

Forged in Flames

by MissWhich

In her final year at Hogwarts, Hermione becomes entangled with her Potions professor in a very tricky and difficult situation--one that could change not only the outcome of the war, but their feelings for each other.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 10

In her final year at Hogwarts, Hermione becomes entangled with her Potions professor in a very tricky and difficult situation--one that could change not only the outcome of the war, but their feelings for each other.

Author's Note: This is a completed novel-length fic. I will post it in chapters once per week or so. This is my first fanfiction, so I hope you all enjoy reading it as much as I've enjoyed writing it. All characters courtesy of J.K. Rowling and her fantastic imagination.

Here goes nothing, Hermione thought. Classes had ended hours before. The hallway leading to the Potions classroom was empty and deserted. The dungeon walls seemed more dank and sinister than usual, and she tried to ignore the creeping feeling that she was a prisoner on her walk to the execution chamber. *Stop being melodramatic*, she told herself.

She'd had an idea for a new potion, one that would increase the power and range of certain spells. She'd done the theoretical part of the work on her own, but if she were going to progress any further, she'd need access to Professor Snape's private stores. She also needed his approval for her to work in his laboratory after class hours. She had already prepared herself for the harsh mocking she was sure she'd have to endure from him when she asked for these things. But she could stand his sarcasm, as long as he gave her what she wanted.

She stopped just outside the classroom, pausing to mentally run through her proposal again. She'd checked and rechecked her work so many times that she could recite it from memory. It was a good idea; there was no question of that. If she told the Order about it, they'd certainly be interested. But she wanted to approach Snape first. Tactically she thought this would be better than having Dumbledore simply command Snape to allow her the use of his stores. She felt instinctively that this would not go well.

That's an understatement

She hadn't told anyone of her plans. If Snape rejected her proposal, she wanted time and privacy to regroup. Ron and Harry going on about how this proved the "Great Git" was an evil bastard would not be helpful. She'd tell them if Snape approved it.

Maybe.

She was as ready as she was ever going to be. She took a deep breath and entered through the Potions classroom door.

"Professor Snape?" she called out. The room was empty, the work tables cleared off and the blackboard wiped clean. He wasn't in. He should have been in. Hermione frowned. This was the time of day when he graded papers in the classroom; she'd made sure of that. She sighed audibly, half-hoping this would summon him from some

shadowy corner. But it appeared he really was gone.

Vexing.

She considered leaving the papers on his desk, but decided against it; it was too likely that he'd see they were from her and sweep them directly into the bin. Or burn them in the fireplace. The Potions master had no love lost for his most enthusiastic student, and she well knew it.

Highly vexing. She glanced around the classroom one last time. Empty and deserted.

Snape had a laboratory and office in his private quarters, and with a sinking heart, Hermione realized that is where he must be *Interrupting him in the midst of working in his private lab. Brilliant idea, Hermione. That should go really, really well.* But the proposal wasn't going to present itself. If she put it off, she'd just have to do this some other day instead.

No. She'd do it now. She took another deep breath, inhaling the familiar dank scent of the Potions classroom. She'd never been inside Snape's private quarters, but she knew where they were. A few short minutes and she'd be there, and she'd have this over with. She squared her shoulders, and left the deserted room behind her.

Snape was in a foul mood from having had to attend an emergency Order-related meeting in Dumbledore's office, and in his distraction he was almost at his chambers before he saw that his wards were broken. He had his wand out instantly, surveying the hallway around him. No-one. Whoever it was might still be inside.

He pushed the door open with the toe of his boot. As it swung open, he scanned the interior for intruders. There were few places to hide. The great stone room was lined with bookshelves, but otherwise contained only his desk and a few chairs, separated from the hearth by a wide expanse of stone flooring. Snape had designed his quarters to be spare, both because he preferred that aesthetic and for the lack of cover it afforded. Paranoid, yes; but paranoia was why he was still alive.

There was a figure standing in the center of that wide stone expanse. A person.

Snape reflexively cast, "*Expelliarmus!*" Nothing happened. The figure remained perfectly motionless, unrecognizable in the darkness. Apparently there was nothing to disarm.

"What is this?" he snarled. With a quick *Lumos*, he brightened the room.

He expelled his breath then and, with a grunt of disgust, said, "Granger. Why am I not surprised?"

It *would* be her. He wondered if Potter and Weasley were involved in this somehow. He wouldn't be terribly surprised if they were here as well, although a quick glance revealed that Granger was currently the only Petrified student in his private office. He examined her; she was frozen in place, her arms straight down at her sides and her back ramrod straight, staring at him silently. She blinked as he watched, so at least she could do that much. Other than that, she could have been an unusually lifelike statue. This was an odd form of Petrificus; Granger was standing upright. Someone must have charmed her to stay that way... or used a form of Petrificus he hadn't seen before.

Of greater concern was the fact that whoever it was had broken through his wards. It couldn't have been the girl; she wasn't skilled enough for that *Or was she?* He considered this and then dismissed it. No, it had to be someone experienced in the Dark Arts. His wards were complex and difficult even for other staff members here at Hogwarts. It was simply not possible that a student, even a bright student--his best student; yes, in the privacy of his own thoughts he could admit this--could have broken through them. Someone else had to have done it. Likely a Death Eater.

So what was Granger doing here? And why in the hell were Death Eaters breaking into his quarters? He felt icy tendrils of fear creep down his spine *Have I been found out?* But that made no sense; if Voldemort suspected him, he'd be dead already. And it defied reason that Granger could be involved with rogue Death Eaters in any way.

Logically he had to conclude that the girl had come upon one or more Death Eaters after they'd already broken into his quarters. But why was she in his quarters in the first place? He was increasingly certain that Potter and Weasley had somehow put her up to it. Granger was tedious and annoying, but it was uncharacteristic for her to go sneaking around his private offices after hours.

Well, he could find out what had happened easily enough. He pointed his wand at her. She flinched, barely visible as a tightening around the corners of her eyes, and he allowed himself a small smirk, wondering exactly what she thought he might do.

"*Finite Incantatem.*"

Nothing happened. Granger's eyes visibly widened. Snape was rather surprised as well. The failure of *Finite Incantatem* indicated complex magic. Any thoughts that this might have been a childish prank were now dismissed; this spell was the work of a Death Eater.

"Miss Granger, can you move?"

Nothing. She only stared, motionless and silent. He thought with some irony about the many times in his classroom he'd wished he could hex the girl into silence.

Again, then: "*Finite Incantatem!*"

She remained still and frozen except for her eyes. And judging by those eyes, she was quite afraid. As well she should be. The spell holding her in place was powerful Dark magic. If he knew exactly what the spell was, he might be able to reverse it, but of course the girl had no way of telling him.

No way of directly telling him, that is.

You're a bastard, Snape, he thought to himself, but there was really no other way.

He looked directly into her frightened eyes and said, "This is necessary." She began blinking rapidly, and he almost laughed. She couldn't help protesting and arguing, even now. Admittedly, what he was about to do was somewhat unethical, but he had no real alternative. *And it's not as though there's anything she can do about it* he thought without a trace of guilt.

He looked into her wide brown eyes, tapped his wand to her forehead--gratifyingly, she flinched--and said, "*Legilimens!*"

Chapter 2

Snape attempts to find out what Miss Granger was doing in his quarters.

Snape entered her mind easily, like sliding into water, just as he'd expected. She attempted a faint, weak resistance, but he pushed past it easily. He saw memories of her past few weeks of schooling, her worries about N.E.W.T. exams; all useless and pointless. A lot of pap about the Weasley boy and his unrequited feelings of love toward her. Fears of Voldemort and his minions, fears of--his mouth curled into a smirk--himself.

And then, as he approached her memory of that morning, he encountered a powerful, crippling shame and humiliation in her mind. It was like hitting a brick wall. He physically flinched and nearly broke the Legilimency contact.

What in the fuck?

He regained his composure and sank back into the memory: she left her room in Gryffindor Tower, she made her way to the dungeons, and then... it struck him again, a hot, powerful blast of intense and unbearable shame.

The emotion--one of the strongest he'd ever felt in someone else's mind--was divorced from the memories it should have been attached to. Normally a person's memories and emotions were inextricably linked. Looking into someone's mind meant experiencing not just their thoughts, but their feelings as well, all wrapped together. But Granger's memories of that morning were simply gone, leaving only the emotional resonance behind.

He tried following the emotions to their source, like tracing a single thread through a woven tapestry. Difficult, but he was an experienced Legilimens; few were better. This search, though, led him to the same featureless wall. The wall was nothing but a metaphor, the way that Hermione's mind interpreted the reality that some of her memories were inaccessible and hidden. But metaphor or no, it was completely impenetrable. Snape tried every trick, every tactic that he knew, but the wall was impassible. Whatever had happened to Granger in the past few hours, whatever had caused her this unbearable shame and humiliation, he could not reach it, could not see it. At last he withdrew from her mind, frustrated and angry.

"What the *fuck*?" he breathed, looking directly into her eyes. "What did you do?"

There is no way in hell that a seventh-year Hogwarts student, not even this one, could manage that level of Occlumency. Not possible. Someone had done this to her, built that wall to keep him from seeing into her mind. It had to be the same person who had broken his wards, the same person who had used Dark magic to bind and silence her.

What, or who, could you possibly have seen, for them to silence you like this... but leave you here, like a wrapped gift, for me to find? And why are you so ashamed? What did you do, Granger?

He needed to find out what Death Eaters had been doing in his quarters, and he needed to find out quickly. And he could hardly get anything done with a Petrified Gryffindor stuck in the middle of his office. He ground his teeth, realizing that he was going to have to ask for help.

Snape watched the girl. She blinked rapidly, her brown eyes bright and shining, and then a tear trickled slowly down her cheek.

Pathetic.

He briefly considered simply leaving her there while he examined his laboratory. The idea had its merits; he had to admit to taking a certain amount of pleasure in the girl's predicament. But, no. A childish satisfaction in causing the insufferable Miss Granger a bit of discomfort was less important than finding out who had been in his quarters practicing Dark Arts, and why.

He stared down his nose at her, seized with the sudden desire to torment her, to punish her for having invaded his privacy. "Odd that your *friends* haven't missed you yet, Miss Granger," he said. "Or perhaps they have, and they're too stupid to sound an alarm." He paused, as though waiting for her to respond, and then finished, "Yes, that does sound more like them."

He knew he was being cruel, but he didn't particularly care. She'd had the temerity to enter his office without permission. This is what she got.

"Or maybe they simply thought you were in the library," he said. "Is that it? You're there often enough, reading your books." He let the corner of his mouth turn up in a sneer. "How much did your *books* help you today?"

He heard the tiniest sound from the back of her throat. Very interesting. He wondered what it had cost her to make that sound. Truthfully, if he had to be stuck with Hermione Granger in his quarters, it was preferable that she'd been silenced. He momentarily thought that he'd have to thank whoever had done it to her, but then considered the few likely culprits and decided against. He was not inclined to offer thanks to the Dark Lord's minions, not even for quieting one of his more irritating students.

Stay focused, Severus. It was time to call Dumbledore.

Half an hour later, Headmaster Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall had joined Snape in his private office. The two staff members examined Hermione closely, Dumbledore occasionally waving his wand and murmuring some small incantation, so far to no discernible effect.

"You say you found her exactly like this, Severus?" Minerva McGonagall asked, frowning at the frozen girl.

He exhaled sharply through his nose. "Yes, Minerva. What, *exactly*, are you implying?"

The older woman looked at him in surprise. "Implying?"

"Nothing. Never mind." He folded his arms and leaned against his desk, watching the proceedings with barely-disguised annoyance. "Shall I call one of the first-years to assist you two?"

"There's no need for sarcasm. This spell is unusual, and quite powerful. It may take some time to figure it out. Although hopefully not much longer." She frowned and peered into Hermione's eyes. "I don't know if being frozen like this will harm the girl. She has been cursed for at least... would you say two hours, Severus?"

"At least one and no more than eight, and that is all I can tell you."

Dumbledore, who had been tracing a complicated sigil in the air with his wand, stopped, nodding slightly.

"Minerva, I believe I have identified the spell. I'm surprised that Severus did not recognize it as well. It's a variation on Petrificus Totalus. A Dark variation," he finished, with a meaningful look at his Potions professor. Snape fought the sudden urge to adjust the sleeve of his frock-coat to hide the Dark Mark on his arm. It was well-hidden, but Dumbledore often had this effect on him. Even though the old bastard knew damned well that it was there.

"I am unfamiliar with such a variation," he said, keeping his voice even and level.

Dumbledore said, "Yes. Well, not many would be familiar, I suppose. Petrificus Silencio. Freezes the victim just as Petrificus Totalus does, but silences him--or her--completely. Much more importantly, it is impervious to Finite Incantatem, as we have seen. It is a rarely-used spell. Very difficult to cast, and even more difficult to make last for any length of time. It should wear off on its own soon."

Snape sighed with deliberate exasperation. "Would it not be more appropriate for Pomfrey to look after her in the infirmary? I have things to do."

"As you wish, Severus. We clearly can't leave her alone." Dumbledore pointed his wand at the girl and intoned, *Mobilicorpus*."

Nothing happened.

With great feeling, Snape said, "Fuck," drawing a gasp from McGonagall.

"Severus!"

"Minerva, trust me when I say that I have *better things to do* than to sit here being nursemaid to an over-inquisitive Gryffindor brat for the next several hours."

Dumbledore revealed nothing with his expression except his usual façade of benign geniality. "Well," he said cheerfully, "I doubt it will take that long. Although it's impossible to be sure, of course. Notify us as soon as she's free, won't you? Minerva and I will investigate the problem of how Death Eaters got into the castle in the first place."

He and McGonagall departed, leaving Snape alone again with the Petrified girl.

He rose from where he'd been leaning against his desk, arms still folded, to glare at her. She made no reaction other than to blink, and somehow this irritated him even further. He hissed, "You're probably enjoying this, aren't you? Why is it always you and your obnoxious little brat friends who cause these problems? The only thing worse than having to look at *you* here, in my quarters, of all places, would be having to sit here and babysit Weasley, or Merlin forbid *Potter*." He spat Harry's name as though it were a curse.

Then, as though flipping a switch, he shifted back into the smooth, controlled Snape she was more familiar with. "*I will* find out what you were doing here in my quarters, Granger," he said. "I will find that out, and I will find out what else you did. I know you're ashamed of something. I *saw* it." Her eyes opened wide in shock, and his lip curled into a grin.

"Oh, yes. Did you think you had hidden that from me? You will tell... me... everything."

He tapped her chest with his wand as punctuation, and then fixed her with a baleful glare for a long moment before finally retreating to his laboratory, turning his back on her before the tears escaped her eyes, leaving slow tracks down her motionless cheeks.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 10

In her final year at Hogwarts, Hermione becomes entangled with her Potions professor in a very tricky and difficult situation--one that could change not only the outcome of the war, but their feelings for each other.

Two hours later, Snape gave up even the pretense of doing paperwork, pushing a second-year Hufflepuff's essay away from him with a snarl and nearly knocking over his mug of tea. He simply could not concentrate under these circumstances. His anger at the girl for invading his private sanctuary would have been enough all on its own, but he was more than a little worried about what Voldemort's Death Eaters might have been poking around at in his offices. He'd checked his private storeroom thrice and found nothing obviously amiss. He'd done magic-revealing spells meant to show any listening devices that had been left in his quarters. Nothing. There was no evidence left behind, and nothing for him to do except wait.

He leaned back in his chair, studying the girl. This was a rare opportunity; she was usually surrounded by her puling, incompetent friends, or bent over a book or cauldron. It was always surprising to see his students grow and change from babyish first-years into fully-grown adults by the end of their time at Hogwarts, but he felt that this case was more surprising than most. Granger had lost most of her puppy fat and become almost... willowy, he decided, was the appropriate word. And, he noticed, she had filled out in the right places for a woman. His eyes traveled over the curve of her hips and her small, firm breasts. When had she grown into that body? No wonder Weasley was constantly drooling over her.

At this, he stopped abruptly. *You're leering at a student, Severus. And then, Yes, and what's she going to do to stop me?*

He permitted himself a small smile. It amused him to think of humiliating her in this small way. She'd never know, of course. She no doubt assumed that the Great Git was ticking through exam papers. Perhaps working on some potion. Certainly not letting his eyes explore every inch of her body.

Well, what she doesn't know won't hurt her And it's not as though he actually wanted her. He was merely indulging himself for a moment in a brief and meaningless humiliation.

Her fingers twitched. Snape checked the time. In the hours since Dumbledore and McGonagall had left, she had not moved a single muscle. But there was no mistaking it; her hand had twitched... and now the other one. A moan escaped her lips. The curse was definitely wearing off. He observed with interest as her limbs began to tremble, only slightly at first but then intensifying into what looked like a convulsion. She sank to her knees and sucked in a great, shuddering breath like a drowning woman coming up for air.

"I couldn't breathe," she gasped. "The spell was like someone was sitting on my chest. And every time anyone used magic on me, it got tighter."

Snape lifted an eyebrow. Was that one of the known effects of the Silencio curse? He made a mental note to check into it later.

But enough of that. They had work to do.

Snape rose from behind his desk, his hooked nose and black robes giving him the impression of a bird of prey. "Miss Granger," he said with no trace of emotion in his voice, "pull yourself together. I believe you have some answers for me."

Her breathing had returned almost to normal, but she was still on her knees, staring down at the floor.

"I... I don't know, sir."

Is she blushing? He ground his teeth together and took a deep breath. *Control, Severus.*

"Miss Granger. There have clearly been Death Eaters in my quarters, and one or more of them has just as clearly cursed you. I want to know the following things, in the following order: what you were doing here, what you saw or heard, and who cursed you. And I want to know *now*."

She got to her feet slowly, having difficulty making her limbs work after having been frozen for so long. He was within arm's reach and could have helped her. Instead he merely folded his arms and leaned back against his desk, watching her struggle. He waved a hand at the high-backed wooden chair opposite the desk, and Hermione sank into it heavily.

"I'm sorry, sir."

For fuck's sake. Bloody Gryffindors. Through clenched teeth, nearly snarling, he said, *Miss Granger.* Don't be sorry, just tell me what the *fuck* happened in here."

She blanched; what little color was left in her face paled even further. Her eyes darted from side to side. She would not look at him.

"I can't, sir," she said. If he hadn't been looking at her, he wouldn't have recognized it as her voice; it was timid and trembling. Nothing like the know-it-all brashness he was accustomed to. He was seized with the impulse to grab her and shake the information out of her. Who—or what—in the hell could possibly have done this to her?

In a deceptively soft voice, he asked her, "What, exactly, do you mean by that, Granger? You can't, or *youwon't*?"

Hermione folded her hands carefully in her lap, still looking anywhere but into his face. Instead she stared at a spot on the wall somewhere beyond him and said, in a careful, controlled voice, "Professor Snape, believe me, I want to tell you. But I can't. Can't you just..." She trailed off, unable to complete the sentence.

"Rip it out of your mind?" he finished for her. "No. I tried that once, and I have no interest in trying again. I've seen more than my fill of your petty little problems with Ronald bloody Weasley and whether or not you'd like him to snog you." On cruel impulse, he added, "It seems rather *not*, if you want my opinion."

Her head snapped upward. Ah, that had got a reaction. She met his eyes now, her own filled with outrage. "Professor Snape, you had no right to--"

He cut her off. "No right? You stupid little chit, for all I know there are Death Eaters advancing on the castle as we speak. I have every right to look into your mind, and if I thought it would help, I'd do so right now. And do you know what you could do to stop me?" he added, eyes glittering. "Nothing."

Hermione broke eye contact again, her cheeks flushed. He waited for the inevitable retort from her, but none came. *What has her this cowed?* His curiosity was a living thing, twisting and writhing inside him.

"Can't tell me. A tongue-tying curse of some sort, then."

Hermione opened her mouth as though to say something, winced sharply, and then closed her mouth again.

"I'll take that as a yes."

He crossed his arms over his chest. The girl was uncharacteristically quiet and pale. She should be nattering on at a mile a minute. She should have endless theories and ideas about how to break the curse. *Stupid* theories, no doubt, but that had never stopped her before.

She still wouldn't meet his gaze. That was typical behavior from most of his students, but not from brave little Gryffindor Granger. She seemed to make it a point of pride that she wasn't intimidated by her Potions professor. So why wouldn't she look at him?

She knows, he realized. *She knows exactly damned well how to break the curse*

"Granger," he said, quietly. She flinched, but refused to look up.

"Look at me."

With obvious difficulty she lifted her gaze toward him and looked into his eyes, but this lasted only a moment before she looked away again, over his shoulder.

"Granger, there is often a key to breaking a tongue-tie curse. Some action that the recipient must perform in order to break the curse."

"Yes, sir," she whispered.

Oh, yes. That's it He felt a flush of satisfaction at having solved at least one part of this mystery.

"Tell me the key, Miss Granger."

She shook her head. "I can't, Professor."

"Can't or won't?"

She said nothing for so long that he thought he was going to have to command her to speak. But then, nearly inaudible, she said, "Won't." She was grasping one hand in the other, twisting them together in her lap.

It will be some humiliation, then. I would wager any amount of Galleons that that bitch Lestrage is behind this.

"Perhaps it would be easier for you to tell someone else. Shall I summon Professor McGonagall?"

Her eyes flew open, and she gasped, "No! Gods, no! No, it has to be--Professor Snape, I'm sorry, it's... it's..." She shook her head mutely.

"It has to do with me specifically then, is that it?"

Hermione nodded quickly, her face twisted in shame. Snape's stomach did a cold, lazy turn. This was almost certainly Bellatrix's handiwork. He began to understand the girl's horror.

"Professor Snape," she burst, "there has to be some way to break it or let you Legilimens me or... something! Please, there *must* be some way to break a tongue-tie without the key. There *must*." Her voice had taken on a note of hysteria, Snape noted with disquiet.

"Miss Granger, I wish that there were." He spoke without his usual sarcasm. "There are methods, but they all require the one thing we do not have: time. We must break the curse now, and that means you have very little choice."

She swallowed hard, and nodded. Her skin was pale white with high spots of color in her cheeks *Just as though she'd been slapped*, Snape thought.

"Let me ask you this, Miss Granger. I already have a very good idea who at least one of the culprits was. If that is all you have to tell me, then we need progress no further. But if there is more--if there is information that I need to know, that the Order needs to know--then it is your duty and responsibility to pass that information along to us." He fixed her with an intent stare. "No matter what the cost to you personally."

Her whole body was trembling now, like a bell that had just been struck. He had a sudden urge to reach out and put his hands on either side of her to dampen the vibrations.

He said quietly, "I believe you know that I know something about duty, Miss Granger."

Let it not be said that a Slytherin knows nothing about manipulation he thought. Her Gryffindor sense of honor would force her to reveal the information he sought. He could see her struggling with herself, making the decision. If she wanted to, she could claim that the identity of the Death Eater was all she had to tell. She could escape her fate, just that easily. But she wouldn't. He knew she wouldn't. He'd made sure of it. All he had to do was wait for her to decide... as though it were ever her decision to begin with. He reached for his cup of tea while he waited.

Granger's eyes widened in horror. She shrieked, "No!" and then clutched her midsection as though someone had punched her in the stomach. Snape gave her the tea an appraising look and then put it down, untouched.

"Something about the tea, then," he said.

She neither confirmed nor denied, only looking at him helplessly, but still, he thought it best to leave the tea for now. He arched an eyebrow at her, waiting for an explanation.

Hermione, looking at her hands, said, "All right, yes. There is... more. More I need to tell you. You were right. So I have to... have to do this."

"Tell me, Miss Granger."

She raised her head to look at him. "Professor, please, are you absolutely sure you can't just pull it from my mind? Not even just this part?"

He sighed. "I assure you that on my previous attempt I did everything within my power to find out any piece of information about your capture. I admit that having a student beg me to perform Legilimency on her is certainly quite a novelty, but I feel compelled to point out that you are wasting time, Miss Granger, and frankly you are trying my patience. *Now tell me the key.*"

He could read the panic on her face, clear as text on a scroll. Normally she would have bristled at his tone, but now she simply looked frightened. He waited, unblinking. She had no choice. He would give her no choice.

The silence stretched between them, thick and tangible.

She swallowed, and then her face hardened; she'd clearly come to some decision. She drew a deep breath, closed her eyes, and said, "There are two parts."

He cocked an eyebrow and waited.

"First, I have... I... I h-have..." She was faltering.

There was a sick, heavy feeling in his gut. "Spit it out, Granger," he told her.

"Fine! I... I have to kiss you!" she said then, almost angrily. She looked directly at him. "I have to kiss you *that* is the first thing, and it has to be a... a..."

"For fuck's sake, Granger."

"... a real kiss," she finished, "they told me it has to be a real kiss, a... a good kiss." She still sounded angry, but there were tears sliding down her cheeks now.

Goddamn you to hell, Bellatrix.

"And the second part?" he asked. He was rigid and still, betraying no emotion.

"Professor, I really don't think I can do this." She wiped her sleeve across her face to clear it of tears.

"You can and you will, Miss Granger. I assure you that whatever it is, I have done far worse in the service of the Dark Lord."

This reminder seemed to stiffen her spine somewhat. She wiped the last of her tears and looked up at her Potions professor with a resolute expression on her face. *An easy mark*, he thought. *So simple to manipulate*. But the pleasure he would normally have felt in such an exercise was hollow and cold. Whatever Bellatrix had planned for him--for *them*--would undoubtedly be extraordinarily unpleasant.

Hermione opened her mouth, closed it again. He could see her jaw trembling.

There was a beat of silence, then another, and finally Snape said, "There are ways of forcing you to tell me, and ways of forcing you to do it. Those methods would be unpleasant for me and even more so for you. Do not make me resort to this."

"No, I mean..." she faltered again, and then went on, "I mean, I don't think I... It's... they want me to... I mean, they told me to..."

Snape stopped her. "First, Miss Granger, know that at the first reasonable opportunity, I shall find Bellatrix Lestrange and choke the life from her, preferably with my bare hands."

Hermione's eyebrows shot up, but her professor smoothly continued, "Second, I would like you to simply repeat the words that they spoke to you, verbatim, to me."

She nodded. "Yes. I can... I can do that." She took a deep breath, and then, staring at an unfocused point on the wall behind him, she said, "They said they wanted to humil..." and then suddenly broke off in a moan of agony, her face contorted in pain. She clenched her teeth together and stifled a scream; whether of frustration or pain, he could not quite tell.

"I'm sorry, Professor. I guess I can't tell you the... the thing I was about to tell you. I hate this!" she cried out suddenly.

"Granger, we have no time for histrionics. Tell me exactly what they told you about the key, and only the key, leaving out extraneous details, if you please."

Her gaze met his for the barest fraction of a second, and in that moment he saw raw, brimming anger in her eyes. For him or for the Death Eaters who had cursed her, he couldn't be sure. *Likely both*, he thought.

"Yes, *Professor*. They told me... what I told you before, that I had to k-kiss you."

He gave her a short, sharp nod. "Go on."

"And then they said... they said, that wouldn't be enough. They said I would have to... to..."

No, he thought. *No. Please, no.*

She closed her eyes. She was rigid, and her entire body was trembling. "To suck y-your cock, sir. And s-s-swallow the come. And then they laughed."

Snape felt light-headed, as if all of the air had just been swept from the room.

He stared at the girl, who was clearly keeping control of herself by only the thinnest of threads. She wasn't crying, or begging, or trying to bargain or reason her way out of it. She was simply holding herself tightly, waiting for him to respond.

No. Not with a student. Not because Bellatrix fucking Lestrangle told her to. I don't want her.

And then, just for a moment, gone from his mind nearly before he could even process it, he thought, *Not like this.*

She interrupted his thoughts with a stammered, "But sir... I... I don't think... we can't..."

He lifted an eyebrow and looked at her with a sudden surge of irritation. He would not make this easy for her. There was nothing easy about this, and it was her own fault they were both involved in it.

"Professor, we can't, because... because..." The next words tumbled out together in a rush, "Well, for one thing, you won't want to."

He wondered what it had taken for her to say that to him. And then, on the heels of that thought, he wondered just exactly what Bellatrix had told her.

"They told you that, did they?" he said to the girl.

She nodded wordlessly. Her eyes were bright and clear, unclouded by tears.

He laughed, cold and humorless. "Yes, I'm sure that Bellatrix thought she was being very clever."

Hermione said, "I'm... not sure I understand, Professor." Her cheeks flamed bright red.

He regarded her somewhat less disdainfully than usual and said, "No. You wouldn't."

His thoughts turned inward as he decided how much to tell her. She held herself perfectly still while she waited for him to speak, as though she thought that as long as she didn't move, she'd be safe.

At last he said, "I am going to tell you something in confidence, Miss Granger. I shall trust you not to reveal it to anyone, including your... friends." He made *friends* sound unclean. "The dissemination of this information would have consequences for me that would be severe. *Quite* severe. Do you understand?"

She nodded. "Yes, Professor."

"Good." She flinched from his gaze. *She feels vulnerable*, he thought. *As well she might*

"Miss Granger," he went on, "the reason that Bellatrix Lestrangle was so certain that her instructions to you would prove unfruitful is that she is laboring under the misapprehension that I am... unable to perform."

Hermione's eyebrows lifted in shock, but she said nothing. He saw with some satisfaction that her blush had deepened.

"I have, in fact, worked quite diligently at making sure that she, and others, maintain this misapprehension. Do you follow my meaning, Miss Granger?" He hoped she would be able to restrain herself from the inevitable prying questions, as he had no desire to explain a Dark Revel. He closed his eyes for a moment and saw Muggle women being raped and tortured by gleeful Death Eaters, and heard the mocking voices: *Too bad you can't play too, Sev! Give me a hand holding this one down, though, yeah?*

He opened his eyes again; Granger said, "Yes, sir," but nothing more. He exhaled a private sigh of relief.

"Bellatrix undoubtedly thought that it would be quite impossible for you to satisfy the conditions of the curse, thus leaving you tormented with knowledge you were unable to relay. I am sure she found this quite amusing. But I can assure you it is not impossible." He fixed her with a cold stare.

Hermione tried one last time, "Professor, please, there must be some other way..."

He said simply, "There is not." If she had cried, or begged, or called him names, he might have been able to hate her, and he wanted to; he wanted to be able to hate her for this. But she wasn't begging or crying. She was sitting in his chair, still and motionless, rigid and controlled. Whatever her private thoughts and feelings, she was prepared to go through with it. *For the sake of her precious Order*, he thought, as scenes from some of the things he'd done for that same Order flashed before his eyes.

Enough self-indulgence, Severus. Get it over with.

"Come here, Miss Granger."

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 10

In her final year at Hogwarts, Hermione becomes entangled with her Potions professor in a very tricky and difficult situation—one that could change not only the outcome of the war, but their feelings for each other.

Snape's tone brooked no resistance. Hermione thought, *This is it*, and rose from the chair to approach him where he stood, unsteady on her feet, as though standing on the deck of a ship in rolling seas. Snape rested his hands on her shoulders, looking at her with an expression she could not read. She opened her mouth and began to say, "Sir," but then he was upon her. He pressed one hand against the small of her back, pulling her close; the other hand held the back of her head, his fingers wound through her curls. His kiss was long and searching, almost violent. Hermione pushed back against his chest reflexively at first, but he only pulled her in closer, holding her to him, and she stopped resisting. *You are kissing Professor Snape*, she thought. And then, *No, Professor Snape is kissing me*.

Her mind flashed to Ron's fumbling attempts, but only for a moment before her attention turned back to her Potions professor and what he was doing. She could feel the outline of Snape's long, lean body pressed against her, could feel his hands on her body and in her hair. Without intending to, she let her body relax into his, let herself kiss him back. It just felt so... *No*. She would not allow herself to admit that. It was not, strictly *bad*; that is all she would allow.

Snape found to his intense surprise that the woman in his arms was pressing herself tightly against him and was--yes--kissing him in return *Women do not kiss me voluntarily. She is making the best out of a situation that has been forced on her*. But he would extract every ounce of enjoyment from this opportunity while it lasted. He wound his fingers more tightly through her curls, eliciting a moan, and drew her body even closer. He could feel her heart beating and her hands tracing delicately down his back. *Gods, woman, what are you doing?* With faint horror, he felt his prick stiffen slightly in response.

When at last he pulled away from her, she looked no less surprised than he felt. She met his eyes for a long, half-dazed moment before realizing what she was doing and looking away again hurriedly. Snape was the first to break the silence. He asked roughly, "Do you believe that will satisfy the first condition?"

She had trouble finding her voice, but managed, "Yes, Professor." He noted her flushed cheeks as well as his own elevated heart rate *What the hell just happened?*

"Miss Granger, indulge me for a moment."

They had disengaged from the embrace, but remained within arm's reach. Both studiously avoided looking at the other.

"Professor?" Hermione swallowed hard, trying to sort through what had just happened. During the hours she had stood Petrified in his office, she had played the scenario of the kiss out in her mind dozens of times. She had thought that perhaps he might refuse to do it at all, which would have been rather a relief, or that he might do it quickly and harshly, as that seemed in keeping with his character. She had not--could not have, could *never* have--envisioned *that*. He thought of her as an ugly, buck-toothed Muddblood. If she had learned anything in her years at Hogwarts, she'd learned that. But he wouldn't have kissed an ugly Muddblood that way... would he?

Perhaps that was his way of mocking her after all, all the more devastating for its subtlety. That did seem more Snape-like. But she thought of his fingers wrapped through her hair and his arms pulling her close, and she wondered.

His voice interrupted her thoughts. "Tell me the identity of the Death Eater that cursed you."

Hermione nodded. Maybe the kiss had been enough. She took a deep breath and braced herself. "It was," she began, but then pain struck her, sharp and excruciating, causing her to cry out and double over. Snape reached out to support her, and she shook her head violently. "No! Let me try again!" He nodded silently and stepped back. She opened her mouth again, and this time managed to get out the first sound, "B..." This dissolved into a moan of agony, and her body shivered with convulsions. It looked remarkably similar to the effects of Cruciatius, something that Snape was all too familiar with. This time he did reach out to steady her, with one hand on each of her elbows.

"Thank you, Miss Granger. I believe that is enough."

She looked up at him, breathing raggedly, and said, "I'm sorry, Professor. I tried."

She expected some mockery from him, but he only said, "Yes. It was worth the attempt," and withdrew his touch.

After a too-long silence, Hermione was the first to speak. She closed her eyes because she could not stand to look at her Potions professor while she asked him this, and in a small, tight voice, she said, "Professor Snape... are we really going to do this?" *Please, I can't bear it if you mock me for this.*

But he said only, "It would seem that we are." She nodded tightly in response.

"Then I have to tell you one more thing," she said.

He said, "Miss Granger," but she opened her eyes and looked at him with a trembling jaw and said, "No, let me finish! I'm only going to have the courage to say this once."

He inclined his head in assent, waiting for her.

"Professor Snape, I... I've never... I've never done this before. I don't know how. So it might not... might not work." Her face was flame-bright with embarrassment.

Interesting. I suppose there's no N.E.W.T. on this topic.

"Then, Miss Granger, I will teach you."

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 10

In her final year at Hogwarts, Hermione becomes entangled with her Potions professor in a very tricky and difficult situation--one that could change not only the outcome of the war, but their feelings for each other.

"Do exactly as I say, and we will get through this quickly and efficiently. I am quite sure that you have no more wish to prolong this experience than I do."

Hermione supposed that she ought to be offended by this, but truthfully, he was right. She just wanted to get it over with... though this did not keep her from audibly gasping when Snape began removing his outer frock-coat.

He cocked an eyebrow at her. "Surely, Miss Granger, this isn't the first time you've seen a man disrobe. Or perhaps it is? Has young Mr. Weasley not indulged you?"

She set her lips together in a thin, hard line. "That's none of your business."

"Apparently not, then." He draped the frock-coat over the back of the large, ornately carved chair at his desk, standing before her in only his white long-sleeved shirt and his black trousers. Hermione realized suddenly that for all her years living in the world of magic, she had no idea how non-Muggle trousers opened. Did they use zippers, or button-flies, or... *Focus*, she told herself. *You'll have your answer soon enough.*

Snape was right, of course. She'd never seen Ron with his clothes off. Not for lack of his trying; he'd certainly suggested it or something similar often enough. She thought again of his fumbling attempts at groping and kissing her, and how she'd... yes, *indulged* him in it. He'd wanted more. How many times had he suggested to her hopefully, "I know a place we can go, 'Mione...?" But she'd told him she wasn't ready. And she wasn't. Not with him, anyway.

No, apparently you were saving yourself for Snape. She quirked the corner of her mouth up in a bitter smile; Snape noticed, and sharply said, "Something amusing?"

His eyes were frozen black pools. She closed her own eyes to compose herself, and said, "No, Professor."

I can't do this, she thought. It's Professor Snape. I can't. This isn't happening, can't happen.

With a rapid flick of his wrist, Snape's wand was in his hand, and Hermione instinctively flinched. His mouth twitched, but he said nothing to her, only muttering incantations as he traversed the perimeter of the large, drafty room, casting repelling and silencing spells as he went. He paid particular attention to the sturdy wooden door and to the large stone hearth set into the far wall. Yes. Good. Bad enough that they had to do this; worse if they were to be discovered.

She'd been afraid that he would take her to his bedroom. She didn't think she could have borne that added humiliation. But it seemed it was to happen right here in his office; otherwise, he wouldn't be so carefully securing it. It was a small relief; the office felt safer, somehow.

After finishing the incantations, Snape concealed his wand, as quickly and dexterously as he'd produced it in the first place. He sat down in the high-backed wooden chair that Hermione had used earlier. She could hear the blood rushing in her ears, and she forced herself to breathe. Snape regarded her for a moment in seeming evaluation, and then, in a flat and disinterested tone, said, "On your knees in front of me, Miss Granger."

This is it, oh Gods, this is really it. She did as she was told, carefully kneeling on the cold, stone floor in front of her seated professor. She thought distantly that her knees would ache before long.

"Open my trousers," he told her.

She bit her lip and looked at his waistband, seemingly featureless, and then tentatively slid her fingers along the inside, pushing her hand between the fabric and his skin, feeling for a clasp or catch. Snape closed his eyes and exhaled sharply--whether in irritation or impatience, she couldn't tell--and then took her hand in his and guided it to the right spot. "Here," he said. His voice was cold and dispassionate. She felt the buttons then, sewn in oddly off to the side. *Concentrate on the buttons. Don't think about touching Professor Snape.* But she was touching him; her hands pressed against the bare skin of his hip as she undid the buttons of his trousers. There were seven, and she wondered if there were some sort of magical significance to that, but the thought was fleet and brief because then Snape shifted his hips slightly, reached down to make some adjustment that Hermione couldn't quite see, and freed his cock from his trousers.

Her lips went suddenly dry. *So that's what one looks like close up.* As she watched, it twitched and lengthened. She caught her breath. Was she making that happen? The newness of the situation made her forget her embarrassment, her humiliation. She watched the stiffening flesh in front of her with unabashed intrigue.

Snape didn't know exactly what he'd expected from the girl; revulsion, maybe. Horror. Certainly reluctance. But not this... attentive interest. She had moved closer to watch his cock, and he could feel her breath on the sensitive skin there. He'd thought that he might have to use an enhancement potion, but no, that would clearly not be necessary. Not necessary at all.

Hermione found that his cock jerked and lengthened every time she exhaled. *That's Professor Snape's cock, and it's getting hard while he looks at you, Hermione.* His body was otherwise rigid and still. She was quite sure that his arousal had nothing to do with her specifically; likely he was envisioning someone more to his liking. Someone with pretty hair; someone who wasn't a student. Someone that he hadn't done everything in his power to deride and humiliate for the past six years. But she watched his cock twitching and reacting to her and thought, *it's not someone else making that happen. That's me. I'm doing that. I'm making you twitch. I'm making you hard. Whether you like it or not.*

"Use your tongue," he said, the sound of his voice breaking through the girl's preoccupied thoughts. His voice was still disinterested and flat, almost bored. *Yes, Hermione thought. That will make this easier.* But it was already easier than she'd expected. A part of her mind was caught up in horrified shock that she was kneeling between Professor Snape's legs, about to use her mouth on him, but another part was curious... almost eager. *If I can make it twitch just by breathing on it, then what can I make it do with my mouth?*

His cock was so hard now that she could see the veins in it pulsing rhythmically. She wrapped her fingers around it at the base to steady it. His entire body tensed, but he made no sound.

She was unsure exactly what he meant for her to do, but she was hardly going to ask him to explain, as though she were asking if her ingredients were correctly prepared in Potions class. But then, if this were Potions class, he would snidely respond that she would know she had done it incorrectly when he informed her of such. *You can't say I haven't learned that lesson, she thought.*

Tentatively, lightly, she touched her tongue to the skin of his cock, just at the base. He jerked, but then stilled himself again. And then she traced the tip of her tongue all the way from the bottom to the tip, circling the top a time or two, and then traced back down again. Hermione was a keen and careful observer in this as in most other circumstances, and she noted that her professor's flesh had become even more hard and taut since she'd begun. *He likes this.*

Snape's jaw was clenched and his eyes were tightly shut. He was using every ounce of his self-discipline to keep from audibly moaning. How long had it been since a woman touched him this way? Years? Decades? There had been a few girls after Lily's rejection, and a few... unwilling girls after he'd become a Death Eater. But then he'd begun feigning impotence. What woman would have had him anyway? A sallow, greasy Death Eater: hardly. It had been a dozen years or more since he'd felt a woman's mouth on him, willing or unwilling, and...

Hermione's tongue found the sensitive slit at the tip of his penis and slid into it. This at last drew an uncontrollable moan from him. She noticed, she must have, because she did it again, pushing the tip of her tongue in and circling it back and forth. He moaned again, and this time pushed his hips forward to meet her.

No, he thought, I will not lose control to her. I will not. But he moaned again even as he thought this; the feel of her mouth moving over him was unbearably good. *can't make her stop.*

I won't.

Hermione concentrated her efforts at the tip; his reactions told her that he was the most sensitive there. It sent a dark thrill through her when he began to moan and thrust. She could tell that he was holding back, that he didn't want to reveal his enjoyment.

She began leaving little nibbling kisses around the swollen head of his cock. He gasped and shifted his hips, and she realized with a shock that she was enjoying herself as well. This thought should have been disturbing, repellent. But... it wasn't. *Yes. Yes, I am enjoying this. I am enjoying making him hard, making him moan. I am enjoying*

this so very much indeed.

Snape, for his part, was rapidly losing the battle to maintain self-control. He had underestimated the Granger girl's capacity to be a quick study, even in this situation. *Especially in this situation; she never learned a new spell as quickly as she learned how to suck your cock.* Another moan escaped his lips. He could not stand much more of this.

Roughly, his voice neither calm nor detached anymore, he said, "Take it into your mouth; all of it." She paused for the first time and looked up at him with searching brown eyes--sending him rocketing even closer to the edge--and then she nodded quickly and did as he'd instructed. She instinctively knew how to maintain the right amount of pressure. He could feel her lips sliding up and down his cock, and he could feel her moaning. Gods yes, she was making little quick noises in the back of her throat every time she took him fully into her mouth. The finest mind in House Gryffindor was kneeling between his legs with her lips wrapped around his cock, moaning.

She is going to hate me after this humiliation. Even more than she already does.

He was seized by the sudden impulse to draw it out and make it last, to make the girl between his legs work for her prize. He reached down and wound his hands through her hair and pulled, just a bit, and then a bit more, just to see what it would take to make her stop, to distract her from her task. But if anything it only seemed to drive her even harder. He was hurting her; he could see tears of pain in her eyes. But still she wouldn't stop. He realized dimly that this was having the opposite effect that he'd intended, that he was so much closer, so much faster, but he had stopped caring. He heard himself gasp, "Don't stop," and knew that he was pulling cruelly at her hair and pushing her head down onto his cock again and again, but he didn't care about any of that; she made gasping little ecstatic sobs that he could feel more than hear--*how much would I have to hurt this girl to make her stop sucking me?*--and her mouth was so good...

Hermione knew that Snape was inflicting pain to try to control his own pleasure. *He's using you*, she thought, but this realization only made a warm ball of heat expand deep inside her. *He's using you for his pleasure.* His hands pulling her hair hurt a little, but he was inflicting that hurt because he was enjoying her mouth so very much.

Go ahead, pull as hard as you want, Professor; I won't stop. She was faintly aware that he was moaning actual words now, "don't stop," and then he pulled her head down tightly onto his cock and thrust it deep into her mouth. Her eyes watered, and she gagged a little bit, but then her mouth was full of a warm, salty liquid and her knees went fluid and weak at the realization of what she'd done to him. *Of what she'd made him do.*

Snape closed his eyes and let his head rest back on the chair; the girl was swallowing it. All of it. She was--he hissed--gently sucking the rest out of the tip. He released her hair and let his arms fall to his sides, feeling his heart hammering in his chest.

She said something, but her mouth was muffled against his thigh. His stomach turned over; she would likely be full of recriminations. Or tears. He felt he could stand neither from her.

She turned her head and swept her hair away from where it had fallen across her face, and said again:

"Bellatrix Lestrage."

She gasped a sob of relief then, and looked up at him with bright, glittering eyes. "Professor Snape," she said, "I have a lot to tell you."

Snape wasted no time in putting himself back together, rising and donning his frock-coat again. With it buttoned all the way to the high collar, he looked as he always did, as Hermione was used to seeing him, and some of the terrifying surreality of the preceding incident was swept away. *Did that really just happen?* she asked herself.

She licked her lips and tasted the salty residue there. Yes; it had happened. But Snape apparently had no interest in discussing it, which she found a relief. He sat now in his usual chair, and she took a seat in the high-backed wooden one, and they faced each other across the broad mahogany expanse of his desk. A single bead of sweat glistened on his brow; it was the only sign that anything out of the ordinary had happened.

For his part, Snape noted that the girl had regained much of her usual composure and confidence. She sat tall in her chair and faced him levelly; her pale faltering from earlier was gone.

He steepled his fingers and regarded her with one slightly cocked eyebrow, considering his next step.

"Miss Granger," he said, "you are going to tell me everything."

She opened her mouth, but he said, "Forgive me," and before she had time to react, he invaded her mind again. Just as before, it was as easy as sliding into a quiet pool of water. *She has no defenses whatsoever; if she went before Voldemort, he would read her like a book.*

Snape rifled through her memories, scene after scene playing in her mind's eye for his examination. This time was different than before; this time, he wasted no effort rummaging around in her thoughts about the Weasley boy, or N.E.W.T. exams, or her holiday plans. He sought something specific: the moment she'd encountered the Death Eaters in his office. Her panic rose as she realized what he was after; she didn't want to relive that. He felt her trying to force him out of her memories. His lip curled. Her efforts had no more effect than a butterfly's wing flapping. *You think you can keep a master Legilimens out of your mind, girl?*

He kept pushing, kept driving forward towards the memory he wanted. Granger gave up resisting, undoubtedly realizing that her attempts were useless... and then he reached what he sought. There was no wall stopping him from seeing the memory this time. No, this time it was as clear and sharp as though he'd been there himself.

In the girl's mind, he saw her leave Gryffindor Tower, descend into the dungeons, and enter his own office with her research proposal in hand. She had been surprised that his wards were down, and called out his name, only for a Death Eater to cast Petrificus Silencio on her before she even had time to react. He heard Bellatrix Lestrage's mad, high-pitched laugh, and he watched Lestrage and another Death Eater, Jensen...Snape recognized him as one of the Dark Lord's sycophants...advance on the now-helpless girl.

Granger moaned in protest, but Snape was relentless, inescapable. He gave her no choice but to relive what had happened next.

She could not possibly hate me more than she already does.

He sank deeper into her mind, watching the rest of the encounter unfold. Bellatrix laughed at Granger, taunting her, asking why she wasn't fighting back. The Death Eater noticed the fallen parchments and nudged them with her foot. "Mudblood scratchings," she said with scorn. "Burn them."

Jensen scuttled over to scoop them up from the floor and did as his mistress had commanded. Hermione could hear the fire roaring up off to her side and the scrolls crackling and burning.

"Oh, poor Mudblood, were those *important?*"

The hair on the back of Hermione's neck rose up. Bellatrix had circled behind her, standing well out of sight. Every nerve in the girl's body screamed for her to run. But she couldn't. She couldn't even twitch, could barely even force air into her lungs. And then Lestrage touched her wand lightly to the nape of Hermione's neck. The thrill of terror that coursed through her was so intense that it felt almost like an electric shock.

I am going to die, she thought. She thought of her parents, of Harry, of members of the Weasley clan, all flashing through her mind in the space of an instant. But Bellatrix only laughed, prodded the back of Hermione's neck with her wand, and said, "Poor little Mudblood, you thought I was going to *hurt* you! No, I have better plans for you."

She withdrew her wand and snapped at Jensen, "Come with me." They disappeared somewhere to the rear; Hermione could hear them moving around, rummaging through bottles and flasks. They were in Snape's private laboratory and storeroom, looking for something by the sounds of it.

"He has it!" LeStrange cried. "He is *lying!* I know he is! It must be here! *Find it!*"

But based on the sounds the girl was able to overhear, they hadn't found it. Snape, observing this memory, smiled humorlessly. Of course they hadn't.

But then Bellatrix's voice had turned sly and giggly, a sound he knew all too well.

"No matter," she told her associate. "You have the potion I made up? Give it to me."

As Snape/Hermione listened, they added it to... something. Bellatrix giggled again, a mad awful sound, and then muttered to herself, at the very limits of Hermione's hearing, "A special brew for the Potions master... I think he'll enjoy it very much indeed. Oh yes, he'll simply *love* it, and the next time he goes before our Dark Lord and tries to hide all the foul thoughts in his filthy mind, he'll *pay.*" Her cackle rose into a shriek, "Our Dark Lord and master will see him *fowhat he truly is!*"

Snape's spine went cold. Lumia potion. They must have dosed his tea with Lumia. Had he taken even a single sip since returning to his quarters and finding Granger frozen? He thought he had not... though thanks only to her warning.

And her repayment is you invading her mind for the second time tonight without permission.

He brushed this uncharacteristic thought away as being indicative of a morality that he had neither the time nor the patience for.

In Hermione's memory, Bellatrix and Jensen returned from the storeroom, flanking the frozen girl on either side. "Let's have some fun now, Jensen!" Bellatrix hissed. Her tone reminded Snape of Voldemort's lisping tenor, and he wondered, not for the first time, how many of the Dark Lord's proclivities and inclinations were imprinted onto his twisted, broken plaything.

Bellatrix positioned herself directly in front of Hermione, her face completely filling the girl's field of vision. Snape felt the girl's rising terror and panic. The Death Eater tapped a finger on her own chin thoughtfully and said, "*You* look like the type of girl that would run and tattle on us! We simply *can't* have *that.* You'd ruin all our fun!" With a giggle, she pointed her wand directly at Hermione's throat and incanted, "*Logocaesura!*" Hermione felt her throat constrict briefly, then relax again. LeStrange put her wand away with an elaborate flourish.

"There, that's sorted!" she said, and then frowned. "But that's not very sporting, is it? That's not *veryfair.* You'd like a fair chance, wouldn't you?" She waited expectantly as though Hermione were going to answer, and then with another giggle--the sound grated on Snape, even filtered through someone else's mind--she said, "Of course you would. So here's what we'll do, my delightful little Mudblood. We'll give you a chance. A... *challenge,* you might say. Naturally, you'll fail." Another giggle, and this time, Jensen joined in with a grunting chuckle and a leer. "But if, by chance, you *don't*... then you'll be able to tell anyone you want anything at all about what you saw here today." LeStrange's lips stretched into a wide rictus, and she leaned forward until her nose was almost touching Hermione's.

She whispered, "But you won't tell. Because you won't meet this challenge, darling little Mudblood. Although perhaps.... mm, yes, perhaps you'll have lots of *furtrying.*"

Then, more loudly, as though announcing it to a crowd, she said what Hermione had repeated to Snape earlier that evening: "You're to kiss Professor Snape, and it's to be a good kiss. A *real* kiss." Snape noted, with a faint wrench in his gut, that when Granger had related this to him, she had failed to mention the complete and consuming horror and humiliation she'd felt.

Not, of course, that I care. Or would have expected anything else.

She'd been forced to choose between either degrading and humiliating herself with her Potions professor, or letting him be murdered by the Dark Lord. He told himself that her horror and humiliation were to be expected under the circumstances.

He knew what came next and could have withdrawn from her mind at this point, saving her from having to relive it. But he wanted to know exactly and precisely what Bellatrix had said to the girl. Perhaps Granger had left out some important nuance, some critical detail, when she was relating the story to him.

If it occurred to him even for a moment that he might want to see the girl's reaction to being told she'd have to suck his cock, he dismissed the thought instantly. It was of no matter to him how she felt about it.

No matter at all.

In the memory, Bellatrix laughed gaily and went on, "Of course, that's not all. That's only the *first* part. Would you like to know the second part? Hm?" She giggled, and Jensen's face lurched into a grinning sneer.

"This is the part I think you'll enjoy the most...the part you'll *savor.* Oh, I do hope you try, even though you are utterly... and completely...*doomed* to failure." Hermione's heart pounded in her chest so hard that she thought she might be on the verge of fainting.

The Death Eater leaned down so that she was level with Hermione, and caressed the girl's face, drawing a line down her cheekbone with a single long nail.

"You're to suck your professor's cock, little Mudblood. Get him nice and hard," she said, tracing her fingers down the curve of Hermione's jaw and onto her throat, "and then, at the end, you're to swallow his come. Mm, doesn't that sound nice? Doesn't that sound *lovely?*"

Snape was almost forced out of Hermione's mind, just as he had been the first time, by the shockwave of her reaction. Thoughts flooded her mind, half-formed and panicky: *I can't it's Professor Snape there must be some way to I can't do it I've never done it he'll kill me for even being in here he'll kill me for making him do this he won't do it I can't do it it's Snape it's Snape it's Snape what do I do we'll find another way I can't let him drink the tea I can't let him die but I can't do this either oh Gods I don't know what to do...*

No, he supposed she didn't know what to do, and he also supposed that this was very unusual for her. Miss Hermione Granger, book-perfect at casting spells and brewing potions, always first in the class, always quick to know the answer to every problem. Every problem but this one.

He allowed himself for just a moment to relive the memory of her lips on his skin.

Her next memories were of himself, entering the office and finding her there frozen. He had no need to view those; he remembered very well what had happened afterward, and he had no desire to feel the hatred and revulsion she'd experienced during the... event.

A voice whispered inside his head, *but she was moaning in pleasure* He suppressed it harshly. *She imagined someone else. Or perhaps her moans were of humiliation, not pleasure; either way, it is of no consequence. She is a student, and a particularly irritating one at that, and if I experienced a moment of carnal pleasure with her, it's only to be expected after denying myself for so long. Nothing to do with her at all.*

He withdrew from her mind; she jerked forward and gasped, and for just a moment, their eyes locked, hers blazing with cold intensity.

"You didn't need to do that," she said.

"It was the best way."

"No. I know. I mean, you could have asked."

He lifted an eyebrow, and she said, "I would have said yes."

He shrugged with a slight twitch of his shoulders, and said, "It is done, and would have been either way, so asking you was completely irrelevant." He saw her face darken with anger, and continued smoothly, "Miss Granger, much though I am sure we would both enjoy the flurry of accusations and recriminations you are clearly about to shower on me, I must inform you that there is a rather immediate problem. One that I admit I am quite surprised that someone of your obvious intellect has failed to observe."

"Oh?" she said, visibly taken aback.

"Yes. Your efforts today have at least given me some warning, but the fact remains that the next time I go before the Dark Lord, I am likely to die."

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 10

In her final year at Hogwarts, Hermione becomes entangled with her Potions professor in a very tricky and difficult situation—one that could change not only the outcome of the war, but their feelings for each other.

Author's Note: This story continues to be dark, and this chapter and the next include scenes of torture; be warned.

...~...~...

Hermione's face had gone completely white.

Snape said, "You are familiar, I believe, with the work I do for the Order?" He sounded no different, no less calm and composed, than if he were asking her the ingredients of some potion in his classroom.

She hesitated, on uncertain ground. "Professor... I, uh, think the term is 'double agent'."

He inclined his head toward her and said, "That is an accurate assessment. I won't bore you with the details of intrigue in the Dark Lord's immediate circle; suffice it to say that our mutual acquaintance, Ms. LeStrange, suspects that I am not being entirely... *honest* with the Dark Lord."

Hermione knit her eyebrows together. He easily anticipated the inevitable follow-up question: "Professor Snape, why are you telling me this?"

He pushed back the arm of his robe and rolled back his shirtsleeve, displaying the Dark Mark, currently pale and quiescent. He was grimly satisfied to see the girl recoil.

"This is why. At any moment, this Mark may turn black, and at that time I must appear *instantly* before the Dark Lord. If that happens before I am... adequately prepared, then my life will be forfeit. And so," he said with a dark glance at her, "will yours."

He could read the confusion in her face, a thousand questions bubbling their way to the surface. He pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger and sighed. "I have neither the time nor the patience for an interrogation, Miss Granger. I realize that it is not in your nature to simply stay quiet and pay *attention*, but right now that is exactly what I need you to do. *Do you understand?*"

She returned his gaze, cocking an eyebrow. *That's my trick*, he thought. *Impudent.*

"I understand," she said.

"Good. Now. Are you familiar with Lumia potion?"

She frowned. Her eyes glazed over as she attempted to recall the properties of one of the more obscure and rare potions; he'd certainly never discussed it in class.

"It... it alters brain chemistry, Professor," she said. "It prevents the taker from..." She stopped, going pale and bringing her hand to her mouth. "From being able to successfully use Occlumency."

Five points for Gryffindor.

"Indeed. Miss Granger, your memory is accurate as usual. I am sure you can see the difficulty this presents me."

"But sir, you didn't take the..." She broke off, seeing his glare and remembering her promise not to ask questions.

"Indeed I did not; nor will I. But LeStrange will expect that I have, and therefore so shall the Dark Lord. He will expect to find my mind completely defenseless and free of any obstruction...the mind of someone with no Occlumens ability whatsoever."

He fixed her with his gaze again. "Much like yours, Miss Granger."

Hermione flushed, remembering his invasion of her mind and what he'd seen there.

Snape appeared to take no notice. He continued, "Once the Dark Lord realizes that I have not taken the potion, his next question will be to ask *why*. Clearly I must have found out about the tampering; the only reasonable way for me to have done so would be to..." He paused, his eyes shifting away from her. Hermione blinked; she could not recall ever before seeing him appear unsure.

"...To break the curse," he finally said. "Something that I have given him cause to believe would be physically impossible for me."

"I believe the most likely outcome will be my death. Immediately followed by your capture, certainly your torture and interrogation, and likely your death as well. I am afraid

that Bellatrix has planned this perfectly."

He cleared his throat, and then, focused somewhere behind her, he said, "I regret that you have become involved in this, Miss Granger."

Could that have been an apology? On a day filled with impossibilities, this seemed the biggest one yet.

"It's my own fault, Professor," she said. "I shouldn't have been in your office without permission." His expression didn't change, and she hurriedly continued, "But sir, surely Vol...You-Know-Who wouldn't go that far, would he? I mean, killing a Hogwarts teacher and student..."

Snape interrupted her. "He would. And he will." His face was expressionless, and his eyes never left her face.

The surreality of the situation caught up with her in that moment and she thought wildly. *Fifteen minutes ago my mouth was on him* She shook her head a little to clear it.

"Professor," she said, "is there really no other way you could have got the information? I mean, couldn't you have... tortured me for it? You're a master Occlumens. Surely you could make him see that image in your mind."

She thought that perhaps she'd overstepped her bounds. He regarded her in silence for a long moment; she could not tell whether he was angry at the suggestion or simply considering his response.

"Yes," he said at last. "That would be a possibility. But in order to convince the Dark Lord that I had tortured you, I would need to construct a highly detailed image with strong emotional resonance. Unfortunately, the..." He stopped abruptly. Hermione was on the verge of asking what was wrong when he continued, "The most recent image I have of you in my mind with strong emotional resonance... would not be helpful. In this situation."

The blush Hermione had been trying to hold back suddenly erupted in full bloom.

"Oh," was all she could manage. Snape was rigid, staring into unfocused space.

And then tentatively she said, "Professor, can we... construct a new image?"

His gaze snapped back to her face.

"Explain."

"Well, sir... if you *actually* tortured me, you'd be able to use that instead, right?"

He looked at her in flat disbelief.

"Miss Granger. The *only* way to break a tongue-tie curse of that complexity without satisfying its requirements would be to inflict severe and extreme torture on the victim."

"Cruciatus," she said. *I will not panic. I can do this.*

He gave a sharp nod. "Yes. I have withstood its effects. You are younger than I, and far less experienced at defending against the Dark Arts. Setting aside the fact that it is an Unforgivable and not something I am inclined to cast lightly, if at all, I believe it would... be impossible for you to withstand."

"You think it would break me," she said.

"Yes." He winced immediately after saying it.

She thrust her chin forward. "You won't break me. Cast it," she said.

"Miss Granger, this is not necessary. Given time to prepare, I can successfully Occlu..."

She interrupted him: "You said there might not be any time. You need an image of me being tortured. I'm here *So do it.*"

Snape's breathing came short and shallow. The girl was right. This was the best opportunity they had. He could use the real and vivid images of her torture and construct a realistic... a *believable* structure around them. But Cruciatus on a student... *(Especially on this student, his traitorous mind whispered.)*

He looked down to find that his wand was in his hand. Hermione stared at him with dark brown eyes, unflinching.

I have badly underestimated this girl, he thought.

"Forgive me," he breathed. And then, before he lost his nerve:

"*Crucio.*"

...~...~...

Voldemort's throne in the lower levels of Malfoy Manor was large and elaborate, elevated above the rest of the cavernous dungeon room by magic, a show of braggadocio meant to keep his followers in their rightful place. Snape knelt before it on one knee, head bowed.

It was difficult not to contrast this with Dumbledore's tower office, all books and simple flagstones. Nothing ornate there. Nothing ostentatious. Barely recognizable as a Headmaster's office at all.

Snape thought of the meeting he'd had there the day before, after he had... finished with Granger. He'd given Dumbledore and McGonagall a bare-bones account: the names of the Death Eaters who had broken into his quarters and the information that nothing had been stolen. They had inquired as to Miss Granger's condition, and he'd told them she was unharmed. *Except that she was forced to suck my cock and then I cast Cruciatus on her,* he thought. *No harm done to your prize pet Gryffindor, I'm sure.* He was convinced that Dumbledore knew he was holding something back, but the old wizard knew better than to try to force information out of his Potions instructor. They'd have to cast Cruciatus on him themselves before he told them what he'd done to the girl that day.

And their time would be far better spent figuring out exactly how Death Eaters had got into Hogwarts.

All of these thoughts passed through his mind in the space of no more than a few seconds, and then he shut them away behind the featureless wall of Occlumency. It was an familiar and comfortable process to him after so many years, as easy as closing a well-oiled drawer. He felt Voldemort's icy tendrils probing at his mind already; this too was a familiar sensation and meant that Voldemort had now discovered Snape's failure to consume the Lumia potion. It was no matter, though. Snape had had a full day before the Mark on his arm glowed with dark life, calling him here. A full day to build a believable structure for Voldemort's examination. It was perfect.

The Dark Lord would find nothing amiss.

Snape heard a mad, high-pitched giggle and knew it was Bellatrix Lestrange. With his head bowed, he could not see her, but he knew she would be sitting in her usual place, on an ornately decorated couch next to the elevated throne. And she would be staring in adoration at the snake-like creature perched on that throne...staring with

adoration and lust. Behind the wall he had constructed in his mind, he felt the powerful mad urge to seize her and choke the life out of her. It subsided; he was master of this emotion as of all others. There would be time enough for that later.

If I survive this.

Snape wondered where Voldemort's snake, Nagini, was. He thought he'd heard a dry slithering as he entered, but there was no trace of her now. Snape found this unsettling; he preferred to keep tabs on the snake's location at all times.

"Severus!" Bellatrix cooed. "What a lovely surprise!"

"Bellatrix," he murmured, inclining his head slightly while keeping his head bowed in deference.

"We have been... so looking forward to your latest report!" She burst into a fresh cascade of giggling.

He heard the Dark Lord's voice now: "Rise, Severus."

Snape rose gracefully from his kneeling posture and stood with legs slightly parted and hands clasped behind his back, waiting, as always, like a good servant. Voldemort smiled indulgently at Lestrane and reached down to stroke her hair. She shuddered and moved her head towards him in the manner of a cat being petted, her eyes rolling back slightly in her head. Snape watched impassively, a reaction borne of long practice, waiting until Voldemort's reptilian eyes shifted to where he stood.

"Sseverus, I am prepared to hear your report."

Snape nodded. *Here we go.* "Yes, my Lord. There has been recent activity that I believe you will find highly interesting. But first..." He paused, hesitantly, with a note of nervousness.

"...I must ask you if I have given you cause to doubt my loyalty, my Lord."

Voldemort furrowed his brow into scaly ripples, and spoke, his speech threaded with sibilants, "Ssseverus, why do you ask me this?"

Snape let his gaze flicker quickly to Bellatrix, and then back to Voldemort. "I have reason to believe, my Lord, that Miss Lestrane and her cohort were in my chambers at Hogwarts, with the intent of dosing my tea with Lumia...for what purpose, my Lord, I am unsure, and thus the question I laid before you." He stepped back, bowing his head obsequiously.

It is in these moments that we define ourselves. Life or death, balanced on the fine edge of a knife.

He waited in the silence. After a long moment, unbearably long, he heard Voldemort's inhuman hiss. He dared not look at the Dark Lord's face and so could not gauge his reaction.

"Bella, my... *dear,*" came the smooth, unctuous words, "is this... true?"

Snape allowed himself a glance at the Death Eater. Her face had gone a gratifying shade of white. She trembled, pointing a shaking finger at Snape. A gabble of broken, outraged syllables poured out of her, gradually forming into a teapot crescendo of screeching, culminating with, "He is a liar, a *traitor!* He couldn't possibly know that unless he has been *LYING* all this time. My Lord and Master, you know he must be *LYING!*" She turned to Snape, who still waited in perfect calm, and shrieked, "*You couldn't know, you couldn't possibly, you... you...*"

Voldemort made a subtle gesture with his hand and the sound was abruptly cut off. Bellatrix's mouth still gaped open, but no sound emerged. She looked up at the Dark Lord with large, pleading eyes, the expression on her face perfectly clear: *He's lying. I've discovered him for you. Shall I not have my reward?* In return Voldemort merely looked directly into her eyes and went still. After a moment, he said only, "Ah... I see."

Voldemort let his gaze rest on Snape, who had remained silent through the entire performance.

"Is this... true, Sseverus? Did you allow a filthy little Mudblood *slut* to suck your cock? After turning down so many... *finer* choices, over the years! I admit I am quite... *sssurrprised*... to discover this information." He toyed with his wand, letting it lazily drift back and forth but keeping it always pointed in Snape's general direction.

"My Lord, of course not. As you know, I couldn't, even if I had wanted to."

"Then explain." Instantly, the casual playfulness was gone from Voldemort's voice, leaving only a cold threat.

"Cruciatus, my Lord."

"On a student! You surprise me, Severus."

"Yes, my Lord. It was rather easy. She offered very little resistance."

Voldemort sucked his breath in sharply. He liked this thought, just as Snape had suspected he would.

"Let me see," he hissed. Before Snape could respond, Voldemort plunged into his mind. He quickly found the scene: Snape dispassionately holding his wand on his student as she shrieked in agony and writhed in helpless twisting circles on the floor, until she finally gave up all the information the Logocoesura curse had protected. The Dark Lord inspected this scene with attentive care, savoring every moan, every plea, every cry. Snape had known Voldemort would enjoy watching a Mudblood student suffer, particularly one as close to Potter as this one. And so he had made it last. He had made Granger suffer. She had screamed in agony, and then pleaded for him to stop, and finally begged for death. "Kill me," she'd sobbed. "Just end it, *please!*"

Voldemort particularly enjoyed that bit, reviewing it over and over again and laughing, a cold and awful sound that crawled down Snape's spine. But Snape's mind was disciplined; he was prepared. He allowed himself to feel a frisson of pleasure at the Dark Lord's seeming approval, and knew that it had not gone unnoticed.

"Sseverus, I would not have thought you had it in you."

Snape nodded in affirmation. "It was... not unenjoyable, my Lord." And in the false version he had constructed for Voldemort to examine, it had not been. He'd hidden his reluctance and the way he'd pretended the girl was Bellatrix Lestrane in order to muster up the necessary emotional state to cast the curse.

Voldemort chuckled, the menace gone from his voice; behind him, Bellatrix was screaming silently, the cords in her neck standing out, her entire face glowing red. Snape could see her lips forming the word "traitor" over and over again.

"I'll deal with my pet later. She does overstep her bounds from time to time. I trust you did not actually consume any of the Lumia?"

"No, my Lord. That would have left me exposed and defenseless to the Order."

"Indeed. I shall speak to Bellatrix about this."

Snape observed Lestrane's hysterical reaction and memorized it mentally. He would enjoy and savor it later, in privacy.

Voldemort was still speaking, "...something you had to tell me, something... highly interesting?"

Snape nodded again. "Yes, my Lord. The Order is attempting to create a potion that will provide protection against Dark Magic."

Voldemort threw his head back and laughed. "How charming. As though a potion could protect them from me!" A few Death Eaters dared a chuckle from the edges of the room. "But surely, Sseverus," he said, "this is not what you found... interesting."

"No, my Lord. I have led them to believe that firedrake scales are a key component of this potion. They are expending great effort in the pursuit of this ingredient."

Voldemort's eyes dilated perceptibly. Yes, he'd taken the bait. "And are firedrake scales indeed a key component?"

Snape smiled slightly. "Of course not, my Lord. But when they obtain them for this potion, I should have no difficulty in procuring a few for my own purposes."

"Excellent work, Sseverus. The sooner you can finish my restoration potion, the better."

Snape had planted that seed long ago. A few manufactured "ancient" scrolls and a careful word dropped here and there had done the trick. Voldemort believed that Snape knew how to create a potion that would restore him to full strength and power; a potion that required firedrake scales as a key ingredient. Firedrake scales were one of the rarest ingredients known, impossibly difficult to obtain. Few wizards had even seen one, much less collected a supply of them. And so Snape's story had bought the Order some much-needed time.

But time was running out; Voldemort had become impatient. Snape suspected that Bellatrix and her piggish little friend had been searching for firedrake scales in his quarters, on Voldemort's specific instructions. The Lumia potion, of course, had been her own clever little idea and was the reason she was clawing at the inside of an invisible cage right now, silenced and struggling. It didn't pay to be too clever around Lord Voldemort.

The firedrake scales were a red herring, of course. There wasn't a potion in the world incorporating them, and for good reason: the second you tried to use any sort of magic around them, they burst instantly into flames. It was one of the reasons firedrakes were such a menace in their natural environments...impossible to use spells against them without burning down half the forest. Their primary application was as use in fireworks. Voldemort, having no interest in dragons or potion lore, was unaware of this.

Still. Too clever. Too clever by half. Voldemort's mounting impatience meant that Snape had to claim that he was getting closer and closer to creating the potion. Eventually, it was inevitable that his subterfuge would be discovered, and then, well...

But enough self-pity. There'd be time for that later.

Voldemort still casually held his wand, but had lowered it at last. "Inform me at once of any developments in obtaining the scales, Sseverus. I'll expect a report in no later than two weeks' time. You've done well."

"Yes, my Lord. Thank you."

As he turned to go, Voldemort said, "One last thing: the girl. Potter's Mudblood friend. Will she run and tell her Headmaster about what her *stasty, awful* Potions professor did?"

Snape stopped without turning around and said, "Unlikely, my Lord. I Obliviated all of it from her mind."

Voldemort laughed again...chilling, inhuman...and said, "Sseverus, I continue to underestimate you. Carry on."

He nodded. "Yes, Lord." He hurried from the chamber, feeling Voldemort's serpentine stare on his back until the doors firmly closed behind him.

Still alive. Surprising.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 10

In her final year at Hogwarts, Hermione becomes entangled with her Potions professor in a very tricky and difficult situation--one that could change not only the outcome of the war, but their feelings for each other.

Snape summoned the last remaining shreds of his energy to Apparate back to the gates of Hogwarts and had barely anything left for the long trek to the castle. He was nearly at the door to his quarters, bone-tired and thinking only of sleep, when he noticed the cloaked figure huddled near his door. On hearing his approach, the figure rose to a standing position. With a lurch in his stomach, he realized who it must be, an instant before she pushed the hood from her face.

"Miss Granger," he said, "to what do I owe this... pleasure?" He had intended sarcasm but managed only exhaustion and weariness. He noted that she looked equally weary, and he wondered how long had she been waiting for him on that cold stone floor.

Without emotion she said, "Did it work?"

"Not here," he said, and with a series of gestures, he unwarded the door to let them both through. She hesitated before entering...hardly surprising, considering what had happened the last time she was here. But it was a brief hesitation only, and then they were both inside the large, sparsely furnished stone room where they had last met.

"Care to have a seat?" He gestured at the high-backed chair facing his desk, and after a moment's pause and what appeared to be a brief mental calculation, the girl nodded her assent. Wrapping her cloak tightly around herself, she perched gingerly on the edge of the chair.

He took the other seat. It would have suited his disposition to remain standing, but he was just so damnably tired.

"Professor," she began, but he interrupted her.

"Miss Granger, you asked me if it worked. If by that you are asking me if I was able to successfully deceive the Dark Lord into believing that I tortured you for information, rather than obtaining it by any... *other* means, then yes. I believe I was successful."

She closed her eyes for a moment, and some of the tension left her posture.

"Thank you, Professor. That's all I needed." She rose to leave, but he stopped her, sudden impulse bringing the words to his lips before he had time to think.

"Miss Granger, I do not understand why you will not let me Obliviate this from your mind."

Her gaze betrayed no emotion. "Thank you, Professor. I would just... I would rather you didn't."

Hidden by his sleeve, his fingers slid along the polished wooden surface of his wand. It would be so easy for him to do it without her permission; she must know that. She was standing there almost expectantly, as though she were waiting for him to do it.

To violate her again.

No, he decided. If she wanted the memory of being forced to suck his cock, of being humiliated and shamed, of being made to writhe in agony while begging him to kill her... if she wanted that, she could bloody well have it. It was of no matter to him.

He nodded. "As you wish. But..."

She lifted an eyebrow, waiting. Uncharacteristically silent, again. *You made her beg for death, Severus. Do you expect her to be her normally chatty self?*

He knew what he had to do. Not Obliviate her, though it would be so easy...the work of a moment, and then all of this would be forgotten. She could go back to being the classroom know-it-all, an answer to every problem ready on her lips. But... nobody knew exactly what the long-term effects of Obliviation were. Except that if you did it to someone too many times, it turned them into a vacant, gibbering wreck. He imagined this bright, sharp-witted girl in that condition, and a wave of revulsion rose up inside him. Likely this is also why she herself was anxious to avoid having the spell performed on her. They needed her mind, her talents, her ability to solve problems.

And so even though he wanted nothing more than for her to be out of his sight, out of his classroom, out of his life, there was only one thing to be done.

"You must learn Occlumency. Having this... *information* in your completely defenseless mind is dangerous. I'm sure you're smart enough to understand why." He let his words drip with sarcasm. It was easier for him to fall back into the role of sneering Potions professor, easier to distance himself from what they'd done. *From what you did to her.*

Her gaze never faltered.

"Do I? I suppose I do. Who do you suggest I find to teach me?"

The words hung between them; they both knew the answer.

Finally he spoke, his words clipped and cold. "Be at my Potions classroom tomorrow evening at 7. Do not be late, or I will take 10 points from Gryffindor for each tardy minute."

She nodded in acknowledgment. "Yes, Professor. I won't be late." And with a sweep of her cloak, she was gone.

...~...~...

That night he dreamt of her, kneeling between his thighs, her eyes flashing teasingly at him as she ran the tip of her tongue along his prick. The dream-Granger was even more talented and enthusiastic than the real one had been, and he woke in a cold sweat, his cock throbbing and ready for release. He threw the bedcovers off and got out of bed, pacing around his bedchamber, running his hands through his hair.

He was not some teenager to be enthralled with a girl, having puerile dreams about her desire for him. And even if *he'd* want that, he'd hardly get it from this girl. He'd degraded her, humiliated her, tortured her. He could still hear her screams, could see her scrabbling uselessly at the floor, unable to gain any surcease from the pain. He had held his wand on her relentlessly, far longer than he had thought he could, wanting and needing to make it last, make it real, make sure that it would *work*. Inevitably, too, making sure that she would despise him.

His mind drifted again to how her mouth had felt sliding over his cock, and he realized that none of this had done anything to help with the reason he'd woken up in the first place. No, he would allow himself no relief this evening. He would not give himself pleasure while thinking of *her*. No. No, he would not.

He ran a shower with water that was glacially cold and stayed in it until his skin was mottled and blue. It did the job. But he got no further sleep that night.

...~...~...

Hermione, for her part, spent the night staring at the shadow-stippled ceiling of her bedchamber. She supposed that one of the benefits of being Head Girl was that she didn't have to pretend to be asleep for the benefit of her roommates.

If she closed her eyes, she could feel the Cruciatus curse again, feel herself writhing and twisting, desperate to make the pain stop. She could see Professor Snape's face, twisted with cruelty, watching her scream. She hadn't wanted to scream, but the sounds had been wrenched from her, almost as though Snape were drawing them out of her with his wand, his hateful wand.

And what a stupid, ridiculous situation to have got herself into, simply because she was so over-eager to share her research with a professor who openly despised her. *But he was the only one who would have understood*, she thought. Snape was cruel and belittling, but he also had a sharp mind and a fine eye for detail, not to mention a comprehensive knowledge of Potions. She wondered if he would have looked at her work... if he still would. Bellatrix had only burned one of her copies. She still had the original stashed in her room.

But she was in no mood, no position, to ask him for favors right now. She'd barely been able to stand being in the same room with him earlier that evening, but she'd had to know. Had to know if he'd been successful: if he'd shown Voldemort her torture, and if Voldemort had believed it. Had to know if there would be Death Eaters sent for her.

He said that he had achieved his task, and she believed him. No Death Eaters on their way *Except the one in the dungeons right now*, she thought.

She closed her eyes, weary beyond reason, and again heard her own screams, felt Cruciatus, saw his sneer. You couldn't use Cruciatus against someone unless you really despised them. It had to come from a place of true hatred. He had to have been able to muster that up from somewhere.

He liked what I did to his cock, though. He didn't despise that she thought with some vindictiveness. But maybe that had made it easier for him to cast the curse on her. Maybe his humiliation at being made to submit to some... *Mudblood* had given him what he needed to torture her afterward.

She could have let him Obliviate it from her mind, and she had been tempted. It would be as though it had never happened. He'd go back to simply being her Potions professor, and she'd go back to being his most irritating student. She knew it would have been easy for him to do it. She wondered why he hadn't done it to her anyway.

She knew why she'd refused him: She couldn't bear the thought of Snape looking at her and knowing what she'd done while she remained stupidly ignorant. The thought roiled her stomach. *But... it's not just that, is it?*

No, it was that she'd made him enjoy her. She'd given him pleasure, and they both knew it, and she would not let him take that away from her.

She wanted to be able to stop thinking about Snape and what he'd done to her...and what she'd done to him. She wanted to never see him again. She wanted sleep.

But instead she lay in her room, staring at the ceiling, while the hours ticked silently past.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 10

In her final year at Hogwarts, Hermione becomes entangled with her Potions professor in a very tricky and difficult situation—one that could change not only the outcome of the war, but their feelings for each other.

The next day, at breakfast in the Great Hall, Harry remarked that she was looking a little tired. Ron interjected, "Yeah, you've looked like a wreck all weekend, 'Mione!" and then colored red as he realized what he'd said. He stammered over himself, "Er... not that... I mean, you look fine, really... it's just..."

Hermione sighed and said, "It's fine, Ron. I understood what you meant. Anyway, I'm all right. Studying too much for N.E.W.T.s, I guess."

Harry and Ron exchanged a knowing look. *Typical*, it said.

Harry said, "You shouldn't push yourself so hard, Hermione. You've got dark circles under your eyes. I mean, not that... well, what Ron said. You look pretty rough."

Ron glanced at his friend appreciatively. "See!"

A faint smile touched Hermione's lips; they were endearing when they were protective. But her current problems were hardly a burden she wanted to share. She tried to imagine how that conversation would go: *Well, guys, in the past three days I've been Petrified by rogue Death Eaters, given my first blowjob...which was to Professor Snape, by the way...and endured Cruciatius. Also from Professor Snape. How was your weekend?* Her mouth quirked a little. It was slightly more than a butterbeer at the Three Broomsticks was likely to sort out.

"What's so funny?" asked Ron, looking hurt.

"You," Hermione said with affection. "Both of you. You're sweet, that's all. But really, I'll be fine."

Ron and Harry shared another glance, and then both of them shrugged, like mirror images. It was too ridiculous for Hermione not to laugh.

After breakfast, Ron accompanied Hermione out of the Great Hall and in a low voice said, "After dinner tonight, want to... hang out?"

The lightness of mood she'd been enjoying vanished instantly. "Hanging out" meant Ron coming to her room and groping and pawing at her for a while. She usually indulged him, working under the vague assumption that it's the sort of thing you're supposed to do as a girlfriend, but she simply couldn't stomach it tonight. Not tonight. *Maybe not ever again.* It was all she could manage not to grimace in revulsion at the thought of Ron's tongue probing her mouth and his big sweaty hands sliding up inside her jumper. She flashed to the memory of Snape kissing her, but she suppressed *that* thought instantly.

Ron was still at her side like an eager puppy, anxious for her answer.

"Oh, Ron," she said, "I just can't. I'm so swamped with research and studying, and I just don't have time. I'm going to probably spend most of the night in the library, to be honest."

I have a date with Professor Snape. This thought popped out at her with no warning, and she bit the inside of her cheek hard to keep from giggling. Ron had enough of an inferiority complex without his thinking she was laughing at him.

"Aw, 'Mione. Are you sure? You study all the time! Aren't you caught up by now?"

"Ron, N.E.W.T.s are *important!* Honestly, you should think about taking them a little more seriously yourself."

He rolled his eyes. This was well-traveled territory between them. "Yeah, right. Well, at least I'll see you in Potions later on."

"Yes. Later, Ron." Her tone brooked no further conversation.

Ron's shoulders slumped as he slouched off toward his next class. Hermione knew she'd have to end things with him, sooner rather than later. It had been coming even before the events of the prior weekend, but it felt more pressing now. She simply didn't think of him romantically. Not anymore. She wasn't sure she really ever had. He'd shown interest in her, and she'd been flattered by that, and of course they were good friends. But there was no spark, no fire. He didn't make her feel the delicious, shivery warmth expanding in her belly that she'd felt with Krum.

Krum, Hermione? I think the last time you felt that way was when you were kneeling between Snape's legs She folded her arms over her chest and held them there tightly. This was exactly why things had to end with Ron. She had to sort out her feelings, and she had to do it alone. Without the help of Ronald Weasley. She hoped their friendship could weather the storm.

...~...~...

Potions class was a nightmare. She came prepared to simply ignore Professor Snape. She'd assumed that he would do the same. But instead he was... well, breathing down her neck. He'd begun by asking the class to name the three key ingredients of the *Fleur-de-Lis* potion. Hermione knew, obviously; it was a simple potion from the third-year book. But she didn't raise her hand. She didn't want to call attention to herself, didn't want to have to speak to Snape any more than necessary.

He apparently felt no such compunctions. "Miss Granger," he said, "I cannot fail to notice the lack of your eager hand, waving furiously in the air." Some of the Slytherins snickered, and her cheeks burned. *Why is he doing this?*

"Can you tell me," he asked her, "the ingredients of *Fleur-de-Lis*?" He drifted over to her desk, standing directly in front of her and tapping his wand on it. The wand she'd

last seen pointed at her face while he Crucioed her.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

She hesitated and cleared her throat. "Uh, Professor, I believe they are forget-me-not, lily of the valley, and Jack-in-the-Pulpit, in equal proportions."

His voice was like a satin-sheathed knife. "Very good, Miss Granger. Five points from Gryffindor..." Her head shot up and she met his gaze for the first time, her eyes opened wide with confusion. "... for knowing the answer and not bothering to raise your hand." She heard open laughter from the Slytherins. Draco Malfoy in particular looked highly entertained by this new humiliation his Head of House was inflicting on their least-favorite classmate.

And then he did it again. Twice more he forced her to give the answer even though she hadn't raised her hand and then took House points from her after she answered correctly. When she finally did raise her hand in response to a question, he ignored her even though she was the only student with her hand in the air. She fought back hot, stinging tears of shame. He carried on this way for the duration of the class, forcing answers out of her if she didn't raise her hand and ignoring her raised hand when she did try to answer. Ron and Harry's faces were tight with fury, but there was nothing they could do. They'd learned from long experience that complaining to Snape about unfair treatment in class would only result in loss of House points, detentions, and other unpleasant punishments. So they watched impotently as Hermione bore her humiliation publicly and yet alone.

...~...~...

Snape did not fail to notice the glares being sent his way by Potter and Weasley. He wondered how much Granger had told them about her weekend activities and then decided she must have stayed quiet or the two boys would have had their wands at his throat before class even started. No, they were reacting solely to this little humiliation he was putting her through. When class ended, Granger rose stiffly from her desk and quickly turned to go...quickly, he suspected, because she wanted to leave before tears spilled openly down her face. That is what he had reduced her to.

He told himself that it would have been unusual for him *not* to humiliate a Gryffindor in his class. It certainly wasn't the first time he'd held a student up for ridicule in his classroom. Particularly not this student. He was only maintaining appearances. It was standard operating procedure for his class and nothing more.

And if there was a quiet voice in the back of his mind telling him that he had publicly humiliated her that day as a form of punishment, he ignored it. Ignored it almost completely. *Punishing her for what, Severus? The crime of showing up in your fevered dreams?*

...~...~...

Later that evening, Snape watched his office door in restless anticipation. He half-expected her to skip their appointment after what had happened in the classroom earlier. He eyed the pocket watch he'd left open on his desk. But just as the hour hand ticked onto the 7, there was a knock at the door.

He assumed the disdainful expression he customarily wore in the classroom and opened the door with a gesture.

She was in her Head Girl robes, he noted, and he realized that he'd expected her to be in the same cloak she'd worn the previous evening. She held a sheaf of loosely-bound parchment, and her face was taut and composed. She avoided his gaze as she entered.

"Miss Granger, I did not assign you homework for this meeting."

"No, sir." She looked toward the general direction of his face, but never into his eyes. "If you recall, the whole reason that I... that..." She faltered, but recovered quickly. "... that I was coming to find you on Friday is that I had a research proposal I wanted you to look over."

She never stops. Amazing.

Before he could respond, she said, "Please, Professor Snape. I know it's... it's extra work for you. I don't mean to burden you. But I think there are some good ideas there and I'd like you to read it. Please."

She was clutching the papers so tightly that they were crumpling slightly under her fingers. "Leave it on my desk," he told her. "I'll deal with it later."

She did as he said and then stood clasping her hands in front of her, twisting them together. Snape rose from his seat and approached her, coming close enough to make her flinch.

"Miss Granger, I am going to look into your eyes and then into your mind. I want you to try to stop me."

Before she could respond, he caught her gaze and said, *Legilimens.*

Hermione felt him in her mind again, rifling through her memories and looking for something. She could tell that he sought a specific memory. She pushed back at him, but his presence in her mind was strong, massive, powerful. It was like pushing against a stone wall. Her efforts were weak and useless.

"Try harder, girl." She wondered faintly how he'd managed to speak, and then she redoubled her efforts to push him out, to no avail. Nothing she did seemed to have any effect at all.

And then he found the memory he sought. It was from earlier that weekend; she had been with Harry and Ron in the Gryffindor common room. Ron was talking about some Quidditch team he admired, while Hermione tried to hide her exhaustion and feign at least mild interest.

At first she couldn't think why Snape would be interested in this particular memory. And then with hot anger, she realized ~~he~~ *he thinks I told them. And he wants to know what I said.*

Sudden fury boiled out of her in a powerful, unstoppable flood, everything she'd felt and suppressed since the Death Eaters had Petrified her three days earlier, all the shame and fear and rage and anger. Her thoughts rose into a scream of outrage, "**GET OUT! YOU HAVE NO RIGHT! HOW CAN YOU NOT TRUST ME? AFTER WHAT I DID FOR YOU, HOW CAN YOU NOT?**" and then somehow, inside her mind, she *pushed* him.

He staggered backward, breaking eye contact. She found that tears were streaming down her cheeks. Snape's breathing was heavy and ragged, as though he'd just run a long distance.

Looking away from him, she said in a low voice, as steady as she could manage, "I never would have told. Never. Not to anyone."

"Granger, look at me."

She did, her eyes narrowed with anger. He said, "I knew you had not. But I wanted something specific and recent. I wanted to see if you could keep me out of such a memory. It... rather seems that you can. Although," he said with a twitch of his mouth, "it was not particularly subtle."

"No, Professor, I suppose it wasn't." The ghost of a smile touched her lips.

"You'll work on that. I shall attempt to view that same memory. Keep me away from it *Legilimens!*"

I'm not ready! she wanted to say, but it was too late; he was inside her mind again, and there she was, sitting next to Ron and Harry, listening to them talk about Quidditch.

How can I keep him out? She'd managed it before only with an uncontrollable outburst of rage. His presence in her mind was too powerful; she couldn't get him out, couldn't stop him from seeing and hearing anything he wanted. But then... she had an idea.

With considerable effort, she summoned a different memory, of a day some weeks ago. In it, she sat next to Ron on her bed, running her hand along his leg and over his trousers. His face contorted with pleasure and his hands roamed over her jumper, squeezing and pinching her breasts through it. "Mione," he groaned.

Inside her mind, Hermione felt Snape's focus turn to this new memory. The scene played in front of her eyes as though she were there again; she'd hidden her irritation at Ron's clumsy fumbling and let her hand drift over the crotch of his trousers. He gasped and she gave him a few light squeezes through the fabric. He tensed suddenly, moaned, and a large wet spot appeared under her hand. Ron's face colored red and he stammered, "Hermione... I didn't mean... it was just so good..."

She let him squirm in embarrassment for a few seconds before smiling and telling him it was fine, letting him off the hook. He got up and stumbled out of her room, unable to even look her in the face.

Snape abruptly withdrew from her mind; he stared at her in what appeared to be cold fury.

"Why did you show me that particular memory?"

She shrugged lightly, nervously. "You hate Ron. I thought that if I showed you some humiliation of his, it would distract you from the other one, the one you were after."

Snape's face hardened. "Do not presume to know my mind!"

"It worked, didn't it?" she snapped in return.

He couldn't argue with this and so only clenched his teeth together, a muscle working in his jaw. She was only partially right. Her distraction had worked, but not for the reason she thought. Seeing the Weasley boy's humiliation was entertaining enough, yes, but the real distraction was Hermione. He'd felt an unexpected wave of sheer, pulsing fury when she'd touched the boy's cock, followed by visceral satisfaction when she went on to rebuff his further advances. He'd let this completely distract him from his original purpose.

Had she known that he would have this reaction to seeing her touching someone else? Was she *using* him?

Get control of yourself, Severus. Do you really believe her to be capable of such manipulation? He glanced at her; she was wringing her hands together and avoiding his gaze. He suddenly wanted nothing more than to be rid of her.

"I think that's enough for now, Miss Granger. You may leave." He turned away from her, back to his desk...where her wretched research paper sat, waiting for him...but she didn't leave.

"Professor?" she asked. There was a hint of tremor in her voice. *No. Just go. Please, just go.*

"Miss Granger, I believe I dismissed you already."

"Sir, please. I need to say something."

He ground his teeth together again; the beginnings of a blockbuster headache were forming in his temples.

"Make it quick, Miss Granger; you may find this difficult to believe, but I have other things to do this evening than listen to you prattle."

After a brief pause, she said, "Professor Snape, it's about Potions class..." She took a deep breath, clearly trying to control herself. "Sir, I don't think I can withstand many more days like today."

He spun on her, his face tight with anger. "You can and you will, Miss Granger, because if any of those little Slytherin fucks that call themselves my students were to notice anything *amiss* between us, anything at all, *any change, any deviation*, then you may rest assured that they would instantly run back to Mummy and Daddy Death Eater and tell them all about it. And what do you think that the Dark Lord would do with this news?"

The blood ran out of her face. *Didn't think about that, did you?* he thought with bitter satisfaction. It was hardly the first time he'd savaged her with his words; he expected her to turn and run from the room. He *wanted* that.

Instead she lifted her eyes to his, her face pale but composed. She said, *Is there something amiss between us, Professor?*

He froze. She only waited with her bright brown eyes and her messy curls, biting her lip and waiting for his answer, the answer that was so apparent in his mind that if she'd had the slightest skill in Legilimency, she'd have been able to pluck it straight from the air.

He let the corner of his mouth pull up into a sneer, assumed his most intimidating professorial tone, and said, "There is not, Miss Granger. If there were, your life would be forfeit as surely as mine would. Now. Get. *Out.*"

At last she did, closing the door behind her. He watched the space where she had been, and he knew that he had just told her a lie.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 10

In her final year at Hogwarts, Hermione becomes entangled with her Potions professor in a very tricky and difficult situation—one that could change not only the outcome of the war, but their feelings for each other.

Author's Note: In this version of the universe, there is a Yule Ball every year at Hogwarts.

...~...~...

It was an hour and a much-needed tumbler of Firewhiskey later when he finally picked up her papers from where she'd left them on his desk. *H. Granger*, it said in neat lettering at the top of the first page. Precise. Always precise. Always logical.

Undoubtedly she analyzed him as she analyzed everything else in her life. He could find out easily enough. He could drag up her memories of him and examine them, moment by moment, feeling everything that she felt and hearing every last one of her thoughts. If he cared enough to, of course.

He laughed, a short bark. Hardly. He hardly cared what she thought of him. At any rate, it was obvious. He'd violated her, tortured her, made her scream in agony. The only possible feeling she could have toward her tormentor would be hatred. Pure, unrefined hatred. He didn't need to look inside her mind to see that. She must find his presence intolerable. It was surprising to him that she had even agreed to Occlumency lessons.

Well, she wasn't lacking in courage. That much was clear. And he was used to being reviled by the people around him. She was no different. Just another student.

He ground his teeth. No, she *would* have been just another student, if she hadn't been so damnably ill-fortuned as to run into a pair of Death Eaters while trying to deliver a fucking research paper, of all things. Now she was... a distraction. A distraction that he neither needed nor wanted.

He wanted to hate her in return. He certainly had in the past, along with her obnoxious friends. And it was her fault that he'd been forced into this situation. Her fault that he was so fucking *distracted*. But he couldn't. He'd tried to summon it up, tried so many times, but it simply wasn't there to be summoned.

And every time he thought of her, he remembered. Even now, the image of her chestnut curls moving between his legs rose unbidden to his mind.

No. A wave of self-disgust swept over him, so powerful that it brought bile to his throat.

He shook it off. He was stronger than this. She was just another student, nothing more. Speaking of which... he reached out and opened her paper to the first page, beginning to read.

...~...~...

An hour later, he had not moved other than to turn pages, some of them now dog-eared as he'd gone back and forth multiple times, checking again and again to make sure he was reading her work correctly.

She cannot possibly understand what she has discovered.

He was vaguely aware that his heart was pounding. The implications were staggering, if the girl's theories were *correct*. *It's Granger; of course they are*, he thought. But he hadn't stayed alive as long as he had by relying on unverified information. It would be a sleepless night in the lab.

Granger's work was nominally about increasing the range and power of certain spells. But the really interesting part, the part that had made his mouth go dry and his hands tremble when he read it, had been tucked into a tangential side-discussion, almost a footnote. She couldn't have realized what she'd found, or she'd have already gone to the Order.

Instead she'd come to him. After everything he'd done... she'd come to him. But he'd consider the implications of that later; he had more pressing obligations at the moment.

His mouth twitched as he realized that at last he had actually found a use for firedrake scales. Bellatrix was quite correct; he did indeed have a stash of them in his quarters. It always pays to hedge one's bets. He'd procured a supply long ago, when he'd first had the idea to bait Voldemort with them. If the Dark Lord ever became suspicious or impatient, Snape would be able to produce the scales to buy himself some more time.

But he was nowhere near stupid enough as to keep them in his storeroom. They were underneath one of the flagstones in the hearth. And for now that is where they would stay; no need getting too excited until he'd done some tests first. Firedrake scales were, after all, quite difficult to obtain.

Snape found that he was looking forward to the prospect of spending a long night hard at work on testing a new potion, free from other worries or distractions.

Hard work is exactly what you need right now, Severus. Stay disciplined, stay focused, and you will stay alive.

He rolled up his sleeves.

...~...~...

The next morning, Hermione sat in Herbology class and tried to pay attention to what Professor Sprout was saying about homunculi roots. The night before had again failed to bring sleep. At breakfast, Ron, with typical tact, had said, "Hermione, you look like *hell*!" She'd rolled her eyes and ignored him, but she had to admit he was right. The exhaustion and turmoil of the previous few days showed plainly on her face. Her eyes were bloodshot with dark circles underneath, and her hair was a wreck... or somewhat more of a wreck than usual, anyway. She felt as though she could crawl under her bedcovers and stay there for a week.

But N.E.W.T.s loomed on the horizon. And Snape's attempts to teach her Occlumency...couldn't forget that *Doomed attempts*, she thought. She'd just barely been able to push him out of her mind with pure rage, and she'd been able to briefly distract him with... well, with Ron. But those would hardly work on Lord Voldemort.

Of course, finding herself in front of Lord Voldemort would mean that so many things had gone so badly wrong that her failure to Occlude would be no more than a minor detail under the circumstances. But Snape wouldn't be bothering to try to teach her if he didn't think it was a possibility.

"Miss Granger!" Hermione's head snapped upright and she realized that Professor Sprout had called her name several times already. "Everything all right, my dear?" the short old professor said, frowning.

Hermione turned pink and said, "Yes, Professor. Sorry, just a bit tired today. I apologize."

Her instructor waved a dismissive hand and said, "No need! Simply explain to me how one goes about uprooting a mandrake," carrying on as though nothing were amiss. But Hermione berated herself for the lapse. *Pull yourself together, for Merlin's sake. You can't let on that anything is wrong.*

She forced herself to be more attentive for the rest of Herbology. Afterward was lunch, and Hermione nearly excused herself early to avoid having to feign interest in her friends' conversation until she noticed that Ron and Harry were talking about Quidditch. It would have been more unusual for her to *participate* in a Quidditch discussion. She turned her attention to her lunch instead and worked on quieting her mind and stilling her jangling nerves. Potions class was next.

Hermione entered the classroom two minutes before class was scheduled to begin, daring only a quick look at Professor Snape out of the corner of her eye. She kept her head down and made her way quickly to her lab table, hoping to avoid notice.

Today, though, Professor Snape seemed distracted. He assigned the class the relatively simple task of brewing the first stage of Polyjuice potion and then retreated to a shadowy corner of the classroom, lurking there in his usual bat-like way. Hermione breathed a quiet sigh of relief as she realized that today she would not be held in the crucible.

As she worked on unsucculating her first leech, she allowed herself a few glances in Snape's direction. His brow was furrowed, and he had a distant expression in his eyes. He was clearly deep in thought. She wondered whether it had anything to do with her, but then told herself to leave it. He was ignoring her, and that's exactly what she wanted. *Isn't it?*

At the least it was better than yesterday. After his outburst the previous evening, she had expected more, and worse. Perhaps he was saving it all for their next Occlumency lesson. She sighed, a little more loudly than she'd intended, and then she dared a look at Snape. He was still frowning off into the distance.

Well, good, she thought and turned back to her work. Neville's cauldron, situated directly next to hers, was glowing a faint pink. She thought she might lend him a subtle hand before the whole thing went pear-shaped...quite literally; it looked to her eye as though the mixture was building up to a small explosion...and attracted the eye of Professor Snape. No, today she was quite happy to escape his notice.

Though she did wonder what had him so preoccupied.

...~...~...

As soon as class finished, Hermione put away her notes and quills and parchment, moving so quickly that her hands shook slightly. She wasn't ready for another conversation with Snape. Not yet. She intended to be gone before he had a chance to confront her. She saw him move out of the corner of her eye, and without looking in his direction, she shouldered her bag and hurried from the room. She knew she couldn't avoid him forever; she didn't even want to. Just for right now. Just for today.

Before she'd made it halfway to the stairs at the end of the hall, though, she heard Ron behind her, calling out, "Hermione! Wait!" She stopped, arranged her face into a semblance of a smile, and turned to face him, her eyes flickering to the Potions classroom door for only the tiniest fraction of a second.

"What's up, Ron?" Her voice sounded much more pleasant and light-hearted than she really felt. Gods, she wanted sleep. She turned to continue down the hall, but Ron, failing yet again to read her body language, stayed exactly where he was, clearly intending to have this conversation right there in the dungeons. She suppressed an irritated sigh. It was just as well this way. It was cold down here, and damp, and the discomfort would keep them from having a lengthy chat.

"Well, uh... I was just wondering... you know..."

It took all of her willpower not to shriek at him *tospit it out already*.

"The uh... the Yule Ball..." *Oh, Gods. Of course.* Hermione felt sick. *How am I going to get out of this?*

Hogwarts' annual Yule Ball was approaching. It was an excuse for the students, particularly the sixth- and seventh-years, to dress up and put on grownup airs for a night. This year, with the war against Voldemort in full swing, the student body needed it more than ever. Hermione had overheard countless discussions and debates about who was to accompany whom. The political intrigue was enough to rival the most complicated machinations at the Ministry of Magic.

Most years, Hermione hadn't even bothered to find a date. There had been the once with Krum; she had to admit that had been quite lovely. But generally she found the Ball a tiresome nuisance, serving no purpose but to distract her from her studies. Her sole concession to taking the damn thing seriously was asking Ginny Weasley for help in finding an appropriate gown and doing her hair. This year, she hadn't even managed to do that much. She'd forgotten about the Ball entirely. She did a quick calculation and realized with faint horror that it was to be the following weekend. *Left things a bit last-minute, didn't we, Ron?* she thought, rather uncharitably; really she wished he weren't asking her in the first place. But he was, fumbling and stammering over his words. Typical Ron.

"... I was wondering if you wanted to go. With me. Because you haven't said. So... you know, I was just... wondering. Wondering if you wanted to go with me. I said that already, didn't I?" he finished miserably. His face matched the shade of his hair near-perfectly. Hermione felt a sudden wash of pity for him; she had not been terribly kind to him lately, and yet he had still mustered up the courage to ask her this. She opened her mouth to respond but then snapped it shut again immediately. Malfoy, surrounded by a small group of Slytherins, had emerged from the Potions classroom. He was smirking; with a sinking feeling, she realized that he must have heard the last bit of her conversation with Ron. Always sensitive to the impending humiliation of someone of lesser status, Malfoy had seen immediately that there was something here worth picking at. He glided over to where Ron and Hermione stood and cooed, "My my, troubles in paradise? Let me guess... the school *dance*?"

Hermione rolled her eyes and said, "Shut up, Malfoy," while Ron glared, the veins in his neck bulging and his face going past red and straight into purple.

Malfoy smiled indulgently and pretended to examine a bit of dirt on one of his fingernails. "Aw. Poor Granger. It must be tough when the only person who appreciates your... *charms*..." He glanced at her hair, and waited until the Slytherin goons behind him finished sniggering obediently before continuing, "... is Weasley here, who can't even afford decent looking *school* robes, much less something appropriate for the Ball. Guess you'll just have to go alone... again."

Ron's mouth was open and working with no sound coming out. Hermione reflected that she spent entirely too much of her time protecting her friends from their own testosterone. *Perhaps not today, though,* she thought, seized by a devilish impulse. She was tired of keeping Ron out of trouble, tired of being mocked, tired of all of House Slytherin. One Slytherin in particular, although the one standing in front of her at the moment would do nicely as a substitute.

Hermione lowered her lashes at Draco and then simpered, in her best Pansy Parkinson imitation, "Malfoy, it's *so* nice of you to take an interest. I understand you're having a bit of difficulty finding a date yourself this year. Are you... *asking*?"

Draco's demeanor changed in an instant. Now he and Ron *wereboth* staring at her with red faces, Malfoy's angry and Ron's astonished. Hermione was good at piecing together bits of information, and she'd overheard enough whispered fragments of gossip over the past few weeks to know that Lucius Malfoy was out of favor in the Dark Lord's circle, and furthermore that his son was suffering by association. Pansy Parkinson had found someone more politically favorable to attend the ball with, and so far Draco hadn't found a replacement date.

Draco's thoughts were plainly visible on his face: if even bookworm Hermione Granger knew... *who else did?* His initial look of dumbfounded astonishment transformed into a snarl of cold, naked fury. On any other day that would have been good enough for her, but his humiliation was too irresistible; she wanted to prod him just a bit further, make him cringe and squirm like she'd been made to in class the day before. *How does it feel, Malfoy?*

And so with a wide, flirtatious smile, she said, "Oh, no worries, Draco! certainly don't have any problem with whatever your dad has been up to lately. I'm not that sort of girl. Always found Death Eaters a bit boring, to be honest."

Ron was staring in open-mouthed shock. *There are quite a few things you don't know about me, Ronald Weasley* she thought.

Malfoy trembled with fury. His face was bloodless and white, with two feverish spots of color high in his cheeks. Hermione found her hand creeping towards her wand; it occurred to her with a jolt that she might have really pushed him over the edge this time.

In a cracking, high-pitched voice, Draco said, "You know *nothing* about my father. You know *nothing* about me. And by the time we're finished with you and your kind, you'll know *nothing* at all forever, you filthy MUDBLOOD!"

Out of the corner of her eye, Hermione saw Ron going for his wand. She thought *ph no*, and then time seemed to slow down. She reached for her own wand, but Malfoy somehow already had his in his hand, aimed between her eyes, while Ron's wand was aimed in turn at Malfoy. Every nerve in her body screamed for her to run...but before her body could respond to the command, she heard a familiar baritone voice, and everyone froze.

"Mr. Weasley. Mr. Malfoy." A pause, and then, "Miss... Granger."

Snape. She felt an electric shiver when he spoke her name but remained perfectly still. Without otherwise moving, she opened her fingers to release her grip on her wand. Ron and Malfoy both lowered theirs, glaring at each other. She wondered what Malfoy had been about to cast on her. She had never seen him so consumed with rage.

Snape's voice came from behind her, "I believe that public dueling is expressly forbidden on school grounds. Twenty points from Gryffindor and ten from Slytherin, and then I want the lot of you back in your towers where you belong."

Ron sputtered in outrage, "But... why twenty from *us*?"

Dangerously quiet, Snape said, "That's ten for you and ten for Miss Granger, who as Head Girl should know better than to become involved in petty disputes of this nature."

The hairs on the back of her neck stood up; he was so close behind her that she could feel the air moving every time his robes shifted. In front of her, Ron flushed red again, but he kept his mouth shut. It was clearly unfair that Gryffindor was being docked ten additional points when Slytherin had an entire goon squad backing up Malfoy, but they expected this sort of thing from Snape. Hermione was glad to see that Ron knew better than to protest.

"On your way, all of you. No...Miss Granger, a moment, if you please." Malfoy and the Slytherins were already retreating, smirking to each other. Hermione could feel Snape looming just over her shoulder. She wondered if he knew how uncomfortable he was making her. *Likely yes, and no doubt he's enjoying every second of it.* With deep resentment, she considered that if Ron hadn't stopped her to ask about the damned Yule Ball, she'd have been halfway back to Gryffindor Tower by now.

Ron clearly didn't want to leave her; he stopped and gave her a questioning look. Hermione shook her head. "I'll catch up later, Ron; no worries." He hesitated, shooting a baleful glare at the dark figure standing behind her, but finally trudged off down the hallway.

Leaving Hermione alone with her Potions professor.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 of 10

In her final year at Hogwarts, Hermione becomes entangled with her Potions professor in a very tricky and difficult situation—one that could change not only the outcome of the war, but their feelings for each other.

Hermione wondered how much of the altercation Professor Snape had seen before intervening. She braced herself for a reprimand; instead he raised an imperious eyebrow and said, "Miss Granger, you will accompany me to the lab."

"Sir?" she asked. She wasn't ready for Occlumency practice again, not so soon after yesterday. She needed to sort through her conflicted, jumbled feelings about the previous few days, and she needed a day or two away from the source of her difficulties, currently striding into the Potions classroom ahead of her. She needed time away from his mockery and his needling. Time away from having him inside her mind. Time to simply think.

Snape stopped at the door and looked back at her impatiently. *Now, Miss Granger.*"

Well, she wouldn't be getting it today; that much was clear. *Pull yourself together, Hermione. You can do this.*

...~...~...

Inside the Potions classroom, she began to ask him, "Professor, is this..." but he cut her off abruptly.

"Miss Granger. Your research proposal. Have you shared it with anyone else?"

She looked at him stupidly; her research proposal? She hadn't expected him to have even read it yet. He stared back, waiting for an answer. She cast her mind back through the work she'd done; *had* she told anyone else? She'd mentioned to Ron and Harry that she was working on an extracurricular project, but she didn't think she'd even mentioned that it was Potions-related, much less any specifics.

"Uh... no, sir. Just you."

His eyes narrowed. "Think *hard*, Miss Granger. Did you share it with *anyone at all*? Mention it to a friend? Ask another professor for assistance?"

His intent stare made her feel exposed and vulnerable. She had a sudden wild urge to hide behind one of the tables.

"Professor Snape, I'm sure. I worked on it alone and didn't get help from anyone. I only made two copies of it; Bellatrix Lestrange threw the first one into your fire..." She faltered briefly, thinking about the circumstances surrounding that incident. "... And the second one has been in my room since I finished it. I haven't told anyone. But... it's just some preliminary ideas I had about potion enhancement. Why are you..."

Snape interrupted her again. "Miss Granger, do you recall the part of your proposal regarding a suspension charm? One, I believe, of your own device?"

Hermione felt as though her head were whirling. Why was he bringing *that* up?

"Yes, sir, but that was just a footnote. I nearly didn't bother to mention it. It's... it's just a helpful little tool I came up with. You know, to save myself from having to constantly stir during certain parts of the potion preparation."

Silence stretched between them. And then under his breath, he said, "A helpful little tool. You really have ~~no~~ idea."

"I... sir? I don't understand."

"Clearly not. Come with me, Miss Granger." In a swirl of robes, he turned and disappeared into the classroom laboratory. Biting her lip, she followed him. It appeared this was not to be an Occlumency lesson. Or a reprimand for her behavior in the hallway earlier, which if she were to be honest with herself, she deserved. What *had* she been thinking, prodding at Malfoy that way? He'd been stretched out like piano wire for weeks now. She was lucky not to be in the infirmary. *Or worse*, she thought, but surely he wouldn't have unleashed an Unforgivable on her right in the middle of Hogwarts.

Why not? His Head of House certainly had no trouble doing so she thought, but she immediately scolded herself for being unfair. You did tell him to do it

The laboratory had been cleared of the day's experiments and paraphernalia. All of the tables were clean and uncluttered, save for the one in the middle of the room. On the bare wooden tabletop, there rested a small glass phial filled with a clear liquid. It looked like water, though Hermione had learned never to make assumptions in Potions class.

Snape faced her across the table, his hands clasped behind his back, never shifting his gaze from her face. Hermione felt a momentary disquiet at being alone with him, but her mounting academic interest in the situation soon took over. She couldn't imagine what on earth could possibly have Snape... a Potions master, for Merlin's sake... so worked up over a little footnote in a student's research proposal.

"Your suspension charm, Miss Granger. Tell me about it."

She was wary of his motives. This was uncomfortably close to being put on the spot in his classroom. Yet his tone held no sarcasm or mocking, and answering questions in class was a role she slipped into easily and comfortably. Staring at the glass phial, she said, "Well, preparing my range-increasing potion required several different mixtures to be stirred simultaneously. It occurred to me that it might be easier if I simply suspended the particles in solution, so I devised a little suspension charm to do it. I tested it several times and found it to be quite effective. Once you've combined substances with the suspension charm, they'll stay together, perfectly mixed, until you reverse the charm. Or forever, I suppose, if you never do. It's really very handy..."

"That is sufficient, Miss Granger. You would do well to learn to answer questions succinctly and without a surfeit of detail." Her cheeks reddened again; how was he able to do so constantly and effectively wrong-foot her?

He continued, "Now. What would happen if you used this suspension charm on particles that were so small they could not be detected with the naked eye?"

She frowned. "Well, assuming that you're referring to a microscopic scale..." She broke off and said, "I'm sorry, that's a Muggle term; I meant..."

Drily, he said, "I am familiar. Continue."

"Er... yes, well, if the particles were that small, then the solution would appear identical to the base liquid of the suspension. So for example, if they were mixed into water, it would look like... water..." She trailed off, looking at the innocuous little phial of liquid in the center of the table.

"Indeed. A further question: What if the... *microscopic* particles were toxic in nature?"

"Obviously you'd have a poison, but of course any standard poison detection spell would... oh... oh, my God."

She braced her hands on the edge of the table for support; the blood had run out of her head and she felt faint. Potions preparation was an incredibly common skill in the world of magic, and she herself had wondered, when she first came to Hogwarts, what stopped everyone from constantly poisoning all of their enemies. It would be easy enough to prepare a toxic potion and disguise it as something else... the victim's tea, for example, as Bellatrix Lestrange had proved with her Lumia potion. But of course Lumia wasn't a toxic poison; if it had been, the standard poison-detection charm incorporated into every mug, cup, bowl, and other serving dish would have neutralized it. Nobody would even think of buying dishes without such a charm, and so the idea of poisoning someone else was... well, quite literally unthinkable. It wouldn't even occur to someone to try because it would be completely pointless. Completely impossible.

Except that she'd just come up with a way to make it possible. Her knees felt watery and weak.

Snape waited with a look of grim satisfaction.

"Continue, Miss Granger."

Still leaning hard against the table, she drew a deep breath and said, "Normally toxic particles would be detected by a poison detection spell, but in this case, the charm would have encased each of the particles in its own tiny little bubble of magic. The poison would be... would be..."

"Totally undetectable," he said. "Full marks, Miss Granger."

She looked at him helplessly, still unable to tell whether he was angry, or pleased, or... something else. His face was calm, composed, just as though he were instructing her in a standard potion in his classroom. *Classroom, yes; standard, no*, she thought and had to stifle a sudden near-hysterical giggle. Snape took no notice.

"Let us continue with this... thought experiment," he said, the words unrolling like a bolt of fine satin. "What if the substance weren't toxic at all? What if, instead, it were... explosive?"

"I don't understand, sir."

"Do you know what these are?" He withdrew a small pouch from inside his robes and opened it, shaking out a handful of glittering, iridescent wafers, glinting red and gold in the light.

"Professor, are those... fire-drake scales? But those are impossible to... where did you even..."

Ignoring her unfinished questions, he said, "Well done, Miss Granger. Now tell me their properties."

She frowned again. "Well, they're not very useful in potions because as soon as you cast any sort of magic on them, they explode."

"Exactly. Now outline for me, if you will, what would happen if you were to use your *helpful* little suspension charm on fire-drake scales."

"They'd explode..." but she cut herself off, her brow wrinkled in thought. "Wait. No, they wouldn't. The charm encases the suspended particles in a bubble of magic; it doesn't actually use magic on them. So you could easily suspend them in liquid that way, and then if you wanted, you could reduce the little magic bubbles down in size to the microscopic level. The fire-drake scales would be unaffected by magic; they'd only be along for the ride. At least, I think that's how it would work." Her face was animated with the challenge of solving an interesting puzzle.

"Very good, Miss Granger." His voice had grown softer, quieter; his stare never wavered. "What would happen... if you administered this suspension to a person?"

She thought for a moment. "Well, nothing; the suspension would be inert in their body, except that... except..." Her eyes widened in horror.

"Go on, please."

In a whisper, she said, "Except that the tiny little fire-drake particles would travel throughout every part of their body, lodge in every cell, waiting there forever, totally harmless, until... until..."

"Say it."

She had trouble drawing breath; her chest felt as though there were a heavy weight sitting on it. *What had she done?* "Until someone ends the spell, and then... then..."

Snape pointed his wand at the little phial of water in the center of the table and said, *Finite Incantatem*. The phial exploded outwards in a gout of flame, sending a column

of water into the air and glass shards flying in every direction. Hermione shrieked and ducked, protecting her head with her hands, but Snape arrested the shards, holding them motionless in the air before letting them harmlessly drop to the floor.

"And then," he said, "the scales come into contact with magic, with... predictable results."

Hermione straightened up from her defensive crouch. She folded her arms tightly against her body to stop her hands from uncontrollably shaking. "Every cell in the person's body would simultaneously explode."

"Quite. I believe the effect would be rather... what's the Muggle term?*Pyrotechnic.*"

Her face was white. "I didn't know... I didn't mean..."

"Miss Granger, you have created a weapon."

"Sir, I didn't mean to, I swear, I just..."

He ignored this. "A weapon that I intend to use."

The words she'd been about to speak died on her lips. Snape watched and waited as realization dawned on her face *Bright girl.*

Fixing her with an even stare, he said, "You will tell no-one about any of this."

"No, sir," she managed unsteadily.

"Not the Order. Not your friends. Not anyone. Trust me, if this information is disseminated at large, *it will be used*, and there will be no stopping it."

"Yes, Professor," she said and then hesitated. "Professor Snape, I have to ask... why did you tell me? Why not just use it yourself?"

"For two reasons, Miss Granger. First, I could not take the chance that you would tell some... *friend* about your clever little discovery. Your ignorance of its implications was dangerous." He noted her cheeks redden and felt gratified. *Yes, even brilliant H. Granger misses the obvious sometimes.*

"Second, and more to the point, every day that passes increases the likelihood that I will not survive one of my encounters with the Dark Lord." Her eyes widened. In pleasure, perhaps; he imagined that she savored the thought of his death. He wondered if she fantasized about it.

Enough self-indulgence.

"If I do not, someone else will have to cast Finite Incantatem in his presence. That person will have to be you."

"What?"

He enjoyed her shocked expression. *Weren't expecting that, were you?*

"Who would you suggest, then?" His eyes glinted in challenge. "What member of the Order would you trust with this knowledge? Who would you trust implicitly not to tell? Who would you trust not to *use* it?"

She stared at him in silence.

"Precisely."

He had considered this at length the night before. He would be damned if he let any other human being lay eyes on the girl's poisoning charm...for that's really what it was...and it would be stupid not to have a backup plan. He was mildly surprised every time he managed to leave Voldemort's presence still breathing. It would be a waste to go to the trouble of brewing and administering the firedrake potion only to be unable to activate the fucking thing. So Granger would be his backup plan.

He'd asked himself whether she were trustworthy for something of this magnitude... whether she could be relied on to carry out the task if need be. He thought about how she'd demanded that he cast an Unforgivable on her and how she'd held herself in perfect stillness while she waited for him to do it. He thought about how she'd picked herself up afterward and limped to the door, broken and bruised, refusing any help. He thought about how she'd suffered through his excoriation in the classroom. And through all of this, she had told no-one. She had suffered alone in her misery.

Yes, he thought that she would prove sufficient to the task. If necessary.

"But Professor Snape, why not simply poison Lor... him. Poison him. Surely that would be easier?"

He lifted an eyebrow. "Your definition of the word 'easy' is rather different from mine, apparently. But you are correct. There are poisons that would be simpler and less time-consuming than the firedrake potion. Tell me why we are using the firedrake scales in your suspension charm instead."

She stifled the urge to point out that she was the one who had asked him. Fine, she could work this out. Her eyes unfocused as she cast her mind through the various properties and characteristics of firedrake scales. *What did I miss?*

With the part of her mind not otherwise preoccupied, she noted that Snape's attitude was different from his usual classroom demeanor. In the classroom, he took delight in publicly humiliating her; he relished her failures. But not now, not here. Now he merely waited for her answer with an unreadable expression on his face. And then she blinked and realized that it wasn't unreadable at all. She just hadn't recognized it, never having seen it from him before: *He is confident in me.*

Shortly after that, another realization struck her, and her cheeks reddened slightly.

"I am an idiot."

Snape's eyebrow lifted even higher, and he murmured, "Oh?"

She shot him an accusing glance. "You could have just told me, you know."

"Your assessment is, as usual, correct, Miss Granger. But please, elaborate."

She sighed, and recited out of the fourth-year Potions textbook (*how could she have forgotten this?*): "There is no known magical poison that has proven effective on incorporeal persons."

"Indeed, Miss Granger."

"Although usually that's assumed to refer to ghosts, and not... whatever Lor... You-Know-Who is."

Snape inclined his head slightly, the most assent she'd likely get from him on this subject, and said, "The point remains, he is at least semi-incorporeal."

"But firedrake scales will work? You can't know that. Have you considered using a Muggle poison? Something non-magical?"

Snape ground his teeth. He wasn't sure what irritated him more: her questions or the fact that she had a point.

"I will admit that I am not... entirely sure that the firedrake scales will kill him. But I believe that the physical effect of the explosion will at least harm him, yes. His body may be only semi-corporeal, but he still requires it in order to live and function. And there are no Muggle poisons that would be both undetectable and instantaneously fatal. Yes, I've checked," he finished, forestalling the obvious follow-up question.

She opened her mouth anyway, but before she could launch into what would undoubtedly be an interminable series of ideas he'd already considered and dismissed, he cut her off.

"Miss Granger, I think you will agree that this means the need for you to be able to effectively use Occlumency is somewhat more... urgent, shall we say."

If Voldemort...or any other Death Eater, for that matter...saw into her mind in its current unprotected state, they'd be fucked, no two ways around it. He could see in her eyes that she knew he was right.

Her voice was even and level: "Yes, sir. When?" Her mouth tightened a fraction as she braced herself against the possibility that he would want to begin immediately.

"My next lesson with you will have to wait. I have an... appointment this Friday evening, and I will need to spend what little spare time I have beforehand brewing a sufficient quantity of potion."

Her eyes widened a little, but she said nothing. Snape wondered with irritation exactly how she'd thought they were going to get the potion to Voldemort. Obviously he'd have to take it there himself. This hardly warranted surprise, he thought.

Though he had barely enough time. He was to report to Voldemort on Friday about his progress on the restoration potion. If the firedrake potion was ready by then, he would easily be able to pass it off instead.

This potion, unfortunately, was more difficult and time-consuming to brew than most. The firedrake scales were slow to shrink and required constant observation to keep the magic field around them from inadvertently causing an early detonation. The demonstration phial he'd made up had incorporated only a single firedrake scale and had taken most of a night. He had no time to spare if he wanted to have enough for Lord Voldemort in three days' time.

Granger stood waiting for instructions. *Always a good student*, he thought blackly.

"In the meantime," he told her, "you will practice on your own. Part of successful Occlumency, as you may have heard from your friend *Potter*, is being able to completely clear your mind of thoughts and distractions."

He could not keep the loathing out of his voice when he mentioned the boy's name. Teaching Occlumency to Potter had been a complete fucking nightmare, and he didn't enjoy thinking about it. He composed himself and went on, "You have discovered that you can overpower the Legilimens with brute emotional force. This is crude and unsubtle and will therefore ultimately prove ineffective. Clearing your mind perfectly is the first step towards true Occlumency."

Her eyes were fixed on him; she was absorbing everything he said, as he'd seen her do so many times in his classroom.

He said, "When we next meet, I will enter your mind. You will keep it completely blank, clear from all thoughts. This is a skill that you can learn with practice." He stopped, then said, "Or at least it is a skill that *some* can learn."

"I... think I can do that, Professor."

"See that you can," he said sharply. "You will be here Saturday at 7 o'clock exactly. I expect you to be ready."

It occurred to him that she might have to cancel evening plans for their lesson... perhaps a snogging session with Weasley. He thought of the memory she'd shown him, thought of how Weasley had humiliated himself at the end of their last evening together. But that was of no consequence. It was nothing to him if she wanted to use her talents...*her body*...on some puling little twit. Hardly any of his concern. And hardly any of his concern if she'd have to cancel such an engagement in order to learn how to keep the Dark fucking Lord out of her head.

With a scowl, he said, "Dismissed, Granger. There's no need to stand there like a sheep chewing its cud."

Her cheeks colored and her eyes flashed. She said, "Sir," nodded to him with a jerk, and left without saying anything further, closing the classroom door behind her a little more loudly than usual.

Snape expelled a long breath. He wondered whether he were *trying* to make her hate him. But he dismissed the thought as nothing more than sentimental rubbish. He was above that sort of thing.

And at any rate, he certainly didn't have to try.