

# The Price of Perfection

by HermioneDancr

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## The First Duty of a Teacher

Chapter 1 of 2

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Hermione Granger chewed at her lip as she recopied the last sentence of her rune translation. She had *meant* to finish the final draft on Saturday afternoon, but an Arithmancy project had taken much longer than expected, leaving only Sunday night for the rest of her work.

*There, finished. Well, better reread it, she thought. Wouldn't want to make a silly mistake out of carelessness!* Returning to the top of the parchment and frowning in concentration, Hermione began reading. And promptly sneezed. *Drat.* Two paragraphs further down, she sneezed again...twice...and blew her nose. *Bother.*

Twenty minutes later, Hermione had removed an apostrophe, changed one comma to a semi-colon, and finished going over her translation. Her nose was most decidedly running.

Carefully stowing her finished translation inside of her bag, Hermione reached for her Defense Against the Dark Arts essay and slowly smoothed it out on the desk in front of her, glancing at the clock as she absently wiped her nose with her handkerchief. 3:14 A.M. She groaned.

Hermione looked longingly at the empty bed behind her, then back at the parchment and books on the desk. She sighed. Slowly she massaged the area around the bridge of her nose and stared back at the clock. Her head was stuffy and her body ached...

Would it be so bad to go to bed instead, just tonight? *No!* she chastised herself, *you can't. You have to finish it. You must.* But despite her determination, she could not bring herself to go over the essay yet again. If only her head was clearer, maybe then she could do it.

Scrunching her face, Hermione massaged her temples, wishing there was a charm to relieve sinus pressure, not just a wide variety of potions...none of which she had access to at three in the morning. What she would give for a hot, steamy bath. Oh, a bath would be perfect! Not in the dormitory bathroom, though...that would likely wake Parvati, and the prefects' bath was ever so much nicer. Yes, a bath in the prefects' bathroom was a good idea. It was much more appealing than working on her essay yet still better than giving up and going to bed.

Leaving the essay unedited on the desk, she stood up as silently as she could and tiptoed over to her trunk to retrieve her bathrobe and pajamas. She changed quietly, only to sneeze loudly as she tied her robe around her waist. After yanking her towel from its peg on the wall, she padded towards the door, slippers muffling the noise of

her feet.

Down the stairs, through the darkened common room to the portrait hole. A sneeze. *Drat*. Through the portrait hole, along two corridors, and down to the sixth floor by way of an unremarkable staircase that was never there on Tuesdays. Two successive sneezes. *Really*. Five feet further along the corridor, she sneezed again. Loudly. At this rate, she'd be lucky not to attract the attention of Filch. Or worse,

Professor Snape. "Miss Granger."

"Sir." Really, this was bad luck.

"Miss Granger, can you explain why you are awake and wandering the corridors at three-thirty in the morning?"

"Please, sir, I'm going to take a bath. I am allowed to do that."

"I did not ask *what* you were doing, Miss Granger. *That* much is evident. Answer the question."

"The question, sir?"

"Yes, the question," he repeated impatiently.

She stared blankly, wishing she had thought to bring a handkerchief.

"Are you incapable of giving any answer not taken directly from a textbook? Or can you possibly explain why you are awake and wandering about in the dead of night?"

She sneezed again, violently, and was surprised when he produced a handkerchief. She accepted it, and when she was finished, she answered, "Please, Professor, I've been doing homework." She blushed and bit her lip, embarrassed by the implication that she had left her work so late, even knowing that it wasn't true. "I just wanted to take a bath before getting back to my essay. Really, I haven't been doing anything I wasn't supposed to."

"On the contrary, Miss Granger. You may be allowed to access the prefects' bathroom at any time of day, but no student was ever meant to use it at three-thirty in the morning. And you hardly have permission to be standing about in the corridors at this time of night. If you wish to have your bath, I suggest you go on your way directly."

"Yes, sir." And she hurriedly set off along the corridor once more, so distracted by the aching in her temples and cheeks that she almost didn't realize that he had neglected to take points from Gryffindor.

Twenty minutes later Hermione emerged from the steaming water of the prefect's bath with noticeably clearer sinuses but an even more noticeably running nose. Much to her consternation, she had to stop and make use of the handkerchief several times while performing a drying charm on her hair. Still, she was feeling remarkably more aware as she clambered through the portrait hole and out of the bathroom. And found herself once more facing Professor Snape.

"Tell me, Miss Granger, has it ever occurred to you or your friends that wandering the castle at night might be unsafe? Not to mention detrimental to your health?"

There wasn't really anything she could say to that. Hermione blew her nose.

"Come." He turned and began down the corridor.

"Sir?" she hesitated.

He stopped and turned to face her. "You are obviously unwell, Miss Granger. Because of your foolish disregard for your own health, you will need a sinus-clearing serum if you wish to be of the slightest use in your classes later today. You will accompany me to my office."

She nodded, eyes wide with surprise, and hurried after him as he turned and began striding down the corridor once again. He did not speak as he led the way toward the dungeons, and she did not attempt to make conversation.

Upon entering the office he nodded to the chair in front of the desk. "Sit." She sat while he retrieved a vial of sinus-clearing serum from a cabinet and brought it to her. Removing the stopper, he handed her the vial. "Drink."

She drank...and grimaced.

Ignoring the expression on her face, he resumed his questioning. "Now that you are capable of answering coherently, I will try again: why did you not go to bed hours ago? Is your homework really so imperative that it takes precedence over your health?"

"Please, sir, I wanted to work on my Defense essay for tomorrow. I've written three drafts of it." She lifted her chin. "I *will* manage to do better than an Acceptable."

"Surely, Miss Granger, you could not still be so naïve as to assume that your grades in my class were based solely on the content of your work?"

"But..." she sputtered. "You're a professor! It wouldn't be fair..."

"Indeed, I am your teacher." His indignation was enough to match hers, but it was older, colder, and better honed.

"Then..."

"Miss Granger," he interrupted. "What is the first duty of a teacher? Before even instilling knowledge, much less pithy ideas of fairness."

She took a deep breath. This she could answer. "A teacher's first duty is to look after the well being of his students."

"Correct. And do you really believe it would be in your best interest for my... colleagues... to know the extent of your knowledge of Defense Against the Dark Arts?"

Her lips fell open, but for once no sound came through them.

"You are supposed to be the brightest witch of your generation. Can you not *think*? Or is your pride really more important to you than your safety?"

"Professor, I..."

"If I had graded based on merit, your overly thorough regurgitations would have received at least an E on every paper you have handed in this year, even from me. But for your protection, it is more important that your enemies underestimate your knowledge than that your adolescent pride be satisfied."

"Oh." Oh, this was strange. She wanted to be angry. She wanted to be furious. But she wasn't; she hadn't the slightest idea how she felt.

His eyes bored into her face. "You must learn to *think*, Miss Granger. And think constantly, not just when you are told to do so. Obvious explanations, you may discover, are often as not obviously wrong."

She bit her lip. "I do think about things, Sir. I think about things a great deal. But it's hard, I suppose, to find time to really consider everything. Homework and studying take

up so much of my time..."

"Perhaps," he said, voice tinged with asperity, "you should consider the cost of memorizing all your textbooks word for word and always turning in essays twice the required length."

"The cost? What cost? I don't see any great cost to being diligent in my studies! It's if I don't study that I'll pay the price!"

"Everything has a price, Miss Granger. Do not fool yourself."

"I'm not sure I understand, sir."

"Think on it, then. But not right now. Now," he said, "you will return to Gryffindor tower and *go to sleep*."

Professor Snape did nothing to acknowledge either her or their conversation in class that day, nor in any of the classes that followed. But the next time she had an essay returned, there was a note scrawled at the bottom underneath the customary *Acceptable*:

*Is perfection worth its price?*

## In Search Of A Puzzle

### Chapter 2 of 2

Hermione attempts to work out what Professor Snape was trying to tell her.

A/N: Many grateful thanks to Ennalee and Aequitas for their beta work, and to BlackClaude for helping me over the words and phrases where my mind got stuck.

"But Frances, you promised!"

"I know, I'm sorry...I already told you I'm sorry!"

"That doesn't make it any better!"

"Weren't you listening? He already knew. What was the point of not telling him?"

"But you *promised*, Frances!"

Hermione scowled and put down her quill. On most Saturday mornings the Gryffindor common room was an ideal place to study, but with a pair of fourth-year girls reducing each other to tears halfway across the room, this Saturday was not one of them.

As she stared blankly into space, her mind drifted to the conversation she had had with Professor Snape several weeks previously. Ever since he had questioned the cost of her dedication to her schoolwork, she had brooded over it. She had even, after due consideration, started limiting her essays to one foot less than twice the required length. So far, the only result seemed to be that she had more time to worry about what he'd been trying to tell her, but if nothing else she hoped it would demonstrate that she was taking his advice seriously.

When she approached the question logically, the obvious cost of her diligence was the time she devoted to her studies. Certainly it couldn't be knowledge in and of itself! Her time, on the other hand, was not unlimited, so the direct consequence of her academic dedication was less time for other pursuits.

But what did he want her to do? Professor Snape could hardly want her to spend two hours brushing her hair and applying makeup charms every morning the way Parvati and Lavender did. Nor would he consider it worthwhile to spend endless hours discussing Quidditch tactics with Harry and Ron. She snorted at the thought.

No, he'd told her she ought to think, which implied that she would better spend her time thinking. As good as said it outright, really. Thus she was supposed to think. But really, there were so many things she could possibly think about; the word 'think' hardly limited the possibilities. What was she supposed to think about? That was the real question.

He had been trying to tell her something. That much she was sure of. He would never have bothered to speak to her without a reason, much less be so kind...at least by his usual standards. Clearly there was some puzzle she was supposed to solve, or some obvious conclusion she was supposed to rethink. But what?

It wasn't that her life was lacking in puzzles. There were plenty, even in Gryffindor Tower: Parvati's utter lack of enthusiasm for the upcoming summer holidays, Colin Creevey's sudden obsession with photographing owls, the way Seamus's jaw slackened every time he set eyes on Katie Bell. Outside of the common room there were other, less trivial enigmas: the slight furrow of worry in Professor McGonagall's forehead which was becoming more pronounced with every passing week, the house-elves' desire for servitude, the seemingly intractable idiocy of the Ministry of Magic.

The trouble was that almost all of the puzzles she could think of seemed unimportant, certainly not worth Professor Snape's concern. When she considered the few puzzles that weren't trivial, she couldn't identify any that needed her in particular to solve them. Professor Snape was in a much better position to decipher them than she was, so he could have no reason to involve her unless it was specifically her understanding that mattered...she was certain he wouldn't concern himself just to give her the pleasure of knowledge.

Besides, even if he did want her to figure out what was worrying Professor McGonagall or why the Ministry was so determinedly ineffective, Hermione had no information, no evidence, no way to draw solid inferences. The same went for the still unsolved puzzles of the cursed necklace and the poisoned mead. The last thing she wanted was to imitate Harry's obsession with Malfoy, jumping to baseless conclusions at the least provocation. She sniffed. She could not...she would not...reach conclusions without sufficient evidence with which to support them.

She chewed her lip, frustrated by her lack of progress, and contemplated the ink stains on the table before her. Maybe she was starting at the wrong place, approaching it from the wrong direction? But could she make any progress towards finding an answer without knowing the question?

She would, of course, need to apply evidence before concluding anything. Evidence... Maybe she could start with the evidence? It would be hard to find the right information without knowing what she was supposed to figure out. But it was somewhere to start, at least. If she observed enough, gathered enough data, the puzzle might emerge along with the solution.

It wasn't much, but it was a beginning. At least it was something other than wasting long hours wondering what Professor Snape wanted her to figure out, and probably more fruitful as well. She smiled at the thought.

Observing would, of course, require time and energy. But when? Certainly not during classes...those were far too important. And there wasn't likely to be much worth observing in the common room. In the hallways between classes, then. And of course in the bathrooms; people were always so careless of who was listening in there. But would that be enough? She grimaced, reluctant. She should, she supposed, refrain from bringing a book to breakfast. Well, at least this once.

Resigning herself, she glanced at her watch. Harry and Ron would probably come down for breakfast within the next half hour, but she could work on her essay until then.

Punctual as always (at least so far as meals were concerned), Ron and Harry emerged from the boys' dormitories fifteen minutes later. Spotting her, they shuffled over to the table where she was working.

"Mornin', 'ermione," Harry yawned.

She set down her quill and stoppered her ink bottle. "Good morning!"

"Ready for breakfast?" asked Ron.

"Of course. Just a moment while I put all this away." Hermione nodded to the supplies in front of her as she gathered them up. After stowing everything in her room she bounced down to the common room to meet the boys, eager to get to the Great Hall and begin her observations. They greeted her with bemused smiles.

"What, no book?" asked Harry, mildly surprised.

"You know, if I didn't know any better I'd think you actually wanted to spend time with us." Ron grinned.

"Don't be a prat, Ron." Rolling her eyes, Hermione made a swatting motion at the air in front of him. She refrained from pointing out that her lack of a book was unlikely to keep them from their morning discussion of Quidditch...it would only raise questions she would rather not have to answer.

Sunday evening found Hermione sitting Disillusioned between the roots of her favorite tree at the edge of the forest. She didn't dare linger visibly alone after her run-in with the centaurs at the end of the previous year, but she didn't see why that should stop her coming, so long as she was careful about it.

Harry and Ron were busy with their homework in the common room, and it was early enough that they wouldn't be looking for her help yet. She had already finished all her homework through Thursday, so she didn't feel at all guilty taking the time to relax and enjoy the sound of the wind through the leaves.

Her newfound devotion to observation over the last day and a half had proven more rewarding than she had expected. Draco Malfoy certainly looked sick and unhappy, from what she had seen from across the Great Hall at meal times. Parvati and Dean also seemed unusually subdued, while Neville had grown noticeably more confident at some point in the last year. And Hannah Abbott now appeared to have a crush on Justin Finch-Fletchley...not that every girl in their year hadn't seen that coming.

Meal times were also a good time to observe the staff beyond her usual cursory glance to see who was present. Professor Sprout seemed slightly concerned about Professor Vector, judging by her looks and gestures towards the younger witch, while Professor Sinistra seemed wary of Madam Hooch. And much to Hermione's amusement, Professor Snape spoke almost solely with Professor McGonagall, for all the rivalry between their Houses.

Hermione stared out across the lawn towards the castle, mentally going over her observations in search of a pattern or puzzle. As if drawn by her thoughts, Professor Snape came into sight, making his way across the grass towards the forest. As he drew nearer, she saw that he was scowling. Though there was nothing unusual about that, really.

He continued towards her and she sat as still as she could, careful not to attract his attention through motion. He was less than twenty feet away now and still walking closer.

He growled harshly, "There *must* be another way."

She held her breath, hoping he might say more before he moved out of earshot, and almost cried out in surprise when a disembodied voice, immediately recognizable as the Headmaster's, replied, "But there is no other way, Severus. Surely you must see that?"

"No, Albus..."

Hermione strained her ears, but she heard no more as a gust of wind carried away the rest of the Potion master's rebuttal and the pair walked on into the forest. For a moment she considered following, but realized that moving she would be all too easy to spot, especially for two such powerful wizards.

Sighing quietly, she settled back between the roots to resume thinking. Here at last was a puzzle worth pondering.