

Moments of Insanity

by Losille

Ten years after the final battle, many things have changed considerably for our favorite witch and wizard. Severus becomes Headmaster of Hogwarts. Hermione has recently acquired Flourish and Blotts with the help of the wealthy Potters. Perchance two bibliophiles could meet and form a relationship over a good read, or will it take Severus' "moment of insanity" to bring them together?

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 11

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Full Story Synopsis: Ten years after the final battle, many things have changed considerably for our favorite witches and wizards. Arthur Weasley is the new Minister for Magic. Harry and Ginny are busily creating their own Quidditch team to eventually compete against Ron and Luna's own growing team. Hermione has her own bookstore and is blissfully single after a few soured relationships. And Severus Snape has finally gotten what he wanted: power and wealth. Of course, he'd have been much more delighted to not be Headmaster to a bunch of dunderheads...

Notes before this story gets going... and should cover most of the story:

This came as a plot bunny I could not swat away. It was warm, pink and fluffy. It reminded me of my childhood security blanket. I was cold and lonely. It took away the chill, but in return made me write this. Please excuse me for the blasphemy of this canon.

This story could be considered slightly AU, as it is a big "WHAT IF", though it is up to you to choose whether it truly qualifies as AU. JKR has said Snape does not have a daughter, and I do believe he doesn't have any children at all, even though some might secretly wish for something like that. However, him not having a daughter is canon only in the first seven books...because that is the scope JKR is writing in. Who knows if he got a little frisky in a bar one night and ended up with a baby on his doorstep nine months later after the war. Of course, that's saying he makes it out of Book 7 alive...

The ideas represented in this fic, as far as legislation and Ministry activities go, are slightly more Americanized than I had intended, but I hope you will forgive me. I also hope you will forgive me for making Snape a little bit more "human" now that he has power, money and a kid to tame him. I'll try not to make Snape too fluffy with his daughter, as I always strive to stay as in canon and character as possible, but the idea of this story is new territory for me.

Lastly, I do know how Chris Columbus portrayed Flourish and Blotts as a well-organized bookstore in Movie 2...at least from what I could see. From my reading in the books, I feel that it might be different, especially if it is an old establishment like the other shops on Diagon Alley. You know, sort of like one of those old antique bookstores. It's lived in and there's a general area for everything, but it's not in any particular order.

Constructive criticism is always appreciated, and if you are a Brit picker, or would like to be my Brit picker, let me know. I could use someone well versed in all things British looking over my chapters for me.

*A very special thanks to my new beta, Keladry. *hugs**

Prologue

::March 2003::

Severus Snape poured himself onto the uncomfortable, lumpy sofa and took another long swig of Ogden's straight from the heavy, fancy cut crystal bottle. It was definitely one of the best gifts he had received lately, and from someone who actually understood what he went through on a daily basis. They knew why he would need such a potent elixir to cope with his life; as far as he was concerned, everyone should be aware what the educators at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry dealt with on a daily basis. If the general public even knew what incompetence they were faced with, they would have been appalled, and the demand for strong liquor would have increased tenfold.

Something needed to be done before these dunderheads got to Hogwarts. He was afraid that he might do something drastic if another child asked him to clarify the difference of wolfsbane and monkshood when he had already given a lengthy explanation over their similarities many times before. Nonetheless, education was the last on the list of reforms Rufus Scrimgeour was pushing through the Ministry. The most important thing on his list, essentially, was pleasing as many wealthy people as he could manage so that he would win the bid in a year's time to run for Minister again. He had been a slightly more effective Minister during the Second War than Fudge had ever been, but his popularity was waning now that the Dark Lord's terrorism had been vanquished for some time.

However, the public did not appreciate Scrimgeour's clawing for approval with convoluted legislation to improve his poll scores. As a matter of fact, it was the popular consensus of much of the English magical world that Muggle and Muggle-born relations was the most important issue facing their world, not the reelection of a mediocre leader. And it would seem that there was only one person who would be able to do that job fairly: Arthur Weasley.

Severus grumbled lowly. He would rather poison himself before seeing that man as the head of his government. All right, Severus knew he may not go that far, but Arthur did love Muggles far too much and would eventually anger many remaining purebloods and half-bloods when he only gave his attention to Muggle-borns. Severus would not be able to handle that, even if he did not care whether someone's father was a monkey or a wizard of the purest blood, so long as that someone could write a decent essay!

He did have to admit...albeit grudgingly...that Arthur had done a fair job picking up where Dumbledore had left off with the Order. Since Severus' true loyalties to the Light were made apparent four months after Dumbledore's death, and therefore marked him as enemy number two to the Dark Lord, he would have been useless to the Order out in the field. This left him in a permanent limbo with nothing to do until Arthur, knowing that strategy was not his strongest suit, asked Severus to be his right hand man in planning. He had been allowed ample time to observe the man stalwartly command and rally the troops. It had turned out that Arthur was considerably more intelligent and capable than anyone gave him credit for, and Severus fell into a peaceful advisory role.

Still, Severus had to worry about what Arthur's love for Muggles might mean to everyone else.

All avenues seemed to lead to the red-haired, bespectacled man as the clear contender for the upcoming elections...his family had gained wealth, prominence and various Orders of Merlin since the Dark Lord's fall. Severus supposed, though, in picking the lesser of two evils, he would have to cast his vote for Arthur. Perhaps having "friends" in high places was a good thing and certainly appeared to be better than being aligned with the Malfoys, who were now shunned in most circles.

A knock at the door to his chambers startled him out of his thoughts.

"Who is it?"

"Minerva," said the slightly hoarse voice of their fearless headmistress.

Severus muttered a few oaths as he pushed himself from his seat. Muscles groaned and joints crackled. It was hell to get old. Well, at least age faster than he should have. Damn the Cruciatus-happy, snake-faced lunatic that had done this to him. He set the firewhisky bottle on a side table before opening the heavy wooden door to reveal the severe, tartan-clad woman. She was in her dressing gown with her hair out of the customarily strict bun; she had clearly been going through her evening rituals when *something* had obviously crossed her mind in need of dire, critical attention. He was about to ask why the old bat had trudged all this way on such a chilly night when he noticed the pink parcel in her arms, clashing horribly with the dark earth tones of clan plaid.

The parcel proceeded to wiggle and gurgle.

"Which of our foolish students..."

"No one," she said.

"Well then, I didn't know you were a nanny now, Minerva," he remarked.

She pursed her lips into a fine line, clearly not amused with his cheek. "I am not. No, Severus, this child was left for you."

"What?" Incomprehension found and muddled his brain. What did Minerva mean that *this thing* was left for him?

"Filius was coming in from Hogsmeade this evening and found this bundle outside in the cold by the front gates. He brought the ween to me. Thought that there was some mistake that it would have a letter attached and addressed to you," she explained. With thin, wrinkled fingers, she pushed away the disgustingly pink flannel blanket from the baby's face. He did not look at the baby, though. He was too busy trying to read Minerva's face for any sign of jest.

Severus, feeling the full affects of the Ogden's in his blood now, let out a completely ridiculous bark of laughter. "Hilarious, Minerva. So, who was the mastermind behind this prank? He will meet the same fate as the person who gave me that Canary Cream."

Minerva scowled. "No one is joking, Severus. This is quite genuine."

He dared to look down at the squirming bundle now, overcome with the insane need to disprove this situation, and he was not beyond using physical characteristics as evidence. Large blue eyes stared back at him inquisitively on opposite sides of a well-proportioned nose. The child had alabaster, porcelain skin and the blackest hair. The only thing that told him the gender of the child was the pink blanket around her. She was a cute child, he would admit, though he had never been particularly fond of babies or children to begin with. Who in Minerva's acquaintance had given birth recently and allowed the child to be used as pawn in this wicked joke?

A Potter?

Sudden, intense bitterness flooded his body. It would not be the first despicable prank by a Potter... but he had expected better of Ginevra.

"Cannot possibly be mine. The nose is too small," he said.

The headmistress met his gaze and rolled her eyes. "Noses continue to grow throughout one's life, Severus. Surely you know that."

"I have never gone to bed easily with anyone. Well, perhaps there may have been some on occasion. But I haven't," he paused and met Minerva's eyes sheepishly as an excuse not to say "have sex" in front of her, "with anyone since that Muggle on New Year's last year, and a Muggle wouldn't have been able to find Hogwarts to leave the

child."

"Unless that Muggle found someone else to do it."

"The Muggle didn't even believe me. How would she find someone else, witch or wizard, who would do it?"

"There are ways, Severus," Minerva said and dug into her dressing gown pocket.

Minerva handed him the sealed Muggle envelope with his name scrawled across in flowery lettering. He warily took the white paper from her hands, collecting himself as best as he could before splitting open the gummed lining with a finger. This *had* to be some joke, and he most certainly would not give Minerva the pleasure of seeing him resort to panic over the situation. Face the Dark Lord? Sure, no problem. Be the one responsible for the greatest wizard of all time's death? Alright, he would make do. Tell him he had fathered a child? There was no way on this green earth that he could handle a situation like this with any amount of aplomb. Still, curiosity won out, and he opened the letter.

Minerva readjusted the child against her chest and cooed lovingly; he read aloud.

"Mr. Snape...I didn't know what to do with Dorothea. I never planned to become pregnant after that evening together, but I did. I never believed what you told me about being a wizard. It was New Years after all; I had thought it was the character you chose to portray for the evening. I cannot continue to care for this baby...this *thing*...with such freakish tendencies. If you are what you say you are, then she is too, and I can't care for her without loathing. I'm sorry.' This is ridiculous. How can she even be sure it is mine?"

"How can you say she is not yours, Severus? She looks like you, except for the nose and eyes. The woman obviously has seen some magical predisposition, going by what she has said in the note."

"I still do not..." He began, looking up from the letter now grasped tightly in his fist. "I...she said she had taken potions against conception. I made sure to ask."

The old witch scoffed at him. "How romantic. Was this before, during or after?"

"I cannot recall."

Minerva sighed. "Well then, you must have kept in mind that she is a Muggle, Severus. You know as well as I, perhaps better than I do, that Muggle contraceptive potions are not as good as ours."

"Merlin's balls, Minerva, of course I do! But even I cannot think straight with the prospect of pleasure staring at me in the face. Can't I have one weakness and not end up penalized for it?"

"Men," she muttered.

A feeling of hope seized his senses when he remembered something important. Perhaps he could prove the girl was not his. After all, if the child truly was his, then the chances were she would be a witch, even if the mother was not. The mother's testimony about odd occurrences be damned. "You didn't see her name on the list when she was born?"

"I don't watch the list, Severus. I have other important things that occupy my time," she said. "I probably would not have noticed until we started preparing Hogwarts letters for her year that she carried your last name."

"So you verified? And the bewitched quill did give her my name?"

Minerva nodded slowly, but unquestionably. "Dorothea Snape. Middle name: Marie. Date of birth: 5 September 2002."

"Or perhaps you are really jesting and you found a Muggle birth certification with her when Filius brought her to you."

"Severus, be reasonable here! Have you ever known me to scheme like this? I scheme for the better, not the worse."

"This cannot be happening. I cannot care for a... a... child!" he said, moving quickly away from the door. Minerva followed him and shut the heavy wooden door. "You know I cannot, Minerva! Send her to an orphanage... something! I cannot even care for myself, much less another being."

Minerva moved over to him slowly. "I will not send her to an orphanage, Severus."

He clenched his fists. "I don't know the first thing about babies or about children. *I hate* children, or perhaps you forget my thoughts on those dunderheads I try to educate. I know nothing about the fairer sex. Who will care for her when I teach? I simply cannot take her, and you're foolish to think I can."

"If she truly is your child, Severus, she will not be a dunderhead," Minerva said and looked at the baby again, cooing and smiling.

He dropped onto the settee, covering his face with his hands. "Minerva, I can't."

The matriarch sighed heavily and sat beside him. "You know I have no Inner Eye, but perhaps this beautiful girl was born for a reason. Perhaps the Powers decided this was what you needed in your life at this time."

"To accomplish what, exactly?"

"Something to soften you up." Minerva let a smile crack her lips.

"All she will be is a vexation."

Minerva shook her head and looked down at the child again, who had fallen asleep in her arms. "I will care for her tonight, and tomorrow, when you have a clear head, we will discuss this further."

Severus grew a little more enamored with the child every day.

Despite his initial reservations, which clearly had a great amount of validity at the time, he had risen to the challenge. He had risen to the challenge of combating the uneasy feeling fear gave him. Still, though, he could not quite ignore the sheer beauty of the generation of the human species, and that he, Severus Snape, greasy-haired, black-clad bat of the dungeons could have been fifty-percent responsible for such an amazing feat. Even he could appreciate the creation of another life, the remarkableness of it all, and this was perhaps more the reason why he had resigned himself to being saddled with a daughter sooner rather than later.

Perhaps it was wrong of him to view her as another one of his experiments, but that was what she was to him most of the time. Everything he did was trial and error. How was he supposed to know that he had to hold the child regularly? Or that her crying was a need for attention in other forms of play, rather than only picking her up and feeding her? That he was supposed to talk to her? But as he would with experimental potions, he added one variable and observed. Then he would add another, or take something out. Eventually he would find a halfway decent product.

As she grew older, he learned quickly that his domineering personality had to soften slightly if he was going to survive the following years; she would immediately start bawling when he stood over her, scowled and berated her over something she did wrong. It got to such a point that she was becoming afraid of him and was losing that remarkable curiosity with the world around her. He, on the other hand, realized that he was falling into the same pattern his own father had fallen into when Severus was a child. From that point forward, he had vowed that he would not allow them to be the same...where his child was always running and hiding from his violent mood swings.

Severus knew without a doubt that his father was the reason why he had become so antisocial and incredibly insecure. His father had been the reason for it all along, but this was not saying that Severus wanted to change himself. As a matter of fact, he was quite pleased staying where he was: alone. He *was* insecure...he did not know if the next thing he did would be met with rancor or with happiness. So many times had he been met with rancor, though, he had eventually learned that all he was capable of receiving was animosity, even amongst his peers. Even within his own House, he never had any close friends. They all considered him a little odd, but they at least had also feared him to some degree. His insecurity had for so long manifested itself in his cruel mannerisms. It was the only way he could control anything, and it had worked satisfactorily for so long.

Until Thea was left for him. Of course, his students would not see any difference in class, but things were considerably different for Thea. She had taught him, absurdly enough, that there was a time and place for his snark and overbearing attitude. She was to be met with compassion when she did not know any better, even if she did deserve punishment. He would shamefacedly admit that all the insufferable girl had to do was ask and he would do his best to procure whatever it was she wanted. If she asked him to jump, he would ask, "How high?" It was such a peculiarity to go from controlling one's own life to be controlled by someone who was forty-three years younger than himself.

But even he would have to admit he would not change it if he could. Perhaps Minerva had been right...he had needed this more than anything else in the world.

Hell Hath Frozen Over

Chapter 2 of 11

It had not occurred to Hermione that she should question who the girl's father was, until a dark shadow fell over the duo with their heads bent over a stack of books. Hermione was explaining to Thea what the book called Cinderella was about when she first noticed the shadow. She glanced to her side at a pair of fine dragon-hide boots and followed the well-tailored black robes up to a face she had little desire to see.

A huge, huge, HUGE thank you to Keladry and especially to my newest beta, Subversa. Thank you, my dears, you are both amazing and I couldn't do this without you!

Reviews will be responded to in the Author response form.

Enjoy!

Chapter 1- Hell Hath Frozen Over

Five years later

Tip tap-tap. Tap tip tap, tip tep tap.

Click click.

"Bloody hell, what do you mean *fatal error*? All I did was double click!"

Tap TAP TAP. DING DING DING DING.

"Work, you damn machine!"

Laughter followed her outburst as the young sales clerk came into the room from storage, levitating a large box in front of him. He set the box to the side where he was stocking and organizing textbooks. "You know, it sounds like more trouble than it's worth, Hermione."

She did not bother to glance up from the computer screen where she was watching the infernal hourglass button flip over yet again as the computer struggled to open up a large program. "Indeed, but it does offer a little bit more organization, don't you think? You saw those ledgers left behind by the old manager."

"True, but is it really worth it to keep arguing with the thing?" Luke asked, splitting open the packaging tape. "Surely you could come up with some type of spell or charm to do the cataloguing. I mean, you *are* Hermione Granger."

"Thanks for your vote of confidence, Luke," she said, smiling softly, "but I like staying connected to my Muggle roots as much as possible."

"Or maybe a charm or counter-jinx to fix the computer."

Hermione shrugged as the program she wanted finally opened. If only the previous owners of Flourish and Blotts had known the glories of a Muggle cataloguing system...they didn't even need a computer for it...then things would have been much easier when she had taken over ownership a few months prior. Hermione abhorred disorder; when she had moved in, so had the computer she'd charmed to work in Diagon Alley, along with an expensive cataloguing system fit for the task of going through decades of misplaced literature.

The computer *had* helped a lot since then, though, allowing her to regroup the entire three stories of store...including the mildew-ridden basement...into semi-organized sections of textbooks, general purpose, and her personal addition to the store: Muggle literature. Of course, she did most of the data entry; Luke worked at a snail's pace, typing in information and scanning barcodes. Apparently, wizards could rattle off any number of difficult spells, but the instant they were faced with this new task of typing, they could not help but wonder at the foreign Muggle technology. Often times it meant getting no work done at all. Even Arthur Weasley had heard about the addition to the store and had made a special visit, despite his busy schedule, to see the Muggle contraption. He had then monopolized it an entire day trying to understand the purpose of a mouse, and why exactly it was called a "mouse." Apparently, saying that it *looked* like one did not explain it thoroughly enough for him.

Nonetheless, what mattered now was *not* the fact that Hermione had to fight with the computer; it was that she had a rather busy bookshop to run, and the new school year was set to begin in only a few weeks. Hogwarts letters would be sent to families soon; she and Luke, her sole employee, would be inundated with children both anxious

and reluctant to start another year at Hogwarts. In addition, with new legislation from the Ministry that mandated primary school for all magical children over the age of six, younger brothers and sisters would be coming in to get their own basic school books.

The Department for Magical Education had only been created three years ago. Hermione had been overjoyed to hear that the Ministry was finally taking an actively beneficial role in updating the magical educational system in England. Other countries' ministries had yet to catch on, but dipping test scores and complaints from the educators at Hogwarts had made it evident that something had to be done. The Ministry's answer was the creation of magical primary schools dotting the United Kingdom where magical children would learn from qualified professionals, rather than leaving their pre-Hogwarts education up to parents. Muggle-born children were left out of this mandate as they already were required to attend primary school through the government of the United Kingdom, and would still only learn of their abilities by a visit from a designated witch or wizard before admittance to Hogwarts.

In addition, this opportunity also served as the perfect career for those who were born Squibs. No magic would be done at the schools: only reading, writing, arithmetic and very rudimentary book knowledge on subjects that would prove beneficial later in Hogwarts life.

This also allowed a tired Minerva McGonagall to resign her position of headmistress to oversee the Department and this venture...she seemed to enjoy the community outreach more than continuing to drum information into unreceptive minds. As she had been responsible for a good deal of the original legislation to begin with, it had only seemed natural for her to take the position when it was offered to her. Hermione had questioned idly whether Professor McGonagall had accepted to ensure another Dolores Umbridge could not happen. After all, there certainly was no other teacher at the school who had despised Umbridge more. While Minerva ruled with an iron fist, she was certainly fair and would be able to handpick her replacement when she retired.

Yet, Hermione could not but speculate for a little bit about her former professor's intentions, especially when she heard who would be the new Headmaster at Hogwarts. Truth be told, Hermione had nearly fainted when she read the article in the *Daily Prophet*. Who the hell thought it would be a good idea to put Severus Snape in such a position of power? Sure, he was a capable educator, if a little frightening at times. Yes, he was a war hero. He had, indeed, redeemed himself to the rest of the world. But in charge of discipline? Soon enough, he would be holding regular public beatings of Gryffindors and allowing the stringing up of Hufflepuffs by their thumbs.

"Are you cold?"

She glanced over at Luke, startled at his intrusion. "Huh?"

"You just shivered," he pointed out.

"Oh, no, not cold." Hermione shook her head and chuckled guiltily. "I was thinking about what sort of new tortures the new Hogwarts Headmaster would instate."

Luke laughed. "How did you even get there from computers?"

"Don't question how a great mind works," she said with a small smile.

The front door creaked open slowly, and the tiny bells jingled to alert them of someone entering the shop. It had been a slow week thus far...the calm before the inevitable storm...so any customer was welcome, at the moment, to break up the monotony of the day. Hermione stood on her tiptoes and leaned over the tall counter, peering around the shelves blocking her view of the door to see who had come in. There was a young girl standing in the doorway and gazing around the store with bulging eyes, as though she had never seen something so lovely in her life and had no idea where to start.

"Well, hello there," Hermione called, smiling. It was not every day that a child came to the bookshop with an expression as if she saw Elysian Fields ahead of her.

Dark blue eyes found Hermione's brown, and the girl smiled sheepishly, her porcelain cheeks tingeing a faint pink. "Good day, miss."

Hermione glanced over at Luke, who was now watching the customer with some interest. He chuckled and shook his head. The child inched over to Hermione warily, her proper dark robes moving about her ankles. Completely straight, satiny black hair ruffled slightly with the air passing by her ears. Hermione thought the girl looked a bit like a miniature Morticia Addams, from that silly Muggle program she saw once, but her face was still fairly unfettered by any other characteristic besides winsome naïveté. Nothing about the girl gave the impression that she was not well-cared for...as a matter of fact, she looked to be a child with absolutely no worries except, perhaps, where she had misplaced her doll...however, it was a little odd that someone so young was left to her own devices in Diagon Alley. Even though there was no Dark Lord threatening death at this point, it certainly was not safe for her to be unaccompanied.

"Where are your parents, love?" Hermione asked.

"Father is at the apothecary's, miss," she said.

And her manners were without doubt some of the best Hermione had seen lately.

Hermione moved around the end of the counter and glanced out the far window toward the apothecary shop and the movement inside. She lowered herself down onto her haunches so that she would be eye-to-eye with the girl and smiled again. "My name's Hermione. Yours is?"

"Thea, miss," the girl responded.

"That's a pretty name," Hermione said.

Thea giggled quietly with a soft, infectious sound. "So is yours, miss."

"You can call me Hermione if you like," she urged. "I don't like my last name... it makes me feel... old."

And as though she was being scolded by one of her former professors.

"Father says I should always address others with their title, except for him and my friends."

Hermione could not keep the smile on her face from growing larger. Yes, this child was certainly a product of a true wizarding family and clearly had been taught to act much older than her young age.

"As well you should," Hermione said. "Then call me Miss Hermione."

Thea nodded in agreement and blushed again.

Hermione laughed lightly and stood to her full height. "Can I help you find anything, Miss Thea?"

"I don't know." Her voice sounded as though she were overwhelmed. She shrugged her tiny shoulders and glanced back from the stacks to Hermione. "This is the first bookshop I've ever been to, Miss Hermione. Father says I will need school books, and that is why we came to Diagon Alley. He said he would help me when he finished at the apothecary's shop. But I'm supposed to pick out some of my own for fun."

"May I ask how old you are, Miss Thea?" Hermione questioned.

"I'm five, Miss Hermione. Father says my sixth birthday is in..." She paused to count on her stubby fingers, but it only seemed to be a show of what her father might have done to explain how many days remained. She stopped at ten fingers and said, "Twenty-one days."

She had never really been around children much throughout her life, with no younger relatives, but since Ginny and Luna started popping children out at a swift pace, Hermione had fallen in love with them. How could she not fall in love with the cute, bogey-nosed little faces, endless hugs, and the endearing things they said? Granted, when the children were tired or misbehaving, Hermione had a more ambivalent feeling toward the very young ones, but she still found them irresistible. So irresistible, in fact, that her biological clock had started ticking almost two years before, when she had looked after five-month-old Caroline Potter, her goddaughter and Harry and Ginny's firstborn, for a weekend.

It was nothing more than a menace now, *tick-tick-ticking* all the damn time and whenever it bloody well chose, serving as a constant reminder of wasted years such as when she was breaking up with Tristan. At least it had not been a problem before then...or she would have never realized the relationship with Dean Thomas was going nowhere.

"You seem very smart for being six years old... can you read already?"

Thea nodded. "Yes, miss. But Father still must help me sometimes. And he reads for me when I go to bed at night."

"Well, what do you like to read? Fairy tales? Fantasy? Princesses in castles?"

"Oh! Do you have fairy tales? Auntie Minerva once gave me one for my birthday," Thea explained.

The mention of Hermione's former Transfiguration professor and frequent correspondent startled her a bit. Since when did Minerva have siblings so young that they would still have a daughter this age? It seemed highly unlikely to Hermione that Thea was related to the venerable woman, but then again, one could never tell. "Well, what does your father usually read to you?"

"His own books. Last night he read one about something called flubberworms."

"They're flobberworms," Hermione chuckled lowly, "but that certainly doesn't matter. We need to get you some proper reading material."

Hermione stood up and stuck her hand out, Thea's tiny hand curling into hers without a second thought. In a matter of minutes, Thea and Hermione were chest-and-knee deep, respectively, in various texts from the "Kid's Korner." There were tales of witches and wizards, faraway places, princesses, knights, and even girls walking through mirrors and being transported to a different world. Thea clearly was enjoying herself and was unable to decide on exactly which book she wanted the most. Hermione had encouraged her to come in for the monthly story time she led for children, but Thea had said her father would not bring her back repeatedly, so Hermione had dropped it. It definitely would not do if Thea's father came in and was immediately badgered by the young child about coming back. Said father most likely would avoid the bookshop like the plague after that.

It had not occurred to Hermione that she should question who the girl's father was, until a dark shadow fell over the duo with their heads bent over a stack of books.

Hermione was explaining to Thea what the book called *Cinderella* was about when she first noticed the shadow. She glanced to her side at a pair of fine dragon-hide boots and followed the well-tailored black robes up to a face she had little desire to see.

"Miss Granger," he inclined his head in acknowledgement. "I must say I'm not quite surprised to find you here, but I had thought you graduated to more advanced literature by now."

She frowned deeply and rolled her eyes. It would seem ten years had not changed the man at all, except that he did not sneer as profoundly as he had back when she had been his student. He had changed physically a bit, though, or so she noticed as she quickly stood up and smoothed her own robes over her abdomen in an effort to look presentable. That morning had been comprised of working in the dusty attic, and she knew she was not up to the high standard the man most obviously employed. He had it ten years ago, even when he was not nearly close to meeting it himself. Lord only knew what his expectations were now that he had a little bit of wealth and power, not to mention he no longer had to worry about spying and keeping himself forgettable.

Now that she was fully able to look at him, she had to admit that he appeared quite attractive. He skin was still a bit sallow, but it looked healthier, perhaps from better nutrition and a bit more weight on his bones that plumped the previously sharp, hawkish features. He now wore a short, trimmed goatee about his mouth that drew away from the large proboscis centered on his face; some silver mingled in the short black whiskers and extended to a few silver strands at his temples. Vanity obviously had never plagued him, as he wore the silver proudly pulled back into a tail of longer hair at his neck. Walking by him on the street, Hermione knew she may not have recognized him. For all she would have known, he could have been some well-to-do lord with his aristocratic (dare she say handsome?) features, not her former Potions master who had looked down that hooked nose when he was scolding her and had to brush back oily strands of black hair so he could peer at her with those unforgiving obsidian eyes.

The biggest change, perhaps, was that he appeared visibly unburdened, quite unlike he had been back during the war. Perhaps that was why he looked so different now.

"I'm helping a customer, thank you," she said with an imperious tone. "To what do I owe the dubious pleasure, Professor?"

"Ah, Miss Granger," he said again, the left corner of his lips tugging into a ghost of a smile. "I do believe it should be, 'To what do I owe the dubious pleasure, Headmaster?'"

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Father, do you know Miss Hermione?" asked the small voice at their side.

Hermione's eyes darted down to the small girl and then back up to the tall man. Back and forth she went until realization dawned on her. Now that she really looked, they had the same hair and skin. Thea had the characteristic bump of the Roman nose as Snape did, though hers less prominent. The shape of her eyes was the same, though blue. Thea was lean and stringy as he was. How could she not have made the connection before?

Because you would have never thought Snape had a kid... even in your wildest dreams.

"As a matter of fact, I do, Thea," he said and looked at the girl. "Miss Granger was once a student of mine, ten years ago."

"Eleven," Hermione reminded him.

Thea let out an excited yelp. "You knew Father before I was born?"

Hermione nodded, suddenly unable to find any words to accurately describe her shock. Thea was Snape's daughter, but nothing seemed out of place as far as Thea was concerned. The girl was a typical little girl, well cared for and without a worry in the world. How could Snape raise such a child when he was such a sadistic bastard himself? They were polar opposites. Thea was too sweet to have such a parent. There was no possible way... and who could he possibly have gotten drunk enough to sleep with him?

Where was the mother?

"Luke!" Hermione called anxiously, turning away from the dark-haired pair. She walked briskly toward the storeroom where he had disappeared a little while ago. A head of golden hair popped out and looked at her questioningly. "Will you help Thea find her school books, please?"

Luke dropped whatever he had in his hands behind the door as he nodded his head in agreement. He paused, though, on his way over to help and gave Hermione the once-over. "What's got you so tense?"

Hermione nodded toward the father and daughter now discussing book selections.

"Is that...?"

"Yes," she said. "Professor Snape. Excuse me, *Headmaster* Snape... and his daughter."

"His *what*?!" Luke questioned in a half-shriek, drawing the attention of her customers to them.

Hermione felt the fierce blush on her cheeks spread to her throat. "Shhh! And yes."

Luke glanced back at the duo. "That's *so* not fair."

"What isn't fair?"

"That kid means he's getting laid. And if he's getting something, then why am I not able to get anything?"

Hermione pursed her lips together in frustration and placed her hands upon her hips. "Men! I swear."

Luke laughed good-naturedly and clasped her shoulder in friendly reassurance. "I'll go help them."

She mouthed a 'thank you' as he walked away. Her anxiety was not so much that she feared her former Potions master and Defence teacher, but the fact that she knew she would not be able to trust what came out of her mouth pertaining to Thea. The last thing Hermione wanted was to act like a petulant child around Snape's daughter. Hermione retreated to her work at the till counter and was absently clicking buttons on the computer screen when the dark shadow fell over her again.

"Do I still intimidate you?" asked the deadly, gravelly voice.

"No," she said quietly. "It was just a shock about Thea."

"Is it so hard to believe that I have a child whom I love and care for?"

Hermione looked directly into his eyes. "Yes, it is."

He sneered and nodded his head. "I see."

Hermione did not reply, and the silence grew awkward.

"What, no rebuttal?" he asked, a brow rising in challenge.

She shook her head.

"I can't say I blame you," he replied nonchalantly, picking up a book on display and flipping through it absently. "I still find it hard to believe myself."

His admission was not expected; Hermione had to make sure this was still the man who had once done everything in his power to expel her and her friends from Hogwarts. It just couldn't be the same man... not with the way he was acting. Awkward silence filled the air between them again, and she began tidying up her already tidy work area, arbitrarily moving things to another position at the counter. It was a few moments before she realized he was watching her movements with an amused smirk.

An idea crossed her mind. She stopped in her tracks and met his forbidding eyes once more. "Why are you here, anyway?"

"I do believe this is a bookshop, and my daughter was in need of her school books."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Yes, but I also know that the Headmaster or mistress of Hogwarts pretty much lives in the castle all year round. And if that is so, then Hogsmeade was a fairly short walk away, with an apothecary and a bookshop for your needs. There was absolutely no reason to put your child through a Side-Along Apparition to bring her to Diagon Alley. It's out of the way. You have an agenda for coming all this way, and your greeting told me that you knew you'd find me here. So, this leaves me to believe that you, a) came just to see me, which is highly unlikely because you detest me, or b) there is something dire that requires my help, which is why you are stalling because you cannot bear to ask for my help."

"Are you finished?"

"AND you obviously know my weaknesses with children because you brought your daughter with you. It's hard to miss the stupid gossip stories in the *Prophet* about me toting around the Potters' daughter. She's my goddaughter, by the way, so that's the reason why I was with her if you're questioning me."

His lips cracked open slightly in a half-sneer, half-smile that was incredibly uncomfortable at best. "I do not care why you were with her. What I do care about, though, is why a reasonably intelligent witch, with all the world at her feet, ends up peddling books in a bookshop on Diagon Alley. Naturally, when I learned of this, I had to ask myself why you had destined yourself to such a life. Miss Granger, you have master qualifications in Potions *and* Arithmancy from the elite Glastonbury Magick Academy, including various lower qualifications in Transfiguration, Astronomy and Herbology. You dabbled as a mediwitch for some time after your stint at the Academy. When Weasley was named Minister, he offered you a rather lucrative position within the Ministry, and yet you turned it down. Then the Potters bought you this derelict bookshop and here you are, selling fantasies to five-year-olds."

While it was not surprising that Snape knew all of this information about her, it did make her wonder whether he had been privy to an intensive file on her from the Ministry, or had been keeping tabs on her since she left Hogwarts. The latter was a tad unsettling.

"I like what I'm doing, Snape," she barely got out through clenched teeth.

"Are you happy you're neither married nor have children of your own?"

Hermione frowned. "You're one to lecture me on happiness, Snape. Have you even had *one* happy moment in your life?"

"A few," he responded shortly, but did not elaborate. He straightened his back and looked directly at her then. "I see bandying words is not going to work with you. You prefer the direct approach."

"I don't like subterfuge. Not as much as you do, anyway," she replied.

His lips pursed into a thin line. "You will be glad to know I do not readily participate in much of that any longer."

"You're Slytherin, sir. You'll always be like that."

"Touché, Miss Granger," he said quietly and shifted his weight on his legs to lean against the counter and watch Thea discussing her book purchases with Luke. "Your boyfriend?"

Hermione scoffed. "No, my employee. And why would you care?"

"Because personal attachments might make why I am here difficult for you to consider," he explained.

"I'm not sleeping with you."

Before the remark had moved through her seven-second filter, it was out in the open, and she was receiving a rather appalled look from the severe man in front of her. Why did she even think that? Surely he had a wife, if he had a child. Hermione felt the intense heat of a blush flush her face as she closed her eyes tightly and let out a slow, low sigh.

"Still can't hold your tongue." He shook his head and clicked his tongue menacingly across his teeth.

"I'm sorry... I just... you must have a lovely wife to have a girl like Thea."

He gave a derisive snort. "Wrong again, Miss Granger. I have no wife, neither have I ever been married nor even in a semi-committed relationship. Thea is a result of something that happened in a weak moment. Such a moment will plague me for the rest of my life."

"Hmph. Nice to think about your daughter that way."

"However, this is not what I came here to discuss. My intention was to offer you something."

This piqued her interest. "Offer me what?"

"As you know, I am now Headmaster at Hogwarts, and being such, I will no longer be teaching classes. Because of this, I will need someone adequately qualified in Potions to teach. The applicants for the position, thus far, have been unsurprisingly second-rate. As I am sure you are aware, I do not appreciate any educator unable to brew even the simplest potions. That is where you come in, Miss Granger. With your education and experience in potion-making, you seem the best candidate for the position."

Her heart leapt. "No."

A dark brow arched to his hairline. "Refusing before I even tell you the terms of your tenure?"

A professorship? Potions?

"I'm not insane enough to take on a position that was once your lifeblood, sir. As though being in your Potions classes weren't stressful enough with you breathing down my neck and scolding me all the time for helping Neville, I couldn't imagine *working* for you."

"You're not necessarily working for me, but for the Ministry."

You don't want to work for him!

Hermione pursed her lips together in a tight line. "I have a bookshop to run."

"Full tenure, Gryffindor Head of House, and most likely, Deputy Headmistress. No one seems to want that task, either, with me as Headmaster."

"So that's what this is all about?! You're reacting to all the acrimonious backlash from Arthur and Minerva choosing you as Headmaster? You need someone who is loved by the rest of the Wizarding community. Someone who was a war hero. Someone who's Harry Potter's closest friend without being Harry Potter."

Snape sneered. "My, you certainly *do* think highly of yourself."

"I think *you're* awfully full of yourself to walk in here and expect me to jump at the opportunity to teach at Hogwarts. Did it ever occur to you that I enjoy where I am? That I never wanted to teach? I'm not like you, Snape. I'm happy with friends and family and a cozy little flat over my bookshop, where I can inspire the imaginations of thousands. I don't need riches and power and everything else," Hermione explained.

He seemed vaguely impressed by her passion, but continued to appear skeptical as his dark eyes narrowed inquisitively at her. Damn him anyway! It was obvious that he sensed the gears in her head, turning relentlessly since he had mentioned the opportunity. But damn her if she was going to allow him the satisfaction of knowing he understood her that well.

Luckily, though, Luke and Thea made their way over to them and sufficiently broke up the tension. Hermione smiled as pleasantly as she could. "All set?"

Thea nodded. The cost of the books was totaled, but Thea was begging her father for a second fairy tale. Snape clearly was not having it, quite incensed after everything that had played out with Hermione in the past few minutes. He told her to choose between *Cinderella* and *Snow White*. Hermione, taking pity on the girl, handed both books back to Thea. Snape had the girl's other school things reduced in size and was placing them in a pocket inside his robes.

"But I don't know which one, Miss Hermione," said Thea with tears in her eyes.

"Keep both of them, love." She smiled. "And happy birthday."

"You shouldn't encourage --" Snape began, but Thea was already around the counter, throwing herself at Hermione with her arms outstretched.

Hermione could not help but laugh at the reaction and peeled the girl away from her hips. "You should never deny a girl a book when she wants it, Snape. And she certainly needs better reading material than the Encyclopaedia of Flobberworms."

"Say thank you, Thea." Snape sneered at Hermione.

"Thank you, Miss Hermione!" The girl skipped back toward her father, both books in her hands.

"Good day, Miss Granger."

Before Hermione could say anything else, the black robes were swishing out the shop and the wooden door slammed a little too harshly, rattling the windows.

"What was that all about?" asked Luke.

Hermione shook her head. "Hell hath frozen over."

One, the Loneliest Number

Chapter 3 of 11

She hated it when other people were right and she was wrong.

Standard disclaimer applies. I own nothing.

I couldn't do this without Keladry and Subversa. You girls are amazing!

Chapter 2- One, the Loneliest Number

Severus dropped onto the wingback chair in front of the large casement overlooking the grounds, swirling the rich red wine in the goblet a bit before taking a short sniff of the fragrant bouquet and sipping it. He would not lie to anyone if they asked. Being Headmaster definitely had its perks, one of them being the largest and finest living quarters in the entire castle. Even if he could no longer retreat to the dungeons for solitude, he loved the fact that he actually had enough room to spread out his things. He even had a separate room for a study and library, on top of his own laboratory and three large bedrooms for guests, Thea and himself. On top of that, he repeatedly received gifts for no apparent reason, like the expensive bottle of wine that had been sent to him via two eagle owls, courtesy of Malfoy Manor.

With his own child due to begin at Hogwarts this term, Draco was apparently resorting to his father's bribery tactics.

Severus leaned his head back against the chair, watching the sparkling lights of Hogsmeade fade out into black Scottish countryside. It would have all been simpler if he had gone there this afternoon to collect Thea's things for school, instead of taking her to Diagon Alley. No one except the Hogwarts professors knew of his daughter, and he had endeavored to keep it that way for as long as possible. Taking her to Diagon Alley had been a big risk, and now everyone would know something of his private life. He had only taken her because of Granger, anyway. He had thought that perhaps meeting Thea would make Granger see that he was different now and would not be so difficult to work for.

Severus frowned into the goblet and grunted. That big mouth of Granger's surely would not remain shut for long, once she saw her friends. For all he knew, she had owed them especially just to let them in on the secret that the Greasy Git had a child.

And damn Granger anyway for even realizing the reason he had toted Thea out to Diagon Alley! Time was running out, and he was beginning to worry that he would not be able to fill the Potions position. Why had he even thought his ruse would work with Granger? And why did she have to be so stubborn, anyway? He was giving her an opportunity that someone her age did not deserve. He was handing it to her on a silver platter with perquisites a first-year professor should not be allowed. Instead, she wanted to stay in her little bookstore earning a pittance with a blond-haired Adonis named Luke.

What angered him the most, though, was the fact that he specifically sought her out for this job. He had chosen *her*, and she still did not seem all that impressed with the fact that he was asking her...nicely, even!...to take the Potions professorship at Hogwarts. Did she even realize what it had taken for him to humble himself enough to offer the post to *her*, of all people? After all, she was Potter's best friend, the most insufferable know-it-all and an incomparably silly girl, whose penchant for going along with those idiotic boys had frequently given him the desire to slap her senseless.

However, he was not fooled by the happy face she put on when she said that she was content to stay where she was. He didn't need Legilimency to know that her confirming smile did not reach her eyes. When he mentioned her not being married and having children of her own, he saw a great deal of despair in her face. It was clear that she loved children. The *Prophet* had written any number of exposés about her apparent love for children...toting the Potters' child everywhere and visiting multiple Weasleys at St. Mungo's when a new brat was born into the family. The writers had even gone so far as to suggest her biological clock was running into overdrive and that readers should start writing in and giving names of eligible wizards to whom she could be introduced! Even if Hermione Granger was a brash Gryffindor, she had a private side that no one deserved to read or speculate about. Hogwarts would have offered her solace away from the media's prying eyes and plenty of foolish children to watch over. Surely she realized that.

Severus was getting worried, though. He had two weeks until the start of term, and he still had not found a suitable teacher for Potions. He had no intention of teaching it himself until a teacher could be found! How would that look to parents of his students if the new Headmaster could not even hire a qualified teacher for the school? Horrible. He would get so much flak over that.

And it wasn't as though he had stayed at this school since the end of the last war for his health. He had stayed because there was the prospect of finally being the head and being able to shape up this school a little bit at a time: by hiring better educators. Sure, Albus and Minerva had both been great heads, but Severus had a plan to make the educational requirements a bit stricter. For years, the educational requirements for students graduating and moving from year to year had been lessening. Students were often passed in classes just to get them out of the school as quickly as possible. It was now his job to make sure he stopped dunderheads in their tracks. He wanted Hogwarts to live up to its reputation of being the premiere wizarding school in Western Europe. But how was he going to do that if he couldn't even get qualified teaching staff?

"Father?"

He turned his head toward the quiet, beckoning call. Thea padded over to him, cautiously stopping a few feet away. She held one of the books from Flourish and Blotts against her chest and waited apprehensively for him to acknowledge her. He certainly had not been happy when he left the bookshop earlier, and Thea had known it instantly. The girl seemed to have a sixth sense about his moods and would often disappear when all clues were pointing to the advent of his less-than-charitable demeanor. This was besides the fact that he had been incredibly short with her a few times since they had come back, about her toy broom in the middle of the floor, or her incessant questioning.

"Yes?"

"Will you read to me, Father?"

He let out a long breath and sat up in the chair, placing the goblet of wine on the side table. "Of course."

Thea smiled brightly and made short work of crawling into his lap and resting her head against his shoulder. He would be loath to admit it to anyone, but he did so love times like these where it was just the two of them. Such... tender moments had indeed grown on him, and he often wondered what it would possibly be like when she got old enough that she did not need him in such a security blanket capacity any longer. "Lonely" wouldn't even begin to describe how he felt, or so he had convinced himself. He worried that he would be even lonelier than he had been before her unceremonious entrance into his life.

However, as much as keeping the girl to himself for as long as he could manage was important, he was also well aware of the fact Thea needed a female presence in her life. Minerva had been wonderful before as a surrogate grandmother, but now that she was no longer at Hogwarts, Thea would be left wholly to his whims, even when he was in a despicable mood. Even he knew that was not something anyone should have to live through. He had hoped that if Granger had accepted the position, in part due to Thea, that she would be the one to take Minerva's place. For those nights he needed to be gone at the Ministry or doing other things, Miss Granger could take care of her. When Thea got older, they could talk about whatever women spoke and giggled so annoyingly about together.

Except, he knew Granger, and she would probably read into things and start thinking he was conditioning her for a more permanent role as a mother. And that definitely was not what he wanted or needed. He was perfectly content being single, and he certainly did not need the Granger girl as a significant other.

No matter how physically appealing she was at twenty-eight.

Thea just needed... femininity... in her life, or she would eventually end up exactly like him: a crusty old person.

"What are we reading tonight?" he asked quietly, pulling the book away from her chest.

"Cinderella," she said. "Miss Hermione said it was her favorite when she was my age."

He ran his fingers over the gilded lettering spelling out "Charles Perrault" on the cover of the thin book. It was a strange book. Definitely not one made by a wizarding publisher, if he was going by the shoddy binding. The tome's unrealistic, unmoving picture on the front cover convinced him of its inferiority.

Muggles.

"Did you like Miss Gran... er... Miss Hermione?" It was a struggle for him to get the woman's given name out of his mouth. She would forever be Miss Granger to him and nothing else.

Thea nodded her head enthusiastically. "I did, Father. She's really clever, like you."

He could not decide what to focus on: the fact that his daughter thought he was intelligent, or that Hermione was being compared to him. In the past, he might have balked at anyone who compared that insufferable know-it-all to him, but now it was more a compliment than anything. Insufferable she may be, but dimwitted she certainly never was. At the very least, *she* should be honored to be considered in *his* league...and to know that he personally considered her clever enough to take over his old classes.

Severus rolled his eyes, pushing the thoughts of the woman out of his head. Tomorrow he would start the hunt once more for a teacher who would not melt a cauldron during lessons.

"I still can't believe it. Snape seriously has a kid?"

Hermione glanced up from the *Evening Prophet* she was reading, toward the voice of the quite pregnant redhead standing over a steaming pot. "That's what I said, Ginny. Trust me, I still don't believe it myself, and I saw the girl with my own eyes."

Ginny shook her head and leaned over the pot, lifting a wooden spoon to her mouth to taste the concoction. She lowered back down onto her heels and set the spoon aside. Hermione smiled as the woman waddled over to the chair opposite her in the little breakfast nook to the side of the kitchen.

"I've got to tell you, I'll be glad when I finally have them."

"Your mum never told you that the predisposition for twins runs in the female line, did she?" Hermione asked with a raised brow.

The pretty redhead shook her head and laughed. She rested her hand on top of her burgeoning stomach. "I was lucky I even knew what went where when I had sex for the first time, much less the... what do the Muggles call it? 'The Birds and the Bees'?"

"And she thought *you*, of all people, were still a virgin when you married Harry," Hermione remarked.

"Hey, now! I was never *that* loose." Ginny frowned, but it quickly turned into a smile and a laugh. She and Ginny had become very close friends since Hogwarts, especially since Ginny and Harry had finally realized they were perfect for each other. Because they were really the only younger women in a sea of males...Luna had always been in her own little world...they had to band together out of necessity for sanity. War had brought them even closer. Hermione dating Ron for a little while had aided the bond even further. Now they figured they might as well call each other sisters. And what a pair they made, the pureblood and the Muggle-born.

Because of this and her business ties with Harry, dinners at the Potters' rather large manor house had become a regular occurrence for Hermione. She visited several times a week to discuss business, since Harry was the silent partner in the bookshop. He cared little for the running of the business, but Hermione had insisted he stay as informed as possible on the matters of the shop in case something ever happened to her. He had only laughed, stating that he was certain everything he needed to know was written and catalogued in notes in the shop.

Truth be told, though, she insisted on visiting so often only because she was lonely in her little flat after the shop closed for the day. A sixteen-year-old Crookshanks was not an exciting companion. Here, at least, she had loud-mouthed Ginny to gossip with, Caroline to spoil, and oftentimes, the Potters' nieces and nephews to take her mind off her rather mundane life. Other times, when she *really* wanted excitement, she visited the circus that was Ron and Luna's home, but that sort of excitement was only for the days she felt most able to do battle. It seemed that both Harry and Ginny had realized very early on why she called upon them as much as she did, but they had never seemed to mind her company.

Damn Snape for being able to sense my unhappiness, despite all the evidence to the contrary.

It was all she could think about for the rest of the day: Snape and his visit to Flourish and Blotts, including his offer of employment at Hogwarts. Hogwarts, the school that had been truly home to her ever since she first learned she was a witch. It was an honor to be asked to teach there...and even more of an honor that Snape intentionally sought her out to take over his subject. He was asking her, the girl he had loathed in his classes, to teach.

It was a dream position that many people twice her age only could have wished for. She should have asked where her rooms were. She should have asked to sign the contract. But she just couldn't leave the bookshop. There was still so much to be done.

"And then he showed up wearing nothing but a ribbon..." said Ginny, sufficiently drawing Hermione out of her trance.

"Huh?!" Hermione asked.

Ginny crossed her arms over her chest and rested them atop her distended abdomen. "There's something on your mind. You're too quiet."

"Just thinking."

"About?" Ginny asked, but they were interrupted by Caroline waking up from her nap in the sitting room and requiring her mother's attention in the toilet. The sound of the front door opening had two-year-old Caroline running down the hallway, wearing only her nappy, a security blanket and a stuffed Pygmy Puff toy beneath her arm. Ginny appeared in the hall with a harried expression, a tiny dress in her hand.

"Daddy!" squealed Caroline.

"What happened to your clothes, little one?" a disembodied voice asked with a short laugh. Ginny stomped toward the entrance, tossed the dress at the voice and stomped back toward the kitchen.

Hermione tried not to laugh, but it was futile.

Ginny grumbled. "If the twins are anything like her... I don't know what I'll do. I've had these nightmares that Fred and George will pop out."

"Well, they'll definitely take a keen interest in their nephews or nieces, whatever you have."

Harry entered the room with Caroline on his hip. He set the small girl down and walked to his wife to give her a kiss. Hermione knew she should look away from the private moment...after all, it would only serve to thrust her own spinsterhood into harsh light...but she was enthralled by the way Ginny and Harry acted with each other. They were clearly very deeply in love, if one could tell by the starry expressions in their eyes after a short welcoming kiss or the way Harry gave Ginny's abdomen a light caress as though greeting his unborn children. It made Hermione's heart melt and harden all at the same time. Why couldn't she have that? Sure, Harry deserved this idyllic happiness after everything that had gone on in his early life, but didn't she deserve a small slice of it as well?

"Hey 'Mione," he said as he walked past her seat and squeezed her shoulder in a friendly gesture. Soon he had divested himself of the navy-colored Auror robes, hanging them on a peg to the side of the room.

Caroline finally noticed that Hermione was there as well and ran over, arms outstretched. "Aunnie Ermione!"

Hermione, covetous of her friends' happiness, did not need another enticement to take the girl into her arms and hold her tightly. Meanwhile, Ginny and Harry began to talk about Ministry gossip.

"To tell you the truth, I'm a little worried it's so quiet," he said. "Something's bound to happen. Who knows, maybe Snape's last nerve will finally snap, and we'll have to clean up the kids who got the worst of it."

"I think it snapped a long time ago, Harry," Hermione said quietly.

"Speaking of Snape," Ginny began; she could always be counted on to stir things up. "Guess who came into the bookshop today?"

"Snape?" Harry asked, unimpressed.

"And his daughter," Ginny added.

"His *what*?" Harry asked, suddenly flabbergasted.

Ginny nodded and deferred to Hermione to recount finding out about Snape having a daughter, and a rather well-adjusted daughter, at that. Harry still did not seem to believe it at the end of the story and just sat back in his seat, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Why did he make the trip to Diagon Alley, anyway? Isn't that a little far from Scotland?" Harry questioned.

Hermione sighed. She might as well tell them because they would pull each tooth out of her one at a time if they had to. "He wants me to teach at Hogwarts. Potions."

"You didn't tell me that!" Ginny exclaimed. "You hadn't said you applied for the job."

"I didn't," Hermione said.

"You mean he intentionally sought you out to teach Potions?" Harry asked. "Is it a cruel joke or something?"

"Yes, because my master qualification in Potions means absolutely nothing, Harry." Hermione pursed her lips together. "I told him no."

"Why?" Ginny exclaimed. "It's perfect for you, Hermione. You love school. What could be more perfect for you than teaching?"

"But it's *his* subject, Ginny. You know how he treated her in his classes," Harry said. "Am I right, Hermione?"

She nodded. "I am worried that he would hold me to an impossible standard, considering everything. He'll probably be breathing down my neck like he did when he was overseeing brewing back then."

"But it is a good opportunity, Hermione," he said, the gears clearly turning in his head. "And I would have a reliable source of information, should anything unsavory happen at the school."

"I refuse to be your informant," she said. "If you want to uncover something happening, you'll just have to do good old detective work. Besides, I have the bookshop to run."

"Luke can handle it and hire a flunky," Harry offered.

Hermione shook her head. "But you bought it for me, Harry. I wouldn't feel right."

Harry scoffed. "Don't worry about what you 'think' is right, Hermione. What's the worst that could happen? We sell it again. If you really want to teach, then you should."

"I just..."

"Don't go there." He raised his hand in an effort to stop her. "Hermione, I'm saying this just because I love you...saying it because both Ginny and I love you. We see how unhappy you are right now."

"I..."

"Don't disagree with me, you know you are, and we're worried about you. I know you've been waiting for something like this to fall into your lap," he continued.

Hermione glanced at Ginny, who nodded in agreement with her husband.

"He's right, Hermione, we are worried," Ginny confirmed, though she clearly had not planned on this heart-to-heart happening like this. "You've been searching for a place to fit in, and Hogwarts is it. School is it."

Crossing her arms across her chest, Hermione frowned slightly. "I don't know."

"Just think about it," Harry encouraged. "You'd definitely be a million times better than the previous Potions professor."

Hermione couldn't help but let out a chuckle at the looks both of the Potters were shooting at her. It was one of those parental you-will-do-as-I-say looks that they seemed to have mastered recently, and one that Hermione had only seen on her own parents' faces a few times in her life.

"Fine! I'll think about it." Hermione threw up her arms in disgust.

She *hated* it when other people were right and she was wrong.

Weasleys Can Be Slytherin, Too!

Chapter 4 of 11

But he was deeply satisfied right now...

Satisfied that his tricks still worked.

Thank you all for your interest in this story!

I would also like to wish you all a very happy holiday, no matter what you celebrate. May your lives be full of love, and your inboxes full of story updates!

Without further ado...

Chapter 3- Weasleys Can Be Slytherin, Too!

Surely it had been Harry's and Ginny's intention to help her with this rather daunting, life-altering decision a week ago; all through dinner that evening they had brought up many points she should consider. Some of the points they made were very definite pros, and the others cons. Hermione voiced her own thoughts on the matter and, in their own well-meaning, meddling ways, they had shot each one down with logical, if threadbare, rebuttals, reminding her of memories that would serve to make her realize Hogwarts was where she should be. As needless as it was to say, her mind had been muddled incomprehensibly since then, and as such, she decided it was best not to visit the Potters again for a little while.

After all, this was a decision she would have to make entirely on her own; it was ~~her~~ her life...her future...she found herself debating.

How was she supposed to find a man, get married and procreate up there in a remote part of the Scottish Highlands? She certainly did not think she would want a life like her professors. As far as she knew, none of the Hogwarts professors had mates, and if they had, said mates had been dead for a long time or had separated before she went to school there. Unless, of course, she just didn't know the whole truth, which was quite possible. Snape *did* have a daughter. What else were the denizens of Hogwarts hiding? Still, there was no man in Hogsmeade she would fraternize with given the chance, except on a drunken bender. And even then, she would think twice about it. The male professors at Hogwarts were few, and the only even slightly acceptable one for whom she could conceive having any feeling beyond professional courtesy would be Snape.

But *that* would *never* happen. The thought alone gave her such violent heebie-jeebies that she could not imagine eating anything for hours.

No, this decision was her own and one that she would not make lightly. Her choices were either eternal spinsterhood with a well-paying, strenuous career, including the possibility of one day becoming Headmistress of Hogwarts, or the scant possibility of romance and a life of mediocrity as a bookshop owner.

It was exactly one week later, as Hermione welcomed families into her bookshop to procure their students' school materials, that the witch made any headway whatsoever in deciding exactly what she was going to do about Professor Snape's offer of tenure. Very early that morning, it had become apparent that the Potters were not going to let Hermione make this decision by herself. As it appeared, they had set the rest of the Weasley family to the task of talking her into the position of Potions mistress. Or, at least, the news of the offer had spread like wildfire to every freckled, redheaded wizard and witch in Britain.

Ron and Luna had been the first Weasleys into the shop with their growing gaggle of children. Little Phineas and Miles were due to begin classes at the primary school farther down Diagon Alley in the coming week. Luna had been in charge of controlling her four rather rambunctious offspring in the shop, while Ron had apparently been set to talk Hermione into becoming a teacher.

He had leaned against the till counter and said, "You know, I'd feel a lot better knowing you were there when Phineas started Hogwarts in a few years. And when the other ones get there, too. Anything to check that bastard."

"Ronald!"

"I'm just telling it like it is."

Hermione had frowned. "Just because you are the only one who has never forgiven him gives you no right to speak of him like that."

He had smiled. "See? Loyalty for your employer already."

"Get out of here before I cuff you," Hermione had said through clenched teeth. Really, did he think that argument was going to work? And didn't Ginny and Harry know that Ron was absolute shite at persuasion?

The family had left shortly after. Hermione had offered each child two handfuls of sweets each; Aunt Hermione knew how to get revenge on anyone who tried to meddle in her life! Ron's chagrined glare had been very satisfying. Hopefully the candy would serve its purpose and energize the children to such a peak that they would give Ron a pounding migraine. He deserved it, after all. Sure, Snape had never been the nicest man in the world, but his intentions...while veiled...had always been honorable. Tough love was what he dealt with all the time; there was no room for coddling as with some professors they had in the past. Ron just needed to grow up and understand that.

But the rest of the Weasleys were not to be outdone in their crusade.

Percy and Penelope had come in then, a little before lunch. Of course, Percy had always been the radically straight-laced one in the family, to the point of fanaticism. He had always taken Hermione under his wing at Hogwarts because she had seemed to be the only other Gryffindor who was serious about her education and future. He used their history together as housemates in his approach of the subject. Percy had made it clear that, according to the Ministry, she was the only one in a vast sea of applicants qualified to teach at Hogwarts. He had even gone so far as to say that he knew with her and Snape, there certainly would be nothing disagreeable going on at Hogwarts. At least he did have a real position of concern; his daughter Persephone was slated to begin Hogwarts this year.

Hermione had smiled and thanked him for his confidence.

Later in the afternoon, the entire bustling bookshop came to a standstill when Fleur Delacour-Weasley made her entrance, nose in the air and an ethereal glow about her, followed by a miniature of herself, but with coppery red hair. It irritated Hermione how the whole world seemed to fall at the woman's feet like this, and it looked like the girl was destined to glide in her mother's footsteps. Did no one realize it was because of their bewitching Veela blood that men fell in love with these two?

Hermione sighed, tucking a disobedient curl behind her ear for the twentieth time that day. Didn't real brains count for anything?

The pregnancy glow and small bump barely visible beneath Fleur's stylish, body-hugging robes only added to the image of the feminine ideal. Luke had almost tripped over himself to help both mother and daughter. Hermione just hoped that she would not be faced with having to strike up a conversation with the French witch.

Indeed, it turned out she would not have to. Instead, Bill, on a break from his post at Gringotts, had decided to stop in and visit his wife and daughter. The handsome redhead still wore his hair long and in a ponytail, the dragon's tooth earring in his ear. Madam Pomfrey had done the impossible and healed him well after his attack in Hermione's sixth year; he had suffered no lingering affects, including full-blown lycanthropy. Now the marks Fenrir Greyback had left were merely faint lines of pink, an example of the atrocities that everyone had suffered during the war.

Bill used the same approach Percy had chosen. His daughter, Marguerite, would start Hogwarts with Persephone this year.

Thoroughly annoyed by his insistence, she was glad to see him leave with Fleur and Marguerite.

Honestly! She knew Harry and Ginny had probably meant well, letting it "slip" about her offer, but Hermione liked to think her life was her own to live. But then again, she had felt for some time now that as she was the last single one of her friends and family, that they all had an opinion as to how she should conduct her life.

The only true help in her decision came an hour before closing, and from someone who she was certain the Potters' had not spoken to. It came in the form of a pug-faced, blonde-haired boy named Atticus, with his pretentious, arrogant father, Draco. Hermione had enjoyed reading *To Kill A Mockingbird*, long ago, and she found it highly amusing that this Atticus shared a name with a solicitor who stood up for the rights of those seen as "impure" by Southern Americans. After Hermione had recovered from the pure hilarity of the child's name, she decided that she had better resign herself to the fact that one of the banes of her existence had reproduced...and reproduced with another bane of her existence, no less. Didn't Malfoy realize that adding two negatives did not make a positive?

She had not paid much attention to it when the announcement was in the papers, but she knew that soon after the war had ended in her seventh year, the year Draco and Pansy did not return to Hogwarts, the two pure-bloods had been married. Draco had not been held accountable for the Death Eater break-in at Hogwarts, but had nonetheless decided to stay at Malfoy Manor and wait out the war; Pansy, for whatever reason, had decided not to continue her schooling.

According to reports, it had been a quick marriage made on the sly, which had suggested Pansy was already with child on their wedding day. However, Draco's father, still incarcerated in Azkaban and awaiting sentencing by the Wizengamot, had approved the marriage to the pureblood witch. Narcissa did not seem to care, so long as she was protected at Malfoy Manor. Lucius had been sentenced to receive the Dementor's Kiss shortly after the birth of his grandson, and Draco picked up right where his father had left off with the full power of the Malfoy estate now at his back. Sure, his pure-blood ideals were pretty quiet these days, but it was apparent he had been devastated when Arthur Weasley was made Minister for Magic, and he was doing anything in his power to let the Weasleys know he was not happy with it.

It was also apparent that he still could not seem to find common ground with Hermione.

"What are you doing here, Granger?" asked the cornsilk-haired man.

"I own Flourish and Blotts," Hermione responded, trying desperately to keep her wits about her.

He sneered. "Everything is going to the dogs now. Weasel in the Ministry. Mud...excuse me, Muggle-borns...owning half our world. Father would never have stood for it. At least we have a decent man in charge of Hogwarts now. He won't let your people in as easily."

"Yes, Malfoy, but that man, if you recall, fought for the Order of the Phoenix," she replied.

"He fought for himself, Granger, and *you* should remember *that*. No true allegiance. He switched his allegiances with the tide of the war, as did Father."

Hermione sighed. It made sense that Snape had only been a double agent to protect his own interests...he was a Slytherin...but she could not necessarily fault him for that. While it would have been a perfect world had he fought for all the right reasons, she knew that was not Severus Snape and never would be. What she did know, though, was that he did not care how much wizarding blood someone had, so long as they were capable at their craft.

"Your father had one allegiance, Draco. He was just a good liar with a full pocket that made it seem otherwise," she said, but she was not finished. Inspiration had hit her, and she was quickly losing her indecision on a certain matter. "And I am certain it would please you to know that Professor Snape has asked me to teach Potions. He doesn't seem to mind that I have Muggle parents."

Draco had the audacity to laugh at her. "It must be a joke! I will have to get in on the bet he has going about how long you'll last...certainly he would not give *you* that position. Not knowing what he thinks about you."

"And what does he think about me?"

"You've always been the 'insufferable know-it-all', Granger."

"If I take the position, I will also be Head of Gryffindor House and Deputy Headmistress." She watched with a satisfied expression as his sneer slowly began to turn into one of worry. "And mark my words, I *will* have your child expelled should he do something... horrible."

"Yes, well..." He cleared his throat. "We'll just see about that now, won't we?"

"Good thing you're not on the Board like Daddy was, isn't it?" She smiled as sweetly as she could manage.

Draco turned sharply to Atticus. "Let's go, Atticus. I have business I need to see to elsewhere."

"Yes, you'd better hurry. Borgin and Burkes will be closed soon," she said, watching the retreating pair.

Well, that pretty much settled it. Just to make Draco Malfoy's life a living hell, she would take that position. For some strange reason, she didn't care that she was acting exactly like Snape and projecting behaviors and attitudes of their parents onto the progeny of previously-despised classmates. She didn't care that she would punish the child of the person she could not punish in the past. She didn't care that she had Snape-ish characteristics.

However, she certainly was not going to stop washing her hair or brushing her teeth. Or wear head-to-toe black.

Severus sat in his office, poring over various purchase orders given to him at the faculty meeting earlier that afternoon. It had been a long day as the school was finishing its preparations for the incoming students, including a final three-hour faculty gathering to discuss patrol duties and other housekeeping matters. There had also been the necessary discussion of the big events of the upcoming year, including the annual alumni ball to be held on Halloween and the slightly watered-down version of the Yule Ball to be held at Christmas.

He had not really thought about it before, but he realized that now, as Headmaster, he would be expected to not only help plan such events, but attend all school functions whether he wanted to or not. This wasn't even to mention that he would be expected to socialize in a semi-charitable way. Neither had it occurred to him, until Minerva had reminded him, that this socializing would further entail sycophantic adulation of certain beneficiaries.

At least he could wait to worry about that for a little while.

There had also been the task today of choosing a deputy head, but all of the other faculty members had shied away from the position for various reasons. Sure, it was a lot of extra work on top of normal classes, and he was not the easiest boss to work for, but was he really *that* horrible? Was the position with the added benefits not tempting? Flitwick had offered to take the position should no one else wish to take it, *if and only if* Severus found himself in dire straits at the beginning of the term. However, as far as Severus was concerned at this point in time, he was already in what one would call "dire straits." *Severe* dire straits. No one...absolutely no one...could be found to take

over Potions. Those he had approached about the position had laughed in his face, all giving the same reason Granger had as to why they would not dare take it: they were not foolish enough to teach Potions with him overseeing them.

In a way, he could understand their reasons for believing this, even if he did not want to admit it to himself. If only he had been slightly more yielding when they had been his students or peers in school. It would have been so much easier to get someone to accept the offer.

But Severus had never looked toward the future, nor had he even begun to think he would ever be named Headmaster. Eleven years ago, he had been certain he would not make it out of the Second War against Dark Lord alive, much less completely healthy. So certain, in fact, that he had become increasingly more reckless near the end, when the Final Battle was slowly coalescing. He had wanted to take a more active role even if it meant assured death to him...he felt it was his only way to achieve true atonement for his old ways. He had been as nasty as ever in his personal and professional dealings, making certain to form no lasting attachments. He had been convinced he would never teach again after killing Dumbledore. Now he found himself at forty-eight, the Headmaster of Hogwarts, with a daughter and living his life much more carefully than he had ever done before.

Yet, there was still a slim chance he was not totally out of options yet.

After reading with Thea that evening a week ago, and finishing the bottle of wine delivered from Malfoy Manor, he had formulated a ghost of a plan involving Draco Malfoy that he did not think would ever come to fruition. It had only materialized, though, when Arthur, the ever-diligent Minister, had stopped by a few days ago to see about the Potions position and whether it had been filled or not. When the freckled redhead found out that it, indeed, had not been filled and that Hermione Granger had not accepted his offer, Arthur had looked troubled, saying that he had expected Hermione to jump at the opportunity.

That night, he and Arthur had sat down, constructing Operation Potions Mistress, as he liked to refer to it. Apparently, Arthur was like a father to her and knew her better than Severus did. The Minister had said he would make certain the rest of his family knew about the predicament to see if they could add their two Knuts' worth when they visited Flourish and Blotts for school books. According to Arthur, Hermione Granger could not always be swayed in her stances, but Arthur was certain that in a situation such as this, it could happen if their plans were laid correctly to strike the right chord. That was when Severus decided it might prove profitable to bring Draco in on their plans. Severus was wary about it, and he could not be certain if using Malfoy's stinging, supercilious words would successfully bait this altruistic Gryffindor, to strike that proverbial chord, but he was willing to give it a try.

His delight knew no limit when the eagle owl had shown up at breakfast with a message from Draco, saying that Granger could indeed be a little like her former Potions master and accept a position just to promise retribution to the spawn of certain previous classmates of hers. It had surprised him, without doubt, but it had given him something to work with.

Perhaps she was not as unflappable as she let on?

However, he had expected her to make an appearance before now to let him know she accepted. It had been a full day since Draco and Atticus had paid Granger a visit. Surely, if the plan had worked, the Gryffindor would not have been able to wait. This did trouble him greatly. She should have been bursting from the seams just to tell him.

As though on cue, a brown barn owl swooped in through the open window in his office and landed on his desk. He removed the rolled parchment from the bird's leg, offering it an owl treat for its trouble, but it still looked at him expectantly like he had not been given enough. Severus scowled at it defiantly and split open the wax seal on the parchment to find a tidy, articulate script within.

Professor Snape,

If you are still searching for someone to teach Potions, I would like to take you up on your offer. Circumstances have changed considerably for me only recently, and I hope that the position is still open. While I am sure it will not be an easy task, it is definitely one to which I can set myself. Please send a reply via this owl with any information I may need before the term begins. I will be needed here at Flourish and Blotts until the last possible moment.

Regards,

Hermione Granger

He leaned back in his seat and looked at the parchment again, a feeling of satisfaction flowing through him. On any normal occasion, he would have been indignant she had first turned down his offer, then nearly begged for it afterward. And any other time, he would have rather slit his own wrists than have to work with a member of the Dream Team and who was the silliest girl he had ever known. But he was deeply satisfied right now...

Satisfied that his tricks still worked.

The Prodigal Alumna's Return

Chapter 5 of 11

She pursed her lips together into a thin line, letting out a short, indignant grunt. If he needed her so horribly, he should have been there at the gates to welcome her.

A/N: Thank you all so much for the reviews. They mean so much to me!

I have made the definitive decision to stick with capitalizing Headmaster, Deputy Headmistress, etc. as per the UK editions of the books. The previous chapters have been changed to reflect this. No big deal, just wanted to make sure that if there was anyone that noticed and it bothered them, it has all been changed for continuity's sake.

To my dear betas Subversa and Keladry...you are amazing!

Chapter 4- The Prodigal Alumna's Return

Hermione arrived at Hogwarts the Saturday morning before the beginning of the fall term, trepidation having firmly implanted itself into her mind and vocalizing itself in every waking thought surfacing in her head.

It had seemed like a brilliant idea to write to Snape, after Draco left the bookshop. True, she *had* taken much of the evening following Draco's reentrance into her life to think about what the pure-blood had said before sending her owl, but there had been little *rational* thought that had crossed her mind. As a matter of fact, thinking about

Draco had only ever served to agitate her to such an extent that she started making horribly rash decisions.

Hermione was extremely concerned for this reason alone. None of her past decisions made in the irrationality of the moment had turned out exceptionally well. Yes, she, Harry and Ron all seemed to have a force guarding them that always made their forays into stupidity turn out well and often times left them smelling like roses, but Hermione was quite certain that force would not follow her into the classroom under Snape's direction.

Maybe she should not have accepted? After all, she had never really wanted to teach in the first place. And she would be damned if she ended up like Snape: a bitter, lonely person who seemingly had only taken his original tenure as Potions master to obtain pleasure from belittling the progeny of his former tormentors.

She did worry, though, about things completely unrelated to working for someone she had despised for most of her years at school.

Would she remember everything she needed to while teaching classes? Could she even teach the subject adequately? How would she be able to command the attention of an entire class when she had not even been able to control Ron and Harry when she needed to? Would she turn to her bossy, opinionated side that believed anyone whose views differed from hers, however logical, was wrong and completely mental? Would her past catch up with her? Would she make any friends amongst the staff? Could she, in good conscience, teach the children she considered her own nieces and nephews without favoritism? And would she really be able to judge children like Atticus Malfoy fairly, even though she had threatened otherwise?

Most importantly, would she be able to be as effective an educator as Snape had been without ending up cynical and cruel?

Indeed, there were so many unanswerable questions that she barely had enough brain power left over to contemplate her lesson plans. As it was, she had never made a lesson plan before. Hell, she hadn't even *taught* a class before! There had been one time while at Glastonbury that she had been made chief laboratory assistant, and she *had* done some paper and potion grading for her mentor-professor, but that had been the extent of her training in the classroom. Yes, she had some fine examples of teachers in her background after whom to model herself; she even had some horrible ones she had no desire to emulate, but that really didn't make any difference to Hermione. She knew all too well that without practical experience, she was pretty much dead in the water.

There was no doubt about it: Hermione Granger, normally confident Gryffindor, was terrified.

At least Hogwarts was as she remembered it; the castle was warm and welcoming, instantly making her feel as though she was home, and this was the only place in the world she wanted to be. On the other hand, the high-ceilinged corridors were a little too quiet for her liking, but then again, Hermione reminded herself, she had never been to the school when there weren't students present. She was sure everything would be back to "normal" once the term started; it was merely something else she would have to become accustomed to, especially when the winter and summer hols came around.

She had not seen anyone yet but a few house-elves; Snape had not deigned to welcome her.

Winky had been dispatched to help Hermione with her things and to find her rooms. The squeaky little house-elf had also been instructed to give her a folded piece of parchment. Apparently, she had also been instructed to refuse to leave before insisting that Hermione allow her to have food and tea sent to the room. Hermione had declined the offer, disappointing Winky to such an extent that the little elf started to sniffle, making it clear that she thought Hermione was displeased with her. Taking pity on the creature, Hermione had rolled her eyes and asked for sandwiches and tea. Winky's ears had perked up immediately, and she snapped her fingers eagerly, two overflowing trays of libations appearing on the sideboard. The elf had given her a toothless smile and disappeared.

At least the elderly Winky had forgotten Hermione's earlier attempts at freeing the house-elves from servitude. The last thing she needed were house-elves scared to come around her for fear of being given clothes, especially since Dobby was now helping out at the Potters a few days a week...for pay, of course...and would not be able to help Harry Potter's frizzy-haired friend.

Hermione sighed heavily to herself and looked around the living area of her rooms, located directly below the Gryffindor common room, in an effort to orient herself with what might be the setting for the rest of her adult life. It was nothing to shout about, surely, with boring stone walls, basic furniture and a large hearth to one side of the front room. There was a small, modernized kitchen and dinette close to the entrance, but clearly there would not be enough space to cook and serve a decent meal for entertaining purposes. Moving back to the bedroom, Hermione was met with even more basic wooden furniture. Dominating the room was a bed far more luxurious than the four-poster she'd slept in as a student: it was a king-sized sleigh bed, stained a dark mahogany. Intricate woodwork showed a pride of lions about the footboard; a large lion's head, replete with magnificently bushy mane, graced the center of the headboard.

How very Gryffindor, Hermione decided.

An ancient-looking mattress rested on top of the springs; essential bed clothes in shades of crimson and gold were folded and resting on a nightstand. There would be a great number of transfigurations and charms performed over the next few weeks to make these chambers more livable and more to her own personal tastes, but Hermione supposed it wasn't too horrible.

After all, you could be in the dungeons.

Supposing these chambers had once been Godric Gryffindor's and had since been passed to each Gryffindor head, she decided she should send silent gratitude to Gryffindor for having the largesse to create such an amazing bathing sanctuary...better than any prefects' or Head Girl's bath. It reminded her of those Roman baths she had seen while on holiday with her family in Italy: open and airy, meant for a relaxing retreat instead of a perfunctory scrub under pelting water. Over the large whirlpool-like bath was a charmed ceiling to mimic blue skies with fluffy white clouds, casting fake, muted sunlight around the room.

If there was one personal enjoyment Hermione indulged in, it was a nice, long hot bath after a trying day. She had a very distinct feeling she would have a lot of those days to come and was glad for the addition.

Hermione made her way back out of the room to find that the three owls she had sent earlier with bundles of shrunken belongings, mainly her books, had arrived and were tapping anxiously at the glass-paned casement in the living room. After letting the barn owls in, she offered them some of the food Winky had Summoned and placed the tiny boxes with the other things she had brought, to be sorted out later. Dipping her hand into her pocket, her fingers skimmed the rough, folded parchment Winky had given her. Pulling out the parchment, Hermione broke the wax seal and read the short note written in spiky black letters:

Miss Granger,

Unfortunately, I will be detained in a meeting with an associate in Hogsmeade. I will Floo you when I return to discuss some important matters with you.

S. Snape

She pursed her lips together into a thin line, letting out a short, indignant grunt. If he needed her so horribly, he should have been there at the gates to welcome her.

He should be here to carry my bloody bags for me!

Leaving the door to her chambers unwarded...there was little chance of anything sprouting legs and walking off, or being damaged...her mind had again thoroughly immersed itself in renewed trepidation over her position. This was not discounting the mixture of indifferent exasperation that had entered her thoughts as well, for not being thought important enough to garner Snape's utmost attention upon her arrival. He had told her to be here at this time. Why couldn't he have scheduled his appointment for later, after he had dealt with her?

Before she knew it, she had worked her way down to the dungeons, heading straight for what would be her classroom in two days. Given her choice, she would prefer one of the rooms with large windows overlooking the grounds on one of the upper floors. She was not thrilled to have to use this room in the cold, clammy dungeons for her

classes, but any decent potions maker knew that temperature and moisture control were pertinent to effective ingredients and most potion brewing. Trying the door handle, she found it unlocked and unwarded, the ancient hinges groaning loudly with the weight of the wood as it swung to reveal the empty room.

The room had not changed much since she had been a student; Snape's personal effects had been removed from the room, but otherwise, everything seemed exactly as she remembered it at her last class of seventh year. The workbench Neville had used for five years was blackened with repeated mistakes that magic could no longer fix nor hide. The faint evidence of a cauldron meltdown that Hermione remembered well was to the left of the room where Malfoy and his cronies used to sit. The room as just as dank and depressing as she remembered. With any luck, she would endeavor to make the classroom, if not the class itself, a tad more enjoyable.

She moved slowly through the classroom, glimpses of Potions classes past materializing in front of her for brief moments.

Herself, sitting quietly and watching a simmering cauldron, every so often leaning over to whisper a quick instruction to Neville.

Draco and his cronies jeering at everyone. Snape moving lithely through the tables, coming to stand over and berate her for helping Neville even after he had told her not to.

She smiled ruefully to herself, thinking of Neville's crippling fear whenever Snape was in sight. The Greasy Git had never frightened her. Infuriated her, sure, but she had never felt particularly terrified of the man. That was, perhaps, a reason why she disregarded Snape's orders pertaining to assisting Neville. He could threaten her with detention all he wanted, but it was not going to change her mind about helping the poor boy.

Yet, Hermione reminded herself, Snape had never actually given her a detention for helping Neville, even when it was glaringly obvious that was what she was doing on various occasions. As a matter of fact, she had only ever lost a handful of house points for disobeying. Had he just been keeping up appearances, threatening her? Had she been a bit of teacher's pet to the Potions master, even if it was in an odd, twisted way?

Running her fingers along the well-worn wood of the lectern Snape had stood at and lectured from during his classes, she let out a low sigh. Could she really be here, preparing to teach a class in two days? Was she really going to stand in Snape's spot and pray to any deity that would listen that she would make it out alive?

"It is rather difficult to Floo someone when they are not in their rooms."

The sarcasm-laden voice startled her enough to exclaim a panicked profanity, even as she identified the speaker. She pivoted quickly to find Snape leaning against the doorjamb, his arms folded across his chest.

"Why would I sit in my rooms, waiting for you to decide to Floo, when I have other things to see?" she asked, the adrenaline in her veins making her cross. "I don't spend my time waiting on people. There's no point."

"My, that is rather cynical of you."

"I'm not a Hufflepuff," she said and closed the distance between them. "So, now that you have deemed it appropriate to find me, please, let's not beat around the bush."

Snape raised a defiant brow. "I left a note for Winky to give to you."

"She did give it me. But I'm rather annoyed at the thought that I should be left waiting at your beck and call after I told you exactly what time I would arrive. Isn't it considered poor manners to not be..."

"Miss Granger," he responded tersely, "I assure you that I had planned to be here for your arrival, but I was called away to Hogsmeade at the last minute. It was important, and I could not delay the meeting. Now, I believe we should start *our* meeting with some rules, however difficult they may be for you to follow."

Am I out of line for saying what I did?

Hermione bit her tongue to keep her ire from boiling over. He could have a decent excuse, but he would never tell her. Whatever he had been doing wasn't her business, after all, and all she would ever know was that it was a last minute meeting. According to him, everything was on a need-to-know basis, and she obviously did not need to know. It clashed horribly with her Gryffindor tendencies to lay everything out on the table.

"The most important rule you must remember is that I am your superior, and as I expected respect from you as a student, I also expect it from the teachers working for me."

Hermione barely managed to keep from rolling her eyes. Had he ever had her respect when she was his student? She had never really respected him until *after* all was said and done. Only then had she understood everything that he had gone through for the Order and Harry's cause.

"I thought I was working for the Ministry, sir," she said, knowing she was being overly petulant, but she was not in the most charitable of moods at the moment. Her anxiety over the whole teaching ordeal seemed to be manifesting itself in this new way being snippy towards her superior.

He sneered. "It would also behoove you to remember that you are an adult and not a student any longer," he said. "Act your age."

It was amazing how something that simple, coming from his mouth in such a vitriolic way, could still sting her. She *could* have been out of line. After all, it was her decision to come. As much as she wanted to take her frustration out on him for not meeting her, she had better give him the benefit of the doubt, if only in hopes of maintaining a peaceful working relationship in days to come. She was older and should know better.

For the first time in a long time, she actually felt like apologizing to the man, but she could not make herself say the words.

Apparently, a look of regret had surfaced on her face; as his eyes flicked in her direction again, he gave a curt nod. Snape motioned to the empty room, continuing, "As you must know, you will be teaching classes down here. Everything was left as you remember it in the class storeroom, so it should not be difficult to find what you need. Since it has taken so long to find a suitable replacement for myself, I have ordered supplies based on my lesson plans. If you need anything more, you may place an order through me to be approved. The Ministry keeps close watch on how money is spent, now that the Board of Governors has been replaced with the Department of Magical Education."

"I don't think I'll need much," she said. "I'm using your lesson plans."

"And how did you come by those?" he asked, seemingly interested that she had offered that information freely.

Hermione did roll her eyes, this time. "I took notes every day about what we did. Sixth and seventh year were a little more nebulous since we had the fine... teaching... of Horace Slughorn."

Snape smirked. "He was a capable-enough instructor, but he could have been amazing if he had not paid so much attention to his Club."

"I agree," she said. "I hated that. I don't think I even got in on my own merits; I'm certain being associated with Harry helped."

"I must inquire, though, why you have not developed your own lesson plans?"

The moment of truth. Hermione hesitated.

The question was not one of sneering incredulity, but merely one that served to gather information for future knowledge. It was his right to know, after all, why his new

Potions mistress did not know how to develop a lesson plan. If she did not know how to do that, then how would she be able to teach a class?

Hermione did wonder at his tone of voice, though. Even in the bookshop, he had behaved in a much more approachable manner than he had ever done as her professor, or during those last days of the war. Sure, he still had his sardonic mind...hopefully he would never lose that, as she would admit she liked such sarcasm to a point...but there was still that feeling that he was constantly teetering between sadistic bastard and venerable war hero and Headmaster.

Her grouchiness not a few minutes before hadn't even set him off. He gave fair warning she was getting close, yes, but cheek like that in the past would have earned her *such* a berating from his sharp tongue.

I wonder what would make him snap now?

A sweet face came to Hermione's mind. Was this Thea's influence?

"As interesting as I am sure your thoughts are, would it be an inconvenience to quit daydreaming?"

Hermione felt a blush rise from the demure collar of her robes to her cheeks. "Sorry, Professor. I, erm, have never taught a class before."

"You went to university and never once were an apprentice or professor's aide?" he asked.

"I helped in the lab and did some grading," she explained, "but I never taught."

He considered her for a moment before asking his next question. "Why did you go all the way to your master's, then, if you did not want to teach? The only reason for a master qualification in anything is to become an educator."

She smiled ruefully. "I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life. After Hogwarts and the war, I had absolutely no desire to go into Auror training with Harry and Ron. Other possibilities were open, but I decided to continue my education because that was what I was good at, and I didn't need to make a decision about anything. My Arithmancy mastery fell into my lap because I took so many extra courses. I almost planned for a Dark Arts mastery, because that was the one subject I never did perfectly in and wanted to master, but I ended up in Potions. To make a long story short, I went through school and university until I got to the point that there was just no more."

"You put yourself through the stress of the Glastonbury master's programs, with no intention to put them to any use?"

"Well, I did the medi-witch thing and considered graduating to Healer, but I couldn't handle very difficult tasks. Keeping a brave face with blood pouring everywhere isn't my strong suit. I ended up in the laboratory, eventually... but I don't think you want to know this."

Hermione had never seen Severus Snape look worried before. "Have you kept up with the latest discoveries and your knowledge on the subject? If you have not, then you must tell me now. I may need to find someone..."

Perhaps the pressure of proving himself as Headmaster after everything he had done and been through in the past was getting to him, so Hermione interrupted, "Professor Snape, I assure you that I read periodicals and brew regularly. Mostly for household potions like Pepperup for Harry's or Ron's families, but I do some experimenting as well." Hermione met his dark eyes, waiting to see some flicker of relief. It never showed, but his apprehension had faded.

"Very well," said he, pushing away from the door and deeper into the classroom, bidding her to follow.

Hermione struggled to catch up with him and stay in stride with his longer legs. "You don't need to worry. You're hiring what you thought you were. I just haven't been active in the Potions scene."

"Teaching, while a...er...noble profession, is not an easy profession," he remarked as they turned the corner and stopped abruptly in front of a closed door.

"Really? I always thought all that sadistic bastard stuff when I was a student was just a show," she joked.

He turned to her, his thin lips flattened into a straight line, threatening to change to a sneer.

"I'm only kidding, Professor," she said, exasperated at his sudden turn of demeanor.

So any mention of the past will get your hackles up.

"I'm just saying that with all the pressure you were under, carrying on a duplicitous life *and* teaching, it showed in your teaching style," she added.

"Miss Granger, while I am flattered you believe you know me, you certainly *do not* know me."

Okay?

Hermione raised a curious brow. "You were such a horrible man before, but you've definitely changed now."

"You're either very brave or very foolish to admit that to my face," he remarked.

"Neither, I think. I'm stating a fact. Since we last spoke ten years ago, you have changed quite a lot," she replied.

She had absolutely no idea why she was telling him all this; Snape was not a man who inspired confidences. He gave her a discerning look and frowned slightly, as though he were disappointed that he had changed so much.

Not dwelling on it, he turned to open the door in front of them and bring down the wards. "I am sure you are well aware as to how this room is organized, seeing as boomslang skin and lacewing flies are rather spread apart."

"You still remember that after all these years?"

"It was the only time a student ever made it out of the room and back in time without being caught red-handed," he said. "Were you the one who thought to use a firework?"

"No, I left the diversion up to Ron and Harry," she replied, not really having the luxury of denying anything at this point.

"It explains the lack of thought that went into it," he said thoughtfully, but quickly diverted her attention to the storeroom once more.

Hermione looked into the small room, walls lined with shelves and hundreds of Potions ingredients that ranged from the basic and harmless to the rare and caustic.

She paused and glanced back at him again. "But isn't this your personal storeroom?"

"It is the Potions instructor's storeroom. I have removed any rare and precious materials that I have come by on my own," he said. "I would ask that I still have access to this storeroom, as I do brew on occasion."

Hermione nodded. Could she really have said no?

They continued on the tour of the office and private lab; Snape drawled on about her duties as Deputy Headmistress. She would be the liaison between the staff and him, as well as in charge of scheduling things such as curfew patrols. After about twenty minutes of him rattling off her duties, Hermione decided that her position as Deputy would be to do anything Severus Snape did not wish to do himself. Not that she minded terribly; she had already figured out that much.

As far as her duties as Head of House were concerned, they would be few and rather simple to do; handing out punishments would not be all that difficult.

Their meeting ended an hour later just outside the staff lounge with a few curt nods and thank yous. Feeling no more confident about the start of classes on Monday, and even a little more confused about a few things pertaining to a Hogwarts professor's life, Hermione trudged back up to Gryffindor Tower and into her chambers with one thought:

What in Circe's name had she gotten herself into?

"...either very brave or very foolish..." was shamelessly stolen out of the lips of Movie!Lucius!Jason Isaacs.

Orange and Red All Over

Chapter 6 of 11

"Your," he said and glanced down at his feet, distaste of the creature replacing annoyance, "mongrel is here."

A/N: I don't know what to say for myself, except that I am extremely sorry for the wait on this chapter. My life has been crazy and exhausting recently, and I have every intention of finishing this story... though it may be slow coming. However, reality continues to mess with life especially by crashing my computer last weekend and losing EVERYTHING. I had a lot of data saved, but alas I had to rewrite a bit.

I thank you for your continued support!

Big hugs to my betas Keladry and Subversa, who put up with me!

Chapter 5- Orange and Red All Over

Severus let himself into his chambers that afternoon to find his daughter lounging on the sofa in front of the dormant hearth. A hideous, fat, orange cat with a squashed face lay atop her chest, seemingly content with the steady rise and fall of its makeshift bed. The ugly beast was quite unprepared, though, for the sudden jolt of falling from its comfortable spot as Thea jumped to greet her father; the girl tried in vain to hide the smuggled animal away before he noticed anything out of the ordinary. Severus knew that it was going to take some time before his daughter would be a proper Slytherin; even if she had succeeded in hiding the beast, Thea's dark robes were still covered with ginger cat hairs.

The cat hissed at Thea, plainly incensed for her interruption of whatever feline dream had overtaken its mind.

"Can we keep him, Father?" Thea asked, stubbing the toes of her shoes into the ground and looking sheepish. "He's a nice kitty."

"Thea, I've said no to every creature you've brought home. What do you believe I will say about this one?" he asked the girl evenly, watching the cat move stiffly toward him. Yellow eyes flicked across Severus for a brief moment, as though making sure Snape could be trusted. The cat's flat nose immediately went into the air as he sat down heavily beside Snape's feet, its bandy legs unable to support the considerable weight of its body any longer.

"You'll say no," said Thea, but did not stop there, "BUT I can take care of him, Father. He can sleep in my room. Really! For my birthday gift, Father."

Snape sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "You may have an animal of your choosing when you begin school here at Hogwarts, but not until then."

"But, Father," she whined, kneeling down and petting the cat.

"I've been to Hogsmeade just today to pick up your gift, Thea," he said in a firm voice he hoped would end the discussion.

All this did was make the child turn her blue eyes up at him, one final attempt at keeping this stowaway left on her lips. "Please, Daddy?"

She never called him that but for the times that she really wanted something, and would hate him forever...or at least a five-year-old's approximation of "forever"...if she did not get it. For this reason alone, he never allowed her to address him any differently than "Father." On any occasion, as soon as that little voice uttered "Daddy," it was everything he could do to keep denying her. Somehow, the title always hit the one soft spot in his hardened heart.

It was not going to work today. She simply could not have her own animal until she began school at Hogwarts.

Snape looked again at the cat, the squashed face turned to look up at him in an almost quizzical fashion. Something clicked in his head as he studied the massive feline. It couldn't be, could it?

He knew this cat... er... half-Kneazle.

"Damn it anyway," he mumbled to himself, sneering at the creature. Poor tom had to be ancient by now; no wonder the cat could barely walk.

"Where did you find this fellow?" Snape asked, resigned that he would have to speak with Granger again before the night had ended. She would be looking for her animal soon enough, and he did not want to be accused of taking the beast, on top of everything they had discussed and squabbled over today.

Not that their meeting had been terribly bad...it had actually gone more quickly than he thought it would...but that still did nothing to make him forget six years worth of irritation that she caused. Six years of his long life that he would never get back.

It seemed it would be much of the same thing now that she was a teacher here.

"Winky was feeding him in the kitchens, Father," Thea answered.

"I see," he replied and let out a long sigh. "You cannot keep this cat, because it belongs to someone else, Thea. It's not a stray. Do you remember Miss Hermione?"

Thea appeared confused, but nodded nonetheless.

"Miss Hermione is a teacher here now," he said. "And this is her cat."

"Miss Hermione is here?!" Thea jumped up excitedly, the animal forgotten. "May we go see her, Father? Please?"

The hearth suddenly flared a vibrant green and a head of bushy curls swirled to a stop. "I'm sorry to interrupt, Professor. Winky said..."

"Miss Hermione!" Thea exclaimed.

The woman in the fire let out a short laugh and looked at the girl. "Hello, love. How are you?"

"I am good, Miss Hermione. Father said you're a teacher now? Do you live in the castle, too?"

Snape cleared his throat, interrupting the beginning of a conversation.

"Your," he said and glanced down at his feet, distaste of the creature replacing annoyance, "mongrel is here."

"I'll come through and retrieve him," the woman replied evenly. "If that is all right with you, Professor?"

He nodded his head silently, moving across the room to busy himself with something...anything...to not have to speak with the child at length over anything else.

In a few short seconds, the bushy head had sprouted a torso, arms and legs. She hitched up her robes to step out of the stone hearth, revealing a pair of bare feet... and a shapely ankle. Her short toenails were painted a hideous shade of crimson. Could she not have even put on proper shoes before coming through? It was improper. And even, in some ways, provocative of her to Floo like that.

Shaking his head to rid himself of these unwelcome thoughts, he looked back at the face of the woman who was now brushing soot from herself.

"Ah! There you are, you lug," Hermione muttered as she bent down to pick up the pudgy lump of orange fur. Instead of leaving immediately, Hermione turned to look at Thea and smiled warmly. "If Crookshanks bothers you again, Miss Thea, you just let me know. He's getting forgetful these days."

"He didn't bother me, Miss Hermione!" Thea said. "I brought him up here... I thought he needed a home."

"She has a penchant for bringing strays in," Snape mentioned.

Hermione glanced in his direction and chuckled, then lowered down onto her haunches, balancing precariously on the balls of her feet with an added twenty pounds...at least...curled up in her arms. "Don't feel bad, Thea. I tried to bring home everything that I found that looked hungry or hurt... even those I thought just needed a friend."

"Did you get to keep them, Miss Hermione? Father says I cannot keep one until I start Hogwarts." The anguish in the child's voice was thick.

Snape almost intruded in the conversation then. He would be damned if Granger confirmed that her parents had ever allowed her to keep an animal when she was a child. If Thea heard that, then there would be no end to the whining. As though Hermione had thought the same thing, she glanced up in his direction, her brown eyes quickly flashing with understanding.

At least there was something to be said for intuition, and the gift of being able to comprehend it correctly.

Hermione smiled sadly at Thea. "Unfortunately, my Mum and Dad didn't allow animals in our house. I didn't get Crookshanks here until my third year! All my friends got their pets before I did."

"Really?" Thea asked.

Hermione nodded. "But you are more than welcome to come visit Crookshanks, whenever you want. He enjoys visitors who will sit and pet him... and feed him."

"Oh, may I, Father?" Thea asked excitedly.

He nodded slightly in the affirmative, now thoroughly interested in how the loud-mouthed, Gryffindor hoyden had suddenly turned into a compassionate, soft-spoken woman. He'd never seen this aspect of his former student's personality before, and even he had to admit that it was ... endearing.

Thea had never taken to another human so quickly; she had inherited that introverted, observing quality from her father. It was difficult to get her to speak to anyone but Minerva. Even the other teachers at Hogwarts were lucky to get Thea out of her shell and not blushing timidly, hiding behind her father's robes, at gatherings she attended.

Maybe having Granger as an instructor at Hogwarts was a good thing for *everyone* involved?

"Well, I best be getting back to my rooms," Hermione said, standing up slowly. "I'm sorry about the inconvenience, Professor."

He inclined his head to acknowledge her, unwilling to verbally accept her apology. Though he knew that Thea should hear it, Granger could not hear it... it would only make her read more into his "changed" demeanor. Then again, he supposed that the curt nod of his head was more than he had ever afforded her in the past. She would probably note and log this action as well.

"Oh! Miss Hermione," Thea exclaimed loudly, stopping Granger halfway to the Floo.

The woman turned slightly and smiled at the tiny girl. "Yes, love?"

"Father said I am to have a party on next Friday evening, for my birthday! Auntie Minerva will be there. Will you be there?"

Hermione chuckled. "Well, I was not invited, but if you want me there, then I will definitely see about joining you. I can't promise I will come, though. I think I might still be settling into my rooms."

Severus could see the apprehension in Hermione's face. He wondered casually if it was a hesitation from knowing that to join the birthday festivities, she would have to spend more *clearly* unbearable time with him. After all, it had been made perfectly clear earlier in the day he was wasting her time. And who was he kidding anyway? He did not wish to spend any more time with her than he absolutely had to, either.

The instant admiration between his daughter and his deputy made him realize that a slew of uncomfortable situations was inevitable. The thought that shy little Thea would take the initiative had not occurred to Severus; he had hoped to avoid Granger, except for meetings that were necessary, and at his behest.

Still, as long as Granger was as uncomfortable as he was, all would be right with the world.

"May I come play with Crookshanks now?" Thea questioned, her attention shifting rapidly to the squirming ball of fur in Hermione's arms.

"I think Crooks and I are both quite tired, Thea," Hermione said. "Come tomorrow. Your father can show you where I live, and you can keep Crooks company while I

unpack my things."

Without another word, Hermione took a pinch of Floo powder and disappeared from the room in a swirl of emerald flames. Severus looked at his daughter questioningly, not knowing quite what he wanted to say. What was there to say? That he did not want Thea spending time with Hermione? That he felt guilty for using his daughter's innocence and gullibility to get into Hermione's good graces...not that he really *wanted* to be a part of Hermione's good graces?

What was it about Hermione that made Thea take to the young woman so impulsively?

Severus sneered slightly and turned on his heels quickly, heading back into the small study he kept, in search of solitude.

Hermione always had a hard time feeling comfortable enough to sleep in a new place. When on holiday, it took her one or two nights to feel comfortable in a hotel room. Each time she came home from Hogwarts after a school year ended, there was a period of readjustment.

Moving into the Head of House's quarters of Gryffindor Tower was no different. Of course, the rickety old mattress probably had not helped matters much as she lay down on the bed and tried to sleep that night, too mentally exhausted to do any magic that would fluff it up. Hermione was also certain that her second "meeting" with Snape was contributing to her insomnia.

With her monumental work load staring at her in the face, courtesy of her first meeting with the headmaster, she had ventured back to her chambers in hope of peace and quiet for a little while before attempting to do any unpacking. She had gotten that, and it was only as she began unpacking that she noticed Crookshanks' carrier was empty and the blob of cat was nowhere to be found. Winky, who was a short call away, had informed her that Thea had confiscated the animal.

Vexation of vexations.

The last person with whom she wanted to engage in another conversation was Snape -- especially about a cat that should not have been in his personal quarters to begin with! What would he say? Would he snarl? Be his cantankerous self?

She had Floored his rooms with a great unease, but had been delighted that most of her conversation had been centered around Thea. Snape had said only a few words to her, and yet the looks of... something... he had been sending her were in no way calming. As a matter of fact, they were rather frightening. Frightening in the sense that one moment he had incomparable snark, and the next his eyes were speculating.

It was the latter of the two emotions that worried her so. What should she glean from his eyes? Those bottomless pits usually betrayed nothing but an intense abhorrence for her... what had he been thinking, at that moment? Did he even realize that he had been so unveiled? Had he thought he hid it well? And why was he speculating anyway? Perhaps he was resigning himself to her continued presence in the castle, and was merely trying to make himself see some good in her... some part other than the knowledge that she was well-qualified to teach Potions. That was probably it, now that she thought about it. He was most likely struggling to see her as a peer rather than a student. Snape must be annoyed with the teachers at times, but they were his contemporaries...his colleagues...and he seemed to honor that distinction with them.

Hermione knew it would be a struggle to see him as anything other than her cruel, sadistic professor of six years. Gods only knew what he would have to square with, regarding her as anything more than an annoying chit who spoke out of turn and continually flouted his rules in class.

Grumbling into her pillow, Hermione flopped over onto her stomach for the thirtieth time that night, head turned to the side and eyes focusing on the dark windowpane that was bordered by silvery moonlight.

Ever so slowly, sleep finally came, and she felt her body shutting down for the night. The last thought in her mind before she was lost to the world of sugarplums was that she had made a mistake. What had she gotten herself into, anyway?

Maybe the new day would give her some answers.

Hermione: Troublemaker?

Chapter 7 of 11

Hermione turned to the tall, broad-shouldered figure standing to her right, a line of perfect ivory between two dark, smiling lips. He looked as though he were a venerable African king from a time long ago, clothed in bright ceremonial robes, wizard issue. His bald head shone more brightly in the dim corridor light than the fine gold of his hoop earring.

Many thanks to my awesome betas Keladry and Subversa. Now onward to the SS_HG Exchange...

Chapter 6- Hermione: Troublemaker?

The sugarplums revolted against Hermione; after an hour of waking, tossing and turning, she would fall back into a fitful sleep. This repeated several times throughout the remaining hours of the night, and at six the following morning, Hermione gave up her valiant fight.

She took her time preparing for the day ahead of her, as it was sure to be a rather taxing one. As much as she adored Thea, the girl would be another distraction on Hermione's mind as she tried to mentally prepare herself for the arrival of students that evening. It was seven by the time she had gotten out of the shower and put her bathroom necessities in some semblance of working order, and eight by the time she was ready to organize her classroom.

Thea had not arrived yet. Or, more aptly, the black cloud that was Severus Snape had not arrived yet to deposit Thea on her doorstep for the day. Deciding not to wait...Snape knew she was not going to wait around for anyone, especially after their meeting yesterday...Hermione gathered her condensed box of teaching supplies and moved down to the dungeons. It did not take her long to sort everything out and organize it in a workable fashion. She *was* Hermione Granger, after all. She had organized the lesson plans, course materials and potions paraphernalia and been ready for transport to Hogwarts within forty-eight hours of accepting her tenure. Granted, she did spend some time arranging and rearranging said paraphernalia to dispel some nervous energy, but it still only took about two hours of her morning.

The Black Cloud had not yet appeared by eleven, so Hermione set off to explore the castle for the first time as an adult. She had seen some of the castle the previous afternoon, but that had been with her mind trying to catalogue all of Snape's instructions and comments. It had become clear ten minutes into their meeting that she could either pay attention to what he was saying or pay attention to the portraits trying to get her attention. As much as she would have loved to engage Sir Cadogan in a ridiculous conversation, she certainly knew that she would be dead in the water if she did not pay attention to her boss. Reminiscing had been left until now.

It was not long before she found herself standing in front of a large, nearly floor-to-ceiling oil of the Order of the Phoenix, Second War Against Tom Riddle. Her caricature waved back at her. Ron was being harangued by Mrs. Weasley for something or other. Harry looked sullen.

Out of nowhere came a deep, commanding voice, and for a second she had thought the dark man in the picture had spoken to her. It took her another long moment to realize that the voice had come from the actual man beside her, not his likeness. Hermione turned to the tall, broad-shouldered figure standing to her right, a line of perfect ivory between two dark, smiling lips. He looked as though he were a venerable African king from a time long ago, clothed in bright ceremonial robes, wizard issue. His bald head shone more brightly in the dim corridor light than the fine gold of his hoop earring.

"Kingsley!" Hermione smiled and stood on her toes and kissed each cheek.

"How are you this fine day, Hermione?"

"Oh, you know, the usual," she said.

Kingsley Shacklebolt had been a most useful ally in the war, when the Order of the Phoenix had needed a spy at the top of the Ministry. When he had no longer been needed in a governmental position, a greater need for Aurors had come along, so he had returned to his original calling. After all, Magical Law Enforcement would need able bodies and brilliant minds to track down remaining Death Eater cells. When the magical world had finally seemed to be in a state of equilibrium, Kingsley had moved on, looking for a place that needed him.

Hogwarts' dearth of qualified educators beckoned him to the position of Professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts.

The last time she and Kingsley had actually said more than a few words of greeting to each other was at Harry's and Ron's Auror academy graduation...now nearly eight years ago...but she had always gotten along well with the genial man.

"Yourself?" she asked.

"Well, you know, this and that," he jested. "When did you get here? Harry said in his last owl that he did not know when you were scheduled to arrive."

"Yesterday. After my meeting with Snape, I went straight back to my room and whimpered," she said.

Kingsley laughed. "I highly doubt that, but I can understand being overwhelmed."

Hermione nodded her head and was silent for a few moments, trying to think of something to say. Harry and Kingsley had been made partners after Harry had become a fully-vested Auror, but Harry had never really spoken about him except in the context of a case they were working on.

But then something dawned on her.

If Harry knew that Kingsley was at Hogwarts, then why would he need her to "spy?" For that matter, why had she not thought of that during her argument with Harry and Ginny? Had she become that much of a nuisance that Harry had still chosen to use this argument to get her away? And why hadn't she thought of it?

"Well, I don't like *that* look," Kingsley said, motioning for her to fall into step beside him at an easy pace down the hall.

"I'm just thinking," Hermione said. "So, Harry told you I was coming to teach?"

"That he did," Kingsley affirmed with a nod of his head. "I hear it was quite a struggle to convince you to come... I hope you came because ~~you~~ wanted to."

Hermione frowned slightly. "I haven't decided yet... but Harry told you? Did he tell *everyone* about the offer and my refusal?"

"He's only concerned for you, Hermione," Kingsley laughed. "Why do you ask?"

"Because every single one of the Weasleys who came into Flourish and Blotts last week asked me about it. I figured he and Ginny had called in reinforcements, but he apparently told everyone, not just reinforcements. Let's just say that Harry is going to be on the receiving end of a nasty hex the next time I see him."

Kingsley smiled. "Though my Slytherin tendencies tell me not to say anything more on this matter, I feel that I should defend my... associate... of seven years. He only wrote to me about it because he knew I would be here. He said that I was to make sure nothing happened to you. Something about keeping you out of trouble ... seems to think you're a troublemaker."

"If I'm a troublemaker, he's the next dark lord!" Hermione huffed, crossing her arms over her chest.

"I think it's safe to say that there was another force at work here, Hermione."

Hermione worried her lip between her teeth. Who, though? Surely Snape had not given her a second thought after she had initially turned him down.

"I wouldn't worry about it. You have plenty more to be worrying about with the start of term tomorrow, Deputy Headmistress."

She chuckled lowly. "That sounds so odd. I always think of Minerva whenever I hear that. Why didn't anyone else take the post?"

Kingsley looked at her with a cocked brow. "What do you mean?"

"I'm certain I was the absolute last person on his list to be his deputy," she said. "Why didn't he offer it to you? Or Flitwick? Sprout?"

"Each of us has turned it down for our own reasons. Pomona can't be removed from her greenhouses most of the time. Filius said he would be deputy should Severus find no one else. Filius has gotten much older, after all, and it's hard for him to take a commanding tone anymore. As for me, the last thing this school needs is two Slytherins presiding. After all, a Gryffindor and Slytherin worked so well for so long, it might just work again."

"I understand Snape and Minerva... but Dumbledore..." Hermione began.

Kingsley laughed. "Well, yes, that was two Gryffindors by title, but you could never really tell with Dumbledore."

"No, I suppose not." Hermione smiled.

"There she is, Father!"

Both Hermione and Kingsley wrenched their heads to the left, looking down the corridor they were passing to find black robes billowing and a tiny girl struggling to keep up with her father's longer strides. Snape certainly did not look pleased, most likely because Thea had not let her father give up the search for Miss Hermione's whereabouts, by the sound of it.

"Good morning, Professor," Hermione said with a small smirk. "Good morning, Thea."

"Miss Hermione! We looked all over the castle for you. First we went to your rooms. Then to Father's old classroom! We even went outside, but we couldn't find you."

The words spilled forth from the girl's mouth in a nearly incomprehensible rush. Thea's eyes were wild, and her muscles moving in a jittery fashion; Ron's children looked

and acted like this at times when they could not wait for something to happen, like their trip to Grandpa and Grandmum Weasley's house. Hermione might even have said Thea's excitement was due to too much sugar that morning, but knowing Snape, the girl probably did not get sugar very often.

What had her so keyed up? Was she really that anxious to go "play" with Crookshanks, despite the fact that all the playing the old furball did any more was to bat a catnip toy about his feather pillow?

But then again, Thea probably did not get that much excitement being cooped up here in the castle. And even for all the majestic and fascinating qualities of Hogwarts, it must get pretty boring after a little while. Hermione had always been ready to go home after the last term of the year. She could not imagine living here all the days of her life. Crookshanks was a new and exciting addition, however; Thea obviously needed to study him.

Or was Thea studying *her*?

Hermione did think highly of herself at times, she would not deny that, and this was one of those times. Both she and Thea had taken an instant liking to each other since the encounter at the bookshop. Perhaps Thea was just happy to see and spend time with her? With someone other than the crust of wizard who was her father?

Looking up to find a sneer on the face of the hook-nosed man, Hermione sighed. Well, she definitely could not blame Thea.

"I'm here now!" Hermione exclaimed and lowered herself onto her haunches to look at the girl. "Have you had lunch?"

"No." Thea shook her head.

"Why don't we go back to my chambers, and we'll ask Winky to bring us something while we work, okay?" Hermione asked Thea.

Thea nodded her head excitedly. "Alright, Miss Hermione."

Hermione stood up and smoothed her robes over her abdomen haphazardly. "It was nice to talk to you, Kingsley. I trust I'll see you this evening?"

"I believe there's a good chance of that," he said. "Perhaps we may continue our discussion over a drink one of these nights."

She laughed. "I'm going to need more than one after this week, I assure you."

"Then I'll be sure to have some of the good stuff on hand," he said.

"Professor." Hermione inclined her head toward their severe leader to bid him farewell.

He did not reply, but inclined his head in turn. Hermione looked down at Thea, smiled, and turned on her heels. Thea followed quickly along after her.

Hermione had not offered her hand this time, as she had at Flourish and Blotts. It was a surprise to Hermione to feel the small hand slipping into hers, but she suddenly felt warm. Odd, yes, but warm and fuzzy all the same.

Severus tried to ignore the retreating females by engaging Shacklebolt in conversation. However, the instant Thea slipped her hand into Granger's, he found himself strangely entranced by the situation playing out before him. Entranced by the way Thea seemed completely at ease with Granger; his own daughter did not even reach for his hand unless in the most dire need of attention. Entranced by Thea's giddy giggle when Granger glanced down at Thea because his daughter was never that happy with him around.

What entranced him the most, though, was neither of those things. What captured his attention was the sudden glow that seemed to emanate from Granger's countenance, as though this was all she had ever wanted.

Certainly, her face was hidden by a curtain of brown curls, and he only saw this look for a fleeting moment, but he was sure it was happiness -- or something like it.

It was certainly something *he* had never felt before for his daughter. After all, he thought it rather weak to allow the child to hold onto his hand as tightly as Thea was now holding Granger's. Thea would not always have him around to act as a security blanket. She needed to learn to stand up for herself before she started school...

... before she met female versions of Potter, Black and Lupin.

Severus could not help the bitter taste in his mouth at the thought of his childhood enemies, even after all these years. Potter and Black were long dead; Lupin had asked for forgiveness sometime shortly after the last war. They had been able to establish a rocky, yet companionable, camaraderie. Different though things may be at this point, Severus had every right to be slightly paranoid about what his progeny might suffer when Thea's classmates learned that she was a Snape.

"Thea seems to have taken a liking to Hermione," Kingsley remarked beside him, successfully pulling Severus from his thoughts and bringing the vexation to the light.

"Yes, well, Granger is Potter's darling sidekick," Snape said, making no effort to hide the acrimony in his voice.

Shacklebolt's face remained expressionless, but Snape knew the man was reading between the lines; Snape hated being transparent. Yet, he was also glad. Certainly, Severus would have never seen true freedom unless a fellow Slytherin in the Order of the Phoenix had been one of his staunchest supporters. As an Auror, Shacklebolt had honed elusiveness to an art, even more so than his consummate Slytherin housemate. For that reason, Shacklebolt had been able to see through Severus' smoke screens and misdirection in many cases during the war.

"It's good to see her so happy," Shacklebolt replied.

Snape frowned. "Whom? Granger?"

"Your daughter," the other corrected. "Hermione seems overwhelmed right now, more than anything."

"It was her choice to accept my offer only a week before term," Snape said. "If you will excuse me, Shacklebolt, I have work to tend to."

With that, Snape turned and went back the direction from which he had come with Thea, not knowing what to think about Hermione and his daughter.

Fluffy Bunny Slippers

Hermione did not know if she should feel odd for learning information like this about the man she had long since labeled "Sadistic Bastard" and put under the column of "People Who Will Never Change." But it was particularly peculiar to think about Snape—the black bat and greasy git extraordinaire—reading Cinderella to a five-year-old.

A/N: I'm back finally! Thank you all so much for your kind words. Life is back on track, I'm finished with my English BA coursework, and everything else is caught up.

Please note that I will be melding DH canon into this story from this point forward wherever it may fit. You have been warned if you have yet to finish it.

Many thanks to my betas, Keladry and Subversa, for the time they take to look over my chapters for me.

Catch the reference to His Draught of Delicate Poison by Subversa and win 100 meaningless house points!

Chapter 7- Fluffy Bunny Slippers

"Did you bring *all* the books from your bookshop, Miss Hermione?!" Thea called exasperatedly from the study.

Hermione chuckled at Thea's observation and poked her head around the bedroom door to find the girl heaving two large reference books from the box on the floor and stuffing them haphazardly onto a shelf. She had set Thea onto the task of organizing her books on the bookshelves she had Transfigured out of empty cardboard boxes. However, Thea was making no effort keep them in any semblance of the order in which Hermione had packed them, putting each book haphazardly on the shelves so that Transfiguration texts were mixed with Astronomy, and Runes with Charms. Who knew where the fiction books would end up.

To keep herself sane, Hermione had decided it best to leave the girl to the task for now while she busied herself with things in her bedroom. Later, she would come back and rearrange everything to her satisfaction. Luckily there were spells for that.

"No, these are my own books," Hermione said. "My bookshop has many, many thousands more than I do."

"I think you have more books than Father!" Thea remarked, going back to an open box and choosing another book.

Hermione smiled to herself. She had not brought up the topic of Snape yet with Thea, and Thea had seemed too preoccupied with Crookshanks, then lunch with Crookshanks, followed by unpacking with Crookshanks, to talk about her father. As it was, the lazy half-Kneazle was now sprawled on the floor in such a way that Thea had to pet and then step over him every time she went to a shelf. It was hard to draw Thea's attention away to anything else, but Hermione was terribly curious about this antisocial man, and she was not about to let this opportunity to learn go by. It was not necessarily that she *wanted* to know more about him; it was that being Hermione Granger, she *needed* to know all she could about him.

"I doubt that," Hermione said. "He's lived longer than I have."

Thea shook her head resolutely. "He doesn't have that many. At least you have Cinderella!"

Hermione laughed as Thea pointed at the thick collection of Charles Perrault's fairytales.

"You liked the book then?"

Thea nodded. "I *loved* it, Miss Hermione. Father read it to me."

Hermione did not know if she should feel odd for learning information like this about the man she had long since labeled "Sadistic Bastard" and put under the column of "People Who Will Never Change." But it was particularly peculiar to think about Snape...the black bat and greasy git extraordinaire...reading Cinderella to a five-year-old.

And the five-year-old surviving the experience to tell the tale.

After all, this man had been a Death Eater. He had killed numerous times and had done any number of other horrible things. Who in their right mind would picture such a man reading a fairytale to a little girl, even if she was his daughter?

It was like saying Dementors liked pink, fluffy bunny slippers.

Pygmy puffs, on the other hand, she could definitely see enjoying said slippers.

There were just some things one could not logically picture.

And it was by some insanity that Hermione's mind continued to wonder what it would be like to listen to the man's voice actually read to her. Admittedly, she had enjoyed his lectures, even when he was being horrible to her and other students. Severus Snape used words as an eloquent weapon just as adeptly as he might use his wand, and Hermione would be the first to acknowledge the fact that it was a delightfully dangerous quality.

"Oh, Miss Hermione! You look so pretty!"

Hermione jolted back to reality with the exclamation from across the room, not realizing that she had gotten so lost in her thoughts. Thea appeared to be holding a photograph...one of the many things Hermione used as impromptu bookmarks...that had fallen from the book now at Thea's feet.

"Hmm?" she asked, walking over to Thea. The girl handed her two photographs of Hermione in the formal dress robes she had worn for the Potters' wedding. It seemed like such a long time ago that they had gotten married.

Which reminded her, she needed to Floo Harry and let him know what she had learned from Kingsley.

"Who are the other people in the pictures?" Thea asked.

"They're Harry and Ginny Potter." Hermione settled carefully down onto her haunches.

Thea looked up at her with wide eyes. "Harry Potter?"

"You know about Harry?" Hermione asked, thoroughly surprised that Snape's daughter had heard anything about Potter. As far as she knew, Snape chose to keep any dealings with the Boy Who Made Him Miserable fairly quiet.

"Auntie Minerva always talked about Harry Potter and his friends," Thea said, holding the pictures with reverence. "Auntie Minerva always told me a story about Harry when I would get into trouble with Father. She said that if the Boy Who Lived could deal with him, then so could I."

Hermione could not help but laugh at that knowledge. "Yes, Harry always used to get into quite a lot of trouble especially where your father was concerned. Your father doesn't seem to like certain Gryffindors very much."

"But he likes Auntie Minerva!"

"Of course he does. I mean to say that there a few of us Gryffindors your father found... difficult... to teach," Hermione said. There were definitely other reasons Snape acted the way he did, but those reasons would be kept quiet until the girl could understand the Marauder/Snape feud and other more nefarious plots her father had dealt with. And Hermione was not entirely sure that she should be the one to talk about them. Snape should tell her. It was a miracle in itself that he had allowed Minerva to talk to Thea about Harry.

"Father likes you, too, Miss Hermione," Thea said sincerely.

For all she knew, it could have been a curse flung at her, the way Hermione felt like she had been laid out flat on her back with the shock of this statement. "Why do you say that, Thea?"

Thea shrugged and went back to her work unloading books. "I don't know."

"You must have a reason," Hermione prodded gently.

"Because you released me from a particular tight spot in regards to teachers."

If Hermione could have jumped out of her skin, she would have. As it was, the sudden intrusion of the headmaster's sinuous voice into the conversation was enough to make her wobble on her haunches, struggle to find balance, and then fall back on her arse against a box of books.

Hermione shot him a glare and blew a strand of curly hair out of her eyes. "Why must you always do that?!"

He stood still, raising a challenging brow. For all the severity of the look on his features, it seemed as though he was in a much better mood than he had been in this morning. "Do what exactly?"

"Sweep in like a bat and scare me out of my wits."

There was a faint glimmer of a smile on his lips, as though he were pleased with her approximation, rather than angry.

She squinted slightly, trying to read further into the expression on his face, but it was pointless. He was not going to show any more than he already had. "I thought that we had determined that I'm not a student anymore, Snape. You can't just come barging in... Next time try knocking on the dam...er, on the door, I mean."

"Your door was open, Miss Granger," he said, sneering. It was unclear if he was sneering at her or the fact that she had to catch herself from cursing in front of Thea.

"Just knock next time."

In an unprecedented movement, however, he took a few steps toward her and offered a hand. She looked at it for a long moment, not knowing what to do. Either she should amiably accept his offer to help her up or *Stun* him so she could go find out what happened to the real Severus Snape. Whether he had worked for their side or not, he was most certainly *not* a nice man who favored chivalry when it came to women who had fallen on their arses.

He seemed to realize the gaffe and started to withdraw his hand, but she was not going to let this moment pass. She grabbed his hand before it was out of reach. To this, he mirrored her initial surprise. It was as though he had not expected her to accept the hand of the man she so often loathed. Hermione could not get over the feeling of their two hands entwined, even in so innocent an action as this.

Snape was surprisingly strong; Hermione was not a waif, after all, and had struggled in vain like every other female on the planet to keep healthy. Right now, with all the stress eating she had been doing, she was a few pounds over her optimal weight, but he had lifted her to her feet easily.

"Thank you," she said quietly, standing still and looking at him curiously. The past few seconds had been odd, but not as odd as standing frozen in the middle of the room, their hands clasped, and his dark gaze holding hers. It was as though they were in some strange sort of fog and there was nothing else in the world but them.

It was maddening; she was certain she would be up for a few sleepless nights just trying to dissect what had happened here. She desperately wished she could read what was going through his mind. But if the Dark Lord had not been able to, then there was unquestionably no way she could break past this impenetrable fortress.

"Father!" Thea, always a warm ray of sunshine, burned through the fog.

Hermione hurriedly pulled away her hand and turned around to look at Thea.

"Yes, Thea?" questioned Snape.

"Miss Hermione has more books than you!"

Hermione felt a blush creep to her cheeks. "I already told you that's probably not true. She's just impressed because I have *Cinderella*."

If he could have blushed, Hermione was sure he would have. The look on his usually stony face was that of faint embarrassment. Obviously, he knew that Thea had talked about him reading the book to her. Hermione smiled at his discomfort.

"Come, Thea, we must give Miss Granger some time to get ready for tonight."

Thea bent down and patted Crookshanks on the head. "Goodbye, Crooks."

Thea bounced over to her father. They turned to leave without saying anything else. Hermione followed them out to the living room, and it was when Thea was at the threshold of the door, she froze as though she had forgotten something.

She spun around quickly and ran to Hermione. Hermione lowered down onto her haunches again, accepting the child into her arms for a long hug. This was different than the one she had received from the girl at the bookshop. At the bookshop, it had been one of gratitude. Now it was one of approval and... love?

Thea stepped back, smiled, and turned on her heel to join her father again, who was looking on thoughtfully. Such an expression worried Hermione more than anything else could, as it was so different from anything else she had ever seen on his features.

Soon they disappeared, and Hermione shut the door quietly, leaning her shoulder against the thick wood. She had not even started teaching yet, and things were already getting strange. It did not bode well.

In the Great Hall, Severus sat stiffly in the large gilt chair usually occupied by the Headmaster or Headmistress of Hogwarts. Though he would never tell anyone, he was supremely nervous for this opening feast. He knew it was of the utmost importance that he conceal his nerves. He already had a carefully built reputation with the older students; the last thing he needed was for the new first-years to see a crack in his black-and-white veneer. They would all use it to their advantage if they noticed it.

All of the returning students were peering up at him curiously, probably trying to understand how he had ended up as their Headmaster. Even he was not quite sure why the Ministry had wanted him to be in such a high-ranking position.

After all, they had all suffered under his tutelage for a long while. Though the truth had come out about his allegiances, he had still maintained a great deal of his privacy...that overwhelming need to push everyone away and keep them guessing...and he had also retained his less-than-pliant attitude. Students and parents looked at him with slightly less contempt than before, but they still knew him as "stringent," if not completely evil.

Many people had looked at him with contempt for countless years, and he had not enjoyed it; to have most of them now looking his way with such a thought made it unbearable.

If only his damned Potions mistress would hurry up with the first-years and take the attention off of him for a bit.

Said Potions mistress, however, was quickly becoming more of a problem than he had originally thought she would. He knew that she would do wonderfully as deputy headmistress and as a teacher. This, surprisingly, did not turn out to be the problem. No, the new vexation was one he had certainly not expected and most certainly did not welcome.

He could not even intelligently dissect it at this point. There was no name for it, no reason it should be there; all he knew was that it meant trouble...lots of trouble.

Finally the large doors at the opposite end of the hall opened and revealed what he had been anxiously waiting.

All attention shifted to the pretty woman now leading the procession of first-years down the long aisle. He would not call her extremely beautiful by any means, but she certainly had grown up from an insufferable girl who had been all frizzy hair and buckteeth. Hermione Granger was certainly easy to look at for an extended amount of time.

Why he was thinking like this, he did not know and did not care to find out. Yes, he was a man and like every other man had the same urges, but it was wholly irresponsible of him to think like this for more than one reason.

But maybe he was on to something.

They had all seen better marks in O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. scores the previous year in Defense Against the Dark Arts since "dashing" Kingsley had been on staff, especially amongst the female students. Perhaps more students would pay attention in Potions now that they could look upon a teacher who was a little easier on the eyes than he was. It was a ridiculous notion, yes, but it might help.

Though paying attention had never been his problem in school, he was quite certain that having someone like her would have been much nicer than Horace Slughorn.

His hearing picked up the general murmuring of the students. Most of them had learned about the woman from tales told by their elders and from chapters in their History of Magic classes. They had seen pictures of the abominable Golden Trio, heard of their deeds. She was as good a celebrity as any international Quidditch star might be.

And he had also taken this knowledge into account when seeking her out to work at Hogwarts.

He looked on as she called the names of the first-years up one by one to place the Sorting Hat on their heads. Teddy Lupin was sorted quickly into Gryffindor; Atticus Malfoy went directly to Slytherin.

The Sorting Ceremony drew on; when he had looked at the list of students to attend this year, he had almost been appalled at the sheer number of Order members' and past students' children he would be in charge of. At least there was no Potter to worry about yet.

The ceremony ended with Persephone Weasley being sorted into Ravenclaw with her cousin, Marguerite.

Granger magicked the stool and hat over to the right as she made her way up the dais to take her seat between him and Kingsley. At least he would not have to talk to her. She had seemed fairly friendly with Shackbolt earlier; Severus hoped they would entertain each other.

He had an insane urge to be a gentleman and help her with the chair, but resisted the urge. Instead, he stood up to welcome everyone and begin the feast. Announcements would wait until later.

"I'm far too tired to even think about eating," he heard Hermione remark to no one in particular.

Severus glanced at her to remark, but Kingsley had already beaten him to the punch.

"If you had needed help with your unpacking and settling in, I would have helped," Kingsley said with a smile, pouring dark wine into his goblet and motioning toward Granger's goblet with the carafe. She smiled faintly and moved her goblet so he could fill it.

"Thank you, Kingsley," Hermione said. "And I already had help, if you'll recall. It was the help I had that made me so tired. She kept me on my toes."

Severus tried not to pay attention to the conversation taking place beside him, but it was futile. They were talking about his daughter after all.

"Speaking of which, where is Thea?"

It took him a moment to realize the question was directed at him.

"She has dinner in our quarters," he replied, glancing quickly at her.

"Alone?" Hermione questioned.

Snape tried not to grimace at the pitch in her voice. He had heard it many times before when she was voicing her opinions on the plight of the house-elves and other magical creatures. It was the slightly shrill, riddled-with-disbelief tone of a woman who would quickly become disagreeable, should she decide that what she was hearing was appalling.

Much like Minerva's used to get.

"She hardly could sit with the students, much less at the staff table," Severus replied, sipping his own wine.

Hermione scoffed. "You make your six-year-old daughter eat by herself?"

Kingsley cleared his throat and said as quietly as possible over the din of the room, though could still be heard two seats over, "Not many people know about Thea, Hermione."

"No wonder she needs companionship so badly. I can see now what's going on... You keep her locked up in your quarters all the time. What, are you too afraid to let people know you too are capable of having a child?" Hermione asked.

Snape turned to her and hoped the glare he gave her was enough to silence her. It seemed to do the trick, as she pursed her lips together and turned to face the room rather than him.

He leaned over to her. "There are many reasons, Miss Granger, many of which I do not expect you to understand. She is my child, and I will do as I see fit."

She opened her mouth to say something else, looking like a rather ridiculous fish, but closed it again. Granger quickly turned her full attention to Kingsley, seemingly forgetting the headmaster for the rest of the evening.

Hopefully it would stay that way for a while longer.

Bookworms

Chapter 9 of 11

She yawned again. "This teaching thing is for the birds."

A/N: Hello all, and huge thank yous for sticking around this far. Life has been constantly changing since I started this and have not been able to write or update as frequently as I had originally planned. I appreciate your support as readers and reviewers more than I can ever possibly relate.

I am off to Boston for a week's vacation, and then back to finish an Exchange gift. A new chapter for Mol should be up in less than two months.

Chapter 8- Bookworms

"I expect a foot of parchment on my desk Monday, detailing the uses of unicorn parts in potions," Hermione called over the loud shuffling of her students.

The first year, combined Hufflepuff-Ravenclaw class hastily began breaking down their cauldrons and potion sets for storage, desperate to get out of the classroom as swiftly as they could manage. As it was the final class of the first week of the new term, they were anxious to get out of their bondage and into relaxing the weekend away with their housemates.

At least, that was what she told herself.

In the back of her mind, Hermione could not help but wonder if the real reason for the speedy exits was because they hated her class, that they hated her, or worst of all, because she was as bad as...or worse than...Snape have ever been.

Hermione had to laugh at herself, though. How could she *possibly* be worse than Snape?

Along with other education reform enacted this past year, the Ministry of Magic now set very straightforward guidelines as to how a teacher was to behave in class toward her students, especially in regards to punishment. Poor examples of teachers in the past, including Umbridge, the Carrows and even Snape, had prompted Minerva to lobby for this addition to the ancient Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry Procedural Handbook. Of course, this was all under the delusion that the Ministry would forever remain incorruptible from this point forward...that another Dark Lord would not gain power and influence sometime in the future. Everyone knew it was only a matter of time before there was a new foe to their world and way of living, but these rules were a good thing to have... for now.

The knowledge that she would...by following the rules, that is...be a more likable teacher than Snape was a small consolation in the face of her ever-annoying lack of self-confidence.

However, after this week, Hermione could finally understand why Snape had acted in class the way he had all those years, excluding his double agent status and the pressure he'd been under.

She was not, by nature, a very patient person. As a matter of fact, she was probably the least patient person she knew. When faced with youths who really could not care less about their education, or youths who were truly inept, Hermione could feel her ire rising. There had been more than one occasion this week when she had wanted to openly berate someone for being a "dunderhead." She had refrained, though. Barely. She was not going to end up like Snape.

No, she would not, even if she *could* empathize with him.

When her last student had escaped, Hermione headed out the door, warding it as she walked away. Numbly, she made her way to the staff lounge. By the end of the day, it was usually filled with professors ready to exchange their day's horror stories. This afternoon, however, it was empty. Still becoming accustomed to how the staff at Hogwarts worked, she had not been aware that Friday would be different than any other day.

At least she knew where they kept the Firewhisky.

Walking over to the disguised, wood-paneled case, Hermione pulled out the large glass decanter and poured two fingers' worth of the potent, amber liquid in an accompanying glass.

She lifted it to her nose, sniffed it and lowered to take a sip. In mid-sip, the door opened with a loud groan. She turned to see who had entered, only to find Snape standing there with his vile smirk.

"Starting early, Miss Granger?" he asked slowly, his left brow arching.

"Obviously," Hermione answered. She took another small sip and began to close the paneling when his voice stopped her again.

"Pour me one as well," he murmured.

Hermione glanced back at him with a bit of incomprehension, but poured him his own glass. She handed it to him as she sank into one of the plush chairs facing the dormant hearth. There was nothing else in the world she would rather do than drink herself into oblivion for the night, though she knew she would not even finish this glass of Firewhisky. She was a "light-weight" in every sense of the word.

Silence enveloped the room, except for the clap of his boot heels on the stone floor. He sank carefully into the chair facing her and smirked again.

"I would rather be alone, Professor," she said into her glass. "What is it you need?"

"Is it so unbelievable that I came to see how my new Potions mistress held up her first week? It is in the job description that I make certain my second-in-command is still alive," he remarked.

Hermione frowned. "You came only to see if I was ready to leave Hogwarts yet... if I had enough of the dunderheads."

He was silent and did not seem to acknowledge her answer.

"I am more tenacious than that, Snape. Give me some credit," she said. "I know you are worried that you will be left without a full staff, and thus have it endanger your precarious position as Headmaster, should word get out. I never imagined you to be so insecure. It's like you feel you have to prove yourself."

"Do not presume to think you know me," he said.

Hermione sighed and rested her head back on the chair, closing her eyes for a moment and then opening them. "You and I are quite alike, Professor. I think we understand each other better than we let on. We have both, you and I, had to constantly prove ourselves in some form or another...take that as you will."

Silence again as he regarded his glass, now empty.

"We are both different people than we were back... then," she sighed. "But I'd rather not talk about that on Friday afternoon when I should be relaxing."

He leaned back in his chair and observed her slowly. "Minerva will be arriving for Thea's party at seven, if you are joining us."

"Of course. I already promised Thea last Saturday that I would be there tonight." She nodded. "Her gift just arrived yesterday by owl."

"She does not require a gift," he said flatly. "You have already ruined her."

"Ruined her?" Hermione questioned with exasperation.

"She must learn that wanting something does not mean she can have it," Snape said.

Hermione raised a questioning brow. "Yes, you are her father, and it's your prerogative to withhold things from her as you see fit, but it is everyone else's job to spoil her. I am sure Auntie Minerva has been guilty of it on more than one occasion."

"You have already said that the blasted *Cinderella* book was her gift," he said. "She does not need more."

"As I have said, never deprive a girl of a book, she might actually learn something from them," Hermione said.

He snorted derisively. "So she can turn into you?"

Hermione scoffed. "I could have done worse, *Sir!* Really, you should be thankful you had at least one person in class who knew what was going on, even if my answers *were* directly from a textbook."

They glared at each other.

"Since it is her birthday, I have gotten her more gifts," Hermione said. "At least let her have something to do when you keep her locked away in your chambers all the time!"

He stood up suddenly and stormed over to her, leaning down over her in a frightening manner. "You have no right to criticize."

"She's like that princess you keep locked up in a tower..." Hermione did not know what had come over her, but it suddenly felt right to continue goading him.

"I will have you know, Miss Granger, that before this year, we have shared every meal together in my chambers, except for Welcoming and Leaving feasts. She can go where she likes on the grounds, but she chooses to stay in our chambers. This year will be different because I am expected to be at most mealtimes as Headmaster. She must eat alone."

"She should eat with everyone else."

"You do not understand, do you?" he said. "I am protecting her."

"From what, Snape?"

"From the world."

With this, he stood ramrod straight. With a swish of his robes, he moved toward the door, placed his glass firmly on a table and disappeared. Hermione watched him leave with great curiosity.

Of course, the admission had answered more questions than he had probably cared to concede, but it was a startling admission nonetheless. She had never imagined Snape would be so touchy about how he raised his daughter. Nor could she believe him to be so naturally protective about another human, even of his own flesh.

Harry had told her what he learned in the Pensieve, both in their fifth year and after the Final Battle. She could only surmise that the professor's upbringing had been painful, not only from a lack of decent family but also from being the constant target for the Marauders.

It made complete sense that he wanted to protect Thea "from the world" as he had said, but Hermione could not, for the life of her, understand how keeping Thea locked up all the time she was at Hogwarts was protecting her. She *was* at school now... he could not protect her so absolutely.

Even if Hermione wanted to be angry with him for his methods, she could not. His motives were pure and, surprisingly, made her heart strings tug violently. It was still unclear as to whether he viewed Thea as a blessing or a curse, but Hermione supposed that did not matter any more.

What mattered was that, perhaps, her crusty old professor was not so horrible after all. And if he was not so horrible, conceivably they could in time come to a mutual friendship for the sake of their careers.

And now, it seemed, for Thea as well.

Thea set her book on the nightstand beside her bed, fondly running her fingers across the cover. It would be easier to get to it there when she tried to convince Miss Hermione to read it to her before going to bed.

Turning quickly, Thea skipped to the living room where her father sat waiting with a wizarding chess board, a game half played and waiting since Wednesday for its conclusion.

"When is Auntie Minerva going to be here, Father?" Thea asked as she climbed up onto the chair facing the quiet man.

He had been really grumpy with her ever since fetching her from her school in Hogsmeade, and for him, this was saying a lot. She knew that her father had never been and never would be like Auntie Minerva or Miss Hermione were with her, but he hardly ever acted as angry as he had this afternoon. As far as Thea could remember, she had not left her toys out for him to trip over. She had not spoken back to him when she should not have. What had put him in such an angry mood then?

"Soon," he replied, surveying the board carefully.

Thea knew her father always looked for the least useful move that he could manage, to help her along with the game. At least, she had noticed the king and queen giving him nasty looks when he made certain moves with his pawns and knights. She knew he would never admit that he was losing on purpose while he was still teaching her

the game, but she liked the satisfied feeling it gave her when her own knights would knock off one of his black pawns. And nothing made her more excited than when her father leaned back in his seat, defeated, with a small smile on his lips for her as she took a victory spin around the room.

"What about Miss Hermione, Father?" Thea questioned, watching as his knight took her pawn. It did not appear that he heard her, and she questioned again tentatively, "Father?"

The breath he sucked in through his lips was barely audible, but she could see him tense as though he were getting ready to shout at her. Thea braced herself for the inevitable.

"Miss Granger will be here soon, Thea," he answered calmly and scratched at the corner of his mouth quickly. "It's your move."

Thea moved her rook. "Check."

During the next long minutes as her father considered his next move, Thea watched him carefully. She may have only been six years old, but she knew when something was bothering him. She was just happy that it wasn't her who was bothering him, for a change.

Not that she was thrilled that Father was frowning even more once she'd mentioned Miss Hermione. After all, she loved Miss Hermione...why didn't he? This, perhaps, was what confused Thea the most: How could anyone not like Miss Hermione? And was Thea the only one who thought that Miss Hermione and Father were so alike?

It was while she had been helping Miss Hermione that she had realized that Miss Hermione and her father ought to be very good friends. After all, half the books both of them owned were the same! If they could spend time together, like she and Miss Hermione did, they would have a great deal of fun. By all accounts, Miss Hermione was everything her father was not, especially when it came to the hugs Thea treasured so much.

Thea loved both of them equally. Now the only problem was pushing them together so they could *all* love each other.

"Oh, Minerva, it's so wonderful to see you," Hermione said as she embraced the elderly witch, partly as a need for a hug from an old friend and partly to hold the frail woman from being knocked to the ground. Hermione had not intended on launching herself at her former teacher, but seeing her face when the door to the headmaster's quarters opened was a nice surprise. At least she wasn't greeted with the sour mug of her sour boss. Minerva had been completely unprepared, and Hermione had felt her teeter on her feet.

Minerva pulled back from her, eyes narrowing slightly. "I didn't expect anyone else tonight."

Hermione smiled slightly. "Thea wanted me to come."

"Ah, so you've met the lass," Minerva said and stepped back from the door, allowing Hermione to enter.

"Miss Hermione!"

Hermione turned to see Thea jump up from the seat next to her father and run over to her. The girl hugged her closely around the hips, stepping back long enough to grab her hand and pull her toward the settee she had been sitting on. Hermione reluctantly sat down on the other edge, as far away from Snape as she could manage. If the sneer he had given her before she sat down meant anything, he was still deeply incensed with her from this afternoon.

Distracting herself from the frowning man, Hermione pulled out her wand and two small, glittery boxes from her robes. She enlarged them back to the correct size and held them out to Thea. "These are for you, love."

"Really?" the girl asked with wide eyes. "May I open them?"

Hermione nodded. Minerva sat gingerly on the squashy chair set in an L-shape by the couch, her eyes ever astute. The old witch took a sip of Firewhisky from the glass in front of her.

Severus stood up quickly. "Would you care for anything to drink, Miss Granger?"

"Whatever Minerva's having."

"Is that a...wise...choice?"

Hermione felt herself blush. How did he know she was still feeling the aftereffects of her afternoon drinks? How did he know that she was light-weight? Lucky guess? Whether it was or not, it was still particularly embarrassing for him to ask such a question. Not that she would have expected anything more or less from him but to try to humiliate her.

"Yes," she replied flatly.

After he handed her the glass of amber liquid, he disappeared; Thea tore hurriedly at the paper on her gifts. She let out a squeal when she found that they were books, ran around looking for her father, showed them to him excitedly and ran back to throw herself at Hermione.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you!" Thea exclaimed, sitting back on the couch and opening the first tome on her lap. Within minutes, the girl was gone into the world of fantasy, looking curiously at the stationary pictures.

Snape reappeared again, this time with a house-elf following him, tea and cakes balancing precariously on a tray. The elf set the tray on the coffee table. "Thank you, Lugknut."

The elf snapped its fingers and disappeared.

At least he was pleasant to house-elves.

Hermione smiled, accepting a cup and saucer from Minerva. Time seemed to pass remarkably quickly despite having to be within *his* presence; the conversation moved around easily and about different subjects, but Hermione and Snape never addressed each other directly. It would be Hermione and Minerva in conversation, Snape scowling. Then Snape and Minerva would be off and Hermione would talk with Thea. In no time, Thea had fallen asleep with a book on her face.

It was while Snape was putting Thea to bed...this action in itself anomalous to his usual frostiness...that the evening took an interesting turn.

"I really was surprised to know that you were invited, Hermione," Minerva said.

Hermione smiled slightly. "I'm just as surprised as you, but I couldn't have very well have said no to Thea."

"You like Thea?"

"How could you not like her? She is a special little girl," Hermione chuckled. "I just can't believe she's *his*."

Minerva nodded and leaned back in her chair. "He's really a very good father. Rough around the edges, yes, but he has done well."

"I suppose I shouldn't pass judgment on the relationship, but it is so difficult not to with my own past with him," Hermione said.

"All you can do is what I have done these past years. Just be there for Thea when he is in one of his moods," Minerva said. "I know it is a lot to ask, but she obviously likes you very much. Severus does not seem to relish that fact, either. I imagine that he finds it difficult not to pass judgment on you. You weren't exactly a wonderful child to be around yourself."

Hermione tried hard to blush at that, but she knew Minerva was telling the truth. She had probably been a rather large pain in the arse as a child here at Hogwarts, even if she had been a good student, and she certainly was not doing anything to prove Snape's past opinions and assumptions wrong. She may have been nearing thirty years of age, but she had been acting like a petulant child toward him. This could not continue. Hermione made it her goal to make him see her as a mature, capable woman.

She yawned, the fatigue of her week finally hitting with full force. "I really need to go." She yawned again. "This teaching thing is for the birds."

Hermione moved toward the door before stopping to turn toward Minerva. "Would you tell Professor Snape I said thank you?"

A shadow emerged from the far end of the room. "You're welcome, Miss Granger."

She smiled slowly and nodded. "Good evening."

A Knight in Shining Armor

Chapter 10 of 11

"Thank you for saving me from a most horrible fate, good sir knight," she teased and stood on tiptoe to kiss his cheek.

My sincerest thanks to everyone who reads this... I was a little off in my two month prediction last time I updated. However, there should be pretty regular updates from now on, so stay tuned.

A big hug, flowers, and chocolate-covered, ambiguously dark wizards to my wonderful betas, Keladry and Subversa.

Chapter 9- A Knight in Shining Armor

The following two months were a veritable blur. Hogwarts finally fell into the term routine, the students settled into their work, and Hermione found her niche in the staff. She enjoyed everyone immensely, and most of them accepted her with open arms. Snape still kept his arms firmly crossed against his chest, but she could not blame him. She had been a horrible little monster starting this position when he had never deserved such a thing. It had taken her this full month, and falling into the new groove of her life, to realize she had let her anxiety over teaching and proving herself to everyone manifest itself in behavior unbecoming in a mature, intelligent woman of twenty-nine.

Her interactions with Snape had calmed as she had, and he seemed relieved. Well, as relieved as the man could ever get. He always appeared on edge. But Hermione found she could empathize with Snape now...with any of her professors, for that matter. Being a teacher was hard work. Yes, Snape had been an utter bastard to students during the war because of other issues, but just teaching students must have driven him batty. Teaching was quickly making her a little Trelawney-like, in the fact that alcoholic beverages were the only things that calmed her annoyances since she had signed the contract to teach these imbeciles.

But she was being hard on some of her students. Some of them actually wanted to learn, and though she desperately wanted to favor them, it was important not to do so in a class where the other students would see it. She refused to show preferences, unlike some of her own professors had.

Yes, her own professors' preferences were unmerited much of the time, and she strove to champion only those students who deserved it academically while pushing the others along in hopes that they would do better.

Even if it was remotely possible.

One thing was certain, though. If she had to clean up one more melted cauldron, she would scream.

And Atticus seemed to be on his way to doing that right at the moment.

"Mr Malfoy!"

The blond, pug-faced child started.

"What did I say about handling aconite?" Hermione watched with pleasure as Atticus' eyes quickly grew wide, and the plant in his hands was dropped unceremoniously to the workbench.

"Gloves, Mr Malfoy."

She had wondered if working with such a volatile substance would be too difficult for the first years, but she was following Snape's lesson plans from when she had been in school. Surely if her classmates had been able to handle it, then her students could.

Well, except for Neville, but he was usually an exception to any rule.

The classroom door burst open at that minute, a pang of uneasiness flooding through her because it had been thrown open with such a recognizable panache. However, it was not Severus Snape who stomped into the room, ready to give a glowering lecture. Instead, it was his fairer miniature that ran through the classroom and grabbed tightly onto Hermione's hips for dear life. Hermione looked down at the top of the inky-black head, letting the shock of this appearance finally dissipate. And as it wore off, she could feel the little body shaking and hear the quiet sniffing buried within her teaching robes.

She had not chosen this position of pseudo mother-nanny-friend that had been foisted upon her, but she had enjoyed it thus far even if Snape took too much pleasure in dropping his child off on her doorstep each evening he had "business" elsewhere. It was not odd that Thea, if she had gotten into an argument with her father, would come to her for comfort. What was odd was that the girl was home on a school day.

Not only that, but she was out of the headmaster's apartment and visible to most students. Despite the students' supreme and utter dunderheadedness, they could put two

and two together enough to know this child looked like a much younger and prettier version of their feared headmaster. Was that not why Snape kept the princess locked up in her tower?

Hermione glanced up at the class who was not thoroughly enthralled with the newcomer. She let out a small sigh. "Go back to work."

She then set down onto her haunches to look at Thea. Her eyes were red with tears. "What is it, Thea?"

The girl could not stop her sobbing.

"What is it, Thea?" Hermione repeated, comfortingly.

"I-I-It's Father, Miss Hermione," she cried.

Hermione had expected as much.

"H-he... I-I... flash of... r-red."

"Is he hurt, Thea?" Hermione asked, feeling her chest tighten for some odd reason.

She nodded her head forlornly.

Hermione stood up quickly, surveying the room. There was no way she could leave them to continue brewing on their own. She just did not trust them enough not to kill each other. She would have to Floo the hospital wing. Except today was the one day Madam Pomfrey was not in the castle; Madam Pomfrey's niece had just had a child in France, and she had gone to call on them.

Running through her mind the list of other staff members who were not in classes at the moment, she remembered that Kingsley had his free hour during this period.

"I will be back in a moment," she said, motioning for Thea to sit in her seat behind the desk. She added to the students, "And I said get back to work."

Hermione walked back into her private office and grabbed a pinch of Floo powder, wasting no time in finding Kingsley. She found him in his office, either marking papers or preparing for his next lesson.

"Ah, Hermione! To what do I owe this pleasure before lunch time?" he asked, turning to look at her.

"Would you please go check on Professor Snape for me?" Hermione asked. "Thea just ran down here sobbing about something happening to him, and I can't leave my class."

He was up and moving to the door before she said anything else.

"Thank you!" she called and turned back to her classroom.

Severus woke laying supine, a blinding headache throbbing tremendously. The world and colors slowly returned to normal, fuzziness drifting away from the corners of his sight. He attempted to sit up, but the headache did not allow for sudden movements. It almost felt like a sloshing of his brain. But he knew for a fact he had not been drinking, and this was not a hangover.

The events before he fell unconscious quickly came back to him then, and he reached up to pinch the bridge of his nose.

"Here, take this," said the feminine voice.

He opened his eyes again to see the tired face of his deputy looking down at him inquisitively. In her hand was a vial of an olive-colored potion. Knowing what it was, he reached for and downed the headache relief potion in a quick second.

"Where is she?" he asked quietly.

"Sleeping."

"What time is it!?" He sat up quickly, a wave of nausea moving through him.

"It's only three in the afternoon," Hermione replied. "I gave her a Calming Draught. She was very upset."

Severus pressed the heels of his hands into his closed eyes, waiting for the potion he had consumed to take effect. Slowly he felt the warm, soothing tendrils of relief curling around his brain.

"I suspect Thea was not very happy and let her magic get the better of her," she said and moved on quickly from Thea. "When you fell, you hit your head, and that's what knocked you out."

Hermione sighed and moved away from his side. Now that his head had stopped throbbing, he found he was lying on the couch in the front chamber of his apartments, not in the hospital wing.

"Where's Madam Pomfrey?"

"Visiting her niece in France, don't you remember?"

Severus was quite mortified, not remembering where the matron had gone, but the day's earlier occurrences slowly filtered back into his mind.

"You'll be fine," she said. "Those medi-witchery courses at University actually paid off."

Hermione collected her things: a stack of parchments, a quill and a bottle of ink. "If you need any other potions, you know where to find me."

"I will use my own potions, thank you," he snapped.

She spun on a heel and gave him a hard look. "As you wish, Professor."

He watched her walked to the door, suddenly bewildered by her. Of all things he had anticipated, he had not expected her to refrain from questioning him endlessly about what had actually happened.

"You're not even curious as to why Thea is here and not at school?" he questioned, nearly disbelieving he had asked it. Really, he could not tell why he had an overwhelming need to discuss the situation with her, but he felt it was important. Perhaps it was because he knew Thea cared so deeply for the insufferable chit.

"Of course I am curious, Professor, but would you have answered me, had I asked?"

He frowned. "Touché."

Hermione shrugged her shoulders and reached for the handle on the door. But she stopped again and turned around. "You may have to do some damage control, though, Professor. After you had been knocked out, she came running down to the dungeons. The children we teach are thick, but I'm certain a few put two and two together."

"Don't you mean one and one?"

She let out a derisive chuckle, perhaps more mocking than she had meant it. She worried her bottom lip between her teeth. "It's not important. Good day, Professor."

As she was shutting the door, he called a soft, "Thank you," hoping that she would not hear him. At least he would know he had thanked her, and that would be sufficient.

Hermione stood outside the headmaster's door, staring at the ancient wood. She felt an odd compulsion to open the door and ask what he had just said, but if she did that, he would only say something contrary. She was quite certain, though, that he had thanked her.

This pleasant thought carried her back to her office to put her things away and then to her storage room where she began to pull ingredients out to make replacement potions for the infirmary.

She worked slowly this Friday. There was no rush for these supplies, so she did not feel compelled to move quickly. It allowed her a little while to speculate on how incredibly odd the day had been since Thea had shown up in her classroom, sobbing from anger and worry. There were millions of explanations as to why Thea had been angered enough to use her magic, but Hermione could not possibly pin one reason down. After all, no one really knew Snape's mind except Snape himself, so how was she supposed to know what had started the chain of events?

Whatever it had been had thoroughly enraged little Thea, though. Truthfully, Hermione had been quite surprised that something like this had not happened sooner. Snape was an unpleasant man; more tolerable than he had been "back then," but he was still unpleasant. There was no reason for him to change, even for a child. And, yes, she would admit she had seen some major promise for his sociability because of Thea, but that did not mitigate the point. Snape was an arse most of the time.

That Thea had never been angry enough since Hermione came to Hogwarts to cause uncontrolled magic was even more promising. Maybe he was not so horrible as Hermione had originally thought?

This notion kept her perplexed and a little preoccupied when she should have been paying attention to her brewing. What was the number one thing she yelled at her students for? Not paying attention to what they were doing. But then again, it was only Pepper-Up, and she had brewed it countless times before. There was little chance of her cauldron melting or exploding.

After working for some time, Hermione grew warm from climbing up and down the ladder in between standing over boiling cauldrons and decided to divest herself of the heavy teaching robes she had been wearing. However, even getting rid of the bulky robes and her sensibly heeled work shoes did not prevent her from losing her balance on the ladder when a deep voice called to her from behind.

It was a combination of futile movements all rolled into one: first she jumped at the sudden intrusion into her thoughts, then a quick movement of her hand away from the breakables on the shelf, ending with a movement with the other hand to hold on for dear life. She had been high enough on the ladder to hit her head on the stone ceiling when she jumped, knocking two jars of salamander eyes to the ground, and her other hand totally missed the rung of the ladder to steady herself.

Most people might have screamed, but only a low, guttural sound of complete shock escaped her as she scrambled, her arms flailing. Expecting to land unceremoniously on the stone ground, she had enough mental capacity to relax her body for the fall. Instead of landing, hard and ungracefully, though, she was caught by two extremely strong arms.

Hermione let out a gasp of air, as she slumped back into the hold.

"What I've always wanted," said the voice behind her. "A woman falling at my feet."

Hermione pushed away from the broad chest and turned around to face Kingsley. "I didn't fall at your feet."

"You would have if I had not caught you," he chuckled, his smile brilliant in the dim light.

"And here I was going to proclaim you my knight in shining armor," she said.

Kingsley shrugged. "You can still do that, if you like. You know how Slytherin egos like such things."

Hermione pursed her lips together, stepping back from him and running a hand haphazardly over her clothes to do a quick check to make sure she had not injured herself...even though she knew she had not.

"Thank you for saving me from a most horrible fate, good sir knight," she teased and stood on tiptoe to kiss his cheek.

But he pulled back from her, meeting her eyes. "I thought we had gotten past that nonsense."

Hermione felt heat rise to her face.

Since the beginning of the year, they had spent quite a few nights over dinner, regaling each other with their exploits teaching that day, whether this was in the Great Hall or privately at a restaurant. More than once, they had ended up back at one of their apartments to continue the evening.

The relationship...if one could call it that...was purely sexual in nature and seemed to be exactly what the both of them needed. She *did* hold a genuine affection for the strong, serious man who, in her eyes, had once been the very paragon of valor. However, they both recognized that they were too dissimilar to make a serious, committed relationship out of it.

Hermione had realized early on that she was actually *enjoying* not being committed to something. For a woman who was used to always having a reason for doing something, it had been a rather large step to take. Though it was a far cry from what she craved...that of a husband and family...it was an oddly liberating experience to take part in a liaison that was for the sole purpose of amusement.

And, she rationalized, everyone had to have at least one of these mindless flings before they settled down. Didn't they?

She smiled suggestively and reached up to pull his head down to meet hers. The exchange was slow and tentative at first, but quickly changed into headiness that had her pressed against the storeroom ladder and praying the ladder would hold the weight they were placing upon it.

When his soft and amazing mouth moved down her jaw to her neck, she chuckled throatily. "I have potions brewing."

"Hmm," he said, catching her earlobe between his teeth.

"I really should get back to them."

Kingsley pulled his head back to look down at her, a smile on his face. She was acutely aware that his large hands were on her hips and gripping into her clothes and flesh.

"I suppose I can't let the Potions mistress blow up the Potions lab," he said. "It would look bad."

"Very bad," she said, stretching her neck up to kiss him again, her teeth grabbing his bottom lip for a split second before pulling back again.

He groaned softly, not allowing her to get away that easily. "You know better than to do that and expect to get away with it."

Hermione giggled and pushed at his chest. He stepped back reluctantly, motioning for her to leave the room in front of him, allowing him a few moments to calm himself in case anyone should be outside the door.

"Oh, the sala..." she said, pivoting back to look into the storeroom.

"I saved them as well. They're on the floor," he replied. "Were you putting away or retrieving, though?"

"Putting away," she said and turned back around, leading him to the semi-private Potions lab. Semi-private because Snape still used the room for brewing his own things. And semi-private because he had chosen today of all days to show up and inspect her work.

He looked up from the cauldron he was stirring. "You know better than to leave a cauldron unattended for this long. I have completed the next step for you."

"I-I...er... thank you," she said.

Snape looked up from the cauldron then, his eyes narrowing first at her and then at the man behind her, then back again, as realization dawned. She was certain she looked quite disheveled despite trying to remedy that when they had separated in the storeroom.

"I see," Snape said. He looked pained as he took in the situation in front of him, but quickly masked it. He turned back to the cauldron. "I will require more headache relief. I find that I am out in my own stores."

Hermione wanted to ask why he had not gone to the infirmary, but decided not to and risk bringing out his snark. She considered it a small godsend to not have him harping on seeing Kingsley and herself in such a state. "I'll get it; one minute, Professor."

She turned around to look up at Kingsley and shrugged her shoulders at him. Standing on her tip toes, she kissed him quickly. "I'll see you later?"

He nodded and left the room, a devious look on his face.

Had Hermione been facing the other direction, she would have noticed the other occupant of the room twitch and tense at the affection between herself and Kingsley. But she did not, so she moved quickly back to her storeroom to hide her own embarrassment over the situation.

But she was not quite sure what she was embarrassed about.

The Snake Charmer

Chapter 11 of 11

Hermione's brows raised in question. "Sir? If I wanted something I would come right out and ask it of you. I know better than to provoke the snake when I'm not a snake charmer."

A/N: I'm off on holiday to Atlanta, Georgia for the next few weeks, so I do not expect another chapter before the end of June. I just wanted to post this as a thank you for those who have stuck around during my long absence.

Many thanks to the wonderful betas, Keladry and Subversa.

Chapter 10- The Snake Charmer

Severus glanced up from his work the following morning, finding the source of the soft shuffling standing in the doorway looking at him. Her hair and clothes were tousled, her eyes still heavy from sleep. Thea had not woken since he had fully regained consciousness, for which he had been both worried and delighted.

He had been glad not to face the small likeness of himself yet, until this moment. He did not know if he could face her and the problems they had been arguing about and what had resulted in a rather strong flash of uncontrolled magic.

Thea had come home Thursday afternoon, looking unwell. She had gone to bed early and awakened in the morning to a stomach ache. Severus, unaccustomed to ever taking a day from his duties for something so inconsequential as a belly ache, gave her a potion and sent her on her way to school. At school, she had, according to her teacher's owl, gotten worse through the morning and could he please come fetch her before she had to Floo Thea to St. Mungo's.

Angered and annoyed that Thea had not been able to make it through the day, he had Flooed to the school, retrieved her and brought her back to Hogwarts. Once back in their chambers, after a few minutes of moping around, Thea had pulled out some of her toys and begun to play. Severus had watched in disbelief that she would so quickly start to play when she had just been complaining of a malady.

He had asked as evenly as possible whether she would not rather lie down. She was ill, after all. Thea had looked up at him silently, her large eyes almost pleading to be left alone and not questioned. There was something there, though, something she was not willing to say openly, that she was trying to convey with only her eyes. He was intrigued, more than incensed, that she was defying him and not answering the question. Nor was he particularly angry she had lied to get home.

He'd tried to control his urge to cast the spell. Really, he had. But the incantation was out of his mouth before he could stop it. The memories had flooded him as though he had cracked a dam wall. The only child's mind he had ever entered before was Potter's, but Potter had been a pimply-faced teen by then. Potter's mind had been more controlled than the mind of the six-year-old in front of him. But he found what he needed at the forefront of her memories.

There was a sandy-haired boy. Thea and the sandy-haired boy, named Julian, had become good friends. However, there was a gang of girls who did not like this one bit. They made certain to let her and Julian know what they thought of them.

A shiver had run up his spine, and he tried desperately not to think of his own similar situations from a time not quite forgotten.

It was then that he had felt her pushing at him. He wanted to know more, let it play, and wonder how he had not only been cursed once with such a problem in his life, but had it foisted upon his own daughter. For someone to anger Thea was to enrage him.

He had severed the magical connection, only to find her sobbing and livid. Obviously, she had not quite understood why she had felt so violated, but she knew she had been, and she was beside herself. He had, quite effectually, abused her in the most heinous way. In his sudden remorse, he had reached out for her, to touch her shoulder and try to comfort her. She had pulled back harshly and then all he could remember was black, until waking up to Granger's presence in his rooms.

"I'm not angry with you, Thea," he said finally, watching her tense body relax.

"What happened, Father?" She looked sheepishly down at the ground. "What did I do?"

Severus motioned for her to come sit with him. She was reluctant to crawl in his lap, but she did so eventually and settled down against his chest. "What you did was uncontrolled magic. Sometimes, when young witches and wizards let their emotions get the better of them, their magic wells up and bursts out at the person they direct it at."

He had not had "the talk" with her yet. But that brought up other unpleasant thoughts about conversations he would just as soon leave until she was thirty.

"But I thought you needed a wand to do that?" she questioned.

"When you start school here at Hogwarts, and you have a wand, you will learn to control your magic through the use of your wand and hands. Until then, you can cause magic to happen unexpectedly." He sighed and looked down at her. "When your magic hit me yesterday, I fell and struck my head. That is why I was unconscious... er, asleep."

"Oh," she said, as though it made all the sense in the world to her. "I'm sorry, Father."

Severus pursed his lips together. "You should not be sorry. It is, as I said, not something you can control. Your temper, in the future, however, you can control. In this situation, you had every right to let your temper out. I should not have done what I did."

She looked at him imploringly.

"I cast a spell so I could look into your memories. It is not a nice spell, and I do not know why I cast it...." He knew why, but she did not need to know that he was a completely sadistic bastard.

"I-I was scared, Father. I didn't know what was happening," she said, her bottom lip quivering.

He nodded. "I promise never to do it again."

He said this despite the fact he knew he would be tempted a million times more as she got older and would probably slip a few of those times.

"I'll go back to school if you want me to."

Severus could not help but chuckle at the girl. "It is Saturday morning, Thea. You slept through the afternoon and night."

"Oh! Is it because of the potion Miss Hermione gave me?"

"It can have that effect on some people, but it usually doesn't," he said. "I am going to see Miss Hermione in just a few moments to discuss it with her."

"May I come?"

"Not this morning, Thea," he said.

Last night, when Thea still had not woken up, he had gone to Hermione's chambers to ask her what exactly she had given Thea. Any good potioneer knew that a Calming Draught did not cause a person to fall asleep. It merely evened out their emotions and allowed them to continue on with daily activities in a normal manner.

Of course, he trusted Hermione implicitly with Thea's health and well-being; she had, at least, proved herself in that area. Hermione would not do anything to endanger the girl, but he was interested in what exactly Thea had taken.

However, he had forgotten completely why he had sought her out when she had opened the door to her chambers. She had stood there, a glow surrounding her tousled hair, her skin flushed and her lips quite puffy. He had realized then that it was probably Kingsley who had made her look this way and why she was clutching a robe to her quite obviously nude body.

It had made him irrationally jealous. After all, there was no basis whatsoever for his own bodily reactions at the sight of the sex-rumped Hermione. Miss Granger, he corrected. There was absolutely no reason he could have been befuddled enough to forget his own voice. Why had he stood there dumbly, staring at her? She was not his. He was quite certain he did not want the insufferable woman to be his. He could barely tolerate her! How could he even think of her in this way?

There was no explanation for it.

And then Kingsley had come to the door, unclothed except for his trousers. He had wrapped an arm around her, looking at him questioningly. Severus had felt his hands ball into fists. Without another word, Severus had turned on his heel and walked away. He was certain he left them completely confused, but he did not care. He had needed a strong drink.

But he had resolved to go back this morning, even knowing that Kingsley was most likely still there. He had to show her the sight had not affected him as much as it appeared last night. If she looked unconvinced, he could use the knock to the head earlier in the day to explain it away.

He was pretty convinced of that himself. Perhaps the bump *had* altered his mental state.

The roaring front door startled them.

Severus lifted his wand to unlock the door, calling a quiet, "Come in."

The door opened, and Granger appeared, looking confused. "Did the door just roar like a lion?"

"You are the Gryffindor Head of House, are you not?"

"It's never done that before," she replied.

"It's spelled to only do it when it is locked. One of the previous Headmasters thought it would be humorous to put an irremovable spell on it, so that when the Heads of House are near it, the door makes a corresponding sound."

Hermione frowned as she glanced askance at the aged wood again. "That would get very annoying."

"I'd like to know which Head found enough time in their schedule to spell such a thing," he said.

Severus shifted slightly, the increasingly heavy child and boney arse on his lap growing uncomfortable. Rather than remove herself from his lap, though, Thea stayed firmly in place. It was odd behavior for the child who was shy to show any emotion at all to others, especially if her father was around. Perhaps it was a Snape trait...the unwillingness to show emotion. His father has used alcohol to stuff down his problems. Severus himself had used his sadistic personality. Thea just put on an indifferent mask, even though she did not seem to know that she did it.

But then again, she always acted differently when Hermione was around.

"That's simple, sir; the Heads merely pawned off all the work onto their Deputies."

She met his eyes with a smirk worthy of his own doing. At least she was jesting. While it had been extremely tempting to leave hordes of work for her to do rather than complete it himself, he had been very conscious of dividing the work evenly between them. He knew how difficult it was to teach, after all.

Deciding that there had been enough pleasantries for the morning, Hermione moved her eyes to meet Thea's. "I came to see if Thea would like to run some errands with me today."

Thea turned quickly and looked at him questioningly.

He nodded slightly and before he could help her down, Thea had jumped from his lap and was running toward her bedroom to change.

"Winky!" he called.

The elderly house-elf appeared with a soft *pop*. "Please help Thea get ready to go to Diagon Alley."

Winky bowed lowly and disappeared, squeaking about something as she went. It sounded suspiciously like she was angry about being interrupted while serving breakfast.

Severus turned to watch Granger gaze after the elf. She chuckled and glanced back at him, her face straightening. He sighed and sat up in his chair, grabbing for the wand on the desk in front of him. "Would you care for some tea, Miss Granger?"

"I...sure," she said ambivalently, taking the seat across from him when he motioned to it.

Severus conjured the tea and waited until they were settled in uncomfortable silence to say anything more. He cleared his throat. "You didn't give Thea a Calming Draught."

"Yes, I did," she replied, sipping her tea and looking at him from over the rim of the porcelain cup. "However, a drop of Dreamless Sleep never hurt anyone, especially when they're as distressed as she was yesterday."

"A drop doesn't cause someone to sleep for twenty hours," he remarked.

Hermione placed her cup on the saucer and set it carefully on the table in front of her. She folded her hands in her denim-clad lap and fixed him with an amused smile. "It does in a body that small and with a more potent efficacy of Dreamless Sleep. Besides, I'm sure the amount of magic she used yesterday tired her a great deal on top of everything else."

He looked her over carefully and knew that she knew he was quizzing her as he might have back in the days as her teacher.

"You still answer by the book," he replied.

"Your book," she said.

"My what?"

She sighed. "The Prince's book."

"I thought that had been destroyed in the battle," he said gravely.

Hermione uncrossed her legs and repositioned herself in the chair. "I may have disliked the fact that Harry was cheating all sixth year, but I wasn't stupid enough to trust him with such a valuable resource. I made a copy of it. It's really quite simple once you've found the right spell. Good thing I did it when I did, too, or it would have been lost when Harry threw it into the Room of Requirement."

Severus leveled his eyes at hers, not quite knowing what to say.

She shrugged her shoulders and let out a light sigh. Looking around the room at nothing in particular, she let a small smile cross her lips. "Did you ever think about publishing your own revised edition?"

"It was not at the top of my priorities list," he said.

"Well, if you would like to visit that idea, you may have a copy of it back," she said. "Flourish and Blotts has publishing connections, after all."

His eyes narrowed, the warning bells in his mind suddenly triggering. She was up to something. There was absolutely no reason for her to be this nice to him, this pleasantness beyond professional courtesy, when he had certainly not inspired it in her to begin with.

"You are no Slytherin, Professor," he said with a sneer. "I find it quite droll that you think you can be."

"Excuse me, sir?"

"You want something."

Hermione's brows raised in question. "Sir? If I wanted something, I would come right out and ask it of you. I know better than to provoke the snake when I'm not a snake charmer."

"Then why are you offering something like this to me?"

"Because I think it is a waste of scholarly genius to not have it published for others to learn from it. Certainly, it takes away the edge you might have had as a Potions master and knowing the tricks, but you, of all people, believe in educating the masses if they are willing to learn."

Severus steepled his fingers in front of his mouth, considering her statement. "However, Professor, the operative statement there *is* *if they are willing to learn*. As of yet, I have not encountered many students who understood the true beauty of the art."

"Of learning or of potions-brewing?"

"Both," he murmured, slipping into a contemplative trance.

It was true that he had never considered publishing a revised edition of the standard textbook for the NEWT-level Potions classes, but frivolous thinking had never been a luxury he had permitted himself. And truly, it had been frivolous. There were other much more important things to worry about in the world that did not involve publishing

books and collecting the royalties.

But, as much as it pained him to admit it, Granger did have a point. There was absolutely no reason not to visit this possibility now, even if he still wasn't completely sure she was not doing this to get something. However, that had never been Miss Granger's style. She was quite irritatingly open about her intentions most of the time.

She shrugged. "It is only a suggestion, sir."

Silence passed between them again, and Hermione took the opportunity to sip the rest of her tea, neither looking at him or anything in particular. She did not seem agitated that he continued to look over her, trying to read her without employing any magic to do so. Such a thing had already got him into trouble yesterday; the last thing he needed right now was for the witch in front of him to sense what he was doing and do something much worse to his person than Stunning him for perpetrating it. Hermione merely sat there, head held high as though she were basically allowing him to look.

He could not believe he was being so utterly obvious about it.

Snapping out of his thoughts, he cleared his throat roughly, searching for something to say. But he really did not have anything to say to her.

She set her empty cup and saucer down, meeting his eyes again. "I will be meeting up with the Potters later this evening for dinner. Ginny wondered if you might like to come as well."

He hoped his horrified expression was obvious.

At her amused laugh, he frowned.

"I told her that would be your reaction," Hermione said. "It wouldn't be so horrible. All adults, no children, and I was promised Molly Weasley's constant henpecking would be nonexistent. Apparently she and Arthur are playing babysitter to the children for the evening."

The invitation sounded all the more delightful now.

"Why, Miss Granger, did Mrs Potter not invite me herself?"

"Because I suggested it," she replied. "I thought you might like some grownup time away from Thea."

"You will not be here to look after her, though, if I leave her here," he said.

Hermione pursed her lips. "I'm not her nanny, Snape, and don't be fooled into thinking that you can make me one."

"I had no such intention."

She took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "She is more than welcome to stay with the other children. I think it might be good for her, just like grownup time might be good for you."

"The attendees of this little soiree... will they all be past students?"

"Many of them, but they aren't nearly as grating as they were as your students," she replied.

Despite the fact that he should be wholly opposed to such a proposition, he found that he was intrigued. He had never been able to observe previous students in their natural environments, or after they had a few years to mature. Perhaps it would be an interesting social experiment.

"And if it pleases you to look at it this way, they all know how taciturn you can be, so it won't be any surprise if you're quiet and moody the whole evening," Hermione added.

"Very well, Miss Granger," he said. "When am I to make an appearance?"

"Seven this evening, at..."

He raised a hand to stop her. "Unfortunately, I know where the Potters live."

Hermione raised a curious eyebrow, but said nothing of it. Even if she had wanted to, she could not as Thea ran into the room then, ready to go on her outing with Miss Hermione. Severus watched the two most important females in his life leave the room hand-in-hand.

That thought made him shudder, however.

Two most important females indeed.