

The Ice-Cream Man Cometh

by Clairvoyant

Unspeakable Severus Snape accepts an unusual assignment without considering the consequences. His colleague Hermione Granger reluctantly helps prepare him for the mysterious mission. How will these two solitary, headstrong individuals learn to play nice together?

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 7

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Chapter One

BOOM!

An enormous cloud of acrid black smoke mushroomed over the cauldron and obscured the workbench. Snape emerged, covered in fine gray soot, spluttering profanity between fits of coughing.

"Fuck, fuck, buggery, fuck, shit, bollocks!"

When he finally caught his breath, and the ash had settled, he dusted off his singed and splattered notebook and scribbled a few lines within. He punctuated the remarks with a vicious stab of his quill.

"That's a big no for shredded ginger root. Wit-Sharpener Potion version 2.3, marked as a failure."

Epic failure if you ask me, thought Brian. That was painful.

"Oh, what are you complaining about?" Snape asked rhetorically. "You're a brain. You don't have any sensory receptors."

Oh, yeah? Well, I have feelings, you know. And at the moment, I feel rather hurt.

While their relationship had begun years ago as researcher and test subject, Brian naturally assumed the role of confidante and sounding board for Snape, yet the stoic wizard often discounted Brian's emotional needs.

"Bugger your feelings, Brian. I... I can't believe... I'm arguing with a disembodied brain... again. There's something definitely wrong with me."

He slid to the floor and cradled his face in his hands, sighing in melodramatic fashion. "I really need a break from this. I must stop hiding in the Ministry."

Oh, I hear you, Severus, Brian said, his telepathic voice sounding melancholy. *I wish I could have a change of scenery, but I'm more or less tethered to the Brain Room. That's what I get for donating myself to magical research.*

"Would you stop whining?" Snape bellowed, forgetting his self-pity for a brief moment. "You enjoyed a long, full life before you died. You were a productive member of Wizarding Britain, sired five *wonderful* children, as you say," he rolled his eyes as he commented, "married a loving witch with whom you enjoyed... erm, sexual relations at least three times a week, as you claim..."

That's what you need, man! You need sex, and lots of it, on a regular basis. You would be a hell of a lot more relaxed.

"How do you know I'm *not* getting laid regularly?" he replied, blushing. "And what makes you an expert in... Oh, this conversation is over! I'm going to the departmental meeting now. I'll be back later... maybe."

He stood tall, brushed the smokey residue from his robes, and billowed from the room.

The Department of Mysteries head Jonathan Dougherty counted aloud the seats in the briefing room while muttering profanities aimed at his quirky underlings, who had not yet arrived. Fortunately, nobody was there to witness his unprofessional behavior. "Twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-four... Fucking weirdos... Twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-seven... Can't tolerate another being within one meter for even five minutes... Twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty. Done. Next time you can conjure your own damn chairs, you barmy buggers."

The Unspeakables were generally regarded as a secretive and solitary bunch, better suited for investigations of the odd, unusual, and misunderstood phenomena of the Wizarding world than for a position in the public sector, like the Welcome Witch at St. Mungo's. They wouldn't even sit next to one another at the weekly departmental briefings let alone eat together in the Ministry commissary; actually, they were so anti-social that they would rather spend the lunch hour in isolation at their desks. Agent Dougherty had to be a bit of an odd duck himself to lead them. He complained about those chairs every time; nevertheless, he still accommodated his employees with extra seats, albeit uncomfortable ones upholstered in a scratchy, synthetic fabric.

At precisely 8:59 a.m., field agents and researchers filed into the room, all of them silent, save for their shuffling feet. Some carried parchment and self-inking quills, presumably to take notes, but on occasion, even the most dedicated, stalwart employee, like Hermione Granger, had been known to draw a doodle or two to pass the time. Some carried cups of fragrant tea or bitter, black coffee, presumably for the caffeine, but rarely, even the most eagle-eyed, observant employee, like Severus Snape, had been known to cast a discreet Rennervate to stave off slumber whilst Agent Dougherty droned on, as these so-called briefings were anything but brief.

Hermione took her usual spot, aisle seat, middle row, right center. She greeted her coworkers with an ambiguous nod and a weary smile, having recently completed her midnight shift. As she reached into her beaded handbag still stylistically inappropriate for everyday use, especially for a Ministry meeting on a Friday morning she seemed to detect the faint odor of burnt armadillo organs. A few surreptitious sniffs and some furtive glances led her to the source of the smell: Severus Snape, seated across the aisle from her on the left.

He would have lobbed a sharp, biting verbal attack on her rude nose-wrinkling behavior, but he knew the meeting was about to start, so he settled for a penetrating narrow-eyed glare.

"Nine o'clock on the dot, so let's get started," Dougherty announced with a contrasting mix of verve and restraint. "Due to a scheduling conflict, my usual confab with the Minister has been moved to the morning, so I really will keep this short," he said, smiling knowingly.

"We are coming up on the fifth anniversary of Voldemort's second and ultimate demise. The researchers in the Death Chamber have noted an increase in spectregraphic and spectreaudio activity from the other side of the Veil. This could be a coincidence. Perhaps there's been a spike in the number of recent deaths in the Wizarding world, but I haven't received a memo on that. Regardless of the reason, Magical Law Enforcement will be assisting us in securing the area at least the Death Chamber until this minor hubbub dies down.

"With that in mind, our housekeeping must be top notch because we cannot ward an entire department against outsiders, especially those we've asked to help us. File or bin sensitive memos and documents; if that's not possible, please encode them for your eyes only. Files should be locked at all times when you leave your offices or labs, even momentarily. Rubbish bins should be set to auto-Evanesco."

Dougherty organized his note cards, then glanced at his watch. "Oh, look at the time. Before we adjourn, there's one last item of a somewhat urgent nature. We've received reports of strange happenings in a Muggle community up north. It's also attracted the attention of... erm, shall we say... non-human entities. This calls for subtle surveillance to assess the situation; however, our field agents are spread thin as it is, what with the Veil and those bird sightings at Dover. I need a volunteer from amongst the researchers for this assignment."

This is a sign, Snape thought. This is the break I need.

"I'll do it," he intoned flatly. After all, he didn't want his coworkers thinking he was eager to leave his Brain Room research.

"Excellent, Snape. You are uniquely qualified for this assignment coincidentally," Dougherty said. "Well, that's it. Meeting adjourned." As the Unspeakables left the room, he gathered his note cards into a neat pile on the lectern, set them ablaze with a silent incendio, then directed the ashes into the dust bin with a swish of his wand. "Snape, walk with me to the Minister's office, and I'll give you the details."

Snape stumbled into the Brain Room, robes deflated, gait unsteady, and eyes glazed over with terror. Brian could only come to one conclusion:

Did those wankers in the Locked Room dose you with a Love Potion again?

"What?" Snape replied, still a touch shocked. "No, no," he continued, shaking his head vigorously, finally coming back to reality. "I wish it were that simple. I would prefer snogging She-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named in a dark cupboard over what I just agreed to."

When he wasn't forthcoming with an explanation, Brian joked, *Well, are you going to tell me, or do I have to beat it out of you?* He waved his tendrils the physical manifestation of his thought in a menacing manner, sloshing the water from his personal tank onto the floor.

"Stop messing up the place, and I'll tell you. I'm feeling weak again, so I need to sit for this." Snape dragged a stool from across the room. He watched in sadistic bemusement as Brian retreated from the noise, squeezing himself into a far corner of his tank. "Ah, that's better," he said, settling onto the chair.

Must you torture me like that?

"I have so very little joy in life. Must you begrudge me these tiny diversions?" he said, smirking.

Just tell me what's going on. He broadcast that thought with touch of exasperation.

"I am to unobtrusively observe the denizens of a village by the name of Lower Tadfield," Snape explained.

Never heard of it. Is that even in England?

"Of course you've never heard of it. You're a pureblood who rarely stepped foot outside of Devon, except to attend Hogwarts, shop in Diagon Alley, and see an occasional West End show."

What's so special about Lower Tadpole?

"Tadfield," Snape corrected the geographically challenged Brian. "The initial report claims extraordinary ley lines, impeccably predictable weather, and anachronistic beauty for a southeastern English village the nearest motorway is tens of miles away. In summary, it's too perfect, especially for twentieth century Muggles; otherworldly forces are obviously at work there."

So what's the issue here? You're a master of subtle surveillance. You should have no trouble keeping a low profile.

"And that's the problem," Snape said, his prolonged sigh only emphasizing his irritation. "I'm going so deep undercover that the use of magic has been forbidden. No Disillusionment or invisibility cloak allowed. I'm going native, as the Muggles say, so that I won't raise suspicion among the unearthly beings, should they be in attendance."

You'll have no trouble blending in, Brian encouraged. *You grew up among Muggles, and you're an adaptable, intelligent man.*

"Ah, if it were as simple as just 'blending in,' I would have no complaint, but Dougherty insists this stakeout be highly visible, 'transparent' was his word. So I'll be operating an ice-cream van as my cover."

What is that exactly?

Snape pinched the bridge of his nose with a vice-like grip. Conversations with Brian occasionally involved extensive explanations of Muggle culture, and even though he expected it to happen at least once a day, that didn't make it any less aggravating.

"A motorized vehicle from which one sells frozen confections," he answered quickly, yet without any hint of annoyance.

You drive and scoop ice-cream. What's the difficulty in that?

Snape didn't respond, but instead gave into the sudden, irresistible urge to pull on each and every button on his frock coat, testing for breaches in thread integrity. While it didn't take a genius to puzzle out the meaning behind Snape's reticence, Brian considered himself rather perceptive for a mere brain, having only two out of five senses at his disposal sight and hearing.

You don't know how to drive, do you? Further silence only verified Brian's suspicions. *Why did you agree to this assignment if you don't know how to drive?*

"Because I was impulsive, impetuous, just plain foolish. I volunteered for a field assignment without knowing any of the details before hand. Dougherty asked... and I... I said yes before I could consider the consequences."

Well, just this morning you said, and I quote,"I really need a break from this. I must stop hiding in the Ministry."

"Yes, today's botched potion had some influence on my rash decision; however, I don't want to discuss the real motivations behind my actions at this moment."

Brian usually respected Snape's wishes, and he would have dropped the subject had he not felt a prickly, tingling sensation in his prefrontal cortex; he called it his sixth sense.

Why didn't you graciously retract your offer once you knew the mission involved skills you don't possess?

He sighed deeply, looking off into the distance, probably at the exit sign above the doorway. "That would have been admitting defeat." Now, he directed his defiant gaze at Brian. "Just because I don't know how to drive now doesn't mean I can't learn. And I wasn't about to let a prime assignment fall into Granger's lap by default. I'm sure she would never let me hear the end of it. You should have seen her this morning, turning her nose up at me... literally," he said, adding a contemptuous snort for good measure.

I might not have the ability to smell, but I'm certain that fouled up potion did nothing to improve upon your personal hygiene. Plus, you looked a bit sooty, I think, but the lighting in here is always so dismal, so who can tell?

"Let's forget about my grooming and focus on the problem at hand: learning how to drive."

How do the Muggles do it?

"Specialized schools offer lessons of a practical and theoretical nature, but I don't have the time for that. I only have ten days to learn before I'm expected to peddle ice-cream from the back of a van."

You would have the time if you were willing to test out one of the new prototype Time-Turners.

"I refuse to be in the same room with that contraption until it's been sorted out. Chandler still isn't right in the head after his brief jaunt into the past. He's perpetually running an hour late, and he's convinced his office is infested by Cornish pixies who delight in hiding his current case files."

He stood up and began to pace around the tank. "Oh, this is ridiculous. There's no reason I should be acting like a nervous ninny without common sense." After a few more laps, he stopped abruptly and announced, "Ah, I've got it!"

So, what's your plan, Professor?

"I'll read a how-to manual and use my neighbor's car for practice," Snape replied smugly. "Seriously, how difficult can it be if it's the primary mode of transportation for Muggles? Even teenagers can learn to drive, and their brains are thoroughly muddled by overactive hormones. I see no reason why I shouldn't master the skills of driving a motorized vehicle by the end of the weekend." He picked up the stool and gently placed it in its proper spot across the room. "I'm leaving early to go and do some research at a local bookstore. Maybe I'll have one of those frou-frou coffees made with frothy milk, too. If I must blend inconspicuously with Muggles, I might as well start practicing now."

Severus, you may be able to blend, but inconspicuously is asking for a lot.

"I appreciate your vote of confidence, Brian," he sneered. "I bid you farewell. Have a pleasant weekend." He almost cracked a smile as he turned to leave.

Oh, before you go, would you be so kind as to turn on the wireless? Witching Hour is going to have an interview with Celestina Warbeck today. I can hardly wait for her new album to be released.

Snape switched it on as he exited the room, his robes billowing once more with their usual aplomb. Under his breath, he muttered, "I'm a handmaiden to a brain. This is why I need to get out of here."

story so as not to give anything away. If you've had any contact with me, either virtual or real, then you already know where this is headed.

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 7

The best laid plans of mice and men – and wizards and brains – often go awry. And a consummate Slytherin finds himself outslitherin'd.

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Chapter Two

Snape returned to the Brain Room Monday, more than an hour before his usual arrival time, looking ashen and wobbly, not unlike his appearance upon entering the lab on the previous Friday. He retired to his desk to review the notes on his most recent potion research. He had barely leafed through the last pages of his abused notebook when Brian piped up.

You're here rather early. Can I assume your weekend didn't go exactly as planned?

"That's an understatement," he said succinctly. He resumed studying his nearly illegible remarks *Does that call for coarsely chopped sneezeweed or snotgrass?* hoping Brian would drop the subject.

Do you want to talk about it?

"Not particularly," he drawled. "But I assume you won't let me work in peace until your curiosity is satisfied."

I'm just concerned about you, Severus. You don't look well. I think this driving business is too much pressure for you.

"Thank you, Brian, but I truly want to do this. I will do this," he insisted. "I just don't know how... yet." He wheeled his desk chair next to Brian's tank, then took a fortifying breath before relating his tale of woe.

"The weekend started off well. I thoroughly enjoyed my time spent at the Muggle bookstore-cum-cafe. I drank a caramel macchiato while skimming through *Driving for Dummies*. The book is not only informative but amusing I almost laughed out loud many times. I took it home and read through it twice on Saturday, making sure I paid close attention to the etiquette of the road it wouldn't do to be pulled over for a traffic offense or a breach of the Highway Code, although a discreetly aimed Obliviate would solve so many problems. I felt completely confident with the theoretical content, so I thought mastering the practical skills would be straightforward as well. I reserved Sunday for practice behind the wheel that's a Muggle phrase for driving, by the way."

Thanks for explaining that.

"I woke up bright and early Sunday morning, and I purchased freshly baked pastries. I thought it might take more than a little cajoling for my neighbor, Mrs. O'Leary, to lend me her automobile, but she agreed with no hesitation, even offered to share the scones with me. Ah, if everything that day were so simple. Turned out that her car was an automatic maybe the only one in all of Europe but the book only covered instructions for cars with a gearstick.

"I assumed a transfiguration spell would solve that problem, but something went terribly wrong; the advanced electronics in the car must have interfered with the spell. So rather than change it into the manual version I'd read about, I accidentally..." Snape couldn't bring himself to finish the sentence.

Yes, yes, what happened? Tell me! Brian thought impatiently.

"Let's just say she won't be driving *that* anymore. I spent the remainder of the day concocting a viable lie to explain the 'missing' car to the widow O'Leary. She took the news rather well, I must say. I had rather enjoyed my new adventure until yesterday, that is. That was one of the most morale-deflating experiences I've ever had."

You still need to learn the practical side of driving.

"Thanks for reminding me, Brian. I was so absorbed in self-pity I forgot about that. Oh, but wait, I scheduled windmill tilting for this evening, so the driving practice will have to wait."

You lost me there, Severus. Was that meant to be sarcasm?

"Yes, Brian. I'll explain the meaning another day. But the driving..." He hung his head and stared at his hands.

Don't give up yet, man. The school...

"Is expensive and time consuming. I can neither afford the high cost nor take time off for a week-long intensive course. And I doubt my other neighbors will let me borrow their cars after yesterday's fiasco. Frankly, I'm a bit nervous to proceed on my own now."

You should ask a coworker for help, then. There must be a half-blood or a Muggle-born in this department who knows how to drive.

Snape looked up and smiled at Brian, appreciating his encouragement. "You see the Ministry through rose-colored glasses, my friend, when in reality it's populated by more dunderheads than I had the misfortune to teach in all of my seventeen years at Hogwarts."

There must be someone you trust.

After prolonged moments of silence, he reluctantly admitted, "Yes. Granger."

However, he felt ambivalent about her. On one hand, he considered her to be his most annoying student... ever, but on the other hand, he begrudgingly respected her intellect and ability to think outside the box and on her feet, the very same qualities that made him the perfect recruit for the Department of Mysteries. Hell, not only were

they departmental colleagues, they were in the same division, although she studied the effects of spells on the human brain while Snape specialized in potions.

"Given our history, I doubt she would agree to help me, but I might be able to convince her..."

Snape sought Hermione out in her office, far from the sensitive hearing of disembodied brains and curious coworkers. He found her hunched over her desk, absorbed in departmental paperwork, filling out a daily progress report which encrypted itself as soon as the ink dried. She didn't even look up to acknowledge his presence when he knocked sharply on the door frame.

"Granger, might I have a word with you please?" He cringed inwardly, hating to ask for assistance. Next time if there were a next time he would think twice before volunteering for a mission without knowing the details beforehand.

Hermione stopped her frantic scribbling only long enough to gesture with her quill at the chair in front of her desk. "I hope this isn't about the mysterious water rings on your lab desk. Instead of wasting your time with this grand inquisition, trying to find the culprit, you could apply a refinishing and protection charm on the wood surface."

He slid gracefully into the club chair and took a deep breath, trying to disguise his roiling insides with a cool façade. "This has nothing to do with that. But mark my words, I will find the responsible party, despite your reluctance to cooperate."

"Get to the point then," she insisted, still engrossed in her writing. "I'm leaving for the day as soon as I finish these forms."

"Teachmehowtodrive," he blurted out. There was simply no elegant way to beg.

She looked up and blinked a few times before a sly smile pulled at her lips. "Well, that is certainly blunt, no padding, greasing or sugarcoating of any sort. A man who doesn't resort to flattery or manipulation. How refreshingly un-Slytherin of you."

"Oh, I have no compunctions about using Slytherin techniques to get what I want," Snape said smoothly, regaining his composure in quick time.

"And what led you to the assumption that I know how to drive? Because I'm Muggle-born?"

He quickly quelled his first response *No, because you're an overachieving know-it-all* in favor of the more politically correct yes.

She stared into the distance, tapping her quill against her cheek, a pondering look on her face.

"I suppose this has to be done off the clock, in a hush-hush kind of way."

He smiled, an oily smile, the kind expected of used broom salesmen. "I would appreciate that immensely. Are you available to start today?" No use in playing coy at this point.

Her eyes focused on him again. "If you had been paying attention, Snape, you would know I haven't agreed to anything. Tell me, what's in this for me?" She leaned back in her chair, crossed her arms across her perfectly proportioned bosom, and assumed the smug countenance of one sitting comfortably in the catbird seat.

That once-in-a-lifetime grin evaporated to reveal his usual stony expression. "Frankly, I hadn't thought to offer you any compensation or favor in return. I planned to use extortion if the need arose." He was still blunt, yet honest in his answer.

She didn't flinch, twitch, or move one iota. "The answer is no then."

Snape applied a surreptitious balancing charm to his chair and mimicked Hermione's posture, going one step better and resting his feet on her desk. "Very well. And how will your Department of Mysteries colleagues nay, the entire Ministry of Magic react when your secret is revealed?"

"Ho, hum," she sighed dramatically. "You'll have to do better than that. I have nothing to hide."

"Oh, really?" he drawled. "Then why were you snogging Cormac McLaggen in Hammett's office at last year's Yule celebration? If you had nothing to hide, as you claim, why not allow him a public grope? Unless you were embarrassed..."

"Pfftt," she replied with a dismissive swish of her hand. "Nobody would care two whits about that. The more tantalizing secret is you... Love Potion... Umbridge... need I continue?"

"No, that's quite enough," he growled behind gritted teeth, immensely vexed that her blackmail trumped his. "What do you require?" At this point, he would have agreed to anything, even dressing up in Augusta Longbottom's Sunday best and having tea with Neville at Madam Puddifoot's, in order to gain Hermione's acquiescence.

"Well," she began, brows knit in concentration, "I don't know off the top of my head. Hmm..." She turned her attention back to her paperwork, gnawing gingerly at her lower lip. Once finished, she signed it with a flourish, and the form immediately folded itself into a basic aeroplane and flew from the room, presumably heading toward Dougherty's in-box.

"Granger, I must remind you time is of the essence for me," he said, exasperated.

"I'll think about it and get back to you tomorrow. Can you see yourself out?" she asked brightly as she stood to leave.

"Wait!" he exclaimed, jumping up to stop her departure. He needed a quick plan of action to ensure her cooperation. "I can't believe I'm saying this," he muttered. "Granger, I'm offering you a favor to be specified at a future date."

She gasped with delight, and her eyes widened, pupils dilated to their limit he could barely discern the iris with the poor lighting in her office. Snape feared the outlandish ideas forming in her head.

"Within reason, Granger. Don't let your imagination run too wild. I reserve the right of veto."

Hermione thrust her hand at him, and he gladly accepted it, shaking her hand firmly. "It's a deal. I'll meet you outside the visitors' entrance at five o'clock."

For one so experienced in reading the motivations behind facial expressions, Snape didn't know if Hermione's radiant grin mirrored her genuine excitement or concealed some heinous plan of revenge.

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 7

Driving for dummies, indeed! Now Hermione can more than appreciate the dread all parents experience when their children begin to drive.

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Chapter Three

At exactly 4:59 BST (British Summer Time), Snape emerged from the faux payphone that served as the visitors' entrance to the Ministry, looking quite sharp in a black Muggle suit and gray buttoned-down shirt he skipped the tie for a more casual look. He had one minute to ponder his impending folly before the nightmare would begin. *Do I really want to hurtle down a rock-hard concrete thoroughfare in a flimsy metal box at speeds not to exceed seventy miles per hour? Is it too late to change careers?*

The low roar of an engine shook him from his musings. A sleek gull-wing door flew open. Snape stared, slack jawed and googly eyed.

"Don't just stand there, get in," Hermione huffed. "We're losing valuable daylight."

His mouth snapped shut and his eyes narrowed, from wonderment to irritation in 3.2 seconds. "What the hell is that supposed to be? It looks like a flying contraption from a bad science fiction film."

She laughed at his unintentionally ironic observation. "It's a DeLorean. Now get in, and I'll tell you all about it while we go and find some less congested roads for you to practice on."

Snape slid his long, lean frame into the passenger seat with some difficulty, his knees pressed into the glove box.

"Oh, if you pull back on the lever under the front of the seat, it will move back to accommodate your legs," she said, making tiny adjustments to the rear-view mirror.

Blindly groping beneath the seat, he found the handle and pulled. The seat lurched back with such unexpected force that Snape's head smacked against the headrest. "Thanks, Granger. My legs are quite comfortable, but I'm suffering from whiplash now. Who was sitting here before me? A house-elf?"

"Must have been Molly, I'd hazard to guess."

His trust in her began to wane, replaced by a gnawing ache in the pit of his stomach, adding to the pain in his neck. "Granger, whose car is this?" he growled.

"Arthur Weasley's, of course," she said with a knowing grin.

He slammed his fist against the armrest. "I knew there was something odd about those doors. It flies, doesn't it, just like the Anglia?"

"It's all right. This is a genuine Muggle automobile, powered by a petrol-fueled V6 engine, no enchantments whatsoever. I can say with all honesty the wheels never leave the ground." Her smile radiated warmth and reassurance, and he felt the tension in his body easing just a bit.

"Why would a wizard even a Muggle-obsessed wizard like Arthur need a frivolous vehicle such as this?" he wondered.

"I believe it's called a mid-life crisis, and even wizards are susceptible."

"Indeed." For one moment, he wondered if his desire to leave the Brain Room signaled the start of his own mid-life crisis.

"Let's get on with it, shall we? Put your seat belt on, Snape," Hermione ordered, revving the idling engine, wasting no more time on small talk.

He looked on either side of the seat for... he had no idea what a seat belt looked like. *Driving for Dummies* mentioned safety equipment in the briefest of terms, offering no pictures, but Snape knew enough not to expect naturally tanned cowhide.

"It's actually above and behind you. Pull down the silver clip and insert it in the buckle at your left hip."

Once secured in the passenger seat, she put the car in gear, and they took off for greener pastures, or rather lower populated areas. She turned from the side street onto a main thoroughfare only to be stopped by a traffic light.

"Oh, excellent teaching opportunity," she chirped. "This is a standard three-aspect stoplight, red, amber, and green. The red means..."

"Stop right there, Granger. I haven't survived over forty-two years without some basic urban knowledge. I grew up in a big city." *Albeit a decaying cesspit of a big city.*

"Sorry if I offended you, Snape. You asked me to teach you how to drive, and I assumed you needed all aspects of instruction: theory, driving, Highway Code."

"I'm all set for theory and the rules of the road, thank you very much."

"Excellent! Why don't you impress me with your knowledge of cars."

"Nooo," he drawled. All that chitchat was giving him a throbbing headache.

"It might help to be conversant in car lingo, just in case you have car trouble and need to speak intelligently with a mechanic."

He named various parts, moving from front to back, gesturing to each one with a bony index finger as he listed it. "Headlamps, bonnet, windscreen, windscreen wipers, rear-view mirror, dashboard, steering wheel, ignition, gearstick, accelerator, brake, clutch, hand brake, boot, tail lamps."

When he finished, he turned his head to the side and stared out the window at the last bits of the city as they motored toward the suburbs of Greater London. As Gryffindors weren't known for subtlety, he hoped she understood his unspoken message: he had no desire or capacity for meaningful conversation. His jumbled emotions excitement,

anxiety, confidence, and despair overwhelmed his brain and his vocal cords, and he needed every ounce of concentration to focus on the task at hand.

"It's going to be a long night," Hermione muttered under her breath. She switched on the radio to break the awkward silence.

The home-bound traffic on the South Circular Road was light for a Monday evening. They soon reached their destination, the deserted car park of one of the many schools in Croydon, only enduring thirty minutes of insipid music on BBC Radio 2. "*And the droning engine throbs in time with your beating heart*" took on new meaning for Snape.

She killed the engine, pulled the key from the ignition, and, with a smile, presented it to him. "Your turn."

No fear. I survived a snake attack huge fucking snake, too and a full-on Wizengamot inquiry, and I emerged triumphant from both. I can do this.

With firm, steely eyes, he held her gaze as he snatched the key from her hand. They switched positions, and Snape made adjustments to the mirrors and driver's seat this time with the cautious restraint one would expect from a man who handled noxious materials for a living. He turned the radio off with a vicious twist of the knob and preemptively raised a single eyebrow, daring her to challenge the driver's right to control the car stereo. She had no reaction whatsoever, simply staring at him with an expectant look.

Depress the clutch, move the gearstick into neutral, turn the ignition. The car didn't roar to life so much as it pleasantly purred. *Move to first gear, disengage the hand brake, ease off the clutch and lightly push on the accelerator.* The car jerked ever so slightly and moved forward.

"Great start, Snape," she said, giving him an encouraging pat on the arm.

He flinched at the unexpected contact, then moved his hand from the gearstick to the steering wheel, a passable cover, in his opinion.

If she noticed his unease, she made no mention of it. "Just circle slowly around the perimeter of the car park. You're doing fine. At my first lesson, the car lurched and hopped so much I thought my instructor was going to be sick. It took a bit of practice before I got the feel of the friction point. That's the spot..."

"Where most of the engine power goes from idling freely to transferring through the transmission and then to the wheels; it is approximately halfway between a fully depressed clutch pedal and one that is completely disengaged." He waited a beat, then added, "Sorry, Granger, but you're not the only swotty know-it-all in this car." He regretted his last words as soon as they'd left his mouth; he couldn't afford to anger her too much.

Hermione's bright face clouded over, her plump pink lips disappearing into a thin white line. "Hey, Captain Slow, don't you think it's time to change into second?" she said acerbically, accompanied by a smirk worthy of Snape himself. "You've almost reached three thousand RPMs, and you can't stay in first forever."

He resisted the urge to glare he'd done enough damage already. *Foot off the gas, depress the clutch, pull down the gearstick, simultaneously release the clutch and step on the accelerator.* He changed gear like a seasoned driver, although he still felt like an inept firstie, trying to levitate that damn feather.

She put him through the paces: changing up, changing down, stopping, and starting. Every move precisely as it was described in his book, yet all accomplished while driving in circles in the deserted school car park.

"Time to take this on the road, Snape."

Half an hour ago, those words would have terrified him, but now he felt quite confident he could handle anything she tossed at him.

"We should head south to more rural areas with less traffic. How's your sense of direction?" she asked.

"Awful. If I had any *sense*, I should have fled in the oppositedirection when I first met the Dark Lord," he deadpanned.

Her lyrical laughter surpassed any of the music he had heard that evening, but that wasn't saying much. Still, Snape couldn't remember the last time he'd intentionally made a woman laugh, and he rather liked it.

"Well, just turn left at the exit, then continue," she said, pointing him toward the other end of the parking lot. "And you might want to invest in a map book and a dash-mounted compass if you intend to make driving a hobby," she joked.

"Thanks for the advice, Granger, but I actually do have a knack for navigation." And it was back to business, flirtatious Severus replaced by somber Snape.

He turned onto the main road, stopping at the first traffic light and encountering other cars for the first time. He maintained an overly cautious full car-length distance between them and the car in front, and when the light turned green, he once again moved forward with the ease of a seasoned driver. She directed him back to the A road, heading south then east.

"Wow, you're a natural, Snape," she commented, surprised.

"Did you expect that I would fail miserably, Granger?"

"Not in the least. I was positive you would learn to drive, but I'm rather shocked at how quickly you've taken to it."

"Why is that?"

"You're the most pureblood half-blood wizard I know, firmly entrenched in the Wizarding world, eschewing practically all Muggle conveniences, such as coasters."

"I am not the one responsible for those water rings," he snapped. "I never eat or drink while in the lab. It might contaminate the potions, or worse... I might be accidentally dosed."

Hermione turned away to snicker quietly behind her hand.

"What is so funny?" he demanded.

"Nothing of importance, I assure you," she replied, smiling like an unregistered Animagus beetle filled with juicy gossip.

"What are you keeping from me, Gra..."

"Snape, look out for that dog!"

An errant pooch appeared from nowhere, sauntering across the road. He swerved to avoid it, but lost control of the car.

"Clutch!" she cried. "Change down! Brake, Snape!"

In those frightening, chaotic moments, he managed to slow the car's momentum a bit, but they came to a sudden halt, not on the hard shoulder but in a ditch.

BANG... whoosh.

His eyes widened in terror. "What the hell was that noise!"

"Sounded like a blowout," she answered, rubbing her neck and wincing after she'd disengaged from the seat belt.

"Are you all right?" he asked, his voice deep with concern.

"A bit sore, nothing that some bruise-healing paste won't fix. And you?"

He too rubbed his neck, the left side, which bore a thickened, pale pink reminder of less happy times. "Also sore, but glad we weren't more seriously harmed." *Damn fucking snake.*

She nodded in agreement. "We should see about the car." He killed the ignition and applied the hand brake.

They surveyed the damage, a flat tire and a broken indicator lens. "Well, not great, but not bad either," she said, sounding unusually cheerful for someone who had just been in an accident.

"*Not bad*," he spat, his tone bordering on whiny. "If I remember correctly, and I always do, you shouldn't drive on a flat tire. So, how can this be anything but bad?"

She really could have assumed her superior know-it-all stance: chin jutted out, eyes narrowed and hands planted on her curvy hips. Instead, she remained calm and pleasant, explaining, "It still runs, so there's presumably no damage to the engine or transmission. Besides, it's better to experience these technical difficulties early in your training so you know what to do if it happens while you're on assignment."

"I suppose you're right," he conceded. "And the next step would be to swap the spare for the flat tire. I'll open the boot."

She waved him off with one hand while brandishing her wand with the other. "Oh, don't bother. We're on a tight schedule, so I'll just fix the tire magically."

"No!" he shouted, fearful of another debacle if magic were mixed with Muggle engineering. If Mrs. O'Leary's ordinary car turned into a pumpkin, what would Arthur's fancy sports car become? An artichoke? Perhaps a lemon? "I mean, I'm not allowed to use magic when I'm on assignment, so I should learn to fix it like Muggles do."

"If you insist." She pocketed her wand while shaking her head.

He popped open the boot, and they peered inside to find... nothing. No tire iron, no jack, and worst of all, no spare.

"Now what?" he intoned, once again thinking this whole driving business was a very bad idea indeed.

She grabbed her ever-present beaded bag from the car, pulled out a mobile phone, and punched a few numbers on the keypad. "Good evening. I need the number for the RAC please... Thank you, that would be lovely. You have a pleasant evening as well... Hello, I'm in need of roadside assistance... Yes, last name is Granger, first name is Hermione... H-e-r-m... Yes, that's me... I've got a flat tire, a blowout really, and no spare... No, I'm not in any danger... About one and a quarter miles southeast of Croydon on the A212... Yes, fifteen minutes is perfectly acceptable. Thank you."

Eyeing the tiny clam shell phone with wary curiosity, Snape asked, "May I see that please?"

She handed it to him, and he held it by his fingertips, keeping it as far away from his body as possible, as if it were dripping with destructive bubotuber pus. He flipped it open and examined it, careful not to touch any of the buttons despite an almost obsessive desire to do so. Having sated his inquiring mind, he gave the mobile back to her. *Eschewing Muggle conveniences, indeed.*

"You might consider getting one for your field work, especially your first assignment," she suggested. "Just in case of emergency, of course."

"Why would I need *that*," he asked, pointing a disdainful finger at the little device, "when I have magic for communication?"

"Hmmm." She cocked her head to the side, a mock-pondering look on her face. "Because not more than five minutes ago, you said, '*I'm not allowed to use magic when I'm on assignment.*' And I've never seen such a thing as a discreet Patronus Charm, have you?"

"And just whom would I call?" he challenged, unable to admit she did have a good point. "I don't have breakdown cover with RAC as you do."

"You could call me if you need assistance." Her offer seemed earnest, no hint of sarcasm as she smiled and looked him straight in the eye.

Snape rarely depended on anyone but himself, but more and more, he was beginning to trust Hermione. Ever since that morning, when she agreed to help him learn to drive, his ambivalence toward her had been dissipating, melting away, replaced by begrudging acceptance. Still, he didn't know what to make of the ambitious Gryffindor.

"Thank you," he replied, trying to smile, but feeling incredibly uncomfortable, as if he'd lost the World Stinging Nettle Eating Championship (held annually in Marshwood in Dorset).

Then the awkward silence came as they waited for the breakdown company mechanic to appear.

Hermione pulled a book from deep within her bag, perched on the car boot, and proceeded to read. Snape occupied his time by surveying the DeLorean, running his hand over the stainless-steel body, kicking the serviceable tires. He even opened the bonnet to study the engine, battery, and cooling system, even though he had no appreciation for the mechanics behind the high-performance vehicle.

"That's a PRV fuel-injected V6 engine with 170 horsepower output; however, that's further reduced by 40 horsepower because of the US-required catalytic converter." She never looked up from her book as she gave him the lecture.

"Fascinating," he drawled, then snapped the bonnet shut with a satisfying *thunk*.

She continued, oblivious to his indifference. "Despite its less than stellar output, it handles quite well with its independent double wishbone front suspension and multi-link rear suspension, rack-and-pinion steering, and power-assisted disc brakes."

"Granger, I just need to learn how to drive. I don't give a rat's arse about performance or handling. You might as well be speaking a foreign language. To me, a car is just a metal box with wheels that takes me from point A to point B, nothing more. I will always prefer Apparition; it's so much more efficient and cost effective."

"Fine," she answered in icy, clipped tones, still seemingly absorbed in her reading.

Twilight crept over the horizon, the gray, barren roads bathed in a dark orange glow. Snape felt time moving backwards; the idle minutes seemed an unbearable eternity. He paced around the car in an endless circuit, stopping every so often to kick a stone with the toe of his now dusty, scuffed tassel loafers. Between his inert hands and the pressure-filled silence, he could bear it no longer he spoke.

"What are you reading, Granger?" he asked in his most pleasant voice, deep and sweet like hot chocolate.

She finally looked up and lifted the book from her lap to show him the cover.

"I've always considered you a witch who knows where her towel is." He smirked as he paraphrased *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, but it could have been easily taken as a compliment about the always prepared Hermione.

"It's scary to think we have similar tastes in reading material, Snape. Your knowledge of Muggle literature surprises me."

"I'm just shocked you're reading anything other than some weighty, ancient magical tome or a periodical."

"I get enough of that during work. I like to escape from the Wizarding world when I read."

"Who are you and what have you done to Hermione Granger?" he joked, finally able to fashion a comfortable smile.

Before she could answer, the RAC van suddenly appeared at the crest of the road, its headlamps a bright, hopeful harbinger of rescue from their awkward situation.

The shaggy-haired, gangly, coverall-clad mechanic Lloyd, according to his name tag leapt from the van and ambled toward them, consulting a clipboard on the way.

"Good evening, folks. May I see your membership card please?" He checked Hermione's proffered card against his paperwork and handed it back. "Thanks, miss. So, you got a flat tire, eh, McFly?" His grin seemed nearly as wide as he was tall.

"I think you've mistaken me for someone else," Snape replied, a bit bewildered by the young man's non sequitur.

Hermione suppressed a giggle. "It's a blowout and we've no spare. We had to swerve to avoid hitting a dog, and that's how we ended up in the ditch."

Lloyd examined the tire and shook his head. "That's beyond repair, I'm afraid. It won't be easy to find a replacement, but not impossible. Do you want me to tow you to Croydon or closer to your home?"

Her disappointment reflected in her fallen face. "I don't expect that service centers in either location would be open at this time of night. I guess it's London then so it can be repaired tomorrow."

"If you are looking for an immediate replacement and don't mind paying extra, I'll call my cousin Vincent. He's the manager of the Mr. Clutch in Croydon. He'd be happy to open up shop if you've got cash."

"Brilliant!" she shouted, startling both Snape and Lloyd with the volume and abruptness of her response. Was Hermione as eager to be done with this fiasco as Snape was? The animosity between them had appeared to be diminishing just minutes ago, but her reaction seemed to indicate otherwise.

"Okay. It's probably going to take over an hour in the shop between putting on the new tire and a general systems check to make sure there's no hidden damage. Plus, I have to call Vincent so he can get his sorry arse off the sofa. Just loves to sit in front of the telly at night, that one." Lloyd continued to talk as he prepared the car for towing. "You'd be welcome to stay in the lounge at the garage, or I can drop you off at the nearby pub if you like."

"Pub!" they both shouted enthusiastically, startling the poor mechanic once again.

Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 7

Despite being Unspeakables, Snape and Hermione have a lot to talk about. It just takes a bit of social lubricant to loosen their tongues. How much of themselves will they reveal?

Disclaimer: All characters you recognize are the brainchildren of J. K. Rowling. All brains and other original characters are my creations.

Chapter Four

It was not for nothing that The Royal Standard pub had been mentioned in *The Good Beer Guide* every year since 1988: their beer and wine menu had just as many items as if not more than the food menu. Snape placed their order at the bar and returned to the table with two pints of Fuller's London Pride ale.

"Here's to a good ending for this evening," Hermione offered, raising her glass.

"Indeed. Cheers," he toasted, hoisting his as well.

They both drew long, satisfying draughts, savoring the malty base and complementary hopsy flavor of the complex ale. Snape leaned back against the leather banquette and closed his eyes, the alcohol just starting to wash away the tension he'd held in his neck and shoulders since the breakdown. He felt strangely at peace in the yeasty-smelling, boisterous pub, and he wondered why. Was it his first successful driving lesson? Well, successful until that cur fouled things up. At least he wasn't too old to learn new skills. Or maybe it was his companion that put him at ease? Before he could ponder that somewhat uncomfortable thought and have another sip of ale, Hermione cleared her throat, an apparent sign of the impending inquisition.

"So, what kind of assignment calls for a wizard to drive a Muggle vehicle?"

He made her wait while he took multiple gulps, emptying half his pint. "A secret one," he finally answered, his face covered in smugness and a bit of foam on his upper lip.

She made no attempt to advise him of his new facial feature. "You'll have to do better than that. Practically everything in the Department of Mysteries is a secret." With a long series of sips, she emptied half her glass as well.

"I will explain as much as I can. It's undercover surveillance in a village north of London that is apparently too idyllic by Muggle standards."

She snorted behind her glass, not really attempting to hide it well. "Undercover? Meaning *you* are not supposed to stand out in the crowd? How are you going to manage that?"

"What? Don't you think I blend in here?" he asked facetiously, gesturing at his sartorial finery.

"Oh, certainly, if this were a pub in central London and you worked for MI6," she said, adding to the jest. "But seriously, what has Dougherty planned for your cover? Financier? Solicitor?"

"Ice-cream van driver." His stone-faced delivery held no hint of humor.

"Really? Well, I guess that would work if you were spying on children..."

His furious blinking either meant he had a vicious twitch or his Unspeakable pledge had taken effect, preventing him from revealing sensitive information.

"To brew the perfect Draught of Living Death, one must crush the sopophorous beans with the broad side of a silver knife to obtain an adequate quantity of juice and add a clockwise stir after the seventh anti-clockwise one."

Hermione's broad grin lit up her face. "Do you always recite brewing tips?"

"No, sometimes I list ingredients and instructions. And what are you currently researching?"

"A sad tale's best for winter. I have one of sprites and goblins."

"Do you always quote *The Winter's Tale*?"

"Of course, although I once recited lyrics from a Queen song with almost the exact same title."

"Well, you're much better off than Doyle. He recites dirty limericks. How embarrassing." Snape didn't really object to his colleague's quirk, but he wouldn't let Hermione know that.

"Embarrassing, yes, but sometimes quite funny. I would prefer that to Keene's show tunes."

"You haven't lived until you've heard her sing selections from *Annie, Get Your Gun*."

"All the same, I'm happy to work the night shift, so I don't have too much contact with the rest of the department."

A hush fell between them, filled with the dull roar of pub noise. The silence felt neither tense nor awkward, so neither Snape nor Hermione felt the need to fill the air with inane blathering. With impeccable timing, the barmaid arrived with their food just as their pints were drained.

"Who's got the salad and jacket potato?" she asked.

Hermione's hand shot up, an old habit from years ago. "That would be mine."

"That means you have the chip butty, sir." She emptied her tray of their meals and condiments. "Can I bring you another round?"

They shook their heads, and the barmaid nodded and walked away.

"Granger, that's not proper pub food. Why are you eating that tasteless rabbit fodder?"

"It's not tasteless," she replied, exasperated. "You might try eating something healthy instead of that heart attack on a plate."

"I survived two masters and that big fucking snake, so I think I've earned the right to eat whatever I damn well please!"

That harsh commentary might have deterred persons of meeker spirits, but not Hermione Granger. "Too bad they don't serve dessert here. We did pass an ice-cream parlor on the way here. We could go there after dinner and get you a sundae. That would surely send you over the edge."

"Ha, bloody, ha! It's potato. It can't be that bad if you're eating it," he retorted, then stabbed a chip and bit the crispy and soggy morsel in two.

"Well, mine is healthy, dry baked, and yours is unhealthy, deep fried in oil. It's like comparing apples to oranges; it's simply not done," she said with an air of complete confidence.

He couldn't resist rolling his eyes. "Granger, have you ever thrown caution to the wind and eaten a food purely for its taste, without regard for calories or fat? Something totally hedonistic with no nutritional value?"

"Yes, at Hogwarts. Back then, I was literally running for my life, so I wasn't concerned with calories or cholesterol. I'm more sedentary now, so I'm careful about what I eat."

Snape glanced at her as she speared the tender salad greens and chewed them thoroughly, as if she were pulverizing potions ingredients. He had a vague memory of the pale, waif-like girl foraging for berries and mushrooms in the Forest of Dean just to survive. Slightly heavier now, she looked much healthier, her face full and glowing.

"I remember you had an interest in Arithmancy and Ancient Runes at Hogwarts. What made you decide to pursue Charms instead?"

She became engrossed in her baked potato, mixing in the salsa to within an inch of its life. "It's such a wide and varied subject. I'll never be bored with it."

"Why did you choose to study the long-term effects of Memory Charms?"

"Well, I have to earn a living. You know the stipend from an Order of Merlin, Second Class, doesn't go very far." She stopped fussing with her meal and looked up, as if firm eye contact could prove her sincerity.

He suspected her reasons were more complex than she let on; he could read that in her eyes. He had spent years stretching the truth to suit his needs, lying to others as well as himself; self-delusion was an art he had perfected.

"Second class," he scoffed. "They practically give those away. Brunhilde Scower received one. That means inventing a cleanser is on the same level as helping bring down the most evil wizard of all time."

"Do you work at the Ministry simply for the glory and the financial benefits?"

"I could have done many things, but it seemed like the best fit." *At the time.* "Minerva constantly tries to lure me back to Hogwarts. She thinks a bottle of Ogden's Hundred Year Special Blend outweighs the danger of three hundred students mixed with fire and noxious potions."

"Slug and Jiggers had offered me a position as their exclusive brewer. I assume they valued my skills rather than my name; however, I don't think the general public would readily seek out products made by Dumbledore's killer. I can just imagine it: Snape's Headache Remedy one dose of this, and you'll never worry about your pain again."

Hermione smiled and snorted at his wicked self-deprecating humor; who would have thought that behind the black 'armor' and scowling visage lay the sharp-witted tongue of a comedian? "So, what did you find so appealing about the Department of Mysteries?"

"Research, Granger, pure and simple. Plus, my contract states I have the first right of refusal for any Ministry project concerning potions, not just in our department, mind you."

"Having a dedicated research subject is a definite perk," she added. "I know I would be lost without Abby. Your Brian speaks very highly of you."

"Well, we have an excellent working relationship," Snape boasted matter-of-factly. "He's one of my most trusted confidantes." *My only confidante.*

"You might want to have a talk with Brian about confidentiality, then. If you weren't aware, he's a bit of a gossip. That's how I knew about your little peccadillo with Umbridge," she whispered in vain, the Muggles of Greater London surely not caring one whit about Snape's love life.

Beneath his cool façade, his blood boiled. "You realize I was dosed by those twats in the Locked Room." *Brian will get an earful tomorrow. Gossip, indeed!*

She nodded slowly, a look of disbelief in her eyes. "So, why did you accept a field assignment?" Ah, not the most subtle of segues, but it was the heart of the matter and the sticky wicket, all rolled into one brain-splitting, stomach-roiling issue for him.

He couldn't use that trite, old excuse of the piss-poor stipend to evade the question because she had jumped on it first. He still hadn't thoroughly examined his motivations yet, and he had no intention of sharing such personal musings with Hermione Granger anyway. *Think, Severus, think.* "Is that Lloyd at the door?"

Snape was most likely the unluckiest man in the world, or at least in England, but the Fates smiled upon him at that moment. Hermione whipped her head around to face the entrance just as Lloyd entered the pub. He signaled the car was ready with a pantomime steering wheel motion. Snape acknowledged him with a wave and a nod.

Hermione rummaged for her wallet in her at-the-ready beaded bag. "I need to settle up at Mr. Clutch. How much do I owe for my dinner and drink?"

"Not to worry, Granger. You've been kind enough to teach me how to drive tonight, so I'll treat you to dinner." As she opened her mouth, he raised his hand to still her speech. "I know, I know, this doesn't count as your favor."

She shook her head and chuckled. "You better brush up on those Legilimency skills, Snape. I was going to say we have four more days, or rather evenings, of lessons."

"I thought you said I was a natural. What else are you going to cover in four days that I can't figure out on my own?"

"I owe it to you and all the people of Greater London... no, the UK and all the world... to train you properly. You still have to learn parallel parking, lane changes, merging, right-hand turns, and roundabouts..."

His eyes glazed over as she listed more driving skills. Or maybe the ale was at last taking effect. "All that in four more days?" His expression appeared pained, as if he'd just broken a tooth eating one of Hagrid's rock cakes.

"Yes, you'll be a competent driver by Friday evening. I took one of those week-long intensive courses to prepare for my driving license road test. Have you heard about those?"

"Yessssss," he hissed. He had just enough mental capacity for one word answers by now.

"Great! Meet me at the service center once you've paid the bill here. Don't be rude to the barmaid," she admonished him, adding a saucy wink before she walked away.

What the hell was that for? Why does she think I would be rude to a complete stranger? Especially one who brings food and offers more ale. All those thoughts made his head hurt, so he rested it upon the table, cradled in his arms.

"Well, looks like you've had enough to drink, plus your date's left you. I'll just leave the bill and you can pay when you're ready," said the barmaid, slapping it on the table next to his throbbing head.

Oh, bollocks! "Thank you." Two words. Perhaps the evening would end on a bright note.

On Tuesday morning, Brian swam the length of his tank, back and forth ad nauseam, his form of pacing. Since his natural milieu was a deep green liquid, he didn't really get seasick. When the door to the Brain Room banged open and he heard heavy, angry footsteps approaching, he stopped his movement.

Somebody hasn't had his caffeine this morning Brian broadcast his thought, unable to keep it to himself.

Snape grunted, his less-than-loquacious answer proving he had bypassed his morning cuppa.

Brian waited for Snape to unpack his satchel before attempting any conversation. The taciturn wizard took an inordinate amount of time organizing his potions *mise en place* notebook opened to the last entry, every quill and stirring rod perfectly parallel and equidistant apart from each other. Patient and inquisitive Brian could stand it no longer.

So, tell me, how did last night's lesson go? Have you 'mastered the skills of driving a motorized vehicle' yet? His thought tendrils tapped the rim of his tank as he waited for Snape to respond.

Snape indulged in a petulant, lung-deflating sigh. "I can see I'll have no peace until your rabid curiosity is sated." Despite his irritation, he hadn't the heart or the energy to torture Brian with the usual scraping-the-stool-across-the-floor bit, so he stood before the tank, vowing to keep the interrogation short with succinct answers and intense glowers. "The lesson went very well, in my opinion and Granger's, too. She said I was a natural. It ended when a dog crossed our path and I accidentally drove the car into a ditch, blowing out the tire. The end." That was the briefest brief Snape had ever reported, but would it satisfy the brain?

Driving into a ditch and blowing out a tire seems counter-productive. Was that really how the evening ended, with the two of you stranded?

He responded with the first glower, a combination of narrowed eyes and creased brow. "I said it was an accident. And no, she called a mechanic who towed the car to a service station for repair."

During which time, you two...

"Had dinner in a pub."

Oh, how romantic, Brian gushed.

Snape felt warmth suffuse his cheeks, which he willed away with ease. "Eating greasy food in a noisy, beer-scented atmosphere is not my idea of romantic. It was a driving lesson, not a date."

Miss Granger doesn't seem the type to eat pub food. She's very health conscious from what I can see.

"I hadn't noticed." What a lie! He could finally look beyond his skewed memories of the annoying Gryffindor to behold the lovely young woman she had become. Gone were the gangly limbs, flat chest, and out-of-control hair, replaced by a fit, curvy figure and tamed, chestnut-colored curls, gently framing her...

Severus, are you paying attention?

"No, Brian, I had momentarily tuned out your droning. What were you saying?"

Pay attention, man. I said she's highly intelligent, not at all like the usual Ministry dunderheads one would encounter, present company excepted, of course.

Snape nodded in agreement, finding humor in his corruption of Brian's vocabulary and truth in his assessment of Hermione.

And she can converse easily on a variety of topics, much like you. She's just very pleasant company.

"Yes. Now about those conversations you've had with her..." Snape approached the tank, wand in hand, a malevolent glint in his eye.

Chapter Five

Chapter 5 of 7

Do all former spies have aversions to fuel-efficient, subcompact cars?

Disclaimer: All characters you recognize are the brainchildren of J. K. Rowling. All brains and other original characters are my creations.

Chapter 5

On Wednesday evening after work, Snape waited for Hermione at his usual spot, the visitors' entrance of the Ministry, leaning against the grimy, broken-down red telephone box, but only after he applied a cleansing charm to it. After a minute, he began to pace, the master of self-control unable to contain his nervous energy. He glanced at his wristwatch: 5:01:29. *Where in the hell is she?* He soon grew bored of pacing and amused himself by casting color-changing charms on his clothes. His one and only Muggle suit went from black to gray to blue before he finally settled on dark brown with a tan pinstripe over an ecru shirt *sans* tie for a relaxed, yet suave look. Then he paced again, eager to get behind the wheel and on the open road.

Yesterday's successful lesson entrance ramps, exit ramps, merging, lane changes left him feeling exhilarated and confident he could take on anything she threw at him, even those dreaded roundabouts. He checked his watch again 5:09:24 and was considering sending a message to the missing witch via his Patronus Charm when he heard a funny noise, a combination of grinding metal and squeaky rubber. Moments later, the source of said racket a faded blue banger turned onto the street and stopped at the telephone box. He recognized the driver, if not the car.

"What the hell is that? A sardine tin? Where is the DeLorean?" he asked, his shoulders sagging a bit.

"Greetings to you too, Snape," Hermione chirped, her plastic grin stretching her facial muscles to their limits. "For your information, Arthur needed it tonight. He's taking Molly on a moonlight drive through the Devon countryside. This," she paused, sweeping her arm over the dashboard, "is my great-aunt Agatha's 1992 Renault Clio. I'll spare you the technical description."

He poked his head through the open passenger-side window and surveyed the interior, sneering at the worn bucket seats, stained carpet, and the bright yellow, piña colada-scented paper pine tree hanging from the rear-view mirror. "It looks like an old lady car." He flicked the air-freshener and wrinkled his nose. "Smells like one, too."

Her look of mock-mortification would have fooled even the most discerning Hufflepuff. "Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot you have a reputation to uphold as a sexy, sophisticated secret agent. I'll just transfigure..."

"No!" he roared, running around the car to the driver's side and wrenching open the door. "Budge over, I'm driving."

Hermione had barely scabbled over the gearstick as Snape wedged himself sideways into the driver's seat, adjusted it to accommodate his legs, and securely fastened his seat belt over his hips.

"That's the second time you stopped me from using magic on a car. There's something you're not telling me, Snape."

"There are a lot of things I'm not telling you, Granger," he whispered, his voice preternaturally rich and playful, his smirk adding to the tease. What was it about her that transformed the dour Snape into an outrageous flirt, not in the same league as the sophisticated Lucius Malfoy, but a player, nevertheless.

She eyed him warily as he tweaked every mirror, knob, button, and lever within arm's reach. "This car was manufactured for direct sales in the UK, so naturally the steering wheel is on the right. That means you'll need to operate the gearstick with your left hand. Will that be a problem?"

"Certainly not. My left hand is quite talented, in my opinion."

Hermione struggled to keep a straight face, biting her lip and turning away, peering out her window at the graffiti-covered wall across the street. "That's misspelled. There's no 'c' in wanker."

Snape couldn't help but laugh at her bawdy and well-timed non sequitur. "Are you going to give me directions, or shall I resort to a Four-Point Spell?"

She smiled as she turned to face him, not a hint of blush coloring her pale peach skin. "Let's try higher ground tonight. Head north toward Finchley."

Ten miles of stop-and-go traffic, thirty-five minutes of drive time with Johnnie Walker on BBC Radio 2 driver's choice of album-oriented classic rock and twenty individual steps in Hermione's turn-by-turn directions later, they reached their destination, the same as the previous two evenings, another parking lot of another school.

"If I didn't know any better, I would say you're obsessed with instructional institutions," he commented as he parked the car and kept the engine idling.

"Not at all. Schools have large car parks that are vacant during the summer months, perfect for practicing driving skills."

"Obviously," he replied drily. "And what level of hell will you have me visiting tonight?"

"You'll be going backwards, so to speak. I'm putting you through the paces of reverse, parallel parking, two-point turns, three-point turns, and u-turns."

"Honestly, Granger, when do you think I'll have the need to parallel park an ice-cream van? Or negotiate a one-hundred-eighty-degree rotation on narrow village streets?"

"You're not thinking ahead. If you do well with this assignment, Daugherty might offer you others that involve motoring, like chauffeuring the Muggle prime minister or

driving the clown car in a circus."

"Ha, bloody ha," he intoned. "Let's get on with this, shall we?"

Hermione responded by arching one professionally shaped eyebrow. She stepped from the car and rummaged through her beaded bag of tricks, pulling out several large pieces of conical-shaped, orange thermoplastic and placing them equidistant apart behind the car.

Snape's own brows bumped into each other, meeting over the bridge of his nose. "What the..."

"Traffic cones!" she announced with too much eagerness. "You'll practice driving in reverse, snaking around..."

Snape flinched, her poor choice of words conjuring one very unpleasant memory.

Hermione winced at her own faux pas. "Sorry, I meant *weaving* around the cones. It's trickier than you might think because you're depending on the mirrors to see where you're going. Whenever you're ready, Snape."

Engage the clutch, shift to reverse, release the clutch, step on the gas... Go. Although he had driven in reverse during the previous lesson, negotiating the cones added a level of difficulty he quickly mastered, arcing widely at first, then cutting close to the cones. After several passes through and around the cones, Hermione deemed him ready to start specialized turns for reversing direction.

"Before you begin, search the area for pedestrians, traffic, and other obstacles, check the mirrors and blind spots, and activate the left turn indicator." She barked orders at him, directing each maneuver as he performed it, and he didn't protest; he didn't mind at all really. "First, turn ninety degrees to the left."

When she's bossy like that, she reminds me of Minerva McGonagall. He turned left and stopped.

"Second, check traffic, mirrors, and blind spots again, then in reverse, turn ninety degrees to the right."

Only younger and with better tits. He reversed to the right and stopped.

"Third, look at your surroundings one last time and pull forward."

She could order me around anytime, especially if she were wearing something tight... in black leather... or vinyl. Oh, what the fuck! Why am I thinking like that? Is Brian right, do I need to get laid? He pulled forward and kept moving.

She ran after him, waving her arms frantically. "Snape, stop. STOP!"

The tires squealed and the car lurched to a halt as he hurriedly applied the brakes, although he was only traveling fifteen miles per hour.

She reached the car within seconds, only slightly out of breath, and poked her head through the open driver's side window, resting her arms on the door, unintentionally giving him an unhindered view of her cleavage. "Snape, are you paying attention?"

No, I was entertaining improper thoughts about you. "Yes. You told me to move forward, but you never mentioned stopping." He smirked for the second time that night, knowing he tried her patience. He had the good sense to focus on her eyes rather than her bosom, which shone like a beacon on a black, moonless night.

She responded with a smirk of her own; the hands on her hips only accentuated her affected attitude. "Alright, Captain Literal, tell me, under what conditions would you perform a three-point turn?"

He paraphrased the canonical *Driving for Dummies*. "If one lacks a side street or driveway, required for proper execution of a two-point turn, or if the roadway width is less than that of the vehicle plus the diameter of its turning circumference, needed for a proper u-turn, then a three-point turn is appropriate." Pleased with his answer, he looked to Hermione for validation.

Her expression was unreadable, and she remained silent just long enough to make Snape squirm. "Exactly, but next time answer using your own words, not something regurgitated from a book. Now let's take this on the road, shall we?" She collected the traffic cones, hastily stuffing them into her bag, and returned to the car. "Turn right at the exit. We'll head toward Tally-Ho Corner in North Finchley. There shouldn't be too much traffic this time of day, perfect for practice."

She directed him turn by turn, in a gruff, humorless voice, and critiqued his driving, too. "Left at the light. Accelerate three-quarters into the turn. You're drifting to the right, Snape. Stay centered."

He didn't care much for her brusque manner, but he refused to call her on it after all, he had two more days of instruction to endure and instead choose to break the tension with music. No matter how much he tweaked the knobs, the radio spluttered and eventually petered out, the harbinger of another troubled evening.

"Is that normal for the radio to just stop operating?" he asked.

"Of course," she answered with know-it-all conviction. "It's eleven years old, and parts do wear out."

As if on cue, the instrument panel flickered, gauges and meters fading in and out, the next sign of impending doom. "You can't tell me that's normal."

"Erm... not usually," she said, her confidence dimming like the dashboard lights.

Then finally, the engine stopped, died really, as did the entire electrical system. Luckily, Snape drove cautiously, at least five miles per hour under the speed limit, and the car coasted to a stop on the nearly deserted A road, coming to rest on the hard shoulder and out of harm's way.

Hermione hadn't heard such creative profanity since that one morning at Grimmauld Place when Mad-Eye Moody had awoken to find his prosthetic eye had become Crookshanks' favorite new toy.

"Granger, don't you know anyone who owns a late model car in good running condition?" Fortunately, the darkness of the car hid his sneer.

"Spare me your drama. I'll call RAC for a jump start." She rummaged through her bag once more.

"Don't bother," he drawled. "I've read all about it, and I can do it."

"You know, it doesn't reflect poorly if one calls for breakdown service." She pulled out her phone, flipped it open, and began to press the buttons. "I pay good money for it, so I might as well use it."

Snape pulled open the door with a violent jerk and jumped out. "I said I can handle it," he growled through gritted teeth, punctuating his statement by slamming the door shut.

Hermione followed suit, exiting the car in a huffy snit. She snapped the phone shut and shoved it back into her magical handbag, where it *thumped* against the traffic cones. "Fine, have at it," she replied, her frosty, clipped tones a contrast to the warm, sultry evening. She conjured a camp chair and, placing it to the side of the car, plopped into it, as gracefully as one can when flopping onto a rickety canvas-and-aluminum folding chair. "I only wish I had a beverage to enjoy while I watch the show."

Snape couldn't let that comment slide, but he had neither the time nor the mental capacity to formulate a scathing retort, so he fixed her with a withering glare, which probably went unnoticed in the waning light. He propped open the bonnet, popped the boot, and pulled out the jumper cables, relieved to see that great-aunt Agatha was responsible and prepared for any eventuality – a first aid kit and road flares, too – just like Hermione. Now all he needed was a driver willing to give him a jump.

The traffic was very light that evening, indeed non-existent, for not a single car had passed or approached them since the breakdown a few minutes earlier. What if there were no more cars coming or going? Or even worse, an available car with an unwilling driver? Would he resort to using an Imperio just to avoid a call to RAC?

He actually began to ponder that option until the lights of an oncoming car breached the horizon. He stepped into the road a bit and held the cables above his head, letting them sway in the gentle summer breeze; it wouldn't be dignified for him to use the patented Granger arm wave to get the driver's attention.

The driver caught view of Snape in his headlamps and slowed down. He drove across the median and stopped on the shoulder, facing the broken-down beater, an older version of his 2002 Clio. A young man – he seemed barely out of his teens, sporting a prominent spot on his sparsely haired chin – stepped from the vehicle. "Good evening, miss, sir. Need a jump, do ya?" he asked.

Obviously, Snape resisted the urge to dangle the jumper cables in front of the young man's eyes. Instead, he smiled tightly and replied, "Yes, please."

The good Samaritan popped the bonnet on his car and propped it open. "I've never done this before. Just got my driving license, as a matter of fact."

"Congratulations," Hermione chirped and smirked from the comfort of her chair, apparently pleased with Snape's choice of inexperienced driver.

"Not to worry, I know exactly what I'm doing." As he executed each step, he recited the instructions he'd memorized. "Connect the positive clamp to the positive terminal of the dead battery. Done. Connect the other positive clamp to the positive terminal of the starting battery. Done. Connect the negative clamp to the negative terminal of the starting battery. Done. Connect the other negative clamp to the engine block – or other metal surface – of the disabled car; this acts as a ground." He said that in his most professorial tone. "Ensure the cables are clear of moving parts such as fan blades and belts on both cars and step away from the vehicles. Done. If you would be so kind as to start your car."

The young man returned to his car and turned the ignition. The engine jumped to life, but Hermione had no reaction to the noxious noise, unfiltered by the open bonnet. Her eyes followed Snape's every move, attentive, but with a hint of malevolence.

"Watch this," Snape directed, his boastful imperative meant for Hermione's ears alone. He reached inside the car and flipped the key and... nothing happened.

"Did it work?" the young man asked, shouting above the din.

"Not yet," Snape bellowed. He waited a few minutes, allowing the starting battery to charge his lifeless one, then tried again.

Hermione watched intently as Snape turned the key once more and... nothing happened. In the gloaming, he couldn't see her evil, self-satisfied grin.

Snape motioned for the young man to kill his engine, pulling his finger across his throat, never touching the left side of his neck. He walked to the other car, snatching away the cable clamps and slamming down the bonnet none too gently, and sneered at it, his thin, pale lips demonstrating undeserved disdain. "Obviously, your car and specifically its battery are defective."

The young man's face fell. "Maybe your jumper cables are defective," he shot back.

"Thanks for nothing." He dismissed him with an imperious wave before turning his back to the well-intentioned stranger and walking away.

"Piss off, arsehole." The young man added a hand gesture of his own – the two-fingered salute – which went unseen unless Snape did indeed possess eyes in the back of his head as many a teacher boasted to have. "Goodnight, miss. Good luck with the car." Then he backed up quickly and sped away, leaving Snape in a tiny cloud of dust, barely reaching mid-leg.

Snape *Evanescio'd* the dirt from his trousers and shoes before he stepped into the road again, attempting to flag down another car so he could repeat his folly... *ad infinitum*, if need be.

"Please get out of the road, Snape," she beseeched him. "I'm calling RAC."

He stood firm and in the middle of the road. He waved frantically at an oncoming car, overriding his self-control, but his efforts were all for naught as the car passed him by without even slowing down.

Hermione leapt from her seat and grabbed his arm, dragging him back to the relative safety of the shoulder.

He twisted, easily escaping her grasp, and hissed, "I can do this. I just need..."

"It's futile, it doesn't matter how many times you try to jump start the battery, it's obviously old and not holding a charge," she tried reasoning with the stubborn Slytherin. "Or maybe it's the failure of some other electrical component."

"Fine." He stomped off into the gathering gloom as she placed the call.

"Hello, I'm in need of roadside assistance. Last name is Granger, first name is Her... Yes, I called for service two days ago... Hey, I've carried this coverage for over six years, and this is only the second time I've needed breakdown service... I know for a fact my coverage has no restrictions on the number of times I call for roadside assistance... I'm glad you see it my way... Something's wrong with the electrical system. My companion tried to jump start the battery, but it didn't work... No, I'm not in any danger, at least none that I can't handle," she said, searching about for her broody, wayward pupil. "We're about half a mile northeast of Finchley on the A598... Yes, Ballard Lane, that's right. Thirty to sixty minutes is marginally acceptable... Thank you, ma'am. Good evening to you as well." She closed the clam shell phone with a satisfying *click* and returned to her camp chair. "Too bad dirty looks can't be seen over the phone."

"Indeed," a disembodied voice answered. "But I'm certain your sarcasm came through loud and clear."

Snape moved from the inky darkness beyond the shoulder to stand beside Hermione. He conjured an exact replica of her chair, then lowered himself into it with his usual grace. He still needed to shrug off those last few layers of moodiness, so he fidgeted, flicking imaginary lint from his trousers and smoothing non-existent wrinkles from his suit coat. Perhaps one snarky jab directed at Hermione might set him right.

"Your self-control is utterly amazing tonight, Granger. I'd fully expected you to be engaged in the Gryffindor 'I told you so' dance by now."

"I think you mean my 'insufferable know-it-all' strut."

Finally, the last traces of his irritability evaporated, and he could laugh at her self-deprecating humor, even if it were directed at him in part.

Then they fell into silence, lasting for mere minutes, but of course it felt like an eternity. They could speak so easily when it came to magic or work – to the degree their Unspeakable's Pledge of Secrecy would allow, of course – or their new common interest, motoring, so why did it feel so awkward to sit side by side, waiting, on a breezy summer night? It felt as if a family of Cornish pixies were practicing cartwheels in his stomach. Did he need a legitimate excuse to talk to her, or could he fill the empty spaces with small talk?

He was jostled from his musings by a rustling noise: Hermione stowing the mobile back in her purse, this time placing it gently amongst her many possessions. Snape

watched her closely, intrigued by the intricate magic woven into her ubiquitous beaded bag.

"That bag is truly a work of art, Granger," he said, complimenting her handiwork.

"This old thing? It's seen better days," she said dismissively.

"Yes, stylistically, it's gaudy and shabby, totally inappropriate for most occasions, but I was referring to the excellent charm work saturating the fibers."

"Undetectable Extension Charm," she said, sitting up a bit straighter.

"It's very impressive, and given its current condition, I assume you've had it for some years." She nodded slowly, and he continued, "Quite remarkable, indeed, to maintain its power for that length of time."

"I created it just before I went on the run with Harry and Ron, late summer of 1997. That whole experience put me off camping, probably for the rest of my life."

"I suppose camping is meant to be an enjoyable diversion, but if Potter and Weasley were your only companions, that could make solitary confinement in Azkaban seem like a five-star hotel." His knee-jerk reaction to the names Potter and Weasley naturally would be sarcastic, but if he were to examine his feelings, he would find hints of annoyance and jealousy there.

She laughed, a rich throaty laugh, and he could see her beaming face, even through the faint moonlight. "Where has this funny man been hiding?"

"During the Hogwarts years, I kept him chained in the dungeon for his own safety. The Dark Lord certainly would have killed him, for he had no sense of humor, and sarcasm went right over Dumbledore's head. Now they are dead, and the funny man is free to roam at will."

Something he said *dungeon, Dark Lord, Dumbledore* dimmed the light in her eyes, her bright smile dulled by some distant association.

"I didn't intend to... if you don't want to talk about it..." he began to apologize, uncertain of her willingness to talk about what she'd experienced during the last year of the war.

"No, it's okay. I never talk about it because nobody ever asks. It's the proverbial elephant in the room. But if you read *The Quibbler*, then you know what happened. But you knew what happened because you were there by proxy. Had I realized that Headmaster Black leaked every scrap of conversation to you, I would have been a lot less loquacious."

"Retired spies are entitled to a bit of fun every once in a while," he said, throwing in a wink instead of his usual smirk. "I'll admit Phineas Nigellus is one cantankerous, sarcastic bastard who does not suffer fools gladly, but without him, I would never have been able to provide what little help I could. And he wasn't all that forthcoming with details. Yes, I knew what was happening, but I didn't know how you were."

"No, and I didn't share any of those personal details in my interview with Mr. Lovegood either, just dates, locations, and actions." She paused a moment, seeming to compose herself, her breathing deep and audible. She looked off into the distance as she spoke.

"In a nutshell, I felt cold, hungry, and tired physically, although there were plenty of times we stayed put in one place and did absolutely nothing. Intellectually, I was challenged, exhilarated, and exhausted; researching took a lot out of me, but it was a genuine thrill when we discovered some tiny bit of minutia that led us to another Horcrux. And emotionally... well, I probably felt every emotion known to man and a few as of then undocumented ones. Mostly I felt anger, fear, despair a veritable feast for a Dementor, had there been any around. There were very few moments of happiness. I don't particularly like to think about that time, but it's so much easier to talk about it now." She breathed a heavy sigh of relief, perhaps and turned to look at him, a curve to her lips and a glimmer of hope in her eyes.

She had revealed very little actually, but the point was she had opened up to him, and this surprised Snape. Women never voluntarily shared personal information like that with him, but then, neither did men. His dark façade in mood and dress usually put people off. But Hermione was different. She was not afraid of him. She had just spoken to him as if he were a lifelong friend, like Potter or Weasley. Could she be interested in him like that? As he entertained that foolish notion, the pixie family in his digestive tract seemed to be acting up again.

Snape realized if he wanted to know Hermione better, he would have to open up to her as well. He took a deep breath, exhaled, and began his tale.

"I've never told anyone save for a portrait what happened during my tenure as Headmaster. I've never spoken of it with Brian, either. My year at Hogwarts was a bed of blasted roses compared to yours on the run, but it was the most discomfited I'd ever been in my life, and trust me, I'd been in many a tense, unpredictable situation. I had food, shelter, a decadent bed 400-thread count Egyptian cotton sheets and a feather bed and the company of hundreds, yet I have never been more alone, not one living soul willing to talk to me. I couldn't eat or sleep despite all the material comfort that surrounded me."

He paused a moment, squirming a bit in his chair and pulling at the cuffs of his suit jacket.

"Most of the staff those that remained from Dumbledore's tenure despised and distrusted me; why would they support me after what I'd done? That broke their spirits. They didn't dare challenge me. Only Minerva had the balls to speak to me. And the Carrows, of course, but I didn't want to be in the same room with them, let alone talk to them. Dark Lord groupies, almost as bad as Bellatrix. And just as blood thirsty, too."

"They lacked her wariness, but made up for it in ambition. They completely reinvented the curricula for Muggle Studies and Defense to meet the Dark Lord's specifications. I'm surprised they didn't rename them Muggle Maligning and Offensive Dark Arts. Yet I worried more about their detentions than their classroom activities. Students returned bruised and battered, some injured so badly they needed Madame Pomfrey's care."

Should I really be telling her all this? What will she think of me? Why do I care what she thinks of me? He stared far into the distance, focusing on absolutely nothing, just to avoid the discomfort of eye contact.

"But the students especially loathed me; even the Slytherins kept their distance. You won't be shocked to learn the Gryffindors were especially defiant. Quelling the student rebellion kept me busy. I had to find creative ways to discipline the repeat offenders; they might have been permanently disabled if they had been subjected to the Carrows' cruelty more than once. The trophy room never shined so brightly before that year. Slughorn was in charge of too many detentions; he ended up with enough bubotuber pus to rid all the UK of teenaged acne. But there were limits to my imagination, and I ran out of acceptable 'cruel and unusual' punishments. I could never take the easy route and resort to using Umbridge's special quill because I promised Albus I would protect the students at all costs."

Finally, he turned to look at her, and in the dim, almost moonless night, he could see understanding in her eyes.

"That damn portrait," he growled. "No living human would voluntarily speak to me, but that thing wouldn't fucking shut up. I tolerated it only because I was lonely, plus it endured my occasional ranting without complaint. How else was I supposed to let off steam? It wouldn't do for the Headmaster to be seen using the Giant Squid for target practice. And of course, Albus was still pulling strings from beyond the grave. You wouldn't believe how much of his unfinished business I attended to. Defeating the Dark Lord would have been a lot simpler if only Albus had trusted someone anyone well enough to reveal all his secrets."

Hermione nodded solemnly in agreement. "No doubt. I still can't believe he expected Harry to hunt for and destroy all those Horcruxes without giving him full instructions. He's lucky I figured out the connection between the goblin-wrought sword and the basilisk venom. Seriously, the war would have gone on for years before Harry would have puzzled that out on his own."

"Indeed."

He might have reverted back to one word sentences again, but what he'd just accomplished was monumental, so outside his comfort zone. He had revealed personal

information and discussed his feelings with someone other than a disembodied brain or an oily rendering of Albus Dumbledore and the world hadn't come crashing down around his ears. Even the damn stomach-pixies had disappeared, replaced by a comfortable flutter in his belly. He felt so relaxed, in fact, a yawn escaped from his mouth without his permission. *Dammit! Why must my body betray me at the most inopportune moments?*

"Oh, are you tired?" she asked, her tone an odd blend of concern and playfulness.

"No, I'm not tired," he replied, his smile strained as he maintained his cool in the face of embarrassment. "A yawn doesn't always indicate a state of tiredness or sleepiness or boredom. Sometimes it is merely the body's attempt to bring more air into the lungs and expand the alveoli."

"Thanks for the physiology lesson, Snape. I officially relinquish my title of know-it-all to you."

"I wouldn't dream of it. We'll share the title," he said, smirking, feeling he'd won that argument. "And speaking of physiology, how can you stand working the midnight shift? Doesn't that wreak havoc with your internal clock?"

"Not at all. I got used to the schedule rather quickly. I work when most people are asleep, take care of my business shopping, appointments, tidying up in the morning, and sleep during the afternoon."

"Perhaps the most important question is why do you work those hours? To the untrained eye, it appears as though you prefer the midnight shift because it's quiet, less disruptive. But I see a witch trying to avoid... something... a person or... persons? Why are you hiding, Granger? Surely you haven't become a hermit at your age?"

"What's wrong with that?" she challenged. "You have been antisocial for a good portion of your adult life."

"Yes, but I'm genetically predisposed to that. You don't have an excuse for that sort of behavior."

"Don't I? What about seeing the gory details of my failed love life splashed across the front page of the *Daily Prophet*? Or fighting off glory-seeking wizards who want nothing more than to say they've dated the famous war heroine Hermione Granger. Or my well-intentioned friends who think it's unnatural that I'm alone, so they try to fix me up with some 'nice' fellow from work."

"Just because you and Weasley were thrown together through extraordinary circumstances doesn't mean you were destined to remain together forever."

"Well, aren't you Mr. Cynical."

"Romances sprouting from extreme situations rarely endure. You and Weasley are too disparate in intellect, temperament, and character. I could see that when you were students. I can see it now when you are adults."

"I know everyone says the secret of a successful relationship is starting with friendship, but we are polar opposites. And the other thing everyone says is opposites attract. It's pure rubbish. I mean, would you think it a good idea to set me up with someone who is generally pleasant, but with a short fuse and a large, interfering family? His interests include chess, Quidditch, and raucous evenings at the pub, playing darts. His future wife must love children... and lots of them. Well, Harry and Ginny seem to think it's a grand idea."

"I've never had the urge to play matchmaker, but if I did, I would never put the two of you together."

"Why not?" she asked, seeming genuinely curious.

"Because you're too smart for the likes of a Gryffindor," he said, a spurious grin accompanying the compliment.

"But I am a Gryffindor too," she protested, failing to find the flattery hidden under his insult.

"Really? I think you exhibit more Slytherin traits of late," he said, their recent negotiations still fresh in his mind.

"I'm obviously biased because I've spent so much time with Ronald. Aside from our shared history at Hogwarts, we have little in common but Harry and Ginny. I like books and quiet evenings at home. I can't cook and I hate flying. The one thing we could agree upon was children should be raised by their own parents, not some surrogate."

"That's revolutionary thinking for a wizard. So Weasley was prepared to stay at home while you joined the work force?"

"No. He expected *me* to stay home and raise our hypothetical children. He likes the idea of hearth, home, and family, but he has too much fun in the outside world, playing Auror with Harry after his professional Quidditch career as a second-string Keeper ended.

"I love working. I always wanted to establish my career before getting married and starting a family, a small one at that, no more than two children. I still plan to have that someday, just not with Ronald Weasley."

"I have every confidence that you will have it all, as they say, Granger." He puffed a wistful sigh and peered into the distance, noticing a pair of teenagers loitering across the road.

"Long ago I thought I might have those very same things, a wife and family."

"But I thought you hate children."

"I hate other people's children, but I would like my own, of course."

"Well, it could still happen. You're young for a wizard. I know this witch who would be perfect for you..."

His reddened face signaled fury rather than embarrassment. He'd had enough of well-meaning, meddlesome people to last a lifetime, and in this his second life, he could find his own damn witch if he so desired.

"Absolutely not. I forbid it."

She laughed, patting his hand. "I'm kidding, Snape. If I won't allow my friends to make matches for me, I certainly wouldn't do that to anyone else." Neither seemed inclined to pull their hands apart, but the rough sound of a large engine drew their attention away from each other, causing them to break contact.

Moments later the RAC van appeared, its headlamps flooding the scene with harsh light. The driver parked in front of the broken-down car, then jumped from the van, his clipboard in hand.

"Good evening, Miss Granger, McFly. Oi, where's the DeLorean?" asked the familiar-looking shaggy-haired, gangly, coverall-clad mechanic.

"Erm, our friend Arthur needed it tonight. He's taking his wife for a moonlight drive through the Devon countryside," Hermione explained, using the same response she'd given Snape just hours before.

"Nice. She's one sweet ride, eh?" Lloyd commented, peering down at his paperwork. "Says here you've got an electrical problem. I'll try to jump start..."

"That won't be necessary," Snape interrupted. "I've tried that to no avail. The car needs service at a proper garage."

"All right, McFly, I'll tow her into town. You two can wait in the van while I hook her up." He readied the car while Hermione and Snape packed up their camp chairs and settled into the van once again.

"There's something wrong with that mechanic. Why does he insist on calling me McFly after I clearly stated he'd mistaken me for someone else?" Snape wondered. "It can't be a short-term memory issue because he remembered your name well enough."

"Well, first, although you corrected him, you never gave him your name, and second... I'll tell you later."

Chapter Six

Chapter 6 of 7

Snape and Hermione share more secrets from the past. How much heart to heart can Snape's heart take? And Snape seeks romantic advice from a disembodied brain.

Disclaimer: All characters you recognize are the brainchildren of J. K. Rowling. All brains and other original characters are my creations.

Chapter 6

In the early morning hours, in a dim and spooky room housed within an imposing subterranean building, a disembodied brain steeped in murky green water, waiting for the dark man to return and regale him with tales of driving the metal chariot. But alas, the man had an agenda of his own, taking him slightly off course from his normal routine.

Snape had never set foot in the Ministry commissary before that day, but he strode in confidently, like he owned the place, robes a-billowing with unnatural liveliness despite the early hour. The smell of stale coffee, burnt toast, and something unidentifiable perfumed the air, a subtle assault on his delicate olfactory sense. If he had been drawn there for the food, the smell alone would have put him off eating, but no, his mission was to locate a witch, and not just any witch, but one in particular.

He had searched almost the whole of the ninth floor, scouting her usual haunts the Brain Room, the Unspeakables' briefing room, her office, Dougherty's office and found them empty, all devoid of witch, or anyone else for that matter at eight o'clock in the morning, a good hour before the official start of the Ministry work day.

When he explored the commissary, however, success: his quarry sat alone at a small table at the very back, head down, right hand absorbed in furious scribbling, left hand wrapped around a white china cup embellished with the Ministry logo. It seemed she hadn't noticed him, for she hadn't looked up since he'd walked in.

He approached stealthily, applying a wordless Silencing Charm to his boots to deaden the sound of his steps.

"Good morning," she greeted him, never once looking up from her paperwork. "Your swishing robes gave you away. Next time apply the Silencing Charm to your entire self." Apparently his spy skills were a bit rusty.

"May I join you?" he asked, eyeing the tiny table strewn with numerous stacks of textbooks, parchments, and empty teacups.

"Of course," she replied, finally looking up, her eyes weary, but her smile bright. She hastily gathered her research materials into one very tall, tottering pile and then, using her wand, sent the china back to the kitchen.

"You're a hard woman to find, Granger. If I didn't find you here, I would have filed a missing person report with the MLE and forced them to investigate your disappearance."

"But wouldn't that be a wish come true for you? The bane of your existence gone forever?" she teased.

He leaned in close and spoke in hushed tones. "Until we finish my training, I'm keeping an eye on you." His dark eyes held her gaze until a flash of white sailed by, catching his peripheral vision and breaking the trance. "What the..."

"Automatic refill," she explained blithely, plucking the teacup from the air, never spilling a drop of fragrant Earl Grey with a splash of milk.

"Am I to understand you have confined yourself and nearly the entire contents of your personal library to this minuscule space in the commissary so you can have a hot beverage?" he asked, brow raised in disbelief.

"Absolutely," she replied with enthusiasm that could only have been caffeine induced. "The tea would be cold by the time it reaches my office, so I tolerate the cramped quarters here in order to enjoy a cup of hot tea while I do my research."

"Couldn't you brew the tea in your office?"

"And take valuable time from my research? No, I would rather let the commissary take care of it."

He shook his head. "You are a strange witch, Granger."

"Don't you think it's time to call me by my given name? Our conversations last night were of a rather personal nature, so for you to call me Granger seems so cold, so distant. That might be the image you project for public consumption, but you're not really like that, not anymore at least."

"Of course, Hermione," he replied, a smile twitching his lips. "I only ask you not to reveal my secret Mr. Nice Guy identity. And you may call me Severus."

"Are you sure you wouldn't prefer McFly?" she teased again.

"Would you *please* tell me what that's all about?" he implored.

"A 1985 American movie called *Back to the Future* used the DeLorean car as a prop, a time machine specifically. The protagonist of the film is a young man named Marty McFly."

"I see. So do I resemble him in some fashion?"

"Not by a long shot. He's short and brown haired, but if you squint and look through a petroleum jelly-smeared lens, you could pass for his father, George McFly. He's tall, dark, and lanky... with a large nose."

"He sounds charming, the perfect matinee idol," he said, his tone as acerbic as toxic lemon drops.

"Well, I find him appealing," she defended. "He's a hero in his own right."

This piqued his interest because popular culture usually cast physically odd characters as the comic relief or the villain, not the hero. "What sort of hero?"

"In the beginning, he's portrayed as a bit naughty, a Peeping Tom. He fancies Lorraine, but he's too shy to tell her. George is very smart and timid, an easy target for bullies. When he sees his love being assaulted, he takes on the biggest of the bullies in town and knocks him flat on his arse. And in the end, he gets the girl."

He rolled his eyes. "Bollocks. Average blokes aren't destined to become gallant knights, except in fairy tales." But in reality, he didn't mind the comparison. Perhaps *he* could get the girl in the end.

She lightly slapped him on the arm, a playful gesture if she were a third year. "It's a comedy film, Severus. Accept it for what it is, pure entertainment."

How could he argue with that? He opened his mouth to do just that, challenge her on what passed for quality entertainment these days, but a little voice inside his head told him to shut it. He chose to speak about safe, yet mundane topics instead.

"It was rather cloudy when I left home this morning. Do you think it will rain tonight?" he asked nonchalantly. "I understand it's difficult to drive under wet road conditions, but I'm certain I will rise to the challenge."

Hermione stared at him, speechless, her face a curious mix of disbelief and annoyance. "Are you serious? The weather? You couldn't think of anything else to talk about?" she admonished him. "You're better than that, Severus. Why can't you just talk to me?"

He truly was curious about the weather and its effects on driving, but if she wanted deeper conversation, he knew exactly what topic to broach. "As you wish. Tell me about your research, Hermione. You were rather evasive earlier about what led you to it."

"I-I'm sorry... it's just... personal reasons... and they're... difficult to talk about."

"Of course. We all have our reasons for what we do, and they are commonly... very personal."

He didn't press for details, but she offered them freely. "In my past, I'd broken rules and done things I'm not proud of, but all in the name of survival, in the interest of defeating Voldemort. Some things I considered minor: sneaking out after curfew, petrifying Neville..."

"Stealing from my stores?" he drawled, the silken tone of his voice softening the accusation.

She winced, embarrassed. "Sorry about that, but to a twelve-year-old child, a few nicked ingredients meant nothing compared to gaining access to the Slytherin common room in order to question Malfoy."

He nodded and gestured for her to continue.

"Some things I considered major. If not unforgivable, then unconscionable and morally questionable. I... I performed a Memory Charm on my parents without their knowledge. I changed their identities: Jonathan and Hortensia Granger became Wendell and Monica Wilkins. I moved them to Australia for their safety. I wiped all traces of myself from their memories; for all intents and purposes, they didn't have a daughter because they didn't know I existed.

"I traveled to Australia after the war ended and eventually restored their memories. I'm not boasting when I say it was difficult. Physically, mentally, emotionally, it took a toll on all of us. At first, they were confused... then they were angry. Intellectually, they understood my reasons for altering their memories: they would be less vulnerable if they didn't know me. Emotionally, they felt betrayed that I used magic on them without their permission. In the end, they chose to remain abroad, to be... distant. So, even with my good intentions, I've lost my parents."

She delivered the entire explanation with a cool detachment, but her glistening eyes told him of deep feelings he knew very well: regret and guilt.

"Hermione, I assume you have no friends who are former Death Eaters and thus were privy to the Dark Lord's inner circle?"

She nodded, pressing her trembling lips tightly. Deep within, she must have known what he was about to tell her.

"The Dark Lord often tormented the families of Muggle-borns to intimidate and demoralize. Your parents were watched, and they were targeted for termination. Yaxley reported he had visited their home in late summer 1997, and he had found it empty." He leaned forward and placed his hand over hers. "Hermione, don't you realize you were destined to lose no matter what you did? Your parents would have been killed if you hadn't moved them, and they would never have agreed to leave the country realizing the danger you faced. Knowing this is no consolation for what you've lost, but perhaps it will assuage your..." He didn't feel it was his place to label her emotions.

She pulled her hand from beneath his to wipe her watery eyes. She sniffled, swallowed, and released the breath she was holding. "Guilt. It's a strong motivator."

He smiled halfheartedly, only the right corner of his mouth uplifted. "For some, indeed." He conjured a handkerchief and gently pressed it into her hand. "Your feelings are legitimate. Very few people get to save the day without experiencing guilt on some level. But don't dwell on it forever. It's unhealthy; I can personally attest to that. It's time for you to move forward."

"You're right," she agreed, wiping her tear-stained face. "Guilt led me to my field, but I find great fulfillment in my research. And now it seems I've found a kindred spirit in you, another guilt-ridden soul in need of good company, even if you just want to talk about the weather." She smirked and reached across the table to squeeze his hand.

"Well, what should we talk about then?" he asked, rather enjoying their brief contact.

"You were rather evasive yourself when I asked why you opted for a field assignment."

Why did she have to ask about that? Snape's silence signaled his continued reticence on the subject. However, he realized it was his own damn fault he was in that position. He should have made a list of acceptable conversation topics beforehand, instead of leaving himself so open, so vulnerable.

"Quid pro quo, Clarice. I tell you things, you tell me things."

"Clarice? What have you been into, Hermione? Is there some hallucinogen in that tea? How could you confuse me for a woman?"

She laughed, and her face shone, despite the dim ambient lighting in the cafeteria. "It's another movie reference. I'll tell you about it later. But for now, tell me something about you."

He wondered if perhaps he'd passed into an alternate universe where women actually sought out his company and wanted to know about his thoughts and feelings. The only woman who cared about what he had to say was Rita Skeeter, and actually, she didn't care; she wrote whatever the hell she wanted and called it the truth.

But Hermione seemed truly interested in him, or else she wouldn't have asked; she wasn't one to make small talk for no good reason.

He trusted her enough to put his life in her hands; he would never have gotten into a car with anyone but Hermione Granger. But did he trust her with his friendship? Snape did the math and calculated that trusting her with his friendship could yield dividends far greater than an occasional hand squeeze, like a closer look at her breasts. *Oh, what the hell.*

"So, you want to know why after years of devoting my life to potions research I've taken a field assignment?"

"Yes," she said, leaning forward and inadvertently giving Snape a lovely view of her cleavage again. That little glimpse of heaven confirmed the wisdom of his decision.

He ran his hand through his hair, not quite believing the ease of discussing such things with Hermione, things that he would normally ponder by himself. As he spoke, his disjointed thoughts flowed more eloquently than he had ever imagined.

"I've been in hiding essentially since childhood. I learned at a young age that it was better sometimes not to be noticed. Soon, I became accustomed to the solitude. Later, I lived in the midst of the Wizarding world, even though I existed on the fringes of polite society, lurking in shadows because that's what spies do. But it's not what I truly wanted."

"What do you mean?" she interjected.

"All my life I've searched for acceptance and recognition. I never had that as a student at Hogwarts despite my academic achievements; except for Albus, I never had that as a teacher or Headmaster, either. I thought I'd found it when I joined the Death Eaters, but my brethren scorned me, only acknowledging me because the Dark Lord valued me."

He looked away from Hermione and focused on his hands folded in his lap.

"After the war, the Ministry's propaganda machine presented me as a hero and bestowed honor upon me with that blasted Order of Merlin, Second Class. Finally, I had the recognition I so dearly desired, but it was bittersweet. The public realized Potter could not have defeated the Dark Lord without my assistance, but they treated me with contempt for my heinous acts, all done for the greater good; even those few who were less than thrilled with the new Wizarding world order treated me with disdain. And there was my acceptance, albeit reluctant. So many people greet me with a smile, but as soon as I present my backside to them, they delight in kicking me in the arse."

She grimaced. "The media and the public are more than happy to put their heroes on pedestals, but it seems their greatest pleasure is then knocking them down to the ground."

"Yes, and thus I have remained in hiding, avoiding public reaction. I work for the Wizarding world's largest employer, but in the smallest, most enigmatic department. I make my required appearance at every anniversary event commemorating the Dark Lord's demise, but I do so warily.

"I resent being treated as a pariah, the necessary evil, and I refuse to accept those titles anymore. I didn't survive that bloody, fucking snake to be in the dark, forever hiding. I've been given a second chance to live, and I'm going to do that on my terms.

"If I want to take a stroll down Diagon Alley, I will. If I want to attend those damn celebrations and leer at the pretty women, I will. And if I want to work beyond the dark confines of my Ministry lab, I will. I don't care what anyone thinks anymore. I'm going to live."

He'd done it again, opened up to her, poured his heart out, and nothing bad happened as a result. He wasn't struck by lightning or mowed down by a stray erumpent. Best of all, Hermione had listened to his rant with rapt attention, never once pitying or mocking him.

"I envy you, Severus. You really do practice what you preach, taking your own words to heart. You told me to move on, and you've already done so. Not simply existing, but really living, and..."

A vexatious noise, a combination of buzzing and humming, emanated from her wand, interrupting Hermione. With a tap to her palm and a "*Finite*," she silenced it. "Sorry about that. It's the Alarm Charm, my own creation, to remind me of imminent appointments," she spoke humbly, no hint of braggadocio in her voice. "This morning I'm getting my eyebrows shaped, one of my few indulgences," she explained, smiling slyly.

"Hmph," he muttered.

She raised one quizzical and slightly unkempt eyebrow in response, then began the arduous process of shrinking her leaning tower of textbooks and parchments. Once completed, she packed her belongings into her ever-present evening bag especially unsuitable for day use and rose to leave.

"Have a productive day, Severus. I'll see you after work."

"Until this evening, Hermione." He nodded farewell and intently watched her retreating form, thoroughly enjoying the view, despite her best assets being hidden under heavy work robes. He remained in the vacant cafeteria for a few moments longer, thinking about the past few days. His opinion of Hermione had changed drastically in that time, and the thought of that made his head spin and stomach pitch. He needed to analyze these new feelings. Time for a meeting with his brainy confidante.

By the time Snape arrived in the Brain Room, Brian's frantic pacing had agitated the liquid in his tank to a bubbly froth, and his peevish thought tendrils splashed dark green fluid onto the floor.

There you are, you inconsiderate man! I thought you had got lost or been in an accident.

Snape rolled his eyes and busied himself with organizing his workbench, even though he wanted nothing more than to glean romantic advice from Brian.

"It's not even nine o'clock yet. Technically, I'm not late," he huffed.

You're usually here well before then.

He stomped towards Brian, artfully dodging the wet spots on the floor surrounding the tank, each step echoing with unbridled exasperation. "I didn't know I needed to report my whereabouts to you on an hourly basis," he snarled.

I was worried about you.

Snape breathed slow and deep, suffusing every irritated cell in his body with calm. He still couldn't believe it when someone actually voiced or thought, in Brian's case concern for him. "I didn't mean to snap at you. I'm sorry to be so ill-tempered."

Tell me something I don't know, Brian thought sarcastically.

"I met with Hermione this morning. That's why I was detained," he explained, ignoring Brian's flippant mockery and actually responding to his imperative.

I'm still mad at you and...wait! Did you just call her Hermione? When did that start?

Snape glanced at his wristwatch. "Oh, forty-five, fifty minutes ago, I reckon."

Oh, that's a new development, a good one. I guess things are moving in the right direction. You'll be laid before you know it, Severus.

"I... erm... that... it's not like that," Snape spluttered, annoyed that Brian knew exactly what he was thinking.

Oh, what's it like then? Brian teased.

Snape sighed. Why was it so awkward for him to talk about these touchy-feely things? In the few instances when he'd discussed his thoughts and emotions with Brian, he had felt at ease, most likely because Brian's response didn't have the added burden of facial expressions or body language.

"I like her... a lot, in fact," he admitted. "I feel quite comfortable with her, although sometimes my chest gets tight and tingly when I'm with her."

Maybe you're having a heart attack, Brian diagnosed, trying to be helpful. *I read about that in a medical textbook once.*

"It's not a heart attack," Snape responded vehemently. After a deep, cleansing sigh, he continued, his tone softened. "And I think she likes me. She smiles at me a lot, touches my hand, and laughs at my bons mots."

Oh, yes! She does like you. So what's the problem?

"The problem is that after tomorrow I'll have no excuse to see her outside the workplace."

That's not insurmountable, Severus. You ask her out on a date, dinner and a show perhaps. It's very simple.

Insecurity and doubt darkened his face. "That's easy for you to say. You see the best in everyone. I have no idea what she sees in me."

Stop whining, Severus, Brian insisted. *I'm not going to waste our time listing your finer qualities. Suffice it to say, there's a witch out there who's your perfect complement, like salt and vinegar, sweet and sour...*

"Enough. I'll ask her out," he snapped, all traces of self-doubt vanished, replaced by his patented Snape snark. "Can we concentrate on work now?"

Chapter Seven

Chapter 7 of 7

It's Snape's final driving lesson. What could possibly go wrong? Will the hand of Fate slap him in the face once again? Will the scales tip in his favor? Perhaps the most important question is will Snape finally get the girl?

Disclaimer: All characters you recognize are the brainchildren of J. K. Rowling. All brains and other original characters are my creations.

Chapter 7

A most pleasant sight greeted Snape as he slowly ascended in the false phone box. On the pavement outside the visitors' entrance stood a sleek stainless-steel sports car with gull-wing doors and, perched on the front, the loveliest bonnet ornament he'd ever seen, a pretty young witch wearing a coppery-brown sundress and strappy sandals, the stiletto heel of which appeared so high as to preclude comfortable pedal maneuvering.

"Now that's a car befitting a sexy, sophisticated secret agent," he asserted, a self-satisfied smile pulling at his lips. "And it comes standard with a stunning cohort."

Hermione beamed, brilliant white teeth flashing. "I guess that qualifies me as your Bond girl."

He wasn't quite certain how to respond to that. A number of naughty names came to mind, all involving portions of the female reproductive anatomy. He had to think and act quickly to quell the burgeoning bulge in his trousers. "Shall we get this show on the road?" he asked, smiling tightly as he walked briskly to the car.

He positioned himself on the driver's side, making the necessary adjustments to the seat and mirrors. As they simultaneously secured their shoulder/seat belts, he caught a glimpse of creamy décolletage peeking out from the bodice of her low-cut dress. He could feel the blood rushing to his nether regions again. Did the saucy Gryffindor have no idea what torment this was for him? He closed his eyes and brought to mind the most gruesome images he could muster: Hagrid in a bathing costume, Arthur playing nude volleyball, snogging Umbridge in a musty cupboard. Finally, he experienced a reprieve down below, but at what cost to his dignity?

"Are you all right, Severus? You have this odd look upon your face, like a combination of pain and relief," she commented. "Are you nervous about tonight's road test?"

"Not at all," he sighed, opening his eyes, looking deep into hers. "Where shall I take you?" he asked, his voice husky, tinging the question with a soupçon of suggestion.

She laughed, genuine music to his ears. "Anywhere and everywhere. We have a lot to accomplish tonight. I'm going to put you through your paces."

That would be a dream come true, he thought lasciviously. Snape shook those rampant sexual thoughts from his head once more and concentrated on his driving skills. *Clutch, neutral, ignition, first gear, hand brake, accelerator.* "Off we go," he announced with a grand flourish.

For the better part of an hour, he navigated the streets and roads of Greater London, reviewing the skills he'd learned and hopefully mastered over the past four days and answering questions on driving theory and the rules of the road.

He performed several stops and starts on inclines. *Brake short of a full stop, engage the hand brake, release the clutch while gently depressing the accelerator, release the hand brake, and go!*

"As you are driving along a road, a van cuts in close in front of you. What should you do?" she asked, adding, "And 'Hex the driver' is *not* an acceptable answer."

She tested his general driving ability, directing him to drive in various road and traffic conditions. He nearly hexed her when she suggested casting weather charms to test his skills on wet pavement.

"A police car is following you, and the officer flashes his headlamps and points to the left. What do you do?" she asked another theory question, adding, "And 'Cast the Confundus Charm' is *not* an acceptable answer."

She forced him to perform all three reverse exercises: parallel parking, reversing around a corner, and turning in the road, a three-point turn.

"An injured motorcyclist is lying unconscious on the side of the road. What should you do?" she asked yet another question, adding, "And 'Keep on driving' is *not* the correct answer."

The last portion of the road test included ten minutes of independent driving. Snape motored about the northern suburbs without any input or comment from Hermione, although she insisted they stop at London Gateway services. The motorway service station had been named five-star Loo of the Year Award winner for 2003, although they stopped there solely for purposes of demonstrating proper fueling techniques.

"Topping off the tank is a waste of time and money, not to mention environmentally unsound," she opined.

Finally, she directed Snape to park at the periphery of the service area so that she could administer a vision test which was rather like putting the thestral behind the carriage because if he couldn't see, how could he drive? and ask vehicle safety questions.

"Tell me where to find the information for the recommended tire pressures for this car and how tire pressures are checked," she demanded in the business-like tone of an examiner.

"I don't fucking know, and I care even less," he answered, exasperated. "If I have any mechanical issues with a motorized vehicle, I'll contact you to handle it. How's that for a response?"

"Spoken like a veteran driver," she said with a cheery voice. "And thus ends your driving test."

"Well?" Snape asked, his face and voice both faking disinterest. In his head, he knew his driving met or exceeded expectations, but that didn't stop the acid churning in his stomach. He wanted her approval more than anything at that very moment... well, almost anything.

After an inordinately long pause she must have known how her silence tortured him she grinned and exclaimed, "You passed!" She conjured him a driving license, an almost exact copy of her own, except for his photo, looking not much better than one of those wanted posters appearing in Diagon Alley during the war, and the address.

He plucked it from the air and examined it closely. "'Kensington Gore, London SW7 2AP, United Kingdom,'" he read aloud. "Thank you, Hermione, but that's not where I reside."

"Well, I didn't think you would want the Muggle authorities to know where you live, so I used the address of the Royal Albert Hall," she explained, smirking.

"How inventive and devious. I approve. We'll make a Slytherin of you yet," he said nonchalantly. He smiled inwardly when she didn't object to his prophecy.

"Oh, I almost forgot," she chirped, reaching into her bag of tricks. "I have some gifts for you, this being your graduation and all. First," she said, pausing to pull out a cellophane-wrapped paper pine tree, "I saw how you admired the air-freshener in Agatha's car, so here's one of your own." She winked and handed it to him with great care, as if it were a precious magical relic, and he accepted it with the very tips of his fingers, as if he would contract some dreaded disease if he touched it any more than necessary.

She delved into the handbag again, this time pulling out a palm-sized plastic box housing another plastic box filled with spools of black ribbons and little white wheels, all wrapped within a curious list.

He eagerly dropped the air-freshener and took the proffered box, turning it in his hands, carefully inspecting it. "Songs to Drive By: *The Chauffeur, She Drives Me Crazy, Drive My Car, Get Outta My Dreams, Get into My Car, The Long and Winding Road, Hit the Road, Jack, Highway to Hell, Two of Us, Radar Love...* Hermione, what is this?" he asked, raising a single curious eyebrow.

"It's a mix tape, Severus, an audio recording of songs by various artists, usually with a common theme," she explained excitedly. "I made it especially for you. I thought you might like to listen to some music while you're on field assignment."

He was momentarily rendered speechless by her thoughtfulness and generosity. Who had ever given him anything out of the kindness of their hearts? The staff at Hogwarts didn't count; the gifts they gave him were out of a sense of obligation. "Thank you, Hermione. I don't know what to say," he eventually responded, his voice a bit rough. He swallowed thickly and asked, "Is this new recording technology?" He wasn't the least bit interested in audio technology, but he needed to divert the conversation to a safer, less emotive topic. "I remember tapes being at least twice the size of this when I was younger."

"Oh, goodness, no. The MP3 format is one of the newest and most popular, but I chose the cassette tape because I assumed the Ministry probably wouldn't place you in a late model ice-cream van with a state-of-the-art audio system."

"With their tight budget, I wouldn't be shocked if they set me up with a horse-drawn cart," he said, his remark slightly acerbic, but delivered with a smile.

And she laughed again, which made Snape wonder whether she was easy to amuse, or rather, he was gifted with true wit and humor, but he had no time for thoughtful analysis at that moment. He pocketed the license and the cassette tape, conveniently overlooking the air-freshener lying at his feet.

"Hermione, I must thank you for everything, but especially the time and effort you've put into teaching me to drive. I commend your patience and restraint, as well; if I had been in your shoes, I don't know if I would have been half as gracious as you've been. Thank you once more."

"You're very welcome, but don't forget, you owe me a favor, Severus," she reminded him in a stern, but friendly tone.

"I hadn't forgotten, Hermione. I just didn't expect you to call in your favor so soon." He truthfully hadn't thought about that since Monday, and he began to worry again. What did she have in mind? He didn't have long to ponder that question, though.

"I want to join you on field assignment," she demanded, a firm, yet expectant look on her face, as if she presumed he would challenge her request and was armed with several arguments to support her case.

Snape momentarily sported the wide-eyed deer-in-the-headlamps look he obviously wasn't expecting to hear that but quickly recovered his customary, unreadable stone face. "I thought dinner and a show might be more to your liking and commensurate remuneration for your efforts," he offered with conviction, hoping a strong delivery would hide his brief bout of shock.

"I had a feeling you might object, but hear me out, Severus. I've thought for some time now that research alone does not make me a well-rounded Unspeakable; I need some experience as a field agent, too. Your upcoming mission would be the perfect opportunity.

"It calls for two agents, really, one concentrating on the ice-cream van and the vending while the other is devoted to the surveillance. I know you would be capable of handling it all on your own, but if I'm with you, then all your energy could be directed to gathering intelligence. You wouldn't have to worry about driving, or vehicle maintenance, or selling the ice-cream, or being polite to the customers. And I could learn about spying from a master. It would be the perfect win-win situation, and I'm certain we could convince Dougherty to sign off on it, too."

Although she had a compelling argument, Snape automatically objected, sardonic wit spewing from him like steam from a geyser. "While spending countless hours alone

with me in a frigid icebox would be the perfect way for you to spend the summer, I must regretfully deny your request." That brought to mind an image of Hermione shivering in the extreme cold, certain parts of her anatomy reacting (favorably?) to the icy conditions; perhaps they would be forced to cuddle in the back of the ice-cream van, sharing their body heat to keep warm because warming charms not only would be forbidden on the mission no magic allowed but they would melt the ice-cream, too.

"Well, I respectfully disagree," she said with feisty Gryffindor defiance, folding her arms across her chest, bringing her bosom into the forefront once more. "It would be productive, educational, and fun."

Snape became fixated on her body again, his self-control depleted as he blurted out, "Hermione, I cannot work in such close quarters with you. I would be constantly distracted, wondering what it would be like to kiss you." *Bollocks! Did I just say that aloud?*

"That variable needs to be removed from the equation immediately," she insisted, her bossy nature very strong that evening.

Her response did more to deflate his ego than had Lucius' comment that Snape's Savile Row suit looked like a knock-off. *What the fuck? I thought she liked me. She smiled at me, laughed at my jokes, and practically flashed me with her breasts on three separate occasions. How could...*

His irrational thoughts were interrupted by a lapful of curvy witch and a warm, soft mouth upon his. This dispelled any doubts he held about her attraction to him. He could have easily obsessed over the quality of his breath *Next time, skip the raw onion on the burger, Snape* the oiliness of his hair, or any number of esthetic or hygienic issues, but he didn't. Instead, he simply accepted she indeed fancied him like he fancied her, and they were at last acting on their mutual attraction.

As Snape was already sitting in the driver's seat, he felt an obligation to take over, holding Hermione in his strong embrace, one hand luxuriating in her curls and the other caressing her flank. He deepened the kiss, his insistent tongue tracing her lips, pressing for entry.

Hermione moaned softly and opened her mouth, but she would not give up the title of aggressor so easily, her tongue nudging past his, fighting for dominance, her hands fisting his hair. Neither party seemed willing to abdicate their position of power, each looking to control the action. Hermione broke away first, breathing a contented sigh before planting playful kisses on his jawline and nipping at his neck, what little was exposed to her given his penchant for puritanical fashions.

Snape would not remain a spectator in the game either, his hands traveling to her breasts, fondling them. She whimpered as his thumbs rubbed at her nipples hidden under layers of dress and brassiere. He peppered her neck and cleavage with kisses and bites whenever her movements allowed him access.

An inarticulate grunt escaped his lips as she unfastened his collar, all the buttons below, and his seat belt, thus facilitating her exploration. Their frantic kissing resumed as her fingers roamed the planes and contours of his chest and abdomen. She raked her nails across his nipples and tangled in his treasure trail, and his quiet moans ebbed and flowed as she touched those sensitive spots.

Although he was denied direct contact with her corresponding anatomy he refused to undress her, to utterly expose her, because they were engaged in petting in a public area, even if they were in the privacy of a car he knew a thing or two (in theory) about eliciting wanton cries from a woman. His clever right hand gently pried her knees apart, and his talented left hand eased slowly, teasingly, into her knickers, his fingers brushing her damp curls. He stroked her with a tortuously delicate touch, forcing Hermione to rub against his hand, seeking more stimulation. And not only did she moan but she purred.

Despite a lack of space to maneuver, Hermione's deft fingers of her own talented left hand unzipped his trousers, dove into his pants, and wrapped snugly around his length, tumescent once again. As she stroked him slowly at first, then quickening her pace his hushed mutterings transformed to raspy profanity.

The moaning, muttering, purring, and swearing stopped long enough for their lips to lock again, the kissing more fervent than before, only breaking every so often to allow them to breath. The action escalated, nearing a frenzied tempo for both. Snape could feel that good old, telltale tightening in his balls...

Tap, tap, tap

"Oi, Miss Granger, McFly, are you okay in there?" Lloyd, the ubiquitous mechanic, asked in earnest.

He watched as the driver's side window lowered, inch by agonizing inch, accompanied by a whiny, motorized hum. Oblivious, Lloyd nattered on, "Hey, I thought I might run into you two again, just not so soon. You know, there aren't that many DeLoreans in the UK, and when I saw you parked at a motorway service station, I assumed you might be having trouble again, so I..." He stopped mid-sentence, apparently having noticed the fogged windows of the car as well as the heaving chests and disheveled appearances of the car's occupants.

Snape stared daggers at the well-meaning, gormless young man. It took every ounce of self-control to keep himself from casting an Unforgivable on Lloyd.

Hermione remained poised in the face of great embarrassment. "We're just fine, Lloyd, and so is the car. Thanks for your concern. Goodnight." She waved as the window whined and crept closed.

Lloyd took the hint, turned on his heel, and sped from the scene, never looking back.

A tense, complex air of frustration, relief, discomfiture, and longing hung between Snape and Hermione, yet she closed the physical gap separating them when she leaned back and rested her head upon his shoulder. "That was unfortunate," she said, her voice full of disappointment.

Snape wrapped his arms around her, and his fingers around a particularly curly tendril just begging to be played with. "Yes, a rude and unsolicited interruption, but that insensitive oaf probably did us a favor."

"What?" she screeched, pulling away just enough to fix him with a glare of annoyance.

He gently guided her head back to his shoulder and resumed teasing her tresses. "Did you really want our first time together to be in Arthur Weasley's car?"

"No, you're right. But still, it would have been nice to finish what we started," she lamented, half-joking presumably.

He laughed, a deep, rich laughter that reverberated in his chest and jostled Hermione as she lay atop him. "We could go somewhere more private, say your place or mine, and finish what we started."

He felt confident propositioning her, his voice low and smooth, seductive like a velvety red wine. But as soon as the words flew from his mouth, a smidgeon of anxiety crept into his stomach. Then he remembered. *What am I afraid of? She jumped me first*, he thought, and his uneasiness disappeared.

"Yes!" she exclaimed. "But speaking of favors," she began, moving away just enough to look him in the eye, "have you reached a final decision regarding my request?" Her face shone bright and hopeful in the moonlight of the cloudless night.

"I have indeed come to a decision," he drawled, drawing out his answer simply to tease Hermione. Given the chance to do it over, he probably would have come straight to the point, for the antsy witch bounced with anticipation, which only tortured him and his unresolved erection.

He continued to speak, his voice slightly strained. "Earlier, I argued that your mere presence would be a distraction, but the fact remains that you would be a true asset to the mission, for the very reasons you put forth."

If he thought acquiescing to her demands would bring an end to her squirming, he was sorely mistaken. She became more animated; her bouncing resembled a sort of a poor man's lap dance. She threw her arms around and kissed him soundly. "Thank you, Severus. You won't regret it. I'll see to that."

He groaned, the discomfort in his groin growing more intense. "Please settle down, Hermione. I haven't actually agreed to your request, nor have you heard my conditions."

She suppressed her exuberant movements, and he could breathe again, experiencing some relief. "Sorry about that, Severus. I didn't mean to make things worse for you."

"Thank you," he croaked. "If I may continue?" She nodded and he began once more. "I'm a solitary man. I've never had a partner mostly because I've never needed to rely on anyone but myself, but the other reason is I typically don't play well with others. I'm fastidious and have a low threshold for bullshit and tomfoolery. I'm an uncompromising professional, with tremendous self-control, and who conducts himself with utmost decorum. You would be a good partner for me, a good match, for you possess many of the same qualities."

She beamed upon hearing his praise, a smile that would have melted even the most stoic.

"However, I'll only be able to work with you, Hermione, side by side, in very close quarters, provided we continue our intimate research whilst off the clock... and provided you wear multiple layers of clothing while we're on assignment." He added, "For warmth, of course."

"It's settled then," she agreed, snuggling into him again. "I'll even wear a puffy, goose down jacket if it will make you happy." She sighed. "Summer spent in an ice-cream van. What could be better than that?"

"I'll show you what's better than that," he replied, nuzzling her neck with his appreciable nose. "I think you'll catch on rather quickly. You always were an apt student."

"Indeed," she said. "Let's go, Severus."

Late that night, in a dark, creepy, nearly empty room, deep within a mysterious underground building located in the heart of London, a bodiless encephalon was awakened from dreamless slumber by a pleasant tingling sensation in his prefrontal cortex.

My sixth sense! Brian shouted with unadulterated glee. *It's telling me Severus got laid. Well done, my friend.*

And all was well with the Wizarding world.

The End

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Original Prompt: Severus and Hermione are both Unspeakables. They are mostly assigned to separate missions and rarely interact with each other. Both carry pain and secrets from the war and enjoy their solitary lifestyles. However, their latest assignment requires that Severus learn how to drive a Muggle vehicle. Hermione is to teach him. It is not, of course, easy as it sounds.