

# Wicked Game

*by shalimar1981*

After the events in the Department of Mysteries, Hermione finds it hard to cope and receives help from someone unexpected. When a friendship of a sort develops, will it survive the events of the Lightning-Struck Tower? Will an ancient ritual help the Light win the war or will it destroy everything? An HG/SS romance. Not DH compliant.

## Prologue: Frustration

*Chapter 1 of 14*

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Disclaimer: I'm not making any money from this. Anything you recognize is not mine but Jo's. Sadly.

A/N: Though I've been writing fanfiction for various fandoms for the past twelve years, this is my first attempt to get one actually posted. I'm very excited about this story and want to give it my best, so criticism and ideas on how the story could progress will be greatly appreciated. This is possible since this is a work in progress and a great chunk in the middle (namely their sixth year at Hogwarts) is still missing.

I will try to follow the course of the Half-Blood Prince as accurately as possible, but since this story is mainly from the point of view of Hermione and not of Harry, some things are bound to be different.

I also admit that to make this story work, I had to change the setting from The Burrow to 12 Grimmauld Place at the beginning of the story. I've tried to give a plausible explanation for it, but if you feel I need to add something, please let me know.

This is categorized as a romance, but it will be slow in coming. It's mainly friendship at first but there's plenty UST, rest assured.

Now I want to thank my wonderful beta, Dark-Hamadryad, who polished off the rough edges and bore the hopeless situation of lack of commas and too long paragraphs.

Additional thanks goes to my two pals, HoneyB and Bi, who gave it a once-over (and more) and kept me from drowning myself in the bathtub in despair when some things didn't work the way I wanted.

And finally, I want to thank my baby girl, who is always wondering what the food person is doing in front of that flimmering box and who bore the occasional delay of a milk bottle and cursing when something went wrong with all the amused confusion of someone who does not understand the language - yet.

Boy, am I glad of that! :)

bye

Shal

\* \* \*

## Prologue: Frustration

The summer between her fifth and sixth year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry was passing more slowly than Hermione Granger would have liked. It was three weeks into the holidays, and she had already run out of things to do. She was fast coming to the end of her tether.

Countless times Hermione had sat in the library of number twelve, Grimmauld Place and had pondered what she hadn't tried yet to keep herself busy. Staring at books was only getting her so far. She needed something to keep herself from thinking about... things. So far, that had proven to be a fruitless endeavour, though it certainly wasn't for lack of trying. Purposely not thinking about something was far more difficult than she had imagined.

For safety reasons, the Weasleys, Hermione and Harry, who would join them later, were spending the summer holidays at number twelve, Grimmauld Place instead of at the Burrow. Too many accidents had happened to witches and wizards with connections to the Order to not take the threat seriously. As a result, Harry had been notified of his godfather's will immediately after the events at the Ministry. It was not very tactful, under the circumstances, and none of the Order had been comfortable with it, but it had been necessary since it involved headquarters.

Predictably, Harry had still been very much in shock and had difficulty accepting that Sirius was really gone and that all Sirius had possessed was now his. Still, with some persuading on the Weasleys' part, he had finally relented before they had gotten on the Hogwarts Express at the end of the previous term. He knew it was wiser to stay at headquarters. The only stipulation Harry had made was that Kreacher, the treacherous house-elf, had to remain at Hogwarts (with strict and very detailed instructions). Dobby would join them instead paid, of course. He'd had to be convinced of that, but Mrs Weasley had managed it.

Mrs Weasley was quite relieved at Harry's demand. Not being solely responsible for an even larger household than she was normally used to meant that she only had the kitchen to worry about. That suited her just fine. More than enough chores would have remained for the younger generation to tend to, but after several Tonks-induced explosions, Mrs Weasley wouldn't let anyone help in the kitchen again. Ever.

The others rejoiced, while Hermione's jaw ached from pretending to smile.

Now she spent most of her time here, in the Black library, staring at all the treasures within. She had already read all books she was allowed to, of course. Not that there were many of those since the family's main occupation had apparently been to accumulate as many texts on the Dark Arts as possible. Those were shielded with a Restrictus Charm - a particularly nasty version of an Identity Charm. It had the unfortunate side-effect of zapping the hand of anyone who dared to touch the forbidden books without permission, leaving the limb lifeless, yet in excruciating pain for the rest of the day.

She knew because she had tried, of course - an unread book was too much of a temptation for her to resist - and had no desire to repeat the experiment. Once was quite enough, thank you very much.

Her next avenue had been to study, because after the OWLs was before the NEWTs, after all. Studying, however, had - strangely enough - lost its appeal for her. She was still eager to learn, but in the face of death and destruction, her wish to achieve the highest NEWT scores ever simply left a bitter taste in her mouth. So her studies were conducted only half-heartedly at best.

Thanks to her Time-Turner experiment in her third year, Hermione had already turned seventeen and thus reached her majority a year early last summer. At first, she had kept it a secret because at the time, she was still somewhat shocked that the additional time she'd spent on lessons and studying had affected her life so much. Then, she had been too embarrassed and had finally decided to wait for the opportune moment to tell her friends. That moment had simply never arrived, though, and so they'd found out when Professor McGonagall had pulled her aside before leaving Hogwarts and gave her a stern talk about "responsible use of magic during the holidays". They were overjoyed of course and needless to say, conversation was very tense on the ride to King's Cross.

After the initial shock had worn off, she'd been quite excited about the prospects. The fact that she was no longer subject to the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery seemed to open up a whole new area of activity. She could now do magic whenever she wanted.

Charms, Transfiguration and Defense Against the Dark Arts were foremost on her mind because she knew she'd need them in the fight against Voldemort. She had realized this shortly after Umbridge had started her theoretical approach to Defense Against the Dark Arts the previous year and had thus convinced Harry to found the practical defense club they had dubbed the D.A.

The events in the Department of Mysteries, too, had taught her a lesson: Death Eaters didn't care how young or inexperienced you were, and if they had time, they would torture before they killed, simply because they enjoyed it.

Harry had arrived two weeks into the holidays, accompanied by Dumbledore, no less, with news of how they had convinced yet another teacher to join the ranks of Hogwarts' numerous and unfortunate DADA professors. He'd been glad to be rid of the Dursleys, of course, but was subdued and determined not to show that he was taking Sirius' loss hard. Along with the others, he seemed to have no trouble at all thinking up distractions; they were always playing Quidditch in the backyard, testing the twins' newest inventions when they came to visit, wreaking havoc on Mrs Weasley's nerves by exploring number twelve, Grimmauld Place or some similar nonsense she had no patience for.

After the fiasco in the Department of Mysteries in June, which she felt more than a little guilty about, the last thing she wanted was to have time on her hands to relax or join the others in their frivolous pursuits. In other words, she had a hard time not climbing up the walls.

Ron also hadn't taken very well the fact that she was already seventeen and had been for almost a year. It was just one more thing in which he felt deficient. Age had never been an issue between them before even though she was the oldest of the trio, but now, she fell in the same category as his brothers: all older, better and - most importantly - more special than him in some way.

She didn't know what she had done to deserve what followed because she'd never dreamed the additional time would be added to her official age by the Ministry. She told him so, repeatedly, but it didn't matter. He avoided her whenever he could. And so did Harry. Again.

Even though it had happened before - third year with the Crookshanks vs. Scabbers debacle instantly came to mind - it still hurt more than she wanted to admit. She knew that when it came down to it, Harry would always choose Ron - the two of them had been friends with each other before they had been friends with her. It was a sad truth. Harry still talked to her occasionally, but it just wasn't the same.

Thank god she still had Ginny. Ginny, her only female friend, thankfully hadn't changed a bit. Though she still fancied Harry, she was always ready to praise Hermione's ingenuity to be able to do magic way earlier than the others (as if that had actually been her plan) and to badmouth the 'two insensitive prats', as she called them, whenever she felt it would cheer her up. Bless her.

But her majority also meant that whereas she could do magic now, the others couldn't. So she'd tried to practise all she had learned so far and some things she had only read about on her own. And it had helped. For a while.

Yet it also became even more frustrating because her options were limited. Only a few charms would be useful in dire situations. Transfiguration was practically useless except for Human Transfiguration, which they wouldn't start until next term. She had read a fair bit about it and had been itching to try it, but after an incident which left her hair standing even more on end than usual, she decided to ask someone more experienced to help her.

Only no one ever seemed to have time to spare.

What was her foolish practising compared to a real situation where her life would be in danger? Nothing! From there on it only got worse. Practising spells, hexes, jinxes and counter-jinxes for Defense Against the Dark Arts was all very well and good, but without an opponent to practise with like they had in the D.A., how would she know it worked?

It was futile.

Her new privilege of doing magic outside of school was proving to be more of a curse than a blessing with each passing day. If she wasn't of age, she could have at least complained along with the others, shooting murderous looks at those allowed - like they were now doing with her. But she was of age, and every day, her frustration was growing.

The only things left for her to do were to research ahead what they had yet to learn, memorize the relevant school texts and wait for the new school year to begin. How predictable.

Oh, and practise Potions, of course.

She had actually been quite hopeful regarding this avenue since she knew Professor Snape had a laboratory on the third floor.

Only it wasn't quite that easy.

Though they were in desperate need of healing and restorative potions, Professor Snape didn't seem to have any time to brew them, what with his main duty as spy for the Order.

Nor had anyone else, apparently.

This seemed to be the perfect opportunity for her to get rid of her frustration and unrest, to do something useful and restock their meager potions supply all at the same time.

She should have known it was too good to be true.

After an accident in which she'd burned her hands slightly with bubotuber pus, she'd been forbidden to use the Potions laboratory again. And had received two stern talks from Molly Weasley and Professor Snape on her "foolish assumption she could brew potions a witch in possession of all 'Outstanding' NEWTs still needed a three-year apprenticeship with a longtime Potions Master for".

For that they had time.

Of course they'd conveniently forgotten her incompetence when they used the potion she had just finished to heal her hands.

"Go study, Miss Granger. That's what you're best at. And if it's not too much to ask, keep yourself out of trouble! Some of us have more important things to do than baby-sit a restless teenager." Professor Snape had sneered at her as a parting gift before he went to another Order meeting.

As if she needed reminding.

"Fine. Rub it in!" she'd muttered under her breath, as she left the room with her hands tingling. After-effects of the healing, of course.

In direct violation of the order she had just received, she'd gone immediately to the Potions laboratory.

'Fuck the lot of them!' she had thought ungraciously as she stomped up the stairs to the attic. Her arms had been loaded with stolen ingredients to brew the rest of the needed potions she was "due to her lack of mental capability and imagination incapable of producing", to quote Professor Snape again.

*HA!*

Hidden in an otherwise unused room in the attic, she'd managed to brew the required potions with only slight difficulties within a matter of days, and soon, they'd quietly found their way into the supply cupboard of the Potions laboratory.

If Professor Snape had noticed the much needed addition to their supply, he certainly hadn't said anything. He'd studied her, though, when she was waiting like the rest for dinner to start in the parlour that evening. That was unusual in itself; he normally avoided looking at anyone directly and glowered at his tea cup instead.

She supposed he thought this way no one would dare pester him with idle conversation in mind.

When the others filed out of the room into the kitchen, she'd been last in the hallway. The swirl of black at the edge of her vision had made her stop in her tracks and turn around to the front door. He'd been preparing to leave, wrapping himself in a tatty-looking cloak so as not to draw unnecessary attention to himself in the Muggle square in front of the house.

He never stayed for dinner.

He'd opened the door but looked back at her as if he'd known she'd been standing there the whole time.

It was hard to believe, but nevertheless she could have sworn that he smirked at her briefly before he vanished into the night.

He knew. He knew and... approved?

When that realisation finally sank in, cold sweat broke out on the skin of her neck and she hurried in after the others to sit down for dinner.

As suddenly as that the steam which had kept her brewing those potions against direct orders went out of her.

After that, she hadn't dared steal ingredients from his stores again. She wasn't that eager for more reprimands or something worse.

Instead, Hermione had continued brewing with her own supply of ingredients. Easy and harmless potions so as not to loose practise, but other than that a waste of time and ingredients.

She had no idea what to do with herself anymore. She had to find herself a distraction quickly, or ...

Or what exactly?

She... didn't know.

And that scared her more than anything.

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A/N: So, what do you think?

Seems like Hermione is very stressed out. She is also feeling guilty about something. What can that be?

Twenty-five points on the correct guess where the title came from!

Next: Nighttime visitors, some tea and an unusual conversation.

# Chapter 1: Night-time Visitors

Chapter 2 of 14

After the events in the Department of Mysteries, Hermione finds it hard to cope and receives help from someone unexpected. When a friendship of a sort develops, will it survive the events of the Lightning-Struck Tower? Will an ancient ritual help the Light win the war or will it destroy everything? An HG/SS romance. Not DH compliant.

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize is not mine but Jo's. Sadly.

A/N: First of all thanks to everyone who reviewed! You've totally blown me away with your enthusiasm!

Also thanks to everyone who named me one of their favourites or simply read the Prologue. I never expected there to be so many!

This is the first story I posted, so I was very unsure of its reception no matter what my friends tell me (luv ya!). The Prologue was especially hard to write and even when I posted it I still wasn't satisfied with it. Sometimes it sucks to be a perfectionist. ;)

But all of your kind comments really gave me a boost to bulldoze any problems the storyline might pose for me at the moment (dratted fifth chapter!).

Leah829 even gave me a great idea for some of the following chapters, although I have to admit it had to have been the perfectly obvious consequence to everyone but me. \*smacks forehead\*

Oh, and the title is derived from the song 'Wicked Game' by Chris Isaak. Twenty-five points to DawnEB! ;)

I just kept replaying that song while writing and I was never really satisfied with the original title 'Price of Redemption'. It simply didn't fit. But to reassure those familiar with the song and its generally depressing lyrics, it only reflects some views the characters have throughout the story and is not foreshadowing how the story will end. I will totally ignore the last line.

I am a romantic at heart after all. ;)

Finally I thank my friends, HoneyB and Bi, again for looking it over and boosting my self-esteem, my beta, Dark-Hamadryad, for doing her brilliant work and Snarkyroxy, who joined me after my first post to OWL and who gave me a few ideas for the Prologue and who will fill in as first beta while Dark-Hamadryad is away on her trip for the next two months. Cheers!

And as always to my baby girl, who was waving along happily when Mommy was excitedly bouncing away in her seat the day the story was posted.

Bye,

Shal

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## Chapter 1: Night-time Visitors

There was another thing that was puzzling her.

About a week and a half into the holidays, Hermione had been unable to fall asleep. That fact alone was not unusual. These days, untroubled sleep was a rarity she still remembered but no longer experienced. So it had become a ritual of sorts to tip-toe down the stairs and into the kitchen, determined to perfect some of the housekeeping spells she was banned from doing during the day and had therefore been practising on the sly.

Lying in bed, listening to Ginny mumble in her sleep ("Harry, my handsome wild stallion!") and counting the cracks in the ceiling simply wasn't a very productive pastime, in her opinion.

Just when she had mastered the art of having a grubby pan scrub itself clean, *awhoosh* behind her alerted her to the fact that a guest had Flooed in at two o'clock in the morning.

She turned around to see Professor Snape brushing ashes from his robes and was all of a sudden acutely aware of her dishabille. Awkwardly, she touched the birds' nest that was her hair and pulled her robe closer together. When he was finished, he looked around the kitchen in a most agitated manner, not noticing her at all until his second perusal of the room was done.

"Well, where is he?" he inquired gruffly.

She frowned. "Who?"

"So, he's not here yet. Damn it, I have to be back before..." he began exasperatedly, then caught himself before he divulged something obviously quite important in front of innocent ears. He straightened and scowled at her as if his near-slip was her fault entirely, simply by existing.

"I'll be out in the backyard," he stated before, billowing cloak and all, he stalked out the kitchen door.

"Nice seeing you, too, Professor Snape. Why he bothers to tell me where he's going, I've no idea," she muttered to herself sarcastically, furiously attacking a new pan until suddenly, a second *whoosh* announced another late-night visitor.

Now quite annoyed, she turned around again, prepared to snap at whoever it was that the kitchen of number twelve, Grimmauld Place was not a train station. The words died in her throat, however, at the sight of the wizard in front of her.

Dumbledore shook ashes from his usual violet, star-studded robes and greeted her warmly as if he had just come over for afternoon tea.

"Good evening, Miss Granger. Though I should probably say 'Goodnight', considering the hour."

"Good evening, Professor," she merely said, wondering what on earth these sudden arrivals were all about and if she should offer him tea, regardless of the hour.

"Er, he's out in the backyard, Professor," she volunteered instead, guessing that a meeting between the two teachers was the most likely solution to this bizarre situation.

The Headmaster smiled at her, nodded and swept past her out the kitchen door without another word. She stood there for a moment, looking confusedly at the door before sidling out of the room silently.

Since following them outside would be neither prudent nor productive they would hardly stand close enough to the house for anyone to overhear and would surely notice her she quickly made her way up the stairs to peep over the edge of the window overlooking the backyard to observe them.

They stood just out of hearing range from the house but in perfect view for her to watch.

Snape seemed to have something very important to tell Dumbledore. He seemed unable to stand still, pacing the width of the yard, gesticulating wildly, to her great astonishment. She had never seen the Potions master so upset.

At one point the professor seemed to have finished, and for a long while, the two men only stared at each other, obviously thinking about the implications of what Snape had just divulged. Then the Headmaster joined in the discussion, which was more of an argument, really, considering how vehemently words were exchanged.

Suddenly, Professor Snape shook his head so fiercely and grabbed the Headmaster's shoulders so desperately that she wondered more than ever at what had been said that could make a man who was normally so controlled lose it like that.

Then, with one decisive sentence they were finished. Dumbledore walked swiftly back toward the house, leaving a defeated and incredibly weary-looking Snape behind.

She rushed back into the kitchen as quickly as she could, starting on another pan. She had barely managed it before the Headmaster joined her, standing beside the table behind her. Trying to look as nonchalantly at him as possible, she decided to offer him tea, no matter what time it was.

"Thank you, Miss Granger, but I think I'll pass. It is quite late at night."

"Goodnight, then, Professor," she replied, somewhat at a loss as to which niceties should be observed at two o'clock in the morning.

"Goodnight, Miss Granger, and thank you for being on the lookout so none of the house's inhabitants disturbed us."

She flushed guiltily. "Er..."

"No matter, no matter. I must insist, however, that our discussion, in fact our whole visit to the Rhododendron bushes in the backyard, stays among the three of us."

"Of course, Headmaster, not even Harry or Ron..." she heard herself mumble unintelligently.

"Good, good. While I must decline tea, I think it would be nice to offer Professor Snape one, too. I think it will be just the thing for him," he suggested and with a wave, Flooded back to Hogwarts.

Somehow, she doubted she'd ever see a grateful Snape, but as long as she was occupied and useful in some small way, she supposed it wouldn't matter.

As long as he managed to be civil, that was.

She put the kettle on and began to search for tea. Having tried the cupboards with no success, she finally found some in a far corner on the topmost shelf in the pantry.

Apparently no one ever drank tea here.

She sighed. And they were only tea bags.

Darjeeling, Fruit, Fennel, Peppermint where was it?

*Ah, there!*

The Chamomile tea was even more well-hidden than the rest.

Curiously enough, she found it beneath an almost empty packet of *Lovers Tea*, an aphrodisiac blend she had read about when researching love potions for class, of course.

She blushed furiously. She did *not* want to know to whom that belonged.

She took the Chamomile tea from the shelf, walked over to another cupboard and got out two cups, determined to drink a cup as well for two reasons: one, so she did not brew the tea especially for Professor Snape, who would undoubtedly tell her she could bathe in it for all he cared, and two, so she could finally get to sleep.

She added a tea bag to each cup and placed them on the table just as the kettle whistled. After she had poured the hot water into each cup, she placed one in front of the chair she had occupied earlier at one end of the table and the other at the opposite end of the table, thinking it a safe enough distance from her teacher.

She sat down, and while she waited for the tea to steep, she rummaged in her robe pocket for the Valerian she always carried these days to help her get to sleep at night. When the tea was ready, she gulped down the pill with it, relishing the hot, burning sensation in her throat.

She must be really strange to feel like that about pain, she thought wearily, staring into her tea.

After a while, she heard the tell-tale swishing of robes behind her, announcing the arrival of her teacher. His stride faltered for a moment, then continued on more forcefully as he walked past her in the direction of the fireplace.

"Professor Snape? Would you care for a cup of tea?" she asked, without looking up from the cup she held in both of her hands.

He came to a sudden stop, his hand already outstretched toward the pot containing the Floo powder.

"No, I would not, Miss Granger," he replied tersely, without turning around.

"Professor Dumbledore made me promise I'd insist, sir." She was not above lying for a good cause.

Anyone who witnessed the argument in the backyard would've seen he'd been upset. The fact that he generally behaved like a complete bastard did not make her forget her good manners.

A long pause ensued, during which he said nothing.

*Probably deciding whether to hex me immediately or reprimand me for my insolence first.*

A tense sigh, a swish of robes and a chair was pulled back noisily.

She looked up at him, sitting in the chair across from her and looking down at the tea cup sceptically.

As if she'd be stupid enough to poison him in the kitchen of Order headquarters without an alibi. Honestly!

"Chamomile tea, Professor."

"I know. I detest Chamomile tea."

"So do I, sir. Doesn't taste much like anything, really."

Had he been anyone else, she'd say the expression he looked at her with was surprise. But surely the infamous spy for the Order of the Phoenix couldn't be surprised by someone like her?

Then he took a tentative sip of his tea and winced, obviously disgusted.

They drank their tea in complete silence. She, looking into her teacup, studying its intricate flowery design, and he with his eyes directed at the table-top.

At least at first.

As more and more time passed, he began to stare at her from beneath hooded eyes instead.

"Was there something you wish to say, sir?" she finally asked. She simply could no longer stand feeling his eyes bore into her head. It made her feel weird.

"You're not saying anything," he observed, openly curious.

"And?"

"You haven't for almost half an hour."

"Contrary to popular belief, Professor, I *can* be quiet. I prefer silence, actually."

"Curious, coming from you. I don't know anyone who talks as much as you do."

"I talk less than Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown!" she replied indignantly. Surely he couldn't compare her to them!

"Now that's not very difficult, is it? In class, however..."

"I ask questions and answer yours when no one else is forthcoming," she interrupted him before remembering that he was her teacher and additionally not a very wise choice of man to cross.

He snorted. "The term 'question' would implicate you don't know the answer to it and yet you do every time. And I think I made it clear that I do not care for answers that are copied word for word out of the textbooks."

"A question to confirm knowledge I am not sure of is unnecessary, then? And if I am not allowed to know the contents of our textbooks, why do I have to read them?" she asked tartly, starting to get angry.

This was really all she needed to top off her day.

"Such drama does not become you and neither does this turning of the facts. You have to be unsure of many things for you scarcely have your hand down." He sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose tiredly.

All of a sudden she noticed that he, too, sported dark circles under his eyes. It reminded her uncomfortably that he was only human. Something akin to what she felt towards Harry and Ron when they were about to do something incredibly stupid settled in her stomach.

This feeling had always been her undoing.

The thought that she now felt like this in regards to her surly teacher raised nothing less than a full-fledged panic.

She put down the tea cup noisily and accidentally sloshed some of the hot liquid onto the table. Thankfully, the object of her musings was too wrapped up in the dissection of her character to notice. Thank God for small favours, indeed!

"You can't control everything, Miss Granger. A risk now and then on an intellectual level aside from your yearly escapades with Potter and Weasley would greatly benefit your character.... I can't believe I am actually suggesting this to a Gryffindor!" He emphasized this with an impatient sigh. "A set mind can't be challenged. In Potions, as in many other subjects, creativity and imagination as well as a flexible mind are much more important than the knowledge textbooks can provide. Besides, rapping out knowledge won't get any of your classmates anywhere. We both know that you know the answer to every question I ask, but not everyone is that fast. Most students don't have the whole term prepared in advance and have to understand the basics first. And being an insufferable..."

"Why don't we postpone this argument to a later date?" she interrupted him, fuming and getting up from her seat.

"Tomorrow will be all right with me. Shall we say ten o'clock? We'll have to change our location, of course, since Mr Weasley will undoubtedly be gorging himself on his second dessert by then," he replied, mildly sarcastic, unfazed that she had interrupted him again.

It seemed it was fast becoming a habit for her.

"I was actually thinking about next term. While it will certainly enliven my undoubtedly boring day then, now it merely keeps me from my bed," she said icily.

"Is the Valerian finally taking effect, then?" he asked interestedly.

She hesitated, surprised how he knew, and debated with herself whether to lie or not. Honesty won.

"No," she replied grudgingly.

"I thought as much," he replied mysteriously and without looking away from her, took a small leather pouch out of an inner pocket of his robes and laid it on the table in front of her. When she didn't react, he motioned for her to open it.

With a suspicious look, she sat back down, feeling very childish for her outburst at his nickname for her, took it and released the leather strings holding it closed. Mindful of Professor Dumbledore's Liquorice Snaps, she poked her index finger inside it cautiously and when nothing happened, took out one of its contents.

There, in the middle of her palm lay a midnight blue version of Dumbledore's Lemon Drops, although she seriously doubted this was a sweet.

She looked at him questioningly.

"Take one half an hour before going to bed. You'll drop like a fly. Much more effective than Valerian."

She held it up to her nose and breathed in.

"A mixture of Jasmine and... Scull Cap?"

"With a touch of Passion Flower. My own creation."

She looked at him, bewildered. He'd offered her something to help her sleep just like that? No sarcasm? No snide remarks?

"Thank you, Professor," she replied warily.

She swallowed the pill with the rest of her tea, proceeded to secure the leather pouch with its leather strings again and held it out for him to take.

But he shook his head, studying her carefully.

"Keep them. I have more than enough at Hogwarts, and it looks as if you need them."

She was normally not vain (not with hair like hers) but it irked her that someone who generally took no interest in her whatsoever now noticed the dark circles under her eyes. They had to be really obvious if *he* noticed them.

No one else had, though.

She nodded at him, now more confused than ever, unconsciously holding the leather pouch to her breast.

He got up, then, and washed out his cup in the sink behind her. With her back to him, she was nonetheless incredibly aware of his every movement, especially when his long cloak brushed past her legs.

"It's time I left. Thank you for the tea. It was welcome. Goodnight, Miss Granger. I hope I don't need to emphasize that the meeting between the Headmaster and I was in secret."

"But you just did, sir," she dared to tease. "However, Professor Dumbledore already ensured my silence in the matter. So rest assured that Harry won't suspect you of another nefarious plot this term," she said lightly, smiling.

Her smile vanished quickly, however, when he kept staring at her with the same bleak and defeated look he'd had after his argument with the Headmaster among the Rhododendrons outside.

"Professor?" she asked weakly.

He jerked out of his reverie, turned away from her and walked toward the fireplace, grabbing some Floo powder out of the nearby pot.

"Goodnight," he said again and vanished in the green flames before she had a chance to reply in kind.

She stared into the now cold and empty hearth, thoroughly confused.

*Who was that, and what has he done with Professor Snape?*

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A/N: So, what do you think?

What is our dear Potions master so upset about? I wonder what your theories will be.

All herbs in this chapter were researched and the Lovers Tea truly exists. I didn't try it out though.

I admit I got the idea to postpone an argument for a few hours from a movie. Can anyone guess which one?

I'm going to do that a lot through the course of the story as a way of a compliment. I simply love to guess quotes and can't resist slipping some in.

Up next: An explosion and a witness.

## Chapter 2: The Dam Bursts

*Chapter 3 of 14*

After the events in the Department of Mysteries, Hermione finds it hard to cope and receives help from someone unexpected. When a friendship of a sort develops, will it survive the events of the Lightning-Struck Tower? Will an ancient ritual help the Light win the war or will it destroy everything? An HG/SS romance. Not DH compliant.

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize is not mine but Jo's. Sadly.

A/N: Once more thanks for all of your reviews! I want to make this story as good as it can be and am glad for all of your comments and ideas.

From now on I'll make the Author's notes shorter. They shouldn't be longer than the chapter! ;)

The idea to postpone an argument was incidentally from the movie "Volcano".

Thanks again to Bi for reading it over, encouragement and her total lack of surprise at the reviews I've received from you. Thanks also to my beta, Snarkyroxy, for corrections and bearing with my slightly hysterical moments.

And of course to my baby girl, for not being jealous of the flimmering box Mommy sometimes sits behind.

\* \* \*

Two weeks later, Severus Snape stood at a window in the library of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, staring out at the backyard blankly.

He did not know what to do anymore.

He had come here again to think and to look for an answer to his 'problem'.

His 'problem'. If only it were that simple.

The Black library had by far the most extensive collection of books on the Dark Arts he'd ever seen, he grudgingly had to admit, but even here he'd found nothing to get him out of this nightmare. All the books he'd searched, and yet he was nowhere closer to his goal.

There had to be a way.

No problem was insoluble.

There was a way to undo it, and when he found it he'd be out of this mess. It didn't even bear thinking about, what would happen if he didn't find a way.

If he'd only found out sooner what that midnight visit had been about...

He'd thought it worth the risk to find out what had been so important for her to seek him out. He'd only realised what he would have to do when it had been complete.

His fingers curled almost painfully into a fist. He didn't notice.

Just then, the sound of furniture crashing and a male yell reverberated through the house, triggering the usual mayhem caused by Mrs Black from the painting in the hallway.

"Blood-traitors!... Filthy Mudbloods desecrating my noble home!" the portrait of Mrs Black began its inevitable tirade.

So much for peace and quiet.

He hissed, annoyed. *Teenagers!*

Couldn't they ever control themselves?

He stayed where he was. He'd be damned if he had to get them to behave themselves even during his summer holidays.

Though he couldn't help but wonder who it was this time.

Potter and Weasley, the twins, or someone else from that ridiculously large family?

An extremely angry female shriek echoed up the stairs.

That had been much too high for Mrs Weasley or the painting, and there was only one other female currently in the house.

*Granger?*

He frowned.

She was normally very controlled. Usually only a life and death situation involving her friends would make her lose her hold of her emotions.

*At least in public*, he thought, remembering the troll incident in her first year. Her eyes had shone far too brightly after lying to both him and her Head of House.

*Or the threat of not quite perfect NEWTs*, he thought with a smirk, thinking back to her mere Exceeds Expectations OWL in Defence Against the Dark Arts, and the rumor of what her Boggart had been in her end-of-year examination in her third year.

A stupid thing to fear.

He wondered if it was still the same, though. His smirk was replaced by a frown.

She had trouble sleeping, judging from the dark circles beneath her eyes and the late-night activities he'd witnessed.

And she had taken a particularly nasty hex back at the Department of Mysteries.

He knew because he'd had a hand in healing her, helping out with a few counter-curses and some of the more particular healing potions. And even then it hadn't been easy. But it had worked.

Now that he thought about it, she had tried keeping awfully busy the month she'd been here. Maybe she had reached her breaking point.

If his assessment was correct, then the others wouldn't be far behind. Something had to be done.

"Ron, you big oaf! What do you think I've been doing these past few weeks since I've known for sure? Trying to make amends! For what, though, I don't know. It's not as if it's a crime!" The female voice increased in pitch and reached Snape's ears with perfect clarity even through the closed library door.

"Ha! 'Mione, do you think I'm that stupid? You've been rubbing it in my face ever since!"

"Like how? I've been grovelling at your feet for something I hadn't foreseen and can't help now that it's done!"

"As if you didn't know exactly what you were doing! Did it intentionally, did you?"

"No! Believe it or not my whole life doesn't revolve around you, Ron!"

What was this about? Had she dared take interest in some other boy?

He had certainly heard no rumours to that effect. The Hogwarts grapevine was a very accurate source on these things. Thus, he also knew Granger and Weasley hadn't been an item when they left Hogwarts at the end of term, but maybe the issue had finally arisen. They had certainly been dancing around each other for as long as he had known them.

"As if I wanted it to! Nevertheless, you can't deny that you don't even go to the..."



"...loo without a plan'," a surprisingly sarcastic female voice answered.

Snape snorted.

It was a very accurate image.

"Yes, Ron, I know about that one. Very nice of you, too, to gossip behind my back. You are such a friend. You seem to be much more confident of my Divination skills than I am, however. I dropped it for a reason and that's because I think it's rubbish!"

He agreed whole-heartedly with that sentiment. Trelawney alone was reason enough to turn one off the subject forever.

"So what do you expect me to do, Ron? Take it back? I've tried not doing any magic now that I'm allowed, but you look at me like I've betrayed you regardless of what I do!" She implored him to listen in an exasperated tone.

She was no longer underage? Hmm, she did take quite a few subjects back in her third year. Far more in fact than could have been managed without help. A Time-Turner, probably.

Was that it?! She was of age and he wasn't?

*My oh my, his self-confidence must really be low for him to worry about something as mundane as that and behave like an absolute moron with a witch he has his sights set on.*

"I don't care what you do, 'Mione! Just leave me alone." That whining voice of the boy was really starting to get on Snape's nerves.

"What now, Ron? Are you going to sulk again like you did in fourth year when Harry was a Triwizard champion and you weren't? Are you going to do that every time someone has an opportunity to do something before you do? Because I can assure you, jealousy will never get you where you want to be! And I would be careful how you treat your friends, or someday you won't have any left!" she retorted a bit shrilly.

"I knew this was about Krum! I knew he'd try things with you, didn't he?" he retorted with a sneer.

*smack!*

*smack!*

*smack!*

Apparently Weasley had gone too far.

It was a sad testament to Ron's social skills with women that even Snape could see what Weasley shouldn't have said.

And he really had no experience with regards to relationships.

The next sound that could be heard was the bounding of light feet up the stairs and along hallways in the direction of the library.

*Oh, no.*

In the next moment, the door was flung open and the slight, bushy-haired figure he'd been expecting bolted inside, closing the door behind her with a silent click, much to his surprise.

Chest heaving with emotional upheaval, exertion or perhaps both, she locked and cast a Silencing charm on the door.

So much for peace and quiet.

He hid behind a shelf, fully prepared to hold his hands to his ears and weather out the storm that was about to break.

And it did.

Next came a piercing and agonising scream, the likes of which he'd never before had the misfortune to hear.

And he was a Death Eater.

It didn't last long, however, and cautiously he removed his hands from his ears.

He heard nothing.

At first he thought he'd been struck deaf on top of everything else, until he heard it.

A faint snuffle.

*Oh, no.*

Now he rather wished he was deaf and anywhere but where he was.

Granger. Crying.

Though certainly a new experience, he really didn't care to make it.

*Damn it all!*

Why hadn't he reacted when he had the chance and escaped the library? Feeling the first hints of entirely uncharacteristic panic surface, he looked around the edge of the shelf to see how bad it was.

Something he couldn't name and didn't want to feel squeezed his chest tightly at the sight that greeted him.

She was sitting huddled in a far corner, leaning against the arm of one of the sofas, arms wrapped tightly around herself as she cried.

It wasn't the loud bawling of a first-year, nor the desperately heart-breaking type usually favoured by girls her age. She was silent, tears just streaming down her cheeks while blankly staring straight ahead, making not a sound apart from the occasional snuffle.

Which made it even harder for him to endure.

\* \* \*

The longer she sat there, tears flowing down her cheeks, the more her embarrassment and pain over the situation with Ron were replaced by the frustration which had plagued her the past weeks, and the anger no, fury she felt at the dead-end she found herself in.

This was the final straw!

"What the fuck do they want of me?!" she yelled, punctuating her question by hitting the sofa she had been leaning on.

It hurt.

But it hurt in a good kind of way. If there was such a thing.

At least when she felt the pain fade slowly from her bruised knuckles, she felt like she had done something!

"Argh! How am I supposed to cope if I'm not allowed to do anything?!" she continued to yell, grabbing the nearest pillow from the sofa and started hitting it furiously.

"No studying, because it doesn't work for me anymore. No housework, because Tonks is a walking disaster. No spells of any kind, because the others are not old enough and all 'adults' can't be bothered. No Quidditch, because Ron is a prat, the others side with him and I'm too 'stupid' to join their little club. Oh, and don't forget, no Potions either, because I'm too 'stupid' for that as well! Why can't they just... just..."

But she didn't know what they could do.

She didn't know anything anymore.

She hated that feeling. Hated it more than anything in the world. It made her feel **soweak**.

And just like that, the fight went out of her. She collapsed against the much abused sofa and resumed crying quietly.

The frustration and lack of sleep of the past month finally caught up with her. Combined with the fight she'd just had with Ron and letting out her aggressive side, she was completely exhausted. And yet she still wasn't tired enough to sleep.

How could that be?

Somehow she slid back down to the floor as she tried to figure that one out, but couldn't, since her mind seemed to work only partially. She closed her eyes and rested her head against the wall, unsuccessfully stifling a yawn.

Suddenly Ron's expression as she hit him popped up in her mind.

She chuckled.

Then it hit her.

"Oh, my God... I slapped him!" she exploded, gasping for air.

She burst out laughing.

"The... look on his... face!"

She laughed so hard, she had to hold her sides to keep them from hurting. It was no use.

"Three... times!"

She laughed so hard it felt as if something large was being ripped from her stomach.

"Bang! Bang! Bang!"

When her jaw started to cramp uncomfortably, she tried to stop. She knew she was hysterical, but that only made it all seem funnier for some reason. So she tried to think of dinner and that she would have to face him then. It helped a little, but she couldn't stop completely because she kept imagining him with three overlapping imprints of her right hand on his cheek.

Finally only chuckling mildly, she ran a hand through her completely dishevelled hair and said what she hadn't wanted to think about and what her little madhouse episode hadn't changed one bit.

"Oh, dear. What am I going to do now?"

As soon as those words were out of her mouth, a voice she knew only too well spoke up from somewhere in the room.

A voice belonging to the one person aside from Ron she'd rather not have witnessed her disassembling into tiny, psychotic pieces.

"I wouldn't worry too much about Mr Weasley, if I were you. In my opinion, men in general are least attracted to women who treat them well. And who knows? It might shake his brain about a bit and do him some good. He must learn he cannot depend on you or Potter forever," Professor Snape said conversationally, stepping out from behind one of the bookshelves.

"On the other hand, if you meant your other 'difficulties', I'd try the third door on the right in the attic after dinner, Miss Granger," he continued quite calmly, inclining his head by way of goodbye as he made for the door. He undid the Silencing and locking spells, opened the door and left.

She looked after him, a hand pressed to her open mouth, horrified.

\* \* \*

Well, what do you think?

Finally all that frustration came to the surface. And how it did!

Three more movie quotes in this one. One from "Dogma" (I couldn't resist), one from "The Hunt for Red October" and one from "Death on the Nile".

Up next: What awaits Hermione in the "third room on the right in the attic after dinner"?

# Chapter 3: "Why do I always have to think so much?"

Chapter 4 of 14

After the events in the Department of Mysteries, Hermione finds it hard to cope and receives help from someone unexpected. When a friendship of a sort develops, will it survive the events of the Lightning-Struck Tower? Will an ancient ritual help the Light win the war or will it destroy everything? An HG/SS romance. Not DH compliant.

Disclaimer: I'm not making any money from this. Anything you recognise is not mine but Jo's. Sadly.

A/N: Thanks again for everyone who reviewed. You really make my day! ^.^ Anyone who'd like to have a particular scene of HBP rewritten to suit this story please tell me. I already have a few in mind but I still need a few more (hint).

This chapter was absolute murder to write. RL intruded into my little story-writing haze and took my hamster from me.

Please don't laugh. I really miss the little bugger. \*sigh\*

Thanks again to Bi for reading it over, taking the time to reassure me that *everything is going to be just fine* when I'm having another crisis and offering encouragement in my time of grief \*sniff\*. Thanks also to SnarkyRoxy, my wonderful beta, once more for smoothing over the rough edges.

And as always I thank my baby girl just for starting to crawl the day I beat this chapter! ^.^

Have restarted my Livejournal which I will try to keep as up to date as I can. Comments and help regarding HTML will be appreciated under:

<http://shalimar1981.livejournal.com/>

since I don't know di%& about it, I'm afraid. %D

\*\*\*

The time between breakfast and dinner passed slowly, much too slowly for Hermione's taste. Since she was used to things not going her way by now, however, she bore it like she had borne the last few weeks, stoically.

After Professor Snape had left the library, it had taken only a moment's hesitation on Hermione's part, staring after him, eyes wide with horror, before she'd dashed out of the room. She had run up one flight of stairs and into the room she shared with Ginny, had slammed the door behind her and had barricaded herself inside for the rest of the day.

So since Ginny was visiting the twins in Diagon Alley that day, Hermione had plenty of time to torture herself by pondering the morning's events.

She had long since stopped trying to analyse why Ron behaved the way he did. It led absolutely nowhere and only gave her a headache.

Judging from his parting shot, however, he was probably jealous. Again. Not only of Hermione's advantage of age and ability to do magic outside of school, apparently, but also still of Viktor Krum.

Though the reason why eluded her.

She and Viktor had been close in her fourth year, but after he'd left at the end of the Triwizard Tournament, they had been nothing more than pen-pals.

In her opinion, there was nothing to be jealous of.

Ron had the right to write her whenever he wanted to, yet he never did. Probably heartily sick of her emphasis on intellectual pursuits, even in her letters to him. She couldn't help it, and Quidditch only ever interested her when Harry (and Ron, of course) played for Gryffindor.

She had also spent a lot of time with him and Harry. Plenty of time to show her he cared for her as more than just a friend. And yet despite some slight overtures in that direction, he'd never even asked her out. Not that she would be too thrilled, mind, if he did.

At one time, she *would* have been thrilled had he shown any interest. But now? Not really. It wasn't like they had all that much in common. And she was just plain tired of always having to justify how and who she was. Which brought her back to her current dilemma.

Since this avenue of speculation had very quickly run dry, she turned her mind to dinner, or more accurately, what awaited her for dinner.

*RATHAG* or in full: *Ron's Ability To Hold A Grudge* was legendary and had always held a mild fascination for her. It worked so completely outside the realm of logic or common sense that she often wondered how it decided when and how to start operating.

In one of her less occupied moments, she had even tried to analyse the data she had gathered on *RATHAG* over the years, but it had not been interesting enough to keep her attention, and so she was left without a definitive conclusion on that project. It was probably the only time she had abandoned something.

Er, apart from Divination, of course. And S.P.E.W. was only temporarily on hold while she tried to figure out how to make it more popular among Wizarding society.

Therefore, she had no concrete idea what exactly to expect for dinner. Ron alone might be predictable enough, but Ron in a fit of temper was completely unpredictable. Even for someone who took Arithmancy at school.

*Will he continue to sulk, as he so often does?* she thought, lying on her bed again, staring at the ceiling, tense muscles aching from the effort to keep herself from getting up and pacing.

*Or will he start another scene over... Ah! Roast chicken!* Her mind wandered to the meal being prepared downstairs as her stomach growled loudly at those tasty scents.

*Hmmm...*

Then she admonished herself sternly and turned back to pondering, doing her best to ignore the loud growling permeating the room.

Wondering what horrible scene Ron would undoubtedly start later in the kitchen certainly kept her mind blissfully free of dangerous thoughts about the puzzle that was her teacher. For a while, anyway. They had tried over and over again to occupy her thoughts whenever she wasn't quick enough to push them away.

But since changing a subject with one's own mind was an ideal but nevertheless unrealistic endeavour, her thoughts always turned back to Professor Snape.

This new side of her teacher she had seen during her last few encounters with the man was very disconcerting. It made her almost wish for his petty and insulting sarcasm to return.

Almost.

If the persona Professor Snape presented to the world was only a facade, could the real Professor Snape really be so very different on the inside compared to the facade?

Some clues she had gathered since her very first day at Hogwarts as well as her interactions with him in the past few weeks certainly seemed to support that conclusion.

*What if...*

**No.**

This was not the time to analyse her teacher's character, but to figure out what might await her during their planned encounter later on.

*OH.* She blushed guiltily.

"And to wonder how awkward dinner will be, of course," she muttered to herself self-consciously.

She was almost convinced that Ronald wouldn't miss the opportunity to behave like a total prat again. At the thought of dinner, she looked at the clock on the wall, covered her face with her hands and groaned in dismay.

Although she had been waiting for the day to be over since their argument in the kitchen, now that the time had come to go downstairs, she wanted nothing more than to hide in her closet like a little girl.

But since she was no *silly little girl*, and a brave Gryffindor, no less a thought that didn't help in the least she withdrew her hands from her face, swung her legs over the side of her bed and got up.

Now she couldn't shake thoughts about Professor Snape. Wonderful.

She really couldn't make head nor tails of it: his behaviour at school and towards her here at Grimmauld Place were so contradictory.

She frowned at her reflection in the mirror of the vanity as she tried to brush the more obvious tangles out of her bushy hair.

The meeting between him and the Headmaster and the conversation afterwards. Her illicit potion brewing and his obvious approval. And finally her breakdown, how he'd behaved towards her afterwards and that he'd possibly invited her to help her with her situation.

All in all, they were a very confusing series of events, which went totally against the Professor Snape she knew at school. Not that she really knew him, of course. She wondered briefly if anyone truly did.

If she didn't know better, she would've thought it was someone else under Polyjuice Potion it was featured in those Ministry pamphlets for a reason but she knew it was him all right.

He always answered the mandatory question correctly before entering the house. Not to mention the fact that the house wards only admitted individuals loyal to the Order of the Phoenix, an added measure of security courtesy of Mad-Eye Moody.

Professor Snape, the Greasy Git of the dungeons, the heartless bastard, was familiar comfortable even. Meanwhile, she knew how to handle him. She knew exactly how far she could go without seriously annoying him in class. She'd pushed those limits with him often enough to know it now by heart.

Familiar was good. Familiar was safe.

She nodded at her reflection absent-mindedly, although she was not quite satisfied with her result, and made her way to the door.

After his failed Occlumency lessons last term, Harry had also mentioned Snape being very similar as a student to how he was now. How Harry knew that, he'd never fully explained. But that knowledge, the abrupt end to their lessons and the disaster at the Ministry suggested a much different reason behind it all than the one Harry had initially volunteered. Maybe Harry had once again failed to realise that curiosity killed the cat.

Hmm. She couldn't deny being quite curious herself.

It helped keep her mind off other things, at least.

She walked down the stairs with one hand on the banister as she was musing about this hopelessly difficult topic.

She didn't know what to make of this 'feeling' Snape at all. He confused her and intrigued her, she had to admit. But confusing was not good. Not good at all! No matter how intriguing he was. He was not a challenge or a riddle to solve. That way lay only disaster, considering the kind of man he was, his position at school as well as in the Order not to mention his position with Voldemort.

*There is probably a perfectly rational explanation for all this,* she thought a bit desperately, perfectly willing to grasp at any straw in her vicinity. Maybe he was feeling a bit under the weather, causing him to let his guard down. Or was it the argument he'd had with Dumbledore that was dragging him down? She'd never yet seen the pair disagree over anything.

*Perhaps because Professor Snape never openly disagreed before?* A voice piped up inside her, the very same voice that had been extremely interested when that very same professor had decided to take up the topic of werewolves half a year in advance during her third year.

Perhaps the strain of his spying activity was finally getting to him, causing him to act so out of character.

In that vein, Hermione continued to try to convince herself that her observations were false and that any evidence she had gathered to the contrary was inconclusive. She conveniently forgot that her judge of character had never yet failed her - Oh, all right! But she had been twelve for heaven's sake and Lockhart was... Lockhart and that it had always insisted on respecting and trusting Professor Snape, regardless of how he behaved towards her and her friends.

But since it seemed to be the easiest, most obvious and logical explanation, she convinced herself that she would get another setdown and/or a punishment from him on the subject that she needed to reign in her uncontrollable emotional impulses.

She couldn't make sense of his words, otherwise. It sounded too much like he was being *nice* to her and offering a way to help her.

And **that** was as different from the Professor Snape she knew as it could get.

*Except for a Lockhart in disguise, of course,* she thought with a nervous giggle as she reached the last landing.

Some kind of worm or insect seemed to have lodged itself in her stomach as soon as he'd left her in the library earlier today, and it had fluttered about uncomfortably ever since whenever she'd started to think about what might await her after dinner.

It hadn't really been a choice to go to the attic later, no matter how his comment had been phrased. Of course she would go.

She wanted to know what she could do against this frustration, and if there was even the slimmest chance he might provide a solution to her dilemma, she was prepared to brave the consequences, even if it was much more likely she would be serving her first ever during-the-holidays detention. She simply couldn't resist.

*Maybe I'm not much different from Harry in that regard after all. I'm such a hypocrite!* That voice mocked her as she hesitated in front of the kitchen door for a moment.

She hadn't been down since her confrontation with Ron after breakfast, skipping lunch in favour of bolstering her self-confidence a bit by reading Ginny's copy of 'Wizards are from Mars, Witches are from Venus A Theory on Sexuality or Muggle Space Travel?' for a change from her wool-gathering. So she was now quite ravenous, but at the same time probably too nervous to eat much due to the thought of what would follow.

With a deep breath, she pushed the kitchen door open and came to a halt just inside.

Snape was still there. *Eating.* At the same table as Harry.

Now it was clear. The world as she knew it had ended.

Why would he stay for dinner? *He never* stayed for dinner!

Did it have something to do with his 'invitation'? Maybe that explained it. If he'd said he wanted to meet her after dinner, why shouldn't he eat with them as well? The only reason she could think of was that he'd never done so before. But there were probably hundreds of things he'd never done in her presence, so that was hardly a sufficient reason for him not to do one such thing now.

Her short perusal of the room showed that apart from Snape, who seemed quite unperturbed and engrossed in the task of eating, the rest of the house's inhabitants were anything but and had obviously waited (read: dreaded) for her to come down.

Smiling much more cheerfully than was normal for her these days, Mrs Weasley motioned for her to sit down in the chair across from Professor Snape and as far away from Ron as possible. She didn't know whether to be grateful for that or not. Curiously enough, the insect in her stomach was rolling around far more insistently when thinking about Professor Snape than what an embarrassing scene would ensue when Ron finally decided to speak.

She kept herself from looking at both men directly, though she didn't think she was quite successful at smothering a snort when she caught a look of her hand's imprint still visible on Ron's cheek. She might have imagined it, but she could've sworn she heard an answering snort from opposite her.

Naturally, dinner was a very tense affair. For the most part silent, the only ones who really seemed to be eating their fill were Professor Snape, and Shackbolt and Tonks, who came in later and openly wondered what had gotten into the rest of them.

Thus, most abandoned pretending to eat fairly quickly and adjourned into one of the sitting rooms.

Hermione left before Professor Snape finished eating and went up to her room to contemplate for the umpteenth time what he would tell her later. The others left her to brood on her own. Today was one of the rare instances she had the room to herself. They probably thought they could lower the chance of her flipping out again this way. *Ron probably also needs baby-sitting while I can be left to my own devices!* that nasty voice piped up again, uninvited.

At half past seven, she finally decided that not much could be garnered from postponing the inevitable and climbed the stairs up to the attic.

While she trudged up the stairs, she wondered for the first time if maybe Professor Snape's invitation and her resulting anxious contemplations hadn't in fact been the punishment she'd been expecting all day, as she remembered one curious fact: as far as she remembered, there was no third door on the right side in the attic.

When she had been illicitly brewing healing potions the week before, she'd had the opportunity to explore the unused and almost completely empty rooms at her leisure. There were four rooms in total on the fourth floor, two small ones, one a bit larger and the fourth was a fairly long and narrow one. Only one of them was on the right side.

She pondered this for quite a while, standing in the hallway of the fourth floor with her arms crossed beneath her breasts, then opened each door to investigate.

All were as empty and dusty as she remembered.

Staring for a minute longer at the long strip of wall on the right-hand side, she came to one conclusion: the only room on the right side was one of the smaller rooms. The length of the wall, however, suggested that there had to be at least two more rooms mirroring those on the opposite side of the hallway.

But where were the doors leading to them?

She walked along the stretch of the wall, feeling all over it with both of her hands. Nothing.

Contemplating this curious puzzle, she removed her wand from the back pocket of her jeans constant vigilance or not, it was the best place for it.

She thought hard, all the while staring blankly at the wall. Then all of a sudden she stiffened and with a purposeful flick trained her wand at the wall.

*"Reveal your secrets."*

Nothing happened.

*"Show yourself."*

Again nothing.

She made a frustrated sound and resumed thinking.

*"Revelo."*

Nothing. She was getting seriously annoyed.

What had he said?

*'On the other hand, if you meant your other 'difficulties', I'd try the third door on the right in the attic after dinner.'*

"Difficulties."

Nothing.

"Argh! For God's sakes, open already!"

And thus appeared two doors on the wall to her right, one of them incidentally the third one opening conveniently.

\* \* \*

A/N: Ohhh, am I cruel or what? \*maniacal laughter\*

After having had such a horrible time rewriting the mess I call my notes, the third chapter got rather long and in a fit I decided to renege on my promise to reveal the secret of the "third door on the right in the attic" in this one and divided it into two parts.

Don't sharpen your spears however for part two of this one will be up in a week. Got my taste for cliffhangers incidentally from Jocemum. Compared to hers, mine are relatively mild.

So since you're all just 'hanging there'(Pirates of the Caribbean), anyone care to guess once more what's in store for Hermione?

Another quote, from The Show of all Shows: The X-Files (at least before it went down the drain). And I twisted the title of the all-time self-help book women all around the world **can** live without: Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus. Huh! As if we didn't know that already. ;)

## Chapter 4: High Tea in the Attic

*Chapter 5 of 14*

After the events in the Department of Mysteries, Hermione finds it hard to cope and receives help from someone unexpected. When a friendship of a sort develops, will it survive the events of the Lightning-Struck Tower? Will an ancient ritual help the Light win the war or will it destroy everything? An HG/SS romance. Not DH compliant.

Disclaimer: I'm not making any money from this. Anything you recognise is not mine but Jo's. Sadly.

A/N: Thanks for all those nice reviews. You pull me up every time! ^.^

Now follows the continuation and you'll find out what happens to Hermione. I wonder what you think about my solution and am anxiously awaiting reviews! ;)

Anyone interested in my Livejournal will find it at <http://shalimar1981.livejournal.com/>. Comments will be appreciated. ;)

As ever thanks to the indomitable Bi for reading over the chapter, her encouragement and lack of surprise over the enthusiastic reviews I receive. Thanks also to SnarkyRox, who has to be the fastest beta ever!

And I thank my baby girl just because. :X

This chapter is a dedication to HoneyB and Bi, my best friends, as a birthday present. Sorry, but you'll have to share. ;P

\* \* \*

Chapter 4: High Tea in the Attic

For a long moment, she could only stare at the wide-open door incredulously, then she gave a low and weak chuckle and moved towards it just as she heard a familiar voice call out, "Come in, Miss Granger, or do you want to stand out there all night?"

She screwed her eyes shut for a moment, chanting, "*I won't kill my teacher*," under her breath then straightened her shoulders, pocketed her wand once more and walked towards the open door.

She passed through it slowly, curious despite herself at what she'd find inside.

When she entered and saw what was in the room, she stopped dead in her tracks and stared dumbly at the scene before her. Whatever she'd imagined, this certainly wasn't it.

As she'd suspected from the outside, the rooms on the right side mirrored exactly the ones on the left-hand side of the hallway, making this a long and narrow room with windows in the roof all along one side. Curiously enough, there was a long, grey mat of perhaps fourteen metres by two, with two metres of room to spare at both ends, lying on the floor, the purpose of which eluded her.

And then there was that comfortable sitting area looking totally out of place in the far corner of the room. It was comprised of a dark red sofa, two accompanying dark red, upholstered chairs and a coffee-table made of teak wood on which tea for two was laid out, complete with scones, jam and clotted cream.

All in all, it looked so cozy it was almost surreal.

Beside the sofa, with his hands folded neatly behind his back, stood Professor Snape; though it had been only once before she had seen him out of his usual intimidating teaching robes like this: at the Yule Ball in her fourth year.

Just like then, he was dressed in a plain black, multi-buttoned waistcoat, a simple white dress shirt well, probably; it was hard to tell with only a bit of it peeking out at his neck and cuffs and black trousers.

So, this was his normal attire? She'd been wondering about that. How he had managed to be the only one at the Ball not having to wear dress robes was one of the things she'd dearly like to know.

And now, just like at the Ball, she couldn't help finding him... very appealing in a certain way.

It had infuriated and worried her simultaneously that she had been distracted from her date to the Ball by her Potions Professor, but it had been hardly surprising. As had been the number of crushes that sixth and seventh year girls and one fourth year girl from all houses had developed for him after the Ball.

The waistcoat and trousers, which were tailored to his frame, emphasised his lean form and understated strength. Its conservative cut underlined his natural elegance,

making him appear very handsome and also much more approachable than he would in his intimidating robes. They usually detracted from any appeal he had very effectively, which was probably one of their purposes. And contrary to popular opinion, she found the colour black suited him just fine and made him look austere and serious, rather than pale and sickly.

She felt the blush rise up in her cheeks again. She didn't understand **this** at all! The way he looked right now made her forget to care how much he scowled normally. It may be superficial of her, but that's the way it was.

Although, he didn't. Scowl, that was.

That in itself was probably the most unusual thing so far. Professor Snape scowled. It was almost a law of nature. But he didn't now.

All of a sudden she was starting to get a little bit anxious about this 'meeting'.

Actually, he almost looked... relaxed. If that was possible to imagine.

He still didn't smile or anything like that. Thank God, or it would've probably been straight to St. Mungo's for her. No, nothing like that. Relaxed was probably the best word to describe it. The lines around his eyes and mouth, as well as those on his forehead, normally etched deeply into a sneer or a similarly unpleasant expression were less prominent at present. He certainly didn't look like he had a raging headache as he did whenever he taught Gryffindor/Slytherin Potions.

She blushed guiltily at the thoughts running through her head, which weren't exactly the sort of thoughts one should be having about one's teacher both the complimentary and the faintly insulting ones.

"Please, make yourself comfortable, Miss Granger." He simply motioned for her to take a seat, his expression inscrutable.

She hesitated, still much too stunned to comprehend what he had just said.

*Did he just say, 'please'?*

Not having even entertained the idea to take his invitation seriously, she was now shocked to discover the truth.

He wasn't trying to be... *nice*?

When he didn't say anything else but merely beckoned her closer to the sitting area, her legs finally moved her in his general direction.

She sat down at the edge of the soft sofa, her back ramrod-straight and her hands grasping each other tightly in her lap. She had expected him to sit down opposite her in one of the chairs to firmly establish his authority and properly distance himself from her, but to her great surprise Snape sat down at the other end of the sofa instead. Although, lounging was more like it. He seemed completely at ease, which only made her even more uncomfortably aware of how far out of her depth she really was with him.

She didn't know exactly what she'd expected...

No, that was a lie.

She'd expected to meet Professor Snape, Potions master and Head of Slytherin House, who terrorised Hufflepuffs, Ravenclaws and Gryffindors with relish, gave students from his own House preferential treatment and who never **ever** had a kind word for anyone.

**That** Professor Snape was apparently not on duty today.

"Tea?"

After simply staring at him for a moment, she recalled her manners.

"Yes, thank you, sir." she replied, more than a bit bewildered at his courteous tone.

He poured both of them a cup and, after enquiring, added sugar and lemon to hers, and some sugar to his.

Another surprise.

She would've pegged him as the 'I-take-my-tea-black' kind of person.

He handed her the cup of tea and motioned for her to take one of the scones.

"You've had no lunch and no dinner to speak of, so I expect that plate to be empty when we leave." Still that infuriatingly courteous tone, as if she had stopped by for a social visit!

*And how the devil does he know I had no lunch?!*

Spy secrets, she supposed.

Shrugging inwardly, she took one of the scones, forsaking jam and clotted cream for now. She didn't trust herself to be poised and elegant with a knife and something runny and sticky before she knew what exactly this meeting was about.

She took a sip of her tea and then a bite of her scone, barely keeping from moaning in ecstasy. She really, *really* liked scones, and these were particularly heavenly.

He seemed to have noticed, nevertheless.

"They're my favourite as well. Minerva simply makes the best," he remarked conversationally. That fact alone made her blink. Then she registered what he'd said.

*Professor McGonagall bakes scones in her free-time?*

Today was full of surprises. And she had a dour feeling she hadn't seen the end of them yet.

"I trust this tea is more to your liking?" he inquired, as unfazed as ever, and yet she could swear he was amused.

"It is, sir, thank you. Infinitely better than those ghastly tea bags, not to mention that this is obviously a Darjeeling and not that pitiful excuse for tea we had the other night. Unfortunately, it doesn't possess its soothing qualities or we wouldn't have had to suffer that abominable brew." She launched into the familiar tirade, relieved she would have a reprieve before having to talk about her behaviour in the library or worse, why she'd lost it in the first place.

He began to cough violently, covering his mouth with his hand. When he'd recovered somewhat, he quickly took a gulp of his tea.

"Are you all right, sir?" she asked, concerned.

"Yes, yes, quite," he merely replied and took another gulp of his tea.

"From your... altercation with Mr Weasley, I gather you are no longer underage?" he managed to mention casually, one or two coughs slipping out and effectively changed the subject.

So much for a reprieve.

Though, she certainly hadn't expected that to be the first thing he'd say when they dispensed with the small talk.

"I'm sorry, sir. I don't know what got into me. I..." she panicked as her confidence and righteous anger from earlier went right out of the closed window in the face of actually having to talk with Professor Snape about her misconduct and what else he quite possibly would get out of her although she didn't want to and began to ramble like an imbecile.

"Miss Granger, did I give the impression earlier that I invited you here to reprimand you?" he interrupted her quietly.

"Er... no, sir," she answered hesitantly, when her panic subsided a little.

"Would you simply answer my question then?" he continued calmly.

What was this about?

"I am of age, Professor. I'm going to be eighteen two weeks before the start of term, on August 18th."

"Have you tried practising? Spells? Charms? Hexes?... Potions?" he inquired innocently.

How someone with a disposition like his could pull that off, she had no idea, but it sure seemed like it.

The first years, who had the firm belief he snatched naughty children in their sleep and fed them to Hagrid's remaining Blast-Ended Skrewt, certainly wouldn't believe her.

That the last Skrewt had died near the end of previous year - thankfully - and that they didn't like human flesh to begin with was obviously of little importance, as was the fact that no children had ever gone missing at Hogwarts. Well, aside from that Montague, but since he was a Slytherin and an unpleasant one at that, it made the same difference to her.

"Yes, but without much success," she answered cautiously, narrowing her eyes at him.

"Meaning, of course, that you had no one to practise with and no one was willing to correct your mistakes," he interpreted bluntly.

She hesitated, her eyes riveted to the tea cup she held in her hand, her emotions battling between helpless frustration and anger. Although she had voiced her frustration quite plainly in the library and had not wasted her breath making anything seem nicer than it was, it *was* her problem.

As he himself had pointed out very tactfully, all of them had more important things to do than deal with an overzealous student who couldn't wait out the holidays.

And it would certainly **not** help if she were to hex her teacher. Even if she were to give in to his provocation, she seriously doubted that she could draw faster than him. She was really not angry enough to find out.

He apparently sensed her reluctance, though he latched on the less incriminating one of her thoughts, to her immense relief.

"I overheard you, remember? And no one is more honest than at the height of their temper. Teachers are supposed to teach. That is their first duty. A duty your teachers failed to fulfil. I'm not here to blame anyone who doesn't deserve it. Rather, I want to rectify a lapse of judgment of mine."

*'A lapse of judgement'? Did Professor Snape, Potions master and bane of Harry's existence, just admit to making a mistake?! He's not going to punish me; he's going to kill me! After this, he can't let me live!* she thought a bit giddily.

Hysterics were obviously still a possibility if she wasn't careful in containing them.

"Which would be?" she gave in to her curiosity, latching onto the last part of his sentence.

"I knew you'd ask," he responded with a slight smirk. "You seem to be unable to pass the time with frivolous pursuits like your friends. Your studying has also failed you. Every alternative you've tried was either forbidden or failed to achieve the desired result. Your talents and physical resources aren't used even remotely the way they should be. In short, you are restless, frustrated."

"Yes, sir," she replied, having no idea how recounting her miserable existence was going to get them anywhere.

Maybe she had been right in distrusting her instincts. The way this was going, he was probably going to gloat about her situation and add some insults about know-it-all students for good measure while he had her at his mercy.

Hmph.

"Which is why you brewed the rest of the healing potions although you were forbidden to do so."

So, he definitely knew. Well, good for him.

"I was forbidden to use your lab, sir, and I didn't," she answered defiantly, waiting for her teacher to explode.

She had never spoken to any one of her teachers with such a lack of respect, least of all him. Maybe the past few weeks were finally getting to her. Maybe this was a new Hermione in the making. Harry and Ron would be delighted, to be sure. They always grumbled about her sticking to the rules when they wanted nothing more than to break each and every one of them.

Instead of exploding and showering her with his usual vitriol, however, he smiled. Really. Not a smirk or a quirk of his thin lips, but a full, pleased smile.

Now she knew it; she was as good as dead. Had anyone ever seen him smile before?

From one moment to the next, he was a completely different person. The smile transformed his whole face. With the lines around his eyes and mouth used for something so completely different not to mention pleasant than his usual sneer, he looked much younger than his years and almost, well, carefree. And handsome; very, very handsome.

Sadly enough it lasted only a moment, his face once more wearing the carefully blank expression he had whenever he didn't scowl.

Wow, was her only coherent thought on the matter. As she was flooded with warmth from head to toes, she swallowed compulsively, her mouth dry. St. Mungo's was far from her mind.



"I know you didn't. Which makes the results even more of a surprise. Such circumvention of something forbidden was worthy of a Slytherin."

She jerked awake from her daydream and gaped at him incredulously. Then a smile formed on her lips.

Was that a compliment? From him?! This was just getting weirder by the moment!

First an apology, then a real smile and now a compliment!

She should savour it while it lasted. This was as close to any recognition of her talents as she would probably ever get from him.

"Potions shouldn't be brewed anywhere but in a lab. Not in a dusty attic room, nor in an unused Girls' bathroom, Miss Granger," he lectured her, very much enjoying himself.

She flushed uncomfortably, happy feelings along with her smile vanishing in a flash. So much for making it last.

"Well, you have to make do with what you've got. And I was careful," she huffed at him.

"Of course."

He seemed quite amused now, obviously remembering the way that particular piece of potion brewing had turned out. If he knew she had brewed Polyjuice in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, undoubtedly he knew about her coughing up hairballs for three weeks afterwards as well. She remembered all those reversive potions she'd had to swallow during those unbearably long two months.

Not to forget the fact that he must have wondered at some point how she had procured the Boomslang skin and the Bicorn horn.

*Damn the man!* she thought and glared at him hotly.

"Miss Granger, however much I might like to muse over one of the school's Prefect's past misdemeanours, I want to get back to your current, unfortunate situation. I, too, am your teacher. I had my part in hindering your efforts. You wanted to help, made a single mistake, and instead of giving you another chance and supervising you, I shut down another avenue for you to let off steam, no matter how good the end result. And I want to rectify that. In short, I want to help you."

*Why ever would he? Is he sick? Did someone hit him over the head? What?!*

"How?" she couldn't help saying, knowing very well she might regret it. She was hooked now.

What would he offer?

"What do you know about fencing?"

\* \* \*

A/N: Doh! Fencing?! What is Snape on about?

Floored you, didn't I? I doubt anyone expected that.

I will explain what that has to do with Hermione and why Snape suggests this Muggle sport of all things. How Snape knows about fencing in the first place will be more thoroughly explained a few chapters down the road. Anyone care to speculate?

Regarding Hermione's age, I know that her birthday is September 19th, but I figured she didn't gain a whole year using the Time-Turner making her birthday now August 18th the day in the middle of the birthdays of my two best friends (see dedication). :)

I think you can tell that as soon as I got the hang of chapters three and four, I was having a lot of fun at the expense of poor Hermione and the others. I hope you like both of them nevertheless, as they **were** especially hard to write and bear with me a little. I needed to laugh very badly.

Another quote, this time from the book "Bridget Jones's Dairy".

On another note, the line "'I-take-my-tea-black' kind of person..." was inspired by LOTM's great fic "Protector". If you're finished here, go read it now. It's brilliant!

\*Hugs LOTM\*

Up next: Finally some explanations...

## Chapter 5: Subversive Tactics

*Chapter 6 of 14*

After the events in the Department of Mysteries, Hermione finds it hard to cope and receives help from someone unexpected. When a friendship of a sort develops, will it survive the events of the Lightning-Struck Tower? Will an ancient ritual help the Light win the war or will it destroy everything? An HG/SS romance. Not DH compliant.

Disclaimer: I'm not making any money from this. Anything you recognise is not mine but Jo's. Sadly.

A/N: Thanks again to everyone who reviewed! You always make my day! ^.^

For those of you who are perhaps a bit fed up with Emotional!Hermione, you will be glad to hear that after this chapter she will take a break for chapter six. In chapters seven and eight she will return and reveal what has been bothering Hermione all this time, but after that she will only return for a few short scenes in the future.

But please understand, Hermione needed to let off a little steam, and since Harry spent most of book five yelling and Ron sulks in every book, I thought she deserved a little break, too.

My Livejournal is located at <http://shalimar1981.livejournal.com/> and I'm glad for anyone who stops by and leaves a comment! :)

Thanks again to my beta, SnarkyRoxy, for whipping this chapter (and the next one) up into shape, and my other beta, Dark\_Hamadryad, who's just come back from her holiday!

And as always thanks to my little girl, for already knowing how to stand! ^.^

\* \* \*

## Chapter 5: Subversive Tactics

She looked at him, gobsmacked. Of all the things she'd thought he could suggest, that idea certainly hadn't been on her list.

"Fencing? You mean the Muggle sport?" she asked, completely flummoxed.

"Indeed. Although I rather had a combination of the Art of Dueling and the FIE style sport in mind."

"Er?"

"How eloquent. Have I finally found a topic you are not well-read on?" he commented with a wry smile.

That, that... infuriating man!

"What *do* you know about fencing?" he continued, thankfully unaware of the content of her mind at that moment.

"Next to nothing, I'm ready to admit. Two figures garbed in quite incomprehensible, disfiguring white clothes trying to stab each other with swords," she elaborated on her admittedly poor knowledge of the sport.

*Well, I have been in the Wizarding world the past five years. Or is it six years? Honestly! I can't know everything* she fumed inwardly.

"You're right. 'Next to nothing' indeed. How refreshing. Personally, I never thought I'd see the day."

"What has fencing got to do with anything?" she enquired exasperatedly.

"Let's put that off for a moment. What was your argument with Mr Weasley about?"

"If you don't know from what you heard, forget it, Professor. I'm not going to tell you that," she scoffed at that ridiculous demand. As if she would tell him, of all people!

"Rest assured that I wouldn't involve myself in your, ah, *affairs* unless it was truly necessary," he replied, giving a very good impression that he loathed doing so at all.

"My *affairs* are none of your business!" she snapped at him.

"You're right, of course. They weren't my business when I blasted those rosebushes apart to keep a certain Bulgarian Seeker from going further than what a fourth-year female student was ready for, and they certainly aren't my business now," he finished, sending a sly look her way.

She fidgeted uncomfortably in her seat, kneading her hands in her lap, looking anywhere but at that infuriating, arrogant, nosy, know-it-all...

"I had no idea you knew it was us," she relented with a combination of guilt and the anger that never seemed to be far from her mind these days.

"Haven't you realised yet that I know everything, Miss Granger?" he sneered at her sarcastically.

"If you knew it was me and Viktor behind those rosebushes, why didn't you take points?" That truly bewildered her. He never missed an opportunity to get Gryffindor down by a few points.

"For the same reason I, ah, discouraged Potter and Weasley from asking you to accompany one of them to the Ball during study hour a week before that event. I didn't think it wise to bring the smartest and probably the most powerful Muggle-born witch of a generation to the attention of a Death Eater who was most desperate for some leverage to get himself back into the favour of the Dark Lord, who he had a very good reason to believe would rise again shortly."

She flushed beet red at his words and their implications. She'd already had Viktor as her date when he'd tried to keep her out of the limelight to protect her from Karkaroff. And the well-worn compliment she'd heard many times before certainly held a different weight now when uttered by this fastidious man. Did he really think that of her?

"Not that it did any good. You were quite high-profile in your fourth year," he observed slyly.

She glowered at him darkly. Really! Did he *have* to blow hot and cold like this? It was very confusing.

Besides, it's not as if she had known back then *any* of what he had just told her! Or would have had any choice in the matter. Rita Skeeter wrote about you, whether you talked with her or not. As if she would ever fancy Harry. Honestly!

At the thought of Rita Skeeter, she allowed herself to feel quite smug for a moment, although she hoped it didn't show on her face. No need for him to know all about **that** as well.

"Now that I think about it, Miss Skeeter's column was strangely absent from the pages of the *Daily Prophet* during the last year," he commented to her chagrin.

She bit on the inside of her cheek, when he contemplated her speculatively.

"You wouldn't know anything about that, would you, Miss Granger?"

"No, I don't. Why should I?" she managed to lie through her teeth, looking anywhere but at him. Though there wasn't exactly much to look at in this room.

He snorted, apparently not convinced of her innocence in that matter.

"The devil you don't. However, that piece of information is not material at the moment. What I am interested in, however, is to hear what your argument with Weasley was really about."

"Whatever do you mean? You heard everything there was to hear."

"I have been lied to by many more proficient at it than you, Miss Granger. And I can tell you're lying right now. Must I resort to different means of finding out what you're hiding?" he asked with a sort of deadly calm, which frightened her more than any shouting would have done.

"Why should I tell you?" she gave in, lest he resort to Legilimency. In her terror, she forgot that Legilimency didn't work like opening a book and taking out the required information.

He pinched the bridge of his nose irritably, all trace of good humor gone.

*Good. Now I'm back on familiar ground,* she thought desperately.

"Miss Granger, don't try my patience. What started that argument between you and Mr Weasley?" he enquired, now more annoyed than anything else.

She almost sagged with relief. He had rephrased his question. She could answer that one and he wouldn't be any the wiser.

*It won't do to appear too eager now, though.*

"Very well," she began somewhat shakily, "Mrs Weasley went shopping after breakfast. So I took the opportunity to clear up the kitchen when everyone else went outside into the backyard after they had finished the meal."

"With magic, I suppose?" he interrupted in a mild tone that she had seldom heard him use before and then only since the start of the holidays. Without a trace of sarcasm or his usual sneer, he sounded so... normal. The effect was very surreal. When he didn't use his voice for taunts or insults... it made her want to keep talking to him. Made her want to like him even. Heaven forbid!

Not to mention the effect his voice had on her knees.

Once again she felt a blush suffuse the skin of her face.

"I was just starting to wash the dishes, or rather have them wash themselves while having the table scrubbed, when Ron came back to refill his glass with pumpkin juice..."

"Ah, I see," he murmured, although she certainly didn't. It still confused her why Ron had shoved one of the chairs so roughly against the table it had moved a foot. He had startled the living daylight out of her.

"So basically he's jealous of your new freedom and of Mr Krum still if I understood that correctly?"

"Well..." she started to defend her friend then trailed off. It was no use. It was as it was.

"And Mr Self-Confidence-Personified takes it out on you, who in his opinion did it all on purpose, to hurt him specifically."

She nodded again, this time miserably.

Ron was a prat. She knew it and Professor Snape knew it now, too.

So, why did that bother her so much? It was easy really. He was her friend and she hated arguing with him. Though it certainly happened often enough.

"For a young man with a pathological lack of self-confidence, he is certainly very sure of his importance in your life, Miss Granger," Professor Snape remarked casually.

In a flash, her misery was replaced by the righteous anger she had felt right before she'd slapped Ron this morning. It was very disorienting that her mood could change so quickly.

*He's right! Ron has never asked me out, not to mention that it has taken him ages to realise I'm even a girl. Yet he just presumes I belong to him! As if I were his property!* she fumed inwardly, gripping the armrest of the sofa so hard the wood beneath the upholstery creaked.

"I see you don't approve of his presumption," he stated with a raised brow that basically invited her to vent her anger.

Afterwards, she would wonder what devil had gotten into her, but in that moment she just couldn't stop herself. She knew she should have known better. It was Professor Snape she was talking to, after all.

But no...

"That... that... Oh, that weasel is too unimaginative; prat, too well-used. I lack the words to describe what he is!" she began to rant.

"Really?" Professor Snape inquired curiously, clearly interested that her mental faculties could fail her at such mundane a task.

"NO! He's...he's nothing but a short-chain molecule! A useless Flobberworm! A Blast-Ended Skrewt! No, that doesn't work. That would imply that he's actually dangerous, that miserable excuse for a Homosapien! Homosapiens my arse, it should be Homostultus in his case!"

He choked, trying to suppress a chuckle before it escaped. He had to think of his reputation, after all. Although after this evening was over, she would probably never be frightened of him again if she ever had been in the first place. He had his doubts about that.

"That's not funny!" she snapped at him, unsure whether she should gape or glower at him.

She must be mad. There could be no other explanation. No one in their right mind would snap at Professor Snape.

"Of course not. However, for someone who had professed not knowing how to disparage Mr Weasley adequately, you were very eloquent in your choice of insults."

This was just getting better and better. He let her snap at him? Maybe she was dreaming? No. Not even dreams could be that surreal, could they?

*Weeee!!!. It could be one of those dreams. Maybe your hidden domina wants to get out more,* that infuriating voice commented cheerfully once more. She should've known. It had been quiet for too long.

Hidden Domina? Her face had to be bright red by now. Why did she have to think about *those things* right now?!

*Sure, you certainly boss the other two around enough. Maybe you've got a taste for it? And who better to boss around than Severus Snape?*

"Did you just compliment the way I insulted Ronald?" she asked him, quite flustered but determined to ignore that voice from now on. At least when Professor Snape was present. It really was much safer that way.

"So it would seem. Though it's not very effective if there's no one present to tell him. That does not mean, however, that I didn't enjoy it. In my opinion you give those two far too much leeway."

"I slapped Ron three times in full view of the rest of the house!"

"But no one was there to witness your 'display of affection'. Am I right?"

"Well, Harry came in to see what all the shouting was about..."

"As if the other half of the Imbecilic Duo would ever breathe a word about his friend's humiliation."

"...and Mrs Weasley was just coming back from her shopping excursion in Diagon Alley."

"All right. I concede the point to you. Good work. His humiliation will be public knowledge before the start of term. Only the twins themselves are bigger gossips than Molly, and you can be sure that *they* will know all about it with embellishments before the day is out."

"What did you mean by 'display of affection'?" she asked with a hint of foreboding.

"You do realise that this or something in that vein will be what he will chalk your behaviour towards him down to? The idea that you could possibly not be interested in him will never enter his thick head."

"That... oaf!" she exploded weakly. Even she knew her former insults had been much more imaginative. She was just so furious she couldn't think up another one.

"Don't reproach yourself. Even an intellect such as yours won't be able to find an adequate insult for Mr Weasley at this point."

"Ah, thank you?" she decided to answer, although she wasn't entirely sure he hadn't just insulted her, or Ron, but at that point she couldn't care less about *that*. "Remind me, why are we talking about my argument with Ron again?"

"Since you have a certain lack of confidantes at the moment, I offered myself up on a plate, Miss Granger. Why would a fairly ordinary and undoubtedly common argument between you and Mr Weasley result in a nervous breakdown on your part?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," he sighed.

"Denial will only get you so far, Miss Granger. I offer you a willing ear. Surely that alone must be an unusual enough occurrence for you to want to grab it with both hands. It works like this: I offer to listen, you talk. A basic principle of exchange."

*Damn that man.*

"And you would do that simply out of the goodness of your heart? Forgive me if I find that a little hard to believe."

"I do, Miss Granger," he replied wryly, and it took a moment for her to realise what he meant.

*Bastard.*

Just when she was about to put all the insults she had ever thought of for him for all his point-taking without cause, for his biased behaviour, for all his disparaging remarks and most of all for ignoring her all these years in class into words, he took the wind out of her sails with a very simple question.

"What do you think of me, Miss Granger?" he asked very quietly, studying her intently.

\* \* \*

A/N: Whoa! What is Snape on about? Why is he so nice all of a sudden? And what does **fencing** have to do with everything?

See next chapter! \*evil grin\*

For anyone who's interested: 'Home stulto', Hermione's renaming of Ron's classification means 'stupid man'.

I hope I declined it correctly. Latin class has been a while and my teacher would undoubtedly be horrified at my lax handling of this precious language. His teaching methods are incidentally very similar to Snape's, which is the main reason I believe there is more to him than meets the eye and that he is innocent. In what way only book seven will clear up.

Some more quotes: One from "Ghostbusters II", one from "Pirates of the Caribbean I", a sort of twisted line of Hans Gruber's from "Die Hard I" and one from a historical movie about... Oh, bugger. Ok, I admit one from a adaptation of a Barbara Cartland novel called "A Hazard of Hearts".

Not very intellectual I admit, but Marcus Gilbert is verry nice on the eyes. \*sigh\*

## Chapter 6: What do you think of me?

*Chapter 7 of 14*

After the events in the Department of Mysteries, Hermione finds it hard to cope and receives help from someone unexpected. When a friendship of a sort develops, will it survive the events of the Lightning-Struck Tower? Will an ancient ritual help the Light win the war or will it destroy everything? An HG/SS romance. Not DH compliant.

Disclaimer: I'm not making any money from this. Anything you recognise is not mine but Jo's. Sadly.

A/N: Thanks again to all who reviewed! I'm always bouncing in my chair when I get another notification email. ^.^

Here follows the conclusion of this very long day (huh! Five chapters!) and you will finally find out about fencing. Though not all about it, or there would be nothing left for Hermione to learn. :)

My Livejournal is located at <http://shalimar1981.livejournal.com/> and I'm always glad for anyone who stops by and leaves a comment! :)

Thanks to my beta, SnarkyRoxy, for whipping this chapter (and the previous one) up into shape, and to my other beta, Dark\_Hamadryad.

Thanks also to my little girl, for finding my tiny note-pads so very interesting and for being a year old now! ^.^

\* \* \*

**Chapter 6: What do you think of me?**

For a long moment, she could only gape at him incredulously.

She'd always speculated that he must be very confident in himself to behave and to dress the way he did. That he simply didn't care about the opinions of others and did so simply because he wanted to. He never seemed to be concerned by the opinions of others, no matter what they said about his sour disposition, mode of dress, personal hygiene or his teaching methods. And that kind of confidence he had was something she had always admired in him even envied in him.

She had always wanted to be like that, to not have to care what her friends and school-mates or even he thought of her but she did. That was one of the reasons she had always defended him to Harry and Ron, aside from her strong sense of justice and the fact that she simply didn't believe in insulting her teachers behind their backs only because she didn't agree with them.

What Harry and Ron would probably never understand was that in an argument the guilt never only lies with one party. At least always two people had to be involved in an argument or disagreement and such would never arise if only one of the parties was being disagreeable, even if the other party just let himself be provoked.

So if she got detention or was insulted by Professor Snape, it was never only his fault alone. Something she had done perhaps had drawn attention to her or had maybe provoked him, even if it was just a tiny thing that would never be noticed by anyone else. It was a principle of action and reaction. That didn't mean that reaction was always reasonable or fair. With regards to Professor Snape, it hardly ever was. She might not like it, but she would never insult him publicly. In her mind that was another thing entirely, but well, she insulted even herself and people she loved sometimes in her mind without really meaning it, so what made him any different?

Why would Professor Snape, who possessed so much self-confidence, ask her now what she thought of him?

"Why ever do you want to know that for?" she burst out, completely gobsmacked.

To curb temptation, she pressed her lips firmly together so as not to say what was on her mind right then. She must have made quite a sight like this; she had no other explanation for why he started to chuckle. It had a hoarse sound to it, as if it didn't see the light of day very often, which she supposed was the truth.

She flushed once more and looked away. It was certainly a very nice sound to her ears. She firmly stamped down on that wayward insect in her stomach. This wasn't the time for her school-girl crush from fourth year to resurface! Oh, but she couldn't deny that when he chuckled like that...

"Humour me, Miss Granger. This is not meant as a trap. Tell me, now that you have seen a side of me no student has ever seen; what do you think of me?"

She looked at him sceptically, drawing a deep breath, prepared to give him a piece of her mind while she had the chance, and... hesitated.

Something stopped her. She wasn't quite sure exactly what it was. Was it the intensity in his eyes as he studied her? Or his unconventional request itself perhaps? Or was it the fact that he had asked her in such an unconcerned manner? She had no idea, but something shifted inside her then, and she snapped her mouth shut without uttering a sound.

His softly spoken query achieved in an instant what she had tried all day without success: her frayed nerves calmed down, her jumbled mind focused and the emotional roller-coaster she had been on since she'd fled the kitchen that morning ground to a halt.

She sighed in relief. *Finally!*

All of a sudden, all her doubts and the anxiety she'd experienced that day about Ron and about this meeting were gone. She felt as if a great cloud had been lifted from her mind, as if a roadblock had been removed in front of her and as if she'd had a double espresso all in one. Never mind the fact that she really didn't care for coffee, but if she did, she supposed it would feel like this. Her mind was clear, sharp and focused.

Her unreasonable and rather emotional contemplations about her teacher's character, which had kept her busy all day, were replaced by the cold hard facts she had gathered as evidence of his character in the past.

In short, the control she'd lost during that argument with Ron, which had eluded her the whole day, was back.

She couldn't help feeling a tad miffed that he had accomplished with one sentence what she had battled for over twelve hours to do. She was also mortified at her behaviour that day, in general and especially towards him. For God's sake, she had snapped at him!

Her change of mind also affected her physically, although she wasn't aware of it. Her posture straightened and her tense muscles relaxed virtually simultaneously, letting her finally rest against the backrest of the sofa comfortably.

She could tell the transformation of her state of mind was noticeable, for he gave her a short nod of approval.

Only then did she realise the implications of this action and its connection to his question.

The bastard had manipulated her.

How did he do that? How had he known? How could he have known what would focus her when she didn't even know exactly what it had been? Was she that predictable? Or did he really know her that well?

No, it couldn't be that. Perhaps he was simply very good at reading people? How else could he have...

**No!** *He didn't dare! If he's so much as taken a peek at my thoughts, I'll hex him six ways till Sunday!... Or try to at least.*

Trying to decide between indignation and fury, she glared at him, but he didn't seem particularly perturbed by her reaction.

Well, in that case, she wanted to see if she couldn't wipe that satisfied expression off his face.

"Shall I commence or did your query achieve its purpose?" she asked a bit tartly and raised a brow, imitating him unconsciously in her anger.

"No. Answer my question," he replied calmly but expectantly, an index finger resting against his bottom lip as he contemplated her.

That threw her. She hadn't expected him to take her up on her offer, but rather simply admit he'd achieved his purpose. If he'd only wanted to shake her from her emotional roller-coaster ride, why would he insist she still answer him?

Did he really want to know?

"All right. Well, er, you're Hogwarts' Potions master and have been so for the past fifteen years, although you are rumoured to have always been after the Defense Against the Dark Arts position..."

"Miss Granger, I know very well what I am. I want to know *your* opinion of me. If that is too tasking an assignment for..."

"...though why you should want to be a teacher and moreover to remain one for so long a time with your abominable teaching methods, I don't know..." she wondered aloud, curious if he really wanted to know the truth or not.

When she looked up and saw that he was about to interrupt her again, she pressed on, consequences be damned.

*Give him a taste of his own medicine!*

"...or I should say, I wouldn't if I wasn't aware of your activities both for the Order and... You-Know-Who. I suppose you took that position initially for the advantage it would give you to spy on Professor Dumbledore for You-Know-Who. And after you changed sides for whatever reason it gave Professor Dumbledore an opportunity to keep an eye on you and for you to establish your cover."

"My cover'. How very dramatic. And what, pray tell, is my cover?" he mocked her quietly.

"The persona you display every day at school, sir. Whenever there are people present who cannot be trusted, you sneer and insult and take off points. It's a very good disguise. Your cruel and sinister behaviour keeps you apart from other people, effectively shielding you against any advances of a positive nature.

"Your reputation precedes you until even first-years quiver with trepidation when only your name is mentioned and before they have ever met you. You hide every emotion other than the negative ones you possess until people think you have no positive feelings at all. It makes you available to former Death Eaters like Malfoy, keeping up the image of the perfect Slytherin and Ex-Death Eater who unwillingly reformed. It's almost perfect."

He was silent and studied her with a calculating and strangely enough appreciating glint in his eyes. He didn't let her wonder for long whether she had passed his test. He chuckled wryly.

"Very good, Miss Granger. So you know. Although I probably shouldn't be surprised that you've realised more than you've let on. An intelligent decision from which your friends could learn. The question now is: did you speak in the heat of the moment when you insulted me and denied all you apparently know, or did you purposely pretend to be of the opposite opinion to throw the likes of Potter?"

She hesitated, debating what he wanted to hear, as it would undoubtedly influence the outcome of her visit to the attic.

"A bit of both," she finally admitted, giving him the truth, and awaited the verdict.

"It seems you truly see more than you let on. Playing down your intelligence may be necessary in the company of your friends, but not with me. From now on, I want you to tell me exactly what you think. Only in the privacy of our lessons, however. With that out of the way, you will answer one more question... you said 'almost perfect'?"

She flushed once more.

"Well, I would never have thought to question your cover's veracity like the others were it not for slight discrepancies between the person you pretend to be and the person you really are."

Instead of the explosion she had expected, or at least a sarcastic insult, came the simple but intensely voiced question, "What discrepancies?"

Slightly taken aback that he was indeed asking her for an analysis of his character or at least the character she thought she had known until the beginning of the holidays it took her a moment to gather her thoughts.

"Are you interested in details and chronological order, or shall I list only the most convincing arguments?"

"The short version, if you please. I do have to get back tonight," he replied sarcastically and she stifled the urge to chuckle at that.

He neither said where he needed to go nor how he knew her list would be a long one if she were to recount all the details. Strangely enough, that simple confidence in her abilities was the best compliment she'd received to date.

"The revelations after Quirrell tried to steal the Philosopher's Stone laid the groundwork for making me doubt the general assumption that you are a truly dark wizard. You tried to protect Harry all through that year and your riddle protecting the Stone was literally foolproof. It made me doubt appearances in general from then on. Your proficiency at dueling revealed in my second year was another factor. Even if you seemed to be simply enjoying yourself putting that fool Lockhart in his place, you taught us all to defend ourselves in the process. Third year was very interesting in that regard. You had reasons to despise Remus Lupin from both a personal and a professional perspective, and yet you didn't treat him *that* horribly in the end; you brewed Wolfsbane for him perfectly."

"I let it slip that he was a werewolf, Miss Granger," he interrupted her for the first time, his tone and expression inscrutable.

"If I may be so bold, I don't think that was truly only your doing."

"What are you implying?"

"The whole affair of Black's sighting, his capture and escape couldn't simply be hushed up. The Minister was there and knew, er, all about it," she continued with another blush she couldn't suppress that clearly broadcast that she knew the Minister of Magic knew far from *everything* about Sirius' escape.

"It would have come out anyway. I think Professor Dumbledore ordered you to tell one of the Slytherin students, so that Professor Lupin would have a chance to resign. That way, the situation was controlled and diverted attention from the questions the Minister might have thought to ask otherwise about the other events of that night."

She looked up from her study of her hands at him, but his face was devoid of expression.

"Continue," he merely said.

"The essay on werewolves you set was an obvious ploy to make someone realise what Professor Lupin's absences meant. I assume it was to make one of Harry's friends aware of the threat, since you were already suspicious of Professor Lupin. And although we... attacked you in the Shrieking Shack, you tried to protect us from the transformed Professor Lupin."

She hesitated there before continuing, waiting if he wanted to comment on that as well. But he didn't.

"Fourth year. You were suspicious of Professor Moody very early on, and not because he was the Ex-Auror assigned to your case, as everyone thought. The rosebushes," she commented, blushing again and continued resolutely, "You tried to avoid Karkaroff. You showed Fudge your Dark Mark the night of the third task and went to You-Know-Who, although he had to assume you had changed sides. Last year. Most prominent were the Occlumency lessons with Harry, which you gave despite loathing him. I can only assume that something must have happened most probably that Harry invaded your privacy in some way for you to stop them."

"Do you mean to tell me that Potter didn't tell his friends why I stopped the lessons?" he enquired in that dangerously low voice.

"He said that you thought he was ready. But considering what happened at the... at the Department of Mysteries..." she trailed off and knew she was correct when she saw his incensed expression.

*Hopefully he didn't notice when I faltered like that. Stupid, stupid!*

"Ready', indeed," he muttered furiously, then motioned for her to continue.

"Well, then there is your behaviour towards me here at Grimmauld Place since the start of the holidays. Although I assume that you are nice to me now to catch me off guard, to make whatever your purpose easier."

"Very good, Miss Granger. I'm glad not even emotional turmoil can curb your busy mind. That will be all on that subject," he replied and effectively closed the topic without giving her any inkling whether her assumptions of his character were even remotely correct. Infuriating man!

"What is it that you want from me?" she finally asked, so very weary of this game.

"I want the truth about why you lost your prized control over such a mundane and everyday occurrence as an argument with Weasley; what really triggered your breakdown? But I can see that I won't be getting that answer today. And although I don't believe you're being entirely truthful about your reasons for losing control over your emotions like that, I will leave it be for now.

"I let you talk about your argument with Weasley to determine said reasons. To come back to the purpose of this interview, the control you have over your impulsive nature and your rather volatile emotions in times of stress is fragile at best. This state of affairs cannot be allowed to continue. You might end up seriously injuring either yourself or people you care about."

"Whatever do you mean?" she asked in confusion, her voice trembling slightly.

"It cannot have escaped your notice that you completely wrecked the library this morning."

"What?! I didn't!"

"You did, I can assure you. I repaired the damage before you recovered sufficiently to notice apparently."

"Dear God!" Deeply upset, she ran a trembling hand over her now ashen face.

"And that is precisely the reason why such behaviour cannot repeat itself. You are a very powerful witch. Much more powerful than you realise. When your emotions run out of control like that, your magic does the same with catastrophic results. You might remember this phenomenon from before you got your Hogwarts letter."

She nodded weakly, grasping her hands tightly in her lap, her knuckles white.

"After five years of training, this only happens when feelings of the most extreme kind surface: hate, anger, fear." He stopped there and stared at her intensely for a moment, then continued silkily.

"Which of course leads me to believe that your argument with Weasley was not as harmless as you would like me to believe at least not for you. While it is admirable that you had the presence of mind not to release your emotions in the presence of others, you are a witch and such a display is dangerous, both to yourself and to others.

"You will need to attain a firmer hold on your emotions, find a way to release them gradually so they won't bottle up like this again, and find an outlet to vent the frustration you will accumulate. Which brings us to the reason of why you are here."

"Fencing," she stated, understanding a bit better now but still not yet fully.

"Indeed. Fencing is not merely a sport. It is an art and as such requires the utmost attention to detail, the willingness and discipline to train as often as possible and also an enormous amount of self-control. Requirements you fulfill to the letter."

"But today I..."

"One day is hardly significant when compared to your immaculate record so far, Miss Granger. I am not in the position to give promising students the marks they deserve, and while they are still lower than what you do deserve, I have never given you anything lesser than O's in Potions. Believe me, you fulfill the requirements. I will teach you the..."

"...exact art and subtle science' that is fencing?" she asked wryly.

"Correct. Meaning the correct stances and moves and the way to beat your opponent so he doesn't know what hit him literally. Strength, speed, unpredictability, fast reflexes and good strategy make a good fencer. To add cunning will make an exceptional fencer. I will teach you to become that."

"But how will fencing..."

"Patience, Miss Granger. I was just coming to that. To learn the art of defending yourself with the foil will demand a lot of you. To build up strength and endurance, you will start to have a run of ten minutes twice daily. That will also wear you out, which will make you sleep more soundly from now on. My pills may be excellent, but it doesn't do to become dependent on a substance of any kind neither physically nor emotionally.

"We will train twice during the week, Mondays and Wednesdays, same time as today, and once on the weekend on Saturdays after lunch from now on. That will give you an occupation for mind and body. As you learn to fence, you will come to realize that the self-control that is required will become second nature to you in situations of stress with routine. To be specific: in situations of combat.

"An argument is a battle of wit, of two minds, and thus not much different from a physical fight. In short, you will have what you lack at present: an occupation, something to employ your vast resources of both body and mind, which will hopefully burn up any frustration *before* it reaches boiling point. And the self-control is self-explanatory, I think. All of it will become second nature for you in time. Any questions?" he asked with a sardonic glint in his eyes.

She shook her head, a bit overwhelmed both by his willingness to impart information on the subject as well as the information itself.

"Excellent," he replied with a satisfied smile.

Obviously, he was glad to have the upper hand in this area since she couldn't prepare in advance and pester him with questions, she thought somewhat uncharitably.

Just as she thought this, he turned around in his seat to a small table behind the sofa she hadn't noticed before and retrieved two items.

Books, she saw to her astonishment as he turned back around to her.

He held them out to her with an expectant expression.

"Research material. I wouldn't want to force Hogwarts' resident know-it-all to be unprepared for something for once in her life," he replied, the old insult lacking its sting for the first time, oddly enough.

She took them with a slightly dazed expression. To her surprise, she noted that they were Muggle books. One was on the history of fencing with emphasis on its origin in dueling, and the other was a practical instruction manual.

"I expect you know what I'm talking about on Wednesday when next we meet, Miss Granger."

"Of course," she answered, strength returning to her voice. The conversation seemed to have come to an end.

"Good. Now that we have that out of the way, eat and drink. Take a new cup. Your tea is bound to be cold by now. And it doesn't bear thinking about to warm up tea that has already been cold," he ordered, conjuring a new cup into his left hand and fixed her a fresh cup of tea. She looked on impassively, all of a sudden feeling as if a train had rolled over her with all that had happened today.

Like that night two weeks ago, they drank the tea and ate the scones in silence, with her eating considerably more than him, since this was technically her first real meal of the day. Breakfast normally constituted nothing more than a glass of orange (or pumpkin) juice and one dry slice of toast for her. She couldn't stomach much more so early in the morning. This time she also made use of the clotted cream still cold and firm thanks to a Cooling Charm and strawberry jam, which tasted as if it was freshly made. Heavenly.

Only sporadically did she glance up at him to find him contemplating his tea in silence. When the plate was empty save for a few last crumbs, Snape put his tea cup and saucer back on the coffee-table and turned to regard her thoughtfully.

"Are you still hungry?" he asked with a hint of concern.

She shook her head, face flushed once again with embarrassment.

"No, I'm not. Thank you. The scones really were delicious. My compliments to Professor McGonagall when next you see her."

"I will," he said, the corner of his mouth turned up in a half-smile, and continued to study her in silence.

"Was there something else you wanted to discuss, sir?" she asked hesitantly after a while, not wanting to appear as if she wanted this... meeting to be over with, but feeling quite drained of the events of the day.

"I realise this subject has been broached before, but all that we discuss and the lessons themselves have to remain between the two of us. Secrecy of all our dealings is of the utmost importance. Lives could depend on it, Miss Granger. No one is to know we even meet outside of the usual casual meeting in the kitchen before an Order meeting when I come through the Floo. Understood?"

"Of course," she agreed, struck by the sudden seriousness with which he had requested her silence.

He got up from the sofa and held out his hand to her. The gravity of the situation curiously becoming painfully clear with this, in the Muggle world, everyday gesture. Wizards seldomly shook hands. They inclined their heads or bowed. Only wizards fascinated with Muggles like Mr Weasley, Muggle-borns or very seldomly half-bloods living among Muggles did so. Or the shaking of hands was more ritualistic in nature than a gesture of greeting. Hmm...

If she'd had the time and means, she would have researched it, like she did everything else. But she didn't.

She stared at his outstretched hand for a moment, the vague thought flitting through her mind that the situation had evolved quite suddenly from a tea-party-like atmosphere to the point where he was entrusting her with the safety of others.

How had it come to this point? And more importantly: how could anything he talked about with her be so serious that he required her word for it that she wouldn't tell anyone? And why would he trust her that she keep it?

After her slight hesitation, she got up from her seat on the other end of the sofa and bridged the distance between her and her Potions professor with two small steps. She grasped his broad hand with her smaller one and shook it, her gaze never straying from his. He had a firm but not overly tight grip, just like she had always thought a handshake must be like. His hand was surprisingly warm and soft and the skin of her palm where their hands touched tingled. From that simple and innocent touch, a pleasant shiver raced down her spine, which she didn't understand at all.

Why did she have the feeling of having fallen irreversibly down the rabbit hole like *Alice in Wonderland*? In more than one sense?

*Oh, no. Mustn't think of Snape as the White Rabbit, spouting any moment now, "Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be too late!" Really mustn't! If I giggle now, he'll kill me for sure agreement or not!*

"Good," he said, released her hand and stepped away from her. He took another few strides till he'd cleared the way for her to pass and motioned for her to lead the way to the door.

Head buzzing slightly and her hand feeling strangely empty, she followed his directions till she stood in front of the door once more.

She hesitated with her hand on the doorknob, however, and turned back around to her teacher.

"One more thing, sir. I want to apologise for the lack of respect with which I treated and addressed you, not only today but also... that night. You can't imagine how embarrassed I am over my lack of courtesy and self-control."

"Your apology, though appreciated, is completely unnecessary. Everyone has a limit and we will work on it that such a loss of control doesn't happen again. Incidentally, while I must insist that we maintain our distance as is appropriate for a teacher/student relationship, I believe our situation has changed," he responded in his accustomed drawl, though it was lacking its usual chill.

She nodded again, unsure what exactly she was agreeing to and for once utterly at a loss for words.

"It was refreshing to be treated just like you do... everyone else. An interesting experience."

She nodded once more, feeling more and more like a parrot. Speech, at least, had returned.

"It must be hard to be feared," she observed thoughtfully, daring to comment on something she had wondered for quite a while.

"But it is effective, Miss Granger. Never forget that," he replied briskly and more like the Professor Snape she thought she knew until today. His words were lacking their usual bite, though. She knew better now.

She nodded, solemnly.

"Goodnight, Professor."

"Goodnight, Miss Granger," he replied, inclining his head at her in an old-fashioned gesture of respect.

She swallowed around the lump in her throat, turned back towards the door without a last look at him and left the room. The door vanished immediately upon closing it behind her, making her question unreasonably if the meeting had happened at all or had simply been a figment of her imagination.

\* \* \*

A/N: Well, what do you think? Why is Snape so nice all of a sudden? What will happen during Hermione's first lesson? And what is up with Harry and Ron?

Another quote from "Dogma" again. Great movie, is all I can say.

And of course the famous line of the White Rabbit, taken from "Alice in Wonderland".



# Chapter 7: In Interim

*Chapter 8 of 14*

After the events in the Department of Mysteries, Hermione finds it hard to cope and receives help from someone unexpected. When a friendship of a sort develops, will it survive the events of the Lightning-Struck Tower? Will an ancient ritual help the Light win the war or will it destroy everything? An HG/SS romance. Not DH compliant.

Disclaimer: I'm not making any money from this. Anything you recognise is not mine, but Jo's. Sadly.

A/N: Ah! Am basking in the reviews you have all showered me with. Thanks! And here I was afraid you were losing interest in the story. Shame on me for doubting you! \*whip-crack\* ;)

I know you're going to throw stones at me again, but I have decided to cut this chapter in half again. It was very long and... To be quite honest here, I have some trouble with the chapter after next, and I simply want to keep my self-imposed posting deadline for a chapter every two to three weeks. And I don't think I can manage it otherwise. :( This is also what you might call a transition chapter. But don't worry, the action not to mention the fencing lessons will start soon. :)

Thanks for being understanding and bribing me with reviews... Oh, no. You weren't. Although that would be a good way to ensure said self-imposed deadline and keep the fuzzy bunnies breeding in my head. What an image, huh? ;)

Thanks to Bi, the girls (and hubbies, lately ;) ) from the Potter\_Place chat and forum as well as the MoITWF forum, for your encouragement and endless patience re: frustrated rants. \*hugs them all\* I also want to thank my beta, SnarkyRoxxy, for her great work, and to the new one on board, ladyinthecloak, for stepping in at such short notice.

And thanks to my big girl, for making her first little steps! Love ya! \*smooch\*

\* \* \*

## Chapter 7: In Interim

She stared at the wall, pondering aimlessly the night's events until she shook herself out of her reverie. Absent-mindedly, she took one of the small, midnight-blue pills out of the pocket of her jeans, popped it into her mouth and swallowed it easily. Over the last few weeks, she had gotten used to taking a pill without having to drink something after it. A useful, but undeniably, somewhat alarming ability.

Then she turned away from the door, stuffed her hands into her pockets and began the trek down the stairs, brooding about another tea-party with Professor Snape. When she reached her room, she undressed quickly and slipped into a soft, old nightgown of her mother's with an old-fashioned floral print on it, only barely registering that she had put it on correctly.

Flopping down on her bed, already drowsy with impending sleep, she grappled with the sheets so they only covered the left side of her body, keeping her cool in the summer heat, and fumbled with her wand to extinguish the light as she laid it down on the bedside table. She jumped, already half-asleep, when something heavy plopped down on the mattress, cuddling against her side. One of her arms, which was heavy with approaching sleep, crept over her body, her hand lazily stroking Crookshanks' fur.

The half-Kneazle, having sorely been neglected that day, mewed once in complaint, butted his head a few times against her hand to get it to settle against some other part of his body to stroke and then began to purr contentedly.

And so she fell asleep to her cat's purring and dreamt of swimming in a tea cup filled to the brim with fragrant Darjeeling first flush, sweetened with sugar, under a watchful black-eyed gaze. The tea cup never so much as wavered, and she swam on, feeling content and safe.

\*\*\*\*\*

In the meantime, while Hermione was blissfully unaware, she was cause for much discussion in another part of the house. In one of the sitting rooms a floor beneath her, to be exact.

Two people were arguing. About her.

"What in Merlin's name made you think mentioning Krum to her at that point was a good idea?"

This was certainly not Ron's day.

"I don't know. It just sort of... slipped out," Ron muttered and shrugged for good measure, clearly uncomfortable with this topic.

"Well, then you really shouldn't be surprised that her hand 'slipped' too, mate."

"What? Are you taking sides now, Harry?" Ron asked, starting to get angry.

"Of course I am! You're both my friends, and yet, I'm sitting here with you! What is that if not taking sides?" Harry exploded.

"Oh," Ron merely said, lamely.

"Yes! But you know what? I'm sick of it! Just because you are angry with her now, Hermione is supposed to be my mortal enemy as well, since you'd think me some sort of traitor to our friendship if I didn't side with you! Funny how Hermione managed just fine to be friends with *both* of us in fourth year. I'm sick of being stuck in the middle, Ron! I want to talk to her again. No offense, mate, but sometimes I want to talk about something other than Quidditch."

"Really?" Ron asked, actually astonished.

"Yes, really," Harry replied wearily, running a hand through his constantly tousled-looking hair.

"Well, then, what's stopping you? Talk to her, by all means," Ron said petulantly, looking at an ugly painting to the side of Harry.

"And you won't call me disloyal?"

Ron sighed.

"No. I won't. Look, you're right. Talk with her and maybe you could... put in a good word for me? To smooth the waves a bit? I'm not ready to try my luck just yet."

Harry grinned.

"Of course, mate. Don't expect any miracles, though. Remember what Malfoy did to tick her off enough to slap him?"

Ron nodded with a satisfied grin at the memory.

"Well, but Ron, she only slapped *him* once, you know?" Harry tried again when it didn't seem that Ron had gotten his point.

This time, Ron nodded a bit more slowly and winced. He rubbed the bruises on his cheek gingerly.

"Maybe this time I've really blown it with her. I've done some pretty stupid stuff..." He glared when Harry nodded vigorously. Wasn't a real mate supposed to deny things like that?

"...but this really tops everything so far. Not that I'm not still angry with her, mind."

"But why? What ticked you off in the first place, having a go at her like that? Sure, she's smarter than both of us combined, but I bet even she didn't see it coming that the time she used the Time-Turner would be added to her legal age by the Ministry."

Ron miserably ran a hand through his ginger hair.

"It's not really that she's allowed to do magic now. It's just... one more thing that we don't have in common, you know? She's already smarter than me. Reads all sorts of books and journals no-one in their right mind understands. Talks about things like how to improve Wolfsbane, which is not even on the seventh year curriculum. I checked! Now she's also older than me..."

"Ron, she's always been half a year older than you and almost eleven months older than me."

"Yes, but it was never so much that it made a real difference, you know? Blast! I just realised! She could've gone for her Apparition license last year!"

"But she hasn't! She's going to go for it this year right along with us. Doesn't that count for something?"

"And now she can do magic all through the summer, and I can't! I've fancied her for ages, but, hell, we don't have anything in common, do we?" Ron steam-rolled on, not having even heard a word Harry had said.

Now it was Harry's turn to sigh. Did Ron have to ask his opinion on that? It seemed to be a sure way to get him to stop talking with him, too.

"Why don't you just ask her out and see where it leads? She might not even want to, you know," Harry replied instead, evading the question.

"Of course she does," Ron responded moodily, but seemed confident of his assertion. "Maybe I haven't blown it totally this time, after all. You know her, she's always been a bit mental... maybe now she's only a bit more than usual."

It wasn't clear to Harry whether Ron had said that just to be contrary, not really believing a word of it, or if he truly believed what he had just said. The way Harry saw it, it could be either way. What he was sure of, however, was that Ron was clearly in denial. Hermione and Ron had nothing in common aside from their friendship. Sure, Hermione had fancied Ron at some point, but not anymore; Harry could tell.

If Ron didn't want to see... Well, that was his problem.

"Well, then get a move on and for God's sakes change tactics, for you certainly won't get her to go out with you if you continue to insult her! And I'm not keen to pick up the pieces when she's finished with you the next time you do that," Harry said, getting up from his chair.

"I suppose you're right. Although I'm not that bad at dueling!"

"Of course I am," Harry replied good-naturedly, wisely ignoring Ron's latter comment and smacking his mate's shoulder. With that, they left the sitting room, tempers pacified for now, and made their way to their beds, closing the door to their bedroom noisily behind them.

They never noticed one of the shadows at the end of the hall by the doorway to the sitting room moving, nor did they see how it made its way silently down the stairs and out of the front door.

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Next morning, Hermione woke slowly to the sounds of birds chirping outside her window. Feeling content and relaxed, she lay there for a while, sleep-tousled hair fanned about her and listened to the sounds of the awakening house without opening her eyes. Then she stretched lazily as she tried to remember the last vague shreds of her dream.

*Something about... tea?* she thought, blinking drowsily. What confused her a bit was that she was feeling unaccountably very happy thinking about it. Tea wasn't usually something that made her happy. It was nice, sure, and tasted good, but that was all, really.

She stretched more languorously with an unconscious smile on her lips.

As sleep gradually left her, she began to remember the somewhat disconcerting events of the day before. The argument with Ron didn't count among them, for she was more or less used to them by now; nor did her actions throughout the rest of the day, including her breakdown, although those had been unusual enough... but her two encounters with Professor Snape did.

She sighed and rubbed sleep from her eyes.

As early in the day as it was, she could admit that her behaviour yesterday had been abominable. The only thing that reassured her a little was the fact that there had been mitigating circumstances. Yes, looking back, she knew she had good cause to be hysterical. And it wasn't as if she behaved like that every day.

Ron had deserved all he'd gotten, and Professor Snape...

He didn't seem to mind too much when she'd behaved like the Bandon Banshee, not even when she had insulted him. It was mortifying to remember how she'd behaved toward one of her teachers, and him, of all people, although he'd seemed to be more amused than disapproving of her mood swings.

*If he finds those amusing, he should be present when my real PMS kicks in. I doubt he would find that very amusing at all* she thought with a snigger.

Ron and Harry very wisely never dared cross her when that time of the month approached.

The one thing she was really ashamed of was how she'd tried to convince herself of Snape's shady character, solely based on his behaviour at school and her friends' opinion of him, ignoring all her evidence to the contrary and thus abandoning her normally logical nature in favour of sensationalism.

*Like... Oh God, like Rita Skeeter!* she thought in horror.

That was despicable. She felt downright dirty.

It was unlike her, and he deserved better, much better for the sacrifices he made daily of which there seemed to be even more than she'd realised, if the revelations about him yesterday were any indication.

She was disgusted with herself. Even hysterical, she should never have let her Inner Ron and Harry get the better of her.

She was the cool, calm thinker, who thrived on puzzles and everything logical and who didn't just judge by appearances. She was the best proof for that. There were many more layers to a person than merely the obvious. She was certainly not only the know-it-all bookworm the others perceived her to be, so why should he only be the mean Potions master?

She would do better from now on, she promised herself, and would try to live up to her epithet.

Not that she felt much like it at the moment.

*The brightest witch of her age*, she scoffed inwardly and more than a touch bitterly.

She wondered, not for the first time, what it was that people saw in her to inspire them to come to that conclusion. Sure, she was smart, good at studying and had more than once kept her wits about her in a dangerous situation, which had saved her and her friends' lives.

But was that enough to deserve such a weighty title? It was certainly hard to live up to such high expectations. What did exceptional marks in every subject count for in that respect? But what else did she have to offer, after all? Books and cleverness were all she had, weren't they?

And Professor Snape was turning out to be even more intriguing than she'd initially thought.

*Fencing? How in the world does he, a confirmed Death Eater, know a Muggle sport? And well enough to teach it, no less!* She wondered, rolling onto her side and wrestling her legs free of the sheets.

Yesterday evening had certainly been interesting.

Very... enlightening and revealing. Both because of the things he'd done as well as the things he hadn't done.

He had behaved in a manner totally contrary to the way she had expected him to behave, which had been designed to keep her off-balance. It made her focus on herself and her emotions instead of on him.

Manipulating bastard.

And although his, *"Very good, Miss Granger,"* had ostensibly confirmed her speculations, she doubted Professor Snape had been entirely truthful in this matter. All he'd really done was praise her line of speculations. He hadn't explained what he'd meant by his remark. So he hadn't really confirmed anything. Professor Snape had taken great care not to reveal anything about himself at least not intentionally. Even so, she had several more things to add to her list about the man.

One, his teaching persona was definitely only a facade all the evidence of her last three encounters with him pointed to that fact. It would be foolish and illogical in the extreme to assume the personality he displayed to the world day after day did not differ considerably from the one of the real Severus Snape, though who this elusive man really was still remained a mystery to her. She wondered if anyone knew this man.

Sadly enough, a spy couldn't afford anyone knowing their real character. It would leave him too exposed, leaving both strengths and weaknesses on display for friend and foe alike.

So, the assumption that his real character was exactly the same as his teaching persona was illogical in so far that it served no purpose, and that it was actually very dangerous, leaving him completely exposed. No spy, especially not one who had been a double agent for close to twenty years, would be that stupid. And no one could accuse Severus Snape of being stupid.

That left only one option that he'd created his teaching persona on purpose to protect himself. It was close enough to the truth to convince those who had known him at school, but shielded his self, including his real strengths and weaknesses, while projecting false ones.

Two, his Mr-Nice-Guy act was also most likely just that, an act, or rather a means to an end to get what he wanted when his sarcasm and a sneer didn't frighten people into compliance.

And three, though his congenial behaviour was most probably an act, he truly seemed to want to help her. Why he would, and for what purpose, was one of the things still shrouded in mystery.

Of course, one *'didn't look a gift horse in the mouth'*, but she knew her Greek Mythology, and particularly that of the Trojan War, too well to put much store into that saying.

*'Phobou tous Danaous kai dôra pherontas'* or rather *'Beware of the Danaans, even bearing gifts'* was a much more appropriate quote in her opinion when dealing with her teacher. She doubted that Professor Snape ever did something without a good reason and one which would work to his advantage.

So what did he have to gain by tutoring her in fencing?

She had no idea why the most unapproachable member of the Order of the Phoenix would offer to help her, but she was grateful. She just couldn't figure out why he would do this for her when the logical conclusion to draw from his offer was that he would thus be forced to spend time with her. A lot of time.

Surely, giving up three evenings a week of his precious student-free summer holidays for extra lessons with one of his most despised students could not be what he wanted? Not without a good reason, in any case.

Did he truly despise her, though?

He'd always appeared to dislike her before almost as much as he did Harry both for her association with Harry as well as for her propensity for broadcasting her knowledge in the secret hope it would impress him. Although he didn't know that.

Of course, those instances had always been in public in the company of others the *Densaugeo* hex incident immediately came to mind, much to her chagrin. And before the night of his argument with Dumbledore, she had never been alone with him before. So who was she to judge what he really thought of her?

Maybe that was another reason why he had asked for her opinion of him last night. Maybe he had really wanted to know. Or perhaps he was curious if, despite yesterday's drama, she could read between the lines, if her intelligence was limited to memorising books, or if she was capable of independent thought as well.

If her suspicions or even parts of them proved to be correct, the conclusion that he despised her as much as Harry would be very questionable indeed. If she was correct.

That did not automatically mean he liked her, of course.

That possibility she found highly unlikely, no matter how much her wayward crush for him might like that. He was just not the type to 'fancy' anyone. Deep feelings of one type or another, maybe, but no crush. Although deep feelings were preferable anyway, that scenario was also a stretch of imagination.

She was glad he was not really who he appeared to be on more than one level, however. It made the crush she'd developed for him in her fourth year not as sick as she'd always thought it to be. Although she hadn't been able to help herself, Bad Boy syndrome was one thing, but to fall for a fully-fledged Death Eater stretched that a bit too much, even for her taste.

That would be like falling for Lucius Malfoy. Eww.

And anyway, she was so totally over him that the continued proximity of their lessons together wouldn't be a problem.

*Hopefully not*, she thought with a frown and worried her lower lip with her front teeth. She shook her head at her inner ramblings and came back to the topic at hand. Folding her arms behind her head, she stared at the ceiling.

Right.

But between 'despising' and 'liking' were various shades of grey, one of which might explain his willingness to help her.

It might account for several other things as well.

That he'd tolerated her abominable behaviour towards him since the start of the holidays, for one.

For another, his concern for her well-being. If what he'd said yesterday was any indication, his whole behaviour towards her since the start of the holidays and in some instances in the years before, could be seen as a form of well-meaning concern.

That he'd let her speculate about his character was also very telling. While he'd neither confirmed nor denied her suspicions, one thing was patently clear: he'd been curious.

Enough so to put aside his natural sense of authority and his almost pedantic desire for privacy; for he'd asked one of his students and her to boot.

Though she couldn't imagine even 'liking' her would make the prickly man put up with that.

The one question that remained, however, was why a man like Severus Snape would offer to help and tutor her?

No matter what he said, she didn't believe for one minute he would sacrifice his time and expertise for her, of all people, even if it was for something as eclectic a past-time as fencing. He would only do something for someone else if it either helped him gain something or if she had something he wanted. Now what did she have to offer that he could want?

Nothing. At least, nothing he didn't have or couldn't get in a much easier way. She tried to not think too hard on what that might imply.

*So what can it be that he has to gain from these lessons?* She wondered, as she swung her legs over the side of the bed and got ready for the new day.

\* \* \*

A/N:

*'Phobou tous Danaous kai dôra pherontas'* or *Beware of the Danaans, even bearing gifts*, is from the Iliad, by Homer. The Danaans being the Greeks or Greek tribes in general. The Iliad is the tale of the Trojan War, which contrary to what the movie 'Troy' will have us believe, is not about Achillies, but a) about Troy, obviously, b) what terrible consequences our actions can have and c) what havoc the Gods could wreak on mere mortals out of jealousy.

An appropriate quote I think with regard to Snape's niceness and restraint even in the face of immense provocation. I can assure you there is a good reason for that. \*evil grin\*

Something to do with another saying, about catching flies with honey.

Wonder what you will make of that. Dum de dum dumm... ;D

Up next: A talk between women, the twins are back and one of Hermione's runs end a little unexpectedly.

## Chapter 8: She cried, 'More! More! More!'

### Chapter 9 of 14

After the events in the Department of Mysteries, Hermione finds it hard to cope and receives help from someone unexpected. When a friendship of a sort develops, will it survive the events of the Lightning-Struck Tower? Will an ancient ritual help the Light win the war or will it destroy everything? An HG/SS romance. Not DH compliant.

Disclaimer: I'm not making any money from this. Anything you recognise is not mine, but Jo's. Sadly.

A/N: Thanks to all those who read and reviewed! And to all you others, I give in and will never sell myself out for reviews again. It put you off reviewing, I just know it! ;)

Updates and progress reports, as well as the story now can be found on my Lj under <http://shalimar1981.livejournal.com>

Emotional!Hermione makes a comeback in this and the next chapter, so be warned. After that she will make only sporadic and short appearances. Relax, the worst is almost over. ^.^ After that, we will start with fencing. Tee-hee.

Thanks as ever to my betas, SnarkyRoxy and Ladyinthecloak, for being the best there are and polishing off my storytelling. I'm also indebted to the Wiktt, MoITWF and Potter\_Place forums and chats, for being especially encouraging and offers of chocolate. ^.^

Thanks also to my little girl, for thankfully starting to eat something besides carrot and potato mush. Yuk. It's a mystery why anyone would ~~w~~ant to eat that. :)

\* \* \*

## Chapter 8: She cried, "More! More! More!"

Hermione was so wrapped up in her contemplations about the curious behaviour of her teacher when she came down the stairs that Ron, or what could be another tense meal in the company of the rest of the house's inhabitants after yesterday's debacle, didn't even enter her head.

So when she was on her way down for breakfast, absent-mindedly thinking about Professor Snape's change of attire during yesterday's meeting with a slight flush suffusing her cheeks, she was surprised to bump into Harry on her way down the stairs. He usually slept in like Ron, coming in only a few minutes before Ron to ensure there was still something edible left before his mate took a swipe at it. Ron was still growing, but watching him eat was admittedly not a sight one wanted to remember.

But the surprises didn't end there. Something seemed to have shaken up the other inhabitants of number twelve, Grimmauld Place. After her fight with Ron and the subsequent tense dinner the day before, she expected Harry to behave as he usually did when two of the three friends had a fight and step aside. Judging from his behaviour of the previous weeks and at dinner yesterday, this fight wouldn't be an exception.

So when Harry got up this early and greeted her cordially on the stairs, at first she thought he must be ill. Or at least ~~C~~Confunded. Then she remembered that this wasn't an option because the twins didn't live at number twelve, Grimmauld Place; the others were either too young to do magic during the holidays or adults, and adults didn't touch Harry. Ever. Even if he did stupid things, dangerous things, the most he'd get was detention or loss of House points. Though she often all right, almost always participated in said dangerous pastimes, she didn't agree with the lax way the three of them were treated with regard to punishment. Of course she didn't fancy being expelled for their adventures, especially since they had proved to be always necessary for one reason or another, but it wasn't okay to basically encourage them to break the rules without further consideration.

Since all those possibilities could be discounted, the only other option available was that Harry felt guilty about shunning her, had finally behaved like the man he should be by now and stood up to Ron. She looked at him warily, but joined him on the way down to the kitchen, chatting about the all purpose topic, the weather.

The impossible seemed actually to have happened; her conclusion proved to be correct.

The moment they sat down, he practically interrogated her on which spells, charms and hexes she'd practised already and volunteered as a victim. He did it so pointedly in front of the others especially those of age like Fred and George, who'd come over in the wee hours of the morning escorting Ginny home, and Order members complete with a raised voice, inviting them to 'volunteer' as victims as well, she could've kissed the little idiot. Not that he was so little anymore, of course.

She didn't, for Ginny was back, and Hermione had no desire whatsoever to have another strained friendship on her hands. Ron had also just come down, and she didn't want to pour oil into the already blazing fire of jealousy either. Waiting expectantly for Ron to explode, but rather with a mild, detached sort of interest in which form it would take than with true apprehension, she was surprised when the explosion she'd expected didn't come.

Instead, Ron merely grunted when both Harry's elbow and Fred's or George's foot connected with his ribs and shin respectively, and muttered an almost incoherent, "Good morning, 'Mio... I mean, Hermione." The mumbled nature of his words had probably more to do with the fact that his eyes were still glued together with sleep than actual remorse, but it was a start.

He quickly ate while the rest of them talked about everything and anything, mostly about what creative hexes she'd read about lately and how Transfiguration could best be used for Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes. When the twins, along with Ginny, wondered aloud how Neville and Luna were doing after the fiasco at the Ministry, they tried not to notice that neither Harry nor Hermione joined into the discussion, kept their gazes firmly affixed on the remnants of their breakfast and changed the subject. Soon after, Ron finished his breakfast and left without a word, Ginny trailing after him with an apologetic look sent her way. But Harry, true to his word, stayed behind, staring at the closed kitchen door for quite a while with a thoughtful expression on his face.

The twins, however, leapt at the chance to finally be able to interrogate her the second the kitchen door closed behind their two siblings.

"So you finally walloped him a good one?" Fred asked her, both of the twins regarding her with something akin to awe.

"Er..." she only managed while looking anxiously over to where Mrs Weasley was cleaning up the counter. Although her back was turned to them and she was busy coordinating the cleaning efforts of both the brush doing the washing up and a dish-rag cleaning the work space, Hermione could tell the older woman was listening avidly. Mrs Weasley normally didn't even need to be present for half of the Burrow to clean itself, so her continued presence was highly suspicious. Dare she tell the unmitigated truth or hush things up, once again?

Some spark from her *I-don't-give-a-shit* attitude from the illicit potion brewing two weeks ago was still left over apparently, for when the twins continued to pester her for details, she gave them what they wanted in only a slightly edited version of events. Namely where the Potions master came into the equation.

"Come on! Give us the juicy details! You really flipped out on him? Miss Prim Prefect?" George goaded her with an expectant grin.

She chuckled at the nickname. She'd almost forgotten that one.

"If you must know, yes I did. I hit him. More than once, in fact."

"Wicked," they said in unison, the tone both awed and laden with mischief at the same time. It was one of those words they used frequently, and the way they said it never failed to make her grin. Even at a time when she didn't really want to, like now.

"There's really not much to tell. He yelled, I yelled. He was being a tactless prat as usual, and I slapped him, three times. Then I barricaded myself in the library for a good bout of yelling and crying..."

With a muted *Phlonk*, her narrative was interrupted by the brush and one of the dishes dropping unceremoniously into the washing-up water in the sink. Mrs Weasley merely muttered a brief, "Sorry", then resumed her charm work, much more furiously than before.

Hermione looked worriedly at the woman's back.

Had she gone too far? Said too much? Was Mrs Weasley now angry at Hermione for telling her other children how her son had behaved?

God, she hoped not! Memories from fourth year came distinctly to mind, when after being accused of leading Harry on by the *Daily Prophet*, Mrs Weasley had made it only too clear that she didn't approve, never mind that it hadn't been true. She still remembered that one, tiny Easter Egg.

"...during which I apparently almost completely destroyed all the furniture in the process. But I repaired everything as soon as I noticed," she continued hastily, having made up her mind to tell all well, almost all and damn the consequences, but quickly enough before Mrs Weasley had a chance to interrupt. She carefully left out all mention of Snape in that scenario as if he hadn't been there at all.

"That's it, really," she answered with a worried look at Mrs Weasley, who was now scrubbing a clean pan furiously *by hand*.

"Oh, how boring. No blood spilt at all? Mind you, Ron deserves it sometimes," George said eagerly with a bloodthirsty glint in his eyes.

"No," she replied cautiously, giving George a hard look.

At her look of worry, Fred replied with a carefree, inborn-of-being-a-middle-child-complete-with-his-twin-as-backup manner, "Don't worry. It's bound to have shaken things up a bit in that head of his. Not much in there, after all." George snickered.

At that point, Mrs Weasley decided to join the conversation, if only to thwack both her sons over the head.

"You two! Go out before I'll change my mind about dessert for you tonight! And try to keep out of mischief for one day, will you? Just because you're getting paid for it now doesn't mean you should corrupt those still with a *proper education* in mind!" With that, she hustled not only the twins but also an apologetic-looking Harry out the kitchen door, leaving Hermione to the mercy of the mother of the boy she'd slapped yesterday and had just now defamed in front of his best friend and his two brothers.

She didn't feel too good about the scolding that would inevitably follow.

At first, Mrs Weasley continued to cast a few more house-keeping charms, silently for the most part, then turned around to Hermione with an indignant expression on her face, thus confirming her theories that a) the presence of Mrs Weasley was quite unnecessary for her charm work, and b) the admonishing would ensue forthwith. Or so she thought.

But the first words out of Mrs Weasley's mouth were, "I can't believe that boy of mine!" and effectively stunned Hermione into silence, when she'd have normally tried to defend herself.

"I don't know where he got that from! Certainly not from me! And his father was never like that either! Maybe from one of his uncles? But don't you worry, dear. As much as I hate to agree with my other son, the trouble-maker, I'm sure those slaps of yours are bound to have put things into perspective for him. He'll come around, you'll see," Mrs Weasley gave vent to the immense fury apparently bottled up inside of her.

That she was really so angry on her behalf had Hermione blinking furiously so as not to lose control over her emotions again. Why, she defended Hermione's actions towards her own son! Why was she doing that? Although she was now a tad confused as to why the older woman had behaved like she was on Fluoxetine more commonly known as Prozac yesterday at dinner. But maybe a fight that should have stayed within the family, so to speak, played out in front of Order members simply hadn't appealed to her.

"He'll have to. Otherwise no girl in her right mind will have him! Sorry to be so frank, Mrs Weasley," Hermione stated with determination.

"Molly, dear. You're of age and one of us now," she replied gently, guiding Hermione to sit back down in the chair she had just vacated, while taking the seat beside her. "Oh, he will. Ron still has quite a bit of growing up to do."

"Though slapping him was not exactly mature either," Hermione admitted ruefully.

"Sometimes you're too grown up for your own good. It's good to see you behave like one closer to your age now and then. Don't mind Ron. His father was also a bit of an idiot before we got together. Although not *that* much of an idiot," Molly added with a frown.

Hermione swallowed nervously. There was nothing for it, she would have to tell her or the matchmaking and subsequent bullying of Ron that would ensue didn't bear thinking about.

"Er, actually, Mrs... Molly, I don't like Ron... in that way," Hermione explained worriedly.

"I know, dear. It's obvious you two wouldn't do well together. You have absolutely nothing in common. I'm glad you have enough sense to see it. Not many girls your age think twice about a teenage romance. Liking each other or finding one another attractive simply aren't good enough reasons to build a lasting relationship on. But I'm afraid Ron will need some more time to realise that. Bear with him, will you? Just a little longer? I'm sure he will get it once he's thought about it. But tell me if it's taking him too long or if it gets unbearable, and I'll set him to rights."

"Thanks, Molly. I will," Hermione replied warmly, scolding herself inwardly for being surprised at the older woman's insight and understanding. With such a big family, it really shouldn't surprise her that Molly Weasley knew *everything* that was going on in her vicinity.

"Good, good. Now, run along and spend some time with Harry. The poor boy has felt frightfully guilty the past two weeks with you and Ron quarrelling."

And with a last smile at Molly, Hermione left in search of Harry.

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Completely opposite to how the past three weeks had passed, the time until Wednesday flew by like a whirlwind. Of course, mostly her new routine of two runs a day of ten minutes each, some practising of moves she managed to squeeze in, and her two new books, which she had to admit were fascinating, mainly deserved the credit for that. But Harry also made a point of talking to Hermione and spending time with her over the next few days.

She could've laughed at the irony of the situation. When all of her friends had basically left her to her own devices, she admitted to have secretly wished they would at least try to approach her. And now that she finally had something to focus on, a purpose, but of which she couldn't tell anyone, they made an effort to include her!

At least they saw now what a great prat Ron could be when he put his mind to it, and that of age or not, she was still their friend, not a leper to be shunned, and that it was not necessary to choose between friends who were not talking to each other if they all tried to behave like adults.

She was grateful for this turnaround in the relationship with Harry, and though it cost her a great deal of patience and concentration, she made the same effort to approach him and the others. She managed to stay away from her two new books and practising long enough for the time she spent with them, when all she wanted was to devour them whole at the knowledge and salvation they represented for her. On the upside, it distracted her from the curious problem of why parries *Seconde* and *Octave* as well as *Tierce* and *Sixte* looked so similar to each other in the sketches in one of her new books when there was supposed to be quite a difference between them.

In those instances, wizarding books with their moving pictures and drawings were definitely vastly superior.

That day after the meeting in the attic set the routine for the following days before her first lesson on Wednesday evening.

She would get up at around half past eight, eat a light breakfast though she now added scrambled eggs to her menu in view of her daily exercise. Then she would have one of her two daily runs in the backyard. Afterwards, she would spend some time with Harry or Ginny, either just talking or trying to practise some of the Defense Against the Dark Arts spells they had done in the D.A. Her *Patronus* particularly still needed some work, in her opinion, and she wanted to try her hand at transmitting messages with it, too.

They, along with the twins who came by sometimes, were more or less willing victims in her quest for perfecting her knowledge and took hexes and jinxes in stride as long as she reversed the consequences immediately. Order members still kept their distance, despite having volunteered at Harry's 'invitation' to help her practise. It was no more than she had expected. She was glad that she had someone to practise on, and the other Order members like Tonks, Moody, Remus Lupin or her teachers had undoubtedly much more important things to do than humour Harry and help her.

A delayed lunch, then some more practising would usually follow, on her own this time to try out some of the moves illustrated in her new instruction manual on fencing. Most moves and stances were easy enough to understand, like the initial position and the on-guard or *en garde* position. But the concept of the different parries still eluded her. How could the *Quarte* and the *Quinte* cover the same quadrant of a body's target zone, or rather the same quarter of a line of a body, and yet be supposedly different? Also, the constant parrying and riposting, not to mention the parry-riposting, confused her a little. And she had no idea whatsoever what was meant by the *pronate* and the

*supinate* type of parry.

Then came always dinner, which since Harry's talk with Ron was much more bearable than the one on the day of the fight. In the three days since their meeting in the attic, she hadn't seen Professor Snape even once at Order Headquarters. Although he could've been there, she admitted to herself; that she didn't see him didn't mean he hadn't been there.

In fact, more than once she'd felt the sensation of someone watching her, but when she'd turned around to look, there had been no one visible. She dismissed it as a figment of her overactive imagination.

Usually a few hours after dinner, when her friends were busy talking in either her and Ginny's or Harry and Ron's room, she had her evening run and a shower after that.

And so it went, until Wednesday the day of her first lesson arrived. The day started off badly already when she woke up, dishevelled and sweaty, from a nightmare she couldn't remember, but which had left her wide-awake and shaking.

As soon as her mind was able to throw off the last vestiges of her dream-induced numbness, her nerves began to act up again.

At first, as she went through her morning routine, she couldn't for the life of her decipher the reason for her renewed case of nerves. After all, those lessons with Snape were for her to lose this infernal tension! And Professor Snape didn't seem to be as sadistic as he was at school, so there was nothing to be apprehensive about on that score either. She berated herself all through the brushing of teeth and combing of (er, wrestling with) her hair, but as the day progressed and with it her first fencing lesson with Professor Snape approached, she gained an inkling as to why she was nervous again.

He would certainly try to tackle her again for the reason of her nervous breakdown. He'd said so that evening, in fact.

*And although I don't believe you're being entirely truthful about your reasons for losing control over your emotions like that, I will leave it be for now.*

But it was clear that he was one of the few persons who absolutely **mustn't** find out!

She would be on her guard, just in case. As a spy, he would know better than anyone how to extract information which wasn't freely volunteered. But trying to think of all the questions he might ask was making her edgy, and trying to think up ways of how to circumvent those questions had her once more on the edge of hysteria.

She knew it was only a matter of the right provocation to set her off again, no matter how hard she tried to subdue her frazzled nerves. She knew it was no good, but she had to try at least. Her peace of mind was apparently still too fragile after her outburst four days ago.

She just hoped to God that whatever it would be, it would wait until after her lesson and would not have her succumb again in her teacher's presence.

Although he had been kind to her the last time and to her since then, until she knew his real motive in helping her somehow the term 'philanthropist' and Professor Snape, Potions master didn't exactly go together she would be wary of this 'improved' Snape, pending further evidence.

In fact, she was both right and wrong with regard to her next breakdown.

The last straw this time proved to be her evening run before she planned to go to the third room on the right in the attic for her lesson.

After a few warm-up exercises, she started to run as usual, making one circumference of the backyard after the other. Normally, she would cease thinking for those brief, blissful ten minutes twice a day.

Today was different, however. After the fifth lap, images suddenly started to flash in front of her inner eye in her agitated state.

Unconsciously, she began to run faster.

Bits and pieces, both real and imagined, of what had happened that night in the Department of Mysteries began to flit through her mind at an alarming rate. Jewel-coloured lights of hexes, horrible and eerily beautiful at the same time, striking through the air; gasps, screams and moans breaking the unnatural silence of an office building after work-hours; the stench of smoke, sweat and fear permeating the air.

Pain slicing through her chest. Pain so terrible and overwhelming, all her senses were on overload until there was nothing else - not the feeling of her blood that must've gushed from her wound down her body, for she'd seen the remnants of her clothes afterwards; not the scream that had escaped her, judging from the soreness of her throat when she awoke, and not the discomfort of hitting the floor. She'd already been unconscious before she even began to fall.

She could feel the pain right then; her wound had not entirely healed yet. The scar still prominent across her chest, pain sliced through her now along its seam.

What must've happened after she'd fallen? The arrival of the Order, the rest of her friends being hexed, the fights between Order members and Death Eaters culminating in a single moment when flesh passed cloth.

A life gone within a millisecond without a trace, soundless, painless unaware? They'd never know.

And without a body to mourn, letting go was made that much harder.

The fight between the two most powerful wizards of the time.

One only saved by a bird of fire, representing both life and death. Another only spared by chance.

And a third holed up in a castle awaiting the verdict of what would come a choice between certain death or a miserable existence in hiding should they have failed; or the continued threat of spying should the worst have been averted once more.

All because of a dream and a team of six reckless students.

Always over and over:

The overwhelming pain.

That instant between passing from life to death with merely a swish of cloth.

A flash of fire with a life saved.

The dead stare watching the clock.

Her speed increased until she was running, not from an enemy made of flesh, but from one settled in her mind. It was impossible to run away from those and yet she tried. Fear, pain, guilt, shame. They were ever present. They would never go away.

Her breath rushed out in shallow gasps. Her lungs started to burn. Her whole body was on fire as she willed herself to keep running. Running away from overwhelming pain, paralysing fear, immeasurable guilt and all that... **Death!**

More heaving than actually breathing, she staggered to her knees on the soft grass, leaning heavily on her arms, which were braced on the ground, and felt dizzy because

of the lack of oxygen in her blood. Hurling herself upright, she pressed the heels of her palms against her eyes to keep the images she knew were only in her mind at bay. And failed abysmally.

She cried out her anguish silently, her whole body wracked by her sobs. Her diaphragm constricted so hard it hurt and caused her to bend over until the hands covering her face almost touched the grass beneath her.

Crying until she had no tears left and could only choke and gasp, she half-sat, half-lay on the grass, staring numbly into nothingness.

The familiar sound of a throat being cleared penetrated the thick haze she was wrapped up in. Her only coherent thought in that moment was:

*Oh, no. Not again!*

Why did it always have to be him? Why couldn't someone else find her for a change? Not that that scenario would be really an improvement. Just thinking about Harry or Ron finding her like this was the stuff for nightmares. No one, save Professor Snape, even knew she had a problem, and it was only a matter of time until he knew precisely what said problem was.

And now, that she had just broken beneath the pressure for the second time in his presence in under a week, she harboured no illusions to the fact that he would likely find out *tonight* what he wanted to know.

And then he would rescind his offer for the fencing lessons. What she was hiding was probably enough for him to do so, but she also hadn't passed the test of endurance, after all.

Why, oh, why couldn't she have stopped the images? Just for one more hour? Then they would've started with the lessons and her control over herself and these... moments would've increased, she was sure of it.

She finally looked up from her kneeling position in the wet grass to see him standing in the doorway to the house, illuminated by the light from the hallway like some sinister dark angel lacking its wings.

He wore another shabby cloak, this time in a truly filthy ochre colour. At least that's what she assumed its colour was originally. For all she knew, it could also easily have been mud brown.

Taking in her tear-stained cheeks and puffy, red eyes, he studied her like he would a curious insect or potions ingredient. One which he couldn't seem to decide whether he approved of or was disgusted with. It occurred to her then in a detached manner that she must look a real fright combined with her sweaty T-Shirt and now grass-stained training pants.

Long minutes passed, in which nothing disturbed the silence of the night, save her slowly evening breathing, and they simply stared at each other.

Then he held a hand out to her, beckoning her to come to him.

\* \* \*

A/N: So what do you think? Maybe some of you can already guess what Hermione is hiding. I'm curious what your guesses might be. :)

Another quote, this time from "Bram Stoker's Dracula" - the movie. And it's not one of the fanged creature's lines either (don't want to feed those vampire rumours :)). The title of this chapter is a line from a song. Can anyone guess which one?

And the comment about Mrs Weasley acting as if on Prozac was incidentally inspired by a post on Chapter three from Potion Mistress on the OWL forum. Thanks!

Up next: The first fencing lesson and Snape finds out what Hermione has been hiding (Am I mean, leaving you hanging like that, or what? :)).

## Chapter 9: Words like Violence

*Chapter 10 of 14*

After the events in the Department of Mysteries, Hermione finds it hard to cope and receives help from someone unexpected. When a friendship of a sort develops, will it survive the events of the Lightning-Struck Tower? Will an ancient ritual help the Light win the war or will it destroy everything? An HG/SS romance. Not DH compliant.

Disclaimer: I'm not making any money from this. Anything you recognise is not mine, but Jo's. Sadly.

A/N: Thanks so much to everyone who reviewed! This has been a very difficult chapter for me, and every time I saw another review alert in my mailbox, it just lifted my heart up a notch again. \*hugs to all around\*

I'm really sorry for the long wait, some things happened that were just totally beyond my control, but I hope this chapter is worth it. It's certainly much longer than what you're used to from me. Double the length in fact, since I didn't have the heart to cut it in half again. I hope you enjoy it.

I know I promised never to beg for reviews again, but I'm so nervous how you'll all like this chapter, I have to break my promise and beg so loud for reviews or mails or comments of any kind, you'll hear it where you live. :) Because in this chapter the fencing starts, complete with a real bout. My first fight scene and my first brush with fencing since I stopped going to practise almost three years ago. I so hope you'll like it!

First of all thanks to Riposte, who send me a very nice mail of concrit, which solved one of the trickier passages of chapter eight for me. Concrit is always welcome! I want to make this fic the best it can be, so don't be shy if there's something bothering you or you have an idea. Thanks also to Keket\_Amunet for her advice about in depth description. It's my Achilles heel, and it still needs a lot of work, I'm afraid. And thanks also to Casey for a terrific analysis of the nine chapters so far. She is good, I tell you, and found out stuff that... Well, don't want to spoil anything. :D

Thanks to everyone I could ask on the topic of fencing (sadly, I couldn't make use of the picket fencing treatise Warty offered me), especially Zebbee, who should write a book on fencing. She managed to raise a whole new line of subplot from the dead simply by burying me in interesting information and firing questions at me left, right and centre. I'll probably start fencing again thanks to her if my babysitter and baby will get along. Thanks sooo much!



Thanks also to everyone whom I could whine about the lack of progress on the chapter, everyone on the Wiktt and Potter\_Place chats, forums and LJs. Thanks to my indomitable betas, SnarkyRoxy, Ladyinthecloak, and Dryad for managing to whip this mess of a chapter up in shape. A huge thanks to Bi, simply for telling me that I'm a better writer than some of the most popular authors in Germany, which sadly enough doesn't actually mean much, but God bless her ignorance of high-quality fanfiction, my biggest fan.

And thanks as always to my little one. This one is for being an angel on our first holiday.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 9: Words like Violence

Keeping her eyes trained on Snape's out-stretched hand, Hermione waited. For what wasn't entirely clear, not even to her. That he would pull it back? For the admonishments at her repeated loss of control to start?

Certainly not for what actually happened next.

Nothing. He simply continued to hold his hand out to her, waiting calmly for her to grasp it.

*What the hell does this mean? What is he on about? Why doesn't he scold me, berate me for losing it again? Make some derogatory remark about weepy women? Hiss or sneer at me? Why, why, why isn't he behaving like he normally would?*

Coming to a resolution, she sniffed once and wiped the tears off her cheeks with the back of her left hand while she grasped his hand with her right. Again, a feeling like electric current ran through her blood at his touch. He pulled her to her feet as if she weighed nothing. He seemed to be much stronger than he looked. As soon as she stood, she noticed that her muscles were sore and stiff at the same time. Snape silently handed her a bottle of water and a towel, watching her with an unfathomable expression.

For a long moment, she stared dumbly at the items in her hands. Shivering from the light breeze blowing across her wet skin, she unwrapped the towel, roughly dried her face and neck as well as her sweat-soaked hair with the soft terry-cloth towel and laid it casually around her neck. Next, she opened the bottle of water and downed several long gulps of the refreshingly cool liquid, soothing her raw throat on its way down, then some more until the litre bottle was almost empty. She emerged from it, gasping for breath, and felt something approaching human again.

Without a word, he took the bottle from her hand and handed her a translucent vial containing a sickly green liquid.

She looked at him questioningly, but when he failed to provide her with an explanation, she did something she normally would never even remotely consider: without enquiring further, she just shrugged, opened the vial and downed it in one long swallow. It tasted as abominable as one expected potions to taste and left a weird, algae-like aftertaste in her mouth. She opened the water bottle again, downing the remains in hopes of clearing out the odd flavour, not really succeeding.

His eyebrow quirked upward, and his face had taken on an even more curious expression of surprised disbelief. She shrugged again. She could be reckless, just like the others, from time to time. Besides, there were too many people who would miss her should she fail to appear at breakfast the next morning, so he definitely wouldn't dare poison her. Everyone who knew Mrs Weasley would never touch anyone in her charge, unless they had a death wish.

Only seconds later, she felt the painful soreness and stiffness of her muscles subside, leaving her pleasantly relaxed.

How had he known to get her a muscle relaxing potion in advance? Had he really seen this coming?

*Of course he did. He's probably counted on it, making his job to interrogate me all the easier* she thought bitterly, all thoughts of resisting the questioning that would come vanished. She felt too numb emotionally right now to care much anymore.

*Let him ask, and let's see how he likes the answers!*

But he didn't. He merely studied her face for a long minute, then nodded infinitesimally. He stepped aside so he didn't block the entrance to the house anymore and motioned for her to precede him inside.

Bewildered, she did as he apparently expected of her and stepped into the house quietly so as not to disturb Mrs Black's painting. Having that old harpy start her usual diatribe and have the whole house come down on them was the last thing she needed right now.

Snape silently closed the door to the backyard behind them as she started to climb the stairs. Just moments later, he was back right behind her. Automatically climbing one step after the other and just as slowly, her brain began to respond to the soothing motions, and she reflected what the hell she was going to do now. If jogging in the backyard set her off, what was still safe? And what was Snape thinking, wanting to teach her anything, let alone fencing?

She had never been good at anything even remotely physical. She couldn't even ride a broom properly, which was a source of endless amusement to Ron of course. What had she been thinking, trying her hand at sports? And what was going through Snape's head, thinking she could master a sport as complicated and strenuous as fencing?

*If she could hold herself together long enough to try.*

All too soon, the climb up the stairs into the attic was over, and she stepped aside to let him pass. This time, he could demonstrate how one got the elusive Third Door on the Right to appear. Without swearing.

He glided over to the part of the blank stretch of wall on which the door had appeared after her extensive attempts, lifted his wand and said in a commanding voice, "Open."

That was it. The door appeared just where it was supposed to and opened conveniently. *It would* have to be an easy solution like that. It bloody figured.

Once more he stepped aside to let her precede him into the room. She did so, but not without grumbling under her breath. Something sounding remarkably like 'show-off' and 'acting like the gentleman when it was convenient for him'.

If he heard, he certainly didn't react to her ramblings.

Just like the last time, the room was separated into two parts: the training area, which she now noticed had mirrors on the walls opposite those huge windows and which had that long grey mat lying on the floor; and the comfy part, complete with the cozy sitting group. This time, the couch table was empty though.

*Pity. Could really use some tea and one of Professor McGonagall's heavenly scones right now.*

The door closed behind them with a dull *thud* and brought her unfocused attention back to the matter at hand. Expectantly, she turned around to her teacher. She was curious how these lessons would be compared to Potions classes with him. Aside from her, there was no one to observe his behaviour and endanger his position as a spy, so it logically followed he could behave and teach the way he wanted without having to fear exposure.

He'd already shrugged out of his shabby cloak and hung it on a conveniently placed coat stand by the door. To her surprise, he still wore his usual black waistcoat and trousers. Didn't he need to change into one of these fancy white fencing suits? Or was that just for her?

She looked around and couldn't see anything out of place. So unless he planned to transfigure something or conjure the clothes out of thin air which was devilishly difficult

they couldn't start with the lesson, could they? Of course, she didn't know anything about proper fencing lessons, so it could be that they only covered theory or some practise exercises at the beginning, for which protective clothing wasn't necessary.

When she looked back at her teacher, she found him staring at her speculatively. But not the favourable kind she had almost become used to during the past few encounters with him, but a nasty kind. The kind she'd always abhorred and which made her feel utterly worthless.

He looked at her as if deciding if she was really worth the effort and if he wasn't better off at home sitting in a comfortable armchair with an interesting book and a good glass of wine.

Immediately she felt eleven again, when all those wizards from the Ministry had come to her home after the latest incident involving a spurt of latent magic. It was the same look of disgust her aunt had given her then. As if she disgusted *him*.

She stiffened and looked away.

After what seemed like an eternity, he finally moved. Lifting his arm, he motioned her closer to the long grey mat in the center of the room.

Audibly sighing in relief, she followed his lead and walked closer to the mat, studying it with interest. What had so confused her during her first sojourn into this room had to be the *piste*, the length of a mat on the floor on which one fenced. As she studied it more closely, she noticed now several lines crossing the width of the piste. One across the centre of the piste, which was the *centre line*; two *on guard lines*, about two metres away from the centre line on each side, and two *warning lines*, about five metres away from the centre line on each side, which marked for the fencer the point of where there was only about two metres' worth of the mat left on each end, providing running out space.

When she turned away from her study of the mat on the floor and back to her teacher, it was again to find him staring at her. Not disdainful of her very existence this time, but what *was* hidden in that gaze she could not tell.

"So, in the past few days, what have you learned?" he spoke for the first time that evening. His voice was cold and haughty as she knew it from Potions class. Her heart sank. Was this to be no different?

Or was this another game? Had she really blown her chance to be respected and not disdained by him? Had his being nice to her really only been an act like she'd assumed? Or had he only pretended in the past weeks? What was pretense and what was real about him anyway? Or perhaps there was nothing real about him anymore?

She was thoroughly confused again, and in her still emotionally unstable state of mind (and that's what it was, no matter how numb she felt), she couldn't find the energy to focus on this extremely difficult puzzle that was her teacher. Only facts were able to stabilise her enough to stay in his presence. Facts like the exact measurements of the *piste*, or how many parries and attacks she'd learned there were. She always took comfort in cold hard facts more than anything else, save books of course. And since they always helped, she indulged in them now. He'd finally asked her a question, and she would answer, probably in more detail than he'd care for.

"This is the *piste*, sir. It is a total of fourteen metres long and three and a half metres wide. The lines across the piste are known as the *centre*, *on guard* and *warning lines*."

At that point she stopped, chancing a look at him. He was still staring intently at her in that cool manner. The only difference to his usual teaching approach was that he not once interrupted and insulted her. A slight improvement at least.

Still staring at her, he motioned for her to continue with a wave of his hand. To say she was surprised he let her flaunt her knowledge for once would be an understatement. Normally, she would've been very suspicious of this wholly uncharacteristic behaviour, but right then she didn't much care why he indulged her. The fact that he did was enough for her. And the lure to impart her knowledge was too powerful for her to resist.

"Fencers position themselves at the start of a bout on the on guard line. The warning line is, as the name states, there as a warning for a fencer so they know they have only two metres of the piste left. To cross the end of the piste is punished with a hit."

"Thank you, Miss Granger. I'm relieved that you seem to know what you will be standing on during a fencing bout. On to the actual fencing now, if you please."

She flushed, both from embarrassment and anger.

Bastard. That expletive might be getting old, but it was still accurate.

"To start with the initial position, from which all consecutive stances are derived..."

"Don't tell me, show me."

She looked at him apprehensively.

"Talking about it won't show me you know how it is done. Demonstrate, please."

Grinding her teeth, she did as asked, but only because he hadn't demanded it, despite his tone. Of course, the fact she had otherwise no idea what to do with herself might have been a major point for making that decision.

She moved over to the piste and, standing completely straight, positioned herself on the on guard line with her left foot resting directly on the line and with her right foot in a ninety degree angle to it, her heels touching.

"The initial position is basically standing straight with the one important difference how the feet are positioned. They are positioned in a ninety degree angle to each other, with the heels touching."

She looked over at him to see if he approved. He gave a sharp nod. She was relieved in a way, though it was admittedly hard to do the initial position wrong.

Now it was on to the real test.

The en garde position wasn't exactly complicated either compared to some of the parries or attacks she'd seen in the sketches of her book but since it was the starting position for every attack or defense action, exact alignment of the body in this position was crucial or every consecutive action would be ineffective.

"The en garde position starts off the same way," she explained. "The fencer takes a large step forwards with his front foot, then rests his weight on both of his knees, so that his balance is centered. He lifts his right arm or sword arm in front of him and his left arm or free arm behind his back, and both are bent at the elbow though not to the same degree. The free arm is rather more curled in on itself than only bent like the sword arm."

Lifting her right foot, she took a large step forwards while her left remained on the en garde line. Next she lifted both of her arms, raising her right up in front of her, her arm bent in the crook of her elbow. Her left arm was raised to the same height, but rather than simply bent at the elbow, it was curled in on itself in a graceful arch behind her back. This she thought must be the en garde position, or rather what the drawings had led her to believe was the en garde position. In reality, the step she'd taken was still too small, having her put her balance slightly on her front foot. Her torso was turned too much toward her opponent presenting her whole left side as an easy target, and she wasn't resting deep enough in her knees.

But Hermione didn't realize this when she settled into the position and looked at Snape expectantly. Not everything could be learned from books, however, although she had certainly tried to do so in the past and would thus have steadfastly denied this. But a drawing simply couldn't replace a teacher in that respect.

That was one lesson she had yet to learn.

"No," he simply said. "Why are you not doing what you are talking about so eloquently?"

"Sir?"

When she looked at him quizzically, genuinely puzzled as to what she could be doing wrong, he elaborated, "I can't see that anything in the books I gave you really penetrated that thick head of yours. I wonder what you must have done all this time since our last meeting? You certainly can't have been practising. You're doing it completely wrong. It looks ridiculous, and you would be *dead* within a minute."

She jumped, startled at his venom and very uneasy he took this so seriously. It was only a sport, right? No one ever was killed during a fencing match. At least she thought so. Her book had not covered competitions at all, save for the rules. And she still had no idea what she was doing wrong. The figure in the sketch had looked exactly the same when she'd looked into a mirror to check.

With an impatient sigh, he approached her and firmly rectified her stance, explaining all the while.

"Your feet are still too close together, impairing your balance. Take another smaller step forwards. No.... N...Yes, that's it. Now do it again correctly this time from the initial position to the en garde position."

She got it right on the fifth try. And didn't miss it again in the subsequent ten further tries he insisted on.

But that wasn't all he had to criticise.

"You're also not resting deep enough in your knees, and your balance is not centered yet. Bend your knees some more and both to the same level. No, deeper. Deeper. Yes, exactly."

She only barely suppressed a groan. She was now resting very deeply in the knees, almost crouching. A minute and already her muscles were protesting vigorously. Again. She would be very sore the next morning.

And all that only covered footwork and balance. Her torso was still turned too much inside, toward her opponent, when it should have been as parallel to her feet as possible so that it was guarded.

The only thing she was doing correctly was the way she held her arms, which didn't say much about her ability at all.

Not to mention the thunderstorm of swirling emotions that was going on inside of her.

She froze when he started to touch her.

His hands gripped her waist firmly from where he was standing behind her and adjusted her posture. Tugging a little here, twisting a little there until he was satisfied her posture was correct now.

It wasn't an especially intimate touch. She could remember various instances with Viktor where he'd been far more daring than this simple, innocent touch. Even Harry and Ron had touched her like this and more, and it had not brought forth this kind of reaction.

She was disturbingly aware of him and his every move: the rustle of his waistcoat; his breath ruffling strands of her hair when he leaned in; the strange combination of soap, sandalwood and a scent uniquely his own assailed her senses and made her weak in the knees (fortunately for her it was useful in fencing); his smooth, deep voice washing over and holding her in thrall; and the pressure of his fingers as they moved against her cloth-covered skin.

She was flustered and breathing uneasily, her eyes half-closed.

There, one of his fingers moved as he explained and slipped from the t-shirt covering her waist onto the sliver of bare flesh peeking out between her shirt and her training pants.

The heat spiraling through her had her close her eyes, and a strangled noise was stuck in the back of her throat, wanting to escape. She didn't let it.

What the hell was going on? A crush was supposed to be fun, to keep one warm at night and not to have to feel too pathetic at having no one even to dream over. But this... She remembered her crush on Lockhart as much as she *didn't* want to and that had been completely different. She had been only thirteen at the time of course, but nevertheless. She was tingly and uncomfortable and all fluttery inside. This couldn't be right.

Couldn't she even crush on someone properly without having to look it up?!

He continued to correct her posture to his heart's content and then removed his hands from her person.

Although he was still in the room, the feeling of loneliness of something inherently, vitally important missing was staggering.

Not enough so for her to lose her balance, however; then he'd have had to touch her again. Pity. Or she could've fallen on her arse. Probably better this way then.

But it brought her back to the matter at hand. Fencing, en garde position. Right.

*Ok. So what now?*

"Now show me the lunge."

Now she was getting really nervous.

The lunge was the first attack a student learned. It was both very simple and not simple at once, for its execution seemed to be an art in itself. Like the en garde position, if executed wrong or rather sloppily, death was a sure consequence if one wasn't fast enough to flee.

She took a large step forwards, which was too large in fact, overbalancing and swaying a little, and rested low on her front leg, her weapon arm outstretched.

It didn't come as a surprise to her when he said, "What are you doing now? Is that supposed to be the lunge? You're overbalancing because the distance between your feet is too large. How will you ever get up from down there? Also you need to keep your left foot precisely in a ninety degree angle and on the floor, not to mention that you completely forgot that your free arm has to be extended as well."

Snape came over to her again and made her do it again until she had it right, his touch confusing her so much it took even longer than it normally would've taken her.

But again he wasn't quite finished. "Now that you know how you have to stand for the lunge so as not to be killed instantly, you need to know that there is such a thing as *Right of Way* in foil fencing, regulating who has the right to attack, which I'm sure you must've noticed, even reading over the unexciting passages," he commented with a sneer. "In foil fencing you need to observe the Right of Way, or even if you scored a hit, it would be worthless. For that you need to extend your weapon arm in a line of attack *before* actually falling into the lunge. Got it?"

She bit the inside of her cheek so as not to demonstrate how she *got it* on her teacher and nodded mutely.

Then he had her demonstrate that she really *got it*. He was satisfied with her performance after the tenth try. She was gritting her teeth by then, and her muscles were as sore as if she didn't have a muscle relaxing potion earlier.

What more would he make her do?

"Mm, that will do; for now. Parries now, if you please."

*Oh, dear.*

"Um, sir? I didn't really..."

"What? Do you mean to tell me that books are not in every way superior?" he asked with pure condescension and raised a brow arrogantly.

*That... That infuriating man!* she thought, flushing harder. Of all the people in the world, or at least at school, why did she have to fancy *him*? That line of thought was old, however, and not very productive, so she let it go as she always did.

With a stubborn toss of her head, she sank once again into the en garde position and proceeded to demonstrate the eight parries she knew at least as far as she had understood them herself. He corrected every parry she did, his touch overwhelming her just as it had done earlier and making it hard for her to concentrate on what he was telling her all the while.

Finally he stepped away from her, that part apparently finished. But what he said next made her panic from earlier seem like nothing indeed.

"While this was by no means perfect, it was nevertheless proof that you haven't lost your knack for memorising your textbooks. Now we will see if you can use what you have learned."

"Pardon?" She must've misunderstood. He didn't just say what she thought he had said.

"You understand me, get over to the other side of the piste. Now we will fight."

"But, sir! I don't know how to fight! I know nothing of how to attack or how to defend myself!"

"You know enough. You know the parries to defend yourself, and you cannot tell me you didn't understand the diagrams with regard to attacks. Now, use them!"

"But surely not as we are? We will have protective clothing, right?"

"I know enough about fencing to restrain myself from dealing you a fatal blow. For minor scrapes there are Healing charms. And if, as you say, you have no idea of attacking then it is most unlikely you will achieve a hit. Now get on with it!"

"You're insane! You cannot mean to go through with this with sharp foils, without masks, without protective clothing?!"

"You know my teaching methods: either you do as I tell you or there's the door. Choose. I don't have all day."

Of course she would stay. No matter how insane this was, he was her only hope. She was desperate now. Perhaps a match like this had some undefinable purpose and she just couldn't see its advantage at the moment. In any case, she would stay.

Shaking like a leaf, which was probably the worst condition to be in for a fight, she made her way over to the piste, positioning herself on the en garde line in the same position opposite Professor Snape.

Then she noticed several things simultaneously: that she had her wand in her hand instead of a foil and that he was standing on the on guard line on his side, but he was still standing straight as a board in the initial position, glaring at her furiously.

She straightened hastily back into the initial position when she remembered what started a bout: the salute.

"Sorry," she muttered. Now she'd probably offended him. Great. That didn't bode well for their bout at all.

Just as she was wondering how she could do the salute, not to mention fence without a foil, her wand which was still in her sword hand elongated, firmed and transformed into the sleek, gleaming metal of a training foil, complete with blade, coquille or guard, grip and pommel.

She smiled sheepishly as she thanked him, then fell into the initial position once more. She raised the blade until it was almost touching her face, staring at Snape in salute, then lowered it, raised and lowered it again in a sharp flourish.

With a sharp nod, he followed likewise, though his salute involved a slight loop before he lowered his blade a second time in the same sharp flourish as she had done. It was almost imperceptible, but noticeable if one paid attention. So he had his own salute. Interesting.

He hadn't criticised her on her salute, so she could assume it was one of the few things she had done correctly today. Oh, joy. It was at least something, she supposed.

"En garde."

She came suddenly back to the here and now when Snape fell into the en garde position opposite her, gracefully and without seeming to mind the strain on his thigh muscles at all. Immediately her apprehension and fear were back, and as she lowered herself into the en garde position as well, she saw her blade was trembling. Not good. Not good at all.

Snape stared at her intently for a moment, assessing her posture. Apparently satisfied for the moment, which she found ridiculous since if she didn't do this correctly now, it could be one of her last moments, he asked, "Ready?"

She felt like laughing hysterically, but nodded. She wished he would start already, the tension was becoming unbearable, and already she could feel sweat breaking out all over her body.

"Allez!"

For a long moment, neither of them moved, held back by the mounting tension in their bodies. Then all of a sudden everything happened very quickly.

He moved first, a step forward and a slight adjustment of the foil in his hand, blocking any attempt of an attack she might have made. She shrank back from him with a clumsy step, again overbalancing on her front leg, and whilst making sure she would not stumble, she was unprepared for his attack when it finally came.

Her brain supplied her with the correct name for the attack and the correct name for the most likely parry to that one, only didn't as helpfully remember what it looked like and how the devil she was supposed to do it from only reading that bloody book! So she blocked it as best as she could: she whacked his foil away as if they were both using swords instead. It reminded her very inappropriately of batting at a nasty and insistent fly.

And he continued in this vein, attacking with merely a lunge forward as if he didn't need to use another attack, as if she wasn't good enough for him to be bothered like this and forcing her to whack his foil away and to retreat.

Finally she noticed she was already behind the warning line, reminding her that she was about to stumble against the wall and lose consequently. Well, she was about to lose anyway, so she would try to at least once to attack him.

That next time he lunged forward, and she prepared to lunge as well, she overbalanced on her front foot and stumbled, and then something happened she hadn't read about in her book, or had been taught anywhere. She did it instinctively to defend herself because she saw his foil coming closer than it had come before dangerously close.

As she stumbled she braced herself on the ground with her free arm, crouched low, brought her head close to her breast bone with her chin touching her t-shirt-covered chest in an attempt to get her head out of the way of his sharp foil, raised her out-stretched sword arm and lunged. It was the first and only thing that came to her mind on how to defend herself. Due to the fact that he had just prepared a lunge, he hadn't protected the left side of his torso as he should have, and with her instinctive maneuver, in an attempt to parry his attack her foil whirled just past his own, she managed to scrape him on his free arm, the blade of her foil slicing through the cloth of his waistcoat, his shirt underneath and through his skin, drawing blood.

They were both stunned at what had happened, he because he had not had time to react to her stumble and subsequent defence, which was in fact *passatta sotto* attack, though crudely executed; and she because in her attempt to defend herself, she had unintentionally managed to achieve a hit.

Then she saw blood peeking through the gap in his clothes, seeping from a narrow gash into the dark cloth of his clothes, staining his white shirt underneath a deep red.

Staring at that sliver of white, drenched in red, she stood up dizzily, belatedly realizing that she was breathing so fast she was close to hyperventilating. Shaking from head to toe, she finally wrenched her gaze free from his wound.

*I hurt him. I could've killed him! I'm no better than... I have... just like...*

The last hold she'd had on her fragile control snapped. With a heart-wrenching sob she threw her foil or rather her transfigured wand to the ground, turned around and ran so fast as if all the hounds of hell were behind her. And in a way they were. For her at least.

He ran after her as quickly, having expected this development, and caught her just as she made to open the door. He barrelled into her, kicking the door shut with the force of both their bodies' impact. He grabbed her arm, wrenched her around in a vice-like grip and slammed her against the wall beside the door, roughly holding her arms against it to each side of her head, and immobilizing her with his body pressing her against the wall.

"Oh, no. You won't run this time!" he rasped in her ear, looking down on her from his position above her.

She gasped and looked at him in horror, not really seeing him but Dolohov and the other Death Eaters in the Department of Mysteries, and frantically struggling against his hold on her.

"Let me go, you piece of filth!"

"It's me, Severus Snape. I'm neither Dolohov, Malfoy, Jugson or Rookwood. Not Avery, Nott or Mulciber. Not one of the Lestranges, and not Crabbe or Macnair. I am Severus Snape, your teacher, and we are here at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, you are safe," he continued talking to her as if she were a shying horse, to make her come back to herself. The tension in her body subsided slightly and her struggling ceased. When he saw her begin to register where she was and who he was, he took advantage of the fact that her inner defenses were still down and asked her forcefully, "You spoke of making amends to Weasley the other day. You didn't mean just being allowed to do magic, did you?"

At her agonized expression he knew he'd struck gold. Now to get her to tell him.

She shook her head to stave him off, although deep down she knew it wouldn't work on him and that it was too late anyway. This time, she couldn't hold it back anymore. This time there would be no escape.

Tears began to pour down her cheeks before she even realised. Tears worked all right with Harry and Ron, but Snape had to be immune to them since he didn't show the slightest reaction to hers.

She shook her head again as if willing herself to forget, to make it all undone.

"Dammit! Don't shut yourself away! Do you think that helps? Would you feel like this, behave like this, if it did after all these weeks? Just stop and spit it out, you stupid girl!"

"You're right! I am a stupid little girl! If I wasn't, none of this would've happened!"

"None of what wouldn't have happened?"

"It's my fault!"

"What's your fault?" And that last question was the final straw and had her story gushing out of her like a waterfall.

"It's my fault! I'm the responsible one. I'm the brain. I'm the one who plans ahead, who gets the others out of trouble. They always depend on me. Whenever they are going to do something stupid it falls to me to keep them from getting killed. I knew what Harry wanted to do from the beginning. I should have come up with a better plan. A better plan than six *children* barging into the Ministry without backup intent on saving a grown man from Death Eaters! I could only think of getting Umbridge out of the way. It didn't even occur to me to get someone for you. I just remember thinking "Stay with Harry. Stay with him or he'll do something stupid." Over and over. All of us were hexed and cursed. Sirius... is dead. Harry and Dumbledore could've been killed as well! Your cover could've blown! And because of what? A stupid little girl couldn't even turn her brain on long enough to think!

"I'm supposed to be reasonable, to think things through from the beginning, yet I went along with that half-cocked plan and didn't even think about alerting you the last Order member at Hogwarts until Harry yelled at you in the Headmaster's office! Me! The supposed 'brightest witch of her age'! Hah! I should've put a stop to it! Why didn't I just *Stupefy* Harry or at least try to convince him further? Tried to come up with a better plan? No, all I could come up with was that stupid plan how to get into the Headmaster's office to contact Headquarters which almost blew everything!" she yelled at him or rather at herself. She'd stopped noticing he was pressing her against the wall when she'd started her tirade. Now that she was finished, she sagged in on herself, held up only by his arms. His grip had slackened as soon as she had stopped struggling.

"It's all my fault."

"Your fault," he repeated flatly, and she was reminded of a parrot. It almost made her smile.

"Well, not only. I'm not as arrogant as that. But I could've prevented all of it. Somehow," she insisted, tears still flowing freely. She didn't even notice when the pressure on her arms and the rest of her body vanished as he put some distance between them.

"Well, I'm glad to hear that at least one of the infamous Trio is finally ready to accept responsibility for her actions."

"Then you... believe it, too?" she asked, afraid to have misunderstood, afraid to have not. She looked strangely torn between a combination of relief and despair at his

admission.

"That's what you wanted to hear, wasn't it? No false reassurances, no pretense. Well, there I give you the honest truth. You are right. You bear some responsibility for what happened at the Ministry. But so do a lot of people, among them the Headmaster, almost all Order members, myself of course and even Potter and Weasley. All of our actions from that night and from the months before led directly to it. We are all guilty, some more than others. Everything we do or don't do affects the world we live in. It is very easy to claim we have no responsibility for the consequences of our actions, if we don't draw the dagger ourselves to kill someone. And yet in the end we *are* responsible.

"In the end those who face up to these consequences and their part in them will be richer in experience. A painful one occasionally like this one, but eventually, you will be the one to profit from these experiences and will be able to grow beyond yourself. The others will be stuck in the effort to deny their part in unpleasant things and waste energy and stay the way they are: little, pisen, and small minded. You can still become the 'brightest witch of her age' as long as you face up to what is inevitable: that everything we do affects our environment; actions have consequences, for which we are responsible, no matter how little we might like it."

"But what am I supposed to do now? This guilt is tearing me apart and eating me up from the inside! I can't sleep. I can barely eat. I can't think! How do you cope?" she asked, the desperation creeping back into her voice and, without realising it, began to tear at her shirt.

"What makes you ask that? There is nothing for me to cope with."

"Liar!" she countered immediately, although how she could tell, she had no idea. She just... knew. It was the same with the observations that followed her exclamation. "I can sense it. I can feel the guilt eating you up from the inside! Just like it does me, only worse." Her eyes widened as she realized. She stumbled towards him until they were only a few feet apart.

"You've killed! Tell me what to do to lessen this agony and I will! Please, *please* help me," she begged, closing the distance between them and raising her arms towards him, her fingers curled around the cloth of his waistcoat covering his arms and hanging onto him for dear life.

With an incensed glare, he took hold of her hands, roughly pried them from his clothes and shoved her violently away from him.

"How dare you! No student will question me like this. You forget your place, Miss Granger."

"My *place*? And where exactly might that place be? To you I'm your student; to the other teachers I'm someone else's student and not their responsibility; to the students I'm an adult one of you but in reality my place is among neither. And since I am neither there is no place for me to forget. So I can question you to my heart's content!" she all but screeched at him in a shrill voice.

"That may be right. Receiving answers to your questions is another matter entirely, however," he replied coldly, then asked, looking at her speculatively, "... What did you mean by *felt it*?"

"I don't know. I could sense it as I spoke."

"I see," he said, giving her a strange look.

"Please. I'm not whole anymore. I don't know what to do anymore. Nothing helps. Please, I know you can help me. I will do anything! I just... I can't stand it anymore."

With a sudden cold fury in his eyes, he stared at her for a long time until he spoke suddenly, brusquely and very quietly; almost against his will.

"Do you accept responsibility for the consequences of your actions?" he asked her in a strangely stiff and very formal manner. It had an almost ritualistic quality to it to her ears.

"I do," the answer burst forth before she even thought it, as if it had a will of its own.

"Will you face the consequences as they are brought before you?"

"I will."

"Without exception?"

"Without exception," she agreed, and though she had no idea what exactly she had just agreed to, it had felt right. So indescribably right.

Snape gave a choked sort of noise, but when she looked at him, he seemed as composed as ever.

"So be it," he said quietly, and somehow she felt the weight on her shoulders that had pressed down on her ever more in the past few weeks lessen.

Her mind cleared in a way she seldom experienced anymore, and she wondered what had just happened.

Had he really invoked some sort of ritual to help her?

In hindsight, his questions and the way he'd asked them sounded very much like a ritual, although it had seemed perfectly normal to her at the time.

Three pleas and three questions which had received three positive answers. Three times three.

Three was a number with very powerful magical properties and was used very often in rituals of vows, bonds and magical promises, that much she knew. Whatever ritual it was, it was now set in motion. There was nothing she could do about it now, even had she wanted to, but accept and wait what would happen.

She didn't know what was going on with her, but she wanted it to stop. A feeling of being torn from limb to limb, only not physically that description did and didn't make sense at the same time was her constant companion since the skirmish in the Department of Mysteries. Only it seemed to be getting worse with each passing day.

She had tried to ignore it, had tried to keep busy, but that hadn't been as easy as one would think. Her every attempt had been thwarted.

She was prepared to do *anything* to make this feeling stop. So she could finally feel normal again. She was afraid if it didn't stop soon, she would go mad. That was one of her greatest fears. To be aware of the outside world but not being able to interact with it properly, to communicate with it, and to use the brain she was so famous for.

Lost in her contemplation, she studied the floor absent-mindedly. She turned her attention back to the man in front of her.

She gasped, then frowned in confusion.

For a moment there, she could've sworn he had looked at her with a mixture of compassion and concern, but after a second it was gone, replaced by his usual impenetrable mask of indifference.

Just when she tried to dare to ask him about it, he asked her in a confusingly nonchalant manner, "Now what was so hard about telling someone of your feelings on the matter?"

"You must be joking! What was not hard about telling you all of this?!"

"I fail to see your point. Are 'friends' not for confiding in? I don't have a lot of experience with the dubious concept of friendship but isn't *trust* a fundamental component a necessary requirement?"

She flushed bright red with fury.

"First of all, until recently you've only ever been a complete bastard to me and my friends, so why should I tell *you* of all people anything? And my 'friends' of whom you speak with so much derision, have enough on their plates right now without my problems to add to them. Harry's just lost another person close to him. I didn't want to burden him. And do I really have to outline why I wouldn't confide in Ron?! The subject of Ron is self-explanatory, I think, and the others..." she exhaled raggedly, "I just couldn't."

"Ah, I see. You didn't want them to placate you, but you didn't want them to be honest with you either."

She gaped at him.

"How dare you judge others so harshly and never let others criticise you, you hypocrite!"

He wasn't rattled by her outburst in any way, which only infuriated her more. It wasn't that she wanted him to be angry, but this simply wasn't normal behaviour. He was holding himself back, manipulating her again. If only he wasn't so damnably considerate and understanding.

He merely replied calmly, "It is correct that I don't let myself be criticised by or in front of students. To allow that would ruin my authority. How dare *you* presume to judge *me* with the meager information you have? Your speculations about me are not proof, and you don't know me in any way other than in my capacity as your teacher. You have no idea what I might let others do. Kindly remember that in the future."

Throughout this admonishment he kept his calm, which made her anger and humiliation all the worse.

"However that is not the point right now. It is all right to feel conflicted. Not every problem has a perfect solution. That you feel unsure of what you want to hear shows that you are only human. No one likes to be hurt voluntarily and consciously. However, that you are not simply denying the truth about your guilt with regard to Black's demise shows that you also have a strong sense of responsibility and that you indeed use the head on your shoulders; compared to some others I could name."

She couldn't seem to get her mouth closed, she was so astonished.

"Why are you being so nice to me? What is it you really want? Can't you stop being manipulative for even one minute and try to get what you want simply by asking for it? Do you even know who you really are anymore underneath all those roles you play?" she demanded hotly.

Caught off guard, his quiet, "No," slipped out before he could stop it. Shocked as he was at his slip, he was nevertheless pleasantly surprised that she continued to be perceptive even when she was distraught.

So it had already worked. Good. That could work to all of their advantage.

"I see. Of course I can 'cut the bullshit', so to speak, and behave like your mean professor if that makes you more comfortable," he sneered at her.

"You just don't get it, do you? There's no need to pretend. There's no one here to betray you!"

"Oh, but there is, Miss Granger."

She recoiled as if he had just hit her.

She would never voluntarily betray him! How could he think she would put another life in danger, especially after what happened to Sirius? Why would he...

These thoughts chased each other until they stopped abruptly when her brain engaged.

He hadn't mentioned *who* it was who could betray him. There were *two* people in the room right now. In her self-bashing mood she'd automatically assumed he meant *her*. But all things considered, it could also be that he meant himself. Occlumency. Of course.

God, what a life must that be like? Unable to trust anyone, to let anyone close for fear he might slip up one day? To trust only his instincts and never his emotions? To be all alone all the time?

Her fury abated as she contemplated his life and suddenly she felt very weary.

"I'm sorry. I understand. I hadn't considered... This must be a very difficult situation for you."

And she'd surprised him again. She definitely had potential. But how to get her to develop it further without her knowledge until he knew for certain she was suitable?

A curious problem that would need further thinking on.

"I just wished you could just once say honestly what you want. Who knows? I just might surprise you."

He just barely suppressed a snort. She already had in more ways than one. Not that he could tell her that. Like so many things it was safer she didn't know about it.

"I don't like to be manipulated."

"Then you should be more exacting with the company you keep, Miss Granger. Besides, it worked, didn't it?"

While the first comment almost had her laugh out loud, a slight frown was marring her forehead at the second. Nevertheless she nodded slowly in agreement.

"This evening was a lesson for you; not the lesson I had planned to give you, but a valuable one indeed. I hope you will linger on it and reflect what you have learned tonight, both about yourself as well as fencing.

"It is not wise to have secrets which are harmful to your well-being. Humans need other people. We are not a solitary kind. And sometimes it is better to confide in someone, even if they are not our first choice. It makes life easier.

"As for fencing. Aside from the corrections I made to your posture in each position, I need you to know that this was not a real lesson. At least not the way I have them in mind. This time here tonight served the purpose of drawing the secret that was eating you up from the inside out of your shell. We will never bout again until you are ready. That is usually not until about half a year to a year into the lessons.

"So rest assured I won't abuse my power in this subject like this again. It was a necessary evil, I'm afraid, Miss Granger. Since this was not a real lesson, and there will possibly not be a lesson on Friday, we will meet here again at the same time tomorrow night. In that lesson I will teach you about your protective garb, some exercises for footwork and parries and possibly some of the attacks. But that depends on your progress alone, Miss Granger.

"Now on to another matter," he said cryptically, snapped his fingers, and a small glass jar filled with a white cream appeared in his palm.

"Apply this every hour to the affected area. It will heal slowly but it will. And you will do it, or I will do it for you," he told her ominously, and for a moment, she didn't know what he meant. Then she paled and blushed at the same time, which was quite a feat to be sure. She chanced a look at the front of her shirt, and sure enough, there were traces of blood spattered on the grey fabric. She grabbed it with both her hands and tried to hold it off her body, self-consciously trying not to look at him when she snatched the jar from his hand.

"Now I will bid you good night."

She was slightly stumped that he was basically throwing her out without an explanation and still somewhat dazed by the events of the evening when she noticed the split cloth of his waistcoat at his left shoulder. The wound that had turned everything upside-down for her.

"What about your wound, sir?" she asked very quietly.

He started and looked down at his upper left arm, where his clothing was cut.

"Oh, that. Look what magic is good for, Miss Granger," he said cryptically and said very clearly, "*Finite Incantatem*."

A change of atmosphere rippled through the air, leaving her breathless with the loss of... something that had been there a moment ago and had apparently been there the whole time she'd spent in this room tonight. She watched his form intently to see what this was all about and saw quite clearly the blood and the wound it originated from disappear, leaving only the ripped clothing behind as the sole proof she had wounded him in the first place.

"See? Nothing happened; you didn't hurt me. I'm fine," he explained in a strangely reassuring manner, transfigured his foil back into his wand along with hers that was still lying on the floor a few feet away from her, and continued, tapping his wand once on his ripped clothes, "Now the only thing that remains, is *Reparo*," and the rip mended itself smoothly. An instant later he looked as immaculate as ever.

"Professor, how..."

"Ah, ah, I can't reveal all my secrets at once. Rest assured it is a form of protection, for just this contingency. Now go to bed, Miss Granger."

She looked at him for a long moment, wondering if there was something left to say. Then she turned around, picked up her wand from the floor and left the room without a backward glance.

\* \* \*

A/N: Well? What do you think? Many already guessed as to the reason for Hermione's guilt, but I think it's probable anyway. I assure you though that there's more to it.

The title is derived from another song. Care to guess?

Now that you are all finished with the chapter, I apologise to all you who know about fencing for any mistakes you may find in my portrayal of a faux-lesson and a bout. I had a fencing beta and after she had the chapter she simply never replied to any of my mails. If you find a mistake, or would be willing to step in for future chapters as a sounding board, mail me! I'd appreciate it.

And before anyone thinks of flaming me about Snape's reaction to Hermione's confession, I was inspired to that scene from the book "The Bee-keeper's Apprentice" by Laurie R. King, which dealt with a similar matter. It's a brilliant book on an older Sherlock Holmes, for anyone who's interested. I just thought it was a more unusual reaction one could have in such a situation, and struck me of Snape. I hope I have explained it sufficiently enough in context for no one to become offended. If that isn't so, please tell me and I will try to rectify that.

Up next: Another conversation - and not between Hermione and Snape!

## Chapter 10: King and Queen

*Chapter 11 of 14*

After the events in the Department of Mysteries, Hermione finds it hard to cope and receives help from someone unexpected. When a friendship of a sort develops, will it survive the events of the Lightning-Struck Tower? Will an ancient ritual help the Light win the war or will it destroy everything? An HG/SS romance. Not DH compliant.

Disclaimer: All you recognise is not mine.

A/N: Thanks for all of your kind reviews. They really pulled me up. :)

I hope you enjoy this chapter as well. I wonder what you will make of it since the plot is starting to thicken, so to speak. :)

Thanks for the Latin to Soul\_Bound. She kept me from being too cheesy. LOL

Also thanks to enchanter. She found a plot-hole of mine, which I have since corrected. Thank you so much! If anyone else finds one of those, please tell me!

Thanks as always to my betas, Ladyinthecloak and lux\_astraea, who is newly with me on 'Wicked' to replace SnarkyRoxxy. Snark sadly had to step down, but I hope that she won't leave HP fandom for good. Thanks also to Bi, my greatest fan and cheerleader when I'm down, and my little one, for being incredibly patient with me.

\* \* \*

### Chapter 10: King and Queen

Hermione slowly made her way down the stairs from the attic, mind buzzing with all that had happened. After that night practising with the foil, her wand suddenly felt slightly foreign, something which had never happened to her before. Even after a summer of not using it, it always felt like seeing Ron or Harry again: a sort of pleased surprise and a never-ending source of comfort.

But now... It was strange. She rolled her wand over and over in her palm, stroking, rubbing, her touch whispering over the smooth vine wood, trying to get the feel of it back. Finally she grew impatient, tired as she was, and decided to cast a spell.



"*Scourgify*," she said, directing her wand at the small dots of dried blood on her T-shirt. They vanished, but it felt a little strange.

She yawned loudly, holding the other hand in front of her mouth as she descended the next flight of stairs, still musing about the peculiarities of spell-casting with her wand, when...

"Jimbo! What have you done with your pants?"

She squeaked loudly and in a very undignified fashion, like a strangled mouse.

"Ron! Do you have to startle me like that?" she huffed, annoyed, without thinking. Then she remembered that their relationship was a little tense at the moment and just barely kept herself from groaning aloud. She just wanted to go to bed and sleep for all eternity.

"Of course. Someone has to," Ron replied with a tense smile, and for an insane second she wanted nothing more than to launch herself into his arms, tell him the whole sorry mess she'd made of herself and cry until everything was better. It was a seductive thought, especially since she knew that he had feelings for her. But the second passed, and she wanted to go to bed before her tired mind did something incredibly stupid.

"What are you doing up? And why are your pants so... dirty?" he asked, and only then did she understand what he'd meant. She looked down at the remnants of her training pants. They were not only grass-stained, but muddy as well. She doubted even a *Scourgify* would get out the stains. Only with a supreme effort did she manage to hold back a frustrated groan. Maybe Molly could help. With a band of boys, she was sure to know a spell for that.

"Nothing. I... sleepwalked," she improvised lamely, but once he started, he was like a dog with a bone: he wouldn't stop until he'd gotten to the bottom of it all. But sleepwalking was a good excuse you could neither prove nor disprove. It was a wonder she thought of even this much in her current state.

"Into the attic?"

She shrugged, glad she'd gotten rid of the bloody spots on her shirt before he'd appeared.

"And into the backyard apparently," Ron continued sceptically with a look at her dirty training pants. "What were you really up to?"

It took all of her self control to not sigh impatiently just then. "Ron, I'm really tired. Can we continue this lovely interrogation tomorrow?" she asked with more bite than she'd wanted, but she was tired, so very tired right then.

Apparently it was the one acceptable response she could've given, for he immediately looked sheepish and nodded. But just before she could say, "Good night," to him, his gaze grew thoughtful and nervous, and she panicked.

*Oh, no, he wouldn't. Not now! But it would be just like him to pick the one moment for the Talk that is the most inconvenient.*

Although she was more than ready to bite his head off and make him hate her once and for all (she was very emotional still; that and extreme tiredness can do that to you), she just sighed quietly when he started, "Mio... I mean, Hermione, I..."

She did her best to look patient and inviting to midnight conversation. "Yes, Ron?" she even added with what she hoped could pass as an encouraging smile.

That apparently did it.

He immediately backed off again, a panicked look on his face, "Uh... never mind. Good night, Hermione," he said and quickly trudged into the direction of his and Harry's room.

She blinked. *No! It can't be... that is brilliant. Simply brilliant.*

She had to remember that. He apparently thought better of trying to talk to her whenever she acted as if she were willing to entertain the idea of a relationship with him!

How... twisted.

*Poor Ron*, she actually managed to think. Good thing she didn't want him anymore, or she'd become seriously frustrated with him again. Honestly, to behave like that!

She tsked and, swaying slightly, made her way to her room as silently as possible so as not to wake Ginny and collapsed on her bed, already half-asleep when she hit the covers.

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Only twenty minutes later a tall form dressed in a shabby, mud brown cloak strode in a cloud of soot out of the fireplace into the Headmaster's office at Hogwarts.

Dumbledore looked up from the parchment he had been perusing when his guest arrived.

The other man *Evanescodes* any trace of dirt from his person with a silent flick of his wand. Then he raised his eyes at the old man before him, an unreadable expression on his face.

"Good evening, Severus. Please sit down," Dumbledore said and motioned Snape forward to one of the high winged-back chairs upholstered in fanciful colours and which were totally mismatched in front of his desk. Snape walked cautiously over to the one on the left, which was farthest from the door, and sank wearily down into it.

His eyes surveyed the room with its eccentric instruments, nosy paintings and its two occupants with one swift glance. It was easy to forget that he wasn't still sixteen and here to be punished. Easy that was until one looked at Dumbledore more closely. His hair and beard were whiter, and he looked more tired and resigned than he had back then. Then there was the matter of his right hand.

"So? How did it go?" Dumbledore said into the cold silence.

When after a long moment Snape continued to stare at his desk, Dumbledore knew something had happened, but decided to prod the other man into speaking regardless.

"I presume there is something you wish to tell me for you to actually visit me?"

Snape's head whirled around and he shot him a sharp glance. That had been unnecessary.

"So, have you been able to assess her potential?"

Snape nodded. "Indeed, I have. In my opinion she is ready. Time to put that overactive brain of hers to good use."

"Ah, very good. I had hoped for this. Miss Granger is a singularly intelligent and clever young woman."

Snape nodded again. This time very slowly, however, while staring into space.

The contemplative silence of the younger man and his intense study of one of the countless whirring gadgets in the room told Dumbledore there was more.

"Severus?"

"There are... complications."

"Ah, yes. You mentioned she was keeping something from you."

"She has been feeling guilty about the ramifications of their little sojourn to the Department of Mysteries. To be exact, she's been feeling guilty about Black's untimely demise and her role in it."

"Then your suspicions proved correct."

Snape shot him a glare. "My suspicions didn't even come close, I'm afraid. She has taken the responsibility for Black's death upon herself. She has invoked the *Ritus Ultionis*."

"How... unusual. Had she already done so, or did she do it in your presence?"

"I was present. She fulfilled all the requirements."

"But how...?"

"I don't know. I personally made sure that no book either here or at Grimmauld Place would contain this kind of arcane magic. That fact coupled with the way she spoke the invocation suggests to me that she knew *instinctively* which words to use." Snape let this unconventional theory fall on the table between them with a pointed look. "It was very unsettling," he added, turning his gaze away, looking about the room, clearly uneasy, before coming to rest on the Headmaster again.

"I'm sure it must have been. It's a disturbing experience to literally hold another person's life in your hand. I find it very curious, however, that she chose *you* of all people as her Witness, don't you think?"

Snape looked abruptly away.

Dumbledore sighed, then thoughtfully began to stroke his long, white beard.

"How very... interesting. And her being a Muggle-born. Were she of pure-blood or even half-blood descent, one could argue that even had she never heard of this particular ritual, she would have heard about other, similar ones and would know the basic procedure. But the way it stands, her clandestine sojourns to the Restricted Section could not have led her in this direction, and there are no other ways she could've learned of it. If that is indeed true, it could be one more clue to our puzzle. We know already that magic has a will of its own, or rather that it obeys *Her* will. But I'm becoming more and more convinced that magic sometimes really comes to those who seek it. How could she have known about the *Ritus Ultionis* otherwise? How could Lily Potter have known what to do that night? And how could Riddle..."

"Do you have to speak his name? I'm grateful for every chance I have to be outside his awareness, and yet you persist in..." Snape hissed angrily.

"Severus, you know very well why this has to be so, especially now," Dumbledore reminded him, adjusting the sleeve over his blackened hand with his left.

"Outwardly nothing can change. He mustn't know that I am aware of what is to come, or all will fail."

"Headmaster, I know several individuals with excellent libraries specialised in unusual branches of magic. If you would only give me permission to contact them, I could..." Snape began tentatively only to be cut off by the Headmaster.

"Severus, I have made my decision. There is more at stake here than one life."

"What about them? They are still only children, but for everything going according to plan, they will have to search for and destroy each one. They could easily come to the same conclusion you did or at least one of them and then what? They have served their purpose? If only the three of them are to do it, we need to know the way to prevent the backlash, or stop it, or there may not even be one of them left to fight the Dark Lord let alone Potter."

"I agree, Severus. You may contact any individuals you deem necessary after the current matter is resolved and in a way that won't blow your cover."

Snape gritted his teeth, but didn't bother to protest.

"That means we have to find a suitable candidate for the role of the Avenger. Anyone in particular coming to mind?"

"I know none of Black's relatives who can be trusted, who aren't dancing on his grave, not to mention someone who wouldn't take advantage of the situation and kill her for sport during the ritual; and fulfill the necessary requirements of course."

"What about Nymphadora?"

Snape snorted. "This is a serious business. Miss Granger will not be able to withstand the pressure for much longer. The ritual will have to be performed as soon as possible. We can't trust Tonks to follow it. She won't be able to do it. She's too soft. Unless she does it while tripping over something. We could build a parcours if you're willing?" Snape suggested sarcastically.

"Too soft like Molly you mean?" Dumbledore asked, ignoring the other man's sarcasm, then let the matter drop at the other man's icy glare.

"By all means ask her. But don't be surprised if it doesn't work. It's not as if Miss Granger's life is in any way important," Snape commented, bitter sarcasm veritably dripping from his mouth now.

"Good," Dumbledore replied, once more ignoring Snape's comments, "So the *Ritus Ultionis*, a Recognition and the induction ceremony all within one week. That will be hard on Miss Granger."

Snape nodded with a strangely grave look on his normally expressionless face. "Indeed. If the ritual works."

"Of course it will work. We must think positively. The alternative doesn't bear thinking about."

"To lose one so bright to madness would be a shame, indeed," Snape replied with a dark look on his face.

"Don't you find it curious that we are awash in pledges and oaths, vows and bonds this year?"

"You ask that as if it's a good thing."

"I think it might be. Magical promises like these are very powerful, as you well know. The power words hold in our world is immeasurable. It may be a sign that the importance of the power of words is going to increase significantly this year. It could be a sign that the *Ways of Old* are going to be brought back."

"Are you mad? The Ministry might be incompetent and full of bureaucracy and corruption, but in the Days of Old people were killing each other left, right and centre for power!"

"That is not quite accurate, Severus; you didn't listen to Professor Binns' classes back then, eh?"

"Does anyone listen to that old ghost?" Snape muttered disparagingly.

Dumbledore chuckled, but his eyes were serious. "Probably not. But we won't get rid of him, so he might as well do something useful."

"Useful indeed. He's managed to instill an unparalleled hatred for History of Magic in the hearts of every student he taught even before he died. Quite an achievement. Not even I managed that."

"But then your subject is hard to really hate. The magic of the simmering cauldron..." Dumbledore trailed off in his teasing and came back to his original train of thought. "Severus, you were too young to remember, and even then it wasn't the same as when I was a boy, but to feel the air literally crackling with magical energy simply because of a word being spoken... It was breath-taking and awe-inspiring. But these days have long passed. The Earth and She are getting tired of us. The Wizarding population is fast declining, and the magic is slowly disappearing. It is undoubtedly hard for you to think about the Days of Old, considering your family history."

"The Clans had too much power and greedy as they were, abused it continuously. But the Clans as they were meant to be, ruled for over a thousand years before the lust for power corrupted them. They kept the families together, upheld traditions received from Her personally before our people could even measure time. The *Ways of Old* are very powerful and are not to be underestimated. They could help us if we are careful. All these recent events involving binding magic are too conspicuous to be coincidental. Perhaps we have received a sign. Maybe it is time to find comfort in old values and rituals once again."

Snape looked at him for a long moment, thinking. Then he nodded. "Perhaps."

"In any case we should focus more on the traditional Sabbaths and celebrations this coming year, starting with Miss Granger's series of rituals. It could make a difference."

"You will have to advise us on how best to do so. I doubt that any other living member of the Order has had any personal experience with the festivities and traditions as they were meant to be."

"I will give you and Minerva access to books and scrolls of accounts on such rituals. And I will add what I can. Pity we missed Midsummer and Lughnassadh. But then our organisation is not yet as populated with younger folk that would make such a celebration an experience indeed," Dumbledore ended with a smile, his gaze faraway as he was clearly thinking of one of those sacred holidays he had partaken of himself once upon a time.

Snape tried very hard not to think about the implications.

A pause, then Dumbledore asked thoughtfully, "You said she *met* the requirements?"

"Yes. She's been neglecting herself, punishing herself. She didn't sleep until I gave her something of my own creation, she doesn't eat much, and she... The wound she received in the battle from Dolohov; she should have gone to a weekly check-up with Poppy. She hasn't. And she hasn't treated the wound herself at all. It was still open and bleeding when I left her."

"That was what she intended, subconsciously, though, wasn't it?"

"Of course, but I'll be damned if I let that girl kill herself over..." He took in a rattled breath and exhaled slowly. "Never mind. I gave her a salve which should heal the wound in a matter of weeks. Perhaps she won't even retain a scar."

"How exactly did you get her to confide in you? I would have thought your role would be enough to dissuade her from even thinking about doing so?" Dumbledore inquired curiously.

"It was. Especially with the *Ritus Ultionis* gnawing at her sanity. But I have my methods. You know that."

Dumbledore merely looked at him curiously.

"I didn't hurt her for heaven's sake!" Snape felt compelled to defend himself. "I was rough, but she won't even retain a bruise. It was necessary."

"I didn't say it wasn't, my friend. In all your time as a teacher at this school, not one student has come to harm when you could have prevented it... So what did you do?"

Snape hesitated, which spoke volumes in itself. "... reinstated the Club. It seemed the best way to get her to open up to me."

"The Gobstones Club? Very interesting and fitting I suppose. And how is she faring? Nothing less than brilliant of course."

"Well, while it is clear that physical pursuits are not her forte, she is improving quickly. Nevertheless, she is still under-worked. Her usual pursuits do not satisfy her anymore. And should the ritual be successful, she will need an occupation more than ever. In my opinion she is now ready to explore her true potential."

"I see. What do you suggest?"

"Let her have a duty that demands her particular skills while honing the skills she does not yet possess. All of you always talk about her being the 'brightest witch of her age', but although she admittedly has the potential, it will have to be developed so she can make use of it. She could be a singularly powerful witch if we only take the trouble to train her."

Dumbledore nodded slowly, stroking his beard thoughtfully.

"Which subjects?"

"Push her limits. All of her best subjects well beyond the advanced levels: Transfiguration, Charms, Potions, with special emphasis on Defense Against the Dark Arts and the Dark Arts themselves; plus the usual training after the ceremony."

"Defense Against the Dark Arts and the Dark Arts. What do you have in mind?"

"I have nothing unusual in mind, but for what is to come, *someone* will have to be prepared. Potter will never be able to do it alone. He will need help. And she is ideally suited for that purpose. We may also need a back-up plan, just in case."

"For what purpose?"

"You underestimate Potter's hatred of me. If I am to help them, they need to be convinced of my loyalty first. After... It won't be easy." Snape forced out, grabbing the armrests of his chair tightly.

"And considering what lies ahead, to know that there is someone to be trusted should the plan fail would greatly reassure ~~me~~ if it doesn't you," he replied icily.

Dumbledore studied him thoughtfully.

After a contemplative silence on Dumbledore's part, during which the younger man managed to compose himself again, Dumbledore asked, "What of Miss Granger? Does she trust you?"

"I think so, but warily. Once she was free of the approaching madness for a short while, she displayed a knack for analysis and a preference for using and trusting logic over emotions. She could be useful."

"Very useful if what you said is true."

"You want her to spy on Potter," Snape stated flatly.

"It would be the best way to keep tabs on the boy. He has a way of being where he shouldn't."

"And how pray tell are you going to get her to spy on her two best friends? Tell me when you decide to break the news to her. It should prove to be entertaining."

"Oh, you will be there. Tell me if you found it entertaining."

"I won't..."

"Before you continue that sentence, I think I have to remind you again of the consequ..."

"No... Of course you don't," Snape cut him off bitterly. "Damn you."

"Grindelwald became the most powerful wizard of his time because I didn't stop him in time. The same happened with Tom. I won't allow it to happen a third time. Understood?" It wasn't a question, not really.

Snape could've said that he thought these two wizards became so powerful because the Headmaster had an unfortunate habit of giving out lots of second chances to those who were undeserving while ignoring those who were deserving, but for two reasons he held his tongue. One reason he didn't wish to think about, while the other was one he never forgot: he, too, had been undeserving of a second chance when he had been granted it.

"Of course, Headmaster. I apologise."

"There's no need. No one said it wouldn't be difficult. You have a right to feel that way. But our plans have to be in place in time, or all will be lost."

Snape nodded in resignation.

Dumbledore watched him carefully and finally offered him one of his sweets.

"Liquorice Snap?"

Snape hesitated before taking one out of the glass bowl.

"I believe this one time I need one. But don't get used to it."

Dumbledore chuckled.

"I wouldn't dream of doing so."

A long moment passed while they chewed on their sweets in silence. Then they both got up at the same time.

"I will take my leave now. I am 'expected' at home," he bit out in disgust at the thought of Wormtail.

Dumbledore looked at him in concern, but then thought better of broaching another sensitive subject tonight. Perhaps an alternative arrangement could be found in this case.

"Of course. How will you get her to fall in with our plans?"

"I think I will use your approach. It has been most effective, wouldn't you say?"

Dumbledore looked at him in concern.

"Indeed. Just keep in mind that she is merely an eighteen-year-old with a serious case of guilt, whilst you were a bitter, suicidal twenty-year-old Death Eater. You will have to allow for some difference in your approach."

"I will keep that in mind. Good night, Albus."

"Good night, Severus."

Snape left, closing the door softly behind him.

The mask Dumbledore had been wearing throughout the meeting crumbled in a matter of seconds until only a very old and tired man was sitting in his place, looking weary, sad and full of regrets all at once.

Under the eyes of his watchful familiar, the man sat staring into the fire in the hearth until light filtered through the curtains covering the windows from outside.

He never went to bed that night.

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A/N: Well, I'm curious what your theories are on what they talked about exactly. And that ritual? Wonder what you make of that...

I would also be interested to know what you make of the title of this chapter. I had a hard time coming up with one till this one just popped into my head. Am very pleased with it now.

Since a WIP poses an unfair temptation for some readers, I let Shell, a fellow member of the Mob, give me a prompt in exchange for reading my fic. I call that a fair exchange. :) The prompt is Ron's first sentence when he meets Hermione on the stairs. Was a challenge to come up with a good use for that particular sentence!

If anyone else needs some incitement of this sort, I found including this prompt in my story quite funny and invigorating for the plot bunnies. So feel free to join in. :)

As for the Days of Old/Ways of Old, I realise this may sound like 'The Old Ways' by Thalassa, which is incidentally a superb story. But apart of the resemblance of the name, trust me it doesn't have anything to do with it. I just couldn't come up with a better name. If you can, mail me. :)

# Chapter 11: El Maestro de Esgrima

Chapter 12 of 14

After the events in the Department of Mysteries, Hermione finds it hard to cope and receives help from someone unexpected. When a friendship of a sort develops, will it survive the events of the Lightning-Struck Tower? Will an ancient ritual help the Light win the war or will it destroy everything? An HG/SS romance. Not DH compliant.

Disclaimer: It's not mine. It never was and it never will. Sadly.

Thanks as ever to my vigilant betas, lux\_astraea and ladyinthecloak. I really hit a dry spell with this chapter, and both of them helped me a lot to get the muse back into gear. I am especially indebted to the prompts both lux\_astraea and firefly124 gave me when I was at my most desperate. In the end only the OotP movie premiere pulled me out of the writing drought completely. Go figure. :)

Thanks also as ever to my little one, who in true JK style waited patiently while I wrote on 'Wicked' (and Trials and a few RLHG one-shots) in a cafe in between pretzel bites. You're an angel. \*hugs\* :)

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## Chapter 11: El Maestro de Esgrima

Hermione spent the hours till the next morning in a daze of a kind and only came back to herself when she heard Ginny mention something about a birthday.

"Hmm?" she inquired with a blank look.

"Hermione. Harry's birthday. The one we've been planning since you arrived. You didn't forget, did you?"

"No! No, of course not. I just..." *I just forgot.* "I was just thinking about something and didn't immediately get what you meant. Of course I wouldn't forget Harry's birthday. He's my best friend after all," she replied, affronted, but even to her ears it sounded like she was protesting too hard.

Ginny glanced at her knowingly.

"Well, we're planning after lunch. The party is tomorrow, so we will all have a lot to do today," Ginny added with such a pointed look that it took all of Hermione's willpower not to snap at her. After all, she *had* forgotten her best friend's birthday party.

When Ginny left the room, she stared at the empty doorway for a moment, leaning onto the backrest of her chair, her arms crossed, fingernails digging painfully into her skin.

Then she shook herself, turned back around to look at the top of the desk, then lowered her head to a few centimetres above the desktop and smacked her forehead against it a few times.

*How could I just forget Harry's birthday? What kind of friend am I?*

Of course, both Harry and Ron had forgotten her birthday a couple of times over the years, but that did not mean she could do the same. She was organised. She was meticulous about these things. And she always remembered the birthdays of those close to her. And some of those who weren't. Like Professor Snape's. Or Lupin's. Or Dumbledore's. You get the picture.

She sighed. She knew of course why she had forgotten, and no matter how much she scolded herself, it wouldn't get better.

It was getting worse again.

She had hoped that after yesterday she would be able to control herself again one of these days. But this ritual Professor Snape had performed if that was indeed what it had been and which had provided her temporary relief, was wearing off. She seriously doubted that whatever it had been could be duplicated with greater effect or that Professor Snape would be able to help in some other way. Anything, just to be herself again.

But what was happening to her?

She knew that something was very much wrong she wasn't stupid. She just didn't know exactly *what*.

Could it be that her guilt over Sirius' death had turned her into this wreck? Scatter-brained, lost and out of control?

She was merely a shell of herself.

How had it come to this? That she was sitting here unable to concentrate, awash with confusing feelings she couldn't control and without the power to rein them in or make sense of them? Unable to distract herself with anything she usually enjoyed, but which didn't interest her now at all, she could do nothing to alleviate her problem.

And her control over herself in the presence of others was slipping now as well. Clearly whatever Snape had done last night was wearing off.

What did all that mean anyhow?

Had it really been a ritual like she had assumed yesterday? And if yes, then what kind of ritual had it been?

She couldn't imagine a ritual that would only work for less than a day. But then she didn't know much about rituals.

*Time to rectify that*, she thought grimly. *Who knows? It might help distract me from this feverish restlessness.* She headed over to the first shelf to her right, thinking it was as good a place as any to start. The 'forbidden' books did not only zap but, if you looked closely, were also surrounded by a fine haze. So she kept a distance to those. There were lots of other interesting books available to her, which she took advantage of. There had to be something about the ritual in one of them...

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She finally gave up three hours later, just prior to lunch. It was hopeless. No book she was able to access (she wasn't too fond of getting zapped all for nothing, thank you very much) had any mention in it about a ritual remotely similar to what had happened the day before. Not that she knew exactly what had happened, which hampered her search additionally. It was also getting harder for her to concentrate.

The subject of rituals was generally fascinating, as it dealt with a kind of magic that was long gone and had lost its importance over the centuries. Rituals had been all important in the times of Merlin and other great Warlocks, when the importance of magical woods in the form of wands to channel magical energy hadn't been discovered yet. Though Merlin himself had possessed a staff, the power of magical woods was next to unknown back then except for their uses for potions. Back then there was a ritual for every circumstance of life. Love, marriage, baptism, the passage from youth to adult, and even death. Those were the more common ones, which had even survived until today and in more harmless forms even in the Muggle world.

The more powerful and also more dangerous a ritual was, the more secret it was. They were kept closely under lock and key, it seemed, so as not to inspire reckless and untrained youths to invoke them.

If this was true then this ritual had to be equally powerful and dangerous. There wasn't a mention of it *anywhere*. Nothing. No name, no instructions, and no mention of what it was used for. Simply nothing. That worried her more than anything else. It had to be awful.

Hermione shivered, flicking through a few more pages listlessly, trying hard to ignore how her hands were shaking.

There were some really interesting as in difficult rituals described in a book called *Praxis Relice*. Bonding rituals of all kinds, like the Unbreakable Vow or an arcane marriage ritual, which sounded quite interesting, although none of the instructions were given, the description of the way it was supposed to work was intriguing. There was also a description of something that sounded alarmingly like what Lily Potter might have used to save Harry. A shiver ran down Hermione's spine at that, but she was grateful that the book hinted that there were precise instructions to be followed which were said to be lost. Hermione doubted that, since otherwise Harry's mother couldn't have used it, but she left it alone for now.

Just then Ginny yelled, in what could only have been a magically amplified voice, that lunch was ready.

Hermione sighed and put the book away, leaving a piece of paper in it, though, to mark her place. The Ways of Old were certainly very intriguing.

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The rest of the day passed in a whirl fortunately, so Hermione didn't have much chance to brood over her problems for long stretches of time like the previous few weeks. Most of it was naturally taken up with the planning of Harry's birthday, which wasn't as easy as it sounded with Harry being in the house and Molly insisting on the party being a surprise for him. But the planning and the necessary secrecy made for a nice change in the unbelievable boredom of the past weeks so she wasn't going to complain. Although she probably should. Just docilely doing as she was told apparently made both Molly and Ginny suspicious if the wary looks they kept shooting her way now and then were anything to go by.

Typical. If she was quiet, people got suspicious, and if she yelled and slapped Ron... Oh, well, maybe a middle ground between the two would be better. She had tried though, and only the two extremes seemed to be possible at the moment.

Evening arrived before she knew it, and though she was already exhausted from all of the preparations necessary for the next day, she was beginning to feel excited about the first real fencing lesson she would have from Snape when she was heading down to the kitchen for dinner, carefully trying to ignore her uneasiness about that ritual. She was dreading a repeat of Ron's attempt at having The Talk with her again today after dinner, despite the distance he had kept between them all that day. Throughout the day, they had all been too busy, not to mention they were never alone with each other. He had been peeking at her every now and then, in turns both terrified and curious, but didn't say anything to her. She could only hope that her ruse (she still couldn't believe it had worked) would keep him away from her for a while longer.

That's why she excused herself for her evening run as soon as she could, taking care to take her time with changing clothes so that she was about to start when the first of the others were heading up to bed. This way she finished her run when all had gone to their rooms already and she could sneak upstairs at her leisure.

Now that she knew the damn password, her entrance into the room was a lot smoother, not to mention quieter, than the times before. Whatever Snape had done the day before, it had clearly helped for a while. She really hoped he would be able to help her again or have at least an idea what could. She wasn't so naive to think her problem had been solved; she could feel it at the back of her mind more than ever, gnawing at her sanity.

When the door opened magically at her command, she entered, shutting it quietly behind her. And stared.

It was strange to see him dressed in anything but his black robes, waistcoat and trousers, which had caused many a student to liken him to an overlarge bat.

But the white shirt that was closed to the last button at his neck and the beechwood-coloured trousers looked very well on him. Colour suited him as well, which she could attest when he put a blue fencing jacket on over his shirt.

"Don't stand there gaping! You will need to get used to this sight, or you will never evade a hit, let alone score one.... But it brings me to the first point on tonight's agenda. Look over there," he said briskly and motioned over to the wall behind her.

She was surprised that she'd actually managed to overlook the display in front of the far wall when she'd entered. But then Snape had been enough reason to miss it.

A magnificent screen took up most of the wall, a Japanese print of two cranes captured in flight displayed in all their glory. Beside it stood a mannequin draped all over in the massive bulk of what she recognised from her books to be protective fencing garb.

Hermione walked closer to it, inspecting the various parts closely. Apparently it was a whole set of clothes, complete with a glove, shoes and a fencing mask, all in pristine white.

She glanced at Snape questioningly.

"Well? Are you just going to stare at it?"

"Sir?"

"You're meant to try them on to see if they fit, Miss Granger," he said with an impatient gesture of his hand, talking as if that had been perfectly obvious all along. Which she supposed it should've been.

She flushed bright red, from both anger at having not realised the purpose of the screen earlier and from embarrassment. She was going to try them on right now, with him just paces away. She tried not to think of it too much though.

Hermione dragged the screen around herself and the clothed mannequin, then stared at them for a moment, wondering where to begin.

As if on cue, Snape said, as if he was talking about the weather (or as anyone else would talk about the weather; she only heard him talking like this once, about a particular fine pair of butterfly wings he had to sacrifice for a potion in one of his classes), "The appropriate place to start are the fencing trousers. Next the... plastron, the under jacket and the fencing jacket itself. Last are shoes and the glove. One keeps a shirt on beneath the plastron, I'm told." He explained all this as matter-of-factly as she only heard him talk about the correct number of stirs in a potion before.

She put on the trousers, pleased to find them long, but not too long, which was a rarity being regular size as she was, wide and comfortable. Then she picked up what could only be the plastron with a bemused look.

That was... interesting.

It looked like a mould of a woman's bosom and a generous one at that. It strangely reminded Hermione of a plastic cast of female breast armour, though she had never

seen such a thing. Attached to the plastic mould were elastic straps she knew from her own bras, though they were made of a different material.

Shaking her head, with a confused smile she proceeded to put the thing on over her shirt. When she was finished with that not-so-easy task, she looked around for a mirror. One promptly appeared on the wall beside her. She shook her head again, openly smiling now. It looked seriously weird. She couldn't resist the compulsion and knocked once on the rounded part of her breast. She giggled softly at the hollow sound of it. She truly was armoured now, she thought with another giggle.

"Miss Granger, if you would please curb your immature fascination with that contraption and get on with it?"

She couldn't be sure, but he sounded a bit peeved actually.

Hermione headed on to the under jacket and then the fencing jacket itself. With the straps, buttons and zippers, it took a moment for her to figure it out, but she managed quite quickly in the end. Then she looked at herself.

Well.

She looked like a marshmallow. *A giant marshmallow. Hmph.*

"Well?"

She emerged from behind the dressing screen, self-consciously tugging at the too-large, white fencing jacket she was wearing, muttering insults under her breath.

When her eyes touched upon his shoes and travelled upwards along his immaculately fitting fencing garb, including a trainer's fencing jacket (beechwood-coloured no less), she shot him an indignant glare.

"What does *that* mean? I walk around wearing a sack and your clothes are tailor-made?"

"A man's form is hardly material. The figure of a woman, however, especially with that plastic contraption, tends to distract from the matter at hand."

She just caught herself in time before she started to disagree. He didn't need to know she found him very distracting the way he was dressed and otherwise as well.

But wait! Did he just say...?

He found her appearance sufficiently distracting to put her in this sack?

She blushed, though this time she didn't give a fig.

A heady feeling rushed through her body at lightning speed, and she had to swallow around her very dry throat. Hermione realised something right then something she recognised to having felt in fourth year as well: It was nice to be appreciated. Especially by someone who one appreciated as well sort of.

She didn't have a lot of time to muse over this startling revelation, however, for only a moment later, Snape began snapping at her again.

"Well? What are you waiting for, girl? Get over to the mat. We'll start with drills now."

And he continued in a similar vein. To do this, to do that. He called them 'drills'; she called them 'slave-labour'. Plus he was being his usual evil-git-classroom self again. That strangely disappointed her. If she had thought his demeanour and behaviour toward her would change just because they seemed to have come to an understanding and he had strange enough but that's what it was comforted her a few times, she was sorely mistaken.

She couldn't do anything right, according to him at least, and she was inclined to say he was right. Her attacks were just plain rubbish, judging by the professor's harsh remarks. That it was a wonder she could do magic at all the way she held the foil was an immediate favourite of hers. Another was that she was still standing upright was a miracle the way she lunged forward as if to swat a nasty insect, which wasn't that far from the truth, she thought, glaring at him.

She either gripped the foil too tightly, or it lay in her hand like a dead fish. She held it too high or too low, too far to the right or too far to the left.

Her stance was passable, but only just so; she was still not resting low enough in the knees. She shuffled her feet too much when taking a step forward and even worse when she took one backwards. Her lunge was an absolute catastrophe: too short, too high and she was too squeamish after yesterday's mishap, stopping before she could actually hit him and so she would never achieve a hit.

At some point she began to question the wisdom of *everconsidering* his offer. A quarter of an hour later, she was fighting back the tears stinging her eyes after yet another insult to her obviously inferior abilities. Five minutes more, shortly before she had been about to give up, something interesting happened: her mind went strangely blank.

Blank, that is, of everything not to do with the drills. She didn't think of the insults (well, mostly, instead she imagined hitting him again and again), why he was like that to her, why she just couldn't manage what he wanted her to, why she was there in the first place, Ron, Harry, the ritual, Sirius...

Everything went deliciously blank or rather she focused on the task at hand. And then...

*Thud.*

The tip of her foil hit the bull's eye of fencing: the small heart-shaped black patch located directly over where his heart must be.

Snape said nothing, simply watched her as she gaped at him. Then he gave a curt nod and said, "Now do that again."

She missed of course. As she did twice more. Only when his taunts got considerably worse did she manage that feat again.

*Thud.*

*Thud.*

*Thud, thud.*

Four times in a row. Only then did he let her have a short break.

Panting profusely, she popped open the top buttons of her jacket immediately and sloped over to her stuff on the bench. Wipe off her wet face and neck with a towel or get a drink from her water bottle first?

It was a tough decision, but she opted for the towel first in the end. Scrubbing her face and neck several times, she almost began to feel human again when she grabbed the bottle of water, gulping down half of it in one go.

Her heart rate and breathing slowed, and when she finished taking care of the necessities, she turned back to her teacher.

Snape was still standing exactly where she'd left him exactly how she had left him, too studying her.

That stare wasn't like the others though. It felt slightly foreboding, dark even.

Which now that she wasn't distracted brought reality and all the things she had managed to avoid thinking about the past half hour crashing back down on her; the helplessness, the pain, the worry, the fear. Unconsciously, she began to worry her bottom lip with her front teeth, tightening her hold on the towel still in her left hand.

She wanted to know and she didn't want to at the same time.

"Why don't you stop this nonsense and just ask what you wanted to ask since yesterday?"

"What has been happening to me, Professor?"

"You're tired, overworked and undertasked at the same time, and you're feeling guilty because of your part in Black's demise."

She frowned. "And? Surely that's not all?"

"Why? Should there be more?"

"You know there is, and I want you to tell me what it is."

He simply studied her for a moment, then said to her surprise, "What do you think happened yesterday?"

"I..." She hesitated, then continued on, "I think you performed some sort of ritual to help me... with everything."

He nodded. "That is partly correct."

"Which part?"

"Oh, a ritual was set in motion last night, but you started it, not I."

"Me? But..."

"Yes, you. I merely played a small but necessary part in it, and the ritual is not yet complete."

"Is that why I'm starting to feel..."

"What?"

".. undone? It sounds strange, I know, but it feels as if it's starting all over again, only worse."

"Yes, indeed it is, Miss Granger."

"When will it be completed then?"

"One stage of the ritual still remains. We will meet here again tomorrow. You mustn't be seen of course." That sounded like a dismissal, and true enough, he was starting to undo the buttons of his jacket, ignoring her. Was that all he was going to tell her about the ritual?

She felt chilled, and her hands cramped into fists.

It wasn't what he'd said about that ritual, but rather what he hadn't said.

*That can't be all.*

If there was more to it and he didn't want to tell her, then it was most likely bad. Not only that but probably dangerous.

She would be damned, however, if he was going to treat her as they all treated Harry, never telling him anything. Which was one of the reasons she was now in this predicament.

But to call him not only one of her teachers, but this teacher of all up on withholding information...

*Ah, what the hell...*

"That's not all, Professor."

"Whatever would you give you that idea, Miss Granger?"

"I may be on the constant verge of a nervous breakdown these days, but I'm not stupid. You never leave out pertinent details unless it serves your own purpose. But I'll be damned if I let you treat me like every adult treats Harry," she burst out angrily. "I want to know," she added, imploring him to tell her the truth.

For an instant the ghost of a smile passed over his face. But it was gone before she knew it.

"There is no such thing as no forewarning, no hints or no warnings of things to come. There are always clues. To stay in the dark one has to want to stay blind to them."

She nodded slowly at his cryptic words, understanding what he meant to say. But as his intent gaze rested on her, she couldn't help the feeling that they weren't talking about the ritual anymore, but about something totally different.

"What do you want to know?"

She looked at him suspiciously. It wasn't like him to be so... accommodating.

"What will happen if this ritual doesn't work?" She asked the one question that had worried her most since she had noticed something was wrong at the beginning of the holidays. She feared that his answer would confirm her fears.

"I think you know the answer to this question already. If you continue this way without some relief for your soul, you will go mad," he replied with a shrewd look.

Her hands shook as she contemplated a fate she feared above everything else. She thought about the helplessness, the loss of control and how she would never be sure again of what she thought, saw or heard.

There wasn't really a decision to make.

She swallowed around the lump in her throat and asked, hoping her voice wouldn't give her away, "What is this ritual called?"

Knowledge, safe and grounding.



"It's called the *Ritus Ultionis*, but you won't find anything on it in any book you have access to, so don't even bother looking for it."

"Why is there nothing on it in any book? *I have access to?*" she asked tartly, knowing now who had charmed the books in the library to zap anyone not allowed to read them. Bastard.

"It is an arcane ritual and very dangerous in the wrong or untutored hands."

"Dangerous? In what way?"

"Miss Granger, it is commendable that you'd rather know the full details of what awaits you rather than be left in the dark. It is a smart decision because it evens the balance of power things or people have over us. Knowledge is power in itself. But there are exceptions to this when knowledge makes things not easier but harder to bear. This is one of these instances. The ritual can only begin tomorrow night during the new moon, and it won't help you to fret over unknowns till then."

"But that is precisely what I'm going to do now with only these cryptic words of danger to tide me over! Knowledge is my only..."

"I understand you. I really do, but this ritual is different for everyone, which is one more reason why I can't tell you more. There are only rough guidelines for those leading the ritual to follow. The ritual mostly leads itself. Therefore knowing any more about it won't help you any to know what to expect."

When he saw she was about to protest once more, he asked urgently, "I have to ask you to trust me on this, Miss Granger."

Her eyes widened, then squeezed shut tightly, and she bit her lip, battling with herself.

*Damn him.*

She opened her eyes again, let out a shaky breath, and looked at him only to find him studying her intently. "Very well," she replied, although a very insistent part of her was rebelling against her decision.

He studied her for a moment longer, then nodded. "The ritual will take place at Hogwarts, and since it will start at about eleven o'clock at night, you will need to come up with a good excuse and meet me here at ten thirty," he explained matter-of-factly, then added as an after-thought, "Since you are in a very vulnerable position until we can be sure the ritual worked, I advise you not to tell anyone about it. In fact, even after the ritual is successful."

"Why?" she asked, surprised.

"The first point is of course that since I was the one you told of your problem, I will be involved in this ritual, and no one must know of my involvement with you for obvious reasons. The second point is that although there has never been a documented case of this... condition happening twice to the same person, most who know of this ritual think of it as an instrument for those who are too weak to deal with the consequences of their actions. Which is of course absolute nonsense, but that wouldn't stop this *elite organisation* from seeking out known victims and torturing them for sport. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly," she ground out, her face pale and her hands shaking and clammy.

From the emphasis he put on the words it was only too clear who he meant by *the elite organisation*.

*Death Eaters*. Images of Bellatrix LeStrange, Lucius Malfoy and... Antonin Dolohov, as she now knew he was called, in the Department of Mysteries made her stomach turn.

Though she had no idea how they could learn of her predicament, she wasn't foolish enough to test it. Just because she couldn't think of a way didn't mean there wasn't one. That was one of the things she had learned in the Department of Mysteries.

She felt her skin cool even more, her hands shaking and a panic surging to the surface. Something... She needed to distract herself. She didn't want to fall to pieces once more in front of him.

Something...

Right.

He looked at her expectantly. "Anything else you wanted?"

She hesitated, but only for a second this time. "Why were you so horrible to me earlier?"

"Miss Granger, what did you feel like when I taunted you like that?"

She flushed, the panic ebbing a little as she remembered. "I was angry... and disappointed."

"Because I set impossible standards, correct?"

She nodded.

"And yet you managed a perfect hit four times in a row once you let go of those emotions for long enough to focus on doing instead of thinking of doing and channeled them into motion."

She was confused. "You insulted me, so I was angry enough to stop thinking and do it already?"

"Exactly."

"That's..."

"Brilliant, I know." She could swear he smirked. She didn't even notice how she regained control of herself and her feelings as he proceeded to distract her.

"Familiar, actually. You did the same to get me to break down. You also do that in class."

"Perfected over the years, I assure you, and as you could see, effective."

She nodded thoughtfully. "Mostly. Not everyone is self-assured enough not to doubt themselves."

"Then it is a worthwhile lesson they do well to be taught, Miss Granger. Life is not considerate enough to spare those in need of coddling."

"But with some people a more reasonable approach works wonders," she said with a pointed look.

"Neville Longbottom is a menace near a cauldron because he lets his feelings overshadow his task. He hasn't learnt the lesson yet that it might be prudent not to wear his emotions on his sleeves when he is supposed to be doing something dangerous."

"Neville blossomed when he was taken under the wing by Professor Lupin and Professor M..." she interrupted herself.

"Ah, yes, Professor Moody or should I say Bartemious Crouch Jr. He blossomed under their tutelage indeed, while being taken in by two possible and in one case proven dangerous criminals. What does that say about his perception?"

"That he was so grateful to encounter kindness instead of scathing insults he was blind to everything else. There's nothing wrong with wanting to be liked!"

"Ah, Miss Granger, in this case you are wrong. He is liked by many. While some me included might ridicule him for his ways, he is liked by true friends and many of his teachers. Why am I that important?"

That was such a convoluted argument, she was actually speechless. "Do you really believe all you're saying?"

"Do you?"

"Would you for once not answer a question with another question?"

"Why should I?"

She was sure to pop a vein any second now when he cut her off with a wave of his hand. "This is a really fascinating dissection of my methods, but since they work and you haven't offered up a suitable alternative, I will keep to them. Now it is getting late and there is much yet to prepare. Change," Snape replied briskly, already undoing his fencing jacket. Dismissed.

Hermione humphed under her breath as she headed over to the screened area, removing one article of clothing after the other. As distracted and miffed as she was, however, she couldn't help but listen to the sounds from the other side of the screen. The soft sounds of buttons being released from their cloth constraints, the swish of the heavier fabric of the jacket sliding against the fabric of his shirt. How he moved over close to the other side of her screen to fold away his clothes.

She had to shake herself out of her preoccupation with what he was doing more than once and hurry so he wouldn't have to wait much longer for her.

Soon enough she was ready, her fencing garb back on the mannequin, and stepped from behind the screen, not thinking anything at the moment. Snape just stood there for a moment, studying her again, then motioned for her to precede him out of the room. Hermione complied, a curious thought being the last she contemplated that night. Where would Snape have procured regular, Muggle fencing garb?

\* \* \*

A/N: I really want to apologise to everyone who has been waiting for this chapter for so long. I hope I have not lost too many of you. I've just been very occupied with RL lately (tried dating again "sigh"), and I participated in the summer round of the sshg\_exchange on LJ, which took a lot out of me. The Trials of Matchmaking is a sort of SS/HG/RL threesome and can be found on that LJ comm and very soon on TPP, Ash and OWL as well.

Thanks for all of your reviews and general support, and I hope you'll enjoy this chapter. The next one is already half-way finished, and I hope to post it soon.

The title is of course derived from the excellent book by the same name by Arturo Perez-Reverte. Not mine at all.

'Praxis Relice' is 'Ancient Customs' in butchered Middle English or whatnot. I could try to track someone down who knows what they're doing, but I was so glad to write on 'Wicked' again, I figured this was less important. But if there's anyone who knows what it's called properly then I'd be glad to correct myself.

The dead fish remark is derived and mutilated from one of Alan's lines in 'Dogma' of course.

## Chapter 12: Gifts

*Chapter 13 of 14*

After the events in the Department of Mysteries, Hermione finds it hard to cope and receives help from someone unexpected. When a friendship of a sort develops, will it survive the events of the Lightning-Struck Tower? Will an ancient ritual help the Light win the war or will it destroy everything? An HG/SS romance. Not DH compliant.

Disclaimer: I do not, nor will I ever own these characters. The situations they are confronted with are mine however.

\* \* \*

### Chapter 12: Gifts

*Sniff*

"Hermione?"

Another sniff, followed by a hiccup.

"Hermione, are you in there?"

She took a deep breath and wiped her tear-stained cheeks dry. Or attempted to at least, since the floodgates couldn't be shut that easily.

"Yeah, Ginny. What's up?"

"Can I come in?"

"**No!**" she yelled, then caught herself, grasping the edge of the bathtub she was sitting on tightly. "I mean, I'm busy in here."

"Hermione, are you all right?" Molly.

She sighed in exasperation, which turned into more of a choked gasp due to the fact that she was still crying.

"I'm fine! I'll be right out! Honestly, can't one have even *amoment* to oneself in this bloody house?! Use one of the other three bathrooms, Ginny!"

The silence on the other side of the door was more recrimination than any words would have been, and she felt terribly guilty. She just had such a frail control over her emotions and temper right now. Whatever Snape had done two nights ago, its influence over her had clearly worn off and now everything was much, much worse than it had been before.

But that was no reason to yell at the two people apart from Snape who had shown their support to her in the past few days.

She wiped her face with another deep breath, trying to calm herself down, and got up from her seat on the edge of the bathtub to survey the damage in the mirror above the sink.

Her cheeks were still tear-stained, her eyes red and puffy, and her nose was slightly red and swollen from her constant wiping at it. Ugh. She grabbed some toilet paper, folded it up neatly into a makeshift hankie and blew her nose, not caring whether Molly and Ginny could hear on the other side of the door.

By the looks of it, they would know instantly what she had been up to in here anyway.

She gave her face a good wash with cold water in an effort to alleviate the puffiness of her eyes, but it only worked a little. Well, she ~~had~~ been crying in here for half an hour.

"Hold yourself together, Hermione. Do you want to be likened to Moaning Myrtle?" she muttered to her battered mirror-self looking back at her.

Then she dried her face and hands with a towel and, with two deep, steeling breaths, opened the door.

Sure enough, the two of them were still standing outside the door, looking both shocked and unsure at once. She hated that they were looking at her this way because of something she had said.

Taking another deep breath and looking at the floor she started to say, "I'm sorry, Molly, Ginny. I don't know what came over me. I just..." she trailed off, realising in disbelief that once again tears were spilling out of her eyes. She wiped at them angrily. She hated losing control like this, and now she had done so three times in thirty minutes!

Expression easing into a concerned smile, Molly came over and laid a comforting arm around Hermione's shoulders. "There, there. No need to be sorry. I realise this must be hard for you," Molly said soothingly.

Hermione did a double-take and ceased wiping at her wet face for a moment. "You do?"

"Yes, Hermione, we don't blame you at all for being short with us. Ron, honestly! One would think he'd have the guts to just tell you how he feels instead of playing these games!" Ginny huffed in indignation on her behalf, and Hermione was strangely relieved that both of them thought another topic entirely was at fault for her moodiness.

"But it's no excuse. I'm so sorry," she said more than a little guilty, both for yelling at them and now for letting them think she was crying about Ron. Though it was just as well, since she couldn't tell them the real reason.

"Nonsense, Hermione. I just hope he gets his head out of his behind soon, or I will make him see the error of his ways," Molly remarked with a dark look, then cheered up and said, "Come now, there's still a lot to do before the start of the party. That will distract you."

She seriously doubted that would be the case, judging by her rampant emotions, but it was nice of her to offer to take her mind off things. Besides, it couldn't hurt to try. So she let herself be led off downstairs into the study to continue putting up decorations for later.

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In the end there was still quite enough to do to keep all of them very busy, especially since the hide and seek of the surprise party was still on. Hermione worked as hard as ever, but with a kind of silent, dogged determination that was new.

Her mind had gone numb sometime in, making worrying blissfully impossible. That had drawbacks, too, however. She felt curiously dead on her feet, dragging herself from one task to the next, as if her body obeyed not her but some unknown master, pulling her strings. It was also not like she was especially tired, but more like nothing really mattered to her anymore, so if that was the case, why was she even still alive?

Not wanting to alert anyone with these morbid thoughts of hers, she kept them to herself and generally talked very little with the others. She wouldn't have known how to put her thoughts into words anyway, even if the others had wanted to hear them. Things had improved between her and her friends, that was true, but they were still far from the way they had been.

So she worked in a stoic manner, and finally after a few hours, all preparations were in place; Harry was out of the house, the food was in the final stages of being prepared, the decorations where Molly wanted, the gifts wrapped, and now the only thing left to do was to get ready for the party.

Hermione trudged up the stairs behind the others, went into the room she shared with Ginny, picked some random things out of her cupboard and like on autopilot left the room to get dressed in the bathroom down the hall.

Normally she wasn't that modest about changing in front of Ginny, but then she didn't even notice what she was doing, let alone the confused and slightly hurt look Ginny sent her way.

Hermione's awareness of her surroundings had been reduced to the absolute minimum without her even being aware of it.

So it was that a scant hour later, Hermione Granger was oblivious to the fact that reminiscent of Luna Lovegood she was wearing a green and yellow striped shirt, a maroon skirt and two different kinds of socks, complete with a necklace made up of brightly painted noodles that Luna had given her last Christmas to Harry's birthday party.

Of course she was also oblivious to the strange and inquiring looks sent her way until she was approached by the person she least expected to take an interest in how she was, when the party was already in full swing.

Harry had been duly surprised, the cake cut and eaten and the gifts opened. Music from the Wireless was blaring in the background, and the party was getting more rowdy and louder by the minute. Staring off into space as she was, Hermione didn't immediately notice that someone was standing next to her, let alone had called her name more than once.

"Hermione?"

"Hmm? Yes, Remus? Is something the matter?"

"I was just about to ask you the same thing. Are you all right?" Remus asked her, his brows drawn together in concern.

"Of course," she replied with she hoped was a big smile on her lips. "Why shouldn't I be?"

"It's just... Not that I mean to pry, but you're dressed very peculiarly."

"Really?" she asked without even bothering to check if he was correct. "You know, you're not supposed to criticise how a woman is dressed, Remus. She might be offended and hex you or something," she quipped, staring at a lampshade. It did look very curious. Why had she never noticed before?

A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth, but he wasn't about to be deterred that easily. "Of course, I'm sorry about making such a faux pas. You're right of course. However, I'm sure you won't hold it against me as you do look very... strange tonight."

"Thank you, and you're forgiven," she replied simply, now studying the pattern on the wallpaper with a curious expression instead.

If she had indeed heard or comprehended what he had said, he couldn't be sure.

"I'm glad," he said, studying her intently, his concern now more evident than before. She noticed neither.

With that short exchange the topic was closed and Remus was unable to catch her attention again that evening. He continued to observe her throughout the party, however, to the dismay of one very attentive pair of eyes.

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"Hermione? Ron?"

Hermione turned away from her study of an absolutely normal Ficus Ficus, aside from the fact that it 'looked' to be staring at her, though she couldn't be really sure without asking it, and Harry had just interrupted her attempt to do just that.

Her attention was grabbed for the first time since her strange chat with Remus. She was a bit alarmed to notice that things had quieted down considerably.

Nothing short of a few hours must have passed while she had studied - and tried to talk to - *aplant*.

"Yes, Harry? What is it?" she asked, trying to hide her alarm. It wouldn't do anyone any good if she upset him now with her problems.

"Can I talk to you for a second?" Harry asked quietly, looking around them to make sure no one was listening.

That didn't bode well at all, Hermione thought with furrowed brows. But after a hesitant sidelong glance at Ron, who she noticed had probably been standing next to her for a while, Hermione nodded decisively. Ron looked, for lack of a better word, pissed off. Uh-oh. But just because she and Ron had, uh, communication problems didn't mean she couldn't be in the same room with him without quarrelling. She at least would try to resist. And Harry had proved a real friend in the past week, talking to her again, although he normally tried not to take sides.

Ron hesitated a moment longer, but seeing as she had consented, he finally nodded as well.

Visibly relieved, Harry led the way away from the party and into one of the lesser-used sitting rooms.

When they were all inside, Harry closed the door behind them and with a slight hesitation, asked, "Hermione, would you? An Imperturbable Charm?"

She simply stared at him for a long moment - it was the first time he had respected her new-found ability to use magic outside of school - before she pulled her wand out of its place up her left sleeve and uttered the incantation, effectively sealing the room.

*What can be so important, we'll need...?*

"What is this about, Harry?" Ron asked, a wary look on his face.

Harry leaned back against the door with a strange expression on his face.

"What do you want to tell us, Harry? You know that it'll be all right, we'll just listen if you want us to," she said, thinking that might be the reason for his reluctance to speak.

"I know," Harry said with a weak smile, "That is not the reason I... You know that night at the Ministry?"

Hermione looked abruptly away and tried to keep from shaking. She nodded.

"Yeah," Ron replied, "How could I forget? Never had a brain attached to me before."

Hermione, feeling his eyes on her as he spoke, wondered once again about her friend. That he would bring that *upow* of all times, just when Harry wanted open up to them and tell them something important. If he thought such behaviour, not to mention bad humour, would enamour her of him, he was seriously mistaken.

She only barely kept from snorting out loud in disgust.

Harry wisely ignored his best friend and continued, "Do you remember what Malfoy said? About that prophecy?"

Hermione's gaze whipped up to Harry's, meeting someone's eyes for the first time that day.

"Yes, of course. I just... thought it would be best to wait to ask you about it," she said tentatively. Just because she was neck-deep in trouble didn't mean she was the only one still bothered by Sirius' death.

"Yeah, me, too," Ron added.

"He was right. Malfoy. There was a prophecy about Voldemort and me."

"And now it's gone," Ron said, dismayed.

"No, it's not," Harry said to both her and Ron's surprise.

"That prophecy was made to Dumbledore, and he told it to me that night," Harry explained, his eyes fixed on something far away. "He told me *everything* that night." She was stunned to hear bitterness in his voice. He usually worshipped the ground Dumbledore walked on. What could he have told Harry to cause this change of heart?

"What did it say, Harry?" she asked, at once curious and reluctant to hear what the infernal prophecy said that had cost Sirius his life.

"From what it said," Harry took a deep breath, "it looks like I'm the one who's got to finish off Voldemort... at least, it said neither of us could live while the other survives."

The tension in the silence that followed was so thick it was almost tangible.

So many thoughts whirled through Hermione's head that not one was able to push itself to the forefront.

She was speechless.

With this prophecy and the ritual that would follow in a few hours she didn't know what to think anymore. It was as if all those thoughts were crowding her head, without

even one of them making it to the surface. The only thing she felt with every fibre of her being was that something *big* was coming.

She needed to get out of this room and quickly.

She couldn't pretend for a moment longer that nothing was going on. She could feel the fragile control she'd had on herself all that day slipping, like a scarf being smoothly pulled from around someone's neck.

She managed to mumble some apologetic and hopefully reassuring words to Harry about the prophecy and to excuse herself before she fought to walk as slowly as she could to the door. Hermione tried to open it in as calm a manner as possible, ignoring the concerned questions of her friends behind her. But of course the door wouldn't open. It took her some desperate rattling of the doorknob to realise that the Imperturbable Charm was still on the door, keeping everyone inside in and everyone else out. With a mumbled curse she lifted the charm from the door and escaped.

The hold she had on herself evaporated instantly. She ran past all kinds of people on her way upstairs and straight into the attic, her only haven, not really seeing any of them. Her view was misty with tears spilling over, but curiously she didn't stumble even once on her way up the stairs.

She reached the top of them in a daze, ran on down the hallway and through the already open door, not noticing that fact in the least. It slammed shut behind her, the noise echoing down the stairs for a good minute.

\* \* \*

A/N: First of all sorry to all who have been waiting for this chapter. My LJ under the same name will reveal all the troubles of the past few months to you.

I'm glad for everyone who is still along for the ride, and rest assured I \*will\* finish this fic, even if I can't promise regular updates at the moment.

Thanks as ever to my vigilant betas, ladyinthecloak and lux\_astraea, as well as Geminiscorp for wielding the whip. Thanks also to Firefly\_124 who set me the challenge to finish this chapter by her birthday. So now this is your birthday prezzie! Enjoy! I hope it lives up to expectations. :) Thanks also to voxangelus, who set me a similar deadline for her birthday. It seems I can only work under pressure, so keep badgering me and it'll go faster. :)

Thanks as ever to little one, who was a brave little patient on New Years. \*hugs\*

## Chapter 13: On the Brink

*Chapter 14 of 14*

After Hermione disappeared, what happens now?

Well, well, never thought you'd see an update on this fic again, eh? Well, here it is, hope you enjoy it.

Lots of people helped me get back from my writer's block during the course of the past year, sadly I don't remember them all, but their help was greatly appreciated. This chapter is for all of you, but especially my pals who let me and Izzy stay with them last year during the summer of cons, Lady\_Karelia, SouthernWitch69 and Geminiscorp and my lovely Betas, lux\_astraea and luvsev.

Now, on with the show. :)

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### Chapter 13: On the Brink

After it had been banged shut, an ear was pressed to the door in an effort to hear. To hear what was not clear, just that it was immensely important. The effort was superfluous however.

That pain, those electric shocks pulsing through the body made it impossible to hear anything except the rushing of blood through veins and arteries. It also caused the body sliding down the wood of the door very slowly till it was lying awkwardly half against the door, half on the floor.

It didn't matter at all. The eyes were now not closed from the pain, but from lack of awareness. It was lost in a sea of dreams, illusions and hallucinations.

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"She seemed very upset about something."

That was the first thing Severus Snape heard when he stepped out of the Floo in the kitchen of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, a mere fifteen minutes later.

Amid the aghast looks from half a dozen Order members he dusted himself down nonchalantly.

"What are *you* doing here, Snape?"

"Why, Hestia, I believe this is still Order Headquarters, is it not?"

"Why, yes, but..."

"Severus, it's Harry's birthday and his party is going on in the parlour," Remus added, looking at him strangely. Remus moved toward Snape, his head brushing past the low-hanging banner hanging from the middle of the kitchen ceiling. That and the remainder of the birthday cake on the kitchen table were unnecessary clues as to what was going on in the adjoining parlour.

"Should that interest me? As you've surmised I'm hardly here to congratulate the boy," Snape said with an arrogantly raised brow.

"Is your business very urgent, Severus?" Lupin asked.

"I'm here, that should be sufficient to answer your question, Lu..."

"It's just... we're looking for Hermione," Remus interrupted him mid-rant, obviously concerned.

Snape's hesitation was miniscule but visible enough for Remus to notice. He had, after all, known him the longest.

"So look for her. I don't care what Potter or any of his *little friends* get up to outside of school. Perhaps I am wrong, but one should think a wagon-load of Order members at Headquarters would be enough to keep even those three out of mischief."

"I just wondered if you could help us. After all, you seem to know the house much better than even good old Sirius did," Remus continued as if Snape hadn't interrupted, the hard glint in his eyes only emphasising the implication that was made.

Snape surveyed the room in a split-second, then drew his wand unobtrusively and merely uttered a low "*Confundus*".

All at once every occupant save Snape, Remus and Kingsley, left the kitchen totally convinced they had important business elsewhere. Most headed through the kitchen door into the parlour where the birthday party took place, noises of everyone in the parlour having lots of fun echoed into the kitchen before the door shut close behind Hestia.

Once they were alone, Kingsley exclaimed, "Snape! How could you?"

"You saw me do it, didn't you, Kingsley?"

Remus' lips curved upward a little. "I think he meant the wards, Severus."

"The wards only give alarm if an Order member is *harm*ed, Kingsley, not if an Order member is hit by a spell. One of the many improvements of Order Headquarters I have relayed to the Headmaster," Snape finished his correction of Kingsley's assumption and turned to Remus. "Now, what is this business with Granger?"

"She was out of sorts all day, and then at the party she wore the strangest..." Remus stopped himself when he saw both of their expressions. They confirmed pretty much that brevity was the best approach in information relay at the moment. "Well, ah, anyway, earlier she ran through the house like a madwoman and then simply vanished. That was about twenty minutes ago and we've been unable to find her since."

Snape didn't reveal through any change in expression that this information interested him. It was more the lack thereof - that his expression was frozen - that alerted the two men that the situation was even more grave than they had realised. That, and the fact that Snape seemed to contemplate the situation at all.

"Severus?"

"Kingsley, you will find Nymphadora and Molly. Then you will proceed to tell Molly that the 'party'," he said it with nothing less than total disdain, "is over now, that the plan has been changed and that we're running out of time. Just tell her that, she will know what to do. Then send them on ahead. They are to wait for us on the seventh floor in front of the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy. They will ask no questions. No one else is to know what is really going on."

"Not that I know what exactly *is* going on!" Kingsley muttered under his breath. Noting Snape's glare he stopped immediately, squaring his shoulders and looking quite mutinous. "The one in which he tries to teach Trolls how to dance ballet?"

"That's the one."

"Do you know where..."

"I do. Now go," Snape interrupted him, motioning with one hand toward the door.

Frowning, Kingsley did as he was bid, grabbing a glass of indeterminate content and striding off in the direction of the parlour as if he hadn't a care in the world.

"Severus..."

"Remus, I need you to leave for Hogwarts and go to the Potions storeroom," Snape interrupted him brusquely. "You know the password. Bring me the vial of blue-coloured potion that is lying disilluminated in the top drawer of my office desk to the Room of Requirement. It's important." Snape added the last because Lupin looked like he was about to protest again.

It worked. Remus nodded, and then left through the Floo, leaving Snape to stare at the fireplace.

But only for a second, then Snape took out a piece of parchment, waved his wand over it in complicated movements, never uttering even a word. Writing appeared on it, and then he quickly folded it and sealed it with his wand, sending it through the Floo with some Floo-powder.

When that was done, he hesitated only for another second before rushing through the kitchen door and up the stairs leading up to the attic as fast as he could.

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A mere half hour later and the seventh floor corridor opposite the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy was very busy indeed considering it was still the summer holidays.

While the remainder of the castle was merely dimly lit by a sconce now and then and almost deathly quiet, this passage was quite the opposite. The air was rank with the scent of freshly lit wick and wax and burnt dust and echoed with conversations.

The Headmaster was sitting calmly on a footstool he had conjured some time ago, sucking on some indeterminate sweet and was seemingly ignoring the hokum that was going on around him.

Molly Weasley paced a little, wringing her hands. Occasionally she answered a question with a nod or shake of her head, agitating her puzzled companions even further.

Kingsley, Nymphadora and Remus kept discussing quietly what this could be all about. Or rather the two men were discussing it, feeling completely left out.

They were badgering the two women for information but clearly were not getting any and were growing more and more frustrated by the minute. Tonks just kept shrugging and avoiding their eyes, while Molly merely muttered one-word answers when she absolutely had to. Kingsley maintained a modicum of calm, leaning against a wall, while Remus was openly frantic, much more concerned about his student than was normal perhaps.

They were all still in their party clothes, which didn't say much about Remus'; he had gotten the old-fashioned robes and suit second hand from some nice old lady in the past year. Compared to Remus, Kingsley cleaned up very well in a stylish robe and suit underneath. Tonks always maintained her own fashion statement, dressed in a pair of low-riding jeans and a belly-revealing, tight t-shirt of a wizarding indie band. Molly meanwhile was wearing her best dress, adorned with tiny flowers and much more stylish than one would give her credit for perhaps, as a mother of seven with a tight budget. She was a good seamstress, however, which should explain a lot.

This had been going on for a few minutes when Severus Snape appeared from around the corner carrying an unconscious Hermione Granger.

"Hermione!" echoed four voices at once in astonishment.

As Snape walked toward them, his robes once again billowing dramatically, he raised a brow and muttered, "You mention secrecy and suddenly the whole Order is present. Perhaps we should use this method for our weekly Order meetings when *certain people* don't feel inclined to show up." That last was said with a glare in Tonks'

direction, earning him a look both guilty and mutinous.

"What is going on here?" Remus demanded, concerned when he saw the condition Hermione was in. Pale and drawn, Hermione was no longer the picture of youthful health as usual with her rosy cheeks and typical alertness. She looked rather ill instead and curiously as if the last few hours had aged her several years. They didn't make her look more physically mature however, but rather like a wizened old woman in a moderately young body.

Tonks shifted from foot to foot, quickly looking away from Remus and wrapping her arms around herself.

"I hardly think this concerns you, Wolf." Snape glared at him and shifted his load a bit.

Dumbledore got up from his comfy footstool and glanced down at his student with an indeterminate expression on his face.

Then he focused on the one holding her. "Now, Severus, be kind. They are only concerned for their friend."

"If things had gone according to plan there would've been no need to draw in more than needed."

"Planned? Needed? I want to know what's going on right now!"

Snape glanced at Remus and then to Dumbledore pointedly.

"Remus, we know what needs to be done. We've got it all in hand," Dumbledore finally said and laid a hand on Lupin's shoulder. After a moment, Lupin nodded in resignation and didn't say anything else. "How is she?" Dumbledore asked Snape.

"As expected, but her condition deteriorated much more quickly than I had anticipated."

"It's not too late yet, Severus."

"No; not yet. But time is now of the essence." Snape turned to Lupin once more. "Did you get what I asked you for?" Snape asked quietly.

Lupin threw him a side-long glance and nodded, handing the opaque vial containing an azure blue potion over to Dumbledore as Snape's hands were definitely occupied.

"Good, good. Now please, Remus, Kingsley, go back to Order Headquarters and make sure that the story we told is believed, that everyone heads to bed, and see to it that no one disturbs us," Dumbledore said and motioned for them to leave.

They both nodded reluctantly. "Should one of us stay behind in case... help is needed?" It was Kingsley's turn to ask.

"I will stay behind, Kingsley," Molly piped up. "Don't worry, you two, it will be all right," she said in her best calming tone while holding fiercely onto her wand.

They nodded again, though rather half-hearted this time and looking rather worried, and left, their footsteps echoing in the silence of their departure.

For a moment Tonks and Molly eyed the two remaining men uncertainly, looking increasingly concerned the longer the silence lasted. Then the bundle in Snape's arms whimpered and brought them all suddenly back to the task at hand.

"We should prepare quickly. We don't have much time left," Snape said, Dumbledore and the others agreeing with decisive nods.

Snape juggled the weight in his arms gently to make holding her a little more comfortable, then walked up to the wall opposite the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy, striding in circles past it three times with an intense expression on his face.

Suddenly, after the third time, an intricately ornate door appeared right in the centre of the wall. Tonks quickly stepped forward and opened the door, letting Snape stride right past her quickly into the darkened room.

As Tonks peeked inside and her eyes got accustomed to the blackness, it became clear quickly that the room wasn't just dark per se. It was actually a clearing in a forest just when the sun had set, leaving streaks of orange, pink, violet and even a little yellow in the sky, illuminating the scene slightly.

When she had taken in the scenery, her eyes followed Snape to his destination, a stone altar in the centre of the room. It was surrounded by large monoliths, reminding her of one of the temples of old, like Stonehenge. Snape laid Hermione down on the altar gently, a finger coming dangerously close to touching her cheek accidentally. He removed it quickly back to his side. He then looked back at his companions for this... ritual.

\* \* \*

Well? Am curious what you think about this chapter that was so long in coming.

Chapter 14 is almost finished as well, so the wait won't be as long now, I can assure you. \*hugs\* Thanks to all of you who stayed with me and to all of you who are new to this fic.