

A Potionful of Trouble

by *TempestOfDreams*

A response to the Potter_Place Fall prompt challenge: #22. The Weasley twins come across Snape shopping for Potions ingredients. A commotion causes Snape to become distracted, and the twins promptly take advantage of this once-in-a-lifetime golden opportunity to slip Snape one of their "experimental" products.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 10

A response to the Potter_Place Fall prompt challenge: #22. The Weasley twins come across Snape shopping for Potions ingredients. A commotion causes Snape to become distracted, and the twins promptly take advantage of this once-in-a-lifetime golden opportunity to slip Snape one of their "experimental" products.

Author's Notes: First, many thanks go out to Elfarren and Scabbyfish for beta reading. Second, this was my NaNoWriMo work for 2006; it is complete in ten chapters that will be uploaded regularly.

Severus Snape was always going to be looking for potions ingredients. That's just the way things were. Whether he was a professor (he wasn't, not anymore) or an apothecary (probably never would be, as he'd scare off most of the customers) or just a regular old well, not so old wizarding citizen, he was going to make potions. The Potions mastery he had acquired while teaching at Hogwarts had gone from being a necessary requirement to maintain his façade as a spy on both sides of the war to being a necessary distraction to keep him at least somewhat sane.

Right now he was bent over the bottles and jars in the Diagon Alley apothecary, examining beetle eyes for freshness, unicorn horn for validity it was a heavily black-marketed and frequently-faked item and a variety of other items for various uses. He had a small pile growing on the counter before him, and the proprietor was in the back, retrieving some Class B substances that were only allowed to be purchased by those with some type of certification and a documented use. Severus needed items to create the potions to stock the Hogwarts hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey could order the potions ready-made, but they would cost more, have a shorter shelf life due to being bottled, stored and so on, and they may not be as reliable as those that he could make.

His hands picked over the current ingredient he was examining, sorting by size and quality, as he needed a very specific high-quality batch for the potion he was going to begin within the next few days.

Despite the fact that since the war was over, he was no longer on staff at Hogwarts and was free to make a normal living, he supplied the Hogwarts infirmary at less-than-going rates. It was the least he could do in memory of Albus Dumbledore, who had mentored him and sheltered him for nearly twenty years. He would always be shadowed by Albus's death, but he could endure, knowing that his act had been a merciful one.

The proprietor, a short, balding wizard in fraying robes, returned with the flask of Chinese Fireball dragon's blood that he needed. For most potions, any type of dragon could supply the blood, but for a few select ones, it was important to match the type of potion to the type of dragon. In this case, it was a very special version of Pepper-Up that functioned as a medical restorative for those who were sick. Either the Fireball or the Hungarian Horntail would work, but the Fireball was a little more reliable. Severus held the flask up to the light, checking to be sure that the blood was clear with no traces of cloudiness, which would indicate that it was old or had been badly stored.

Fortunately, the blood was clear and just the right shade of red. He nodded brusquely at the man behind the counter and added the blood the rather large pile of ingredients

that he would be purchasing this afternoon. That was the last item he would be buying today, though he had to discuss a special order for some additional rare items.

"I need to purchase Boomslang skin, Doxy venom, and an Erumpent horn, Mr. Jigger. The Ministry will provide any documentation you might require. Will you be able to acquire them for me?"

"Of course, Mr. Snape," came the prompt reply. "Let me just get the special order forms from my office." He bustled towards the back of the shop again.

Although he was done making his selections, Severus took a few minutes to look over the current supply of several other items he frequently needed to purchase. It was always good to know how much was currently available.

The door to the shop burst open, and Severus thought for a few seconds that he was seeing double. He shook his head before realizing it was the once-bane of his existence (second only to Potter), the Weasley twins. They dived pell-mell into a display of ingredients, presumably for one of those highly annoying ridiculous items they were always experimenting with.

"I think we need"

"definitely one of those"

"and some of"

"the red ones, for sure"

"right, and let's try mixing this one and the one over there"

"exactly."

The twins looked at each other, apparently in complete accord. Severus had absolutely no idea what they had just communicated to each other, but he did know that the two ingredients they were holding together had been separated by the length of the table for a very good reason.

"Mr. Weasley. Both of you. I suggest you pay close attention to the ingredients you are holding. While it is no concern of mine what you do with them when you get back to your shop, it is because of me that Mr. Jigger is in the back room, so I do feel somewhat compelled to point out that they need to be kept separate unless you want..." He trailed off as the twins grinned at each other. Perhaps bringing it to their attention was a poor decision.

"Unless we want what?" one of them Fred asked.

He made certain his sneer was in place before responding. "Unless you want to see how creative I can still be with detention. I assure you, despite the fact that you are no longer students and I am no longer a teacher, I *will* find a way to ensure that you serve one."

The twins looked at each other, looked at him, and carefully stepped away from each other before continuing to look at the available ingredients at a more leisurely, calm pace.

"Mr. Snape, here are the forms, all filled out," the proprietor announced as he hurried up to the counter and placed the paperwork down. "Ah, Mr. Weasley and Mr. Weasley, how nice to see you. Do try not to melt anything this time if you will. While I am very pleased to supply you with ingredients, I do hate to have to charge you for wasted stock! Mr. Snape, let me total you up now."

Severus gave one more harsh look to the Weasley twins, who had both grinned at the proprietor and shrugged at each other as if to say, "Who, us?" before turning toward the counter to finalise his purchases.

"Thank you, Mr. Jigger. I appreciate your assistance today." He picked up the special order forms to review as his total was tallied up. Everything looked in order.

"That will be fifteen Galleons, two Sickles, and three Knuts, please."

Severus slipped his hand into one of the hidden pockets of his robes still the flared robes he had favoured as a teacher, they were very good at concealing both pockets and carry-about items and retrieved his money. He carefully counted it out on the counter before slipping the extra away.

By the time he had finished, the proprietor had considerably packaged up his purchases. Severus picked them up (no shrinking on these, too risky for the ingredients) and was preparing to leave when a loud bang filled the shop.

He spun towards the noise, expecting and finding the Weasley twits to be right in the middle of it. They were covered in a purple haze with brown ash scattered all over themselves, the shelves of ingredients, and the floor. He put his package back down on the counter and stalked over towards them.

"Did I not tell you to keep those ingredients apart?" he spat. "Are you finished with your imbecilic activities for the day? Did it occur to you that *I still know more than you do about potions and you might consider taking my advice?* Or that you may be free to endanger your own lives while experimenting, but *doing so in a public place endangers others, too?* How dare you pull these stunts in the apothecary!"

"But we always pay" one started.

"for things we break!" the other concluded.

"And that gives you the right to force Mr. Jigger to waste his time cleaning up after you? By rights, he should charge you a clean-up fee!"

"Well, if he needs to"

"we would of course pay it."

Did nothing get through their skulls? He could think of one more possible argument to use on them. It was rumoured that the best way to stopper their idiocy was with a good old-fashioned threat of telling tales, as unpleasant as that seemed. "What would your mother say?" he bit out.

That got their attention as they looked at each other and shifted closer together, then looked back at him with identically alarmed expressions.

"You wouldn't really"

"consider telling her"

"would you?"

They glanced at each other and back to Severus once more.

He leaned forward to deliberately invade their collective personal space. "If I see her, I most certainly will tell her, I assure you." Not that he was likely to see her, and he knew that they knew that, but the point was clear.

He spun back toward the counter, where he found the proprietor gathering cleaning supplies and looking rather battle-worn. "Thank you, Mr. Snape," he said under his breath, "but it's really not necessary. The Weasleys are good business for me they could go straight to the source, but opt to go through me instead and I wouldn't want to alienate them."

Severus replied just as quietly. "You won't. If those two idiots are nothing else, they're fanatically loyal. They won't stop frequenting you just because I told them off. But hopefully they'll behave better while they're here. Though with them, I really can't promise anything."

"If you're certain about that, I thank you, then." He bustled around the counter to begin the clean-up.

Severus looked back at the twins, who glanced nervously between the two men.

"Perhaps we should"

"help with the clean-up?"

The proprietor stopped in his tracks and threw a panicked look over his shoulder at Severus.

"Perhaps you should simply clear out and leave Mr. Jigger to restore his merchandise floor in his own preferred way. I'm sure if you put your items on the counter, he would be happy to tally them up, put them on your account, and send them to the shop later in the day."

"Right-o, Mr. Snape," one of them said, grinning. Together could they ever do anything separately? they walked over to, ostensibly, put their items on the glass. Severus strode over to the Mr. Jigger and asked quietly, "Was that acceptable to you?"

"Yes, certainly."

Severus turned around just in time to see one of the twins sliding his own package of ingredients further down the counter, apparently to make room for their ingredients directly next to the proprietor's till.

"Remove your hands from that at once," he snapped.

"Why, Mr. Snape, don't you"

"trust us?"

Four hands haphazardly piled bottles and jars on the counter in the space that they had cleared. A few items slid free of the jumble and had to be quickly righted.

"Absolutely not. However, I *do* trust that you'll be leaving now that you've *neatly* arranged all your items exactly where my package just was."

They shrugged and dropped their arms back to their sides.

"Of course, of course. We're"

"all done here, and"

"we'll be seeing you around"

"or not, as the case may be." The two of them were going drive the rest of the world insane with their inability to speak individually. It was one more reason he was quite happy to see the back of them as they ambled towards the front door.

In unison, they paused and turned just before exiting. "Oh, and Mr. Snape" one began.

"do enjoy yourself now, won't you?" the other continued.

"We are so very terribly sorry"

"for interrupting"

"your precious time. We do hope"

"we won't see you again"

"anytime soon," they concluded at the same time.

"I assure you," he replied as he crossed his arms in front of himself and leaned back slightly against the counter, "that I have the exact same hope. However, I warn you that I have not forgotten my original comment about detention. You *will* be serving one, in some fashion, as soon as I can devise something that I deem suitable, and I will take great pleasure in ensuring that you comply."

"Not if we see you first," one of them mumbled under his breath.

Severus felt his mouth twist into one of his nastiest grins. "Oh, George, trust me, you won't need to see me, but it will happen."

They looked at each other, and Fred mouthed, "How did he know you were George?"

"Never underestimate your teachers, Fred. Or your adversaries, if you prefer to identify it that way now that I no longer serve a professorial role."

Fred looked at him and cocked an eyebrow. "Just so." And once again in unison, they turned and exited the shop.

Severus watched them leave with a distinct feeling of trepidation. While they had traded a charming set of insults on the way out, all-in-all they seemed rather calm and unbothered by it. Which was rather out-of-character for them, he thought. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and reopened them.

The proprietor was still cleaning up the mess that the powder explosion had caused. "Do you need help, Mr. Jigger?"

"No, no, I'm almost done here. You take your purchases and be on your way. I hope to see you again soon. And please don't forget you have a standing offer to provide potions for me to sell here. I haven't sold many in the past because I'm picky, but I would always be happy to purchase your work from you."

It was a standing refrain between them, but Severus was quite content servicing the school as well as some research departments in the Ministry. That kept him busy enough that he didn't have time for additional commissions.

"Thank you. And while my schedule is still full, I do appreciate knowing that this avenue is available to me should things change," he concluded as he picked up the package. It felt a little dusty; the idiots must have sprinkled some of their accumulated ash onto it. The slightly odd tingling sensation from the dust made him stop and brush both the package and his hands off before he left the shop.

Severus was ready to return home. He strode to the Apparition point behind Flourish & Blotts and Disapparated to his house on Spinner's End with a very small pop.

Hermione shifted a book across her desk at Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes. In the upper laboratory, things were quiet, far removed from the hustle and bustle of the main shop floor. She loved it up here. Her part-time work with the twins was a fun way to supplement her income from the Ministry of Magic which altogether did not provide much in the way of a salary to entry-level Arithmancers. Plus, it allowed her to continue her studies in Potions and Charms, which would certainly have been neglected otherwise.

Though it seemed like she had spent her entire first year as a Prefect fighting the twins about testing and selling their products, she could never quite deny their cleverness and ingenuity. She knew she was clever as well, and her research and cross-disciplinary instincts outshone theirs, but her creativity was no match for them. So they worked best as a team, where the twins came up with a concept and some rough ideas as to what might work for an approach, and she took it from there and refined it.

She might suggest that they supplement a charm with a potion or vice-versa, or she might have an idea for a substitute ingredient that would keep an item shelf-stable longer. And then together they would finalise the product and come up with a production plan. It made them all happy.

She picked up the sheaf of parchment that had been hiding under the book it was the list of ingredients and order of addition the recipe, if you will, though she would never call it that in Professor Snape's hearing for the latest product. This one was going to have to be kept behind the counter and probably only sold to adults. It wasn't strictly sexual, per se, but it definitely could be problematic in young hands, as the most obvious uses were definitely sexual.

Actually, unintended use could be a problem in or rather on any hands. The product was a powder designed to release a nerve-sensitising agent directly into the skin. It worked quickly and its base was nearly Muggle in nature, but the ingredients were worked in such a way that it would magically enhance pleasurable feelings to the affected areas but wouldn't exacerbate any painful ones.

It was called Can-Touch Talc and took its name not only from the sense of touch that it enhanced but also from the fact that it was, at heart, a version of the old wizarding aphrodisiac cantharis. In Victorian times, Muggles had heard rumours of the aphrodisiac properties, but for them it was just an irritation agent. The magical preparations nullified the toxic properties, fortunately.

While Hermione knew that many of the potions she had taken had various animal and insect ingredients, she just couldn't quite yet get past the idea of using ground-up beetles as something to enhance sexual pleasure.

Fortunately, however, she had discovered that when you added the powder to one of a number of base oils, it worked incredibly well as a massage agent, giving both the masseuse and recipient additional non-sexual pleasure. Ginny and Harry, and she and Ron had taken turns with that on a number of occasions, though it seemed that she and Ginny were usually the ones massaging the boys men after a Quidditch practice or game. Until she and Ron had broken up, that is, and Hermione had moved into her own flat. She assumed that Ginny and Harry still used the infusion.

Their Auror training and their contracts with their respective teams kept Harry and Ron busy and always on the go, but they each tried to get to as many of the other's games as possible. Hermione didn't even try to attend most of the games, but she did make sure she managed to catch a game by each of them at least once a month though she cheated as often as possible and went to see the games where their teams were playing each other.

She wanted to refine the process for creating the powder a bit more. They were still having the problem that in the process of refining it to a talc-like consistency, it tended to drift into a haze in the manufacturing room. It could be extremely distracting to them as they worked on it, and even though it wouldn't amplify pain, it could be quite annoying and irritating simply because it was a powder that was caking on the skin.

Hermione thought that it was worth pursuing the idea of better pulverising individual ingredients and then putting them in some sort of sealed bin to mix. Or possibly finding what would amount to a super-blender, which could refine the powder automatically rather than by hand as they were doing now.

She had just settled down into her chair and was hunched over the desk when the twins came bursting through the door and skidded to a halt in front of her. *Honestly, you'd think they were five instead of twenty-five.*

"Hermione!"

"You'll never guess"

"who we ran into"

"and what we did!"

Hermione sat back in the chair and automatically started fiddling with her quill. "Let's see, you were supposed to be going to the apothecary. Did you actually make it there, Fred?" she enquired.

"Of course we did," he responded.

"Would we ever *not* find our way to where we were supposed to go?" George continued.

"Don't make me answer that." Hermione rolled her eyes. "But please don't tell me you left your packages from the apothecary down on the shop floor. I'd rather not find them all over the place again."

"Oh, no Mr. Jigger is sending them over."

"He's a nice chap we should do something for him."

"Yes, but first Hermione has to guess who we ran into."

Hermione's eyes were tired of flicking back and forth between the twins, so she leaned back and closed them. "Well, let's see. You obviously ran into one of the apothecaries, probably Mr. Jigger as today is Saturday, but I assume that's not who you mean. Who else would you see at the apothecary? Professor Slughorn?"

"Definitely not."

"I don't think he'd fit inside the shop, actually."

"He probably has to order everything via Owl Post."

Hermione snorted. The twins were obnoxious, but they certainly had a sense of humour. And the absurd. "You may be right at that. Professor Snape, then, I assume?"

"Hey, how was it that obvious? He's not a Potions teacher anymore!"

Hermione's eyes snapped open. "What planet have you been on? No, he's not a teacher anymore, but he's still supplying Hogwarts with medical potions, and he's doing a lot of stuff for the Department of Mysteries. Though obviously I don't know exactly what. I thought you two were in contact with folks at the Ministry? That seems like something you'd have picked up on."

The twins looked at each other, then back at her. "Well, there were rumours, but we thought they were just that because no one could agree on the details," George said.

"Of course they couldn't, I doubt more than a handful of people know what he's actually supplying. But the fact that he's supplying *something* is definitely true. I've seen him in the building on a regular basis, and he's always carrying full bottles or jars in and empty ones out."

"Hmmpf," said Fred. "Learn something new every day. But you still haven't guessed what we *did*."

"Well, I assume you insulted him and he insulted you back. Or perhaps he insulted you first, and you responded in kind."

"Of course, but besides that. Come on, Hermione," George wheedled, "you have to guess."

"Did you melt something this time?"

"No, no, of course not." That was Fred.

"Nick something?"

"Who, us? Never"

"or at least not since we became such upstanding businessmen."

"Certainly," Hermione retorted. "That explains how various books and slightly Dark items keep disappearing from Harry's house."

"Oh, now, see here, that's a completely different thing. Harry's a friend, he won't mind if we borrow some things. It's not like nicking from a store."

"Interesting rationalisation, but we'll put it aside for a moment. So, what did you do? Let's see. If I look closely, there seems to be some sort of dusty, powdery residue on your cheek, George. Explode something?"

"Well, yeah, actually we did, but that's not what we meant. Actually, it was kind of the reason why we did it to Snape, though."

"You did something to *Professor Snape*? Are you out of your mind? You didn't really, did you?"

"He's plain old Mr. Snape these days," Fred reminded her. "And of course we did. He threatened to tell Mum about the explosion."

Hermione sighed. *That would do it, all right* "Professor or Mr., he's apparently still aiming terror into the hearts of both of you. Okay, why don't you tell me what you did."

"We had this great opportunity while his back was turned and he was talking to Mr. Jigger. He was already rung up, so his package was all wrapped up, right on the counter. So we sprinkled some of the Can-Touch Talc on it!"

"*You did what?*" Hermione screeched. "You must be crazy. Not only is that not for sale yet, but we haven't tested it more widely for potential allergic reactions! *And you haven't determined a reliable dosage or identified the expected onset timeframe or duration of symptoms!*"

"Well, we thought"

"that the former *Professor Snape*"

"would make a good test subject"

"because it would undoubtedly"

"test the limit of sharing pleasurable touches."

"I mean really, does he get any?"

"I'm sure he doesn't give any."

Hermione was back to feeling like she was watching a tennis match. Back and forth, back and forth, was it even possible for one of them to make an entire speech himself? Apparently not. She sighed and pushed her chair further back from her desk so that she could stand up.

She gritted her teeth before she responded. "And so what do you expect will happen now?"

The twins looked at each other and shrugged. "Who cares?" they asked in unison.

Hermione closed her eyes again briefly and stepped closer to them. "*You should care, you idiotic pea brain imbeciles.*" She pointed back and forth between them. "The man has significant influence at the Ministry right now. You do remember the Ministry, don't you? That would be the organisation that grants you research and development funds in return for first pick of your products for their Aurors?"

"Aw, but Harry wouldn't let them pull the money out." That was from Fred.

"He's still really their favourite Auror recruit," George added.

They truly couldn't see the forest for the trees. "Yes, but he's a recruit, and he wants to be treated as such. Which means he's not going around pulling strings all the time! And besides, I assure you, the Ministry might be stupid, but if *Mr. Snape* is supplying them with something that important to the Department of Mysteries, Harry's voice won't have a say in things."

"How do you know?" In unison. Again.

"Because I pay attention, gentlemen. I sit in my little office all day long and run Arithmantic equations for all the departments none of them have their own Arithmancy staff, so we're shared among them. Which means I see people from all areas. And while the Minister may want to tout Harry left and right, the rest of the staff is far past that and just wants him to do his job."

She picked up her cloak from the table and wrapped it around herself. It would be particularly chilly in Scotland this time of year. "And now, if you will excuse me, it sounds like I have some work to do once again to save you from yourselves. Not that I know exactly what I'm going to do about it, but I believe I'll start by talking to someone who might be able to help me figure it out."

The twins spluttered in protest. "Now see here, Hermione. The git deserves it. And it's not like it's really nasty or anything. He just won't know what hit him."

"If you think that excuses you to me, or if you think that will make a bit of difference to him, I don't think you were paying attention in class for seven no, five, you didn't do a NEWT in Potions, did you? years. Or perhaps since then your brains have leaked out of your heads! I wouldn't be surprised." She pushed past them and stomped down the stairs to the main store.

"Felicity, I'm heading out, and I'm not sure if or when I'll be back today," she mentioned to one of the floor assistants on her way to the door. "Mr. Weasley and Mr. Weasley

are upstairs if you need anything."

"Thank you, Miss Granger," Felicity replied.

Hermione stepped out into the cool London afternoon and headed for the Apparition point behind Flourish & Blotts. She was dearly hoping that Professor McGonagall could give her some advice on dealing with or placating Severus Snape.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 10

A response to the Potter Place Fall prompt challenge: #22. The Weasley twins come across Snape shopping for Potions ingredients. A commotion causes Snape to become distracted, and the twins promptly take advantage of this once-in-a-lifetime golden opportunity to slip Snape one of their "experimental" products.

Author's Notes: thanks again to out to Scabbyfish and Elfarren for beta reading!

Severus arrived back at his home on Spinner's End and made directly for the small laboratory that was on the first floor. It had been his parents' bedroom when he was a child, and was the larger of the rooms upstairs. His needs were few, and he had opted to keep his own smaller bedroom to sleep in and to instead dedicate more space to his work.

He carefully set his package down on the closest lab bench and began to unpack his purchases. He admitted he leaned towards the fanatical about order, though his ordering system might not make sense to anyone but him. Liquid ingredients including the new batch of Chinese Fireball blood went in one cabinet, dry ingredients another, and volatile ingredients were locked up in a cabinet reinforced with extra magical strength.

After putting away his purchases, he sat down at his desk to review his notes for the next potion he was going to brew. One of the deepest secrets in the Department of Mysteries was the disposal of the mortal remains of some of the Darkest wizards to walk the face of Europe. Both Voldemort's and Grindelwald's remains were locked away there, as were those of some earlier Dark wizards and some of the higher-ranking Death Eaters. They were trying to determine if there was any sort of biological trigger that enabled a person to manage such high levels of Dark magic.

The potions that Severus created some old, some reformulated, some brand new were just a small part, but they helped break down tissue and blood and allowed the Unspeakables to do further analysis. He didn't know the results and didn't want to, though from time to time he could figure it out based on what they asked for next.

It took him nearly an hour to review his notes and decide he was confident enough in his revised brewing method to begin the process. He collected the equipment he would need for his next experimental potion for the Ministry and set it on the lab table.

He was carefully setting a small flame under a copper cauldron when he realised that the warmth emanating from it felt particularly nice on his hands. *Odd*, he thought, *I don't usually notice those things*. Shaking his head, he continued to work through the initial steps to set up his work area. Before assembling his ingredients, he went to wash his hands he had no intention of contaminating anything, especially after dealing with the results of the idiot twins' explosion.

The warm water on his hands was extra soothing, so much so that he decided that perhaps he could use a little extra washing time, just to be absolutely sure the residue from their idiocy was completely gone.

It was at that moment that things clicked. The dusty powder on his package when he went to pick it up, the fact that one of them had moved it. What the devil had they done? There was no way he could start work on a potion until he knew what was on his hands. Washing them didn't seem to change things, so it must have been absorbed already.

Experimentally, he touched different non-reactive items in the room. A cold cauldron nothing. The fabric of his robes nothing. His face something. He wasn't quite sure what it was, but it was pleasant. However, that only made him angrier as he had no idea what he was looking at.

He took out a knife and scraped his hand, being sure not to draw any blood, as he had no idea what that might do. It felt like he was scraping his hand, but nothing else. He went back to the fire and felt the radiating warmth again. With a slicing gesture of his wand, he extinguished the flame and headed for the door.

Despite his comments, he hadn't really been serious about the detention scenario. Until now. Those two needed a lesson, and he was going to provide it. But first, he had to figure out how to get rid of whatever it was that was on his hands. And that meant determining what was on his hands to begin with. Given that he truly didn't recognise the symptoms he was having and also that he just might be too close to the issue to think clearly, he thought asking someone with more experience than himself would be a good way to go about getting started.

Hermione sat across from Professor McGonagall in the Headmaster *er*, *Headmistress's*, she still stumbled over that office. Her former Transfiguration teacher still looked a bit tired, but otherwise seemed to have recovered as well as could be expected from the variety of nasty curses and hexes she had received during the Final Battle. She was as Scottish as ever, though, with her tartan-trimmed hat that matched her emerald green robes.

They had been chatting over mundane Hogwarts gossip for a while now. The pot of tea and plate of chocolate biscuits between them had diminished significantly over the last hour, but Hermione still hadn't worked up to the point of her visit.

Apparently Professor McGonagall realised this. "Now, Hermione, I'm rather sure you didn't trudge through the mud from Hogsmeade just to listen to me ramble about the current Gryffindor-Slytherin rivalries. And while it was a distinctly pleasant surprise to see you at my door, it was nevertheless a surprise, so I suspect you have something you wish to ask me," she concluded.

Transparency must still be a hallmark of my style Hermione thought.

"I wish I had come just to chat, but you're correct, I need some advice." She frowned and looked into her cup as if the tea leaves were the answer to her problems. *Hardly*. "It's about Fred and George, Professor."

"Hermione, I've told you to please call me Minerva. And what, pray tell, have the twins done this time?"

"I'm trying, Minerva. It's just difficult to break seven years of habit."

"Very true. I suppose it's easier from my side. Continue."

"The twins were at the apothecary in Diagon Alley today. To make a long story short, they managed to dust Professor Snape or his package, at least with a new product that hasn't yet been released." She went on to describe the Can-Touch Talc. "But they haven't widely tested for allergies, nor have they figured out average durations or anything. I'm sure they don't even know how much they dusted him with!"

Minerva pinched the bridge of her nose before answering. "Why is it that there are some students who seem to need to be parented their entire lives?" she muttered.

"I hope that was a rhetorical question," Hermione responded, "because I certainly don't have an answer for you."

"Of course it was a rhetorical question. Though sometimes it seems everything I ask around here is rhetorical, as usually no one knows the answers for me. Now, what to do about Severus and this what was it called?"

"Can-Touch Talc. Did I mention it's a derivative of cantharis?"

As Hermione was speaking, the door to the Headmistress's office swung open. Given how her day had gone, she was completely unsurprised to see the Potions master in question standing there. He looked as menacing and livid as he ever had as a Hogwarts teacher. Even the clothes hadn't changed.

"Well, well," he sneered. "I was just coming to let you know, Minerva, that I was here and was planning to talk to Professor Slughorn. But if this discussion is about cantharis, perhaps I don't need to go any further, hmm, Miss Granger?"

Hermione was relieved to know that he was apparently okay and that he was already aware that something was going on. But for once she wished he wasn't quite as knowledgeable as he was she suspected that most people, even Potions masters, wouldn't have recognised the active ingredient. He had to be widely read or no, she wouldn't go there. If it was from personal experience, she really didn't want to know about it.

"Yes, well, um, you see, Professor"

"I'm no longer a member of the Hogwarts staff, Miss Granger," he interrupted.

"You see, *Mr. Snape*, the twins got a little carried away"

"No doubt," he interrupted again, looking down at her. "Since apparently this would take the rest of the afternoon for you to explain, why don't I begin by recapping what I know?"

"Tweedledum and Tweedledumber were as irritated to see me at the apothecary as I was to see them. I warned them off combining two items that I knew they knew would cause an explosion. They deliberately combined the aforementioned items and made a mess that Mr. Jigger was forced to clean up. I threatened them with detention and telling Molly Weasley. In the process of moving my package, they dusted it with something that apparently contains the toxin cantharis. The preparation somehow amplifies pleasurable sensations to the skin without amplifying unpleasant ones."

"Does that sum up the situation as you currently see it, Miss Granger?"

Annoyed that he was looking so superior and smug, Hermione stood up and crossed her arms. "I suppose it does, Mr. Snape. Except I hadn't heard about the threat of detention, only the threat of telling Mrs. Weasley."

Professor McGonagall *no, Minerva, she had to remember* had been silent from the time her former colleague had arrived. "I'm afraid I'm not as up on my potions ingredients as the two of you obviously are. Would one of you care to explain to me what cantharis is?" she asked from behind her desk.

"Do I have to?" Hermione muttered.

"Perpetual parenting, and I don't want to have to do so with you," was Minerva's reply.

"Right. Cantharis, or more specifically the compound cantharidin, is extracted from dried Spanish flies and other blister beetles. In its natural form, it has magical nerve-sensitising and aphrodisiac properties for wizards and witches, and it has mundane nerve-sensitising and potentially irritant properties for Muggles. It is also as toxic as strychnine. It can be used in herbicide preparations. Diluted, it is used by Muggles as a third-tier treatment for wart removal and can also be used to remove tattoos. Victorians also used it in hair-preparation formulas, though that was later proven to be useless."

"A textbook answer, Miss Granger, but adequate."

Minerva apparently didn't agree. "As toxic as strychnine? What on earth are those two doing with it?"

Hermione sighed. This was not going well. "I said it was toxic in its natural state. The magical preparation methods used on it mitigate its toxic properties and, in this case, ensure that the only nerve-sensitizing effects are pleasurable ones." She looked up at Professor Mr. *oh, forget it, he would always be Professor Snape in her mind* "It's called Can-Touch Talc, sir."

Professor Snape flinched a bit and tucked his hands firmly across his chest. "I see. No, actually, I don't think I do see. I wasn't aware that the Mssrs. Weasley were branching into adult-only products."

It was Hermione's turn to flinch. "Well, that wasn't the original intention, sir. They were aiming for something that would simply cause a tingling sensation for a short time, a more pleasant version of hitting your funny bone, more or less, used for practical jokes. I think they were going to call it Prickle Powder. But it ended up tingling only on initial contact, then after absorption being only noticeable when there is a pleasurable sensation on the skin, so unless you specifically do something, you can't feel it at all."

"In other words, they took what is normally an ingested aphrodisiac and made a sex-enhancing contact powder."

"Well, it certainly can be used in that capacity. However, there are more general uses for it. For example, it can be added to massage oil to increase the relaxation sensations that a massage induces in the recipient while simultaneously enhancing the pleasurable touch sensations for the masseuse. Which makes both parties happier."

He snorted. "Just precisely how long does this effect last, Miss Granger? And for how long is it traceable on the skin? It's rather difficult to brew potions if I might contaminate the ingredients."

That was the question she didn't want to answer.

"Well, you see, sir, they haven't actually put the product on the market yet, so, well"

"Miss Granger, do you mean to tell me that those two idiots dosed me with something they *haven't finished researching yet?*"

Hermione gulped. "Um. Yes. Sir?"

"Slughorn's office. *Now*. Minerva, if you'll excuse us?" He gritted his teeth as he swung around, indicating that Hermione should precede him through the door. *Was he*

always a gentleman, just not to the students? she wondered. She gave Minerva a pained smile and murmured her farewells.

Unfortunately, Professor Slughorn had no useful advice to give, either. While both he and Professor Snape were apparently aware of the basic properties and likely uses of cantharis, neither had ever had any reason to experiment with it.

"Well, Severus, I suppose it'll wear off when it does, probably no more than a few hours, if that, wouldn't you say, Miss Granger? Did you know, Severus, that Miss Granger is amazingly talented for a Muggle-born? So rare to find someone like her. She would have given Lily Evans a run for her money."

An insult and a compliment all in one only a Slytherin could do that so well. Hermione rather thought that Professor Slughorn would out-Slytherin Professor Snape in a head-to-head comparison. Snape was nasty, cruel, and had always favoured his own house. Or at least didn't disfavour them the way he did the other houses. To be fair, she couldn't actually remember him ever granting points to anyone. But Slughorn was amiable and appeared laid-back, equally generous with points to all houses, yet had amassed the greatest web of favours she had ever encountered. What was more ambitious than that? And from her very first day at Hogwarts, the Sorting Hat had made it clear that ambition was the most identifiable, uniting trait of Slytherin House.

Professor Slughorn rambled on for a bit longer before she and Professor Snape were able to indicate that they needed to take their leave.

"Oh, do come back and visit again, Miss Granger. I've recently spoken with several of your schoolmates weren't Blaise Zabini and Cormac McLaggen in or around your year? In fact, if I recall correctly, didn't you and Cormac date? I take it that didn't work out? Much too bad, he's doing so well for himself, a shame you couldn't have made a go of it together. And Severus, don't be a stranger. You're still one of the brightest students I've ever had the pleasure to teach, and it's so rewarding that you chose my field to go into!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, yes, and a good day to you," Professor Snape said quickly, once again ushering Hermione out in front of him to the hall.

Once the door was shut, she slumped against the wall and rubbed her temples. "Doesn't he ever shut up?" she asked.

"Rarely," Professor Snape replied. He had stopped next to her and was standing in the middle of the hall, looking rather pensive.

"Oh! I'm sorry, Professor. I wouldn't usually make a comment like that, especially not in front of someone's colleague, or mentor or whatever you'd call him, but I've the beginnings of a headache, and I'm afraid it overruled my judgment."

"How many times, Miss Granger? I'm no longer a teacher."

She shrugged. "I know, sir, but Mr. Snape just doesn't sound right to me. You might not be a teacher now, but you were my teacher for six years, and it just seems respectful."

"Yet you can call Professor McGonagall by her given name."

"She asked me to, and so I'm trying. I don't manage it all the time, though."

He looked at her with a thoughtful expression. "I see. Well, if Mr. Snape is such an obstacle for you, I suppose you may address me as Severus. I would prefer not to be addressed as Professor. As I hope you understand, I need to put that part of my life behind me."

Hermione was dumbfounded. If there was one thing she was not expecting him to do, it was to invite her to use his first name. Her shock must have been apparent.

"Don't gape at me, Miss Granger. You are an adult now, are you not? Do act like one, even if your colleagues are incapable. I expected better of you."

"Yes, sir, er, Severus. And please do call me Hermione."

"Of course, Hermione," he responded.

The way he emphasised her name threw her momentarily back to the speech he had given at the very beginning of their first year. Though she hadn't recognised it as such at the time, being only eleven, in retrospect that speech was one of the most sensual things she had ever heard. And his voice was caressing the syllables in her name in the exact same way. She suppressed a shiver. *Even if he said to call him Severus, he's still the same person* she reminded herself. As she could tell by looking at him, actually.

"It might be easier to remember not to call you Professor if you perhaps varied your outfit a bit, you know."

He glanced down at his attire. "I hardly see how it's any business of yours, but for your information, Slughorn aside, most Potions teachers and masters stick to heavy dark or black clothing because many of the most common ingredients stain."

Oops. "Oh. Yes, well, anyway, Severus, I do apologise for complaining about Professor Slughorn to you. As I said, I have the beginnings of a headache, but that is no excuse."

"You only spoke the truth, Hermione. I assure you, I am not offended. In fact, the only time I've ever seen him to be at a loss for words was one time when Lily and I managed to switch one of his sample potions on him without him realising it. The one we gave him made him absolutely silent for a blissful fifteen minutes."

"You and *Lily Potter* did that? Did he find out?"

"*Lily Evans*, Miss Granger Hermione. This was before she had even started dating Potter " it sound like he was choking on the name as he turned and took a few steps down the hall, " and I assume Slughorn knew who did it, even though we were never punished. There were very few students in the class who were capable of brewing the silencing potion or pulling off the switch. Most likely he was impressed with our ingenuity. That is his typical *modus operandi*, after all. He was no different when I was a student." He concluded his words by turning back to face her once more.

"I see." And Hermione rather thought she did see, at that. Apparently Harry's mum and Professor Snape Severus were friends at one point. She assumed it was before the incident that Harry had seen in the Pensieve during Occlumency lessons in their fifth year. Probably best not to mention that she knew about that, however.

Still . . . "How did a Slytherin and a Gryffindor manage to be friends, or at least temporary comrades-in-arms?" At his glower, she hastened to continue. "Not that I don't think they could be under the right circumstances, but in our year, I suppose everything was overshadowed by Harry. And he and Draco made immediate enemies of each other in first year, and Draco was essentially the top of the pecking order in Slytherin in our year, so of course no one would dare cross the line. And I've just answered my own question, haven't I? In our year everything was always different because of Harry," she concluded.

"Quite. Potter, inept as he may have been at many things, though he apparently did quite well by copying my own work, was such a sensation that your years at Hogwarts were some of the most abnormal ones in the last several decades. I suspect that within the last century or so, only Tom Riddle's time here might have been stranger." He started down the hall towards the staircases. "Come," he commanded.

She immediately fell into step slightly behind him. He may have wanted to put his teaching days behind him, but his people-control skills were apparently still fully intact.

She followed him up out of the dungeons and down to the library. Madam Pince was nowhere to be seen, but Severus headed straight for the Restricted Section. Normally she loved the quiet of an empty library, but at the moment the slightly musty smell of the older tomes in this section just served to exacerbate her headache.

"We'll look for books together, but you'll need to handle them, as I don't want to risk contaminating them," he said brusquely as he turned to scan the first row of titles.

"You wouldn't happen to have any headache potion on you, would you?" she asked him.

He turned to her and peered into her face. "You're pale. Sit down, Hermione," he said, pointing to the table and chairs in the middle of the stacks. He followed her as she crossed over and sat down without complaint.

"I'm sorry that I don't have any headache potion with me," he said quietly, "but I do know another remedy, and I might actually have to thank the Weasley twins if the cantharis amplifies the effect for you."

"What is it?" Hermione asked warily as she dropped her head onto her arms on the table.

"A head massage," came the reply as he stepped up behind her.

She shot up and spun around. He couldn't have said what she thought he did. "A *head massage*? Did I just hear you offer to give me a head massage?"

Obviously, he was out of his mind. Using given names had obviously prompted his brain to associate her as someone he might desire friendship with, and had lowered his guard to the point where he'd say something as idiotic as what he had just said.

Severus suspected his brain was subconsciously praising the narration that led her to understand how Potter had affected her entire career at Hogwarts in such a way that it coloured her view of even inter-house relations. He had always known, despite his insulting, nasty teaching style particularly against Gryffindors that she was intelligent and logical. She had proven that in her very first year by solving his obstacle to the Philosopher's Stone. But rarely had he seen her work through a problem verbally like she had the one about Lily.

Likely as a student she would never have been comfortable doing so in front of him, but he admired her ability and recognised that she would be someone he could intellectually converse with. Hence, his brain promptly slotted her as "potential friend" and therefore deserving of had he really suggested a head massage? That was going beyond friendship. He really shouldn't go there, but she looked so miserable....

As the silence between them grew, she began to fidget, then turned and put her head back down on the table. "Obviously, I was hearing things," she muttered. And then, louder, "Just give me a few minutes, please."

That spurred him into action. He stepped up just behind her chair and had started to reach for her when he paused. He looked down at his hands and wondered if the cantharis powder had even started to wear off. Either way, this would be interesting. He wasn't sure for which of them it would be more so.

Taking a deep breath, he leaned over and placed his fingers on her temples, straightening her head so that her forehead was touching her hands on the table. She started, but held her body still and let him guide her head into place.

He knew it was a bad idea before he started, but as soon as he spread his hands on the sides of her head, he realised it was outright stupid. The tantalising sensation of gentle human contact, even if he was the one providing it, was increased at least tenfold in his hands. It made him want to do this all day, and that thought alone was enough to snap him back to blocking out the feeling.

He circled his fingers around her temples in as clinical a way as he could manage.

Hermione sighed.

Perhaps if he minimised the skin contact. He eased away and just used his fingertips. That was a little better and allowed him to press in a little deeper, which would hopefully rid her of the headache faster, and allow him to be done all the sooner.

He was nothing if not methodical and wouldn't leave a job half-done.

Hermione sighed again and added a moan.

Severus jumped back. Perhaps he could leave a job half-done after all.

"Oh, that definitely helped my headache," she murmured as she sat up again. "Though to be fair, I don't think it produced exaggerated sensations; I think it was just the pressure from your fingertips. So I believe we can tentatively conclude that the powdered form, once absorbed into a person's skin, does not transfer to someone he or she touches. That is, assuming it was still affecting you."

The scientific analysis put Severus back on an even keel, and he dropped his hands to his sides. "Quite," he agreed as he stepped back from her chair. "On both counts. That is, I could still feel a distinct difference, an enhancement you might say, and given such, I agree with your conclusion."

Hermione pushed her chair back and stood up. "Shall we return to the original reason for venturing into the library on a Saturday evening? I assume we were looking for books that discussed preparations of cantharis."

"Correct," he responded. "You take that stack over on the right, and I'll start here on the left." He walked to the stack he had indicated for himself and left her to begin on her own.

He had worked through about two rows of books still touching any, however when the door to the library slammed open. Someone was going to lose points immediately no wait, he couldn't do that anymore. Damn.

"Hermione! We've been looking all over for you and Fred and George said they thought you might have come here," said a somewhat frantic voice that Severus had hoped to never hear again.

"If it were possible, that would be twenty points from Gryffindor, Mr. Potter," he sneered as he turned around to face the boy, young man, who was loping across the room.

"For what, sir? And what are you doing here with Hermione, anyway?"

"Ten points each for slamming a door open and raising your voice in the library. And as for what I'm doing with your friend, perhaps you should ask her. I believe I'll take my leave. Miss Granger, you will hear from me tomorrow if things don't resolve themselves. I suggest you rein in those idiots you call your colleagues. And do mention to them that they should count themselves lucky I realised there was a problem *before* I started brewing. Or else they would owe me some very expensive ingredients."

Hermione shot him a quizzical look. "Of course, *sir*. I will certainly do my best, *sir*."

Severus strode past Potter without responding any further. Irritating little pest. In the span of an hour's time, he had managed to completely forget that Miss Granger was attached, if not at the mouth or hip, then at some fundamental level with the reincarnation of his school-hood nemesis. And the hero's requisite sidekick, of course. Just like one of those American western movies. He paused his thoughts as he deliberately opened the door and shut it as quietly as he could before heading for the Entrance Hall.

Resuming his mental ramblings, on this theme of the American western movie, he was actually somewhat surprised that neither the hero nor the sidekick had ended up with the girl. If rumours were to be believed, the Weasley boy was kicking up his heels with Quidditch groupies, and Potter was practically engaged to Weasley's sister. Hermione must have managed to keep her romantic interests very, very private, since the *Daily Prophet* hadn't seemed to have tracked down of any gossip to publish.

Clever woman, he said to himself as he departed from the castle.

Hermione watched Severus leave the library before shifting her gaze to Harry. "What's so urgent that you had to track me down here?" she asked.

"It's Ron. He's okay, but he took a nasty fall during a training exercise. We were supposed to be Apparating silently from the ground to the roof of a storage shed we were using for training, and, well, he missed."

"Oh, no. Where is he now? St. Mungo's? How high was the roof?"

"Yes, of course, he's at St. Mungo's, and it was less than eight feet off the ground. He's hurt, broke a few bones, but he'll be fine by morning. He's asking for both of us, however, which is why I've been trying to track you down."

Ron was indeed feeling better in the morning. Hermione and Harry had gone their separate ways after visiting him, Harry to number twelve, Grimmauld Place, and Hermione to her flat off Diagon Alley. However, by unspoken agreement, they met back at Ron's room the following morning directly after breakfast.

Unfortunately for her, Ron had apparently had a flash of insight during his recuperation, and had realised that groupies were not likely to follow him into St. Mungo's and stick with him if he ever had any sort of long rehabilitation. He was currently trying to talk Hermione back into dating him.

"But, Hermione, I thought you thought I wasn't ready to settle down? You were right. But this made me think more about it, and I want to try."

"That was one of the reasons I gave you, Ron, but you do recall there were others?" Her headache from the day before was coming back en force, and it wasn't even nine yet.

"Well, sure, but you didn't really mean them, did you? I mean, I know you're always going to be more intellectual than I am, and I know we fight all the time, but that doesn't mean we don't get along, does it?"

She glanced away and noticed that Harry seemed to be trying to blend in with the woodwork next to the door. No help from that quarter, apparently. She sighed and gave thanks that the other bed in the room wasn't occupied, as apparently this was going to get rather personal. She turned back to the bed and perched herself at the foot of it.

"Ron, your family is fun-loving, boisterous, and, well, loud. And everyone fights now and then and it's all fine. But I didn't grow up like that, and I'm not used to it. And it's not that I'm more intellectual it's just that we rarely have anything in common to talk about other than Harry. We don't enjoy the same things. I love books and research and puzzles, and you love Quidditch and chess and active stuff like Auror training."

"Well, sure, but what does that have to do with being together?"

Hermione dropped her head into her hands. This was exactly why it wouldn't work out with Ron. He was a terrific guy and would make some woman a wonderful husband, but not her. His one-track mind would just not see her point.

"Ron, please. I was glad we tried being together as a couple, because I think that was the only way I knew it wouldn't work. Yes, there's an attraction between us. Yes, it might always be there a bit, regardless of who we choose to date, but no, the relationship isn't right for us. Or at least me."

She stood up and crossed to where Harry was still attempting to make himself invisible without the aid of his invisibility cloak. Turning back, she said, "I'm sorry, Ron. And I think I'd better go now." Hermione touched Harry's arm and gave him a look that tried to convey that it was his turn to deal with their friend, and left the room.

As she walked down the hall, she heard Ron exclaim, "She doesn't really mean it, does she? I really thought we'd be together eventually, once I was ready."

Harry's voice was rather subdued when he replied. "I think she probably does mean it, Ron. You might want to consider moving on."

"No way, Harry. She'll come around."

Hermione shook her head as she continued out of the hospital. He'd better come around soon, or else this was going to be a rather awkward friendship for a while. Probably more awkward than when they had ended their romantic relationship to begin with it was mutual at the time, and everything had felt more natural once they had slipped back to friendship. They were attracted to each other, yes, but it had always felt a bit uncomfortable. Not like being attracted to a brother or anything, but maybe to a cousin. Yes, people used to marry their cousins in the Muggle world, but not any longer.

She wouldn't be surprised if it was common to marry cousins in the Malfoys' world, though. And perhaps it wasn't that uncommon to the Weasleys, either they were pure-blood, after all, no matter that they didn't have the airs and attitude of many other pure-blood families.

She took the lift back to street level and exited through the department store window. It gave her a bit of an idea it was time for some good old-fashioned retail therapy. She quickly checked her outfit to make sure it was Muggle-safe before she set out.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 10

A response to the Potter_Place Fall prompt challenge: #22. The Weasley twins come across Snape shopping for Potions ingredients. A commotion causes Snape to become distracted, and the twins promptly take advantage of this once-in-a-lifetime golden opportunity to slip Snape one of their "experimental" products.

Author's Notes: I don't pretend to be British, but I do try not to make this story sound too American. Scabbyfish deserves major kudos on this chapter for all the comments she made to help me at least tone down my Americanisms!

Severus woke with a feeling of trepidation the morning after the cantharis powder incident. He desperately hoped that the effects had worn off. The previous evening, he had put off his brewing for fear of contamination the potions he was attempting to create for the Department of Mysteries simply used too many expensive, difficult-to-replace ingredients for him to risk having a batch go to waste.

He had relaxed and caught up on reading some journals instead and had found some more detailed information about cantharis in his own personal library. He hadn't realised that it was covered in quite that much detail in the home medical remedies book.

He had to admit, to himself at least, that the thought had occurred to him that it was a shame that the heightened sensitivity wouldn't transfer from his hands to other areas he touched. He thought he could have won any battle with his conscience about the source of the sensations and relaxed in a completely different fashion instead.

Going about his morning ablutions, Severus gingerly turned on the hot water in the shower and stuck his hands under it. Nothing. It seemed that the preparation the Weasley twins had used kept the symptoms to a typical several-hour duration.

Thank Merlin for small miracles.

But he was still doubly determined to give them *adertention* they'd never forget. He had a hunch that the best way to do that would be to revisit some memories from his childhood that he'd rather leave forgotten and all the tricks that Muggle children play on the odd one out.

Severus had nearly always been the odd one out. Either because of the typical childhood bursts of magic that had to be explained away by his overly-anxious mother, or because he was so bookish that he preferred reading to football, or simply because he had inherited the least attractive physical features from each of his parents. He had all the good genes when it came to stuff you couldn't see, but all the bad ones when it came to the things you could. So it was time to draw on the experiences of being the victim.

It was time to head to Muggle London and to some of the non-magical joke shops. He'd have to figure out where they were first, though.

Hermione meandered through Muggle London with no particular aim in mind. She wanted to find something for Ginny's birthday, perhaps, or if she was very ambitious, for Minerva's. She didn't know what she might get for either, but gifts were as good as anything else to look for when she just needed to get out and about to escape Ron and Harry. Well, at least Ron, but it tended to have the side effect of avoiding Harry as well.

She was looking in the window of a joke shop, debating whether or not Ginny would appreciate some Muggle "magic" tricks, when she heard a familiar voice behind her.

"Doing a little research for that sorry excuse for a shop, Miss Granger?" Severus sounded very close.

Turning to face him, Hermione had to tip her head back so that she could meet his eyes, as he was indeed just a few feet away, wearing a conservatively-cut Muggle suit, no less. Black, of course. "I thought you had agreed to call me Hermione, *Severus*."

He cocked a brow at her but didn't take the bait.

She snorted in disgust. "No, I am not doing *research* for the shop. And on that note, I trust that the powder has worn off by now? In all of the twins' personal experiments, it wore off long before the twenty-four hour mark."

"Yes, it has worn off, but don't think I've forgotten that it happened, or that you proved unable to help me find the information I needed yesterday. Because, of course, the Chosen One called," he sneered.

"Suit yourself," she responded, then quickly changed the subject back to less inflammatory topics. "I was actually wondering if Ginny would like some Muggle magic tricks for her birthday next week. For some reason, I'm still stumped as to what to get for her this year. I briefly considered them for Minerva, but decided rather quickly that that just wouldn't do."

He stared down at her with a look of confusion on his face, something she had never seen there before. "Minerva's birthday? We are talking about Minerva McGonagall, aren't we? Her birthday is two months away!"

Hermione stifled a grin. It seemed that the dour Potions master from her schooldays had hidden a significant part of his personality from the students. The side of him that she had previously seen would never remember a woman's birthday or a man's, for that matter. "Yes, well, it's never too early to shop, is it? Percy's birthday is sooner, of course, but he and I have never exchanged more than cards."

Severus didn't seem to know what to say. "Hermione," he began, then paused and shook his head. "Do you mean to tell me that you shop for birthdays months in advance?"

"I don't always expect to find things that early, but I start thinking about it that early, yes. Otherwise you get stuck with a few days left and no ideas. Like I've found myself with regards to Ginny and I am extremely displeased about it. If you think about gifts early, then generally speaking, chances are you'll find some inspiration before you actually need to buy the gift."

"I'll bet you have all your Christmas shopping done by the end of November, as well," he muttered.

"Oh, definitely not," Hermione replied cheerfully, "but I usually have a fair start by then, and have a good idea of what I want to get everyone."

He shook his head again. "Well, it looks like this shop doesn't open up for another hour on Sundays. I suppose I'll come back later. Knowing my luck, you'll be here when I do." He turned in the direction of the nearest Apparation point.

On impulse, she placed a hand on his arm. He checked his step, but didn't turn back to face her.

She pushed the words out quickly. "There's a good Muggle café just a little way from here. I've been walking around window shopping for a couple of hours now, and I could use a break and a cup of tea. Would you join me?"

Severus slowly turned back to face her. "Surely you'd rather go do something like visit your friends until the shop opens?"

"Hardly," she snorted. "I'm sure you don't want the details of my personal life, but I'll just say that at the moment I need to stay away from Ron, and that generally means giving the entire Weasley clan a pass as well. And Harry, too, of course. Though obviously I won't be able to completely avoid the twins."

"Do you mean to tell me that the Dream Team isn't inseparable anymore?" he asked acerbically.

"I told you," she repeated, "that I don't think you want the details of my personal life. And I assure you that I have no desire to share them, either but if you must know, we've been growing a bit more distant from each other ever since I decided to move into my own flat. I love them dearly, but I have no desire to live with either of them, especially at Harry's house."

"I see," he replied.

"So, now that you've heard more than you undoubtedly care to about my life, could I interest you in that cup of tea or coffee? No personal conversation, if you please. I was just looking for a discussion about something like the latest *Ars Alchemica*."

She held his eyes while she waited for him to decide. Even though it was a Sunday morning in London, the silence between them was punctuated by car horns.

"Very well. I certainly could find something more productive to do, but you'll probably nag at me if I don't say yes, so I might as well get it over with," he brusquely agreed.

"Don't do me any favours," Hermione muttered. "If you're interested, the shop is just on the next corner." She pointed towards a building in the opposite direction to the Apparation point, then set off for it without looking back to see if he was following.

A few feet down the street she heard him fall into step next to her.

"You don't have robes to swing about today."

"Must you always state the obvious?" he retorted. He lowered his voice as he continued. "Your powers of observation are astonishing. If this is how you got by at Hogwarts, I have no idea how you did so well in your other classes."

"I was only making conversation. You don't have to insult me about it. I was just surprised; none of us have ever seen you in Muggle clothes."

"I know that you and your friends are aware that I grew up with a Muggle father. Regardless of what else you may have heard about my childhood, I am comfortable with Muggle clothing and customs. I am perfectly capable of blending in."

Hermione couldn't help but roll her eyes at that. "Professor Snape Severus if there is one thing that I don't think you're capable of, it's blending in."

"How do you think I was a successful spy for so many years, then?"

"Not by blending in. Not exactly, anyway. You were very good at appearing to align yourself in the right way, but you always stood out."

"Lucius Malfoy stood out."

"Yes, he did," Hermione agreed, "but in a completely different way. He stood out as the person who ever-so-politely shoved his way to the front of the line. You stood out because you didn't appear to care, yet everyone knew you could get to the front of the line faster than anyone else if you wanted to."

Hermione wasn't sure whether she wanted to continue this somewhat uncomfortable and awkward line of conversation, so she was glad to notice that they had arrived in front of the café. She was reaching for the door when Severus leaned past her and opened it first, gesturing for her to enter.

"Must be nice to have long arms," she said.

"Indeed."

As they ordered and paid for their drinks, Hermione once again goggled at Severus's familiarity with Muggle customs. He didn't hesitate at all in ordering an espresso, nor did he show any signs of confusion with Muggle money as he paid.

They found a spot near the window and sat down to enjoy their drinks. Hermione idly stirred her tea long after she had added milk and sweetener. (She'd prefer the taste of sugar, but it was one of those side effects of growing up with dentists for parents: she couldn't quite justify the potential problems that sugar could cause the teeth.) The monotony of the task had her thinking about Ron and what to do about him. She couldn't quite bring herself to just let it go.

"Are you ever going to drink your tea, Miss Granger Hermione or do you plan to stir it into a vortex?"

His comment brought her back down to earth, at least temporarily. "My apologies, sir; I invited you here, and now I'm being rude and ignoring you. I assume you've read the latest issue of *Ars Alchemica*? I was wondering about one of the articles. . ."

They both lapsed into polite professional talk for quite some time. Hermione was enjoying the rare privilege of talking with someone who appreciated the same subjects that she did. She noticed that there were times when she didn't understand the details of what Severus was talking about, but thankfully he didn't talk down to her or make her feel inferior for it. On the other hand, she could discuss anything in her entire Potions knowledge, and he was able to address her questions. She realised that despite his acidic response to her invitation, he was treating her as an adult. Perhaps not an equal, but an adult nonetheless. How odd. Refreshing, but odd. Even the twins tended to still treat her as an annoying little sister or simply a walking encyclopaedia, rather than as a true business partner.

And on the subject of the twins it was almost opening time. "Severus, why are you going to a Muggle joke shop, anyway?"

He instantly clammed up. It was rather amazing to see how quickly his expression changed. It had been, if not relaxed, then at least not sneering or dismissive. But as soon as she asked that question, his expression reverted to his typical derisive sneer, complete with ice-cold eyes. It was disconcerting Dr. Jekyll had just turned into Mr. Hyde, albeit in a less extreme fashion.

She eyed the transformation warily. "I take it that was a bad question to ask."

"I don't believe my personal shopping is any of your business."

"I would tend to agree. But if you're so against telling me, it does make me wonder if it's something that I'm going to be unhappy to see again in the future."

Severus looked at her evenly, his expression remaining unchanged even as he pushed aside his empty cup and saucer.

Hermione returned his gaze. "I believe I would hate to play poker with you."

"Quite probably," he agreed.

"Does this have anything to do with a threat of detention that you made to a certain pair of redheads? The threat that they neglected to mention to me?"

"If I said no, you undoubtedly would not believe me. If I said yes, you would likely press me for more information, which I would be unwilling to provide."

"Perhaps. Though I wouldn't want to know the details, including anything you might buy to incorporate into it and that I might later recognise. But perhaps you could avoid me getting caught in the crossfire, so to speak?"

His expression shifted into a twisted thoughtful look very Professor Snape as he stood up and automatically moved to pull her chair back for her.

"I could. Or I could take the opportunity to allow you to make up the detentions you never served as a student. Setting fire to a teacher? Stealing from my private stores? Do any of these sound familiar to you?" As he ended his mini-diatribes, his face lost its thoughtful expression and returned to its customary sneer again.

So much for being treated like an adult. Hermione was rarely tempted to insult her teachers behind their back, much less to their face. This was rapidly approaching one of the few times that she was. She rose from her chair and stood in front of him, unwilling to yield.

"I was *twelve* and *thirteen* at those times, and you had only ever given evidence that you hated my brains, hated my friends, and hated me. While I never disrespected you, I was a child, and didn't always see beyond my actions. If you, as the adult in the situation, have held a grudge for this long, then I think you might reconsider who deserves detention," she concluded with as much dignity as she could muster.

He crossed his arms, took a step back, and declared, "A Slytherin would have thought things through and avoided detection. You were sloppy and didn't cover your tracks properly. Not to mention irresponsible if your brain is as logical as you purport it to be, you should have known how risky it was to let Potter throw something in a brewing potion to cause a diversion, even if it was just a Swelling Solution."

"I hardly think that *any* student would have got away with stealing from your stores, and certainly not at that age. But if you'd like to think otherwise. . ." She ignored the comment about her intelligence as she put her rubbish in the nearest bin. "Good day."

"Good riddance," she heard him mutter.

Hermione shook her head and left the café, heading away from the magic shop and Apparation point, instead choosing to walk back to Diagon Alley. Birthday shopping could easily wait for another day. She fumed all the way back to her flat, irritated beyond measure at the vagaries of Professor Snape.

He'd been polite, and even slightly amusing, when discussing birthdays. Then cynical about spending an hour in her company, though he decided to anyway. Pleasant and almost congenial as they discussed the latest developments in the Potions field. Then flat-out rude and closed off when she asked something that might possibly relate to her friends. If he had just been pleasant about it, she would have laughed it off and apologised for being so nosy. But no, he had to go and make a mountain out of a molehill.

Come to think of it, he had left abruptly when Harry had arrived the previous night, too. It was almost as if he would rather talk to her only when she was disassociated from her friends and colleagues. Well, she might be frustrated with Ron at the moment, and unfortunately that meant avoiding Harry as well, but she wasn't about to cut off her friends just to find a truce with Severus. No matter how interesting his conversation could be.

Hermione realised that she was standing in front of her door with no memory of weaving her way through London and Diagon Alley to get there. She shook her head in a vague attempt to clear away her thoughts before she turned to unlock her door.

"Hermione! There you are! I've been looking for you. Again." Harry's voice reverberated down the alley, and she turned to face him.

"Hi, Harry. Didn't we run this scene yesterday?"

He laughed. "Seems so. That's what happens when I never know where you are these days."

She grinned back. "You seem happy, so I assume things are going well with Ron, at least physically if not with regards to me?"

"Definitely," he replied. His face fell a bit as he continued. "Hermione . . . are you sure you won't get back together with him?"

"Did he send you as his emissary again?" She gritted her teeth. "No, Harry, I will not get back together with Ron. I love him, but I love him the same way I love you. Which is not the way you and Ginny love each other."

He made a face. "I assume that being an emissary means being sent to talk to someone about something."

"More or less."

"I guess I'm a self-appointed emissary, then. I was just hoping it would have been nice, that's all. I suppose I was still wishing that the four of us could all be together, living near each other and raising kids together."

"Harry, you want kids. Ginny wants kids. Ron wants kids. I don't. At least, not anytime soon. Maybe I'll want one one, mind you when I'm older, but not yet. I liked the way I was raised, as an only child, with lots of attention from my parents. Ron made it clear that he hoped that we could raise an entire Quidditch team between the four of us. I'm sorry, but no, thank you."

She turned back to her door and finished unlocking it with a few whispered incantations.

"Come in, Harry. There's no point in standing out here discussing this where anyone could come by and listen."

Harry followed her inside, and they both made themselves comfortable in Hermione's small sitting room. They sat, facing each other, silent. Harry didn't seem to know what to say any more than she did.

She took a deep breath and said, "Have you and Ginny set a date yet?"

"Yes, just yesterday," he replied with relief. "More or less. We've decided on December, a holiday wedding, but we need to check the exact term dates at Hogwarts before we finalise things we want to be sure Remus and Minerva can be there."

"Oh, that sounds lovely. It's been such an unhappy time of the year, and a wedding will be just the thing to help the Weasleys find some happiness again." Arthur Weasley and Tonks had died, in a skirmish with Death Eaters, just before Christmas one year. Since then, the holiday spirit had been understandably lacking.

"That's what we were hoping. Ginny's planning to have Remus give her away. She wants you to be in the wedding party, of course."

And just like that, the tension was back.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea right now, Harry," Hermione said tentatively. "Of course I'd like to, and I'll be there that day no matter what, but I'm afraid it might be too uncomfortable for all of us for me to be so involved in the wedding."

Harry sighed. "Ginny and I will have to talk about it again. Obviously, she had initially mentioned the idea before your, er, talk with Ron this morning, and we'll need to revisit our decision." He narrowed his eyes in thought. "Ron's being kept at St. Mungo's for another night to make sure nothing goes wrong, so are you free for dinner? It might be a good time for you to come over."

"I'd be happy to," Hermione agreed.

After a delightful meal in which Dobby prepared some of Hermione's favourite dishes "Miss Hermione has not been here in weeks!" Harry retreated upstairs and left the two women to themselves.

By silent accord, Ginny and Hermione moved to the library and settled into chairs facing one another.

Ginny spoke first. "Harry hasn't told me anything beyond 'Ron and Hermione had a falling-out and maybe Hermione shouldn't be in the wedding party'. I assume there's more to it than that."

"Men are the masters of understatement." Hermione tucked her feet up underneath herself as she recounted the conversation between them at St. Mungo's that morning.

"Baboons," Ginny said decisively, leaning forward. "Would I have liked it if you and Ron had worked out? Of course I would have, I'd love to have you as a sister-in-law. But I completely understand that you and Ron want different things out of life. I would much rather keep you as a family friend than have the two of you get married and end up miserable or divorced."

"*Thank you*, Ginny. You have no idea how relieved I am to hear that not everyone thinks it's a foregone conclusion that I am destined to marry your brother just because you and Harry ended up together. Heck, even Professor Snape got all sneery-faced about how what did he say exactly? oh, yes, 'the Dream Team isn't inseparable anymore'."

Ginny looked askance at her. "When were you and Snape talking about you and Ron and Harry?"

It was on the tip of Hermione's tongue to tell Ginny it was *Professor* Snape when she remembered that it wasn't. And she realised that she had never told Harry about the incident with the Can-Touch Talc, so she decided to only mention today's run-in with him. "Long story," she finally said, "but I ran into him today in Muggle London. He was remarkably pleasant, given his normal self, and actually sat with me in a café for almost an hour, letting me ask him questions about *Ars Alchemica*."

"Arse what?" Ginny asked, wide-eyed.

"Not 'arse! *Ars Alchemica*," she enunciated carefully. "It's an academic research journal."

"Oh. I see. I think. Maybe? Why did he let you ask questions?"

"I have no idea! I invited him to join me on a whim, and Severus agreed with ill grace, I must say. But I'd have been a fool not to follow through when he said yes."

"*Severus*?" It was a half-shriek, half-squeal.

Hermione winced. She hadn't meant to let that slip. "He got upset when I called him *Professor* Snape, and I explained that it somehow seemed disrespectful to call him *Mr.* Snape. Oddly enough, he extended the invitation to call him by his given name." She didn't mention that he had done so the previous day, in a completely different conversation.

"How totally out of character," Ginny said.

"I think he's trying to put things behind him as best he can, and perhaps it's manifesting in a mellowing of his disposition? I really don't know. But he was almost pleasant for most of our conversation. Until the twins came up." *Oops, didn't mean to mention that bit. Cover-up time.* "Of course, they can be enough to make anyone cranky, so I really can't blame him for that."

Ginny laughed. "Too true. How's the shop going, anyway?"

They lapsed into safer conversation about popular items and the twins' latest romantic escapades. Hermione was careful to avoid talking about the Can-Touch Talc, however, just to be on the safe side. Quite aside from her reluctance to discuss Severus any further, she had no idea if the rest of the Weasleys or Harry, despite his more-or-less investor status knew about the apothecary "experiment" with the cantharis product. Better to let Fred and George bring it up. Hermione was rather certain that she had no interest in explaining the details again.

Eventually, however, the talk came back around to Hermione and Ron.

"Ron's being a stubborn idiot, but despite all this, I'd still like you to be in the wedding party," Ginny said, bringing the conversation full circle.

"Are you sure?" Hermione asked. "I would completely understand and wouldn't be at all offended not that I don't want to be there for you!"

Ginny shrugged. "I'll see what I can do about setting him up with someone to distract him. Can you think of any suggestions?"

"There were several very nice Hufflepuff girls in our year. Susan Bones or Hannah Abbot, maybe?"

"Good ideas," Ginny agreed, "but I think Neville is dating Hannah, so it'll have to be Susan. She's single."

"That works, then. I doubt there's anything I can do, but if you think of anything, let me know. I suspect that Ron will take some serious convincing at this point to shift his attentions. You might try the 'make-Hermione-jealous' argument if all else fails, and hopefully Susan can take it from there."

"Another good idea."

"And, as I'm assuming you know your fiancé's opinions on the matter, you might want to sort out what you're going to tell him."

Ginny laughed at the face that Hermione made. "You're just full of excellent points tonight, Hermione."

"I always am, it's just that most of the time no one listens!"

Hermione was on low-level tenterhooks whenever she was anywhere near the twins. She was rather certain that Severus hadn't put aside his plans for detention, but since she had left in the middle of an upset, she didn't know if he'd returned to the joke shop or what he might have bought so she had no way of being on the look-out for a set-up.

It was nearly a full week after The Apothecary Incident, as she had taken to calling it, when the twins finally bothered to ask her what had happened when she'd left to sort out their mess.

She was sitting at her desk in the upstairs office, reading and taking notes on some additional information about cantharis reactions in wizards, when there was a knock at the door. "Hermione?"

"Yes, come in," she replied absently, tucking her quill behind her ear.

"Good grief, you look like Ginny's friend Loony, Hermione." She wasn't sure which twin it was, and fleetingly thought that perhaps Severus's reference to Tweedledum and Tweedledumber was more accurate than she'd like to admit.

"Luna puts her wand behind her ear, not a quill . . . George?"

"Nope, Fred. Sorry. Still haven't tattooed our initials on our foreheads."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "I'm sorry I'm not reliable at figuring out which of you it is when there's only one of you, but at least I seem to be in good company, since few others can, either."

"Most people can't figure us out whether we're together or apart. How d'you do it?"

"Nope, my secret. I'm sure you didn't come up here to chat about my twin-recognising ability, anyway. What can I do for you?"

Fred grimaced and pulled out the extra chair from a slightly dusty corner of the room. "Snape. Is, um, everything okay on that front?"

"That depends on how you define 'okay'," Hermione replied. "If you mean, is he physically recovered and did he deal with it, yes. He had already noticed something was happening to his hands when I ran into him in Minerva's office."

"Good, good, so things are all sorted," Fred said with relief.

Hermione clucked her tongue. "That's not quite true, Fred. Yes, he's physically fine, but he was livid. Truly. He made me explain the entire scenario to Minerva, dragged me

to see Professor Slughorn for more information, which he didn't have, and then dragged me to the Hogwarts library to see if we could find anything."

Fred closed his eyes and winced. "Oh, dear, I'm sorry, Hermione."

"You will be, I think. I don't know about his threat to tell your mother, but I'm fairly certain he's planning revenge. That would be the bit in the name of detention."

"How do you know?"

Hermione explained about running into him the following day.

"Shit. We are royally fucked."

"Though I wouldn't have used precisely those terms, I am inclined to agree with you over the basic premise, yes."

Fred stood and paced the tiny room as well as the tiny space would allow him. "You said you had a civil conversation with him? Do you think you could find out more?"

"Hardly, or did you not listen to the bit about his reaction to my questions about it? And how did you get stuck talking to me about this, anyway or rather, how did George get out of it?"

"We flipped a coin for it. I lost."

"Obviously. Are we almost done? I've been reading here for several hours and before that had already put in a full day at the Ministry. I'd like to get home and get some sleep."

"Oh, right. And I have to get back to the Pygmy Puffs shortly this breeding thing is an absolute pain, but they sell incredibly well . . . so you're saying we should be on the look-out for something from a Muggle joke shop, because that's where he was looking for supplies for this so-called detention?"

"I have to assume so, though I certainly could be mistaken. I have no way of knowing. He seems to have been trained early and thoroughly to control his expressions. As I told him, I'd hate to play poker against him."

"I think we all would." Fred frowned as he shoved the extra chair back into the corner. "Thanks for what you could tell me, anyway. We appreciate it. And we'll be on the look-out for Muggle joke shop goods," he said with a smirk.

"Fred, what"

But he was already out the door. Hermione rested her head back against the chair and decided she didn't want to know what the smirk was about after all. It could only possibly make her more stressed out and anxious. And that was hardly the way to get caught up on her sleep.

Instead, she gathered her belongings, lit a fire in the small fireplace, and travelled home by Floo powder to do just that.

Severus was sitting in his office one evening in the weeks following the Can-Touch Talc fiasco. He was admiring the large collection of Muggle joke wands and other so-called magic tricks that were in front of him. The shop he had gone to had been happy to order him entire cases at a highly discounted rate. Now all he had to do was figure out an actual plan. And eventually, he would set it in motion. Eventually.

This was going to be fun, in a warped kind of way. Which was just how he preferred it.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 10

A response to the Potter_Place Fall prompt challenge: #22. The Weasley twins come across Snape shopping for Potions ingredients. A commotion causes Snape to become distracted, and the twins promptly take advantage of this once-in-a-lifetime golden opportunity to slip Snape one of their "experimental" products.

Author's Notes: thanks again to out to Scabbyfish for beta reading and minimizing my symptoms of the look-it's-an-American-writer-pretending-to-be-British syndrome. Anything that still sounds US-centric is likely due to my belief in compromising.

Weeks later, Hermione was still waiting for the other shoe to drop.

She moved through her days at the Ministry on auto-pilot, creating and solving all manner of Arithmantic equations for the Aurors, the Wizengamot, and other departments that needed assistance. She kept her ear to the ground for any rumours about Severus. And she retreated to the office above the shop every night to double-check and triple-check the information they'd worked out about the Can-Touch Talc.

She had convinced the twins that until they were seriously ready to create an adults-only section, they would be better off keeping their new product for personal use only, if they wanted to use it. They were unhappy about it, but they had agreed.

Or so Hermione thought.

She finished up at her Ministry office early one Friday afternoon and decided to head to the shop to kill some time before going home to relax in a bubble bath with a glass of wine and a good book.

The door chimes jangled as she stepped inside, and she glanced towards the counter to see who was working.

One of the twins she thought it was George hastily shoved what looked to be a cloth sack under the counter, and announced to Lee Jordan that they'd have more Aardvark Almonds by early next week. "We sold the last of them yesterday," he said.

Lee put his hand in his pocket, attempting to look inconspicuous but failing utterly. "Of course just give me a Floo-call when you get some more in, will you? My cousin is

coming to visit my parents next weekend, and he and I don't get along much, you see."

Hermione gritted her teeth and moved to the counter to stand next to Lee. She had a nasty but strong suspicion that she had been too trusting. Lee turned to go, but didn't get far as she grabbed him by the arm.

"So, gentlemen, would you like to tell me what's in that sack beneath the till, and also in a packet in Lee's pocket? Or should I guess?"

"See here, now, Hermione," Lee spluttered, "it's just a free sample!"

"Exactly, Hermione," George Fred? continued. "I know you don't think we should give away the merchandise, but we like to reward our best customers. Keeps 'em coming back, you know."

"So if I asked Lee to empty that packet into his hand to show me, it wouldn't be a problem?"

It was definitely George. He and Lee traded glances before he replied. "Well, if you did that, it'd spill all over, and that would waste some perfectly good Peruvian Darkness Powder."

Hermione rolled her eyes and set her bag on the floor. "You don't sell that anymore, remember? The Ministry confiscated it after the night Professor Dumbledore died. That was a terrible excuse, George."

Lee cringed, but George just cocked an eyebrow. "So? It's our shop, Hermione. Yes, we appreciate your advice, but if we want to give something away, we will."

"You can make the decision, yes. But *you lied to me*." She slapped both hands down on the counter. "That's the part that's inexcusable!"

"It's hardly the first time," Lee muttered.

Hermione frowned at him. George groaned.

"When else did you lie to me?" she asked quietly.

George let out a breath. "Hermione, Fred and I spent your entire fifth year at Hogwarts lying to you before we 'did a Weasley' and escaped the Wicked Witch of the Wizengamot. We haven't lied to you since then. At least, I haven't. I suppose I can't completely speak for Fred."

"Until now."

"Oh, come off it, Hermione," he retorted, his voice getting louder. "You love the stuff yourself. You and Ron and Harry and Ginny practically had an orgy going with all the backrubs you were giving each other!"

There were gasps from behind them, and Hermione spun around to see several parents slapping their hands over their children's ears. She felt her face heat and knew she must be turning red. The parents hustled their children out of the shop, dropping items back haphazardly wherever it was convenient.

"That was just brilliant, George," she said, still facing the shop floor. "Not only did you embarrass me, but you also emptied your shop and drove away customers."

She could have sworn she heard him shrug. "They'll be back. And if not, others will."

Hermione closed her eyes and leaned back against the counter, crossing her arms over her chest. She let the sounds of George and Lee talking wash over her as she battled desperately to get her embarrassment and anger under control. Moments later, she heard footsteps fade from the counter towards the shop door and a brief tinkling of the chimes before the shop fell silent again.

A hand dropped onto her shoulder. "I'm sorry, Hermione."

"Why? Why did you have to lie to me about it?"

George turned her around so that she was facing him, and she reluctantly opened her eyes.

"We lie to everyone, Hermione. It's actually more of a wonder that we haven't lied to you about anything else since you started working here. We needed you."

"Hermione Granger, walking encyclopaedia of magic," she said irritably. "Somehow, that doesn't make me feel better, George."

"Fine. Fine! Here, take the damn stuff and get rid of it, okay? Will that make things better?" He grabbed the sack from under the counter and shoved it at her. Unfortunately, he hadn't tied it tightly when she had walked in earlier, and the abrupt movement to give it to her showered them both with a huge cloud of Can-Touch Talc.

"Shit," George muttered.

"What on earth have you done?" Hermione shrieked. "I can't believe you! Not only do you lie to me and start distributing this, but you can't take the time to put it in a proper container so that it doesn't stand a likelihood of leaking?"

"I'm sorry, Hermione! I forgot that I'd put it away without closing it."

"And that carelessness is exactly my point! You can't be careless with products like these! You have to be prepared to deal with them properly and responsibly!"

George winced.

"Forget it," she continued flatly. "You're on your own. There has to be some other way I can stretch my brain that doesn't require putting up with idiocies like this." She shook the dust off as best she could and moved towards the fireplace, then shook her head and changed directions. She didn't know what travelling by Floo would feel like against her skin, so she headed for the door instead.

Before she exited, though, Hermione felt the need to get in a parting shot. "I'd say good luck, George, but I wouldn't mean it." She let the door slam behind her as she melted into the crowd in Diagon Alley.

If this had happened during her fifth year at Hogwarts, the two of them would have been given detention until they left school. Detention. Detention . . . Hermione wondered if there was any way she could assist a certain Potions master in exchange for her own revenge.

Severus kept the boxes of Muggle magic tricks on the corner of his desk where he could admire them daily. He was biding his time. He had no interest in exacting Tweedledum and Tweedledumber's comeuppance until they had completely forgotten about it and would have no idea what was happening or why.

He, on the other hand, would not have forgotten. And since he had no intention of forgetting, he kept the trick wands and other sundries in a location where he would see them every time he sat down to work. There was only one small problem with the arrangement.

Remembering the detention he needed to arrange inevitably reminded him of Hermione. In particular, Severus didn't seem to be able to forget the feeling of touching her when he had massaged her headache away. The Can-Touch Talc Merlin knew why they gave their products such stupid names had ensured that he had derived an

inordinate amount of pleasure from the experience.

He was fiddling with one of the trick wands, collapsing it and straightening it, lost in thought, when he felt a shudder run through him. Someone a witch or wizard had crossed the perimeter of his property. Friday night was an odd night to come calling. He carefully set the trick wand back down on the edge of his desk. It looked out of place, painted white and black; nothing like a real magic wand. But he had plans for it. Tentative plans, perhaps, but plans nonetheless.

He rose and went downstairs, and stood in the sitting room, waiting. A scant minute later, the doorbell rang and he crossed to the foyer. Severus preferred not to use potentially-detectable magic to see who was on the other side, so instead he peered through the Muggle peephole that had been installed by his paranoid father.

He almost rapped his head against the door when he saw Hermione on the other side. He quickly unlocked and opened it.

"Hermione! What brings you all the way out here? I didn't realise you even knew where I lived. Do come in." He was babbling and he knew it.

She smiled, however, and didn't seem to mind. "Thank you, Severus. Of course I know where you live. I wish I could say I had learned for pleasant reasons, but the fact is, you had to recite your address when you took the stand during your trial, remember?" She followed him into the sitting room and took a place on the chair he indicated with a wave of his hand. After stepping aside to let her pass, he remained standing just inside the doorway.

A lesser wizard would have completely dropped his jaw. Severus was proud of himself for keeping what he thought hoped was a neutral expression on his face. "You don't mean to tell me you remember that kind of detail about everything?"

"No, of course not," she replied. "But it was a rather memorable day, you must admit. The few of us who were privy to the contents of Professor Dumbledore's memories were anxious and probably overly attentive."

"Anxious to see me into Azkaban?"

"Must you, Severus? It was general anxiety not knowing what was going to happen, but knowing it was going to be a circus either way."

"So you didn't want to see me into Azkaban?" He knew he was being ridiculous for dragging this out, but he didn't seem to be able to help himself. That day was burned into his brain; the sight of the Dream Team sitting together had made him want to spit fire.

Hermione looked up at him and rolled her eyes. "Severus, I didn't know you. I still don't. I wanted justice but didn't know what that would be in your case, so I tried to go in with an open mind. And by the way, I didn't come by here today to discuss old news."

He grimaced. It seemed he wasn't capable of polite conversation. "And so why did you see fit to grace me with your presence?"

"Can I help you give the twins detention?"

Severus was glad he wasn't eating or drinking anything, or else he would have choked. "Come again?" He sat down, heavily, into a chair across from her.

"You heard me. I want to help you with whatever you're planning to do to Gred and Forge," she repeated.

He looked at his former student and frowned. Something must have happened. "Who said I was actually going to give them detention? That was weeks ago. Water under the bridge."

"And I'd like to sell you some seaside property in Glasgow."

Apparently she'd learned something in six years of being his student. "And if I am how do I know this isn't a trick, and you're going to report back to them?"

She grimaced, but then a sly look came over her face. "I think it's my turn to give you a head massage, isn't it?"

He was confused at the non sequitur and had no idea why she was bringing that up. It had been uncharacteristic of him to offer the massage, true, but he had only thought of it because of the cantharis powder oh. "They didn't."

"George did. To be fair, it was an accident, but it was an accident that shouldn't have happened. And it was right on the heels of discovering that they'd lied to me about not distributing the stuff."

Severus quirked a brow. "How did you find out that they had lied?"

"I finished up early at the Ministry tonight and stopped by the shop. I caught George red-handed as he gave some to Lee Jordan."

He had to refrain from smiling at her disgust. Even coming from his post-war, less-grim self, that might scare her off completely. "And this is why I am supposed to trust that you won't go back to them with tales?"

She harrumphed and crossed her arms. "I'm not a schoolgirl to be accused of 'telling tales' anymore, Severus. And even when I was, I wouldn't have given the time of day to those two. Harry and Ron, yes, but I always drew the line at the twins."

Pondering, Severus steepled his fingers in front of himself, elbows on his knees, as he looked at her. Having her help him would invariably give him inside information that would make the revenge all the more effective, but would he be risking leaking information to Potter and his sidekick, which would inevitably then trickle back to the Toxic Twins?

He hadn't successfully spied on the Dark Lord for years without being a good judge of character, however. And it seemed to him that Hermione was sincere in her intent as long as the "detention" wasn't going to harm anyone, chances were good that she would do whatever was needed. And even if she decided to back out, she'd keep it to herself.

She was practically squirming in her seat, waiting for him to respond. It reminded Severus, not particularly comfortably, of his days in a classroom, looking at her from across his lectern and her desk. Always squirming and shooting her hand into the air. She didn't look like a student anymore, however. Particularly not in the Muggle attire she was currently wearing. The deep red jumper clung to *best not go there right now*, he thought, shifting a bit himself. *Or ever, actually.*

"Very well," Severus said.

Hermione's smile was big enough to light the room, he thought a moment later. She was apparently absolutely thrilled that he had agreed.

"Oh, thank you, Severus!" She jumped up and, much to Severus's surprise, threw herself at him in a hug. He caught her awkwardly before she landed in his lap, held her arms for a moment, and set her back on her feet. She blushed and stepped hastily away from his chair, briskly rubbing her hands together. "I'm so sorry! I just reacted I admit, I'm a rather huggy sort of person. Ron and Harry are used to it, but I know most people dislike it."

Severus couldn't remember the last time someone had "just reacted" by hugging him. If anyone ever had, that was. He wasn't sure how he felt about it, but for some reason it didn't anger him or make him cringe as he would have expected.

"No matter," he replied, "though I wouldn't expect it to happen again."

"Of course not, sir."

"Tut, tut, *Miss Granger*."

If it was possible, she blushed even redder. It was hell, he couldn't say it, could he? cute. Her face came close to matching her jumper, which was still clinging to her like she had stepped out in the rain. He closed his eyes and silently counted to ten as he stood up.

"Now," he said, looking at her again, "we could seal our bargain more appropriately, if you wish with a handshake, perhaps?"

She grinned again and immediately stuck her hand out. Severus met her halfway and clasped it with his own, perhaps squeezing a bit more personally than necessary and lingering a bit longer than he normally would have. There was a sparkle in her eye that made him think that she had noticed. The way she gently pulled her hand out of his made him sure of it oh, drat, her hands. The powder. Yes, she had definitely noticed his lapse in judgment.

He cleared his throat as he dropped his hand. He was afraid he was in uncharted territory here; he rather suspected that Hermione was attempting to befriend him. If a former student had approached him like this ten years earlier, he would have sneered at her and insulted her; he had been in no position to make any friendly overtures then. Now, though there wasn't really any reason they couldn't be friendly at least, was there? Voldemort was gone for good, and Severus was no longer terrorising students and making everyone around him fear and despise him. Not that he wanted to be friendly with all his former students, of course, but perhaps a few of the ones that could provide tolerably intelligent conversation.

Hermione was still standing in front of him, her expression back to neutral. She was waiting for him to do or say something, he realised. He started to tell her to sit back down, but what came out of his mouth was, "Would you like to go to dinner?"

That question triggered another smile from her. Severus panicked and backtracked. "That is, we should discuss our plans, and I know I haven't eaten yet this evening. If you haven't either, it would be pleasant to have our discussion over a nice meal."

He thought he saw a frown flash across her face, but her expression returned to a smile so quickly that he wasn't certain. "That would be lovely, Severus," she replied, "but given the Talc accident, I think that it's probably not a good night for me to do so. Monday, perhaps? Did you have a particular place in mind?"

He quickly ruled out pubs like the Hog's Head and the Leaky Cauldron. The Three Broomsticks would be acceptable, but . . . "Have you been to Avalon before? It's off Diagon Alley. A step up from pub food, but not a place that requires being particularly dressed up."

"I haven't, no. I've walked past it a few times, but it's not the kind of place I'd go to by myself, and generally if I'm eating with Harry or Ron or the twins, we go to some place more casual. Seven o'clock?"

"Certainly. Where do you live?"

She gave him her address and turned to go. "I'll be looking forward to it," she said as she left.

A short half-hour later, Hermione was stretched out in bed with a cup of tea and her copy of the latest Charms journal. She wasn't particularly hungry and was a tad worried about preparing a meal while her hands were sensitive to warmth, so she decided that she'd just read for a bit and then go to sleep. Hopefully the effects of the Can-Touch Talc would have worn off by the time she woke up.

Because right now she was in trouble. She could still feel the phantom echo of tingling in her hands, first from hugging Severus, then from a simple handshake. *An almost simple handshake*, she corrected herself. He had definitely held her hand a second or two longer than was strictly necessary, and it had caused her skin to heat up and her hands to feel a little too pleasant, thanks to the effects of the powder.

The first thing Hermione realised the next morning was that while the residual effects of the Can-Touch Talc had worn off overnight, the phantom feelings must have invaded her sleeping mind. Her subconscious had clearly enjoyed expanding on them. She could remember Severus's low voice murmuring to her in her dreams, arousing her without any physical contact. And she could smell herself on her hands her body had clearly needed relief while she slept, and she must have brought herself to climax. She winced, thinking of how she had to face him in just a few days, and got out of bed to shower and get dressed.

Hopefully, spending the weekend with her parents would distract her from all of this. Staying in her childhood bedroom would certainly discourage any wayward thoughts about her former teacher. She was rapidly becoming far too interested in him on a personal level. He seemed to have made peace with himself since the end of the war, as his face no longer looked like he was always in a state of frustration. Or, on occasion, in pain. His nose was still overly large, and his hair oily, but with the rest of his features more relaxed, the flaws were less obtrusive. And his voice . . . alternately arousing and calming and sneering . . . the voice was something a woman only dreamed about. In her case, literally.

Any relationship with him sexual, romantic, or platonic would be full of obstacles. Most of whom were named Weasley, plus one Potter. If he was willing to make an effort, however, she thought whatever he was offering would be worth it. She couldn't remember the last time she had enjoyed a conversation as much as she had back in the café before things turned sour. That was what she had been looking for and just didn't find with Ron. But other than a slightly overly-friendly handshake, he had made no indication at all that he would welcome her attention. And she hardly thought a friendly handshake was indicative of anything more than a truce.

She had a pleasant weekend in Oxford, and was busy all day Monday at work. The evening came faster than Hermione expected, and she had to rush home to get tidied up for her dinner meeting. *Not a date*, she told herself. He had made that clear enough. Still, her clothes from the day felt grimy and tired from sitting in a dank little office for so long. She could at least put on fresh robes her aqua ones were very attractive on her but were casual enough that they wouldn't appear as if she was dressing up brush her teeth and hair, and freshen her make-up. Just because it wasn't a date didn't mean she wanted to go out looking sloppy.

Severus arrived promptly at seven o'clock. Hermione noticed that he appeared to have taken particular care with his appearance. His robes were the same as ever, but looked to perhaps be his newest set, with nothing faded or fraying. His hair was combed neatly and looked like it had just been washed. She smiled and invited him in for a glass of wine before they left, but he politely declined, saying that he had made a reservation for seven fifteen. He offered his arm, and after locking her door, she tucked her hand into his elbow.

Before they set off, however, Severus looked down at her with a serious expression on his face. "Hermione, when I suggested dinner I hadn't thought through the repercussions for you. I'm the most infamous former Death Eater alive, and you were staunchly at Potter's side during the war. If we're spotted and I have to assume we will be I'm confident that people will talk. Certainly behind your back, and quite possibly to your face."

Hermione raised her eyebrows. He had obviously thought that speech through multiple times since she last saw him. She couldn't decide if he wanted her to change her mind or to go through with it. The same thoughts had crossed her mind as well, but she had committed to going, and was looking forward to it, and that was that. He'd probably call her an idiotic Gryffindor for it if they were still at Hogwarts. So be it.

"I'm aware of that, Severus. I've had several days to change my mind and cancel on you by owl post if I was going to do so, don't you think I would have done so in a more polite way than waiting for you to arrive and then not going with you?"

She could see a minute relaxing around his eyes and mouth, and concluded she had said the right thing. He nodded. He started to say something, but apparently changed his mind and instead made a waving gesture with his hand to indicate that they should be off.

A short walk later and they had arrived. Hermione was surprised, though she thought she shouldn't have been by now, when he reached in front of her to open the door and hold it while she entered. A quiet word with the maitre d' and they were promptly seated in a back corner table, away from prying eyes and unlikely to be overheard.

"I thought it would be easier to be out of the limelight, and besides, I didn't want to risk anyone getting wind of our plans," he said as he held her chair out for her.

"No, of course not," she replied. She sat down, and he took his seat as well. "I take it you've been here before? Is there something you'd recommend?"

Severus picked up his menu and scanned it. "Do you like seafood? Eggs?" he asked.

"I love seafood," Hermione replied, picking up her own menu. "I'm terrible at cooking it myself, so I enjoy ordering it when I go out to eat. Eggs are fine, too."

"Then I suggest you try the seafood soufflé. It was very good the last time I was here."

She found the soufflé on the menu and agreed that it looked very good. "And may I ask what you're having?" she asked as the waiter came to their table.

"I believe I'll have the beef tonight. Medium," he said, addressing the waiter. "My companion will have the seafood soufflé. A glass of wine, Hermione?"

"Please. Whatever the chef or sommelier thinks would go best; I'm not familiar with any of the wines listed here."

Severus nodded to the waiter and added, "And I'll have a glass of the Pinot Noir." The waiter nodded without taking any notes no scribbling down orders on an order pad at this establishment and took his leave.

They made small talk for a little while, though Hermione noticed that Severus looked rather uncomfortable, and that his half of the conversation was rather stiff. Still, he was clearly making an effort to be pleasant. She was flattered. She suspected he hadn't made any effort for any of his former students in recent years, if ever.

Finally, once their meals and drinks had arrived and they had started eating, she broached the official reason for getting together. "Will you tell me what you had in mind for the twins?" she asked.

He stiffened briefly, then seemed to force himself to relax. "Of course," Severus replied. "Though I must admit, it's nothing particularly exciting or disgusting, more annoying and tedious for them than anything."

"Oh?"

"I ordered a collection of Muggle joke shop 'magic' tricks with the intention of disguising them as Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes products, then somehow getting them mixed in with their stock." He fiddled with his fork and knife, then set them down again. "The idea being that they'd have to go through nearly all their stock item by item to separate out the good from the bad."

"That seems pretty good to me. It's not as disgusting as disembowelling horned toads, but the twins are pretty immune to disgusting stuff, anyway. And as a general rule, Can-Touch Talc aside, they *are* very proud of the quality of their products. So they would definitely feel the need to sort out the Muggle things."

She took a sip of her wine before smiling and continuing. "Of course, the one downside to your plan is that they may well find themselves interested in the Muggle items, and keep them to resell."

"You think they would?" Severus asked. He took a few bites of his steak. "Ah, perfectly cooked, as always."

That prompted Hermione to further taste her soufflé. "Also excellent," she agreed. "And yes, I am quite sure they'll feel the need to at least examine the Muggle items. Probably they'll also feel compelled to take them apart to see how they work. And to see if they can use any of the Muggle techniques in their own products, I would think."

Severus snorted at that. "That shouldn't surprise me, but it does. Actually, though, my main concern is that they discover the mix-up before customers start buying them accidentally."

"Um," Hermione replied stupidly. She had trouble believing that Severus's conscience though she had seen evidence of its existence at his trial extended to ensuring that the Wizarding public wasn't hoodwinked by products that by definition were designed to hoodwink people.

"No, Hermione, I don't care about the general public." Hermione felt her eyebrows shoot up in surprise. Was he using Legilimency? "No, not Legilimency, either. You're showing your emotions and thoughts almost as obviously as Potter used to. If I was using Legilimency, I'm sure your thoughts would be shouting at me right now."

She could feel a gentle probe at the edges her mind. Not that he was trying to get in but just trying to tell her that he could.

Apparently she had become rather complacent in his company, which was rather a long way from the neutral she had started at just scant weeks ago. She deliberately cleared her mind and dropped a mental screen in front of her thinking processes.

His eyes narrowed. "Very good, Hermione," Severus commented. "But you would have done better to do that at the beginning of dinner."

His previous comments had irritated her. This last one made her angry. "Thank you for the advice. Were you planning on raiding my mind while we ate?"

"Of course not," he said.

"Then I'd prefer to think of it as having good judgment on who I can trust, thank you very much," Hermione snapped. It was an effort, but she maintained her mental defences.

Severus just quirked the edge of his mouth at her. "As I was saying, I don't particularly care about the general public. But I do have a career to think of, now that I'm not indefinitely tied to Hogwarts. I would prefer not to deliberately do something that will cause my credibility to suffer, were it to cross certain ears."

"So why don't you just put the things in the stockroom on the upper floor?"

He looked at her. "First of all, because I didn't know about it. Second of all, that might help, but I still don't see how to ensure they spot it before it gets cycled into the main shop and sold to customers."

Hermione shrugged and pondered. He had a point, unfortunately. "I still think it's a good, viable plan. And if I'm still invited to be a part of it, perhaps I can figure out some way to trigger their notice."

"We wouldn't be discussing it if you weren't still invited," he said wryly. "However, I do suggest we finish our meals before they get cold."

They ate the rest of their food in a companionable silence. They both declined dessert and were standing to leave when Hermione looked across the room towards the door and spotted something she truly didn't want to see.

"Severus, is there a back door we can leave through?" she asked, turning to him.

He looked down at her, obviously not having seen the problem. "I would think so, undoubtedly through the kitchen. Why?"

"About ten feet to the right of the main door, at the table in the front window," she replied.

Severus followed her implicit instructions and turned his gaze in the appropriate direction. A redhead that he recognised all too well sat conversing with a woman at the table she had indicated.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 10

A response to the Potter_Place Fall prompt challenge: #22. The Weasley twins come across Snape shopping for Potions ingredients. A commotion causes Snape to become distracted, and the twins promptly take advantage of this once-in-a-lifetime golden opportunity to slip Snape one of their "experimental" products.

Author's Notes: I once again send out many thanks to Scabbyfish for beta reading! And, seeing as how I never did so, please apply all the usual disclaimers and so on retroactive to the first chapter and to all chapters hereafter. In short: I don't own anything you recognise. Can-Touch Talc, on the other hand, is a figment of my own bizarre imagination.

"Mr. Weasley is here with someone is that Miss Bones?" he asked. When Hermione nodded, but didn't otherwise respond, he continued, "Is that a problem? I recall you mentioning a falling-out." His tone seemed to indicate some surprise at the thought that she might be jealous.

"Yes, it's a problem," she admitted. She hated to think about what Ron might say about Severus being with her, date or no date, especially after the disastrous conversation at St. Mungo's. "Not to me. I'm happy he's here with Susan. Ginny and I had discussed the possibility of her setting them up, though I didn't know it had happened already. No, the problem is simply that he and I haven't talked since I refused to . . ." she trailed off.

"Yes?" he prompted. "If you want me to help you make a clean escape, you owe me an explanation."

She sighed. "Since I refused to get back together with him romantically. We tried being together. I thought it was an abysmal failure, and, at the time, so did he. But I think Harry got this picture of domestic bliss stuck in his head, especially when it became clear that Harry and Ginny were going to be a permanent item."

"And so you're afraid that he'll make a scene in front of Miss Bones, declaring his passion for you in the middle of the restaurant?" Severus scoffed.

"Not exactly," she said, but then rethought it. "Well, actually, yes. That wasn't my concern, though. If he does declare any sort of passion, he's just going to make a complete idiot of himself, but that's nothing new or abnormal. No, what I'm concerned about is his reaction to you."

Severus raised a brow. "Why? It's common knowledge that he and Potter both still despise me, and I assure you, the feeling is mutual. It might entertain the other customers, but I hardly think a row between us would do anything more than make people blink."

He didn't understand my point at all Hermione thought. "I rather meant that in his rage, the accusations might get more personal than usual. You are here with me, right? And while you and I know it was more or less a business meeting, Ron would never be able to see it that way. And we can't exactly explain, if you want to keep your revenge a secret."

"And so you think he'll conclude that you would actually go on a what do you call it now *date* with me?" His voice sounded incredulous.

His tone of voice temporarily derailed her train of thought about the possible confrontation. After her dream the other night, she wanted this belief nipped in the bud. "Excuse me? Why wouldn't I, if you had asked? You're intelligent, a good conversationalist when you're talking about topics you're comfortable with, and even I can tell you've been making an effort to be pleasant and friendly with me tonight. You picked me up at my flat. We had dinner. Current circumstances indicate that you're planning to walk me home. Aside from our short conversation about the twins, what about tonight *isn't* like a date?" she asked.

Severus stared at her in astonishment. As far as he could understand, she was arguing that tonight had been a date, but of course it hadn't. It was just a collegial meeting between two adults with a shared goal. He was twice her age, or nearly so, for Merlin's sake. And he knew well enough what he looked like and how he had treated her as a student. *What kind of game is she playing?*

"Excuse me," he retorted, "but as far as I know, young, intelligent, attractive women like yourself don't agree to a social dinner with men of my age, disposition, and looks."

"Well, as far as I know, men of your intelligence and experience have no interest in bushy-haired, walking encyclopaedic, barely-out-of-school girls like me!" she huffed. And paused. "Did you just say that you think I'm attractive?"

This wasn't going the way he had expected, drat it all. He sneered at her. "I was merely making a basic observation."

"Damn you, Severus!" The low expletive was as unexpected as her previous statement. She turned around and stalked off, apparently forgetting their original argument was about avoiding the most junior Weasley male.

He sighed. Given her temper, it was decidedly likely that any confrontation would be unpleasant, but he wouldn't let her walk home alone after dark. He resigned himself to an emotional scene as he strode across the restaurant after her.

He caught up to her just as she tried to pass Weasley's table without him noticing.

"Hermione!" Weasley exclaimed, looking back and forth between his date and his former girlfriend. Miss Bones looked decidedly uncomfortable.

"Hello, Ron," Hermione replied. "It's nice to see you, Susan. If you'll excuse me, I was just leaving."

Weasley, the idiot, would have none of that. "No, don't leave! Susan won't mind if you join us, will you, Susan?"

Susan looked like she would rather invite Black in his mongrel form than invite Hermione at the moment, but she contained herself politely and replied, "Of course not. It's lovely to see you too, Hermione."

Severus realised that Weasley hadn't seen him yet. He debated whether jumping in proactively would be more entertaining than waiting to be noticed, and decided it would.

"I'm afraid that won't be possible, Mr. Weasley."

Weasley's gaze finally shot to him, and Severus watched his eyes grow wide. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed that Miss Bones had a matching expression on her face.

"What are you doing here, Snape? And why do you think you have any say in what's possible for Hermione?"

Mindful of Hermione's concern over Weasley's opinion, he opted for discretion. "Miss Granger was assisting me with a small Potions conundrum I've been facing for the Ministry. There were some Arithmetic calculations needed, and while I am loath to admit it, her skills in that area outdo my own. Given some time-sensitive issues around the project, she graciously agreed to discuss it with me tonight."

His lengthy pronouncement apparently astounded Hermione's former classmates. Weasley's mouth gaped quite satisfactorily like a fish's. Miss Bones just bounced her head back and forth between Severus and Hermione, as if trying to connect them together and failing. Severus didn't dare smile, but enjoyed smirking rather nastily, instead.

Weasley's speaking capability seemed to be knocked further off kilter than normal, possibly because of the gaping of his mouth. "Hermione . . . you . . . Snape . . . but he's . . . how could you?"

Hermione sighed loudly. "How could I what, Ron? Do my job? Assist a key researcher who does work for the Ministry? Eat dinner? I'm afraid you'll have to be more specific. I do all these things regularly, and enjoy them."

"You know what I mean, Hermione. He's Snape! He hates us." He was practically stomping his feet and whining, but he dropped his voice and looked around before saying, "He killed Dumbledore!"

"And you know as well as I do that he was cleared of all charges. You were there. You saw the evidence. The war is over, Ronald. It's time to move on with our lives," she concluded, looking pointedly at Miss Bones.

"Besides," Severus interjected, trying to draw some of Weasley's attention away from Hermione. "I only ever hated Potter. You I disliked because of your attachment to him and your carelessness in the classroom. Miss Granger annoyed me with her know-it-all tendencies and her abysmal taste in friends, but at least she did her work and did it well."

Weasley barely glanced at him before turning back to Hermione. "Traitor," he snapped. "I'm going to tell Harry about this."

"I wouldn't expect otherwise, Ron," she replied, looking away. "When you do, be sure to ask him to tell Ginny that I'll be in touch soon. I'm terribly sorry we've interrupted and disrupted your evening, Susan."

Miss Bones looked at Hermione with a more tolerant expression than she had started with. Apparently she had picked up on more of the undercurrents than she had let on and was placing the blame solely where it belonged.

"Think nothing of it, Hermione," she replied. "These things happen. We were just sitting down, and you've apparently finished. Is there anything on the menu you'd recommend?"

Hermione and Miss Bones exchanged small talk for a few minutes while Severus and Weasley glared at each other. Finally, Weasley broke.

"You leave her be," he said.

"Excuse me?" Severus returned.

"You know what I mean. You're not looking at her as if she's working with you. You're looking at her as if . . ." he trailed off, looking uncomfortable with his own words.

Severus frowned at him. "I'm quite sure you're imagining things, Mr. Weasley. Perhaps you're projecting your own opinions onto me."

Hermione's eyes snapped to him at that remark, and Miss Bones trailed off in mid-sentence. A little too blatant a remark, apparently.

"Miss Granger, perhaps we should take our leave? I will escort you home so we can finish discussing the project."

"Yes, of course, sir," she responded quickly, implicitly agreeing to address each other formally in front of her friends, at least for the time being.

Hermione turned to her friends. She looked at Weasley and shook her head. "I'm sorry, Ron, truly," she said. "Tell Harry and Ginny I'll be by soon. Take care, Susan, it was nice to see you."

"Good-bye, Hermione," Miss Bones replied. "Good-bye, Professor Snape." Severus didn't bother to correct her, just nodded his head before silently following Hermione out the door and into the night.

He let her lead him through Diagon Alley and back to the front of her flat in silence. She stopped by her door and paused, resting her head against it for a moment before turning to face him.

"Hermione," he began, but trailed off, not knowing what else to say. She looked down, avoiding his eyes, but making no move to go inside, either.

When he was a teacher, if a student in his house was involved in an altercation like the one they'd just had, he ignored them or told them to toughen up. Occasionally he would let some of the youngest ones talk and sniffle at him, but he was only there to listen, not give emotional advice. He limited himself to dispensing tissues. But he was no longer a teacher, and Hermione was long past the age of student troubles, in experience at least, even though her student days were more recent than he liked to remember.

"Hermione," he tried again, once again trailing off. He sighed. "I just don't know what to do or say at the moment."

At that, she looked up at him and gave him a small smile, though it didn't reach her eyes. "Really? I think that must be a first."

"I rather thought it was you who always had something to say," he responded. The comment lacked any bite.

"I talk all the time. That doesn't always mean I have something to say. You don't talk all the time, but whenever you do speak, you know exactly what to say though admittedly, it's usually to cut the other person down to size."

Severus winced at that. It was true, but he wasn't very happy she was thinking it at the moment. "I don't want to cut you down just now."

"I gathered that," Hermione said. "And actually, I'm flattered that you want to be able to say something in this instance, even if you don't know what to say. There really isn't anything to say, anyway. Ron's a prat, and I'm still hoping he'll grow out of it. I'm crossing my fingers that he and Susan work out because I think she'll be good for him. She won't tolerate his nonsense, but she'll do it in a more subtle way than I would." She fiddled with a strand of her hair.

"Are you, ah, upset that he's moved on? I know you said you weren't interested in him any longer, but nonetheless . . ."

"Oh, definitely not!" Hermione exclaimed. "Remember at the magic shop when I said I needed to stay away from Ron?"

Severus nodded, unsure where she was going with that comment.

"He and I had just made an uncomfortable scene at St. Mungo's in which he declared how much he wanted to get back together with me, and I had to turn him down. I upset both him and Harry, who found me right after you and I had words, and explained all about the hopes he'd Ron well, actually both of them had had."

"Hopes of what?"

"The four of us living next door to each other and raising a Quidditch team between us over the next fifteen years. Definitely *not* what I had in mind. Maybe one kid, *someday*, but not now, and not like that."

"Ah, I see."

Severus couldn't figure out what he wanted to do. He wanted to murmur words of comfort, but that was hardly something he was experienced in. It was a very foreign feeling, and he didn't know what to do with it. He wanted to reach out and touch her hair, run his hand down her face, take her in his arms and hold her. He was completely out of his element trying to deal with tenderness. Sex he could handle. Enemies, allies, colleagues he could handle. Friends or more didn't exist for him. *And why the devil am I thinking of Hermione Granger and sex in practically the same sentence?*

She was watching him evenly, waiting, as he sorted through these odd things called emotions. He deliberately kept as blank an expression as possible on his face. Finally the drive to touch her overwhelmed his internal need to keep away from emotional entanglements, and he reached his hand out and simply let it rest on her upper arm.

Hermione waited a beat, then covered it with her own, saying nothing. He felt the softness of the lightweight wool robes she was wearing. When Severus had picked her up, one of his first thoughts was that the colour looked wonderful on her, but now he kept his eyes on her own and didn't pay it any attention.

He watched her, and she gazed back, and the seconds stretched into a minute and then into two. Finally she broke the silence and blurted out, "Would you like to come in for coffee or tea?"

Hermione held her breath as she waited for Severus to answer. She was surprised at her own recklessness, asking him in. Between his hand, and their gazes, and now this, it was clear they had pushed beyond a collegial dinner and were in date land. While she waited for his response, she studied his face. No one would ever call him handsome, and his nose was well, he and Cyrano would have a host to talk about, most likely. The limp, lanky, and yes, greasy hair was hardly a ringing endorsement either. Though it didn't look too greasy tonight, at least.

But his intelligence, and his passion, and his eyes they attracted her despite the rest of the package. Hermione could hardly throw stones at his hair when her own frequently looked like she had stuck her finger in a light socket Muggle, that is. And she wasn't conventionally pretty, either, though she thought she could look passable with the right clothes and cosmetics. Men with few exceptions in the Muggle world and even fewer in the wizarding one weren't culturally allowed the fall-back of cosmetics.

And his voice she felt her face flush as she recalled the dream she had had the night of the her Can-Touch Talc incident. She squashed the thoughts quickly and focused on the moment at hand until she was certain her face wasn't showing anything. But his voice was truly a very attractive feature.

She tilted her head and lifted her eyebrows. Severus hadn't broken her gaze, and eventually, slowly, he nodded. She let out her breath and smiled in relief before retrieving her wand from her robes and turning to unlock the door. She felt his hand drop from her arm as she did so, but then it ever-so-lightly came to rest on the small of her back as he stepped up behind her and guided her through the door. Another swirl of her wand as she muttered a soft incantation and several lamps sprung softly to life.

"Do you, um, did you want coffee or tea?" she asked, without turning to look at him.

"Tea, please," he responded quietly.

Hermione reluctantly stepped away from his hand, and she heard him turn and pull the door closed behind him. "Please, have a seat, I'll be back shortly," she said, waving in the vague direction of the sofa before ducking into the kitchen to prepare the tea.

As the water came to a boil, she stuck her head back into the living room and saw he had sat down stiffly on the sofa, at the end closest to the door, and was staring at today's *Daily Prophet* on the coffee table. He was clearly uncomfortable, yet determined to follow her request.

"Severus," she called. He flinched, but looked up at her. "I just wanted to know how you take your tea."

He nodded abruptly. "A bit of milk, no sugar, please."

She finished up in the kitchen and returned to the couch with two steaming mugs, setting one on the table in front of Severus before walking around it and sitting down herself. She carefully judged it so that she was technically on the opposite side of the couch, but was as close to his side as she could get. Since he was sitting right up against the edge at his end, she wasn't actually invading his personal space, but she wasn't defending her own, either.

The silence stretched between them as they sipped their tea. It began comfortably enough, but ultimately grew strained. Hermione didn't know where they were going, and she assumed Severus didn't know, either.

Finally, she put her mug down and turned to him. "At the risk of being too bluntly Gryffindor for your comfort, where are we?"

As she was half-expecting him to say something about her flat, it surprised her when he acknowledged what she meant without any verbal parrying. "I don't know, Hermione. I started the night with the strict understanding that we were going to work together to exact a bit of punishment for the Weasley twins, and I don't quite know how we got from that to this." He continued to hold his mug, staring into it as if he would find the answers there. Since she had made the tea from a bag, she thought it highly unlikely, Divination or not.

On impulse, she reached for his mug and pried it from his fingers, putting it down next to her own. Her hands returned to his and held them loosely, inviting him to take the next step. Slowly, he turned his hands palm-up and grasped hers, lifting his gaze at the same time. They sat for long moments before Hermione worked up her next bit of courage and slid closer to him.

She glanced down at his mouth and back up. That was apparently as obvious as a declaration or request because Severus immediately asked, "Hermione, are you sure? You can't I can't we wouldn't be able to blame the cantharis for this. There would be no going back."

Hermione pulled one hand from his and slipped it around the back of his neck, keeping her eyes trained on his to convince him of her sincerity. "The cantharis may have brought us together due to a chance meeting, and yes, we noticed its effects before, but no, this has nothing to do with it. I'm sure about this, Severus. Please, kiss me."

He drew his free hand up her arm, over her shoulder, and up to cup her face. Slowly, keeping his eyes on her own, he leaned down until his lips were just a breath apart from her own. "Last chance to say no," he whispered.

Hermione let her eyes drift shut and responded by closing the final gap. His lips were thin, and a bit chapped, but warm and so very gentle when they moved against hers. They stayed within the sweetness of their first kiss until Hermione sighed contentedly.

At the sound, Severus slid his hand behind her head and tightened his grip. His tongue touched her lips and she quickly opened them, darting her own tongue out to taste and explore.

They stayed that way for minutes, occasionally coming up for breath, but by mutual unspoken consent continued to explore, just mouth-to-mouth, until finally Hermione broke the connection and smiled. Then she pulled Severus back against the pillows on the couch and laid her head on his shoulder.

He responded by pulling his other hand out of hers and putting his arm around her. She snuggled in, and they sat together, content, happy just to be with one another, and

not interested in anything else for the time being.

Tomorrow would be soon enough to discuss this development and to return to the other issues that they were facing. Tonight would be for beginnings, and for them.

Some time later, Hermione kissed Severus good-bye one last time at her door. He promised to talk to her if not the next day, then the day after. She watched him walk a little way away and then Disapparate with a tiny pop before shutting her door and drifting through her evening routine with a smile on her face.

Unfortunately, consequences do come back to bite you, as Hermione realised the next day. Ron and Susan clearly weren't the only ones who had been in the restaurant during the altercation and recognised them. She doubted even Ron's ability to spread gossip overnight could account for the number of looks and whispered comments during her walk from the Atrium to her cubbyhole in the middle of the Ministry administrative offices.

The Ministry staff wasn't particularly discreet, and she was fairly certain she was meant to "overhear" many of the whispered comments.

"I bet he slipped her a potion!" seemed to be a common theme, as did, "You don't think he'd dare use the Imperius Curse on her, do you?"

Less common were remarks such as, "Why would she want to look *at that* over a dinner table, project or no?" One person even responded, "Well, it's not like he was getting a treat to see, either." Hermione was absolutely certain she was meant to overhear that.

To top it off, it didn't help that Severus had invented his cover story on the spot and they had never talked about it afterwards.

"But Hermione, I didn't know Snape was working on anything that he'd need your help with!" her supervisor complained as he stood in front of her desk. Decimer Podmore was an ageing wizard in old-fashioned robes with a somewhat scholarly air, a look that was enhanced by the way he wore his spectacles just below the bridge of his nose.

"I believe he wasn't certain as to what he needed, and wanted my opinion, Mr. Podmore."

"He should have gone through proper channels for this!"

Mr. Podmore continued to drone on about procedures and channels and paperwork. Hermione tuned it out as best she could while keeping a smile on her face and hopefully indicating that she was paying attention. Thankfully, the idea of Severus not going about things the proper way apparently had driven all thoughts of what he might have asked her opinion on completely out of her supervisor's mind. Hermione wasn't quite sure what she could come up with on the spur of the moment that wouldn't be cause for further suspicion.

Eventually he moved on to more personal accusations, which brought Hermione back to the conversation. "And see here, a man like him taking a young lady like you out to dinner like that. It just isn't done! Does he have no sense of propriety?"

Hermione refrained from rolling her eyes at the antiquated turn of phrase. Date or not, it had seemed perfectly reasonable to her. "Quite aside from any assistance he might need, Severus Snape and I enjoyed discussing the latest academic research and publications, Mr. Podmore. Is there something wrong with sharing a friendly meal?"

"But he was a Death Eater! Everyone knows he should really be locked up in Azkaban, Miss Granger. How can he think he's an appropriate escort for you? How could you agree?"

"He was acquitted at trial, Mr. Podmore," Hermione said icily, putting both hands on her desk and standing up to look at her manager eye-to-eye. "While I admit that he was a truly unpleasant and even downright cruel teacher, he had my respect for what he taught us and how he kept us safe despite the tendencies of some of us to do truly idiotic things. He still does have that respect, and when we bumped into each other recently, we managed to form a tentative collegial relationship despite past animosities."

Mr. Podmore looked taken aback at her comments. "Yes, well, fine," he spluttered. "But next time you make sure he goes through the proper channels!" He left quickly, his robes fluttering behind him.

Hermione took a deep breath and sank back into her chair. She had known, even before Severus had warned her, that there would be some fallout from her dinner with him. She hadn't expected it from quite so many people quite so quickly, however.

Traffic near her desk seemed particularly busy during the morning, and Hermione did her best to block out the noise as people shuffled past. It was distracting, to say the least, but she actually did have work she needed to get done for the International Magical Trading Standards Body regarding some compatibility issues between domestic and foreign import cauldron parts Percy Weasley all over again. It didn't help that her mind kept wandering back to the previous night at her flat, and she suspected that more than one person got a view of her grinning foolishly to herself. She could only hope they thought it was because her work was going well.

Not that she was ashamed of being romantically involved with Severus, but they hadn't discussed it. Personally, she thought she would prefer to keep it quiet for a bit while they discovered whether they were compatible enough to pursue a more involved relationship. She would do the same for anyone she was involved with, because she simply didn't see the point of broadcasting her personal life to the entire wizarding or Muggle world.

She would need to break the news to Harry, Ron and Ginny first anyway. And probably Minerva as well. She thought Minerva would accept it, at least, and hopefully that would pave the way for others to do so as well. It occurred to Hermione that it might be best to give Minerva time to spread word to the rest of the former members of the Order of the Phoenix before going completely public. Even if Hermione and Severus never spoke to the Order members, Minerva's backing might ensure some additional supporters before the the *Daily Prophet* got wind of things and twisted them out of proportion.

She was finishing up an equation just as Ginny popped in at lunchtime. "Hello, Hermione, it seemed like the day to come by," she said by way of a greeting. "Everyone else in Broom Regulatory Control seems to be doing so, and I hate to feel left out."

Hermione snorted. "Come by, yes, but you're not supposed to actually *talk* to me, you realise. It's more important to whisper behind my back."

"Ah, well, I never liked sticking with tradition. Started at birth, you know, insisting on being a girl child in a family of boys, and all that." She grinned, and lowered her voice. "Seriously, are you okay? I don't really know what happened since I didn't get to talk to Susan, and I'm sure Ron's version of events is completely skewed."

"I'll be fine." Hermione shrugged. "It's a bit disconcerting, being the centre of negative attention like this, but it's not the first time. Remember the year of the Triwizard Tournament and Rita Skeeter's article about me jilting Harry?"

Ginny frowned for a minute and then her face cleared. "Now that you mention it, yes. I had fleeting moments of hating you over it. Not that I thought you were jilting Harry or anything; it was just the thought that other people saw you together."

"I'd be flattered if I didn't know how idiotically stupid he was about girls at that point."

"He was, wasn't he? At least he's a bit cleverer by now. He has me, right?"

"You bet." Hermione felt thoroughly cheered up by this turn of conversation, enough that she felt bolstered to return to the original topic at hand. "I assume Ron has inflicted his poisonous opinion on your fiancé, so I do appreciate you keeping an open mind."

"You're quite welcome. I actually came to ask you to go to lunch, if you're interested?" The invitation was clearly not just for lunch. Hermione sighed mentally. Better to start with talking to Ginny before approaching Harry, who would undoubtedly go ballistic. If he hadn't already. And she had no idea what to do about Ron at the moment.

"Of course," she replied. "Just let me finish up here."

A few minutes later they had left through the Visitors' Entrance into Muggle London, having agreed that it would be a better location for them today. They weaved through several streets to make sure they were far enough away from the Ministry that it was unlikely any other witches or wizards would be taking a lunch break in the vicinity. Hermione pointed out a pub that didn't seem to have a queue but was large enough to be bustling with people.

Ginny waited until they were seated and had ordered before taking up the conversation. "So, spill," she said simply.

Hermione back-tracked to fill in the gaps in what she and Ginny had already talked about. She explained how she had run interference for the twins, but realised she'd need to edit the rest of the tale in order to keep the so-called detention secret. She mentioned that she'd run into him in Muggle London unexpectedly, as they'd talked about before, and had enjoyed a surprisingly amicable conversation over drinks at the café. She didn't reiterate his reaction to the twins.

She fumbled a bit on explaining how she saw him again to bring about the dinner invitation, but settled on just saying she'd had another question about his projects and had rashly gone to his house to ask him. That he had looked as surprised at asking her to dinner to talk as she had felt at being asked, and that she had ended up agreeing to go, but put him off until after the weekend.

She wasn't sure Ginny believed the last bit completely, but since Ginny didn't say anything, she continued after their food had arrived and they had started eating.

"He was once again quite pleasant at dinner, actually. He seemed rather uncomfortable making small talk, but I could tell he made an effort. I was surprised by how much I enjoyed the evening, at least until we were ready to leave and I noticed Ron and Susan."

"I'm sorry about that. I mean, I'm not sorry they were out together, but that I didn't warn you about it."

Hermione smiled weakly. "You had no way to know that I'd be out at that kind of restaurant for dinner it's not a place I'd likely go by myself, and there was no reason to think I'd be out with someone else, either. Especially not Severus."

"You seem completely comfortable calling him by his given name now." Ginny looked at her quizzically, though not accusingly, while digging into her fish and chips.

"Well, I have seen him several times recently," Hermione said, but she could feel herself blushing. Dratted involuntary responses. "I may be ridiculously deferential to teachers, but even I can have it drilled out of me if I'm reminded enough times by the teacher involved."

"I suppose so. You always tried to keep Ron and Harry from insulting the teachers behind their backs, Snape included."

"They should be respectful! Even now. I know things were terribly painful for everyone during the war, but it's over, and he was acquitted, and you know the whole story there. It must have been terrible to have to do what he did during the war. They should get it through their heads that he did far more than they ever did, and give him some respect."

"Hmm, respect, really?" Ginny asked. "Is that all it is for you?"

"Well. . ."

"I'm not going to say anything if you have a crush on him, Hermione. It sounds like he's been thawing, to you at least. It makes sense, I suppose. He's not working at Hogwarts any longer he must get tired of his own company, and you're someone he could talk to without making the person feel stupid," she concluded.

"Yes, well, he still does that occasionally. It's not possible for a leopard to change his spots overnight. Or should that be a snake to shed his skin? Except that might be possible overnight, I'm not sure how long moulting takes"

"Hermione."

"Hmm? Oh, sorry," Hermione apologised. "Queen of tangential information and questions, I know. Anyway, he still snipes at me sometimes, but not constantly. Though the times we ran into Harry or Ron, things were noticeably less pleasant."

"No surprise there."

"No." Hermione's sigh sounded wistful even to herself. "I guess not."

Ginny stopped in the middle of eating and dropped the chip that was in her hand. "Hermione Granger, *its* just a crush, isn't it?"

Hermione felt her cheeks flame again and couldn't formulate a response. Which turned out to be a response in and of itself.

"He likes you, too?" Ginny's eyes were as wide as Hermione had ever seen them.

"Apparently," Hermione whispered.

"Just how apparent is *apparently*?"

She was never going to turn back to her normal colour. "He kissed me last night, after he walked me back to my flat. Or rather, I kissed him, and he kissed me back."

If it was possible, Ginny's eyes got even wider. "Oh, Hermione." She sounded almost disappointed.

"I didn't expect it to happen!" she said defensively. "When we saw Ron at the restaurant we had just finished arguing about whether or not it was a date, with Severus saying it wasn't. Then Severus made up this business about my help with a Ministry project"

"So that wasn't true, then?" Ginny cut in, pushing her plate aside. By now, both women had given up any thought of actually eating their lunch.

"No. It wasn't meant to be a date, either, and I knew that, but pushed him on it."

"You were already angry with Snape when you ran into Ron?"

"Yes. Undoubtedly that made the situation worse," Hermione admitted. "I stalked off home afterwards, and Severus actually tried to console me. I was surprised, and flattered, and I liked it. I like *him*."

"Are you sure it's not just a rebound thing, after completely severing ties with Ron?" Ginny prodded.

"No! It's not. The seeds of it were there that first night at Hogwarts, before Harry found me to tell me about Ron's injury."

"Are you sure?" Ginny asked. "Because it seems to me that you're playing with fire, Hermione. Possibly *fire works*, and I don't want to see things blow up on you."

"I know," Hermione said glumly. "Neither do I."

"Just be careful, I guess. But if it makes you happy, we'll figure out a way to deal with it. I will, anyway. I can't promise Harry or Ron will. You do realise you might end up cutting yourself off from them?"

Hermione closed her eyes. "Yes, I do. I would hate to, but . . . this thing with Severus . . . I need to try. I can only hope that eventually Harry and Ron will come around. But if you don't mind, I'd rather hold off on telling them." She reopened her eyes to see Ginny looking very seriously at her.

"I agree," Ginny said. "Sort yourselves out first. As far as I'm concerned, you were talking about a professional project last night, and he walked you home. End of story."

"It's pretty much the truth, up to a point, as we did talk projects," Hermione hedged.

"Good, that will make it more convincing. But we'd better get back to work before they dock our pay." They collected themselves and ventured back to the Visitors' Entrance to the Ministry.

Hermione only frowned a little when evening came and Severus hadn't been by to say hello. Maybe it was for the best, but she had hoped to see him during the day and had thought perhaps him stopping by and deliberately having a mundane conversation would put the rumours aside.

On the other hand, the conversation or rather, the confrontation with Harry came much sooner than Hermione had hoped for. The morning after her lunch with Ginny, Hermione was feeling a bit cranky as she still hadn't heard from Severus, and she was afraid of pushing herself on him too much, too soon.

So when Harry ploughed into her as he entered and she exited her cubbyhole, she was more than a little dismayed and, subsequently, her words were quite snippy. "Watch where you're going, Harry! How on earth do you plan to pass Auror training if you can't keep from smashing into people?"

Harry raised his eyebrows and returned the insult. "I see the rumours are true about you and Snape you're obviously channelling him already. Are you insane? Why would you have dinner with that traitor?" He stopped when Hermione made a face at him. "with the greasy git?" he concluded between gritted teeth.

"You know, Harry," Hermione said, tilting her head to the side, "I really don't feel like discussing this with you right now. I will grant that you have the right to dislike it, but I am actually enjoying his company, as it gives me the opportunity to converse with someone who likes the same topics that I do. So thank you very much for your opinion, but sod off!" She pushed past him and headed down the hall towards Mr. Podmore's office.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 10

A response to the Potter Place Fall prompt challenge: #22. The Weasley twins come across Snape shopping for Potions ingredients. A commotion causes Snape to become distracted, and the twins promptly take advantage of this once-in-a-lifetime golden opportunity to slip Snape one of their "experimental" products.

As always, many thanks to Scabbyfish for beta reading!

Severus watched the altercation from just outside of the lift. He had just stepped off it when Potter and Hermione had slammed into each other. His brows lifted at the vehemence of Hermione's comments, but as he started down the hall, she pushed past Potter and stormed off in the other direction, her simple navy blue business robes barely trailing behind her.

It was ridiculously trite, but he couldn't help but think that she was beautiful when she was angry. Anger was such a passionate emotion that it heightened a person's senses and made others aware of that heightened state.

Potter stood outside her office, if the closet-sized space where her desk was located could be called that, shaking his head in confusion. "What was that about?" Severus heard him mutter.

Severus closed the gap until he was within ten feet of the Auror-in-Training. "Apparently, she didn't want to talk to you, Potter," he snapped, but kept his voice low to avoid eavesdroppers. "Is that so difficult to understand?"

Potter's head shot up to look at him in dismay. "Snape. Couldn't you be decent and stay away? You do realise that your showing up will only make matters worse?" He followed Severus's lead, speaking quietly despite his fervour.

"On the contrary, Potter; showing up will make them acceptable." Severus smirked at the uncomprehending look on the man's face. He glanced up and down the hall to be sure no lurkers had materialised nearby before continuing. "Potter, if I stay away, and someone catches Hermione and I talking sometime in the future, then it looks like we're hiding something. If I come here, to her place of work during business hours, then we are clearly just colleagues who enjoyed an evening discussing some project or other."

The disgusted expression on Potter's face made no sense until he griped, "Since when do you call her Hermione?" Severus took the lack of protest regarding the rest of his statement to mean tacit, though definitely not admitted, agreement.

"Since we shared a meal and some companionable time together," he retorted, glossing over the other times he had seen her recently.

Potter's mouth was pursed as if he were sucking on a lemon, but his eyes showed that he was deep in thought. Severus conceded enough to add, "Potter, I have no intention of being a complete bastard to her. I could say I won't ever be unpleasant to her, but we both know there's no way I could promise that. But I will do my best not to be."

There was a meaningful pause while Potter decided what to say. "Fine," he grouched, his shoulders slumping. "I won't bug her about it, but I don't like it, and I still don't like you, Snape. If you hurt her, I promise you'll regret it."

"The dislike is entirely mutual, I assure you. And if *you* hurt her over this, you'll regret it as well. Additionally, I suggest you not tell Weasley you've had this discussion. I somehow doubt he'll listen. Now, do you want to be here when she returns?"

Without responding, Potter skulked off to the lift and a minute later was gone in a swarm of paper airplanes.

Just in time, Severus thought as he leaned against the doorframe to Hermione's office. Seconds after the lift doors closed, Hermione came around a corner back into the

hallway. She was frowning until she looked up and saw him, at which point her face relaxed into a bright smile.

She kept her voice professional, however. "Severus, a pleasure to see you again," she greeted him. Her eyes were far warmer than her platonic words.

"And you, Hermione," he returned cordially. "Do you have time to take a coffee break? I'd like to speak to you further about the project we discussed." He kept his words vague as there was the risk that they might be overheard, but he wanted to see her outside the Ministry. He kept his expression neutral as he spoke. Perhaps too neutral, if the narrowing of her eyes was any indication, but he was used to keeping private things private for safety's sake.

"Of course. Just let me set this work down." Her tone had cooled just enough for him to notice, though it was unlikely anyone else would.

They travelled by Floo powder to the Leaky Cauldron and exited to Diagon Alley. As they headed for a safe Apparition point, Severus leaned down to her and whispered, "My house." Hermione nodded, and, minutes later, they were walking along Spinner's End to his doorstep. He quickly pulled out his wand and said several incantations to unlock the door while using his other hand to pull her inside.

He heard her let out a breath when he took her hand. "I was afraid you were going to tell me it was all a mistake," she said.

Severus turned to face her, shoving his wand back into his robes. He lifted his hand to brush a few curling strands of hair out of her face and kept his eyes locked on hers as he lowered his head. *Bliss*, he thought. His lips moved tentatively across her own, gently coaxing her to relax and open for him.

When her fingers crept up his frockcoat and slipped around his neck, he used his free hand to slip under her outer robes and pull her closer to him so that they were pressed against one another from chest to hips. Hermione moaned, and he took advantage of her open mouth to delve in, sweeping his tongue across hers and teasing them both. When he needed to come up for air, he pulled back and rested his forehead against hers.

"I'm sure I *should* be telling you that this is a mistake," Severus muttered. "But there's no way I'm going to do so. *Mine*."

Hermione smiled one of those smiles that only a woman who knows her effect on a man can smile. "I missed you yesterday," she said. "I knew we were probably better off not seeing each other, to keep the gossip under control, but I still missed you."

"And I missed you, as well," Severus replied, "but I'm afraid you're correct about the gossip. I don't wish for you to be hurt by it. I think we should keep our relationship for lack of a better word to ourselves and stay out of public areas." He was not about to let her ruin her reputation, as antiquated as he knew that sounded, over him.

Hermione looked at him, her fingers still at the back of his neck, playing with the strands of his hair at his nape. He desperately wanted to close his eyes and revel in the sensation, but it was clear that this conversation wasn't over quite yet.

"Severus, I'm not ashamed of being with you, or of being seen with you," she said quietly. "But I do realise this is going to be very difficult on my other friends, and possibly people like Minerva as well. I agree with keeping this quiet, but only to a point. I just want time to see if this relationship and it definitely is a relationship has long-term potential."

Hermione was thinking of long-term potential? He knew he had to be goggling at her. *With him?* "Hermione, I wasn't expecting you to be interested in a long-term anything with me." He couldn't envision a scenario where that worked out without her getting hurt; people were bound to snub her as they currently did him. He didn't care for himself, but she deserved better.

"Severus Snape, do you think I'm that dim-witted? If I wanted something casual and easy, I would certainly pick someone besides *you* to have it with. There's no way anything with you could ever be easy."

He decided that ignoring that comment might be in his best interests. "Hermione, you'll be snubbed if this gets out."

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. Ginny already knows, and, while she's nervous about it, she accepts it. I don't know about Harry and Ron; we'll have to see. But I'm going to be selfish and look towards my own happiness rather than worrying about theirs." Her voice was firm and decisive.

Severus was amazed. Truly, absolutely amazed. Flabbergasted. She meant it. He had no idea how to respond, so he tipped his head down and kissed her again, pouring everything he felt into it. He backed her up against the closed door and slid his hand from her back around to her waist, and slowly higher, keeping her pinned in place with his hips.

When she made no move to stop him, he closed his hand over her breast and teased her nipple through the jumper she had on beneath her robes. Hermione rubbed against his erection, and this time it was Severus who moaned. Eventually, he pulled back, gasping, "This was only supposed to be a coffee break."

Hermione was breathing as heavily as he was. "Right. Coffee break." They looked at each other and dove into another kiss, dragging each other across the foyer and into the living room, where they could stumble to the couch. Severus pulled Hermione down on top of him, his legs dangling awkwardly off the edge, but Hermione squirmed until she was on the bottom, and rubbed their hips together. Much better, he silently agreed. He was larger and heavier than she was, and the friction was much better if he was on top.

Severus didn't attempt to take things any further. Eventually, they once again surfaced for air, and this time Hermione pulled herself out from under him and quickly moved to another chair. He was left sprawled face-down, and he quickly righted himself. Still sprawled, but more acceptably so, if one could ignore his raging erection. He noticed that her hair, which normally was more contained than it had been when she was a young student, was as bushy as he'd ever seen it. Severus rather liked the fact that he had caused it, but she must have realised what he was looking at, because she quickly pulled out her wand and Transfigured a coaster into a brush.

"That was far preferable to a coffee break," she said, yanking the brush through her hair roughly. "But for the moment, I suppose I do need to get back to work. A question, though do you have any suggestions as to what I should say when I'm asked about this project that I'm supposedly helping you with? My supervisor got all huffy about it yesterday."

"Hermione, promise me you won't talk about anything that I do for the Department of Mysteries," Severus requested quickly.

She looked at him quizzically and said, "Of course. I promise. But what do I tell them about this non-existent project?"

He smiled at her. If there was ever a good example of Gryffindor versus Slytherin thinking . . . "Just tell them I made you promise not to talk about the projects I do for the Department of Mysteries. You don't need to mention anything about this *particular* project then."

Hermione stopped brushing her hair and laughed. "I should have known." She Untransfigured the brush and set the coaster back on the table.

"On the subject of projects, however, I still haven't managed to Transfigure or Charm the Muggle wands to look like Weasley trick wands," he said, standing and adjusting his frockcoat and robes. He was thankful that the distraction of conversation about the Ministry had allowed his erection to subside.

"I'd love to help," she replied, standing up and adjusting her own robes and her jumper. "As long as we can take some breaks to relax occasionally. Transfiguration is hard work, you know."

"Indeed. Tonight?"

Hermione looked down and fiddled with her jumper a bit more. "Quite aside from the excuses I might have to start making if we see each other every day, do you think we're rushing this?" She waved vaguely between them.

Severus didn't answer right away. Sometime in the last forty-eight hours he had come to realise that Hermione was important to him. Very important. He wasn't sure if it had started when she stormed in looking for revenge on the Weasley twits, or at the café over coffee, or even at Hogwarts on the night of the Apothecary Incident. Sometime before dinner on Monday he had begun vaguely longing for more, but he had assumed that the mistakes of his past would once again stand in the way he had expected that his penance would last indefinitely. And sometime since dinner he had realised that Hermione had snuck up into the vacant cavern in his chest the one he had previously assumed had been ripped to shreds years ago.

And he was growing ridiculous with this poetry he thought. Maudlin sentiment did not match up with his Department of Mysteries persona any more than it had his Hogwarts one or any of his other personas, for that matter. Still, he assumed he would have to exert some effort to make this work. He reached out and tipped her chin up to force her to meet his gaze.

"Hermione, I'm not good at expressing these kinds of things, as I'm sure you're aware. Anger and fury, yes, even passion, but over the years I learned to hide pain and subvert anything else. Dumbledore saw more than most, because I was no older than you are now when I started teaching, and I needed an outlet. Gradually I stopped showing things even to him."

He took her hand and brought it up to right over the place in his chest he had thought was gone forever. He kept his hand over hers. "But I can already tell that whatever this is between us is important. I seem to . . . care . . . about you, and I need to do whatever I can to make it work."

Hermione gaped at him, and he couldn't bring himself to be surprised at her expression. A declaration like he had just made must seem tantamount to Dumbledore coming back to life and promptly giving up sherbet lemons. Finally, she slipped her free hand around him and leaned her head against their joined hands on his chest.

Severus rested his cheek against the top of her head and closed his eyes, the corners of his lips lifting just a bit as he relaxed.

Weeks later, they had learned a lot about each other, but they were still stumped on the wand transfiguration. They'd spent countless hours on the problem with nothing to show for it but a messy pile of wands on her coffee table. Something was eluding them. Every time they tried to Transfigure the Muggle wands, or to put some sort of illusion charm on them, it shimmered as if it was going to work, and then just died out as if nothing had been cast.

Hermione threw a wand across her sitting room in frustration. Severus looked up from his place on the couch, where he had been making some notes. He had taken off his outer robes and frockcoat when he arrived and looked as relaxed as she had ever seen him. He smirked at her. "Problem?"

"You're the problem, I think what did you do, get a defective batch of these things?" she grouched.

Severus put his notes aside and held out his hand. She joined him on the couch and snuggled in next to his side. These evenings were her favourite moments; the time spent side-by-side was becoming the way she grounded herself after the grind and tedium of her days at work. Occasionally, Severus would stop by her cubbyhole to "consult with her", but they kept those appearances professional. They hadn't pretended to slip out for coffee again since that first time, but Hermione hoped that their "consultations" were slowly accustoming people to seeing the two of them together.

Still, the time they spent together in the evenings, usually alternating between her flat and his house, was particularly precious to her. They spent the time discussing Potions and Arithmancy in addition to working on the trick wands. And, of course, there were the "relaxation" breaks, though they were taking those fairly slowly.

"I am unwilling to let a Muggle wand outwit me," Severus murmured from above her head as his arms closed around her. "But I'm unsure as to the best direction to take next. What are your thoughts?"

"Honestly?" she asked. "I think the best option is to send a vague question to Minerva and see if she can provide any insight."

She could feel him nodding. "I believe you might be right. It may well be something we could figure out eventually, but there's no point in wasting time over it if someone else knows the answer."

"I'll send a letter by owl in the morning."

"Why don't you just try contacting her via the Floo Network right now? Eight o'clock is early yet, and she may well still be in her office."

Hermione froze, uncertain. After that first dinner, they had been very careful so far to avoid being seen by the general wizarding population in the evenings. No one was ever near Spinner's End, so Hermione's visits there were easy to keep secret. And Severus's skills from his previous life were coming in handy to avoid detection when he came to her flat. Contacting Minerva while he was there, however, ran a higher risk of her slipping and letting the information out.

"What is it?" he asked, clearly picking up on her discomfort.

She pulled back to look at him as she explained. "Minerva has an uncanny ability to extract information from me. I suppose it's a product of having been her student in class and in Gryffindor. I don't care if she finds out that we're together; in fact, she'd be the next person I want to tell, but would it bother you?"

"No, it wouldn't," Severus responded. He smiled down at her with warm eyes, a look that seemed to be reserved for her alone. "She would be my choice, as well, for furthering the knowledge of our relationship. I think by now we know that this has serious potential?" They hadn't talked about where they were going in any of the weeks since their pseudo-professional meetings had become personal.

Hermione smiled back at him. "I certainly think so, yes," she agreed.

"Then I believe we should slowly accustom some of our acquaintances to the idea. It will be easier for you, once it is public, to have a foundation of people who will speak favourably for us." Severus had clearly given this a lot of thought.

"Unfortunately," Hermione said, "I think that means we need to win Harry over."

He winced at that, but nodded. "I'd prefer to let a few others know first, if possible, however."

"Of course, Severus. But why don't I go ahead and talk to Minerva about the wands. It may or may not come up."

She extracted herself from Severus's arms and moved to the fireplace. After establishing a connection, she stuck her head through and called, "Minerva, are you available, just for a few minutes?"

Minerva was sitting at her desk, writing something. "Of course, Hermione, come right through."

"Oh, no, I just have a question."

Minerva moved around her desk to take a seat by the fire, nodding for Hermione to continue.

"I'm trying to Transfigure something a Muggle item to change its appearance. Every time I try, nothing happens. I've experimented with various incantations and even illusion charms, but nothing works. Do you have any idea why that would happen?" Hermione asked.

"On a Muggle item, you say?" Hermione nodded. "No, I can't think of anything. May I see the item?"

Hermione hadn't thought of that and hadn't brought one near the fireplace. "Hang on just a minute, Minerva, let me get it." She started to pull her head out.

"Oh, nonsense, I'll come through," she replied.

Hermione panicked she hadn't anticipated more than a mention of her and Severus and quickly shook her head. "That's not necessary, Minerva, I don't want to bother you. I'll be right back."

She pulled her head out and crossed over to the pile of wands. "Why didn't I think to take one to the fire with me?" she muttered as she chose one.

Severus started to respond. "Because you were distracted by"

He was cut off when the fire flared green. Minerva stepped out, apparently not the least bit interested in Hermione's concern for her time.

"Nonsense, Hermione," she said as she looked down and dusted off her robes. "You know I enjoy chatting with you."

"But do you enjoy chatting with me, Minerva?" Severus asked.

Her head shot up at the sound of his voice. "Severus? What are you doing here?" she asked.

"This is actually his project," said Hermione from across the room. "We have been working on it together, but he had started it before he invited me to join him."

Minerva looked back and forth between them several times. Hermione stood quietly, waiting for a reaction, and Severus kept silent as well.

Finally Minerva looked at Severus and enquired, "Would you like to explain how this *project cooperation* came about?"

Severus raised a brow. "Is that your real question?" he responded.

"No, of course not, though it's terribly impolite of you to call me on it." Minerva sat in the closest chair. "You're sitting here looking very comfortable and casual, Severus. I can't say that I've seen you with your frockcoat even partially unbuttoned in the last ten years, yet you're sitting in Hermione's flat without it . . ." She trailed off.

Hermione picked up the conversation. "That's not a question, Minerva," she noted. "If you'd care to ask one, Severus or I might answer."

"And your personality has clearly started rubbing off on her," Minerva continued, "so I suspect this isn't a first meeting, or even a second or third. What is going on here?"

"What does it look like?" This from Severus, who clearly was enjoying the upper hand while he had it.

"It *looks* like two of my former star pupils, albeit from completely different times, one of whom oh, you know what I mean have decided to form a . . . a . . . liaison with each other."

"And so we have," said Hermione. "But I would prefer the term 'relationship'."

"As would I," Severus agreed.

"But . . . but . . . how? Why? Hermione, I thought you and your friends hated Severus? Severus, quite aside from your loathing of all things related to Harry Potter, I thought you disdained how did you routinely phrase it *romantic twaddle*?"

Hermione turned to Severus and raised her brows. "'Twaddle'?"

He uncharacteristically shrugged and replied, "My life revolved around teenagers and their personal problems, including whatever pornographic, or at least semi-pornographic, material they managed to smuggle into the school. 'Twaddle' generally summed it up more accurately than anything else."

"I see." Hermione rolled her eyes in response and turned back to Minerva, who was staring at Severus as if he'd grown an extra head. "These things happen, Minerva. I never hated him as Professor Snape, at least not like Harry and Ron did. I always respected him. And now that I'm not a student, we have much more in common."

Hermione watched as Minerva fought some sort of internal battle, eventually nodding in agreement. "Yes, I can see that. Though I hadn't considered it before, you both do share quite a bit of intellectual common ground. I just worry that Hermione, are you sure?"

"Yes, I am. Please don't tell me that you worry about the fact that he was a Death Eater and a spy!"

"No, of course not," Minerva assured her. "Not in the way you seem to mean, at any rate." She glanced at Severus before continuing. "I know that he's a good man, despite spending years attempting to cloud that fact with a Slytherinesque smokescreen. And I know that despite what others think, Albus could be a right stubborn pain in the arse and undoubtedly would have used a wordless, wandless Imperius Curse on Severus if that would have ensured that Draco wouldn't have to be his killer, and that Severus would be able to continue as a double agent. So I *know* Severus did what he needed to do, and while I'm saddened that Albus is gone, I'm just as saddened that Severus had to be the one to do it.

"Unfortunately, not everyone else thinks that way, and any relationship between the 'Supporting Heroine to the Boy Who Lived' and the 'Questionable Double Agent' is bound to be fraught with public complications," she finished.

Severus stood and stepped behind Hermione, placing a hand lightly on the small of her back. "We know, Minerva, and believe me when I say that I've tried to impart that issue into Hermione's head, but her skull is rather thick. She's very insistent, and I find it difficult to say no to her."

Hermione elbowed him hard in the gut. *Annoying bastard*, she thought fondly. "What Severus means to say is that we've discussed the issue multiple times and are prepared to deal with the consequences, as we both have come to care for each other. Though we did think we might first approach some friends and acquaintances who can be trusted to keep a secret. Like you."

"Of course, *dear*, that's exactly what I meant to say," Severus added. Hermione couldn't see his face, but she was quite sure he was sneering, albeit in as friendly a manner as was possible for him.

Minerva, on the other hand, looked as if she was about to laugh.

"I'm so glad we could provide you with your entertainment for the evening, Minerva," Hermione said.

The Headmistress composed herself and said, "Yes, indeed. I must say that it is extremely satisfying to see Severus find someone who can not only match him wit-for-wit, but also can actually put up with him."

"Oh, I certainly can't best him in a contest, but I admit I do well enough in our verbal fencing matches that I don't feel as if I've always been trounced. And that's enough to keep him on his toes."

Hermione felt him squeeze her waist and congratulated herself on getting away with that comment when ran his fingers down her side. "Stop!" she gasped. "I'm ticklish!"

"I'm quite aware of that, Hermione."

"Bastard."

"Not literally, no," he retorted.

"Figuratively, then," she said, spinning in his arms to face him.

He just quirked a brow at her. "This surprises you?"

"As charming as this discussion may be," Minerva cut in, rising from her chair, "and as surprised as I may be by the developments between the two of you, I don't believe any of that was the original reason for my visit?"

Hermione and Severus broke apart and turned to face her.

"Um right, anyway," Hermione stuttered as she offered Minerva the Muggle wand that was still in her hand. "This is what we've been looking at. We can't figure out how an ordinary Muggle wand could be so resistant to transfiguration and charms."

Minerva took the wand and looked it over. She took out her own wand from her robes and quietly executed some incantations that Hermione didn't recognise. Neither did Severus, if the look on his face was any indication. After turning the Muggle wand this way and that, and frowning at it for several minutes, she eventually handed it back to Hermione.

"As odd as this may seem, that isn't a Muggle wand. Or at least, it wasn't made by Muggles. It's not an actual wand with a magical core like a witch or wizard would use, but it definitely has some sort of magic that's binding it in the condition it's in."

"*What?*" That was from Severus. "But they came from a completely Muggle joke shop in London!"

Hermione thought about it. "The joke shop was Muggle, Severus, but they don't make their own items. Was there a supplier's name on the case?"

"I don't remember," he huffed, crossing his arms over his chest. "I was a little more concerned with ensuring that the products were the ones I requested."

"Do you still have the box?" asked Minerva.

Severus frowned at her. "Yes, of course."

"Then go get it!"

He glared harder at her before somewhat rudely Disapparating from the middle of the room.

Minerva looked at Hermione and said, "He's still a grumpy sourpuss, isn't he?" She took her seat again, and this time Hermione sat down on the couch opposite her.

"Of course," Hermione replied. "He wouldn't be Severus if he wasn't. Wouldn't you be worried if he turned up all sweet and rosy?"

The Headmistress laughed. "I would, at that," she agreed. "I'm glad to see that you're not going into this with false impressions of completely reforming him. He may mellow in fact, he appears to have already done so but nearly twenty years of cutting himself off from pleasantries and positive emotions is bound to leave some permanent changes."

Hermione nodded even as she fiddled with the ends of her hair. "He'll never be sunny and happy, but I think we balance each other out well, actually. In the other direction, when I get too focused and obsessed, he pulls me back. He's meticulous, but his experiences have made sure that he generally doesn't have a one-track mind, which could have been a deadly mistake. Harry and the Marauders excepted, that is."

Any further conversation was halted by the abrupt reappearance of the man under discussion. He looked at the two women and promptly walked over to sit next to Hermione, putting the box he was carrying on the table between the three of them.

They all stared at it for a moment before Minerva leaned forward so that she could read the printing on the top. "Forgedged, Ltd," she read.

Hermione peered at it and burst out laughing. "I wish I had thought to ask you for this earlier, Severus, as it would have saved us hours of frustration."

"I hardly see how the company name is that hysteria-provoking, Hermione. Nor do I see why it would have helped." He frowned at her.

"Perhaps their tendencies to mix things up in this regard didn't spread beyond Gryffindor, Hermione," chided Minerva.

"Apparently not," Hermione agreed. "Severus, think of the twins' *names*."

"Weasley? I still don't see . . ." He trailed off as Hermione shook her head.

"Their given names," she corrected.

"Fred and George? Still, that doesn't oh, for Merlin's sake, they anagrammed it. How are they getting away with this? And why?"

Hermione turned serious. "Honestly?" she asked. "The first thing that comes to mind is that it's a somewhat twisted memorial to their father, the master of the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts. Both creating and confiscating."

"Damn it, that means we can't use them to pull this off! Aside from the fact that they'd know instantly we can't if they're about Arthur . . . as odd as these wands may be, I can't disrespect him . . ."

Hermione nodded.

"Which reminds me; why were you trying to Transfigure these in the first place? If they truly were Muggle items, you'd be in violation yourself," Minerva interjected.

Hermione and Severus looked at each other and then looked back to Minerva. "You don't want to know," they said in unison.

"I see," she replied. "May I at least trust that whatever you were planning would not have caused any physical harm or lasting damage?"

Severus pinched his eyebrows together, but nodded. "War aside, when have I ever done anything to the students or former students that would make you think otherwise?"

Minerva had the grace to look abashed. "You haven't, Severus, and I apologise. I suppose I was just thrown off-guard by Hermione's collaboration not that I think she would harm them, either! But I'm overly protective of those in the Order, I suppose."

"Quite understandable," Hermione said. "But I we " She looked at Severus, who nodded. "We promise that we won't do anything to them that they wouldn't do to others, and probably significantly less than they'd do to others."

"Very well." Minerva stood and crossed back to the fireplace, taking a handful of Floo powder from the dish on Hermione's mantle. "Since it sounds like the two of you have some planning to do, and it's getting late by now, I think I'll just head back to Hogwarts. And . . . Hermione and Severus . . . I *am* happy for you both, on a personal level. And I'll tell anyone who asks me that I think you're a good match."

"Thank you, Minerva," Severus replied, putting his arm around Hermione's shoulders. "That means a lot to both of us."

"Yes, thank you, Minerva." Hermione glanced at Severus. At his infinitesimal nod, she continued, "And we were actually hoping to ask one more favour of you. Would you be willing to mention us to a few other people who can be trusted not to talk about it especially to Harry or Ron? Remus, perhaps? The other teachers?"

Minerva looked at them critically for a moment before nodding her agreement. "I think that would be an excellent idea, and would be delighted to. Good night," she said, tossing the Floo powder into the fire and stepping through the flames. "Hogwarts Headmistress's office, password Military Tattoo."

After she was gone, Hermione turned to Severus and asked, "Now what do we do? With regards to the twins, that is."

"As my Muggle relatives would undoubtedly say, it's back to the drawing board," he responded. "But I can think of better ways to spend the rest of tonight."

Later, when Severus left, Hermione's clothes were a bit mussed and her lips were decidedly puffy, but she was quite happy about it.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 10

A response to the Potter Place Fall prompt challenge: #22. The Weasley twins come across Snape shopping for Potions ingredients. A commotion causes Snape to become distracted, and the twins promptly take advantage of this once-in-a-lifetime golden opportunity to slip Snape one of their "experimental" products. Hermione attempts to rectify their actions, and her interactions with Severus take an interesting twist.

Author's Notes: I am, as always, indebted to Scabbyfish for her time and effort beta reading. And just as a reminder, I don't own anything you recognize. Or recognise, if you prefer.

Ginny's head popped through the fireplace. "Hermione?" she called.

Hermione ambled out of her kitchen and into the living room. "Hello, Ginny. What can I do for you?"

"I was hoping you had some free time at the moment, actually. Harry is in a particularly good mood, and it occurred to me that it might be a good time for ah a visit?" She turned the comment into a question with a lift in inflection that matched the lift of her brows.

Hermione nodded slowly, understanding the actual question Ginny was asking. She didn't know if she was truly ready to face Harry over Severus, but it had to be done sooner rather than later. Minerva had received a positive response from the teachers and Order members she had spoken to. Remus had quietly talked to both Hermione and Severus on different occasions to give them his support. Despite their discretion, eventually someone would figure things out, and it might even make the *Daily Prophet*; it would be better to have faced Harry before than to have him feeling betrayed and angry. A betrayed, self-righteous Harry did not make for a pleasant friendship or in Ginny's case, engagement or marriage.

"Great!" Ginny said in a cheery voice that made Hermione think Harry was probably listening on the other end. "We'll see you in a minute."

"No, wait, Ginny give me a few minutes. I, um, need to change shirts spilled something on this one," Hermione fabricated.

Ginny narrowed her eyes but nodded. "We'll see you shortly, then." Moments later the fire was normal again.

Hermione quickly went to the bedroom to change tops to give credence to the fib (it seemed that some Slytherin deception tendencies were wearing off on her). Returning to the fireplace, she quickly tossed in a handful of Floo powder so that she could contact Minerva.

"Minerva?" she called as her head popped out into the headmistress' office.

"Yes, Hermione, what is it? You sound well, not right," Minerva responded. She was sitting in a wingback chair by the fire, reading and having a simple tea of cheese on toast.

"I'm about to tell Harry about Severus and I will you be available if things go so badly that we need someone to step in?"

Minerva placed her plate down on the table beside her. "Yes, of course, my dear. And good luck."

Hermione nodded her thanks and pulled her head back out of the connection. With a larger fistful of Floo powder she called, "Number twelve, Grimmauld Place", and felt herself spinning away. She stepped out into the library of Harry's house.

"Hermione!" Harry crossed to greet her with a hug. Ginny was nowhere to be seen, presumably giving them a bit of space. Hermione returned the hug with a forced smile before stepping back and brushing off her jumper and jeans. "Sit down, can we get you anything? Tea?"

Shaking her head, Hermione sat down in the closest armchair. "No, thank you, Harry, not tonight."

Harry seemed to recognise that she wasn't in a cheerful mood, as he asked more seriously, "What's wrong? Are you still angry with me over the greasy er, over Snape? I'm sorry I snapped at you about it, Hermione."

Hermione closed her eyes and kept herself from clenching her jaw and gritting her teeth again. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she could hear her parents lecturing about wearing the enamel down.

"Yes and no, Harry. And don't call him a greasy git."

"But he is one, you know," Harry said. "I'm sure he can't help it by now, but he just is. I really don't understand why you like to talk to him, but I suppose as long as it makes you happy, I can deal with it. I guess no one else is likely to ramble about the same research stuff that you do. But if he gets any ideas starts to bother you let me know."

Hermione felt her face pinch as she fisted her hands in her lap. "Harry, that's what I wanted to talk to you about, actually," she began.

"What? What has he done? Did he try something with you? I'll kill him! You're like my sister, I won't let him"

"Stop, Harry," Hermione interjected, cutting him off before he could finish building up a head of steam. "That's not what I meant. I mean, it is, but not that he was bothering me, that is to say . . . oh, drat it all, Harry. Severus and I are seeing each other."

Harry looked at her quizzically. "Yes, you told me that before. Dinner or whatever to talk about your research projects and all the latest potions stuff."

Hermione stared at him. *Is he really still that dense about men and women?* She thought. "No, Harry. I mean, we're seeing each other as in dating."

There was complete silence for approximately fifteen seconds. Hermione counted. before the explosion. "You're *what?*"

"Please, Harry, I know you don't like him." At Harry's look, she amended her statement. "I know you hate him, and while he doesn't hate you, the dislike and resentment is completely mutual."

"What right does he have to dislike or resent me?" Harry snapped.

Ignoring him, Hermione continued. "And it would certainly have been easier if I had been attracted to someone . . . well, easier. He's a difficult man, and while you've only seen some facets of his personality, none of them are free of issues. Add the fact that none of my friends like him, and it would have been much simpler to fall for someone like Seamus or Dean."

Harry's face contorted in disgust. "Attracted?" he spluttered. "But he's *ugly!* How can you be? Urgh! Do you mean to tell me you're having . . . I'm not even sure I can say it. It's about *sex?* With *Snape?*"

"It is not about sex!" Hermione retorted. "We haven't yet . . . that's none of your business, anyway. It's not a casual affair, Harry. If it had been, I would have let it run its course without burdening you. But it's not casual, and so I needed to tell you."

"Who else knows?" he asked bitterly. "Besides my fiancée, as I can now guess, based on how nervous she seemed about asking you over."

"We told Minerva first, and she told Remus and a few other teachers and Order members."

"Remus and Minerva know? But you didn't tell me?"

She closed her eyes. *First he doesn't want to hear it, then he doesn't like that he didn't hear it first. Typical.* "Minerva was more likely to be open to the idea than you were, Harry. And it was important to me, at any rate that someone be supportive of Severus. Ginny is supportive of me, but it has nothing to do with him. We asked Minerva to tell a few other people to gauge their reactions."

Harry didn't seem to hear her last sentence. "Of course it has nothing to do with him! He's a traitor! A murderer! He killed Professor Dumbledore, or have you forgotten?"

Hermione's eyes popped back open, narrowing at the same time. "How dare you! I am so tired of hearing you vilify a man who gave years of his life *years*, Harry! to do far more than you ever had to do in the war."

"I killed Voldemort!"

"Yes, and it took you how long to do that? A year, maybe, counting the search for the Horcruxes? Severus risked his life as an active spy for at least four years, and maintained a façade for another fourteen, give or take!"

"Is he that good in the sack, Hermione, that you can forget everything? How hideous he gets in a temper? Shrieking Shack, third year. Ring any bells? And you didn't see him as he was fleeing Hogwarts *disgusting.*" Harry's arms were crossed against his chest defensively.

"Damn you, Harry! I defended him long before he and I ran into each other and this all began." She was standing now, jaw clenched.

"And you were always blinded by his brains! Even after you realised that he was the Half-Blood Prince, you only temporarily stopped trusting him! He's a Slytherin; his ambition tops everything! Is he trying to get something from you for his research?"

Before Hermione could respond, Ginny burst into the room. "Harry, knock it off and sit down," she ordered. To Hermione's great surprise, Harry did just that. Ginny then turned to Hermione and fixed her with a meaningful look. Hermione sat, too.

"Now, then, both of you need to calm down, I think *yes*, both of you," she reiterated when Hermione started to protest.

Hermione took a deep breath. "Fine," she said icily, "but I don't know if I want to stay around much longer." She dropped her head onto her arms on the side of the chair. She had known this would be difficult, but Harry's attitude was cutting her even more deeply than she had expected.

There was a silence, and then she heard a shuffling that approached her seat. Harry's hand dropped onto her shoulder. "Hermione," he said dispiritedly, "I just don't understand." Apparently Ginny had managed to calm him down, at least temporarily.

She lifted her head to look at him. He was kneeling beside her, so she didn't have to crane her neck to meet his eyes. "I know, Harry, and to be honest, I'm not sure I do, either. Or that he does. It just happened. We were enjoying bantering about academic topics that I can't talk to you and Ron about, and that's attractive to me. It just spiralled from there."

Harry tipped his forehead against hers and wrapped his arms around her. "Is this permanent yet?" he asked.

"No."

"Well, that's something, anyway."

"Harry! Don't I have the right to find happiness, too?"

He sighed. "Of course you do. I just *well*, I admit, I'm hoping it won't be with Snape. I'm hoping that this is just a novelty that will eventually wear off."

Hermione pulled back and crossed her arms. "That's not going to happen, Harry, at least not any time soon. I can't help that I fell in love with him!" She gasped and stood up, barely avoiding Harry's head as she did so.

"What? I thought you said it wasn't permanent?" Ginny jumped in.

Hermione had turned her back on them, though, as she processed what she had just said. Did she really love Severus? She must, if she was willing to brave Harry and the wizarding world, not to mention, eventually, her parents, to be with him.

She faced her friends again and found that Harry had followed her lead and stood as well. "It's not permanent yet, and I don't know if he loves me. He's said he cares for me, though, and from him, that's a fairly serious statement." Hermione waited, her heart racing and her body tense, for Harry's response.

He looked at her steadily, as if searching for an answer to a question he wouldn't articulate. After nearly a minute had passed, he said, "I don't know what to say, Hermione."

I had hoped . . . well, you know what I had hoped. I thought we'd all be together."

Ginny stepped up next to him and laid her hand on his arm. "Harry, it wasn't going to happen," she chided softly. "Hermione being with Snape Severus," she corrected with a look at the woman in question, "doesn't have anything to do with it. You know that."

"I know," Harry sighed, running a hand through his messy-as-usual hair. At the sceptical look on Hermione's face, he continued. "I *do* know, really, but I can't like it. It was such a happy thought. And then I assumed you'd find someone else and things would work out so you'd still be nearby all the time, maybe still live near us. But with Snape..." He trailed off.

Hermione nodded, but could feel tears forming in her eyes. "I know, but Harry, I was drifting apart anyway because now that we're done with school and the war is over, we just don't have much in common except past experiences and enjoying each other's company. I love you all, and I want us to still be part of each other's lives, but at an everyday level, it's just not there."

"But . . . Snape . . . how can I?"

"You don't have to, not yet, Harry. Eventually, maybe, quite possibly, but not just yet."

Harry put his hands on her arms and tipped his head down so their foreheads touched again. "He's always been a git to all of us, Hermione. I'm going to worry."

She smiled. "I know, but he treats me very well, Harry. He didn't hate me the way he hated you or more to the point, the way he hated your father and let it spill over onto you. So I think he found it easier to overcome it with me." She ended by putting her arms around his waist for a hug, which he immediately returned before stepping back.

"Well, give me some time. I'll try, okay?"

"That's all I ask, Harry," she said with relief.

A *whoosh* was accompanied by booted footsteps as Severus arrived in the library's fireplace. The unexpected arrival, however, had him facing three wands from the room's current occupants.

Unsurprisingly, Hermione was the first to recover and shove her wand back into her robes. "Severus! What are you doing here?" she asked a bit warily, despite her happiness at seeing him.

Severus dusted himself off and crossed his arms. "It was taking you a long time, and Minerva and I were concerned that Potter had reacted by trying to figure out if I had somehow jinxed you," he sneered.

Just as he finished speaking, Minerva appeared behind him in the fireplace with another *whoosh*. "Severus, I did not say that; you did," Minerva stated firmly as she stepped out. "I'm sorry, Hermione, I assumed he knew you were here and thought he could use some company while waiting. I obviously made a mistake."

Hermione sighed. "It doesn't matter, Minerva. Severus, everything is just fine, and I was just leaving. Shall we go to your place or mine?" she asked in a tone clearly meant to indicate that the conversation was over.

Harry and Severus, however, both ignored her, choosing instead to stare each other down. Severus, to Hermione's surprise, broke first. "Very well. Your flat," he stated brusquely.

"Here now, I thought you said he treated you well, Hermione!" Harry put a hand out to restrain her.

"I also said that he found it easier to ease off around me than around you, Harry. And you're not exactly looking receptive to his presence, you know."

Harry had the grace to look a bit sheepish. "Uh right," he said before snapping back to a frown. "Snape, you'd better treat her well. I believe my duelling and Occlumency skills have made a complete turnaround since we last faced off at the end of my sixth year."

Severus raised a brow. "Presumably so, given that you're still here, and Voldemort is dead, with minimal additional casualties." He continued to watch Harry while he held his hand out to Hermione.

She stepped over to him and bypassed his hand, sliding her arm around his waist instead. Severus glanced down at her with a grimace, but put his arm around her shoulders anyway. Hermione knew he generally preferred to avoid public displays of affection, but since he was here, she felt the need to make a visual statement. Not a huge one, but something. She squeezed his waist in thanks and turned back to Harry and Minerva, who had moved to stand next to him.

"We'll leave now, Harry, and give you some peace. Thank you for inviting me, Ginny. Minerva, would you like to come back to my flat for a cup of tea?"

Minerva looked at them steadily, then turned to Ginny. "No, thank you, I was actually hoping to spend some time with Harry and Ginny since I'm already here it's been quite a while since I've seen them. May I impose, Ginny?"

"Of course, Minerva, it's never an imposition."

"Excellent. Well, be off with the two of you," Minerva stated firmly.

Hermione nodded and nudged Severus to leave first. After he stepped into the fireplace and disappeared, she looked back and said, "I'll be back soon," before disappearing in another swirl of green.

She arrived back at her own flat to find that Severus had already removed his outer robes and was waiting to help her out of the fireplace. He brushed off her jumper and avoided her eyes.

"Severus, what is it?" she asked.

He did glance up at her then. "I'm sorry, Hermione. I shouldn't have barged into Grimmauld Place like that. I was just damn it, I was worried."

She frowned and stilled his hands with her own. "You thought he'd hurt me?"

"No, not physically, of course. But I was afraid he was upsetting you." He tugged her over to the couch and sat down, pulling her down next to him and wrapping his arms around her.

Hermione snuggled into his embrace and rested her head on his chest. "Of course he was going to upset me, but I thought it went fairly well, all things considering. I'm not looking forward to telling Ron, but that can wait, unless Harry does it anyway. In which case I can justifiably be angry with both of them, and ignore them both until they cool down. Or until Ron explodes, whichever comes first."

"Interesting plan."

"It works for me." She shrugged and wrapped her arms around him.

After a few minutes, Hermione leaned up and kissed him. He responded gently, moving his lips slowly, softly slipping his tongue in to touch hers. She slipped her hands

around his neck and tangled her fingers in his hair, causing him to tighten his arms around her.

It wasn't enough tonight. Given Hermione's recent stunning conclusion that she loved this man, she desperately wanted to express it in a very fundamental way. She shifted so that she was kneeling next to him, then moved her leg to straddle him on the couch. She could feel his erection straining and ground herself against it for a few minutes.

Then, taking a mental breath, she scooted back just enough to slip her hand down the front of his trousers and pants to touch him. At this addition to their typical routine, Severus pulled back from the kiss and looked at her quizzically.

"Please, Severus?" she asked.

"Hermione, I assure you, I'm not objecting. But I haven't wanted to push you, and I want to be sure that *you're* sure of anything else we might do."

She pulled her hand back and reached up to feather her fingers over his cheek while smiling softly. "I love you, Severus," she said. His eyes closed, and he briefly pressed his cheek against hers, gathering her tightly in his arms. "I had a bit of a revelation tonight while talking to Harry," she continued. "I knew that I cared about you. I thought it might be love, but it struck me so strongly tonight that I knew I had to tell you."

She heard him take in a deep breath and let it out. "I had hoped . . . but I didn't want to assume . . . was afraid to believe . . . I undoubtedly won't say it as often as I should, but I love you, as well, you know," he said. Then he frowned. "Do you mean to tell me I owe Potter for you coming to this realisation?"

"And if I say yes?"

"Then I will endeavour to be more pleasant to that annoying pain in my backside," he grumpily responded.

Hermione smiled. "I would appreciate it if you would do that anyway. I'm sure I would have come to this realisation shortly myself, but I suppose it's accurate to say that my confrontation with Harry triggered it to come about sooner."

"Oh, very well."

She leaned back in to kiss him again. His willingness to work past his resentment and dislike of Harry said more to her than any grand romantic gestures would. Which, she reasoned, was a good thing, as she didn't consider herself the type to inspire grand gestures, and he certainly wasn't the type to give them, anyway.

And besides, right now she wanted other kinds of gestures. She stood up and pulled him to his feet, leading him away from the couch and towards her bedroom door. He paused and held her back at the threshold.

"Hermione," he murmured, "is this truly what you want? I have no expectation that a declaration of love means that we will further our physical relationship."

She pressed herself up against him before answering. "I'm very sure, Severus. I've wanted this for some time now, but was hesitant to move forward. Now I'm not."

Severus smiled back at her and dipped his head to capture her mouth again. His hands came up to her waist and slipped beneath her jumper and started pushing it up. He hesitated when he reached her breasts, and Hermione decided she needed to take matters into her own hands. She stepped back and pulled her jumper off, then toed off her shoes and removed her jeans and socks. Standing before him in just her underwear, she watched his eyes move up and down her body hungrily.

Slowly, as if waiting for her to refuse, he stepped closer and reached out to trace a single finger from her chin down her throat, over her breast, and around behind and over her bum. Hermione closed her eyes and tipped her head back. She felt him bring both hands around to pull her up against his erection once again, then move one hand up her back to hold her tightly as his lips moved on her neck, alternately nipping then soothing with his tongue.

"Too many clothes," Hermione gasped. When he moved to unclasp her brassiere, she pushed him back and opened her eyes. "I meant you! You can get to me in a bit."

He smirked, but quickly began to remove his frockcoat. She stared at his hands as they efficiently dealt with the long row of buttons. "Enjoying this?" he asked.

"If I wasn't going to enjoy this, I assure you that it wouldn't be happening," she retorted hotly.

Minutes later he had stripped the frockcoat as well as the white shirt he wore beneath it and had removed his boots and socks. Hermione stopped him before he started on his trousers.

"Mine," she said simply, moving her own hands to the buttons. She slowly unfastened his trousers and hooked her fingers inside his pants, catching both and manoeuvring them down over his jutting erection. She paused and sank to her knees, leaning over to kiss the tip before continuing to remove the remainder of his clothes.

He moaned, and Hermione decided that this was behaviour to be encouraged, so she carefully took him into her mouth and ran her tongue along the underside, starting at the tip and going back as far as she could, then back up again, ending with a swirl around the mushroom-shaped head. He moaned again, his hands fisting in her hair.

Severus didn't let her continue for long before he pulled her up and plundered her mouth with his own, all the while gently pushing her backwards until she fell back onto her bed. He quickly yanked off her remaining clothes and began suckling at her breast while his fingers slid along her stomach until they slipped through her hair and found her clitoris. Circling it for a minute, he shifted to the other breast before leaving his thumb on her clitoris and slipping two fingers inside her.

It was Hermione's turn to moan at the stimulation of his mouth and fingers. "Please, Severus," she breathed. "I need you."

"Not yet," he murmured, licking his way from her well-laved breasts down to join his fingers. "Soon, but not yet." He sliced his thumb along one side of her pleasure nub as his tongue darted around the other side and the two fingers inside her thrust in and out.

"Oh, love, oh, oh..." she moaned. "I'm so close . . . please, I want you inside me."

He kept up the tantalising suckling and teasing until she was on the verge of orgasm. Just as she felt the beginning of the fluttering that meant one was imminent, Severus pulled away. She cried out and reached to meet him as he slid back up her body, but held himself back just before he thrust himself inside.

"Contraception?" he gasped.

Hermione groaned. "Yes, yes, daily Muggle pills, they work better for me. Now, damn it!"

At her reassuring response, he immediately pushed into her wet passage. She shattered and convulsed as he pumped once, twice, three times.

"Hermione, oh, my Hermione." Severus slumped against her, but kept himself in check as he pressed himself tightly inside, wrapping his arms tightly around her and shifting so that she was on top but they were still connected.

Severus pulled Hermione close against him and held her tightly, keeping them joined for as long as he could. They stayed that way, silently, for some time. Eventually, however, his softening penis slipped out of her warm passage, and the connection was lost. He let her slide off to his side but kept an arm around her as she laid her head on his chest. His hands tangled in her hair as he toyed with her curls.

"That was amazing, love," he said.

She lifted her head to look at him. "I like the sound of that," she murmured with a satisfied smile, propping her chin on her hands directly over his heart.

He didn't pretend to not understand. "My love," he repeated.

Hermione snuggled her head back against him. "Yes, that's it exactly. My love. I love you, Severus." She shivered and pressed her body closer to him. "But now that we're not expending all that energy, I'm getting rather cold."

Severus grunted his agreement and shifted so that he could swing himself up and scoop Hermione off the covers, just enough to pull them down. Depositing both of them onto the sheets, he yanked the duvet back up over them.

"Are you staying the night?" she asked sleepily. "I know it's early yet, but I'm exhausted."

He smiled even though he knew Hermione couldn't see it. Severus couldn't remember ever having been asked that particular question before. While he had been involved in a handful of relationships in the past, he had always been living at Hogwarts, and staying had been out of the question. He had avoided relationships during the summer months when he didn't have that excuse.

"Do you want me to?"

"Mmm . . . yes . . . please . . ."

"Then I'll stay." He leaned down to kiss her forehead as she slipped off to sleep. "Goodnight, Hermione."

"G'night, Severus."

Severus lay awake long after Hermione had fallen asleep in his arms. He was having trouble convincing himself that she was truly here with him. Or, technically, that he was here with her, given that they were at her flat. Something along those lines, regardless.

She was bright and sweet and having her near was like being able to bask in the sunlight that he had avoided for so many years. He had cultivated the image he had portrayed: the bat of the dungeons with rumours of vampirism, but most of all a creature of the dark. And the Dark. It had been a useful image. He had been the stereotypical nemesis for the students. They saw a one-dimensional teacher who terrorised all but his own house and didn't look further which meant they didn't see anything further, either. And that avoided all questions that might expose his true loyalties. The few who had reason to know had been remarkably hard-headed about believing, and didn't spread the information, thankfully.

But now . . . his black robes and buttoned-up frockcoat were a comfort, and he was loath to part with them. Nevertheless, being able to live outside the dungeons and smile when he wanted to was a welcome change. And Hermione she was the ultimate sunshine, the enveloping warmth he had never expected to feel. He had thought he would always feel deep-down cold after the events of the war. He would probably always have seeds of pain inside himself over killing Albus, but with Hermione's quiet faith, he was beginning to let go of the ongoing hatred of Albus for ordering it, and of himself for carrying it out. It was done, and he was trying to move on.

Severus woke quickly in the morning, keeping still as he assimilated his surroundings without opening his eyes. It took just moments before he realised that the fuzzy weight on his chest was Hermione's hair, but what was the furry lump under his hand? He slitted his eyes open just enough to peer down the bed. A large orange ball of fur was nestled against him under his palm. Apparently the ball of fur sensed his observation, as it lifted its head and stared back. What was its name again? Crookbanks no, Crookshanks. Severus warily offered his hand for a sniff and, at the satisfactory reaction, scratched the cat behind the ears.

"You know," Hermione murmured from somewhere in the vicinity of his chest, "Crookshanks was the main reason I could convince Harry to accept your messages through Remus during the search for the Horcruxes."

Severus shifted his hand from Hermione's cat to Hermione's hair, tucking it behind her ear so that he could see at least part of her face. "Good morning," he said. "How so?"

"He's half-Kneazle, and had proved his instinct for finding untrustworthy characters in our third year when he was constantly trying to attack Ron's rat. Wormtail, that is."

"And how did that convert to trusting me?"

He could feel her grimace. "*Trust* would be a bit of a stretch. I tried pointing out that Crookshanks had never once hissed at you or done anything to indicate he didn't like you, but that wasn't enough. However, Harry believed that the messages were accurate when I offered *them* to Crookshanks. Who promptly rubbed his face against them and curled up with them, as odd as that sounds." She sat up when she was done with her comments and smiled down at him.

Severus reached up to draw her into a good morning kiss, but she pulled away, shaking her head. He frowned at her askance.

"Morning breath. Mine, not yours," she hastily added, scrambling out of bed. "Sorry, just let me brush my teeth"

"It doesn't matter to me, Hermione," he interrupted, grabbing her hand before she made it across the room. "It's just a kiss, which will undoubtedly happen to us many times when our breath is less than perfect."

She winced. "My parents are dentists, I can't help it. Humour me, Severus, please?"

"Oh, very well," he grumbled. "But hurry back." He shifted so that he could watch her stumble across the room to the en-suite, stretching her arms above her head as she walked.

The power of suggestion hit him while she was in there, however, and he was waiting at the door when she came back out. "Go arrange yourself back on the bed I'll be back in just a few minutes," he said, dropping a kiss on her head as he crossed paths with her. "Do you have a spare toothbrush?"

"Under the sink," she replied with a smile.

Severus availed himself of the facilities, washed up and brushed his teeth before returning to the bedroom. He was pleasantly surprised to see that Hermione had taken him literally she was sprawled on the bed, propped up on the pillows, her legs slightly spread and her hands resting on her thighs.

He licked his lips as he slowly crossed the room and stopped at the foot of the bed. Kneeling on the edge, he put one hand on each of her ankles and slowly started moving up her legs, his eyes staying fixed on hers, until he had spread her thighs wide. He snagged a pillow and used it to prop up her hips, then paused and looked at her again. Seeing Hermione's lips tipped up in a half-smile and her eyes drifting closed, he quickly leaned forward and tongued her clit. Her whimpering response gratified him and encouraged him to continue. He kept his hands on her thighs, touching her only with his mouth. When her whimpering reached a crescendo he quickly shifted up her body, fingering her nipples at the same time he thrust inside her.

It was calmer, and sweeter, than it had been the night before. Severus wrapped his arms around her and held her close as they found a gentle grinding rhythm that had them both moaning in pleasure. When Hermione's cries peaked, and he could feel her convulsing around his shaft, he thrust rapidly just a few more times before he exploded inside her, holding himself tightly as far in as he could.

When he could speak again, Severus kissed her gently. "That wasn't what I was actually intending this morning, but I'm very glad it happened." He pulled her into his arms for a hug.

"Mmmm," she said. She squeezed him back, then reluctantly drew back. "But I suppose we shouldn't laze about all day." She yawned and closed her eyes. "All I really want to do is sleep, however."

"Perhaps you could doze while I nip back home to pick up fresh clothes? And could you be convinced to share your shower when I return?"

She opened an eye to look at him. "I suppose I could be convinced to share my shower. It's conservation of water, right?"

"Indeed. I'll be back in just a bit."

Though when he returned, he had to agree that very little water could possibly have been conserved while they washed each other and a bit more.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 10

A response to the Potter Place Fall prompt challenge: #22. The Weasley twins come across Snape shopping for Potions ingredients. A commotion causes Snape to become distracted, and the twins promptly take advantage of this once-in-a-lifetime golden opportunity to slip Snape one of their "experimental" products.

Hermione had pulled together a quick breakfast of scrambled eggs on toast, and now they sat in her kitchen, lingering over tea. Severus stared into his cup, a little out of sorts and ill-at-ease. Everything had felt natural and *right* up until breakfast. Though he had rarely spent the night at a woman's home in the past, when he had, it had been all about mutual pleasure and not at all about anything more.

In those previous encounters, however, he never stayed until dawn, much less the morning meal. Breakfast suddenly ventured into a territory that he had previously avoided entirely: domesticity and couple-ness. It implied wanting to see the person during breakfast. It implied commitment and long-term and all sorts of things he had never wanted before. Despite his being certain that he wanted them with Hermione, it was still very disconcerting.

Hermione seemed to have picked up on his discomfort and was quietly letting him be while she nursed her own tea and fiddled with her spoon. "Would you like another cup?" she asked.

Severus sighed and shook his head. He stood and offered his hand to help her out of her chair. Keeping her hand tightly in his own, he walked back to her living room and pulled her down with him onto the couch. He kept his eyes on their joined hands as he worried hers with his own.

Again she kept quiet while he mulled over his discombobulated thoughts. Finally he looked up at her to see her eyes on him, concerned but calm. "I'm sorry, Hermione," he began. "I suppose I hit a bout of nerves. Out of character, I realise, but it happens. I'm out of my element at this point. I suspect that you have more experience sharing a morning meal with a member of the opposite sex. Hogwarts aside, of course. It doesn't exactly count when the entire staff is in attendance."

Hermione ran her hands up and down his own, up his wrists and down, and finally laced their fingers together. "I would hope that you were getting past the need to *be* in character around me, Severus. If you need silence, or need to get angry, or need to be happy, it's all part and parcel of being together. If I don't realise what you need, tell me. We can make this *us* work, I truly believe that. But there *is* work involved."

"I'm a cantankerous sort, you realise. Prone to grumpiness, rudeness, and a short temper. And then there's the matter of my ongoing animosity towards your best friend." He stumbled over the last bit. It wasn't fair to make Hermione choose between them, but he had no idea how to reconcile his dislike of Potter admittedly, partially Potter's father more than Harry himself and his love for Hermione.

She rolled her eyes at him and lifted a hand to his cheek, letting his hand to fall free. He immediately reached for her hair and pulled her close, tucking her against his side.

"Severus, you were an absolute terror to *us* including me for six years. I know that side of you. I can see you holding it in sometimes around me. I appreciate that you're restraining it, but I don't expect you to do so all the time."

"I don't want to frighten you, Hermione." His temper was an ugly thing, as she had seen when she was just a third-year at the Shrieking Shack.

"Does your anger change your feelings for me?" she asked.

"Of course not!"

She nodded. "And if I exploded in tears and yelled and screamed, would you realise that I just needed to get it out of my system?"

"Yes, but..."

"No buts. You have your temper and I have mine. Yours may be darker, but that's to be expected. You've had to live as if every day could be your last."

Severus just quirked a brow at that comment. It was rather an understatement, given that during the war he had frequently been in the position where every *minute* could have been his last.

She flushed. "Right. That was obvious. But you understand my point."

"Yes, I do. I'm not certain I agree with it, but I do understand."

"Good. Then, enough on that?"

He nodded. They certainly seemed to have discussed all the important bits.

"Excellent. Now, how is your knowledge of Muggle popular culture?"

The non sequitur had Severus nearly shaking his head in confusion. "Not thoroughly up-to-date, but passable. There is a working telly in my house, you realise. While I obviously could never watch any during the school year, I did occasionally entertain myself with it during the summers. And do periodically watch it now."

"Ah, I hadn't noticed. It hasn't exactly been something we've needed to entertain each other," she replied with a grin. "Have you ever watched *Star Trek*?"

"Original Series, The Next Generation, Deep Space Nine, or Voyager?" Severus enjoyed the look of astonishment that appeared on Hermione's face at his knowledge of the specific versions of the show.

She blinked and said, "Original Series. And is it overly rude to say that I am extremely surprised?"

Severus chuckled. "Hermione, I was the quintessential what was the term? *geek* during school. Wizards may not have the same technological gadgets, but the role is basically the same in the wizarding world as it is in the Muggle one. My father, as you may have surmised, was sub-par at best as a parent, and he hated the fact that by my very wizarding nature I was more powerful than he was. So he was happy to let me retreat to the telly during the summer holidays, as it was normal to him."

"I see."

The astonishment had given way to a look of disgust that suggested that she did see, as well as she could, at any rate. Severus was fairly certain her childhood had been ideal and sheltered, if a bit lonely as an only child. Still, her parents were dentists and she had always appeared solidly middle to upper-middle class. He filed away the questions for later, though, as she seemed to have a particular train of thought she wanted to follow.

"*Star Trek*, the Original Series?" he prompted, to get them back on track. "Why are you asking, anyway?"

"The not-Muggle-after-all wands caused plan A to backfire. So I've been mulling over a plan B. We should have had a plan B to begin with, but we didn't, so we'll just have to go from here. In fact, I'd venture to say that the extra elapsed time will go further to guarantee that the twins don't realise what's hitting them." Her smile would have fit in well in the Slytherin common room.

Severus slowly returned her smile. "What do you have in mind?"

"It depends on the requirements for a particular type of potion, as well your ingredients supply, because I'm assuming we don't want to have to go purchase anything special that might be traced back to us," she said with a touch of worry.

"Would you please tell me what it is?"

He quirked a brow at her hesitation. "Can you make a fertility potion for magical creatures?" she asked in a rush.

"Pardon me?" He couldn't possibly have heard her correctly.

"A fertility potion," she repeated.

Severus was completely stumped as to what this had to do with the twins, much less *Star Trek*. *What in Merlin's name could she be thinking?* I've never brewed one, but I know I've seen them in some of my books. I can't say it's something I've ever had need of before. I think all the ingredients were fairly standard."

"Wonderful."

"Can I reiterate how confused I am at the moment?"

Hermione nibbled on her lower lip. "I've long wondered at some of the *Star Trek* writers, whether perhaps they were actually wizards."

"How do you mean?"

"Did you ever notice that a Tribble bears a remarkable resemblance to a Puffskein or a Pygmy Puff?"

Severus closed his eyes. It seemed that Hermione possibly should have been sorted into Slytherin. He wasn't sure if he was encouraged or scared by that. "You aren't serious."

"That they resemble each other? Of course they do." A sneaky smile played around the corners of her mouth.

Severus' eyes shot back open. "That is not what I meant, and you know it, my dear. You cannot be serious about what you obviously plan to do with them."

"And why not? It's as good as a detention, since they have to figure out why it's happening. But, ultimately, it doesn't hurt anyone or anything, except perhaps their budget and their time and possibly their cleanliness and even that will only be temporary. The Pygmy Puffs are a very popular item. The twins keep complaining that they can't breed them fast enough. We're only fixing that for them. So, we're kind of doing them a favour. Except for the fact that they'll have to clean up after all the little darlings, which is where the worst of the detention comes in. Well, that and the Pygmy Puffs' lamentable tendency to stick their tongues up people's noses to eat their snot."

"I could have lived without that image, thank you very much. However, aren't they likely to assign the care to an assistant, causing the punishment to be inflicted on some other helpless idiot rather than those currently deserving of it?"

"No, they're very proprietary about taking care of them, actually. I believe they once caught an assistant trying to nick one to sell, black market so to speak, and since then they've been extraordinarily careful. So it would definitely cause them headaches personally, but would only be a temporary problem, as it will even out quickly, I would think."

"Please don't tell me you're planning on poisoning the food supply. Or using a Portkey to send the lot of them to some enemy location."

"You really do know your *Star Trek*, don't you? Everyone remembers the Tribbles, not everyone remembers what happened to them. No, I'm not planning on poisoning them. I just expect the extras to sell quickly."

"Very well, then. Let's see what we can do."

Hermione sat on a stool next to Severus as he quickly and efficiently retrieved various items from his ingredient shelves. He had had to move his current Ministry work off to the side, but fortunately it was at a stage where he could shift it without causing any problems. Apparently he didn't have any other projects underway at the moment; the Hogwarts hospital wing must be fully stocked.

The book with the correct recipe was open next to them. Hermione had noted that several of the ingredients were long-standing Muggle homeopathic solutions for infertility. Some of them were probably old wives' tales as far as Muggle fertility was concerned, but many of those tales originated from wizarding solutions, so that wasn't a surprise.

While Severus was busy working on the actual potion, Hermione was turning to the problem of distribution. Pygmy Puffs, like full-size Puffskeins, ate anything and everything. Which was great for feeding practicality, but not so good for trying to contaminate their food source. Despite the fact that she was fairly certain that the twins had a specific feed for them they couldn't be relied on to eat it. The potion needed to be difficult to detect, which meant that, first of all, it needed to not be visually noticeable. It would, unfortunately, become a bright red when it was complete, which meant dosing their water dishes wasn't feasible.

They would take a supply of the liquid with them, but Hermione was trying to identify a way to convert it to a powdered form that could be sprinkled on their typical solid food as well. The ideal situation, of course, would be if the twins provided something red for their food, such as tomatoes, but that seemed doubtful given how likely they

were to stain everything in sight. She assumed that they probably got some sort of food like dry cereal, though she'd never seen it. Severus would need to create a very finely grained powder that would be hard to see.

She flipped through a pile of books he had dropped beside her, and hesitated between several books on potion alteration methods. Each was from a completely different time period, ranging from twenty years ago to nearly one hundred years ago. She started to pick up the most recent, then changed her mind and went for the oldest, instead. Before opening the book, she glanced up and saw his fierce scowl of concentration as he worked through the unfamiliar brewing process.

Though Hermione hated that she was the source of his frustration at the moment, it was in some ways a relief to realise that he sometimes struggled, at least the first time through, with potions. Made-up spells aside, his actual potions notes from his copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* were intimidating to her, as they so frequently seemed to make no sense but were invariably an improvement on the standard method. Hermione knew she was intelligent, and clever, and logical. But Severus was brilliant in a completely different way. An Einstein kind of way.

She gently opened the book to the table of contents. Her eyes skimmed the cramped words, looking for likely sections. Nothing immediately matched her needs, so she set on a systematic method based on a mental calculation of probability of closeness. The first two sections she referenced had nothing, but the third ah! There. "Severus?" she asked.

"Hmmm?" He was stirring with one hand while the other hand opened up the next ingredient and measured it. Hermione shook her head at his efficiency only someone thoroughly ambidextrous could manage what he was doing. Useful talent. She fleetingly wondered if he was born with it or if he had developed it as a way to improve his duelling and spell-casting skills.

"I think I found it. There's a method here for charming the essence of the potion into dust that's what the book calls it, anyway. Reading between the lines, I think it creates micro-suspensions of liquid inside some sort of bubble, at a size that's so small that it looks and acts like powder."

"Read it to me," he responded brusquely. For a moment Hermione was back in his Potions classroom in the dungeons, being snapped at to get on with it. She shook her head to clear the image and did as he had asked.

He started nodding infinitesimally when she was just a few lines in. By the time she was done, he had taken to nodding broadly every time she finished a sentence. "Yes, definitely," he agreed when she finally finished. "That's exactly what we need to do, as odd as it sounds. Nice work, Hermione. You have a knack for knowing how to find information; not everyone can do that, you know. I'm terrible at it."

"But you found the right potion so quickly!" Hermione exclaimed.

"Yes, I did. But I had seen it before. My memory is excellent and once I've found something I'll almost certainly remember where it was should I ever need it again. And you saw my *Advanced Potions* textbook I can make up spells, and I have an uncanny knack for potion alteration. But while doing research finding something unfamiliar is not nearly as easy for me."

Hermione tipped her head to the side. "Do you mean to tell me that the great Severus Snape hold on, what's your middle name?"

He shrugged. "I don't have one."

"You don't?"

"No. Not everyone does, you know." The teasing note in his voice assured her that he wasn't offended or upset by the question as he continued the potion.

Hermione flushed. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to sound so dense."

He sent her an inquisitive sidelong glance. "Hermione, I wasn't indicating that I thought you did. It was a reaction, nothing more. You're a talkative person, so your reactions tend to be verbal. There's nothing wrong with that."

"I'm sorry," she repeated.

"Would you stop apologising?"

"I'm sorry." But she smiled as she said it.

He made a face at her. "That was deliberate."

"Of course it was. But what I had been trying to say was that I am sorry I'm being touchy about it. I seem to be having flashbacks of Potions class and feeling a bit inadequate and unequal."

He shook his head. "We're definitely not in Potions class, love. I do understand, though. But I assure you I'm not thinking about you as anything other than my lover and my project partner."

"In that order, I suppose," she said, grinning. "Typical male."

"Hmmpf. I don't think I should answer that."

"Good plan. But I think that 'partner in crime' would be a more appropriate moniker than 'project partner'. Disturbingly accurate, actually, given that I'm about to suggest that we sneak in at night to distribute the fertility potion."

He narrowed his eyes. "Why?" he asked. "You can easily say you can't find something and want to know if you left it there, or come up with some other excuse. Actually, I suspect you barely need an excuse. They're not likely to see through anything you come up with anyway. Clever in a twisted sort of way, but frequently seriously lacking in common sense."

"Very true," she agreed. "But even the twins won't miss the fact that I show up after weeks of absence and shortly thereafter the Pygmy Puff population explodes. And since it's possible, even likely, that word has made its way 'round to them about us, at least the dinner where we ran into Ron and Susan, I suspect that might raise their suspicions. They may appear a bit on the ne'er-do-well side, but they're innately suspicious."

"Excellent point. I hadn't taken into account the effect of potential gossip. I must say, I'm very glad to have your assistance on this, ah, project. You do have excellent insight into their minds. Though I am rather proud of the fact that I can distinguish between them."

Hermione nodded. "Me, too. They haven't figured it out yet, and I still refuse to tell them how I know. They're confounded by the fact that anyone can, yet Mrs. Weasley can't."

"Molly Weasley is a wonderful woman, but is slightly blinded by dealing with seven offspring. I don't think she's been able to distinguish between them in years, but if you spend enough time with them, deliberately watching for differences, you can spot them eventually. I suspect that Molly knew when they were infants, but eventually gave up and decided it wasn't worth it, given that she had to pay attention to all the rest of her brood anyway."

"I suspect you're correct. And I imagine that as a teacher, and in particular as a teacher who knew they were using information from your class to create all their pranks, you made a point of keeping tabs on them?"

"Indeed."

"Nice to know I'm not the only one who's figured out their shades of freckles."

His eyes glinted. "Who said anything about freckles?"

"So while 'researching topics' is apparently a weakness of the great Severus no-middle-name Snape, observation is not. Though this doesn't come as a surprise. Tell me," Hermione demanded. She was curious; after deliberately studying the twins for months, she had realised that George's freckles were a bit lighter in pigment than Fred's. If you knew what to look for, you could differentiate between them quickly, but if you didn't, it was nearly impossible. It was also more difficult to recognise one twin by himself. She hadn't realised there were any other noticeable differences.

Severus unabashedly grinned at her a very rare sight, indeed. "The other way to see differences would be to be present when something caused one. Madam Pomfrey is very skilled at what she does. When she's allowed to do it, that is. For minor cuts and scrapes, there's no reason to send someone off to the hospital wing, is there?"

"Nooo..." Hermione had a feeling she knew where this was going.

"Of course not. Any Hogwarts teacher could fix a basic cut in moments. But if it just conveniently was a tad too deep to heal without a scar, well, that would just be a shame, wouldn't it?"

"Where?"

"Fred, left hand, index finger, between the first and second joints, alongside the middle finger. It should come as no surprise to learn that he got it while attempting to prank someone. Jordan must have done something significant in order to have them risk it in my classroom. They never did that again." His malicious smile told Hermione all she needed to know about how unpleasant the results undoubtedly had been.

"And what did they do for detention?"

"They had to clean up after Peeves for a week. I thought it . . . appropriate."

She rolled her eyes in response. "And I suppose you conveniently mentioned said detention to Peeves?" Her voice was wry.

"Of course," he agreed.

Hermione shook her head, but put her book down and crossed to circle her arms around him. He hesitated, then hugged her back. Clearly he wasn't accustomed to random acts of affection. She'd have to work on that. And in the spirit of not discomfiting him further, she changed the topic of conversation.

"I'm still feeling as if we should do something about the joke wands. Have you thought about the issue further?"

He sighed. "Yes, and have come to no further conclusions, either. Every time I become absolutely determined to send an anonymous message to the Ministry about them, I see Arthur Weasley's grinning face and realise I somehow can't crush their memory of him he deserves so much more."

"I have the same problem," Hermione agreed. "Perhaps we should discreetly return to the Muggle joke shop and enquire further. Suggest that we were impressed with the quality of the product and wanted to see what other items they offered. Based on the results of that enquiry, we can decide on a course of action."

"In the meantime, shall we get back to work on our revenge . . . I mean, their most recent detention?"

"Definitely."

All their planning, and brewing, and forcing Hermione to learn to Apparate near-silently all of it had come to this. The following Friday night Hermione crouched in the alley behind Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, underneath a window that still shone brightly in the darkness. "The best-laid plans of fuzzy little things and men," she misquoted in a whisper.

Severus, looking decidedly grumpy in an undignified crouch beside her, murmured his agreement. "Annoying, unreliable, flaky idiots," he muttered. "Tweedledum and Tweedledumber strike again."

They had watched the shop for several nights in a row to make sure that Hermione's knowledge of the twins' night time routine wasn't out of date. While Fred and George had left at slightly different times every evening, it was always in the six to seven o'clock timeframe. Tonight, though, when they were planning to break in, the twins were still there at ten o'clock at night. Thankfully, Severus and Hermione had deliberately Apparated nearby rather than making a long-distance attempt to get through any anti-Apparation wards.

"What do we do now?" she asked quietly.

Hermione couldn't see his expression in the dark, but by the wry tone of his voice, she trusted that was a good thing. "This was your plan, Hermione, why don't you tell me?"

"Since you were the spy," she hissed back, "it seems that you would know better than me how to proceed when things go awry."

She felt his hand come up unexpectedly to rest on her back, and she flinched. Damned black robes, she thought. She glanced down, as useless as that was, at her own dark clothing, which Severus had insisted upon. She turned her head back in his direction and took a deep breath. "Well?" she continued. "Ideas?"

"As much as it pains me to try to explain this to a trouble-seeking, rushing-forward-into-peril, reckless Gryffindor," he began, rubbing his hand on her back at her snicker, "the best option is to just wait. The twins go out the front door every night, or just Apparate from inside, and it's dark and quiet back here. We could leave and return another night, but there's no guarantee it will be different."

"Very true," Hermione agreed reluctantly. She carefully scooted closer to him, still along the back of the building but slightly out of range of the shop's rear windows. "I suppose we're just lucky that they're only paranoid about the Pygmy Puffs. Much easier to avoid a small radius of alarm spells than a large one. Let's hope they haven't removed my magical signature from the inside spells."

"Best not count on it, Hermione. Rule number one for counterintelligence: never count on anything."

Hermione leaned against his shoulder and nodded. "I'm glad I could come up with an idea, Severus, but the execution of a plan that requires . . . ah . . . counterintelligence skills, also known in layperson's terms as breaking and entering in this case . . . well, let's just say it's a bit beyond me."

"This from a member of the trio that got into some of the biggest, and potentially deadliest, I might add, mischief ever seen at Hogwarts?" She could hear the disbelief in his voice.

She shrugged, trusting that he could feel it even if he couldn't see it. "I spent most of my time trying to be the Voice of Reason, and failing that, tagging along to attempt to help minimise the disastrous results."

He nodded against the top of her head. "Yes, I can see that. You did, however, prove eminently valuable once in the midst of those adventures, I believe. I fumed for days about the fact that you got past my potions logic puzzle to reach the Philosopher's Stone. Exceedingly annoying that you were able to do that. Especially as a first-year."

"As I mentioned to Harry, many wizards have no logic in the traditional Muggle sense at all. They don't have to, given that their very existence is *illogical* in the traditional Muggle sense," she replied. "Muggle-borns have an advantage there, I think. At the time, I wondered at it, actually, as we all assumed you were pure-blooded."

She sensed rather than saw his raised eyebrow. "I see. And now?"

"At the risk of inflating your ego even further than it usually appears to be, now I know it's just that you tip the scale towards brilliance."

His arm came around her and tightened into a hard hug as he rested his head against her own. "Hermione, love," he whispered. "You can't know . . ."

At his trailed-off response Hermione wrapped her own arms around his waist. "I can't know how much it means to hear that from someone other than Professor Dumbledore?" she guessed, wary of treading on painful memories.

He let out a breath. "Exactly."

"I suppose that everyone else just saw 'Dark spells' and didn't see your brains for what they were worth independent of that," she speculated.

"That is the short version of it, yes."

She nodded again. "Short-sighted idiots." The lights went out in the shop. "How long do we have to wait now?"

"A little while, at least, I'm afraid, to be absolutely safe."

"I'm following your lead on this," Hermione said before returning to the previous topic. "I'm glad you found your way out of that, Severus. You're a better man than you give yourself credit for."

"Only you see" He was interrupted by the sound of the back door opening.

Damn!

Hermione focused on breathing the way Severus had taught her. Not holding her breath, but shallowly and evenly inhaling and exhaling. She tucked her head up under his chin, knowing that her hair was probably their biggest risk of detection. She felt Severus slide his robes up over her head. And presumably his mouth and nose, as suddenly his breathing seemed louder to her. He was keeping watch with as little of his face showing as possible.

Encompassed in black cloth, Hermione had nothing to do but ponder what was going on and why someone the twins, she assumed had exited the shop from the back.

"Are you sure you want to do this, Fred?"

Obviously, that was George.

"I'm sure," Fred replied. "I know it's a nasty thing to sneak out and do, but we really want to avoid being found out until it's too late."

They were getting closer, and Hermione prayed they were far enough away from the wall that there wouldn't be an actual collision, at least.

George sighed loudly. "If you must, you must. But don't expect me to hold back Mum once she learns what you've done."

"Once it's done, it doesn't matter. Thanks." The twins were right in front of them now, but seemed to be too engrossed in their conversation to notice anything out of place around them.

Both twins suddenly Disapparated with loud cracks, and just like that, the risk was gone.

Hermione froze and waited for Severus to tell her what to do. Theoretically, only the twins had been in the shop and they were now free to go in, but the adrenaline pumping through her system made her think of all sorts of terrifying scenarios of getting caught.

Severus lowered his robes from her face and squeezed her gently. "All clear," he said.

Her deep breath was noisy in the quiet night, and she glanced around to confirm for herself that there was no one nearby to take notice. The alleyway was empty, and all the windows around them were dark.

"Give me a minute for my heart to calm down," she said, nearly panting as her adrenaline levels started to subside. "Or at least my breathing. How are you so calm?"

"Practice. And live experience," he replied dryly.

She slipped a hand up over his frockcoat to his chest. And frowned. "Yes, but even your heart rate is still slow and steady!"

"Practice," he repeated. "It's very difficult to keep your heart rate down, and it takes a lot of practice, but it can be done. Controlling your breathing is much easier nice and even, there." He rested his forehead against hers and led her through controlled breathing.

A few minutes later she was calm again. Her heart was still beating faster than normal, but it wasn't the thumping double-time that it had been before. "I'm ready now."

She felt him pause and look down at her, but all she could see of his face was a shadow. His fingers came up to caress her cheek. "Very well. Let's move quietly to the back door."

He stood and offered his hand, enjoyably but unnecessarily sliding her along his body as he pulled her up. She grinned. "Naughty Severus."

"You have to expect that when you've put thoughts in my head by asking me to brew and deliver a fertility potion, my dear. Regardless of the fact that it's not designed for wizards, it puts this wizard to thinking of certain related activities."

Hermione snorted. "I'm quite certain it would put any wizard to thinking of those certain activities. It just puts you thinking about those activities with me."

"I believe the Muggle expression is 'caught me'," he replied sardonically. "Come, we're wasting time. And I would much prefer to get this over with."

The rest of the plan went off without a hitch, despite their earlier scares.

"Child's play," Severus harrumphed as he avoided the magical alarms and sensors, Hermione simply slipping by after testing to confirm that Fred and George hadn't removed her from the 'approved' list. While Severus carefully sprinkled the fertility potion powder over the dry food that was indeed in dishes of the Pygmy Puff cages, then moved onto the storage container for the rest of the food, Hermione slipped over to the counter and stuck her hand beneath. She found exactly what she was expecting to find and quickly produced a small sealable jar from her pocket to nick a bit well, maybe more than a bit in. Severus was busy paying attention to avoiding Pygmy Puff tongues and didn't notice what she was doing. Within ten minutes they were back outside and Apparating to the house on Spinner's End.

"Going by the normal reproduction cycles of the Pygmy Puffs, we should see the results in about a week, I think," Hermione theorized. "It's a little uncertain, as it took a while for Fred and George to work out a strain that could reproduce independently rather than being sterile. The gestation time is much shorter than that of a Puffskein, but despite that, the Pygmy Puffs don't seem to be able to reproduce nearly as often. This, presumably, should help cure that."

Severus looked at her questioningly. "Indeed, and the fact that this particular variation of the potion has very mild aphrodisiac properties won't hurt. But that brings me to something that I didn't think to ask you. Is it possible that the twins will see them in more-frequent acts of reproducing, so to speak, and therefore the element of surprise will be lost?"

"Oh, no," Hermione said with a devious smile. This was one of those times she was immensely proud of the research and record-keeping she had done for the twins, and she was quite sure the smugness carried through to her voice, but she simply couldn't help herself. "While it is possible for Pygmy Puffs to mate, I'm fairly certain they are primarily parthenogenetic and therefore generally reproduce asexually. And they do typically only 'reproduce' at night, anyway. So I don't think the surprise is likely to be ruined."

"I see."

"Now, Severus, you've been very patient tonight. Obviously, the implementation of my plan had all sorts of potential pitfalls, but you didn't complain. I think you deserve a bit of reward."

Severus quirked a brow at her.

She smiled back. "While you were busy contaminating the food supply, I was busy collecting . . . evidence . . . of their past transgressions."

"You were, were you?" he asked, eyes narrowing.

"I was indeed. And just to make sure that the efficacy of this can still be proven," Hermione continued, taking the small jar out of a pocket and holding it in front of her, "I thought we might experiment with it. Just to show that it still lasts for hours, of course."

Severus stepped forward and took the 'evidence' out of her hand. "I think we could find some excellent proof of past transgressions with this. Particularly if we adjourn to my bedroom now."

"That was exactly what I had in mind." Hermione turned and dashed up the staircase ahead of him.

Author's Notes: (At the end this time, because they're unusually long.) Once again, I must thank Scabbyfish for leading me out of my erroneous Americanism ways and polishing up my prose and grammar at the same time. It's also been a while since I've acknowledged Elfarren for her initial plot read-through, which was (and still is) greatly appreciated.

In addition to my thank yous, I also need to note that this chapter had several sections that were inspired by other sources. In retrospect, I believe the section about Severus' ambidexterity was subconsciously inspired by Quillusion's Soul Searching. And I'm quite sure that the segment about controlling heart rate and breathing was inspired by Jo Beverley's Devilish, though, once again, I didn't realize this as I was writing it. Finally, to be scrupulously honest, the entire "counterintelligence" scene, in particular the breathing lessons, likely had a smattering of inspiration from Suzanne Brockmann's Navy SEALs stories.

That sums up the inspirations that I am aware of. If there are more, and it's quite possible that there are somewhere, then I haven't realized it yet!

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 10

A response to the Potter_Place Fall prompt challenge: #22. The Weasley twins come across Snape shopping for Potions ingredients. A commotion causes Snape to become distracted, and the twins promptly take advantage of this once-in-a-lifetime golden opportunity to slip Snape one of their "experimental" products.

Author's notes: Once again, my thanks go out to my beta, Scabbyfish. And this time, my apologies go out to my readers who have been waiting for an update. Real life caught up with me for a bit. I am doing everything I can to get the next (and final) chapter out faster!

Severus followed Hermione upstairs and into his bedroom. She had already lit the lamp and was removing her clothing by the time he got there just a few seconds after her. He dropped the 'evidence' on the edge of the bed and reached for her before she stripped her undergarments. She stood before him, open and inviting, perfectly relaxed in her near-nakedness, unlike other women he'd been with. They had preferred the dark. Severus pushed the thought of anyone else out of his mind and focused strictly on the here and now. Hermione was *his*, and he intended to enjoy her for as long as he could. Forever, if he had any say in the matter.

But that was for later. For now, he reached a hand out and dipped into one of the cups of her bra, running the tip of his finger over her nipple. It immediately hardened, and he continued to twirl it around for a moment before pushing Hermione back on the bed and leaning over to lave it with his tongue through the flimsy material. Her responsive moan shot straight to his groin, and his semi-erect penis was suddenly painfully tight inside his trousers.

Severus shifted his mouth to her other breast as he snatched the bag of Can-Touch Talc from beside them. He fumbled with the closure due to his split attention and pulled back with a grunt to work out the knot. Hermione's eyes were closed and her hands had drifted into his hair. *Perfect*, he thought, *if she'll just keep them closed for a few seconds longer.*

He scooped a bit of powder out of the bag with one hand and pulled her bra cups down over her breasts with the other. A quick dab on each nipple followed again by his tongue swirling and his mouth suckling ensured that both of them would particularly enjoy this. He could feel his mouth tingling with the increased sensation as the powder was absorbed by both their bodies. Hermione's hands tightened in his hair and held him so close he had to tilt his head so that he could breathe, and her moans were exponentially increasing in volume.

Severus shifted back and forth between her breasts with his mouth while his fingers continued to work whichever was unattended by his lips. He kept all contact strictly above the waist, yet Hermione's hips were beginning to writhe and seek contact with his. Determined to take his time, he shifted his hips further to the side to avoid the temptation of grinding into her. Moments later, Hermione cried out and convulsed in orgasm.

"Oh heavens, oh Severus, oh oh oh!" she cried. Severus gently lapped at her breasts as she calmed down. Flushed, she opened her eyes. "I've never come like that before."

Severus knew his smile was predatory, but he quite simply didn't care. In fact, he was rather pleased about it. "Mine," he said, snaking his hands underneath her back to release the clasp on her bra before tossing it aside. "Mine," he continued, slipping his hands down to her knickers and sliding them down her legs before sending them the same way as her bra.

He kept his eyes on hers as he took another scoop of the Can-Touch Talc and spread her legs, only breaking her gaze when he looked down to dribble it on her clitoris and into her now-wet folds. His fingers followed to massage it around and into all the crevices and up into her passage, aiming for her g-spot.

"Oh, oh . . . mmmmm," she half-whispered, half-whined as she thrust her hips up at him, seeking contact.

"Mine," Severus said one more time before situating his shoulders between her thighs. He blew gently on her engorged clitoris and her knees came up to squeeze his ears. He pushed them back down onto the bed and held them in place with his elbows as he leaned forward to swipe his tongue through her wetness.

She lasted even less time than she had with the nipple stimulation. In just four strokes of his tongue she shattered and screamed his name. He quickly stripped off his own clothes and slid up to kiss her with her own taste still on his mouth. Just as he moved to thrust home, she shifted around until she was upside-down underneath him. Severus braced himself on his elbows and glanced down between their bodies.

Hermione grabbed the bag of Can-Touch Talc and scooped some out. Her mouth unerringly hit the tip of his cock and she sucked it in as far as she could. Her tongue swirled even farther towards the base before she removed it. He groaned and pushed forward again, desperately on tenterhooks as he waited for what he assumed would come next.

He wasn't to be disappointed. Hermione rubbed the powder all over his penis and then delved back onto it, sucking and nibbling, running her tongue around the edges of its mushroom-shaped head. She found the particularly sensitive spot right at the underside of the tip and teased him again and again.

Severus' head fell forward, only to have his nose connect with her soaking-wet folds. He backed up just enough to greedily slurp up the juices that were before him, running his nose over her clit as he did so. She hummed and moaned in her throat as she continued her own oral ministrations, and the vibrations were nearly enough to send him over.

He let his cheek rest against her thigh as he moaned. "Hermione, oh, Merlin, please, Hermione..." He reached down and tugged at her arm. She obligingly turned and scooted back into proper alignment with his body.

Without entering her, Severus ground their hips together for another spot of excessively sensitive stimulation thanks to the cantharis. They both groaned before indulging in a feverishly sloppy kiss. He moved his lips along her cheek and nipped at her ear as she reached down and held his bum tightly, keeping them so close to that oh, my, there it was. His cock slid smoothly inside her and oh, the heightened feelings were spectacular.

Hermione agreed rather vociferously. "Severus oh my, Severus, feels so amazing harder, faster..."

Severus was happy to oblige. He pounded into her, grinding his pubic bone against her clitoris on every down stroke. He could feel his balls slapping against her arse, which was damp with the juices that had seeped out of her.

He wrapped his arms around her and buried his face in her neck as he continued thrusting, desperately trying to hold himself back until she came again. As her moans increased in length and volume, he shifted his thrusts to give more of a circular motion until finally she came apart in his arms. The convulsions irrevocably triggered his own climax as he thrust hard a last few times and then held himself deep inside her.

Glancing down, he realised she had actually passed out from the intensity of their shared pleasure. "Mine," he whispered as he slipped off her, gathered her close and held her tightly. And promptly fell asleep.

Hermione slowly drifted back to consciousness to the tune of Severus' soft snores beside her. Keeping her eyes closed, she smiled and twisted her face more securely into his side. His arms tightened around her, and she peeked out from under her eyelashes to see if he was awake. No, just an instinctive reaction, which made her smile even more broadly.

She muddled around inside her imagination while dozing on and off, still tingling from the afterglow and the Can-Touch Talc, given that it would last several more hours. Her fuzzy mind moaned at that, and she squirmed against Severus' side as the wetness seeping out of her teased her still-sensitive clit and g-spot.

After a few unsatisfying minutes she shifted her leg over him and started grinding against his thigh in earnest. The direct pressure wakened him, and his eyes opened just before he sealed his lips to hers and plundered her mouth with his tongue. His hands came around to clasp her bum as he slid his leg up to better give direct pressure on her clit, and in short order she was once again spasming with pleasure.

He broke away from her mouth and pulled her flush against his body so that his straining erection was pressed against her belly. "The only problem with the cantharis, love," he said, "is that it lasts for *hours*. At the risk of sounding crude, we're going to fuck ourselves raw."

Hermione didn't see the problem with that scenario. Not that she'd want to do this on a daily basis, or even a weekly basis, but once in a while, for a treat? Certainly. "Then we'll just have to kiss each other better, won't we?"

Severus agreed, and they did. Several times over.

A few days later, Hermione woke to hear someone yelling from her living room. *The fireplace . . . someone must be calling via Floo powder* she thought sleepily. She wriggled out from underneath a sprawled Severus, donned a robe, and stumbled through the doorway, thankful that the fireplace did not provide a view through to her bedroom. The sunlight indicated that they had both slept in far longer than usual. She didn't think she was late to work yet, however.

Ron's head was sitting in the flames. "Hermione," he stuttered. "I was about to give up and assume you had already left." He looked her up and down, his eyes narrowing. "It's nearly time for you to be at the Ministry, but you're not dressed? You're always dressed and whatever right away in the morning. But you look like you've been shagging"

"Stop it right there, Ronald Weasley," she interrupted, all traces of sleepiness vanishing. "You have no business judging my life, especially in that tone of voice."

He flushed as red as his hair, but continued digging a hole for himself. "You didn't want to shag me, but you went and found someone else? Wasn't I good enough?"

Hermione rolled her eyes, took a deep breath and counted to ten before exhaling. "Ron, you're talking utter nonsense. I broke up with you for reasons completely unrelated to sex, and you know it. Furthermore, haven't you been seeing Susan? Aren't you being a bit hypocritical? And what are you here for, anyway?" she huffed, folding her arms across her chest to better keep her robe tightly shut.

"Susan knows I'm talking to you," he said defensively. "She wanted me to invite you over to dinner, actually."

"If you're that involved with Susan, what are you doing asking me about my sex life, which is clearly *none of your business*?" she ended on a bit of a shriek.

Ron's head bobbed in the fireplace looking slightly confused and thoroughly annoyed. "But . . . you weren't with anyone . . . who . . . when did you meet up with someone?" he spluttered.

Just as Hermione was about to respond, Ron's head disappeared from the fire and was quickly replaced with Susan's. "Don't mind my idiot," she said cheerfully. "You do look quite satisfied, Hermione, but he'll learn to keep his stupidity to himself, I promise. Lesson number one will be not hanging about in the fireplace like that; we're all adults now and quite entitled to each other's respect. Shut up, Ron." The last bit was clearly aimed back to her side of the connection.

"I'm sure it will only take clubbing him over the head several hundred times to get the point across, Susan, but thank you." Hermione's smile was genuine; she did hope that Susan and Ron would work out. "And if the invitation is still there, I would love to come to dinner, but"

"it might be awkward because of me," said a sleep-heavy voice from behind her.

Hermione deliberately didn't turn back to look at him but just extended her hand instead. He touched her hand, but returned it to her side. Still, she could feel his presence at her back. If she had turned, she would have missed Susan's eyes going as wide as saucers as Severus stepped up behind her. She also would have missed Susan gaping like a fish, which provided a twisted sense of satisfaction. Hermione felt guilty until she reassured herself that she wasn't with Severus to astonish or annoy her friends, but there was no reason she couldn't grab a little perverse pleasure out of it nonetheless.

"Ah, um, yes, I can see that might be awkward. Terribly impolite to exclude, but it would be . . . hmm." Susan's face had turned as red as Ron's had, and Hermione glanced back to check that Severus was at least reasonably dressed and not discomforting her friend in that way. His shirt wasn't buttoned all the way up, and wasn't tucked neatly into his trousers, but he was certainly decent though probably not dressed in a way Susan had ever envisioned let alone seen him.

"No, Ron, don't," Susan said impatiently, grimacing. Apparently her previous comment had made it clear to Ron that the cause of Hermione's disarray had arrived.

She disappeared from the flames and Hermione held her breath waiting to see what would happen. Severus gave her a brief hug, and she leaned up for a quick kiss, morning breath and all, as an apology for the scene that was undoubtedly about to unfold.

Sure enough, Ron's head popped back into view. "No way, Hermione." Apparently Susan had told him who was with her before he stuck his head through again. Ron looked straight at Severus before continuing. "At the restaurant you said it wasn't anything like this, Snape!"

Hermione felt Severus shrug. "It wasn't, then," he said. "It is now."

"You bastard! Hermione, he's using you!"

"For what?" Hermione chuckled.

"For sex, of course! You're young and sort of pretty and you have this stupid habit of being drawn to brains, of all things. Perfect for him, since no one else can see past his looks," Ron sneered. "Why wouldn't he take advantage of that?"

Severus stiffened. "Perhaps because I prefer to not insult and demean the woman I'm seeing? At least I don't go flaunting my ex-lovers in Hermione's face."

"Hermione's not just an ex-lover, she's still one of my best friends! What do you expect me to do?" Ron shouted.

"Treat her like one, rather than developing a Madonna/whore complex about her," Severus replied.

Ron screwed up his face in confusion. "A whatsit-who complex?"

"Never mind, Ron," said Hermione. "Truce, both of you. Ron, I'm sorry I didn't manage to break this news to you more gently. Severus, I'm sorry for the scene. Ron, let me tell you this: I'm happy. He treats me well, I promise. Isn't that what matters?" She stood firmly, jaw clenched, waiting.

"But he's Snape!" Ron cried before being yanked back out of the fireplace again.

Once more Susan's head returned. "Hermione, I'm sorry, but obviously this is a shock for him. I don't know how long it will take him to come around, but I'll make him . . . ah, does Harry know? Because if he doesn't, he will in five minutes."

"Yes, Harry knows. Ginny's been rather accepting of it and I think she's helping him work through it. Will you . . . ah, are you and Ron serious enough that you can help him with this one?" Hermione was certain her nerves were about to explode.

"I'll knock some sense er, we'll talk it through." She paused. "I don't pretend to understand, Hermione, but he makes you happy, I take it?"

Hermione smiled for the first time since the conversation started. "Yes, he does."

"Then we'll work it out somehow," the other witch said as she disappeared.

Hermione slumped back against the man behind her and tipped her head back onto his shoulder. "Hold me," she murmured.

He didn't reply, but his arms slid around her waist.

His presence and patience soothed her, and she calmed down in a matter of minutes. She could very much become accustomed to this. Preferably every day. In fact, perhaps it was time to test the waters....

"You do realise that since you're this good at calming me down, I'm going to have to marry you just to avoid committing homicide. Figurative fratricide, I suppose, since I think of them as brothers."

She was encouraged by the fact that he didn't seem to panic at this comment, but rather ran a hand down her cheek and said, "Hmm. I think I'd prefer to be married for other reasons, thank you, though I certainly can empathise with that one."

"Ah." Hermione was traditional enough to want to be the recipient of an actual formal proposal, so she opted to let the topic drop for the time being. If he were truly interested, he'd ask when he was ready. And now she had dropped the clue that she was ready whenever he was. In the meantime, she extricated herself from his arms and headed into the bedroom to complete her morning routine before leaving for work. Severus' footsteps were close behind her.

The following weekend they were seated, enjoying breakfast of sorts, given that it was once again past lunchtime. No Can-Touch Talc to blame for this one they had just enjoyed a comfortable evening listening to music, playing some good old-fashioned Muggle card games, and talking. Today they planned to do a little reconnoitring to investigate the results of their work the previous Friday. They also planned to visit the Muggle joke shop again. The details on the day's plans were a little fuzzy, but for once, Hermione was content to just let things unfold as they would. Harry and Ron seemed to have calmed down and more or less worked past the worst of their anger over the course of the week; certainly something this simple would readily unfold on its own.

Now they were enjoying a comfortable silence, something Hermione rarely practiced but nevertheless occasionally enjoyed. Severus looked pensive, even a bit withdrawn, but not so much so that she was worried. He had the same look on his face that she saw in the mirror when she was mulling things over. She suspected he was wondering if she was worth dealing with all the absurdity that her friends could, and would, dish out at him. She was wondering if he was willing to put up with it. Of course, she was also wondering if the worst was truly over.

Ron and Harry had taken turns ranting at her over the course of the week, but by the end, they were calming down. She hoped. It seemed like it would work out eventually, at least.

Roused from her musings when Severus stood and walked around the table towards her, she pushed her own chair back from the table with the intention of standing up. Before she could, however, he placed a hand on her shoulder with a gentle but firm push that indicated that she should remain seated. She looked up at him quizzically, but he put a finger to her mouth before she could ask any questions.

His serious demeanour concerned her, but he didn't appear to be upset, or angry. Just serious. Severus slowly sank down to one knee in front of her, and her eyes popped wide, her jaw dropping.

"Stop gaping at me, Hermione," he grouched, "or I'll never get through this."

She shut her mouth and forced her eyes to gaze at him normally. That comment had sounded more like Severus, and suddenly everything looked bright and cheerful.

He slowly inhaled and exhaled, then took both her hands from her lap and held them in his own, fiddling with her fingers.

Finally... "I love you, Hermione. I truly thought I would always be alone except for fleeting companionship, but you make me want more. I want to wake up with you every day, and be with you every night when we go to sleep. I want us to have *our home*, not your flat and my house. I've never wanted to be a hero, yet I find myself wanting to be able to take care of you and save you from pain. I can live without you, but I don't want to. Will you marry me?"

By the time Severus finished, Hermione could feel the tears running down her cheeks even as they ached with the width of her smile. This man, this proud, private, testy, and yes, difficult man had delved deep into the recesses of himself that he rarely showed even to her, just to make this moment meaningful and special and memorable.

She wanted to keep this memory in a well-guarded, private Pensieve so that she could revisit it as often as she liked. They were both stubborn, and were bound to fight, but this memory, if she could relive it, would go far to ease any future difficulties, she was certain.

She pulled her hands out of his and eased them up to slide them through the hair at his temples, around his ears, and down to his cheeks. "Oh, Severus, I love you, too. And of course I'll marry you. Hermione Snape. I do like the sound of that."

Severus blinked. "You'll take my name? Are you positive you want to do that? Quite aside from the difficulties it will give you in public, what about your professional career?"

"I don't want anyone to think I'm not proud to be your wife, Severus. My career is just getting started; it can handle a name change without a problem. And while it may be old-fashioned, I think it's important that children and both parents share the same family name." She stopped abruptly, concerned. "If you want a child, that is? Not now, but eventually?"

"My Hermione," he replied, scooping her up into his arms and settling her on his lap as he took her spot in the chair. "I didn't think you wanted children, and that was fine, because I never wanted them before now, either, but now"

"I don't want a Quidditch team," Hermione interrupted. "One child would be nice. After I'm a little more established professionally, that is. I might be open to a second, but I would prefer to wait and see what I think about having the first before deciding anything further."

Severus kissed her hard and fast. "I'm not certain I want more than one, either. When you're ready for the first, we'll worry about it." He shifted until he could reach a hand to his pocket. He took her left hand and carefully slid a beautiful diamond solitaire onto her fourth finger, where it sat loosely. Pulling his wand out as well, he murmured a spell and tapped the ring several times until it fit perfectly.

"It's gorgeous, Severus. Exactly what I would have chosen. Thank you."

"Thank *you*, Hermione, for being with me and loving me and agreeing to marry me."

Their plans for the day were pushed aside in favour of celebrating.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 of 10

A response to the Potter_Place Fall prompt challenge: #22. The Weasley twins come across Snape shopping for Potions ingredients. A commotion causes Snape to become distracted, and the twins promptly take advantage of this once-in-a-lifetime golden opportunity to slip Snape one of their "experimental" products.

Final disclaimer: I don't own them. Honest. I do claim Can-Touch Talc, though, so if for some reason you want to use it (in a story, not as a product!), please ask.

Severus arrived at the Ministry early in the week after returning to the Muggle joke shop. He wanted to tell Hermione what he had found out, and was hoping that in the meantime she had heard rumours of the results of the . . . detention assignment . . . as their engagement had thoroughly distracted them from their intended weekend tasks. Not only had they felt the need to privately celebrate, but Hermione had insisted on taking him to meet her parents.

He thought the visit had been successful given that he was still alive.

He still couldn't believe she hadn't warned them first. Or at least warned *him* that she hadn't warned them. Oh, no, they just showed up unexpectedly on the Grangers' porch with Hermione announcing that she and her fiancé were there to visit, and oh by the way, it's Severus Snape, who used to be her Potions teacher and was deeply involved in the war. Yes, he was the one who killed Professor Dumbledore, but he had been exonerated, she had told them all about it, remember?

After the shock on both sides wore off, things did get better. They questioned the age difference, wanted reassurance that it was a recent development and not something from their time at Hogwarts, and generally noticed that Hermione was practically glowing. Even he, the emotionally cut-off bat of the dungeons, could see how happy she was. He still was amazed that he was the one causing her happiness, but he wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

As he exited the lift on her floor, he shook his head at the vagaries of life. He had to consciously prevent himself from smiling, as he was that happy as well. While he was content to let Hermione see that side of him, it wasn't something he wanted to share with all and sundry.

Hermione was sitting at her desk, her hair tucked neatly into one of those bun-things, like Minerva wore, only Hermione's wasn't quite as neat and tidy. She was scribbling

furiously on a piece of parchment while referring back to a thick book every few seconds. By mutual agreement her ring was Disillusioned for the time being.

Severus cleared his throat.

Hermione's head shot up and she jumped in shock, her quill flying across the room (thankfully not at him), before she managed to extricate herself from her chair and cross over to him. "Severus! Goodness, you startled me. What are you doing here?"

"I came to take you to lunch, if you're available."

"What? Huh? I thought you didn't want..." She trailed off, peeking past him up and down the hall, before lowering her voice. "Is this as colleagues or as a couple?"

He suspected that if he answered this question incorrectly, he was in trouble. Truthfully, he hadn't really thought about it; he had just wanted to see her, and sharing news and asking about the twins were excuses, not reasons.

"Now that your parents and friends know, and Minerva knows and has talked to some of the Order members, I have no objection to showing the public that we're together. But the decision is yours."

Apparently, as stilted as he knew that had been, it was an acceptable answer, as she smiled back at him. "I think . . . I think I'd like to be *us* in public now, if it's truly acceptable to you."

"Hermione, I will never be one for significant public displays of affection, but subtle actions are certainly acceptable." He offered her his arm in what he realised was an old-fashioned gesture, but taking her hand in the middle of the Ministry offices was a little too informal for his taste. She didn't seem to mind, as she placed her hand in the crook of his elbow and nodded for them to start off.

They didn't even make it to the lift before they were spotted and commented upon. Thankfully, it was just a random person from Hermione's department, someone older than Severus by a good margin of years. It was no one that knew either of them from Hogwarts (in his case, either as a student or as a teacher), and no one that Hermione needed to have a drawn-out conversation with. A simple "yes" to the man's impertinent question about their dating status and they could easily continue on.

When they reached the Atrium, however, it was a completely different story. Several people that Severus recognised as Hermione's former classmates swarmed her as they exited the lift onto the main floor.

"Hermione? *Professor Snape*?" echoed various confused voices.

His fiancée tightened her hand on his arm and replied politely to everyone.

"Yes, Padma, Severus and I are going to lunch together."

In response to a stuttering male voice: "Excuse me, Neville? I didn't catch that?"

"Of course we'll tell you if there's anything you need to know, Dean." Severus personally didn't think Mr. Thomas needed to know much of anything, but he trusted Hermione would be reasonable in that regard, if not as reticent as he might prefer.

Finally they managed to escape from the small gathered crowd and make it to the fireplaces.

Severus stopped them in front of one about two-thirds of the way across the room. "Do you think we might be best served by retreating to one of our homes at this point?" he asked.

"Definitely not," Hermione was quick to reply. "If we disappear and our lunchtime whereabouts can't be vouched for by anyone, then the gossip will run rampant. If we have a casual lunch, with a bit of affection at most, they'll goggle over it but the potential for nastiness is reduced dramatically."

He knew she was correct but was exceedingly displeased about it. Not displeased that she knew it; despite his one-time loathing for her know-it-all tendencies in the classroom, her intelligence didn't bother him. No, he just didn't like the answer itself, correct and accurate though it was. His solitary existence was being forcibly though voluntarily taken away from him, and sometimes it was a bit difficult to reconcile himself to the changes.

"Very well," he grumbled. "Shall we make it as public as possible, then? The Leaky Cauldron?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes, I think so. I can't say it would be my first choice; I'd actually rather go somewhere quiet, either wizard or Muggle, but it looks like that option isn't to be." She grabbed a handful of Floo powder from the bowl on the mantle and quickly left the Ministry. Severus followed immediately behind her.

He carefully brushed off his robes as Hermione did the same, then offered his arm once again. She allowed him to escort her to a table that was on the perimeter of the room but not too far into a corner. He didn't want to appear to be hiding, but neither did he want to sit in a spot that begged the other patrons to stare at them.

They both knew what they wanted, and after Severus helped Hermione into her chair, he crossed to the bar to place their order. He was just sitting down again when they were descended upon by yet another about-to-be confused former Hogwarts student.

"Hey, Hermione, how are you?" came an officious voice. "I was wondering if you were interested in . . . uh, hi, Professor Snape," it ended in a more bewildered tone as its owner stopped next to them. A former Gryffindor *What was his name? McGordon? No. McLaggen, yes, that was it.*

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Mr. McLaggen," he acknowledged, deciding he would prefer not to have this pompous idiot address him less formally.

"Cormac, what an unexpected surprise." Hermione's voice was surprisingly cool considering that she was addressing one of her former housemates. Severus' senses immediately went on alert.

McLaggen looked back and forth between them before continuing. "Yes, well, I wanted to speak with you, Hermione, about inviting you to watch one of my games? First-string Keeper for the Wimbledon Wasps, you know." His boastful words were accompanied by a distinct puffing out of his chest.

She shook her head in reply. "I appreciate the thought, Cormac, but I'm not much of a Quidditch fan, I must admit."

"But I thought . . . never mind. How about drinks some night?"

"I'm afraid I don't think that's a good idea. Severus and I are seeing each other. I'm sorry, I should have said that straight off." The frown that accompanied her comment assured Severus that she was not unhappy to have him as an excuse.

"Huh?" McLaggen looked back and forth between them again. "You and..." He trailed off when Severus crossed his arms, despite his deliberately keeping a neutral expression on his face.

"Yes, Severus and I. So you see, it wouldn't at all be appropriate for me to meet you. Thanks for thinking of me, though, Cormac, and good luck in your next match!" Hermione's fake cheerfulness did the ticket and McLaggen wandered off without any good-byes, all the while shaking his head.

Their food was delivered to their table, and they managed to make it halfway through their lunches before the next explosion occurred. This time it came in the annoying, bouncy form of Miss Weasley.

"Hermione! Professor Snape! Nice to see you both. My friends" she indicated a group of witches across the dining room by the door, "and I had just finished up, and I wanted to say hello before leaving." Her companions exchanged odd looks with each other as they waved briefly before exiting.

Severus revised his opinion of her; she was clearly trying to put a stamp of approval on their lunch date. "Please, Miss Weasley, I'm no longer a teacher. Severus, if you would, or Mr. Snape, if that's more comfortable for you."

She looked at him thoughtfully. "Severus," she continued. "If you'll call me Ginny. Yes, I'm glad to see you both out have you heard the latest?"

Severus and Hermione looked at each other. "Apparently not, as I can't think of any recent noteworthy news," Hermione responded, a tad cautiously. Her tone struck Severus as sounding rather guilty, but Miss Weasley Ginny didn't seem to notice.

"The shop has been overrun with a flood of Pygmy Puffs! Fred and George were having such trouble breeding them, but all of a sudden there was what's that Muggle term? a population explosion? Something like that, anyway."

Severus kept his face impassive and watched Hermione struggle to put on a look of curiosity before she answered. "Gracious, they were indeed having problems with it, I remember one of them I'm not sure which, however complaining. What happened?"

"That's just it! They don't know. They're up to their ears in Pygmy Puffs figuratively, not literally, at least not yet and are spending all hours of the day replenishing their dry food and cleaning up after them. I've never heard them string so many swearwords together, and that's saying something!"

"What are they going to do?"

Ginny frowned. "I'm not sure. They muttered something about some Muggle show on the telly and a Portkey, but I don't think they were serious." Hermione was clearly working very hard not to glance in his direction. "I think they might just wait and see if it's a one-time deal or if it keeps going."

"I suppose they could run a sale on them, couldn't they?" Hermione suggested. "That might help get a chunk of them out of the shop quickly."

"Good thought, thanks. I'll pass it onto them. Are you still not speaking to them?"

"I was never 'not speaking' to them," Hermione huffed. "I was just avoiding them while my temper cooled down, and then it became a habit. I don't want to work there again, however, as I don't think I could handle that. We'll stop by after lunch, perhaps, and say hello."

Ginny raised her brows at that but didn't comment on it. "Be careful when you do; it is, as you can imagine, a little crowded right now. Cute though the critters are, the back room of the shop is currently this disgusting tangle of pink tongues and usually at least several of them are trying to get up your nose. This bunch seems particularly active and despite Puffskeins' normal preference for sleeping wizards, these don't care if you're wide awake. I swear, Fred and George are covered in Pygmy Puff spit, and visitors to the back aren't exempt from the furry critters' attempts to scavenge."

Severus thought it would be perfectly in character for him to frown at that point, so he did so. "That is a disgusting image, Miss Weasley . . . Ginny," he corrected at a reciprocal frown from said witch. "I do so thank you for sharing it with us while we're eating our lunch."

"Oh, you know us Weasleys, always ready to spread gross tales everywhere," she said with a grin. "But I apologise for doing so during your meal."

Hermione jumped back into the conversation with a change of topic. "Thanks for the gossip er, news, Ginny. How is your wedding planning coming along?"

At this, Ginny pulled up a chair from a nearby table and the two women engaged in a long conversation about wedding preparations. Which put Severus in a rather cranky mood though he tried to keep his face from frowning any more, the conversation was reminding him of several things.

First, he was probably going to have to attend Potter's wedding. Bigger all. Potter undoubtedly desired his presence about as much as Severus wanted to attend, but he suspected there was no real way around it. He had conveniently ignored that fact when Hermione had mentioned the second thing that was currently bothering him.

The second thing being that it reminded him that Hermione wanted to wait until after the Weasley-Potter wedding which was at least only a couple of months away to announce their engagement. He agreed in principle that the publicity would be more favourable towards them if they waited. But he didn't like the idea of it.

And finally, it reminded him that he was going to have to suffer through all of this planning rubbish for their own wedding, as Hermione clearly was enjoying the process vicariously through Ginny at the moment. He couldn't imagine asking her to nip off for a Registry wedding without the hundreds or at least dozens of people they would undoubtedly be forced to invite. And they'd probably have to have two weddings. One for Hermione's Muggle relatives, who could thankfully be told the simple truth: that he had no close family and just a few friends, who he would hand-select for their ability to blend in with Muggles. And a second, Wizarding ceremony as well.

How decidedly unpleasant, all around.

"Severus?" The annoyed look on Hermione's face indicated that it wasn't the first time she had called his name.

Best to just ignore that part. "Yes?" He rather thought that wedding plans had to be whole-scale revenge for something that the male population once did, but he couldn't quite pinpoint what that something might have been.

She made another face at him and said, "Ginny was just saying that they were using a deep violet and gold as their wedding colours. Doesn't that sound lovely?"

Severus repressed the inclination to roll his eyes, instead opting to keep the peace and play along. "Personally, I've always preferred silver to gold, but I'm sure it will be very nice." There, that was just a bit Snape-like without being overly rude.

Obviously, he was supposed to be paying attention to the conversation, however, so he forced himself to listen to Hermione and Ginny as they went on about flowers and food and venues "the house in Godric's Hollow should be ready by then!"

Severus froze at that.

Hermione immediately noticed and glanced at him.

"Ah, that sounds terrific, Ginny," she said, turning back to the other witch. "And I can't wait to talk to you more about it. But we're boring my lunch date, I believe could we talk another time?"

Ginny looked at him and apparently recognised the strain in his face, as she didn't say anything other than "of course" and "good to see you" before she retreated and left the dining room.

Hermione turned to him and reached across the table for his hand. "What is it, Severus?"

He just shook his head.

"Godric's Hollow?" she prodded gently.

"Later, Hermione," he said roughly.

She nodded and they continued their lunch in a silence punctuated by inane comments and the occasional small smile. He offered his arm again as they stood to leave and

was relieved when she took it without hesitation; he knew he had been rather shut-off and unpleasant for the last half of their meal.

Instead of heading straight back to the Ministry, they opted to meander through Diagon Alley for an additional spot of publicity, so to speak. And perhaps they both intended to check the results of their handiwork at number ninety-three. Hermione kept her hand tucked tightly in his elbow and walked very close to his side as they made their way past the shops.

When they were nearing Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, Severus stepped off to the edge of the stones and planted himself up against the wall between numbers ninety-two and ninety-three. He pulled Hermione near him but kept a slight distance. The hustle and bustle around them would keep the chances of eavesdroppers low.

"Godric's Hollow was the site of several of my worst memories, Hermione. Arriving too late to do anything, and seeing Lily dead, for a start, and realising what it meant when Potter Harry lived. Several skirmishes were held in and around there, too, as Voldemort tried to pinpoint their location. And of course, the final battle." He sighed. "Fitting, I suppose, that it was there, but very off-putting as well. I can't believe Potter wants to hold a wedding there."

Hermione looked up at him with a sad smile. "I think that's the point, Severus. The place is filled with bad memories, yet it's fundamentally a good place, where Lily and James wanted to raise Harry, where many generations of Potters had lived in the past. They want to reinstate the good memories," she said softly.

"I know. I'll work it out," he responded.

"Will it help if I promise to take the Can-Touch Talc with us?" she asked mischievously.

Severus looked down at her in exasperation. "Do you mean to tell me we'll be staying there?" he growled. "You didn't mention that part before!"

She shrugged. "You would have heard if you'd been paying better attention to the conversation with Ginny back at the Leaky Cauldron."

He grimaced. "When the time comes, can I just ask for veto power on our wedding plan items and leave it at that?"

"Of course," she said. "That's what Harry's done, and it seems to be working well for them."

"How nice to know that Potter and I have something in common."

"Veto power?"

"No, my dear," he responded silkily. "The stereotypical male dislike of wedding planning."

Hermione blushed. "Umm right, of course." She paused. "Okay about Godric's Hollow?"

Severus sighed. If there was any accuracy to Muggle psychology, it was probably a good thing for him to attend a happy event at the place, even if the event was Potter's wedding. That word about finishing up closing closure. Positive closure to the events that had happened there.

"I'll manage. I won't pretend it will be incredibly easy, but I will make it work," he said. He felt the corners of his lips turn up. "Being with you with or without Can-Touch Talc will undoubtedly make it all the more manageable."

Hermione looked intently at him and then surprised him not entirely unpleasantly, despite their public location with a quick kiss. "I love you, Severus," she said quietly.

"I love you, too, Hermione," he responded, equally softly, as he took her hand and tucked it back securely in his elbow before beginning to set off towards the front door of the twins' shop.

He immediately paused again, though, as he thought of something. "I went to the joke shop today," he said quickly. "The proprietor told me that the company had gone out of business."

Hermione frowned. "That's odd I wonder what made them stop. I can't imagine them doing it just because they should."

"I agree," he replied. They continued on.

The lurid window displays attracted a certain type of clientele, and despite the fact that Hogwarts was in session, there were plenty of under-elevens frequenting the main floor when they stepped inside.

"Mum, look!" was the most common phrase he heard around them.

They wound their way back to the counter, where neither twin was anywhere to be seen. This was certainly promising.

Hermione pulled him back past the shop clerks with a brief wave, then through a door that was nearly concealed by all the shelves. To both their amusement and their satisfaction, the back room was exactly as Miss Weasley Ginny had described. Fred and George sat in the middle of the pile of fur balls, looking just like Captain Kirk with the Tribbles. Hermione and Severus kept their distance in the hopes of avoiding pink tongues. Nonetheless, they both discreetly took their wands out.

"Fred, George, you seem to be ah, floating in fluff?" Hermione asked.

The twins turned to them and their eyes immediately narrowed. "It's true, then?" George asked. "We told Ron and Harry we"

"wouldn't believe it unless"

"we saw it ourselves."

Hermione shrugged. "Yes, it's true, Severus and I are together. Do you have a problem with that?"

Fred and George looked at each other and then back at Hermione and Severus. "To each his or her own, I suppose," Fred muttered.

"But we do have one question for you," George said too casually, putting Severus on red alert, fairly certain that this visit had ended the game. Which was actually fine he did want them to know who had caused it, after all. But he couldn't let them confirm it too easily, either.

"Yes?" he asked.

"Can we have the potion that did this?" Fred followed up.

He put on a surprised expression, and said, "Did what? This, meaning your Pygmy Puff explosion? I wish I could take the credit."

"Oh, I'm certain you can take the credit," Fred replied. "We may not have shown it well at the time, but we did"

"learn something in your classes," George finished. "Such as how to examine a sample of food, in this case for contamination."

Hermione cut in at that point, obviously also happy to have the game over, as enjoyable as it had been to implement. "Maybe we'll consider it when you explain why you were selling wands in the Muggle market and what made you stop."

"Got nailed"

"on that one"

"by an old colleague of Dad's."

Hermione zapped a couple of Pygmy Puffs whose tongues were creeping towards her and Severus before glaring at them.

Both their shoulders slumped. "It was just a bit of fun," George grumbled. "Not like Dad didn't do far worse."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Your father didn't try selling things back to Muggles, gentlemen."

"Yeah, that's what the old man from the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office said," George replied.

"Ruined a perfectly good money-making venture, where no one would get hurt," Fred agreed. "None of them had magical cores or anything, just a magical signature from our method of transfiguring the lengths of wood to the right shape and colours."

Hermione shook her head. "So it was just to make money?" she asked, clearly disgusted with them.

Fred sighed. "No, of course not, Hermione."

"It just cheered us up and Mum, too, I think to tinker with things in his shed," George explained.

"Do *not* try to tell me your mum knew you were selling these to Muggles!" Hermione said.

"She didn't," George agreed.

"It was just that she liked having us there," Fred concluded.

Hermione looked at them both intently, then nodded.

Severus and Fred both took a turn zapping tongues back to their proper orifices on the bodies of the fuzzy creatures that owned them.

Severus rejoined the conversation. "Nevertheless, we're not giving you the potion. If you can find it yourselves, I will leave you to your own devices, but if I give it to you for permanent use yes, this batch will wear off when this round of food is gone, and the rates will slow down again then I run the risk of being stripped of my Potions mastery if anything goes wrong."

"Really?" The twins exchanged glances.

"Shut it, you two," Hermione snapped.

"Oh, all right. I don't think we could deal with using it all the time, anyway. This was in a word gross."

"Yes, thanks a bundle for all the trouble."

Hermione and Severus looked at each other and quoted in unison, "It was no Tribble at all!" With that for an exit line, they turned and left.

Fred and George just groaned behind them.

Hermione and Severus smiled as he took her arm and led her back through the shop before they Apparated back to her flat.

The Weasley-Potter wedding went off flawlessly at Godric's Hollow, and to no one's surprise, Hermione and Severus announced that they would be married next. Ron Weasley was heard to swear at this as Susan Bones gave him decidedly cranky looks. Which prompted another proposal and engagement announcement, much to Hermione's amusement and Severus' consternation. But Severus smiled anyway and gamely shook hands with the newly engaged man, his fiancée's former lover, knowing that as annoying as Potter and Weasley might be, they would undoubtedly be inescapable for the remainder of his life. And the look on Hermione's face every time he successfully managed cordiality would make it worth it.

Author's notes:

One last set of thanks to my chapter-by-chapter beta, Scabbyfish, and also to Elfarren for her plot read-through. I am so thankful to both of you for taking the time to help me!

Thank you, too, to all the readers who have read my story, and especially to those who have reviewed. I appreciate your time and your feedback. I do realize this story was light on plot and heavy on fluff, but it wasn't meant to be an adventure or anything, just a light romance. And in my own defense, it was done as part of NaNoWriMo, and my primary goal was just to see if I could write something that was both this long as well as reasonably coherent. I will work on more tension and plot next time, I promise. In the meantime, if you have any constructive feedback for me, please feel free to send it along. (Though I admit that hearing it may frustrate me, I truly do want to improve.)