off lunch. When he received a confused look at his request his only reply was to chuckle lightly and say, "You will see Hermione. Come."

They walked to the end of the balcony and Hermione caught the tip of her flats on a protruding tile, she stumbled, giggled, blushed and excused herself.

Severus smiled warmly and offered her the crook of his elbow for support and if anyone happened to see them they would assume she was being courted and therefore off limits. He relished in the fact that she clung onto his arm and leaned into his body for support instead of making use of the stairway railing. The wine in her system must be

circulating nicely; things were going very well indeed. Not that he was planning on taking advantage of her while she was without all her faculties, but it would certainly help in keeping her open to... suggestion.

Hermione was astounded, gobsmacked, speechless, baffled even. Maybe not so much baffled as a little... slow. Had she not been floating along upon a wine induced cloud, she would have processed, as soon as they'd passed the lattice archway, that they'd been automatically teleported!

It was a very complex piece of magic, for not only had they just been relocated to a lusciously vibrant and healthy vineyard on the outskirts of some small Italian village, which they had been viewing from a rather cosy terrace in London, but their whole attire had been transfigured. They had been transported and transfigured to suit their environment... cool.

She'd really had too much to drink and Severus couldn't help but notice the cheesy grin on her face. Gods! The girl was all but plastered, snuggling herself into the side of his body like that, not that he minded in the least. But there was no way she would be so free were she not.

"Come Hermione, I'd like to show you something."

Severus proceeded to steer her between rows of ripening grape vines, through a small meadow and up a slight incline with a few stumbles along the way.

When they crested the small hill, dark wood cherry trees that were full of pale pink blossoms greeted their eyes; a few petals had been freed by a recent breeze and were littering the ground making it look like a wonderland.

Hermione gasped at the beauty of the scene and immediately left Severus' side, much to his chagrin, to feather light touches in awe upon some low residing blooms.

"They're beautiful Severus; this place is beautiful," she said, swinging around with a wistful smile directed at her soon to be beau and promptly caught her foot on an exposed root. Swaying slightly due to her consumption and her swift movements she stumbled and fell straight into Severus' arms.

As far as Severus was concerned he had never seen a picture more worthy of the word perfection in all his days. Hermione's awe struck delight warmed him deeply and he couldn't help feeling quiet smug at having pleased her so.

As soon as he saw her footing slip he closed their distance and caught her in a firm embrace. He all but sang when the beautiful witch reached up and brushed her fingers from his brow to his cheek, down his jaw and to a feather light caress across his bottom lip.

"You're not what I expected you to be, Severus," she all but whispered. At Severus' slight crease in his brow, Hermione reluctantly pulled away and sighed almost indistinctly.

"And what did you expect me to be, Hermione?" Severus retorted softly from behind, his breath tickling her neck with delightful warmth.

Slightly leaning back in her haze against his chest she replied, "I'm honestly not sure."

Moving slowly, so as not to startle her brain into functioning properly, Severus snuck an arm around her abdomen and gently pulled her flush against him. Oh how this lovely witch made his heart flutter, he could have died happy having just had this moment to take with him. The picturesque scene before him and the beautiful warm witch against him was too much for his sensibilities to handle, he just had to do something to let his intentions be known.

Hermione's eyes fluttered closed and she sighed as she felt the warm caresses of Severus' lips brushing lightly upon her neck, when his lips enclosed around her lobe she let out a long deep breath she hadn't realised she'd held and leant her head to the side to give him more skin to work with.

The feel of her skin against his lips was heavenly, warm and inviting were a few words that flittered through his mind briefly. She was so responsive to his touch; it was hard not to drown within her. The steady, deep breaths she was taking were making her breasts heave enticingly, invitingly. He could see her pebbled nipples straining against the white cotton shirt that had been transfigured for her when they entered the vineyard and could not watch any longer. Severus' other hand slid up her torso to cup one of the heaving orbs and massage it lightly, he was elated to see and feel her pushing up into his touch.

Taking a mental step back from his actions he noted how beautifully flushed she looked, when his other hand left its place from her waist and it to made its way to the other perfectly shaped breast, he was nearly undone at the sensual growl that came from her throat and went straight to his groin. The way her head tossed from side to side back against his chest and the way her back arched as she ground her rounded cheeks into his almost painful erection. The sheer passion in such actions was enough to have him involuntary thrust back.

Flushed with desire and heat Hermione felt about ready to boil over. She was no longer affected by her earlier wine consumption. That had cleared when she felt a hand enclose her breast only to be replaced by an intense heat that almost had her screaming. Snaking a hand above her Hermione turned her head and pulled Severus into a searing kiss that spoke of just how heated she did feel.

Demanding! That's the only word that Severus could think of to describe a kiss such as this, no hesitant gentleness or shy fumbling, not at the moment at any rate. She'd just decided she wanted to possess his mouth and he wasn't going to complain, the way his young goddess had just claimed his mouth and was continuing to plunder it as if she owned it sent jolts of uncontrollable arousal through his body. He swung her fiercely by the shoulders to face him and pulled her flush against him as he proceeded to do some plundering of his own.

Being kissed so passionately with the combination of hands running their fill around her body with no sign of stopping had Hermione in sensation overload. She withered and rubbed against him, delighting in the primal growl she had brought forth when she palmed his impressive erection through his cargo pants. Spurred on, she ripped open the casual button down shirt and ran her hands up his abdomen and splayed them across his taut chest, flicking his nipples with her thumbnails.

Severus broke away abruptly holding Hermione by her shoulders, his head was tilted back slightly, plush red lips parted and panting as if he had never breathed before. His eyes were half lidded and his pupils widely dilated as he stared back into the eyes that mirrored his own condition. He could still feel the pressure of her hands against his chest while he fought for oxygen and realised that her chest was rising and falling in sync with his own. She was just as breathless and aroused as he was and he had never wanted her more in his life than he did at this moment.

But he couldn't bring himself to take advantage of her while she was inebriated. He wanted her, oh how he wanted her and he would allow no room for regret after the fact, for when he claimed her she would be his forever and he would give her no reason to doubt that.

A/N: Oh you lovely reviewers, I love you! I realise it has been an unforgivable amount of time between updates, but you should be happy to know my third trimester is progressing nicely (if not uncomfortably, bloody toilet stops!)

And I have been bitten with the inspiration bug to write a few more chaps, so you should see some more over the next few weeks. Please review you guys, you've been great! I'm off to answer as many reviews as I can before I have to go shopping.

alicat xox

P.S. 'Prettylittleowl' I know its not the smutty chap you wanted...but it just wasn't right yet, I promise there's a wicked make up chap for it though, I'll even make it ultra long. :)



# WHAT!?...There's Plot?

## Chapter 9 of 10

"He knew he thought about her more than what was entirely appropriate. The worst thoughts though, were the ones he had when he was alone."

Well, you guys, I'm back; you've probably forgotten my little fic, but I am now here to continue it. I actually deleted half this chapter off my hard drive before saving it to disk \*shakes head and sighs\* (I'm going to blame it on post pregnancy syndrome), and then when I finally felt like nutting it out for a second time, we had a power surge and I lost it again! Just couldn't find the inspiration to re-write it once more...until now.

Obviously, after reading HBP, this fic is now completely AU, even though it wasn't really IU to begin with. You probably won't find any spoilers in it just in case you haven't read HBP yet so it should still be safe. The occasional spell or some such thing may make it in, but as for direct plot, you should be all right.

Massive, huge, enormous thanks go out to my beta, 'Nakhash Mekashefah', who took her scant spare time to clean this up and make it readable. Without her, it simply wouldn't be here ;).

WHAT!?... There's Plot?

It was mid-afternoon and Neville had been back from lunch for quite a while now. He was feeling very pleased with the way things had gone over the course of his meal, and was quietly humming a Weird Sisters tune he had picked up from somewhere while he washed up for a brief afternoon tea.

Neville's ears pricked at some slight sounds of movement coming from the main room, but he thought nothing of it, as surely it was just Hermione and Severus returned from lunch. Consequently, he was rather surprised and disturbed to find Lucius Malfoy turning swiftly from a filing cabinet and sending a full Body-Bind straight into his chest!

In the helpless position he found himself in, all Neville could do was watch as the elder Malfoy went through just about every nook and cranny he could find. He was then even more deeply disturbed to see Lucius pocket a few scrolls of parchment, turn with a triumphant gleam in his eye and stride confidently towards the elevator, throwing a Stunner and an 'Obliviate' over his shoulder for good measure.

If poor Neville could've remembered the encounter, he would've known from the look on Lucius' face that he had been successful in his reason for being there, and that alone did not bode well for anyone at all...ever.

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Bill Weasley had been recovering in St Mungo's for the last few weeks.

Being a curse-breaker for the goblins at Gringotts Wizarding Bank was in itself a rather dangerous choice of employment. Oh sure, it was interesting and adventurous: the surprise of a new assignment. Not knowing where you'd Portkey to next lent a certain air of mystery to the job. Coming up against some of the most interesting and inventive ward work ever seen kept a mind sharp and creative, trying to figure out how to get around or dissolve them without tripping any.

But for all that action and excitement, it was just plain dangerous!

There were an uncomfortable number of close calls and near misses that made Bill shudder just to think about. The last one included.

Basing his decision on the last encounter and a few other rather sticky situations, Bill had decided to take Severus (which is what he was asked to call him now) up on his offer, which in itself was a strange affair. He had been minding his own business (in between making the young mediwitches blush and giggle... In fact there was this one time...), when lo and behold the last person he'd expected to pay him a visit...did.

Bill couldn't have been more shocked when he saw his former Potions master/Death Eater spy stride into his room as he so pleased. Of course, he'd gotten along with the elder wizard fairly well during that whole Voldemort business. Sure, the wizard was strung tighter than a centaur's bow 80% of the time, but that was to be expected of any man who was trying to gather information that could turn the tide of the war in their favor without being caught. Not to mention the condition he usually returned in on his little field trips. No, Bill couldn't begrudge the wizard his impatience and acid tongue, what with everything else he had to deal with.

Still, he had never gone out of his way, exactly, to make Bill's life especially hard. Severus and he had even gotten along quite amicably, working closely together near the end of the war. They were the ones who had to figure out how to get past and dismantle all of the many layered wards and such that had been surrounding Voldemort and the Riddle estate.

If anything, Bill had to admire Severus' intellect; the wizard was sharp as a quill when it came to grasping concepts and solving particularly difficult problems. It was like his mind was already thinking three moves ahead, but he supposed in Severus' position he had to just to survive.

Bill hadn't at all been shocked to learn from Severus that he'd left Hogwarts and gone into research, though he had been surprised to discover that there was a whole department funded by the Ministry to do just that. When Severus had first made the offer, Bill had said he'd think on it and let him know, though he'd had no intentions of accepting. However...

After thinking on things for a few days, Bill was more inclined to change his mind; surely, he couldn't keep cheating death on a regular basis for a living. One day it was going to catch up with him for being so cheeky as to test the Fates. Again, the last job was proof of that.

The Galleons offered in wages was nothing to sniff at, either, especially since it was double what the tight-fisted goblins at Gringotts were paying him. Also, he wouldn't have to be away from home all the time, which was why he thought his mother would back this avenue all the way.

Wincing, Bill wasn't all that sure he wanted his mother to have such ready access to his person; the woman could be a tad overbearing at times. Thinking on it more, though, he reflected that maybe it wouldn't be too much of a problem, as his mum had decided to go back to work this year.

Yes. Yes, maybe it would be nice to stay in England for the time being. Who knows, maybe he'd meet a nice witch he'd want to spend his time with? Sure, his roguish looks and easy-going nature made sure he was never in want of a witch. But sometimes spontaneous, passionate sex with a different array of women, witch and Muggle alike, got quite lonely.

So, taking a deep breath to steel himself for such a big life change, Bill transfigured some parchment and he quilled his acceptance to Severus, letting him know that he still had a few weeks in St Mungo's before they'd give him the all clear and allow him to leave.

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Hermione's head, heart and body were racing wildly when Severus pulled away from her. And if Severus continued to pull away from her like that every time they shared a heated snog, she thought she'd just about pitch a fit! How could this man stir such lust within her from just a simple kiss? This tall, dark, intelligent wizard had managed to stir passions in her that she hadn't even known she held. Hermione had never looked upon Severus with anything but respect for his authority as her Professor, and he'd earned that in spades as far as she was concerned. Not only was the man's mind incredibly quick, but also the things he would've gone through as a double agent made the mind boggle.

Hermione felt extremely smiled-upon by the Fates now that she'd been shown another side to him. Not only had she discovered recently that he was actually a very pleasant person to be around and converse with, when one had something intelligent to talk about, he also held the reins tightly on a very explosive ardour he held for anything that interested him. She only hoped she was included in that category now she'd had a taste of what it was like to be the focus of his interest.

"Hermione, we need to talk about this," Severus started, as he grasped her hands tightly in his. "I'm not prepared..." he trailed off.

What? Hermione's mind screamed. What are you not prepared for? Not prepared to take things further? Not prepared for a relationship? How could he just trail off like that! Was this too much for him to deal with? Was he trying to think of a way to let her down gently? She'd never known him to be at a loss for words; he was all witty comebacks and scathing retorts.

She noticed he was staring off over her shoulder with his eyes narrowed and head cocked to the side. Following his gaze, Hermione turned to see an owl, about the size of a Quaffle, heading towards them.

Severus recognized the bland little creature as a standard Ministry owl. What in Merlin's name couldn't wait until they got back from lunch? For Circe's sake! How in Hades was he supposed to get Hermione where he wanted her (between his sheets) if every time he was getting somewhere with her, they were fucking-well interrupted!

Impatiently, he snatched the scroll from the owl and proceeded to read it with the most puzzled expression on his face. All Severus said was, "Come," and then the next thing Hermione knew, she was being held tightly as they Apparated to the front of the Ministry.

"Severus, what...?" Hermione started to question.

"We didn't even pay for lunch!" she squealed indignantly, mid-sentence.

Severus waved his hand at her in an offhand manner and said, "They have my Gringotts details," all the while pulling a very confused Hermione along by the hand through the entire Ministry checks and corridors.

She gasped Neville's name when they walked out of the lift into R.O.A.M and disentangled herself from Severus to rush over and see to her friend.

While Hermione went about discovering what had happened to Neville, Severus approached one of the Aurors on the scene that he knew from his work with the Order.

He had worked closely with him too, nutting out which rebel attacks could be intervened upon and, sadly, which ones couldn't, so as not to blow his cover. Severus had found the wizard to be very levelheaded and quite the strategist; never once did the Auror demand to be able to save them all. To Severus, that spoke volumes, not even Albus had been comfortable playing God like that.

He'd been glad Albus had left those calls to himself and Kingsley; the ones that were spared had made things tricky enough for him as it was. Sighing to himself internally, Severus didn't really want to think about that time in his life. He did wonder occasionally, though, how he had managed to live through it all and not end up a wretch; he'd fully expected to die during, if not before, the final battle.

Pushing such thoughts from his mind, he turned to Kingsley to learn what had happened, exactly.

"The Ministry wards picked up some suspicious activity in your department. Of course, you already know that guests have to relinquish their wands before entering, so that leaves Ministry workers. Only the wand's signature isn't registered to anyone the Ministry employs."

At Severus' raised eyebrow, Kingsley continued. "The wards are layered to pick up different sorts of activities within the building. One of them recognises the wand in use and its owner; inbuilt into the wards is each employee's wand signature. Another ward monitors the kinds of spells, charms or hexes performed within the building. It sends an alert out when they are of a suspicious nature."

Severus was getting impatient with this long-winded explanation, and said so. After all, he already knew this information. He did what he did best before agreeing to work within the Ministry: Severus researched and tested all the safety measures. Even with Voldemort gone, one could never be too careful. If someone wanted to know Severus' every move, he was damn well sure that he was going to know theirs!

"The thing is, Severus, we had an alert come up for two powerful Body Binds and a Memory Charm in your department." At Severus' expectant expression, he went on. "The only problem is...the signature ward did not recognise the wand. Not only do we now have a Ministry member who was smart enough to be able to smuggle in an unregistered wand, but we also have no leads to finding out who it was or what they were after. They've gone and modified the memory our only witness and, as far as I know, there's no way to restore those memories."

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Lucius Malfoy was sitting in his rather large Manor, in his rather large study, stroking his rather large ego. He couldn't help but feel quite smug over a job well done as he gazed down upon the scrolls of parchment he had retrieved from Severus' disillusioned hidey-hole. The filthy traitor would get what was coming to him, that was for sure, and with the other unexpected parchments he'd found...the Mudblood bitch would get it, too.

He just couldn't understand how his one-time friend, and godfather to his only son, could have sided with a filthy Mudblood. Lucius and Severus had been crib mates. They'd done and experienced all their firsts together: flying brooms; experimenting with spells and potions; and sneaking out into Muggle towns, which had later turned into visiting their stuffy, dirty clubs and bars. Muggle women had been easier to woo and bed than witches back then. Pureblood witches wanted quilled and signed marriage contracts if you wanted to sample their wares, and they'd been too young and free to be worrying about that sort of thing, at the time.

Oh, how free they'd been! Both had been born into very privileged families and had never been in want for anything. So their home lives weren't exactly all warm and fuzzy, but everything they could've asked for was given to them with no questions asked. It had gotten rather boring after a while; hence the sneaky trips into the Muggle world. Being of true Slytherin stock, they had observed everything about such a forbidden place before even approaching the areas of interest.

Those were the days, Lucius thought fondly. If he were in the mood to be honest with himself, he could acknowledge the fact that joining Voldemort had been one of the most stupid decisions of his life. The Malfoy name used to be respected and feared; now, though, the looks of pure loathing directed straight to his face were a little disconcerting. The only thing that had kept him from receiving the Dementors' Kiss or a lifetime in Azkaban was the fact that too many Wizarding projects and services would lose all their funding. The problem with that was, everybody else knew it too.

Lucius knew what Severus had been up to when the war was in full swing; he knew Severus had defected and was betraying them all. But he couldn't bring himself to reveal this fact to their Lord and see Severus' life forfeit. Lucius had considered Severus the brother he'd never had. He'd been mistaken in believing that Severus had felt the same.

To betray him in such a way was just unfathomable. Lucius cursed a house-elf quite severely in his outrage. He couldn't believe Severus had just about beaten his own godson to a bloody pulp. Lucius' only son and heir!

Though, in a way, he was quite disgusted with his young progeny. Lucius was fairly certain his only child had fancied himself in love with the filthy Mudblood. Sneering to himself at the thought of the Malfoy name being tainted with such a thing, Lucius was just grateful that his son had had no idea how gain her affections. After all, brute force

didn't always have the desired outcome.

Being expelled from Hogwarts had been a blessing in disguise for Draco, as far as he was concerned. Lucius had finally been able to send him to Durmstrang as an alternative. He should've gone there from the beginning, but he'd caved to his beautiful wife's only demand: to keep him close to home. Nevertheless, in the end, it had had the desired effect; Draco was now everything he'd hoped him to be. Without the mollicoddling of his fellow Slytherins to pamper and cater to his every whim, the boy had had to finally stand on his own merit and had become a man because of it.

In the end, Lucius had decided that since Severus had done him some small favor in that instance, he'd try and sway him into being the wizard he was meant to be, instead of this flowers and candy Gryffindor-hugger he'd become. If that didn't happen, then he'd crush him by destroying everything he held dear.

As he watched the sun sinking into the horizon from his study windows, he smirked and thought about how Severus would soon be coming across his first warning.

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After the Aurors left, Severus, Hermione and Neville seated themselves around the large jarrah table in the middle of the room and discussed recent developments.

"Do you trust me, Neville?" Severus asked quietly, looking into his former pupil's eyes.

Neville cast his eyes sideways to meet Hermione's; he must've found what he was searching for because he looked back to Severus and gave a small, but firm, nod for him to continue.

Severus straightened and brushed the hair from his eyes before he whispered, 'Legilimens,' and viewed the afternoon's events through Neville's mind. When he'd finished, Severus raised an eyebrow at Neville, who incidentally blushed a deep scarlet, leaving a very confused Hermione to look between the pair of them.

"Well? Did you find anything?" Hermione asked impatiently.

Clearing his throat, he gave Neville one last amused glance before answering. "I'm afraid not. The caster of the Memory Charm must have been a powerful wizard, indeed. He's managed to wipe the memory, from just after Neville heard a noise, completely from his mind. I think it would be best if we wait until the Aurors have finished with the Pensieve."

Just in case the fiend responsible was watching one of them, Severus had managed to talk Hermione into allowing him to see her home. Of course, he would have followed her home anyway, but he wasn't planning on leaving once they got there. If everything went according to plan, and he'd waited too long for it not to, then they were going to discuss what had been developing between them and, hopefully, end up in bed, the floor, against the wall or even over the table. Severus really wasn't that fussy where it happened, so long as it did happen.

Merlin, was Hermione in for a surprise when they got home...

AN: I had a beautiful baby girl Ashlee Elizabeth on June 10, an hour and a half after my water broke! With absolutely no drugs! (Simply because there wasn't time, not because I didn't want them... and boy did I really want them!) 'laughs' She weighed in at 7 lbs, 4 oz and is now starting to settle into some semblance of a routine. I'm still a little out of whack, but I'm getting there. You should see another update from me fairly quickly, as I'm already in the middle of writing it. Don't forget to REVIEW!

P.S. You can't even begin to believe how grateful I am to not have to run to the loo every five minutes now!

## Chapter 10

### *Chapter 10 of 10*

"He knew he thought about her more than what was entirely appropriate. The worst thoughts though, were the ones he had when he was alone."

*A/N: My dear readers, raise your tea, coffee or cocktails, whatever it is that you keep close to you, to the beta who ended the seven-week draught and had this chapter returned within twenty-four hours!*

*Groveling, praise and endless amounts of appreciation go out to my last-minute Super Beta notsosaintly, who swooped in and rescued me so heroically and at such a huge risk to her own sanity that I think I may just owe her a Wizard's Debt.*

### Chapter 10

When Severus had imagined holding his goddess within his arms that evening, this was not exactly what he had had in mind.

They had strolled leisurely to her townhouse from the Ministry, chatting casually about this and that. Hermione had had to repeat herself on more than one occasion though, figuring that Severus was lost in thought, puzzling over the events of this afternoon.

He was in a way, only he had not been puzzling over the attack and break-in at ROAM. He was too busy marvelling at how the dusk sunlight reflected off Hermione's curls and the way it danced around her face with such animation as she spoke. It made her look so beautiful and full of life. She was everything he desired and more: intelligent and expressive, mature beyond her years and oh so physically desirable it almost pained him to look upon her. He could not wait to get to her home. He had no intention of just escorting her safely to her door. Severus was finally going to take things further.

Unfortunately, things did not go as Severus had planned.

When the pair arrived on her doorstep, Hermione knew something was totally off. Furrowing her brow in confusion and biting her bottom lip, she cast a glance sideways at Severus. Hermione could not feel the wards tingling with her magical signature.

Severus had known instantly what the problem was. He had checked out her wards when he had first learnt where she was living. You could never be too careful, what with a young (not to mention his) witch, and war hero to boot, living on her own. He was not willing to take the risk of someone trying to get even or simply wishing her harm. This was why he had added his own wards as a precaution and how he had known something was wrong... He could not feel his own wards either.

Through his contemplation, Severus' spine stiffened and his shoulders went back. He looked every bit the formidable wizard who spent years in the Dark Lord's service.

He turned and bore his eyes into Hermione's, and some agreement seemed to pass between them. Hermione gave a curt nod, and they both moved forward, with Severus taking the lead, as they relied on their experience from the war to conduct their movements.

Cautiously, Severus raised his wand and checked the apartment for foreign wards and alarms. Glancing over his shoulder, he gave Hermione an indication that all was clear and gently eased the front door open in case the intruder was still within.

Closing the front door as quietly as he could manage in his haste, he spun around abruptly and faced Hermione. "You will stay here," he stated in a tone that brooked absolutely *no* argument.

Hermione...being who she was, the absolute essence of Gryffindor pride and stubbornness...straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin in what could only be the prelude to a rather heated debate.

Seeing her hackles rise instantly and taking his time to admire the fiery glint shining in his witch's eyes (gods, but he could not wait to see that gaze looking up at him from a bed), Severus softened his expression and laid a placating hand upon her folded arms.

"Hermione. Please, trust me."

She relaxed her stance a little, gave a reluctant nod and watched as Severus slipped through the front door and entered her home.

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Finally, things were getting back to a form of normalcy. Well, what passed for normalcy in the Wizarding world, Molly thought to herself with a chuckle. Molly Weasley could not be more pleased by this fact as things were looking up indeed.

It had hardly been two weeks since she had signed a contract of employment with St Mungo's. Molly was to be their new external mediwitch, which meant that she would be handling home births and checkups for those families who preferred not to use the hospital or simply didn't want the trouble of going all the way into London if nothing was seriously wrong.

After the war, there had been a great influx of marriages and births now that the dangers had passed, and the Ministry of Magic had been only too happy to provide more funding for St Mungo's to accommodate the steady growth in population. It was in the Ministry's best interests, after all, that their numbers increase and expand after the massive loss and decline they had suffered due to Voldemort's second reign.

Molly had held a position at St Mungo's many years ago before she and Arthur had decided to start a small family, which got a bit out of hand and had somehow ended up resembling their very own Quidditch team. Molly shook her head ruefully at her thoughts. She loved her brood dearly, probably a little too much if she were to be completely honest with herself, and wouldn't swap a single one of them for all the gold in Gringotts. However, never in her wildest dreams as a youth did she expect to have such a large family. She'd thought that maybe one or two would suit her just fine, while she continued with her career at the hospital, healing and fussing over the Wizarding population.

Molly seemed to be a natural at that sort of thing. Therefore, she should not have really been surprised after she had Bill and could not bear to be away from him for even one afternoon. This is how Molly found herself to be a stay-at-home witch. With every red-headed, sweet-rounded, freckled-faced addition to her family, she thought less and less about leaving them in the hands of another.

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Arthur Weasley smiled ruefully on the inside as he watched his wife make a fuss over their youngest son, Ron, while eating dinner. He really did not want to be the one to burst her bubble later on, but Molly was going to need her eyes opened if the Weasley family was going to continue to view Hermione Granger as a part of their clan.

When Arthur was about halfway through his sixth year, he had been summoning small breezes to lift the girls' skirts as they strolled past him and his little group of friends. They were sitting upon a low residing wall outside the castle; that was until Molly Prewett turned back towards them, eyes blazing, lids narrowed, and threw the most vicious Bat-Bogey Hex he'd ever encountered. She had flipped her hair and flounced away, wearing the most cheeky, self-satisfied smirk he'd ever seen cross the normally demure girl's features. He knew at that moment that he had to learn more about this young woman. Of course, he later learned a lot about her stellar qualities: kind, friendly, helpful and very studious, not unlike their lovely, young Hermione. Arthur had spent the next eighteen months pursuing Molly relentlessly.

Molly was a very open and loving woman, and he had never seen a woman made of stronger stuff than his wife. The fact that they had more children after the twins came along should be testament to that alone. The only flaw he had seen her display on numerous occasions during their marriage was the rose-coloured glasses she wore when it came to their brood.

Molly could sniff out any hint of mischief her children were up to quicker than you could say, "Quidditch," and she was far more reliable than any Remembrall. However, when it came to their children's happiness and well-being, she could become a little short-sighted. Take the issue with Ron and Hermione, for example. Of course her ideal image of the situation was quite a lovely tale, and it did paint a rather romantic little picture: Best friends, coming together after all of the turmoil and uncertainty they would have suffered through together. Having always danced around one another, but never really taking that final step. Finally finding their way back to each other after the greatest of evils was defeated. Having the perfect bonding, settling down and breeding for Molly a large number of grandchildren to dote upon.

She was well intentioned, Nimue bless her soul. Molly just failed to see through the picture-perfect painting she had created in her mind's eye.

Arthur knew exactly what would happen should that scenario take place... He loved his youngest son as equally as the rest, he really did, but he was hardly blind to his personality faults.

Ronald could be very self-centred and had a tendency to be quiet sulky. The woman who finally married the boy would need to be extremely patient, very reassuring and be willing to make Ron the centre of her world.

A lot of it was probably their own fault, having had so many children. They had spread themselves thin among the lot of them, but that could not be changed now. Sure, they had many children, and sometimes you just could not be there every step of the way for each of them. None of them were permanently scarred for it though, and they had all turned out to be fine young people in the end.

In no way was Hermione built to handle the youngest male Weasley. The emotional sieve the poor boy would attach to her would be disastrous to her sanity. She was bright...too bright, he thought sometimes...dedicated and determined at whatever she put her mind to accomplish. Hermione would be a great mover and shaker of the purebloods within the Wizarding world, he was sure of it. She would need a partner who was there for her when she needed it, but would not need her constant time and attention. Someone willing to let her grow as a person and a scholar without making her feel guilty or neglectful because of it. As far as Arthur was concerned, Ron was waaay too high maintenance for what Hermione would need in a beau... besides which, he had a feeling his son wasn't quite sure of what he wanted yet.

The only thing he needed to do now was to convince Molly of this... Arthur grimaced minutely to himself, hoping a Bat-Bogey Hex wouldn't get involved.

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The Weasley twins, Fred and George, were currently bunkered down in their office, which was located behind the counter and out the back of their joke shop, Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes.

Not only had their ex-professor torn them a new one, but their mother had given them a hefty tongue lashing too. They would be in the Crup house over this one for a while, especially since they knew their mum was planning on Hermione being her daughter-in-law in the future. Rolling their eyes at each other, they both highly doubted that dream would ever come to fruition. Ron wasn't man enough to take on Hermione as a wife as far as they were concerned; besides which, they figured their mum was just

upset because in the process of one of their pranks, Hermione could've been 'compromised' by Snape of all people.

As soon as they had found out who the Potions master had felt an... 'inkling' to kiss, they had barricaded themselves inside their office quicker than you could say, "Quidditch." They were not exactly looking forward to the ramifications of that little stunt at all.

The young men had been shocked senseless when they discovered that their ex-Potions professor, the ever formidable poster child for all things dark and evil, Severus Snape, had a decidedly wicked sense of humour!

It had been purely accidental, of course, that they had witnessed this perversion of nature occur. The war had still been in full swing a few months before the final battle had taken place, if they recalled correctly.

How they had managed it, they would never know. It was not easy to get one past the Weasley matron. Especially for them. Mamma Weasley seemed to have a sixth sense for mischief when it came to her troublesome twins.

They'd overheard Mrs Weasley delegate the job of cleaning out the basement to Harry and Ron so that it could be used as a makeshift Potions lab to brew any elixirs that may be of help in the upcoming battle.

The atmosphere inside of the Order's Headquarters at number twelve, Grimmauld Place had been rather stressful and depressive. Death Eater attacks and revels had been happening constantly, families were being torn apart over loyalties and some families wiped out completely in a matter of minutes for their open defiance of He Who Must Not Be Named. Fred and George had decided that a little stress relief was in order, by way of their own brand of magic.

Their first targets...or victims...had been Harry and Ron as they went about clearing the basement. They'd overheard their mum saying that she would send down lunch when the time came. Seeing as how the basement was needed for the labs fairly quickly, the pair of them were going to have to work flat stick straight through lunch and probably dinner as well.

Fred and George had Disillusioned themselves and waited at the top of the upper stairs leading down to the basement. As predicted, Mrs Weasley was too busy bustling around the kitchen and fussing over the older Order members who were at Headquarters for lunch. Therefore, she had charmed Harry and Ron's lunch trays to float on down the basement stairs towards the boys.

Moving as quietly as they could so as not to be discovered, the twins deftly tipped a satchel of fine powder into each of the two pumpkin juices that were sitting upon the trays. They snickered quietly to themselves as they awaited the events to unfold. As they watched the unsuspecting pair, Professor Snape approached, about to descend the stairs so he could hurry along Harry and Ron's progress with a well-placed snide comment or two.

He had not survived as a spy all this time out of sheer luck, that was for sure. Severus approached the stairs stealthily. No point in giving the dunderheads notice of his arrival; it did not have the same effect. Once he reached the doorway, he could feel the faint tingle of magic in the air. Severus knew Harry and Ron were not the source of the magical vibrations as they were still underage wizards and unable to perform magic outside of school.

Severus snorted to himself derisively, like something as flippant as rules would apply to 'The Chosen One'. He knew damn well that Albus would find a way for the boy to get away with it... Bloody Gryffindors always got an easy ride, he thought bitterly to himself.

Concentrating briefly, he identified the spell as a Disillusionment Charm, and there were two sources of magic behind them. Severus smirked when he realised it was the twins he was sensing and cast a weak Notice-Me-Not Charm so he could observe what the Troublesome Two were up to now. Though he would never admit it aloud, he respected the identical lads quite a bit. Their minds were quick, and they were quite adept at some impressive magic when they really got going. Severus thought it a pity they were not scholars. With their imagination and talent, the Wizarding world would have been in for many breakthroughs. Unfortunately, they had this inbuilt sense of mischief no amount of nagging from their overbearing mother or detentions from their professors was able to stamp out.

Therefore, he slunk along the wall in the shadows as he took the first few steps down. What he saw in the middle of the basement drew an unexpected but appreciative laugh from the dour wizard, who normally retained such control of himself.

Kneeling over Harry, who was lying on the floor in the middle of the room, was Ronald Weasley, using all his might to pin the saviour of the Wizarding world down so he could not escape. All the while, the youngest Weasley alternated between declaring his undying love and trying to snog his best mate senseless.

Ever since that day, he'd developed a sort of secret camaraderie with the mischief makers; sometimes he was given a barely noticeable nod to let him know something was about to happen. A meaningful look would be cast at Severus and then to something in the room, be it food, drink or sometimes even furniture that they were advising he not get near if he did not want to be embarrassed. For his part, every now and then Severus would slip the boys some rare Potions ingredients or lend them large tomes with suggestive pages marked. Needless to say, it was a happy partnership. Fred and George got plenty of fresh ideas and hard-to-find ingredients to work with, and the Potions master got entertained at everyone else's expense and never his own.

That was until the stunt they had pulled with the ink.

So, while the twins were hiding out in the office in their store, they were feeling decidedly paranoid. They had every reason to feel that way too. The Potions master had a vindictive streak when crossed, they shuddered simultaneously, and Hermione was not the cleverest witch of her age for nothing. They really had fucked up this time.

\*\*

After Severus had gotten a quick glimpse at the inside of her apartment, he had immediately stopped Hermione from entering. Severus had known exactly who had breached Hermione's wards and home in that moment. There was no way he could let his witch view her beloved familiar in such a state. The loyal, if not hideous looking, cat had been pinned by all four paws to the middle of the lounge room wall. Its head had been removed clean off, and there were splatters of blood all over the flat. After reassuring that she would stay put while he went to investigate, he entered the flat fully and started to look around.

Severus could not understand how so much blood could come from such a small animal, though to be fair, Crookshanks had been at the larger end of the scale for a cat; he supposed the Kneazle genes he had inherited accounted for that fact. The metallic stench of blood was ripe in the air, and the Potions master gently gathered a sample of blood on his fingertips from the familiar's neck wound. Rubbing his fingers together, he noted that the blood was still warm, which meant that this had happened just a few scant hours ago. Severus scowled blackly as he viewed the blood-written message across the wall:

#### NEXT TIME TRAITOR

He knew exactly who was behind this. Severus would bet the deeds to the Manor that Lucius Malfoy was behind this display, as well as the breach at the Ministry Department. It smacked of Lucius; he had been his partner in crime long enough to recognise his style.

Although they had remained friends since the Dark Lord's demise, how did you end a friendship that started in nappies? The incident involving Draco and his witch had caused a seemingly giant rift between the two; in fact, they had not exchanged words since the meeting of tempers in the Headmaster's office. Sneering to himself, Severus thought, fuck the Auror's this time, he would handle this himself. It was time he paid his dear old friend a visit. First things first, though. He cast a *Scourgify*, banishing the remains and stains of Hermione's familiar from her flat. He strode determinedly back to the front door, intent on taking his witch back to the Manor for safe keeping.

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Notes: Credits to The HP Lexicon: A Crup is a magical creature that strongly resembles a Jack Russel terrier, except that a Crup has a forked tail. Crups are extremely loyal to wizards and ferocious to Muggles. They also eat anything.

A/N: Ah shucks, you guys, I've had so many e-mails full of congratulations and pleadings that I just don't know where to begin. I will endeavor to make more writing time, I

promise. I am so terribly sorry if I haven't had time to answer your review. I am not ignoring you, I just have nooooo spare time lately.

'Madam-Fluffy-Pants' is doing very well and has the whole house wrapped completely around her little finger. *Chuckles*\* She's even managed to cut her first three teeth, at the same time I might add *\*rocks backwards and forwards\** in the last two and a half weeks. I've had to rearrange my whole household and spend a tidy sum on cupboard, drawer and fridge locks. I swear to Severus that my oldest two never caused me this much trouble!

I've managed to enter myself into the Winter/Christmas Round 2006 of exchanges over at [sshg\\_exchange](#). I'm feeling completely out of my depth and extremely nervous about the whole affair, but am determined to give it a go at least this once... If anything (since I'm supposed to tell you nothing), *\*laughs\** you will be pleased and delighted no doubt to know that I am having lemons forced out of me. *\*grins cheekily\**

On that note, I'm going to inform you that I have a LiveJournal now, which I'm gradually becoming addicted to. If you want to pester, nag or be a sounding board you are more than welcome to stop by and friend me. You can find the link to get there in my profile. =D