

What Is Right

by MmeTherese

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Me and My Big Mouth

Chapter 1 of 15

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Chapter 1: Me and My Big Mouth

"Ten points from Gryffindor for failing to follow directions!" Snape shouted after Dean added too much newt tail to his potion. Hermione tried not to cringe as she stirred her own stunning potion. It was only her first day of classes of the seventh and last year at Hogwarts, and she already couldn't wait to be finished with Potions forever.

Well, that wasn't entirely true.

She *loved* Potions, but she *hated* the professor.

Well, that wasn't entirely true either.

She didn't particularly *like* Snape all that much, but she did respect him, especially what he did for the Order. Hermione had spent a lot of time at the Order's headquarters that summer, realizing for the first time just how great of an asset he was to their cause. She even admired him for his intellect. How could she not? After all, he was a brilliant man, and an expert in his field. He was very logical and witty. However his intelligence was usually masked by his atrocious personality. Still, he could do without the bellowing, the name-calling, the sneers, the favoritism to those slimy Slytherin snakes. Perhaps if he cracked a smile now and then, he'd be in a better mood, but, for now, it was just a good thing Potions was the last class of the day.

She stared at the yellow goo inside her cauldron, which strangely reminded her of her birthday cake her parents made for her eighteenth birthday. It was yellow too. Mmm, yellow cake was her favorite. They had made it extra special not only because she was eighteen, but also because Dumbledore secretly told her she was going to be

Head Girl! She was so ecstatic that she didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Instead, she made some indistinguishable animalistic sound, which Dumbledore smiled at and simply said, "You're welcome, my dear!"

She continued to stir, hoping Snape wouldn't deduct any more points from Gryffindor. He had already taken thirty in their class alone.

'He's in such a "delightful" mood!' Hermione thought sarcastically to herself. Suddenly, she noticed her potion began to turn from yellow to orange.

"Perfect," she grinned before stirring three times to the left, then three times to the right. 'Just needs to simmer for ten minutes,' she thought as she sat down on her stool.

Of course, since she was ahead of the class, she began to think of what she could do to pass the time. She had already completed the homework assigned from her other classes, and she didn't *dare* pull out a book or magazine and start reading it in the middle of Potions class. She was forbidden to assist Neville -Snape's orders -who miraculously made it into seventh year Potions! What was more amazing was that he actually *wanted* to be in the class! Why he would want to be here was a mystery to her. Suddenly, Hermione thought of a brilliant way to pass by the time: riddles.

Hermione *loved* riddles, both creating and solving them. She was currently trying to solve one she read in Witch Weekly just before her Potions class started. Hermione racked her brain in an attempt to remember exactly how the riddle began.

"Let's see," she mumbled to herself while tapping a finger to her chin, "how did it... Oh! What's placed on the table, cut, passed around to everyone present, but never eaten?" She propped her head up with one of her hands and rapped her fingers on the desk with the other as she contemplated. "Hm... Perhaps a..."

"*Weasley!*" Snape bellowed, "Ten points for not stripping your ivy leaves properly."

'Oh, he's horrible today,' she thought to herself with a sour look.

She never liked the way he was always so mean and nasty towards Harry and Ron. What disgusted her even more was the fact his precious Slytherin students got away with murder, particularly the repulsive Draco Malfoy. She wouldn't mind reminding him how she socked him in the face during their third year. However, she tried to remind herself Snape was stuck between a rock and a hard place with being a spy for the Order as well as keeping up appearances with Death Eater families such as the Malfoys. It must be hard living two lives.

Hermione sighed to herself and returned to her previous thoughts. "Okay," she whispered to herself, "Napkins? No. Maybe..."

"*Potter!*" Snape barked, "What are you doing to those mustard seeds? They're supposed to be slightly crushed, not pulverized into powder, you twit. Ten more points from Gryffindor."

Hermione felt her nerves wearing thin.

"It's not eaten by anyone, but it's passed out," she muttered out loud, "Could it be..."

"*Miss Granger!*" Snape shouted, "Is my class so monotonous and dull that you need to carry on conversations with yourself to be entertained?"

"Oh, n-n-no, sir!" Hermione stuttered snapping to attention, "I..."

"Have gone completely mad, have you?"

"No, sir, I'm sorry I..."

"Five points for *not* paying attention."

"But I just have to simmer..."

"Make it ten for talking back."

She opened her mouth to protest but then closed it. There was no point in arguing, especially with him. He'd have the last word no matter what. It wasn't worth the headache.

"That's a good girl, Miss Granger. I knew you'd see things my way," Snape said smugly before turning away.

Hermione glared at Snape as he went back to surveying the classroom. Oh, that man was intolerable! How could Dumbledore stand him?! She clenched her teeth and tried to refocus among the Slytherin's snickers and smirks.

That's when she saw it.

Malfoy slipped something into Neville's cauldron while he wasn't looking. She couldn't tell what it was, but she knew it wasn't a potion ingredient for that day. Suddenly, the mixture turned red and began to boil rapidly. Soon, it was seeping over the sides and onto the floor.

"What the devil... *Longbottom!*" Snape boomed, "*What in the bloody hell have you done?*"

"I-I-I, uh..." Neville stammered as the potion started to smell like dirty gym socks, "Sir, I d-d-don't..."

"Don't use your brain? That's quite apparent!"

"It's not his fault!" Hermione suddenly protested jumping to her feet.

"Quiet, Miss Granger."

"But sir..."

"I said silence! Not another word or else..."

"Malfoy put..."

"Ten points for not knowing when to shut that horrible mouth of yours, Miss Granger! In case you've forgotten, *you* are the student, and *I* am the instructor. You listen to me and what I say. I will *not* have you play the hero in my classroom. Now quiet, you silly girl!"

Suddenly, after keeping quiet and well behaved for the past six years, something in Hermione snapped. She no longer cared about points, Potions, or herself. She didn't care that she was Head Girl and had to set a good example for others. She had enough of this injustice. She wanted to do what was right! Little did she or anyone else know that day Hermione Granger's name would be forever immortalized in student rumors for years to come, and it wasn't because she did something extraordinary with Harry or Ron. It was for the next word that came flying out of her mouth, for she was the first student in Hogwarts history to ever say that one little two-letter word to Professor Snape...

"No," Hermione said sternly looking straight into Snape's black eyes with an icy gaze.

The class gasped and shrunk back. Snape was absolutely stunned, but didn't show it. He didn't dare, especially with that little Know-It-All Gryffindor chit. Snape walked menacingly right up to the opposite side of her desk, making sure his boot heels scraped on the stone floor.

"Do you care to repeat that, Miss Granger?" Snape sneered with venom dripping from every word.

"I said 'no,' Professor Snape," she repeated coldly, "I will not be quiet."

"How... dare... you!" he seethed with fury, "How dare you defy me? *bordered* you to remain silent!"

"And I refused! Not until you..."

"I do *not* have to listen to you, to a child! I..."

"I am *not* a child!"

"How dare you interrupt me?" Snape spat slamming his hands on the desk, "*Fifty points from Gryffindor and detention!*"

"Malfoy put..."

"Two detentions..."

"Something..."

"Three..."

"In Neville's..."

"Four..."

"Cauldron!"

"Detentions everyday this week!"

The whole class gasped again and shrunk back even further if that was possible. Both Snape and Hermione realized they were leaning over the desk nose to nose with each other. They were red in the face and panting, neither one daring to look away from the other's steely gaze. That little witch! How dare she? She may have gotten under his skin and caused him to lose his cool, but he still had another trick up his sleeve. He knew he had something on his side that she didn't, twenty years of terrorizing students with fear and intimidation. These were to be his allies in round two of the Granger verses Snape rumble.

While continuing to stare straight at Hermione, Snape asked in a harsh voice, "Did anyone see Malfoy allegedly add something to Longbottom's potion?"

No one dared to breathe let alone answer! Slowly, Ron rose a timid and shaky hand stuttering, "I-I-I saw Mal..."

"Quiet, Weasley!" Snape snapped causing Ron's hand to dart back down into his lap.

"Let him speak, sir," Hermione told Snape with a glare.

"Oh, Miss Granger, you are *very* close to an expulsion."

"You *can't* expel me, Professor Snape You're not the head of my house nor are you the Headmaster."

"Don't be so sure of yourself, silly girl. I have more influence than you think. Mr. Malfoy?"

"Yes, Professor Snape, sir?" Malfoy said in a calm cool voice.

"Did you put anything in Longbottom's potion?"

"Absolutely *not*, sir," he said smoothly.

"There, happy, Miss Granger?" Snape hissed, "No one saw Mr. Malfoy do anything wrong and he admitted to nothing."

"I wouldn't take him at his word. I wouldn't believe him if his tongue came notarized!"

"Another ten points, Miss Granger, for your cheek. Now, I expect you to come down here tonight at seven o'clock to serve your first detention."

Snape whipped his head towards Neveille while still leaning on Hermione's desk and spat, "Mr. Longbottom, I don't know *what* I was thinking when I agreed to let you attend seventh year Potions, but, as of now, you are dismissed from class forever. It's obvious you are *not* cut out to handle such a delicate and artful science, being the complete inept dunderhead that you undoubting are. After you clean up this mess you created all over my dungeon floor, I expect you to leave at once and never return."

Neville looked horrified as Snape's words came crashing down on him, causing Hermione's anger to grow. The Slytherins fought hard to suppress their snickers, while the Gryffindors were wide-eyed with shock. Neville hung his head in shame, feeling everyone's eyes burning into him.

The Potions Master looked back to Hermione with that famous sneer on his face as he said sourly, "I wanted this to be professional. Efficient, adroit, cooperative, not a lot to ask. Alas, your Mr. Longbottom did not see it that way, so he won't be joining us for the rest of his life."

Snape pushed off the table and his robes rustled behind him as he made his way to his desk... but he never got there. Hermione, who was still in the same position he had left her, watched him leave with a glare.

Finally, she found her voice and said maliciously, "I pray that someday, Professor Snape, you actually have a heart so that you know the difference between what is wrong and what is right. I also pray you're stuck in this cold smelly dungeon teaching Potions forever, and never get the Defense Against Dark Arts position!"

Again, the class gasped, Ron looking as if he just saw the Dark Lord himself rise up from the floor. Snape stopped dead in his tracks, and slowly turned around. He suppressed his body from shaking with rage as he stared down Hermione Granger and asked in a smooth but dangerous voice, "Would you care to repeat that, Miss Granger?"

"I thought I was perfectly clear when I said that I pray that someday, Professor Snape, you actually have a heart so that you know the difference between what is wrong and what is right. I also pray you're stuck in this cold smelly dungeon teaching Potions forever, and never get the Defense Against Dark Arts position!"

For a fourth time, the class gasped. Lavender Brown looked as if she was about to faint. Both Snape and Hermione stared coldly at each other, neither backing down.

Finally, Snape walked over to Hermione and stood next to her. She followed him with her eyes the entire time until she turned to face him. Neither one said a word or even uttered a sound until Snape slowly put both of his hands on her shoulders, forcing her to suppress a shudder as his long fingers tightly gripped her. He leaned over until his mouth was right next to her left ear. Her breath hitched just slightly as she felt his hot breath tickle her ear as he breathed in slow rhythmic breaths before whispering, "You must think you are such a brave Gryffindor by standing up to the greasy old evil git Professor Snape, don't you, Miss Granger?"

His voice was like silk in her ear as she again forced to resist a shiver that longed to crawl down her spine. She tried to find her voice to speak, but found that she couldn't. Merlin's beard, what was wrong with her? Why was she reacting *this* way?

"While you might be a brave insufferable Know-It-All, it doesn't stop you from being foolish," he continued to murmur almost melodically in her ear. "If I were you, I'd start packing my bags. I'll see to it that you, your children, and your children's children are expelled from Hogwarts forever. Until then, you... are... mine!"

Hermione slowly took in a breath, not daring to look weak in front of Snape. She knew he could smell fear, and she didn't want to give him the satisfaction of knowing he was intimidating her. Instead, when he stood up straight and released her shoulders, she stared straight into those dark cold eyes, those eyes where she felt she could lose herself completely. He merely stared right back into her fearless chocolate eyes, which had lost their warmth.

Finally he broke the silence and said sternly, "Do I make myself perfectly clear?"

"Crystal," she replied brusquely.

"Tut, tut, tut," Snape said condescendingly shaking a long pale index finger from side to side, "Temper, temper, Miss Granger. You don't want to get into *any*more trouble, do you?"

Hermione bit her tongue and forced herself to remain calm. There was no sense of making things worse than they already were.

"Now," Snape continued, "I expect you to come here tonight at seven o'clock sharp to start your detentions for the *next* month, as well as discuss the probability of your expulsion."

The class, for the final time, gasped in horror. Lavender fainted dead away, but Ron managed to catch her in his arms before she hit the cold stone floor. Whipping his robes behind him, Snape returned to his desk and Hermione to her seat. This battle might have been finished, but the war was far from over.

Everyone worked in silence for the rest of the period, except for Neville who left the dungeons fighting back tears. Snape and Hermione ignored each other the entire time, not even daring to steal a glance at each other.

When class was finally dismissed, Snape called out to Hermione as she walked up the steps, "Miss Granger, when you return tonight, bring a toothbrush... You're going to be needing it."

Hermione cringed as she exited the dungeons, not really wanting to know *what* her toothbrush would be touching.

Whew! There's chapter 1 [inserts cheers, lights, buzzers, and sirens here]. I hope you enjoyed it. Again, this is my FIRST story, so encouraging words, nice and helpful criticism is highly recommended and welcome.

Okay, I will award 5 points to you and your house if you can tell me the answer to Hermione's riddle.

I'll award another 5 if you can tell me the hidden Alan Rickman quote in the chapter, and I'll give you another 5 points if you can name the movie the quote is from!

"We fight against those who control the darkness."

- DADA Mistress

Interesting Revelations

Chapter 2 of 15

Hermione finds out a few things she didn't know about Neville. Snape discovers a few things he didn't notice about Hermione during her first detention.

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Chapter 2: Interesting Revelations

"A whole month's worth of DETENTION?! Bloody 'ell!" Ron yelled as he, Harry, and Hermione made their way down to dinner.

"I know better than anyone that Snape can be cruel, but kicking Neville out AND giving you detention for that long was over the top!" Harry added. "But I'm still very proud of you, Hermione."

"Me?" Hermione questioned, "Why?"

"Because you stood up to that no good greasy ol' git!" Ron responded indignantly.

"I just hope I'm NOT expelled."

"Yes, and from what I remember, there was a time in your life when that was worse than death."

"It STILL is!"

"And you STILL need to get your priorities straight!"

"Well, I don't care what you think, I KNOW I was rather snide with Snape today, and he'll try everything in his power to expel me, my children, and my children's children. I just hope he doesn't succeed."

"Are you kidding?!" Harry asked in disbelief, "Everyone KNOWS you are the smartest student in all of Hogwarts! They're NOT throwing you out!"

"I hope not," she sighed while her stomach was tied up in knots. She couldn't shake out the image of Snape in her head. His lips curling into that sneer, those dark intense eyes, those long fingers wrapping around her shoulders, the heat of his breath against her ear as he whispered into it, how he smelled of sandalwood and cinnamon... All of these impressions were pounding in her mind, refusing to disappear. It was a little unnerving.

Wait, sandalwood and cinnamon? Where did that come from? True, he did smell of those things (which rather surprised her), but why would she remember that? Hm, how odd.

What was even odder to her was how her body reacted when he touched her. Despite the fact that it was in no way tender or affectionate contact, it still caused goose bumps over her flesh. She couldn't believe how hard it was to suppress the shivers that so desperately wanted to crawl down to her toes, especially when his silky voice invaded her ear. Well, she supposed it wasn't too abnormal, after all, there are tons of little nerve endings on the ear, so it's only natural that it would cause such a reaction... Right?

'Stop over analyzing this, Hermione!' she scolded to herself in her head, 'It was just a reaction from nerves, nothing more!' While she told this to herself over and over, somehow, she didn't find it convincing.

Her thoughts were interrupted when she heard the horrible voice of Draco Malfoy taunt, "What's the matter, Granger? Are you thinking about what else to pack for your train ride home tomorrow? I'm sure Professor Snape would be more than happy to owl you any items you leave behind!"

Hermione looked up in front of her to see the fair-haired boy standing in front of the doors to the Great Hall with a smug look on his face. Of course, Crabbe and Goyle were standing by his side chuckling along with him.

"Shut your damn mouth, Malfoy!" Ron snapped.

"It's a shame, really," Malfoy continued, "After all the hard work you've done, you get kicked out on your last year. Tsk. Tsk, tsk, what a pity."

"I'm warning you, Malfoy!" Harry growled.

"You must be heart-broken, aren't you, Granger. Well, I can't say I feel the same way because... I don't! In fact, I'll help you pack if you like. The sooner you leave, the better off Hogwarts will be."

"Sh-shut your big stupid mouth, Malfoy!" a voice suddenly piped up from behind the Gryffindors.

Hermione turned around and was surprised to see Neville Longbottom standing there trying to look tall and courageous but he wasn't very convincing.

"Ah, Longbottom, the number one screw up in Hogwarts," Malfoy smirked, "and today was no exception."

"You slimy Slytherin snake!" Hermione hissed, "He didn't screw up today, it was YOU who ruined his potion and you know it!"

"Come now, Granger. We both know he WOULD HAVE botched up eventually and been thrown out of class. I just hurried along the process so I wouldn't have to see the back of his empty head!"

Surprisingly, both Neville and Hermione rushed at Draco, whose eyes grew wide at the sudden attack. What was even more surprising was that Harry and Ron actually held the other two Gryffindors at bay. "Hermione, Neville, stop!" Harry demanded holding Hermione by her waist.

"Yeah, settle down, mate!" Ron insisted as he held Neville back by his elbows with great difficulty while Malfoy and his goons laughed.

"Let him go, Weasley!" Draco chortled, "Let's see how far he can get before I pummel him!"

Suddenly, Neville stopped struggling against Ron and glared hard at Malfoy with a determined gaze. The look was rather unsettling, especially coming from Neville since it was so uncharacteristic. Hermione and the other Gryffindors looked at him in shock. This wasn't like Neville at all! Perhaps, just like Hermione, he snapped too, and this was the straw that broke the camel's back!

"Mark my words, Malfoy," Neville said red in the face, "I will get back at you for what you did to me!"

The Slytherins and other Gryffindors stared at Neville in astonishment. Who was this guy who suddenly grew a backbone? Perhaps there was a reason Neville was sorted into Gryffindor.

"Ooooo!" Malfoy and his goons hooted after regaining their composure.

"Laugh it up now, Malfoy," Neville grimaced throwing off Ron's arms and walking right up to Draco, "because you won't be laughing later!" The two boys stared each other down with hatred burning in both their eyes, not daring to avert their gaze.

"What's going on?!" a voice suddenly barked from the Great Hall. The students turned around to see Professor McGonagall with her hands on her hips and her lips pursed tightly.

"Nothing, professor" Malfoy said in velvet tones while continuing to stare Neville down, "Longbottom and I were just talking."

"I bet you were!" she glared, "Now stop loitering in front of the doorway and go to your tables for dinner, all of you! Go on! Shoo! Move along, Mr. Malfoy. Mr. Weasley, please keep your tongue inside your mouth. Mr. Crabbe, please refrain from cracking your knuckles, it's such a horrible habit!"

The rivaling houses gave one last glare at each other before taking their seats in the Great Hall. "Neville, that was bloody amazing!" Ron smiled patting him hard on the back, "Good show, mate!"

"Th-thanks," Neville blushed, "I don't know what came over me."

"Well whatever it was, it was brilliant!" Harry smiled, "Did you see Malfoy blanch? I thought I was going to laugh out loud!"

"Yeah Neville, if looks could kill, Draco would have been dead five times over before he hit the ground!" Ron cheered, causing the others to laugh.

"Yeah, what happened to the bashful shy Neville I once knew?" Hermione grinned at the now bashful shy Neville that blushed at her.

"I don't know," he shrugged, "Like I said, I don't what came over me. I was just so... angry. I guess Malfoy just brings out the worst in me."

"He brings out the worst in everyone," Harry grimaced.

"That and getting pushed around for the past six years would help release all that pent up anger," Hermione growled to herself as she remembered the events from potions.

"Speaking of being out of character, YOU surprised us all today in class, Hermione! I NEVER thought you of all people would talk back to a professor, let alone Snape!"

"I wasn't talking back, I was standing up for..."

"Me," Neville whispered.

"Yes, and myself as well. I was just doing what was right."

"Well, um... Thanks... For standing up for me... I'm really sorry you got in trouble."

"I think you got the worst end of the deal by getting kicked out. I have to admit I was surprised to see you in class. I didn't think you'd want to take Potions."

"Well, I wanted to prove something. I just wanted to prove to Snape and those other Slytherins that I WASN'T incompetent, that I knew what I was doing. I just get so nervous around Snape that I get mixed up and do something stupid. But the most important reason I wanted to enroll in Advanced Potions was because... I wanted to create a potion... for my mom and dad. I'm really good at herbology, Hermione, everyone knows that, and if I can apply that knowledge to potion making... Then, maybe, I can find a cure for them so they can be... parents... real parents."

"Oh. Neville, I... I had no idea!"

"I could have helped my parents become normal as well as prove I wasn't a dunderhead... but I guess I am."

"Not in the least," Hermione said putting her hand over Neville's, which caused him to jump slightly. "Neville, you can't be blamed for what Malfoy did. I'm sure if you go talk with Dumbledore about what happened, you can get back into class."

"Well I can't now, because Professor Sprout found me in the library after I left the dungeons and wanted to know why I wasn't in class. After I told her the story, she said I could help with her research during that period so I can learn more about herbology AND have some lab experience already when I apply for a job."

"That's wonderful, Neville!" she exclaimed squeezing his hand, "Some good DID come out from all of this!"

"Yeah, I guess I should thank Malfoy, huh?"

"No way. That little snake should still be punished!"

"Don't worry, Hermione, he will be."

"What did you have in mind?"

"That's for me to know and for no one to find out until it happens," Neville smiled at Malfoy, which made Hermione withdraw her hand and shift uncomfortably in her seat. Geez, that look he gave was disturbing, especially for someone like Neville!

Suddenly, Hermione got the strange feeling that she was being watched, the creepy feeling where one can feel someone's stare boring into the back of their head. Hermione turned around and looked over at the High Table and saw Snape watching her.

"I wonder if he heard the whole thing?" she thought to herself as the food appeared on the table.

She dismissed the thought from her head as dinner commenced, trying to enjoy her meal as she resisted the urge to turn around and stare back at the Potions Master.

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It was ten to seven when Hermione made her way from the Gryffindor common room down to Snape's dungon with a toothbrush in hand.

"Good luck!" Harry, Ron, and Neville called out to her.

She smiled back at them before the Fat Lady portrait closed on their sorry faces. It grew colder as she came closer to the dungeons.

She shivered from both the cold and nerves as she thought, "Oh, what am I going to have to do with a toothbrush?!"

The horrible thoughts flooded and tormented her mind as she finally arrived at Snape's door and knocked three times.

"Enter," Snape said curtly from inside.

Hermione slowly opened the door and descended the steps to stand in front of Snape's desk. He was writing something on a scroll, not bothering to look up at her.

"You are late," he said while still writing.

"I'm sorry, sir?" Hermione asked in confusion.

"Did I not make myself clear or are you deaf? I said that you are late."

"Late?! But, sir..."

"I said be here at seven o'clock SHARP. It is quiet near a minute past now."

"But..."

"That's another day I'm adding to your extensive detentions."

Hermione's mouth dropped open in surprise and her eyes grew wide with shock. Unbelievable! Is there nothing this man won't do to try and ruin her life?!

"But, sir, that's... That's not fair!"

"Do you want another detention, Miss Granger? If not, then I suggest you remain silent," he scowled finally looking up at her huge chocolate eyes, "When I say seven o'clock SHARP, I MEAN seven o'clock SHARP! When I say to shut that horrible mouth of yours, Miss Granger, I mean close that obnoxious trap and shut up, understood?!"

She nodded.

"Of course, you talk at the most inappropriate times, but now you fall silent when you need to speak! I can't hear your head rattle, Miss Granger! I'd appreciate a verbal response!"

"Yes, sir, I understand," she said barely above a whisper.

"Finally, you understand! Pray you recall that information before you open your treacherous mouth and spew more insolence! Now, use that toothbrush to scrub those cauldrons in the corner. No magic is to be used."

"Yes, sir," Hermione sighed as she made her way to the back where there were four stacks of cauldrons. Her mouth dropped open as she saw the stacks were taller than her by a good foot and a half!

"I'd leave your boyfriend's cauldron last if I were you," Snape sneered bitterly, "That's going to take a LONG time to scrub out that travesty!"

"My boyfriend?!" Hermione asked in puzzlement as she spun around to face Snape.

"Longbottom, of course. Isn't that why you defended him? Was that not the reason you held his hand at dinner this evening?"

"Good Lord, no! Not at all! He's just my friend, not that it's any of your business, sir."

"Five points for that saucy remark, Miss Granger, and another detention!"

"WHAT?!"

"Lower your voice, Miss Granger, lest you want to make it TWO months."

"Pardon me, sir," Hermione said through clenched teeth, "but, as I was trying to tell you earlier, I was defending Neville not only because he's my friend, but because it was the right thing to do."

"Right, eh?" Snape asked with a raised eyebrow and some musing in his voice, "Perhaps you won't be saying that at the end of a month... and two days."

"I highly doubt it," she grumbled as she took the first cauldron from the first stack and began to scrub it vigorously.

Snape smirked before he looked back down at his scroll and began to scribble on it again, wondering why he was prying into her love life to begin with. After all, who cared what children did as long as they left him the hell alone? God, he hated teaching!

Hermione gritted her teeth in anger as she scraped and scrubbed the crusted green rims of the cauldron.

'Lousy horrible man!' she thought to herself, 'I need to focus on something else before I get another day added to my detention!'

In hopes of drowning out the thoughts of Snape (both the good and the bad), Hermione began to whistle. It wasn't anything specific, just a tune she improvised. She whistled as she scrubbed the first cauldron clean, which seemed to take forever. She could feel his eyes glaring at her, like hot daggers burning the back of her head, just like at dinner. She didn't care. Besides, she was kind of doing it to upset him. Serves him right.

As she started to work on the next cauldron, Snape growled, "Miss Granger, cease that infernal whistling!"

"Sorry, sir," she said not feeling the least bit sorry as her eyes narrowed. 'Denying me from whistling?! Geez, what a grouch!'

Hermione resumed scrubbing the cauldron, taking notice that her toothbrush was already mangled. As she continued her work, she started to hum without thinking about the wrath of Snape. It was another improvised tune, but it kept her mind off her work. Her fingers drummed to the beat on the cauldron as she hummed and scrubbed. Just as she swept off the last piece of pink gunk from the cauldron, Snape slammed his hands on his desk and stood up.

"Miss Granger!" he spat, "It is so difficult for you to remain silent that you must hum ridiculous and nonsensical tunes?! For Merlin's sake, can you resist the temptation to be absolutely aggravating?!"

"Y-y-yes, sir. I'm sorry!" she stammered as she grabbed the next cauldron.

"That's yet ANOTHER day added to your extensive detention! Now I don't want to hear another word from you, understood?!"

"Yes, sir," she said through clenched teeth.

Snape sat back down, satisfied that she wouldn't be creating anymore rude noises and respect the silence. They both returned to their work, counting down the minutes until this horrible experience was over, especially Hermione. Now she was not just angry, she was livid! She couldn't believe it! In a matter of minutes, he had already tacked on THREE more days to her huge detention list. That ruddy poor excuse for a...

"Angry are we, Miss Granger?" Snape asked mockingly, "Well you brought this upon yourself. I wouldn't be concerned if I were you. After all, you needn't serve your detentions if you're expelled."

He chuckled low as he twirled his quill between his fingers.

Oh, that did it!

Hermione's nails scraped against the cauldron as her hand formed a fist.

'Don't say anything!' she thought as her face grew red with rage, 'Just let it go! He's trying to get you another detention. Think of something else!'

Hermione racked her brain and searched through her head to try and find something, anything, to distract her from the vindictive remarks of her Potions Master. Suddenly, she remembered the riddle! Yes, the riddle! She hadn't time to figure it out yet, and now would be the perfect opportunity to do so without any interruption. She relaxed her fist and went back to scrubbing. Snape merely grunted and returned to his scroll.

'Let's see,' she thought, 'What's placed on the table, cut, and passed out to everyone present, but never eaten?'

She tried to think of things that were on the table in the Great Hall, hoping it would clue her into the answer.

'Spoons, forks, knives, plates... No, no, no. They can't be cut.'

As a number of possibilities whirled in her mind, she didn't realize that she began to mumble out loud, growing louder as she thought about the riddle more and more.

"No, not butter, although you really shouldn't eat that, well, too much of it anyway. Hmm. What's placed on the table, cut, passed out to everyone present, but never

eat..."

"That does it, Miss Granger! You're not my last nerve!" Snape bellowed from his seat. "What was it that just earned you another detention?!"

Hermione squeaked in surprise and jumped. She snapped her head up and locked eyes with his as he seethed with rage.

"Oh my gosh! I'm sorry, Professor Snape!" Hermione apologized profusely.

"Not as sorry as you're going to be!" he fumed as he pulled out his wand.

Hermione's eyes grew wide with terror as she realized she left her wand in her room. There was no way she could defend herself if he tried to hex her.

"Sir!" she gasped as he raised his wand over his head, "What are you..."

"I'm pissed off is what I am!" he spat as he flicked his wand and caused all the cauldrons she just cleaned to be completely dirty again. She sighed inwardly in relief once she realized he didn't curse her.

"THAT will teach you to defy me again!" Snape sneered tucking his wand back in his sleeve. "You better NOT so much as sneeze for the remainder of your detention, Miss Granger! Do you understand?!"

"Please, sir," Hermione pleaded, "I didn't realize I spoke aloud!"

"You truly ARE going mad, Miss Granger, if you are oblivious to the fact that you're talking! WHAT did you say that you couldn't POSSIBLY keep to yourself?!"

"Um, well, sir, it's, um, uh..."

"SPEAK!"

"It's a riddle, sir!"

To Hermione's surprise, and relief, Snape's hard cold features softened and his eyebrows went up in curiosity.

He continued to stare at her horror stricken face until he asked sternly yet calmly, "A riddle?"

"Y-yes, sir" she responded quickly, "I was thinking about it and I guess I just..."

"What's the riddle?"

"What?"

"You really should get your hearing check by Madam Pomfrey, Miss Granger, since you never seem to listen. I inquired about the riddle."

Hermione was taken back by Snape's sudden interest until she remembered that, like herself, Snape loved riddles and logic. In fact, she remembered her first year at Hogwarts when she solved the most lovely and challenging riddle he created to protect the Sorcerer's Stone. It was brilliant!

"Well," Hermione started hesitantly, "What's placed on the table, cut, passed out to everyone present, but never eaten?"

Snape looked down at his scroll, pondering the riddle in his head. Hermione looked at him one last time before returning to her work, not looking forward to another yelling match. Besides, she better start working faster if she wants to get out of there before midnight. She STILL had to re-clean all those cauldrons!

Hermione sighed quietly to herself and wiped her brow. All of this scrubbing and yelling was making her hot, not to mention the huge annoying school robe that kept getting in her way when she scrubbed! She might as well make herself comfortable. After all, she was going to be in here for quite awhile. Hermione shed her robe, removed her gray over shirt, pulled off her tie, and rolled up the sleeves of her white button up collar shirt. Ah, much better... and cooler! Now if only she could take off her socks and shoes! She pulled back her hair and tucked it behind her ears before she began to scrub again, this time without the big black school robe hindering her.

As both Snape and Hermione worked in the eerie silence of the dungeons, they contemplated the riddle in their head, trying to decipher the solution.

'I'm thinking too narrowly,' she reflected, 'I have to think past food at the dinner table.'

'Food is too obvious,' Snape considered, 'I must think of things that can be cut.'

'Paper can be cut.'

'Perhaps "cut" has a double meaning.'

'Other forms of paper can be cut too, like wood, cardboard... Wait a minute...'

'Hmmm, "cut" has its obvious definition, but one can cut in a line and it doesn't have the same connotation. Of course, one can cut... Oh that's it!'

'Of course!'

Suddenly, Hermione and Snape whipped their heads up at each other and said simultaneously, "Playing cards!"

They both drew back slightly looking stunned at the other's response. They stared at one another for a moment, only this time without anger or resentment, but instead in disbelief and wonder, especially Snape.

'When did she remove her clothing?' he wondered to himself as he gazed at the girl nay, young woman with a pile of clothes behind her.

She stared back in her plaid skirt and white dress shirt, which accentuated all her curves in all the right places. He noticed her hair wasn't at all big and bushy as it had been in the past. In fact, it was smooth and looked silky to the touch. Mature feminine features replaced her girlish looks without losing her pixy face with those dark chocolate brown eyes that seemed as if they were looking into his soul. Snape was suddenly seeing Hermione in a very different light, and he wasn't quite sure if he liked it or not.

Hermione quickly looked away and began to scrub again, uneasy by the strange stare from her Potions Master. Stupid, she should have NEVER cried out like that! Now he was probably sitting there staring at her trying to decide what other forms of punishment he could dish out as penalty for breaking the silence he so desperately sought.

"So," Snape began startling Hermione from her dreadful thoughts, "like riddles, do you Miss Granger?"

"Yes, and, apparently, so do you, sir," she responded with her head down, still slightly embarrassed from her outburst.

"Miss Granger, do me the courtesy of looking up at my face when you're addressing me."

She didn't want to, but she forced herself to meet his eyes, those black-tunneled eyes that had obviously not left her since he and she had both blurted out the solution to



the riddle. She fought hard to prevent the blood that was rising to her cheeks. She couldn't help it. The way he was just staring at her would have made anyone blush. It was... weird, yet... intriguing.

"Ah, yes, I recall you solving a riddle from my own mind in your first year," Snape replied. "It's a good thing 'precious Potter' had YOU along to decipher it. He'd probably still be down there or poisoned by now if it weren't for your company. Lord knows he isn't the best when it comes to logic... or common sense."

To his surprise, Hermione giggled. He thought for sure that she'd defend her friend, but apparently, she knew he wasn't the best when it came to problem solving. He was just too impatient and arrogant for such things, or so Snape thought. Honestly, how could the Boy-Who-Lived who vanquished the most evil wizard of their time also be the Boy-Who-Doesn't-Know-His-Ass-From-A-Hole-In-The-Ground? Well, at least he was in Snape's mind. That little Potter prat was definitely lucky to have a friend like Hermione. Anyone would be lucky to have Hermione as a friend... or otherwise.

Wait, where did THAT come from?! Ugh, it must be those fumes from potions all day. They must be getting to his head. That had to be it. He wasn't even going to think about the other possibility of why he would have such thoughts, especially of... HER! That little Gryffin-dork chit!

For the rest of the time, Hermione and Snape worked in silence, except for the sound of a scribbling quill or a scrubbing mangled toothbrush. Occasionally, Snape would discreetly look up to steal a glance at the girl, but he wasn't entirely sure why. Oh, he had an idea, but he wasn't going to admit it. In fact, he fought to remain focused on his work. He wrestled with himself to not look up at her or even think about her, but unfortunately for him, his mind always wandered back to the pretty young woman scrubbing out cauldrons on the dungeon floor in front of his desk. Damn him for being so weak!

Finally, Hermione finished the last caludron with a badly battered toothbrush. After stacking them neatly in the storage closet and gathering her clothes, she informed Snape that she had completed her task for the evening.

"Very well, you are dismissed," Snape said snappily not bothering to look up at her, "but don't forget to arrive for your next detention at seven o'clock SHARP tomorrow!"

"Yes, sir," she said in a tired voice as she walked up the stairs.

As she pulled the door open, she turned around and declared, "Professor Snape, I just want to tell you that I thought the riddle you created for the Sorcerer's Stone was absolutely brilliant. I've never seen or heard a better riddle in all my life!"

"Well, that's not saying much since you've only been around for eighteen years," Snape responded tersely. "Flattery won't get you anywhere, Miss Granger, not out of your detentions OR out of your possible expulsion."

"Those weren't my intensions, sir."

"Whether they were or not, nothing will save or redeem you from this month and now four days of punishment... unless, of course, you are prohibited from attend Hogwarts."

"Yes, sir," she answered down-heartedly as she began to walk out of the classroom.

At that moment, Snape didn't know what came over him. He wasn't sure if it was the hurt look in her eyes, the small frown on her face, or the sadness in her voice, but it tugged at his heartstrings and caused him to do something that he RARELY did.

"Miss Granger."

"Yes, Professor Snape?"

"Thank you."

"For what, sir?"

"For finding the cure for the common cold. Really, Miss Granger, what do you think?! For the compliment about the riddle, silly girl!"

"Oh, you're welcome sir, and I really did mean it when I said it was the best!"

"Yes, well a riddle like that could have only been solved by the best, Miss Granger."

Hermione's eyes lit up and the corners of her mouth formed a small smile that slowly grew into a wide grin across her face. She knew, in Snape Speak, that was as close to a compliment as she was EVER going to get from him.

Seeing how she was no longer depressed, Snape returned to his cold merciless self and hissed, "Now leave and get out of my sight!"

Without a second thought, Hermione turned tail and ran all the way to the Gryffindor common room out of pure adrenaline and joy from being the only Gryffindor in Hogwart's history to ever receive a flattering remark from Professor Snape.

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*Yea, there's chapter 2! I hope you all liked it!*

*Thanks to everyone who gave me reviews! I love reading them and they really inspire me to improve my writing! I'm glad you are all enjoying the story! You guys rock my rocks! :)*

*Also, find the hidden Alan Rickman quote for 5 more points, or make it 10 if you name the movie!*

*Thanks again, everyone! I'll try to post chapter 3 very soon! :)*

*"We fight against those who control the darkness."*

*- DADA Mistress*

## A Restless Mind

The Potions Master ponders about Hermione and the time spent with her.

*Disclaimer: I have never owned any of these characters from the Harry Potter series and I never will. They all belong to the brilliant mind of J.K. Rowling, however this story belongs to me, spewing forth from my very own sick and demented mind. I don't plan on receiving any sort of profit for these stories. I just love the characters so much that I HAVE to write about them.*

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### Chapter 3: A Restless Mind

Hermione ran as fast as her legs could carry her. She was tired and wanted nothing more than to go soak in the tub with some rose oil and loosen the knots in her shoulders and arms. As she turned the corner of the last hall that would lead her to the common room, Hermione hit something quite solid and hard, falling over backwards onto the floor with an "oof!"

"Ow!" she groaned slowly getting up while rubbing her shoulder, "Why don't you watch where you're... HARRY! RON! What are you doing?!"

"Hi, 'Mione," Harry grimaced rubbing the back of his neck, "Nice to see you're all right."

"All right? Why wouldn't I be all right?"

"Because it's almost bloody curfew!" Ron exclaimed rubbing his bum, "Harry and I got worried and decided to take the Invisibility Cloak to see what you were doing. Snape can't keep you captive all night!"

"Maybe not, but he can certainly keep me in detention all year if he wants."

"What do you mean, Hermione?" Harry asked quizzically.

"Professor Snape added four more days to my detention list."

"WHAT?!" Ron hollered rather loudly, "FOUR MORE DAYS?!"

"SHHHHH!" Harry and Hermione hissed, "Keep your voice down!"

"That dirty bastard!" Ron whispered harshly.

"RON!" Hermione snapped, "Hold your tongue!"

"Four more days?! Isn't that a bit much for one detention?" Harry questioned hoping to prevent Ron and Hermione from having a yelling match in the hall.

"Yes, well, I'm sure he felt it was justified," Hermione sighed, "especially after my 'horrible mouth' as he put it. Besides, he's just doing his job."

"Oh sure, Snape is doing his job if it's to be an unfair nasty ol' prat!" Ron spat.

"Stop it, Ron! Watch your mouth, AND as I've told you before, it's PROFESSOR Snape!"

"What's the matter, 'Mione?" Harry smiled mockingly while nudging her in the ribs, "Afraid he's lurking in the corner?"

"That man is a menace!" Ron ranted, "He's intolerable! He should be reported! He should be sacked! He should be... um... hung from the ceiling by his feet and beaten with sticks until candy pops out of him! He..."

"What are you babbling about now, Weasley?" a sharp voice snapped behind him.

The three Gryffindors whipped around and gasped to find none other than Professor Snape standing behind them.

"AH!" they cried in surprise.

"So much for the brave Gryffindor spirit," Snape said with a twisted smile, "I appreciate the resounding 'hello.' What are the three of you doing out here so close to curfew?"

Harry started stammering, "We, er, uh, we were, um, just, uh, going back to, um, well, uh, were talking about, uh, er... stuff."

"My, my, Potter. You have quite an extensive and astonishing vocabulary, especially for a Gryffindor."

"I-I-is there, um, something you need, Professor Snape?" Hermione asked nervously.

"Yes, Miss Granger. I need you to be more responsible and stop leaving your things in my classroom."

"Sir?"

"Seeing as you completely failed to remember your item, I'm not surprised that you'd be clueless as to what I am referring to. You forgot this. You might want to keep it for tomorrow."

Snape handed Hermione a pathetic and mutilated toothbrush with clumps of green and pink chunks in between the black stained bristles. She forgot she left it next to the cauldrons. She could see why he wouldn't want to keep it in his room. It looked almost as bad as some of the things he kept floating in jars around the dungeons.

"Um, thank you, sir," she said with a disgusted look on her face.

"Crikey, Hermione!" Harry exclaimed, "What did you have to... Ugh! Never mind, I don't want to know!"

"Um, sir," Ron started looking at the filthy object that was once a toothbrush, "This, uh, toothbrush seems to be... well... broken."

"Oh my, Mr. Weasley," Snape said unenthusiastically, "I admire your keen sense of the obvious, not to mention your eloquence. You must be taking lessons from Mr. Potter."

"What I meant, sir, was that, since it looks to be useless, why didn't you just throw the toothbrush away?"

"Oh, I see what you mean, Mr. Weasley."

Snape suddenly whipped his head toward Hermione and glared at her menacingly.

"Leaving trash in my classroom! Is that what you were doing, Miss Granger?"

"No, Pro..." Hermione began, but Snape cut her off.

"Five points from Gryffindor for not cleaning your mess and another detention!"

"Now wait just a bloody minute!" Ron protested.

"And another five points for not minding your own business, Mr. Weasley. Although I must thank you for bringing that 'garbage' she left in the classroom to my attention. Now when ever I see or throw away trash, I'll think of you, Mr. Weasley."

"But..."

"I suggest all of you return to your dorms before it's past curfew. You don't want to lose anymore points for Gryffindor, do you, especially when Slytherin is in the lead for the House Cup?"

"Yes, sir," the three friends said quickly as they turned heel and began power walking back to the common room.

"Thanks a lot for another detention, Ron!" Hermione growled next to him.

"Sorry, 'Mione," Ron whispered back, "but I figured someone had to stand up to that no good bloke and it might as well have been me!"

"By the way, Mr. Weasley," Snape called out after them in such an icy voice that the Gryffindors stopped dead in their tracks, "despite popular belief, my parents were married long before I was born, thus not making me a 'bastard.' Also, I'd like to see you TRY to hang me by my feet and beat me with sticks. I guarantee you wouldn't get that far."

"Oh bugger!" Ron gulped as he quickly sprinted toward the Fat Lady portrait. Harry and Hermione followed his lead.

"Oh, my hero!" Hermione huffed before Ron yelled out the password and dove into the common room, "So much for Gryffindor courage indeed!"

Snape watched the trio enter their common room safely before turning heel and making his way back towards the dungeons. He walked quickly down the hall trying to stifle his laughter.

'Oh that Weasley is such a prat,' he thought.

They had no idea he'd been listening since Ron had called him a "dirty bastard." Snape couldn't help but chuckle as he remembered their faces when he walked up behind them. He LOVED striking fear into the hearts of students... and in people in general! He hungered for the look in their eyes as they became wide with fright, the pupil dilating in terror. Oh, he reveled in it! However, there was one student that ALWAYS needed a bit more intimidation than the rest of the student body: Hermione Granger.

Yes, Hermione Granger constantly gave him a run for his money. Sometimes, he often thought she saw right through his threats, especially the one about expelling her from Hogwarts. She was truly the smartest student that anyone had seen for a very long time. There was no way that anyone, not even Voldemort, could kick her out of school. In fact, she received the highest OWL marks in all her classes. She almost beat Snape's OWL score in Potions, but she was just a point short.

Of course, he was not surprised by Hermione's Potion marks. She had a vast knowledge of the subtle and delicate art. She had spent a lot of time with Snape over the summer at Grimmauld place helping him with his research, so he knew her capabilities beforehand. He didn't want her company at first, and was even reluctant to ask for her assistance in brewing some experiments he was conducting, but he needed more than one pair of hands to help him record some of his findings. Besides, he'd be damned if he'd have Potter or Weasley aid him. Those dunderheads didn't know a bloody thing about Potions, nor did they have the appreciation for it!

Snape had to admit he was quite impressed with Hermione's grace and refinement over the soft shimmering fumes of the bubbling cauldron. He was equally struck with her hunger for knowledge. She constantly asked questions, which annoyed him at first, until it became clear that she wasn't do it to bother him, but to learn more about Potions. As the summer continued, he ended up looking forward to working with her as well as answering questions she asked which usually ended in debates and discussions about everything from aconite to zingiber.

He recalled the first day of her first year in Potions class, how she leapt out of her chair to answer the questions, how she sat on the edge of her seat in anticipation of the first lesson. It was then Snape realized that she wasn't an ordinary student. She WANTED to be there. She wasn't another asinine sod forced to sit in his class and try to lackadaisically pass with the bare minimum requirements. She wasn't even an insufferable Know-It-All that just wanted attention for her extensive comprehension of various subjects (although he'd never admit that). Hermione was truly a lover of knowledge, craving for wisdom, yearning to learn... just like Snape.

While she was a pain at times, Snape had an understanding and admiration for Hermione. He never had a favorite student before, but Miss Ganger was the first. Not even little spoiled Draco Malfoy could compare to her. Of course, he'd never let anyone know that. What would people say, especially knowing she's a Gryffindor muggle-born girl?!

Well, she wasn't really a girl anymore, now was she?

He couldn't believe his eyes when he saw her earlier in the dungeon. He noticed for the first time ever she looked, sounded, thought, and acted like a woman... a very beautiful woman.

Snape shook the thoughts from his head as he entered into his private chambers. Where the hell did THAT come from? Well, beautiful or not, she was still an annoying little chit! He sighed and closed the door behind him after igniting a fire inside the fireplace with a flick of his wand. He threw off his school robe and frock before rolling up the sleeves of his white button up dress shirt. He poured himself some brandy in a snifter and swirled it before inhaling its sweet nutty aroma.

Ah, nothing like brandy on a quiet evening!

He slowly lowered himself down onto one of the big velvet chairs by the fire. He kicked off his boots and swirled his brandy thoughtfully with his hand before taking a sip. He felt the hot sweetness touch his lips and tongue, warming his whole mouth. He savored the warmth continuing down his throat and spread to his whole body as he stared into the fire. He always imagined that a kiss, love, being in love, would feel like that, but those feelings were foreign to him.

Snape's thoughts drifted back to Hermione, though he didn't mean to. He was surprised she has defended him in front of Potter and Weasley.

'I wonder how often she does that?' he contemplated to himself.

He couldn't imagine, in all his years of teaching, that a student would ever stand up FOR him... or stand up TO him for that matter. However, Hermione had already done both. She was definitely set apart from the class.

Apparently he wasn't the only one who noticed.

Longbottom, that incompetent sod, obviously had noticed her mature feminine refinement or else he wouldn't have allowed her to ugh touch his huge clumsy hand. Luckily, years of spying for the Order had enabled Snape to drown out background noise and focus on one specific conversation. In this case Hermione and Longbottom were his

victims during dinner in the Great Hall.

He couldn't believe Longbottom wanted to take Potions to help his mother and father! Unfortunately, the sad truth was there was probably nothing that he or anyone could do for his parents, but he could understand the boy's reasoning. Snape too wished he had "parents." Of course, he had a mother and father, but they were far from being loving parents. They were more like... genetic donors. They never cared for him, never loved him, never treated him like he was a gift from the heavens. Instead, they treated him like an inconvenience, a plague on their house. Although the Longbottoms were somewhat mentally inefficient, at least they showed their boy some sort of affection, even if it came by way of gum wrappers and pats on the head, which was more than Snape ever got from his own parents.

Still, even if Longbottom was feeling like having a pity party, he didn't have to invite Hermione! Really, he needn't touch her! It was completely uncalled for!

*"Of course, the same could have been said for you,"* a little voice responded in his head.

What was that? His conscience? He thought he got rid of that a long time ago. Or perhaps it was his darker side, his Death Eater side, the side he had been trying to completely rid himself of for sometime now.

*"You needn't touch her in class either, yet you did,"* the voice continued, *"In fact, you seemed to take some sinful delight in feeling the softness of her shoulders. You know you'd wonder about that every now and then during the summer at Grimmauld Place."*

Snape gritted his teeth and took a long sip of his brandy, trying to drown out the voice with alcohol. Unfortunately, the brandy only made the voice louder.

*"Oh, and you could smell her too when you were that close. Mmm, wild roses. How enchanting."*

"Stop it!" he grumbled to himself out loud.

*"You could feel her shuddered breath on your neck too when you were bent low like that, remember? Of course you do."*

Snape let out a frustrated growl and flicked his wand at the bookshelf and summoned a book to read. He had to do something to get his mind off of the current subject and quiet the voice in his head. He quickly read the book cover to see what he had randomly selected to read. He rolled his eyes and sighed loudly. A book of riddles.

*"Oh how wonderfully appropriate,"* the voice mused, *"It's like throwing gasoline on a flame."*

"Hush!" he barked as he cracked open the book in hopes of silencing his conscience or whatever it was nagging at him. It was rather annoying!

He flipped through the pages while the book hovered in midair in front of him thanks to the floating charm he administered. As he read on he couldn't help but think of the riddle Hermione and he had solved earlier that evening. It was odd that they answered it simultaneously. Hmmm, odd indeed. Well, great minds do think alike after all, however he'd be damned first before he admitted to thinking like a Gryffindor, especially one like HER!

Snape took another sip of his brandy and turned another page, in search of the perfect riddle to stump the little chit.

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*Sorry, no riddle this time, but I promise there will be in the next chapter. Oh, there's another Alan Rickman quote interwoven in this chapter! 5 points if you can figure it out and 5 more if you can name the movie! Here's a hint: it's near the end of the chapter and it's one of my favorite Alan Rickman movies of all time. Well, it's one of my favorite movies period. Oddly enough, I don't own it. Well, for those of you who want to purchase me a present (and I KNOW you all do) that would be a great movie to buy me. Actually, on second thought, I'll just swing by BestBuy tomorrow and get it. I can't wait till Christmas!*

*Oh, for those of you keeping track of your points, the hidden Alan Rickman quote from chapter 2 was "I'm pissed off is what I am!" from that awesome Kevin Smith movie Dogma. If you were able to figure that out, then give yourself a big warm hug and 5 points, well, 10 if you figured out the movie too!*

*Also, special thanks to my editors Mom, Sister, and best friend Daniela, especially with helping me with Neville and THIS chapter!*

*Don't forget to check the review page if you're expecting a response.*

*Thanks for all the support! You all are the best! You rock my world!*

*"We fight against those who control the darkness."*

- DADA Mistress

## Something to Think About

Chapter 4 of 15

Snape gives Hermione a riddle and they both think about a few incidents that occurred in the potions lab over the summer.

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#### Chapter 4: Something to Think About

Hermione closed her eyes in silent agony as she tried to will her headache away. Potions seemed to be excruciatingly longer than usual. Ron and Professor Snape kept glaring at one another, Harry and Draco were making empty threats, two cauldrons had already exploded, one pair of students had succeeded in gluing themselves to each other, her hands were sore from scrubbing the night before, and she STILL had another detention at seven o'clock SHARP that night!

"Good Lord, will the day ever end?!" Hermione dreaded.

She slowly poured the fig tree sap into her sticky potion and sighed loudly, part of her wishing she had never stood up to Snape. It didn't help Neville back into Potions, and she was stuck for a month and now FOUR days worth of detention. Sometimes, life just wasn't fair.

Hermione's thoughts were suddenly interrupted by a familiar scent. No, it wasn't her potion, because that was supposed to be odorless. It most certainly wasn't her, because she didn't wear perfume that smelled like that. She slowly inhaled through her nose again and recognized the smell of sandalwood and cinnamon. She held her breath. Oh good Lord, it was Professor Snape! Suddenly Hermione stiffened slightly as she felt his presence directly behind her while he looked over her shoulder and stared into the cauldron. Her heart quickened. He was so close that she could actually feel the heat radiating off of his body. It was a bit unsettling since the last time he was so near she received her detentions, and yet, Hermione couldn't help but feel a little... intrigued?

'No, no, no,' Hermione scolded to herself, 'you're nervous, Hermione, just nervous he's so close... again! God, how uncomfortable! Why does he have to loom over me like this, trying to act so domineering? Geez, what happened to the somewhat cool Potions Master I knew over the summer?'

Hermione tried to shake the thoughts from her head and concentrate on anything but the man behind her that was making her stomachs do flip-flops, and she didn't know why. After all, she wasn't afraid of him, but still... Why was her body acting this way?

Snape was surveying the classroom with scrutiny after the cauldrons exploded and the incident between Crabbe and Goyle. "It never ends!" he sneered when he had to detach them. Honestly, if there were two idiots that could get themselves glued to each other, it was definitely them! He felt a headache coming, and no potion in the world would be able to prevent it. It had just been too stressful! Damn kids, such a pain in his arse!

As his stern face scanned the room, his eyes fell on Hermione who sighed rather loudly while pouring exactly three millimeters of fig tree sap into her potion. Hm, what could be troubling the star student? He'd better go over there, at least to make sure she wasn't about to take revenge for Longbottom and blow up the whole dungeon.

*"Oh, since when did we start making excuses to go and check on students, hm?"* the voice in his head teased, *"What happened to big bad Snape who would just stride over to anyone to give them hell without so much as a second thought?"*

Snape pursed his lips and ignored the annoying voice as he slowly walked right behind Hermione Granger hard at work. At first she didn't notice he was there, but Snape knew immediately the moment that she did. She stopped breathing for a moment and her body stiffened slightly. Silly young woman, er, girl!

Snape leaned closer to Hermione, not purposely meaning to slightly brush up against her, but to make sure her potion was indeed odorless as well as thickening. He looked menacingly into the bubbling potion. Hmmm, everything seemed to be brewing just fine. He tested the air for any hint that the potion might be giving off some sort of odor, but, as he predicted, all was perfect in the land of Granger.

Snape was about to take his leave until all of the sudden he stopped and sniffed the air again. This time he did smell something: roses. Wild roses. Well, well, well, it seems Miss Granger isn't perfect after all. Suddenly, it occurred to him that the scent wasn't coming from Miss Granger's potion, but from Miss Granger herself! Of course, how could he forget THAT?!

In an attempt to cover his discomfort (or sudden interest) from standing so close, he stepped back and said sternly, "Miss Granger, a word after class."

"Yes, sir," Hermione squeaked as he walked back to his desk. Great, what did she do now? That man just could never be satisfied no matter what! She remembered when she was working with him over the summer. He was a perfectionist, never content with just mediocre results. He'd work all night if he had to until he got exactly what he desired.

Sometimes, Hermione would finish recording the results of her brew and look up to find Snape asleep at his desk with a quill in hand pressed against a parchment filled with notes and formulas. Hermione lost count of the number of times she'd clean up and pull a blanket over him while he slept. Whenever she saw Snape like that, Hermione couldn't help but feel some warmth in her heart. He looked so peaceful then, so clam, so gentle, even a little dare she say handsome. In that state of such tranquility, he looked almost... human. She often wondered if that Snape even existed anymore. Had years of working as a double agent completely erase a softer side of Snape never before seen by the public? For some strange reason, Hermione hoped not.

At the end of class, each student filed out of the classroom... except Hermione, Ron, and Harry. After convincing her friends she'd be fine by herself with the Potions Master, Harry and Ron reluctantly left the room and waited outside close to the door just in case she screamed for help. Hermione quietly approached Snape's desk as he wrote something down on a scroll.

"You wanted to see me, Professor Snape?" she asked.

He put down his quill and looked up, meeting Hermione's curious eyes. He stared at her for a moment before he finally broke the silence and say slowly, "Just two hairs upon my head, but I wear a flowered gown and dance in the flower bed, the prettiest creature in town."

'Oh God, he's gone mad!' Hermione feared, 'Great, I'm alone in the dungeons with Professor Snape who has just fallen off his rocker! All that spying must have caused him to snap!'

Hermione took a deep breath before asking, "Um... Are you feeling all right, sir?"

"Here I thought you were more intelligent than that, Miss Granger, but I guess you don't know a riddle when you hear one. I suppose I was just expecting too much from a Gryffindor."

"Oh no, sir. I knew it was a riddle," Hermione lied, "but I thought..."

"You thought what?"

"I thought..."

"Thought I went mad?"

"Well...Never mind, sir."

"Well mad or not, see to it that you arrive here ON TIME at seven o'clock SHARP for your next detention."

"Yes, sir. I'll try to solve the riddle before detention."

"See that you do, Miss Granger. It would be to your benefit."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

"You are dismissed."

Hermione left Snape's desk and quickly walked up the stairs towards door, where Harry and Ron waited on the other side.

"All right, 'Monie?'" Harry asked with a very concerned look.

"Oh, I'm fine," she said with a forced smile.

"What did he say to you?" Ron asked.

"He told me, 'Just two hairs upon my head, but I wear a flowered gown and dance in the flower bed, the prettiest creature in town.' "

"WHAT?!" Harry and Ron asked shocked.

"He told me, 'Just two hairs upon my head, but I wear a flowered gown and dance in the flower bed, the prettiest creature in town.' "

Ron and Harry looked at each other with disgusted looks on their faces before looking back to Hermione with the same sour expressions.

"Ew, gross!" Ron grimaced, "I don't want to know what Snape does on the weekends outside of Hogwarts!"

"No, no, no," Hermione scolded, "It's not what you think. It's a riddle!"

"Oh, that makes sense," Harry sighed with relief, "but why did he tell you a riddle?"

"I'm not quite sure," she lied again.

"Is that all he told you?"

"Well, he also said it would be beneficial if I figured out the riddle BEFORE I serve detention."

"Why?" Ron asked.

"I don't know."

"Wouldn't it be a kicker if Snape gave you some kind of reward?" Harry said jokingly.

Hermione's eyes slightly widened. COULD have Professor Snape been hinting at some sort of reward? That would be too good to be true! Hermione broke into a grin as the wheels of her mind began to turn, hoping the Professor Snape she knew over the summer would grant her some leniency.

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The corners of Snape's mouth slightly twitched as he tried not to smirk. It was too funny to see Hermione run up the stairs in dread, yet he ALMOST felt bad for seeing the uneasiness in her eyes. Was he losing his touch? No, it definitely had something to do with her. There was a sort of understanding and tenderness she possessed that Snape couldn't really conceive, something about her that made his skin tingle... or crawl, he really wasn't sure.

He leaned back in his chair and put his feet up on he desk, clasping his hands behind his head. He remembered an occasion at Grimmauld Place when he had woken up at his desk with a warm blanket covering him as well as all his experiments cleaned and ready for continuation the next day. His notes were neatly stacked in a pile in front of him and his quill was laying next to his ink well. At first he suspected Molly Weasley had cleaned up and covered him during the night, but how would she know to keep the belladonna and arnica mixture simmering overnight?

At that moment, it suddenly occurred to Snape that it wasn't Molly at all, but, instead Miss Granger! That was all Hermione's doing. It only made sense since she was the only person who had his permission to enter his laboratory. He could understand her tidiness, but he couldn't believe that she would do something as... kind as to cover him and let him sleep, something he cherished since he rarely had a chance to do it. Voldemort loved to keep the Death Eaters all night to do dirty deeds or just as a pathetic power trip. Between that, teaching, his research, and reporting to the Order of the Dark Lord's intentions, he got little rest. Letting him sleep was about the most thoughtful thing she could have ever done for him. But why would she do such a thing? If anything he expected her to awake him up or at least let him freeze during the night, but no, she didn't. Why did she do it?

Snape had found himself in that situation several more times over the summer at Grimmauld Place. He'd awaken with a warm blanket tucked tightly around him with his lab orderly and ready for the next day's experimentation. He never fell asleep THAT often in the past when he did his research, why was he suddenly dropping off then? Perhaps it was because he was getting older, or he had too much burdens and responsibilities on his shoulders. Although he'd never admit it, perhaps it was because he felt so... calm... so comfortable around her, that he knew she could handle anything that came her way, and that filled him with a peace he hadn't felt in such a long time.

However, despite the fact that he knew it was Hermione who took care of the lab (and him), he never lead on that he recognized it was her. In fact, he never mentioned the incidents to anyone. He didn't want everybody to know, especially since he had secretly taken pleasure in the strange act of "affection." It was nice to know that precious prat Potter wasn't the only one getting special treatment.

Snape sat up in his chair and stretched. He looked at his pocket watch and saw he had plenty of time to finish writing a couple lesson plans before dinner. He began writing on the scroll again, wondering if Miss Granger would figure out the riddle BEFORE seven o'clock and wondering why he was wondering about her at all.

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Hermione picked at her food, trying to think of creatures (mainly mammals) with two hairs on their head, while Harry and Ron where discussing Quidditch, of course. While Harry began listing the many reasons the Cannons were not going to win any games this year, Ron stole a glance at Hermione and smiled as a single stray curl fell into her face. He hesitated for a moment as he debated whether or not to tuck the hair neatly behind her ear. His question was answered when she removed the stray curl herself. That's when he noticed the focus on her face, how her brow furrowed and her lips pursed as she contemplated the riddle. Doesn't this girl ever rest? Still, Ron had to admit she looked pretty cute when she was completely engrossed with her thoughts!

"Hey, 'Monie, could you keep it down? You're concentrating so hard that I can hear you think!" Ron teased.

"Quiet, I'm thinking," Hermione hissed ignoring his words.

"That's obvious," Harry chuckled.

"That's enough from you too."

"Aw, we're only fooling..."

"I know but... I just NEED to figure out this riddle Professor Snape told me. Maybe you're right about the 'reward,' Harry. He did say it would be to my benefit."

"I was only joking when I said that, Hermione, I wasn't serious. Besides, I think he told you that as more of a warning than enticement anyway."

"Snape giving a Gryffindor a reward?" Ron asked with a forkful of mashed potatoes to his mouth, "I think he'll do a ballet with Hagrid in tights before he hands out rewards

to Gryffindors."

"He's got a point," Harry nodded, "I mean, honestly, even if Snape DID hand out a 'reward,' I think you both would have different definitions of what a pleasant reward would be. Seriously, what kind of 'reward' do you think Snape would hand out to you?"

"Knowing Snape it's probably a new toothbrush to clean more cauldrons," Ron said with a mouthful of mashed potatoes.

"Ron Weasley, I KNOW your mother taught you better manners than THAT! Talk AFTER your mouth isn't brimming with food!" Hermione scolded, "I know you two think it's silly, but I want to solve this riddle before detention, so, if you'll please excuse me..."

She rose from the table and made her way out of the Great Hall with Ron calling after her, "IF YOU'RE DONE EATING, THEN CAN I HAVE THE REST OF YOUR MASHED POTATOES?!"

~~~~~

Hermione sat on the rug in front of the fire in the Gryffindor common room, thinking about the riddle as she stared into the flames. Everyone was still at dinner so it was nice and quiet enough for her to think uninterrupted. She repeated the riddle to herself again while she pulled her knees up to her chest and watched the orange flames dance and flicker as they threw shadows on the walls. She sighed and contemplated in the warm glow of the fire, concentrating her efforts into solving that riddle. She sat in the silence as the minutes passed, which was only interrupted by the sound of cracking logs. She repeated the riddle again and giggled when she imagined Snape dancing in flower beds with a flowered gown with only two hairs poking out of his head. He would look ridiculous! He'd probably pass as some sort of alien or bug with those hairs sticking out like...

Suddenly, Hermione sprung to her feet. Of course! She quickly looked at the clock on the wall that read, "You've got a few more minutes!" Hermione rushed up the stairs to her room.

'I hope I only have to scrub half the cauldrons,' she thought to herself as grabbed her toothbrush, wand, and a pink button that had fallen off of her blouse last weekend.

She ran back down the stairs and looked back up at the clock. "You'd better hurry!" the clock read. Jumping over the last few steps, Hermione dashed out of the common room and towards the dungeons with a huge grin on her face.

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Snape was sitting at his desk about to grade those damnable third year essays when the door to the potions room suddenly slammed open. He jumped to his feet (and just about jumped out of his skin) with his wand ready to defend himself when Hermione burst into the dungeon flying down the stairs yelling, "I have it, sir, I have it! I have the answer to the riddle!"

Snape rolled his eyes and sighed in relief. Good God, he almost had a heart attack! He put his wand away and sat back down in his seat pinching the bridge of his nose while Hermione stood in front of his desk grinning from ear to ear. After regaining his composure, Snape looked up and sneered, "Did you have to scream like a banshee, Miss Granger?! You Gryffindors and your grand entrances! Ten points for failing to control your vocal chords!"

"Sorry, sir," Hermione continued grinning, "but I was just so excited about discovering the answer BEFORE my detention!"

"So it would seem. Now then, Miss Granger, if you know the answer, then what is it?"

Hermione placed the pink button on the edge of the desk and stepped back. Snape studied the button and raised an eyebrow.

"I'm sorry, Miss Granger, but a button is NOT the answer to the riddle," Snape said almost triumphantly at the thought of stumping the little Know-It-All.

"I know, sir," Hermione continued grinning as she took out her wand, "THIS is the answer."

With a few flicks and motions of her wand, Hermione transfigured the pink button into the answer..."

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*Yea, there's chapter 4! I hope you all liked it!*

*I KNOW it was evil of me to leave you guys hanging like that, and I KNOW I said I'd have two riddles in this next chapter, but when I saw there were twelve pages in this chapter alone, I HAD to split it up. Sorry! Please forgive me! Of course, I gave you guys MANY hints as to what the answer is, but you'll still get 5 points if you can solve the riddle.*

*The Alan Rickman quote in chapter 3 was "It's like throwing gasoline on a flame." That quote was from Galaxy Quest, one of the greatest movies of all time! 5 points to you if you found the quote and another 5 if you knew the movie!*

*Of course, as always, there's another Alan Rickman quote in the chapter. You know what to do and how much it's worth.*

*I'll post chapter 5 VERY soon!*

*Thanks for all your support and reviews! You guys are the best and still rock my world!*

*"We fight against those who control the darkness."*

*- DADA Mistress*

## There's Nothing Worse Than A Nagging Conscience

Chapter 5 of 15

Oh dear, Snape is talking to himself again during the second detention, but that little voice has some good advice!  
What will Hermione think?

First, I want to give special thanks to Fictionlover\_32, Snapesbbwlover, MelissaAdams, and Lady\_Peeves for their support and helpfulness! **It's much appreciated!**

Also I just saw **Dark Harbor** Monday afternoon and it's a VERY good movie. As always, Alan Rickman gives a WONDERFUL performance and his monologue about love is moving and mesmerizing. I seriously got choked up. Yeah, I know I'm a sick sorry sod, so sue me.

On second thought, please don't.

Now, a word from my disclaimer.

Disclaimer: I have never owned any of these characters from the Harry Potter series and I never will. They all belong to the brilliant mind of J.K. Rowling, however this story belongs to me, spewing forth from my very own sick and demented mind. I don't plan on receiving any sort of profit for these stories. I just love the characters so much that I HAVE to write about them.

Please, no lawsuits.

Also, this is my FIRST story, so please, be nice and helpful. Enjoy! :)

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Chapter 5: There's Nothing Worse Than A Nagging Conscience

"Now then, Miss Granger, if you know the answer, then what is it?"

Hermione placed the pink button on the edge of the desk and stepped back. Snape studied the button and raised an eyebrow.

"I'm sorry, Miss Granger, but a button is NOT the answer to the riddle," Snape said almost triumphantly at the thought of stumping the little Know-It-All.

"I know, sir," Hermione continued grinning as she took out her wand, "THIS is the answer..."

With a few flicks and motions of her wand, Hermione transfigured the pink button into the answer... a beautiful butterfly!

The butterfly fluttered into the air, Hermione watching with her little pixie face glowing with triumph while Snape looked on with a glare.

"Yes, Miss Granger, you solved it," he said reluctantly, "Congratulations." With a flick of his wand and a sneer on his face, the butterfly turned back into a button in midair and dropped onto the cold dungeon floor.

"Sir," Hermione began a bit nervously but still grinning, "Um, I'm not quite sure how to ask this, but..."

"Miss Granger not sure of something?" Snape said dryly, "Oh I do believe the world is about to end. The little Know-It-All apparently DOESN'T know it all."

"Please, sir, I never claimed to know everything. What I was trying to ask you before was... Well, was there a reason you, um, wanted me to solve the riddle before detention? You did mention how it would be to my benefit."

"Ah, I see what you're saying," Snape smirked knowing what she wanted from eavesdropping on her conversation at dinner. "You're thinking of perhaps a reward, hm? I thought you were just excited about deciphering the riddle. Obviously you're just as materialistic as any other dunderhead."

"Oh no, sir. That's not true! It was a very good riddle, sir, but... Well, let's just say these hands weren't made for scrubbing."

Hermione held her hands out to Snape to show a couple of blisters that had begun to appear last night after scrubbing. Snape felt a slight tug in his gut as he glanced at her red hands, each with a blister forming on her palms. Snape's immediate reaction was to take her hands into his and rub ointment on them, but, of course, he resisted the temptation. He tried to ignore this feeling of guilt that was slowly over coming him. What was happening? When did he suddenly start giving a damn?

Looking up at Hermione with a sneer, Snape asked snidely, "Is that so? Then what were they made for besides scratching yourself and picking your nose?"

"Professor Snape!" Hermione gasped, "I do NOT under any circumstances..."

"Care? Neither do I, Miss Granger. You want a reward? Fine. You can have your reward."

"Really?" Hermione asked with a pleasantly surprised look.

"Of course. Would you like to know what it is?"

"Oh please, sir!"

"Was that a yes?" Snape asked sarcastically.

"Yes, Professor Snape!"

"All right," Snape said with a sly smirk, "Your reward is the satisfaction of knowing that you solved one of my riddles."

Suddenly, Hermione's face fell as she just looked at him with her mouth open and her eyes wide with shock. She couldn't believe it! She just couldn't believe it! The nerve of that man! That... that scoundrel! He lead her on! What a cad!

"What's the matter, Miss Granger?" Snape mocked, "Were you expecting something more?"

She moved her mouth to speak what she was thinking, but couldn't get the words to come out.

"Ah, another articulate Gryffindor," Snape said smugly, "Are you taking lessons from Potter too?"

"That was a dirty trick, Professor Snape!" Hermione said angrily.

"Now is that a way to say 'thank you' to someone, Miss Granger, because I KNOW you wouldn't be questioning my integrity unless you wanted another detention. Now, what do you say to someone to express your deep appreciation?"

Hermione gritted her teeth and clenched her fists as she held back tears of frustration and anger. "Thank you for that lovely riddle, Professor Snape," she finally spat, "It was most intriguing!"

"That's better, Miss Granger," he said coolly in his silkiest voice, "Now I want you to grade these third year essays on the properties of *Melissa officinalis* in an anti-depressant potion."



"Yes, sir," she scowled snatching half the pile and sitting at one of the desks.

Oh, that dirty rotten bastard! How dare he get her hopes up like that?! Oh how her blood boiled at that moment!

'How stupid to think that Severus Snape would EVER give out an award!' Hermione grimaced to herself, 'Oh that prat! How could I have ever thought there was something about him that seemed anything but intolerable?'

She sighed loudly and grabbed the first scroll from the pile and began to read, hoping the homework would get her mind off of Severus Snape!

'Well,' she finally thought to herself, 'at least I'm not scrubbing cauldrons.'

The Potions Master was trying to concentrate on the essays in front of him instead of the young woman in front of his desk. He was hoping that arousing her anger would cause her to keep her distance from him, much to his benefit. He continued marking scrolls, hoping his plan would work. As the minutes passed while they marked in silence he couldn't help but occasionally look up and steal a glance at her. She was angry, that was obvious, but he could see in her eyes that she was... Humiliated... Hurt. She had put some faith and trust in him and he laughed in her face. Any other time with any other student he'd be thrilled with that look, but for some odd reason he didn't feel that way at all. Instead he felt... Terrible.

'No, no, I DO NOT feel like some prat!' he told himself angrily.

*"Are you sure about that?"* the voice in his head asked.

'YES!'

*"Really? Then why are you trying to justify your actions to yourself? It's because you feel bad for what you did."*

'Not at all! I love that sort of power! I feed off of students quivering in my wake! I live for that feeling of sending someone's world crashing and burning into the ground!'

*"Buuuuuuut?"*

Snape stole another glance at Hermione who had a melancholy look full of betrayal and sorrow. Suddenly, his heart felt heavy and that pang returned to his stomach.

He sighed quietly and thought, 'But not with her.'

He cursed himself as he opened a drawer and pulled out a blank scroll and began to write furiously. There had to be some way to get rid of that annoying voice, and he had a feeling this ought to do the trick... and perhaps even put a smile on Hermione's face.

Hermione was still cursing Snape in her head as she was finishing her last markings on the last essay in her pile. He was so full of himself! He was being so nasty to her, and for what? There was no reason! Well, she'd show him! She'd get him at...

"Here, Miss Granger!" Snape hissed.

Hermione looked up in time to see the scroll Snape had thrown at her. She dropped her quill and caught the parchment.

'Great, another essay,' she thought, 'he's going to keep me here all night!'

She opened the scroll to mark what she assumed was her final essay, thank God! She truly couldn't grade another! As she began to read her mouth dropped open in surprise. It wasn't an essay! This was... a homework pass?! She read the scroll again to make sure she wasn't delusional:

*"I, Professor Severus Snape, have awarded this student, Miss Hermione Granger, a 'homework pass' for her quick intellect in solving a rather perplexing enigma. This 'pass' is good for receiving full credit for one assignment, however, this does not include examinations."*

Hermione looked up at Snape with her face still in shock. He was marking his last essay while red in the face with anger and embarrassment for listening to that damn conscience of his. She was still watching him as she started grinning from ear to ear, hoping he'd look up at her, but he continued to focus on his markings.

Finally, as if he knew she was staring at him, Snape said in the silkiest voice while continuing with his grades, "You are not to tell anyone of your 'reward,' Miss Granger. If you do, the scroll will become blank when you turn it into me, making it null and void. Do I make myself clear?"

"Oh, yes, sir!" Hermione exclaimed, "Thank you, sir!"

She quickly tucked her pass in her robes and gathered the finished scrolls, putting them neatly in a pile on his desk exactly like she did at Grimmauld's Place.

"They're all done, Professor Snape," she said sweetly.

She couldn't help but inhale deeply next to him. Mmm, still smelled delicious. The way she was staring at Snape that moment, one would have never guessed that she was cursing his name only minutes ago.

"Fine, Miss Granger. You are dismissed."

"Thank you, sir, and thank you for the 'reward!' I promise I won't tell a soul, not even Crookshanks!"

"Crookshanks?" he asked while looking up at her with a raised eyebrow.

"My cat! I promise I won't even tell him! Thank you so much Professor Snape!"

Hermione didn't wait for a response as she turned tail and ran up the stairs. Suddenly, she stopped and turned around to face Severus Snape with a wide grin on her face. As she stood there Snape could feel her deep brown eyes burning into his head with a hard concentrated stare. Finally, he put down his quill and looked up at her with narrowed eyes.

"Oh, what is it now, Miss Granger?!" Snape demanded thoroughly annoyed, "Can't you leave me in peace for just a moment?"

"Sir, as a thank you, might I muse you with a riddle of my own?"

He raised his eyebrow in curiosity before scowling, "You're trying my patience, Miss Granger, but if you must... Just make it a good one or else I'll take back the homework pass."

"Oh no, sir, it's a good one! I wouldn't dream of insulting your intelligence!"

"Well what is it already? I don't have all night!"

"My life is measured in hours. I serve by being devoured. Thin, I am quick. Thick, I am slow. A gust of wind is my greatest foe."

Snape leaned back in his chair and looked up at the ceiling deep in thought. He steepled his hands over his chest with his elbows resting on the arms of the chair. To

Hermione's surprise, he smiled a true genuine smile! For a moment, she was afraid his face was going to crack under the pressure of that mysterious grin. He'd probably be sore tomorrow. Lord knows when the last time those muscles were used!

"Well, that is a good one," Snape continued smiling at her.

Suddenly realizing he was smiling in her general direction, the corners of his mouth dropped and he cleared his throat saying, "Ahem, yes, well, thank you Miss Granger. Now leave! The sight of you is making me weary. I don't know WHAT I was thinking when I gave you a month's worth of detention with me. God, I can barely stand to look at you during the day. Why do I torture myself by seeing you again?!"

"Well, sir," she said sweetly from the doorway, "you could always take away some of my detentions so you wouldn't have to see me so much."

Ironically, that was the last thing either one of them wanted to do, but they couldn't afford to let the other know that.

"Five points, Miss Granger, for tempting a professor!" Snape declared, "Good night!"

"Good night, Professor Snape."

Hermione turned and almost closed the door behind her until she stopped. She had no idea what possessed her to say such a thing, but she slowly turned around and added, "Sweet dreams."

Snape looked up in time to see Hermione dash away out of sight closing the door behind her. By the hem of Merlin's robes, what did that girl just say?! Sweet dreams?! He snorted at the thought. He knew they'd only be sweet if they were about...

He shook the thoughts from his head. He had to stop such thoughts and feelings now before they got too out of hand! It was stupid to let one's emotions get in the way of rational thinking, like some hormone driven teenager! Of course, he wasn't one to talk. After all, he changed her detention duty based on his culpable feelings, especially when he saw how sad her eyes looked. Truth be told, he actually HATED to see that pain in her eyes. How could he betray her like that?

Despite his concern towards Hermione, Snape was still a bit angry at himself for giving into his gnawing guilt. Good God, what was wrong with him lately? First he spends half the night looking for a riddle to tell her, then he takes pity on her poor sore hands and makes her grade essays instead, and NOW he was giving her a homework pass?! He's NEVER given ANYONE a homework pass, not even to a Slytherin! What made her so special?

"Oh, you know what it is that makes her so extraordinary," the voice chided in his head.

"Not this again," he groaned, "Go away and stop pestering me, Conscience!"

"Who said I was a conscience? Maybe I'm common sense!"

"That's highly doubtful since you are forcing me to have conversations with myself like some unstable crazy old bat like Dumbledore!"

"But you ARE unstable!" the voice asserted.

"Shut up!"

"Maybe she can tame you, soothe the wild beast inside," the voice continued, "If anyone could do it, she could."

"I'm not listening!"

"Maybe you should for once! After all, you did crack a smile tonight. Perhaps not all hope is lost."

"Is that what you are?" Severus asked with a puzzled look, "Hope?"

"Precisely," the voice chirped.

"Rubbish!"

"Obviously not. You are still speaking to me."

"Well not anymore," Snape declared, "because I'm going to drown you out in double shots of firewhiskey."

"I really don't think..."

"Exactly, don't think, drink!"

Snape gathered all his marked essays and put them in a neat pile on his desk before heading to his private chambers for a well-deserved rest, wondering if he would indeed have sweet dreams that night. It had been a very long time since he had one.

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Yea, there's chapter 5! I hope you all liked it!

Yea, I learned html codes! I'm so proud of myself! ^\_^

Again, 5 points if you knew the answer to the riddle was butterfly. Earn another 5 points if you can figure out the answer to this new one Hermione told Snape.

There's an Alan Rickman quote in the mix. 5 points if you find it and another 5 if you know the movie! The quote from the last chapter was VERY hard. It was from Dogma again when AR shouted, "It never ends!" I KNOW that was a hard one, so if you got it and you knew the movie, give yourself an additional 5 points for a total of 15 points!

So far Slytherin is in the lead with 35 points while Gryffindor is in second with 25 points and Ravenclaw has 5. I don't have any from Hufflepuff because no one has mentioned that house yet. If you want your house recognized, say so on your review. I plan to do something special for the winning house in the story. ^\_^

Thanks for all your support and reviews! You guys are the best and still rock my world!

"We fight against those who control the darkness."

- DADA Mistress

# D-E-N-I-A-L

## Chapter 6 of 15

Mmm, yes. Denial can be such a good thing, especially when there's something you don't want to admit!

*Hello party people!*

*It has come to my attention that there's been some cheating going on, mostly with the Slytherins (go figure). Why am I not surprised? It seems some Slytherins are using different names on the review board and claiming to be someone else. For example, I happen to know for a FACT that Lady\_Peeves and Lady\_Dobby are one in the same, yet this ONE person uses BOTH names to earn more points for her house, in this case Slytherin. For shame! I SHOULD take away points, but I won't. Instead, I'll award 5 more points to each house.*

*The house standings are as follows:*

*Gryffindor: 115 points*

*Slytherin: 113 points*

*Ravenclaw: 45 points*

*Hufflepuff: 25 points*

*If I catch anyone cheating again, I'll deduct 10 points no matter whose house it is! Play nice, everyone!*

*Special thanks to my sister, Lady\_Peeves (oddly enough), and my beta reader snapesbbwlover for helping me with this chapter. You ladies are the best! Also, thanks for your attention and continuing to follow my story. You rock my world!*

*Disclaimer: I have never owned any of these characters from the Harry Potter series and I never will. They all belong to the brilliant mind of J.K. Rowling, however this story belongs to me, spewing forth from my very own sick and demented mind. I don't plan on receiving any sort of profit for these stories. I just love the characters so much that I HAVE to write about them.*

*Please, no lawsuits.*

*Also, this is my FIRST story, so please, be nice and helpful. Enjoy! :)*

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## Chapter 6: D-E-N-I-A-L

"He let you out early? That was your big reward?" Ron asked sarcastically while playing chess with Harry, "Well whoop-whoop-dee-do. I TOLD you it wouldn't be anything good!"

"Quiet, he might be just outside the door!" Harry whispered with a watchful eye, "Remember what happened LAST time you opened your big mouth?!"

"It's fine, Ron," Hermione smiled behind her Arithmancy book, "I'm rather happy and quite grateful about my reward, thank you."

"Oh you're just saying that because you think he's behind the door too!" Ron whispered harshly looking at the door suspiciously.

"No, I am truly grateful. Besides, he wouldn't be up here tonight anyway. When I left he was still marking essays in the dungeons."

"Well good! I hope the greasy git dies in there!" Ron proclaimed with new fervor.

"Ron, PLEASE try to control your tongue," Hermione commanded with a glare.

"Yeah," Harry teased giving him a playful shove, "control your tongue."

"Ron, PLEASE try to control your tongue," Ron mocked in a high pitch voice and a sour look.

Hermione rolled her eyes and disappeared behind her Arithmancy book again. Actually, she wasn't studying Arithmancy at all (she had done that earlier). Oddly enough, her thoughts were with Professor Snape! She still couldn't believe how wonderful he smelled. She supposed he'd smell quite ripe from being locked up in the dungeons with different concoctions brewing all day long. Fortunately, he didn't. She took a deep breath through her nose, remembering his scent. Ah, so good; so strong.

As her thoughts about the Potions Master continued, Hermione remembered how he smiled earlier that evening. If Hermione thought she was surprised at his scent, she nearly fainted at the sight of his smile! Not only was it a rarity to see, but also he looked rather decent when he grinned like that. He wasn't so horrible! In fact, he looked almost... handsome, just like he did when Hermione would cover him with a blanket at Grimmauld Place.

Hermione had to admit she felt a bit uneasy thinking about her professor in such a way, but she didn't feel uncomfortable enough to stop. There was just something about that man that intrigued her. She wasn't sure if it was the first year speech he gave about "bewitching the mind and ensnaring the senses," or if was the way he bravely stepped forth and shoved his Dark Mark under Fudge's nose, or even that he was constantly laying his life on the line to spy for the Order and protect the very students that hated him. Whatever it was, she admired him, and even, on some level, cared for him.

What?! Cared for him?! Good Lord, what was she thinking?! Sure, she was CONCERNED for him, but that wasn't the same as caring! Concerned just meant she somewhat looked out for him and his best interest, but caring implies emotional attachment. She did worry about him and even prayed for his well-being, but she didn't CARE about Severus Snape... did she?

Hermione felt her ears and cheeks grow hot as she thought such things about the Potions Master. God, she must be losing it. Of all the things to think about, she stumbled onto this in that massive brain of hers. Still, she couldn't help but think that perhaps this had to do with something more than...

"Uh-oh, Hermione," Harry grinned devilishly at her, "Someone's thinking dirty thoughts."

"WHAT?!" she asked in disbelief as she was snapped back into reality. She knew Harry practiced some Legilimens with Professor Snape for a little while, but she didn't know he had gotten this good! Oh crap, what was she going to do now?

The only other person that was more surprised by Harry's remark was Ron. Hermione having dirty thoughts? Not possible, unless, of course, they were about him, which, in that case, he wouldn't mind. In fact he'd prefer it. However, he had the sick feeling in his stomach that said her thoughts were not with him, and Ron couldn't afford to lose the girl he'd been pining and crushing after for over six years. Instead, he did what any other chap in his position would do: panicked.

"How can you tell?" Ron asked Harry while suspiciously eyeing Hermione.

"Her ears are red and her cheeks are flushed," Harry pointed out, "I have to admit, 'Mione, that I'm really disappointed that reading an Arithmancy book can turn you on."

Hermione gave an inward sigh on relief. Good, Harry DIDN'T know Legilimens, just too observant for his own good! She looked over at Harry with a glare that would have made Snape proud and spat, "I'm NOT thinking dirty thoughts, you dirty boys!"

"Dirty men!" Harry corrected with a grin and puffed out his chest a bit, "So what were you thinking about 'Mione?"

"Better yet, WHO were you thinking about?" Ron asked seriously.

"Nothing! No one!" Hermione insisted, "I wasn't thinking about anything except Arithmancy!"

"You know you're a bad liar," Harry observed, "Come on, we won't tell, we promise, right Ron?"

"Right, mate," Ron said trying to read Hermione's face, "You can tell us. What were you thinking about?"

"Fine," Hermione snapped, "You want to know what I was thinking about, Ron? I'll tell you. I was fantasizing about YOU!"

"Really?!" Ron asked as his face lit up and his heart began to beat rapidly in his chest.

"Yes. You're surrounded by a group of gigantic spiders with boxing gloves as they repeatedly beat you about the face! There, is THAT what you wanted to hear?!"

"Not exactly," Ron said downcast with a small frown. Well, at least she was thinking about him. It wasn't specifically how he wanted her to envision him, but it was a start. Sooner or later she'd see him in the right light.

Ron's thoughts were broken by Harry's laughter ringing through out the common room as he chuckled, "Oh Hermione! You are too funny!"

"Oh I'm glad SOMEONE is getting a laugh out of my expense," she said snidely with a grimace.

"Seriously though, WHAT or WHO were you thinking about?" Ron asked again only this time a little aggressively.

"NOTHING!"

"We KNOW you were, Hermione!"

"Yeah, you even smiled a bit," Harry commented.

"Really, we won't tell. We swear."

"Oh Ron, I know why she's not talking. She fancies somebody and she doesn't want US to know WHO!"

"Do you think so?" Ron asked wide-eyed, praying that fellow she fancied was he.

Hermione slammed her book shut and seethed, "Harry Potter, you are absolutely..."

"RIGHT!" Harry beamed cutting her off, "See, I told you!"

"Actually, I was going to say incorrigible!"

"Well Ron, if she's getting THIS defensive, I'd say I'm probably right."

"So, who IS he?" Ron asked Hermione with narrowed eyes and jealously written all over his face.

"It's nobody!" Hermione protested again, "You BOTH are so..."

"RIGHT!" the boys exclaimed simultaneously interrupting her again.

As they burst into laughter (Ron having to force his) Hermione gave up, finding it meaningless to talk to them. It was pointless, especially if they were that riled up over a stupid accusation. Damn her body for giving her away like that! She stood up and stormed over to the stairs with her book in hand.

"Oh, come on now, 'Mione," Ron called after her in an apologetic voice.

"We were only foolin'," Harry explained.

"I know," Hermione sighed, "but I can't concentrate with you two laughing like hyenas, so, if you'll please excuse me, I'll see you in the morning!"

"Concentrate? On what?" Ron asked, "Your Arithmancy or your mystery man you won't tell us about?"

"GOOD NIGHT!" she yelled with a frustrated cry and ran up the rest of the stairs and disappeared down the hall.

When the boys heard the door to the Head Girl's private room slam shut, Harry turned to Ron and whispered, "I think she really DOES fancy some chap."

"I agree," Ron answered in a low voice, "You were right. She wouldn't have gotten that upset if she didn't."

"Who do you think it is?"

"I don't know, but we GOTTA find out who!"

"Let's not pry," Harry cautioned, "She'll tell us when she's good and ready,"

"NO!" Ron protested slamming his fist on the chest board, causing the pieces to scream and scatter, "It might be too late by then! We have to find out NOW!"

"Calm down, Ron! What's the matter with you?"

"Sorry, mate," Ron said grimly diverting his gaze to the fire, "It's just... It's just I..."

"You were hoping it was you she fancied," Harry stated watching his friend with a sympathetic look.

Ron was silent for a few moments as he stared into the fire before giving a great big sigh and said sheepishly, "Yes... I was."

"I thought you were over her already."

"I NEVER got over her, Harry, and I don't think I ever will."

"But Ron..."

"Listen Harry, whether she realizes it or not, I KNOW Hermione and I are meant for each other. It may take her a while to recognize that, but, before you know it, she'll come to me with open arms."

"Ron, I don't want you to get your hopes up, but..."

"Don't worry," Ron said cutting Harry off, "It will all work out in the end. Trust me."

Harry shook his head and sighed. Sometimes Ron could be so delusional.

"What?" Ron questioned.

"Nothing," Harry answered, "Okay, so what's the plan? We find out who this guy is, keep an eye on him, and just act surprised when she finally DOES tell us?"

"Righto!" Ron beamed, "That's what we'll do... for now. Let Operation Fancy Pants begin!"

"Fancy Pants?!"

"Well if you can think of a better name, I'd like to know."

"I think any name other than 'fancy pants' is good."

"Oh bugger off!" Ron scowled.

"Fine," Harry sighed, "let Operation Fancy Pants begin."

The boys shook hands before returning their attention to the chessboard, Ron still thinking about Hermione, hoping that she'd come to her senses soon and hold him in her arms.

~~~~~

Hermione slammed the door shut as she entered her quarters. She threw the Arithmancy book on the floor and plopped down on her bed. She grabbed her pillow and buried her face into it before screaming at the top of her lungs. Well, she felt a little better, but not completely. As she began to bite at the corner of her pillow, Crookshanks opened one of his eyes lazily and watched her from one of the soft chairs in front of the fire. Seeing she was in no immediate danger, he closed his eye and curled up even tighter than before, continuing to sleep.

"No good gits!" Hermione thought and she slammed the pillow back down on her bed, "What's their problem?! Why do they HAVE to know every inch of my life! Who cares if I LIKE SEVERUS SNAPE or not?! It's not any of their business who..."

She stopped and gasped at herself before covering her mouth with her hands. Holy crap! Did she just say she LIKED SEVERUS SNAPE?! Jesus wept! She didn't even call him 'Professor Snape!' She used his first name! She sighed loudly and ran her fingers through her untamed hair. No, this wasn't right. Only first graders had crushes on their Professors! However, if he was just a Professor to her, then why didn't she call him that? But she didn't. Could that mean she saw Sever... Uh, Professor Snape as something... more? No, of course not!

"Good God, what's gotten into me?!" she quietly said to herself while shaking her head.

No, she didn't have anything feelings for Snape that extended beyond a student/ Professor relationship. She was just angry and upset which caused her not to think straight. Yes, that was it exactly! It HAD to be! Besides, she had been spending so much time with him at Grimmauld Place and detention, what else could she have thought about? Still, in the back of her mind (and maybe deep down in her heart), Hermione thought otherwise. Slowly, she remembered the way he complimented her the night before, how he looked when he slept, how he gave her a homework pass, how he smiled... Maybe Severus wasn't the monster he claimed to be, and maybe she just found out she...

"NO!" she scolded and fell back onto the bed, "Hermione, you're tired! You just need a warm bath and a good night's rest! In the morning you'll be so embarrassed you even thought such things! There's NOTHING going on with PROFESSOR Snape! You feel nothing for him, and he feels nothing for you... because you're nothing to him."

She sighed again and rolled off her bed and onto the floor with a thud. Crookshanks again opened one eye to check on her and then closed it again upon seeing that she actually chose to lie next to her bed instead of on it. Feh, silly humans. He'd never understand them. Hermione lay there for several moments before she crawled her way to the Head Girl's bathroom, hoping there was a way to indeed "wash that man right out of her hair."

~~~~~

Snape took another double shot of Fire whiskey. He growled a bit as he felt it burn down his throat. He poured himself another and he breathed hard and heavily with watery eyes. He downed the alcohol again, deciding that would be his last. He only hoped he'd be able to wake up and open his eyes tomorrow morning, considering. Well, at least that damnable voice was gone! He didn't think he had too much to drink, but he left the hangover potion upon his nightstand anyway. As he got up from his favorite chair by the fire, he looked around his chambers, something that he had done since he had become a spy. One could never be too careful.

His private chambers were not what anyone would consider "Snape-like." It was very warm and elegant, with only the finest furniture to adorn it. Of course, it was all black furniture, even his bed sheets and towels were black! There was a small kitchen (which he had no idea why it was even there) that he cooked in occasionally when he didn't feel like company or dealing with those damn kids. His bathroom was all in black and white tile, which was big enough to hold a mirror, a sink, a toilet, a bathtub, and a shower.

After seeing everything was in order, Snape sat on the edge of his bed and pulled off his black boots, lining them up along the wall. He sighed as he let his robes and all of his other clothing drop to the floor and crawled under the covers of his soft bed. He sighed somewhat contently as he, for some reason, was reminded of Hermione Granger when his feather pillow was gentle against his cheek.

'I bet her skin is silky like this,' Snape thought to himself with his eyes closed in a rather tipsy state, 'Oh, yes, and she must be warm to the touch!'

Snape snapped his eyes open as he suddenly sobered up. He sat straight up in bed and looked around the room as if he was expecting to see her standing there shaking a finger at him for thinking such dirty thoughts about her.

"What the hell am I thinking?!" he asked running his fingers through his hair, "That damn whiskey is getting to me!"

Slowly, he lowered himself back down onto the bed. He rolled onto his back and looked up at the ceiling. Why was he thinking such things? It had to be the Fire whiskey,

of course. There was no other explanation. Although he had to admit that he'd always seen Hermione in a different light ever since she began covering him with a blanket as he slept while they were at Grimmauld Place. She had shown him such kindness, the first caring act someone had shown him since Dumbledore had taken him back from the Dark Side and allowed him Hogwarts' protection. Could she really care about him?

Snape cringed as he pushed the ridiculous thought from his head. No, one could ever love or care for the evil Professor Severus Snape! Wait. Love? Of all the things to think about, why did he think about love? Is it because he loves her? Now THAT is even MORE impossible than the thought of someone actually loving him! He was incapable of love. It was something that was always foreign to him. He had nothing to offer back but despair and emptiness from his cold dark world of guilt. Oh yeah, women love that!

How could he think that she cared for him? Honestly, Voldemort would start eating lemon drops before THAT ever happened. "I am the classic fool," he sighed at his silly thoughts. Nobody could ever care for him... Nobody.

As Snape put his hands behind his head he suddenly remembered the riddle Hermione had told him earlier. Ah, it was a very good riddle! He wasn't surprised she had thought of it. Despite the fact he was slightly inebriated, he decided to try and decipher it nonetheless. After all, he was a Slytherin for a reason!

'My life is measured in hours. I serve by being devoured. Thin, I am quick. Thick, I am slow. A gust of wind is my greatest foe,' he repeated to himself.

He lay there quietly on his bed for several minutes as his muddled thoughts swam in his head. Every so often they were about Hermione or Grimmauld Place, but he mainly focused on the riddle.

The flickering light from the flames in the fireplace would cast silent shadows that crept along the walls. Snape watched the shadows, making sure they were actually shadows and not things that would go "bump" in the night. The light from the fire continued to flicker and caused the shadows to dance. Slowly, a wicked grin spread across Snape's face. At last he discovered the answer to the riddle.

Quite pleased with himself, Snape grabbed his wand, got out of bed, put on a bathrobe, and walked to the kitchen and opened a cupboard over the counter. He searched it until he found exactly what he was looking for. He pulled out the object and smiled another genuine smile. Hermione was going to have quite a shock the next morning.

~~~~~

Morning came too soon in the Gryffindor dormitories, well, it did for the Head Girl anyway. If Crookshanks hadn't woken up Hermione (just so he could sleep in her bed after she left), she would have slept through the day. She couldn't help it though. She had a restless night, mostly because she was trying to convince herself that she didn't like Professor Snape... in "that" way!

Her eyes fluttered open and she smiled at Crookshanks who was nose to nose with her purring like some motorboat.

"Well good morning to you too," she sighed and scratched him behind his ear.

Crookshanks purred and slightly drooled with delight before jumping off the bed. As Hermione sat up she stretched and squeezed her eyes shut. Ah, that felt good! She inhaled deeply through her nose expecting to smell the scents of breakfast being cooked in the kitchens, but something else entirely caught her attention...

Sandalwood and cinnamon.

Oh sweet God, Professor Snape!

Hermione's eyes snapped open and frantically darted around the room. She pulled her bed sheet up to her chin and looked for the Potions Master. Was Professor Snape there now?! WHY?! What was he doing in her room?!

"Professor Snape?" she whispered in a shaky voice, "Are you there?"

Hermione sat in bed not making a sound as only silence greeted her ears. Where was he? Where did he go?

Suddenly, Hermione looked to her right and gasped at the sight. On her nightstand sat a long silver candle with a green wax snake spiraling up the side of it. What the heck? What was this candle doing on her nightstand? That wasn't hers. Slowly (because it was still morning), her mind began to contemplate why she'd have this candle until it suddenly hit her: Professor Snape. He figured out the riddle! Candle was the answer!

Hermione couldn't help but grin when her heart suddenly felt like it jumped into her throat. Had he actually entered her room while she was sleeping and left this snake candle on her nightstand? How else could he do it?

Hermione leaned closer to the candle and inspected it carefully. It was beautiful, the most beautiful candle she had ever seen. She reached out for the candle and skimmed a finger over the head of the snake at the tip. Suddenly, as soon as she touched it, the candle was lit. Hermione gasped and cried out in surprise before quickly withdrawing her hand. Oh, that scared her! Typical of Professor Snape though.

The little flame on the wick danced and flickered as the candle burned the scent of sandalwood and cinnamon. Ah, THAT'S why she could smell it so strongly. It was a scented candle. Ooo, how nice! Who knew Professor Snape kept scented candles in his room? The man truly was a mystery.

She inhaled deeply and sighed as she watched the smoke from the candle curl in the air. Suddenly, the smoke hung over the candle like a cloud until, oddly enough, the smoke began to curl again. Hermione watched the smoke with curiosity as it arched and twisted in the air, waiting to see what in the heck it was going to do. Finally, the smoke curled one more time until it had formed the word "Two" in cursive script.

WHAT?! Why did the smoke just write out "Two?" What in Merlin's name was THAT supposed to mean to her?! She remained silent as the "Two" hung in the air and more smoke began to curl to form another word. Hermione observed as this time the smoke spelled out "bodies." Finally, she realized what was going on: Professor Snape had charmed the candle to spell out a riddle from the smoke. Amazing!

She continued to watch with unbridled excitement as the smoke spelled out word after word until it at last said:

"Two bodies have I, though both joined as one. The stiller I stand, the faster I run."

Hermione read the riddle over and over to herself until she had finally memorized it. Suddenly, the candle was snuffed out and the smoky message was blown away by some unseen wind, leaving the clean spicy scent of the candle to linger in its wake.

"BRILLIANT!" danced Hermione as she leaped out of bed and did a little shimmy and a shake in her PJ's, much to Crookshanks content as he then took over her bed and fell asleep.

After getting her joy out of her system, Hermione practically skipped to her bathroom to prepare for the day. However, as happy as she was, there were still some questions that bothered her in the back of her mind, the major one troubling her the most: How did Professor Snape get a candle into her room?

Yea, there's chapter 6! I hope you all liked it!

5 points to your house if you knew candle was the answer to the previous riddle. You can get 5 more if you figure out the latest riddle!

The Alan Rickman quote in chapter 5 was "Exactly! Don't think, Drink!" from **Dark Harbor**, a great movie (AR has a nudie scene in there! [gasp] How naughty!). Give your house 5 points for knowing the quote and another 5 if you knew the movie! I've given extra points to those of you who know the name of the character too! There's another AR quote in this chapter. Happy hunting!

Thanks for all the support! You all are the best! You rock my world!

"We fight against those who control the darkness."

- DADA Mistress

Let the Games Begin

Chapter 7 of 15

After a strange event takes place in the Great Hall, Hermione and Snape begin their little game of riddles.

Special thanks to my mom, my sister, Lady_Peeves, and my beta snapesbbwlover for helping me with this chapter. You ladies are the best! :)

Does anyone have any idea what to get an ex-boyfriend for a 22nd birthday gift? We broke up 2 months ago and we're still friends, but he's living in Italy for the time being and I don't know what to get him. Any ideas?

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Please, no lawsuits.

Also, this is my FIRST story, so please, be nice and helpful. Enjoy! :)

Chapter 7: Let the Games Begin

The Great Hall was buzzing with chatter when Hermione took her seat next to Ron and across from Neville.

"Good morning, Harry!" Hermione chirped, "Good morning, Ron!"

"Morning 'Mione," Harry smiled taking a drink of his pumpkin juice.

"Hello, Hermione, and isn't it just a lovely morning?" Ron said in a low voice before flashing a smile in an attempt to look sexy. Unfortunately, he looked like he had gas instead of charm.

"Um... yeah," Hermione said confused, "Could you please pass me the eggs, Ron?"

"But of course," Ron smiled again.

He grabbed the eggs but he didn't give them to her. She sat there with a confused look and her hands stretched out ready to receive the eggs. Harry looked over at the scene taking place and merely rolled his eyes and sighed before shaking his head and returning to his breakfast.

"Uh, Ron?" Hermione asked, "The eggs, please?"

"I know," he continued grinning, "Move your hands so I can serve you."

"That's very kind of you, Ron, but, really, I'm quite capable of serving myself my own eggs."

"Nonsense!" Ron said with a dismissive wave and began serving piles upon piles of eggs onto her plate.

"Ron PLEASE!" Hermione blurted out, "The first time was enough! I don't need THAT much!"

"But you NEED all that protein," Ron said with that same stupid grin while putting down the eggs, "It's brain food you know, and you're always using that big brain of yours, Hermione, so you need more protein than the average person."

"Um, while appreciate your concern, I can assure you that my stomach can't handle that much protein."

"Oh, right. Well, try your best then."

Crap! That didn't go as well as he planned. Ron couldn't understand why she wouldn't enjoy having him serve her eggs. After all, his mother appreciated it when his father served her breakfast. Of course, he'd usually cook it for her too, but Ron was at a disadvantage considering the house elves prepared everything. He looked over at Hermione who was pouring herself some pumpkin juice. She looked so happy when she came practically skipping into the Great Hall. How could he have mucked things up already?

Ron's thoughts were interrupted when a pair of brown screech owls came flying in with a long white box tied with a green velvet ribbon. The owls swooped over the Slytherin table and dropped the package onto Draco Malfoy's lap. Everyone in the Great Hall stared at the mysterious gift, including the professors. This was much to Draco's content as he always enjoyed being the center of attention. There was a little note on the box that read, "*To Draco Malfoy from your Secret Admirer.*" Draco smiled at this. Ah, he's caught the eye of another swooning witch. With his dashing good looks and his charming ways, he really wasn't surprised. Why he'd go out with himself if he could!

Making sure everyone was watching, Draco slowly untied the ribbon and lifted the lid. In the box lay a single large green flower. What was unusual about the flower, besides its size, was that all the green petals were closed. There was another note under the flower that was written in wizard's ink. Carefully withdrawing the flower and holding it in his hand, Draco took out the note and read it.

Roses are red

Violets are blue

Booglocks stink

AND SO WILL YOU!

"What kind of love letter is this?" Draco thought to himself, "And what in the hell is a booglack?"

Suddenly, the flower began to bloom. Draco watched the flower open with unbelievable beauty as it unfolded to reveal the long glimmering silver petals inside with four large pearl-like structures in the middle of it that sparkled like precious gems. The Great Hall gasped with wonder, hypnotized by the flower's unnatural splendor. Overcome with joy, Draco smiled and brought the flower to his face to smell its scent. Whoever sent THIS to him would be greatly rewarded.

All of the sudden, Professor Sprout jumped out of her seat and screeched, "NO, MR. MALFOY! DON'T..."

But it was too late.

As Draco inhaled the scent, the four large "pearls" in the middle of the flower burst, covering Draco with vast amounts of silver glitter-like spores.

That's when it began to smell.

"Oh Merlin!" Pansy Parkinson coughed as she got up and ran from the Slytherin table, "It smells like rotten eggs stuffed into a dead fish!"

"No it doesn't!" Millicent Bulstrode gagged also leaving the table, "It smells like dragon dung topped with decaying flesh!"

"Not precisely!" a fifth year Ravenclaw protested as the whole Slytherin table began to evacuate the premises, "It resembles a combined scent of body odor with a hint of industrial waste!"

"NO!" said a first year Hufflepuff, "It's like a wet dog rolled around in a cat box!"

"IT... SMELL... BAD!" Goyle said as he lumbered away from the table while pinching his nose.

"CRABBE NO LIKE!" Crabbe stated as he too waddled away from a stunned and stinky Malfoy.

"It smells like the sweet scent of victory to me," Neville smiled to Hermione, Ron and Harry, "Revenge is so rewarding."

The whole Gryffindor table burst into laughter as Malfoy was the only one left sitting there with the now wilted, black, and dried up flower in his hand while he smelled of only God knows what, but whatever it was, it smelled disgusting!

Finally, Draco flung his arms in the air and shouted, "WHAT IN THE HELL WAS THAT?!"

"I tried to warn you, Mr. Malfoy," Professor Sprout said holding her nose, "but that's a booglack flower. They release spores that will make whomever they land on smell terribly for a week!"

"WHAT?! I'LL BE LIKE THIS FOR A WEEK?!"

"I'm afraid so."

"Oh my," Dumbledore said while he and the rest of the staff held their noses, "Mr. Malfoy, I'm afraid that due to your unusual situation, you'll have to spend the next week OUTSIDE of the school."

"WHAT?!" Draco asked flabbergasted, "BUT HOW WILL I GO TO CLASS?! HOW CAN I PERFORM MY HEAD BOY DUTIES?! HOW AM I..."

"You can receive private instruction for the next week until you're no longer... offensive. As for the Head Boy duties, I'll find someone else that can perform them until you have recovered from the affections of your secret admirer. Now let's see who... Ah, Neville Longbottom! Would you like to be our temporary Head Boy?"

"M-me?" Neville stuttered, "Oh, I, uh... Why yes, of course!"

"WHAT?!" Draco spat, "YOU'RE GIVING IT TO... TO HIM?!"

"For the time being, Draco," Dumbledore smiled turning to Snape, "Well, Severus, since he is a part of YOUR house, I think you should deal with his... situation."

"Oh thank you, Headmaster," Snape scowled pinching his nose and rolling his eyes, "Mr. Malfoy, please remove yourself from the table and meet me outside in front of Hagrid's hut."

"My hut?!" Hagrid exclaimed with a worried look, "No, I don't want THAT skunk in front of my house! He'll stink up the place worse than Fang!"

"Fine! Mr. Malfoy, meet me in front of the lake. We'll see if we can't pitch up a tent for you there!"

"But what about the giant Squid?" Draco asked apprehensively.

"If you continue smelling THIS offensive, I doubt that even a mountain troll will want your company. I believe that you won't have any trouble defending yourself if danger rears its ugly head."

Angrily, Draco stood from his place at the table while still holding his head up high and left the Great Hall with what little dignity he had left. He knew that flower was from Longbottom! Draco planned on using every second spent in that tent to plot revenge for humiliating him like that in the Great Hall. Longbottom was going to curse the day he ever crossed the line with Draco Malfoy!

"Neville, that was bloody brilliant!" Ron cheered shaking his hand.

"NO, Ron," Harry grinned shaking Neville's other hand, "It's not Neville anymore. It's HEAD BOY!"

"Uh, th-thanks!" Neville grinned bashfully.

"That was very clever," Hermione grinned pushing her plate away, "but now that smell ruined my appetite."

"Where did you find that flower?" Harry asked.

"In the Forbidden Forrest," Neville answered, "Professor Sprout has me go and collect herbs sometimes and I just happened to find it while it was closed. I checked the color of the petals and knew it would be ready in time to make a nice gift for Malfoy."

"Well, I'm sure he'll enjoy it for the next week!" Hermione grinned.

"Do you find it humorous to laugh at other people's misfortune, Miss Granger?" a dangerously silky voice asked from behind.

Slowly Hermione turned around in her seat and looked up at a rather perturbed Potions Master staring down at her. A sudden chill went through her as she met his black eyes, but it wasn't an uncomfortable feeling. Despite that he was speaking down to her, Hermione felt warm and safe as his gaze trapped her.

"No, she wasn't, Professor Snape," Ron spoke up acting brave (or foolish depending how you looked at it), "She was..."

"I'm sure Miss Granger can speak for herself, Mr. Weasley," Snape hissed without diverting his gaze from those deep chocolate eyes, "Five points from Gryffindor for speaking when not spoken to."

Ron opened his mouth to protest, but one swift kick to the shin by Harry under the table shut him up rather quickly. He watched as Hermione and Snape stared each other down, both unrelenting in their battle to dominate the other through their steely gaze.

"I was NOT laughing at Draco Malfoy, sir," Hermione said airily, "I merely found it humorous that our new Head Boy happens to be a Gryffindor, just like the Head Girl."

"Yes, so it would seem," Snape glared, "Are you finished eating, Miss Granger?"

"Um, yes sir," Hermione answered rather confused at the strange question.

"Really? Well you still have a plate full of scrambled eggs, quite a copious amount of eggs might I add."

"Oh, well that wasn't my..."

"Your gluttony will cost you five more points, Miss Granger, for being so wasteful! Also may I remind you of your detention tonight?"

"No sir, I remember."

"Good, I expect you there at seven o'clock PRECISELY!"

"Yes, sir."

They held each other's gaze for a moment longer before Snape turned and walked out of the Great Hall in search of the former Head Boy. However, Hermione did not break her stare as her eyes followed the Potions Master out, wondering if and when she'd ever feel those shivers again. She had no idea Ron too was watching her face and her gaze hoping that Operation Fancy Pants would be a success, so he could have the witch of his dreams.

~~~~~

Harry looked at his frog in disgust. Why wasn't it transfiguring into a hamster? He glanced over at Ron who had a hamster with frog legs. It was quite interesting to see a hamster hop so high! Harry turned his attention to Hermione, who, of course, was turning her frog into a hamster and back again. He watched her wave her wand again and again, trying to figure out where he was going wrong. Suddenly, he noticed her lips were moving as she transfigured the frog again. Was there supposed to be an incantation along with the wand motions? Harry grabbed his frog and walked over towards Hermione.

"Hey, Mione," Harry smiled as he took a seat next to her.

"Hi, Harry," she responded thoughtfully, "All right?"

"I'm having no luck transfiguring my frog. What's the incantation?"

"What incantation? There isn't one, Harry."

"But I just saw you mumbling..."

"Oh, it's a riddle I, uh, read in a magazine. I was just repeating it out loud hoping my brain would start working."

"Oh you and your riddles," Harry sighed rolling his eyes, "Well could you please help me anyway? I want to get my frog transfigured BEFORE class ends. I've already wasted too much time standing here like a dunder..."

"HARRY! THAT'S IT!" Hermione exclaimed as she wrapped Harry in a huge embrace, "YOU'RE A GENIUS!"

Harry jumped at Hermione's reaction before he got his wits about him and hugged her back. Neither one of them noticed Ron eyeing them suspiciously while his hamster-frog jumped into Lavender Brown's hair.

"Uh, er... Thanks," Harry cracked as he and Hermione ended their embrace.

"Harry, do you still have that cheap digital watch your uncle gave you for your birthday?" Hermione inquired.

"You mean the one Dudley broke and he gave to me?" Harry asked with a hint of bitterness in his voice, "Yeah, why?"

"Do you mind if I have it?"

"Not at all, but why would you want a broken watch?"

Hermione grinned wide before answering, "I'm going to transfigure it into the answer to my riddle."

Harry gave Hermione a puzzled look while Lavender ran out of the transfiguration classroom screaming with Ron hot on her heels apologizing profusely and begging for his hamster-frog to be returned to him.

~~~~~

Snape glared at his seventh year class as they brewed their rejuvenation potions. He seemed to glide along the floor as he walked up and down the isles, inspecting cauldron after cauldron. He only stopped a few times to praise Slytherins on their excellent work and hurl insults at Gryffindors. Finally, he came to Hermione Granger's desk, where she was stirring her potion. He peered into her brew, admiring the thick white substance. Despite the fact she was doing everything correctly, Snape felt the need to chastise her.

"That brew is too thick, Miss Granger," Snape condemned.

"I know, sir," Hermione retorted calmly in a whisper only Snape could hear, "but it still has to simmer for half an hour. However, if Ron keeps adding anymore Flobberworm mucous, he'll have to wait an hour before his potion is done. In that case, I'd give him THIS, although I think you'd be more interested in it."

Snape raised an eyebrow as Hermione pulled out a small package from her robes, placed it on her desk, and rolled it over to the Potions Master. He caught the rolling object wrapped in parchment paper and looked down at Hermione suspiciously, who had since returned to her potion. He hid the object up the sleeve of his robe and walked to his desk. He sat in his chair and turned his back to the class so that none may see this strange gift from Hermione Granger. He inspected the object even further noting it was cylindrical and no bigger than the palm of his hand. After looking around to make sure no one was watching, Snape unwrapped the object, which immediately began to grow larger in his hand.

"What the devil?" Snape began to think to himself until he realized it was merely charmed by the engorgio spell to grow larger.

When the object had completely enlarged, Snape looked down at it and smirked. It was an hourglass, the answer to the riddle!

"You did well, little girl. I knew you'd come around," Snape said softly to himself with a slightly sly smile.

He wanted to look back at Hermione, but he restrained himself. Instead, he turned his attention back on the hourglass. It was a rather handsome piece. The top and bottom bases as well as the rims made out of silver. He turned it over and the white sand began to fall. Ah, very nice indeed.

Suddenly, Snape noticed that there was something written on the inside of the parchment. He placed the hourglass in a drawer of his desk before he took the parchment and read the script.

I can sizzle like bacon

I am made with an egg

I have plenty of backbone, but lack a good leg

I peel layers like onions, but still remain whole

I can be long, like a flagpole, yet fit in a hole

Ah, another riddle. This one was even more intriguing than the last! Clever girl.

Snape folded up the parchment and tucked it into his robes before chuckling to himself. So, she wanted to make a game out of this, did she? Well she'd soon discover that she could not outwit Professor Severus Snape! She'll regret she even started this contest once she sees how sly and cunning he could be when it came to a competition. He leaned back in his seat and thought about the riddle, anticipating seven o'clock that evening with his favorite insufferable Know-It-All student, Miss Hermione Granger.

As Snape contemplated the riddle, little did he know that Hermione had been watching him the entire time. She smiled to herself upon seeing him read the next riddle.

"Oh yes," she thought, "Let the games begin!"

Yea, there's chapter 7! I hope you all liked it!

BTW, the whole scene between Ron and Hermione at breakfast when he served her eggs REALLY happened to me with one of the freaks I used to date. It was all word for word too, the dialogue and everything! It was horrible!

5 points to your house if you knew hourglass was the answer to the previous riddle. You can get 5 more if you figure out the latest riddle!

The Alan Rickman quote in chapter 6 was "I am the classic fool." from Love Actually. Actually, it wasn't one of my favorites, but I liked AR's story and Hugh Grant's story. Those were cute. There's another AR quote in this chapter. Happy hunting!

Thanks for all the support! You all are the best! You rock my world!

"We fight against those who control the darkness."

- DADA Mistress

Getting Too Close

Chapter 8 of 15

Accidents happen, and they either bring people closer together or they make people run away screaming.

Special thanks to my mom, my sister, Lady_Peeves, Jade_Orchid, and my beta snapesbbwlover for everything you lovely ladies do to encourage me.

These are the current house point standings:

Slytherin: 466

Gryffindor: 330

Ravenclaw: 200

Hufflepuff: -15

Oh, to answer a frequently asked question I get the riddles from either what people have told me over the years or else they are from readers that wish to contribute to the story. There will be a few in the future that I have created from my own mind. :) Thanks to everyone who's continuing to read and review. It's very encouraging! :)

Disclaimer: I have never owned any of these characters from the Harry Potter series and I never will. They all belong to the brilliant mind of J.K. Rowling, however this story belongs to me, spewing forth from my very own sick and demented mind. I don't plan on receiving any sort of profit for these stories. I just love the characters so much that I HAVE to write about them.

Please, no lawsuits.

Also, this is my FIRST story, so please, be nice and helpful. Enjoy! :)

Chapter 8: Getting Too Close

Snape sneered as he walked quickly down the hall. He had to go and get Draco Malfoy caught up on that day's potion lesson. God, he hated that little bastard! He deserved every bit of that Booglack flower's spores! Unfortunately, the boy was becoming more and more like his father everyday. It wouldn't be long before he too took the Dark Mark. Stupid boy, if he only knew...

He saw a group of students scatter as he approached. He couldn't help but feel a bit elated at the sight. Ah, sweet domination! Snape felt a bit better. He loved seeing the little children run away from him in fear.

Snape was about to take away points from a scared second year Hufflepuff for loitering in the halls until he suddenly heard that voice, HER voice. The voice that sent chills down his spine, the voice that haunted him in his sleep, the voice which he could not escape no matter how hard he tried...

"SEVERUS!" the voice called out from behind him again as Snape cringed.

Slowly Snape turned around with a scowl to face the pain in his side worse than Hermione Granger.

"Professor Trelawney," Snape said in a solemn voice to the Divination instructor (if you could call her that).

Although Snape intimidated her at first, Trelawney had developed a not-so-secret crush on the Potions Master and tried weekly to seduce him into her tower; which, of course, was never going to happen as far as Snape was concerned. He loathed her constant advances and horrendous pick-up lines, such as, "I was looking in my crystal ball and saw us together in the future," or, "If you come up to my office, I'll do more than just read your tea leaves." The look of anguish on Snape's face more than outweighed the longing gaze and crooked smile of Trelawney's pathetic seduction techniques.

"Now, Severus, how many times have I told you to call me Sybil?" she asked flirtatiously.

"Enough that I've come to ignore you," he said curtly.

"Oh, Severus, I had a vision today and I HAD to tell you," she sighed over dramatically, "Oh, it was horrible, just awful!"

"I'm sure it was," Snape said shortly, "Now, if you'll..."

"You poor dear, you willingly went into the Forbidden Forest at night when you were suddenly attacked by a tall figure clad in black! Oh, I can't bear to go on about what happened to you after that, but with my inner-eye, I'm able to save you from such a fate! Severus, promise me you won't go out into the forest today!"

"Professor Trelawney, I can assure you without a shadow of a doubt that I have no business or intention to enter the forest today, tonight, or any other time for that matter, nor do I have some sick twisted death wish! Now, please ex..."

"OH THANK YOU, SEVERUS!" she exclaimed.

To his absolute horror, she bounded over to him, wrapping her arms around his middle in exaggerated sobs, "I'M SO HAPPY YOU'RE ALIVE BECAUSE OF ME!" She closed her eyes and puckered her lips up at his face, causing him to become nauseous.

"Professor Trelawney!" Snape hissed while some passing students could no longer hold back their giggles, "I'm not dead yet! Will you please get a hold of yourself?! You're setting a bad example for the students!"

Snape shot a glare over to the group of students, indicating that they'd better shut up and leave before something terrible happened to them. Since they did value their lives, the students took the hint and went quickly down the hall.

"Professor Trelawney, please remove yourself!" Snape hissed, "I have to..."

"Oy, what's going on here?" a voice suddenly asked behind them.

The instructors turned around and were taken by surprise to find none other than their newly appointed Head Boy Neville Longbottom with his arms folded over his chest and a foot tapping impatiently on the ground while Dumbledore stood behind him chuckling.

"And just what do you think YOU'RE doing, Mr. Longbottom?" Snape asked dangerously.

"As Head Boy," Neville began while puffing out his chest and proudly displaying his new shiny Head Boy badge, "part of my duties is to patrol the halls and make sure that neither students nor teachers are engaging in inappropriate behavior."

"You'd better watch what you say..."

"Now, now, Severus," Dumbledore said with twinkling eyes while putting a hand on Neville's shoulder, "He's just doing his job."

"Yes, Headmaster," Snape growled before shooting one last glare at Longbottom, "Now, as I was trying to say earlier, I must give Mr. Malfoy his assignment for today!"

"Oh, so sorry," Trelawney blushed.

"Do attempt to prevent making a spectacle of yourself in the future, Professor Trelawney," Snape said smoothly. "Good night!"

Neville and Dumbledore chuckled as they observed a forlorn Trelawney watching the Professor stride quickly down the hall and around the corner, cursing that she didn't even get to first base with the man of her dreams: Severus Snape!

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Hermione hummed happily to herself as she fixed her hair in the mirror before she went to her detention. She really didn't see the reason for it, especially if he was going to have her scrub cauldrons; however, she felt the need to look nicer. She tried to deny her reasoning, dismissing it as just an act of grooming to make her feel "pretty," but she knew the real reason why: it was for Professor Snape.

She tried to deny herself even further by stating it was only because she didn't want to hear him tease her about her bushy hair, but she knew that wasn't entirely the reason. The thought disgusted her yet she didn't really care. Had he REALLY bewitched her mind and ensnared her senses?

Finally, she put the finishing touches on her hair that flowed down her back in long soft curls. After checking what little make-up she did use (only mascara and lipstick), she decided that was as good as it was going to get. She summoned her mangled toothbrush (just in case), and hurried out the door. She didn't want anyone to notice she had redone her hair or touched up her make-up. As she quietly descended the stairs and crept out the door, Hermione let out a sigh of relief, happy she slipped out unnoticed.

"Hello, Hermione," a low voice suddenly said behind her.

She gave a startled yelp as she spun around to face...

"Ron!" Hermione gasped, "Oh, you startled me!"

"Sorry," Ron grinned taking a step closer to her. Suddenly, his eyes grew wide as he noticed how she looked. "Wow, you look... different."

"Gee, thanks," Hermione said sarcastically.

"No, I mean in a good way. I mean it's just... You look nice."

"What? I don't look nice ALL the time?" Hermione questioned with her hands on her hips, "I usually look like trash?"

"No! You KNOW that's NOT what I meant. I mean... you look so... beautiful," Ron said as he gaped at her, "even more so than usual."

"Oh... Thanks, Ron," Hermione said uncomfortably under his strange gaze.

"Why did you sneak out of..."

"I don't have time to explain. I have to get to detention. See you later!"

Before Ron had a chance to stop her, Hermione was running down the hall towards the dungeons. He stood there flabbergasted, not just because she acted so strangely, but because he was amazed she looked so... lovely.

Hermione gave a sigh of relief as she turned the corner and didn't see Ron running after her. The last thing she needed was him pestering her! Slowly, she made her way to the dungeons, wondering if Snape had figured out the riddle yet. She was hoping not. It would definitely be nice to know she could stump the highly intellectual Professor Severus Snape!

Finally, she arrived to the dungeons and opened the door at seven o'clock sharp. She couldn't help but smile when she saw Snape writing at his desk with the hourglass sitting on the top of it.

"Since when did you stop knocking?" Snape asked curtly as he quickly put the hourglass back in the drawer of his desk, "I didn't allow your entrance. What if I was doing something dangerous and you walked right into it?"

"Well, sir," Hermione began as she stood in front of his desk, "The only reason I can see that you wanted me to warn you about my entrance is because you wanted time to put away the hourglass I gave you."

"Nothing can be further from the truth!" Snape lied.

"Besides, Professor, it's not like you didn't know I wasn't coming."

"That's enough of your impertinence for one evening, Miss Granger."

"Speaking of impertinence, how's Draco Malfoy?"

"Please stop acting like you care," Snape drawled, "but since you did ask, he's doing as well as one could hope. He has set up his tent by the lake and is studying at the moment."

"Well maybe the sunshine and fresh air will do him some good, not to mention he'll be free of distractions and can study more often. Maybe he could even read a good book. There are tons of good reads in the library!"

"Why am I not surprised that you'd see his misery as an opportunity for him to study?" Snape asked rolling his eyes.

"Well, Professor, my philosophy is when life gives you lemons, make lemonade."

"Hmph," Snape snorted in response.

*"She's got a point you know,"* the voice inside his head chirped.

"Shut-up!" he hissed out loud.

"Excuse me, sir?" Hermione asked with a puzzled look.

"Nothing, Miss Granger. How are your hands? Are they useful enough to extract beetle wings?"

"Oh, uh, yes, they can do that," Hermione said quite shocked that Snape asked her about her hands first.

"Good, at least you'll be useful for something tonight. I just received a shipment of dead black beetles this afternoon and I need the wings extracted, stored into a jar, and labeled. Are you capable of not botching that up?"

"Yes, sir."

"The box of beetles as well as the jars are in the storage room. Get to work."

"Yes, sir," Hermione giggled as she walked over to the storage room.

"What's so funny, Miss Granger?"

"Nothing, Professor," she answered with a giggle again.

"It must be something unless you are going mad and laughing for no reason at all."

"Well, sir, if you must know..."

"I thought I made it clear that I must."

"I was wondering if you had solved the riddle or not," she began, "but since you hadn't said anything about it, I suppose that you were... stumped."

"Hmph, hardly," Snape smirked as he pointed his wand towards her, "*Serpentsortia!*"

With a flash of light, a snake flew out of the tip of Snape's wand and landed at Hermione's feet. She gasped at the sight of the large black snake as it slinked towards her, but a low chuckle from Snape strangely gave her some comfort.

Knowing he wouldn't let anything harm her, she grinned and said, "Very good, sir. You got it correct."

"Of course I did," he said smugly before banishing the snake with a flick of his wand, "It would be a travesty to Slytherin if I didn't. Although I must say I'm disappointed it was so easy."

"Easy?!" Hermione scowled, "Easy my left foot!"

"Tut, tut, tut, Miss Granger," Snape warned in a voice smooth as silk, "Remember, you're speaking to a Professor."

"Well, sir," Hermione said sarcastically, "if you think THAT was easy then PLEASE, by all means, tell me a better riddle that is worthy of your intellect, Professor Snape."

"Your temper and cynicism will get you into trouble, silly girl. However, since you DID say please... We are twins that see all except each other."

"Feh, talk about easy! They're eyes," Hermione said haughtily getting a bit bolder, "If that was worthy of your intellect, then I'm very sorry that even Crabbe and Goyle can out wit you."

"Oh, Miss Granger, you are skating on thin ice!"

"By the way, Professor, not all eyes are the same, either. Some people have two different eye colors."

"And some people are unbearable little chits!"

"And some people are uncouth sadists!"

"Oh yes, that temper and mouth WILL get you into trouble! Fine, if you didn't find THAT worthy of the Know-It-All brain of yours, then here's another..."

"No, sir. It's MY turn to give a riddle since that's how the game has been played thus far."

"A game now, is it?" Snape asked dangerously, "Well, Miss Granger, I don't play games. I play for blood, and I guarantee that you won't win."

Hermione didn't show any intimidation or fear from Snape's words as she stared him straight in the eye. Finally, she said just as dangerously, "With all do respect, sir... bring it on!"

"I thought you'd say as much," he smirked, "Fine then. It's your funeral. What are the rules of engagement since this is YOUR game."

"Rule number one," Hermione began, "you can only tell riddles you know the answer to."

"Of course," Snape huffed rolling his eyes, "the second rule should be that the opponent has only twenty-four hours to solve the riddle."

"Agreed. Rule number three: if I stump you, then I get one detention taken off from this month."

"All right, Miss Granger, but if I stump you, then I add another detention to your month."

"Fine, are we clear on the rules?" Hermione asked with her hands on her hips.

"Crystal," Snape smirked, "Now that's taken care of... Let's play. It's your move, Miss Granger."

Hermione grinned deviously as her mind chose the perfect riddle for her Professor Snape. All the Potions Master could do was lean back in his chair and wait for the retaliation from his lioness. That night marked the beginning of a strange new friendship between the Professor and the student.

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A week and a half had passed as Snape and Hermione continued their competition, neither one successful in stumping the other. Hermione served her detentions faithfully everyday, including on Saturdays and Sundays, much to her dismay.

"Since when did 'everyday for a month' exclude weekends?" Snape asked sarcastically before dropping a pile of first year essays in her lap at dinner Saturday evening.

Despite she was forced to give up her Saturday and Sunday nights, Hermione had to admit she was having fun with their little game. Although she knew he'd never fess up to it, Snape was enjoying the competition as well. Everything was running smoothly.

That was until the second Sunday evening.

Hermione had just arrived for her detention when Snape handed her an empty jar. At first, she was confused until she remembered the riddle she had told him yesterday.

"Yes, Professor Snape, a jar is correct," she grinned.

"Yes, and I must thank you for that one, Miss Granger, for it was the inspiration for your detention duty today."

"Uh-oh," she frowned.

"Uh-oh indeed. Today you shall go into the storage room and label every jar on every shelf as well as place them in alphabetical order."

"Yes, sir," Hermione said as she walked to the room and opened the door. She stood in the doorway in complete shock as she saw the entire room was in... orderly fashion. What was going on here? Why would he send her into a room that was already clean?

"Professor Snape," Hermione said quizzically, "the storage room is in tip-top shape. It's already clean and orderly. With all do respect, sir, why fix something if it isn't broken?"

"Just because something's fixed, doesn't mean it can't be broken," Snape drawled, "Now, as I said before, I want everything with a label and on the shelf in alphabetical order. I want to make sure these dunderheads I have to instruct actually put away my ingredients properly. Can you manage that while resisting the urge to once again steal something from my storage room?"

Hermione fought the blood that was rising to her cheeks, but knew it was a losing battle. Instead, she quickly turned away and began her task.

"I'll take that as a yes," Snape said sarcastically, "I shall be attending to another storage room by my desk if for some odd reason you'll need to speak with me. Unless the castle is on fire, please, hesitate to ask me anything."

"Yes, sir," she said as he turned heel and unlocked the second room with his wand.

"Sir, do you need labels on those specimens in that room too?" Hermione asked, hoping she wouldn't have to do such a tedious task.

"Yes, Miss Granger, but I won't have you do it. You see THIS room is ONLY for potion ingredients that are dangerous and unstable. One wrong move and you'll be haunting my dungeons for the rest of eternity, and Lord knows the last thing I ever want is to have your Know-It-All spirit tormenting me for the rest of my days!"

"A simple, 'No thank you,' would have sufficed!" Hermione growled to herself before returning to her labeling.

Snape heard her little remark, but chose not to retort. Besides, he had more important things to attend to. He also had to be extremely careful with his work. He was serious when he gave Hermione that warning.

Slowly, Snape took the first jar off the shelf and began to label it carefully, making sure not to agitate the ingredients inside or else the bottle would explode. He did the same with the second jar as well as the third without consequence.

It was the fourth jar that would be the problem.

This jar contained a substance called Muertolla, a substance distilled from the Morira plant. Its nickname was "Muerto," the Spanish word for "death" for it possessed a neurological poison so powerful that the effects from the fumes alone could cause paralysis. In less than ten seconds, the toxin would invade the lungs and enter the blood, eventually causing the nerves to cease transmitting messages to and from the brain as well as stop all motor functions. Eventually, the toxin would reach the heart before a minute had passed, causing it to stop beating, which would inevitably lead to death. Unless there was an antidote near by, no one survived "Muerto."

Even later, when Snape looked back on that night, he still wasn't sure what went wrong or how that jar even ended up broken on the floor, but, before he even knew what was going on, the fumes as well as the liquid of the Muertolla crept up on him. As soon as he smelled the strong sickening scent, Snape immediately dropped to the floor, no longer capable of moving. Damn it, he KNEW he should have worn some sort of mask! Soon, Snape's breaths became labored and his eyes began to sting and blur from the harsh fumes. He tried to will himself to stand, but his legs wouldn't budge as the fumes filled the room. Soon, his arms gave out and all he could do was lie there, waiting to die.

'So this is it,' he thought to himself, 'This is how it's all going to end. Not on a battlefield during the glory of combat, not in a bed surrounded by friends and family, not even surrounded by Death Eaters waiting to hex me. I, the Potions Master, die miserably at Hogwarts on the cold dungeon floor by means of a potion ingredient that was broken by my own hand. How pathetic!'

As he struggled to breathe, all he could do was think about Hermione and how he could warn her not to enter the room and leave the dungeons immediately. Then he began to think of her beauty, her intellect, her smile, and how he never got to tell her how gifted she really was.

"Hermione," he whispered what he thought to be his last breath and pictured her face in his head. If he were to die in such a lowly matter, at least he'd have an image of her as his last memory. Slowly, Snape closed his eyes and saw Hermione smile again as the world around her began to turn black...

"SEVERUS!" a voice suddenly called out from behind him.

Snape snapped his eyes open. That voice. It sounded so far away. Who could it be?

"SEVERUS!" a voice called again. Suddenly, he recognized the voice.

It was Hermione.

"Hermione, no!" he said as loud as he could, "Don't... Muertolla..."

Just as he was about to slip into unconsciousness, Snape suddenly felt a pair of hands grab his own and began to drag him out of the storage room. Although he couldn't raise his head to see his savior he already knew who it was.

'Stupid girl,' he thought as he slowly began to slip from consciousness, 'Silly stupid girl.'

Hermione pulled and tugged at Snape with all her might trying hard NOT to breathe in the fumes. For being such a thin guy, Snape was heavy! She had seen him collapse from the other room and panic struck her. Her first reaction was to call out to him, her second shock that she called him by his first name and not his title. However, now was not the time to think of such things. She had to get him out before he... well she didn't want to think about it. With her eyes squeezed shut, the Gryffindor continued to pull at her Potions Master's paralyzed body, dragging it along the stony floor. Finally, she had him out of the storage room safe and sound.

"*Frios!*" Hermione cried as she pointed her wand at the spilt substance.

A blast of cold blue sparks flew out from the end of her wand, hitting the Muertolla and freezing into its harmless solid form. A quick "*Expurgo Aeris!*" quickly cleansed the air of the remaining fumes. Hermione ran to Snape's personal storage room and retrieved the antidote for Muertolla poisoning. He had to receive it before he stopped breathing or else there would be no hope for him to recover. Time was of the essence!

"Severus!" she cried as she dove next to his body with the vial in hand, "Severus, I have the antidote! You need to drink this before it's too late!"

She set the vial down by his head and pulled on his hands to try and sit him up. Unfortunately, Hermione couldn't possibly hold him up and administer the antidote at the same time! After slowly lowering him to the ground, she scrambled over to the top of his head and pushed him up slightly off the ground before maneuvering herself under him. Finally, she laid his head on her lap and looked down at him.

'God please don't let it be too late!' she thought as she uncorked the vile.

Snape's eyes were little slits as he fought to stay awake. Oh, her lap was so soft against his head, like a warm pillow made just for him. He wanted nothing more than to just sleep, nothing more. The problem was that he knew that if he did he'd never wake up again. He looked up at Hermione as she wore an expression of pure distress and fear on her face. Why was she so scared? If anything, he should be frightened... but he wasn't. He knew she'd take care of him, and that brought him a strange peace. Although, she was still an idiot for running in there to save him in the first place, typical Gryffin-dork!

However, he couldn't help but think how most students would have probably let him die and rot in there without giving it a second thought. Hermione was different though. She was always more mature than her years, and she reacted quickly and sensibly. He didn't know if it was her Gryffindor spirit or Gryffindor stupidity, but whatever it was, it would probably (hopefully) save his life.

Snape was too tired to cringe when Hermione poured the bitter tasting antidote into his mouth. God it was horrible! What was even worse was the fact that he couldn't even swallow the sour substance. Really, if he could barely breathe, why on earth did she think he could swallow?!

"Severus, please!" Hermione pleaded, "You have to drink this!"

Severus? Did she just call him Severus? Not Professor, not sir, no formalities at all. Why? He'll have to reprimand her for that later. However, he couldn't help but think how melodious his name sounded rolling off her tongue.

Snape's thoughts were broken when he felt Hermione's gentle but strong hands slowly glide down his neck, trying to coax the antidote down his throat. He wanted to close his eyes so badly and just feel her hands on his skin. It was the first tender touch he had ever received from a woman in such a long time. Usually the only thing he received from a woman was her scorn or a slap in the face. His own mother hadn't even caressed him like that as a child! Snape couldn't suppress a chill as her hands stroked his throat. Oh, it was so good!

Snape finally felt the antidote go down his throat. It was surprisingly soothing, almost as soothing as Hermione's gentle hands. However there was still something that wasn't feeling right, something that was still off.

Suddenly, he felt very dizzy. He felt so tired. He really couldn't... stay... awake... The world began to turn black. Snape closed his eyes as he heard someone who sounded far away call out his name. If he could, he would have smiled knowing the last thing he saw before he succumbed to the darkness was Hermione looking down upon him with those deep chocolate eyes.

"Severus!" Hermione called out in alarm, "SEVERUS! NO!"

She shook his shoulders hoping to awake him, but it didn't help. He was out cold... and he stopped breathing! Oh no! What was she going to do? She'd already given him the antidote! What else was there? Actually, she knew there was something else that might be able to save Severus, and she knew how to do it too.

CPR.

Hermione took a deep breath and checked his pulse. It was faint, but at least it was there. At least she'd only have to perform rescue breathing! She gently put his head back on the dungeon floor and positioned herself so that she was now kneeling beside his head. She tucked her hair behind her ears and took another deep breath. Hermione pinched Snape's nose and tilted his head back ever so slightly to allow air to enter and exit his lungs. Hermione closed her eyes and took a deep breath once more to relax herself before finally descending her mouth onto Snape's, crushing her lips onto his own as she fought to bring him back to... her.

'Severus!' she thought as she gave him his first breath, 'If you can hear me, please, don't die! Don't die! Don't leave me!'

Although he was unconscious, Snape felt his lungs fill with air before gravity pushed down his chest and let the air out. He felt it happen again while a pair of lips touched his own. What was going on? How was this "kiss" literally filling him with life? He heard someone call out to him again.

"Severus!" the voice cried, "If you can hear me, please, don't die! Don't die! Don't leave me!"

Who was that? It wasn't his damn conscience. Oh God, was it Trelawney? No, not her, so then who could it be? Whoever it was, they apparently wanted him to stay. As the lips crushed against his again, he thought it best if he listened to whoever was speaking to him and fight this poison in his body. After all, he needed to live, not only because he was an essential asset to the Order, but he hadn't told Hermione his riddle yet. He'd be damned if he was going to let the little chit win!

Before he could analyze the voice any further, he felt the antidote begin to course through his veins, slowly counteracting the toxin and bringing mobility back into his limbs. Finally, as the lips once more pull away his own, he began to cough.

"Oh thank you, God!" Hermione sighed in relief holding back tears. He survived the "Muertolla!" He was going to be just fine. She rolled him onto his side and let him continue coughing.

Snape tried to sit up, but was having great difficulty while coughing and regaining his strength.

"No, sir," Hermione gestured tried to lie him back down, "Don't get up just yet. You need..."

"What I need is for you to get away from me!" he snapped as he pushed away her hands and sat up. Unfortunately, he moved too quickly and a pain shot up into his head like a knife. He almost fell backwards back onto the floor, but Hermione grabbed him at the shirt just in time and held him up.

"Sir, please!" Hermione pleaded.

It took all her remaining strength to steady him.

"Stop it!" he spat as he pushed her hands away again.

Suddenly, Snape grabbed Hermione's arms, causing her to yelp in surprise.

"Hermione, you stupid girl!" he sneered shaking her slightly as he continued, "Why did you do such a thing?! You could have been killed! I'm not worth risking your life! Why didn't you use that brain of yours you love to show off and..."

"Severus, please, calm down!" Hermione begged with those pleading chocolate eyes.

Suddenly, she grabbed his face and stared deeply into his black eyes full of anger and... worry? Yes, he was worried; however Hermione had a feeling it wasn't because he was fretful about himself. He was worried for her, and whether the Muertolla affected her or not.

"Severus," she whispered as a thumb gently stroked his cheekbone, "please, calm down. It's over. We both survived. It's okay... It's all right..."

Hermione and Severus were entranced by each other's gaze as they continued to hold each other close. There was something between them, an unspoken force that seemed to bring them closer, something buried inside them that only wanted to cry out to the heavens and let itself be known. Whatever it was, it was stirring emotions inside of them neither could have anticipated and neither could seem to fight against.

"It's all right?" he asked in a whisper.

"Yes," she answered back, "It's all right... It is right."

Severus' grip on Hermione's arms loosened but he did not remove his hands. Instead, he continued to stare at her and she at him. Those eyes... so beautiful, so deep, so sweet. Hermione's thumb slowly stopped stroking his cheek and brushed against the corner of his lips, sending a surge of adrenaline through his body. That alone felt intoxicating. He slid his hands slowly up her arms and gently squeezed her shoulders, which sent a small shiver through her.

"Hermione," he whispered in a voice smooth as velvet.

"Severus," she whispered back.

Slowly, the two began to lean towards each other; their heads tilted slightly, their eyes gradually closing, and their lips tingling in anticipation of feeling the other's upon them. Finally, Hermione could have the desires of her heart, the man she had been captivated with since 12 Grimmauld Place. She could have Severus Snape for herself.

Their lips were inches from each other's now and getting closer by the second.

Finally, Severus could have what he thought he never could, he could have her, the girl who had fascinated him for years. He could have Hermione, his Hermione, his...

STUDENT!

"NO!" Snape suddenly bellowed making Hermione jump and let go of his face.

He quickly released his hands from her shoulders and jumped to his feet. He backed away from Hermione as if she carried the plague and turned his back to her. He couldn't face her, he just couldn't. Funny how he could stare Voldemort straight in the eye and lie to him but he couldn't face the young woman behind him who wanted nothing more than answers as to why he wasn't following his heart.

"Thank you for your assistance, Miss Granger," he said gruffly with his back still to her, "You must never speak of tonight to anyone, understood?"

"But Severus..." Hermione began to protest.

"PROFESSOR SNAPE, MISS GRANGER!" he suddenly snapped, "And 10 points for not addressing me as such!"

"Y-y-yes sir," Hermione said down hearted, "And I understand. I will not speak of what happened tonight to anyone, I promise."

"Good. You are done for the night. You are dismissed."

"Sir," Hermione said in a soft voice as she rose from the floor near tears, "Sir, I think you should see Madam Pom..."

"Thank you for your concern, Miss Granger, but you are done for the night. You are dismissed."

Hermione stood there silently staring at the Potions Master in disbelief. No, no, no! It couldn't end like this, not like this! She had to know what to do from here.

"Sir, please," Hermione pleaded, "We have to talk about... About what happened tonight. I have to know what you're thinking. What happened between us? What's going to happen to us n...?"

"YOU MUST NEVER SPEAK OF TONIGHT WITH ANYONE! YOU ARE DONE FOR THE NIGHT, MISS GRANGER! YOU ARE DISMISSED! NOW GET OUT!"

Hermione took a deep breath, fighting against the tears she desperately tried to hold back. Why was he doing this? She knew he felt the same emotions she had, but what caused him to push her away? Hermione tried to speak but found the words stuck in her throat. She wanted to tell him it was okay, it was right... but the words would come. Damn her body for betraying her again!

After standing there a few moments staring at his back in disbelief, Hermione sprinted up the stairs and slammed the door behind her, causing Snape to cringe. It was only after she was gone that he released his sorrow and his anger against himself for being so weak and began to over turn desks, kick chairs, throw cauldrons, and break jars into thousands of pieces. He knew it was right, he knew it, but he couldn't act on it! She was STILL his student and THAT made it wrong. However, if this was the right thing to do, then why was he feeling so terrible? Finally he sank into his chair and laid his head on his desk, hoping he hadn't made the biggest mistake of his life.

Hermione was sobbing loudly into her pillow while Crookshanks flicked his tail in annoyance at the edge of the bed. Honestly, she wasn't hurt so why was she making such a fuss, especially when it was so close to his bedtime? The truth was Hermione actually WAS hurt, but not physically. She was heart broken a pain unlike anything imaginable. She couldn't believe how much it ached. It was worse than anything she had ever felt before. Oh, out of all the people in the whole wide world why did she have to like a man that didn't like her back? What made it even worse was he was her PROFESSOR! How could something like this happen? How?

Hermione stopped crying after she heard a tapping at her windowsill. She looked up and gasped at the sight of a very large black horned owl with green eyes glaring at her through the glass. She sat up and wiped the tears from her eyes before she went to the window and let the owl in. It fluttered onto one of the chairs by the fireplace and held out one of his legs to her that contained a note. She took some of Crookshanks' dry cat food and gave it to the owl, much to Crookshanks' discontent. The owl hooted happily in surprise of the treat and flew out the window after gobbling it up.

Hermione slowly opened the note and recognized the writing immediately. Oh Lord, it was a note from Professor Snape! Again, she took a deep breath to steal herself against anymore harsh words and began to read.

Miss Granger,

The remainder of your detentions will be served with Mr. Filch beginning tomorrow.

There is a thing I cannot say

And you, as well, will feel this way.

For Truth demands the honest words

Yet must condemn you if they're heard.

The words are four: the first is me,

The second two deny, you see.

The fourth sounds like the back of yes

But speak them all, and do not guess,

The answers there, I'm sure you see,

Well spoken they can never be.

Name the answer now out loud

And though you're wrong I'm sure you're proud.

Prof. S.S.

Hermione crumbled the note in her hand and threw it into the fire. What the hell?! What was that riddle supposed to mean?! What kind of answer was that?!

"No, I'm not wrong!" Hermione growled, "I'm not! He's the one!"

Hermione crawled back into bed and cried herself to sleep; her last thought was wondering why Snape never gave her an answer. What was to happen to them? Little did she know he actually did give her his answer, but she just hadn't figured it out yet.

Yea, there's chapter 8! I hope you all liked it!

Sorry I had to fast forward a bit. It was chapter 8 and I was only on day 3! Sorry if anyone got upset about this, but I HAD to do something to move the story along! Usually people are turned off by 50 chapter stories!

5 points to your house if you knew snake was the answer to the previous riddle. You can get 5 more if you figure out the latest riddle!

The Alan Rickman quote in chapter 7 was "You did well, little girl. I knew you'd come around," from Dogma when he played the Metatron. I love that movie! There's another

AR quote in this chapter. Happy hunting!

Thanks for all the support! You all are the best! You rock my world!

"We fight against those who control the darkness."

- DADA Mistress

Death Eater Be Not Proud

Chapter 9 of 15

Flich has some "business" he needs to take care of and sends Hermione to serve detention with Professor Snape. Unfortunately, Severus has just been summoned by Lord Voldemort. What will happen when they're together alone in the dungeons again?

Special thanks to my mom, my sister, Lady_Peeves, Jade_Orchid, and my beta Lady_Lucius for everything you lovely ladies do to encourage me.

Sorry it took so long to update. I've been so busy with projects, lab reports, and midterms that it's not even funny. I STILL have another midterm and two more labs due next week as well, but writing is my outlet. If I don't get to write I become VERY irritated, and those around me end up suffering (just ask my lab partner). I'll try to update sooner next time.

FYI, the title is a nod to **Death Be Not Proud**, which is a sad but great book.

Disclaimer: I have never owned any of these characters from the Harry Potter series and I never will. They all belong to the brilliant mind of J.K. Rowling, however this story belongs to me, spewing forth from my very own sick and demented mind. I don't plan on receiving any sort of profit for these stories. I just love the characters so much that I HAVE to write about them.

Please, no lawsuits.

Also, this is my FIRST story, so please, be nice and helpful. Enjoy! :)

Chapter 9: Death Eater Be Not Proud

Snape sat in his favorite chair by the fireplace as he sipped his brandy. A week had passed since the incident in the dungeons (he had been counting the days), but he still couldn't get HER out of his mind. He had tried everything in his power to escape her, to put her out of his head... but he couldn't. Nothing worked. Snape avoided talking to her in Potions and even stopped correspondence with the riddles. Since she never gave him an answer to his riddle, he took some comfort knowing that he stumped his little lioness. Apparently, she didn't know the solution was "I do not know." HE did not know. He didn't know what would happen to them. He didn't know if things would even be the same. However there was one thing he did know: he did miss her riddles.

Who was he kidding? He missed HER!

He missed her long silky hair with the subtle scent of roses, her beautiful chocolate eyes that sparkled when she laughed, and her smile that could brighten the darkest parts of his heart. And of course, he missed that brilliant brain! But why?! Why was this little lioness having such an effect on him? Could it be because...

He loved her?

NO! That couldn't be! Snape was incapable of love! Besides, there was no way anyone, especially someone as pure and good as Hermione, could ever love a monster like him.

However she did risk her life to save his own, not to mention she almost kissed him... and he almost kissed her. THAT thought was on his mind the most that week, and it was tortuous to remember. He wanted so badly to take her in his arms and kiss her softly, sweetly, passionately. He wanted to tangle his hands in those soft curls, lose himself in her eyes, he wanted to...

Oh Merlin, what was he THINKING?! Dirty old man! He was old enough to be her father! However, that really didn't matter. Wizards aged much slower than Muggles or Muggle-borns, so despite the fact that he was in his early forties, he was in no way too old for her by wizard standards.

Snape grimaced at himself for thinking such foolish thoughts. Good Lord what was wrong with him?! He had to stop thinking about her before she drove him mad! Still he couldn't help but think this wasn't just some passing fancy. Did he really love her?

"You know you do," the voice in his head said, "Why are you denying yourself?"

"Merlin's beard, can't you just leave me alone?" Snape sighed in annoyance.

"Not until you admit that you miss her because you love her."

"This is ridiculous!"

"Is it really? It makes sense. You haven't looked at her, you haven't spoken to her, you haven't walked past her..."

"And all the better for her."

"Doubtful. Maybe if you just..."

"I can't believe this! I'm pining over a student, arguing with a voice in my head, and now I just ran out of brandy. Could this evening get any worse?!"

He immediately regretted saying that.

Suddenly, the inside of his left arm began to burn like fire, sending a shooting pain up to his head. Oh no! Not now! Snape immediately pulled up his sleeve and his heart sank as he beheld the Dark Mark standing out against his white skin. He was being summoned. With a heavy heart, Snape stood from his chair and walked slowly over to his closet to retrieve a small black box containing his Death Eater robes. He put his hand on the door and sighed before closing his eyes, preparing himself before he faced the man nay monster that he despised the most: Lord Voldemort.

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Hermione tapped her foot impatiently as she waited for Filch to come out of his office. What was taking him so long?! She had already knocked on his door four times! He had to have heard her at least once! She huffed in annoyance and knocked on the door again a little bit harder and faster than she did last time and waited once more. Honestly, this was incredibly rude! She pressed her ear to the door to see if she could hear any movement from inside. Finally, she heard Filch mumble something inaudible and yank open the door with a scowl. Hermione jumped back in surprise, not at Filch's glare, but at his attire.

Filch was wearing a plum suit with white pin strips and white shoes. He was clean-shaven and wore his hair back in a ponytail tied with a plum ribbon. Hermione also noticed that he was clutching Mrs. Norris tightly at his side. Good Lord, was he going on a date and bringing his cat with him?! It took all of Hermione's strength NOT to laugh as she continued to stare at the new Mr. Filch and his chaperon cat.

"What do you want?!" he snapped at Hermione as Mrs. Norris flicked her tail in annoyance.

"Mr. Filch, are you all right?" Hermione asked, "I knocked about five times before you answered the door!"

"Yes but I was hoping that by the second or third knock that you'd take the hint and LEAVE!"

"Sir?"

"I KNOW you have detention, but I can't baby-sit you tonight! I've got... uh..."

"A date?" Hermione asked with a small smile.

"That's none of your business!" Filch snapped, "I have plans and they don't involve you!"

"All right, sir, but..."

"Go back to Professor Snape and have him oversee your detention!"

Before Hermione had a chance to respond, Filch stepped out of his office, closed the door behind him, and took off down the hall still holding Mrs. Norris close.

Hermione stood flabbergasted for a moment before she came to her senses and made her way towards the dungeons. Oh no! She'd have to see Snape... alone... in the dungeons. A small shiver ran down her spine as she remembered the "almost kiss" from a week ago. They hadn't spoken to each other since and the time they had to spend together in Potions or the Great Hall, neither one of them made eye contact or even dared to speak.

This practically killed Hermione.

She longed for him. She burned his candle everyday, which was almost gone. She relived that night over and over again in her mind as the candle let off his delicious scent. Hermione knew why he pushed her away. She knew why he hesitated. Even if they did fancy each other, they were STILL teacher and student. Despite that fact, Hermione wanted to be with the snarky mean Potions Master, confused as to why he just didn't follow his heart.

Before Hermione knew it, she was standing in front of Snape's office door, her stomach tied up in knots. Oh, how was she going to be able to be near him when she felt so strongly for him? Wait, she shouldn't be nervous. He probably wouldn't speak to her anyway unless he was ordering her around. After scolding herself for being so childish, Hermione rapped on the door three times and waited. She growled impatiently after a few minutes and knocked again. Oh no, she wasn't waiting outside of a door for ten minutes again! Hermione pulled out her wand and quickly tore down the wards on the door. She slipped quietly inside and closed the door behind her.

"Professor Snape?" she asked hesitantly, "Are you there?"

Silence only answered her. She gave a small sigh and put her wand back. She surveyed the office. It looked like no one had been in there at all that day. Where could he possibly be? Hermione's eye then caught something rather enticing: a bookcase overflowing with books! She grinned and walked over to it. Surely he wouldn't mind if she read a book while she waited for him. After all, what else was she going to do?

She scanned the titles with her finger lightly until she found a book that sparked her interest: *Potions and Their Defense Against the Dark Arts* by Professor Severus Snape. Oh wow, Professor Snape wrote a book?! Just when she thought she read everything in Hogwarts! She snatched the book from the shelf and opened the front cover, excited about the endless amount of knowledge a man such as himself would write to a hungry young mind.

Suddenly, the bookcase was pushed aside by an invisible hand like a sliding door. Hermione jumped and look up from the book. A tall figure clad in a black hooded robe stood with black eyes peeking out from behind a white mask. Hermione gasped and stood in absolute terror as she found herself face to face with a Death Eater.

Hermione was frozen in place and flabbergasted for a moment until she suddenly dropped the book and withdrew her wand. She was about to hex the Death Eater until he spoke.

"Miss Granger?" he asked in a soft smooth tone while his heart leaped into his throat at the sight of her.

Hermione blanched upon hearing that baritone voice. Oh Lord, it was Severus!

"Professor Snape?" she asked just as softly.

Snape stepped forward a little into the light as the bookcase closed behind him. He removed part of his mask with his left hand, just enough that Hermione could see him peeking out from behind it to assure her that it really was him. She took a small step back to take in the entire scene and let it soak in. His tall menacing figure loomed over her own as the long jet black robes flowed down to the floor. The light reflected off the mask eerily, making Snape look paler than usual. She noticed part of the sleeve to his robe slipped down, revealing the Dark Mark vividly against his skin. Her eyes darted back to his own, which looked empty and sad, yet determined. Hermione took another step back and beheld him one last time. It was a magnificent sight, yet at the same time it was also terrifying.

Noticing the fearful look in her eyes, Snape slipped the mask back on again and asked no louder than a whisper, "What are you doing here, Miss Granger? You got tired of stealing all of my potions ingredients and have now moved up to stealing my books?"

Snapping back to her senses, Hermione regained her composure and responded, "Oh no, sir! I just saw the book and I was intrigued by the title... as well as the author."

"That still doesn't explain why you've broken into my office."

"Mr. Filch had some business to tend to that didn't involve me. He sent me here to serve detention with you."

If it were any other student, Snape wouldn't have believed them. Of course, if it were any other student, they'd still be outside the door, not knowing how to take down such

complicated wards. Hell, who was he kidding?! If it were any other student they wouldn't have bothered coming! They'd go back to their common room and pretend they served detention. But not her. She was different. She was always honest and true, and she always would be.

"I see," is all Snape could say.

He couldn't help but feel somewhat elated seeing her again as well as hearing her voice. It was like a cool drink of water after a long drought. However, he felt absolutely terrible that she had seen him in his Death Eater robes. It was something he wished she'd never have to witness. He wanted to keep her safe from such disgusting and appalling horrors, despite she had already seen so much so young. He suddenly felt like such a disgrace, even though he was doing this not only for the cause of the Order, but because this was his way of gaining absolution. It was right.

"You've been summoned?" she asked sheepishly

Normally, Snape's first response would have been, "No, I just like to frolic around in my disgusting Death Eater garments while wandering the halls and scare unsuspecting students!" However, things were different that night. Instead, he simply nodded.

"I'm sorry, sir," Hermione whispered with a sad look in her eyes.

"Whatever for?" he asked.

"I'm sorry you have to wear that... I'm sorry you have to face him and pretend to be something you're not... I'm sorry you have to relive your past when you've been trying to escape it. I'm sorry for... gawking at you. You must hate to put that on, and I apologize that I made you feel... uncomfortable. I didn't mean to stare."

"It's all right, Miss Granger," Snape said surprised by her words, "You needn't worry about me."

"Yes I do."

Snape held his breath. Oh God, she was worried. That meant she cared, didn't it? It also meant that maybe she even... loved?

The silence stretched between them as they continued to stare at each other. Finally, Hermione asked, "Are you going to tell Professor Dumbledore or should I tell him for you?"

"I will tell him myself," Snape responded without a hint of resentment in his voice, "I use a concealment charm and go to his office to inform him of the meeting before I leave the grounds."

Hermione nodded and looked away. Never in her entire life did she feel sorry for Snape more than she did at that moment. She never felt more love for him than she did at that point as well. What? Love? No! Fancy, yes, but love was something different. However, she couldn't help but think...

"You will not have to serve detention tonight, Miss Granger," Snape finally said, "Go back to your common room and do not speak of this to anyone."

"Yes, sir," she said still looking away.

There was silence again as they both wished they could say the things on their heart, but didn't.

Finally, Snape said quietly, "I must away."

Hermione could only nod again, but she didn't meet his eyes. He really couldn't blame her. He looked more than intimidating. Still, he wished he could have seen her face once more, a last chance to view something beautiful before witnessing the ugliness that was sure to come.

He withdrew his wand and was about to use a concealment charm on himself until Hermione suddenly looked up at him and said, "I cut through evil like a double edged sword, and chaos flees at my approach. Balance I single-handedly upraise, through battles fought with heart and mind, instead of with my gaze."

Snape stopped dead in his tracks and looked at Hermione. His heart practically leaped into his throat. Oh finally, a riddle! Bless that sweet girl! He continued to stare at her as she looked up at him with those hypnotic eyes that threatened to leak tears at any second. Tears? For him?

"Just a little something to take your mind off of it," Hermione said in a shaky voice, "A place for you to go when you need to escape."

Snape nodded slowly before saying in a soft voice, "Thank you, Miss Granger. I shall remember it when the time comes."

The next thing that happened took them both by surprise. Hermione suddenly rushed over to Snape and threw her arms around his middle in a tight embrace. She felt his body stiffen under her as she buried her head in his chest. She didn't want him to go! She wanted him to stay there with her where she knew he'd be protected from harm, but she knew he had to leave. She wished there was another way without the risk of her snarky Potions Master putting his life on the line, but she understood that Severus would answer the Dark Lord's call for the sake of the Order as well as for all of the wizarding world.

"Please," she pleaded, "Be smart... Be safe... Be careful."

Soon Hermione could no longer hold back the tears and openly wept into his chest, baffling Snape even further. He could hardly believe what was happening. Not only did she weep for him, but she was actually HUGGING him even while he was dressed in his Death Eater garments! He looked down at the top of her head as she continued to sob and cling onto him. She truly was an amazing human being, a beautiful and delicate creature whose tears he didn't deserve.

As Severus continued to watch her, he suddenly let down his guard and his body relaxed... slightly. Cautiously, he allowed his right hand to touch the top of her head and slowly stroke her hair that cascaded down her back, causing her to shiver slightly at his feathered touch. He closed his eyes as he felt the soft curls entwine in his fingers and allowed her sweet rose scent to entrap him. Ah, sweet angel. What was she doing consorting with a demon? He found himself stroking her hair a second time, and then a third as her weeping grew fainter each time he touched her. Without thinking, he wrapped his arm around her shoulders and did something he hadn't done in such a long time: he gave a small hug back. He couldn't even remember the last time he held someone this close. It was a wonderful feeling. God, whatever did he do to deserve this?

Snape took off this Death Eater mask and held it in the same hand as his wand at his side as he looked at Hermione. How precious his lioness was to weep for him.

"Hermione," he finally whispered finding his voice. She stopped sobbing long enough to look up at him with her soft brown eyes now wet with tears.

"Hermione, I... I..."

Snape wanted to say more, but he found himself at a loss for words. He wanted to kiss her more at that moment than he did a week ago. If it was the last thing he did that night before meeting his possible doom, he'd die a happy man.

"Severus," she whispered back.

She knew everything he wanted to say with that simple look he gave her. There was no scowling, no narrowed eyes, no hint of a sneer. It simply told her he'd be all right. She wanted to kiss him so badly, to let him know how much he meant to her, and how torturous that past week had been without him. However, they both knew he very well couldn't waltz into a Dark Rival looking love-struck, so they used all their might to deny their impassioned lips.

They continued to hold each other, not wanting that moment to end. Suddenly, Snape's left arm burned again, the searing pain shooting up his arm. He hissed slightly and

grimaced in pain, causing Hermione to hold onto him even tighter. She hated to see him like that.

She was about to speak when he abruptly pulled away from her and said in a gruff voice, "I must go now. See yourself out."

Hermione tried to speak again, but with a flick of his wand, Snape turned invisible, opened the door, and slammed it shut behind him as he made his way to Dumbledore's office. She covered her mouth to prevent a sob from escaping her lips. Oh, her poor Potions Master! If there was only a way she could know he was safe! Suddenly, her eyes brightened as a light bulb went off in her head. A slow smile spread across her face as she dashed out of Snape's office and sprinted to the Gryffindor common room, hoping to find Harry.

~~~~~

Ron was pissed. It had been over two weeks since the commencement of Operation Fancy Pants and there had been no leads at all! He investigated into Neville Longbottom, who had "tutoring sessions" much too often with Hermione in Ron's opinion, but he came up empty handed. Apparently, Neville only has eyes for Luna Lovegood. That would be an odd pair. He had suspected a student in Ravenclaw named Matt Hunter, but it ended up that Matt didn't even fancy girls! So now Ron was back at square one and furious about it.

"Ron, you gotta stop this," Harry tried to reason as they sat on the rug in front of the fireplace looking through a Quidditch catalog. "You're running yourself ragged with this 'fancy pants' nonsense."

"OPERATION Fancy Pants, mate," Ron corrected, "and it's NOT nonsense! What if she's seeing a bad fellow, Harry? We have to be able to intervene in case she's fancying after someone we BOTH know is no good."

"I think we can trust Hermione's judgment. It's our own I'm not too sure about."

"Believe me, Harry it's for the best! Besides, if I want Hermione to be with me then I gotta find out what she likes in a man!"

"You've been her friend for over seven years and you don't know what she likes?"

"I think I do, but..."

"HARRY!" Hermione shouted as she raced into the common room.

The two boys turned around and looked over at her as she came flying in and crash landed on the floor between them.

"What's wrong?" Ron asked genuinely concerned.

"Hi Ron," Hermione said quickly before turning her attention to her other friend, "Harry, I need your help."

"Of course, 'Mione," Harry said also in a concerned voice.

"I'll help too," Ron said putting a hand on Hermione's shoulder, "What are we going to do?"

"No," Hermione said quickly brushing of Ron's hand, "WE are not going to do anything, Ron. I have to do this on my own. Harry, I need to borrow the cloak and the Marauder's Map."

"Wait, what for?" Harry asked.

"Please, I can't tell you why. All I can tell you is that I need to go off the grounds. Just know it's for a good cause."

"Hermione..."

"Of course you can!" Ron suddenly exclaimed putting his hand on her shoulder again, "C'm on, Harry! Let's go!"

Before Harry could protest, Ron grabbed Harry by the front of his robes and went flying up the stairs and into their room.

"Bloody hell, Ron, what's gotten into you?!" Harry demanded smoothing his robes and glaring at his friend.

"Harry, don't you see?!" Ron whispered excitedly, "This is the perfect opportunity to finally crack Operation Fancy Pants!"

"What?"

"Listen, she's probably going off to secretly meet her 'mystery man' which is why she needs the cloak and map!"

"Oh, I didn't even think of that! But why would she..."

"Trust me, Harry," Ron said confidently putting a hand on his friend's shoulder, "She's going to meet him. She would have invited us along for her adventure if she wasn't seeing him."

"You have a point, Ron," Harry said thoughtfully, "but how are we going to follow her if she's invisible and she has the Marauder's Map?"

"With this," Ron grinned.

He went over to his bed and opened the top drawer of his nightstand. He retrieved the items he was looking for and brought it back to Harry grinning like an idiot.

"A scroll and an quill?" Harry asked quizzically, "How is THAT supposed to help us?"

"It's not just ANY scroll or quill," Ron beamed, "It's called 'The Peek-A-Boo-Quill!' It's another one of Fred and George's inventions. What you do is take a strand of hair from the 'suspect' and wrap it around the quill. After a few choice words, the quill will draw the face and write the name of the first person the 'suspect' comes in contact with."

"Ron that's brilliant!" Harry smiled, "Wait, what if she talks to someone on her way..."

"Harry, I didn't say the next person she TALKS to, I said the next person she comes in CONTACT with! The next person who touches her after I perform the charm will appear on the scroll."

"Ron, I think this is your best plan yet. It's practically fool proof!"

"Yeah! I gave Fred and George the idea."

"Why am I not surprised?"

The boys grinned at each other before gathering the cloak and the map and heading back to Hermione who was waiting outside their door.

"Here you are, 'Mione," Harry grinned handing her the items, "Good luck."

"Thanks for understanding you guys," she smiled sheepishly, "It means a lot to me."

"Of course," Ron smiled.

Suddenly, Harry gave Hermione a hug while discreetly running a hand through her hair to obtain any loose strands. Ron arched his eyebrows in surprise. It was times like these when Ron wondered if Harry really should have been sorted into Slytherin.

"Aww, Harry, don't worry," Hermione said as they separated, "I'll be fine, trust me."

"Be careful," Ron said as he too followed Harry's lead and hugged her while running a hand discreetly through her hair.

"Oh thanks Ron," Hermione smiled as they separated, "Don't worry about me. I'll see you guys sooner than you think. Oh, and if anyone asks where I am, I'm patrolling the halls."

With that she threw on the cloak and went sprinting down the stairs and out the common room, not knowing Harry and Ron had confiscated five strands of her hair.

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Snape left Dumbledore's office and made his way to the Forbidden Forest still under the concealment charm. He kept looking behind him, feeling as if he was being followed or at least watched. He cast several revealing spells behind him, but he never found anyone... or anything. He finally conceded the "funny feeling" to nerves and continued towards the forest, not knowing he was indeed being followed by none other than Hermione Granger.

Hermione didn't have trouble finding him. She saw in the map that he was still in Dumbledore's office when she arrived. After a few minutes, Snape emerged under the concealment charm and her mission began: to make sure Severus was safe. She followed him out of the castle and towards the forest. Luckily for her, she cast a charm on herself that prevented her from being unveiled when Snape used the revealing spell. Her heart leaped into her throat every time he turned around and cast the spell, as if he knew she was there.

Hermione continued to follow Snape as they approached the woods. Fortunately, it was a full moon that night, which allowed her to see the map clearly. She followed him, listening for his footsteps on the soft forest floor, the occasional snap of a twig, or his breathing. She wasn't going to let him out of her sight.

Snape tried to be quiet as he walked through the woods, but the new fall leaves on the ground made it hard to be silent. He noticed a milk thistle growing near the base of a tree. He'd have to remember to get that on the way back to Hogwarts. Those were good for healing bruises. He looked up and saw he wasn't far from the clearing that was just outside Hogwarts' boundaries where he'd Apparate to the Dark Revel. He sighed as he approached his destination, preparing to steel himself against what was to come.

Severus walked into the middle of the clearing and stopped while Hermione hung behind some trees and watched him from just inside Hogwarts' Territory. Suddenly, Snape closed his eyes and Disapparated, causing Hermione to jump in surprise. Oh no! Where did he go? Hermione frowned, wishing she could have gone with him. She sighed quietly and looked around at the different herbs and plant life that surrounded her. She began to play the "alphabet game" that she used to play with her parents on long car trips. She identified aconite for "A," and belladonna for "B." Now she was on the lookout for something that started with "C." Slowly, she sat down on the ground against the base of a tree as her eyes scanned the area while still under the concealment of the cloak. Hey, if she was going to be there for a while, she might as well make herself comfortable.

Snape appeared in a dark place, a dark place indeed. He didn't bother looking around. He knew where he was, and he had to fight the bile rising in his throat, especially at the sight of the newly splattered blood on the walls. This was Voldemort's home for the time being at the Riddle residence.

"Ah, Severus," a familiar slick voice said behind him, "It's good to see you, old friend."

"Hello Lucius," Snape smirked turning around to face Malfoy senior, "It's good to see you too."

Lucius gave a sly smile, the same one he gave to Snape when he defended that he was under the Imperius Curse AGAIN in court after being apprehended at the Ministry two years ago. Of course, after strangely receiving a large sum of galleons from an "unknown donor," the judges ruled in Malfoy's favor. They even gave him a job back in the Ministry! Those fools! If they only knew that same day Lucius kidnapped a Muggle and tortured him for days until he finally killed him. Truly justice was blind.

"How's my boy doing?" Lucius asked airily.

"Excellent as always," Snape responded.

"Of course. Malfoys excel in all that they do."

"How's work at the Ministry?"

"Dismal as always, however I do get pleasure annoying Fudge. He's such a prat."

"And he shall be one of the first to die when the time comes," a dark hiss came from behind the two men.

Snape froze. He didn't have to turn around to know who it was. Malfoy and he immediately turned around though and fell to their knees with their heads bowed before crawling on all fours towards the disgusting creature that stood before them.

"My lord," Malfoy whispered before kissing the hem of Voldemort's robes.

"Master," Snape said before doing the same.

"Arise," Voldemort commanded, "but not you, Severus."

Lucius got to his feet with a small smirk, thinking Snape was in trouble, but both the Dark Lord and Severus knew it was quite the opposite.

"You may not rise until you answer this," Voldemort began, "If you cannot answer it within the next minute, you shall face dire consequences. This is as light as a feather, yet no man can hold it long. What is it?"

Snape smiled wickedly at the riddle, a game the Dark Lord and he had played since Snape was first brought into the Death Eaters. They both admired each other's logic and cunning mind, thus initiating the game from so long ago. Neither one of them had ever been stumped by the other.

Snape waited a few moments as he thought about the riddle, the other Death Eaters holding their breath wondering if he was going to botch it up this time and really get punished. The seconds stretched and the others became anxious. Was he really going to lose this time?

Finally, Snape said in a low voice, "Breath, Master. The answer is breath."

"Ha, ha, ha! You've done it again!" Voldemort laughed darkly, "But one of these days I shall fool you! I swear by it!"

"Thank you for the riddle, Master," Snape said rising to his feet, "I shall think of one worthy enough for you the next time we meet."

"Of course you will," Voldemort grinned showing his pointed teeth, "Now fall back, most faithful servant and the revel shall begin!"

Snape bowed his head before standing next to Malfoy, who glared at Severus with jealousy. Why was HE the Dark Lord's favorite? Merlin's ass, Snape didn't even try to harm Muggles like Lucius did, even when they went on their raids! Just because he was a spy at Hogwarts made him Voldemort's most treasured follower. Bullocks!

The Dark Lord eyed the Death Eaters that had formed a semicircle around him. They respected him, of course, but he also knew that they feared him, as they should. He could smell the fear off of them. Ah, tantalizing!

"Malfoy," Voldemort growled, "What news is there from the Ministry?"

"They still believe that you are a threat, my lord," Malfoy answered, "but they are too afraid to do anything about it. What is even better, is that fool Fudge is putting me in charge of more departments, claiming that since I have been under the Dark Lord's 'spell,' I know exactly how to defend and strengthen them against you."

"Ha! Fudge will pay for his folly," Voldemort laughed, "Excellent. Anything else?"

"Only that Fudge still fears that Dumbledore is out to take his job."

"Ah, which brings me to my next spy. Severus, tell me the events at Hogwarts."

"They are totally unprepared, Master," Snape lied, "Dumbledore does not think you are brave enough to attack the school."

"He doesn't, does he?"

"Indeed, Master. He also believes you fear the boy."

"Nothing could be more inaccurate. By the way, how IS Harry Potter?"

"Growing more and more arrogant everyday. He does not fear you either, Master. Dumbledore and he both believe they can solve this war by simply believing you are incompetent to defeat them."

"They will soon discover that I cannot and will not be conquered after we overthrow Hogwarts! Is that all?"

"Unless you'd like to hear how the boy and the old man are a pain in my arse, then I have no other news for you, Master."

"Ha! Do not fret, Severus," Voldemort laughed, "You shall have your revenge! I will make sure that you can personally spit on the boy's dead body after I am through with him. You can also be the one to give that old coot Dumbledore the Killing Curse after I've had my fun with him."

"Thank you, Master," Snape bowed as Malfoy clenched his teeth in jealousy again.

"Now, onto other business," Voldemort continued looking at his followers, "Tomorrow we shall attack Hogsmeade at dawn. I want it to be a warning to the boy and the Ministry that I am a force to be reckoned with. Be prepared to meet here before hand. Is this clear to everyone?"

"Yes, my lord," the mass of Death Eaters answered.

"Very good, now go and spread the word of the Dark Lord."

The Death Eaters were about to take their leave until suddenly Voldemort stopped them.

"Wait!" he shouted, "I feel like having a little fun before you leave."

Malfoy and Snape glanced at each other as a ripple of apprehension went through those gathered. They knew that couldn't be good. It was never good. They looked back at Voldemort who was slowly pulling out his wand with an evil grin across his face.

"I feel like a game of... Mercy," the Dark Lord hissed, "and I will start with... Burton."

Voldemort pointed his wand at the Death Eater named Burton who blanched upon hearing his name. Snape's heart sank knowing Burton would not last long playing Mercy, which meant that he would suffer worse consequences.

"Snape!" Voldemort snapped, "Keep the time!"

"Yes, Master," Snape bowed.

Voldemort looked back at Burton who was trying not to shake in fear.

"Crucio!" Voldemort shouted.

As Burton began screaming and rolling on the ground in pain, Snape kept the time, wishing the war was over, wishing he was back in his dungeons, wishing he was with Hermione. He sent a quick and silent prayer up towards the heavens. This was going to be a long and painful night.

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*Yea, there's chapter 9! I hope you all liked it!*

*Again, sorry it took so long to update! I swear work & school will be the death of me! Ill try to update sooner next time!*

*5 points to your house if you knew the answer to the previous riddle, which was "I don't know." You can get 5 more if you figure out the latest riddle!*

*The Alan Rickman quote in chapter 8 was "Just because something's fixed, doesn't mean it can't be broken," said by Phil Allen in Blow Dry. After I finished writing this chapter, I realized there are 2 AR quotes hidden in the text. I didn't mean for that to happen, but it did. Happy hunting! [Hint: They're both from the same movie].*

*Thanks for all the support! You all are the best! You rock my world!*

*"We fight against those who control the darkness."*

*- DADA Mistress*

# Admit the Needs of the Heart

Chapter 10 of 15

Hermione has an encounter in the woods while Severus is "playing" Mercy at the Dark Revel. However, upon his return, both Severus and Hermione finally admit something important to themselves.

*Special thanks to my mom, my sister, Lord\_and\_Lady\_Peeves, and Jade\_Orchid my beta for everything you lovely ladies (and gentleman) do to encourage me.*

*My best friend has submitted a story called **A Traitor's Alliance** on the Pureblood page (stories about the Malfoys). I could not call myself her friend if I did not advertise it, especially since it is her first story. It's really good, and I'm not just saying that. Please visit the site below:*

**<http://pureblood.sycophanthex.com/viewstory.php?sid=187&PHPSESSID=24f48dc6d6c034029507420e57cbc0bc>**

*Disclaimer: I have never owned any of these characters from the Harry Potter series and I never will. They all belong to the brilliant mind of J.K. Rowling, however this story belongs to me, spewing forth from my very own sick and demented mind. I don't plan on receiving any sort of profit for these stories. I just love the characters so much that I HAVE to write about them.*

*Please, no lawsuits.*

*Also, this is my FIRST story, so please, be nice and helpful. Enjoy! :)*

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## Chapter 10: Admit the Needs of the Heart

Hermione suppressed a shiver as she sat at the bottom of the tree. It was starting to get chilly. Goodness, how long did these Dark Revels take? She sighed quietly to herself and went back to making her night blossom flower wreath, patiently waiting for Severus's return. She prayed he was safe. She hoped he'd return soon. She...

Heard something.

Hermione held her breath and remained perfectly still, straining to see if she could hear the noise again.

\*snap\*

There it was! It sounded like twigs snapping. She listened harder in the silence until she heard it for a third time, only now it was louder and closer than before. Whatever it was, it was coming towards her.

Slowly, Hermione got to her feet with her wand raised, prepared to defend herself by any means necessary. Her eyes darted around the moonlit clearing, but she saw nothing. She looked behind her and still didn't see anything. She looked everywhere around her; nothing was there, yet the noise was still coming closer. Hermione was starting to worry and decided the best thing for her to do was to hide in some brush until whatever it was that was making the noise came into view. At least she'd be concealed if it turned out to be something dangerous!

Silently, Hermione made a quick dash towards the bushes. Suddenly, she hit something rather hard and went flying backwards, hitting the ground with an "oof!" At first she was discombobulated, but she soon sobered upon realizing there was a dark figure standing in front of her and Harry's cloak had slipped off, revealing her identity. Quickly, she scrambled to her feet and pointed her wand at the tall form in front of her. It was then she noticed that the person also had a wand pointing at her. She squinted at the being in front of her, trying to see its features in the moonlight. She could make out shoulder length blonde hair, blue eyes, and a tall slender body. She could also see the "thing" in front of her wasn't a thing at all, but a man! Several of his buttons were in the wrong holes, making his shirt appear crooked. He looked even more comical since his shirt was only partially tucked into his pants. She looked to his feet and noticed a crumpled cloak in front of him. Ah: he, too, must have used an invisibility cloak. No wonder she hadn't seen him approach.

"Hermione Granger?!" the man suddenly asked in disbelief.

That's when she recognized the voice.

"David Heart?" she asked in shock.

"The one and only," he grinned putting his wand away.

Hermione knew David from school. He was a seventh year Hufflepuff and a notorious libertine. She could smell the firewhisky on his breath from where she stood, as well as the scent of perfume. He had some smudged red lipstick on his cheek and she was pretty sure that was a hickey on the right side of his neck. He must have gone into Hogsmeade for some "entertainment" with some of the women at The Hog's Head.

"What are you doing out here?" Hermione demanded.

"I could ask the same to you," David answered smugly. "What IS the Head Girl doing outside of Hogwarts at this hour, hmm?"

Oh no!

Hermione pursed her lips and gave a stern look at Heart who gave back a crooked and somewhat inebriated grin. She couldn't tell him why she was in the forest. She'd betray Severus's secret if she did, and she'd die before that happened. However, as Head Girl, she couldn't let David Heart get away with his debauchery either. Hermione put her hands on her hips and glared at David with his smug look. It made Hermione think that he really should have been put into Slytherin.

"Well, I asked you first," Hermione said airily, which only caused David to laugh.

"Oh please," he chuckled with a dismissive wave, "Tell you what, I won't tell anyone you were out here, if you don't tell anyone I was out here."

"But..."

"And I won't ask what you're doing if you don't ask me what I'm doing."

"More like WERE doing."

"Whatever, do we have a deal?" David asked with a sly smile as he extended his hand.

Hermione looked at his hand for a moment, battling between her Head Girl duties and her devotion to Severus. She knew she had to keep Severus safe, even if it meant overlooking Heart's midnight rendezvous in Hogsmeade. Finally, with a heavy sigh, she took David's hand into her own and shook it.

"Excellent," David smiled before picking up his cloak and throwing over his shoulders, "It will be our little secret."

"You should have been sorted into Slytherin, David Heart," Hermione said sourly before picking up her own cloak.

"You know, the hat WAS going to sort me into it."

"What stopped him?"

"He said I was too devious," David smiled before pulling the hood up over his head and becoming completely invisible.

"Why am I not surprised?" Hermione sighed as she too put on her cloak and become invisible as well.

"Good night, Hermione," David's voice said, "See you tomorrow."

"Same to you," Hermione's voice answered.

"Hey."

"Hm?"

"Be careful, Hermione. It's not very safe to be out here alone at this hour."

Hermione heard David walk past as he made his way towards Hogwarts. She stood there listening to his footsteps until they faded away into the night and she was once again alone. She sighed loudly and looked up towards the sky.

"Don't tell that to me," she whispered, "tell that to Severus."

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Meanwhile in the Gryffindor common room...

"Why is it taking so long?!" Ron demanded in anticipation as the quill entwined with Hermione's hair scribbled frantically on the scroll.

"Hang on, Ron," Harry said reassuringly, "It's almost finished."

Ron crossed his arms in annoyance and pouted. He and Harry watched the quill as it scribbled and stroked out the picture line by line. Harry cracked his knuckles nervously, hoping that Hermione wasn't seeing a bad chap. That would really make things difficult, not to mention it would send Ron over the edge.

Finally, the quill scrawled the name of the person under the picture, stood straight up, and toppled over, indicating the picture was complete. At that moment, Ron and Harry rushed over to the scroll and peered at the picture before gasping in shock.

"DAVID HEART?!" the boys shouted in shock.

"David Heart as in David 'Heartbreaker' Heart?!" Ron sputtered in disbelief.

"Looks like it," Harry nodded, still staring at the picture.

"David Heartbreaker the man-whore?!"

"I think so."

"Bloody 'ell!" Ron shouted, red in the face with anger. "I TOLD you she was seeing a bad fellow!"

"Ron, let's not jump to conclusions," Harry added.

"Not jump to conclusions?! Harry, are you mad?! Don't you see the picture too?! She's with him right now! We gotta stop her! We gotta tell her he's no good! We gotta..."

"Keep our mouths shut."

"WHAT?!" Ron asked in disbelief, "No, we have to tell her he's..."

"No, we can't!" Harry said adamantly.

"And why not?! Don't you care about Hermione's welfare?!"

"Of course I do, but think about it, Ron. If we tell her, she'll know we were prying into her affairs after she told us not to. That will make her so upset and she'll never trust us again!"

"You right," Ron said crest-fallen. "I didn't think of it that way."

"It's okay," Harry said putting a reassuring hand on Ron's shoulder, "Listen, we'll just stick with the plan. We wait until she finally tells us who it is and we act shocked and surprised."

"Oh, all right, but we gotta keep a close eye on him! We have to make sure he's treating her right, we gotta..."

"Oh no!" Harry moaned, "You don't mean..."

"Yes!" Ron said triumphantly, "Operation Fancy Pants isn't over yet! There's still lots more to learn about David Heartbreaker!"

"How do I get myself in these situations with you?"

"Hey, I've been in worst situations with you!"

"It's true. You have."

"Damn right I have, so after everything we've been through, Operation Fancy Pants will be simple."

"I guess you're right," Harry shrugged.

They took the quill and parchment and headed back up to their rooms, totally convinced that their meddling was only to keep Hermione safe. After all, what kind of friends would they be if they let her stand in harm's way? As Ron put the quill away back in his nightstand, he couldn't help but think what Hermione could possibly see in that Hufflepuff hustler. Now Ron was determined more than ever to make sure Hermione would be his if it was the last thing he did.


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Hermione sat on a log near the clearing. She had tired of counting the number of fungi growing around there. She sighed and looked up at the moon again, basking in its splendor. She longed for Snape to return. Really, what could be taking so long? Things couldn't be that interesting at a Dark Revel.

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Snape couldn't help but cry out again as the Crucio hit him in the chest and ripped through his body. God, he felt like he was on fire while people peeled off his skin! He was bent over while kneeling on the floor, his fingers dug and clawed at the ground while he squeezed his eyes shut. Finally, the pain stopped and he gasped for air.

"Do you want to cry mercy yet?" Voldemort asked in an acidic voice.

Slowly, Snape sat up to face Voldemort as sweat poured down his face and back. In reality, he wanted it to stop, but he couldn't. HE had to continue with the onslaught, fight against the pain. He wasn't sure how long he'd been under the effects of the Cruciatus. All he knew was that Voldemort saved him for last and he had to beat fifteen minutes, which was the longest any Death Eater had lasted and Malfoy's personal best.

"No," he finally said through labored breaths.

Voldemort wasted no time as he immediately hit Snape with another Crucio curse. Snape fell over onto all fours as he felt his elbows buckling under his weight. He let another cry of agony escape from his lips as the curse tore through him again. He didn't care if he screamed or not. It was better than soiling himself or crying like a child like some of the others did. Of course, most of them didn't last for more than five minutes, and that angered the Dark Lord to no end, forcing those who failed to suffer even further by handing them over to Lucius, a glutton for torture. Voldemort didn't tolerate weakness, which is why Snape had to remain strong.

The pain stopped once more and this time Snape stayed on all fours like a dog and sweating like pig. The next voice he expected to hear was Voldemort's, but instead he heard something quite peculiar.

He heard a giggle, like that of a young girl.

Slowly, Snape lifted his head to see from whom the giggling was originating. To his surprise, he saw none other than Hermione Granger standing in front of him grinning like a Cheshire cat. What was she doing here?! He had to get her out before...

Suddenly, something occurred to Snape. This couldn't be Hermione. If it was, the others would have noticed her. Besides, how would she know where the Dark Revel was being held? Obviously, he was hallucinating, a side effect from too many Crucios.

"H... H... Hermione?" Snape asked in barely a whisper.

"What did he say?" one of the Death Eaters asked Lucius while he rubbed his right arm still in pain.

"Sounded like 'mercy' to me," Lucius sneer behind his mask as rubbed his hands to relieve the pain. He was hoping Snape wouldn't beat his record yet again. Perhaps today would be the day Lucius would finally step out if Snape's shadow and show the Dark Lord just how strong he was compared to the others.

"No, he most certainly did NOT say 'mercy'!" Voldemort glared, "*Crucio!*"

Snape threw his head back and hissed, arching his back as his body stiffened from the anguish. He felt the blood begin to seep out the corner of his mouth as he bit the side of his cheek. He finally screamed again, no longer being able to contain his suffering. To his fortune, the pain ceased once more. He breathed hard as fell to his elbows and his leg stretched under him. He was about to drop his head until he thought he felt a hand under his chin, holding his head up.

"Oh, Severus, don't give up," he heard Hermione say.

He felt her lift his chin and met Hermione's deep chocolate eyes. He suddenly felt very safe as he lost himself in her gaze. She smiled and giggled again, causing him to give a crooked smile back.

"Merlin's beard, did he just smile?!" a Death Eater asked in horror.

"What's he staring at?" another questioned.

"Oh, think it's funny, do you?" Voldemort hissed at Snape, "*Crucio!*"

The pain ripped through Snape again and he squeezed his eyes shut and groaned.

"Shh!" Hermione cooed, holding his face. "It shall pass."

As if her words were magic, the pain began to lessen. He stared into her eyes though his dark hair wet with sweat and the pain lessened even more. How was she able to make the world fade away? Suddenly the pain ceased again, causing Snape to shudder.

"Have you figured out my riddle yet?" Hermione asked him sweetly.

"No," he whispered shaking his head, "No."

"Sorry, Severus, but 'no' isn't the 'magic word,'" Lucius scoffed but Snape didn't hear him.

"Silly man, why not?" Hermione teased, "Come now, it's time to think about it."

"Yes," he nodded.

"Yes you want more?" Voldemort asked sinisterly, "That can be arranged.*Crucio!*"

The curse hit Snape again, but this time he did not cry out. Instead, he gasped and his body stiffed against the sudden jolts to his system, never leaving Hermione's eyes.

"Now listen, Severus," Hermione smiled while he focused on her instead of the pain, "I cut through evil like a double edged sword, and chaos flees at my approach. Balance I single-handedly upraise, through battles fought with heart and mind, instead of with my gaze."

Severus fought through the agony, listened and pondering her words. The more he thought of it, the less pain he felt. He tried to grasp the concept and think hard about the enigma. His mind struggled against holding onto his sanity while the pain shredded at it.

Lucius growled as he watched the clock. Snape was approaching fifteen minutes. Damn it, why did that greasy git always have to try and one up him?! Lucius was that bastard's best and probably only friend, so why was he trying to create tension between them? Well, friend or not, he was not going to beat Lucius's score, not this time. Slowly, Lucius pulled out his wand and waited for the perfect opportunity to knock Snape out of the running. No one betters a Malfoy at anything...

Nobody.

Snape panted hard as his body shook uncontrollably. God, he was getting too old for this, or at least it felt like it! Despite Voldemort stopping the curse once more, the pain

still pulsed through Snape. He felt as if his blood was boiling and his muscles ached with a grueling soreness. His mouth was dry and his throat was raw from screaming. Despite the bad shape he was in, Snape had never felt safer in his life. He never took his eyes off the Hermione mirage that continually smiled at him, giving him strength when he needed it most. He was afraid if he tore his gaze from her for even a moment she'd disappear and he'd be alone again in a place he hated the most.

"Severus," Hermione said seriously, "Think of the answer. I cut through evil like a double-edged sword, and chaos flees at my approach. Balance I single-handedly upraise, through battles fought with heart and mind, instead of with my gaze. Severus, this is something you want and shall have before the war is over."

Snape thought long and hard about the clue she gave to him. What was something he wanted before the war was over (besides Hermione of course)? What could be something that he desired, something he wanted to be done? Finally, Snape knew the answer, but just before he could speak it, he suddenly heard both Voldemort and Lucius bellow, "*Crucio!*"

The curse that hit Snape was twice the amount any normal person could have endured, hard like two bolts of lightning. It was the most painful thing he had ever felt! It hurt more than any *Crucio* he had ever received! He felt the flesh on his shoulder blade tear open after Lucius's curse hit his back. Just one more scar to add to the rest of the collection on his body. Finally, he threw his head back and screamed the answer to Hermione's riddle.

"JUSTICE!" he screamed. "JUSTICE!"

Voldemort stopped his attack while Lucius continued his onslaught on Severus.

"MALFOY STOP!" the Dark Lord bellowed.

Lucius stopped with a satisfied smirk on his face as he watched Snape collapse on the floor shaking uncontrollably with blood seeping from his mouth and nose. However, Malfoy stopped smirking and slightly blanched upon seeing Voldemort sneering at him.

"MALFOY YOU FOOL!" Voldemort hissed, "THIS WAS A GAME, NOT A KILLING SPREE! WE NEED HIM TO LIVE SO HE CAN INFORM US ABOUT HOGWARTS!"

"I'm sorry, my lord," Lucius bowed, "but I was..."

"I know. You didn't want him to beat you again! However, you're very lucky he's still alive and breathing, you imbecile, for if his heart HAD given out and he died, YOU would pay dearly with your own life! If you try anything like that again, I'll have you eat your own flesh and blood!"

"Yes, my lord," Malfoy bowed while he glared at Snape who was coughing up blood and struggling to push himself off the floor.

"I think," Voldemort continued, "that in your pain, Severus, that you forgot that the word is 'mercy,' not 'justice.' However, I think you've endured enough for one night. After all, we don't want to have Dumbledore become suspicious."

Voldemort then turned his attention to the other Death Eaters present, eyeing them with an ice-cold glare.

"Since I don't think ANY of you could ever endure a pain such as that, I declare Snape the winner of this mercy game!" he spat. "Now arise, Severus."

Snape's vision was blurred as he fought not to pass out. He felt the bile rising from his stomach, but he managed to keep it down. Instead, he coughed up more blood and struggled to breathe.

'Get up, Severus,' he thought to himself as he forced his sore legs to move under him, 'Get up now! Do it for the Order, do it for all the wizards, do it... for her.'

Snape winced in pain as he slowly pushed himself off the floor and sat in a kneeling position before finally lifting himself up and stand on his feet, which were also sore from the pain. He staggered at first as his legs almost gave out under his weight, but he managed to steady himself and stand to face Voldemort with his mask partially red from the blood and his hands still slightly shaking.

"Well done, my most faithful servant," Voldemort drawled.

"Thank you, Master," Snape said with his voice sore and gruffly as he bowed his head.

"Once again you have out done your colleagues. It's a shame you can't join us tomorrow, Severus, since you DO teach those damn children, but we need you there to spy on that old fool and the boy more than we need you at Hogsmeade."

"I agree, Master, but I know once you come into power, I will no longer have to keep this facade."

"No, you will not," Voldemort smiled slyly. "You will be by my right side as one of my closest advisors."

"Thank you, Master. I look forward to the day," Snape lied.

"I know my faithful servant. Now go, all of you."

"Yes, my lord," the Death Eaters answered as Voldemort turned away and went into an adjacent room, slamming the door behind him as he left.

Most of the Death Eaters Disappeared while a few stayed to boast about all the horrors they had inflicted upon unsuspecting Muggles as of late. Lucius took the opportunity to approach Severus as he slightly hobbled to a near by chair and leaned against it, afraid if he sat down he wouldn't be able to get back up.

"So sorry about that, old friend," Lucius said smoothly with that wolfish grin, "I just wanted to win. It's nothing personal."

"I understand that this isn't personal because you're not a person," Snape said coldly.

"Ah, my dear friend, I'm so glad you see it my way. No hard feelings?"

"Of course not, but it's not like you'd care if I did."

"On the contrary. I would care because it'd mean I'd have to keep my eye on you, making sure you wouldn't stab me in the back."

"I think tonight's events made it clear as to who would stab their friend in the back, old chum."

"Oh Severus, you're too funny!" Lucius laughed patting Snape hard on the back, causing him to wince in pain. "Now I must be off. I have a dinner date. Try to have a good night, Severus. I hope the soreness doesn't keep you up tonight," Lucius lied.

"Good-bye, Lucius. Give my regards to Narcissa when you see her tonight at your dinner."

"Who said I'm seeing HER for dinner?" were Lucius's last words before he gave Snape a wink and Disappeared from the Manor.

Snape sighed as he pushed himself off the chair. He felt so bad for his dear friend Narcissa. She was a good woman deep down inside, but Lucius's infidelity as well as evilness had drained her over the years. Now she was nothing more than an empty shell of herself. However, now he had to focus all his energy upon Apparating to the clearing. He closed his eyes and thought of the clearing before he felt himself suspended through space and time and left the bloodstained room in Riddle Manor with a crack.

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Hermione stretched and looked up at the stars while she lay out on a log by the clearing. They were unusually bright that night. They looked as if they were quivering they were so bright. She inhaled deeply as she allowed the scents of the forest to tantalize her senses. It was so peaceful and serene here. She only wished she could visit it more often. It was a nice change from all the hustle and bustle at Hogwarts, not to mention it'd be a nice place to study. Of course, she'd need to have the cloak to...

Suddenly, there was a loud crack that caused Hermione to jump out of her skin. She sat straight up as she looked to the clearing and saw a Death Eater standing there. She stifled a gasp, before studying him closely; making sure it was Severus before she approached him. She saw the blood against his white mask as the moonlight bathed him in an eerie glow. He was breathing rather hard and his hands were slightly shaking. He teetered for only a moment before finally collapsing into a heap on the soft forest floor. When he hit the ground, the mask slipped off revealed part of his face, confirming Hermione's thoughts that it was indeed her Potions Master returned and badly wounded from the Dark Revel.

"Severus!" Hermione gasped as she ripped off the cloak and ran to his side.

She rolled him over and took off his mask, turning his head towards her. He was sweating profusely and bleeding badly from the nose and his mouth. Dear God what did they do to him?! Hermione pulled out her wand and mutter the cleansing spell to make the bloodstains and the sweat disappear. She pulled him up so that she was cradling his upper body in her arms as she assessed his situation. He appeared to have no broken bones or head trauma, and his breathing was now shallow, but his pulse was strong. That was a good sign. Her hand brushed his bad shoulder, causing Snape to wince and moan.

"What's wrong?" she asked with a concerned look, but he didn't answer. He was too dazed to process her question. Hermione felt the wetness and warmth from the blood on his robes as she brushed her hand over his shoulder blade again before using a cleansing spell on that wound also.

"Severus," she whispered as she brought her face close to his, brushing away a few strands of hair from his face, "Severus, can you hear me?"

"H-Hermione?" he whispered back and slightly opened his eyes to look up at her. He was completely dazed and confused, however he did know one thing, and that was that the REAL Hermione was with him, so he'd be safe. He tried to give her a small smile, but found it too painful to bear.

"What happened?!" she asked anxiously.

"A game of 'mercy,' and I won," he croaked.

"Oh Lord! Did HE Crucio..."

"Yesss," Snape hissed with a dazed look on his face, "but I'll be all right... just need to get back..."

He attempted to sit up, but discovered that he couldn't. He moaned loudly as he tried again, only to find out that it was virtually impossible for the time being. He flopped back down against Hermione as he gasped in pain. That took a lot more out of him than he expected. He fought to stay awake as the world spun around him, drowning him in a sea of black.

"Hang on, Severus!" Hermione whispered, her voice distressed but strong.

She took off her school robe and covered him with it to prevent his sore muscles becoming stiff from the cold. She lifted her wand in the air and sent up a "flare," just like what Hagrid had told Harry, Ron, Draco, and her to do during their first detention at Hogwarts. Hopefully, Hagrid would see it and come to help her.

Hermione looked back to Snape who was obviously still in a lot of pain. There had to be something she could do in the mean time until Hagrid came. She couldn't give him the proper treatment a mediwitch could, but she could certainly make something that would alleviate the pain for the time being. She pointed her wand at a nearby plant and said, "*Accio amica!*"

The small plant uprooted itself and went flying across the air into her hands. She then summoned some calendula, and hypercum before transfiguring a rock into a small stone bowl. She quickly stripped the leaves from the plants and threw them into the bowl before grinding them with a rock. Within seconds, she had made a foul smelling paste and scooped some onto her index finger.

"Severus," she said softly, "I made a mixture that should help with the pain as well as the bleeding."

Without wasting any time, she rubbed it into the pulse points on his body as well as the wound on his back until the paste was gone. He immediately began to feel better as his muscles relaxed and the pain subsided. She must have used some magic during the process to speed up the anesthetic.

"I'm sorry that it's not a cure," Hermione said sheepishly, "but it's what I can do until I can get you back to see Madam Pomfrey."

Snape looked at her in wonder. How did she know about this place? How did she know he was badly injured and needed assistance? She truly was amazing, his little lioness. Normally, Snape would have shook such thoughts out of his head before blasting her and her obvious disregard for the rules by venturing into the Forbidden Forest, not to mention that she had once again failed to call him by his title. However, as he stared at her, he felt no need to berate her. Instead, he felt only one thing: love. Yes, love, and there was no denying it any longer. He loved Hermione Granger.

"This is the second time you've saved me tonight," Snape said quietly, "I... I can't thank you enough."

"You needn't thank me," Hermione said just as softly.

She could have left it that... but she didn't. She felt the need to say more, to tell him how she really felt. However he had a very rough night, and there was no need for her to compound it with the confessions of her heart. That would have to be saved for a later time.

Hermione gazed into Snape's eyes intensely before adding, "I'd do it for you again in an instant... I'd do anything for you, Severus."

She looked down upon him with all the grace of an angel as she smiled warmly, melting the final layer of ice that surrounded his heart.

At that moment, Snape knew his feelings were true. He knew there was no turning back. He loved and was in love with Hermione Granger, Hogwarts' Head Girl, Gryffindor's Know-It-All, and thief of his potions and of his heart. From that day forward he'd belong to her whether she'd have him or not. If only he could call her his own as well.

Hermione blushed and diverted her gaze from his eyes. Oh man, why did she say that?! Well, that was a silly question. She knew why she said it. She said it because she loved him. Yes, that's right: she loved him. As shocking as it seemed, there was someone who did care about the snarky Potions Master. There was someone who cared if he went to the Dark Revels unscathed or not. There was someone who cared if he lived or died. There was someone who cared about and loved Severus Snape, and that person was Hermione Granger.

Severus and Hermione were snapped out of their thoughts when they suddenly heard a noise. Hermione gasped, as she feared for Severus and herself. She had to hide herself and Severus, but she couldn't drag him into the bushes. She didn't have time! The noise was getting louder and closer as Hermione racked her brain. Suddenly, she saw the cloak crumpled next to the log. Of course! Quickly, she laid Snape on the ground before she grabbed the invisible cloak. She sized it up and knew it would cover Severus. However, Snape was VERY tall, the tallest amongst the teachers except for Hagrid. Would the cloak be able to hide them both?

"Severus," Hermione whispered as she knelt by him again, "I think we can cover ourselves with this invisibility cloak, but..."

"Is that Potter's?" Snape asked with a disgusted look, as if his skin would melt off if he put on the garment.

"Yes, but don't get petty with me now! We might be able to hide from whatever is coming with the cloak, but... we're going to have to... um... huddle."

"Huddle?" Snape asked as his heart skipped a beat. If he could raise an eyebrow without it being too painful, he would.

"Um... yes," Hermione whispered, blushing. "But we've got to hurry!"

With as much gusto as she could muster, Hermione covered Snape with the cloak and then slipped under it before pulling herself close to Snape's body, as close as she could get. Her heart quickened as she felt Snape wrap an arm around her and pull her even closer. He grimaced as his sore muscles in his arm protested against the sudden movement, but his heart skipped a beat again as he felt her warm little body next to his. Oh God, this was too good to be true! Snape only wished he could hold her for the rest of the evening while they looked up at the stars. He had to suppress a gasp as he felt Hermione laid a delicate hand on his chest. She didn't know why she did that. It wasn't completely necessary, for they were both completely hidden from view; however, Hermione felt like it was appropriate, even natural.

They held their breath as the sound became louder and the Earth was now slightly vibrating beneath them. Suddenly, a huge figure lumbered into the clearing. Oh great! Just what they needed! A huge overgrown something whose diet probably consisted of wizards and witches stuck in the forest.

"Hello?!" Hermione and Severus heard Hagrid boom. "Hey, anybody out there?!"

The two of them gave a silent sigh of relief at the sound of the Groundskeeper's voice. Thank God he had seen the signal! Hermione knew Severus would be safe now that Hagrid was here. Her job was done.

"Severus," she whispered softly in his ear, causing him to quell a shiver, "Now that Hagrid is here, I'm going to roll away while wrapping myself in the cloak so that he can see you and take you back to Hogwarts."

"What about you, Miss Granger?" he whispered back in that deep velvet voice.

'Back to formalities, are we?' Hermione thought before she said, "Don't worry, Professor Snape. I'll follow you from behind in the cloak. All right?"

Snape nodded. He really wanted to say no and keep her by him, but he knew it was for the best. Besides, Hagrid was there now. Before he knew it, Hermione had pulled away (too soon, in his opinion) and rolled from him while wrapping the cloak around herself as she did, revealing Snape lying in the middle of the clearing.

"Who's there?!" Hagrid demanded as he whipped around upon hearing what sounded like the rustling of robes. Suddenly, he noticed Snape on the ground with his Death Eater mask and wand in hand looking exhausted and worn.

"Professor Snape!" Hagrid gasped as he rushed over to him, "Professor! Oh, what did those no-good buggers do to ya?! Are you all right?"

"As well as one could be after a Dark Revel, I suppose," Snape said back to his old snarky self yet still rather weak.

"Well I'll take you back to Professor Dumbledore!" the giant said as he scooped Snape into his arms and began carrying him back to Hogwarts with Hermione hot on his heels.

"Hagrid," Snape whispered as he shifted uncomfortably in Hagrid's grasp from weakness and some pain, "in case I pass out before we get back... Tell Dumbledore that... there's going to be an attack on Hogsmeade at dawn."

"At dawn?!" Hagrid gasped, "Good Merlin! We'd better get there fast then!"

Hagrid quickened his pace, much to both Snape and Hermione's discontent. Snape began to feel dizzy again as the giant moved as quickly as he could. Severus glanced behind them, wishing he could see Hermione but knowing she was right behind them frantically trying to keep up with the giant's long strides. The forest began to spin around him, and he didn't know how much longer he was going to be conscious. He looked behind him again, wanting to say something to Hermione without actually saying it.

Suddenly inspiration hit him and he said, "What is it you have to answer, but to answer you have to ask? And to ask you have to speak? And to speak you have to know, the answer."

"What was that, Professor?" Hagrid asked in confusion, but Snape passed out before he could answer.

Hermione smiled to herself upon hearing the riddle. The game was on once again, and she couldn't be happier because it was with the man she loved.

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*Yea, there's chapter 10! I hope you all liked it!*

*Again, sorry it took so long to update! I swear work & school will be the death of me! I'll try to update sooner next time!*

*5 points to your house if you knew the answer to the previous riddle, which was "justice." You can get 5 more if you figure out the latest riddle!*

*The Alan Rickman quotes in chapter 9 were "And all the better for her," and "I must away," said by Col. Brandon in Sense and Sensibility. There's another quote hidden in the text. Happy hunting!*

*Thanks for all the support! You all are the best! You rock my world!*

*"We fight against those who control the darkness."*

*- DADA Mistress*

## **An Offer She Couldn't Refuse**

*Chapter 11 of 15*

After another strange incident in the Great Hall involving Neville, Snape offers Hermione position of Potions Apprentice.

What exactly will their research entail?

*Special thanks to my mom, my sister, Lord\_and\_Lady\_Peeves, and Jade\_Orchid my beta for everything you lovely ladies (and gentleman) do to encourage me.*

*Disclaimer: I have never owned any of these characters from the Harry Potter series and I never will. They all belong to the brilliant mind of J.K. Rowling, however this story belongs to me, spewing forth from my very own sick and demented mind. I don't plan on receiving any sort of profit for these stories. I just love the characters so much that I HAVE to write about them.*

*Please, no lawsuits.*

*Also, this is my FIRST story, so please, be nice and helpful. Enjoy! :)*

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## Chapter 11: An Offer She Couldn't Refuse

Ron glared at David Heart from across the Great Hall during breakfast the next day. He was furious. He was even more furious when David flashed him that winning smile and winked. The red head grimaced before turning his head away in disgust. That no good bloke! How dare he?! How could he even think he was in Hermione's league? She was way too good for him! More importantly, what could she actually SEE in him?! He was a dirty rotten scoundrel and as shallow as they came. Why would she do such a thing?

"Harry," Ron growled, as attacked his eggs with his fork in irritation. "I think we should stop Operation Fancy Pants."

"Oh, good," Harry smiled upon swallowing. "You've finally come to your senses and realized that was a stupid plan. Just let Hermione be and..."

"No, that's not what I mean. I think we need to change the name to Operation DIRTY Pants."

"Oh, God."

"Well, it makes sense, doesn't it? I mean Lord knows how many women he's been with, and for all we know..."

"Stop, stop, stop!" Harry demanded. "I'm trying to eat here!"

"Sorry, mate, but I'm just stating the facts," Ron said nonchalantly.

"Speaking of Hermione, did you see her today?" Harry asked, shaking the images of Dirty Pants David out of his head.

"No, I didn't," Ron sighed. "I asked Ginny and she said Hermione was VERY tired and slept in a bit longer than usual. 'She must have had a long night,' Ginny said. Hmph, I bet she did, and with that no good bugger, too!"

"Ron, please. Try to calm yourself. Your face is as red as your hair. You can't even tell you have freckles now," Harry informed him.

"Good morning, all," Neville beamed as he sat down in front of his two friends.

"Morning, Neville," Harry greeted back. "All right?"

"Couldn't be better!"

"What's got you in such a great mood?" Ron asked bitterly.

"What's got you in such a bad one?" Neville questioned in puzzlement.

"Nothing," Harry sighed, rolling his eyes. "He had a bad night. So, why so chipper, Neville?"

"I'm just in a great mood," Neville grinned. "Professor Sprout and I made a break through in our research in Transfolias, I'm prepared for McGonagall's test today, I had a good night's rest, and Luna and I are going to spend this evening together. Nothing can spoil this day for me!"

He spoke too soon.

There was a swooshing sound as a rather large red envelope came bursting through the window. The whole hall became silent as they watched it fly at full speed towards the Gryffindor table, where it dropped with a heavy thud right on Neville's plate. His eyes grew wide with shock and worry as every eye in the Great Hall watched the Howler in anticipation. Slowly, with a shaky hand, Neville picked up the Howler.

"Better take that outside, mate," Ron frowned.

"Too late to take it out now," Neville whimpered as it began to smoke.

"Well hurry up and be done with it!" Harry whispered.

Quickly, Neville squeezed his eyes shut and ripped open the envelope, releasing the fury inside.

"NEVILLE LONGBOTTOM!" a rather familiar voice boomed, rattling the windows through out the Great Hall. "AS HONORABLE CHAIRMAN OF THE APPARATION DIVISION OF THE DEPARTMENT OF MAGICAL TRANSPORTATION, I HEARBY SUSPEND YOUR APPARATING LICENSE FOR APPARATING UNDER THE INFLUENCE!"

"WHAT?!" Neville shouted in disbelief, as he jumped to his feet. "An A.U.I.?"

"Ooo!" the Great Hall gasped in shock. Everyone knew taking a teenage wizard or witch's Apparating license away was like a death sentence, quite similar to suspending a teenage Muggle's driver's license.

"THIS PAST WEEKEND AT LEAST FIVE CREDIBLE WITNESSES SAW YOU DRINKING COPIOUS AMOUNTS OF FIREWHISKY AT THE THREE BROOMSTICKS!"

Neville's jaw dropped in shock. Firewhisky?! He'd never even touched the stuff! He couldn't even smell it without his eyes watering! Who could be accusing him of such wild and untrue charges?!

"THESE SAME WITNESSES THEN WATCHED AS YOU STUMBLED OUT OF THE PUB AND ATTEMPTED TO APPARATE!" the familiar voice continued. "UNFORTUNATELY, YOU ENDED UP APPARATING UPON AN OLD WITCH STANDING ACROSS THE STREET FROM YOU!"

"This is outrageous!" Neville shouted outraged.

"DESPITE THAT SHE WAS BADLY INJURED, WITNESSES THEN SAW YOU FLEEING FROM THE SCENE AND APPARATE FOR A SECOND TIME. YOU'RE LUCKY YOU DIDN'T GET SPLINCHED!"

"But I never..."

"FROM THIS MOMENT ON, YOUR APPARATING LICENSE IS TEMPORARILY SUSPENDED!"

Suddenly, Neville's Apparating license flew out of the back pocket of his trousers and made for the window.

"Nooo!" Neville wailed as he took off after it, his arms stretched out in front of him as the license was just out of his reach. Finally, the license flew out the window and towards the Ministry. Luckily for Neville, Hagrid was sitting right by the window and caught the distraught teen just before he went jumping out after the elusive license.

"IN ORDER TO RETAIN YOUR APPARATING LICENSE," the voice continued, as it flew over to shout in front of Neville who was hanging his head in shame and embarrassment, "YOU MUST PERFORM 120 HOURS OF COMMUNITY SERVICE AS WELL AS ATTEND TWELVE W.A.A. MEETINGS WITHIN THE NEXT THREE MONTHS!"

"120 HOURS?!" Neville gasped. "AND I HAVE TO ATTEND WIZARD'S ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS?! THIS IS INSANE!"

"IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS REGARDING YOUR CRIMES OR PUNISHMENT," the voice continued, "YOU MAY OWL HONORABLE CHAIRMAN OF THE APPARATION DIVISION OF THE DEPARTMENT OF MAGICAL TRANSPORTATION, LUCIUS MALFOY!"

Suddenly, that's when Neville recognized the voice. It was Lucius Malfoy, Draco's father. At that moment, everything made sense. This was all Draco's doing. He was getting back at him for the booglack flower! Neville shot a glare over to the Slytherin table to see Draco, Crabbe, Goyle, Pansy, and Millicent Bulstrode giggling like mad. Ah: the five witnesses!

Neville turned back to the letter just in time to hear Lucius say in his silkiest voice, "Have a nice day." The letter then ripped itself to shreds before bursting into flames, leaving nothing but ashes in its wake. The whole hall still remained silent as Neville stood staring at the ashes for what seemed to him like an eternity. His license was gone! Good Lord, it would be easier if he could have just died! Why his license? Why?!

Neville was suddenly snapped back into reality as Draco broke the silence, saying in a voice as silky as his father's, "Oh my, how embarrassing!"

"YOU BASTARD!" Neville spat as he whipped out his wand and charged at Draco.

"Whoa! Easy now, Neville!" Hagrid exclaimed, as he grabbed Neville by the back of his robes, while the Slytherins' roared with laughter.

"Mr. Longbottom, that's quite enough!" McGonagall scolded. "Do not take out your aggressions on Mr. Malfoy!"

"But he did this!" Neville objected, as Hagrid held him above the floor. "He told his father lies about..."

"If you think there's been an injustice done, then please owl Mr. Lucius Malfoy and protest your charges, but until then..."

"This is preposterous!" Neville spat. "Let go of me!"

Hagrid dropped Neville who straightened his robes and stormed down the aisle towards the doors of the Great Hall.

"Hey, Longbottom!" Draco called out to him. "As part of your community service, you can start carrying my books to class for me!"

The Slytherins burst into laughter for a second time as Neville growled and tore open the huge double doors before storming towards the Gryffindor Common room.

"Hi, Neville," Hermione beamed as he passed her down the hall.

Neville didn't even look in her direction as he continued to seethe with anger, making his way towards the Gryffindor Tower.

"Um... okay, bye!" Hermione called out to him. She'd better ask Ron and Harry what happened.

As she entered the Great Hall, Ron and Harry waved at her and she gave them a warm smile back, causing Ron's heart to melt. However, jealously reared its ugly head once more when David passed by Hermione as he made his way out of the hall.

"Morning, Hermione," David winked before biting into an apple he was holding.

"Good morning, David," Hermione gave a small smile back, knowing it was David's way of saying he was glad she made it back to Hogwarts.

"Did you hear that?!" Ron whispered to Harry nastily. "He said 'good morning' to her!"

"Uh-oh, not 'good morning!' " Harry said sarcastically. "Everyone knows that really means 'I'm going to snog your face off!' "

"Damn right it does!" Ron answered indignantly.

"But you told me 'good morning,' Ron. Does that mean we're going to snog, because if so, I have to say you're not my type... nor are you the right gender."

"Oh, stuff it, Harry! You know what I meant!"

"You're being ridiculous," Harry said before taking a sip of his pumpkin juice.

"Quiet, her she comes! Try to act normal!"

"I've been. You're the one that's been acting paranoid."

"Good morning, you two!" Hermione grinned before seating herself between them.

"Morning, 'Mione," the two boys said.

"So," Ron began, "how was your night, 'Mione? Get any sleep?"

"It was fine," she said nonchalantly, knowing Ron was trying to get her to cough up her escapades from last night. "I got plenty of rest, thank you."

That was a lie actually. She had been up most of the night pacing back and forth in her room, worrying about Severus, worrying about Hogsmeade, and worrying about Severus again. Finally, Crookshanks managed to convince her to go to bed by jumping onto her pillow, kneading and purring like mad. He knew she couldn't resist it when he looked so cute like that, much to his disgust. However, the reward was always sweet when she sat down at the edge of the bed and scratched him just right behind the ear. He knew it was relaxing for her too, which was indicated when she finally curled up under the covers and drifted to sleep while petting Crookshanks. Finally, now he could get some rest without her constant pacing to keep him awake!

"Oh, really?" Ron asked with a raised eyebrow. "I wouldn't have known by the way you slept in today."

"By the way, Harry," Hermione said, ignoring Ron's comment, "Thank you so much for letting me borrow your cloak and map. I put them back under your bed this morning before I came here."

"No problem, Hermione," Harry beamed, happy to know not only did he help out one of his best friends, but she was smart enough to snub Ron's constant prying.

Hermione then asked the boys about Neville, and they retold the tale of the Howler in full detail.

"Oh no!" Hermione frowned. "Poor Neville! I better go talk to him."

"He might want to be alone, Hermione," Harry pointed out.

"That's true" Ron added. "Why don't you finish your breakfast first, 'Mione, and then..."

"Oh, he's probably hungry!" Hermione exclaimed. "I'll make a plate for him and take it to his room!"

"That's a good idea," Harry commented. "But if he doesn't want to talk..."

"I know, Harry, I won't force him."

After she filled a plate for Neville, she waved good-bye to her friends and exited through the big double doors of the Great Hall, however, her first stop was not to the Gryffindor Common room, but to the hospital wing. She wanted to see Professor Snape very badly! She stopped by earlier on her way to the Great Hall, but Madame Pomfrey was by the door. She didn't want to seem like she KNEW Severus was there, so she decided to try to stop by again after breakfast.

Hermione wondered if Snape had eaten breakfast yet. She was sure Madame Pomfrey had already fed him, but in case she hadn't, Hermione was willing to give up her plate to him. She could always go back to get Neville more food. If anyone asked, she'd say she just tripped and accidentally dropped the food.

She thought a lot about the sweet and stolen moments they had shared before and after the Dark Revel. Did he feel something for her? Did he ponder her words when she said, "I'd do anything for you, Severus." She had meant every word of it. She remember his scent and his hard body against hers as she hugged him tightly in his office and then again when they hid under the cloak. He hadn't recoiled from her or tried to stop her. Could he love her back? She sighed to herself. Of course he couldn't. She was his student and that's all he'd ever see in her. He only saw her as a silly girl who was scared last night.

Nothing more.

Hermione frowned as she sighed to herself, "There's nothing worse than unrequited love."

Hermione found herself in front of the doors to the hospital wing. She felt nervous again, the same way she felt last night when she lingered in front of Snape's door. What was she going to say? What was HE going to say? Hermione looked down at the plate. She decided to shrink it down to the size of a coin and hide it in her hand. She didn't want to look stupid if he already had breakfast. It would be rather awkward to be holding the plate. Finally, Hermione took a deep breath and summoned her Gryffindor courage before slowly opening the door and peeking her head inside.

Severus was up. He'd been up since early that morning. He'd been thinking, mostly about Hermione. She had demonstrated her excellent skill as well as talent last night. She kept a cool level head during the ordeal and knew exactly what properties each plant possessed in order to heal his ailments. That was most impressive, especially for a student. Even Poppy was impressed by the concoction Hermione had made it to counter the effects of the Cruciatus curse. She definitely had a gift. Talent like that shouldn't go to waste. Snape had begun to pace the floor in front of his bed, trying to think of the best way to maximize his young lioness's potential.

At that moment, Snape was standing in front of the window in his teaching robes, gazing out onto the lake while drinking his morning cup of coffee. He heard the door open, but didn't turn around. He was hoping it was Albus coming to tell him about the Order's plans for Hogsmeade. He looked into the window to see whose reflection was lingering in the doorway. He took in a breath slowly as he saw his savior Hermione peeking out from behind the door. Had she come in to see him? Maybe she had some business with Poppy. What if she was hurt? Oh no! If that were the case, he'd hex whoever dared to lay a finger on her to hell and back!

"Professor Snape?" he heard Hermione ask softly.

Oh, her voice was like that of an angel's!

"Miss Granger," he said in a strong yet gentle voice. "To what do I owe the displeasure of seeing you so early in the morning?"

Hermione's heart sank upon hearing his words. Really, what was she expecting though? It wasn't like he was going to drop to the floor and kiss her feet, thanking her for being there for him when he needed it the most. Hermione suddenly felt very silly for even daring to show her face in the hospital wing. She better make this a quick visit. It was obvious the Potions Master wasn't a morning person. Come to think of it, he wasn't an afternoon person either... or an evening person, at that!

Snape kept his back to Hermione, not daring to turn around and face her. He inwardly cringed at the words that came flying out of his mouth. He didn't want to hurt her feelings, especially if she did come in to see him. However, he felt it necessary to continue being snarky with her. He couldn't afford to let anyone know about his true feelings, especially her. Merlin's beard, she was STILL HIS STUDENT! He couldn't treat her any differently, despite that she was the light in his life. He had to be strong. He had to be hard. He had to be... a complete jackass.

Severus set his coffee on the windowsill, and allowed himself to turn around and face Hermione. She stared back with hurt in her eyes, causing him to clench his fists.

"I asked you a question, Miss Granger," Snape continued in a condescending voice. "Normally the polite thing to do is answer, however I realize that you ARE a Gryffindor, so class is foreign to you."

Oh, he may have laid it on a bit thick! Great, now she REALLY hated him! Nice one, Severus! You really are a jackass!

Despite Snape's snippy attitude, Hermione took it all in stride, steeling herself against his harsh words. She wasn't going to let it get to her, nor was she going to back down from his obvious challenge. If a challenge is what he wanted, then a challenge was what he was getting. However, his words stung like a bucket of ice water on her bare skin.

"Well, Professor," she said, hoping her voice did not waver, "I came in to see how you were this morning."

"Very well, thank you, Miss Granger. Well enough to be able to teach classes, so I'm afraid that a substitute for Potions today is out of the question, much to your dismay. Is that all?"

"Yes, I suppose so," Hermione said softly. "I'll be going then."

She turned around and was about to take her leave until she felt a hand on her shoulder, causing her breath to hitch.

"Wait, Miss Granger," Snape said in his silkiest voice, "There's a matter I need to discuss with you."

"Yes, sir?" she asked turned around to meet his black eyes.

"You showed... great courage and forte last night. Not everyone would know that mixture you created... I have been thinking about your... abilities, Miss Granger, and I believe you are capable of more than just fiddling with shrinking potions."

Hermione was in complete and utter shock. Had Professor Snape had just given her a compliment?! If he weren't standing in front of the window, she'd look out of it to see if there were any pigs flying by.

"Sir," Hermione gulped, "what are you trying to say?"

"I'm trying to offer you the position of Potions Apprentice," Snape smirked, crossing his arms over his chest.

Hermione couldn't help it when her jaw dropped open in shock. What?! No way! Potions Apprentice?! That was something she had always dreamed about. She NEVER thought he'd ever offer her that! She always figured Draco Malfoy, his precious Slytherin, would get the position! She'd be a fool to pass up this opportunity.

"Of course, unless you don't want the position," Snape taunted, "I can always offer it to Malfoy; however, I doubt he'd appreciate it as much as you."

"Oh, no, sir!" Hermione said quickly. "I'd LOVE the position more than anything!"

"More than anything, hmm? We'll see what you have to say AFTER the first meeting. I must warn you, Miss Granger, it is very complicated, and the tasks are difficult."

"I understand, Professor! I won't let you down!"

"Let us hope not," Snape said snidely, "You are expected to arrive in my classroom no later than seven o'clock as usual."

"Oh, thank you, Professor Snape!" Hermione grinned.

"You are dismissed."

"Oh thank you again, sir! I promise you won't regret this!" Hermione beamed as she practically skipped to the door. "See you later!"

"Indeed," Snape said shortly, as she opened the door.

Suddenly, she stopped and turned around, still smiling.

"Oh, what is it now?" Snape huffed in bogus frustration.

"Riddle," she said cheerfully, "That's the answer to your riddle."

"So it is," Snape smirked. "So are we continuing the game, then?"

"Let me put it this way," Hermione smiled before she gave Snape a riddle of her own. "I can transport you to a world you've never visited without having you leave your seat. I can tell you truths or lies, which ever you prefer. I can introduce you to people and creatures from the past, present, and future that are forever immortalized through me."

Snape stroked his chin and arched his eyebrows at the young woman who beamed at him like a sun goddess. Oh, she was so beautiful when she smiled like that!

"Ah, very clever, Miss Granger," Snape said smoothly. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, sir. I'll see you at seven o'clock SHARP!" Hermione waved before she closed the door behind her.

Snape tried to keep a straight face after she left but the very thought of her brought a small smile across his lips. He couldn't help the emotion she elicited in him. This was certainly going to be an interesting learning experience for both his little lioness and himself.

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"Potions Apprentice?!" Ginny exclaimed as she, Hermione, Harry, and Ron sat around the fireplace in their common room. "Oh Hermione, I'm so proud of you!"

"Thanks, Gin," Hermione smiled. "I couldn't believe my ears when he asked me. This is going to be a wonderful learning experience!"

"If you say so," Ron sighed. "Although I can hardly see ANY experience with Snape would be wonderful."

"Ron, how many times..."

"PROFESSOR Snape! Blimey, Hermione, don't get your knickers in a bunch!"

"I'm proud of you too, Hermione," Harry smiled quickly in an attempt to prevent Hermione and Ron from arguing.

"Thanks, Harry. At least TWO people are happy for me," Hermione said curtly while she glared at Ron.

"Oh, I'm happy for you, 'Mione," Ron said sincerely. "I'm just unhappy that you have to spend it with Sn... Professor Snape. He's such an overgrown evil black bat who..."

"Who happens to be the best Potions Master in all of Britain and one of the few left in the entire wizarding world!"

"And the reason of that is because Potions is SOOO boring!"

"Well, only to those you don't have the mind set for it!"

"Well excuse me if I'm not a nasty ol' mean bugger, which seems to be of the proper 'mind-set' to be a Potions Master!"

"Ron Weasley!" Hermione exclaimed jumping got her feet, "I will NOT let you sit here and insult Professor Snape OR myself any further!"

"I wasn't insulting you!" Ron said defensively, also jumping to his feet.

"Yes, you were! I've given serious thought to becoming a Potions Mistress someday and the fact that YOU..."

"A POTION'S MISTRESS?! Are you serious?! Why would ANYONE in his or her right mind..."

"Hey you two, knock it off!" Ginny demanded, stepping in between them. "This is ridiculous! You two need to stop screaming like banshees at one another! Ron, you need to grow up! It doesn't matter if she's working with Professor Snape or Professor Dumbledore, you should be happy that all her hard work has paid off, and she has a position that NO student has ever had before!"

Ron stopped scowling as his sister's words penetrated him. He looked at Hermione who also had stopped glowering and looked very hurt. It felt like a knife through his heart to see her like that. He felt so foolish as he tore his gaze from her and looked down at his feet. In truth, he was jealous. Ron was more upset that she was going to be spending more time with Snape and less time with him. It was bad enough she was sneaking off with David "Heartbreaker," but now she was choosing FREELY to spend every night with the greasy git! It wasn't fair! He just wanted her to himself! When was this torture going to end?!

Ron sighed and looked up at his friend, his one love, his Hermione. She was so beautiful, so sweet. Why in all her infinite wisdom did she not see why that Heart fellow

was just a user?! He didn't deserve her. How Ron wished at that moment he could have told Hermione he knew about her outing with the "Hufflepuff Hustler," but he remained tight-lipped. He had to continue the charade of not knowing. Damn that libertine for taking his Hermione away from him! Damn Snape for doing the same!

"Hermione, I'm sorry, I really am," Ron said sincerely, as he walked up to her and put his hands on her shoulders. "I didn't mean anything by it. I really am happy for you. I'm just upset that you'll be spending less time with us, that's all. We'll miss you... I'll miss you."

"Oh, Ron," Hermione smiled, "I'll still spend time with you and Harry and Ginny. It's just that this is an opportunity of a lifetime. I can't pass this up. I know you don't like Potions, but understand that this is something I'm interested in. Taking this position is the best thing for me. If I enjoy myself, I know that a career in Potions could very well be in my future. If I end up hating it, then maybe Potions isn't my destiny, and I'll look into something else. Do you understand?"

"Yes, and I'm sorry I hurt your feelings. I'd never want to make you unhappy. Can you find it in your heart to forgive me?"

"Of course," Hermione grinned.

They smiled before giving each other a great big hug. Ron was hoping they could kiss and make up, but he'd take a hug from Hermione any day.

"Aww, that's better," Ginny grinned. "I'm so glad!"

Ginny, in her excitement, threw her arms around Harry in a warm embrace (not that she hadn't planned it ahead of time). Harry didn't mind one bit to have HIS secret crush hold him tightly. He hugged her back with a silly grin on his face. Sometimes being Harry Potter had its benefits.

"I better go now so I'm not late," Hermione said as she pulled away from Ron. "I'll see you all when I come back."

"Okay," Ron smiled, "We'll be waiting."

Suddenly, the common room door opened and in strode a very angry Neville Longbottom. He was red in the face and his hands were balled into tight fists at his sides.

"Neville!" Hermione exclaimed, "What happened? You look..."

"Upset?" Neville asked, finishing Hermione's sentence. "Well I think you would be too if Lucius Malfoy took away your Apparating License and forced you to attend WAA meetings and 120 hours of community service for something you DIDN'T do!"

"So I take it that the meeting didn't go well?" Harry asked with Ginny at his side.

"That's an understatement! Even with Professor Dumbledore with me, Malfoy wouldn't budge! However, he DID mention that I could perform 'civil acts of duty' towards my fellow classmates and THAT would count towards my community service!"

"In other words, you really do get to carry Draco Malfoy's text books," Ginny sighed.

"Looks like it! Oh, he better watch his back because..."

"Neville," Hermione began to plead, "please don't..."

"I know what you're going to say, Hermione, but I'm tired of being the butt of every joke. I'm proving to Malfoy that I'm NOT a disgraceful wizard and he can't push me around anymore."

"He's got a point," Ron nodded, knowing what it was like to be a laughing stock. "Understand this is personal, Hermione."

"Well I still think revenge is silly, even if it is Malfoy. In the end, you only end up hurting yourself. Oh my, I really have to go now! Bye you guys! Take care!"

The other Gryffindors smiled and waved good-bye as she exited the common room, praying that her first night as Potions Apprentice would be a pleasant one.

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Hermione arrived to the dungeons at seven o'clock on the dot. Snape was already there, getting a few things started before they began. When he saw her, she took his breath away, as she always did when she entered the room. He could see the anticipation and the excitement in her deep amber eyes. She had been waiting all day for this moment, and now she was ready.

"What are we going to start out with tonight, Professor?" Hermione asked with a huge grin. "Will we be doing the same experiments that we performed over the summer?"

"Actually, no," Snape said shortly. "Tonight, as we will do every night from here on in, we will be attempting to create a potion that will resist the effects of the Imperius and Cruciatus Curses."

Hermione's eyes widened in surprise. By the hem of Merlin's robes, was he seriously going to try and tackle the Unforgivables?! Wizards had been doing that for centuries! It was something that was attempted near the end of a Potion Master's career, because no one could ever possibly find a solution to them! Even if they spent their whole life on that cause, no one had ever come even close to discovering a cure for ONE of the Unforgivables! Finding a cure for TWO of them was just unbelievable!

"I-I-I'm sorry, sir, but I'm not quite sure I heard you correctly," Hermione sputtered.

"If you heard me say that we'll be attempting to create a potion that will resist the effects of both the Imperius and Cruciatus Curses, then you in fact heard me correctly," Snape said in a silky voice.

"BOTH?! But that's impossible! They are two totally different curses! They..."

"Are not that different from one another. Now, if you're quite done ranting and raving about it, would you like to see what I've found so far?"

Hermione shut her mouth immediately. He was mad! However, she had to see where he was getting this preposterous idea about finding a curse for TWO Unforgivables.

"Yes, I'd like to see it very much," Hermione stated airily.

Snape smirked at her, taking her tone as a challenge. He could hardly wait to wipe that silly little smirk from her face when she saw his research.

"Right this way, Miss Granger," he said smoothly, gesturing for her to follow him.

Hermione was led to Snape's private lab adjacent to the classroom. It was a good-sized room with plenty of tables full of equipment and every potion ingredient one could think of stocked neatly on shelves or floating in jars.

"After you, Miss Granger," Snape smirked as he held open the door for her.

"Thank you, sir," she said before stepping into the room and taking a seat in a chair next to his desk.

Snape closed the door and took a seat at his desk before speaking with Hermione.

"Now, Miss Granger," Snape began, "It seems you have little faith in my... experiment. However, I hope to rectify that before the night is through. Despite the terrible and incompetent Defense Against the Dark Arts instructors you've had over the years, I'm sure I don't have to explain the effects of the Imperius and Cruciatius to you."

Hermione shook her head before Snape continued.

"Good, that's a start. As you and everyone else in the wizarding world know, the Cruciatius Curse affects the nervous system, which is why the pain is so... amplified to the victim. Of course, this was also proved in the late 17th century in China through Professor Ming's research. The Imperius Curse has always been thought to have ONLY controlled the mind of the user. However, recent discoveries have proven otherwise."

Snape opened the top right drawer of his desk and pulled out a brand new edition of Scientific Wizard. He flipped through the journal and found the page he desired before handing it to Hermione.

"That is a paper by Professor Silverman of the United States, who recently died after publishing his article. For the past thirteen years he conducted experiments regarding the Imperius Curse. He discovered that it's not just about mind control, but about NERVOUS control as well."

"So both curses affect the central nervous system," Hermione whispered.

"Exactly, Miss Granger. If one were to find a way to have the nervous system reject such impulses from the curse..."

"Then the spells would be ineffective."

"Precisely, and what better to ensnare the senses than a potion?"

Hermione stared at the article a few moments longer before she looked wide-eyed at Professor Snape, who was sitting back in his chair with a smirk on his face.

"You know," Hermione whispered, "This just... might... work!"

"I know it can," Snape answered, "but it will NOT be an easy task. Are you sure you're ready for something of this magnitude, Miss Granger?"

Hermione grinned, her eyes flashing in excitement before answering: "I was born ready."

For the next hour and a half, the two of them discussed (and at times argued) potential ingredients, cauldrons, and techniques for brewing this "super potion." They finally agreed to try the concoction Hermione used in the woods with some added zinberger and raven feathers in a copper level four cauldron. As Hermione worked, she studied Severus's face every now and then. She watched his hands move smoothly and gracefully over the ingredients. He really was a natural at this, his hands proving that potion making could be considered an art. She almost felt like sighing in contentment as she watched him take notes and perform his research, just like she had admired him over the summer. She would always look forward to it at Grimmauld Place. She was happy they were working together again.

As Hermione watched him record the amount of arnica he had weighed out, she noticed him grimace a little in pain. He still must have been sore. Cruciatius scars took a long time to heal, and victims could linger in pain. She cursed Voldemort for hurting Severus. Then, she began to wonder... what had made him go to the Dark Lord, exactly? What about Voldemort had appealed to him, and what had caused him to turn his back to the Death Eaters? Her heart ached for him at that moment, in more ways than one. She wished she could make it all go away so he would be safe... so he would be hers.

Suddenly, Snape looked up from his scroll and met her eyes, causing Hermione to stifle a gasp before bringing her full attention back to the hypercum she was grinding. Oh Lord, he saw her staring at him! How embarrassing!

Snape couldn't help but smirk at Hermione, as the blood slowly flushed her cheeks. He had caught her staring at him. Silly girl. What was she thinking about while she looked at him that would cause her to scarlet like that? He decided he'd have some fun (at her expense of course) and ask.

"Miss Granger," he said in his smooth baritone voice, "what exactly about me did you find interesting enough to stop your work and stare at me?"

'Oh crap!' Hermione thought. 'He noticed! Crap-for-crap!'

"Well, I was thinking," Hermione said quickly, trying not to lie, but at the same time, trying not to be totally honest.

"About what?" Snape pressed.

Oh, horrible man! He wasn't going to let it go, was he?! Well, she really put herself between a rock and a hard place.

"About... I don't remember."

"Miss Granger, you are the worst liar I know."

"Oh, NOW I remember! I was wondering when you'd stop with these silly formalities and call me by my FIRST name," Hermione lied: and rather well, thank you very much.

"Call you by your given name?" Snape asked dangerously with a raised eyebrow. "In case you've forgotten, you are the student and I am the teacher. There needs to be a certain amount of professionalism."

"You can be as professional as you'd like, sir, but we worked together all summer, and it drove me insane when you called me 'Miss Granger.' I'd understand if we were in the Great Hall or in the classroom, but there will never be anyone here in this lab but us. Since that is the case, I'd be more comfortable if you called me 'Hermione.' It's not that difficult to say. If Victor Krum can say it, I think you can say it too."

Snape smirked at that last comment. He couldn't imagine butchering Her-my-o-nee's name like Krum did.

"And I suppose you'll want me to permit you to call me by my given name as well," Snape drawled.

"Not at all, sir. I'll continue to call you by your title, Professor Snape, but I prefer it if you'd please call me 'Hermione' instead of 'Miss Granger' when we're alone together."

Those last few words struck both the Professor and student in an unusual way.

*When we're alone together.*

It felt both exciting and mischievous at the same time, like forbidden fruit hanging from a low branch. Hermione flushed and looked away, expecting the Potions Master to blast her any minute for saying something so ridiculous.

However, he didn't.

Snape was surprised by Hermione's outburst, but he didn't show it. She, the little lioness, wanted him to call her by her given name? How odd: and yet, how charming. The corners of his mouth twitched as he suppressed a grin when her face flushed and she turned away. How terribly amusing it was to see her panic! Really, she had nothing to be ashamed of. It was a reasonable request.

"All right," Snape sighed, "I'll honor your request and call you by your given name... Hermione."

He gave her a sly look from the side and saw her grinning from ear to ear out of the corner of his eye.

"Thank you, sir," Hermione replied before returning to her work.

They were silent for a moment until Snape said in a strong voice, "Severus."

"I'm sorry, sir?"

"My name is Severus," he said turning to face her. "You may call me by my given name as long as we are, as you put it, alone together. If you dare utter my name outside of this room, you'll be begging me to have you expelled. Is that clear, Hermione?"

"Yes," she said in awe, both surprised and elated that Professor Snape (no, Severus) would allow her to call him by his first name. "Thank you very much... Severus."

Snape nodded and returned to his work, and Hermione did the same. For the next hour, they worked on their brews, talking only about potions, and using each other's first names. Finally, at a quarter past nine, they decided to clean up and call it a night.

"I still think we should add some holly into the brew," Hermione insisted after putting the last item away.

"No!" Snape snapped. "No bloody holly!"

"Severus, really! You're being unreasonable!"

"Hermione, I don't care WHAT you think the holly will add or balance out in the potion. Holly can make the concoction too unstable!"

"Unstable?! Not in the least! If you had your way and added any more belladonna, THEN the mixture would be unstable! Why you can't see the calming properties holly has is really a mystery to me."

"Speaking of mysteries, I have something that might interest you," Snape said with a sly smile.

"Really?" Hermione asked with an uncertain look. "Well, what is it?"

"It is several things, but the far more important one is that it is the answer to your riddle."

Snape snapped his fingers and a drawer popped open under one of the lab tables. Her walked over, pulled out the object in question and strode back over to Hermione.

"Here, Hermione," Snape said with that same sly smile, as he held the object out to her. "I believe this is the correct answer to your riddle."

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*Yea, there's chapter 11! I hope you all liked it!*

*Again, sorry it took so long to update! Midterms suck. Sorry that I left you hanging too, but how else would I hook you into reading the next chapter? ;)*

*5 points to your house if you knew the answer to the previous riddle, which was "riddle." You can get 5 more if you figure out the latest riddle!*

*The Alan Rickman quote in chapter 10 was "I understand that this isn't personal because you're not a person," said by Dave Friedman in Judas Kiss. There's another quote in this chapter. Happy hunting!*

*Thanks for all the support! You all are the best! You rock my world!*

*"We fight against those who control the darkness."*

*- DADA Mistress*

## A Day in Hogsmeade

*Chapter 12 of 15*

What a better way to relax than to spend a day in Hogsmeade? However, it is wise to always be on your guard, especially around suspicious people.

*Special thanks to my mom, my sister, Lord\_and\_Lady\_Peeves, yutamiyu, and Jade\_Orchid my beta along with my other SASS sisters Pooka, NotSoSaintly, Kim and Fishie, and Tarah for everything you lovely ladies (and gentleman) do to encourage me.*

*Disclaimer: I have never owned any of these characters from the Harry Potter series and I never will. They all belong to the brilliant mind of J.K. Rowling, however this story belongs to me, spewing forth from my very own sick and demented mind. I don't plan on receiving any sort of profit for these stories. I just love the characters so much that I HAVE to write about them.*

*Please, no lawsuits.*

*Also, this is my FIRST story, so please, be nice and helpful. Enjoy! ;)*

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Chapter 12: A Day in Hogsmeade

Snape snapped his fingers and a drawer popped open under one of the lab tables. He walked over, pulled out the object in question and strode back over to Hermione.

"Here, Hermione," Snape said with that same sly smile, as he held the object out to her. "I believe this is the correct answer to your riddle."

He handed the object to Hermione who received it with eyes wide with shock and excitement. It was a book, the answer to her riddle; however, it was even more than that! It was the book she was about to read the night Severus found her in his office: *Potions and their Defense Against the Dark Arts* Oh, this was a dream come true! She was so upset she couldn't even begin to read it in the office, but now she'd be able to read it from cover to cover!

"Oh... Oh, Severus!" Hermione gasped as she ran her fingers over the cover. "Th-thank you so much!"

"I thought perhaps it would be best if you read up on potions and their correlation with the defense against the dark arts," Snape said with a twisted smile and crossed his arms over his chest. "I think it will aid you in the research, and perhaps you'll finally see WHY holly would be a terrible idea!"

"Oh, and what chapter would I find that in?"

"Find out for yourself, but if you must know, the information you desire would be in chapter 14: Berries and Boogey-men."

"Well, I shall look into that chapter especially."

"See that you do."

"Oh, before I go..."

"Yes?"

"Um... What is going to happen... at dawn... in Hogsmeade?" Hermione asked hesitantly with a concerned look on her face.

"You needn't fret, Hermione. I informed the Headmaster and the Order members are out there now as we speak keeping watch over Hogsmeade. Everything will be fine. Don't worry."

"Oh, good. Thank you for telling me."

Snape grunted in reply.

"Well... Good night, Severus," Hermione grinned. "Thank you again for letting me borrow the book."

"Good night, Hermione," Snape nodded. "Come tomorrow at seven o'clock with some background knowledge in your berries this time."

"I will," Hermione smiled and exited through the door, leaving Snape alone in the lab.

Well, that went better than he thought it would. In fact, it was wonderful! Despite that she practically disagreed with practically everything he had suggested, Hermione definitely had the knowledge and the determination that would not only aid them in their research, but allow her to quickly move up in the ranks from Potions Apprentice to Potions Mistress, should she choose to pursue such a career. She should consider it, he mused. After all, Potion Masters were few in number, and schools and research facilities were ALWAYS looking for them.

Snape smirked to himself at the thought of Hermione someday occupying his dungeons. Despite that she was talented in the art of potion making, she was still a Gryffindor. He couldn't imagine one of them having to practically LIVE down there. He found himself chuckling as he gathered up his notes and made his way to his personal quarters, wondering if Hermione would have covered him with a blanket again if he had fallen asleep in the lab like he had in the summer.

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For a month, Hermione and Snape worked peacefully side-by-side everyday from seven o'clock to about nine or nine thirty. They agreed as quickly as they disagreed and debated as much as they came to an understanding. Their sorrows and joys were each other's and they shared their failures and triumphs. Things were going smoothly for the two of them.

However, all of that changed in the course of one November evening.

The day began with an outing to Hogsmeade. Hermione, Harry, Ron, and Ginny spent the day wandering the streets, making a few purchases at some nearby shops, but mostly enjoying the time they were spending together. Between Hermione's research, Quidditch practice, homework, and the Order, it had been harder for all of them to hang out with each other and just be teenagers. By the late afternoon, the friends had browsed through most of the shops. Suddenly, Ginny's eyes caught the sign for the new store that opened called Scents and Sensibility, a perfume and cologne boutique.

"Oh, Hermione, look!" Ginny said excitedly pointing to the new shop. "Let's go in there!"

"Yeah!" Hermione agreed.

"NO!" the boys said resoundingly in unison.

"Oh come on you two," Ginny huffed. "It's perfume AND cologne! You could use some. I know what you guys smell like after Quidditch practice."

"We don't need anything, thanks," Ron glared at his sister. "We smell fine."

"Of course you do... If you like the smell of sweaty stinky men!"

"Honestly, you guys, it wouldn't kill you," Hermione added.

At that point, both Harry and Ron grabbed at their throats and pretended to start suffocating.

"Oh God, it's horrible!" Harry coughed while leaning on Ron. "I can't breathe! I think I'm dying!"

"They lied to us, Harry!" Ron wheezed as he held his friend. "It WILL kill us!"

"Ooh!" the two boys moaned simultaneously before bursting into fits of laughter.

"You're such drama queens," Ginny sighed while rolling her eyes. "Well, Hermione and I are going to have a look around."

"Fine, we'll wait out here," Harry said. "We can find other way of entertaining ourselves, right Ron?"

Ron wasn't listening to Harry. The only thing he was focusing on was David Heart holding the door of The Three Broomsticks open for Daniela Castañeta, a 6th year Slytherin. Ron glared after him as Heart put a hand on Daniela's lower, LOWER back and followed her into the pub. Oh, what was that no good dirty scoundrel up to now? Cheating on Hermione?! He had better not! Of course, Ron found it odd that over the past month, Hermione had not made any indication that she was seeing David Heart. It was difficult for Ron to remain tight-lipped about his knowledge of the midnight rendezvous. He wished Hermione would just tell them already. Well, even if she wasn't going to say anything, Ron was going to make sure David Heart remained true to his best friend and secret crush.

"Tell you what," Ron started and turned to the others. "Harry and I will go to The Three Broomsticks and get a table. You meet up with us there when you've had your fill of Stench and Stenchability."

"Ha, ha," Ginny said sarcastically. "All right, sounds good. We'll see you later!"

"Cheerio!" Hermione called over her shoulder as she followed Ginny inside.

"Bye!" the boys yelled after them.

"Come on, Harry!" Ron exclaimed grabbing the front of Harry's sweater and tugging him along as they ran to the pub.

"Cricky, Ron! Slow down!" Harry demanded. "What's gotten into you?!"

"I'm going to catch that man whore in the act!"

"Oh no, not Operation Poopy Pants again, or whatever it is that you call it."

"Shhh! Don't say it out loud! You'll blow our cover!"

"Ron, this is..."

"Shhh! We got to act natural!" Ron whispered and let go of Harry's sweater. "Now, just walk in as if you weren't spying on anyone!"

Harry sighed and straightened his sweater before walking into the pub. Ron was right behind him, pretending that he didn't have a care in the world... Except to be rid of that cheating Heart!

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"Look at this one, Hermione!" Ginny exclaimed as she shoved a small blue bottle under Hermione's nose.

"Oh... Cool," Hermione said unenthusiastically as she read the label. " 'Sweet Siren's Secret. Lure men to your side with the song of the scent.' Oh Lord, that's just pathetic."

"Do you think Harry would fancy it?"

"Ginny, if you're thinking of buying this so you can get Harry to fancy you, don't. I think Harry fancies you just the way you are."

"Really?! You think he fancies me?! Oh, I hope so!"

Ginny giggled before she skipped away in search for more alluring scents. Hermione chuckled to herself before she moved down the aisle in search for something that smelled sweet, but not overpowering; something subtle, but not so faint that it couldn't be detected. She continued walking down the aisle, unsatisfied with that she saw. Flowery scents might be okay. Roses were always nice, but they could be overwhelming sometimes. Did Snape like roses? Did he even like perfume? Maybe he preferred women didn't wear perfume at all. Oh, what was she to do?

Deep in her thoughts, Hermione unknowingly wandered into an aisle containing men's cologne. The masculine scents snapped her back into reality, forcing her to notice where she was standing. She looked around at the different labels, and had to giggle at some of the names of the colognes. Suddenly, a thought came to her: maybe the cologne Severus wore would be in there. With new fervor, Hermione began going down the aisle and gently wafting the different scents, hoping his would be there.

"Here you are!" Ginny exclaimed suddenly appearing next to Hermione. "What are you doing HERE in the MEN'S cologne aisle?"

"Oh," Hermione said a bit startled, "Well, um, nothing. I-I'm just..."

"Browsing?"

"Yes."

"For whom?"

"What?"

"For whom are you browsing?"

"Oh! I guess I'm just... looking for ... myself," Hermione lied, and this time she didn't do it well at all.

"Oh really?" Ginny asked with a raised eyebrow. "Do you often wear men's cologne?"

"Well, no but..."

"It's a mystery guy, hmm?"

"Uh..."

"So, who is he?"

"Say, Ginny, we better get back to the guys! They'll be wondering if we really DID suffocate in here!"

Before Ginny could even open her mouth to press Hermione about this "mystery guy," Hermione was walking rather quickly down the aisle. The red head smirked as she watched her suddenly nervous friend push through the crowds of patrons and made her way towards the exit. Ah, so it WAS a mystery guy, just like Ron had hinted! Ginny smiled to herself and also began her trek to the door. It was about time Hermione found someone. Now it was only a matter of time before her mystery man would be revealed. After all, Hermione couldn't possibly keep any secret from her best friends... could she?

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Ron peeked over the menu he was holding as he spied on David Heart and Daniela Castañeta flirting with each other. Oh, the nerve of that bugger! How could he do such a thing to Hermione?! She was so sweet and innocent, and this pervert was throwing her out like last week's Daily Prophet!

"Look at that bloke, Harry," Ron said bitterly as he ducked back behind the menu. "Look how he's sitting there trying to be dashing and charming! Poor Hermione probably doesn't even know he's seeing someone else."

Harry wasn't paying much attention to Ron. He was mostly thinking about Ginny (which he often did). He knew he was no flower, but he really didn't smell THAT bad after Quidditch practice, did he? The last thing he wanted to do was offend Ginny. Maybe...

"Harry, have you even heard a word I said?" Ron asked with a stern look.

"Do you think it would make Ginny happy if I DID purchase some cologne?" Harry asked thoughtfully.

"What?! Harry, get your head out of the clouds and focus! We're talking about Heart, not Ginny!"

"I know, but..."

"Wait, why do I have to pay for this?!" a voice in the back of the pub demanded.

Harry and Ron turned around to see Neville Longbottom and Draco with his goons sitting at a nearby table. Neville was staring down in disbelief at a bill he was holding while Crabbe and Goyle were rubbing their bellies in obvious satisfaction of just having eaten one of everything on the menu.

"See it as a 'donation,' Longbottom," Draco said snidely before finishing off his butterbeer. "It can be apart of your community service."

"But I didn't even order anything! Besides, I don't even know if I have enough money..."

"Well you better check then, and make it quick because I want to purchase a new grooming kit for my broom."

"What you're doing to me isn't 'community service' anymore, Malfoy!" Neville spat. "This is slavery!"

"Call it whatever you want, Longbottom, but I can either tell my father that you've finished all 120 hours of 'civil service' or I could tell him that you've been smoking gillyweed in the green houses."

"THAT'S NOT TRUE!"

"No, but I can make it true! Now shut up and get moving!"

Draco and his goons stood up and left the table.

"Oh, don't forget our bags!" Draco added over his shoulder.

Neville clenched his teeth and threw down all the sickles and galleons he had which were JUST enough to pay for the meal as well as a reasonable tip. As he was grumbling and gathering the bags, Harry asked, "Hey, Neville, you want some help with those?"

"Thanks, Harry, but it's all right," Neville sighed. "If Malfoy sees someone helping me, he tells his father that I've been making others do my work for me. Personally, I just want to be done with this!"

"All right then. Good luck."

"Thanks, I'll need it," Neville grimaced as he lumbered out of the pub.

"Poor guy," Harry said solemnly. "He shouldn't have to do that. Malfoy has enough of his own money to pay for everyone's drink here in the pub!"

"Speaking of drinks, where the bloody hell are ours?" Ron asked with a twisted face. "We order them almost ten minutes ago. They're not THAT busy!"

"They have other customers besides us, Ron," Harry pointed out.

"Yeah, but those guys at that table came in after we did, and they got their order before us."

"Aren't you suppose to be spying or something?"

"Oh, right!" Ron whispered and glanced back over at Heart and his date in time to see him whispering something in her ear, causing her to blush and giggle.

"Lousy bugger," Ron hissed. "I wish we had a camera or something. Hey, do you think Collin would join us in our cause?"

"Oy, watch it now," said the waiter in a gruff voice as he approached Harry and Ron's table with their drinks. "Sorry about the wait there, mates, but Rosmerta's feelin' a wee bit under the weather and she dropped ya drinks."

"Oh, will she be all right?" Harry asked.

"Of course she will! I ain't seen nuthin' that can git that woman down! She'll be right as rain in no time. Now, here's a butterbeer for you, lad, and here's another one just for mister Harry Potter."

"Uh, thank you," Harry said sheepishly, uneasy under the waiter's piercing gaze from his gray eyes.

"Yeah, thanks," Ron agreed before taking a big gulp from his mug.

"There be anythin' else for ya lads?" the waiter asked running a pale hand through his short wavy brown hair.

"Not yet. We're still waiting for some frien..."

"What's your soup for tonight?" Ron asked hungrily, "because I'll have a bowl if it's potatoes and leek. Oh, and can you add a side of bacon, too?"

"Uh... I'll go check on that for ya."

Before Ron or Harry could ask anything else, the waiter turned tail and went quickly back to the bar.

"He must be new," Ron observed.

Harry shrugged before taking a swig of his butterbeer and went back to thinking about Ginny while Ron "spied" on Heart again. Moments later, the door opened and in walked Hermione and Ginny, who Harry spotted right away, and waved them over.

"So how was Stench and Stenchability?" Harry teased as the girls took their seats.

"It was actually pretty nice," Ginny smiled. "There was some really nice things there. I think we both found something interesting, right, Hermione?"

"Oh, y-yes, it was nice," Hermione stammered.

"Did you find anything you liked?" Harry asked looking straight at Ginny.

"Well there was this perfume called 'Mar de Mermaid' and that..."

"Made you smell like a fish?" Ron asked with a wicked smile, causing the others to laugh (except Ginny).

"You daft pillock!" Ginny hissed. "It didn't smell like a fish! It happened to smell quite pleasant! Anyway, there was another one called 'Angel Wings' and that was lovely, but way too expensive for me."

"Cool," Harry grinned, hoping he could remember the name of that perfume come Christmas time.

"What did you find, Hermione?" Ron asked.

"Um... nothing," she said quietly.

"Nothing? Not one perfume bottle in that whole bloody store caught your eye?"

"Well, maybe not the perfumes," Ginny said quietly before taking a sip of Ron's butterbeer.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Harry asked quizzically.

"She means that I was looking to see if they had some type of... um... dehydrogenated oil that could be used as a buffer to balance a reaction between acidic lemon balm and basic calendula with an enzymatic catalyst in my research with Professor Snape."

Hermione's friends started at her in complete silence. She probably lost them after "dehydrogenated." Good, that shut them up, despite it made absolutely no sense. If Snape had heard her ramble complete nonsense like that, he'd kick her out of the lab before she could say "dehydrogenated." Hmph, buffer indeed.

"Well, since you did bring it up," Harry said breaking the uncomfortable silence, "how is your research going?"

"Oh, it's going along just fine," she smiled, not mentioning how Snape WAS right about holly making the mixture too unstable. He reminded her of that plenty of times over the past few days. Of course, he didn't need to remind her. The book he wrote had a whole chapter about how most berries had negative effects in potions when it came to defense against the arts. It was truly a wonderful book! She couldn't put it down! In fact, she should have been looking for that book instead of poking around in the perfume shop like a ninny.

"Well, how are you holding up with Sn... Professor Snape?" Ron asked. "Is he treating you right? Is he giving you a hard time?"

"Oh, I can deal with Sev... Uh, severe tongue lashings from him," Hermione said calmly, praying that the others didn't notice she almost called him by his given name, and how she suppressed a shiver at the mention of "tongue lashings."

Unfortunately for her, one person noticed. Ginny didn't think anything of it at first, but didn't ignore the thought completely either. She decided to keep it in the back of her mind and would ask Hermione about it later.

Moments later, Rosmerta appeared with two mugs of butterbeers. She looked a bit surprised when she saw Ron and Harry already had their drinks. Instead, she gave them to Hermione and Ginny.

"Are you feeling all right, Rosmerta?" Harry asked.

"Oh, of course, love!" she smiled. "I'm as good as I can be when it's as busy as this! I'll be back in a bit after you've all decided on what you want, all right?"

Before they could respond, she bustled away and disappeared behind the bar.

"She must not be feeling well if she forgot she sent someone else to get our drinks," Harry remark, scratching his head before taking another gulp of his butterbeer.

Ron merely nodded. Suddenly, he pointed over towards Heart's table before asking, "Hermione, who's sitting at the table over there?"

"Where?" Hermione questioned looking at Ron as if he just sprouted another nose.

"Over there at the table in the corner."

"Uh... No one."

"WHAT?!" Ron asked in disbelief as he turned and saw that Hermione was absolutely correct. Heart and his date weren't there. Bloody hell! Just when Hermione could have caught him in the act of infidelity! Where did that bleeding prat run off to anyway?

"Hello everyone," a voice suddenly chirped.

The group of friends looked up to see David Heart smiling down at them as he stood next to the table... on Hermione's side.

"Hello," the group (except for Ron) greeted back.

"Sorry to interrupt, but I have to ask Hermione a question."

"Oh, all right," Hermione grinned up at Heart, causing Ron to fume with jealousy. "How can I help you?"

"Well, it's like this," Heart started as he knelt down next to Hermione, making Ron grind his teeth. "You see, I'm falling behind in Transfiguration and McGonagall suggested I get a tutor, so I immediately thought of you."

"Well, Hermione is very busy," Ron said snidely. "Can't you find someone else?"

"RON!" Hermione warned with a dangerous look.

"I suppose I could," David said smoothly while smiling at Hermione, "but she's the best student in all of Hogwarts, and I know I can learn so many things from her."

"Oh, David," Hermione blushed while Ron was red in the face with anger.

"Please, Hermione, can you find some time in your busy schedule to help me out?"

"Sure! When did you want to meet?"

"How about we meet after lunch on Tuesdays and Thursdays from one to one thirty?"

"Sounds great!"

"Good," David smiled putting his hand upon Hermione's, causing Ron sneer in a way that would have made even Snape proud. "Thank you so much."

"Not a problem. Hey, would you like to join us for some butterbeers, David?"

"WHAT?!" Ron exclaimed.

"I'd love to, but I have a friend waiting for me outside, but thank you anyway," David said politely. "Well, I'll see you then. Bye everyone! Take care!"

The group waved good bye (except for Ron) as David waved back and winked at Hermione before he Disappeared.

"Ooo, now Hermione has a date every Tuesday and Thursday!" Ginny teased.

"No, they're tutoring sessions!" Ron corrected with a sour look.

"Easy, Ron, I was just kidding! Blimey, don't get so worked up! What do you have against David anyway?"

"It's nothing," Harry said with a dismissive wave after taking another gulp of his butterbeer. "They had a disagreement about Quidditch, that's all."

"Oh, all right. So, what do you want to do after this?" Ginny asked.

"Well, I have to get back to Hogwarts. Professor Snape is expecting me back by seven."

"Going back sounds like a good idea," Harry yawned scratching his head again. "I'm getting pretty tired."

"All right, then let's finish our drinks and then we'll go back. Sounds good?"

"Yeah," the group agreed (except Ron who was still pouting).

Hermione lifted her mug and toasted, "Cheers."

The others followed her lead and cheered with her. The rest of the time, they talked and cracked jokes with each other before they finished their drinks and headed off to Hogwarts again, arriving in time for dinner (much to Ron's content).

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Snape sneered as he threw out his second batch of marigolds he boiled too long. He wasn't focused on the task at hand. Of course, he was always on edge whenever Dumbledore left Hogwarts on business. Minerva did a fine job handling things while Dumbledore was away, but Severus always felt a little more vulnerable without the headmaster.

"Severus, may I ask you a question?" Hermione inquired holding a rather large brown mushroom cap.

"You just did," said Snape snidely without looking up at her.

Hermione was used to his snarky comments and simply ignored him asking, "Should I cut this into chunks or strips. If I do cut it into strips, should I make them thin or..."

"It's just a mushroom. There's nothing that special about how you cut it, because they all cook down the same. I thought even YOU of all people would know that!"

Hermione knew that wasn't true, since Snape said himself in the book he wrote that the size and shape of an ingredient is just as important as the amount put into the potion. Something was wrong, and he was lashing out at her. She sighed and set the mushroom cap on her workbench before turning to Snape who was busying himself with marigolds again.

"What's wrong, Severus?" Hermione asked genuinely concerned.

"I'm fine," Snape sneered. "Why don't you mind your own business?"

"Crikey, I'm sorry! I was just seeing if I could help."

"You can help by keeping your mouth shut and making sure your beezles don't pop in the cauldron."

"Are you sure you're..."

"I'm FINE, Hermione!"

"Well you don't seem fine!"

Hermione gasped and covered her mouth with her hands while Snape gave her a dangerous look. Oh no! The last time she snapped at him like that, she landed in detention! Great, she was in for it now. This time he was going to throw her out. She overstepped her bounds. However, Severus didn't think so. She was right. He wasn't fine, but he didn't want her to notice, though it seemed that she already had. Curse her observant eye!

Slowly, Snape walked over to Hermione, his boots sounding loud against the stony floor. He stopped in front of Hermione and towered over her. He stared deeply into her amber eyes, practically losing himself in her gaze. She was a beauty to behold.

"I can assure you, Hermione, that I am well," Snape said in a low voice.

"Yes, of course," she said softly. "I'm sorry for not believing you."

Not wanting to argue, because he felt a headache coming on, Snape pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed, "Seeing how we've barely got anything done, why don't we just call it a night."

"Are you sure?" Hermione asked.

Snape shot her a rather acrimonious look, which told her she's better keep quiet. She nodded and began to clean up the supplies, part of her happy that she could get out early, and yet she was saddened because she was cheated out of time with Severus.

"I guess it's for the best," Hermione said. "I'll have more time to finish my homework."

"You mean the resident Know-It-All didn't finish her homework BEFORE the weekend?" Snape asked, oddly enough without any malice or scorn. Instead, it sounded somewhat light-hearted, almost in a teasing manner.

Hermione grinned before she responded, "Well, you know, my Potion's Master would not be pleased if I didn't do my best on my three feet of parchment about the differences and similarities between a frog liver and a toad liver."

"Indeed," Snape said deadpan, but he was smirking on the inside.

The two of them spent the rest of the time cleaning up in silence. Once everything was put away, Hermione was dismissed. She was about to pull open the door until Snape stopped her.

"By the way," Snape drawled, "I believe it is my turn to recite a riddle."



"Oh, yes, that's correct!" Hermione smiled.

"Indeed. Now, it is as follows: Only three letters are we. Add two more letters and fewer there will be."

"Ah, very nice! I shall definitely think about that and then get back to you."

"Very well then. Good night, Hermione."

"Good night, Severus. Pleasant dreams."

Hermione gave Snape one last smile before she left the lab. Snape didn't plan on sleep that night, not until Dumbledore returned from London. He sat down in his chair and sighed, hoping his headache would go away. He knew it was only from nerves, but he couldn't help but think how he didn't even notice the pain when Hermione was with him. His little lioness had quite an effect on him, and apparently in more ways than one. Snape leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes for moment, thinking about the riddle... and Hermione.

Meanwhile in the Gryffindor Boy's Dormitories...

"Harry, are you sure you don't want to see Madame Pomfrey?" Ron asked with a quizzical look as he stared down at Harry who was lying in bed. "You barely ate any of your dinner, and you look paler than Nearly Headless Nick."

"Really, Ron, I'll be fine," Harry said barely above a whisper while scratching his head. "I just need to lie down for a bit. I'm very tired."

"Do you need something?"

"Just some peace and quiet. I guess homework, Quidditch practice, and walking around Hogsmeade today has finally caught up to me."

"I guess so. Are you sure you're all right?"

"For the last time, Ron..."

"All right, mate, all right. I'm just making sure, because you suddenly became so tired."

"Well I got tired at The Three Broomsticks, but now I feel so exhausted."

"All right, then. I'm going to spy on 'Heartbreaker.' I saw him heading towards the library with Daniela. I'll see you later."

"Take care," Harry croaked as Ron left the room and closed the door behind him.

Harry sighed as he slowly rolled onto his back. Bugger, what was wrong him? His limbs felt like lead and he could barely move. He'd been busy, but this was ridiculous! Harry felt the itch in his head again and scratched it. He slowly turned his head to the side toward his nightstand where his wand, glasses, and a framed picture stood on it. He stared at a picture of Ron, Hermione and himself at 12 Gimmauld Place that past summer. Ron and he were smiling and waving. Hermione was as well, but she kept glancing away at the camera. She was distracted by something else just off to the side. What could she had been watching?

Suddenly, something caught Harry's eye. It was sudden movement from some small, black speck on the edge of his pillow. What was that? Was it a... ew! It was a flea! Gross! Harry slowly moved his hand towards the flea to smash it until something very peculiar happened. All of the suddenly, the flea began to grow larger and larger. Suddenly, it was no longer in the shape of a flea, but taking form of a man. To Harry's absolute horror, the flea wasn't a flea at all, but an animagus... a Death Eater animagus.

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*Yea, there's chapter 12! I hope you all liked it!*

*Sorry it took so long to update! Christmas really caught me unprepared.*

*5 points to your house if you knew the answer to the previous riddle, which was "book." You can get 5 more if you figure out the latest riddle!*

*The Alan Rickman quote in chapter 11 was "No bloody holly!" said by Harry (oddly enough) in Love Actually. There's another quote in this chapter. Happy hunting!*

*Thanks for all the support! You all are the best! You rock my world!*

*"We fight against those who control the darkness."*

*- DADA Mistress*

## **Riddle Me This, Riddle Me That, Who's Afraid of the Big Black Bat?**

*Chapter 13 of 15*

A Death Eater has kidnapped Harry! Will someone save him?

*Whew! FINALLY after over a month of writing and scraping, changing and deleting, loving and hating the scenes in this chapter, it... is... FINISHED! Sweet cuppin' cakes, I am NOT kidding when I say this is and will probably always be the most difficult chapter I've ever written! It's chapter 13, which means it was meant to be unlucky anyway. Go figure.*

*I have to give EXTRA SPECIAL thanks to Lady Peeves who encouraged and helped me along the way. "Um... men don't knee men in the groin, Melissa. That's just... weird." ;) Tee hee!*

*Special thanks to my mom, my sister (even after that nasty review she left), Lord\_and\_Lady\_Peeves, yutamiyu, and Jade\_Orchid my beta for everything you lovely ladies (and gentleman) do to encourage me.*

*Disclaimer: I have never owned any of these characters from the Harry Potter series and I never will. They all belong to the brilliant mind of J.K. Rowling, however this story belongs to me, spewing forth from my very own sick and demented mind. I don't plan on receiving any sort of profit for these stories. I just love the characters so much that I HAVE to write about them.*

*Please, no lawsuits.*

*Also, this is my FIRST story, so please, be nice and helpful. Enjoy! :)*

**WARNING:** *There's a rather graphic scene where Severus attempts to extract information from a Death Eater through "unorthodox means." If you're a little squeamish about this, then you may want to skip that part of the chapter. You've been warned.*

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### Chapter 13: Riddle Me This, Riddle Me That, Who's Afraid of the Big Black Bat?

Harry's eye grew wide as he stared at the Death Eater that sat at the edge of his bed grinning like a Cheshire cat behind his mask. Good God, how did he get in here? What was he going to do? Harry tried vainly to shout out and yell to the outside world, but he couldn't speak beyond a whisper. It was useless.

"What's the matter, Mister Potter?" the Death Eater taunted in a gruff voice. "Are we feeling a bit under the weather?"

That voice. Harry recognized that voice, but he couldn't remember who...

"Come along now, Mister Potter," the Death Eater hissed rising from the bed. "We've got to get you to the Dark Lord before anyone notices you're gone."

"N-no," Harry stammered.

"I'm afraid you don't have a choice in the matter. Now, get up!"

"Even if I wanted to go... I can't... I can barely move."

"Oh, you'll move all right. If you don't I may just go down to your common room and have some fun with a few of the students, especially that little redhead girl that sat next to you today. Ginny, wasn't it?"

"You leave her out of this!" Harry growled as dangerously as he could.

"Then you'd better get yourself out of bed now!" the Death Eater ordered. "I know you have enough strength to make it down to the dungeons."

"Why are we going there?"

"You ask too many questions, Mister Potter, and that's how innocent lives get hurt. Now are you going to stop asking questions and cooperate, or am I going to have to find that Weasley girl and make her my new toy, hmm?"

"You leave her and the others alone... and I'll come quietly," Harry glared.

"As long as you don't make any mischief, I'll spare her and the rest. Death Eaters' honor."

"There's an oxymoron for you," Harry whispered snidely.

"Ah, ah, ah, Mister Potter. Let's not say or do anything that would make me angry. Now tell me, where is that invisible cloak I've heard you possess? It'll make it much easier to take you."

"Under my bed. Where are we going and why..."

"Enough chatting!" the Death Eater sneered. "Get up and moving!"

As Harry began to crawl out of bed, the Death Eater wrapped Harry's Invisibility Cloak around himself so no one would see him kidnap the Boy-Who-Lived. Lumbering to the door, Harry felt the tip of the Death Eater's wand pushing into the small of his back. Slowly, he took a deep breath and opened the door, praying that his friends would be spared and someone would notice how strange he was looking as he tired to walk clumsily out of the common room. As he came down the stairs, Harry saw the first and last person he wanted to see in there that evening, reading on the couch.

"Hi, Harry," Ginny said with a smile after looking up from her book. "Are you feeling any better?"

"No," Harry sighed, happy to look at Ginny one last time before facing Voldemort. "I'm going to Madame Pomfrey."

"Do you want me to come with you?"

"N-no, Ginny. It's all right."

"But you look like you're ..."

"Really, I'm fine. Please, just let me be."

"Oh, well, okay then, Harry. I'll stop by later to see how you're doing."

"Good-bye, Ginny," Harry whispered, afraid his voice was going to crack with emotion. "You're a great friend... and... and a beautiful woman."

"Oh... Oh my! Why, thank you, Harry," Ginny said as she blushed.

Before she could reply further, Harry was ushered out of the common room by the Death Eater, and they made their way towards the dungeons. All the while Harry only pondered about Ginny, and how he had never taken the chance to tell her his true feelings.

Time seemed to have slowed down to a crawl for Harry. Seconds stretched out to minutes, and minutes seemed like hours as he slowly made his way to the dungeons with the Death Eater prodding him along with his wand. Oh, if only Dumbledore were there! If only he hadn't left for London!

Harry's thoughts were broken as the icy damp air from the dungeons hit his flushed cheeks. The dungeons always had unusually cold air, but that night it felt even chillier than ever before. The coldness was not helping Harry at all, especially since his legs were becoming heavy with fatigue and his body ached with exhaustion. To prevent the risk of collapsing, Harry slowed down to a stop and leaned against a cool wall.

"Get a move on, boy!" the Death Eater hissed in Harry's ear.

"I can't," Harry panted. "You don't understand... I feel very sick... It's to the point where I feel like... like..."

"Harry, is that you?" a voice asked.

Harry slowly turned his head toward the voice and his heart sank and he saw Hermione standing there with a quizzical look on her face. Oh no! She had probably just left Snape's lab. He had to get her to leave before the Death Eater decided to involve her in his plot. Harry felt the Death Eater grab his arm and squeeze it tight, warning him to not do anything heroic.

"Hi," Harry replied quietly, trying not to meet Hermione's eyes.

"What are you doing down here?"

"Uh... I was..."

"Are you okay?" Hermione asked with a concerned look.

"Yeah... I'm fine," Harry whispered as the invisible Death Eater pushed his wand harder into his back.

"Are you sure? No offense, but you don't look so good."

"I'm all right... Listen, I have to go."

"Oh," Hermione said in an unconvinced tone. "Where are you going?"

"Please, Hermione... I can't explain."

Hermione gave Harry a very disapproving look. Why was he down in the dungeons? Why was he acting so strangely? Why was he trying to get rid of her?

"Harry, what's really the mat..."

That was when Hermione noticed the snagged fabric on his arm. Why would his shirt be bunched like that? Suddenly, all the pieces began to fall into place, leading Hermione to the sudden realization that Harry wasn't acting this way of his own free will. He was trying to protect her from something or someone.

"Come on, Harry," Hermione said taking Harry by the hand. "Let's take you to Madam Pomfrey."

"No!" Harry whispered harshly. "Hermione..."

Despite how weak Harry was, he barely moved away from the wall. That only confirmed Hermione's suspicions that someone was grabbing his arm. Harry was in danger!

Suddenly, in one swift movement, she pulled her wand from her robes and exclaimed, "*Flabrorum!*"

Yellow sparks flew out of the end of her wand and a cold wind blew onto Harry, blowing the cloak right off of the Death Eater and slamming him into the wall. Harry felt the Death Eater release his arm, and he turned to Hermione.

"RUN!" Harry cried as loud as he could.

Hermione didn't listen. She wasn't about to leave one of her best friends behind. Instead she grabbed Harry's arm and attempted to run off with him back into Professor Snape's lab. He attempted to clumsily force his limbs to keep up with Hermione's pace. Unfortunately, he was mostly deadweight and staggered only for a few steps before collapsing onto the floor, dragging Hermione down with him.

"Oh!" she exclaimed as she hit the dungeon floor. Her wand went flying out of her hand from the impact and down the steps. She felt Harry's hand slide out of her own as he tried to pick himself up. As she tried to do the same, she heard her friend say, "oof" as the Death Eater kicked him back onto the ground.

"PROFESSOR SNA..." Hermione blurted out before the Death Eater cut her off with a swift kick to the ribs, knocking the wind out of her. She dropped back onto the floor, clutching her side in pain.

"Shut up, you little Mudblood bitch!" he hissed digging the tip of his wand into the nape of her neck. "You're NOT going to spoil my plans! Get up; you're coming with us! I don't want you running off to tell! Come on now, get up!"

The Death Eater grabbed a fistful of her hair and lifted Hermione to her feet, causing her to squeak in pain.

"Leave her alone!" Harry barely croaked.

"Then you'd better come quietly, Potter, unless you want your little friend to get hurt."

Harry slowly rose to his feet, using the wall for support. The Death Eater grabbed him by the shoulder and pushed him towards the stairs. Harry stumbled forward and gripped the wall as he made his slow descent. Hermione whimpered as the Death Eater tugged at her hair and pulled her down with him as he pushed Harry down the rest of the stairs, slamming him into the door of Snape's lab.

"Harry!" Hermione gasped. "Leave him alone!"

"You're not in a position to give orders, Mudblood," the Death Eater hissed. "Now both of you get inside before someone sees you."

He herded them into the lab and threw them on the floor before warding the door with a silence and locking charm. Hermione's eyes darted around the lab. Where was Severus? Had he already gone back to his chambers? Her heart sank as she surveyed the room only to see it was completely empty. Oh no! That was NOT good! She turned to Harry lying next to her on the floor.

"Are you okay?" Hermione whispered to Harry.

"I feel so weak," Harry panted. "How are you?"

"My side hurts and my head aches, but other than that..."

"I SAID SHUT UP!" the Death Eater shouted before slapping Hermione hard across the face, causing Hermione to squeak.

"Stop!" Harry demanded, trying to get off the floor, but the Death Eater pushed him back down with his foot.

"Are you Mudbloods deaf as well as stupid?! I said shut up! Unless you really want your friend to die, Potter, then both of you stay quiet while I look for the Portkey."

"A Portkey?" Hermione moaned. She immediately regretted it as the Death Eater kicked her again while she was on the floor. She grabbed her side and clenched her teeth

in pain, not giving him the satisfaction of hearing her whimper or scream again.

"If I have to tell you to shut up one more time, you Mudblood whore, I swear I'll..."

At that moment, the door to the storage room burst open and Snape came flying in, yelling: "*Expelliarmus!*" at the top of his lungs, wand pointed at the Death Eater. The wand flew through the air toward him. He caught it with his left hand, and pocketed it into his robes, with a sneer.

Snape had been in the storage room when he heard the loud bang against the door. He'd

frozen and listened carefully. When the lab door opened and three voices filled the room, he knew it couldn't have been anything good. He distinctly heard Hermione's voice first, followed by Potter's. Then he could have sworn he heard Burton's voice, but he was a Death Eater. How did he get into Hogwarts? Snape opened the door just a crack in time to witness Burton backhand Hermione across her delicate cheek.

Snape's eyes narrowed until they were merely slits. How DARE that bastard strike his little lioness in such a way?! Suddenly a rage began forming in Severus, a rage he hadn't felt in years, a rage that not even the Marauders had invoked in his school days. Voldemort himself hadn't ever made him this irate. Snape's hand clenched tightly around his wand and ground his teeth as the rage was building.

He watched on, the fury inside him growing. He could barely hear what was happening over the roar from the blood rushing in his ears. His body began to shake as the scene continued. Suddenly, Burton kicked Hermione and called her a filthy name, causing Snape to see nothing but red. At that moment, something in Severus snapped. He could no longer stand around to see what would happen. Years of being inconspicuous and spying no longer mattered. As he burst through the door and cast the disarming spell, his only thought dwelled on one thing: revenge for Hermione's pain.

"Snape, what in the hell are you doing?!" the Death Eater demanded. "It's me, Burton! I've got the Potter boy for the Dark Lord! Give me the Portkey you have, and I'll take him straight to..."

"SILENCE!" Snape shouted, spit flying out of his mouth. "YOU'RE A DEAD MAN!"

"What?! What are you talking about, Snape?!"

"You're a fool, Burton, if you think you're going to just waltz out of here with Potter and the girl!"

"You've gone mad! Why would you..." Suddenly Burton stopped mid sentence as a thought suddenly came to mind.

"Of course," he said quietly, "you don't want me to take Potter away because YOU want to bask in the Dark Lord's praises! Always have to be the 'Golden Boy,' don't you? Well, you're not going to take this opportunity from me! Share the spotlight with someone else for a change, Snape, and give me the Portkey!"

"As I said before, you are a fool, and so is your 'Dark Lord.' I meant what I said, Burton... You're a dead man."

Slowly, Burton began to process exactly what Snape has said, and his eye grew wide behind his mask in realization. While the Death Eater was distracted by his thoughts, Hermione seized the opportunity to crawl over to Harry and helped him along as they crawled behind Snape's desk and watched the scene from there. Hermione couldn't express her joy when she saw Snape standing there, but she couldn't say that she wasn't intimidated by his presence. He had never looked so angry or mad! In truth, it even frightened her a bit.

"So," Burton hissed, "there's more to you than meets the eye, isn't there? You... you're a traitor... a spy... you actually WANT to help this Potter boy and his Mudblood bitch!"

"SILENCE!" Snape spat. "Don't you ever..."

"YOU MUST DIE FOR BETRAYING THE DARK LORD, YOU TRAITOROUS SCUM!"

The Death Eater charged at Snape, but Snape punched him right in the face with a left hook. Burton flew back and fell over one of the workbenches, hitting the floor with a sickening thud. The mask slipped off from where Snape had punched him, revealing a bloodied face and some matted brown hair. Snape picked Burton up by the hood of his robes and threw him into the wall on the other side of the room. The Death Eater hit the wall hard on his right side before dropping to the ground with a thud. Snape sneered in disgust before striding over to the bloodied Death Eater, who lashed out at him while crawling on the ground.

Snape merely dodged him, remarking: "Not so great without your wand, hmm?"

Hermione was in shock the entire time. She had expected for Severus to fight with magic. However, he was definitely hanging up the wand so to speak and desired to use physical force instead. Why? Wouldn't have it been easier if he had just used a body bind on the fellow? However, it seemed as Severus was taking this to a personal level. This was more than just fighting to save Harry. Severus was fighting for something else as well, but what that was, she didn't know.

Hermione's thoughts were broken as Snape kicked Burton hard in his left shoulder. A loud crack filled the room and caused the Death Eater to cry out before grasping his dislocated shoulder. She gasped upon hearing the sickening sound. Hermione looked up at Snape who stared down at the Death Eater with hatred flashing in his eyes and a twisted sneer on his face. He was doing it on purpose. He WANTED to cause pain. There wasn't an ounce of remorse in his face. He'd deliberately broken the Death Eater's shoulder, and thought nothing of it. Despite the situation, this didn't sit well with Hermione. It was one thing to subdue a criminal, but it was completely another to be brutal.

She looked on in horror as Snape pulled Burton to his feet and pushed him against the wall, his right forearm on the Death Eater's neck pinning him there while pointing the wand at Burton's face.

"Tell me what the Dark Lord told you!" Snape demanded in a bellow.

"You're wasting your time," the Death Eater said. "I'll never talk."

"Is that so?" Snape challenged, removing his forearm, "We'll see about that!"

Snape punched Burton hard in the stomach, knocking the wind out of him and causing him to double over with pain. He pushed the Death Eater down to the floor until he was completely sprawled upon it, look very odd since his shoulder was dislocated. Hermione and Harry could only look on in disbelief. Snape was pummeling this Death Eater with his bare hands! Where did he learn to fight like that? Why wasn't he using magic now?

"Snape, you traitor!" Burton panted as he unsuccessfully tried to get up. "Helping the Potter boy... and his Mudblood bitch?!"

"Quiet!" Snape growled, kicking him hard in the side just as Burton had with Hermione.

Harry and Hermione distinctly heard a rib crack as the Death Eater moaned in pain. Hermione looked away and buried her face in Harry's shoulder. He slowly moved closer to her, wishing he could wrap her in a tight embrace, but he as still too weak. This was scaring even him. Why wasn't Snape getting McGonagall? Was he actually getting some sort of pleasure out of this? Well whatever the reason was, it was appalling both him and Hermione.

"Doesn't feel very good, does it, Burton?" Snape taunted in a whisper with a crooked smirk on his face.

"I'm going to inform the Dark Lord about your betrayal!" Burton seethed. "I'll tell everyone! You'll be destroyed!"

"Well, that doesn't give me much incentive to let you go, does it?"

"You can do whatever you please, Snape, but no matter what I'll remain a loyal servant to the Dark Lord! I'll never betray him! I'll never talk!"

Snape stared at Burton for a moment before he spoke, collecting his thoughts and regaining his composure. Wouldn't talk, would he? Well, that could be remedied with a certain form of... persuasion.

"So," Snape said softly, "This is how you want it. Fine by me. I would have thought that you of all people would remember why the Dark Lord always uses me to extract information from prisoners. However, I'll be more than happy to demonstrate my tactics."

Burton's eyes grew wide and his mouth partially dropped open. Hermione and Harry looked at each other. What did Snape mean by "tactics?"

With a snap of his fingers, Snape opened a cupboard in the right far back corner of the room. Suddenly, a dark black vial shot out of the cupboard and into the palm of his hand. He looked at the vial while Burton visibly shook beneath him.

"Scared, Burton?" Snape asked barely above a whisper. "You should be."

Burton said nothing, but forced himself to stop quivering while Snape placed the vial on a near by workbench. If anything was going to make Burton talk, this was definitely going to do it.

Hermione looked at her Professor, the object of her affection, as Snape shed off his teaching robes and threw them over a chair. As he unbuttoned and rolled up his sleeves, Snape said to Hermione and Harry gravely, "You would do well to depersonalize what follows."

Hermione's eyes grew wide in shock as he turned his back to her and Harry. Severus didn't even look the same. This was someone she had never known, someone colder and harder than Severus. This no longer was Severus the Potions Master of Hogwarts: this was Snape the Death Eater, and the thought unsettled her.

Burton tried to lift himself off the floor again, but Snape's foot came down hard on his back and pinned him there.

"Where are you going, Burton?" Snape taunted as he swiped the vial from the table. "The fun is about to begin."

Snape pushed over the Death Eater with his foot, causing Burton to flip onto his back. With a flick of his wrist, ropes shot out from the end of Snape's wand and bound Burton's arms and legs down to the floor. Another flick of his wand and Burton's black Death Eater robes were ripped down the middle from the top of his chest to just below his navel, exposing the pale skin underneath. Slowly and carefully, Snape uncorked the vial containing the strange clear substance before taking a glass stirring-rod from the work bench. He dipped it into the vial and held it over Burton's bare chest.

"You know what this is, correct?" Snape asked in his silkiest voice. "I am sure that you do since you've seen me use it before."

"It's *Flamma Liquidus*," Burton spoke bitterly, hoping his voice wouldn't crack under fear. "Liquid Fire."

"Correct, Burton. This happens to be a product of my own design. I made it especially for the Dark Lord when I was first recruited many years ago... It has never failed in uncovering even the darkest of secrets."

"Well there's a first for everything, Snape!" Burton spat. "You can use the whole damn bottle! It doesn't matter, because I'm NOT a double-crosser like you!"

"Let's test your theory as well as your loyalty, Burton," Snape scowled. "Now, tell me before you regret it... What did the Dark Lord tell you?"

"Piss off!" the Death Eater hissed back. Snape dug his heel into Burton's diaphragm, causing him to cry out in pain. He took his heel off and asked again, getting only the same reply.

"Piss off!" Burton spat. "You've gotten soft loving these dirty Mudbloods! Unlike you, I took pleasure in poisoning Potter and hurting that little Mudblood bitch over there. Oh, it was wonderful to hear her moan after..."

Suddenly, Snape sneered down over Burton, rage and hatred burning in his eyes "You will pay for hurting her!" he said ominously in a whisper only Burton could hear. "I will personally make it my priority that you will feel her pain tenfold."

Slowly, Snape pushed the tip of the stirring rod to the left side of the Death Eater's chest and dragged it across towards the right. The man shook and screamed in pain. Hermione stared wide-eyed in shock and horror. She had never heard such a blood-curdling scream in her life. It seemed to ring in her ears even after Burton stopped. By the hem of Merlin's robes, what in the HELL did Severus think he was doing, especially inside of Hogwarts?

When Snape removed the rod from Burton's chest, Hermione gasped in shock. There was a huge raised red line across his chest with a few heat blisters that had already begun to form. It was as if he were being burned by a flame itself. Soon, an empty feeling began growing in the pit of Hermione's stomach. She looked up at Snape who was sneering down at the Death Eater, as tears pricked at the corners of her eyes. This wasn't the Severus she knew and loved. This wasn't the real him...

Was it?

"Let's try another question," Snape said calmly to the Death Eater after dipping the rod into the vial for a second time. "How did you get into Hogwarts?"

Burton was clearly in immense pain, but he remained silent.

"Speak!" Snape hissed.

This time he held the tip of the rod in the middle of the Death Eater's stomach, concentrating on that area. Burton writhed and screamed in pain again as his eyes rolled into the back of his head and his body seized. Again, Hermione buried her head in Harry's shoulder. She was seeing a side of Snape he had hidden from her and she did not like it at all! After what seemed like an eternity, Snape stopped again while the Death Eater tried to catch his breath. The smell of burnt hair wafted up to Hermione, causing bile to rise in her throat that she forced back down.

"A flea!" Burton spat out as his body already ached in anguish. "That's how I got in! I can transfigure into a flea!"

"Is that how you REALLY entered into Hogwarts?" Snape asked with his arms crossed as he dipped the rod back into the vial.

"Y-y-yes."

"I don't believe you," Snape sneered as he brought the end of the rod toward Burton's face.

"NO, it's true! I SWEAR IT!"

"Ah, now we're getting somewhere," Snape smirked coolly withdrawing the rod and putting it into the vial. "I knew you'd see things my way. Now explain to me your plan. You've already made it clear that you snuck in Hogwarts undetected in a form of a flea, but by what means did you enter?"

"I... I came with... Potter," Burton panted, blood trickling down the corner of his mouth.

'WHAT?!' both Harry and Hermione thought in surprise.

"Explain!" Snape demanded with a hard nudge into Burton's ribs with his boot.

"I was in Hogsmeade," Burton began, "and I knew Potter and his friends would be at The Three Broomsticks... I slipped in through the back of the pub and disguised myself as a waiter... biding my time until the perfect opportunity came when young Malfoy and the Longbottom boy began arguing over who would pay for their bill."

Harry's eyes grew wide as he suddenly realized how he knew why the man's voice was so familiar: he was the waiter that had served Ron and him their drinks! That's why he'd looking at Harry strangely. That's why he hadn't known the soup specials for that evening. That's why Rosmerta had looked so flabbergasted when they had their drinks before she arrived at their table. He was a Death Eater!

"At that moment," Burton continued, snapping Harry out of his realizations, "when all eyes were on them, I took two butterbeers from the bar and poisoned the one I gave to Potter."

"What did you poison him with?" Snape interrogated.

"What? You're a Potion's Master and you can't figure that out? I must admit I'm a little disappointed."

Snape glared as he dug the rod into the Death Eater's left cheek. The man screamed in agony again. Hermione looked at Snape's face. There was absolutely no emotion at all. It didn't seem he was enjoying it, but he wasn't disgusted by it either. Finally, he stopped and said something to Burton she couldn't hear.

"The Lethargy Potion!" Burton coughed as more blisters began to form on his skin. "It would make him easier to kidnap as well as easier for the Dark Lord to kill!"

Harry nodded slowly, remembering how he suddenly became so tired and weak after drinking the Butterbeer. Well, that explained the onset of fatigue.

"This still doesn't explain how you came into Hogwarts," Snape interrogated relentlessly. "Would you care to explain or am I going to have to apply the serum again? You know I don't mind doing it in the least."

Hermione shuddered at the eerie tone in Snape's voice as he spoke those words. Who was his man she thought she knew? Was she in love with the real Severus or was this man, this monster, the real Severus?

"Please, Snape, don't force me to tell you!" Burton pleaded from the floor while Snape looked down his nose with a cold hard scowl. "If the Dark Lord finds out..."

Snape didn't wait for him to finish. Instead he put the tip of the rod on the Death Eater's dislocated shoulder. Hermione almost felt sick to her stomach as she watched the scene. The man suffered loudly again before Snape stopped once more. Burton looked like he was about to pass out soon, as his body shuddered uncontrollably. His mouth was moving slightly but no words were coming out.

"I'm waiting!" Snape snarled.

"After I served them... I went to the back of the pub again and transfigured into a flea without anyone noticing... I waited for Rosemerta to come along and I jumped on her."

He paused for a moment to catch his breath.

"I traveled with her until she finally came to Potter's table again. When she set down the drinks, I jumped onto the Potter boy in his hair where I waited until he was alone and the potion had taken effect."

Harry's eyes grew wide again. Of course! No wonder his head had itched so much! It suddenly all made so much sense!

"Why did you bring him down here?" Snape demanded of the Death Eater.

"I... I can't..."

Snape slowly dipped the rod into the vial.

"The Portkey!" Burton exclaimed. "The Portkey that you keep here that will take you straight to Lord Voldemort. I was going to use it to take me and the boy to him."

Snape looked down at the Death Eater in disgust. Of all the worthless people who blindly followed Voldemort, why on EARTH would he send one of the weakest and stupidest Death Eaters to get the precious Boy-Who-Lived? What was more important to Snape was why Voldemort hadn't told HIM of his plans. Did he know that he was a spy? Of course not. Burton wouldn't have said he'd tell the Dark Lord of Snape's betrayal if that were the case. Snape decided it was time to dig deeper into the Death Eater's head and find out Lord Voldemort's plans.

Snape slowly paced around Burton as he spoke in a silky tone, "It seems you've wised up a bit, which is beneficial for you. The more information you reveal, the longer you get to live."

Hermione couldn't help but give a stifled gasp at his words. He didn't really mean it. He wasn't going to... no, not Severus.

He wouldn't.

He couldn't.

Could he?

"Now," Snape continued in a smooth voice, "since things are coming along so nicely, let's start with the first question again: What did the Dark Lord tell you?"

"N-n-nothing."

Snape growled as he laid the rod onto the Death Eater's face, over his right cheek. Hermione turned her head away as Burton screamed in severe pain again. His body writhed on the floor as the white-hot pain seared through his body. His nails dug into his palms and his eyes were squeezed shut. Despite that he was a Death Eater, Hermione couldn't stand to see him in pain. She couldn't stand it even more that Severus was the one causing it. Why was he using such barbaric methods? Why didn't he just use Veritas serum or Legilimens? She looked at Harry who also turned away from the ghastly scene. She wasn't surprised. Finally, Burton stopped screaming when Snape stopped, allowing Hermione to slowly turn her head back onto the scene.

She heard Snape say smoothly, "Let's try this again. Tell me all that you know this instant!"

Burton panted in response, trying to catch his breath after he had screamed at the top of his lungs. Snape was too impatient and laid the rod across the Death Eater again. He cried out loudly as the pain seared and pulsed through him. Snape glared down at the lowly miscreant as he continued, secretly hating and enjoying ever scream the man uttered, even forgetting that Hermione and Harry were in the room. The only thing on his mind was revenge!

Snape stopped and towered over the badly beaten Death Eater with his arm crossed over his chest. Despite all the information he was able to extract, it didn't satisfy him, nor did he forget about how Burton had abused Hermione! He glared at the man who dared to harm his lioness, his Hermione! He told the bastard that he'd pay for hurting her!

"How long is it going to take in order to loosen your tongue, Burton?" Snape said with a spiteful look. "Believe me, I can do this all night long. It's up to you."

"Snape... please..." Burton managed to choke out, "I know nothing... Have mercy."

"Have mercy? You didn't show any to Potter or Miss Granger. Why should I? I will NOT show mercy!"

"Wait, I..."

"Don't waste my time!"

With one swift movement, Snape brought the rod to the Death Eater's chin and slowly trailed it down his neck, chest, and stomach; not stopping until he had reached the naval. Meanwhile, the Death Eater screamed louder than he ever had, causing his throat to burn. His body arched as he howled from the pit of his stomach. The nails digging into his palms drew blood and the blisters on his chest began to bleed as well. Even Voldemort didn't cause this amount of pain to Burton when they played the humiliating game of mercy.

Hermione wanted to scream for Snape to stop, but she didn't dare. She didn't know what to expect from him. Good God, she never expected him to torture information out of anyone. Who knew what else he was capable of? He showed no emotion whatsoever, almost as if he didn't care. This wasn't the Severus she knew night after night in the labs, this was the Snape that turned to Voldemort. At that moment, for the first time in her life, Hermione was absolutely terrified of Snape.

Burton panted hard while his body shook and he winced in pain. Snape looked down at him in disgust, unaware of Hermione's fear.

"What did Voldemort tell you?!" Snape demanded again this time pressing his foot down on the Death Eater's dislocated shoulder. Burton could only whimper in pain like a child since his throat was so raw from screaming. Snape threateningly dipped the rod into the vial again, which was the breaking point for Hermione.

"NOTHING, HE KNOWS NOTHING!" Hermione stood and yelled from behind the desk. "PLEASE, HE KNOWS NOTHING! STOP IT!"

For the first time, Snape looked over at Hermione. He was definitely surprised by her reaction. He was even more surprised to see her slightly trembling and sorrow filled her eyes. Snape's heart sank as he looked at her with pain in his own eyes. Slowly, the anger was dying down and being replaced with shame. He looked back down at the Death Eater saw, for the first time, the pain Burton was experiencing, remembering his own when he was subjected to the Cruciatius Curse and other forms of torture from Voldemort.

"It's true," Burton said in a hoarse voice. "She's right... The Dark Lord had nothing to do with this... I planned it all."

"WHAT?!" Hermione and Snape gasped.

"I... I organized it all... without telling Lord Voldemort."

Snape stared down in disbelief at his former comrade, but didn't show it.

"Are you telling me that the Dark Lord doesn't even know of your plans?" Snape asked angrily. "You're acting without his permission?"

"Why would it matter if I had his permission or not, Snape?!" Burton spat with new fervor before breaking down into a coughing fit. Snape waited patiently with his arms crossed over his chest while the Death Eater tried to catch his breath before continuing. "I was humiliated at the last Dark Revel... when the Dark Lord used the Cruciatius Curse on us... I didn't even last five minutes. He told me I was weak... that he couldn't afford to have weak followers... that I deserved to die... I thought if I could bring Potter to Lord Voldemort... He'd see I was a strong... loyal... and cunning servant... It would have worked too if YOU hadn't become a spy!"

Burton strained his neck so he could glare up at Snape

"I always thought it odd that YOU who have been residing in the same castle with the boy for YEARS could not bring him to the Dark Lord," Burton hissed. "Now I know why, you traitor!"

"Burton, you have no idea what you've gotten yourself into," Snape drawled. "When the Dark Lord finds out you've acted without his consent, you're as good as dead."

"NO! I'll have the Potter boy! I'll..."

"But you've been caught, and when Dumbledore returns, he's going to make damn sure that there's no way something like this will ever happen again. You just made it a hundred times harder for the Dark Lord to apprehend the boy. You don't think he'd blame you for that? You don't think you'll be punished for doing such a thing?"

Burton stared wide-eyed at Snape, the color draining from his face.

"No, he wouldn't," Burton whispered.

"Yes, he would," Snape said gravely. "He doesn't care about you; you're expendable. He only cares about one thing: power. He'll stop at nothing to get it."

"You're one to talk, Snape! Don't think I don't know why you're so close with him... Everyone knows he'll have you on his right side when he comes to power. Oh, if he only knew the truth. I bet he was already thinking on how you two would spend the day playing that stupid silly game of riddles you tell each other!"

Hermione's hands flew up to cover her mouth as she gasped loudly at those words. Frankly, she couldn't help herself. Dear God, Severus actually played that game with that monster?! She closed her eyes as her heart sank with grief, tears threatening to spill out from her eyes. How could he do such a thing? How could he?

Severus wasn't blind to the absolute horror on Hermione's face after Burton's proclamation. The one secret Severus wanted to keep from his lioness had just been unexpectedly revealed in a manner that was less than sensitive. That damn fool! He was going to pay for it now!

Snape sneered, anger pulsing through him as he turned the vial upside down and poured all of the *Flamma Liquidus* all over Burton's trunk. The Death Eater's screams echoed off the walls, as his entire body arched against the restraints. The scalding liquid sizzled his skin, turning it from a pale white to a scorching red. Previous blisters began to bleed with the smell of his own burnt flesh and hair invading his nostrils. If Burton didn't know what Hell was like, he had an idea at that moment.

Hermione covered her ears and squeezed her eyes shut, trying to push out the agonizing screams and the image of the broken and burning body in front of her. By the hem of Merlin's robes, what had Snape done?! He had got all his information. He had only done that out of pure anger, out of pure hatred. He was acting no better than a Death Eater, and that caused Hermione's heart to break. Oh, Severus, why? Why did he do it? Soon, a sob escaped from her lips as she cried not just for the loss of her innocence, but the realization that Severus was not the man she thought him to be.

Harry was forced to watch the horrific scene, as he could not do much else. He looked at his Potion Master and saw the anger in his twisted face. Every ounce of Snape's bitterness and wrath went into that act of rage and it showed. But why? Who cares if he exchanged riddles with Voldemort? Was it because of Hermione's appalled reaction, and why did she find it so shocking anyway? Harry didn't have the answers, but he knew one thing was certain: Snape was very close to killing Burton off.

Finally, the pain was too much for Burton to bear. His eyes rolled into the back of his head and he passed out, while his body slightly shook from the shock. Snape stood there breathing hard, never looking angrier in his life. His hands were in tight fists and his body shook with rage. His black eyes flashed with fury and his yellow teeth were grinding as he sneered. His eyes were narrowed into little slits as he glared down at the Death Eater, the one who hurt his lioness, the one who revealed his dark secret about the riddle game with Voldemort. Well, he'd gotten what was coming to him for hurting Hermione.

Hermione!

Snape looked up quickly to see if Hermione was indeed all right. He drew a sharp breath as he saw her sitting there with her hands covering her ears and her eyes squeezed so hard together that tears leaked out and trailed down her cheeks. Her body shuddered as she broke into another sob. Feeling Burton would no longer be a threat, he removed the ropes that tied the Death Eater to the floor and strode over to Hermione, not even giving Harry one glance.

"Hermione," Snape whispered as he stood in front of her. "Hermione."

He gently took hold of her hands and attempted to pry them off her ears. She flinched at his touch and backed away. Her eyes flashed open and, upon realizing it was him, gave a startled gasp before snatching her hands away.

"Hermione," Snape repeated but she only backed farther away, causing his heart to sink.

'She's afraid of me,' he thought to himself.

"Hermione," Snape repeated more calmly, "tell me if you're all right."

Hermione stared at Snape for a moment, as if she couldn't understand what he was saying. She had a blank look in her eyes, but behind them grew sorrow, fear, and anger. So many emotions filled her mind at once that it seemed overwhelming. This morning she was head-over-heels in love with her Potions Master. Now she just wanted to get as far away from him as possible.

Finally, she looked over at Harry and whispered: "Harry... he needs the antidote."

Snape turned to Harry and glared as if he was the cause of all the events that had occurred that evening. He strode to a nearby cupboard and quickly scanned through the vials before selecting the antidote to the Lethargy Potion.

"Drink this all in one gulp, Potter!" Snape commanded shoving the vial into his hands. "You're lucky I had this already. It'd take too long if I had to brew it, and you'd die from suffocation because you'd be too tired to breathe!"

"Thank you, sir," Harry whispered before drinking the entire vial. He immediately began to feel much more energized and awake as he felt the antidote go down his throat. His strength was returning while Snape turned his attention to Hermione.

"Hermione," Snape whispered standing beside her. "Hermione, are you all right?"

Hermione said nothing as she continued to look down at her feet.

"Hermione," Snape said a little more firmly, but still she remained silent.

Seeing how this was probably going to take more of an effort on his part, he whipped around and barked, "Potter! Once you have completely recuperated, floo to Professor McGonagall's office immediately and fetch her along with some aurors to collect Mr. Burton!"

"Yes, sir!" Harry said, jumping to his feet and running to the fireplace (rather grateful he could run again).

Just when Harry grabbed the floo powder, Snape stopped him saying, "By the way, Potter: after Mr. Burton attacked me and we fought in my laboratory, he stumbled into some of my experiments, breaking the vials and spilling the contents onto his body. Do you understand?"

Harry looked at Snape in shock. Snape was asking him to lie. No, he wasn't even doing that. He was TELLING him to lie, not just to McGonagall, but to Aurors as well! No way! He couldn't do that!

"Potter!" Snape snapped. "Do you understand? Unless you want certain people in the Ministry to know that I am a double agent for the Order, you'll comply with my commands."

Harry looked down at his feet for a moment, wondering if Snape's words were a warning or a threat. Finally, he looked up at the Potions Master and nodded whispering, "Yes, sir."

"Good, now go."

Harry looked at Hermione before he flooed to the temporary Head Mistress's office, wondering if she was feeling uncomfortable about the secret as well. When The-Boy-Who-Gave-Him-A-Headache had finally left, Snape turned all his attention back to Hermione, who had not changed her position or demeanor since Potter's departure.

"Hermione!" Snape finally growled, frustrated and annoyed that she was ignoring him. "Dammit, answer me this instant!"

Suddenly, Hermione's mood changed from somber to surly in a matter of moments as she turned to challenge Snape. Her eyes reflected her anger and hurt as she hissed, "Or what? You'll play a game of mercy with me, too? Just like you and Voldemort play together? Just like the game of riddles you two love even more?"

As much as Snape was surprised at her words, he was more hurt as they stung his heart. At least she had waited until Potter was gone before she ripped him apart.

"Hermione..." he began, but she cut him off.

"Oh, by the way, the answer to your riddle is 'few,' just like it seems that there's only a few things about the real Severus Snape I knew about."

"Hermione, please ..."

"Did your Dark Lord tell you that riddle, too, or did you tell it to him already? Well, in case you did, here's one you can tell him: What is that which goes out of the body when death comes in and is also the part of you that sees a dream? I'll give you a hint: YOU seem to be lacking one, from what you did to Burton!"

"That's not fair!"

"You know what's not fair, Professor? What's not fair is leading a person to believe that only they had something special with you, that they were the only one who..."

Hermione stopped and turned her head away from Snape, already afraid she had said too much. Snape's heart jumped into his throat as his chest tightened at her ultimatum. He looked at her, trying to read her face to see what she was going to say.

"Finish your statement," Snape said calmly, hoping it was the declaration he was looking for, and yet dreading it at the same time.

Hermione shook the thoughts of love for her Potions Master out of her head before whipping around to face him again. "You had no right to do what you did," she continued. "You're NOT an auror! Leave the questioning to them!"

His hope faded at her remark, and his anger and resentment settled in his chest once more. "I was doing it for the Order!" he said defensively.

"Don't you dare use the Order as an excuse!"

"It wasn't like he was a saint! The man was going to murder you and Potter, or have you forgotten how he abused you before I intervened?"



"I haven't forgotten!"

"Then why are you upset that I saved you?!"

"I'm NOT upset that you saved us, I'm upset about what you did AFTER you saved us as well as not telling me about your 'game' with Voldemort!"

"I gave that man what he deserved! As for the ga..."

"And what do YOU deserve, Professor Snape? If everyone is getting what they deserve then what do you think YOU deserve?"

Snape stared at her in stunned silence while she gave him a cold hard glare. What hurt him the most was that Hermione called him by his title when they both very well knew she could have addressed him by his given name. Then there was her question: what did he deserve? He knew things he had done in the past were ten times more horrible than anything Burton had ever accomplished. That being the case, if HE was to get what he deserved...

Snape shook his head, not even wanting to think about it. Besides, he had changed his ways. He still couldn't be held accountable for his past transgressions. She was just trying to make him feel guilty! After what he did for her and that prat Potter THIS was his thanks?! With a sneer he spat, "You have NO idea what you are saying, you silly girl, but I suppose it is too much for a child to understand!"

Hermione was hurt by his comment, but didn't show it. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction. Instead she glared at him and said dangerously, "It is one thing to defend yourself or others against a threat... It is completely another to cause pain because you can, or out of anger, as if it were using the Cruciatus Curse! You just made yourself no better than the rest of the Death Eaters!"

At that point, Snape was outraged. He couldn't believe the words that came flying out of her impertinent mouth. How could she even think that? He was nothing like them! Despite his love for the lioness, she had pushed him over the breaking point.

Snape took a step forward and roared, "HOW DARE YOU COMPARE ME TO THEM?"

Hermione was unfazed as she took a step towards Snape and shouted back, "HOW DARE YOU TAKE ME FOR GRANTED?"

"WHAT? I NEVER..."

"YOU DID! YOU WERE RUNNING OUT OF RIDDLES FOR YOUR DARK LORD, SO YOU DECIDED TO PICK MY BRAIN!"

Snape looked at her in shock. That thought had NEVER crossed his mind. He was playing the game because he liked her company. He had never even used one of Hermione's riddles to the Dark Lord.

Before he could speak to tell her how he truly felt, Hermione continued spitefully, "I would have helped you if you would have asked, but to deceive me and pretend... pretend to be my friend..."

"But, Hermione," Snape started in a firm tone, "I..."

"I can't stay here any longer," Hermione said softly as a lump began to form in her throat. "If the aurors want to speak to me tell them they can find me in my room!"

Hermione dashed for the door and grabbed the handle.

"Stop!" Snape demanded. "Don't..."

"Don't tell anyone happened tonight?" Hermione interrupted in a stern tone. "Don't worry, I'll keep your secret safe. Besides, you're going to have to live with yourself about what you did. I pray that you can only remember what is right when the time comes. Good bye... Professor Snape."

She quickly yanked open the door and slammed it shut behind her, hoping the sound would echo and mask her sobs as she ran up to her room. Snape stood there as the sound of the door slamming in his face reverberated off the walls, filling the room with an empty feeling before it slowly died down and the silence roared in his ears. He was alone... ashamed... and dejected. He stood there looking at the place she had once stood, wishing he could have taken her in his arms and told her that he did care and love her, that he wasn't taking advantage of her, that he was sorry for what he had done.

But it was too late.

He was alone.

Perhaps this is what he deserved.

Snape continued to stand there with his arms limp at his sides until Harry returned with Professor McGonagall and the aurors, none of them knowing the real tragedy that had occurred that night.

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*Yea, there's chapter 13! I hope you all liked it (I worked too damn hard for you not to)!*

*Sorry it took so long to update, but as I explained before, this one kicked my butt!*

*5 points to your house if you knew the answer to the previous riddle, which was "few." You can get 5 more if you figure out the latest riddle!*

*The Alan Rickman quote in chapter 12 was "It's just a mushroom." said by David in Dark Harbor. Yeah, that was tricky, but if you've seen the movie, you know there's significance behind his words. ;) There's another quote in this chapter. Happy hunting!*

*Also, as an added bonus since this chapter took SO long, if you can figure out the significance of the chapter title, then I'll award you even more points. Hint: the more specific you are (actor, character, movie, etc), the more points I'll give your house.*

*Thanks for all the support! You all are the best! You rock my socks!*

*"We fight against those who control the darkness."*

*- DADA Mistress*

# Finding Each Other Again

## Chapter 14 of 15

Hermione and Snape have not talked to each other since "the incident." Can Snape ever regain Hermione's trust? Maybe she'd understand him better if he told her about his past.

*Special thanks to my mom, my sister, Lord\_and\_Lady\_Peeves, and Doomspark (my beta) for everything you lovely ladies (and gentlemen) do to encourage me.*

*Disclaimer: I have never owned any of these characters from the Harry Potter series and I never will. They all belong to the brilliant mind of J.K. Rowling; however this story belongs to me, spewing forth from my very own sick and demented mind. I don't plan on receiving any sort of profit for these stories. I just love the characters so much that I HAVE to write about them.*

*Please, no lawsuits.*

*Also, this is my FIRST story, so please, be nice and helpful. Enjoy! :)*

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### Chapter 14: Finding Each Other Again

The early December snow crunched beneath Hermione and David's feet, as they made their way into the courtyard after lunch for his regular transfiguration tutoring. Almost two weeks had passed since the incident with the Death Eater, and Hermione had not talked to her professor since. Of course, she still saw him in Potions, and she was terribly vexed when he ordered her to continue working with him in his research, but she only spoke to him when it was related to the experiments. She was still angry with him for what he had done, but, damn her heart, she still loved him. How she could, she didn't know, but the thought of him still sent her heart all aflutter.

"Hermione, are you all right?" David asked, noticing the sad look in his friend's eyes.

"Hmm? Oh, I'm fine, David," Hermione answered, faking a smile. "I was just thinking of, er, some new transfiguration techniques. Um, why don't we stop here by this tree and begin practicing, shall we?"

The two of them spent the majority of the time reviewing wand movements. David occasionally growled in frustration, while Hermione patiently instructed him. Finally, after some trial and err, David Heart grinned as he successfully transfigured a tree into a shrubbery and back again.

"Very good!" Hermione praised with a smile. "That was much better!"

"Yeah, these tutoring sessions are really helping," David beamed.

"You have shown so much improvement. I'm proud of you."

"Thank you, Hermione, but really, all the credit should be going to you. After all, I'd probably still be failing if it wasn't for you."

"Oh, not true."

"Yes it is, and you know it. Come on, give me a hug. Come on; you know you want to!"

Hermione chuckled when David flashed her his winning grin and hugged her tight. It was a friendly hug, so she smiled and received it warmly, as well as gave a small one back. While they hugged, Hermione swore that she heard what sounded like the shutter of a camera. No, that couldn't be. Honestly, who in their right mind would be taking pictures of her and David?

"Big Red to Camera Man! Big Red to Camera Man! Did you get that? Over," Ron whispered into his Sneaky Snooper, Fred and George's latest invention that was inspired by Muggle walkie-talkies their father brought home one evening. It resembled a thimble that covered the end of one's finger, allowing him or her to communicate with others that also wore the Sneak Snooper over one of their digits.

"Camera Man to Big Red! I caught the perfect shot!" Colin Creevey whispered into his own Sneaky Snooper, as he hid behind a row of snow covered hedges. "Over."

"Brilliant! Remain at your position and continue surveillance! I'll remain hidden by this rock. Big Red to Scar Face! Big Red to Scar Face! Did you hear that last conversation? Over."

"Yeah, yeah, I got it," Harry said with a frustrated sigh into his own Sneaky Snooper, as he hovered on his broom behind a near by tree with an Extendable Ear, courtesy of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes. "Ron, honestly, this is..."

"No, Scar Face! I'm 'Big Red,' remember? Over."

"And don't call me 'Scar Face,' either!"

"Scar Face, you gotta say 'over' at the end of your statement. Over."

"Ro... Er, Big Red, can we go in now? Uh, over."

"Negative, Scar Face. Remain at your post eavesdropping on their conversation from aerial surveillance. We'll combine our information later just before dinner."

"Fine, Ro... Er, Big Red... Over."

"Camera Man to Big Red!" Colin said urgently. "The Cock and the Chick are heading back to the castle! We're standing by and awaiting orders."

"All right, team, Operation Fancy Pants is relocating to the Gryffindor Common Room until further activity! Big Red, over and out!"

The three "agents" of Operation Fancy Pants moved out, following the two friends, as they made their way back towards Hogwarts. Hermione didn't notice the group that trailed behind her. She wasn't really listening to David talk about his new sea serpent boots either. All she was focusing on was Snape. She wished he hadn't tortured Burton. She was grateful he saved Harry and her when he did, but then to deliberately inflict pain and suffering after the two of them were safe... That was awful. However, she was reminded of a very important fact: Snape was once a Death Eater, and he did some terrible things. Loving Severus meant she would have to accept the good and the bad about him. However the question was could she, especially after witnessing what he was capable of doing to another human being? She shuddered, as scenes from that grisly night reappeared in her mind.

"Cold?" David asked.

"Oh, uh, yes, just a bit," Hermione said shyly, not wanting to reveal the real reason she shivered.

"Aww, come here then, and we'll bunch up."

Suddenly, David wrapped his arm around Hermione's shoulders and pulled her close, sharing his body heat.

"Oh, David Heart!" Hermione giggled, as she gave him a playful nudge. "You're so..."

"Handsome? Charming? I know. Just don't let Daniela see us; she's the jealous type. She'd take an innocent gesture between friends and blow it way out of proportion."

"Yes, I know a couple of people who would do that as well."

As the two friends continued walking back to Hogwarts, Hermione thought about the night she had hugged Snape, before he left for the Dark Revel, the same night she realized she was in love with him. She longed for that feeling of closeness with him again. She moved even closer to David, imagining he was Severus, as she recalled every thought and emotion she felt that night, while being held in his arms.

"Hey now, Hermione, don't try to get fresh with me," David teased. "I like to make the first move."

"Shut up, prat!" Hermione growled, causing David to burst out laughing. Behind them chaos erupted.

"Take the picture, Colin!" Ron hissed hysterically.

"Wait, I thought my code name is 'Camera Man,' right?" Colin questioned.

"There's no time for that now, man! Take the bloody pictures as evidence! Harry, what are they saying?"

"Ron, I'm hovering right above you. Can you hear what they're saying?"

"No."

"Then neither can I."

"Bloody hell! They could be talking about something serious, like asking her to come home with him for Christmas to meet his parents!"

As Colin began to furiously take pictures and Harry tried his best to calm Ron down, Hermione sighed sadly to herself, wondering if things would ever be the same between Severus and her.

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Snape threw his teaching robes over a near by chair and pushed up his sleeves enough to prevent them from getting in the way, as he sliced the tarantula legs into thin strips. He was trying his best to ignore Hermione, but failing miserably. He couldn't help it. She was constantly on his mind. He missed seeing the warmth in her eyes, and their conversations about everything from potions to poetry. He even missed her pushy Gryffindor attitude. Unfortunately, this Hermione was nothing like that. She was still intelligent and articulate, but she lacked all the charm and grace of the young woman he knew before that night in the dungeons with Burton. Although weeks had passed, her words still cut through him like a knife, especially her riddle. He still spent some night lying in bed awake as the riddle echoed over and over in his head.

"What is that which goes out of the body when death comes in and is also the part of you that sees a dream? I'll give you a hint: YOU seem to be lacking one after what you did!"

A soul; Snape knew the answer was a soul, therefore, she was calling him "soulless." That hurt him more than anything. He couldn't help but cringe at the thought. He understood his anger did get out of hand, but that didn't make him some inhuman creature. However, no matter how many times he tried to convince himself otherwise, his heart still ached for his little lioness. He had to get her back. The question was only how?

"Professor?" Hermione asked for a third time, causing Snape to snap back into reality.

"What is it, Miss Granger?" he asked sternly.

"Sir, I have finished extracting the morning glory seeds. I just have to add the ginger root, but we seem to be out of it. What do you want me to do in the mean time?"

"Out of ginger root? Nonsense. I just purchased some from Hogsmeade not too long ago."

"But I just check the cupboard, sir, and the jar was empty. You can see for yourself if you wish."

Snape furrowed his brow, knowing he recently purchased ginger root, but trying to think of why it was not in the jar. Ah, he remembered he had it in his personal supplies inside his chambers. Ginger was great for combating indigestion, especially after he had to endure some of Hagrid's cooking from a Staff Meeting the night before. He'd have to go down and get it. Come to think of it, he had to get several ingredients from his personal storage, too many for one person to carry. Of course, he could use a floating charm to transport them, but he did not like to taint potions or their ingredients with "foolish wand waving." He was going to have to bring Hermione with him to carry the other ingredients. For an odd reason, the thought of Hermione in his chambers sent his mind spinning. However, he quickly got a handle on his emotions and scolded himself for acting like such a schoolboy.

After clearing his throat, Snape said, "Miss Granger you will have to accompany me to my... private chambers to retrieve some ingredients necessary for the next brew."

"Yes, sir," Hermione said calmly, while her insides flipped and somersaulted. Good God, she was going into HIS private chambers? She fought hard to prevent the color slowly creeping to her cheeks. Honestly, she shouldn't act so immature. They were merely going in and then out again. She wouldn't even have time to get a good look at the decor and such.

Hermione was snapped back to her senses when she heard Snape's robes rustling, as he turned and strode to the door. She put down the morning glory seeds and headed after him. They were both silent as they made their way to his private rooms. Hermione trailed behind him as he led her through the dungeons, past the Potions classroom, and the Slytherin Common Room. Finally, they came to his office, where he quickly let down the wards and entered. Hermione followed him in, shutting the door behind her. Snape warded the door again just when he was about to tell Hermione to shut her eyes and turn her back to him, before he could use the secret entrance to his chambers. However, something inside of him thought different. Really, he knew he could trust her, and, for some reason, he wanted her to know how to enter his chambers. Ignoring his natural suspicion towards people in general, Snape walked to the bookshelf, pulled out his wand, and had the tip touch the side of the bookshelf with Hermione watching in full view.

"Penance," Snape said softly, and the bookshelf was suddenly pushed aside, just like that night of the Dark Revel. Hermione was taken back that Snape had trusted her enough to reveal the entrance to his chambers. She imagined few people knew about it, yet he allowed her to know. The thought alone warmed her heart.

"Come along, Miss Granger," Snape rumbled from the bookshelf. He swept into the tunnel behind the shelf, and Hermione quickly followed. She jumped when the bookshelf slammed shut behind her, and found herself in complete darkness, but only for a second. Suddenly, torches along both sides of the wall sprung to life and let off a warm glow to light their path. Despite the eerie environment, she was impressed. Without looking behind him to see if she was there, Snape began to walk down the tunnel. Hermione was hot on his heels, not wanting to be alone in such a ghostly place.

The two walked on through twists and turns along the tunnel until they came to a door. Snape flung it open and allowed Hermione to step inside first. She took a deep breath and muttered, "Thank you," before she walked into his private chambers. She looked around and smiled to herself, not surprised to see most of it in black. Oddly enough, his rooms were almost just as she imagined, except it was bigger than she anticipated. It was elegant, dark, and refined, just like him. Her thoughts were broken when she heard the door shut behind her and Snape said quietly, "Miss Granger, I will go and unlock the cupboard containing the ingredients and call you over when your assistance is needed."

"Yes, sir," Hermione said as her eyes continued to soak up the room. She didn't even notice that Snape had left as her eyes scanned the area. There was a beautiful black couch along with a black chair next to the fireplace, which looked to be his favorite since the table next to it was littered with books, quills, and an empty snifter glass. There was also a handsome writing desk along the wall next to...

Hermione's breath caught in her throat as she gasped in astonishment at the object in the corner of the room. Could it be? She approached the object cautiously, as if it would spring to life at any moment. As she came closer, she realized that her assumptions were correct. Snape owned a harpsichord!

Hermione was amazed as she stood by it, looking longingly at the keys and sheet music that adorned the stand. Oh, she loved harpsichord music! The sounds and sweet melodies always raised her spirits and put a satisfied smile on her face. She remembered even as a young girl how she loved to play her mother's cassette tapes of Johann Sebastian Bach Harpsichord Concertos. She'd dance along as the music swelled and lifted her up into the clouds and she'd feel like she'd fly up to heaven. She'd beg and plead her parents to get a harpsichord so she could take lessons, but they'd always tell her how it was too expensive. After one too many rejections, Hermione finally gave up trying to convince her parents, and settled for mere recordings and concerts, but always still yearned to play.

Now she was standing right next to one, and Hermione couldn't be happier. She slowly felt the smoothness of one of the keys and craved to gently push down on it to hear the strong note reverberating from the plucked string. Oh, it would sound like heaven! Unfortunately, she didn't dare, not as long as Snape was around. No doubt he would have her head if she did! She sighed as her finger continued wandering from key to key, wishing she knew how to play.

"Miss Granger," a voice said sternly behind her, "did you not hear me when I called for you?"

Hermione quickly whipped around to find herself face to face with Snape as he stood with his arms folded over his chest. Hermione gasped and quickly pulled her hand from the harpsichord keys. Oh, she was in for it now!

"Oh my goodness! I'm so sorry, Professor Snape!" Hermione gasped. "I was, well, I was looking at your quarters, which are very nice by the way, when I was suddenly distracted seeing your harpsichord, which is also very nice, and, well you see, I love the harpsichord, and I had to see it up close, and then, oh I'm so sorry, but I felt the keys, because I've always wanted to play, but don't worry, I didn't break anything! I was just..."

"I take it you enjoy the harpsichord?" Snape asked silkily.

Hermione stopped her rambling immediately and looked at her Potions master. He didn't appear angry or annoyed, rather he seemed curious and even slightly intrigued she had taken an interest in the old instrument. She cleared her throat before she said, "Yes, sir, I actually love harpsichord music."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, sir. Like I said, I'm very sorry, but when I saw the harpsichord here in the corner... oh, I just had to see it up close. It's so beautiful!"

With his arms still folded, Snape slowly made his way to stand along side of Hermione next to the harpsichord, as he said, "This harpsichord has been in the Snape family for centuries. It has been passed down from generation to generation, each owner adding a new memory, a new saga to it."

He momentarily allowed a hand to rush over the keys, just as Hermione had done. He then turned to face her and asked, "Do you know how to play?"

"Oh no, sir," Hermione said with a twinge of sadness in her voice. "I wish I did. I've always wanted to learn, but my parents said it was far too expensive."

"I see."

The conversation came to an abrupt halt. They stood beside each other, next to the harpsichord in the silence, looking into each other's eyes for the first time in weeks without fear of what the other might see. Finally, Hermione broke her gaze and the silence when she turned away and stammered, "W-w-well, I'm sorry I didn't hear you, Professor Snape, but as I said, I was distracted by the beautiful harpsichord. It really is wonderful. I suppose we..."

"Sit down, Miss Granger."

Hermione turned around to find Snape no longer standing beside her, but from behind the harpsichord bench, which he had turned around so that the bench was perpendicular to the instrument instead of parallel with it. Confused, Hermione asked, "I'm sorry, sir?"

"Sit... Hermione."

She slowly took in a deep breath upon hearing her name on his lips for the first time in weeks. Oh, it felt so good! How could she resist his request? Slowly, Hermione walked over to the bench and lowered herself onto it with her back to Snape, wondering what he was going to do.

"Face the harpsichord, Hermione."

She glanced at him from behind her shoulder and saw he was dead serious about his order. Instead of inquiring about his strange demand, Hermione followed his instructions perfectly. She now sat at the end of the bench with her hands on her lap while the keys were spread out in front of her, begging to be played. Just when she was about to ask what he wanted her to do next, Hermione suddenly gave a small gasp, as she felt a warm body mold itself behind her. She quickly glanced over her shoulder again only to see Professor Snape sitting behind her on the bench! Slowly, he moved his arms to come around her body and take a C chord position on the harpsichord keys.

"Hermione," Snape purred into her ear, causing her to melt from the inside out, "place your hands on top of mine so that the pads of your fingers match up with my own."

Intoxicated by both the sound of his voice in her ear and the feeling of his body pressed up against hers, Hermione complied and gently placed her hands on his own, reveling in the contact and electricity that seemed to course through them both at their touch.

"Now, just relax, and feel the movement of my hands under your own, remembering and following their actions."

Hermione nodded since her breath was caught in her throat. The man had a voice like velvet! Then, very slowly, Snape's hands began to move beneath her own. She felt his long elegant fingers play out *Greensleeves* on the harpsichord, his hands floating over the keys, as she followed him note for note. They were like one person as Snape played, while Hermione watched and learned as her hands rested upon his. As he performed, Snape inhaled the scent of her hair, grateful he could once again be close enough to smell it. Ah, roses! He ventured to have his cheek brush up against it and felt its soft curls. He was surprised as he felt her body relax even more and lean back into his own. He almost gave a sigh of relief and satisfaction but resisted the temptation. Instead, he continued to play, nearly finished with the sixteenth century piece, and watch Hermione with a most peaceful and pleasant look on her face.

Hermione felt as if she had died and gone to heaven. Oh, it was magnificent to hear such a beautiful song, especially with Severus Snape playing it just for her! She felt her heart soar higher and higher with each note and Snape's slow, rhythmic breath she felt hot against her neck or cheek. She felt herself let go of all the troubles and worries that plagued her mind and slowly sink deeper into Snape's form. For the first time in weeks, she felt comfortable with her Potions master again, a feeling she had longed for and regained at last. She could stay in this position with Severus forever.

The two continued to play together, playing the song at least three times before Snape finally began to slow the last few bars of the piece before holding down the last note for the big finish, allowing it to die out and echo into silence. The two remained glued to their seat on the bench with neither wanting to leave, but knowing they had to eventually. Slowly Hermione turned to face Snape, grateful that he had been kind enough to not only realize a dream, but to remind her of how miserable things had been without him. Though Snape would never admit it, he felt the exact way. They said nothing, as they looked deep into each other's eyes, seeing the fear had disappeared and was replaced with adoration. Finally, Hermione saw the man she had been deprived of for the past few weeks, the man she knew prior to the incident in the dungeon. Her eyes brimmed with tears and emotion at her discovery, and nothing could make her happier at that moment.

"There you are, Severus," Hermione whispered, as a single tear trickled down her cheek. "I've missed you."

"I've been here," Severus whispered back, while he gently wiped the tear away with his thumb. "I've always been here."

"No... Not the man I saw in the dungeons. That man wasn't you... He was someone else entirely."

Snape gave her a sad look, before he stood from the bench and slowly walked toward his desk. He clutched the back of the chair and pinched the bridge of his nose, his back to Hermione. Why was this so hard? Why did this conversation suddenly matter so much to him? Finally, he sighed and turned to face his little lioness, as she sat perfectly still on the harpsichord bench.

"Hermione," Snape began solemnly. "That man you saw that night was... a part of me from long ago. Though I have abandoned my heinous ways, bear in mind, there lies a darker side that resides in me, and I fight to control it. There was a reason I was a Death Eater."

"But..."

Hermione stopped herself before she said too much. However, she didn't pull her eyes away from Snape. She wanted to prove to him that she was serious, that she was sorry, and that she cared with all her heart.

Snape, noticing what she was trying to ask, said softly, "Go on."

He turned his head away, suddenly busying himself with... well, whatever he found on his desk; anything to try and hide his shame. Hermione felt her stomach clench. She had knocked on the door to Snape's past, a door he had kept under lock and key for God knows how long. There was no way of avoiding it now. She took a breath and asked seriously, "Severus... Why did you join the Death Eaters?"

Snape stopped what he was doing upon hearing her words. Oh, of all the things she could have thought, why did it have to be that one? He put down his work and slowly lifted his head to meet her eyes that were full of curiosity as well as concern. Snape studied her, wondering why she even cared. As he looked into her eyes, he realized she really wanted to know, but not because she was nosy, but because she wanted to understand him better. No one, except for Dumbledore, ever actually cared enough to want to know what he did and why he did them. They were quick to judge and label him without giving his feelings a second thought. But not her. Like Dumbledore, she was willing to hear his side of the story, not to judge him, but to understand him. Truly, she was an angel!

The silence in the room was deafening, as they continued to stare at one another. Hermione couldn't bear to see the hurt in his eyes and wanted to turn away, but his gaze entrapped her. She shouldn't have asked him something so personal. Any moment now he was going to lash out at her or, worst of all, kick her out and take away her position as Potions Apprentice. Oh, what a fool she was! She should have never...

Suddenly, both the silence and her thoughts were broken as Snape said in low velvet tones, "Our aim is to rid society of negative influences. This end justifies certain unorthodox means."

Hermione couldn't help but shudder at the words. Oh, it was so eerie to hear him say that! That's what they truly believed! They thought they were right in their cause, not knowing that they were causing only pain and suffering. They were so brainwashed that they couldn't see their wrong, nor could they admit it if they did see their destruction. How did Severus escape it then? When did he realize it was the wrong path?

She held her breath as Snape rose from his seat and slowly approached her. She had to crane her neck to look up at his face from the bench, as he loomed over her, but not in a domineering fashion. His arms were limp at his sides and his broad shoulders looked slightly slumped. His facial features were soft and his eyes still foretold the pain and regret he experienced daily. Slowly, he lowered himself next to her onto the bench and sighed.

"Yes, there was once a time I believed that," he said no louder than a whisper, still looking deep into her eyes. "I believed in The Dark Lord's words. I thought the Wizarding world needed to be purged of Muggles and Muggleborns, convinced that they were the cause of all our suffering. I believed they were tainting the bloodlines, and they were the reason our world was becoming more and more corrupt. Also, I believed this was a way to weed out those old Wizarding families that were a disgrace to the other purebloods by associating and even at times defending Muggles and Muggleborns."

"Purebloods like James Potter, who actually liked and accepted those like Lily Evans," Hermione said softly.

"Yes, like them," Snape answered, now looking down at his hands. "I thought it would be poetic justice to have them pay for what..."

Snape and Hermione both noticed his hands had formed tight fists that shook with rage. Snape closed his eyes and took a deep breath, letting it out slowly to calm his frayed nerves. Suddenly, his eyes snapped open as he felt a warm hand on his own two fists. He looked down to see Hermione's delicate little hand resting upon his own, which slowly melted under her and relaxed on his lap. He wished to God that he could have taken her hand and engulfed it with his own, but he didn't dare. Besides, she was still a student.

"*A student that's of age*," the voice in his head reminded him.

Snape ignored the voice and focused only on the hand, wishing he could hold her, wishing he could kiss it, wishing she had finished school already. Instead, he savored the feeling of her hand upon his, the heat radiating off of it and warming his entire body. Oh, if only she knew his true feelings for her; if only he could let them be known.

Finally, he looked up to meet her amber eyes again. She did not recoil or even show any sign of discomfort under his gaze. Rather she merely looked back at him, her eyes reflecting not pity, but great sorrow, as if his loss, his pain, his memories of the good and the bad were her own, and she could feel every emotion that he felt in them.

"What happened that made you come back to the Light?" Hermione whispered, her eyes never tearing from his.

Snape was silent for a moment, wondering if he should burden her with the details of that night that was to be the final straw for him. Finally, he spoke.

"I don't know if there was a time I was in the Light before this, Hermione, but I shall tell you of the details of my departure from the Dark."

"When I first began my service with the Dark Lord, his plans were strategic and purposeful. He only targeted Muggles and Muggleborns. But soon, I began to see no objective in the raids, only a chance to terrorize, maim, and traumatize the inhabitants of whatever village the Dark Lord saw fit. There no longer was any organization, just commands to hunt them down and kill them. Finally, he was no longer specific in his instructions. He was demanding we kill anyone who stood in our path, no matter who it was. He was no longer the strong leader that I saw as a young man. He was now a crazed megalomaniac that only cared about himself. However, it would still be some time before I finally broke off the chains that bound me to him. I don't know why I waited so long. I suppose part of it was because I was and am the, as much as it disgusts me to say it now, 'favorite' out of group (as well as Bellatrix), and I craved the praise and attention the Dark Lord bestowed upon me. However, the night I left his side, I have never regretted it, nor have I ever looked back."

"That night seemed like any other night at the Dark Revel. He barked out his orders and dismissed us to do his will. However, what made this raid interesting was that he himself was going to accompany us. He wanted to see the looks of terror and confusion on the enemies' faces. We Apparated to a village about thirteen miles north of Hogsmeade. It was dark and cold, deathly silent before we attacked. Curses were being hurled through the air, buzzing past my head. Houses were torched. Cries filled the

night sky and the stars seemed to tremble at the sound.

"As the raid was dying down, the Dark Lord brought out a scared Muggle woman and her son, who look no older than five years of age. He threw her onto the ground and ordered us to gather around her. She laid sobbing and shaking, begging us to spare the life of her son, who the Dark Lord had thrown to Lucius. He forced the boy to watch as the Dark Lord... as he..."

"Violated her?" Hermione whispered in wide-eyed horror.

"No. It is a common misconception that Death Eaters would rape Muggle women. That is entirely untrue. You must understand that they view Muggles as not even human. To rape a Muggle would be equivalent to bestiality, so they wouldn't even 'soil themselves,' so to say."

"Oh... I didn't... I didn't know... What happened to her?"

"I will spare you the gory details, as it is too horrible to retell. I will just tell you they made her suffer. As Dark Lord and a few others began their onslaught, I remember seeing the boy huddled at Malfoy's feet, his hands covering his ears as he cried. He begged for them to leave his mother alone, but they merely laughed and continued to taunt him, forcing him to look at his mother.

"As I continued to look at the boy, I suddenly recalled... an incident that happened in my childhood, one of my earliest memories. No doubt Potter told you about what he saw in my Pensive when I was teaching him Occlumency."

"If you mean that he told me of the incident of not only between you and his father, but of the memories of what he assumed were your mother and father, then yes," Hermione answered honestly.

"I thought as much. Then you already know how dismal and horrid my life was as a boy. To be honest, it hasn't changed much, but that's not the point. When I saw that child, that young boy crying as he huddled at Lucius's feet, I was reminded of my life as a child, witnessing and experiencing the beatings from my father. I remembered feeling so helpless and wishing how I could stop the madness, the evil that was running ramped through our lives. Suddenly, at that moment, I realized that I was now apart of that very evil, the same that caused my mother and I so much pain and sorrow. I had fallen into the trap and was following my father's footsteps, after I vowed to myself never to do so.

"I remember then feeling a cold emptiness inside of me upon this realization. I wanted to scream and cry to the heavens, to tear my soul out from my body, and to just die for the sins I had committed over the years. Instead, I watched, helpless and alone once more, just as I had been as a child. For the first time in my adult life, I was scared. I didn't know what to do or who to tell, but there was only one thing I knew: in my heart, I was no longer a Death Eater; I was against it.

"My thoughts were broken as I heard the group burst into laughter. The boy had broken away from Lucius and was beating his little fists on the Dark Lord's back, demanding he stop hurting his mother at once and leave them alone. The Dark Lord merely turned around and pinned the boy with that wicked grin. The boy was not fazed and instead took a swing, and told him he was a bad man. Suddenly, the Dark Lord unsheathed his wand and used a constricting charm around the boy's neck. The mother, close to death, still pleaded for her son's life. The Dark Lord then looked down at her and smiled, baring those sharp teeth, and hissed, 'Tell me, if you saw a rat with her offspring, would you allow them to live? Would you let them thrive and over run your house? Would you let those filthy rodents increase in number and spread disease, poisoning your own children? I would think not. That being the case, can you blame me for just purging the world of vermin like you?' And with that, he... he..."

Snape stopped and tore his eyes from Hermione. Even now, it was still difficult for him to speak about it. He felt Hermione squeeze his hands, tears falling from her eyes.

"Oh, Severus, I'm so sorry," she whispered.

"The Dark Lord threw their bodies at my feet," Snape continued. "He told me to dispose of that trash and dismissed everyone else until the next Dark Revel. After I was sure everyone had left, I actually gave them a proper burial. Usually the Dark Lord wants their bodies thrown to the bog, but I didn't this time. I made sure their souls would be at peace.

"After I buried them, I didn't know what to do at first. I didn't want to continue this desolate existence, but I knew my life was at risk if I simply refused to be a part of this genocide. Once the mark is branded on your arm, you belong to him. Suddenly, a name appeared to me, a name I had always trusted and respected through out my life: Dumbledore. I immediately headed to Hogwarts, not caring about my attire as I slipped in through a secret entrance in the Slytherin Common Room and came upon the Headmaster's office. I thought I would somehow break into the office, since I didn't know the password, but, as luck would have it, the staircase was already open and I walked up and let myself into Dumbledore's office.

"The Headmaster was at his desk, not even looking up from his work when I entered. It wasn't until I closed the door and a few of his portraits gasped in horror that he finally looked at me. 'Headmaster Dumbledore,' I began, as I removed my mask. He met my eyes and merely stared at me for a moment. I saw no twinkle in them, nor did I see a hint of a smile played on his lips upon my arrival. In the past whether I was a boy in his school or a man helping him with a task, he always greeted me with smiles and twinkling. At that moment, he looked at me with... sadness... disappointment... even pity.

"Then he finally said solemnly, 'Oh, Severus, my boy. Where have you been?'"

"Upon hearing those words, despair suddenly swept over me and I crumbled to the floor. For the first time since I was a child, I cried. I sobbed and pulled at my hair, ashamed of what I had done. I clawed at the Dark Mark on my arm until it bled. However, I stopped when I felt Dumbledore lift me to my feet, and embrace me like a father would to his son. That was the first time that anyone had ever touched me in an affectionate way. I didn't know what to do, but I merely clung to him and wept.

"After I had regained my composure, I told him everything. I told him all that I knew. I told him about secrets the Dark Lord had only shared with me, the Dark Revels, the raid, and the boy. Finally, after I was through, he said, 'Well done, my boy. You have turned away from your old ways and have joined on the side of right. This is the first step towards redemption.' I felt that way, too. I felt I had done what was right, and... It felt good.

"The Headmaster then asked me what did I intend to do now that I had turned my back on the Dark Lord and his followers. I took a moment to collect my thoughts, since I hadn't even considered what to do next. Suddenly, it came to me. I suggested that since I was a favorite with the Dark Lord, my information would be useful, and I volunteered to be a spy, a double agent. Though he was reluctant at first, because it was a great risk on my life, Dumbledore finally agreed. We planned on telling the Dark Lord I was captured by the Order, and told Dumbledore I would be a spy for them if they spared my life, but I would secretly remain faithful to the Death Eaters. Of course, the Dark Lord bought the story. Though there are those who continuously question my loyalty to the Order, I have remained faithful to Dumbledore ever since. He is one of the few who trusted and believed in me when no one else would. He is truly one of the few I call friend."

"And... and what would you call me, Severus?" Hermione asked, half dreading and half anticipating the answer.

Snape hesitated only for a moment, wanting to say what was on his heart, but afraid of chasing his lioness away. Instead, he looked her straight in the eye and whispered, "I'd like to call you friend."

"Among other things," the voice in his head echoed.

"Of course, that is if you'll have me," Snape finished, hoping she WOULD have him.

Hermione smiled and without faltering, whispered back, "Of course, Severus, as I would like to call you friend as well."

She gave him a shy smile, and he gave a very small one back, the corners of his mouth lifting ever so slightly. Snape paused for a moment, feeling almost as if a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. He sighed quietly before he continued, "Sometimes... Sometimes I wonder what that boy would have been like had he a chance to grow up. Would he have been like me after witnessing what he had that night? Would he have become a wizard as well? Would I have taught him? Would he have recognized

me if I did? I think he might have, because... sometimes, when I look up from my cauldron, or my paper, or even from my plate at the Great Hall... I see him... I see that little boy standing there, just for a moment... and then he's gone... but I know he's still there... a constant reminder of my wrongs..."

"Severus, there was nothing you can do. They were going to kill them no matter what you did. You've done right since then. You're a different man."

"You didn't seem to think so a few weeks ago."

"Severus... You must understand something. I was very frightened and very worried. This was a side of you I had never seen before. Suddenly you were this man that wasn't the Severus I knew... For a while, I was afraid I had lost you. For a while... I was afraid that man was the REAL Severus, and I had gotten to know the facade."

"And now?" Snape asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Now... I know that wasn't you... You wouldn't take advantage of me, even if your life was at risk, that's not who you are. I know that this," she whispered putting her hand on his cheek, "this is who you are, Severus. Please forgive me for thinking otherwise. I promise you it will never happen again."

The two of them stared longingly at one another, Snape at a total loss for words. No one had ever asked him for forgiveness. However, he felt no ill feelings towards his lioness. Slowly, he brought his hand up to cover her own hand that still held his cheek. Then, looking straight into her amber eyes, he whispered, "I... forgive you, Hermione. I forgive you."

"Do you really?"

"If I didn't would I tell you this: What is it that even if I do not come looking for it, it will come looking for me?"

Hermione gave a small sigh of relief and smiled, warming Snape to the core. Suddenly, his heart was pounding in his chest, and her small hand on his cheek began to feel like a weight. He felt himself leaning forward as Hermione did the same. Merlin, what was happening to him?

"*You're about to kiss her, that's what, you fool!*" the voice hissed in his head.

Kiss her? Good God, what should he do?

"*Pucker up your lips and have them touch hers, what the hell do you think?*"

For once, Snape did not try to argue with the voice in his head. He had spent the last several weeks without Hermione, and, frankly, he couldn't bear to be away from her again. He leaned closer, ready to feel her lips at any moment, as she too trembled slightly with excitement.

Suddenly, the fireplace roared to life with huge green flames. Hermione and Snape pulled away from each other quickly and immediately stood from the bench in time to see Dumbledore's head floating within the flames.

"Professor Snape and Miss Granger," Dumbledore said seriously, "I need you both to Floo to my office at once. I'm afraid this cannot wait."

Before either one of them had a chance to respond, Dumbledore's head and the green fire disappeared from the hearth. Hermione and Snape's stomachs were in knots. Oh good Lord, how much did Dumbledore see, if he saw anything at all? Maybe THAT'S why he sounded so concerned. Maybe he saw them about to kiss. Oh no, what if he called them in his office to sack Severus and expel Hermione? If that were the case, Severus planned to take the fall for the both of them. After all, he didn't care what happened to him as long as Hermione could graduate and be happy.

Sensing both their anxieties, Snape put a reassuring hand on Hermione's back and said, "Come along, Hermione. It sounds urgent."

Hermione nodded as her Potions master gathered a hand full of Floo powder and said, "The Headmaster's office," in a booming voice. They stepped into the fire together as the green flames lapped and surrounded them, both wondering if that night would be their last in Hogwarts.

Yea, there's chapter 14! I hope you all liked it!

5 points to your house if you knew the answer to the previous riddle, which was "soul." You can get 5 more if you figure out the latest riddle!

The Alan Rickman quote in chapter 13 was "You would do well to depersonalize what follows," said by The Interrogator in Closet Land. Dude, that is the creepiest movie! He's so good in it, too! It's one of his finest roles. There's another quote in this chapter. Happy hunting!

Thanks for all the support! You all are the best! You rock my socks!

"We fight against those who control the darkness."

- DADA Mistress

Bad News

Chapter 15 of 15

Hermione and Snape get called into Dumbledore's office for some shocking news. Draco causes trouble, but he's in for some bad news as well.

Hi everyone! Sorry it took so long to update. You know how busy school can be, plus I got really, really, REALLY sick.

Special thanks to my mom, my sister (even after that nasty review she left), Lord_and_Lady_Peeves, and my beta yutamiyu for everything you lovely ladies (and gentleman) do to encourage me.

Disclaimer: I have never owned any of these characters from the Harry Potter series and I never will. They all belong to the brilliant mind of J.K. Rowling. However this story

belongs to me, spewing forth from my very own sick and demented mind. I don't plan on receiving any sort of profit for these stories. I just love the characters so much that I HAVE to write about them.

Please, no lawsuits.

Also, this is my FIRST story, so please, be nice and helpful. Enjoy! :)

Chapter 15: Bad News

Hermione stepped out of the fireplace first with Snape not far behind. Dumbledore was sitting at his desk with a pained look on his face, which made both student and teacher uneasy. Had the headmaster seen them about to kiss? Was he calling them over for their immediate expulsion? Snape made no indication of his worry as he stepped out of the fireplace and stood beside Hermione with his arms crossed over his chest.

"Please, have a seat," Dumbledore told them as he waved a hand towards the two chairs in front of his desk.

Hermione took the chair closest to the fireplace, while Snape took the opposite chair. The three of them sat in silence for a few moments, as Dumbledore took off his spectacles and rubbed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger, obviously upset. He finally sighed and put on his moon-crescent glasses again before turning his attention to Hermione.

"Miss Granger... Hermione," Dumbledore began, "there really is no easy way of saying this, so I'll get to the reason I called you here right away."

'Oh God, he's going to expel me for almost kissing a professor!' Hermione thought in her head, as panic swept over her. 'Well, I'll take all the blame as long as Severus gets to keep his job. I'll just tell him...'

"Hermione, your parents have been attacked by Death Eaters."

Hermione gasped in surprise. In a way she was relieved that Dumbledore obviously didn't see anything between Snape and her, yet horrified by the news of her parents' assault. The relief was short-lived, as it soon turned into grief and dread. She blanched and her eyes grew wide with horror. As her stomach began to turn, her arms slowly encompassed her body on their own accord and, she huddled in her chair, as if she was a scared child.

For a moment, Snape thought Hermione had completely withdrawn from the world, and it terrified him. He wished he could take her in his arms and comfort her, but that wasn't going to happen as long as the headmaster was sitting in front of them. However, he saw her lips begin to move, but no words were coming out of her mouth. Seeing how Hermione responded to the news, Snape decided to step in and ask the questions she obviously wanted answered, but was unable to articulate.

"When did this happen?" Snape asked the headmaster with a furrowed brow.

"About three hours ago," Dumbledore answered gravely. "The Grangers were closing for the day when it happened. At first, no one seemed to think anything was unusual, until around seven o'clock. The shopkeeper from across the street found it odd that their automobile was still in front of the clinic, since they usually left by six. After he closed, he went to see if the Grangers were all right, when he suddenly witnessed three men (or what he assumed to be men) in long black robes run out the back door and literally disappeared in the alley." Dumbledore turned his attention back to Hermione before he continued. "My dear girl, I'm so sorry, but your parents were badly injured. They..."

"They were tortured, weren't they?" Hermione asked softly, while she looked down. "They were subjected to the Cruciatus Curse, weren't they?"

Dumbledore closed his eyes and sighed, "I'm afraid so, my dear."

Hermione was immobile and silent, not looking up at anyone. Her heart was aching and her mind was a blur. It was only yesterday that she received a letter from her parents telling her how much they loved her and missed her and couldn't wait for her to come home for Christmas. Suddenly, all of that changed in a moment. How could it be?

"What has happened to them?" Snape asked for Hermione again.

"The shopkeeper ran inside and saw the Grangers badly injured on the floor and called for help."

"Oh, don't tell me the Muggle police are involved."

"Actually, the shopkeeper is a wizard named Tobias Peregine. He recognized the three men as Death Eaters and sent for Aurors, and Tonks was among the ones who responded."

"Where are the Grangers now?"

"St. Mungo's, where they are in critical condition."

"When will they know when they're out of danger?"

"It's hard to say, Severus, but they seem to be fighting..."

"Will it... drive them mad?" Hermione asked tremulously, still not meeting anyone's eyes, while her thoughts dwelled on the images of the Longbottoms at St. Mungo's.

Dumbledore swallowed hard, before he said sadly, "I don't know, Hermione. As I told Professor Snape, it's hard to say at this moment."

Hermione continued to look down, as she wrapped her arms around herself tighter. Snape had to look away, not being able to bear seeing her like that and not being able to do anything about it. Instead, he turned to Dumbledore again and said seriously, "It seems very odd that they knew exactly when the Grangers closed their clinic, and where to escape when someone arrived. This wasn't a random incident. This was a planned attack."

"Do you think this was something Tom ordered?" Dumbledore asked.

"No, it doesn't sound like something he would do. It was sophisticated, but not as precise or diabolical. He wouldn't have allowed the Grangers to live. No, someone else planned this, someone trying to send a message to Potter and the rest of us. This was plotted by another Death Eater, and I have a feeling I know exactly who would target the Grangers."

Dumbledore nodded as he thought of the same person Snape was thinking: Lucius Malfoy.

"I want to see them," Hermione suddenly said. Both Dumbledore and Snape looked at her, as she lifted her head for the first time since she received the news. She looked Dumbledore straight in the eye and repeated her statement: "I want to see them... tonight."

"I'm afraid that's impossible, my dear," the old wizard frowned. "You see, you're at a great risk now. Whoever planned this knows that would be the first thing you'd do, and then he or she would have the opportunity to attack you. Of course, those responsible for harming your parents will not have the opportunity to do it again, for we have our people protecting them at all times in St. Mungo's, but we don't want the same tragedy to happen to you. Unfortunately, this also means you cannot leave Hogwarts, even for Hogsmeade or Christmas. We need to be very cautious. Do you understand?"

"But my parents need me," she protested in a much stronger voice.

"What they need is rest."

"But professor..."

"Hermione, I know this is hard to accept, but please, trust me when I say that we are doing everything in our power to ensure the safety of your parents and you as well. The best thing for them right now is rest and secrecy. I promise I will allow you to see them as soon as possible. All right?"

"Yes," Hermione whispered, before she cast her gaze back down at her feet.

"For now, just try to get some rest. Again, I promise you that as soon as I hear any change in their status, I'll let you be the first to know."

"Thank you, sir."

"Severus, would you please be so kind as to escort Miss Granger back to her rooms?"

"Of course, Headmaster," Snape said with a nod. As the three of them rose, Dumbledore reached over and put a hand on Hermione's shoulder and gave it a squeeze.

"I'm so sorry, my dear," Dumbledore said with tears threatening to leak out of his eyes. "If you need anything..."

"Thank you, sir," is all Hermione said, as she patted his hand, but still did not meet his eyes. She turned towards Snape and said softly, "Professor Snape, I left my notes in the lab. Can we stop there to get my things before we go to my rooms?"

"Yes," Snape said in a detached voice. He turned to the fireplace and cast the Floo powder and said, "Potions Laboratory" before stepping into the green fire.

Snape was the first to step out of the flames and into the lab. Hermione trailed slowly behind him, still in obvious shock. In light of the recent events, Snape decided to end the night's experiments and save them for the next day. He briefly left Hermione standing in the middle of the lab to stop the current experiments and make sure nothing that was left out could spoil. Upon his return, he was shocked to see Hermione no longer standing, but crumpled on the floor and on her knees while weeping into her hands. Snape was flabbergasted. He didn't know what to do. After all, he had little experience with women, especially when they wept. However, he felt his heart ache, as he watched her weep and heard her sobs of despair. Mustering up all his strength, Snape slowly walked over to Hermione and knelt down beside her on the floor.

"Hermione," he whispered. "Hermione."

The poor girl tried to control herself, so she could answer, but found it difficult to do so. Hesitantly, Snape put a slightly shaky hand on Hermione's back in an attempt to comfort her. Although she calmed down slightly at his touch, she still in no way had controlled herself from the sobbing. Snape felt as if his heart was being torn in two. He felt helpless seeing his little lioness in so much pain, and not being able to do a damn thing about it.

Not knowing what else to do, Snape began to slowly rub Hermione's back and asked in a gentle voice, "Is there anything I can do?"

To his surprise, Hermione said through her sobs. "Severus, please... just... just hold me."

Before Snape could respond, Hermione threw herself into his lap and wrapped her arms around his waist. She buried her head into his chest, as she cried, her tears soaking into his frock coat. Snape was motionless and speechless for several moments, surprised she had been bold enough to not only latch onto him, but seek comfort from him also. Well, he supposed it wasn't all too shocking. After all, if that meddling old goat hadn't interrupted them when he did, they'd probably still be lip-locked and... goodness knows what else.

Finally, after feeling her body shudder with every sob that escaped her lips, Snape slowly encompassed his arms around Hermione and held her close. He turned his head to let his cheek rest on top of her and allowed a hand run down the soft curls of her hair. She held onto him tighter, feeling warm and safe within his arms. While his hand stroked her hair, she felt the muscles of his chest tighten, as he brought her closer to his body. As he continued caressing her hair, he tried to remember comforting words his mother used to say to calm him after his father had finished beating the both of them.

"Hush now," he said as gently as he could. "It will be all right. Your tears are unnecessary. I will not lie to you. Your parents will be in a great deal of pain, but I can assure you they will not die."

"How can you know that?" Hermione's voice cracked. She looked up at him with tears streaming down her amber eyes, causing Snape's heart to break even further.

"Call it Death Eater's intuition," he smirked.

"But you're not a Death Eater."

"I was at one time, and I know that if they had meant to kill your parents, they would have done so before they left, even if they were hastened to escape. It takes only seconds to cast a Killing Curse."

Hermione looked down and put her head on Snape's chest again, inadvertently listening to his heart beat. She thought it would be calm and steady, but she was quite wrong. To her surprise it was beating rather quickly. Was he worried about her parents, too? Or... perhaps he was worried about her...

"Hermione," Snape said quietly, delicately putting a hand under her chin and tilting her head up until she met his eyes. "You mustn't let the sorrow get to you. Be strong, for your parents' sakes."

"I want to see them," Hermione whimpered. "They need me by their side."

"You will see them in due time, but for now they need to heal. In the mean time, what you can do to help them is to be strong and courageous. Do not let those who harmed your parents win by showing your sorrow, letting them think you're broken. It will only fuel their fire. Show them you are not ashamed of who you are or where you are from, and no matter what they do, you will not lose hope. When people lose hope, that is when they become weak, and you will never let them see that. Show them you are Hermione Granger, proud Gryffindor witch and resident know-it-all."

Hermione chuckled at his remark and even Snape gave a very small smile. He took Hermione's hands into his own and helped her to her feet. However, when they were both standing, neither of them let go of each other. They stood facing each other hand in hand saying nothing. Snape looked longingly into her soft brown eyes that were red from crying, and he vowed to make Lucius pay for causing his lioness so much pain. Hermione could read the underlying animosity in Snape's dark eyes that flashed with anger. She knew that he also felt upset about that situation, helpless to do anything about the injustice done to her parents. She felt comforted knowing Snape was on her side.

Hermione gave Snape's hands a gentle squeeze and, as much as she hated to do it, released his hands from her grasp. Wiping away the last of her tears, Hermione said softly, "Thank you, Severus. I'm... I'm feeling much better now... I'm glad you are my friend."

"As am I," Snape said with a nod. "Shall I escort you to your room?"

"Actually, I'd like to be alone with my thoughts for now."

"Are you sure that's wise?"

"I'll be fine, but thank you all the same."

"As you wish."

"Good night, Severus."

"Good night, Hermione."

She turned and slowly walked to the door, while he merely stood there and watched her with his arms folded across his chest. As she reached for the door handle, Hermione stopped. She turned back to Snape and said in a small voice, "I wish now more than ever that the potion we're working on was complete. Maybe it would help them heal faster. Either way... I wish it were done."

"So do I," Snape whispered.

Hermione nodded and gave him a very small smile. Finally she opened the door and left Snape alone in his lab, just as she had several weeks earlier, only this time he did not *feel* alone as he had that night. She was back in his life, a precious commodity he had craved since the day she had left him. Snape continued to stand in the place where Hermione and he had held each other, wondering if someday, maybe after the war was over, they could be together without fear of anyone harming her or her family every again.

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Hermione wasn't sure how long she had been wandering the halls of Hogwarts, but she knew it had been a while. She intended to go straight to her room, but then she remembered the picture she had of her parents on her nightstand, and she just couldn't face it yet. Besides, there was a possibility that Harry, Ron, and Ginny were still in the Common Room, and she didn't want to talk about it. She just wanted to be alone for the time being. She tried to distract herself by thinking about Snape's riddle. It took her a while to decipher that the answer was fate, only because she was so distracted by the attack on her parents. However, even after figuring out the riddle, she continued to walk the halls, collecting her thoughts. Was her fate to constantly be disrespected for her Muggle blood? Was her fate to watch her family and friends suffer because of their association with her? These thoughts swirled through her mind, causing her heart to fill with even more sadness. She was trying to be strong, but it was so difficult.

"Well, well, well, what have we here?" a cold voice said behind her.

Hermione jumped at the unexpected voice and whipped around to see Draco Malfoy and his goons emerging from the stairway leading down to the kitchens. Apparently, Crabbe and Goyle's stomachs couldn't wait until morning for breakfast. Hermione glared as Draco approached her with Crabbe and Goyle behind him. He had a horrible grin on his face, the same wolfish grin his father wore the night he had Dumbledore suspended and Hagrid thrown into Azkaban. Despite Hermione's unease, she stood her ground and looked Malfoy straight in his cold blue eyes.

"What are you doing wondering the halls at such a late hour, Mudblood?" Draco asked snidely.

Hermione scowl deepened as Crabbe and Goyle chuckled. Before she could respond, Draco suddenly put his hand over his chest and gasped over dramatically, "Merlin's beard, what's this?" He ran a finger over a trail that a tear had left on Hermione's face.

"Get away from me!" Hermione spat, as she slapped Draco's hand away.

"Looks like you've been crying. Oh, this wouldn't be about your mummy and daddy, would it?"

Hermione's eyes grew wide with shock and horror. He knew. The little bastard knew, which meant... Oh God, Lucius! It was him who tortured her parents! Of course, who else would have targeted them? The other two with him must have been none other Crabbe and Goyle. They were all in it!

Draco reveled in Hermione's reaction to his remark and decided to push her even further.

"Wasn't good news, hmm?" he taunted. "Looks like you wouldn't be going home for Christmas. Too bad. You'll have to say here, while I get to go home to my own family. Maybe *my* father will be kind enough to retell us how *your* father screamed like a little girl and your mother wouldn't stop crying."

Hermione fought back the tears as well as the rage that threatened to burst out of her in front of Malfoy. However, she wasn't going to let him win. She continued to look the flaxen haired boy in the eye and glare, not daring to reveal any hint that he was getting to her. She was going to be strong, not just for her parents' sakes, but for her and Severus as well.

Malfoy saw the inward battle Hermione was fighting with herself. Oh, he could tell she was near the breaking point, and she was struggling to keep her emotions in check. He decided to abrade her will even further, just to see how far he could get until she broke down in front a him, a sight he'd love to see. With a sly smile, Draco took a step closer to Hermione, until they were practically nose-to-nose.

"Aw, don't worry, Mudblood," Draco cooed. "I'm sure they won't be as brainless as Longbottom's parents, but they'll be loony. Oh, they may not recognize you. What a pity that would be, parents that can't even recognize their one and only daughter. Tsk, tsk, tsk."

Hermione felt her insides tighten and twist into knots, while she fought the urge to tear Malfoy limb from limb. She was not going to lose control in front of him. She was going to continue to be strong. She was going to show him who she was, and she was *not* going to be intimidated by the likes of him!

Looking straight into his heartless eyes, Hermione said coolly, "Draco Malfoy, you are even more pathetic than I thought if you think that would get to me. Ha! You are an idiot. You forget that I am Hermione Granger, proud Muggle-born Gryffindor witch and resident know-it-all, and your empty words have no effect on me."

Draco's smile immediately faded and was replaced with shock. Self-satisfied about taking the wind out of his sails, Hermione gave that same smirk she had seen Snape give on so many occasions to different students. She really was spending too much time with him. Fueled by his reaction and Snape's words to her earlier, Hermione showed off her new gusto by probing Draco even further, just as he had done to her.

"Tell me, Draco, how does it feel to be second best to Harry on the Quidditch field and to me in the classroom? It must be maddening for you and your father that you're inferior to Gryffindors with Muggle blood coursing through their veins."

Hermione took cheer in the fact that Draco's smile faded within seconds. However, she was uneasy about the anger that was setting in his eyes when she spoke. In fact, she was rather worried by the time she finished...though she didn't show it...because at that moment he looked down right infuriated. Maybe she went too far. Of course, that was the typical Gryffindor: act before you think.

As they stared each other down, Draco quickly whipped out his wand and pointed it at Hermione's neck. However, she didn't even flinch. She just kept staring right back at him with her wand pointed at a valued place on Draco's body he was rather fond of. He wouldn't try anything in that position. With fury written on his face, Draco spat, "Filthy little Mudblood! You'll see who's best when the Dark Lord comes into power! Then you'll be begging for mercy, just like your parents were!"

"I doubt my parents were begging and neither will I, because you are delusional, Draco Malfoy," Hermione said calmly.

Before Draco could respond, a voice shouted, "*Expelliarmus!*". The spell hit Draco's side and he immediately went flying into the wall while his wand flew into the air and was caught by a person in the shadows. Crabbe and Goyle were to flabbergasted to pull out their own wands, and instead opted to stare at their fallen leader in disbelief, as Draco scrambled to his feet after lying on the floor in a daze for several seconds.

"Who's there?" Draco demanded with a sneer. "Show yourself, you coward!"

"The only coward here is one who would raise a wand to a woman," the voice said, as a person stepped out of the shadows. Hermione couldn't be more delighted or relieved to see the culprit to Draco's undoing was none other than her good friend and pupil David Heart.

Malfoy's eyes narrowed until they were small slits, as David strode to Hermione's side and asked, "Are you all right?"

"Just fine, David," Hermione smiled.

"Fine? It didn't look fine, especially by the way he held his wand at your neck."

"Really, it's all right. Malfoy and I were having a little Head Boy and Girl meeting."

"In the middle of the hall?"

"Yes, and we were just going back to our rooms for the night, weren't we, Draco?"

At first, Draco said nothing. He just glared at the two friends as they stood their ground. Finally, Draco nodded and said darkly, "Yes, we were." He looked over at Crabbe and Goyle and jerked his head towards the dungeons. The three of them gave one final poisonous look and Hermione and David before they turned and disappeared into the shadows towards their rooms. Hermione continued to stare after them even after they left, as if she were in a trance. She felt good; she felt strong. She hoped that if Snape would be proud of her, if he'd had seen what had happened just now.

"Hermione," she heard David say to her as he touched her arm. "Come on. Let me take you back to Gryffindor Tower."

Hermione nodded before David led her out of the hall. Neither one of them said anything for a long time. It wasn't until they were near the Common Room before David finally spoke.

"I know you weren't having a 'meeting,' Hermione. I'm not stupid."

"You aren't stupid, David," Hermione smiled. "I figured you knew we weren't 'talking' either."

"I know you can take care of yourself, but you really need to be more careful. The Malfoys are bad news. I don't know what either of you said to each other, and I know it's none of my business, but I even know you don't mess with Malfoy."

"David, I understand you're concerned, and I appreciate it, I do, but you needn't worry."

"If you say so," David sighed as she finally came to the portrait of the Fat Lady. "Well, here we are. If you need anything, don't hesitate to call. It's the least I can do after all the help you've given me."

"Thanks, David," Hermione smiled. "You're a true friend."

David flashed her his winning grin before giving her a quick hug. Just as he turned to take his leave, Hermione suddenly asked, "Oh wait. There was one thing I was wondering: what were you doing out in the dungeons so late?"

David's face flushed a little, but he didn't turn away from Hermione. Instead he asked rather gravely, "Is this Hermione the Head Girl asking?"

"No, this is Hermione your friend asking. You weren't returning from Hog's Head, were you?"

"You see," David began to explain, "I was spending time with Daniela, and... I lost track of time."

"And what hidden section in the dungeons were you stealing these moments with her?"

"Now that's for me to know and you to find out. After all, I can't reveal all of my secrets."

He gave her a wink and smile, causing her to giggle. "Oh, all right," she finally conceded. "But again, thank you, David. You really helped me out tonight."

"Anytime, Hermione."

As she turned to the Fat Lady, the portrait suddenly swung open. Hermione jumped back in surprise. She even more surprised to see Neville Longbottom standing there with Trevor in hand.

"I thought I heard voices out here," Neville said looking from Hermione to David. Upon seeing the "Hufflepuff Hustler," Neville's brow furrowed and he turned to Hermione and asked, "Is everything all right?" It was apparent that he'd been waiting for her to return.

"Yes, Neville," Hermione smiled before she waved good-bye to David, who disappeared down the stairs.

"What was that all about?" Neville asked quizzically as Hermione stepped over the threshold.

"I'll tell you about it inside," she told him. She peered into the Common Room and gave a small sigh of relief when she saw Harry, Ron, and Ginny waiting for her on the couch. Taking a deep breath, she followed her friend and his toad into the Common Room to face her friends. She sat down in a plush chair by the fire, finally prepared to tell the tale of the night's events to everyone, starting from the urgent message from Dumbledore to the rescue from David Heart. She had already planned to leave out the scene that took place in the lab between Professor Snape and herself. After all, he'd never forgive her if she compromised his image. She also kept David's reason for his late-night excursion to herself. It wasn't anyone's business anyway.

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The Great Hall was buzzing with excitement on the last day of classes before Christmas Break. Students were telling each other how they were planning on spending the holiday as well as making a list of exactly what they hoped to receive as gifts. Only one person was not discussing *anything* about Christmas.

Ron Weasley.

He was convinced more than ever that his sweet innocent and naive Hermione had a secret relationship with the dirty rotten libertine David Heart. "Why else would they be out late at night together?" Ron asked sourly. "I'll tell you why. It was because they're an item. He's a bad influence on her!"

"I think you're a bad influence on me," Harry teased before biting into his toast.

"Me? A bad influence?"

"Yes. Whatever relationship Hermione and Heart have, it is obviously platonic."

"Oh, that's laughable."

"What's laughable is you constantly thinking Hermione is fanning about at night with the likes of David," Ginny said, who sat across from her brother and love interest.

"She is, and I don't know why you can't see that. Don't worry though. After the New Year, you won't have a shadow of a doubt. Since there are less students and no classes during Christmas, I'm having Operation Fancy Pants agents on high alert. We're going to be out there spying more than ever. We've got plans, Harry, lots of plans."

"What plans?" Hermione asked, suddenly appearing behind the boys.

"*Ahh!*" Ron replied with a jump.

"Good morning to you, too," she said rolling her eyes while taking a seat in between him and Harry.

"Don't mind him," Ginny said, rather embarrassed by her brother's reaction. "He only woke up with half his brain today."

"Hi, Hermione," Harry smiled, hoping to prevent a Weasley brawl. "How are you feeling?"

"Better, thanks. I finally slept the whole night."

"Is there any word about your parents yet?"

"Professor Dumbledore said last night that they were out of danger, but they hadn't awakened yet."

"Don't worry, Hermione," Ginny said, reassuringly patting her friend's hand. "They'll be all right."

"Yeah, maybe they'll wake up before the New Year," Ron added. "And since they're out of danger now, you can probably see them, right?"

"Well... no," Hermione said sheepishly looking down at her hands. "I still can't see them yet because..." Her voice trailed off for a moment, so she could regain her composure before speaking again. Finally, she said no louder than a whisper, "Because the healers still don't know about their sanity."

The group suddenly fell into a very uncomfortable silence, which seemed to slice even through the murmuring of the Great Hall. Hermione bit her lip, trying to get a handle on her emotions, while the other three looked at each other nervously. They looked so worried that even Snape noticed the friends concern for his little lioness from the High Table. What have those idiots done to upset his Hermione? If he could find a way to give them all detention, he would. In the meantime, he shot a dirty look at the group, accidentally making eye contact with Ginny, who quickly turned away.

In an act of desperation to lighten the mood, Ginny asked, "So, are you guys ready for the Charms exam today?"

"Oh yeah," Harry agreed, happy to change the somber subject. "I was practicing all day yesterday and I think I've got it."

"Me too," Ron nodded. "The only problem is..."

Suddenly, the whole Great Hall fell silent as four large eagle owls flew in carrying a long box wrapped in silver paper and decorated with a green velvet bow. The owls swooped down low over the Slytherin table and dropped the package in Draco's lap. Once again, all the students in the Great Hall were craning their necks to get a glimpse at what new and interesting parcel the flaxen-haired boy received. Of course, Draco loved the attention and made sure to play it up for the crowd and over-dramatize his reactions. A note attached to the bow caught his eye and he snatched it into his hand.

"Quick, ask me what it says," Draco muttered under his breath to Goyle.

Goyle leaned over and whispered "What does it say, Draco?"

"Ask it out loud, you oaf!" Draco whispered back harshly.

"*What does it say, Draco?*" Goyle shouted without moving away from Draco's ear.

Draco shoved his idiotic friend and rubbed his ear. Stupid dolt! Honestly, at times that simpleton Hagrid had more brains. He had better ask Crabbe the next time something important like this happened again.

After recovering from his temporary deafness, Draco said while projecting his voice, "I don't know, Goyle. I'll read it and find out." He cleared his throat before he began reading aloud.

Draco -

*Your mother and I thought it best if we sent you **one** of your Christmas presents early. We know you have been waiting for this one quite a while, and decided you can have it now. I think it will help you fine-tune your already impressive Quidditch skills. We look forward to seeing you later tonight after your classes are over.*

Warmest Regards,

Father

After stuffing the note in his pocket, Draco immediately tore at the paper and ripped off the lid to the long box. The Slytherins crowded around the table to get a glimpse at the new item, and gasped in absolute shock and surprise. Even Draco Malfoy was speechless as he stared down at the brand new Carrington Broom in the box with the legendary and trademark silver tag tied to the handle of the broom that had *Carrington Broom* written on it.

"What is it?" a curious Ravenclaw asked.

"*It's a Carrington Broom!*" Pansy exclaimed. "*Draco got a Carrington Broom for Christmas!*"

The entire hall soon broke into gasps and chatter, even at the High Table. Every witch and wizard knew that a Carrington Broom was top of the line. They were specially designed to the person's agility, body build, eye-hand coordination, and speed. Like Ollivander and his wand shop, Carrington didn't hand out his brooms to just anyone. They had to be very special and gifted in order to handle such a delicate item that he himself would carve and build with his own two hands. Even Viktor Krum had to wait for nearly three years before could get his hands on one of those beauties. Since Carrington had so many requests for his brooms that could take years in the making, they were very expensive. Even Lucius Malfoy with all his money and fame probably had to save his Galleons for decades before he could purchase one.

The fact that Draco got one of the elusive brooms came as a great shock, even to him. The corners of his lips pulled up into a sly smile and he gingerly placed a hand on the handle of the broom. It was so perfect! The dark wood smelled of rich mahogany and there wasn't a bristle out of place. If it wasn't for the fact he was going to ride it, Draco was certain that it could be hung over the mantle and be considered a work of art.

"Don't touch it!" Draco hissed, slapping Crabbe's hand away from his broom. "This is *mine*."

"Oh, Draco, please let me watch you ride it!" Pansy begged pathetically, causing Draco to smirk in satisfaction. "I promise I won't get too close. I just want to see Hogwarts's best Seeker on such a magnificent broom."

"Then Draco should be giving the broom to Harry," Ginny said rather loudly, causing the Gryffindors to laugh.

Pansy shot Ginny a look, who just smiled in response.

"Don't worry, Pansy," Draco said smoothly after the laughter died down. "You can see me fly it after lunch, when I take it out for my first ride. In the mean time, I'll just carry it with me until then. After all, I wouldn't want any obviously *jealous* and *poor* people to steal my broom."

He shot a cold hard glare over towards Harry and Ron before dabbing his mouth with his napkin and standing from his seat. Draco clutched the broom close to his side and waltzed out of the hall with his head held high, Pansy and his goons not far behind him. He suddenly couldn't wait for the Gryffindor versus Slytherin Quidditch game after the New Year.

"Lousy good-for-nothing brute," Ginny grumbled after Draco left the Great Hall.

"Out of all the wizards in the world, *he* had to be lucky and rich enough to get a Carrington Broom!" Ron said indignantly, pounding his fist on the table. "Sometimes life isn't fair."

"Tell me about it," Harry mumbled pushing his plate away from him. "I think I lost my appetite."

"Don't let it get to you," Hermione said, crossing her arms over her chest just like Snape. "He wants to feel upset. Just beat him on the Quidditch field and show him it's the person, not the broom, that makes a player. Besides, he'll probably break it anyway after..."

Suddenly, Neville Longbottom shot out of his seat like a bat out of hell and ran towards the big double doors of the Great Hall.

"Oy, Neville!" Ron called out to him. "Where's the fire?"

Neville didn't answer. He just continued running all the way out of the Great Hall, out of the castle, and towards the greenhouses. He had a plan for revenge, and if it was anything like the flower he sent the first time, this time it would be even sweeter.

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Draco was true to his word and carried his broom with him the entire day. He wouldn't allow it to leave his sight, and even earned a detention from Professor McGonagall when he refused to place it in his rooms instead of across his lap during Transfiguration. He didn't care. It'd all be worth it once he took to the sky and his one-of-a-kind broomstick suddenly became the envy of all of Hogwarts, especially Potty Potter!

Lunch couldn't come soon enough for the sneaky blond Slytherin. He took his time eating, enjoying the quick glances from some of the student body as well as a few of the teachers, making sure he hadn't left for his afternoon ride. Draco also was pleased to hear the low whispers from some of the Slytherin girls that were commenting on how handsome he looked carrying his broom, and how they hoped he would take them for a spin. He smirked as he thought of how he wouldn't mind fulfilling their fantasies... in more ways than one.

Finally, Draco stretched in his seat before he stood up with his broom and walked towards the door. Immediately, over three-quarters of the student body and even some teachers were on their feet and following him outside. Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny made no attempt to trail the egotistical Slytherin outside. However, they were shocked to see Neville Longbottom practically running after Draco with a box of Bernie Bott's Every Flavor Beans in his hands.

Noticing his friends' strange looks, Neville smiled and whispered, "You guys better come if you don't want to miss all the fun."

"What?" they asked in confusion.

Neville merely winked before rushing out of the Great Hall.

"Fun?" Ron asked quizzically. "What could possibly be fun about watching Malfoy fly around on his stupid broom?"

"Well, if I know Neville, he wouldn't have said that unless he had a good reason," Harry said seriously. "I think... I think we should go."

Before anyone else could respond, Harry stood and made his way to the doors. Ron looked at Hermione and Ginny who shrugged before they too got up and went after Harry and the others. Finally, the redhead sighed and shook his head as he also stood from his seat and reluctantly followed the crowd. "This better be worth it," he grumbled.

As Ron made his way to the door, Snape rolled his eyes and stood to bring up the rear of the group of onlookers. He really had no desire to see the spoiled brat flaunt his new broom, but he still had to keep up appearances with the Death Eaters. He knew Lucius would ask him about Draco's "exhibition," and it would look quite suspicious if Snape hadn't attended. Giving a sigh of reluctance, the Potions master left through the rear entrance of the Great Hall and went to meet the rest of the crowd that was anticipating the display of Malfoy's new toy.

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Draco smiled proudly at the crowd that gathered around him, as he stood by the lake with his broom. He saw the excitement dancing in the students' eyes, watching him in anticipation. Pansy was standing rather close and grinning flirtatiously, as were a few other Slytherin girls, not to mention a few Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff girls. Hmm, no Gryffindors. Really, he wasn't surprised. However, he was surprised to see Potter and his gaggle of geeks with him. Draco smirked, rather pleased to see them. He was going to love the look on their faces when he took off into the sky, making death-defying maneuvers with the greatest of ease.

Suddenly, there was a strange noise to his left and Draco turned in time to see Neville standing rather close to his broom. He noticed the Gryffindor was looking down at his feet and Draco followed his gaze. He sneered as he witnessed the pile box of Bernie Bott's Every Flavor Beans on the ground right next to the bristles of his Carrington Broom.

"Oops!" Neville gasped.

"Watch what you're doing, Longbottom!" Draco snapped. "Go be clumsy somewhere else, somewhere far away from my broom!"

Neville gave a sheepish look and shrank back into the crowd among the snickers.

"Poor Neville," Hermione sighed to her friends. "Malfoy shouldn't have..."

"Hey, did that bean just move?" Ron asked in shock.

"What bean?" Ginny asked with a furrowed brow.

"I swore I saw a brown bean move."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

"Oy, there just went another brown one, right into Malfoy's broom. Did you see it?"

"Ron, I can't..."

"And another, just now. Did you see it this time?"

Before Harry could respond, Draco raised his free hand in the air and said in a loud and confident voice, "I'd like to thank you all for coming out here on what promises to be a most historic moment in not only Malfoy history, but Hogwarts history as well."

"Oh, he can't be serious," Harry scoffed to his friends.

"What an egotistical wanker," Ginny huffed. "Can you believe this guy?"

"I know for many of you, this will be the first time you see someone actually ride a Carrington broom," Draco continued in his cocky manner. "I hope actually, I know I shall make this a memorable experience you will not forget."

"But we'll wish we could," Ron grumbled, losing interest in the mysterious moving beans.

"Before I take flight," Draco continued, "I'd first like to warn you all that what you are about to see will be breathtaking and those of you with cameras may want to start taking pictures soon. You, Creevey."

"Me?" Dennis asked pointing to himself.

"No!" Draco spat. "The one with the camera. Yes, you. Make sure you get some good pictures of me. They'll make very nice Christmas presents to all my friends."

"Oh good Lord," Hermione said rolling her eyes, as some Slytherin girls swooned. "That would definitely be a gift that I'd want to return."

"All right, ladies and gentlemen," Draco smiled, "without further delay, I shall make my ascent to heaven."

He threw a leg over his broom and with a sly smile on his face, he kicked off the ground and slowly began to rise into the air. Draco was impressed by how well the broom was handling. Usually one was a bit wobbly when trying out a new broom no matter how accomplished they were. However, he did not experience that. In fact, all he was experiencing was pure rhapsody. He closed his eyes in ecstasy, reveling in the feel of the wind whipping through his hair and caressing his face. Draco heard the crowd "Ooo" and "Ahh" as he climbed higher and higher above the lake.

'All right,' Draco thought to himself, 'First thing I'll do is go right into a nose dive towards the water and then make a sharp turn spiraling up before going straight into a loop-de-loop. That'll get the crowd...'

Suddenly, there was a *poof* and Draco suddenly felt quite vulnerable. He looked down in time to see two things were very wrong:

One, his broom was suddenly sawdust in his hands.

Two, the water was suddenly getting much closer rather quickly.

"Ayeeeeeeeeee!" Draco screamed as he fell out of the sky and went headfirst into the ice-cold lake, which wasn't the nosedive he had planned on doing.

SPLOSH!

Draco surfaced moments later gasping for breath. He heard the roar of laughter from the crowd before he got hit in the face by a rather ornery and annoyed fish, causing them to laugh even harder. He supposed he was lucky the lake wasn't frozen over; however, death might have been slightly better than the humiliation he was feeling at that moment. Draco began to splash and thrash about in the cold water, yelling in frustration, "*Someone get me out of here this instant!*"

Unfortunately, Draco saw no one make any attempt to pull him out of surprisingly slimy and rather dirty lake. Instead, the crowd continued to howl with laughter. Right away, he spotted Pansy and her friends trying hard not to laugh, but failing miserably. He also spotted Harry and Ginny hanging onto each other so they wouldn't crumple to the ground in a heap of laughter like Ron, who was rolling on the ground with tears streaming from his face. Hermione was holding her sides and laughing so hard that she was snorting in a not so lady like fashion. The only one who wasn't laughing was Snape, who was having a very hard time trying not to, as he fought the corners of his mouth from turning upwards into a smile.

Draco was about to throw another hissy-fit when he suddenly felt himself being lifted from the water and plopped onto the shore. He turned his head just in time to see a massive tentacle from the giant squid gracefully slip back into the water. Draco looked down at his hands that were covered in some sort of slimy substance. What the devil could *that* be? He always thought the lake had water in it.

"My goodness!" said an urgent voice from the castle. "What in Merlin's name is going on?"

The laughter died down as Draco and the rest of the crowd turned toward the sound of the voice and saw Dumbledore, McGonagall, and the rest of the staff and student body that had remain in the castle running towards them in obvious concern.

"We heard a girl screaming outside and ran to see what had happened," Dumbledore went on to explain as he stopped in front of the group. "It sounded like a first year. Where is she and what happened to her?"

The crowd responded by bursting into laughter once again. The color began to rise in Draco's cheeks, while he shivered.

"I'm afraid you're mistaken, Headmaster," Snape said, stepping towards the old wizard. He shot a glare towards the crowd, which caused them to fall silent almost immediately. "You see, Mr. Malfoy was making his grand entrance into the sky," Snape continued, "when his broom suddenly dissolved in his hands, and *he* screamed..."

"Wait, it was *Mr. Malfoy* who screamed?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, that is interesting, but please, do continue, Professor Snape."

"As I was saying, Mr. Malfoy screamed as he fell into the lake where he was then cornobbled."

"Cornobbled? Oh my, what a pity!"

"A great pity indeed."

"Did our trusty lifeguard 'fish' him out of the water?" Dumbledore said chuckling at his own pun he found quite clever.

"Yes, the giant squid managed to pull him out of the water and set him ashore."

"Oh, splendid! I imagine you're not hurt then, Mr. Malfoy?"

"It's l-l-lucky I'm not!" Draco said through his chattering teeth with a scowl on his face. "I w-w-want to know *why* my b-b-broom suddenly turned into saw d-d-dust and *why* is the lake f-f-filled with slime instead of w-w-water?"

"Aww, 'tis a shame yeh fell in ter the lake during giant squid mating season," Hagrid said in the straightest face he could, though his smile was visible even under all those layers of hair.

Most of the students gave looks of disgust while the few that were somewhat near Draco took a few generous steps away from him. Draco looked down at himself in horror, knowing the slime wasn't really slime.

"Well, that answers your question about the lake, Mr. Malfoy," Dumbledore said, "but I really have no idea what could have possibly caused your broom to suddenly dissolve into sawdust."

"I think I do," Professor Sprout said stepping forward. She bravely stepped up to Draco and peered at something in his hair. She pulled a bobby pin from her hair and extracted the "slime" covered thing from the boy's golden hair. It looked like a brown bean, but upon closer inspection, Professor Sprout saw it was not that at all.

"Ah ha!" she said triumphantly. "Mr. Malfoy, it seems you had the misfortune of having some Cellulomites make a meal out of your broom."

"*What?*" Draco asked in shock.

"Cellulomites. They are like termites, except they eat the cellulose in wood, especially dark rich woods like mahogany. Cellulose is a major component for plant structure and rigidity. Cellulomites tend to eat incredible amounts of cellulose in a short matter of time. Once all the cellulose is gone, the wood collapses, and, as you experienced, turns into sawdust. I'm sure your broom was only a mere appetizer to them compared to the amount they usually eat."

"A b-b-bloody bug did all that?" Draco asked in disbelief. "Well w-w-what am I going to..."

Suddenly, Draco stopped as he began to notice large red swollen splotches forming on his hands and arms. Soon, his skin was becoming red and itchy and he felt his eyes becoming irritated and puffy as well.

"Wh-what's happening to me?" Draco asked in a panicked voice.

"Ah, squid allergies," Hermione said. "It's common among pureblood families, especially those who have ahem a 'homogeneous family tree.' "

Giggling erupted from the students. Draco only glared in response. Actually, it was all he could do since his eyes were swelling shut.

"Madam Pomfrey, could you please take Mr. Malfoy to the hospital wing and inform his family of what happened?" Dumbledore asked politely.

"Of course, Headmaster," she smiled as she put an arm around Draco's shoulders, leading him away from the crowd. "Let's go get you warmed up, Mr. Malfoy, and we better get you an antihistamine right away."

"My goodness!" Professor Sprout said exasperatedly. "I can't believe it. This is the fifth time this week I've encountered Cellulomites. Mr. Longbottom and I had to throw out all of our beetlebark the other day because it was infested with the little buggers. It almost ruined our research."

"LONGBOTTOM?" Draco suddenly boomed, causing many students to jump. He sneered at Neville and pointed a fat swollen finger at him before snarling, "It was you, wasn't it? You somehow put those things on my broom!"

"Me?" Neville asked innocently. "Oh don't be daft, Malfoy."

"I'll g-g-get you for this, L-L-Longbottom! Mark m-m-my words!"

"That is quite enough, Mr. Malfoy!" Madam Pomfrey scolded. "Now come along before you go into anaphylactic shock."

Draco gave one last acrimonious look at Neville before turning away and waddling towards the castle. Just when his mind was about to plan for his revenge, he heard Neville call out, "By the way, Malfoy, you're right. I don't think I'm ever going to forget this moment. Thanks for the memories!"

The crowd burst into laughter again, and Draco gritted his teeth. Oh, Longbottom was going to be sorry he crossed paths with him. No one got away with humiliating a Malfoy.

"Well, now that's settled, I think it's best if we all went back inside and relaxed before we begin the last half of classes before Christmas break," Dumbledore suggested. "Besides, I wasn't even finished with my lemon tart. It's quite delectable!"

The students laughed and followed their headmaster's order. As they began to file back into the castle, Hermione, Ginny, Harry, and Ron walked directly up to Neville, who had a very satisfied smug on his face.

"Neville that was bloody fantastic!" Ron said as he and Harry patted him on the back.

"Smashing idea, Neville!" Harry smiled.

"I thought I saw some of those beans move!"

"I had to mix the Cellulomites with the beans to they wouldn't eat through the cardboard," Neville grinned. "I'm just glad they took to the broom so quickly."

"The prat deserved it!" Ginny said indignantly. "Honestly, he was asking for it; strutting around with his broom like it was his girlfriend."

"Well I don't think Draco is going to be strutting for quite some time," Neville smiled. "But if he does, I know exactly what's coming to him."

"What precisely is coming to him, Mr. Longbottom?" a foreboding voice asked from behind.

The Gryffindors spun around to see Snape with his arms folded over his chest, wearing a dark look on his face. Of course, the boys hesitated and looked at each other nervously. Luckily, Hermione's quick thinking saved them the trouble of stammer and stuttering poor sorry excuses.

"We were just discussing what Draco Malfoy was going to get for Christmas."

"And what would that be, Miss Granger?"

"Well, sir, let me put it this way: it is something that you can catch, but not throw."

The group of Gryffindors were expecting Snape to roll his eyes and deduct points for being so vague. However, he shocked them all when he instead snorted and smirked. Cheeky little chit, but a clever one at that.

"Move it along inside," he said while jerking his head towards the entrance. "And don't dawdle."

"Yes, sir," Hermione nodded while Snape turned on his heel and stalked off towards the castle with his robes billowing behind him.

"So what's the answer?" Ron asked stunned as the Gryffindor group made their way to the entrance.

"To what?" Hermione asked quizzically.

"What's the answer to the riddle you just told Snape, which, by the way, was brilliant thinking on your part."

"Oh, it's not too difficult, Ron. Just think about it a bit and it'll come to you."

"I can't think of anything. What is it?"

"You didn't even try."

"Aww, come on, 'Mione. Just tell me."

Hermione sighed and shook her head. This was going to be a long Christmas Break if he was going to act like that the entire time. However, as long as her Potions master was safe and sound with her at Hogwarts, she was determined to make this a happy Christmas, even if the circumstances were less than ideal .

Yea, there's chapter 15! I hope you all liked it!

5 points to your house if you knew the answer to the previous riddle, which was "fate." You can get 5 more if you figure out the latest riddle!

The Alan Rickman quote in chapter 14 was "Our aim is to rid society of negative influences. This end justifies certain unorthodox means," said by The Interrogator in Closet Land. Dude, that is the **creepiest** movie! He's so good in it, too! It's one of his finest roles. There's another quote in this chapter. Happy hunting!

You get 5 extra points if you can tell me what "cornobbled" means. Yes, it is a real word. Archaic yes, but real none the less.

Thanks for all the support! You all are the best! You rock my socks!

"We fight against those who control the darkness."

- DADA Mistress